Boys dancing with men: fiction

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Iowa State University
Boys dancing with men: Fiction

by

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This is to certify that the master's thesis of

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has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have the most sincere gratitude toward those who have had a significant role in my continuing development as a story writer. I have not reached this point, such as it is, alone. Surely the instruction, influence and goodwill of some important individuals will reach far into my future. I thank the following mentors for their professional and personal presence over the past several years: Carol Sparks, Maureen Fry, Kent Dixon, Timothy Wilkerson, M. Evelina Galang and Debra Marquart. I shall travel onward from this point with fond remembrance of your teachings, and with anticipation of our next meeting as friends and colleagues.

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Not long ago, I was returning from a conference in New Orleans with a group of other graduate students. It had been a long drive that day. We entered southern Iowa near dusk, and as our van moved away from the Mississippi River it had been hugging throughout our trip northward, the land cleared away. The trees and other greenery gave way to long, clean stretches of farmland. It was still late winter, but there was no snow covering the earth, which lay there brown and plain and reaching out to the sky.

I was sitting in the back of the van, and as we shot through the end of another day, I watched the sun die beneath the horizon. The sky lit up in purples and pinks and oranges of all kinds, but the earth grew darker. As the sunset became more spectacular, the earth receded further away until it looked like night waiting for the day to finish its last dance.

People around me were talking, listening to music, sleeping. But I could not stop watching this sunset because at that moment I had no idea how I had arrived in this place, with Iowa slipping past beneath me and the day losing its color against my retinas. Before long, the day would close and I would be left with only the dark earth. The day had passed before my eyes, much too quickly, and I wasn’t sure exactly how I had arrived at the end of this day, and how I had ended this day unzipping Iowa on the road.

I can’t plead total ignorance, of course. I did understand a great deal about how I had arrived in that place at that time. I knew something of my choices—my good ones and bad ones—that had conspired together to make my life as it existed at that moment. I knew why I arrived in Iowa instead of Oregon or Ohio or Indiana.

But it was the sort of moment I have every so often, when I shake the crud from my eyes and yawn and look around me as if everything is new, and I’ve just woken into it. It is a
moment of passage, of old lives I’ve lived, of living people I will never see again. A moment when I wonder over the tiny choices that spin our lives off to different places and fates. A moment to think of how our choices knick away possibilities and send us here instead of everywhere else.

We can only be in one place at a time.

And what sends us to the places we occupy with simple singularity? How did I end up in Iowa when all my family lives in Ohio? Where is my ex-fiancée right now? Who is this man she has married? What of the loss of friends and estrangement from family I have endured over the past two years? And for that matter, what of my year as a waiter in a tavern, the way my life drained away into the glib culture of food service, into beers and liquor and drunk driving and a woman whose abysmal mysteries I barely glimpsed at?

What of these choices? Where have they taken me?

This is not simply a matter of exploring chance. When I sit in the back of the van and watch another day end, I am also thinking about those choices—the daily, incidental types—that take us where we ultimately go. Like my mother, who watched her father die and told me afterwards that she wondered what it was like for him, the end of that last breath, alive for just a moment longer, the heart finally all still—like her, I wonder about people who pass from one type of life to another. I’m interested in what constitutes this passage. Does it always need to be our graduation or wedding days, or the night our mother or father died suddenly of a heart attack?

I think not. More likely, our lives are strung together by the incidentals of daily life, not those relatively few memories emblazoned into our psyche. Certainly most days in my
America pass by in smooth, comfortable patterns. What changes our patterns into new patterns could likely be as incidental as a walk to the post office, a port instead of an ale, sitting at the bar instead of sitting alone in a booth. These are choices, not chance. Every so often, these small choices take us somewhere different. Their impact is disproportionately large.

That's what you'll find in my stories, I hope. Each of my main characters are, quite by coincidence, either boys or men, in all their various incarnations. And each are coming up against places in their lives where, to put it passively, choices are made. By the end of the story they exist within, the primary characters cannot go back to the place where the story began. These characters are changed people, even if they will not discover this difference until the story has finished, like the sunset that squeezes its million colors into only a few spastic moments, fighting the turn of the earth.

That is to say, the sunset may not have known exactly what it was saying or doing. I'm sure it had no care at all about a transplanted Ohioan staring into its belly and listening, listening to its catcalls. But it left me with a sense of something beyond itself; when the cold dirt had reclaimed the landscape, I was still thinking of the dying and not the death. And I am still thinking about those few moments in southern Iowa. And I hope that these stories leave my readers with a sense of the same kind, that thing which reaches beyond the last word of a story’s life, to what may be that new, changed place for the character they have followed for a time. The places may not be good places, or uplifting, or better—but such is the way with lives, sometimes. After all, for all the beauty of the falling sun and the dying day, what I remember feeling is loss. I didn’t want anything back, but I missed the places I had been and people I had known, and all the events I had grown estranged from, and how the days are
always ending and never beginning again, and I cannot go back to see old haunts and the people who once lived there.
LITTLE MISTER UTAH

My mother sometimes like to tell me why she's famous. Usually it's late on some weekend night, or after drinks at The Lasso after work, when she comes home fumbling with her keys, pressing her weight against the plastic door of our trailer, literally falling into our little home, all warm in the winter, and I'll hand her the hot cup of tea I've had steeping for an hour, keeping it warm with occasional shots from the microwave, until it's dark green and thick.

She plops down on that plush chair that predates me, and she will point to the once-glossy poster of David Lee Roth, that first guy to headline and sing for Van Halen, which she's attached to the wall above our television, and she will go on about her days as a groupie. I always curl myself into the droopy corner of our couch, the end closest to her, and cup my own tea and listen to her wild tales of adventure and what she did when she was a younger, happier woman.

Brady, she says, and I only let her call me Brady at twelve, everybody else calls me Brandon, have I ever told you about me and David? She has, she's told me a million times, but I know she wants me to hear it for the first time again, so I nod the negative and she goes on about the years she spent traveling with Van Halen when they were just a club band, before they hit it big in the eighties, when David was still their front man—to mention Sammy Hagar in this house is blasphemy—and she traveled alongside the band in a black Pinto with two other groupies, and the competition was fierce! They all wanted David, she says, but show after show he always went with other women. But they carried on, undeterred, and they took mental notes and spiked their hair higher, tightened those skirts and cropped them closer to their rear ends, anything so that David would see them late in the concert, screaming in the front row, looking up to the great god David and his long sandy hair and
spandex bodysuits and white teeth—my mom literally cringes here, the mind-image of David so great and vivid, like he’s right here with us—until one night at a small show in Nevada he did see her, and he liked what he saw, yes, yes indeed.

But it was a small show that night, she says, her mouth corners drooping in doubt, what if he just settled? This is where I come in, always. Mom, I say, you are a beautiful woman now, and I am sure that you were stunning back then, all decked out and dressed up like you were. It was only a matter of him seeing you, I tell her, and she accepts the comfort, nodding her head in my direction and sipping from her tea—green tea, I should note, good for one’s immune system—and finishing the story: David nodded to a security man at the side, who swooped over to my mother and placed a backstage pass around her neck, and only an hour or two later, after mingling backstage and trying coke and finally getting David alone, did she finally sleep with him. February 26, 1975. She mercifully spares me the details each time, instead falling off into some nostalgia-hued dream, her narrative trailing away, her body against the firm, worn back of that seat, as she stares off into the distance of that poster, still autographed to her, which David signed against her back as they lay in bed (he kept a sharpie on the nightstand, the requests were so many): To Babette, with memories from today until sometime tomorrow, David Lee Roth. Babette was my mother’s groupie name back then, the one she pitched to men less famous than David, but he liked it, a nod and a guffaw when she told him, but it’s not as good as her real name which is Madeline. It’s classy and I tell her that a woman named Madeline is too good for a rock star, and in fact too good to wait tables at the Melodee Restaurant in town, because I’m always pushing my mom to become more than she is. I believe in her potential, and what may be for her, since she is smart and beautiful and she has had it rough besides.
But I tell her and she is still looking at that poster, and she has set down the tea saying, It's a bit too strong, Brady, and for the first time I catch the scent of heavy liquor wafting off her body. Do you want some graham crackers? I ask her, Some scones? I'm getting up to take the two steps to our kitchen, but I see that her eyes are heavy. So I sit down again and I look at her, a curled ball of drunk in the seat, still wearing her apron from work, starting to fall off toward sleep, and I leap up to prepare the bed and fold the covers just the way she likes, with her pillow fully exposed and the sheets peeking out so she can just fall in there and I can wrap the warmth around her. Brady, she says to me as she falls asleep, It's just you and me, kiddo, and don't forget it. And I know she's talking about my daddy again, who only comes up when she's drunk or screaming in her sleep, who only comes up when it's just us, the two people he left behind when he went with that pretty young girl on his gleaming new motorcycle, kicking up desert dirt to remind us how old we are to him, as old as the dirt in this town, the way it sets there and sets there on top of everything, even us, even us, and then she is asleep.

I go back to the living room and clean up our little mess, the cups and the tussled blanket where she crumpled against the fabric, and I look at David and then I look out the window. These are the Utah mountains in the winter after all, and our town is barely a blip on anything, and Madeline’s had it hard, and that’s what I think about while I stare out there, and David observes us from above the television set, his big rock star mouth puffed out, spandex leg resting on an amplifier, blonde locks falling over his tight tan face, saying to me that my mother was the best he'd ever had, period, and you should be proud, boy, and your daddy was a fool to let this shit get away.
But lately my mother hasn’t been coming home every night, so her hot cup of tea steeps until morning, when it looks like cold syrup and awfully strange in the daylight, and it stinks up the whole living room, but rather than worry I busy myself with cleaning the place. The problem with a small place is that it can get grimy in about a day, no matter how much you clean it, even if there are only two people, but at least it keeps me busy. My mom has been staying with that Terry and I don’t like it one bit. He lives in town, a freelance lumberjack from Oregon who came down here for reasons unclear, but he left behind a wife and a couple rugrats, as he calls them, to start anew. Thought maybe I’d try a new line of work, I heard him say over dinner one night, one of their first dates, and my mother was so nervous that she kindly asked if I would mind being locked in my room for a couple hours so that she could enjoy some alone time with this new man. But no matter—I read a book on aviation because I fully plan to build planes when I get older, and I listened to this Terry talk. His voice was slight and creaky, like they don’t speak much in those forests up north, and he talked all about being a lumberjack and his strong hands, and how difficult it can be to find someone to appreciate you, even the people you create and bring into this world and rear and provide for. I had to agree with him on that one, sure.

After then their date had ended and Terry was putting on his coat, my mom clicks my lock and springs me, Brady this is Terry, she says, I just made him that broccoli special you like so much. Of course I taught her how to make it, but I know she wants to impress this Terry even though I wasn’t all that impressed by him, so I let her have that one. Oh, I say, isn’t it great? Terry rubs his belly and I hear his rough hands scratch against the worn flannel of his shirt and he says, Oh, yes, I loved it a lot, your mother is a very sweet woman, did you know? I want to smart off and tell him that I taught her nearly everything she knows, but I
don’t want to embarrass her. Instead I say that she and I are a package deal so hopefully I’ll be seeing a lot of him.

That’s when he looks at me sorta funny, like he just had the best thought ever, and he asks me to step forward into the light, so I do and he walks up and points to my chin and says, You have quite a jaw for a boy of your age. I say back that I got it from my father, who was quite handsome, and Terry just nods at me with a grin on his puffy face, which looks like it’s made of wet leather, and he asks my mother if he can see her again. She looks starstruck—maybe a bit of the groupie left in her, I don’t know, and Yes, why yes I’d like that, she says. And that’s all it took. Now my mom likes to stop by his house—it’s a real house, she says—after work for a drink or, I’m guessing, a little romance, and she often calls me and says she won’t be home, she’s much too tired to drive out to the country, do I understand? And I always do since she has to make her own choices about everything. But the tea is waiting on her, and just to let her know that I’m thinking about her I’ll leave the tea out so it smells up the joint by morning when she rolls in, and even though I have cleaned up and our place looks as nice as it will look, she opens the door as tells me the place stinks like a rotten pear, and I remind her that she’s the one who decided not to come home for her tea last night.

She comes home one morning more chipper than usual, and it puts me of a good mind until she tells why. Terry thinks you can win this, she says, handing me a bright yellow flyer for the Little Mister Utah teen-boy pageant. I look at it close, something like panic welling up inside me: teen-boy pageant? So I say, handing her the flyer, aren’t I just a tad bit too old for this sort of thing? But she’s already pointing at a line on the paper, which says the age ranges
are 8 to 12. See, she says, you fit right in! I tell her No, it would be embarrassing, and these judges all want cute little boys who can still sing soprano, not some gawky twelve year-old who can’t even dance. She points again and says, Look, the flyer says it is looking for is all sorts of style and flair, a strong presence, and all the things that makes Utah the best darn state in the country!

I am still dubious about it, and this must have shown because my mother gives me that tilted mom stare, which at twelve I am embarrassed to say still works on me, but it does. She wants me to do this, I think, and I can see little glimmers in the corners of her eyes, something maybe happy and sober. So I give her a hug and say, Okay, let me think about it for a day or so, just to be sure I want to do this. As I’m hugging her I look over to the television, where David is hanging, and I give his face a long stare and I squint my eyes like him, and I think: That there’s a star.

I was reading my book on building airplanes later that very same day when Terry knocked on the door. Funny thing was, my mom wasn’t with him. I dropped her off at work, Brady, he says, and thought I’d come by so you and me could have a talk about the pageant, you know. He brushes past me and heads straight for the refrigerator, which I stock except for the beer, which is what he grabs. Then he has a seat on the couch and looks at my book, which I have on the coffee table. Plane building, eh? he says, all friendly, so I say Yes, plane building, that’s what I’m meant to do, I fully intend to build the best planes ever. Why do you want to do that, he asks, and I say that it’s so I can go wherever I want, and my mom too, faster and cleaner and better than before.
He agrees with that, and then he says that he likes my mom lots, and launches into what he calls a metaphor about the Oregon forests, and how he cut down trees to help us all, to make chairs and tables and whatnot, and how that’s like a divorce, or leaving a person. Sometimes you chop something off and change it around and use it differently, and it’s all better that way. That’s why, he says, I had to leave my home, and golly I love those kids of mine, but I had to go, it was a bad deal, one of them was getting into the reefer already, but if I left and went somewhere else, then maybe my talents would be appreciated. I want to do so much for your mother, he says, I can tell her heart is aching inside and I’m just the man to fix it up. Is that okay with me? he asks.

Sure, I say, even though I am thinking that the job is already taken, buster, by me, we’re doing okay, me and her and a little David on the side. David helps remind my mother about something maybe not good, but something she liked a lot, and how it made her famous for a little while, in her own head.

Terry finally stops with this logging metaphor and tells me that I should really do this pageant, for my mother, because she is so excited about it, and we’d get to travel to Salt Lake City, which is a big place with lots to do, and Terry says, We’ll stay in the nicest hotel in the city and we’ll win that pageant because I have experience with these things and I know how to train you to win. He pulls some pictures out of his jacket, they’re bent at the corners and all uneven, but they’re of a cute little girl walking across a stage, then another one with an older man bending down to place a crown atop her head, and another one of the girl up close, standing with the crown on her head holding a bunch of roses, smiling big and happy into the camera, teeth huge and white. Who’s this, I ask, and Terry tells me that the picture is of his daughter, before she got all caught up with the reefer and the punks that roost in certain rural
parts of Oregon, and this is her as he always wants to remember her, when she won the Oregon State River Queen Pageant, junior division, hands down, nobody could even touch her, and I trained her, he says. I taught her how to walk and talk and dress, she was a natural and so was I, he says, quite a team. Makes a father proud. Then he gives them a good long look himself, smiling like he’s hurt real bad, a look I get to see a lot, then he turns to look at me and puts the pictures face down on the table.

You want to make your mother happy, don’t you? he asks me. Yes I do, I say, nodding. This is your way, he tells me, this would give her such pride in you, if you’d let me train you for this pageant then I know you can win it, you’re a natural, quite handsome and mature for your age. You got the look they’re looking for. What do you say? he says. Help her see that she didn’t totally fuck up when she married your dad, that something good will come out of that whole mess that’ll make her happy.

An impressive argument, I admit, and I’m in no position to refuse. Make my mother happy? Sure, where do I sign up? So Terry pulls out a paper from his jacket, a registration sheet, and I grab my pen I was using to take notes on the building of airplanes and fill it all out, every last question and line. You won’t regret this, Terry says, and things were feeling pretty good. I had some ideas but Terry said that I should listen to him, if I want to win the pageant and my mother’s heart. So I don’t say anything at all.

Terry’s ideas were pretty screwy ideas about how I should go about pleasing my mother, like how I should start shaving to get rid of my prized peach fuzz to make my face all smooth, how I needed to walk with my shoulders back, way back, and stick my chest out, and I thought to myself but never said, Hey, Terry this isn’t the military, this is the Little Mister
Utah teen-boy pageant, this is all about the looks on my mom’s face when I strut out there during the talent portion of the show and play guitar or sing a jig or dance some two-step. But he said, This is very important Brady, you’ll be eliminated by the time they even get there if you don’t know how to walk or shave, or even talk, so get rid of that hiccup of an accent you got there, it’s nearly as old as this mobile home you call a house, and he points around at our little shack as he says this. My mother was always at work when Terry was there training me, not there for me to appeal to, and Terry was out of work, so he had lots of energy for me, and in a way I was thankful, because he cared so much about making my mother happy, and me.

So I start to shaving, but I’m not sure I’m progressing as much as Terry wanted because one night, actually it was around dusk, he sighs at me while I’m trying to strut in the way he wants me to strut, shoulders back, my big handsome chin jutting out to the judges and the audience, my smile big but more teeth, dammit! You’ve got naturally straight teeth, and they’ll be looking, because they can sight natural-grown teeth a mile away, Terry says, and they like that, they like it all natural-like. They like things to really be the way they look, and they can smell a faker.

So I say, I got my straight teeth from my dad. Terry sighs again, gives a grin like I’ve just popped him one in the face, and he grabs me by the arm and almost drags me out of the house, down our front steps and straight to the edge of our little collection of homes. He points out past the edge and says, Go up that bluff. So I do, I climb up mostly out of fear, and Terry is following behind me, rather athletically for a man who seems a few pounds over the legal limit, I hear his boots crunching down on the little rocks that set on the steep embankment of larger rocks, and finally I reach the top and a moment later he reaches the
top, too. He takes a couple long breaths, rests his hands on his knees, then comes up beside me. Look around he says, and I do, and I see two things. The first is our town, set in between a bunch of bluffs like the one I’m standing on, all sunken in and gray, invisible to the rest of the world, just a tiny place that doesn’t do anything, it just sits there. The other thing I see is the rest of Utah, or the most of it, a mix of ragged mountains and smooth, beige bluffs, all right beside each other, and they look so different from each other that they can’t both exist in the same place at the same time, no way, but there they are. What makes it better is that the sun is just then catching the tip of the earth, and in southern Utah this means the tips of these flat bluffs and ragged mountains, and the sun lit up the bluffs and darkened the mountains—day and night, right there in front of me, what a sight.

And Terry, he puts his heavy arm on my shoulder, and he says, What you got to do, Brady, is make them judges forget about that town you’re from. He uses his hands to turn my head away from that beautiful scene and back to the gray town, You see that, he says. That place sucks, we both know it, and if they think of that when they think of Brady, then we’ll be headed home early, yes sir. What you want them to think of—and here he cranes my head back to the land—is something like this. Look at it, Brady, see how beautiful this is? I say, Yes, I see. That is how you want those judges to feel, like they’re looking at a boy as beautiful as the land. That’s why you gotta shave, and stand straight, and use them pearly whites to win the judges over. Make them think you’re too good for the place you’re from. And I said, I see.

That night my mother comes home crying, and wouldn’t you know, I didn’t make any tea for her that night because I think, hell, she’ll just be at Terry’s again tonight, so why bother? But
in she came, first stumbling up the iron steps like always, and when I hear that I’m up in a flash, because I know it’s her, so I’m grabbing for the green tea and trying to act like I was just then getting it ready, yes I knew you were coming and all that, but then she stumbles through the door just as I am pouring a spoonful of honey into the cup and heating the water on the stove, and she is in shrieking tears and falls to the floor. She often gets weepy when she’s had a little too much alcohol, but this was too much. My heart opens and tried to take away her ache, but I forget to put down the spoon of honey and a big dollop of it plops on my pants as I race over to her.

What is it, I ask her, and she looks up and tells me, slowly and between sobs, that Terry came to her at work and said maybe I didn’t have what it took to be Little Mister Utah after all, that I was a difficult pupil, as he had put it, so much potential but so much attitude, and maybe I just wasn’t getting it, maybe he had been wrong about me. He had been wrong before, he said, what with the daughter and the dope. My mother, bless her heart, begged Terry not to give up hope, that I could still do it and we could all stay in a nice hotel in Salt Lake City the night before the pageant, and then the next night I would walk away with the title and shower all that prestige on her, and we would celebrate by having the best steak dinner ever. It could still happen, she said, but Terry shook his head, No, he said, when I look at Brady I still see this dirty little town and all the dirty little people that live in it, and I don’t think he’ll ever be any different. He’ll be like everyone here especially you, Terry’d said, jabbing his finger against my mother, and I guess that’s when she started to cry, little hiccups of sobs at first, the kind you get when you’re still trying not to cry, until finally she cut loose and the tears fell out of her face.
It’s too much for me, seeing her like this, so I pat her on the back and say, Here, have this tea, it will calm you down, it will help you feel better like always. I walk to the kitchen and pour the hot water into the cup and stir it quick so it will steep, then I give it to her and the tea is still very hot. She drinks the hot tea in a few gulps like she needs what it has simply to keep breathing, then she falls into a sudden and deep sleep like so many nights before, so I rock her body until she wakes up, and I say, You’ll be all kinked up if you sleep on the couch, I’ve made the bed for you, go on in there. And she does, she stumbles sleepy into her bed, and I hear her peel away her clothes and collapse into bed, and I wish for a second it was like it had been before that Terry had snuck his way into his life with his big lumberjack hands and all this talk of me being Little Mister Utah.

Then I feel myself getting all sad and I cry for a minute right there on our big couch, all by myself, but I remind myself to keep things together. So I sit there for awhile, maybe an hour or two, talking out loud and arriving at an idea that maybe is the most perfect thing I have ever thought, something that will make my mom happy as ever.

I’m up early the next day on almost no sleep at all, but I’m too excited to sleep and besides, I need to do this part before my mom gets up. So I call Terry, knowing he’s still sound asleep and fizzing beer, and I say, Terry it’s Brady, yes, it’s early and I’m sorry, but mostly I’m sorry for breaking my poor mother’s heart. I feel just awful about that part. You should have seen her last night, I say, it was sad and all I really want to do is make her happy. And so on. I eventually get around to the meat of this whole thing, and I beg him—Please!—to give me once more chance, just once more, I don’t want to screw up and I want to make my mother proud. And you, too, Terry, I say. I want to make you happy too, I know you want to help me
better than you helped your kid and I'd feel just awful if you didn't let me have the chance to
give all this help! He can't resist that last part, just as I figure, so he says, Okay, one more
time, Brady, don't waste my time and yours. No, I say, I won't, and I don't, either—I'm the
best student ever made, I listen to everything, throw my shoulders back, use my teeth just as
he said, even working up a little jig for the talent part of the show, even though I have own
special plans for that, and after a few weeks Terry is smiling all the time, Yes, I think this
will do, he is saying all the time, arms folded over his big flannel chest. That makes my
mother happy too, which is good, she's beaming and saying that I'll make her so proud up
there being Little Mister Utah, so talented, so good at things, I'll surely prove my daddy
wrong for bolting with the pretty thing. And I have to tell you how selfish I am, and how I
don't want to share Madeline's happiness with anyone, especially Terry, and that's why I did
what I did at the pageant.

Salt Lake City is a big place that pops right out of mountains and desert and lake, almost like
it doesn't belong where it's at, and when we first pull up I think, Wow, this is beautiful and
our hotel must be just great. But it's in a part of town they don't show you in the brochures, a
little bit rundown and crawling with people I wouldn't want to see after dark—It's the best I
could get, Terry says not-quite-in-defense, shrugging his shoulders, I'm out of work. It's a
Days Inn and that sounds nice, he says, so tell all your friends at home that it was, I don't
care. The room stinks like dead moths, but my mother airs it out because she doesn't want
my clothes to get all stinky, which I'm glad for because we have along the very best clothes I
own. But I keep my little duffel bag in the car so I can sneak it inside the place where the
pageant would be, and it turns out that was easy enough since my mother and Terry were
having a little spat by the time we got to the joint due to the gunfire we heard outside our
crappy little hotel—Still nicer than your house, Terry says, this place don’t have wheels on
the bottom of it—and I just carry the bag over my shoulder, nice and easy while I whistle,
then they hardly notice when I have to go to the registration place on my own, a wave and
quick kiss and then back to the argument, and I sign in. Just before I disappear behind this
huge purple curtain that says WELCOME TO ALL LITTLE MISTER UTAHS, I see them
aswim with all the parents who are tense or silent or arguing, and all that seems so wrong, so
unhappy. I look close at my mother and see the crease lines on her forehead, the sharp snap
snap of her mouth as she barks out her half of the argument they’re having, and I think to
myself, You just hang in there, and you watch close, and then I go behind the purple curtain.

The early stuff wasn’t so bad, it went just like Terry said, and if I smile enough but not too
much and walk upright like I want to be the next president, and I was a great student there,
just so I could make it out of those early, dull rounds—I could do them in my sleep—and
into that talent show where I could do my little thing. I told Terry I was going to do some jig
for my talent part of the show, a little two-minute judge pleaser that could maybe get me to
the next round when it got really tough, something with the fancy dance steps he’s taught me,
but the thing is that I know Terry cared about it more than my mom. So instead I hide
somewhere with my duffel bag and I produce its contents and put them all in the right places
on my body, so I actually look like David, the way my mother remembers him, the way he
looks on that poster in our house. I have the tiniest spandex bodysuit that clings cold to my
skin, and a blond mop of a wig, and some face makeup I learn to apply all those nights alone
before Madeline met Terry, when I was just fooling around, and now it’s done me some
good. I’m really David’s spitting image, I look in a mirror and grin, then snarl my lips and
stick out my chest and imagine a group of women screaming for me, David. Then it’s my
turn and I strut onstage at my turn and cue the music man with the stuff I gave him earlier on,
a classic Van Halen tune called Panama, it’s a song about a paradise, and I look around until
I see my mother’s shimmering eyes right beside Terry’s dark, fallen face, all that
disappointment I’m so happy to see, and I smile and point at my mom and wink and say, This
is for my Babette, and in that small moment of silence just before the music starts, I hear a
girlish giggle come from my mother’s mouth, and it is the best thing I have ever heard.
YES, REALLY, EVERYTHING WILL BE FINE

After All

At eight o’clock I am awake, upright and sweaty in my bed. I look at my window and see that the sky is gray and low, and I know that there will be no more sleeping until this day, of all days, has finished. Then, I think, maybe I can rest easy again.

By nine o’clock I am dressed and sipping coffee in my kitchen. I am looking out the window there too, hoping the sky will break. But it seems to descend lower until the powdery sky looks as though it will cut itself on the tips of the buildings across the street. I watch, hoping the clouds will gut themselves and fall away, and that it will be night and that this day will be over.

But I know better. By nine-thirty I have tucked Paully’s letter into my coat pocket and descended the stairs outside my apartment. I have lowered myself into my car, which grumbles alive slowly, and written a mental map of all the places I plan to hit throughout the morning. By two o’clock, I know, I will need to have arrived at the detention hall. I will need to be sitting at a small table in a small, windowless room. I will need to look at Paully, who I have not seen or talked to in these years, and I will need to open my mouth and say something to him.

Inside my coat, his letter burns.

I drive toward Thousand Oaks and I think about the past for the first time in a good long while. I think about being thirteen. That year, I learned to watch the moon at night, the craters dancing and oscillating, the satellite so close I thought I could lift it away like a painting and set it in my lap and pet it, and it would purr and listen to me speak. I learned to drink liquid metal, to poke keyholes in the sides of cans and pour all that cold metal into my
throat, to hear it gurgle on the way down, to ignore its heavy half-life in my stomach. We do things and we think we know the reasons why.

I learned a lot that year. But what I have just told you, those trappings of small town adolescence, the false adventure all of that represented to me then—that is not the entire story. Adolescence is a web of symptoms. I also got mad, without any cause apparent to me at that time. I turned thirteen and I got angry.
Before

I.

Mom still liked to tuck me in at that age. She still enforced a bedtime I didn’t know I could rebel against, and each weeknight during the school year she would walk into the living room and stand by the television I was watching.

“Would you like some warm milk?” she’d say, her head cocked.

I would take the warm milk, for awhile. Made you sleepy, she said, ensured good dreams. I did it because she wanted me to. I would follow her into our kitchen, my bare feet warming the dingy linoleum the previous owners had laid down before I’d been born, and watch her pour milk into glass. The limited chores of a housewife. *Take care of the children. Clean the house as best you can. Fold the laundry. Smile. Smile.* The lip of the plastic jug would kiss the unyielding lip of the glass, and the milk would pour from one to the other like an ivory stream. She’s the one who made this act beautiful, her tiny cracked hands manipulating the milk from one container to another. She grinned as she presided over the transfer.

Cup of milk in hand, I followed Mom upstairs, brush my teeth, and changed into my pajamas. She’d wait at my bedroom door as I left the bathroom and went into my bedroom, then follow me into the room and wait as I climbed into bed.

“Mom, when is Dad getting home from Zimmerman’s?”

“I’m not sure. Sometimes he likes to get a few extra hours.” She looked at my comforter and watched my body situate itself underneath it. “We’re planning for vacation.”
Once I stopped moving and appeared comfortable to her, she sat down beside me and stroked my hair, letting my bangs fall across my forehead. Part of her ritual was to smooth out my comforter, in her methodical way, until the entire surface was smooth around the shape of my body. There you are. I've put you to bed one more time. "You have such nice hair," she said. "Like your grandfather did."

"I want a haircut. It’s longer than anyone else’s at school."

"We’ll get that taken care of."

She pressed the blanket firmly against my outline, studying it.

"Mom?"

That night, she looked up, into my eyes. Hers were small and gray, always had been, and glimmered with the smallest tired part of gentility. "Happy birthday, Martin," she said.

She placed her hand on the curve of my shoulder, and I noticed for the first time that it was becoming too large for her to cup. She was rocking, so slightly I barely noticed it in the dimness of my bedroom. I looked at her again. She was smiling, hardly visible in the dim yellow light sticking to the bare white walls of my bedroom. I closed my eyes and after a moment longer, my mother got up and slid from the room.

I woke to raised voices—not yelling, but louder and more tense than talking.

"But he says he needs a haircut."

"His hair’s fine."

"He says his hair is much longer than the other boys at school."

There was a pause. I remained motionless, sure that any movement would alert my parents that I was awake.
“Doesn’t he know how much a haircut costs? That’s thirteen hundred bike spokes to me. Two hours of work.”

“Dan, he just turned thirteen.”

Another pause. I imagined my father’s sunken figure backlit by the hallway light, a tall, sinewy silhouette at my bedroom door. “He wants a haircut,” my father said.

Things went silent. The light in the hallway outside my room went out, and I heard Dad’s heavy footsteps descending the stairs. I imagined him settling into his favorite beat-up lounger, reaching for the remote control, cupping his beer with both hands. I imagined a lot about Dad.

Mom shuffled by my bedroom, probably to keep from waking me, and went to their bedroom. I began to fall asleep again. I looked at my ceiling. The streetlights just outside threw distorted windows onto the ceiling. A car drove by, its engine clanking, and its headlights dashed across my room, lighting things too quickly for me to see anything.

I was nearly asleep again when I heard my father ascending our creaky wooden stairs. His steps were quick, punchy. I saw the hallway light outline my bedroom door again and heard my father in the bathroom. I heard rustling, the high-pitched clang of tiny metal objects, his murmuring voice. Then it stopped. His steps began coming closer to my bedroom door. They were fast and certain, and they grew louder.

He opened my bedroom door and walked in, his silhouette growing as he approached my bed. He walked through the distorted windows and I saw one blue eye, the rustled collar of his work shirt, the lean sheet of his forearm. He stopped at my bedside and reached into the small bag he held. I heard the clink of metal again.
He stepped partially into the glow of the nightlight, but all I could see was one dull leg. I vaguely noticed the thin tan ribs in his dark pants.

"Get up," he said. "I know you’re awake."

I sat up in bed and my father began moving. It was difficult to tell exactly what he was doing, his body stark against the hallway light, illuminated in parts by the nightlight and the distorted windows. All arms and hair and legs, a torso, teeth, a flash of something metal, something plastic, all of them manipulating in dim silence just beyond my view. *This is what it’s like to get what you want.*

He took the nightlight from the outlet and plugged in something else. I heard him flip a switch on the machine he was holding, and it vibrated to life. Next, I felt my father’s callused hands on my forehead and scalp, then the cold, pulsing metal against my hair. The clippers mowed down my hair in quick, measured bursts. The hair fell off my head in feathery tufts, landing on my shoulders and chest, on my comforter and sheets.

My father was silent as he performed the haircut. Each gesture was punctuated with a muffled grunt—almost a sigh, but not that soft. And the cut was precise, even in the dark. His hands could place spokes in bicycles six hundred per hour—precision, measure, control. He cut my hair almost to nothing. When he finished, he stood up before me.

"Turn on that light." I saw his shadowy hand point to the lamp on my nightstand.

I flipped the switch and the lamp emitted a weak current of light—enough to illuminate me, enough to cast my father’s face in yellow pallor. I couldn’t really see him, but I saw enough to know that he was appraising his work. He grinned like an artisan modestly proud of a job he has done.

"Good," he said, turning around. "Clean up your hair and go to sleep."
It wasn’t mean, what he said, or the tint of his voice didn’t say so. He walked out of the room without another word, slapping the loose hairs off his hands. I got up and went to my dresser. I looked at myself in the dim light.

My head was round, almost perfectly round. That was my first impression. And my forehead and facial features, what I could see of them, seemed oddly oversized without my mop of hair to even it out. I ran my hand across my hair and felt the sharp, split edges slide against my skin. My father had never done anything like this to me before.

I looked down at my hands and saw tiny bits of hair all over. I slapped my own hands now, releasing the shorn hair into the air. I looked in the mirror again and slitted my eyes, trying to make them appear smaller. I placed my hands over my cherubic cheeks, which seemed even rounder than before the haircut. I tried to imagine myself in seven years, at twenty, with my cheeks sunken like an adult’s, and I wondered where I would be.

After collecting gobs of my own hair and tossing it in the trash, I turned off all the lights and went to bed. I watched the distorted windows on my ceiling until I closed my eyes. I was still not sure exactly what had happened to me, but I fell asleep that night with my hands clenched into tense fists up near my chest, my skin itchy and, I imagined, red, as bits of hair invisible in dim lighting chafed my body.

I was walking across a desert. The sand lay before me in long, arching waves like a motionless brown sea that went on forever. I had no shoes on, but the sand didn’t burn my feet. It was met at the low horizon by the enormous sky, one uniform blue screen. The sun was huge and directly above me. I understood that it was hot in this desert, and that the sun itself was beating on me. But I wasn’t hot. I continued walking. A breeze began blowing,
shifting the sand in front of me, altering the landscape. The breeze became a stiff wind, kicking up more sand, changing the land. The sand began to collect into a hill just in front of me. It grew larger. I looked down and saw my feet were covered in sand up to my ankles. I could still walk, and continued toward the hill of sand. I entered its shadow. The sun disappeared behind the hill, but the sand began burning my feet. I heard a sizzle off to my left but knew my feet were burning. I looked down and saw that all the sand had blown away, replaced by oven burners, all rusty and red. My feet burst into flames and I screamed but made no noise.

I saw a small figure standing on the horizon. I knew it was my mother, even though I could not see her face or her body in any detail. She was simply standing there. I dove into the hill of sand.

In the morning, my shorn head forgotten like a dream, I stumbled downstairs. Mom was busy making scrambled eggs for me and my father, her body turned away from the door. Dad was standing by the large window with a grin on his face.

I pulled out a chair and sat down at the table. There was a card tucked underneath my plate, and when I pulled it away I noticed a grimy smudge of grease in the corner of the envelope: my father’s signature. I tore away the edges and pulled out the card.

The card featured a bright clown in a multi-colored suit leering at me with a painted red grin. He was holding a balloon, which had “13” printed on it in bold white type. The inside read: *Hope you don’t clown around too much on your birthday!* Then, Love Dad. I placed it back in the envelope and looked over my shoulder at Mom, who was dumping the scrambled eggs from the skillet into a plastic bowl. Surrounded by our cracked white walls
and all the nakedness of daylight, her grooved gestures lost the careful aura of the night before. Now I saw the terse, jerky movements of the giant spoon as she transferred the steaming yellow mass from one place to the next. It was subtle precision, this punctuation to each gesture, and maybe that was why I hadn’t really noticed it before.

Then she got a look at my hair. I heard her quick, shuffling steps cease as she approached the table. I turned around and saw her, halfway between the stove and the table, holding a plastic bowl heaping with scrambled eggs, mouth ajar, eyes fixed on my head.

“Dan,” she said.

My father turned his head but did not turn around.

“Martin’s hair.”

He turned to the window again, and shrugged his shoulders. “He wanted a haircut.”

“Did he cut your hair in bed?” Mom approached me slowly, her eyes still glued to my shaved head.

I went to speak but felt a lump in my throat. I nodded. I had started to notice these moments of unspoken tension between my parents, the taut silence stripping the air of oxygen and the space for voices.

My father was still looking out the window, ignoring my mother’s eyes on his back. She stared at him a moment longer, her mouth tentatively forming words of protest and anger. But she swallowed those thoughts and placed the bowl on the table. “I’ll have to clean those sheets,” she said absently, to herself, and left the room. I heard her feet on the steps, then in my room upstairs. Dad chuckled as I dumped some eggs onto my plate. I chewed on them for awhile, barely tasting them, when Dad beckoned me over to the window. “You’ve got to see this,” he said.
I joined Dad at the window. The houses in our neighborhood were packed together closely, and our kitchen window mostly showed into the narrow space between the two houses—a small strip of green and maybe ten feet of open air separated our house from the next one. “What is it?” I asked.

Dad pointed toward the back yard. I had to strain my neck to see the bird feeder hanging from a long nail at the back of the neighbors’ house. It was red and made of plastic, and filled with bird seed. A tiny bird, mostly gray but striped in black and white on the head, flitted about quickly, picking up one seed at a time and dashing to safety before eating it. It placed the small seed between its toes and pecked away at it, eventually breaking through the seed’s tough exterior. Then it did the whole thing over again.

“Isn’t that something?” Dad said, shielding the sunlight from his eyes with his hand.

I looked at the man now that it was daylight and the sun had illuminated his face. It looked rough, that skin, and wizened. Tired. He looked like a man who had worked construction for twenty-five years, not like a man who had spent all that time indoors placing spokes in bicycle wheels as they whizzed past on an assembly line: that sort of work would keep your hands young, if nothing else. But as he looked out the window, craning his neck to observe the bird feeder, he also looked young, in the eyes, the mouth. The crinkles surrounding both seemed, in that moment, only to accentuate his youth, not punctuate his growing age, and for a second or two my father’s face was a perfect mix of youth and middle age: leathery hooded skin, baby blue eyes, a wild white smile.

A speckled black bird swooped onto the feeder and my father gasped slightly. “That’s a starling, Martin,” he said. “Those things are real sons of bitches. You know they sometimes scare woodpeckers out of their own holes?”
I looked at the thing—a gawky, squawky bitch of a bird, clinging to the side of the bird feeder and looking around with round, white eyes. Mine. "Where’s the little bird?" I asked.

"That chickadee? That runt? They’re too damned timid. They’re scared of everything, even each other." Dad looked again and giggled. "I think we’re about to see a fight."

I craned my neck again and saw a flash of blue swoop past the feeder. The starling watched the flash steadily, still clinging to the feeder. When the blue jay landed beside the starling, my father clapped his hands, and the two birds stared at each other for a tense moment.

"Blue jays are even worse than starlings," Dad said.

"But they’re so pretty."

"Looks can be deceiving, Marty. They’re pretty birds, sure, but that they scare away almost all other birds. They steal the nests of other birds, and sometimes eat their young."

Dad shook his head. "Sons of bitches, too."

I watched the birds squawk at each other, open their beaks and poke out a bit, neither one willing to give ground. The little birds were nowhere to be found.

"Watch closely, Marty."

The two birds carefully maneuvered themselves on the teetering plastic tray, never taking their eyes off each other. The starling opened its beak and made a grating call. The blue jay cocked its head, as if to be sure of what it had heard, and moved closer, its long beak jabbing the air.

Finally, the birds seemed at an impasse. They stood, transfixed to the tray, eyes locked on each other. My father put his arm around me and squeezed gently, just tightly
enough for me to know that he was there, a reassurance. But those wiry muscular fingers felt strange squeezing my soft shoulder. I remembered my head again and thought about those same fingers directing the metal clippers over my scalp, the cold sureness, the measured hands slicing my hair in the dark. I shivered at the thought of the cold metal and cold hands and the dark.

The starling flew away. The blue jay perked up, cocked its head in terse turns, and flew away without eating a single seed. “See, it was all about territory for them,” Dad said.

“Where is that small bird?”

Dad turned to face me, the smile gone from his face. He didn’t look angry with me. He just looked unimpressed. “I don’t know,” he said, dropping his arm off my shoulder. He walked over to the table and noticed the card I had opened. “Happy birthday, Marty,” he said, getting some lukewarm scrambled eggs. “Sorry the card is late.”

I was still looking outside, at the bird feeder. There were no birds anywhere. My father seemed far from me. I felt my mind push him away into a far corner, his face falling comfortably into blurs and shadows. I heard my mother upstairs, shuffling around, in a big hurry to clean up another mess, and I felt a tinge of disgust and began to push her away, too. But she was harder—she was heavier.

I turned around and walked to the table. “I’ve got to catch a shower,” I said, picking up my half-eaten plate of eggs and dumping them into the garbage.

Then I remembered the card. I went back to the table and picked up the sneering clown. I looked at it as I walked from the room. It was laughing at me, I was sure. So I dumped it along with that morning’s breakfast.

II.
My father was watching birds again when I went back downstairs, fully dressed and ready for school. His arms were crossed and his hands were tucked into his armpits, which looked particularly strange since he was only wearing a thin and slightly soiled white tank top that I hadn’t noticed before. He also wore a trim grin as he craned his neck to observe the neighbor’s cheap bird feeder. Mom was still absent, but I’d heard her through the thin bathroom walls as I’d showered, quickly stripping away my bed sheets. By the time I finished in the bathroom, she had replaced the old sheets with clean white ones. *All is as it was.*

"Where’s Mom?"

Dad uncrossed his arms and stopped grinning. "She went to get some detergent," he said, looking over his shoulder. "Ran out."

I nodded. Dad looked at me again, squinting as he studied my figure, appraising me as I imagine he had the dark haircut the night before. "You look handsome with that haircut," he said. "Like a real bad ass." He nodded, as if to convince himself.

For the first time, I rolled my eyes at him. "Whatever," I said, turning to walk away.

My father was across the room in a flash, given his bad knee, his lean strong fingers grappling my arm and yanking me backwards. The gesture would have been violent had it not seemed so controlled. My body snapped backwards, but only slightly, only enough to get my attention. I looked over my shoulder at my father. He was still holding onto my arm, his mouth curdled into a painful grimace, his hair falling down over his forehead and eyes. I looked down at his arm and saw a thin layer of sweat wetting the leathery skin. "That was a joke," he said.
I met his stare at tried to look impassive, but my arm was starting to hurt. Then Mom opened the front door in the next room, and I shook my arm loose and adjusted my shirt. I saw the blurry likeness of birds scuttling just outside the window behind my father, and it pleased me to know that he was missing them. “I’m going to school,” I said, and not kindly. A surge of heat rippled across my scalp. My mother walked into the room and looked at my father and me, eyes dancing uncertainly at first, then sharpening into focus. *I leave the house for ten minutes...*

My father looked at me, his dark eyes poking out from behind his long, dirty bangs, and rested his arm at his side. He began coughing, the gurgling deep within his lungs climbing violently up his throat. As the phlegm reached higher, the gurgle and cough became louder, until finally my father turned and limped to the kitchen sink. He leaned over it, took a deep breath, and sent brown phlegm into the sink. I saw his body heaving from the effort, his lungs breathless.

I turned to Mom and rolled my eyes. “I’m going to catch the bus,” I said, brushing past her.

The first real stirrings of fear had happened only a moment later, when I walked outside and felt the cold air rush over my bristly hair and scalp, stripping away the hot flashes and anger from inside. I was surrounded by Thousand Oaks, by the split streets and the faces of other poor homes. I was surrounded by beaten, slumbering men, in late from the factory or the bar, sleeping off their life.

I suddenly missed the stifling air of the house, its stagnant warmth, and I considered not going to school but spending the day someplace warm. I looked back at the door and its
chipped red paint—it seemed strangely attractive—until I heard my father inside coughing
again, and the idea of going back in there made me more afraid than going to school.

I remembered that even as I worked my head into a cold sweat waiting on the bus,
even as I climbed on board the bus to face those silent jaw-dropped faces, even as I plopped
down into my seat and hid my head beneath the high back of the seat in front of me.

My friend Terry always sat next to me on the bus. He carried the impassive
expression I had sought at home. His lips flat, his hair brushed by fingers, his glasses soiled
with fingerprints. He gave my head a careful look. “You look like hell,” he said. “You’re
really going to get it.”

I smiled but felt a bolt of fear shoot from my stomach to my mouth. “Thanks, man,” I
said. “But I’ll be fine.”

Acre Heights Middle School was a new building laid out at the edge of town like a strip mall.
A few years before, the state had built a new high school and the town residents had
petitioned to have Thousand Oaks students attend the old school, which was nearly
condemned, but the motion had never gone to referendum. It was too expensive to hire in
new teachers and principals, officials said, to create two schools when one would work fine
for everyone.

So the school still hadn’t taken on the weary personality of most public school
buildings. The brick outside was still deep crimson, and Mr. Shelton, the principal, made sure
that any graffiti didn’t stay on very long. But if any graffiti survived until Monday, we
Thousand Oaks were blamed.
The school’s interior was shiny and loud, and the noisy banter of the students bouncing off the buffed, hard floors. Lockers opened and shut, sneakers squeaked, people brushed past. The noise never ended but simply carried throughout the halls forever, waiting around corners, coming out of bathrooms, worming into the walls. It was easy to blend into all that white noise, to be a cog in the clunking machine of middle school life, to exist only to be made fun of and grin shyly as it happened. It was comforting, in a way, understanding my role.

But the haircut changed all of that. People who never gave me even a first look now gave lengthy double takes as I entered the school and walked down the long hallway to my locker. Somebody whistled. Others unconsciously stroked their own coiffed hair, grateful or momentarily paranoid. Surprised faces morphed into smart toothy grins at the edge of my vision. Boys squeezed their girlfriends, hands grabbing waists, directing their attention to my head with a glance and a whisper, a subtle jerk of their head. _When you’re too poor for a haircut, babe._ Girls stifled giggles, others laughed out loud. Everyone had hair but me.

The looks and the noise combined in my head until the glances and snickers behaved like echoes and the banter froze like a snapshot, and I remembered the measured hands that had caused all this attention and chaos. I clenched my teeth together, put down my head, walked to my locker and pretended I was invisible, floating in fluorescent air, just like yesterday. My anonymity had disappeared like vapor. For no reason at all I thought of my mother’s invisible presence, the sad eyes, and I opened my locker with measured, angry bursts not entirely my own.
At lunch, I sat at the same small circular table in the corner of the cafeteria with Terry and some others. They were from Thousand Oaks, too, and that’s why we sat together. We were not friends, not really. We rarely talked, instead looking blankly at each other, fumbling at our food with disinterest and looking out at the lunchroom until a dirty look sent us back to our food.

But that day, everyone stole curious glances at my scalp when I looked at my food, looking quickly over my shoulder with feigned boredom when I lifted my head. Terry remained himself, though, looking without interest at my head, his lunch, the chattering lunchroom—it was all the same to him.

Finally he broke the silence. “How’s it going?” he said, the implication clear.

“Fine,” I said, closely regarding a soggy tater tot. I didn’t say anything about the constant glances and snickers all morning, the rattling memory of my father’s hands easing the hair off my head and how I’d itched all morning, even after showering. “Yeah. Nobody’s said anything.”

Terry shrugged. “You look sort of mean,” he said, returning to his pizza.

I got up. “I’m going to take a piss.”

In the bathroom I checked underneath the stalls before looking at myself in the mirror. The glass was worn and seemed metallic, and my face appeared distorted and gray in its reflection. My forehead was too large. I squinted and saw my eyes disappear. My cheeks seemed more sunken in this mirror, my face longer. I set my jaw and rubbed my hands together slowly, as if deciding whether to throw a punch. The surface was just poor enough that I found myself convincing.
“Fuck you, Dad,” I said out loud. I had meant to say it to myself, and I was surprised to hear this husky whisper come from my mouth. “Yeah”—this time louder—“fuck off.”

Somebody giggled from the far stall, the one I hadn’t checked. A belt clanged on the floor, echoing off the painted cinderblock, and a pair of shoes hit the floor. I heard cotton against skin as this somebody pulled up his pants. The stall’s door opened and my face flushed in a red mix of anger and embarrassment.

I had seen the guy around the halls a little bit. He was from town, I knew, because he and his friends liked to make fun of us Thousand Oaks boys. The boy wore a tight, confident smirk as he walked out of the stall and looked at me. His eyes glazed over knowingly.

“What’s with all this racket out here, guy?” he said, approaching me. “I was trying to shit”

I said nothing but looked at him, slitting my eyes and envisioning a taller, stronger self.

“Are we mad at Daddy?” the boy said, swooping up close to my face. I smelled his heavy minty aftershave but saw the peach fuzz he hadn’t bothered shaving.

“No.”

“’’But you’re blushing—oh, you must be mad at Daddy. Did your Daddy cuss you out?” The boy looked at himself in the mirror, arranging his hair then glancing at me through the mirror. “Or did he give you that haircut?”

He gasped even before I could speak. My face, surely, gave the answer he sought.

“Oh, he did!” The boy beamed and messed with his belt some. He held one thumb between the belt and the pants. He turned to me again and looked me up and down. “Fucking Thousand Oaks kids. Fucking poor, roaming around the halls like bums.”
This boy used his profanity well, lunging forward with his words, stabbing with precision. He shook his head and reached for the door, his face still plastered with that grin. “I’m going to have to tell everyone about this,” he said. “I don’t want anyone getting hurt in case you go nutty on us.”

He opened the door and the dim bathroom was briefly illuminated by the fluorescent lights from the lunchroom. The boy’s figure flickered for that moment into a thick black silhouette, and I saw my father’s sinewy figure in front of me, holding a bag of metal clippers and attachments in one hand and a mass of my hair in the other. He was grimacing and I couldn’t tell if it was supposed to be a smile or a frown. Then the door swept shut and the room switched back to gray, and I was alone.

I glanced in the mirror as I strode out of the place, but my face was entirely hidden by vertical marks. When I entered the lunchroom, I looked for the boy and saw him standing at a faraway table, talking to a group of girls. They were all turned to watch him as he told his story. He pointed his thumb over this shoulder in the direction of the bathroom. I walked towards him with a mechanical ease I neither recognized nor challenged.

As I neared him, I picked up a plastic tray from an empty table. It was smeared with a white mass of half-eaten cole slaw and sloppy, burnt edges of pizza. I stopped hearing all other voices and focused only on the boy’s pubescent intonations. I couldn’t hear what he was saying, but he was laughing, his chest lurching in forced heaves. The girls sat in their seats and blinked their outlined eyes at his story, and then one of them looked at me and stopped laughing.

The girl’s mouth opened as if to say something to the boy, but I didn’t give her the chance. I held the tray on end, swung it, and hit the boy’s head flush. He fell forward onto the
table of girls as a narrow gap opened on the back of his head and he began to bleed on them.
I heard the impact’s crackle only after it had echoed off the walls and silenced the lunchroom.
When I got home, my mother sent me straight to my room, and I complied only after a momentary stare. She had looked surprised when she first arrived at school to pick me up, then adjusted and narrowed her eyes to meet mine. They seemed both angry and sad, revelatory, and the regret and embarrassment simmering inside me began to gurgle. She had never looked at me like that before, but I could tell that she was well-practiced at meeting menacing stares—mine, I’m sure, was easy enough to dissect. But she was strained from the effort, and I began to see why she always seemed slightly weary whenever I looked closely at her. I sniffed gruffly and bounded upstairs to my room.

I wept for two hours, overwhelmed by remorse and guilt. I pictured how the boy’s face must have appeared when I struck him with the tray, the sudden shift from jovial to pained, normal to searing. I imagined his own mother scrubbing her boy’s blood off what may have been a brand-new shirt, store-bought, vainly attempting to wash the stained fabric clean of blood. Whenever I heard my mother’s footsteps coming upstairs, I held my tears, sucking the sobs into my lungs until they ached. I was sorry, but that needed to be a secret.

I looked at my hands, as well, trying to remember how crisply they had grasped the cold plastic, how effortless and appropriate it had seemed at that time. I had focused only on that tray, bracketing out the rest of the lunchroom and the banter I had never ignored before. And still, even as I writhed in regret, I liked that feeling. I had liked the dispassionate cutoff, the dreamlike dismissal of the rest of the world. I had concentrated only on the back of the boy’s head and the opening I would create there. The empty thud. I’d felt justified in a way that no one would understand—I knew that dimly, knew something of the ramifications. But
only after I had been seized by a burly lunchroom monitor and dragged from the lunchroom and seen several adults swarming around the fallen boy did I begin to feel the first panicked twinges of the sobs that poured out of my face in my room. I had done an awful thing, a violent thing. *These hands.*

The burly man had nearly dragged me through the maze of sterile hallways, and for the first time the place seemed silent. The lunchroom receded and so did its awed chatter, and the hallways seemed lonely and forlorn without the noise of students to fill them. I imagined myself briefly in a straight jacket, weaving through an impossible maze in the basement of a hospital.

We arrived at the office and the man tugged at my collar and sent me roughly into a chair. “Wait here,” he said, pointing a plump finger. He disappeared behind a translucent door, and I heard his deep baritone explain the situation to the principal’s secretary, who then phoned Mr. Shelton in the next room. A moment later the burly man reappeared. For the first time I noticed the swollen biceps stretching his cotton sleeves. He looked at me, assuming a posture of awe and disappointment I knew was false.

“Mr. Shelton will want to speak with you,” he said, hoping to strike chords of fear. It worked. I had never been in any trouble before, except for talking and passing notes. “Wait here,” he said again, and pointed again. Then he left.

I waited for some time, sitting in a daze. For awhile I felt nothing, staring at the brown clusters on the bulletin board, creating constellations with thumbtacks. Finally I felt the plastic fabric of the seat sink its chill into my thighs, and I reached down and stroked the cold surface, hoping to coax it into warmth. But it was unyielding, and I shivered. I stared at
the bulletin board again, studying the yellow map posted in an upper corner. *There I am.*  
*There I go.*

Finally the secretary opened the ghostly door and ushered me in, looking around quickly. I found out why—as the door closed I saw a glimpse of two frazzled adults. “Where is he?” the man said. “The clinic,” the secretary said, pointing the way.

The door closed. A moment later, the secretary joined me. “Mr. Shelton will see you now,” she said.

I opened his door and looked around. The place was cramped and musty, not at all like I had expected. Mr. Shelton, a short, bald man, sat at a miniature desk but who nevertheless carried himself with a purpose I could not understand. He kept his chin high, ready to meet the stares of taller colleagues and students, and his hair cropped closely to the side of his scalp. Without fail, he dressed in varying shades of brown and different frequencies of corduroy. It gave his skin an unnatural tan shade, and sometimes I wondered how he would look in white pants and a Hawaiian shirt. But I could never make the image appear in my head.

Naturally, he had never really looked at me before, so his first look at me was one that told me he expected conflict. His brow hung low, hovering just above his eyes. He chewed his gum slowly, extending a hand and gesturing for me to sit down. I did so quickly and thankfully, feeling naked standing by the door subjected to his furrowed gaze.

He leaned back in his seat and glanced at me, then the wall. I waited, noticing the stale odor of cigarettes or cigars. Dust seemed to cover everything, even the air, like I was looking at Mr. Shelton through a screen door. The sunlight from his window appeared yellow
like the pages of an old book. He looked at again, and then away again. He picked up a
manila folder, read a few things quickly, and pointed at me with it.

“You see this?” he said.

“Yes, sir.”

“This,” he continued, dropping it onto his desk as if releasing a great weight, “is your
entire record, kindergarten until now. You’ve been a fine boy up until now.”

I nodded. “Thank you.”

The principal webbed his hands together. “Usually I just see the same people in that
chair you’re sitting in, over and over,” he said. “Makes me feel like I’m not doing a very
good job, if the same people keep getting in trouble. Like I’m not helping them.”

My leg began to shiver for no reason, and I was certain he could hear the chatter of
my bones. I nodded again, at a loss.

He went on. “That’s why I depend on the good boys and girls to stay good boys and
girls.” He stood up and looked out the window. “It’s hard being disappointed like this.”

We were silent for some time. Mr. Shelton unbuttoned his jacket and put his hands on
his hips, head down. I looked at the floor myself and noticed the seams in the carpet slowly
growing larger.

Then he turned around, his open jacket flying open and trying to catch up, and leaned
on his desk. He jutted up his chin and looked down at me. “Explain to me why you did this,
Martin,” he said. It was clear that he really expected me to answer.

I still felt stunned myself, although enough guilt had crept in that being stunned didn’t
seem acceptable. Mr. Shelton was right. I needed to answer for this. I had nothing for either
of us. I felt my mouth open, my eyes blink, my heart flutter, and I still had no idea what to
say. It doesn’t surprise me now, knowing that I had no vocabulary for what was happening at that time. But on that day, sitting in that chair, my hands began trembling. Mr. Shelton’s quick dark eyes noticed. He stepped out from behind his desk for the first time. He stood before me and cocked his head in thought.

“I can tell you’re really a good kid, Martin,” he said. “And maybe you don’t know why. Maybe you don’t.” This seemed like a revelation to him, and he buried his chin in his chest, thinking. “Maybe you need some time to mull all of this over without any school to worry about.”

He retreated to the safety of his desk and sat down. He opened a cabinet and pulled out some paperwork. “Usually, Martin, I suspend people for starting fights on school ground,” he said. “But I’m still hoping that you’re different from a lot of the kids that come through here.” He bent over the paper and began to fill it out. “Honestly I think that something can still be done for you.”

I nodded, but he wasn’t looking. He was scrawling all over the paper and mumbling quietly to himself as he thought over the answers to whatever questions that form asked. I wondered briefly what my punishment would be until I remembered why I was being punished. Sitting in that dusty room, it seemed so long ago. I imagined that I could forget it. Even the ridicule was a more welcome fate than facing up to this.

Mr. Shelton completed his signature with an uncharacteristic flourish. “I am going to suspend you,” he said, “for one week. But I don’t want you simply sitting at home watching TV. This isn’t supposed to be a vacation. No way.” He shook his head tightly. “Have you ever heard of in-school suspension?”
I had. Apparently it was some sort of purgatory, a waiting room for real punishment. You still had to get up in the morning and come to school, but instead of going about your daily schedule you went to a windowless room with a group of other recalcitrants and did special work in addition to regular work. “Is that where I’m going?” I asked.

The principal nodded. “It’s the best punishment I can imagine for you,” he said. Then he picked up his phone and called the secretary in the next room. He ordered her to call my mother, file the in-school suspension papers and tell the injured boy’s parents that he’s be right there to talk with them. Then he hung up. “You’ve made my day quite a busy one,” he said, standing. “You wait in the lobby for your mother.”

He offered me the door first. I stepped out and into my new life. I felt like I had been beaten. My shoulders slumped. My eyes hurt like I had been staring at the sun. The secretary glared at me over her shoulder. Her eyes caused a guilty, splitting headache.

“Keep an eye on him,” Mr. Shelton said to the secretary as he walked past.

I sat there for awhile once again. Every so often I heard Mr. Shelton’s voice from down the hall, carrying along the shiny floors and impossibly hard walls. I heard a clamor of adult voices swell in opposition to his. Finally there came shuffling footsteps and silence. Mr. Shelton poked his head in the office, ignoring me. He looked tired.

“Hold my calls,” he said to the secretary. Then he left, continuing to walk past the open doorway. He was followed by a man and a woman, and after them, the boy. His head was wrapped in white gauze, fracturing it. I looked at him and thought of saying something, but I couldn’t. He passed by. At the last moment, he glanced sideways and our eyes met. His widened in fear.
II.

My mother didn’t speak on the ride home, instead steadily directing the car over potholes and between other unruly cars. She gripped the wheel firmly, taking extra care as she watched for traffic and pedestrians. Her normally thin lips were almost invisible and white, pressed up against her teeth.

Every so often I would steal a glance, hoping to extract some meaning from her face. She noticed, cocking her head just slightly enough that I turned mine back to face the road, pretending to be lost in my own thoughts as well.

In truth, I could not forget the frozen picture of the boy’s face. One moment he had been merely walking by, his head bowed, sulking. When he looked at me, though, I saw his face change suddenly into an expression of fear. His eyebrows lost their bearings and shot up, his mouth opened slightly, cheeks started to flush. He was afraid of me. Nobody had looked at me in fear before, and some part of me—the part that had guided the plastic tray into the back of his head—liked it. That part of me felt warm.

“What did he say?” We were pulling into the driveway. I refocused my eyes and looked to Mom.

“What?”

She put the car in park and took the keys from the ignition. Then she opened the door, got halfway out, and spoke again. “Mr. Shelton. What did he tell you?”

I told her about the in-school suspension but didn’t say anything about how he really thought I was a good boy, somebody worth saving. She nodded slowly and grimly. “Go to your room,” she said. “Your father and me will need to talk about this.”
He arrived well after dark at a time when I was usually asleep. But I was awake that night and cringed upon hearing the door creak open and close heavily behind him. His footsteps lumbered into the living room directly beneath my room and stopped abruptly. I could hear my mother’s voice, explaining. After awhile his footsteps resumed, and I waited to hear them climbing the stairs and arriving at my bedroom door. But they didn’t. My father. I’m sure, settled into his chair and flipped on the television as usual. I stayed awake late that night, spooked by the ghostly windows on the wall and in the air, trying hard not to be afraid of them.

The next in-school suspension session didn’t begin for another two days, and Mr. Shelton made it clear that he didn’t want me anywhere near school until it started. Until that time, Mom said, I was to stay at home with her.

For the first time since I had been a small child, I observed my mother as she experienced another day. In the morning, she thoroughly cleaned the living room where my father had lounged the night before, throwing away a couple empty beer cans and a balled-up bag of potato chips. She vacuumed the floor in the living room. She mopped the kitchen floor. She dusted everything. She washed the dirty laundry, then folded and ironed the clean laundry. Then she walked around the kitchen and investigated the pantry, making a grocery list.

She ignored me the entire time, going about her daily work, I imagined, just as she would have if I’d been at school. I didn’t mind. Whenever she did look at me, her eyes became pained and a jolt of shame coursed throughout my body. I longed for invisibility, and she gave it to me. Besides, I was strangely interested in the workings of her day, the manner
in which she passed the hours. I was able to observe her schedule of cleaning practically unnoticed.

Finally she left for the grocery. “Don’t go anywhere,” she called after me on her way out the door. I nodded but she wasn’t looking. The door closed.

I was rarely home alone, and I felt immediately liberated. I walked slowly around the house, soaking in the silence. I felt the floorboards creak underneath me and didn’t worry if the noise would disturb someone’s sleep. The place seemed so spacious when it was all mine, and I thought that maybe that’s what I needed. More space of my own. I fantasized again about running away, but what I really wanted was to be old enough to move out on my own, to operate freely in the adult world.

I observed my mother’s work more closely now that she was gone. She cleaned very well, but the house still looked bad. The floorboards were cracked and misshapen, warped by water and time. The walls, too, had tiny splits in the corners and were uneven and uncertain, and white paint was rolled into tight curls in the ceiling corners. The banister wavered underneath the weight of my hand. The shag carpet upstairs felt aged, too, and rough to the touch.

This lasted for a while. I entered every room, observed how clean my mother had made, and then noticed the house’s poor craftsmanship and dilapidated state. Something like anger began welling up inside me, its intensity increasing with each room, except that it was accompanied by shame—for me, for my mother.

I had only been in my parents’ room alone one time, when they had gone out to dinner for an anniversary. I was small then, and confused by the shiny pictures of naked women tucked underneath the mattress, its dog-eared edges just sticking out. But I had
understood that I’d found something hidden as I leafed through those pages, and it was exhilarating. I was still somehow happy even when I was unable to lift the mattress and put the magazine back, and when my father had discovered the magazine simply laying beside the bed. He had whipped me for that, and I had cried, but I had figured the punishment worth the thrill of discovery. That day, I found myself standing before their door again, tempted. I was smarter this time, I told myself, I won’t get caught. Mom will be gone for another hour yet.

Entering their room was similar to entering Mr. Shelton’s office. Everything seemed old and worn. Their bed, which they’d had since I was small, had two distinct depressions where their bodies rested during sleep. There was two feet of space between the depressions. The aged comforter was a lighter version of black. A spring-loaded alarm clock lay on a nightstand beside the bed, the chimes rusted and painful to look at.

I lifted the comforter at the edge and pulled up the mattress, but there was no magazine. I looked in the nightstands but only saw a Bible, a pile of old bills, a half-empty bottle of Ny-Quil and an unburned candle in the shape of the Virgin Mary. I picked it up and looked at it curiously. The candle was white and covered with dust, speckled by dirt. I couldn’t make out the Virgin’s face in the invisible white wax, but her mouth was slightly open as if she was about to speak. Her arms were extended upward and outward, and the loose sleeves of her shawl drooped down in a flowing pattern. I thought about lighting the candle and burning away the wax to free her contrite face. Then I remembered myself and gingerly placed the candle back in the nightstand and closed it.

The room was also clean like the rest of the house, but seemed dirty too because of the dim lighting. I walked to the closet and opened it. Inside was a wall of clothing, all hung
neatly on hangers, and to my right a wiry metal structure holding several pairs of my mother's shoes. On the other side of that, I noticed a thick, leather-bound book that shined even in the dark closet. I pulled it out of the closet and sat on the bed.

I ran my fingers over it. The leather was moist and thick to the touch, treated often with balsam. I unsnapped the flap attached to the front and back and opened the book. Papers of all sizes—notebook paper, lined and unlined paper, thin blue aerogramme paper, index cards, receipts—nearly flooded out onto my lap. I caught them just before they spilled into a heap, sealing my fate and punishment, and collected them together. I glanced at the pile. Some of the paper looked quite old, some recently added. I flipped through some of the papers and saw my mother's tight spirals on each one.

It was poetry. It was notes about poetry or poems she had read. It was a journal. I saw a couple longer pieces that looked like stories. I looked at page after page, too shocked to stop, too surprised to do anything but make sure my eyes weren't lying to me.

I was angry. I had never seen my mother so much as read a book, much less write anything. Why hadn't she told us, told me? Some of the papers were dated before my birth, exasperating me more. I wanted to read every bit, but my mother's secrecy filled me with shame, made me feel awful for sitting on her bed leafing through her most private belonging.

I carefully arranged the papers in their original state and closed the binder. The leather still shone. I placed it back on the floor of the closet and closed it, burying the thing once again. It felt wrong. A part of me wanted to toss the papers out into the world and give them some air—look, I'd say, look at what my mother does. She doesn't sit at home all day and clean the same rooms over and over. She writes. She thinks about the world outside this place. It gave me a satisfying thrill to know it, and an angry one to need to keep it secret.
I was halfway down the stairs when I turned around, went back into their room, and fished out the binder again. I opened it and quickly, without looking at which one, pulled out a thin, yellow sheet. I folded it once and tucked it into my pants. Then I placed the binder just as it had been beforehand. I hid the paper in my backpack, where neither of my parents ever looked.

When I returned downstairs, I looked again at her cleaning job and became overwhelmingly sad. I couldn’t understand why I was so sad. I only knew that I felt guilty to have stolen a piece of her secret and happy to know that this clean house was not the sum of her. But the confluence of those two hit me like a punch. Why a secret? Why was she here?

That night, my father came home from work early and collapsed into bed. He slept all evening and all night. I wasn’t told why.
In-school suspension was held in perhaps the most secure building in school. It was a large, windowless place with green cinderblock walls—effectively stripped down, as if the builders just forgot to finish it. The room was located across the hall from the principal’s office, between two long, parallel hallways. The school day went on as normal all around us, while we sat at our desks and worked noiselessly. We rarely heard any noise penetrate the walls.

Ms. Wander’s sole responsibility on this earth, I imagined, consisted of sitting at the front desk with a permanent scowl etched into her face, watching each of us at the same time. Her eyes were everywhere—every time I looked up from my work, she was watching me unhappily. At the start of the day, she handed out thick folders to each of us. It was filled with our schoolwork for the days we were missing as well as detailed instructions for the thousand-word essay of contrition we were to compose in addition. If, at the end of our suspension, we were not finished, we had to say until it was done. It was important that we were regretful.

I agreed. I put my schoolwork aside, knowing I could do it at home, and set to work on the essay. I wanted to be cleansed by my contrition, but as I worked I felt more like the wax candle in my parent’s room. I had something to say, fine words of regret and newfound wisdom, but they got trapped in my gut somewhere and refused to move. I sat there for a half-hour on that first morning, staring at the blank, lined paper, until Ms. Wander’s sandpapery voice called out to me. “You are to be doing work, Martin,” she said.

“I know. I—” She held up a wrinkled hand and I understood that I was to stop speaking.
“Write,” she said.

So I did. I wrote my name over and over. I wrote my street address, the name of every family member I could recall and the brand names of the cleaning supplies my mother had used the day before. My eyes began hurting. I wrote like this all morning, barely looking up.

At noon the burly man brought in our lunches in a large cardboard box, holding it easily with one hand. He scanned the room, squinting. After he had set the box on Ms. Wander’s desk, she helped him take them out. For a moment, she took her eyes off us.

A folded half-sheet of paper landed on my desk. The boy next to me, a hoodlum from Thousand Oaks, had tossed it over with well-practiced expertise. The two teachers were squabbling over who deserved the lunchmeat and who would be relegated to peanut butter and honey. I opened the note. YOU’RE NEW, it read.

It was a relief to have something to write other than my social security number or the capitals of every state. I wrote back YES and tried tossing it back, but the paper fluttered in the air and fell to the boy’s feet. Before I could grow afraid of getting caught, though, the boy had swooped down and grabbed it, tucking it neatly in his palm so the teachers couldn’t see it. They kept arguing, oblivious.

I stole a glance at the boy as he quickly read my reply and began writing one of his own. The pen moved in tight, uncoordinated bursts, his hands tensed and the outline of his wrist bone pressed against the skin. He had long, scraggly hair that hung from his head all limp and greasy. His skin was white, his clothes gray and black. It created a ghostly effect that also seemed very present and powerful. The tremors of his handwriting shook the desk, his shoes squeaked against the unbuffed tile floors, he seemed larger than the desk. He handed the note back to me just before the teachers distributed lunches.
The burly man dropped the paper sack on my desk as I reached out to take it from him, and a flash of anger rippled through me. He smirked and kept handing out lunches, and when his back was to me, I read the reply: WE HEARD ABOUT YOU. GOOD JOB ON THAT ACRE HEIGHTS KID. THEY ALL DESERVE IT. MEET US BEHIND THE BUILDING AFTER SCHOOL. When I finished, I noticed him observing me. Without quite meaning to, I nodded. He grinned and looked to some of the others in the room. I noticed that there were a few people dressed in black, and that they were all sharing mutual expressions. Each one nodded at the other one, indicating an understanding about which I knew nothing.

“Give me that.”

Paully handed his cigarette to Tara, who used the burning end to light her own. We were all huddled underneath the loading dock at the back of the school building, watching the rain fall. We were protected by the wood dock, but I felt naked. I huddled in my jacket and shivered.

Paully exhaled, stroking his smooth, hairless face. “This is our secret place,” he said to me while looking at the others. “Us bringing you here means that we want to talk to you. You’re not going to tell anybody about this place.”

I agreed. Paully and I had exchanged notes all afternoon, me learning from his acumen how not to get caught. I’d heard of him before, but since he spent nearly all his time serving some sort of suspension, it was nearly impossible to speak to him at all. He guessed, in a particularly long reply, that school officials trumped up charges against him to keep him out of mainstream circulation. “I ain’t that bad,” he’d written.
But I thought he was bad. He had a reputation for being a hoodlum or a bad ass, depending upon who you asked. Acre Heights boys knew better to deride him or call him a Tree, and they even made way for him when he stalked down the halls. He was fifteen. The rest of us were twelve or thirteen.

And so it was with some awe that I had received his compliment. The painful shame was sugar-coated with coerced pride. I felt attached and free at the same time. He was very convincing, and as I stood with him and his friends underneath the loading dock, I felt included and understood.

Paully grabbed the pack from Andy. “You want one?”

I had no choice, really, but I didn’t want one. I took the thin cigarette from the pack and placed the filter between my lips. Paully extended a lit match, the thing appearing out of the palm of his hand, and I bent my neck forward to accept it. The tobacco caught the flame and burned thickly. I smelled its thick odor creep down my throat. I had done this once before but didn’t remember how difficult it was. I steeled my eyes and forced the smoke past a cool barrier in my lungs. I held things together for a second, then faltered. The smoke rushed out. I coughed. My eyes watered.

Paully gently slapped my back. “You’ll get used to it, Martin,” he said.

I coughed some more then smiled, liking the sound of what he’d just said. I looked at him, his pale and round face smiling at me with something like paternal care, and felt his certain hand at my back. He seemed very certain of what he was saying.

I spent my school time sequestered in the timeless room, staring at the stagnant dust and the immovable features of the impassive Ms. Wander, passing notes with Paully while the others,
Tara and Andy, passed notes between themselves. I learned that Tara and Andy had already been kicked out of the school at Little Palace, a small town about a half hour away, and their parents had been forced to move to Thousand Oaks because the school district here wouldn’t bus them all the way to the school in Acre Heights, the nearest town. It wasn’t much of a problem for the parents to leave their jobs and find new ones in Acre Heights—they fit right in at Thousand Oaks, where people often moved between menial jobs. Their father had found work at the same bicycle factory my father worked at, and their mother worked graveyard at the dingy convenience store at the edge of town—buildings and homes on one side, vast flat cornfields on the other. Acre Heights simply ceased to be at a certain line, giving way to the landscape with halting precision.

Paully himself was a “lifer,” as he called it—like me, a lifelong resident of Thousand Oaks. And like me, he and his family had lived in the same deteriorating home since his birth. He was in the same grade as me, but he was fifteen, having been held back twice in middle school. This was his second attempt to complete the eighth grade. BUT I DON’T REALLY CARE THAT MUCH, he wrote me. FUCK EM!

Each day after our punishment was done, we met underneath the school’s loading dock to bullshit and smoke cigarettes. I learned to inhale the smoke underneath that rotting wood, the gray plumes stripping away enough of my lungs so I might enjoy it. We talked about the Thousand Oaks kids, the grave injustices visited upon us and my act of aggression. “That was really something,” said Tara, wildly flicking ash into the air.

I was still ashamed of my violence, and secretly I imagined apologizing to the boy or letting him take a shot at me to balance out the equation. It felt strange to carry this aura around with me, disorienting and charged with power all at once. But in their company I
simply grinned and looked at my feet as if too modest to speak much of my exploits. They all loved it. They demanded more.

Tara in particular took an interest in me, in a way that no other girl had. I had never kissed a girl before, and those first stirrings at twelve had made this poverty an important one to rectify. But being a Tree, the lowest part of the pecking order in Acre Heights, had made such a thing so fantastic as to seem impossible. Girls didn’t really look at me back then, and I took a ribbing from Paully and the others when the found out I still had my cherry—that had seemed totally normal to me, being only thirteen. But, upon hearing that I was still a virgin at that ripe age, Paully looked at the other two and smiled. “We can’t have a virgin in our group,” he said, causing me to panic for a moment: already I felt implicated in their lifestyle, afraid to leave it behind. Then he said, “We’ll have to help you out with that”—he looked at Andy and Tara—“right?”

They nodded, and Tara grinned.

She wasn’t really someone I would have looked at closely beforehand, but after Paully’s comment I found myself growing increasingly curious about Tara’s body. For thirteen—for any age—she wore a lot of makeup, etching out sharp lips in deep red, highlighting with deep black makeup the outline of her eyes. Her cheeks and neck were caked with foundation, casting her face in contrasts from dark details to stark, naked landscape.

Tara also wore her shirts cut low, the triangular shape joining together right at the place where her chest enlarged and raised. It cast her cleavage in tempting shadows of different intensity. Whenever I looked, the open space between her breasts always seemed
both impending and impossibly out of sight. These shirts often hugged her sides and ceased just short of her pants, revealing a soft creamy ring of skin all over her body.

The jeans themselves always hugged her waistline, and I began to envision the tender red imprints the jeans left around the soft skin just below my eyesight. After Pauly’s comment, she began to welcome my gaze with thick, fluttering eyelashes and dark brown eyes.

I was happy to look, and to have my looks met with what I perceived as appreciation, but the happiness was accompanied by a terror I had never before known. A look from Tara sent my stomach spiraling to the ground, queasy and uncertain. I was afraid that my looks would be met with scorn or laughter, or indifference. I stole glances only when Tara wasn’t looking, when perhaps she had contorted her body to its voluptuous extreme, and quickly looked away when my stares caught her attention. But she never said a bad word to me about it. Only later would she say anything at all.

I was released from suspension after one week, but the change was remarkable. The hallways, once bright and shimmering and never ending, seemed cast in gray now. Students who had previously never even noticed me now gave me long, confused stares, as if trying to figure how such a small, bald-headed boy could crack a much larger boy across the back of the head with a lunch tray. Many others made way for me, allowing me enough space to pass the halls in a straight line, virtually untouched. Before, I’d weaved between unyielding crowds of classmates or been the one to give way, back when everyone knew what to think of me. Teachers passed by, still nodding sadly as if viewing a tragic car accident all over again.
My third day back, two things happened. First, Paully got into a fight with an Acre Heights boy and was suspended for another week—this time, it was out-of-school suspension. He wasn’t allowed on school property for the week, unless he arrived with his parents. “Fat chance of that,” he’d snorted after giving us the news. Then he’d looked at me, placing a heavy, trusting hand on my bony shoulder and taking me aside. “I want you to make sure things run the way we want them to while I’m gone,” he said. “Andy and Tara are tight, but they don’t have what it takes. They almost never get into trouble because they aren’t standing up to the people around here. I think you can do it,” he said, patting the same shoulder. His hand felt heavy, and I knew he meant it to. I looked over his shoulder and saw Tara glancing at us, beautiful and curious.

After I got home, I found out that my father hadn’t gone to work that day. He had never missed a day of work in my lifetime, and he prided himself on that fact. But that day, all the shades were drawn, giving of a feeble tan light all over the house like the outside might cause us all headaches. My mother was sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee and she told me. Then, abruptly, she clicked the cordless telephone to life and called our family doctor to make an appointment with the doctor he had never visited before.
Over the next several days, things changed at home at a swift, unstoppable pace. My father visited the doctor—I heard him cursing my mother on their way to the car as I looked out my bedroom window, clutching a pack of cigarettes and waiting for them to leave. When finally the car doors shut, one more weakly than the other, and the car backed out and then drove off, I opened my window, slid out a thin cylinder of tobacco, and lit up. When they pulled in a couple hours later, I lit a stick of incense that Paully had given me to smother to stale odor of the cigarettes. A few minutes later my mother came upstairs to investigate the smell. She opened my door as I sat at my desk, reading. I turned around and saw her sniffing. “What’s that smell?” she asked.

I pointed across the room to the thin sick and the smoke pluming out from its edge. “It’s incense,” I said. “Some friends of mine at school gave it to me. It makes everything smell good.”

She had entirely entered the room now, and I noticed a stack of papers in her arm. Her eyes were glossy and red, and the skin beneath her eyes shimmered from the inexplicable sweat layering her face. “Lord knows we need something smelling good around here,” she said finally, after smelling the incense for a moment. “Just keep the door shut when you have it going. It may upset your father to breathe it.”

I thought of asking her what exactly that meant, but she closed the door behind her as I contemplated just how to phrase such a question. She went downstairs, leaving me alone upstairs in my room. I looked at the walls, all white, and finally focused on the slow, snaking smoke before returning to my desk to pretend to do schoolwork.
Later that night, after both my parents had gone to bed much too early, I went downstairs and into the kitchen, looking for a snack. The stack of papers that my mother had been carrying earlier was laying on the kitchen table, face down and curled into a loose cylinder. I picked up the stack, straightened the paper, and walked to the window to read by the neighbor’s kitchen light, which shone weakly into our own kitchen.

The first several sheets were job applications, each filled out in the distinctive curling hand of my mother. I scanned them quickly: one was for a convenience store, another a warehouse, a thrift shop, and a discount clothing shop. She had already filled them out completely, save the section requesting her work history. She left that section blank.

Underneath these papers were a couple sheets from the doctor’s office that she and my father had visited earlier that day. I looked at them closely, both curious and cringing inside, and barely understood the coded information. I deciphered enough to figure out that my father had been given a chest x-ray and a series of respiratory tests, as well as a CAT scan. The results were unreadable and I assumed that the doctor had simply translated the confused jumble of number and letter codes on the sheet before me. But I still stared at them, trying to arrange the characters into a sequence that made sense to me. This code answered questions about my father, questions I didn’t even know.

Later, after my snack, I returned to my bedroom and lit another stick of incense. Then I opened the window to let the chilly air hide my smoking and scooted my desk chair up next to the window. I lit up and stared out at the yellow streetlight for awhile, still thinking of the codes downstairs and the questions and answers I didn’t know. Finally I sent the burning filter out of the open window and into the street pressing up against me and my house, and I flipped off the lights and I tried to sleep.
It is dark and there is sand in my mouth because I am trying to scream, but the sand only
presses into my mouth and down my throat with more force. The more I try to scream to drier
I become, the more impossible it becomes for me to be heard. And it is hot, searing into the
wet pink skin inside my mouth, and I swear that I would breathe smoke if I could breathe at
all.

I pull forward through the sand with my arms and stretch my fingers until the tips
burn, too, and it feels like they will simply break off from the rest of my body and die here in
this black sand. But they stretch until they poke free of the sand and I can feel the sun on
them instantly, burning my tender skin. I pull myself forward and slowly extricate myself
from the mound of sand. I am still in the desert, and I am still standing on rusty stove
burners, the metal curled into a maze of heat. But I don't burn. It is safer out here.

I look over my shoulder and see my mother, further away than when I last saw her.
Next to her is my father. He is sitting in a wooden chair painted brown and he is holding an
axe, and he is trying to slice himself open with it. But he is too weak and the axe falls to the
sand every time. I point and begin to speak, but a mouthful of wet sand falls from my face,
and then it begins to rain above me as some force of sight carries my parents further away.
Then I can't tell which is which. They keep switching.

Someone places a hand on my shoulder, pressing my cold, wet tee-shirt against my
shoulder. I turn and see a man in a white trench coat holding a stethoscope and smoking a
cigarette. He is both smiling and frowning. He begins to speak but the thunder drowns him
out. I look. It is raining everywhere. There is nothing worse than a rainy desert, I decide, and
the man nods. More sand falls from my mouth. I stop speaking and close my eyes and hear someone shaving and some one screaming. Then there is a cough.

I opened my eyes and it was the middle of the night and I had broken into a sweat. It rolled, cold, down my scalp and I felt it land on my pillow with a soft patter. From the next room I heard a loud wheezing, and then a curdling cough rattling the thin wall separating my room from theirs. It stopped long enough for my father to catch his breath and then started again, each time the noise breaking apart more of the wall and intruding my bedroom.

I sat up as a light came on in the hallway, and I heard my mother’s bare feet race into the bathroom. I approached the door and pressed my ear up against it, careful not to make the floor creak with my feet. I heard the shuffle of pills in a bottle, the hurried motions of my mother’s hand manipulating the plastic cap. The pills still shook inside the plastic, eager to get out, but my mother’s steady hand failed her. She cursed under her breath before finally opening the bottle. I heard her empty some into her hand and hurry quietly back into the bedroom, leaving the door open in her haste.

My father said, “Water.” Then he coughed some more, sending shivers throughout the wooden door. My mother returned to the bathroom, poured out a small cup of water, and returned. I heard my father greedily swallow down the water, pausing every few seconds to take another pill. The water seemed to help, and his coughing slowly subsided. I heard my mother’s voice softly coaxing him back to sleep, and finally I only heard his labored wheezing. The lights clicked off, and everything was dark again.
The next morning was gray outside, and I woke with a vague pain in my lungs like something immovable was stuck inside them. I quietly drew up a small amount of mucus and spit it into the trash can beside my bed.
We were sitting at lunch when Paully called us all around to his chair. He was grinning, half his mouth hoisted up, and slid his eyes around the lunchroom. The monitors were all looking elsewhere. We crowded around his chair. Tara stood next to me, her jeans groaning as she bent forward. I felt her hip press gently against mine.

"Look what I scored," he said, pulling a wrapped plastic baggie out of his backpack. I squinted at the baggie but couldn't quite see what was inside, but I could tell that the baggie had assumed the cylindrical shape of whatever it held. Tara snickered quietly.

"What is it?" I asked.

Paully looked up as if he had been expecting an ignorant question from me. "Maybe this will help," he said. He unrolled the baggie and I saw something like a cigarette inside. He opened the top of the baggie. "Smell it," he said.

I'd never smelled pot before, much less smoked or eaten it, and the odor took me by surprise. It felt like I was whiffing an entire dense forest packed into thin rolling paper. But there was something soothing about the smell, even as I stepped backwards to get away from it.

I noticed Tara lick her lips as she eyed the joint and took a deep whiff. "Delicious," she said in a voice deeper than I knew she had.

I stood up and looked around me. Everybody was still eating their lunch. The monitors were all standing around talking with each other, sharing some adult joke and laughing over it. The pot odor crept up to meet me, and I was sure that in a moment it would stink up the whole lunchroom.
But Paully was already closing the baggie and wrapping it up again. He placed it back inside the small compartment in his backpack where it had been hidden before. “Where did you get that?” I asked.

“Doesn't matter,” he said coolly, not looking at me.

I felt Tara's elbow jab my side, then her forearm slide and linger against the same place. Even over my shirt, I knew her skin was warm. "Get off it, Paully," she said. She looked at me. "He probably stole it from his mom's stash. Always does."

Paully looked up at her, his dark eyes hard. "Shut up."

Tara looked down at him and shrugged. "It's true," she said. "You think Paully has the connections to get himself some weed? Christ. He's only fifteen."

Paully had heard enough. He stood and looked at me. "You've never smoked before, have you?" he asked.

I understood that by smoking, he meant smoking pot. "No," I said.

Paully stepped forward, close to me, blocking Tara's face. "My man, I think it's been long enough," he said. "I snagged this joint for us. First I meant me and you and the rest, but"--he nodded over in Tara's direction--"some people are too damn smart for their own good, and I don't want to share with them."

Tara turned and walked away. I tried to watch her, but Paully's blurry face prevented that. "What do you say we burn this fatty later on today?" he asked.

He meant business, there was no doubting that. Everything about him, especially his proximity from my face, seemed urgent. I thought about it for a moment, focusing on a kinky black curl snaking out from behind his head somewhere. I knew what I had to say.
That afternoon, I didn't go straight home like I usually did. Paully and I walked out of school and directly to a small patch of forest that had survived the development of Thousand Oaks. One of the perimeter roads of the subdivision simply ended right at the entrance to the forest. No signs or warnings were posted. The road simply stopped and the trees began.

As we walked off the road, I saw several dirt paths that had been worn into permanence by previous visitors. They snaked off in separate directions, between trees and over exposed roots, before disappearing as the woods became more dense.

Paully led me down one of these paths but kept looking back to make sure I was still behind him, grinning. I couldn't tell if I was supposed to grin back, as if we were sharing at mutual secret, or if something else was working on him. I decided to grin back, but he didn't say anything. We began walking faster.

Paully stopped abruptly in one of the densest parts of the forest. Still, I saw a few clear holes of light poking through the leaves because the forest was so small. We weren't far away from anything, but I pretended we were. A car squealed its tires somewhere close by.

Earlier in the day, Paully had given me his lighter for safekeeping and, he said, to show that he trusted me. "If we don't have a lighter, then the weed's all but useless out in the woods like that," he said, pressing the lighter into my palm. He asked for it in the forest by extending his open hand. I placed the lighter in it.

"Good," he said. "This shows me that I can trust you. That we can trust each other. I bring the weed, you bring the supplies to make it happen. Like we're a team."

I grinned what I felt must have been a foolish grin and tried to suppress it. I felt my lips stretching against my teeth and my face darkening into red. Paully patted me on the back and dug into the small niche in his backpack. He produced the baggie, unwrapped it, and
pulled out the joint. Its pungent odor wafted slowly towards me but didn’t seem as strange surrounded by trees and other plants, each giving off their own plant odor. Saliva filled the bottom of my mouth, and I spat it onto the ground.

We didn’t speak as we smoked the thing. Instead, Paully led silently and deliberately, looking at me carefully as he lit the joint and held it up to his mouth. He pinched his thumb and forefinger tightly against the end closest to his mouth, his other fingers fanning outward. After he inhaled, he held the joint away and pointed to his chest, and he held the smoke in for a few seconds. Finally he exhaled and a blue plume streamed out, then became misshapen as it clung to the air. Then he handed the burning joint to me.

I held it just like Paully, clenching it tightly. It was unfiltered, unlike cigarettes, and I felt the heat from the pot press against my finger. Smoke meandered from both ends. I took it to my mouth and inhaled. At first I was too fast, and Paully noticed. He held up a hand quickly, then drew it away slowly. I knew what that meant. I took my time sucking the smoke into my lungs. It was stronger than the cigarette smoke I’d become accustomed to, and it burned all the way down until it filled up my lungs. Then I stood there for a few seconds, my lungs aching, as I held in the smoke.

Paully watched closely, appraising my form and appearance like a man who knew the aesthetic well. When I glanced at him, I thought he looked awkwardly sophisticated. He stroked his fuzzy chin and nodded slowly, his eyes growing tinier as I watched. At the same time, he was still a hoodlum. His hair was still stringy and greasy, his tee-shirt faded and dirty at the armpits. The combination seemed impossible, even as I observed it.
I blew the smoke out and coughed for several minutes. Each time I stopped to gasp air, I heard Paully chuckling. When I had recovered, I saw that he had already finished half the joint. He handed it back to me, and I accepted it. I didn't cough.

Several minutes later we finished off the thing. Paully stomped on the roach until he was sure it was out, then buried it just to be sure that nobody would find it. "You gotta be careful," he said.

I nodded in total agreement. I didn't want anybody finding the leftover joint and figuring out who had left it there. It would only take some fingerprint work to find out. Then I wondered if the local police had a fingerprint machine, but before I could make up my mind about that I began to envision just what a fingerprint machine would look like. I imagined something large with sliding panels and a tooth-like wheel, but I wasn't sure why. I laughed.

I hadn't noticed, but Paully was already digging through his backpack for the candy he had stolen from the lunchroom earlier that day. He pulled out several plastic wrapped brownies and tossed one my way without looking back. I opened the wrapping with some difficulty and felt the chocolate merge with my mouth as I took a bite. I saw what the bite tasted like, clearly, and spent the rest of the brownie wondering just how that had happened. I thought about it for either a long or short time. I couldn't tell. The sun seemed to be getting lower in the sky.

I hadn't cut my hair in the two months since my father had shaved it off, and it stood out at all points. The hair on top was a lazy spike like a meadow of wild grass, swaying against the whims of my head. I began running my fingers through it, feeling my rough texture and gristled scalp. Small pieces of dead skin fell from there and landed in the dirt all
around me. I stared at the small grayish flecks and wondered if there was anything still alive in them, writhing against the dead cells, screaming to get out. I laid down next to a few of them and began to listen.

Paully had lit a cigarette and had been savoring it while staring into the trees. Every so often he would begin to make a comment, then turn to find me engrossed in something else, and allow his voice to fade beneath the forest noises and the sounds of car horns. When he saw me laying next to my own dead skin, listening, he rose from the tree stump he'd been sitting on and walked over. He watched me for a long moment, stifling his laughter. "What are you doing?" he finally asked.

I honestly had no idea how to explain it to anybody who was not inside my brain, but I thought about it. The more I thought about it, the more absurd it seemed. I began laughing. "I don't know," I said. I began laughing harder.

Paully sat down on a felled tree. "Get up," he said.

I looked up and saw him sitting directly in front of me, his legs apart, his hands on his knees. His stringy hair fell against his cheeks such that I could only see his toothy smile in the shadows they created. They looked sharp and wet. Tires squealed in the distance, and I got up. I stood in front of him. Paully stared at me for awhile, the cigarette dangling in his mouth, the ash growing longer until it bent and fell onto his jeans.

"You need a haircut," he said, taking the cigarette in his hand and pointing at my head with it. "You need a haircut, my man."

He talked for awhile, and I began to think of Tara's creamy skin poking out between her shirt and jeans. It seemed like a skin-colored cloud, one that would disappear if I tried to touch it. She would evaporate, leaving behind a pile of hollow clothes. Then I moved north,
straight up her stomach and to her breasts, overdeveloped for a thirteen year-old. Her tight shirt clung to their round contours, and I tried to picture them naked but couldn't—I'd never seen naked breasts before, in print or for real. I tried to envision the vast flat landscape of her stomach but couldn't do that, either. I kept picturing my own stomach, matted with peach fuzz and flat up to my neck. I felt myself stirring and knew I had to do something about it. I was tired of not knowing.

"Hey man, are you listening?" It was Paully.

"Sure. I just wandered for a minute," I said. "What is it?"

"I said that I wanted to see how long your hair is," he said, "so come here."

I complied. I stood up and walked over to Paully, who also stood when I approached him. He was two years older than me but only a couple inches taller, and I thought that I might outgrow him in the long run. He tussled one of his hands through my hair playfully, upsetting the lazy sway of each lock. After he finished, I felt my hair reassume its original place. "Amazing," Paully said. "You've got amazing hair, Marty. Really keen locks on you."

He began tussling my hair again, talking to himself about how long my hair was getting and how I didn't quite look mean anymore, just poor. No, this wouldn't do at all, he said, we need to cut your hair right off and put the fear of God in everybody again. He began to use both hands to tussle my hair, which was uncomfortable but also such a strange sensation that I allowed it. I felt each lock sway against his fingers and move in my scalp. I looked past his face and into the forest, and for a moment I forgot that there were actually homes nearby. I heard a voice, two voices, but couldn't make out their words. They seemed to be talking in code.
Paully's hands slowed down and massaged my hair. I looked at him and saw him staring at me. He closed his eyes, clenched his hands in my hair, and came at me. He kissed me.
VI.

Years later, when asked about my first kiss, I would finally tell the truth. I would say that a friend of mine, a guy, pulled me against his lips and shot his tongue into my mouth and moved it around, then drew away, giggled, and sat down to scarf down another stolen brownie. I would say that I stood in place, stunned, and tried to figure out what had happened to me, absently licking my lips the whole time. I barely knew what a kiss was, but I knew I had been kissed. Another person's tongue probing my mouth, licking my insides, was apparently how things were done. I understood that immediately, as if it were some secret I had been keeping from myself.

I did not enjoy kissing Paully. His tongue was thick and wet one the bottom side, dry and sandpapery on the top side. I imagined the muscle oscillating is tight swirls in my mouth, licking my teeth and gums. I thought about how we must have looked to someone passing by, or to a forest animal. I looked at Paully, but he was staring into the forest again and eating his brownie. Occasionally he laughed. It was as though it had never happened.

I began walking back to the entrance of the forest. I wanted to go home and see my mother. I didn't want to tell her anything or even really to say anything, but I wanted to be in her presence. I left the forest behind and began walking in the center of the road because it seemed at the time like the fastest way home, but my street still seemed a long way off. Cars whizzed by and honked. Someone spat their dip onto the front of my shirt, leaving a dark purple circle that looked like a spot of warm blood.

I arrived home to find my father asleep on the couch, his snores echoing throughout our barren home. The television was turned to an afternoon talk show, one of those intended to both help and humiliate those with problems. I sat down and began to watch, but my
father's snores drowned out the talking. Instead I watched the moving faces and mouths, the pointed fingers and tears and the consoling host, a black man with a shaved head and a thin goatee. He was wearing a ribbed turtleneck sweater that gripped his sinewy body.

As soon as I saw my father's body on the couch, I remembered everything I had forgotten so easily. My mother was at work at the convenience store in Augustus, a town nearby, and my father was on extended sick leave from work. I wanted to be concerned for him, and when I had asked what was the matter with him, he glared at me and grumbled, "Nothing. None of your business. You stick to yours, and I'll stick to mine."

Mom had been standing there behind him, nodding, but I could tell she didn't want to agree. Three days later she had gotten an interview, and two days after that she was in training and had her first job. Then she was gone. My mind began to clear as I watched the talk show and wondered why people did this to themselves and each other. She worked double shifts nearly every day, hoarding whatever hours the other employees discarded. My father stayed on the couch, shivering underneath a wool blanket and curling his body into a ball. He often pulled his hands up to his nose, cloaking the bottom half of his face as if wearing a mask. He had fallen asleep like that, watching television, until he began coughing again. I turned from the television and watched him struggle underneath the force of his coughing. His half-face turned red, and he opened his eyes. He blinked slowly a couple of times, getting his bearings, then he directed his eyes over to me. He blinked again.

"Hi," I said.

He sat up slowly and looked at me again. "What's that on your shirt?" he asked.

I looked down at the purple spot. It seemed to have grown larger. I felt the thick saliva against my chest, soaking into my body, somehow empowering me. "It's dip," I said.
“Are you chewing tobacco now?” my father wanted to sound menacing, I knew. I sensed the shell of anger and intimidation in his voice, understood how a more powerful man would have frightened me. I started to giggle, but tried to make it sound like a cough.

“No,” I said. “I’m not chewing tobacco.”

He seemed pleased at that, or too weary to investigate further. I could no longer tell the difference. He lowered his body back onto the couch and tilted his body so as to face the television and began watching it. I sat there for a moment and watched him. The face seemed white from lack of oxygen, as if he was being asphyxiated within the folds of the couch.

I was hungry. I entered the kitchen and flipped on the light. As I approached the refrigerator, I looked at the sink, which was full with dirty pots and pans. The room smelled like stale grease and the lingering aroma of gravy or soup. Maybe I should have been shocked or surprised by the new dilapidated state of the kitchen, my mother’s old office, but the scents smelled good to me and I opened the refrigerator door, ravenous.
I was sitting at the kitchen table when my mother returned from work, well after dark. I had spent nearly the whole time eating, and the kitchen table was covered with smudged plates, wrinkled napkins and empty boxes that had once held snack food and cereal. When I heard her key in the door, I sprang up, suddenly aware of my mess and mortified of its presence.

I had scrambled around for a few minutes before I realized that my mother had stopped in the living room, where my father was still sleeping. I walked to the doorway and looked in the darkened room. The only illumination was the television, which provided me with quick, awkward bursts of light by which to see. My mother had sat down on the edge of the couch, stroking the face of my sleeping father and whispering something. Her house keys were still in one hand, and a new, large purse hung off her shoulder and swayed gently against her body. She leaned down, close to my father’s white face, and kissed him on the cheek.

I returned to the kitchen, embarrassed, and continued to pick up after myself. The pot had mostly worn off, and my mother’s appearance had surprised me into complete sobriety. I moved quickly to pick up the mess I had created, stuffing empty containers into the overflowing garbage can.

A moment later, my mother came into the kitchen and sat down at the table. She looked around. “He’s sick,” she said.

I set down the garbage bag I was hoisting and looked at her. “I know,” I said.

She nodded, curdling her mouth into a frown, and placed her purse on the table.

I joined her, standing at the table and resting my hands on its grimy surface. “What’s the matter with him?” I asked.
“Nobody’s quite sure,” she said. “We’ve taken him to plenty of doctors and they can’t quite locate the problem. But it has something to do with Zimmerman’s.”

“Why Zimmerman’s?”

She looked me in the eyes, sharply, then looked down at her hands. “You’ve never been in there,” she said.

I nodded.

“There’s a reason for that, you know,” she said. “No accident. The air in that place smells like burnt rubber.”

“But Dad only puts spokes on the wheels of bicycles.”

Mom chuckled. “Yeah, in his part of the factory. But that place is huge. In other parts they’re making the tires, burning all that rubber.” She shook her head. “It just smells awful in there but they won’t ventilate it.”

I pulled out a chair and sat down across from her. I rested my forearms on the table.

“Why don’t they?”

“All the workers are from Thousand Oaks.” This was an answer unto itself.

I thought about the boy from school again, the thick smugness of his manner, the satisfying crunch of the lunch tray hitting him in the back of the head. I was more glad than ever that I had injured the boy. I wanted my father to have enough air, to work and breathe. I clenched and unclenched my hands into tight little balls. Then I remembered my head and the haircut, and I felt a surge of satisfaction that my father was lying, injured and incapacitated, in the next room.

My mother looked at me, closely, and clenched her hands together. “Martin, I’d like you to get a job,” she said. “To help out around here.”
I leaned back.
Strange men began visiting my father. My mother told me that they were other workers at Zimmerman’s, and they visited in singles or pairs, shuffling awkwardly in their chairs as they attempted to talk to my father, who had taken up a permanent residence on the couch. He was covered in blankets, shivering and sweating, and tried to smile and pay attention when the men visited.

Their presence reminded me of my grandfather’s co-workers, other stucco men who had come to his viewing during their lunch breaks dressed in faded blue jeans spotted with dried fragments of their work. Those men had looked out of place, because of their dress, and because they were so restless in the funeral home for reasons I did not understand then. But they were looking at their own end and they knew it.

The men who visited my father were the same, and after awhile I stopped distinguishing between them. They were a single mass, a river of blue jeans and flannels, cigarettes and hacking coughs. They each held a nervous grin, they each attempted to cheer up my father with jokes and talk of the shit at work, and how they missed him on the line. And they never stayed very long, just long enough to finish their cup of coffee, doing their duty.

Paully was hunched underneath the loading dock behind the school again, shivering in the cold and looking at me and Tara. “I got suspended again,” he said. “Only this time they’re talking about keeping me out for good.”

He paused, and I understood that I was to assume a disappointed expression. I did. But I did not look him in the eyes—I had not, in fact, since he had kissed me in the forest.
“Shit,” Tara said. “What are you going to do?”

Paully pulled out a bag of weed and began rolling a joint. “The first thing I’m going to do is smoke this joint I’m making,” he said. “If I can’t sell it, I may as well smoke it all up.”

“You sell pot?” I asked.

He lit up the weed, took a drag and passed it to Tara. He held it, exhaled, and grinned at me. Then he leaned in close enough to make me uncomfortable, but I did not lean back.

“You think I pay for this?”

“Most people do.”

“Listen. This is how I work it. I get the shit from a supplier, let’s call him, and he gives me a cut of the money I make from selling it.” Paully paused to toss back his hair. The joint came my way, and I accepted it without hesitation. “I just amp up the cost to my customers a bit so I can have my own cut for free, and the man who grows it never knows I’m skimming.”

“Brilliant,” said Tara, shaking her head at the genius of it all.

I sucked in the smoke, held it, exhaled, and thought of my sick father. I had found myself thinking of him more and more since he had fallen ill. Usually these thoughts varied from intense satisfaction to empathy, sorrow and depression. In some ways I had enjoyed the power he carried in our house. If nothing else, his moods, his presence, all of it, had defined the way I defined safe passage. There were some things you said and did, and other things you never said and did. Now it was all fucked up. I had to get a job.

I began feeling light from the weed again, and found myself staring at Tara. She was talking to Paully, her breasts oscillating firmly as she gestured and made her point. I wasn’t
listening, but I was watching. Her face was bright and shiny, her eyes trained on Paully. He said something and she laughed wildly.

“Hey, give me that,” Paully said, grabbing the joint from my extended hand. “This shit doesn’t grown on trees, you know.”

Tara laughed again. Had she ever laughed that way for me? I couldn’t remember.

I was sure that my father was out there right now, coughing and sickly, and alone in the house.

“I’ll sell it,” I said abruptly, interrupting another of Paully’s jokes.

He and Tara stopped talking. Above us, somebody walked on the loading dock. But that noise seemed far away and irrelevant, and it was. Paully and Tara looked at me, blinked a few times, and then Paully laughed some more. “No way,” he said, holding up a hand and waving me off. “You? No. No way. Can’t see it.”

“Why not?”

“What do you need to sell weed for? For the fun of it?”

Paully passed the joint to Tara, who took it and appeared to listen with great interest. She leaned in, the bottom of her shirt lifting above the lip of her jeans. I saw a flash of cream and proceeded.

“Let’s just say that I have a compelling reason,” I said. “I have a need for the money.”

“I have a need for it, too,” Paully said, tapping his head.

I took a breath, exhilarated from the negotiations because I felt like I was winning. “Paully, you won’t make any money if you can’t deal while you’re suspended,” I said. “We can share the cut.”

“And what if I come back?”
“We’ll deal with it then. But we have to figure something out for right now.”

Paully grimaced and nodded. I knew that I had him, and he knew it, too.

I looked at Tara, who was smiling at me, but thought about my father.

We left Tara behind and went to a small subdivision of rundown townhouses deep within Thousand Oaks—“a project within a project,” giggled Paully as we approached the place.

These townhouses had tall chain-link fences surrounding them, though I wasn’t sure whether it was intended to keep people in or out. Inside the fences were several buildings, a concrete basketball court with weeds protruding from its many cracks and people, standing and staring, or sitting and staring, or running and staring. I looked around at the faces. They looked hungry.

The rest of Thousand Oaks was happy to have these projects because it gave them somebody to be better than. It was also rumored that one could come here to purchase drugs or pay for sex.

Paully approached one of the doors and knocked. From behind the door came several muffled voices, mostly young. Then a deep voice rose up and demanded silence.

The door opened slightly and I saw a nose poke out. “What are you doing back?” the person asked.

Paully shrugged his shoulders. “I got suspended,” he said.

The nose moved until it pointed at me. “Who’s that?” the voice asked.

“Listen, listen.” Paully’s voice was easy now, malleable. “This man here wants to step in for me while I’m out of business.” He looked at me. “School people don’t even wants me on their property for a month.”
“Shit.” The door closed, a lock rattled, then it opened again. A gaunt, pale figure stood in the doorway. His eyes were huge, set deeply into his head, and were looking at me. “Who’s he?” the man said.

“This is Marty,” he said. “You can trust him.”

The man stepped outside, and I noticed that he was dressed only in boxer shorts and a threadbare tee-shirt. He did not seem affected by the cold. He studied my face, probing for clues about my intentions. He stepped closer, and I understood that it was my job not to flinch.

Paully stepped in closer, too. “Marty can keep a secret,” he said. “Believe me, I wouldn’t send him here if I didn’t know that.”

The man turned toward Paully and frowned, but he did not speak. Then, slowly, he backed away, turned around, and walked back into the townhouse. He left the door open. Paully began walking in and motioned for me to follow.

The lights inside were yellow and weak, making the place feel dark and small. Paully and I followed the man, whose white clothes stood out against the feeble pallor. But I understood by then that Paully knew where he was going, anyway. A few children were sitting on the couch and floor, and they watched us closely, mouths ajar, as we strode through the place.

We arrived in a back room filled with pot plants. “Shut the door,” the man said, opening a desk drawer and pulling out a large baggie filled with weed. “Do you know how to weigh this shit?”

“I can show him,” Paully said. He looked at me. “It’s nothing, really. Just have to get the hang of it.”
The man also pulled out several pieces of paper and began writing numbers on them. Finally he arrived at a figure and held the paper up to my face. He pointed at the weed with his other hand. “For that much shit,” he said, “I expect you to make this much money. You keep fifteen percent of it, the rest comes right to my door.”

“Sounds cool,” I said, looking at the figure with one eye and the pot with the other. The man grimaced again, which seemed a natural thing for him. Paully grinned and slapped me on the back.
IX.

At first, my mother had said politely that she wanted me to get a job, to “help.” Then, after she took on a second job as a waitress, her requests became less friendly; in fact, they sounded less like requests and more like tired demands.

Meanwhile, I was raking in a fair amount of money by assuming Pauly’s pot route in school. We broke in one night so he could personally show me the safe places in the building to make transactions, the little niches and dark corners. He told me who met where, and when, and how much to charge them. “And thanks,” he said, “for saving my ass while I’m out of commission.”

I saved my cut of the money for a few weeks, silently enduring my mother’s pleas, until I had made enough money to cover the rent for the next month. It amounted to a thick stack of small bills, so big I could hardly fit it all into my front pockets. One night after my mother went to bed, I snuck downstairs, past my snoring father on the couch, and slid the wad of money into her purse, which hung off a kitchen chair.

My father woke up as I tried walking past him again. His eyes just opened, like those of a reanimated zombie, and he turned his head slowly and looked at me. He blinked, and seemed not to recognize me. “Martin,” he said, grinning. His teeth appeared yellow in the dimness. “Where have you been?”

“The kitchen.”

He tried sitting up but only made it high enough to prop up his body with his elbows. He was breathing hard. “No, not that,” he said. “I feel like I never get to see you any more, boy. Never do.”
When my father was healthy, he’d looked awkward on the couch because it seemed to small for him. But he had lost a dramatic amount of weight over the past months just as his voice had lost its vigor. The couch swallowed him now; it appeared to master the contours of this weaker body and suffocate the flimsy intonations of his voice. “You’re sick,” I said.

He nodded. “I am, Martin,” he said. “I just feel awful.”

“What’s wrong with you?”

My father blinked and looked like he was trying to remember something. “The doctors have names for these things,” he said. “But you know what? I can’t remember a single one of them. You know what it feels like to run as hard as you can for as long as you can, that burnt-out feeling?”

I nodded.

“That’s how my lungs feel all the time,” he said. “Shit.”

I moved towards him and sat in a nearby chair, leaning in, hovering above his prone body. “I don’t want you to worry about me and Mom,” I said. “We’re doing okay.”

“Everybody was better when I was making enough for all of us,” he said, looking up at the wall. He took a deep breath, which caused a thick, loud cough.

I looked at his sunken face, at the deep lines carved into his forehead and above his mouth, and I wondered how he could cling to such a fantasy, that his meager income alone had been enough to provide for us. I had, in some way, hoped that his illness would force his hand, that he would admit the central fallacies that had guided his life. He would break free, I thought. But he seemed to cling tighter.

“Don’t you worry about me and Mom,” I said again. “She’s got a job or two, and I’m even helping out.”
“You? You’re only thirteen. What can you do?”

“Paper route,” I said, with a practicality he seemed to buy. He wouldn’t ask again.

“Martin?”

“Yes.”

“Martin?” He was growing tired again, winded by our brief conversation. I leaned close to his face as his eyes fluttered and closed, and I felt happy and guilty that I was in the chair above him, healthy and alive.

“You go to sleep now,” I said, like a father might. “Everything will be fine.”

The next morning my mother woke me early with a terse knock. Then the door opened.

“Martin,” she said.

I had half-expected her to do this, but even so I was dead tired. I sat up and looked at her. She was holding the wad of money, but I noticed the rubber band holding it together was gone. She had counted the money.

“How did this get in my purse?” she asked.

I stood up. “I put it there,” I said, reaching for my shirt.

She stood for a moment until I looked at her again, so I did. She looked tired. “I don’t have all day to have this conversation,” she said. “I have to go to work.”

“I got a job, like you asked,” I said, shrugging my shoulders.

“Where?” she asked. “Why don’t you need a ride to work, and why didn’t you tell me?”

These were all good questions, and ones I was in no mood to answer. “I got a paper route,” I said.
My mother clearly understood this to be a lie. There was only one paper delivery person for all of Thousand Oaks, and that guy had been doing it for years. My mother absorbed my lie without flinching, continuing to look at me. “I have to go to work,” she said finally, turning her back. She was still holding the money.

“There is enough in there to pay the rent next month,” I called after her. I also knew that the wad of money she held equaled about a month’s pay at the convenience store. She knew it, too, and stopped without turning around. She stood there for a minute, then continued walking, more slowly, with less need for hurry.

After she left for work, I shaved off my own hair and admired my scalp in the bathroom mirror.
With Paully out of school, it became easy for me to act charming around Tara. I simply slid into place, assuming his old seat at the lunch table, hitting his spots around the building for selling weed to hoods and jocks alike. As a result, everybody noticed me more, and Tara, I was sure, noticed this. People approached me at lunch for brief, coded conversations about exchanges to come.

I smoked a fair amount of the weed, too, but not as much as Paully had. I was able to withhold even more money than Paully, which I slid into my mother’s purse once a week. She did not again ask where the money had come from. Instead, she quit her job at the convenience store.

“Have you ever kissed anyone?”

I took a long, slow drag off my cigarette. It was damp and cold outside, raining even though it was still winter. I exhaled and looked out beyond the loading dock, then looked back at Tara, who wanted her answer.

The truth of the matter was that I had kissed someone. I had kissed Paully, or been kissed by him. The difference didn’t much matter to me. But I did not understand why he had kissed me. The kiss had not been romantic, or enjoyable for either of us. But I had felt Paully’s tongue probing, with specific purpose, the insides of my mouth. He had been inside of me, and part of me felt owned by that experience. The memory of that experience was one I intended never to share with another person.

“No,” I said. “Not yet.”
Tara smiled at this as if she had known the answer all along. “I figured that,” she said, touching my hand and plucking away my cigarette. She took a drag, and I imagined my saliva on her lips.

I kicked a pebble. “Have you?” I asked. I figured I knew the answer, too.

“Mmm.” She licked her lips and returned the cigarette to my fingers. “Yeah. I’ve kissed Paully.”

The answer should not have surprised me, and deep down it did not. But an electric surge of jealousy shot through my body. I felt my face growing a little red, but I tried to compose myself otherwise. “Really?” I said. “I didn’t know that you two were boyfriend and girlfriend.”

“We weren’t.” She slapped me on the arm. “Damn, you don’t have to date someone in order to kiss them. Or fuck them.”

I looked up and saw that Tara was looking directly at me. The space underneath the loading dock was always dim, and I took comfort in that. I didn’t have to look anybody in the eye. But Tara’s eyes were big and white and seemed to have their own source of illumination. I couldn’t help but look at her.

Her touch was soft and experienced, unlike Paully, and at the first measured touch of her hand to my cheek I gave myself over to her. I felt momentum in her hand: after the first touch came a second, her other hand reaching to my face, then her own face moving into mine. She kissed me.

For the rest of the day, I was lost to the world. I have no real memories of the day, lost as I was inside some unspeakable thrill. The day reappears now in fragments: I was walking
home, I was passing by my slumbering father on the couch, I was smoking some of the weed I was supposed to sell, I was waiting for my mother to return from her job, her only job because I was helping pull my weight around the house. Everything seemed fine.
Getting What You Want

I.

My father’s wheezing seemed to grow more severe with each passing day, but my mother wasn’t around as much to see it. She had quit her job at the convenience store, yes, but had kept her job waiting tables part-time. She worked nights, and at first she came home directly from work, pulling in no later than eleven o’clock.

Her first move was to sit on the edge of the couch, next to my father. I was usually sitting in the kitchen, pretending like I had been doing homework for hours. I’d steal glances, but usually all I could see were the distorted glances I could see by television light. But I imagined her tenderness. She was bent in close to her husband, whispering something, offering food and drink. She patted and stroked his bony shoulder. Then, when my father had fallen off to sleep again, she rose gingerly, took off her coat, and walked into the kitchen. Sometimes she said hello, sometimes she did not.

She smelled like grease and food, a trail of it wafting up behind her as she walked across the kitchen, opened the refrigerator and pulled out a beer. Then she sat across from me, smiling a tired smile, and sipped her beer. I continued pretending to do homework, as if my work was the reason we were not talking.

Gradually, she began arriving home later. Before long she never arrived home earlier than twelve-thirty. Then her sojourns into the kitchen, which had smelled of grease and food, began to reek of heavy perfume and alcohol. But I was still there, sitting in the kitchen, pretending I was doing homework, listening to the volume of my father’s wheezes increase.
She sat down across from me one of those late nights. I could feel her eyes on me, like a bully. She was looking for an excuse to fight.

"Where did you get that money?" she asked.

I looked up from my textbook as though I had hardly known she was present at all. "Paper route," I said, returning to my false concentration.

I heard her fingernails tapping against the beer bottle. "That’s a lie," she said.

"You’re lying to me."

I understood that she was going to cause trouble whether I spoke at all or not, but I decided not to say anything.

"Do you think I enjoy having my son lie to me?" She dipped her head down low until I had to glance up and see her staring at me. "Do you think I like that?"

"It’s not a lie," I said. "Not really."

She stood up, lurched against the table some, and walked deliberately towards me. "Don’t lie to me, Martin." Her voice was thick—I had never heard it this way—and it oscillated between anger and sadness.

She came up to me and stood there, silently, her arms crossed.

"Are you drunk, Mom?" I asked.

She slapped me across the cheek.

I stood up and realized all over again that I had become taller than her. She shrank beneath me, suddenly afraid. "Don’t hit me," she said.

The thought to strike her back had not occurred to me. I wanted to ask her why she had said that, what I had done to make her afraid that I would hit her. But I also knew this wasn’t the time or place.
My father coughed from the next room. "What’s going on in there?" he asked. A second later he was snoring.

My mother was looking over my shoulder, into the darkness of the living room. Her eyes were wet, but she was trying not to cry. "And I have that to deal with," she said, nodding with her head in the direction of my sleeping father. "You know he’s not going to get any better? That’s what the doctors say."

"What doctors?"

She started walking in large circles around the kitchen. She took a big drink of beer. "They say there’s permanent damage to his lungs," she said, looking at the floor as if she were talking to it and not me. "It won’t kill him, but he’s going to be a God-damned invalid the rest of his life. Sitting on the couch. It’s like having another kid."

I didn’t know what to say to her. She continued walking in circles, occasionally muttering something out loud. Like climbing to the top of a mountain and realizing it is just an endless plateau, I felt some new landscape creeping upon me. I thought about the drug dealer, the creepy man who was always in his underwear. Although I liked making money, I did not like that man, or his house. I felt the eyes of his children accusing me every time I visited. I felt a thrill every time I left that house, full of weed, but there had been moments of intense guilt, too. The thrill was dirty and tainted, something I did not want to last forever. Besides, Paully was due back in a couple weeks, and I figured I’d have to defer his route to him again. But now it seemed like I might have to do this forever.

My mother held up her hand and pointed at me. She wanted desperately to make a point of some sort, but I could tell she was tired. "And I don’t even want to feel guilty about
going out to a bar every once in a while,” she said. “I’ve got friends, Martin. Friends. Do you know what that means?”

I shook my head.

“It means that I do things.” She wiped her nose. “All this time in this house”—she cut herself off and looked around at our surroundings—“all this time, and now I have friends because I have a job. I do things, Martin.”

I knew that this was meant to be profound, and to her I’m sure it was. At that time, however, I was still processing the fact of my father’s illness. Like this for good? I thought. Who will take care of him? I knew that my mother would take care of him, but a part of her did not want to. She liked having friends, which my father’s insistence on being the breadwinner had kept her from having for years. Now that she was out in the world, what would happen to him? What would happen to me?

A moment later my mother sat down in a chair. “I’m tired, Martin,” she said, putting her head down. She was falling asleep.

My face stung from where she had slapped me, and my scalp tingled from where my father had first shaved me. I heard my mother breathing heavily, alternating in her respirations with my father. I thought about what to do for a moment. Then I walked over to my mother and tapped her shoulder.

“Come on,” I said. “I’ll tuck you in.”
II.

I did not love Tara, but I hardly understood that then. But the way I felt about was all-encompassing, a hungry acid eating at my stomach all the time. I had a difficult time sleeping; at school I sometimes missed appointments with my clients because I had been following Tara around, lagging a few feet behind her so that I might discover who she was talking to, and how, and how differently she talked to me.

I also did not trust her, and that distrust, too, was acidic and constant, and it grew. I also did not understand the reason for my distrust, or recognize that there was any other way to feel about her. To me, distrust seemed a natural condition of affection.

As a result, I needed to see her constantly. This did not necessarily bother her.

We liked to meet underneath the loading dock right after school, where we would be assured privacy from prying eyes. One day we made out for awhile, consuming the face of the other, before she stopped suddenly and wiped her lips. “Paully called me,” she said.

I had been avoiding Paully ever since I realized that my drug dealing might become more permanent. “Really,” I said. “What did he have to say?”

Tara shrugged. “He wanted to come over and see me,” she said. “You know, like old times is what he said.”

At those words, something in my spine froze up, then my face began to feel hot. This was pure jealousy, more consuming than our kisses. I looked down at my feet.

“What?” Tara was looking at me.

“Do you still like him?” I asked. My voice felt hollow and ineffective.

Tara grinned to herself. “Yeah, I do,” she said. “But I like you a lot, too.”
In one way, this seemed unreasonable. But I had been preparing for something bad to happen for awhile, secretly awaiting its arrival. It had, to me, finally arrived, and it felt worse than those pangs of fear had felt when I considered just what the terrible thing might be. But now I also felt justified in having been afraid.

I kissed her again, mainly because I had no idea what to say. Paully was the trump card; he was the real deal. Compared to him, I felt somehow smaller, a fake. “Do you still like me?” I asked Tara. “Do you still like me?”

Tara looked at me, then slowly petted my hair. I began to soften. “Sure I do,” she said. “Of course I do.” She stroked my face, touched my shoulders. “Of course I do.”

The drug man opened his door and looked at me. His forehead was crinkled and he looked like he had a headache. “What?” he said. “You were just here to pick up.”

I had spent the day between my last encounter with Tara and that moment deciding exactly what to say, but I couldn’t remember all that careful planning. “Do you have a second?” he said.

A child screeched inside. The drug man bellowed a string of profanities inside and the small voices stopped. “I’m not going anywhere,” he said.

We stepped inside and he closed the door. I didn’t want to go any further and be subjected to the judgmental eyes of his children, so I started speaking. “I was wondering if I could start selling any of the heavier stuff,” I said.

He crossed his arms and looked genuinely thoughtful for a moment. “Why you want to do that?” he asked. “It can get you in some real trouble.”
I was wondering the same thing. I had caught a few glances of his stash of cocaine, the tight baggies filled with whitish powder, and that proximity to real danger and addiction had scared me. It wasn’t like pot at all: you could smoke weed and still be elected president. Weed hardly ever ruined someone’s life. The other stuff was dangerous. But here I was, wanting it.

I shrugged the nonchalant shrug I had practiced in the mirror at home. “I know it can,” I said. “But I’d like to make some extra money.” The drug man did not look entirely convinced, so I leaned in and added, “For my family.”

This was partially true, but I also had another purpose in mind for the extra money. The man uncrossed his arms. “You’re willing to sell at school?”


The drug man nodded. “Okay,” he said. “You come with me.”

Less than two hours after completing my first major “transaction,” I visited a flower shop in the only strip mall in Thousand Oaks. The inside was dingy and stagnant, a mix of cigarette smoke and day-old flowers. An ancient woman sat perpetually behind the counter, a lit cigarette hanging from her lip as she cut long stems off flowers. She had been there as long as I could remember, always vaguely present through the window as I passed by.

She looked up at me. She did not speak.

“Hi,” I said.

“Hi,” she said.

“I’d like to buy some flowers,” I said, smiling and growing red-faced.
This was apparently the right thing to say. She smiled, revealing a set of false yellow teeth. “For your mother?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said, not quite realizing my lie until I had said it. I thought about correcting myself, telling her that no, the flowers were not for my mom. But my answer had pleased her still more, and she had moved from that stool to reach for fresh red roses.

“You’ll want these,” she said. I realized that it was not for me to decide, which was fine, because I wouldn’t have known what to get anyway. “A dozen.”

“A dozen,” I repeated, and the old woman smiled some more.
My father was not home when I got back, something I did not notice at first. I was busy envisioning the manner in which Tara would receive the flowers, and all my affection. I saw her opening the front door, confused at first. Then her expression would change as she realized just what was happening and who was responsible for it.

I walked into the kitchen and saw a note on the table. It was from my mother: “Father in the hospital. I’m with him, will tell all when I get home. Love, Mom.”

Until that point, I had not entirely realized the extent of my father’s illness. He had become to me a permanent fixture on the couch, encased in stasis, never getting better but never getting worse, always remaining the prone, helpless figure wasting away on the couch. It was comforting to see things in this way because I did not have to feel guilty about my secret happiness that my father had become so dependent upon me.

I sat down at the table, staring at the note. Because it was written and I could stare at it and read it again and again, the fact of my father’s illness was impossible to deny any longer. I felt my face flush red, as if I were being laughed at for not realizing, all this time, that my father was terribly ill. I had been called on it; the note was undeniable proof.

I also felt the familiar release of anger. It seeped from somewhere inside and hit my bloodstream, going all places at once, and my body was full with it. I was angry at my father, for being sick, for having been worked into this sickness, for turning me into a drug dealer.

I felt the wad of bills pressing against my side, the fruits of my labor earlier in the day. I wanted to call the florists and cancel the delivery. I pictured the man delivering vials of cocaine and weed instead of roses. It all seemed exactly the same. I was angry at Tara for being so pretty, for making me want her affection so badly. If not for that, I thought, then I
wouldn’t need to be a drug dealer. Then I thought about my mother and all the weed I’d sold just to sit in our drafty kitchen and read a note about my father going to the hospital. For a moment, all these people were the same to me, equal partners. I clenched my fist without entirely realizing that it hurt.

My mother returned home after dark. I was stoned by then, drifting upon a carefree reverie. I sat up in my chair when the front door opened, blinking as if I had been sitting in the dark all that time.

I had not yet heard from Tara, who I had been expecting to call ever since I first got home. I only thought it natural that she would call me immediately to thank me for the roses, and though I was secretly ashamed of the source of the income that had allowed me to buy roses and pay rent, I was also eager for Tara to respond in the way I knew she would.

By the time my mother arrived home, my vigil at the telephone had lasted for hours, long enough for me to doubt myself. I agonized over the card I had sent with the flowers. Did I say something wrong? Maybe I had misspelled her name without knowing it. I considered everything from every angle, over and over.

But Tara was gone from my mind when my mother walked into the kitchen. She looked like herself, but whiter. Her eyes seemed larger than they had been. She took slow, deliberate steps to the table, then sat down heavily across from me.

“You get my note?” she said.

I nodded. “How is he?”

My mother sighed. “He’s in for some tests,” she said, “to make sure he’s not getting any worse.”
I blinked and ate a cookie. “Do they know what’s wrong?”

“I don’t know how we’re going to pay for this,” she said, to herself. “He might be there for months.” Then, my question seemed to register on her. “He has permanent lung damage, from prolonged exposure to poor air quality and chemicals and stuff. That’s what they said. It’s not going to get any better.”
IV.

I had never been followed before, but I understood with strange familiarity that I was being followed during my last walk to the drug man’s place. Perhaps it was all the movies I’d seen, where the hero understands that he is being followed but does not panic, and instead allows his pursuer to think he is unawares. At the perfect moment—always—the hero springs a quickly-conceived and yet flawless trap.

But I was afraid. I felt sharp, painful pricks against my back and neck and the threat of my pursuer’s intent. I did not walk at my normal pace, or even more slowly; I sped up. I crossed and re-crossed the street several times for a reason I still do not understand. And when I arrived at the chain link fence surrounding the drug man’s apartment complex, I slid between it with relief, as if that fence could somehow keep out what was closing on me.

I paid the drug man the money he was owed and picked up the next load of drugs he wanted me to sell around school. He was pleased; I could tell even though he refused to smile. He held the thick wad of cash in his hand as if figuring its exact weight. He grumbled, “Good job,” and ushered me out the door. “Got me a date tonight,” he said. Only then did I notice that the clamor of children’s voices was entirely absent, that the place was well-lit and smelled fresh. “I’m gonna do it up right.”

As soon as I left the apartment, I felt the same pair of eyes upon me again. My face and chest tingled, and the thought that someone would actually recognize me leaving the drug man’s house sent a wave of guilt throughout me. Though I had not been raised with any religion to speak of, I still looked skyward, at whatever might be gazing back. “Are you looking at me?” I asked. Then I laughed and started to hurry home.
I had just passed through the chain-link fence when Paully placed his hand on my shoulder. I turned around quickly; I’d had no idea that my pursuer was so close. “Marty,” he said, looking at me as though he were proud. He kept his hand on my shoulder. “Just pick up some more weed?”

It wasn’t entirely false of me to say yes, so I did.

“I’m glad,” Paully said. His stringy hair fell down over his face. It looked like he hadn’t showered in days. “I’m glad you’ve been keeping the route warm for me.”

I shivered. During all those walks to the drug man’s house, I had always looked straight ahead, single-minded, unaware of everything going on around me. But looking at Paully reminded me of the chilly air, the damp stacks of snow piled up beside driveways and along the road, the endless blue sky. I thought again about heaven.

“Glad to do it,” I said, and started walking again. Paully clenched my shoulder, and felt his wiry fingers dig in. I stopped.

“I’m coming back to school next week,” he said. He nodded his head in the direction of the drug man’s house. “That’s why I stopped by to see him tonight, to see about resuming my duties. He couldn’t see me. Do you know why?”

“He has a date tonight.”

Paully nodded, smiled, but then held up a finger. “He’s doing pretty well for himself,” he said. “Don’t you think?”

I shrugged, still feigning innocence. “He’s a drug dealer,” I said. “I mean, isn’t he supposed to make a lot of money?”

Paully took his hand away from my shoulder, and I could feel my skin filling in the depression he had left with his grasp. “I’ve never seen him like this,” Paully said. “I’ve never
seen him fully dressed before, and to the nines! This ain’t no ordinary drug dealer we’re talking about.”

A car of teenagers drove by. Though it was cold out, all the windows were rolled down, and I saw the orange swabs of cigarette tips tracing the air as the car swept by. Someone inside hooted. Then, the car disappeared around a corner, and the silence it left behind was louder than the silence it had interrupted. From somewhere, a child screeched, a dog barked. The noises seemed far away and melodramatic.

I began walking again. "Paully, I’ve got to go," I said. “I don’t like standing around with a bunch of weed on me.”

He kept time. “Have you seen Tara?”

“No.”

“That’s funny,” Paully said. “She won’t call me back.”

I wanted to sympathize with him, but I understood that what I had been doing with Tara was somehow not allowed. “I only see her at school,” I lied.

Paully stopped short. I took a few extra steps, then slowed down and turned. I looked at him.

He had pulled his hair over his ears so that I could see his face clearly. “I gave you the chance to come clean with me, Marty,” he said. “You think I’m full of shit?” He stepped towards me and started counting off with his fingers. “You’re dealing a lot more than weed, and you’re messing around with Tara.”

Paully stepped up close to me, reminding me of the day in the woods. It felt like a long time ago. I had spent a lot of time erasing the memory of his kiss, his aggressive tongue taking up the space inside my mouth.
“You don’t own me,” I said. “I can do whatever I want.”

Paully pressed himself closer to me. When he spoke, his breath ran hot over my face. “You’re wrong,” he said. Then he stepped away and fanned his hands. “That fucking dope you’re carrying, the money in your pocket, the girl you’re fucking around with? It all comes back to me.” He laughed. “I don’t own you? Shit, Marty. Where would you be without me?”

I understood that he meant the answer to be self-evident. But I had heard this sort of thing too many times before. My head felt prickly and cold, egg-like. The hair was as short as it had become the night my father first cut it all off.

I didn’t know what to say or how to explain it all, even to myself, not then. Everything felt compressed, out of space. Too close together. Something had to burst forth, and it did. “Tara loves me,” I said.

“She told you so?”

I nodded, lying.

Paully stood there a moment, his hair fallen back in front of his face, figuring me out. Then he said: “Well, I fucked her.”
What happened next, exactly, is difficult for me to remember. I made a choice to be angry. I saw myself atop a plateau, standing on its ledge, my feet teetering on the lip of the earth and the air, and I was thinking: if I lean back, I will be the same, but if I fall forward, I don't know what will come of me. I could do either one. I chose to fall forward. I smacked the butt of my hand against Paully's ear, and was dimly aware of his scream. But it looked to me like a rupture in the air, a slow wave, than it sounded like anything.

I kept punching and pushing, and when Paully fell, I fell atop him and continued to punch and push. As long as I did this, I felt perfectly calm, just fine. I didn't have to consider the provocation, I didn't have to worry about Tara and the roses I had sent to her, or about my mother, or about my father, whose face I envisioned instead of Paully's. I pictured myself punishing him, always, in many ways.

I do not know how long I beat Paully, and would not know how severely for awhile yet, and I hardly remember stopping—for no reason, just quitting—and getting up and walking towards home. I walked in a stupor, half-blacked out, occasionally looking up to the world in the sky and asking if I was still being watched. I cried and I didn't cry, I did both at the same time, I felt blood drying on my knuckles, I tried wiping it away.

Then, there were lights, red and blue, and me trying to run and falling in the snow. I remember being pulled up, I remember stern male faces and baritone voices, and I remember trying to feel inside my coat pockets. But I couldn't find my coat; I had left it somewhere. I also remember the police pulling my arms behind my back, and then I remember the back seat of a car and vinyl seats up against my face. And I only partially remember the waning sensation I felt, and how I seemed to be carried someplace else altogether.
This World Is Big

1.

My mouth is dry, and sand falls out when I open it. I try to talk but I make more sand instead of noise.

I am hungry. It is dark but I know that I am outside. The air is damp and water drips on my scalp, which is now completely bald. There is no hair left to cut.

Up ahead, if only I can find it, is a meadow of roses. I can smell the sweetness and feel the red petals, a blanket, resting gently on the earth beneath the flowers. I want to pick up all the loose petals and make more roses, but I can’t see where I’m going. Every time I think or try to speak, more sand comes out of my nose.

I sit down on the rock. Now I am cold, the kind of cold that saunters its way through each cell, until your entire body is soggy. I miss the desert. I miss being warm. I miss the petals that fall from the roses, waiting for me to collect and rearrange them.

Then, later, I am sitting on the same rock, and it is still damp, but I am looking out at the desert. I wish that I was there, burning. Two figures are running in the distance, over the horizon away from me. They are both carrying bird feathers and I am cold.

Before I woke up for good, I had a few vague episodes woven in between my dreams. These waking moments felt like dreams, in fact, and my dreams had become another coded reality for me: deserts and frozen rocks, mysterious figures always standing far off, where I could not quite see them. I was always seeing myself from another angle, or I was higher or lower to the ground, but my new reality consisted of mild variations on the same theme. It was like
forever being forced to see the same view from your least favorite window. It felt, I imagine, the way prison felt.

In these interludes of wakefulness, I felt activity happening around me. Voices that I did not recognize. My mother’s face; somebody saying something about my father. Then, Tara, smelling like roses. I wanted to speak but my mouth could not move. I wanted to know everything: where I was, for how long, what had become of Paully and the drugs I’d been carrying, everything, all at once, my past and my future. Then I would sink back into the prison in my mind, and the freedoms of wakefulness no longer mattered to me.

When I finally did open my eyes, I did so as if I had missed half my life. They opened quickly, without warning; I realized I was covered in sweat, and then I realized that it was dark. I turned my head and looked around. There was a small halogen light in the corner of the room, unrolling a crisp golden blanket of illumination. I followed the light around the room, which was boxy and sterile, a hospital room, and saw my mother in a lounge chair by the door. She was asleep. She was curled up, almost circular, and at first glance she had seemed like a girl, like Tara.

The clock by my bed said that it was nearly four in the morning. I heard murmurs beyond my door, shoes squeaking on tile floors, keys jingling. All the noises made me tired again. I looked at the clock again, and I closed my eyes.

I am sitting on the rock again and looking out at the desert. There are no people anywhere, just endless sand and endless warmth. Then I see the silhouettes of birds in the distance. They
are barely dipping above the curve of the earth, but I understand that I know them. I know those birds, and they are flapping their wings and flying away.

I lean forward on the rock and watch. I breathe, sigh, and watch the birds disappear underneath the horizon.

"Has he woken up?"

There was a moment’s pause. Somebody groaned and stretched, then my mother said, "I don’t think so. But I fell asleep for a few hours."

Somebody took steps toward me, then stopped. I felt a large presence hovering near me, watching me. But something about the presence felt untrained for the task it was performing.

The presence backed away and turned around. "We’ll still need to talk to him when he comes out of this," the presence said. "What did the doctors say was the matter?"

"They’re not entirely sure," I heard my mother say. "Some sort of shock. Something they say he’ll come out of."

The presence made some sort of gesture—I could tell—and walked out. I opened my eyes. My mother was staring out the door’s smallish window at the man who had just left the room. I could see him too, tall and broad shouldered, wearing a trench coat, his hair neatly trimmed in the back. "Mom," I said.

She turned around and looked at me. When she saw that my eyes were open, she scurried forward to my bed as if I might close them again at any second.

"What day is it?" I asked.
“You’ve been here for four days,” my mother said. She looked even more tired than before.

“Have you been here the whole time?” I asked her.

She grinned and looked at her feet. “You father’s two floors down,” she said. “I’ve been splitting time.”

I tried to understand that four entire days had passed. But it had felt both much longer and shorter than that. “What about your job?” I asked her. Asking about work made me think of the drugs I’d been carrying. “And the rent?”

She placed her hand on my shoulder, and though her hand was now far too small to enclose it, the hand felt firm compared to my flesh, which seemed flabby and underused. “Don’t you worry about that right now, Martin,” she said. “You just get well.”

“I feel okay,” I said, which was partially true. My body hurt from being in bed for so long, and I was more groggy than I knew I could be. “What’s wrong with me? Why am I here?”

“The police found you in the snow with blood all over you,” my mother said, then frowned. “They found the other guy a few blocks away. He was beaten up pretty bad.”

“Where is he?”

My mother shook her head. “He’s in the part of the hospital where they keep people under arrest,” she said. “Don’t you worry, they’re keeping an eye on him.”

I didn’t understand exactly what she meant when she said that, but a strange mixture of relief and anxiety came over me. The giddy peace that comes when you suspect you’ve gotten away with something. My eyelids fluttered.

“You go to sleep now,” my mother said. “You rest. We can talk more later.”
“Martin?” It was my mother. I opened my eyes.

“Martin? There is a man here to see you,” my mother said.

The man stepped forward. He was the presence from before; he wore the same trench coat, the same tightly cropped hair, had the same broad shoulders. He smiled at me. His teeth gleamed so much that it hurt me eyes. “Hi, Martin,” he said. “I’m Detective Logan from the police.” I moved to shake his hand, put he stopped me. “Please, that’s okay. You stay put. I only have a few questions.”

Beyond him was the door to my hospital room, and beyond that, a vein of hospital workers and family members, all hurrying past my door, all free and with something to do. I thought about joining them, what it would be like to walk down hallways with someplace to go, free to do as I pleased. Detective Logan stood as a sentinel between that door—that life—and me, and I feared him for it. I had no idea what he meant to ask me, and for what purpose.

I smiled weakly at him. “Okay,” I said. “Do you know what exactly happened to me?”

My mother stepped up beside him. “It was so cold out there, Martin,” she said. “You were out there for awhile, with nothing for a coat.”

Detective Logan nodded. “You were lucky that the police answered another call nearby,” he said. “That’s how we found both you and your coat.”

“What about Paully?”

“We found him in the middle of the road, hit by a car and wearing your coat,” the detective said. “His real first name is Richard. He’s been stealing and running drugs around
here for a long time, since he was younger than you.” The detective leaned in until I could taste his minty breath in my mouth. “That’s why we need your help.”

Just how Paully had wound up wearing my coat I wasn’t sure, but some new images flashed through my head. I saw myself standing over Paully, who wasn’t moving, and screaming at him. I saw myself leaning over Paully, checking to make sure he was still okay, Paully spitting blood in my face. I remembered an image of me tearing off my coat and yelling something about the drugs and Tara, something black and angry.

I also remembered screaming at my parents. I remembered Paully stumbling up, carrying my coat, and limping down the street. There was blood on my hands. I remembered stumbling in another direction. Then I remembered police, red and blue lights, laying down in the back seat of their car, moving fast through dark streets.

“How can I help you?” I asked.

The detective backed away from me. He took a notebook and pen from his trench coat. “I need to know what happened between you two,” he said. He took the cap off his pen, then readied himself to take notes. He looked at me expectantly. “How did drugs get into your coat?”

My mother was right beside him, but I felt her recede. The detective faded away for a moment, too, and all I heard were the voices outside the door. I caught a few snippets of conversation, about life and death and all the things that are discussed in hospitals. They interested me a great deal. I wanted to know everything that was going on beyond the detective. Now that I felt separate from it, the world beyond the detective seemed so big.

Then it was just the detective and myself. No mother, no hospital room, no conversations or sunlight or moonlight. And I told him a story about that night, where
everything fit together just like I knew he wanted it to, and he scribbled down each word I had to say. With each sentence, I pulled away from Paully and left him out there, alone, and I pulled away from Tara and the drug man and everybody else who had caused me trouble.
My mother had spent so long at the hospital that she learned about a job in the cardiology department a few floors above me. “Good health care,” she told me, “they’ll help me with the bills for you and your father.”

My mother had a job, and she kept that job for several years, until my father was moved to a nursing home as his condition worsened. She still followed him everywhere: she took a job at the same nursing home.

When I returned to school after my recovery, my hair had grown in some, and Tara and Paully were nowhere to be found. I ignored the friends I used to supply with drugs, and they eventually found their way to other sources.

Everything seemed severed from everything past, and I allowed it to happen. I hardly noticed when I heard news that Paully had struck a plea bargain with county prosecutors, that he’s given up Ramsey and would be in detention hall until he was twenty for possessing the drugs I’d been carrying.
Ever After

It is mid-afternoon when I arrive at the detention hall where Paully has been incarcerated for the past several years. The day feels long, as if it has lasted several years instead of only a few hours, and I am suddenly weary as I pull my car into the visitor lot. For a moment, I sit in my car and consider turning back, changing my name, forgetting Paully and all the stuff of years before.

But his letter is still burning against my chest, quickening my pulse. I pull the letter from my jacket and look at its tattered edges and yellow pallor. I read the postmark and try to calculate how many hundreds of days have passed since he sent the letter inside, with words so angry and frightening that I have not been able to toss the letter away. The threat. The threat to my mother and father, to me, and everything he intends to do the day after his release. I have no doubts his intention is still the same.

I have kept the date of Paully’s release circled on a calendar in my apartment, promising myself that I would visit him just before he gets out and try to smooth the waters. My father is a sick man, I think, and all my mother does now is watch over him. How could you possibly harm these people any more than they are already harmed, Paully? It’s what I think. It’s what I want. Leave them alone.

Every Thursday for these five years I have visited my father, first in the hospital and then at his new, permanent home at the nursing community, just outside Acre Heights. We don’t talk too much about the past, or about his deteriorating health. He makes cracks about the Jewish owners, how they probably buy everything on the cheap, he rubs his bald head and pokes fun at my long hair, which now extends below my shoulders.
His voice doesn’t threaten anymore. It is small and weak, and when he talks to me it is with the hopeful tone of a child. He begs me to stay longer, but I always leave when I need to.

“The factory,” I’ll tell him, and he can never argue with me. He only nods and grumbles.

“You oughta go to school,” he says. “Do something with yourself.”

Instead, I am here at the detention hall on a gray afternoon that looks like every gray afternoon I have ever experienced rolled together, into one perpetual day. I am entering the building, I am climbing the stairs behind the armed officer, I am being ushered into the small, smoky room where visitors wait for the incarcerated to flicker into the world again, for a moment or two.

The place is full of rage and frustration, and for a moment I imagine that it is all Paully’s, that his anger has infected everybody else, and that he will tear me into pieces when he sees me. But everyone here has their own story.

I think of my father, in bed somewhere else. I feel a joy at the sight of him, an affirmative clenching of my stomach. He is sick and bald, and he counts the hours until my visit, and he tells me he loves me now. And I feel joy when I consider the past five years, and where I have spent them, and where Paully has spent them. I’d rather be where I am. But I’m also afraid to be here.

There is a knock at a door on the far end of the room, and an officer leans over to open it. I sit back into my chair and stare at the door as it groans open, and I wait for Paully to re-enter my view.
I had been feeling down until the lesbian couple moved into the other half of my duplex. It cheered me up, you know, a little spunk and life on the other side of that wall. All that lesbian sex. Before the wintry day they moved all their stuff in—and in only three hours flat, mighty impressive—I hadn’t quite been feeling right. I’d taken a little vacation from work, and rather than use those tickets to Maui I’d bought, I just crashed out. No job, no housework, no nothing that forced me to leave the house. I’ll stay in bed, thank you. My roommate hated me for it, sure, but my girlfriend Alicia had been just a dear, because if she hadn’t come over and sat beside my bed as I lay there and moped, we probably wouldn’t still be dating today.

The other half of the duplex had been empty for a couple months, so I was both alarmed and annoyed when I was awakened by the harsh slams and clicks of furniture being dragged up stairs, across floors, into bedrooms. I heard mechanical groans as a bed frame was unfolded and reassembled. It felt like hearing a new beginning. I rose from bed and felt immediately faint, so I retreated to the pillow again and listened for awhile, allowing myself to feel curious for the first time in weeks.

Around noon I managed myself downstairs, where my roommate Patrick sat on the couch, reading a *Playboy*. And when I say reading, I mean it—he’s that sort of guy. He subscribes to anything that publishes fiction, ignoring the magazine’s other contents. He’s a student, so he likes to pretend he’s high-minded. He looked up at me and blinked. He checked his watch. “What are you doing up this early, Jack?” he asked.

“Kiss my ass.” I kept past him.

“Still cheery as ever,” Patrick said back, following me to the window. “Don’t wear yourself out so early in the morning.”
I glared at him over my shoulder. I had become skilled at glaring, and he backed off. “Seen the new neighbors yet?” I asked, squinting into the harsh daylight so I could catch a peek. Their yellow moving van was backed right up to the cement porch we shared, and the back was open, but there was nobody to be found. “Strange,” I said.

Patrick made a noise something like a laugh. “Maybe they’re taking a lunch break,” he said. “This is midday for the rest of the world.”

The comment made me hungry for breakfast, so I slid into the kitchen and had a bowl of cereal—a crispy conglomeration of multi-colored bits. I sat down with the heaping bowl and stared at all those colors. Only the day before, even those colors had seemed so blasé. Who cares about the colors in my cereal? I had thought. But that day the cereal seemed a little brighter, the meteorites of cereal more defined and distinct from each other. I stared at them for awhile, the deepening hues of blue and yellow and green. I took a bite and felt its crunchy echoes throughout my head, certain that Patrick could hear, that he’d come in bitching at me in a minute. The day before, the noise had been muffled and undynamic—who cares all over again—but everything seemed a little louder that day, everything sharper and more interesting.

I looked across the room to my stable of pills, and thought about taking some. Just then somebody in the neighboring duplex slammed a table or something heavy against the wall, and I looked at the wall and actually grinned a little, and I remembered that I didn’t need the pills, no matter what the doctor told me.

I saw the lesbians not long after lunch, when they returned to continue unloading the moving van. I was watching from the safety of my living room, peeking between the curtains I had drawn as soon as Patrick had left for class. They were an odd couple, I figured. One was tall and
downright leggy with fiery red hair pulled back into a pony tail. The other one looked like a little bully, all stocky and gruff, walking bowlegged. She had bright blonde hair that stood up in tight, erect spikes. The Tall One and the Short One. They sat on the porch we shared and snuggled and talked and giggled for a minute. It was the quintessential scene of lesbian domestic bliss, and I felt honored and a little dirty to observe it. But I let the good vibes wash all over me.

Then the Short One drew a hand to her mouth and blew out a sharp whistle. A dog—an old dog, a deaf old dog with a limp—came around the far corner of the house and approached the Short One. It licked her hands and stared at her with absent blue eyes. The Short One leaned down and nuzzled the dog, saying something in dogspeak, and I thought I heard her call the dog Killer. It may have been Keith or Kilroy or even Kat, but I preferred Killer and that was enough for me.

I sat down on my couch and picked the fruity cereal out of my teeth for awhile, listening to the lesbians slide their furniture across the hardwood floors of their new living room. Then I called Alicia. “Funny hearing from you,” she said. I heard her punching on a keyboard.

“Working on something?” I asked.

“Yep.” The typing stopped. “It’s for history. Remember, it’s the same class you flunked two years ago?”

I preferred not to discuss my failed venture as a student. “Sure,” I said. “I’m going to get back to being a student one of these days. Maybe next semester.”

Alicia laughed, then exhaled deeply. “I thought you loved your new job,” she said.

“What did you say? You get to live around college without all the messy work? Do your eight hours a day and then all that free time. That’s what you said.”

“I remember,” I said. “The job’s okay, but I’m glad I have the two weeks off—”
“So we could go to Maui?”

I took a breath and started feeling bummed out again. “If I felt up to it, I’d have gone. Sorry I don’t feel well.”

“Cut it out,” Alicia said. “Listen, why are you calling me? I don’t hear a word from you, I keep away like you said the last time, and now you call.”

“Some new neighbors are moving in,” I said. “They’re lesbians.”

“Oh, that’s great,” Alicia said. “How can you tell they’re lesbians?”

“Come on,” I said, rolling my eyes. “It’s not rocket science. They’re cuddling up and stuff.”

“Maybe they’re sisters or roommates.”

“And get this—they have a dog named Killer,” I told her. “Things are looking up.”

Alicia paused, typed something, and then stopped again. “Why are you calling?” she said.

“Do you want to come over?” I asked. “I’d like to see you.”

“I’m not coming over if you want me to make you chicken soup and let you cry all over my shoulder,” she said. “I’m sick of that. I’m sick of seeing you in bed all the time. I want us to go places together, like real couples do.”

“Me too,” I said. “I’m feeling better today. I’m lonely. It’s just me and the lesbians and Killer. I thought maybe I could make you some dinner, you know, to help make up for the nice stuff you did for me.”

“You serious?”

“I surely am.”
Alicia was quiet. No typing, just breathing. “Okay,” she said. “One hour. And make sure you’ve showered.”

I forgot the shower but managed to wipe myself down with a dishtowel I’d smothered with hand soap. After all, preparing dinner was a consuming project, and by the time it was ready, Alicia was due to arrive in only minutes. So I improvised.

The chicken and the broccoli was ready, and I was just lighting the candles, when Patrick came in. He walked back into the kitchen and blinked a couple times. “What are you doing?” he asked me.

“Making dinner,” I said, shooing him from the room. “You’re tracking snow all over the place, and I’m trying to make this look good.”

Patrick grinned. “Broke down and called Alicia,” he said. “You must be hurting bad to go and make her dinner like this.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” I said as I pulled the bread from the oven. “I’m just feeling better today. It’s that simple.”

Patrick backed off as I sliced the bread. “Sure,” he said. “Maybe for me. But I’m not the one who’s spent the last month in bed.”

I shot him a look that I hoped would seem menacing. “It happens,” I said. “I’m feeling a whole new vibe in the house since our new neighbors moved in.”

“Have you been taking your meds?” Patrick asked. He stepped toward the stable of pill bottles I kept by the toaster.

The doorbell chimed as Patrick neared my meds, and he stopped in his tracks, smiled at me, then bowed and left the room. I heard him climb the stairs and I went to open the door and
introduce Alicia to my brand new life, or at least a life brighter and happier than the last time she had seen me.

Instead it was the Tall One, who stood huddled in a gray sweatsuit and blanket, holding a bottle of wine. She looked radiant and happy. “Hi,” she said. She kept talking but I could only look at her long, pale neck. I watched the muscles inside as she intoned words and turned her head around. Her hair was still up in a bun. The neck looked so cold out there in the winter weather. I felt sorry for that neck. “…so can I borrow one?” she finished.

I cleared my throat. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t catch what you said there.”

She rested the bottle near her wide, high hips. “A cork screw. May I borrow yours?”

“Sure. Would you like to come in while I look for it?”

The Tall One seemed to give it serious thought for a moment. Then Killer barked from their half of the house, and she shook her head. “I’d better not,” she said. “I’ll wait here if you don’t mind.”

When I returned with the cork screw, I heard a scratchy voice from their place say, “Do they have one or not?”

The Tall One looked in the direction of the voice, then back at me. She reached out and plucked the metal cork screw from my hands. I let the oily metal slip away. “There you go,” I said.

“Thanks,” she said. “I’d better get back.”

“Wait,” I said, but not loudly enough for her to hear. Then, after she had shut her front door, I ventured, “What’s your name, neighbor?”
Dinner was great, and Alicia even liked the way I smelled. “Like my jasmine body wash,” she said, sniffing the collar of my last clean shirt. I smiled in return and told her that it was natural, that my sweat smelled of expensive body wash, and she laughed. Good times.

After the chicken and the broccoli had been consumed, after I had blown out Patrick’s candles that I had burned down to their stumps, Alicia wanted to “talk,” and there was no better place to talk than in my bedroom. It had become my little home lately—honestly, I didn’t know the day or the month, though I had some theories—complete with computer, and bed, and chair, and television with VCR and remote. The place had stunk like I really stink, heavy with sweat and the stagnant odor of dirt, but I had aired the place out and lit some incense. The room was downright inviting. I sat in my chair and waited for Alicia to come out of the bathroom.

She came out red-faced, stifling laughter. She hopped over to my chair. “I think I heard them doing it,” she said, giggling.

I sat right up. “The lesbians?” I asked. “How could you tell?”

“I heard moaning.”

“Are you sure?” I said. “Maybe they’re just working out or wrestling or something.”

“No way,” Alicia said. She sounded sure of herself.

“In the bathroom?”

Alicia shook her head. “It sounded further away than that,” she said, “like they were down the hall and left the bathroom door open.”

“I dunno. Sounds fishy. Maybe you’re hearing things.”

“I’m not dense, you know,” Alicia said. She opened her eyes wide. “It just sounded like it. One moaned and then the other. Like they were taking turns.”
“Really.” I thought about this for a good long minute. “But how do you know what lesbians sound like when, they’re, you know—”

“Doing it?” Alicia rolled her eyes. “They’re not aliens, you know. When it comes down to it, sex sounds like sex.”

I thought about this for another good long moment.

“Oh, cut that out,” Alicia said, sliding onto my lap. I grinned at her, brushed my hands across the wide bones in her hips and felt, gently, for her pulse.

“Turn off the light,” she said.

Yes, sir. Lesbians.

The next morning I found the cork screw in our mailbox beside the door. As I opened the door to fetch it, I saw Killer standing in the yard, looking out across the road. I followed its stare but saw nothing in particular. I stepped outside, into the frigid winter air, and felt the cold replenish my lungs, freezing out the warm, cloying air of the duplex. It felt great to be outside, to live life, to have gotten laid. I almost knocked on the lesbians’ door to personally thank them for that new feng shui, but instead I had a seat on our very cold metal chair and looked out past the porch at the greater world.

Killer finished staring at the air and began ambling toward the house when it caught sight of me. At least, I think it saw me—its blue eyes were clouded over with cataracts. Killer blinked at me. I smiled at it. “Good dog,” I said. “Good pup. Good doggy, good lesbians.” I kissed the air and smiled and felt the metal chair freezing into my ass. All these sensations, I thought. All this stimulus. How great. How could I have spent these last days in that warm bed,
breathing the same air over and over? No wonder I hadn’t been feeling well. A man needs his fresh air.

I looked at the dog again, smiling broadly, riding the wave. I thought up a good show tune, something by Barry Manilow, and started humming at the dog, singing “Here doggy,” every few notes. I started snapping my fingers. My cold ass bounced up and down, but I was warm and soulful inside, and that’s what matters most.

The dog looked back at me for awhile, its pinkish tongue dangling from the side of its mouth. Then it licked some snow, looked at me piteously, and walked into the back yard.

That look, that careless indifference—it froze me. Why couldn’t Killer understand my position? Weren’t dogs supposed to give unconditional love? These seemed like gaping questions. I stopped singing. My face grew red and hot. I began sweating—snap—like that. The coldness in my ass suddenly shot throughout my whole body, freezing my fingertips. I frowned. I dropped the cork screw on the porch. It made a loud metallic impact noise, which annoyed me, so I kicked the cork screw into the snow so the lesbians could never ask for it again, not to celebrate anything.

Killer barked at another dog in the back yard. I heard growling. Stupid dog, I thought, a stupid name for a stupid dog.

I went back to bed. Alicia was still there, wrapped up in my blankets in some pattern that seemed impossible to understand or unravel. “I need in,” I said.

Alicia rolled over, complicating the blankets even more, and opened her eyes. She smiled. “Hi,” she said, hugging part of the pillow.
“I need in,” I said again, “I really need in there.” The bed seemed like the center of the world, always warm with my body, always assuring me that I was still alive.

Alicia fumbled with the blanket and opened the intricate pattern without effort, but I couldn’t understand such simplicity. I blinked at her and the bed. “Come on in,” she said. I saw a flash of her skin. It looked unbearable. She smiled at me sleepily.

“No,” I said. “I mean, I need the place to myself. I need it to be just me in there.”

She still did not understand. She shook her head and a big flop of hair fell over her face. Then she sat up, the blanket falling below her naked chest.

“Out!” I said, jabbing my finger toward my bedroom door.

I stayed in bed until dark, when I felt safe enough to leave it and venture downstairs. The place was mostly dark—some streetlights inside slid between the narrow slits of the blinds. Patrick had gone out hours ago, without so much as a word or, “Are you okay, buddy?” And Alicia—I felt bad about her, in a way. I had been so gruff, so unable to explain myself.

I walked into the kitchen, which was almost totally dark, and opened the refrigerator. Everything inside looked so processed and contained, and I looked at everything and wondered how many strange hands had handled all my food. I closed the refrigerator in disgust, murmuring something I do not remember, but just as it closed I caught the tantalizing white glow of the plastic medicine containers, tucked into the corner. I approached them, picked one of them up, and squinted at them. One green, one red, one blue. And so on. I had opened none of them, and when I shook a bottle, I could hardly feel the thick weight of the pills shifting inside. They were packed too tightly. I thought again about trying the pills, maybe taking the medication as I had been told. Maybe I should try a different one each day until I found the one that worked. I picked
up three bottles and began juggling them in the dark. The pills rattled tightly as the bottles landed in my hand.

My doctor was a hairy young man. I did not trust him. I did not like the tuft of thick black hair spilling over his back collar, I did not like his round dark eyes, the ones that begged for my trust like I owed it to him. I did not like his fashionably receding hairline, the comb over. And he always needed a shave, it seemed. How can you trust a man who cannot remember to shave? I tried thinking reasonably for awhile but it was too difficult, and after awhile I just juggled and I just did not trust the doctor. He was always prescribing these pills, always in a hurry to juice me up with the latest potion. I kept juggling. I walked around the dark kitchen and continued to juggle the bottles of pills.

Finally, a bottle glanced off my fingertips and hit the floor and rolled against the wall we shared with the lesbians. I stood there for a moment, considering my options. I decided to search for the bottle in the dark. I got on my hands and knees and crawled on the floor until I was against the wall. I found the bottle and picked it up and looked at it, and then I heard the noises coming from the lesbians' apartment.

At first it was just a laugh or two, the occasional clank of glass on glass. But even that sounded festive, the light, carefree noises of friendship and celebration. There was a laugh, then a stifled clamor of voices, forks hitting plates, and I thought: how quaint, a dinner party, a housewarming party, right next door. I pressed my body up against the wall, listening to the happy murmur emanating from their apartment. I tried to soak in all that positivity again, to rearrange my head according to the happy noises and positive energy, I closed my eyes and tried to will myself through the wall. But of course I couldn't. I couldn't. When I figured out I was
still in my dark kitchen, my palms sweating all over the smooth surface of the bottles, I stood and carefully replaced the bottles on the counter, and then I stared out the window.

Patrick knocked on my door after three days. I had hardly moved, except to pee or eat a few crackers. “You okay in there?” he asked, and not in a friendly way.

“Go away.” I turned up the television.

Instead, he opened the door and tried to enter but was stopped short by my considerable stink. “Jesus, man,” he said. “I can smell this in the hallway, but it’s ten times worse in here.”

I managed a weak smile in reply.

“This has got to stop.” Patrick opened my bedroom window, letting the cold air sweep throughout the room and carry away my odor. I tried to sit up but couldn’t. Patrick said, “What is going on here?”

“What do you mean?”

“What I mean is that you won’t leave your room.” Patrick sat down on the edge of my bed, then thought better of it and stood. I grinned back. “Alicia calls and you won’t answer. You’ve got to go back to work on Monday. You won’t take a bath. You won’t eat anything but crackers. You lay here all day and watch TV and you just stink. I’m sick of having a roommate like this.”

I recognized that this was a moment where I needed to defend myself, or at least reassure Patrick. I wanted to get up, dressed in a three-piece suit, something snappy and gleaming, and tell him it’s all been one big joke all along, the mood swings, the paranoia. It’s a joke and that’s why I don’t need medicine.
Instead, I continued to grin weakly. I simply had no energy for anything else. Patrick took a couple deep breaths, then returned to the window and slammed it shut. The window slid loudly against the sill, and I started. “Good,” he said. “You have a pulse after all.” He walked to the bed, to the door, and then back to the bed. “I can’t do this,” he said. “I do all the chores around here. Plus, I just plain worry about you in here like this, all the time.” He frowned. “I can’t put up with it much longer.”

“Or what?” I asked. I felt a vague, faraway welling up in my chest, and I knew I would be sad in a couple hours. I could always see it coming, but I could never ever stop the sadness from arriving.

“Or you have to go. I’m sorry.” Patrick stared at an interesting spot on my floor for awhile. “I’m willing to give you a few days to start figuring this out. Maybe you can.”

“Maybe.”

“Yeah.” He ambled toward the door, lingering.

“You can go if you want,” I said.

Patrick looked up at me, his lips straight and taut, and then he left.

The next afternoon, I made a real effort to get myself circulating in the rest of the house. After Patrick left for his late classes, I moved to the bathroom, which was adjacent to my room, and took a long pee. Then I stayed in there and looked out the window, slowly adjusting to a new environment, the tiny room like a decompression chamber.

After awhile I was in the living room downstairs, where I sat for awhile and thought about what to do. What I hadn’t been able to tell Patrick, much less Alicia, was that I did want to get better. I had moments every week of strong, urgent clarity, where I knew exactly what was
the matter with me—the doctor was right, I was sick and needed help—and I wanted to take all
my pills, just as I was instructed, and feel better and be happier. It seemed like a central truth,
like God or death, and I wanted to act on it. But I always got hung up. I’d start wondering how
many pills I should take, or where I’d left the dosage information, or which of the pills might be
most effective, how I might feel better as soon as possible. And then other thoughts would creep
in, about how happiness was an abstraction, nothing you could reach out and touch, that it was
elusive and impossible. And before I knew it, all that momentum would have just disappeared
into all those tiny details, all the things I could never make a decision about.

I felt the same central urge that day—I wanted the happiness. I thought about Alicia
and how she had tried not to cry as she had gotten dressed, while I’d crawled under my covers
and pointed to the door. “Out,” I had said. “Out!” I thought about Patrick serving me an eviction
notice. “I’ve already got another roommate lined up,” he was saying. “A sane one. One who
takes a shower and leaves the house.” Then I saw him with Alicia, and I saw them both happy
and smiling as roommates, and me out somewhere in the black future. I shivered.

I stood up and half-ran into the kitchen. It was the fastest I had moved in weeks, and I
felt an affirmative rush of pain in my legs that told me I was doing something unusual. I saw the
pills, setting bunched into the same corner on the counter. I walked over, thinking about Patrick
and Alicia and the cold uncertainty of my life if I did not get my shit together. I picked up the
bottle of green pills and read the label. Then I picked up the reds, then the blues. Paralysis swept
over me again. What would help me the most? I fumbled with the bottles, and I worried, and
then I got an idea.

I opened each bottle and extracted two pills apiece. Two, four, six. I stopped at six and
held them in my palm, noting the differences in shape and size. Then I tossed them into my
mouth. They slammed against the back of my throat, and I forced them down without even a sip of water. I belched a dry, sterile belch.

Some time later I heard Killer yelp from the back yard. I was sitting in the breakfast nook in our kitchen, but I wasn’t sure how long I had been there. My face felt warm and buzzy, like being drunk and stoned at the same time, and a crushing euphoria was stinking off my body. I wasn’t sure what it was, but the sensation made me feel light, and I liked feeling light rather than heavy and sad and immobile. I took a sip from my beer, which I had opened to help wash down my pills, and I listened. After a moment, Killer yelped again. I waited for the lesbians to respond. Instead, Killer yelped again. And again.

I got up and walked to the window. The dog was laying down, a faded red stain in the snow by its head. It yelped, then it tried to look around but couldn’t.

I actually started crying—evidence, I thought, that the mixture of anti-depressants was loosening up my soul. I took a vague satisfaction, and I wanted to investigate it. I walked to the back door and stepped out. The cold hit my body, but since I felt separate from my body, the cold also did not bother me. Killer was already looking at me by the time I looked at it.

“How’s a boy doing?” I kneeled before the dog. This time, the dog was very interested in seeing me. I leaned over and placed a hand against Killer’s head, and I saw the cut there. It didn’t seem serious, just a flesh wound from one dog to another. It was a territorial thing. Part of the Dog Code. “How’s a boy doing?” I said again. Killer yelped.

I knocked on the lesbians’ back door and waited for a moment. I realized I was still holding my beer. I set it down on their cement steps and knocked again, and again. My knuckles began tickling and I stopped. No answer. I looked through a couple small windows in the back
door. I couldn’t see anyone, but I could see the setting sunshine lighting up their house. The light was rich and orange, a nostalgic color. I missed the place, even though I had never been inside. I felt that promising energy again, their newness and their freshness in the house. I couldn’t explain it to myself. I just felt it.

The sun glowed behind their curtains, and the room was burning hot orange. I looked at Killer, and then again at the heaven in their apartment. Then I saw a small back window within arm’s reach. And the logic wasn’t really there at all—no rationalization necessary. It was already happening. I was already reaching for the window and, finding it open, I was already opening it wide and hoisting my body surely inside. I felt strong. And then, already, I was sliding through, headfirst, and already I was standing up and looking around at their bathroom.

The room was already a mess. That’s the first thing I thought. Their toothbrushes were in the sink. Two wet blue towels were bunched into the corner. I picked them up, one at a time, and I folded them into neat squares and placed them on the toilet.

I walked into their living room and was confronted by a large, square painting I hadn’t seen from the outside. The painting was an abstract, I guessed, with splotches of red and blue paint on a black background, long, tortured lines of green, dots of yellow like faraway stars. I stared at the art, unsure what to think. Was it really this complicated, or was I just making it that way? I couldn’t tell, and after a moment, that weighty question slipped off my brain. Before the pills, a question like that could have plagued and depressed me for days.

I smiled and entered their living room and saw the dark throw over the couch. Such darkness stood out in the sunny, orange room, and I plopped down on the couch. I felt the darkness of the couch pulsing against the lightness, drawing me in and keeping me warm. I inspected the throw carefully and saw that it was actually an elaborate network of several fuzzy
throws, one piled on the other. The make and design of the network was again too complicated for me, and I could not understand how the lesbians had known to arrange the throws into this pattern, and not another one. I decided I needed something simpler and turned on their television, which was featuring one of those afternoon talk shows. The theme for the day was “My Daughter is a Slut.” A fat woman was shaking her head at her daughter, and she was saying how she seemed like a total whore, dressed too loose and whatnot. But the girl wasn’t convincing as a slut. Her makeup and lipstick were just too careful and sculpted. Her retorts were scripted, but I laughed anyway. I pretended that someone was sitting next to me, and I nudged them and pointed at the television. “Whore,” I said, then laughed.

I thought a beer would go well with the show and got up to get mine from outside, but then I saw that it had been knocked over and that Killer had dragged itself over to the spill and was lapping up the snow, and I remembered: Bring the dog in. That’s why you’re here. But then I heard a hoot from the television, from the show’s audience, and I forgot Killer entirely and opened the refrigerator and pulled out a beer, a German import with a busty woman on the label holding pitchers over her breasts. I took a long drink and thought the beer tasted cloying, like a yellow flowery weed. But I drank it down anyway. I wanted to know what everything in here felt like. I tingled with my own aliveness in here. I wanted to live here.

I found myself again in the bathroom. It was dusk outside and I clicked on the light and grabbed the lady shaver from the shower and some shaving gel, and I gave myself maybe the closest shave ever. I drank from the beer after each burst brought another ribbon of hair off my face. I was feeling better and better. The medication was working. Why hadn’t I tried it sooner? I had never felt so vital, so aware of the context around me. How a different context can change it all. Everything. I was soaking everything in, trying it all, feeling that tingle of aliveness. For
minute, I dislodged myself from things around me. I could do that. I just laughed, but when I
came to, I was clean-shaven. Nary a nick. Magic. I couldn’t wait to tell Alicia about this. It
seemed like just the thing to do.

Then the back door opened and the lesbians were fighting. Too too bad, I thought, until I
realized they were just worried about Killer. Somebody said, “What’s that smell?” Somebody
else said, “Did you leave the bathroom light on?”

I heard Killer yelp again. I heard one of them picking up the telephone and dialing
numbers. I lathered my face with moisturizer. My skin soaked up the thick liquid. The audience
on the television hooted again, and chanted the host’s name in a mantra. I looked at my face in
the mirror, but I couldn’t quite see myself. No matter, I thought. I felt great. The world’s pulse
picked up.

I walked out of the bathroom and saw Killer laying in a white heap by the door. The
Tall One looked at me. Her eyes widened, and I knew right then it would be impossible to
explain it all. “Hi,” I said. “Remember me?” I extended a hand. “I’m your neighbor, and I meant
to bring your dog inside, but, as you can see, I got a little sidetracked. Beautiful place. Love it.”

But the Short One had already hung up the line and dialed another number, only three
digits. I understood. The Tall One took a long, fast stride in my direction, so I kept my hand
extended, waiting for her to take it.
Tom looked around the table. It was packed with former friends from college, sitting shoulder to shoulder, holding their beers or their mixed drinks. They were the last party-goers from the rehearsal dinner, and their party had moved back to the hotel. The table, black and square, was huge and set squarely in the corner of the otherwise empty hotel bar. Tom had started in the middle of the table, with easy access to several conversations. But all the people getting up for drinks, getting up to piss, and the creation and dissolution of those strange alliances of conversation, had rearranged everybody. Tom had been quiet all night, mostly, and found himself anchored to a faraway corner, backs turned to him. These people weren’t being mean, Tom reminded himself.

He rested his hands on his jeans and began smoothing out the new, stiff fabric. He placed his fingers on his beer bottle, then, dissatisfied, he rearranged them in what would seem a more assertive, aggressive manner. But what he really wanted wasn’t a beer. The liquid just seemed too musty, overwrought with barley and hops and the sweaty hands of those men who had plucked the weeds from the damp earth. He really wanted something crisp and light, a drink so clean it tasted fresh from the shower. Something made with washed hands. A glass of white wine.

His brain felt soggy and slow, not at all like the warm, active feeling that wine had always created inside him. The tipsy feeling from the beer was like the heavy pressure of a man lying on top of him, pressing his body downwards onto Tom. But he kept trying new beers with heavy-lidded names: Bass, Becks, Molson, Killians. Barley, hops, big sweaty men in dirty coveralls. It was, for Tom, a brave new world.
Tom had lost count of the bottles of beer he had drunk when the groom’s brother entered the bar. He was a strange man, Tom decided, behaving boorishly at the reception earlier that night, throwing back iced cans of Budweiser and laughing and belching so loud that Tom heard it from across the reception hall. He was also the best man, and though he was strange, Tom was impressed by that title, and by the oblivious nature of the groom’s brother. It simply seemed that he had no other recourse but behave in his thick-headed way.

So Tom was mildly relieved when the groom’s brother saw him, the only person at the only occupied table at the bar not involved in conversation, and smiled and pointed his thumb and forefinger at Tom like a cute little gun and fired away. *Gotcha.*

He approached Tom and stopped before him, vaguely stroking the paunch of his stomach with his fingertips in small, loose circles. “Tim—”

“Tom. My name is Tom.”

“Okay. Tom. What’s the drink?” The groom’s brother pointed at Tom’s beer bottle with his index and middle finger, a forceful salute to nothing in particular.

The drink was, at that moment, an Amstel Light. Tom chose it because the name started with a vowel. The word seemed to offer freshness and crispness, sanctuary from the terse names and thick buzz of the other beers. So he had made a deal with himself. Light beer. He turned the bottle so the groom’s brother could read the label.

The groom’s brother picked up the bottle, gingerly, and took a sip. His face took the appearance of a person who had just smelled rancid meat or had accidentally hit a small rodent with his car. He held the bottle like a tiny carcass and placed it back atop the ring of water on the table. “I should have known,” he said, shaking his head.

“Known what?”
“Light beer tastes like rat piss,” the groom’s brother said. He placed a hand on his hip, underneath his button-up shirt that was neither buttoned nor tucked in, then flopped open that half of the shirt, revealing a silvery flask tucked into his jeans. The container gleamed darkly in the dim atmosphere of the bar, both available and ominous, promising something bad. Tom felt a familiar charge when the groom’s brother flopped open that shirt to reveal the white undershirt tight to his gut, and the protruding flask. Then Tom noticed his vague likeness in the reflection of the flask, a reflection distorted enough to narrow his new, thick jaw and arch his eyebrows far above his eyes like terrible, ancient curtains.

The groom’s brother carefully extracted the flask from his jeans and handed it to Tom. The metal felt warm and familiar to Tom. He looked up at the groom’s brother as he fingered the flask’s oily surface.

“I came here to party,” the groom’s brother said. “So you have a little of that to warm you up. I’m going to go get us something real.”

The flask was a gentle curve, and Tom turned it over to its concave face so he wouldn’t have to look at his own. He ran his hand across the surface again as he oscillated between relief and fear, gratitude and uncertainty. But that beer inside him, the festering weeds from which they were brewed, made it hard to tell the difference. He looked at the table again. It had started to clear out, but many of Tom’s former friends were still sitting at the table, huddled together in small groups and whispering, or bursting out in drunken, overwrought laughter at some joke or memory. Another time, a few years ago, and maybe Tom would have been in there dishing out the gossip, snickering at the pariah in the corner.

Somebody’s head turned around slowly, eyes slitted, smile creeping all over Tom. He knew they were talking about him. What on earth...? Can you imagine? Then, a stifled fit of
laughter. Tom looked up from the flask, attempting to set his jaw squarely, but it didn’t matter. They had turned their backs again.

But really, he had to remind himself, it was like a lifetime ago, him and those people being friends.

Tom turned his attention to the groom’s brother, who was still getting their “real” drinks from the bar. He had apparently decided to stay there for awhile. The drinks, contained in two tiny glasses, set on the bar beside him. The groom’s brother had also bought another can of Budweiser. He held it in one hand and leaned against the bar with the other hand. Every few seconds he would tilt back his head and take another huge drink. Between these drinks, he found time to speak and listen to the bartender. Both the groom’s brother and the bartender were gesturing at each other, as if one was attempting to understand the directions of the other.

The bar was in the center of the room, surrounded on all sides by stools and, beyond them, chairs and tables. Tom wanted to get up and join the groom’s brother as he threw back a beer and talked to the bartender. It seemed like just the thing he should be doing. He used his hands as a brace and tried to rise from his seat, but his body saturated with the beer, soggy like a wet bag of rice. His hands slipped, and he plopped back into his chair. The legs rattled against the tile floor.

A former friend at a far end of the table turned to face Tom. “Easy there, gracie,” he said to Tom, tipping his glass. The others giggled.
In all his years at college and in those few years following college until that night, Tom had never bothered to take shots of hard liquor. It was counterproductive, he always said, and he had meant it back then. He’d been to all those parties where the men—be they ominous, hulking characters or sinewy, underdeveloped types—drank way too much beer and sucked their liquor directly from the bottle. Tom remembered, in that dismembered way you recall the events of your former lives, the blatant struggle these men had had with basic motor functions: speaking, blinking, unzipping their jeans and unpeeling them from rubbery legs. Even bodily functions were crudely reversed: those men couldn’t help but belch and fart, and in certain rare instances they couldn’t help but piss and shit, either. But never could these men, their speech thick, their hands fumbling like calloused balls of stone across tight white skin, maintain even the least inspired erection. Hello and goodbye.

Tom took a swing from the flask. Before the vodka, warmed by the heat coming off the groom’s brother’s gut, hit his mouth and continued down his throat, Tom tasted the warm residue of saliva on the lip of the flask. It was minty, like the groom’s brother had been chewing Dentyne or smoking menthols.

Then came the vodka. It tasted like water at first, Tom thought dimly as he took a long swig of it, the liquor dripping from the corners of his mouth. He swallowed it down, and felt all the moisture in his mouth go down with the drink. He took a pensive breath, exhaled through his mouth, and thought the air before him would erupt. Everything seemed ripe for a fire.

Tom closed his eyes and squeezed out the surprised moisture there. When he opened them again, he saw the vague figure of the groom’s brother snaking between the uneven rows of chairs, gingerly toting along a bottle holding dark, golden liquor. In his pockets, Tom
thought he saw shot glasses. The groom’s brother was big and now he was very drunk, and kept bumping into the backs of chairs. People would look up, annoyed, and recognize him from the rehearsal dinner. Their eyes would glaze over knowingly, their mouths would straighten, their lips would grow taut.

He finally arrived in the corner, where Tom was still sitting, and set down the bottle with awkward, uncoordinated flourish. It was a nearly-empty bottle of tequila. “My little brother is getting married tomorrow,” the groom’s brother said, and loudly enough to disrupt others even though he looked only at Tom. “Gone forever into the great marriage beyond.” He picked up the bottle and held it like a torch. “And I am here to celebrate. We’re all here to celebrate, right?”

A few people turned and nodded until they saw it was the groom’s brother speaking, then returned quickly to their conversations. Tom only blinked and stared at the groom’s brother’s silver belt buckle. It was the only thing he could see clearly.

The groom’s brother leaned toward Tom, still hoisting the bottle. “I got this off the bartender for cheap,” he said. “This is what they drink in Mexico when they’re celebrating.”

And he pulled a shot glass from his linty breast pocket, set it on the table in front of Tom, and filled it with tequila.

Tom understood both clearly and vaguely that he was participating in a ritual of some sort, but for several reasons he couldn’t quite understand what that ritual was, or what its implications were. It was all so confusing. He should have stayed sober, he thought.

Instead, Tom said, “But we’re in Pennsylvania.”

The groom’s brother was cleaning another shot glass with his shirttail. He set it on the table beside Tom’s and poured the rest of the liquor in it. Then the groom’s brother used his
thick fingers to nudge Tom’s glass closer to Tom. “If Pennsylvania made a tequila,” he said, “we’d drink it.”

Tom willed himself to remember why he had come in the first place. He was there to celebrate, yes indeed. He was there to be Tom, to find out what that actually meant.

Then Tom looked around at the backs of his former friends, then to the groom’s brother, the only person in the room who had never met him before that day. And in his drunk mind he envisioned some severance from things past, a gleaming scalpel slicing a long string connecting the present and future to the past. He cut that weight, he thought, and watched the great wet mass of the past fall into a dark chasm beneath him, gone forever. Forever.

He held up the liquor and winked at it. The groom’s brother laughed, picked up his own, and clanked the glasses together. Then they drank to “the fucking future,” the groom’s brother said.

Tom shot the liquor down his throat. It tasted of some unknowable overripe fruit, Tom thought. It was both too tangy and yet also dry like the spiked punch popular at old college parties. Instead of the false, produced fruitiness of those drinks, tequila seemed to come from the very souls of fruits themselves. The noises from the bar—all that talking and laughing, the fragile noise of glasses slamming on the table—it softened into one noise, vague around the edges, slightly further away. Neon beer signs lost focus, the reds and blues expanding. Tom stared at one for a moment, trying to read the brand, but he couldn’t see what it said. When he turned away, the sign followed him like tracer fire.

The groom’s brother slammed down his glass, took a deep breath, and reached for his breast pocket. After fumbling around for a long time, he finally plucked out two cigarettes.
He handed one to Tom, then placed the other between his lips and lit it with a match. He took a drag, exhaled slowly, then looked around the room. “Listen, man,” he said to Tom. “I got a better place to go where we can celebrate.”

Tom pushed away the old implications in those words, the syrupy smugness of boys to girls, and grinned. Tom also looked around the room, as if appraising the scene himself. He stood up without any difficulty at all and exulted in the power of feeling above everyone at the table. They still ignored him but he no longer cared. Tom felt unglued from this room and these people.

“Is it close?” Tom asked.

“Next town over,” the groom’s brother said. “One of my favorite places to go on a night like this.”

Tom remained standing. He felt wise. He knew something. Yes. A night like this.

“Let’s go,” he said to the groom’s brother.

As they left they passed by a large mirror in the hotel lobby, and Tom glanced at the reflections even though he didn’t really want to. He saw the groom’s brother, too large for his clothes, broad shouldered and striding fast and wide with single-minded purpose. Then he saw himself, much shorter and still too familiar: the hips too wide, the shoulders still too narrow, the chest still sunken and invisible. They walked outside. Tom drank from the flask again in a sudden urge to obliterate that image and remake it according to his most ardent wishes.
The groom’s brother directed his car, a beat up mass of silver and red lines, through the night across curved, narrow roads. Tom heard the gravel kick up against the side of the car as they careened around corners. Above them, the moon shone fully and brightly, a hopeful beacon that seemed impossible to reach in all this dark. Tom squinted. He saw the craters on the moon, a blemish like acne, and the small black gap between the moon’s surface and its brilliance, the reflection of the sun.

The groom’s brother had taken back the flask from Tom and sat in the driver’s seat, one hand grasping the steering wheel, the other tilting the flask to his mouth. “I can hardly believe my baby brother’s getting married tomorrow,” he said. He handed the flask to Tom, who accepted it, then drew out a cigarette and lit it. “I just hope it turns out better than my marriage. Mine left for Arkansas. Can you believe it? Arkansas.”

He said it again, this time to himself. Tom nodded, as if understanding. “That must have been tough,” Tom said.

The groom’s brother looked at him sharply. The car careened into the gravel lining the road, and the car grumbled and slowed as the little rocks spat up against the car’s frame again. The groom’s brother righted the car while holding the cigarette tightly between his lips, then relaxed and took a drag. Then he looked at Tom again. “How would you know if it sucked?” he asked.

“I’ve been married before,” Tom said. This was true.

“Bitch leave you?”

Tom shuddered. “Yeah.” This was not true, though the bitch had done the leaving.

The groom’s brother began talking about his ex-wife, and how Arkansas was like a culture warp, and that he wouldn’t step foot in the state, not even to visit his kids, no, no way.
Tom looked out the window. There were foothills in the distance, and at night they were just jagged black curtains, darker than the sky itself. Shrubs and trees bordered the road closely, but they were blurs to Tom as the car clipped by. Everything was moving fast. He blinked and looked at his gray reflection in the side view mirror. His face was misshapen in the warped mirror. His chin appeared narrower, his hairline lower and fuller. Below his face, as if a caption, the mirror read: *Objects in mirror may be closer than they appear.* Closer to what? Tom thought.

"Are you listening, man?" It was the groom’s brother.

"Yeah," Tom said. "I just zoned out for a minute."

"That’s okay, man," the groom’s brother said. He continued talking, and Tom continued not to listen. He took a healthy swig from the flask and all things felt a little better. He continued staring at his new reflection, wondering where he was going.

The car fishtailed around a corner and Tom saw the weak swabbing of lights in the air ahead.

Skippy’s was a dive. Tom knew it immediately even though he had never been inside a strip club before. When the groom’s brother opened the scarred double doors, the heavy bass from the music was joined by the searing guitars and deep, male vocals. The sound was everywhere. So was the cigarette smoke, which dangled in the stagnant air.

The men who populated the bar, and the cheap circular tables on the floor, seemed part of an exotic redneck collective to Tom. They all hunkered down before their beers, staring at both the golden drink and the women dancing on stage, weighed down by heavy
flannels and greasy long hair. Tom felt some invisible grievance in the club, resting on all that smoke and riding the punishing music.

Tom looked around as the groom's brother walked up to the bar and "ordered up a couple brews," Tom heard him say. Some cheap, harsh stage lights were strung up in the black corners of the room, illuminating the place at awkward angles. The raised runway stage, bordered with holiday lights of many colors, jutted out diagonally from a far corner to the center of the room. At the front, a dull metal pole protruded from the bottom of the stage and connected to the ceiling. A woman was swinging on it, defying many laws with a willful dance—swinging, flipping, flipping, flying out of control, her hair sprayed blonde mane flopping in the air, the only ventilation in the place. She landed on her feet, fitted with high heels, and Tom gave her a close and jealous look. Her body was slim to the point of appearing concave at places, but it also had curves and protrusions at the right places. Tom stared at her breasts, which jiggled as the woman smiled and waved at the cheering men, and tried to think of them as objects of desire, things to be touched and caressed and kneaded and aroused. But he couldn't. Bills of all amounts, rolled into balls or shaped into makeshift airplanes, flew onstage, and the woman bent down to fetch them on her way out, her ass to the crowd, giving them one more peek and whetting their appetite for the next performer. Tom couldn't tell if the woman looked happy or not as she left the stage, but her happiness felt important to Tom.

The groom's brother pressed a cold, bottled beer against Tom's chest. "She's one of my favorites," he said, pointing the head of his bottle toward the empty stage. "She's a spicy one."

Tom frowned. "But she looked happy up there," he said. "Didn't she?"
“Shit.” The groom’s brother whistled and took a long drink of his beer. “It’s an act, man. You should see her when she does lap dances up on stage.”

“She does that?”

“Sure.” They started walking to a table. “I love getting dances from her. It puts a certain spring in my step, if you know what I mean.”

Tom felt less certain than he had earlier. They sat down at a small table for two next to the deejay’s booth in the corner furthest from the stage. It was loud there, with the deejay blasting metal music and blaring his own voice between performers, searching for catcalls. From there, they had a full view of the place. Tom hoped the would remain in the back, drinking beers and watching the women from the dark corner, the deejay too loud for conversation.

The groom’s brother continued to talk, but not loud enough for Tom to hear him over the music and deejay. He talked and pointed towards the stage, and odd words like dance and sweat and last escaped the heavy metal and reached Tom’s ears. Tom just nodded in agreement and drank his beer fast. When it was time for another round, the groom’s brother grabbed their empties and went away to the bar.

Tom looked at the stage again. Another woman, who the deejay had called Des’re in his introduction, was swaying to the music. Men either hooted or drank their beers, transfixed by the movements of her body. Tom could tell she was faking it because he had faked it in the same way at house parties or clubs, swaying because he had been on display for men—prettier men, but no different really. It was fake, and her body had felt like a rusted farm machine, but the men who danced with him all that time ago didn’t notice or mind. Des’re danced the same way.
She finished her dance and collected the white feather boa that she had discarded on the stage as part of her act, draping it over her shoulders and covering her naked breasts. She walked offstage and was greeted by a gaggle of eager men holding bills above their heads. She displayed her thong and they took turns placing the folded paper money between the shiny black fabric and her skin. One man ducked in between the line and dropped a heavy golden coin inside the front of her thong. The others gaped, then giggled and hooted as Des’re grimaced, reached down the front of her panties, and plucked out the coin. Her face darkened, then reddened. She flicked the coin across the room. It hit a man sitting at a far table squarely on the forehead.

This man looked up from the table, where he had been staring into and whispering at his beer. He appeared confused for a moment, then his eyebrows lowered against the top of his sockets and he rose—and rose. He was big and tall and heavy, and he was drunk, and he began moving towards Des’re. He passed underneath a stage light and Tom noticed the red in his face, the bulging vein in his forehead. A bead of sweat ran along the vein the way a river follows along the edge of a steep bluff.

He was met by a stable of bouncers, who corralled him as he approached Des’re. He lunged forward and lost his balance, falling into the arm of a bouncer. His ballcap fell to the floor. His breath was heaving, his mouth open wide, his teeth wet and wide. He bit the bouncer deeply on the forearm.

The bouncer howled and dropped the man, who got up quickly and made for Des’re again. The other bouncers jumped on him, pushed him from behind onto the floor, and began punching him in his neck and kidneys. Once, twice, three times. Four times. The man didn’t move. His face was sideways to the floor, facing Tom. Tom looked at him from his safe spot.
in the dark corner. One eye was blotted out entirely by the harsh stage lighting above, but the other floated there, blue and lost. Tom imagined it the eye of a younger man despite the leathery hood of skin framing it. Tom looked closely. That eye was quivering.

The music had stopped, but everyone stayed where they were. They sipped beers and watched the man get beaten in the same way you watch a fight in the movies. Punch, drink. The groom’s brother stood by the bar, holding a beer in each hand, smiling absently as he watched.

Tom looked at Des’re. Her straight brown hair had fallen like soft cables before her face, fracturing it. But Tom saw her mouth, straight and narrow and taut, and he thought he understood what she must have been thinking. He hunkered down in his seat.

After she had retired offstage to freshen up, Des’re returned for lap dances. It was, the groom’s brother said, the money part of the night for the strippers. “You can dance for an hour and maybe make fifty bucks,” he said. “Or you can do ten or fifteen lap dances in a row and make three times that in, like, the same time.”

Tom had to admit that it was good money. He looked onto the stage, which seemed so far away from their back table. Des’re was dancing on the lap of a man who sat bound to a folding lawn chair. She unzipped his pants and held her hands to her mouth as if impressed with her discovery. He looked closer. Des’re was faking it, too. She was faking it bad.

The groom’s brother had gotten up for another beer, leaving Tom alone again in the corner. On the way back to the table, the groom’s brother stopped at a few tables, slapping men on their shoulders or participating in elaborate handshakes, a ritual of masculinity Tom was still attempting to understand. He watched closely and took mental notes.
The groom’s brother also stopped off at the deejay’s station, jawing over the music. The deejay, a greasy man with greasy hair wearing a dusty black fedora, leaned in to hear the groom’s brother. They nodded mutually, and the groom’s brother pulled out his wallet and pressed a couple bills into the deejay’s waiting hand. Then he came back to the table, holding only one beer.

“Where’s mine?” Tom asked.

The music ended and the crowd cheered Des’re. The man leapt from the lawn chair, holding onto the unbuttoned edges of his jeans, and hobbled quickly off stage. He was smiling and sweating. He joined a stable of other men at a large table, front and center, and the others all whooped and slapped him on the back.

The groom’s brother sipped his beer and looked at the stage so that Tom could only see him in profile. “You won’t need a beer where you’re going,” he said.

In his brief life as a man—and in his recent public unveiling of this new self, this Tom—he was both afraid of and eager for those moments. He had observed such truth before, diluted in estrogen, and always speculated how he would react if only he could. If he was allowed. If he allowed himself.

But this allowance, he realized, had brought him there, to Skippy’s, to the corner stage, to poor fake Des’re. She tightened the satin-like cord around his wrists. The thin skin there pressed against the pole, which felt warm and oily like the flask, and Tom wanted a drink desperately. But he could not. His hands were tied behind his back, he was sitting on the folding lawn chair, he was facing the crowd of men. Des’re was somewhere behind him.
Tom looked out into the crowd and saw that the groom’s brother had moved out of the dark corner and joined a group of men at a much larger and closer table. He was jostling around with a few of them, sharing what seemed to be the mutual male joke Tom wanted to understand. The groom’s brother took a drink of beer, looked at Tom, and winked.

Des’re walked in front of Tom, facing him, and adjusted her thong so it rested high on her hips. The crowd behind her whistled. She looked at Tom, and he looked up at her. The stage lights darkened her face in the shadow of a thousand hairs, and her makeup was runny with sweat now, and tiny fault lines of moisture ran down her face. He looked below her face, at her body. It stretched in those places a woman’s body stretched, but the marks and distortions were covered with skin-colored paint or splotchy white powder.

“You like what you see?” she said to Tom, grinning as she approached him.

He put his head down and felt his chin biting into his sternum. The music, another guitar-heavy selection, began in mid-song. The men cheered, but the music only made Tom feel tired. Des’re began dancing, but Tom only looked at her heeled feet and noticed that they barely moved. They just swayed a little to keep up with the manipulations of her body. Des’re held a hand underneath each breast, lifted them, then pressed them together, leaned in, and pushed them into Tom’s face. They felt clammy and dead to Tom, touched by the calloused faces of a hundred cheap men and their fifteen-dollar hard-on’s.

Des’re noticed Tom’s frown. “What’s the matter, honey?” she whispered as she pressed them more firmly against his face, nearly suffocating him. “Don’t you like them? My tits are my big moneymakers.”

Tom wanted to answer her question thoroughly and thoughtfully, maybe over coffee somewhere quiet, somewhere away from such a bad idea as this. Instead, and without quite
meaning to, he smirked. Des’re’s face went from accommodating grin to taut scowl. Tom had seen that scowl earlier. She climbed on his lap and the crowd cheered.

She grabbed the top of Tom’s jeans and took off the belt. She whipped it out of the loops with great flourish, then unbuttoned his pants and unzipped them halfway. She stood and walked behind Tom, holding the belt in one hand as she stroked the pole with the other. The she wrapped the belt around Tom’s head. He felt the musty leather pressing into his forehead and she fastened it firmly into place. Then she backed off, appraising her work, and saluted to the crowd. Again they cheered.

Tom began to struggle with the cord restraining his hands, but Des’re had done this too many times before. The knot grew tighter. Des’re presented Tom to the crowd as if he were an exhibit—and indeed he felt like one: how not to be a man. She picked up a nearby glass of ice water and took a long drink, giving Tom a moment alone on stage. He looked out and saw the groom’s brother laughing and cheering at the spectacle taking place on stage.

Des’re returned, glass in hand, and unzipped Tom’s pants the rest of the way. Her hand lingered for a moment against Tom’s flaccidity, and she grinned and leaned forward and pressed her mouth against his ear. “Maybe this will help,” she said.

She held up the glass for all to see, then poured the water and the ice down Tom’s open pants. The water soaked through the jeans, but the ice rested inside his boxers, melting slowly. Tom closed his eyes in resistance to the cold. He wanted to be in on the jokes. He didn’t want to be the joke.

Tom opened his eyes and it felt like they had been closed for a long time. Skippy’s and everybody in it seemed to have aged a little during that brief time he had spent in the dark. He saw himself from afar, on display for the men, tied to a rusted-out pole.
Des’re climbed back on him and began grinding her lower body against his, pressing the cold deeper beneath his skin. She was grinning. The crowd was going wild. Tom leaned forward and whispered into her ear. Water ran down his leg. The ice shifted against him. Des’re slowed and gradually stopped moving on top of Tom. She looked at him. He grinned, and she fell backwards, onto the dance floor, then quickly picked herself up. She turned to the deejay’s station and gestured for him to cut the music. He did. The men quieted. A vacuum of silence replaced the music and the men. Des’re backed away from Tom, then turned and hurried back stage.

“What happened?” asked the groom’s brother, disappointed.

Tom looked out at them all.

“Bring her back!” someone yelled.

But it was too late, Tom knew. She was gone for good.
HOW TO TELL A TRUE FAMILY STORY

This is what happened:

During the fall of my first year of graduate school, I received a letter from an uncle I didn’t know I had. His name was Richard Austin, but he said he preferred Rick. In the letter, he told me about the murder he had committed thirty years ago, how he had been convicted and sentenced to the death penalty, how my family had blackballed him, erased him from our history. He had abided by this silence, never making any effort to contact the nieces and nephews who didn’t know he existed. But he had written me because his execution date was drawing near, and he finally couldn’t bear leaving this life without somebody acknowledging him, without reaching out and being reached toward. I wrote him back, and a quick, intense correspondence followed. He asked me to be present at his execution as a witness more to his life than his death.

So, on a cold November morning eleven days before Thanksgiving, I scraped the frost off my car’s windshield in preparation for the drive to Marion, Ohio, where my uncle’s penitentiary was located. It wasn’t quite dawn yet, and the sky was deep and dark and teased me with the mystery of light, if only I could see a little better. Something was behind the indigo that I felt I could both see and would never see. I lived in Iowa at the time and drove east along Interstate 80, directly into the beginning of every day, all the way to Ohio.

I arrived at night, stayed in a cheap hotel that smelled like a stale cigarette, and the next day attended my uncle’s execution. I was the only one from my family present.

When I think about how to tell this story, the usual avenues escape me. Every time I write the story down and tell it in chronological order, I always wind up forgetting some detail, some
significant detail that will shade the story in important ways. If writing is about lifting three-dimensional insights from flat pages and some dried ink, then it may be impossible like magic. The best stories we read elude us as soon as we finish them.

I just told you the story, but a thousand important things have been lost. Each of them seems like the important thing right now: the letter arrived in a light, pastel blue envelope. The back had been taped shut, and I could see the small tears where prison security had opened and read my uncle’s words. My address was written in neat block lettering on the front, and I saw the imprint of the ruler my uncle had used to keep the lines straight and correctly spaced. The paper inside was also pastel blue, the consistency of tissue paper. The pen marks were blotchy, but timid. These all seem important because they say something to me about breaking a large silence in my family. Each brought me closer to something true and spoken: families tend to their silences.

Or I could tell you something about my uncle’s face, the narrow, haunted eyes and the black stubble on his cheeks. We had the same nose. He seemed afraid when he met me, keeping his eyes directed at the floor, toying with his prison-issue thongs. I remember feeling time slip away, even as I felt drawn to him.

Or I could tell you what he said at the end of our first meeting, the morning of the day he died. He said, “I would tell you I love you, but then, I don’t really know you.”

And it was true.

In one of his letters, my uncle confessed his murder to me, details and all. I’ll let him tell you:
I was a stupid hood like your dad had been, just hanging out in Manchester and drinking whatever cheap beer I could get my hands on and smoking weed. That was a normal thing to do, that and fighting. I was kind of big back then, and that scared off a lot of guys and helped me out when other guys didn’t scare so easy. The guy I killed was like this, big and drunk and not scared of anything. We were at some hole in the wall right on the river where guys liked to get loaded and talk to the women, and right away he started riding me. He was on me about my sister, about my daddy, about anything that might rile me up. I was game for a fight—I hadn’t had one for a few weeks.

Men fighting is a funny thing, especially the way it happens in bars. Some guys go there looking to fight, and they scope everybody til they find someone else with a mind to fight. It’s like checking out women. And all the meanness and huffing is just some formality, like asking a woman to dance, in order to get to the fight. But you can’t fight without the other stuff. The longer I go, the sillier it all seems.

But I did fight him. He just kept getting all in my face, saying a bunch of nasty shit, and in those days it didn’t take much for me to fight. He was bigger than me so I jumped him. You have to jump the bigger guys because they’ll really screw you up if they get the advantage. The table broke and we hit the floor and pitchers of beer came down on us. My hair flopped down into my face and the guy hit me. I kicked him. We fought like this for a long time until the manager told us to go into the street. So we stopped right there, and I coulda walked away or run off down the street, but I didn’t.

We went outside and rolled on the pavement. Cars drove by and honked, people crowded around us. The road stopped right at the edge of a steep hill that led down to the Ohio River, and we rolled right up to that edge and we kept on punching each other. I could tell my face was getting bloody because I tasted it in my mouth.

The rest is easy enough to figure out, I reckon. I spiked his head on the edge of the pavement where it met the incline and heard a crack. He gasped and went sort of dead against me, and I got scared and let go and he rolled down the incline and hit the water. He didn’t move a muscle, and the river is very big and fast, and it just started taking him away. I was still on the road, watching. Everybody else crowded behind me and watched. Some people screamed, and a couple guys started to go save him. They turned back halfway down—the incline was too steep and they were too drunk. But they were braver than me. So we all watched this guy float away down the river and get sucked underneath a passing barge. Three days later the workers on the barge found his body clogging up the exhaust, but by then I was in jail. I was nineteen. After I got in jail, I read in the papers about the man, his age, who he was. I had no idea before that.

I read my uncle’s words with a thirsty anticipation. The admission came in his seventh letter, and by that time I figured he was working up to it. He’d already told me that nobody in the
family wanted to know anything about the details—my grandmother had tried buying all the newspapers in town the week following the murder, burning the couple hundred she did buy in a huge steel barrel in her backyard, using the ashes as fertilizer for her garden. I looked for some underlying importance to this act, something symbolic, but my grandmother was not that sort of woman. It was, I imagine, just gut-level shame, a visceral and selfish reaction. Everyone else in the family followed her lead, closing up the world on my uncle, learning to ignore the stares and whispers of the townspeople. But it was too much shame to carry around. Eventually everyone in the family left Manchester except for my grandmother, and even she moved out of town and barely ventured back.

Rick’s admission troubled me. I felt bad for the dead man but in the way you might mourn a politician or celebrity, distant and cool. But the biggest issue for me, because it involved me so directly, was that part of my family’s history had been systematically deleted, and I felt cheated. What else hadn’t I been told? What other silences patched up dirty secrets, large and small?

But more than all of that, my uncle’s words parted ways with silence, violating a carefully constructed border. I felt both full of truth and starving for more, satisfied and emaciated. Something true and awful in our families, the people we share our looks and genes and homes and hatreds with, feels heavy even as it races throughout our bodies, alerting each atom to its presence. That’s what happened for me, at least, as I sat in my vanilla love seat and tossed the crumpled envelope onto the coffee table and soaked in the story, felt him pushing me, felt my uncle’s contrite pulse in the pen marks, felt the heaviness of silence lifted away.
Because silence, when held up to a bright light and squinted at as if a picture negative, tells the other half you didn’t know was there. It conceals, and when uncovered you see fields of untended feelings suffocating under black tarp. Now, I can almost understand my father’s growing eccentricities, the gnawing weight he always seems to carry, the stiff heaviness in his shoulders. I can almost understand why he savors a cigarette because I know something of the release it must give him, the temporary reprieve. The secrets that body holds, the buried shame. Almost.

I spoke to my father not long after my uncle and I began corresponding. I had been avoiding his calls, begging off when my roommates told me he was on the line, but one night I answered and there he was and there I was, too. For a couple weeks I had been processing everything, allowing the new truth to reconfigure my family for me, and trying to figure out what to say to my father when we spoke. Sometimes I was so angry I shuddered and delivered long soliloquies to my bedroom wall, divorcing myself from a family that had divorced itself from my uncle. Other times I struggled with uncertainty, never wanting to face my family again. But I had remained quiet.

There was a long moment after I heard his voice when neither of us said anything; I was certain that somehow he knew that I knew, and it made me afraid. I reached for my own cigarette, took a drag, and began speaking to him about my studies, all the smart things I was doing. During the course of the conversation, my uncle grew more and more abstract, as if I could wish him away like a story. I spoke and spoke about everything typical, and my uncle’s story again grew silent. I decided then that I would never speak to my family about what I knew, telling them about it wasn’t the point. Some decorum must be maintained. Otherwise, I
would rip open wounds that were larger and more numerous than I could know: that much of my ignorance I did know. I violated one silence and maintained many others.

Families are constellations. You look into the past and find some good spots and some bad spots and you connect them into a history and throw them onto the sky and make a mythology. You point to the sky and share the story with your son or daughter, and nobody ever thinks to ask about the large black expanse of sky in between and within. What does it say?

Some constellations are more articulate than others, but there are millions of stars we never see.

The morning I met my uncle, I left the hotel that reeked of stale tobacco and drove just outside Marion, Ohio, a town unremarkable in every way except that it was home to a state penitentiary, and that penitentiary would execute a man that night. It wasn’t like those well-publicized executions you see on television, where anti-capital punishment demonstrators scream against chain link fences, or where family members of the murder victim hold vigils and mourn their dead with burning candles and tearful television interviews. The sun rose over the huge building, which was surrounded by flat, brown cornfields, and somewhere on the structure a smokestack coughed out black, billowing soot. I directed my car to the gate and moments later sat in a cinderblock room, waiting on my uncle.

The encounter didn’t feel like enough, and yet at the same time it did. I saw my uncle enter through a steel door and check with an officer who looked at a clipboard and then
pointed at me. He looked at me and his eyes narrowed as we recognized each other. Our nose were similar, as was our sandy brown hair.

He approached, his hands behind his back, and stood before me, his eyes directed at his thongs. I stood up and we both looked at each other for a moment, as if sizing up exactly what we had both done. Then he extended his hand slowly, and I reached toward him with my own. His grip grew more certain as we shook hands. I felt his fingers, thick and strong and thankful, close around my own.

We talked for a long time. He had kept up on everybody from afar, knew his nieces’ and nephews’ birthdays, where his siblings had moved, our addresses. He’d written to each of us at least a thousand times, it seemed, when the memory of his purge added onto the weight of his destiny seemed too much, when he needed connections that weren’t there. It had helped a little bit. He kept them all, even the ones from fifteen or sixteen years ago, and presented me with every letter he had ever written to me. “You don’t have to read them,” he said. “I wouldn’t expect you to.” The other letters, written to my sisters or my aunts, would be lost when my uncle was executed and his cell was prepared for the next occupant.

He also gave me a picture of himself and my father as teenagers. “My mom made me give her every picture I had of myself,” he said, “but I kept that one.” He looked at it again. “I just couldn’t give it all away, you know?”

Then he handed it to me. They were standing by an old car, one of my father’s first and the first he would wreck on drunken driving sprees through the countryside, my uncle propped against a bulging fender. They both wore white tee-shirts and each had cigarettes dangling from their mouths. Rick was looking sideways at my father, who seemed to be speaking to the person taking the picture. The person’s shadow fell onto the dirt and grass in
the foreground. My grandfather’s barn loomed in the background, a place where he had cured tobacco, a place I had explored many times as a child.

“Who took the picture?” I asked.

My uncle thought for a moment. He rubbed his jaw and chin just like my father does when deep in thought. “Your mother did, I reckon,” he said. “Your dad and me both had a little crush on her, but she liked him more than me.”

He was silent again. I put the photograph in my breast pocket. “Just don’t let your dad ever see it,” he said.

He was definitive on this point, that nobody know what we were doing. He asked me in the very first letter, when he introduced himself, to tell nobody about our correspondence and, later, our meeting. For awhile I wasn’t sure I’d be able to do it, and I thought it unfair. He came to me with this upheaval, and he expected me to stay silent about it all?

But just then I felt the picture burning against my chest. I looked at his grin, playful and happy at seeing one of his kin, and I knew what he was looking for. I could ease him of this. So I did. I took on his silence.

Even to the end, my uncle maintained his decorum. Sure, he reached out to me, and that alone must have been a monumental effort of courage. But he did it knowing that nobody else could know that I knew about him—that upheaval would have been too much, and his reasons for contacting me had nothing to do with vengeance. He didn’t want that for us. In his final and perhaps largest act of love, he wanted our family to stay the way it had been constructed: without him.
Another metaphor, another detail, another angle on the same story:

Playing a musical instrument is as much about silence as noise. If there was no lack of noise, no control over the noise, there would be no music. We have narratives from silence, too. The same is true with my family and, I imagine, with all families. Our silences remain well-groomed and immaculately preened. It’s about the spaces between what we utter.

My uncle wanted the constellation to read the same story, he wanted the tone to remain consistent. And how to accomplish that and yet quench his last need for familial contact and camaraderie? Why, write to me, of course.

“You know why I wrote to you?” he asked me after I pocketed the picture.

Honestly, I had been wondering, but hadn’t been able to think of an appropriate manner for stating the question. Of all the people in my family—my sisters, parents, aunts and uncles, grandparents—how had he zeroed in on me? “No,” I replied. “But I have been curious, I must admit.”

“Well, once I decided to stick my neck out and write somebody,” he said, “I thought you might be a good one. You come from blood that keeps secrets real well.”

“You mean my dad?”

Rick nodded. “Me and him will take a few of them to the grave together,” he said. “Big ones. Ones I promised never to tell anybody, ones he swore he’d never tell. If you’re anything like him, I figured you’d keep this one.”
I wasn't sure what to say in reply. I wanted to know the secrets again, all of them. I wanted the whole story. Or, maybe I wanted to know that it was possible to know the whole story, that my family was more than a strung-up arrangement of carefully chosen histories.

Instead, consistent with my new silence, I nodded. “Thanks,” I said.

When we finished our conversation, he stood up and said, “I would tell you I love you, but then, I don’t really know you.”

My uncle returned to his cell to pack it, which seemed akin to digging his own grave, while I went into town to have lunch. Surprisingly, I was ravenous, and I stopped at a local diner and sat in a corner booth by myself and watched cars and trucks drive past my window. Marion seemed like a decent place—like my hometown further south, so decent it will kill you. The streets were not spectacular, but they were kept up well. It had snowed a little that morning, and already the sidewalks were clear. People walked the streets, on their way to or from lunch, or on some important errand. The town had a modest bustle.

My sandwich arrived and I began eating. I watched the people inside the diner. Some drank coffee and smoked their cigarettes in silence, either deeply in thought or reading the newspaper. Others, on their lunch hour, chatted about office gossip or their husbands or wives or children—whatever it is that makes life interesting to people. I gulped down my sandwich, taking huge bites. The meat was still steaming as I ate it—I would develop blisters the next day—and my stomach was bloated and full. I just kept eating because, despite everything, I still felt hungry.
This isn’t a story about the death penalty and why I’m against it, but I am—and I was even before my uncle was executed by the state of Ohio. But it, like war, will always exist, I’m sure. The sovereign will always kill its subjects in both of these ways until there are either no more nations or no more subjects. There will always be a reason. And my uncle had been convicted of killing a man, and had been convicted by an ambitious Adams County district attorney who ultimately served on the state Supreme Court that rejected my uncle’s final appeal in 1996. Something about the arrangement of the situation still doesn’t set well with me. My uncle was guilty, yes, but killing him seemed little more than a combination of retribution and ambition. Or maybe it was because death is the final silence.

So much of that last conversation escapes me now, such a short time after, but I recall feeling hungry for something. I had bought my uncle a pack of unfiltered Lucky Strikes, his favorite brand, and we smoked them together in the small room with a single light and no ventilation. By the end of the visit, our eyes were burning. There wasn’t a lot to say, in large part because he didn’t have any parting words for the family. “Things between us and me finished up a long time ago,” he said.

Being executed by lethal injection looks similar to a crucifixion, I’d imagine—I’ve never seen the latter. They lay you spread-eagled on a table and strap down your legs, then pull your arms out flat on either side of you and strap them down, too. They strap down your head by lacing up a leather strip across your forehead. Then they lift the table up on hydraulics so that you are nearly perpendicular to the floor, and finally they turn the table on an axle and display you to the small audience of witnesses who observe through a window from an adjacent room.
The execution was unceremonious, and took longer than I thought. A man in a brown suit administered three separate injections into my uncle’s bloodstream, each spaced a few minutes apart and each designed to take my uncle a step closer to death. He stopped stirring after the first one; his breathing slowed dramatically. I remember watching his foot, which he had been tapping nervously, slow and finally stop altogether. The doctor stepped forward after several silent minutes, checked my uncle’s wrist and measured his body temperature, then looked at his watch and declared a time of death. There seemed to be a collective sigh from everyone in my room, as if we had all been holding the same breath. A few reporters beside me marked down the time, and began whispering into tape recorders. The other people in the room, all strangers to me, rose from their chairs one at a time and ambled out the door in the back. I looked back into the execution chamber at my uncle’s body.

A man walked up to the observation window and drew a dark curtain over it. Behind me, a voice said: “Come on, now. Show’s over.”

A month later I returned to my hometown for Christmas break. The space between my two journeys had been quick and intense, a flurry of student papers and final assignments for my own courses. My uncle had receded a little bit, the picture of his dead body had grown fuzzy at the edges. But I would think about him at strange moments, like when I was sitting in class, listening to my professors speak. I would look around the room at my fellow students, and I would think of Rick and wonder what secrets these people held, and which secrets had been withheld from them.

Coming home for Christmas brought the edges back into sharp focus, brought my uncle’s tired face into high relief. I stayed at my father’s big house in the country, and at
night I would watch television and sip beer and think suspicious thoughts about my family. Who knew what? How much did they know? When I visited family, I tried to imagine them containing such large secrets, and where in their bodies they held it all. Expansion and contraction.

One day just after the new year my curiosity boiled over. I woke up from a dark, vague dream that featured my uncle, tied to a noose, dangling in front of an audience of my family. I was in the audience, too, and everybody was still and quiet. Nobody was breathing except for my uncle, who was gasping for breath and begging forgiveness. I shot up, angry, and made coffee and stewed and talked out loud.

My father was at work early that day, so I went into his bedroom and opened the door to one of his closets, the one where he kept family pictures and modest heirlooms. I rifled through old pictures, looked at and then touched his father’s old hunting rifle, his father’s Purple Heart, an old pair of cufflinks, and a Cuban cigar he had been given upon the event of my birth. At last I opened a shoebox full of letters. I was about to discard them like the other shoeboxes when I noticed a section of light blue envelopes. I blinked, then pulled them out. They were from Rick, and they dated back at least ten years. A tremor of cold raced quickly throughout my body, something of both anger and fear that crystallized. I took out a letter and started to read it, but then I felt like a sneak and a traitor to my family. The feeling was deep and undeniable. So I put the letter back and carefully replaced all the boxes and heirlooms in their original positions. I didn’t really want to know what my uncle had said, not all of it. He had said enough to me, and I had believed him. Those letters carried the power to disrupt the disruption, and as the new carrier of his silence, I wanted to protect the secret in the way that I understood it. My father never knew that I had read the letters.
When I returned to Iowa a few days later, I found a letter, addressed to me, in the mailbox. There was no return address, but the postmark was the same as letters from family members in southern Ohio, the place most of my family had vacated.

I tore open the envelope. Inside was a note, and a sealed letter addressed to Rick. The note was typewritten and said only: “Rick asked me to send this to you. He said it would help you understand.” The second was addressed to Rick, and was written in my father’s clumsy cursive. One section in particular was highlighted:

I can’t come, Rick. I’d like to be there, but if I came then people would find out about you and all things would be a mess with the family. I know you want somebody to be there, and the only person I can think of would be James. He’s a lot like us. He can keep a secret. He’s kept a lot of secrets for me.

I never told my father about the anonymous letter from southern Ohio. I kept that string of stars in the recessed darkness, so that the family history would never account for it, so the eyes of everyone could continue skipping beyond it without a moment’s thought, without a moment’s doubt.
Jim and Billy are riding in silence towards the train station. They light cigarettes and cradle them like babies. They look out beyond the front window, toward the land they are swallowing up and leaving behind them.

Jim presses down on the gas pedal and looks at the clock on the car radio. “You can still stay awhile, if you want,” he says to Billy.

Billy does not immediately respond. He’s busy lighting another menthol, but that’s not why he does not respond. Jim always does this, he thinks, every year when I visit. He always wants me to stay longer. “I can’t,” Billy says. “I’ve got work.”

Jim is the older of the two, the paternal sibling. He shakes his head and laughs quietly. He thinks of their father, dead over twenty years. Their father, who managed a farm all by himself while also pounding dents from fenders in a body shop. The man never allowed himself a single day off. Even going to church was a grievance to their father, because, as he said to Jim many times, the cows need milking no matter what day it is.

Then Jim tries again to envision the image of his father, vigorously raking leaves on a fall evening. Then he tries to envision his father clutching his chest and doubling over. He wants to see his father die in mid-air, on his way to the earth, his face bruised from the fall. But he can’t see any of that. He can only remember the skin-colored makeup covering those purple blemishes, the spotlights looming like a false heaven above his father’s open casket.

The man had worked himself to death, just as poor people have always done. Jim sets his jaw and glances at Billy, who is still staring out the window. The sun is setting now. “But I thought the restaurant was closed today,” Jim says. “I thought you’d want a taste of the freedom, since it’s almost never closed.”
“It’s hard to get good help in that town,” Billy says. “I have to do so much of it myself. I have to get ready for tomorrow.”

Jim understands that his brother will never stay any longer. Once a year Billy takes a day off from the grind of that stupid diner. And for what? To attend a food service conference up in Columbus. Lord knows what people do at a conference like that, Jim thinks. It has become tradition that Billy will stop briefly at his brother’s, just long enough for a couple cups of coffee, long enough to leave again.

“You work too hard,” Jim says, trying to relax his jaw.

Billy’s train rolls in a few minutes late, long enough for Billy to begin feeling nervous. He does not like to be away from the restaurant for long. Whenever he leaves, he returns to find incomplete receipts, food left unprepared for the morning rush, floors unmopped and tables left dirty. Being away is an anxious experience.

Jim helps Billy with his bags. Then, before the train’s doors close and the thing rumbles Billy back to his work, they stand and look at each other for a moment.

Jim thinks his younger brother looks old and haggard. Billy’s hair is gray and stringy, some of it pulled across a massive bald spot. There are faint brown circles under his eyes, and his skin is pasty. Jim thinks his brother does not get enough sun, that he spends too much time chopping lettuce or reaming teen-aged employees who enjoy watching his brother’s round face grow red and angry. He wishes he could do something for his brother. Take him on vacation. Introduce him to a nice woman. Give him enough money to retire and to rest easy.

But Billy never stays beyond his second cup of coffee, and that is the way things are
with Billy. Jim wishes he knew better why Billy was so much like their father.

Jim insists on upgrading Billy’s ticket so that his brother would have a compartment of his own, a place to stretch out and relax and enjoy the two hours south. When Jim hands him the upgraded ticket, Billy looks up to thank his brother. But Jim is looking right at him with those brown, piercing eyes. Billy can tell that Jim wants to know things, wants to know why he is like this, always so eager to return to the restaurant. But the train is leaving, and they hug goodbye. Billy watches his brother recede as the train picks up speed.

Billy enters his private compartment and thinks it is too quiet. What will he do for these two hours? He settles into a seat and unbuttons the top of his shirt. He rubs his skin above his heart, which has been hurting more recently, and waits until the ache there eases. He knows he should go to a doctor for the ache, but he also knows that he won’t. That’s the way he is. Then he plucks another menthol from the pack and hunches down into the seat. The world outside is dark. The train hums against the rails. Billy closes his eyes but keeps smoking his menthol.

He sees his brother’s small, sad eyes. The eyes stay with him longer after each visit. Jim wants to know so much, but Billy does not know what to tell him. He does not know what Jim wants him to say. Of this, Billy is almost certain.

The train passes through several small towns. In one town—Billy does not even bother to look at the name—the train comes to a complete stop next to an apartment building. Though it is dark, Billy can tell that the building is in poor condition. The back steps are crumbling and the trash cans have overflowed, spilling garbage around the rear of the building. The
light above the back door flickers, and its fixture has broken off the wall and blows in the breeze.

Billy looks out the window and sees that the blinds to several back windows are open, and he can see clearly the rooms inside. They appear to be bedrooms, and for a moment Billy averts his gaze. He pretends to read a magazine, but he notices a light click on in one of the rooms and he looks over.

In the room, a woman is carrying an infant toward a crib. This isn’t remarkable to Billy except that the woman has no idea that she is being watched. For this reason, Billy finds the whole thing fascinating and irresistible. Billy leans over and clicks off the light to his compartment. He slides over to his window and watches this woman as she carefully places the infant into the crib. He can not really make out her features, not sharply, but he thinks she looks like a young woman.

The woman leans against the crib and begins talking to the baby. She bobs her head back and forth. She opens her eyes very wide. Then she takes a book from a bookshelf, opens it, and begins reading. Billy thinks that he would like to hear a story, too, so he presses his ear against the cold window of the train. But he does not hear her, of course.

Below the woman and the infant, another light comes on in a different apartment. A fat bald man with no shirt is pacing back and forth. He is crying. He walks over to the window and opens it, despite the cold, and screams something into the night. The woman upstairs stops reading for a moment, then glances down and shakes her head slowly. She leans closer to the infant. Billy thinks he sees her lips move.

There is a knock on Billy’s door. “Yes,” he says, settling back in and closing his eyes.

It’s one of the train’s employees. “Sorry to wake you, sir,” the man says, tipping his
hat. "I’m just telling everybody that we’re waiting for a freight train to move on past us before we get on our way. We’re sorry for the delay."

Billy smiles at the man. “That’s okay,” he says.

One December when Jim and Billy were still boys, there was an unusual stretch of warm weather that lasted nearly two weeks. The boys spent hours after school hiking around the farm, to their normal hangouts and to places they had never seen before. They wanted to know each inch of their father’s enormous acreage like the backs of their hands.

Their mother did not like the idea. “It’s muddy out there,” she said. When this failed to frighten her sons, she added: “You’ll catch your death out there.” On their way out the door, she called after them, “I won’t be there to help if you fall and hurt yourselves.”

But the boys went anyway. What was sickness and injury when the world was coming to life again? They hiked through the dense thickets and tossed rocks across the layers of soft ice covering the creeks. Underneath the ice they heard water rushing past, free from the stasis of the ice. Billy heard the water in his dreams for weeks afterwards.

The sunsets, though they came in the afternoon, seemed summer-like. Jim and Billy would rush to the highest point they could find to watch the sun descend into the leafless trees, split apart by the bare branches, then dip underneath the wet earth. Then they would race home to see if they could make it back before complete darkness.

On the last warm day of that December, Jim and Billy raced to the highest point they could find. By this point they were near the back of their father’s land, to a place they had never seen before. It seemed possible that no person had ever set foot there before.

But they were mistaken. As they ran up a small, sharp hill, Billy heard voices. They
weren’t saying anything, but he knew they were voices. One was much deeper than the other one. He nudged Jim and they snuck through a thicket to see what they would see.

A young couple had found a dry spot of land and had draped a large blanket on the ground. They were on the blanket, naked. The man was lying on his back and the woman was sitting on him, moving back and forth. Jim knew what they were doing, but Billy would not figure it out for a couple more years.

But that didn’t matter. He stared at the two naked people. The woman had curly hair, part blonde and part brown, that had fallen over her face. In the deepening golden sunset, Billy saw the sweat on her neck and breasts, the way it moved and fell off her in rhythm with her movements. He blinked and watched. She tossed her head back. The young man ran his fingertips up and down the woman’s body, then leaned upward and kissed her neck and face. The two groaned in unison.

Billy understood, vaguely, that something unusual would happen to him some day, something like the act he was observing. He understood this as an act that any two people could perform with each other. He knew what he was watching was both common and uncommon. He stared at the two people for awhile longer.

Jim forbade him from telling their parents, which was fine with Billy. They kept the secret, and they did not discuss it again. Billy liked keeping that memory close to him, not giving away a single grain of it. He never discussed it with anybody.

For a long time, Billy has forgotten about the young couple having sex. The golden-hued sunset, the woman’s bare clavicles, the warmth and life evident to him even as a boy, all of it. But watching the woman and her infant, and then the crying bald man, reminds him.
He looks back at the building. The woman has turned out the light and left her infant alone, but the bald man is still wailing away. Then he stops and turns. He leaves the room, and when he comes back the woman from upstairs is with him. She speaks and points to the ceiling. She does not appear to be angry. She uses her hands slowly, to make a point. The man nods. Then he buries his face against her shoulder and begins heaving again. The woman stands there for a moment, then slowly places her arms around the fat man’s naked torso. Eventually, she squeezes harder, and Billy sees a serene smile flash quickly across her face. The fat bald man’s torso heaves more lightly, then not at all.

This is when Billy looks away. Watching people go about their normal business is one thing, but he is uncomfortable watching their intimacy. It’s not right, and what’s more, it’s an illusion anyway. He doesn’t know the first thing about those people and their lives, and what they are really talking about. It could be anything.

Then a woman walks past Billy’s compartment. Through the glass door Billy sees her shiny tan heels, a flash of pale calf and thigh, and a brown suede skirt. He can almost hear those fair thighs rubbing together, generating heat. Billy thinks about this as the woman walks away, and he considers getting up, leaving the dark room and following the woman, talking to her, getting to know her.

But even as he considers it, Billy knows he will not do it. He makes no effort to move his body. His path is clear.

So he lights another menthol and smokes it in the dark. A few moments later, the train is underway again.

When Jim and Billy were boys and the world still a thing to come, they had a spell of warmth
one December that lasted for two weeks. That last warm evening, the snow seemed far off, a
dream. Jim and Billy raced home, and because he was bigger, Jim won the race. When Billy
finally reached their house, he stood outside for a moment as the sun set into the trees. In a
moment he would go back inside and talk to his mother as she prepared dinner for the
evening. Not long after that, their father would return from the body shop, tired and hungry.
Things would be as they always had been.

Billy looked into the sky directly above his head and watched the colors darken. The
sky was open and clear. For the first time, the boy felt himself being thrust into the future,
and he felt quite sure that anything was possible.

It was December, he reminded himself, and it could snow at any time. Billy stuck out
his tongue against the deep indigo evening and waited for the snow to land.