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Excerpts from Television's Greatest Hits and Other Stories

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The University of Southern Mississippi

EXCERPTS FROM *TELEVISION'S GREATEST HITS AND OTHER STORIES*

by

Zachary Stephen Williams

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

Approved:

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ABSTRACT

EXCERPTS FROM *TELEVISION'S GREATEST HITS*

by Zachary Stephen Williams

The short stories contained in this manuscript are mostly of the realist stripe, with a few concessions made to my more fabulist tendencies. Each is about men and women being forced to relive their old lives or finding themselves at the cusp of new ones, propositions which prove simultaneously attractive and repulsive. By the end of each story, it is my hope to transmit that the characters have survived somewhat intact, though reconstituted. There is a man in grief over the death of the wife he could not stop cheating on, adults trick-or-treating at the expense of their children's youth a young woman who obsesses after a high school crush post-divorce. Former *enfant terribles* get the band back together for reasons that compromise their ethos. Best friends disappear into thin air. A young man is forced to face the consequences of his tendencies toward historical revisionism in his art. An all-night lock-in at a skating rink serves as the venue for confrontations intimate and violent. Ultimately, my hope is that these stories say something about desperate people and what happens when our nostalgia is brought into conflict with the inevitability of aging, the things we create, and how others see us.

DEDICATION

Thanks to my family, by blood and by spirit: the above, Nina Williams, Gregory Rishel, Ryan Williams, Dionne Williams, Allyssa Peace, Nicholas Bass, Brandi Sapp, Brandon Skelton, Tristan McNeil, Kaylor Maddox, Morgan Rose, Payton Fisher, Carley Edwards, Matthew Buzzell, and a hundred others. Thanks, finally, to those who are no longer with us that inspired in my childhood impulses to question and create: Renate Williams, Mary Rishel, Calvin Rishel, and, most importantly, Ron Rishel, a man who taught me the importance of honesty, compassion, and a good record and set of speakers.

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INTRODUCTION

During my first undergraduate fiction workshop, I became acquainted with John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction*. Up to that point I had taken two Intro to Creative Writing courses, each of which were heavy on praise and light on instruction. I was happy to finally receive more prescriptive guidance. Near the beginning of the book, Gardner attempts to address the problem of how one is to approach the enterprise of writing fiction:

A common and usually unfortunate answer is 'Write about what you know. Nothing can be more limiting to the imagination, nothing is quicker to turn on the psyche's censoring devices and distortion systems, than trying to write truthfully and interestingly about one's home town, one's Episcopalian mother, one's crippled younger sister. For some writers, the advice may work, but when it does, it usually works by curious accident: The writer writes well about what he knows because he has read primarily fiction of just this kind—realistic fiction... (18)

I mostly ignored the last part about how writing what one knows may be done well, focusing instead on the bit about limitation, censorship, and distortion. It was compatible with my own attitudes toward the type of writing I wanted to do and what I thought was already working.

I had been doing it for almost as long as I could spell, after all. I sat hunched over the coffee table every morning before school and drew comic strips, little scenes of things I wanted to work on later that would be completely wiped from memory by the time I got home from school. My family was given an old Unix PC when I was eight, and I'd spend

hours on it writing stories, if they can be called that. Almost all of them were fantastical, filled with flying man-eating eyeballs, killer trees, and super heroes. As I grew, my concerns broadened, but I still held what Gardner calls “jazzing around”—foregoing attention to conventional plotting and characterization to make room for more eccentric content—higher than anything.

My stories in undergraduate workshop were indicative of this, beholden more to gimmickry and navel-gazing play than characterization and drama. Characters communicated almost exclusively with imaginary friends. There was a gym run by Satan. Much of the dialogue came in the form of quips. Most of these pieces were mere contraptions with visible machinery; I was doing little more than taking a bunch of genre tropes, jumbling them together, and seeing what happened. To make matters worse, all of it was self-consciously grasping at cleverness, an alienating tactic that often undermines the very thing that brings people to stories in the first place: the desire for entertainment and genuine emotion. There simply was not much to relate to in these old stories. My undergraduate writing professor, Jared Hegwood, saw as much, remarking that the work was entrenched in a sometimes amusing, but mostly tacky imitation of postmodernism.

I balked at the idea that my fiction could be composed from material informed by my own experience. I rationalized that this lacked imagination, that it was lazy. I was also uncomfortable with the idea of my fiction revealing myself. I had spent my entire adolescence mostly indoors with few friends and a sick grandmother to take care of. Much of it was painful. Part of my impulse to write came from a need to escape. How could I escape anything if I was constantly putting it on the page? It was all so maudlin. Who would want to read that?

The larger problem, though, had to do with the limited scope of my reading. I had been consumed with genre fiction and comic books almost exclusively as a child, and as I grew tired of those things, I sought my kicks in mythology and epics, the strange worlds conjured by early American authors like Nathaniel Hawthorne and Washington Irving, and the gothic tales of Poe, Shelley, Stoker, and Stevenson. What is often termed realist fiction—the kind Gardner associates with *The New Yorker*, the *Atlantic*, and *Harper's*—was almost all but ignored, and much of my writing followed from the impulse to simply make it as strange as possible. When these grew tiresome, I self-consciously pursued more heady fare: Faulkner, Kafka, Borges, Camus, Delillo, and the like, works that left me in the dark, decentralized, distracted by a coldness of tone, fragmentation, intense absurdity, and narrative self-consciousness. What drew me to them was not their precision or almost mystical capacities to render the human experience unusual *and* affecting. I read them because they were something I could brag about reading and understanding. And of course, I didn't understand what these stories were really "saying" at all, much less how they were working. I took cues. I wrote more dream sequences. I waxed philosophically. I continued to fail.

It took careful reading of realist fiction to get me to a place where I could really start to see how a story works. One of the most formative experiences I have had as a reader occurred when I reread John Updike's "A&P." I had originally been assigned the story for my composition class several years early, and I did not find much special about it: teenage male clerk, girls in bikinis, they get asked to leave the store, he quits to show solidarity with them and join them on the beach. It's a simple story, and as such, I

labelled it uninteresting. When I returned to it several years later, something seemed to click. The key, I think, lies in its final paragraph:

I look around for my girls, but they're gone, of course. There wasn't anybody but some young married screaming with her children about some candy they didn't get by the door of a powder-blue Falcon station wagon. Looking back in the big windows, over the bags of peat moss and aluminum lawn furniture stacked on the pavement, I could see Lengel in my place in the slot, checking the sheep through. His face was dark gray and his back stiff, as if he'd just had an injection of iron, and my stomach kind of fell as I felt how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter. (105)

We are grounded in the present moment where Sammy realizes his rebellion means nothing, that his life from here on will be punctuated by disappointment. He has attempted to conjure an ideal self with an ideal world to occupy, neither of which will ever exist. Sammy, of course, is not me, but he is so like me that my own heart sank when I read that final paragraph. The story, in spite of its modesty, reveals something that anyone who has had a job or been initiated into adulthood has felt at one time or another. This is the power that realistic fiction can have. At its best it makes use of materials from life as it is lived, allowing the writer to draw from his or her own experience and the reader to share in a familiarity with it. This familiarity may then render true feeling and, in the best of circumstances, new understandings. Amy Hempel, Raymond Carver, Andre Dubus, Joan Didion, James Baldwin, and the many others I have read have proven even more instructive.

It is this tension between the will to an ideal world and the sometimes crushing reality that inevitably undermines it that fuels much of *Television's Greatest Hits*. These are stories about “real” people with real concerns, based my own experiences and those of my friends and family. They go to work, obsess over music and movies, have sex, bury their dead, drink, and attempt to ground themselves in identities tied to their past selves, versions that they perceive to be better or at least more content. The title is taken from a series of compilations that collected music from popular television shows, and the themes explored here are tied to the nostalgia invoked by such a title. This nostalgia can sometimes serve a positive function, but most often it tends to distort the characters’ realities or reveal their shortcomings. In this way I hope to fashion fiction with stakes, something that inspires empathy regardless of its eccentricities.

All of the stories presented here are set within the same city: my hometown of Augusta, Georgia. Victor LaValle and Junot Diaz are two writers who do this well, and their collections—*Slapboxing With Jesus* and *Drown*, respectively—make particularly good use of setting. LaValle’s New York, especially, grounds the reader in a consistent world that functions much like a character. The opening lines of “Ghost Story” personify the borough in which it is set:

Move anywhere, when you’re from the Bronx, you’re of the Bronx, it doesn’t shed. The buildings are medium height: schools, factories, projects. It’s not Manhattan, where everything’s so tall you can’t forget you’re in a city; in the Bronx you can see the sky, it’s not blotted out. The place isn’t standing or on its back, the whole borough lies on its side. And when the wind goes through there, you can’t kid yourself—there are voices. (LaValle 18)

The setting exerts a force, even in these few lines, a gravity that illustrates its desolate and haunted character wonderfully. It is simultaneously alluring and portentous. It also says a great deal about the characters who will populate the story. The opening lines assert that the Bronx stays with all those who have come from it. They must wear the desolation of the place. They are similarly haunted.

It is my desire to present my hometown in much the same way. Augusta exerts a force of its own, even as I am distanced from it. It is both compelling and repulsive. I wanted to present both aspects of the city's character. Locations, such as the skating rink of "Couples Skate," express a trashy allure that is hypnotizing to those in its throes, but ultimately proves a site rife with violence. The Hill, in which "Summer's Last Sound" takes place, is beautifully landscaped but ultimately soulless and monotonous, a place worth escaping. East Lakes, the affluent gated community of "The Halloween Parade" serves as a site of role-playing, abandonment, and murder. The broader view of Augusta and its culture presented in Terrence Lynne's article in "Cuneiform Alleyway" functions similarly to LaValle's invocation of the Bronx in that it paints a picture of the place while hinting at the characters of those who populate it. The economic disparities and underdog creative spirit serve to enforce both the positive and the negative. It is inhospitable, but its denizens are up to the task of living, working, and creating there. Considering my familiarity with its landscapes, and Gardner's appeals to creating, through details, a world the reader can trust, this seems a more effective strategy than setting stories in far-flung locales. I have the topography memorized, shops and districts, street names. Though Gardner decries this practice in young writers, I found this familiarity helpful when trying to "argue the reader into acceptance" (22). Though the names of some locations have

been changed, and some invented altogether, I believe I have done the place some justice in my depiction of it. The setting also serves to center my own ideas, allowing me to engage in the sort of personal writing I had once tried to avoid.

Most of my protagonists are composites built from local personalities, and many of them, including myself, seem to be trapped in either a prolonged adolescence or a tendency to despair over poor decision-making and circumstances outside of their control. I find the tensions that grow from these preoccupations compelling, and examination helps me to further understand them and gesture toward means for recovery. As such, most of the stories here deal with characters that are trapped by their pasts. This is especially prevalent in the three connected pieces presented here. My rationale behind this cycle of stories is to illustrate how aging brings the world into stark, sometimes terrifying relief for a mostly consistent cast of characters. Collin, the narrator of the first story, "Summer's Last Sound," is forced to deal with the his best friend Evan's disappearance, an event that casts his entire world and those who occupy it, including himself, in darkness and doubt. In response, he attempts to find Evan but must ultimately make due with coming to understand his friend's reasons for leaving and what that may mean for his own future. I was originally inspired by Haruki Murakami novels, namely *Sputnik Sweetheart*, when focusing the narrative on this disappearance. I have always admired how Murakami's disappearing ladies serve as a catalyst for intense self-reflection in his protagonists, a means of change in a usually static life. "The Difference In Her Size" follows a middle-aged man, the father of the first and third story's Maggie, navigating his new life after the death of his wife and failing to do so. "Margaret Is a Mother's Name" finds Maggie, near thirty, forced to start her life again after a failed

marriage. Collin's return to town hints at a return to the halcyon days, but that possibility is short-lived, forcing her to relinquish that past and try to move on as best she can. Each examines the pain and drudgery of growing older that my friends and I have experienced and mostly worked through.

Another concern that recurs is art's potential limitations. The film at the heart of "Lorelei Revisited" is an attempt to create a version of the past that is more palatable and romantic than the truth of the situation. The work ultimately forces the narrator to confront his intentions and dishonesty. The film's subject sees the movie in question, forcing a final confrontation between the former lovers during which all grievances are aired and hopes of reconciliation are quashed. "Cuneiform Alleyway" concerns two aging punk rockers, one of whom abandons his art to more fully pursue his politics and ethics. Yet for all these limitations, art is nonetheless a means for self-actualization and personal growth. Punk rock and the world of leftist ideology and bohemia it opens up for both the narrators of the "Cuneiform Alleyway" prove invigorating and life-changing, catalysts for individual reinvention and finding one's place in a community. References to films, books, and music occur throughout, serving less as mere ornaments and more as elements which help inform the characters' world views and provide a means to make sense of their lives.

In spite of my embracing realism, I still sometimes find myself wanting to jazz around. The final two stories, "Cuneiform Alleyway" and "The Halloween Parade," are both exercises in the trickery and sense of play of the stories I'd been writing in my younger years. I had rehearsed the meta-textual element of "Cuneiform Alleyway" in an earlier draft of "Lorelei Revisited." This strategy did not work for that story, as the weight

of the multiple narratives left little room for the relationship at the center of the piece. Lorelei felt like a construction because the version of her that dominated the story was just that, a fact that was not apparent until the draft's final two pages. "Cuneiform Alleyway," however, seemed more appropriate for such an experiment, as there are multiple tensions to be navigated. The story is divided into sides, like a record, and each alternates narrators: Julie, lead singer of the group on Sides A and C, Terrence Lynne, reporter and former scenester on Sides B and D. The story is structured in such a way to allow for parallel narratives that both echo and undermine one another. Lynne's insight as consumer/spectator tempers his view of events, again, through a lens of nostalgia, a need to historicize and canonize his adolescence. Julie, on the other hand, is in a state of desperation, forced by financial hardship to confront her old lover and creative partner. The tension between spectator and creator poses interesting questions about the intention behind and reception of art, how no matter what one does there will always be another voice to appraise it and contextualize it to suit its own ends.

"The Halloween Parade" proved a more daunting proposition. In spite of it being the newest story here, it feels closer to the types of fabulist stories I used to write, the ones which were all world, unpopulated by characters. Still, the experience I have accrued writing realist fiction has proven helpful. Gardner asserts that the process behind the writing of each is not all that different, as both must possess characters who speak in ways we recognize and whose actions follow from clear motivations (22). Anton and Laird, the two brothers at the center, are ostensibly normal teenagers who want to exert some control over their senses of self—Anton through observance of traditions and more attention to his social life, and Laird through subversion of his school hero image. Both

suffer from a sense of incompleteness that they are trying to remedy. Yet, considering this is a story in which voodoo rites, body switching, and an inversion of Halloween traditions take place, it was necessary to set the parameters of the world immediately. “The Halloween Parade” opens with a line not dissimilar to Gardner’s example of Dinesen’s “The Cloak.” It plainly states the implausible fact that one of these affluent brothers is engaged in voodoo rites and walking around on all fours. This renders all that occurs afterward more plausible as a result (24).

The story also serves as a bit of an inversion of some of the themes that I’ve discussed above. Rather than live in the past, Anton wishes to grow into his notion of adulthood more quickly. As the youngest character in the book, aside from those that populate “Couples Skate,” I wanted him to be a figure who desires to leave behind his past and look toward the future from the very beginning. In this way, he is most like me, tired of waiting, ready to grow up and begin his life. He is one of the few characters here who actually gets what he wants. There is, of course, a grave cost in this. Perhaps he will appear again when the collection is finished. I would like to imagine him in a better place by then, myself better equipped to tell his story.

Television’s Greatest Hits is a mingling of my broadened sense of what a story can and should do and my tendencies to render a world that is both like and not like our own. Through the process of composing these stories I have learned what it takes to make a story move, what stakes are, and what decisions may allow examinations of my own history and proclivities to feel suitably inviting to the reader. Most importantly, I believe I have developed a voice and type of story I want to write: something simultaneously real and unreal, shot through with curiosity and empathy. The project is unfinished, and much

of what is presented here will need further work to better represent my intentions for the project. Still, it is my hope that what follows is indicative of growth, another step toward the type of art I want to create.

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LORELEI REVISITED

The music in the Soul Bar is loud, all wobbly bass, nothing like the James Brown and Minnie Ripperton they used play when I was regular. All the old posters are still up, it's dirty as it's ever been, and it's the one place in town you can still drink and smoke indoors. But the crowd is younger. They all look like they've gotten in with fake IDs. Soul Night only happens one Thursday out of the month. None of my friends come here anymore, except on birthdays, which is why I'm here in the first place. They've already taken Jimmy out of the front door and loaded him in a cab, called the night. I sit at the bar chain-smoking, pacing myself. I've finally learned how to muster a good buzz without getting sick, which, if you know me, is something to be proud of, even if I'm almost thirty-three. I'm a late bloomer. I still forget to breathe when I brush my teeth. I gag almost every time.

I find her in the back corner on the way to the restroom, at a large table next to the rear exit with other women, all wearing dresses you'd expect to see on Young Professionals and Junior Leaguers. Her hair is straight now, cut into a bob, the bangs stopping just above her eyebrows. She's also in heels, something I'd never known her to wear throughout the fourteen years we were together off and on. She's one of them now, something I never would've expected considering what she used to be like. And yet, despite her being three years older than me, she still looks younger, perhaps younger now than she's ever looked. But she's crying, a half-finished martini in front of her beside three more empty glasses. I'm glad to see that some things don't change. She was always a sad drunk. I make my approach, pushing through the long line for the women's restroom, which still has to be held shut to keep others from coming in. I'm glad I

remembered to shave today, that I dressed in something besides a t-shirt and jeans. I haven't seen Lorelei, haven't spoken to her in nearly two years.

Her mascara is running down her cheeks, and her friends look ready to intercept, like I'm just some guy trying to pick her up. I say her name, and she looks up, confused for a moment before forcing a smile. I motion to the space next to her and she scoots over to make room. She clears her throat and introduces me to everyone else, and they all introduce themselves like they don't know who I am, like she hasn't told them. This hurts a little. Their conversation returns to whatever they were talking about before Lorelei's crying fit, and they seem almost thankful that I'm here to distract her, keep her stable. I lean in close and ask her if she's all right, and she nods before downing the rest of her drink.

"Do you wanna get out of here?" I say, to which she also nods. We say goodbye to her friends, exchange the usual pleasantries. Halfway to the door I turn back to look at them and they're all leaned in, talking fast, laughing.

She sobers up over the five block walk, another thing that impresses me about her. All she needs is fresh air and to move and it's like whatever is bothering her goes away. Even in heels she walks faster than I do, each block her steps grow more sure, less shaky. She still lives in the same apartment she always has, a third-floor one bedroom with hardwood floors and brick walls, windows that stretch from the floor to the ceiling. It's strange to think I used to sleep here every night. Without saying a word she walks straight to her bedroom and the bathroom door shuts.

I've made a movie about the whole thing. I'd always wanted to make films, go to film school, but her own experiences at college had soured me on the idea. I wrote,

directed, edited, composed the music, and even played myself. A girl I was sleeping with at the time played Lorelei. I didn't change any of the names. It even screened at a local festival. It's not very good. Me and some friends shot it on one of those digital cameras that also takes video. No budget. Lots of nudity. Everything in the movie is presented exactly as I remembered it. Well, most of it is.

I first met Lorelei when I was seventeen, at some shitty party full of people I didn't know. That didn't stop me from getting hammered and dancing like an idiot. I found her in the kitchen while getting another drink. She was all legs and inky hair that fell in curled drips over her shoulders, a few stray freckles, nose slightly upturned, large green eyes magnified behind cat eye glasses. She was sitting on the countertop, her legs dangling over the edge, clad in cutoff denim shorts. She wore a baseball tee with the words "Tanya Harding Was Framed" scribbled on it in permanent marker, sipped Coca-Cola through a straw and giggled while I groped around in the fridge for a beer, never breaking eye contact.

"You know you spelled her name wrong, right?" I said. Her cheeks flushed. My cheeks flushed. I handed her a beer and introduced myself.

We talked until five in the morning in front of the iron fire pit on the house's back deck. We compared our upbringings—her staunch First Baptist family, my Greek Orthodox one—and our feelings about them. She showed me the first tattoos I didn't think were tacky. They're tacky now because I've seen similar ones so many times, peacock feathers, Hindu deities, that kind of thing. When the sun began to rise we found everyone had left. The host had thrown up on his love seat and passed out on the floor.

We carried him to his own bed, tucked him in before sharing the ragged couch, myself sinking into the back cushions to give her room. When I woke mid-afternoon she was gone. I found a post-it note stuck to the table with her phone number. I didn't bother waiting the customary three days to call.

The next time I saw her we went out to dinner with what little money I had. She must have known, because she offered to tip the waiter, something that impressed me. We went to her apartment afterwards. The first thing I noticed walking in were the stacks of ashtrays propped against the wall. I counted seventeen of them, some glazed, some not. Some were symmetrical, simple squares and triangles. Others were oblong, warped or shaped like animals. There was even the requisite skull, two pieces, the top cap sawed off to be used as a reservoir to catch the ashes. She had diagrammed and color-coded each of the sutures.

“Did you make all these?”

“Yep. I'm studying sculpture at the college. They have us making mostly housewares now, before we get to the good stuff. Check the cabinets.” She'd made all her own dishes, too, a few misshapen coffee cups and plates, all chipped and faded from use and washing.

“That's impressive,” I said.

“I'm pretty sick of it myself, but we have to start somewhere, I guess.”

Abstract paintings hung lopsided on the walls. All of them vaguely resembled female forms, the shapes floating together to resemble a breast, the triangle where thighs meet. Many of them looked similar in form; only the colors were different.

“You keep busy,” I said.

“Not much else to do. I don’t work, so I’m either in the studio on campus or painting up here.”

“How do you pay for the apartment?”

“I don’t. The parentals do. Jeez, you ask a lot of questions.”

I shut up, and she led me to her room. When we were through, she put on my shirt and we sat on her balcony smoking cigarettes. I still remember every crease in that shirt as she wore it, the scent she left on its collar, sweat and cheap lavender perfume. How her nipples showed through.

“I’m thinking about getting a potbellied pig,” she said. “What should I name it?”

“I don’t know. Boy or girl?”

“What’s it matter? It’s a pig.”

“They stink.”

“Wait. Do you hear that?”

“What?”

“Downstairs...” We leaned over the rail to look at the sidewalk, where a guy had begun to strum a guitar. The dead notes buzzed out as he struggled to keep a consistent rhythm. He finally settled on something: the vocal melody from “Dead Or Alive,” slow-picked single notes.

Lorelei cupped her hands over her mouth and yelled “Play some Queen!”

He looked up. “Hey, fuck you.”

“No, fuck you,” she said. “Take that bullshit down the block.” He flipped her off and kept playing, but she continued heckling him until he shuffled off.

“That’s a common misconception,” she said. “All things stink if they go unwashed.”

“Did you know that if you pour soda on a pig, these little worms shoot out from its skin?”

“Well, I don’t plan on eating the thing.”

“I say name it...Snowball.”

“That’s a bit obvious, isn’t it?”

The first half of the film goes like this. The good parts.

She returns from the bathroom with her pajamas on, her face clear of makeup, and plops down on the couch. I’m sitting on her granite countertop, peeling an orange. I’ve almost got the rind off in one piece. The ashtrays have been gone for years now, and the cabinets are filled with store-bought dishes. Her paintings have been replaced with calendars and tasteful prints of classical work. Still lifes and landscapes, the type of stuff you’d see in a dentist’s office. As I’m taking it all in, the rind picks a place to break in half. I pull the naked slices off, throw the unpeeled half back in the bowl.

“You’re a real shit, you know that?”

“Why is that?” I reply, jumping off the counter and handing her a few slices.

She rolls her eyes. “Don’t be coy. Besides the obvious, I saw the movie.”

“It only screened once. I didn’t see you there.”

“I was avoiding you. I skipped out as soon as the credits started rolling. I was furious.”

“Why?”

“Well, you didn’t even change the names, for starters. I was excited for you until I figured out what was going on.”

“At least I finished something. I figured you’d be proud. I can’t draw or paint for shit, so what else was I supposed to do?”

“You do something else. Build a ship in a bottle. Get a kitten. Fuck, keep a diary for all I care. Just don’t put it all out there for everyone to see.”

“I don’t really get what the big deal is. I wanted to put it all together, see where the last fourteen years of my life went. I don’t regret any of it. Didn’t you have fun?”

“Oh, God. Yes it was, but that’s not what this is about. You didn’t make it to say ‘aw, shucks, that was great.’ It’s not about us or me or the good times. It’s about you.” She stands and throws her last slices of orange at me, which I catch and toss into my mouth.

“Of course it’s about us,” I say, still chewing.

“I’m fucking dead at the end!” I don’t really have anything to say to that. I’m lying anyway. I knew what I was doing, that she’d probably end up seeing it somehow. I wanted to hurt her feelings, to prove something to her. Three deep taps rise from the floor below, which she meets with three stomps in return. Her voice, quivering, reduces to a whisper. “You take all of this shit, attach a bunch of empty symbolism to it, and ask everyone if they like it. This isn’t about me, or us, at all. It’s about making you feel good about yourself. Making yourself the hero. But how about how I feel? You never, not once, give my side of the story. You know why I asked you to leave? Besides me wanting to see other people, besides you refusing to work and running around in my car at all hours of the day and night to meet all those vacant bitches you were sleeping with?” I’d

left most of that out. In fact, Lorelei is presented as the unfaithful one, even though that didn't happen until I had cheated first, numerous times. "I asked you to go because I woke up one morning and I felt my age. I walked around the apartment all morning, looking at all of that embarrassing fucking pottery, at you sleeping until noon every day, thinking about you not touching me for months and all the other girls getting younger and younger, at you still being seventeen. And I couldn't. Fucking. Do it anymore."

After the good parts things get a little strange. She starts cheating, and I catch her with one of my friends. I start seeing someone else, also named Lorelei. She is played by a different actress, whom I was also sleeping with in real life, unbeknownst to the other. We never fight. She gives me pet names and feeds me big breakfasts, homemade waffles and exotic cheeses. We fuck in the morning and go to brunches and drink Bloody Marys. She asks me to look for a job, gives me leads. Then I see the old Lorelei one night out, hanging on some other guy, sucking on the tips of his fingers while they grind against each in front of the bar. I panic and break things off with the other one, leaving her crying on the sofa. This is the one moment in the movie that I allow myself to look remotely cruel. And from there it gets weirder.

The first Lorelei comes to the door of her building, which is exactly like the building of the other. She stares at me for a moment through the plate glass window and lets me in. She leads me up the stairs. In the light of the living room she looks gaunt and pale, almost translucent. Her skin is oily and pock marked. She never once speaks during the encounter, and when we fuck the camera fixes on her face, unmoved, while I grunt away in the background, as if her not coming is some sort of event, not commonplace.

I wake up in bed alone the next morning and tidy up. There is so much cat hair on the carpet that I have to clean the vacuum three times. Tumbleweeds of it roll across the floor, kicked around by the ceiling fan. The cat is nowhere to be found. Food clogs the kitchen sink, and I waste several minutes of screen time hunched over it with a knife and a bottle of Drain-o, my nose pinched shut to keep the rot out. After that I open the blinds and wash her bedding. When she finally returns the camera lingers on her body, the disturbing amount of weight she's lost. I don't say anything about it. She doesn't say a word about how clean the apartment is. We make lunch together, canned beans and white rice, and she tells me where she's been.

"I've just come back from the doctor," she says. "I'm very ill." She says this like she's presenting the weather or yesterday's lotto numbers. "They don't know what it is," she continues. I look concerned, almost comically so. "But it's not contagious or anything. They say it's all in my head."

The rest that follows is even worse. I move back in and stay with her all day and night. I keep feeding her but she grows more gaunt. Her teeth begin to fall out. She falls trying to get out of the tub. Then her speech goes. Time lapse footage depicts the days and nights flashing through the window, me getting in and out of bed, the TV flickering constantly while she lies still in the same place. In one shot she wakes and turns, speaks in slurred words that are almost inaudible, save for the final phrase: "...this is why." Still not exactly sure what I was going for there.

Finally, I am reading to her in bed, and it happens just like that. No single, spastic movement, just a deep sigh and a deflation, then a bloated silence, no birds or cars or hum of the air conditioner. I feel for a pulse, start to cry. I lie in bed with her corpse all

day, more time lapse footage, the minor light sifting through the blinds until it's dark out again. The window unit clicks on and kicks a cloud of dust up from the floor. I kiss her forehead and leave, shutting the door behind me. The camera lingers on her face before the screen jumps to black. Roll credits.

“The worst part of it isn't even the dumb shit with the double me and the sickness. It's that, like always, you're the good guy. All our friends sided with you. And why should I tell them everything? Why's that my responsibility?”

We both sit in silence until she stands.

“I'm tired,” she says. She walks to her bedroom and turns when she gets to the doorway. “Well, come on, you're already here. It's late. But you're out first thing in the morning.” I follow her inside and start undressing. “Have you been listening to a word I've said? Nope. We both know how this ends up. Clothes on.”

We get in bed and she lies on her side with her back to me. I face the ceiling, staring into the slowly spinning ceiling fan, not saying anything. She finally turns over and puts her head on my chest, looks at me.

“You understand: I can never trust you again, right? Not after all that's happened.”

“Yeah.”

“I am sort of proud of you,” she admits. “You finally finished something. And I really like the first half.”

I force a smile. “What's your favorite part?”

“The trip.”

It's my favorite part, too. The trip was a last ditch effort to save things. Neither of us had seen anything outside of Georgia, and she borrowed some money from her parents to drive across the country and back. This is rendered in montage. A scene where we get lost in Wyoming. A herd of does and fawns kick about in the snow outside a rest stop, their eyes glowing, seemingly unafraid as we approach them. She reaches out to pet one and they all bound off into the woods. Giant lakes and mountains in Colorado. The vast Nevada desert, Reno lit up at night. We pose for photos in the Slot Canyons of Arizona, the walls seemingly painted through years of flooding and erosion, playing tricks with the light. Small glowing orbs hover next to us in the pictures. Finally, we're in the Redwood forest in Eureka, California, standing before the gigantic, ancient things, their canopies brushing up into the clouds. After that we're on the way back, parked in a lot in Utah, the Great Salt Flats stretching out before us as far as the eyes can see, hills in the distance jutting out of the fog.

"I heard that whatever you write in the sand stays there forever," she says. She bends and writes my name with her finger, and I write hers.

She's sleeping now. Outside raindrops start tapping against her window, the top of her air conditioner, and then grow heavier. The rain stops suddenly, and I imagine that time has stopped, that if I hold my breath I can stay here forever, that I won't have to leave at sun-up. It's so quiet I can hear the pulse thumping in the back of my head. I shut my eyes and see the image of our names in the sand of the Salt Flats, still there even though it must have been washed away by now. I open my eyes and turn my head to face her bathroom. The toothbrush sitting in the cup on the sink seems to change colors, but it's only the traffic light switching from outside the window, red, green, yellow, red.

COUPLES' SKATE

I'm in the junkyard, looking for wiring pigtails that, if bought at market, would cost more than I actually paid for this piece of shit car. Passing by wall after wall of crunched metal, I'm beginning to think this trip wasn't worth the drive. But then I see it. The paint job on the body is sun bleached and worn from years of rain, the Goodyears are dry rotted, and the laces are frayed and covered in mildew, but the whole thing is otherwise just as I remember it. I'm not sure how to feel about it at first—the thought of Talon and Lewis and Trey bores a deep pit in my stomach—but the thing proves irresistible. I make my way back to the office, past the sleeping Bassett Hound, and ask the guy how much it would cost.

“Been sittin’ there for years. Looks stupid as hell. All that money and work and you can’t even drive the thing. The tires alone are a waste. I’ll let you have it for sixty-five. A buck if you want it towed.” I pay for it and walk back to the car. I’ve forgotten why I’ve come here in the first place. All the old sensations come rushing back, and I feel as though I can see the old rink as clear as if I were standing in front of it.

The line stretched from the entrance all the way to the giant roller skate in the middle of the parking lot. The amount of work that had gone into it was strange, especially as everything about the building was neglected. Signs were missing letters, and those that were still there dangled precariously. The paint had faded and peeled away. The carpets were sticky, covered in gum and condiments and who knows what else. I won't even talk about the toilets. It was a wonder my mother let me come to this place at

all, let alone for the all-nights. I hadn't been in nearly a year. This was the last one of the school year.

Trey and Lewis stood in front of me, taunting some poor gawky girl.

"You see the Adam's apple on that one?" Trey said, making no effort to whisper. "Christ! You could jump that thing with a dirt bike." He tapped her on the shoulder.

"Excuse me, but, uh, do you have a dick? Could I see it?" They both laughed as she looked blankly into my eyes, as if to ask why I didn't do anything about it. I sometimes wondered myself, considering my size and how most people even seemed intimidated by me. It was a strange reputation I didn't feel I had earned. I never got into fights, didn't play sports, kept mostly to myself, playing video games and helping Mom take care of my baby sister, Carla. The only reason I hung around with Trey was because he was the only kid in the trailer park whose parents could afford to buy him video games. Lewis was just around.

I never understood how Trey could be so cruel; he was one of the strangest looking kids at school. He had frizzy red hair, jagged buckteeth, and skin you could almost see through, dotted head to ankle with freckles. He'd recently thought it'd be a good idea to grow a mustache; the sparse hair spread across his upper lip in patches. It was hard to see it at all unless in the right light or when it was covered in Cheeto dust. Sometimes he was funny, and he was harmless enough, but here lately he had begun to try my patience.

Lewis had it even worse: one of his eyes drifted, he had bald spots in his buzzed scalp, his nose was crooked and smushed in, and he had the shortest neck I had ever seen. We all lived in mobile homes where you had to cover holes in the ceiling with paper

plates, flimsy houses that shook when anyone did laundry or screamed or got beaten. The trailer park was a hard place, and we knew we had to stick together, even though we had little in common.

“It’s probably bigger than yours,” I grumbled, regretting that my idea of defending her had only taken the joke farther. I wasn’t much to look at either, and I didn’t like making fun of people for things they couldn’t help.

“Whatever you say, man. I’m workin’ with a monster.” Trey grabbed at the leg of his denim cargo shorts a good seven inches below where the crotch ended. I regretted speaking up because this was how this sort of thing always ended: him with a quick retort, myself too slow to think of anything else to say. I was thankful when Lewis cut in.

“So, guys, what are we getting into tonight?”

Trey shrugged. “The usual. Get in. Scare some kid into coughin’ up his wallet.”

“We should roll that Jesse faggot.” Lewis had taken to using Trey’s favorite word whenever he got the chance. “I can’t stand that fat fucker.”

Trey turned to me. “You got any ideas?”

“It’s stupid”— I pulled three small bottles of crazy glue from my pocket—”but I figured we could wait until everyone was out on the floor and then put glue in all the keyholes on the lockers.”

“That’s brilliant,” Lewis said.

“You got anything?”

“Not really,” he replied. “I was gonna try to talk to Rosie.”

Trey rolled his eyes. “Why are you bothering with that slut, dude? She’s a total dog.”

“Don’t call her that, dick.” Lewis had been stuck on Rosie for a while, and though Trey was being harsh, he was kind of right; she wasn’t much to look at. She had greasy, pale skin that was often broken out with pimples and stringy blonde hair. Her eyes were deeply set and beady, and her nose, though thin, was bulbous and hooked at the end. She was also built like a piece of plywood; wide but flat with no shape to her, straight up and down from her shoulders to her feet. She was nice to me, though, and I wanted her and Lewis to get together. I figured he at least had a chance. He was a sweet kid, in spite of the fact that Trey and I were, admittedly, pretty bad influences on him. The argument continued, and I was glad when the line began to move, bringing us inward.

The first thing that hit was the smell. Mold mingled with imitation nacho cheese and fake butter on stale popcorn, corn dog husks and soda fountain syrup, those shitty little pizzas with the cardboard crusts burning in see-through ovens. And, of course, the stench and fragrances of all our peers, the Polo cologne and Lip Smackers and natural musk rising from unwashed hair. There was still something intoxicating about it, though, the sweets and savories combining to make my stomach turn and my mouth water at the same time. It would take a good half hour, or the taste of one of those pizzas, to make you forget the smell. But the lights helped. The lights were a reminder of why we came there in the first place. Then Afrika Bambaataa’s “Planet Rock” started playing, the doors locked behind us, and for fourteen straight hours we would answer to no one.

The place was already packed. The pro shop to the right of the entrance was filled with kids renting their skates, getting their bearings greased, and buying WWJD bracelets. Lines stretched alongside the concessions stand just outside its doors. The alternating purple and yellow tabletops were already strewn with napkins and stray

French fries. Just beyond the dining area, spreading out toward the wall that surrounded the hardwood rink, was the arcade, the only thing about the place that was up to date. Rows of tables for foosball and air hockey were lined up in the middle, surrounded by racing games with hydraulic seats and cabinets for the newest fighters and light gun shooters. The three of us forced our way through the crowd and into the shop.

My half-brother Mike, from my mom's first marriage, stood behind the counter, his curly fro cut above his ears by a sweatband, wearing those tiny red shorts he always wore, trying his best to look like John McEnroe even though he was a decade and half late. He was seventeen now, three years older than me, and a dynamite tennis player. We'd been close when we were younger, but he had changed with his growth spurt. He came around less and less, and when he did he and my mom always got into shouting matches. When he was thirteen he went to live with his dad. The last time he visited before he stopped coming around he backed her into a corner of the living room and wouldn't let her out of it. It had been a couple years. I hadn't known he worked at the rink, and I cringed at having to talk to him if I wanted my skates.

"If it isn't little brother," he said. "Long time, no see. You doing alright, Gabe?"

"I guess," I replied, avoiding eye contact.

"You still a size eleven?"

"Leven and a half." He turned around and pulled my size from the wall. He was never this nice. He must've known about Dad skipping out. The thought that he was being nice because he felt sorry for me made me hate him more.

"There you go. How's baby Carla?"

"She's fine."

“And your mom?” What was that supposed to mean, *your*? This was probably what I hated most about him. There was a smugness to him, like he was totally apart from everything. Above it. Just because she drank a little.

“Good.”

“Growing to be the strong, silent type, huh?” He looked behind me, watching Trey and Lewis fawning over the Hooters calendar from '95.

“That your crew?”

“That’s Trey and Lewis, kids from the neighborhood.”

“I know who they are. They’re here all the time. They pick on the younger kids, smoke in the bathroom. You aren’t smoking, are you?”

“No. I don’t like that stuff.”

“Good. You got a girlfriend yet? Big as you are I bet they’re all over you.” He was clueless. Girls didn’t even look at me. I was quiet and clumsy.

“A few.”

“That’s my boy.” I was relieved when Lewis broke himself from the wheels display.

“Hurry up, asshole, I wanna hit the floor. Why you talkin’ to this jerk?”

“Watch your mouth or you don’t get skates, Ladyfeet,” Mike said. I hadn’t noticed before, but Lewis’ feet were unusually small. Mike picked a size four and half and chucked them at him. Lewis and Trey walked out the door and made their way to the locker room at the back of the dining area. “I really don’t like those two.”

The door opened, and she rolled in. She had been the counselor for the girls’ bunk at summer camp a couple of years before. On the night before the final day there was a

dance, and she'd pulled me away from the bleachers where I was sitting alone and forced me to slow dance with her. The scent of her perfume mixed with the pine wafting in the wind made me dizzy. Her red hair was longer now, cascading down over her shoulders and falling into the space where her v-neck met her cleavage. She'd grown several inches in her milky, freckled legs, which stretched down from the same short tennis shorts Mike wore. Clumsy on her skates, she ran into the counter to bring herself to a stop. She leaned over and kissed him on the mouth.

“Laurie, this is my little bro, Gabe. Gabe, this is my girlfriend, Laurie.” She held her hand out and we shook.

“Nice to meet you.”

Mike gave me a knowing smirk, turning to look into her large, green eyes.

“Have fun out there tonight, but be careful. I don't want to have to kick anyone out, especially not you.”

“You know me.”

“It was good talking to you. Come back when it slows down in here. I'd like to catch up.”

I walked out the door without a word. The lights were swirling from the rafters, neon reds and greens and pinks skittering across every face, glinting off the shiny lacquered hardwood of the rink floor. I was numb to the smell by then, more drawn to all of the faces I knew in the crowd, all the thirteen-and-ups from every public school in the area. “Planet Rock” bled seamlessly into “My Boo,” the timing of the beats matched perfectly. A tight feeling rose in my chest, and I sulked to the locker room.

“Where the hell have you been?” Trey said. “And why were you talking to that Mike asshole?” I kicked off my shoes and pulled on my skates, double-knotting the laces so they wouldn’t get caught in the wheels. Foot odor and the scent of anti-fungal powder hung in the air.

“He’s my half-brother.”

“I feel sorry for you, then,” Lewis said. “I’d throw myself under a bus. That guy sucks.”

A guy from class called Talon—a nickname he’d given himself—walked in, a lock of his black hair in his mouth. He was Mike’s age, but somehow managed to be in the same grade as us. He stood taller than even me, always clothed in a black tank top and billowy jeans which, in spite of their size, did little to hide his enormous dick. He was a fucking mutant; he played trombone, was rail-thin, had back hair, and a thing that hung halfway to his knee. Legend had it that he’d already fucked no less than three girls in our class. None of the guys liked him. Later that summer Mike told me he’d been taping a tissue-filled sock to his leg every day since seventh grade, but we felt bad making fun of him considering what happened. He sat down on the bench next to me. The musky stench of his cologne filled my nostrils and settled at the back of my throat.

“Barely been in here twenty minutes and I’ve already gone fishin’.” He put two fingers under my nose, which I swatted away.

“Come on, dude. Get that shit out of my face.”

“What’s the matter, ‘Gay-briel’? Scared of a little pussy? Might help you grow some hair on your lip.”

“You’re one to be talking about people being gay, band geek,” Trey said. “Why don’t you go home and blow on your bassoon or whatever?”

“You’re just pissed ‘cause I’m a ladies’ man.” He pointed at Lewis. “Maybe if you stopped hangin’ around no-neck over there you’d get some.”

“Finish taping that donkey dick to your leg and get the fuck out of here,” Lewis retorted. “At least I can read.”

“You guys are no fun. If you get antsy, find me out there. I’m sure I’ll have some leftovers for you.” He got up and skated backwards out the door, giving us his middle fingers.

“I fucking hate that guy,” Lewis said.

“Just ignore him,” I replied. “He’s an idiot. I bet he couldn’t spell his own name if you paid him to.”

“I mean, that’s not real,” Trey said. “There’s no way that’s real, right?”

Jesse, another kid from class, walked in, going to the far end of the room to avoid us. He already got his fair share of shit from everyone for his big glasses and funny way of dressing—big windbreakers regardless of the weather, too tight high waters that had been washed more times than they could stand—but he’d been growing fatter over the past year, giving everyone something else to snicker about. Two masses were beginning to form on his chest, increasingly harder to hide under his jacket.

“Don’t think we don’t see you, Chubby Tits,” Trey said. “Bring your sweet ass over here and pay tribute to your bestest buddies.” Jesse ignored him, shutting his locker and jamming the key into his back pocket. He skated out, and the key fell out of a hole in his jeans. I waited until he was out of earshot.

“Jackpot! Let’s see what he’s got in there.” We crowded around his locker and pulled out his backpack and bedding. Lewis opened his bag and turned it upside down, dumping a wallet, a travel bag for toiletries, and a cassette Walkman onto the floor. Trey picked the Walkman up and threw it back to the ground, shattering it. I emptied his wallet of the two ten dollar bills.

“Looks like we’re set for the arcade.” We gathered up the pieces of the Walkman and shoved everything back into the Jesse’s locker.

“Hand me that crazy glue,” Lewis said. I gave each of them a bottle and we began filling each locker’s keyhole.

When we finally emerged the floor was full, sound booming from the PA so loud that I thought Mariah’s high notes would shatter my eardrums. We went to the concessions stand and each got a chili dog basket, splitting the change. I could see Jesse apart from the crowd, kicking clumsily, clutching the wall to keep his balance. Rosie and her friends were skating backwards in a line, holding each other by the shoulders.

“When are you going to talk to her?” I asked.

“I’ve got to build myself up. But it’s happening.”

“You’re gonna chicken out like you always do,” Trey said.

“No I’m not. Just wait for couples skate.” The midnight couples skate hadn’t even crossed my mind. I found myself thinking about Laurie and that night at summer camp. Then I thought of Mike and his stupid shorts and I lost my appetite.

After we finished eating we hit the arcade, working our way through each of the fighting games. We found three couples making out behind the cabinets. After we got bored with wailing on each other we moved on to foosball. Lewis was an expert, and he

made quick work of Trey, who spent the whole game spinning the bars and cursing each time he scored on his own goal. I stepped in for my turn. I was almost as good as Lewis, and each of his shots was deflected. The game went back and forth without an end in sight, and a few kids stopped to watch. Laurie walked up and put a dollar down.

“I’ve got winner,” she said, smiling at me. I was suddenly kicked into gear, my focus sharpened to such an extent that Lewis’ men seemed to slow down. I found holes in his defense and exploited them, scoring goal after goal until, finally, Lewis fell. Laurie put her dollar in and dropped the ball.

“I bet you think you’re hot shit,” she said. I tried my best not to look at her and keep my mind on the game, but my eyes kept drifting to her chest, the v-neck hanging slack enough to give me a peek at the roundness of her breasts, cupped by a purple bra. She made quick work of me, then skated off without so much as a “good game.”

“Who the fuck was that?” Trey said.

“Laurie. Mike’s girlfriend.”

“Jesus Christ,” Lewis said. “It’s so unfair.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Jesse rolled past. In spite of the timidity of his skating he had broken into a ridiculous sweat, the drips colored by the ever intensifying overheads. He clopped back to the locker room, and minutes later he burst forth in a panic. He went to the DJ booth, and the guy followed him out with a ring of locker keys.

“Showtime, you guys,” Trey said. “Let’s see them fix that shit.”

The DJ walked in and out, obviously pissed, and went straight to the pro shop. Mike skated out with a bottle of nail polish remover.

“Oh, come on,” Lewis said. “Who the fuck is this guy? Batman? He’s got a god damn answer for everything.”

“Well, that was disappointing,” Trey said. “We could do it again. Just to piss him off.”

“No,” I replied. “It was a stupid idea anyway.”

“Then what are we gonna do now?”

“We haven’t even been on the rink yet.”

I hadn’t been skating in a while and it showed. I had once been able to roll backwards and do spins, but now I struggled to make simple turns. Even braking was hard. I felt a strange kinship with Jesse in that moment, and for the first time guilt seized me. I couldn’t think about it for too long, because Trey and Lewis zoomed past me and went to work, executing tight turns and zig-zagging between the other skaters, breaking up the hand-holders. At one point the two of them crowded the center, leap-frogging and sliding between one another’s legs. In the time we’d been coming to the rink I had never even seen them skate; they were content to pick fights and play video games. Watching them now, they looked more like ice dancers than trailer park kids. Once they got tired they slowed it down a bit and skated with me, but this got boring and we decided to head back to the arcade.

It was getting late and Lewis was running out of time. He stood against the wall of the rink watching her, bathed in neon that gave her already shiny skin a brighter sheen.

“You better make your move,” I said.

“I don’t know if I can do it, man.”

“I knew you’d puss out,” Trey said.

“We’ll go with you if that’ll help,” I said. We had to drag him back to the rink, and when we got there, before we could even push him onto it, one of Rosie’s friends skated up. I could practically smell the look on her face.

“Nuh-uh,” she said. “Rosie doesn’t want to talk to you. She’s seen you stalking her at school, and you creep her out. So leave her alone.” She skated off without giving any of us a chance to respond. Rosie looked at us from the rink, disgusted. Lewis was devastated.

“What a bitch,” Trey said. “Dude, forget it, just go out there anyway.”

“What’s the point? Look at her out there. You can tell by her face. She hates me.” It was hard to argue with him.

Sitting in the dining area, he looked as if he was about to cry. Trey unloaded insults, all of which did nothing to make Lewis feel better. It hurt to see him so sad, but I had an idea. I left them at the table and went to the pro shop. Mike reeked of finger nail polish remover, and I told him so.

“Some real funny guy glued all the locks in the locker room. You wouldn’t know anything about that would you?”

“No. We’ve been on our best behavior all night.” I could tell he knew I was full of shit.

“You still haven’t learned that you have to look someone in the face when you lie to them. Don’t worry, though. It wasn’t that hard to get the glue out. And at least it was creative.”

It was strange, but I actually enjoyed talking to him, even though the conversation was just stock catching up, talking about Mom and how Dad had left and our money problems. The grudge I had held for the past couple years suddenly felt stupid.

“You know I got into college on a scholarship? Fully paid for by tennis. That means I’m only in town for the summer. I’d like to get you out of the house once in a while. Skip town like we used to. Maybe come around and see Ma and Carla.”

“I’d like that.” I missed the camping trips and the baseball games he and his dad would take me to, how he used to include me in things. That was the only time in my life when I really felt comfortable with myself. “Can I ask you a favor? And you can say no if you want, but my buddy Lewis...”

“Ladyfeet?”

“Yeah. Look, Trey sucks, but Lewis is a good guy, and he’s had a really bad night. This girl he’s stuck on just told him off and he gets picked on pretty bad. Do you think you could ask Laurie if she’d do a couples skate with him?”

“I don’t see the harm in asking.” We found Laurie at the concessions stand and explained the situation. She gave us the same look one gives a runt puppy and agreed without even thinking about it. As we approached the table the DJ’s voice came over the PA.

“Alright, guys and gals, these next three songs are couples skate only, repeat, couples skate only. No solos on the floor. No imaginary girlfriends or boyfriends, either. Keep all hands on the waist and shoulders and don’t get too sexy with it.” The lights dimmed and slowed, and the music started again. She approached Lewis and took his hand in hers.

“Come on, sugar foot. You have to have better moves than I do.” Mike, Trey, and I watched them from the wall. They spent almost the entire song tripping over one another, doing awkward turns and running into the wall. He struggled to keep her on her feet at first, but eventually they locked into a steady rhythm. Everyone around them skated slowly, staring into each other’s eyes, entranced. It gave me a warm feeling. I wanted to be out there with them.

The song ended and they found us at the wall. Laurie grabbed my hand and pulled me away. I tried to protest but she dragged me to the floor.

“Feels familiar, huh?” I couldn’t believe she remembered. “You’re a bit taller now, though. That was a really sweet idea.”

“Thanks. You really made his night.”

“Mike says you’re a good guy. He misses you.”

“I know. I miss him, too. But it’s hard. He and Mom don’t get along, and...”

“He’s not gonna be around much longer. You know that, right? We’ll never see him.” I could tell it was a sensitive subject, that she was trying to mask her disappointment.

“Why are you with him, then? If he’s just going to go away...”

“Because he’s sweet. He’s a good tennis partner, too. You’re a better dancer, though.” I was glad it was too dark for her to see me blushing.

The song ended and we met up with Mike and Lewis. Trey had gone to the bathroom. Mike and Laurie made their way back to the pro shop.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Lewis said.

“I didn’t.”

“Don’t bullshit me...but thank you.” I grabbed him by the shoulder and we made our way back to the arcade. It was the closest I’d ever felt to him, to anyone besides Mike. Trey rolled up with a dumb grin on his face.

“You are not going to believe what I just saw! So, I’m taking a piss, and Talon rolls in with Rosie. They were all over each other. They locked themselves in a stall, and ‘ziiiiiip’ the pants dropped. That guy has no fuckin’ shame.” Any trace of Lewis’s triumph immediately disappeared. He skated off to the locker room.

“Why the fuck would you do that?” I said.

“Who fuckin’ cares? She’s gross. Besides, it’s better he knows.”

“I swear, man, you can be such a dick.”

“Get off my back, asshole!” He pushed me into one of the cabinets, and for a second I thought about retaliating. Then I thought about Mike and how I didn’t want to cause him any more problems. I skated away instead, back toward the locker room to find Lewis. My skate got hung up on something as I passed the tables, and I fell face first to the moldy carpet, the smell of stale cheese and caked gum filled my nostrils. I picked myself up and turned to see what I’d tripped over, and discovered Jesse’s legs jutting out from under the table, kicking wildly. I skated as fast as I could to find Mike. When we got back, we pulled him out from under the table and stood over his still shaking body. His eyes were fluttering and rolling into the back of his head, his face was covered with drool, and blood dribbled down his chin.

“Fuck, he’s bit his tongue,” Mike said, lifting his head off the ground. A crowd began to form. Trey and Lewis rolled up and went pale, face to face with the contorted body on the floor. “Someone call an ambulance!” No one moved, too arrested by the

sight to do anything. “Christ! Gabe, hold his mouth open so he doesn’t bite his tongue off.” He pushed through the crowd. I pulled Jesse’s jaw open and more blood poured out. A chunk of the tip of his tongue dangled over his teeth, barely held to the rest of it. Trey and Lewis were trembling so badly that I thought they would hit the floor, too. Fifteen minutes passed, in which Jesse managed to drip blood all over my hands and forearms. The doors were unlocked to let the EMT’s in. They stabilized Jesse and rolled him out, the neons and music having been turned off, the floor vacated.

“Alright, everybody,” Mike screamed. “Calm down. Get your sleeping bags. Lights out in ten. If you wanna go home, now’s the time to call your folks.” Half the kids decided to leave, and after they’d all been picked up the lights went down, save for the bulb above the restroom. No matter how I tried I couldn’t fall asleep. The rustling in the sleeping bags and the smacking of wet mouths, coupled with the image of Jesse, were too much for me. When I finally did fall asleep the sun was coming through the windows.

We were all woken by Talon screaming. I stood up and saw the crowd forming around the locker room. Trey and I rushed over and pushed toward the center of the crowd.

“I can’t open my eyes,” Talon yelled.

Someone had crazy glued his eyelids shut while he slept. I thought we’d used all of it, and I couldn’t imagine either Trey or Lewis, bad as they could be, doing such a thing. For the second time in less than twelve hours the flashing lights of the ambulance filled the windows.

“Jesus,” Trey said.

“The guy sucks, but nobody deserves that,” I replied.

Lewis skated out of the bathroom and joined us. “What the fuck just happened?”

Because he knew about the glue, Mike had no choice but to report us. The police saw each of us separately. I went first, and I answered their questions honestly; we had glued the keyholes, used all the glue, went to sleep, and woke to the screaming. They called Lewis in after that, and Trey in the waiting room. It had been a long night and we were both at a loss for words. Lewis returned and the officer told him and me that we could leave. Trey was ushered into the interrogation room as we walked out the door. He looked at us pitifully as we left. I’d never seen him scared before.

Trey didn’t show up for school that Monday. Lewis didn’t have anything to say about it, but I was worried that he was in real trouble. He was waiting at the bus stop after school, though, and I was relieved to see him. I stepped off the bus, but Lewis stood at the door, refusing to move. The bus driver finally forced him out, and Trey walked right up without so much as a word and punched him in the face. He got him on the ground and continued hitting him. I tried pulling him off, but he elbowed me in the mouth, knocking me to the ground. I brought myself to my feet and kicked him in the gut as hard as I could. He doubled over, clutching his belly. I stood and helped Lewis off the ground.

“You all right?” I asked. “What the fuck was that about?” He was shaking.

“I’m...I’m fine.” I couldn’t understand what Trey’s problem was, but seeing the look on Lewis’ face, I put it all together: him disappearing until after Talon got carted out, how he’d been on edge all day.

“Lewis, you didn’t.”

“I..I didn’t know it would be that bad. I was angry. It just happened. Please don’t tell anybody. I don’t wanna go to jail.”

“But what about Trey?” He didn’t say anything. He turned and ran down the dirt road to his trailer as fast as he could. I helped Trey off the ground and walked him home, apologizing the whole way.

“Fuck you,” he said.

That night Mike came to the house for dinner. He never showed up unannounced, and I figured Mom had called him, told him about the fight. After we cleaned up the dishes we built a small fire in the yard. He stabbed a skewer into a marshmallow and handed it to me.

“Be sure to hold it above the fire, not in it. The fumes’ll make it taste bad.” We assembled a few s’mores before he finally broached the subject. “What’s the matter with you, Gabe? Ma told me everything. About the fight. Cutting school. Staying in your room all day.”

“I don’t know. Since Dad left I haven’t felt like myself.”

“I know it’s tough. I shouldn’t have stopped coming around. I just can’t watch her drink herself to death. She hides it from you. You don’t know, but it’s bad.”

“I’m not a baby. I know. But she’s getting better.”

“She’s not drunk tonight, at least.”

“I think she’s lonely. He hasn’t even called, you know?” He didn’t have anything to say to that. I kicked a rock into the fire. “You know, I know who did it. Who glued Talon’s eyes shut. The cops think it’s Trey, but it’s not. Lewis did it.”

“You’ve gotta tell them, Gabe. He could be locked up for a while if you don’t.”

“I know that. But I can’t. He’s my best friend. It just happened, he didn’t mean to...”

“Gabe. He hurt someone. Very badly. You hurt someone very badly today, and now you’re going to let him get locked up for something he didn’t even do? You’ve gotta do the right thing here.” The thought of turning Lewis in felt wrong, but I knew I had to. I tried to hold it in, but I started to cry. Mike put his arm around me and pulled me close to him. It was the first time that I could remember that we’d ever had a moment like that. We stayed outside until the wood burned to embers, and he left, making promises to come around more often. And he did. We started playing tennis together every Thursday. Every other weekend he, Laurie, and I would go camping at the lake. Mom and Carla even came a few times.

The last weekend before he left for school it was just the three of us. I could feel the tension between him and Laurie during the drive, and when the two spoke they did so in clipped sentences. That night, while he roasted hot dogs over the fire and Laurie played guitar, I decided to head down to the water for some time alone. I sat on a log on the clay beach, looking up at moon, hung huge in the violet sky. I felt peaceful. Laurie came up and sat beside me.

“You doing okay out here?”

“Yeah, I’m just thinking.”

“Me, too. I’m sorry things are weird.”

“You don’t have to apologize. I understand.” Everything was still and quiet, save the wind rippling over the water. No birds. Even the crickets were sleeping.

“I’m really glad you two are getting this time together,” she said. “You were all he talked about. Besides tennis.” We heard the sounds of clattering dishes behind us, Mike cursing. “You and him are a lot alike, you know? Gentle. Handsome, too.” She leaned in and kissed me on the cheek.

“But what about Mike?”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, jailbait.” She turned back to look at him struggling to gather the camping stove and kettle off the ground. “And what about him? He’s already gone.” She was right. Mike was already gone, and so were Trey and Lewis. But for that moment I didn’t mind.

Jesse turned out all right. His lack of food that evening had triggered a diabetic seizure, which explained his weight gain and the sweating. No one had known before then. This didn’t stop his parents from suing the rink for negligence. Talon was worse off; he was blinded by what Lewis had done, and his parents filed a suit of their own. Besides that, a whole bunch of stories came out about the other seedier things going on there: the dope-smoking and secret drinking and the fooling around. The rink was shuttered by the end of the year. Mike came to his senses and changed his mind about breaking up with Laurie. We’d drive up to visit him every once in a while, but the distance became too much for them. Laurie broke it off and moved away around the same time the rink closed.

I didn’t see Trey after the beating except in the hallway at school. We never spoke, and I spent most of my time as I had before meeting them. I never saw Lewis again. Mom found a job with the postal service before he got released. She could afford

daycare and moved us into a house, one that didn't shake when we did laundry. I went to a different school, kept in touch with Mike, graduated on time. About a year later I heard that Trey's dad got drunk and laid down on some train tracks, but I couldn't bring myself to call him. Someone told me he dropped out and joined the military, got married and turned out all right in spite of everything. I sometimes think about them, wonder if Lewis ever forgave me for what I'd done, if he ever forgave himself for what he'd done. Most times I try not to think about that, but instead hope that he's safe somewhere, that everything turned out fine for him like it has for me.

I feel dumb each time I look at the tow truck in the rear view mirror. Outside the grey of the junkyard, the skate looks even worse, every bump and stain revealed by direct sunlight. I park on the street in front of my house and wave the driver through the gate into the backyard. Gwen, my wife, comes home and she's pissed.

"What the fuck is that doing here? It looks like hell. And the neighbors...Christ, Gabe. How much did you pay for it?"

"A hundred."

"For that?" She doesn't get it. I walk back into the house and mix two gin and tonics before pulling my copy of "Planet Rock" from the CD rack. I turn the stereo up loud enough to hear outside. I hand her the drink and we both sit down at the patio table. We stare at the ugly thing, standing giant in the middle of the parched, uncut grass.

"You know, it's actually kind of cool-looking," she says. "It matches the rest of the yard."

I hold my eyes shut, pushing on the lids until the neons return.

SUMMER'S LAST SOUND

I first met Evan Fleischer on the playground when I was eight. I'd been trapped inside the jungle gym by some other boys, who clanged at the bars with sticks, making fun of my speech impediment and the cleft palate that caused it. I looked out over the blacktop and saw him, charging forward like a rhinoceros, the sheer size of him dispersing the crowd.

He'd just moved to town, and we spent nearly every day after that together, trading lunches, cards, shooting basketball at recess. He was the largest boy in our class, serious, imposing, and as such he became my confidant, my de facto bodyguard. But he was also really funny in his own quiet way. Every year he'd devise some elaborate prank, a slow burn, one he would brilliantly work out and flawlessly execute. One year he'd introduced bettas to every fish tank at school. The next, he spent the whole year teaching the school's mascot, a myna bird named Dutch, how to say "fuck," repeating it over and over again in the hours after basketball practice, until it was the only word it knew. Another year, on the last day of school, he'd broken into all the lockers on the third floor during lunch and swapped everyone's things. It took hours to sort out. He never got caught.

We were inseparable. I even went to his house to observe the Jewish holidays his family celebrated. I attended Passover Seder with them every year, observed all eight days of Chanukah. They were like second family, and never once made me feel like a goy. No matter how much I grew through the years, I could never rival his size. Sitting next to him at graduation was bittersweet. We'd done nearly everything together, and by the end of summer we'd both go our separate ways. I wondered what I'd do without him.

They had us up and there at eight in the morning and it was already hot as hell. I must have zoned out watching the dew evaporate on the grass of the football field because Evan had to elbow me in the ribs to get my attention. “Collin Finley” echoed off of the stadium seats in an impatient tone, as if it had been called several times already. I coughed and made my way to the podium which, quite far from the chairs, stood in the middle of the field. From halfway there I could tell the principal was pissed, but I didn’t care. It wasn’t like I’d have to see him anymore. I gave him my slimy palm, my best shit-eating grin, and he returned them with a firm—too firm—pat on the shoulder and a bulky, leather-bound album with a gold leaf image of the Academy, as if the piece of card stock inside belonged to it, not me. My father screamed my name from the seats even though everyone had been asked not to applaud until the end of the ceremony. I took my seat again, panting and trying to dry my face with my gown. It scratched shaving cuts and spread the sweat into them. There was another hour of name-calling, after which we did as instructed and threw our hats into the air in unison, as if we’d been practicing for this moment forever. Watching them fall to the ground, I couldn’t help but feel empty. For an instant the symbol of all we had been forced to do for the past four years had been big enough to black out the sky. Some played basketball, or looked good, or took college classes during the second half of the day. I smoked a lot of weed and faked my way onto the honor roll. Almost made salutatorian, but thank god I didn’t. I was never one for speeches.

Now, with all that polyester lying in a heap on the ground and our families filing out into the parking, the sun burned our faces as well as our hands. Just another hot, shitty

Saturday. And at school, no less. Not a thing felt different aside from the mounting temperature and the sweat stains growing beneath my underarms. All I really got out of the whole experience was a garment I'd never wear again and a ruined shirt.

After the ceremony the entire graduating class of '05 reconvened at The Flat Field. It had been a tradition for generations now, a place to steal away and smoke and drink and fuck hidden in its tall grasses. My father's favorite story of The Flat Field was of how in the seventies a biplane carrying pounds upon pounds of fine California kind bud had crashed in it. He and his buddies, dressed head to toe in black, crawled through the weeds and dandelions in a prone position to evade the twenty-four hour police presence, filling empty Wonder Bread bags with the stuff. Evan and I had no such luck; we had bought our weed for that evening like any other respectable citizen.

"This shit's not very good," Evan croaked.

"Yeah, well beggars can't be..."

"Shut the fuck up. That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard. Who the fuck really believes that? Who even says that?"

"Touchy!"

"I'm sorry. I've just got a lot on my mind."

"Me too. I got the letter yesterday. From Colgate. I got in."

"That's awesome," he said, his tone implying a complete lack of interest. I couldn't blame him. I myself could've cared less. My parents, however, crossed their chests and prayed as they stood over my shoulder while I opened the envelope. It seemed stupid; though I didn't care, hadn't even tried, I'd been a shoe-in, anyway.

“Fuck that,” I said.

“Then what are you gonna do?” The look on Evan’s face was sad, the moonlight revealing his square, clenched jaw and pale skin taut around his cheek bones.

“I don’t know. Maybe hang around a bit. Make some money. Give myself some time to breathe.”

“That’s fucking stupid,” he replied. “You’ve never had a job in your life. Besides, there’s no work around here.”

“Well what the hell should I do then?”

“Go somewhere. Anywhere, really. But probably to school. Dismantle the system from inside, you revolutionary, you.” The sarcasm of the last bit wasn’t lost on me. I hated it when he talked down to me like that, a behavior that had grown more frequent in recent months. There was silence for a time, and he hung his head. A smirk came across his face. “Did you see Maggie tonight?”

“Come on, Evan. Don’t be a dick.” My fear of talking to Maggie, of even looking at her, was absurdly funny to him. She was a year ahead of us, and in the three years we had shared a campus she had greeted me once. I stammered before deciding to fake that I was deaf, signing nonsense at her as I made bee line for the nearest bathroom.

I had seen her. She’d just returned from her first year at the Rhode Island School of Design, and not much had changed: tall, light brown hair, dark eyes, the same clothes she used to wear, stained with paint. Her nose was somewhat bulbous, which gave her a certain character, as did the moles and freckles dotted across face. She was tan but not too tan, a natural brownness that blanketed her even in winter. That night, in my weed haze,

she seemed to emit a bright light; one that doesn't illuminate, but blots everything around it out.

"She's a nice girl. Smart, too." Evan and Maggie had spent those three years on debate team together, and were rather close, but he was cagey about introducing his other friends to me, kept his groups separate. "And she just loves sarcastic little chicken shits like you."

"I can't even speak to her. I don't have a prayer."

"You don't give yourself enough credit." Evan hid the joint as we heard the approach of sneakers crushing grass.

"Faaaaaaag-ots! You guys jackin' each other off again?" Robby Wexler yelled, arms in the air as he approached Evan's car. He wasn't so much a threat as he was a largely unwanted presence. We'd all run together until high school, but the summer before freshman year he'd stopped coming around, started getting into more trouble. He'd been banned from the mall for life for stealing from nearly every store in it. Now he didn't go to school with any of us; we were Hill people, the sons and daughters of lawyers and doctors and real estate firm owners. He held the distinction of having seen the walls of every alternative school in the area, but there he was anyway. He'd miraculously finished on time.

"You guys blowin' on some grass? Gimme some." Evan passed the joint to Wexler with an annoyed grunt. He'd been calling us "faggots" and Evan Jewish epithets for years now, in spite of his own Hebrew roots.

"So, faggots, where-oh-where do we go from here?" He slipped his arms around our necks and pulled us into his chest.

“Prison,” Evan replied, freeing himself. Wexler laughed a puff of smoke through his nose thick enough to write your name in. Half the remainder of the joint had vanished.

“Field day for you faggots, then. Blech! Tastes like dog shit!”

“You’d know,” Evan said.

“Wexler, why don’t you go somewhere and get fucked? God damn, you suck the air out of the place. We’re having a conversation here.” I usually had no reason to find Robby intimidating, but the weed, on top of the compressed, fizzy Natural Light from the kegs, had heightened his natural blood lust. His chest puffed out and he tossed me to the ground. My head hit a rock and half out of pain, half out of reflex, I screamed, causing our peers to focus their collective attention to us. Evan came to my rescue as he had so many times before. Wexler, admirably, took two hard, Semitic fists to the face before crumpling to the ground. Everyone applauded.

“Fuckin’ kike’s got an arm,” Wexler said as he emerged from the grass, face red, bleeding from his mouth, curled into a smile you’d expect from someone trying to save face after an ass-whooping. “I think I’ve had enough for one night. Be seeing you guys around.” He trudged off into the night, hopefully never to be heard from again. Evan held his right hand in his left, nursing his knuckles. We walked to the creek and he dipped his hand in the water.

“Thanks for saving my ass,” I said, feeling the knot in my head already forming.

“No problem. Probably the last chance I’ll ever get to.”

“I’ll only be gone for two weeks. Then we’ll have the whole the summer.” The cruise was supposed to be a graduation present from my parents. I, myself, had no

interest in cruises. I dipped my hands into the creek and splashed my face, wiped the dirt from it. “Then it’s off with you to Dartmouth.”

“We’ll never see each other again.”

“Sure we will. There are buses and trains. Or, you know, you could drive up if you wanted. But for right now, I gotta go. We leave early. Plus, my parents are gonna wonder where the hell I am and I’d rather not bum them out. They’ll be dicks the whole trip.” We shook hands and I started the half-mile walk home. I stopped at his car and turned to wave to him. He stood at the creek bed, the stones glinting and reflecting cobalt blue light across him. I couldn’t help but notice how much he had changed in the time that I’d known him; the three feet he had grown, how he’d gotten fat and then skinny, how he hadn’t even bothered with a prank senior year.

After two seasick weeks, I was relieved to be on solid ground again. The cruise had gone as I had expected. My parents harassed sad boys in Bermuda shorts and I got shithouse drunk in international waters. Even a place like Augusta was preferable to that; at least you didn’t have to move when you didn’t want to. Once through the door my mother hit the button on the answering machine, which held twelve messages.

“Hey guys, it’s Evelyn. Evan didn’t come home last night and we were just wondering if he was with you. Call me back.” The eleven messages after said much the same thing, but became more desperate in tone. Around the fourth or fifth it had become obvious that Evan had never returned from The Flat Field that night. He’d been gone as long as I had.

The cops had searched the area, put an APB out for his car, and questioned everyone before figuring him for a runaway and dropping the case altogether. Every day I walked around our little pocket of town, hitting its tree-shaded streets, spending full mornings and afternoons browsing the shops, looking for him. The café on Central Ave. where he used to read his terrible poetry on Fridays. The deli around the corner from school we'd sneak to during lunchtime. I even asked around his dealer's apartment, a mere two blocks from his front door. The guy tried to act like he recognized me, but I knew he didn't.

But I couldn't bring myself to The Flat Field, didn't want to find his body in the grass in a place the police had missed. I avoided even looking at it, taking alley streets instead to avoid the place. The temperature rose higher and higher, the days grew longer. Everyone was quiet, drained, the clerks, the police, our neighbors. The "Missing" signs adorned with his photo stayed on trees, power poles, and in shop windows for a while longer, but eventually they were taken down, stapled over with other fliers, or washed away by the rain. When his face finally disappeared altogether, except the photos I had of him, I knew I had to go there, regardless of what I could or couldn't find.

It felt strange to be walking to The Flat Field alone for the first time. Like everything else, summer had drawn the moisture from it and it had begun to look half dead. Its green grasses were now browned and brittle. I came out from under the trees that concealed the creek. The heat hung in the air, damp and fetid. No breeze blew, and sweat burned my eyes. Robby Wexler sat at the creek bed, throwing stones at the birds that jumped across the rocks. He saw me and stood up. The next thing I remember was sitting on top of his chest and punching him in the face.

“Where is he, Robby?” I said, trying my best to keep my voice from cracking. My fist ran into his mouth. “What the fuck did you do to him, Robby?” The thought of stopping didn’t even occur to me until he spat blood in my face. He lay under me, choking and sobbing. It made me nauseous, seeing him sputter and shake before lying there like a corpse. I imagined Evan dead in a creek like this one. An intense feeling of dread came over me, and I found it hard to breathe. My chest tightened and I became dizzy. I stumbled to the woods, leaving him there, crying in the grass. I crossed the street and walked into the café to run my hand under the tap. It had swollen, and a dull pain had made its way into my knuckles. Upon passing through the door, Maggie greeted me. I was glad I hadn’t eaten yet.

“I need to use your bathroom.” She pointed to the door without a word. I realized that I had forgotten to wipe Wexler’s blood from my face. When I came back outside Maggie was leaned against the front window and smoking.

“Are you alright? What happened?”

“I fell.”

“I’m about to be off. You need to go to the hospital?”

“Actually, I think that might be a good idea.” The pain in my hand grew more intense by the second.

“Alright. Give me a few minutes.”

We rode the entire way in silence. I was too shaken, by the beating and by her presence, to utter a word. After a quiet half hour in the waiting room of the clinic flipping through magazines I spoke up.

“I really appreciate this.”

“It’s not a problem. I’ve got nothing better to do tonight.”

“Well, I mean, it’s just that I was covered in blood and you don’t really know me.”

“I know Evan, though. So, in a way, I kind of know you.”

After another hour I was seen. X-rays were taken, and I was relieved to find that I hadn’t broken anything. Maggie drove me home afterward. We pulled into the driveway and through the window shades I could see the silhouettes of my parents pacing, their arms spastic.

“What really happened?”

“I beat Robby Wexler up.”

She laughed. “Why’d you do that? Besides the obvious reasons.”

“I don’t really know. I guess I was convinced he had done something to Evan.”

The inside of the car was hushed, save for the talk-radio show playing at low volume.

“Do you think Evan’s okay?” she said.

“I don’t know. I’m really scared for him. If he’s not dead, he’s alone somewhere.”

“His poor parents.” We sat in silence again.

“I have to go.” Maggie reached across my lap for the glove box and pulled a pad of paper and a pen from it. She scrawled her phone number on a page, ripped it out, and handed it to me.

“If you ever want to hang out or need someone to talk to, just call me. I don’t really have many friends around here anymore, and I just got hired there, so I don’t get many hours.” We looked at each other for a moment. I opened the door and thanked her

again, trying my best not to betray my fears of what would happen once I walked through the front door. I stood on my stoop and watched her drive away.

“Where the hell have you been?” My father sat on the couch in the den, red-faced. My mother came in from the hallway and slapped me across my cheek.

“What is the matter with you?” My mother was less red, but obviously more angry. She had raised a conscientious, sensitive boy. I had not been that boy hours earlier. I tried to lie, to tell them that it was self-defense, but I instantly felt guilty for it.

“I thought he’d hurt Evan.”

“That’s ridiculous,” my father said. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done? You’re lucky his parents aren’t going to press charges. You’re lucky they’re understanding of what’s going on.”

“Do you understand the consequences of what you’ve done? What the alumni association would think? We had to pull a lot of strings...”

“Well, maybe I don’t want to go, Mom.” The two of them stared at me, hurt, disappointed, trying their best not to scream. My father collected himself before speaking.

“Look, I know you’re feeling a lot of things right now. And I know you’re scared. But you need to take a long hard look at yourself and think about what you’re doing. We have busted our asses to put you through school, to get you into a good college.”

“I know.” I was too tired not to admit defeat. My father threw his hands up.

“Just go to your room. We’ll finish talking about this later.” I trudged up the stairs, and though I felt guilty, an unusual sense of accomplishment dulled that guilt. Several hours later my mother came in with a dinner plate.

“I’m sorry for hitting you.”

“It’s fine, Ma.”

“Well, I still feel bad about it. Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” She lingered in the doorway while I ignored her before finally turning to go downstairs. I could hear the two of them talking, their voices low, the words impossible to parse.

I called Maggie the next day and made plans to meet at the café. When I got there she was sitting in the corner closest to the cash-register. She smiled and waved at me through the window, standing up to hug me as I walked in. I almost jumped back, and the hug was awkward as a result; one arm, tentative, quick. We took our seats and she came right out with it.

“How was Evan when you last saw him?”

“He seemed fine. A bit angry and on edge, but he’d been like that for a while.”

“He wasn’t always that way.”

“Yeah, but I just figured that’s what he grew into.”

“It’s just strange. He was so fun. Then I leave for a year, come back, and he’s, just, kind of a dick.”

“What do you think it was, then?”

“I dunno. It’s just weird that he was fine, then he gets into college, becomes a completely different guy, and then he disappears right before he’s supposed to leave.”

“He roughed Wexler up the night he disappeared.”

“Do you really think Evan was afraid of Robby?”

“No. He can handle himself.”

“Okay, then. He didn’t say anything to you at all?”

I told her about what happened at the creek, about what he’d said to me. She worked all of it out in her head for a moment, biting her lip and rolling her eyes around, cocking her head to the side.

“He’s obviously run away.”

“But why would he do that without telling me?”

“Maybe he didn’t think you’d keep your mouth shut.” The idea that Evan didn’t fully trust me hurt, but seemed the most likely situation. I never had a knack for keeping secrets. Maggie got up from the table and brought me an espresso. I’d never had it before. It was hot and bitter.

“I’m sorry. I could’ve worded that a bit better. Besides, what do I know?”

“What Evan tells you.” We sat there without saying anything, sipping our coffees and watching the cars pass by through the window. It was pleasant.

“We should try to find him,” she said.

“Where would we start? I have no idea where he would have gone.”

“Well, it’s doubtful he had enough money to get very far.”

“He’s got savings. Plus, his parents are loaded. He could have taken some.”

“Well, in the very least, it’s worth a try. We’ll go to Athens and see what we can find. It’s pretty close. We’ll take a picture, ask around. He doesn’t look like a lot of people, so he’s someone others would notice.” Though I was skeptical of her plan, her enthusiasm won me over. It was also an excuse to spend time with her without being too obvious.

“Alright, I’m in. I kinda feel dumb for not thinking about it before. When do we start?”

She smiled. “What are you doing with the rest of your day?”

The entire way to Athens we listened to her tapes and smoked her cigarettes. I felt bad being such a bum, but she kept on offering, lighting two and handing me one, the filter stained with lipstick. The air conditioner was broken so we rode with the windows down, the wind wafting about in the car, blowing her hair and the scent of her perfume into my face.

The first day in the city proved fruitless. We hit every business downtown, the head shops, the record store, the comics shop, every restaurant, motel, and frat house.

We handed out fliers on campus with his photo and our phone numbers on them until it got dark. Maggie could tell that I was already discouraged.

“We can only cover so much ground in a day. We’ll just have to come back.” We were having our fourth espressos of the day, trying to fight off the fatigue brought on by all the ground we’d covered. “What do you wanna do now?”

“I dunno. We could hang around Junkman’s. That place looks cool.”

“Are you serious? That place is bullshit. There’s so much else to do. There’s music, there’s movies...All types of cool shit.”

“If you know so much, then you make a decision. I’m out of my depth as far as all of that goes.”

“We’ll go to the cinema, then. They’ve always got double-features.”

And so we went to the cinema. The first film was short, all still photography, save for a single scene, during which the protagonist is in bed, watching his lover’s eyes blink

after waking. It was about time travel, a bit over my head, but short enough and pretty to look at. Sad, too. The ending had the main character reliving his own death which he'd just so happened witness as a child. An agent shot him to death on the pier while his younger self and his beloved watched. The second film was about two best friends who pined after the same woman. They went to a party, and a young girl blew smoke from a cigarette with the lit end in her mouth like a train engine. Two people were dead by the end, but it was less sad than the first, almost funny.

Every day she had off from work Maggie and I would go to a different city to look for Evan. Savannah smelled like piss and salt, but the streets were paved with brick in some places and the willow trees, hung with Spanish moss, were lovely. Atlanta was mostly grey, but had a huge aquarium. There was a whale shark there, and as we stared at the immensity of it, suspended in the tank, I couldn't help but feel sad for it, trapped there for the rest of its life. Macon was a total shit hole. After several hours of dead ends, we'd always end up at the movie house or some book store or record shop she knew about. When we got tired of looking we'd go to the grocery store to buy beer with her fake ID and drink it in the park. Once home we'd stay up all night, smoking and lighting incense in the apartment she'd leased for the summer, listening to music and reading to each other from books by authors and poets I'd never heard of. I paid special attention to the passages she'd underlined, memorizing and recalling them to her. When a song she really loved came on the stereo she'd become giddy, standing with a jolt and running to the stereo, turning the knob to ten.

“Do you hear that? Fucking amazing.” She'd mime playing the instrument for whatever melody (if there was one) she was talking about while the neighbors pounded

the walls on all sides. I often fell asleep on her couch, or otherwise lay awake all night, fighting the urge to go into her room and join her in bed. Sitting on her roof on the Fourth of July, we watched the fireworks burst in the skyline over the Savannah River, stoned and drunk on boxed wine. She laid her head on my shoulder.

“You think he’s watching this with us somewhere?” she said.

“I’d like to think so.” She turned to whisper into my ear. Her lips gliding against my earlobe made the hairs on my neck stand at end.

“I really like you, Collin.”

I forgot about my parents and school. For a moment I even forgot about Evan. I kissed her, and she kissed back.

A week later there was another party at The Flat Field. Maggie was busy talking to people, friends who’d finally managed to make it back, and I didn’t feel like standing awkwardly beside her all night, trying my best to insert myself into the conversation. I instead walked back to the creek, lighting the last half of a joint I’d started earlier. I came upon Wexler, sitting at the creek bed. I was glad I hadn’t started drinking yet. I began to feel sick. He didn’t move as I approached, just stared into the cloudy sky. The air smelled like rain, but he was somewhere too far away to care. I sat beside him and passed him the joint.

“Thanks.”

“Robby, I’m really sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize. I’ve been giving you shit long enough. Had it coming.”

“I just thought you’d hurt Evan or something.”

“Well I said I was going to, so I get it.”

“Well...I’m just really sorry.”

He turned and grabbed my hand. “It’s no big deal.” He smiled a toothy grin, exposing the hole in his gums. “Good look for me, huh?”

“It suits you,” I replied.

“I’d never hurt Evan,” he said. “He and I are a lot alike, actually. Boys like us, we only get one, maybe two chances to prove ourselves, that we’re worth anything.” I’d never heard him speak like this. It made me uncomfortable, more remorseful for what I’d done to him. I patted him on the shoulder, even though I didn’t quite understand what he was saying. His eyes turned towards the water and he fell silent.

“He didn’t get into Dartmouth, you know?”

“He never told me that.”

“Well, he didn’t.” He turned to face me again, only this time his eyes were closed. He leaned in toward me, his mouth approaching mine, and I fell backwards. I didn’t know why, but I reached out and touched the side of his face. His stubble pricked the tips of my fingers. He smiled and did the same to me.

“There you are! I’ve been looking for you forever.” It was Maggie. She’d managed a comfortable, giggly drunk. “I’m ready to go. Come on.” She grabbed me by the arm and pulled me to my feet. Wexler blushed and turned to the creek again. I left him there, but not as I’d found him. Something inside him had opened itself to me, and I couldn’t help but feel sympathy for him, alone out there and probably everywhere else. I

wondered what his parents thought of him, why he'd stopped hanging out with us. I never saw him alive again.

I took the car keys from her. She was obviously too drunk to drive. Though I was dizzy from what happened at the creek I figured I could hold it together for the five minute drive to her apartment. This proved too hopeful an assumption. She kissed the side of my neck and my vision narrowed and went blurry. Her car's engine grew louder and louder. The drizzle that stabbed at the windshield began to catch my eye, and I felt myself drifting into the other lanes as the street lights grew brighter, their bulbs casting light in colors I was unaccustomed to: grey pink, drunk-piss orange, grape vomit purple. Everything seemed to hum at once, a faint but disconcerting drone. By the time we turned into her parking lot I could barely hold my head up, much less park in one space. My concepts of geometry had been taken from me, as well as my motor skills. The areas of my brain responsible for such things had gone darker than the wet pavement. I struggled to take breaths.

Once out of the car I fell forward and caught myself, staring down through the grated iron into the concrete below. Maggie giggled and brought me to my feet.

"What's the matter with you?" The words echoed as they left her lips. She reeked of tequila. I stammered an unintelligible reply and she continued dragging me toward her door. Every muscle in my body was contracting, and a buzzing sensation came to my skin, covered in sweat and chill bumps.

Once through the door we stumbled into her room. The lights were off, but the street lamp that shined through her window cut through the dark, making everything visible. She threw her purse to the floor and flung herself onto her bed.

“Take my shirt off,” she whispered. The inside of my ear twitched, received the sound after it issued, made her look as if her voice had been dubbed for some film.

“Are you sure?,” I said. My voice sounded off, like it was issuing from a distance.

“Don’t even ask me that,” she whined. I peeled the garment over her shoulders as she fell backwards into her blankets. She lay half-nude, braless and quivering. “What are you waiting for?”

Frozen in place, I breathed in and out of my mouth, counting the moles on her belly silently, trying to compose myself. She grew impatient and sat up, began to unfasten my belt. My pants fell to my ankles, followed by my underwear. She held me in here hand, tried to get me up, but nothing she did worked. I had wanted her for so long; now all I could do was stand flaccid before her. It felt like an awful joke.

“What’s the matter?”

“I dunno. I need to leave.” I pulled my pants up around my waist and refastened my belt. I couldn’t even bring myself to kiss her before I walked out the door. The rain had grown heavier, and that buzzing, like the rain, washed over me as I stumbled home, only stopping to vomit in the Fleischers’ bushes.

In the weeks that followed I didn’t see Maggie. I avoided the café. She even called my house several times, but I told my parents to tell her I was out. The embarrassment gnawed at me. Why had Wexler tried to kiss me? Why had I been so afraid of it, and even then, why had I touched him if I was? Being completely alone with it all didn’t help matters, but I needed the time to myself. Besides, I had bigger problems. Summer was winding down and Evan’s parents had invited my family over to dinner.

They had turned inward, and I hadn't seen them for most of the summer, except briefly at the grocery store, where they mostly ignored me. I was frightened that they may have changed, grown gaunt and quiet. I was relieved to find, walking into their living room, that the two had actually grown rounder. The boxes, however, marked which things belonged to Evelyn and which belonged to Cline. All of their photos of Evan remained unpacked. His bar mitzvah portrait hung on the wall where it always had, along with family photos. Cline sat on the couch, flipping through the channels. Evelyn was setting the table. Neither said a word to the other, and my mother thought it best to uncork the bottle of wine she'd brought immediately.

We sat down to dinner, the conspicuous silence still hanging, tingeing the meal with a bitterness that was barely palatable. I didn't know what to say. The Fleischers were not big talkers, but they were usually pleasant, hospitable hosts. That evening, their usual good humor had been replaced by something else. After twenty minutes, my father finally broke the silence.

“Cline, I hear you're taking the Barnett case. You care to talk about it?”

Cline took a sip of water and smiled. “Glad you asked. It's a strange one, but I think we have something.”

My mother nodded and turned to Evelyn. “Not to pry, but what's with all the boxes? Are you guys moving?” Evan's mother didn't say a word, just nodded.

“We figure the space is too big for us,” Cline said. “A change of scenery would do us good.” He reached and put his hand on top of Evelyn's, who pulled away. She reached across the table and poured more wine. No one said anything for a long time, and my parents looked at me, as if I was supposed to fill in the conversation. The sound of

cutlery scraping china was almost deafening. Cline finally slapped the table, and we all jumped.

“For God’s sake, Evelyn, say something.”

She cleared her throat. “Why bother? This dinner thing was your idea. Everything is your idea.” She had drunk most of the first bottle of wine by herself, was struggling with the cork screw to open a second.

“Evelyn, that’s unfair! I was only trying to...”

“What *were* you trying to do, Cline?”

“Evey, you were so mad at him. You wouldn’t even speak to him. I wanted to help.”

“Good for you. What a great job you did.”

“Evelyn, put that fucking wine down and shut your mouth! Don’t think for a second that I’ll sit here and let you blame me for this. You barely utter as much as a goddamn word all summer and now you have an audience and you want to crucify me. You’re just as much at fault as I am.”

She smirked at him and finished the glass in a gulp. Cline held his face in his hands. He began to sob as Evelyn took her plate into the kitchen. My mother dropped her napkin on her plate and followed her. The garbage disposal began to whirl and gurgle. I excused myself to go to the bathroom, leaving my parents alone with them. The looks on their faces begged me to stay. Walking through the kitchen, I saw Evelyn hunched over the sink, bracing herself on the countertop. The garbage disposal whirred on, and the sound of clanging metal rattled through the house. I could hear them both crying from the top of the stairs.

I passed the bathroom and turned to face Evan's door, running my hand over the wood. The door creaked open and I walked inside. His things were undisturbed, left exactly as they had been the last time I had seen them. The room still smelled like he did. My fingers ran across the weathered spines of the books on his shelf. The intramural soccer trophies and our team photo sat atop his desk. We were kneeling next to each other, big-headed and gangly. Even then he seemed twice my size.

My curiosity got the better of me and I began sifting through the contents of the desk's drawers. They were filled with his journals and old photographs, papers he'd written for school. I dug through the first five of them without finding a clue, a note that would at least put the queasiness of not knowing to rest. Flipping his poems from the last drawer, I found a brochure, all color, with the words "Freedom," "Love," and "Grace" printed, in that order, down the front. I thumbed through the pamphlet for a moment before realizing what it was. It held none of the solemn sobriety of his parents' Conservative Judaism. It was all brazen ecstasy, hands in the air, tears, and white-toothed smiles. In spite of his occasional joint, Evan had fulfilled all of the requirements of a good son. Mr. and Mrs. Fleischer returned the favor by trying to hand him over to the Charismatics. To a place that could pray the gay right out of him. Wexler at the creek made sense now. Tears pooled in my eyes. I was at once repulsed and frightened. I thought for a moment that if I had been more observant, if I had known, I could have talked him out of leaving, or that I could have gone with him. We'd have been safe from all of them. After a moment, that notion felt as silly as the notion that I had even known him at all, and my tears fell to the paper, making the ink run in spots his own tears blurred and bloated in the months prior. I rushed down the stairs and out the front door.

My father called after me, but I ignored him as I crossed the lawn, the cicadas screaming, the sprinklers soaking my dress clothes.

I ran the entire way to Maggie's apartment, hoping she'd be there. I didn't want to have this conversation with her at work. The familiarity of the place nagged at me, it's smallness, every shop, every identical house on every identical plot of land, how I had committed every turn and shortcut to memory, how there was no distance to be had from any of it. I had never even gone out of town until that summer. Everything and everyone, every day, was exactly the same. I needed to leave it all behind, see something else. She screamed from inside when I banged on the door and called her name.

"What the fuck do you want?" she screamed.

"Maggie, come on. Open up." The door unlatched and she stood in the doorway, obviously not in the mood for anything I was about to try to sell her. "Can I please come in?"

"You're a real asshole, you know that. A real shit."

"I know."

She let me inside. I told her everything, about Wexler, about Evan and his parents.

"I can't believe you didn't know Evan was gay." The revelation that she'd known all along hurt, but I had gotten used to the fact that if Evan was good at one thing it was keeping secrets from me. "So, Wexler tried to kiss you?"

"Yeah."

"And are you..."

"I'm not really sure I can answer that right now."

She seemed hurt by this, bit her lip like she always did when she was unsure of something. “Then why were you avoiding me?”

“Because I’m afraid. I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Collin, I don’t know shit, either.” She tried to kiss me, but I pulled away.

“I’m leaving. I have to leave.” The words left my mouth without a thought, as if by reflex, an instinct, something I’d known all along.

“So do I,” she replied. She grabbed my hand in hers and walked to the boombox on her nightstand, pressing play with her free hand. We lay in the bed, clothed and dry, her head resting on my chest. We didn’t speak. I stroked her hair and stared into the ceiling fan, trying my best to fall asleep, though I couldn’t stop thinking about leaving, about what that meant and how I was going to be able to. I had no money, no car. But the answer was obvious, and that’s why I truly couldn’t sleep.

It was still hot on that Tuesday afternoon in mid-August, when my parents and I packed my bedroom into a trailer with a gaudy largemouth bass painted on the side. Maggie came to see me off, though things still felt strange between us. I introduced her to my parents, who were happy to meet her. My dad winked at me when she and my mom went inside for coffee.

“I’m proud of you, you know? I know it’s been rough, but you’re doing the right thing. And it’s really beautiful up there. You’ve never seen an autumn like New England autumn.”

The two came out and we finished packing the trailer. My parents left Maggie and me alone to say our goodbyes.

“I’m sorry about everything,” I said.

“Yeah you are. We made a pretty good team.”

“Maybe when I get sorted out. Maybe the timing will be better.”

“Maybe. I made this for you.” She pulled a jewel case out of her back pocket and handed it to me. “Don’t play it until the time zone changes. Promise?”

“I promise.” She kissed me on the cheek and turned to walk away. My mother walked up and grabbed my shoulder.

“You ready?”

“I guess.” We all loaded into the car and pulled out from my driveway. I looked through the back windshield and Maggie was already a dot on the horizon. We drove down Central Avenue, with its Victorian houses and landscaped medians, past the Academy, and then on to I-20, going east. I pulled the CD from my pocket and read the label: “Summer’s Last Sound.” Why wait, I figured. My parents slid it into the slot and rolled the windows up. The sound of birds and water and gently plucked guitars gradually swelled, followed by percussive notes and a distant voice. It all felt like a dream. In that moment, speeding along the gray interstate, past the blur of trees and maintenance crews, I was glad that I, like Evan, had had the good sense to know when to leave.

THE DIFFERENCE IN HER SIZE

I'm not ready to let her go yet. I thought I was, that the last twenty-five years didn't amount to much anymore, before all this, but when I woke up two weeks ago and she wasn't breathing next to me something changed. I dream about her handwriting now, her grocery lists and the way she signed checks in simple italic print, I dream about these things. And there she is, what's left of her, in the bronze urn on the mantle in the living room, not even fifty yet, next to a photo of the three of us together, me, Linda, and Maggie, our daughter.

She's here, too. She's slowly moving her things back in, what little she has. She and Brandon are getting a divorce. She won't tell me what for, but I can imagine. It's hard to hate him for it, though. He reminds me of what I put Linda through.

But the son of a bitch showed up at the funeral. He actually had the nerve. Suit and tie and everything. He looked like a fucking kid. They stood outside, and before things got out of hand I walked out and asked her for a cigarette. They both shut up and I lit the thing—I hadn't smoked in fifteen years—and as soon as I exhaled the first puff I got light-headed. Everything around me started to feel small, even my mental image of Linda as she had been began to shrink; all I could think about was her there in that urn. No face, no hair, no nails, nothing of her left but that dust. She used to be taller than me. I lost my balance and hit the ground, banged my head of the side of a concrete planter, and everything went black. I even managed to screw up saying goodbye to her for everyone.

Now Maggie says it's time. Linda wanted the ashes scattered on her birthday, to be taken all the way to Big Sur and thrown off the edge of the world, where we met. But I don't want to. I need her here. I talk to the urn when I know Maggie isn't around to hear

it. She wouldn't understand. It's how I raised her: don't be weak, buck up. Do the right thing. I'm a liar. I can't do it. It should be me in the urn, me dead of an aneurism, me with the dumb, awful luck. I should be the one being thrown off a cliff. I want to be.

It's almost night time and the continent terminates before us. The sky has gone indigo, the sun tucking itself into the Pacific. Kelp juts up from the clear green water, as if it's asking for her. In that light Maggie looks just like her mother, and it takes everything I have to hold onto the urn, to not let her see me cry.

Linda's voice echoes off the cliffs again. I see myself, twenty-two and backpacking down the west coast. I haven't shaved or showered in five days. I can smell my hair through my tracker hat, what Linda would later call my "birth control helmet." "I love you, but if I see you in that thing I'm not letting you come near me," she would say.

She is standing on the outcropping of a low cliff, singing at the birds, throwing them bits of bread. She is tall, leggy, her blonde hair whips around at the ends, held tight at the top by a green skull cap. There is no one else around, or at least this is how I remember it. I watch for a while before she feels someone else is there, turns around, her face difficult to place in the light. She is almost a silhouette.

"What were you singing?" I ask her, knowing full well that it's "Wild Is the Wind," by Johnny Mathis. She looks at me, puzzled.

"You a foreigner?" she asks.

Then we're dancing to it at our wedding. She hunches over so my shoulder reaches her hand without me having to stand on tip-toes. Then I'm going to bed with a

younger woman, then another, and another. One bangs on the door late into the night as Linda pretends to sleep through it. We are in a counselor's office. I stop. We have Maggie. I start again, better at hiding it this time. But she knows. That's the worst part, that she knew the whole time and put up with it.

But then I see other things. I see the present, my daughter's face for what it is. Not just Linda; the cleft in her chin, the one she was picked on for having so mercilessly as a child—buck up, don't be weak—is mine. The way her brow arches. The way her eyes sit a bit too close together. We walk to the edge of the cliff, stepping slowly, each with a hand on the urn.

After my accident I came to in the hospital with my head in bandages and found Maggie sleeping in a chair next to me. Linda's urn was on the table beside her. I began crying so loud that I woke her, and she put her hand on mine and held my face. When I could speak I told her that she should leave me there, that she needed to go to Brandon, that she could save it, that she had to. She just stared at me, perfectly composed, and said, "I'm here now, dad. You need me. He doesn't. It's as simple as that." She didn't shed a single tear. I asked her, "How do you do it? How can you feel okay?" She squeezed my hand, smiled as best she could. She looked tired.

"Pop," she said. "It's just how we're made."

I hope so.

MARGARET IS A MOTHER'S NAME

If I can say anything about my liberal arts education, it's that I've spent enough time reading about commodity fetishism to become really good at selling make-up. This woman stands across the counter from me, already beautiful in her own strange way. Her lips curl unevenly, and she squints a lot, but you can tell it when you see it. I've learned to. She has a face so angular and symmetrical you could slice deli meat on it.

"Does this shade look good?" she asks, thumbing at the over-caked rouge on her cheeks. The hue is deep, looks almost like a fresh bruise.

"Oh, yes," I reply. "It really suits your skin tone. And it accentuates your cheek bones." I have said this to at least nine women today.

"I dunno. It's kind of slutty, don't you think?"

"Not at all. It's feminine." This is a go-to.

"You know what? You're right. I really like this color. It makes me look...healthy."

I can't tell you how much I hate myself in this moment and in all the moments I spend in this goddamn JC Penney, throwing this face paint at these ladies. The words leave my mouth, carefully measured, memorized: "You know, if you spend fifty dollars, you get a complimentary lipstick, mascara, and a ten dollar gift card for our intimates section." I'm going straight to Hell when I die, I just know it. "You also get a lotion that doubles as an exfoliant." The little beads in it scratch your skin raw. It smells like those Andes mints that everyone except me seems to like and burns popped zits and other wounds. I look into the vanity mirror on the counter and find a grey hair in my bangs. I'll

be twenty-five in a week. My name tag spells out my full first name, “Margaret,” which makes me feel even older.

“Well, then, what do you recommend for my lashes?”

I took the job because, honestly, it’s been a really rough year. First my divorce, then my mother dying. I took care of my dad for a while, but he started seeing someone only a few months later. She’s four years older than me. One of her friends did a Sephora workshop and that’s all she would talk about. “Doing make-up is an art unto itself. Each face is a new canvas.” She’s pretty on board with the whole idea. And seeing as I have little else to do right now and I had to get out of my house—for the sake of my dignity and sanity—I took the job. There’s a commission, vacation days. I just started working enough hours to qualify for benefits. And I’m so damn good at it that I get to work alone at the counter. This is especially good, because nearly everyone here is nineteen or younger. The closest thing I have to a friend is Gilbert. He’s twenty, a church boy, and he always never leaves the house in anything other than finely tailored slacks and a vest, a pastel shirt and bow tie. He gets his hair done every week, too, changing from a squared fade to twists to long, braided extensions as if it’s nothing.

I leave the counter to find him in men’s wear, and he’s talking to Gina. Gina and I only speak because I’m willing to buy her booze on weekends. I sometimes stay for a minute when I deliver, see if any of the boys her age try to make a pass at me. It’s kind of exhilarating, watching them approach, only to laugh and tell them off when they try to talk me up. As I get closer I can hear that they’re playing “Would You or Wouldn’t You” like they always do.

“Ooooh, Gilbert that one.” Gina points at a guy in skinny jeans, his hair coifed in a pompadour.

“Totally,” he replies.

“Is this all you guys ever talk about?” I ask. “It’s pathetic.”

“You’re just bitter,” Gina says. “When was the last time you got any?” She’s kind of a bitch, thinks it looks good on her. Which it kind of does. That’s the problem: everything does. Husbands drool over her in plain sight of their wives, don’t seem to care that she’s barely seventeen. She’s like all the other girls who work here. They’re all thin and have perfect tits, or at least an ass. That’s the weirdest thing. They all have asses now, and no matter how much weight I gain or miles on the elliptical I do, I never will. To make peace with this fact, and the fact that my ex is almost exactly like my father—he likes them young, pert, and completely different from the women they’re obligated, by law and religion, to love—I go home, take a Xanax, and melt into the cushions of my couch with a glass of gin while the TV Guide channel scrolls over and over again. I don’t even like gin, but Brandon left it in the freezer before moving to India to deny immigrants visas all day. I’m not one to let booze go to waste.

Our boss comes by and breaks it up, tells us to get back to work. I stand at the counter, smiling at the passersby, waiting for something to do. All I can think about is clocking out and having a day to myself.

I’m observing the routine I’ve settled into on my days off—Xanax, couch, TV, just like my nights. My favorite things about watching the network are the titles of the skin flicks they play on the upper channels. “Witches of Breastwick.” “The Bare Wench

Project.” “Sex Hex.” I watched a few of them in college. They’re all hilariously bad. Most of the ones I saw had a guy named Jay Richardson in them. He’s always a Bosley character to a group of Charlie’s Angels proxies or a coven of witches or a brothel full of hookers who also foil international jewel thieves with terrible accents. He’s the only one in the movies who never has sex. He seems like a kind man. In one called “Busty Cops 2”—I’ve found no evidence that a “Busty Cops 1” even exists—he directs them to an oracular talking llama named “the Dalai Llama.” I’m serious. He bleats at the Busty Cops, calls them “sugartits.” Around two PM, my phone rings, knocking the pill bottle of the coffee table. I look at the screen, and it’s Dad, so I silence it and put it on the floor. He calls three more times before I pick up.

“What?” I yawn into the receiver.

“Gracie’s leaving, Maggie.”

By the time I get to Dad’s house, she’s already taken off. I haven’t set foot in here since I moved out, wanted to keep my distance from the whole thing. I walk into the foyer and pick the mail up off the floor. Several of my old paintings hang on the wall, and I can’t help but feel embarrassed that I was once a landscape painter. I could never paint people, could never make them look alive. They all had the same dead eyes. I couldn’t even get the symmetry right. One would always hang lower than the other, or the irises would be off in one, making the subject look cross-eyed. Hence, the make-up job.

My father is sitting at the kitchen table, drinking a beer. He’s quiet, his face has the same pouty, tired expression it had after Mom being gone sunk in. It’s obnoxious, offensive even, but I don’t feel like arguing. We’d already fought about Gracie enough.

“Have you eaten anything today?”

“Not yet.”

“Dad, it’s past three. You’ve got to eat something.” I open the refrigerator, which is empty apart from a bag of wilted spinach, beer, and a can of parmesan cheese. I go to the pantry and pull a box of linguini, empty it into a pot of salted water, and set two places at the table for us. The pasta comes to a boil, and after a few minutes I strain it, pile it onto a plate, and shake the cheese over it. We sit and stare at the mounds of processed semolina, not saying anything. He gets up to get a beer.

“You’re day drinking,” I say. “You’re about as bad as I am.”

“I think I’ve earned it. I never used to drink. I’m old now. It’s not like there’s anything else to do.”

“It’s not good on an empty stomach.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He takes his place at the table again and downs half the bottle in one pull.

“Dad, slow down.”

“You want one?”

“No.”

“That’s unusual.” He jams his fork into the pasta and spoos some around it. He brings it to his mouth, sniffs it, then sets it down again. “Brandon called me. Just to check up.” They’d gotten along before everything went to shit, still do.

“Motherfucker.”

We’d only been married a little under a year. He was the son of an acquaintance of my mother’s, and we’d met at one of our family Christmas parties. He approached me on the back deck, where I was smoking, a bit drunk on eggnog.

“Your hair looks red in this light,” he said. “I like it.”

“Thank you,” I replied, blushing and trying not to meet his eyes. He looked a bit like my old friend Evan: tall, muscular, dark-haired, with a sharp jawline and wide, brown eyes, set just the right distance from each other. All his features were symmetrical, perfect. There was a certainty to everything about him. I’d just completed a four-year stint at the Rhode Island School of Design, where I’d studied oil painting, and his stability seemed incredibly attractive at the time. He had no taste, couldn’t dance—nor would he, ever—and he dressed like a member of a golf club, polos and pleated khaki slacks. Still, he was kind, and he made me laugh. Less than a year later we were exchanging vows, and then separated the next year. He had been assigned, and I didn’t want to go, outright refused, even. I’m not even sure of the reasons why, anymore, but I’m glad I did.

“So, you’ve decided that it’s over?”

“I think we both have. For a while now. Papers are signed and everything.”

“He promised me he’d take care of you, leave you set up. He’s a son of a bitch, but at least he knows it. It’s good to know that about yourself when you’re young.”

“Can we not talk about it right now? I don’t care about what he says. I don’t want anything. I just want to be done with it. I really wish you two would just stop already.”

He finishes the rest of his beer, shrugs. “Alright. Give me a cigarette.” He’s taken up smoking again, which I hate in spite of my own pack-a-day habit. I don’t want to have this conversation, either, so I pull the pack from my purse and toss him one. He lights it and takes a drag, ashes onto his plate before stubbing it out in the noodles.

“For Christ’s sake, Dad, come on. You’ve known her six months.” I sound like the adult in the room, which bothers me.

“Maggie, I really can’t do this.” Pulling another beer from the fridge, he closes the door and begins to cry. “Who’s gonna have me now?” he warbles.

“My God. Look, I’m gonna go to the store and buy you some groceries. Just calm down.” I storm out of the house as he slumps back into his chair and collects himself. He starts whistling “Wild Is the Wind,” the song he and my mother danced to at their wedding, and I make sure to slam the door behind me.

I’m in line at the grocery store and I feel a tap on my shoulder. I turn around, and Collin Finley is standing there. I haven’t seen him since he left for college. We kept in touch for a little while, but you know how those things go. He’s taller, thinner, and subtle hints of age lines arch around his mouth and eyes. But that hairlip scar, that messy hair, those same big blue eyes. He wraps me in his arms.

“Maggie, my god! He pulls back, holds me by the shoulders, looks me up and down. “You look great!”

“You too!” The whole thing feels impossible, and I struggle to form sentence.

“What are you doing here?”

“You haven’t heard? I don’t want to bum you out.”

“No, tell me. Is everything all right?”

“Well, you remember Robby Wexler, from school? He got shot to death this past weekend. I’m here for the funeral. Skipped out to get the family a few things.”

“My god, that’s awful.” I remember Robby. He was a little fucker.

“Yeah. I just talked to him last week. We kept in touch. He seemed to be doing fine. And then, poof, gone.” He leaned in. “He was trying to rob a convenience store.” I’m a bit hurt by the fact that he and Robby talked regularly and he couldn’t even bother to e-mail me to tell me he was in town. But I am transfixed by him. He is even cuter than he was back then, his boyish features given a more dignified character in the years that have passed. “I know it’s short notice, but you maybe wanna go? The funeral’s tomorrow.”

“No, I have work. Besides, it wouldn’t feel right.”

“Say no more. No problem. Where are you working at now?”

I look down at my shoes. “JC Penney.”

“Oh...huh...all right, then what time do you get off? We should meet up for a drink at the Soul Bar. Catch up.”

“I’d really like that.” We exchange numbers and hug again. I turn and the cashier glares at me, waiting for me to unload my cart.

When I get back I find Dad asleep on the couch with the TV on. I pull a throw blanket over him and put the groceries away before making my way upstairs. It is exactly the same as it had been before college. I fall onto my childhood bed, which I can still fit on without my legs dangling over the foot of it. The floral bedspread smells like mountain air, or what the detergent bottles advertise as “Spring Breeze.”

I get up and walk to the book shelf. I had organized the entire thing chronologically, from first books to last. Shel Silverstein and *Goodnight Moon* leads into an entire row of Judy Blume, and below that I can track my entire adolescence, Bataille and Proust and Camus, sad Frenchmen, most of whom didn’t know how sad they were.

The picture of Collin and me at the Atlanta Aquarium, standing in front of the whale shark tank, is still on this shelf. Neither of us look happy in the picture, because we aren't. The whale shark, encased in glass, immense and trapped, even now, makes me think of Evan. Christ, I wish I could go back. Not just to be younger. I had things to do. I felt more grown up then than I do now. I was smarter. I grab the photo and place it on my nightstand before flopping on the bed. If I could do it all again. The drinking and smoking have put the age on my face before my time. I could've tried harder. Me and Collin and Evan could have left together, could've been happy. In this alternate life we share a place somewhere out west. We are straight edge and have interesting progressive friends who like all the things we do. I still paint, can finally get the eyes straight. I'm beautiful again. I try to sleep but just lie there staring out the window, at the line of street lamps turning on, one after the other.

The next day at work my boss tells me that he's promoted Gina and that she'll be joining me at the counter. My commission will probably be cut in half by this, if I can even compete with her in the first place. She comes in and immediately pulls her phone out of her purse, leans against the counter. It's slow, so I try to make conversation, to which she responds with a single finger in the air, a "Don't." I'm relieved to see Gilbert walking toward us. I tell him everything, about meeting Collin again, about the date we'd set for the night. He'd heard about all of it, my wild high school days, the summer when Evan disappeared. I got the impression that he was trying to live vicariously through my past self. His eyes widen.

"Oh my gosh, you have to let me go with you."

“I don’t know,” I say. Taking him to a bar makes me feel uncomfortable. Unlike Gina, who does whatever she wants, Gilbert’s parents are vigilant, keep him in church or in the house so they can always keep an eye on him, make sure he doesn’t wander.

Would he know how to conduct himself?

“Pleeeeeeaaase. I have to meet him, see what the fuss is about for myself.” He begs me some more and I see the boss, vulture-like in the distance, already cutting his eyes at us.

“Alright, fine. We’re meeting at the Soul Bar at seven. You have a fake?”

“No, but all my friends get in all the time. Don’t worry about it. I won’t even drink.” The boss starts walking over and I shoo him away. Gina is completely unmoved, doesn’t even attempt to hide her phone. She doesn’t even seem aware that he’s here.

We all meet on the sidewalk and it’s no problem, as Gilbert predicted, getting him in. It’s mostly empty on weeknights, the music less loud. We make our way to a booth and sit, Gilbert and I on one side, Collin on the other.

“He’s cute,” Gilbert says while Collin is at the bar ordering us drinks. He refuses to let us pay for anything the entire night. We reminisce about that summer, Gilbert inserting himself as if he were there. He knows all the beats.

“After about a year at Colgate I decided to fuck off for a while,” Collin says. “Travelled a bit. I’m actually working on a book about it. I never knew how huge this country was until then. How simultaneously full and empty.” He regales us with stories about his trips, all the strange people he met. After a while my bladder is full and I excuse myself to go the restroom. When I return the two of them are sitting next to each other in

the booth. They mostly ignore me for the rest of the night, laughing at photos on each other's phones. It takes me a while to realize what's happening, but it's obvious. The way they're leaning into each other, how whenever I try to insert myself into the conversation it's met with more laughter and them going back and forth, talking over me. I feel obligated to stick around, and I'm sort of thankful when they both leave in a cab together. Of course they would. What was I thinking?

I'm in my apartment again when my phone buzzes in my purse. I pull it out and it's a text from Gilbert.

"r u mad at me"

I toss it back in my bag and turn on the TV, pour myself a gin, neat, and use it to wash down a Xanax, just like every other night.

The ringing of the phone wakes me. I check the time and it's two PM; I've already missed most of my shift, but the call isn't from my boss. He hasn't called at all. It's Gina who's calling, has called five times already.

"Look, if you think I'm gonna pick you up some booze after you..." She's crying on the other end of the line.

"Can I come over?" she asks.

"Gina, what's wrong?"

"Can I please come over?"

"Yes, yes, but do you remember how to get here?"

She pulls a loud, phlegmy breath through her nose. "Yeah."

"Alright, just let yourself in." The line goes dead. I scramble to tidy up, and she's here within ten minutes, bursting through the door without so much as a hello. She

empties her purse on my kitchen counter, and three home pregnancy tests are scattered among all the hard candy and receipts. Each of them is positive, a powder blue plus sign in each display.

“Oh shit.”

“Yeah,” she says. She’s a mess. No make-up, sweatpants, her hair matted and pulled into a floppy bun on top of her head. She’s plain, not the same girl I work with. Her eyes look squinty, her lips dry, her face puffy. I hold her while she cries into my shoulder, flinging tears and snot on my shirt. “What am I gonna do, Maggie?”

I look her in the eye. “These things aren’t definitive.”

“There’s fucking three of them!”

“I know, but, here, sit down.” I guide her to the couch and sit her down before pouring her a cup of water from the tap. She downs the whole thing in a gulp. “Listen, I’m gonna take you to my OB/GYN. Then we’ll know for sure.” I call the office to see if they have an opening, which they do. I wipe her face and try to brush the mats out of her hair. It’s so twisted that it’s impossible to get the brush through. “Would you feel more comfortable going out if you took a shower?” I ask. She nods. I give her two towels and show her the way, and while she’s in there I pick the debris off the counter, chucking the tests in the garbage can so neither of us has to look at them anymore.

They call her back and I’m alone in the waiting room, eyeing the Anne Geddes calendar by the window, fat little baby elves bursting from Christmas presents, cheeks as red as their hats. I wonder what people think of it, whether it persuades more people to keep the baby. I wonder if Gina even knows who Anne Geddes is. I’ve always hated these photos. All the babies are creepily perfect, but those outfits, the hot light cannot be

comfortable for them. I can't believe it's December already. And soon New Years, then my birthday weeks after that.

It only takes ten minutes before she comes out, and neither of us has to say a word to know what the result is. She's pale, quiet, drags her feet when she walks. I take her back to my apartment.

"It's gonna be okay, Gina."

"No, it's not," she says. She doesn't even have it in her to cry anymore.

"Have you thought about what you're gonna do now?"

"I don't even know. My parents will kill me. But I know I can't keep it. They won't understand, they'll..."

Something rises in me and suddenly I'm talking, each word measured, precise. I don't even feel it's me saying the words. It's almost like I'm hovering below the ceiling fan, watching myself say it.

"They don't have a say in any of it. This is about you. You have to do what's best for you. Don't worry about them. There's no one else that can make this decision for you. You don't have to listen to a thing they say."

I sound like my mother. We hadn't been close before she died, had begun growing apart when I was a teenager. Whenever we'd go out, she'd insist that I call her by her first name. She only seemed to get prettier as she got older. People would often mistake her for my older sister, which she got a big kick out of. I resented her for it, but now that she's gone, I understand. It must be hard spending twenty-five years with someone who, no matter how beautiful you are, how loving, just can't be satisfied. I'd come to her with the news that I'd gotten pregnant just before Bran left. I'd repeated

everything she said to me to Gina, almost verbatim. I'd always been told that the procedure would be something I'd regret my entire life, but I never even thought about it. The whole thing seemed as distant as high school. I tell her all of it, let her cry until she can't anymore.

“Have you told the father yet?”

“No. Should I?”

“Not if you don't want to.”

“You know, they said ‘congratulations.’ Are they required by law to say that or something?” She forces a laugh.

“Have you eaten anything yet?”

“No. I don't think I can.”

“You have to.” I go into my fridge and pull out a pack of bologna, some Wonder Bread from the freezer. I crack the slices apart, set them on the counter and look at them, their bleached whiteness, each slice dense and freezer burnt, pumped full of chemicals so that it can even be considered food. I need to throw this shit out, but it's all I have. I fry the bologna in butter, toast the bread. I hand her the plate and she eats, struggling to get each bite down. I open the window to let some fresh air in, stick my head out. A school bus pulls to the curb below, spilling khaki-clad children into the streets. Day drinkers gather at umbrella covered tables, breathing smoke and steam into the air. Five pigeons sit on the power line adjacent to my window, their heads not staying in one place for more than a second. They never stop moving.

CUNEIFORM ALLEYWAY

Side A

“I guess what I’m confused about is the interest,” I say, the phone pinned to my shoulder as I chop up potatoes to go with scrambled eggs for the third time this week.

“You know how it goes: band doesn’t get its due, calls it quits, gets lauded as visionaries after the fact.” Glenn’s hand covers the receiver as he orders his sandwich. I can still hear him making sure they understand: “No. Mayonnaise.” This was one of the things about Glenn that’s always irked me. Even when we would go to shows together back in high school. He acted as though everything he said needed emphasis, to be repeated for the sake of clarity. It isn’t just smug; it also signals his own capacity for bullshit. If he can say it seriously twice, it’s as good as true to him. “It’s not like this is rare these days. Happens all the time. No one wants to buy the stuff anymore, but they will buy the illusion of sharing something, of ‘being there’.” This type of talk makes me even more uncomfortable. I should hang up, should’ve said no in the first place, but I stay on the line.

“I don’t think Jared will go for it,” I say. “He doesn’t like this sort of thing.”

“I’m sure you can reason with him. There’s a lot of money involved.”

“That’s the problem. That’s what he’s not going to go for.”

“I don’t really get people who don’t want to make a few quick bucks for doing basically nothing. Besides, he can do what he wants with it. Donate it to charity. Give it to the homeless. Start a church. I don’t give a fuck.”

“It’s the principle of the thing.”

“How is not getting paid to do something you like doing ‘principled’?”

“Well, he doesn’t like it. That’s why we stopped in the first place.” This is only somewhat true. “He’s got other things going on.”

“But Julie, you’ll talk to him, right? I’ve got a lot riding on this thing, and so do you.”

“I’ll try, but I’m not sure what good it could do.”

“Figure it out. I’m throwing you a bone here. I could get anybody I want to headline this first night, but as soon as people heard me say your name, they really started paying attention. And, strange as it is for me to admit it, I respect you. I want to see you do well. You deserve it.”

Glenn’s end of the line goes dead, as it always does, without a goodbye. I slide my phone into my pocket and go back to cutting. It’s difficult for me to process what’s happening. Glenn has offered me and Jared ten grand apiece to participate in All Points Festival, a two-day event that will unite the “best” of the regional underground, past and present, under one roof. This includes young upstarts as well as people we used to play with, bands older than ours. The entire first night is filled with bands from the old days at the Ellis Laundry. It was the first time that I realized that what I had done in my teens had rippled out and found purchase elsewhere. The idea makes me nauseous.

I finish frying up the potatoes and eggs and take two plates of it to the coffee table, one for me and one for my mother, who watches the news on mute at all hours of the day. Just follows the ticker. Says it helps her stay focused. She’s been living with me since the bank repossessed her house. She can’t work anymore. She’d started getting sick young, rheumatism in her mid-twenties, then seizures, small heart attacks. Then she started losing feeling in her fingers, then her memory. We keep getting her MRI’s, but the

doctors say they can't figure out what it is. They say it's like Alzheimer's but it isn't. Every day I watch her on the couch, wondering if it's hereditary. This is why I didn't even think to say no when Glenn first called with the offer. I don't know how much longer I can do this on my own. I don't know how long she has.

I'm almost thirty now. I stare at the stack of boxes I've just taken out of storage, each frayed and buckling around the edges. A cockroach skitters out from under them, which I ignore as I dig through the contents. I love the smells. Old paper and rainwater and sawdust. I thumb through phone bills from when people still had landlines and rotary phones. Every pink slip my grandmother had ever gotten from the textile mill. Letters to her sister in German. Polaroids from nearly a half century ago. Her family has always been curators of a kind, an inclination that has thankfully been passed down to me, sans their intense fervor for cataloguing. As such, what I'm looking for is buried deep at the bottom of one of these boxes.

The notebooks and tapes are under a heap of old blue jeans and a stack of my Uncle Don's old records. The words *Cuneiform Alleyway* are Sharpied on each artifact. It feels strange how new everything still looks, like it hasn't been over ten years since I'd buried them. I flip through each notebooks' pages, looking at old lyrics—if you can even call them that—and the manifesto written on the first page of each, the script becoming more garbled every time I wrote it, as if it were slowly retreating from my memory. Most days I don't even think that *Cuneiform Alleyway* actually happened. That part of me is so far removed from my reality. But the evidence is all there, for better or worse; I'm not sure which. I feel old. I feel dirty, culpable. I don't feel at all like Jane Clang. But I'm also broke.

I walked into the record shop on Georgia Avenue at the end of December, my feet soaked and my nose cold, flush with Christmas money. The only thing I'd asked for was a turntable, and Mom had delivered a slightly used Pioneer belt-drive and a full receiver system with massive wood paneled speakers. She'd done one better by including fifty bucks for records, something I knew she couldn't afford as Dad was still on his "vacation," not sending a cent of support our way. We'd moved in with my grandmother, Mom working night shifts on a John Deere assembly line, the only source of income in the house aside from Granny's social security checks. I was fifteen by this point, fully consumed by punk rock yet still ignorant of the full extent of its possibilities.

Rickshaw, as it was called, for reasons known only to Lenny and Tad, the uncle/nephew team of unrepentant dopers who owned the place until it closed the next year, specialized in curiosities more so than what was considered sacred or vogue in most circles, at least the ones I travelled in. Underground comics, found VHS tapes, photographic slides—mostly pornographic ones from the early twentieth century, Cambodian garage-rock imports, ambient, kraut rock, gamelan orchestra recordings, No-Wave, and Noise were Tad and Lenny's *raison d'être*, and they obliged the small contingent of those in town who would be interested in such artifacts. If a kid came in, cutting his or her teeth on more lascivious, dangerous pop music, Tad, ever the talker, would deadpan them into total, all-consuming frustration. I walked in, my hair done up in liberty spikes and dyed a fluorescent blue, safety-pin through my face, leather jacket stabbed through with studs and band buttons, big Crass patch on the back in spite of the fact I'd never heard a single Crass "song" in my life; a short, laughable, walking

anachronism with apparently neglectful parents. My being a girl didn't help, I found out years later. These sorts of places are almost roundly boys' clubs.

"Do you guys have any Sex Pistols?" I sheepishly asked Tad with the slight cockney inflection I'd adopted to give myself some edge. I had bought the kit before I'd even tuned in to see what the story was.

"We got Wire," he replied in a monotone without looking up from his free weekly, clearly not having any of this kiddie poseur dress-up nonsense.

"What about The Ramones?"

"We got Wire."

This exchange continued with every query I made into every supposedly obscure punk band my cousins had told me about: Dead Kennedys, Circle Jerks, Dag Nasty, and, god forbid, The Vandals. After about ten minutes of this, I got miffed and walked to Home Folks on Martintown, where they traded in decidedly more mainstream tastes. I bought *Nevermind the Bollocks* and *The Clash*. And I loved, and still love, both those records. But Tad's insistence on Wire had me intrigued. I went back to Rickshaw to inquire about them the next morning, waiting a full hour after the listed time for Tad to unlock the door. He approached me hesitantly, smelling acrid, his eyes bloodshot and droopy, either from his hangover or his wake-and-bake.

He passed without a word or even a nod, eyes fixed to the ground as he walked into the store front, keys jingling in his shaking hands.

"You guys got Wire, right?" I said as I passed through the doorway.

"Which one you want?"

"Well, what's the best one?"

“*You’d* probably be into their first one. Hold on a sec.” He disappeared into the back of the store, and returned with *Pink Flag*.

The sleeve is really nothing special in retrospect; it’s a simple drab landscape with a blue sky behind, a flag jutting from it with a pink banner, the word “WIRE” printed in simple black text in the top left corner. But holding it in my hands at the time, it looked imposing, mysterious. I asked Tad for the price.

“I’ll give it to ya, four bucks,” he replied. “That one’s been here for ages.”

“Can we put it on?”

“If you’re buyin’ it.”

I dropped the bills on the counter and removed the record from its sleeve. Tad snatched it, careful to hold it by the edges between the palms of his hands, like Don used to, and slid it onto the turntable. Then the needle dropped. It started slow, single notes picked over and over again before rumbling alive in an intense, incomprehensible explosion of sound. I felt a deep pit forming in the bottom of my stomach, and the room grew narrower and narrower, until only the spinning black disk, monolithic, touched my vision. I went home, took the safety pins out, and cut my hair.

Side B

From *Navigating the Cuneiform Alleyway* by Terrence Lynne

The Ellis laundry sits on a small plot next to a Ramada Inn across from the United Way, still unoccupied and in growing disrepair. The signage, which has survived the forty years of urban blight that have visited this section of Downtown Augusta, Georgia time and again, is now indecipherable, barely hanging over the door by one rusty chain.

Ten years ago, when the place was shuttered for good, one could see the change in foot traffic. Streets once crowded with teenagers in varying states of alternative dress—green liberty spikes here, torn fishnets there, patches and t-shirts of obscure thrash outfits—are now vacated save for the night walkers and the patrons of an “Irish” pub on 7th Street, the bartenders decked in the too-high skirts of some male fantasy parochial school.

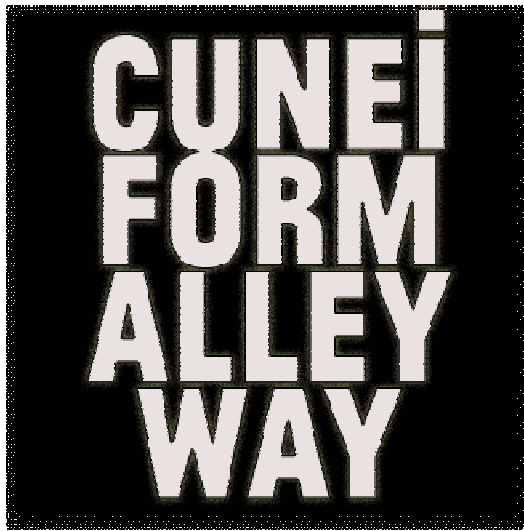
It’s difficult to imagine the near seismic shift in the history of this place over the past several months. This twelve by thirty cinder block building, as the new word on the street will tell you, is ground zero. What happened here is now the stuff of legend, a development I meet with some optimism, tempered with suspicion. Mostly because I lived it, and want to see the story told right.

Augusta, Georgia is not a hospitable place. “The Garden City,” former state capital, lies 130 miles south of Atlanta and 80 miles south of Athens, business and cultural centers which have mostly weathered the recessions of the past twenty years in ways Augusta has failed to. What was once a bustling cultural and commercial center in its own right, home of James Brown, Starkey Flythe, and Jessye Norman, is now known better for its unemployment, its large swaths of abandoned real estate—including an entire mall complex—and growing disparities between the old money “Hill People,” Columbia County “white flight”-ers, and the rest of the bunch. What work there is lies either in the service industries, which favor youth over experience, or factory jobs some fifty miles to the north. One need only look at the photos of Downtown Augusta during its heyday juxtaposed with the empty Broad Street of now to understand just how much things have changed.

Yet, in spite of lack of resources, there is something to this place that inspires a creative bent in its locals, especially among its youth. Rents are cheap, guerilla art shows creep up in apartments off side streets, restaurants and bars are invested in local creatives—many of whom are on the payroll—and there seems to be a shared sense of both work ethic and hope among all those involved. Which makes the once forgotten Ellis Laundry so much more dumbfounding. At a time where the creative pulse of Augusta is pumping more vigorously than it has in years, it's important to take note of what happened here to make that possible. Those kids in their finery sitting outside of an old laundromat at five on a Tuesday, waiting for the doors to open. And I was one of them, every Tuesday and Saturday, until the very end.

It was at that final show that I heard Cuneiform Alleyway for the first time. The two of them stood on stage, their names, Jane Clang and Mikhail Kinski, printed on their shirts. The whole thing was shambolic at best, but I'd never heard anything like it, difficult as it was to parse any sense of order out of the chaos.

It was sort of my own version of a first communion. I had become initiated into a chiming, screeching secret world of code-speak, non-sequiturs, and slogans. The guitar sounded like it was being strummed with painters' nails, crashing against and careening off of the low, warped organ notes, often off time with the pre-recorded drum loops issuing from the keyboard, pumping like a prisoner's last heart beats played through a monitor as the poison seeps through him. I bought the CD from them after the set. The insert bears the same style of lettering as their shirts, aped from Godard films, no lyrics, just the name:



After a few more house shows they went silent. No one knew them by their real names or knew where to find them. Rumor has it that they were working on a second record, but it never materialized. To this day I haven't seen or heard anything like it. I still listen to it regularly. The album holds its power; it's frightening, brash, unmusical. It never fails to reinvigorate. I have memorized the lyrics, made effort to decipher some hidden code which was certain to be imbedded in Clang's twisted, shouty language, commentaries on a wide range of social ills: the death of the intellectual, technological advancement, the oppression of women and minorities, the coming police state, paranoia, and mental illness. But there are also more upbeat tracks, less esoteric ones about writers and books, favorite films, stories of youth in abandon, the stories I wanted to fashion for myself. Plus, Jane rhymes "anti-disestablishmentarianism" with some mumbled nonsense and "aquarium," a combination of sounds so absurd that it's impossible not to be enamored by it, context be damned. It represents everything that I was becoming interested in at the time, distilled into one autonomous thing, huffing and chanting out from my stereo speakers. And this is what I'm scared of. Will that power still hold for them, will seeing them try again move me in the same way it did when I was sixteen? Will it still have teeth? Or is it all just cheap nostalgia, a cash grab?

Side C

Jared and I haven't spoken for years. Last I heard he'd taken the inheritance he got when his father died and bought an old mill house out near Aiken. He's got a commune now, where all the crust kids go when they hop off the train. Some of them stay, cut their dreads and go to work, grow vegetables and make things no one will ever see. An anarchist paradise; off the grid, hydroelectricity, small-scale subsistence agriculture.

I met him at one of the Ellis Laundry shows. His head was shaved like mine, and we both had the Straight Edge Xes drawn on our hands. It all sort of piled up from there. I was living with him within a month, and we spent all day in his apartment reading Marx and DeBord, Bakunin, big fat novels. We began to print zines, modeled after defunct leftist publications. It seemed natural for us to start a band of our own, so we began practicing, just making noise, me shouting and playing warped bass organ notes on an old Casio, him squelching away on his cheap pawn shop guitar. We made a record, played out a few times, first at the final show before the Laundry closed, then a few more at some friends' houses. We tried to record another one, but we were pretty much over by then. For all his politics, he was a mean bastard, prone to violent outbursts. When I made the decision to leave he took a baseball bat to all our equipment, put several holes in the wall. I still have the old demo tapes, which are mostly just us starting and stopping to scream at each other.

It's not hard to find with Glenn's directions, just two turns off of Exit 1 and I'm on the dirt road that leads to the place. The house is quaint, all logs, no siding, with a wraparound porch cluttered with rocking chairs and small tables. Two teenagers in shirts

with the sleeves cut off and patched jeans work in the garden, pulling weeds, picking tomatoes off the vines. I get out of my car and approach the porch, the two looking suspiciously at me the whole way. A man with long, stringy greying hair comes through the screen door to meet me.

“Jules.” He smiles at me. He’s almost unrecognizable. Aside from the hair, his eyes are sunken, his face tanned from work outdoors. The sun has aged him. He looks like he could be my father. “Please, come inside.” He makes room in the doorway for me to walk through. “I like your hair.”

“Thanks.”

“Can I get you some tea? Give you a tour?”

“Sure.”

He hands me a cup of Yerba Matte and guides me through the house. It seems much smaller on the inside, cluttered with books and other people’s things, bags of clothes, shoes, music equipment. There’s a single computer hooked into an old CRT monitor in the study, the largest room in the house. It’s also filled with music equipment, even an old drum kit. Pillows are all over the floor. There isn’t a television to be found. After the tour we return to this room, settle on the pillows.

“So, what brings you to my door after all these years?” he asks. I can tell he already knows.

“I’m sure Glenn’s talked to you already.”

“He has.”

“He sent me out here to...”

“Stop there. I don’t want to sound rude, but I really expected more from you. I’ve got something good out here. It’s peaceful. I feel at peace.” This much is apparent. The old Jared would have broken something over the mere sight of me. All evidence of that old temper is gone, replaced by exasperated bemusement, something bordering on sympathy. His eyes are clear and sad. “Why would I want to revisit any of that? I feel bad about it as is. I was a monster. I treated you awful. For which I am terribly sorry. Regardless of where we leave things today, I want you to know that I regret everything that happened.”

“Jared, it’s really nothing. It was a long time ago.”

“But I think about it. Almost every day. My logic still stands, though. What we made means nothing to me anymore. I have no attachments to it. It was naive. Dishonest. Plagiarized. I wanted to do something significant. And that’s what this place is. It’s my one way of giving back. Making a difference. I had to put my money where my mouth is. And I thought that mere provocation could change things. But it doesn’t. People are provoked all the time. They’re used to it. Expect it even. The world doesn’t need it anymore. We’re all deaf and blind to it. Otherwise, it just gets absorbed and sold back. I love Glenn, but Jesus Christ. It’s all pretty disgusting, if you ask me. What we need now is positive movement. Right action. A demonstration that it’s all possible, that we can do it ourselves. That we can take care of each other.”

“You sound like a Lutheran,” I say, immediately regretting it. He looks hurt.

“Perhaps. But it means more than art. This place, the work I’m doing. At least to me.”

I struggle to swallow the rest of the tea and put the mug on the floor. “I didn’t want to beg you, but I guess it’s come to this. My mom’s sick. I have her living with me, she’s got no place to go. I don’t know how much longer she can hold on. They don’t know what it is. The medication’s expensive. I can barely pay the rent and keep us fed. I’m working two jobs, late night at a gas station and GED classes in the morning. And it’s still not enough. I need this, Jared. Please. I need it.”

He stands and goes to the window, opens it, takes a deep breath. “What do you think of it out here? Beautiful isn’t it? A mile away, it’s all horse people and old money, but this. As long as I’ve been out here, I still wake up every morning in love with it. I know you’re proud, but we can find a place for you here. For you both. It won’t be an issue.”

“I appreciate the thought, but I don’t think you understand. This isn’t about me. She can’t be out here, with all these people going in and out. It’s only a matter of time before she stops recognizing me, let alone everyone else. She could hurt someone. It’s not safe. And I can’t leave her to the state hospitals. I refuse to. She’s worked too hard her whole life to end up like that.”

He joins me again on the floor, his legs crossed, as if he’s about to meditate. He is relaxed, detached, not betraying a single hint of emotion.

“Look, you won’t even have to play a note.” I grab my purse and pull the old tapes out of it. “You want to end it, close the books on the whole thing, to atone? Here it is.”

“You’ve kept these?”

“I’ve kept everything. What Glenn wants is nostalgia. But we can give something better than that. The real thing. Warts and all.”

He smiles. “And here I thought you’d gone soft.”

“Please, Jared.”

He grabs the tapes, looks at each of them before handing them back to me.

“Fine. You can have my cut, of course.” He gets up and climbs through the open window, walks back to his garden, and starts pulling up weeds.

Side D

Navigating the Cuneiform Alleyway cont...

Ciudad del Cielo, the site of the All Points Festival, is what you’d expect of a music venue in a small town: oversized and underutilized. Tonight, it is uncharacteristically packed, locals, journalists, and college boys and girls curious enough to fork out the sixty bucks for the two-day passes all nurse their beers and carry shots between their fingers. James Brown screams through the PA. Bartenders scuttle about in a combination of excitement over what will be the most lucrative night of the year and frustration over what it will take out of them to get to the end of it. Many in attendance don’t look old enough to have attended a single Ellis Laundry show.

The bill follows in a predictable order, composed entirely of groups that used to play at the old venue. The openers are the Marlboro Men, a group that melds spiky post-punk with country and western. The Replacements-indebted power pop of Turd Boyz follows, then the garage punk of The No-Nos. The slow-burn loud-quiet-loud dynamics of Langues Romanes. Mudbrute coats the entire place in sludgy drop-D tuning and big

flat drums. Truck Fun steers the evening into noisier, more abstract waters as a palate cleanser, to prepare us for the beating our ears are about to take. The non-believers are slowly weeded out, but this is fine. The poseurs can go, we don't need them.

Jane and Mikhail stand on the stage. Their shaved heads have been replaced by shoulder-length hair, and they look at the few of us that are left before plugging in. But it all still feels like a miracle, like finding your lost dog, missing for months, in a yard two streets over. Something interesting happens. Sound issues from the PA, but neither of them move, don't even mime playing. It hisses and pops, but one can still hear what it is. The two of them start and stop, cursing one another. They sound tired and mean. Suggestions are tempered with and met with condescension. Then they switch sides. Two more filled tapes follow. The set lasts nearly three hours. Not a single one of us still standing even moves. We are all transfixed. As the din rises and falls, cutting and coming back in mid-phrase, the squealing stabbing at our ears, it's hard to think, in spite of the tables upon tables of new merch, the half-empty room, the drunk people at the bar screaming so they can hear one another complaining about the volume, that this isn't something close to a miracle, to proving all the kids right. Neither says a word, and we don't either, not even after the noise stops.

THE HALLOWEEN PARADE

It had been two weeks since Laird had taken up voodoo and started walking about on all fours. Not like a cat or dog, but more like when crab kickball was played in gym class, belly to the ceiling, limbs bent backward. Anton didn't find it so annoying at first; there were more important things to worry about. Mom and Step-Dad had left at the beginning of October, just packed up and went before the two woke up. Anton figured it was about the money.

Their real Dad had invented spray cheese, which helped pay for the huge white house in East Lakes—a spiral staircase, in the kitchen!—but had done little to save his own skin. He always told his identical twin sons, whom he'd named after his father and uncle, two Danes who had died drunk and broke before their time, that the cheese business was a cutthroat one. He was found face-down in a motel off the interstate with his throat still intact, no apparent foul play, just crusted arteries and a fifty-six-year-old pair of lungs which had taken the brunt of tobacco smoke for nearly as long.

Mom married Step-Dad several months later in a courthouse. She hadn't planned on remarrying, but he was just so damn charming. And he liked to throw money around; Dad's money, not his own. They were happy for a time. They had two TVs in the kitchen, one for sports, one for infomercials, and enough spray cheese and butter crackers to last them for as long as they needed. Or so the brothers thought. Now Anton and Laird were left alone, with only a day left until Halloween. The money, as well as the cheese, had run dry.

Anton stared into the bottom of the cracker sleeve before dumping the last of the crumbs into his mouth. Laird came crawling in, belly up, and opened the refrigerator with his toes, kicking it closed after finding it empty.

“I don’t know why I even bother checking,” Laird said. Anton ignored him, still chewing, transfixed by the sound of football highlights bleeding into an ad for a drill with detachable parts for any household situation. One could even convert it into an iron, an electric icepick, a hair crimper. He grabbed a pen from the drawer and wrote the 800 number on the palm of his hand, “79.95 plus processing and handling” under it.

“That the last of the crackers?” Laird asked.

“Just crumbs, you aren’t missing anything.”

“Says you. At least it tastes like something.” He stood to turn the tap on and wrapped his lips around the spout, dabbing at the droplets that fell on his letterman jacket before arching backwards and assuming the crab position again.

Anton stood to throw the box away. “Couldn’t you just ask one of your friends to share their lunch?”

“Ha! You think I don’t already?”

“And you didn’t even think about bringing some for me?”

“Come on, you can take care of yourself. Besides, I’m a growing boy.”

Anton chucked the empty cracker box at his brother, who kicked it out of the air.

“What are you even at with all this voodoo stuff?” Anton yelled.

“Just having a bit of fun, is all. It’s good to have hobbies.” Laird had, to this point, excelled at nearly everything he tried. Not only was Laird, like his, brother, tall, blonde, and exceptionally handsome, he also played on the varsity teams of every sport

Hawthorne Prep offered, was a card-carrying member of the Key Club, captained the chess squad—changed, by him, from “team” to give it a more competitive, militant edge—and had been, just three days prior, the first in his grade to lose his virginity. Given Laird’s standing, no one much cared that he had been stealing every albino rat from every classroom on campus for his “experiments.” He’d run through close to forty, now. He wasn’t very good at it.

Anton, on the other hand, kept mostly to himself in spite of his own pleasant appearance. Much of it had to do with the one feature he did not share with Laird: he was missing the middle, ring, and pinkie fingers on his left hand, had been born without them. He was extremely self-conscious about this fact, always wearing long sleeves, regardless of the weather, to hide it. As a result of this defect, Anton could not, for the life of him, place himself in anything. He felt nondescript, empty, famished for a self that as yet hadn’t materialized, one that simply couldn’t be conjured into being. Most days it seemed that absolutely nothing came easy to him. On good days, it was difficult for him not to feel suspicious.

“You’ve got plenty going on,” Anton said. “Why get all weird and burn little wicker figures and kill mice? Why the crab walking?”

“I add my own flavor. It gives me a sense of spiritual purpose. Plus, I get to see how much I can get away with. Why are *you* being weird about it? And why don’t you try it? It’d get you out of the house, at the very least.

“I’ve been thinking about that, actually. I want to join the debate team.”

“But you don’t argue. In fact, you don’t seem to have much an opinion about anything, other than my ‘experiments’.”

“That’s the thing. I want to branch out. I want to be a good interlocutor.”

Laird scuttled forward and narrowed his eyes. “An interlocutor, huh? I’ll bet. This wouldn’t have anything to do with Lucette would it?”

“No. I want to do it for its own sake.”

“Sure, whatever you say. Don’t think I haven’t seen you following her around.”

Anton had been following her around. She was as tall and thin as him with a head of short, platinum hair, and had the largest, whitest teeth he had ever seen, framed each day by lips painted candy-apple. She rode a motorcycle she’d bought with a loan taken out with her older sister’s identity, also using the credentials to secure an M-class license. Everything she said, no matter how ridiculous or stupid, sounded pointed and correct. She even wore a rosary around her neck that hung down to her navel, despite not being the least bit Catholic. He had begun wearing t-shirts of the bands she liked, bands he found off-putting. He downloaded their discographies anyway, had them on repeat as he did his homework. He was infatuated with her. “You can just admit it. Nothing wrong with wanting to impress her. I say go for it. And if you have any questions, let me know. There’s this little spot you can...”

“Stop it,” Anton said. Laird winked and nudged his knee against Anton’s calf before shuffling back up the stairs.

Russell, Anton’s black Bombay, slid in through the cat door, a dead sparrow crammed into his mouth. He dropped the bird on the linoleum and began batting it around for several minutes. He grew tired of its lack of response and began digging in, spilling little bits of bird blood onto the floor. He had grown fat from the rat remains Laird had been feeding him, yet still he ate and ate and ate. Anton tapped him on the head, and

Russell darted off up the stairs. “Well, at least I don’t have to worry about feeding you, too,” Anton said to himself, staring hungrily at the tiny organs left on the tile floor

The attic was sweltering, and Anton felt the weight of dank, humid air in his chest as he crawled atop the buckling boards, groping for the overhead lamp. All of the artifacts of their childhoods were stowed away up here. Laird’s intramural trophies, Anton’s macaroni pictures, the latter rendered see-through from the heat. He grabbed the boxes of decorations and slid them to the hole in the ceiling, taking each step down the crippled ladder carefully. Once in his room, he opened the boxes and pulled out the statues, the latex limbs, the tangled mass of fake cobwebs, the plastic jack-o-lantern with the tea lamp attached to the bottom of it. He preferred the real deal, but couldn’t afford even the two dollars for the midget pumpkins, already pocked and covered in mold this late in the season.

Halloween in East Lakes was a strange holiday. The feast of Samhain was celebrated not by the township’s children, but rather the adults. Unlike Christmas, which was reviled, somber and joyless, Halloween inspired a peculiar excitement in all the grown-ups. There were arcane traditions. For one night a year, roles would be reversed. The children would don scale reproductions of their parents’ work uniforms, while the adults dressed in costumes and ran about the streets, begging for money. To add more pageantry, each household was expected to erect a makeshift business or institutional building on the lawn. These would function as haunted houses of a sort, with pharmacies, pawn shops, banks, post offices, planned parenthoods, and courthouses yielding their particular, mundane horrors. After draping the cobwebs and placing a gift basket of

severed limbs on the porch with the jack-o-lantern, Anton set himself to the task of filling quarter rolls with sand from the back yard to at least give the trick-or-treaters the illusion they were participating.

Once he had finished he stood at his window and looked into the yards below. The trees hadn't fully turned yet, but were awash in enough copper and red to bring him comfort. The neighbor kids, whose parents were still cooking for them and cleaning up after them and, in their own ways, loving them, were constructing the haunted houses with cardboard, tape, and magic marker. They labored silently in their yards as the moon rose higher in the sky. Unlike them, Anton cherished the tradition. He enjoyed the strangeness of it, liked making people happy. He secretly wanted to join them, so he too could feel grown up, a real, full person, with a life and responsibilities to return to begrudgingly, even if only for a night. He looked up at that moon, which hung full above the trees, huge and red. Anton found it unusual that the moon would be so full. It was supposed to be in its first quarter phase, cleaved discretely in half by its own shadow.

That night Anton struggled to wake from a disturbing dream. In it, two embryos, like tiny lima beans, floated in their shared space, waiting to be born. As they slowly grew, sprouting translucent limbs and beady black eyes, each began to vie for what room was left. Then, the two, pink and fully formed, lay in a crib, screaming and fidgeting in their discomfort, their teeth stabbing through their gums. One grabbed the tiny hand of the other, put it in its mouth and gnawed on it to ease the pain. This occurred over and over again, seemingly unnoticed by their mother or father, until finally the little fingers gave way and disappeared. Everything went white, and Anton, seeing things through

what felt like the eyes of another, rounded a base before falling to the ground, the dust clouding his vision. When he stood again, he looked up to see everyone in the bleachers on their feet, cheering him. Again, the scene changed. Now all he could see was himself entering her, a girl who looked familiar but whose name he didn't know, his gaze transferring from this position to her stomach, to her splayed breasts, making eye contact for only a second out of the few seconds it took for him to finish. She was beautiful and distant before the vision of her disappeared into the pure white of a pillowcase. Then, finally, a fire burned in the waste basket while whoever he was occupying chanted and stared into the ceiling fan swinging above, each blade ornamented with a bleached rat skeleton, suspended by fishing line. Anton woke to a burning sensation in the knuckles where his fingers had been, staring at the exact same image bathed in daylight, the smell of burnt paper filling his nostrils. He couldn't move. The room wasn't his own, the walls covered in posters and little love letters, written in gel ink with glitter.

“Laird,” he called out. The voice didn't sound quite right, issued lower than usual. It, like the walls, were not his. Laird walked into the room, wearing the tiger-striped pajamas Anton had fallen asleep in the night before. His fingers were missing. Anton turned his head, finding his wrists tied to the bedposts with rope, his left hand with all its digits.

“What's going on?” he said.

Laird bent down beside the bed, checked the tightness of the ropes. “Said some magic words. Flayed some rats. Burned some candles. That weird moon last night? All me. Abracadabra. I've fucking done it!”

“What are you talking about?”

Laird waved the nubby hand in front of his brother's face. "Isn't it obvious? I switched our bodies, baby bro."

"That's impossible."

"Give yourself to the mystery, man. Jeez, I never thought you'd turn out to be such a bore. I've got plans. This is for your own good."

"What are you gonna do?"

"Well, I'm gonna go to school, like you always do, and I'm going to follow Lucette around, like you always do. But unlike you, baby bro, I'm gonna ask her over."

"Oh, Jesus, Laird, give me a break. I'm waiting for the right time. And stop calling me 'baby bro.' You were born four minutes before me."

"Those four minutes counted." He sat beside Anton on the bed and put his arm around his shoulder. "Wooing a lady like this takes finesse. You need me. What about all that 'interlocution' you've got your heart set on?"

"But the trick-or-treaters..."

"I'll take care of it. You hide out up here, I act all smooth with a capital S-M-double O-V, set the mood. Then I untie you, we switch back, I fuck off for the rest of the night, and you continue with your romantic evening. You've got nothing to lose."

Anton began to shake his arms, causing the posts to hit the wall, taking chips out of the paint.

"Cool it," Laird said. "You're gonna thank me for this." Anton huffed and settled, looking, like a trapped animal, into each of the room's corners. Russell, wrapped in fake cobwebs stapled to the ceiling, hung low next to the door.

"What'd you do to Russell?"

“It’s part of the thing. He binds the thing together. The ropes are just a precaution if he gets out. As long as he is there lookin’ at you, you can’t leave the bed. A li’l gris gris. Pretty genius, huh?”

He actually did it, Anton thought. Yet another dumb thing he’s good at.

Lucette coasted down Laurens Street, careful to avoid the adults already ambling in the road, dressed in their Halloween finery. Businessmen and women, real estate company owners, lawyers, and investment bankers, one and all, were unrecognizable. Ghosts clad in sheets of the highest possible thread count floated across lawns, made their way through the makeshift buildings. A coven of grey-skinned witches came running out of the cardboard Bank of America on the Smeak lawn, croaking about their negative balances, the nerve of these people, how they’d already done enough. Faux-derelicts congregated in front of the fake soup kitchen in the Thompson yard, all huddled around fires burning in empty drums, smoking cigarettes and singing train car songs. At the Sprouse’s across the street, twenty-some-odd men waged a full reenactment of the Battle of Antietam, popping their muskets, filling the air with gun smoke. They all played by the rules and took their shots, fell to the ground in heaps. In thirty minutes, not a single one would be left standing. The entire thing was stupefying to her. Never had she seen so many otherwise responsible people making such asses of themselves.

She rolled to a stop outside of Anton and Laird’s house, the Doric columns already splattered with egg, toilet paper hanging from the branches of every tree, wafting spectre-like in the mild breeze. Approaching the door, she spied a man skipping down the street towards her. As he came closer she could see he was dressed in a navy coat which

stopped just above his knees, his long hair done up in matted curls. Small bifocal specs slid down his red nose. Ben Franklin, history teacher at Hawthorne Prep, had opted to go as his namesake.

“Why, Miss Lucette, you look absolutely ravishing this evening.”

She rolled her eyes. “Hi, Mr. Franklin.”

“And for what occasion do I owe the pleasure of your gracing our neck of the woods with your presence? Study date?”

“I guess you could say that.”

“Ah, yes, fine young men in this house. Sturdy, of good constitution. But lacking in experience.” Lucette turned and knocked on the door as loud as she could until it opened. Laird stood in the doorway, holding it open with the nubby hand.

“Mr. Franklin, what are you doing?”

“I was simply conversing with this lovely creature.” He smiled, revealing a set of large, oaken teeth.

Lucette balked. “Are those real?”

Franklin looked dejectedly at the ground and kicked up a clod of grass and dirt. “No. They’re just those fake inserts you get out of the gumball machine. But I simply love playing the part.”

“Ben Franklin didn’t even have wooden teeth. George Washington did. And that’s not even true,” Lucette said.

“Ah, I see you’ve been paying attention in my class. But the myth is more fun, is it not?” He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at the sweat on his forehead. “I do say I must be going. I have appointments, and I absolutely detest tarrying

in one place for too long. Good evening to you both.” He tore off, nearly knocking over two buff police officers in hot pants.

“Weirdo,” Lucette said. “You’d figure he’d know that tomorrow’s gonna be business as usual. I’m gonna have to see that guy every day for the next two years. And all I’m gonna be able to think about is that dumb get-up.” She took in the scene one last time. “Weird setup you guys have out here. Where I’m from this shit is for kids.” She stepped into the house. Laird turned off the porch light to prevent anyone from mistaking the house for one participating in the festivities. It was already nine, anyway, and the store of fake quarter rolls had been exhausted.

“You want a cup of water or something?”

“Sure.” Lucette sat on the couch and took off her leather jacket, adjusted the rumpled sleeves of her Christian Death t-shirt while Laird poured from the tap in the kitchen.

“Thanks,” Lucette said when he returned. “And thanks for having me over. So, what’s the plan?”

“I figure a scary movie. You ever see *Night of the Creeps*?”

“No. What’s it about.”

“Parasitic slugs. It’s great.”

Upstairs, Anton seethed, his sweat tracing the outline of his new body across Laird’s comforter. He thought endlessly of the dream from the night before. The sounds of groans and laughter cut through the walls, while outside the night nagged at him through the open window. He clenched his teeth at the thought of Lucette buying into Laird’s scheme, at the sheer audacity of his brother trying to pass himself off as him.

Russell, still suspended from the ceiling, locked eyes with him and licked his mouth. Anton pulled at the headboard as hard as could, scrubbing the rope into the cheap particle board post, each jolt causing the frame to slide a few inches across the floor. With some effort, the right post snapped, and he began to untie himself. Being an Eagle Scout, Laird had made this particularly difficult. He pulled at the knots with his teeth and set himself free. Russell mewed down at him, and Anton took aim with the bedpost and threw it into the webbing, setting the cat free. He got out of bed, grabbed the post and sat bristling in the corner behind the doorway. Laird had everything. Laird could do everything. He got away with all of it. And he probably always would.

Downstairs, the movie was ending. Tom Atkins shuffled down the street on screen, smoldering and covered in burns. He stopped, his head split open, and from it flew more of the parasitic leeches the heroes thought they'd blown up. The aliens responsible swooped over the valleys that abutted the town, portentous, ready to clean house. There would no doubt be a sequel.

“That’s disgusting,” Lucette said as the credits began to roll.

“What did you think?”

“It was gross. And it tried too hard to be funny.”

“But it’s a classic. At least the special effects are good.”

“They looked like shit.”

“Hey, it’s pretty good for the eighties.”

“Well,” she said, scooting closer. “I like that you like it. It makes you seem less serious.”

“Yeah?” Laird could see what Anton was so in awe of. She was lovely in a rough sort of way, unlike the girls who’d written him the letters. He felt that there would always be something about her he would never know. They shut their eyes and leaned in close. A crash came from the kitchen and he pulled back, opening his eyes to find Russell darting around the house.

“I’ve gotta go to the bathroom,” he said.

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah, weak bladder. I’ll be back.”

He made his way up the stairs and pushed the cracked door of his bedroom open. Anton was not on the bed, and the rope lay unwound on the hardwood. He stepped in.

“Anton, you here, buddy? It’s your time. Everything downstairs is perfect.” Anton stood up from the corner and crept quietly behind his brother. “You just have to be fun and...” Anton lunged at him. The change in bodies had done little to dull Laird’s natural reflexes, and he turned in time to grab his brother. The two struggled, before finally Anton’s new body overpowered his old one. He overtook Laird and shoved him as hard as he could. Laird fell backward and hit the back of his head hard against the nightstand before sliding limp to the floor. Anton stood over him and saw the blood pooling under his head, his eyes large, pupils dilated, motionless, not even breathing. Anton fell beside him.

“Laird,” he shouted, shaking him as if her were only sleeping. His own image was reflected in the awful blankness of the dead’s eyes. The room tightened around them until it disappeared altogether, replaced by scenes from memory, as if his own life were flashing before him. The trophies. The letters. The knuckles. Then, the shared little

league games, the birthdays, the hugging when Mom and Dad fought, huddled under covers with a flashlight and Laird's comic books. These all receded and Anton was left there with the corpse of his old body, the one he could never return to. Russell trudged in and pawed at the puddle before lapping at it. Anton heard footsteps on the stairs and turned to the open doorway that Lucette now filled. She put her hand over her mouth and began to wretch.

"Lucette," Anton said. "I can explain!" But she was already bolting down the stairs and out the door. He ran after her and stopped on his porch in time to watch her put the bike into gear and peel off down the street.

"I thought we were punks," he screamed. "What happened to that?" He turned his attention to Mr. Franklin, standing in the middle of his lawn again, struggling to keep a kite in the air.

"Where was she off to in such a rush?" he said while reeling the kite in and collecting it off the lawn. He stepped onto the porch. "Say, you wouldn't happen to have one of those 1943 silver half dollars, would you? I need smokes, and I just love to see myself when I'm paying for something."

Anton grabbed the kite from his hands and screamed, "Get the fuck off my lawn!" Franklin turned and jumped, arched clear across the lawn and landed on the sidewalk on his tip-toes with a clap. He turned to face Anton and bowed with his right hand over his heart, the left extended to the ground, before taking off again.

"This is mine now," Anton yelled, brandishing the kite like a saber. "I'm keeping it!" He went back inside and into Laird's room. He stood over his former body, his brother no longer populating it, or anything. It all seemed such a waste. Anton felt awful,

but what could be done? His stomach began to growl. He eyed his form, spread out on the floor. The smell of blood had begun to coat the entire room. All Anton could think about was rare steak. Saliva collected at the corners of his mouth and dried. He had always been taught not to let things go to waste. He started with the fingers.

The clock chimed twelve. The adults were all lining up outside, and Anton felt compelled, finally, to walk with them. But something was missing. He had removed the bloody suit and worn it as his own, but he needed something else for it to qualify as a costume. He walked into the living room and found Lucette's leather jacket draped over the back of the couch. He slid it on and, to his surprise, it fit him well, aside for some tightness around the shoulders. He stepped out onto his stoop, his eyes on the procession and the makeshift buildings burning on each lawn save his own. The scent of lighter fluid and leaves and cardboard hung in the air, and he breathed in deeply, savoring it. A single low note was hummed in unison as each person, every zombie and phantom, every hippy and velvet-clad pimp, stared intently into the space between the shoulder blades of the person in front of them, calculating their bank balances. He buttoned Laird's suit coat and walked down the cement path into the street. He assumed his position at the tail of the line, intoned the note like everyone else. It took him a few tries before he could pitch his voice low enough.

A guy in front of him dressed as a sand creature turned his head and strained to make him out.

“What are you supposed to be?”

Anton grabbed at the collar of Lucette's jacket and flipped it up. The seams at the shoulders ripped.

"Leader of the pack."

The creature snorted and turned forward again. They walked on in single file until dawn, slowly removing their costumes in pieces to reveal the work clothes beneath.

Anton did the same until he stood clad only in his birthday suit. He couldn't shake how hungry he still was.

