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The University of Southern Mississippi

THINGS YOU CAN'T SEE

by

Alan Ellis Purdie

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

August 2015

ABSTRACT

THINGS YOU CAN'T SEE

by

Alan Ellis Purdie

August 2015

The following is a collection of short fiction exploring the human-dog relationship. The stories work to evade the sentimentality generally associated with fiction wherein pets or animals are featured, depicting instead the dramatic complications the canine has upon human relationship and interaction.

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2015

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A Dissertation
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of The University of Southern Mississippi
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for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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INTRODUCTION

OPEN WORLD, OPEN WOUND

In August of 2012, just before starting Ph.D. work in creative writing, I bought a dog in considerable ignorance. Though I'd grown up with dogs, I had never had sole responsibility for one. For the past several years, I'd walked my neighbors' dogs for them, the dogs bonding with me more than with their actual masters, and I figured it was time to get one of my own. Walking the dogs cleared my head and made me healthier. I also liked the companionship of the canine. That day in August, one of the shelter staff had shown me four different dogs in a fenced-in square of grass by the road, but I'd declined on each of them. The dogs he'd showed me seemed disinterested, or skittish, and by the time I'd passed on all four his manner had shifted from friendly and informative to annoyed. He gave up on me for other inquirers. Later, when I tracked him down to look at one last dog, he reluctantly eased open the pen, restrained the dog by its collar, and let me pet it a moment before closing the gate back and leaving once again. I stood in the hot, damp cinder block building, the late sun glaring outside the glass door. At each end of the hall, huge fans wasted themselves in the heat, dulling the sharp, constant barks from the pens. I had outstayed my welcome. In hindsight, sentimentality—something I diligently avoid when it comes to writing—had guided my expectations. Concerning fiction, sentimentality describes heavy-handed emotions on the page, lacking the work and thought of effective drama. Like sentimental fiction, I had wanted to walk in and connect with the right dog in seconds, but I had invested nothing in any of these canines. I had not earned the emotional response I sought—the primary difference between sentimentality and sentiment.

I had expected adopting a dog to be easy. I would show up, find the right fit of dog, and leave with it. The dog's love would cost me nothing. After a while, I admitted to myself that my reluctance wasn't so much due to the dogs as to myself. Flannery O'Connor, in a letter to Cecil Dawkins claims, "To expect too much is to have a sentimental view of life and this is a softness that ends in bitterness. Charity is hard and endures" (HB 308). Indeed, buying a dog meant exercising charity or care for the foreseeable future, and there at the shelter, faced with the reality of taking a dog home, my interest in compassion waned. My time and money, already in short supply as a graduate student, would be further compromised. If things didn't work out, I would end up that guy I ridiculed, the one who bought a dog only to get rid of it after a few weeks. I didn't want to resent the animal, didn't want my buying a dog to "end in bitterness" as O'Connor remarked. After a long time wandering the shelter, I finally accepted that as with much of our lives, dog-owning would be difficult, but it would be good. There would be times where I felt bitter, but working through that bitterness would lead to genuine sentiment for the animal. I left the shelter with a foxhound, Belladonna, went home and let my decision work on me.

While it may seem an unlikely fictional preoccupation, dogs and dog-owning proved abundant in terms of material for story. In becoming a dog owner myself, my life was in many respects displaced. My foxhound needed at least two-and-a-half to three hours of exercise a day, or her angst drove her to chewing things or bothering me while I tried to sleep. Thus, when I awoke in the morning, my first task was to give her an hour-long walk, around mid-day a trip to the dog park, and then before settling in at night,

another walk of forty-five minutes to an hour. The notion of doing things on my terms dissolved. My former life was displaced. This change in my life weighed heavily upon my fiction, as my characters, too, began dealing with displacement, be it physical, emotional, or both.

In “Someplace Safe,” Libby contends with her mother’s willful displacement upsetting her life. “Things You Can’t See” depicts Reid’s physical relocation because of his divorce, but also the impending upset of his brother Justin’s death by cystic fibrosis. Due to a poisonous rooming situation, the main character of “In the Way,” Clare, feels more distraught than at peace when she’s at home, and part of her distress is borne of having to displace her roommate John Henry upon telling him to move out. This connection between the characters was lost on me until I began doing research on the canine in American history.

Though my own life had been displaced by my canine, the canine itself has lived with dislocation on a greater scale. Mark Derr in *his A Dog’s History of America: How Our Best Friend Explored, Conquered, and Settled a Continent*, claims:

“by the middle of the nineteenth century, coincident with the ride of the Fancy in England and the United States, people began arguing that the time had come to ‘civilize’ the dog, to make it suitable by virtue of its pedigree, bearing, and behavior for proper urban bourgeois society. . . . In effect the dog came to embody the conflict between city and country, rich and poor, white and black, civilization and the wild, to assume an ambiguous position as an intermediary between two worlds” (xii).

In several of my stories, the dogs respond instinctively to their own dislocation. Defying the confines of our modern world, the dogs in these stories escape, hunt at inopportune times, thrash their indoor boundaries, and suffer due to confinement. This defiance increases the already-tense circumstances of each story, and, in most cases, the protagonists experience revelation in responding to the canine's acting out. In "He Belonged to Someone," Ezrin Molette finds a retired racing hound. Displaced by his mother's death and having been roommates with his estranged stepfather, Ezrin studies the Bible and theology in hopes of discovering that he means something to God if no one else. Later in the story, Ezrin comes to liken the tattoo in the dog's ear with the mark of Cain in the book of Genesis. Cain, though fallen from his own actions and forced to move through the world in solitude, still belongs to someone. In this scene, Ezrin finds something akin to hope despite his displacement. In this way the dogs affect the characters, trying their patience and time, but also allowing them to see their predicament from a different angle.

Though trite in much of its mainstream exploration, my dog-owning proved rife with fictional possibility, possibility usually ignored in sentimental fiction. With these pieces, I wanted to include the dog in the relative comfort of modern life but focus also on the ways in which owning a canine causes trouble in the day-to-day. In Derr's words, "People seeking to keep their dogs exercised in a world of diminishing public open space frequently clash with their human opposites" (xii). Derr's claim rings true. On more than one occasion, hostility arose between myself and other persons due to my dog-walking. One morning, a police officer hassled me after someone called complaining of

a stranger on their property. Since I was nearest the residence and the sole person walking the street, the officer assumed I was the offender. Another time as I crossed through an apartment complex that forbid pets, a manager sent a large, coarse tenant to threaten me off the property. It seemed some persons resented me simply for owning a dog. While I knew the dog would open my world to new tasks and people, I had not anticipated that this open world would be, in so many cases, wounding. The stuff of sentimental fiction it was not.

Taking writing courses for the last six years, I have been indoctrinated with the idea that only trouble is interesting. My trouble with the dog started with much more than the cartoon complaints of bad television and movies: a dog-eaten wallet would have been a blessing. For the first six months, the poor dog was wracked with stomach issues. Her suffering was continuous. She could keep little down and woke often in the night, getting sick in the back yard. We were at the vet all the time, once a month, sometimes more, with visits to the E-Vet on the weekends. Most of the difficulties, however, came from the aforementioned dog walking, from being, simply, someone out in the world.

A few times, the dog and I passed houses where the crying, shouts, and crashes left no impression but domestic abuse, and I would call the police and wait there in the dark until their blue lights washed over the street. Afterward, I would wonder if I had done the wrong thing, if I should have just knocked on the door myself and spared them the cops. Other times, we passed houses where the residents were in poor health.

A few houses down, a man in his late eighties named Mr. Ball was living with cancer. He was tall, limbs knotty and bruised, a thin wisp of hair around his head. He

would sit on his porch and smoke cigars, his Jack Russell, Big Boy, coming to the edge of the yard to see us but going no further. Before long, our conversations went from small talk in passing to my coming inside any time and checking on him, making sure his dog was indoors by day's end. When he was put on hospice care, his family showed up more often, and I withdrew some, unable to stomach his deterioration. When he finally passed, I asked his family gathered at his home what happened to Big Boy. His daughter informed me he was given to the humane society. I was disappointed. She'd given up a dog who'd stuck it out by her father in his final days. These experiences shaped my fictional approach for the next three years. Dog owning and the observation of dog owners became a compelling fictional subject, but I would have to work hard to avoid trite and sentimental storytelling.

To avoid sentimental fiction, I sought out writers who had woven the canine into their work in a literary sense. One such writer was Brad Watson, whose collection *Last Days of the Dog-Men* made me think more deeply about my own stories. At least one dog makes an appearance in every story in Watson's collection, and each story explores a different angle of the human-dog relationship. In the title story of the book, a couple's marriage is falling apart. The narrator has a beloved dog, an ailing greyhound named Spike, and when the marriage goes from bad to worse, the narrator's wife, Lois, puts Spike down without her husband's permission.

Watson's story helped me think about fiction and sentimentality. While Watson writes in such a way that the dog's loss is felt, the dog's death is peripheral event. The story's front-and-center is the disintegrating marriage, the euthanized dog just one of

what author Robert Boswell calls narrative spandrels. In his *The Half-Known World*, Boswell refers to O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find" to illustrate narrative spandrels. In O'Connor's story, the grandmother sneaks her cat into the car before a road trip. Boswell argues, "The act embodies the selfishness and self-serving dishonesty of the old woman," thus building character and doing dramatic work on the page (51). Later in the story, "the cat's escape precipitates the accident that leads to the story's astonishing conclusion" (Boswell 51). As such, the cat's presence as well as the ensuing action feels organic to the story rather than heavy-handed or out-of-place. Given Watson's material, a lesser writer would have made the euthanization the core of the story, by-passing any artful characterization and putting all effort into a present scene at the vet's office, describing the process of putting the dog to sleep. In this version, the writer would impress upon the reader the dead canine as metaphor for the couple's broken marriage, ending the piece. In such a version, however, the literary reader feels nothing, as she knows nothing about these people or what the dog means to them. Watson, however, crafts the story in a more artful way. Rather than ending the story when the dog dies, Watson brings the characters together after a period of separation, and then the wife remembers what happened at the vet's, the deceased dog facilitating characterization:

"I missed you," she said. She shook her head. "I sure as hell didn't want to."

"Well," I said. "I know." Anger over Spike rose in me then, but I held my tongue. "I missed you, too," I said. She looked at me with anger and desire. . . .

We lay on our backs. The sky was empty. It was all we could see with the grass so high around us. We didn't talk for a while, and then Lois began to tell me what had happened at the vet's. She told me how she'd held Spike while the vet gave him the injection.

"I guess he just thought he was getting more shots," she said. "Like when I first took him in." . . .

She was crying as she told me this.

"He laid down his head and closed his eyes," she said. "And then, with my hands on him like that, I tried to pull him back to me. Back to us." She said, No, Spike, don't go. She pleaded with him not to die. The vet was upset and said some words to her and left the room in anger, left her alone in her grief. And when it was over, she had a sense of not knowing where she was for a moment. Sitting on the floor in there alone with the strong smell of flea killer and antiseptic, and the white of the floor and walls and the stainless steel of the examination table where Spike had died and where he lay now, and in that moment he was everything she had ever loved.

She drained the beer can, wiping her eyes. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I just wanted to hurt you. I didn't realize how much it would hurt me."

She shook her head.

"And now I can't forgive you," she said. "Or me." (33-4)

While this scene is rife with emotion, Watson steers the story into sentiment rather than sentimentality. The scene arrives after eighteen pages that build both character and dramatic tension unrelated to the dog's death, thus rendering the euthanized dog powerful without being heavy-handed, the death feeling natural but not predictable. Thus, Watson earns the emotional response of his readers because of his interest in his people rather than the dog's death alone. The story is more than mere scaffolding for pain, begging for the reader's emotional response. His well-wrought characters grapple with pain, making the reader feel their pain. Like Watson, I wanted to incorporate dogs into my stories to spur drama and build characterization without slipping into sentimentality.

I believe my title piece, "Things You Can't See," best achieves this end. The story is about Reid, a divorced, working-class father who has moved in with his brother Justin, who suffers from cystic fibrosis. Justin, beat with disease, is often short and impatient with others, necessarily selfish. Justin owns a blue heeler named Pepper, and the dog serves to reveal Justin's nuanced nature: though self-absorbed by his slow decline, Justin cares deeply for the animal. In one scene, Justin gets sick and coughs infection into Pepper's dog bed. Reid tells him it's fine, the bed will be washed, but in a weak rage, Justin orders "the fucking bed" thrown away. He will not have his dog sleeping where he was sick. I wanted Justin to come across as rough, bitter, but I also wanted him to have heart. The dog works to reveal Justin's heart but also that of Reid and the other characters.

Later in the story, desperate for his brother's healing, Reid convinces Justin to go with him to a cookout hosted by a charismatic church. Reid meets some of the church members on his own early in the story, one of which is a girl, Stacy, whose faith strikes him as beautiful. Reid tells Stacy about Justin's condition, who in turn tells members of her church, and he brings Justin to the cookout hoping for a healing. In addition to the dog, I wanted the presence of Christianity to complicate the piece. Like O'Connor, I want my fiction to deal with the struggle of Christian faith rather than attempt to convince others of Christianity's legitimacy. Similar to my love for dogs despite all hardship, my Christian faith appears ingrained regardless of all disappointment, but as with sentimental fiction, I avoid sentimental faith. For me, faith is only compelling when it faces the world head-on, when it's riddled with doubt. Like Reid, I've dealt with the disappointment of prayers going unanswered but still find the Christian story compelling, less so as a religion than as an attitude—things are not okay, but one day they will be. My intention with "Things You Can't See" is to show a character finding an attitude closer to faith due to the trouble he endures. The literary reader, however, will only buy Reid's shift if Reid breathes on the page and if the change is a narrative spandrel as opposed to didacticism.

Like dogs in fiction, Christianity in fiction typically leans towards the sentimental. Christian fiction often seeks the emotional response from the reader at the expense of original characters, living dialogue, and strong sentences. Thus, Christian fiction appears more interested in winning the convert than creating a compelling work of art. Forget creating a work of art. Taking on both dogs and Christianity in my stories, I

wanted to challenge myself to handle the material well enough to move the literary reader, avoiding cliché or pat scenes. This choice meant exploring Christianity and trouble, dogs and trouble, as only trouble is interesting. This is likely why so many of the characters in these stories deal with chronic or terminal affliction. Christ will not break in to save the day on human terms. When the church fails to heal Justin, Reid must deal with his attraction to both Stacy and her faith, while also accepting faith's limitations. When Pepper gets lost in the woods at the cookout, Reid's characterization is brought to light, as he takes his exhausted brother home, and with Stacy, searches until finding the dog. Finding the dog becomes more important than a miracle, as Reid feels Justin will die sooner of despair without Pepper.

Prompted by my brooding over Mr. Ball, my piece "A Light On a Stand" uses the dog to bring two unlikely persons into conversation. The story is told by an unnamed narrator, who, due to a serious accident, lives a sedentary existence. His canine companion is a boxer mutt, a breed suited for active persons, but because of his owner's injuries, the dog lives a bored life indoors, often causing disturbance. One such uproar occurs whenever the narrator's neighbor, a young and good-looking college kid, passes the narrator's house walking his own dog. In the story, the narrator recognizes that the kid's passing by reminds him of his own declining health. Like Watson's work, I wanted the story to include dogs, but for the dogs to reveal something about the character. "A Light On a Stand" works to show that a dog is a window into its owner's life. The young man's dog looks like a spry deer, while the narrator's disability forces his dog into a life of monotony and occasional outburst.

Like Watson's, my stories needed to approach different angles of dog owning. After months of writing dog-related stories, however, workshop showed me that my fiction was getting repetitive. There were too many lost or unruly dogs on the page, too many similar protagonists. I was encouraged to read David Vann's collection *Legend of a Suicide*, a book of interrelated stories centering around the suicide of the main character's father. Like dogs and Christianity, suicide is also a theme often used poorly in fiction. As with Watson's collection, Vann's stories explore the resonance of the same subject through different perspectives and circumstances. Vann's protagonist, Roy Fenn, spends several stories recalling memories of his father that weigh heavily on him. Other stories show him in his present life, returning to his hometown and speaking with those who knew his father in an attempt to better understand the suicide. The collection helped me in revising my drafts, forcing me to consider different fictional themes and approaches to dogs and dog owning. Aside from causing the characters trouble, I wanted the dogs to speak something into their existence, to be revelatory. "Someplace Safe," the first story I wrote after starting Ph.D. work, involves Libby, whose mother is unhappy in her marriage and keeps disappearing for months at a time. Libby works for a veterinarian and has a pregnant dog in her care. Initially, I ended the story with the dog's having puppies, and due to freezing weather, their dying in the cold. Reading Vann's collection, I realized that dealing with the death of anything in a story is likely best approached when it's a peripheral event bearing down on the main character. The death of the puppies at the story's end felt too heavy-handed, too easy, and ultimately sentimental. My workshop instructor pointed out that the puppies could in some way serve to make Libby

think more deeply about her relationship with her missing mother, and after reading Vann's collection, I felt that the puppies would better serve the story if they survived despite the weather, because of the mother dog, making Libby feel she had never had the same sort of protection, and deciding that she'd have to take care of herself, be her own parent. All of my revisions of the stories in this collection have followed suit, searching for ways to gain a new perspective on dog-owning and dog-owners, causing the emotional shift in the character to distinguish itself from the other stories.

In adopting a dog in August of 2012, I opened my world to greater difficulty, but also greater beauty and mystery. In discussing her Catholic faith and her fiction, O'Connor writes in "The Church and the Fiction Writer," "When fiction is made according to its nature, it should reinforce our sense of the supernatural by grounding it in concrete, observable reality. If the writer uses his eyes in the real security of his Faith, he will be obliged to use them honestly, and his sense of mystery, and acceptance of it, will be increased" (MM 148). Owning my dog put me into the physical world in a manner I had not yet experienced, and it was not all innocence and bliss. Many days, just the opposite. The stories in this dissertation are meditations on the observable reality brought about by my owning a dog: a reality of both beauty and wounds. My hope is that the beauty and wounds are genuine, that they genuinely earn the reader's emotional response.

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SOMEPLACE SAFE

Libby Cullen awoke and sat up. Her jacket fell from her left shoulder, and she rubbed sleep from her eyes. Footsteps came down the tiled hallway, and after a moment her father Tye and the officer stood on the other side of her cell. She tried remembering the policeman's name, but could not. He was a member of her father's church; she knew that, and that was why she was getting to go home. No charges. Her father stared in at her while the officer unlocked the door. "Your dad's here, Libby—Miss Cullen," the officer said. He opened the door and stood to the side. "Don't forget what I said: quit worrying about what you can't control. Get some rest, and I mean it—you drive that car home and then you stay off the road a while."

Libby nodded and stood. She slid her arms into her jacket, pushed the blonde strands from her eyes and walked out. Without speaking, her father walked ahead of her. Libby followed him to the front of the station, and he gave a nod to the woman at the desk before opening and holding the door for Libby. She walked out into the icy drear. Wind blew in bitter bursts and cars on the road swished through a cold mist. Libby pulled her hood over her head and ducked into the passenger side of her father's Taurus. Once Tye was inside the car he cranked the engine, turned the heat on high. He sat there for a long minute, letting the transmission idle. He wore a green jacket, a button-up tucked into his slacks, and dark brown dress shoes. His face was clean-shaven, and his salt and pepper hair was cut short and combed. He looked at Libby. "Do you have money for the impound?"

Libby shook her head. “Jim owes me a check,” she said. “That’s where I was going when I fell asleep. If you want to take me by there first—”

He held a hand up and then rested an elbow on the steering wheel, squeezing the bridge of his nose. “I know why you’re not sleeping, Lib. What I don’t get is why you won’t do anything about it.”

“She’s not your mom, and I guess I’m the only one that knows you’ve wanted a divorce for years. Your congregation is blind.”

“Libby, there’s no divorce to get. Elaine had an affair, ending our marriage, and now she’s run off and won’t face what she’s done. You can’t live like this, you could have been killed this morning. Maybe it’s time to move.”

Libby did not want to move again. She loved her parents’ home, where she’d grown up, and had moved back to Liona to be near them. Libby had not seen it coming when her mother had an affair with Justin Lanclos, a member of her father’s church and a client her mother had been counseling. After getting caught, Elaine wanted Tye’s forgiveness and begged him to work things out, and though he forgave her, he told her their marriage was over. The first time she disappeared had lasted three weeks. His congregation did not encourage him to get a divorce, but they promised him that if he did, they would not fire him. Libby did not want to see her family split up. Her mother did not either, and instead of sticking around to sign the divorce papers, she left again, and had now been gone for two months.

Libby shook her head. She was thirty-two, and did not know why she felt so attached to the things of her childhood.

The windshield wipers squelched the glass. Tye put the car in reverse and backed out into the road. “You can pay me back for the impound later,” he said. “You’re a grown woman, Lib, you’ve got to get it together. For your and my sake.”

“The only reason Mom’s not here is because you won’t forgive her.”

“I’ve forgiven her, Libby—”

“Let her come home, then.” Libby put her head against the window. The cold glass felt good where her head had come down hard on the steering wheel. She tried remembering what happened, but could not recall much. Just the closing of her eyes, then a start: her car tilted in a ditch by the roadside, the officer opening her door and asking if she was all right.

“If she wants the house she can have it,” Tye said.

Libby flipped the visor down and slid the mirror open, studied the knot over her right eye. From above her brow and down into her eyelid, the skin was welted and bruised. “She doesn’t want the house without you,” Libby said. “She wants home.”

Tye kept his eyes on the road. His face tightened and he took a breath.

Libby leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes.

Libby’s boss, Jim Leland, ran his veterinary clinic from his home, Leland Ranch. The ranch was a few miles north of the beach, off of I-90, and he treated larger animals like horses as well as house pets. For as long as she had been alive, horses were a marvel to Libby. They spoke to her of the eternal, and whenever her father preached on the story of Elijah, Libby imagined the fiery chariot led by two flaming roans, their ears blue like

the tongues of fire on her grandparents' gas stove, galloping out of the sky to carry Elijah someplace safe. The first horse she considered her own came at the age of twelve: Dusty, a blue roan that belonged to her grandfather and stayed on his land. Weekends, she was with the horse, and more than a few times, Libby cut class and walked the five miles to her grandfather's, crossing through the woods straight to the stables to see Dusty. Libby knew after the horse died the only way to cope was to stay around horses the rest of her days. Until her mother left, this had been true for any hurt, but now not even the horses kept her pain at bay, and of late it showed.

Libby walked into the stables and stood next to the tool cart.

"You're late," Jim said. He threw a glance at her over his shoulder, noticed her eye and then turned all the way around. "What happened to you?" he said. He stood and walked over to her. Over his jeans Jim wore a farrier apron, stained and worn. He was fifty-eight and stocky with white brushstrokes through his hair at the temples. Beside him stood Lefty, a Saddlebred Pinto. The horse showed his teeth, and then clicked them, lifting his front left foot. When Jim ignored him, Lefty clicked his teeth again. "I know it, I know it," said Jim. "Hang on we're getting you a new shoe."

Libby opened a drawer on the cart and handed him the pick. "Just an accident," she said. "Nothing major."

He threw the pick behind him by the stand. "Lib, you should've called me. What are you even doing here? Go home, get in the bed."

"I didn't want to let you down," she said. Lately, she had been forgetting things, basic things of her work routine. She had let the horses' water freeze over last week, and

though Libby knew the threat to the horses' health, Jim gave her a long talk about the risk of colic. He had not made much of her mistakes, but she could tell he was losing patience.

“You need time off. That's not letting me down, it's just the facts.”

They stood just inside the opening of the stables that looked out onto the wheat-colored pasture, grey with falling mist. A cold gust blustered into the entrance, rattling the tin roof. Water dripped from the eaves and onto Libby's shoulder. She shuffled further into the stables beside Jim. “Seems like the horses used to make things all right,” Libby said. “Now, nothing does.”

Jim was back beside the horse, and he crouched down and took up the pick. He put Lefty's hoof on the stand and scraped his lamina clean. Black dirt fell away from the hoof. Libby liked watching Jim shoe the horses, liked the dead layers falling from the horses' feet, the milk white of the inner wall after being filed. She leaned against the tool cart, waiting for him to speak. His silence meant he was thinking, and she worried it was about firing her.

He picked up the rasp next to his boot and with the file side stroked the bottom of Lefty's hoof. The horse snorted two plumes of breath, and the steam spun off and thinned in the air. “The job will be here,” he said. “Do what you need to do. Come back tonight though after I'm gone and check on things. Make sure Kansas has what she needs.” Kansas, like Libby's dog Wrigley, was a Border Collie, and Jim had bred them. He'd become interested in sheep, and he wanted the Borders around to keep the coyotes away. Kansas's puppies were due any day.

“Sometimes I think I should head out, too. Mom didn’t leave for nothing.”

“Don’t do that,” Jim said. “Your dad needs you here. I need you here.”

“My dad needs a divorce so he can date Sally Burt,” Libby said.

Jim tossed the rasp into the cart and it pinged into the other tools. “You don’t know that.”

“I’ve guessed as much,” she said. Libby moved further into the stables. “Sally’s been by a good bit since Mom left, always with other people, she’d never do so alone. That’d be too obvious.”

“Hand me that nipper would you?” Jim said.

Libby took hold of one of the handles and passed him the tool.

“Those are the tongs, Lib; I need the nipper.”

“Oh,” she said. She ducked down and rummaged through the bottom drawer.

“Libby, it’s up top,” Jim said.

She took them down and passed them behind her. “I’m sorry, Jim.”

He continued working on the hoof, nodded and said, “You’re free to go. Get back in the bed.”

She gave his shoulder a squeeze, then turned and walked out, bracing herself in the mist.

After Tye caught her with Justin Lanclos, he allowed Elaine to stay at their home under the condition she worked towards their divorce: he would give her time to pack her things and find another place to live. Libby wanted him to reconsider.

That was months ago. One day during that time Libby pointed the car down the gravel driveway. The house was pushed back from the road and stood behind a copse of beech trees. The sun turned the windshield a bleached gold, and Libby slowed, knowing what came next: barely visible, her father's Spitz, Moses, crossed through the glare and up to the house to wait for her to park. She did not want her parents torn apart, to lose the home she had loved her whole life. Once out of the light, Libby parked the car, and by the garage the dog stood next to her mother's pale blue 1969 Simca: her mother under the hood. She walked over. Her mother stared into the guts of the vehicle, a manual open beside her, and her right hand working something down by the engine. Libby's grandfather had been an auto mechanic, and he had taught Elaine to be useful with her hands. Elaine liked Cody because the two of them could talk cars, and she went to him whenever she was stumped by something on the Simca. The two of them would meet at El Sombrero, the Mexican restaurant across the street from Cody's shop, and they would look at the car together in the parking lot while eating burritos from to-go boxes. Her mother's dark hair was up in a ponytail and she wore a t-shirt, streaked here and there with grime, jeans and the worn out boots she put on whenever working in the yard or on the car. The Simca was her hobby, and seeing the hood up and the dog beside her mother was a comfort, a thing she had not seen for several weeks as Elaine had left.

"Anything good today?" Libby said.

Her mother held a pencil in her mouth which she took out, made a mark on the manual, and then placed it behind her ear. "Just procrastinating," she said. "I don't know why I came back."

“What are you talking about?” Libby said. “You came back to me.”

“Lib, you know what I mean,” Elaine said.

“No, I don’t know what you mean,” Libby said. “You cheat on Dad and then run out, no call no nothing, and you come back disappointed you’re not the Prodigal Son?”

“Libby, I didn’t mean that; all I meant was that he’s not glad I’m here, and neither is his church. It’s like people only wanted me to come home so they could tell me to pack my bags.”

Libby slid down the car, resting her back against the clean chrome of the hub cap.

“What did you think would happen?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t think anything. I’d hoped to give everyone enough space to forgive me.”

“If you wanted that,” Libby said, “You should have told us where you were going instead of disappearing. What’d you, *want* us sick over you? And you want forgiveness?” She turned, went through the garage and into the house. The living room led to the back porch, and out there, Tye sat in a chair on the deck.

“What is your problem?” Libby said from the back door.

Tye looked up sideways, meeting her eye from the corner of his own. “Elizabeth, don’t start,” he said.

“I get it,” she said. “You think I don’t know about you and Sally Burt?”

“Am I the one who had an affair?” Tye said.

“At least Mom was honest, at least she was upfront. You want a life with Sally more than the home you’ve made?”

Tye got to his feet. “Your mother is the one who slept with Justin Lanclos, and you’re questioning my faithfulness to her? Get out,” he said.

“Tye,” Elaine said. She stood in the doorway. “You’re kicking me out, not our daughter.”

“She doesn’t live here,” Tye said.

Libby broke in: “I never said—”

“You’ve said enough,” Tye said.

“You think I don’t forgive you for Sally?” Elaine said.

“Forgive me what? I haven’t done anything,” Tye said.

“Not that anyone can see,” Libby said. “You told me nothing was private, not until you’re married. That’s what you’ve taught everyone. So admit it; you, like everyone, want something other than what you’re supposed to.”

“Last I checked you weren’t a part of my church. You don’t hold me accountable. It doesn’t matter, anyway. Your mother dissolved this marriage before any of that could be dealt with. It’s over. Done.”

Libby stood looking at her mother. Elaine shrugged in the doorway. Libby looked around for something to explain what felt like retribution, for something else to occur that hurt, that made things unlike how she wanted them. She put a palm to her eye and went around the side of the house and to her car.

Libby passed through Gulfport and into Pass Christian, and after a while took a left off the interstate into Allen’s—the auto repair shop Cody managed. Libby parked the

car and switched it off. The shop had its back to the water and Libby sat in the car a few minutes, watching the ocean bleed into the mist. She had the visor flipped down and the mirror open, studying herself, when a long and loud blaring occurred from the left bay of the shop: Cody leaning into the driver's side of a Chrysler testing the horn. He pressed a button near him and the Chrysler rose until it was above him. A lean kid in his thirties, he wore navy blue slacks, Converse shoes, and a grey work shirt. His long brown hair stopped at his shoulder blades. Libby liked his eyes most; they were green like the broken bottle glass she'd retrieved from Siwell Creek as a child—her mother always alongside her, making sure the glass never dug into Libby's soft, sodden palms—and they sustained her belief that things held dear somehow or another found a way to reemerge, and never really disappeared. He turned, and seeing her, made his way toward her car.

Libby rolled down the window and when he reached her he leaned in and kissed her on the mouth. He eyed her, kissed her again, and when he drew back she stared at the green of his irises. For a moment she felt as though Dusty could walk up beside her, and she could almost hear the click of steel on stone, the champ of his teeth. "I just put on a fresh pot of coffee for you," Cody said. "You should come in and get some, get out of the cold." He glanced at his watch. "I've got to get back in there another few." The mist had formed a down in his hair and he passed a hand through it and turned to go back inside. Libby got out and followed. In the waiting area the coffee pot was stationed next to the small, box television beside the door to the restroom. Libby coasted over to the pot and tipped the half-inch left into a Styrofoam cup. Tapped in some creamer. To stir, she

used her car key. She walked over to the window and stared out at the road, listening to the swish of tires on asphalt, and took a sip of the hot coffee. I should be doing something, she thought. She watched Cody a moment and then looked back out at the road. Across the street on the sidewalk a woman walked under an umbrella, wearing jeans and a hooded jacket with long dark tendrils of hair falling out of the hood—like her mother's. Something in the woman's gait reminded Libby of Elaine, and when the woman turned towards Taco Town, Libby knew her mother was there in front of her.

Libby let the coffee fall from her hand and moved towards the entrance and pushed past the glass into the rain. Evening had begun to set and Libby kept her eyes on the woman, certain that if her sight fell elsewhere then her mother would disappear, walk back into whatever world she'd left them for, like sand through her fingers. Libby ran ahead, closing the distance between them, when there was a screech on the wet asphalt and her legs came out from under her. The side of her face hit the road hard, and there was white blinding light, the bright switch of stoplights against the wet street. When she opened her eyes and looked up rain fell softly through the headlights next to her, and then there were hands scooping her up by the underarms. She smelled Cody.

In the waiting area at the shop, the two paramedics tried convincing Libby to go in the ambulance, but she did not budge. "Look," she said, "I'm fine, really, just a tumble in the road."

One of them, Dan he said his name was, took her blood pressure. "I'd go ahead and let them check you out, make sure there's no internal injuries."

The other paramedic held her wrist for a pulse. “She has good vitals. We can’t make you do anything, but monitor yourself. I’m with him; I’d go now if I were you, but it’s your call.”

Libby looked at Cody. He shrugged with his eyes. “Thanks guys. I’ll make sure she’s taken care of, hopefully we won’t need to go by the ER.” The paramedics packed up their gear and got back into the ambulance, pulled out of the parking lot and onto the road.

Cody slid down off the counter and faced Libby. “What the hell really happened out there?” he said.

“I thought I saw Mom,” Libby said.

“You thought you saw Mom?”

“I thought I saw Mom, heading into El Sombrero. I mean it makes sense doesn’t it?”

“Lib, skip the ER if you want, but you should see someone. Your mom’s done some damage this go around.”

“It’s not all her fault. Don’t talk about her like that. I just want her to come home, I thought she had.”

Cody walked to where she was seated and fell in beside her, pulling his hair back and then letting it fall. He sighed. “You need to eat something, and then go to bed. You should stay with me tonight. Leave your car here, we’ll get it in the morning.”

Libby remembered Kansas.

She left Cody behind and got in the car, turned the engine over once more and steered the car out of the lot and onto the road, headed north. After several miles, the lights of the coast were behind her. The stars appeared, strewn across the sky. The moon gave off a cold, pale light, and there were the dark figures of cows lying about in the pastures she moved past.

Ahead, Jim's house stood at the crest of a hill, and a couple of windows on the second floor showed light. The car dipped and jarred moving toward the house. Once out of the car she went up the steps and unlocked the door to Kansas's room. The dog was not there, and she opened the door that led into the house and called. When Kansas did not come, Libby went around to the back of the house to the stables. They were dark. Nothing but the horses getting to their feet as she approached. "No, boys," she said. "Go back to sleep." She stuck her hand over the stall door and let Lefty breathe onto her fingers. The horse smelled sweet, and his breath was hot. She brought up her cell and called Jim.

"Hey, Liz," he said.

"I'm at the ranch. I don't know where Kansas is."

"Check the far right stall. She was scratching around in there earlier, before I brought her inside. Those pups will freeze, Libby."

She walked to the far end of the stables and opened the last gate on the right. Kansas licked at the pups, letting out a whine with every few strokes. She gave Libby an uncertain look. In the moonlight the breath steamed from her mouth. The stables were dark and whether or not the pups moved or had a heartbeat, Libby did not know. She

figured they did: the warmth of that tongue, the shelter of mother. Maybe somewhere inside herself, she had something like that. Something that was enough.

THINGS YOU CAN'T SEE

In the early gloom, up on an elbow, Reid listened from his bed hoping the coughing would cease. He felt afraid. His brother Justin struggled in the next room—his low, scraping cough cutting through the wall between their rooms. Justin's dog, Pepper, barked. His brother had been burdened off and on for months with a lung infection after he'd fallen out of their fishing boat into Lake Trevor and taken a breath of water. Flare-ups of his cystic fibrosis had been a constant. He'd recovered slowly, and only in the last week had finally gotten back to tuning and playing his guitar, talking with a voice less hoarse and restrained.

Reid got up and pushed his sheets back, swung his feet to the floor and crossed the room. The floor boomed under his feet: foundation problems he'd yet to take care of. He opened his door, and in the hall his daughter Merrill stood in her doorway. Her light brown hair was messy, sharp shoulders jutting through a long, light-yellow t-shirt. She pressed her lips together and looked away from him.

Reid held up a hand as he opened Justin's door, mouthed "I got it" to his daughter.

His brother looked up at him as he entered the room, turned over and coughed into his mattress. Justin wore a patchy beard. He'd begun to sweat and his black hair was matted to his forehead and glistening dully.

"Easy, easy," Reid said. He led the dog by her collar down off the bed. "Turn over, hey," he said to his brother, tugging at his shoulder. Reid felt something relax in his brother's bones, a weakening of resistance that calmed him in return. He placed a

pillow under his brother's abdomen, and with cupped hands, massaged just below Justin's shoulder blades on either side of the spine. The spine felt somewhat ridged and brittle, like an old cat's. Reid moved his laced hands along Justin's back, a sound like the pop of a tennis ball. "Just like she taught us—breathe and cough," he said. He did this for several minutes. He closed his eyes and felt fatigue settle in the sockets, in his shoulders. Felt it lessen the pressure he'd been applying on his brother. Sleep was all he had wanted this morning after an evening spent in training at his job. He'd just taken a position at a company that sold food processors, and when he wasn't answering phones for customer service, he packed and then loaded machines into trucks or did the receiving for defective merchandise. His body had begun tilting forward in sleep, when Justin's coughing tore him awake. A different cough this time, the one Reid was hoping for. He searched over the room. Beside the door was an empty trashcan. No liner. "Merrill," Reid called. When he heard her voice he told her to bring a liner. Coughs wracked his brother's body.

Before she could return, Justin began to force the junk from his lungs. Reid stepped away, coaxed Pepper up off her bed and then slid the bed across the floor towards Justin. His brother shook his head, but then gave in, holding his head over the dog bed until he'd coughed up all he could. When he was done he lay back, eyes watery, taking whistling breaths.

Merrill ran in with the liner, stood a moment. "Buck short," she said.

Reid shrugged, rolled his eyes. The dog bed would have to be washed, and he wasn't sure the outer cover was removable, washer friendly. The possibility he'd have to scrub it himself made him weary.

“Sorry I woke you—both of you,” Justin said.

Reid sat down at the end of the bed, rubbed his eyes. He needed a shower. “It’s fine,” he said. “We got any upholstery cleaner?”

“Of course,” Justin said. Justin worked at an auto detailing shop, and there was a steady supply of car products around the house: wax, jugs of ocean-blue soap, wipes that made a dashboard glare. “I’ll take care of that,” he waved down toward the dog bed.

Reid nodded, relieved. “We need to check your breathing,” he said. Merrill left the room. He waited for his brother to sit up on his own, and when he did not, he shuffled over and pulled him up by one arm. Did he expect to be helped with every little thing? Sometimes Reid felt he needed some help, needed more people around. They spent too much time in this house, went too long just the two of them, the three of them on weekends when Merrill was around.

Reid watched his brother. Justin looked beat, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. He wore a faded black t-shirt with the front pocket unraveling and cut-off shorts. Merrill returned with a big cup of water from which Justin sipped. She’d brought the spirometer from the kitchen as well: a mouthpiece and long tube attached to an encased piston. It measured Justin’s inhalations.

“Throw that fucking bed away,” Justin said.

Reid said, “We’ll take care of the bed,” adjusting the target pointer on the spirometer to the level he wanted his brother to reach.

“I mean do it now. Merrill—now.” He motioned toward the dog bed.

Merrill rolled her eyes. Her shoulders slackened and she let herself stagger to the dog bed, feet hitting the floor hard.

“What are you rolling your eyes for?” Justin said.

“Justin—,” Reid waved a hand. “Merr, I got the bed. Go back to sleep.”

Merrill turned from the bed, ruffling her hair. “Like I could,” she said, leaving the room.

His brother inhaled on the spirometer. He kept the ball in the air about the same as he’d done all year, but no better, struggling to meet the level on the target pointer.

Pepper watched from the hall. When Justin was done, he lay back on the bed.

“Get up, let’s go get something to eat. You need some protein,” Reid said.

The three of them washed up and then drove out to Pass Christian for Japanese take-out. They piled back into the car with their clamshell boxes of chicken and shrimp, fried rice and small containers of pink sauce. They drove to the beach and parked. Reid killed the engine but left the radio on, rolled down all the windows. While they were eating, a song by the Counting Crows came on, one Reid remembered from the late 90s, “Angels of Silence” or something like that, he couldn’t remember for sure. Justin reached over and turned the volume up a bit too high: something he did when his ears were stuffy and deafened some. “Down a little,” Reid said, turning the knob left. He dipped a shrimp in pink sauce and brought it to his mouth.

The sky was still overcast and hot breeze blew into the car, threatening rain. The water out in the gulf was choppy and white. Reid punched the button set to NPR, to hear the weather report.

“Put that back. I fucking love that song,” Justin said.

“All right, putting it back,” Reid said. He grinned and swapped it to a local station, the one that played right wing commentary during the week, Baptist sermons on Sunday. A voice came through the speakers: “You’re asking me, ‘How come the world has such a hold on my child?’”

“We’re missing the rest of the song,” Justin said. He reached over and Reid batted his hand down.

“Just listen, sometimes the guy says something interesting.”

“God never got a hold of you, that’s why,” the preacher said. “You’d rather watch TV. You can’t make it here in the morning, but you can sit in a deer stand. I have people tell me, ‘Well, I don’t feel good that’s why I don’t make it to church.’ But you can suck those cigarettes. You feel good enough to do that.”

“He’s got us on all counts,” Reid said. “Swap deer stand for boat.”

“Speak for yourself,” Merrill said, her mouth full of fried rice. “I don’t smoke or watch TV.”

“You’re answerable just for hanging out with us,” Justin said. “I’ve heard this one before. Pretty soon he’s going to talk about Lot. You know—camped beside Sodom and Gomorrah. Then he moved in. Give it time, Merr.”

His daughter shrugged. “How else am I going to get lunch?” She pinned a shrimp with her fork and ate.

“Good point,” Reid said, looking at her in the rearview.

Gulls swooped and screeched out by the water. Reid listened to the sermon. Same old shit. Still, listening was sort of comforting. There were others listening too, guilty too. Reid didn’t share the gospel, didn’t go to church or force Merrill to go. He did pray sometimes, mostly when he felt helpless, mostly over Justin, but it didn’t mean much—he didn’t believe it made any difference. But it did make him thankful, thankful his brother was there with him in the car, eating by the beach. He wasn’t sure there’d be many more days like this one.

The radio went to a commercial break, the pastor they’d been listening to announcing a revival at a lake where Reid and Justin fished. Reid looked at his brother.

When they finished eating, they drove to an arcade nearby, next to a Laundromat, and Reid and Merrill watched while Justin played Punch-Out. Sweat popped from Justin’s forehead as he leaned into play, buttons snapping under his fingers.

“Oh my gosh, someone has something to prove,” Merrill said.

A young black man sat a table nearby, wearing long braids and wife-beater and jeans. He had one shiny gold tooth in front and was drinking a Coke. “He gone get to Tyson in a minute. This man’s a warrior.”

“Going to burn my initials into this machine,” Justin said. He forced the joystick to the right and tapped a button combo. The gloved arms onscreen swung a right hook: Justin’s opponent collapsing, the letters “K.O.” blinking in bright yellow and red. Justin

looked at Reid and breathed, grinned and wiped his forehead with his sleeve. “You want to try it?”

By now a small crowd had gathered, had come over from doing laundry. A couple of Mexican kids about ten or so, and their father Reid guessed seated on the window sill, reading a paper and glancing up every now and then above his glasses to see Justin play. And a white woman had taken a seat next to the black guy at the table.

Reid shook his head. “I wouldn’t remember what to do.”

“You remember, let me teach you, come on,” Justin said. “I ever let you embarrass yourself before?”

“Step into the ring,” the black guy said. “Bets are open.”

His daughter slapped his shoulder, told him to come on. Reid staggered over to the machine. “Okay,” he said. “Let’s get this over with.” Justin moved in beside him, his face a few inches above his left hand, pressed against the machine. He coached him, Reid’s hand-eye moves led with ease by Justin’s voice. His brother was a good teacher, and Reid wondered what he could do if he just had a few more years.

*

From the severed pier, Reid sat staring into the lake water. The shallow water was dirty, but see-through, and shadows wavered on the bottom like electricity. A soda can, half-eaten with algae, lay tilting slightly one way, then the other, the brand obscured by rust. “Could be a beer can,” Reid said aloud. The last time he’d fished here with his brother, they’d drunk a warm six-pack of PBR because they’d forgotten to grab ice on the

way. The day had been warm, but easy, and Reid had been relieved. When it was too hot, Justin's fatigue set in, forcing them home. He'd still fallen in, taken that breath of water.

Reid needed to try fishing without his brother. He'd tried to get Justin to come along, to check out the revival with him, just for a laugh, but Justin had said he wasn't feeling up to it, the morning going like it had. At best, Justin would live into his forties. He was thirty-nine now, and before long, Reid would have no choice but to get along on his own. The thought knotted in his chest, moved up his throat. Across the lake, music played from two speakers set up at one of the cabins: the revival, Reid figured.

Reid went back down the pier towards his pick-up and stepped off into the mud to launch the boat. He needed to fish, to do something to ease his mind. Reid had been disappointed the clouds had cleared off after noon. The lake was down several feet, the air traced with the sodden earth, and Reid took a breath and tried to be thankful. He passed the boat trailer and reached his dark green Ford Edge, got in and turned the engine over. The truck in reverse, Reid looked behind him and eased off of the brake back into the mud, knowing the moment he did the truck would be stuck. He closed his eyes. His hand trembled on the steering wheel. Justin wouldn't have let him to do that; he'd have thought longer, harder. That was his way. Reid flung the lever into drive and gave her some gas and the truck jolted forward with an abrupt stop, tires shrieking in the mud. He set his teeth, killed the engine and got out. He kicked the side of the truck bed and took a few steps forward, rested his hands on his knees and breathed.

"You all right?" a woman said.

She had to be about his age, mid-thirties. Her long dark hair was up, two chopsticks it looked like crossed through the bun. The face was soft, with eyes sudden and blue, a long handsome nose. On her feet, ballet shoes.

“I’d give you a hug,” she said. “But I’d rather not get these dirty.” She stood on her toes a second.

Reid spat. “I look like I need a hug?” Hands still on his knees, he squinted at her.

“Your truck does, with that dent you just left in it.”

He smiled at her. “I’ll bet you can’t see the dent riding shotgun.”

She rocked forward again on the platforms of her slippers. “I was actually going to sort of ask you over.” She crooked her head, gestured with her eyebrows across the lake. The revival.

He turned and glanced at the truck, shrugged. “You ever had anyone, just sort of guided you through things?”

“Christ,” she said. “And my community.” Again, she nodded toward the other side of the lake, to the cabin with the music. “I came over to see if you wanted to join us. Maybe after we pull your truck out?”

Reid stood. “Someone over there have a truck?”

She offered her hand. “I’m Stacy,” she said. “And yeah—friend’s husband has a truck. Let’s walk.”

He nodded and followed her. “Reid,” he said. “I’m Reid.”

“You shouldn’t be out here alone, Reid,” she said. “Christ sent out his disciples in twos, and some of them were fishermen.” She frowned sweetly.

“My brother usually comes along. He’s sick.”

They walked around the far end of the lake, and through the pines trees. Parked at the side of the cabin was bright red Dodge truck. “Justin has cystic fibrosis, so he’s tired most of the time.”

“You live with him?” Stacy said.

“Yeah, his house, out in Pascagoula.”

“Is that what you both want?”

Reid drew his eyebrows together, sort of laughed.

“What?” she said.

“Well, no, not really,” Reid said. “I don’t want to be living with my brother. I’m broke, so that’s why. But, he’s also sick and needs the help around the place. And I guess I’m not doing so well either since the divorce.”

“My parents got divorced. Didn’t do anyone any good.”

“I didn’t want it; she did,” Reid said. They were going up the hill toward the cabin, and Reid’s legs began to cramp. This would have been hell on Justin. His shirt went damp at the chest, and he thought how good it would feel once he was inside, the air-conditioning cooling the fabric. The music had grown louder as they neared and Stacy waved for a man’s attention, and getting it, motioned him toward them. The volume decreased. “That’s Kyle,” Stacy said, voice raised over the music. “He’s got the truck.”

Kyle made his way down to them. He wore a baseball cap, a t-shirt and jeans and had large muscles. Had he chosen, he could have been intimidating. He introduced himself and Reid explained how he'd back into the mud.

"That's yours on the other side?" Kyle said. His green eyes were sober, face slack. He spoke like someone who'd never had a problem he couldn't fix.

"Yeah, the one with the trailer."

"All right," Kyle said. With his head he gestured towards the Dodge and they walked over. There was a cardinal on Kyle's ball cap.

"You keep up with baseball?"

"Oh yeah," Kyle said, sticking his key into the ignition. The Dodge rumbled to a start and he looked out the back windshield. "My family's from Arizona, so we root for the Cardinals. You like baseball?"

Reid gave a nervous laugh. No getting away from Justin. "My brother and I played ball for a long time, until he got sick, until he couldn't anymore. He was too tired, didn't make for a good short-stop."

Kyle's face slackened. "What's wrong with him?"

Reid was tired of talking. "CF," he said.

"What's that now?"

"Cystic fibrosis," he said. He opened the door while they were still a couple of yards away from the Ford and Kyle slowed down and let him out. Reid took up the chain from his truck and motioned for Kyle to turn the Dodge around. Once he'd secured the chains around Kyle's hitch and around his own bumper, he got in and started the engine,

and in a few minutes, Reid's truck was free from the mud. He got out and took up the chain again, tossed it back into the truck bed with a heavy crash. He nodded at Kyle.

"Thanks."

Kyle lifted his hat and ran a hand through his hair, readjusted it on his head.

"You should go get your brother, come back to the cookout," Kyle said. "We'd love to have you."

Reid wanted to say no, but had trouble doing so, seeing as how kind they'd been.

"I don't know," he said.

Kyle roughed Reid up at the shoulders. "What'd you, need to pay for your next meal? Come out and eat with us."

No, he didn't need to pay for his next meal, and if there was food leftover, he might be able to take some home and not worry about paying for meals for a couple of days. "I'll see," he said. He got into his truck and pulled away, glanced in his mirror at Kyle, who stood there watching him go, hands by his side.

They seemed to have some sort of weird joy.

When he pointed into his driveway Pepper shot out from under the steps and began racing alongside the truck until Reid reached the house. He messed with her, hitting the brakes to make her stop, then flooring it so she'd have to speed up. He killed the engine and got out. "Hey, gal," Reid said. "You're going to hurt yourself one of these days. You been looking after brother man?" He grasped one of her ears as he went up the steps, letting it sweep through his hand as he headed for the door. Inside, Merrill

sat at the kitchen table. Her textbooks were out, and she appeared to be working on homework. Justin lay on the couch and looked over at him. Reid smelled cigarette smoke.

“He been smoking?”

The girl rolled her eyes. Looking at her was heartbreaking. She looked so much like her mother. Justin reached into his shirt pocket and took out a hand-rolled cigarette, put it to his mouth.

“Damn it,” Reid said. He snatched the cigarette from his lips. “What the hell are you thinking?”

Justin spat weakly at a speck of tobacco on his lower lip. His eyes had deep circles under them, a sort of bruised purple.

“You fucking know better,” Reid said. “And in front of her?”

Justin sat up slowly. “But it’s okay to swear in front of her.”

“This isn’t about me,” he said.

His brother stood, staggered towards his corner where he kept an eight-track recorder, a microphone and his guitar. Knowing his years were short, Justin had decided that he needed to record as much of his own music as possible, so that when he died, he’d still be able to speak. The problem was that he wasn’t all that good at the guitar, but he’d spent over a thousand dollars on an electric Les Paul Hollowbody anyway, because it was the guitar John Lennon played.

Reid knew a little about guitars. Though he didn’t play, he’d worked at a music shop for a few years, setting up drum sets, cleaning the bodies of guitars and installing

new strings and pickups. He'd spent a lot of time listening to people who could play, and he struggled to keep his mouth shut over Justin's missed notes and broken rhythms, the position of his hand. He didn't want an album of his brother's music. He wanted Justin to live another fifty years, for him to be the one to bear the loss.

"You catch anything?" Justin said. In his chair, he swiveled around to his brother, a wing of black hair in front of his face. He tuned his guitar, slid a headphone over one ear and hit play on the eight-track.

Reid shook his head. "Nothing," he said. "Had to have someone pull the truck out."

"Lucky you someone was around," Justin said.

"Yeah. A church group. They invited us back to their cookout; I told them I'd come."

Justin had turned away.

"You hear me?" Reid said.

Justin peered over his shoulder. "Who are they?"

"They're with a church," Reid said. He poured himself a cup of cold coffee and stuck the mug in the microwave. "Merrill, do you want to come?"

"Okay," the girl said.

"Justin, you coming?"

He now had his headphones on both ears, turning knobs on the eight-track. Then he coughed, low and raucous, and he took a rag from his back pocket and brought it to his mouth.

“Justin,” Reid said louder. He was angry at his brother for coughing, for not being able to stop. “I’m talking to you,” he said.

His brother yanked off his headphones. “What?” he said softly.

Reid had been prepared for Justin to shout, to tell him he couldn’t fucking talk for the coughing, and his yielding voice made him feel awful. “Are you coming or are you not?”

“I’d prefer to stay here, get some work done.” He spoke into his hand.

The microwave dinged and Reid reached for his coffee but stopped. “Come hang out with and me and Merrill,” he said. “Maybe the temps will drop and we can find a shady place to fish.”

Justin shook his head. “Too hot, the bream will have moved to deeper water.”

“That’s why I said maybe it’ll cool down. Maybe they’ll come back.”

“They don’t do that, Reid.”

Reid came up behind him and put him in a headlock. “You want to fucking argue? I’ll tell you what doesn’t do something, those notes don’t come out right when you hold the guitar like that. Prick.” His brother gripped his shoulders, pressing him back. Reid tried to kid with him, but frustration tightened in his forearm, pressed from his chin into the top of Justin’s head. He struggled to breathe. The chair began to lean back, then fell, and Reid let go.

“Jesus Christ,” Justin said into the floor. “What the fuck is wrong with you? Fine, let’s go.” He pushed up on his hands and knees. The guitar lay off to the side of him, the strap across his back at the waist.

His brother was too weak to argue, to fight back. Reid felt sick. In his frustration he'd forgotten how little his brother could take. He was like a rotted plank in a pier, porous and flaking: one hard step and it could snap, sink from sight. Still, he'd liked the girl, Stacy, and wanted Justin to meet her, approve of her. And maybe she'd be good for Merrill. Maybe he could steal that joy from those people. They needed to get out.

He lifted his brother up from the floor. The microwave beeped again, and Reid went over and took out the coffee. He offered it to Justin.

Justin coughed. "Had some," he said. He disappeared into the hallway, to get dressed Reid figured. Water started through the pipes in the bathroom.

Reid took his coffee over to the window. The mug bumped against the sill and coffee leapt over the rim. He dried the sill with his shirt.

"Mom called," Merrill said.

"She say what for?" He turned with his back against the glass.

"To ask how your job is going," she said.

"Tell her I'm fine," he said.

"You're not going to call her?"

"Barring a miracle, May, I don't see why your mom would be sitting around waiting on me to call. Unless it's about child support."

His daughter looked up. "You ever think maybe you should keep some things to yourself?"

Reid pushed off from the window, coasted to the table and kissed Merrill on her head. She smelled bright and clean, the shampoo she used. "Yeah," he said. "I'll call

her.” He went out the door and stepped onto the porch and dialed Lindie. The sun fell across the driveway, made the bits of quartz glass in the gravel sparkle. Reid sat in one of the white wood beach chairs, the one with one arm broken, his legs straight out, and Pepper lay down at his feet.

When Lindie answered she said, “Make it quick, Bub. I’m in the middle of something.”

“What’s that?” Reid said.

She told him she was going out that evening, and when he asked her if it was a date she said she thought so.

“I think I sort of have one, too,” Reid said.

“It’s all right, isn’t it?” she said. “Don’t you feel like you’ve got more potential now? Like there’s room?”

“Not really,” Reid said. “You’ll recall I have a dying brother.”

“I recall,” Lindie said. “How is he?”

“Oh, you know: a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down.”

“Yeah, he’s a different case, I know. I guess I meant that most things end, but with you and me, it doesn’t feel hopeless. More like a rearrangement, less like an amputation.”

“Glad things look good from where you’re standing.”

“You know what I mean,” she said. She asked about Merrill and work and he told her both were fine. When he hung up, Justin had come out the door, dressed, his hair wet and combed back. His face had more color to it, from the heat in the shower. Still, he

never seemed to look much better these days. He could not wash away his illness.

Reid's mind went back to Stacy, her quoting the Bible, and from there his mind went to church, to that story where Christ told the blind man to wash in the pool, and the man came out seeing. "Look," Reid said. "There's this girl at the lake I want you to meet."

His brother eased into the chair next to his, exhaled and coughed. "Why didn't you just say that?" he said. Pepper moved from Reid to Justin.

When they reached the cabin, there were more cars out front than when he left. He found a spot next to a large pine and parked, switched off the engine. The dog climbed onto the side of the truck bed, poised a second before leaping onto the ground, put her head down and started trailing. They got out and made their way towards the cabin, but before they reached the front door, Kyle came out and greeted them. "It's good you made it back. Whose dog is that?"

"Mine," Justin said.

"That's fine," Kyle said, pushing his cap up a little. "Just keep her out here. Wife's allergic, bad allergic."

"Who said she was coming inside?"

"Just letting you know," Kyle said.

Reid turned and looked at his brother, eyes telling him to take it easy. Justin whistled for Pepper, and she came running. The two of them made their way down the incline towards the lake. Reid followed Kyle inside. "I'm sorry about him," he said.

Kyle nodded. "Not trying to be rude, Heather just can't handle pets."

“It’s fine,” Reid said. “He’ll be fine.” To the right was a den, and on the hardwood floor Stacy sat stretching. She looked up, a tendril of hair in front of her eye. “I know you’d come back. Your brother’s here, too?”

“Sort of. What’s with the shoes?”

She lay her face alongside her knee, spoke into the floor. “I’ve been into ballet for—.” She glanced to her left, squinting. “Twenty-two years?” she said. “Something like that.” She sat up and brushed the strand of hair behind her ear. “I teach dance downtown as well.” Stacy stood, balanced herself on her toes. She moved towards him. Watching her, he felt as though he were seeing something for the first time. The ribbons wrapped around her ankles reminded him of delicate birds.

Reid said, “What do you know about that Jesus story? The one where he tells the guy to go wash in the pool?”

“The blind man,” she said. “Hand me that would you?” She pointed to a clear-blue water container on a small table beside the arm of the couch.

He passed her the water. “That one, yeah; what do you know about it?”

“Only what scripture says, I guess. And that I’ve seen miracles.” She took a long swig of water and he watched the hollow of her neck move slightly up and down.

“You’ve seen miracles?”

“I’m a living one,” she said. She collapsed cross-legged onto the beige carpet. “I used to have asthma. I don’t anymore.”

Reid shook his head, sat down on the couch and stared past her out the window.

“That’s so easy and you know it. It’s always something you can’t see that’s healed.

Whenever people talk about it.”

“That’s fine, you don’t have to believe me. I’m more interested in your believing in Christ.”

“What about my brother?” he said. “Could you heal him?”

Her arms were outstretched, a position you’d make for a snow angel. “I don’t know who can and can’t be healed. I know if the Spirit moves he’ll be healed.”

If the Spirit moves, Reid thought. Pepper moved past the window, still trailing. It had been a long time since he’d been around someone who talked like this. He liked hearing her talk about it, real or not.

“I don’t know like, Christ didn’t heal everyone, but he did heal some. And that’s what he still does, heals some.” She got up and sat next to him on the couch.

“Like you,” Reid said.

“You’ve got be willing,” Stacy said.

“We’re willing,” Reid said. “Who wouldn’t be willing?”

In the corner was a beach ball, and Stacy stood up and went over rolled the ball towards her with a foot. “Is that why you’re here?”

“I think I’d have come back with or without him.”

“Well, you’re both here,” she said. She brought the ball into the air with her foot and caught it. “You want us to pray for him? Lay hands on him?”

He'd crossed the room and was behind her. "Lay your hand on me first," Reid said. "For all the things you can't see."

She leaned in and kissed him, quick and soft, and she ran a thumb along his brow and down his face.

"Dad," Merrill said.

His daughter stood in the doorway, and in a way seeing her felt like healing. With Stacy in the room it hurt less to see her. "Yeah?" he said.

"Didn't know you had a daughter," Stacy said. She offered her hand to Merrill and introduced herself.

"You're the reason he's out here," Merrill said.

"Not the only one I hope," Stacy said.

Behind Merrill, Justin came inside. A number of people had made their way back inside the cabin, and the hallway had gotten busier and the main room at the back of the house noisier. Reid could see Justin was ready to go and he went up to him. "I want to talk to you," he said.

They went outside. The light had begun to die, the surface of the lake, slick as glass, holding onto the last of the pale orange glow. Crickets sang in the brush, and down by the water, the frogs. "What if you let them pray over you?" Reid said.

"You're the fifth person here who's asked me that. Since when do you give a shit?"

"Since your whole life, Justin."

Stacy came out and stood by the doorway. Reid gave her a nod. “Look, I don’t know. There’s something in her, the girl, Stacy. Just let her pray over you.”

Justin’s fatigue showed in his face, the same weakness from earlier in the day. He would not argue. “All right,” he said. “Then we can go home?”

“Yeah,” he said. He motioned for Stacy to come over, and when she reached them he said, “Does he need to wash in the lake or something?”

Justin’s mouth opened. “What are you, out of your mind? The lake will fucking kill me, Reid. I’ll get cold.”

Stacy’s eyes widened a second and she bit her lip. “No—no he doesn’t have to do that.” She shook her head. “Let’s go inside.”

When they went in, several people, all members of the church Reid figured, had gathered in the den. People Reid had not met. Stacy pushed them into their midst and Reid was beside a man with thinning, curled dark hair. Hands touched his back, reached over his shoulder and onto Justin’s back. The man wore a sharp cologne that smelled like aftershave, and Reid couldn’t tell if his eyes were closed or a little open. There was Kyle, and another couple beside him. They looked so clean, their clothes stylish. The guy’s hair was short and he wore a black short-sleeved button-up and jeans, his wife’s skin white and her arms and legs limber.

“He’s sick,” Stacy said. “He needs healing.”

“You got that everyone,” the man with the Bible said. “This man wants healing. We’re going to proclaim a healing right here and now.”

“That’s right,” Kyle said.

There were Amens, and Reid heard whispers in tongues. Someone asked Stacy to pray for them. She took her hand from Reid's shoulder and placed both of them on his brother, then began to pray. He tried listening but could not pay attention. The others prayed louder now, gibberish he could not understand. He'd heard of speaking in "tongues," but never heard it until now. He wanted to hear Stacy's words, and knew then he wanted hers to be the voice of God. It occurred to him his eyes were open, but he was not where he could see her lips move. He watched a man's face. He had copper-colored skin, a short, curly haircut. Beside him a short, stocky black woman also kept her eyes closed, praying in tongues. Justin's eyes were open, too, and his teeth were gritted. The praying went on for too long, and the muscles in Reid's neck and back began to ache. His brother's eyes met his own but he looked away. Outside, Pepper howled, the one she made whenever she went after something. Justin broke free from the group, shoved past the arms that tried holding him there. "Let go, damnit," he said. "Pepper," he called. "Pepper!" he said again.

"She'll come back," Reid said, following

"She's hunting, she'll be at I-10 before long." He was out the door. His breath began to quicken and he called again, the dog's name came out wasted and raw from his chest.

"Calm down. She'll come back."

"Should have brought her inside. I didn't because that bitch who isn't sick didn't want her in there. Fuck, what are we doing here?"

"Why didn't you just put her in the fucking truck?" Reid said.

The sun was gone and the sky was blue-grey in the dusk. The air had grown cool. Justin walked towards the woods. “Justin, what the fuck are you doing?”

“Someone’s got to find her,” he said.

“You’re going to get sick. Wait till she comes back.”

He spoke without turning around. “Why don’t you go back in and try praying her back?”

Several people from inside the cabin had come out, Kyle and Stacy with them. Reid caught up with his brother, grabbed him by the shirt collar. “Get your ass in the truck,” he said.

Justin turned and shoved Reid. It was everything he had, and he began to cough. Seeing the church members watching, he tried to close his mouth, bury the racket. He staggered to the truck and got in.

“Pepper,” Reid yelled. He spotted his daughter. “Merrill, keep calling the dog.”

His brother coughed hard inside the truck.

Those gathered outside looked more broken than powerless. Reid looked away in the dark, where his shadowed daughter made her way toward the trees.

They called for close to two hours, but did not find the dog. They drove home without speaking, nothing but the tires on the road, his daughter’s and brother’s faces blue in the dash glow. Merrill kept looking worriedly over at her uncle. They reached the house and went inside, Justin ahead of them. He disappeared in the back to his room.

Reid went for the Les Paul. He brought the guitar into his brother's bedroom, flipped the light on. He lay the guitar on the bed, next to his brother who was facedown.

“Play,” he told him. “Please. I’ll find the dog.”

Reid parked his truck back in front of the cabin. There were fewer cars, and he wasn't sure Stacy would even be there. He went inside and the man he'd noticed next to Justin was still there. “Stacy around?” he said.

He scratched above his ear. “She left, went on back home I imagine. Something I can do for you, man?”

“You know where I can find her?”

The man's eyes narrowed, and he said he wasn't sure he should be giving out Stacy's personal information. When Reid pressed him the guy said he'd text Stacy his number, and if she wanted to contact him, the ball would be in her court.

When she called, he answered, back on the road. She told him where she lived, and he drove. Her house had a white, wicker swing, where she sat when he pulled up. Flowers with pots, vines on the squared columns. He approached her and said, “We've got to find that dog.”

“I've got some flashlights,” she said. “A lantern if you're interested.”

“You couldn't heal him.”

“I can't heal anyone,” she said. “The Spirit does that.”

“The Spirit won’t do for him,” Reid said. The air was crisp, getting colder, and he dug his hands into his pockets. “But I’m praying we find this dog. He’ll die quicker if we don’t. And I don’t want to pray about it, or talk really, I just want to do it.”

She got up and took his arm just above the elbow. She walked him to the passenger side, opened the door for him then closed him in. Then she got in, asked for the keys.

They drove back out to the cabin and called. Stacy still had on her shoes, and now they were caked with mud. When Pepper did not come they began to drive down the rutted, dirt roads leading into the woods. The moon was bright, cutting through the trees, its light sharp with cold. The truck bumped and jarred, the headlights washing over the tree trunks on either side of them, the standing water in the ruts and the dead leaves. His brother had not been healed. The road stretched ahead of them, straight into the darkness. Then they spotted her, running in front of the truck, in the headlights.

“Stop, that’s her,” Reid said, and looked over. But for some reason, Stacy did not stop the truck.

“Don’t you want to see how far she’ll go?” Stacy said. “Where she’ll take us?” She pressed the gas some, and Pepper sped up, too, the muscles tense through her coat.

He looked over at Stacy. She bit her lower lip in a smile. The dog galloped like she was in front of a sled, pulling them by a strap of light.

A LIGHT ON A STAND

The neighbor kid passes by our screen door—again—walking the dog that looks like a deer. My boxer mutt De la Hoya doesn't like it. He jolts the screen three or four times, barking and grumbling, always while I'm drifting off or watching a game. The other day, De la Hoya got so frantic he bit down on a silver candleholder from off the bureau and flung it onto the hardwood floor, making a loud, startling boom like pistol shot.

When I came down with diabetes, the doctor told me to get out more. Stay active thirty minutes a day, five times a week, he said. I never asked for a dog, but my wife thought I'd be more inclined to get out and walk—and for a time this worked. Then I had the accident. I broke my pelvic bone in four places two years ago at a parade. An old high school buddy of mine, from 40 years ago, Miguel, was on the float with a horn section, and seeing me on the sidewalk, he motioned for me to come up. Boy he could play the trumpet. On the float, putting the brass to my lips again to play was a marvel. The trumpet gleamed in the sunlight like a new penny. The pistons popped in the valves, and something electric moved from the finger buttons into my hands and on into my body, warming my bones. I leaned back to belt a long note, tilted over the side of the float and dropped to the pavement. I've been sitting, mostly, ever since.

The easiest times are when the patch of sky visible through the screen door goes grey, and after a while, rain clatters onto our tin roof. De la Hoya likes it, too. At first, I'd tried shuffling out onto the porch to sit in one of the light blue wicker chairs, but they didn't work: too bony, not much of a brace in that sunken seat. I tried standing out there, leaned up against the railing with my eyes closed, hearing the rain and trying to forget the

dull ache of being on my feet. Then my wife had the screen door installed. Now I put the volume of the television on low, sit and listen. On such days, when the neighbor kid traipses by in a bright red plastic poncho, dog in tow, De le Hoya gazes out the door, puffs his mouth and then settles back in. I'll be honest; I envy the boy. His youth.

My wife steps into the room. Renee's yellow-haired and pretty, shirtless beneath her robe. She lights a cigarette.

“Why are you doing that in here?” I ask her.

“My God,” she says. “I didn't even think about it.” She heads for the back door, remembers she doesn't have the tie to fasten her robe, and goes into the bedroom. She's tired, beat from keeping up with me, and what I want to do is to stand and go back there, pick her up and swing her around, put her in the car and drive us down to a creek bed, where I'd cup my hands and immerse them, bring up sand and creek water and tadpoles, their narrow bodies trembling into the palms of my hands. Like I used to. Renee never tired of that.

Now, the neighbor boy is coming back, heading east back toward his place. I hadn't noticed before, but he is wearing a white t-shirt and jeans, his hair slicked back with solution, dark, showy sideburns drawn on. He must have somewhere to be, cutting his walk short like this.

His outfit loosens me up. “You look sharp,” I tell him through the screen.

He lifts a hand. He's young and handsome, a college kid looks like. The wave of his black hair shines.

“Where you headed all dressed like that?”

“Friend's birthday party,” he calls back. “Sock Hop theme.”

“Will there be music?” I say.

He nods. “The guys playing, they play Del Shannon better than Del Shannon ever did.”

Del Shannon played “Runaway,” but other songs escape me. De la Hoya gets up, faces the screen. A growl rumbles in his throat.

“Hush,” I say, and then to the kid, “Sorry about him, I know you hear it every day.”

“You're fine—he's a fine looking dog.” He walks on.

“Wait,” Renee says. “You'll need this.” She passes me and goes out the door, lets it clap shut. Reaching him, Renee tucks a cigarette pack into his sleeve, rolls up the cloth. “You're done,” she says standing back, admiring her work.

He looks at his arm and flexes. He says, “True greaser,” and gives her a smile.

Renee watches him go. I lean over the arm of my chair to do the same. Tonight he will smile at pretty girls in red lipstick. The ground beneath his feet like he owns it. Grooved muscles under a pack of cigarettes. He'll be like a lamp atop a stand. He'll give off light in a room.

OLD RESISTANCE

It had been Josiah's fault: the dog nearly dying of heat stroke. The day had been in the nineties, but Winnie had been stuck inside for hours while he was at work, and he figured she'd be fine for a short walk. He'd filled his father's old military canteen with water, leashed her, and they'd left the house. Later, when she slumped under an oak, panting hard and refusing to drink, he knew he'd made a mistake. Her chest had galloped, breath gusting into the dirt. Josiah's lips moved silently in prayer.

He remembered this while driving north on I-110 out of Leona towards D'Iberville where his father James lived. Winnie rooted in the trash bag around the gearshift, trying for the to-go box from yesterday's fried chicken and potato wedges. He reached over and pat the dog's shoulder and said stop. She bit down on the bag and tore a piece off, let it flutter to the floorboard.

"Winnie—quit," he said, steering with his left hand and pushing her back from the trash. He hit the stereo and the Slayer CD he'd been listening to blasted into the car, loud and brain-scrambling. This music didn't do much for him anymore, but it was interesting hearing it after years of letting it lie.

The other day he'd run into a girl from high school, Kenna Wright, at the gas station. A pretty blond with freckles, wearing scrubs like a grown-up and still taller by a few inches. They'd set their nozzles to pump and talked, and she'd told him how different and good he looked. Then she'd asked if he still listened to "that screaming music" and feigned a roar into an air mic, laughing. She'd been charming, but annoying. He didn't tell her he'd done time. People did not let you change small things. Tell them

you went to prison and you were a criminal for life. His father thought this way, too, and he wondered if their encounter today would be at all amiable.

Josiah tucked Winnie's lip into a snarl to the song and made her headbang a little. She pulled away from his hand, licking her chops. "How about a kiss, huh?" He stretched his face over to her but she just stared forward. Winnie did not lick people, never had. "No love," Josiah said. "I feed you, walk you." He switched the radio off.

The quiet felt better. The sun came through the windshield warm on his face and arms. In the cup holder stood a glass bottle of Coke, and he took it and pulled. He didn't drink anymore, but still liked the feel of cold glass in his hand. Grasping a bottle felt more like you were doing something, like you *could* do something. He liked the pop-and-scatter of glass when it went from container to weapon. He'd once held a broken bottle up to a girl and made her undress. That'd been as far as he'd gone, just looking at her. She'd looked good, but he hated remembering himself. It was the power involved in the thing, the being able to force someone into something that made all the difference. He wanted to be done with bad power. He had new blood. The dog had been good for him in this way: you couldn't earn any respect from a mutt with bad power. Submission and fear, sure, but if a dog was a window into yourself, you didn't want them loveless or cowering.

He turned at the exit, veered right onto Rodriguez Street and drove until he hit Quave Road which ran into Lorraine Circle. Pine trees lined the roadside, making the sun roll off the dashboard like spilled coins. His stomach sickened nearing the house. Had for years. The pines thinned for the subdivisions, and he took a few more turns

before easing up to his father's driveway at the end of the street. The place was two stories, brick, and like a threat cut the warm sunlight from the car as he drove in. A fountain of coral-pink marble trickled clear-blue water down its bowls. The blue dye didn't look right, an excess that made no sense, as if clear water wasn't good enough when you had money. With his new blood, water had more meaning now: the Christ described as living water. Earlier in the summer, he'd swam in a river with Alix, the girl he'd been seeing, near a waterfall gushing white over big, moss-covered rocks, and he'd never known anything so cold and pure in all his life. And he liked to think something like that ran through his blood now, something that didn't need altering, that was right like it was and always had been. He killed the engine and sat there, looking at the house until Winnie began nosing in the trash again.

Josiah snapped the bag's handles from the gearshift, took up Winnie's leash and led her out of the car. He stretched, walking towards the door. He wore blue jeans and black PF Flyers laced up in white shoestrings, a grey t-shirt. Alix had given him a haircut, shaving it short on the back and sides and leaving length up front she styled with solution. He was just over six feet tall, had grown more nimble in the two years due to lifting weights and running in place in his cell. Looking at him now, you'd bet he could hold his own on a basketball court, and while he wasn't the worst, he'd never played on a team. He was someone whose potential was, at thirty-two, just turning to substance.

James's truck was parked in the driveway, a fading United States Marine Corps sticker on the back windshield. There was a glassed-in front room to the right, and in there his father got up from the couch to open the door. Josiah was holding the trash bag

up away from Winnie, searching the driveway for a garbage bin when James opened the door wide, his husky Natchez following behind. He wore sweatpants, running shoes and a t-shirt, a navy-blue hat with that Alabama war boat stitched on it. He had a grey mustache and three-day scruff that made him look resigned. “Look who made it, Natchez,” he said, standing aside of the door.

“Am I late?” Josiah said.

The dogs touched noses then dashed out into the driveway, Winnie to the fountain.

“Winnie, get out of the water, no blue dogs.” He looked at his father. His phone showed he was early. “Winnie,” he turned and said again.

“Pipe down, let them play. You got something against having to bathe your dog?”

“I’m not late,” he said and started to lean against the doorframe before stopping himself.

“I know. I’m just not used to all this. You get that,” James said.

“You got somewhere I can drop this?” he said, holding up the trash. At the fountain Winnie drank, slopping blue water beads onto the pavement.

“So long as it’s the only trash I deal with this week,” James said, and baring his teeth in a grin he took the bag.

“A doomed smartass, this one,” Josiah said and saluted, walking inside. “And what do you mean, ‘You get that’?” He stopped in the doorway for an answer.

James waved a hand on his way into the kitchen. “There’s nothing to understand,” he said. “You’ve backed out on me before, not even a phone call.”

“Not in over two years last I checked,” Josiah said.

“Well, you hardly had the opportunity most of that time, so let’s get to the experiment,” he said, and with his palms did a short drum roll on the countertop. “I got something for you.” He left the kitchen and went through the living room, disappeared into his office.

The place was messier than when Josiah’s stepmother Evelyn had been living there. Used dishes filled the sink, dirty laundry hanging over the backs of furniture. White dog hairs were scattered along the tiles and on the thin maroon rug leading out the back door. It didn’t look awful, but her touch was gone. That much, Josiah thought, she had done right. He went into the living room.

A few months prior, James had woken to find her packing. She’d told him she needed space from him, from his attitude and what she’d termed “light abuse.” Evelyn said she’d get a divorce only if he wanted one, but otherwise just wanted to be alone. Josiah didn’t know the details, but did feel something over her leaving, a sort of affirmation that his father hadn’t been the best or always right after all, and it was strange to feel any solidarity with her. When he was fifteen Josiah blacked her eye after months of arguing and problems. Looking back, the night had been Josiah’s fault, and he’d deserved worse than what happened: James’s big fist clocking him hard from ear to temple, his running out into the dark, palming his split ear up over neighbor fences and on until he’d crashed into the ravine running along the back of the neighborhood. The

water and night so cold his legs went numb before he pulled himself onto the bank. Ice scabbed his jean creases and he lay there watching his breath huff into the black until the police found him. He'd been sent to Memphis to live with his mother Beth afterward.

"You talk to Evelyn?" At the window he slipped up the blinds. The dogs lay in the sun on the grass.

James reappeared and handed him a typed-up sheet of paper—his itinerary for his trip along with instructions for keeping the dog. He was transporting his friend Carl to the VA hospital where he could get the daily assistance he needed. Carl was an amputee and a diabetic, and living alone safely was no longer an option.

Josiah set the list on the counter.

"Read it aloud," James said. "In front of me."

"Don't want to talk about Evelyn?"

James took a string cheese out of the refrigerator, peeled it open and bit off the top. "No, I don't think children are entitled to know why their parents' marriage failed."

"I'm not a child, she's not my mom."

"That was always how you saw it, wasn't it?" He set the wrapper on the counter, swallowing.

"It was lucky for you I had Mom to go to."

"I'd have rather not sent you there in the first place," James said. "Rather've had no reason to, I mean." He snatched the paper out of Josiah's hands. A bright-red Ford Falcon magnet slanted on the refrigerator, and with it James smacked the list above the

ice dispenser. “Take it seriously,” he said, tapping it. “And it’s just you over here. Not even that girlfriend of yours for a visit.”

“What are you worried about her for?”

“She know you did some time?”

“She does.”

“Well, either you’ve proven you’re a changed man or she likes a good felony.”

“I’ve got new blood, borrowed blood. I don’t know what to call it, really—.”

“And I still don’t understand why you needed it in the first place,” James said. “I fucked something up, somebody slapped the shit out of me, be it my father, drill sergeant, what-have-you, and I didn’t do it again.” His phone rang and he looked at it and pocketed it after a few seconds. “Carl’s misplaced his needles, I have to go,” he said. He disappeared past the doorframe.

Josiah thought about the difficulty of living disabled, how you paid for things long after they’d happened. If someone hadn’t sent Carl to war he wouldn’t have lost that leg and then lost his health, and James wouldn’t be leaving to help him. James, Josiah knew, still felt like he was paying for things Josiah had done in the past. People still saw his father as the man who’d raised the car thief and debtor, who’d reared one of the hopeless ones. Josiah sensed bitterness there, a resentment that church or some ritual had gotten his son to do right when he’d tried and failed for years to do the same, and he could not believe it had any lasting power.

Josiah held his phone up to the list, snapped a picture to have it on him all the time. He’d take care of the dog. Things would turn around.

*

Both dogs in the CRX, Josiah headed out of the neighborhood. After the episode with Winnie, they needed somewhere to roam with plenty of shade. She stood next to him in the passenger seat, Natchez poised nervously in the back. The dread of thinking he'd killed her washed over him. Somewhere cool in the pines off 49 would do. He drove for a while, half-listened to Mississippi Public Broadcasting. A woman's voice came through the speakers: "WMAH, Biloxi," and a few notes played after her words, reminding Josiah of light and ocean water and making him feel something like prayer or gratitude, and he thought of Alix. They'd been hanging out for several months now, and he still wasn't sure if it was too soon for him to get involved.

One night, while Josiah was still living in Memphis, she'd sent him a Facebook message. She'd told him when they were in high school, she'd looked up to him. That'd been it, just that she'd noticed him back then. He'd rolled through her pictures before writing her back. Her hair was straight and black, a handsome face, neck long and delicate-looking like a bird's. She was part Cherokee Indian and had grown up on a reservation. Her eyes bared lines of disappointment and let-downs. She looked tough but not callous. There were other pictures of her under a bridge in Alabama, swinging from a rope into a river. Worn black combat boots on her feet, slugging bottles of beer. After telling her he'd just finished a run in prison and asking if she still admired him knowing that, she'd said, "It depends on what you went in for. For instance, if you like, broke the nose of the last guy I dated, I'd have picketed for your freedom." She also admitted that when she'd read *The Outsiders* in eighth grade, she'd pictured Dallas Winston as Josiah,

even though Dallas dies in the end, “So I used to worry about you. That you’ve made it to 32 is a good thing. Cut the criminal shit before it kills you.”

When Josiah told her he’d broken into a few cars, stolen one, she’d invited him to come see her in his hometown, preferably in his own car. They’d been hanging out ever since, catching movies and getting Mexican food, taking road trips to swim in rivers. He’d also moved back, renting a house in Leona and landing a job at FedEx.

Alix worked at an assisted living center, and Josiah was completing his court-ordered community service hours there. He’d sort of dreaded the work at first and still didn’t love it, but liked working alongside Alix when he could. There’d been a lot of sick residents lately, and somehow he liked it better when he was caring for someone sick. They were all right with sitting quietly, they slept a lot, and the work involved touching their foreheads, making sure they drank plenty of liquids. Easy tasks that gave purpose.

Natchez stood on the console between the seats, panting, tongue dripping onto the gearshift. The sky was a dull, weary blue, and Josiah rolled down the window and let the air whip into the car. Natchez returned to the backseat, visible in the rearview, wind lashing her long fur. They pulled up the crest of a hill and the road sloped downward. As they rounded a sharp turn Josiah hooked two fingers under Winnie’s collar, keeping her from pitching into the dash. In the distance to the left, there looked to be a vacant lot. He slowed the car down and, there being no construction workers, turned in.

The lot was wide and walled in with pines. Uprooted stumps lay tumbled in the dirt, and there were long piles of limbs and debris. Parked near the roadside, a rust-scabbed backhoe and bulldozer. Josiah killed the engine and the dogs followed him out

of the car. Both put their noses to the dirt, wove towards and then away from one another, catching a scent. Drought had hardened the dirt and clods collapsed under Josiah's shoes. A path had been cut in the trees to the right and Josiah headed for it, dogs trailing behind. Once at the path tall weeds that looked like huge dandelions stood to the left, the breeze gathering their seeds like snowdrift, and for a minute Josiah watched the sun glare off their down.

The dogs clipped ahead of him where the path was blunted by a dirt road, went further into the woods, Natchez sloshing through pine scrub after something, a squirrel probably. A gunshot reported through the trees, from far away. Likely nothing, target practice somewhere. Natchez's ears perked, and she cut towards Josiah then halted, gave an abrupt bark. "It's all right, Natchez. C'mon." She trotted stiffly, timid. Up ahead the road forked toward what Josiah guessed was a storage shed, and on closer look, more like a place that had once been a store.

The awning over the entrance sloped towards the ground, heaped with rotted pine straw, and on each side of the door were two big, square windows. Josiah went under, cupped his hands around his face and looked in. There, on the floor, was a girl, bare legs sticking out from the hem of her pale-blue sundress. She looked asleep, but he wasn't sure. He tried the door: locked. The chink of the knob stirred her. She looked at him. She had wavy light-colored hair, matted strands at her cheeks like she'd been crying. Then she was up on her knees, turning and making for a door behind her. Josiah ran to catch her and she met him at the side of the place, pushing her hair from her eyes.

"What are you doing?" she said.

“What are you?” Josiah said. He paused: her right arm stopped just before the elbow, the skin there rounded smooth over bone. “You don’t look all right,” Josiah said. Out of habit he put his hand to her head, checking for fever.

She let him and then smacked him away. “I’m not sick,” she said. “You do that a lot? Touch total strangers?” Her jaw tremored.

He looked at her, and sort of laughed. “Yeah, actually,” he said. “Girlfriend gets paid to, but they stop being strangers after a while.” In the distance another gunshot, closer this time. Natchez whimpered and he turned to the dog and told her to sit, take it easy, then gave his attention back to the girl. It occurred to him the arm wasn’t urgent, not something that needed tending to. He told her his name and started to offer his right hand then went with the left. Winnie began to sniff the back of her leg.

The girl tilted forward until her forehead touched his outstretched palm. “So do I feel sick to you? Like something’s wrong with me?”

Her head felt damp. She looked fourteen, maybe fifteen, pale, exhausted. There were welts on the one forearm.

Winnie followed her the few steps forward, licking at her calf.

“What’s she doing?” Josiah said.

“Hey—stop it,” the girl said, slapping behind her.

Josiah got to where he could see. Welts streaked the back of her leg. “Someone did this to you,” Josiah said. “Hit you with something.”

She slumped to a seat, took up a strand of pine straw and tore at it using her toes where her other hand would be. “No nobody did this to me. It’s from running through here,” she said, and waved to the side.

“What are you running from?” Josiah said.

“I cut school,” she said, “and I live out this way, the house just down the road. I didn’t want to be found so I hid in Machado’s shed there. I won’t again.” She stressed the word “again,” eyes widening. “Was a bad idea anyway. He’s an asshole. If he’d found me he’d have told my folks.” She looked at him. “Are you gonna do that?”

“That’d be pretty wrong,” Josiah said. “Why’d you cut school?”

“Because I don’t fucking want to be there.”

“Why not?”

“Jesus—really? Who the fuck are you, anyway? Why am I even talking to you?”

She started to stand.

Josiah leaned against a pine. “One more question: did you go to school without shoes?”

Halfway to her feet she sat again, holding back a smile it looked like. She brought the damaged arm to her face, shoulders moving in mute laughter Josiah hoped, though it could have been crying. She breathed. “These peaches?” she said, grabbing her feet. “They’re tough as nails. But I did have shoes on before I left—they came off somewhere around there,” and again she gestured at the woods.

“Maybe we should find them?” Josiah said. The girl had wide feet, wider than any he’d seen on someone her size. Tough and calloused.

“I left because the guy I wanted to ask me to this dance didn’t. I’m going to be stuck going with some jerk-off loser again if I go at all. Another last-ditch date—because of this fucking thing.” She held up her arm. “He told me he’d at least think about it. I’m such a fucking cry-baby.”

Winnie lay down next to the girl, panting, and nearby Natchez gazed up a pine, eyes on some scratching Josiah could not locate. “You need a ride home? Or I could take you back to school,” Josiah said.

The girl looked doubtful. She swatted the gnats at her face and when they didn’t go away she got to her feet, brushed off her backside. “What kind of car you got?”

“CRX,” Josiah said.

“Never heard of it,” she said.

“It’ll get you there,” Josiah said.

“How do I know you won’t kill me?”

“I could kill you now,” Josiah said. “We’re in the middle of nowhere, I’m—.”

“You’ve got two arms to my one,” she said.

Josiah nodded.

“I’m Hadley,” she said. “Josiah you said?”

He offered his hand again and this time she took it. She smelled sweet like deodorant, but a little dank, like something left too long in the wash once the cycle had finished. “So what’ll it be? Home or school?”

“I better go back to school,” she said.

Josiah whistled and the dogs followed them out the way they'd come, back to the lot. They emerged from the woods and by the car stood a man, a stout fellow even from this distance, scant hair. A rifle strap over his chest, barrel jutting past his shoulder. His voice carried across the lot, calling Hadley's name.

"Shit," Hadley said. She slouched her neck and shoulders: "It's Machado—no use running."

"It'll be fine," Josiah said, "I'll talk to him."

Hadley said, "You won't talk to him. He does the talking."

The man tramped towards them, wide steps, and ignored Josiah asking him how he was doing. He met them halfway to the car. "Who are you, what are you doing on this property? This is private." Turning to Hadley: "Why are you not in school?" Sun flashed off the bullets in his strap.

"Hey, take it easy," Josiah said. "I'm taking her—."

"What are you doing with her out here? You forget your shoes after you undressed?" He grabbed hold of Hadley's arm and Josiah shoved him back.

A yellow light snaked behind Josiah's eyes, a dull cheekbone ache. His hand formed a fist and swung, brushed something but did not land. Then there was the slide action of the rifle, a gunshot that made his ears ring. Sky tumbled beneath earth, a glance of Winnie moving into his vision before light pulled itself away again. Someone ordered the gun dropped. Machado said, "I am the one who made the call." Josiah tried sighting Natchez, but a face hovered before him, asked him if he understood.

After sitting for a couple of hours and then being questioned only a few minutes, the officers had mostly decided there was no criminal intent on Josiah's part. Noticing his vehicle, Machado had called the sheriff about someone trespassing. They'd come over thinking it was nothing, but the physical altercation and Josiah's record convinced them to bring Josiah in for questioning. They could not, however, understand why someone with his record would trespass at all onto someone else's property, let alone shove the property owner. "That person must want a ride in a cruiser and a better look at headquarters," the officer named Edwards said. He was tall and slouched back some when he walked like his limbs were heavy, crinkly marks around his eyes from smiling a lot. "But you've seen a police station before, right?"

"One in Memphis has better digs," Josiah said. "I mean, if you can't afford Coke products, at least budget for Pepsi. That RC Cola machine out there is a tragedy." His hands were cuffed in front of him. He smirked, looking at his warped face in the steel. "I'd press a can to this eye here, though, if someone's buying."

"You're really going to let this asshole go?" the other officer said. He had short blond hair, spiked and shining, bulging arms in short sleeves. He looked red in the face with too much sun.

"I'm sorry what was your name?" Josiah said. "I got Officer Edwards here, but who are you?"

"Officer Lee Oglesby," he said. He smacked his gum.

"Josiah Milner," he said. He offered his cuffed hands to shake.

“I know your name,” he said, tapping his temple. “I still say there’s more to your story.”

“You’re right,” Josiah said. He reminded them that he had two dogs with him, one of them his father’s, which was still out there somewhere, and if he could, he’d like to find her before sundown.

Edwards came around and removed the cuffs from his hands. Josiah’s wrists were ringed red and he stood and went to the Men’s and ran cold water over them. When he came out he picked up his keys, wallet, and cell phone and started outside to dial Alix. He stopped for Hadley, still behind the wire-mesh glass of an adjacent office. She looked his way, rose and flattened her hands on the glass, doing mime movements to show she was trapped. She reeled a pretend lasso over her head and threw it at him, began pulling, and when he didn’t walk over, she dropped the act and waved him to her. Josiah asked the woman behind the desk what was going to happen with the girl.

“I don’t know, you’d have to ask the officer tending to her.”

“So there’s no way I could drop her back off at school?”

“Likely out of the question,” she said. “Parental guardians only at this point, I’d think. And school’s over, it’s past three, isn’t it—yeah.”

He backed away from the desk shrugged and waved at Hadley. “And where’s my dog? The hound,” he said.

By this time the receptionist looked annoyed. “Animal Warden should be here if he’s not on patrol, he’s the second to last office in the back.”

Josiah went down the hallway, knocked on the door that said “Animal Warden,” and when no one answered, he went out and around the back of the station. Winnie lay inside a tall, chain-link pen, a shut lock on its gate. In the row of police cars parked in the lot, none read “Animal Warden.” He slouched against the pen, dialed Alix.

*

Josiah waited outside the station for Alix. He slept a little with his back against the brick of the station, opened his eyes every now and then if someone passed or the doors opened and closed. At one point, a man went in wearing a button-up and tie, dress pants. He wondered if it might be Hadley’s father. After a minute, he opened the door and peered in and sure enough, Hadley stood beside him at the front desk, getting checked out. Josiah let the door shut back and waited, and when the two of them emerged, he said, “Sir,” and offered his hand, “My name’s Josiah Milner, I met your daughter today.”

Hadley interrupted him. “He lost his dog near our house,” she said. “He’s welcome to come find her, right?”

The man stared down Josiah, “Met her where?” he said.

Josiah explained that the whole thing was an accident, that he’d been walking the dogs near their place, that he’d run into Hadley, and that things had gone badly with the property owner, then he mentioned that if she needed a date to the dance, he had a friend—her age—that he knew, that would probably be interested.

“I don’t know him,” Hadley’s father said.

“Yeah, but you will, I could arrange that,” Josiah said. “So you’re comfortable.”

He glanced back at his daughter. “We’ll see. I don’t think she’s going to be going anywhere after this stunt she’s pulled. Come on, Had,” he said, “I’ve still got things to do.”

“And where do you work?” Josiah said.

Hadley’s father turned around again. “I own a steam-cleaning service,” he said. “Come on, Had. You need shoes.”

Josiah watched them leave. Hadley waved to him, and got in the car with her father and they drove away.

A few minutes later, Alix showed up. She rolled up to the curb and opened his door for him from the driver’s seat. “Get in,” she said. “I’ve always wanted to say that, just like that.” Josiah signaled for her to hold on, and went back into the station. This time someone else was behind the desk, and when Josiah asked about Winnie, they led him back out to the pen, opened the gate and gave him his dog. In the car on top of the console between the seats was a brown paper bag, soaked through near the bottom, inside a cheeseburger and sweating can of cream soda. Josiah unwrapped the burger and ate, told Alix the story between bites, slugs of cream soda. When he’d finished talking, telling her that Natchez was still somewhere off of 49, Alix pulled her brown hair to the back of her head and held it there a few seconds, let it fall. She was pretty but not in the way of other girls he’d dated. Her arms were thick at the biceps and she had an oval face with calm, flint-colored eyes that made her look relentlessly self-assured. Something moved in her face that Josiah had come to associate with care. The car was heading to 49. “Okay. Trespassing,” she said. “Like a person can really own land. Wait till the

government needs it for a highway. See if he breaks out his gun then, the bastard. All this in front of the girl?" Alix spent a lot of time studying American Indians, understanding where she came from.

"Yeah, he put his hands on her—hence," he said, pointing to his eye.

"Isn't there some verse about that, not touching children or something?"

"Yeah," Josiah said. He finished off his cream soda. "Better for you to have millstone around your neck than to bother one."

"So that's why you're a Christian? To save the kids."

"I guess it's one reason," Josiah said.

"And what are the others?"

"I didn't care about anyone but myself for a long time. I'd rather care for anyone vulnerable. Dad's getting there, but, we don't find that dog, he'll never speak to me again."

"What about salvation? The whole heaven thing?"

Josiah shook his head. "I don't really care about that. I like how Christ defies people, makes people angry. I like how you can do that and still be good, that sort of thing. I don't know that the afterlife matters that much. At least not to me."

"Kind of like Crazy Horse," Alix said.

"Sure, they've got some similarities," Josiah said.

"You don't know anything about Crazy Horse," she said.

"I don't," Josiah said. "That's why you're here." He told her where to go to get to the lot, and when they pulled in, Winnie stood and followed them out of the car,

trailing back to the edge of the pines where'd they'd been earlier. Josiah felt some relief in his chest, they were back where they'd started, here is where he'd find the dog, fix this finally, and head back to his father's place like nothing at all had gone wrong. Once they reached the edge of the woods, Winnie began to look resigned., her hind leg muscles twitching with fear. Josiah rubbed her ears and told her it was okay, but she stayed put. She scratched out a spot under some brush, and lay down. Then his phone rang: his father.

Josiah answered.

"You didn't tell me you lost the dog," he said.

"Dad--,"

"Don't start, you should have called immediately. Someone found her, called me."

"Who found her?"

"Some man, name's Machado. Sounded like he spoke Spanish. I'm on my way back to get her."

"Dad, this is fine, though, let me get her, you stay where you are."

"No," James said. "You kept this from me. You going to keep anything else from me while I'm away? It doesn't matter. You won't have the chance. I'm on my way back. You get any things you may have left over there, and I don't want to see you again."

Josiah hung up the phone and made his way towards Machado's place. He broke into a sprint and Alix followed him, asking him what happened.

When they reached the house, Josiah banged on the door, and Machado came and opened it. “You get out of here, I mean it,” he said. “I speak to your father he will come and get this dog. You are to leave.”

“Just let me have her, I’ll take her home, it won’t be your problem anymore.”

“Your father’s in the marine corps. I listen to what he says. You,” he said, shaking his head. “There is nothing further to say.”

“Sir, I’m begging you, please let me have the dog.”

Alix broke in, “What is your problem, man?”

About that time, a police car came up the hill. Josiah recognized the man once he got out of the car. It was the same officer from earlier, the one who’d been convinced there was more to Josiah’s story. “You’re back?” he said. “I didn’t figure you’d leave well enough alone. He bothering you again, sir?”

“It’s fine,” Josiah said. “We’ll leave. We’re going. We were just going to ask if it was all right if we picked up the dog. He found her, Officer. I just want to take her home.”

“Is that right?” Officer Oglseby said. “You have his dog?”

“I have his father’s dog. I spoke with him on the phone. He is on his way to pick up the animal. I want him to go.” He gestured at Josiah.

“You heard him,” Officer Oglseby said. “You’re on his property.”

Josiah took one last look at Machado. He’d have liked to break his nose. Take what was his, but the day had been too long, the hours settling in him like large stones. He turned and walked away from the house, back through the woods, and when he passed

Winnie, he could see that she was breathing hard into the dirt. The tremors hadn't been out of fear. He'd done his reading. They'd been because of dehydration, they'd been her muscles cramping. He lifted her up off the ground, carried her to the car and lay her in the backseat, put the air on high and on cold. He turned the engine over and Alix's presence beside him was like something expected and given no attention, the wheel and its turns a blur, the distance short he knew but feeling like a thousand miles.

Winnie stayed overnight at the E-Vet. Things looked all right, but she needed to take it easy a while, stay out of the sun. He and Alix drove out. The day seemed easier suddenly, no longer weighted with the need of making things right with his father. He drove out to the high school where Hadley would be in the morning. They got out and the two of them sat on the steps, where inside the moonlight reflected off the scarred fire-red paint of the lockers. Josiah thought about her, how she'd be here tomorrow, walking these halls, how they must have felt to her. "She needs a date to this dance," he said. "I told them I know somebody."

"What if they won't go with her?"

"Then we'll go with her, or we'll take her out that night, I don't know."

Alix stood and opened the passenger side of her car, stuck the key in and turned it so that the radio worked without starting the engine. She switched CDs in the stereo, and in a minute, Del Shannon was playing "That Little Town Flirt." She came out and made him stand. He looked around. He watched her dance. He didn't need heaven. He had all this.

THE WEIGHT OF GRACE

I'm not sleeping, just lying there in the dark, when the hallway light flicks on, making a line below the door like a laser. Our cat, Van Gogh, stirs next to me. Once feral, he stuck around after we caught him with others from his litter. The vet insisted he get the half-moon sliced from his ear, marking the fixed from unfixed. There's the soft pad of Sophie's bare feet down the tile floor, and then my door groans open. In the doorway, Sophie's shape emerges, and I stare at the outline of her short, wavy hair, burnished slightly at the edges in the light. She bathes with this mango-melon shampoo, and I'm certain I smell its scent even from across the room. "Dad," she says. Her voice is confident, stern. "They're loud again."

I don't know if she means fighting or sex. We've heard the neighbors doing both, and it's too soon to explain the latter to my four-year-old daughter.

I guess I should tell you how I got into this mess. My name's Carter Eldridge. I'm a pharmacist and I'm divorced. My daughter's a beacon of light, the only thing I feel certain is shot through with God anymore. I work and I provide, but there's no greater job than keeping her safe until she's ready for the world. I've been a Presbyterian since birth, P.C.A.-branch. I like the headier, intellectual style of the sermons. How they're not afraid to talk about the doctrine of hell. But, I married a non-believer, and I married her because I got her pregnant. Now, Sophie's divided between two lives—one Christian with me, one not with her mother—and it's my duty to show her Christ tenfold because of this.

My ex-wife, Natalee, left for many reasons, but mainly because she wasn't a believer. I pressured her to accept Christ, desired for her to be part of the elect as Calvin

termed it, but she was not interested. She claimed she needed the space, that her journey was hers. I don't get that at all. She had an affair with a man named Byron, whom she's still with. She kept the house, and I'm living in the rental until my new place is built.

I suppose there are things I've enjoyed about singleness. The Apostle Paul desired that all could be single as he was, but his circumstances were not like mine. But my house is cleaner than it's ever been, I'm allowed a cat, and Sophie has a home where there is no fighting. Except for the neighbors. They're awful.

Right then, I'm aware their dog, a blue pit, has been barking the past ten minutes. They're likely fighting. I switch my lamp on and get up, slip into my house shoes. I place Sophie in the bed next to Van Gogh. "Try to sleep in here; Papa will take care of it." I turn the light back off, cross the room and shut the door behind me, then hit the hallway light too as I head towards the front door. Outside, the night is balmy. There are crickets, the racket of tree frogs plastered to our windows, and I smell rain. I walk over and stand outside the windows of their living room. He shouts, "I'll fucking hit you again." When the fist lands I sidle up to their porch, pause before knocking. She is crying.

I consider just calling the police, but the idea bothers me. You read the Bible, you know we're to hold one another accountable. Certain things in the community are everyone's business. We've forgotten this, though, traded it in for individualism. I beat on the door with the side of my fist.

Their porch light snaps on. At the window to the left of the door the curtain parts and his gaze meets mine. He opens the door in a t-shirt, and bright orange mesh shorts.

His hair is short and blond and he has a face that could get him a good job if he'd act right. Handsome, save for his heart. "Your problem?" he says.

"I heard you hit her," I say.

He screws his face up. "I don't hit her," he says.

"Yeah, you do," I say, "and your dog's keeping us up, too. Get him inside and get quiet or I'm calling the police."

Inside, she sits on a rundown couch, passing her palms over her eyes.

I look past him at her. "Do you need any help—."

She says, "No, mind your business, please."

He looks at me, cocks his leg to the side and breaks wind. "You got anything else to say, 700 Club?"

I shake my head, turn and start back for the house, and he shuts the door.

Their back yard door clamors open. He tells the dog shut up two or three times, then the dog shrieks and quiets. I walk up to my door. Sheet lightning pulses inside the clouds.

It rains hard. I get Sophie dressed, fix her lunch, and get her to brush her teeth. Van Gogh heads out the door when I open it, leaps onto the banister and watches, safe from the rain. My shift begins at 11:00 AM, ends around 9:00 PM. It's allergy season and the day will likely be busy. I step outside to get the paper. Rain falls on the roofs across the street, fogging out the space between houses. Reminds me of God's grace, how the rain falls on the just and the unjust, and I pray peace for my neighbors and that I

would be good in their eyes. The paper lies in sitting water, and I snatch it up and shake off the plastic. When I head back towards the house, the neighbor calls out, and lifts a hand. Motions me over. My hair and shirt are getting soaked, and I'd rather just head inside, but I sprint over, nod and give him a smile.

He takes a seat on his porch swing, offers me the flaking, dull green chair nearby. Water drips down my face and I pass a hand through my hair.

“Just thought I'd tell you I'm sorry about all of that last night,” he says.

I want to believe him, but he reeks of alcohol and can't be sincere.

“Things've been hard,” he says. “Money problems.”

I stand up. “Maybe you should stop spending money on alcohol.” A spray of rain comes under the porch. “And I don't know if you know this, but a dog needs exercise. How'd you like to be stuck in that back yard the whole day?”

He glares at me and leans into the right arm of the swing, props his legs. “You're a real gentleman, aren't you?” he says. “One who's got it figured out and can hand it on to the rest of us.”

I take this moment to evangelize. “No, I don't know a thing. Other than what's been revealed thanks to God's grace. You live your life to tell people, and some will believe. Now, let me ask you: what is it you believe? I look into that house, and I don't see the triune God at work.”

He laughs. “If you're a preacher what are you doing down at that Rite-Aid?”

I've asked myself the same question. “Let's focus on you,” I say.

“No, let’s don’t,” he says. He gets to his feet and gets in close, and he’s a good five inches taller than me. “Let’s hear more from you—you’re the know-it-all in the white coat, the saint. I’ll give you the porch, tell the neighborhood.” He takes the chair I was sitting in and moves it down off the porch into the yard. “Rain or shine, let’s hear it.” He plops down and drops of rain darken his t-shirt.

“My daughter’s got to get to daycare,” I say. The rain comes down hard all the way to my front porch steps. I pass a wet hand over Van Gogh’s head, matting his fur some between his ears: a thing he likes. He scrubs where I’ve touched him with his paw, bathing. I’m running late, and the folks at school won’t be pleased that Sophie isn’t on time. Natalee will probably get a call about it. It’s the second time this has happened. I go in and make sure Sophie eats something, and then I carry her to the car, umbrella overhead. The engine turns over, and I switch the wipers on. Water slings off from right to left, returning as quickly as it goes. I’ll need to drive slowly, making Sophie even later. I back out and into the road, put the Toyota in drive. As we’re pulling away, drapes of rain run down my window, making the view clear. I didn’t catch his name, and I’m bothered by that, but he’s out in the weather on the other side of his house, barefoot, going after his dog. A snapped piece of tether juts out from around the dog’s neck. At least he’s finally getting out.

My coat buttoned, I head into Rite-Aid thankful for the rain. Likely, it will make the day slow and that’s all right with me. I like my job because I know people and their needs. Knowing what illnesses certain folks struggle with, I know how better to pray for

them. Often, people go to the pharmacy and it's difficult. I do my best to alleviate any unnecessary snags for our clients. We've been rated well in Leona, and I'm proud of that. The clerk, Bryan, asks me how I'm doing when I walk in. He knows I'm late and knows that's rare. I nod and move along. It's spring and the seasonal aisles upfront are stocked with the necessities for a luau or a trip to the beach: leis, citronella, yard flamingoes. I prefer Halloween. Despite the Presbyterian tradition's frowning on Halloween, I've never minded. Kids ought to be able to have fun without having to worry about a razor in their Laffy Taffy. The issues are with the adults, and not the kids. That's usually the case. I pass the photo shop and the frozen food section and head in through the door to the back counter. I've got three people who work the pharmacy with me. Jiah, a South Korean girl who is working towards being a pharmacist herself. The other's Samuel, a psychology student at the community college on the coast, and then there's Ryne, who goes by the name Ryno. He's overweight, bearded, smokes incessantly, but he's good at counting pills.

Before I've settled in, Mrs. Rainey's shows up to the counter. Her son's sickly, has asthma, and was also born with a caved-in chest. Typically, she's here for an antibiotic or an inhaler. Today she's handed me a prescription for cough medicine.

"How's Kevin?" I ask. I punch her data into the computer. She's got good insurance, a card with the information there, and I don't have to check or memorize a thing.

A pretty woman, she sighs, rolls her eyes sweetly. “Carter, it’s the same story year after year. The doctor says he’ll outgrow some of it, but it’s killing him and me. He takes it on the chin, though, gets all the work done and goes back to school.”

My guess is her insurance won’t cover this medicine. It’s seventy dollars and basically Robitussin. She’ll insist there’s a difference, but I send it over anyway. When they finally respond, it’s as I predicted: they won’t pay for this prescription. I gently tell her the reasons behind their decision, and she tells me I have to be joking.

“I’m not, but it’s the same as an over-the-counter like Robitussin,” I say. I point to the section where the cough medicine’s stocked, but she’s not done.

“Why would a doctor give me this instead of just telling me to buy Robitussin?”

I’m about to answer when Ryne says Natalee is on line one. “Tell her hold a minute,” I say.

Mrs. Rainey’s finally satisfied after I show her the ingredients of both medicines, but she’s appalled her doctor would try to get anyone to spend seventy dollars if they didn’t have to. I understand her frustration, and tell her it’s likely because her son has asthma that the Tussionex was prescribed in the first place. I tell her I enjoy what I do, but remind her that there are people in all trades who aren’t in it for the noblest of reasons. As we’re checking out, Ryne says Natalee hung up, then called again.

I pick up and say, “Hey, Alee.”

“Alee?” she says.

I haven't called her this since we divorced, probably not since our marriage dissolved. Alee's a name her friends and loved ones use, and I stopped being one of those a while ago. "Yeah, don't people call you that?" I say.

"Oh, sorry, Carter," she says. "There for a second I thought you might be glad I called."

"Thought I'd throw you off," I say. "Make it harder to fuss."

"And why would I fuss at you?"

I sit down in a rolling chair and lean back against the wall, the telephone dock attached above my head, the cord snaking down along my chest and to the floor. "I made Sophie late. They didn't call you?"

"Not yet," she says. "Hey, listen, I need to talk to you. Do you think you could carve out some time later this week?"

The chair groans when I lean forward. "I don't like your tone," I say. Jiah's counting pills in an adjacent row, and her eyes cut over to me.

Natalee whistles into the line, a long, high note. "Somebody's tough guy today."

"Just tell me now," I say.

"Will you be anywhere tonight where I can talk to you?" she says. "I'll come to you."

I've got a feeling I know what she's going to tell me: she's engaged. I don't know what this has to do with me, unless it means changes for Sophie, and I want those kept to a minimum. She's been through enough of those. "I'll be out at the house later tonight, checking the progress."

When she asks what time I tell her 9:30 or 10:00 when I'm off, and that there are four people lined up at the counter and I am needed.

Later in the day, it doesn't look like I'll be walking around the lot of my new place. The rain lashes the cars in the parking lot, people huddle under umbrellas and slickers for the Red Box. The big windows are steamed up, washed with the color of the traffic lights and fast food chains on the corner. I fill a few more prescriptions, one for Tamiflu, which is rare in April, and take a call from a frantic father who's afraid he's given his son too high a dose of Nyquil.

The last couple of hours are slow, and I gather my things, tell those working goodbye and head out to the car. The parking lot glistens wet, and the rain's been reduced to gusts. My weather app says there will be more later, which means Natalee and I will likely be talking in the car, parked before the lot. I drive out towards the neighborhood, a place that represents a new start for me. My realtor's a friend from church who recommended this spot. It has a lot of potential as a development. There are plenty of kids, and I feel good about Sophie spending time here. When I pull up Natalee's beaten me. Her taillights glow against the asphalt, and I pull in behind her.

The wind shifts low, gray-black clouds across the sky. The house is in the early stages: clean, linear, and promising. I switch the Toyota off and get out. At the driver's side, she rolls down the windows and tells me to come around and get in and I do so. There's not a ring on her finger, and I'm relieved.

"It's looking good out here," she says. "Does it have a pool?"

“No pool,” I say. “Too many kids around.”

She’s wearing a white frilly top under her rain jacket, a skirt. She wears hose and her feet are bare, her heels next to my feet in the floorboard. “You are impossible,” she says. “Do you ever find joy? I mean, for all the Jesus in you, there’s not an ounce of fun.”

I shift and stare out the window. “Do you ever watch the news? There’s reason to be troubled.”

“So you deal by not letting Sophie have a pool?”

“I don’t need a pool. There’s a community pool at the Y.”

“Or you could bring it into your home. Just a thought.”

“I had a few thoughts for you; you weren’t interested. What’s this you need to tell me?”

She turns the air on high. “Byron wants me to leave with him. He’s taking a job, New York Life in Atlanta.”

“You have custody of Sophie,” I say. “You can’t be serious.”

“Sophie will be fine.”

I lean forward in the seat. “Will she? I don’t follow.”

She slips off her seatbelt and turns towards me. “There are good schools there, opportunities for me—Carter, I can’t stay here. I told you I wanted to move when we were married.”

“And I didn’t, and you got what you wanted in Byron, and now that’s not enough either. I’d go into what genuine satisfaction is, but you’ve never cared.”

She laughs through her nose. “Since when were you ever satisfied, Carter? I wonder what the fuck you’d do if the whole world came to Jesus. What would you have to worry about then?”

I close my eyes, reach out and angle a vent towards my face. The cold air feels good. “You try taking Sophie to Atlanta, we’re going to court; it’s that simple.”

She starts to speak, stops and then grips the steering wheel with both hands. “You’d put her through that?”

“You’re not even married to him—.”

“Oh, Jesus, spare me your morality, Carter, I’ve had a lifetime without it and I’m just fine.”

The rain picks up in the headlights.

“I wanted to ask you to come with us, pick up and follow us there,” she says. “It’s not like you can’t find a job.”

I motion out towards the lot. “I just built this fucking house, Natalee. Haven’t lived in it and you’re telling me it’s a waste of time.” I try to hold onto something, the promise that all things work for the good of those who love the Lord, but it means nothing right now. I get out of her car and head back to my own.

When I reach home I get out and call for Van Gogh. Usually if it’s raining, he’ll stay under the porch, leap up through the banister when I call. It’s dark and he’s been out too long. The rain saps my voice. I get up on the porch, cup my hands and holler and look out into the street. A sodden mound cuts the current of water running along the

curb. I hold off going over. Let myself wait before any such conclusion. But then I see the pit, his nose down in the sopping grass, searching out a scent. I go over to the curb. Van Gogh's been mauled, fur torn from his muscles. My feet get wet when I cross out into the street, and I shine the flashlight on my phone at the curb. There's blood, tooth marks. I lift him up, go back to the porch and lay him on the floor. Telling Sophie's the last thing I want to do. For the first time, there's no control. I quote Calvin—that God leads us to Himself like rain drops towards the river. The dog hunkers down when I approach. His collar gripped, I drag him towards my vehicle, his nails scraping the pavement in resistance. I open the cargo door, strain to lift him up and then shove him into the backseat. His coat is soaked, and he smells like wet dog. In the car I turn the engine over again and pull back out into the street, heading towards work. In the cargo space the dog stays mostly silent, looking out, an occasional whine escaping. He's visible in my rearview, and passing headlights wash across his face.

Before going to Rite-Aid I make a stop at a grocery store nearby. I run through the hot rain, go in and grab a thick, marbled steak and pay for it at the front. I'll need a lie for why I'm returning to work, and I plan to tell them I've left my phone. I've never stolen from work before, ever, and Loss Prevention won't suspect me if they do discover the pills missing. The sliding doors whoosh open and I enter, nod at the clerk working the night shift and give her my lie. I reach the counter. It's dim back there. Moths titter at the drive-thru window. The Digoxin's located on the second to last aisle, top shelf. The pills rattle out into my hand, ten total. Leaving the desk, I wave to Renee, who is stocking diabetic socks. The movie bin catches me in the side on the way out.

I reach the car and stop. The dog's in the front seat. I open the door to get in, but he's torn into the steaks already. I can't use them. There's nothing left and he licks his chops in loud smacks. I jerk him over and attempt to pry open his jaws. He struggles and I pinch his jowls harder, but I can't open his mouth with one hand and force pills with the other. I let him go and lean over the driver's seat, breathing. When he snaps down I don't see it, just feel the bones in my right hand fracture, an explosion of color. He bounds past me and out of the car onto the parking lot with a thump. The foot pounds of pressure from the dog breaking in like the weight of grace. I try to recover him, but he won't come to me.

I drive home with one hand. Moving my fingers is painful. She—I don't know her name, never asked and this bothers me—is out in the street, and she waves me down as I roll up. She asks me if I've seen their dog by chance, tells me her boyfriend's looking a few blocks up. I tell her I have, ask her where he is and that I'll get him, too. We'll bring the dog home together.

BITTER KEEPER

From the living room, Parker watched his younger brother. Bryce sat forward in one of the deck chairs, his gaze back on the iPhone Parker was paying for. He was skinny and his head was shaved. He wore sweatpants and a dark green, puffy jacket against the cold, his socked feet on the newly-finished cedar. A cigarette burned in his hand, and he swiped the screen, dragged hard. Parker did not know what to do with him. Bryce was nineteen, twelve years younger, and he'd returned home about a year prior. He'd avoided college and traveled to sub-Saharan Africa. Once there, he'd ditched the orphanage he'd signed up with and was missing until he had need: a missionary doctor's tests showed Bryce had typhoid fever. Parker recalled Bryce Skyping from the hospital room: face blotched with fever, tubes strung from a hand weakly giving a thumbs up. Parker had never felt more irresponsible.

Though troubled by Bryce's leaving, he'd made no effort to stop him, nearly breaking his word to their late mother that he would look after him. Bryce had not made it easy, though. Since coming back he'd failed to hold down a job and get his own place, had been arrested for driving drunk, and showed no interest in going back to school. Parker was Head Supervisor of Transporting at St. John's Hospital in Leona, and he'd given Bryce a job only to be forced to fire him for smoking during assignments.

At the front door, Parker's wife, Angela, keyed the lock and came in, grocery bags rustling. She made her way into the living room, wearing a white tank top, a long tan sweater and jeans, tractor gloves hanging out from her back pocket. She wore brown boots with a few straps and buckles on them. The gloves were for the hawk. She'd taken

up falconry since Bryce had moved in, and spent most of her time now with the bird. Angela had tried to go without the gloves at first, “To experience the hawk’s authentic self,” she’d said, but when the hawk had gotten spooked and gashed her knuckles open, she’d consented and worn the gloves. Now, she kept them on her all time. Her brown hair was in one long braid and draped over her shoulder. She was a nurse, and she and Parker had met at the hospital.

Parker followed her into the kitchen. “There more bags?” he said.

She started to say what sounded like “Yes,” and then set the bags on the counter and paused. “It’s fine,” she said.

“Well, are there more or not?” he said.

She looked at him and ran her hands down the length of the braid, gripped it and let it hold their weight. “There are, but I don’t need you to get them.”

He knew what she was telling him. She’d talked to him about moving in with a friend from work, at least until Bryce was gone. The rest of the groceries were for her to take there. “So that’s happening today?” Parker said.

Angela nodded. She turned to the freezer and took out the sack of bagels, went to the counter and stuck one into the toaster. Behind her, a bench stood before the front window of the kitchen, and she sat on its edge.

The back door opened and Bryce came in. He walked over to the bar where Parker stood. “Will you pop one of those in for me, Ange?” he said.

Angela looked up, gave him a brittle smile. “It’ll be the last time.”

Bryce turned to Parker. “What’s up her ass?”

His brother was taller than he was, a thing Parker did not like. Parker was of average height, had short, black hair and a beard. He sized up his brother. He was stouter than Bryce, and knew if it came to it he could win a fight. He'd never had such thoughts about Bryce. Were things coming to that? "It's a little crowded around here is all," Parker said.

Bryce said, "Oh, you mean she wants me gone."

Angela's bagel sprung from the toaster. She got up and opened a cabinet. "Don't act surprised," she said, reaching for the peanut butter.

"You can stay with Dove," Parker said. "If she'll have you." Dove was their grandmother. When it became clear that their mother, Pam, was not going to get better, their father Glenn stopped going to the hospital, and Dove took over taking them to their visits. "She needs you to go over there anyway. You can take that dog to the shelter for her."

"You didn't already do that for her?" Angela said. She crunched her bagel.

Parker took a seat at the kitchen table. "No, he didn't. And he had nothing better to keep him from it either."

Bryce lifted his hands and let them fall. "She wants me to execute that dog for her."

"She wants you to drop it off at the shelter, Bryce. Stop the theatre."

"Look, asshole," Bryce said, jabbing himself with a finger, "I'm the one who almost died. You think I'm going to jump to do that to something else?"

Parker closed his eyes, pinched the bridge of his nose. “You had typhoid. The dog may get adopted.”

“Big dog like that,” Bryce said, “full grown. No way.”

“Then why don’t you get a job, get your own place, and take care of him yourself?” Angela said.

Parker began playing with the salt shaker. It was a watermelon, and he longed for spring, to slice open a watermelon, to salt it and eat it in the warm, dying light of afternoon. Parker hated winter, and this had been a cold, dreary one, and aside from his promise to his mother, he felt like the winter made him too weak, too apathetic to set Bryce straight. “You’ll go to Dove’s,” he said. “And you’ll take her car and take that dog to the shelter. Got it?”

“Aye, aye,” Bryce said. He walked past Parker and out of the room.

Angela pushed herself up onto the kitchen counter. She licked a light smear of peanut butter from her thumb. “You sure that’s a good idea?”

Parker walked over to her, stood between her knees. He laid his forehead on her shoulder and closed his eyes.

Her posture was hard. She patted him lightly on the neck. “I’ve got to go,” she said.

“Just sixty more seconds,” said Parker.

“Jump up, would you?” She began sliding off the counter.

He backed up and sat on the bench. “You’re making me choose, aren’t you?”

Angela looked at him over her shoulder. “I’ll be okay,” she said. “I’ve got my hawk.” She waved her scarred knuckles at him and left the room.

*

In the car, Bryce turned up Madonna’s “Like a Prayer.” He danced in his seat, moving his open hand in-and-out with the variation of notes Madonna hit. Parker reached over and put the volume on low. “Enough, okay?” he said.

“What? I’m feeling good enough to dance and it’s a drag?”

“Sort of,” Parker said. He felt bad asking Dove to take on Bryce. He wasn’t sure she’d agree to it. Dove was the last, stable bridge Bryce had at home, and if he lost that, they were out of options.

“I’ve told you guys. I just think we need to take things really slow,” Bryce said.

“Bryce it’s been a year. We can’t go any slower.”

“You could if you’d been there.”

Parker looked at his brother. They pulled up to a stoplight. “Then maybe you should check yourself in somewhere. Do what Dad said.”

Bryce kicked the dash. “Oh, come on,” he said. “Dad never said that, Dad’s just doing whatever Sara tells him to. She’s the reason I can’t stay there. The reason you don’t go over there.”

His brother had a point. They’d never gotten along with their stepmother. Though Sara would deny it, she’d seen them as a burden, baggage, a thing you just have to accept about the person you’ve married. It was one of the things he loved about Angela’s parents. He remembered how in awe he was the first time he’d gone with her to

visit: how easily she'd coasted to the refrigerator, popped the tab on a Coke, and then gone to the pantry for Oreos. Not a care in the world about someone complaining. But, for the first time, Parker felt he identified with Sara. Bryce had been living in their house, eating their groceries, using their hot water. "Yeah, Sara doesn't want you there. But that's not why you're not on your feet."

"Well, you did fire me. I wasn't doing a bad job."

"Bryce you were cutting assignments. We were having to hand off patients to the other employees because no one knew where you were."

"You said I could take smoke breaks."

"Not as many as you were taking."

"No one told me."

Parker turned left off of Beach Boulevard. "No, it couldn't possibly be your fault." A few blocks up was Dove's house, and he didn't want to show up and upset her, arguing with Bryce. "Take it easy and get this thing done for Dove. She doesn't let you stay, you'll come back with me a few more days."

Dove's house was one-story, the brick painted a pale blue, finish flaking from the steps. He parked and cut the engine and they got out. They walked over the winter-killed grass and up onto the porch, knocked and opened the door. "Knock, knock," Parker said. The house was quiet, the hardwood floor clean, magazines fanned out on the tiled coffee table and the television off. "Dove?" Parker said. He said her name again and when no answer came he moved down the hallway and into the bedroom, and from the window there saw her lying on her side in the back yard.

Bryce got there first, crouching next to her. The dog sat nearby on the brick patio, watching: a big, German Shepherd-looking thing she'd taken in off the streets. Parker swept Dove's strawberry blond hair from her face, and she came to a little, then passed out again. "I think it's pain," Parker said. "Check her hip." He curled his arms under her shoulders and when Bryce uncovered her side there was swelling and bruising. They each took a side, supported one of her arms and legs, like Parker had been taught, and then carried her from the back yard through the gate to the car. When Bryce tried to open the passenger side door and get in, Parker hit the lock switch. He stared at Bryce over the roof of the car, pointed back to the house. "Get her car and take that dog to the shelter."

Bryce jostled the handle. "Open the door, Parker."

"If you'd done it before now we wouldn't be here."

"You don't know that."

"I'll know it when she comes to." He unlocked the door and got in, cranked the engine and left his brother standing in the yard.

*

Parker did not have to call in to work. He simply went down the hallway from the ER waiting room and let the other supervisors know. X-rays showed that Dove had chipped her left pelvic bone. Surgery would not be necessary, but she'd be off her feet a while. She was resting now, letting the pain meds do their work. Parker called Angela, and when he told her, she said she'd be on her way, but that she could not stay long, she had one of the birds, and could not leave her in the car in the lot.

When Angela arrived he met her out in the parking lot, got in the car with her.

“Well, what do you think now?” she said.

The bird was in the back seat, stirring a little in a big, rectangular cage that took up half of the backseat, nearly touched the roof. On its head was a leather cap covering its eyes and skull. “Will he freak out if you take that off?” He realized the moment he asked that he’d never inquired about her hobby before.

She looked at the bird, smiled into one cheek. “You never know. She may love riding in cars, but, the hood keeps her calm, always.”

Parker looked at the bird, too. The thing’s back was to him, he noticed, its head cocked in Angela’s direction, tassels from the hood arrayed on its neck. Its beak drew down almost into a hook. “What kind is she?” he said.

“She’s a goshawk,” Angela said. “If she’d turn around, she’d show you her pretty chest. It’s like a, white tiger or something.”

“She staying with you tonight?”

Angela looked out the windshield. “Yeah, I brought the hackbox over to Lindsay’s. Won’t be long and this little thing will be ready for release.”

“Hackbox?”

“You’ve got a lot of catching up to do. Or we do, I guess. Where’s Bryce?”

“He is—,” he said and stopped. “I assume he is taking the dog to the shelter.”

“You sound about ready to give up,” Angela said. A rabbit’s foot was strung around the rearview mirror, dyed hot pink, and Angela reached over and rubbed it with her thumb and forefinger.

“He’s my brother, I can’t. I made a promise.”

“You promised your mother you’d look after him. You didn’t promise her you’d put up with his shit your whole life.”

“I know. I don’t know what she would do, though. She’s not here.”

“He’s the reason Dove’s in that hospital bed.”

“Angela, we could have gone and gotten the dog, we didn’t.”

“And we didn’t because you wanted your brother to ‘do something responsible for once.’”

“Either way, staying with Dove is out of the question for him now. He can crash there until she’s home, but I don’t know where he’s going to go.”

Angela stuck the key in the ignition. “We’ve got to roll,” she said.

“You’re not coming in?” Parker said.

Angela shook her head. “Let me know when Dove’s up and talking. I’ll come in then.”

“Come by and see you later?”

She pulled a breath through her teeth. “I don’t know about that. That might be up to Lindsay, her place and all.”

Parker nodded. “All right. Come see me later?”

“Depends,” Angela said.

He told her he’d call her and got out of the car, started to shut the door hard and remembered the bird. He swung it slowly, nudged it to with his hip. Her Buick rumbled to a start and backed out, left the parking lot.

*

Bryce had not answered his phone, and Parker had called at least ten times. Parker drove back out to Dove's. The car was gone and so was the dog: a good sign so long as he'd done what he was told. Still, it shouldn't have taken this long to drop off the dog and get back. He wondered if there was a surrender fee, and if there was, Bryce was broke and he'd still have that dog. He called his father.

"Hey, Park," his father answered. "I was just salting a grapefruit."

"Save me one. You haven't heard from Bryce, have you?" Parker sat on the chipped steps of Dove's house.

"Sure haven't, why?"

"Oh, he's just, you know, M.I.A. again."

"He'll be back. He'll need money at some point."

"He doesn't have any now," Parker said.

"He has his ways," Glenn said.

Parker picked a flake off the finish. "That's what I'm afraid of."

"He'll turn up," Glenn said. He slurped his grapefruit. "Wait it out."

"Yeah, you call me if you hear anything." Parker hung up.

*

By evening it had gotten colder and begun to rain lightly. Parker went outside onto Dove's porch and stood there, listening. Here and there the rain started crackling in the leaves, sounding like sleet. He walked out and watched the arms of his coat. Grains of ice fell and tumbled past the crook of his elbow. Parker wanted Bryce off the road, to know he was somewhere safe. There were a few of Bryce's friends he could contact, an

ex-girlfriend who worked at a bakery. But if he was going to start dropping by and asking around, he needed to do so now. The roads might not be safe before too much longer.

*

Parker eased the Toyota up the hill, craning to see the place. The house was red-brick, fixed at a dead end in a decent neighborhood, the yard well-kept. This surprised him, but Bryce had to be inside. Dove's Honda was parked out front. Bryce's ex-girlfriend—a moody, yellow-faced girl with a nose-ring—had told him where to go. She didn't know for sure, but her guess was better than Parker's. She'd been right: cars were parked crookedly at the yard's edge and in the gravel, one's tires sunk in the wet grass off the driveway. Parker turned the Toyota left and pulled in at the front of the line, shut the engine off and got out.

In the driveway, his shoes crunched gravel and hushed noise came from the house: music—blaring from inside. Parker reached the porch and knocked on the door and waited, doubtful anyone would hear over the racket. No one answered. He tried the knob, then pounded harder. When no one showed he made his way around back.

A tall, wooden fence ran along the back yard. Parker tried the gate. A combination padlock was looped into the handle. He held it in his palm before letting it thump back against the gate. "Shut up tight, aren't you?" he said. He studied the fence, wishing he were taller. He figured he could climb it. He checked for a dog warning, didn't see any. Through the space in the boards he looked at the back yard. Pale light fell across the yard from windows housed in a screened porch. There was a pool, covered

in a tarp, piles of dead leaves weighing it down. He looked back over his shoulder.

Three windows lined the side of the house. The first one was locked, but the second one slid up when he pushed. “Missed one,” he said. He hoisted himself up onto the sill, angled down head first, the blinds dragging down his back. He dragged himself across the carpet until all of him was inside.

The music was louder now. The room was dark, cold, and when his eyes adjusted there was a bed and dresser, an open closet. He got to his feet and shut the window, locked it. “Jesus, Bryce,” he said. “Did I just break and enter?” The window had been open, he told himself. Still, this was a situation he’d never figured being in. He’d hoped it wouldn’t get any worse than bailing Bryce out for a DUI at three in the morning. But, here he was, sneaking into someone else’s house. He made his way to the door, opened it and looked out into the hallway.

Then something, a thing shaped with speed and strength, took hold of his thigh and took him to the floor. In the struggle Parker recognized the face of the dog. He’d been trained for this, in the event an intruder broke into Dove’s home. Parker felt teeth tear at his collarbone. He took hold of the dog’s collar and shoved off with his feet, scrambled towards the light at the hallway’s end before the dog reached him again. He thought of how it must have been for Dove, just like this, panicked and slow before the lights went out. It seemed to end almost as soon as it began. There was his brother, before him, holding the dog back as it strained. Even after it all stopped, Parker continued shoving back with his heels, against the wall. He couldn’t make himself stop.

There was blood on his hand, in the cotton hanging out of his torn coat, on his thigh and the floor where he'd slid.

“Hey, buddy, you with me?” a voice said. Bryce. He looked at his brother and saw his mother there, and let that come into focus. He breathed and stared until he felt his faculties return to him. A few more kids crowded around him. A girl with purple hair, a kid in ripped jeans and Converse. Someone had put a towel to his shoulder. They all held beers, offered him one. He waved a hand, he'd pass.

He reached up and bared his wound: it needed stitches. “You want me to drive you back to the hospital?” Bryce said.

“Take me home,” he said. They helped him up and out the door. The sleet rattled on the asphalt. “Drive slowly, but hurry,” he told his brother. He lay along the backseat and closed his eyes. He thought of Angela as Bryce drove him. She would drive home in the sleet for him, knit his wound neatly as the stitching reeled along that hawk's cap, a cap that shut out the world and brought a darkness that made all things safe.

Bryce waited with him there while Angela arrived. It took a long time, and he called her every few minutes, making sure she had not slid off the road or been in a wreck. When she arrived she came in, bits of ice glittering in her hair, a kit containing medical supplies in her hand. He spoke to her, but it didn't feel like he was the one speaking. It felt more like he stood outside of himself, watching her do her work. Her scarred hand looping the stitching into his skin, blotting iodine as she laced. Bryce sat on

the couch. Parker would go with her to release that bird. He'd ask if it would lift off from his hand.

ANCHORED HORSES

Will Currie sat on the ratty couch he'd bought from the Salvation Army. He'd opened the sliding door that led onto the balcony an inch, to smell the hot rain from an earlier shower and give the dog some outside air without getting caught. He'd not gotten used to the apartment smell: like new plaster and steam-cleaning solution, too fake to feel like home. In the few hours he'd had him, the dog helped with this some, but Will couldn't keep him. There was a no pet policy. He'd snuck him in late the night before, no one around. His apartment was on the second floor, so no one was likely to notice the dog splayed out in front of the gray light streaming through the gap. The dog looked like a Rottweiler, but shorter, stockier. There were cuts on his head, scars on his side. The thing looked tired, and had not made a sound since Will picked him up, had slept a lot, its eyes opening slightly every now and again whenever the breeze made the long, vinyl blinds clatter.

Will rested his shoes on the sheet of bottle-green glass atop the coffee table, next to his wife Deanna's father's old, worn-leather Bible. He'd been reading the Bible again, really for the first time on his own. Growing up, adults had taught it to him, had told him it was the most important book he'd ever read, but back then he had not needed answers the way he did now, and searching his memory, what little he recalled of their teaching did not aid him in the present. He'd been scouring the Bible to see if it said anything about step-parenting, that and he wanted to be someone who reminded Deanna of her father. A gentle Christian, if a bit too controlling. When he hadn't found what he was looking for, he started from the beginning, finding himself swept up in the stories. He'd

finished Genesis and Exodus, and had liked them both, though nothing else in either had struck him the way the sea killing Pharaoh's army had—the men, chariots, horses, everything crushed by the waves, drowned. The horses should have made it out alive. But overall, he was frustrated. Exodus gave rules for everything, from what to eat even to something as awful as sacrificing an animal, but nothing on how to be a father to a kid who wasn't yours.

The television was on a local news channel covering the damage from the tornado two days before. His own house had been on a few seconds of the footage, shots spanning the tree trunk crushed through the roof. Deanna had been interviewed saying she liked the idea of a wetland in her bedroom, of naming all the tadpoles: a put-on. Trevor had stood beside her with a hand on her nearest shoulder. You'd never guess, looking at him, that just three weeks prior he'd broken into someone's house and been caught at gunpoint. The man had promised not to press charges so long as Trevor went through rehabilitation. But there he stood, with Deanna. Currie resented that his life hadn't been at stake in the damage done to the house, the way Deanna's had, the way her kids Trevor's and Jane's had. He'd ridden the storm out at his office: the other place he'd been crashing in the six months since the tension between him and Trevor had forced him out of the house.

The air had gotten close and he got up off the couch and slid the door to, then sat down next to the dog and put his back against the wall, stroked the dog's hind leg. He ran a hand through his thinning blond hair. It was going on eleven and he still had not showered, was wearing a t-shirt bearing the logo of the company he worked for, Coastal

Auto Insurance. Things had been more routine before all this. The separation had him acting in ways unlike himself. He'd always liked dogs, abided by rules and let others break them if they pleased, but just two weeks ago he'd confronted a kid walking through the apartment complex.

He'd been on his way to work when he saw Karen, his superintendent, leave her office and go up the steps towards the courtyard. Karen was pretty with long, birdish legs and ringlets of black hair. "Excuse me, sir," she'd called to the kid. "We don't allow animals on the property. Don't come back." The kid had kept walking, then turned and mouthed off to Karen: "Why don't you get a real problem?"

"Why don't you watch your fucking mouth?" Will had said to him. "The lady told you to leave."

Karen had drawn a hand across the air in front of her neck. "Will, it's all right," she said.

Will kept going. "You and your fucking dog need to get on." The kid had been tall, capable-looking, and as Will got closer, he realized the guy was probably in his thirties, not his twenties as he'd first thought. The dog had patterns like a hound and cowered behind the kid as Will drew near, raking itself along the rough brick of a column at the front entrance. The kid patted the dog. "It's all right, Winnie," he'd said to her, then to Will, "why don't you take it easy? I'm not threatening anybody."

Will pointed to the road. "I don't care. Go." He walked until he stood almost chest-to-chest with the kid. The kid did not back down, and things seemed to have gone too far. Will wondered how Deanna's father might handle this. The man had never been

a fighter, even in all his strength. Cars passed on the road and the dog tugged herself off the sidewalk onto the asphalt and the kid pulled her back. “Stay out of the road, Winnie.” He’d turned to Will. “Do you just like violence, man?” He gripped the leash, tendons flaring in his hand.

Will stared at him. He was not angry at this kid and his dog. He was angry at Trevor, angry at Deanna for loving her punk son, at himself for somehow not being enough for Deanna. “No,” he’d said to the kid, aware of himself again. He’d reached for his wallet to give the kid his card and introduce himself but found his back pocket empty. He checked to see if Karen was watching. He wondered if winning a fight with the kid might make her want him around. Seeing she looked upset, he walked away.

He’d gone in, left the door open while he went to grab his wallet. When he went out, he found Karen waiting near the door. “Will, I appreciate your wanting to help,” she said, “but the boy was right, you needed to calm down. It’s not the first time somebody’s talked back to me.”

He shut his door, locked it. “I made a fool of myself,” he said. He waited for her to tell him he hadn’t and when she didn’t he brushed past her heading towards the parking lot.

She’d caught up with him, grabbed his shoulder to turn him around. “See to it it doesn’t happen again,” she’d said, the corners of her mouth drawn down. “There are kids around here,” she pointed behind her shoulder. “So heed your advice about watching your mouth.” She walked on ahead of him. He watched the smooth curve of her bottom

in her skirt. He accepted that he'd wanted to impress her, to have some purpose in this place.

Downstairs a door opened and then thumped closed, the sliding door trembling. The dog looked up, barked. "Hush," Will said. He stroked the dog from one ear down his side, touched the wide, pink scar traversing two ribs. He studied his own two fingers touching the scar: bent outward from being shut hard in a swinging pantry door, the middle one still healing from a recent break. He was right handed, and the accident made him hold a pen between his middle and ring fingers, also made it hard to do much useful with his right hand. He liked telling people he'd gotten the trait from his father, which was technically true, since his father had been the one who shut the door on his hand. Fathers and fathering would not leave his mind. His own failed attempt at step-fathering, which had led to Deanna announcing he'd stopped reminding her of Dad. He got up from the floor and crossed the room into the kitchen.

As Will had gotten to know Deanna's father, Jeff, he wanted to be like him. Someone people viewed as involved and able, needed. He was the kind of person who could take control of a situation without being resented, and thus he'd been good at dealing with Trevor's behavior—something Will was unable to do. Still, Jeff had not lived to see Trevor's recent stunts, the coming home late without calling, sometimes drunk. The last argument they'd had, Trevor had come at Will with a metal stool, leaving Will no choice but to pummel the boy in the stomach, leaving him breathless and drunk on the kitchen floor. Deanna had told him she regretted ever comparing him to her father. Dad would have found another way, she'd said. Will longed to remind her of him

again, to get to a place where even Trevor felt the same. The aqua-blue numbers on the stove clock read 8:06. The shelter would be open now.

The temporary loss of the house had brought him an opportunity. So had the rescue of the dog: an act that would impress Deanna. Deanna and the kids had been staying at her sister Lori's. Today, Will was going to take the dog over to the house, let Jane and Trevor enjoy it some, ask them to help him find a good home for him, then ask them to move into the apartment while the damages to the house were repaired. In Genesis, Joseph's brothers had sold him into the slavery. Despite their awful deed, great good had come from it in the end, Joseph becoming king, being reconciled to his family. Though he and Trevor had not gotten along, their problems had caused Will to get the apartment, and what had been a bad situation would now allow them back under the same roof.

His phone lay charging on the counter, next to the toaster and half a loaf of bread. He walked past the kitchen table, took out the charger and slid the drawer open for the phone book. The phone book had grown thinner in recent years, and he remembered when he could go to a pay phone, pick up the hefty, armored phone book and call almost anyone in town. People gave you more access to themselves back then, and he couldn't help but think it was a generational thing, the way Trevor didn't look at him like someone with authority, or someone he could trust. He looked up the number for the shelter again and then dialed. For a moment the line was silent, then it went to voicemail. The number likely a landline, that was odd. He hung up and tried again. This time, a ring. After several seconds, someone picked up: "Gulf Coast Animal, Hugh here. Could you hold,

please?” Before Will could answer he was on hold. In a few minutes, someone picked up: “Were you holding for someone?” A woman, the voice sounded lazy.

Will told her he’d rescued a dog. She interrupted him.

“Before you go on, sir, I’m to tell all callers that we are not accepting surrenders at this time.”

Will rested an elbow on top of the microwave. “So no dropping the dog off?”

“That’s right, sir,” she said. She continued talking, but just then the dog stood, put his head between the blinds and the glass. Will walked over and took him by the collar and pulled him back away from the door. The dog might need to go out, might be hungry. “I’m sorry, what?” he said to the woman.

“I said the storm displaced a lot of pets. That’s why we’re full. If you want, I can post a picture of the animal to Facebook if you send one, post your contact information as well. We’ve had some success with owners coming forward.

His phone beeped for call-waiting and he looked at the screen: Deanna. “Hold on a minute,” he told the woman, switched over. “Hey, everything all right?”

Deanna paused. “Yes,” she said. “Aside from all the new standing water, and I’m taking refuge in the car. It’s raining here. Are you at the office?”

“Still at the apartment,” he said, pulling out a chair from the table. He thought of her leaned back in the driver’s seat of her car, rain running down the glass in folds.

Deanna had straight, short brown hair not quite to her shoulders, freckles scattered along her cheekbones and the bridge of her nose, some on her shoulders.

“I just got a call from Trevor. The Mazda’s broke down out your way, he and a couple of friends. I can get him if you don’t want to, but thought you might like the chance.”

“Any of them scared of dogs?” Will said.

“I,” she said, “don’t know. Should they be?”

“I rescued a dog last night,” he said, resting a foot on the seat of the kitchen chair. “I found him near the house. Can’t leave him here.”

“I guess the apartment was getting lonely,” she said. “What’s he look like?”

“That’s not why I rescued him,” Will said. “He looks like a mutt. A black and orange mutt. Kind of chubby in a threatening way.”

“Sounds adorable. Why did you rescue him?” Deanna said.

Will walked over to the dog, stared. “I don’t know. He looked like he needed it. He looks beat.”

“Maybe you need him,” Deanna said, stressing “him.”

“If I keep him I can’t stay here, and he’d be yours, too, you know.”

“You should probably hang onto him for a while. He might teach you about loving something hard to love. He torn up anything yet?”

Will moved the blinds to look out the glass again. “No. Haven’t let him out of my sight.” The sun was behind a thick cloud, and in the dim of the apartment, the television had started to reflect on the wall like it was the end of the day. “And don’t say I don’t love Trevor.” He turned from the window and switched on the lamp next to the couch.

“It’s okay you don’t love him. He’s not yours.”

“Neither is Jane. You wouldn’t say the same about her.”

“Everyone loves Jane.”

“So I have no real ties with Jane?”

“I guess I just mean the dog could show you why I haven’t given up on Trevor. It was sort of a joke.”

“I never asked you to give up on Trevor.”

“Do you want to go help him or not?”

Will ran a hand down his face. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, I’ll take care of it. The dog and me.”

She told him where Trevor was, and when she was done, he tried to lighten things. “So are any of them afraid of dogs?”

“Take your chances. Maybe the dog will whisper you and Trevor into friendship.” she said. “I’ll see you at the house.”

Will looked at his phone. He called the shelter back, got the e-mail address to send them information. He held his phone up to the dog to take a photo: “Sounds like it’s best we see if someone’s looking for you,” he said. He checked his wallet for cash: two twenties. The dog needed to be fed, walked. He’d stop somewhere and grab some dog food on his way to help Trevor.

Trevor had broken down and pulled into the parking lot of a Mexican restaurant, now out of business. Will turned in and parked beside them, cut the engine. He got out

and let the dog follow, nodded to Trevor and his friends. “Any of you in need of a canine?” He opened the back door and took out the dog food, then looked around for something to pour it in. He turned to them. “You boys don’t happen to have a bowl or anything do you?”

“What, you smoke?” one of them said.

Will could not recall his name, even though Trevor hung out with him all the time. He was of average height, floppy curls over his eyebrows and ears. The other one, tall and dark-skinned, maybe Hispanic, laughed. Will started to say, “Not that kind,” but Trevor, his eyes on Will, backhanded the kid in the chest. “I’ll check,” Trevor said. He opened the back door on the passenger side of his car, leaned in and looked around. When he came out he held up a large, empty dip can. “You could use this,” he said.

Will shook his head.

Trevor was a good-looking kid, favored his father from the pictures he’d seen. He had short brown hair, a sharp nose that came to a handsome dull point, was solid-limbed. Looking at him, you wouldn’t think of how quickly he went primitive. How his anger typically came with violence. There were times Will wished Trevor’s father were still alive, that there was another man to hold the kid accountable, to get in his face with authority. “Pop that hood for me.”

While Trevor popped the hood, Will poured some food onto the pavement in front of the dog, who started eating before Will finished pouring, champing the nuggets.

“You have any idea why it stopped?” Will said

“If I knew I wouldn’t ask you to look,” Trevor said. He sort of laughed. A laugh he used whenever trying to appear respectful without actually doing so. “I don’t think it’s the battery. It still cranks.”

“Well it’s definitely not the battery if it cranks,” Will said. He did not know why he was here, trying to help this kid he didn’t even like. Moses had had patience with Pharaoh a long time. He won out, but there wouldn’t be any miracles getting this kid out of his life. His friend Marsh had told him to hold on until Trevor went to college, but at this rate, Trevor would flunk out of college at best, get kicked out at worst. “Tell me your name again?” Will looked out from under the hood and offered his hand to the one he’d met.

The tall one who had been crouched next to the dog interrupted, “I think he’s still hungry, man.”

“Get him some more food, it’s in the backseat, and what was your name?”

“Gabe,” he said and stood, headed to Will’s car.

“And yours?” He still offered his hand.

“Zach,” he said. “We’ve met.” He gave Will’s hand a shake.

“That’s why I said tell me again,” Will said. He stopped himself from shaking his head, turned and looked back under the hood. The other one poured the dog more food. Will felt the belts, checked the hoses and cables, adjusting his hand for the awkward fit of his fingers. “Crank it for me,” he told Trevor.

Trevor got back behind the wheel and turned the key. Nothing seemed off about the cranked engine. He stood looking, felt the boys’ eyes on him.

“Hey, man, you fight this dog?” Gabe said.

Will looked over his shoulder, shook his head. “Why?”

“I don’t know—the scars, man.” He held up the dog’s paw, ran a pointed finger down a splash of scar on the dog’s right front leg. “See that? He wasn’t born with that.”

“Only found him last night.” Will motioned for Trevor to shut the car off.

“He already finish that food again?” Zach said. Looking at his phone, Zach walked over to where Gabe was crouched, took up the bag of food and put it in the car.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with it,” he said. “We’ll have to tow it. On me.” He tried to smile.

Gabe was still in front of the dog, now pushing his jowls up with thumb and forefinger, making the dog look like he was growling. “Telling you,” he said. “These teeth. You see this one’s missing?”

“Yeah,” Will said. “I’ve seen a dog lose a tooth before.”

“Yeah, man, but this one’s not so old. I think you’ve got a fighter on your hands.” He smacked the dog’s back. “You’re a winner, eh?”

Zach was already in Will’s car. He held out his phone from the open door. “Website here says it’s probably either the transmission pan or the linkage. Whatever that means. I thought Trevor said you did cars.”

“Insurance. Not repairs. Give your folks my card.” Touching his back pocket, he remembered he’d left his wallet in the change tray in his car. He reached up and shut the hood. “It’s in there. Take a card if want it. You all going to help Deanna or I need to drop you off somewhere?”

“We’re helping Mom,” Trevor said, locking and then shutting the door to his car.

“You guys mind if I stop at the store again? If I’m going to have this dog around he’ll need a leash.” He led the dog up into the backseat as the others got in.

“We should probably book it,” Trevor said. “Mom’s been at the house a while now. She needs help.”

Will looked in the rearview at Zach and Gabe. “You guys in a hurry?”

Zach was grinning, looking out his window. “We should probably go.”

Will sat a second, key almost at the ignition. He brought it down to his lap. “What’s funny?” he said. “You’re all in a rush. We could get some lunch if you wanted.”

“I told you, Mom’s alone,” Trevor said. “I can eat later.”

His wallet lay in front of the gearshift, and he took it up and opened it. The other twenty was missing.

“Okay, I confess,” Zach said. He handed the twenty back over the seat. “Trevor made you sound less sharp. Just seeing if you’d notice.”

The bill was poised before his face, and he looked past it at Trevor. “You going to help him get away with it?”

“I didn’t know he’d taken it.”

“No bullshit, Trevor.”

“Look, man, just—.”

“You, shut up,” Will said to Gabe. He snatched the twenty from Zach’s hand and looked again at Trevor. “You didn’t know?”

Trevor lifted his hands. “No, I didn’t know. He was joking.” He motioned towards Zach, his eyes growing large.

The leather groaned as Will shifted in his seat. “Gabe, are they lying?”

“I was playing with the dog, man,” Gabe said.

Will started the engine, backed out and then pointed the car towards the road. It was lunch hour and traffic had picked up. He waited, turn signal clicking, the quiet in the car making him angry. “Just tell me the truth,” he said.

“I already did,” Trevor said. “I’m not a fucking liar.”

A driver motioned for Will to go and he turned right. “You’ve done some things,” Will said.

“Yeah, but I didn’t lie in any of it,” Trevor said.

“You tried to keep me from stopping again, knew I’d notice if I went somewhere and bought something,” Will said. “We’ll talk to your mother.” Noise might ease things. He turned on the radio. The stoplight switched to green and the traffic moved. Will made another right. “Taking what’s not yours isn’t a joke. You ever read your Bible?” When the three of them just sat there, he glanced over his shoulder at Zach. “I’m asking you especially.”

“Yeah, I mean not every day,” Zach said.

“It’s in the Ten Commandments,” Will said. “You’re not supposed to lie about your neighbor either, but I’m pretty sure lying in general is off-limits, too.”

“Don’t call me a fucking liar again,” Trevor said. “I mean it.”

He let the threat go, checked the rearview. The dog slept between the two boys, eyes closed, a hard sigh heaving from his chest. Gabe's hand rested between the dog's ears. "We'll talk about it with Deanna," Will said. "I had some other things I wanted to talk about, too, but I think it'll wait, if it gets talked about at all." Ahead, just before the interstate, was a pet supply store, and Will drove towards it. He found a parking spot, opened the door and let the dog crawl over Zach and out onto the ground. No one volunteered to go with him, so he went in alone.

The dog had a fat, muscular neck, and it took several tries to find the right collar. Will settled on a Martingale collar, grabbed a leash of the same color, thick and tough, unlikely to wear out or snap. He paid at the counter. The girl working there was black, pretty, hair black with a streak of violet over the right side of her face. "Your new friend's first leash?" she said.

"I don't know that I'm keeping him," Will said.

"Fostering? You'll keep him," she laughed. "Happens all the time, happened to me." She reached into a bin and fetched out a treat and the dog crunched down on it. "Yeah, I bet you've found your forever home." She looked up at Will and smiled.

Will walked towards the automatic doors and they whisked open. From the entrance he could see the boys around his car, phones to their ears. It was humid and sweat started to pop out on his forehead as he crossed the lot. The sun glared off windshields. When he reached the car, the boys seemed to distance themselves further. Each of Trevor's friends several cars down. He put the dog in and got back in the

driver's seat, but no one followed. He cranked up and rolled down the window. "Trevor, we going?" Trevor ignored him, talking into the phone. "Trevor," Will said.

He looked up and took the phone away from his mouth. "Mom says don't worry about it."

"What do you mean?" Will said.

"She says don't worry about it, that I can catch up with her later."

"You've got a ride?"

"Zach's calling someone." He turned back to his conversation.

Will leaned out his window. "Don't tell your mother about this over the phone." He got out. "Give me the phone."

"No," Trevor glanced irritably. "You can talk to her when you get there."

"Give me the phone." He snatched it out of the boy's hand and Trevor shoved him back.

"Deanna, one of them stole from me."

"Give him his phone back. God, I knew I should have just gotten him myself," Deanna said.

"Give me the fucking phone," Trevor said.

A woman, heavy-set, in a light pink shirt and khakis, drove over in a golf cart. A yellow strobe lit up and spinning on top. "Everything all right over here?" she said. She spoke softly, showing the palm of her hand. She wore glasses with large lenses, her brown hair clearly dyed, lots of makeup.

"Fine," Will said, "thank you. Deanna?" She'd hung up.

“Well, I saw you take the phone from him,” the woman said. “Whose is it?”

Will flung the phone hard onto the asphalt. Right after, Trevor’s fist landed hard on his right temple. A good lick, sharp pain when he opened his jaw. He shoved Trevor’s head against the glass of someone’s car, wrenched his arm up behind his back.

“I need an officer,” the woman radioed.

Will stepped back. Trevor put a hand to his bleeding head. Will got into his car and put it in reverse, watched them grow smaller in the mirror.

*

The street where their house stood was busy. A couple of trucks bordering the sidewalk, tending to power lines, a big orange one cutting down limbs. The piles of debris had grown bigger at the end of driveways: shorn metal, branches from trees, wood with nails jutting out. He drove and pointed the car into the driveway and did not see

Deanna.

Inside the house, Will called for her and then for Jane, but no one responded.

Will sat down on the end of the couch. From there, the blue tarp was visible where the wall used to be, nailed up to keep any further water from getting into the house. It billowed a little, crackling. He walked back into the bedroom, where the sitting water lay next to Deanna’s side of the bed. The roof dripping every few seconds, flakes of plaster and dirt settled on the bottom. He walked out through the back door and over a few houses, where the canal ran behind the neighborhood. The water was too high, and he crossed through it and up into the patch of woods flanking the canal. He walked, enjoying the swish of wet leaves under his shoes, and then found what he was looking

for. A pool of tadpoles. He didn't know how he'd get them inside. He had nothing to scoop them with, but there they were in the amber light, poised and darting, some of them speckled with their new webbed and pointed feet. His phone buzzed in his pocket. A number he did not recognize.

“Hello?” he said.

“Hey, is this uh, William Currie?” A man's voice.

“Speaking,” Will said.

“Yeah, I think you have my dog.”

“That right? You saw him online.”

“Yeah, the shelter's website. He's been gone a few days now.”

“Lost him before the storm, huh?”

“Oh yeah, looking forward to having him back. Surprised he survived.”

Will imagined some punk in baggy jeans, maybe a gold chain around his neck, a hostile little beard. Someone who might fight a dog. “Well, if you think he's yours. I'll bring him to you.”

Will took down the address, hung up and punched it into GoogleMaps for directions.

The dog's chin rested on his lap. He drove. The apartments Will was trying to find were in a poorer part of town. The gas stations looked run-down, potholes in the street. He passed a liquor store, a few check-into-cash deals. He drove slowly. “Glad I didn't come alone,” Will said to the dog. “This your turf?” The dog's ears lifted halfway.

Will took a wrong turn and had to double back. He'd missed the street looking around, the sign behind a crepe myrtle in an otherwise dingy yard, the house abandoned. He found the apartments and, no free spots, he put it in park and left the engine running. "You're up for review," he said, opening the door. The dog got down onto the pavement.

Will searched the apartment numbers. The one he was looking for was on the second floor, the setup more like a motel. The dog walked with him up the first few stairs, then planted his feet at the platform. He tugged back on the leash, a back paw slipping off the top step and down. Muscle corded the dog's head, reminding Will of the lean, raw power of horses, of the ones drowned in the Red Sea, anchored to the ocean floor by their chariots. God showing his people where to go. How easily He'd done things for them. He let the dog pull him back down the stairs. From here, he did not know where to go.

HE BELONGED TO SOMEONE

The greyhound stood in the bare room, crunching chow from a Tupperware bowl. Broken bits fell back into the bowl, onto the hardwood. He was white with brindle swatches down his back and left side. Sunlight fell over his hind end, flared golden through his legs where coat stretched between tendon and bone. Ezrin sat with his back against the wall reading a book on John Calvin's theology and glancing at the dog once in a while, his left elbow on the bag of Blue Buffalo. He smelled the dog food, a full, gamey scent he liked, but that had grown a bit strong the longer he'd sat there. Just then the sun reached him, his bad eye, and he squinted and stood to get out of its way. From Ezrin's right cheekbone to brow, it looked like his skin had healed over a round of birdshot. In the eye itself, a sliver of blue seamed with a gray like fouled snow. He was mostly blind in the eye, and too much direct sunlight gave him headaches. He hated the way his face looked, and from the moment he'd picked up the dog, he didn't feel like the dog stared at his marred eye.

He'd found him off the highway that morning, wandering in the foxtails that bordered a gated neighborhood. Both ears bore tattoos: one read 4088, the other looked like it had a Z, maybe an L, too, but he couldn't tell. He was either a rescue or someone's racing dog. In either case, someone was probably looking for him. That, or they weren't worth a fuck. And if he was being raced, they weren't worth a fuck whether they were looking or not. He'd read some about dog-racing. Seen pictures of their broken necks, their value based on their profit. Ezrin liked watching him eat. It made his chest feel less tight, made him forget the move. It was good to see something's need easily met, and

he'd begun wondering why he hadn't thought to try a dog sooner after his mother's death. The dog had made him want to look again at Calvin's doctrine on creation, animals in particular. Things felt out of his control, and Calvin did not make him feel any better. He'd written that humans should not be like "mettlesome horses" that kick and rage against the One that nourishes them, but should yield to the control of the Lord. Ezrin wasn't sure his circumstances were of the Lord so much as of Darren.

Behind him, the door off the kitchen opened: Darren, his former stepfather, and Darren's son Chase. Darren came in through the door sideways, holding a stack of broken-down boxes flat against his chest. The kitchen was about the only thing left to pack. The counter was strewn with plates and cups, glass stuffed with brown grocery bag, silverware in dividers sealed over with saran wrap. Darren's keys plinked onto the tile. "Grab that for me, will you?" he said to Chase. He leaned the boxes against the cabinet doors at the sink. Chase scooped up the keys and handed them back to his father. Darren turned on the tap, leaned over and took a drink. Ezrin's eyes met Chase's, and he looked away and back at the dog.

When Darren was done he shut off the water and wiped his mouth with his wrist. "So what's the plan?" he said. Darren spoke quickly and liked for people to keep up. He was an ear, nose, and throat doctor. At work he was the one in charge, and he had the annoying habit of speaking the same to people whether at work or home. He had a handsome, commanding face and iron-gray hair, the features of someone who was confident they'd made all the right decisions.

Ezrin kept his gaze on the dog, nodded toward him. "I'm feeding him," he said.

The sun had gone back behind the cloud cover, the walls taking on the smoky wash of the sky. Outside the window, the crepe myrtle lashed at the glass. The day was gray, windy, gusts of mist here and there, and severe weather was slated for tomorrow morning, possibly later that evening. Ezrin hoped the gray would stick around a while, so he could walk around outside without squinting.

Darren stood in the doorway. “Okay,” he said. “What are you going to do with him tonight?”

Ezrin shrugged. “I don’t have to go.”

“You do have to go too,” Darren said. He faced him, crossing his arms. “They’re expecting you.”

Chase came into the room. “You guys fighting again? Whoa—you could have a ballroom dance in here,” he said. “Don’t you love empty houses? The potential in them. The lack of clutter.” Chase was taking the route of his father, was up at the medical school slated to earn his white coat in the next year and a half. He was reckless, though, liked cocaine from time to time, liked expensive booze, liked street racing his Mustang. He kneeled before the greyhound, took a back hip in each hand. “Bet this som’bitch is fast right here.”

“He’s retired,” Ezrin said.

Chase flipped his hair from his eyes. “Let him outside, let’s see our little brother here run a lap. Retired. His muzzle’s not even white.”

“He’s retired because I said so,” Ezrin said.

“Kind of like yourself, then,” Chase said.

“Chase,” Darren said. He made a “cut-it” gesture with his hands. “You’re just comfortable, Ezrin. Too comfortable. Which is why you need to go tonight. The Cottrell’s want you there.”

Ezrin had been invited to his ex-girlfriend West’s engagement party. When they were fifteen, the two of them started dating, and they’d been together for seven years when Ezrin’s mother drowned. Ezrin had mostly withdrawn after her death. His guilt stemmed not only from his failure to pull her from the water, but because of the fight he’d picked with Darren that had caused her to walk out to the ocean crag alone in the first place. That had been two years ago, and Ezrin’s life had been on halt since. Any plans he’d had for school or marriage collapsed. He’d poured himself into trying to figure out God and had stopped sleeping with West for fear premarital sex was sinful, only to use her for sex later. He’d taken a job at Southern Auto Glass, replacing windshields, and continued living there in the house his mother and Darren had bought until recently, when Darren sold the house out from under him. To help all of them move on, he’d said.

“They shouldn’t expect anything from me,” Ezrin said. “I’m not the one promised them anything.”

Chase went over to the chimney. “I’ve never stood in one of these things,” he said.

Darren shrugged and shook his head, disappeared back into the kitchen. “At some point you’ve got to be happy for someone else. They’re asking you to celebrate with them.”

Chase bent down and leaned in, eased himself up into the chimney. “Howls a little,” he said. “Like a quiet ghost. You ought to hear this.”

“They have plenty of people to celebrate with,” Ezrin said. The dog had finished eating and lay on the hardwood next to the bowl. He kept swallowing, licking his chops. The smack of his tongue was distracting.

He raised his voice to be heard from the kitchen. “Yeah, but they’re looking forward to seeing *you*. You could be a smash, have everyone leaving saying, ‘That Ezrin’s doing all right after all.’ Why wouldn’t you want that?”

“Maybe I’ll arrive in a cab. Get smashed,” Ezrin said.

“Yeah, I know Jean would love that,” Darren said.

“About like she’d love you selling off her work.” His mother had done most of the woodwork in the house: the window frames, the hearth above the fireplace, the hardwood floors. She’d grown up with a father who made and sold shutters, and she’d spent her childhood in his workshop, getting good with her hands. She knew her saws, sanded things pure. She worked slowly, deliberately, had never injured herself.

“What do you want me to pull the hearth out of the wall? Jesus Christ, Ezrin. Enough.”

“The new owners won’t appreciate it, not like I do.”

“And what happens when you die, Ezrin? Who’ll appreciate it to your standards then?”

“My kids, maybe.”

He bolted back into the room. “What kids?” His hands were in the air. “What do you have to offer any kids? A wife? You live at the shop.”

“Right. Because only doctors make family men. Fuck you.”

Darren met him, almost chest to chest. “Watch it,” he said with a nod. “You keep talking like that, someone less restrained is going bust up that other eye of yours.” Regret traced his eyes the moment he finished speaking. “You all right?”

Ezrin stared.

“Don’t come tonight if you’re going to be like this. I don’t want you there.”

“I never cared whether you wanted me there.”

Chase had disappeared from the shoulders up, his right hand against the back of the chimney, his other gripping the open mouth. There was a dry, dusty explosion inside the chimney and Chase fell back against the side of the fireplace, grate scraping across the concrete bottom. “There’s fucking birds in here,” he said. “A bunch of them.”

His mother Jean had never lit a fire in the thing. She’d had the chimney built wide, with an open top, hoping the swifts would come. Ezrin had checked most of the summer, but when none had shown by June, he’d stopped looking. The noise had brought the dog to his feet, and he’d begun to bark, casting forth on his front legs. Ezrin turned and went through the kitchen out to the garage, on into the street. He walked backwards onto the asphalt, his gaze to the roof. The swifts arced out of the chimney, shifting and diving. Ezrin counted eleven, twelve maybe. Their bodies flashed black and then narrowed. Ezrin thought of the depth-perception he lacked, how he was missing their full glory. He wondered what people in the neighborhood would think of him in the

months to come, parked in the street, cross-legged on the hood of his car, staring. If anyone would tell him to move on, make him stop considering the birds.

For the time being, Ezrin was staying in a back room of the repair shop. He slept on a cot, the sheets and pillow brought from home. He'd loaded his bed and most of his other belongings into storage some weeks before, and Mickey, his boss and owner of the shop, had said he could stay for as long as needed. He was trying to save money, and here, he wouldn't owe rent. He'd have to keep the place clean, don't leave out trash, Mickey had said, keep your clothes orderly, and if he used the sink to bathe, clean up the counter good when he was done. Now Ezrin had the dog, and he did not figure Mickey would be interested in keeping the animal around.

Ezrin lay on his back reading, his pillow doubled-over and pressed against the cinder-block wall. The dog lay alongside him, nearly his length. The dog would adjust himself after a while, push a hard sigh from his chest. The walls were painted a shade of blue he'd seen in the ocean, the last time he'd snorkeled and seen a coral reef. Ezrin had loved the ocean at one time, loved swimming in it, the taste of salt, the way the salt hardened on the skin. But he didn't care for it much anymore. The water had slammed him into a rock half-consumed in sea urchins, and their spines had broken off in his face, forearms and side. The pain had been immense, searing, and he'd lost his sight instantly to their poisoned burn. He liked staying here, because there weren't any mirrors. At night, though, with the lights on, he could see himself in the black of the bare windows. Tonight there was sheet lightning flashing outside of them. Used to, he liked looking at

himself, had found himself handsome, liked the way his hair fell over his forehead, liked the line of his jaw. He'd picture pretty girls he knew hanging out, splitting pizza and talking about boys, what they might say if he came up in conversation. More than once a girl had told him to his face he was beautiful. He used to wonder if girls ever masturbated to him, and if so how many. If the number was higher than he'd thought, lower than he'd hoped. There was power in that, impermanent as it was. He didn't figure any girl thought about him now.

He lay there, let the book fall open on his chest. There was a water stain on the ceiling, painted over white with Kilz, so the mold would not grow. The room was hot and still. His forehead was damp, and he swept the hair from his eyes and it stayed put. He wasn't allowed to run the air conditioner all night, and across the break room to his left a box fan stood to the side of the countertop, its cord draped down from the outlet near the faucet. To get up, he'd have to move the dog. "Sorry, uh—," he said. He hadn't thought of a name for the thing. Ezrin sat up, the dog lifting his head. He got to his feet, went over and turned the fan so it faced the open door and cranked it to high. In the middle of the room was a laminate table, a few mismatched chairs, and behind it on the opposite wall a sole clock with a headshot of Buddy Holly for a face. "How about Buddy?" he said, looking at the dog. "We call you Buddy, Mickey might let you stay." Mickey was a fan of the 50s, always lamenting that he'd only spent six years of his life in them, if only he'd been born a decade sooner.

Ezrin hadn't thought about what he'd wear. He admitted to himself he cared, that he wanted to see West, otherwise he'd just not go. To the right was a closet where they

kept the mop and bucket, other cleaning supplies and pest killers on the shelves running the walls. It was where he was stowing the few shirts he had that needed hanging. He opened the door and pulled the bulb string. The hangers and shirts hung crooked, each hook placed on the edge of a flat shelf and bending up some with the weight. He'd wear his jeans, a button-up tucked in and a coat. He'd boxed his dress shoes and put them in storage. All he had with him was a pair of Dingo boots, the square-toed kind with the brass ring cinched in at the ankle. They'd have to do.

He wasn't sure if he'd even be able to talk to her much. All the people, the pictures to take. He'd seen photos of them, glossy ones of her and her fiancé in the local magazine that announced the events, the gatherings of the local wealth. The whole thing seemed off. West had always been sort of put off by the stench of her own wealth, her inescapable familial expectations. He'd known a girl with hot-pink hair, who listened to Slayer and pierced her face. In these photos, she looked clean, her hair the natural light-brown, the only rings the ones in her ears. She'd worn a lacy white skirt, a white top that revealed her slender arms, her toenails painted red in their sandals. He took down the shirt, his coat, and got dressed.

The yard was wide and sloped upward, the house tucked back on the hill. There was a row of small, clean-limbed trees along the front of the yard, a gap for the walkway. The house was one-story but extended the width of the lawn and far back. There was plenty of glass in its front, lit up this evening so the inside was visible behind the palm fronds and elephant ears bordering the house. Even in the dark the house caught light,

gleamed with fresh lacquer, treated wood. The light coming from inside looked new, lasting. People moved about behind the windows. The road was narrowed for the parked cars, and Ezrin drove slow, past one car he was pretty sure was Darren's. Ezrin parked almost past the next lot and rolled down the windows a couple of inches. There were a few tall pines in the adjacent yard, and the wind moved their branches and swept past the glass over Ezrin's forehead. He tugged one of the dog's ears. "You'll be fine here." The dog lifted his chin, tested the air coming through the window. Ezrin opened the door and got out.

Ezrin had made his way a few yards up the street when the dog started barking. Another couple coming up behind him looked at him as they passed, and Ezrin gave a nod. The woman's heels clacked on the street. The dog hadn't done much of that all day, and Ezrin wondered if it was because he was being left alone. He turned and sprinted back to the car, the boots tough to run in. When he got there, he noticed the dog facing the passenger window, not the windshield like he'd expected. He was poised with his back legs in the driver's side and front in the passenger's. Ezrin looked over the hood of the car. The house on the lot was dark, no one around, but there was a light on at the house behind him, and he didn't figure they'd put up with the noise. The trees stirred. Then they came into focus: two rabbits still as a picture, dark-brown splotches on the lawn. "Hush," he told the dog. He rounded the front of the car towards the rabbits, and they flashed off in the direction of the house. He went back up to the passenger window. "Lie down," he said. "No more." The dog ceased barking, and Ezrin made his way up the street again to the party. The dog stayed quiet.

By the time he reached the house, there were already people out front playing horseshoes. The plink of iron on iron. The floodlights were on at the corner of the house, and mist crossed in front of the beams, intermittent solid drops. The air smelled damp, charged. He passed in front of the window, checking to see if he knew any faces on his way inside. The light was blond and easy, lots of people talking, milling around with wine or champagne, plates of dessert. There was the strong smell of new leather. The floor was of dark gray stone, the walls a lighter gray. Ezrin searched the faces. He met the eyes of a tall, leggy blonde girl his age in a red skirt and polished heels talking in a group. She traded hands with her drink, kept glancing at him, furrowed her brow a little. She looked away and then looked back. He was underdressed. Darren would be sure to tell him so.

Near the back door, West's mom stood speaking with an older couple. She was a short woman, though her torso seemed longer than most people's. She spotted him, and he turned and looked to his left. He'd begun to sweat a little, and rubbed at his bad eye. His surroundings were sleek. Things were neat, linear, in order. Crowded. To his left was a hallway and he made for it. He leaned into the wall as a couple of women passed him. Another young man followed behind them. Dale Quarterman, a classmate from high school. He brushed shoulders with Ezrin, glancing up. He wore a red tie and suspenders, the sleeves on his white shirt rolled up. He was of average height and stocky, cheeks flushed with good will. "Ezrin Molette," he said. He offered his hand. "I wondered if you'd be here. You and the bride-to-be still friendly?"

“I wouldn’t say we were ever unfriendly. I don’t recall you two being particularly close.”

Dale turned out the palm of his free hand, the other holding a blocky, iced tumbler of something that reeked of whiskey. He took a pull from its stirrer. “Easy, easy, Tiger. How about a belt of this? He offered him the glass. “Will change your handwriting, if not your ‘tude.”

Ezrin waved off the drink. “I don’t.”

“Never? Well, shit. What the fuck *are* you doing here, then?”

“I don’t know. I guess I didn’t want to be rude.” He looked past Dale’s shoulder. Regina, her mother, looked like she was mingling her way towards them.

“You know, I always wanted to get to know you. You seemed to know things. The two of you together did, like, you had a hold on what was important or something.”

“I don’t think so. We were fastened in the cave, just like you.”

He scratched at the back of his head. “And I was sorry to hear about your loss. I saw your stepfather around here. He seems to be doing all right. What are you doing now?”

“He’s not my stepfather.”

Regina made her way into the hall. “Ezrin Molette step out here. I am so glad to see you.” She came over and side-hugged him, pressing her cheek to his own. “Have you spoken to West?”

Ezrin shook his head.

“Out, out, out,” Regina said, patting his back. “We have to find her.” She guided him back into the front room. They slid past backs, knuckles raking knuckles. Someone’s drink slopped onto his hand, and they apologized. The back door was open and the lights in the pool were on. She stood on her toes. “Wyatt? Wyatt.”

From the crowd, her husband said, “Yeah?”

“Where’s our West, did you see who’s here?” Her fingertip touched the top of his head.

Ezrin eased toward the back door. He’d feel better outside, where there was space, less light. He broke away. “Tell her I’m out here,” he said.

Regina told him to fix himself a drink out there, that she’d be back. There was a bartender out there, manning a counter under the gazebo, a few guests sitting around in tall silver chairs. Over every table were wide umbrellas, that flapped and nodded with the breeze. He walked around the pool to the back gate, where an unlatched door led out to a sandstone path down to the lake. Sheet lightning quaked through the pines, flashing off the water. Someone sat at the bench about halfway down the path, a cigarette burning in their hand. From their mouth the smoke rode the air like a ribbon. Ezrin made his way down.

“You don’t have another one of those, do you?”

“You caught me at my last one.” Chase. He took a drag and offered the cigarette by the filter. “You made it.”

Ezrin took the cigarette and drew long and hard. The smoke felt good in his lungs.

Chase's tie was a bit loose, and next to him was a gin and tonic he brought to his face. "You want some?" He shook the glass, ice rattling like dog tags.

"Why do people who drink have to have someone to drink with? You people are annoying."

"Well, you're a fucking alcoholic if you drink alone. Don't you know that?"

"Guess I just saved you," Ezrin said. He handed the cigarette back.

"Savedy, savedy, saved. What do you know about God lately? As a doctor I'll need him to get out of my way. Let me do the healing."

"I don't know much of anything. I think you're supposed to surrender or something, but I'm not so good at that these days."

Chase stepped up onto the bench, raged with his fist at the sky. "I surrender nothing."

Regina's voice carried on the air. She appeared in the gateway, with West, the fiancé. They came down the path.

"And here, we, go," Chase said.

West's scent reached him before she did. She made the darkness floral, a scent bright and clean like honeysuckle. Regina introduced West's fiancé, Patrick, a clean-cut guy, with a wave of black hair, probably born with a smile on his face. Regina left them to it. He'd met Chase earlier. West hugged him, drew him to her. Her right hand moved up his back, clasped his right shoulder and squeezed, her fingertips in the crevice over his collarbone. She stood back from him, fixed the collar of his coat. There was a lingering like static at his neck that carried over to his shoulder.

“West drove me by your workplace the other day. You do glass?” Patrick said.

“You drove by my workplace?”

“We were in the area,” West said. “Southern Auto Glass, right?”

Ezrin felt like an idiot. He nodded. Like she got in the car just to pass his workplace.

“She drives too close to those trucks that say don’t drive so close,” Patrick said.

“She’s ruined both our windshields.”

“Must be a new development,” Ezrin said. “You’re not a fast driver.”

“Are you kidding?” West said.

“She’s got two tickets right now,” Patrick said. “I’ve pretty well got the one dismissed, but the other—.” He shrugged.

Ezrin realized he did not know her, at least not as well as he once did. There was some part of her now he did not know: a change that had occurred gradually outside of his presence, without him.

The wind blew Patrick’s tie over his shoulder. Wyatt came through the gate, Darren in tow. “Ezrin—yeah, he’s back here. Ezrin.” He cupped both hands over his mouth. “You need to see if you can move your car or do something. Neighbor’s complaining about the dog in your car.”

Darren’s face looked firm in the dark.

Ezrin touched West’s arm at the shoulder. “I should probably go. I found this dog.”

“Well why don’t you bring him in?” West said. “Dad,” she called, “open up the laundry room.”

Darren responded. “He doesn’t need to do that. Y’all don’t need to do that, I told him not to bring that thing out here.”

“Actually you didn’t,” Ezrin said. “You might have implied, but there was no saying.” He turned back to West, Patrick. He told him it was nice meeting him, that it was good to see them. West told him she’d walk him back to his car.

“That all right with you?” she said to Patrick.

He nodded and told Ezrin to drive safely. That they really might have a look at letting him replace their windshields.

She walked with him down the street, which had started feeling a bit oily with the mist. The closer they got to the car, the less muffled the barking. When they reached the car, she leaned down and peered into the window. “Ezrin, he’s beautiful. Where’d you get him?”

“He’s a found thing. Over off the highway in front of Wind Rush.”

She nodded. “I’m glad to have found you here. Where do you live right now?”

He told her about the move, about staying in the shop while he saved money.

“Darren sold the house?”

The dog had grown restless in the car, was whining. The whine reminded Ezrin of the Morse code. “What? What?” he said to him through the glass. “We losing the war?” He went to the passenger side and let him out. “Go,” he said. “Do dog stuff.” Ezrin saw no rabbits, and he figured it’d be fine if the dog wanted to walk the yard.

“These people don’t look like they’re home. I’ll see you later. You have a good time; congratulations.”

“You’re coming to the wedding, right?”

“I really don’t know, West. I’m, I don’t like those sorts of things.”

The dog had eased up the hill, paused, and then he started running.

Ezrin sighed. “Damn it,” he said. He went after him, up into the lot. He saw the dog cross the porch, knocking over a wicker table, heading towards the house’s right side. There wasn’t any barking. He shouted for the dog. Found him at the fence. Whatever it was was probably dead, and Ezrin took out his phone, shined the camera flash on the dog. The rabbit was still alive, light glinting off its jet-black eyes, though it looked like its back had been mauled. A tear of blood near the neck. Its limbs were still, heart punching its chest. The dog seemed to be waiting for it to move again. “Get out of the way,” Ezrin said. “Move.” Ezrin took off his coat, wrapped it around the rabbit, which made a strange, small screech when he lifted it. “It’s okay,” Ezrin said. “It’s okay. Come on,” he told the dog. The dog followed him, face upturned to what Ezrin held in his hands. West was coming toward him, walking with her weight on her toes, trying to keep her heels from sinking into the lawn.

“What is it?” she said.

“He caught a rabbit.”

“Is it dead?”

“No, at least not yet,” Ezrin said. Its chest hammered through the coat. Ezrin took him down to the car, put the dog back in. He wondered if Darren might be able to

do something for him, though he was not a vet. He couldn't count on Darren for anything. Not for anything he cared about. "I guess I've got a trip to the animal ER," Ezrin said.

"I'd like to come with you, you need somebody to come with you. To keep it away from the dog while you drive?"

"Yeah, I guess so, but—won't they get angry?"

West glared, that "give me a break" glare, the one he knew, the half-smile into her cheek that showed some teeth. He handed the coat off to her, and she got into the passenger side. He cranked the engine and they drove out of the subdivision, made their way towards the highway where he gunned the gas. The sign for the E-Vet was visible from the road, a bright, glowing red in an otherwise dead strip center. They got out and looked in the glass, tried the locked door. Someone behind the desk, a large, sweet-looking young woman with her hair pulled back, pressed a button and motioned for them to come in.

"What's the problem with your baby tonight?" she said.

"Well," Ezrin said. "It's not exactly my baby. My, uh, baby, did a number on this rabbit."

"It's a wild rabbit?" the woman said.

Ezrin nodded. West peeled the coat back a little and the woman looked.

"Must be in shock, you couldn't hold it otherwise," she said. "Hold on a second I need you to fill out a form."

"Can you hold this a second?" West said. "Is there a bathroom?"

The woman pointed her in the direction of the restroom and West handed off the rabbit and disappeared behind the closed door.

Ezrin took the rabbit in the crook of his left arm, filled out the form with his right. He'd made his way down most of the page, had started the initialing, when the rabbit struck him. He tasted metal in the back of his throat, blood cooling as it moved from his nose to lip. He tried to set the rabbit down before collapsing, but the fabric slipped through his hands. His vision was jarred.

“Oh, sweetie,” the woman said.

Then his head lay in West's lap. The pads of her fingers moved along his face, read his scars like braille. Ezrin thought of the marks around his eye, of the marks in the dog's ears. Of the mark God gave Cain after killing his brother, right on the forehead, to tell others that though he was a murderer he was the beloved. That he belonged to someone.

IN THE WAY

Clare collapsed again. This time at a breakfast engagement party, in front of the second clients who had hired her for the quality of her pictures and not because they knew her. Her photography company, Pillar and Beam, had been running around six months, and though she'd woken up that morning with a headache, she needed the money, and most of all the good name.

She'd worn her tan leather flats with the ornate silver buckles, a dark-blue sweater dress, and was positioning herself at the base of a huge oak tree, Nikon slung around her neck. A breeze moved the limbs in the trees, washed the air with cut grass. Her legs were spread awkwardly, feet tucked between roots for balance. Her long black curls kept falling into her eyes. From this angle Clare had a shot from the table's head: of the brightly-dressed men and women eating strawberries and stuffed egg crepes, pitchers of coffee and juice lined down the middle. But right then, the nagging pain she'd woken up with at the back of her head moved to her right eye, pulsed fiercely. Clare figured she should have eaten more. She'd overslept and grabbed only two slices of cheddar sourdough bread before leaving the house. Her stomach did feel empty, sick in a way usually alleviated with food. It would be rude to ask, but maybe she just needed to eat, and she'd see if she couldn't have something here after a few more shots.

Clare palmed the sweat at her lip and brow, tried bringing the camera to her eye, elbow dug into the bark of the tree. She needed sleep, too, needed home. But thinking of home made her think of John Henry, how home did not feel like home right now. Then her ankles felt as if the bones were liquid, and the camera dropped and thumped her hard

in the gut. Her vision blackened from the center out like a film burn and she fell face first onto the oak's snaking roots.

Voices surrounded her, rivaled by something in her ears like rushing water. The smell of cologne, Old Spice, then hands on each of her upper arms. Her body felt like something pulled by a gentle current. Someone slapped her lightly on the face. Her back rested against something hard. "Sweetie, you've got to hear me." Clare opened her eyes: an older, graying man stood before her, the bride's father whose name she did not recall, and behind him a younger man with dark-brown, swooping hair. Light knifed behind her eyes. The fountain trickled above her, behind her, her back against the wall of its rim.

The older man dabbed with his white sleeve at her forehead and face. "Sweetie, did you eat breakfast?" He took a handkerchief from his pocket, pressed it to her eyebrow, pulled away blood. "You got a mean bark scour," he said. "There's an ambulance coming."

The other one now brought a short plastic cup of what looked like ginger ale to her mouth. "You're not a diabetic are you?"

Clare, sipping, shook her head. She'd dropped into some other, less restrained part of herself. "I don't need to live like I'm living," she said.

The graying man, his name came to her—Evans, Swayze Evans—shook his head. "Not this day you don't," he said.

"My roommate," Clare said, nodding. She took hold of the cup. Her tongue rasped the top of her mouth, and she downed the rest of the drink. "I've got to tell him, but, I don't need to live with him anymore."

The younger one drew his lips in and studied her, brow furrowed. Then Clare became aware of how many people stood behind them, watched her from their seats at the table, the servers standing in the doorways in their black vests and shimmering shoes. The fountain running down behind her, flecks of water hitting her neck. She clasped the edge to push herself up.

“Whoa, easy girlie,” Swayze said. He lifted her up by the underarms like a child, sat her on the fountain edge.

“I can work,” Clare said. “I need the money.” Her dress rode up her thighs some, and she straightened it. Swayze’s wife, Clare had forgotten her name also, had been standing off to the right. She was long with fiery-red hair to her chin, a sort of stern, permanent beauty about her. Her face was taut and controlled somewhere between anger and indifference.

Clare swept her black curls from her eyes. Trouble reminded her she was half Filipino. Whenever going through a road block or, in the past, if she was called in about an issue at work, her brown skin burned in her mind. The last time this happened, she’d been questioned about anorexia. The eyes around her now seemed to say, “Brown girl, poor, maybe a drug problem.”

“You alluded you needed some help, didn’t you?” Swayze said.

Their daughter led two paramedics to her. One was overweight, belly punching through his shirt, hair messy and glasses smeared. The other a tall, athletic-looking girl with wavy brown hair.

“I’ve just been stressed. My roommate—I said that, right?” The moments prior seemed far away, fragments of dream.

“Didn’t you just say something about substance abuse?” Swayze said. “I swear she did,” he said the paramedics.

The bigger one introduced himself as Patrick and asked if she’d taken anything this morning he needed to know about. Clare shook her head while he wrapped her arm to take her blood pressure. The bulb pumped and hissed in his latexed hand.

The girl medic gave her name as Laura and asked Clare more questions about alcohol, pills, and Clare said no to all of them, winced with the wipe down and bandaging over her eye.

Swayze’s wife turned and walked past them on toward the open back doors, probably to get Clare’s things. Clare held up a hand, started to say she didn’t have to, but then turned to Swayze. “This happens sometimes,” she said. “Photographers fall out. I’m right back to work you say the word.”

Swayze lowered his head, looking away, then cut his eyes back to her. “That’s come and gone, I think. Not up to me I don’t think.” He looked behind him at his daughter, shrugged.

His daughter wore jewels on her wrist, catching harsh light. “She should go,” she said. “You need to get checked out, honey.” Her voice like she was speaking to a child.

“I’m really sorry,” Clare said. She got to her feet, the world reeling a bit, and Swayze caught her by the arm, Patrick at the shoulder. “You want us to take you to the ER?” he said.

Clare said no. All of her felt burdensome, weighted with a primitive need for sleep. Her eyes met one of the servers. “Mind spotting me a cup of coffee?” He nodded at her and disappeared back into the house. Swayze’s wife returned with Clare’s things, and Swayze took on the camera bag and purse and he and the medics led her on towards the front of the house.

Once situated in the car, the server brought her the coffee capped in a Styrofoam cup and the medics asked once more if she was sure she didn’t want to see a doctor. She told them no again, apologized again to Swayze and shut the door to her car, cranked the engine and put the air on high. She closed her eyes on her car. The interior was unbearable. Bits of sand, dust and leaves in the floorboard, Coke-soaked nickels and pennies stuck to the side of the drink holder. This had happened again because of John Henry.

Earlier that month, she’d fainted at a grocery store while browsing the magazine rack. A lot of the photos in news magazines thrilled her, stirred her hope that one day something worth covering might happen here, in this town, and she’d be around to take pictures, deliver something needed to the world. Clare had stayed away from home a lot lately, and she’d tried convincing herself that it was because she wanted to be present for something that needed to be filmed or photographed. The girl who snapped the shots of police brutality that led to an indictment. But her reason for not being home anymore was twofold: her roommate John Henry, whom she could no longer stand living with, and Eric. John Henry had been able to help with the bills, but now that her business was

starting to take off, that she had Eric, she wasn't sure she needed him around anymore. Knew, finally, she didn't want him around.

She started the car and pulled out onto the road. After about a mile, the glare was bad even with her sunglasses on, the road more winding than she remembered. Her stomach went stale, and she pointed the car to the side of the road. She dialed Eric.

John Henry had an eBay store. His room was dim, the curtains drawn, the only light the screen of his computer. His desk was stationed next to his unmade bed and behind him was the closet, its paneled bi-fold doors open, his cases and boxes of memorabilia spilling out into the room. He sold war memorabilia mostly, picked up from the gun shows his father ran at the Trade Mart. He stared at his computer screen. He'd put up a rare set of WWII U.S. dog tags, priced at \$500. No bites yet, but he still had three days. He pushed his glasses up his nose. The glasses had been sliding on him more than usual, and he needed to make an appointment. Business had been good lately, and he could afford a new pair.

His father had named him after John Henry "Doc" Holliday, hoping he'd be either a doctor or a sharpshooter. John Henry had no interest in being a doctor. He'd spent too much time around them already, too many surgeries, some of which had gone nowhere in making his life easier. As for his being a gunslinger, cerebral palsy had halted any pursuit. He did like guns, however, military history and its artifacts. He had sandy blond hair cut short, was about 5'10 and 165 pounds, all muscle and no fat, his body grown firm with the regular lifting he did with his left arm and abdomen.

Recently, he'd gotten Clare to take a photo of him wearing an armored, camo vest issued to U.S. Army soldiers during the Iraq campaign. In the photo, a canteen hung strapped to his right side, the other Velcro compartments containing sunscreen, a bulky pocket knife with a can opener, boxes of .9mm ammunition, C Rations, and mosquito repellent.

The photo cropped out his legs and right arm. The arm was bent permanently at the elbow, hand in a fist. The fist forced him to trim his thumbnail often, to keep it from cutting into his gun finger, as he liked to call it. His legs, too, were stiff but mobile, and he got around well with a cane as long as the ground was level. His leg braces fit the contours of his feet, rising up the length of his calves. The braces required certain fitting shoes, navy-blue and sporty-looking with Velcro straps. If he wanted to get somewhere quickly, he used a battery-powered chair. He'd also taken off his glasses for the picture, and this added to his looking, authentically, like a soldier, like someone who had been born without disorder. His eyes were a dark, ocean blue. Clare had been trying for years to switch him to contacts. "Those eyes will get you laid," she'd said. The photo had received a lot of Likes on Facebook, a military friend commenting that he looked ready and that he should join him in Kuwait.

John Henry liked social media. It made him feel a part of things, the way Clare had made him feel when he first met her in college. He felt of more use than he had in years, helping Clare get her business and her life off the ground. She had been helping him, too, taking photographs to put up for the bids. She caught the pieces at their best angles, kept the sheen on the brass and silver and off the surface of the table or tile where they lay. He wanted Clare to like living with him. For some part of her to decide she

wouldn't mind the arrangement permanently. He was being something of a provider to her, and he'd have liked for her to acknowledge that more. Lately, she'd been gone a good deal, late nights, no calls during the afternoon, and he figured it was because she was with Eric, though she hadn't talked to him about Eric much, and he wondered if she was all right.

Outside, tires rolled up the driveway. After a second, the slam of a car door. John Henry shifted himself around to look out the blinds, jammed his right hand into the side of the keyboard tray. He took his right hand with his left, guided it beneath the tray and then turned and faced the window, raised two blinds with his middle and gun fingers. He leaned to his right to see better: Eric's SUV. Clare walking in front of him across the lawn toward the front door. He took hold of the curved top of his chair and pushed himself up. The chair tipped back some and he pulled it towards his side and steadied himself. His cane lay across the bed and he reached and took hold of it, hearing the front door. The cane clinked against the floor and he shuffled out toward the hallway, eager to speak to Eric before he left, to get to know this guy Clare was spending so much time with. Once at his door, he roped the cane around his wrist with the cord at its handle, opened the door wide.

His cane clinked down the hall. John Henry had heard them, seen them maybe, and she should have done what she'd been doing the last few weeks: parking on the street and going into the house through her unlocked window. Clare did not want to talk with John Henry about her day, asking her why she was home early, why Eric had driven her.

“You need to tell him,” Eric said, behind her. “You want me to tell him?”

Clare turned to him, taking up a handful of her hair. “Eric, shut up. Not now.”

John Henry emerged from the hallway, a scar of a person. His eyes above his glasses looked ready to end a threat. “Did you get in a wreck?” he said. “I wish you’d called me.”

He did this all the time, assumed scenarios that Clare had to extinguish. John Henry stressed his need to be there for her, a need she could not fulfill. “No, no wreck, Eric made sure of that.”

“I’d have driven if you needed me,” John Henry said. He came further into the room, paused to push up his glasses, then came toward her. “Legal or not. You know I would have. I’m there for my friends.”

Eric set Clare’s purse and camera bag down on the tile floor, in front of the built-in media center.

“And then you would have gotten in the wreck,” Clare said. She regretted the words the moment she said them, and she made for her room down the opposite hallway. She shut her door behind her. All she wanted was sleep, to wake up to a plate of her mother’s Sio Pao and a Coke over ice. In the bathroom, she turned on the water, sat with her back against the tub, listening to it run.

*

Without Clare in the room, Eric looked more like a stranger standing in the kitchen. No ties present. Eric sold life insurance, wore a coat and tie every time John

Henry had seen him. His black hair was styled messily off his forehead, and he was clean-shaven and certain of himself.

“She needed a ride home?” John Henry said.

“Yeah, stomach bug. Maybe.”

“We need to get to her something from Walgreens?” John Henry said. “We can take my car.”

“I got it thanks,” Eric said. He gave John Henry a short salute, which he wasn’t sure was friendly or an insult, then left the kitchen the same way as Clare.

John Henry followed. “We should take my car,” he said. “It’ll dry rot you don’t drive it.”

Eric stopped at Clare’s door, knocked, calling her name.

John Henry waited with him. Water whined through the pipes. “She’s in the shower, Eric. She can’t hear you.”

“Clare, open up,” Eric said. “She didn’t pass out in there again, did she?”

“She passed out?”

The door opened a crack, Clare’s eye between the door and the frame. John Henry thought about her body behind the door. Her smooth, brown legs, her butt pale with the outline of her panties. He’d done all right not thinking about her like this since moving in, but there she was, and he wanted to see. “I’m fine, guys,” she said. “Really.”

“You passed out?” John Henry said.

“It wasn’t a thing,” she said.

“Is there anything we can get you?” John Henry said.

“Yeah, just out of here. Into a successful life. That would do it.” She shut the door and the lock cinched.

Eric looked over at him. “Let’s give her some time,” he said. “Wait in the living room.” He passed him and took a seat in the recliner, switched on the small flat-screen that John Henry thought looked silly in its much bigger compartment.

John Henry let himself fall back into the couch.

Eric kept his eyes on the screen, flipping channels. “The three of us should hang out, you know? Maybe this weekend.”

John Henry nodded.

He let the channel stop on a hunting show. A dead clearing took up the screen, naked branches, the hunter’s breath swirled around his whiskered face. “You ever shot one of those guns of yours?” Eric said.

John Henry had a .22 pistol as well as a .9mm, but he had never shot either. “I have not,” he said. He felt stupid, admitting this. Time and again his father had told him he’d take him to the range, but he never had. He should have been more familiar with his own arsenal than he was, but there was nothing else he could say.

“About time you did, don’t you think?” Eric said. “Maybe about time I did, too.”

“You’ve never shot one?”

“Nope, no use. Didn’t grow up around them. Nobody hunted in my family. Well, my dad did, then he stopped when I was born for some reason. I tried hunting with him once. Went on a dove hunt, spent the whole day there, even invited a friend. The whole fucking day not one dove. Never went again.”

“You’d hit something at a firing range,” John Henry said.

“Let’s plan to go then,” Eric said. “Sunday. You off Sunday?”

“I’m sure I can let the store go idle a while.”

“Good,” Eric said. “Clare’s coming, too.” He stood and walked past John Henry and patted him on the shoulder.

Eric went to his car, then figured he’d get the plans established with Clare. He wanted to talk to her, in person and not over the phone. He walked around the side of the house to her window and knocked. When no one answered, he knocked at the glass again, and then he lifted the window and stepped inside. The light was on in the bathroom, and Eric opened the door. Clare was behind the shower curtain and he opened it, and saw her there, bare, shampoo foam running down her neck and back. She turned toward him washing her hair and squinting and then she screamed, took hold of the bath caddy hooked round the shower head and tried throwing it, but it slipped off and banged down into the tub bottom.

“Jesus Christ,” she shrieked. “Have you lost your fucking mind?”

“Easy,” he said. He held up his hands. “Easy, you’re all right. I just wanted to talk to you.”

“How about a fucking phone call?” she said.

Eric reached into the tub, took up the conditioner bottle that had slid nearest him and set it on the side of the tub. “You need to tell him he’s got to move out. We’ll take

him shooting this weekend, get some lunch, and you can tell him he's got to move out, that this arrangement isn't working for you."

Clare switched off the water. Her hair was soaked, dark curls mostly straightened with the water. "Sounds cruel, doesn't it?"

"How is it cruel? We tell him things have to change after showing him we care about him."

"Clare are you all right in there?" John Henry banged hard on the door.

"She's fine," Eric said.

"What are you doing in there, Eric?" John Henry said. "Open the door, Clare."

Eric lowered his voice. "Clare, there's no nice way to do this," he said. "No easy way at all. It's just got to be done. You're going to lose your clientele, what if you seriously hurt yourself next time? Have one of these falling outs while driving a car?"

Clare looked away from the window. Her eyes plain in the dim. "Okay," she said. "But you let me do the talking. You just hang out."

"All right," he said. He went out and opened the door to John Henry.

"What are you doing?" John Henry said.

"I needed to talk to Clare."

"You could have waited for her."

"Thought this would be quicker, it was a quick thing."

"You're acting strange," John Henry said. "Making me think I should worry."

"No, no—no, no," Eric said, shaking his head. "Just needed some privacy is all."

"In there?" John Henry said, nodding towards Clare's room. "By breaking in?"

“I didn’t break in,” he said. “Next time I’ll use the front door.”

“Be sure you do,” John Henry said.

His eyes felt angry, measured in threat, though Eric could not read them well in the dim of the hallway. He tried passing him, but John Henry’s left arm shot up across his chest, blocking the way. There was serious strength in the arm, the thing taut, roped in muscle.

“Especially at night,” John Henry said. “We wouldn’t want me using my firearm before the range.” He brought his arm down.

Eric went on.

Clare put on a t-shirt and jeans, left her room in her bare feet. Hopefully, John Henry was back in his room: she didn’t want to see him, not after what he’d seen. She made her way into the kitchen, took out the eggs from the refrigerator, a zip-loc of ground beef from the freezer. She put the sealed meat in a bowl, brought the bowl to the sink and let the hot water run into it. The front door opened, John Henry’s cane clinked into the front foyer. He crossed the living room and came past the bar and into the kitchen, and she resigned herself to talking with him. He’d want to know everything, always did. He’d wonder if she was making dumplings for two or just one. What she and Eric were talking about. All of it hit her in the stomach before he’d even opened his mouth.

“Something about that guy,” John Henry said. “I don’t like him.”

Clare took out a searing pan. “You don’t know him,” she said.

“Do you really either?” he said.

“Yes, I know him better than you do. He’s a good guy, he’s just—never been around anyone with a disability.” She set the pan on top of the stove, slipped the spices she needed from the spinning rack. She tried to make sure not to look him in the eye, maybe if she busied herself he’d get the point.

“So he’s uncomfortable,” John Henry said.

“No, just unsure of himself. He doesn’t want to do the wrong thing.”

“What are you making?”

“Just some Sio Pao.” He seemed to pause there, the way he used to in college. Sometimes he’d come into the cafeteria, needing someone to help him with his tray, and he’d ask her without asking her, just by coming over and standing next to her, face stern with expectation though she’d be trying to wolf down her own food and get on to class.

He asked her why Eric had brought her home.

“Because I wasn’t feeling well.”

“You fainted.”

She nodded. She coasted back to the sink and shut the water off.

He pulled out a chair from the kitchen table and sat down, facing her. “Are you sick?”

“Not sick. I’m stressed.” Her voice was hard, as if she were saying something he should have known. “It’s work, a lot of things. I’m not doing well.”

“I get that,” he said. “The surgeries I’ve been through, the physical therapy.”

The comment made her furious. He had this way of comparing everyone else's trouble to all he'd been through—a lot for sure—but, he never sounded like he was relating, more like his problems were more real, substantial. “Look, I realize you've been through it, but I need you to let me have this one, okay?” she said. “Seriously. Just this once.”

“What's up with you?” he said.

“Your life isn't relatable to everyone else's. No matter what you've been through. Stop acting like it is.”

He looked at her a second, began gesturing with his hand. “I know that,” he said. “I—.”

“No you don't,” she said. “You don't know it at all, that's your problem.”

He shook his head. Glasses slipping down his nose. “Okay,” he said, fixing the glasses. He brought himself to a stand. “You up for doing this thing? On Sunday?”

Clare nodded. Part of her thought to ask him if he wanted some of the Sio Pao, and another part of her said she had to quit cooking for him. If he was going to be on his own, he'd have to start living like it, figuring out how to cook for himself, to do more than sit in front of his computer, selling medals chained to pieces of cloth, bullets. The sooner Sunday came the better.

That Sunday after she'd showered and dressed she came out into the living room, where John Henry already had his two cases of guns stacked on the kitchen table. He'd

snapped the top on a can of Minute Maid grape juice and had the TV going on CNN.

“Up a while?” she said.

“Since 5:00 AM.”

It was something she found endearing about him, how he got excited about things. John Henry always needed something to look forward to it seemed, and sometimes this got tiresome. If he did not get out, did not do something, have something planned, he'd get draggy, moody, somewhat mopey, and she'd get tired of him quickly. She'd slept in, and she needed the sleep. It was about 10:00 AM, and they were supposed to be at the shooting range around 11:30. Eric was going to show up pretty soon, pick them up and they would drive out. He'd texted to say he was on the way.

“You've never shot one of your guns,” she said. She took bagels down from the freezer, slid the halves into the toaster. “You eaten something?” she said.

“I haven't,” he said.

“You want anything?”

“I mean about the guns, I've never shot one of the guns.”

“Your dad ran a gun show. Didn't he have friends in that line of work?”

“Yeah, but, Dad was busy. He worked late. He used to come home at eleven, still in his work clothes, and he'd open a bag of chips and switch on the TV. He'd fall asleep on the couch. He worked too much.”

“So taking you to the firing range was more work?”

“Yeah, I don't know, I guess it would have been. He'd never meant to have a kid like me. I talk to him more now that I don't live there. That's been good.”

Clare clamped her jaw together. She might be sending him back there, into that, taking from him what little independence he'd been granted. But maybe it wouldn't be like that. Maybe he'd get his own place, gain even more independence. There was no way to tell until he made his next move.

The front door opened and Eric came in. He wore a t-shirt and dark blue-jeans, a ball cap and tennis shoes. "You guys ready to roll?" he said.

"Yeah, grab one of these cases, will you?" John Henry said. He stood, cane in hand, and made his way over to Eric. "I need to apologize," he said. "I wasn't the best to you the other day."

Eric waved him off. "No worries," he said. "I get being particular about your space. You ready to shoot one of these things?"

"I don't know," he said. "What if it's not like how I'd hoped?"

"No need for disappointment yet," Eric said.

Eric sounded to Clare like he was being disingenuous, like he was faking the niceness.

She took him aside in the kitchen. "Why don't you cut it out?" she said.

"Cut what out?"

"The posturing," she said.

"I'm not posturing anything. I actually want to shoot a gun. This could be fun."

"And the after party?"

"It's just you getting to be honest. You need to talk. Things can't go on like they are."

They loaded themselves into the car. John Henry sat next to Eric. The drive seemed long, and Clare took the time to make a pillow out of the thin sweater she'd brought along, leaned her head against her window. The dips and turns lulled her, and every now and again, she opened her eyes: barbed wire strung along posts, green grass even brighter as her eyes adjusted to the light. A little over a half hour had passed when they pulled up into the gravel drive of the place. There was a cabin house, its deep green paint flaking, the boards on its porch warped and pushing out bent nails. They got out, Clare putting her camera around her neck, and an older man wearing a fly-fishing shirt, jeans and work boots came out to greet them. "You must be Eric," he said. He had a face of white scruff, lines in his cheeks, and a ball cap with a rusting fish hook cinched into the brim. He introduced himself as Tyler, "Call me Big Ty." "What y'all want to do today? Break clay? Hit targets? Y'all tell me I'll get you set up."

Eric turned to John Henry. "Targets," John Henry said.

"He's brought some guns," Eric said.

"Pistols," John Henry said. Big Ty asked what kind of make they were, and John Henry told him and Big Ty opened the cases on the porch banister and they looked them over. Clare made a picture of the two of them, talking guns. Then Big Ty led them over to the shooting booths. On the dividers separating each booth was a skull, deer Clare figured, its bleached antlers reaching out its side. On the walls of one booth, Clare counted three hornets, eating away at the wood, for their nest probably. The booths looked out onto a large patch of green grass, and a line of trees: a thick coppice of pines.

"This look good?" Big Ty said.

John Henry and Eric nodded. “What you think, Clare?” Eric said.

“I think whatever makes you happy.”

“I just need y’all to sign some papers before you get started,” Big Ty said. They followed him up into the cabin, and once inside, Clare found the bathroom. On the sink was a rusting can of shaving cream, next to it two old, corroded-silver razors, the kind you stuck an actual blade in, and a dirty bar of soap dropped into a coffee cup. She had not seen one of these razors since her grandfather’s. She remembered him old, how weak he’d look after not shaving for a few days. She splashed water on her face and fought the headache forming at her right temple. “Jesus, Clare,” she said. “Just get it over with.” But there wasn’t any getting it over with right then. There were gunshots to hear, targets to check. There was the drive out of there, finding someplace to eat lunch.

When she came out, they asked her, “Clare, you planning on shooting?”

John Henry nodded. “Come on, Clare. Show us what you’ve got.”

Clare did not have any interest in shooting, but she agreed, and signed her name at the bottom of a white piece of paper, and followed the men out of the cabin.

Big Ty set up a fresh target against a long hay bale stood upright. Eric snapped open the case containing the .9mm. Took it up and lay it on its side in his open hand, pointed toward Big Ty. “I’m not sure how to load this thing,” he said.

“I’ll show you in a minute,” Big Ty said. “But you point that thing my way again while I’m out here and you’re out of here,” he said. “I don’t care if it’s loaded or unloaded, that’s the first order of business. Set it down.”

Eric looked pissed. He half set, half dropped the gun back into the case. He looked back at Clare, mouthed “asshole,” and she shrugged.

When he’d finished with the target, Big Ty came around into the shooting booth. “What you need is to take this clip,” he said, punching it out of the pistol grip.

“Yeah, you have to take out the clip, load it and punch it back in,” John Henry said. He looked at Clare.

John Henry, showing off his knowledge.

“I’ve got the .9mm rounds right here,” John Henry said. He fiddled at the zipper of the boxed duffle, then retrieved a small box of bullets. He set it on the shelf of wood running the width of the booth. His hand was trembling some. Eric stood back and so did John Henry as the Big Ty loaded the clip and then slid it back into the gun.

“Now,” he said, he was talking to Eric. “You see this safety, pop that down, grip the gun so that the pistol-grip safety is not engaged, and fire.” He pulled the trigger before Clare had put on her headgear. Then he looked back at Clare. “See why I gave you those?” he said. “Who’s next?”

The air was charged with gun powder, and it made Clare’s headache burn.

“You want to take it from here?” Eric said.

John Henry nodded. He took up the gun in his left hand, which now trembled harder. Clare put on her head gear, eyes wincing in preparation, and she took a photo of him. When the shot finally went off, dirt shot up from the ground, then a few more followed until the clip was empty. Big Ty took the gun from John Henry, removed the clip and set it down on the board. He walked out to the target and checked the holes.

“This burglar got right on through,” he said. “Don’t quit your day job.” He laughed.

“You know I’m only kidding. You’re here to have fun.”

“Let me try,” Eric said.

“Wait till I’m back there,” Big Ty said.

Eric reloaded the gun and looked back at Clare, winked. He aimed, then fired, each round coming out slowly, one after the other. Big Ty ran over, studied the target.

“Six shots the face, got a few shots to the arm and chest,” he said. “Not bad.”

That look crossed John Henry’s face, the annoyed one. The burning in Clare’s head and nose grew worse, and even with the headgear on, Clare’s ears seemed to hurt, the muscles in her neck tense. She walked back to the cabin, and went back to the bathroom, looked from the window. She watched Eric and Big Ty horse around, John Henry standing there watching. He took up the gun again, trying to steady his hand.

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John Henry knew the trembling would not stop with a tighter grip. He let go some. He needed to push his glasses up his eyes, brought the gun toward his face to do so.

“Whoa, hoss,” Big Ty said, grabbing John Henry’s arm, not gently. “What are you doing?”

The force knocked John Henry off his feet and he clattered down onto the floor of the booth. Between Eric’s legs, in the distance, came Clare, running from the cabin, then blocked from view as Eric crouched down in front of him. “You all right?” he said.

“You all right?”

John Henry started to speak, but Eric wasn't someone who would understand.