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Inflatable castles

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Inflatable Castles

by

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

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Program of Study Committee:

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Preface

The collection of short stories that follows is a tour. On it, the reader will observe familiar emblems of our national identity: from those as iconic as Woodstock and Disneyland, to others more common, such as roadside stands or the suburbs. In our minds, these emblems remain fixed despite their placelessness. Most people don't know that Woodstock actually occurred in Bethel, New York, instead of Woodstock. Disney has theme parks in Paris and Hong Kong. What seems distinctly American in the contemporary age bleeds across borders. How can we tell ourselves apart from our neighbors if we all grew up with the same cultural influences? Doesn't the serialization of these influences cheapen them? The answers are further complicated when we look behind the scenes and on the fringes. This fictional tour misses Splash Mountain. You won't meet anyone famous, though in "The Woodstock," you will meet musicians who *pretend* to be famous people, such as Don, a character who "plays" both Jerry Garcia and John Fogerty simply by changing wigs. In fact, all the fictional sites in my collection are inflatable castles, puffed up with our collective imagination. If they disappoint, it is only because we have overfilled them. These castles shift when they aren't staked down. We run to them for shelter, and they blow away with us inside.

The characters in *Inflatable Castles* have different idols that they cling to: money, a nostalgia for an imaginary past, a yearning for family, a yearning for a better life. But they also have the same idol—Robert Swain, a charismatic, shape-shifting trickster figure, a transient husband and father—who appears in each of the stories, sometimes as the protagonist (in the title story), but often as a secondary or offstage character, creating

unseen chaos. Through him, I hope to uncover what is inherent in all idols: they are overwrought representations of the elusive and mysterious *thing* we each secretly desire—a psychological and often spiritual need for familial connection and legacy. Who raises us defines and shapes who we are.

What happens when what we thought defined us is revealed to be false, flimsy, or mass-produced? What happens when we discover that we, ourselves, are false, flimsy, or mass-produced? How, my characters frequently wonder, can anything be original? I am not the first artist to examine these questions. It is a postmodern (or rather a post-postmodern) preoccupation. The celebrated experimental short story writer, George Saunders, for example, often makes tourist attractions out of our historical sacred sites, as we see in his collections *Civil War Land In Bad Decline* and *Pastoralia*, in order to reconcile the shabby transience of these sacred places with our reverence. Takashi Murakami, the renowned visual artist, frequently produces images of a warped Mickey Mouse with razor teeth and a gaping maw, as if this cultural symbol of childhood were an all-consuming force that adulterates the originality of art itself by stamping everything with its trademark—his commentary on the “Disneyfication” of our contemporary culture. My collection of stories finds its thematic roots in works like these, which seek to unsettle our notions of sacred places and supposedly benign cultural images.

Although each of the stories is meant to be self-contained, the collection overall tells the story of an extended family linked by Robert Swain. While Robert drifts in and out of our nation’s sacred but seedy places, his children are often stuck in them, left behind to clean up after the carnival leaves town.

In *Inflatable Castles*, I examine a fragmented family subsumed by a common identity. My characters—the sons, daughters, and spouses of Robert Swain—wrestle to define their lives beyond their relationship to the trickster patriarch. Most of the characters in *Inflatable Castles* have never met one another and live across the North American continent, and in some cases seem linked only in terms of common themes. Robert Swain is the connecting thread. His flaws become the legacy my characters inherit.

Inflatable Castles

My father loved tools. He kept his sharp, and in return the tools did as he asked. Fans called him the Carpenter, because whatever he withdrew blindly from his bag, then flung—whether hammer, screwdriver, or hacksaw—pinned balloon targets to our wooden backstop just as well as a nail. I stood downrange with eyes shut, waiting for the whoosh of something heavy fly past my ear, followed by the pop when it made contact with the board. Then, I'd offer Dad the crowd's applause by holding up the hand that he'd nearly skewered with an icepick or smashed with a monkey wrench. When he bowed for long enough, I would lever a buried implement out of the board by its handle so my father wouldn't deplete his store of tools mid-show.

The audience would clap as we finished. That never failed to make Mitch, the strongman, mad. When he heard that last applause, I always saw him by the tent's entrance biting his corndog aggressively as if to stop it from squirming. The Carpenter was a tough act to follow. Sometimes, if Mitch felt especially indignant, he'd stop by our lot after his steel-bending demonstration to tell us what he'd done all morning while Dad and I were "lost." He'd point to the coaster, already unfurled from the back of the truck, or the pile of sand bags that was hard dirt before the sun rose.

"Why do you always fall so far behind the convoy?" he'd ask.

"Let me worry about me. You worry about you," my father would respond, if it hadn't been too long since his last fix.

"I am," Mitch said. If it had been a long time since his fix, Dad just stood there trying not to shake until Mitch walked away. You might think my father was a common

junkie, but he never got high before a show. He never even took a bump before our night drive to the next gig, which would have eased his muscles after helping to pack all those trucks. For the first twelve years of my life, Dad hid his addiction from just about everyone but me. Not that he didn't take good care of me. We took care of each other. Nighttime, Dad sat watch while I slept in the passenger seat. To this day, I can only sleep sitting.

Castle time was my watch. After Dad's show, we rolled the inflatable castle out of the truck and onto our lot. He always made sure I stood well clear before pushing the six hundred pounds of packed vinyl that dented the storm-soaked ground where it landed. Once inflated, though, it could fly away on a sudden gust, so we drove in stakes. We inhaled gnats.

"Exhaust is just what generators make, Robert," Dad said to me, smiling. He pulled on the motor, pointing its nose at me to blow off the bugs and dry my sweat before inserting it into the intake and tightening. Our castle exhaled mold through stretched seams. It reeked with the accumulated musk of feet from five thousand counties. I pressed my face to the cool material that hadn't yet absorbed the sun, digging my arms into the folds to fish out the wet Band-Aids or mummified socks.

Dad crawled into the castle when it was up. After a minute, he handed me his needle gingerly.

"Good night," he said in the middle of the day. "Love you, buddy. Have a good shift."

"Okay, folks," I'd say to the children lined up to get in the castle. "Please avoid the far corner where you will find my associate testing the elasticity matrix. It might look

like he's not watching, but if he sees you doing flips, you're out. Take off any shoes, glasses, earrings, necklaces, rings, or wallets and pass them to me to hold on to as you approach the entrance. And no pushing."

I took a buck from this wallet or five bucks from that one, depending on how much money was in them to begin with, just like Dad taught me. He would lie there bobbing in the eye of whirling bodies. A foot stomped his hand occasionally, but he never noticed. Sometimes a parent saw Dad in there through the castle's mesh walls, and I'd make something up about doubling our safety measures by adding his weight to the grip of our stakes and sandbags.

"The weatherman said something about a microburst this afternoon. Supposedly those things can come out of nowhere. My associate is lying like that to keep the castle's center of gravity low. He can also watch your kids a lot better from in there."

I asked sometimes, in my naiveté, why we had to trick people.

"Does it matter?" Dad responded.

And mostly it didn't. Carny life meant hitting the reset button every shift. A new town meant new customers. News traveled slower back then. You had to call up a stranger if you wanted a review. Sometimes the stranger you got was our boss, Jim Crack. He had the first cell phone I ever saw. This was back in the early 80s. He carried it in a shoulder bag. I remember pretending that he was using the boxy thing to call in missile strikes on the Russians.

Children, some of them older than I was (twelve), would tug my shirtsleeves to ask if Billy was around, or, "Do you know if Phil made it to the fair yet? Is he still grounded?" Their world was so small they'd never met anyone that didn't know Billy or

Phil. Young men rode above the crowd on horseback. ATVs carried extended families with little ones perched on the handlebars down main streets named Broken Spoke Road or Impasse Avenue, after whatever had caused their founders to settle along the way to the West.

Near dusk, the cotton candy horizon wafted a fog of grilled meats and fried butter. That's when Dad emerged, and we set up the fish toss in front of the castle. Assorted cups held wriggling fish that children threw Ping Pong balls at to win. Winning was easy—easier than the ring toss or Skee-ball. For those games, profits came from repeat attempts; our money came from fish tank sales. My father usually managed to talk parents into an upgrade.

“Frankly, friend, a fish needs more space than the studio model can provide. Come on, don't you want to teach your kid what it means to have something depend on you? These little things get bigger than you think.”

Of course, some parents insisted on the studio model. We'd laugh at them after they left. In the fading light, even a discerning eye could not tell our baby stream fish from the stunted pet shop variety. Dad knew every water worth netting as long as it flowed within a mile of any major roadway. This was before GPS, of course, and the Internet, so the saps that skimped, most of whom lived at least a hundred miles from a pet shop, soon found themselves with problems too big to flush down their toilets.

“Robert, show this guy your trick,” Dad said, whenever he found someone to bet. I would down a cup's murky contents, feeling the fish struggle all the way to my stomach and wiggle for a second longer once inside before finally stopping.

Dad had a talent for spotting those among the crowd who would bet on stupid stuff. He also knew the types who would buy dope off him or sell him some, like a long-sleeved, vein smacking extended family eager to greet us at every stop. Usually, though, they only knew the places to send us where Dad could score. While the convoy groaned down the highway, we split away to find trailers on cinderblocks where he could score what he needed. If Dad took too long inside, we sometimes caught grief from Jim Crack when we finally did rendezvous with the others. As long as the boss didn't notice us gone, Dad considered the run a success. He patted me on the shoulder for my role as guardian of our pickup— scanner of sodium-lit dumpsters and wind-blown bushes with only the truck's horn and a box full of tools to fight what the darkness held.

Dad drew a bigger crowd than anyone. That's why he lasted for so long despite the drugs. As long as the Carpenter showed up on time, Boss Crack was usually satisfied. He could get anyone to pack sandbags, and besides, he cut corners himself. The science of weighing down our daily encampments left room for interpretation. Boss Crack kept us on watch for playgrounds as we rolled into town, where woodchips made for quicker digging but lighter bags. With all the members of the crew present, we excavated sizable lots in seconds. At the end of the shift, we'd pocket the burlap, leaving the woodchips in little piles all over our field for the townsfolk to find in the morning. Boss Crack's job was knowing when to leave, not just where to go. He walked the grounds on his stilts, stretching a wetted finger to the sky. A nod meant the wind blew too hard. Time to pack. A shake could mean either that the wind wasn't bad or that business was too good.

Sometimes the decision to leave was made collectively; whenever a father pushed to the front of someone's line screaming that his kid ate a sour corndog or almost fell out of the coaster because the safety bar on the back car unlatched mid-ride again.

"I just work here," one of us would say. "But my boss is over there running the Tilt-A-Whirl—he'd be the one to talk to." Boss Crack never had a Tilt-A-Whirl. Still, all of us knew what to say if asked how to find it.

"Oh, you're way off," the next person would say. "You were supposed to go to the other end of the fair. Yes, the Tilt-A-Whirl was going to go here, but they decided to move it to the other end at the last minute so it would be closer to the porta-potties."

Then another person would say, "The Tilt-A-Whirl was by the porta-potties, but the breakers over here couldn't handle the amps, so they moved it near the bumper cars." Meanwhile, my father, the Carpenter, gave a free, impromptu encore in the tent to draw the crowd away from the rides and games while the rest of the carnies loosened bolts and knots so we could make our getaway.

"Don't worry about my son, folks," my dad would say, whenever screams rippled in the audience after a near miss. "I can always make another."

Someone would stand at the back of the audience to point out the dissatisfied customer that started it all, whenever he stumbled through the tent flap. The complainer would pick his way toward the stage—someone having told him that the man on it owned the place. We'd keep performing until the hick got himself bogged down in the crowd, then we'd rush out the back to find the fair vanished. Someone would have loaded our truck. In our haste we'd leave the tent behind, but tents cost less than lawsuits. It was really just a long sheet of tarp anyway, stretched around poles for a

partition. Only rarely did dissatisfied customers try to follow us down the road, with their shotguns flashing in our mirrors but faintly heard at a hundred miles an hour. They never followed for long. Eventually they realized we didn't mean to stop anytime soon, that each mile from home would mean another mile they'd have to travel to get back. For us, home was wherever we were headed.

The start of a shift meant people all around, eager to ask us about our travels and to tell us all the stories they wore out long ago on their friends. I'd tell them the miles I'd traveled in my sleep and how I rarely awoke in the same place twice. I never told them that one place was the same as the other, save for slight variations. Some fields grew wheat instead of corn. Some dirt was more red than brown. The horizon was always far away. Stare at it long enough, it stares back. Our fair sprang up like a beautiful flowering poisonous weed, attracting people from neighboring counties with its toxic colors. We gave them what their world normally lacked—a destination, anything to fill the empty space.

Townies always told me how happy it made them to see a son working alongside his father.

“My son went out east for college,” they said. “Settled in the suburbs. His plot's too small to park a combine on.”

Some communities barely persisted. Old folks sat in lawn chairs, lining sidewalks on the shady sides of town squares, arriving before us just to get a good spot from which to watch the carnies set up. We stayed just long enough to figure out more children wouldn't show.

An agricultural wasteland lay between our next gig and us. Highway slums sprang up around golden neon arches, and the lumber from defunct schoolhouses fueled stoves in winter. Barn roofs lay limp between their trusses like hunger-sucked ribs. Home isn't returned to; it's kept up with.

"A man's home is his castle," my father said, cutting the generator to bleed the bag. Vinyl spires sunk slowly, then bent limply inward. We walked the rest of the air out through zippered vents in the stone-painted embattlements before folding, rolling, loading. In the truck, Dad told me how much our home had made that day as the shocks rocked me to sleep. I was eleven before I ever slept in a bed.

Not all of our gigs started and ended within hours. Boss Crack booked county fairs sometimes that lasted through the weekend. These were the places where, through some miracle of probability, Boss Crack actually managed to make a good impression. He told me once that consistency actually hurts return business, although, in fairness, he never managed much return business. Mostly he just booked small-town, one-time gigs.

"Be fickle like the harvest, and they'll get hooked," Crack said. "People tend to assume that what worked once will again with patience."

We set the fair that day on a stalk-stubbed field near the edge of town. The boss needed small hands to grease the merry-go-round's gears, which had started to drown out *Pop Goes the Weasel* with their squeaking.

"What's the best circus you can think of?" the boss asked, Lazy Susaning me another rag from where he knelt replacing a solenoid in the control panel. I sweated the question. Once formed, the boss's opinions of people stuck. Dad always stressed the

importance of seeming busy in front of the boss when you were one-on-one with him, and that included quick thinking.

“Barnum & Bailey,” I said, picking the rag from a plastic mare’s stirrup where Crack stopped it in front of me.

“Exactly, but I bet you didn’t know that back in the day they used to cut cost by waterproofing their tents with gasoline? In ‘44, more than a hundred people died as a result. Nostalgia fuels our industry.”

After a while, Crack sent me away to prepare for a show. The breeze-ruffled banners advertised eating contests whose proceeds went to the church. Grasshoppers startled by my footfalls launched themselves at random, sometimes away from my legs and sometimes at them. I stuck my tongue out at Mitch as I passed by his strength tester. He did curls with the mallet while he waited for customers, stopping mid-rep to scowl when he saw me. On the inside of his right calf, tattooed figures mid-coitus scowled as well, so that three sets of eyes watched me go by.

Richie filled a long balloon as I approached his stall. He folded it quickly into a dog and shoved it at my gut.

“Robert, my boy, have a pet. Careful, he isn’t house broken.” I’d had close to a million such pets by that point in my life. I thanked Richie, then wished him a good shift.

Dad sat with his back to a tire on the shady side of the truck. Somewhere near Omaha was his last high. He scratched more than sharpened the tips of his shears, although the rusted bolt connecting the blades hardly allowed them to unhinge. They shrieked across the whetstone in Dad’s jerking hands. He threw the shears and stone at the dirt in frustration, and then hugged himself, trapping his hands in his armpits.

I collected the tools, holding the bag out to one side like a counterweight to help me pull the Carpenter to his feet with my other hand. We walked toward the roofless tent that failed to contain the laughter within, as Widget the Clown wobbled through the tent flap on his unicycle, barely in control.

“You’re up,” he said, regaining his balance and pedaling away backwards toward his spin-art booth.

I made us ready on stage, blowing up the balloon targets. I held Richie’s dog out first for Dad to take a shot. He shook his fingers as if to dry them. When his hand went for the bag on the stool, I shut my eyes. When the screams came as usual, the pop didn’t. A false start, I wondered? The screwdriver had hit less than a centimeter from my head, an arm’s length from the balloon animal. I could have run off stage, faking a bee sting. That was the fantasy playing on the backs of my eyelids during Dad’s shakier shows. I’d shout, “Dad, the EpiPen!” But Boss Crack, the man who could exile us with one word, always watched. My father depended on his niche, and I depended on him.

“Come on, Dad,” I yelled. “I said I wanted my left ear pierced.”

The audience laughed. One girl in the front row kept laughing long after the others had stopped. She had big teeth that made it look like she was perpetually trying to stifle a smile. The shears thudded over my other shoulder before I had a chance to shut my eyes.

“That better, son?” Dad dialed in his aim as he went. I kept watching the girl in the front row, transfixed by her, oblivious to the tools landing all around me. The act ended to applause like always.

Dopeless, he crawled into our castle and vomited immediately. Soon, a crowd of parents gathered, tugged by children. A man in a wheelchair rolled toward me, accompanied by the girl I'd seen at our show. The crowd parted to admit the two into its center. At first, it seemed as if the man had a motorized chair since it moved unaided by his hands, but then I saw the little feet. The man's son, pushing from behind, stood shorter than his seated father.

"He's just a little food sick, folks," I said. "No reason to worry." Mitch shoved himself sideways through a gap in the crowd, accidentally splashing red slushy out of a little girl's cup with his knee. Jim Crack followed behind him.

"We should take him to the doctor," Mitch said, eyeing Dad suspiciously. "See what's really wrong with him."

"We need neither doctors nor police in this town, sir," the man in the wheelchair said. "We'll take him to the church."

"I'm so sorry about this, Mr. Delehanty," Crack said. "As I told you over the phone when you booked our services, I've always been committed to professionalism."

"Don't be sorry," he said. "I'm just glad this didn't hit him until after we got a chance to see him perform." The man in the chair turned his head toward me. "It's so good to see a son working alongside his father."

Two men from the crowd stepped forward to pick Dad up, and they carried him in the rear of the procession led by the man in the chair, who affectionately tapped his daughter on the elbow as he passed her. She stood there, watching me, twirling blond curls while I unpacked. I poured fish into every other cup on the folding table. Checking that the girl hadn't left, I picked up one of the cups and gulped the fish. My efforts to

impress her elicited no change in her expression. She either meant to frown and couldn't or tried to smile, but her lips were already stretched too tautly over her mouth to open wider. Stepping forward, she picked a cup off the table and, to my surprise, swallowed a fish herself without flinching.

"How do you think it dies?" she asked. "Does stomach acid dissolve its skin, or does it suffocate first from not having water to breathe?"

"It doesn't die," I said, trying to surprise her in turn. "It stays in there, eating what you eat, until it gets big and bursts through your belly button."

She tapped her belly.

A little boy stepped up to the game after I finished setting it. He won, as I expected him to. I did my best to talk his mother into the deluxe model upgrade with the bubbling treasure chest and plastic castle, but Dad handled that stuff better than me.

"I'd trust him, Miss Melinda," the girl said, trying to help.

"Thanks anyway, Allie," the mother said. "The studio model is big enough."

I laughed out loud, and all three of them looked sideways at me. The woman led her child away, reminding him that he had just assumed a major responsibility. Sure, pets are fun, she said, but not always. We worked together like that for a while, Allie adding personal touches to my pitch. Saying things like, "This'll go well next to the lava lamp in your room, Sarah," or "Mark, you've always liked animals." She tried so hard to help me I considered mentioning a few times that I didn't have the authority to give her a cut of the profits. In retrospect, I was probably the first boy she'd seen that she hadn't also known in diapers.

I finished bagging two fish for a brother and sister when I noticed Allie gone. Hoping I hadn't missed my chance to show her my juggling, I scanned faces cued at the nearby booths. After a while, though, she tapped me on my shoulder, offering to share her cotton candy.

"To pay you back for sharing your fish with me earlier," she said.

The pink fibers melted like snow when I licked them and evaporated on the way down my throat, making me want another bite to slake my thirst. Saliva mixed with sugar grew viscous in my mouth.

"Where are you from?" she asked, taking the cotton candy back.

"The highway," I told her.

"Cool" was all she said.

Later, when it got too dark to track wayward Ping-Pong balls in the dirt, Allie helped me pack up the fish toss. During the day, our castle's hot vinyl had baked the puddle of vomit so it came off fairly cleanly in three solid pieces. I bled the bag but didn't bother rolling it since we planned to stay through the following night. The church where they kept Dad was really just a reading room with a couple of cots. Dad writhed on one while Allie's father spoke under his breath, ignoring us completely. Allie's brother smiled as he entered the room with a sponge and bucket, patting Dad's head with the former. Finding no way to lend a hand, we left, walking down a narrow strip of road between rows of houses. The cicadas changed pitch in time with each other. Humidity parted like a curtain, brushing against us as we went.

“Is your boss looking to hire anyone?” Allie asked eventually. “Anyone like me?”

I thought for a moment. “What can you do?” I asked.

She winged her elbows and then touched them together behind her back.

“Impressive,” I said, trying it myself and twingeing something in my shoulder. I asked her what else she could do. She said we had to go to her family’s home before she could show me.

People talk about having trouble undoing the bra the first time. Allie’s reminded me of the straps we used to tie down our castle in transit, and so the mechanism unfastened easily with a pinch of my calloused fingers. When I kissed the back of her neck I felt the little hairs against my lips that were too fine to see. Reaching under her arms to grab her palm-sized breasts, I pulled her against me and buried my face in her shoulder, gnawing it a little before taking my mouth away. The tattoo on the inside of Mitch’s right calf taught me what to expect of sex, although I wished it were more detailed, included diagrams, an FAQ. Ultimately, Allie jolted forward when I breached the wrong orifice by accident, but she corrected me, turning around and lying down to give me better access.

I awoke the following morning next to her, having fallen asleep only after sitting up with my back against the headboard. A speck of sun traveled slowly across Allie’s bedroom. Somewhere on the fair grounds, Boss Crack walked, I knew, on stilts to survey which stalls still needed setting. Dad’s sickness, although sufficient to keep us off stage, didn’t absolve us from not running the inflatable bounce castle two days in a row. Allie

knew where to find me, I figured, and so I left her sleeping to attend to work, expecting to see her again in a couple hours.

Noon came and went. I started scanning the crowd, neglecting the fish toss, shoving the studio model at winners without a word to coax them into an upgrade. Near dusk, Dad returned with the man pushed by his son. Allie wasn't with them.

"Thanks for everything, Mr. Delehanty," Dad said, motioning for me to start bleeding the bag and packing the fish toss. "All that praying must have chased the sickness right outta me."

I wanted to run back to Allie's house to find her but couldn't think of what to tell my dad.

"Robert, what are you doing?" Dad said.

Noticing the sandbag in my arms, I dropped it on the ground and pulled it open to drain. I'd lost track for a second of whether we were on our way to or from this town.

"Come on, Robert. You know we don't need the extra weight."

That's what Allie would have been. I'm not sure why she never came to see me off. Maybe she reached the same conclusion I did: that sequels always underperform their originals. In the truck, Dad waved through the window while we backed out of our lot.

"The great thing about getting sober," he said, as if I asked, "is that when you finally do get high, it's like the first time again."

That year, I met many Allies and Annes and Joanns. In time, I could lure them deftly to our castle. My pitch got better the way any barker's does. Dad's got worse, the

way any junkie's does. The scabs he scratched into his face quit healing. He started breaking his own rules, taking hits in the passenger seat after picking up, teaching me to drive while he found a vein. We showed up to shows later and later. When we were there on time, the Carpenter's condition occasionally prevented us from performing and often resulted in what he jokingly called his *bouncy castle omelets*. Crack's patience wore thin.

I remember the mist at morning when our caravan descended on an elementary school. Close by but unseen, shovels plunged the playground where Boss Crack awaited our arrival. We grabbed the empty bags from the back of the truck and ran to join the group. Dad fell to his knees mid-stride, vomiting.

"Come on, Dad," I said. "Exhaust is just what generators make." He didn't acknowledge me except to vomit again. I pulled him up, but when we reached the others, the mist couldn't hide his state.

"I don't believe this," Crack said. "Is this a new shtick or something? Round of applause, folks. For his final act, the Carpenter will transform himself into the Regurgitator. Go ahead—clap!" he yelled.

Dozens of shovels hit the ground in unison, and lackluster applause echoed off the nearby school building's brick façade.

"Am I correct in assuming you will not be performing an hour from now?"

I nodded my head to confirm the boss's assumption.

"Once more," he said, "and you're gone."

Mitch retrieved his shovel, standing up again with his tongue sticking out at me. Everyone knew what gone meant. The last guy who got gone, Shep, figured out how to

cut his load time in half by using a winch to drag the climbing wall onto the truck bed, instead of taking it apart first. He ended up breaking it, but Crack managed to hide his anger until Shep slept. With the aid of Mitch and my father, they dragged Shep out of the RV in his underwear and marooned him on a gravel strip that separated two oceans of corn.

We went back to shoveling while Dad crawled into the tube slide. The mist unveiled our progress as we hefted the last full bags to the trucks. Swings hung too high for children to reach them then, after we dug up the bed of woodchips. The merry-go-round flashed like a circular blade at my waist when I spun it.

About a month after that, word came down that Jim Crack had booked us again at the county fair where I met Allie. I started planning a reunion, thinking of things to say, imagining scenarios, practicing my juggling. Dad brooded when he heard the news about going back, maybe because the county was a dry area. He mentioned that he couldn't understand why I was so excited, but at a gas station en route, he came around to the idea when he met a man in the restroom willing to deal.

Later that day, we put on the best show ever. Maybe the anticipation of his first high following a recent period of forced abstinence made Dad more eager to impress. He plugged the narrow gap between my knees. I released two helium balloons, while Dad burst them both at once with two whooshing wire strippers. Neglecting the tools that started to quill our backstop, I watched the crowd. Tools hit all around me, but I didn't close my eyes once.

Allie never showed.

We unrolled the castle and Dad prepared for bed, passing out with the needle still stuck in his arm. I crawled inside to retrieve the needle, then waited by the entrance for a line to form. Customers stayed in the tent, as much to avoid the gusting wind as to watch Mitch fold frying pans like burritos. Flapping banners advertised eating contests too chilly to sit still for. Clouds massed on the horizon, blocking the rising sun. Vinyl against my back felt cold at first but warmed quickly with trapped body heat.

About the time that I gave up on ever seeing Allie again, she and her father came walking side by side. I saw her younger brother from a distance this time, his head poking up from behind the chair he pushed. As Allie drew closer, I noticed that she'd straightened her hair. Her father held a baby in his lap, another one of many children, I assumed, though I wondered for a second how a man in a wheelchair was still having children. He spoke first, to ask after my father.

"You probably don't remember me," he started. "But we met briefly last year."

"Oh, sure, Mr. Delehanty," I said. "You helped my dad get rid of that stomach bug." I looked at Allie. Her breasts were definitely bigger. For the first time, I couldn't see her teeth. Either she'd gotten braces or learned how to frown. "How're you folks?"

"Fine, I just wanted to look in on" Mr. Delehanty trailed off. "Is that your father in the castle?"

"Yes, sir, it is. We need him in there to plug up a hole—to keep the castle from deflating. He can also watch your kids a lot better from in there."

"But he's sleeping," Delehanty said. "Although I guess there really aren't very many kids about right now. Which reminds me, can my son Jeremy come around after his chores and bounce for a while?"

I said, "Of course," and the boy behind his father pumped his fist in excitement.

The two turned to leave when Allie asked if she could walk around the fair by herself for a moment. Mr. Delehanty repositioned the gurgling baby on his lap to free one of his arms. He grabbed Allie by the elbow, warning her that she'd better be at the church in eight minutes. When his hand came away, I saw the red lines on her pale skin.

"You want a fish?" I asked Allie, after her father was out of earshot. She just looked at me, not saying anything. All the time I spent preparing for that moment and that's the best I could come up with.

"I see you've got a new younger sister," I said, finally. Allie sighed.

"It's my daughter," she said. "Yours too."

I staggered back a step, as if that might help me reshuffle the words Allie had just spoken into a cogent order. "Daughter" sounded only vaguely familiar in my confusion.

"What?" I looked at the baby. She had the same beak nose as my father had, that he stared down like a rifle-site when he took aim. The same nose I have.

"Don't play dumb. You know what."

I felt conflicted. I wanted to run, but looking at Allie, I wasn't sure I ever wanted to leave. After the shock, I thought nervously about what a child would mean. The bigger it gets, the more it will weigh. The more it weighs, the harder it will be to keep. When you live on the road, every pound has to have a purpose. On the other hand, I had been only a couple years older than the baby when Dad taught me to stand still while holding a balloon. With a daughter to replace me, I could practice juggling. I'd move from pins to fire, followed by chainsaws. Maybe work my way up to Barnum & Bailey, though even then I could sense how farfetched that dream was. Allie, working alongside

me as my protégé, could practice her contortion routine on the road until she made it show ready. I imagined her sleeping, curled up in a suitcase between my feet as we went down the highway. The baby could sleep on my lap.

“I’ll talk to the boss,” I said. Allie mouthed the word *what* and shook her head.

“I mean I’ll get you a job, Allie. Boss Crack can start you off as a ticket girl or something.” I tried to think of other couples in Crack’s crew to cite as precedents, but there weren’t any other couples or even families. Not even another father-and-son team besides me and Dad.

“I’m from this town,” Allie said, kicking up dirt for a gust to scatter. “Now that I’m a mother, I have to die here. That’s how it works. That’s what’s best for the child.”

A little girl climbed into the castle with her mud-caked shoes still on, but I said nothing to stop her. She crouched before each jump, then landed on where she had launched.

“But what can I do here?” I asked, after a while.

Allie had to leave before we could think of something. We made plans to meet again at shift’s end. Boss Crack walked the grounds on his stilts, pointing at the sky as if commanding the clouds to part. A pile of used napkins uncoiled in a gust and slithered between my feet. I watched Allie disappear around the Haunted Trailer attraction, on her way toward the rows of houses surrounding the church.

Imagining my life beyond the tarpaulin walls of the fair took work. Dad and I could still do our routine here, I thought, and make a living that way. Soon, though, people would get bored. Subtract novelty, and the Carpenter produced nothing. Besides, he depended on his niche, and he depended on me, too. What might his show look like

without someone to stand downrange and hold the targets? The power to spare is only significant when complemented by the potential to kill. What might Dad look like without the act? Just a common junkie. Even I could see that my father was heading for a fall. Each fix fed his hunger but wasted his body. No matter what, I realized, someone had to suffer for my choices.

Business started picking up. Jeremy, Allie's younger brother, stood at the threshold waiting for express permission to enter, and when I gave it, he dove through the castle's Velcro flap. Shrieking with laughter, he started throwing himself at the walls, almost landing on Dad a couple times.

"Hey, Jeremy," I said, motioning him to bounce closer. His hair landed after his body, whipping the tops of his ears. "Your sister—what's it like living with her? Is she nice to you?"

"Allie's real nice, and she tarnished the family name through her sinful ways," he said smiling.

"That's not nice," I said.

"By being a whore," he continued. "A whore is someone who has a baby before getting married, did you know?"

I knew then that even if I stayed with Allie, I could never fix anything. At best, we'd weather the storm. The wind tugged my hair back. I turned to look at the horizon, knowing how quickly problems catch up when you quit running.

The man who spun me around by the shoulder held a small boy in his arms crying for his mommy.

“Where’s the Tilt-A-Whirl?” he screamed. “Someone told me I couldn’t miss it.”

Boss Crack peeked over the backboards of the Free-Throw-King, twirling his finger like a propeller over his head until I confirmed with a half-nod that I’d seen him. He took three strides toward the Ferris Wheel, vanishing from view behind it.

“The Tilt-A-Whirl *was* over here by the bouncy castle,” I said. “But the boss decided, for aesthetic purposes, that he liked it better by the Gravitron.”

The man hurried away. The fair was ending, and for once I empathized with the tantrum-throwers that kept us waiting when all I wanted to do was pack and get the place behind me. It was time to say goodbye, but I could barely slap Dad awake. Jeremy stood still, watching.

“Five more minutes,” Dad whined, his tongue fumbling the words.

I dragged him out by the legs, as I had so many screaming children that just didn’t know when to leave.

“Come on, Dad,” I said. “We have to do a show.”

I kicked his feet until he opened his eyes again, then ran to the truck to retrieve the bag of tools. No matter what I decided to do, Dad had to get down the road. A place where names didn’t matter as much. Still, the Carpenter’s fix could mean my undoing, I thought, as I rummaged behind the seat, imagining the heavy and sharp tools I handled there all sheathed in my chest.

Suddenly, a gust of wind slammed the truck’s door so hard it shattered the window. I felt lucky at first that my leg hadn’t gotten caught. After getting out, though, I noticed the vacant rectangle of matted grass where our castle had pulled up its own stakes and taken off. It twirled near a cloud. Dad lay on the ground blinking. Lightning flashed

like a silver shiv across the sky, shocking me back in my step. Next time I saw the castle, it hit the earth twenty yards away and clumsily settled in a heap, parts still puffed with air. A woman nearby bent to see better through the castle's mesh walls, then stood straight and screamed. Jeremy was still inside.

“Dad,” I yelled, sliding in the grass. “Get up.” He blinked, too groggy yet to move anything but his eyelids. I couldn't budge him. Two more people had already gathered around the bounce castle. One tried his knife on the thickly bunched vinyl to get at Jeremy while the other clasped his hands over his bald spot.

“He's gone,” I heard the man shout faintly over the distance between us. The fair ground in front of me picked up speed. Widget raced by on his unicycle at full tilt with a sack under each arm: one for washers and the other for rapid links. A sedan beeped away, the windows crowded by pressed faces.

I saw Allie pushing her father, with our daughter in his lap, across the field. From far off, their pace seemed gradual, instantly at odds with their hurried demeanor, as if Allie waded in deep snow.

A stranger toed Dad in the ribs, while another picked through woodchips strewn by one of the bags our castle had whipped open.

“This guy's on drugs,” said the former, holding up a cellophane-wrapped ball of heroin tar. He and the other man lifted my father to his feet. I clung to him, trying to weigh him down. A ways off, Mr. Delehanty rocked himself out of his wheelchair, barely giving Allie enough time to grab our daughter off his lap, and tried to worm into the folds of the castle.

“Get him too, Frank,” said one of the men holding my father to yet another man just then running over to join the commotion.

The man named Frank picked me up by my hair. The pain made me knee his groin, and so he kicked me in mine while I rolled on the ground. Dad, coming to his senses, took his captors by surprise and stumbled away from them toward the truck. He reached through the window, then swatted the air over his shoulder, tacking Frank’s ear to his head with a hypodermic needle.

“That was supposed to be a Phillip’s head, you fucker,” my father said while his pursuers wrestled him down. “Don’t touch my kid.”

Frank winced as he pulled out the needle. Then, taking a gun from the bib of his overalls, he pressed it carefully against my father’s temple and, as I started screaming, fired. The ground turned muddy by his head.

I was hurt, still writhing on the ground, in fetal position. That’s why I couldn’t help. Even if I had caught up to Frank in time, I wouldn’t have been able to fight off everyone at once.

He had to get up, I told myself. I really half-expected him to. So many years of watching him teeter, I guess, of watching him puke his brains out and then stand up to joke about it before doing another show. Fans called him the Carpenter, and although he may seem like a makeshift façade held together with one zip-tie, one trick, one addiction, he was also a great father.

Almost out of instinct, I ran for the truck to try to get away. I groped for the keys and found shears. Frank snatched them before dragging me off the seat, then held them to my neck.

“Stop,” Mr. Delehanty said. Onlookers took turns pushing the chair as he struggled by them, his hands bloody at the wheels. Allie, who held our daughter, approached as well.

“Is it true?” he asked. “You did this to Allie? Now you want forgiveness?”

“He said he’d stay, Dad,” Allie cried. “He’s not one of them anymore.”

I looked over the crowd to see the Ferris Wheel gone. Foil bags trafficked the fairground like tumble weeds. Two trucks churned dust toward the highway with top-heavy loads.

“His father killed my son through debauchery and this boy stole my daughter’s innocence through lust.” He looked from one bloody hand to the other, then slammed both on his thighs. “And still, I must forgive him, if he asks.”

I sat there thinking about it. Without Dad I no longer had a reason for leaving. Only he had known where Crack’s carnival was headed next. Why not stay with Allie and my daughter?

“Well?” Mr. Delehanty asked.

Looking at the crowd, I imagined life as one of them. Allie wanted me to stay even though she hardly knew me. That’s always how it was at first. Then, after a little time passes, the same one who has clapped and cheered can’t get rid of you fast enough. I was a curiosity, a spectacle. The trick isn’t knowing where to go; it’s knowing when to leave. My father taught me that you can’t abandon a memory the way you can a person.

“I forgive you for killing my father,” I said. Mr. Delehanty nodded to Frank, who sheared my ring finger. It took him the strength of both of his hands to make it through the bone. Blood spurted at first but once he’d made it all the way through, it slowed to a

trickle. I squeezed the nub until it only dripped. The rest of my finger lay on the ground, covered in dust. A burning sensation spread from the cut in both directions confused, overshooting the sudden dead-end as if I could feel the wind's pain. To dull it, I wished I had some of my father's drugs; pretty sure I'd be able to figure out how to inject them after all the years of watching him. Wrapping the slimy, red nub with my shirt, I scrambled to the truck as the crowd formed a channel for me.

“Good luck explaining that,” Mr. Delehanty said, “to the next woman you trick. Whenever you do, I want you to remember this town.”

But you know what? They remember me more. No one can forget a spectacle like that. The myth of me, no matter how well they spin it for my daughter, ultimately must tell of opportunities just over the horizon. A fresh start. I waved goodbye to the crowd through the windshield, flaunting the missing finger, numbness already starting to creep down from the phantom tip to replace pain. My daughter slept so I patted the truck's horn to wake her as I rolled toward the highway, passing the castle—fully deflated at last except for a little mound near the middle.

When she does leave home, it will be to find her father.

Seedy

Blue-tipped spires grow taller over the tops of houses. The click and hum of Mike's rollerblades on the pavement follow him down one of Orlando's ambiguous hills until it dead ends unexpectedly in a cul-de-sac. Wheel-melting heat makes the distance back up the road wavy, like a funhouse mirror reflecting endless rows of ranch-style homes. Lizards brown in shady flowerbeds. Hydrangeas bloom a neon blue only attainable with acidic fertilizers and the crepe myrtle smells of lemon cleaning solution. Mike wishes he had a map but then remembers the phone in his pocket and wonders if its owner thought to have the Internet service disconnected yet.

The phone had come from The Haunted Mansion at Disney World, where Mike's friends swipe things from tourists in the dark. Play the game by anticipating the scares, then seize on that instant of distraction to prod the pockets of the people sitting ahead for whatever falls out. The more difficult the item is to steal, the more points it's worth. Rory usually wins. He's stolen hearing aids and glasses right off a person's head. Even if Mike's friends get caught, they say they can always retreat into the smoke-filled backdrop of plastic tombstones, past the spring-loaded skeleton near the emergency exit. So they say. Mike has never been to Disney World. His mother works at the park but forbids him from going. Strange how working someplace, even the most fun place in the world, ruins it forever. That's why she always says that she likes to keep work and fun separate.

When the phone powers on, Mike sees that it still has Internet. He asks it timidly for the directions to Pawnamerica, near Disney World, knowing how stupid the question would sound to any of his friends, who spend entire summers at the park. Most children

in Mike's neighborhood spend whatever free time they have in the park because most parents work there. On the phone's screen, a red line appears to guide Mike through the tangled maze of streets, but then quickly changes its mind. Mike wonders if one of the other ways he might have gone is blocked. He thinks of satellites tracking his movement like an orbiting mother.

The GPS reminds Mike of an ant farm his mother's boyfriend, Robert, once gave him as a gift. Mike saw the box under his mother's bed days before Robert's return from a business trip and knew she had gotten it for Robert to give to him. It didn't make a difference to Mike at that age—he just wanted the toy. And, to Robert's credit, he did help set it up. Together, they watched the ants scribble shapes in the sand like illegible cursive. They flicked the Plexiglass window, collapsing tunnels and laughing and at the ants they buried.

It's a Small World After All starts playing, and Mike drops the vibrating phone in surprise. It lands face up on the pavement so Mike can see that someone named Tom just texted the owner of the phone, telling him to meet by The Haunted Mansion. The fall had put a few scratches in the phone's plastic. Mike tries to rub them off, then blows grit from the power jack. He assures himself that the phone only has to sell for a hundred dollars to afford a pass through Disney World's front gates. After pocketing it, Mike lunges up the road, tasting salt from the sweat channeling in the wrinkles of his grimace.

Mike remembers the first time he asked his mother if he could go to Disney World.

"Of course not," she said back then, scouring her lips with a paper napkin until it pilled. "If you go to the park, you might not leave again. Take it from me. I started

working there the year you were born. I thought it was just going to be for a little while.”

“What do you do there?” Mike asked. “Why do you hate it?”

He had just returned from his first day at kindergarten, where his classmates chose the batting lineup for kickball based on whose parents held the better jobs. Of course, the fact that Mike had only one parent instead of two put him at a disadvantage instantly. All she would ever say about Mike’s father was that he “freelanced,” whatever that meant, and so, because he couldn’t stay in one place long enough to be a proper father, he shouldn’t even try. Mike’s mother didn’t seem bothered by this arrangement—just business-like.

“Your mom,” Robert interrupted, “she works at the bank.” Robert laughed a few globs of mashed potatoes back onto his dish.

Mike didn’t get the joke. “They’ve got banks at Disney World?” Mike asked, disappointed that of all the jobs at Disney, his mother seemed to have the most boring. He knew his friends would think so. Rory, who batted third, always talked about how his mother let him cut her line at Splash Mountain. At least Blake’s mom spun cotton candy. Mike imagined his own mother stacking bills in the tower stronghold.

“Yeah.” Robert’s plate squeaked with the stab of a fork. “Like if Cinderella wants to start a family or something, she’d see Evelyn for a loan.” Mike’s mother scowled at him.

“Sure, it’s got a bank,” she said. “Disney World is like a city, and cities need banks. It’s plenty boring, but it pays a lot better than a fun job, which is why one day

you'll go to college and your friends will get so fat on corndogs that they can't fit through the turnstiles.

Mike watched an ant scuttle across the bottom shelf and then into the poison-baited plastic trapbox his mother swaps out weekly, even though the wrapper says they last a month: *Slow acting poison encourages ants to carry the bait back to their nest and leave pheromone trails, leading other ants to the source.*

One block Mike skates down has *For Sale* signs on every lot. They rush past on either side as flashes of red and white. Spires spear clouds in the distance. Suddenly, suburban sprawl feeds into a desert of parking lots and strip malls. This is a part of Disney World that shouldn't exist. Mickey Mouse shouldn't need TVs and toilet paper, so they keep this pocket hidden near employee parking and the back exit to the park where employees have to walk after receiving their pay. Mike's friends call it Park Place.

The woman's nude selfies were all cropped to look headless. "But the head was attached to her body," Rory said, "when I stole the phone from her purse." After Mike won the pot, Rory remembered who the woman on the phone had reminded him of. "She looked like your mom, Mike."

Rory laughed. Mike thought it was a bad joke. Rory's desperate attempt to mar the phone before surrendering it didn't bother Mike at first, but what happened afterward tormented him. Tom and Freddy joined Rory, talking about how much they *jacked it to* Mike's mother.

"I didn't know your mother was a whore," Freddy said.

“Maybe Mikey’s the bastard of one of Evelyn’s johns,” Tom offered, and the three of them laughed their heads off.

Mike tried to go along with the joke, smiling. But it made him feel ashamed and suddenly furious. Mike wonders why his mother never spoke about his father. Were his friends right? Could this be the reason? Surely not. But still. Did she not like to talk about his father because she wasn’t sure who he was?

“Mikey the Bastard, Mikey the Bastard,” Rory chanted, and then Tom and Freddy joined in.

Poker ended when Mike kicked the green-felted table, sending sodas splashing from the built-in cup holders. Freddy’s father, who had heard the boys fighting, descended the stairs. He glared at Mike like he’d just trampled the American flag in mud. Mike had always envied Freddy for having a father who threw the switch to start the cars rolling at The Haunted Mansion—the man who, seeing his table overturned, raised an arm sleeved by a schematic of tattoos to point the way out for Mike.

A black and white cop car tests its sirens. Mike jams the phone into his pocket. A man wearing newspaper slinks out of a dumpster, rubs his loose cheeks, and limps down the alley behind the O.T.B. Lounge. The police turn to Mike, discussing silently through the windshield. Not wanting to give them a chance to decide Mike is suspicious, he skates after the homeless man.

Mike sidesteps the alley’s shiny puddles of broken glass, hopping a little to pick a foil wrapper out of his wheels. Cracked bumper cars line the dirt between the chain-link fence and building on the other side. Although the façade might suggest a royal ballroom, the beige paint at the back stops abruptly in a jagged line near the air-

conditioning unit. Frayed fins lie scattered as if an army had once tried to capture Disney World by this wall, only to leave their dismembered weapons like warnings.

Emerging from behind the O.T.B. Lounge, Mike finds himself in the parking lot of a Dollar Tree. According to a sign, the strip mall across the street consists of a Lucky Massage Parlor, some business called Fertile Grounds, and a Pawnamerica, where the GPS's red vein ends. A car alarm comes on somewhere close by, and another answers the mating call with its own, higher-pitched version in the distance. The sewer grate on the curb exhales cool air. Mike flaps his shirt with the stale smell, letting it dry the dark swaths under his arms. As he draws near to the pawnshop's window, he sees assorted cameras within, riding a fleet of motorized wheelchairs while the manikin models an undeveloped face. From around the side of the building, a woman—could it be his mother?—is dressed all in white. She knees her plastic bag accidentally when she hurries into the door next to the one that would have taken her into the pawnshop. Mike has never seen his mother dress this way before; she always left the house in a navy blue pantsuit no matter how hot the morning. Is she getting a massage during her lunch break? Mike intends to find out.

He stumbles through the door once his mother's through, struggling to skate across the foyer's thick carpet. The massage parlor's threshold has bars on it, a kind of cage, as if the man inside might escape. He points at Mike.

“You're a long way from Disney World.”

A woman, whose skirt rides up to reveal her underwear, scurries into view. With the deepest voice Mike can force from his stomach, he approaches the cage and asks, “Can I come in?”

The man kneels in front of his stool, laughing and coughing and shoving the collar of his shirt under his sunglasses to dry his eyes.

“How about it, Jasmine?” the man says. “You wanna give the kid a happy ending?”

Blood rushes to Mike’s face. He tries to laugh along with the grownups, but at what he isn’t sure.

Mike’s mother’s voice echoes from the stairwell across the foyer, which he didn’t notice at first: “I just got back. Give me a minute.”

If she isn’t getting a massage, then what has brought her so far from the park? Mike clicks down the stairs, passing a man in a Mickey Mouse costume going the other way. His head rests under his left arm, while, with his right index, he scratches out a check, trying to read the amount. When the man sees Mike, he drops the slip into his mask and then throws it over the little bearded node between his bulky shoulders.

“What the hell you looking at, kid?”

He sidles past Mike, practically riding the banister. At the landing in the foyer, he turns, wearing a smile that would rip a man’s cheeks. He waves slowly until he disappears from view behind the ceiling’s pitch.

Rory has spoken of Disney World’s labyrinth of tunnels that exist beneath the park so that costumed characters can teleport to the places they are most needed. Mike suspects he’s found his mother’s special entrance to the park that concessions workers like Rory’s father probably don’t even know exist. At the bottom of the stairs, Mike notices a small tray on the floor full of some quicksand concoction. He pushes the double doors and finds a waiting room on the other side. Another Mickey Mouse sits in

the corner jiggling his knees next to a potted plant, whose glossy leaves reflect the fluorescent lighting. Mufasa does a crossword puzzle and then, noticing a fly, kills it with a whip of his lion's tail. Tarzan lies sprawled across three seats, picking pretzels out of his oversized belly button and then feeding them to himself under the chin of his mask. He chews with locked jaws. Near a desk sits Beauty's Beast, but just the shell of him. Mike can see down through his neck that the man inside is missing, like something sprung from a chrysalis. Mike wonders if the man might still be in the room, moving behind the ceiling's foam panels.

A toilet flushes, and a man—perhaps the one who belongs in the Beast costume— walks through a doorway, wearing boxers and a white T-shirt stained yellow at the pits. He puts a white cup on the desk.

“Hey, I'm finished here,” he says. Then he notices Mike. The man swings his hands together in front of himself. “Woops. Sorry, kid. The suit won't fit in the bathroom.”

“Where am I?” Mike asks. He looks at the barely dressed man and thinks of what his friends said about his mother. “Is this a whorehouse?”

“Yikes.” The man rubs his chin. “Um, yeah actually. I'm the whore.”

He points to a laminated sheet on the corkboard instructing new visitors of *Fertile Grounds Sperm Donor Clinic* to check-in with the receptionist. Suddenly, Mike understands the kind of banker his mother is. He can sense it swimming in the man's white cup on the desk: sperm. His mother is a sperm banker. Ms. Fishman had taught him during Health, to the class's muted laughter, that sperm banks were for mothers who had trouble “conceiving.” Mike feels sperm crawling on his skin, sees sperm riding the

air like dust mites. A door slams faintly, perhaps upstairs, but Mike crouches by reflex, ready to dive and roll if someone starts blind-firing sperm from around the corner.

Mike's mother enters the room from an adjoining area behind a row of filing cabinets, dressed all in white except for a scarlet plus sign over her left breast. Mike inhales, but the oxygen content seems lower at this level. Several lungfuls fail to restore his breath. The clipboard falls from Mike's mother's hands. She stares at her son, then jolts forward in surprise when the clipboard clatters on the desk.

"Hey," the man in his boxers says, "they told me at the massage parlor upstairs to tell you that they sent me." He rubs his chin when Mike's mother doesn't seem to notice him, so fixated is she on Mike. "They also said there might be a ten-dollar rebate involved if I do, which I just did."

"What are you doing here?" his mother asks Mike, her eyebrows furrowed in astonishment and—he can't quite tell—anger. He feels suddenly afraid of her.

"I'll leave," Mike says, trying not to look in his mother's eyes.

"No," she says, stamping her heel. "No, you won't."

"I'll wait for you outside then."

Mike wonders why his mother isn't shouting yet. He hopes she will wait at least until they get away from the room of onlookers. The stairwell will probably muddle her shouting enough so neither the patrons of the massage parlor nor the sperm bank will hear.

"Hey, what is this? Bring-your-kid-to-work day?" The man in his boxers takes the check Mike's mother has cut him off the clipboard and then gets back into his costume.

She ignores the man and says quietly, “Mike, this is a seedy neighborhood.”

Pulling a seat closer to her desk, she motions for Mike to sit. “Wait here.”

She then reaches for the cup and carries it into the adjoining space beyond the reception area. Mike wonders if the shouting will start once she returns or if she will wait until the car doors shut behind them after her shift’s over. He hopes the latter, noticing Mickey Mouse’s perked ears like satellite dishes. Mufasa stares through his mouth. They have probably all been staring for some time now. If Mike had a mask too, he could better fight the urge to escape. He and everyone else in the room could sit and stare, none of them really seeing.

Mike studies pamphlets on the desk to keep from acknowledging the costumed audience. When his mother returns to her desk, Mike pretends not to notice her. She picks up a white plastic bag and drops it on the desk in front of Mike.

“Swap these with the ones in the bathroom,” she says, instead of yelling.

“What?” he asks. He’s not sure what she wants him to do.

“If you’re here, you might as well help out,” she says. “Put these magazines in the bathroom and bring the other ones out.”

Mike stands and instantly trips on the roller blades he has forgotten he is wearing, getting up gradually as he scurries across the floor.

On a changing table in the bathroom sits a library of magazines neatly stacked and alphabetized with the *Penthouses* on top of the *Playboys*. Mike knows this is his mother’s touch. At home, forgetting to use a coaster is a groundable offense. He looks in the bag and, seeing more magazines, wonders why the ones on the table need swapping. He flips one open. Someone has torn out and stolen most of the bodies so that

only the surprised heads remain between the sticky pages. After putting the old magazines in the bag and alphabetizing the new ones the way his mother seems to like them, Mike hears *It's a Small World After All* from his pocket—the phone he won from Rory. He thinks of what his friends will say if they ever find out about Mike's mother. Insisting that there is no sex involved in a sperm banker's work will only worsen their taunts. The exchange of seed for money makes his mother's work shameful, no matter who gets the money.

“I just saw your mom yesterday, Mikey,” Rory will say. “She wanted it so bad she paid *me*.”

Mike drops the phone into the bag with the used-up magazines. He pounds on the soap dispenser until his palm is cupped with pink liquid, then turns the sink as hot as it will go to scald the germs.

When Mike opens the door, he sees his mother at her desk on the phone. Tarzan, like the Beast before him, is a hollow shell slumped forward in his chair. Another man—the suit's occupant—in his underwear and T-shirt hurries past Mike into the bathroom. Mike sits behind the desk and, after a while, the man walks back into the waiting area holding a white cup. He sets it down in front of Evelyn, who raises a finger to ask for a second to finish her call. The man stares at Mike, sizing him up. Without a clear sense of purpose, Mike knows he will not last the hours until closing.

“Finished already, sir? I'll take care of that for you.” Mike feels as though he is looking down from the security camera in the corner of the room. “I'm an apprentice.”

The Mickey Mouse across the room slaps his knees, then stands. “You're sick, Lady. This is no place for children,” he says before leaving through the double doors.

“Oh, Mike,” his mother says breathlessly, raking her bottom lip with her teeth until blood appears. “Just put that on the counter back there.”

Around the filing cabinets, Mike finds a whirring crockpot-looking thing next to a rack of vials. A sign over them reads: *Remember to sterilize test tubes before sperm washing*. Mike wonders what *clean* sperm looks like, but his imagination only offers an empty cup.

Back behind the desk, he watches Tarzan wriggle into his costume. Mufasa stands and approaches the desk. As he does, he removes his mask to reveal shoulder-length blond hair, and Mike realizes there is actually a woman inside the costume. She sets the mask down on the desk to sign some forms. Afterwards, she and Mike’s mother go around the cabinets, where a door shuts behind receding footsteps. Mike turns the mask that Mufasa left on the desk in a safer direction, and then he hears her scream from another room. What has his mother done to her? Mike is fairly sure there is no sex involved in a sperm banker’s work.

Later, the woman returns to retrieve her mask, then leaves. Without looking at Mike, his mother walks in, having already changed out of her white nurse’s costume and into her pantsuit. “Let’s go,” she says.

They walk up the stairs in silence, passing the man behind the bars of the massage parlor. He sits slouched on his stool now and gives Mike an abrupt, complicit nod, as if he is a regular the bouncer has come to expect at this hour.

“No jokes today, Joe,” his mother says.

“I was just gonna say, see you next time” he snickers, shaking his head.

Evelyn and Mike walk to her sedan in the parking lot. Surprisingly, the blacktop still gives off heat now that the sun has dipped behind Disney World's tallest spire. Once the car doors seal them in with the humidity and seatbelt tips hot enough to brand, his mother throws her work clothes over her shoulder into the backseat. Mike notices the nametag on her shirt reads *Mary*, and asks why, desperate to prolong the onset of his mother's fury, which she has successfully hidden while in public but will surely now unleash.

"I don't want clients knowing anything about me," she says, but then she seems to ponder for a moment. "Usually, I mean." Mike wonders under what circumstances she would share anything about herself with one of her seedy clients.

"Who knows?" Mike's thoughts go to his friends. How many of their parents know his mother's secret identity?

"Robert knows," she says.

"That's different," Mike starts, because Robert is his mother's boyfriend, not one of her clients.

"He came in one day, but unlike the others, he tried to talk to me. Not the usual 'Can you lend me a hand, nurse?' When he looked at me, I felt like he was seeing the real me, not just my uniform. He seemed smart, nice, good looking: he had all the traits I was looking for. All the traits I wanted to give to you."

Rory had been right. Mike was the bastard child of one of his mother's clients.

"But why? Why with a stranger?" Mike opens the sun visor's mirror and sees his own face. Any traces of Robert must be hidden deep underneath the skin.

“Most mothers choose a husband,” she continues. She’s not mad anymore. “Then, based on that decision, a child is born. When I saw the opportunity to give you a childhood free of the adult stress that marriage adds, I thought I was being pragmatic. I never planned on seeing Robert again, but once you came along, it was like he was already a part of me. I fought the urge to track him down through his files for as long as I could.”

Mike wonders if artificial insemination hurts, and if that’s why Mufasa had screamed.

“What about Robert? Is he my dad now, or is he still your boyfriend?”

“I don’t know.” She takes her eyes off the busy main drag of Park Place for what seems like a long minute to look at Mike. “If you tell him about today,” she continues, “he’ll know that you know. It *will* change things between you.” She exhales. Her eyelids are purple and swollen like a rotten cut. She looks back to the road. “I’m sorry, Mike. I thought I could keep business and fun separate.”

“Business,” Mike mutters to himself. That’s what he is. If Robert is fun, then Mike’s entire existence is just work that his mother meticulously tried and failed to keep from ruining what she truly enjoys.

Traffic along Park Place crawls through low hanging clouds of exhaust. Everyone goes the same way at rush hour. Since noon, when he first confronted his mother at the sperm bank, Mike has dreaded this ride, but now he wishes the traffic would stop, thus dragging it out indefinitely. He needs time to think of what he will say to Robert, and how he will face him in light of his mother’s news.

“Well,” Mike says. “Should I tell him?”

“That’s your decision,” she says. “Trying to spare you from it has only made things worse.”

Now Mike realizes that the punishment he has awaited all day has finally come.

They arrive home to find Robert kneeling in the garden out front, greeting Mike and his mother with a quarter-wave before returning to the mound of dirt he’s massaging. She gets out of the car and walks casually up the driveway and into the house to start dinner. Mike walks over to Robert, whose tool flashes with the orange haze of the horizon before he plunges it into the earth.

“It’s a terrible time for this,” he says, his back still to Mike and his hands still busy with dirt. “I’ll be lucky if these seeds even take. It’s late in the season, but they were on sale, so fuck it, right?”

Despite the sale, he rations the seeds one per hole, burying only three and leaving the rest of the bag unused. Mike notices, for the first time, that the rest of the garden is similarly arranged: three rose bushes, three trellises hung with passion vine, three ceramic bunnies for lawn ornaments nestled among newly surfaced stemmy shoots.

“Why plant everything in threes, Robert?”

“Well,” he answers, “I read somewhere that threes seem natural. Like the wind had planted the seeds and not a person.”

Robert deadheads the marigolds with a few screeching repetitions on his rusty sheers. Fireworks start to pop over Disney World, as they do each night, right on schedule, quieting the lull of cicadas. Mike imagines ants in the soil rushing down to air-locked cells to escape the approaching, magnesium storm. He looks up and down the

block, at all the identical homes in their neighborhood that, Mike knows, contain three bedrooms each, although his mother uses their third bedroom for storage. The world is built for families, Mike realizes, and no one can change that. In the distance, he hears *It's a Small World After All* until the wind shifts.

“What are you planting, Dad?” Mike asks.

Poachers

Candy stripe gates cut the road. Through the windshield, a coal train clacks past Michelle and her mother. Gravel ballast furrowed between weathered railroad ties reminds Michelle of receding gums. The two slide off the hot leather in the cab of the Ford and meet by the tailgate, where they can feel the breeze better.

“Ma, you mind if I bum a cigarette? I’ll pay you back when we get to the gas station.” Michelle hops onto the downed tailgate.

“If you don’t mind the menthols,” she yells, overcompensating for the noise of the train. She lights her daughter’s cigarette from her own and hands it off, tapping Michelle with the back of her wrist. “Look lively, dude,” she screams, although she already has Michelle’s attention. “We’ll be there soon.”

Her mother’s *dudes* are a relatively new development—as is her smoking. Six months ago, Michelle had mentioned to her that it was difficult to take cleaning up seriously when ordered to do it by someone who insisted on calling people *dude*. She wished her mother would at least use a label appropriate to Michelle’s gender.

“If you wanna live like a pig,” she’d said, “well, then go ahead, dude.” And just like that, coasters were optional. Now, Michelle sometimes finds her mother asleep on the sofa in the living room, where she had once forbade anyone from entering, except when the family had guests.

Michelle has stifled her desire to point out her mother’s hypocrisy in case doing so prompted her to rescind her new, laxer cleaning policies. As the space under Michelle’s bed becomes too compacted to admit any more dirty clothes, her mother’s *dudes* start to sound normal.

She and Michelle flick their butts onto the stalks of stunted ditch-corn by the flashing lamppost. The bells don't stop ringing, nor does the gate rise, until the distance absorbs the train.

On the other side of the tracks, the two find the town's main drag much as they had left it, as though it hibernated in anticipation of their annual return. A man mops the lobby under a marquee and waves a woman away who tries the rigid, glass doors. More storefronts seem abandoned this year than last, but Michelle can't say that for sure. None would be open on the Fourth of July anyway. The next town over has fireworks, and most people from this town go there. Her mother owns one twenty-sixth of a timeshare at a ski resort a mile away, and she and Michelle have visited every July she could remember. The town itself merely serves to resupply them on their way up the mountain. Only a gas station convenience store remains open this late in the afternoon. The neon oasis hums promises of lotteries that alter lives.

Michelle grabs a shrink-wrapped sandwich from the slide-top cooler and sets it on the counter. Blinking chaffs her eyeballs, dry from miles of road and hours of traffic along New York City's sprawling outskirts north of the Tappan Zee. Michelle asks the clerk for a pack of Camels.

"What are you doing buying that garbage?" Her mother grabs the sandwich from next to the Camels where the clerk put them, and then takes a jump shot. When it plops on the shut cooler, mayonnaise, through a tear in the cellophane, oozes onto the glass. She says, "We're eating poachers. It's tradition."

It's Michelle's father's tradition really, although it wouldn't have started if it weren't for her mother complaining about the state of the women's bathroom one July many years ago.

"No wonder she can't keep her store clean," her mother had said, loud enough for the clerk to hear. "She can't even keep herself clean. Look at her pizza face."

The clerk chewed out Michelle and her family before they could buy anything. Michelle's father reentered to sweet-talk the family's way back into the clerk's good graces. Michelle and her mother watched through the window as the girl dropped the grimace and started to twirl a strand of her pink hair around a finger; her pustules poised to burst forth a fine mist to season those in close proximity to her.

"Oh look at Robert with his new girlfriend," Michelle's mother said. "I don't care if this is the only place in town. I'd rather starve on principle than support highway robbery." Michelle's father waved them back in once he had the clerk laughing. Her father could sweet-talk almost anyone into forgiving him.

Evelyn just opened the door a crack and stuck her mouth in. "You can stay and shop if you'd like, but your fucking truck's leaving now, with or without you."

"Fucking Christ, Kelly. Language," Robert said, glancing at his daughter.

Now, years later, the clerk's pink hair is faded. Her acne's gone or else scratched off into scars. She doesn't seem to recognize Michelle's mother from their now decades-old feud. Yet Michelle's mother refuses to patronize the gas station. Michelle hopes that's why she insists on poachers: because of anger and not out of some pitiful desperation to cling to her ex-husband's memory.

“Ma, poachers mean going a couple miles out of our way.” Michelle rocks on her stiff knees and feels blood rush to them. “Let’s just go straight to the timeshare. We can buy eggs here.”

“Not an option. We have to have farm-fresh.”

Outside, soda cans rattle off the running boards as Michelle opens the truck’s door. Her mother fiddles with the tunes, but the only clear station is country. They drive past skylight cellars and chimneys sprouting out of rubble, onto a road shaded by evergreens. One rendition of *The Star-Spangled Banner* ends and another begins, this one with more slide guitar. Michelle’s mother zips toward the railroad crossing, and the Ford’s tires plane over the gaps. Michelle’s father would have coasted at five miles an hour—the truck was one of the few things he treated well. But he left it behind when he disappeared, just like his family. When she realized that the truck had become hers, everyone expected her to sell it. It’s a classic F series and would have been worth a lot. The light blue trim still gleams in the sun, except on the now bush-wacked side panels.

Michelle remembers her father at the wheel, taking them away from the gas station empty-handed. Evelyn looked off into the black of her window, where she continued to insist they’d see the golden arches of a McDonald’s soon. Buffering her parents in the middle seat, Michelle was the first to see the red cooler on the side of the road with FARM FRESH EGGS spray painted in black.

The condo where they spent that night, and every July Fourth afterwards, is really just a hotel room with a kitchenette, located on the second floor of the ski lodge. No stove, but it does provide a working microwave and a random assortment of ceramic mugs. Although Michelle’s father usually left the cooking to her mother, he had a talent

for taking the mugs out of the microwave a half-second before the eggs exploded—something Michelle never could master all the times she tried poaching eggs in the microwave at home. After eating the eggs, which Michelle’s father dubbed “poachers,” Michelle’s parents fell asleep in each other’s arms. But whatever magic the timeshare held in its wood grain wallpaper had expired. The ceasefire poachers once engendered in Michelle’s parents ended with their separation, especially once her mother’s suspicions of her husband’s infidelity surfaced. He even had the gall to take his other women to stay at the exact same timeshare he took Michelle’s family to.

Michelle’s mother took it upon herself to track down as many names from the timeshare’s guestbook as possible. Most turned out to be one of Robert’s jilted wives, some still under the impression that he was coming home soon from a business trip. Those leads panned out as delusions. He’d known the jig was up and severed all contact. Michelle’s mother did become friends with one of the women—she called the woman her friend anyway. They had never actually met, and really only spoke via Facebook posts. Michelle refused to even look up pictures of her father’s secret families. She doesn’t understand how her mother can call herself the friend of someone who was having sex with her husband behind her back. No one could be sure how many other wives he had.

Michelle smells the pine scent through the open window like a caustic cleaning solution. She smacks the dash with her fresh pack and lights the first cigarette once she’s unraveled the plastic. Recalling her cigarette debt, she pulls a dollar bill from her pocket that the clerk had given her in change.

“I owed you,” Michelle says, handing her mother the bill.

“That’s alright.” She waves her hand away, focused on driving.

“Oh come on, Ma,” she says. “Just because the clerk touched it, you won’t take it?”

“No, because it’s a dollar,” she laughs. “I genuinely do not care to have it.” Michelle shoves the bill into her mother’s purse anyway.

“First the rent checks, then this.” Evelyn flips down the sun visor. “What’s next? Are you going to pay me back for all those diapers you used, too?”

Michelle *had* decided to start paying her mother back for the money she wasted on college. Four years and one history degree later, she works as a line chef at Ruby Tuesday. With enough experience now to get a job cooking for Carnival Cruises, Michelle plans to be even with her mother after six years at sea. Of course they both recognize the new job means no more holidays at the timeshare—although neither has said as much.

The red cooler that they typically buy their eggs from is not where the farmer usually leaves it on the side of the road, nor is the coffee can cash box, the one Michelle always felt the urge to steal. This far from the highway, the forest alone enforces the honor system.

“Maybe the farmer decided to go to the fireworks this year,” her mother says, stumbling out of the truck. She slams her door, and toes the tall grass where pavement meets dirt.

“Maybe,” Michelle says from her seat, through the cracked passenger window. The black flies are thick in the shade.

“That’s probably it.” She climbs over the low metal gate across the driveway.

“So you’re gonna steal eggs from some backwoods farmer?” Michelle asks. She looks to where the gravel disappears around the bend. “I know you’ve seen *Deliverance*.”

“What steal? We’ll leave the money where we find the eggs, just like we would if we’d found them by the road. Think of it like a pumpkin patch or a cut-your-own-Christmas-tree type operation.” She steps over the chain and starts walking down the driveway.

“Ma, come back.” Michelle gets out of the truck. “Hey, Kelly. Come back.” She keeps walking. Michelle considers staying behind. She could sit there and smoke a half-pack while her mother wastes time in the woods. Of course, that plan assumes she’ll make it out eventually. And when she does, probably without the eggs, she will blame Michelle, if only tacitly, for denying her any portion of the tradition. Her mother is a child on the cusp of discovering that Christmas has just been canceled. Worse than that, Michelle thinks, her mother has no self-respect. Some memories, no matter how nice, are tainted by their context. She feels that way about the timeshare in general.

One Fourth of July, after her parents had fallen asleep, Michelle sat on the couch, finishing the last bit of her poacher. At sixteen, she had already started smoking. Cigarettes weren’t a problem; Michelle had grown adept at fusing the leftover tobacco from her father’s butts. What Michelle needed was a lighter. Her father always kept his close by, even sticking it into the waistband of his underwear sometimes when he wore no other clothes. Usually the gas grill in the backyard worked to light Michelle’s cigarettes whenever she’d sneak out at night, but the timeshare doesn’t even have a stovetop. Desperate, she decided to look in the owner’s closet for storm matches. The

cheap lock came open with a few prods of her I.D. card into the doorjamb, scoring her picture a little. Using her cell phone to light the dark closet, she found matches next to a box of candles among the owner's personal belongings. When she reached for the high shelf, Michelle knocked over a tin that spilled pictures all over the floor. She worried that her parents heard the crash until she noticed her father's face in every picture. It didn't make sense for pictures of Michelle's family to be in the closet reserved for the majority owner. Michelle had never stayed more than a couple weeks out of every July. Surely, the family would visit more often if they outright owned the room, she conjectured. Then, Michelle noticed most of the pictures were not of the family at all, but featured strangers alongside Robert. Someone's child bouncing on his knee, a woman, not her mother, leaning skis against the rack by the door, another woman eating eggs out of a ceramic cup. That's when Michelle's mother, drawn by the noise, opened the closet.

Discovering her husband's infidelity could not keep her from trying to relive the better times they shared. To Michelle, accepting help from her father, even via an abandoned truck and timeshare, didn't make things even; it just gave him permission to feel absolved.

As her mother walks around a bush, gone from Michelle's view, she slams the truck door and climbs over the gate. She follows her mother, pitiful though she is, if only because by next year she won't have a choice but to go alone.

Michelle catches up to her. She slows her breath and hopes for someone around the next bend to yell them back the other way before it gets too dark. Red light from the

sun shines sideways through distant trees. They pass something that must be dead in a bush. Michelle sees her mother sniffing the air too—a gagging rankness with a palpable weight on the back of the tongue. It’s soon replaced by the piney, air-freshener scent of the forest. They walk in silence awhile, half-listening for signs of whatever waits for them at the end of the long driveway. Gradually, the bugs disperse along with the humidity, and Michelle sparks another cigarette.

“Did you ever consider where you’ll smoke on the cruise ship?” her mother asks, buttoning her shirt and rolling down her sleeves. “I don’t think they let you smoke on board.”

“What do you think—everyone goes cold turkey when they take a cruise?” she asks. “There’d be a mutiny every week. It’s not a submarine. If I need a smoke, I’ll go up on deck.”

“Yeah, but you’ll be in the bowels of the ship, stuck in the kitchen most of the day. You can’t just duck out the door like you do now.”

“I don’t understand.” Michelle kicks the gravel, scatter-shotting the underbrush. “Is this a no-smoking talk or a no-cooking talk?”

“I’m not telling you not to do anything. I was just wondering out loud about this cooking phase, and if you’ve really thought the decision through. It’s a big commitment.”

“Well, what about your smoking phase. A year ago you never smoked once, and now you’re an expert. People adapt.”

Her smoking annoys and confuses Michelle. Initially, her mother forbade Michelle from indulging in the habit, citing all the standard health concerns as well as

some she invented on the spot, like “burst lung.” Each cigarette equaled seven minutes of independence—an excuse to step outside and be alone so as to spare her mother the nasty habit. Michelle remembers the first time she caught her smoking in the backyard when she was seventeen.

“I can’t believe you would do that,” Michelle’s mother said. “After everything I’ve invested in your health.”

But it was Michelle’s health, and she would dispense with it as she wished. Then while home from college for the summer recess between her junior and senior year, her mother caught Michelle sneaking into the backyard again. She readied herself for another no smoking talk, but instead, her mother asked to join. The first Camel she coughed down made Michelle laugh, but ever since she switched to menthols, her intrusions have lost their novelty. Sometimes Michelle still sneaks into the backyard just to smoke alone.

A pop echoes off the mountain, followed by silence. Michelle imagines pyrotechnicians nodding to one another somewhere in the neighboring town, having fired a warning shot over a glow-stick-studded crowd. Dragging on her cigarette, smoke stings the place where Michelle habitually gnaws the inside of her cheek, a nervous habit she picked up pulling all-nighters during college. When the two emerge into a clearing, only a tinge of purple remains on the horizon. The farmer has a trailer, no home or barn. One of the windows is backlit blue by a television. In their garden they grow tangled heaps of wrought-iron wreckage and dishwasher husks. A truck’s parts lay scattered, the hitch rusted by Michelle’s feet.

“Ma, someone’s home.” A cat’s sudden silhouette crops the window.

“Aren’t you some kind of cook?” She yells loud enough, Michelle thinks, for the cat to hear. “Don’t you care if we eat decent?” She sidles between stacks of junk, looking back at Michelle once she’s through. “You’re on my time right now, you know. I say we’re eating poachers.”

She’s worse than Michelle thought, so pitiful she’s willing to risk a gut full of buckshot for a couple stolen farm fresh eggs. What would she get herself into next year without Michelle around? Would she still try to relive Michelle’s father’s tradition at any cost? They don’t even know for sure how many children, in addition to those children from his secret stash of pictures, grew up eating poachers. Michelle doesn’t want to know. If her seminal moment from childhood was mass-produced, than what does that make her?

She worries the wrinkly skin of her inner cheek. The blood she tastes there seems to curdle in her deflated stomach when she swallows. Another cigarette would slake her hunger. She thinks of the ember lighting her path into the tree line and back to the truck. Even in the open now, she can barely distinguish gravel from grass, with only faint traces of the sun to see the traveled distance up the driveway.

Michelle turns at the sound of a pop just in time to see her mother lunge behind a stack of tractor tires. A three-round burst fizzles, followed by a whistler. The fireworks in the neighboring town have started. Michelle’s mother stands up and slaps dirt off her knee, then checks on Michelle before continuing toward the trailer. Michelle decides to help her mother so that they might leave sooner while the popping still masks their progress.

The channel through the piles of parts grows narrower the closer Michelle gets to her. Up ahead, she struggles against a spring fixed to her sleeve, the other end buried in an engine's crisscrossed manifold. Michelle helps her free, and the two move to the wire enclosure behind the trailer, framed in an electronic glow by the nearby television. Michelle looks in the window as she creeps past. On the television screen within, fireworks explode in front of feet propped up on an ottoman. Her mother unlatches the door to the chicken coop as one or two bangs echo off the valley. The feet on the ottoman do not stir. Michelle hopes that whoever she sees is sleeping.

Her mother pulls back the chicken coop's low door for Michelle, and she ducks through it. Her last footfalls resonate between rocket blasts on the plywood ramp. Michelle smells rotting cedar and moldy newspaper. Her mother closes the door behind them and points to the feather-stuffed cubbies along the wall. Shoving their hands under the warm bodies of the hens, she and her mother feel for eggs. The squawking starts with one chicken and then suddenly spreads to all of them.

"I'm not finding any, Ma," Michelle whispers.

"Me neither," her mother says. "Keep looking." Michelle hears cicadas, once the squawking lulls, and realizes the fireworks have ended.

"We need to leave, Ma." She looks at the trailer's door. "Did it ever occur to you that they're all out of eggs?"

"Not possible." Michelle's mother jabs her fingers at another chicken. Michelle can feel her stomach anxiously eating itself.

"Got one," her mother says. Too loudly it turns out. The trailer's screen door claps the aluminum siding.

“Who’s out there?” a female voice calls. The low slope of the chicken enclosure’s roof obstructs anything above the woman’s waist from Michelle’s view. She looks at her mother, crouched by a dark puddle on the floor, bracing herself with the chicken wire. The chicken circles her egg and then pecks it open. Yoke strings off the hen’s beak as she takes another bite.

“My husband’s inside loading his gun,” the silhouetted legs in the doorway say. “He’s coming to get you.” Michelle’s mother loses her balance and falls to her knees. Michelle scans the windows for signs of movement.

“I mean it. If you’re out there.” Her feet tap the cinderblock stoop. Michelle can see across the trailer’s innards between the woman’s legs by the light of the TV. She wonders if the woman’s husband is in the other room, but then she realizes the trailer only has one room. Michelle inches closer to the front of the coop to see more of the woman and what lies behind her. The handgun that she holds by her side is lime green. Its foam projectile has a suction-cup tip.

“So what if you are out there,” the woman calls. “I got nothing worth taking. Happy Independence Day.”

And then the screen slams shut. Michelle and her mother run for the tree line and don’t stop until they feel the give of gravel under foot. Michelle pants as she stumbles, coughing, then spitting.

“I didn’t know chickens did that,” Michelle says, finally catching her breath. “Ate their own eggs?”

“Maybe the chickens got tired of them getting taken.” Her mother says.

She slaps her hay-covered knees. Michelle kicks a divot into the driveway with sneakers dampened by an anonymous sludge. She reaches for the bulge of her cigarettes in her back pocket but feels them squished. She thumbs her lighter and sees a crease through the camel's hump, the cracked reservoir that would sustain the animal on her journey toward the horizon's pyramid. Michelle drops the pack, the tobacco now loosed from its tubes.

"Ma, would you mind if I bum a cigarette?"

"You'll owe me," her mother chuckles in the dark, somewhere close by. She lights one of her menthols, passing Michelle the glowing paper gingerly.

They stop at the convenience store again on their way to the timeshare. Michelle's mother slides a six-pack of eggs on the counter. She has feathers in her hair. In the reflection of the obsidian window, Michelle notices feathers in her own hair.

"I've decided to buy eggs here," Michelle's mother says. After everything they have risked to make the vacation special, they have succeeded, although in a different way than intended. Michelle probes for some hint of recognition from the clerk as she asks for another pack of Camels. Like extended family, she has visited with her once a year for most of their lives—twice this year. Yet they are strangers to one another. She just looks bored, probably at the end of a long shift. Michelle feels sorry for her, as if she was a sad, distant cousin, or like one of her unknown half-brothers and half-sisters her father has scattered across the country. She knows this woman better than all those secret siblings. Her fingers work the keypad reflexively to run Michelle's mother's card for the eggs plus cigarettes.

“Well,” Michelle says. “See ya.” The clerk blinks her half open eyes slowly.

Later, at the timeshare, they put their egg-filled mugs in the microwave before stepping outside on the breezeway for a cigarette. They finish smoking and then reenter to find the microwave’s viewing window plastered with yolk. Michelle doesn’t understand. Her father had never set the eggs for a specific time. They always seemed to cook exactly as long as her father needed to finish a cigarette. Suddenly, Michelle realizes that one less mug than normal affects the cooking time of the remaining two.

She and her mother leave the mess to harden, knowing the maid service will come with their bleach eventually to sterilize the timeshare for the next family. Following her mother back into the breezeway, Michelle lights another cigarette to hold her over until morning.

Artist For Sale

Janet finds popcorn, the last non-condiment in her kitchen, mislaid in the corner of the Tupperware cabinet. Shutting the microwave, she presses start and then walks to the edge of the empty dining room.

“Mind if it’s got extra sodium?” she calls over the table. No response comes from the den, where her husband John is, save for the TV, which seems excitedly out of breath. The microwave casts a ray of dawn across the dark kitchen by which Janet finds the salt. They’re out of butter. The Ziploc baggie she pulls from the cabinet says *The Piercing Lounge* across the top. She only bothered with the salt-water-soaking regimen a few times before her hairdresser accidentally popped the stud out of her brow with a brush. Since John practically failed to notice her midlife crisis anyway, Janet decided to forget about it.

Behind the microwave window, seedy morsels unpack their crunchy economy, inflating the folded envelope. After the popping reaches a crescendo, Janet pulls open the bag delicately to avoid its scalding breath, then walks with it toward the sound of the TV. She passes the dining room table and thinks she hears rustling underneath, so she drops on the hardwood. If her cat Boo had been there, she isn’t now. Janet hasn’t seen her for close to a week, and for close to a week, Janet hasn’t worked on her paintings. How could she make art without her muse? All of her art bears Boo’s paw-print signature next to her own name. Boo deserves it, since she provides the medium as well as the inspiration. For example, in order to convey surfaces like stainless steel or glass tile, Janet glues claw clippings to the canvas. Whiskers work for wood tones, like in cabinets, if the picture Janet cuts out of *Good Housekeeping* as a model calls for some. The

glossy, mottled overcoat with its orange-on-black represents granite countertops, or the evening sky viewed from the kitchen window. After filling in the canvas with the castoffs from Boo's body, she blow-dries it to completion.

Brushing a few stray pieces of dusty popcorn back into the sideways bag on the floor, Janet waddles into the den, rubbing a kneecap bruised by her acrobatics. John is sitting on the couch. The blue light from the TV makes John's wrinkled face look like the surface of the moon.

"Who's playing this year?" Janet asks.

"I don't know," he says.

"Well, if you're not watching the game, can we flip to something else?"

"In a while. They've got to go to the commercials soon. The first ones are always the best. Companies pay the most for ad space at the beginning of the Super Bowl. After the first round of commercials end, we can flip to something else as long as I can keep checking on this channel. Actually, could you turn it up? I can feel them starting."

"I'll find the remote." Janet passes John the popcorn to free her hands.

"You mean dial?" He grins, then pinches a few kernels into his mouth.

"Yeah, and after this game," she says, "I'm gonna get into my automobile and go find a speakeasy."

She laughs at her own joke and, after some searching, births the *dial* from between the couch cushions. They'd had this argument about the remote control a million times. It started out as playful teasing during their courtship and had evolved into familiar banter before their wedding, a kind of theatre for them to stage in front of new acquaintances. John calling the remote a "dial" accentuated his charm. Charm was the

word she had used to justify to her friends that John's being twenty-two years her senior was an asset. She hasn't seen those friends in years. Now, it's just her, John, and Boo.

A commercial for Lysol starts. Lysol wipes slide into Janet's subconscious, kenneling there with promises of a quick clean. A child' who spilled the grape juice gets off with a hair-tussled warning from the smiling mother armed with disinfectant.

When the channel returns to football, Janet flips to another. She finds an *Under Katz* marathon. Her favorite show. Frank, the linebacker, has a bum knee that he's been caught coddling in the locker room. He's too old for this game—everyone says so. Coach Katz, with the cigarette stuck into the corner of his iconic scowl, rummages through a drawer of pill bottles.

“Oxycodone,” he says, giving one of the bottles to Frank. Coach Katz is such a rebel, Janet thinks. That's why they give him such crappy talent, but he always turns it around by the playoffs. All the characters except Coach Katz are new this season. Sometimes they retire. Sometimes they die. Sometimes, new actors play old characters while the writers scramble to kill off people who died in reality.

Coach Katz hears one of the owners complain over the headset that his son, Cowboy, hasn't gotten any playing time. But he doesn't have anywhere near as much heart as Thompson.

“Welcome to my team,” Coach Katz says to the owner. Coach Katz says “Welcome to my team” several times during the game, as if the writers are trying to get the catchphrase out of their system while they still can. There'd been talk of them finally ending the eighteen-season series.

“Did you get the basement clean?” John asks before crunching more popcorn.

“Mostly. There’s just a few of my pieces still on the wall.”

“Janet, we talked about making a good first impression.”

“Gee, thanks.” Her artwork didn’t make a good-enough impression? she wondered. Her *furry kitchen pictures*, as John called them, even though he knew it was Janet’s *Domesticus Series*.

“You know I think your pictures are terrific,” John says. “I’m just saying, what if these people are allergic? Imagine walking into your new apartment, and you’re tired from a long day’s travel, and you’re allergic to cats, and the fur is literally hanging from the wall like art.”

Janet cringes, although she knows that John meant *art* as it pertains to form and not as a slight against her work’s aesthetic merit. Nevertheless, she has explained before how one might misconstrue such a comment. In fact, Janet’s work *was* art. Art with a capital A. Not *like* it, except in as much as a calico is like a cat. If John’s ads could be art, and as an advertising man he did make that argument, then her *furry kitchens* certainly were.

At first, Janet was excited when she heard the news about John’s *staycation*. He’d been working himself too hard. The off-time meant that John might finally get to spend some with her, after so many years of late nights by herself. Unfortunately, since Momentum Worldwide Media wouldn’t pay John for not working, and because of high property taxes in the suburbs, John staying home also meant that Janet had to lose her art studio in the downstairs apartment. They needed to rent it out. She might even have to go back to pet grooming to make the mortgage.

“Janet, the commercials are starting.”

She switches the channel. Michael Jordan smirks at some poor guy who just doesn't understand what it means to be Hanes underwear comfortable.

Janet thinks she hears something rustling, so she slides off the couch, letting her cheek hit the carpet's coarse, piercing strands. No sight of Boo. Cat hairs have spun themselves into a wreath around the couch's leg, and Janet pockets them for later. A canvas sits bald under magnifying lenses and cold bulbs in the basement.

"Boo?" Janet says, her voice pitched high. "You there, Boo? Boo's just a little kitty. She doesn't want her daddy inviting strangers into the house. That's why she's hiding. Isn't that right, Boo?"

"Did you say something, Janet?"

"I was talking to Boo."

"Oh, you found her?"

"No, but she's in here somewhere. Maybe she's hiding in the basement?"

Boo only gave people the benefit of her company when she was comfortable. The basement gave both Janet and Boo a place to hide, and always proved the most likely place to sight either of them after a long absence. Janet wondered whether John remembered the promise he made her the night she finally said yes to his proposal: that her identity as a wife would never subsume her identity as a woman and an artist. In fact, John wanted to commission Janet's work by giving her a workshop, and a way to live that didn't require her to waste her energy on kitsch she'd have to sell in flea markets and summer art sales. Upstairs, Janet is a doting wife. Downstairs, in her workshop, she's independent like Boo. John, in addition to being her husband is also her patron.

Before she married John, she tried to make a go of it alone, grooming dogs at Petco. Her boss kept telling her that the customer was always right, but Janet tried to imbue the work with her signature style anyway. The intricate crop circles she buzzed into the pets' back haunches looked like eyes. The tail that wagged resembled a long snout, like an elephant's, with a mouth sometimes hidden beneath. To Janet, the customer was always wrong. Even when she explained her intent—*that the two-headed poodle is the perfect symbol for our neoliberal preoccupation with the myth of clean consumerism*—few customers approved of the liberties she took with the standard cut. At best, they called them *cute*. At worst, they complained to management. Some cited animal cruelty for the razor burns. Janet got fired around the time that she first began dating John.

The doorbell rings while, on the screen, a luxury car drives past monolithic sculptures of jaguars in a desert that reminds Janet of a Dali. She opens the door for the faded blue eyes she sees multiplied in the frosted glass, but before addressing the man on her stoop, a U-haul's hatch slaps the end of the driveway. A little boy walks up the ramp and into the darkness, dragging out behind him a lobster pot half his size, overflowing with assorted, plastic dishes. Tin grates pavement, and claw crackers dangle from the boy's belt loops like six-shooters. A parasitic toe worms in the tear of his worn sneakers whose Velcro no longer sticks. Janet wonders if the neighbors hear the racket.

“That's my son, Arthur,” the man on the stoop says. “I'm Robert Swain.”

His tattooed knuckles spell *loya*. Janet mutters the letters until she sees the puzzle continued onto his left hand: *loyalty* all together, with a gap between the *t* and *y* to

account for the missing ring finger of his left hand. The stretched skin of the nub shines under the porch light. Robert grabs Janet by her fingers and shakes them to say hello. He nods and smiles, then slides in past her. He flicks his head to move his black hair off his forehead.

“Is that popcorn I smell?”

This Robert character walks into the den, as if he owns the place. Janet looks back out the door, poised to shut it against the cold night as soon as Arthur enters. The boy reaches the stoop with his load and then turns back around to retrieve another, rudely not bothering to acknowledge her. After shutting the door, Janet joins John and Robert near the TV. She wonders about the background check she ran on Mr. Swain and is concerned that the check hasn't caught everything.

“Oh, this is a good one,” John chuckles at the TV. The center hikes a pink balloon to the quarterback, but it pops under a tight end's cleats.

“Can't we just do it the old way?” the quarterback asks. A Ford truck comes to a skidding stop before the line of scrimmage, the bed overloaded with footballs. Real football starts again, and Janet makes a grab for the remote.

“I guess you've figured out that John's in advertising,” Janet says.

“Sure,” Robert says. “I like ad men. They're so perceptive. A bullshit artist has to be.” John nods his head while he watches the TV.

“What is it you do again, Mr. Swain,” Janet asks, although she already knows from the digging she's done that he is a consultant for a community and regional planning firm—whatever that means.

“Please, Janet. Call me Robert.”

“Wait.” Janet thought for a moment. “I don’t remember telling you my name.”

“Please, Janet.” Robert grins. “You don’t think that I’d come to live in some stranger’s basement without doing a little research. For all I knew, you and John-boy here were the Craigslist Killers. I’m a consultant, as you probably already know. Suburbs are my specialty. A lot of communities like this one that grew up with the housing bubble never expected it to burst. Now, the feted beast needs life support: that’s me. I do cost/benefit analyses for homeowners associations and town supervisors. Try to recommend new policies and cost-saving measures—that sort of thing.”

“Ha,” John says. “We’ve had a run-in with the HOA ourselves.”

Janet wishes he wouldn’t tell the story about her *Unity Brow Series* again. The idea came to her while watching Mexican yard crews cut the same striped patterns into her front lawn. She bought a second-hand mower at a garage sale down her block, and while her neighbors were at work, she made some site-specific art.

“So I get a knock on my door,” John says. “They ask for Janet, then tell me everyone on Arcadia Way wants me to reimburse them for the damage she did. I walk over to Arcadia. The block is torn up to the dirt, except for a pair of very neat grass eyebrows in the middle of each yard.”

It turned out that one of Janet’s victims had a camera mounted to his gutter to catch the neighbors’ kids stealing garden gnomes. John had promised to be Janet’s patron—he had basically talked his way into the position in order to get her to marry him—and he did pay the residents of Arcadia Way for the *damage* (another word for art that Janet still bristles at), but he also complained about it every chance he got.

Under Katz goes to a commercial for makeup. Magnified eyes thresh the air with dusty lashes. Janet runs a finger between her own eyes to feel what the camera might see. Bumps form over follicles where black seedlings try to needle through the red skin. She wonders if Robert notices, and if it's already too late, thanks to John, to make a good first impression. She admonishes herself for caring about her hair, since it makes her a bad feminist. In college, Janet didn't shave her legs. The hair in her armpits got so long she could have braided it. Once she got a pixie cut, but even her lesbian friends said it was a mistake.

"Wow," Robert chuckles. "That little neighborhood ruckus didn't come up in my research. With all the information on the net, it's funny what it misses."

The next commercial features a montage of rugged representations of historical figures. Einstein's angular biceps involuntarily flex as he puzzles out $E=MC^2$ on the chalkboard. John snickers when Benjamin Franklin gets shocked through his kite but sloughs it off with gritted teeth. *Real men don't ignore problems*, the text scrawls across the bottom of the screen as the camera pans to Abe Lincoln's bedside table, where a bottle of Viagra sits uncapped.

"Janet, hand me the dial so I can get back to the real commercials," John says. "Not the low-brow stuff they play during reruns." She drops the remote on his lap.

"Robert," Janet says, "did your research find anything about John's police record?"

"No, it didn't." Robert furrows his brow.

“That’s because there is no record, Janet!” John flips the channel to the Super Bowl, where fans scream and beat the air in anger or in jubilation. “No one pressed charges. I never went to jail. The cops just drove me home.”

“But if there had been charges—for both our crimes, I mean—mine would be trespassing and criminal mischief, maybe destruction of property. Yours would be breaking and entering.”

“Wow, John-boy,” Robert says, grinning. “B’n’E?”

Janet tells Robert the story about John coming home late from work and walking into a stranger’s unlocked house. “The homeowner came down the stairs to find a half-naked intruder sprawled on the sofa, watching infomercials at four a.m., a burgled beer from the fridge nesting in his belly hair.”

“Forgive me for working too hard,” John says. “It’s probably difficult for some people to realize how a man could be so tired that he walks into the wrong house and, not wanting to wake up his wife, decides to keep the lights off while he drinks his wired brain to sleep.” He coughs something out of his throat, a popcorn kernel probably, then cracks it with his teeth. “Plus all the houses look the same in this neighborhood.”

“They *are* the same,” Robert says excitedly. “You have Levitt and Sons to thank for that. They were the real estate company that realized they could save money if they reused blueprints and streamlined the means of production. Most developers still use some variation of the same formula. That’s why you have serial homes in private, mass-produced communities. The suburbs were going to be a middle-class utopia.”

Janet thinks about New York City, forty-five minutes away by train, where all the starving artists live—where she should have lived, although she would have needed a wealthier patron even to afford the right to starve in the city.

“That’s right,” John says, clearing his throat. “And besides, I’m going back to work as soon as I have a chance to recharge my batteries. It’s just a little staycation to clear my head.”

John is getting older, whether or not he admits it. Janet had never pictured him retiring, but eventually, maybe sooner rather than later, he will. When that happens, they’ll have to move even further away from the city than they are already. She wonders if John could be the type to move to Florida—and not Miami, but a retirement condo community with shuffleboard and a bingo hall.

He gets up to go to the bathroom. The first quarter ends with low-flying fighter jets draping tails of red, white, and blue exhaust over the stadium. Arthur opens the door and, passing Janet without a glance, walks directly toward his father, brandishing a cupped hand from his coat pocket. His long fingernails curl down at the ends, scratching Robert’s ear as he whispers.

“Janet,” Robert says, smiling. “My son will need the keys now to finish unpacking.”

She points at John’s spare set on the table next to the popcorn. Arthur tips the stale bag into his mouth before pocketing the keys.

“The exterior entrance is around back,” Janet says slowly as Arthur chews. “Down the stairs.”

Janet wonders if the prospective tenants ought to have access to the keys before signing the contract. There could be a falling out. It could be difficult to rid themselves of these people once they move in. She smirks at Arthur, who avoids eye contact. She hopes the boy gets his bad manners from his mother. Perhaps Robert is escaping a bad marriage.

“Are you married, Mr. Swain?” She knows from her background check that he isn’t married now, but she’s curious if he will offer more details.

“Please, Janet. Call me Robert.” He holds up his hand to show her that he wears no ring—an act trumped by his lack of finger. “Why do you ask?”

“Oh, just curious about Arthur’s mother, if she’ll be living here too,” Janet says. “We only made one set of keys for the downstairs is the thing.”

“She’s spending some time with her husband,” Robert says. “Actually, he’s an ad man too. I love it how men in your husband’s profession work for so many hours. It really is impressive. Wow, what a coincidence that both of them are in advertising, right? Say, you’re not trying to replace your husband too, are you?” Robert grins.

Even after she looks back to the cheerleaders on screen, who smile painfully through clenched teeth to stop their chattering, Janet feels Robert’s eyes on her. She can feel herself blushing, and it confuses her. Is he making a pass at her? She doesn’t know whether to be flattered or offended. She shakes her back reflexively like Boo does before pouncing. No matter what deal John has struck with this man over the phone, he has to rescind it now. Certainly, the basement is a poor fit for these people. Of course, John will say she is crazy. Had he been in the room to hear the flirtation, he probably wouldn’t have noticed Robert’s comment. He never notices anything anymore. Later tonight, if

Janet, all freshly waxed, sits on John's lap wearing nothing but her *Show Stopper* bra and panties, he will complain about the weight and go back to watching commercials.

A long curtain grazes the baseboard, so Janet hops to her feet, hoping to uncover Boo before he dismounts the windowsill. Instead of fur, her probing hands find only the bite of a cold draft. Where can Boo be? She spins to find John returned from the bathroom. He and Robert stare at her.

"Oh, my name is Boo," Janet says, her voice rising again as she turns back to the curtain to brush it with her hand. "I'm just a little kitty who gets her fur on everything and makes people sneeze. Did you know we have a cat, Robert?"

She hopes he's allergic.

"I believe I heard something about that, yeah."

"Robert," John says, still eyeing his wife, "I think what Janet's getting at is that we keep the cat upstairs, so you don't have to worry. Why don't you come downstairs with me so you can get settled?"

"Don't speak for me, John." Janet smacks a cloud of dust from the curtains.

"Actually, what I'm getting at is that we should have an honest appraisal of all possible issues before we make any final decisions because even small issues can become big ones over time."

Commercials start again, transfixing John temporarily. Four women stand in a line, focused on the counter in front of them, with their backs turned to the camera. The black fabric of their burkas conforms to every crevice when stretched by the stiff, desert breeze that blows from an open door. Each woman jiggles her upper body to keep pace with the assembly-line choreography, occasionally passing spoons or spices to the

woman standing beside her. White words appear on the screen as it fades to black: *Did you know that Arab men can have four wives? Just saying. Arabdate.com.*

John and Robert both laugh.

“That’s disgusting,” Janet says.

“But they’re free now,” John says. “If for cultural reasons they should choose their stereotypical roles, well, that’s freedom too.”

“I don’t understand why four is the magic number,” Robert says. “A man should be able to have as many wives as he wants, right John?”

John snickers, then leads the way toward the basement stairs.

“You don’t actually think that, do you, John?”

Janet tries to get her husband’s attention with a dirty look. He either ignores her or doesn’t notice.

“Yup,” Robert says. “John just gave us the okay, Janet.”

He winks, and she shivers. Another proposition? The gall of this man. She looks to her husband to see if he heard the remark, but he steps down the stairs. Robert follows, and Janet follows him.

Pink insulation pokes between wood panels in the stairwell’s overstuffed walls. The three descend single-file. At the bottom, John grabs the contract off the washing machine before pushing the door that connects the laundry room to the basement apartment. He lowers the kitchenette’s foldout dining table as they enter so that Robert gets the full effect.

Janet loves how you can hide in the basement. When the towers fell less than fifteen miles away in Manhattan, she didn’t notice for twenty hours. First, she smelled

the smoke, but figured the burning was simply her blow dryer overheating again. The phone upstairs rang, but Janet couldn't hear. John was at work, calling, where the trains wouldn't run and the damage was horrendous. Tweezers in hand, she threaded her canvas with the sharp roots of whiskers, having recently scored a few ounces from a volunteer gig at the animal shelter. She relished being divorced from the nation's tragedy, and would do anything to keep her studio, her hiding place. John knows it. After using her fifth veto because the prospective tenant listed percussion as an interest on Facebook, John took vetoes off the table. Janet no longer had any choice in the matter.

Arthur walks through the exterior door and deposits another load on the linoleum, entrenching himself with each additional box of cookware.

"This is Arthur, John," Janet says, noticing her husband's confusion at the grubby intruder. "Robert's son, who has been outside in the cold dark unpacking this whole time all by himself."

Janet notices that the boy's shirt is coming unstitched at the arm, as if someone had pulled him hard by his sleeve. She wonders why he doesn't complain about his chore, as she might expect a boy his age to do.

"Call me Art," he says, then leaves the way he came in, followed by his body odor.

"Oh, what's this over here?" Robert walks toward one of Janet's pieces on the wall, looking closely enough to nuzzle the canvas. "I'll buy it for five hundred."

Shocked, John drops the contract on the floor, then bends to collect the scattered sheets. Janet, too, is shocked, even mystified, by Robert's sudden offer. She's not sure if he's serious. She can't tell with him. A trickster.

The most anyone, other than John, has ever offered for Janet's work was one hundred. Until a second ago, it had been the only offer of her career. When she asked the buyer why she liked the piece, the woman called it *cute*. Janet refused to sell the piece to her. She wonders if Robert's offer is a joke until he pulls a wad of hundreds from his pocket.

"Wow," John says, after reshuffling the contract. "You're finally an artist, Janet. Congratulations. You sure it's not worth six, Robert?" John snickers again, a bad habit that Janet wishes she could correct, but John's too old for correction. "That'd be enough to reseed four front lawns on Arcadia Way at a hundred twenty bucks per thousand square feet."

Janet feels her eyes bulge and strain; the blood wells up behind them before warming her ears. She doesn't need her husband to sully her triumph with his commentary. She rips the contract from John's hands and plucks the pen from his shirt pocket.

"You want to stay here," she says, pushing her hands at Robert's chest. "You sign." He lays the contract against the fridge, filling the blanks on the last page without reading. Janet gives the contract to John.

"Your basement is rented," she says. She turns back to Robert and gives him a wary smile, part suspicious, part flirtatious. "Now leave me alone to negotiate the sale of *my* art."

John looks at Robert, then back to Janet. Slack cheeks bunch over his jowls, and his wrinkles switch directions. "Okay then," John says. "A deal." He checks the watch

he's not wearing and leaves, his footsteps creaking up the staircase on the other side of the laundry room. The contract scrapes the banister as he grips them both with one hand.

Janet faces her new benefactor, still skeptical of his offer. She decides that Robert is either a flatterer or has exquisite taste, but that both might be true seems unlikely. If John only gave her one choice in whom to rent to anyway, better that Janet choose it rather than have it forced upon her. Nevertheless, she needs to know the kind of man Robert is before she shares her home with him, and certainly before she sells him her art.

“Not to give you a hard-buy, Robert,” Janet says. “But why do you like the piece so much?”

“Cats leave their scent on places that once offered shelter, so they know where to return,” Robert says, smiling. “Fur, nails, the more of themselves that they spread around, the more comfortable they feel. We either become home, or home becomes us.”

After all the years John had looked at her work and only saw the contents of a dustpan, Robert took less than a few seconds to articulate the real value. Impulsively, she hugs Robert. He pecks her mouth, surprising her. Then, Janet feels his tongue between her lips, the sour taste of his cigarette lingering. She is surprised at how good it tastes.

Hearing a noise, she pushes back, knocking over one of the boxes. She looks to the laundry room, checking for John, wondering how much longer she would have let Robert continue kissing her, barring this interruption. How long had it been? Two seconds? Boo, the source of the noise, lies on the dining table with her front paws crossed, looking down her snout in judgment.

Janet guesses what Boo would say if she could speak: *There are easier ways to sell your body, Janet. But hey, what do I know? My name's Boo, I'm just a little kitty.*

“What’d you say, Janet?” Robert slides his hand across the small of her back. She pulls away but he smiles and inches closer. What had she done?

You did the same thing with John, Janet. You try to play yourself off as some kind of an independent woman, an artist, a feminist, but could you even survive without someone to take care of you? Without a master?

Boo’s right. Patrons expect ownership. After putting so much of herself into her artwork, the two had become indistinguishable. Now, even Janet doesn’t know what the five hundred is for. She watches, suddenly frozen in place, as Robert moves in for another kiss. His mouth sucking her into it like fur clumps into a vacuum cleaner.

Arthur elbows open the door carrying plates, using his chin to press the tall stack to his palms. Startled, Janet pushes away from Robert. Boo turns from Janet as though disgusted and jumps off the table. She scurries between Arthur’s legs, making her escape from the house before Janet can think to run after her.

Shaggy Dog Stories

Jason wakes slowly so that his journey to the station seems like part of a dream pieced together from disintegrating memories. A jelly donut glitters under the train car's lights. Suddenly awake, he brushes his sugary lap and puts his forehead to the cool glass of the window to look through his reflection, out onto the parking lot where people rush around.

He remembers the view from his father's back, and the moon behind them that cast one shadow into the bedroom. Branching shoulders creaked under Jason's weight, making him wonder if they would hold.

"Have a look, son," his father said earlier that morning, escorting Jason, still half-asleep but dressed, to the master bedroom. "What do you think of your mom now?" his father said, pointing to the bed. His mother lay naked on top of the covers, snoring. In her arms she held the hairy torso of a man whose head disappeared under a pillow. Then his father closed the door, took Jason's hand, grabbed his briefcase, and the two of them left for the train station in the morning dark. "A day at work with dear old Dad," his father said.

Somewhere along the trip, Jason fell back to sleep. He had grown used to his father waking him in the middle of the night ever since they'd become bunkmates. His mother had convinced Jason that having a grownup in the room would be fun. Sometimes, when Jason woke up, his father would be in the middle of a story. Not a bedtime story with a moral at the end and people living happily ever after, but what Jason's mother called *shaggy dog stories*, because their fluff suggested more substance than what the punchline delivered. Jason only knew they lasted too long.

Wind unlatches the comb-over of a man wearing a bowtie. Doors ding shut, and the man hurls his suitcase at the fence that runs along the tracks.

“City can’t wait for lollygaggers,” Jason’s father says, pointing. Coffee grounds rot in his dentures, making his breath septic. A woman sits down in the aisle seat on his other side. Her cheeks look red as if she had tried to eat a jelly donut too fast. Jason takes a bite of his own, crunching the sweet grit.

“He’s so cute,” the woman says. “Are you grandpa?”

“I’m his father.” He clears his throat. “Gary’s my name.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. He doesn’t look much like you, so I just figured,” she says, quickly offering, “He must take after his mom.” Jason’s father often passed for a grandfather, whenever strangers met the family.

“Jason might look like her, but that’s it,” his father says, crossing his arms. “He’s my kid. That’s for sure.”

“So where are you off to?” the woman asks, trying a new subject. Jason can tell she’s a little alarmed by his father’s defensive tone.

“I’m taking him to work with me to see the office—to teach him something about hard work.”

“And where do you work?”

Jason knew better than to ask his father about work. He would tell without asking.

“I’m Chapman’s right-hand man,” his father says. “Ask anyone in advertising who Richard R. Chapman is, and they’ll tell you, he’s big. When he retires, I’m first in line to take his place. Once, I was at the store with Chapman, and there was this long line

to checkout, but Chapman didn't wait. He threw a wad of bills into the open register, telling the cashier to keep the change."

He continues while the woman nods her head, often at first, and then, gradually, not at all. When the train stops, she says she has to leave, gets up, but then takes another seat at the far end of the car.

Outside his window, Jason sees a golf course tessellated through chain links. Wind-stretched flags reveal numbers unrecognizable by the purple light of the nearly risen sun. He lurches forward with the train, and the ground by the tracks turns quick with plastic: outgrown toys hurled over barbed wire.

Suburbs yield to the semi-detached. Foreign glyphs on nearby buildings announce the end of the world or cheap jeans. A man who wears a wicker cone on his head kneels in the dirt between the tracks and fence. Beside him, a bamboo trellis lashed with burlap. Sun flashes brightly when it finds an avenue straight enough. Billboards that race into view need their tarps replaced. Two people in white hats lay out tools and step over trays on the tight scaffold. An eye only remains of the old advertisement, the other swollen red with graffiti, perhaps blinded by a homerun ball from the nearby stadium, where a faceless, neon idol shoulders his giant club. Rows of bright windows rush by Jason, and he sees people buzz around the honeycomb of cubicles within. Far off but growing closer, the East River throbs like a wound stapled shut by bridges. Beyond it, the jagged tear of city across sky.

He hears his father say all the time that New York is the city that never sleeps. Was the city awake then, Jason wondered? A living thing? He knows so little of the lights he often watches from his bedroom window in the moments before sleep; he has

never seen Manhattan this closely until now. To him, the horizon's buildings must trudge at a glacier's pace, more slowly than the eye notices.

The tracks take them across a barbed wire pit full of train cars.

“Look there, Jason. The yard. When people fall asleep on the train, that's where they wake up—if the conductor forgets to make his final rounds.”

Jason wishes he had this information sooner since he'd slept for much of the ride. He imagines people broken down, trapped behind the glass, convinced someone will come for them.

“Can't wait for lollygaggers,” Jason says, trying to impress.

“That's right,” his father laughs, then pats Jason on the shoulder. “Absolutely right, Son. Good boy.”

Suddenly, the windows turn obsidian. Ears well and pop, halving the world's volume. The garbled public announcer tells Jason to watch the gap and to remember, but what, he can't hear. Jason's father checks his reflection in the glass, straightening his tie.

When the train rolls to a stop, the car's passengers stand in unison and march in lockstep toward the exits. John joins the rest, moving too swiftly to follow. Jason scurries after him, out into the underground of stomping feet.

“Wait, Dad,” he yells, scanning the crowd's canopy for his father's shaggy black beret of hair. The outflow of people catches Jason, sweeping him up one of the escalators even as he tries to fight the current. Cattle come to mind, conveyed on belts toward the sharpened, blood-splattered background that is, in this nightmare, the last stop for everyone.

Is he dreaming? Jason wonders. Had he fallen asleep? It was only logical to assume. Adults don't act this way; at least they never did in the suburbs. A knee scuffs his ear, and the culprit doesn't even slow to say sorry. Starting to cry, Jason takes refuge in the lee of a trashcan. Voices fuse in the vaulted ceiling and echo down again, as if the edifice itself had its own dialect that gathered momentum in this hallway before muttering into the streets.

"Now what did you learn?" his father asks. Jason spins around to find his father looking down at him with hands on hips. "You got to hustle in the city, you understand? No lollygaggers. Chapman can spot 'em. Come on. We're a few minutes behind schedule. I can't tell you how many people we've had to let go over the years because they didn't hustle."

Let go? Jason thinks but doesn't say. He grabs his father's sleeve tightly, afraid of him running off again. It becomes clear to Jason that he will have to try harder if he wants approval—that that approval might be necessary for his own safety. Lollygaggers get left behind. Jason promises himself never to forget again.

The crowd ahead parts to make way for a man wrapped in a blanket. He sticks his hand out, asking for something, but Jason's father waves him away. Talking rapidly to himself, the man reaches into the trash.

Skyscraper trunks rise over the lip of another escalator, their tops obscured by a low-hanging mist that wafts up from sewer grates. Lines of tables along the street display watches all set to different times. Legs clip the air, and soles slap sidewalk. The loose fabric of someone's pants flaps at Jason's eye. John tows him through the throng, every once in a while reminding his son to make a good impression on Chapman. Jason dodges

a rolling cart coming up behind them, “Nuts 4 Nuts” spelled on the side. They follow in the wake of its caramelized cloud until John pivots hard left through revolving doors.

The people in the lobby wait, clicking in texted impatience before spilling into the elevator.

“Are you starting today?” a woman among them says to Jason. The elevator chuckles.

“I’m his son,” he says quickly, wedging himself into the corner behind his father, afraid that one of them, or perhaps the crowd collectively, might otherwise try to claim him. At the first stop, Jason follows his father out. The receptionist who greets them raises her brow in surprise.

“Mr. Farrell,” she says, “what are you doing here?”

“I decided to come in today. I wanted to show my son the office.” Jason’s father walks around the woman’s desk, toward a hallway. “Any idea where Chapman’s at right now?”

“Please wait, Mr. Farrell. Why don’t you take a few steps back and let me call.”

“Can’t you just tell him I’ll be at my desk?”

But the woman is already on the phone. She speaks softly to it, and then Jason hears her whisper, “I know, but he’s got his kid with him this time.” After that, she hangs up. Busy with something on her computer screen, she fails to hear his father when he asks if she managed to get ahold of Chapman.

A man hurries from the hallway smiling, taking the wary hand of Jason’s father.

“Mr. Farrell, how are you today, sir?” he says.

“Have we met?” his father asks.

“We met the last time you were here. I’m Phil Cohen, the H.R. guy. Why don’t you two follow me? I think I know why you’re here.” He looks at Jason. “Hey, little guy, I bet you’re a dynamo, just like your dad.”

Jason’s father smiles wide and chuckles. “Is he ever. Chapman will probably want to hire him on the spot, but child labor laws—what’re you gonna do?”

Cohen’s loud laughter cuts to abrupt silence. Heads appear briefly over cubical walls. The office he leads them through is decorated with assorted, framed ads for defunct brands of tire oil, a moving service, something called *Speedease*. Drywall turns to brick, and Jason can tell they’re entering an older part of the building, or perhaps a portion of it less recently renovated. Florescent lights give way to the yellow glow of filament. Exposed pipes digest audibly. His father bunches the fabric over Jason’s shoulder.

“Look there,” he says, pausing to point. “That’s the one. The one I was telling you about.”

Over the copy machine, Jason sees a framed ad for bifocals. In the foreground, a briefcase is splayed open on someone’s lap to reveal scribbled pages. The background is out of focus, but Jason can make out the burning hearth and the shaggy dog by their shapes. The text reads, *You can see well enough to know you’re missing out.*

“Chapman challenged me to sell these glasses,” his father says. “But the things were so damn ugly no one thought it could be done.”

“Yes, you told me last time,” Cohen says, tapping his foot. “So you made the background blurry, along with the glasses.” Jason now sees the glasses on the mantle,

but only just well enough to tell that they are purple and squared. “Sometimes what you leave out is more important than what you put in.”

“The dog’s my favorite part,” his father says. “The way it’s waiting there for the man to finish working. Chapman always taught me that if you can put a dog in, do it, because it’ll make the consumer hurry. Those who depend on you are always waiting, just like the dog.”

In the background of the ad, Jason also notices a couple of chairs. There is no way to tell, due to distortion, if they are occupied or vacant. The copy machine blinks green and whirs to life, spitting blank pages. Jason can smell its inky bowels.

“Follow me.” His father smiles at his son. “Let’s go find Chapman.”

“Mr. Farrell,” Cohen says, “before you do. . . .”

But Jason’s father ignores him, and Cohen tails Jason who, in turn, tails his father around the bend of a hallway, into a bullpen of desks.

“Mr. Farrell, you really want to listen to me.”

Jason’s father stops short, and Jason stumbles into him. Cohen, only barely avoiding the collision as well, hops to one side, hugging a water cooler to absorb his momentum. The man at the desk in front of Jason’s father looks up from his laptop.

“Can I help you?” he asks. Jason sees his father’s eyes go wide.

“Help me? That’s my desk you’re sitting at.”

“No it’s not.” The man tongues the tip of his mustache. “I don’t even know who you are.”

“Well, you must be new because everyone knows I’ve always sat here, right next to Chapman’s office.” Jason’s father points to the door’s glass where the stenciled

lettering reads William Gainer. He jerks his hand away from the “G,” as if it were white hot.

“Yo Phil, who’s this nut?” the man asks.

Jason watches his father twirl to survey the room. “Did they move Chapman’s people?” His voice cracks. A woman leans over from her desk to whisper something in a man’s ear. He scratches at his nostrils, the veins of which make his nose look sewn on by a series of red and purple threads.

“Poor Gary,” Jason hears her whisper. “He’s lost his fire.”

“He’s the guy who peed his pants during a pitch to some Pampers execs,” the man adds, shaking his head. “Not by accident.”

Jason hardly ever pees his pants anymore. He wonders why his father would, especially not by accident

“I hear he freaked when his wife tried to check him into a nursing home,” the woman says, then goes back to typing on her computer.

“Mr. Farrell, I hate to be the bearer of bad news again, but Richard Chapman’s dead.” Cohen rubs his bicep. “For almost two years now.”

Jason toes at the linoleum disappointedly, after so much talk about the man who seemed to tower in his father’s stories.

“That’s impossible,” his father says, falling back into his familiar chair, barely giving the mustached man a chance to slide away. “If Chapman’s dead, I should have his job. I’m next in line. Everyone knows.” His lower lip quivers, admitting from within a thin sliver of drool.

“It’s okay, Mr. Farrell,” Cohen says. “The receptionist will call your wife, you understand? She’ll come and take you home, just like the last time you were here. All I want you to do right now is wait.”

Jason’s father hops out of his chair. “No,” he shouts, waving his hands. “Don’t call Janet. I mean, don’t bother. She’s downstairs with the car.”

“Dad,” Jason says, “we came on the train, remember?” He knows that his mother probably hasn’t even woken up yet. Jason wonders if the man she was sleeping with is awake and hopefully returned to the basement apartment. It didn’t make sense to Jason why his father allowed the creepy man to stay.

“Right, Jason.” He grabs Jason by the elbow and starts pulling him out of the room. “Mom’s getting a cab to take us back to the station. She probably already hailed one, so we have to hurry.”

“But Dad” Jason wants to tell him that lying is wrong, and that the real trick to getting things done is to hustle, but Cohen puts his arm across the alley between desks to stop their progress.

“Mr. Farrell,” he says, “at least let me get security to escort you down. To make sure you find your wife okay.”

“No time,” he says, pushing Cohen’s arm aside and pulling Jason by his. “Sorry I got confused, but it’s all very clear now.”

In the elevator, Jason waves bye to the receptionist through the narrowing gap of the sliding doors.

“Very clear,” his father repeats with his shoulders slack as the timer near the ceiling counts down to one. He winks, then stares gravely at Jason until the elevator’s

ding signals their arrival. Suddenly, his father goes rigid and does a quarter-turn, like a soldier on parade.

After sprinting through the lobby, he wanders onto the street with his son panting to catch his breath but following closely. Pigeons crowd window ledges. By an unmarked door sits a cracked dish full of pittance for a stray. A cab swerves to miss the two, honking as it fishtails.

After walking across town for a couple minutes, Jason starts to wonder where they're headed. Had his mother planned to meet them all along? Did his father think they might find her with the cab, hiding somewhere, waiting for them to seek?

Soon, the two arrive at a gap in the wall that borders acres of winding paths among dark trees. It starts to rain, and, noticing, John sits down on a bench just inside the park's gates as if this spot, out in the open, were somewhere he intended to take refuge.

"What are we doing here, Dad?" Jason rubs his wet shoulders, driving the moisture deeper.

His father's head dips. His toupee slides into his lap. He looks at it for a while before answering.

"If you see Chapman, tell him I'm behind schedule, but that I'll catch up with him soon."

Jason knows his father won't catch up to anyone sitting on a bench, especially not Chapman.

"Dad, we have to find Mom. We have to go home? Chapman can't help us anymore."

Tears make Jason's cold face hot. He bawls, tugging the man too dazed to budge. The only thing worse than being separated from his father is being stuck with him. Why had he run off earlier? Was it his way of teaching Jason what he should do? To make him proud, Jason has to prove to his father that he had been listening, if only to show him that his efforts were not wasted.

He reminds Jason of someone who fell asleep on the train and now has to wait for another he's not sure is coming, along with the other blurry-eyed commuters too tired to watch the gap between dream and reality. Although unable to articulate it yet, Jason's father looks perpetually baffled as if only just awakened, riding the tides out at morning and then in again at night, according to a tradition of muddled beginnings encoded on his brain. Don't some of those who head out get lost or stranded, never to return? Of course, but the city doesn't sleep.

Asphalt grumbles underfoot and trains hiss from grated pits. On the other side of the wall, men clap down a stairwell. Jason looks at his father's bald scalp. Wrinkles disappear in the dark of a spreading liver spot.

"Can't wait for lollygaggers," Jason says, standing to catch his train. He can tell by the way the men hustled they'd know the way home.

The Woodstock

Usually, Ron waits until the Hendrix look-alike starts his distorted rendition of *The Star-Spangled Banner* before changing the marquee, but tonight Beaver, the bar manager, winks and says, “Go ahead, Ron. Go ahead and change it now.”

Ron removes the old letters, spelling “The Woodstock” along the curb. The venue’s owners had abridged the famous festival to run from Friday evening to early Sunday morning, instead of all through the weekend like in ‘69. Vacant old men wearing tie-dye often asked things like, “Hey man, what happened to Quill?” Or, “Hey man, what happened to John B. Sebastian?” Ron responds to such questions by saying that those acts lost their way, along with their relevance. The Woodstock barely manages half-capacity with Janis Joplin. Of course, Carol, who plays Janis, can’t sing very loudly, and the P.A. screeches when it’s cranked. Besides, he thinks, even if these hippies could go back in time and see the festival exactly like it happened, it still wouldn’t measure up to their drug-laced memory of it, or the collective memory they’ve adopted as their own.

On Sundays and during the week, people rent The Woodstock out for weddings. Ron lays Sunday’s letters by the hydrant. He shuffles them into coherence: “Congratulations Ron and Rachel.” Ron never meant for the relationship to last. Like all relationships predicated on lies, this one is self-destructing. He planned to end things after Rachel’s last birthday, after they got back from visiting Beaver, her brother, in Woodstock, New York. They’d been living in his basement ever since. When he learned that Ron had served in Iraq, Beaver gave him the job of head bouncer, no interview required, no applications asking him to disclose his dishonorable discharge.

Each ceramic letter that shatters on the sidewalk costs Ron five bucks from his pay, but he feels that he could almost throw them onto their backlit hooks overhead with the pole's claw. The tool makes Ron think of something the elderly might use to grab a can of soup off the top shelf, and it embarrasses him for customers to see him at this menial task, even after doing it five nights a week for close to a year. He leans the pole against the side of the building, lifting his pant leg to itch at the spot where his ill-fitting prosthetic chaffs the nub below his knee. Working at The Woodstock will pay off Ron's leg quicker than a job flipping burgers. Once it does, married or not, he plans to walk out on Rachel and Beaver.

When a kid stops under the marquee to ask if Credence Clearwater Revival has taken the stage yet or if The Dead are still playing, Ron tells him that the amplifiers will overload in ten minutes during *Turn On Your Love Light*, and then, after a twenty-five minute intermission, CCR will take the stage. He doesn't mention that both bands are the same: Don, who plays Jerry Garcia, also plays John Fogerty—he just wears a different wig.

Ron notices the kid's hand stamp is smudged. He may have washed recently or sweated off the ink on the dance floor, but Ron asks the kid for his I.D. anyway. Underagers sometimes get an older friend to press a freshly stamped hand against their own, thereby sharing admission.

“You see the bubbles?” Ron says, bending the plastic as if trying to break it. He holds the I.D. up to reflect the marquee's red neon. “The bubbles mean this I.D. was made without a dye-caster. Otherwise, this is a pretty good fake. You must have paid a lot.”

The kid makes a grab for it, but Ron sits him on the pavement by jabbing his throat with two stiff fingers. Any muscles Ron got during basic have shriveled into stretch marks long ago. He feels justified in disarming the situation before it turns into one he can't control. If Ron were Beaver, he would have chosen any one of the other bouncers to act as head, someone who could put people in their place just by flexing. Beaver made him the brain only because he clearly wasn't the brawn—that and nepotism.

“If you want it back,” Ron says, as the kid regains his composure then stands, “all you have to do is call the police.” Ron takes out his cell phone. “Or do you want me to do it for you?”

In truth, Ron doesn't want to call the police. They offered a twenty-five dollar bounty for fake I.D.s—the black market could pay six times that. All one had to do was find an eager face to go with the existing picture. Identity is plastic. The kid doesn't want to go to jail, so he zips his coat and slinks away. His freckly smirk disappears in the hologram's flash. Ron stoops to lift his right pant leg, and slips the I.D. into the cavity behind his prosthetic's flesh-colored covering, where he keeps all the contraband he confiscates.

Rachel doesn't even like it that Beaver (much less Ron) works at The Woodstock, even though he's just the bar manager. If she knew half of what went on here, even if it was just the legal half, Ron would have to quit, or else lose Rachel. If he lost Rachel, he'd lose Beaver and the job and would have to go back to flipping burgers anyway. Ron did the math once. At his previous wages, it would take him thirty years of making payments before he could actually own his leg. No one but Beaver would beg a cripple to come and work as head bouncer.

Ron goes back to changing the marquee. The cold metal pole saves his fingerprints in frost. Smokers file out of the lobby, signaling intermission, looking up and down the row of Main Street's shut storefronts for a doorway free of the wind. Right on time, Ron sees Curly up the block, leading a group of five tonight. At twenty bucks a head, that means Curly will have a hundred bucks to give to Ron. Ron reaches into his leg to fish out an eight ball of cocaine.

Curly's ghost tours usually bleed participants during the long walk from the graveyard to The Woodstock. Since he still has five followers, Ron can tell none of them have asked yet why Curly makes no mention of the celebrity ghosts. Surely, many must haunt the sacred ground of the seminal concert with which the town itself shares a name? But Curly disappoints them. Assuming ghosts exist, few if any celebrities from Woodstock 69 would haunt The Woodstock. Woodstock took place in Bethel, New York, fifty miles away. They planned to have the festival in Woodstock originally, but the town didn't want to play host to an influx of hippies.

"Alright folks, gather round, get in close so you can hear," Curly says. "The Woodstock, formerly The Rose, a vaudevillian theatre established nineteen-o-two, saw one singer's last show. She received—"

"Does she know Jerry Garcia's ghost?" a small boy standing next to his hippie parents says. The crowd chuckles that the boy would even know about Jerry Garcia, but Curly silences them by talking louder.

"She received word that her husband had died fighting the Viet Cong. Ever the performer, she hung herself in front of a packed house. Now, you can hear her footsteps on the catwalk after closing."

Curly's crowd waits for the lead act to make listening to all his unsung openers worthwhile. Jerry Garcia, or rather Don dressed up like him, does make an appearance when he comes out for his smoke break. He says the cigarette helps his vocal cords transition to John Fogerty's voice. No one notices him, save Ron.

The little boy and his parents leave when Curly starts talking about the guy who died of a heart attack while masturbating during the eighties when The Woodstock was an adult movie house. Curly's other two participants, a man and woman, stay to hear him finish, but only to ask for a refund. He ignores them, as if they were ghosts themselves. Instead, after they leave, Curly gives Ron their money, who, in turn, high fives him the cocaine he's pulled from behind the plastic covering on his prosthesis.

"Finally asked Rachel to marry you, huh?" Curly says to Ron, looking at the marquee and pocketing his purchase.

"It would appear so," he says, about to put the second-to-last letter of the puzzle in place. Actually, she had asked him. They went for a ride on the chair lift at one of the local ski lodges. Rachel liked watching Ron use his riflescope, which he carried in his coat pocket to point out wildlife.

"Look, Rachel," he'd say. "There's a doe at a thousand yards." He didn't mention how easily he could put it down if he'd had a gun, or the algorithm his brain pondered unbidden to compensate for the constant motion of the lift, and how the cold dense air would slow the bullet.

Ron remembers his squadron looking downrange through hand-wrought squares like Hollywood directors scouting a location, while Sergeant Samuels taught them how to find their dominant eyes during basic. He stuttered, searching for an antonym of

“dominant” before finally landing on “undominant.” Ron offered “subservient,” which he knew was college talk. Sgt. Sam screamed, exacerbating his stutter. The crowd suppressed its laughter into a collective chuckle. Private Gibbs patted Ron on the shoulder as he knelt to do his penance in pushups.

“Ga-ga-ghost image,” said Sgt. Sam, stuttering like he’d just seen one. “It’s a ka-ka-kind of du-du-double vision you get when your eyes fa-focus independently of one another.”

To aim properly, one needed to ignore these ghost images. Common sense says close one eye. Do so at war, he warned, and risk losing track of unintended targets. Ron mastered the trigonometry he needed to do windage calculations on his dope card, but he never did learn to aim with two eyes open. That’s why, when Rachel put a ring on the lens while he looked through, he swatted it away thinking a bug had landed. Feeling Rachel’s hand with the back of his, he reprimanded her for scratching the glass before realizing her reason. It took two hours of searching in the slushy muck below the lift to find the engagement ring.

“You gonna stop dealing now?” Curly asks, as Ron hooks the last letter.

“Why? Are you gonna quit buying?”

Curly likes getting amped and chopping wood. Many of the trailer dwellers along the road toward the rustic log cabin mansions on the mountains supplement their income by selling firewood to weekend renters. Even though all the cabins have propane at least, and usually a hot tub, tourists from the city and surrounding suburbs always seem to want to sit around a hearth-lit room in a séance huddle just to watch the flames. Pretending, Ron thought, running his finger under a leaky nostril he had ignored while the pole and

claw had demanded his attention. Pretending they were back in older times, when the mere act of warming oneself required communal effort. Not just to stock the woodpile, but also to watch and make sure the fire remained sated and shed no sparks on the lacquer-stained floor. With attendance so low on the muddy ski hills, woodpiles rot on Curly's front yard. Still, he keeps chopping.

Lecher, one of the other bouncers, bursts through the front door, pulling a man after by his arm and then flinging him onto the sidewalk.

"The Woodstock does appreciate your business, sir," Lecher says to the man. "It just doesn't care for you."

"Not cool," the man says, rubbing his arm under the marquee. "What's the big deal anyway? Everyone at the original Woodstock was on drugs. No one got hurt."

Lecher laughs. "The original Woodstock was a financial bust."

"Well, yeah and also two people did die," Curly says. "One from a heroin overdose, the other run over by a tractor. The guy driving may or may not have been on drugs. They never did catch him."

"Shut up, Curly," Lecher says, annoyed. Maybe at being forced to learn something, Ron thinks. "Boss, you remember the meeting, right?" But Lecher apparently sees by Ron's face that he doesn't remember. "Oh come on, Boss: Beaver, ten minutes." Lecher turns to reenter the lobby, and Ron hastily follows, leaving Curly to bum a smoke off the man Lecher threw out

"Hey, nice bounce by the way," Ron says, catching up to Lecher in the lobby bottlenecked with bodies trying to get back inside before CCR starts.

Lecher hands him the take: a couple eight balls. “Caught him dealing in the bathroom.”

“*Very* nice bounce,” Ron corrects himself. Lecher must not hear him over the crowd, because he doesn’t acknowledge the compliment. Ron takes a second to slip the cocaine into his leg. Then he stashes the pole and claw in the ticket booth. He follows in the channel Lecher forges through the crowd with his elbows. The bass echoes in the chambers of his heart. Bodies move to private beats, imparting sweat to the humid air. Ron’s soles stick to the floor, throwing off his step, forcing him to hop to keep from falling. Lecher notices and shakes his head.

When Ron first started working at The Woodstock, he got into a scuffle with someone trying to sneak a half-ounce of Molly into the venue. The bulge in the man’s sleeve gave him away, but when Ron tried to uncover it, he got punched instead. Lecher saw, putting the guy swiftly in a headlock and instructing Ron to grab the bottom half of the man’s body. They dragged him to the alley where Lecher kned the guy’s nose flat against his face.

“You punch us,” Lecher said, dealing the guy a second blow to the gut with his toe, “this is what happens.”

Lecher had Ron follow him to the emergency stairwell, stage right, where they met D.K., another bouncer. He explained how it worked while he cut the half-ounce into three eighths and change. While the bartenders divided the tips, the bouncers divided the drugs.

“We only get in trouble when someone complains,” he said. “The guy you took this from won’t unless he wants the cops in his business.”

Tonight, Ron thinks, they're in trouble. Beaver only calls meetings to chew out him and his guys—to air customer complaints. He smiles as if in a contest with the other bartenders to prove he has more teeth. The smile falls off his face the minute he steps from behind the bar. When he sees Lecher and Ron approaching, he throws a rag over his shoulder. A man sips his glass at the bar, kicking it with his alligator skin shoe in time to Don's shouted rendition of *Proud Mary*. Staring at Ron cross the room, the man finally signals for assistance with a wave of his finger.

“Thank you for your service,” the man says, handing Ron a hundred dollar bill. Ron thinks he must have misheard over the loud music. He draws closer to hear better.

“But I didn't serve you anything,” he says. “That was the bartender. You're supposed to pay him.”

“Didn't you?” He points to Ron's leg. “I'm pretty good at spotting a prosthetic by a person's stride. Soldiers too. So many of them are clients. Plus, I was a medic. They flew a bunch of us out to Woodstock in '69. It's funny, if you did drugs at Woodstock, you were fighting the war effort, but if you overdosed at Woodstock, you directly benefited from its infrastructure. The concert wouldn't have been so peaceful if it wasn't for us.”

The man waves the bill. Ron thinks about taking it. He could even whip out his dog tags that he never has removed. After the military rescinded all Ron's benefits, though, he refuses to accept the man's pittance since it comes circuitously from the military. Of course, here Ron is at his job that he got for name-dropping the marines. He waves the man away, hardly able to hide how pathetic the offer makes him feel.

The year he served before his dishonorable discharge was the most peaceful one in memory. Foster care, where Ron spent his childhood, furnished him with too many brothers to count and none to call on. The marines, by contrast, are an exclusive brotherhood bound by a common cause. Knowing friend from foe required a simple comparison of uniforms. Ron graduated near the top of his class in sniper school, and the military soon became the family he never had.

His fire team was garrisoned in a concrete culvert near Mahmoudiyah. From their cover they watched an enemy supply train: several farmers with a mule-drawn, barley-packed cart full of rocket casings picked their way through a valley. The first volley put the enemy in the dust, echoing off the crumbling hills like return fire. Two of the farmers still lived, bleeding out in the sand. The others' shots were near misses.

You fight us, Ron thought, here's what you get. He took aim into the shaded recess of a man's Keffiyeh to stop his squirming. The JAG officer prosecuting Ron's case called it "the double-tap," and went on to suggest the other incapacitated enemy combatant would have met the same fate if Gibbs hadn't taken swift action to thwart Ron's next shot with a well-placed one of his own to the leg.

Leaving the man in the alligator skin shoes at the bar, Ron heads for Beaver's closet office where he finds the others waiting. D.K. and Lecher sit on a couple eighty-sixed kegs along the wall, which is decorated with spreadsheets. A picture on Beaver's desk has him grinning and shaking the hand of one of the owners with both of his. Ron takes the empty keg between Lecher and D.K. They flank him like airbags, holding him upright with their puffed shoulders.

“Hey,” Lecher says, “Ron called him in over the radio. He said he had dope. I went to escort the dude off the premises, but he tried to get away and slipped.”

Lecher, who fought mixed martial arts, had actually choked the man by pulling his arm across his windpipe before bashing his face with a free fist. At Ron’s command, Lecher ran down from the balcony where he usually patrolled for people shooting up or having sex in the dark.

“He probably saw us coming and tossed the drugs away,” D.K. added. “Or maybe he downed a whole bag of PCP, you know, like to destroy the evidence; which would explain why he claims to remember us beating on him. He was probably bugging.”

Ron had seen D.K. carry the flailing man to the sidewalk like an old toy running out its wind. The second he clocked out, D.K. always put on his leather vest with the Hell’s Angels logo. His Fat Boy Harley roused the entirety of any household he rumbled past when on his early morning rides home from work. During his shift, he stationed himself between the bar and the bathrooms, checking intermittently under the stalls for more than one set of legs. That was all the proof he needed to lift the door off its hinges and confiscate whatever he found the people inside snorting off the toilet-paper dispenser.

“Well,” Beaver says. “I don’t care what the guy was taking since we can’t prove it. The point is, no matter what the reason, this looks bad. And Ron, you’re the one I’m supposed to be able to trust to keep this kind of thing in check. I mean, I want you to keep drugs out of the venue, but if people are getting hurt in the process, then we’re doing more harm than good. Just know that we’re all on thin ice here.”

He sends D.K. and Lecher out of the room but tells Ron to stay. “Rachel called while you were changing the marquee. You can use my phone to call her back.”

He wonders what Rachel is doing up at such a late hour. Only rarely does she stay up past ten, and oftentimes she awakes to Ron lying down to bed, starting her day as he drifts off to sleep.

Rachel picks up before the first ring finishes.

“I’m pregnant,” she answers, without even asking to see who’s calling.

“Unplanned,” he says, after a moment of silence.

Rachel never mentioned a kid as part of her proposal. Ron had wanted the relationship to end long before they got around to moving out of Beaver’s basement, so that even the question of how to split a home would not complicate the break-up. He knew he couldn’t keep the dishonorable discharge a secret for life. Eventually, she’d want him to get a better job—sooner rather than later, given the kid. What would happen when she realized that he can’t get a better job and, worse, why? Ron had been waiting for the perfect time to leave: late enough to pay off his leg but early enough to remain the war hero in everyone’s memory. Now, he wonders if such a time exists.

“Well, we didn’t plan it,” she says. “We were probably going to start having kids soon anyway, right?”

“Right.” In frustration, Ron slams his thigh with his fist but then remembers Beaver is still beside him. “Of course you’re right, but this is very soon.”

“I know. It’s sooner than I thought too. Don’t worry about it, though. We’ll get the money somehow.” She means Ron will get the money. “Congratulations, Dad.”

Rachel laughs.

“Oh yeah, you too,” Ron says. “Congratulations, Mom.” Beaver bookends his giddy grin with two shaking fists.

“See you when you get home, honey? We’ll celebrate?”

“Yeah. Sounds great.”

Ron wonders how in the hell he could get a mortgage on a home when he hasn’t even paid off his own body yet. After fighting someone else’s war for a year and narrowly escaping prison time for fighting it too well, Ron will not indenture himself again. If he does, his child will discover the man his father really is. Better he know nothing, nothing more than Ron knows about his own father. Rachel will tell the kid stories, even if she doesn’t want to. Before she died, Ron’s mother spoke often about her husband despite what he’d done. Ostensibly, Ron’s father had been a good man: a charmer, a joker, and a hard worker. It’s just that, one day when he left for work, he didn’t come home. She didn’t know much more than that to tell, and neither will Rachel. Ron is a peacekeeper with a pawnshop purple heart for proof—that’s the legacy he’ll leave—but only if he leaves soon.

He hangs up the phone and stands. Halfway out the door of his office, Beaver grabs Ron in a bear hug.

“I’m going to spoil the heck out of my nephew,” he says, finally releasing Ron and giving him his hand to shake. Ron does, then notices Lecher and D.K. still near the bar, both staring—waiting.

“See you after your shift?” Beaver says. “We’ll celebrate.” He ducks under the bar’s trapdoor, coming up again with tin and mixing glass. Ron joins the other bouncers.

“What was that about?” Lecher asks.

“Nothing,” Ron says distractedly. “Forget about it.”

“Look Ron,” D.K. adds. “We’re concerned that you’re, you know, like not your normal self lately. That guy last night clearly didn’t have any drugs. I saw it in his face once I got him out to the curb. Do not call it in unless you’re sure. We’re down in the crowd, Ron. You’re supposed to be the eyes.”

“What does Ron care, D.K.?” Lecher smiles and shakes his head. “He might as well be a fixture at this place, as long as his hands stay clean and ours get dirty.”

“Lecher, come on,” Ron says. “The guy had drugs. I made sure. Why would I call in someone who didn’t? I’m sorry I didn’t see who he handed them off to, but the view from the catwalk isn’t always the best.”

“It is the best,” Lecher says. “That’s why the head bouncer is supposed to be stationed there.”

D.K. puts his hand on Lecher’s shoulder and leads him aside. “Just see that it doesn’t happen again, okay Ron?” D.K. smiles. “Congrats on the marriage and all. Real good stuff, Boss.”

Ron considers how much he struggles just to manage two grown men. He will ruin his child sooner if he stays rather than leaves. Truthfully, he doesn’t know if the man from last night had drugs or not. He seemed to, but sometimes, up in the catwalk, when you spend all night looking, you start to find what you’re looking for everywhere, even in its absence. A man’s hand went into his pocket yesterday and came out with a lighter. Ron instinctively grabbed the man’s wrist before realizing they were at the bus stop. Even if the man had been going for a crack stem instead of cigarettes, it wouldn’t have made a difference. Outside The Woodstock, Ron is powerless. Inside, though, he’s

Boss. Secretly, he relishes the power—not just because of the money that comes with it and the freedom that money will buy. The marines kicked Ron out; now, kicking people out is *his* job. His duty is to maintain the balance between order and liberty.

After dealing some heroin to a contact in the emergency stairwell, Ron rocks himself up, toward his catwalk. At this time of night, when the dance floor overflows into the bar area, those at the center of the herd grow brazen. A lighter sparks somewhere below. Ron retrieves his scope that he always hangs in its case by a clamp overhead at the start of each shift. The stage lights stutter, and Ron sees through the scope winged elbows and a bent head about to smoke a bowl. He taps the talk button on his walkie-talkie.

“Okay, guys,” Ron says, “we’ve got someone smoking weed, third row back from stage left by the subwoofers. He kind of looks like George Bush wearing shutter shades, and he’s next to the girl with a hula hoop, over.”

“There are two George Bushes,” Lecher says.

“Junior. He looks like junior.” Ron sets the walkie-talkie and scope down to grab his laser pointer. The green dot buzzes near the man’s temple, where D.K. will spot it easily on the approach. He and Lecher, in their red staff shirts, move from opposite sides toward the center of the seizing crowd like cats between rows of windswept corn. Picking the smoker up in a hug, D.K. subdues him while Lecher turns out his pockets. They have him out the door in ten seconds, and, ten seconds after that, D.K. comes back over the radio.

“Okay, good bounce, Boss,” D.K. says. D.K. and Lecher return to their posts, ready for the next offender.

People come to The Woodstock because they think it's sacred ground. Yuppies from Manhattan that turn their sandal businesses and kale chip recipes into major conglomerates come up here to get away from the structure that governs their normal lives. They hang up their neckties for a weekend and drive to the hills with bongos in the passenger seats of their sports cars. They let their bonfires grow out of control during dry seasons and get quoted in the police blotter saying things like, "Hey man, we didn't know." Ron does. He knows that the same fires that keep us warm only do so by consuming, and for that reason, those fires occasionally must be stamped. He knows that freedom costs ten bucks a hit, so why shouldn't the bouncers double as collectors?

In the crowd, Ron sees another spark in his periphery. He grabs his scope to glass the dance floor. After some searching he sees the joint, passing from one hand to another down at waist level. A woman holds it to her pucker for a smoke, then passes it to the next eager hand. Instead of following the ember, though, Ron stays with the woman. Her hair is pushed up under a flat-billed hat. Loose-fitting flannel hardly hides the bulge of her stomach. She relieves her pregnant lungs, finally exhaling a puff that dissipates around her. Someone standing near the woman in the crowd wafts the second-hand consequences away. Ron dials in his scope so that the girl's stomach fills his purview. He wonders if she's pregnant or hiding drugs. Hopefully the latter since considering the former makes Ron's gut churn. Leaning over the catwalk's railing, he waits for the girl to dance back into view from around a group of men trying to budge their way to the front of the dance floor.

Curly told Ron once that supposedly a child was born during the original Woodstock. John Sebastian even mentioned something about it as a lead-in to his set: a kid destined to be far-out. But Curly said there's no evidence anywhere that such a kid was ever born. Was it a myth? Ron wonders. Another possibility is that this kid, wherever he is, doesn't know his own significance. Maybe his parents weren't around to tell him? The communal torch gets passed until it goes out, with no one left sober to notice.

As Ron walks side to side along the catwalk, frantically trying to get a better vantage point of the woman, he thinks about his decision to leave. He couldn't. If he did, that would make him no better than her—no better than all the hippies who cling selfishly to their own peace at the expense of another's. Slipping poison to the unborn umbilically so they come into this world with a taste for it. The contraband has to be there, although Ron can't verify it yet. If not, it will mean that while a child hangs in the balance, Ron has no authority to help. He stamps his foot, unable to get a clear view of the woman. But he *is* the authority. The Woodstock belongs to him. Everyone claims it, but taking care of the place is his duty. With so little of Ron's life still under his control, he refuses to forfeit this final vestige of power. Lacking the ability to help, Ron can still destroy.

“We got another one,” says Ron, pushing the radio's talk button. “Standing near the trashcan, stage-left, blue hat.” He takes his finger off the talk button but then presses it again. “Drugs under her shirt. Over.” With his scope in one hand and his laser pointer in the other, Ron grinds his teeth, waiting for the truth to tumble out onto the dance floor for everyone to see.

Lecher grabs her first. The woman claws his face, and he punches hers. D.K. catches up, squeezing the woman as Lecher's hand disappears up her shirt. Suddenly, he's slapping D.K. on the shoulder, trying to get him to drop her. She tumbles to the floor. Bill, the Hendrix look-alike, starts to play *The Star-Spangled Banner* while Ron rushes down the back staircase. He savors the last seconds of hollow quiet before bursting through the double doors at ground level. Beaver is standing on the other side.

"I want you to get Lecher out of here, Ron," Beaver says. "Some knocked-up chick's saying he punched her. And then I want to talk to you."

He follows Ron, as he clears a path through the crowd to where Lecher is still trying to help the pregnant hippie regain her composure. A disintegrated bar napkin Lecher uses to wipe the blood off her face still sticks to her cheek like peeling skin. Lecher sees Ron and Beaver approaching. Beaver calls to D.K. with a wave, and they flank Ron.

"Lecher," Beaver says, "you're fired. Please leave now."

"You're kidding, right?" Lecher says to Ron instead of Beaver. Ron looks away as the crowd forms a clearing around them. "Do you have anything to say, Boss?" Lecher says, accusing.

"Okay D.K.," Ron says, "let's escort Mr. Lecher out of here calmly and professionally." Beaver nods his approval and moves toward the injured woman to offer whatever assistance he can, but D.K. holds his stance.

"D.K.," Beaver says, "you're on the clock. The head bouncer just gave you an order."

D.K. tackles Ron, lifting him at the knees before flopping him on the ground. Lecher jumps on top, landing a right-hook to Ron's nose. Blood flows from his sinuses, down his throat. He chokes, swallowing quickly to clear his airways. Through watery eyes he watches Beaver pull Lecher back, but when Lecher's shirt rips, so does the handhold. Ron feels his kidney crush under D.K.'s knee. With clenched fists, he plays Ron's temple like a kettledrum he's trying to break open, raining successive blows in tempo until Ron quits squirming. Meanwhile, Lecher flips his switchblade, steel reflecting stage lights in the instant before he plunges it into Ron's shin. He screams in pain, then realizes the blade has only punctured his prosthesis. Lecher saws the knife, and the plastic squeaks under Ron's pant-leg. Each stroke turns weeks of hard work into wasted effort. Desperate to get away before Lecher renders the prosthesis unusable, Ron scrambles toward Beaver for protection, leaving a trail of cellophane and powder in his wake.

"You wanna fire *me*, Beaver?" Lecher says. "Your own brother-in-law is dealing drugs out of the venue. Look for yourself. I threatened to tell when I found out so Ron tricked me into destroying my credibility."

"That can't be true." Beaver's jaw hangs limp, wagging as he starts to shake his head. "Ron, you're an honorable man, right? He can't be dealing drugs, Lecher. You're lying." In desperation, Ron kicks the contraband away, even though he knows it's too late. He surreptitiously tries to disguise the action with a casual second kick, as if struggling to stand up on his humbled appendage sent it sliding out from under him uncontrollably. Beaver grimaces, obviously having seen the awkward choreography for

what it was. There is no use arguing with Lecher or trying to split hairs about whose version of the truth is truer. Ron can tell by Beaver's face that he won't listen.

"Not my brother-in-law," Beaver says, looking at the trail of drugs, still mostly leading straight to Ron. "Not if I can do something about it. Lecher, take D.K. and bounce this fucking bastard out of here." The others slink closer as Beaver starts to back away. Thinking twice apparently, he takes a running punt at Ron's good leg, sweeping it out from under him while bystanders jump back to avoid the second wave of Beaver's fury.

Lecher and D.K. drag Ron by his feet toward the back exit so he can have the rest of his beating in the alley behind The Woodstock.

"My father's a lawyer," Ron lies. "You better watch out I don't sue your asses." His threats just make the kicks harder. He squirms around a trashcan, hoping it will shield some portion of their blows.

"You are assaulting a disabled veteran." Ron screams. "This does not look good for you. You guys are gonna be so sorry." D.K. picks the trashcan up, over his head, then slams it back down with the full force of his weight. For a second, the alley goes blurry.

Ron's head throbs. He feels something slimy against his cheek and recoils in disgust, thinking it alley juice, but soon notices the puddle of his own blood. Slowly, he rises to his feet, testing the function of both of his legs. Assured he won't fall, he takes off at a jog.

With a piece of his prosthetic peeled and dragging, Ron can only think of getting home—Beaver's home really—before he can pull himself away from the mess inside The

Woodstock long enough to call Rachel and tell her what's happened. If she heard Ron's version first, she might at least let him be a father to his child. The child is all he has left now. If Ron's identity is a lie then he will borrow his child's and live vicariously through its accomplishments. Everything it does will be because Ron was there to set the example.

Ron can tell he's too late as he pants up the walkway, looking at his stuff in a pile by the front door Rachel refuses to open.

"Just leave the engagement ring in the mailbox, Ron," she says from within the house. No matter how much Ron pounds, Rachel will not respond again. He scratches dried blood off his upper lip.

Sitting down on the stoop, suddenly shivering, wondering what to do next, Ron's imagination conveys him far into the future, so that the night's events seem to play out as distant memories.

In a doorway shielded from the wind, Ron will watch a young man, his son, change the marquee. Curly will walk down the sidewalk leading a group. He'll tell a story that ends with some soldier and a spirit who has nowhere else to go.

"You can still hear footsteps on the catwalk," he'll say.

"Uh, yeah," my son will interject. "I hear them every time I'm walking around up there." The group will chuckle. Then, a drunk will stumble out of the lobby. Seeing the porcelain "Woodstock" scrambled on the sidewalk, the man's widening eyes will signal the senile epiphany forming behind them. He'll grab one of the letters while Ron's son has his back turned, and walk briskly away, clutching the souvenir, smiling to himself. That's when, from out of the darkness, Ron will limp. One swift shot to the man's neck

will send him running for the intersection. No one will notice the clatter of porcelain on pavement. In fact, Ron's son will forget the "S" after he finishes, leaving his father outside to guard it until closing.