Tethers

Logan Adams
Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/etd

Part of the Fine Arts Commons

Recommended Citation
Adams, Logan, "Tethers" (2013). Graduate Theses and Dissertations. 13392.
https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/etd/13392

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Iowa State University Capstones, Theses and Dissertations at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
Tethers

by

Logan Adams

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Creative Writing and Environment

Program of Study Committee:
Co-major professor: Benjamin Percy
Co-major professor: David Zimmerman
Brianna Burke
Gloria Jones-Johnson

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2013
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TETHERS</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRANSLUCENT</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIRECTIONS</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE COVE</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIGHT OVER THE ATCHAFALAYA</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WAKE</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IN REAL LIFE</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEVER BREAKS</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE CASE OF THE MISSING BAR</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TETHERS (1997)

Under the midday prairie sun, heat washed over my brother and me. We sat on one of the hills that ran like puckers in an untucked sheet across the ranch land dirt and shimmering waves of Indian grass. Andrew slumped against a fence post no longer strung with barbed wire. I stood and licked the salt on my lips, deciding what to do with him. Two beveled holes—one on each side of his calf—had yellowed and the surrounding skin was swollen, tight and blue. A thin stream of dried blood ran down to his sock like a seam—as if you could peel it away to find the stitching that held him together. Andrew’s tongue lolled in his mouth, dry and white, and he complained about how tired he was—as if he’d never been more ready to sleep, to crawl under the hills and pull them to his neck and close his eyes. But from this hill we could see a house, its cottonwood windbreak, and the highway. He asked me to go on and get help. We’d come from New Orleans by boxcar, a ride we hopped the night our mother died, and now he wanted to go back there, where the city would put him in a group home. He was choosing it over living on the road with me. I felt like I was in one of those moments where you get the urge to swerve into oncoming headlights or launch yourself off an apartment building’s roof. And so why not? No one knew we were in the South Dakota and sometimes you just have to yank the wheel.
Sometimes when we were younger, our mother, fresh off a shift at St. Luke’s, would come home to find us in the living room of our shotgun playing Duck Hunt, and she’d make us go outside to play. So we’d unplug the Nintendo pistols and wrap their cords around our fists and hide behind bushes in our neighborhood, hunting each other. I always shot Andrew first, and he would protest, say it wasn’t fair, but I’d push him down—usually on the uneven sidewalk with concrete slabs like busted piano keys—and put a knee in his kidney. I’d grind it in until he promised to bring me one of Dad’s beers, pushing my knee into his back harder until he cried and pounded the ground and screamed that he would. Then I’d sip the bottles in the wormy dirt under the porch, beads of beer clinging to the peach fuzz on my lip. Andrew would kneel next to me and talk about Mom and what we’d do on her day off. He thought maybe we’d go to the aquarium or Café Du Monde. I’d say, “Probably nothing.” He’d just pick through the dirt some more and pull out worms and study them, like they had little messages written on their sides.

In ’98, Falstaff Brewery became a steel fabrication yard and my father, a thin, boney man with one fist always wrapped around a Bud longneck, lost his job and kind of unstuck from things like New Orleans and his family. I’d be eating a bag of chips and he’d walk out the door like he was going to get beer, like he’d done a million times before. But that trip to the corner store would last three months.

Mom didn’t talk about it. Like it’d always been that way. She’d go to work and empty bedpans, take blood pressure and rectal temperatures. Andrew and I tried to stay busy. Mostly we tried to make money for ourselves. Panhandling worked okay.
We’d hike the miles to the Quarter and sit at the corner of Royal and St. Peter, down from Preservation, with our hats between our feet. We did better than the veteran homeless or the traveling kids with their kerchiefed dogs and patched denim vests. That was because Andrew looked young and he said and did what I told him to so people would give us money. But we were only two in a high tide of teens elbowing for space on the sidewalk. One January, the first time Dad left, on a day when I couldn’t seem to pull my sleeves far enough over my hands to keep them warm, a guy threw a twenty into the shoebox of the kid next to us. His sign said something like, “I left when my dad tried to kill me.”

After Dad returned from his second disappearance, I started following him. I kept a backpack of clothes wrapped in plastic bags under our porch. When he would leave I’d follow, grab the bag, and keep a block between us. He usually just went to the levee or the corner store or Cooter Brown’s. Then one time, in the middle of the night, he kept walking and we ended up in the rail yard.

“We’re taking the trains north,” my father said over his shoulder. I jogged up next to him and we crossed tracks and ties until he pointed to a boxcar. We pulled one of the doors aside and climbed in. He didn’t say anything to me for a long time.

We rolled through fields until the fields got bigger and then we got to the mountains. When the train stopped we went into town to buy cans of food and beer. We ate beans with spoons and dropped the empties in the ballast whizzing under us.

“Where are we headed?”

“End of the line.”
That turned out to be northern California where we signed on as a vineyard’s seasonal labor. We pruned, watered, and kept our eyes peeled for mealybugs. We worked for room, board, and jugs of wine. After each dinner, our muscles ached from stalking scores of acres. Some time after the Fourth of July—I don’t remember when exactly—a meteor shower cut into the night sky. Lying in the soft grass, the night’s fire crackling at our feet, our mouths stained purple, my father and I watched points of light stretch into glowing ribbons across the black before disappearing. I’d never seen anything like it in New Orleans.

“Those aren’t actually stars, you know,” my dad said, his speech slurred.

“They’re rock, I know.”

“But it looks like they’re stars that are falling. That’s how they got their name, I reckon. It’s like they’re all taped up there and then one of them isn’t and it’s falling and then it’s burned up and gone.”

Though Dad was lying a couple feet away, I felt like I was still in New Orleans with Andrew, lying on the sidewalk staring up at the cloud of bugs pulsing under a streetlight. Wishing I was somewhere else. During that meteor shower it sunk in that Dad didn’t really care whether I was there or not. He hadn’t once clapped me on the back after a day in the field or looked at me over a bowl of chili to tell me how happy he was that I came along. It wasn’t anything like I’d seen on television.

“Why do you leave?” I asked.

He exhaled. I didn’t know whether it was a sigh or if it was just an old man forcing air through his rusty ducting.
“People used to need stars, Cole. Sailing and whatnot. Used them to tell stories. Now we have maps and roads and People magazine. Stars are just ornaments. Most people can’t even see them at night anymore, anyway. So now, those stars have to jump over the edge just to get any attention.”

Other than the crackling fire and the hum of insect legs, I thought I could hear the stars unzipping the sky. And then I opened my mouth.

“Why do you come here?”

“I don’t. Never been here before. Real question is why I go back to New Orleans at all.”

The next time Dad left, I stayed. So while my mother worked at St. Luke’s and my brother collected change in the Quarter, I spent the days in the air-conditioned shotgun drinking Budweisers and playing video games. When I ran out of beer I just got more money from the garage. Our mom kept twenties in a Folgers can out there. It was one of dozens on the chipboard shelves that took up an entire wall—cans filled with nails, screws, bolts, keys, feathers, quartz, paper clips, pencils, pens, hotel shampoo bottles, carefully-folded school assignments, shower caps, shoe laces, caps for guns my brother and I used to pull on the neighbors, and the popsicle sticks with jokes on them—“What do you call a teepee with split personality disorder? Too tense.”

The cans were our mother’s idea. None of them labeled—just organized according to her memory.
Once, when returning the money can I saw something dark and shiny tucked behind the shelf. I lifted a long, vinyl bag with two hands. The zipper that ran down its side fell away revealing Dad’s rifle—in a smaller pocket, the shells.

The fluorescent lights reflected as a bright streak down the barrel, like there was lightning inside. I put a shell in the breech and locked the bolt the way Dad showed me on the particularly drunk afternoon when he got fed up with the dog’s laugh in *Duck Hunt*, threw the rifle and a box of shells on the couch beside me and said, “No more of this play shit.”

Mom never liked the gun. Now that I’d found it, I sighted the coffee cans, the doorknob, the lights. I breathed deeply, sucking the gun oil into my chest. “Bang,” I said. I went to St. Charles and Carrolton, and laid under bushes, the empty rifle bag beside me. When the trolleys rolled by I watched their passengers through the scope. Some of them looked slack faced, tired. Life hadn’t turned out as they’d hoped. But they couldn’t admit it to themselves, so they just let the trolley ferry them from work to home, counting the hours until they had to get up again.

Others were young. Their cheeks red and happy like children on Christmas. They saw life as mystery and promise. They didn’t know that all it took was a bad break like getting pregnant young or your husband losing his job or your husband skipping town for months at a time to wreck it. They all would find themselves stuck in the same routine, the repetition would bleach their rosy cheeks, and they’d live years in each day until they ran out of fuel and disappeared.

It’s impossible to hold a loaded gun and not want to use it. To squeeze the trigger and free the bullet trapped inside. Under those bushes I wanted to burst a
head onto a trolley's bench seats. Just to see if I could do it. Those people, those sad people, I'd think. And I just kept repeating that in my head, until it came out of my mouth and I mumbled it to myself and the headlights on the trolley looked just like the big trucks that tore open deer and left them on the side of the highway and then I jerked the rifle just a little bit when the hammer fell and the lightning leapt out of the barrel and the round ricocheted off the chassis and the whole thing came to a stop and the people went screaming into the night.

But then dad came back, and I put the rifle behind the wall of coffee tins. The smell of gun oil disappeared and I stopped buying Bud and just sat in the beanbags for five months waiting, until mom died.

Dad met the young cop swatting mosquitoes at our screen door without opening it. The cop was fat and his pockmarked face shone under the yellow porch light. He had a stammer and launched right into his, “There’s been an a-a-accident.”

A log from a flatbed on I-10 unchained and came through our mother's windshield. Right in the kisser. Dad told us to go to our room. But Andrew, an emotional kid, charged and kicked the officer's gut right through the screen. The cop let out a gurgle and fell off our stoop into Mom's overgrown hawthorns. While my brother freed himself from the torn screen our father went to the kitchen, took the rest of his 12-pack from the fridge and left out the back door.

With Mom dead, I knew Dad wouldn’t come back for a long time. Maybe never. So I said to Andrew, “Dad’s got the right idea. You coming?”

He was checking the crotch of his jeans. I could see his eyes were wet.
“What about Mom?” he asked.

“What about the funeral? What about rent? How are you expecting to pay for them?”

He didn’t answer. Gravity caught his tears and they ran down his face.

“Fine, it’s all yours,” I said. “Take the plates, the mattresses, the Nintendo, the Hoover, it’s all yours now. I’m fucking leaving.”

I stuffed some clothes in a bag, and left out the back into the hot night. I stumbled through the rutted streets. I felt them sway like a boat in the Gulf, sweat dripping into my mouth. When I got off Carrolton I heard footsteps behind me, running. It was Andrew. On his back was a drawstring bag, a t-shirt flopping out the top. He slowed beside me, we said nothing, just walked.

In the rail yard, the trains slept under their lights like some kind of prehistoric creatures, waiting for their time to come when they could again lurch alive. We crossed crushed stone ballast and kicked ties until we found a car with a missing door. We climbed in the metal box, chose our own corners, and bedded down.

“Where are we headed?” Andrew asked me. The whine of crickets echoed inside the car.

“Really only one choice: North.”

Our father was probably headed the same direction. Maybe even on the same train.

Andrew and I didn’t talk much. I just listened to the clicking of the train’s wheels on the rails—most of the time while sitting in the open door of the boxcar.
watching the engine chase the edge of the flat land that seemed to fall off at the horizon.

We rode the seam between states: Texas, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Kansas, Iowa, Nebraska, into South Dakota. At depots we crept behind counters and into kitchens and stole food—mainly deli meats between hoagie buns, premade pies in cellophane, and cans of beans and corn.

Andrew spent most of the time curled in his corner, though at night, when we were far outside any cities, he'd sit in the doorway and look at the sky. But mainly he just stayed in that corner. Sometimes, when I got sick of watching the fields whip by, I watched Andrew and tried to figure out what he was thinking.

"Can we take a break next stop?"

"You hungry?"

"No. Just want a break."

"You have some place in particular in mind?"

"No."

We stepped into the wash of rocks at the next stop, Hermosa, South Dakota, with our backpacks, a tent we'd lifted in Missouri, and walked into town in the glow of the afternoon. It was only technically a town. A small collection of small streets, trailer homes, an old bank converted to an apartment, the volunteer fire station, a single subdivision of 12 prefab houses, the Hermosa Museum, which looked like it'd never been opened, and a grocery store that exclusively sold dented cans. It was surrounded by hilly prairie.
Andrew, an extra t-shirt wrapped around his head, watched a group of men at the BP. Each stood with a foot pressed into the side of a truck, his hat the color of bone. I walked past them and into the BP, Andrew following. In the food aisle we slipped packages of beef jerky and crackers into Andrew’s waistband. He went to the bathroom to transfer the food into his backpack and I went to the counter with a bag of Combos and two bottles of water, paying with our last ten.

Outside, the men against the truck followed us with their eyes. I saw them watching from under the brims of their hats. One of them spit on the ground.

We walked out of town through a sunflower field, into the prairie. Each step we took, grasshoppers and beetles scattered through the dry grass in waves. Their whine was like a dial tone.

“Where are we going?” Andrew asked, sipping from a bottle of water.

“We need a place to set up the tent. You wanted to stop here and now we need to get far enough out of town to camp.”

For an hour we hugged the line between the plowed fields and the wild grassland where cattle dark as oil wandered. Even in the late afternoon, the heat and sun made our lungs feel shallow, our tongues sticky. Sweat left streaks of salt in the creases beside our squinted eyes. Through the rows of sunflowers and corn we could see the state highway a half-mile away running parallel to our path. There were houses every so often and we cut through backyards, checking to see if anyone was home. Whether or not we could slip inside and take food, maybe some cash from under a mattress. But there were trucks in the garages or men out back in corrals, boots ankle-deep in mud. So we left those houses alone.
In one of the fields we saw a swarm of snakes. They were all black and brown diamonds and crawled over each other so we couldn’t tell where one began and another ended. From somewhere in the spinning mess came a rattle that penetrated the deepest part of my ears so that they itched. I wished I had my gun. Instead I picked three rocks from the ground and hurled them into the middle of the snakes. Dirt rocketed up and they scattered then regrouped before beginning to rattle again. With each stone, this happened as if they were held together by invisible elastic.

We stopped in a ditch between fields where a creek trickled between banks green with tall weeds. We sat and drank from the water bottles and chewed on jerky and fanned ourselves. Andrew batted at his calves often. The rough grasses had left a matrix of thin white lines on the skin below his shorts.

“Do you think we’re going to see Dad again?” he asked.

“Why? Not like he cares to see us.”

“I wonder what they did for Mom’s funeral.”

“You want to go to a group home? That’s what would happen if you—”

“I know, Cole. I’m not stupid. I was just asking you.”

“What we need to do is find a place with no one home.”

“I’m getting kind of tired.”

Though it was still light, the sun had begun its slow descent to the horizon. So I said to Andrew, “Okay, fine, let’s try that last one there—pointing to a small ranch house on the side of a hill—then we’ll pitch the tent.”

“Okay.”
The house was dark. Through the mostly green lawn stuck long strands of prairie grass like loose threads on a sweater. The first breeze all day rustled everything living and dead in a dry chorus, replacing the insects. By the backdoor was a large water dish—ripples from the wind lapped against the sides. There was no sign of any dog or person. No car in the garage and when I pressed my face to the window on the backdoor I saw no one. The knob turned and I pushed my way inside.

“Cole.”

It smelled like Vinny. He was one of my dad’s friends that Mom didn’t allow over anymore after he started our couch on fire. Vinny fell asleep with a cigarette in his hand while Dad was gone getting more beer. He got home in time to put it out, but since Mom didn’t allow smoking in the house and we had to throw out the couch and get beanbags, Vinny got eighty-sixed.

The sun was setting. The dust hanging in the living room glowed orange as if they were flecks of rust. On one wall was a yellow flag with a coiled snake and the words, “DON’T TREAD ON ME.” On the opposite wall was a picture of the Virgin Mary and a topographical map of South Dakota that made the state look like a fingerprint. I told Andrew to search for food while I explored down the hall at the far end of the room.

The walls were wood paneling and led to a bathroom, a bedroom, and a room with a long freezer like at grocery stores. In the bedroom I found a broken silver pocket watch and a stack of cash in a tin with a steam engine on it. From the window, I had a view of a field and the cars on the highway. At that distance I
couldn’t see their wheels turning so it seemed as if they stood in place while the earth turned below them.

Back in the kitchen, Andrew had pulled the bread and peanut butter from the refrigerator.

“What’s there to drink?”

Andrew shrugged.

Nothing in the fridge, but an inch of milk at the bottom of a glass bottle. I drank it and started opening cabinets—plates, glasses, a flashlight, unpopped bags of popcorn, dusty cans of spinach and black beans, a nearly finished bottle of whiskey. I handed the whiskey to Andrew and he put it in his bag. I kept the flashlight.

“Let’s head out,” I said.

“I’m going to the bathroom first.”

“Quick, it’s getting dark.”

I put the watch and the tin in Andrew’s bag on the kitchen floor. He was disorganized and often made me wait or change my plans. I was standing in the living room, thinking about that when a square of light shone on the wall from outside. From the window I could see a truck coming up the driveway with its high beams on. Moving fast.

I ran to the bathroom and banged on the door. There was a crack of light beneath it, the only one on in the house. I heard him fumbling. I pounded again.

When he said, “Hold on,” I ran. Out the backdoor and across the lawn and the gravel in front of the garage, to a three-sided barn, the missing wall open to a
fenced-in pit of mud. I swung myself over the fence and crouched, peeking around the rough barn wall, watching the house.

Andrew burst through the backdoor as the truck pulled into the large turnaround at the mouth of the garage. I saw him in the headlights try to change directions, but he slipped and fell in the gravel. His backpack came to rest on his head, the straps pulling his arms awkwardly forward like they were broken wings.

The driver was already out of the cab. In the light, his features were blurred—he was a shadow cast by nothing. I strained to make out any detail—the only thing I could tell for sure was that one of his arms was longer than the other. He was holding something.

“Stay right the fuck there,” the man growled from the back of his throat.

Andrew scampered to his feet, looking toward the barn. Toward me. Sparks and a crack leapt from the man’s longer arm. Andrew froze.

“I said stay the fuck there. Sit down.”

Andrew eased himself onto the gravel. The man took Andrew’s backpack and overturned it. Out fell packages of convenience store food, a bottle of water, bread, peanut butter, the pocket watch, the money tin, and the whiskey. The man picked at the pile. He put something in his back pocket and something in his front pocket.

“So you’re a thief. If you want this stuff so bad, you know what, I have something else for you.”

The man kicked the bottom of his foot into Andrew’s chest, as if he were knocking down a door. Andrew’s head bounced off the ground. The man walked to
his truck and fished something from the front seat. It was a large bottle. He dropped it on Andrew’s legs.

“Open it,” he said.

Andrew sat up with a hand on his chest and opened the bottle.

“Since you wanted it so bad, drink.”

Andrew looked up at the man for the first time.

“Drink!”

Andrew brought the bottle to his lips with two hands, then coughed.

“You’re going to drink the whole bottle.”

In the circle of light between the truck and the garage Andrew drank, gagging and coughing with each mouthful as I watched from the barn. When he threw up, the man kicked him and made him drink more. Andrew tried to talk, tried to apologize or explain, but once he started, snot and blood hanging down his face, the man pushed the mouth of the bottle into his lips. Andrew eventually got something out, and he screamed it so it echoed off the hills in the darkness. My name.

The man kicked him again. The bottle fell over and drained into the driveway. Andrew lay crumbled in the gravel, facing away from me, sobbing.

“Cole!”

The man knelt on him, lowering his face to Andrew’s. I couldn’t hear what they said, but then he stood up and scanned from the edge of the light.

“You won’t come help your brother? Take responsibility with him?”

The man kicked Andrew again. Again. Again.

“You just going to wait out there and let your brother pay alone?”
He pointed his gun at Andrew’s legs.

“Last chance.”

I wouldn’t notice until later that my fingernails were pushing through the skin of my palms making four red crescents in each. The shadow man focused his eyes on the gaping side of the barn, as if he could see me in the dark.

“Where are you?” he whispered.

Sparks erupted from his arm. Andrew flopped, then curled up, holding his leg.

What other choice did I have? I stood, rolled over the fence, and walked out to the man.

I woke to a blazing sun. Most of my vision was green and red spots. My face felt tight, hot. Andrew lay beside me. His face was purple and swollen. Dark lines and patches of dried blood covered his face like webbing. I sat up. My temple throbbed. I felt a knot just above it. Red flecks came off on my hand. Flies buzzed around us. I shook Andrew. He breathed out and made a noise through his nose.

We were in a small valley blanketed with dry, twisted grasses. A dead tree stood atop a hill to our left, maybe a quarter-mile away. I shook Andrew again and said his name. His eyes, though blackened, were not swollen shut.

His leg looked bad. I spit in my hand and wiped some of the sticky blood from the two holes on either side of his calf. They were wet, but the bleeding was under control.

“Fuck,” he groaned.
“How do you feel?”

“Terrible.”

“Your leg looks like shit. Fucker took our bags, too. Why didn’t you fucking listen to me?”

Andrew winced.

“Can you walk?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Not much choice. I think we’re way the fuck out. I don’t see any tracks. Who knows where he dropped us off.”

“He shot me, Cole.”

“It’s not bleeding very much and I’ll help you. We need to go.”

I lifted him up and started walking. With one arm wrapped around my shoulders, he used me as a second leg to cross from valley to hilltop where we looked for houses or roads on our side of the horizon. On top of each one Andrew would collapse to the ground and hold his calf, defeated. The wound grew yellower and the surrounding skin more inflated, a shiny purple in the sunlight. He winced from the pain—though I don’t think he realized how much he’d fucked up. If we got Andrew help, he was headed back to New Orleans to a bunk bed in some home where they collected a check per head.

He said, “Shit it fucking hurts,” and, “Are we headed in the right direction?”

“Who knows.”

“It feels like fucking fire ants are crawling under my skin.”

I pulled him to his feet.
Before we went to the vineyard, my dad took me to San Francisco. We went to Golden Gate Fields and he let me pick a horse and put $5 on it. I picked Deal Me In. He got us both Dr. Peppers and hotdogs and we sat in the stands to watch them run around the track. I remember the must of dirt and animal. My father smiled the whole time. When the race started the eight of them broke out in a line that quickly collapsed into a pack around the first turn. Deal Me In had a white spot like a bit of sunlight wrapped around its belly, so it was easy to tell apart. It stayed in the middle most of the race and made a move at the end, kicking out to the side of the other galloping horses, but it came in fourth so we left and walked to the Golden Gate Bridge. It was the largest thing I’d seen. The mist from the bay made it look like it was so big that it poked through the clouds.

“Why is it called Golden Gate when it’s red?”

“You know, Cole, people jump off it all the time.”

“This confused me. For what?” I asked.

“Because they aren’t happy and they don’t think it really matters whether they’re still alive.”

“They drown?”

“Well, that bridge is really high. You fall so fast that the water can’t splash quick enough to break your fall. It’s like landing on concrete. You splat. Then, if you survive the fall somehow, you get sucked out to the ocean and drown.”
We stood there for a long time. The breeze picked up dirt and made my face feel damp and gritty. My father’s hair whipped to the side and sometimes in his eyes, but he just stared at the thing for a long time.

He said, “I read a story a while back in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*. Couple was celebrating their anniversary, 10th or something. It said they had met on the Golden Gate—both of them had gone there to jump.”

So I’m back to the beginning, when we paused once more under the throbbing sun. I wanted to get a view of what was around. At the foot of the hill we saw cattle—beyond that, two houses, a barn hunkered behind a line of trees, and a highway with its cars and trailers. But Andrew’d had enough. He sank to the ground against a bare fence post, no longer strung with barbed wire. The discoloration in his leg had stopped traveling, but the swelling had gone outward about as far as it could without starting to split open the purple skin.

He asked me to go and get help.

“We’re almost there.”

He said his leg fucking hurt, he was dizzy, his lips were numb, and he was seeing spots.

“You stopped sweating,” I said.

His shirt, though tight against his body, was dry.

He looked at me, his face twisted and sad. If there had been water in him, he’d have been crying.

“I just want to go home,” he said, slurring.
He didn’t care about a group shelter or that Dad wasn’t coming back. When his head rocked backwards and hit the fence post it reminded me of when he was ten and our family went to Gulf Shores, Alabama, on vacation. Andrew and I went to the beach while our mother soaked in the hotel’s pool and our father played slots. I spent the day under an abandoned umbrella, reading magazines I stole from a gas station. Andrew played in the sand. He played right through lunch and into the afternoon. We didn’t speak. I read about video games and what kind of man naked women wanted. Andrew hunted crabs and played with other children and they threw sand into the air and raced into the waves together. Neither of us wore sunscreen and Andrew drank nothing other than Gulf water. When we returned, he was burned and wilted, only able to whisper. My mother asked me what the fuck I was thinking. My father hit me for being so goddamn dumb. We had to take Andrew to the hospital because his skin blistered and he pissed brown.

I shouted at him, “We’re not going back to New Orleans. You think being there will make anything better? You won’t see Mom anyway. Her fucking head was smashed in.”

His eyes were stuck in a blank stare. I wasn’t sure if he’d heard anything I said. Even if he had, he was just like those people on the trolley. Even when the fucking worst of life uncoiled and bit them in the leg, they couldn’t admit to themselves that it was always going to turn out that way. That life was fixed shit.

I laid my brother on his back and buried my shin in his neck. His eyes might have moved to look at me, bleary and unsure, but I couldn’t quite tell. I shifted to press down with all my weight—it felt like old celery under his skin. No snap. I drew
the deepest breath I could and leaned on him until my own chest burned and stars spotted my vision. Then I stood and began to breathe.

The highway was probably a mile away as the crow flies. The grasshoppers were jumping in their waves and the rustling prairie grass sounded like the spring rains in New Orleans. I started down the hill toward the house, picking up speed as I descended. With everything bright around the edges, I ran faster and faster down until, for a moment, I felt like I was falling.
I was in the kitchen, chopping vegetables for a late lunch, when I heard the toilet flush for the fifth time, so I set down the celery stalks and investigated. At the bathroom door I paused to listen. It was the week of second grade parent-teacher conferences and Sarah had the school day off. I heard footsteps so I pushed open the door. Sarah stood over the toilet bowl and in it was a dead rat. Its tail bobbed in the water rippling at the end of the cycle.

“Are you trying to flush that?” I asked.

Sarah looked at me, brushed her hands on her dress, but didn't answer. It had been two months since my wife, Colleen, died and Sarah still wasn't speaking. The doctors and therapists had said give her time.

“I won't be mad. Did you find it outside? In the field?”

We lived on 80 acres of land—some woods, some wild grassland, the kinds that once covered all southern Minnesota. Until they moved to Arizona, the land had been my in-laws'. Though they weren't my in-laws anymore.

Sarah pushed her glasses higher up her nose and sniffed. Pollen, dust, animals. She didn’t let allergies stop her from going outside. I brought my head down, closer to her eye level, and asked her again where she found the rat. I could see the networks of veins running through her cheeks and forehead, the capillaries
that pulsed in red plumes beneath her skin. She was small for an eight year-old and
pale and fragile, but she had never seemed to worry about those things.

Sarah scooted between me and the toilet and pushed the lever down again—
the tank gargled and a vortex formed beneath the rat, spinning it, pulling it toward
the hole in the porcelain. The rat’s head and rigored legs kept it suspended, safe
from being sucked into the pipes. I was surprised the old, high-flow toilet hadn’t
sucked the thing out to the septic tank. In the last two months it had handled three
goldfish, a frog, and a hamster—that I knew of.

“I’ll ask once more: where did you find it?”

Sarah shrugged and watched it slowly rise back to the stasis level.

“I need you to wash your hands right now, we’re eating lunch soon.”

I slid her red stool in front of the sink. Sarah stepped up. I turned on the
water and squirted two pumps of soap in her hands.

“What do you know why touching a wild animal is dangerous?”

She rinsed her hands without looking up.

“Hey, look at me.”

She pulled her hands to her sides. Drops of water fell from her fingers onto
the stool. Sarah peered over the toilet bowl’s lip one more time. She wiped her nose
on her sleeve and left the bathroom without drying her hands.

“You especially can’t be doing this at Diana’s this weekend,” I said after her.

“No picking up animals, alive or dead.” I had been reminding Sarah of my upcoming
trip for a week, trying to prepare her, to make it easier on both of us.
I hadn’t traveled since Colleen’s car accident. She had swerved to avoid a something, overcompensated, and plowed the Jetta through a guardrail, down a wooded ravine. A farmer found the crumpled car while hunting squirrels. Later, with a toothpick in his mouth, he told me she hadn’t looked dead—not a spot on her except the single starburst bruise on her forehead. Her airbag was still packed tightly in the steering wheel when the EMTs cut her seatbelt and pulled her from the wreck.

After the accident, Sarah climbed the maple tree for the first time. She sat up in the branches and looked over the backyard to the field we’d seeded with prairie grasses. I worried she’d fall, but I wasn’t going to take her out of her mother’s tree.

My wife’s parents planted it when Colleen was born. And when she was pregnant with Sarah, when her parents packed up for Tucson, we sat under the maple where the sunlight filtered through the leaves onto our faces. She told me stories about when her parents rented the field to alfalfa farmers. During the day, between the green rows she had poured tea for dolls, dug up worms for her father’s fishing trips, and raced her cocker spaniel. At night, she sleepwalked.

Sometimes she woke in the kitchen, a glass of milk in hand or on the couch, television snow crackling through the dark. And once or twice a month, out in the alfalfa. The rising sun woke her by burning through her eyelids.

Then, around the time her middle school friend Janie died of leukemia, the sleepwalking stopped.
I hadn’t told Sarah her mother’s stories. I was rationing them for the milestone father-daughter moments I imagined we would have: birthdays, first crush, first F, first broken heart, graduation.

When Sarah sat in the maple, I wondered what she saw or wanted to see in that field.

The bar stool from my work shed was under the maple’s lowest branch. Some of the duct tape holding the cushion together flapped like an old flag. Through a pocket where some of the orange and red leaves had already fallen, I could see Sarah’s fine hair flutter on her shoulders. I rinsed off the last two plates and checked my watch. Time to leave. I dried my hands and went outside.

“What are you doing up there, Nugget?”

Sarah looked down at me but didn’t answer. She pumped her legs and rocked herself back and forth—trying to move the branch like it was a swing.

“We have to go to your conference with Ms. Vogel.”

Sarah leaned back and pumped harder, as if she only needed a little more oomph and the branch would take her higher, up to the place where disease had stripped a wide hole in the leaves. A better vantage point. But the branch didn’t move, and neither did she.

“Kiddo. Now.”

Sarah let her legs go loose and slowly come to a stop, then scooted toward the trunk, down two limbs, and dropped into my outstretched arms. When I set her upright she straightened her red jumper. On her chest was a pocket embroidered with a yellow bird. She pulled out a hard candy wrapped in clear cellophane, popped
it in her mouth, and put the wrapper back in the pocket. She looked at me and nodded.

Ms. Vogel was a thin, older woman. A styled tuft of silver hair topped her narrow head. She was excited to see everyone. I remembered that from the school’s open house the previous month.

We sat at her kidney-shaped table in the back of the room, surrounded by walls of clear plastic bins, filled with blocks, spinners, and crayons. A pencil clock the size of a trophy bass stretched above the chalkboard. The chairs fit Sarah well, but most of my weight stayed on the balls of my feet. I pictured the bolted legs tearing through the yellow plastic seat. Ms. Vogel said it was good for parents to see the world from their child’s perspective. She wanted to remind parents how awkward it must be for their child to live in such an adult-centered world.

“Sarah’s a very bright girl,” Ms. Vogel said, to start off.

“Yes, she is.” I smiled. It was true. Sarah’d always done things better than other kids her age. She walked early. She spoke early. Read early. Colleen had been relentless. Sarah already knew her times tables to twelve.

“I’ve been concerned, though,” Ms. Vogel said.

“About?”

“Well, first, I haven’t gotten her to talk for me, yet, though we’re working at it. Aren’t we Sarah?”

Sarah studied her left palm as if she had never seen it before.
Ms. Vogel continued, “I am concerned that more and more Sarah’s not completing her work. She just stares out the window. I’ve moved her seat to face completely away, but when I look up, she’ll be back looking out the window. I need to stand by her or she won’t even pick up her pencil. Just look out the window. Have you noticed similar behaviors at home?”

She was looking at her feet as she tapped the sides of her toes together.

“I can’t say that I have,” I said. “I mean, she’s outside all the time.”

“Do you see her do homework?”

I didn’t remember the last time I had. She always had before. Colleen told me we hadn’t gotten any complaints from her first grade teacher. I hadn’t been able to be there because I was on a business trip. “Hasn’t she been turning it in?”

“Well, no.”

“I’m sorry, but why haven’t you called me about this?”

“I’ve left messages at your home several times.”

Sarah stopped clicking her toes together and walked her fingertips against each other like they were mirror-image spiders.

I nudged her with my elbow. “Well?”

She folded her arms and buried her head.

“Sarah?” Ms. Vogel asked. “What do you think?”

Sarah’s feet started clicking again. Ms. Vogel turned back to me.

“This won’t harm her in the long run, but she does owe me work.”

“You’ll get it.” I patted Sarah’s back.
Ms. Vogel nodded then said, “Good. And I have one last thing. Sarah, do you mind if I tell your father about what Gerald and Kayla said to you last week?”

Sarah shrugged, her face still down.

“I need more than that, Sarah,” Ms. Vogel said.

Sarah went still and nodded into her arms.

“Thank you, Sarah. Mr. Gilman, because of her complexion, after we learned about jellyfish two weeks ago some students began to call her Jellyfish. Sarah wrote that it didn’t bother her. But I talked to the students and their parents anyway.”

“I appreciate that, Ms. Vogel.” Sarah hadn’t told me, but then again she didn’t let that kind of stuff get to her.

“If there’s anything else?”

“Actually, Ms. Vogel, I’ll be out of town for work Sunday through Tuesday. It’s the first time in a while.”

She looked at Sarah, who still had her head buried, and nodded. Sarah’s toes clicked with the second hand on the big pencil clock.

Dinner was salad from a bag, grilled cheese cut into triangles, and tomato soup. When Sarah finished the last slurps of her soup and wiped most of it from her face, I asked her if she knew what homework was late.

She nodded.

“Do you have it?”
Sarah got up from the table, folded her napkin, placed it beside her plate, and disappeared down the hallway. She reemerged with a stack of paper, the edges all aligned as if it were bound. Where had she kept it?

“Do you have a plan for finishing this?”

She nodded.

“Okay.”

After I put Sarah to bed and washed the dishes, I sat in the family room and watched one of the shows Colleen used to fold laundry to. It was the one where people that had great lives did things for people that didn't have great lives and everyone cried after. I flipped through an old issue of *Good Housekeeping* while the host of the show told me how thankful he was for the chance to help the Smiths, or whoever.

When the show ended I went through two checklists. One was things I’d packed in Sarah’s bag for her stay at Diana’s. The other list was for my bag, which I hadn’t yet packed. Presentation box, two changes of clothes, bathroom stuff, phone charger, laptop, laptop charger, headphones, and disposable camera—I took pictures of my business trips for Sarah. She liked to see where I went.

When the next show started I saw the porch’s floodlight click on through the glass doors. Neighbors’ cats usually tripped it. I sat up and squinted. I didn’t see any animals, but in the field, near the edge of the light, there was a small shape on the ground. I walked to the door and put my forehead against it. It was a lightly colored lump patterned with the Little Mermaid. I slipped on some shoes and walked into the cool night.
The lawn felt rigid against my soles, and though I couldn't see my breath, I had to cross my arms to not shake. A breeze pushed across the field. The prairie grasses hissed and waved. I arced around until I saw the side of Sarah's face. Her head was tilted upwards, the starlight filtering down.

I touched her shoulder. The wind picked up and the maple leaves crackled to life.

"Kiddo, it's late."

She sniffed. The floodlight clicked off.

I looked up and tried to see what Sarah was watching. The Milky Way was a pale smear across the middle of the sky. Stars radiated out in every direction. It was like someone with a compass had poked a million holes into a giant black dome. I pointed to a constellation I recognized, but then realized I had forgotten the name and its story.

"You know Mom used to come out here at night," I said, looking down at Sarah. The starlight made her skin almost glow.

She sniffed twice.

I crouched next to her. A stronger wind surged past and between us. The maple tree murmured. Under the rush, I heard a tiny sound shake in Sarah's throat like a skittering insect was caught in there. I put an arm around her back and the other under her knees and lifted her up.

Sarah shrieked, spasmed, and kicked her way out of my arms. It surprised me so much she fell, still tangled in her blanket, and hit the ground with a low thud.
moved to pick her up, apologizing, but she kicked again. So I stood over her, dirt on
my knees, and thought about what to do, thought about what Colleen would do.

Sarah just lay there, trembling, like a broken-winged bird, unnatural on its
back. In one movement scooped her up and carried her inside. She pushed against
me and slammed her head into my sternum.

I set Sarah down on her bed and, with my arm still wrapped around her, lay
down, too. I rubbed her shoulder until it stopped heaving. I talked into her ear until
her breathing slowed, and finally she was still. Then I let go. Immediately, she
squirmed upright and looked out the window beside her bed. It was open. I got up
and closed it. Never had she thrown a tantrum like that. But then she acted like it
never happened.

Had Sarah been sleepwalking? Had she always been sleepwalking? I took
deep breaths. “Talk to me,” I said. She didn’t look at me or move. I squeezed her
ankle and imagined that Colleen was in the kitchen, sitting on the floor, her back
against the oven. “About anything. Please.”

Outside the porch light clicked on. Two cats ran across the yard—one chasing
the other. It stayed on for a minute then it was dark again. Colleen and I never put an
alarm clock in Sarah’s room because we wanted her to sleep and not worry about
the time. Now I wondered what time it was—how many hours we had left before
morning.

Eventually, I said, “Well, we’ve got a big day tomorrow so I’m going to sleep.
You should, too.” I laid my head down and closed my eyes. I squeezed Sarah’s ankle.
I counted. We stayed like that until the sun came up.
Diana lived down the road. Her husband owned a landscaping business so he was gone most days managing projects. Sarah and I still went there on Sunday afternoons, though we didn't go to church anymore. Sarah and Diana's son, David, had out a tub of Legos in the living room. Diana and I sat at her kitchen table and drank coffee from PTA mugs. The table was made of a dark wood and had leaves that folded up so Diana could host dinner parties for ten.

Diana tried to keep me up to date with the gossip in town. The previous night, the principal's youngest son wrapped his car around a tree. Diana told me how the boy shattered an arm and his jaw and how lucky he was to still be alive after a crash like that, then she looked at me and said, “Sorry.”

“It happens,” I said, and nodded at her to show that it was okay, that I was okay, and leaned back in my chair to check on the kids through the doorway.

David, wrist-deep in Legos, cupped and stirred them as if he were playing with sand on a beach. He sifted while Sarah sat on an overstuffed armchair and crinkled a plastic wrapper between her fingers. David turned, said, “Shh,” and continued to dig. I watched Sarah tuck the wrapper in her sock and then drum her fingertips on the chair’s armrests. David and Sarah used to play together and she had always had a great time. But she hadn’t joined him for weeks. I wanted that for her again, though I supposed it was good for her just to be around other kids. So I wouldn’t push her too hard. Diana agreed.

“Why are they making you go on this trip?” Diana asked, after I told her about Sarah’s tantrum in the field.
“Got to get back at it sometime. While it’s a well-oiled machine, BizComm can’t run itself.”

“Still.”

I sipped my coffee and looked out at their backyard: the inch and a half-long grass, the wandering flagstone paths, the playscape, and the tall, spear-like cedar trees that fenced it all in.

“I don’t think Sarah will give you any problems. I think it’s our house without Colleen.”

“I wish your work was more understanding,” Diana said.

“It’s alright.”

“Really, you should say something to them. There are how many other people that could do this trip?”

“I asked for the trip, Diana. It’s alright. I need to get back to it.”

When we finished our coffee I washed both mugs in Diana’s stainless steel sink. From the kitchen window, I looked out at her backyard and thought about her husband and his lawn mower with the adjustable deck. I traced his winding path along the alternating dark/light green stripes to the playscape. There, at the bottom of the slide, Sarah sat in the pea gravel, poking into the gray rocks. She looked up at me.

I dried my hands and nodded for Diana.

“She looks like this every day,” I said.

“Like she’s waiting for something.”

“Yeah.”
Around 1:00, rain came in a downpour. Sarah ran inside from somewhere behind the cedars. Her hair clung together in wet ropes and left dark streaks down a sweatshirt I pulled from her Barbie bag. Diana gave her a hot chocolate. Sarah held the warm mug while Diana patted her head with a towel.

Across the room, David slammed his fist onto a Lego X-Wing he had built. It blew apart into small plastic bricks that clinked off the coffee table. I stepped over David’s mess and knelt by Sarah. My flight was at 4:00 in Minneapolis. I had to leave.

“You know you’re coming here after school tomorrow.”

She nodded. Damp hair slipped between my knuckles.

“Diana will get you ready for school both mornings. Remember to finish all your homework.”

She nodded again.

“Just two days this time. I packed your bag with everything you’ll need. I fly in Tuesday at noon. You can watch for my plane during recess if you want. I’m not sure you’ll see it, but you never know.”

I stood up. Sarah scooted forward in the chair and hugged my thigh. I bent down and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. Diana knelt with David and helped him clean up his broken spaceship.

The job was routine. I installed a server and led the employees through a seminar about how to use their new intranet. Productivity thrives on clear and timely communication, yada, yada, yada. One more step toward BizComm president.
The owner was a short white man and wore Polos that barely held in his large stomach. He nodded with too much enthusiasm. His palms were sweaty and he kept asking where in “the tubes” all this new communication would happen. I laughed and said with a smile, “Right where you need it to.”

I called Diana from the tarmac while our plane went through final crosschecks. Her voice sounded off, like maybe something was wrong. “What happened?” I asked.

“Oh, nothing, nothing bad. Sarah finished half of all that homework last night. She was a little machine.”

“Okay. Good.”

“Robert, it might be insomnia.”

“Sarah?”

“I got up at three in the morning for a glass of water and she was sitting by the back door, just staring. I said her name. I snapped in front of face. Nothing.”

“Oh jeez.”

“I had to carry her back to the fold-out. She didn’t fight me, though.”

“Magic touch.”

“Does she do that at home? Besides the other night?”

I didn’t think so. After Colleen died, I got a prescription for sleeping pills, but her therapist said she shook her head no when he asked if she was having trouble sleeping. “I’ll call Dr. Pritchard tomorrow. Thanks, so much, Diana.”

“Sure.”

“How’s the husband doing?”
“It’s the busy season alright.”

After the plane took off, a flight attendant with an up-do and ribbed turtleneck came to my row for drink orders. I asked for a coffee and one of those little bottles of Crown Royal. When I handed her my credit card, I noticed her earrings were snowmen made of beads threaded on a single strand of brass.

“My wife had the same ones,” I said, pinching my earlobe.

She smiled. “Oh really? I wish I remembered where I got these. Sounds like she has taste.” She turned to continue down the cabin, and I remembered I had the camera.

“Excuse me,” I said, touching her arm. “Odd, I know, but can I take a picture of your earrings?”

She hesitated then said, “Sure. I’d like that.” She knelt beside my seat while I dug through my laptop bag for the camera. I took the picture and she worked her way down the aisle again. I tapped the camera on my knee. The only other pictures were of my hotel. Gold and green striped wallpaper. A table with one short leg. A view of the parking lot. I wished I had a video camera so the woman could’ve shaken her head a little so the snowman seemed alive.

While I waited for her to come back with my drinks, the hum of the engines and the fatigue from explaining the abstractions of electronic communication to middle management, just a step above Neanderthals, put me under, the camera still in my lap.

I woke to another flight attendant’s face. One caked with heavy foundation to fill the pockmarks of severe adolescent acne. Her lips were Corvette red. A pale blue
scarf was folded below her neck and she had wings pinned on her left breast. Her hand was on my shoulder, shaking me gently.

“Sir, is your name, Robert Gilman?”

“Yes.”

“Is this your credit card, sir?”

She held out a blue Visa card. My name was stamped along the bottom. Expiration: 1/98.

“Yeah. Yeah, I ordered a drink,” I said, rubbing my forehead. With my free hand I found my camera on my lap and slid it to my side.

“Yes, Mr. Gilman. I’m afraid that woman doesn’t work for the airline. She had no right to be taking orders or payment.”

I was still waking up—I squeezed a thumb and index finger across my eyelids and tried to sift through what the flight attendant just said.

“She’s a passenger on this flight, sir.” She pointed. Seven rows back the woman with the snowman earrings was buckled into an aisle seat. She smiled at me.

“Can I still get my drink?”

“Yes sir. We’ll be coming around the cabin in ten minutes. And do know that the woman has been confined to her seat for the remainder of the flight.” She smiled and continued down the aisle. She didn’t have earrings and she wore her pants high on her waist.

I breathed in the familiar wood smell of my bedroom, my own pillow soft under my head. Out of a muscle memory I still hadn’t shaken, I stretched and ran my
hand across Colleen’s side half-expecting to find her. I rolled onto my back and
exhaled through my nose. The quilt felt heavy on my chest, uncomfortable, so I
pushed it back and immediately felt the draft from my window. My skin flexed with
goose bumps. I wondered how many hours were left until I had to wake up and get
Sarah ready. I opened my eyes to check my alarm clock, but was blinded.

Instinctively, I rolled toward the middle of the bed, away from the window.
The fog retreated from my head. My eyelids, still closed, were green on the inside, as
if I was lying under a bright noon sun. I brought a hand to my face, turned back, and
opened my eyes. The window next to my bed boiled over with light so white it
looked blue around the edges. It was as if a lighthouse had been built in my
backyard while I slept, its beam trained on my bed. I felt on my nightstand for the
alarm clock and brought it to my face: 3:05am.

I sat up and kicked the rest of the covers off. On the floor were my jeans and
shirt, I pulled them on, and rolled off Colleen’s side toward the door. During the
dismount I slammed my foot into her nightstand. Her candy dish and lamp rattled
against its wooden top. With one hand pressed against the wall, I groped my way
into the hallway toward Sarah’s room. Through every doorway and window on one
side of the house burning whiteness streamed in like a prolonged movie flashback.

At Sarah’s room I pushed open the door. The backs of my eyelids were now
green with bursts of white, like a field of seeding dandelions. I felt my way to her
bed and ran my hands across it, searching for her. From the pillows down to where
the sheets disappeared under the mattress, there was nothing.

I knew she was in the field.
At the backdoor, I lifted a hand to my eyes and squinted between my fingers, through the glass. The field was still. Over it was a glowing ball, maybe three feet across. It hung low over the field and threw out light in every direction. It bleached the prairie grasses of their browns and purples. The maple tree stood naked, its leaves a colorless blanket on the ground. I pulled open the door and staggered onto the porch. The light was so bright it rang in my ears. Under the floating ball I finally saw her small, lone shadow.

I leapt off the porch. The grass whipped my feet as I ran, half-blind across the lawn, unmowed in too long. I must have thought about each of Sarah’s close calls: the fall in the road from her bicycle, our car accident four years earlier, when we lost her in the mall, when she fell off the City Park footbridge into the pond.

I collapsed next to Sarah and wrapped my arms around her. She didn’t look at me. Instead, she bent forward toward a long hole in the ground. The flood of light washed through her hands and I saw what I thought was her skeleton and her pulsing arteries as she lifted dark earth from the field and set it aside. The hole was so big I could have laid down in it, half my body surrounded by dirt, half in the night air.

But I wasn’t thinking about the hole as I held onto Sarah. I was scared and in awe of the light. I felt so heavy underneath it, like we were pinned there. I thought about the last appointment with Sarah’s therapist. I pictured sitting on his couch and him telling me we needed to give her more time. That time was all that could help. More and more time. I remembered feeling helpless, like without the couch beneath me I would have fallen through the floor into some empty space few ventured.
Sarah stopped digging and tilted her head back. She felt small, but confident in the face of that bright, intruding thing. I pressed my nose into her scalp and squeezed tighter. I tried to think of a story about Colleen. But they were all outlines in my memory that wouldn’t fill in or focus. It was like each one had fallen from my mind to that place under the therapist’s couch. Like they weren’t around for Sarah and I anymore.

Tiny fingers clasped my hand. They tugged and I opened my eyes. The light was gone. I hadn’t noticed Sarah wriggle from my arms. She stood over me in the dark, silent—the porch light on behind her. She tugged at my hand again. In that moment, while I was still on my knees in the dirt, I thought about asking her for answers. But instead I unfolded myself and stood up.

Sarah nodded and led me back to the house so we could both finish our sleep.
I hadn’t noticed Mr. Wilson was in the office—what with the mechanics air-gunning truck tires and Rush ranting on the AM—until he stomped and the ceiling fans rocked in their casings like it was earthquake or something. Mr. Wilson’s suspenders did their damndest to keep his pants up, their U-Haul print trembling around his gut in black and orange blurs. The mountains of pink and unlogged service reports on my desk whispered to me, “He’s coming for you.” In the emails I’d been copied, national hounded him about our lag, saying the paper needed inputting into the online database yesterday. I clacked the keys a little harder, scrunched my forehead, and mumbled nonsense to myself, knowing I was so close to settling my dad’s loan to me in lump sum. Mr. Wilson lumbered over and I held my breath as he passed me by, stopping instead in front of the new guy, Elijah.

“How do you just let a customer get off my lot when their van has the goddamn side mirror ripped off? With goddamn holes ripped in the door? Did you even get the goddamn story?”

Elijah put his feet up on a stack of the MISSING INFO forms. I had just asked him to track down information on those.

“Ran into a utility pole. All the way from Phoenix fucking like that.” Elijah came up from New Orleans with a girlfriend and all his words were rounded with “aw” sounds in a way I didn’t think I’d get used to.
Mr. Wilson grabbed Elijah’s foot, shook it, and said, “And this little piggy cried wee-wee-wee all the way home because he wasn’t doing his job.” He pushed Elijah’s feet from the desk, scattering triplicate forms from underheel. “Off the furniture. And get yourself cleaned up. Look like you’re sleeping in a dumpster.”

Mr. Wilson pointed at me, with an I-told-you-to-get-him-straight look, said, “My wife says I give too many chances,” and slammed the door, rattling the window overlooking the lot where the rows of 14- and 17-footers, all white and silver and orange, hunched on the frozen asphalt, their iced windshields blaring in the sun.

I met Elijah three weeks earlier when he walked into the office holding our WANTED sign like he was one of those movie drifters, just arriving in town. Not sure why he asked me for the position—I was nineteen and behind in paperwork on my first job off the family farm. He stood there—the ice in his beard melting onto my then manageable NOT ENTERED pile. Mr. Wilson had come in, given Elijah the up and down, and waved him back into his office. When they emerged and shook, Mr. Wilson asked his usual last interview question: favorite movie. Elijah said, “Die Hard.” With their hands still clasped, Mr. Wilson leaned in with a raised eyebrow, until his belly touched Elijah’s belt buckle, and shouted, “Well, yippee ki yay, motherfucker!” Mr. Wilson had burst out laughing—his knees quaked, his red face sparkled. “You’ll fit in good here, kid.” Elijah looked at me and I shrugged.

When Mr. Wilson pulled away, off to one of our two other locations, I breathed out, felt my muscles loosen. I said to Elijah, “You got to stop that. I told him you’d get it together.”
“Matty, Matty, Matty. I don’t know how you look at that computer map all day,” he said, scratching in his tangled beard. His hair stuck out in straw-stack angles and shined under the fluorescents like he’d botched an oil change. He tossed a crumpled form at my head. “How do you do it, you go-getter, you?” he asked, shaking his head like he was my dad or Coach Schneider.

I couldn’t help but smile, though I didn’t want to. “Part of the job. And it’s sensei to you.” I pointed and clicked inside U-Haul’s national computerized inventory. I wondered what the downtown Seattle or south side Miami offices were like. Outside my window the exhaust clouds rose from tailpipes into the early winter air.

My stomach roared. Almost lunch time. I dragged the 17-footer from the “On the Road” bin to “Des Moines - East,” and entered the damage. Easy. Marked it “unpaid.”

Elijah looked amused. I could tell he had a few years on me, years that hadn’t shook out quite right. The stares he fell into. His wide dark pores that grayed his skin the way Coach Schneider’s face had been when it wasn’t gin blossomed during football season. But Mr. Wilson still treated me like Elijah’s senior. I had to teach him everything.

“You’re going to call about the mirror and door?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Elijah said, bending over a large duffel he kept stashed between his desk and the wall. He’d brought it all that week. Thick, woven cotton the color of the mold, it was big enough to fit a sixty-pound dog. He said it was for the gym.
Elijah pulled out an apple, then snugged up on his keyboard and started pecking away, every once in a while raising a hand to muss down his hair.

Elijah got the Phoenix driver's credit card over the phone and I punched out for lunch. Elijah said he had his own. When I came back from Mickey-D’s, curling off I-80 by our towering Cyclops sign, I had a large Coke rumbling in my gut. I ducked through the mechanics bay, walked by my desk, and pushed open the staff pisser. Door didn’t always lock right. Elijah was standing there shirtless, the pink dispenser soap a pathetic lather on his head and in his pits. We both just stood there for a second, the cool office air rolling between us.

Elijah dropped his hands to his sides, his chest marked with a few long, serious-looking scars and shitty tattoos. “Dude. My lady kicked me out. You mind if I crash for a week until I get back up?”

I’m an Iowan, born and raised. In snowstorms my dad chains his truck’s tires and takes off down the county roads, looking for folks stuck in drifts or blown into the ditch. In that way I’m my father’s son. Of course Elijah could stay with me.

On Saturday nights in high school, Sherm and me the rest of my buddies drove into the fields our families farmed with an army of F-150s and spray painted Chevy Luminas. There we whipped deep circles into the loam and pig shit and drank cans of Keystone and threw the empties in our trunks as time sped and blurred and single moments stretched and became our entire lives. My friends and I had run deep.
Elijah kind of filled the hole left by my high school buddies back in Adel. We talked college football and shot the shit about women that came in, wondering what hid under their coats. With Elijah around I kind of liked fielding and tracking reservations, collecting payments for busted radio dials. So when Elijah moved in, I threw his duffel into the corner of my apartment, offered my futon, and handed him one of my Xbox controllers. We split-screened *Halo* on cooperative through his learning curve, then dug our heels in on opposite teams and hunted each other, strapped with carbines and grenade bandoliers. I ordered pizza and Elijah said to keep him a tab for food and rent. He’d pay me back once he’d found a place. Then I’d be even closer to paying off my debt to Dad. He’d leant me the money and said, “Fine, give the city a try, but you’ll be coming back.”

At nights we got drunk with beer Elijah bought and sometimes went into the backyard with my paintball gun, hopper full of Romanian-bought red paint paintballs, and stood ten paces back from a cardboard Han Solo cutout. We shot Han and Elijah told me to fuck my family and friends. I didn’t need them guilting me about money or moving away. I told him to fuck that bitch Amanda. I didn’t even consider that the other tenants could call the police because of our noise and they never did. Elijah said he’d been all over and the only thing his dad ever taught him was that family ties you down.

“That’s why he left. That’s why I left. And what does your dad want? You to live on a square of shit-smereared land in Bumblefuck. Fuck him,” Elijah said. “Fuck him and fuck this job. Us kind need to be getting on anyway.”
When he said that I took a minute with the gun in my hands and noticed how the city light washed out the stars. Elijah didn’t say anything else about his family when I asked, said he never thought about them either—but mine, I still did. At my parents’ house, I used to gig frogs in the night on Fisherman’s Creek, with the galaxy overhead looking like God knocked a milk pail across the sky’s center. A white river that started and ended in places unknown. Neither in Iowa.

My grandpa used to sit at our dinner table in his overalls and cut his meat with silverware wrapped in fists. One day on the Register’s front-page an article called Iowa “fly-over country.” “Because we’re at the center of everything,” Grandpa had said. It wasn’t a particularly warm day, but he was sweating—beads ran down his face to the skin that hung from his jaw. “All the food—what sustains this country—starts here, then shoots out, like a thousand points of light.” He was dead before the year was over.

I wondered about flying on a plane and what the World Trade Center hole looked like close up. Elijah knew. He’d been all kinds of places—the Rockies, Miami, Mexico. He was different than me. It was easier to leave if you didn’t have roots.

Elijah watched me stand there, thinking. He said, “World ain’t watching you stand there. World’s moving on. Don’t need to care if you even exist.”

I squeezed off the whole hopper, splatting out Han’s face. A few careened past, through the chain link and into the alleyway with skidding echoes.

Elijah gave the thumbs up that he’d lashed the cable around the last bale as I’d showed him. I levered the throttle and the tractor surged through fallow mud.
The wheel vibrated, the crystalline air stabbed my lungs. Another surge and the steel rope snapped from the rolled hay like a bullwhip and the our load bounced down the ravine, clipping and shattering the top boards of a retaining wall before landing in Fisherman’s Creek. I killed the engine and jumped from the cab. The echo still shaking the cedars, I two-stepped from the field, down to where Elijah stood against the spared section of retaining wall. He shrugged the duck jacket I’d leant him higher around his collar and seemed to be counting his breaths as I descended.

“The hell happened?”

“Did what you said. It just let go.” He kicked at a roughly hewed plank. My boots, too. I’d thrown the whole getup at him that morning when Dad called, said he needed help at the farm. Right away. Bring someone if I could. My first instinct was dial up Kutz or Sherm, but it’d been awhile and they’d be busy with their own. But I had Elijah, the freshly showered guy on my futon, my going-on two-week roommate, his bag unloaded in the corner, milky bowls on the coffee table, television blaring.

“You looped twice?”

“What’d I just say?” Though Elijah’d cut back his beard with my trimmer, his mustache had iced into needles. “This is farm work?”

“Never seen this before. But yeah. This sort of thing.”

Dad wasn’t exactly sure what happened—either my brother misstacked the bales or the field’s edge had eroded and destabilized the whole pile. Like spilled marbles. That’s why we’d never put them near the ravine to begin with. But Dad couldn’t supervise everything anymore.
Our last failed bale sat with eight others lost when the pile shifted. Nine humps amongst the floating ice shards in Fisherman’s Creek. While Elijah stared down at them with unaffected eyes, his gloved hands popping knuckles one at a time, Dad came galloping over the tractor bridge with one leg he couldn’t bend that well.

“The hell, boys,” he’d said from under his hood, face beat red by the cold.

“It’s my fault. Elijah tied it. I checked it. Thought it’d hold like the rest.”

“Apparently not.” Dad kicked at the ground. “Got the other twelve.” I nodded.

“Well, looks like we’re losing hay to the Mississippi this year. Shoot.”

“Suppose so.”

Elijah hawked. “We done then?”

Dad clicked. “I thank you for the help.”

“No problem. Matt, I’ll be in the truck.”

We watched him hike the ghost rows and clunk across the wood and steel to the next field, toward my family’s home. The clouds had slid in low that morning. A gray filter for the day, making the whole scene on the back property like something out of pictures Mom kept in shoeboxes. Dad looked at me sidelong, his head tilted, his ungloved hands webbed with blood. “Mom said your brother called. He’ll be home soon. Little too much last night.”

“I’ll bet.”

Dad grabbed the cable and started winding it. “So that’s who you’re living with? Ain’t it a one bedroom?”
“Nah he’s just getting back on his feet. He’s on the futon. Girlfriend tossed him. He was sleeping in the library or something.”

“Huh. Paying rent?”

“Says he will for the days he’s there.”

Dad hung his head and tied the last of the cable around on itself, bundling it. He looked tired. Skin had gathered around his eyes and hung a bit beneath his unshaved jaw. Like I’d moved out ten years ago, not just five months. It was one of the few times I realized he was the shorter one.

“Well it was good of you to high-tail it out here.”

I shrugged.

“You know if you change your mind. I mean, your brother’s trying,” he said and cuffed me on the shoulder, tossed the cable in the back bin, climbed the tractor, and coaxed it alive. “Say hello to your mother before you leave. She misses you. She ain’t just birth to you.” He shoved the gearshift and rode the Deere further back in the field, toward the path that cut through the whispering cedars to the fields beyond.

Mr. Wilson was calm most of the time. Then something would trip in his big head. It was like he ran with so much anxiety hidden behind his face that something little could set him off and turn that little thing into an emergency. Like this one.

“Those trucks need to be cleaned now. Hours ago. I don’t care if you have to sit out there freezing with him, Matt. It can’t be put off anymore. Get it done,” he said, then turned to Elijah, “You hear me, Roomie Number 2?”
Elijah didn’t turn from his computer. Mr. Wilson had begun going through me, treating me like Elijah’s manager, as if I didn’t have other things to do. I’d beat down the stacks of forms and was finally entering them on the day-to-day, but there were still national’s seemingly daily changes in the procedures for the filing and keeping of records.

Mr. Wilson pulled up a chair next to Elijah and sat in it backwards. He said, “You haven’t been completely worthless lately, so why don’t you tell me your side of what this is all about, so I understand.”

Elijah shrugged.

“You make quite a case.”

Elijah leaned back. “It’s just going to get used again and nobody much cares if it’s swept out. All those lucky fuckers getting out of this shithole town. I’m just sick is all.”

Mr. Wilson picked up the day’s stack of unprocessed requests from my desk and set them on Elijah’s. “You got a choice. These or the trucks or you get moving on, job-wise. People don’t clamor, but I’ll find someone to at least do more than nothing.”

Elijah glanced at me, appearing to weigh his options. The fan overhead squeaked in its casing, on the radio Rush Limbaugh made some exasperated sound and went to the phones. The caller didn’t respond immediately, so there was this pause in the office. It gave me the same feeling as when I heard the cable give on that bale, before I turned to see Elijah still standing there.
Elijah sighed, kicked his feet off the desk and grabbed the jacket I’d leant him. Mr. Wilson stood up, giving me a sidelong look, and shuffled into the vehicle bay where a mechanic waited with a spanner.

Three 14-footers were filed in the auxiliary bay that Mr. Wilson kept just above freezing. Grit and salt streaks fanned from the wheel wells and skirted their undercarriages—their paint, dull. They’d just been returned that morning, but still they looked frozen to the ground. Like they might stay that way until spring.

Elijah and I had a bucket of hot water and bleach that steamed on the steel bed, cut through the acrid stink. A man and his son had rented that one. The man—wearing a seed hat, but well groomed—paid and apologized for the smell. “Son doesn’t take too good care of his things,” he said, while I processed their balance. “Doing good in school though, so can’t complain. Used to just sit and watch the sun rise and set. Yep, starting at Drake in January, just getting settled now. Computer scholarship. Boy knows computers. Drive from Lincoln got a fire in my ass something great. Got a Walgreens ‘round here? Oh and how much do I owe you?”

Elijah scrubbed hard for about thirty-seconds at a time, getting frustrated until he kicked at the metal wall and the hold reverberated. I ignored Elijah and the rest of the trucks, focusing just on the spot in front of me—same as I’d done when bailing hay. Hundreds of acres would make you crazy. That’s what happened when Dad started talking about me taking over. Having the house someday. The land being mine. Looking out for my older brother.

I kept scrubbing, but asked him, “Elijah, you’re still planning to cover some rent?”
“Look, I’ll get you when I can. I got to save up to get out of your place. Get out of this fucking town. I’m cleaning some kid’s mess from a fucking moving truck.”

“Maybe you should try your girlfriend again.”

Elijah kept scrubbing, lowering his face to the metal.

“She might be over her bullshit.”

“Doubtful.”

“I could talk to her. Tell her you’re doing good.”

“Drop it, dude.”

My square had something like tuna fish caked on it. I scrubbed harder, shrinking the spot until it was gone. I almost said, “Well you got to do something, dude,” but didn’t.

We got to Lyle’s Liquor just before it closed and bought a six-pack of Bud tall boys. After I beat Elijah a fourth Halo game in a row, he demanded we get more beer, so there we were. Elijah paid even, said he’d forgotten about some of the cash he’d saved, found it in his other pants. I carried the bag with four of the Buds, looking for police, as Elijah and I sipped from the red cans. It was the coldest night so far, hovering around 10°F the TV said. I felt dry air creep up my pants, over my boots and socks, chilling the skin on my calf.

“Can’t take Wilson or that fucking job much more,” Elijah said. He pulled the tab from his can with a ping and flicked it into a yard.

“Said you needed a job to get out of here. And to pay me. I don’t know what else you want.”
“Every day you get it rubbed in your face that you’re stuck here.”

“For now I’m choosing to be here. After your girl kicked you out or whatever you didn’t have to stay here. Where you’re at is where you put yourself.”

Elijah drank deep and a rare silence settled around him. He looked dark and drunk. A few blocks down I saw a car’s headlights approach the stop. I heard it skid until it slowed and settled in the intersection. The tires flailed for catch, the car inched forward until the rubber hit road and it zipped behind the trees and houses and the sound faded away.

Meanwhile, Elijah had veered down a side street lined with wide-branched beeches and speed bumps that marked every third of the block. I jogged to catch up, my feet unsure on the slick sidewalk.

“I’m going to show you Amanda’s place,” he said with a belch.

“Oh. Now?”

“Because you don’t fucking believe me.”

“No, I just don’t see why she’s still not talking to you.”

“Bug up her ass. Like your dad, Matt.”

The houses were nice. I never drove through there, even though it was only a stone’s throw—maybe a mile or so—from my apartment. Two or three stories, a couple with columns flanking the front door, all with dormant flowerbeds, no doubt with big things planned for spring. Elijah was looking around, sometimes turning as he walked, his beer sloshing loudly in the half-empty can.

After a while, the houses shrank, but we kept going until we stopped in front of a light blue, single-story place on a corner lot. The beginning of a new
neighborhood. Honda Civics rather than Expeditions out front. “This is where I used to call home,” he said, pointing at its dark windows and bare hedges that lined the stoop.

“Nice house.”

“She’s a managing night nurse at a hospital. Gets paid really good. Good place.”

“I always thought that science stuff was cool. Like figuring out how people’s brains work, you know?”

“She was in on all that.”

“You angry?”

Elijah hesitated, swaying slightly. Then he stomped across the yard, the frozen grass crunching underfoot. I watched him set his beer down on the stoop, set beside it, and undo his fly. I could’ve picked out that patter from down the block. I stashed the beer bag under the Corolla on the curb, hunched, and ran over to him, afraid we might be seen. “Elijah, what are you doing?” I whispered, checking the house’s windows and the street. “Dude.” I grabbed his arm.

Elijah turned. I heard it first, then felt the wetness soaking through my pants, against my thigh and over my knee. I pushed him and walked back to the sidewalk, wondering what to do about it, what to do about him—the living room he’d taken over. My money. While shaking, I thought I heard him say, “Showed you.”

On the walk home Elijah asked me about the beers. I lied and said I thought he’d had them.

*
Mr. Wilson came into the office red in the face, with an uncapped Sharpie in his mouth and greasy handkerchief in his hand. “Where’s Elijah?”

The phone receiver was to my ear, a half-filled-out insurance claim in front of me, when I looked out the windows—first to the vehicle bay, then I split the blinds behind me and checked the lot. Rows of orange and gray trucks sat in the sun, ice still twinkling on their windshield and hoods. Through the receiver, Sherm’s phone rang and rang. “He said he’d be outside,” I said.

Mr. Wilson bit down on the marker and stuffed his handkerchief into his back pocket before heading outside and standing on the cracked asphalt, hands on hips, scanning all his trucks before kicking at the ground. Beyond him was the interstate—I-80—that stretched from California all the way to New Jersey, a nearly identical route to the ties and rails of the Transcontinental Railroad. In that time, the corridor transported people west for gold and wide-open spaces and east for industry and society—even then, Iowa was a place people traveled through while heading elsewhere.

Elijah rumbled into the parking lot about a half-hour later, bouncing over the curb in a cargo-van with “U-Haul” printed large across its side. I knew all that reflected on me because Mr. Wilson treated me as Elijah’s manager, but on our rides home, when I brought up a too-long lunch or playing computer games on the clock, Elijah would just fiddle with the radio dial, wondering aloud why all the Des Moines stations sucked.

Elijah got out with a cigarette between his lips and a half-eaten cheeseburger wrapped in yellow paper. He shrugged my jacket higher and smiled and waved at
Mr. Wilson who was already stalking across the asphalt, ignoring the ovals of ice that looked like portholes to the underground.

I leapt from my desk and jogged outside without grabbing my own jacket from the hook beside the door, expecting to hear Mr. Wilson say in his Asian voice, “Oooo, I ruv reasons to fire pee-po!”

Instead, when Mr. Wilson pulled alongside Elijah, he asked, “What do you call a woman walking toward the sunset?”

“Don’t know.”

“Westward ho!” he shouted and fell into a coughing fit. Mr. Wilson grabbed and held Elijah’s arm as he stopped and doubled over, spitting on the ground every three or so hacks.

“Ha,” Elijah said, trying to shake free the boss’ grip. Mr. Wilson squeezed tighter, his knuckles white and cracked.

When he was able to right himself, he continued. “And you might as well be headed west, too. Because you aren’t working here anymore.”

“Is that a joke?”

“Oh heavens, no. Life—life is the joke. ‘You’re fired’ is nothing of the kind.”

Though Mr. Wilson had let go, something changed in Elijah’s face. His eyes flashed like light off a blade. He stepped toward Mr. Wilson and asked, “How many fat people does it take to screw in a light bulb?”

“And he’s daring, too!”

“Zero. Because there aren’t any left. Because I killed them all.”
Air escaped Mr. Wilson like bubbles popping inside him. I say that only because I felt the same, like a tankful of air had been injected into my throbbing chest. While looking into Elijah’s eyes, Mr. Wilson put his hand on my shoulder and said, “Matty, I think you should take your friend home and the rest of the week off. We’ll be fine here. Come back on Monday.”

Elijah turned and headed for my truck. His stride lengthened and when he was halfway there he looked up at the sky and said, “I hear there’s going to be snow.”

I heard the streetlight explode while I waited for the microwave’s ding, telling me my instant mac and cheese dinner was ready. Earlier Elijah had taken my paintball gun to the backyard. I slammed from my apartment to confront him, the screen door slapping behind me. My kitchen window cast a square of light onto the snow-dusted ground just short of Elijah’s wide-stanced feet, his cheek flush to the aluminum endcap. He and the gun shuddered between the falling white flakes and another round thwapped high against the apartment building across the alley. The wall and the gray arm of the now dark streetlight were splattered in red, as if the shattered bulb had been filled with blood. Elijah ignored me, instead lowered the gun, tilted his head back, and in his mouth caught the falling flakes.

I’d been silent on the drive home, deciding I couldn’t help Elijah, couldn’t train him one way or the other, couldn’t even be his friend. I needed my money. In the silence of my backyard and the dampening snow I made another decision: it was as good a time as any.
“You trying to get me kicked out of here, too?” I asked and reached for the gun.

Elijah pulled it across his body, beyond my fingers, and said, “You got to stop worrying about other people. Going back on Monday, ain’t you?”

“It’s my fucking job and I’m saving, too. Not that you give a shit.”

Elijah slid away from me and fired two more shots, this time at the streetlight down the alley, where it met 28th Street. The snow was sticking, adding shading to the eaves of the neighboring buildings, texture to my lawn. I counted the puffs of breath from my mouth and Elijah’s as we stood there, the cold seeping through my thermal.

“I’ve been thinking about you staying here.”

Elijah shook his head. “You know, I used to have one of these,” he said, hefting the paintball gun. “Real rifle though. Lightning. Was my dad’s.”

“A couch isn’t really a permanent place.”

Elijah lifted his left foot and brushed the slush from his sole with the paintball gun’s barrel. “Suppose not. I was about to get moving anyway. One of us has to.”

“And my money you owe.”

Elijah, with something like amazement said, “Fuck, I’ve done so much for you.”

Elijah poked at his shoe once more before leveling the gun and pulling off a string of rounds. It was not the quick pops, but the wet slaps on my chest, that sent me spinning to the frozen ground, as if I’d stuck my finger in an exposed electrical
housing. Sparks snapped through my synapses until they found their way to my
fingertips and toes and leapt from my nails into the night air.

Elijah dropped the gun and stepped over me, toward my door. It rattled
against the jamb. The paintballs left in the hopper whirred against the textured
plastic as they settled, then nothing.

I lay there, listening to the hum from the highway, slowly regaining my
bearings, until I pulled up my shirt and felt the snow against my back. Already, I
could see in the pale light a constellation of bruises dotting my chest, as if the
pockets of dying blood had bubbled up from deep inside, like oil from a hole. There
were six of them, varied in size, but spread in a pattern I recognized—of what I
couldn’t remember. It was one my dad pointed out as we lay on the roof outside my
childhood window. I remember feeling the shingles’ grit on warm summer nights
holding me, preventing either of us from sliding down and over the gutters. My
father smelled like dirt and the soap he washed his hands with at the kitchen sink
every evening.

I laid there, in the grass I shared with three other apartments, as the snow
fell, and tried to remember the exact night, the exact angle at which he’d pointed
toward the sky, the exact cluster of stars and their story, but it never came and
eventually I was cold and realized I had to confront Elijah and make him leave.

I pulled my arms to my sides and pushed myself forward and up. My hands
were wet and I brushed the snow back onto the ground. The snow wasn’t white in
the light, instead it was sepia toned, as if this all this had happened long ago, as if it
was just being replayed. I stood and crunched through the snow. When I got inside, Elijah was gone.

On Monday I drove down Washington and turned off into Westwood, passing under the leafless, snow-cruste trees and skipping over speed bumps. I navigated the streets until I came to a familiar intersection where a house on the corner, blue as windblown ice, sat huddled against the deepening winter. In the driveway, two people shoveled the latest white stuff. Both had hair, the same color as their blanketed lawn, poking from beneath their knit hats. I wondered whether they also had to dig out the long, deep creases in their faces from the snow that whipped in the air with each toss of their shovels.

At work, Mr. Wilson was waiting for me at my desk. After I peeled off my jacket and sat, he handed me a piece of paper, still fresh with the smell of ink. A faxed police report. Mr. Wilson had reported one of the cargo vans missing the day after he fired Elijah. It had been found in Missouri, parked behind a rail yard warehouse. Door open, key still in the ignition.

When I finished reading Mr. Wilson stood and knocked on my desk. I looked at him as he opened the door and pushed past a familiar customer walking in, the chimes shaking and tinkling as if they were carved from ice. A guy about my age.

“I was in here last week with my dad. He thinks he left an envelope of cash in the truck. Says nobody’s been answering or returning his messages.”

“I’ve been out on vacation.” I pulled open the drawer we kept that kind of stuff in. Nothing. I shrugged. “Hope there wasn’t too much money in it or anything.”
“Few twenties or something. Could I look through the truck?”

“We already cleaned it,” I said, then stopped. I wondered about the beer Elijah’d bought that night. “If we’d found anything we’d have told you. You all came from Lincoln?”

He rolled his eyes.

“I thought about there for psychology or something,” I said. “At some point, maybe.”

He was already headed for the door. “If it was my money I’d be on the coast. Miami or New Orleans. That’s the whole point. Getting out. Finally.”

That bastard. That lucky bastard. Right then, in the east side U-Haul office, I swear I felt the earth move. Nothing short, subtle, or slow. Instead, like an engine warming up, the RPMs climbing. The door rattled closed and I felt the ground beneath my chair turned faster. Elijah, that smart fucking bastard. I saw tumbling hay bales and tracks crossing states like stitches and my father and Mr. Wilson and all of Adel standing between the ties, daring me. I swiveled in my chair, toward the window and the cars on I-80—the ones headed east and west and away from there—and wondered whether they were actually sitting still and only seemed to be speeding along because the ground beneath them was spinning on madly.
THE COVE (2005)

The day my older sister shipped to Iraq, I took the lavender jewelry box she kept in her closet and threw it into the cove behind our house. I remember the lid flew open and cast out the tin trinkets she collected as a child, painted gold and bulging with large purple gems. I watched the necklaces and bangles, earrings and broaches descend through the water to the bottom, ten feet below the surface, while gray storm clouds pulled a gloomy shade across the sky. White lightning scorched across the bellies of the thunderheads. The wind whipped my hair and the waves and stirred the cove. When I lost sight of my sister’s collection, she was in the gut of a C-17, somewhere over the middle of the country, on her way to sandstorms and jihad.

My family had carved out a real American life between the vineyards on the Northern California coast, and she just gave it up. We had the deed to a house with a driveway and there was nothing between it and the blue horizon. My father could sit and watch game shows and the 49ers, and my mother had a kitchen with enough space for a rolling cart that held the silverware, microwave, and a shiny new griddle. My sister and I had our own rooms, a backyard, and the limestone cove that echoed through every silent night.
The afternoon Morgan shipped, I stood against the wind and biting rain, and above the ocean spray until I was ready to go back inside, sit down, and have dinner with my parents and Morgan’s empty chair.

Morgan graduated early from high school, December 16th, 2002, when I was just twelve. She enlisted a week later. She didn’t have to. She didn’t need a job, not like when we lived in a two-bedroom apartment on Fernandez Drive in Modesto, before Dad won the lawsuit against B.P. Barnum after he t-boned Dad’s car by the eastside Walgreens. Morgan was fourteen when it happened, working the register at the Kleen Kwik, getting paid under the table, helping our family with utilities, basic cable, and movie tickets once a month. When she rang up a customer’s bill for a wax or standard package, her fake gold bracelets clinked softly, as if they were made of tiny stones. The day of the wreck, the TV in the waiting room was on a B.P. Barnum commercial, the one where he wore a cowboy hat and said, “If you’re in a car accident, call me, B.P. Barnum, because I rustle up the biggest settlements in all of Modesto.” It was during that commercial that Morgan picked up the Kleen Kwik phone and Mom was on the other end. Dad had been hit by the cowboy lawyer himself.

The only reason we won the lawsuit was because one of Barnum’s rivals, Kyle “Cash-Now” Keller, took our case to try and bankrupt the Settlement Cowboy. B.P. had blown a BAC of 0.3 at 1:00 in the afternoon. So after Dad got out of his leg and arm casts, and his broken right hand healed mostly straight, Mom and Dad bought a new Ford Bronco and moved us out of Modesto to a clapboard house on
the coast. Morgan didn’t have to work to help out the family anymore. We had satellite TV and ordered movies from there.

Morgan could’ve gone to college. All her teachers told our parents she could do anything she wanted. Morgan aced every math test and even wrote an essay called “Why Women Matter” which she read in front of the whole school. It was like an honest to God movie. Boys and girls alike choked back tears. Brock Anderson, the varsity quarterback, ran out of the gym with his face buried in his hands. Morgan was an athlete, too. All-conference pitcher. Once, when her team was down by one, in the last inning of sectionals, with one runner on base, she hit an in-the-park homerun. She got around the bags not because of poor defense or sloppy relays, but sheer speed. In a postgame interview, her mustached coach said he could’ve sworn her feet never touched the ground.

So why, then, join the military? Was she bored? Was she angry? Had she become the kind of patriot that stuck a NEVER FORGET magnet on the back of her car? I’m still not sure I know. We hadn’t noticed any of those so we were completely surprised on December 22\textsuperscript{nd}, 2002, when sitting at the dinner table eating Mom’s turkey meatloaf and cheesy potatoes Morgan said she had an announcement.

“I signed up with the Army today. I leave for Basic the day after New Years.”

Mom put her fork down. “You need to call them right now and undo it.”

“Mom, no. This is something I have to do. And I can’t anyway.”

“Do you know what it took to get you that secretary job at Dr. Feider’s office?” The plan was that during the spring Morgan would answer phones at the dentist office where Mom cleaned teeth and save some spending money for college.
But instead she’d be in Kansas, crawling under barbed wire and squeezing off rounds into paper outlines of dark, bearded men.

I put my head down and quietly scooped white and yellow potatoes into my mouth.

“They’ll find someone else,” Morgan said to Mom.

“And so can the Army. There are plenty of people happy to do it. Like that football player. Tillman,” Mom said.

“Exactly, then it’ll just be someone else.” Morgan’s eyes were focused on her plate. She pushed a piece of meatloaf next to her potatoes, scooped them both up with her fork, and ate it.

Our mother twisted her face back to her trademark cheery smile and asked, “Well aren’t you scared you might get sent to Afghanistan? Did you think of that?”

While slowly chewing, Morgan said, “It doesn’t matter, Mom. I’ll go where they need me. Just like Dad did.”

The three of us turned to Dad. He had just put a forkful of cheesy potatoes into his mouth and was chewing them quietly, not looking up.

Dad had served in Vietnam, but didn’t really talk about it. At least not with us. All I had known for a long time was that he’d been shot in the arm, just above the wrist. He still had the scar. I always figured he did all his talking once a month, when he’d pull his fatigues and black hat out of the closet, drive somewhere, and wouldn’t come back until the next morning. He’d be at the kitchen table when we came down for breakfast. His eyes would be bloodshot and he’d sleep the rest of the day. What I knew about his time in Vietnam was from letters Morgan found when I was seven.
and we were playing hide and seek. He’d tucked them in an ammunition tin he kept in a larger cardboard box under his bed. He’d filled it with old issues of *Playboy* that came out during the war. While I fumbled through pages of big hair and pale breasts, Morgan read them. They were all from Grandma and another woman named Nancy. It was before Dad had met Mom, so we were pretty sure she was his girlfriend. We didn’t find any that Dad wrote, but could tell by what Nancy and Grandma said to him that Dad, while he didn’t want to be there, at least felt like he was doing some kind of good. I still have never heard my Dad sound like that about anything.

Take, for example, when we moved to the house on the coast. Instead of working six days a week at Red Lobster, Dad took only a part time job, twenty miles away in Fort Bragg. Every Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday he worked a 10-hour shift frying, poaching, and scrambling eggs for the all-egg and John Wayne-themed restaurant, The Egg-cellent Duke. In middle school, when we were studying possible careers, we had to ask our parents why they had the jobs they did. Mom, who was a dental hygienist, said, “Because I’ve always wanted to help people be healthy and beautiful.” Dad said, “I can cook eggs.”

On his days off Dad fished on the coast during the day and flipped channels at night. He’d come across a Vietnam special on the History Channel or something and get stuck watching. Occasionally they’d be about the dogfights over the jungle or the connections between the USSR and North Vietnam or the generals Westmoreland and Abrams. Mostly, though, the shows were about something controversial, like Khmer Rouge or Agent Orange or the My Lai massacre. It’d be those times he’d get
agitated and drink through a six-pack of Olympia like water and pull at the seams of his armchair with his scar-wrapped hand.

So that night at the dinner table, we were all interested in Dad’s opinion. What did he think about Morgan leaving, like he had thirty years earlier?

Finally, Dad swallowed his potatoes and said to Mom, “We’re past the point where that matters.”

“They won’t let me into a combat brigade anyway,” Morgan added, before taking a sip of her milk.

Two years later, after basic in Kansas and time at the Yongsan Garrison in South Korea, Morgan came home for two months. It was then she got her deployment orders, not to Afghanistan, but Iraq. When we dropped her off at the bus station, and we waved goodbye, I saw her wrist was wrapped with some of those gold bracelets she used to wear. Where we were home, I went into Morgan’s room and dug through her closet, looking for the box I’d forgotten existed.

After Morgan left, dinners were the worst. Mom’s normally cheery smile, the one that she held behind her mask the entire time she cleaned plaque from a patient’s teeth, had been amplified. Most days she looked like the Joker—her blonde curls large with hairspray, a toothy smile that mismatched the apathy in our house. She still passed every dish to Morgan’s empty seat, rather than across the table to me, which meant I had to get up and walk around to Mom’s side. Dad’s mood didn’t seem to change much, but it had always been difficult to read his wide, blank face. The only thing that ever seemed out of place was his crooked nose, the result of a
poor setting after another American soldier broke it during a search and destroy mission in the jungle. The man had attacked Dad and another soldier while they slept, screaming, “Who killed Marilyn! Who killed Marilyn Monroe!” He told me that one night in Modesto, on the concrete stoop of our apartment building. He was surrounded by Olympia empties, I was surrounded by Matchbox cars. I didn’t know who Marilyn Monroe was, but I always remembered the name because of the way Dad looked at me when he said it.

In those days after Morgan left for Iraq, and before she came home, Dad’s nose was the only part of his face that told a story.

Dad stopped eating at the dinner table. He spent his nights in the recliner with the TV on, Hungry Man dinner in his lap, an Olympia on the end table.

So Mom and I ate with two empty chairs. She in her hygienist scrubs, reeking of grape-flavored fluoride tooth polish. Me in my unwashed school uniform, reeking.

Mom usually asked me a few questions about my day:

“So how was your day?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did you learn anything at school?”

“Nothing really.”

“Tell me one thing you learned at school?”

“I don’t know. Nothing.”
“Well, I had a wonderful day, today. I saw Wesley Brown, who has finally started flossing and it’s really paid off. That was something from my day. Are you sure you don’t have anything to say about your day?”

“I thought you couldn’t tell people who your patients are.”

“You’re being such a wonderful son tonight.”

When I finished my dinner, I’d climb the carpeted stairs—creaking with each step—to my room. I’d lie in bed and leaf through one of *Sports Illustrated*’s Swimsuit Issues I’d bought and taped behind my headboard. I have these memories of lying on my back, holding a centerfold of Anna Kournikova on a beach over my head, while the sound of machine gun fire and planes soaring low over the thick jungle rose from the vent below my window.

When we lived in Modesto, carnivals came through town every other week during the summer, and set up in the park behind North Modesto High School. On those Saturdays, Dad took us while Mom was taking classes to become a dental hygienist. I followed Morgan as she walked across the trampled grass, between dingy tents and rusted campers. We whipped around in teacups and threw ping-pong balls into jars filled with goldfish. We ate corn dogs and soaked in the smells of sugar, hot oil, and humidity while Dad leaned against portable metal fences and talked with the carnies who also wore black hats stitched with ships and colored bars and the word VETERAN.

Morgan’s throws had always been accurate. She knocked down milk bottles and threw beanbags through diamond-shaped holes. I remember standing to her
right, her non-throwing arm, looking down the tunnel of stuffed pandas, plastic lizards on leashes, Ring Pops, and the kind of jewelry that came out of machines in plastic balls, as she lined up each toss. But even when one of Morgan’s throws set off spinning red alarms and the weasel-looking man gave her the choice of jumbo-sized prizes, Morgan pointed to the pegs on the wall from which hung gold chains and bracelets that shimmered as they swayed in the July breeze.

She wore all her spoils at once. I followed her around in my flip-flops—my mouth rimmed with grease and powdered sugar, as if she were a sultan, her neck and wrists heavy with jewels.

Those nights, full of fried candy bars and funnel cake, we would only poke at Mom’s meatloaf and cheesy potatoes or macaroni and cheese with peas and hotdogs or spaghetti and Spam. But we drank water as if there were no end. After Mom and Dad were in bed, I would sit in Morgan’s room and help sort through her winnings. From each day, she’d only keep one. Once she’d debated and put each of the finer pieces through increasingly intense scrutiny, she tucked her favorite into the lavender jewelry box our mother gave her when she turned eight. The rest we carried out of the apartment, into the warm, summer darkness. Morgan and I would creep through our neighborhood, ducking behind bushes when cars bombed down the avenue. We slid across backyards and tiptoed behind apartment buildings where the blue light from TVs flashed through threadbare curtains. We threw the necklaces and bracelets into the trees of our neighborhood, so they hung down like signal flares falling in the night.
When we moved to the house on the ocean, I was ten, and with no other children nearby, during the summers Morgan and I continued to spend our days together. We played a game Morgan invented called Treasure Hunt. While I ate breakfast, she went out to the backyard and hid one of the necklaces or rings from her jewelry box outside. Then I had to find it. The hunt kept me busy, sometimes for hours.

The cove was nearly a perfect circle, maybe a one hundred feet in diameter, and extended down thirty feet in a rough cylinder. The walls were irregular with dozens of ledges carved naturally from the white rock.

Sometimes Morgan tucked the cache in a crevice near the water and I had to climb down the narrow outcroppings to find it. Other times it was in a snake hole in our lawn. Once I couldn't find the treasure all morning and hunted into the early afternoon. Morgan wouldn’t even give me hot and cold. She just sat in the grass with her legs dangling over the edge and watched me scuttle around on the rim wall. After the sun had set, when the moon was coming up, I climbed back up to the lawn where Morgan was sitting and reading by flashlight. I picked up a rock the size of my foot that was next to her so I could throw it into the water. But when I lifted it, I found hidden underneath a golden chain with an inlaid red plastic jewel.

“About time,” she said without looking up from her book. I threw the stone into the cove.

Eventually, Mom stopped eating at the dinner table at all. She would dish up my plate in the kitchen, then carry one for her and one for Dad into the living room.
She’d come back and stand next to me, her hand on the back of my chair. She had
begun to smell less like grape-flavored tooth polish and more like cigarette smoke.
I’d become familiar with the smell between third and fourth period when my friend
Nesha and I smoked behind the baseball dugout. The only other evidence I’d had
that Mom smoked was one picture in a photo album from when Mom and Dad
started dating. Her eyes were half-closed and she had two lit cigarettes in her
mouth, a bottle of beer in her hand. When Mom stood beside my chair at the dinner
table, she’d ask me about my day. I’d shrug and she’d go back to the living room. Our
house became filled less with our talking and more with the TV. Mom and Dad
watched the 24-hour news channels, which in those times were all suicide bombings
and flag burnings. After I’d finished eating at the dinner table, I would sit on the
couch next to Mom and beside Dad’s chair, sometimes watching the screen,
sometimes watching the reflections of the images on their eyes.

Mom stopped asking me about my day after Mr. Mitchell caught Nesha and I
smoking and we both got suspended. He pulled the butts from our mouths and
marched us to the office. He held the cigarettes still lit in the hand that gripped my
shoulder. By the time we got to the office, some ash had fallen and burned tiny holes
in my shirt. The day my suspension was over, some kid, I didn’t know his name,
bumped me in the lunch line. Sloppy Joe meat spilled down my leg. So I threw my
tray in the kid’s face and started punching him. Sloppy Joe coated my knuckles,
flicking off in thin arcs each time I drew back my fist.

During the nine months Morgan was in Iraq I got suspended twice more.
Once, after we got a letter from Morgan in which she’d included a picture of her
posed against a stone wall, assault rifle in hand, a tower of thick, black smoke rising behind her. I’d been looking at it under my desk in biology when Ms. Lindstrom told me to put it away. “Fuck off,” I said, and pushed my textbook and notebook onto the floor. While I waited in the office for my Mom to come pick me up, I heard the civics teacher, Ms. Powell, announce over the intercom that I’d won the school’s invention contest with my idea for a super strong, remote controlled steamroller that drove in front of military convoys.

We got bent-corner envelopes, stuffed with folded yellow tablet paper and a thimbleful of sand, from Morgan every week. They had her supporting a field medic. Sometimes she went out on convoys and patrols of neighborhoods, sometimes she sat at the base and waited for humvees to bring back shredded bodies. Morgan said she preferred letters to email because they took longer to write, which helped her kill time. We got her letters every week for those nine months, even got one on the Saturday two men in uniforms came to our door and told us Morgan had been hurt and was in Germany. The letters still trickled in for a few weeks after that.

Morgan and her medic had been transporting two injured soldiers to the field hospital, through a neighborhood the Army had cleared three days earlier. When the driver stopped because of debris blocking the road, an RPG spiraled through the air and into the rear fender of the humvee. The explosion took the medic’s legs off and drove a piece of shrapnel into Morgan’s head. The men at our front door said the doctors in Germany repaired her skull with a metal plate. Then they flew her to DC for her recovery.
After Dr. Feider, a vet himself, said, “Don’t worry. Go,” Mom left Dad and me for ten weeks to be with Morgan. She stayed with one of her cousins who lived in Baltimore, a woman I’d never met. I spent those first afternoons tearing through the dunes with Nesha and Bobby on Bobby’s dirt bikes. The sand would fly up in wide arcs and be carried away inland by the wind.

About a month in, Dad and I were sitting in the living room watching First Blood. It was the part where Rambo was in the police station, surrounded, and the colonel was talking him down. Rambo started crying. Dad was reclined and clutching a can of Olympia to his chest with his good hand, and when they finally put the handcuffs on Rambo, Dad shook his can as if it were a bell, drank the last bit, and set it down, beside four others, on the end table.

“Have you heard from your mother?” he asked me.

I looked at him, his soft belly expanding and contracting under his stained v-neck undershirt, and said, “Nope. Nothing since last week. You?”

He kind of grunted and shook his head. The movie credits rolled and then it went to commercial. I leaned back on the couch and took a sip of my own Olympia. Dad had offered me one about a week after Mom left, so we’d been sitting around each night, watching TV, eating Hungry Mans, and drinking Olympia. Sometimes Nesha would call me, ask if I wanted them to pick me up, to go drink beer on the dunes or shoot fireworks at the Hendersons’ llamas. I’d say, no, and that I’d see him the next day, behind the dugouts after third period.
Another movie was starting, *Die Hard*. Dad came back from the kitchen with four more beers and gave two to me. He sat down, cracked one and said, “So, you going to go and join up like your sister?”

“No.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Doesn’t seem all that great. Morgan got blown up and you got shot,” I said.

“What’s your plan then?”

“Don’t know.”

With a knotty finger from his B.P. Barnum hand, Dad touched the circular scar on his opposite forearm, where the AK-47 round went through-and-through.

“Just asking,” he said, “because you ain’t like your sister. But I was just like you.” He sipped his beer. “But that’s what I figured, soldier.” He’d never called me that before. Just “Danny” or “boy.”

“The teachers pull me out of class sometimes to help them with their computers. And I won the invention contest in February.”

“Mmm,” he said, and nodded.

When Bruce Willis dropped that dead terrorist on Sergeant Powell’s cruiser—Dad’s favorite part—I looked over at him. He’d fallen asleep. Without Mom around, Dad had been working six days a week at the The Egg-cellent Duke. He said it was about money.

When the movie was over, I turned off the TV and went upstairs. I walked past my room, to my parents’, and pushed open their door. The bed was neatly made, the sheets hanging perfectly off the sides, just as Mom had left them.
She finally brought Morgan home in the beginning of May. It was a Saturday. Morgan walked out of San Francisco International slowly and with Mom’s help. The piece of humvee door or chassis that pierced her skull had also scraped her brain, so she wobbled when she walked. Dad and I got out of the car, gave them each a hug, and kicked at some pieces of gravel strewn along the curb. Morgan had a gummy patch of scar tissue on the left side of her head. It was the size of a deck of cards and ran from her hairline to the backside of her ear, which had been spared. Her blonde hair had always been thick, so she’d parted it on the right side and that mostly covered up the wound.

Morgan stood up a little taller and said, “Sucks, huh?”

We all got in the car and didn’t say anything the whole three-hour ride home, except once when Dad took a country off-ramp so he could piss in the ditch. While he did Mom said in a really cheery voice, “Well, now I guess we’re going to be late.” I didn’t know to what, because when we got home we just sat and watched TV while Mom messed around in the kitchen.

Morgan got dizzy and disoriented a lot. I would come home from school and find that she’d accidently knocked a mug off the counter or a picture from an end table, the pieces of ceramic or glass piled in the trash. Or Mom, still off from work, would be fussing over a new bruise on Morgan’s forearm, shin, or face.

Some of Morgan’s old friends stopped by over the next couple weeks. They would sit on the couch and watch TV with her. Morgan remembered most of them, but some she didn’t. Like Cheyenne Baumann, who had been Morgan’s best friend
until Cheyenne moved to Pittsburgh in the eleventh grade to live with her father, but after her own messy divorce she’d recently moved back in with her mother. When Cheyenne came in to the living room, she said, “Hi Morgan, it’s Cheyenne. Cheyenne Baumann.”

Morgan nodded then turned back to the television. Our mom asked Morgan if she was excited to see her old friend again. Morgan said, “Who?”

“If your friend from high school. Cheyenne Baumann.”

“I’m not sure,” Morgan said, still watching the big cats on TV as they ran across the African savanna.

Cheyenne and Mom sat with each other in the kitchen and spoke in low voices and cried a bit. Mom invited her back anytime. Cheyenne never did come back. But we did hear later that she got remarried to a bartender at The Charcoal Inn that fall.

In June, a month after Morgan came home, school ended, so Mom went back to work and I was put in charge of being with Morgan. I set my alarm for 7:00 in the morning, when Mom left for work. First, I’d go in to check on Morgan. Usually, she was still asleep. The glow-in-the-dark stars on her ceiling had long lost their light, so they looked like slick spots on the stucco sky. When Morgan slept facing the door, her hair would fall away and I could see where her head had healed over the new titanium piece of skull. I would stand in the doorway, in the light of the rising sun, and stare at it, trying to remember what she had looked like before.

After checking on her, I normally went to the kitchen and reheated whatever breakfast Mom had made. Dad would be at the table, sucking coffee from his white
“Army Dad” mug and reading the newspaper. He’d look up, nod to me. I’d say, “Morning,” while rubbing my eyes. Then he’d say, “What’s on tap, soldier?” I wouldn’t answer. He’d leave for work and I’d turn on the TV and wait for Morgan to wake up.

Morgan didn’t really talk about how she’d been damaged—only sometimes as an afterthought, like something a person says when a long-forgotten memory unexpectedly bubbles back up. She might have been sifting through her cards during one of our games of Uno and say, “My damn fingers used to work,” or she might have been bracing herself on my shoulder as we walked around the backyard for exercise and she’d say, “I used to run around this damn yard.” If we’d get near the cove she would lean away, pulling us back towards the house.

Mostly we watched TV. During commercials I would ask if she wanted anything. Mostly she said no. I brought her glasses of water and crackers. Sometimes Nesha would call and see if I wanted to cruise the beach for girls. There were rumors that Michelle Anderson and her friends went skinny-dipping off Hangman’s Point. I’d say I couldn’t and remind him I had to watch my sister, to make sure she didn’t choke on her tongue during a seizure or something. He’d say that sucks. He never did see Michelle or any one else skinny-dipping—he only broke his arm when Bobby’s dirt bike hit a big piece of driftwood.

Mom started bringing home things from the grocery store she hadn’t since Morgan and I were both in grade school—Oreos, juice boxes, Twizzlers, Fig Newtons. She bought celery, peanut butter, and raisins so I could make ants on a log
that Morgan and I munched on while we watched *The Price is Right*. After a week of that, Morgan turned to me and said, “Danny, do you remember that time someone won both showcases?”

“Yeah. That’s happened a few times,” I said.

“Oh, yeah,” she said, trailing off.

“Yeah.”

Mostly, Morgan would sit there, shapeless, like all her bones had liquefied. I had to ask her three or four times if she wanted more ants on a log, if we could change the channel. I started to hate TV. So on days that Morgan just wanted to watch it all day, I would put the house phone on the table next to her chair and go out to the cove with my cell phone on maximum volume. I’d climb down the sides like I used to when I was younger, down to the lowest ledge, one just inches above the water and dangle my feet in. On sunny days when there was no wind, I sat on that rock and watched crabs scuttle along the bottom. When it stormed, torrents of seawater surged into the cove and stirred the whole thing into a vortex. It had happened enough while Morgan was in Iraq that the silt had been stirred and fallen to cover her jewelry. When I looked down on those summer days after Morgan got back, all I saw was just blue and green. There was no gold, no sparkling plastic jewels.

On a Wednesday, I was down in the cove when my phone rang in my pocket. I slid it out and answered.

“Danny?”

“What’s up?”
“Do you want to do something?”

“Sure.”

“Are you down in the cove?”

“Yeah.”

Morgan didn’t answer right away, but I heard the television get softer. Then she said, “Let’s do something inside.”

“I’ll be right in.”

I first saw her reflection in the black hole of the TV screen. She was in her chair with her hands over her face. I lay down on the couch, propped my legs on its arm, and looked at her between my feet. The house was still. Some light shone through the windows onto the carpet in bright squares.

“So what do you want to do?” I asked.

“I’m supposed to talk with you about when I was in Iraq.”

“Me?”

“It can be anyone, that’s what my shrink said. But Mom doesn’t understand and Dad just zones out.”

“Your shrink?”

“Yeah, the one in D.C.”

“Do you want to?”

“Not really. And not if you don't want to.”

“I’ll listen if you talk.”
Morgan raised one hand to her head, and though I couldn’t see exactly what she did, I knew she was tracing her scar under the thick wave of blonde hair she’d laid over it.

“It was the scariest thing I’ve ever done, but I wish I could go back. Maybe just because that would mean I was better. You could be sneaking peaks at Michelle whatshernamed.”

I tried to imagine, as I had dozens of times, what it would be like to ride a humvee through the desert, covered with grit and gun oil, in air sour with smoke. I thought about when I was doing something new. Playing a new sport or learning to drive. How, at first, everything seemed to go so fast, but as I got better it slowed down, until I felt like I was just going through the motions. I imagined Iraq was like that, but things never actually slowed down.

“I’m sorry,” I said. I touched my toes together so they blocked out Morgan’s face.

I didn’t know what I would have been doing if she were still in Iraq, if she were better. We would’ve still been strung along on letters filled with sand. They were always in the kind of envelopes where all she had to do was pull the translucent wrapper from the glue to seal it. I bet that was because living in the desert none of them had any wetness on their tongues. I’d probably have been out in the dunes with Nesha and Bobby. Maybe I’d have been the one with the broken arm. Maybe I would have led them to Michelle Anderson and all her naked friends. I would have been on Bobby’s dirt bike every day, tearing through the dunes, throwing big rainbows of sand into the air. And in the moments after I skidded to a
stop, and the wind blew grit into my teeth, I’d think about Morgan as I watched my friends coming over the ridge to catch me.

I separated my toes so I could see Morgan again. “I’m sorry,” I said.

She turned her head to look at me and said, “Whatever. Probably just get blown up sooner or later anyway.”

That night, I woke to thunder rattling the bones of our house. Lightning flashed through the curtains in my room, splashing my bed with light. I’d always liked lying under the covers during storms, holding my breath between the cracks of thunder. So I did that, looking at the “Wolverine” poster I’d tacked to my ceiling, his adamantium claws and glistening teeth, shining through the dark over me. First, my lungs would start to ache from holding my breath. Then, my room would light up like it was morning. Then, the thunder would come. I’d exhale and inhale and it all started again. That night, though, something was different. In the time between the booming, I could hear something else through the hiss of rain on the roof.

I got out of bed and descended the stairs, into the kitchen. My father was bracing himself on the sink with both hands, looking out the window, out over the ocean where jagged lightning bolts leapt between the thrashing water and the churning clouds. I stood beside him. In our lawn was Morgan, drenched and thin, looking out, into the storm. The wind whipped her blond hair in seemingly every direction and once.

“Won’t come in,” my father said, without looking over at me. “Been calling.”

He pushed himself off the sink and rubbed his Barnum hand.
“How long’s she been out there?”

“Don’t know.”

“Where’s Mom?”

“Those sleeping pills. Couldn’t wake her, even if I wanted to.”

I put my hand on Dad’s shoulder. I’d never done that before. But there I was. I said, “I got this, soldier.”

Adjacent to the counter was a glass door to the backyard. I slid it open. Rain blew into the house, making everything slick. My coat was on a hook in my closet, so I just stepped out into the wet grass, anyway.

The wind picked up and I had to lean forward just a little bit as I approached. When I got there, I stood next to Morgan and just watched the water with her. My t-shirt and pajama bottoms clung to me. The storm sounded like a heavy truck rumbling over a rutted road. I listened and tried to not shiver. During a lull, Morgan said over the wind, “That’s what it sounded like sometimes. So much noise all at once. It was one giant crunch.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I waited. It wasn’t long before Morgan said, “I didn’t even notice it after a while. It was always there so it just turned into background noise. I had to make it that way. Block out every distraction that could get me killed. Guess it kind of worked.”

A gust made us both wobble, and Morgan take a step back. But instead of bracing her as I had so many times that summer, I left her side, pushing through the wind and rain to the lip of the cove. Down in where the earth had been hollowed out, water beat itself against the walls, breaking apart in fantastic splashes that slapped
at the air. It was like part of the raging sea had been captured and separated from its larger self and now fought to be free. I turned around to look at Morgan, but she was gone. For a moment I panicked, but then she appeared in the kitchen window. I saw Dad rub her head before turning out the light. I leaned over the edge once more, completely enveloped in darkness, then went back to the house, up the stairs to my bed, laid down in my wet clothes, and listened to the storm try to beat its way into our home.

I woke up late. Mom and Dad were both gone. Outside, the day was one of the incredibly sunny ones that made the indoors seem tired and sad.

I took my toast with chunky peanut butter and a cold cup of coffee out to the back stoop, set down my plate, and ate while I watched the blue water slowly ripple in until the waves disappeared under the bluff. The water reminded me of the bedding I had when I was in elementary school. Quilt, pillow cases, and sheets all ocean themed. On them, waves were dark blue squiggles on the otherwise turquoise surface. In a few places an orca or dolphin had been captured midleap. In another a whale had breached the surface and blown a wide spout into the air.

It was so peaceful even though eight hours earlier the oceans had been trying to rip down the whole bluff, pull our house into the water, and batter us under its dark surface.

Behind me the door slid open. Morgan was standing there, braced against the jamb. In one hand she had a coffee cup. I moved to stand up, but Morgan shook her head and said, “No. Stay there.”
I watched her pivot out and lean against the siding, then reach and pull the door shut. She stepped toward me and braced herself on my shoulder and sat next to me. Morgan sighed and pushed her hair out of her face. That revealed the scar, which stared at me, irregular and angry. She must have seen me looking because she pointed at one on my knee and asked, “You got that six years ago, right?”

I rubbed the soft, white ridge and said, “Yeah. Fourth grade. The stairs outside the apartment.”

“And it still looks that that, huh? Suppose mine won’t go away, either.”

We sat and watched two seagulls glide in and set down on our lawn. They looked at us and waddled a bit, picking at the grass with their pointed yellow bills. Morgan slurped her coffee and I wondered, if she had the right gun, could she have shot them both before they took off.

“You know that box you kept all the jewelry in?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“I chucked it into the cove when you left.”

“How come?”

“Pissed off.” One of the gulls poked the other, and then flew off. The one remaining kept picking at the grass, sometimes looking up as if it was searching for something. “Sorry,” I said.

“Wasn’t worth anything. Junk,” Morgan said, then she turned and, while holding my shoulder, leaned backwards to her elbow, then lowered herself so she was lying down on the cement stoop. “I used to do this on base.”

“Yeah?”
“Yeah. We sat around a lot. I mostly sat and waited for people to bring casualties back. When clouds came by I tried to shape them into something. A mountain or bird or anything like that. Like we used to do. It helped pass the time.”

Morgan had one arm behind her head and the other across her belly. “When they set tires on fire or a suicider blew himself up, there’d be these towers of smoke. Happened pretty much every day. So if there was wind it’d spread the smoke out and cover everything. When that happened, nothing looked like anything. It was just gray, brown, and black. Like nothing else existed except those colors.”

“Sucks.”

“Yeah. But I’d go back.”

“Seriously?”

“It’s like I left them behind. Every single soldier that had my back on a ride or while I worked a casualty.” She sighed. “What about you? What’re you going to do?”

“Me? Not sure.”

Morgan looked down. She looked sad, like I hadn’t answered the way she wanted. Or maybe I just answered exactly like she thought I would.

So I said, “Maybe join the circus.”

She laughed.

While she was still smiling, I stood up, and without saying another thing jogged to the cove. When I got to the edge, I looked down into the clear green water. So different than the previous night. Exactly like I wanted to remember it.

I jumped. The water rushed up at me and I straightened myself so I would hit feet first. I plunged under and started kicking. In those moments down there, I knew
it was the last time I would do that. So when I surfaced I treaded water for a minute
and listened to the lapping echo off the walls— the echoes I heard on nights
everything was still. Then I took a deep breath and pushed myself under, down to
the muck, down to where I might find something familiar.
LIGHT OVER THE ATCHAFALAYA (2007)

Lisa had a four-inch bruise in the soft meat under her collarbone. Blood had pooled in violets, crimsons, and blues, like a fat night crawler was buried under her flesh. She retied her yellow hair into a loose ponytail and flipped it off her shoulder so it snaked down her back. She locked another shell into the rifle’s chamber and raised the butt in line with the marbled strip of tissue. Despite the dull ache, she snugged the gun tighter, nuzzled her freckled cheekbone against the stock, sighted down her target, and squeezed the trigger. The metallic crack raced over the bayou waters and disappeared into the bark of cypress trees and the soft hanging moss. No waves lapped against the hull of her boat, no fading reverberations of the shot. Somewhere she heard the rustling of blue herons taking flight. One called to another—she missed if there was a reply.

“Fuck,” she said, and handed the rifle to Olivia, the other woman occupying the wooden pirogue. They both sat for a moment. Lisa rubbed her shoulder. She spun her arm like a rusty flywheel. Olivia slid her hand down the warm barrel. In the bright sunlight, the earth-colored stock seemed to merge with the dark skin of her arm as if it were part of her.

“Time to watch a professional,” Olivia said.
She pulled a shell from the breast pocket of her linen top. She slid it in the breach and locked the bolt. Olivia braced herself on the gunwale with the rifle buried deep in her shoulder.

“Just like this,” she said, and squeezed the trigger. The same crack shot over the waters and disappeared, but this time it was followed by a metallic clang as the last golden beer can spun into the air—blown in half—before it fluttered to the water like a dead bird. The cypress stump was now empty, save for the impact craters from tumbling shells.

“Fuck you,” Lisa said with a smile.

“That’s why Dale always says, breathe out. You got to be listening,” Olivia replied, kicking the bag filled with empties. In the sunlight, her eyes sparkled. “Now, how about you restack them. Three-two.”

Lisa pulled her paddle from the boat’s bottom and swung its nose in line with their stand. “Exhale. Exhale.”

Lisa, Olivia, and another girlfriend, Dale, had taken Thursday and Friday off and rented a houseboat on the Atchafalaya Basin for a long weekend. They were all third year teachers in Baton Rouge, recruited by the non-profit Teach For America and given jobs in poor, underperforming Louisiana schools because of their high performance in college. Lisa and Olivia had been right out of Brown and LSU. Dale joined after a year in Sarajevo on a Fulbright, studying the impact of the “Sarajevo roses” on memory. The crimson resin casts of fatal mortar strikes on buildings, sidewalks, and roads—scabs of a healing city.
They all worked in North Baton Rouge. It was a place where men sat on milk crates behind the barbershop and ate plate lunches from the Exxon station, neighborhoods without sidewalks, corner stores framed by spray-painted plywood signs. Neighborhoods where even the weeds struggled to grow. They twisted up through cracks in the pavement in shades of gray. Olivia remembered how as a child they crunched under her feet on the way to school. And the men, who sat on their porches no matter the hour, watched her hop from one to another like they were lily pads. The rutty pavement was gator-infested water. If she lost her balance she’d be gobbled up.

The Atchafalaya Basin is at the base of the Mississippi River Delta. A large swath of flat land that had been flooding ever since rivers first found the Gulf. As they meandered, the Basin changed from a 3,000-square-mile lake to silt ruts where deer dashed and bred in five hundred year cycles. The Army Corps of Engineers and their levees ended that. The thousands of miles of concrete and mounded earth ensured the settlements of South Louisiana, from Houma to Baton Rouge, would remain places for office buildings and refineries and shotgun houses. The levees created clear borders between where catfish were noodled and where they were bought. They ensured Whiskey Bay wouldn’t bleed away.

Olivia and Lisa paddled and insects scooted through the sunbursts on the surface of the brown water. When the women looked over the side, there was no way to tell if the water was three feet deep or thirty.

“Why have we never done this before, Olivia?”

“Come here?”
“Yeah.”

“This is why I’ve been saying it’s nice.” Of the three, Olivia was the only one from Baton Rouge. She grew up poor in the rotting shotguns off Cadillac Street. Even after she tested out of her neighborhood school and was allowed to catch the transfer bus to a magnet program across the city, she returned every night, to the older brother that made her chili while their mother worked job number two at Sonic and Dad was on the road.

Olivia’s father loved to fish. When he was in town he took her and her brothers out on the Atchafalaya. She remembered leaning against the warm metal of her uncle’s aluminum flat bottom. She bent her shoulders over the bow and soaked the sun into her skin. Sweat beaded on her upper lip and she blew it into the brackish water. She remembered the hum of insects, they sounded like an orchestra of banjos tuning.

“This really is wonderful,” Lisa said.

“Beautiful, indeed,” Olivia replied, maybe to Lisa, but it sounded more addressed to the bald cypresses that stood like the last sentinels of a time when the Atchafalaya wasn’t hemmed in. When there wasn’t a 20-mile-long bridge spanning its belly.

Lisa and Olivia paddled and their boat made a slow, quiet wake. Pirogues like it had been used by generations of Cajuns on the Basin. Vehicles as at home under the tyrannical Louisiana sun as the nutria made crisscrossing patterns on the shorelines.
Dale was on the screened-in porch reading when the two returned. She looked up from her worn and dog-eared copy of *The Virginian* and gave a subtle, two-finger wave.

“Dale, when’d you get up?” Olivia called. Aside from the whine of insect legs, her voice was the only thing to hear.

“About an hour ago. There’s some leftover eggs if y’all want any. And I have instant coffee and bourbon,” she said, wiggling her mug.

“We ran out of cans. And bullets.”

“That’s all I had. Suppose we’re out then.”

“Sorry.”

“Nope. That’s what they’re for,” Dale said, and reclined a little more, bands of triceps flexing. She looked at home, as if she’d never been born, just always existed in that aluminum folding chair.

In the morning, sun streams through the cypress branches in bright shocks of light. It cuts the swarms of mosquitoes and gnats that expand and collapse in the air between the branches and the swamp floor. They pulsate like a heart.

And that’s what I do here in the swamp: I stop hearts. Dismantle the shells that housed them, and arrange the pieces in a box I’ve built. Long ago, I learned that if I didn’t, animals dig them up, leaving white splinters and clumps of hair strewn about the woods. All the indigestible bits. Picked clean of spongy marrow filling and anything that could clot. Devoured. So I make boxes. And pack tissue and bone in until it pushes its way through the seams in little pink rivers.
I build boxes out of cypress. I’ve been doing it for a few years. My mitts have become swollen with calluses after measuring, sawing, and hammering hundreds of dovetail joints together, like zippers with too-fat teeth. Pack that xylem together. I leave the boxes unsanded and unvarnished. They’re just going in the ground to rot.

I also built myself a place in the swamp to live—a spot where the shocks of morning light spot the ground like some kind of disease. My home is also a box. Two spans by two spans by one and a half spans. You can be creative out here with your measurements. A forearm, a leg, a finger—they’re all tools. But some things you can’t replicate. Like the handsaws I’ve stolen. Because there wasn’t any part of the body that could replace stainless steel teeth attached to a handle.

I slathered the box I live in with a thick layer of pitch. You have to boil eight cords of river birch to get it, but I had time. I needed the dark mucus to seal my box from rain. It comes down in sheets and mixes with the dirt and stirs up a stink like a sucking wound. It’s the smell of the dying bayou.

I’m not much of a decorator. It’s pretty sparse inside my black box. Three sawhorses. The mattress I keep on palettes. A varnished box with hinges and an etched lid. The only things hanging on the walls are saws and measuring devices.

The real work is making the lumber. Felling cypresses and with a saw and plane molding them into something flat and usable. Skinning them of their ragged bark, hacking the trunks into manageable sections, then scoring into two to three-inch-thick planks. Even with the calluses, blisters swell and ooze when I saw for more than a few hours. And stopping isn’t an option. When things need to go in the ground, it has to happen fast.
Planks I’m waiting to use are kept dry under a blue tarpaulin I took off some campers who had been using it to suspend food from a tree. I’ve seen a lot of people do that to keep their food safe from animals while they sleep.

My boxes remind me of the cypress chest my grandfather presented on my christening. It was a sanded, shiny thing with hinges and a name etched in the lid. Arthur. It’s the only thing I saved from the storm. It’s where I’ve always kept the few toys I allow myself.

Lisa and Dale were on the porch. The chorus of insects vibrated through the screen in an alternating current of harmony and dissonance—background noise to their books. Some 40 miles away a substitute sat in each of their classrooms. Their students in varying states of disarray. Kids roamed unchecked, sat on desks, threw paper balls, took pictures, gossiped. Play fighting in Lisa’s room had led to an actual fight. Boys often escalated only to save face. They held their fists to their jaws then punched, each desperate for someone to step in. Eventually, other students did. But the women knew nothing of the brawl or mess. They bobbed on and it was peaceful.

Lisa grew anxious during the extended silence and asked Dale, “So what should we do today?”

Without looking up, Dale replied, “Thought about taking the motorboat exploring.”

Lisa shifted in her folding chair. “Cool, where should we go?”

“No plan. We could head that way,” Dale pointed to the left, “or I reckon we could go that way,” she pointed to the right. “No direction in mind.”

Olivia appeared with a dishtowel. “No. I’m fixing to just sit in the sun. Y’all should go.”

“Okay, Dale, it’s you and me. I’m sure we’ll go again if you want to go later. Dale, are you ready?”

Dale leaned a little more into her book before she carefully folded the corner of the yellowed page into a triangle and set the paperback on the sill behind her.

“Okay,” she said, and pushed herself up from her chair.

It had grown hotter. The oppressive mix of heat and humidity only found in Louisiana. Sweat seeped out both the women’s pores and gave their skin a sheen. They felt like native animals, their boat skipping across the water like a stone.

Lisa was at the bow, tasting salt from the spray of brackish water. Beside her was a white v-neck she had taken off and now occasionally used to wipe the back of her neck and the underside of her jaw. The ends of her tied bikini top snapped behind her.

Dale dialed back the engine. “Hey, how’s Derek doing?” she asked Lisa, while scanning a far off stand of trees. Derek came up a lot in conversation. Getting him ready for high school science—and high school in general—had become a project for Lisa. He was an odd child, a New Orleans refugee, who at the beginning of middle school had spent most of his time in her class with his legs folded against his chest, picking at his lips, examining some object he’d found: soda tab, paperclip, half of a pink eraser. Since then, she’d seen real social progress. He started engaging with
classmates, went out for sports, and became well liked—popular even. But his grades continued to lag behind.

“Um, pretty good. Like, he’s focusing more during class, taking guided notes, and completing the work I give him. But the other day he brought in this article about that collider thing in Europe.”

“The Hadron—the super collider. It blows the shit out of atoms and stuff.”

“Yeah. Right, right. So—okay, let me get this right—there was this article about that thing and how some people are concerned it’s going to make black holes, like, small ones and they’re going to end the world or something.”

“He thinks it’s going to happen.”

“Well, get this, he had a picture of a black hole and a satellite photo of Katrina he’d printed off in the library. He looked completely freaked out, Dale. He had these really wide bug eyes and just said, ‘It’s happening again.’”

“You told him that was ridiculous.”

“Well, yeah, but he just pointed to the two and then went to his seat and stared off, picking his lip. What else could I say? So I just let him.”

Dale nodded and throttled the motor and the bow where Lisa sat bucked. They cruised across the open waters of the Basin, listening to the wind in their ears. Both women taught many students who had survived the storm. There were the ones like Derek who’d looked like they’d just emerged from a bomb shelter. Some were happy kids that sometimes split open the faces of others. Others told stories of what they saw. The floating bodies after the storm. Seeing a sibling washed away. The Superdome. The storytellers were matter-of-fact. They didn’t seem troubled at
all. Like they were describing any other time in their life. Those were the kids that hurt them the most.

Dale shouted to Lisa, “Do you see that?”

“What?” Lisa turned to face her, but Dale’s eyes were fixed past Lisa, past the cypress knees jutting through the surface, past a spit of land, to a tattered and upside-down American flag wrapped on a pole thrust above the treetops.

“That.”

“The flag? Yeah.”

“I’m going to take us there.”

Dale had always been an explorer. She grew up in Burley, Idaho on an old sugar beet farm. She couldn’t imagine that it ever turned out many crops and whether it had didn’t really matter—which her parents bought the place ten years before Dale was born, they set fire to the land, put up fences and a stable with horses. There they bred Australian Shepherds, let the horses run, and taught the dogs to herd.

Beginning at 12, she would disappear for days. While her parents slept, when the sun had not yet peeked its head over the infinite Idaho horizon, she let out the family dog, Fred, and spirited away with a horse. The three of them crossed the plains, each with a thick black tail trailing behind them, liberating clouds of dust trapped beneath the cheat as they chased the sun. The prairie dogs must have been reminded of Bannock hunting parties. But Dale and Fred were just trying to find where the sun went each night.
She took a blue tarpaulin, sandwiches, and bones. The horse was content grazing. Out on the plains she searched for Indian artifacts or panned for gold in the streams—at night she bedded down next to Fred under the tarp, rocks at the corners, pinning them to the earth. She trusted her instincts to find the incredible. It was her instincts made her apply to Teach For America and accept her assignment in Baton Rouge. It was her instincts that made her excited about the tattered American flag and the carabineers ringing against the towering mast. It was her instincts pushing them toward it.

“I think it’s a boat,” Dale said, as they rounded the spit to where the more open water narrowed into a slow-moving river. The bow hit the place where the river met the Basin and was forced to slow—a slight chop that sent out a syncopated report through the boat. On the bank opposite the spit, they could faintly make out a white and red hull through the plant growth on shore.

“A hurricane?” Lisa was standing in the boat now and leaning forward, as if those extra inches would help her see through the leaves and vines and moss.

“Doesn’t look too old.”

“It would have to be Rita. Right?”

“Hm.”

“It was Rita and Gustav and Andrew out here. Katrina was way east.”

“Might be. Let’s take a look,” Dale said.

“You want to?”

“When do you find a fucking boat in the woods?”
Lisa took a moment to decide if it was rhetorical before Dale killed the engine and swung the bow into the silty shore. It beached with a satisfying sound. Dale leapt from the boat with the towrope in her hand, hit the ground, and sunk in midway up her shins.

“Balls. Hold on.” She sat down on the soft ground to slide her feet from the suck. Just off where they beached, the ground was firmer so she stood, muddied, and walked without sinking over her cross-trainers.

“You look like the Swamp Thing,” Lisa said to her.

“Slide over the edge so you don’t sink in.”

“Are you going to, like, eat my brains?” Lisa laughed.

“Swamp Thing, not a zombie,” Dale replied, and lobbed a dripping glob of muck over Lisa’s head. The trail of dark silty water that arced behind the mud bomb painted a dotted line across her face.

Lisa slid out of the boat and followed Dale through the fifty yards of undergrowth between the water and the hidden boat. “It’s like it just got dropped out of the sky, Dale.”

The thing was upright. It was a twin mast, the taller of which had the flag. Cables ran from the masts to the hull, the wheel room was dark, nothing seemed to be out of place or broken. In that state it could have been bobbing in a marina somewhere.

“Look. Look at how the trees are there and here,” Dale said, pointing to the lines of trees on either side of the trawler. “Nothing’s disturbed. This boat’s either
been here a long time or, yeah, just dropped out of the sky.” She turned to Lisa.

“Maybe it got spit out of a black hole,” she said, raising her eyebrows.

“Yeah, maybe,” Lisa said. The discovery had left her strangely hollowed. It showed in her voice.

“You okay?” Dale had hoisted herself up a net draped over the boat’s side.


“Yeah, and under that.”

“Port of Green Bay?”

I watched New Orleans drown. In the shadow of a still-standing levee, surrounded by an overflowed cemetery, I watched the concrete and steel fail. I was in my home, a shotgun shack on a mound, behind the cemetery. That’s where the city put me, among the buried. Cordoned 1,000 feet from where the rest of the world tucked their children in at night. They wanted to keep track of me. That’s how I survived Katrina. In the attic of a little house on a little hill.

The dirt road splitting the cemetery ended at my porch as an uneven cul-de-sac. The house was all splintering posts and peeling paint and cypress clapboard. When the wind came in over the tombstones, the ones that stood at attention each time I passed, the loose boards beat the frame like war. The house used to be where the caretaker lived. That was a long time before I was there. Funeral parades used to march down the driveway of St. Gregory Cemetery and circle like wagons before the little slope to my home. There a priest would stand before everyone and speak about life. In the end, only I was left to speak for the dead.
Every morning when I step from my new home on the Atchafalaya, it looks as if the sun opened a vein on the Basin. In that moment I’m back in the morning after Katrina. You don’t forget a lot about that storm. The wind and debris, the way the other levees, not my levee, failed. The waves reached me, though. They rolled through trees and homes, over the tombs, and into my living room. I watched through a small attic window. That morning after, the only thing that existed outside of my porthole was water. The land was gone, replaced by the sea. The sun rose and dyed it red, as if all the people that lived around St. Gregory’s had been squeezed out onto the surface. I had never seen water so red before. And now I see it every morning on the Basin.

The next day, sitting on the roof of my house with my grandfather’s chest, I saw a boat. It was one-third filled with water, bobbing on the waves. I watched it for several hours before it bumped into my house. It was a pirogue and two oars were inside.

It was the third day when bodies began to rise. They floated around my boat, just below the surface. They just hung there, like logs on the Atchafalaya. Sometimes my paddles slapped against their skulls or got stuck in their dark, bloated abdomens with a wet, sucking sound.

Sometimes, out in the middle of everything, I stopped paddling, pulled my knees to my chest, and I imagined them all coming back to life. A new, amphibious army of the living dead. And I prayed for it. Though I knew God wasn’t listening.

*
Lisa talked a lot with her hands. “Olivia, it was like it just dropped from the sky. There’s a ring of trees around it. Standing as straight as they have for the last, like, at least 80 years. That’s what Dale thinks.”

Olivia was sitting on the porch, book in hand, feet propped up on the screen ledge. Her toes pushed the mesh outward in two spots. When she shifted, it just stayed, like it had been starched.

“Yeah, sure,” she said.

“That’s what it looked like, but with cypress. And there weren’t any broken windows or anything wrong.”

Dale had finished tying up the boat and stepped through the door from the dock. “Pretty weird. Just in the middle of the woods.”

“Yeah.”

“Really.” Olivia leaned back a bit further and crossed her arms. “You know, there are a bunch of them all over the Basin. People ditch them in the banks or it could’ve been a hurricane. Rita or Andrew maybe.”

“It’s not on the bank, Olivia. A good 50 yards in. And get this: it’s from Green Bay,” Dale said.

“I said it might be Katrina, but I guess not,” Lisa said. “God, do you remember that? Katrina?”

“Yeah, Lisa, I do,” Olivia said, deadpan. That made them stand in silence. Louisiana wasn’t an adopted home for Olivia. She’d lived every year of her life there—and though they all were present for the storm, neither Lisa nor Dale pretended to understand what it meant to Olivia.
But Olivia’s hurt over the storm had been further complicated, because the night Katrina made landfall, Olivia fucked for the first time. It wasn’t a story she told. It was her first year teaching, but she’d gone to an LSU hurricane party thrown by some friends still in college. When there were hurricanes LSU students had hurricane parties. Wal-Mart saw runs on charcoal, booze, canned food, condoms, and propane. Because it had always turned out fine. No one thought the levees would fail.

The party was at a house in Baton Rouge’s Garden District. It is a mixture of old money homes and rentals for college students with some money. Her friend, Jacob, lived in one of the rentals with three friends. He was a geology student and threw what he promised would be the best hurricane kegger ever.

Before that night, Olivia had had sex before, but only with a boyfriend she dated the previous two years. Never had she acted on the instantaneous, irrepressible need to buck against an anonymous body. Of it she only remembered the urgency, Jacob closing the bathroom door, pulling him toward her, and the cool porcelain sink.

She woke up the next morning with a fuzzy head. The power was out, and the voice on the radio was in shock—New Orleans was flooded. Her grandfather, a preacher racked with dementia, had stayed behind with her aunt, his caretaker. Projections of the dead were staggering. And she was stuck in Baton Rouge, hung over, without a phone or boat. She went into the backyard, littered with plastic cups and branches, tilted her head back, and screamed. The rain ran down her face, mixing with tears.
The refugees flowed into Baton Rouge, uninterrupted. School bus drivers ferried the newly homeless north. They rolled into Baton Rouge three to a seat, empty faces crowding the windows. The city of 230,000 doubled in a week. Gymnasiums were lined with cots and people reduced to flesh husks. Everyone in limbo. All the news channels were in Baton Rouge and New Orleans. When the Baton Rouge River Center opened to move refugees out of schools, Olivia was outside, searching for her grandfather and aunt.

On the houseboat porch, Dale was the first to talk. “You need to see this ship. It’s getting dark, but I think we should go. Not too far. It’s really that wild.”

Olivia stood up. “Lead the way,” she said.

Lisa followed them out, letting the screen door slam behind them.

Many people find the boat. They stand around it. Point, throw conjectures, pretend to lay claim like they were Columbus. They feel so important. Like it would land them in a magazine with the topless natives. There’d be a TV-movie. Or something. They’re sure of it.

First, they suggest causes. Hurricane comes first. They throw their arms from one side to another, together, like they’re moving something out of the way. Then they debate over which hurricane. Katrina is the first suggested. Then they’re corrected. “Katrina hit Mississippi—Rita hit over here.” Recently, more have continued on to suggest Gustav and Ike.

Some of them are men. The ones that dip their shoulder to one side whenever they step—the old football injuries or bad knees from carrying a bloated
gut of boudin and Budweiser. They have camouflage caps and jackets made out of canvas. Their faces have bristly shadows and they paw at the boat with sausage fingers. They say things like, “Holy shit,” and, “I’ll fucking be.” The other men look more groomed. The ones that leave wakes and climb onto the boat in purple and gold Polos. They wear sunshades with bands snaked down their backs. They wear sandals and walk gingerly through the silty soil. They walk like women.

Others actually are women. They want to call someone about the boat. There’s a feeling of responsibility. Their men reassure them. Ease their concerns. Abandoned trawlers are all over the rivers—left rotting on the banks. If there aren’t any bodies they probably collected the insurance long ago. What good’ll it do now except give them a headache? The men don’t have any of that.

I saw new women at the boat. Two of them. They looked like they were from a James Bond movie, all beautiful and adventurous. They want to do something about the boat. You can tell. And not because they think it’s the right thing to do. But because they know they can. They’re confident. I’m sure they are successful. They have everything in neat rows. They care for themselves. You can tell because they had tight muscles that attached their limbs to their bodies. You can see them through their skin. Like rubber bands. They snap.

All of their feet were dark with silt. The bleeding light of the setting sun had washed over the trees—the hanging moss looked orange, like the trees were decorated with strings of lights. Shadows striped the hull of the boat, and a ball of
light glowed on the windshield of the wheel room. Carabineers slapped the mast. It’s all the women heard. The tattered flag hung ominously. No wind, no bugs.

Dale scurried up the nets onto the boat. Lisa and Olivia stood in the muck and examined the name and port sign.

“The Barth Starr. Port of Green Bay. Like the Packers, huh?” Olivia asked.

“I guess,” Lisa answered, with no real sign of certainty in her voice.

Olivia reached out her hand and ran her fingertips across the painted letters. They were slightly raised. She thought of the painting projects her elementary students had done. The feeling of layered paint. The gumminess of it. The bristle lines like Braille. Olivia traced each letter while Lisa watched a bird at the top of a tree suddenly take off squawking. Like the bird was aware of something they couldn’t see. A breeze wove between the trees. She looked at the boat and couldn’t see Dale.

“Hey, Dale,” Lisa called out. There was no answer. She turned to Olivia. “That was stupid what I said,” she began, “I know you remember it.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m not,” she said, and traced the letters again.

“Well, I wanted to apologize, anyway.”

“No worries.”

Dale had opened a hatch and slid under the deck. Below, a few beams from the setting sun made it to the portholes. Those that did washed-out all colors but orange.

Dale took a quick survey. There were padded benches on either side of the hull, a door that led to sleeping quarters, and another, skinnier door to a toilet.
There were some life vests and blankets beneath the benches, a stack of large maps were on a table—Dale rolled them into a tube and turned back to the hatch.

“I had a grandfather in New Orleans,” Olivia said.

“Oh, god. Was he okay?”

“Don’t know.” While they waited for Dale, she told Lisa the story of how her aunt made it back to Baton Rouge. A helicopter came, days after the storm, but only had room left for one person. The man that came down with the basket and took Olivia’s grandfather promised to come right back for her, but never did. The last time she saw him alive, he was strapped in bright orange basket. He waved as they flew away. Days later, she got a ride on a boat, then a bus.

Dale emerged from over the railing. “Maybe someone ditched this boat to fake their death. You go sailing one day in Wisconsin and never come back. Why would they ever look on the Atchafalaya?”

Lisa looked at her, “You’re kidding.”

“Well, yeah. But weirder things, right? Or it could've been ditched after Katrina.”

“Katrina hit Mississippi.”

“Yeah. But a lot of people used it as a chance to go missing. In the dead and missing are a bunch of people that were being tracked by the government. Parolees and sex offenders. All the systems to track them were gone. A ton of them just disappeared. Like last year or something a guy was arrested in New York for raping and murdering people and turns out he was a registered sex offender that had been missing since Katrina.” She climbed down the nets and hopped on the soft ground.
“A child molesting boat captain?” Olivia asked.

Dale shrugged. “Or maybe it was a black hole. Anyway, not too much down there, except these maps.”

“Should you take those?” Lisa asked.

“Nobody seems to in a rush to use them,” Olivia answered, and headed back to the river.

In the houseboat, Dale unfurled a map of Louisiana on the coffee table. She kneeled before it and shifted from side to side to make her knees comfortable in the carpet. Two lamps were on in the room. They each threw soft light that cast pale shadows over the floor and walls. It smelled musty, like brine and wood.

Olivia was in the kitchen boiling water. Lisa sat on the couch and leaned next to Dale to examine the map. It was crisscrossed with all kinds of lines of latitude and longitude, currents. Like a fingerprint. Land was green, swamp was gray, and water was blue.

Dale traced her finger from the Gulf, over the Breton Sound and into Mississippi. “This is how Katrina came in,” she said, “and flattened everything.”

In the kitchen, the kettle shrieked. “Water’s ready,” Olivia called, kind of sing-songy, like she was ringing a triangle. Lisa was glad to hear that. She got up to fill her and Dale’s mugs with instant coffee and bourbon.

Later, it was dark out and the three of them were in the living room. They were all looking out the picture window. All the lights had been clicked off to be rid of the glare on the glass. On the other side, the calm water of the Atchafalaya shimmered with moonlight.
“It was the Apocalypse,” Dale said. “It really was. It was the Rapture and God didn’t pick up a fucking soul.”

She more spit those two words than anything else. Lisa and Olivia heard Dale’s teeth tearing at her lower lip on the ‘fuck.’ They all just sat for a while and listened to the whine of insects and the vibrations of others against the porch screen.


A little breeze. The water rippled with no hint of what was beneath the surface. Olivia leaned back and fished the change from her pocket she’d been carrying around for weeks. Twenty-seven cents.

“Blow on them for luck,” she said, and held out her hand for Dale and Lisa.

Olivia went outside and tossed the coins into the water with satisfying splashes. She imagined that it dropped off forever and that the coins would flip and spin until she was dead and couldn’t imagine them anymore. She liked that. On her way back in, she turned on the porch light. Immediately, the women could see the bugs. Swollen hoards that pulsated in the glow. They flew and fell into the screen, blurring the tree lines to the east, like smoke. The breeze picked up a bit, momentarily dispersing the cloud, and making waves that carried the light out to sea.

Olivia sat back down, and took a long sip of her whiskey and coffee. “I ever tell you two about that old guy’s family I found?” They both shook their heads. “He was a Baptist preacher. Like my grandfather. The guy must have been 70-something.”
Lisa and Dale both nodded.

“This guy was in his Sunday best. This is, like, a week after the storm. All these people were coming out of school gyms or straight off the bus from New Orleans. Those ones you saw flying down I-10, people hanging out of the windows, because they all smelled like flood. But this guy—he was in his best suit and his face was shaved, except under his jaw and his neck. So he had this gray hair there. And he had this picture, that’s what he gave me, like they were his papers, his identification or something. It was a signed picture of Bill Clinton, from when he was president, that said, ‘Thank you for letting me worship in your church,’ or something like that. The guy’s got this picture, his suit, and that’s it. His mind wasn’t really all there, though whose was after the storm? He just kept saying that he had a daughter or a niece or somebody in Baton Rouge. She worked at one of the hospitals, but he only knew her maiden name.” Olivia shrugged. “So I started calling hospitals.”

“Did you find her?” Dale asked, her mug at her lips.

“Well, I called a bunch of hospitals and they were a little flustered by me. You know? They don’t just keep the list of employees by the phone. And they were slammed with patients. Honestly, I was close to just giving up for the night, but I thought of that fucking picture of Clinton. You know? The fucking president gave this guy a picture, with his signature and a hand-written message, so he’s got to be a pretty important guy to somebody. But he’s clueless, like, lost his mind and in Baton Rouge and honestly, I’m wondering if this niece or whoever even exists.”

She stood up and walked to the window. There was just water and cypress. She leaned against the window with her shoulder and continued to look out.
“So I flipped to the back of yellow pages and started with the Women’s Clinic, and guess what? Found her. She wasn’t on or they couldn’t find her, but they said they’d tell her. I assume they got connected. When I told him, he just kept hugging me and his beard is—I can remember the feeling of his beard on my face, and I’m crying, I think it was the first time I cried all day. And I don’t really remember when I stopped.” She tapped the glass and returned to the couch.

Over the boats, swarms of gnats expanded and contracted in the porch light. None of them said anything. The breeze was still blowing and they listened to the pirogue bob and bump into the dock since it was only tied at the bow. Eventually, one of them went out and turned off the light. The stars blinked on. They all sat in silence and watched the Basin get older.

Before I was sent away, I built houses. I led a crew of guys. I had a pocket full of flat pencils, a tool belt, and a favorite claw hammer. I bought and scored all the lumber. I’d head to the lumberyard and run my fingers along the rough ends, my nostrils full of that sweet timber smell.

Then we’d run nails through them. Or a scale saw through them. Or holes for wiring. We’d bury them beneath sheetrock and siding. Like skeletons under the ground. You could find them if you dug. Or knocked through the shell to find what was underneath.

The shell could be sent up. In flames. When your job is to put something together, you also learn how to take it apart. Everything gone in a fraction of the
building time. The sheetrock and siding melts away and the skeleton crumbles and it all returns to the ground as ash.

I saw it happen after the storm. Structure fires. Houses, factories, blocks of buildings, burning. Surrounded by water, but no one to put them out. They burned all day, and at night I bobbed about in my boat with my grandfather’s chest, and watched steam rise from the waves licking the embers. Then they were washed away. Like nothing but water ever existed on those spots.

I thought about those houses on the water, burning. I thought about them while swimming on the Basin, with a plastic bag tied around my neck bobbing in my wake. The singing of insect legs and frog throats sent current though the air. It was my sonar, bouncing off the women’s houseboat, guiding me. I swam toward their watery voice and the porch light’s glow. I bobbed by the dock until the light went out then pulled myself up. I untied the front and back of the flat bottom, the one with the motor, and got in. I untied the plastic bag from my neck. Inside was a capped glass bottle filled with gasoline, a rag and a lighter kept dry in another bag. I opened the bottle, soaked the rag, stuffed it in the neck, and lit it. Then I started the motor.

The power was out in North Baton Rouge.

Derek slipped from his room and felt his way across his house by cell phone light, past his mother asleep on their faded couch, still in her grease-stained Chick-fil-A uniform, and out the front door.

Under the wide trees on his street Derek could faintly see the outlines of the neighboring homes. Low voices grumbled from a nearby porch. Further off, dogs
barking. 2:15. Derek didn’t have a reason to be outside, but now that he was he wanted all the houses and streetlights dark. Without a sidewalk, he crossed the narrow crabgrass lawn, onto the cracked asphalt, and headed left, away from Plank Road and its headlights. Added to the men’s voices and lonely dog howls were the loose pieces of road that skipped off the toes of his tennis shoes.

When he came to the intersection at Booker, he turned right, careful to avoid the pothole that had developed the previous year and grown as the soil beneath the road sank deeper into the earth. He pulled a gold Sacagawea dollar coin from his pocket and turned it over in his fingers as he continued north.

When the substitute teacher hadn’t been watching, Brody had pushed Jamichael over in Lisa’s class and a handful of the dollar coins fell from his pocket. Jamichael’s collection was a hobby, though he was also known to bite one after he said something he thought was funny. He got most to them back by the time the assistant principal came and took him and Brody away. But that one, the one that rolled across the room and bumped into Derek’s shoe, Derek kept.

After two blocks, Booker Street ended at Evanston Park. Sometimes Derek went there on Saturday mornings, before other neighborhood children took over the picnic tables and swings. Without a dense oak canopy, the sky was open for the starlight. From the edge he could see the steel ship, half-buried in the mound that rose at the playground’s center. Derek hiked the hill and climbed up the rigid cargo net, made of two-inch-thick piping, spotted with flaking paint. From its deck he climbed up once more, a ladder, to the square crow’s nest, which, with the added height of the hill, thrust him above the gray waves of treetops covering the
neighborhood’s shingled roofs. The rolling leaves looked like waves, like the Mississippi had overflowed the levees and spread out across the city. Miles downriver, Derek could see the yellow lights of the Exxon oil refinery. It looked as if it had only just landed, an entire Martian city, shimmering with advanced technology, promise, and life. Above one of the towering chimneys, the flame of burning fumes twinkled, a signal that everything was still all right.

Derek sat down, his back flush to the cool metal siding, scratched with twenty years of names, and tilted back his head. He could, for the first time in his life, see the faint white blaze of the Milky Way, bisecting the sky. He’d seen its picture on the overhead in Lisa’s class. There had been a red arrow pointing at the spiral’s center. That was where the hole hid—toward which everything was spinning. As if God had pulled the galaxy’s stopper and was watching it all drain away.

Derek’s phone rang, the chirping bells joining the sound of a car racing down a nearby street. Derek pulled it from his pocket, the mouthwash-blue glow lighting up the crow’s nest.

“Hey,” he said to his mother. “Went for a walk.” He slid onto his back and tried to feel the gentle rock of the ship as Earth hurtled through space. “It’s Saturday tomorrow.” He bit his lip. “I know, Mom. I know.”
WAKE (2010)

Matthew had been lying to his girlfriend. He had, in fact, lost his job as a counselor at the Thibodeaux Mental Health Clinic, bet most his checking account on a Saints game and lost, and, as he’d been slowly realizing, no longer loved Sarah, maybe never even did.

It wasn’t easy to keep those things from her, especially since she lived upstairs in the duplex’s second apartment. Like one Friday night, the last one of September, when he was frying chicken tenders in a skillet on his stove and she wrapped her arms not quite all the way around his thick waist, looping her thumbs under his belt. He felt the buttons on her green overalls—the overalls she always wore—press into his spine. She smelled like vanilla, like the brown candles she burned in her apartment. It was a smell that used to make his cheeks tingle. But over the nine months they’d been together it had become just another smell, like the skim milk in his Cinnamon Toast Crunch or the exhaust from a passing car.

With her arms around him, Sarah asked Matthew how his day had been.

“Fine,” he said. “No complaints.”

“Really?” She spun him around. “So did you get a raise?” He tightened his forehead and she added, “Your performance review with Bob. Last Friday of the month, right?”
He had forgotten. When he still worked at the Thibodeaux Mental Health Clinic each employee sat down with the boss, Bob, the last Friday of the month to talk dollars in, dollars out. Normally it was a time Bob told Matthew to drum up business. Hand out business cards to people, friends. Staple fliers to telephone poles, whatever. Matthew's name didn't bring in new clients, not like Meredith or Jonathan. That needed to change. Bob said there were no excuses—he knew Matthew was on Facebook. “Start there,” he said.

“Oh, the review. Bob said the numbers looked better, but we don’t have the money right now. What, with the economy and all. Maybe next month.” He should’ve just told her. She’d be supportive in her youngish way. The same naivety Matthew had when he moved off the family farm in Adel, Iowa—when a job at a Des Moines U-Haul earned him all the money he needed for rent, video games, and Mountain Dew. That was before he realized it wasn’t the farm he’d wanted to leave—it was Iowa, the Midwest, and how content everyone seemed to be plodding through life.

Sarah, who had been standing on her toes, sunk back onto her heels. “Oh. Well, I’m proud of you anyway.” She kissed him. Her dyed chestnut bob was pinned back by glasses looking as if they’d been recycled from the seafoam green body of a ’54 Thunderbird. Her eyes, light blue moons, said everything would work out, because that’s all she knew. She was only a year out of high school, a year away from her father, the reinstated BizComm president. Matthew and Sarah were so different in that way. Sarah’s dad blessed her leaving their home in Bethesda, Maryland, paid her rent in New Orleans, and praised her art. He even said she was welcome home.
any time. For Matthew’s parents, counseling might as well been a degree in magic, though they did co-sign his loans.

Matthew turned back to the chicken pieces. He poked them in the oil. They reminded him of the ducks that bobbed on the Mississippi River by the Audubon levee. Sarah loved to sit there with him on weekends. Most afternoons since his firing Matthew had gone there and watched the ducks float as they waited for the waves to take them somewhere.

After dinner Matthew and Sarah sat on his couch. Matthew watched TV. Sarah had her laptop open. She worked from home, which meant her hours spilled over 9:00 to 5:00 and flooded every other part of the day. New emails clicked into her inbox. Requests for rhinestone-studded dog collars. Buffalo hide. Snake skin. All shapes and sizes. She won a month of free ad space on The Huffington Post and since then her work schedule had even taken over the time she used to paint—the reason she’d moved to New Orleans. She’d sold paintings in Jackson Square—the dog collars just a hobby until she won that contest. Stacks of unfinished canvases leaned against her walls. One of them was of Matthew—the background, an undercoat of green and blue—his figure, only sketched in pencil.

Sarah poked Matthew's shoulder with her pale finger and smiled. “I have something for you,” she said. From the small front pocket of her overalls she pulled a silver coin. “An Iowa quarter! I found it on the sidewalk. So cool, right?”

He’d rather have an Iowa $100 bill. That might’ve actually helped him with the next month’s rent or his student loans or credit card bill. What would a 20-year-old with an allowance know about that? Matthew turned it over in his hand,
inspecting the schoolhouse and tiny figures holding hands. “You just keep finding these.”

“I can’t help it, I guess. I’m drawn to you,” she said and winked.

On TV thin, rich women pulled each other’s hair and one in heels toppled over with a champagne glass in her hand. The fallen woman had learned her older, investor husband lost most his wealth in some cooked-up market instruments. They were losing the house, just like so many in Matthew’s neighborhood, though he bet the woman’s wouldn’t be announced with a yellow carbon copy stapled to the door.

Sarah looked back at her computer and sighed. “Look at me. It’s not fair that you only work from ten to six. Your life is so well defined.” She paused. “I’m sorry. That’s not fair. I’m making money, that’s good. I just feel like I’m in a hole.”

Most nights Sarah slept with her laptop next to her pillow. When he stayed over he’d wake in the middle of the night and she’d be hammering away emails or pricing a custom collar made from old Levi’s jeans. Sometimes she was just hitting refresh on her website’s traffic tracker. She said it was insomnia. She said it was sick. He said no, it wasn’t. But he did wish she’d just try to sleep.

Sarah moved to the floor. She sat cross-legged and fanned receipts in front of her, lifted them one at a time, and punched amounts into a spreadsheet. Then she was digging under the couch. “What are these?” she asked. Envelopes—nearly a dozen. AT&T, the gas company, water company, electric, student loan agency, the gym. She held them up, between the TV and Matthew. He raised his eyebrows as if asking a question.

“Did you pay these?” Sarah asked.
“Yep. Mail lady had been putting them in some other guy’s mailbox. He just brought them over the other day.”

“You haven’t opened them.”

“I just went online. Used my debit card.”

“Oh. Okay.”

A fatalistic part of him wanted her to push harder, make him show her the receipts, the proof of payment, his checking account’s balance. Matthew tried to focus back on the TV. He absentmindedly pulled strands of hair from his head while Jimmy Savoi, The Cajun Cutthroat, advertised his firm’s newest business—selling foreclosed homes at rock bottom prices or his name wasn’t The Cajun Cutthroat.

The truth was Matthew’s mail hadn’t been misdelivered and he’d actually used the Visa credit card she didn’t know he had. He had eighteen bucks in his checking account. The day Bob told him never to come back Matthew nearly tapped it dry with a losing $1,000 bet on the Saints-Packers game. He’d already downed six Abita Ambers and two gin and tonics at the Banana Boat, so the spread had seemed a lock.

After Sarah finished with her receipts and went back upstairs to her apartment, Matthew turned on the fan in his range hood, put all the envelopes in a stockpot, and lit them on fire.

The next day, Matthew sat on a bent-leg stool at the Searchlight. Alice stood behind the taps, half of which wore plastic cups like hats, drying glasses with a small towel. She’d worked every Saturday afternoon the two years Matthew had been
going to the Searchlight. That day she wore her usual uniform—tight black jeans, a loose-fitting t-shirt with the sleeves and collar sheared off, “Buzzcocks” and a low-resolution photo of the band hanging across her chest. Matthew used to invite Sarah, back when he’d just moved-in beneath her, but dark, humid bars and day drinking weren’t her thing. Sarah had things to do. Matthew didn’t mind anymore.

“You missed it last night, Matty,” Alice said. “The whole place was hammered. I think I gave out thirty free shots.”

He swallowed the rest of his beer and set the empty glass down, letting the remaining foam slip down the inside. “Sorry I missed it.”

Alice spun the half-inch spacer in her left ear and pointed at Matthew’s glass. He checked the time on his phone—2:39—and looked down at the taps, leaning his still-thick farm boy arms on the bar’s edge where the varnish had been worn away.

“Crazy time,” she said. “Some fratty Tulane kids came in later, fucking high as kites. Blow in the bathroom and shit.”

“Give me a PBR.”

She took his glass and crossed back to the taps. Matthew watched how she fed a clutch of hair behind her ear. The unwashed black shined almost purple in the indirect sunlight that fought through the Searchlight’s painted over alley windows and propped front door. “Fucking annoying is what it is. They got to the bar and couldn’t even put together an order that made sense. I mean worse than when I was a kid barbacking at my uncle’s place in Missoula on St. Patrick’s Day.”

“We all have our moments.”
Alice brought back a sweating glass and set it down. She reached across the bar and put her hand on Matthew’s. “Were you a U-NO cokehead, Matty?”

“Oh, no. No. I’m just saying we all have our moments.” He smiled and exhaled, feeling the soft press of her knuckles between his.

“Sure, sure. How’s your gig coming?”

“Work. Yeah, fine. Nothing really new this week. Same old ten to six grind.”

For two years he’d assumed Alice asked about his work to drum up tips or pass the time. Before it was counseling at Thibodeaux, she listened to the stories from his summer shuffling papers in the railroad’s payroll department and the throwaway campus jobs he’d held a semester at a time—everything building toward Thibodeaux and validation. Recently, she’d devoted prolonged attention to him, putting her elbows on the bar and nodding along. She laughed at his stories about Christian, the bipolar bowler, and Wendy, the depressed owner of Tykes & Trykes Day Care. She would smile with her long porcelain teeth and blink her dramatically painted eyelids, making Matthew imagine her leaning against a different bar, one under a Caribbean cabana, wearing a bright red swimsuit, tattoos beaming in the sun.

The song on the speakers, “Atlantic City,” ended. Matthew nodded to Alice and slid off his stool to the jukebox. He fished coins and dollars from his pocket and plugged them into the machine—money from a Planter’s peanuts jar Sarah kept by her door. The speakers jumped alive with “Suffragette City.” “Black Dog,” “Poison Whiskey,” and “London Calling” on deck. He stuffed a few useless dimes and pennies into his pocket. The tab would go on his credit card. Matthew’s debt clicked up in his
head and made him think about his friend Scott that fell fifty thousand down at Harrah’s a few years back. For eight years the casino still garnished his wages from mopping car ferry bathrooms.

Matthew sat back down and sipped his PBR, daydreaming. Lou, another Saturday regular, knocked on the bar beside Matthew and thumbed to the pool table on the screened patio. Three pieces of two-by-four were wedged under one of the legs. The felt top was loose and the wood beneath it, warped. Normally, Matthew would stay, shoot some rounds, drink some rounds, but he had debt on his mind, so he shook his head. Besides, it would be just Matthew and Alice at the bar.

“So work’s coming?” Lou asked.

“Yeah. Same old. I got some crazies, I tell you.”

“Alright,” Lou chuckled, and headed out back to shoot pool alone.

The trapdoor behind the bar was laid open, an amber glow rising from the cellar. Two Saturdays earlier, Alice had taken Matthew down the shaky wooden stairs, saying he, the former hay baler, pig wrestler, football player, would make quick work of keg switches. It was down there, while she bent over, explaining how the CO₂ system attached, that she caught him noticing her from behind and smiled.

Alice climbed the stairs, a flat of High Life in her arms. “You send me a message, but don’t friend me?” she asked. “Facebook. You sent me a message about specials, which have been the same forever, but you didn’t friend me?”

Matthew shrugged. His face felt hot. Her page was public so he could already see her information and her friends, like Tiny, Silvia, and Dio, their photos choked
with dreadlocks, septum piercings, beards, and neck tattoos. He was shy about what she might think, him calling them friends. That wasn’t even his dream. Just the start.

She put the rag down and leaned on the other side of the bar. Her shirt hung open so Matthew could see the band of her bra between her breasts. “You know,” she started, “I’ve seen you on the levee by Audubon.”

“Yeah?”

“On work days. Like, seven times in the last two weeks.”

“I guess I have a twin.”

“Bullshit. You quit or did they fire you?” While he tried not to look down her shirt, she fingered the spacer in her right ear. She smiled. “Well?”

“Fired me.”

“What’d you do?”

“Lost some patient files.”

“Pray tell?”

Matthew hesitated. Looked at his hands. He didn’t want to gossip, not about his lost job, his inability to provide for himself, let alone the embarrassment of being a bumbling small town boy. He said, “I think I’m going to shoot some pool with Lou.”

Alice raised her eyebrows and pushed herself off the bar. Matthew picked up his half-empty glass and went out to the patio.

The day after Matthew lost his job, Sarah came down to his apartment around 9:00pm and asked if he was okay. She’d stood in his doorway, her face glowing in the porch light, and told him she hadn’t seen him go to work like usual.
Had he just left early? He scratched his stubble, looked down at her bare feet and told her he’d been sick, but was better. She said that was good because she liked a man that brought home the bacon. She pinched him and smiled her youthful smile. And she had news—she won a contest for free ad space on *The Huffington Post.* She stayed with him that night—intent on celebrating—but Matthew could only think that the Saints had had such a chance. Sarah showed him her father’s email—the president’s congratulations and announcement he planned to visit his superbly talented daughter. “Your mother would be so proud of you,” his email said. “I’ll tell her in my prayers tonight.” Sarah said that meant a lot though she didn’t really remember her mother—she’d died when Sarah was only six or so.

At 9:35 every morning after that close call, Matthew walked out his door in a shirt and tie, carrying his briefcase. He would pause in the courtyard, turn and wave to Sarah who would be sitting on her balcony, with her feet kicked up, her computer in her lap. Every morning she waved back and told him to have a great day at work. He would say he would and pat his briefcase, as if the pretend case files, breathing exercises, and stress balls inside guaranteed it. In that daily moment he could almost convince himself it was true.

The same people passed him each morning, running up and down St. Charles Avenue—in the wide median where the trolley cars shuffled by, on the sidewalks that were as uneven as Lou’s teeth. Some were older men that ran like they were sitting in invisible chairs. Ruddy-cheeked college girls with breasts that swayed in tight, orange tank tops. Thin women wearing white caps swung their arms as they passed Matthew, toy dogs leashed beside them. The looming live oaks overhead.
On that first morning he’d pretended to go to work, Matthew had set out with no plan. He’d thought about returning to the clinic and begging, but it was the runners—all the people going somewhere, even if it was just around the block or down the street and back again—that made him nostalgic for high school and the punishment of preseason football, when he’d baked in Iowa’s August heat. There was no trip to the Thibodeaux Mental Health Clinic and no attempted apology. Instead, Matthew returned home and told Sarah he’d forgotten something. In his bedroom he put his old running shoes and a change of clothes in his briefcase, then walked to and joined Tony’s Fitness, a gym twenty blocks away. He’d heard Alice tell her dreadlocked friend Silvia about it one Saturday—Matthew had also seen she’d posted its website on her Facebook page.

Matthew’s legs churned the elliptical, sweat collected in his eyebrows, his hands flushed. He could still feel his stomach move—the fat counter-swing as it tried to match his body’s up and down. Matthew put the back of his hand under his jaw. The loose skin hung like a water-damaged ceiling. He’d never been that out of shape on the farm. He frowned and kept spinning while on the TV Detective Brisco put the screws to a suspect.

It was during that interrogation that Matthew noticed Alice standing in front of his machine. He wiped his forehead and stopped his legs. The line graphing his speed plummeted and pulsed red.

“Well look at you,” she said, gripping his handles. She wore an orange, sleeved t-shirt spotted with white and black paint. It was tighter and shorter than
what he’d seen her wear before, the hem settling on her waist. The shirt read, “Dalton Elementary Dolphins.” A dolphin hovered mid-leap. A sun on the horizon wore shades, giving a thumbs-up.

“Thanks,” he said, hands on hips, trying not to sound winded. “Never seen you here.”

“Likewise. I’m only here after a bender.”

“Ah.”

“Heading to the levee later?”

“I guess.”

Alice pushed herself back from his elliptical. “I’ll see you there, then,” she said over her shoulder before disappearing into the next room.

He looked back at the red line on his controls. It scrolled along, undercutting the green pacing bars as if it were a mower with its deck set right down to the dirt. Matthew turned the machine off and hustled to the locker room.

It was a thirty-minute walk from Tony’s. First, he crossed the Loyola and Tulane campuses—their zombie-like students stumbling through their wide quads. Then, across Audubon Park and down the path that lead behind the zoo.

When he got to the levee, Matthew sat on the flagstone-lined edge. His feet dangled over the reinforcing piles of limestone, held in place with heavy-gauge chicken wire that prevented erosion of the levee wall. Out on the water, birds flapped their wings. Barges crawled by. The river was always moving.

Matthew turned and scanned the groups of people sitting in the grass, the people getting out of cars in the parking lot beyond that. There were college
students with their shirts off, one boy with swooped hair and dark aviator glasses rubbed sunblock into the back of a blonde-haired girl lying with her face on the ground. Two middle-aged women sat on a beach towel together, sipping red wine, reading copies of Dial M for Murder. One fat man with a Hawaiian shirt reclined in a foldable lawn chair, a fisherman’s hat over his face. Only his large gray beard poked out from beneath.

Matthew’s phone rang. It was his mother. The proud farmer’s wife, mother of Matthew and his drunken brother.

“How are you, Matthew?”

“Fine, Mom. You?”

“We got some mail here about a missed student loan payment.” Though they cosigned, his parents never asked much about school, just if he had a job, when he’d pay the loans back. He could only do so by wire from his checking account, not credit card. “With Dad on disability, we really don’t have the money to help you out with these.”

“Mom, that was a mistake. It’ll be fine.”

“Matty, this is tens of thousands of dollars.”

“I said I’m fine.”

“Yes, you did.”

“I got to go. There’s a client waiting on me.”

Matthew hung up as a green Frisbee flew by his head. He watched it slowly lose altitude until it set down on the water. Two of the male students walked up next
to him and wrapped their toes over the edge of the levee. One punched the other in the shoulder.

Matthew popped open his briefcase. He removed leftover samosas wrapped in foil and the book *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. He'd borrowed it from Bob's shelf without asking the week before he was fired. He hadn't read it yet. Matthew opened to chapter one and removed the bookmark Sarah had made for him.

It was noon. Sarah would be on the balcony, probably eating her own reheated samosas, typing with one hand. Occasionally she would pick pastry flakes from between her F and G keys. Sarah had made the bookmark by laminating a picture from her father's trip when they three went to Café Du Monde for beignets. Sarah liked to blow the powdered sugar at him if he wasn't paying attention. She'd done it just before that picture, when Alice's friend Tiny walking his kerchiefed dog distracted Matthew. Sarah's father had laughed like he was watching it on TV, like he didn't know Matthew at all.

Matthew bit into a pastry's cold lentil center. That's when Alice sat down next to him and crossed her legs. Her pale knees stuck through tears in her jeans like eyes. She scooted toward him and leaned back on her elbows, looking at the river. A barge stacked with pale green trailer homes chugged by. Matthew wasn't sure what Alice wanted, but was glad she was there. She looked so beautiful reclined in the grass. So natural. Like she'd practiced the pose. Like she was meant for it.

“So,” she said. “What are you up to?”

He held up the book, still swallowing his mouthful.

“No shit. Do you feel synergized yet?”
“You read it?”

“Fuck no. I take my own advice and my own advice only.”

Matthew’s phone vibrated in his pocket—a text message from his mother. “I’m serious, we can’t help you on this.” He imagined his mother and her bulging knuckles serving bright red meatloaf to his bum-legged father, while Matthew’s brother pitched hay in the crumbling barn’s shadow, his sweat-soaked back, his hands wringing the wooden handle, fighting through the shakes.

Alice sat up and pulled a folded paper stack from her bag. Matthew set the book on his briefcase and took what she handed to him. An open house flyer. Some shotgun in the 17th Ward that’d been fixed up, but the bank had foreclosed on last year.

“Day job?” Matthew asked. He wanted to move toward her. He wanted their knees to touch. But he waited and watched her.

She sorted piles of envelopes and papers in the grass, turned to him and said, “I’m not one for sitting around. These places are getting me paid.”

“How much?”

Alice waved her feet. She wore Chuck Taylors like Sarah, but Alice’s were high tops and in much worse condition. “In Montana I had to take gigs where I could. But you got to know how to look.”

A black car with tinted windows parked in the lot. Bass rattled from somewhere inside. The reverberations shook Matthew’s spine. The two Frisbee-less students bobbed their open palms up and down to the beat as if they were robots patting a child’s head.
“Your job hunt?” Alice asked, and turned to him. She licked a flap with her pointed tongue, sealed the envelope, placed it on another pile.

“The hospitals, a clinic or two. Jefferson Prison. No openings, though. I’m thinking, after the dust settles, Bob might ask me back. I don’t know.”

“Your boss?”

“Yeah, sorry. Guess I thought I’d told you about him.”

“My memory’s shit.”

“Yeah, I get that. Sarah’s always giving me a hard time about mine, too.”

“Look Matty,” Alice said, slapping her hand on his thigh and squeezing, “I like you. I get about Sarah, but I want to help you, anyway. I got a money plan.”

“Stuffing envelopes?”

“Do you trust me?”

Matthew thought for a moment, placed his hand on hers and squeezed back.

“You want me to take some now?”

“Bigger plans. Tomorrow. 436 St. Bruno Avenue. 11 in the AM. Up the back stairs.”

Then she packed up her stuff, stood up, and left, waving off Matthew’s questions. He watched her walk away. Black denim begging him to follow. Sarah didn’t move like that, like something wild. Sarah walked like she didn’t need her legs, like she hovered above the ground. She painted, made dog collars, samosas, and special trips down to St. Peter’s with pots of chicken Marsala to feed the families sleeping in the church’s basement. She’d always preferred staying in. Maybe watch a
movie or play a board game, rather than hit up Igor’s for a game of pool with his U-NO friends who hadn’t left the city.

Matthew knew while sitting there in the grass, as the birds from the river flapped their dull gray wings and took off for somewhere else, that he had to start distancing himself from Sarah. She’d be better off with someone her own age. She’d be better off by herself, anyway.

He pulled his phone from his pocket and called AT&T customer service. “Hello, I don’t want to be talked out of this: I want my phone disconnected...no you’re not hearing me, disconnect it now. Now. I’m done. I’m done. Please disconnect my phone now.” When Brad, the customer service rep finally relented and terminated his line, Matthew hung up, leaned back, and threw his phone from the levee, over the limestone abutment, and out into waves.

“Lou came by today,” Sarah said, after kissing Matthew at her door.

“Oh yeah?” He walked past her and into her living room, loosening his tie. The orange evening light came through the windowed doors that opened to her balcony. The dust floating in the air glowed as if it were lit from within, rather than by the setting sun. Her computer was open on her coffee table—three windows of invoices and spreadsheets crowded the screen. More than one hundred dog collars hung from a large shoe rack the size of a front door that stood on the opposite wall. Matthew picked a green one and put it around his neck, held it closed and turned to Sarah. She smiled.
No, that's not what he wanted. In his most seductive voice, he said, "I’ve been bad."

Sarah's head snapped back, as if he had pushed her. "Gross," she said, frowning. Matthew sighed loudly and returned the collar to the rack. "You have these already, but you’re still spending your time making more. You’re never available. Always working."

"I’m getting so many customers, Matt. You know that. And I know."

"It’s just hard on me."

"Well, I’m sorry, but I’m not talking about this now."

"Fine. What did Lou want?"

"Actually, he tried to call you to see if you were going to the Searchlight today, but he said he got messages that your phone was disconnected. I got the same ones." Sarah sat down on her couch and lifted her computer into her lap, but still looked at him.

"Right. You won’t believe this. My phone was stolen today. At the office."

"I was worried, because of those bills you had. But you said you paid them."

"I did, I did. I had it disconnected so whatever patient wouldn’t run up any charges."

"Okay, well I’m glad I didn’t call the clinic, then, acting all hysterical."

"Good. You shouldn’t do that. Bob hates when we get personal calls."

"I remember."

They looked at each other for a little longer. He tried to read her skin for messages telegraphed by subtle muscle twitches. Nothing. She went back to typing
on her computer and he went to the refrigerator for a beer. There was a mostly empty bag of spinach, an apple, hot sauce, the box of baking soda, and a large pot of gumbo.

“The gumbo’s for St. Peter’s. Would you mind walking to Wong’s and pick up dinner?” Wong’s was an Asian-fusion place a few blocks down—great, but expensive.

“How about I make something tonight? We ate there on, what, Thursday?”

“I really could go for some saffron wontons. Here,” she said, lifting her purse from the floor beside the couch. “Take some of mine.”

“No, I got it. I’ll go down to Diego’s and make some dinner. Go to Wong’s for lunch. I have loans to pay off.”

“I know. I didn’t think it would be such a big deal. Then what’re you making?”

Matthew usually cooked from boxes, but a few weeks earlier he’d popped into Vishnu’s Vault off Magazine Street. The bartender was sitting on one of the barstools alone, watching a cooking show. Matthew sat next to him and got a pint of Abita Amber and they watched a short, soft-spoken man make two raw chicken breasts and spinach into something that looked pretty great. Matthew said to Sarah, “I have something in mind.”

Matthew gathered his keys and went for the door.

“Hey,” Sarah said. “So, you’re going to get a phone tomorrow?”

“I don’t see how I’ll have time.”

“Go before work. Take the trolley down to the one by Popeye’s.”
“My mornings are my mornings. They’re one goddamn time in the day when I can actually relax and do something I want. Just because I work set hours, Sarah, doesn’t mean that I have time to get your dinner and get my fucking phone replaced the next day and whatever the hell else is going to crop up. We don’t all get paid to make dog collars for rich people. Maybe you should have thought about it before you took that ad space.” He left.

Diego’s was a convenience/liquor store across the street from Wong’s that sold non-perishable food, a little meat, and fruits and vegetables individually plastic wrapped. Inside, he nodded to Diego, took a basket and headed toward the coolers. With that recipe Matthew would show Sarah he was a thoughtful guy—the kind of guy who deserved a dynamic, fun, spontaneous woman. Besides chicken breasts and fresh spinach, he got a small block of mozzarella, and a cheap bottle of wine. Diego rang him up at the register.

“What’re you making tonight?”

“Something damn good, hopefully.”

The dinner didn’t turn out well. The chicken breasts, which he tried to bake, dried out and flaked, like the clay on a salt flat. He shredded and sprinkled the chicken over some spinach and cut the mozzarella in squares and laid those on top. He zapped the two plates in the microwave to make the cheese melty, then served it.

She didn’t eat all her chicken or the wilted spinach. When she put her fork down she reached across the table and put her hand on Matthew’s. “Hey, I know you work hard. And I admire it. I feel like we’ve been talking less lately. I just wanted to be able to talk to you more. I work hard, too. My job’s just different. It’s not fair for
you to talk to me like you did.” She put her plate in the sink and went back to the couch.

By the time Matthew headed to his apartment for bed she had finished a box of crackers from her cupboard. He paused at the door and, breaking a silence that lasted since dinner, said, “I’m just in a rut and I don’t know how to get out of it. The truth is, I’m not happy and I don’t know why.”

Before she could answer, he closed the door and descended the waffle steel stairs, mosquitoes swimming around his head. On the street, headlights bounced over the pitted pavement, as if the humidity had even warped the asphalt.

Matthew went through his nighttime routines, then lay in his bed and stared at the ceiling. The light from the small garden outside his window glowed yellow, like the flashlight he’d taken behind the Pizza Pantry industrial refrigerators as a busboy. Yellow like the handles of the rusted gardening shears Ken Guidry gave to all the newbies on his landscaping team. Yellow like the mask he wore on the family farm when he power washed the pig barn walls. Yellow like the padded chair cushions at the Des Moines U-Haul he’d worked at before he thought college was even an option. Yellow like the light that seeped into the Searchlight through translucent windows, painting the bar some kind of beautiful.

Matthew closed his eyes and imagined Alice there, on top of him. Her hair hung loose around her face, her firm legs, white and warm as heated cream, clamped his hips as she leaned down and kissed him. He imagined the room, the whole world beyond his sheets falling away so there they were, floating with each other.

*
Matthew opened the doors of the Thibodeaux Mental Health Clinic. There were patients in the waiting room. An overweight woman wore all green. A woman and child pushed beads along a tangle of wires that looked like a model amusement park. A man by the front desk had his chin against his chest and hands folded over his belly. His frown looked like it had been there forever. It was everything Matthew remembered.

Marcia, the secretary, stared at him. Her mouth and eyes were wide. The telephone receiver hovered halfway to her ear. Marcia was a wheezy woman with thin black hair and sinus infections. She used to put messages into Matthew’s box spotted with snot.

He crossed the waiting room, to the wall of employees’ pictures. His had been flanked by Meredith and Jonathan. Meredith was a psychiatrist that had a different shawl for each weekday of the month. Jonathan was a young counselor who Matthew once saw on a Bourbon Street tabletop without his shirt on. Their photos still beamed down from the wall. Matthew’s was gone. Replaced with the Super Dome, all lit up at night.

At the end of the hall was Bob’s door. Matthew paused then pushed it open.

Bob’s top shirt button was undone to make room for a napkin. The takeout box on his desk overflowed with a Caesar salad. Bob fiddled with the cellophane wrapping his plastic knife and fork. Bob looked up. “What do you want?” he asked, and set down the unopened silverware packet. His face turned red.

“Well, I hadn’t heard from you so I wondered if you want me back to work.”

“Absolutely not.”
“Bob—"

“You took files home, which you were explicitly told not to. Then you left said confidential files in a bar.”

“I know.”

“Then, as if it couldn’t have been any worse for us, you left these files on a table next to a *Times-Picayune* reporter.” Bob leaned forward in his chair, napkin dangling into the salad, and pointed at Matthew. “How I got him not to print a story, I’ll never know. But I do know I don’t have time for stupidity.”

“I can assure you it won’t happen again.” Matthew pounded his fist on Bob’s desk. “Because I don’t want anything to do with you and your numbers and your fat ass.” Matthew told Bob everything he hated about him, the clinic, and Marcia. Some of it made-up. Then he left.

Matthew walked down St. Charles, under the live oaks and the clouds rapidly closing up the sky. A dog leapt against a wrought iron fence and barked at him as two women jogged by. They turned their heads, as if they thought he had provoked the animal in some way. Matthew continued down the uneven sidewalks. He passed Audubon Park, where a pair of elderly men on a bench laughed as they tossed pieces of Wonderbread to mallards kicking around the lagoon and a man chinned pull-ups on one of the workout stations.

Alice was sitting on the second story landing around back of 436 St. Bruno Avenue. She drummed her fingers on a bottle of High Life and smiled.

Her apartment had other people sleeping in it. Two of them. One on a couch, arm over his eyes, the other in a faded recliner, head lollled to the side. Alice waved
Matthew into a bedroom and closed the door. The walls were a collage of posters, unframed canvases, and painted sheets of cardboard. The bed was two mattresses stacked on the floor. The window curtains were closed, but threadbare—a gray light filtered through.

“I didn’t know you paint. Sarah paints—painted—too.”

“Something I picked up.” Alice opened the closet and slid over a milk crate, which she stood on to pull down a box from the top shelf.

“Is it in there?” Matthew asked.

“Hold your horses. This is just for us while we discuss your job.” Alice pulled a large manila envelope from the lockbox. She bent back the fastener wings and poured out two Ziploc bags of hand-wrapped cigarettes. Joints.

“You want to split one?” she asked.

“Um, sure. Just a little.”

Alice lit one, puffed, and handed it to Matthew. She resealed the Ziploc, put both baggies back in the envelope, returned them to the box, and the box to the top shelf. “My friend, Tiny, made a list of foreclosed houses. All over the city. We’re going to flip them.”

“What do you mean?” He took a drag, coughed, and handed it back.

“Tiny’s dad is a locksmith on Rampart, so I fronted him the money to change the locks on all these houses we’re going to flip. Places the banks haven’t moved on. Lot of places. I handed out flyers and put up ads on Craigslist for the houses—said they’re going for super cheap because I got them when Bank of America liquidated them or some shit.”
“Wait. How?”

“Pretty easy, actually. Just type it up and hit POST.”

“You don’t own them.”

“Right, so that’s where you come in. You’re a professional—were a professional. You’re going to dress up, like a professional, and show the houses.” She offered him the joint. He shook his head. “People will want to snatch them up. The ads say cash deposit. We might even get a couple people per house to put down a deposit. We’ll say move-in is in three weeks—we’re updating the pipes or something. By then we’ll be all done. My ex, Dio, did this in Shreveport. He’s got the contracts and everything. He made out with a sixty thousand on five places. Matty, you’re going to make us some money.”

“You’re serious.”

“Abso-fucking-lutely,” she said and squeezed his hand.

“So you want me to open-house these places so people will give us their money.”

“Like ten or twenty grand, depending. We start Saturday.” She exhaled smoke and smiled. “It’s a ton of money, Matty. A ton of money.”

“This just seems like a lot.” The light from the shades faded and the room grew dark.

“Dio would do it, but he’s already come through so big. Wouldn’t want him to do more than his fair share. Sue me, but I already told him you were cool.”

“I need to think about it,” he said, standing.
She licked her fingers and pinched the joint. “How can I convince you?” she asked.

“Tell me that we won’t get caught.”

“We will get caught,” she said, meeting his eyes.

“Can I kiss you?”

“Sarah?”

“That’s over.”

“No it’s not.”

“Practically. Soon.”

She let go of his hand and put the burned down joint in an ashtray on the windowsill. “Come on, I’ll drive you home.”

They cut through Broadmoor and Freret, under the wide live oaks that shaded so many of the houses—houses with yellow papers stapled to boarded front doors, yards staked with FOR SALE signs. Matthew hadn’t considered them so closely—not until they had become relevant, like trees growing money. Him and Jimmy Savoi. He rolled down his window and wondered if he would be able to stand in those foyers, convincing excited homebuyers to trust him, to put down cash on a house deal too good to be true. Those couples would probably go to church right after and pray to God, thanking him for the housing crisis, for his glorious bounty.

Alice parked her rusted beige Camry outside Matthew’s apartment. He drummed his fingers on his briefcase. Home early. He’d say his afternoon clients had canceled. Sarah wouldn’t be suspicious. Somewhere in the block behind his house, Matthew could hear children yelling. He’d already driven the wedge between them.
If he kept the pressure, they’d drift apart. Sarah into whatever future her father had dreamed for her. Matthew into Alice’s arms.

“You should do this. Here’s my number,” she said, and gave him a piece of paper.

He inhaled. “No phone right now. But I’ll get one tomorrow. I’ll call you if I’m in.”

Alice leaned across him, as if she was looking at something on the sidewalk or down the street. With her hair in his face he breathed in her smell—smoke and smallest trace of sweat. It was the closest he’d been to her, so close he could only smell her—not contamination of bar, river, or musty apartment. Just Alice. She raised her face to his and brought his hand to the soft press of tendon in her neck. They kissed. Matthew’s cheeks tingled and the car felt like it was bobbing on waves, as if the ground beneath them had turned to water.

Alice sat back in her seat. “Get your phone first thing. Call me by 10. We’re meeting Dio at one.”

Matthew leaned over the console for her, but Alice slid farther toward her window. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Matty,” she said, laughing.


She unlocked the doors. “Dress nice. You want to look like we own these places.”

“Okay.” Matthew got out, and she drove away.

Sarah was on her couch, stuffing collars in nine by twelve padded envelopes. She didn’t say anything when Matthew walked in or when he sat down next to her,
frowning. With each envelope she sealed, she threw them in a white Postal Service basket on the floor without the care she usually showed them. Matthew picked up the remote and sighed. “All my afternoons cancelled. Why can’t that job just go right for me?” She was focused on her packing. Matthew looked at the remote. “Not that you can relate.”

“Who dropped you off?” she asked, before he turned on the TV.

“Meredith. I work with her.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Well, I don’t know what to tell you, because that’s the truth.”

“I don’t believe you because Bob called today. He said if you harass him again, he’s calling the cops. You haven’t been working there for weeks. You got fired, Matthew. He called me because I was your emergency contact, but I think it should be that woman, that fucking woman you were kissing in that car. Is that where you’ve been going? With her?”

Matthew stood up and turned to face her. “What are you talking about?”

“I was right there. There,” she said, pointing, “On the balcony. I saw you kiss her.”

Matthew still held the remote. He started to say, “Well, I’m in love with her,” but instead he just shrugged and dropped the remote on the couch.

“God. Fuck, Matthew. Fuck. I can’t talk to you anymore.” Her eyes shimmered in the early afternoon light. It was in Matthew’s eyes, too, and made everything hard to see. “Just leave. Leave.”
At the door he paused and scanned the room one last time. In the kitchen a box of pasta, a red bell pepper and red onion, can of crushed tomatoes, and cloves of garlic sat on the counter. Sarah had stopped stuffing envelopes, but did not turn around. Her hair fluttered in a breeze that pushed open her unlatched balcony door. It came to rest against the easel holding the now finished portrait of Matthew. The trees and river behind him leaned in a gust of wind. She’d even added the fine lines around his mouth. But something looked different—something about him looked different that he couldn’t immediately place. His face on the canvas, not as thin as he’d shaped at Tony’s, was the change, but it wasn’t just the exercise. Sarah had painted him standing with his hands in his pockets, the way he usually did. It took him a few heaves of Sarah’s shoulders to realize the difference. Though it was his face, he looked happy.

In the morning, when the sun finally cut through his blinds, Matthew was awake. He got up and ate a bowl of Cinnamon Toast Crunch. He dressed and stood in the bathroom mirror. The bottom point of his tie touched the top of his belt buckle. He went back to his bedroom, closed his briefcase, tied his shoes, and went back to the bathroom mirror. Straightened his tie. Pushed his hair to the side. Held out his hand. Smiled and said, “Hi, I’m Jeff. Great to meet you. Hi, I’m Brandon. Are you ready to buy a home today?”
IN REAL LIFE (2011)

Monday

I don’t hear the hundreds of shoes, wet with spring rain, squeaking down the halls, nor do I make out the contours of seniors’ sunburned faces as they push towards their first class on that last week of school at Baton Rouge Central High—I only follow the back of Julia’s head as the current of students parts around her. I watch until she disappears, then swear to myself that she’s wrong, I do have friends.

Many of those friends are my age, but I also know doctors and janitors, artists and astrophysicists. I know it’s fodder for the bullies to admit I met them online. But I did. We gather on the Reddit.com message boards to make each other think and laugh, to help solve problems and grow as people. It makes being alive suck a little less. You see, we humans are evolving, and every day we’re making smarter computers and someday soon we’ll exist more online than as sweating creatures. Already, the community we have on Reddit is more than Julia can say for herself, hanging from the arm of that idiot Derek McDonald every damn day.

Reddit promotes democracy more than any high school’s halls. I thought that’s what we’re all about. Reddit is basically a giant list of cool articles, pictures, and ideas made from one hundred thousand smaller lists, called subreddits. The subreddits can be about anything, like /r/coffee for coffee fans, /r/trees for marijuana fans, /r/chemistry, /r/atheism, /r/cincinnati, and stuff you couldn’t even
imagine. Anyone can sign up for a free username and post content to any subreddit list, like pictures of dogs wearing birthday hats in /r/aww or news articles about why the Republicans’ budget proposal is for asshats in /r/politics or a Q&A in /r/askscience asking expert redditors what color the oceans were before photosynthesis. Every redditor can comment on or upvote any post. The more upvotes a post gets the higher it goes on the subreddit list—so more people see it and comment. The best posts rise to the top of the big Reddit list so everyone can see them. Everyone gets one vote and we're all just usernames, divorced from status, appearance, or how much money we have. The best stuff wins. It’s the future.

But for all the great stuff and the refuge Reddit gives me from Derek McDonald and his moron friends, for all its community that makes my miserable high school life bearable, since I signed up for Reddit at Thanksgiving and took the name 4everAlonesome, Reddit has made other parts even harder to suffer through, because I can now imagine something better, a world where I’m accepted, a world where Julia remembers that we used to be friends. Though in four days it won’t matter anyway.

I’m alone in the first floor computer lab for independent study, but I’m not finishing the coding for my final project, a knock-off of Snake I’m calling Hungry Worm. Instead I’m scrolling through /r/amisexy. The sun is streaming from the dewy skylights over the lab, like spotlights in an empty, unpopular room. The only sounds are my breathing, the computer’s fan, and my clicking mouse. It’s quiet
enough that I wonder for a moment whether all the students left school as some unfunny practical joke. Not that I’d care.

A 17-year-old female redditor has the post titled, “[17f] Never had much self-confidence. Please be honest.” She took the picture in her mirror, a pink bed littered with stuffed animals in the background. She’s skinny, but her eyebrows are plucked too thin and too straight, and her yellow, damaged hair hangs like frayed wires against her over-tanned skin. I’d rate her 5/10. She still wouldn’t give me a chance.

I’m 18 and on the front end of puberty. I’ve tried to grow a beard, but it comes in patchy and soft, like the feathers of newly hatched chick. I wear t-shirts given away for video games promotions. I like them, but they don’t scream “popular” in my high school. Today mine says “Vampire Hunter.” The once stick-straight letters have bowed since my stomach stretches all my shirts into bells.

“Not too bad!” I type. “You’re obviously putting in a lot of effort, but maybe try to be more natural. Your hair is dried to shit and your eyebrows look fake. 5/10.”

Just as I hit ENTER to post my comment, the door behind me opens with a gasp. It startles me and I throw my body backwards, which is stupid. I don’t even have a chance to ex out of the Internet browser when my swivel chair tips and I fall ass-over-tea-kettle to the computer lab carpet.

I’m dizzy, but make out Derek McDonald’s standing in blaring skylight.

“What are you looking at, Slick?” he asks. Pause. So I should say, people call me that because of the dark birthmark on my right cheek. Slick is short and teacher-friendly for Oil Slick, the nickname I’ve had since seventh grade science when we learned
about the Exxon-Valdez spill. It stretches from my temple to my chin and hangs over me like a cloud in real life.

“You nincompoop,” I say, but with the skylights’ starbursts in my eyes I can’t see if he reacts.

“A what?” he says, laughing. Which is typical. I hear the door open again and I crane my head backwards, already knowing whom it is.

Julia, my dream girl. Since I’m looking backwards from the floor, it seems like she’s walking on the ceiling—her chestnut hair hangs straight up, as if even gravity doesn’t apply. She’s thin, but strong, not like her anorexic friends. She has a great smile when she laughs, with eyes that practically wave at you from across the classroom. She plays volleyball and runs a lot so she looks like a warrior. If she wanted, her picture would fit /r/hardbodies to the “T.” She’s the only 10/10 I know.

“Oh, Slick,” Derek says. “What are you spanking it to in here? Oh,” he said, checking my screen, “my bad—what are you spanking it to in here, Mr. 4everAlonesome.” Derek laughed again.

A chill runs under my skin and the room smells like wet metal. For years I’ve scratched Julia’s name in my notebook margins. I’ve sketched and freckled her face on college rule over and over. I’ve drawn her as a medieval hero—swinging a sword, riding a dragon, and standing atop lonely turrets, surveying her kingdom. But she’s demeaned herself by hanging out with jocks and the bleached blonde girls we used to make fun of in middle school.

“Oh you’re ignoring me. Well, ain’t too many people need help sitting in a chair. What do you think, Jules? Too bad he can’t draw himself some friends.”
I imagine Julia and I standing in armor, fighting off Derek and his barbarian army together. But she doesn’t look that powerful now. She finally looks down at me and clenches that marvelous jaw, out of anger no doubt. But she doesn’t come to my rescue. No, Julia turns and leaves through the doors. I watch the back pockets on her jeans tick-tock from side to side until the door rattles closed.

**Tuesday**

Mom gets it—the Internet, she gets it. She returns from the weigh station on I-12 to Hammond each afternoon, practically falling into the house. She knocks on my door and says hello before hunkering in her computer’s glow with weekend leftovers, slipping into the skin of Andrea, her *Second Life* avatar. Andrea can fly.

After Mom microwaves dinner and we both retreat to our separate rooms and computers, I pull a washcloth from my top dresser drawer and scrub my birthmark. Mom and Dad don’t like when I do. If I leave my room and my face is red she’ll say, “Baby bird, you need to keep your chin up and be proud of you for being you.” I usually just grunt, grab a package of beef sticks from the fridge, and shut my door. The last time I went to Dr. Sargasso for a weight check I asked him if he had any creams or pills or anything.

“Well, it’s not cancerous,” he said. “So we just need to give it time. Sometimes they fade. You’re still growing into your body, anyway.”

I told him I feel plenty grown into it already.

He laughed. “Fair enough. But as your doctor, I’m telling you give it time. Maybe you’ll feel differently after you graduate. Now how’s the exercising coming?”
When my face stings and the dark washcloth is flecked with translucent pieces of skin I throw it on my bed, sit at my computer, and log into Reddit. I post about Julia in /r/relationshipadvice. I tell them it’s our last week of high school. I tell them we dated in sixth grade, which is the truth. I tell them we never kissed and only held hands once while sitting on my parents’ couch watching X-Men 2. I tell them it was before her dad’s doomsday guidebooks—Marked for Survival—went bestseller and before she got her period or whatever. I tell them Julia and me and Whitney and even Derek used to sit together at the brown cafeteria table by the milk cooler, but then Julia and Derek changed and now I want to push him down a flight of stairs. I tell them about the Spaghetti Thursday when they came down the lunch line together. She wore her new volleyball sweatshirt, got her milk, and then they walked past Whitney and me. Julia sat with Derek in the bleached-blonde sea at the green cafeteria table without so much as a nod. I click SUBMIT and wait.

I hear the front door open and know it’s Dad, finally home from sorting other people’s mail. The only thing cool about his job is that sometimes he finds stuff sitting on a curb along his route. Once he came home dragging a desk and he gave it to me.

Otherwise, my bedroom is pretty sparse. My bed sags in the middle, under a worn, light blue quilt. The walls are covered with pages I tore from library copies of PCGamer—ads for Super Mario Galaxy, Tekken 4, and Kingdom Hearts 2.

I hear Dad call for Mom and feel his footfalls close in on my door. He knocks as I refresh the comments on my post about Julia.

“Hear anything from the colleges today?” Dad asks.
“Nope. The guidance counselor said it’s pretty normal for the good ones.”

“How was school?” he says, not touching the doorknob.

“Same,” I shout back quickly. So he knows it’s the truth.

It’s quiet, no traffic on Davidson Street, except for the squeaky-wheel call of a black-headed grosbeak sitting in the magnolia outside my window. I know it’s a black-headed grosbeak because I submitted a picture to /r/birdwatchers. It’s the only one I’ve seen, though someone in /r/birdwatchers said they’re common to southeast Louisiana. I listen to his song, imagining all his bird friends sweating in cypress trees, wondering where he was. Eventually Dad walks away, probably for the night, off to a hazy poker game down at Little Burt’s Billiards.

After two hours the most upvoted comment on my post is Dunebiker88’s:

Dude, it sounds like you’re great and Julia just got swept up in being hot. Same thing could happen to anyone. But I bet she hasn’t changed deep down. Good prevails. You just have to take a chance. So I give you until Friday, good sir. If you don’t do something by then I’m going to find you, shove your mouse up your ass, then make you sing and dance to “Camp Town Races” while the cord wiggles around like you’re one of those rats in the fucking Nutcracker. So be a man and do something. Be sure to tell us how it went. Been traveling around this country two years now—just me and my laptop. I thought I knew stuff in high school, but now I know I didn’t. So no excuses. PS: Fuck Derek. A tumble down the stairs would teach him a thing or two. PPS: I saw from your posting history that you live in Louisiana. Totally jealous. Your temperature right now reminds me of hot summer days in N. California. Milwaukee’s too cold for May right now.

Yes, I didn’t tell them that she walked out of the computer lab while Derek stood over me—and I’m sure he enjoyed it, that bastard. I didn’t tell them about yesterday, when I saw her in the hall, when everyone was fresh off the weekend. I didn’t tell them how I bowed and said, “Good morrow, priestess! I trust you had a refreshing weekend?”
I didn’t tell them she sighed, put her hand across her face, and said, “Jesus. This is why you don’t have friends,” before disappearing down a crowded hallway.

It’d just disappoint them. I’ve wasted enough time. I’m going to be a man.

**Wednesday**

I wait in the elective’s stairwell before lunch, peering through the door’s window into the crowded second floor hallway. I rushed here after class to wait for Julia, feeling like a total spy. In the hall, the cliques walk by yammering, unaware. The brain dead stoners are trying to backhand each other’s testicles. They’re coming toward me with one hand over their flies, ready to bend over when a friend swings. The softball girls are wearing their uniforms, sleeves rolled up to their shoulders, their hair braided into pigtails. Half are more muscular than Julia, the kind of muscular that makes them look like rednecks. The best are 7/10. The others are just fat. The churchies have boys that go googly-eyed over those pantyhose-wearing girls who carry their Bibles to class and hold their cross necklaces whenever they’re telling someone to move their fat butt. I’m a militant atheist, so they’re enemies. Julia wears a cross necklace, too, and she holds hands with her lunch table before she eats, but this is the South, so she kind of has to. I could convince her to convert to atheism if I just had 20 minutes to explain it really simply.

Lying in wait is harder than I thought. The trains of kids keep coming and the band geeks keep opening the door and heading down the stairwell to the band room with their plastic lunchboxes. I also have to pee. I lean forward a bit to take some of
the pressure off. None of my morning classes let me go and during passing period,
kids in the bathroom call me Sir Fatass Smalldick and poke my sides until I bruise.

The hallway’s thinning and Julia and the jocks aren’t out there, just the kids
sifting through their lockers or kicking wadded homework as they walk to lunch
alone. Sometimes I see Julia walk to lunch alone, especially on days when there’s a
sports match and all the jocks are dressed in dress shirts, pretending to be civilized.
They go to Coach Erickson’s office and walk into the cafeteria together, puffing their
chests and nodding to each other like they’re Spartans or something.

I open my binder to take my mind off my swollen bladder and pull out a
folded piece of yellow construction paper. On the front I’ve drawn a humble peasant,
kneeling and holding a single rose. It reads, “To the fairest of the fair.” I open it,
trying to keep the paper from sticking to my sweaty fingers. On the inside it reads,
“Trying to behold your splendor is like trying to behold all the world at once.”

A much upvoted comment on my post in /r/relationshipadvice suggested I
tell Julia how I feel in writing if I didn’t think I could say it to her face. I’ve put her on
the tallest pedestal ever carved. The clouds separate her from second and third,
Allison McKay and Stephanie Dole. So yeah, it would be hard.

I adjust my pants and smooth the puckered fabric between the buttons of my
Hawaiian shirt. When my hands lift, the red and white pineapple print over my
stomach crumples back into the wrinkles from being balled in my dresser.

I think through my plan. Empty hallway and she’ll emerge. I’ll tuck the card
against my binder and open the door with my left hand. I’ll walk toward her, looking
into her eyes like I’m in charge. I’ll be so business-like she’ll be transfixed. When I’m
almost to her I’ll shift my binder to my left hand and pass her the card with my right. “For you,” I’ll say and then I’ll continue before she can even say anything back. Smoother than James Bond. It’ll be perfect.

I’m still rehearsing when I hear behind me, “What are you mumbling about?”

My mental picture of Julia holding my card with a look equal parts impressed and surprised dissolves into a Goth girl climbing the stairs toward me. Whitney, my other former friend.

“What?” I say, adjusting my pants and checking the empty hall.

“You’re mumbling and moving around like you’re crazy.” Her eyes look narrow, but it might just be the dark ovals drawn around them. She’s holding a black binder on which she’s written “Nirvana,” “Puddle of Mudd,” and “TOOL” in whiteout. When she gets to the landing she clutches the binder across her chest. Her upper arms and face are round and freckled with the faint red spots of recently healed acne. A 4/10. She’s probably trying to skip lunch. I used to skip with her—in the theater wings, behind the greenhouse, in the classroom that’s been empty since the district cut funding for one of the art teachers—but then sophomore year she and Dana Sheffield started wearing velvet dresses with low necklines, kissing each other, and chanting spells over their food, which conflicted with my atheism.

“I wasn’t mumbling. I was just thinking of a song.”

“I heard you say Julia. You mean Julia Marks,” she says, stepping closer to me. The tiny glitter flecks sparkle in the smudges around her eyes.

“No.” Having her so close to me makes my bladder stretch even farther. I press me legs together and hold off a wince.
“Sure. What other Julia do guys talk about?”

“You don’t know.” The hallway’s still empty and still no Julia. She must’ve gone to lunch before I got to the door. Stupid.

“You don’t have to be anyone to know that all the guys want her.” She drops her binder to her side and steps beside me. “You have to get your act together if you’re ever going to have a chance with her. Otherwise my offer’s still on the table.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“This is you taking your last shot before MIT or wherever you’re going?”

“Whatever.”

“Haven’t seen your name on the honor roll recently.”

“Are you such a loser you can’t find something better to do?”

“You’re the one hiding in the stairwell.”

“Leave me alone,” I say, but I’m stepping on my toes and rubbing my knees together, so it tumbles out as a shout and so quickly that my voice squeaks and reverberates off the cinderblock walls like Ms. Doerr’s chair when she wheels around the room.

“You’re right,” she says, then steps past me and opens the door. She grabs my wrist and yanks me and I stumble into the hallway. I turn, but the door’s closed and she’s vanished from the window. I squint down the harshly lit hall and see Julia, Derek, and Derek’s dressed-up friends walking towards me like at the end of a movie. My face is burning, my bladder pulsing in time with my speeding heart.

I look at my card. The peasant, humble in his rags, holds that delicate flower as if offering it to me. He looks unsure, a bit sad, knowing that the card is a terrible
idea. Julia, Derek, and what must be the dumber half of the already dumb track team, are still coming when I turn, fumble with the stairway door handle while Derek yells, “Hey Slick!” I rush down the stairs so quickly I worry I might trip on the landing and explode, streaming down the stairs in a wave of body parts and shame.

**Thursday**

What an opportunity. My AP Calculus class is on a field trip to a physics day at the Cajun Country amusement park as a reward, so they stuck me in pre-Calc for 3rd hour.

While Mr. Harper, my teacher from last year, goes on about the Friday’s final, I turn in my chair to look at Julia sitting behind and two rows to the right of me. One hand’s holding a pink pen and must be writing down everything Mr. Harper says. The other’s playing with the silver cross around her neck. It twinkles when she moves it just right. Her graphing calculator sits at the corner of her desk and is angled so its infrared data port faces me. I want to report back to Dunebiker88 and the other /r/relationshipadvice Redditors that I successfully made contact with Julia. They might upvote my post big time. It could be such a story. An increasingly personal exchange until Julia admits she’s so unhappy under Derek’s thumb and needs a chivalrous man. She would look around nervously before huddling over her calculator to read each of my messages. Just before the bell rings, she’d tell me to message her on Facebook after school, ending the request with a colon and single parenthesis, “:).”
I turn left to check on Derek. He’s slumped back in his chair, arms crossed and eyes closed. The narrow strip of hair that passes along his jaw line, connecting his sideburns, twitches as he presses his lips together breathing slow and silent, like a long slumbering dragon. I’m not surprised. To be honest I don’t think he actually can do math. He can barely talk and breathe at the same time. But people like him get to go to whatever college they want for free because they can run fast. What about a fast mind?

When we had class together freshman year, I was in a group with him. I spent the whole time correcting his idiot mistakes. God, and when he talked in Chemistry last year. It took everything I had not to declare him retarded then and there. Julia was in that class, too. They actually started dating after Ms. White asked her to tutor Derek. But that’s not important.

I look down at the message I’ve typed into the graphing calculator Mr. Harper handed me when I walked in. “Konichiwa!” A girl on /r/relationshipsadvice said it’s important to be casual and to open conversations with something light hearted. I point my calculator’s infrared data port at Julia and let my finger hover over F5 key to send. But I delete the word and turn back to Mr. Harper, trying to think of something better.

Julia’s always been good at math. She should be in AP Calc with me. Once we did math riddles together at my house after school. That was the day we held hands. She doesn’t look interested in what Mr. Harper’s saying. She probably just wants to know what’s on the test so she can help Derek pass.
In English this year, Julia talks all the time. She volunteers to read and raises her hand for every question. Ms. Doerr is always giving Julia different projects, and then having her present them to the class. One time she read a poem she wrote about the sun setting over the Atchafalaya Basin. Another time it was an essay about a town that reminded her of Maycomb in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Most of us just pretended to read that book. Thankfully it’s one of the most popular summaries posted on /r/readit.

Maybe she likes Mr. Harper’s ties. They all have math jokes. This one is embroidered with 0 and 1 dressed like Musketeers and fencing. Julia was voted “best dressed” in the senior class poll. It’s funny that everyone likes her tights and baggy shirts, but I guess it’s cool. And it’s not like I’m complaining about a free show.

With the flashing cursor I type, “Mr. Harper’s tie’s pretty funny, huh?”

I spin my calculator so the clear piece of plastic on its top, what the infrared data port communicates through, points backward at Julia. I look to get her attention, but her calculator is on the other side of her desk and she’s typing into it from her notebook. Everyone is. Mr. Harper’s standing over his teacher copy of the textbook and tapping a capped marker on it, not paying attention to us. A few integrals are on the board.

I cough once and look out the corner of my eye, but Julia’s still typing, still holding a finger to her notebook. Mr. Harper’s still tapping and spaced out into his book.

I cough twice and a little louder. I tap my calculator on the edge of my desk. The redheaded girl between Julia and me looks at me like I’m the weirdest thing
she’s ever seen, and then goes back to drawing spirals in her notebook. Her
calculator isn’t even uncovered. Mr. Harper’s turned now, taking in the whole board
like it was hanging in the Smithsonian or something. I lean toward the redhead,
realizing I don’t know her name, though we’ve had some classes together this year.
The side bar on my desk is pressing into my ribs, but I still can’t quite reach her
desk. I carefully lean further, the two legs on the far side of my desk lift off the
ground and I’m balancing, reaching with a trembling finger, trying to tap this
redhead’s desk to get her attention. My knee, the one keeping me balanced shakes as
I make a swipe, just missing my target. I over compensate the other direction and
my desk slams back down on the tiles with a bang.

I fold my hands and feel blood pouring into my cheeks as everyone looks at
me with those same are-you-crazy faces. Even Mr. Harper, but then they’re all back
to their calculations.

The redhead, though, is still looking at me. I nod toward Julia and the
redhead leans over and flicks Julia’s desk and jabs her thumb back at me. Their rows
must be closer together.

And there she is looking at me. Julia’s eyes are sparkling under the
fluorescent lights and might as well be the same eyes that looked at me on my
parents’ couch after we decoded that last math joke. “I used to hate math, but then I
realized decimals had a point!”

I hold my calculator up and point it at Julia. She looks at her’s for longer than
I’d like, before switching it to my side of her desk.
I set mine down and look at the message once more, “Mr. Harper’s tie’s pretty funny, huh?” No. I delete it and type, “He can’t even stay awake for notes on the final?” and press SEND. She copies one more thing down from the board before checking her screen, but I don’t see her reaction, because my desk jumps.

I turn and see Derek’s foot still hanging midair. The narrow strip of hair that passes along his jaw line, connecting his sideburns, twitches as he presses his lips together and slowly shakes his head.

I slide my calculator in front of me, look at the board, and punch random keys to look busy, while imagining Derek bouncing down the math wing stairs, legs shattering, his jaw breaking in half, until the bell rings.

Mom knocks at my door. I didn’t even hear her get home. “Hey, baby bird.”

“Hey,” I say and press at my jeans.

“Well are you going to open the door?”

“I’m just in the middle of a paper. I don’t want to lose my thought train.”

“You’re still writing papers? Isn’t tomorrow your last day?”

I take a deep breath and look at the topless woman from /r/gonewild. “Yeah, just polishing it up. It’s due tomorrow. Last one. I think it’s going to be really good.”

“Oh. Okay. Well, when you’re finished, remember I’m hosting a party at seven. And remind your dad in case he forgot.”

It’s a Second Life party. Andrea, her avatar, hosts them every couple weeks. All of Andrea’s friends gather in her virtual house for shaken martinis and some
fancy food she’s whipped up. Those parties usually chain her to the computer until
11 or midnight, so I say I’ll remind Dad, knowing I won’t be interrupted again.

Mom’s forehead or hand rattles the door in the jamb and she says, “Are you
alright?”

I press at my jeans once more and close the browser. The woman’s replaced
by my background—the Horseshoe Nebula. “I’m fine. Just ready to be done with
school.”

“Well, you have plenty more coming.” She pauses. “Maybe we should start
calling the colleges, see if they know yet.”

“I did. They all said it’s a competitive year, but mine looks like sure thing.”

“Okay.” I hear Mom walk away. I open a new browser and click the Reddit
bookmark. I find my /r/relationshipadvice post about Julia. I make a new comment:

UPDATE: I got her number and texted her while we were sitting in math
class. I just came out and told her Derek wasn’t good enough for her. I think it
really hit home with her, because I was walking behind them on the way out
of school and saw them arguing. She lives in the Richie Rich neighborhood,
but he takes the bus back to the ghetto. I don’t know why else they’d be
fighting (besides that he’s a dick). She touched the right side of her face and
got angrier. That’s where my birthmark is! I tried to get closer, but was afraid
they’d see me. So they were arguing then Julia spins around and leaves. She
even looks hot when she’s upset! I think she finally realizes she deserves
better and that looks aren’t everything.

I hit SUBMIT and wait for replies.

I get out of my chair and pull a dusty *Tetris* box from beneath my bed. I dump
onto my quilt all the notes I’ve ever received. Most are red and pink Valentines we
made in elementary school—one for everyone. A few are from Julia when we dated,
even though notes weren’t her thing. Then I find it: the one Ashley Blackman, my
sixth grade math table partner, passed me the day after she got her first period.
Right in the middle of class. I'd given her my windbreaker to wear around her waist after she grabbed my arm so tight I thought she'd broken the skin. Her note was to apologize that my jacket was ruined, but to thank me for being a really nice guy.

When comments on my post start rolling in, they're excited for me. “Yeah! You’re the man!” “Kickass! Fuck that douche.” “She better appreciate what you’ve done for her! Great job!”

And from Dunebiker88, the Redditor who challenged me to win Julia over, “That’s awesome she’s wising up that she’d be lucky to have you. You've handled this like a man. Go get that broad. I’m proud of you.”

“Thanks guys!” I type. “I got to hit the hay. Big day tomorrow!”

Before bed I feed the notes and Valentine’s back in the Tetris box, though some of them get caught on the rejection letters folded up at the bottom and I have to push them in harder.

Friday

I'm sitting in the gym bleachers, surrounded by the entire senior class, when they call my name.

“Nathan Billmann is...still deciding between, and listen to this, Cal Tech and MIT. Is that right, son? No decision yet?”

I look up at Mr. Harper from the bleachers. He's standing behind a podium on the basketball court, reading a list of destinations for the students whose parents submitted information. I filled it out for mine. His tie is black with green code like in
The Matrix. Mr. Harper is the advisor to the student council, so I guess that’s why he has the honor of embarrassing me in front of the school.

“Nathan? You haven’t decided yet?”

I shake my no.

“Don’t you—” He stops. “Anyway, no need to have a conversation while the rest of you are sitting here. So, congratulations, Nathan. Next, Mandy Bordeau is headed to the University of New Orleans.”

My face feels hot and my birthmark throbs while I stare at my shoes, trying not to think of the pictures on the MIT and Cal Tech websites. I try not to think about the lecture halls and the labs. I’m trying not to think about sitting in my room next fall, when in short order I hear, “Julia Marks will be attending Tulane University,” and “Derek McDonald will attend UCLA.”

They aren’t going to college together?

Mr. Harper keeps reading off names and reminds us we can still face discipline on the last day, before dismissing us. I spot Julia ahead of me and I push through the crowd toward her. This is my moment. They’re probably breaking up when school ends. She’ll need someone this summer. I’ll be in town. I’ll have nothing else to do and we can walk down the streets together, to each other’s houses or the river or wherever she wants.

I don’t hear the buzzing fluorescent hallway lights or the roar of students surging back to class or Derek standing by the trophy case laughing and holding the certificates he just got for “Athlete of the Year” and “Most Improved Student.”
It’s hard to squeeze through the crowd. When I’m finally behind her I make a last push, reaching out to grab her shoulder. Julia jumps and her yearbook falls and it’s quickly kicked across the floor, toward the trophy case. She gets out of the stream and I follow her the best I can.

“I’m sorry!” I shout. “Julia!”

It’s like when in movies the hero realizes the conspiracy and the sound cuts out and it’s just his breathing and heartbeat. Derek’s between us when I get free from the herd. He holds his calloused hand in front of my chest. Mouths, “What’s wrong with you?”

“Julia, I’m sorry,” I say over his shoulder. She’s dusting off her yearbook, which is nicked on one corner. Probably from someone kicking it. “I’m sorry! They bumped me! It was all those stupid people! It’s wasn’t my fault!”

But she won’t look at me.

I try to step past Derek, but he moves and presses his hand into my chest. He says something.

Why is she hiding behind him? He abandoned her.

I push past Derek, but my knee hits something and I spin around. Julia’s face becomes the ceiling and my face drags across a backpack and my head bounces and the air blasts from my lungs like two popped balloons.

Derek’s standing over me shouting, but I just hear a humming, like an old dial-up modem connecting to the Internet. My eyes spot up with bright green and red stars and Derek’s gone. I lay there for a while until the modem fades and I hear shoes squeak on the floor tiles and a familiar voice.
“Nathan, are you alright? Derek, go to class and don’t leave. I’m going to find to you in a minute.”

When my vision comes back, first blurry, then slowly into focus, Mr. Harper’s kneeling over me. The light from the window to the courtyard shines around him in thick white bands. He helps me up and brushes off my shoulders. I see Julia, Derek, and two no-necks at the end of the main hallway.

“Are you alright?” he asks.

“I just wanted to talk to Julia. I needed to apologize.”

Mr. Harper nods and straightens his tie. “It’s always the pretty ones, eh?”

Julia’s so far away now, small enough to fit on my computer screen, delicate as the baby birds outside my window. They push through the stairwell door and she’s gone.


I touch the rough skin of my birthmark. I feel a wet trail running down my neck, into my shirt collar.

Mr. Harper says, “Let’s get you to the nurse. Get you cleaned up.”

Mr. Harper gives me an excuse from class so I skip the end-of-year party in AP Calc, and with a bandage on my cheek, sit in the computer lab, drifting across Reddit in no particular direction. I spin the mouse’s scroll wheel through the lists of links and pictures and rants. One of the most upvoted pictures today is called Good Guy Greg. Written over a picture of a smiling cool guy is, “KNOWS YOU FORGOT HIS
NAME, TELLS A STORY WHERE SOMEONE SAYS, ‘LISTEN, GREG.’” That’s pretty
good of him. Names can cause a lot of problems.

It’s the last day of school, but it’s been empty like this all year. The computers
are all bone white and nearly untouched. Rainbow-colored screen saver triangles
twist on black screens like looped radio waves. I don’t know why we have so many
computers when no one is allowed to use them. One of these should be on my desk
at home, next to the sunlit window, where I can look at it or look at the birds
swooping about while a slow page loads. Maybe then I would have finished my
independent study. But I close Reddit and open a new browser anyway.

The door sighs behind me. I don’t worry switching windows or fear Derek’s
hands on my shoulders or Mrs. Carey, the librarian, yelling at me. Whatever
happens, happens. It’s the last day and I’m passing everything and I’m graduating no
matter if I get beaten up or kicked off the computers or don’t finish a stupid
independent study project.

Whitney sits down. This close the tiny hairs on her face glow like tiny fiber
optics. “Well, that was embarrassing,” she says.

The cursor flashes in the address bar. I don’t know what she wants me to say.
She sets down a book she’s been holding,

“Have you really not decided?

“Why doesn’t she talk to me anymore?”

“Dude, when did you two ever talk?”

“We used to be friends.”
“Nathan, that was sixth grade. Shit you and me haven’t hung out in two years.”

“I didn’t get in anywhere.”

“I figured.” She puts her hand on the book and gives it a spin. “Your parents don’t know.”

“She and Derek aren’t going to school together. They can just break up like nothing and I haven’t even had a girlfriend.”

“Nathan, I don’t know if you realize this, but you’re a jerk to people.”

“No way. I’m the one everyone shits on.”

“You’ve spent most of your life basically calling him and everyone else you don’t like an idiot in every class you take. It’s funny that Derek actually should thank you, because it’s the only reason he started asking for help.”

Tears start bubbling in the corners of my eyes so I look back at my flashing cursor. “This was my only chance. And I blew it. I’ve blown everything. College. Having friends. Finally getting a kiss.”

Whitney spins me around and presses her face against mine. It’s her lips—they’re touching my lips. They’re greasy and slid against mine. She smells like chemical, like Mom’s hairspray, but I just want to keep breathing it in. She pulls back and slaps my knee.

“We could’ve gotten that out of the way a long time ago. See you this summer.”

The doors wheeze open and click shut, like a computer powering down. The cursor keeps flashing in the address bar, asking me where I want to go. It could take
me anywhere, tell me anything, but I’m at a loss. There’s nowhere I want to be, nothing I want to know, that I don’t have right now.
Arthur

So, you want to know why? Well, it’s clear you don’t understand if you’re asking that question. It’s about release. You need to get that there’s something satisfying about untying the leash, about being the last push over the crest of a hill.

It wasn’t technically spring, though it felt like it. We crossed paths in a foreclosed New Orleans home boarded up like it expected a storm to rain down in fists, hammers, and godly wrath. He broke in on an early morning when streetlights streamed between the boarded window cracks in dusty yellow daggers. First I heard him rattle the backyard’s chain link. Then I saw his shadow interrupt a beam from the alley. I scooped up my bag I’d used as a pillow and slipped through the living room low, feeling along the baseboards for guidance, just as I had along the cypress knees and bayou undergrowth when the sheriff deputies chased me from the Atchafalaya Basin. He fumbled with the backdoor knob, put himself into it with a thud, and then found it unlocked. I passed under the dark rectangles on the walls where once hung the trappings of the disappeared family—maybe cross-stitched blessings or a hanging Jesus beside family portraits from Gulf Shores. I pressed into the empty oven alcove and gripped a leather-wrapped handle stuck in my belt, as the door gave way. His footfalls echoed off the back hallway hardwood and through the house. Steady, creaking clicks alternated with a slide like he was dragged along a
dead dog. He passed the kitchen and I rose up, trained on his thin figure hobbling to the living room. Noise percolated in from the street and masked my steps until I was behind him. He had no bag and one of his legs looked a bit lame, so I kicked the back of his good knee and he went down like a shovelful of earth. I got on top, one hand gripping his matted hair, the other pressing the knife to his throat.

“What you want here?” I said and regripped a handful of greasy tangles.

His breathing didn’t stop and it didn’t speed up either. He didn’t gasp or start blubbing about my choices or if only he’d busted into a different house. He unkinked his neck, but didn’t move it from the knife.

“Didn’t realize you’d claimed it. No sign up outside.” He coughed and said, “You mind getting off?”

The sun had risen a bit more and spilled through the skylights like broken yolks. The tattoo on the back of his neck disappeared beneath the collar of his rag of a shirt, but it peaked through a hole a little further down. I was one of those swirling patterns I’d see wrapped around overly muscled arms, but that boy’s was faded and interrupted right about C5 by a wide gummy scar. I pulled his hair back and to the side, getting a glimpse for the first time of his beard and pale blue holes of eyes.

“You want me to let you up? You begging?”

“You do what you want, I’m just saying I prefer standing. But it ain’t like you’d be doing me a favor.”

In that light, his eyes seemed to churn. The stripes in those irises swirled like seawater getting whipped up in a storm.
You come to know the reactions of people fearing the end. And you come to love them more than anything else. They’re my favorite things in the world. But that boy didn’t have any to share. And that’s special. See, ain’t worth killing someone who doesn’t mind. Ain’t worth killing one of your own.

So there we were.

Sarah

Our paths crossed on a Saturday morning, in the basement of St. Peter’s Church off St. Charles Avenue, over Styrofoam cups of sweet tea, in a circle of disheveled women who stared into their drinks while they talked about the struggle to remain sober. Father Frank, who ran the meetings and was also a recovering alcoholic, was really good about knowing when to push people. He’d lean in—the fluorescent lights reflecting off his pink head—and ask how each of us was doing. That morning we learned Karen, who had two kids and a husband who wouldn’t go to Father’s male meetings, though he needed them, had relapsed and planned to get back on the wagon Monday.

When it got to me Father Frank leaned in and asked, “Have you found a sponsor, Sarah?” The other women looked at me, intently. The coffee maker against the wall hissed and spit and fell quiet.

“Still looking, Father.”

“Well, keep following the light. It’ll lead you where you need to go,” he said with a wink.
I'd become used to the ritual of Alcoholics Anonymous and looked forward to its Saturday refuge from my lonely apartment, even though I never had a drinking problem. I was inspired seeing people take control of their lives and sobered to see them relapse. But none of that was why I'd attended four months of AA.

Eventually, Father Frank got to the newest face. It was her third meeting in as many weeks and she seemed comfortable, though she just sat there with her strong, pretty face and didn't say much. She was a Tulane student, always with her sorority's letters on her shirts or when she got up for coffee I'd see them stenciled across her butt. That morning she wore all green, with a t-shirt that read, “Alpha Chi Omega St. Paddy's Week 2012!” Didn't seem appropriate.

It was, in fact, St. Patrick’s Day and the city would be tilted and feverish until long after the sun went down. I was sure everyone in the room already knew that.

“Please introduce yourself,” Father Frank said.

“Hi. My name is Julia. I'm a sinner and an alcoholic.” The EXIT light hanging over her head glowed and she smiled an All-American toothy smile that outshined even the glint from the gilded dead Jesus hanging on wall. Her posture was so confident, rail-backed and at attention. Her auburn hair, streaked with highlights, fell over her shoulders like satin. And her pale cheeks, lightly dusted with blush, cut through the baggy-eyed sadness in St. Peter’s like a lighthouse. Even when Barbara started ranting that Mitt Romney better not blow the election, I couldn’t look away.

After meetings, the transition back to the late morning natural light was always harsh, but that day a flood of revelers had seized the street and waited for the parade in green felt top hats, bright orange wigs, and sequined vests over bare
chests. Many folks wore beads—pink, purple, red—clearly leftover from Mardi Gras a month earlier. The crowds pressed against each other and sloshed beer from their plastic cups. It made traversing elbows and suds unscathed difficult.

I wove a few blocks, stepping over coolers and splayed legs, and had just stepped into 12th Street when my elbow jerked backwards.

Julia from AA still held my elbow. "Do you want to be my sponsor?"

"Well," I stammered, trying to get over the surprise and think of an excuse. Up close her face and shoulders were wider than I remembered and her grip on my elbow could have crushed an unopened beer can. I finally got out, "I don’t even have one, yet."

She let go of my elbow and smiled.

"I could help you find one, though," I said.

"I know who you are."

"We aren't supposed to talk about that outside of meeting," I said, and looked for an opening to walk. "First names only."

"No, I mean you're not an alky. My dad, he was an alky. You're not one of them. What's the angle? AA's a scam? The alcoholic priest?"

"I really don't know what you're talking about. If I offended you in some way—"

"No way. I'm not an alky either, Sarah. But you, you're Sarah Gilman, the reporter. I read your story about the housing scam last semester. Does this have to do with that Searchlight bartender who stole your boyfriend? I want in."
Arthur

I needed tools. Once the streets were loud, I took him out to my pickup. We closed the garage behind us and pulled away, past the empty dry cleaners and the blues joint on the next block with its large crowd loitering and whooping outside. We drove parallel to the parade route on St. Charles and the crowds that would be out and drunk and covered in green feathers and shamrock beads until all hours. I told him we’d stop for beers.

He made me feel young. He didn’t look young, with his old bleary eyes, gnarled beard, and the long matted hair beating in the wind coming through the open window. Didn’t act young, either. But, again, you can tell your own.

We were looking for saws and planes and hammers. Spare wood if folks had it lying around. The garage with that house would be a nice workspace. Tucked back in some trees by the alley. Sloped floor: Drain in the middle.

“What’re you fixing to build?” he asked, while he eyed two fresh-faced young ladies waiting to stumble across an intersection.

“I make boxes of all types and dimensions. Bit of a passed-on thing from my granddaddy.”

He nodded and said, “What do you want me calling you? Just ‘Hey, you?’”

“Arthur works.”

“Cole.”

There was the occasional barbeque, but most of the people out-and-about had already made it to the St. Charles route by 10am. Not too many police. Some at the larger intersections, like on Washington and Napoleon, but not out in the
neighborhoods. We cruised unbothered down side streets and through alleys, hunting.

It was in an alley a few hours later we found a detached garage with a window view of a long workbench and rack of drills and saws and stacks of two-by-eights and plywood sheets leaning against the wall.

From the console I pulled a pair of leather work gloves and walked to the house associated with the garage. I knocked twice, but no answer. No one in view through the windows, either.

I checked the alley once more while Cole sat in the truck, then shouldered in the garage’s side door in a rattle of deadbolt and a crack of splinters.

“You want a hand?” he asked.

“You want to give one?”

“How much of that wood you want?”

“Take it all. That tarp and shovel, too.”

Though the garage was quiet and neat, it’d been cobwebbed with disuse, as if some lost tribe or ancient pharaoh of the swamp had sealed it off in another age. How unfortunate. The sawhorses were scarred with deep scores along the crossbeams, but there wasn’t any sawdust or fresh cuts.

We loaded it all into the flatbed. Fast and no need for a lookout. No lookout makes it look like you’re supposed to be there. That was the first thing I learned after I left home. If I acted like I was supposed to be carrying the pair of shoes out of the store, no one stopped me. When I held my knife to Cole’s throat I knew he knew
the same. But I also knew that I had to know it more, because they’re ain’t such thing as 50/50 partners. Always someone running the show.

I slammed the van’s sliding door and we climbed in. “Where to now?” Cole said and kicked his feet onto the dash. I threw the thing into drive and had just begun rolling away when the backdoor of the house opened and a man wearing a green tank top and shorts erupted from the dark mouth like some tropical bat and flew across the yard. I pressed the accelerator, but Cole was already leaping from the passenger seat. He hopped the fence, but the cuff of his jeans on that bad leg caught in the wiring and he tumbled to the ground, leg hanging there. That wild old man kicked at Cole and Cole swatted back from the ground. So I got out and took the fence better than Cole and in one falling motion brought the knuckles of my right fist down on the man’s face. The man fell into a soundless heap.

That was when, as they say, I had a decision to make. The last man in that position had been on a dock on the Atchafalaya Basin. He’d been shaking and pleading and saying he was an important person, but he ended up in a 2-by-2-by-3 box I built, like all the rest. The sheriff’s deputies did come for him, though, combing the Basin in teams. Eventually they found another of my boxes because some raccoon or armadillo dug up one of the corners.

They hollered and radioed for others in the area and they all gathered, poking the corner with their boots and choking down plastic wrapped sandwiches. I watched from a distance while the smallest deputy, with his buzz cut and trousers wet up to his knees, pulled my hewn cypress planks apart and looked inside at what
I’m sure were just the teeth and bones left from two girls I smoked from a houseboat.

Those fat men jumped and high-tailed through the bands of filtering light as if they ran on deer’s legs. But I knew they’d come back with their dogs and fan boats, macheteing through the undergrowth, eventually finding my shack.

So in the case of the old man, unconscious in his yard, I chose to pick my battles.

I got Cole unstuck and us back in the pick-up. Once we were going again he ran his hand over his ropes of hair. “Goddamn. What to do now? Does it get hot?”

I turned at a corner where kids had pulled a portable basketball goal into the street. The plastic backboard had mostly cracked away and the pole was red with rust. They stood on the sidewalk watching us as the tools rattled in the flatbed.

“Police don’t have time to mess with a little robbery or assault. It’s St. Patrick’s Day and that man won’t be able to tell them much of anything for a while. Murder’s the only thing that’ll get their attention anyway. And they certainly have enough to worry about.”

With the kids fading behind us, I flexed my hand holding the wheels. The man’s teeth put four gouges in my skin. Blood slowly bubbled down into my arm hair.

“Hand me that shirt from the floor,” I said. I knotted it around my fist and kept driving. “You sound like you’re from here.”

“Been away. Going on 15 years. Family stuff to settle.”

“Well fair enough. This is a great time. Everything we need is in the back.”
“You said about a liquor store?”

“I bet you need something for that ego. That old man would’ve had you. Don’t worry, we’ll find another. And then, I’ll show you how to build them.”

Sarah

Julia and I walked back onto the curb at St. Charles and 12th. She watched the street, though the floats were still blocks away. The crowd grew louder, cheering and blowing plastic horns. Julia pulled her phone from the back pocket of her green jean shorts as the noise kept growing and snapped a picture of the crowds. She rocked from her heels to toes and scrolled through her phone. She smirked.

The bartender’s name was Alice, she did work at the Searchlight, and she did steal my boyfriend. All that stuff was all in the article, I just was surprised someone like Julia would’ve read it. But she wasn’t the reason I went to AA meetings in the basement of St. Peter’s. I attended AA because I wondered how those meetings turned my dad into a believer. We’d stopped going to church when Mom died. And Dad never drank much. But in middle school I got my period and he didn’t know what to do—and then I started making trouble in Ms. Hill’s English class and he didn’t know what to do—and then bin Laden flew those planes into the World Trade Center and Dad could only sit at the dinner table measuring his job at BizComm to the soldiers diving from the bellies of C-17s. “Ain’t nothing heroic about what I do,” he’d say before washing down a bite of potato salad with a High Life. He’d sit in his chair at night and drink glasses of scotch, yell at the Afghans carrying their dead on the TV. He got fired when the recession tanked the company, but by that time he
was already knocking over my orange juice in the morning or throwing up in the sink. It was a girlfriend he met on OKCupid who took him with her to AA. He married her later. Now, once a month Dad sends me pamphlets about His return. Even got his old job back.

“It’s not about Alice, or Matthew."

“Sounded like a shitty boyfriend.”

“Shitty guy.”

“My Kennedy assassination professor had us read your article. You know the Searchlight has a St. Paddy’s Day party today?”

“It’s not about them.”

“No you have other plans? I’d love to show you something.”

*Not really,* I thought. Scroll through Reddit.com the rest of the day? Maybe take my laptop out on my balcony, but that was it. I hadn’t been making many plans. So I shrugged.

“Follow me,” she said and pulled my sleeve. I resisted, keeping my feet stuck to the corner. “Do you have anything better to do?” She pulled again and unstuck me, dragged me across St. Charles and its grassy median, ahead of the closing parade floats and the waves of green beads raining down on the crowds.

“You read it in class?”

“Were they convicted? I couldn’t find much about it. They used your story, right?”

“Trial hasn’t started, but Alice and Matthew are witnesses. It’s a Houston scam.” I paused. “How did you know I was at St. Peter’s?”
“I just recognized you from your photo.”

We cut through a rutted alley lined with sagging garages. She walked west, sashaying across the concrete, not minding if she stepped on weed-choked cracks. We were offered burgers from grills and caught whistles from a group of men dressed as leprechauns, walking toward the parade. Julia handled them all so well, doling out a smile or a wave and “Hi there!” to keep us moving.

We passed some boys shooting on a basketball hoop they’d pulled into the street. Julia pivoted and clapped her hands for a pass. She got the ball and fired a shot from maybe thirty feet away. It clanged off the rim, but she’d been so confident, like she knew the boys would give her the ball.

“That was a long shot.”

“My ex-boyfriend played. And you see these arms? Dad kept me busy. Gardening to do. Something new to build. That shot wasn’t even close to long.”

“Oh.”

“Not the case for you?”

“My dad runs a computer company. I don’t think he owns a hammer.”

“God’s been good to me, too. Come one,” she said and pulled me along.

We walked parallel to the old-money houses along St. Charles. The rows of houses and buildings, just a few blocks over, were punctuated by the slumped and derelict. Between the barbeques and basketball hoops were corner bodegas shuttered and barred. Vacant lots strewn with broken cinderblocks and waist-high weeds. Homes overrun with vines growing from holes in their roofs. Still more were
just empty—foreclosed—yellow sheets of paper stapled to their front doors like warnings.

At an intersection shaded by two large live oaks we waited for a pick-up loaded with wood planks to creep past. “Seriously, this is going to change the way you think about everything,” Julia said.

“So this is a documentary?”

“I’m in this course about JFK’s assassination. A guy that sits next to me sent me links to a bunch of stuff about 9/11 and Katrina I didn’t know. Super interesting and messed up stuff about our government. Like these FEMA prison camps they built in case there’s an uprising. And all the false flag operations. But what I’m going to show you is mostly about the Federal Reserve.” We kept walking, I kicked a rock. It skipped off the sidewalk and rattled a chain link fence. “I think you’ll like it because your article was about a conspiracy. And the Fed might be the biggest one.”

I hadn’t gone to college and with only one article published, and the *Time-Picayune* not asking for another, I couldn’t say I wrote about anything in particular. Matthew left for Alice. They broke into bank-owned homes, held open houses, and collected cash deposits. I researched and wrote the story out of anger, not because I was a reporter. I wrote it to nail them to a wall. It didn’t work. I still sold paintings on a street corner in the Quarter and they rolled for suspended sentences. They were still together for all I knew.

“I don’t really write about politics,” I said.

“Good, because this isn’t politics, it’s life.”
“No, for sure. Right, life,” I said. It seemed like she really knew a lot, though I was a couple years older. I didn’t say anything else. We walked on, our shoes crunching, our elbows bumping when overgrown shrubs narrowed the sidewalk.

Julia’s apartment was over in East Carrolton, not too far from Tulane University, where she was a student. Also not too far from my friend Kelly, who worked at my favorite art supply store over in Midcity. I hadn’t seen Kelly in a while, but she’d sent an email a few weeks earlier about a St. Patrick’s Day party. And she’d been great when Matthew left. She told me I was always welcome.

We walked up two flights of shag-carpeted stairs and down a dim hallway to 307. Inside was bright. Windows blasted light into every corner—over the polka dotted couch and the crucifix hanging behind it, over the Alpha Chi Omega banner above the TV on the opposite wall, the basket of blankets, the stack of books on the coffee table: *Crossfire, The Unseen Hand, The Creature from Jekyll Island*.

Julia went to the fridge while I scanned the books’ back covers.

“How much of this do you think is true?” I asked. The books sported outdated, cartoonish covers and promised to uncover how things “really were.”

When Matthew and I used to sit on the levee and listen to the radio, sometimes we’d tune to wacko talk radio, like Alex Jones and Sean Hannity. Matthew would listen and say, “They want to be the smartest people on the planet, even if it means writing their own facts.” Matthew grew up in Iowa soybean fields, turning earth and calculating fertilizer per acre. He said he always had to focus on what was real, what he could touch. Which always made him getting wrapped up with Alice and those foreclosure scammers so confusing. I spent too much time on that.
“How much of this do you think is true?” I asked again, but Julia wasn’t listening. She poured two cans of Guinness into tall pink glasses. Then she tucked her hair behind her ears like she was folding fresh sheets for company.

“Is this all real?” I asked, louder, and held up the books, while she carried the two glasses to the coffee table.

“I don’t know. But it’s all pretty creepy, though.” She picked up a DVD case from the coffee table. \textit{Zeitgeist: The Movie}. She read the back cover.

\textit{An aesthetically driven documentary film divided into three sections—each a commentary on what the director calls angles of “Social Mythology.”}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{Chapter One, “The Greatest Story Ever Told.”}
  \item \textit{Chapter Two, “All the World’s a Stage.”}
  \item \textit{Chapter Three, “Don’t Mind the Men Behind the Curtain.”}
\end{itemize}

“Alright.”

“Did you see the Federal Reserve Branch Chair in New Orleans killed herself last week?” She popped the DVD from the case and stuck it in the player on top of her TV.

“No,” I said, unsure of what the Federal Reserve actually was.

“Yeah and another board member died of a heart attack last month. Some people have serious questions about it. They both might very well have been assassinations. There’s a big push on the Internet for New Orleans to create a competing currency.”

“Instead of the dollar?”

“You let the market decide, but yeah. This could be a huge story for you.”

“People want to make their own money?”

“It’s our right. That’s the market.”
Julia sat on her polka-dotted couch and patted the cushion beside her. It was almost like I’d appeared in her apartment. That disorienting feeling like I hadn’t been in control of my own body or mind.

I moved to the counter and leaned against it. “So you just recognized my picture?”

“So I go to AA for the characters—I want to act. Last week you just looked familiar. The other day I realized where from. So I Googled that article and yep.”

“And this was a Tulane class?”

“Sometimes you’re in the right place at the right time.” She patted the cushion again and pressed PLAY. I sat next to her, but sank into the soft couch until our bare knees touched.

“Now, the first part of his evidence I think is just a test from God, but two and three are right on. Anyway, it’s always good to question and do your own research.”

A narrator’s voice slowly rose from the speakers to explain how Christianity, 9/11, and the central banking system were not at all what we thought.

**Arthur**

We parked a short way from the liquor store. No need to risk getting jammed up parking out front. And I could always leave Cole behind. We were a few blocks away from Tchoupitoulas Street on a rehabsed section of Annunciation where all the newly built homes were made to look historic on a treeless stretch of road with uniform lawns and bright white curbs, totally divorced from the slumping houses of the neighborhood. No one was out and about.
My hand wasn’t bleeding anymore so I left the shirt in the car. Cole walked hunched through the sun, occasionally grooping his stomach like it pained him. The leg never fully bent at the knee. Cole swung it to the side a bit, but it dragged anyway.

We walked the five blocks and saw the single-family houses lose their white exteriors and turn to duplexes and eventually graffitied brick buildings. The store stood alone on the corner, neon lights flickering dully in barred windows. The hand-painted sign speckled with the bodies of dead and dried gnats hanging over the door read, “Jimbeaux’s Liquor.” Cole ducked in first, glancing over his shoulder at the empty street as he did. No one stood at the register or stocked any of the dusty shelves that overflowed with all colors of bottles. Cameras hung in both corners on the right wall.

Cole toed a stack of wire baskets as we walked by the magazine rack, mostly filled with the open-mouthed women of Penthouse and Juggs, Club and Barely Legal. We checked the aisles for any crouched or not-immediately-obvious staff. But it was once we followed the whiskey toward the back, that we heard voices in the storeroom. The door was open and one voice shouted while another tried to sneak a word in. I nodded to Cole and he walked around me, dragging that leg across the stained tile floor. The storeroom doorway was lit with a yellow incandescent glow.

“Your friends aren’t the boss. You aren’t the boss, goddamnit. I am the fucking boss. And if I say he’s working, then he’s working. You don’t get to let Johnny off. If Johnny wants a fucking job he better get his ass back here.”

“Jesus Christ, Dad. Okay, okay, I’m calling, I’m fucking calling.”
“And I want to talk to him—hey.”

A kid, 20 perhaps, slicked hair and acne on his forehead, walked out storeroom with a phone pressed to his ear, shaking his head. An older man following slammed his fist into the doorjamb as he came out. The man—bald, with large ears and belly—looked at us and squinted for a moment. “I can help you two with anything?"

I’d grabbed folks from gas stations before, but having the boy with a phone and the two cameras in the wall were too many obvious unknowns with Cole along. But the fat man would’ve been a nice 2-by-2-by-4.

“Just checking our whiskey options, boss.”

He lingered a second longer, eyed my hand, then took off down the aisle. In his back pocket was a rolled copy of *Hustler*. “Hey Jimmy, let me talk to that asshole.” Over the rows of corked bottles I saw him grip his son’s shoulder and reach for the phone.

I didn’t know the guy, so I didn’t know where he fell, but my father used to buy *Hustler*. On the weekends, when Mom worked the night shift as a nanny for the Longs, Dad put me in the crawlspace beneath my parents’ room where he kept copies. I’d hear my dad and some woman’s voice and then lie there, among the glossy breasts and wet t-shirts and listen to the moaning bedposts as they pushed on the frame, the headboard rocking against the wall. I sat on my little cot down there, beside his combination safe, with my knees pulled under my chin and tried to picture the casserole Mom would make once she got home Sunday evening.

I looked at Cole and lifted two plastic bottles of Evan Williams from the shelf.
Cole turned and took two thick glass bottles of tequila from the opposite side of the aisle and nodded. One more look at the distracted owner and we slid through the storeroom door, stepped over unopened boxes and flats of beer and mops collecting dust. We pushed out the backdoor to the alley, to the sunlight, with our spoils.

We headed back to the pick-up truck, clutching a neck in each hand. The morning hadn’t been too hot, but with the afternoon sun overhead, the March day sizzled and I had to regrip the bottle, tighter and tighter as sweat ran down my arms.

“Had to go top shelf, huh?”

“My dad used to drink this stuff. Well, before he lost his job. It always gets me seeing it. I might go see the old house.”

“Is that why you’re back?”

“It’s the only thing left. Everyone else is dead.”

I’d been down by the Tchoupitoulas warehouses before, on that section of Annunciation, back when I lived in the city. After I was set loose from St. Gabriel. The shotguns those new houses replaced had been melting into the ground. Cole and I would’ve looked like just two more fixtures before, but not then. We were out of time. And eventually, just a block from the truck, we heard the crunch of tires slowing, rolling up behind us, and the chirp of a siren.

“Afternoon boys,” the cop said, stepping from his car. His face was red—sunburned—which, when he pulled off his sunglasses, stood in sharp contrast to the whites around his eyes. “What’re y’all planning, a party?”

“Just thinking ahead,” I said, still walking.
“Now, hold on, boys. Don’t you go anywhere just yet.”

“Can I help you?” I asked, and then nodded Cole toward the truck. “Don’t suppose you’ve got a reason to talk to us.”

“Just wondering where you boys got those bottles from. Not in any bags, I noticed.”

“Got these a while ago, just transporting them. It’s St. Paddy’s Day, you know. Just a party.”

“Thought you were planning ahead.”

Cole’d walked up beside me again. He’d repositioned the tequila bottles under each arm and squinted his right eye in the sunlight. Added to the leg and it looked like that whole side of his body was suffering from the brightness.

“Well, got to be off, officer. Parties don’t throw themselves, I suppose.”

The officer put out his hand. “Hold on. The reason I ask is that there’s a liquor store a few blocks over.”

It’s a situation like that—when an opportunity arises that fits your needs so precisely you can’t pass it up. It’s just a matter of initiation.

“Hadn’t the foggiest,” I said.

“I’d like to take a look at a receipt, then I’ll be on my way.”

Cole hadn’t moved and the heavy glass bottles were still tucked under his arms. The officer pushed at the corner of his mustache with one finger.

“Don’t think you have any fucking right to ask.”

“Hey, don’t try that shit, buddy.”

“Fuck you.”
His face flushed from red to purple as he stepped toward me, like a fast moving cloud sweeping across the sun. He reached for me with his right hand, while his left swung behind him, for his handcuffs, I suppose. I took a step back, beyond his reach and swung at him with my right, still clutching a plastic whiskey bottle.

It came down on his shoulder a little harder than I wanted, the cap burst off, into my chest and the brown booze gushed all over. The officer stumbled back and I stepped toward him with the other bottle raised, ready if he moved for his pistol. I was quick and leapt into him, knocking us both on the ground. The houses and the clouds and the thin saplings planted along the sidewalks shook back and forth while he struggled to wrap his arms around me. I dropped the bottles there on the ground and tried to lock eyes with Cole who still stood there, a tequila bottle under each arm.

“Hey, fucking help,” I said, rolling from under the officer. He tried to get back on top of me, but I wanted it to last a little longer. “Hey!” I said again. “Cole!”

I could’ve taken care of it, but I got him. I shouted his name and it was like letting off the leash. He pushed off his good leg, took a hop, and lowered his shoulder. The bottles dropped into the curbside grass and he was on top of the dog pile.

He kicked and pulled me up, but then turned for the pick-up, leaving the cop on the ground fumbling between his radio and gun. So I’d been wrong. There’s an instinct some have. I ended up in St. Gabriel rather than a pine box because of it. Cole wasn’t there yet, and because of that, he was a problem. I knew in that moment my time with Cole was winding down. So I had to act alone on that mustached man
with the sidepiece.

Don’t need much school to understand physics. The arc from ground to skull. The resistance between weighted glass and bone. Then it’s just speed. The time from the bloodied concrete to the pick-up bed to the woods. The luck just comes whether or not those upstanding people in those upstanding homes were watching through their windows or whether they were off enjoying themselves, sweating like they’d caught a spring fever.

Sarah

“So? What did you think of that one?”

“I mean, they’re real questions. I just didn’t know how shady all that is.”

“I told you it was pretty crazy,” Julia said and gave me a little punch to shoulder.

We’d watched Zeitgeist, then Esoteric Agenda, then The Money Masters. The sun had disappeared behind the building next door and I truly was rattled. Julia stood, stretched, and collected the six empty cans of Guinness from the coffee table.

“So you think you’re going to write about this?”

“I mean, I’d need to do some more research, but this is really incredible if he’s right. Even about half the stuff.”

“I told you.” The cans clattered into the trash.

“Yeah, I’ll probably poke around on the Internet tonight, see what I can find.”

Julia leaned against the counter, and crossed her legs. “Sure, yeah. I mean, I didn’t mean to keep you. Sorry if I kept you.”
She seemed sad. I imagined her alone in her apartment on that polka-dot couch, under the glittery pink blanket from the basket, and it got me down. Like the stuff around her was just make believe. Though I was feeling that way, too. Like there was some dark river that ran beneath our city that no one knew existed. Hell, right then I wondered whether it ran beneath the whole country.

“A friend’s throwing a party not too far from here. Walking distance. We could get some dinner then head over there.”

“Yeah, that’d be great,” she said, her smile returning. “Is this okay?” She plucked at her shirt.

“Yeah, it’s just a laid back St. Patrick’s Day thing.”

It was exciting spending time with someone new, someone who knew a different world and was sharing it with me.

The Camilla Grill, like always, was busy. After the short walk and a 20-minute wait, we got a seat on its diner-style bar stools. We ordered burgers and Cokes from their laminated menus.

While we waited for the men in paper hats to throw our patties on the open-air griddle, Julia said, “The Searchlight’s just a few blocks away, too.”

“Yeah.”

“We could go see what they’re up to. You could just hang out in the Community Coffee place on the corner. I could look around.”

“Let’s not talk about them. I don’t want to think about them.” I said it without looking at her.

“Sure. No problem, sorry.”
I picked at my paper placemat and kept my eyes on my sizzling patty.

We heard Kelly's party before we got to it. Dusk had nearly failed. From the alley there were bagpipes, guitars, and yelling—the Dropkick Murphys. Her fence’s back gate was propped open. Light from flood lamps and tiki torches blazing near the buffet table washed the crowded backyard into a bright green tangle. People I didn't recognize carried red plastic cups and paper plates of corned beef, cabbage, and soda bread. Julia and I wandered toward the house, where all the red cups seemed to be leaving from.

I waved to Kelly’s roommate, Brittney. She was tall and slung coffee down in the Quarter for tourists. She shared one half of the shotgun duplex with Kelly, but spent most of her time at her boyfriend’s who I hadn’t met. Brittney didn’t see me and kept talking with a large man with a tight green t-shirt riding up on his belly.

We got our beers from the keg beside the concrete back stoop and stood for a while surveying the circles of party people. One group threw beanbags. Another had set up a sheet of plywood on two barrels and played beer pong.

Matthew and I had gone to another party there once. We played Risk until we were all too drunk to remember how long we’d even been playing. Before long the sun was back up and we walked over to the Oak Street Café for biscuits and gravy, then to the Searchlight to keep going. I’d never drank much, but that was just one of those weekends where anything seemed possible and sleep never snuck into anyone’s mind.

When Kelly appeared from the crowd, with her perfect-for-St. Paddy’s Day red hair bob, she threw up her arms, yipped, and ran to hug me, not minding the
beer spilled from her cup. I introduced her and Julia after commenting on Kelly’s hair and it turned out she and Julia went to the same salon, We Cut Bitches, over on Magazine Street.

“Also,” Kelly said. “I’m going back to school.”

“You’re kidding.” Kelly and I had joked about it since the first time she checked out my basket full of oil paints. “Just saving up for school,” was the refrain. “Well good for you,” I said.

“Thanks, yeah, I’m actually really excited. I’ve always been into politics, but I’ve especially been reading a lot about the presidential race and everything and it’s really interesting. And Loyola has a great political science program.”

“Loyola’s pretty expensive.”

“Yeah, I’ll probably have a bunch of debt, but I’ll be doing something I love, right?”

“I just can’t—”

“Well,” Julia interrupted. It surprised me, because with Kelly’s news I’d really forgotten about the whole party going on around me, including Julia. “I know you two haven’t seen each other in a while, I’m going to wander around.” She turned and walked away, tapping her empty cup against her hand.

Kelly took a sip and said, “So, have you thought anymore about going to school?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t know. I’m sick of spinning my wheels with this art stuff. It’s getting old.”

“Are you still thinking you’ll write about AA?”
“I don’t know. People find God, so what? Maybe I should go back to school.”

We talked like that for a while. We talked through the cheering and the bands of drunks wandering through the alley. I realize now how much I had needed it. When Matthew left I built walls around my apartment, the trolley I took to the Quarter, and my spot by the boardwalk where I sold paintings. The walls were so I wouldn’t have to answer again, “How are you doing?”

“I think I’m mainly going to AA meetings for the company now,” I said with a weak laugh.

“Oh, Sarah. That’s not true.”

“You know,” I said looking up from my empty cup into the shadows on Kelly’s face, “I really think it is.”

Kelly put her arm around me. I leaned into her and just stood there. “Maybe you do, but no reason that has to be the case. I know your friend Julia has that kind of friend network built in, but you have one, too.”

“Julia showed me these documentaries today. About the Federal Reserve. They do some really messed up stuff. Have you heard about this?”

“You’re not serious,” she said, laughing.

“It’s pretty messed up.”

“Sarah, this is one place Julia is wrong. That’s all distortions and cherry-picked, out-of-context stuff. Which ones?”

“I remember Zeitgeist was one.”
“With the cheesy animation? Yeah, you got to read some stuff about the Fed that’s not made by wackos. Here, I got to set Julia straight, too, before you both turn into nuts.”

“I haven’t seen her for a while, actually.” I checked my phone. 8:57. “For about a half hour.”

Kelly and I wandered backyard. I craned over shoulders and squinted through the dark, between sequined hats. She wasn’t at the beanbag station or the beer pong table, both lit by the streetlight over the alley.

“Bill,” Kelly said to the large man I’d seen talking to Brittney. “Have you seen her friend Julia? Brown hair and green shorts. Pretty.”

The large man shook his head. “No she said she needed some cigarettes. Or something. I couldn’t quite understand her.”

“Was she that drunk?” I asked.

“Yeah. Pretty hammered.”

“And you just let her go?”

He shrugged. “I thought she’d come find you.”

“Well, shit,” I said to Kelly. “What’s nearest?”

“Let’s check the house first.”

That’s when I heard Julia. “Hey Sarah!” she shouted, though it was slurred and sounded more like “Acer.”

She was next to a man clearly guiding her back through the fence’s gate. He was older and not dressed in green. Not one of Kelly’s guests. I met them and took
Julia from him. She could stand, but wavered a bit. She looked up at me with glassy eyes and said, “Thanks. I needed that.”

The man fixed his polo’s blousing and adjusted the glasses perched on his beak-like nose. “I saw her walking down the sidewalk like this.”

“Thanks for bringing her back,” I said.

“Look, Kelly, I don’t really mind your party, but I should tell you that Ms. Buras said she called the police. Just a heads up. Have a good evening, y’all.” And he left.

“It’s okay,” Julia said. “I do this a lot.”

“Do what a lot?”

“Getting drunk. But if the cops are coming I’m illegal.”

“I know. Me, too.”

“Don’t worry about it, Sarah,” Kelly said. “They have way more to worry about.”

“I know.”

When I was 17—the year after we’d moved to DC from small-town Minnesota—my dad still picked me up after school. He was nervous about me taking a bus in the city. One day he came late and jumped the curb when he pulled into my high school’s turn around. He was drunk, but waved it off when I asked if he was alright. We got pulled over soon after. The officer took a long time walking up to our window. When he got there he looked at me in the passenger seat and after breathing deep, asked if I could drive home. I said I could. The next week Dad let Barb take him to AA. I remember those sirens whenever I see the ugly truth come
out of someone. I’d heard them the afternoon I saw Matthew and Alice kissing in her car. I heard them in Kelly’s backyard, while I helped Julia find her balance. But on that wild St. Patrick’s Day night, somehow the sirens left my head and soon Kelly heard them, too.

From off through the live oaks and rooftops the sirens rose. We three turned our heads, waiting. The sirens grew louder. They didn’t turn and fade away down a side street. They grew until a few other ears perked in the circles of drinkers.

Julia tugged on my arm. “Come on, Sarah. Let’s run.” And she did. Out the gate and back toward Carrolton Avenue, whether I was coming or not.

**Arthur**

With the city lights small behind us, I drove off the I-10 asphalt and broke through curtains of cogongrass and loosestrife that grew from the cracks of the abandoned service road to Six Flags New Orleans. We passed dark huddles of houses toward the clots of knotted bayou vines, as the rusted skeletons of roller coasters and the broken toothed buildings rose against the night sky like the darkest things ever made. At the gates I parked the pick-up in the middle of the road, its nose pointed at the chain link fence blocking the entrance to the Katrina-ravaged amusement park.

In our headlights, faded signs decorating the fence warned against trespassing and reestablished the City of New Orleans’ claim to the land, the steel tracks and scrap inside. The moon was high and cast its white light through our windows, painting Cole’s sun-beaten skin white as chalk. He held the one bottle of
tequila we managed to get out. He’d killed nearly half that afternoon at my insistence and was drunk. The officer was in the bed. I cut the engine, put the keys on the dash, and leaned back in the seat.

“Here?” he asked, taking a pull.

“This was where they got me,” I said, pointing through the windshield at the middle of a park. I was pointing to the canteen, with its concessions and bumper cars, and the bathrooms I knew were still there. “No reason to be anxious. This is story time.”

See, establishing a connection wins a lot of them over, whether they’re jumpy or just stare out the window while crossing the city with a body in the back. We’d waited out the daylight just past the Lower Ninth in St. Bernard Parish. He thought we were going to dump the officer out there in a lagoon. No, the place has got to mean something to you. But you also got to be smart.

“I was taking too many chances. I just pushed her into a closet. She was fighting and she knocked over some solvent or something. It got hard to breath, and then I’m getting pulled out and folks were stomping on me and, well, that was that.”

“How long?”

“Twenty months. Pledged to attempted with a clean sheet plus good behavior. My problem was I went in alone. I didn’t have someone looking out. Not that you did much better with Friendly back there.”

“Didn’t know you wanted me to kill him.”

“At least you didn’t get caught up on a fence this time.”
Cole had slumped over against the door, his forehead pressed to the glass. He pulled from the bottle again.

“You can open that.”

“I’m going to go see the house.”

“Just need to bury our buddy first.”

“I just need to get inside. When I got mad I’d steal pictures from the picture album and hid them in a box in this hole I found in my closet. It’d be kind of weird to see if it was still there.”

“Awfully sentimental.”

Cole rolled his head back toward me and gave a tired blink. “When are we getting rid of him?”

“I got a place in mind not far. It’s like you’re worried or something.”

“This ain’t a habit of mine.”

“Well, maybe if you’d given me a hand. Not that he should’ve been harassing us anyway. Plenty of blame to go around. It’s pretty exciting, though, ain’t it?”

But Cole was like an open well and everything kept falling in. And that was where it emptied. Out there, on the outskirts of the city. Away from the parades and the tourists eating crawfish, their lips glistening and burning with cayenne, and away from the wealthy citizens, in their Bermudas and Saints jerseys and porkpie hats. Which was fine with me, but I’m just telling it like it is.

We sat there for a while longer. Cole traced the lines of his arm when he wasn’t drinking. Me, I waited for a wind to come and bang the fence’s metal plates. But the wind never came. And we sat there until Cole, with a far out look in his eyes,
gazed upon the twists of rusting bone, and said, “World ain’t a place for kids anyway.”

I grabbed the keys from the dash, turned over the engine, and put some distance between us. Ten feet, three hundred, five thousand, down I-10 toward Slidell, no other headlights on the road. I drove two miles then turned off again, steering around the concrete barrier blocking the abandoned off ramp. My tires lost catch on the shoulder for a second, but I yanked the truck back on pavement and followed our headlights down toward the gravel outlet that led to the levee and Pontchartrain.

For twenty minutes I held a flashlight on Cole from the pick-up’s bed and watched him swing shovelful after shovelful of earth into a pile. I sat beside the pair of feet sticking out from beneath the tarpaulin we’d laid over top of our officer. The moonlight streaked through the pin-sized holes in the wood’s canopy. Cole was a bit drunk, but the two hickory trees framing him stood like sentinels, making sure he finished, six feet by two feet by three feet. The frogs’ throats and screeching insect legs rang from beneath tree roots and beside puddles and filled the heavy air with a cascading and mystic frequency. Cole finished and stuck the shovel in the ground beside the pick-up. I wrenched my neck around and over the cab. I could just make out the glow of city lights.

“That it?” he asked.

“Well, normally I like to have a box on hand for an occasion like this. But we didn’t have the time. He might get dug up.”
We pulled off the tarpaulin and slid the officer from the bed and carried him, Cole at the feet, me at the armpits, to the trench and heaved him in. While Cole shoveled the dirt over his face that’d gone green, I looked at my front side with the flashlight. Long smears of blood and a clump of hair stuck to my shirt. That was another one of those situations I’ve learned to recognize and take advantage of.

I pulled the hair off and flicked it on the ground, “Well, goddammit. We best not get lit up on the way back in.”

“Why don’t you just toss it in here?”

“It’s my shirt. I’ll put it in the back, but my point is I keep getting mucked up because of you.”

“Not sure what you want me to do.”

Now, that’s not the kind of backtalk I expect from a shrinking little man. Dad had a length of willow—his bitch switch—and if I didn’t get something fast enough he lay that across the backs of my legs. So there were ways to handle all manner of backtalk.

“Well, I’m just saying is all. Here, give me that shovel. I’ll finish,” I said and put out my hand.

Cole handed me the shovel and I tossed him the flashlight. He caught it. First, the beam lit his face, and then he pointed it back at the hole.

“Don’t need it with the moon. Take a load off,” I said. “I’ll finish, then we’ll head to that house. Got to face it sometime.” He switched it off and turned to the truck. “After this.”
I brought the shovel blade down on his back and he collapsed to his hands and knees. Then I swung up on his ribs and all the air came out of him with a whoosh that silenced the croaking frogs and whining insects. He laid on his side and grasped at his chest like he was trying to open it up to let air back in. I put my boot on his face and ground down on the cheekbone.

“There’s an order here, boy. Me, then you.” I twisted my boot heel a bit more, and then pushed down, stepping on and over him, back to the truck. In the moonlight the tools and planks in the bed looked like the disassembled body of some horror machine.

“I’ll just wait until you get up. Then we’ll get you home.”

I sat and waited and soon enough a thick band of clouds swept across the moon and the pale light went out.

**Sarah**

I crossed Carrolton in a run, my right hand clasped around Julia’s. We dodged two streaking headlights with a leap onto the sidewalk, passed the neon signs of The Camilla Grill and O’Henry’s crowded patio, and cut down a narrow street toward the great mound of levee only blocks away. I heard the loud whir of engines, but when I looked over my shoulder to see Julia’s red cheeks, no flashing lights followed us. We zagged over another street, our soles slapping the pavement in an uneven time that echoed off the darkened windows of clapboard shotguns, their facades silent as sleeping faces.
A house further down the block, covered in vines that rose from the unkempt lawn and crowned the roof with a thick green mail, sat beneath a lone amber streetlight. I pulled Julia from the asphalt’s crumbling apron and along the derelict house’s chain link fence. She let go of my hand, gripped the metal rail, and threw one foot on top of it, her skin cast gray in the ambient light. She rolled herself over and I followed, landing softly in the thick undergrowth. We breathed heavily, crouching beside each other.

Through the metal diamonds I saw the narrow street we’d cut from. I breathed and watched the house, waiting for it to erupt in red and blue.

“Did you see them?” Julia asked, through rapid intakes of air.

I shook my head.

“Maybe we beat them,” she said. Though we knelt in shadows, I could make out her face, clouded red with swollen capillaries and partially covered by thick clutches of hair. She brushed them back.

“Maybe they weren’t after us.”

Julia leaned against the fence and I chewed on a nail, still watching the road.

“So I might drink more than I need to sometimes.”

“You must’ve really been drinking.”

“At least six.”

“That’s not one.”

“So do you think you’ll really write about the Fed?”

“Kelly seemed pretty skeptical. I told you I’ll need to read more. That guy might be over-thinking.”
Julia adjusted herself from kneeling to sitting, but in the process tipped back into the fence. It rattled for a moment, but settled once Julia leaned into it.

“So I drink too much sometimes. Now you know. But you never told me why you went to meetings. You don’t look too drunk to me. We should go talk to Matt, I think. The Searchlight’s, like, two blocks from here.”

In the next yard the back porch light clicked on. It glowed brightly and I saw the fence’s diamond shadows fall across Julia’s face. I pushed her further back into the yard until we could duck behind a rusted charcoal grill, ringed with hip-high grasses. We kneeled and she squeezed my forearm like she was afraid I’d float away.

I peered through the frame and grass at the square-faced man who leaned through the back door, scanning first his yard, and then gazing longer toward Julia and I. If he saw us, all he had to do was leap from the stoop and grab us as we vaulted over the fence. All other routes were blocked with tall, vine-choked bushes. His eyebrows narrowed. He leaned farther out his door and stared right at us. But then he coughed and went back inside and the light went out.

“That was like my light bulb moment,” Julia said. Her elbow, which had been bracing the arm that was holding up her chin, slipped from her knee and her head dropped and she slowly slid until she was sitting in the grass. “We have to go see Matt and that bitch. I bet they’re there.”

Her eyelids had started to droop a bit. “No, I’m fine. I’m okay, I’m okay. Here,” she said and pulled a plastic flask of back pocket. “Have some.”

After espressos at Community Coffee, we approached the Searchlight from the south, up Oak Street. We heard the Pogues’ plucky banjo and wheezing
accordion of “A Pair of Brown Eyes.” Past the Oak Street Bistro and the hardware store, at the intersection of Oak and Dante, white and orange placards tethered with CAUTION tape block off the street from vehicles. Smoke rose from grills scattered between the sidewalks. The largest crowd gathered around the thickest column of smoke near the middle of the block. There, two large grills, each on wheels with a trailer hitch jutting from the underframe, faced each other.

We milled through the crowd, but as we walked around the coolers of Abita Amber and the grills covered with red snapper and soft shell crabs and the tables of crawfish, potatoes, and mushrooms, the crowd grew denser. People didn’t move out of our way and just kept talking about shrimp prices and the next Rebirth Brass Band show, like we weren’t there. We weren’t so much offered a hunk of corn on the cob.

“Maybe they’re hiding. Or having sex,” Julia said. She wobbled, but steadied herself and rubbed her eyes with her palms. “Okay, so what next?”

Beside me a tall woman with dreadlocks and ears pierced from top to bottom sipped an Amber and talked with her small group.

“Excuse me,” I said. “Have you seen Alice or Matthew?”

She exhaled and turned. “Whole lot of people by those names.”

“Matthew Schneider and—”

“I know who you’re talking about, I just don’t want to talk to your fucking face.” She turned back to her group. “I need a beer. Who else?”

“Well,” Julia said. “What do they look like?”
I scanned through the crowd again, checking faces. I saw bony noses and small ears, jowls and sharp cheekbones, bangs and wandering eyes. At Jacques Imo’s restaurant, a long file was heading in, but no Alice, no Matthew. Then, next door, I caught the flash of a jet-black bob duck into the Searchlight. A car started down the block.

Julia was leaning on the crawfish table eyeing a thin young guy pulling bits of shell from his mustache.

I pushed my way past the dreadlocks, the felt vests, deteriorating t-shirts, the cotton dresses, all of it. The humid March air weighted my lungs so I just held off breathing for those 15 seconds.

The car was a rusted beige Camry and the trunk was popped. That was the car I’d seen them kissing in. The Camry bumped the car in front and reversed into the car behind, both parked too close for it to get out easily. More bumpers crunched as I cleared the edge of the crowd. The car, nearly free, gunned the engine in reverse, lurching from the spot, through a placard and CAUTION tape and into a smoking grill. The rear bumper cut out the legs and the hot black bowl spilled into the still wide-open trunk that snapped down as the car braked and open again as it accelerated away. It sped down Oak Street with that back hood open, flames licking out.

After the car disappeared past Carrolton Avenue the crowd grew louder and someone turned up the Pogues. Julia appeared beside me and put her hand on my shoulder.

“So what’s up?”
“Matthew just drove off.”

“Did you say, ‘Fuck off?’”

“No, I didn’t even see him, just the car.”

“Well, good.”

“I thought you wanted me to yell at him.”

“It doesn’t matter. What matters is that he knew you were here.”

“Why, exactly?”

“It’s the first step.”

Arthur

I used to dream about the old man. I used to dream about creeping up while he slept and driving a knife into his chest. It’d be nights like that one, humid and starless, when my room was suffocating and dark. I’d walk on tiptoes into his room and in my waistband was the pocket knife he’d given me for one of them birthdays when he sat with me for an afternoon and tried to show me to work wood like his dad had shown him. I’d picture the blood bubbling out of the wound like oil from the earth. I wondered whether he’d get up, pull it from his chest, and turn it on me or whether he’d be transfixed, like a vampire stuck on a stake.

I did go into his room one night. I stood over him, looking down at his unshaven face and the ruffled hair beside him I didn’t recognize. But that was it. My Little Ranger pocketknife stayed in the waistband of my pajamas and I tiptoed back to my room and laid there in the dark, hot with regret.
Cole just pointed the way once we hit the surface streets. His face had swollen into a purple knot and the blood smeared on his cheek had dried and cracked like mud. We made our way back up through Carrolton, past crowds gathered in yards lit with twinkling green lights. Young women ran across the street arm in arm. There were the occasional individuals sitting slumped on the curb, passed out and alone in the city. But we were on a mission.

We turned from East Carrolton along the levee and into Black Pearl and then down one of its narrow and poorly lit streets. The truck’s suspension groaned and threw the cab back and forth over each section of buckled pavement. Cole pointed along the road and I pulled over, killed the engine and lights. He sat for a moment craning closer to the windshield, the welt on his face looking even larger.

We got out into the crickets and humidity. Cole looked in both directions, and then turned around. On the side where we’d parked were six newly built or remodeled houses, some two stories even. On the other side were the same rundown shotguns falling down all over Black Pearl. Cole eyed both sides, walked toward the levee, then back again and past, checking the street sign leaning at the corner. He seemed to study each piece of gravel along the road, each windowpane, each curled shingle, as if he would be expected to recall all those details years later. Finally he settled on one of the new houses, a blue two-story house with a SOLD sign in the front yard.

“What the fuck.”

He climbed onto the porch and leaned into the window beside the front door still rimmed with yellow tape. I pulled one of the brochures from the SOLD sign the
realtor must’ve forgotten to take. Cole stepped off the side of the porch and I followed him toward the back, where he found a key beneath the mat. Stupid new owner.

Though bare, without furniture or boxes, light spilled through the many windows and made glowing rectangles on the wood floor as if the builders had installed filaments beneath. I sat on the granite kitchen counter opposite a cordless phone in a cradle, a thermostat, and fire extinguisher hanging on the wall, while Cole stomped through the first floor and up the stairs and back down. He came back to the kitchen while running his fingers along the wall, and then inspected the ceiling as if there would be answers printed there.

“What you expected?”

He punched the sheetrock beside the silent refrigerator. He punched over and over, his fist thudding dully, never breaking through. Dark blood spread across his hand and splattered that spot in the wall. He slipped twice, his bum leg failing to properly brace him. Then he stopped, shoulders heaving, and looked around the room, spotted the fire extinguisher, tore it from the wall and slammed it through the sheetrock in an explosion of packed gypsum and paint. And there it stayed, lodged in the wall like a failed torpedo.

“This isn’t it,” I said.

“No.”

“Well?”

“Nothing.”
I’d spent my life waiting them out—my father, the police, so many delicately boned women—so I waited for Cole’s shoulders to slow, then stop. And eventually they did. His black and blue face had swelled like the two-day-old dead. He stepped out of the streetlight and said, “Well, fuck this.”

What that meant, I still don’t know.

But outside tires screeched against pavement, then lost catch and rattled across gravel. The engine revved and approached quickly. Cole and I jogged to the front door and leaned against the wall, peering through the windows. A large man, wide at the shoulders, jumped from a beater. The trunk was open and flames snapped from inside. The man ran into the yard and down the flagstone path to the front door, fumbling with a ring of keys. Had the windows not yet been installed, either Cole or I could’ve reached out and touched him.

We met eyes and flattened again the wall. The door opened toward me and I lost sight of him and Cole. The man sprawled to the floor and the door slammed shut. The man yelled. No words, I don’t think. Just yelled and pushed himself away, into the shadows of the next room. Cole lunged and heaved him back by the foot.

“Shut up!”

The man laid there, his wide face stretched at the eyes and mouth. Cole thrust his hand toward me, into one of the bands of streetlight. I felt around my belt for the leather handle, removed it, and put it in his bloodied palm.

“What do you want?” the man asked, his voice cracking.

I looked out the window, at the flames licking from his trunk and went to the kitchen, pulled the fire extinguisher from the wall, and returned. Cole, still standing
over the man didn’t speak. The man, with his large eyes, watched me. The blade caught the light.

“You need anything?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said.

The man scooted backward a few inches.

“Don’t yell,” I said and opened the door. I pulled the keys from the lock, stepped outside, and closed it behind me. I pushed the keys into my back pocket and jogged with the fire extinguisher to the car’s trunk. I pulled the pin and put it out, then stood, waiting for the cloud of suppressant to dissolve into the night air. No lights went on in the houses on the block. The thump of a party’s music blocks away pushed at my chest. I threw the fire extinguisher into the trunk and closed it, before pulling the keys from my back pocket.

In that moment, Cole seemed onto something—it might be nice to go home. No reason for me to have stayed. Not with a stolen pick-up that had stolen tools and cop blood in the back. Not when any number of folks might’ve already called the police about a fire in the trunk of a car.

I tossed the keys in my hand and found the one for the car. I took one last look at that big blue house and listened for a moment, taking it its silent face. SOLD. There was always plenty of space in the swamp for me, but I got in thinking I would maybe switch it up and start investing in some real estate. I turned over the engine and drove off, toward those bare bulbs in my mind, glowing over the Atchafalaya water.
THE CASE OF THE MISSING BAR (2016)

It was after Sarah and Daniel cut through the overgrown alley and onto New Orleans’ Salcedo Street in the fading evening light that they saw Jarek’s Happy Time Inn had gone missing—the hand-carved taps, the red-felted pool table, the squeezeboxes and washboards mounted on the walls, the lone bathroom, the jukebox, the entire building. Left was a lone corroded pipe jutting from rubble and the crumbling foundation lining the lot like rows of cracked teeth. They slid into the crowd of regulars gathered at Salcedo and Grover, in the shadow cast by the abandoned Quick & Dry next door. Longtime Jarek’s bartender Martha sat on a cooler with a half-dozen workaday regulars, holding a Budweiser longneck, dabbing her forehead, mumbling. When she made eye contact with Sarah she stood and fished two beers before shuffling toward her and Daniel. Sarah jammed her fingers into the front pockets of her distressed jeans, unsure of what to do. Jarek’s, whose torn-cover stools Sarah had wiped off with Martha for four years of closing times, had disappeared. And now the corner where it had stood, the place where that night she hoped to once again melt away her case of post-college stagnation blues, looked like the surface of the Moon.

“You don’t work tonight,” Martha said, hugging Sarah.

“We’re celebrating. What happened?” Sarah asked, releasing the older woman.
“Hi, Martha,” Daniel said.

Martha looked thinner—her white curls, wilder. She looked tired and unprepared to tell a dirty joke or take a Jell-O shot or hold a 12-inch boudin link between her legs like an oversized penis, as she was known to do. Martha handed both Sarah and Daniel a Budweiser, which they accepted with silent thank yous.

Martha looked at Daniel, who’d been Jarek’s nighttime cook in college, before Sarah bartended, and said, “How about you load that cooler with those cases.”

Daniel scratched the line where his thick brown sideburns ended and the sharp curve of his jaw began. He adjusted the Giants baseball cap hiding the buzz cut Sarah had come to think cute. “Sure,” he said and pivoted, sipping his beer.

Sarah gave him a pat on the butt.

“Thanks,” Sarah said, though she was immediately aware of Martha. She shifted her bottle to her left hand, then back, ultimately gripping the neck between her thumb and forefinger as if it were an inconvenience. When they were alone, Martha often asked Sarah when Daniel was going to pop the question. Sarah always told her they didn’t want to rush it, but really, she was wondering the same. She hoped Daniel’s unusual request for a night at Jarek’s might have answered some questions.

“Well, the bar. It’s a goddamn mystery, darling. What are you celebrating?” Martha asked wiggling her fingers.

Sarah shook her head. “Don’t know. The great deal I got on my new lease? Daniel didn’t say. What happened?”

“I closed last night. And it was gone when I came to open today.”
“It disappeared in nine hours?”

“I don’t know what to tell you. I worked last night and now we’re like everyone else,” Martha said with a shrug. “Looking for work.”

“Not like him,” Sarah said, nodding at Daniel.

Daniel was kneeling on the cracked concrete, lifting brown bottles from cardboard boxes and slipping them with a slush into the large plastic tub. Among all the gin blossomed, middle-aged faces, Daniel’s dark eyelids and pale cheeks stood out like his tight black jeans did among the loose-fitting and paint-stained Carhartts of Ollie, Biddy, and Kurt. So rarely had Daniel come back after he quit, now standing there with the regulars looking disinterested, Sarah almost wished he wasn’t along. He’d been like that more and more, working as a freelance programmer. The jobs kept coming and coming. Sarah felt them pulling him further away all the time.

“It’s Nguyen,” Martha said. “I haven’t heard a damn thing. I ain’t have a problem with him since he bought it, but what the fuck is this?”

“No one knew anything?”

“He’s been building all manner lately. Mostly on lots empty since the storm. But I haven’t seen anything like this.”

“They moved a factory from my hometown back in Minnesota to China when I was a kid,” Sarah said. “Tippecanoe. It seemed like overnight. Not that it really happened overnight.”

Martha sipped from her bottle and looked across Grover Street at the vacant and treeless LeBlanc lot. Some kids were swinging at a tennis ball with an aluminum bat. T-shirts were bases. Their chests twinkled. It was the first day of June and the
air in New Orleans felt like water. It stood stagnant in the recesses between buildings and under the shotgun porches. It rustled live oak leaves, corroded the chain link fence the city put up after they bought and paved over the houses owned by serial killer Arthur LeBlanc. Sarah stood with Martha, watching the young pitcher chew his lip while he waited for the next batter to step over the bundled red t-shirt. Briefly, Sarah caught his eye and gave him a half smile. The boy, perhaps 13, laughed to himself and turned his attention back to the game. He pitched. The batter connected and sent the yellow ball screaming from the lot and over Salcedo Street, into a neighbor’s yard.

“Tippecanoe? Like the lawnmowers?” Martha asked.

“Yeah. My dad played for their softball team even though he didn’t work there. In the summers, after my step-mom took me to church—which was really just Pastor John asking us all pray that Tippecanoe would get more orders—we’d go watch Dad play afterwards. I could drink as much cider as I wanted, so long as I wasn’t trouble.”

“I couldn’t find any contact information for Nguyen.”

“I wonder what he’s thinking.”

“Really did mess everything up. It’s going to be like starting over.”

The boys on the LeBlanc lot screamed at each other. In those last scraps of light, a ball had been lost down a gutter—the last one. They collected their bases, arguing whether the game had ended or if it was only postponed until they got money for another can of balls.
She and Martha stood and sipped their beers until they were gone. Daniel sat on the cooler, pushing through screens on his phone, not even trying to talk with the guys around him. Sarah wished he wouldn’t embarrass her. But she too was at a loss, so she just stood silently with Martha, not wanting to start over, not wanting Martha to have to start over. Overhead, streetlights buzzed to life.

Soon after, the wind picked up and rattled the Quick & Dry’s windows. The wind also rustled the crowd until they shivered in their sweaty skin and threw their empty bottles into the rubble like an offering. The crowd packed up and Sarah collected Daniel and they all dispersed, following the streetlights into the night.

Sarah woke the next morning in bed with Daniel standing over her, wearing a silver and blue cardboard party hat she’d gotten at Jarek’s New Years celebration. Daniel had another hat in his hands and stretched the elastic band beneath Sarah’s chin. Sarah yawned and felt the thin strap tighten into the underside of her jaw.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“It’s a goddamn holiday. A job search holiday. Today, we’re going to find you a real job.”

Midmorning light drew long shadows of the brown plants on her windowsill across the bedroom. Sarah took her hat off and picked at the cardboard. “We need to find Nguyen.”

“This was a great thing. I’ve been trying for months to get you to drop that gig.”

“What’s Martha going to do?”
“Get up, I have breakfast.”

“Who let you in?”

“You’re fault for ever giving me a key. And they’re saying it’ll rain today.”

Sarah laid there, wondering how she could trick him out of the building, but then she smelled chicory, so she rolled out of bed and dressed. It was nice to see him in a good mood.

The coffee table in Sarah’s one-bedroom apartment was covered in empty job applications, copies of her resume she didn’t write, envelopes, stamps, and bricks of staples. The Blu-ray cases from their last action movie marathon were now on the floor.

Daniel lived in a split upper level of a house on St. Charles that was bigger than Sarah’s cramped apartment, but still he spent most his free time on her corduroy couch, stealing her neighbor’s Wi-Fi, stacking his empty cans and takeout cartons on the window unit. Every few days, the passing delivery trucks rumbled the cartons and bits of leftover food to the floor.

She’d suggested they move in together despite habits like that, but he’d always insisted having separate places until they were married. Besides, the St. Charles apartment was also where he worked, often binge coding for days to meet Stemleaf Tech’s tight deadlines.

Daniel handed her a steaming travel mug and a warm bagel bursting with cream cheese.

“Your fridge was empty so I got you these. Going grocery shopping any time soon?” he asked, pulling apart his own bagel and knifing cream cheese over it.
Sarah inhaled the coffee and said, “I have a job. And we deserve an answer.”

Daniel set down a completed half and began smearing the second. “This is perfect. You can get on with your life. You learned three coding languages from me not to mention that journalism degree you got. Or go back to selling paintings.”

“Fine, I’ll write about a fucking building disappearing. You should clear your schedule next week. Who knows how long the investigation will last.”

Daniel looked at her and took a bite of bagel and chewed while the coffee maker flashed 12:00. When he swallowed and Sarah felt ready to scream at him to say something, he said, “On the table, in the green folder.”

Realizing she was still holding the travel mug and bagel and had been waving them wildly, Sarah set both on the counter and went to the coffee table, ready to pitch the entire folder at Daniel’s smug face.

Inside were pages of properties and companies all over the city. She scanned the first few pages—World Wide Connections, Meeting Place, Green Stem Solutions, NOLA-scapes, Landrieu Port Systems, and Jarek’s Happy Time Inn. Sarah flipped back to the beginning and worked through again. The owner of each: Nguyen Holdings.

She looked up at Daniel. “How did you get these? When?”

“A thing called the Internet. No sleep till Brooklyn, kiddo.”

The city roared with the crush of traffic. Delivery trucks rocked on stiff suspensions through the potholed streets. Bicyclists with brightly colored bags synched tightly over their shoulders wove through the cars and trucks as they barreled through yellow lights. Sarah and Daniel had caught a packed bus headed to
the Warehouse District, where developers had snatched up abandoned and underused buildings for lofts and tech start-ups, especially since then-Governor Jindal’s information technology stimulus package.

Sarah shouldered up to a woman holding a Winn Dixie bag and grabbed a hanging strap. She watched the passengers’ faces as the bus rattled along. Most stared at their feet or out windows as the buildings blurred by. Daniel nudged Sarah and nodded toward a seated woman with a baby in one arm and a toddler curled next to her in the olive colored plastic seats. A tote bag looped over her elbow sat shapeless on the floor. Though it wasn’t even 11am, the woman’s eyes were closed as if it were the end of a long night.

Sarah and Daniel got off on Tchoupitoulas Street, in front of a three-story brick building with frosted foldout windows. Daniel held open the glass front door for Sarah, on which was printed, among other abstract names, Meeting Place, Inc.

The start-up’s offices were an open plan on the third floor. Rows of desks without cubicle walls stood starkly under banks of piercing compact fluorescents. Pinned behind computers at each desk were young men with greasy skeins of hair and t-shirts advertising bar crawls and video games Sarah often saw advertised in magazines Daniel brought to her apartment. The employees didn’t seem to notice as Sarah followed Daniel between the desks to the back of the room where a familiar-looking blonde man of about 30 reclined with a tablet, his feet crossed and propped on the desk like signal flags. Sarah couldn’t place him, but it didn’t matter because Daniel threw up his hands and said, “Owen-fucking-Card,” before sitting in a stark white chair in front of the man’s desk and motioning for Sarah to do the same.
Owen dragged a finger across his tablet’s screen seeming to ignore them. Sarah couldn’t see what he was looking at. Instead, she inventoried the perhaps two-dozen Lego people standing on the desk. Pirates, spacemen, knights, cops, and regular blue-collar joes.

“What do you want with Nguyen?”

“He made a building disappear,” Sarah said, picking up a bearded Lego man. Owen looked over his tortoiseshell glasses at Sarah, then back at Daniel.

“This is Sarah. Your Mr. Nguyen tore down her workplace without notice. Jarek’s.”

“Have you seen Meeting Place, yet?” Owen asked, gesturing with the obsidian tablet.

Daniel reached across the desk, lifting the pad from Owen’s open hands. The Meeting Place website was organized like a concept map or the table layout of a restaurant. Daniel zoomed in on a large circle while Sarah looked on. The circle, titled “Work,” expanded to display pictures of the men they passed in the office. Daniel touched the picture of a thin redhead named Will Straub, which populated basic life facts beside his tired face. With another gesture Will was gone and instead the circle named “Jarek’s” grew to fill the screen, though it showed only two pictures, each of unfortunate looking men, one of whom Sarah remembered from the first desk inside Meeting Place’s door. That’s why Owen looked familiar. Owen hadn’t been a regular at Jarek’s, but he’d shown up on Blues Night a few times, back when she first started and Daniel still hung out there. When Sarah was finishing her journalism degree. After Martha got her hired.
“Nguyen owns this building and isn’t charging us rent or utilities,” Owen said.

“Sarah just needs contact info. I wasn’t able to find any records.”

“If Nguyen wanted people to know where he lived, wouldn’t it be public? Wouldn’t you be able to find it pretty easily?”

Sarah bit at her thumbnail, just like Martha used to do when she leaned against the cooler in Jarek’s and watched the Saints throw away a game. She couldn’t remember anything specific about Owen besides that he sat mostly alone, typing on his computer while nursing a beer.

“So you know, but you won’t help us?” Sarah asked, while she chewed at her thumb.

“It’s not my business. And I really can’t talk about it,” he said and swung his feet from the desk.

“How long did you go to Jarek’s?” Sarah asked Owen.

Owen’s tablet sat on the desk, lit with Meeting Place pictures, but he didn’t pick it up. He just sat there, framed from behind by the frosted window glowing yellow in the midday light. “I only went a few times. Danny told me about it.”

“I thought you two met at Jarek’s.”

“No, we met online. We only started hanging out offline, because, well, I don’t really remember now.”

“Who else could help us if you won’t?”

“Daniel, do you remember where that was?” Owen asked. Daniel shook his head. “After Meeting Place launches there won’t be any reason for anyone to remember, anyway.”
“Owen, do you know what happened to Jarek’s?”

Owen picked up his tablet, flipped his fingers across it twice, slowly, and then set it back down with a black screen. “Look,” Owen began, “If Nguyen funds you, you say thank you and focus on your work. It’s in the terms. I can’t help.”

Daniel set his elbows on his knees and looked at Sarah, “Sounds like a dead end.”

Owen spoke over him, to the fluorescent lights as much as to Sarah, “He dissolved an entire company—remember Dynamix—because they met in person instead of video conferencing some meeting. Which, by the way, is the ethos Meeting Place is built upon. Nguyen’s all about post-human. He’s building a fresh start.”

Sarah repeated her question, “Do you know how we can contact him?”

Owen looked in her eyes that time and said, “Not I nor anyone else can or will tell you. Please don’t make this weird, Daniel.”

They sat in silence for a moment, and then Daniel stood and knocked on Owen’s desk. “Okay, time to hit it, Sarah.”

Sarah couldn’t tell if Owen had raised his voice, even slightly, as he connected Meeting Place’s maybe-fate with the putting-down of Dynamix. It seemed as if he had, or had at least punctuated it with hard consonants, like an elbow to the ribs. She walked out of Owen’s corner and through the ranks of programmers with her brain firing in a search for options, but Owen had been their only connection. Daniel had said he was their only chance. If Owen was the only Nguyen employee or partner with whom they had leverage, what were the other options?
It was because of her mental fumbling that Sarah barely noticed the folded piece of paper until it brushed her hand. It was the man in Owen’s Meeting Place picture set. He wouldn’t raise his head, just looked sidelong from his desk and whispered, “Here.” But it was him, the thin redhead, Will Straub.

Will Straub’s note said he had information on Nguyen and asked them to walk down Tchoupitoulas to The Backdoor, a less-traveled bar between the tin-roofed warehouses and wait for him to get away. Daniel seemed unfazed and uninterested by the note and its clandestine nature, even dismissing the likelihood that Will knew anything. But Sarah couldn’t stop speculating and said, “What a great time for a beer,” and led Daniel, crunching across sidewalks peppered with wind-blown grit.

The Backdoor was dim, lit only by the dusty beams of afternoon sunlight that streamed through its smudged windows. The bartender, a middle-aged man with greased back hair and a doughy face, rubbed a rag across the bar top as if he was trying to scour out something that had seeped into the varnished wood. He nodded when Sarah and Daniel entered. A few people sat at tables alone, one man shot darts. Sarah and Daniel paid for two bottles of Abita Amber and went to the pool table along the streetside windows. Across Tchoupitoulas, the Mississippi was blocked by the bricked-over and abandoned loading docks that stretched for miles in either direction, like some kind of industrial castle wall. Sarah pulled a cue stick from the rack while Daniel set-up eight ball.
He also broke, sending two solids into opposite pockets and leaving plenty of open space to sink another two.

“How long do you think?” she asked while Daniel lined up six-to-the-corner.

“What would you even ask him?”

“How about ‘What happened to the fucking bar, Nguyen!’”

“Subtle,” he said and sent the cue ball into the six, though it ricocheted off the bumpers and out. Daniel jerked upright and thrust the butt of his stick into the ground so hard the wood cracked loudly, frightening Sarah, though no one in the bar seemed to care.

“It’s a shot. It’s fine,” Sarah said. She didn’t move to line up her own. She just watched Daniel grip the top of his stick, leaning on it, his jaw tense.

“Do you really think you’re going to get your job back?”

“What have I got to lose? An answer I don’t have? Aren’t you curious how he made a building disappear overnight? These are journalist questions. See, I’m using my degree.”

“No, it’s wasting your time.”

“You don’t get it.”

“You’re up,” Daniel said, then left his cue and walked to the bathroom.

Sarah hesitated, and then bent to line up the fifteen with a side pocket. She squinted and shot, too hard. She sank the fifteen, but the cue caromed off the rail and further down the table, away from any easy follow-up on the nine. The first time they talked about getting married was a drunken walk home through Midcity after a
night of pool at Art’s Land. She’d finally beaten him in eight ball and he’d been so excited for her, buying all ten people in the bar a round. *Asshole*, she thought.

When Will arrived two hours later, he was red-faced and out-of-breath. Sarah was sitting at the bar over a steaming mug of coffee and Bailey’s, half-watching a muted recap of President Obama’s press conference blaming the forest fires in Minnesota on global warming. She saw Will enter with a bag slung over his shoulder and stand in the entryway, scanning the bar. He nodded at Sarah, but kept turning until he saw Daniel, who was pulled up to a video poker machine against the opposite wall. Will hiked up the bag and wove between the low tops toward Daniel. Sarah went back to the president’s closed captions and sipped her spiked coffee.

*It’s been the time to act for more than a decade, but partisan gridlock has held those necessary reforms from leaving committee. Late is better than never. We mustn’t wait until it’s too late.*

The president sounded like her father, always looking on the bright side. When the sheriff found Sarah’s mother in the ravine, still wearing her seatbelt: *We’re just going to love each other more to make up the difference.* When Sarah jumped off the roof, the second time: *Well now you know for sure you can’t fly.* When Sarah learned he was an alcoholic: *Well now I have Jesus because of AA.* When Sarah’s dad got remarried to Barb: *Your step-mom isn’t Mom, but she’s a mom and she loves you and she loves me.* When Sarah moved to New Orleans: *I’ll miss you, but this is the change you need.* When Sarah called him crying, because she’d seen her boyfriend before Daniel kissing a tramp bartender: *What a great opportunity to chart a new course. Remember to follow the light.*
Sarah looked over her shoulder. Will had pulled up a barstool and huddled next to Daniel. Will’s bag was open on his lap. Daniel shook his head.

He and Sarah had played three more games of pool waiting for Will. They were slow and angry games. Daniel had said before the third’s beginning, “This is what people in the real world do: move on.” And after it started: “Have you ever had to do that? Your dad’s BizComm checks kept things pretty cushy.” That’s when Sarah racked her cue stick and sat down at the bar, ignoring him.

_And there are jobs in this Green Revolution. Jobs of the future that will help prevent forest fires and drought, rising oceans and rising electricity costs from having to combat extreme weather. I’d prefer the brave firefighters be watching over our homes and towns, rather than parachuting into dangerous situations we created. So let this be the moment we draw a line in the sand to shift course, to set out on a new journey to create an economy for the future, for our planet, for our children._

With that, the president walked from behind his podium and across the stage. Sarah followed him to the television screen’s edge, where he disappeared. If it hadn’t been for the timing of his exit, she wouldn’t have been looking left, where Will was walking out the front door.

Daniel still sat at the poker machine. Leaving her half-finished drink, Sarah ran after Will, into the bright afternoon light. She caught him at the corner, where he was waiting for the light to change.

“Can you help us?” she asked when she grabbed his elbow.

“Did Daniel tell you?”

“You just left.”
Will hiked his shoulder bag up and raised up on his toes, peering past Sarah. “I didn’t know he worked for Nguyen.”

“Who?”

“Daniel. Look, Owen and I demoed Meeting Place for Nguyen at his apartment. Owen wouldn’t want me to tell you, but I thought Daniel reached out because he really wanted to know. I thought you wanted to know.”

“We do. He told you he works for Nguyen?”

“No I just saw it. Daniel just told me to leave.”

“Give it to me.” Sarah held out her hand, while Will fished through his bag. He produced a white envelope and gave it to her. “What’s Eco-munity?” he asked as a raincloud passed in front of the sun, already on its way toward the horizon.

Daniel wouldn’t tell her either. Eco-munity. She shook the envelope in his face, hitting his nose. He closed his eyes and wouldn’t answer, but followed Sarah to the bus stop and sat beside her while she looked up on her phone for the bus routes necessary to cross town to Nguyen’s apartment.

Daniel just sat on the bus as it bounced down Tchoupitoulas Street, which ran along the river like a companion artery. Sarah held the envelope and checked street signs as they went, crossing onto Decatur and past the Quarter, then Franklin, where they got off, in the rapidly gentrifying Bywater. After the recession lifted construction roared back, as was the desire of retiring baby boomers to be in on the
Four apartment buildings were either recently finished or quickly nearing completion.

The bus pulled away and they were left with the sound of cars and the damp smell of approaching rain. Sarah pulled out the envelope and checked the address—1523 Royal Street. #612. It was etched into a large granite rock sitting on the lawn of a polished condo building overlooking the Mississippi and West Bank. They entered through the front door.

“So are you just not going to tell me?” Sarah asked.

“I don’t know what you want me to say.”

In the lobby, there was no piano or Persian rug as Sarah had seen on their website as she rode the bus. In their places was a long buffet. Milling about were older people in suits and dresses—the kind of people who bought the paintings she used to sell on the boardwalk. Men and women held tiny plates and flutes of champagne, backed by a view of the river. The glasses almost glowed against the darkening sky, as if in them swam phosphorescent sea creatures, perfectly adapted to the harsh realities of life on the ocean floor, thriving amidst overwhelming odds thanks to a few lucky genetic mutations. Then, a lightning crack and rain splattered the windows.

They went left and stepped on a waiting elevator.

“This is what we were going to celebrate at Jarek’s,” Daniel said after the doors closed.

Sarah looked at her warped reflection in the metal wall. “Nguyen?”
“Yeah, this job with Nguyen. We’re building sustainable homes, for the future. He’s not all bad.”

“Oh,” she said and turned to a tired-looking Daniel. His eyes shimmered under the fluorescents like frozen mahogany discs, but not with the exuberance she’d seen that morning when he stood over her, party hat in hand.

The elevator doors opened. She stepped out and felt Daniel do the same behind her. Each side of the dim hallway had the same white doors with gold knockers. Sarah ran her fingers along the cream wallpaper and across the moldings and doorjambs. She read the numbers as they walked by—628, 626, 624. She wondered what the people that lived in the building did. If a man that owned Jarek’s and dozens of other properties lived there, who else did? And what did they do? Did they have other jobs or were their jobs just owning buildings?

They approached apartment 612 and Sarah felt the promise of answers rush over her. But the door was already open. In it stood an Asian man as tall as Sarah. “What?” he said.

“Are you Mr. Nguyen?” Sarah asked.

The man pinched his earlobe and ran his fingers through his jet-black side part, exposing only a few gray hairs. “Yes.”

“The Mr. Nguyen that owns Jarek’s Happy Time Inn?”

“Come in,” he said and disappeared into the apartment.

Its far wall was made of floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked the park that covered the nearly two square blocks between the building and the Mississippi. It was lit by the yellow light of lampposts snaking along empty paths in the rain. The
other walls in the apartment were eggshell white. No paintings, pictures, or other artwork. The furniture was also unremarkable, though it was all polished wood and made entirely of right angles, not the worn edges like the bar at The Backdoor or the one that used to stand in the middle of Jarek’s. The only patterns were on the few padded surfaces, the couch and two low armchairs—bamboo stalk print that gave the effect of stripes.

“Everything in this apartment is recycled. And the building is one of the most efficient in the country. I’m not sure if that impresses you,” he said, looking at Sarah. Then, a little louder, “Hoang, television.”

On the wall opposite the couch, a panel slid up, revealing a large, black screen like an unblinking eye.

“What do you two want from me?” Mr. Nguyen asked after he sat down on the bamboo couch. His suit was crisp, as if he was just about to head for the cocktail hour downstairs.

“We want to know what happened to Jarek’s,” Sarah said as she fingered the shade of the end table lamp. Daniel stood beside Sarah, bracing himself on the back of a chair. She thought Daniel looked smaller, as if Nguyen’s apartment had some kind of *Alice in Wonderland* DRINK ME effect.

“Why are you asking me?”

“Because you own it, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“So where did it go?”
Mr. Nguyen looked at Sarah as if he were rearranging the letters of her question into his answer. He raised a hand to his chin. “Does it matter?”

“I worked there with other people who deserve to know what happened,” Sarah said, “It’s kind of, like, our bar.”

“How is my bar your bar?” Mr. Nguyen asked and leaned back into the couch, crossing one leg over the other.

“It’s where I work and where we hang out,” Sarah said.

Daniel left Sarah and crossed toward the wall of windows.

“Are you concerned about global warming?” asked Mr. Nguyen.

“Sure.”

“So you should be happy your friend is part of the solution.”

“Eco-munity? Is that what you’re building on top of Jarek’s?”

“That’s just an apartment building. No, Daniel’s moving to Wisconsin next week to work on the real thing.”

“What happened to Jarek’s? You don’t even know Martha, but she’s like a mother to me and she deserves to know why you took away our jobs without even a phone call.”

“Daniel’s going to be exceptional. The apartment building is only one building. Wisconsin will be an entire town.”

Sarah stood. She was uncomfortable sitting, especially with Daniel standing across the room, looking out from the water-splashed windows. But without a clear purpose, Sarah sat and watched Nguyen watch her.
“You’re going to Wisconsin? For how long?” she said, refusing to look at Daniel.

Nguyen folded his right leg over his left and clasped his hands on his knee, but Daniel didn’t answer.

“I mean, I just signed a new lease.”

“If you’d just get a real job, you’d be fine. I’ve been trying to get you a job so it won’t matter.”

“You don’t want me to come.” She turned to Daniel, but he was still facing the glass. She could see his reflection, darkly. “How long have you been wasting my fucking time?”

“Not here.”

“Your actions affect other people you fucking asshole!”

Four years prior Sarah met Daniel in the rotating bar on top of the Hyatt downtown. She’d been pulled up along the window, looking out on the Mississippi and the boardwalk on a rainy night, wondering what to do with her life. There’d been a woman pushing a stroller or shopping cart along the river, Sarah couldn’t tell which from that far away. The rain had given the planks a sheen, as if they’d been varnished. Below her, two men were huddled under a bus shelter. One man was lying on the bench and another sat on the ground, against the Plexiglas side. She wondered who they were and why they were out in the dark and the rain.

Daniel, remembering the same night, ran his finger down the window, leaving a long smudge. He’d approached her with a freshly poured beer, already knowing she’d be the end of relationships strung together with blowjobs in
bathroom stalls. Without asking her name, he sat across from her, like they’d been together since high school. When she asked what he did, he said he just left his job as a cook at a great bar to be his own boss. When she asked where he was from he recounted his six-year trip across the country with only a change of clothes and computer in his backpack like the entire time he’d been wandering home to her.

The trip had been liberating, because he learned that there wasn’t much necessity in a world with so much magic and tragedy. He only needed to look to find it. He only needed to make an effort to share in it. He only needed abandon to feel the tethers connecting us all.