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CACOPHONY: STORIES

by

Michael Jeffrey Goodwin

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
and the Department of English
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

CACOPHONY: STORIES

by Michael Jeffrey Goodwin

May 2016

Cacophony: Stories was written over three years in the Center for Writers at the University of Southern Mississippi. The collection depicts middle-class characters disconnected from relationships, careers, and family. Each story explores disillusioned characters forced to confront a major moment in their lives from a bleak setting. Characters find varying degrees of success in forging an identity in the face of flawed existence. This existence lingers, producing an apathetic lifestyle where characters must act. These characters act passively through the narrative and the collection sees them forced to break away from their malaise. The collection aims to explore austere suburban life, removing middle-class virtue to uncover a layer of despondency fraught with social, cultural, economic, and environmental complications.

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I'd like to thank my committee—Director Andrew Milward, Steve Barthelme, Dr. Martina Sciolino, and Dr. Craig Carey—for their guidance on this project, and their indelible instruction over the last few years.

I particularly value my friendship with colleagues Todd Gray, Andrew Gretes, Caleb Tankersley, and Anthony Norris, all who helped in varying ways with the completion of this project.

I also want to specifically thank Dr. Tom Holmes, without which this project would have sanely been formatted.

DEDICATION

To my beautiful wife, Erin, whose love and patience I test every day.

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INTRODUCTION

Writing stories only ever occurred to me after I began college and worked in a locally owned hobby shop inside a mall. The company hired me soon after I applied even though I offered little experience with the products they sold. This was an issue because the avid hobbyist sought some sort of knowledge from store employees, as if we contained secrets about every product in the store. There was no secret though. We learned to race remote control cars by building them or fixing the broken ones customers brought to us. We also built models often, maintained slot car and train sets because we found it interesting, and genuinely loved everything about the business except for the actual work it took to run a store.

This experience, like many others, affected how I viewed the world. This included how I developed and continue to perceive my craft. No secret method of writing occurred to me then, when I first began writing seriously, because none really exists. The remote control car enthusiast learned the inner-workings of their cars and how to race them in part from our instruction; however, the responsible ones then applied their knowledge, either at home or right there in the store. In this way I put together my story collection through a daily grind that involved accessing the wealth of information I managed to recall over thirty years with keen direction from others. These mentors, instructors, and colleagues, specifically over the last three years, prodded me at just the right moments when I needed it most to be a better writer. That guidance, while reading and writing every day, shaped the work here.

I admit to struggling with deconstructing and reconstructing literature in the way I learned to construct various products in the hobby store. This even occurred with

Raymond Carver and Charles Bukowski, arguably the two most influential writers on me; however, I tinkered with each story in this collection, for better or worse, over three years. In my view, each story evolved for the better because of the knowledge I gained from instructors, colleagues, the literature I continue to read, and the writing we all produce and learn from every day.

The germs for some of these stories, like writing about the hobby shop, existed for a long time. Only over the course of the last three years did these stories come together. The first story of my collection begins with a bizarre scene meant to jar the reader like it does the main character. Ernest hears a dog barking at the landscaper, Bernard, who then accidentally runs over it. The sound of the dog and the commotion of its owner, Laverne, moves Ernest from searching for a job to viewing the scene. He reacts viscerally to the sound, and his actions depict a man stirred by the awful moment. The scene ultimately moves Ernest away from pretending that finding a new job will return him and his wife, Tori, to whatever sense of normalcy he felt they had.

The sound physically affects Ernest, and it sets both the story and the collection in motion, depicting a downtrodden character forced to confront his disillusionment. Ernest has to admit something about his life, or see it in a different way, and this perspective is the spirit in which I constructed *Cacophony: Stories*.

Ernest, in the opening story “Cleaned Out,” resembles many of the characters found throughout the collection. The story first began as an attempt at updating and rewriting Raymond Carver’s, “Are These Actual Miles.” I wanted to create my own version to discover why—of all the fiction that influenced me—this one particular story stood out. Carver’s story depicts the crumbling relationship between Leo and Toni as

they suffer through bankruptcy. To avoid repossession of their convertible, Toni finds a buyer and meets with him. Though it occurs off the page, a probable affair results between Toni and the buyer, and Leo reflects on their relationship while he waits for her to return home. Carver uses short, poignant flashbacks to show, among other memories, Leo cheating on Toni. The story ends with a suppressed physical reaction between the two, and further reflection from Leo in regards to the convertible as he traces stretch marks—representing the road of their relationship—on Toni’s flesh.

In order to write my own version of the story, the process began with a lingering question about Carver’s piece that lingered for me: why does the neighbor, Ernest, seem so agitated with Leo and Toni? It seems to me he represents some kind of morality, but few, if any, of Carver’s characters appear justified from any ethically authoritative position. So what was Ernest’s life like? What gave him the ability to judge his neighbors? I wanted to write something that provided Carver’s Ernest permission to feel his agitation; otherwise, the story situates him as a moral compass frustrated by his neighbor’s inappropriate behavior.

I believe “Cleaned Out” evolved into something beyond an imitative story. It also works as an attempt to capture the kind of disillusionment that attracts me to particular literature. I find value in the stories of Chekhov and Gogol, or Salinger and Dickens, and even the various literary criticism assigned to me over the years, but writers like Raymond Carver, Charles Bukowski, Richard Ford, Tobias Wolff, and Bobbie Ann Mason reached me more. They reveal the kind of existence that somehow captured my own, or convey a verisimilitude that connects with my worldview. These writers then, at times classified as dirty realists, affected my direction as a writer.

Dirty realism, a term coined by Bill Buford, Editor of *Granta*, involves the isolation, disconnection, and desperation of characters in literature of the late 70s to the early 90s. Characters tend to avoid participating in the market in traditional ways. These writers seemed to react against, or satirize, a materialistic 80s culture in the post-Vietnam era. Critics point to their work often using a minimalist writing style. This style focuses on the small to create larger tension in the narrative while portraying bleak settings with working or middle-class characters to demonstrate a seedier side of life in an era of cynicism and disillusionment.

This attitude resonated with my worldview. I was born into the materialistic culture of the 80s and came of age in the grunge era that reacted against it. I then saw the early 90s movement co-opted by corporate forces. I also watched O.J. Simpson in a low-speed chase on my thirteenth birthday. Kurt Cobain killed himself only two months before that event. The beginning of that year saw Nancy Kerrigan knee-capped by her Olympic rival. I grew up around the expansion of television and the explosion of the internet. I grew up on artists obsessed with suicide and overdose. This was the era where I had to begin figuring out adulthood. College, increasingly a requirement for my generation, seemed like a poor choice given that I was sleeping through my high school education. I resented the prospect of working hard only to barely succeed, if at all. I was increasingly alienated from a media-driven, mainstream culture. After landing on writing despite myself during a time I could have better planned for a future, it should come as little surprise then that my characters worked blue-collar or menial jobs struggling to find their way.

Literature with downtrodden, uncertain, even seemingly passive characters renders an aimless feeling that takes a particular talent and emotional intelligence to accurately convey. Carver kept his sentence structures simple but still managed to capture something emotionally, be it in his early work filled with tension between characters or his later more sentimental, epiphanic stories. The ability to convey these feelings through text fascinates me, be it in the raw, brash, upfront expressions of Bukowski or the nuances in character relationships that Ford, Wolff, and Mason describe. Each of these writers' fiction represented some kind of individual truth that made the daily slog in life more bearable.

I aim to tell a story with such emotional resonance. I have known people from broken homes like Shane in "Home Made" and failed at relationships in ways represented by "Fighting" and "Jail Break." I have worked as, and with, degenerates like the employees in "It's Just A Race, Right?" I have faced, or have known far too many who dealt with the financial struggle I try to access in "Cleaned Out" or "Interlude." I have maintained dysfunctional friendships as depicted in "Savior." In these stories, I intend to connect readers through some kind of representational, fictional experience, the kind that would have someone say, "Yeah, I've been there," in a way that offers sympathy beyond just those four words.

The word "cacophony" stuck out to me while thinking about the stories of this collection. The word implies harsh sound, or dissonance, and it linked together a collection that explores disillusionment and a resulting discord. For instance, only during a shared silence between characters who loved one another once, like in "After the Fire," does the emptiness of ambience become a conscious thought. Children first playing and

then arguing in conjunction with an emotional breakdown that reaches the patio of an apartment across the street holds together a tenuous reunion in “Jail Break.” A pocket watch falling to the floor shatters in “Interlude.” Are we more affected by imagining the sound of the watch breaking or visualizing its pieces splitting apart?

Furthermore, only during Christmas, or in the months before, it seems, do people take issue with how things might sound outside of silence while they shop. The music supposedly puts everyone in the holiday spirit, a happier disposition for Christmas shopping and purchasing products, surely. But any locally owned hobby store, like the one depicted in “It’s Just A Race, Right?” likely forgoes such loud or overt holiday promotion. A train set hanging from the ceiling simply runs all day, when it works of course. Demos of remote control cars and planes play on old DVD players if not even older VCRs. And if the stoners running the place resemble the characters from the story, then they likely play music on a boom box tuned to their favorite local classic rock station rather than the holiday music that likely drives them mad. Perhaps the dirge of a gas-powered, remote control car on its last gasping breath brought to the store for repair bursts over it all. This story fails without its setting either way, and sound acts as a crucial component to understanding the location of a story.

The sounds in these stories come together without harmony, much in the way characters explore disillusionment in their own ways. This discord also presented problems in the writing. Many of the stories contained in this collection reflect the fourth, fifth, or maybe even ninth complete overhaul in an attempt at writing compelling fiction. I have lost count on “It’s Just A Race, Right?” which even saw a title change for this very collection. When I first tried writing a story about the life of a hobby shop employee, I

was still working at one myself, still resisting college even though I had started at one, and still angry about my direction in life. My first attempt at a story with this setting recalled the time someone stole an empty remote-control car box off the wall that we ended up chasing, leaving the store empty in the process. Several other versions also failed to capitalize on character and setting, resulting in a caricatured, uninteresting narrative.

This remains a problem, like in the story “Home Made.” It, too, saw massive rewrites over several years, beginning in 2009. My mother sent me a newspaper clipping of an obituary. It was that of a former friend I had lost contact with after transferring to another college. He was a friend from my early childhood lasting until high school. We then reconnected when we both began community college before I transferred across state. We lost connection again, and soon after I graduated and first started teaching, he was dead of an overdose.

I do not know the full details of his early or later personal life, nor do I know the details surrounding his death. I do know that he had a daughter, and I do know that I miss him. I missed out on the chance to reconnect with him in the age of always being connected. For these reasons I believe “Home Made” struggled through many different iterations. All attempted to explore the idea of a broken home related to some significant change I felt after my friend’s death. Experiencing his death in such a detached way both represented and exacerbated the feeling of disillusionment that obviously influences my perspective.

Perhaps the most fun I had writing resulted in the three flash fiction pieces featured in the collection. All three stemmed from writing prompts and came from

fragmented ideas stored away for just such a scenario. “Interlude” incorporated two characters working against a ticking clock, where I quite literally represented time. The other two pieces, “Savior” and “Jail Break” have been rewritten enough that I lost the original prompt. Each explores friendship and how one might take advantage of another. “Jail Break” dramatizes this much more, depicting an affair as children across the street play, a sign of innocence still uncorrupted.

Though several stories explore friendship, family, and home, many of the stories in this collection feature struggling relationships. Two stories, “After the Fire” and “Iced Over,” seem appropriate to briefly discuss together, if only through their opposing titles. Each story involves a relationship triangle. “After the Fire” reflects broadly on a relationship after a couple, already in the process of divorcing, lose their home. It depicts how their relationship began, how it ended, and where it went afterward for each individual, while “Iced Over” focuses on how a relationship ends before it really begins. The narrator remains stuck between his past and the potential in the present, much like Catherine feels about the narrator. In the end, their pasts seem to dictate how each intends to forge their future.

“Fighting” also depicts a struggling relationship, but the open-ended conclusion and focus on the struggle of its main character shifts away from the tone of inevitable failure. The story ends the collection on a peculiar sense of hope despite the possibly overwhelming disillusionment of the entire collection. The ending intends to be as open-ended while still telling a complete and compelling story. The narrator confronts his apathy and disconnection through meeting a struggling mixed martial arts fighter. Each character seeks something the other has, and in the end, the narrator faces a statement

from his wife that he only abstractly knows. By the end, the question for the audience then becomes: what will the narrator do?

I was asked once whether the main character of “Fighting” makes something of himself after the conclusion, if he indeed fights back, or works his way through such disillusionment. “He lives,” I deadpanned, not realizing that it would conclude a collection that begins with such utter loss.

CLEANED OUT

Ernest had been looking through the classified section again drinking his spiked late-morning coffee when the sound of the neighbor's dog, Teddy, and the resulting commotion outside jarred him. Teddy's normal barking changed from a territorially overconfident miniature Schnauzer into a creature, lost and terrified, and increasingly disconnected from the world.

Ernest trembled when the neighbor, Laverne, shrieked. He approached the front door and saw Laverne running across the cul-de-sac into her garage cradling Teddy. Bernard, her landscaper, who had by now parked his truck, followed her inside. Ernest still heard Laverne's heightened voice as an incoherent string of vowels. Ernest's stomach churned.

Laverne's car raced from the garage. Bernard then emerged, slumping as he did so. He watched her drive away until she rounded the corner, tires squealing away from the neighborhood. Bernard rubbed the back of his neck when the car disappeared, looked around her lawn and back at his truck, wedged between working and leaving.

Ernest felt dizzy and nauseated, like a reluctant voyeur watching a scene unfold into something he didn't intend to see. He ducked away from the door for another cup of coffee, returning to the newspaper and trying to ignore the whole thing.

The classifieds offered few job opportunities that appealed to him, and he had been imagining himself working in each career he reviewed. He had left off at mechanic, wondering if he could learn a new trade at middle age. He tried again with each job he skimmed: fork lift operator and construction work building houses presented the same problem. He found himself repeatedly viewing the ad for a realtor that Tori had circled.

She would meet with this man today and discuss selling the house. Then the doorbell rang.

Ernest saw it was Bernard from the table, a paltry wooden one from his college days, one that had seen far too many games of quarters. He took a swig of coffee when he saw Bernard peering through the window of the door, smiling and waving like a gray-haired child.

Ernest had only cracked the door when Bernard spoke to him with force, asking, “Yard need a mow?”

“Doesn’t need it,” Ernest said. “Thank you, though.” He tried to shut the door but Bernard interrupted him.

“Free of charge. I’m ready to go and everything,” he said, rubbing his buzz cut. He looked back at his truck and then at the yard and said, “Won’t take me more than thirty minutes to do a yard like this one.”

“We just had it cut and I don’t want to risk the grass being damaged,” Ernest said. “And with it not raining much these days...”

He faced Ernest again and said, “I can give it a loose once over and form a nice pattern.” Bernard clapped his hands together and rubbed them. “Won’t do any damage. Scout’s honor.” He raised his hand and laughed. “The neighborhood’s been awfully kind to me with business,” he said. “Just wanted to return the favor.”

“The thing is,” Ernest said as he stepped outside. He tried looking into Laverne’s garage but couldn’t see it from the patio. “Laverne’s grandson took care of it a few days ago,” he said. “He’s been doing some of the yards around here recently. Said he was saving up some money when he offered to do it. Couldn’t say no.”

“Oh,” Bernard said, slumping again, “Fine boy she’s got there. Smart, or so she tells me anyway.” He rubbed his head again and said, “She’s got herself a good family. Shame she’s all alone over there.”

“Well she does have... I mean, I’m sure they’re very nice,” Ernest said, looking back into the house. “I should get back ins—”

“Heck, you’re right. I’m sorry. I’m just ramblin’ now,” Bernard said. “I won’t bother you no more.” He looked at Laverne’s yard again.

“Listen,” Ernest said, scratching the side of his neck. “She really ought to put a leash on that dog.” He stepped forward and pointed at her yard. “Or build a fence,” he said. “I mean, you shouldn’t beat yourself up about it. It’s just a dog, right? She’ll get another one.”

“I just feel awfully sorry for raising such a commotion,” Bernard said. “Thought I could make up for it somehow.”

“I’m sure nobody saw anything. Nobody is even home. Everyone’s at work anyway,” Ernest said. He twisted his big toe into the concrete of the patio. “You know, it’s nothing, really. I’m surprised it doesn’t happen more often around here with all these dogs running around without a leash,” he said.

“Teddy’s a good dog. And Laverne, she’s—“ Bernard grabbed Ernest’s shoulder, bowed his head onto his arm, and sobbed.

Ernest patted Bernard’s hand, was about to say something, like telling him that it would be okay, but Bernard walked away from him, returning to his truck. Tori’s wind chimes rang over the engine revving and Ernest decided he needed more coffee.

*

Ernest and Tori were going to lose money selling the house. They weren't going to make it without getting out of their mortgage. Ernest had splurged on furniture they could never afford before he started daytrading. The money rolled in and then the money rolled out as fast as he could spend it. Now, trucks had already hauled away a newer sofa set, two of three televisions—both of the big flat screens, leaving the one Tori liked, the one she called “fun-sized”—and then the spare bedroom set.

Then they took the car he had recently bought, a real nice BMW, sleek, in mineral gray metallic that looked classy, something a proper stockbroker would drive, he imagined. They left the Dodge, a practical sedan Tori's father signed over to her as a wedding gift. It got them this far, at least. He felt it would get them a little farther.

The first mistake Ernest believed he made was quitting his job, a steady income plus commission selling medical supplies directly to local doctors. Tori had only just started teaching at an elementary school, and quickly learned, and tired, of the long hours. The after school programs required her to stay later than she expected and offered little incentive.

The second mistake was impulsively taking on daytrading. Television and movies had made the whole scene seem appealing and lucrative. He had reached a ceiling in his career and thought that he would be able to limit his risk. He thought how he had always been controlled, measured, at least with money, like when him and Tori went to a casino on their honeymoon in Niagara Falls after their whirlwind relationship lead to a quick marriage. That was an impulse neither wanted to ignore, but he had told her always to set a certain amount of money to play with, an amount she'd be willing to risk and feel fine

with losing, and be prepared to walk away whether it was within five minutes or five hours.

The third, and biggest, mistake Ernest felt he made was making the change without explaining his decision to Tori until it was too late. She had been laid off, cost cutting from the state level. She was able to substitute from time to time, but not nearly enough to help with much of anything.

Tori began by raising concerns about the similarities between gambling and the stock market. Ernest told her that there was no luck with a proven system in a booming industry. This went on for weeks and Ernest stopped listening, and instead of trying to convince her, he bought her things. He bought her jewelry that looked decorative on her side of the shelves in the walk-in bedroom closet. Flowers overtook the house as he began to earn even bigger chunks of money. Before she finally said to stop buying so many flowers, Tori had to give them to Laverne, who would plant the ones Teddy didn't eat into her flower garden. And just when Ernest was really on a roll, just when he began planning and surprising Tori with a Hawaiian vacation, just when he began to consider fully furnishing the basement, the market crashed.

The signs had been there. Ernest saw the rapid inflation of the dollar and rising oil prices. The economy staggered as the country entered another war. He invested in a small arms company rumored to be acquiring a big contract through the government. The short term gains were nice, but the contract never panned out long term, and his larger, incremental investments remained flat until the collapse.

Tori had been in the shower preparing to meet with the realtor when Bernard ran over Teddy. Ernest's nerves were still jangled as he reread the classifieds for jobs, again

trying to imagine how he would fit into some of them despite their low pay. Hotel service wasn't worth the time and effort and wouldn't save them from having to sell the house. The opening for a 911 operator seemed underpaid according to his research for the amount of pressure he imagined one felt responding to so many emergencies. A truck driver required a special license which he clearly didn't have the time to earn. And several chain restaurants were hiring cooks for the same kind of salary and hours Tori experienced as a teacher.

Ernest finished his spiked coffee and poured more. When he heard the hair dryer, he went to the bedroom to see Tori getting ready, seeing how she was preparing for her meeting with the realtor.

Tori sat on a stepstool wrapped in a thick towel, her head tilted toward the dryer as she ran a hand through her hair. It took her a while to see that he was watching. Ernest laughed when she flinched. She tightened the towel tied around her chest.

“Are you just going to stand there and watch me?”

“Sure,” Ernest said.

“You're making me nervous.”

Ernest looked into his coffee, “I've never actually seen you dry your hair,” he said. “I just thought I'd see why it took so long.”

Tori turned away from him, entering their walk-in closet, and said, “Shouldn't you be looking for a job?”

“Bernard ran over Teddy,” he said, and her eyes widened. “Didn't you hear any of the barking? Or any of the screaming?” His voice had gotten higher. “Didn't you even hear the doorbell?”

“That poor woman,” Tori said. “How did it happen?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I didn’t see it happen. Everything was going as usual one moment, and in the next, it wasn’t. I had to put it all together.”

“I hope she’s okay.”

Ernest thought about Laverne and tapped his fingers on his cup. “Bernard offered to cut our grass,” he said, and took a long drink.

Tori shuffled through her dresses, organized by color and pattern, and said, “So what did you tell him?”

“That it wasn’t his fault.”

“How do you know it wasn’t?”

“Bernard doesn’t target loose dogs.” Ernest laughed at himself. He brushed crumbs away from his plaid pajama pants. “I’m sure it was an accident.”

“He doesn’t have to target anything for it to be his fault. Even if it was an accident it was still his accident,” Tori said. “It’s his fault.”

“He cried on our patio,” Ernest said. “I can’t blame the guy if he’s going to cry about the whole thing on our patio.”

“He cried?” Tori asked. “I mean, I feel bad for him, but he still should’ve been paying attention.” She threw a few dresses to the floor in front of Ernest’s feet.

Ernest flinched when the dresses landed, and said, “In that case, maybe it was Laverne’s fault for not paying attention. She should’ve kept a better eye on that dog. And why aren’t there any leash laws in this state? Seems like a simple enough thing to regulate,” he said. “She should know better than that anyway.”

“You know,” Tori said, “I had a dream last night. We were on a plane and suddenly it was going down. It was nose-diving. People were praying. People were screaming. I was screaming. And you,” Tori laughed and said, “You actually clutched the armrests so hard I thought you’d rip them off. But your expression never changed,” she said. “Then the plane righted itself and everyone celebrated. People cried. Families embraced. Even strangers hugged one another. But you,” she said, “You just held on to those armrests until we landed. I kept touching your arm, but you never looked at me. You never said anything to me. Your face stayed the same even after we got off. You didn’t say anything to anyone.”

Ernest said, “Planes don’t freefall and right themselves like that.”

Tori cycled through more dresses, banging hangers hard into one another, and said, “I know.”

Ernest went back to the table and read the entire newspaper again, finishing with the classifieds, returning to his imagination. As it did before, the realtor’s ad distracted him. He gazed at the smug smile and neatly slicked hair of the agent Tori would soon meet to sell the house.

Tori finished getting ready and came out wearing a white and gold sundress with an unfamiliar, shimmering necklace that hung right above where her cleavage began. She had curled her dark hair at the ends so it looked wavy, the way she had it done right after they first met in college, something he had forgotten about, and he smiled. Ernest walked her to the front door, and when he leaned in close, she turned her head away from him. Ernest got her on the cheek and she told him he needed to shave.

“Stay,” Ernest said. “Give me another week. I bet I’ll have something by then,” he said. “Please.”

“I handle things my way this time,” Tori said. “That was the deal.” Then she left, gone, it seemed to Ernest, before she ever even got into the car.

Ernest waved to her as she backed out of the drive. “We’ll get through this,” he yelled. “We’ll get through this soon enough.”

Tori sped away in their remaining car. Ernest waited until she rounded the corner, remembering her walking down the aisle with her father. They married soon after they graduated. She had worn the same colors as she did now—white and gold—and her father had been crying, had kept rubbing the swollen bags under his eyes, and Tori had to laugh about it to keep herself from crying, which she eventually did anyway.

Ernest went inside and noticed, when closing the door, that Laverne had returned and was spraying her garage out with a garden hose. Her grandson moved things around for her, returning them after she sprayed a section. Ernest went to an empty shelf for the lone bottle of bourbon, and he walked around the house with a glass trembling in his hand. He returned to the door and she had disappeared. Her grandson took over hose duty and Ernest decided then to see about Laverne and Teddy, going outside and confronting the neighbor without much of a greeting.

“So,” Ernest said, “What happened here this morning?”

He stopped spraying the hose and said, “Teddy got hit, I guess. Just spraying away some of the mud her and Bernie tracked in here.”

“Is he okay?”

“To hell with the old man, if that’s who you mean,” he said. “As far as Teddy, Gram hasn’t said. He’s still at the vet either way.”

“Oh, the guy that did it, well, I think he did it anyway,” Ernest said and took a drink. “He seemed pretty broken up about it.”

“He’s alright. Got nothin’ to worry about so far as Gram is concerned,” he said. “A couple of the younger ones love Teddy though. He’s been around their entire lives.”

“Say, shouldn’t you be in school?”

“Graduated,” he said, and sprayed the drive in front of the garage. “I think the kids let out for the summer anyway.”

Ernest raised his voice over the sound of the hose and said, “I mean college.”

“That’s why I’ve been doin’ lawns for people. Gotta pay for it somehow. Gram keeps giving me money but I’m trying to earn it. Take a year or two off, save up, and figure it out from there. Can’t go into this kind of thing anymore without a plan. Takes too long and it’s too expensive.”

Ernest raised his glass to him and kicked rocks on the way back to the house.

*

Ernest checked the carpets in each room to see if they needed vacuuming. He gave them all a quick once over, forming straight patterns the best he could. He then ensured the toilets and showers had been thoroughly scrubbed by doing both bathrooms twice, noticing he had missed cleaning behind each toilet. Hours later, after dusting what he could, he sat down in his old recliner, inherited from his father, which still held the faint, stale smell of cigars. It was where his father watched the moon landing and drank whiskey. It was now where Ernest would drink bourbon and watch the business channels.

After he finished a bottle, Ernest made several more laps around the house before he finally had to piss, bumping into a wall and knocking over a picture of himself along the way to the bathroom down a thin hallway. He did one more lap after, thought that the windows were dirty, so he set up to clean them with an old tee shirt and dollar store window cleaner.

Wiping the windows worked him harder than he expected. He rested in front of the only clean window that faced the front. Laverne was outside spraying her flower garden. He thought that the spray from her hose lacked pressure, and that she stood in place for far too long before moving to another section. He thought about Teddy and wondered if any expression from her would give away his fate.

He went back to the newspaper and read everything all over again. He again tried to imagine himself in any of the jobs calling for applications, jobs he felt would hire him on the spot given his experience. Then once again he became distracted by the ad for the realtor. It wasn't the man's image that bothered him anymore, but the way that Tori had circled it several times over and ignored all the others. As he stared at the image, his phone rang. Ernest jumped at the sound and he answered it on the first ring.

"Tori," Ernest said immediately into the receiver.

"Good news. He thinks the house will sell quickly," Tori said above laughter. "He's networking with some other agents right now for prospective buyers. He thinks we'll get a decent price too, considering the market. We could get real lucky on this."

"Good. That is good," Ernest said. His hand trembled again and he asked, "So you'll be home soon then?"

“I told him the whole story,” Tori said. Then she giggled. “I don’t know what I was thinking. He’s gone through this too. Long ago. But I got some good advice.”

“Please,” Ernest said. “Just come home.”

“We’re almost done here,” she said. “See you soon.”

“We can start over.” He heard men laughing and then the phone went silent. He went back to his chair and stared at the television, watching the same programs that had made his career choice seem so easy. The phone rang again.

“Tori? Hello?” Ernest heard another group of men laughing and still no response. He said Tori’s name several more times before throwing his phone against the wall. It thumped to floor. Ernest went for more bourbon.

*

Unable to sit still and watch his television from his recliner, the only piece of furniture remaining, Ernest walked around the neighborhood. It smelled of freshly cut grass and backyard barbeque by families reconnecting after their long days. As he walked, a sprinkler near the road turned on and sprayed him. Kids riding their bikes nearby laughed. He turned back when he reached the end of the street, walking along the other side, and a dog followed him for the length of a few houses. Another one barked at him from the slight opening of a garage, where the owners left it just ajar enough so it could get in and out when it wanted.

He reached Laverne’s house. Her garage was shut and at her front door was a single rose with a piece of paper attached to it flapping in the light breeze. Bernard sat in his truck in front of the house with both his hands gripping the steering wheel. As Ernest

neared wondering whether he'd stop and see if Bernard was okay, they both made eye contact through the driver's side mirror.

Bernard nodded and said, "Hey there, I wanted to apologize for this morning."

"You were upset," Ernest said. "People get upset all the time."

"I mean about Teddy."

"Oh, the dog," Ernest said. "I still think she needs a fence. I bet you could help her out with that. You seem like a guy who can build a fence."

"I suppose I could," Bernard said. "Say, have you seen Laverne at all today?"

"Her and that lawn-stealing grandson were spraying out the garage earlier."

Ernest laughed at himself.

"Right," Bernard said. "She likes it clean and organized in there. I help her every so often with it. Move things around in there for her. Spare the kid a drive if he doesn't have any lawns to mow."

"It doesn't bother you that he's taking over?"

"I'm recently retired. I'm just making some extra cash with the equipment I've got laying around." Bernard let go of the steering wheel and said, "He ain't affecting me none."

"He told me old man Bernie had nothing to worry about. That's all I know. Might not be worth waiting out here."

"It's worth seeing if she comes outside. She loves her yard too much. That's why I make sure to take good care of it."

Ernest paused, leaned against Bernard's truck, and said, "She should have been paying attention."

“Well, if it’s all the same to you, I’ll wait for her here anyway.”

*

Ernest slept in his recliner with the television’s light flickering over the room, the shadows dancing along the bare walls where pictures of family and friends once hung. He awoke to a car door slamming just before sunrise. He went to the front door. Tori staggered up the walkway. She laughed at him through the door, so he left it shut. She grabbed at the nob and pulled. Her hair frayed in the humid night, the porch light highlighting her dark curls. She balled her fist at him and banged the door. A light outside of Laverne’s garage turned on. Ernest opened the door and let her inside.

Tori bumped the frame entering, tugged her sundress down and straightened her bra, gathering herself to face him. Ernest grabbed her shoulders and pushed her against the nearest wall. He raised his trembling hand and she laughed.

“You’ll get it back twice as hard if you do it,” she said.

He backed away from her and returned to the television. She followed close behind and bumped into him when he stopped. He pushed her down to the couch and she laughed again. Ernest turned the television off, scooped her up, carried her to the bedroom, and removed her sundress. Tori giggled and Ernest calmed, his hands steady until she sat up and slapped him hard in the face.

“Everything!” Tori yelled. She balled her fist, went to hit him again, and shrieked something high-pitched and unintelligible. She flopped onto her stomach and sobbed, which turned to snoring within a few minutes.

*

The neighborhood began their day only hours after Tori had struck him. People walked their dogs, kids dragged their feet to the bus stop, and adults hustled around their cars and sped away.

Laverne watered her flowers. She looked like she did the previous afternoon: impassive, detached, numb. Ernest was drinking his usual morning mix of coffee again, looking for a signal from Laverne that might communicate something. He heard a thump and then hangers clanging from the bedroom closet.

When Ernest reached the bedroom Tori saw him and said, "I'm leaving." She moved about the bedroom, grabbing small jewelry, hair clips, and other loose items and tossed them into an open suitcase.

Ernest sat on the bed and set his drink on her nightstand. He put his face in his hands and sighed. Ernest lifted his head and said, "I still don't get it."

"What?"

"The dream," he said. "I should have said something else. What was I supposed to say?"

"I wanted you to say... I wanted you to acknowledge everything."

"We're broke," he said. "I thought we knew that already?"

Tori packed as much as she could fit into two large suitcases, both of which needed duct tape to avoid tearing apart in two different corners, and dragged them both to the car by herself. She left, and Ernest watched her go after begging her to stay. He begged her one last time from the patio, watched the car drive away, rounding the corner and disappearing like it had the day before.

Laverne and Bernard were near her flower garden. They were holding onto each other, hugging, crying, and apologizing through sobs. They swayed as they held each other, slow dancing to an imaginary song with daisies, rhododendrons, and daffodils behind them.

Ernest felt dizzy and nauseated again. The pang in his stomach returned. Laverne and Bernard remained embraced until they leaned back and saw one another again. They each rubbed their eyes and began to laugh. Laverne took Bernard's hand and they went inside together through the garage. Ernest looked over the neighborhood when they disappeared, listened to the birds whistling and the dogs barking, listened to the engines revving in the distance, and to the wind blowing through the trees. Tori's wind chimes rang above him.

AFTER THE FIRE

Collapse

Fire burst from the roof, animating itself against the cold air, bestowing itself before Orion's belt as embers fell away from the house, snowing ash until the recently refinished attic collapsed into the second floor. Emergency crews parked at angles along the short stub of street, illuminating the otherwise calm night in varying shades of blues and reds. Neighbors watched the blaze with elation and dread, a gaze that both feared and revered the destructive power of fire and its ability to evaporate a structure that very well could have been their own.

As a battalion chief barked orders at bystanders to back away, Billy and Mickey were left alone with their daughter, Amy, to watch their home disintegrate. The crowd watching the entire scene unfold dissipated just as the fire did. Only a handful of people remained when the final section of the burning house had been soaked, a glowing orange piece of siding that went dark upon dampening.

Recollection

What Billy remembered: The overloaded power strip blew, and Billy was jolted from the couch where he had been sleeping. A line of fire crawled up the wall to the ceiling. He dialed emergency with his cell phone and ran upstairs for Amy. He carried her to Mickey and tossed the child into the arms of his panicking wife. They escaped together. Then, obliged by some insistent force, Billy went back inside. He wanted to

salvage something. He managed to retrieve a stuffed monkey from a toy chest near the stairs for Amy.

Mickey looked repulsed. Billy handed the monkey to Amy, who had been digging her chin into her mother's shoulder.

“What in the hell is wrong with you?”

Billy intended to respond, knowing he had the right words somewhere, but all he managed to say was, “It was all I could find.”

Mickey took the charred monkey away from Amy and dropped it to the cracked, crumbling concrete.

What Mickey remembered: It took a moment to realize that the blur in her vision wasn't the haze from waking up but smoke clouding the second floor. Before she could understand what had happened, Billy had already tossed Amy into her arms. Mickey felt her way down the stairs with the banister. She felt the heat rising all around her, maintaining composure only for the sake of her daughter.

Once outside, Billy ran back in before she could say anything to him. A fire truck sped to in front of the house next to theirs. Neighbors wearing sweatpants, coats, and robes appeared behind her. Mickey kept turning Amy in their direction so she wouldn't have to watch everything burning away.

Billy returned with a smoke-damaged stuffed monkey. She snapped at him when he gave it to her. She wished she hadn't done it. And she wished he hadn't gone back inside. When he did, Mickey wondered whether or not she really wanted him to come

back outside, and that was a thought she wouldn't have had if he hadn't been so selfish. She wished he hadn't been so damn selfish for so damn long.

When she took the monkey away from her, Amy whined and reached for it. Mickey adjusted, shifting the child from one arm to the other, and tucked Amy's head into the nape of her neck while wishing for so much more.

Aftershock

Their lives together had already been dissolving. The couple had agreed on a tense, yet cordial living arrangement waiting for the divorce to be lawfully finalized. But they had also been waiting for the right time to alert their friends and family. The fire forced them to move forward.

Billy set up in his parents' basement, forgoing the untouched bedroom of his childhood, an amalgamation of *Maxim* and *FHM* magazines stacked in corners, action figures of wrestlers from the 80s on his bookshelves instead of books, pictures of Pamela Anderson, Anna Nicole Smith, and other *Playboy* models taped to the ceiling above his bed, and posters of Metallica, Megadeth, and Guns N Roses framed in cheap plastic on the walls.

Mickey moved herself and Amy into the guest room on the first floor of her sister's home. At times, Amy would whine for Billy, and Mickey would find a way to distract her. She would thrust Amy upon her nieces who would play silly games or dress Amy up in some of their more ridiculous outfits. Otherwise, Mickey was left to recall the murky time between after Amy was born and when the house burned down.

A Priori: Billy

Billy lived in a row apartment complex near Mickey when they first met. The modern two bedroom, two bathroom layout had been situated across from the northern edge of their college campus. Though it housed mostly juniors and seniors, all kinds of students visited every Friday and Saturday night and formed a block party. It's how he met Mickey. It's how he met most people, but it's also how he met Leah.

It was Billy's last semester as a college student. Leah, only a freshman at the time, ducked into his apartment hurrying away from campus police carding students. She introduced herself and her friends to Billy and his roommate, played beer pong, and smoked one of Billy's cheap cigars. She admired his books, told him to read more, and made suggestions.

Leah was as undecided on a major as Billy was with his relationship with Mickey. They told each other these things, but, to Billy, Leah seemed much more self-assured about the future. Then she discovered his Nintendo. He didn't believe her that she wanted to play, thinking she was coming on too strong, until she started playing with it by herself, blowing the cartridge, *Duck Hunt*, free of dust to get it working.

After their late night gaming session, Billy drove Leah home. When they reached the parking lot of her dorm, they kissed with frantic lust, pawing at each other to get pants off, tossing other articles of clothing they managed to remove from each other into the back seat. They continued for a month until Billy found out Mickey was pregnant a little over a week before graduation.

Billy wondered if he could just stop contacting Leah, but he felt compelled to tell her. He owed it to her. When he went to her dorm, he didn't wait longer than necessary. "She's pregnant," Billy said, and he didn't want to say it out loud. It was admitting to something that wasn't supposed to happen, but there it was, hanging between himself and Leah, who was stunned into silence. She knew the situation before—Billy had made that clear—but this changed everything.

Billy, straining for the right words, wanted to tell her he loved her. He envisioned himself with her, but all he could say was, "Please, just stay away from me and move on. It's better for both of us that way."

A Priori: Mickey

Mickey wished that Billy would grow up sooner than later given how close graduation seemed to be getting. They had only been together for a year, and even then their situation was defined loosely. But they drank every weekend, hooked up often, and took classes together. Billy helped her with accounting courses and Mickey helped him with the sciences.

Enter one night of drunken celebration after Fall finals, a broken condom Billy didn't remember until it was much too late, and the decision that getting rid of it sounded awful and, at this point in her life, unnecessary. Then she was really wishing Billy would grow up much sooner than later.

To her surprise the experience had brought them closer together. After his initial shock, Billy proposed, and the two moved in together. The pregnancy ended up being

among happier times for both. She'd get a late night craving for ice cream almost every weekend, and he would drop the work he brought home from his new assistant job that his father, a financial analyst, provided him. He would drive her to a Dairy Queen right before it closed. It was similar to college, in a way. After drinking, they'd find a Taco Bell, eat it quickly, and make fart jokes to acknowledge the awkward tension of natural biology. They made these jokes again during the pregnancy to acknowledge the sudden closeness of their cramped, one bedroom apartment that echoed every possible sound between them. Gradually though, they left doors open and ignored what used to be funny to them.

They married soon after Amy was born because Mickey didn't want pregnant wedding pictures. He promised a honeymoon when the two could manage the time and finances. But the post-partum delayed any extended excitement a new married life and a baby might bring. Mickey would be up much of the night, drifting in and out of sleep, tossing and turning, and kicking Billy's legs so badly they bruised.

Any time the baby would cry, morning or night, Mickey hustled to her. She would rock Amy slow, then fast, and also sing lullabies. She bought albums with lullabies because she thought maybe it was her own voice that kept the baby crying. She would even play books on tape thinking that it worked for both her and Billy. Then she resorted to begging Amy to sleep or to stop crying. None of it ever felt like it worked, and when she wasn't feeling angry about everything, she felt sad about everything. Or she felt sad that she got angry, or angry that she got sad. It never ended.

Billy got up with her one night. He had begun seeing the stress Mickey was feeling and wanted to help.

“This baby hates me,” she said.

“Let me take her then. Do you want something to eat? To drink?”

“I just want this fucking kid to stop crying,” she said with a quick force. It came out fast like it had to in that very moment.

“We’ll get there,” Billy said. “It just takes time.”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” Mickey said.

“I’m only trying to help.”

“You’re not helping. You’re not helping at all.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Stop making empty statements,” she said. It came out fast again. The force of it silenced Billy, who had quieted Amy at seemingly the moment he cradled her. Mickey seethed.

Reconnecting

Billy took time off after the fire to manage his affairs, and he did little but remain in the basement where his mother brought him lunch daily. His father offered him money, a condolence Billy didn’t need, but took anyway. So he passed the time playing his old Nintendo, spending far too long blowing on the cartridges before remembering to use rubbing alcohol and a cotton swab to get the games working.

The last time he played with it was in college. He thought about the night he met Leah, staying up until 4am mashing buttons to sprint in *Track and Field*; using the warp zones and getting bored with the difficult late levels of *Super Mario Bros.*, and making and racing their own tracks in *Excitebike*.

Billy had been considering contacting Leah again, seeing online that she had graduated and taken a job as a masseuse nearby. He avoided it for a while until he found himself walking into the spa after work one day, feeling a nervous euphoria when he entered the small building in a row of local businesses.

Leah had been standing over the welcome desk filing a nail, and though they stared at one another for what seemed like a long time after he entered, it had been a quick gaze between them. The host interrupted it with her canned greeting.

“I got it,” Leah said. “He’s an old friend.”

Leah led him to a room, closed the door as if she were afraid it would break, shutting it as if she were trying to prevent it from making any sound. She asked without facing him, “After all this time, why now?”

Her reception was unexpected, though he didn’t know exactly what to expect. Billy assumed he would be disappointed in some way, like he wouldn’t see her, or she would pretend he didn’t exist. Maybe he thought he would see her, but from farther away so he didn’t have to confront her. Maybe she would have forgotten him and they could meet again like it was the first time.

He waited for her to turn around, but she leaned her head against the closed door like she had already given up. “I guess I don’t know why I’m here,” Billy said.

“You told me to stay away,” Leah said. “You crushed me, yet here you are, now, of all times.”

“Here I am.” Billy smiled.

“Do you know how much you hurt me?”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Things should have been different. I was hurt too.”

“Say something else,” she said. “I’m not buying it.”

“I feel like every decision I’ve ever made has been the wrong one.”

Leah let his words hang between them. “I just got engaged,” she said.

Recognition

Mickey went entire days without speaking to Billy after Amy was born. He began working more, so Mickey complained that he was never around. She wanted him present, but when he was, he was in the way and she wanted to be alone. There were times he tried to be romantic, but they tended to be when he wanted sex. The thought began to disgust her.

She wasn’t attracted to Billy anymore. She didn’t want to be married anymore. She was lying to herself about what it meant to be married, and she took it all out on Billy until it all blew up, until one of them used the word divorce and it all exploded from there.

What Mickey discovered later, after all the proceedings and formalities of divorce, after the fire erased much of their lives together, was that everything from the beginning of the pregnancy to the final court proceeding had been like an alternate

reality. Only now was Mickey able to finally grasp everything that had happened. She was just as selfish as she accused him of being.

She learned this after they returned to the scorched ground that contained their former lives. Very little worth salvaging survived the fire. A burned trinket here. A charred toy there. Billy told her he was seeing someone already. She wanted to be mad at his desire to tell her such a thing in that moment, and without considering the effect on Amy, but she knew that was him, that he was showing off, or getting back at her. And after rummaging through the remnants of their lot, each lacked the commitment to return to it any longer and continue searching through the mess of what remained.

The lawyers sold the land as is, where their house once stood, where Billy and Mickey created the beginning of their adult lives together, forging a flawed relationship despite each other for the sake of their daughter, a little girl lacking the capacity to comprehend the dissolution of everything around her. The land was sold so the former couple could move on with their lives. Billy and Mickey split the sale of the property, a barren lot between two remodeled houses in a suburban neighborhood fit for full families, like parents who barbecued with the neighbors while all the kids played together.

This was not the life for Mickey. This was a life she thought she wanted. She had spent so much time wishing for things to be different between herself and Billy. Upon reflection, she got what she wished for, unaware of how warped the reality of hopes dreams could be.

Sensations

Billy had talked Leah into meeting for dinner via e-mail after seeing each other again, assuming it would be a one-off event where two old friends could catch up. He repeated the mantra, whether he believed it or not, that nothing would happen.

It began with an accidental touch though, followed by innocent flirtation that evolved to jokes of a sexual nature, which lead to reminiscing of their heated passion in his cramped car. The temptation became too tantalizing, culminating in the same kind of discreet sex the two so often had during their semester long tryst in college.

Leah was still engaged, promising Billy that her own flimsy relationship would end sooner than later. But after Billy returned to work, his timing with Leah seemed off. He'd buy her gifts to make up for lost time that she couldn't accept. The flowers that arrived at the spa appeared suspicious to others and she had to tell him to stop. It was bad enough Leah had put herself at risk of losing her job by giving Billy special attention at the spa. She had to limit his visits.

"We have to stop doing this here," Leah said. "Maybe we should stop doing this entirely."

"I don't want you to lose your job," Billy said.

"It's more complicated than that."

"Just tell him already," he said. "Get it over with so we can finally move on. Together."

"Don't pressure me," she said.

"Look, I'm moving into an apartment nearby the end of this week. Let me know when you can see me again."

“I’ll have to think about it.”

Sparks

Billy sat against a wall of his empty apartment, letting the sun set over the suburban sprawl of his new neighborhood where neighbors remained anonymous. The gated complex sat above town on a hill overlooking it all. He could see outside from his position, looking through the sliding door to a patio from his third floor studio. The glare made him squint, but he knew what he was seeing. The more things changed, the more they stayed the same.

He compelled himself to stand, entered the kitchen, and gathered what he needed to cook rice. He boiled water first, watching the bubbles creep to the surface before it sprayed over the pot and sizzled on the burner. He left one of his arms in the line of fire, each drop a pin prick of pain shooting through his skin. He rubbed his dampening arm and then held his hand over the steam rising into the vent above, moving it closer and closer to the pot. The heat made his palm sweat.

The rice cooked enough, so Billy set the pan aside and moved his hand closer to the burner. The heat radiated through him and pain shot up his arm. He held it there as long as he could, trying to convince himself to slap his hand onto the oven and hold it there, to scar himself with the heat of the moment, and to spark in himself a similar feeling to the one he had when the overloaded power strip blew and burned his house down. He withdrew himself though when the pain became unbearable, after enough sweat from his hand dripped into the burner and hissed him backward.

Burning Away

Another week went by before Billy heard from Leah. She wanted to meet him after work. She alone closed the spa that night, and Leah was leaning against her car in a lot behind the row of buildings where she worked when he arrived.

“You need to shave,” Leah said.

Billy scratched at the hair on his throat. “Seems unnecessary,” he said.

“You were clean shaven when we first met. Do you remember our first night together?”

“The sex? Sure, but I get where you’re going,” Billy said. “I was looking through the sunroof and you pointed out a few of the constellations, the ones you could remember, anyway. Orion was one, for sure.”

“It was a beautiful night. I’ll always remember it.”

“Won’t be another like it.”

“Then you know what I have to ask you to do?”

Billy nodded. He avoided the words neither of them could bear to hear out loud again. Billy stayed away.

ICED OVER

A week after she blustered into the bar for the first time, she settled on me. She called herself Catherine the Great, but everyone else just called her Cat. She would tell anyone listening what she was into at the moment. It was big band music from the 30's and 40's until she moved to the 50s, she thought anyway, with the Beach Boys, though she played *Good Vibrations* a bit too often on the juke. The music gave way to art, and the barflies teased her about liking Andy Warhol after seeing the museum on the North Side, near where the Pirates strung together twenty losing seasons in a row.

Cat found me at a time she was reading romance novels. She wanted a cover Fabio to carry her from a white sand beach onto a hammock bed covered in morning glories. She was willing to settle for the threshold of her one bedroom apartment onto a futon with a floral pattern though.

Our dive was in the South Side, off Carson Street at the kind of place where the chairs wobbled and the bathrooms used troughs with ice instead of stalls. Cat came to know me as a regular and decided that we hadn't spoken enough. Truth was that I hadn't been speaking much to anyone since Deb tried to hang herself a year ago, so the prospect of doing so wasn't exactly exciting me. I was perpetually recovering from the past, and Deb had been calling me more recently. We had ended on account of her plea deal after a bust for theft. She was stuffing shirts underneath her shirts, pants inside her pants, and jewelry, if she could get her hands on it, in every pocket she could find.

The night Cat decided we were a thing she planted one on me so hard it almost knocked me off my stool. Stubs, the bartender, gave us a wink when we were leaving and

Cat led me several blocks back to her place. She kept trying to drag me through intersections, jaywalking her way down Carson with the suburbanites in for a weekend bar crawl.

At her place, I picked her up in front of the door and carried her inside. The futon was there with the floral pattern, as promised. She pulled me down with her and we got to it. I was able to catch my breath just before she insisted on going at it again. She took me all over her place and we ended up on the floor by her bed. She leaned against it when we finished, grabbing at small pouches of fat on her hips and belly. She caught me watching, snatched a nail file from a nightstand next to her, and worked her fingernails.

“Okay, time to go,” Cat said. “What’s your name again?”

“Let me sleep past the morning rush,” I said. “And when I get up maybe we can have another go.”

“I’ve got dildos. Big fat ones I can use on you.”

“Or maybe we can just cuddle for a little while longer.”

“Are you some kind of comedian?”

“I’m the funniest septic tank serviceman you’ll ever meet.”

“You smell hilarious,” she said.

She dragged me to the door, both of us picking up my clothes on the way. She kissed me on the cheek and pushed me out. I dressed right there in hallway. A neighbor peeked out of his own apartment when Cat slammed the door. I gave him a dumb wave.

*

Pittsburgh had an especially wistful nature about it in the New Year. It made people miserable. Wind stung the faces of anyone outside, especially when the temperature hit single digits. Flurries fell almost daily, and some years the snow just accumulated, remaining through winter. Vehicles slid into one another when steep roads went unplowed and unsalted. Shoveling driveways and sidewalks took hours, and people broke bones slipping on ice. Whenever it did melt, the snow turned to slush and absorbed dirt and smog. When the city got around to salting the roads, it made everything gravelly and the cars took on a layer of white film. Then, when the snow finally melted, certain parts of the city would flood.

The walk to my house was a mile or so from Cat's place. Snow piles lined curbs of Carson Street. I avoided black ice along sidewalks as I passed bars and tattoo parlors, breweries and restaurants, high and low end clothing stores, coffee shops and diners, and the occasional pool hall. The street had become a tourist spot for a younger crowd. I wanted to be mad at it all, so I was. It was where I met Deb banging away at a pinball machine. I tried my luck and show her a few tricks, like controlling the flippers and watching for the field lights on the machine. It was where I lost her, too, showing someone else the same tricks and Deb overthinking the interaction. Deb locked herself in her bedroom immediately when we got back to her place until I had to bust the door open and cut her down. I wanted to get out of this place, but the city always seemed to have a way of trapping me inside of it.

I grunted removing my boots and strained with the sweatshirt and coat. The mattress on the floor never looked as good as it did in that moment and I fell backward

onto it. A spring poked me in the back, so I used a few of the empty beer cases for padding and threw a heavy blanket over them. Just when the heaviness got to my eyes, just when I began drifting into a dream consisting of Catherine the Great, the phone rang. I didn't think I could move so I let it go until it stopped. When it started all over again, I had to answer it.

Before I got a word in Deb said, "Were you with another one of your whores?"
"I've been asleep."

"Like hell you were," she said in a gruff voice. "You were screwing around."

"I was out drinking and walked the long way home," I said. "What's so bad about that?"

"The bars closed a couple hours ago."

"It's a long walk when you can't do it straight."

"What kind of a whore was it this time?"

"Have you slept at all today?"

"What do you care?"

"I've always cared."

The phone clicked. I figured it would be a while before she called again. It had been a couple of weeks or so since the last time, but I unplugged the thing for the night anyway and slept.

*

The following night I had taken up my usual stool. Cat made her rounds, earned a few free drinks, and eventually made her way to me. She hooked my arm and asked me to buy her one. I refused.

She unhooked my arm, rubbed my back, and said, “Are you actually mad at me for kicking you out of *my* apartment?”

“I like getting to know people worth knowing.” I looked around the bar and said, “I thought you were different than some of the others. Or, you know, maybe I’m just tired.”

“I’m just so sorry I deprived you of your beauty rest.” Cat patted my hair and yelled to the bartender for two more.

Stubs managed orders well despite only having one arm. She was on the passenger side of an unarmored vehicle for a supply run during the early days of the Iraq war and, boom, somehow ended up being the lucky one out of the three others with her. If someone asked Stubs about her arm, sometimes she would act like she didn’t know it was gone. Other times she would pretend like it was lying around in the bar somewhere, like she simply forgot to put it on, and then disappear searching for it.

Stubs yelled back to Cat, “Don’t wave those meaty hands around like you’re better than me, honey.”

“Do you think you can handle grabbing more than one drink at a time?”
“Sure can.” Stubs stuck her fingers into two bottles of Iron City. She sucked her fingers after she put the bottles down in front of us.

“Look, it was a long night and an even longer day,” I said. “I’m not up for games.”

Cat handed me a bottle and said, “Then here’s to our newfound friendship lasting longer than a game.”

We clinked the bottles together a bit too hard. Her eyes widened when beer sprayed us both. She laughed, and I felt like I had to.

We ended up at her place again, screwing through what little furniture she had. To make conversation afterward, I complained about the delay in plowing. She shushed me and put Benny Goodman on her record player, a vintage find at one of the secondhand shops along Carson Street. When I tried to compliment her figure as she swayed to the music, she sent me on my way, letting me dress first at least.

When I made it to my place, I heard the phone ringing before I even reached the door. Deb didn’t even give me a chance to put the phone to my ear before I heard her say, “Out with your whore again?”

“You sound full of energy,” I said. “Can I do something for you?”

“Stay off the streets. The streets are full of tits.”

“Isn’t that a reason for me to be *on* the streets, dear?”

“Don’t sweet talk me,” she said.

“I’m trying here, Deb. What else can I do? What can I do for you? Just tell me what to do.”

“I told you. Stay off the streets.”

“I don’t know what to say anymore,” I said. “I don’t know what to do. Just tell me what to do.”

She hung up. I left the phone plugged in but it didn’t ring like I wanted it to.

*

Cat and I met up at a small diner on Carson Street a few days later, sitting near a window and eating a late lunch while it was still light out. As it became darker, more people stumbled along the sidewalks. A man stood in the road in front of the diner for a while smoking until he passed out, cracking his head on the curb, smearing blood along the sidewalk.

“If we stay here long enough we might see someone get stabbed,” Cat said. “Did you hear that happened the other day? A few blocks up near Mario’s.”

“Tell me something that’s actually interesting,” I said. “Tell me how you ended up here.”

“That’s not worth going into.” Outside, police moved a gathering crowd away from the bleeding man.

“Where are you originally from?” Police had partitioned a section of sidewalk around the man as paramedics arrived. An officer yelled at some who took pictures.

“Virginia. Then we moved to Maryland when I was real young. Every man my mother dated was in the Navy. I moved myself to California with wild dreams of becoming a celebrity, of being discovered for some hidden talent I hadn’t yet discovered. Now I’m here.”

“Here because...”

“It’s still not worth getting into.”

The chatter around the diner got louder and I thought of Deb. “Maybe this was a bad idea then.”

“Maybe you’re putting a little too much pressure on everything,” she said. “Be in the moment. I mean, look, we might be watching a guy dying here and you’re worried about the past.”

“My last relationship involved a woman who tried to hang herself. I had to break down the door and cut her loose.”

“That’s a hell of a thing to say right now.” Paramedics worked the bleeding man onto a stretcher and loaded him into an ambulance.

“I’m not trying to be anyone’s hero, but maybe you can understand why I’m interested in getting to know you.”

“Did she ever tell you why she did it?” The crowd outside dissipated and officers, one by one, began to leave.

“I never asked. I just said that we’d figure it out. I kept telling her we’d get out of here and that we’d make it. Then her family got involved. Got her the finest care they could find, so they say.”

“I had a doctor taking care of me,” Cat said. “He bought me jewelry and flowers all the time. And books. Lots of books, because he knew I loved to read. He bought me so many books that he turned one of his rooms into a library. Did that just for me.”

“So that was how you ended up here then,” I said. “What went wrong?”

“I couldn’t do anything or go anywhere without him being around. So I left.”

“Still sounds like you had it made.” The two officers who remained outside were talking to some in the crowd that stuck around.

“He threw money around like it didn’t matter. He ran a practice from his house and had other doctors working for him. He’d study special cases though, and take control if something went wrong.” Cat said. “He always had to be in control. If he decided to take me to the beach for a week, then the decision was made. We’d get there and he’d get calls and cut trips short. I’d let him hear it too, but he had this way of talking me into staying every time I tried to leave. He pressured me, like his life would end if I decided to really leave him. He’d say that but I don’t know what he implied by it.”

“Don’t think he’d ice himself?”

“He’s still hoping I’ll come back.”

An officer came inside and asked us if we knew the man and saw what happened. We both said no.

“How did you get away?”

“He had to attend a conference for a weekend,” Cat said. “He wanted me to go but I just couldn’t stand the thought. I told him I’d see him when he came back. As soon as he left, I packed everything I could, grabbed a few thousand bucks from a safe he kept in a desk cabinet, and I just drove.”

“And here you are.”

“I didn’t know where I was going. I just kept driving. Hours and hours. Wyoming. Iowa. They all blended together after a while. Then I hit a bad snowstorm here, and I figured this was as good a place as anywhere else I’d end up.”

The officer who asked us if we saw anything had finished questioning people inside the diner. “I’d argue that, but I get it.”

“Now I don’t know what to do with myself,” Cat said. “I’m not sure I’m strong enough to make it without him.”

The officer went outside, said something into a walkie, and drove away in his squad car. The caution tape flapped in the cold wind. One officer remained inside the partitioned section of sidewalk, guarding against something. Or for something. He just leaned against the diner, his ass pressing against the brick, with arms folded into himself as he occasionally blew warm air into his hands.

We finished our burgers and ended up at my place a little later, rolling all over the slanted kitchen floor. We spotted a mouse under the fridge just after we finished the first time. We ended up on the mattress for our second run through, and the spring gave me a pretty good cut on my side. Afterward, Cat rested her legs on my torso. I rubbed her feet hoping to recalibrate both of our bodies for a third round when the phone rang. We both went for it, but she got it and put it on speaker, singing a greeting that sounded off key.

“Are you the whore?”

Cat looked at me, hugged herself to cover as much possible, and said, “Are you the former whore?”

“You shouldn’t be there.”

“You shouldn’t call here.”

“Get out while you can, whore. Get out, get out, get out!”

Cat hung up and we tried to sleep. I asked her what was wrong. “Nothing,” she said. I kept asking and she just kept saying, “Nothing.”

*

Cat and I arrived to the bar together the following day, late morning, saying little. Three locals had whistled at Cat when we walked in, one nudging me and winking as we approached Stubs. One of the other men kept eyeing Cat and she noticed. She went over to the men and chatted with them, flipping her hair and doing the wide-eyed thing for free drinks again. She got one, then another, then another, and then a round of shots to celebrate their new friend. Stubs obliged it all and I slipped out unseen as soon as I could.

The walk back to my place had been quiet. Few walked the biting cold of Carson Street. I remembered the last time I had been happy with Deb, when we ran out on a check at one of the bars near the Southside Works. We couldn’t afford it, but we ran on it laughing, like we realized it was something we could have been doing all along and only just discovered it for ourselves. It was only a day later I watched her drag rope into my bedroom. The situation didn’t feel real, and only when I heard the chair tip over did it occur to me what was actually happening.

I flopped onto the mattress in the main room in front of the heater and I shut my eyes. I never even took off my coat. It was a good sleep, and when I came to, Cat was sitting next to me peeling a label off a bottle of Yuengling.

“Did you give them what they wanted?”

“I just wanted the free drinks,” she said. “Figured I’d save you the money.”

“Like hell.”

“Do you know that studies show people are happier when they quit something? Instead of sticking through something that causes unnecessary stress, quitting an obligation makes people happier.”

“That sounds like avoiding the problem,” I said. “That sounds like you’re going to run away again.”

She grabbed her coat from the floor and let the door slam. I went to follow her, but the phone rang. I almost answered it, but I let it go. I let it ring over and over again until it stopped on its own.

INTERLUDE

My father's last pocket watch was falling to the kitchen floor, an unforgiving gray slate tile. As it fell, I remembered that it had to be dad's fifth or sixth, having lost or broken them all in the steel mill. He would wonder out loud if maybe the spicks had stolen them, but we all knew he broke them somehow. My mother would chide him, saying that he should know better than to speak that way, but he would just say things to have her straighten him out. Mom helped him along in that way.

Dad worked as a stove tender and said he hated how all the carbon and heat felt like it slowed time. Me and Junior kept buying pocket watches for him anyway. It was the kind of unaware present a child buys for a parent without really knowing anything. So when the first one broke, we replaced it, and then it became a thing between the three of us. We told dad he looked classy, so he humored us, flashing it when we all went to dinner Sundays. They were nice enough local diners, but nothing expensive. They were enough that dad would clean up his act, treat us and himself, and gear up for long week ahead.

It stopped after a couple of years when he began to forget things here and there. Me and Junior took on the expenses when we got older, after dad was on borrowed time and mom had passed. His last pocket watch, one I purchased for him myself, would bring in the extra cash that Junior said we needed. And so we argued over it, and it was enough to make us children again. He had snatched at the pocket watch but I kept it away from him like he did to me when we were younger, pushing at his head and sticking my hand

in his face as long as I could before he yanked at my raised arm. My hand collided with a cupboard and it sprung the pocket watch loose.

I wanted that last pocket watch to retain my connection with dad. I wanted something that could help remind me of being the man he was for us, working long, hard hours to provide as best he knew how, especially after mom was gone. I wanted one last connection to the family I had been losing over the last several years. Mom was gone, dad's memory was fading, and Junior had found work in the coal mines halfway across the state.

The watch became a defining, irreparable moment between me and Junior. Watching the pocket watch fall, its trajectory forming a void between us, the shattered pieces unraveling an already distant brotherhood. After everything was sold, just like Junior wanted, I wouldn't find a way to honor my father's memory with a new pocket watch until long after he was gone, well after Junior and I had anything left to say.

IT'S JUST A RACE, RIGHT?

The unwritten tradition of the hobby shop had been that store managers rang in fake returns and took the money because they weren't paid enough. That's what Ryan had learned, anyway, from a manager that flaked on her just after she began working for the small, family-owned company ten years ago. Several others came in, took part without ever acknowledging they had followed the tradition, and left the company.

Ryan had just begun training a new manager, Carlos, who had only started earlier that week after the previous manager left the company for a Sears at the other end of the mall. Before that, she had been working twelve hour shifts, taking only Sundays off. A customer came in and tried to return an already launched Estes rocket, but Ryan refused to take its pieces back. Then he contacted the home office and the company caved. When she slipped the money over the counter instead of handing it to the man without smiling, he called ownership again. She was instructed to, "Try and be nicer."

Ryan slammed the phone down and went to the back room, a small storage unit the size of a walk-in closet with an attached bathroom. By the time she got there, Carlos was right behind her flicking a lighter, cupping his hand around the flame like they had just stepped outside on a windy day. They sat on metal foldout chairs smoking pot from a pipe purchased at a Spencer's near the food court.

"It'd be real easy to rip this store off with that old register." Ryan said. "The way the family runs the business, you can just ring in returns for anything under twenty bucks and pocket it. There's no paperwork then. Repeat as necessary for a retirement fund."

"Seems like an outdated inventory system, so it makes sense," Carlos said.

“Speaking of inventory, the engine I had special ordered that’s sitting behind the counter is for Weaver. He’ll be back for it before Sunday I’m sure.”

“I don’t know how that guy earns money if he’s always here.” Carlos wiped off his boots and said, “You don’t think they’d know we rang in returns all the time?”

“They’ve been saying for years that they would update the system,” Ryan said. “They won’t.”

*

Ryan trained Carlos the quirks of how the business ran, like taking inventory by hand on certain days of the month or special ordering parts for customers. This usually was for gas-powered, remote-controlled cars. It was Ryan’s expertise in the field that pushed the company to its largest profit in years. The hobby shop also sold other remote control vehicles, slot car sets that were cheaper than the slot cars sold separately, trains in five different scales, models of popular cars throughout the twentieth century, model war planes and ships, and the glue to make the models that kids tried using to get high.

Carlos made sure there was enough overlapping coverage for the shipment of product on Thursday. He also wanted everyone working on Sunday, when kids roamed free from their parents, knocking boxes from shelves and leaving fingerprints on the glass cases displaying hand-crafted chess sets, fully-constructed model ships that Ray, a part-timer, built during store hours, and several rare Lionel trains priced into the thousands.

At close Thursday, Ryan counted the money, Carlos helped Ryan with the nightly paperwork, and Ray and Ed, the other part-timer, reorganized product and cleaned the store.

“They should really pay us more,” Ed said to Carlos.

“The family would sell the business before that happened,” Ryan said.

“Who would want to sell a place like this?” Ray asked while organizing product to his liking. He angled the boxes of model cars and airplanes on the far wall so they all faced the store entrance.

“They don’t make as much money as you think,” Ryan said.

Ed leaned against a tall glass case and said, “They wouldn’t tell any of us how much they really made.”

“The overhead on remote control limits their actual profit,” Ryan said. “The company doesn’t make money on any car we sell. Accessories make them money. The company profits twenty bucks every time we sell a pair of tires. And who’s only going to buy two tires? But we have to sell the cars first, and they’re a costly investment.”

“They don’t invest in anything,” Ed said, moving off the tall glass case and shaking the car engines inside of it. “They could be doing so much better and then we’d obviously do better.”

“If we sell one of those Lionel trains in the back, we make our week,” Carlos said. “Start selling more of the other product on top of what we’re already doing and maybe I can say something about raises.”

“You can’t just sell this junk to anyone though,” Ed said.

“Would you sweep the floor instead of making Ray do it again? Maybe justify the raise that Carlos thinks you can get,” Ryan said.

Ed bared his palms and said, “I’m just saying we all deserve more.”

By the time Ryan finished filling out paperwork and faxing it to the home office, the vacuum finally began wailing from the back of the store. It sounded like there were rocks inside of it, and then they smelled its grinding gears. Ray mopped the tile at the entrance of the store, and Ryan and Carlos waited for them to finish, saying little of anything beyond comparing numbers to the year prior.

When they all finished, Ryan locked the gates and together they walked through the bowels of the mall to their cars, all used Dodge or Ford coupes from the mid-90's, all running on their last fumes.

*

The following morning Ryan edged closer to the mall through rush hour traffic. Though she was always late, it was even later today. Her mother struggled mightily that morning, barely able to move from bed, inching her way to a walk in shower. Ryan had to help her bathe, too. This occasionally happened though, so instead of arriving early afternoon when she was officially scheduled to close the store four days a week, she would get there when she could while Ray covered the store alone. This way, the home office knew little of the situation while Ray covered for her.

Ray understood the situation and even benefitted from it. Ryan would let him leave whenever he wanted, or he could stay if he wanted the extra money. Sometimes he just liked to stay and get high with Ryan and build some of the models for display. But he always left before Ryan closed the store entirely. After the mall closed, she would sometimes linger in the store by sitting against the dimly lit cases with all the other lights off, relishing the silent glow of the solitude.

There were a few people in the store when Ryan arrived. She carried a bag across her body that contained car parts and she gripped her own remote control car by the front bumper. She never tuned any customer's vehicle as good as her own, and she would special order rarer parts through the store's inventory list by making up fake customer names and paying less than cost for them. It was the same as taking from the register to her. It was better, even, because customers would come back and buy parts and get their cars tuned so they could attempt to beat her every Sunday in the races. She wanted to be faster than everyone else though, if only on principle. She felt like she needed to be better than everyone else who paid her to work on their cars. She also just liked being able to win at something.

An old man approached her as soon as she stepped behind the counter and asked, "What are these things? Rocket powered skateboards?"

She took her sunglasses off and stared at the man for a moment, deciding whether or not he was serious, and said, "It's a chassis for a gas-powered, remote-control car."

"Yeah, but that one in the glass case right there looks like a skateboard."

"It's just an aluminum chassis with the wheels attached."

"You can build your own?"

"I can build my own, yes," she said, lifting her car. "I built this one."

"Maybe my grandson would like that."

She smiled and said, "I can show you a few if you're interested." She set her car on top of the case and said, "How old is your grandson?"

"He's four."

Ryan looked down at her sneakers and dropped her bag. “Sir, these cars contain really small parts and go forty miles per hour out of the box,” she said. “If it hits me at full speed, the force of it would break my foot.”

“Well, we’ve sure come a long way,” he said. “Maybe in another year or two.”

Ryan went to the back room, sat down, and rubbed her face. She got up, began jumping in place, and shook her head like a boxer, throwing a few punches. She caught herself in a dirty mirror and stopped. So she pushed boxes of overstock Pinewood Derby cars further into their designated corner. She felt winded and sat back down. She took already broken balsa wood, damaged either in transit or by customers testing its, or their own, strength, and snapped each piece again and again.

Ray knocked on the door and peeked inside the back room. He said, “Everything okay? It looked like you just walked away from a customer there.”

“I’m not feeling like a salesperson today.”

“I thought that was part of what made this job so nice.”

“I think I’m losing it.”

“I guess it’s all about perspective,” Ray said. “Maybe I never grew up. Maybe I’m getting so old that I’m acting more like a child. This store caters to that mentality.” Ray slipped a pipe out of his pocket. “There’s other perks to the job too.”

“Someone just asked me if we sold rocket-powered skateboards,” Ryan said.

“See? That’s funny to me. It’s all about perspective.”

“You know what I did last night? After I paid the neighbor for watching my mother, she stuck around for an hour telling me that I should be out on the town and

having fun. She thinks I should be dating. Said that she had a grandson that just finished college who might be interested in me. I was mortified, but it was all I could think about when she left. What could my life be like outside of all this? Then I slow simmered soup so I could have dinner after helping my mother to bed. I stayed up until four in the morning imagining a different life. I didn't want to go to sleep because I knew I had to get up and do this all over again. So, I'm sorry Ray, but it's hard for me to have a sense of humor."

"I've had a full life," Ray said. "Consider that this job is the only one you've known in your adult life. There's time for you yet."

"If you wouldn't mind, I'd like a few minutes alone before I go back out there."

"I'll leave this here," Ray said. He patted her shoulder and put the pipe on a shelf. "Take as much time as you need. Like I said, you've got plenty of it."

*

Weaver came into the store wearing his cutoff, stonewashed, jean shorts that he wore year round. His voice naturally projected, and anyone in the store easily heard him over the ambient sounds of running trains, demo videos, and mall chatter.

"I've got a Lamborghini stored in a garage at a farmhouse two hours from here. I only take it out once a year because it was stolen and sold to me on the cheap. I'm making the replica now, so I want this to be the fastest car out there!"

"Okay, Weaver, I'll race your imaginary Lamborghini with the Ferrari I got on Social Security," Ray said.

Ryan maintained and repaired remote control cars for customers, pocketing their money because there was no system in place for how to charge them for it. Ryan added spoilers to their plastic car bodies, switched out heavy aluminum parts for lighter carbon fiber fittings, and even changed stock engines for higher quality, more expensive motors. Ryan even painted dozens of the plastic shells, designing them just like the cars in *The Fast and the Furious* that everyone seemed to want. She had done work on Weaver's cars until he decided to do the work for himself.

"Weaver, we've got important work to do," Ryan said. "Why don't you just pay for your engine and get to work on tuning it all wrong."

"I'll take my chances. I want to win against you. I need to win."

"It's just a race, Weaver."

Weaver pulled out a fat wallet and said, "Let me take you out sometime."

"How many more ways can I say no?"

"There can only be so many before you run out."

"I don't mind repeating myself in this case."

"Pick the time and place," Weaver said. "I'll even get someone to look after your mother."

"Just what do you think you know about me and my mother?"

"Carlos told me she had trouble moving around by herself. Scer-o-sis? I figure you can use a nice night on the town."

"I bet."

Weaver then pulled a VHS tape from the front of his shorts and said, “Anyway, you all should check this out.”

Beyond the tall glass display cases, a television played a remote control plane demo. Ryan removed the cassette and Weaver shoved his own into the player. It was an amateur sex tape with a couple whose faces were blurred.

“This isn’t you,” Ryan said, “right?”

“Of course not! I want to make money from this!”

Ryan asked without really asking, “Is that legal?”

“That’s why we blur the heads. Me and my buddy, he owns the motel here. We’ve got a series of these using my equipment and a few of his rooms. He keeps them modeled after other hotels so it’s harder to trace.”

“That’s twisted,” Ray said.

“If you guys spread the word, we can make it worth your while. We’ve hit a plateau and we’re hoping to expand a trusted customer base.”

“Weaver,” Ryan said. “We’re a hobby shop, not a sex store.”

“They don’t pay you guys enough,” Weaver ejected the tape and said, “This is easy money right here!”

“There’s a line I’m not willing to cross,” Ryan said.

*

Ray told Carlos about the tape when he came back that night with his daughter, Mia. Ryan played with her, throwing a small balsa wood airplane back and forth.

“Maybe we should take him up on the offer, make a little money, and turn him in,” Carlos said.

“You’d go down with him,” Ryan said from behind a shelf. “Just give him time. He’ll get caught.”

“I think I could get away with it,” Carlos said. “But yet he’s so dumb he’d somehow accidentally get me pinched and manage to get himself out of it.”

“Camila would kill you before you could get arrested,” Ryan said. She followed Mia to where Carlos leaned against a shelf.

Mia hugged Carlos’ leg. “Wife kills husband over amateur porn ring. Redneck wanted for questioning about a stolen Lambo.” They all laughed, including Mia, who wanted to belong. He shuffled Mia towards Ray and they began playing with a Thomas the Tank Engine set.

“Let me ask you something,” Carlos said. “Are you taking money from the register?”

“Of course not.”

“It’s just been coming up short lately.”

“I have never shorted a register,” Ryan said. “You see the paperwork every morning. It’s even every time.”

“I knew it wasn’t you,” Carlos said. “But he’s trying to make it look like you.”

“Ray?”

Carlos showed Ryan the paper trail. He then beckoned Ray into the hallway outside the store.

Ryan couldn't hear much of the conversation. All she heard was Ray say, "I needed a few bucks to make it through the week. I'm not the only one here who does it."

Customers formed a longer line than usual before close. Carlos came back in and tinkered with his own car. When the last customer left, Carlos said, "That's the first time I ever fired somebody. Anyone I ever let go had already stopped showing up to work."

Ryan stared at her shoes. The lip of her sneaker was coming undone. All the extra cash she had outside of her regular paycheck and she still couldn't afford a decent pair of sneakers, let alone nice shoes she should be wearing to a job.

Carlos asked, "You ever have to fire anyone?"

"I've stepped in more times than I ever wanted to," Ryan said. "I'd like to tell you it gets easier."

"I mean, if you have to be that dumb about how you take money from the register then you need to go, right?" He said, "He'd end up costing us our jobs."

Ryan nodded.

*

On Sunday, Ryan and Carlos ran the store. They had to kick out a half dozen guys waiting to race so they could proceed with closing. The guys talked trash through the gates as the crew went through their duties. Weaver kept taunting Ryan, "Just you and me baby."

Outside, guys were driving laps around a makeshift track between two cones and two medians that formed a large square. Ryan and Carlos moved on easily from their first

several opponents, and then Carlos lost an elimination race to Weaver. Ryan advanced easily racing against several customers who preferred dealing with Carlos over her.

The final race featured Ryan and Weaver, and she heard him say one last time, “Just you and me baby.”

“What makes you think you’ve got a chance, Weaver?”

“Oh, I know your type.”

Carlos raised his arm and waited a few seconds to drop it. Ryan took an early lead around the first corner, handling her car with confident control. She took a wide turn around the second corner and Weaver caught up. They were even as they approached the next median with Ryan on the inside. Going into the turn, Weaver jerked his car into hers and forced it into the curb. Her ’68 Charger body popped off and floated as carbon fiber pieces rained over the third corner turn. The crowd groaned. Weaver slowly guided his car to the finish.

“Put an asterisk on that win,” Ryan said.

“It’s one little victory, honey. Real winning is doing it again and again,” Weaver said. “It’s marathon, not a sprint.”

“I won’t give you the satisfaction racing like that,” Ryan said. “This isn’t destruction derby. Win legit if you want to race.”

Weaver leaned in close to her and said, “You’re no better than anyone else here. I mean, look at that scatter. You’ve got some suspiciously expensive parts all over the lot, parts that your store doesn’t seem to sell, or at least sell to us, parts that you’d otherwise be unable to afford, too, unless you were bringing in some extra money.”

“Don’t worry about what I do.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I don’t,” Weaver said. “We all have our lines that we cross. Or won’t cross. Today, mine just happened to be the finish. But, hey, it’s just a race, right?”

Ryan gathered the remnants of her shattered car. She wondered how long it would take to fix everything. She needed to go home, to help her mother move around again, to pay the neighbor and listen to her lectures about how Ryan should be living her life, lectures her mother couldn’t give anymore. She left the boys to race again, slipping away without telling anyone she was leaving.

On her way home, Ryan wondered what she would have to do to make it to next week. There would be another race. Everyone would expect her to be there.

SAVIOR

Pete and Frank approached the diner entrance where a man played bagpipes, blowing on the instrument over the nearby heavy traffic.

“I think I’ve been saved,” Pete said.

“Saved from what?”

“I’m serious, Frank. I was watching a sermon last night, on the channel that shows the horse races. It really affected me.”

“Let’s just go inside.”

“The preacher said he could feel that there was an isolated individual, a lost and confused soul, and I knew that was me.”

“Seems to me like he could have been referring to anyone.”

Pete tossed a couple of dollars and some change into a container in front of the man playing the bagpipes and said, “I’m a changed man, Frank. I mean it.”

Frank held the door for Pete and they took their usual booth in the corner so they could watch the traffic and the parking lot. The diner was in between an outlet mall and a stretch of several chain restaurants that drew larger crowds as the day went on.

Pete cleared his throat and asked, “You think she’d take me back?”

“God damn it!” Frank said, slamming his fist hard enough to bounce the silverware. “She’s screwing a bartender. Rides him raw twice a day. Get over it already.”

“You shouldn’t take the lord’s name in vain,” Pete said. “It’s not good for the soul.”

“The soul? Nonsense.” A server placed two clear plastic cups of water on their table. “You’re not good for my soul, if you ask me.” Frank ordered his usual: eggs, sunny side up, and coffee, black.

“Well I ain’t asking,” Pete said. “I’m fine with just water.”

“It makes me uncomfortable when I’m the only one eating. Let me get you something.”

“Same as he’s got, but with bacon and hash browns,” Pete said.

“I’ll be paying more for you than for me!”

“You offered! Don’t get cheap on me,” Pete said. “Say, what about that nice girl who works at the grocery?”

“How about you start your new life by getting a job.”

“You got any leads?”

“Am I the classifieds?”

“Don’t be so mean, Frank.”

“I once knew a guy,” Frank said, “who had goals. Real goals. What happened to him?” He sipped at his water.

“Come on, Frank,” Pete said. “I’ve had a bad run. You know that.”

“So what brilliant plan have you got then?”

“Well,” Pete said, tapping his fingers on the table, “I think I could go for both ladies and see which one panned out if you helped me. And I mean really helped. None of the kind of help you give so long as you don’t have to get up.”

“Oh for Chr—” The server delivered the food and Frank ate half of his meal.

“I’ve had enough,” he said.

“You got the check?”

“Yes, god damn it, yes!”

“Language, Frank!”

Frank pushed his plate over to Pete and he finished both their meals. He drank the coffee too, getting the free refills and a newspaper from the stack at the entrance. He listened to the bagpipes, watching the man play between searching the ads, circling a few with a pen he borrowed from the waiter.

“Same time next Sunday Frank?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Frank said. “Stay away from the tube until then.”

HOME MADE

My father violated his dinner, a beef stew concoction made especially for him, chewing and slurping its contents with a lip-smacking, tongue-lashing, open-mouthed, appreciation. He stuffed himself with overflowing spoonfuls of noodles, carrots, and corn. Brown slime dripped from the rough hair on his chin when I told him to shut the fuck up and chew like the civilized, rich prick he wished he could be.

There occurred a tranquil moment between his befuddled, wide-eyed expression and when he grabbed me by my throat. His chair fell behind him and our cups tipped over when he reached for me. My mother continued eating and held her head in the palm of her bony hand. He shoved me into what he always called the family room. He grabbed me again by the back of my neck, pushed me to the door, and threw me out. The screen door banged hard against the house and my knees scraped the concrete patio. I rolled over and remained on my back for a while tasting the rain.

*

Me and Shane threw rocks at parked cars and abandoned houses for the satisfying shatter of glass. We set fires in trash cans and danced around flames like worshippers of some ancient pagan religion. We stole Snickers Bars and Playboys from convenience stores where threats of involving the police always proved empty. And when we finished terrorizing the rest of locals by yelling obscenities at them, we rode bikes around our middle-school parking lot doing tricks like we could someday make a living out of it.

We had discovered a way onto the school's roof, high above the rest of the town, that involved climbing poles, sidings, and ledges, waiting for others to disappear so

nobody ever discovered our spot. It was an area enclosed by walls, pallets, and bricks where no one could see us or find us, where nobody would ever think to look for us. We had ditched petty vandalism and talked about girls and sex and the future and we didn't know a thing about any of it.

We also talked about our homes like they were personal prisons constructed only for us. It was a place where we only had to outlast the other inmates for several more years. We compared bruises, Shane lifting his shirt and showing off the socket wrench marks on his back, and me showing my arms and stomach where hard punches landed and purpled my skin. We made up stories about where they came from, like being initiated into a gang, or playing a rough game of tackle football with older kids, or just saying they were all from the hard falls we took jumping our bikes.

From the roof, we would check to see if anyone was at the bridge near the entrance of our school where we actually did jump our bikes. The bridge crossed over a thin creek with a concrete base below that formed a quarter pipe next to it. We descended the building without being seen so nobody would take away our spot, lowering ourselves on the other side of the building away from the bridge where we kept our bikes locked to a rack.

Me and Shane would sit on the railing watching kids jump and we waited for our turn, approaching the ramp using a worn dirt path that separated the parking lot from the bottom of the pipe. We jumped crates, boxes, and even each other, landing on a thin, unforgiving patch of grass comfortable only after a hard fall, where pain shot through the

body until it relaxed enough for a sweeping sense of relief. That was the pain we truly earned.

*

After my father tossed me out, I went behind the house and sat on the worn, rusty patio furniture where I used to play cards with Shane, using a deck he stole that featured naked girls jacks on up. The smell of stale grass lingered from the old lawnmower nearby. My old bike leaned on the wall next to the lawnmower and both were covered in dust and cobwebs. I couldn't recall the last time I went for a ride, so I decided to bike the mile to the quarter-pipe.

The neighborhoods looked exactly the same as they did when me and Shane made the daily ride. Some of the mailboxes were even still dented from punching them on our way by. The school even looked the same despite having been abandoned. Only now the windows had been broken. Desks were still inside, stacked outside of classrooms in the hallway, and some of the chalkboards in the rooms still looked chalky.

I rode around the parking lot and got a feel for how everything worked again, spinning the bars and doing short wheelies to see if I still had any balance left. Before long, I rode to the worn dirt path over the grass partition separating the pipe from the parking lot. I kicked over the posts holding the chain that blocked the path with a sign reading *No Skateboarding*. I walked my bike to the bottom of the ramp.

There had been a little stream which used to run under the bridge. It was where I flicked my first cigarette from a pack Shane had stolen from his father. It was a similar story for my first beer as well, chugging it, letting half of it spill away from my mouth,

and throwing the bottle as hard as I could at the opposite wall from a sitting position. I wondered if the pieces of that exact broken bottle were still underneath the bridge.

We used this place to hide from people here too, though many others also joined us, or we joined them. Underneath the bridge became a place that walled off the world above, our own underground culture of misfits and malingerers.

*

We lost touch the summer before we began high school. He disappeared, and when I saw him again in the Fall, he was with another group. We took verbal shots at each other, referring to each other in the past tense through our loose connections. That resulted in a weak fight that neither of us wanted, a push-and-shove match ending with empty threats.

Late into our freshman year, we crossed each other in a skyway three stories high. We rushed each other, wildly swinging our arms before I pushed Shane toward an open window. I dangled his upper body out of it. He relaxed and stopped fighting. *Do it.* He repeated himself in a whisper several times over. *Do it.* The phrase rang through me and I slid him back inside. We backed away from each other before security arrived. A crowd of curious students had been hovering around us.

We never saw each other again until the first day of our last semester during senior year in a Psychology class. We talked about our current lives, our girlfriends, our immediate future after graduation—mine a full time job stocking shelves at a grocery store, just like my father; his at a local community college studying accounting—and we

remained cordial until we graduated, staying in touch over the internet through the summer.

He talked me into taking classes with him. We each kept our jobs and made it work the best we could. By the end of our first semester, he had proposed to his pregnant girlfriend. He made the honors list. The next semester he had a daughter. He made the honors list again. And just over a month into the summer, Shane Casey was dead, found by his fiancé with a needle still in his arm. His only regret, he wrote in a short note that only confused everyone more, was that he couldn't watch his daughter grow up.

*

I hauled my bike back over the dirt path and rode around the parking lot some more to get a feel for jumping again, trying minor hops over curbs and painted lines. I worked my way up to taking a few jumps on the ramp, barely doing quick one-footers, kicking my leg out fast and finding the pedal at the last moment possible each time. That I was able to jump at all was good though. It was an improvement, and it was progress, so I attempted a 180 to keep pushing it, to keep moving forward. Changing direction turned out to be more difficult than I expected and the bike got away from me in mid-air. I landed hard, my side colliding with the formerly unforgiving patch of grass that had been worn into a hard clay.

The rain picked up again and I made my way to the bottom of the pipe, crawling under the bridge with my bike. I kept shaking my aching wrists and turned my focus elsewhere to help dull the pain. The thin creek that used to flow under the bridge had remained dried up. Its cracked underside and walls had been tagged in so much graffiti

that it was impossible to even read. I picked at broken beer bottle pieces and tossed them aside so I could sit. I leaned against the wall near the opening with my head inches away from the ceiling.

*

Me and Shane both often tried to locate what went wrong, even after we reconnected, but there was no answer, no solution to a problem that would always exist, even if as a distant memory. Shane's fiancé did the same, speaking with me at his funeral and asking if he had exhibited any signs around me. There was no right answer, no solution, and no particular way to move forward. We came from broken homes, and it would be a part of our lives no matter what we did to change it.

Shane told me, once, about the summer he disappeared. His stepdad broke his arm with a hammer. He went to stay with his real dad until his mom was able to move out. She did, and he moved back, but then so did his stepdad who offered a tearful apology and promised a new life for everyone. Little changed.

Before we had to climb rooftops and crawl underneath bridges to imagine a future and find ourselves at home, we were just kids tuning into the world for the first time. After a wet, heavy snowfall, we threw piles of snow over the railing and jumped from seven or eight feet above into the banks we created at the bottom of the bridge. We slid down the quarter pipe with sleds, the lids to trash cans, skateboards with the trucks removed, and anything else flat we could find. Or on a clear summer day, I brought out my father's binoculars and we'd look into the windows of houses across from the school.

We'd watch kids try and jump their bikes and fall. We'd make fun of them and decide to stay on the roof for a while longer before we showed them how it was done.

We played sports before we knew the meaning of competition. We hiked through woods and built forts from fallen branches, building a home away from home before we knew what we were doing. We tested the ice along the creek when it froze over, breaking through it on our particularly destructive days. We journeyed the creek too, walking along its banks as far as we could imagine, going as far as we could go before we had to turn back, the unfamiliar boundaries too daunting to push.

*

The water rose just enough to form a thin stream that flowed through the center of the pipe. The sound of the stream and the rain echoed off the walls and ceiling of the bridge. The rain had slowed just enough so that I could make another attempt at more difficult jumps. I cleared some of the rocks and glass from the parking lot to gain momentum going into the quarter-pipe, hoping for enough energy to carry me higher, allowing me the ability to make the full 180 turn. I took smaller jumps first, riding through the stream and up the ramp to do the same tricks as before, the water spraying me and the pedals.

Each jump seemed a bit higher and easier than the last. The height no longer tightened my nerves as I felt calmer. The rain had slowed, so I took my time and did my best to find a rhythm. After it got repetitive, I tried one more jump, another 180. I needed momentum for the height, so I charged the ramp as hard as I could. I positioned the bike

perfectly but my foot slipped off the pedal upon landing. My arm and face slammed hard into the damp dirt at the top of the ramp.

I remained on the ground for a while, letting the wet earth and steady rain soak my clothes. Streams formed on my face and the exhibition was over for the day. I thought about climbing up to the roof again, but underneath the bridge would provide more cover. One way or another, it was time to move on. It was time to go home.

JAIL BREAK

A group of children rushed outside for their playhouse, raised six feet from the ground, climbing up a rope ladder to reach the inside of their second home. One quickly covered the rules of their game, where anyone tagged by the opposing team must remain underneath the playhouse jail until a teammate frees them.

Harvey and Anne watched them from her deck, seeing the children going over the rules in the playhouse. Both had chain-smoked their way through sunrise, letting Eric's anger subside overnight. Any time she tried to go back inside to talk to him, Eric yelled at her for answers, throwing whatever happened to be nearby—bottles, books, chairs, dishes and the plastic bowls they still used from their time in college—at any one of the walls that made the most sense to him in the moment. In the meantime, Harvey pissed twice off the railing, avoiding anything about what trouble may have found him inside.

The children across the street began, one team running away from the playhouse while the other counted up from one, skipping numbers on occasion, until they reached sixty.

"Tell me what you're thinking," Anne said.

"I want to believe that rotten things exist to show us the importance of other things," Harvey said.

Anne swept red hair from her face. "I didn't mean for this to happen," she said, throwing a cigarette over the railing, grabbing the cold, rusted iron. Her ring pinged the metal and scared a bird out of a bush below.

“In some way, we wanted this to happen.”

Two of the children were led back by a couple of others to the playhouse. Anne turned around and leaned back against the rail to look inside. Eric had tipped over much of the furniture, all except the couch he sat on with his face held by his fingertips, flanked on each end by old friends Christine and Matthew.

“I should go in there and try again,” Anne said, but she looked back at the children. A “captured” child tried running away from the playhouse but was tackled before he got very far. The birds chirping on the power lines above them flew away when the kids began screeching at each other.

Christine knocked on the sliding glass door before coming outside with Matthew. Anne asked either of them, “How’s he doing?”

“He promised to fix everything, but,” Christine folded her arms and said, “I don’t really know what that means.”

“I think we all need a little distance from today,” Matthew said.

The sliding glass door banged open. Eric approached Harvey and both leaned onto the rail and watched the children arguing. “We should all still get breakfast,” Eric said.

Another child tagged the playhouse and yelled, “Jail break!” Another argument ensued, and their high-pitched voices pierced the thick, humid air. Pigeons flew to and from the power lines along the street.

FIGHTING

The tops of hydraulic fracturing drills punched through trees in the distance as Linda drove us just over the speed limit. The two-lane stretch extended thirty miles from the interstate to Linda's hometown, where new pipelines had been installed near houses and businesses—running along streets in plain sight—to carry natural gas and oil from fracking fields. As we neared houses and full neighborhoods, crude, handcrafted signs welcoming back former high school graduates for alumni weekend were jammed into some of the yards.

When we reached her childhood home, Linda's mother was already outside. She had waited to water the wilted flowers fronting the porch for when she expected us, then hung the wash out to dry on a line in the back yard, where her father had lapped the blades of his manual mower. An hour after she expected our arrival, Linda's mother hugged us both in the unpaved, dirt driveway. Her father soon followed with a pat of Linda's back and a handshake for me as Dick the dog burrowed his nose into our crotches.

“Just push his head away from you,” her father told me, “Hasn't bit me yet.”

“That ‘yet’ worries me a little.”

“Well,” Linda's dad said with a grin, “You never can be too careful.”

We toured the house, seeing it again for the first time in three years, prior to resting up for an unofficial reunion barbeque later. Almost everything remained the same, though her father had begun renovating the bathroom and never finished it. He tore down a section of the wall with the intent to replace it with tile, but a stained beige curtain hung

to hide the still open hole nearer the floor. The rest of the house appeared as constructed mid-century, evolving slightly over time with a bit of modern flare when the occasion demanded change: a new carpet adjacent to the pastel kitchen floor replacing the water damaged shag after the water heater burst; swapping drywall out with much of the older, rotting wood paneling; a new heating system combatted the biting chill of drafty rooms on the second floor; and the central cooling unit helped circulate the stagnant air that settled in the summer months. The house managed to maintain its unique charm though, despite all the change in and around it.

*

Linda was somewhere, doing and saying whatever wives do and say when they've gathered away from their husbands at a backyard barbeque. So I asked the man with the muscles nearby if he had a cigarette.

"I don't smoke," he said. "I have a strict training regimen anyway."

"What kind of training makes the veins on your legs to pop out like that?"

"Resistance training."

"What are you resisting?"

"Losing," he said, and I stared at him long enough, with a head tilt and a raised eyebrow, until he told me what I wanted to hear. "I don't want to lose my next fight."

"Boxer?"

"Mixed martial arts," he said. He screwed and unscrewed the cap of his bottled water without drinking from it. "I fight for a small promotion and I've got a match coming up."

“You figured out how to get paid for fighting my friend,” I said. “You’re a cut above everyone else here.”

“I don’t know about that,” he said. He dropped his bottled water cap to the grass and left it there. “What do you do?”

“High school history seems to be my calling.”

“I’d love to teach, man. I love kids. I don’t think I’m smart enough for it though.”

“You already make a living taking a beating,” I said. “It’s kind of the same thing, except you always lose. Every time you think you’ve got it figured out, you end up getting it all wrong.”

The mixed martial arts fighter acknowledged me with a laugh before his wife, Nikki, summoned him away. He was introduced to various other men looking to impress each other for the rest of the weekend. Many of them formed conversations reflecting upon the past and how things used to be, and I could have shaken a fist at kids these days like the rest of the middle-aged, but I never subscribed to the generational jingoism brought on by statements like, “Back when I was in school...” I overheard one of the husbands ask about the drilling and pipelines in town over the clinking of a horseshoes game. There was some mumbling I couldn’t hear before he, too, was summoned away from the group only to eventually be assimilated into another one.

Most everyone discussed their past connections to others already at the barbeque, or their families. If I took anyone at their word, every kid born in the state over the last three years was the most adorable. But some also talked about office jobs in or around the city, where Linda and I resided two hundred miles away. The conversations benefitted

their wives only, proud partners who made us all presentable for the day. We would be styled the rest of the weekend so we could discuss among us sales figures like civilized people in middle management. We were all little boys in our ties with our wives pressing them to our chests, straightening them along with our postures, and tightening them around our necks in the spirit of maturity.

The competition narrowed with some of the boys breaking their promises of being on their best behavior, moving into the type of shallow political discussion that pervades a person who reads online articles that their preferred cable news network generously calls journalism. I wondered if Linda, still missing from my position near the horseshoes pit, believed I was misbehaving enough to warrant some kind of passive aggressive punishment later. The pressure of her panoptic surveillance threatened me with the kind of silent treatment that makes too much noise.

Even though I paced myself at a beer an hour per my prior arrangement with Linda, I became uncertain if each sip I took was a temptation against the rigorous training of the man I began calling Bruce Lee. He had found a way to rejoin me despite being shown off to everyone. I asked him as many questions as I could about his workout and I learned:

He would not drink until after his fight.

He does not smoke at all, and hadn't since he was in high school over a decade ago.

He maintained a diet that included a lot of steak, chicken, eggs, and protein bars; he ate at Chipotle five days a week as it matched his diet and did so quickly.

He only laughed when I asked him if he would abstain from sex until after his fight.

He always began his day with a workout at 4am, with different routines on different days for three hours a day, before he went to work repairing copiers.

He was able to take a leave of absence from work, a tech-repair company owned by his father-in-law, a month before a scheduled fight to train all day without distraction.

He had won nine fights, five of them by knockout; he had lost seven, six by submission.

“I have to know one more thing,” I said. “Do you scope out a place like this and think about the best way of dropping someone? I would if I had it in me.”

“It never occurred to me, honestly,” he said. Nikki and Linda had returned outside and watched us talking for a time. “So how long have you been married?”

Nikki waved a pinky at Bruce Lee and he blew a kiss back at her. Linda tilted her head to the side and looked at me cockeyed. She likely wanted to mock the strange scene between the couple. Or she might be disapproving of whatever I was doing, or thinking of doing, because I must have been doing or thinking of doing something wrong. It had been harder to tell as of late, so I grabbed a handful of Bruce Lee’s muscular tit, squeezed a couple of quick times, and winked at Linda.

“Hey now,” he said.

Linda grinned but shook her head. “We’ve been married almost four years,” I said.

“Any kids?”

“Let’s just say I’m resistance training.”

*

Linda’s father drank a diet soda and watched television while Dick the dog periodically sniffed at my whiskey. The blank stares of deer and elk heads along the walls reinforced my father-in-law’s choice in programming: a hunting show. On top of his fifty inch tube television, he had placed his only effort practicing taxidermy, a bobcat posed as if it were hissing at anyone no matter where they might be positioned, like the gaze of a painting whose stare follows anyone in a room.

“Ashley loves to tell us all about the diets that she likes,” Linda said to her mother, “but they sure aren’t working!”

“That husband of hers left her for another woman,” Linda’s mother said, “the volunteer firefighter working at the gas station. Did you hear about that?”

“Of course. We all did. Did you know he knocked her up?”

“You just didn’t do that sort of thing when we were younger.”

Linda’s father let out a brusque “mm-hmm” that sandpapered our ears. Dick the dog stared at me long enough that he compelled me to act. I tossed a chew toy at him and it bounced off his nose. He sniffed at it, looked at me, and laid himself down next to the toy, a squeaky duck.

“So when is the actual reunion?”

“Noon tomorrow,” Linda said. “And of course they’re roasting a pig. This town can’t have any kind of function without roasting a pig.”

“How were the other husbands?”

Linda touched my leg and said, “Behaved, for the most part. Some of them tried to argue about all the drilling around town.”

“Such a fuss about all the drilling. Where else are people going to work around here?”

“Some of them said the pipelines have burst and spilled oil or leaked gas everywhere. And that there’ve been more fires.”

A man on the hunting show fired into a skein of geese. Linda’s father kept his focus on it and said, “Fires are gonna happen when guys aren’t paying attention to what they’re doing. No amount of regulation can save a jackass from himself.”

I drank again and Linda said, “Some of them just drank too much and wanted to argue. It could have been about anything, really.”

“Well,” Linda’s mother said, “Some boys do like their drinking a bit too much.”

Linda took her hand off my leg. “We finally met Nikki’s husband,” she said. “He’s a fighter.”

“Oh? And who does he fight?”

Linda slipped into her old, rural accent. “Whoever wants to fight I s’ppose,” she said. “He’s thinking ‘bout retiring though.”

“Maybe he can teach people how to fight. Like a trainer. Oh, he can train Ashley! Get her to lose that weight!”

“Forget her. She’s a lost cause,” Linda said. “He can train me instead. I wouldn’t mind someone exercising me right. Every time I try to get into it I fall right back into my old habits.”

Linda’s father changed the channel and found a boxing match on a classic sports station: Hagler v Hearns trading power punches for an entire round. I swirled the whiskey in circles while keeping it on my lap, spinning the liquor around in the short glass and seeing how far it could go without spilling over.

“Now here was a good fight,” he said. “Don’t see ’em like this anymore. Everyone just thinks they can do whatever they want without proper training. Few really have the drive to earn it. It’s like these new hires we get. They think they know a thing or two ‘cause they read a book about it in college. We gotta hold their goddamn hands through everything when they see it’s a more complicated than some words and pictures on a page.”

Linda said to me, “I bet you could work there and be better than most of the guys he works with.”

Dick’s face returned to my lap when I drank from my whiskey. “I’ll take my chances with the high school,” I said.

Linda’s father drank his diet soda, swallowed loud enough for us all to hear it, and said, “Education really ought to be more practical. Hands on stuff, you know?”

“I keep telling the principal to burn all the books but she just won’t hear me out for some reason.”

The girls laughed and the dog growled at me. I swatted his nose away from my lap and spilled a bit. Linda's father yelled, "Dick!" and I had to believe he was referring to the dog.

*

Me and Bruce Lee shot pool later that night and many watched from barstools nearby. Twice he shot the cue ball off the table, and both times Nikki exposed the top of the crack in her ass retrieving it. Bruce Lee sank all the stripes and then pocketed the cue ball by shooting too hard on the eight ball. Ashley, who wasn't nearly as big as I anticipated, groaned when he lost. Somebody joked about us playing another game for cash when we shook hands, and then somebody else joked that I was probably a pool shark, scamming good, small town people out of their hard earned energy money. I asked why such good, small town people all have names that rhyme. They repeated them to each other—Becky, Debbie, Johnny, and Jeffrey, along with Ashley and Nikki—and discovered the phenomenon for themselves.

Linda saw me slink away from the group and hooked my arm with hers as we approached the bar. "Don't do that thing you always do," she said.

"What thing?"

"You're mean to people without them realizing you're being mean to them."

"That doesn't make any sense," I said.

"You know what I'm saying."

"Okay," I said, leaning on the bar, "I will stop doing the thing you say I'm doing."

“Funny guy,” she said, slapping my arm with the back of her hand. “How do you do it though? How do you say mean things to people and get them to laugh at it instead of arguing with you?”

“I wasn’t aware I did that.”

“Teach me how to do it.”

“Well, hell, I don’t know. I barely know what you’re talking about.”

“Everyone likes you.”

“Nobody likes me,” I said. Ashley was gripping one of Bruce Lee’s thick arms. “See? They’ve forgotten me already. When this is all over these people will say, ‘How’s that husband of yours? He was such a card. What’s his name again?’”

“A card?”

“That’s what people from small towns say, right?”

She laughed and said, “See? You’re doing it again. You know what you’re doing.”

“I don’t know anything,” I said, looking at the blurry television above the bar showing a baseball game.

“Maybe it’s in that grin.” She pinched my hip and said, “You say something bad but it doesn’t look bad. You’ve got a boyish charm.”

I squirmed and said, “They won’t remember a thing about me.”

“They will remember you,” Linda said. She handed me rolled bills. “Here, play some music after you get us drinks. Play something that I’ll like.”

“You know who they’ll remember? Bruce Lee. I bet he’ll be talked about a lot.”

“His name is George, and yes, we will likely remember him.”

“I think he likes it when I call him Bruce Lee.”

“Now he’s a card,” Linda said.

“The goddamned ace of spades.”

*

We arrived thirty minutes after the official start of the reunion, and like any reception for weddings and funerals in many small towns, it occurred in a banquet hall attached to a fire department. I claimed a chair at the end of a long row of brown, particle board foldout tables with flimsy plastic covers. It felt like I was forced into eating lunch with my students. I poked holes through the section in front me until Linda slapped my hand away. She got up and mingled after that, so I retrieved a beer and saw Bruce Lee in a group that gathered around the roasting pig just outside the entrance. In a show of macho solidarity, all the men raised their beers to him. All of them, including Bruce Lee, drank “to fighting” and his new fans high-fived him afterward.

Plaques of retired firefighters issued in memory for outstanding service to the community hung on the walls. I read them quickly as I passed by back to a different spot. All the plaques offered some form of “In memory of...who died bravely serving the community.” No description of specific actions detailed what rendered their names in brass. Whispers around the hall indicated that classified causes surrounding the circumstances of exploding oil wells and gas pipelines automatically transformed nearly a dozen local young men, and one woman, into heroes.

Some of the former students lingered around a collage tribute for several deceased alumni adorning the center of a room, including two who died as firefighters, one on a drill field, and three by suicide. The firefighters also had their plaques decorated with red, white, and blue ribbon. Their deaths conjured hollow expressions of dedication, commitment, and bravery, and little of any tangible statement for the three suicides. “So sad” became the phrase of the day, spoken often enough that it became a drinking game while I sat there.

Lost in all cases were the seemingly trivial associations with others, the smaller moments from years past that affected the lives of so many others. Linda’s experience with the local firefighters and oil field workers, her father’s life included, had been demonstrated for me every so often when the occasion called for it. Her father had resorted to hard liquor for a while after a work-related accident took a family friend—a bigger moment of which the effects appear easily recognized—but it had been around six months before the reunion that Linda’s mother mailed a local newspaper article of one particular firefighter along with his obituary. Linda wanted to finish fixing the flush valve on the toilet, so I opened the envelope and relayed the general details. The letter from her mother said only, “You graduated with him, right?”

“Yeah I knew him,” Linda said. “Called me a dyke all the time.”

“Why?”

She stopped turning the screw driver over, stared at the bowl, and said, “I don’t know. He was a prick.” She went back to working on the valve.

“Well, yeah, I guess that would generally explain it,” I said. “Maybe that wasn’t the right way to ask the question.”

She took a moment to finish tooling around, stood up, and took the article from me. “People thought me and Nikki were lesbians for a long time,” she said, “and you know how boys are.”

“A prickly bunch, apparently.”

“I couldn’t tell you why we were targeted that way other than we were always together,” she said. “Nikki and I were best friends, and the whole thing strained our friendship. I felt like we couldn’t even be in the same room together. We were never the same after that.”

“You know,” I said. “I’ve heard rumors of men existing who can’t stand the thought of women making out. It’s a damn shame really. Whenever you feel the itch, I’ll stand by you. Right by you, in fact.”

Linda laughed and said, “That part is easy to understand: they know they don’t have a fighting chance anymore.” She dropped the article in the toilet and flushed. We waited only a short moment for the satisfying whoosh of properly working plumbing. She celebrated by jumping onto me and dragging us to the floor.

She kissed me, looked over my face, and asked, “Do you think we’ll ever have a baby?”

“I feel bad for that kid if we do.”

“I’m serious.”

“You will be great mother,” I said, shutting my eyes and shaking my head in small jerks. “I’ll screw everything up.”

“How?”

“I don’t know if I’m ready to be a dad. I mean, I struggle caring about anything now. How will I care about, much less care for, a child? I can barely deal with the kids I have at school.”

“You’d care if it was your own.” she said.

She climbed off me, using the sink to steady herself. Somewhere in that moment another pipeline exploded and another drill field burned and first responders fought diligently to control a fire ignited by negligence. Hopeful heroes fought against the odds in dangerous conditions that could have been prevented. They fought to alter an already charred history impossible to change, smoothed over in brass with words devoid of meaning the further time passes.

*

My father-in-law liked to clean his guns, openly acknowledging that my presence reminded him that he “ought to clean ’em just in case.” Even though they always laughed about it, Linda and her mother chided him for what was never really a threat. For the two hours between the official reunion and going back out to the bars, Linda napped upstairs in her old room while her mother slept in a recliner nearby. Dick the dog relaxed on the kitchen floor near his food and water, pellets and puddles all over the faded linoleum marked by muddy boot prints. My father-in-law was polishing, as far as he told me, a

historically accurate American Longrifle that appeared much longer than it actually was from my position on the floor against the wall.

“Did you hunt this morning?”

“No. Got called to work ‘round four this morning. Damn kids can’t fix a leaky toilet let alone a giant goddamn drill. Can’t be there every goddamn day. S’posed to be my goddamn day off.”

Linda’s mother slept with her mouth partially open forming a frown. She had more wrinkles now than when I saw her last, and I wondered what she looked like twenty years ago, and if Linda would look similar in the future. But she always told me that people used to say she looked just like her father. On occasion, Linda would even push shoulder length blonde hair back from her face and explain to me that she had the exact same forehead as her father.

“It’s those damn kids and their impractical education,” I said.

“You ought to come out there some time and see for yourself how we drill the wells,” he said. “You just might enjoy it too.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Could do you some good. Hell, you go just once and you’ve got some experience to pass on to your kids.”

“I believe that you believe fracking isn’t an environmental catastrophe,” I said, wiping my hands on my pants, “but I don’t think I need to have that experience to tell my students about why it’s terrible. It’s not the kind of thing I get to talk to them about anyway.”

“The knowledge is good enough to pass along to students, or otherwise,” he said.
“Couldn’t hurt to get a little experience with the world.”

“Otherwise... Well, look, you’ve done right by Linda,” I said, and stared into the carpet. “You’re a great father, and I don’t know if I can do that.”

“No one way to do things. You gotta just—” He tightened his lips and made a kind of whistling sound through his teeth, pointing his hand forward, like the answer was just on the other side of the wall in front of him. He raised his rifle and aimed it at that spot, a point two feet above my head, and stared down the barrel. Dick the dog flopped his ears up, yawned, and then so did I. Soon we were both asleep waiting to be let out of the house.

*

The last bar of the night only offered country music. Linda and Nikki line danced like they used to do, as best friends who never expected to marry men outside of the confines of their small hometown. I watched Linda dance for a bit and we shared smiles before I needed as much silence as the outside of a dive bar blasting country music can offer.

Bruce Lee followed me, fingering his ear canals and laughing once we reached a row of benches made from log stumps placed haphazardly in the middle of the parking lot. I gave him a nod and a grin, the minimal effort one guy could give another to acknowledge presence, and rested my gaze on a distant drill field. We both stared at it, having grown weary of what little was left of alumni weekend, hypnotized by the faded light as smog drifted away from the drills.

“I’m getting tired of the pressure, man,” he said.

“You’re still Bruce Lee to me,” I said. “Hold on for one more night.”

Ashley burst outside and stumbled to the ground. The door slammed hard into the building. We helped her up, straightened her out, and picked up items that fell out of her purse. Her ex-husband, the gas station attending, volunteer firefighter came outside. His pregnant girlfriend soon followed.

“Piss off,” the ex said to me.

“Don’t start trouble,” Ashley said to him.

Bruce Lee clenched his fists and looked like he was about to flex, like he was carrying big buckets of water. His chest puffed out and he sucked in his cheeks, exacerbating his already chiseled jawline. The veins appeared ready to explode.

“We’re all just a bunch of tough guys,” I said. “Let’s not do anything stupid and just enjoy the beautiful scenery. I mean, look at those drills smoking. I feel myself getting cancer from here.”

The ex-husband turned his attention to Ashley, trying to get her back inside. The pregnant girl wiped her wet face and held her arm at the elbow.

“You know,” I said to Bruce Lee without really saying it to him, “I might not be such a bad father.”

The ex-husband turned back swinging, punching me so hard I thought for a second that I was blind. Just in time though I saw another punch so pretty that people pay to see it. The force knocked the ex-husband unconscious, dropping him to the soft gravel next to me.

For some reason I asked if George was okay. He laughed, noted that it was the first time I called him by his real name, and he helped me up. I promised him that I'd forget his name by the time we went our separate ways, if not by the end of the night, if not by my next drink. He dusted me off, straightened my tie, wrapped an arm around me, and told me he was going to get me some ice.

"I'll buy you that drink, too," he said. "Maybe even a few."

"That might not be the best idea," I admitted. "What if I'm concussed?"

"That was some hit you took there, but you'll be alright. Maybe you ought to learn how to give one. I'd be happy to show you a few things."

I kept touching my face and expecting blood. "I'm going to feel that damn punch for a long time," I said.

George and I went back inside, and he handled the details of explaining what happened to Linda and Nikki. He also handled the drinks, and from that point on, I learned more about George:

He celebrated with a group chanting his name as the man he knocked unconscious was driven away by his pregnant girlfriend.

He called me a pansy when, after buying shots for us all, Linda and Nikki finished faster than me.

He iced his knuckles on each beer he got, though he told me he didn't need to do it.

He said he didn't feel like working out in the morning and intended to skip his usual Sunday training.

He claimed he could live in a town like this one and raise his family away from the bustle of city life.

He asked Linda all about her dad and his work at one of the drill fields.

He thought he wouldn't mind giving firefighting a try either.

After the four of us drank thoroughly enough, we said our goodbyes, and gave hugs and handshakes all around. I held on to Linda so she didn't fall as Nikki helped George in the same way. She guided George into their car and I heard him tell Nikki in a whiny, inebriated voice, "I don't want to fight anymore."

I helped Linda into our car and we laughed after hearing George. I pushed hair out of her face and said in a voice higher than my usual tone, "I don't want to fight anymore."

The bar shut off its lights. A fire alarm blasted in the distance. My head rang from the punch, or the noise, or the alcohol, or something else entirely. Maybe all of it.

And Linda said, "Baby, you never fight. That's the problem."

