Turbines

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Turbines

by

Nate Pillman

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTERS OF FINE ARTS

Major: Creative Writing and Environment

Program of Study Committee:
Steve Pett, Major Professor
Julie Courtwright
Deb Marquart
Greg Wilson

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2013

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my major professor, Steve Pett, for his guidance and encouragement on this novel. I’ve known Steve since I was an undergrad, and I can honestly say I wouldn’t be graduating from this fine program without everything he’s done for me—much of it on his own time, outside of office hours and the classroom. I’d also like to thank Deb Marquart for agreeing to sign on to my committee late, helping me grind through the earliest versions of this story, and for purchasing pizza more times over the past three years than I can count. Thirdly, I’d like to thank my outside committee members, Greg Wilson and Julie Courtwright. During the thesis defense, you withstood the barrage of tangents we novelists tend to go on, gave a ton of great insight, and encouraged me to continue working on this story in the future.

In addition, I would also like to thank my friends and officemates for getting me through a tough third year of grad school. Mary Stoecklein, Abby Stonner, Chris Wiewiora, Kylie Jacobsen, Mary Speckhard, Ashley Haynes, Jamie Harsha, and Claire Kruesel: at one point or another, each of you kept me going with your kindness and support. For that, I’ll always be thankful.

Finally, I’d like to thank my father, Gary, my mother, Betty, and my sister, Sarah. You’ve done everything within your power to make sure I have the best life possible, and it has been. I couldn’t be luckier.
ABSTRACT

*Turbines* is a coming-of-age tale set in rural Iowa just before the wind energy boom of the early 2000s. Through the eyes of three protagonists, I deal with themes of social mobility and otherness—both relevant issues growing up in flyover country. As each character deals with their own sense of identity, they are forced together by the inescapability of small-town life.

The male teenage protagonist, Jake Lakowski, is not used to the quiet, seemingly bland landscape of the Midwest, nor is he used to the unwritten rules of a town where many of his classmates are fourth-generation residents. Always the type who blended in at his old high school in Florida, Jake stands out in Iowa. As his social life begins to flourish, he loses sight of his future.

Brette Fitch, the female teenage protagonist, deals with many of the same issues as Jake, but from the opposite perspective. Brette has lived in Iowa her whole life. Tired of a school system where only a few teachers, and even fewer students, seem to care, and, quite literally, tired of the wind turbines that surround her—she believes they cause her insomnia—Brette wants nothing more than to leave small-town Iowa behind. While Jake loses sight of his future as his popularity grows, Brette loses sight of the present as she only thinks of escaping her current circumstances.

The third protagonist, Ed Pittman, serves as the catalyst for much of the novel’s happenings. Ed’s own indecisiveness has lead to a life of isolation and despair. Ed is a former manager of the wind turbine project. Years ago, two of his employees did something terrible. While the guilty men were arrested and convicted of their crimes, Ed became a target for those still upset with the offense. It wasn’t long before the town’s harassment reached
dangerous heights, which caused his then wife, Maria, to leave. Ed had the choice to go with her, but stayed, and now he wanders the streets at night, looking for a way to make everything right again.
PART ONE

Jake

He knew he was up for good when the kids left their fourth bag of flaming shit on the doorstep. The pounds on the door came again, louder this time, shaking the empty house, but there was no movement from down the hall, where his brother slept. His father was gone. Night one and he already had some sort of wind farm meeting. Not that his father would do anything. He’d do exactly what Jake was doing now. Nothing.

Not that Jake didn’t have a decent excuse. He didn’t have a bowl for water—they’d left everything in the U-Haul, too tired from the drive—and he wasn’t about to step on the bags. So he watched the paper burn through the living room window.

It was a still night and the fires rose straight up, barely moving, reminding Jake of the organ pipes of his grandma’s church in Florida, all neat and in a row and arranged from tallest to shortest. The bags were huge, the grocery variety, and the flames grew paler the closer they got to the shit. They burned that way now, in order, from red to orange to yellow to white.

It was the prettiest thing he’d seen since they’d crossed into Iowa.

Jake could see the kids crouching, their two heads poking from the shoulder-high corn past the front yard, which was the size of a couple of basketball courts and would surely suck to mow.

Jake could see the kids because he could see everything. In one-second clips, the lights from the tops of the wind turbines that circled the town strobed the streets and trees and yards and corn in red. The flashing was slower than the lights that flashed
through the gym of his old high school during dances, and brighter, despite the color.
Cheap horror movie blood.

The lights flashed through their house, too. It was one of the many reasons Jake couldn’t sleep, was awake to hear the knocks on the door. Their house was all by itself on the south edge of town, and his room faced southwest, faced the wind turbines. They were about a quarter of a mile away but the flashing still did something to his head. Not a headache, really, but something uncomfortable, like his brain expanding with every flash and shrinking back to normal in the momentary darkness before the next one. Curtains would help, but they wouldn’t unload those until tomorrow.

The kids were sneaking from the corn again.

Sneak was giving them too much credit. They’d stopped sneaking after the second bag, when no one opened the door. They still moved their heads from side to side, walked a little quickly, but there was nothing else to suggest it was 11 p.m. and they were lighting fires on the new family’s property. They were older than Jake’s little brother. Sixth grade. Maybe seventh.

When they got to the door and started pounding again, Jake went to his room, pulled his Discman and new Blink-182 CD out of his backpack, took the pillow from his sheet-less, blanket-less mattress, and returned to the living room.

They were still knocking when he came back. Both of them, it sounded like. It reminded Jake of Zombies, pawing, wanting brains and blood.
He sat on the three-foot ledge on the far end of the living room—so he could still see them—and put the headphones on, replacing the door pounding with a drum solo that sounded similar. He could still feel the vibrations of their pounding on his back.

The ledge he sat on didn’t serve much purpose as far as he could tell. Maybe the leftovers of an old wall or the front lip of a sealed-up fireplace. A fireplace made the most sense. The fat brick chimney was the first thing he’d noticed in the flashes of red when they’d pulled into the driveway just before the sun had set. He wasn’t able to take in much else because the drive-straight-through attitude had taken its toll on all of them, especially his father, who looked like he was moving in wet cement as he opened the sliding door of the U-Haul and started rummaging in the dark for their beds.

He and Allen hurried as best they could, looked at the yard, the garage, down the street, while their father grunted and swore and hooked mattresses around doorframes. It was hard to make out any of their side of town for sure, especially colors. Everything looked a different shade of red. The only non-red items were the lighted windows of their neighbors’ houses. Those were gold.

After a while the vibrations stopped and he watched the kids walk away from the door and the bags of shit and disappear around the house. Toward the street, he figured. Toward home.

He was wrong. He didn’t even make it through another song before he saw the beams of flashlights jumping around outside. He paused the Discman, and right as he did he heard the rattle of metal on metal. The U-Haul door sliding up.
Jake ripped the headphones off and went to the window. Yep. They stood on the metal ramp of the U-Haul, staring at the cargo.

The gator painted on the side of the U-Haul stared at Jake with skeptical eyes.

They boys both had flashlights, and the beams shook slightly as they flew like houseflies from the end tables to the upright couches to the pieces of bed frame. What the hell was their problem? For the hundredth time in the past week, Jake knew he would hate Iowa.

Jake wished his father were home, but then he thought of his old man’s stature—short, thin—his movements—slow, a slight limp—and his overall disposition for life—timid, unassuming, a baby deer amongst diesel engines and four-wheel drive. His father would do nothing, or even if he did act out, stand up, do something, who knew what the kids would pillage by the time he took Jake seriously and slid on his stupid gray slippers and limped his way from the hallway to the living room to the driveway?

It didn’t matter anyway. Jake was on his own.

He knew complete surprise was his best shot. If the kids had time to see him coming, see that he was only a little taller and more filled-out than them, they’d laugh or shrug or chase him back inside. Or down the street. And if they caught up with him or he tripped they’d beat him with their thick-handed flashlights and he’d have to lie to his father and brother about the welts on his temples and chin and forearms and say that he tripped down the basement steps because he wasn’t used to how steep they were. Or he would be forced to tell the truth, the story the way it happened. Almost. He’d substitute the kids for actual high schoolers, soon-to-be-seniors, like him, only the biggest and
baddest of the kind, and explain that he’d done the honorable thing in trying to protect the few pieces of Florida, of memories, of home, they had left.

The gator had a smile on its face, just a little one, teeth glowing red in the flashes. Fucking pussy, is what it looked like it was thinking.

Jake opened the door in a whoosh and jumped over the flames, screaming like an animal, the way he did into his pillow those first few nights long ago when his mother had died. Without the pillow, the noise scared the hell out of him, how brittle and unnatural it sounded. A wood chipper with something steel running through it.

The kids didn’t hear him. Or at least in the way he wanted them to hear. It was the sound of the wind turbines, their dull hum. Jake could hear it too, even over the metallic scream ricocheting inside his skull.

When he was about to the U-Haul, one of the kids finally turned around and jumped a little. He nudged his buddy. They both faced him.

Jake stopped just before the ramp. The bottoms of his feet were hot from the barefoot run on pavement.

It was the first time he got a clean look at them. He realized he’d been wrong about their age. They were still younger than him, but not by much. One had a scar running down the length of his cheek, dark pink, almost purple, between every flash of red. Another, the one Jake was especially unsure about, age-wise, had little peachy whiskers above his lip and was pushing six feet and 200 pounds. They stared down at him, bags under their eyes, like they were just as tired and fed-up as Jake. Their flashlights pointed down, and shone the metal U-Haul floor like two little suns.
“Pretty late for a fight,” Jake said, and closed his eyes, hard, as soon as he said it. Good job, Clint Eastwood. Good fucking job.

The scar kid and the peach fuzz kid looked at each other, then scar kid said, “Better speak up. Queefs are hard to hear over the turbines.”

They laughed. Peach fuzz punched scar kid on the shoulder.

“Get the fuck off our property,” said Jake. He felt better about that one. The laughter stopped.

“Property?” said Scar kid. He squeezed out this high-pitched sound. A ha maybe.

“What do you know about property? You think Maxton is your property?”

Jake took a step up the ramp. The metal felt nice on his feet. “I don’t want any part of your shitty little redneck town. All I know is this is our house. We own it. So go home.”

Scar kid rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger and shook his head. It looked oddly adult. Jake took another step toward them, glancing inside the U-Haul, looking for the bucket of Allen’s sports equipment. Inside the bucket, wherever it was, Jake knew the duck-taped handle of his little brother’s TPX baseball bat was sticking out. He imagined connecting with scar kids head, sweat spot right on his cheek. It would be so much easier to hit than a baseball, which Allen could do with ease and which Jake had failed at again and again until he finally called it quits. His father turned ghost-white that day.

Scar kid must have seen Jake eyeing the stuff behind him because he turned around and shined his flashlight inside. The light stopped on the TV.
“How about we take the boob tube and call it good,” said scar kid.

With that, peach fuzz walked toward it and bent over. His ass crack turned red.

Jake took another step. “How about I get my dad?”

“New turbine guy?” said scar kid. An ugly smile stretched across his face. The scar curved around it. “I’d love to meet him.”

“Okay,” Jake said. “One second.”

Jake turned around and walked back toward the house. The turbines grew louder as he left the U-Haul. Its cave-like shape must have been blocking some of the sound. He looked back as he neared the door. The bluff hadn’t worked. The boys were duck stepping down the ramp with the TV under their arms. Scar kid went first, went backwards, and peach fuzz had to hunch over to make up for the incline and the height difference. It wasn’t an easy job: a 42 incher with a back the size of a mini-fridge. Jake knew from the move out, he and his father fighting over which way to angle it through the front door, having to set it down three times at least. The whole move out went like that, sweating, swearing, while Allen and his friends fished from the sandbars one last time.

Jake waited until the kids passed the house and were almost to the street before he ran to the U-Haul and searched for the bat. He nudged past the couch and climbed over their tubs of clothes and walked on the box springs of his father’s bed but realized it was hopeless. Too much stuff. Too dark. The red flashes couldn’t reach that far.

He ran back to the house and picked up one of the shit bags, the one with red flames, which were now yellow, and jogged toward the street. He held it as far away from his body as possible but could still smell it. A dull sour. Rancid grass. It was
heavier than he thought and warm liquid leaked through the bottom and ran down the webs of his fingers.

A few lights still shone through the windows of the houses on the block, but Jake couldn’t see any movement in them now. Jake worried about the streetlights as he approached the kids, who weren’t that far up the street. The dull, cream-colored glow made things more visible between red flashes, and Jake was sure they’d see him coming.

Scar kid saw him, but not soon enough. Jake’s bare feet and the turbine moans had kept the attack a secret for too long. He tossed the bag underhand and it flopped through the air like Jell-O and landed on peach fuzz’s back, where it jumped into a ball of white fire and died just as fast. The smell stung Jake’s nose.

Peach fuzz dropped the TV. Scar kid held on and it took him down with it. The screen shattered into giant triangles.

Jake bit his tongue at the sight of it and felt hot, salty blood run between his front teeth. He was a fucking idiot. What did he expect would happen?

Covered in shit, peach fuzz ran to the neighbors’ yard and silently rolled on the grass like his redneck teachers had probably taught him. Only there was no fire. Just shit.

Scar kid watched his friend roll and then turned to Jake. Jake kept his eye on peach fuzz, at the way he rolled, arms at his sides, at his stoic silence through it all.

Scar kid picked up a shard of TV screen glass. Jake laughed. Now that the TV lay in rubble, he felt tired and a little amused.

“What the fuck you laughing at, turbine boy?”
Over scar kid’s shoulder, at his neighbor’s place, a silhouette watched from the sliding glass door, hands near the face, shielding glare. Jake hoped whoever it was didn’t think this had been all him. He looked pretty guilty though. Chasing some poor kids down, breaking their TV, throwing fire at them. He knew his father would be disappointed if he heard the story. That same pale face. He’d be disappointed no matter what. The TV was gone.

“I said what the fuck’s so funny?” Scar kid stepped toward him. He stabbed the air with the glass shard.

“What do you think you’re going to do?” said Jake. The blood from his tongue made it hard to understand, even to him.

“Cut you a new asshole,” he said.

“Dude,” said Jake. His voice was whiny and he lowered it. “The TVs busted. What does it matter?” He looked at the neighbors’. The silhouette still watched. Peach fuzz rolled.

Scar kid kept coming and Jake kept backing up.

“Stop fucking around,” Jake said. Whiny again. He cleared his throat, swallowed more blood. “Let’s just all go home, get some sleep.”

Peach fuzz stood up and walked toward them, his fire safety course complete. He was a little more hunched over than before.

“How’s your back, Dyl?” said scar kid.

“Smells like burnt cow shit,” Peach fuzz said. His voice was higher than Jake thought it’d be.
“What should we do about it?”

Peach fuzz picked up his own glass shard. So did Jake.

Right as Jake did, the neighbors’ front door flew open, banging the metal rail of the steps. It was a girl in pink shorts and a pink sports bra. She walked toward them—no shoes, no flashlight, no baseball bat, no bag of fire, no glass shard, just her.

Her thigh muscles wiggled each step she took, and she walked fast. The kids backed away from Jake and away from the girl until they knocked into the row of mailboxes behind them. In the silence, the turbines groaned louder and louder, and then, when the girl spoke, the sound seemed to disappear.

“What do I tell your brother, Paul?”


“Why wouldn’t I?” said the girl. She had her hands on her hips, facing the kids, sideways to Jake. Jake could see the muscles in her shoulders, and now that she was under the streetlights, he also saw that her shorts and bra weren’t pink, but white. The fabric stood out against her tan skin—tanner than most Florida girls Jake knew, even tanner than Allen—and the slight curve of her belly moved in and out with her rapid breaths. Her hair was long and yellow and everywhere. When the sky flashed, it held no red.

Scar kid made a scrunched up face. “Just don’t tell him,” he said. “Please don’t.”

“You detassel this summer?” said the girl.

Scar kid made another scrunched face. “Yeah.”
The girl turned to Jake, blinked, rubbed the sleep from her eyes. She had beautiful eyelids. “How much you think that TV costs?” She nodded toward it, a gesture that was annoyed and manly and sexy all at once.

“I don’t know,” he said. “It’s pretty old.”

She turned to the kids. “Three hundred bucks,” she said. “You either give it to him or you give it to me.”

“Bullshit,” said scar kid.

The girl walked toward them and scar kid put his hands out. “Okay, okay,” he said.

The girl kept walking until she was inches away from the boy’s face. The top of scar kid’s head went up to her chin. Jake wondered what she smelled like, her breath, her skin. He didn’t think something like her existed in this state.

“The only bullshit here is what you did tonight and what’s between your ears. You think this family’s to blame for what happened? You think the last was?”

The kid said nothing.

“Go home,” she said.

And they did. Scar kid grabbed a shard of glass and slid it into his pocket, probably a souvieveer, and they went up the street, north, dragging their feet.

The girl started walking away too, back to her house. Jake wondered if he should say thanks, ask her what the kids’ problems were, ask her name.

He didn’t. Instead, he just stood there among the pieces of TV screen, watching her move. Over her right shoulder, the silhouette still stared through the sliding door.
Only when the girl entered the house did it disappear, back into the heart of the house somewhere.

**Ed**

Ed followed the boys. He stuck to the sidewalk, the trees shading the bloodshot winks of the turbines, keeping him hidden. He wanted a smoke but didn’t want to give himself away. The boys took the street. They walked in the middle, never wary of traffic. In the middle of the day they would have acted the same. In Maxton, a car driving past was something your head turned toward without thinking. It was rare and fun: rare because the town was so small; fun because you always knew the driver. Even Ed, who’d only lived there a couple of years, knew most of the drivers by the end. The only car you might see this late was Deputy Shively, but he mostly drove around the north side of Maxton. The Brick Bar, the shit huts. It took a lot for him to cruise the south side. Ed found that out the hard way, when the harassment started, harassment not unlike the kind he’d seen tonight. It was exactly the same, right down to the house. It was strange: others moving into Ed’s old home. But he didn’t feel invaded or betrayed by the new family. He felt a kinship.

The boys cut through the old co-op lot. The gravel was white as the moon between turbine flashes. No cover. Ed waited until they rounded the plywood-windowed building before he followed.

Ed wasn’t sure what he’d do. From the corn, he’d seen the whole thing go down. The bags of shit, the TV, the argument. He’d been watching for that very reason. He wasn’t about to let what happened to him and Maria happen again to this new family. In
all his confusion and dilapidation—he’d gone to hell this past year: crusted face, greased, wild hair, neck beard growing into the curls of his chest, connecting to form some sort of impenetrable, beaver-hide chainmail—he recognized that. He had planned on simply yelling at the boys, but the Fitch girl had already done that, and all Ed’s hiding and waiting in the corn made him want to do more of the same. He hadn’t felt this alive in months. So he followed.

The boys crossed Main Street and headed toward the Good’n’Quick. The lights were off and a red Dodge sat next to one of the two pumps. It belonged to Rolland Reed, a senior at Charter-Maxton Schools. Ed was not surprised to see Reed’s truck, though it still saddened him.

Rolland Reed: the mean son of a bitch could run the football like nobody’s business. He was even better at wrestling, gone to state in it last year. Ed knew because everybody knew—because Deputy Shively liked to run his mouth about Rolland every chance he got. He was the kid’s uncle or cousin or something, and sizzled over with pride about it.

Reed lived in Charter but had a bad history with Maxton, the turbines, and the people who ran them—people like the new family, people like Ed, who for three years worked on them, or watched others work, while he nodded and made checkmarks and occasionally fired someone for taking their kids up the ladder or screwing one of the many Maxton high school burnouts inside the dark, cylindrical base. In fact, the turbines were part of Reed’s bad history. Now the workers were small in number, specialized in wind energy, but a few years ago, when the blades were still coming in by the hundreds
on giant flat beds and the roads to the build sights were fresh and growing in length and number, the workers were huge in number and rough in character. At the Good’n’Quick, one came in drunk and knocked over the shelves like dominos. At the post office, one flashed the school board secretary his penis. At the old school, a number of them broke into the old Gymnasium and lived there for two months. And one night, at the shit huts, under the watchful eyes and slapping blades of the turbines, two of them raped Reed’s sister.

The men went to jail, the girl went on to win homecoming queen, but Reed was never the same. And neither was Ed. After the rape, everyone hated the turbines. Everyone hated Ed.

Ed jogged back behind the co-cop, crossed Main from farther down the street, and slunk along the sides of more boarded-up buildings until he stood behind the corner of something that used to be called AC&D Drugs. From there, he was within hearing distance.

“So those fuckers are scared,” Ed heard Reed say.

Ed peeked around the corner. He was fifty feet away. Reed was on the tailgate. Next to him sat CJ Good, Old Man Good’s son.

The two younger boys stared up at them. The fat one’s shoulders rose and fell like a wave. “The dad never came out,” said the smaller boy. Ed thought he could hear the scar on the kid’s face. It smashed his words together. “But we scared the kid good.”

“Until Terri came out,” said the fat one.
“She’ll be gone soon enough,” Reed said. He nudged CJ. “You better hit that before it leaves.”

“Not cool,” CJ said.

Reed shrugged and turned to the boys. “How much shit did she give you?”

“She wants us to pay for the TV.”

“Fuck that. But she might be trouble. I say we lay low until she’s California dreaming.” Reed sung this last part. It was terrible.

“Okay,” the smaller boy said. “You pay, we’re in.”

“You guys are all nuts,” CJ said. “And you’re going to make this new family just as nuts as my neighbor.”

“Fuck that guy,” Rolland said.

“You did,” CJ said. “You fucked him right out of his house and right next to me.”

“I never told you to move in there.”

Ed’s face burned. They were talking about him. CJ and Ed were neighbors, both living one town over in Charter, waiting for something. Ed had quit Florida Wind, moved out of his house and into that tiny strip of apartments, and didn’t know what he was waiting for. But CJ, done with high school last May, was waiting for his girlfriend to graduate. Ed had picked this up through the conversations he sometimes overheard through the thin walls of their apartment building. CJ’s girlfriend had a loud voice and a nice rack. Sometimes Ed heard more than conversations through his walls.

“Go close up daddy’s store then,” Reed said to CJ. “You don’t need to be here.”
“Already did,” CJ said.

Ed didn’t understand why CJ lived next to him. Ed had moved from Maxton out of necessity—protection from physical threats and those of his own heart—but CJ could have lived with his parents and waited a year. Independence, Ed supposed. That, and his old man was a dick. A rich one, though. One that could pay for his son’s rent.

“So where’s our money?” said the boy with the scar.

“Where’s my proof?” Reed said.

Scar boy reached into his pocket and handed something to Reed. It caught a flash of red that hurt Ed’s eyes.

“What is it?” Reed said.

“Part of the TV screen.”

Reed twisted it in his hand. “Huh,” he said. “I thought it’d be sharper.”

Jake

Jake woke to a living room full of furniture. His father sat on the kitchen floor, leaned against the cabinet, drinking water from a pink plastic cup. Sweat soaked his faded Georgia Bulldogs t-shirt and shined off his skinny arms and legs. His face was covered in beard stubble and tiny sweat rivers. He looked mad, though Jake had never seen his father mad before. Not like the loud fathers on TV.

“What time is it?” Jake said.

“Eleven.” It came out soft and nasally. A kazoo, Jake always thought.

Jake leaned against the counter and looked out the window. It was bright. He looked back at his father. They made eye contact and Jake looked out the window again.
He didn’t know how to talk to his father without Allen around. After his mother died bringing Allen into their world, Jake and his father focused so much attention on Allen—diapers, bottle feeding, baths; reading, dressing, haircuts; playing, scolding, homework—that they didn’t know how to act when he wasn’t around.

After awhile, Jake said, “You could have woke me up and ask for some help. Your lucky you didn’t break your back.”

“Where’s the TV?” his father said.

Jake felt his stomach fold inside itself. Hunger giving way to stress. He had forgotten about it—at least in the minute he’d been up and in his dreams, which he couldn’t remember at all. Maybe this was it. His father would get mad. He’d never lost a TV before.

“I don’t know. Jake waited for his father to press, and when he didn’t, Jake knew he’d won—that his father had already thrown the investigation out the window. For the hell of it, Jake added, “We packed it, right?”

“You think we’d miss something like that?” his father said. “A TV? Our only one?” He grabbed the bridge of his nose and lowered his head. It was a gesture Jake knew all too well. He had that same look when he told Jake they were moving. Hopeless, is what he took it as.

His father, not looking up, cup shaking slightly from fatigue in his other hand, said, “Theft? Theft in this little town?”
“Is anything else missing?” Jake said. He knew the answer. After the girl with the shoulders had saved his ass he’d watched for the hick kids from the living room window until his father came home. They never showed.

His father looked up from the floor but still held his nose. His hand made it so Jake couldn’t see his eyes. “I don’t know,” he said. “I just started hauling."

“Anything to eat around here?” said Jake.

“Al was eating those fruit bars last time I saw him. I think he’s outside.” He brought the cup to his lips.

Outside everything was baking, including Allen. He was on a blanket it the middle of the lawn, shirtless, reading a *Sports Illustrated* and listening to Jake’s Discman. He was the only ten-year-old Jake knew who laid out like that. He didn’t do it for the ladies. He did it because he wanted to look exactly like Ken Griffey Junior, right down to the skin.

The driveway cooked the balls of Jake’s feet as he walked passed the U-Haul. It was empty, minus the mower and some tools and boards for the garage, and Jake was glad to see it that way. The emptiness meant safety. No more hick kid threats.

The turbines stood dull and lifeless. Hot-white among corn so dark-green Jake could have sworn it was black. The golden tops of the corn—tassels, he was pretty sure—twiddled every once in a while, but overall, the air was stagnant. The turbines seemed farther apart than they had last night. Less pushy, too. It was the daylight that did it—made them unthreatening and real. But the daylight did the same to everything else. It was all real. The shit town and the hick kids and the TV pieces Jake had swept into a
jagged pile and dumped from a bucket into the field while Allen slept and his father worked.

This was his life. It was 1999 and he was in Iowa, staring at fields and dirt and turbines. He’d be there, staring at the same shit when the millennium hit and the world snapped dark. Or maybe it’d stay lit. Either way, he’d be here and his old life wouldn’t. There was no Zach or Rodg or Anderson. No beach with Tia Burlington in her green bikini beyond the corn. No salt breeze to dry the sweat already forming on the hair above his ears. No openness to give his eyes a break. No water. No Florida.

As Jake neared the blanket he could smell Allen. Bananas and sweat. The bananas brought his hunger up a notch. Foot-high grass surrounded the blanket—surrounded everything—like a frame. Nutrigrain wrappers, three of them, lay crumpled near his head.

Jake nudged his brother with his foot and he moved a bottle cap from one eye. He used them for tanning goggles, fearing the unauthentic raccoon mask. He squinted up at Jake and moved a headphone from his ear. “What’s My Age Again” poured out. Jake’s favorite song. Allen’s, too, which seemed to be the way things worked for about everything on Jake’s list of favorite things. Minus Ken Griffey Junior. Jake had always been loyal to his Florida pro sports teams. His terrible, inconsistent Florida sports teams. Allen picked teams from all over the country to be his favorites, normally whoever had the best records or coolest players, the latter being his reason for his Mariners fanhood. And the Griffey.
“Did you need something?” Allen said. “Because you’re kind of blocking my sun.”

Jake stepped aside. “Any more of those?” he said, pointing at the Nutrigrain wrappers.

“Fresh out,” said Allen.

Jake sighed and blinked the sweat out of his eyes. Sweat ran down Allen’s face and neck too, putting an even darker stain into the couch cushion under his head. He hadn’t needed that before. He used to make pillows out of sand.

“Did you help dad this morning?” said Jake.

“He didn’t ask.”

“How about we explore this piece of shit town?” said Jake.

“In a while,” said Allen. “I’m not going to have as many months of rays up here. I got to get my money’s worth.”

Jake grabbed the tall grass with his toes and ripped some out. “So keep your shirt off while we explore.”

Allen snickered through his nose and his exposed eye rolled. “That’ll tan even,” he said, like Jake was the dumbest person he’d ever seen.

“How about you get an even tan mowing the lawn?” Jake said.

“We just moved,” said Allen, face passive, unmoving. “Let’s take a day off. Recuperate.”

“Either you mow or we head up town.”

“Can’t do it,” he said. “Day off.”
Jake hacked spit from the back of his throat and lowered it slowly toward his brother in a long string.

Allen watched with his one exposed eye as the saliva descended toward his face. When it got a few inches away, he rolled his magazine and hit it at the bottom globe. The spit wrapped around the magazine and the remaining strand swung towards Jake and stuck to his chin.

Allen laughed and put the headphone back on his ear and the bottle cap back on his eye.

Jake lowered spit again and this time Allen didn’t see it coming. It landed on his neck. Allen wiped it with the back of his hand and did nothing. Jake did it again, this time on his chest, and Allen put the magazine down and rubbed the spit in with both hands.

“Thanks,” he said, way too loud, an effect of the headphones. “I needed more oil.”

Watching Allen rub the spit made Jake sick. He decided on a new approach and headed to the U-Haul.

The mower started with a growl that bounced off the metal walls and pushed his eardrums to their limit. Jake threw it in gear and drove down the ramp and toward Allen, starting the blade when he hit the grass.

Right before he reached his brother’s head, Jake took a sharp right. Long, fine grass flew through the air and coated Allen’s face and chest. Allen sprang up and sprinted after the mower. Jake put it into high gear but it was no match for someone
running, especially Allen. Jake had it too. That raw speed, a gift from their mother, one he’d squandered and his brother had put to good use.

Allen hopped onto one of the mower’s footrests and punched at Jake’s neck and shoulders with his little brown fists. Jake covered his head, laughing. They drove into the cornfield and stopped dead as the blades choked and died on thick stalks and clods of dirt.

After they untangled the blades and Allen mowed, leaving lines of cut, clumped grass as thick as washed-in seaweed, and after Jake arranged the furniture in the living room to look like some kind of bachelor pad on acid, the two of them walked into their new town, up Center Street, in search of food.

Jake had started to have second thoughts about exploration after moving all the furniture around, but their father, half asleep on the couch, sweaty middle cushion flipped over, gave them a mission.

“I’m not driving to God knows where today and looking all over for groceries,” he’d said. “See if they’ve got anything for lunch up town at the gas station.”

The thought of food sent Jake’s stomach into a fit again. No food yet and it was almost two. So they were on their way.

Allen wore his Orlando Magic shorts and no shirt. His wet-penny skin glistened. Jake wore his Magic shorts, too—only his were the Away black, not the Away blue—and a cut-off-sleeved Reef shirt the color of the Gulf in postcards. The sun was meaner than hell. A white circle falling on them again and again like a foul ball set on repeat.
So far they’d seen nothing worth notice. No small-town images to write home—their old home—about. No dog with one leg or old man on a deck swing or kids waging water-balloon or squirt-gun wars in a lush front yard. There was no movement of any kind. Just houses sitting as still as the turbines.

Even the trees looked dead, like their leaves were solid plastic, like a storm wouldn’t nudge them an inch.

“This blows,” said Allen after another quiet block.

“Better get used to it,” Jake said.

“I still don’t see why I couldn’t ride my bike.”

“Because I don’t have one.”

“Stupidest thing you’ve ever done,” said Allen.

And he was right. It was.

The morning of the move, Jake left his midnight blue, ten-speed Mongoose in Pensacola. On purpose. He’d propped it against the Burlington’s garage door. Tia Burlington, his old flame, his old, forever-gone love, had said she liked it once. When she was fifteen—Jake was fourteen—she’d picked it off the ground at Tim Milroy’s pool party and pedaled, standing, down the sidewalk, the green, bunny-eared tie of her bikini top and the dewy fingers of yard sprinklers trailing her like a tail of a kite. She’d picked the bike up and ridden it like it was hers. Like it was theirs. And when she came back around the block with a Lemon Shake Up in her hand she dropped the bike at Jake’s feet and said, “I like that bike.”
On moving day, before they even hit the Alabama border, Jake realized his error. What a creepy loser he was, leaving it for her. She’d said “I like that bike,” to no one in particular—which, because she was Tia Burlington, was to everyone within hearing distance. Jake, that afternoon at Tim Milroy’s, just happened to be in that distance.

She’d also said it three years ago.

She also never said anything to him directly, other than that time sophomore year, her junior, when they’d accidentally bumped shoulders in the hall on his way to Medievalism and she’d called him Ronnie. Or maybe she’d said “sorry” and it sounded like Ronnie because the hallways were always noisy at Pens High. It was probably the halls. She knew his name. She had to. They lived only a few palm-scattered blocks from each other. Used to, anyway.

Still, she wouldn’t know the bike. Her father would take one look at it and set it in the yard or maybe even out by the trash. It was old bike, small, and the chain was rusty.

But she had liked it. Maybe she’d remember. Maybe she’d think of him, Ronnie or Jake or whoever, or maybe, if she didn’t remember any of him, if she rode the bike, put her slender feet on the pedals and went for a Lemon Shake Up, she’d remember that time at Tim Milroy’s, remember the feel of it, the smoothness of its gears, the way it hit the ground and the sound of that nerdy kid’s voice saying thanks, not once, but twice, after she’d said she liked it, because he wasn’t sure she’d heard.

That was Jake’s problem. He shouldn’t have focused on Tia. She was older. She was hot—the hottest—and he was a goddamn nerd. The not-particularly-smart kind. The
worst kind. Short, scrawny, uncertain. He needed to go after his own kind. He should have been making out with other dim nerds. Feeling them up. Getting to second, third, home. Getting a track record under his belt and prepping for college—if he decided to apply somewhere and somewhere decided to let him in.

Jake wondered where Tia was going for college. He’d heard FIU. The Golden Panthers. She would fit in nicely there. Her hair was golden.

**Brette**

She awoke but kept her eyes closed.

“I said, Are you okay?”

The tone was unfamiliar so she knew who it was the new neighbor boy—small-town process of elimination.

Brette lifted her head off the counter. He was staring down at her, wearing an 80s-looking shirt. He didn’t seem as feeble as he had last night under the red flashes with Brette’s older sister standing over him.

Brette had pulled for him last night as she watched through the glass door—hoped things would turn out differently, that these turbiners would be okay—but that’s all she did: she hoped, watching it unfold like a movie goer, until Terri went to the kitchen for her protein shake and found Brette leering at the street.

“Damn it,” her sister had said. “People already messing with the new guys?” There was tiredness in her voice that Brette knew. She knew it because that’s the way her own voice sounded—always. Only Terri’s voice was the only that way when she
woke for protein or water or to pee. Not all the time. Terri was a dreamer. She could sleep whenever. Everyone was a dreamer but Brette.

Brette stood up. The neighbor boy wasn’t bad looking. Just thin and a little slumped over. Something about his soft mouth and the way his eyebrows bent down in a permanent, just-barely frown might make him doable—not for Brette, who didn’t do that, but for others who did.

Brette rubbed the sleep from her eyes. “Yeah?” she said.

“Do you have any regular food here?” said the boy.

“Define regular.”

He squinted his eyes slightly. He carried a certain dignity in his dark features—like he’d seen some stuff—non-Iowa stuff, exciting stuff—and like he might be tough in his own weird way. That didn’t bode well for him. Rolland Reed and the other Charter guys would see that dignity and do their best to crush it. Then again, the guy’s face didn’t matter; the town he lived in now—his father’s role in it and outside of it—was all that did.

“Bread, milk, things that will keep you alive,” the guy said.

“Are you dying?” Brette said. She couldn’t help it. She was always cruel when she just woke up, probably because her brain was so starved for sleep.

Something crashed from the candy aisle. Brette knew from the rattle that it was the Snickers display. They were on sale because they were old—expired, actually, like a lot of things at the Quick, only Old Man Good didn’t see it that way. He considered candy old one year after the expiration date. Soup, two.
She also knew that the younger one—the little brother—had knocked the display after she noticed the top of his dark buzzcut floating behind the aisle.

“Damn it, Al,” said the older one. He walked toward the aisle, slow at first, then faster. “Put it down before it—”

A louder crash boomed through the store, stopping him mid-sentence as the snap of candy bars hitting the tile, one after the other, spilled out for a good three seconds.

Brette smiled and that strange feeling came over her face —like the muscles under her eyes didn’t remember exactly how to work. When was the last time she smiled? Normal people didn’t have to ask themselves that question. Normal people, even if they weren’t happy, even if they were downright depressed, wouldn’t ask themselves that question. But she did. She wasn’t normal and everyone knew it—even everyone but this new guy an his brother.

She made sure her ponytail was pulled all the way through the hole in the back of her hat and headed toward them. There were ten aisles in the store, and she only crossed three of them, but when she reached the candy her smile was long gone. The skin under her eyes still felt funny.

The older one was on his knees, scooping Snickers into the metal basket.

“Hi,” said the younger one. He extended a tan hand. Brette brought hers out, hesitated, and shook it.

The older one glanced up and then hopped to his feet, still holding all those Snickers. He was only a little taller than Brette. His almost-frown was less majestic up close.
Brette looked from him to the younger one, then back again. The three of them stood there for a few seconds, not saying anything. Then the older one said, “We’re the Lakowskis. We just moved here.”

“You’re from Florida, right?” Brette said.

“How’d you know?” the big brother said.

“I don’t remember,” Brette said, and she really didn’t. Word worked that way in Maxton. People called and whispered and talked on brief dog-walk stops and before long no one knew who spilled what.

As she looked at the Snickers scattered on the floor, trying to remember, just for the hell of it, she felt the gaze of the older one trail up and down her body. She knew there wasn’t much to look at: no lips, no butt, barely any chest, the ugly orange Good’n’Quick apron pressing her breasts down, making the leftovers of her mother’s boob genes—genes her sister had greedily taken in large quantities a year before Brette was born—even less impressive.

She blinked a few times, hoping he’d notice her eyes and not the bags around them. They seemed a dull gray to her, but once, on AOL, Alfred O’Neal had called them beautiful—back when she still used to sign on. She didn’t like Alfred but appreciated the compliment and showed him so with a thnx and a smiley. She never used smilies, thought they were stupid, and hoped Alfred appreciated the gesture—especially when it was so hard for her real face to smile.

The older one didn’t notice her eyes, gave up on her body, and started back into his candy bar clean up. What did she care? He was nothing special, anyway.
The little brother kept staring at her. “Got a name?” he said.

“Al,” said the older one. He didn’t look up from the floor.

“I’m Brette. I’m pretty sure I’m your neighbor.”

The older one glanced up at her, then toward his little brother. His eyebrows slanted even farther down. A real frown—a scared one. So he hadn’t told his little brother about the TV. Probably not his dad either.

“I had a friend named Brett,” said the young one. “He was a boy though. He’s in Florida still.”

“So,” said the older one, holding and staring at the last Snickers, “you the neighbor across the street...or neighbor by the pine trees?”

“Pine trees,” said Brette. The pine trees had been her dad’s idea—a type of barrier to separate themselves visually from the last turbine guy and his wife. Apparently it had worked. No one had messed with Brette’s family.

The older one stared at Brette for a second and then stood up.

“So was that your sister who—” He closed his mouth and looked down at his brother.

“Terri,” Brette said.

“She was, I mean, she—” He looked at his little bro again and scratched behind his ear. Al looked up at him with adult-like patience—like he was the older brother, waiting for a toddler to form words. Brette wondered if this kid was an example of an “old soul.” Her English teacher had put that on one of her papers before—about her—
but all it did was make her feel boring. This kid made it cool, somehow. Maybe being mature for your age was only cool up to a certain point and Brette had already passed it.

Before the older one could try to work his way around the TV conversation again, the back door slammed and familiar footsteps came toward them.

Old Man Good stopped when he saw them. He had used oil on his hands and wiped them across his Good’n’Quick button up, leaving brown stains on his chest that looked like wings. Good glanced at all three of them—eyes jumping, head still—and then continued forward. He had a bum pelvis, a product of his football days at Maxton—when they were just the Maxton Lions, twenty years before the Charter-Maxton merger—and his left shoe hissed as it slid across the tile. Brette couldn’t imagine him doing anything that required lateral movement. He was like a slowing train: one direction, one line. A lot had to happen for a rail switch, and that pissed-off pain in his eyes always accompanied it.

When he got to them he stuck an oily hand at the older one. “Charlie Good,” he said.

“Jake,” said the new guy. Brette could tell by the way he said his name that Good was turning his knuckles to powder.

“You boys fixing to buy something?” Good said. Brette couldn’t see his face—he had his back to her—but she felt it in his voice: the ever-present hatred of the turbines. He still had a grip on Jake’s hand. His earring—that out-of-place gold cross—jiggled when he spoke.
“We’re the new family in town,” said the younger one. “From Florida. We don’t have a mom. She died when she had me.”

Jake snapped his head at his brother. “Al.”

Good released Jake’s hand. “I’m sorry to hear that,” he said, not an ounce of emotion in his voice.

“We were wondering if you had any food,” Jake said.

Good slid to the Snickers display, bent down like a rusted crane, grabbed a couple, and tossed them to Jake. He caught one and the other hit the ground. “Two for one,” said Good. He bent down again and lifted the sign—two-for-one—Brette had drawn hours earlier. He held it out to both of them. “See?”

“I mean, like, sandwiches and stuff,” Jake said.

“Do you have any hotdogs?” Al said. His brown eyes lit with excitement. “I love gas station hotdogs. Jake says it’s a disease, but he doesn’t know what’s good. It’s the texture. Those warmers make them crispy.”

Good looked down at him, said nothing, and looked back at Jake. “You’re five years late on the sandwiches,” he said. Then he turned and slid toward the back door.

Jake tossed the Snickers back in the bin. The noise stopped Good, but he didn’t turn around. “Fitch,” he said.

“Yeah?” said Brette.

“I came into the store earlier.”

“Sorry,” she said.

“You can’t take people’s money if you’re asleep.”
“I know,” she said.

He slid out the door.

Once Good was gone, Jake said, “What the fuck was that about?” The *fuck* made her stomach jump a little. She didn’t know why. She was well learned in that category, had studied under the best, her father, during Terri’s softball and basketball and volleyball games. Track meets, too, though not as much—there weren’t any refs to yell at.

“We really don’t have any sandwiches,” Brette said. “Burke won’t deliver here anymore. Not enough business.”

“Forget the sandwiches,” the younger one said. “What he meant was, What’s that old dude’s problem?”

“He doesn’t like you,” Brette said. Her bluntness surprised her. It was something about the younger one—the way he spoke and looked at you, like nothing could rattle him.

The little one said, “Why doesn’t he like us?”

“He just doesn’t,” Brette said.

“We don’t like that fuckwad either.”

“Al,” Jake said.

Brette looked at the older one, Jake, then back at Al. She could see the similarities when they both looked at her like that. Not in the frown, though—she was pretty sure the younger one couldn’t frown at all. It was something about their mouths and chins: soft, almost girl-like lips; sharp-angled jaws, like the bottom of a stop sign.
The corners of Jake’s stop sign were more obvious than his brother’s—the little guy still had some baby fat—but it was present in both.

Jake grabbed his little brother’s brown wrist. “Well, if there’s nothing to eat then we’ll get out of here.”

“Sorry,” Brette said. “The town over, Charter, has a Casey’s.”

They looked at her like she was crazy again.

“It’s a chain gas station,” she said, “With pizza and stuff.”

“Dad’s not going to want to drive,” Al said. It was one of those statements that had no intended recipient. It made her feel bad, though she wasn’t sure why. When they turned around and started walking, she felt worse.

“Wait,” Brette said. They stopped. “I can get you two some ice cream. She tilted her head toward the shop door. “But let’s hurry.”

The eyes of the little one—Al—lit like little moons. He pulled his arm away.

“Hell yes,” he said.

“All right,” said Jake.

Jake

On his third day in Iowa, Jake discovered skin-show softball practice and watched it for the rest of the week from his father’s bedroom window. It was better than staring at the wall where the TV should be, and pretty soon he realized it was better than television. Much, much better.

It was a two-girl practice. The neighbor sisters, Brette and Terri. With Jake’s room facing only corn and turbines and his father out doing uninteresting things
somewhere in that great, bland space, his father’s room, facing the neighbor’s yard, was the best option to watch the show.

The room had a few downfalls, though. The first was the feeling without his father inside it. Jake had never felt right in adult bedrooms—they were so sterile and business-like—and it felt that way even more when you knew only one grown up slept there. It was where his father stored himself. Where he’d store himself maybe for the rest of his life. That was it. That was all that happened there.

The room also smelled vaguely of his mother. Vanilla and Lilac—her two perfumes. Vanilla in the fall and winter. Lilac in the spring and summer. Jake wasn’t sure how. His mother had been dead for over ten years—since Allen was born. But he knew he could smell her. Maybe the move had stirred up the scents. At least both were present. Better than just one, especially lilac. Just lilac and it’d be like she was really there, in the present with them, enjoying the final days of summer.

God, he didn’t want to go to school.

School happened in Florida, but summer never really ended, either. Just held its breath for a few months. Jake wasn’t looking forward to this summer’s end. First of all, there was school. Goddamn school. Fucking new-hick-town school. Second, the warm weather wouldn’t just hold its breath here. It would die. Wind. Snow. Blizzards.

Blizzard. Saying it out loud felt wrong to him. Some dirty word he didn’t quite understand and felt uncomfortable using around others.
But even with thoughts of his mother and white winters and the lonely existence his father was cursed to live his final days in, it all soon gave way to the beauty of softball practice.

Jake would wake up, see Allen already making up his tanning station in the yard, and go down the hall to set up a camp of his own. Once there, in the room, he’d lay himself out on top of the comforter, feet where his father’s head would be, and on his stomach eat room-temperature popcorn and untoasted Pop-tarts while the sun grew higher and hotter and the sisters began to sweat through their tank tops.

Terri was always the focal point of the practice. She’d crush all sorts of things with her blue Nike bat. Golf-ball-sized wiffle balls, a softball on a string, a softball attached to the end of a pole. All of these things came at her from the right hand of Brette. It was obvious why they used wiffle balls and balls attached to strings and poles. There’d be nowhere to go with a regular softball. They’d either destroy houses or disappear into the corn.

Terri was the hottest girl Jake had ever seen—even hotter than Tia Burlington. Funny: both T names. But that was where the similarities stopped. Tia had worn her hair long and straight and golden-brown. Terri’s was yellow, almost white, and crinkled and always in a halfway-falling-out ponytail. Tia had moved with slow purpose, which Jake had once found painfully adorable and now, after watching Terri, thought of as unnatural and awkward. Almost bug-like. A pretty girl with the joints of a praying mantas. Terri was not slow or awkward at all. She moved quickly, and when she walked or stood or
took a drink from her milk jug full of water, she carried the swagger of an NFL
linebacker in her movements.

She was built like a linebacker, too. Sort of. The linebacker of the model world.
She was pushing six feet and her shoulder and back muscles convulsed under her copper
skin with each swing of the bat and her ass was so round and powerful Jake imagined he
could set a glass of water on top of it while she was standing and it would balance there,
safe and unbroken.

Sometimes, when Terri disappeared momentarily behind one of the scrawny pine
trees separating the two yards, Jake would consider chopping them down. It would be a
night job. Not too much work, either, given he bought a sharp enough saw. The trunks
were skinny. He had no car, though. He’d have to ask his dad for a ride to a city,
wherever that was. And then his dad would know about the saw and when the trees
disappeared there’d be questions.

Allen had only checked on Jake once during the week. He’d come inside to refill
his own jug of water, walked into the room, moved the curtain aside, said he couldn’t
wait until girls in his class started growing boobs, and left.

Jake said nothing, and knew Allen wouldn’t be back to check again. Once he
knew what you were doing and there wasn’t much interest in it for him, he’d leave you
alone. He was like a dog. Maybe his father would finally let them get a dog now that
they finally lived in the country. Well, sort of the country. More country than Jake had
ever seen.
Because he knew Allen wouldn’t check in again, and because his father came home around 6:00 each day, it was only the sight of Brette, working her skinny ass off alongside her glorious sister, no interest on that moon face of hers, that kept Jake’s hand off his dick. It just didn’t feel right. Something about the way Brette moved out there. She wasn’t completely unlike her big sister. She had some quicks. She had some purpose. But it was the acts she performed. Picking up wiffle balls. Holding onto the string attached to the ball that Terri sent flying into the air at thirty-degree angles. Swinging the ball on the pole toward Terri only to have it smashed back in the opposite direction, her tiny arms vibrating along with the metal stick.

It was pathetic. No other way to explain it.

Every day, around 2:30, the practices would end. The girls would disappear into the house for only their second time—they took an hour off at noon sharp, for lunch, he assumed—and half an hour later Brette would emerge, orange apron slung over her shoulder. She would hop on her bike and pedal north up the street.

So one afternoon, after blinking the haze of another practice from his head, when Jake found a note on the fridge from his father saying they needed milk and bread, he threw on a shirt and headed for the door. Maybe he could learn a thing or two about Terri at the Good’n’Quick that way—by talking to Brette. Hopefully the old timer with the limp wouldn’t be there again. It’d be hard to get any information that way.

It was another hot-as-hell day. The turbines spun slowly, making deep, whooshing sounds like one hundred jets flying over. He hadn’t been outside much lately and the heat shocked him a little. No way he was walking.
He took Allen’s bike, and from the blanket he heard no protest, only snores, as he pedaled away.

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When Jake walked in, Brette was reading a *Rolling Stone* and had her feet up on the counter. Vans. Size seven, he guessed, then shook the thought from his head. What kind of creep estimated those things?

“Nice ride,” she said.

He winced. He’d parked Allen’s Huffy on the periphery to avoid exactly that. He looked out the glass door, the window, and couldn’t see it. He wondered how she could. Stupid Tia Burlington and her stupid green bikini.

“It’s my little brother’s,” Jake said, and headed past her, toward the back of the store.

There was no bread, and most of the milk was two weeks expired. The whole freezer—even the pop sections—smelled a little like rotting milk. He searched the jugs for a decent date and cursed his father under his breath. On Tuesday night, his father had come home with groceries. Jake and Allen were thrilled. They’d been scraping by on their food from the move, and a guy could stomach Cheez Itz and Shock Tarts for only so long. But when he and Allen had looked inside the sacks, their excitement disappeared. Twinkies. Doritos. Pop-Tarts. A industrial-sized bag of Hot Tamales.

Way in the back, on the top milk shelf, Jake finally found some jugs with justifiable dates.
When he set the milk on the counter Brette slapped the magazine down and hopped off the stool. Her orange apron was too big for her. It fit her like a prom dress. She punched the keys on the cash register. She looked tired, and he told her so. He closed his eyes after he said it. Wasn’t it some sort of rule—you didn’t say that to girls? He felt like he’d been asking himself that question his whole life, shortly after each time he spoke to one.

“That’s because I am,” she said. She blew a strand of her hair out of her face and told him $3.50.

“Jeez,” he said.

“This isn’t Hy-Vee,” she said.

He didn’t know what the hell Hy-Vee was—probably another crappy little town—so he gave her a five and asked how summer was treating her. Pretty lame, but at least not a cardinal rule no-no.

“It’s wearing me out,” she said.

“I’ve noticed,” he said.

Brette gave Jake his change and a confused look. His mind raced. Shit, that was stupid. How could he bring up the softball practices without hinting he’d had his own VIP seat for a week?

“I mean from your practices,” he said. I’ve noticed you playing. Plus, Al tells me every time he comes inside.”

“Your brother, right?”

“Right,” he said. “The guy’s a little obsessed with his tan.”
Brette shut the register and smiled. It disappeared fast, but Jake saw that she had small, white teeth, a little crowded on the bottom.

“I noticed,” she said. “Minus some of the people who helped build the turbines, he’s the darkest Maxtoner ever. And they’re long gone now, so he takes it.”

“Nice,” he said.

Jake heard cussing from somewhere in the back. That room—a garage?—behind the store. He grabbed the milk jug.

“Don’t worry,” Brette said. “He’s working on Meryl Olsen’s truck. He’ll be back there all day.”

“What’s his deal, anyway?” said Jake.

“He has a reputation to keep,” said Brette. She gave him his change. “So how’s you’re summer?”

“It’s okay. How come you’re always playing softball so much?”

“Slaveball is what I call it.” She hopped back on the stool and rubbed her eyes.

“Nice,” he said again. God, what the hell was that? Was “Nice” his catch phrase now?

“Terri wants to be the next Kerri Wood,” she said. “Of the softball world, anyway.”

“Really? Allen’s only seen her swing a bat.”

“He must not catch the second half of practice,” Brette said.

The second half? So there was more. He’d been missing what she was best at.

“You know a lot of baseball?” he asked.
“By association.”

“She’s seems pretty freaking good, your sister. You know, from what Allen tells me. And he hasn’t even seen her pitch.”

Brette shrugged. “UCLA liked what they saw.”

“Is she going there?”

“Yep. Full-ride softball scholarship.” Brette opened her magazine again. “She leaves in a week.”

Jake squeezed the handle of the milk hard and felt his stomach drop. So that was it. She’d already graduated. She was leaving and he’d never have his chance. What chance? What was he thinking? It was probably a good thing. Now he could leave his father’s bedroom every once in a while. Now he could focus on school when it came.

“You need anything else?” said Brette. Angelina Jolie stared at him from the cover of her magazine. She lay in a bed, wearing some swirly, see-through top and sucking on her finger. Hot List of ’99, read the title.

“No, I’m good.”

He felt a sadness, and indescribable sadness, building inside him. He knew it was stupid, but also that it wasn’t just Terri. It was the act of leaving. The idea of someone else he knew—however briefly—going away. How could his mother leave like she did—Allen just born, all pink and slimy and new? How could Jake leave, next year, after he graduated, and not feel like a traitor? Like he wasn’t doing something wrong and unnatural?

“So,” said Brette.
He was still standing there like an idiot. More cussing rattled from the back room and into the store.

“See you,” he said.

Later that day, his father already home, Jake waited for practice number two to start from the third row of corn. The sun was falling fast. Mosquitoes and turbines buzzed in his ears.

The girls’ parents pulled into the driveway about ten minutes after he’d entered, both stepping out of a station wagon the same color as Terri’s bat. Jake wondered what kind of job they both had that allowed them to carpool. He’d assumed this state was too spread out for that.

They went into the house, and then the father reemerged in shorts and a cut-off T, stroking his mustache. He disappeared into the garage and came out with one of those double-windowed concrete blocks and a catcher’s mitt. It was obvious where Terri got her shoulders from, but his legs were tiny wires in comparison.

“Jake,” called Allen. Jake couldn’t see the front of his house from where he stood, but knew Allen was standing in the door frame, knew his father probably was, too. He said nothing. In fact, he backed another row into the corn.

“Jake,” Allen yelled again. “Supper.”

Pickles and Slim Jims, probably. Why couldn’t that wait?
Jake didn’t move. He watched Terri’s father, who lowered the garage door, placed the concrete vertically in front of it, and sat down, using the block as a chair. He grimaced as he lowered himself.

Terri came through the sliding glass door not two seconds later. She wore a full-out softball uniform. It was blue, C-M on the front, number 34 on the back. That was weird: the jersey. She had already graduated, softball season was over, yet she still had it. Jake chalked it up to legend. They would let her keep it, probably, if she was as good as her sister said. The blue of the jersey brought out the brilliance of her hair, made it looked like lightning.

Her glove was blue, too.

Terri stood forty feet from the garage, wound up, and slung her first pitch. It smacked the glove with a deep pop, but Jake figured he could have hit it. Well, maybe not him. Allen could, though.

That idea—Allen, or anyone, hitting the pitches—soon proved ridiculous. Each pitch came a little harder until Jake could barely track the neon ball. The sun was setting, casting a dirty glow on everything, but still, it was obvious why the pitching started only when Terri’s father came home. There was no way Brette could handle those pitches. She was too scrawny. Jake probably was, too.

They were nothing alike—Brette and Terri—unless you counted their faces. It was there if you really looked. He’d seen it during the day practices. The wide-set eyes and their slightly up-curved noses. Their light eyebrows, barely visible. Their full cheeks. Still, it seemed they had a different dad or mom. There was the height difference
and the skin. How could they come from the same genes? But then, how could he and Allen? Maybe neither set of siblings was that different. Maybe it was just a matter of sun exposure.

“Jake!” This time it was his father. There was no anger in his voice, just pain.

Jake ignored it. He kept watching this scene of father-daughter love and the house, also full of love, behind them. The mother watched from the sliding glass door every now and then, probably while she made supper.

The sun disappeared, the sky blinked a deeper and deeper red, and the pitches kept coming. Each one could easily dent the ruffled garage door that her father crouched in front of, but they never did. No matter how much force or nasty spin Terri put on the pitches, they never came close to anything but leather.

He saw Allen in the yard, looking for him. Jake moved back two more rows and kept watching. Terri grunted now, after she released each pitch, and her father shouted compliments.

“Jake, come on!” yelled his father.

It went on that way for a long time. Jake’s father calling for him and Terri’s father shouting at her and the neon ball cutting through the dark red sky like a flashlight. And Jake kept standing there, slapping mosquitoes from his legs, until Allen and his father and Terri and hers went inside, wishing he had just a little more time with her, even if all he did was watch.
Ed

Ed woke to screams so loud he sat up in bed, holding his breath. It came from the far wall. CJ and his girlfriend were fighting. He lay back down and rolled over. His alarm projected 4:03 a.m. in cool blue letters.

Charter was supposed to be the calmer, quieter of the two towns, but there were pockets of every town, he figured, where the lights stayed on all hours of the night, where you couldn’t tell the difference between a scream or a laugh or a sob, where a town’s name or size didn’t matter. With Ed’s luck, he’d moved into one of those pockets.

“You’re so fucking selfish,” screamed the girl.

“It didn’t mean anything.”

“You’re just like your dad. You’re going to stay here forever!”

“You’re the one that made me stay here. You think I want to stay here?”

“Then go. If this is how it’s going to be then go!”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

A door slammed. Ed could tell it wasn’t the front door, but a door inside. The front door would have made more a rattle. He could hear her crying, too. Ed was pretty sure the girl was still in high school. She sometimes wore a blue jumpsuit on her visits. Even then he could see the protrusion of her rack. She had these lips, too. They circled...
her smile like the frame of a beautiful picture and she smiled at Ed whenever they
crossed paths.

She was in the bathroom, her cries echoing. Ed thought about rubbing one off.
The sobs sounded close enough to sex. No. He was lonely, he was crazy, but he wasn’t
to that level yet. He got up and walked to the kitchen, his feet picking up all kinds of
hairs and crumbs. He needed to focus on one of his other bodily needs. A meal would set
his mind right.

Some cheap, probably expired turkey roll and jug of certainly expired milk sat on
opposite ends of the fridge shelf. The rest was empty and spotless, just as the day he
moved in. He liked to keep things clean and bare and cheap, in case he ran out of money
or wanted to move. The money part wouldn’t happen anytime soon. He’d made big
bucks spinning turbines, had plenty of months ahead of him—years—if he kept his
frugal ways.

Ed patted the pockets of his jeans, which he’d worn to bed. His pack of camels
was smashed flat against his thigh. He knew it was as empty as his stomach. He didn’t
fish it out. It’d be too tragic.

Through the walls came more screaming.

“Open the fucking door!”

“Open your fucking eyes!”

Ed shook his head and flipped on the kitchen light, checking the wall clock, off-
white like the rest of the apartment, like all the apartments, he figured, in the row of one
story buildings lined up on the edge of Charter like one of those 7-day pill containers old
people used.

God, he needed a smoke. But it was four o’clock. Casey’s wouldn’t open for
another two hours. The ’Quick would be open. But he couldn’t. He didn’t want to show
his face in that town.

He pulled the turkey from the fridge. Without even opening it or checking the
date he knew it was bad. It smelled like a jockstrap. He tossed it and opened the
cupboard, grabbed a lonely loaf of Wonderbread, and worked at the twisty tie. His hands
were shaky now, from the screaming and from the hunger, he figured, but he managed to
get it untied. Little green freckles spotted the crust, but he tore that away, and damn it if
it didn’t remind him of making crust-less peanut-butter-and-banana sandwiches for
Maria. She was always watching weight, cutting whatever she could. Ed would eat her
crusts for her, scarffing them like a growling monster, and she would laugh every time
like she’d never seen the bit before.

He remembered something now. A dream he’d been having. Was it last night or
tonight? Tonight. He hadn’t slept last night. It involved laughing. Maria had been
laughing and then began to scream. It must have been his idiot neighbors’ fight that
triggered it. Yes, he remembered now, and wished he hadn’t.

He and Maria were making love in a cornfield. The stalks were beige stumps,
just harvested, and the moon was out, turning red between turbine blinks—though Ed
didn’t remember any turbines in the dream. He did remember the blanket they were on,
the crunch of the stalks underneath it as they moved. He remembered Maria’s legs
wrapped around him, the slight prickle of tiny hairs set erect from the cold and her hair on her head casting prairie-grass shadows across her face. He remembered her laughs, playful at first, then childish, then mournful. Then they turned to screams. Then Maria changed. Her soil-colored hair turned blonde and her beige skin turned pale and her broad face turned thin and young. She was Andrea Reed, Rolland’s older sister, and Ed was raping her.

Then the screaming from the neighbor’s place, or the horror of the dream, or something, must have woke Ed. And now he was eating old bread, more pieces than he’d planned to, thinking about it.

More fighting sounded through the walls. “I’m going to break the door down.”

“I bet you can’t.”

A deep thud and a crash followed.

“I told you.”

Another one.

At least they weren’t screaming anymore.

Ed didn’t remember the names of the men who raped Andrea Reed. He doubted anyone did. But he remembered they were Mexican, and he knew everyone remembered that, too. They were part of the turbine road crew, not the turbine builders, and they put in a solid fourteen hours like everyone else out there sweating, trying to get things done.

Back then, Ed was mid-level and he and Maria had just moved from Marcus, Iowa. Small-town western Iowa didn’t look a lot different than small-town central, and
the town names were similar, right down to the number of letters. The number of people who lived in town were similar, too, minus all the road crew, who lived in temporary tin trailers out by the turbines, which ended up the shit huts after they all finished their jobs and disappeared.

After the word of the rape went public, Ed feared an outbreak of racial violence. Even to him, who’d spent hours around the workers, most of them looked the same. He felt bad about that. Maria herself had a Mexican-American grandfather, but she was about as whitewashed as they came, and Ed was glad. He felt bad about that, too, but he was used to a certain kind of life with certain kinds of people. Maria had even startled him at first. She’d been a city girl, and talked fast and bold. When she first told Ed she didn’t want to have children, he couldn’t believe it. He also couldn’t help but tell her that was fine. He was already in love.

“Give up yet?” yelled the wall.

“I just want to talk.”

“Now you want to talk?”

“Open the damn door!”

“If you calm down I’ll come out.”

“I’m calm!”

“Looks like I’m not coming out.”

More pounding.

No racial violence ever broke out in Maxton—at least physical violence—but a lot changed: parties near the shit huts, where the workers often supplied the alcohol,
were eliminated, Shively keeping a close eye there until the roads were built and the turbines were up and the workers all moved away; a Charter vs. Maxton feud started, too, which Ed felt had always been there anyway; and the head of Florida Winds of Central Iowa was always a target. First it was Ed’s boss. Then it was Ed, after he took over. Now it would be this new family.

“I’m done with this!” said the wall. Footsteps and silence followed. All of a sudden music pounded through the wall, shaking the cabinet doors of Ed’s kitchen. A guitar screamed and drums pounded like cannons but a male singer started humming a soft melody like an angel.

Maria would sometimes sing with Ed in the shower, often Pink Floyd, which reminded Ed of high school and reminded Maria of college. They sounded good together, but that, along with all their other pleasantries, ended soon after people started letting the air out of their tires and painting wild designs on their siding and breaking the same living room window again and again and calling Maria a spic every time she went to the Good’n’Quick. Once, someone she never identified threatened to rape her like her friends had raped the Reed girl. That was probably the last straw, thought it happened weeks before she left.

On the night she did leave, Maria begged Ed to come with her.

“I can’t,” he’d said. “This is my life now.”

“Who are you, Ed Pittman?” was all she said. Ed opened his mouth but said nothing, and then she closed the front door softly. When the divorce papers came in the mail, he finally gave up on her coming back.
But Ed wasn’t in the clear. People always needed someone to blame, and they kept at it. His tires. His siding. His window. And when he started to hate his work more than even himself—he gave up on that, too.

Ed listened to his neighbor’s rock music for some time, finishing the last of his bread—a whole loaf for God’s sake—but he couldn’t understand any of the lyrics. His neighbors began screaming again. Just the guy. He was screaming the lyrics, though Ed still couldn’t understand them.

**Brette**

Brette got home at 10:00 p.m. and flopped chest-first onto the living room couch. She’d just finished her last shift for months. She would work a few holiday hours, but school was almost here, and she needed to focus. She’d have to power through, stay out of trouble, and graduate. She’d taken her ACTs last spring and scored a 24—nothing wowing, like a perfect game, but more than enough to get into community college in Des Moines. It was no UCLA, but anywhere was better than Maxton. Besides, Terri was gone now. Her parents had driven her all the way to California—were still there, probably combing the beach for shells. Without all those Terri practices, maybe Brette could boost her GPA, study, and take the ACTs again. Maybe she could land a scholarship and go somewhere with a beach.

A good, normal sleep schedule would be the first step.

No matter what she tried, though, Brette knew her body wouldn’t cooperate. She could feel it lying there on the couch. It was in her legs and arms—the way they jittered. Her head was also a part of the problem. It wouldn’t shut down. The main issue,
though—the things underlying at all—stood two hundred feet tall and spun and hummed
and blinked.

Brette rolled over and turned on the TV. ESPN News blinked on. Surprise. They
were still talking about David Cone’s perfect game. It had happened three weeks ago,
against the Expos. What was the big deal? Terri had pitched six perfect games earlier
that summer—two in the state tournament. Those were some wild times, Charter and
Maxton folks cheering side by side, honking horns and rattling backstops after each
seventh inning out. Even with all the fans packing bleachers, home or away, sometimes
Brette wondered if the scouts outnumbered them, though it wasn’t worth her time to
count.

She flipped through the stations, checking her usuals: Travel Channel, History
Channel, Discovery. On Discovery, something called “Deep Inside the Titanic,” had just
started, and that made her sit up a little. A couple of years ago, when it was still in
theaters, she and her mom had seen the Leo DiCaprio flick six times. Her mom was
wary of the nudity rumors—she’d heard terrible things from Carrie Wilson’s mom—but
the two of them went anyway and she loved it just as much as Brette, if not more. It was
nice to have something with her mom like that—something they could put up against
Dad and Terri’s love of sports. But unlike sports, Titanic lasted only a few months—
their bond was too specific, too short-lived. It was predictable, too, and while whispering
their favorite lines to each other in those cushy, straight-backed chairs started out fun, it
soon grew repetitive, like most everything. When it came out on video they didn’t even
buy it.
The Discovery Channel seemed to be playing off the movie’s success. Just like the movie, the documentary started with a group of people in a submarine descending into pitch-black ocean. Then it appeared, the hulking wall of the side of the ship. The sub’s bright lights illuminated an impossibly long wall of pink coral that clung to the ship’s sides. It looked like bubble gum, but she bet it was hard and sharp as rocks.

Brette felt her eyelids growing thick and quickly turned off the TV and slid horizontal. Her mouth guard was in the basement, and she worried a little about that. She grinded her teeth at night. “Bruxism,” the doctor had called it, due to a “mild, temporary, age-related” sleep disorder, which would “soon pass” and “couldn’t possibly” be related to “wind farms.” She’d first noticed it a year ago, when she woke up with a swollen jaw and a piece of molar under her tongue.

Screw it. She’d leave the mouthguard tonight, take her chances. If you didn’t sleep right when it hit you, you might miss your chance.

The lack of TV light made the red coming through the windows more vivid. Her parents normally left the lights on to temper the effect, but she’d forgotten. She turned over and put the pillow on her head. Her hair smelled like the Quick—floor bleach and car parts—and she brought her head back out of its hole.

Already her eyelids felt normal again. It happened even before the smell, and she knew it was her heart. Understanding she had only a few-second time frame to sleep got it fluttering too fast. That was the problem most nights: trying to beat the clock.

Brette went into the damp darkness of the basement and grabbed her pillow and comforter. And the mouthguard. When she slipped it into her mouth the taste of her own
dried-up spit—a metallic taste, like dirty pennies—flooded her mouth before her current spit soaked in and masked it.

She knew she wouldn’t sleep down there tonight, even with the complete lack of red. She’d thought a no-window room was the way to go—it would obviously help with the red lights, and also, the hums. But after the transition—after she convinced her dad to haul all her junk down the narrow, concrete stairs to their wire-exposed, one-room basement—nothing happened. The same sleeplessness plagued her, and when she placed her hand to the stone wall on her third night, another night of constant thinking—sharp thinking that switched from one random thought to the next with the awareness and fluidity of a wide-awake dream—she knew why she wouldn’t ever get a good night’s sleep in Maxton.

The walls were vibrating. Just barely, but it was there. After a while her hand felt fuzzy with all the tiny movements. Were the turbines really shaking the town, rattling their brains to mush? She could never be sure, especially when no one else seemed affected at all. Everyone seemed fine, went along their merry, small-minded way. Even animals seemed fine. Dogs slept at their owners’ restless feet, cats took long, graceful naps during the day and hunted at night, and even Mrs. Rodsheer’s iguana seemed perfectly happy with its caged home near the window and the flashing red lights. Brette and Terri’s own dog, MJ, had enjoyed a normal life of fourteen years, four of them under the turbines, before passing last year.

Hunters were the only ones who complained about the other-animal side of things. Some of them claimed that the turbines messed with their seasons—especially
pheasant season—but Brette wasn’t sure about that either, or why they’d be hunting around the turbines, which stood only in cornfields anyway. Only the word of a few honest farmers—that indeed the birds were fewer, almost nil, around the turbines—made her wonder, but she supposed she would never go find out for herself. She was too lazy—too tired, actually, which bred laziness. She’d been to the turbines, but mostly at night, at stupid parties, and those were no time to check for birds. Part of her didn’t want to know, because she was scared. What if she went to the turbines some random day, and underneath those cold, spinning blades she found dozens of bird corpses, the air totally void of chirps and totally full of hums? Or, worse maybe, what if everything was normal. What if the only thing abnormal were the people. It would be horrible—unbelievably so—if all those sleepless human nights were an imagined thing. But her house’s walls: she couldn’t get them out of her head. And their vibrations weren’t imagined. She’d checked the walls upstairs and never felt it, but in the basement, she always did.

She walked back upstairs with the bed items in her arms and then took a right headed up more stairs to the second story. She peeked at her feet over the blankets as she walked. Terri’s shoe scuffs were forged into the wood like scars from so many two- and three-step hops—plyometrics, their dad called it. Sometimes Brette gave the exercises a try when everyone was at one of Terri’s distant games or meets. She could do it fine at first, just like her sister, but after the second or, if she’d gotten some sleep recently, third time down the stairs, she’d almost fall, not being able to feel her legs, but seeing them—reverse phantom limbs.
Terri’s room looked all wrong. Her sheetless waterbed, weight set, and Kerry Wood poster—a scene from his 20-strike-out game—were all that remained. Brette understood leaving the bed and weights. No way that frame was fitting in her dorm room, and UCLA probably had a space-age fitness center. But the poster was different. Why not bring it? Brette stared at Kerry Wood’s Texas-brown eyes for a while, finally chalking it up to manliness—Terri’s fear of possessing too much of it. Though her sister never took ownership of the fear, Brette could see it, and was pretty sure she was the only one that could.

Brette ran her hand across the barbell of the bench and for a second swore it was warm—like Terri had just finished working out. She touched it again and realized, no, it wasn’t.

She crawled onto the bed. The rubber bladder was colder than the metal bar of the weights. Her dad had shut the water heater off. She reached to the side of the bed frame and twisted the switch all the way to ninety, then wrapped herself in her blanket and folded the pillow double under her head.

Red poured through the curtains here, too, but this was a place of magic. Terri had gotten more normal sleep here the past month than Brette had in a year. Brette thought maybe it had to do with the water absorbing the turbine vibrations. With Terri gone, why not give it a shot? Brette had given it shots before, on those nights when Terri stayed out partying too long, passing out in the bed of Ryan Pontous’s truck or Tyler Ferrington’s garage, home the next morning with a patchy layer of dust on her gold-brown skin and a headache, and maybe, on the worst of night-afters, a beer-colored
vomit stain the shape of some remote island on the front of her shirt. Those nights that Brette had curled into this bed, sleep never happened. And those nights Terri stayed out until the sun showed up? They never stopped her from going 4-5 with three triples and striking out double-digit batters.

Oh, Terri. Ter-bear. T-Dawg. Brette didn’t think she’d miss her, and wasn’t sure if she did now, but it wasn’t the nothing feeling she’d expected. Something was missing in the house. She was home alone for pretty much the first time ever. Perhaps when her parents came back, things would fall back to normal.

If only she hadn’t scared everyone away with her weirdness, she might have used the empty house to throw a party. She might have even gotten drunk like her sister, thrown up, maybe let some guy—Seth Olsen, Andy Winters, Kurt Tolly, maybe even the new guy, if he had it in him—go down her pants for a few seconds before that little fire in her stomach, that guilt-sad feeling, snapped her out of it.

Why didn’t other girls get that feeling?

Brette tried not to move in the bed while the water heated. She faced the Kerry Wood poster. He stared down at her with that stone-cold look of his while his teammates cheered around him like they’d won the world series—fat chance; the cubs hadn’t in 91 years. Terri always said she’d do anything to meet Kerry. Screw him, was what Brette took that as. There was something sexy about his face, though—that baby-fat roundness, that mysterious sadness, too; like a 20-strikeout game meant absolutely nothing to him and never would. Terri had some Kerry Wood about her. After all those perfect games, Brette never saw her sister smile or throw up her hands. Terri saved that for the after
party—the rare couple Brette went to, anyway—and even then, did so only when her favorite songs came on the radio or someone took their first beer bong hit. In fact, party or not, Terri always changed the subject when anyone brought up her flawless performances.

Just when Brette thought it might happen—that sleep might finally take her under, take control—something exploded behind her, outside, and for a second the room turned from deep red to bright white. Brette jumped, then sighed. A second explosion cracked. She got out of bed and with the blanket still wrapped around her waddled to the window. Another explosion, another white sky, happened before she even got there, but by that time she already knew what it was—or who it was for, at least.

Paul Tolly and Dyl Figgins were tormenting the neighbors again. They’d been there last night, too, when it was eggs, at least ten dozen of them. Figgins’ uncle owned a chicken farm outside of Hubbard and they couldn’t have got that many—and felt okay wasting them—from anywhere else. Just this morning she’d woke—sort of woke—to crows fighting over the remains.

Tonight it was explosives. The boys kneeled under one of Brette’s dad’s pines, pulling bottle rockets out of their school bags. God, school: she wasn’t ready. At least she still had Sunday. The boys stuck the rockets into the ground and shot them at the Pittman house—check that: the Lakowski house. It would take her a while to get the hang of that.

A couple of windows in the Lakowski house were already lit, and the kitchen light blinked on, too, just as the fourth rocket exploded. No movement came from inside
that Brette could see. More bottle rockets streamed through the air, two this time. They
crossed just above the chimney in a hot-white X and exploded at the same time with a
deep pop. Brette waited for the dad, the man she’d only seen once, to run out of the
house, cuss words spilling from his mouth, and chase the boys down the street, but
nothing happened. She wondered how long it would take for them to call the cops, and
after they did, how long it would take for Deputy Shively to get his fat ass across town.

Brette walked back to the bed and lay down. The water sloshed while she
propped her pillow. Damn, the bladder was cold. She curled into a ball in her blanket
and listened to the explosions. She imaged the new guy, Jake, walking from the house,
yelling and charging Tolly and Figgins. Would they run? Maybe—a natural reaction
more than from fear. But they might not, and then what? A fight? Jake would have rage
on his side. Plus, he was older. But Figgins was bigger and Tolly was meaner. And then
there was two-on-one to consider. Maybe the tan little brother would help. He had some
spunk in him. It’d be an interesting fight to see.

The fireworks stopped and the turbines did their work alone, flashing and
humming and flashing.

Brette rolled toward the Kerry poster and closed her eyes and watched her
eyelids pulse red. If only they could cut the cord on all those lights. Maybe no one would
have to. Maybe the Y2K computer crisis would put a stop to it. Brette had been looking
forward to the millennium since the turbines first went up. She didn’t know a lot about
it, but she could hope. What would happen if everything shut down? Would the turbines,
too, or would they keep running, keep generating power? Were the turbines powering
the blinking lights, or did the lights run on coal, like the rest of Maxton? Funny how things worked: Ames full of clean wind energy from Maxton’s turbines; Maxton full of dirty coal energy from Ames’ power plant.

Coal was warming this bed right now, and doing a pretty shitty job of it. She shivered, her teeth chattering softly around the pads of her wiry mouthpiece. Was the heater even on? She checked the knob through the flashes. Yes, it was. Brette pulled on the power cord to the bed heater and it came slack in her hands. Soon she was holding the plug-in. Damn it. No wonder. Her dad had unplugged it. And why wouldn’t he? Terri would be gone for a long time.

Brette didn’t even bother plugging it in because the stupid fireworks started up again. Tolly and Figgins had probably just needed to reload.

Brette was sick of it—the bed and the noise and her lack of sleep. She tossed the blanket, stood up, and went to the weight bench. Below it lay two dumbbells with five and two-and-a-half pound discs on either side of their handles, and Brette grabbed them and hoisted them over her head like she’d seen Terri do so many times. They threatened to take her backwards, but she leaned forward and lowered them to her shoulders, her bones shaking and the joints in her elbows feeling oddly firm. She hoisted them up again. This time it was harder. She didn’t have the momentum and anger of the first rep.

Rep: she liked thinking that word. She was doing reps. This was a set. She hadn’t absorbed everything from her dad and Terri via osmosis, but she’d taken in more than she realized. She would do ten reps of this set, then rest—maybe take a look out the window, watch the bombs go off—then do another set. She would do three sets of this
over-the-head thing, then she would do something else. Suddenly, she wanted to be strong—extremely strong. It made sense: she would make up for all her scrawny insides.

She bit her mouthguard and stared at Kerry Wood would while she lifted.

Her arms grew tired by rep eight and the weight came down faster and faster until on rep ten she practically dropped them on her shoulders. A dull pain settled there, but the burn of worked muscle soon replaced it.

The weights crashed to the wood floor. With her parents gone, to hell with it. She walked to the window. Her quickened breath painted it milky as she watched. The explosions seemed louder, but that was probably because she wasn’t paying any attention to them while the weights were in her hands.

She walked back to the dumbbells and stared a second set, only she couldn’t even lift them over her head once. Maybe it was time for a different exercise. Or Lift. That’s what Terri called them. Lifts.

She went to the bench and lay down. There were 25 plates on either side of the bar and she couldn’t even lift it out of its hinges. She sat up, pulled the plates off, and then she could. She felt a rage building inside her as she pounded out rep after rep, not paying attention to the bottle rockets or the red lights or her jaws clenching hard against the padding between her teeth, but only the numbers—the calm, whispery counting of her own voice.

When she got to rep 18 her arms felt iron-hot and her hands were tingly and on the verge of falling asleep—from gripping the bar so tight or from going too long or from doing it wrong, she didn’t know. She decided to get to twenty. Why go all that
way and not? If Kerry Wood would have stopped at 18 or 19 strikeouts, where would he be? He wouldn’t have tied the record. He may not have been Rookie of the Year. The poster might not even exist without 20, and then who would be watching her right now while she filled her arms with blood?

On rep twenty, she lowered the bar quickly, bouncing it off her chest, which she’d been doing the last five reps, at least—no boobs had its advantages—but when she went to snap her elbows straight, she didn’t make it. The bar simply wouldn’t move up any farther. She couldn’t lock them. The bar came crash down again, only this time she had no strength to bounce it back up.

She lay there, panicking. It wasn’t that heavy, but it was sitting on her lungs, which were already working like crazy, and she knew it couldn’t sit there much longer. She started seeing little green spots in the corners of her eyes, mixing with the red flashes, creating a Christmas feel all around her. She was dying. She would die being stupid. She would die with a skinny metal bar across her chest.

She tipped sideways, off the bench, and with a strength far greater than seemed possible, she flung the bar away from her chest as she fell.

It toppled over, one end of it smacking the bed frame and slapping the waterbed. The wood splintered, and water sloshed from head to foot of the bed and back again like a real wave. She held her breath, even though she really needed one, and expected the water to rush from the bladder, expected the room to fill with it, chilling her body and running down the stairs. Only there would be no Leonardo DiCaprio to take her hand, and even if there was, they’d have nowhere to run, because the house wouldn’t sink. It
would sit there, soaking up the old, stagnant water, and when her parents arrived home she’d have to explain why the walls had yellow stains.

Nothing happened, though—except more bottle rockets cracking in the night—and she breathed hard and long, sucking the air greedily like chubby little Karl Sphinx drinking a chocolate shake at the Good’n’Quick.

She breathed and breathed, unable to understand that last bit of strength as she hurled the barbell from her. She’d heard about adrenaline doing amazing things—lifting cars, running from flood waters, all that crap—but she’d never really bought it until now.

When she caught her breath and her arms stopped burning, she picked the barbell up and placed it back on the rack, then felt the bed frame. Not much damage—not much at all. She placed her blanket neatly over the chipped wood and went to the window.

They boys were still out there, sticking several rockets into the ground in a line.

It was time. She needed to help this family. She’d talked to Jake a few times at the Quick, and although she hadn’t seem him in a few days—actually, since Terri left; go figure—she felt responsible for him. She needed to stop the bottle rockets. It would be hard enough for them to sleep without them. She needed to tell them about school. She needed to tell them about Rolland Reed. More than ever, she felt it was owed—not to the Lakowskis, but to some unknown force, for saving the waterbed, for saving her dumb ass from almost suffocating. Everyone needed a favor every once in a while, she supposed. Sometimes it was from your own adrenal glands; sometimes it was from your neighbor. Wasn’t that what made life, even in places like Maxton, livable?
She trotted down the stairs, rolling her neck and stretching her arms across her chest, both of which she’d seen Terri do, and both because she was stiff from the weights. She took her mouthguard out and set it on the key table, so she wouldn’t have a lisp.

The screen door slammed behind her.

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After she kicked Tolly and Figgins in the ribs and legs and tiny balls and they got up and ran down the street, Brette noticed Deputy Shively’s car. It was parked under her dad’s favorite oak tree, it’s left side on the street, it’s right side in their front yard. She couldn’t see Shively with the oak leaves forming a shadow across most of the car and the red flashes glaring off the windshield, but could see his big arm hanging out the window. It waved her over. Brette resisted the urge to pick a bottle rocket and matchbook from the ground before she crossed the pine threshold and walked his way.

Shively came into view as she neared the car. It had been a couple months since she’d seen him—being a hermit had its place—and she’d forgotten how fat his face was. It never used to be that way. He used to be handsome, or at least she’d thought so, but that was when he was still in his twenties; it was also when she was in middle school, when crushes came easier. Even if he hadn’t put on all that weight, she still wouldn’t be able to stand him. Over the past few years, he’d been called to the school too much to help Brette with her “temper.”

When she got to his car, he said, “Trouble at the turbine house?” He had little chocolate smudges in his teeth, and every time he pronounced those fake, drawn-out
vowels of his—this was Maxton, Iowa, for Christ’s sakes, not Marry-your-cousin, Mississippi—she not only could see his Almond Joy remnants, but smell them.

“Shouldn’t you survey the area or something?” she said. “Figure it out for yourself?”

Shively shook his head. “They get prettier and they get mouthier,” he said. He looked across the street, toward Mrs. Elley’s, which was still, then he turned back to her. “Your house sure is spooky without your sister somewhere inside it.”

“What’s creepy,” Brette said, “is us still picking on a family because they work on the stupid turbines.”

“It’ll die down.”

“You’re invaluable,” Brette said.

“You know, I could bring you in for assault. Don’t think I didn’t see what you did to Tolly and Figgins.”

“Get here sooner next time.”

“I’m here now,” he said.

“Can I go?” Brette said. “I’m tired.” And she was. The weight lifting, paired with her Tolly and Figgins ass kicking, had exhausted her.

He turned the ignition, took the last bite of his candy bar, and threw the wrapper out the window. “Have fun at school on Monday,” he said, and drove up the street and into the Lakowski’s driveway.
PART TWO

Jake

He felt like an idiot the moment he and Allen got to the bus stop. Over the past couple of weeks, Brette had explained a lot of things to him. That the townspeople didn’t like them. That they never would. That high school would not be easy because of it. That their school was actually joined. “Consolidated,” she’d called it. Two small towns. Charter, the bigger one, with it’s own restaurant and chain gas station, the place for school.

And despite all that, she hadn’t warned him about the bus stop.

The bus stop was actually the front yard of the old Maxton school—closed down years ago, after the Charter-Maxton merger or something. It stood cold and broad-shouldered on the north side of town, blocking the sun and casting a rectangular shadow over the yard. Inside the old cafeteria, supposedly, was a bar. Open from sun down to sun up, according to Brette. There were no signs, though, and Jake wouldn’t believe it until he saw it.

Fifty kids, easy, were already waiting in the school’s shadow. Some sat in pretzels on the grass. Others stood in circles on the sidewalk. A few grinded down the rails of the front steps in their new Soap shoes, arms spread wide like surfers. Those with new school bags and freshly gelled and trimmed and dyed hair stood out, but not as much as something else, something that made Jake feel like the biggest loser in Iowa state history.

There wasn’t a high schooler in sight.
He scanned the crowd of writhing hick spawn again and again to make sure.

Nothing. Ages five to ten were plenty present. Power Rangers: Lost Galaxy lunch boxes and Beanie Baby key chains and wrists dawning multiple neon slap bracelets. Ages 11-13, too, though not as much. But he was the only one of his kind. The only one with enough years under his belt for a license or an R rated movie or pubes. Well, a substantial amount of pubes—some of those middle schoolers might be sprouting some scraps. But these kids, even the oldest ones, guys in their unbuttoned button ups and girls coated in strawberry hairspray, knew nothing of Jake’s world.

Allen noticed it, too. As he and Jake took their place under the school’s shadow, going for a patch of empty grass far away from everyone else, he said, “I think I see a few freshman.”

“How can you tell?” Allen said. “Maybe Iowa people just look younger.”

“This young?” Jake said.

“Think they’ll notice us?” said Allen.

“Maybe,” said Jake, but he didn’t think so. Not yet, at least. He wore a plain white T-shirt and jeans for that very reason. Allen took a similar route, jeans and a gray shirt, though they hadn’t planned it. Still, Allen’s skin stuck out. There was no one even close to that dark here. Also, his backpack, which was huge, made him look like a soldier.

Two buses rounded the corner in a grumble and Jake again felt stupid.

“Which one do we get on?” Allen said.
“Sh,” said Jake. He watched the children stop what they were doing all at once and file toward the buses. He waited for a clue and didn’t see one.

“Go ask that girl right there,” Jake said. He pointed to a girl close to them with a bird face and braided ponytail. She waddled a few steps behind another group of girls. Nine, ten years old, tops.

“Not my type,” said Allen.

“You’re not looking for a wife. You’re looking for a ride to school.”

“I don’t want to.”

“She’s your age. Maybe you’ll make a friend.”

“Remember what Brette said? They don’t’ like us.”

“Just go.”

“But I don’t want to.”

Jake pushed him, hard, toward the girl. Finally he walked in her direction, glancing over his huge backpack with something close to a scowl on his round face.

Allen stopped the girl, had a quick chat, and returned to Jake. The girl continued to the bus.

“Well?” Jake said. The busses were filling quickly.

“She said she doesn’t talk to losers,” said Allen.

“What? That’s it?”

“Then I told her to eat my cock.”

Jake held out his hands, palms up. “Dude. You can’t say shit like that.”

“I told you they don’t like us,” he said.
One of the buses pulled away. There were only a few more kids, one of them the bird-faced, ponytail girl, before the second bus would, too.


The bus driver, an old guy—really old, his face like the side of a tree—kept his eyes straight ahead when they climbed the stairs. Behind them, the door shut with a bang and they took the seat behind the driver—the only one not occupied by at least one hick zombie. Allen got window seat. Jake slouched extra low so his head wouldn’t stick any farther above the seat than a middle schooler’s.

The bus growled to a start but slowed before they got even one hundred feet. The door unfolded and in walked Peach Fuzz. The chubby kid who got a fiery bag of shit all over his back on night one. He was breathing hard. He glanced at Jake, closed his mouth, and hurried past.

Jake stayed seated.

A voice from somewhere near the back of the bus said, “Tits slow you down?”

“Your mom’s orgasms did,” Peach fuzz said. His voice was high like a girl’s.

Some laughed and said, “Ooh.” Most said nothing.

Allen turned around, then looked at Jake. “See? Lots of people talk like that.”

“Sit down,” Jake said.

The driver put his foot on the accelerator with some force and Allen’s flew back and hit his head on the soft leather. They were off again. Chatter picked up, growing with the bus’s speed.
When they got into the country, Jake felt like he might cry.

Allen breathed onto the window, drew a perfect Mariners logo, and then smudged it away with his hand. Corn, and some shorter stuff—beans, he guessed—replaced the image, and flew by, rows and rows and rows, like cards shuffling.

The turbines all but disappeared, just a random one here or there, then none, and after about ten minutes, as the bus descended the only hill Jake had seen in two weeks, the town of Charter rose into view.

It looked a lot like Maxton, only more trees, more colors, bigger. Maybe twice the size, but it was hard to tell with these runty towns. The water tower was newer. Light gray, made of smooth concrete. Then, when they were about halfway down the hill, he saw the school.

It lay on the south edge of town, corn surrounding it on three sides, highway on the other. It was long and single-storied. It looked like a prison.

When the bus turned into the lot Jake saw the reason no one his age rode the bus. All around the school sat F-150s and rusty-sided cars from the ‘80s, front ends facing the building. None were impressive. Nothing like the cars at Pens High. A car of his own might not be totally out the question if the majority of them looked like this. That is, if he even wanted one like this.

“Here we go,” Allen said.

Jake heard uncertainty in his brother’s voice, which made him even more nervous. What kind of a role model was he, looking to his brother for stability?
“You got this,” said Jake. It was about as convincing as his father had been in the living room of their old home in Florida, its walls and floor now empty, as he said everything would work out for the best.

Allen brought his bag from the floor to his lap, grunting a little. “Just like school anywhere, he said. “Get in, get out. Right?”

“Right,” said Jake.

He noticed the Mariners logo was back on the window, reemerged from Allen’s breathing. He was about to say something encouraging, but he lost it when the bus stopped in front of a wide walk that ran toward glass doors. Jake could see the bus in the window in the reflection. A block of wavy yellow.

Before he could stand, the children were already filing off the bus. The rough canvas of their school bags scraped his arms as they went by.

He and Allen waited until everyone was off, then stepped into the aisle.

“Have a good one,” the driver said. In the rearview mirror, his eyes looked dead.

“Thanks,” Jake said.

The walked down the stairs and the door squeaked closed behind them.

Something nailed Jake in the back of the head. A tightly packed wad of paper rolled to a stop at the foot of the ancient, empty desk to his left. A few snickers peppered the space behind him, but the room was mostly silent.

So it had started. The stuff that Brette warned him about. It was here.
Things had been fine up until then. The halls were musty and hushed and he’d weaved through them with the ease of a ghost. His first class, Chemistry, had also been fine. Normal. He hadn’t talked to a soul. Just syllabus and lecture and homework. This class, Algebra, had been more of the same, only the teacher, after handing out the homework, had left the room. Two seconds later, the wad of paper.

Jake didn’t move. He’d sat on the side of the room, second row, purposefully—it worked well enough in Chemistry, why not try it again?—but now he realized his mistake. No one sat in the front row, and no one was next to him. He was on an island. An easy target. Should he turn, scan the room, face the eyes he could feel on his back, looking for an aggressive pair? No. Whoever did it wanted exactly that. Screw him. Him or her. Him, probably.

Definitely him.

He started back up on his stupid worksheet. Square roots on day one? What the hell? He hated algebra. After he’d failed it his sophomore year at Pens High, the counselor suggested he take Applied Math II to sharpen his skills. Get his footing back under him. Instead, Jake landed a C and felt even less ready for the next step. And now here he was, a thousands miles from the Gulf, his spine throbbing against the back of a 1940s-era desk, worrying about his little brother and bracing for a barrage of paper-throwing dickheadedness. He wished there was a window he could look out and mentally escape for a minute or two, but this room was in the middle of the school. Bare walls on all four sides the color of coffee-stained teeth.

Life, he thought. And that’s all he thought. He didn’t know how to finish.
Behind him, someone said, “Come on, man,” and paper crunched. Another wad hit Jake, this time on the neck. It bounced up and onto his desk. More snickers. This paper ball was made with less craftsmanship—rushed—and Jake could see the 2-root-12 question he’d been slogging through on its crinkled insides. He pushed it off his desk with his forearm.

More paper crunched. A girl voice said, “Rolland, no,” though Jake was pretty sure he heard a giggle in the plea.

This time the ball missed, flying past his ear and to the floor.

Jake put his pencil to his paper and pretended to write something—pretending to be busy. Really, he just drew a tiny circle, tracing it over and over again.

“Pussy,” said a deep, nasally voice.

Yep, Jake thought. Pretty much.

The teacher, Mr. Bowden, trotted his way back into the room. Thank God. Jake was pretty sure Bowden was gay. He’d gone off on a tangent about his cat, only he didn’t say cat, he said “kitty.” Not just once, but three times. Jake wondered how a guy like Bowden survived in Iowa. How the fathers of these paper-throwing students didn’t rise up, pitch forks in one hand, half-empty bottles of whisky in the other, and chaise the poor gay man out of town.

Jake watched Bowden type at his computer. He was heavy around the waist and balding. A neatly trimmed goatee circled his mouth like a chocolate donut. He didn’t look gay. But then what was all that kitty stuff about? And was that all it took to make
up your mind about someone? A word? Jake looked at the papers scattered around his desk and knew what everyone already thought about him.

Jake stood, grabbed the paper farthest from his desk, and grabbed the other two on his way back. He got his first look at the room before he sat down. About a dozen pairs of eyes stared back at him. Not one looked any more or less guilty than the next.

He uncrumpled all three worksheets. They each had a name on top. Meridith Shively, Andy Winters, and Rolland Reed. Rolland’s, the most crumpled of the three, wasn’t started, while the other two were partway finished.

Jake unzipped his bag, trading his pencil for a pen, and drew giant penises on all three worksheets. He set them in a pile on the empty desk next to him, worked on his own paper until the lunch bell rang, and handed all four papers in.

Brette

She leaned against the hallway wall with her eyes close. Why had she looked? Why had she turned her head?

Ten seconds ago, when she walked past the cafeteria, she’d seen Jake, and he was in trouble. Now felt like she had no choice.

She had been on her way to the chemistry lab, where she liked to eat her Casey’s pork tenderloin—way better than anything the Good’n’Quick had to eat. She liked eating her greasy, gas station sandwich among the tranquility of the Bunsen burners and glass cases and rows of dripping sinks. She liked thinking by herself. It was far better than the alternative: the tall-ceilinged, loud-ass cafeteria, girls small-talking about things they deemed important. So what if Candice Walker and Jill Christensen shared a peach-
flavored Cigarillo at Phil Jamison’s party last weekend? So what if Toni Watson stole
the lipgloss from one of their bags during P.E.? So what if Malory Perisho took a dump
before volleyball practice? Since when did those things become real topics? Real issues?
Since people allowed them to be, that’s when. Brette would never understand people.
Plus, people were noisy, and after lunch she liked to nap—though she had slept pretty
well over the weekend; something to do with her late-night workouts, she guessed. And
good thing, too, because she wouldn’t have time for a nap. She had to go to the cafeteria
because Jake was sitting alone—no surprise there—and over him stood Rolland Reed.

And Rolland looked pissed.

Brette approached Rolland from behind. She couldn’t see his face but she could
hear him. “I’m asking you,” he was saying. “That’s all I’m doing right now, and you’re
lucky. I’m asking.”

She stopped a few feet from him. Jake did a double take and then turned his chair
toward her. Rolland turned around, too. The sweet, unhealthy stench of corndogs hung in
the air.

“What is it, Fitch?” Rolland said. The bright lights of the cafeteria made his eyes
even smaller and darker. A shark, she’d always thought. It was something about the way
they were so small and distant from each other. The right one, if you really looked close,
was a little lazy—faced off to the outside. He had a way of looking at you from an angle
so the eye seemed normal. Whether he did this knowingly or not, she wasn’t sure. He
looked at her that way now.
“I like your shirt,” she said. It was black and on it Stone Cold Steve Austin held his hands above his head. Both of his arms were rattlesnakes and his fists were their heads.

Rolland narrowed his tiny eyes like he didn’t quite believe her. “Thanks,” he said. He turned back to Jake. “So what did you do?”

“Nothing,” Jake said. He shot a glance at Brette.

Brette frowned. What the hell was going on? She walked around Rolland so she was closer to the table. Next to Jake’s tray of half-eaten corndog and crumbled corn chips lay a Royal Reminder—which was basically a detention. Brette had seen plenty in her day—sleeping through class on the stage, mouthing off to teachers, that detention last year when she stapled all of Mrs. Freeman’s potted plants. On Rolland’s slip, under the heading Royal was Rolland’s name, under Reminder was Mr. Bowden’s, and under Reason was “Inappropriate behavior.” It was a classic Bowden Reminder. Like his teaching, he put in as little effort as possible.

Rolland put his hands into his pockets and sighed. “Turbine boy, I’m not messing around. This is serious. Bowden handed me this in the hall.” He pointed at the Reminder. “Same goes for Meridith and Winters. We all got football and volleyball after school. We miss it, we run sprints. Now what did you do to our papers?”

Jake looked back at Brette again, then stood up. Some of the cafeteria white noise disappeared. Him standing surprised the hell out of Brette, and it looked like it surprised Jake, too. He was the same height as Rolland, and that wasn’t a good thing. So
many others had felt the same well of confidence before Rolland slugged them in the jaw or wrestled them into some strange hold until their faces turned purple.

“Guys,” Brette said. “Come on.”

“Get the hell out of here, Fitch,” said Rolland. “You aren’t your sister.”

Brette grabbed a handful of Jake’s chip crumbs and tossed them at Rolland’s face. He closed his eyes, but other than that he didn’t react.

“You’re one crazy bitch,” he said.

Brette closed her own eyes. She wanted to lift the empty chair next to Jake and smash it against Rollad’s face. His cheekbone would take most of the force. It would cave in, break off in tiny bits and spread out under his skin in small bumps. She had these thoughts—violent ones—often, especially when she was tired.

The squeal of a chair across tile snapped Brette alert. It was Jake’s. He’d scooted out. “Don’t,” he said.

“Don’t what?” Rolland said.

“Don’t talk to her like that.”

“Jake,” said Brette.

“Jake,” mimicked Rolland. It was airy and pathetic-sounding. The accuracy amazed her.

“I said don’t,” Jake said. He took a step forward.

Rolland matched it.

Their noses were almost touching, Jake’s head titled down slightly, Rolland’s tilted up. Jake’s Adam’s apple moved up and stayed there, mid-swallow, like the ball of
a spirometer Brette had used in Health last spring. They had been measuring lung
capacity, and Brette doubted Jake’s was too impressive now with Rolland pressed
against him. Rolland opened and closed his fists. The muscles and veins in his forearms
jumped each time he closed them and his jaw muscles harmonized with their rhythm.

By now, the only noises in the cafeteria were whispers and Brette could see
Principal Whaley walking toward them. With each step his brown tie swung and his
pants rode up his ankles, exposing white socks. He was the biggest person Brette had
ever seen—in person, anyway. On TV, she’d seen a few worse cases, but those people
couldn’t walk.

“Whaley’s coming,” Brette said. She backed away. She needed to end this year
right and get out of here with a diploma, and Whaley had told her if she “involved
herself in any trouble, of any kind,” that she would “have serious trouble graduating.”
He told her this last spring, the day she slept through two classes, then woke up for P.E.
and pushed Ryan Pontous down the bleachers for calling her mosquito tits.

Rolland grabbed the Reminder from the table. “Good,” he said. “I want to talk to
Whaley.

“What’s going on here, Rolland?” Whaley was out of breath and his glasses were
a little foggy. He looked at Brette first. Brette took another step back.

Rolland handed Whaley the Reminder. He accepted it with a huge, ring-covered
hand. “New guy got me a Reminder on his first day,” said Rolland. “How’s that any kind
of first impression?”
Whaley studied the sheet and then glanced over his glasses. “Was this earned?” He wasn’t looking at Rolland. He was looking over him—toward Jake.

Jake said nothing. Rolland said nothing.

“Both of you come with me,” he said.

Jake started to say something about his tray but Brette stepped forward and touched his arm. “I got it,” she said. “Just go.”

**Jake**

He and Allen stood among the elementary schoolers again, waiting for the busses to take them back to Maxton. The children surrounding them held no excitement in their voices. They sounded like adults.

“Looks like rain.”

“How was your day?”

“Someone ought to mow that grass. Getting long.”

“Did you see Mrs. Rosburg got a new haircut?”

“One day down, four to go.”

It was overcast and warm. High schoolers’ cars thudded over the parking lot speed bump at two-second intervals. Jake imagined himself in a car, in that line, going over that bump. He’d have one hand, his right, on top of the wheel. His left arm he’d hang out the window. His car would be black with a spoiler and he’d have a pair of black dice with white dots hanging from the mirror and his *Enema of the State* CD pounding through the rolled-down windows.

Allen nudged him. “You look tired.”
Jake nodded. It was the first time they’d talked. Jake wasn’t in the mood to give or receive a five-minute, linear account of all the day’s happenings. Especially since, if asked, he’d lie about his.

They’d ratted each other out—Rolland threw the paper; Jake drew the dicks; neither disagreed—and so the second half of the day they’d both spent in the principal’s maroon-carpeted, leather-smelling office, sitting in old desks and facing their respective walls. The principal had given them both a new worksheet. Jake disagreed with that. He’d already finished his and turned it in. To that the principle threw his hand up, quick for the giant that he was, and told Jake to do it again, this time without the attitude. So Jake started, remembering nothing of what he’d worked on.

At least there was one similarity between Charter-Maxton and Pens High. The punishments were illogical.

Still, regardless of the repetitive homework and the first-day bullying, Jake couldn’t help but feel good. He’d never done this before—the principal’s office thing. At Pens High, he blended in like a freckle that only came out with the sun. Sure, he’d had his moments, those times when he finally stood out. Like when he burned his Shaq jersey on the beach. He’d gotten a lot of high fives that night. But even then, he was just another freckle. Plenty of people received high fives because plenty of people were burning their Shaq jerseys. Everyone who owned one had, once he’d signed with the Lakers.

The busses grumbled around the block and turned into the parking lot.

“I’ve never seen such a beautiful sight,” Allen said.
“How was your day?” Jake said.

Allen shrugged. “It was school,” he said.

Just before the bus rolled to a stop, Rolland Reed sidled up next to them. Jake felt suddenly tired. He looked straight ahead. So did Rolland.

“Sorry about earlier,” Rolland said.

Jake didn’t know what to say to that so he kept quiet, kept looking forward, toward the busses. The line of kids was filing on. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Allen facing them.

“You got anything to say to me?” Rolland said. His voice was soft. Nurturing, almost.

“Like what?” Jake said. He noticed all of the chatter around them had stopped. Was it Rolland’s presence or the busses? Maybe a little of both.

“Maybe you’re sorry, too,” Rolland said. “Maybe you feel bad and you’re sorry.”

“I am,” Jake said.

“You’re what?”

“Sorry.”

“Say the whole thing. Complete sentences.”

Rolland said the last part slow and jumbled, like he had putty in his mouth. Jake knew that voice. He was mimicking slurred speech, implying Jake a retard. Only it came out sounding like a deaf person. Maybe there wasn’t much difference when it came to impressions. Jake felt bad for thinking that.
But he didn’t say the whole thing—didn’t say a complete sentence. He didn’t say a word.

“So that’s how it’s going to be,” Rolland said. The first bus opened its doors.

“I guess,” Jake said.

“Then you leave me no choice.”

Rolland’s hand flew fast at Jake’s face, and if Jake had been facing him, instead of facing the little zombie children filing on the bus, he might have ducked or flung his head backward to avoid it. But he wasn’t and he didn’t.

He expected a fist. But no. No hand at all. Instead, something soft and foamy hit his face with a wet slap and everything went brown.

Behind him, he heard laughing.

Jake pealed whatever it was off his face and wiped whatever it was from his eyes.

A paper towel covered in shaving cream. Or soap. It was definitely soap. He could feel the sting in the corners of his eyes.

Rolland walked back toward the school. For the first time Jake noticed his clothes. He wore black cleats, white football pants stained with grass, and a blue, torn-up shirt. He had short, bowed legs. Near the door of the school, other guys in similar clothing leaned against the wall, laughing.

Jake looked at Allen. His hands were balled in tiny fists, his mouth hung slightly open, and his eyes were wide. For once in his life, the kid was quiet. For once in Jake’s life, he wasn’t going to stand by and take crap.
Jake dropped the paper towel and sprinted toward Rolland, the wind from the run only worsening the burn in his eyes. Before he got to him, the others in their football pants called out, “Wolf, wolf, wolf!”

This got Rolland’s attention quickly. He turned halfway around and the two collided. The force was so great Jake lost his breath. Rolland twisted himself around Jake’s torso somehow and ended up on top of him on the ground. Jake rolled over and Rolland rolled with him, ending up on top again. They growled and Jake’s eyes burned and Rolland’s saliva fell onto Jake’s neck.

Fucking kill you, fucking kill you, is what Jake kept thinking, not in his own voice, but in someone else’s.

Then Rolland got off. Or someone got him off.

It was Allen. He’d pick up the paper towel and rubbed it into Rolland’s face. There wasn’t much soap on it, but you could tell it still hurt. Rolland sat on the ground and rubbed his eyes and Allen held out his hand to help Jake up.

Before Jake could grab it, Rolland shoved Allen over. His giant backpack broke his fall. He lay there kicking his arms and legs like a bug on its back.

Jake stood up, ready to dive back in. Rolland’s beady green eyes stared emptily back at him. They were pink around the edges, from the soap, and Jake wondered how bad his own face looked.

He readied his footing and stepped forward, but before anything else could happen, someone else stopped it.

“Rolls!” is all it took.
Rolland stopped and looked toward the school, towards the guys in their football pants. Another guy had appeared—or at least Jake thought so, because he couldn’t remember anyone that tall standing there before. The guy was pushing 6’6”, maybe 6’7”. His pants went down to just above his knees and he was rail-thin.

“Mind your own,” said Rolland.

“He’s from Maxton, ain’t he?” said the tall guy. He had something in his mouth that made his bottom lip stick out. Tobacco, maybe.

Rolland turned toward Jake, blinked, and wiped the suds form his eyes. “So?” he said. He turned back toward the tall guy.

“So that’s my business.”

“Don’t make it us versus you,” Rolland said. “You know it’s not like that.”

The tall guy shook his head. “Just leave the kid alone.” He had a country twang to his voice, and when he spoke, the words came out like a sad song.

“I’d kick your ass, too,” said Rolland, “but I need you to hand me the ball.”

The tall guy nodded, spat brown liquid from the corner of his mouth, and said, “Very true.”

Rolland blinked again, shutting his eyes for a while. When he opened them he looked down at Allen. “You’re a stupid little Mexi,” he said. “Brave, but stupid.”

“I’m not Mexican,” said Allen. He was still on his back.

“I’m betting you are and you just don’t know. Your mom had some Mexican dick inside her.”

Jake’s hands closed into fists but he kept them at his sides.
“Your eye is crooked,” said Allen. “It’s not flattering.”

Rolland blinked again. “It’s the soap,” he said.

“It’s definitely not,” Allen said.

Rolland walked toward him, arms clenched. He was ripped. Jake hadn’t seen it before, in the cafeteria, or when he went after him. Now he realized what might make Rolland intimidating. Might make him the school bully that every school seemed to have. His body was covered with steroid-looking chunks of meat. Plus, he was a nut job. Bullies normally were.

Rolland stood over Allen, face as flat and emotionless as a plain white wall. Allen stared up at him, with his own blank face.

Jake took a step forward, but before he had to do anything, the tall guy was next to him.

“We’re going to be late for practice,” he said. Up close, he looked about forty. His shoulders slouched forward and his face had the worn-out look of a war vet.

“So?” Rolland said.

“So I ain’t running Royal Rounds because you wanted to beat some little kid up and prove how big your wiener is.”

“So go to practice then.”

“You first.”

Rolland walked away slowly, cleats clicking, as if nothing had gone down. He went into the school and the other football-pant wearers—minus the tall guy—followed.
“Is he crazy?” said Allen. He was looking at the tall guy and appeared comfortable on the ground, head resting on his bag. Some of the blood had rushed to his head—his bag had him tipped a little in that direction—and his face was even darker than normal.

“Just stubborn,” the tall guy said. He spit again, and it landed near Allen, but not in a threatening way. Jake could see his collarbone threw the guy’s shirt. It jutted out like the side of a cliff.

Jake helped Allen up and the tall guy’s hand was outstretched when he turned around.

Jake grasped it, or let it grasp his own small hand.

“Howdy,” he said.

“Kurt Tolly.”

“Jake Lakowski.”

“Allen Lakowski.” Allen stuck his hand out and Kurt crouched over and shook it, then straightened up and looked at Jake. His eyes were older than their father’s, it seemed.

“You’re the new turbiners, right?”

“Right,” said Jake.

Kurt spat. “Well, I’d like to say things are going to get better, and maybe they will, I don’t know, but maybe they won’t.” He looked at the ground. “They probably won’t.”

“Yeah, our neighbor Brette filled me in. Kind of.”

“Good,” he said. “Good.”
“Well,” Jake said, “we better get going.”

“Hope you weren’t planning on riding the bus.”

Jake turned around. The busses and children were gone, like they’d never existed. The grass and trees were still and he was warm and dizzy. He wanted to go to bed. Nothing more. But now they were stranded. He felt like crying.

“My kid brother has his school permit,” said Kurt. “You mind a kid driving you home?”

“No,” Jake said. And he didn’t. He just wanted the day done with.

“Okay, let’s see if we can catch him.”

They helped Allen up, which proved harder than it should have been, and then went into the school. They went through the cold halls and blank walls and past the cafeteria, to the other side of the building, which must have been the elementary wing. The halls were carpeted there, and everything smelled like glue and milk.

“There’s my classroom,” said Allen, but he was behind their longer strides and they didn’t stop to look.

They exited the doors on the other side of school. The sky was bluer on this side, or else it had gotten that way and Jake hadn’t noticed. A wheelchair ramp with long blue railings lay a few feet away, connected to another door. A few kids grinded down the rails in their Soaps. Jake wondered if in another year, they’d fall out of fashion, as they had in Florida. Maybe things were just one year behind here. Maybe he was bound to live this year in the past.

“Paul,” Kurt said.
A kid standing next to the rail stopped and walked towards them. He didn’t look a lot like Kurt, especially height-wise. He might have had some similarities in his face—as Brette and Terri did, as he and Allen did—but Jake didn’t have the focus to check. He was too zoned in to the scar.

The kid had one near his mouth, deep and C-shaped. It wasn’t as red as it looked at night.

The first few minutes they rode in silence. Jake sat shotgun in a seat more duct tape than leather, the stale stench he always associated with old people wafting in and out of his nose.

It was an old two-door Chevy of some kind. Cavalier, Jake guessed, but he never gave much of a crap about models and makes. Scar kid—Paul—gripped the wheel at three and nine and his knuckles were so white the skin around them cracked in pink lines. The scar faced Jake, and it sat on the kid’s cheek like a smudge of chocolate. Allen rustled around in the backseat. He must have felt the tension.

In that brief moment before Kurt walked to the practice field and Jake and Allen ducked into the car, Jake had said nothing about Paul plaguing them—about the TV or the bottle rockets or the eggs. Maybe it was self-preservation. Now that Jake had an ally in the kid’s older brother, he didn’t want to complicate things. He needed to bring it up, though. With the kid behind the wheel, it was as good a time as any. He was vulnerable, and Jake could tell by the way he left the rail and his friends so quickly that his giant brother struck a fear in him that Jake could use.
“Anything good on TV lately?” Jake said.

Paul said nothing, but his eyes darted toward Jake for a second.

Allen pulled himself up between the seats. “You talking to me?”

“I’m talking to our taxi driver here,” Jake said.

“Oh,” Allen said. He slid backwards, disappearing.

More silence. Corn and beans flipped by, gray-green through the old window. Jake was tired, the seat was so damn comfortable—it had to be the pliability of duct tape—and he didn’t feel much like dealing with drama. He’d had enough of that today. Maybe he’d see the kid’s older brother tomorrow. Maybe he could put a stop to it then. He sunk into the patched-up seats.

Paul flipped on the radio. “TNT” by AC/DC shrilled out of the fuzzy speakers. A good song, but not enough to pep him up.

The corn was everywhere—so close together and so close to everything else. It smothered you. He’d heard people compare prairie to ocean before, and a cornfield wasn’t much different than prairie. He was pretty sure those who’d made the prairie-ocean comparison had never lived both places, though. They’d probably lived on the plains their whole lives, never had daily beach breeze dry their sweat immediately, no matter the temperature, never felt the daily push and drag, push and drag of a steady tide. They’d only had grass, and maybe, if they were lucky, a hill or a tree. They didn’t know what they were missing.

A cylinder of cold white flashed by and surprised Jake so much he swallowed his own spit down the wrong pipe and started coughing.
It was a turbine. So close to the road. More started popping up in the corn. They grew closer together. Jake could hear them hum. At least he thought he could, and he was still coughing. No one said anything about it.

By the time he composed himself the turbines were everywhere, and he knew he could hear their hum now. It wasn’t even windy. They weren’t even turning. So why did they make noise? What was so energy efficient about that? Noise had to come from some kind of energy, right?

Jake felt himself getting pissed off, felt his heart beating faster. Ugly turbines. Ugly town. Ugly school. Ugly Rolland. Ugly kid with the ugly chocolate scar tormenting them while they tried to sleep.

Jake turned to Paul. “You get ESPN?” he said, his voice high with anger. “We don’t. Or, we can’t. No TV.”

Paul said nothing.

“Hey, Al, you miss TV?”

Allen pulled himself up and turned toward Paul. “Yeah.”

“Paul’s got a TV I bet. Everyone has a TV. Everyone but us. You want Paul to give you the latest Griffey update?”


“I don’t really watch sports,” Paul said. It came out fast, no pause for spaces.

“That’s alright,” Allen said. “To each their own.” You could tell he was disappointed, though. He slid back again.

“Don’t watch sports?” Jake said. He was almost yelling.
“That’s right,” Paul said.

“Don’t play them, either? How come, Paul? Your brother plays football. He’s the quarterback, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, he is.”

“So why don’t you play?”

“I just don’t want to, alright? I play baseball.”

Jake felt the car pick up speed.

“What position?” Allen said.

Paul didn’t answer. Jake continued.

“Sounds like bullshit to me, Paul. I think you’re too busy for football. You’ve got better things to do, shooting bombs at our house and busting our TV.”

Allen sat up. “That was you?”

“Look,” Paul said, and that’s all he said.

There was nothing to look at, so Jake waited. The corn flipped by faster. The speedometer climbed past 70. No cars around, but it didn’t feel safe.

It wasn’t safe.

“Look,” Paul said again. “It ain’t going to happen anymore. Okay?”

“Yeah right,” Jake said.

“Why would you do that?” Allen said.

“I’m sorry,” said Paul.

“Your going to be a whole lot more sorry when I tell your brother about our TV,” said Jake.
“Please don’t.”

The engine moaned a higher moan. Corn and corn and corn.

“How’d you know he broke it?” said Allen.

“Quiet,” Jake said.

“Just don’t tell him,” Paul said.

“Tell who?”

“Don’t tell Kurt.”

“Don’t mess with us anymore,” Jake said.

“Why were you messing with us?” Allen said.

“Al, shut up.”

“I won’t,” said Paul. “No more. I promise.”

“What about our TV?” Jake said.

“I don’t have the money.”

“Are you going to get it?”

“Yes.”

“Promise?”

“Yes.”

They were halfway past 80 now. The car was shaking. The steering wheel jerked quickly from side to side, jiggling the kid’s arms.

“Slow down,” said Jake.

“I promise,” said Paul.

“Slow down,” Jake said.
“I just hate the turbines so goddamn much.”

“Slow down!”

“Shit,” Paul said, and took his foot off the gas.

**Ed**

The younger turbine boy, the one with the tan, dove for the ball. Despite the boys having flipped the switch to the lights, the red flashes made it hard to see if he made the catch. The turbine boy lifted his glove to the air, proof that he had. He hopped up and tossed it in. The Tolly boy stopped the ball with his foot, picked it up, and pinged another one, a line drive that the turbine boy took on a hop.

Ed watched from behind the dugout.

All week he’d been watching his old house from the corn, and all week nothing had happened. After nights of eggs and firecrackers—and of Ed doing nothing about it, waiting, thinking—the silence didn’t feel right. So when a car pulled into the family’s drive and the younger turbine boy, the one with the tan, walked from the house got in, Ed was glad. He was bored and aimless and he knew where they were going. The bat on the boy’s shoulder and the glove on his hand were proof enough. So Ed had cut through the corn, edging the east side of town, until he got to the diamonds.

The turbine boy misjudged a high pop and it landed over his head. As he went to retrieve it a sweep of headlights ran across the field. Ed ducked back to avoid them. Old Man Good’s service truck clunked by, an even older truck in toe. The Tolly boy watched it pass, leaning on the bat like a cane.
Ed didn’t understand the Tolly boy. Why was he playing nice to the turbine family now? Ed never got that treatment. Then again, Ed never had children. It was hard to be mean for too long with kids in the picture. They humanized. Crouched behind the dugout, Ed didn’t feel very human. He was cold and on edge. A chill crept up back and pushed the hairs out on the back of his neck. Fall was creeping in. You wouldn’t know it with these kids still playing baseball, but you could feel it. Nights like tonight, it made itself known, not only the chill, but that smell, something so crisp it numbed your nose. Night after night it kept coming, kept growing stronger. Soon the leaves would dry up, give in, and let go.

Ed was shivering, about to call it quits, when down the left field line, just outside the fence, a red Ram pulled onto the grass. Rolland Reed’s truck. The turbine boy glanced at it, then crouched down and patted his glove, but Tolly, bat on his shoulder, was frozen.

No one emerged from the truck. It just sat there, idling. Tolly waved the turbine boy in and they had a short conversation. The truck revved its engine.

When the two boys headed for Tolly’s car, which was parked in the small lot behind the backstop, the truck backed up and started driving down the street toward the lot. Tolly and the turbine boy started running. Ed felt the cold air drying his eyeballs. He needed to blink but couldn’t.

Just as the boys reached the car, the truck slid into the gravel lot and parked behind them. Unless Tolly wanted to drive through the concession stand, they were wedged in. They weren’t driving anywhere.
Ed backed up a few paces, making sure the dugout’s shadow enclosed him. From this angle, he was more exposed.

The truck shut off. The doors opened. Rolland Reed, CJ Good, and one Ed didn’t recognize, tall and fat, stepped out. Reed had a bottle in his hand.

“I thought we had a deal, Tolly,” he said. He took a drink from the bottle, holding onto the open truck door for support.

Tolly held the bat across his body like a gun. He said something and the three high schoolers laughed. Ed wasn’t sure, but he thought he heard the name “Kurt.”

“Your brother doesn’t like you,” Reed said. He handed the bottle to the big friend. “Why do you think he fucked up your face?”

Tolly didn’t say anything to that. Next to him, the turbine boy looked small and dark and fragile.

“So I’m out, trying to have a good time, celebrate my Tuesday, and I hear this punk Paul Tolly is out hitting pop ups with the enemy. Do you know how that makes me feel?”

Paul said nothing again. Rolland was barely hanging on to the truck door. He looked like he might fall. His friends didn’t look much better.

“What should I do, CJ?” Rolland said.

CJ grabbed the bottle from the big friend and took a pull—a much small pull than Rolland had. “I don’t know,” CJ said. “But you’ve got to do something.”

“I do,” Rolland said. “I have to do something. A traitor and a turbine. My two least favorite things. We’ve got to take care of them both.”
When CJ passed the bottle to Rolland, Tolly threw the bat. It swiveled in the air like a boomerang. Rolland ducked before it hit him. The bat hit the side of his truck; he landed on the ground.

The boys took off running down the street. Rolland’s friends stood there, watching him. Rolland stood and examined the truck, then the three of them got in and backed up, dust flying. The truck disappeared down the street.

Ed ran toward the bat, picked it up, and followed on foot.

Jake

Brette opened the door, her body glistening with sweat. Her soil-colored hair was pulled into a ponytail and little tufts stuck from her hairline like she’d jammed a fork in an outlet. Navy blue stains spotted the armpits and neckline of her royal blue C-M Royals ’98-’99 Girls Basketball District Champs shirt. Her shorts were small, tight, the same color. She looked different. She looked good.

“Do you know the Tollys’ number?” Jake said.

“Why?”

“Allen went off with him to play ball. He isn’t home yet.”

Brette took a few steps back and squinted at something to her right. The yellow glow from a light in some back room, the kitchen maybe, covered her body, and the fineness of it made him forget Allen for a moment. Her calves like baseballs. The two tendons at the front of her neck straining as she turned her head. Veins running down her forearms like the wires of a TV.

“Almost ten,” she said. “Not good.”
That was the understatement of the decade. Of course it wasn’t good. A weeknight, almost eleven, and his ten-year-old brother was missing in a town he didn’t know.

Brette stood there frowning, then turned around and walked farther into the house. Jake took it as an invitation to follow.

Brette walked through the living room and toward the yellow light. Jake’s eyes went from her legs to the person sleeping on the recliner in front of the TV. It was her father. His mustache looked gray in the TV light and he wasn’t sleeping after all. His eyes stared blankly ahead, SportsCenter—what Jake wouldn’t do for a little SportsCenter—talking straight through him. You could tell he wasn’t paying attention by the bored look on his face. The way his mouth hung slightly open and the odd angle of his neck. That, and the fact that he didn’t acknowledge Jake’s presence. Didn’t even turn his head or flinch. If not for the steady rise and fall of his gut, he looked a lot like what Jake imagined a dead man might.

“Jake?” Brette said.

Jake had been standing. Staring. He hurried to meet her.

Gray squares the color of Brette’s eyes checkered the kitchen floor. Everything shone and sparkled. Jake could see the kitchen’s reflection in the fridge and the floor was slippery. No crumbs for traction like his kitchen. He felt bad walking in with his shoes on.

Brette stood with her back to him at the counter, flipping through a phonebook. The biggest phonebook he’d ever seen, which didn’t make sense. Then he saw the list of
towns on the front. Pensacola’s phonebook had been for only Pensacola. Here they had one phonebook for probably the entire state. Jake stood next to her while she turned the pages.

He could smell Brette’s sweat, salty and sweet like a Pepsi at the beach. Her thin finger trailed down the page. He needed to focus. His brother was missing. His only brother in the world.

Brette took the phone from the wall, dialed, and then held it between her ear and her shoulder as she put the phonebook away. With her head dipped like that, closer to his face, he took a whiff of her hair. He couldn’t smell anything but sweat, but her frizz tickled his nose. He pulled he face back as she tipped her head up and held the phone. He could hear it ringing, hear her breath in the mouthpiece, hear the TV talk. He looked back, suddenly aware of the father’s angle to the kitchen. That he could have seen Jake sniffing his daughter. It didn’t look like he did, though. He was in the TV’s world.

“No answer,” Brette said.

“Try again.”

“Alright, but too many calls and they’ll think it’s some Charter kids playing around.” She hit Talk twice, then Redial. She pressed it to her ear again.

The phone rang and rang.

“Nothing,” she said.

“What should we do?”

She put the phone back on the wall and turned to him. The sweat on her forehead had dried. “Wait it out.”
“Wait it out?”

“Yeah.”

“Can you just drive me to the diamonds.”

“Where’s your dad?”

“He’s at work.”

“This late?”

“Look, can you drive me there or not?”

“What if he’s not there?”

“Exactly.”

“Look,” Brette said. “I can’t go driving you all around town. I’m tired. I need to go to sleep.”

“So stay up for ten minutes. We’ll find him. It’s not a big city.”

“If I do that, though, I’ll lose it.”

“Lose what?”

“My sleep.”

Jake didn’t get it. Her face was a plain white wall. She was serious.

“So it’s like taking a crap?” Jake said. “You’re going to get sleep constipated?”

“Look, you don’t understand. I’m tired now. I worked out. I’m worn out. I need to let my exhaustion take over.”

“Can I borrow your car?”

“Do you know how to drive a manual?”
Jake had driven four times his whole life. All four were in his father’s automatic Taurus.

“Please just drive me around.”

“I can’t. The turbines will keep me up.”

“What?”

“The turbines. They vibrate the walls.”

“You’ve got to be fucking joking.”

 Everything okay in there?” came a deep voice from the living room.

Jake felt his neck and shoulders tense up. Brette’s eyes didn’t leave his. “Yeah dad, we’re fine.”

“It’s pretty late. Maybe your friend should take off.”

“He is,” Brette said.

**Ed**

He crawled a little farther into the shrub so he could hear them talk, the pine touching his arms, making them itch. He moved a little, rolling the bat in front of him. He could feel the dew collecting on its barrel. He could barely feel his legs—they were exhausted from the run—but his adrenaline kept them functioning. From this spot, he could only hear bits and pieces of their conversation.

“Tonight’s the night…”

“He’s feisty…”

“…in your dreams.”
They stood on north Center Street. The tan boy was all by himself now, squinting in the glare of the headlights, staring up at three high schoolers. He was breathing heavy from his run. The Tolly boy had vanished, though Ed didn’t know to where. The chase had lasted a long time. Tolly had been smarter than the boy. He’d stayed where the truck couldn’t get him.

Ed crawled from his nook, sliding the bat now, and took up another spot, this one two shrubs closer, but with less cover. He could see the little beads of sweat on the tan one’s forehead. From this distance, he was sure about what Rolland said next:

“Your brother’s a bitch.”

The big friend passed Rolland the bottle and he took a swig.

The boy stood there, not moving or speaking. His breathing had steadied but his stillness only made him look more desperate, like a guy sentenced to the firing wall.

“Maybe he wants a drink,” said CJ Good.

Rolland finished his swing, capped it, and held the bottle out to the boy with two hands, like he was offering some dainty gift. “Care to partake in our festivities?” he said, in what might have been a real bad British accent.

The boy shook his head.

“What?” Rolland said. He looked back at his buddies. “You wish to not partake? On this fine evening?”

Ed was pretty sure about the British thing now. The boy shook his head again.

“He’s shy,” CJ said. “No one’s welcomed him to the neighborhood.”
“Has no one welcomed you to town yet?” said Rolland, his accent gone. “No cookies at your front door?”

The boy shook his head for the third time. It moved a lot less, more like someone with palsy than a gesture of difference.

“Well,” Rolland said, tossing the bottle to his friend, “let us be the first, then. Welcome, friend.”

He walked toward the boy. The boy turned and ran. It was a mistake for the same reason running from a bear or a wolf or a lion was. Rolland ran after him.

The kid was fast, but Rolland was bigger and stronger and Ed figured he’d been running sprints up hills in shoulder pads since the summer. When Rolland got close enough he pushed the boy in the back, hard, and the extra momentum sent him flying forward onto his face. The boy stuck his hands out just in time to break the fall. He tried to stand up but Rolland pushed him down and rolled him over. Then he got down on his knees and put one on either side of the boy’s body, pinning his arms to his sides.

Rolland’s friends, whooping and whistling, were close behind him. Ed was, too. He’d crawled the length of grass near the shrubs and was again very close to the action, so close he thought he could smell the booze on Rolland. He crouched on his hams on the very edge of his cover, the bat clutched tight to his chest.

The boy struggled to get free, but Rolland didn’t budge. He laughed, as did his friends, and then he started smacking the kid in the face quickly with both hands, not with force, but enough to piss someone off real bad. Ed himself was getting pissed.
The boy struggled and growled while Rolland slapped him but soon realized the pointlessness of it and lay still while it happened.

They all laughed. Ed thought he heard sniffles from the boy. He felt sick and wanted to leave. The turbine lights were really going now, and his head pounded with each flash. Ed brought both hands to his head and rubbed his temples. The bat rolled down the dewy little hill behind him and clunked onto the sidewalk.

Rolland’s head snapped Ed’s way first. Then his friends looked, too.

“What?” CJ said.

“I thought I heard something.”

“I’ll check it out,” said the big one. He walked toward Ed.

Ed slid across the grass and grabbed the bat and crouched as far as he could under the shrubs. One had a little overhang and he slid under it, on his back. Again the pine smell sent his stomach on high alert. He could see the friend’s shoes on the other side. They were Nikes and they were large and white. They stopped at the bush as their owner listened.

“I don’t see anything,” the guy said.

“Check the other side,” Rolland said.

Red light flashed across the kid’s shoes as he circled the bush. Ed was cornered and probably done in. He could only hope for a lazy check from this guy, or that the flashes would make things harder to see. He was pretty much covered. It was possible. And even if they saw him, what would they do? Probably nothing. But the thought of
getting caught in Maxton, baseball bat in hand, after he’d stayed invisible for so long, was enough to send a rattled panic through him. He gripped the bat tighter.

The kid crouched down alongside the shrubs on the sidewalk side and started his search. He was starting down the line of shrugs. He stood about fifteen feet from Ed and was closing. Ed could see the shrubs rustling from the kid’s hands. He was getting into all the crannies.

When he got to Ed’s hole he spread the bush and looked right at him. Ed didn’t move, didn’t breathe, didn’t think. It was only for a half second, and then the pine needles closed back in. Ed breathed out.

But the hole opened up again, as soon as he exhaled, and the kid was back staring. He stared longer this time, and Ed could see his flat, round face and close-together eyes. He could smell his drunk breath. The kid was looking straight at Ed, as if he wasn’t quite sure. Ed kept still. The kid moved in for a closer looked, blinked twice, squinted, and then hopped back a step. He’d seen Ed. He was probably trying to figure out if the person he saw was dead or alive.

Ed didn’t wait for him to look closer, or to call out to his friends. In one swift motion he didn’t know he had in him, he lifted the bat from his side and with two hands stabbed the barrel of it into the center of the kid’s face. The motion reminded him of shooting pool, and the kid’s head kicked back like a cue ball, too.

The kid made this strange noise, like he was clearing his throat, only longer. He fell backward onto his ass, holding his mouth and nose. Blood ran in a black trickle through his the cracks of his fingers.
Ed slid from the shrub and pushed the bat into the kid’s face again, just above his nose. It barely made a sound. That knocked him over. He moved, was alive, but only a little.

Ed peeked toward the street, ready to ditch, get the hell out of there, but he saw that Rolland had the bottle of vodka now and was pouring it over the turbine boy’s face in a thin stream. The boy was coughing and trying to speak through it.

A flame crawled inside of Ed, grew from his stomach to his chest to his throat. He realized taking a bat to the kid’s face moments earlier had only prepped the fire. He had enjoyed it. He felt it was deserved then and was deserved now. He looked back at the bloody-faced guy, still on the ground, still trying to lift himself up.

Ed looked back at the road. Rolland stopped pouring the alcohol. He went to say something—probably “have you had enough?”—but he never got it out. The boy spit a mouthful of mist in his face. A large one. One that he must have been saving for a while.

Rolland wiped his face with one hand and kept his other one pinned on the boy. “That burns,” he said. “Which I’m sure you know.” He tossed the bottle to his conscious friend and slapped the boy hard across the face. It sounded like meat, with the boy’s face wet and with the force behind the blow, and something about it, either the sound or the sting or both, sent a rage into the boy. He growled and screamed and somehow rocked Rolland onto his side, getting out of the hold. He crawled a few feet and stood up, ready to run.

He did run, but only a few steps. CJ grabbed hold of his waist and threw him to the ground. Rolland got on top of the boy again, knees again restricting his arms. The
boy said something about Rolland being ugly on the inside and out and no one ever loving him. It sounded oddly calm. Rolland grabbed the bottle from his friend.

“I want to show you how bad that burned,” Rolland said. He turned to his friend. “CJ, hold this little bitch’s eyelids open.”

CJ got to one knee and started messing with the boy’s face. The boy shook his head back and forth but made no noise.

Arms wrapped around Ed from behind. The kid whose face he’d smashed had him in a weak bear hug. Ed wrestled out of it as silently as he could and pushed the kid to the grass. His nose and mouth were coated in black blood. It mad him look like an old-time bandit with a bandana across his mug, shielding his identity. He tried to stand up but fell back down. You could tell his brains were scrambled. Ed walked to him and kicked him in the gut. The toe of his boot went in a lot farther than he thought it would. He kicked him again. The third kick put the kid down for good, lying in a semi-circle, clutching his insides so hard it looked like rigor mortis.

Ed ripped the kid’s shirt off. The bandit mask of blood have given him an idea. He tied the shirt around his face so only his eyes were showing. He could smell the kid’s blood.

Ed ran onto the street.

He ran around the shrubs, cocked slightly sideways and holding the bat over his shoulder like a true baseball player now. Rolland was holding the bottle over the boy’s face. The lid was off. He was going to pour it again. CJ was facing Ed and saw him coming. He didn’t have enough time to warn Rolland, though. Probably because the
sight of Ed charging them in the bloody mask looked like death itself, and how could you form that into words? Instead, CJ just fell on his ass and started scooting away like a half-paralyzed crab.

Ed cocked the bat back, and right as Rolland turned toward him, he swung. A crash as light and beautiful as a harp note filled the air and the bottle turned into a million glittery pieces of red, white, red, white, floating to the ground. Ed was surprised when he heard and saw this. He had swung so hard he felt like he missed completely.

He looked down, afraid he’d gotten some glass on the boy, but he wasn’t there anymore. He was already running south down the street.

Rolland was on his knees still, and he was screaming. Ed figured he might have clipped his hand or sent glass into his face. Either way, he didn’t care.

He turned and faced Rolland and the screaming stopped. Rolland, holding his hand to his chest, stared up at him, at his Ed’s new face.

“What the—” is all he could manage, and it came out shaky, like a big piece of foil.

Ed turned to CJ. He stood up fast, hands up, and backed away. “No, man. No.”

Ed was afraid CJ would notice something in his mannerisms, but his neighbor was too afraid. He kept backing up until he tripped over the shrugs Ed had been hiding in.

Ed headed for the truck, which was still idling, and opened the door. He tossed the bat in the passenger seat, put it into gear, and peeled out, swerving toward Rolland. He crawled out of the way just in time, which was what Ed wanted anyway.
He took a left on Park Street and headed north. He turned right on Highway 18 and accelerated, intentionally driving over the potholes he knew by heart. There was no reason to avoid beating the truck up a little after he’d beaten its passengers up a lot.

He slowed when he got to a spot he liked, a descent distance away from where he needed to be, but not too far. He dipped the truck into the ditch and the angle made the bat slide all the way against the door.

He put it in park. His hands could barely grip the gearshift they were so sweaty. He flipped the dome light and grabbed the bat. He could see the sweaty finger creases on its handle. He grabbed it and wrapped his fingers around the rubber, then released them. More creases. He was sweating bad. He noticed it now, under his arms and down his sides. He hoped it wouldn’t leave behind any DNA. If they checked these kind of crimes for that.

But he had to be a suspect for DNA. They didn’t have a database with his DNA lying around.

Shit. But they did have fingerprints. Did they check for fingerprints on crimes like this? Or was it only murders and such? Shit. Just looking at the bat, at the finger creases, he could see the little rivers of his finger pads.

He looked around the cab, found a crusty undershirt, and proceeded to wipe down every knob and every crevice in the truck. He wiped the gearshift so hard it busted clean off, and he laughed a little at that. Lord, it had been awhile since he laughed.

He wiped the steering wheel and the door handles, even the ones he hadn’t touched. He wiped the baseball bat.
He got out and wiped the outside handle, too, then locked the keys in the truck. He looked both ways, crossed the highway, and entered the corn. His car was parked near the shit huts, and this was as good a route to get there as any. It’d be safer than walking gravel to it. The turbines hummed as he pushed through the first rows carefully, doing his best to avoid corn cuts and the leave-behinds of an obvious trail. He could still smell the kid’s blood on his mask, but not as much. The scent of soil replaced it.

Jake

He was to the left of the road, walking the uneven sidewalk and glancing down every now and then to make sure he didn’t trip. He passed under a huge tree and underneath it he could barely make out the turbine hums. They were distant, water-like whispers. It sounded like the gulf. He wanted to stay under that tree forever, until Allen somehow found his way to Jake, perhaps drawn to the same tree by the same sound.

His theory about taking one more left and circling back proved worthless, and now Jake was lost. Only he could mess this up. Get lost in a town the size of his old high school campus. The houses all looked the same to him. Actually, they all looked different. That was the real problem. Not one of them looked the same, so how was he supposed to know part of town he was in? The new ’burbs, the old ’burbs, downtown, tracktown, coasties, condos. Where were the lines of Maxton’s categories? How did people know where, and who, they were?

Jake didn’t know. And he didn’t know Paul Tolly. Minus all the stuff he’d done to them those first couple of weeks. And the fact that the kid had done all that stuff had
eaten away at Jake all night. Why would Jake let his little brother hang out with someone like that? Why?

Another question suddenly came to him. Maybe he hadn’t thought about it because of the tiredness. Maybe he hadn’t thought about it because he hadn’t seen her much at all. But still, it was there, repeating itself again and again in his head.

Why hadn’t Brette offered them a ride to school? Why would she make them ride the kiddy bus? Why would she make them ride with Paul Tolly?

He passed shadows smoking cigarettes on someone’s deck and two cats trotting slowly up the street like they were part of the traffic.

Jake’s first left should have led him right back to the main road, but it didn’t. Then he thought maybe he needed one more left. No luck there, either. It was like the town’s streets were made of concentric circles. Or wait, were concentric circles connected? It was like a spiral. He started in the middle and was now working his way out, no matter which way he turned.

The water tower emerged on their right, its four legs jutting out of the earth like rusty swords. Jake looked up, tried to see its tank, but it was too high up and all he caught was a face full of red light.

He wished he’d taken Allen’s bike. He was in too much of a hurry. He wished he’d kept his own. He wished he was in Florida. After graduation, he’d go back. He’d work a Waffle House for the rest of his life as long as he could live there and stay there. But what about Allen? He had eight more years in this crap town. Hopefully.
Jake was on McKawsby Street. He knew that. What he didn’t know was anything about McKawsby Street. He didn’t even know how to pronounce it.

He stood in the middle of the road, under the dirty streetlights and the clean red flashes, and waited. Whatever the next car, he would wave it down.

Jake felt a sudden sadness creep into him. He sat down, his heart beating through his shirt. His father had already lost so much when his mother died. Jake was more afraid for him than for himself or Allen. It was his father’s reaction he couldn’t take. Reaction to what? What had happened? Nothing, yet. He was probably fine. But Jake couldn’t help thinking about death. Allen sprawled and lifeless on the street. On someone’s yard. On a flattened row of corn stalks.

Headlights flashed toward him a few blocks down, the engine rattling. Jake stood up and took a few steps toward the side of the road and waved his arms. It didn’t look like Brette’s Geo.

A beat-up truck stopped next to him and the passenger-side door opened with a squeal.

It was Paul Tolly. He had a black eye. He didn’t speak, but his older brother, who sat slouched behind the wheel, did.

“Get in,” Kurt said, his lip full of chew. Paul scooted over.

“Paul?” Jake said. “What are you doing here? Where’s Allen? I thought he was with—”

“Just get in,” Kurt said.
Brette

She pulled into the parking lot. The Brick Bar wasn’t particularly hopping tonight—only eight cars in the lot, nine now, counting Brette’s. Most of the Maxtoners walked, a few of the bar’s patrons were out-of-towners—people from Story City or St. Anthony or Hubbard. It was still early, though.

After she’d lost Jake, she found the Tollys—or, rather, they found her. Paul’s presence was not good sign for Allen. Things were even worse than expected: Rolland and his friends had jumped them both. Paul had gotten out of there in time, but he wasn’t sure what happened to Allen. She could tell Paul felt terrible. Guilt tugged at the corners of his mouth while he told the story.

So she and the Tollys decided to split up, looking for either brother, now that Jake was missing, too. Brette took the northwest side of town, eventually circling her way to the Brick Bar, and the Tollys took the northeast side of town, working their way to the shit huts. Brette was relieved about that: at least she didn’t have to go to the huts. They creeped her out. It wasn’t just the rape happening out there; it was their lonely look. No one cared about them. Everyone was trying to forget.

She sat with her hands clinging to her steering wheel like sleeping bats. She was tired—she could sleep right now—and she didn’t want to go into the bar. She didn’t like drunk adults. It all seemed wrong to her—their childish enthusiasm, impulsive actions, and the sad truthfulness with which they spoke. She’d seen her parents that way a time or two and never grown accustom to it. Now when her parents went to the bar—which
wasn’t often, but more than she liked—she would seal herself in the basement and kill the lights when she saw their headlights pull into the driveway.

She wasn’t scared of what they’d do. They were decent, kind people. She was afraid of what they’d say. She knew people in Maxton had plenty on their minds that they never spoke of. Sometimes drinking brought that out. She’d seen it enough at high school parties—like when Erica Bordeaux told everyone she blew the English student teacher or when Ian Billings spilled the beans on his older brother being gay.

But she had to go in. The bar was the number one place for gossip—and sometimes that gossip was shockingly recent. Maybe someone had seen something. Maybe someone knew something. If not, maybe they could help her look.

Brette forced her car door open—it was extra heavy, like a non-existent wind was trying to blow it shut—and walked to the bar door at the back of her old school, eyeing the old fire escape—a tin, tunnel-shaped slide that lead from the third-story library to the ground. She remembered using that once during a fire drill. All of her classmates had been excited but Brette was terrified. She wondered how hot the metal would be if a fire really was raging.

Brette pushed through the same entrance door that she and her friends used to exit on their way to recess—before the fire marshal closed down the second and third stories, before Charter passed the new k-5 wing, before the two towns merged schools, before the turbines.

She walked up the wheelchair ramp turned foyer to the main lobby, the walls void of any decorative. No windows lined the hall, and the exit sign, which hung from
the doorframe behind her, lit the long, dark space a tangerine orange—much softer than turbine red.

Up ahead, she could already make out the line to the drinking fountain.

York Childress was holding up the line, lapping sloppily. Two big men—Bill O’Hara and someone Brette didn’t recognize, an alchie from Story City or St. Anthony, probably—stood with their arms across their chests, waiting their turn. Neither looked at Brette.

Old Man Good charged for water—a quarter a glass—so the drinking fountain was a hot spot after hours of alcohol, before their pigeon-toed walks or bald-tire drives home. It was a familiar picture, the three of them waiting there, the two in the back licking their parched lips. They were gigantic children, waiting their turn after a game of freeze tag at recess.

Brett passed the sealed-off entrance to the rest of the school, the sealed-off entrance to the old Gymnasium, and headed down the stairs to the old cafeteria.

She’d been to the Brick Bar a couple of times—all kids had. Good let you, as long as you didn’t drink, and when you were younger, it was kind of an adventure—but the bar’s set up always made her feel terribly nostalgic. Claustrophobia crept over her as the low ceiling of the shoebox-shaped room pressed down on her and the floor, white tile with brown and black paint speckles, the effect something close to TV static, grabbed at the bottoms of her shoes. It was sticky with beer, but for all she knew at that moment, it was 1992, this was a school cafeteria, her school cafeteria, and it wasn’t beer sticking to her feet, but Caleb Johnson’s spilled tomato soup.
It smelled exactly like her childhood, too—cardboard and cleaning supplies—and Good served drinks from the two square windows where the cooks used to stand. No stools stood at the bar. Rows of lunch tables—the long, rectangular kind with a long, rectangular benches on either side—made for the only seating. There were two-dozen people, maybe, and you could easily tell where everyone hailed from based on where they sat. The Maxtoners crowded around the front two tables—eleven men and three women. The rest of the people, which were all men, sat in small clusters on distant tables—two here, three there, and five scattered loners. Each time Brette had been in the Brick Bar, she’d seen similar loners and felt sorry for them, even long after she’d left.

Brette walked to the bar. Good was leaned over the counter, spinning a quarter with the flick of his finger. Seeing him anywhere but the Quick was strange—like seeing a Walrus grazing on the African savanna.

“Hi,” Brette said.

His head snapped up and he rubbed his eyes. The quarter flopped to a noisy stop.

“What’ll it be?” Then he looked at her and blinked. “Hey, Fitch.”

“Hey.”

He scratched the mossy stubble on his chin and looked behind her, at the tables.

“I can’t give you anything to drink, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“Have you heard about anything crazy going on tonight?”

“Nothing I haven’t heard before.”

“You sure?”
“Ask around.” He nodded toward the Maxton tables and picked up his quarter.

When he lowered his head and flicked it to a spin, she saw his bald spot through the mesh of his hat.

“Okay,” she said.

When she got to the first table, all conversation stopped. She stood behind one of the benches, and everyone on that side turned around, all eyes on her.

She asked them what she asked Good.

No one said anything at first, just swirled fingers around their glasses or peeled the labels of their Bud Lights. Donna Reifschneider finally spoke up. “Sorry, sweetie,” she said, and that was all.

She went to the next table, where the gruff and broken sat. Here, the scent of oil and dirt and rusted metal covered most of the cafeteria smell. She stood at the head of the table this time, feeling even more awkward, like she was giving a speech at a banquet.

“Charter kids beat some Maxtoners up tonight,” she said—a new route.

“Those bastards,” Dwight Browning said. He shook his head.

“Need help?” said Bailey Martin. He pushed his beer away.

“Who and where?” said Roger Winters. He shot an angry look around the table.

Brette licked her lips. She needed answers, not an army. The next thing she said would be important. “Well, I don’t know who or where. That’s the problem.”

“Who did the fighting?” Bailey said. “Who started it?”

“It might have been Rolland Reed and his friends. I’m not sure. I wasn’t there.”
Bailey shook his tiny bald head. “I’d break that little prick’s knees if he didn’t run the ball so good.”

“Tell me about it,” Roger said. “He keeps ripping our basketball hoop down. He and his friends shit-skulled friends.”

“One night,” said Bailey, leaning in, “he and his buddies kept raising our garage door. Raised it over twenty times. And Nancy kept making me get up and close it. All night it went on. I mean, I feel bad and all, for what happened, but that doesn’t give him the right to be messing around like that.”

“You should get that switch moved to the inside,” said a deep voice behind her. Brette jumped and turned around. Old Man Good. She wondered how long he’d been standing there. He gave her a glance and then sat down at the table. “And get a handheld for your truck,” he added.

“You got time for that?” Bailey said, rubbing his head.

“I’d make some if it was my garage.”

Bailey nodded. “If it happens again.” He took a drink.

Brette knew why Rolland did those things. Rodger Winters had sold land to Florida Wind and moved into town. So had Bailey Martin. Of course, it wasn’t just Rolland doing damage. A lot of Charter hated a lot of Maxton. But Rolland was the ring leader, the most to prove. If he left after graduation, things might die down. For once it occurred to Brette that everyone had their own wish on the horizon. Hers was no more turbines—whether that meant graduation or Y2K. Theirs was no more Rolland. Jake’s, as of now, was to find his brother.
Maybe Brette did want an army. All these wishes had her aching for some kind of action. She just wasn’t sure what type.

“Listen,” Dwight said. “I don’t care what happened to his sister. I don’t care if his uncle’s that fat ass, no-good cop. I don’t care how good of a runner Reed is.” He looked at Bailey. “You know we aren’t going to win no more than two games this year.” He took a drink of his whisky, then his beer. “You bring him to the parking lot,” he said, looking at Brette, “and we’ll make it look like an accident.”

“You know the rules,” Good said. “Anything here you take to the shit huts.”

“We’ll make it look like an accident at the huts, then,” said Dwight.

Brette didn’t want an army. She didn’t want action. She knew that now. No more front-page headlines—one was enough for this little town.

“I don’t want anyone getting hurt,” Brette said. “I don’t know if anyone is hurt. I just wondered if anyone saw or heard anything. My neighbors are both missing.”

They all looked up at her, even Good. She’d blown it. She shouldn’t have spilled that info—that it wasn’t one of their own in trouble, but the turbiners. It was too late. In the silence and stares, she noticed a fifth man at the table. As with Good, she hadn’t noticed him.

At the end of the table, a little space between him and Roger Dickerson, sat the long, thin body of Dave Tolly—Kurt and Paul’s dad. Suddenly Brette knew why Kurt and Paul had split things up the way they did—why they went to the shit huts while sending her to the bar. They didn’t want to see their dad—at least see him like this. With Dave Tolly, it was hard to avoid it.
Finally Bailey broke the silence. “You’re talking about the turbiners?”

“Yeah,” Brette said, almost in a whisper.

Everyone looked down. Roger stood up and went to get another drink.

“So no one’s heard anything?” Brette said. She swallowed, raised her voice. “No one saw anything?”

Silence.

“Mr. Good?” she said.

Silence.

Brette looked at Dave Tolly again—not as tall as Kurt, but close. He was thinner, more tree than person. Something came to her as she stared.

“Actually,” she said, “Rolland and his buddies didn’t just jump the turbiners. Your son was there, Dave.”

Dave’s head rose slowly, a branch sprouting leaves. “Which one?” he said, his voice soft and song-like—_Kurt_-like.

“Paul,” Brette said.

Dave sat up a little, pushed his beer away, and like the rest of them, looked at the table again. “What’s he doing in town tonight?” The question was to himself, not Brette. He looked up. “What’d they do to him?”

“Well, nothing. Luckily he got away, but he was there and now he’s out—both your boys are—driving around, helping—”

“You see them,” Dave said, “tell them to get home.” He wilted back into his slouch and grabbed his beer by the neck. “Their mom’s probably worried white.”
So that was it. That was all the fight and care she could muster from them: sitting up a little straighter. She did want an action, even a violent one. She wanted to dump gasoline on the dying fires in each of these men’s hearts and help them live again.

“You guys are pathetic,” she said.

Silence.

“Can you all just help me look?” she said. “Just drive like I am. Just drive around for five minutes. That’s all I’m asking.”

“I don’t even know what they look like,” Bailey said.

“Well just look for the people you don’t know, then,” Brette said.

“I don’t know their names,” said Bailey.

“Jake and Allen,” Brette said. “What does it matter?”

“What he’s saying,” said Dwight, “is that we don’t want to know. You see?”

“Dave,” Brette said, looking his way. “Dave, your sons are out there helping look. Come help them.”

Dave just sat there like a lightning-struck elm.

“Jesus Christ,” Brette said. “It wasn’t this family’s fault. It wasn’t anyone’s fault but the two guys who got lucked up. Dwight, you even said you didn’t care—

“Don’t,” Good said. “Don’t go digging that up.”

“I’m not digging anything up. I just want some help.”

“Fitch,” said Dwight, staring at her out of the corner of his eye, a smile forming.

“What you need is your sister to teach you how to grow them tits out.”
Bailey started giggling, laughing hard, his head shaking like a tiny, white balloon in the wind.

Just then, Roger came back with a Bud Light and sat down. “What?” he said, looking at Bailey. “What’d I miss?”

“Dwight,” choked Bailey. “Dwight said…tits…” It was a drunken laugh, one where sentences weren’t going to happen. Dwight started laughing, too—laughing at his own creepy, perverted joke—but it was nothing compared to Bailey’s.

“Dwight, Bailey, that’s enough,” said Good, but Brette heard a catch of laughter in his throat.

Brette snatched Roger’s Bud Light from his hand and dumped it all over Bailey.

Bailey screamed like a frightened child and shoved her arm. The bottle flew to the floor and bounced and spun, suds flowing like ribbon. The laughter stopped.

The noise from the adjacent tables died. Good stood up.

“Time to go home, Fitch,” he said.

Brette turned and walked away, eyes burning.

“Great,” she heard Bailey say. “My only work shirt.”

“So wash it,” Good said.

“Nancy’s at her mom’s.”

“Well it’ll smell like beer then,” Good said.

Brette pushed through the cafeteria doors. She wanted to tell them to learn to do their own damn laundry. She wanted to tell them that they were cowards. Most of all, she wanted to tell them that when they got home tomorrow morning, their clothes would
smell like milk cartons and mop bucket water—like a goddamn *elementary school* cafeteria—no matter how many beers spilled.

**Jake**

He had noticed the cloud of dust following them in the review mirror. Now it began to fill the cab. He coughed and squinted. He looked at the Tolly brothers. Their eyes were focused, their steady breathing proof of their adaptation to these conditions. He closed his eyes, trying to seal the stuff out, but it was too late. The little granules were already on the insides of his lids, stabbing. He kept them shut anyway.

Why would Allen make it all the way out on this road? They’d told him about Rolland. About Paul getting the hell out of there, leaving Allen to the wolves. Still, that was way by the school, not in some random field below a row of turbines. Why anyone would go here was behind him. But they’d looked everywhere. This was it. The last place before giving up and going home. Or calling the cops, which the Tollys didn’t seem too fond of. Jake either, after the creepy chase.

The dust was getting intolerable now. His throat burned. His lungs itched. Didn’t the truck of a vent they could close? He didn’t want to open his eyes and look at the dash, but he guessed it probably didn’t. As ghetto as Paul’s car was, Kurt’s truck was worst. He needed relief, though. Even in the simplest form: knowing it would end soon.

“How much longer?” he said.

“Soon,” said Kurt.

Other than the first day of school, Kurt offering them a ride from his brother, he hadn’t said a word to Jake. Paul had given them rides home everyday, and he and Allen
had acted chummy, talking about recess and the physical flaws of the teachers on Allen’s side of the school. Maybe Paul and Allen were friends, but Jake and Kurt weren’t. What could he talk to Kurt about? Farming? Tobacco chew? He supposed he could bring up football. He could talk all day about that, but never having played it, he was afraid he didn’t have the credibility. Jake wondered how Allen did it. Made friends so quickly like that. Then again, was Paul his friend, or did he just feel bad for what he’d done late that summer? And would a friend leave him like he had tonight? At least he was helping out now. With the three of them crowded into the cab, breathing dust—dust Jake was getting used to now—he felt closer in this time of trouble than he had felt with anyone in a long time. If only Allen were there with them and they were looking for someone else.

The images flashed through his skull again. Allen’s body floating down some tiny stream. Being devoured by a pack of screaming pigs. Hanging limply, two hundred feet up, from a turbine blade.

“All right,” Kurt said.

Jake opened his eyes.

Something metal glinted in front of them. It grew larger and larger, and soon Jake could make out an opening in the corn and the shapes of round-roofed trailers, at least twenty of them, sitting in a crude semi-circle.

“What is this?” Jake said.

“The shit huts,” Paul said.

“What?”

“Turbine builders used to live out here,” Kurt said.
“And now?”

“Nope.”

Kurt spat into his Pepsi can. Jake imagined Kurt doing Jake’s mother’s spit-string trick—sucking the brown, bitter saliva back into his mouth—and how nasty it would taste.

Kurt opened his door. Turbine moans, louder than any noise Jake had heard in Iowa, flooded the cab. “Stay here,” Kurt said.

Jake wished Kurt were talking to him, but he wasn’t. He was talking to Paul, whose only reaction was to nod once, a sign he was used to the drill. Jake glanced at his black eye again. From the tension in the car, Jake assumed Kurt had dealt it. He hoped so, at least. He hoped Allen’s face was okay.

Kurt slammed the door shut and walked to the back of his truck. Jake took in a deep breath and stepped out. He stared at the turbines as he circled around. This close, it hurt his eyes to look directly at the throbbing lights, and their bases were wider than he ever imagined. It would take twenty, thirty people connecting arms to encompass one. Maybe more. He did the math—easy math, non-algebra math—and decided definitely more. The blades, which he always thought from a distance resembled elephant tusks, now looked like whale fins—something about the way they curved slightly at the end. It would have to be one giant whale, though. A prehistoric whale. A whale that made a blue whale look like a grouper. It would take about fifty of those prehistoric whales mooing at once to make a noise half as loud as these machines.
Kurt was sitting on the tailgate. “Most times no one’s back here, and if they are, they ain’t looking for trouble,” he yelled. He reached for something and pulled it across the metal of the bed. “But in case they are.” He handed Jake a L-shaped bar, a tool he’d seen before. For changing tires, he thought.

Kurt grabbed a red wrench, its jaws like a robot grouper, for himself.

They walked to the trailers, the truck idling brightly behind them, their shadows stretched out in front of them like dark paths. Kurt’s path went much farther than Jake’s, and he hoped Kurt couldn’t see his shaking.

Rust had started up most of the trailers, and the effect it gave, jagged lines and waves starting from bottom, growing up, looked a lot like fires growing. Especially with the red lights thrown over them. They were identically made. About twenty feet long, each with two windows and a door on one side, three windows on the other. A little set of three stairs leading up to the door, some of them tipped over or moved or gone.

“Alright,” Kurt said, yelling again, but not as loud. “I’m gonna start here and work my way to the left. You work your way to the right. We meet in the middle.”

Jake nodded. Even his nod was shaky.

“If there’s a high schooler in any of them, those are the ones to check. Any kids at all, check them.”

“Aren’t they locked?”

Tolly turned his head toward the trailers and then back to Jake. He raised his eyebrows and spit.
Jake nodded and turned around, then turned back. “How are we going to see in there?”

Tolly looked up at the turbines and the bright red sky, squinting a little, then gave Jake the same raised-eyebrow look.

Jake nodded again.

Kurt walked to the trailer in front of them and Jake went right. He got ten steps before he felt a hand tug on his shoulder.

He brought the tire tool around fast but stopped well short of Kurt.

“I almost forgot,” Kurt said. “Knock. Then wait a little bit. Then knock again. No one opens, you’re good to go in. But keep a tight grip.” He clanked his wrench against Jake’s tire tool. Jake felt it, but heard no noise.

Jake started toward one again. When he felt Kurt was far enough away, he turned and watched him. He was about as tall as the trailer. He put one foot up on the top step, the other on the ground, and pounded on the door with the bottom of his first. He held one ear to the door while covering the other. He pounded again, this time with the wrench. He again held his ear to the door. Then he climbed the other three stairs in one step and ducked inside.

When he exited, he took a sharp right and headed for the next trailer.

Jake turned toward his own.

The first one was empty, or at least seemed to be, after his knocking. The door opened without a sound, the weight of it lighter than he expected.
It smelled like rotted wood and mold. He couldn’t hear much. The trailer walls did a little to shield the turbines, but not enough. But Kurt was right. You could see just fine. In one-second clips, anyway.

A fold-out couch lay straight ahead of the doorway, its mattress long-gone and its springs tangled like hair. At the front, which was the really the back, he guessed, was another bed, no mattress there, either. Cabinets, a sink, and a hole where a fridge used to be spread across the other wall. Facing it was what looked like the bathroom, its door ajar.

He approached it, the tire tool was hot and slippery in his hand. A body. That was all he could think. He didn’t want to find a body. Allen’s or anyone’s.

He turned to the opening fast, tire iron in front of him like a sword. The bathroom was horribly small, but there was nothing in it.

When Jake stepped out into the cool, loud night, he didn’t notice the police lights at first. Not until walking halfway to the next hut did he see the difference in color. The turbine lights were doing their best, but they couldn’t engulf all of the blue. Jake turned. The cop car sat just one trailer over. Kurt lay across the hood, cuffs behind his back. Jake saw him push the used-up dip from his lip and onto the car.

A fat cop had Paul in cuffs, too, at the front of his body, and was leading him from the truck toward the car.

What had they done? Trespassing? It was the one thing that made sense, and Jake supposed they were trespassing. But still, why the cuffs? Was it arrestable? Were they being arrested? Was Jake also under arrest? God, Allen was gone, maybe dead, and now
he would be under arrest. His father would probably kill himself. Jake had never thought that before, but now that he did, and he wondered why not. Why wouldn’t he, after all he’d lost and was losing?

The cop’s head snapped up, his hat shielding his face, the only thing not red. “Hey!” he yelled.

Jake sprinted for the corn, turning his head as he ran. It was probably the same cop that had stalked him earlier. He wore his pants high around his waist, trying to contain the large belly, protruding like he’d swallowed a bowl. He was running toward Jake, but that didn’t matter, because the corn was one hundred feet from him and the cop wouldn’t catch anything the way he ran, especially Jake, who felt like he was flying. He was running from the cops. The feds. The law. If only his old friends could see him now.

He hit the corn hard, not expecting how strong it’d be. His momentum carried him forward, breaking the first few rows, but the impact knocked the wind out of him. He gathered himself, pushed off the dirt and flattened stalks. He could feel the cop’s steps on the ground, thick thuds among the tiny turbines vibrations. He took off running again, through the rows. The cop crashed in behind him, yelling something he couldn’t hear and didn’t care to.

He kept running. The corn was cold and sharp and cut his neck and arms. He took a quick right. A few steps later, a left.

The Po-Po. The Five-Oh. The Blue Meanies.

Jake was a fugitive.
When a corn leaf sliced the corner of his mouth, he stopped and held it, licking either blood or dew. He wasn’t sure. He’d built a decent lead. The cop yelling sounded very distant. Then again, it was hard to hear with all the stalks blocking everything and the turbines shouting back and forth to one another.

The yelling wasn’t getting any closer, but the more Jake listened to it, the more he began to pick out words. The cop was saying the same thing over and over. The fifth time, Jake thought he heard him. The sixth time, he knew he did.

“I found your brother,” he was saying.

Jake sat shoulder-to-shoulder with Kurt, who sat shoulder-to-shoulder with Paul, who sat shoulder-to-shoulder with Allen. Their wrists were all cuffed. Jake and Kurt’s behind their backs. Allen and Paul’s in their laps. It was a tight fit in the back of the cop car. Kurt’s legs could barely fit as it was. His knees almost came up to his chest. Paul rested his head on the backseat, eyes closed. Allen held his hands straight out and pressed together like a prayer. Jake could see, even in the red of night, the marks cut into his brother’s wrists on either side of the cuffs. He could also see the weariness in his brother’s face. And he could smell him. His little brother smelled like booze.

They’d been asking the cop—Shively, Kurt kept calling him—why they were cuffed and locked in the back like criminals. Shively just sat in silence, pretending the grid of wire that separated the front from the back was soundproof, while he drove them away from the turbines and away from Maxton, down a highway Jake had only traveled once. The day they moved in.
“You can’t charge us for shit,” said Kurt. “For what? Being out by the huts? Since when do you arrest people for that?”

Shively brought his Three Musketeers bar to his mouth and devoured a third of it. Kurt somehow unfolded his long leg and kicked the wiring with his feet. “You ain’t even read us our rights. You’re in big trouble for that.” He kicked and kicked. Shively took another bite.

When the kicking stopped, Jake leaned over Kurt and stared at Allen. “You shouldn’t have been out this late,” he said. It was the first thing he’d said directly to him. He could really smell the booze now.

Paul said, “It wasn’t his fault.”

Kurt said, “You’re right. It was yours.”

Allen said nothing.

It was strange, leaving the turbines. They were a ways from Maxton now, the sky in front of them completely dark, minus a little bud of brown. Some distant city. It was different than leaving for Charter, because it was daylight then, and because the bus was noisy and full of sweaty children. There was a peace to this trip, and odd one, even if this cop was arresting them.

“Hey,” said Kurt, nudging Jake. “You ever play football?”

“Huh?”

“You’re fast.”

Jake wondered how he knew that. He must have seen him run into the corn.

“Not big enough,” said Jake.
“Don’t matter. We put you in the backfield, all you got to do is run.”

“This keeps looking worse and worse,” the cop said. It was the first time he spoke. His voice had the same drawl Kurt and Paul’s did, only rougher.


“My nephew gets assaulted with a baseball bat tonight, and here you boys are already talking about replacing him in football.”


“You should know. The new boys especially. Someone attacked him after he and the little one had a run in. The attacker: same height and weight as his brother.”

Jake was confused. He looked at Allen, but Allen was fogging the window. He probably wished he could draw on it.

“What the hell?” Kurt said. “So are you going to tell us what happened?”

“The way I see it,” said Shively, “your new friend there broke Rolland’s hand tonight for bullying his little brother. The punishment don’t fit the crime, though. No sir.”

“Bullshit,” Jake said. “I didn’t even know about this until now.” He looked at Allen again. He was still breathing on the window, making a larger and larger cloud.

“So why am I cuffed?” Kurt said. “Why are any of us cuffed?”

“You plan an attack with a baseball bat and see it out, you’ll need restrained. You’re all suspects. You know, safety purposes.”

“This is such shit,” Kurt said. “Lakowski was with us, out looking for his brother.”
Shively finished his candy bar and toss the wrapper on the empty passenger seat.

“Paul was out there with the little guy. He brought him down the street, to Rolland. If I didn’t know any better, it sounds like a setup.”

Paul said nothing. He was watching Allen breathe on the window.

“What do you mean, ‘brought him down the street’?” said Kurt.

“Exactly what it sounds like. Paul brought the little guy down the road, knew Rolland would go after him, and then boom, out pops his older brother with a bat.”

“They jumped us at the baseball diamonds,” Paul said.

“Rolland was on Center street. That’s pretty far from the diamonds.”

“They chased us.”

“Uh huh,” Shively said.

Jake leaned over Kurt again. “Did Rolland pour booze on you? Make you drink it? Are you drunk?”

Allen kept staring out the window.

“I found your little brother running down Center Street,” Shively said. Jake guessed he was talking to him. “Running directly away from the scene of the crime.”

“This is such shit,” Kurt said. “You can’t prove any of it.”

“I hear things,” Shively said. “Don’t think I don’t know what goes on at school. I know Rolland was giving your buddies hell.” He flipped his thumb at the backseat when he said buddies. “It sure wasn’t deserving, though. Rolland’ll miss all of football. Maybe you wanted him gone, too, aye Kurt? Maybe you wanted a little more passing in the offense.”
“You’ve got it all figured out,” Kurt said.

It wasn’t angering Jake the way it was Kurt. It was just making him tired. So damn tired. When Shively turned his signal light on, Kurt asked him why he was taking Old 29.

“I always take 29,” he said. Then he turned around and winked. “Reminds me of my glory days.”

“Jacking off on back roads,” Kurt said. “Good times. Good times.”

“I banged your cousin, you know.”

“Yeah right.”

“Sure I did. Cary Becker.” He whistled. “Now that chick could put it on you.”

“Why the hell does that even mean: put it on you? Who says that? You’re one old fuck.”

“Ask your cousin what it means,” he said.

The car turned right so sharply that if they weren’t so packed together, they would have slid into the left door. The tires squealed and they straightened out, heads bobbing.

“The thing is,” Shively said, “it’s going to be pretty hard to pass now, without Bud Clevenger protecting your blind side.”


Shively let the silence take its toll. Jake wondered what happened, too. He also wondered who Bud Clevenger was, and why he cared. The brown bud of city light was in front of them now, growing brighter. Oranger.
“Old Bud’s got a busted nose and busted cheekbone. And a concussion so bad he can’t count.”

Kurt said nothing to that.

At a stop sign that existed for, as far as Jake could tell, no reason at all, Shively opened up a Twinkie. “So Rolland and Bud,” he said. “That’s two counts of assault with a deadly weapon.” He made a clicking sound with his tongue, muffled by the Twinkie, and shook his head. He looked at Jake in the mirror. “How old are you, boy?”

“Seventeen,” Jake said.

“Not an adult, but I bet you’re tried as one.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“All signs point to yes,” said Shively, mouth full of dough.

“I was with Brette,” Jake said. “Brette Fitch.”

“From when to when?” Shively said, crinkling the wrapper.

“Um.” Was it midnight? When did he first notice Allen missing?

Kurt nudged Jake. “Better just shut up. Don’t talk until they make you.”

Right. No talking. It was easy at Pens High and should be easier now. Then again, he was never hauled to the county jail in Florida.

Streetlights started to dot the highway, and the backseat was quiet as they drove past a Dairy Queen and a gravel pit and a big factory and a John Deere Motor Supply. So this was a city in Iowa. This was where important things happened.
Jake saw his father’s van first. It sat among the cop cars like a patch of graying hair in an otherwise dark beard. Florida Wind on the side in light blue, so new and shiny in looked wet.

“Fuck,” he whispered.


Jake could hear the joy in the fat man’s voice. He threw the car in park and hobbled out, headed toward the station. Probably to get more officers to help him hall them all in.

More than likely, Shively thought calling their father meant both Jake and Allen were in for a world of hurt. But he didn’t know their father. It was him who was hurting—way more than either of his sons. Jake would go to prison and his father would hurt so bad he’d put his pathetic head in the oven, and then Allen would be by himself, on the streets of Maxton, or some crappy Midwestern city like this one. He’d become an adult too early, the jaded kind, and when he made friends or met people at some bar no one would ever know the real him, how truly cool he used to be.

**Brette**

She knew she would hate her group. Ms. Vanderoh had screwed her over. It was probably intentional, but not intentionally cruel—these people needed someone in their group who had motivation. After last year’s Incomplete in Physics, Brette needed two more science classes to graduate, so she was that someone.

Group projects: unleash your students and take a couple of weeks off. Brette looked at Vanderoh now, all deep in concentration at her desk, flattening her fried red
hair. She was sort of pretty in that too-much-makeup kind of way. Last year, in Biology, Brette had seen her chatting on AOL during class—smiley faces everywhere. It wasn’t long before rumor started about an online boyfriend, though Brette never said a word. She could have. She could have gotten Mrs. Vanderoh in trouble, but she knew—after the incomplete—that she’d need her for her science credits. And here it was, the semester’s first big assignment on the table. And here they were—The Group Mates from Hell:

Meridith Watters. Dark hair (braided today), short, squat, hourglass body, gigantic chapped lips. She cared less about school than about her chances of pregnancy and cared more about volleyball than anything. Known for dating seniors as a freshman, college freshman as a sophomore, and guys who worked at 3M in Ames as a junior. Finally, toward the tail-end of last year, she’d found someone her age in CJ Good, but word had it they were over now. Lord knew what Meridith’s senior year had in store. She would probably chase the older men again. Where was there to go after 3M? Charter had an old folks’ home, if that was the next step.

Ilene Hundermeier. Glasses, pencil pouch, studiously pale hair. Yet still one of the stupidest seventeen year olds Brette had ever known. Once, in freshman-year Physical Science during the unit on Newton’s Laws of Motion, Ilene raised her
hand and asked Mrs. Vanderoh if red meat caused heart disease because when you swallow it, it sticks to your heart on the way down.

Quinn Van Sully. Average build, average height, small, freckled nose. The owner of one of those half-sided smiles. Borderline Special Ed. Quinn’s parents complained enough to get him out of it when he was younger. They didn’t want him on the “slow track with slow Maxtoners.” His one shining moment: dancing on the library table in seventh grade when Mrs. Krabb left the room, for which he was told on and given a week’s worth of *Royal Reminders*.

Vanderoh had assigned the class to create a point-count survey, a project that would take weeks of creativity and dedication.

When Brette began to read the task outline, they started talking, but not about the assignment. Instead, they discussed the happenings of last night. Brette read the rest of the outline before she started listening, hoping it would be over by then, but it was just getting started.

“No fingerprints,” said Meridith. “Wow.”

“Yeah,” Ilene said. “And you know if they checked for prints it’s serious.”

“They didn’t check for prints,” said Quinn. “Where do you think this is, New York City?”

“They did,” Ilene said. “My dad heard from Henry Michelson.”

“Henry Michelson’s a drunk.”
“Yeah, well Shively goes over there all the time. They were old buddies.”

“Shively? You’re going to believe Shively?”

“Sure I am. Why not?”

Last night, Shively and the other Story County goons had questioned Brette about as much as she could handle—about Jake, about what she’d seen and how long she’d been with him and, of course, whether she collaborated.

“It doesn’t even make sense,” said Quinn. “How’d Michelson already hear from Shively about it?”

“Probably the same way you already did. People talking.”

“Yeah right.”

“You’re just pissed,” Ilene said.

“Why would I be?” said Quinn.

“Because someone stood up to you boys and your pranks.”

“Pranks?” said Quinn. “I wasn’t there. I don’t hang around Rolland. I had nothing to do with it.”

“If you’re a guy from Charter you’ve pranked Maxton. Everyone knows that.”

“Like if you’re a girl you’re any more innocent.”

“I just can’t believe there weren’t any prints,” said Meridith. “It’s like a professional did it.”

“I haven’t set foot in Maxton after dark,” said Ilene.

“Bullshit,” said Quinn.

“You think the new guy did it?” said Meridith.
“Everyone thinks it,” said Quinn. “Especially Rolland. No one can prove it is all.”

“Wow.”

“Have you seen his hand?” said Quinn.

“If you think I ever tormented Maxtoners,” Ilene said, “you’re beyond wrong.”

“He’s kind of hot,” said Meridith.

“Rolland?” Ilene said.


“I think it’s Jake,” said Quinn.

“It’s definitely not Jake,” Ilene said. “And I’ve definitely never set foot in Maxton after dark.”

“Guys,” Brette said. “Please.”

“Hey, Fitch, is your neighbor’s name John or Jake?” said Meridith.

“Jake.”

“I knew it,” Meridith said. “He’s got a nice butt.”

“Quinn,” said Ilene, “if you’re going to make things up about me and what I do at night, I’m not going to be in this group.”

“I didn’t say anything,” said Quinn. “You’re the one saying it.”

“So they took you in for questioning, huh?” said Meridith. She was looking at Brette.

“Yeah, it was lame.”

“Do you think he did it? Jake?”
“I don’t know,” Brette said, and she didn’t. Not for sure. Her gut told her he was innocent. He’d shown up at her door almost in tears, and she doubted he had the acting skills to pull that off. Only the craftiest criminal would go for that move, using her for an alibi. But what else did she know about him? And why did she even care? He was a dick. She’d not only gone to the Brick Bar to get sexually harassed, she’d also covered his ass, telling Shively she was with him. And he’d ruined her sleep. Now she was done with it. Now she could just focus her thoughts elsewhere.

“Anyone know when Rolland will be back in school?” Quinn said. “Think it’ll be today?”

“I don’t know,” Ilene said. “What about Bud Clevenger?”

“Clev? He’s out for a long time. I heard he doesn’t even remember who he is. His mom came to visit him and he thought she was the nurse.”

“What about the new guy?” Meridith said.

“He’s here,” Quinn said. “I saw him by his locker. Man, he looked like he had something pretty serious on his mind.”

“Yeah. It’s called assault,” Ilene said.

“It’s called prison,” said Quinn.

“That cute butt’s going to be in trouble in prison,” Meridith said.

“Guys!” said Brette. She slammed her pencil down, surprised by the snap it made. “We’ve got five minutes until the bell rings. Can we please get on the same page with this project?”

Meridith said, “Okay, okay.”
Ilene said, “Let the baby have her bottle.”

Quinn picked at the wart on his palm.

Brette read the task outline aloud again. She knew the others’ thoughts were elsewhere, and that was okay, because hers were too. Hers were the same place. Jake. She couldn’t help it. She finished reading and they sat in silence. Brette could hear the other four groups—groups with actual ambition—speaking in low, rushed voices, like they were planning a surprise party or an assassination. She wanted that excitement in her group. Actually, she wanted it in her entire school experience, but she never found it. After any teacher assigned any thing, in the end even Brette was left raising her brow, sighing, and rolling her eyes like the rest of her peers.

“So basically,” said Quinn, flicking some wart bits to the floor, “We need to walk around measuring some stuff in different areas.”

What was this? Someone listening? Someone taking in information and processing it into words—their own words?

“Right,” Brette said.

“So, like, anything?” said Ilene.

“Whatever we measure has to be something with mobility,” said Brette.

“Something alive. And either the environment or the unit needs to be unnatural.”

“Okay,” Meridith said. “Now I’m lost.”

“Like an invasive species. Or, if it’s the environment, a manmade structure.”

“What’s invasive?” Ilene said.

“Still lost,” said Meridith.
“Like the example of the deer and the stabilization pond,” Brette said.

“What the hell’s a stabilization pond?” said Meridith, curling her fat lips into a snarl.

“Like a shit pond,” Brette said. “Like the ones out by Colo.”

“Oh, okay.”

“So,” Brette said. “Like the examples were heard, people measured the amount of deer sign around the pond. But remember, it wasn’t very reliable.”

“When did we go over this?” Ilene said.

“Before we split up into groups,” said Brette. Or before Mrs. V split them into groups—unfair, cruel, nightmarish groups.

“I don’t remember it,” Quinn said.

“Me either,” Ilene said.

“Look, we just need to decide on something, anything, really, that we can measure to see if the environment’s affecting it. Or visa versa.”

She knew she shouldn’t have said that last part. Ilene was now as confused as ever. But Meridith surprised her.

“So, like, Crystal Wilberts and the rest of the high school?” she said.

Crystal Wilberts lived on a hog farm outside of Maxton and smelled like it. It was cruel, but it was also on the right track. Sort of.

The bell rang. They started to pack up.

“We need to decide on this,” Brette said.

“It isn’t due until October,” said Ilene.
They’d been listening to that at least.

Ilene and Quinn had their backpacks on. Meridith was taking her time, but still putting her things away.

“But it’ll take six weeks to collect the data,” Brette said.

“Can’t we just make the data up?” said Ilene.

“No,” Brette said.

“Why not?”

Brette didn’t know what to say to that, so instead she said she’d call them, each of them, when she decided. It was pointless, but all she had.

“We’ll see each other Thursday, though,” said Ilene. They had Environmental Science again then.

“That’s when we need to have our idea ready,” Brette said.

“So call us then,” said Quinn. “I don’t care.”

Quinn and Ilene turned to leave, chatting while they walked. Brette thought she heard Ilene say, “Maxton,” and “crazy,” and “bitch,” but wasn’t sure of any of them.

She slid her book and notebook and pencil into her bag and started straightening the desks—all four of them. Surprisingly, Meridith helped her. They walked into the hallway together.

“So this neighbor of yours,” Meridith said as they turned the corner. “What else do you know about him?”
Jake

Rolland wasn’t in school. He had found out in a weird way—on his walk to Biology, some kid he didn’t know, a freshman probably, nodding at him in the hallway and telling him so—but now he could confirm it, because Rolland’s Algebra desk was empty.

All through first period he’d felt his biology classmates staring at his back. He felt them now, too, as he sat down in his usual side-corner Algebra spot and removed his textbook and homework. The gazes were different than the first few weeks. Then, they were cold and uncertain. Skeptical. Now they were curious.

He could feel the energy of all those eyes focused on him, the heat of it burning through his shirt, burning his hand as he scribbled his name on the top of his homework he hadn’t finished. He hadn’t had time, what with the grilling at the police station and the awkward ride home with his quiet father and quieter brother. Allen wouldn’t speak, even when they were home. On the ride to school today, Paul had been just as quiet, and the three of them rode to Charter listening to their own breaths, all of them a little quicker than normal.

Jake knew that caused all the stares. His night at the police station. Rolland’s hand. What’s his name’s busted face. There was no other explanation, though he didn’t know how everyone had found out so soon. Or why they were so quick to think him the culprit.

Mr. Bowden walked in and rummaged through his desk. Even he gave Jake a sidelong glance as he searched, his blue tie wiggling. He walked to the front of the class
just as the bell rang. Afterward, the room hung in silence, a lot like Biology had. No small talk. No bullshitting. Bowden didn’t even need to get the class’s attention.

But halfway through his first sample problem, apparently he did. He snapped his fingers a few times, then he waved his arms. “Okay, folks, eyes up here.”

Jake didn’t need to guess where their eyes had been before.

Mr. Bowden had just left the room and Jake had just started his homework, determined this time to get it done before class was out—to avoid another possible distraction, like his brother going missing or himself going to jail—when he felt a tap on his shoulder.

Jake hesitated, but then turned around.

“Hey, man, can you talk?” the guy whispered. The kid, really. He had to be a freshman. Sophomore max.

“I guess,” Jake said.

He looked behind the kid, at the rest of the class. Everyone was staring at them. At him.

“You probably don’t know me. I’m Andy Winters. Most people call me Winters. I live in Maxton. On Cherry Street.”

“Okay,” said Jake, repositioning himself in his seat so he wouldn’t have to look right at the kid. His breath smelled like old coffee.

“I’ve got this problem,” Winters said.

The growing clip-clop of Bowden’s footsteps stopped Winters dead in his sentence.
Jake turned around and stared at his homework, which already looked foreign to him now that he’d taken his mind off of it.

“I’ll talk to you later,” Winters whispered.

Jake nodded and Bowden walked into the room and the desk behind Jake scratched against the floor as Winters departed.

Jake and Brette made eye contact like they normally did at lunch. Even when they hadn’t been speaking, they’d still exchanged a friendly nod. He was sitting at his table, solo, and she walking in front of the trophy cases and past the cafeteria, to whatever nook of whatever room she ate in. She looked particularly gloomy today, hood of her sweatshirt veiling her eyes, pale mouth small and hanging low. No nod this time, because she looked away as soon as she saw him. Jake took it as an admittance of guilt.

He got about halfway past the thought and into a bite of his sandwich—he wasn’t sure what kind, something bland and breaded—before Andy Winters set his tray down on the same table, two chairs away from Jake.

“Sorry if I creeped you out earlier,” Winters said.

“That’s okay,” said Jake. He didn’t feel creeped out at the time, but now, thinking back, it definitely was a creep move.

“My friend and I,” Winters said, opening his milk,” you probably don’t know him, Mike Sadee?”

“No.” Jake wished the kid would get to the point. He could see so many outlines of faces staring their way.
“Okay, anyway, we started talking, and, well, Mike said I should maybe come talk to you about this problem I’ve been having.”

“Okay,” Jake said. A few people behind Winters—those sitting at farther away tables—stood up to get a better look at the two of them. Why did his life always have to be so weird?

“If you’re not up for it,” Winters said, “then, well, that’s okay. It was Mike’s idea and I—”

“Spill it,” Jake said.

“I’ve got this hoop. This basketball hoop. Basketball is kind of my life.”

Winters opened and closed his milk carton a few times. He did not look like a basketball player. He also wasn’t spilling it.

Jake cleared his throat.

Winters let go of the milk. “Yeah, so, Charter guys keep messing with my hoop. Cutting the net down. Taking the rim off. Last month they ripped the whole thing off our garage. This stuff happens no matter what I do. My dad stopped caring and, well, Mike and I, we’ve tried everything. Bolted it in with a couple of L-9s. Staked out the bushes with a pellet gun. Greased the rim with Vaseline. We even left the hoop off for over a month. All that happened was my jump shot got rusty. As soon as I put it back up, it was on the cement again. It’s been off for a long time now.”

“I don’t know why you’re telling me this,” said Jake. Some of the faces had turned away, back to the center of their tables, but most still stared.
“My dad sold his farm land to the wind turbine company. That’s why the Charter
guys do it.”

“Uh huh.”

“I thought you could help me,” he said. “You know, kind of scare them straight
or something.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. I just thought, you know, you knew how to handle this kind of
situation.”

“Dude, that wasn’t me last night. I didn’t do it.”

“Well, alright but,” Winters slogged a french-fry through ketchup and laid it next
to the rest. “You don’t have to do even anything. So don’t even show up, then. Just some
advice would be cool.”

“Call the cops,” Jake said. “It’s vandalism.”

Winters smiled. He had braces, black ones that really set his hair and freckles
ablaze. “Come on, man, you of all people should know how clueless the cops around
here are.”

Jake set down his sandwich. This kid was wearing him out and another bite
seemed out of the question. “It wasn’t me,” he said. “I didn’t do anything. I don’t have
any advice.”

Winters ate a non-ketchupped fry, swallowed some milk, and stood up. “Okay,
man. I just thought I’d ask.”
In Government, Jake got another proposition. This one a little more normal, and from a girl. She had bad acne and was built like a bar of soap.

“Hi,” she said. She sat in the desk in front of Jake this time, rather than Winters’ creepy approach.

“Hi,” Jake said.

She grinded her teeth a little. “Do you want to come sit with us?”

Jake looked where she was looking. A group of people, two girls and one guy, sat in the corner, scribbling away on their amendment assignment. A fourth person, one Jake didn’t see at first, sat in the group, too, head down on his desk, arm twitching from sleep.

Jake felt others looking at him. He was getting used to it. Not out of comfort, but exhaustion.

“No thanks,” he said.

For the rest of the class, he stared at his paper with a deep concentration, though really the Bill of Rights was the last thing on his mind. He was fed up with people—especially the weird people of this state. Even Brette, someone who at first seemed his ally, got all weird about her sleep. Sure, she’d been his alibi, helped him out of that police-station jam, but giving him a ride around town might have avoided all of this in the first place.

A few minutes before the bell rang, the final bell of the day, he gathered his stuff quickly and headed for the door. Some guy, a gangly one with wheat-colored hair, tried to stop him.
“Hey, can I talk to you a second?”

“No,” said Jake.

“Look, if you help me—”

“No,” Jake said again, and pushed past him.

“Mr. Lakowski,” said Mrs. Hill, but he ignored her and hurried through the door and into the hall. Even emptier and sadder than normal, because he was leaving early.

After school, Allen was always waiting for him in Paul’s car. But Jake would get there first. They were riding the bus from now on. To hell with Paul Tolly. To hell with Brette Fitch. No one was worth the trouble.

The problem with heading towards Allen’s side of the school—instead of straight for the parking lot—was that Jake had to go by the locker rooms. This revelation came too late, though. Jake turned the corner and there was Rolland Reed, talking to one of his football buddies—a lineman, by the looks of his size—just outside the sour-smelling doorway.

Jake froze, staring at Rolland. He wanted to smash his face in. For Allen. He wanted to be that guy with the bat, whoever he was, and get a shot at Rolland in the dark.

Before Jake could do or say anything, Rolland did first.

“Grab him,” said Rolland.

The big guy did. He wrapped Jake into a half nelson. The vertebrae below Jake’s skull popped and he stared down at his own chest while Rolland spoke.

“I hear you had a nice little day at school, making all sorts of friends.”
Jake could hardly breathe with his neck bent the way it was. He pushed out an, “I didn’t do it,” and an, “I’ll kill you, you son of a bitch,” but both sounded so garbled he even began to wonder what he’d said.

Something big and royal blue flashed in front of Jake’s eyes and stayed there. A cast. A giant club of a cast on Rolland’s hand. It went halfway up his forearm. The only signatures on it so far were Dad, Mom, and Sarla with an ass-shaped heart around it.

“You think you’re going to get away with this?” Rolland said. “There’s no way.” He held the cast even closer to Jake’s face. So close he could see the imperfections in the plaster wrap.

“I didn’t do it,” Jake said. “But I wish I did.” It was even less recognizable this time. He was getting dizzy.

“It’s going to be a while,” said Rolland, “a long while, but I’ll get you back for this. I’m going to heal up. I’m going to wait in the distance, like an animal, like a mother fucking cheetah, and then, when you least expect it, bam, you and your little spick brother are dead.”

Jake jumped. Not from shock, but rage. And with intention.

The top of his head collided with the big guy’s chin. “Oh,” he gargled, and relinquished the half nelson.

Jake shoved Rolland in his rock-hard chest. The douche bag slipped like he was standing on ice, breaking his fall with his non-cast arm.
He’d slipped because he was wearing his football cleats. Jake hadn’t noticed, but Rolland had his pants on, too. The crazy shit was going to football practice today? With his cast?

When Rolland stood up, the bell rang. At the sound of it, his nasty green eyes jumped to the top of the wall, where one hung.

Jake ran, Rolland slipping after him, the big guy holding his mouth.

He met a crowd of people heading down the hallway. Football guys. Kurt was one of them, towering over the rest.

“Kow!” he said. “What’s up?”

Though the name—Kow, short for Lakowski, Jake guessed—almost made him stop, he ignored it, shoved through the wall of jocks like they were nothing.

He couldn’t find Allen. The carpeted elementary-school wing swelled with children and bright colors and he couldn’t spot the brown one of the bunch. His tan was fading, but still, he had two, three shades on the rest of them.

Before long, the halls were empty. He went into the parking lot, taking the long way, to avoid the locker rooms.

The crappy Cav was there, Paul Tolly’s arm out the window. No one sat in the passenger seat.

“Where’s Allen?” Jake said.

Paul shrugged.

He went back into the school, jogging now. Jesus, the kid sure could worry you.
The janitor, a short lady with weird hair—not quite an afro, but not an eraser top either—was already vacuuming the halls.

He stuck his head into Allen’s classroom. At least what he thought was Allen’s classroom. Another lady, this one older, wearing an long dress, was erasing the white board.

“Are you Allen Lakowski’s teacher?”

“He’s in the nurse’s office,” she said.

“Where exactly is that?”

“Turn right and go up the ramp.”

Jake found him asleep in a bed of off-white sheets. No nurse. Nothing on the walls. Not even a clock.

“Al,” Jake said, and nudged him.

“Sh,” said Allen. He turned over.

“Dude, are you sick?”

“Quiet,” he said into his pillow.

“We’re going to miss the bus.”

“Huh?” He turned over and opened his eyes. “What time is it?”

“School’s out.”

“What bus? What about Paul?”

“We don’t’ ride with him anymore.”

Jake readied for protest, but Allen said nothing. He just rolled out of bed and grabbed his bag.
They walked out the door. The halls were completely empty now. Even the custodian was gone, though Jake could hear the faint hums of vacuum somewhere.

“So are you sick or what?” Jake said.

“I kept falling asleep in class.”

“Jesus. Is it the turbines?”

“Huh?”

“Are the wind turbines keeping you up?”

“What? No. I just didn’t sleep last night. We were at the cop station, remember?”

“Oh,” Jake said.

They walked down the wheelchair ramp hallway and past the janitor with the semi-afro. “The bus is already gone I bet,” Allen said.

“Whose fault is that?”

“So can we ride with Paul?”

“What were you two doing last night? Don’t mess around. Just tell me.”

“We were at the diamond hitting pop ups.”

“And then you ran when Rolland those guys showed up?”

“Yeah.”

“Why did you run?”

“Who are you, the cops?”

“I’m not messing around, Al.”

“We weren’t either. It wasn’t Paul’s fault.”
"We’re not hanging around them anymore. He gives us a ride home today and that’s it."

“He didn’t do anything.”

“He shot fireworks at our house. Lit bags of shit on our porch. You should have never been with him in the first place.”

“Whatever you say, Dad.”

Jake sighed. At least Allen was talking again. Jake wished he had something inside of him like that. Something that just restarted itself after shit went bad. It would have come in handy when their mother died and their father stopped smiling. Then again, Allen had never known their mother. He’d only known what they had now, and all Jake had was anger. Even now, he felt it disappearing. That’s the way his feelings were lately. They grew and they left, like a match. Sometimes the match was wet and nothing even happened.

“When we get home, leave me alone,” Jake said. “I’m taking a nap.”

Allen yawned. “I hear that,” he said.

Jake thought he noticed some Tolly twang in his little brother’s voice, but ignored it.

When they crossed the hallway where Rolland had jumped him, Jake picked up his pace. The hallway was empty. So was the locker room, the door left open, stench of shoulder pad sweat and tile cleaner wafting.

Paul was still waiting for them in the lot. He owed them that. He owed them a lot, for all the stuff he’d pulled and got them into.
They tossed their bags in the backseat and Jake let Allen take shotgun.

“Thought you went MIA again, Al,” said Paul.

“I took a nap.”

“Hey, me, too. Right through English.


When they went past the practice field, all dirt and frizzled grass, Jake looked for Rolland. There he was, standing in that long, soldier-like line with the rest of them. He was easy to pick out with the cast. That royal blue flare among their off-white practice gear.

“Paul,” Jake said, as they left the lot. “What the hell is Rolland’s deal? What happened last night?”

“I don’t think we ought to talk about it.”

Allen turned around, his moon face full of sleep. “Yeah,” he said. “Let’s talk about it when we’re not so tired.”

“I want to know,” said Jake.

“He jumped us,” said Paul. “Come on, you heard all this.”

They turned onto E-18 and into the sun.

“Why, though?”

“Because you pissed him off. And I pissed him off.

“I know what I did. But what did you do?”

“Look, he was paying me and Dyl some money to mess with you guys. That’s what all the bottle rockets and eggs were about.”
“Again,” Jake said, his face hot with anger—the fatigued kind, “why?”

“A few years ago, these Mexican guys did something bad to his sister.” Paul glanced at Allen. “And he’s blamed the turbines ever since. A lot of people have.”

Jake slid down into the back seat and stretched out horizontally, using his and Allen’s bags as pillows. “Jesus Christ. This place is so fucking stupid.”

“What’s stupid is attacking two people with a bat,” Paul said.

Jake sat up. “Bullshit. You know it wasn’t me. You know we didn’t plan some stupid ambush.”

“I know that,” said Paul. “And that’s what I told Shively. But how do I know you weren’t following us?”

“Because I was in bed like a normal person, waiting up for my normal brother.”

“You aren’t normal anymore. Look at your eyes. And you weren’t in bed. Kurt and I found you.”

“Yeah, after Allen never came home.”

“Guys,” said Allen. “Come on.”

“I know you didn’t do it,” Paul said, “but it looks bad. Hell, it looks good, too. Half the girls in my class want to blow you.”

“That’s sick,” Jake said. “They’re thirteen.” Allen looked out the window.

“Older girls, too,” Paul said. “If they’re from Maxton, they love it. Some of the Charter kids, too. Most everyone loves a rebel.”

Jake figured as much after the propositions he’d gotten today. Still, he didn’t like it. It was annoying and creepy. And he didn’t want to welcome it. He’d look guilty.
“All I’m saying,” said Paul, “is that it’s all looking like you did it. Nothing like this has ever happened before in Maxton. Then you show up and it does.”

Ed

His neighbor was being loud again. The girlfriend wasn’t over. She hadn’t been in a while and Ed suspected their fight had lead to their falling out. It was the laughter of men creeping through Ed’s walls. Or Boys. Young men. Ed strained to distinguish the voices—to see if he could hear the Reed boy—but it was too difficult. In a frenzy, they all sounded the same.

They were playing that goddamn Super Mario, its chings and boinks and psychedelic fiddle music. Ed knew the sounds well. He’d often watched Maria’s nephew and niece play it when they would visit Maria’s sister in Missouri. Ed had always enjoyed being around the children, watching their eyes light up when they’d complete a level. Why his neighbor was still playing the same game now, over half a decade later, Ed didn’t know.

One of them yelled “Lava,” or possibly “Fauna,” though Ed doubted the latter. The fiddle music stopped and a different kind, jauntier and full of strange flutes, replaced it.

“Fuck!” one screamed. There was no doubt about that word.

The rest laughed.

He could picture the game, the bright greens and burnt oranges, the little red man doing impossible things with impossible energy: jumping over monsters, swimming
miles underwater, upper cutting bricks, jumping on turtles so hard their shells shit out their soft little bodies.

They must have started the level back up, or a different one, because cannons, it sounded like, fired at Mario now. The barrage was unbearable, and Ed put his pillow over his head.

Through the flattened cotton, he heard one of them yell, “Stay there, stay there, stay there!”

The other said, “I am, I am, I am!”

The flute music played. Then silence.

“What did I tell you?” one said.

“I was running out of time!”

“Bullshit!”

Ed rose like a rusted robot and pulled the untucked blanket and tangled sheets and greasy pillow from his bed. He was still sore, so damn sore, from last week’s chase across Maxton. He deserved it. He hadn’t run in ten years and then he ran for a half hour straight.

He walked across his room and tossed the bedding in a ball on the hallway floor. He would sleep here tonight, the farthest point from his neighbor’s noise, the bathroom to his back, a well-needed barrier.

The floor was softer than he expected, especially with a little extra blanket tucked under his hip and shoulder. Through the tiny hallway window no stars shined. It
was so dark outside he felt like the window was darkening the room more than lighting it, and it felt nice, hiding in the blackness, feeling safe between the walls.

He rolled onto his other side, the Mario music and his neighbor’s shouts only gentle murmurs. When he stuffed his other arm under his pillow, something brushed his hand. It felt like a spider, a giant spider tickling him. He smashed it with the bottom of his fist.

It wasn’t a spider. It was a sock or something. He lifted it from the floor and held it above his face, trying to place it in the dark. Crumbs from some long not-eaten food fell off of it and onto his face. He swiped them away while he felt the thing out with his fingers.

It was the mask, his bloody T-shirt mask, from the Reed boy night, the night that started his brief yet memorable stardom. He had the proof in local papers, the Des Moines Register, the Ames Tribune, the Nevada Journal, all stacked on his kitchen table.

_Masked Mugger Strikes High Schoolers in Maxton._

_Three Teenagers Assaulted; Assailant Unknown._

_Another Tragedy in Small-town Iowa_  

Before now, Ed wasn’t even sure where he’d put the T-shirt. That night, after the attack, he had been dead tired. The bat swings must have drained a year’s worth of built-up adrenaline. He barely made it home. He couldn’t remember making it home, actually, but when he woke up in his own bed, that was proof enough. Did he wear the mask to bed?
Ed didn’t like the thought of lying on that dry blood all those nights. He could smell the blood, even now, that rusty scent. It sickened him, but he kept a hold of it, and before long, sleep started to take a hold. Sleep, and something else, something warmer, was building in the hallway of his heart.

Was it hope? A purpose?

Tomorrow night he would start back up. He would guard the new family’s house again. He’d taken too much time off already. They needed him, and Ed needed them. For not the first time, he thought of the weightlessness of connecting with Rolland Reed’s hand and the putty-like thud of his big friend’s face. He thought of the aching skies of Maxton.

**Brette**

She woke with a start, like she’d been having a bad dream. She remembered Terri—something to do with Terri and softball and her parents screaming. Then she remembered it wasn’t a dream.

Last night, Terri had called. The coach had told her she’d probably see the field, but as a corner outfielder. Their parents—their *dad*—bit his tongue, shook his head, and pressed the phone to his ear harder while he listened. Later—in what an outsider might see as *unrelated*—he burned his lip on her mom’s chili, screamed that she’d heated it that way on purpose, stormed outside, swept the garage floor, and reorganized his wrenches. This happened around nine o’clock, and when he came back inside well after ten, stinking of dust and shame, he went to kitchen, hugged Brette’s mom, and retired to the recliner.
Outside, red still bled from the silver sky—but it was silver, and that meant morning. Brette stretched the sinew of her ribs and flexed the muscles in her thighs—all of which had been feeling stronger lately and, in the body-length mirror in her parent’s room, even showing it a little. She pried the gooey mouth guard from her gums and lifted herself from the waterbed. She’d taken to sleeping in Terri’s room since school started, and apparently it was working. That and the late-night workouts. She’d just woken up, after all. She’d been asleep, eyes closed, worries gone, world gone, and now she was awake.

Brette walked downstairs. An infomercial for diet pills blared from the TV and her father was exactly how she’d left him, turned sideways on his recliner. He was snoring. She tiptoed to the chair and stood over him for a moment. His nose—that tiny, freckled thing he’d passed to both daughters—twitched every few seconds. Each time it did, the freckles momentarily disappeared into little white wrinkles and his mustache climbed his face. There was no pattern to it, though. Sometimes two seconds, sometimes five, sometimes more than she bothered to count. He was dreaming.

He’d had trouble sleeping lately, up past midnight and sometimes later. Brette knew it was Terri’s absence. He was aimless, felt useless. But if he was dreaming, maybe Brette had been, too. Maybe everyone dreamt, and it was just that some couldn’t remember.

She walked to the kitchen, slid two slices of bread in the toaster, and dialed Meridith Watters.

“Hello?” came a breathy voice.
“Hey, is this Meridith?”

“Hey, Bretto. I was just leaving.”

“Okay, see you soon.”

“Can’t wait.” Brette heard her smack her lips.

Meridith had been acting weird lately, and Brette assumed it had to do with Jake. On Monday she’d walked Brette to P.E.—all the way across the school—making inquiry after inquiry about him like she was taking notes for the nonexistent school paper.

Do you think he did it?

Weren’t you out with him that night?

What’s going on with you two? Anything?

Does he have a car?

Does he have a job?

Is that his little brother—the tan one?

Is he just tan, or, you know, something else?

But Brette tolerated the question, because even if Meridith was using her to get to Jake—though Brette was pretty sure she was worthless in that category, since they hadn’t spoke since their fight—she was the only loyal Environmental Science group member Brette had, the only one willing to sacrifice her precious sleep to get up when the birds did.

What was even weirder, though, was that Meridith Watters wasn’t alone in her lust. The bat attack had happened Monday night and now, only Thursday, the whole high school was different. Jake was different, too. He walked the halls with a modest
swagger, and, even worse, the others treated him that way: ever-growing number of pats on the back in the hallway, attendees at his once-empty lunch table, and inquiry from Meridith Watters. It wasn’t all Maxtoners, either. Meridith was proof of that, but so were Michel-Marie Swindle and Chaney Pitts and Alfred O’Neal—the Charter downtrodden who could now look up to someone for standing up to Rolland. Brette felt shitty about all of it. It was in her stomach, not totally unlike that guilty feeling when Chase Bruisner tried to take things too far with her freshman year, but not the same either. Was she jealous? It wasn’t impossible. If so, what was she jealous of? The new guy making friends? Getting his dick played with and his heart broken by Meridith Watters? Having a normal life? It didn’t make sense.

The whole mystery of Jake Lakowski and the night of the bat was turning into popularity’s perfect storm. Brette couldn’t see it, but she could feel it, swirling. In the past few days, their friendship never truly started, she missed him—not him being there, but him being the old him, alone and scared, her secret. But what did she have with him before, anyway? Nothing. Just a few empty conversations at the Good’n’Quick. So what if Jake made some friends and lost his V-card to Meridith Watters.

Brette’s toast popped up and her father grumbled something inaudible from his chair. She removed slices, peanut-buttered them, and scarfed them down in what seemed like two bites apiece. She’d been starving in the morning lately—even after the half gallon of post-workout chocolate milk she’d been chugging before bed.

*Before bed.* There it was again: that beautiful normalcy.
“I’m writing a totally shitty group evaluation for those two,” said Meridith.

“Maybe they’ll come around,” Brette said.

“Psh,” said Meridith.

They were parked in Brette’s car in front of one of the turbines, the sun peaking hot pink from somewhere behind the corn. Meridith chewed at her nails, smelling of sweat pea lotion, wearing bleached jeans and an expensive-looking sweater.

“You bring any boots or overalls?” Brette said.

“It didn’t rain last night, did it?” Meridith said, muffled, her fingernail in her mouth.

“The dew,” said Brette. “It might be bad.”

“The stalks are pretty dry, aren’t they?”

“Maybe,” Brette said.

Brette finalized the chart she’d drawn. It would be a simple, relevant, and, she hoped, brilliant point count survey. Her group—group a loose term, since her and Meridith were the only ones giving a damn—would measure bird populations around the turbines.

The idea for their project came to Brette on Tuesday night while lying in bed. She was thinking about the turbines—go figure—and she was also thinking about their project. When she realized combining the two would work perfectly, she said, “Duh,” so loud she was afraid she’d woken her father.

It was local and relevant. The birds were local; the turbines were foreign. The birds were natural; the turbines were manmade. Best of all, it would be a grownup point
count survey—unlike Sarla Batch’s group and their mosquitoes around the water sprinkler or Justin Pace’s group and their grass around the football sled.

Brette put on her mother’s rain coat, left her father’s work boots in the trunk—she didn’t want to look *too* prepared—and they started to point number one: under the turbine.

The wind was nonexistent, a perfect morning for bird listening, and the turbines cooed gently to each other. The girls walked near the closest one and Brette could already hear the trill of a bird. It sounded like a warning.

“So we’ll start here,” said Brette, “listen for five minutes, then head that way about 300 feet and listen again.”

They stood, facing away from the turbine, and Brette started her stopwatch.

“I forget how loud they are up close,” Meridith said, her face straight up, the outline of her lips fat and beautiful against the brightening sky.

“Wait until they start spinning,” said Brette.

“And tall.”

“Two-hundred feet, I think.”

“I remember them hauling all the blades and stuff past our parents place a long time ago. My brother told me they were building a space ship.”

“Huh,” Brette said. She had already reset the stopwatch twice.

“Is it true what they say? You know, that living around them kills your sex drive?”
That was a new one to Brette, but she wasn’t surprised. She’d done obsessive internet searches in the past—before she’d realized there wasn’t really a point to it. She’d read some ridiculous claims about turbines.

*They stopped your brain from growing.*

*They caused hair loss.*

*They caused cancer.*

*Osteoporosis.*

*Early menopause.*

*Miscarriage.*

*Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (her personal favorite).*

“Sex drive?” Brette said. “I don’t’ know about that one.” But she was already thinking about her parents—about her father sleeping on the recliner.

“I wonder, you know?” Meridith was still looking up. “Like with guys like Kurt Tolly. You think they just knocked the drive right out of him?”

Tolly had never dated anyone. He’d always been a loner. This year he’d become a figure even farther in the distance, though he did help her look for Jake that night.

“We better start this,” said Brette. “We don’t want our *own* sex drive going down hill.”

“Good point,” Meridith said.

Brette started the stopwatch again. They had to stand there, perfectly silent, and listen to birds for six minutes. Then, fifty meters away, they’d do it again. And then again. And again. And again. That was a set—a different kind of set than the ones she
pumped out in Terri’s room. They needed three sets per survey, and five surveys for the project. Brette wondered about Sarla Batch’s group and their sprinkler point-count survey. By point two or three, they’d have to go across the highway. If they went the other way, they’d have to walk through peoples’ yards. And how did you measure mosquito populations anyway? By how many bites you got?

Their first count was awkward. Nothing happened at first, minus the turbine mumbling above them, and Brette felt a strong need to talk. She didn’t know Meridith that well, after all, and this kind of silence thing was only reserved for the best of friends. At least Brette assumed. She’d never really had one.

Suddenly three birds with sharp-angled wings screamed and flew in tiny arches over their heads. They landed on the gravel strip of road to peck at something Brette couldn’t see. Brette marked them down. She checked the stopwatch, thinking their six minutes almost up.

1:02 stared back up at her.

She looked at Meridith, that lippy mouth wrapped around another nail, her eyes scanning the corn.

The birds kept whistling—long, wailing sounds, like a warning—as they continued to stand in silence and the sun peeked its bald head over the corn and the wind blew their hair.

1:38.

To the west, way down the line, Brette saw the first turbine start its first twist. Meridith let out a sigh.
1: 59. Brette thought she heard a bird, a different kind of bird, but wasn’t sure. She turned her head to the right and listened. There it was again. And yes, it sounded different than the screaming white ones. It sounded more peaceful, like a song. She marked it. It didn’t matter whether you saw or heard it, as long as it was there.

2:23.

Another sigh from Meridith—more wind behind this one. The corn began to flutter, the browning leaves scraping against each other.

2:40.

Another sigh.

Brette waited a long time to check the stopwatch this time, not looking until she was sure the time was up.

3:53.

“Man,” said Meridith.

“I know,” Brette said, whispering, hoping Meridith would get the hint and shut up.

Their six minutes finally ended and their birds marked, they walked north, Brette watching the little gray screen of her odometer, and entered the corn. The leaves soaked through her sweatshirt immediately and Meridith said, “Ah fuck,” behind her.

Jake

Friday. Gameday. The football players wore their jerseys, Home blue with silver trim. It was the fourth gameday Friday of the year, but this one felt different. He could now match names, and personalities, to some of the faces, and it really surprised him—that
certain guys were out for the team. The guy that surprised him most of all was Andy Winters.

Jake noticed it when he walked into Algebra. Winters in his number 27 jersey, red hair and freckles clashing against the blue. So scrawny, awkward Winters played football. If he could, then everyone could. Everyone about did, it seemed, except Jake. For the moment, he threw the sad thought aside, because Winters was sitting one desk over from Jake’s usual seat.

He knew he shouldn’t be surprised. After he’d dismissed Winters’ offer at the lunch table, the kid had still sat next to him in the cafeteria the next day. They didn’t talk at all, but it didn’t feel too awkward. It felt more like a dog resting loyally by his side. This, on the other hand—Winters sitting next to him in Algebra—did feel awkward. The lunchroom was big, noisy, and impersonal. The classroom, especially a classroom with Rolland Reed in it, meant this sit-next-to-you stuff was serious business. Friendship business, maybe.

Jake slid into his old, straight-backed Algebra chair. He made the mistake of making eye contact with Andy Winters, who tilted his freckled chin up and said, “What’s up, Kow?”

There it was again. Kow. He’d actually heard it a few times since Monday. Not directed to him, but to others as he walked by.

“Hey,” Jake said.
Before he could unpack his things, Rolland strolled in. He looked at Jake, looked at Winters next to him, and stopped in his tracks, club cast hanging low. Almost to his knee.

“Let’s go Royals!” he screamed, veins popping. He cast a long, deadpan stare at Winters, then proceeded to his desk.

The intensity was obviously negative. He didn’t like Winters sitting by Jake. For the first time, Jake thought a little more closely about the whole Charter-Maxton dynamic—particularly sports. It would be absolute hell competing alongside your enemies while other schools got along fine.

Mr. Bowden walked in wearing his Casual Friday jeans and a Royal Football T-shirt tucked into them. “Is everything okay in here?” he said, his little goatee wrapped around a concerned smile.

“Everything’s fine,” Rolland said. Almost a shout. “Big game tonight, Mr. Bowden. Are you going?”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Bowden said.

“After me going down, Algebra’s own Andy Winters got the nod at tailback,” Rolland said. “He’s going to do great, aren’t you Winters?”

Winters, hands flat on his desk, face flat and straight ahead, said, “I’ll try.”

“We’ll all be rooting for you,” said Bowden. He rolled the overhead projector in front of the board.

“Darn straight,” Rolland said, his voice even louder now. “Woodward-Granger is 0-3. This could be our night. We could finally ring the bell.”
Winters had taken one of his hands off his desk. In it, he now held a pencil. He brought it to his mouth and chewed the metal eraser band.

“Win or lose, we’ll be proud,” said Bowden. The way he flipped through his Teacher’s Edition textbook—the concentrated look on his face, like finding that page was the hardest thing in the world—made it obvious he wanted the conversation over.

“Prouder after a win, though, I bet,” Rolland said.

“Take out today’s assignment and swap with a partner,” Bowden said.

Jake was glad to hear it. It looked like Winters was, too.

Winters put a blank sheet of paper on Jake’s desk. Jake did the same to Winters.

The drill was old news by now. Other than the occasionally printed-out assignment—like the one Jake got busted over, for the penis drawings—Bowden let them check and score each other’s homework before turning it in. It was less work for Bowden, Jake supposed, but it was also stupid and heartbreaking: trusting teenagers like that. The first week Jake had been clueless about the dishonest system his fellow classmates had in place, doing his homework in its entirety, two nights in advance.

When Bowden had told them to pass their homework to a partner that first time, he actually did. To an awkwardly tall girl two seats to his left. She’d looked at him so bewildered Jake thought he might have done the wrong assignment. He even glanced at Mr. Bowden, to make sure he was in the right room. The right class. He was, but he just didn’t know the rules.

Now he did, though. And they were simple. You didn’t do your homework. When Bowden asked you to swap with a partner, you gave your partner a blank sheet of
paper. Your partner did the same. Then you proceeded to do your homework, right there, as he went over the problems on the overhead.

It was sad. It was wonderful. It guaranteed a high score—but not a perfect one, because you had to make it look legit, missing one here or there—and it really saved Jake some time. Not that he did much with it anyway.

He put his feet up on the empty chair in front of him and commenced his copying. A few problems in, he started scrolling spirals around each number so he wouldn’t nod off. It wasn’t working, though. Copying the homework was just too easy, and the room was too quiet. If only his room in Maxton could be this quiet, and maybe it was, maybe, if you didn’t count the white-noise turbines, but white noise should help you get to sleep, right? He remembered his mother used to sleep with a box fan on high next to her bed, not for the air but for the noise.

Jake smelled flowers. A girl he’d seen but didn’t know stood near the projector, note in hand, whispering to Bowden. She must have just walked in. Her dark hair dangled in wet strands on her shoulders, dampening her shirt there. When she turned around he knew he recognized her. She wasn’t pretty, but not ugly either. Nice rack but thick legs. Nice lips, but chapped. He was pretty sure she normally sat near the back of the room—near Rolland—her eyes, like all the others, burning his back.

She was walking to his corner now. Toward Andy Winters. Toward Jake. Bowden started back up on his matrices and determinants rant and she was headed right for him, looking at him, not with wonder or disgust, but something else. She stopped at
the desk in front of him, bent down, hands on her knees, and whispered, “Care if I sit here?”

Jake nodded. Then he shook his head.

She smiled with her big orange lips. “Does that mean I can sit down?”

“Yeah,” Jake said. He took his feet off the seat.

She slid in and brought her bag onto her desk. The scent of her when she moved—some kind of peachy flower, somehow sweet and not sweet at the same time—was so strong his stomach grumbled.

She ripped out a piece of notebook paper, twisted to him, and placed it on his desk. “Swap homework with me?” she said. She wiggled her dark eyebrows when she asked.

Jake tore a piece and handed it to her. Then he looked down at the paper she’d given him. There was a message in the middle of the page. In fat, looping handwriting. 

*So you’re the famous Kow?*

He blinked, his hand shaky on the paper. Notes. Passing notes in class. With a girl.

He wrote back.

*I guess.*

He slid it over her shoulder, careful not to touch her with his hand. She reached back casually, grabbed it, and started scribbling.

He couldn’t believe what she wrote back.

*Meet me on the stage??* 😊
Jake reread it three times and was still sure he’d misinterpreted it. The stage? Just them? When? Where was the stage? He hadn’t seen a stage his whole month here. This was flirting, right? The smiley face was. Yes, it was. It had to be. And what would happen once he got to the stage? What did she expect? How would they both get there in the middle of class? His chest and stomach ached with adrenaline. His foot tapped on the floor. Notes. Smileys faces. Sneaking out of class. This was what high school was supposed to be. He’d been missing out for so long.

He wrote back.

*When?*

He accompanied it with one of the crudest smiley faces he’d ever seen, the oval head and jagged smile of an escaped mental patient. He erased the face but could still see it so he redrew it, breathing slower and taking his time. It still looked deranged, but not as bad. He slid it over her shoulder.

She grabbed it, wrote, and passed it back.

*Wait ten minutes and ask to go to the bathroom.*

Afterward, she raised her hand and told Mr. Bowden she forgot her homework in her locker. It was that easy. For her, at least. When she walked, her butt moved in her jeans like the two pistons of an engine. Not unlike Terri’s Fitch’s. Not like it, either, but close. Close enough.

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A porno, himself the star, flashed through his head as he left the classroom.
It started in-scene. He was somewhere dark and he wore a suit and tie and held a gun in his hand. He pushed open a door, gun raised, and there she was, the girl with the wet hair, smelling of flowers. She lay naked on a white couch in the middle of the dark room, and she waved with her fingers at him. “You look tense,” she said. “Come take a load off.”

He shook his head, trying to snap out of it as he walked down the hallway. He needed to find the stage. Nothing as ridiculous as his mind-porn waited for him there, but something did. Something exciting. Something better than everything else so far.

But where was the damn stage? He needed to find it. Or the auditorium. He could find it from there. The girl had left the class ten minutes before he did, claiming she’d left her book in her locker. That excuse could only last so long.

He walked down the empty hall, checking each double door. He guessed an auditorium would have two doors for easy exits. Once he thought he spotted it. Through the checkered window he saw four different levels of carpet and a giant set of stairs, but it was only a band room. At the bottom of the steps, a small girl held a tuba half her size on her shoulder while the instructor traced sheet music with his fingers, like the tiny girl had all the strength and time in the world.

Maybe Charter-Maxton didn’t have an auditorium. He remembered going to a district basketball game in Florida at one of the poorer schools—Escambia? Choctawhatchee?—and their stage was at the end of their gymnasium. He knew where the gym was here, at least.
Something starchy and bland hung in the air as he walked past the cafeteria. A strange energy also floated there, like a calm before a storm. It was almost eleven, and he guessed the storm was lunchtime.

The thud of basketballs grew as he neared the gym doors and exploded once he opened them. It must have been P.E., because uncoordinated kids, some in jeans, were double dribbling and tossing up two-handed, chest-level shots. A girl and two boys near the door stopped and looked his way.

“Kow!” said one of the boys. He was short and hugged the ball to his pudgy stomach. “What’s up, man?”

“Uh, not much,” Jake said. He looked to the far side of the gym. No stage. Just a white brick wall covered in conference logo pennants. The other side, closest to him, was just as blank. Wooden bleachers pushed into their caverns bordered the sidelines. On the right side, all the way in the corner, an adult with break-away pants and a bald spot stared up at him from his clipboard.

The other boy, taller and a little older—a year or two younger than Jake, he guessed—introduced himself as John Howitzer. “This is my little sister,” Howitzer said, pointing to the scraggly girl next to him.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi,” said Jake.

“We live a few blocks from you,” Howitzer said. “You ever need anything, let me know.”

“Thanks,” Jake said.
“You need anything right now?” said the pudgy one. “It looks like you might.”

“I’m good,” Jake said, and he left.

He’d had the same weird fear in asking Bowden to use the bathroom—i.e. go to the stage. It had taken all his courage to get out of his seat. Though the chubby man gave him a friendly, “Go for it,” he still felt like an idiot leaving the room with all those stares on his back. It was basically his worst nightmare: the stares. He’d always felt like everything he did was watched with a widespread scrutiny, people just waited for him to mess up. He’d gotten so nervous once writing on the chalkboard in fourth grade that he’d almost slipped on a drop of his own sweat. It was hot in the classroom. Florida in August. His mother was in a coma at that point, from losing all that blood, but still, he knew it wasn’t normal, and now it was worse. Because it was real. Everyone was actually staring at him.

Why else would this girl whose name he didn’t even know ask to meet him on the stage? She’d been watching him like all the rest of them. She’d gotten curious. Jake just wasn’t sure how that curiosity led to whatever it was now. A crush? Maybe. That smiley face had crush written all over it.

His heart thumped faster than his steps as he walked past the cafeteria and into the elementary wing. When he passed the fifth-grade classroom, he slowed and tried to get a decent angle to see Allen, but no dice. He couldn’t see into the corners of the room, and that was probably where he sat if he were anything like his brother.

As he walked up the ramp he checked the fat wall clock that hung from the wall. He was running out of time. He’d been gone from class for ten minutes. That meant the
girl had been gone for twenty. If anything, she was back in class already. She’d given up on him. Probably for good.

Mr. Bowden rounded the corner, headed for Jake and staring at his shoes, which were moving quickly. He had pissed-off written all over his normally jolly face. Jake was near an empty classroom and stepped into the entryway. He jiggled the door but it was locked. Still, the little section of wall covered him. He leaned against it, again picturing his movie, gun in hand, suit on body, evading something horrible.

Bowden walked by without seeing him. After he passed, the door Jake had been jiggling opened.

“What?” said an annoyed, high-pitched voice.

The kid wore a number 68 jersey and was overweight and had peach fuzz above his lip. It was the kid from the first week of terror. Paul’s fat sidekick.

“Remember me?” Jake said. He crunched both hands into fists.

The kid wiped sleep from his eyes. They widened. “Shit. Hey. Listen, I heard about Rolland. That’s awesome. Whatever I did before, man, I’m sorry. I really didn’t mean to or want to.”

“Why is Rolland getting hurt so good for you? You were doing his bidding.”

“That doesn’t mean I like him.”

Jake unclenched his fist. It had been a long time since that first night in Maxton. So long he didn’t care anymore.

“What the hell are you doing in there anyway?” Jake said, peering over Peach’s shoulder.
“What’s it look like? I’m taking a fucking nap.”

“What for?”

“I live in the country, man. You ever tried to take a nap right under to a two-hundred-foot noise machine?”

Jake shoved the kid aside and peeked inside. Old tables sat in random patterns all across the room, dust-drowned magazines piled a foot high across them.

“This the place they send the retards?” Jake said.

“Shit,” said Peach Fuzz, “The retard room is thataway. Your taxi driver’s in there.”

“What?”

“Paul. He’s Special Ed.”

“He never told me that.”

“Why would he?”

“I don’t know.”

“He’s also taking eighth grade for the second time.”

“Seriously?”

“It’s not that big a deal. He’s mostly mad he can’t go out for football. Won’t let him play eighth grade again either.”

“Listen,” said Jake. “You might not be Special Ed. just yet, but you’re still stupid. Don’t pull that crap again at our house. If you do—”

“I know. I know. You’ll bust my hand with a bat. Now you listen. I’m on your side. A lot of us our now.”
Peach looked at him like he expected a response. Jake went with, “So?”

“So what’s your next move?”

“Next move?”

“Yeah, what’re you planning on next? The ambush thing was great. I hear you wiped the prints. That’s so bad ass. We’ve been waiting for something like this to happen for so long. Hey, I’ve got an uncle the next town over. He’s got chicken, pigs, cows. We’ve got enough ammo there, with the shit and eggs and the shit, oh man the shit, to really do some—”

“I’m out of here,” Jake said.

“Hey, wait,” Peach said.

Jake turned around.

“Are you hungry? I’ve got a box of Uncrustables back here. The stupid lunch ladies don’t keep inventory.”

“I got to get back to class,” said Jake.

“Fine.”

Jake turned away and then turned back. “Where the stage?”

Peach scrunched up his face. “The cafeteria,” he said.

“Really? Where?”

“What where? Right there. The big ass curtain stretched across it. It’s a can’t miss.”

Apparently it was.

“Okay, thanks,” Jake said.
“Why you want to know?”
“I’ve got to go.”
“Come back any time.”

When Jake left the entryway Mr. Bowden was standing there, arms crossed.

Jake had new tablemates—not only Andy Winters, but three others: numbers 11 and 45 and 47—and he could feel them staring at him. The closer the starer, the more you could feel it. He looked up and they looked away, but he wasn’t aiming to catch them in the act. For at least the tenth time since lunch started, he looked past them, toward the giant maroon curtain he’d never seen until now. The stage. Peach was right: it was a can’t miss. But he had. He had missed it every day. It didn’t help that he always had all those eyes on him. It encouraged tunnel vision.

“Okay, Kow,” said Winters. “I have to ask.”

The other three stopped eating and looked at him. This Kow thing was starting to be too much.

“What?” Jake said.

“What happened in Algebra? Where’d you disappear to?

“I don’t really want to talk about it.”

“Don’t be like that.”

“I’m not talking about it.”

“Okay, man. That’s cool.”
What had happened, after Bowden eavesdropped and caught him, was the standard concerned adult/aphetic kid protocol.

You know, I came out here looking for Meridith, not you. But I’m glad I found you.

I’m sorry. I was just looking for the bathroom.

You’ve been here a month. Don’t lie, Jacob.

I’m sorry.

I’m worried about you.

You don’t need to be.

I’m not from around here, either. I know it’s tough. But violence isn’t the way to get what you want.

I’m not violent.

(Sigh).

I’m really not.

Do you want to be like Dyl Figgins, in there, taking naps, eating stolen food?

No.

What about his friend? What about the other trouble makers?

I don’t know any.

They know you.

They think they do.

Well, when you act a certain way and do certain things, that’s you. That’s what people learn to think of you.
Can I just go back to class?

Where’s Meridith?

I don’t know.

(Sigh). Are you sure?

Why would I know?

I know Charter-Maxton boundaries aren’t as black and white as they appear. I’m not deaf. I’m not blind.

I don’t know what you’re talking about.

You two didn’t sneak off together?

I didn’t even know her name until now.

Let’s get back. I’ll worry about her later.

When he got back to the room, Rolland and his buddies started their Oooh noises and Jake sat down and pretended to do his homework, making circles instead. Then the bell rang. Meridith never showed.

And now he wasn’t hungry, hadn’t touched his mac and cheese. He knew he should. This would be his only real meal of the day.

A few minutes later, he didn’t even notice the girl—Meridith—walk over to them. All of a sudden she was next to him, her tray empty except for her fruit cocktail.

“Hi,” she said. Her hair was dry now, light brown, but he could still smell that shampoo. Or perfume. Or lotion. Whatever it was. That sweet-but-not-too-sweet flower.

“Hey,” said Jake.
Out of the corner of his eye he could see the jerseys at his table looking at one another, then back at him.

“You stood me up earlier,” she said, play in her voice. “No one stands me up.”

“Bowden caught me.”

“I heard,” she said. She reached toward him. Toward his plate. She nudged his untouched tater tots with her surprisingly big hands. When she found one she liked, she dipped it in his pool of ketchup and brought it to her thick-lipped mouth. He liked watching her eat. He was pretty sure everyone at his table did.

“Anyway, I can’t really ask you what I wanted to now.” She looked up at the jerseys. Jake looked, too. Winters’ eyes shot away from them. “But are you going to the game tonight?”

“I was thinking about it,” Jake lied.

“You should. I have flags at halftime, but other than that, I’m free. You could come find me after.”

“Okay,” Jake said.

“Sweet,” she said, and lifted her tray up and left them.

It took all of about three seconds for Winters’ to chime in.

“Shit, man, she wants you.”

“Wants you real bad,” said 45.

“Wants to see that Kow dick,” said 47, and they all laughed.

“Shut up,” Jake said, but he was smiling and couldn’t hide it.
“She’s from Charter, you know,” Winter said, a serious tone somewhere behind his smile.

“So?” Jake said.

Winters shrugged. “Just wondered if you knew.”

“You’re one hell of a secretary,” Jake said.

The jerseys started laughing again, though Jake didn’t think it was that funny. Winters, red-faced, put his head down and scooped macaroni into his wired mouth.

Maybe it was watching Winters duck low into his tray and shovel his mac into his mouth like a machine, maybe it was his lack of home-life food finally catching up with him, but suddenly Jake was hungry. Starved. He ate the rest of his food like a madman. Even the fruit cocktail, which was a lot crunchier than it should have been.

**Jake**

The bleachers were small and packed. Thin, metal structures, they had no concrete in them, and Jake couldn’t help but feel fearful of falling through the cracks between the rows to the garbage-littered grass below. The visitors’ side of the field was even more pathetic. The bleachers half as big, and, it looked at least, made of wood.

On the C-M side, the band sat on the far left and a few old people and moms sat on the right. There was an obvious divide between Maxton and Charter folk, distinguishable by sheer numbers—Charter two-to-one.

Jake and Allen sat on the top row, leaning against the P.A. box and eating cold popcorn while they shivered. They hadn’t brought coats because they hadn’t planned
this. They’d stayed at the school for four hours, waiting for the game, because Paul
wouldn’t take them home and back again. He wouldn’t go to the game.

“No way in hell,” he’d said. “I’d be bored out of my mind.”

Only now Jake knew that was a lie. The kid must have been too heart-broken to
watch, knowing he could be out there, or at least on the sideline with the other freshman.
He was probably afraid he’d lose himself and run on the field and make a tackle. So Jake
let it go, and he and Allen waited their four hours in the gym, lying on the hardwood
floor and talking of what they’d eat if they could have anything in the world.

Jake held the bag of popcorn on his lap, shoveling it in. Allen kept complaining
that he wasn’t getting enough, but Jake didn’t pay much attention to it. He was too busy
looking for Meridith Watters. He hadn’t seen her yet and it was almost halftime. He’d at
least see her then, twirling her flag or whatever.

The C-M Royals had the lead. A pretty exciting game so far. With three minutes
left in the half, after a Rolland Reed fumble recovery, Andy Winters had scored from ten
yards out, his second of the game—he didn’t run with much power or speed, but
followed his blockers like Emmitt Smith—to make it 12-8. Jake was still amazed at the
lack of extra points and field goals. Every touchdown meant going for two. At Pens
High, no field goal kicker meant a nightmare of a season. Those points were crucial. But
it was obvious that neither of these tiny teams had the ability to kick a ball through the
uprights. Kickoffs were painful to watch. Squibs or thirty-yard floaters. He was even
more amazed by the lack of passing. So far Kurt Tolly had thrown one pass, a screen
pass to Andy Winters for three yards. The other team had thrown it three times. One was a deep bomb, and both sets of bleachers loved it, even when it fell short.

Now there were less than two minutes left and the visitors—Woodward-Granger, Warewood-Grunder? Something like that—looked like they were content with running down the clock. Rolland had been lights out on defense. Every time the W-G ball carrier went down, the PA guy said, “Reed with the tackle,” or “Reed’s there first; Simmons cleans it up,” or “Reed and a pile of others make the stop.”

Once, a woman with frizzled hair turned around and yelled at the window. “That was Butler with the tack, not Reed!” But her friend next to her and said, “I’m pretty sure that was Rolland, dear.”

The majority of the crowd wasn’t talking back to the PA guy, though, because they stood along the sideline, just past the gravel track that circled the field, their breaths rising over the action like a silk sheet. They were all men. Fathers standing shoulder to shoulder.

The cheerleaders stood to their right. On the gravel track, they looked up at the bleachers and shook their silver pompoms and kicked their legs barely to their waist. Only six of them, and they weren’t attractive. Not one. He could barely hear their fake enthusiasm over the clicking of helmets and the mumbling of parents and the constant line of cars going by on the highway.

Behind them stood the players, blue and hazy, their silver helmets a dull gray under the lights. Some of the freshmen looked downright pathetic. From up here, they seemed as big as Allen. Jake would have been average-sized among this team.
Some of these players might die, literally, if they played the teams Pens high played.

Soon the halftime horn sounded and the players trotted their floppy pads and dirty jerseys to the north end of the field. Nerds in C-M sweatshirts with instruments at their sides took their place. Following them were half-naked girls with flags under their arms. The flagliners. Glittery blue shorts and tank tops and elbow-length gloves.

So at small schools, the flagline was cool and the cheerleaders were the untouchables. What a world.

Jake’s half-naked girl was front and center, her blue eye shadow extra heavy and sparkling under the lights.

The band started honking out a sloppy version of “Great Balls of Fire” while they flagliners started their routine. They cocked their hips and brought their flags low, then high, then spun. They twirled. They trotted. They flashed mischievous smiles.

“The game’s bad enough,” Allen said. “But this?”

“It’ll be over soon,” Jake said.

“You better hope,” Allen said, all long and deep as he yawned through his shivers.

He hadn’t told Allen about Meridith asking him to the game. He just told him he wanted to go because the guy at his lunch table was starting at running back. Now that he knew where Meridith was, he’d simply follow her with his eyes and, after the show, track her down. Allen could come if he had to, but Jake had been hoarding a few bucks and hoped he could send him to the concession stand. A halftime-long line would give
him plenty of room to be alone with her. Plenty of time for her to ask her question. Was it, “Do you have a girlfriend?” Or was it, “Did you do it?”

“Great Balls of Fire” turned into “Do You Love Me” and “Do You Love Me” turned into some song from *Grease*. Jake watched Meridith. She threw the flag high above her head, higher than all the other girls, and caught it every time.

When they finished and started off the field, the players replacing them, Jake stood up and tromped down the bleacher steps.

“Are we leaving?” said Allen, excited as he’d been all night.

“Let’s get something to eat.”

“Do they sell coats?”

“Come on,” Jake said.

When they got off the bleachers, Jake handed Allen the five bucks. “Line’s over there,” he said, and left towards where the flagliners had gone, weaving through fathers leaned on the chain-linked fence and a group of middle school boys playing Smear the Queer, a few girls sitting cross-legged next to them, chatting, ignoring the violence.

Would Meridith be waiting for him? Would she be alone? Maybe she’d already forgotten about her question.

The flagliners stood around something waist-high and dark. At first it looked like a bush, but then one of the girls jumped up and sat on it.

The girl was Meridith. And what she’d hoped on was a rock.
She was the first to see Jake walking towards them, and waved from her rock like she’d expected him. The others, four of them, walked off without saying a word. It felt kind of cold, but was better than four girls saying, “Kow!”

Jake stopped in front of the rock and looked up at her. The lights were dim here, all of them pointed toward the field, and he could barely make out her face. Minus her white teeth and the broken-glass sparkles of her eye shadow. Behind her swinging, goose-bumped legs, in royal blue letters, he could see the rock had something written on it.

Rock Solid Royals.

“Are you watching this game?” Meridith said. “We might actually win.”

“It’s pretty intense,” he said.

She snorted, still smiling. “It’s intense alright,” she said. She scooted over and leaned back on her hands.

He hopped up with her.

“We haven’t won a home game in three years.”

“I heard,” Jake said. “Or I heard it’s been a while.”

“Yeah. We’re not big as the other schools we play.”

For the first time Jake noticed the trip in her voice when she spoke. Lively yet unsure. Like she was constantly on the verge of laughter. The rock was cold and sharp under Jake’s ass and he moved over a little, toward Meridith, to find a new spot.

“So is it true?” she said.

“What?”
“You know, what they say.”

So that was her question. He stopped thinking selfishly for second and wondered about Allen. He hoped he wasn’t looking for him. But the concession line was long, very long. He could see it from here. There was only one window open.

“Who’s ‘they’?” Jake said.

“I don’t know.” She flipped her hand out at the crowds of people, all facing the field now. “Everyone.”

“Was that what you wanted to ask me?” Jake said.

The scoreboard sounded. The second half starting up.

“Oh,” she said. “Yeah. Duh.” She kicked her legs higher, faster. “Actually, it wasn’t.”

“What was it then?”

“I was wondering if you had a date to the homecoming dance yet.”

For the first time since sitting on the rock, he looked directly at her. She looked at him, all blue-eyes and teeth, and he looked away. The ref blew the whistle, the pathetic band jumped up and down the bleachers, and somewhere behind the wall of fathers, the scrawny kid with the weak leg kicked off.

“I didn’t even know there was a dance,” he said. “I mean, my old high school had a dance, but I just, I don’t know. I guess I haven’t been thinking about it.”

“So do you, or not?” she said.

“No.”

“Me either,” she said.
“Oh,” said Jake, unsure of what to do next. So was she going to ask him? Did girls ask guys these things? If only he’d been cooler, just a little cooler, at his old high school. If only he’d paid attention to stuff like this.

“I mean, I could have date,” she said, sitting up. “If I wanted to. I’m just waiting to see what happens, you know?”

He knew what to do now. She wanted him to ask her. Jake looked at her again. Her head was cocked to one side, away from him. He could see her cleavage, the way she sat. Goose bumps peppered the tops of her breasts. Suddenly, the part of his brain responsible for speaking shut down.

Somewhere, in a world he was no longer in, the PA announcer said, “Reed stops Anders for a two-yard loss.”

The sound of rocks crunching made him look up. Allen was walking their way, a Styrofoam cup in each hand and two hot dogs under each armpit.

“Is that your little brother?” she said.

Jake sat up and looked at her, ignoring the goosebumped cleavage. “Will you go to homecoming with me?” he said.

Her smile disappeared and she moved her head back as if he’d slapped her. “I barely know you,” she said.

Allen stopped in front of the rock and looked up at Jake, then Meridith, then Jake again. “What’s up?” he said.

“Hey,” said Jake. His face was hot. So hot he thought he felt tears forming in his eyes.
Then he felt her breath on his face. Even warmer than him.

“I’m kidding,” she whispered, that giggle in her voice.

“Are you talking about me?” Allen said.

Jake hopped down, his legs light, barely there. “It’s always got to be about you, doesn’t it?” he said.

Meridith laughed behind him and he turned to her. “We’re going to go watch the rest of the game,” he said.

“Cool,” she said. “Maybe I’ll see you later tonight. If we win, there’s going to be some crazy parties.”

The C-M stands screamed right after she said it. The PA system clicked on and thundered over the noise. “Winters breaks into the open field! And he’s gone! Touchdown Charter-Maxton! Winters’ third score of the game!”

Brette

She felt like she might puke.

She was sitting on the tailgate of Andy Winters’ dad’s truck, alone, sipping beer and staring up at the blades spinning above her head. From this angle, directly underneath them, she could barely see the red flashes. From this distance, the blades whooshed like the chug of a train. The trains varied in pitch, though, some high and squeaky, some low and sad—a choir of the insane.

It wasn’t the look or the sound of the blades that caused her nausea. Nor was it the beer—she was only halfway through her first. It wasn’t even the sight of Andy Winters and Jason Charlarly and Fred Sphinx and Trent Ferguson and a bunch of other
football guys doing shots out of Layla Schmidt’s fourteen-year-old belly button. It was Meridith Watters: the way she’d battled through the corn earlier this morning, acting tough, acting like the mud on her new sweater and the sweat flattening her hair didn’t bother her; the way she said hi so cheerily to Brette in the hallway later that day; the way she’d stopped by Brette’s house so late, interrupting her workout, telling her about the victory, the after party, and dragging her to it. Mostly, though, it was that she hadn’t told Brette about going to the Homecoming dance with Jake—with Kow; God, she hated that stupid name—until they were already in her car and headed toward the party, too late to turn back or spit up some excuse.

Her mouth was gathering a lot of spit right now—that pre-puke feeling—because her eyes had betrayed her. She had looked from the blades to the Layla body shots to Meridith, and now she couldn’t look away.

Meridith was still in her stupid flagline outfit, minus the denim jacket she wore overtop, She sat next to Jake on the hood of her car, her hands clamped around his scrawny arm like a chip clip. The two of them were talking and giggling like they’d known each other since the fourth grade. Getting others to like you was that easy for some people.

Brette downed the rest of her beer in a foamy flurry. She didn’t like beer, but it was all Kurt Tolly had supplied them with. Well, that and the three empty barrels that little flames peeked from. Thanks to his dad’s always-inebriated state, he wouldn’t notice either was missing.
Kurt wasn’t around, though. At least not that Brette could see. He did this often: calling the people together, bringing the booze, acting rowdy—all before drinking a beer or two and then retreating off into a row of corn or onto the steps of a distant turbine.

A loud pang almost scared the vomit out of her. Something had slammed against the side of Winters’ truck. The bed was still rattling.

She peered over the edge of the truck. Below, in a stocking hat, gloves, and a coat far too thick for fall, stood Allen Lakowski. He held an ear of corn, tossing it back and forth between his hands.

“You scared the shit out of me,” Brette said.

“You’re scaring me with how bored you look,” said Allen.

“You going to eat that?” Brette said, pointing to the corn.

“Nah.”

Jake was looking at them from Meridith’s car. He must have sent Allen over. A baby sitter: that’s all Brette was to him.

“I bet I’m not as bored as you,” Brette said.

“Correcto,” he said.

He walked to the tailgate and boosted himself up next to her. They sat in silence for a while, watching the belly shots and the laughter and Ryan Pontous and Patricia Canwell compete in a cartwheel contest. Allen rubbed the kernels of corn away with his gloved hands while he watched. Then he looked at his brother.

“I can’t believe he dragged me out here for this,” Allen said. He pointed at Meridith with the empty cob. “For that.”
“Think he likes her?”

He shrugged.

“She’s pretty popular,” Brette said. She popped the tab off her empty beer can and stuck it between her molars. The taste reminded her of her mouthguard. She wished she were home, in bed.

Allen nodded, tossed the cob to the ground, and looked up at blades. His face disappeared and reappeared in their shadows.

“You know what?” he said. “My old third grade teacher was popular. She wasn’t nice or a good teacher or anything. She just graded easy.”

“Good point,” Brette said.

After three and a half more beers, after Pontous ran to his truck and cranked the radio, “TNT” pouring out, Brette saying, “Good song,” and Allen saying, “It’s okay,” after Allen left her to have a pushup contest with Hunter Robinson and won, after Meridith retrieved a blanket for her and Jake and the two sat doing who knows what under it, Brette had had enough. Meridith wasn’t good for him. Maybe they were happy tonight. Maybe they’d be happy at the homecoming dance. Maybe they’d be boyfriend and girlfriend. But it wouldn’t end well. Meridith went through guys like toothbrushes. She wasn’t good for anyone.

Brette slammed her beer down on the tailgate, stretched her arms across her chest—a habit, ever since she started working out—and walked to them.
Meridith had her head on Jake’s shoulder—what there was of one; Brette’s were bigger than his—and it snapped up when she saw Brette headed their way. She smiled that fat-lipped smile.

“B,” she said. “How you doing?”

Brette put one foot up on the bumper and looked up at them. Behind their stupid, happy faces, the stars looked like scars. The red flashes swallowed and regurgitated them every two seconds.

“It’s not right,” Brette said.

They looked at her, confused, unafraid.

Brette didn’t say more, because the corn behind them rustled and cracked. Out of it emerged a guy with a bandana across his face, baseball bat in hand, walking toward their car.

“Run,” Brette said

But they didn’t, even when she pointed behind them and backed up. They didn’t even move. They just kept looking at her, concerned and maybe a little saddened. Only when the first window shattered—the driver’s side rear window—did they turn around.

“What the fuck?” Meridith yelled. She hopped off the hood. So did Jake. “What the fuck?” she said again. It sounded exactly the same as the first one—the exactness of it almost an eerier sound than the glass smashing.

Everyone on their truck beds and around the fires jogged toward the noise.
The masked guy was having trouble getting the bat out of the second window, which had caved in and wrapped itself around it. Meridith started walking toward the mask. Jake held her arm and told her they needed to stay back.

Another window crashed, this one on the opposite side of the car. There were two of them, both wearing masks, both brandishing baseball bats. Only the second attacker’s mask was pulled over his entire head. It was obviously a football sock. The blue coloring and the stretched lines running down his face gave it away.

Two more people slipped from the corn and started on the taillights. A third, Brette noticed, one standing just inside the first row of corn, watched it all. The way he stood—one shoulder in, one shoulder out, like he was hiding something, a casted hand, perhaps—made his identity obvious.

By the time the crowd got to Meridith’s car, the four batsmen were already running back into the corn, making shrill, inhuman sounds—the same kind of sounds Brette heard at those few football games she’d attended when someone would make a big hit or recover a fumble. There was also another sound coming from them—this one inhuman, too, only it was low and guttural. They were mooing. Like cows.

Like Kows.

The crowd looked at the car, at Meridith crying on Jake’s shoulder, and then took off after the mooing masks, obviously drunk, weaving sloppy lines as they crashed into the corn.
Jake

He listened to his heartbeat through his pillow, going a half-beat faster than the blinking lights through his shades. His Miami Dolphin’s alarm clock showed 1:41 a.m. and he’d never felt so awake. Or hungry. His stomach was past the rumbling stage. He’d endured that around midnight. Now his heart was the only thing making noise. That and the slight hum coming through the windows and walls.

It had gotten harder and harder. The sleeping. But each night, he’d still manage a few solid hours. Tonight was different, though. A complete no go, and he knew that going in. He could tell by the way his mind was working.

All he could think about was Meridith Watters. It had been two nights since the football ghouls ruined her car. He hadn’t heard a word from her since. He didn’t hear many words from her that night, either—after the damage had been done. All she did was cry, and she cried a lot. Then she got into her glass-strewn car and drove home.

Maybe whatever chemistry the two had built in those few hours after the game was ruined. Maybe there wasn’t any chemistry anyway. But the way she talked to him, laughed at the things he said, touched his hand and rubbed his knee under the blanket, sure made it seem like they’d had something.

Until two nights ago, he’d been wasting his life.

The bat attack was no doubt retaliation for the earlier one. Payback for something Jake didn’t even do. Meridith was probably better off leaving him alone, whether he did it or not. A car was one thing, but if he were Rolland—or that other kid, still in the hospital with his head all mushy—he wouldn’t stop at a car.
Jake got out of bed and walked to the kitchen. He’d checked the cupboards and fridge once already. When the midnight rumbles started. But a painful hope still rested somewhere inside of him. That he’d been a lazy scavenger and missed a cranny. His father wasn’t getting any better at this grocery thing. In fact, it felt like he was getting worse. He’d never had this problem in Florida. Didn’t he know where the stores were here? He had to. A rainbow of condiments lined the door of their fridge and even some of the fruit crispers. Two ketchups. One catsup. Three mustards. Two ranches. A six pack of Thousand Island dressing. No matter what Jake or Allen said, he kept picking up more and forgetting the real stuff. Actually, sometimes he didn’t forget, but those times they gobbled the real stuff up so fast it felt like it never existed. If only Jake had a car. And money.

His father was awake. Jake didn’t know what shocked him most, the sight of him, sitting on the kitchen counter in his underwear, pale legs kicking, the phone pressed to his ear, or the giant turkey sandwich he was eating, which smelled like barbecue, and not the kind they had in their fridge, either.

“What are you doing?” Jake said.

“Jake,” His father hopped to the floor. A youthful blush crawled up his neck and onto his cheeks.

Something about the way he looked, red-faced, even redder than the turbine lights, pissed Jake off. He felt anger rise out of his empty stomach and settle somewhere in his chest. He imagined it was red, too. Red and crawling, like his father’s embarrassment.
“Where’d you get that food? And who is that?”

His father smiled and grabbed the bridge of his nose. He released it after a second. “A gas station in Story City. It’s open all night.”

“Why don’t you bring us some sandwiches every once in a while? I’m so hungry I can’t sleep.”

“Sh. You’ll wake your brother.”

“Who are you talking to?”

“Someone from work.”

“About why the turbines won’t let people sleep?”

“I thought you said you couldn’t sleep because you were hungry?”

“Well, neither are good.”

“Have some of my sandwich.”

“I don’t want it.”

A smacking noise sounded over Jake’s right shoulder. Allen stood in the hallway opening, rubbing his eyes. The way he stood, all sleepy and slouched, made Jake think of a baby bear.

“What’s that smell?” Allen said.

“Dad’s hoarding food,” said Jake.

“I’m telling you,” their father said, “take the sandwich.”

“I said I don’t want it,” said Jake.

“I’ll have it,” Allen said. His feet slapped across the tile. He grabbed the sandwich and took a bite in one fluid motion.
“I have to let you go,” their father said. He was talking into the phone. A different kind of voice, one meant for people he didn’t care about and therefore had to be nice to. He nodded a few times, to whatever the phone was telling him, and then clicked the off button and with his pale, stick legs slapped his own way across the tile to the receiver. Jake had those legs. No matter what he did, he always would.

“Well,” said their father. “I’m going to give bed another go. It’s a school night. You boys need to get some, too.

Jake felt he was on the verge of “getting some” only two nights ago. Not on that night. Not for a while. But with a girl—a senior girl—touching your leg under a blanket, what else could it lead to?

Their father turned and disappeared into the hallway.

After Jake heard the door close, he turned to Allen. “Give me some of that,” he said.

Allen angled his body away from him. “You said you didn’t want any.”

“I was lying. Now give me half.”

“It’s almost gone,” said Allen. He took a giant bite.

“Bullshit,” Jake said. He reached around Allen and tried to grab it but Allen twisted away and trotted to the living room. He took another bite as he ran.

Jake cornered him between the loveseat and the couch. Allen looked for an escape, but there were none. Suddenly he looked over Jake’s shoulder and jumped a little.

“There’s something at the window.”
“Nice try,” Jake said.

“No, really. I swear.”

“Give me the sandwich.”

“Just look.”

Jake turned around fast, saw nothing, and faced Allen again. Just in time to see him stuff the rest of the sandwich into his already-full mouth. Barbeque sauce dripped down his chin. It looked like blood.

“I can’t believe you,” said Jake.

“I really think I saw something,” Allen said, barely audible.

“Shut up.”

“No, I’m almost positive. I know I saw something.”

“And it was coincidence that you ate the rest when I turned around.”

“I saw my chance, too.”

Jake looked at the window again. Nothing.

“You look like a fat little vampire,” Jake said.

Allen swallowed. “You’re Dad,” Allen said.

He wasn’t sure if Allen knew what he’d said, but the dad comment made sense—the sandwich, Meridith’s car, the shit bags, the fireworks—and it hurt. No matter what Meridith Shively thought, no matter what Rolland thought, No matter what Peach Fuzz and all the other Maxton losers thought, Allen was right. Jake had never done a thing in his life about anything.

Jake headed back to his room.

Jake said nothing. He wanted to change. He would change. All it took was a little action.

**Brette**

Meridith’s shower started with a hiss. “It takes a while to warm up,” she yelled, her voice echoing. It was the most she’d said all morning.

Brette’s clean clothes were piled in the corner of her own shower. The floor and walls were filthy, a brown-green mold speckled the walls and ran between most of the tile. The girls’ locker room had two shower rooms—one for upperclassmen, one for lower. Both had eight udder-like showerheads pointing down from central metal pillar. The only difference between the two as far as Brette could tell was the rust. The lower-class pillar—the one she stood in front of now—was covered in it. It reeked of it, actually. But it might have been a good thing, because she couldn’t smell the mold.

Brette turned a nozzle covered in the least rust. The water sputtered a milky spray, then another, then blasted the floor with a cold, hard jet that hurt her hand.

She turned the water all the way to hot, set her shampoo and conditioner and body wash on the metal shelf circling beneath the utters, and removed her muddy clothes.

They’d just stomped through the cornfields again, recording birds. Meridith had suggested the school showers to avoid going home to shower and receiving tardies—or going to school without a shower and receiving stares. They could have woken earlier—
Brette’s suggestion—but Meridith would have none of that. Brette couldn’t blame her. If she slept like a normal person, she’d want to get as much of it as possible, too.

“How many more mornings of this?” Meridith yelled. It had less echo in it this time, but it sounded bubbly. She must have been washing her face.

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“Just two,” Brette said.

“We going through any bean fields? This corn is killing me.”

“Maybe,” Brette said, though there had been fewer bean fields this year, and she couldn’t remember any near the turbines of their survey point—stupid on her part, now that she thought about it.

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“Are they almost done?” Her voice was less bubbly now.

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“What do you mean?” Brette said.

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“The counts. The project.”

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“Oh. Sure. Want to get it over with these next two mornings?”

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Meridith didn’t answer. Brette asked again.

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“Yeah, sorry. Yeah. That’d be great. I don’t mind showering here. I just don’t want to wake up so early, especially toward the end of the week. You know, parties and stuff.”

“Yeah, sorry. Yeah. That’d be great. I don’t mind showering here. I just don’t want to wake up so early, especially toward the end of the week. You know, parties and stuff.”

“Right,” Brette said.

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She didn’t mind the waking up, but she’d be glad to be done with showering at school. This was their first morning of it, she hadn’t even stepped into the water yet, and she already knew she hated it. She had had opportunities before but avoided them at all costs. Naked and school did not mix. Even after those early September or late May P.E.
days, she just rolled on extra deodorant, wiped her neck and face with a paper towel, and headed back to the gym to wait for the bell. At least this way—just the two of them—meant privacy. Those hot days after P.E., she didn’t know how some of the girls did it, but most who did were like Meridith—in sports, taking P.E. for the easy A, and somehow completely immune to public nudity. She could hear them talking about mundane gossip while they washed themselves clean. Brette couldn’t imagine breathing, let alone holding a conversation, exposed in front of her peers like that.

The water finally heated, she stepped underneath, keeping her face away from the blast. It felt more like pebbles than water. When she moved away from the water to lather her hair—no point in enduring unnecessary pain—she could hear Meridith whistling, who must have somehow, over years of showering here, evolved into a higher being. How else could she handle the water pressure?

Brette stepped back under.

At least Meridith was whistling. That meant a better mood. The whole point count experience that morning had been awkward. Normally, Meridith spoke too much—far too much—but as they rustled through the corn and listened for birdspeak, she barely spoke at all. No doubt it was about her car. No doubt everyone would already know when the two of them walked from the locker rooms and into first period. Mondays were Mondays, and nothing from the weekend escaped them, especially something like vandalism.

Brette was glad to finish, her skin hot and sore, and as she cranked the nozzle closed she saw a shadow walk by her curtain.
“That you, Mer?” She felt stupid calling her that, but she felt semi-obligated now that Meridith called her B and Bretto and, worst of all, B-daddy—which she’d only heard once but was dreading to hear again.

“No, it’s Mr. Faylen,” Meridith said.

“Funny,” Bretto said. She grabbed her towel and rustled her hair dry. “What time is it?”

“No even a quarter till.”

“Looks like we could have got an extra half hour of sleep.”

“Meh.”

Fully clothed, Bretto shoved the curtain aside and saw that Meridith wasn’t at all.

Past the steam of their showers, she was leaning over on one of the benches, roughing some kind of cream into her hair, breasts swinging. They were both big, but the left one was bigger than the right. Bretto had that problem, too.

The only items of clothing Meridith wore were her flip-flops.

“They’re for warts,” she said, lifting one of her feet and wiggling her stubby toes. She must have noticed Bretto staring at them—better than getting caught staring other places. “Your sister was the one who gave me the tip, actually.” She looked at Bretto’s feet. “Better get some if you keep showering here.”

Bretto’s feet suddenly felt covered in rough, spongy bumps. Her breasts also felt small—smaller than ever—watching Meridith’s rock back and forth, so free and unafraid.
“Sorry about this morning,” said Meridith. “I’d tell you what was bothering me if you didn’t already know.”

Brette nodded and sat down on the bench. She wouldn’t have to look from this angle. “I couldn’t believe it,” is all she could think to say.

“I just hope it’s done,” Meridith said. “Or that it doesn’t go any farther. It’s hard to say with Jake, though.”

Brette didn’t like that—her talking like she knew him so well. He was just a scared kid from a far away place, not some badass revenge machine. Even if he did attack Rolland and the guys that night, he was only defending his brother.

“You think it’ll change any of the votes today?” Meridith said.

She was talking about the homecoming court voting. Today the school would select its five girls and five guys to represent class of ’99 royalty. Brette had tried to broach the subject earlier, in the field, but Meridith had shrugged it off. Now she was ready—and Brette wasn’t.

“We’ll know soon enough,” Brette said. She was starting to sweat from all the steam. She wiped her forehead with her damp towel.

“Are you voting for me?” Meridith said. She smiled and slid on spandex shorts.

“What’s with the spandex?” Brette said.

“They’re more comfortable than underwear. Plus, with volleyball after school I just—”

“Slip your pants off,” Brette said.
“Hey now,” Meridith said. She pushed her and smiled. “You make me sound like a slut.”

Brette dabbed her forehead again. “Of course I’ll vote for you,” she said. “Who else is there?”

Brette didn’t bother to ask if Meridith was voting for her. What good was one vote?

“How kind of you,” Meridith said, shoving her again. She pulled on acid-wash jeans. Brette noticed the slight outline of spandex when she buttoned them. Strange she never noticed it before.

“Are you voting for your neighbor?” Meridith said. She pulled her sports bra—royal blue, go figure—over her head and wrapped her asymmetric trophies away.

“Same deal,” Brette said. “Who else is there?”

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In Environmental Science later that day, Meridith sitting to her right, Brette filled out her ballot. She didn’t vote for Meridith, or for Jake. She voted for five guys and five girls that would never see the little platform stage on Friday night—that had a better chance of being president someday than making court.

Brette was one of them.

Brette knew she would never make it and wasn’t even sure why. Because she was always so tired? Because her sister’s shadow would forever darken her footsteps? Because she didn’t care about new jeans and show choir and who made out with whom at some burn-out former graduate’s garage party?
None of these things seemed fair because they were already decided—either chalked up to fate or her own personality; the latter which, for some frustrating-as-hell reason, she couldn’t force to change. Someone had already made sure long ago that she didn’t get to be like everyone else. She wasn’t even sure that she wanted to be, but it had to be easier than who she was now.

So she voted for losers, no names, like herself.

On her drive home from school, long after she’d handed her ballot in, she started calling out the names she’d marked, counting them on her fingers. When all ten of them stuck up from the steering wheel, she realized something obvious that she hadn’t before.

All of them were from Maxton.

**Jake**

On Andy Winters’ garage, he lay on his stomach next to a bucket of his own piss. The idea came to him easy enough. That first night, the shit on his porch, had inspired him. So people in this town liked to play with excrement. Sure, that first night, it was Paul and Peach Fuzz who’d done it, but still, it was probably Rolland’s idea. It didn’t matter, anyway. All that mattered was that Jake had grown tired of doing nothing about it.

Winters lay next to him, his own bucket of piss near his feet. They’d only filled them half-full to compensate for the pitch of the roof, and it still had taken three Gatorades each to do the trick. They’d waited for Winters’ parents to sleep—or at least close the door to their room—before they let loose. It was a little awkward at first, drinking their different colors of sugary water in silence, each of them walking to the bathroom at different intervals, filling their respective pails under the sink. Still, after the
fourth or fifth trip, the humor started to get to them. Jake started to loosen up. Sure those Charter guys had smashed Meridith’s car to hell, probably ruining his chances of getting laid in the process—he hadn’t heard from her since, even that day at school—but it would be a fun way to get revenge, at least.

“You’re sure, right?” Jake said.

“What?” said Winters. The hood of his sweatshirt hid his face, but Jake could see his breath when he spoke.

“About them coming here tonight.”

“I’m telling you. Every other time I’ve put the hoop up, they’ve been here that night. It’s like clockwork.”

“That’s messed up,” Jake said.

“What if this ruins your chances of being king, man?” Winters said. He was talking about homecoming king. That seemed to be all anyone talked about these days.

“You think I want to be king of this shitty place?”

When Winters didn’t say anything back, Jake added, “It didn’t hurt my popularity when Rolland broke his hand.”

“So are you finally admitting it?” Winter’s said. He turned to Jake. Under each red flash, Jake could see the shine of metal off his braces.

“You wish,” Jake said.

They turned back, facing the street, and waited.

Winters had warned him that the guys who smashed her car probably weren’t the guys who kept pulling the hoop down, but Jake didn’t care. A Charter was a Charter.
Especially now that he understood, at least a little bit, how things worked around here. Anything short of human-to-human harm was fine. Normal. Anything that met that criteria—crossed that line—got you in the back of a cop car. Sometimes if you had nothing to do with it.

“So I realize I should have said this probably a long time ago,” Winters said. “Like, before our first piss. But is this going to stop them from pulling the hoop off, or just make them mad but the hoop still goes?”

“For them the hoop is like doing chores,” Jake said. “Think of it this way: would you want to mow the lawn if someone was dumping pee on your head?”

“Good point.”

A car turned down their street. Both their heads snapped toward it.

“Not them,” Winters said.

For a second it looked like Meridith’s car. But it wasn’t and it passed.

“Are you going to college anywhere?” Winters said.

“Dude, your quiz is all over the place.”

“Just making conversation.”

Jake realized he was shivering. He wore his winter coat and gloves, but could barely feel his arms. It was only October. Mid-October. He wasn’t looking forward to the next half year. At least the cold was keeping him awake.

“Hey,” Winters said. “What’s that?”

Jake looked where he was pointing. Across the street at an L-shaped bush, flashing red to black to red. The bush shuddered slightly. Not from the wind.
thought he saw something—maybe a head—poke out a little before sneaking back behind.

“A person?” Jake whispered.

“I don’t know,” Winters said.

Jake watched it, holding his breath. The bush moved again, just barely. The head turned. Yes, it was definitely a head. Definitely a person. Nothing else moved that way.

“Think they’re staking us out?” Jake said.

“Staking out the stake outers?”

“They must be.”

They watched the bush again. No movement this time. Not for a long time. But that didn’t make him feel any better about it.

“What should we do?” said Winters.

“Who knows if they even see us,” Jake said. “We’re pretty hidden.”

“The clouds are low tonight,” said Winters.

By now Jake knew most of the turbine lingo. Low clouds meant a big mirror, reflecting all that red. Supposedly. Everything was extra bright, easier to see. Supposedly. He himself didn’t notice much difference. To him, red was red, and it was always too bright.

Jake squinted toward the bush. He thought he could see the faint outline of ears and maybe the hunch of a hood. “Screw it,” he said. What can he do down there?”

“I just don’t like it,” Winters said. “It doesn’t feel right.”

“So sneak down and leave our posts? What if they come?”
“What if that’s them?”

“I thought they come in a truck?”

“Most times. I don’t know, okay?”

“I’ll go check,” Jake said. He couldn’t believe he was saying it, but Winters’ total lack of confidence left a lot of room for his own to breathe.

“I knew we should have invited the guys over,” Winters said.

He was talking about the jerseys. Their lunch table buddies. Jake figured the less people, the better. A lot of people didn’t always mean safety. Sometimes it meant sloppiness. The party at the turbines last Friday was a perfect example. A few people snuck from the corn, bashed the car, and left. A lot of people chased after them and got nothing but small cuts on their arms and necks.

“I’m going down,” Jake said.

“What’s the signal?”

“Signal?”

“You know, like, if you’re in trouble. Or if it’s them.”

Jake thought about it. There wasn’t much Winters could do way up here. He thought about taking him with, but there wasn’t much he could do with the kid by Jake’s side on the ground, either.

“If it’s them, or if it’s anyone, and they come at me, I’ll run them by the garage.”

Jake nodded toward Winters’ bucket. “You know what to do then.”

“Are you sure I shouldn’t be the one to go? I could outrun—”

“I can outrun them just fine,” Jake said.
Before he started down, he grabbed Allen’s TPX. They almost didn’t get it back. Shively had grilled him like crazy over it. Why was it in the truck? Why did it match the description of the attack weapon? Why did they want it back so bad? All of those question had amounted to nothing but more questions, and they got to take it home. And now it was in Jake’s hand. He’d told himself to bring it for a last resort and was glad he did. The light-as-air power of it turned all his fear to energy.

The climb up the roof had been easy. It had to be, for them to haul their piss buckets. The climb down, even without the bucket, was harder. The roof seemed steeper, the shingles slipperier. He got to the roof of the house, which was flatter and lower to the ground than the garage, and edged his way off the leaf-filled gutter and onto the tree branch that hung just below it.

He tried to climb down quietly, but the leaves were dry and rustled against each other no matter how slow he went. He kept his eye on the bush. Or on the corner of the house, the street, and the thicket of bushes on the other side of it.

His walk to the corner of the house was just as noisy. He wasn’t used to all the fallen leaves. He wasn’t entirely sure he liked their smell, either. Some days, damp ones, the earthiness of them was refreshing. Others, dry ones like tonight, it smelled like something dead. How a mummy might.

The bush dweller was still there. From this angle, the red flashes and the steady orange of streetlights falling down on it, he could make out the shape a little better. He could see the rise and fall of shoulders matched by smoky breaths.
Behind him, something swished through the mummy leaves. Jake flipped around and cocked the bat on his shoulder, ready to swing. The Winters had a lot of trees in their back yard, and leaves covered everything. He waited for the lightest rustle, the slightest flash of shadow, but nothing stirred. The noise had only lasted a second. It was too loud for a wind gust. Tonight the wind was dead anyway.

He lowered the bat but waited at least a minute before he turned around. The shadow behind the bush was still crouching, and now that Jake’s eyes were better adjusted to the darkness—the red, sort-of darkness—he could see the person ever better. There was no doubt about it. Someone was there, watching the house. Their head was angled toward the roof.

It wouldn’t be smart to approach from the front, on the street, especially if it was some sort of set up. He’d have to circle all the way around. To do what? He wasn’t sure. Maybe he could just get a closer look that way. Then he could decide.

Jake went behind the house again, crossing the Winters’ yard, along with two others, a dog going shit-crazy somewhere inside of the second one. Halfway past what looked like the kitchen window, he realized he couldn’t feel his hands. Not from the cold, but from how tight he was gripping the bat. He set it down, opened and closed his fingers, then picked it back up and jogged across the street.

He got to another yard and ducked behind a trashcan that smelled like rotten bananas. He couldn’t see the person behind the bush from here, but could see the bush, and nothing moved from it.
A flank approach didn’t feel right. Especially after the mysterious noise at his back in Winters’ yard. It had probably been just a cat. But still, he felt vulnerable. A side approach was okay, but not if it meant heading for the bush under the streetlights, and the streetlights were bright here—just bright enough to make him forget about the red.

He headed even farther north, crossed behind two more backyards, and on the second, he heard the noise again. This time it was less clear, because he was moving. It was also longer, and sounded almost like footsteps. He stopped right where he stood and listened. He only heard turbines and the thumps of his heart.

He turned around and surveyed. This yard was a lot like Winters’. Maybe this small town had more in common with the city than he thought. It was kind of like the ’burbs in its own way. Decent sized yard, some trees, maybe a swing set. The windows, though—most of them lit up—set Maxton apart. After another minute of what he chalked up to paranoia, he kept moving.

When he made it to the yard with the bush, he crept up the side of the house, bat across his chest, his back to the siding like a movie cop. Near the house was a good place to walk—no leaves—and he walked so quietly he felt he were in a dream. When was the last time he had one?

The bush person was definitely facing Winters’ place. And the person was a definitely a He. It was obvious from the hair. Lack thereof. Jake looked down both sides of the street. For that lurking truck. For the ambush. He looked in the other yards and behind other trees. He looked behind his own hiding spot.
Everything was calm and normal, even his own breathing, which surprised him most of all.

He couldn’t get as close as he wanted. Any farther and he’d expose himself to the streetlight glow and the crunch of leaves. Jake decided he would rush the guy, bat overhead, screaming. He remembered that first night, the U-Haul. His other attempt at the rush, which had failed. Things were different now. Now he had a weapon and this person was alone.

And on edge. You couldn’t stake someone out without being on edge. He learned that from experience. About ten minutes ago, on the roof.

Jake ran at him. “Fuck you fuck you fuck you!” he yelled, twirling the bat with one hand.

The guy didn’t even turn around. Like a rabbit, he leapt from the bush and started to run. Only his foot caught on the bush and he stumbled onto the street. He almost righted himself, but then stumbled again. Smack. Rabbit on concrete.

He lay there, face-down and moaning. He was smaller than Jake first realized, and when he stood above of him, something else made Jake blink and blink and rub his eyes. On the back of the guy’s coat, smiling up at Jake, was a Miami Dolphin’s logo. It was Jake’s old coat. A hand-me-down.

It was Allen.

“Dude, what the hell are you doing out here?”

Allen winced, turned his head, then rolled over. His mouth was a bloody, smiling mess. “Holy shit, am I glad it’s you,” he said. It came out with a lisp.
Jake bent over, grabbed him by the coat, and jerked him to his feet. “Let me see your mouth.”

“It’s not that bad,” Allen said. “I was mostly just faking it. You know, playing dead. I thought I was really dead, you screaming like that and those footsteps.” He licked the blood off his lips. It was bright, bright red under the lights. “You have no idea,” he said.

“Are you missing teeth?” Jake grabbed his jaw and thrust it upward. “Open up.”

Allen shook free and adjusted the collar of his coat like a necktie. “Hey,” he said. “That’s my bat.”

Jake had forgotten he was holding it. “What were you doing out here?”

“What are you doing with my bat?”

“Just let me see your mouth.”

Allen lifted his head and opened his mouth. A row of small teeth, a little too much space between some of them. None missing—other than the two he’d already near his back right molar. New ones were already sprouting in their absence.

“Lucky bastard,” Jake said.

“Bastards don’t have dads,” Allen said.

It took Jake a while to figure that one out. Right when he did, he heard Winters yell.

“Car!” he said. “Car!”
Jake heard the tires, then he felt the headlights on his shoulder—somehow, the heat of them. He grabbed Allen by the coat and pulled him off the street. Together they jumped into the bush.

Shively’s squad car stopped right in front of their cover.

“Let’s run,” Allen whispered. A gob of blood dripped out mouth.

“Quiet,” Jake said.

The engine idled. The car door opened and closed. Footsteps.

“That better not be a gun in your hand, Lakowski,” Shively said.

Jake guessed he was talking about the bat, though he doubted it much resembled a gun. He wondered how it would feel, though. What kind of fearlessness and energy a gun would bring.

“Let’s go,” Allen said. More blood dripped. “We could make it.”

“No use if he knows it’s us.”

“You boys come up here now, nice and slow,” Shively said. “I’ve got my gun drawn, but that’s only because I don’t know what it is that you’ve got.”

Jake took a bite out of his lower lip and chewed on the skin. They didn’t really have a choice now. They never had a choice. In any of this.

“It’s not a gun,” Jake said.

“Whatever it is, throw it out.”

He did. It hit the grass with a thud. Hitting someone’s head with it would probably sound the same.

“I’m putting my gun away,” Shively said. “But get out of that damn bush.”
Jake and Allen stood up. Shively was bent over the bat.

“It’s been a few weeks since I’ve seen you,” he said. He was talking to the bat.

He picked it up, spun it in his hands, and walked to them.

Jake hated Shively’s face. The red flashes casted shadows on everyone else’s face. Darkened their eyes or their jaw lines or even their dimples. Shively’s held no shadows. It was too puffed up.

“Look,” Jake said. “I know this looks bad.”

“You know I used to play first base?” Shively said.

“No, but—”

“I had a bad left eye,” he said, patting the bat into his hand, staring at it. “My batting eye. I crowded the plate a lot, hoping to get hit, get on base. Hell, once I took three straight pitches in the shoulder and the ump wouldn’t let me go because he said I didn’t try to avoid it.” He laughed, then sobered up. “But I tell you what, if I ever got hold of one.” He looked off into the red sky.

“Can I just explain—”

“Shut up,” Shively said. He turned sideways, brought the bat level, and lined it up with Jake’s head.

Jake froze.

“I’m not going to haul you in,” he said, and warm-up swung, like a batter between pitches, stopping the bat just before it touched Jake’s face. “I’m not going to take you home and wake your little daddy.” He swung again. “I’m not even going to ask you what the hell you’re doing on the McCoveys’ front lawn at ten o’clock at night with
a baseball bat.” He swung a third time and kept the bat there, this time pressed to Jake’s cheek. He could feel it shaking slightly. “But if I ever see you—either of you—outside, at night, on these streets again, your family isn’t going to make it out of here whole. You think a baseball bat looks guilty? Try a meth lab in your old man’s work van.”

“That’s not right,” Allen said. “And besides, no one will believe you.”

Shively lowered the bat to Allen’s height. “Everyone will believe me. What no one will believe is a bunch of trouble-making strangers.”

“We’re not bad people,” Allen said.

“I don’t care,” he said. He brought the bat back to Jake’s head. “And just as good as I can plant something, I can cover something up. When my nephew comes for you boys—and he will, you can count on that—don’t think the law is going to be waiting there to protect you.”

“As soon as we get home we’re going to report you,” Allen said.

Shively chuckled. “And say what? You were out on nightly patrol with your baseball bat and a cop stopped by and harassed you?”

“You’re fat,” Allen said. “Fat and ugly.”

“Start walking home. Right now.”

“It’s a free country,” Allen said.

“That it is,” Shively said. “Unless I say otherwise.”

“Come on,” said Jake. He tugged at Allen’s coat.

“But he’s got my bat.”

“It’s mine now,” Shively said.
“You lost my bat!” Allen said. He was looking at Jake now, and he’d forgotten all about the bloody mouth. So had Jake. It trickled down his chin and to one side of his jaw, near his ear. Jake wondered what Shively thought of it and guessed that, if he noticed, he didn’t care.

“I’ll get you a new bat,” Jake said.

“How?” said Allen.

“I’ll buy it.”

“How?”

“Just come on.”

Shively walked to his car and got in. Through his rolled-down window he said, “Don’t you boys worry about your own safety. I’ll follow you home.”

While Shively pulled forward, backed up, and turned around, Jake glanced at Winters’ garage roof. He couldn’t see him anywhere. Just red sky. It hurt his eyes to look. He quickly shook his head, hoping Winters would interpret it as, Not tonight. Maybe Winters could take the hoop down before they Charter guys got there. Maybe they wouldn’t even show.

“Oh look at that,” Shively said. He must have noticed Jake looking in that direction, because now he was. “The Winters’ put their ball hoop back up. I hope nothing bad happens to it.”

**Brette**

Rows of corn nearly ready for harvest stood all around them, just past the ghosts of their breath. The rising sun cut golden lines of light into everything and a killdeer cried...
warning overhead. Brette marked it on their chart. She’d checked out a video on birdcalls from the school library and was getting good at identifying them—not that Mrs. Vanderoh would require them to know that, but it was fun in its own simple, slightly depressing way.

Meridith bent down and stretched her hamstrings, first down one leg, then the other, a volleyball move. She’d finally worn the proper gear—a raincoat, old jeans, muck boots—but it had rained last night and the clothes did little to protect her. Brette’s was getting wet, too. She couldn’t really think about her own discomfort, though, because she was too busy listening to Meridith complain—about the wetness and other things, always other things as of late.

“It’s not fair,” Meridith said. “It’s so not fair.”

“I know,” Brette said.

“And even if he did do it. So what? Those guys have been messing around Andy’s place way too long. He was just defending his friend.”

The “he” was Jake. Everyone would be talking about him today, as usual—only today would be different, because last night gave them something fresh on the subject.

Brette had seen Jake twice last night—one during her workout, around ten, once afterwards, in that almost-sleep of hers. The first time she’d seen him, Shively was following him and Allen home in his car, the headlights casting their silhouettes on the pavement. The image wasn’t too out of the ordinary. Shively had pulled that move on other troublemakers a dozen times at least. The second time she saw Jake, Shively was there again, only that time, the squad car lights were spinning and he was parked in their
driveway, and, soon, he was leading Jake into the back of the car. They took off south, toward Ames, it looked like, and Jake’s father and Allen followed in the work van.

Half an hour later, their phone rang and her dad picked up. The word spread from there: another attack, this time at the Winters’ place; and not on cars this time, but people.

By sunup, everything had somehow been spilled, including the injuries of each victim. The worst of them, CJ, the de facto leader of the three, had busted his knee up—not from the hoe, but from trying to run from it.

And, another late-night trip to the police station, another guilty-looking pile of circumstantial evidence piling up against him, Jake was at the center of the mess.

The craziest part about the whole fiasco was CJ Good’s looming involvement in all their lives. He was last year’s homecoming king. He’d be in front of the bleachers on Friday—well, if his ACL allowed him—crowning the new king. Brette hated to think of the awkwardness that would cause, even if Jake didn’t win. And if he did, CJ having to crown him, the guy who attacked—supposedly attacked—him earlier that week: that would be a new form of drama that even Charter-Maxton wasn’t ready for.

Another killdeer flew overhead and screamed. It seemed close, extremely close, and Brette jumped.

“Those birds are so annoying,” Meridith said.

The Killdeer circled above Meridith’s head. Meridith looked up, squinting as if she expected a wad of bird crap to land on her face. “It’s those striped ones. I swear, they love the turbines.”
Brette was started to think that, too. The farther they got from the turbines, the fewer Killdeer calls she heard. It was weird, and nothing like what she’d heard from other people—that birds and bats avoided their blades and hums or died if they didn’t. But the killdeer seemed to be adapting just fine. If only Brette was a bird.

Meridith pushed a stalk over with her boot. It snapped dryly. “Did Kow ever come home?” she said.

*Kow*: God, Brette hated it.

“Not that I saw.”

Meridith snapped another stalk, this one soggier. “Great. Looks like I need a new date for the dance.” She snapped another stalk, then kicked a mound of mud. It sprayed black bits of soil onto both of them.

Brette wiped her legs with her sweatshirt sleeve. “Who knows?” she said.

“Shively’s a dick, but he’s a dumb one.”

“Some people thought he might win king. You know, if the Charter guys split the votes.”

Brette wasn’t so sure about that. They hadn’t even announced *court* yet. That would come later today.

“I think Jake will be fine,” Brette said. “I mean, it doesn’t really add up. Jake went home, Shively following, and then Shively came back later and hauled him in.”

“That’s true,” Meridith said. “Why do you think he didn’t just haul him in the first time?”

“I don’t know,” Brette said.
“Unless it happened in-between and Jake snuck out to do it.” Meridith kicked more mud.

Brette hadn’t see him sneaking, but she wasn’t looking out her window. She had been lying in bed, thinking about Terri—well, sort of thinking. She was mostly letting her mind, somewhere in the base of it, do the thinking for her. Scenarios—a lot of them—played through her head, but one stood out:

Terri at bat, the powder-blue of UCLA highlighting her bronze shoulders perfectly, the facemask of her helmet casting a toothy shadow across her face; Terri striking out on three straight, sprinting out of the box, catching some advice from the girl now on deck with the black braid and the smudge of eyeblack on her lip; “Never swing at the first two with her. Never. And this girl gets ahead, it’s riser every time”; Terri heading to the end of the dugout, leaning over her knees, rocking as if on a ship, whispering to herself.

It wasn’t a dream exactly—Brette knew because she was staring up at her ceiling, somehow aware of the red flashes while the scene played out—but she knew it was close.

“How much longer?” Meridith said.

Brette checked her stopwatch: 9:22. They’d overstay by more than four minutes.

Brette clicked the watch. “Perfect,” she said. “Right at five.”

They started walking through the corn again to their next point.
“You think this will mess up my chances of queen?” said Meridith. Brette could barely hear her over the turbines paired with the crinkling of corn.

“I don’t know,” Brette said, but what she wanted to say was, *I don’t care.*

“I mean, I know I’ll make court. I mean, I’m pretty sure. But the car thing made it clear that some people don’t like me. Or what I’m doing—going to the dance with Kow—but if anything I thought that might make me look more sympathetic or something, you know?”

“Maybe,” Brette said.

“And now this. *Man,* I wish this didn’t happen.” She kicked another mound.

“Maybe I’m not on court.”

“Be patient. We’ll know soon.”

“I know. I’m just nervous. Aren’t you?”

“Ha,” said Brette.

“You could make it.”

“Ha,” Brette said again.

It was getting harder to walk. Brette’s boots sunk lower and lower into the mud. Meridith’s were fine—barely sinking at all. She had to weigh more than Brette. It wasn’t bad weight—Brette realized that in the locker room—but Meridith had at least thirty on her.

Maybe Brette just picked a bad row to walk down. She moved over one, farther from Meridith.

“You don’t have a crush on him, do you?” said Meridith.

“Kow.”

“It’s Jake, you know.”

“Jake.”

“Why would I?” Through the corn, she couldn’t see Meridith’s face.

“I don’t know. He’s cute and you’ve been acting weird.”

Brette started walking again—a little faster than before. So did Meridith. Leaves rattled.

“How am I acting weird?”

“Just like you’ve got something on your mind. Something more than the attacks.”

Brette hated when people gave definitive, egocentric names to things. *The Attacks. The Shit Huts. The Brick Bar.* Mainly, she just hated the *The.* Those things were not special. They were not singular. They didn’t deserve to stand alone like they were the only ones of their kind, like they were known by all. If you drove half an hour in any direction, no one would know what any of them were.

“Me and you haven’t really hung out much before,” Brette said. “This is just how I am.”

“That’s true. Sorry. I didn’t mean to pry.”

“It’s okay,” Brette said. The row she’d chosen wasn’t any better. Her boots were in almost an inch. Meridith was pulling ahead.

“Me and CJ are broke up, you know,” Meridith said.

“Yeah,” Brette said. She’d known for at least a month. Everyone had.
“He cheated on me.”

Brette didn’t know that part. She dug in and caught up with Meridith, though she wasn’t sure she wanted to.

“I’m sorry,” Brette said.

“You know who with?”

“No.”

“You know her.”

“So tell me then.”

“Your sister.”

They both stopped walking again. Brette wasn’t sure who stopped first.

“I didn’t know,” Brette said.

“I figured you didn’t, since you hadn’t said anything yet.”

“Jesus,” Brette said.

“It was right before she left. I guess they’d always had a thing for each other.”

Brette didn’t know what to say. She started walking. So did Meridith.

Meridith began talking about how she felt, how she found out, how CJ reacted. She talked and talked. Brette couldn’t listen. All she could think about was how Terri didn’t tell her—or how the word never got back to her. She didn’t feel bad for Meridith, or feel guilty-by-association through Terri. She only felt sorry for herself, for being so out of the loop, so distant from her sister—geographically and socially. They’d never really known each other.

She felt bad, she guessed, for not feeling bad for others, but that was it.
Meridith kept talking about her feelings until Brette said, “Stop.” She meant stop *walking*, because they were at their next point, but the way it came out made it seem like more than that.

“Good morning,” said Linda Sowers from the intercom—that professional, robotic voice, “The results are in for this year’s homecoming court.” Linda paused, a paper rustled, and the silence hung so thickly in the air that Brette thought she could see it—a creamy thing, oozing in and out of every space. She looked around at all the blank faces: Quinn Van Sully staring at the ceiling, picking his wart; Toby Mueller’s slackened, overbite jaw; Meridith chewing on her nails. Even Mrs. Vanderoh stared into nothing, her hair framing her face like a redwood windowpane.

“This year’s men’s court will consist of Taylor Bosco, Frederick Corbit, Ray Klein, Jacob Lakowski, and Rolland Reed.”

One side of Meridith’s fat lips rose into a smile when she heard Jake’s name. The rest of the room—all Charters, so no surprise—made a collective, gaspy sound. Brette noticed herself doing it, too. The sound meant a lot of things—frustration, annoyance, some even giddiness—but surprise wasn’t one of them.

“The women’s court will consist of Sarla Batch, Jennifer Edeinborough, Kailey Green, Adrian Tenson, and Meridith Watters.”

Brette was not surprised.
Meridith’s lips curled into an even bigger smile, this one with toothpaste-commercial teeth. Sarla elbowed her and the two raised their shoulders and made excited faces with lots of eyebrow movements.

“Congratulations to all the members,” Linda said. “We look forward to a great week of fun and tradition.”

The intercom clicked off and all the fuzz that accompanied it disappeared. Six of the ten court members were in Environmental Science, and a lot of congratulating followed.

Meridith received some, but not as much as the others, who continued to giggle with excitement and accept high fives. Instead, she sat there, biting her nails.

Brette patted her on the back—just once. “I told you,” she said.

Meridith grabbed her wrist. “Feel my heart,” she said, and pressed Brette’s hands just above her left breast—the bigger of the two.

It was warm and soft and Brette could feel its flesh shaking from the beat. She counted the thumps, knowing sometimes, at night, when she couldn’t sleep, her own heart pounded just as fast—faster.

**Jake**

For the past two nights—even since Jake had made homecoming court—he and Meridith had talked on the phone. She wasn’t comforting—they hadn’t talked about Winters’ place, the garden hoe, police station visit number two, or any of that—but she was distracting. Last night they talked about the homecoming parade. What to wear. What time to be there. Whose car they’d ride together in. Apparently, all of the court members
rode in the backs of convertibles, and, thankfully, Meridith’s father knew a guy who owned one.

Tonight, their conversation was different.

Meridith had just gotten back from a party. Some Charter thing, celebrating her recent homecoming court nomination. She was drunk. And she was talking about sex.

It was even more distracting than Jake’s homecoming nerves. No way he could dwell on the last few days of Shively-laden bullshit. The cop-station grilling. His father sobbing silently not once, not twice, but three times. Winters and the jerseys avoiding him despite more approving hallway nods the past two days than the first whole month and a half combined. He didn’t have time to think about all that, because Meridith was bringing up her sexual escapades, one after the other, and Jake was lying about his, trying to keep up.

“What about you?” she said. “What’s the craziest thing you’ve ever done?”

He could tell she was getting tired. It was almost midnight and her voice slurred in and out of these throaty notes that, to him, were very seductive. Jake wasn’t tired, and he could use it to his advantage. Lying was easier when the other person didn’t know exactly what was going on.

“I was, well, I was in science class my freshman year and—”

“Freshman-year science,” Meridith said, her voice thick with dreamy nostalgia.

“Yeah. Anyway, my teacher, Mrs…Mrs. Griffey, she always had it in for me. Only I didn’t know her reasons for it.”
“She seduced you,” said Meridith. She was suddenly alert. Not what Jake wanted.

“No. No, she just made me stay after school once, with this other girl, and we, yeah, we did it in her room.”

“Where did you do it?”

“On a desk.”

“She must have been hot.”

“She was okay,” Jake said. “Not as hot as you.” He felt his face flush. He didn’t know the boundaries. Or the titles. Were they boyfriend and girlfriend? It didn’t seem like it.

She breathed a laugh into the phone. “Whatever.”

Silence. Jake listened to the turbines and either his father or Allen—probably Allen—rustling around in the kitchen. His dad had been better about food lately, and each of them had been rotating to the fridge in timed intervals as if from a conveyer belt.

“What was her name?” Meridith said.

“Whose?”

“The girl. The girl in biology.”

“Brette.” He bit his tongue. It had just slipped out. Stupid.

“Really? Like your neighbor?”

“Yeah. Yeah, weird, huh?”
“Yeah,” she yawned. “I thought that was a pretty uncommon name.” She giggled, the sound like chopping wind. “People used to make fun of her like crazy when we were younger for it.”

“That’s too bad,” said Jake.

“Your first time freshman year, though. That’s pretty young.”

“Yeah.”

“But maybe it’s different. You know, at bigger schools.”

“It is a little bit,” he said. Like he actually knew.

“Was Brette your first?”

“Yeah,” he said. It seemed unlikely. Ridiculous even. His first time when he was fourteen on some teacher’s desk. But it was too late. He couldn’t formulate another girl and another time. There was no turning back. He and this lie were tied together forever. That is, unless Meridith would forget, too drunk tonight to remember tomorrow. Jake didn’t know how it worked. He’d never been drunk, only “buzzed,” though even that word seemed too extreme for the slight light-headed feeling he’d experienced only a few times.

“I think I kind of traumatized myself,” Meridith said. “The first time I ever did it.”

“Why?”

“The condom broke. Or slipped off. Or something. I don’t know. The guy I was with, CJ, he was a junior and I was a sophomore. You don’t know him, he—”

He could hear her breathing. Deep and steady.
“What?” Jake said.

“You might know him, actually. Well, I don’t know. He was, he was one of the guys at Winters’ on Monday night.”

“Oh,” Jake said.

More silence. More breathing.

“He’s going to be there at coronation. He’s crowning the king.”

It was bad enough hearing about her craziest time. Her friend’s cousin and the rest stop bathroom. If she had a crush on Jake, why would she tell him those things? And now she was implying that it was him who’d attacked those guys at Winters’. Not that everyone hadn’t already with their eyes. And then telling him the victim may be giving him the crown.

Jake fake yawned. “I think I better go,” he said. “I’m pretty tired.”

“Okay,” she said, her voice tired, unaware.

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow. Well, see you, anyway.” She hadn’t talked to him at school since that day at the lunch table. After her car, the garden hoe massacre, he couldn’t blame her. He just didn’t know how he could have avoided that stuff, since he had nothing to do with either.

“No, I’ll talk to you,” she said. “We’re a couple now. Homecoming royalty.”

“Homecoming court,” Jake said. “No royalty yet.” It still sounded weird to him. Weird and unbelievable. If his old friends could see him now.

She breathed a laugh.

“Goodnight,” Jake said.
“Sweet dreams,” she said.

2:03 a.m. and Jake couldn’t sleep. He didn’t even know why he tried. He still slept each night, but it normally wasn’t until the sky started its gray turn or until his mind ran out of thoughts. No way was the second of the two happening tonight. All he could think about, minus Meridith, was Winters’ place. Winters’ had told him he had gone to bed after Jake left. Had he? Could he have attacked the guys? Their plan had been piss. Emotionally scaring but physically harmless. He doubted Winters would ditch the piss and go for the garden hoe. It wasn’t his style. But if it wasn’t Winters, and it wasn’t Jake, then who was it? Like that first attack, weeks ago, it hurt his head to think about it. No way, at least right now, that he would sleep.

When he got to the living room his father was looking out the front window, feeding a stack of Twizzlers into his mouth with one hand—even with the improved fridge stock, he still brought home the classics—and holding the curtain with the other. He looked very into whatever he was staring at. His expression changed every few seconds. Confused. Normal. Confused. Happy. Like he was watching some TV drama.

Jake cleared his throat.

His father jumped, turned around, and nodded. “Your Highness,” he said.

It had been a running joke ever since Jake had made homecoming court. And, Jake knew, a cover for all the awkwardness that the police station trips had caused. Allen had been the one to start the nickname, only when he said it, he bowed down on one knee. Jake would have normally found it annoying, but as long as it kept softening the
dark cloud of police suspicion, he wouldn’t complain. Besides, he’d gotten used to Kow. And no one in Jake’s family had ever gotten close to his level of current popularity. Even his mother and especially his father. He deserved to bask in it, at least for a while. He deserved to be Your Highness.

Jake walked to the window. “What are you looking at?”

His father parted the curtain and again looked outside. “Nothing,” he said, rolling the Twizzlers bag closed. “Are you done on the phone?”

“I was done a long time ago.”

“Hang it on the receiver next time.”

His father took a step back and Jake parted the other side of the curtain. “It looked like you were an hour into a movie,” Jake said. “The way you were staring.”

“Spacing off,” he said.

“About what?” Jake said.

He rubbed his worn out face. “Just work”

The yard was dark and the turbines were spinning. Jake could see them each time a blade topped the spin and started down, when it was nearest the red light. A different kind of light caught his attention. Far into the field, a beam shone like the headlight of a train.

“What is that out there?” Jake said.

“What?”

“That light. Is someone driving around?”

“Oh,” said his father. He plopped down on the loveseat. “Those are combines.”
Jake looked again. There were three lights, maybe four, crawling around out there.

“They’re harvesting or whatever?” Jake said. “This late?”

“Must be,” his father said. He held out the bag of Twizzlers. Jake took them and sat down next to him. They stared at the wall. What he wouldn’t do for a TV in that blank white space.

“Can’t sleep?” said his father.

“How’d you guess?”

He nodded. Jake filled the silence with chewing. After a while he said, “Sorry about the other night.”

“Don’t worry about it,” his father said.

“I know it looks bad, but—

“They don’t have shit on us.”

Jake looked up at him and said nothing.

“You know, your mother would be proud of you.”

Jake nodded.

“I’m going to try some sleep again,” his father said. “Put the phone back on the receiver, please.”

“Okay.”

Jake sat on the couch for a bit longer, then went to the window and spaced off. Only, unlike his father, he knew what he was spacing off about. And it was his father. He never talked about Jake’s mother. He never swore. He also never used the word “us,”
especially when it meant grouping himself with other wrongdoers. Not that Jake did anything wrong. It just appeared that way. It was all about appearances, and his, in the reflection of the window, framed by the soon-to-be-devoured corn, did not look like royalty.

**Brette**

The sun hadn’t yet crept its way up behind turbines, and the sky, all that same color of pre-dawn gray, made Brette feel lonely. She found herself nodding off behind the wheel, head snapping up every few seconds—something that rarely happened unless she was almost to Charter, far enough away from Maxton’s bubble of sleeplessness. It was strange and a little haunting: riding alone.

Meridith had been late—the added time allowing Brette to have an extra slice of toast, so she wasn’t mad—and five minutes after they’d normally left already, the phone rang. Without an ounce of regret or guilt in her voice, Meridith told Brette she was too hungover to point count and that she’d see her at school.

So Brette was up and alone on a cold fall morning. At least it was the last day of counts. At least it was Friday.

When she turned left onto 160th something didn’t look right. She already felt alone, but now it was magnified. The world was so large and empty. At first she thought it was just the lack of sun, but then she realized the corn—the lack of it. The fields on both sides of the gravel road had been harvested. Ragged, foot-high stalks, all of them leaning slightly right, peopled the space that had just yesterday had been walls of eight-foot-high crop so dense you couldn’t see two rows in. Brette could see to Tollys’ farm.
She could see the Wilsons’ duel silos. She’d grown up around this thing—this reparative cycle of growth and death—but it felt different. It felt so sad, so wrong. She knew the point count study—getting used to the corn, being among it, inside of it—was partly to blame.

She turned west on the first unmarked turbine road and drove up to their first point. She threw her stopwatch and odometer around her neck, grabbed her clipboard, and stepped out. Like the corn, the turbine—unspinning, quiet—seemed dead.

She sat down on the turbine steps, clicked her stopwatch, and listened. The turbine above her snapped on, though she felt no gust of wind. She looked up, watched its blades start their turn.

For four minutes, she didn’t hear or see a single bird, and the norm by then was about five or six. Then a killdeer, one that seemed right overhead, screamed a long, strange warning. Brette looked above and saw nothing—nothing but blades, not yet turning at full speed. She looked right, left, and stood up. She heard the call again and looked up. Again there was nothing. When she heard it a third time, she was already staring up, and she saw the noise’s source—not a bird, but the turbine. Each time one of the blades made its fall from top to bottom, it whistled. The whistling was picking up, too. Every eight seconds, every seven, every five.

She stared at the blade until she hit the six-minute mark, the sky almost as white as the metal.
The corn stalks crunched like old bones as she walked to her next point count. She got only fifteen kilometers in when a different kind of crunch—the crunch of tires—started over her left shoulder.

Her first thought was Meridith. Maybe she’d decided to join up after all. Maybe she’d powered down a couple of ibuprophen, eaten a greasy breakfast, and womaned up.

When she turned around, she saw a van—a white van, *Florida Wind* on its side. It pulled in front of her car, their noses facing one another, and Jake Lakowski’s dad stepped out.

He walked toward her with delicate steps, looking down. He wore a white hard hat, and with the backdrop of white behind him, he appeared headless. Only the slight jiggle of it atop his shoulders distinguished it from the sky.

He started talking before he was halfway there. In all that open space, even with the turbines beginning their whirs, she could hear him perfectly.

“I hate to do it, but being out here’s a fine, and I’m the one who writes them.”

She saw and heard so much of his oldest son in him that moment—all that uncertain power—that she almost forgot where she was. He hadn’t taken his eyes off the ground, which you needed to when you walked through a muddy field, she supposed. Still, she couldn’t help but think there was more to it than that.

He stopped a few feet from her and pulled a notebook full of crinkled papers from the inside pocket of his jacket. One of them caught in the breeze—proof there *was* a breeze, because she couldn’t feel it—and skipped away.
“Damn it,” he said. He watched it go and made no effort to follow. He flipped through his papers and found the sheet he was looking for. “Do you have some identification on you?”

Brette didn’t and told him so. She thought her face would be enough, but he hadn’t recognized her. He still hadn’t looked up.

“Well, that’s trouble.” He scribbled something down. “License plate number?”

“Can’t you find that on my car?”

He finally looked at her. He lifted the hard hat slightly and stuck the pen behind his ear. His stubble, more prominent above his lip than anywhere else, had hints of sky-whiteness in it. “You know my son, don’t you,” he said.

“Hi,” she said.

“I thought the car looked familiar.”

“Sorry about being here,” Brette said. “I wasn’t smoking dope or anything. I’m doing a school project.”

“No, no,” he said. “It’s more for your safety than me wanting to bust you.” He put the papers back into his jacket, then took them back out again. He handed her the one he’d been writing on.

It was a piece of graph paper, completely blank except for a couple of scribbles.

“What—”

“It was a bluff,” he said. “I just wanted you scared and gone.”

“So all that fine talk?”

“Oh, it would be a fine. I just can’t write them. I could call the cops.”
“Yeah,” Brette said, “the cops.”

They both laughed, and it seemed significant—like maybe the laugh meant he was a real Maxtoner.

“Seriously, though,” he said. “It’s dangerous out here. Especially in the winter. New wind turbines, they stop spinning when ice accumulates. Not these old junkers. They just keep moving. If a piece of ice falls off one of those blades it does more than any bullet. That’s why you got to wear one of these.” He tapped on the hat, which Brette thought might stop a pellet gun.

“Good thing it’s not winter,” Brette said.

“Rocks,” he said.

“What?”

“Even if it’s not winter, you always got to watch for rocks. A piece of gravel gets caught in one of the gears during transit, slides around up there for months, maybe years—you ever hear one whistling, that’s what it is—and then, one day, it finally finds that couple-inch crease, escapes, and comes flying down.”

Brette thought of the parties she’d been to under the turbines. Everyone was playing with fire.

“I’m done with the project after today,” she said. “Actually, I’m done by the turbines forever. I just need to finish this field.” That was only partially true. She still had two more counts under turbines, but he’d hopefully be gone by then. Plus, now that she knew about the rocks, that blade whistling like a bird above her head, she was thinking about staying in her car with the windows rolled down for those.
“What’s the project about anyway?” he said.
“Point counts,” she said.
“Huh,” he said.
“Basically, I’m counting birds.”

He scanned the empty sky and field. “Huh,” he said.

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Finally, after he’d left, on her fifth and final point down the line, the turbines really going now, spinning like pinwheel ghosts, she saw a bird. It was a killdeer—of course a killdeer. It was all by itself, and made no call. It simply flew over her—that stripped faced, those sharp-cut wings— like it was too tired to say anything. Like it had lost its voice.

**Ed**

Around five, two fire engines and five convertibles crawled through Charter, headed towards Ed’s place. He could see them coming out of his far kitchen window if he really craned his neck. He looked to be the only one watching. No one stood in yards or side streets, no one gazed from their windows, yet the parade pretended otherwise, waving and honking their horns at nothing. A solid hour later and the sun would begin its descent into the brown-corn underworld, and the dying light painted the whole procession a dirty orange with what little oomph it had left.

The first vehicle, one of the Charter Fire Department trucks, all forty-some football players clinging to its handles and railings, was about to his block when Ed’s neighbor shot into view. It looked like CJ was actually getting set up to watch, unfolding
a lawn chair, open cooler resting next to him. The parade would pass in less than a minute, so it hardly seemed worth it. He wore dress pants and a button up. He looked like a college intern, minus the knee brace and crutches. Ed still felt bad about that.

He must have seen Ed through the curtain, because a hand shot up, waving in his direction. Ed flipped the curtains closed and went into the kitchen. He felt like some teen caught peaking in the girls’ locker room.

A few seconds later, someone knocked at his door. Ed stood where he was. He didn’t want this. The past few months, he’d gotten used to not speaking to anyone. What was the point of neighborly courtesy, of showing interest in someone at all, when it was all based solely on geography. So what if they slept and ate and shat near each other? He didn’t want to talk to this kid, especially after what had happened the other night. He didn’t want him getting wise about his knee.

As much as Ed thought he’d stand there and wait for the knocking to stop, after the third knock, a part of him he’d thought died long ago began walking to the door. It was all instinct. He didn’t even want to. He wasn’t even thinking. But soon, he was twisting the knob, pulling the door open, and standing in front of CJ Good.

“Come have a beer, neighbor,” he said. He was hunched over slightly, his crutches a little too small for him. He had an oval goatee, brownish orange like the sky.

“Sure,” said that part of Ed he thought was gone. Maybe it had always been there, and only came out when someone friendly came at him. Maybe it was self-preservation—not wanting to seem guilty for anything. “Let me grab a chair.”
The leaves crunched and the grass was cool, almost cold, on Ed’s bare feet. He sat on his kitchen stool, painfully close to the Good boy’s chair because he didn’t want to seem rude. He handed Ed a Keystone, not much colder than the grass. It had been a while since his last beer, at least for Ed’s standards. He popped it and took a large sip as the red nose of fire truck number one crossed in front of them.

The football squad, most of the smaller, younger-looking ones, waved to the two of them. CJ called out, “Whoop some ass tonight,” and waved. Ed said and did nothing.

“Name’s CJ,” said the boy. “You’re Ed, right?”

“Right,” Ed said.

They shook, one of CJ’s crutches falling to the ground. Then they looked back at the road. Ed took a deep breath. The sun was fading brown into the earth. Somewhere, someone was burning leaves. If Ed could smell the sun, all brown and burning, he imagined it’d smell like leaves.

The fire truck rolled by and the next one, carrying what looked like the volleyball and cross country teams, though it was hard to tell because they weren’t dressed in uniform like the football players, honked as it passed. The young girls hid their bodies under sweat pants and jeans and sweatshirts and jackets, but there was enough beauty in their fresh faces to cause Ed’s back to stiffen. He sat up straighter on his stool.

“My ex-girlfriend’s in this parade,” CJ said. “Bitch will probably win queen.”

Ed nodded. So they had broken up.

“My old best friend, too.”

“Who?” Ed said.
“Rolland Reed.”

“Oh,” Ed said. He didn’t know if he should ask more. He knew more already, but not a lot.

“My knee,” CJ said. “I mean, you probably noticed it. The other night, some wacko attacked me and my buddies with a pitch fork.”

CJ paused, glanced at Ed. Ed knew the weapon was really a garden hoe because he’d swung it. He also knew from the papers. They were in a stack on his kitchen table, on top of the old ones.

Another Assault; Maxton’s Second in as Many Months.

Police Call Maxton Incidents Unrelated; Continue ‘Looking into Things’.

Prank Gone Wrong: Two Hurt, One Hospitalized.

Apparently garden hoes weren’t scary enough and CJ wanted to appear tough.

“And?” Ed said.

“And Rolls bailed, man. He bailed on us all.”

Ed had seen the bailing first hand. He hadn’t planned on attacking them. He’d followed the turbine boys across town to protect them, but when their plan was foiled and the cop followed them home, Ed stayed. He was waiting for the Winters boy on the roof to do something. When he didn’t—when he went inside—Ed kept waiting. Destiny had brought him there, he figured. And it was true. The red Dodge pulled up and the boys started terrorizing another house, another family. Ed wouldn’t allow it.

When Ed crossed the Winters’ driveway wearing his bloody shirt mask, CJ and another boy on the roof of their truck, ratcheting the hoop down, Rolland took one look
at him and ran. The others never saw him coming, and CJ took the worst of it. He took a hard spill right off the top of the cab. Ed heard the knee give way. It was like a corn stalk snapping.

Ed took a sip of beer. “Your old man hook you up with this?” he said, holding his can up.

“Sort of.”

Ed nodded. The first convertible went by, a bulky football player, number 50, next to a flimsy girl in a black-sequenced dress.

“Here come the court jesters,” CJ said.

It still amazed Ed that the shitty surrounding area could supply the homecoming hoopla with five convertibles. He knew a couple of the owners: Ernie Colensey and Stacey O’Neil. Colensey, his red, early-'80s firebird second to last, hauled the only male candidate not in full football uniform, a candidate Ed had seen plenty of lately. In a green button-up shirt, he looked small-shouldered and scared in line with the other boys. He also looked far more tired.

A pretty girl in a green, bosomy dress clung to his arm. CJ’s old girl. She looked at the other side of the street as they passed.

“There she is,” CJ said. “And there he is. And here I am.”

Ed finished his beer, glancing at CJ’s knee as he scooped another out of the cooler. “So who you think attacked you?” Ed said. He was aware it was risky, but he couldn’t help asking. “Think it was him?”
“Rolls seems to think so,” CJ said. “I know he hates the turbines and all—you know that, too, first hand—but the more I think about it, the more I think he’s probably right. Just look at that fucking smug bastard. Look at him with my girl.”

Ed didn’t look. He was too busy thinking about something CJ had said. *You know that, too, first hand.* Ed wondered if that was why CJ had brought him out onto the lawn for a beer—to rub it in the Reed boy’s face. It was stupid, Ed knew, but he felt hurt by it. He thought the gesture had been genuine.

The Reed boy was last in line, his date thin and sickly, wearing yellow. He waved his casted hand at the two of them as they passed. CJ handed Ed another beer but didn’t wave.

Rolland stopped waving, too. He’d realized who CJ was sitting next to.

Ed chugged his beer. Rolland shook his head. CJ chuckled. The car passed.

“I don’t know what will piss me off worse, crowning Rolls king, or that turbine mother fucker.”

Ed finished his beer and went for another. He asked this time.

CJ nodded, sat up a little, and grimaced. He held his knee.

“Definitely the turbine boy. If I have to crown that bastard king, I’m going to lose it.”

Ed cracked his beer. He and CJ watched the line of vehicles turn left, toward Main, and disappear. They’d head around the entire town of Charter, then to the school, to the gravel track, where they’d take one more trip, circling it, while parents and family
and the rest of the school cheered them on from the bleachers and CJ gave his homecoming football to the new king.

“Thanks for the beers,” Ed said.

“You going to the coronation?” CJ said.

“I’d need a lot more beer to stomach that,” Ed said. “No offense.”

“I’ve got more in my fridge.”

“I’m good,” Ed said.

With his crutches, CJ pulled himself to a stand. “Alright,” he said. “Nice talking to you.”

“Let me at least help you carry this stuff in,” Ed said.

**Jake**

They circled the football field. On the track. The crappy gravel track. Again, no one was watching. At least this time they weren’t waving to no one like they had through town. He didn’t get that at all. Maybe some people were watching from their windows, but it seemed like wishful thinking. The only person, minus old folks, he’d seen watching the parade through town was some old guy and Meridith’s ex—that CJ guy, who hated Jake for reasons Jake couldn’t control. Jake wondered how many outsiders, from the beginning of time, had felt that way.

Jake and Meridith’s car reached the back side of the track, facing the empty Away bleachers, still too early for the visiting team to be there. Behind the bleachers, on the highway, trucks and semis zipped by, honking if they saw the tiny parade in time.
Behind the highway, three combines, headlights on, rumbled through a field while spitting eaten corn into their giant grain catchers.

“So after this, we stop by our bleachers,” Meridith said. She’d had her hand on his thigh off and on throughout the trip, and now she put it there again. “Then we walk to the rafter, stand there, and they announce.”

Unlike the Away bleachers, the C-M ones were packed and noisy—parents and the rest of the C-M student body—and Jake wasn’t ready for that contrast. From feeling a part of a pathetic, cricket-chirping event to one of unearned, over the top excitement. It didn’t make a lot of sense. The whole set-up didn’t. Why did football players wear—minus their helmets—their full uniforms? Why did they have to go through empty Charter, waving to no one like idiots. Why did they have to go around the track? He chalked each up to tradition, just like he had this whole past week. All those activities in the gymnasium. Egg toss. Tug of war. Those infantile shoe relays. All of them class vs. class, the seniors vs. the freshman, sophomores vs. juniors, winners face off again for the championship. That part of the tradition, he guessed, stemmed from a darker time: when the seniors used to beat the hell out of the underclassmen as a rite of passage. Now they did things with points and teacher supervision.

Just after they’d passed the Away bleachers, from behind Jake, in his ugly red convertible, Rolland yelled, “It’s almost game time, Lakowski! I believe in you!”

Jake didn’t reply. Or turn around. The driver of Rolland’s car had been riding their driver’s ass all night, and all night Rolland had been shouting words of sarcastic encouragement.
Even in those moments of good old-fashioned bullying, Jake could hear the nerves in Rolland’s voice. He knew the other eight candidates were nervous, too. Anyone who had ever been part of this homecoming crap had to have been. But not everyone had been through the stuff that Jake had. His rep set him apart. New guy. Mysterious guy. Violent guy. The guy you either loved or hated. To top it all off, last year’s king probably wanted him dead for something he didn’t even do. Well, besides ride with Meridith. Meridith had warned him about that. The whole night, Jake had been actually hoping he wouldn’t win, so he wouldn’t have to interact with the guy.

When they got to the home bleachers, all eyes would be on him. Only this time, unlike at the lunch table or in Algebra or walking down the halls, he had nothing to do to keep him busy. To help him ignore the eyes. This time he had to stand there, face the crowd, and be still.

He knew that would be hard because, as they rounded the last corner, the bleachers and crowd in sight, he was shaking. Meridith was, too, only she shook from the cold.

“Just start a trend,” Jake said to her. He held up his coat again. His winter one. Like the rest of the girls atop their convertible rides, Meridith had chosen the bare-shouldered, exposed-legged route around town. And now, with the sun going down, it was starting to seem ridiculous. It was making him angry, actually. Though he knew that was just his mind’s method of trying to distract him from his own nerves.
“The ride’s almost over,” Meridith said. She leaned closer to him, that beautiful cleavage growing, and snuggled her shoulder under his armpit. “You can warm me up during the dance.”

“I’ll try,” he said.

She sat up, eyed the bleachers, and took a deep breath. “How about a kiss for good luck?” she said.

It was a lot to ask in that particular moment of his particularly odd life, but he did. He leaned over, and, both their mouths shaking, they kissed. Her lips were so cold and her tongue was so warm that the contrast burned a little.

He expected Rolland to yell something brutal during, or at least after, but it never happened.

“Mmm,” Meridith said. “That was a good one.”

“Thanks,” Jake said.

“Are you good at everything?” she said.

“Whatever,” Jake said.

“Are you good at science?”

She gave him a weird look, and the question was really weird. He didn’t know what to say, so he smiled.

“You know, because, if you are, we can sneak into the science lab during the dance, and you can teach me a thing or two.” She looked up at him and winked a makeup-circled eye.

Then she leaned closer.
He expected another kiss, but they were basically in front of the bleachers now. Their convertible had stopped and the other candidates were climbing down from theirs. Instead, she brought her mouth to his ear.

“I brought condoms,” she whispered.

Great. All he needed was more pressure.

### Brette

The press box mic snapped on and Linda Bowers’ robot voice crackled out of the speakers behind Brette’s head.

“Welcome to the 1999 homecoming coronation. Before we begin, a great thanks to all of those who helped throughout the week. It is your rock-solid, Royal spirit that makes homecoming such a success each year. Let’s give these hard workers a round of applause.”

Brette rolled her eyes, shook her head, and clapped about three times. She’d made a nice little nest for herself on the top row—schoolbag on one side, coat on the other. The air was crisp, but not cold. She’d brought the coat as a buffer. Not that anyone would sit by her—no one had asked her to the dance, so no way someone would go out of their way to plant themselves by her for the stupid Crowning Ceremony. The only person that might was wearing a green dress, standing in line next to Jake with the other homecoming court members. Then again, seats were scarce. It was the biggest homecoming crowd she could remember, and she noticed a lot of adults who didn’t even have kids in the school system. If someone lost a seat or something, got desperate, they might sit by her.
“First off,” Linda said, “let’s start the evening by welcoming back Corey Good and Ruth Wrinkler, last year’s king and queen.”

Next to the little rafter where this year’s candidates would stand, CJ and Ruth were already on their own, smaller rafter, seated atop their “thrones”—two folding chairs covered in velvet blankets. They waved, CJ with the homecoming king football tucked in the crook of his arm, Ruth donning her silver crown.

People cheered, but a lot of them whispered.

Ruth wore a black, low-cut dress—the same one she wore for last year’s coronation, Brette was pretty sure. From the looks of how it fit her now, the Iowa State dining hall had been treating her well—a little too well. Then again, weight gain was a college thing, and Brette couldn’t ridicule her for that. She’d gladly put on fifteen pounds to get out of Maxton and into a world of where people took learning seriously.

But the whispers from the crowd: they about Ruth’s weight. They were whispering about CJ Good. A pair of crutches leaned against the side of his chair and a metal brace ran from mid-shin to mid-thigh. Seeing CJ see Jake—especially if Jake won king—was what the non-parents had showed up for. Even if Jake hadn’t been the attacker on Tuesday, CJ probably thought so—everyone probably thought so—and that drama was in itself something that Maxton or Charter wanted to miss.

It didn’t help Jake was arm-and-arm with CJ’s ex-girlfriend.

“Just a reminder, folks,” Linda said, “let us please hold our applause until all the candidates have reached the platform.”
That wasn’t going to happen, Brette knew, but for now everyone grew silent as
the first candidate, Kyle Stone—“Stoner”—began his walk across the sideline to the
rafter, his overweight parents on either side of his blocky frame.

“The first candidate is Kyle Stone.”

People cheer and clapped and Linda paused for a moment before continuing.

“Kyle is the son of Kara and Mark Stone. Throughout his high school career,
Kyle has enjoyed his time on the…”

Brette pulled her clipboard from her bag and started tallying her bird stats, trying
her best to cork Linda’s voice from her thoughts. She didn’t need to hear about Stoner’s
mediocre accolades in football and wrestling and track and field or his plans to go to
some two-year technical school next fall. She could write a book on him if she wanted
to. She’d known him since third grade—the Charter-Maxton merger—and didn’t like
him. She felt more or less the same about everyone who made court. She wasn’t even
sure why she’d come. She supposed it was the same reason everyone else had—to see if
the new guy, the assassin-in-the-night, would win king. Also, there was queen. Who
would be praised but secretly hated by all of her friends the rest of the school year? Even
Kurt Tolly—the other non-enthusiast—seemed pumped. He was standing next to Andy
Winters, rubbing his orange head with excitement. She was glad this was her last
homecoming.

She flipped back a few pages, noting her killdeer marks from the last two days of
point counts. She still couldn’t believe the absence of birds earlier that day. Her other
four point counts, she’d only marked two more—another killdeer and a cowbird. The
single cowbird sighting was weird—they usually hung in groups; but, then again, so did killdeer. The harvest had scared them all off. It made sense: all their cover gone. It’d be like if a tornado wiped through Maxton and left not even one building standing.

Everyone would leave.

It had been after she’d looked at her charts for the third time—killing time in College Prep—that she noticed the lack of difference between turbine birds and field birds. Five days, every 50 meters, she’d noted every bird—well, she and Meridith, but mostly her—and though she still had about half of her charting to finish, she wasn’t noticing a difference in the numbers. The birds didn’t avoid the turbines. The turbines didn’t kill the birds. In fact, it seemed like the birds were a little more prevalent near the turbines—especially killdeer.

She wished she would have started noting the different species types from the beginning, but it was too late now. The presentation was due next week. And even if she had another month, the birds were scared off. By the time they came back—if they came back—winter would chase them away again.

Linda was on her sixth candidate—Jake was next, it looked like—when someone stole her coat.

She turned, ready to slug whoever, but stopped well short of the smiling moon face inches from her own.

Allen. He tossed the coat over his shoulders, slid his arms through the too-long sleeves, and sat down next to her.
“This is taking a whole lot longer that I thought,” he said. He’d lost a lot of his tan—she’d seen him out in the yard still, feebly trying to soak in some of the October rays—but her purple coat brought his color out and made him look old and handsome.

Brette looked back at her chart. “Do you think your brother is going to win?”

“No doubt,” he said, but she could hear the doubt in his voice. He slid up on the front of the bleacher and put his hands, which were covered in the folded-over sleeves of Brette’s coat—on his knees.

Past all the commotion, the East Marshall busses, two of them, pulled into the parking lot and disappeared behind the bleachers. Brette never understood their stupid homecoming set-up—coronation before the game. If she were a guy on the football team—God, what a loaded if—the whole process would put her mind anywhere but the game; the game that would start in only a couple of hours. Maybe that was why C-M hadn’t won homecoming since the merger.

“The next candidate is Jacob Roy Lakowski.”

CJ, who had been looking at the other candidates and clapping, slouched down in his throne and stared straight ahead. He kept his hands in his lap.

Others’ applause more than made up for it. From the Maxton side of the student section, they cheered and clapped and sent a scattering of Mooos echoing into the night. Brette wasn’t sure, but she thought she saw some Maxton parents mooing, too.

“I don’t get it,” Allen said, looking at Brette.

“You know, the whole Kow thing?” she said. It came out bitchy. It wasn’t Allen’s fault. She took a breath and put away her clipboard. “You know, cows go Moo.”
“Oh,” said Allen. He looked back at the field. “It’s my last name, too,” he said, more to himself than to Brette.

Jake started across the field—pants too baggy, shirt a little untucked in the back. His father, who looked more nervous than Jake, walked next to him.

“Jacob Lakowski is the son of Roy Lakowski. In his spare time, he enjoys being with his family and friends. Jake’s future plans are undecided.”

It was about as cookie-cutter as you could get, but the crowd—the Maxtoners, anyway—dug it. Those who knew how to whistle with their fingers whistled. Some stomped on the bleachers. Moos flew like grenades, Allen joining in, his sleeve-covered hands cupping his mouth.

Most of the Charter crowd, many who sat in the rows in front of Brette, didn’t clap at all, but the volume still surpassed any of the other candidates. Then again, Jake was the only Maxton candidate, so they had to get their money’s worth. Last year, Terri had been the only Maxton candidate, too. She didn’t win, and, unlike with Jake, there wasn’t much pre-coronation buzz about it being a possibility.

Brette hoped he lost. She hoped he didn’t get a single vote. Let Rolland win, if it had to come to that.

Meridith went next. As she neared the bright lights of the rafter, her green dress sparkled more and more. Even from the top row of bleachers, her cleavage showed like the crack of a cavern. And the dress concealed the caverns unevenness perfectly.

“That dress reminds me of guacamole,” Allen said.
Brette laughed—a real one—and ruffled his stubbly hair. “You’re funny,” she said.

Allen craned his head away. “Easy on the ’do,” he said.

Rolland, his grass-stained cast hanging out of his shirtsleeve, was next, his oddly tall father and square-shaped mother next to him. When Linda announced his name, he held his cast high into the air—some sort of macho gesture. To Brette it looked Black Power-ish. The Charter crowd, especially the Charter football players standing in their blue below the bleachers, let out cheers and claps Brette didn’t know they had in them. It still couldn’t match the cheers Jake had received, though. She didn’t know how it was possible. The Maxton fan base was out-numbered two-to-one.

Sarla Batch—Rolland’s stick of a date—was last. She was going to be valedictorian, and was Charter born-and-raised. Something about her the way she walked—stiff, slow—had always annoyed Brette. Like she was never in a hurry. Like time stood still when she was around.

All of them assembled, the boys on one side—Jake the only one not in uniform, Rolland whispering something to him—and the girls on the other, they looked like a picket fence of varying height and color and sparkle.

Linda said, “Let’s give another round of applause for this year’s candidates.”

Applause and moos. Allen’s sounded more like mow.

“Now it’s time for what we’ve all been waiting for,” said Linda. “The crowning of this year’s king and queen.”

More applause. More moos, but not as many—or stifled, at least, by the clapping.
The king always went first, and CJ got to his feet. He had to tuck the football—the football that he would soon pass to the new king—between his legs while he gathered the crutches. He tried to hop to the candidates with the ball tucked between a crutch and his side but it tumbled to the ground. So many people whispered it sounded like an army walking through leaves.

Ruth stood up, grabbed the football, and the two of them walked to the row of possible kings. When they stopped in front of them, Ruth handed CJ the football and returned to her seat.

“I might pee I’m so nervous,” Allen whispered.

Normally the king and queen walked back and forth between the candidates, toying with the crowd. They might walk up and down the row of all ten of them, stop in front of one, and give them a piece of gum—readying them for their winning kiss—before walking on to the next one and doing the same. There would be none of that tonight, Brette knew. There was no love lost. But CJ was at least taking his time with it. He just stood, crutches now on the ground, tossing the football up and down, staring at the left side of the rafter—staring, definitely, at Jake.

“How long does this usually take?” Allen said.

And right as he said it, CJ threw the homecoming king football. CJ hadn’t been a quarterback—that duty pinned on Kurt Tolly the past two years—but he played third base and had an arm. And he was standing about five feet from the rafter.

The ball, spiraling, the white stripes on either side catching the slightest bit of light, flew right into the face of Jake Lakowski.
The crowd, which was already silent, completely disappeared. All Brette could see was Jake, holding his face—his nose—the ball rolling end over end in the grass. CJ picked up one of his crutches and held it like a bat. He didn’t move toward Jake; he stood there, at guard, ready for an attack.

Brette grabbed Allen by his coat sleeve just before he took off.

“I’ll fucking kill him,” Allen said.

But right after, exactly after, the crowd went crazy.

The Maxton section mooed in unison. People yelled, “We did it!” Feet pounded the bleachers so hard they were surely denting. A lot of people were standing—even some of the Charter crowd.

Jake no longer stood on the rafter. He was standing on the grass, to CJ’s right, and he held the football in one hand above his head—a celebratory thing, not unlike what Rolland had done earlier when he announced his name. A tiny line of blood ran down his mug—from nose to mouth to chin. He had won king. The toss at his face had been just that: CJ’s pathetic surrender of the homecoming crown.

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By the time the crowd quieted down and Ruth crowned Meridith queen and Jake wiped the blood from his nose with his sleeve and kissed her and CJ limped away and the players took the field for warm ups and Meridith and Jake walked behind the bleachers to some dark place, her car, maybe, to screw, Brette didn’t feel like staying anymore.

When Allen asked her if, after the game, he could have a ride home, she said, “How about right now?”
He agreed. And they went, even though she had her dress in her car. Why bother going to the dance when there was no one to dance with? No one ever danced anyway.

**Jake**

They’d tried doing it after Coronation, but little kids kept following them around the school grounds, mooing and chanting “Kow for King!”

So they waited for the dance, and, an hour in, stole away to have sex.

No one had really been dancing anyway. About ninety percent sat in folding chairs along the cafeteria wall, the crappy lights from the DJ table catching their faces every now and then, reminding Jake, as he danced, that they were there. So when Meridith pulled him away from the floor down the trophy case hallway to her coat, placing a single condom in his palm like a piece of candy, and then took his hand again and led him past the rows of lockers and into the cleaning-supply stench of Mrs. Vanderoh’s room, he knew he wouldn’t miss much.

He wasn’t stupid. He knew almost all of the wallflowers had had their eyes on him, and that the Charter flowers were seething over him being king, waiting for him to mess up. Meridith wasn’t stupid, either. Which is why she zigzagged them all over the school, making sure no one was following.

When they got to Vanderoh’s, both of them breathing a little hard, Jake slid a desk to the door and propped the edge of its seat under the doorknob, sealing them in. It felt like the first smart, confident step toward what would be a smart, confident losing of his virginity. When Meridith forced her alcohol-sweet tongue into his mouth—she’d snuck into the bathroom with her girlfriends to have some, he was sure—and he,
somehow, with more miracle behind it than a good night’s sleep, found the tiny zipper at
the back of her dress and brought it down smoothly, he thought that was step number
two.

“Who’s a better kisser, me or Brette?” she said.

He said she was, only it took him a while. He’d almost forgotten that story—not
real Brette, the fake Brette he created.

Step number three was when, with their mouths still locked, they walked through
the maze of desks and made it to Vanderoh’s without falling over.

But soon, as Jake had done while they weaved through the desks, he started
taking steps backwards.

The lack of light really made things difficult. For once he missed the turbines. He
could see the whites of Meridith’s eyes and the slight sparkle of her dress, but that was
about it. And after he’d zipped it down by the door, he’d let it hang there around her
waist, assuming his work—at least the upper-body portion—was over. Now he felt the
foam of a bra. It must have been strapless, because it had been invisible in her strapless
dress. And strapless was good. It seemed less complicated to him. Fewer parts. Fewer
ways for him to screw it up.

But he was screwing it up. They were at Vanderoh’s desk, Meridith’s butt
propped on top of it, her kissing his neck and him struggling with the bra like he was
defusing a bomb. But it wasn’t. It was just hooks. Two of them. He knew how simple it
was because, as a sophomore, he’d purchased a bra from JC Penny’s, snuck it home, tied
it around a balled-up blanket, and practiced taking it off. He’d been so awkward back
then. Awkward and creepy—what a creepy thing to do. But he felt it necessary. He needed to be ready. For a real situation. With a real girl.

He should have kept the bra and kept at his training, or at least gotten another one somehow and had a refresher course before the dance.

“Need some help?” Meridith said. He could see her teeth. A smile, which was good. He was starting to see a little better now.

“That’d be great,” he said.

With the effort of a yawn, the bra was on the floor, and the sight of her breasts, dark gray globes in the dark room, barely there—but there, damn it, there—sent a bolt of lightning into his crotch. When he brought his hand to one, it felt like a definite step in the right direction—a forward step—but when she said, “I want you to fuck me,” he stepped backwards. Literally.

“Yeah,” he said. “Take them off.” She reached down and began unlooping her heels.

So she thought he’d stepped back to take his pants off. That was good, but it was wrong. He’d stepped back because, for whatever reason, the “Fuck me,” had scared him. It was demanding and confident. It was experienced, and he was not.

He unbuckled his pants and slid them down. The electric surge underneath them only a fraction of what it once was. His heart was pounding, threatening to rip through his ribcage and fall onto the floor with a wet splat.

Meridith, lying down now, lifted her hips from the desk and pulled her dress the rest of the way down. She was wearing what looked like boxer briefs. That was weird,
but what did he know? Maybe girls always wore underwear like that under dresses. Maybe it was a special occasion thing. Or precautionary, in case a wind caught the dress.

When she brought those down, he couldn’t see much—just the dark boxer things giving way to paler flesh—but he was pretty sure he could smell her. It was strong, but he liked it. He liked her smelling like something other than flowery perfume. Still, even after the scent, even after the sight of his first naked girl and after he’d de-clothed from the waist down and climbed up and hovered over her, he felt no urge. All he could feel was his heartbeat.

His heart pumped and pumped, but the blood wasn’t going where it needed to go. In fact, thought Meridith had begun playing down there, trying to bring him to life, he could barely feel it at all.

“Do you have the condom?” she said.

“Oh, yeah,” Jake said. He got down. His knees hurt from kneeling on the desk. Maybe all he needed was a break. He sat bare-assed on the cold tile and fished in his pockets for the little wrapper. His hands were shaking. He played with his dick a little while he searched, hoping the familiarity of his own hand would help the situation.

He climbed back onto the desk and over Meridith’s warmth, the condom lying on one side of her head, the wrapper shining slightly. Like her dress. And her eyelids.

“Nervous?” she said.

“Of getting caught, I guess,” he said. Though, really, he hadn’t that about that at all.

“Maybe if I use my mouth for a little bit.”
“Okay.”

“Trade me spots,” she said.

He got up and she did, too. When she rolled off the desk, the condom went flying somewhere into the dark.

“Shit,” she said.

She got down in a crouch and looked under the desk. A line of bumps, three of them, then four, then two, ran up middle of her back while she moved. Her spine.

“Help me look,” she said.

He got on his knees and scooted next to her. Under the desk, it was completely dark. While they groped and poked around on the dusty floor, their hands kept touching. Then their thighs rubbed. She was so warm and the floor was so cold. He felt his excitement coming back. He felt his hand, without telling it to do so, move up her ankle, onto calf, then thigh, then the slippery warmth of her. He was very excited now, and her hand, a little grimy from the floor, wrapped around him.

“Now that we can’t find the condom,” she said. She breathed a laugh, then a moan—from the movement of his fingers. “No fair.”

Then the door busted open.
He watched the fifty-cent TV dinner twirl in the microwave. From the living room, CJ yelled at the TV.

“Every fucking time!”

CJ was playing Super Nintendo. During the couple of weeks Ed had hung out at CJ’s, he’d offered to buy him a new system. Ed didn’t know much about video games but knew Super Nintendo was old news. CJ had declined, said this Christmas just get him coal, but next Christmas Ed could buy him a PS2 if he wanted. Laughter followed, and Ed was left smiling and confused. After that Ed only brought up things he was an expert on.

The microwave beeped and Ed removed his little black tray and peeled the cover from it. It smelled like chicken but the look of the meal wasn’t so genuine. The mashed potatoes were like milk. The chicken breast was a tumor. But he was hungry. He grabbed the cleanest fork he could find, washed it, grabbed a Bud, and sat down couch next to CJ.

“Smells good,” CJ said. He kept his eyes on the screen. “Smells like teen spirit.”

He was playing the dinosaur game again: a soldier running through some dank 2D warehouse firing machine guns at raptors and men in chemical hazard suits.

Ed had been coming over often for the past month. Their friendship started on Homecoming night, not on their front lawn during the parade, but later on. That night, around eight, CJ had come home screaming. Ed was used to hearing noises from the
wall, but not from one person. It bothered him. It worried him. When the screaming and
smashing didn’t stop, he walked over and knocked on his neighbor’s door.

They’d been friends ever since.

And why not? They had the same goals: none. They liked the same beer: any.
They were living where they were for the same reason: for people who didn’t care.
Meridith had left CJ in the dust; Ed’s protectorates would never thank him.

CJ fell down a cliff, stood up, flipped the Nintendo off, and limped to the
kitchen. He hadn’t been using his crutches lately, though he probably should. The knee
brace made him walk like Frankenstein.

“Hey, thanks for the beer, by the way,” CJ said. The crack of a tab followed.

“It doesn’t make a lot of sense,” Ed said. “Me buying your old man’s beer, then
giving it to you. But what can you do?”

“You in Maxton tonight?”

Ed chewed his rubbery chicken and swallowed. “Just passing through.”

CJ didn’t ask more and Ed was glad. He had been to Maxton, but truly to just
pass through. Things had been quiet lately. Ed had heard from CJ that the turbine boy
had got an in-school suspension—a long one—for something. Maybe that punishment
was enough to keep people from messing with their house for a while.

CJ came back into the livingroom and plopped down. “You want to play two-
player?” he said.

Ed glanced at the controllers. He wanted to do nothing less.
A knock at the door saved him. CJ and Ed exchanged glances. Ed went to the door and checked the peephole.

“What do you want?” he said.

“To catch up,” said a muffled voice. A male one.

“On what?”

“Can I just come in?”

“I’ve got company.”

“A chick?”

CJ turned to Ed. “It’s Rolland,” he said. “Care if I let him in for sec. It’s cold out.”

“No problem,” Ed so, though really, it was.

Brette

The clouds were really building. Even in the between-flash darkness, Brette could make them out. They were low and shapeless and so close it felt wrong—like someone had pressed a pillow over Maxton, trying to suffocate it. When the lights did flash, the pillow turned so bright-red she looked away from the window. November and snow already moving in. Her beach-bum neighbors wouldn’t know what hit them.

Brette’s stopwatch beeped. With her eyes closed, she snapped under her last rep of hang cleans, dropped the bar to her waist, then the floor.

She’d checked out a book from the library—H-I-I-T for Y-O-U—and had been following the routine each night. HIIT was High Intensity Interval Training, something she read about online in Computers when she should have been finishing her Excel pie
chart. You did a high intensity exercise—like hang cleans, which she was doing now—for 60 seconds, rested for 30, then did it again, five sets each. Eventually, you worked your way down to 60 second intervals with 10 second rests, thought she didn’t see how that was possible. Basically, HIIT was hell.

Her stopwatch beeped. Thirty seconds always went so fast and sixty seconds felt like sixty minutes. She bent over, making sure to keep her back straight, and lifted the bar from the floor to her waist, and—snap—her waist to her chest. She jumped, straightened her legs, feeling the burn in her calves and thighs, and then lowered the bar to her waist again.

One.

Brette needed the hell. The gentle sway of her post-workout high used to be the only thing powerful enough to put her to bed. Now that didn’t even work. She had been sleeping like shit. So she was trying HIIT.

Two.

With the timer, it was natural enough. She’d gotten used to timing herself after the weeks of point counts—though how she got a B+ on that stupid project she’d never know.

Three.

On the group evaluation, the other two—Illene and Quinn, the ones who hadn’t done shit—probably wrote Brette hadn’t done her part.

Four
Or maybe it was Meridith who had lied on the eval. She was no friend of Brette’s. Brette found that out easy enough after the project was over. They hadn’t talked since.

Five

Then again, Meridith hadn’t talked to a lot of people after getting caught naked in Vanderoh’s with Jake. Her parents might have scolded the socialness out of her.

Six.

Brette was okay with Meridith not talking to her. It was better that way. In a moment of casual girl talk, Brette didn’t want to accidentally slip up. She also didn’t want to fess up out of guilt—something she was known to do.

Seven.

She didn’t want anyone to know it was her who’d told Principal Whaley about Jake and Meridith sneaking off during the dance—that she’d dropped Allen off and went back to the dance for that very reason: to stop them.

Eight.

So far, so good, and Brette doubted Whaley would ever out her. Still, the guilt ate away at her sometimes, especially when she saw how defeated Jake looked during his quarantine at the desk in Whaley’s office.

Nine.

He’d kept his popularity. Getting caught bare-assed had only increased his likeability, and he was even more of a novelty now—talks of seeing Kow in the hallway were the talk of lunch tables.
Ten.

If the homecoming vote had come after him getting caught, it would have been a landslide. And it had gotten Brette nowhere. She at least knew why she’d done it. She liked Jake. She knew that now and she knew she wasn’t the only one.

Eleven.

She wished she were normal. She wished she could sleep and socialize and have sex like the rest of her peers. Sleep: it all stemmed from that, though. She knew it. She needed normal sleep to be a normal person.

Twelve.

She needed a miracle. She needed Y2K. She could no longer wait to graduate. With the snow moving in, it seemed like May, with its green grass and blooming flowers, would never be here.

Brette’s stopwatch beeped. Brette stopped mid-rep and set the weight down. She could smell herself and it wasn’t good.

She walked to the bathroom and applied deodorant. No point in stinking up her—there was no way she was showering tonight; she’d get too awake.

Her face looked like the moon—not moon-shaped, but literally, the moon. It was pale and pock-marked—the pimples a product of not showing after her workouts, no doubt; the paleness just part of who she was. Brette flipped the light off. Then back on. She noticed her tricep. It rippled when she reached for the switch. She examined it in the mirror. It was as hard as the moon’s surface, but guys didn’t go for triceps. Even if they did, it was almost winter—not exactly tricep-baring season.
Jake

He saw the headlights glance across his window but paid them no notice. There hadn’t been any funny business in Maxton in over a week. Besides, headlights came and went all the time, but a snowstorm of this variety he’d never witnessed.

He’d seen the storm coming from the TV.

Their new TV.

It wasn’t his father who’d finally bought it, though. Winters and The Jerseys—who had morphed into The Ties, thanks to basketball seasons—had started a fund at school after the word got out about him not having one. He knew it also had to do with him getting in-school suspended for ten weeks—ten whole goddamn weeks—after the Vanderoh’s desk fiasco. They felt bad for him, and, if anything, it only grew his legend. Meridith wasn’t talking to him anymore—they hadn’t talked since, which somehow seemed natural—but that was okay with him. He was just glad she hadn’t spilled the beans on his performance. Lack thereof. For all anyone knew, they’d scored in Vanderoh’s room before Principal Whaley and the janitor busted in. For all anyone knew, he wasn’t a virgin. He was a badass, having sex in a teacher’s room. What did it matter if he was still a virgin if everyone thought otherwise? What did any truth matter if no one believed it?

Best of all, his father wasn’t even upset. “I tried to put in a good word for you,” he’d said. “Emily wanted to be lenient, but that principal wouldn’t have it.”

“Who’s Emily?” Jake said.

“The teacher whose desk you defiled,” he’d said.
Jake stop asking questions after that, and his father gave him no more grief. In fact, he was happier than usual. Being able to watch SportsCenter must have helped.

A lot of people had had chipped in for the TV. Freshman, middle schoolers, even some kids in Allen’s grade. That was the level of Jake’s popularity. Just when he was getting used to it—just when the Kows and Moos and I-got-your-backs weren’t annoying anymore—they went and did something like that. He felt like a helpless orphan, one who everyone pitied.

Still, if it was sitting in his living room, all 42 inches of it, he might as well watch.

It was close to ten and the storm was almost here. He’d gone to the living room to check. Earlier that night the weatherman had said it would happen during “the daily commute.” Jake laughed at that. Commute to where? The barn? Still, it had been a nervous laugh. He saw the mass of whites and pinks crawling, again and again on loop, from the Dakotas and through Nebraska, swirling back slightly on itself as if not to lose power, and he was both a little excited and very scared. Snow. Wind. Cold. He’d seen a few snowfalls in his Florida days—in March of his fifth grade year they had a whopping four inches, though it only survived a couple of days—but this was different. As cold as it had been the past few weeks, he knew it would stick. He knew it would only get colder. So he grabbed an extra blanket from the closet, warmed the heating pad in the microwave, and sealed himself in his room to wait.

When it did finally fall, he was surprised that it came in jagged-looking flakes. He knew it was stupid, but the radar image had been on a loop in his mind as he lay in
bed, and he had gotten used to the idea of an Iowa storm being something blobbish and solid and slightly pink. The slightly pink was actually the only part the radar image came close to capturing. The white of the snow combined the turbine lights to form an almost-pink in those one-second flashes—but really, truthfully, it was red.

And all that red, no longer in the sky—but just outside his window, piling in divots and to the top sides of tree branches and on the imperfections in the garage roof—felt invasive. It felt wrong.

He tried to close his eyes every other second, opening them only when the white snow was falling—the snow from the movies, the snow his old friends had been jealous of when he told them about the move—but his timing was always off.

Around eleven Allen knocked on his door dressed in three layers and sporting their father’s clunky workbooks.

“Let’s go,” he said.

After Jake applied his own layers, which, because the boots were already claimed, included three pairs of socks, they opened the front door and walked into a world more strange than any they’d ever experienced. The shock was maybe even greater than Jake’s first night in Maxton under all those lights.

There was the bright red snow, yes—it was hard to see anything when the lights flashed—but Jake had been ready for that. His sight was already adjusted from watching it fall from the window of his room. His other senses, though, hadn’t been through any breaking-in period.
It smelled like rain, only fresher. It smelled like the purest water on earth. Like Ponce De Leon Springs, the state park they visited on those afternoons after they visited Jake’s grandma’s church. The state park their mother loved more than any other place, as far as Jake could tell.

But the water at Ponce was only 68 degrees, and when you jumped in took at least five seconds for you to take a breath. Your lungs getting used to that cold. Or shrinking, maybe.

The snow, to be snow, had to be under 32 degrees, didn’t it? That’s what Jake guessed, and he expected a feeling twice as cold as the spring at Ponce to knock the breath out of him for at least twice as long. But it didn’t. It was actually the same temp as it had been all week. An annoying, chilly thing, but nothing he hadn’t toughed out before. How was the snow sticking that way? How was it snowing at all?

Of all his sensory overload, sound was the most surprising of all. Mainly because there was none of it. He could hear everything, and there was nothing to hear. Not even the turbines.

They only got a few paces out of the house before Allen broke into a full-out sprint. In the middle of the yard he dove onto his belly and slid like he was stealing third. He came to a stop, lay there for a second—so much like a corpse with all that red around him—and then hopped to his feet.

“Exceptional!” he yelled.

His new word of late.
Ed

Out the large, Good’n’Quick windows, snow was falling, flashing red like blood. It looked like God had cut an artery and was bleeding to death, and Ed found himself wondering if it was self induced or an accident, hoping, whichever it was, if he’d get it to stop.

Ed was not in a good mood. It was hard to be around the Reed boy—he was at the back of the store with CJ, deciding which beer they wanted—but Ed was trying to drink his way into some happiness. Stopping at the ‘Quick had been part of that. They’d needed more.

He stood at the counter. The store was closed and the lights were off. CJ had let them in. He said his dad wouldn’t mind as long as they left the money.

“We’ve got to wait,” CJ said.

“I know,” Reed said. “I’ve been saying all along.”

They were talking about the turbine boy. The older one. They both had a score to settle with him. CJ hadn’t said anything to Ed about his hatred for the boy, but as soon as Rolland entered CJ’s apartment and they’d said their sorrys, that’s all he spoke of. It made Ed feel worthless. CJ and Ed were acquaintances, not friends. Friends talked about their issues and schemed together; acquaintances drank beer and watch television. But Reed and CJ’s scheming also made Ed feel important. Once again he had a purpose. The boys had both had something explosive, almost evil, in their voices as they’d talked about the turbine boy. They were going to try something bad. Now, though, their voices were pleasant.
“It’s good to have you back, man,” Ed heard CJ say.

“I was never gone,” Reed said.

Ed wished he were gone. He wished he hadn’t joined them on this beer run. The only reason he’d agreed was to listen in on their plan—see what he could find out so he could thwart it before it happened.

A stream of light broke into the store. Old Man Good came walking in. Ed could tell it was him from his walk.

“Corey?” he said.

“Shit, hey, Dad,” CJ said. “Sorry, I didn’t think you were in.”

The lights of the store flickered on overhead. “I was in the shop.”

Ed squinted as everything came into view. Good walked to the counter. His limp reminded Ed of CJ’s.

He nodded at Ed. “More beer, ay?”

Ed nodded back. He’d forgotten he’d already been here once today. Days didn’t separate themselves the way they did when he had a job.

Ed had never liked Old Man Good. In his presence he always felt the uncertainty a child might experience around an adult. The smell of him also reminded Ed of childhood—that cold, oily scent, the scent of his father and his father’s friends.

“Hey, dad, what’s with all the extra beer?” CJ said.

“Stocking up for New Years,” Good said.

“I don’t get it.”
“Haven’t you boys heard? End of the world’s coming. The Brick Bar’s throwing an world-ending party.”

Ed and Good looked at each other. Ed didn’t know if he was supposed to smile. When Good did, he did.

CJ and Rolland came to the counter. They each carried two six packs. Rolland carried one in his left hand and one under the crook of his arm. His right hand was in a brace. The muscles had weakened significantly, and he was in rehab now. He was also losing his wrestling matches. His scholarships to tiny school Ed had never heard of were dwindling. Ed had to hear Rolland seethe about it the whole ride to Maxton. He also had to listen to CJ seethe over what the turbine boy did with his ex on that teacher’s desk. Ed hadn’t even known it was bothering CJ. Ed thought CJ was over her—that his knee was his major bone to pick.

“Are you talking about that Y2K shit?” Reed said.

“You kiss your mother with that mouth, Rolland?” Good said.

“Not since I was ten,” Reed said.

The boys sat the beer down on the counter. CJ reached in his pockets. Rolland didn’t.

“Shit,” CJ said. “Ed, can you get it?”

“Sure,” Ed said.

Good put his hand out. “Don’t worry about it. These are on me.” He turned to CJ.

“But you boys be careful tonight.”
The way he said it, so slow like that, and the way CJ and Rolland both looked at Ed, made it all pretty obvious. Good thought Ed was creepy. He was worried about his son. Who could blame him? Especially if he knew what Ed had really done.

“Okay,” CJ said.

“We will,” said Rolland.

Good smiled at Ed, grabbed their beers and handed it to them. “Especially with that uncle of yours patrolling around,” he said. “He’s a real asshole around he holidays, I hear.”

Rolland chuckled. “The fattest asshole in the state.”

“How is old Shiv?”

“He’s fine,” Rolland said.

A silence hung in the air. The all stood there. Good had tried to clear the awkward tension with the Shively joke, but it hadn’t worked.

“You guys want some ice cream?” Good said, taking another crack at it.

“Yeah,” CJ and Rolland both said.

Good walked around the counter and turned on the machine. “Chocolate or vanilla?”

“Chocolate,” they both said.

“What about you, Pittman?” Good said.

“Sure.”

“Chocolate or vanilla?”

“Chocolate,” Ed said.
On their way back through town, CJ and Rolland talked of Old Man Good’s Y2K party.

“It’ll be perfect,” Rolland said.

“How do you know his dad will go?” CJ said.

“Everyone will go.”

CJ nodded. They looked at each other, smiled, as close to love as Ed had seen two teenage boys.

They drove down boarded-up Main. The Main Streets of small-town America were always boarded up. Even the decent-sized towns were, especially the second and third stories of old brick buildings. Old apartments, Ed guessed. Maxton had a few. He wondered the last time someone lived there. The ’50s? Earlier? He could never remember anyone living up there in his hometown, even as a child.

“But what if the world really does end?” CJ said.

Rolland looked back at the road and took a giant bite of his ice cream cone. It hurt Ed’s own teeth to watch him. “Then everybody dies,” Rolland said.

The turned right on Center and headed south. It wasn’t the best route back to Charter, but Ed knew why they were taking it. To the right, the empty co-op lot lay silent and flawless with snow.

“How’s that ice cream, Ed?” CJ said.

“Wonderful,” Ed said. It was true. Even their newfound friendship couldn’t ruin that.
“Hey, Ed,” Rolland said. “You used to be a Turby. You know about electricity. Think there’s any truth to that Y2K stuff?”

It was the first time Rolland had spoken to him directly. Ed took big lick of his cone before he spoke.

“I don’t know,” he said. “All I know is turbines.”

“Well, what about the turbines then?” Rolland said. “Think they’d keep us all up and running?”

“You mean Ames up and running,” CJ said.

“These turbines weren’t designed for that,” Ed said.

“For what?” Rolland said.

“For end-of-times shit.”

“Why?”

“It’s too complex a system. They aren’t old Dutch windmills smashing grains. The whole power structure fails and they won’t be able to boot it back up. Even a small area. The electricity won’t travel through. The turbines would probably stop working pretty soon after.”

“Shit,” CJ said.

“Huh,” Rolland said.

They neared Ed’s old house. The turbine boys were in the front yard, playing in the snow. Rolland brought the wheel to the left.

“Uh oh,” he said. “These road conditions are pretty rough.”
The skidded off the road and onto the Fitch yard. The tires swooshed. The rattled over bumps. Ed held his ice cream cone away from his body.

“I wouldn’t,” Ed said.

CJ laughed.

Rolland rolled down his window, the engine blaring without the barrier, and let out a primal scream. They skidded between two of the Fitch’s pines and headed into Ed’s old yard, thudded over the driveway, and headed for the two boys.

“This isn’t part of the plan,” Ed said. He didn’t know what their plan was, but it certainly was craftier than this.

“Fuck the plan,” Rolland said. He screamed again.

CJ screamed, too.

The little tan one grabbed his brother by the arm and pointed at the truck. The both started to run. They ran toward nothing. Maybe to the tree on the west side of the lawn—a walnut tree, but it was so far away.

“Enough,” Ed said, but with the window down and them both screaming, Ed doubted they heard. The turbine lights were terribly bright and Ed could see the boys growing larger between each flash.

At the last second Ed leaned over the seat and jerked the wheel to the right. The tail whipped around, toward the boys, and Ed thought he had only killed them from a different angle. The engine whined and they fishtailed once, twice. Ed hit the rear window with his head during the first fishtail and clung to the seat for the second. They
slid to a stop and Ed boosted himself up. Out his window, the powdery creases of the walnut tree trunk were only a few inches away.

“What the hell, Ed?” Rolland yelled. It came out muddied. There was blood all over his face, thick and dark. Ed looked closer and between a flash and realized it was chocolate ice cream.

“You almost killed us you fucking lunatic!” Rolland said.

CJ was screaming. “My knee. Fuck. Fuck.”

“You’re the one who almost killed someone,” Ed said. He pointed backward.

“I did not,” Rolland said. “You see, CJ? You see? Once a fucking asshole turbiner, always one.”

“My knee,” CJ said.

“I had to do something,” Ed said.

“I had it under control,” Rolland said. “I knew what I was doing.”

Ed gave up. He just stared at the chocolate-covered ceiling while the red played off it. He knew it wasn’t true. Rolland was just a kid. They both were. Now he understood why Maria never wanted any of her own. It was such a risk. Kids were never in control. They didn’t have it in their brains yet. They never knew the full extent of what they were doing.

**Brette**

She was in love with Mrs. Vanderoh. It had been her own doing—this newfound love.

Brette had asked a simple question during Vanderoh’s lecture on icecaps melting: “Do
you think the ice caps will stop melting if Y2K happens and everything shuts down on
New Years? Like, what would be warming the earth then?”

“In the long run, yes,” Vanderoh said. “But as much CO2 as we’ve got in the
atmosphere already, we won’t see any change in our lifetime. Earth is like an oven—a
really old, gas oven. We preheated it, we’re cooking in it, and if all of a sudden we’re
done, it still takes a long time to cool down.”

Brette wasn’t sure about the whole ice-cap thing—wouldn’t everyone in the
world be talking about it?—but she was sure about her need for Y2K propaganda. Her
sanity depended on it. The HIIT wasn’t working. Last night it had reached its peak. She
had slept zero hours and zero minutes. She lay there, her body so exhausted from the
relentless workout that she could barely move, but she couldn’t shut her mind down. It
didn’t help that just the other night, she’d watched with horror as Rolland had almost
killed Jake with his truck.

Brette planned on asking Vanderoh more Y2K questions, but she didn’t need to.
Vanderoh just kept going.

She talked about the computer systems turning back to zero and malfunctioning.
She talked about city grids and state grids and our reliance on artificial
intelligence.

She talked about the uselessness of coal.

She talked about what to do if the government came for you—Brette’s favorite,
because it consisted of scooping away snow, pealing back frozen sod, and hiding under
your own yard.
Brette knew this would be an ineffective way to hide against the government. She also knew that only crazy people used that term in an obscure way: The government.

Still, she just nodded and smiled. She was in love. What else could she do?

_____

Vanderoh had made Brette feel so calm, so happy, that after she passed out their worksheets on icecaps—stuff they didn’t understand, thanks to the Y2K tangent—Brette fell asleep. She woke to the bell ringing. All of the other students had already packed their bags, anticipating the bell. They left the room quickly, and Brette was alone with Vanderoh and the silence, packing her things.

“Class was really interesting today,” Brette said. She could feel Vanderoh’s eyes on her.

“I’m glad you thought so.”

“Well, see you.”

“One second,” Vanderoh said.

Brette knew what the second was for, even it before Vanderoh handed it to her. It sat like a bomb on Vanderoh’s empty desk. Strange she kept it so empty. No wonder Jake and Meridith had picked this room.

“But—”

“I’m sorry, Brette,” Vanderoh said. “I want to make an exception, but I can’t. Principal Whaley said we have to crack down on sleepers.”

Vanderoh pealed away the top sheet of the Royal Reminder and handed Brette her copy, the top one, blue as her heart.
He was almost free. He’d done his time. He’d faced his demons. He’d sat in Principal Whaley’s office for fifty school days. It was 2:52. So close.

“I’ll take that clock off the wall,” Whaley said.

He sat at his desk, doing exactly what Jake was doing. Nothing. Adults could do that.

Jake stared down at his Government homework.

Back in October, ten weeks of in-school suspension seemed unheard of then and even more ridiculous now that he’d ridden it out. Jake knew it was a message, loud and clear: stop attacking people with bats, stop attacking people with garden hoes, stop getting ass on the teachers’ desks. And he hadn’t done any. In his fifty days of quarantine, he’d had plenty of time to think, and what he thought about most was this: had someone set him up?

Winters. Kurt Tolly. Paul Tolly. Meridith. Brette. Any of his allies or once-allies could have it out for him and he’d never know. He was on the outside, and he had been even more so during his stint in solitary.

Brette especially confused him. She had refused to give him a ride that night, when Allen was missing. She never offered to give them rides to school. She never congratulated him on Homecoming King. He couldn’t remember the last time they’d even talked. They were neighbors, after all. And maybe that was the biggest thing eating at him: after Rolland Reed almost killed Jake and Allen with his truck, he’d looked up and seen her in the window. And when she saw him look, she vanished.
“Well, Jacob,” Whaley said. “Tell you what. You’ve been more than cooperative. Go ahead. Take off a few minutes early.”

Jake looked at the clock. It was 2:58 and a half. So that was his reward. Ninety seconds for ten weeks.

“Thanks,” he said.

The bell rang before he could pack up. Before he could leave, Brette Finch walked into Whaley’s office. Her eyes were full of water. She looked away when she saw Jake.

Whaley didn’t appear surprised to see her. He just held out his hand.

Jake stood in the doorway, bag on his shoulder, the flood of footsteps and voices in the hallway gaining strength.

“I’ve done so well,” he heard Brette say.

Whaley didn’t say anything. He just stared at the piece of paper Brette had handed him.

Jake tried to understand it, but nothing else was said. Whaley just sat there and Brette just stood there. Her shoulders, well muscled, Jake could tell, even under her sweater, bounced as she as she began to cry. Something about it softened his paranoia. She wasn’t pulling any strings. She was innocent. She was out of control. She was a fuck up, just like him.
Brette

She turned around and walked back upstairs, avoiding Terri’s shoe scuffs. Jake followed.
When she turned on the curve of the banister she could see him eyeing her dad on the recliner.

The scent of her sweat was noticeable as she entered the room. She quickly sniffed her armpits but only smelled deodorant. The sweat smell must have soaked into Terri’s walls. They were Brette’s walls now anyway. She had made it her own: the Kerry Wood poster was down, the waterbed was plugged in, and a small mirror leaned against the wall just below the window sill so she could watch her feet when she did squats and cleans. She had noticed her right foot pigeon ed in a little, something H-I-I-T for Y-O-U frowned upon but claimed was fixable. She watched Jake take it all in. His nostrils flared a few times, probably over the smell.

“So what’s up?” Brette said. It sounded too friendly. She picked up some dumbbells, faced the window, and started curling. It wasn’t a bicep night, but she wanted to look busy, not vulnerable.

“I need to talk to you about something.”

Brette waited. She could see him in the mirror, his poofy coat so out of place next to her own tank and shorts. It was like they were in different worlds or times.

“Are you okay?” Jake said.

Brette kept lifting. Jake’s gaze went up and down the length of her body. When their eyes met in the mirror, Jake looked away and sat down on the bench.
Brette dropped the weights. She didn’t want to bend over and set them down like she usually did. “I’m fine,” she said, still facing the window, the mirror.

“What happened today?” Jake said.

“What do you mean?”

“You know, in the office. What’d you do?”

“Look, we haven’t talked in weeks. You can’t just start up asking me about my issues.”

Jake lay down on the bench and sighed. “I’ve been in the office for weeks. I haven’t talked to anybody.”

Brette walked to her bed and sat on the edge. It felt warm, too warm. She slid so she was sitting on the wooden frame.

“How was it?” she said. “That was a lot of time you got.”

“Whaley never talked. He was there all day, every day, and he never said a word. Just watched.”

“That’s why everyone hates *Royal Reminders* so much,” Brette said. “At least you got some.”

“Some what?”

“You know. From Meridith.”

Jake raised an eyebrow. Brette bit her tongue.

“Sorry,” she said.

Jake sighed again and brought his hands up onto the barbell. He looked at the weights on either side. “How much is this anyway?”
“Only seventy-five,” Brette said. She didn’t like the way the only sounded but it was too late.

Jake lifted it off its hinges and brought it down too fast. It bounced off his coat and back up again. He did seven more with shaky form. Brette could do fifteen reps of seventy-five—maybe twenty if she hadn’t done any other lifts before. She helped Jake rack it and sat back down on the bed.

“Rolland’s going to want to fight you sometime, you know,” Brette said.

“I know,” Jake said.

“You should get ready for it. Get bigger. Start eating right.”

“What do you know about what I eat?”

“Look how skinny you are.”

“I’m not that skinny.”

“I can bring you over some supper sometime.”

“That’s okay.”

“You guys want to have Thanksgiving with us?”

“That’d be awkward.”

“Is your dad cooking dinner?”

“How should I know?”

“You need to eat. You’re growing.”

“Who are you, my mom?”

“I’m just trying to help.”
Jake ran his hands along the barbell again. Brette hoped he wasn’t going to go for another set, especially that soon after. He didn’t. Instead he brought his hands off the bar, rested them on his stomach, and said, “What’s it like to have a mom?”

Brette was so taken aback by the question that she grabbed the bed frame like she might fall, chipping one of her barely-there nails.

After awhile she said, “I’m not the best person to ask.”

Brette was suddenly both very tired and very aware. She could sink back into the bed and fall asleep right now. The awareness of where she was and who she was with would be the only thing that might stop her. A boy was in her room but she felt no excitement. It felt like she was talking to some stranger in a storage shed, not a boy, alone, next to the bed she slept in.

Jake sat up and put his hands on his knees. “So are you going to tell me what was wrong today or not?”

What really happened, it turned out, was nothing. Brette stayed after school, cried, and after her detention Whaley assured her that she would still graduate. She’d stayed out of trouble all year, which, he’d said, was especially impressive given this year’s epidemic of trouble.

Still, Vanderoh had really tried to screw her. Or at least had zero empathy. Brette wished she would have told on Vanderoh last year, when she saw the AOL messenger screen up, she and her boyfriend typing away. She wished there was a way to go back.

“Nothing happened,” Brette said. “I thought I was screwed, but it turns out I wasn’t.”
“Fine,” Jake said. “I’m going to be honest with you. I’ll show you how it’s done.”

Brette rolled her eyes.

Jake stared at the floor, his eyes moving back and forth like he was reading. Finally he let out of a breath.

“I’m a sham,” he said.


He lifted the bar and pumped out twelve solid reps. When he racked the weight, Brette said, “Why are you telling me this?”

Jake sat up, breathing heavy. “I don’t know,” he said. “I saw you in the office today and, I don’t know. Maybe because you’re the only one who doesn’t praise me like I’m some kind of god.”

“Or king.”

Jake raised his eyebrow.

“So you really didn’t do any of that?” Brette said.

“No,” Jake said. “I swear.”

“Then who did?”

“That’s what I wanted to ask you,” he said. He scooted to the very edge of the bench. Their faces were a few feet away—not close, but closer than Brette was used to. “Because, if you think about it, it’s really fucking scary.”
On Thanksgiving morning, he woke to rain pattering his window, bacon frying in the kitchen, and his father sitting at the edge of his bed.

“Were you watching me sleep?”

“Good morning.”

“Is that breakfast?”

“The Fitches are cooking dinner,” his father said. “So I owe you breakfast.”

Jake had talked to Brette for almost an hour in her room, mostly about who might have attacked Rolland and Bud Clevenger and CJ, but about trivial things, too. Thanksgiving was one of them. She had invited them again, insisting, and when Jake arrived home and asked his father if he would want to—a throwaway question, almost, in Jake’s eyes—his father surprised him. He said yes. Jake was nervous to go, though he didn’t know why. Terri wasn’t even going to be there. She wouldn’t be home until Christmas.

Jake sat up and stretched his arms above his head. His chest was sore—from bench press. “Since when do you cook breakfast?” he said.

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about,” his father said.

“Breakfast?”

“There’s someone in the kitchen that I want you to meet, but first I need to explain something.”

Jake had to pee. He probably had had to all night, but the comment magnified it.

*Someone in the kitchen.*
“What?” Jake said.

His father took a breath and began. He’d met a woman. He’d been talking to this woman on the phone. They’d also gone on dates—late-night dates, when he’d claimed to be working. He was sorry about the lying but didn’t know how Jake would take it. Her name was Emily and she was great. He had planned on breaking the news to Jake that night—that he was inviting her to their own Thanksgiving dinner, and she was supplying the food—but the Fitch invitation seemed right to him. He didn’t want Emily doing all that work herself. She’d brought pumpkin pie. It was cooling on their coffee table.

She was also in the kitchen, making them breakfast.

After the story was over Jake lay down and stared the ceiling. The rain was picking up. It sounded small and solid, like a truck dumping sand on their house.

“You better tell Allen,” Jake said.

“I’m sorry to spring this all on you like this.”

“Better tell Allen quick.”

“Jake, I’m sorry. You’ll like her.”

“Tell Allen,” Jake said.

Jake’s father patted his foot through the blankets and stood. He stopped in the doorway and ran his thumb alone the trim. “Just give her a chance,” he said.

Jake was about to say, “Tell Allen,” again, but heavy footsteps stopped him. It was too late.

“There’s someone in our house!” Allen yelled, his voice and footsteps growing louder as he ran down the hall. “Someone’s in our house!”
They walked to the kitchen together. Jake rested his hand on Allen’s shoulder. They had explained things to him in Jake’s room but Jake wasn’t sure he took it all in. His chest still rose and fall in quick bursts, the initial adrenaline of an intruder in their house still inside him.

There she was. Emily. She had her back turned to them, brownish orange hair waving slightly and she went from the stove to the microwave and back to the stove. Her movements were stressed—like maybe she didn’t cook breakfast all that often. At least she was giving it a try. It was more than their father could say. And it smelled good. So good.

“Boys, this is Emily,” their father said, and she turned around.

“Hi,” she said. She walked to them and extended a hand, little sparkles of grease on her wrist. Jake extended his own hand and they shook. He looked over her shoulder instead of at her face—eyeing the bacon and eggs, wondering what was in the microwave.

“You’re the high school science teacher,” Allen said.

Jake, Allen, their father, and Mrs. Vanderoh tromped through the crunchy snow and freezing rain to the Fitches in silence. It was impossible to look anywhere but down because the rain stung your face, so that’s where Jake looked. He put his feet inside his father’s bulky footprints while he walked. Allen matched Vanderoh’s two-pronged-healed ones.
So his father had been talking to Vanderoh. For months? All those nights on the phone? All those late night dates? It was a lot of time to fill up. How could they not have talked about Jake and Meridith on Vanderoh’s desk? Jake’s naked body. He didn’t want his father talking about it. It was weird.

His father went up the stairs to the sliding glass door—a door Jake had never been through. Jake knew it wasn’t a good move. It went into the kitchen, a place surely busy before the meal. But he wasn’t about to help his father, who set them up for a weird-ass dinner. A good breakfast, too, but that wouldn’t make up for the pain they were about to endure.

Mrs. Fitch sat at the kitchen table, folding napkins. Jake’s father knocked and she didn’t move. It wasn’t a hard knock, but hard enough. The drizzle bounced off his father’s coat and stuck to the hair on the back of his neck. He knocked twice more before Brette came walking through the kitchen and let them in.

“Mrs. Vanderoh?” she said.

“Happy Thanksgiving,” Vanderoh said.

“I hope it’s okay if we brought an extra guest,” Jake’s father said.

Vanderoh walked to the kitchen table, laid her burnt-crust pumpkin pie down, and laid a hand on Mrs. Fitch’s shoulder. “Hi, Denise.”

Mrs. Fitch smiled. “Emily, are you joining us?”

It was the first time Jake had heard Mrs. Fitch speak. It was one of the first times he’d seen her, too. Wheat-blonde hair, large chested, it was easy to see her in her oldest daughter.
“If you have enough food,” Vanderoh said.

“Of course,” Mrs. Finch said.

Brette shot panicked eyes at Jake. She looked different. She was wearing makeup, her gray eyes lined in gray-brown, her cheeks a soft pink. A brown turtle-neck t-shirt clung to her muscled torso. A khaki skirt, knee-length gave her this adult look, as did the heals. She was taller than Jake in them. She had on lipgloss and earrings. Jake felt like a little boy in his jeans and green sweater but he didn’t dwell on that. There was too much going on with Brette. She looked nothing like herself and Jake couldn’t stop staring.

Brette watched Vanderoh and her mother exchange words and then looked at Jake again. Her look was even more panicked. He liked it. It was like they had their own secret language. He mouthed, “Fucking awkward.”

She pressed her shiny lips together and raised her eyebrows. Then she lowered them and looked at Vanderoh and Jake’s father. “Let me take your coats,” she said.

In the livingroom, Mr. Fitch was already sitting at the head of the table. It was a table Jake had never seen before, dark brown and oval with one of those sliding middle pieces.

“Hi,” Jake’s father said. They shook hands but Mr. Fitch didn’t stand up. Jake had seen the men exchange a few conversations, but that was earlier in the year.

“Hi, Brian,” Vanderoh said. They shook also.

Jake looked for Brette but she was in the kitchen. He nudged Allen’s shoulder.

“Hungry?”
Allen ignored him and pulled out a chair and sat down. When Jake’s father pulled out the chair next to Allen for Vanderoh, Allen asked where the bathroom was.

He wasn’t gone long at all, and when he came back he sat on the other side of the table.

**Brette**

She waited until everyone had plated their food and topics like the freezing rain and Christmas had fizzled out before she mentioned the turbines.

Sure she felt sorry for the Lakowskis. Sure she wanted them to have a good meal. Sure she liked Jake. But the biggest reason for the invite—or at least the one she’d realized was the biggest now—was her obsession with the turbines and Mr. Lakowski’s knowledge of them. She needed to know. If the whole country shut down, would they follow suit?

After Brette was done with her question—it took a lot more time than she thought it would—Mr. Lakowski finished chewing his stuffing, cleared his throat, and said, “Maybe.”

He took another bite. So did everyone else. Through the gunk of her mascara, Brette could see Jake staring at her out of the corner of her eye. They’d had to bring in the kitchen table—they hadn’t planned on seven—and push it next to the oval one. Jake sat on one side of it, next to Brette, and Allen sat across from him. Brette faked an itch on her face, turning her head toward Jake. Jake’s gaze darted to his plate. He’d been staring at her since he’d got here. Typical: he suddenly found her attractive. All guys were the same. You could have any you wanted. All it took was some decoration.
Brette reorganized her turkey slices and then tried again.

“I heard it had something to do with the underground wiring,” she said. “Like, if all the power grids shut down, the electricity wouldn’t make it anywhere. Nothing would pull it through.”

“It’s possible,” Mr. Lakowski said. “But the chances of every power grid in the U.S. going down are slim. One in a million. A computer doesn’t run all of them.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Vanderoh said. She nudged her elbow into Mr. Lakowski. “We talked about this. We’re all reliant on machines. It happened on a smaller scale with Microsoft Excel. That’s what they thought, too. They had to reprogram everything.”

“What does that even mean?” Allen said. Brette had forgotten he was there. He’d loaded his plate with a pile of mashed potatoes, a pile of stuffing, and a turkey-slice bridge. From the looks of it, he hadn’t taken a bite.

“What does what mean, Al?” said Vanderoh.

“My name’s Allen,” he said.

“Do you know about the computer crisis?” Vanderoh said.

“My name’s Allen,” he said.

“Let’s not start, Em,” said Mr. Lakowski.

Jake frowned and shook his head slightly. Brette didn’t blame him. It must have been strange hearing your dad call some new woman a nickname. Vanderoh wasn’t completely novel, though. Jake knew her a little—or knew her desk, at least.
“But say it did,” Brette said. “Say somehow, someway, the power went out. Completely blackout. Would the turbines keep us running? Well, keep Ames running? Would someone go out and try to re-wire them?”

“I doubt it,” Mr. Lakowski said.

“It’s very likely the computers will falter,” Vanderoh said. “60 Minutes did a really good segment on it, scientifically backed and everything.”

“But that’s a news program,” Mr. Lakowski said. “They need to draw you in somehow.”

“You know about big machines. You don’t know about tiny ones. Computer chips.”

“And you do?”

“What about the wind brakes?” Brette said.

“What about them?”

“You know, the things that keep the blades from spinning too fast. Do those need extra electricity? Say the power goes out everywhere. Will the brakes fail?”

“Possibly.”

“And then if they did, on the first windy day, wouldn’t the turbines spin too fast and explode or something?”

“I just don’t see it happening.”

“The brakes failing or Y2K?”

“Either.”
“Just use your imagination,” Vanderoh said. She cut a slice of turkey, forked it, and looked at Brette. “It’s so hard for men to use their imagination.”

“That’s sexist,” Allen said.

“Can we just drop it?” Jake said.

“But the wind brakes—”

“The brakes are powered by the turbine,” Mr. Lakowski said.

“So, not everything is, though?” Brette said.

“That’s enough,” Brette’s dad said. He slapped the table. Even the adults bowed their heads like children.

They clinked their silverware against their plates for a while, got seconds, refilled their small water glasses, shoveled small bits of food into their mouths like machines. No one said much. The rain picked up. It didn’t sound like sleet anymore. Either way, it would freeze by tonight.

“Who’s ready for pie?” Vanderoh said, the same cheery voice she used when she said, _Put your notes away_, before a test, or _Brette, could you come here for a second_, before a Royal Reminder.

“I’m stuffed,” said Allen. His food bridge had gone untouched. It was still intact—a little sunken, but intact.

“I’d love a piece,” Mr. Lakowski said. “Jake?”

“Sure.”

“Who else?”
No one said anything. They were still too solemn—or embarrassed, or scared—from the table smack.

“I wish Terri was here,” Brette’s dad said, making small tracks with his fork in what was left of his potatoes. His voice was soft. “It sure is quiet without her.”

Brette’s mom put a hand on his hand. “Be grateful for who is,” she said. She flicked her eyes at Brette and back at him, then she raised her glass. “And for all the new friends at our table.”

“It’s just not the same,” he said again.

Mr. Lakowski and Mrs. Vanderoh brought their glasses up and clinked with Brette’s mom’s. No one else did.

After taking a sip, Vanderoh said, “I’ll get the pie.”

“I got it,” said Brette.

When she returned, a feeling of claustrophobia took hold of her. The pie didn’t seem appetizing before and really didn’t now. She felt too warm. Her neck itched and she folded the turtleneck down. The table seemed so small and her mom’s elbow was practically in Brette’s lap as she sliced the pie.

Brette realized that the fucked-up family scene was part of her claustrophobia, but there was also a physical reason. Jake had scooted his chair closer. She realized when he held his plate over the center of the table and her mom dished him a slice of pie. He was sitting uncomfortably close. He got his pie, put some Cool Whip on it, but didn’t take a bite. Instead he stared at it. His eyes moved over it like he was reading a book. Then he looked at Brette, sadness and something else—understanding?—lodged deep
inside his brown eyes. Under the table, but visible to Brette, he held out his hand, palm up. Brette looked away but put her hand on top. Her heart was sad and racing at once. Jake’s hand was colder than hers, but the cold was reassuring somehow.

Brette’s dad and mom ate and Allen pouted and Mr. Pittman and Mrs. Vanderoh praised the pie and the rain kept slapping the windows and Brette kept her hand there. After a while they laced fingers. Brette squeezed hard at times, let up others, but she never let go.

**Ed**

The day after Thanksgiving he and CJ waited for the five o’clock news. CJ had seen a preview for it earlier in the day, the main story a woman stabbing another woman in a Des Moines Target over the last Furby. He’d asked Ed over to watch. They sat on the couch, a waist-high Christmas tree already up and sparkling in the corner.

“You decorate that yourself?” Ed said.

“The lights are attached,” CJ said.

Ed hated Christmas. It reminded him of how alone he was. All around Charter children giggled with excited and adults sighed with stress and the Christmas lights hung from the roofs of houses like gobs of bloody spit. He remembered his own attempt at Christmas lights when he lived in Maxton. That last year especially, after the incident with the Reed girl, he’d gone to a lot of effort, hoping the townsfolk would take his Christmas spirit as a token of his American ideals and accept him and Maria. All the workers were gone, after all. The town was back to normal, but Ed and Maria weren’t normal—not to them anyway. People were always looking for someone to blame.
Ed’s Christmas lights came down a week before Christmas, stripped off his roof and windows from the back of some high schooler’s bumper. The gutter on the west side of the house went with them.

“Only a few more minutes,” CJ said.

It was almost five. Since a little after one, they’d been drinking, waiting for the news story.

“What the hell does it do, anyway?” Ed said.

“What does what do?”

“The Furby or whatever.”

“I don’t know. Just sits there. Like you.”

“I do more than that,” Ed said. He finished his beer, crunched the can, and tossed it on the floor. “See?”

CJ laughed. “I missed you, you old bastard.”

Ed hadn’t been invited to CJ’s in a while, and knew it had to do with Rolland and the two boys’ rekindled friendship. He’d been stewing about it, bitter, but the bitter taste of cheap beer was softening him.

“I’m going to get another,” Ed said. He stood up, surprised at his own lack of balance. “You want one?”

CJ shook his can. It was full. “What the hell,” he said. “For future reference.”

The kitchen tile stung Ed’s feet, even through his socks. He’d noticed the cold as soon as he got inside the apartment, but the alcohol had made him forget. He wondered
if CJ had paid his heat bill. He grabbed two beers checked the thermostat by the fridge. It was set at 58.

“What’s with temp in here? You trying to save up for Christmas?”

“Yeah,” CJ said.

Ed walked back to the livingroom and tossed CJ the beer. “For what? One of those Furbies? Going to stab someone?”

“Promise not to laugh?”

Ed sat down and cracked his beer. “No.”

“It’s for Y2K. It’s dumb, I know, but I figure if all the electricity goes out, we’ll be down to basically no heat.”

“So?”

“So I’m trying to get used to that. Adapt to it. I’ve been lowering the heat a couple of degrees a night.”

Ed looked at CJ, long and hard. He was serious.

Someone pounded on the front door. Ed jumped. He told CJ he’d get it but CJ insisted on answering. He grabbed his crutch and hobbled to the door. They hadn’t had to operate again, which was good, but a lot of his progress had backtracked. Ed still felt bad about that. He also felt angry at the Reed boy for causing it in the first place.

And at the door, who else but Reed himself. Ed felt trapped.

“I thought you weren’t getting back until tomorrow,” CJ said.

“We were supposed to late tonight, but we came home early. Beat the storm.”

Someone stepped into the doorway behind Rolland. He was large and familiar.
“Bud fucking Clevenger,” CJ said. “That nose is looking good.”

That nose. Ed recognized him now. The first guy he’d hit with the bat. The guy who’d checked the bush. He’d seen Ed’s face. It was dark, the sky was flashing, but he’d seen it. He’d been the only one. He’d also got his senses knocked out of him. Ed hoped that night remained hazy. The kid’s own face was flat, stemming not from the baseball bat, but from his own ugly genetics. The nose, though: that was a different story. Ed could tell the bridge of it used be far better centered.

He and Ed made contact. Ed knew he should look away, but the beer in him wouldn’t allow it.

“How,” Ed said.

“Hey.”

“That’s Ed,” CJ said. “He’s cool.”

“He’s okay,” Rolland said, “but I think he better leave if we’re going to catch up.”

Ed knew from the way Rolland said catch up that it was more than that. They were planning something.

CJ nodded, took a sip of beer. “Let’s just wait for the news,” he said. “Someone got stabbed over a Furby.”

“I heard about that,” the big guy said. He took his eyes off Ed and laid down on the floor. Ed started breathing again.

Rolland sat next to CJ and Ed on the couch. When the news came on, CJ said, “Here we go,” and the news didn’t waste any time. It was their first story.
Ed wasn’t sure what a Furby even looked, and when they flashed a picture of it on the screen for a second he figured it for a striped, poorly crafted monkey. The report showed several eye-witness interviews and a description of the maddening shopping that day. Finally it got to the good stuff: the security camera footage. It didn’t last long. A few seconds at best. Two people went for a box on a shelf. A large woman pushed a thin woman. The thin woman stabbed the large woman again and again, sometimes in the face. It looked like she was punching, as hard as she swung her fist.

After it was over, Rolland stood up and stretched.

“Well, I’m going to grab a beer. Clev, you want one?”

“Just one,” the big guy said. “I haven’t drank in a while.”

Rolland nodded and walked toward the kitchen. “Ed, it was good seeing you,” he said.

CJ nodded. “Yeah, Ed. Take it easy, man.”

Ed felt alone and angry and rejected. He felt like picking the Christmas tree up and smashing the TV with it and then picking the TV up and smashing Rolland Reed.

And he needed to stick around. These boys—all the boys he’d hurt over the past months—had it in for the turbine family. They blamed the oldest son. They were going to do something, and Ed needed to know what.

The Clev kid rolled on his other side, his crooked nose pointing at Ed like a finger. “Nice to meet you,” he said. He kept staring. He had a look of someone doing a math problem. Ed hoped that was his brain-scrambled look, not his realization one.
Ed stood, said, “You, too,” and left. He could always involve himself through the walls. They were thin enough.

**Jake**

The basement was as cold as a meat locker but Brette’s skin was warm. She lay on top of Jake, her hard bare stomach pressed against his as they kissed. Jake was only in his boxers, she in her bra and underwear, which were black, or maybe blue. It was hard to tell. It was dark in the basement and they had a blanket sealed around their bodies.

In the corner, the screen saver of the Fitch’s computer cast red shadows on the wall while the Chili Peppers’ sang about drugs and love and losing from the speakers. At first the screen saver disoriented him. It was an endless loop of a brick-wall maze, someone searching to get to the end and never getting there. Sometimes the screen would flip, the ceiling become the floor, and the entire wall of basement would spin, making him dizzy. Now, he liked it. He liked the wall displaying how he felt.

He was also beginning to like the Red Hot Chili Peppers. It’d been an East vs. West thing in Florida, or something, because the cool kids always talked shit about them. Jake had never even given them a listen. They weren’t Blink, but they made good make-out music. Jake couldn’t imagine making out to Blink-182 at all.

They’d been making out a lot lately. Almost everyday after school since Thanksgiving break. The first time Jake tried to take it further Brette grabbed his wrist and told him she wasn’t her sister. He didn’t try again after that, not because he felt bad about trying to take it further, but because he thought of her sister for the next fifteen minutes of their make-out session. Jake liked Brette. A lot. She didn’t deserve those
daydreams. And she knew about them. He’d seen the way she looked at him when he asked what day Terri was coming home—the 20th—and even before that he assumed she knew. Why else were they in the basement instead of her sister’s old room?

But maybe she did have Terri’s inhibition—just a slower-cooked version of it. They were in their underwear, after all, and he could feel her—and knew she could feel him—through their respective layers of thin fabric. Jake moved his hand over Brette’s back. He wondered if she wanted him to take the bra off. He wanted to but the reward didn’t outweigh the risks. He could fail. She could stop him and say the sister thing again. She could let him and he wouldn’t fail and then things would go further and he might fail or in nine months they could have a baby.

To hell with it. He was unhooking the bra.

Brette’s kisses tamed when his hands started in on the hooks but she didn’t protest. She even arched her back a little. To make it easier, Jake guessed. The brick-wall pattern on the basement wall flipped. The ceiling was now the floor.

Those damn hooks. They weren’t budging. They clung to one another like magnets. It wasn’t a problem a senior in high school should be having. He kept trying, but less and less for the purpose of actually getting the bra off. He was waiting for Brette to do what Meridith did. Ask if he needed help and then take the damn thing off for him.

But Brette didn’t offer help. They stopped kissing. Her breathing was just as shallow as Jake’s. Anthony Kiedis sang out long, throaty notes about being as lonely as the birds while Jake struggled.
Brette’s stopwatch went off. Normally it was the sound of doom. It meant it was 5:15 and her parents would be home soon. Today, Jake would take it. The four shrill beeps were wonderful. Better than music.

Brette slid off and pulled the chain to the single bulb, drowning out the purple walls. Jake watched her put her jeans and shirt on. Her back muscles rippled like TV static.

“Let’s go,” she said. She hit the space bar on the computer and the music and screen saver disappeared. Jake dressed, and they went upstairs, into the heat.

Jake followed Brette into the kitchen. She poured some instant oatmeal into a bowl and filled it with water and stuck it in the microwave. Her pre-workout meal, he knew. Normally they talked for a few minutes after their basement sessions but this time they only listened to the microwave breathe. Brette always wanted Jake gone before her parents got there, though once, when he hadn’t left in time, they didn’t seem bothered by his presence at all.

Jake sat down at the kitchen table. There was a groove mark on the tablecloth—a long white line with only the slightest markings of plaid still there. Jake ran his finger across it.

“What are you doing?” Brette said.

“Nothing.”

The microwave beeped. Brette sliced a banana into her oatmeal and sat across from Jake. She chewed with only the right side of her mouth. Jake normally found it adorable but today it looked vicious—like a cavewoman or something.
“I like your Christmas tree,” Jake said. He was desperate. He wanted to leave on a good note—because of the bra mishap. “Nice and simple.”

Brette mixed her oatmeal around and spoke with her mouth full. “It’s like most here. No one puts lights up. There are enough lights blinking without it.”

“I wondered what the deal was. No one around here has any Christmas shit.”

“Yeah.”

“For once my dad’s uselessness comes in handy.”

“Huh?”

“He never puts up lights.”

“You better go soon,” Brette said. She took another bite. “They’ll be home anytime.”

“Come to the game with me tonight,” Jake said. The girls team was young and could scrap out a win here or there, but the boys team, lead by Andy Winters’ jumper and Kurt’s length in the middle of their 2-3 zone, was unbeaten.

“I’ve seen enough sports for one life,” Brette said.

“Are your parents going? I saw them there last Friday.”

“They’re weird. I hate when people don’t have kids playing but go to games. It’s pedophilic.”

“It’s not that weird,” Jake said. “My dad is way weirder.”

“My dad yelled at us on Thanksgiving,” Brette said. “He slapped the table and yelled at your dad. And at our science teacher.”

“My dad brought our science teacher to Thanksgiving.”
“She’s pretty weird herself,” Brette said.

“Everything’s weird,” Jake said. “I don’t know how you’ve lived here so long and aren’t.”

“Psh.”

“Seriously. You’re like, the most normal person here.”


**Brette**

Terri wrapped her arms around Brette in the doorway. When she pulled back, she looked Brette up and down. “Damn, sis, you’re huge!”

Brette understood this to be a compliment. More than ever, she understood she was not normal, and that neither was Terri.

“You are!” Brette said.

It was true. Terri had gotten even larger. Her neck, the one thing that remained dainty, had even started to widen. Each time the turbines flashed, Brette could see a vein on the right side of her sister’s neck. It ran from ear to collarbone and wasn’t ugly, though on Brette, it would have been.

“So you have been hitting my weights,” Terri said. “What else? What’s new?”

Brette shrugged, aware of her own traps, the way they lifted her shoulders with ease. “Nothing much,” she said.

It was a lie. A lot had changed—especially the past couple of weeks. She’d gone to third base. Twice.
“Move it, movie it,” their dad said. He pushed passed Terri with two large UCLA duffle strapped around each shoulder. He had been upbeat all week, and when he’d left for the airport in the Des Moines, he gave Brette a kiss on the forehead.

“Ter-bear!” their mom said. She came running from the kitchen. She was making Terri’s favorite meal, spaghetti with butter—which Brette disliked but could tolerate—and smelled of it. She hugged Terri; Terri hugged back, lifting her a little.

“Whoa,” their mom said. She laughed like she was seventeen.

“Where do you want these?” their dad said. He was talking about the duffles.

“My room,” Terri said. “But I can get them.”

“No, no,” their dad said. He started up the steps.

“You’re jetlagged,” their mom said. “You rest.”

“Actually, it’s, like, 3 o’clock in L.A. I’ll probably be up all night.”

Brette had never heard Terri say L.A. before. It sounded elitist.

“Where am I supposed to sleep?” Brette said. “My stuff’s up there.”

“Your old room,” their mom said.

Brette knew she wouldn’t sleep in the basement. She’d done things down there—grown-up things—and she thought about them enough when she tried to sleep upstairs. She’d given her first blowjob, which she couldn’t say she really enjoyed it. But Jake had. And it wasn’t so much the taste as the idea of the taste. She could overcome it—a mental thing, like overcoming the buttered noodles.
Their mom took Terri by the hand and dragged her into the kitchen. “Tell me about L.A.,” she said. “The City of Angels. Tell me all about it. Did your friends go back home for Christmas?”

Terri started talking about some girl named Chloe and they disappeared around the corner.

Brette’s dad came back downstairs. He held his hands up, frowning, confused.

“What?” Brette said.

“What do you mean, what?” he said. He walked past her, glaring, and shut the door. A cold breeze flew through the house. “This isn’t L.A.”

**Jake**

This time when he woke Allen was sitting on his bed. “I’ve got good news and bad,” he said.

Jake had a hard on. He’d been dreaming about Brette. He rolled over, facing away from his brother. “Go away.”

“The good news is there are a shit-ton of presents under the tree.”

“Language,” Jake said.

“There’s tons of presents.”

“Well, it’s Christmas,” Jake said.

“But there’s a lot. More than usual.”

Jake guessed it was an apology of sorts—their father sorry for the sudden invasion of Mrs. Vanderoh in their life. She’d been coming over a lot lately, and Jake
had been going to Brette’s. Allen had had to face it alone, though he had gone to the
Tollys a few times to ride snowmobiles.

“So what’s the bad news?” Jake said.

“Guess.”

“No.”

“Come on. It’s pretty easy.”

“Just tell me.”

“Emily’s here.”

Jake’s erection had been dying but now it completely vanished. He rolled over.

“It’s Vanderoh,” he said.

“Vanderoh’s here,” said Allen.

Jake got a pair of snow pants, a winter coat, a pair of boots, and two sweaters. Allen got
the same, minus the sweaters and plus a Furby. The thing was grey and blacked striped
with a white belly and when he put the batteries in it blinked and rocked and talked like
a human toddler.

“Me Cocoa. Me like you.”

“That’s creepy,” Jake said. He watched Allen play with it from the chair. His
father and Vanderoh sat on the loveseat, drinking coffee out of the mugs they’d gifted
each other.

“It’s awesome,” Allen said. “I hear you can teach them different languages.” He
tipped it upside down and the Furby said, “Whoa!”
“I highly doubt that,” Jake said.

“It’s pretty technological,” Vanderoh said. “You’d be surprised.”

Jake stood up and went to the window. The snow had started to melt the past few days. Brown grass and mud peaked through in patches. “Only a few more days until all that technology fails,” Jake said.

“Jake,” his father said.

“That’s right, Jake,” Vanderoh said.

Jake’s father had long grown tired of hearing about Y2K. Jake brought it up whenever he felt unhappy with the Vanderoh situation, which was often.

“Yes,” Jake’s father said. “It’s right all right.”

“It is,” Vanderoh said.

“Oh, I know.”

“He’s such a sour puss,” Vanderoh said. “I don’t know how you boys put up with that for so many years.”

Allen fed the Furby until it burped. Outside, a crow shat purple down the side of their father’s work van.


Jake sat back down on the chair. His father was gone, his coffee mug steaming on the table. “It said its name was Cocoa,” Jake said. “And I’m pretty sure Cocoa’s a girl’s name.”

“Is not,” Allen said.
Jake feared moments like these. Allen in his own world. His father off somewhere, probably pissing. It was just him and Vanderoh. He wished he’d stayed at the window.

“How did your grades turn out?” Vanderoh said.

Jake thought about saying that was confidential. Instead he said, “Two-point-seven.”

Vanderoh nodded and took a sip of coffee. Allen stuffed his Furby in the Christmas tree. Apparently the needles blocked its sensor, because it said, “Hey! Me no see you.” Allen laughed.

“How’s Brette?” Vanderoh said.

Jake wondered the same thing. He hadn’t heard from her in a couple of days. She was working the ‘Quick today—Old Man Good prided himself in being open every day of the year. Jake wanted to see her. At some point, he also wouldn’t mind seeing her sister, just to say hi.

“I don’t know,” he said.

Vanderoh took another sip.

Jake’s father came back, a present in his hand. “I almost forgot,” he said. He winked at Vanderoh and tossed it to Jake.

“No fair,” Allen said.

“Mr. Furby cost plenty,” their father said.

“His name is Cocoa,” Allen said. He grabbed it from the tree and tickled it.
Jake opened the present. It was a tall can of something. *3M Desk and Office Cleaner.*

His father started laughing. Emily snickered. “Roy,” she said, almost a whisper.

“I don’t get it,” Jake said.

“Think about it,” his father said.

Jake did, and when he finally understood his face turned hot. He wanted his father’s face to feel the same—to take his coffee and throw it on him. He tried to think of it in a good light. Emily wasn’t mad anymore about what he’d done on desk if she and his father could joke about it. That was good. That was something. But Jake’s face stayed hot and his thoughts soon turned dark. His mother had been so pale the day they pulled the plug. They gave her more blood, tried to fill her back with life, but it hadn’t taken. Her brain had gone too long without it. It was his father’s idea—the plug pulling—though he had talked Jake into it. He wouldn’t talk Jake into Vanderoh. This joke, or anything else, would never convince him she was what he and Allen needed.

When Jake stood up, his father said, “Now, Jake, I was just joshing.”


“I’m going to try on my new boots,” Jake said.

He slid them on, and without tying them, went outside.

**Brette**

When Brette pulled up, Jake was sitting on the curb of the Good’n’Quick, arms wrapped around his torso. He had on only a t-shirt and sweatpants.

“What are you doing here?” Brette said.
“I thought you worked today,” he said. His lips were blue.

“Where’s your coat?”

“Where have you been?”

“It’s Christmas,” she said. “We don’t open until noon.”

“A sign would be nice,” Jake said.

“Everyone knows,” Brette said.

“Almost everyone,” Jake said. “I’ve been sitting here for over an hour.”

Brette unlocked the door. “What the hell for?”

“I just needed to get out of the house,” he said.

He pushed past her, into the heat of the store. Brette followed and locked the door behind her. It was only eleven, and from the looks of the floors, she had a lot of prep before opening.

Jake went to the coffee machine and grabbed a 32-ounce Styrofoam cup. He tried to fill it but nothing came out.

“It takes a while to warm up,” Brette said. “And I’ve got to add the coffee and water, too.”

Jake smacked the cup to the ground and wrapped his arms around his body again. Brette walked over to him and unzipped her coat and closed it around him. Jake hugged her inside of it.

“What happened?” she said.
“I’m tired of my dad. He just doesn’t get it. Allen’s never had anyone but him and me. And I—” he slid his hands under Brette’s shirt and onto her back. They were so cold it made it hard to breathe. “I’m just tired of him.”

“So you decide to freeze yourself to death?”

“I thought you’d be here.”

“Well, I’m here now.”

Jake pressed his nose to her neck. It felt like a small cold rock.

“How are things with Terri?” he said.

“Well, I’m basically invisible.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Let’s go to the bathroom and get you some hot water or something,” Brette said.

Brette ran paper towels under the facet and pressed them to Jake’s ears and nose. Jake kept the water running and held his hands underneath it. They went from light blue to hot pink. He was shivering.

“I’m getting out of here,” Jake said. “Next year, I’m not staying.”

“Who said you were?”

Jake shrugged. “I just can’t. Allen is going to have to tough it out on his own.”

Brette pulled more paper towels from the dispenser, heated them, and wrapped them around the back of his neck. Jake put his wrists under the water. He pulled the water up and down his arms. The mirror had steamed over, someone’s past-written *Fuck You* reappearing in the center.
“You dry off,” Brette said. She opened the dispenser and handed him the entire stack of paper towels. “I think Old Man Good has a blanket in his office. I’ll go get it.”

Jake grabbed her wrist. “This is going to sound stupid, but can you wait? I don’t want to be alone.”

“Sure,” Brette said. She took half of the stack and helped him dry.

Jake

When Brette left Old Man Good’s office to get a package of condoms he felt his hard on begin to melt. It was there, had been there the whole time, but suddenly the real prospect of sex was scaring it away. He’d thought about it often the past few weeks. He’d even asked Brette if she wanted to in the basement, but she’d said no, gotten quiet and distant, and it completely killed the mood. Now here it was, his chance, and he was letting it slip away again.

Maybe it had something to do with offices. They were on a couch this time, not a desk like with Meridith, but wasn’t a first time supposed to be on a bed or in a car—something normal? Jake used his hand and tried to keep himself alive but it was no use. He pulled the blanket up to his chin and waited.

The door opened and a stream of gray light entered. Brette was wearing Jake’s T-shirt and her jeans, which were unbuttoned and unzipped. She’d thrown them on quickly to get the condoms. All but the smallest of light disappeared as the door closed. Brette sat down at Jake’s feet.

“So I don’t know much about them,” Brette said, excitement in her voice. “I’ve got lubricated, spermicidal lubricated, and non-lubricated. What do you think?”
“You pick,” Jake said.

“You’re fun.”

“The sperm one.”

“That’s the spirit.”

Brette held the boxes up to the dim light coming through the small office window. “I think these ones.” She tossed the other two boxes to the floor and opened the one in her hand. The tearing of the cardboard gave Jake chills.

She lifted the t-shirt off and slid the jeans down and crawled inside the blanket. When she brought her hand to him, she said, “What happened to all my progress?”

“Ha, sorry,” Jake said.

She tried to get him excited. She brought both hands down and did the thing she normally did—the thing that normally blew Jakes’s mind—but it didn’t work.

“We don’t have a lot of time,” she said. “Fifteen minutes maybe.”

“Well saying that won’t help,” Jake said.

“Help what?”

“You know. This.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Well something must be.”

“It’s not. Just give it a second.”

They lay in silence, Brette doing all the work, Jake feeling worthless.

“Maybe you should touch me, too,” Brette said. “Take your mind off of it.”
Jake did, and after a while, it started to work. She breathed in his ear and he kissed her neck and she put her fingers through his hair from front to back. He was ready.

Brette unwrapped the condom and handed it to him, then slid underneath him. Jake tossed off the blanket. He wasn’t sure what to do and it was dark, but it ended up easier than he thought.

Neither made a sound or took a breath when he first entered. They moved together in silence. Finally Brette said, “What do you think?”

“It’s so warm,” he said.

She giggled, then let out a small moan. From the light coming through door he could see nothing but her eyes. The shadow of his shoulder blocked the rest. They were gray like the sky and fields of Iowa in the winter. They closed suddenly. Her eyebrows squeezed into a pleasurable frown.

“It feels good,” she said. “Like you’re pulling on me. Pushing and then pulling me away from myself.”

Jake slowed down. “That’s kind of weird,” he said.

Her eyes snapped opened. “It’s good,” she said. She put her hands on his hips and moved him. She was so strong. “Don’t stop.”

Jake didn’t, and as they moved and breathed together, he kept thinking about what she said. It made him feel good, and she felt good, but something about it killed him a little.
**Ed**

Knees tucked to his chest, he waited inside the old fire escape slide outside of the brick bar. He had his bloody t-shirt mask strung through one of his belt loops. The freezing rain pattered the tin slide, making it hard to hear. The weatherman had said it would turn to snow around the start of the New Year. Ed hoped he wouldn’t have to wait that long.

He was waiting for the same reason he waited all those other nights. To protect the turbine family. The father had already entered the bar with his girlfriend, and they’d entered alone. It wasn’t what Rolland had planned. Ed hoped the man’s sons would stay home all night.

Ed had heard it all. He wondered why Rolland and CJ and Clev would talk so loud about something so crazy. Ed realized it had a lot to do with him. CJ didn’t know how thin the apartment walls were because Ed never made a sound. And so on Black Friday, after the three boys subtly kicked Ed out, he went directly to his bedroom, crawled into bed, and listened.

“You brought the t-shirt, right Clev?” It was Rolland’s voice. Ed could tell because it sounded like an asshole’s.

“The one on my back.”

“Good. Skin cells and shit. Good.”

“Why do we want skin cells on it?” CJ said.

“Because the real t-shirt that fuck stole off Clev’s back would have them.”

“Are we sure about this?” Clev said.

“Clev, have you looked in the mirror lately?” Rolland said.
“I know.”

“How’s your vision?”

“Still blurry.”

“How are the headaches?”

“Still bad.”

“What about you, C? You have any doubts? After what that turbining asshole did with your girlfriend?”

“And his knee,” Clev said.

“And your knee.”

“No,” CJ said.

“Well me either. You think my dumb ass is going to college anymore? No school is taking a bite at me with this many losses. I’ll end up at 3M. Making fucking sand paper. You think that was my dream?”

Silence.

“So if my fat ass uncle and the other fat ass cops aren’t going to do anything about it, then it’s time we did. This isn’t just for us, C. We can’t have these crazy turbine people in our towns anymore. Look what happens every time they show up. This is bigger than us. This is for my sister. It’s for Maxton.”

More silence. Ed sat up in bed and pressed his ear to the wall, just to make sure they weren’t whispering.

“Clev, you ready?” Rolland said.

“Yeah.”
“Alright, C. Go get the knife.”

They weren’t going to stab the turbine boy. They were stabbing Clev. Ed wasn’t sure where, but heard the kid make a hissing noise when the knife went in, probably a small slice, but painful when you knew it was coming. They needed the blood for the t-shirt mask. The pattern would be consistent. The attacker would still have it, still wear it. That, at least, they had right.

The three of them planned on luring the turbine boy away from the Brick Bar and staging an attack. During the proposed attack, the turbine boy would get in a few good swings before Rolland, who’d been doing research on the subject, would snap his neck. Then they’d put the mask on him, a bat in his hand, and close the case.

Their plan wasn’t perfect. It would probably get them caught and imprisoned. But Ed didn’t want that. He wanted everyone alive and free.

He would watch the bar door all night. He would wait for Rolland and his friends to lure the turbine boy outside. Then, once he saw them, he would put on his mask and emerge.

**Brette**

Halfway through her third watch of *A Christmas Story*—she never understood why they showed it all the way to New Year’s, or why she insisted on watching it up until New Year’s—Terri snoring on their dad’s recliner, slippered feet poking from the blanket, braided head titled to one side, Jake knocked on the door. Brette could tell it was Jake from the rhythm. He’d been distant since the sex, and Brette was glad for it. Not that she regretted it. It was more about Terri. He had a crush on her, sure, but more than that,
Brette didn’t want Jake to see her in her subordinate role. She didn’t want him to see her in little-sister mode.

Brette opened the door as quietly as she could. The night was windy and full of sleet. The turbines whooshed. Brette glanced back at Terri as the sound filled the house. She didn’t move. On TV, Ralphy was beating the hell out of the freckled bully with the coonskin cap.

“Happy New Year,” Jake said.

“Thanks,” she said.

“We’re going to the bar,” Allen said.

Brette hadn’t even noticed him there. He peeked around Jake’s shoulder. They both wore poofy coats she hadn’t seen before.

“What the hell for?” Brette said.

“Because it’s New Year’s Eve,” Jake said.

“The Specials,” Allen said.

Good had 3-for-1 specials on New Years Eve—the booze would taste better while they had power, he’d said; a reference to Y2K and a clever ploy, not that the town needed an excuse to drink—and Brette’s parents, along with most of the town, were there. It still didn’t explain why Jake and Allen wanted go.

“I don’t get it,” Brette said.

“We’ve had enough,” Allen said.

“Our dad’s there with Vanderoh.”
“He made our Christmas awkward,” said Allen, “so we’re going to ruin his End of the World.”

“How do you plan on doing this?” Brette said. “Make it awkward?”

“Pretend like he likes us and we like him,” Allen said.

“We haven’t really figured it out yet,” Jake said. “But we’d love it if you came with. Your sister can come, too, if she wants.”

“She’s pretty tired,” Brette said. She looked back again. Still asleep. “She said earlier that she just wanted to stay in.” It was true. For once, Terri wanted to stay home, relax. Maybe she’d partied enough in California—or maybe Iowa just couldn’t live up to California anymore.

“Okay,” Jake said. “Are you coming?”

“I don’t think so,” Brette said.

Jake stared at Brette’s feet. Brette stared at his giant coat. She really didn’t feel like going. She was even more tired than Terri, and she didn’t want to be around people during New Year’s. If the power went out, people would panic. If it didn’t, she would cry.

“Well, see you around, I guess,” Jake said.

“Do you need a ride?”

“We’re fine.”

“Are you sure?”

Jake patted his coat, then Allen’s. “We’ve got plenty of armor.”

“Hey, before I forget,” Brette said, “I got you a present.”
“What?”

“Kind of late, I know. Wait right here.”

Brette went into the basement. The computer was on, screensaver maze jerking left, then right, on the stone wall. Brette flipped off the monitor and headed upstairs.

“Here,” she said.

Jake raised one eyebrow and opened it, his stare locked on her. When the wrapping paper hit the porch steps, he looked at the gift.

“What is it?” Allen said.


“It’s actually my old one,” Brette said. “I erased all my answers.”

“Thanks,” Jake said.

“You know, in case the world doesn’t end tonight, and in case you want to take them. You’re pretty smart. Maybe you could—”

“Can I leave it here for now?” Jake said.

“Sure,” Brette said.

**Jake**

So this was the Brick Bar. He and Allen stood in the doorway, taking it all in.

It was packed. Despite Christmas being over, people wore Santa hats and reindeer sweaters and elf shoes with the little jingle bells on the up-curved toes. Old Man Good and was behind the bar, his movements like that of a young man.

Andy Winters stumbled up, still in his winter coat, holding a beer. “Fucking Kow? Is that you? Happy end of the world, man.” He hugged Jake awkwardly and then
took an even more awkward drink of his beer. It was something about the way his elbow was too close to his body. It reminded Jake of Winters’ jump shot. Good for three pointers, bad for drinking.

“You too,” Jake said. He hugged back and Winters thankfully walked away.

Jake started noticing the high schoolers, both of Charter and Maxton variety. Apparently Good had served them. They held glass mugs and bottles in their hands and looked like miniature versions of their parents. He looked for Rolland but didn’t see him. Still, he had to be there. Everyone was. He even saw a couple of middle schoolers. Paul Tolly stirred his dark drink—Whiskey and Coke, probably—with a fat black straw. Maybe it was only Coke, though Jake doubted it.

On the far wall Jake spotted them. His stomach turned. It felt wrong, so wrong. The crowd parted even more, and the picture became even clearer. Their father, one hand on his beer, the other pressed against the wall, was leaned over and making out with Mrs. Vanderoh.

“For fuck’s sake,” Allen said.

Jake didn’t even care about the cussing. He was going to say the same thing.

“Maybe we shouldn’t,” Jake said.

Allen either didn’t hear him or didn’t care. He walked towards them. Jake followed.

Allen tugged on their father’s shirt. He didn’t notice. More tugging, more tongue. Allen slid in-between them, the friction causing both to jump. Their father took a big step back.
“Hey,” Allen yelled. His grin was as loud as the bar noise.

Jake couldn’t see his father’s face but could see Vanderoh’s. She had on makeup, her eyelids like slices of kiwi and her cheeks fiery orange. Her whole face flushed to match it when she took in the situation. Allen smiling, Jake staring. Vanderoh said something to Allen that Jake couldn’t hear.

Jake stepped closer, joining the awkward Allen-made scene. He noticed, even in the dim lights, that his father and Vanderoh’s eyes were bloodshot. A lot more than usual.

“Hey,” Jake said.

“Hi,” said his father, a slit of a smile on his face. He widened his bloody eyes at Jake, moving them down, in Allen’s direction, and back. The look was the ultimate sign of desperation. He was treating Jake like a friend, a peer, a wingman. He was saying, *Dude, help. This kid is blocking my cock.*

Allen gave Jake the most serious look he’d ever seen out of his brother. It also said something. It said, *You’ve got my back, right, bro?* He wanted Jake to up the stakes. Help him out. Make it awkward. Jake didn’t want to do any of that. He just wanted to be with Brette. In truth, he wanted to be with Terri, too. He didn’t want to do anything with her. He just wanted to talk. Ask her if she remembered him from that first night when his TV crashed. Ask her if the water in California was as cold as they said. Ask her if she’d heard about the bat attacks and him winning king and what he’d done, in theory, on the high school science teacher’s desk. He wanted her to know he wasn’t the scared kid he’d been the first time she’d met him.
Jake turned to his father and said, “Did you see it’s snowing out?” He was surprised at his own enthusiasm. He could really turn it on when he tried. “Allen and I wondered if you two wanted to come out and play.”

Allen smiled and winked at Jake. His father’s smile disappeared. His eyes shrunk. “How about that,” he said.

“Do you want to build snow angels, Emily?” Allen said.

“Maybe later, boys,” said their father.

“How much later?” Allen said.

“I don’t know.”

“We’ll wait,” Allen said. “While we’re waiting, will you get us a pop? I don’t have any money.”

Jake’s father gave him a very angry look while he fished in his pocket. He handed a ball of cash to Jake.

“You’re giving Jake money for alcohol?” Allen said. He looked at Vanderoh with concerned eyes.

“You said you wanted pop.”

“Oh, okay. Yeah, I do.”

“Okay.”

Jake started for the bar but Allen didn’t follow. Jake stopped. Allen was still standing between them. He waved Jake off, keeping his gaze straight up at their father.

Dull browns and drab grays and dirty off-whites were the only colors that painted the room. That and the red coming through the cafeteria windows.
When they got to the front of the line Old Man Good was the only one with his hands free. Jake tried to lean away, but they’d already made eye contact.

“How goes it, Lakowski?”

“I just need two Pepsis,” Jake said.

Good smiled and shook his head. “The only grown-up here.” He limped back to the soda dispenser.

“How much?” Jake said.

“Those are on me,” he said.

Before Jake could say thanks, Good said, “The syrup in that fountain is about eight years old, so don’t go thanking me. Just don’t sue when you taste it.” He smiled.

Jake grabbed the Pepsis, turned around, and spilled them all over Rolla nd Reed’s blue sweater.

Ed

He had his mask on and was about to crawl from his hiding spot when Andrea Reed appeared. The turbine boy and Rolland had just stepped out of the bar. They hadn’t swung at each other or even exchanged words yet. And here was Rolland’s sister, walking toward them from the opposite direction.

“What are you doing here?” Rolland said.

“You told me you were done fucking with them,” Andrea said.

“Who’s fucking with who?”

“Don’t think I don’t know who that is,” she said, pointing at the turbine boy.
Ed hadn’t seen Andrea Reed in over two years. He wondered if anyone had. Her hair was wheat-colored like her brother’s and her voice sounded grown-up, though now that he thought about it, he’d never heard her talk. The freezing rain had stopped. Red and white snow floated around them.

“This guy poured his drink on my shirt,” Rolland said. “That’s all. We’re stepping outside to settle it.”

“You’re trying to settle more than that,” she said.

“I thought you were staying home tonight.”

“I’m not just going to hide all my life,” she said. “And I knew you were up to no good.”

“So you followed me?”

“I’m the older one, remember? I have to look out for you and your stupidity.”

The Reed boy looked defeated. The turbine boy looked confused. This wasn’t part of Rolland and CJ’s plan. Not at all. Ed felt a relief wash over him. The fire escape warmed and softened under his ass.

CJ and their crooked-nosed friend stepped out from somewhere Ed couldn’t see. He couldn’t see much, just whatever was in the circular frame of the fire escape opening.

“Not tonight,” Rolland told them.

“What’s not tonight?” Andrea said.

A few high school kids filed from the bar. Ed recognized the Winters boy and the younger Tolly.

“You okay, Kow?” Tolly said.
“I’m fine,” the turbine boy said.

Winters stared at Andrea. He looked like he’d seen a ghost. Soon he disappeared back into the bar.

“Listen,” turbine boy said. “I don’t know what’s going on, but I’m sorry about your sweater, and your hand, and everything else. Can I just go back inside.”

“So you admit it,” Rolland said. “You admit you did it.”


Winters and about thirty other high schoolers exited the bar. They all stared at Andrea with that same ghost-look, their breaths casting ghosts into the sky. The snow was falling harder now.

“What the fuck is everyone staring at?” Rolland said.

“It’s fine,” Andrea said.

“You see?” Rolland said. He was looking at Jake. “You see what it’s like? See what you people do?”

Someone pushed the crowd of high schoolers from behind. It was Old Man Good. He limped past them and in front of Jake and Rolland.

“You boys have something to settle?” he said.

Neither said anything.

“Well if you do, you aren’t doing it in my parking lot. You take it to the shit huts.”
Rolland looked back at Andrea, then at Jake. “Let’s go then, Kow. Let’s take it there.”

Andrea said, “Rolland.”

CJ said, “This isn’t the plan.”

Rolland said, “Fuck the plan.”

Jake said nothing. He just nodded. They would go.

The crowd behind him exploded into conversation—talk about who was driving and who could ride with whom. Soon they dispersed into the parking lot and started their cars and drove off through the snow.

**Jake**

Underneath a fine layer of snow the shit huts stuck from the earth like tumors. Inside the shit huts stood the crowd. Charters and Maxtoners with no line dividing them—not enough time or room for it. Inside the crowd stood Rolland and Jake. The turbines surrounded it all, humming together, eerie-sounding. Monks in a cathedral.

“I’m impressed, Kow,” Rolland said. He walked away from Jake and stomped the snow as he did. Jake realized he was breaking up the hard stuff, the freezing rain underneath, making a soft little ring for the two of them. Jake decided not to help.

He’d ridden with the Tollys. He didn’t want Allen or his father to see him get his ass kicked. He wasn’t even sure why he was out here. Maybe to end it. Maybe an ass kicking would solve it all.
When Rolland was done stomping, he returned to Jake. “I’m impressed,” he said. “You really manned up.” His hood shrouded all but his nose and tiny eyes, the lazy one looking off somewhere over Jake’s shoulder.

Jake glanced over Rolland’s shoulder. In between Meridith Watters and Andy Winters stood Rolland’s sister. She was shivering. In every flash of red Jake could see the bangs of her hair sticking from her hat.

“All right,” Rolland said, louder, obviously meant for everyone. “We’re going to see some redemption tonight. And after it’s over, we’re going to go back to the bar and get drunk and watch that ball drop. Maxtoners, Charters, all of us.”

Nothing but the turbines made a sound. Jake was surprised, not by the silence, but by Rolland’s ploy. He was trying to win the crowd over. For a second Jake put himself in their shoes. In Andy Winters’, still drinking his beer in that awkward-elbow way. In Meridith’s, tugging on Andrea Reed’s coat sleeve, whispering. In Peach Fuzz’s, standing among a pack of Charter jocks, blocking some of their views. In Kurt Tolly’s, standing in the final layer of crowd, his head and shoulders so still above the rest.

Rolland took a step forward. Jake could see the frozen snot on his upper lip. It looked like blood with each flash. Snow clung to his eyelashes. Also blood.

“You ready?” Rolland said.

“Yep,” said Jake, and he punched Rolland Reed right in the nose.

Rolland bent over, holding his face. The crowd took in a collective breath and held it. Jake held his breath, too. Rolland sneezed, hand still over his face, and a shotgun blast of blood spattered onto the snow. It looked black, even during flashes.
Jake glanced at Andrea Reed. She was the only one in the crowd who moved.
She shook her head, just slightly. It reminded Jake of someone but he couldn’t remember who.

“So we’re playing cheap shots, aye, Kow?” Rolland said. He was still bent over, still bleeding. “I can play that game.”

Rolland sprang upright and swung wildly in one- and two-punch combinations. Jake held his hands in front of his face and backed up. The blows hurt the bones on the undersides of his forearms. If only he’d had more to eat this year. If only he’d hit the weights in Brette’s room. Terri’s Room.

He could hear Rolland’s constipated-sounding grunts, the turbines, his own sucked in breaths each time Rolland took a swing. What he didn’t hear was crowd noise. Even now, they were silent. It wasn’t like the movies. Maybe no one wanted to see a fight. Maybe they hated fighting, but when one happened, something inside them, something ancient, forced them to watch.

Jake felt the back of his leg hit a ledge. The non-broken shelf of snow and ice. He couldn’t back up any farther. He stood there, taking Rolland’s swings. In between the flashes of red and the flashes of Rolland’s coat sleeves, Jake could see Rolland’s bloody face. His head was cocked and his lazy eye looked at the sky.

The good thing about the lack of crowd noise was that Jake knew when Rolland would throw a blow. From his grunts. He waited for a grunt and a swing to pass, and just as the next grunt started he pushed both his hands forward—an awkward move. Both fists caught Rolland in the forehead and he backed up and winced.
Jake ducked down and lunged at Rolland’s waist, hoping to spear him down. It didn’t work. Rolland spun, holding onto Jake’s waist now, and flung him onto the unbroken snow. Jake smashed his head, everything turning green for a second. When the sky came back into its red focus, he realized the snow had broken all around Jake’s body and he had sunk through into softer snow. He felt like a picture in a frame. A piece of limp dough inside a cookie cutter.

The snow crackled four times and then Rolland was on top of him. Jake put his arms up again. Rolland swung his meat-heavy blows. The turbine lights swallowed the stars shrouding Rolland’s face and vomited them back up.

Again between grunts, Jake grabbed a jagged block of frozen snow and smashed it into Rolland’s face. It exploded into thousands of red diamonds. Rolland got off. Jake broke out of his frame and climbed to his feet and something was on his back, twisting him to the ground. His head collided with the hard stuff again, busted through, but this time he saw no green flash, only pure white snow, hidden from the red flashes by his own face. Rolland was rubbing his face into it. It was amazing how something soft could sting so bad.

Jake tried to wiggle free. He kicked and he thrashed his head and he jutted his ass up and down like he was having a seizure. He floundered until he had nothing left. He couldn’t lift his head out of the snow. Rolland had his arms pinned in some sort of pretzel behind his back. His face was numb. He could hardly breathe. Smothered by snow—what a way to die. He wondered if he were the first, then remembered avalanches. Only there weren’t two tons of snow on top of Jake, pinning him inside a
frozen grave. There was only a crazy boy, yelling something. Was he playing to the crowd or taunting Jake? He would never know. Jake tried to yell, too. He tried to tell Rolland that he was actually killing someone. That Jake would die. But he couldn’t.

There was too much snow. He started to eat it—eat his way out of it and form a whole—but in was in vain. There was too much and his face was too numb. Things turned green again, fading out. He wouldn’t even see the new millennium. The end of the world.

At least he wouldn’t die a virgin.

Jake

Something was growling. Something was growling and someone was screaming. He saw red. The sliver of a red and white moon shook into focus. So did the blades of a turbine.

A few feet away, Rolland rolled in the snow, something little and furious clinging to his neck.

Allen.

It was hard to tell who was screaming and who was growling. They each might have been. From the looks of it, Allen was biting Rolland flush on the face. Their movements were fuzzy. A dark out-of-focus circle ringed the scene like he was looking from binoculars.

If Allen had made it out to the shit huts, then their father must have too.

The thought came just as his father leaped from the dark ring and onto the rolling boys.

He grabbed Allen around the waist and pulled him away. Allen let go immediately but as he hung suspended he spit on Rolland. It came out in a dark mist.
“How do you like it?” Allen screamed, and then their father hauled him away under the crook of his arm like a football while Rolland wiped his face with one hand, held the side of his head with the other, and promised he’d kill the little Mike Tyson ear gobbler.

Jake stood up. So did Rolland.

“Brought reinforcements, ay Kow?” Two lines of blood ran from Rolland’s nose like Do-Not-Pass lines on a highway. His right earlobe was still there, but barely. White gobs of its insides mixed with blood. It looked more twisted than bitten. It looked like a candy cane.

“I didn’t ask for them,” Jake said, “but they’re here.

“I’m not done, you know,” Rolland said.

“Your face is.”

Rolland bent over, grabbed a handful of snow, and pressed it to his ear. “I’m just taking an ice break. Coach always said, you’re hurt, go with the RICE Method. Rest, Ice, Compression, and, of course, Elevation.” He titled his head to the side, so his bad ear was pointed up.

Allen, restrained by Paul Tolly and Peach Fuzz, growled from the crowd. Jake saw movement. It was his father. Walking toward them.

“You’ll get your chance, Pa,” Rolland said. “I’ll take you after I take your sons.”

Jake’s father kept coming. His boots cracked through the snow in short chops. The rhythmic crunch reminded Jake of salty nights in Pensacola, listening to the frogs.

“Don’t come any closer, old timer,” Rolland said, but Jake’s father didn’t listen. His head was down like he was fighting wind, though the wind was at his back.
Rolland’s swing was a lot more controlled this time. Jake’s father held up his left forearm, shielded the blow, and then lowered his body, grabbed Rolland’s coat by the collar, and drove him backwards. Rolland tried to spin out of it but Jake’s father’s legs kept pumping, marching them. They stopped when Rolland’s back thundered against the nearest shit hut.

Jake’s father slammed Rolland against the tin siding. He said nothing. He just stared at Rolland.

Jake knew he should feel embarrassed for his father fighting his fights for him. Brette was here now. She stood next to Meridith and Andrea Reed. Terri stood next to her. Still, all he could feel was proud.

Rolland looked helpless. Bigger than Jake’s father but not by much. They were both so small at this distance, the turbines fully visible, spinning above them with gratitude. The gratitude didn’t seem like the good kind, though. It felt like the gluttonous kind. Like the turbines were applauding not for the victory, but the violence. They were on no one’s side.

In a flurry Rolland suddenly twisted free, spun around his father’s back, and suplexed him into the snow, a block-shaped dent where his back had collided with the hut.

“Woo!” Rolland yelled, both of them scrambling in the snow. “Woo!”

It was the same sound those masked batters made that party at the turbines, Meridith’s car in ruins. It sounded like a wounded owl.
Jake ran toward them. Out of the corner of his eye he saw others running, too. Vanderoh. Terri. Brette. Tolly. Winters. And a lot of others—a lot of football players and wrestlers and people from Charter, all on Rolland’s side.

Jake tried to pull Rolland off of his father but someone pulled him off of Rolland. Then he heard the connection of bare fist to cheekbone and someone fell on top of him. He saw Rolland yelling at Meridith and Winters tackled Rolland from behind, his head snapping back. Someone tried shoving Jake’s head in the snow but he was tired of that and brought his elbow back hard and the person was gone. But another was on top of him now. All around him there was struggling and yelling and people throwing each other into the snow.

“Stop!” Jake heard Vanderoh yell. “Stop it! This is no way to act. The ball is going to drop soon! The lights, the heat. Everything! We need to get organized!”

No one listened.

Allen ran from pile to pile, rubbing snow in Charter kid’s faces and then running behind other clusters of fights. Winters kept pushing people over and doing the same. Meridith tried prying Charters and Maxtoners away from one another and kept getting shoved backward. Kurt flung a Charter sophomore from Peach Fuzz’s back and lifted the chubby guy out of the snow. The Charter stood up out of Kurt’s view and charged him. Jake ran for them but someone blindsided Jake and brought him to the snow. Jake fended whoever it was off of him while he yelled for Kurt to watch out but it was too late. The kid drove his shoulder into Kurt’s midsection and folded him in half.
Someone hit the kid who was on top of Jake hard on the back with a big block of snow.

“Fuck,” he said, and rolled off.

Terri stuck a purple mitten out and Jake grabbed it. She lifted him up with ease.

She had a clump of snow between the side of her hood and her thick neck. Jake brushed it off. They stared at each other for a second while people cussed and swung and rolled and the turbines moaned with pleasure.

“Welcome home,” Jake said.

Terri disappeared. The kid who she’d smashed with snow had swept his legs at her from behind. He crawled on top of her.

Jake grabbed the kid by the coat but they both flew back, the kid landing on Jake. Terri had flung him off somehow. Now Jake and the kid rolled in the snow. He waited for Terri to help him again but she didn’t. She was fighting another battle somewhere. He hoped she was okay.

Jake head butted the kid in the nose. Then again in the chin. It only pissed him off more. When one of the kid’s swings missed high, Jake took the moment and went with it, swinging the kid over his head and into the snow.

Jake stood up and ran toward Kurt but saw that he wasn’t needed. Kurt had already pushed the Charter off and was kicking him in the ribs with his cowboy boots.

He turned and looked for his father and Allen. And Brette. Arms swung. Legs kicked. It was sloppy as hell and everyone looked the same under the red. But it wasn’t
red anymore. It was turning green. He felt dizzy and stumbled backward, catching himself before hitting the steps of the shit hut.

An arm wrapped around his neck.

“Ready to fucking die?” Rolland said.

Then they both flew forward, Rolland smacking his face on the side of the hut.

He grabbed it and screamed and rolled in the snow. In a daze, Jake tried to stand but couldn’t. Then someone grabbed him by the arms and dragged him up the stairs and into the shit hut.

**Brette**

She stood a good distance away, watching the brawl. CJ good had some kid in a headlock. Bud Clevenger was bearhugging another. Kurt Tolly and Ryan Pontous took turns hitting each other in the face.

Brette was terrified—not of the fighting, but the turbines. She didn’t want to get any closer. They would continue to spin past midnight. The ball dropping in Times Square and Boston and Miami proved that. It was the reason she was at the shit huts: after watching the lights of all those east coast cities remain steady, she knew there would be no hope for her time zone, so she and Terri left for the Brick Bar, asked Old Man Good why it was a ghost town, and headed for the huts.

Brette checked her stopwatch, which she’d strung around her neck before leaving. 11:42 pm. She was so tired. The new year would arrive with a whisper, just like all the others, and the turbines would always spin, rain or shine or snow. Or ice. And that
was what scared her. The Ice. She could see each blade of each turbine covered in a heavy layer of it.

Brette scanned for Jake in the crowd. She couldn’t find him. She’d seen him earlier—talking to Terri—so he was alive. Brette wondered what the two of them said. It was a quick exchange, and Terri had helped him. He probably just said thank you. Still, Brette wished Jake could have thanked her instead.

At least she could see Rolland. He pushed Paul Tolly down again and again. As cruel as it seemed, seeing that calmed her—his attention was focused elsewhere.

Someone walked towards Brette, a girl, her face shrouded by a fur hood. When she neared, she removed it. It was Andrea Reed. Brette hadn’t seen her since she was fifteen, Andrea walking across the stage for her diploma to all that extra applause.

“So this is what I’ve been missing,” Andrea said.

“Did you see Terri’s home?” Brette said.

“Yeah. I saw her out there, dropping people.”

“Yeah.”

“I heard she goes to UCLA.”

“Yeah.”

Brette scanned the crowd again. Still no Jake. Just when the fighting looked like it was about to die, someone would run in and tackle someone and a whole pile would accumulate. It was strange to see Mr. Lakowski out there. He was trying to make peace, but it wasn’t working. It was also strange that from this distance all the rolling around and yelling and swinging had no noise to it. The turbines blocked it all out.
“Did you try to reason with Rolland?” Brette said. “I mean, that’s pretty much the cause of all this.”

“It’s not,” Andrea said. “But yeah, I tried.”

“I wish this year would end,” Brette said. She checked her watch. 11:48.

“You need to get out of here,” Andrea said.

“I will as soon as it dies down.”

“I mean, this town.”

“I will.”

“What happened to me,” Andrea said. “It was bad. Yeah, it was fucking terrible. But I don’t know if I ever would have left if it hadn’t.”

Brette didn’t know what to say to that. She checked her stopwatch. The time hadn’t moved.

Jake

He woke on the floor, pebbles of raccoon shit near his face. He sat up. The trailer’s silence was shocking. The turbine hums were still there, but the fighting sounded distant—like it flowed from the speakers of their TV. Jake would take turbines hums over yelling and fighting any day.

Metal creaked and Jake shuffled to his feet. On the springs of the long-gone pull-out couch sat a man with a heavy beard. He leaned onto his knees, peering out the slits of the blinds. The red flashed through and striped his face.

“It’s a goddamn shame,” he said.

Jake blinked and tried to focus. He got dizzy again and sat down next to him.
“How’d I get in here?” Jake said.

“I brought you.”

“I mean, like, how?”

“I just grabbed you. Everyone else is too busy swinging at whatever moves.”

“I need to find Allen,” Jake said. He tried to stand but the man brought his arm in front of Jake’s chest, a move his father pulled when he slammed on the breaks in the car to whoever was riding shotgun.

“He’s fine,” Ed said. “You’re the one you need to worry about.”

Jake pushed the man’s arm away and walked to the window, leaning against the wall for support. Allen was pulling some little kid off an even littler one. His father and Vanderoh stood in front of CJ Good, talking with their hands. Trying to calm him, Jake guessed. Shively had arrived at some point. He was trying to pry two girls off of a small boy with no shoes on. Way off in the distance, he thought he saw Brette.

“I should let them know I’m okay,” Jake said.

“They aren’t the only ones looking for you,” the man said. “I’d sit tight.”

Jake felt dizzy again. The crowd flashes turned green, then red, then green. Christmas was over and the combination made him sick. He sat down next to the man again, the springs hard on his back and thudding against the wall a few times before settling.

“I don’t feel good,” Jake said.

“Stay awake a second longer,” the man said.

“Why?”
“Do you want to fix all this?”

“Yes.”

“You can’t. But you can fix a little of it.”

“How?”

The man pulled something from his pants. It was a stained white sheet. He wrapped it around his face and pulled it taught. It smelled like rust.

“I’m so confused,” Jake said.

“I know,” the man said. “Just step outside with me.”

**Ed**

He stood next to Jake on the top step of the shit hut and waited. Winter smelled different through the mask. It smelled like fall.

A girl was the first to notice. Ed didn’t know her, but she’d been standing on the periphery, throwing snowballs. She wore a pink coat and couldn’t have been more than twelve.

“Look,” she said, and pointed. No one listened, but Ed knew that didn’t matter.

The Tolly boy noticed next. He helped up his fat friend and together they stared at Ed and Jake.

Winters was next. Then the older Tolly brother. The older Fitch sister. The science teacher. Shively. CJ. CJ’s ex. CJ’s buddy with the busted nose.

They all stared up at Ed and Jake, and soon no one fought. The turbine hummed and moaned and the blades chopped the noises into chugs like a train moving through.

Finally Rolland stepped forward.
“Who the fuck is that?” he said. He walked closer “Who the fuck are you?”

Ed said nothing.

Rolland turned to his big friend with the crooked nose. “You still got your shirt?”

The kid pulled the shirt from his coat pocket. Even under the turbines, Ed could tell its stains were much redder than his own mask.

Jake almost fell but Ed caught him. He put an arm around him for support.

“Jake,” said the boy’s father. The little brother stood next to him, his hand in the science teacher’s.

Jake left Ed on the steps and stumbled to his father. They hugged.

“Where’s Brette?” he said.

“She’s fine,” the father said. “She’s over there, where the rest of us should be.”

Rolland took the bloody t-shirt from his friend and examined it. He wiped his own blood on it, tossed it on the ground, and looked at Ed again.

“I said, Who the fuck are you?”

Everyone was staring, waiting. The sky pulsed in red. Ed opened his mouth but said nothing. Someone had asked him the same question long ago and he hadn’t been sure of the answer.

He still wasn’t.