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The University of Southern Mississippi

STRANGE PLACES

by

Alex James Morris

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

August 2011

ABSTRACT

STRANGE PLACES

by Alex James Morris

August 2011

*Strange Places* is a collection of short stories and short shorts written during my time at The University of Southern Mississippi. Set primarily in Akron, Ohio, the stories in this collection explore a range of themes, such as trauma, death, alienation, social class, and the struggle to connect to others. This collection is preceded by a critical introduction.

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2011

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Alex James Morris

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate School  
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for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## INTRODUCTION

The title of this compilation, *Strange Places*, came to me more readily than titles ordinarily do, perhaps because it is more of an aspirational than a descriptive title. Strange places are what I have always wanted my stories to be to those who read them, at least since I began to think seriously about my writing. What that strangeness really consists of, and how it is expressed on the page, however, has in many ways remained elusive to me. As I began revising the stories that follow, I also began to question what I meant by the title *Strange Places*. Like many of my stories, the more I thought about the title I had chosen, the less clear its meaning became, and also like a lot of my stories, I considered getting rid of it. Instead, I want to try to think through what strangeness means to my work and how I have tried to make it present in my writing.

One other title I considered for this collection was *Akron Stories*, because almost all of the stories I've written in the last three years take place in Akron, Ohio. I never set out to be a writer of place, but increasingly my writing carries me back to Akron, the city where I was born and raised. And Akron is a strange place. It is a city founded on the Little Cuyahoga, a tributary of a river known chiefly for catching on fire, where we call the grass between the sidewalk and the road a devil's strip (or devil strip, depending on who you ask). My mother used to tell a story that became one of the foundational myths of my Akron, the story of how once, in the late seventies, Glendale Cemetery gave up its dead.

Every Akronite of my mother's generation tells some variation of the story of that night. One of my mother's friends worked for the cemetery in question, and he was drunk one night when the earth began to shake and the graves around him opened up,

disgorging their contents with a sound he is supposed to have taken for the horn of Judgment Day before fleeing, repentant, into the night. The sound was actually a sewer explosion nearby that collapsed streets, launched manhole covers into the air, and reportedly set toilets on fire all over West Akron. The explosion was caused by a chemical dumped into the sewer system, some said by labor unions and others by vandals. I make allusion to the explosion in “The Inviolable Bodies of Saints and Others,” telling my own taller, if not really any weirder, version of that strange night. A morbid kid, this was always one of my favorite stories, and I remember wishing I could have been there that night to see the dead rise, even though I knew it was just an industrial accident (or sabotage). It did not matter if the story was true or not, and my Akron is made up of stories like my mother’s as much as it is concrete and asphalt.

Chrissie Hynde famously sang of Akron in the 1980s that her city was gone, but I never knew the pastoral town she pines for in “My City Was Gone.” Born in 1981, I grew up in the “gone,” in a city where the pavement and parking malls she complains of were already falling apart. Hynde’s lyrics evoke a narrative of the pastoral ideal destroyed by capitalistic progress. For Hynde, as for my mother and many who remember Hynde’s Akron, the urban landscape is experienced as a loss and a betrayal. Place for many is more than just a hometown, more than a few sentimental memories of farm houses and better times that probably never were. I think for some of us place becomes a kind of secret language of the self, a lexicon at once symbolic and yet tangible that helps us make sense of ourselves and our stories, gives us some illusion of stability and permanence to those identities. For many in my mother’s generation it was as though their pasts had been stolen from them; the place they were from did not exist anymore. But for me, and I

think a lot of people who grew up in the Rust Belt, the relationship to place is more ambivalent, or rather ambivalent in a different, more apparent way. The tension between the idyllic pastoral past and mechanistic progress has mutated. Its terms are irreparably confused and mixed. Akron can seem like a bleak place, but for me it is a productive bleakness. There is a hard beauty for me in the abandoned factory, the train yard, even an empty gas station at night has a kind of urban poetry to it for me, though I struggle for a language that can express the beauty in all the ugliness. It is a kind of beauty that defies conventional categories, for me at least. Where in the official lens of our culture we might only see blight, I want also to see play and transformation. Decay is perhaps most threatening; the smooth and permanent facades of our civilization are revealed to be penetrable, impermanent and eternally unfinished.

In my Akron, there was never any illusion of permanence. When I was in high school there was a place called Flint Trails that only a handful of people knew about. Adjacent to a gravel quarry, it was essentially a few big piles of dirt that had grown over with thistle, Queen Anne's lace, and tall grass. The center of these hills formed a kind of bowl, which made it an ideal place to hide when we were skipping school. It was a space that was neither one thing nor another. Though in the process of being reclaimed by nature, Flint Trails remained, like Akron, also marked by images of industry and mechanization. Being in Flint Trails was technically illegal, but there was a tacit understanding that if we remained ignorable we would be ignored, making it a socially liminal space as well, Flint Trails was a place of decay, but at the same time it was a place of growth and vitality.

Flint Trails was only one of many wastelands that formed on the peripheries of Akron's neighborhoods, secret and sometimes dangerous places that were the playgrounds of my adolescence. These were interstitial spaces, a shifting borderland between nature and machine, and also visibly impermanent. Flint Trails was apt to change without notice. A new hill might appear or an old one might disappear from one visit to the next. One day the whole place was plowed into a flat plain of red dirt. Nobody was surprised. After high school I heard something like Flint Trails popped back up in the same spot, but I haven't been back. A place that almost never existed at all, it exists now only in the memories of the people who spent their fugitive afternoons there, getting drunk and falling asleep in the warm grass. This blurring of place and memory, of reality and representation, is something like what Akron has always been for me, a space that is at least as much imagined or remembered as real, even in the moment of living it.

This landscape of industrial decay makes its way into nearly all of my stories, in part because these are the places I know best. My work tends to be driven by images, and the images that come to me with the most clarity and particularity are often made of rust and decay. There was also a time when I regarded this kind of ugliness as aesthetically superior, as fundamentally more honest or more real than other modes of representation. I had absorbed the unfortunate notion that any kind of description that lacked an edge of brutality was less authentic. Other authors looked at the world and, in my facile estimation, they blinked, because they did not see it as I did. Naturally, this led to a good deal of bad writing. Equating "grittiness" with authenticity, my stories often dripped with blood and yet they remained flat, emotionless things once the initial transport of writing them had passed. No matter how many times I left a human skin in the kitchen sink, it

always failed to be emotionally moving or even interesting. In part, I expected my imagery to carry more of the story than even the most well-turned description can by itself. There was also plenty of action and conflict in these stories, but ultimately none of it mattered. I've since come to think that what matters in stories more than conflict is connection, the connections we strive to make with others and the connections we cannot break no matter how hard we try. As Janet Burroway argues, "narrative is also driven by a pattern of connection and disconnection between characters that is the main source of its emotional effect" (255). This pattern of connection is, I realize now, at the emotional core of most of my stories and always has been, though I could not always see it.

More than that, however, I was fundamentally betraying my own vision because I did not properly understand it. I thought that the fundamental strangeness and disorientation that I sought could be found by assaulting the reader with unpleasant details. Mostly I was aping the conventions in the horror fiction that filled up most of my reading hours as an adolescent, but upping the ante on the gore, reaching for more and more transgressive extremes. If I were to search now for a theoretical justification for what I was writing, I might say that I was trying to shock the reader out of their ordinary frame of mind, push them into a hostile conceptual space. I do believe good horror fiction sometimes does that. Deep down, though, I think I just wanted to prove I had the strongest stomach in the room, which I have come to believe is not a very good way to treat your reader. I still wanted to get at the sense of disorientation I felt in good horror fiction, but I did not feel like I had the language to do the job.

What really turned me away from horror fiction, though, was reading Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. It was my first encounter with magical

realism. I went on to read Kafka, Borges, Rushdie, Murakami and others, and I was enraptured by the seemingly infinite potential of magic realism. At that time though, I was mostly dazzled by the special effects. I saw the weirdness of these stories without really stopping to understand where the weirdness came from. I think now that what drew me to magical realism had less to do with the impossibilities that I marveled over than an interaction between conventional reality and the impossible.

Tzvetan Todorov describes a similar dynamic in the fantastic, a genre defined by a state of hesitation “between a natural or supernatural explanation of the events described” (33). Magical realism can be said to differ from the fantastic in the sense that the reader is not really asked to choose between competing realities, but rather is presented with simultaneous and equally weighted realities. Nonetheless, the tension between knowing and not-knowing in the fantastic creates a space of conscious contact and play between imagination and reality. It is the contact point between imagination and reality that interests me most now, and I think what I was most drawn to then. As I was beginning in the final semester of my Master’s program to take up my writing again after almost five years of neglect, I tried my hand at magical realism. What I ended up writing, in the few faltering attempts I made at writing at all, went nowhere. “Echoes” represents the late stages of this phase of my writing, and it is a story marked by an attraction to the weird and inexplicable, but it only barely gestures towards the strangeness I was looking for.

The first story I workshopped here at Southern Miss was a similar case, a throwback to the phase where I thought anything weird would do. It was a dreadful thing full of pallid skin and blue veins that seemed to glow in the moonlight. Unfavorable

comparisons were made to Poe and Stephen King. I walked out of workshop convinced that I had no idea what I was doing and the first thing I did was delete the story from my hard drive. What I should have done was re-write it, but I had not yet accepted that we learn by making mistakes. What I did instead was start writing realistic fiction, something I had never done before.

All of the stories I've written over the last three years have some basis in autobiography. Initially this became a habit because I had no idea how to make a story happen without the old gimmicks. So, I worked from a kernel of lived experience and tried to extrapolate stories from there. In the case of "Night People" the biographical element, a coffee shop where I used to sit around with my friends, was excised from the draft. I am not scrupulous about literal "truth," so that in "On Cleaning Day" I picked a different housing project for my protagonist to grow up in because the one I grew up in was less interesting than Elizabeth Park to me visually. Worse, Joy Park seemed too forcefully ironic. On the page it looked like the hand of the writer in spite of being the simple "truth." Similarly, the beating in "Seen by Firelight" happened to me more or less as written, though I was fifteen at the time, not nineteen, and I had to do the first aid by myself in the bathroom while I waited for my mother to get home from work. I had sought to bring more emotional weight to my stories by bringing in things that mattered to me and details that I felt viscerally. It was a way of forcing myself to have more skin in the game, but in the process I found that the experiences I was trying to draw upon had little intrinsic relationship to the "real" details of the events. Sticking to "my" story, the literal truth of my autobiography, robbed the experiences I was trying to bring to life of

their interest and vitality, perhaps because I was centering myself as the author and centering my experience of the process of writing.

Incorporating autobiography has been, in part, an effort on my part to embed the magical and weird in my stories into a context that would make the stories matter and give them some purchase on a reader, not because the events really happened but because the stories emerge from emotional and social realities. I was beginning to understand that for a reader to invest in a story, there had to be more at stake than who kills who. I also discovered that in doing so I was coming closer to the strangeness that attracted me to writing in the first place. Working mainly in short-shorts, I began to mythologize my childhood, rendering my own life in fantastic terms. In “Outside St. Vincent’s Cemetery, 1987,” I re-imagined an incident from my own early childhood where my father, frequently a hypochondriac, thought he was having a heart attack and got annoyed with me when I could not cross the street. “An Escape, 1989” is on one level just the story of how my mother ran away with me to a battered women’s shelter, a story that tries to capture elements of the experience that I did not feel I could express in realistic terms.

Among the ten rules for writing that Jonathan Franzen offers in an article for *The Guardian*, he advises that “The most purely autobiographical fiction requires pure invention. Nobody ever wrote a more autobiographical story than ‘The Metamorphosis’.” It has proven true for me that trying to capture the stories of my childhood required not a scrupulous attention to the actual events, but putting the events of my life in dialogue with my imagination. When I started on this experiment, the first story I wrote was “Summit County Fair, 1999.” I have never really been able to write about my father successfully, not directly at least. If I write about the time when I was ten and he was

supposed to take me to the fair and instead I found him half-naked and blind drunk under a collapsed stack of pornography in his one-room apartment, I am told that he is a cliché drunk. Which is fair enough, because he was. It was a story as old as Noah and Ham.

Tim O'Brien takes up a similar issue; talking about representing the realities of war in his fiction, O'Brien writes, "The truths are contradictory. It can be argued, for instance, that war is grotesque. But in truth war is also beauty. For all its horror, you can't help but gape at the awful majesty of combat" (80). Representing my father as I did was a lie in this sense, because implicit in that representation was a kind of maudlin sentimentality that I have never felt for him. I cannot say I am entirely satisfied with how I have represented him in the stories that follow, but I at least recognize him, and I hope captured some kind of beauty in the process. Furthermore, the state of truth that O'Brien talks about is something like the strangeness I've tried to bring to my own writing. I am forever trying to find my way back to that irreconcilable and yet inseparable duality of fact and fantasy that I felt in my mother's Glendale Cemetery story. That is, finally, I think, the strange place I have been trying to reach, a space where I can hear the horn of judgment and the sewer pipe.

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## OUTSIDE ST. VINCENT'S CEMETERY, 1987

The father held his son's cool, damp hand as they passed the cemetery, where on other days they had played hide and seek among the gravestones and eaten the small, sweet grapes that grew along the back fence. His father didn't feel like playing that day. They reached the corner and the father sat down on the low cement wall, his face tight. He wouldn't look up. "What's wrong?" "Just go home. Get your mother," he said with a hand over his heart like he was going to say the pledge of allegiance. The boy turned to cross the road, but he was afraid. He wasn't supposed to cross the street alone. Rows of small white fingers peeped out of the storm drain, their thin nails scraping up asphalt pebbles. The drain went down and down forever. He went back to his father and took hold of his free hand. The boy pulled hard, but his father just looked down. "Never mind. Just never mind," his father said, snatching his hand back. Slowly, the brown, bony hand worked the buttons of his shirt. His father's hands had letters written across the fingers in shaky, purple ink, words he couldn't read. The tattooed hands pulled away the red flannel carefully, like unwrapping bandages. A rose with petals the color of India ink grew there, casting a long, spindly shadow across the olive-colored flesh. A drop of blood, lustrous in the sun, ran down the pale green stem.

The small white hand reached to touch it.

## AN ESCAPE, 1989

The woman on TV had a silver face ringed with curly black hair, her dark eyes wide, urgent as she whispered something to the boy through the hiss of static. He tried to ask her if he could stay up a little longer, but her gray hand covered his mouth. Her skin was cold and tasted like batteries. She pulled him up from the mound of blankets on the floor, put his coat on, tied his shoes. He wanted to take his stuffed animals with him, but he didn't know where anything was in the stranger's house. They were staying there until they could find a new place. His father hadn't paid the rent. The black and white woman kept telling him to hurry up, to be quiet. His mother was there too, gathering bags, file folders, things the boy couldn't make out. She too was gray in the flickering light.

There was a taxi outside. His mother hurried him across the wet lawn and into the car, sliding in after him, pushing him across the squeaky vinyl seats. The cab driver's neck was thick and wet, covered in bumps like a toad. His face was not a face, only a fleshy smudge like a thumbprint on a picture. Before the cabbie could ask, the boy's mother said "Drive." It's all she will say as they swish over the wet, shining asphalt. The black and white woman stands in the doorway, seemed to waver as the rain rippled over the rear windshield.

He woke on a bare mattress in an attic room, the dusty orange light of morning coming through the one square window. His mother's long dark braid hung over the edge of the mattress next to him. There was a strange woman, tanned arms above her head in front of a mirror, her long naked back a rainbow of fading bruises. In the mirror he could see her small breasts hanging, the nipples tight and pink. Her eyes met his in the mirror and she smiled.

## AN INHERITANCE, 1994

In a ziplock bag with Jason's name on it in magic marker:

A sandalwood box with two deer, a buck and a doe, carved onto the lid.

A pot metal security guard badge, the pin on the back broken off.

An empty book of matches from the neighborhood bar, "Night People's" and a gold crescent moon on the cover. Everyone always called it "Night Crawlers."

A black and brass Case folding knife with a shark on the blade.

A scratched silver Zippo.

A brown leather wallet he made in rehab. It was like going to camp, he had told them.

An old, yellowing pillowcase with a lion on it that he had confessed to keeping because Jason's mother loved it. "I still have something she wants."

A set of partial dentures, three molars set in pale pink plastic gums with metal hooks on each end.

A chest x-ray.

An 1887 Indian head penny.

The tip of a finger bone, yellow and lacquered. He never said how he lost it.

A broken wristwatch, passed from grandfather to father to son.

## A FUNERAL, 1994

The seven of them stood at the edge of the cliff of knife-edged slate layered like shark's teeth and passed the creased, black cardboard box between them. Their lips move, but all anyone can hear is the wind. The dead man collected in the cuffs of their jeans, crept into the low-heeled shoes his ex-wife wore to weddings, funerals, the son's graduation. Fingers of ash coming towards them like lines of ants. The ashes stuck to the son's shoe, creeping over Doc Martens polished like black glass. He has a bitter taste in his mouth. Dark spots appear on the ground, but they can't feel the rain.

The dead man's daughter, a mannish woman with his dark skin, black hair, cups her hand around a cigarette to keep it lit, but the wind takes the cherry. She ran away when she was sixteen. Her two youngest children huddle around her. The ember hangs there, throwing orange sparks as it tumbles in the wind. It sinks into the fog below, still burning, spreading like a sunrise.

## SUMMIT COUNTY FAIR, 1999

They get to the front of the line and watch the Ferris wheel operator strap in a pair of sullen faced boys. The smell of hot sugar sticks in Jason's throat. The man pulls a lever and the kids are gone. He turns around. Cracked lips shape words like a fly buzzing in Jason's ear. The man is his father, dead seven years and running a Ferris wheel at the county fair. The sun-burnt skin and ropy muscles the same. Hair long now. He's shaved his mustache, like a fugitive. Dark eyes startled against the Polaroid color of his face. The gate clangs shut behind them. The man leads them up a metal ramp and holds the car steady. The red vinyl seats are dewy and covered in jagged creases. Jason gets in first, then helps Samantha. He can feel the little bones in her hand, her fingertips rough against his palm. His father smiles at them as he pulls down the lap bar. The same, sunken, half toothless grin. The car jerks into motion and in a moment they're looking down on a row of white, metal concession stalls offering gyros, homemade root beer, Italian sausages. His father's head appears between their feet, a skull covered in black horsehair and thin-stretched leather, and he crawls spider-like into the car. He squeezes between them, sliding under the bar like the cancer has eaten the bones out of his legs. He's holding a black and red vodka bottle between his knees, the mouth and improbably long neck smeared gritty black. "Want some?" he asks, wiggling the bottle with his knees. "You're dead," his son answers. He looks to Sam for backup. She takes the bottle in both hands. "She's cute." The dead man jams his knobby elbow into Jason's ribs. Sam smiles, a trickle of vodka running down her chin. His father laughs. A long, rasping laugh full of phlegm and creaking metal. The wheel spins faster.

## SOMEWHERE BETWEEN HUNTINGTON, WV AND AKRON, OH, 2007

Jason was dozing with his head against the Plexiglas window, so when the bus hit a rumble strip he woke up with his teeth buzzing. He wiped off the cloud of fog he had left on the window and tried to read the snow-fringed exit sign. He wasn't even sure what state they were in now. This was his favorite part of travelling, the sense of being in-between.

The bus rolled to a stop in an unplowed parking lot behind bus station. Jason could see a window with schedules taped to it and a few chunky wooden benches. The driver called that they had ten minutes and Jason filed out, stiff and jerky-legged. There were only a few other people, sleeping, or pretending to.

The bathroom had a green and yellow checkerboard floor. He could see his breath. There was somebody in the furthest of the three stalls, so Jason stepped into the first and closed the door. The hinge was bad and he had to lift the door up by the bottom to get it to latch. Sitting on the cold plastic seat, Jason kept an eye on his watch.

He washed his hands and then splashed some of the cold water on his face. The stall door opened behind him and a man walked out. He wore the same boots and jeans as Jason. Same faded t-shirt. He had Jason's face. Without looking at Jason, the man walked up to the sink next to his. With the water still running, Jason straightened up and faced his double. The twin was rubbing his hands together under the faucet without turning on the water, smearing his hands with something like dark green tar. "Now look—" Jason started to say. Without moving his head the double fixed his eyes on Jason. A look spread across his face, too wide to be a smile, the eyes too flat, a shark smile, not Jason's. Grinning, the twin made splashing motions at his face, then stepped away from the sink

and turned to go. Jason stepped back without meaning to and stood between his twin and the exit. He stepped one way and the twin followed. It was like dancing in front of a mirror. Recoiling from its touch, Jason let it pass.

The bus was gone. Nothing remained but tracks in the snow. The sky was clearing and the moon was big and cold in the sky. The snow sparkled and the wind kicked up a fine, shimmery dust.

## HIS WIFE'S FEET

Bloodied scraps of toilet paper like rose petals lay crumpled in the sink. He blotted at the gash at his hairline with a clean wad from the roll sitting on the dusty toilet tank. They didn't have a proper first-aid kit. There was gauze somewhere, but he didn't want to ask his wife where it was. She had just hit him in the head with a piece of marble and he was still trying to figure out how to feel about that, beyond dizzy. The wound looked deep, but he couldn't tell. He took his hand away, fingers stained, and the paper stuck in place. He hoped that if he left the wound alone it would clot.

Watching the toilet paper wilt against his head, he tried to rewind things in his mind. They were in the middle of moving, going through books hairy with dust and he found the sculpture under the bookshelf, a cultured marble impression of her feet that she'd done her first year of art school. It was glossy white with faint dark veins and jagged along one edge to make it look like a broken scrap. One side was smooth and flat, and on the other there was an impression of her feet, slender and straight, no bigger than his hands, the toes perfect ovals pressed into the stone. She chucked it in the black garbage bag, then touched her finger to the cracked spine of a German textbook and asked him if he needed it anymore. He picked her feet back out of the bag without answering and wedged the sculpture into a box of books. Then they had fought.

He had always believed they weren't the kind of couple that fought. He imagined himself standing out in the dark, waiting for a taxi, her at the window as the taillights disappeared around the corner.

He gathered up the scraps and dropped them into the toilet, watching as the blood sunk into the blue water in long, smoky strands, then wiped the remainder of the mess off the counter with his hands and rinsed off.

A fist sized ball of toilet paper held to his forehead, he stepped out into the kitchen. His wife was standing there, her head down so he could see the blonde roots of her burgundy hair. He looked down too. She was barefoot. Bunions, red, rubbed shiny and smooth, stuck out on one side, the bone straining against taut skin thick like scar tissue. Her little toes were crooked and bent inward. A big drop of blood fell onto the square of white linoleum between them and she flinched.

“I think it’s going to need stitches,” he said. She had her keys in her hand.

## FALL AFTERNOONS

Mom didn't get out of the car when she dropped me off at Dad's. I was usually glad to be rid of her, but not that day. My father was closing in on the last stages of lung cancer and Mom assumed I would want the time alone with him. Or maybe she just didn't want to deal. I took a handful of mail from the distended mailbox and went in. I tried not to cringe when Dad hugged me. He seemed so implausibly small and soft.

Dust rose like smoke from the green shag carpet as I crossed the dim living room. A scorched pan of French fries lay in the kitchen sink. I tossed the mail onto the kitchen table with the rest.

Dad was making a roast, which meant I was making a roast. I rifled through the fridge to see what I had to work with, pouring out the sour milk. Dinner in the oven, I plopped down onto the couch across from Dad's recliner.

"So, how've you been?" I asked the obvious, the inevitable question.

"Okay," he lied. He smiled and I saw he wasn't wearing his dentures. Half the top teeth gone. "How's school?"

"Oh, okay. Want to watch something on TV?"

"No, no." He explained that he couldn't follow anything on TV anymore, coupled with the pain meds it just made him sleep. "You go ahead. But, could you get in my radio station?"

"Sure, Dad." I tried to smile back.

We'd had the wooden box radio forever. I pulled open the little door and started fiddling with the chrome knobs until a jumpy pop song that made me think of the intros to old TV shows came on.

“So, how’s school?” I looked at him for a long time after he said it.

“Good, Dad. I made honor roll.” I immediately wished I hadn’t brought it up.

“That’s great.” Dad smiled. I really wanted to go find his teeth. “You always were such a smart boy. I’m proud of you, son. Too smart for your own good, I always used to tell your mother.” That wasn’t quite how I remembered it.

“Thanks, Dad.” I took a deep breath and made a small show of my patience. Finally, I found the remote underneath a couch cushion.

“I just need you to keep me talking, okay.” He was almost pleading.

“Okay,” I said, channel surfing.

When I settled on *Kung Fu: The Legend Continues*, Dad was already asleep. I wished I could just go to sleep too. When a commercial came on, I checked the stove and sat back down as soundlessly as I could. I tried to think of something to say. I’d been addicted to his stories as a child. Sitting there, I couldn’t think of anything we could say to each other. I felt like I was letting Dad down.

The roast wasn’t any more done than it had been ten minutes before and I went out on the porch to smoke a cigarette. I relished the irony so as not to think too hard about it, hot-boxing the hell out of my cigarette in the process. I watched cars go by and smoked until I only had three left.

“You smoke now?” His voice came from behind me as I was closing the door, for just a second the voice of the man I remembered. I turned and saw a hand like a latex Halloween prop turn on the lamp. My father’s yellow, bloodshot eyes looked wet in the light.

“Yeah.”

“Since when?”

“I don’t know, like a year.”

“Shit, son. How old are you now?”

“Fifteen.”

“Shit.” I thought he was going to tell me again how he started smoking when he was thirteen, behind the pig shed on his grandfather’s farm in West Virginia. He didn’t.

In a few minutes he was sleeping again and I let the TV pass the time until I decided that dinner was done enough. The carrots were cooked, which was all that mattered. We’d both always liked our meat bloody. I cut two thick pieces, giving Dad the fatty end.

As a little kid, it had been my job to wake Dad up. Whenever he was passed out and late for work, I was the only one who could get him out of bed. The trick was to lift up his left leg. That had always worked. I shook his leg, so much lighter now. Nothing.

“Wake up, Dad,” I said, tilting back his chair. I just wanted to go home. “Dinner’s ready!” I yelled and his eyes goggled open. He took the knife and fork like a child and I set the plate in his lap. The meat was surprisingly tender and I was hungry. Dad picked at his food and watched me watch TV. *Kung-Fu* was on again.

“I wasn’t much of a father, was I?” For a second I thought it was the TV.

I didn’t know what to say. I wanted to laugh. Instead I lied: “You weren’t so bad.”

“Really?”

I kept my eyes on the screen. David Carradine was convincing some strung-out blonde not to jump off a building. On television words could change things.

## SEEN BY FIRELIGHT

Chris lay in the wet grass trying to count his teeth with his tongue. He came up with twenty-six, then thirty-one, then twenty-eight. He couldn't remember how many teeth a person was supposed to have. It didn't matter. It was something to focus on until he was ready to get up. In the distance someone laughed and the patter of running feet echoed somewhere along the side streets, seeming to come from all around him. Cars passed. Nothing hurt, but his whole body buzzed like when you hit your funny bone. At first all he could manage was to raise his knees, but slowly, jerking like a tangled marionette, he got to his feet. His blue work pants were wet down to the knee, warm and clinging heavily to his thighs. "Great," he tried to say, but his mouth was stiff and swollen, so it came out "gate."

He was standing in someone's front yard, an old house with a covered balcony and a big porch of cracked, gray wood. The porch light was on, a single moth bouncing against the cloudy white plastic. Someone would be inside, watching, roused from their episode of *Law and Order* by the commotion, probably relieved that they didn't have a dead man in their yard. He gave the house the finger and started walking.

He leaned over, hands on his knees, and tried to spit onto the sidewalk, but all he could manage was a long string of pink drool that clung to his lower lip and chin. He wiped it away with his hand, slimy and hot, then wiped his hands on his pants. Somehow he'd gotten a block away from the corner where they'd first caught up with him. He didn't remember running. It hadn't even occurred to him.

Chris knew better than to walk through the neighborhood at night, but he'd lost track of time at work. A woman had brought in a Geo Prizm with what looked like a dead

battery and Chris spent the rest of the day chasing the problem. He should have turned it over to somebody with more electrical experience, but he'd been too absorbed. It finally turned out that a ground wire had come loose. People had offered him a ride home, but he'd turned them all down, saying it was a nice night and he didn't mind the walk. All of which was true, but part of it too was that he didn't want to look like a wuss.

The street was dark except for a few faint house lights and the dim blue glow of an industrial torch that rose up out of the fenced in field across the street from Chris. In the wavering firelight his shadow dodged and twitched across the cracked sidewalk and the crisscross shadow of the chain-link fence rose and fell over the houses like a tide. The torch was a methane valve installed by the city to keep the old landfill from exploding and gas from leaking into people's basements.

"Where's the party, dude?" a girl's voice called from inside a darkened porch. Chris turned to see where it was coming from, but all he could see was the orange glow of a cigarette. "Aw, shit," she said and let the cigarette fall.

Her freckled face looked blue in the half darkness, and that's how he would remember her, blue girl. Her curly, dark hair was pulled back in a tangled ponytail and she was only chin high to him. She had the chubby shapelessness of a middle-school girl, but her face was older.

"I fell," he said, thinking of the now cold piss down the front of his pants.

"Come on," she said as she laid one small, hot hand on his wrist and the other just above his elbow to lead him up the steps. She pulled him up the three wooden steps and into the house.

"Gram!" the girl called.

“What? What? I’m not that— ” the small stooped woman said as she looked up from a pink book of crossword puzzles. She sat with a blanket over her lap in a brown, tweed recliner opposite a wood-paneled TV on the floor.

“I fell,” he said again, though it wasn’t what he meant to say.

“I can see that hon,” the old woman said. She stood and crossed the living room to them, then took his other arm and led him towards a stucco archway. “Don’t get blood on my carpet.”

They sat him down in a wobbly plastic lawn chair by the kitchen table. All the kitchen chairs were different. The old woman was wearing a yellow nightgown with little chicks printed on it and her tightly curled gray hair sat on her head like a neglected hedge. Behind her was a narrow brown refrigerator covered in magnets with pictures of people embedded in cloudy plastic. One of them was the girl in a softball uniform, smiling with broad, uneven teeth. She was younger in the picture, spindly and sexless. Next to that was an older boy with the same unruly black hair cradling a chipped, red electric guitar. There were baby pictures too, and one of a man in a yellow tuxedo and big sunglasses next to a blonde woman in a wedding dress.

“What happened? Did you see who jumped you?” the girl asked.

“Hush, Nessa. Look at me boy, how many fingers am I holding up?”

Chris only saw two fingers and that seemed to be a relief to the old woman.

“They rob you?” the girl asked. He said no, but ran his hand over his pockets to make sure. Then the woman took his head into her hands and tilted it back, peering into his eyes. Her hands were bony and strong, a gold ring on every finger. She ran her fingers

over his scalp. It felt like when the principal had checked all the kids' heads for lice when he was in grade school. Seeming satisfied, the woman let go of Chris.

In a stiff, labored voice Chris started to explain what happened as the old woman went to work on his face with a warm washcloth. The girl leaned towards them, her wide brown eyes probing his face, for what he didn't know. Her stare and the washcloth felt like they were one thing, scouring him, hurting him, but making him feel better, too. It made him want to tell. A group of people, he didn't know how many but it was a lot, more than ten, came around the corner on him. They surrounded him before he knew what was going on. Their faces had been hidden, some of them by stockings but most just by hoods. He could feel the steam of their breath, the heat of their bodies. One of them, young or maybe just scared, said "let's go." Chris wasn't sure how he meant it, like if he just wanted them all to go and leave him alone, or if it was their signal to start beating the shit out of him. The old woman cut his story short by reaming out his nostrils with the rag then pinching his nose shut. She told him to hold it that way and he obeyed.

"Granma used to work at the hospital. I'm Vanessa, by the way," the girl said, holding out her hand.

"Charmed," Chris said, which sounded like "chahmed," and squeezed her hand. Vanessa laughed and Chris started to laugh too, but a pain shot through his ribs that yanked the breath out of him. "I'm Chris," he said then, trying not to wince. They sat without saying anything after that. She watched him with a look of fascination.

Periodically, blood ran into his eye or down the side of his face and Vanessa would wipe it away. Her light touch gave Chris a chill each time and she would whisper "sorry," and smile.

“Are my teeth okay?” he asked after a while and tried to grin wide like he was at the dentist.

“What’d they look like before?”

Chris closed his mouth.

“I’m kidding, come on.” She scooted her chair closer to his and took his lower lip between thumb and forefinger. She pulled his lip down gently, then did the same with his upper lip. Her tiny finger traced the edges on his swollen mouth before she pulled it away and wiped it on her jeans. “Looks like they’re all there. The inside of your mouth’s just all tore up.”

She wanted to know if he’d seen any of their faces. He felt like he should have, but he couldn’t remember anything. She wanted to know too if he’d been scared, how much it hurt. As much as his mouth hurt, it still felt good to talk. Then the front door opened and slammed shut and they were both quiet as someone ran up the stairs. The breeze from outside reached them and Chris suppressed a shiver.

“That’s just my brother. Now that he’s a senior, he’s too cool to say hi to anybody,” Vanessa said.

“Yeah?”

“He’s late, too. Gram was just chewing his ass on the phone before I saw you.”

“What grade are you in, anyway?”

“It’s rude to ask a lady her age,” Vanessa said. She pulled a cigarette out of the store brand pack in front of her and played with it, trying to pass it from finger to finger with one hand.

“Sorry.”

“Shut up. Didn’t say I was a lady,” Vanessa said, dropping the cigarette and picking it up again. “I’m in the tenth grade.”

Grandma came in with an armload of supplies: gauze, Band-Aids, rubbing alcohol, and a mirror. She cleaned off the wound over his eye with alcohol, then took a tube of superglue from a drawer and used it to pinch the wound shut. When she finished patching him up, she looked at him for a long time, like it was the first time she’d seen him.

The mirror lay face down in front of him. It felt like a moment from a movie. Chris was the Joker about to unwrap his bandages. It made him smile. He wanted to tell them it would be okay. Chris took up the mirror and looked. It wasn’t as bad as he’d expected. His face was red and swollen, right eye bloodshot and swollen into a squint. Lips swollen too and purple like a drowned man’s. All he could think to say was that it wasn’t him and that seemed stupid, so he didn’t say anything at all.

“Is there anybody we can call for you?” the old woman asked.

“No,” he said. “I live just around the corner. I’m okay now.”

“Aren’t we gonna call the cops?” the girl asked.

“I don’t know,” Chris said, looking at his hands. His knuckles were scraped raw.

The memory came over him, he’d thrown a few punches before he went down, connected hard with something he couldn’t see. It had felt like punching a wall.

“Don’t you want to catch them? If it was me I—”

“It ain’t you girl,” her grandmother interrupted. She didn’t say anything else, just turned to Chris and waited for his decision, her brown and faintly clouded eyes fixed on him.

Half an hour after they called, the cops showed up. Their knocking shook the whole house and Chris could feel their stomping in his teeth. One of them was a young guy carrying a chunky plastic clipboard and the other was an older man with a bad case of cop-stashe. They made the kitchen feel smaller. The room was darker with them in it. They asked him a lot of questions and didn't seem happy with his answers.

The cops wanted to call EMS to check him out, but Chris said no. He didn't want to face any more people. He didn't want to try to explain things to anybody else. The situation kept getting bigger, more out of his control, when all he wanted was to go home. They drove him to his apartment, both windows down despite the chill in the air. As he was getting out they told him to take pictures, in case they caught somebody and he wanted to sue. They said to take one set before he went to bed and another in the morning. They explained that the bruises would change overnight, most likely get worse. The best thing would have been to take pictures with all the blood, juries like blood, but it was too late for that. Chris thanked them and went inside.

Chris lived in an old house that had been converted into apartments. He didn't know any of his neighbors very well. It was the kind of place people didn't say hello to each other. Chris' apartment used to be the attic. The ceiling was high and the whole apartment was one big room. He took the steps slowly, because each time he pulled himself up another step there was a sharp twinge in his ass. It was almost funny.

He'd expected to feel relieved when he finally got home, but he didn't feel anything but tired. He stripped down in the bathroom, first pulling off the blue work shirt without unbuttoning it and hanging it on the doorknob. He threw the blood spotted undershirt into the trash and then he sat on the toilet to get his boots off. His numb fingers

fumbled with the laces. Then he took off the pants, almost dry now, and laid them over the edge of the bathtub. He stood naked in front of the bathroom mirror. Little red triangles of torn flesh dotted his bruised shoulders. Some of them had been wearing rings. A yellow, foot shaped bruise was starting to come out on his side. It was a small foot. With a damp towel he rubbed himself down, rubbing hard at his bruised skin so that some of the cuts opened back up, welling with tiny dark beads.

The kitchen counter was covered in ants. A glass that had Mountain Dew in it earlier was filled with little black ants crawling in circles around the sides. The black and red raku-glazed plate that he'd left a corner of bread on was covered with them, too. Chris took the glass in his hand and, still naked, climbed out onto the wooden fire escape. He threw the glass into the street below, watching as it bounced against the asphalt and disintegrated into sparkling light. The square plate he threw like a Frisbee out into the street. The set had been a housewarming gift from his parents. He emptied his cabinets in two trips, the whole time expecting the cops to show up or someone to come outside and see him there, naked in the moonlight. Nobody came. If anyone noticed at all, he wasn't an interesting enough spectacle to come out and gawk.

That night he kept waking up, once his ass so wet with sweat that he thought he'd pissed himself again until he realized his pillow was soaked, too. He opened a window and tried to go back to sleep, but the sound of traffic outside kept him up. The highway was a few blocks away and it was never quiet. At the black edge of sleep he saw the blue girl's face again, her eyes full of blue fire.

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In the morning Chris' piss was brown, the rusty color that the water turned when they flushed the fire hydrants. He called off work without telling his boss why, just that he wasn't feeling well. Chris worked in one of the big chain shops. Officially he was a "Lube Technician," a title he good humoredly took endless shit about, but he did a lot of the odds and ends type work. Most weeks he brought home just under three hundred dollars. Even though he knew his way around a garage, he wasn't supposed to take on any real work until he got his ASE certification. Lou, the master technician and manager, liked him and had promised that if he got certified in a year or so he'd move up to "automotive technician," which would mean almost twice the pay after a few years and benefits down the road. The night before Chris' life had seemed like a wide, straight path before him.

He spent the rest of the day playing Call of Duty. Even when his hands were going numb and the screen started to hurt his eyes he kept playing, not because he was enjoying it at all but because it was something he could manage and it kept him from having to think. When he had to stop or he got killed and had to wait around for a respawn, he would think about what that boy had said, he was sure it was a boy now. "Let's go." He wanted to believe that one of them had hesitated, that he'd been just as afraid as Chris was, if just for a second. But, the more he thought about it the less likely it seemed.

Around three his cell rang. It was his friend Jimmy, and when Chris answered the phone the first thing his friend said was "Why do you sound like you have a dick in your mouth?" He told Jimmy to fuck off and decided he wasn't going to answer the phone. It occurred to him then to call his parents and let them know what happened. But he didn't

want them to know. His mother read the police blotter every day, so she was going to call eventually to check on him. She called whenever his neighborhood showed up in the blotter. It was part of her campaign to get him to move back home and go back to school. His dad would ask him again why he didn't have a car yet. Chris didn't own a car because he didn't like driving. He had trouble explaining this to people, his father especially. Chris had grown up working on cars with his father, who fixed up and resold them as a side job, and he loved anything mechanical. But he hated driving. He had a driver's license because he needed it for work, but to him driving was a tedious waste of a perfectly good walk. Chris had taken up smoking in high school, mostly for the same reasons as other teenage boys, but he discovered that there was a whole world you could only see on foot. When he was driving, all he was aware of was the driving.

Chris didn't leave the apartment for another five days, when his boss finally told him he had to come in if he wanted to keep his job. The swelling was gone and his ribs felt fine, but he still had two black eyes and a big scab. He had to stay away from the front desk because he couldn't deal with the way customers would look at him, staring then looking away as soon as he made eye contact. Lou called him into the office and apologized, said he could have as much time off as he needed, that he felt like a real asshole for calling him in. Chris didn't look up the whole time, because he didn't want Lou to feel bad for him. He went to work every day after that and even pulled some overtime Saturday morning.

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“Sit down, I’ll make coffee,” the woman said, waving at a chair. It was the same chair he’d sat in the week before, but it was clean now, no trace of what had happened remained. It bothered him.

“No, that’s alright. I just wanted to thank you,” Chris said.

“No thanks necessary, hon,” she said as she filled a coffeepot with water anyway.

Chris sat. They had coffee and she talked about how bad the neighborhood was getting. She’d lived there for thirty years. There were three empty houses on her street and the roof of one of them had just fallen in a few weeks ago. Chris had seen the blue tarp spread over it. He asked if it had been better before, and she thought about it for a moment.

“No, not really,” she said, taking a loud sip of her coffee. “You know, the water here used to burn. You could set a match to a glass of it and it would just go up like gasoline. Damnedest thing. It didn’t do it all the time, just on and off. Stopped when we got hooked up to the city water.”

Chris finished his coffee and thanked her again. When he stood to leave, he made sure his back was to the refrigerator and slipped the picture of Vanessa into his back pocket. If anyone had asked him to explain why he did it, he would have said it was an impulse, but he’d been thinking about taking the picture since he walked into the room. He’d been disappointed that the girl wasn’t home. The picture felt like compensation.

When he got home, he put the picture on his refrigerator.

After that he started to time his walk to work so that he’d see her waiting for the bus with a few other teenagers from the neighborhood. The brother was always there with her. Chris always stayed on the other side of the street, even though some of it

didn't have sidewalk. He didn't know what he wanted from her, just that he needed to see her. Sometimes he would wave to her, just a quick raise of the hand, and she would wave back, a quick frantic wave, while her brother stared flatly at him.

In a few weeks all the bruises were gone. He worked more, sometimes staying late and walking home in the dark. He kept a length of half-inch thick tow chain in his pocket and wound it around his wrist and hand as he walked. It weighed four and half pounds. He knew it wouldn't do much good if he ran into real trouble, but he liked the weight of it.

When he passed the corner his chest tightened, but there was never anybody there. He read in the paper that there'd been similar beatings in other parts of town. The police thought it was teenagers doing it for the thrill. Chris didn't think very much of that explanation. The police never called for a follow-up interview. Except for work he didn't leave the apartment unless his friends drug him out. He missed the ASE test and Lou gave him a hard time about it. He had a whole lecture about responsibility, his future. He was disappointed in Chris. "You're my boss, not my dad," Chris had told him and walked out. He didn't see Lou for the rest of the day.

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The snow had a translucent crust of ice that Chris had to stomp through every time he took a step. No one in the neighborhood shoveled their sidewalks. Chris had saved up enough money that he could move to a better neighborhood if he wanted. He'd found a place on Craigslist he could afford. The area was mostly college students and

artsy types, young people. He couldn't decide what he wanted to do. He wasn't sure how he'd manage getting to work if he moved though. Even with his gloves on, the chain was painfully cold in his hand.

At the corner he stopped, took a few deep breaths, and watched the jets of steam roll out in front of him. The torch was burning again and it made the surface of the snow look like glass. Two people were kicking their way up the slushy, brick-paved street. When they got a little closer he saw that it was Vanessa and her brother. She was carrying a plastic bag and walking a little ways behind her brother. Chris waited for them.

"Dangerous neighborhood to be walking at night," he called from the corner. They were standing in the street a few feet away.

For a moment they both just looked at him. The boy's fists were clenched, his hips turned like he was ready for trouble. Vanessa walked past her brother and hit Chris with the bag. It felt like it had a carton of cigarettes in it.

"Scared the shit out of me. Hey, let me see," she said, pointing to a spot over her eye.

Chris looked down and leaned forward so she could see the scar. It was small, really just a line through his eyebrow.

"That's kind of badass, actually," she said. Chris saw that Vanessa's brother was watching him. He was edging towards them with an expression on his face Chris couldn't read.

"Yeah, I think so too," Chris said, running a finger over his eyebrow with his free hand. He felt silly with his other hand in his pocket.

“Come on, Nessa, Gram’s going to be back from bingo like any minute,” her brother said, eyeing Chris. He could just imagine what the kid was thinking, some creep trying to mack on his little sister. Chris wanted to explain that it wasn’t like that, but he didn’t know how to say it.

“People still play bingo?” Chris asked.

“I know, right,” Vanessa said.

“We got to go,” the brother said, snatching his sister’s wrist.

“Fine, Jessie,” she said, emphasizing the last syllable of his name in a tone of irritation as she let him drag her a few steps up the street, “Hey, nice seeing you.”

Chris wasn’t listening. He walked past Vanessa and pulled his other hand out of his jacket pocket. The chain cut a pair red furrows into Jessie’s cheek. He waved his arms in front of him, trying to ward off the next blow as he stumbled backward. His fist fell like a hammer across the side of Jessie’s head and he sprawled in the snow, a slowly spreading halo of red snow around his head. The chain hung half uncoiled from Chris’ hand.

He turned to Vanessa and took two steps, stopped. Behind him Jessie groaned, a low, keening, animal sound.

Vanessa watched it all, her wide black eyes reflecting firelight.

## THE INVIOLE BODIES OF SAINTS AND OTHERS

John finally came to himself again during his funeral, aware of the narrow coffin and clinging crepe the way he might have been aware of his bed in the last few moments before the alarm clock went off. From outside there came the tidal rhythm of his father's voice as he stopped every few moments to clear his throat. Other voices came through, buzzing like a bad connection. John tried to picture the scene outside, his sister Mary and his mother clung to each other like drowning women in his mind, but the rest, the friends, the other teachers, the cousins and aunts and uncles, were just a black-clad mass, smeary in his mind's eye like old watercolors.

Four days before, John had jumped a curb and plowed through a telephone pole, leaving it hanging by the wires in his rearview. The steering column had come up through his chest. There had been no pain, just numbness and a feeling like falling down. He was in and out after that. Mostly he remembered being wheeled around with steadily decreasing urgency. Vaguely familiar voices whispering over Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata" formed John's first distinct impression of the afterlife.

It was apparently agreed that the mortician, who everyone persisted in calling "they," had done a good job. A little too good to judge from the voices that hovered around him, who didn't sound all that comforted that he "looked just like he was sleeping." When someone bumped the lid closed, nobody opened it again, and John was left to contemplate his bad luck in relative peace. He had always half suspected something like this might happen. He had never been a rational, considered atheism, but rather just a necessary corollary of his pessimism. He couldn't quite suppress a perverse sense of vindication.

As the sounds of the funeral faded, John started to wonder how he was going to get out. He was pretty sure coffins had locks or seals on them. In the nineteenth century, some coffins had come with a string you could pull that would ring a bell, in case somebody got buried alive. It didn't seem so quaint anymore. Of course, most designs neglected any kind of oxygen supply, so even then it had mostly been a gimmick.

He wondered what would happen if he couldn't get out. Would anyone answer him if he screamed, banged on the coffin? He didn't think so. At any rate, he wouldn't have opened a coffin that was jumping around and screaming. It made him think of the stories of the saints whose bodies didn't decompose. They remained incorruptible, even in the grave. Murdered children, sometimes, too. Of course, how incorruptible he was remained an open question, and he didn't want to wait around for the worms to test his hypothesis.

The lid was heavy, like opening a car door against a hill, but it opened. The coffin itself was set in a big box made of thick pearlescent plastic. The metal lid was split into two sections and John pulled himself very slowly onto the lower half. The grave was shorter than he'd imagined, making it necessary for him to crouch gargoyle-like over his empty coffin. There was a piece of plywood over the hole, a line of blue sky where one end wasn't flush with the ground. He tried to peek through the gap, one hand pressing into the clay. Someone was blowing their nose in long, honking bursts. He waited for it to pass, then pressed both hands against the board, intending to push it aside. It jumped out of his hands, revealing a thin man in muddy jeans and a Carhartt jacket staring down at him, holding the plywood board like an open door. John's eyes squeezed shut, the red afterimage of the sun throbbing against his eyelids.

“What’re you doing there, buddy,” the man asked, adjusting a yellow trucker hat that was about two sizes too big.

“Nothing!” John said back, squinting up at him.

“Well, some of us got to work.”

“I appreciate that,” John said, straightening up so that he was eye level with a pair of mud-encrusted work boots.

“You’re supposed to be in there when I seal the vault.”

“I’d rather not be.”

“But, that’s how it’s supposed to work,” the man said, taking off the yellow hat, which John could see now said “Miller High Life” across the front, and putting it back on again.

“So, can’t you just seal it without me in it? There’s nothing about my not being in it that would prevent it from sealing, I assume.”

The man thought about that, running a dirty, cracked hand through his patchy beard. He looked young enough to be one of John’s students, except for the hands, yellow-callused with big, wrinkly knuckles. “I guess not, but it would sort of defeat the purpose.”

“Which is what, exactly?” John asked, slipping into his teacher voice.

“Well, I guess mostly it’s so the graves don’t collapse when we run a backhoe over them.”

“See, then it doesn’t matter if I’m in there or not. There’s nothing about my body that could possibly enhance the structural integrity of the burial vault one bit,” he said and poked himself in the belly to illustrate his squishiness.

“It’s not just that though,” the gravedigger said, leaning against the plywood, “It’s about peace of mind, too. The families trust that their loved ones will be protected. They can rest knowing that the deceased is safe and preserved, and that they know where they are, in body at least if not in spirit.”

“They don’t have to know. I mean, we hardly ever saw each other when I was alive, so there’s no reason I couldn’t just avoid them.”

“That’d be worse, though. To have somebody you loved just out there, wandering around. Catching glimpses of them on the street, pretending not to know them at the grocery store. No, I think we should just stick to procedure here.”

“Look, I’m getting out of this hole. If it’s so important that there be a body in there, you’re welcome to climb in.”

“There’s a larger principle at stake, too,” his adversary continued, seeming not to have heard him. “This is, like, the only certainty we have left anymore.”

“And what if all these graves are full of people screaming to get out!”

“They’re not, but it wouldn’t matter. We can’t see them or hear them. Whatever reality they’re experiencing can’t possibly matter to us. Knowing where they are is what really matters, I think.”

“I don’t care, I’m getting out,” John said, making a jump for the edge of the grave and sliding down the slick clay. The metal casket boomed as he landed. John tried again only managed to streak his shirt and jacket with orange mud. Chin on his chest, John looked into the coffin with its red, scratchy crepe. A hand, orange and deeply lined, dropped into John’s field of vision and after a moment’s hesitation, he took it.

“If anybody asks, I was on a lunch break.”

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John's life, even before the accident, hadn't been going according to plan. Teaching high school was just supposed to be a pit stop while he finished his Master's thesis, a treatise on the underground pornography trade in mid-Victorian England. His particular fascination had been with images concealed in objects like dice. But two years later, he was still teaching World History to 10<sup>th</sup> graders. He had planned to go back to his thesis over summer vacation. Finishing the thesis was as far as the plan went, which John knew was part of why it was taking him so long.

As far back as he could remember, he'd felt like he was just killing time, waiting for the real show. Teaching was no different. Every day felt like sitting through a commercial. Then he was driving down one of those winding country roads doing sixty, parting the low, heavy fog behind him. He had liked to drive fast.

It was a long walk back to the house, a two-bedroom bungalow he was renting from a holding company. He'd tried to hitch a ride, but there'd been no takers. When he got home, everything was in boxes and the carpet was damp. John went to the bathroom and stripped to his underwear, then went back to the living room and pulled the TV out of its box and hooked the cable back up.

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John discovered that breathing was no longer an absolute necessity for him as his father and sister tried in vain to pry his head out of his mother's arms. Once his mother had released him of her own volition and settled down onto the couch, she'd wanted to know what the hell he was thinking. They'd all wanted to know that a lot lately, he knew, but had generally refrained from asking. Up to then, he'd thought of his death as kind of romantic, but explaining to his mother and father how the roads had been a little wet and he had been going maybe a little too fast and he missed the curve, where they needed to put in a guardrail anyway (nods of agreement all around), took some of the shine off it.

"I always told you. Didn't I always tell him," his father said, turning to John's mother, who had gotten up in the middle of her son's stammered self-justifications and was busying herself by unpacking boxes and putting things back in their places. "Just like when you broke the axle on the Dodge."

"I didn't break the axle, it was a CV joint. A rusted, old, CV joint," John said.

"The mechanic said he hit the curb doing at least sixty," his father said with a sideways smile on his face that John seemed not to see, seemed not to have seen for seven years. He stopped to clear his throat then added, "In a school zone!" addressing John's sister, Mary, this time, who had taken charge of the TV. She glanced up at them and pointed the remote in their general direction before flipping to the next channel.

"I was doing thirty, tops," John said.

"That's not what the mechanic said. The mechanic said—"

"That mechanic was a moron. Do we really have to talk about this right now?"

"When should we talk about it then, the next time you kill yourself?"

“Well Dad, you have to be alive to die, pretty much by definition, so I don’t think there’s going to be a next time. They should say you only die once.” John’s smirk fell as he saw the same pained expression pass between his mother and sister. Everyone was quiet.

His mother tried to get him to eat some of the leftover sweet and sour pork from the new Chinese place that had opened downtown, right next to the only bar in Brimfield and across the street from the police station. He tried to eat, but everything tasted spoiled and bitter.

That night his parents slept in his room, his sister took the couch in the living room, and he tried to sleep on the loveseat in the office. He’d found the oversized loveseat on the curb and it still smelled like somebody’s dog, but John didn’t think the smell was why he couldn’t sleep. It was sometime after midnight when his sister came in and sat on the arm of loveseat, facing him with her feet touching his, scalding hot. There was something in the way she sat, the way she swayed slowly one way, then the other, that made him think she might be drunk or sleepwalking.

“I missed you,” she said.

“I wasn’t gone long, M.”

There was a long pause, then she said, “That’s not what I meant.”

John had more or less written his sister off after she got married. They’d been close growing up. Their mother had had gotten pregnant with her just about two months after John was born and they’d been in the same classes growing up, because Mary was “gifted.” In class they always sat next to each other, people thought they were twins. They were the spooky kids right up to high school, when she’d started taking college

classes in the evenings and he'd gotten into playing obscure role-playing games with his friend. Hunched side by side over stacks of college brochures, they had planned everything out together.

But in the first year of her Master's program she married some guy she met in her advanced statistics class and got her CPA license instead of the degree in theoretical mathematics they had planned on. The guy, Richard, had some middle-management office job for the telephone company and he was only taking graduate classes in the first place so he could move up. She worked from home doing people's taxes. They hadn't had any kids yet, but John knew it was a matter of time before she went full-on housewife. No one else in the family had shared John's outrage at the waste.

"You had a phone, too," John said.

She didn't respond, just lowered herself onto the loveseat, wedging herself between him and the lumpy cushions.

"Where's Richard, anyway," John said, "Was he even at the funeral?"

"Did you come back for me?" Mary asked, resting her head on his shoulder. Her skin burned.

The question hung over them as he lay stiffly trying not to touch her burning skin. Her breathing slowed and after a while John could hear birds outside.

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It was his father's idea that he should go ask for his job back. John was reading the news on his laptop at the kitchen table when his father came in and slapped a stack of yellow invoices down in front of him.

"What is this shit?"

"The bills for the funeral."

"I can see that, Dad. Why are you giving them to me?"

"Why do you think, smart ass," he said, stopping to clear his throat, "You owe me seven thousand, three hundred and forty dollars."

John closed his laptop and took up the papers, leafing through them one by one. He'd never known dying cost so much. When he put the bills down, his father pulled out a manila envelope and set it on top of the stack. John shot his father a look, then opened it. It contained the official death certificate, which was just a standard government form that looked like it had been printed out on a dot-matrix printer, and underneath that there was a death certificate from the funeral home with big gothic letters and an embossed gold seal.

"Thanks, Dad, I'll hang it up in the office."

"That sounds fine," his father said.

"What about my life insurance," John said, picking up the bills and gesturing towards his father with them. "You and Mom are the beneficiaries. It should cover at least most of this."

"You think those bastards are going to pay out with you up and walking around."

"Fuck," John said without any heat. "Well, how am I supposed to pay for this?"

His father told him to go beg for his old job back, and that's what he did. John went over to the school when the kids would all be gone, knowing that Ben, the principal, never left before six. Mary insisted on driving him. The car he'd died in was a total loss and he didn't have money for a rental.

There was a makeshift memorial in the front hallway, a big black wreath made of construction paper flowers around a pixelated printout of him that must have come from the yearbook files. The principal smiled and shook his hand, but the whole time they were talking he was staring over John's shoulder, out the big Plexiglas window into the main hallway. The position had already been filled, and really it would just be too much for the children. "It wouldn't be right to interrupt the grieving process," the principal told him solemnly. He offered to put in a good word for him in another district, or to see if he could get him on the substitute list, but John had mostly stopped listening at that point. Allowing himself to be gently corralled into the parking lot, John sat down on the curb to wait for his sister. She'd said she was going to go down the street and pick up some things from the drug store.

Both the heavy steel doors swooshed open behind him and a student came out, a faded army backpack over one shoulder. John recognized him but did not remember his name. He was tall, and looked like he was twenty-five, except that his skin was still a little too even and the big beard he wore was too straight and soft looking, like a child's hair. He'd been in his third period class last year. John had never liked the kid, who'd sat in the back of his classroom with his feet up on the desk and only spoke to correct other students when they gave stupid answers to John's questions.

"Mr. Erikson?" he said, stopping next to him.

“Yep.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be dead?”

“Yep.”

“So, what’s your deal?” the kid asked, sitting down next to John. It was a startling question.

“How do you mean?” John responded out of his bag of teacherly phrases.

The kid gave him an annoyed look, but explained, “You must have some kind of unfinished business. I mean, if you were buried in hallowed ground and everything. Were you a really bad person, like a wife-beater or a pedophile or something?”

“No,” John said.

“Well, then it has to be some tie left to the world of the living. Revenge or a long lost love or something.”

John thought about it. On those TV shows about ghosts there was always some sort of reason, something left unsaid, but there was nothing he could think of, nothing that simple. He wanted to know, wanted there to be something.

“Well, if I was after brains I wouldn’t have come here,” John joked, afraid as he did that the kid might take it personally.

“Yeah,” was all he said, then he stood and, gravel crunching under his scuffed combat boots, walked off towards the concrete stairs that led down a hill and away from the schools.

“So, how’d it go,” Mary asked as soon as he got into the car.

“You never said why Richard isn’t with you.”

“And you’re changing the subject. See, I can state the obvious, too, Johnny,” she said as they pulled onto the long, empty road. “And buckle your seat belt.”

“Why?” This was one of their perennial arguments and John perked up a bit at the prospect of finally winning it.

“Because it would make me feel better, asshole.”

“But why? What’s there to worry about, I mean. It’s not logical to—” With a thud John’s forehead smacked into the rapidly approaching windshield. His sister took her foot off the brake and sat with the engine idling, eyes forward, while John buckled his seat belt.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Are you going to tell me what’s up with you and Richard, or am I going to have to wheedle it out of Mom?” John asked after a brief sulk.

“We’re separated, okay. Don’t do a fucking happy dance, I’m still figuring out how I feel about it.”

“No dance, I promise. But he still could have gone with you with to your brother’s funeral, I mean to be supportive,” John said.

“He would probably agree with you. I didn’t want him to come. He even tried to insist, got all chivalrous about it,” Mary said with evident disdain.

Neither of them said anything for a while beyond commenting on the landscape of grazing animals and fallen-in barns. John wanted to conceal his glee at the prospect of his sister’s divorce, if only for fear of making her reconsider.

“So, what are your plans?”

“Don’t start with this, John. Richard was never the reason I didn’t keep going with school.”

“But it doesn’t make sense. You’re depriving society of the contributions you could make,” John said, exasperated.

“I was good at school. That’s all. And when it’s over, nobody cares anymore. Is this what you came back for? To keep having the same old fights,” Mary said. The color was rising in her cheeks.

“Everything was always so easy for you. You never had to study or work to get the grade. It made you lazy.”

“Maybe I’m the one who died. Maybe this is hell, trapped forever with my disapproving big brother. At least Mom and Dad have had the good grace to give up on me.”

John didn’t know what to say. He leaned his head against the window, watching a split rail fence zip by, imagining himself running alongside the car. It was still a child he saw in his daydream, the same skinny kid who’d sprinted to the grocery store and turned family vacations into impossible marathons, moving so fast he wouldn’t feel his feet touch the ground.

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John sat in his insurance agent’s four-chair waiting room armed with a box full of papers and receipts, glaring through her receptionist, a bone thin woman who seemed to be having trouble swallowing. An older man with a much younger woman came up the

narrow hallway and passed them into the parking lot. For a moment neither John nor the receptionist moved or spoke, then John rose slowly and marched towards the insurance agent's office.

The door read "Barbara Jakubowski" in plain black type across the rough, translucent window. Inside, John was greeted by a small woman, much too small for a Barbara Jakubowski to John's mind, in a crisp black pantsuit holding a china cup towards him. She leaned on a cane of silver-colored wood, unremarkable except for the bronze chicken foot curled into something like a fist that served as the cane's head.

"You must be Mr. Erikson. Would you like a cup of tea?" the insurance agent asked. John glanced down into the cup, frowning at what he saw. The tea looked to John like gutter water, deep blue topped with a film like a gasoline rainbow.

"No," John said, taking the tea anyway. The cup had looked normal in her hand, but looked like it came from a child's play set when he held it. "I mean, yes, I am Mr. Erikson."

"How can I help you, today Mr. Erikson," she asked, edging around a large, cluttered desk

"John," he said, trying to hold the tea at bay with one hand and dig through his box of papers with the other.

Slowly at first, John told Mrs. Jakubowski his problem, starting with the car accident, referring to documentary evidence from the box at each relevant point. As he started to explain the funeral expenses in detail, a small black cat presented itself, emerging from underneath his chair. He gave the cat a perfunctory pat and returned to sifting through the receipts in his lap. Before he knew it, three cats were swarming

around his legs, a black one with a little white crescent over one eye, a red tabby and a round white Persian running back and forth across his legs, then disappearing behind him and popping back out again on the other side as regularly as a train set. Finally, he reached down and petted them each one by one, which seemed to placate them, but made it impossible for him to continue.

“We do have protocols in place for this sort of situation,” Mrs. Jakubowski said as soon as she was sure that John had finished.

“What do I have to do?” John asked, standing suddenly and scattering the cats in the process.

“These things happen. When I was working in the Akron office, I think it was ‘76 or ‘77, dozens of policyholders came up after some kind of sewer explosion. The West Side was overrun with them, wandering the street, sleeping in cars and generally scaring people.”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing. Nobody knew what to do. The mayor called in the state police to clear them out. Some of them got away and it took weeks to clear the little ones out of the storm drains, but order was restored.”

“How does that help me?”

“I suppose it doesn’t. But, now we have forms you can fill out.”

The form itself was fairly simple. What it boiled down to was a declaration that he was in fact dead and that, in exchange for redeeming his policy, the company would not be responsible for any further liability. There were pages of clauses and sub-clauses. It was a way, Barbara explained, of severing his financial ties to the living world.

John left with the form.

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Weeks passed. During the day he watched television. The house was empty during the day on weekdays. His parents drove to some rental property they were working on and his sister came and went less predictably, but at night everyone was always there, watching his TV or playing board games in his kitchen. They tried to get him to join in, but he was having none of it. At night he wandered the neighborhood and abused people or their property. He pulled down fences, screamed at traffic. It got to where he was always carrying a rock or a length of old pipe. People ran when they saw him, which felt surprisingly good.

But he knew it wouldn't last. People were already getting used to him and he was barely more of a concern than the group of teenagers who'd been spray-painting cows on the other side of the county. Editorials and letters to the editor appeared in the local newspaper about the necessity of somebody doing something, but the torches and pitchforks were not forthcoming, John knew.

So he began making preparations. First John opened up his thesis on the laptop with the intention of finishing it, or else deleting it if it was as hopelessly inane as he remembered, but he discovered that the thesis was done. Had been for a year. It wasn't brilliant, but it would have been more than good enough, if he wanted to be OSU's first dead graduate. Second, he got what was left of his affairs in order, the most difficult part

of which was getting his credit card company to accept that he no longer had any need for them. Third, he got the suit he'd been buried in dry-cleaned.

Then, after everyone had gone to bed, John put on his grave clothes and signed the insurance form, scribbled out a few notes before reconsidering and throwing them in the trash, then walked out the back door. He stood in the yard, watching the moon rise and running his hands over wet blades of grass that had started to go to seed. The screen door squeaked behind him, but he didn't turn around.

"What's this about?" Mary came out the back door with the form in her hand.

"Freedom through better bureaucracy," John said with a shrug.

"Does that mean if I tear it up, you'll have to stay?"

"No, but it'll probably mean you'll owe Dad seven grand."

"Whatever, I can't believe you fell for that shit. Now that you've encouraged him, he'll probably start trying to get me to pay back all the school bills I stuck him with again."

"Shit, sorry. Hey, look on the bright side. Maybe Dick will get Dad in the divorce settlement," John said as he turned to look at her.

"I should be so lucky," Mary said.

His sister threw her arms around John and squeezed hard. John hugged her back and rested his chin on her shoulder. Neither of them said anything for a while.

"Listen, for whatever it's worth, I'm sorry I was such a prick. It's just, you were always the smart one, you know," John said.

“Yeah, I’m sorry you were such a prick, too. Seriously, though, I never realized you were trying so hard to keep up with me. I was just trying to make Mom and Dad proud of me.”

“Well, at least you’ve come to your senses there. Tell them I love them, alright,” John said as he pulled away.

“So that’s it? You’re just going to light out for the territories?” Mary asked.

“Something like that, I guess.”

“What are you going to do?”

“No clue.”

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John walked along the shoulder of the empty highway, tall pines rising in the darkness on either side. His steps were soundless amid the rising song of frogs and crickets. The air seemed to waver with the sound. Then he ran. He ran, carried on the buzzing pulse of the night, weightless.

## THURSDAYS

The gun was ridiculous, a nickel plated Colt revolver with a nine-inch barrel. A Dirty Harry gun. It looked impossible in Jesse's spindly ten-year-old hands, cradled in his father's rough brown ones. Jesse aimed the revolver, squeezed the trigger. The first two shots missed. His father kept telling him to relax. Tensing up only makes your aim shakier. Jesse knew that, but knowing it didn't help. He took a deep breath, tried to forget his father, his sun-burnt, grinning cousin, took aim and fired. It worked. One after the other, the remainder of the Pepsi cans jumped off the row of rocks and crates they were using for a shooting gallery. His father laughed and patted him on his back. He was his boy.

They had a few more rounds. Jesse was a better shot than either of them. A natural, they agreed. He'd never been good at sports, or school. The gunpowder burned his eyes, made him feel cold and sick, but he liked shooting. The sun was dropping behind the weedy hills, but Jesse begged for one more round. It wasn't like Jesse to ask his father for anything, much less to beg. "One more," his father said, and trotted to the ledge of rocky orange dirt.

Jesse held the gun out in front of him and pulled the hammer back. He knew this was unnecessary, but it made pulling the trigger easier. Then he aimed at his father as he leaned over to pick up a can. Right over the ear. "Exhale slowly as you squeeze the trigger. Squeeze, don't pull," a voice in his mind reminded him, his father's voice. His heart beats in his head as he tries to pull the trigger, but his hand won't obey. His vision ringed in red, Jesse leans over and pukes sweet brown foam into the dust, careful not to get any on his new white tennis shoes.

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“Where are you, baby.” Gin’s voice snapped him back to their bedroom. Jesse was staring at the high, unfinished ceiling of their attic apartment. He blew the smoke into the baffle he’d made of a toilet paper roll stuffed with dryer sheets, breathing out slowly.

“I’m here, right here,” Jesse said. He didn’t think about his father much. Jesse had been thirteen when his mother gave him the news that his father had died. It had been a relief, because it meant they could stop running. Before his mother had escaped with him in the middle of a cool May night, Jesse’s father had beaten her, but never Jesse. Whatever Jesse did wrong was treated as his mother’s fault.

“This is what I don’t like about this shit. You drift off and it’s like we’re not even in the same room.” Gin stubbed out the joint and sat back on the bed. Jesse leaned forward in the office chair and took her tiny, freckled hands in his. It hurt Jesse to think he was scaring her with his day dreams, but it seemed like the only time he could remember the times before was when he smoked. They weren’t happy memories for the most part, but they had a kind of gravity that had only grown as he got older. These weren’t things he could talk about.

“I’m right where I want to be, babe,” he said, putting on the sly half smile that, in their private code, meant sex. Gin returned his look with an expression like you might expect to see on a boxer’s face before pulling him onto the bed. He held his breath as he looked at her. She was small, barely five foot, wild black curls spilling over the pillow.

A little bit of hair peeked from under her arms, because she'd refused to shave her armpits since she was nineteen, even though she got a Brazilian wax every month. As he kissed his way down her stomach, he remembered her reasoning, "I have no interest in men sticking their tongues in my armpit."

By the time Jesse had finished peeling off the condom and washing up, Gin was already asleep, splayed diagonally across the bed. He threw a blanket over her tan, spotted back and pushed in next to her. They had been dating for a year and three months now, a record for Jesse. Ordinarily he would have found an excuse to bail inside of six months, but Gin (short for Jeanette) was different. At least, he told himself she was the new variable. Other women had been easier to disentangle himself from.

She was gone in the morning. Running his hand over the cool absence on the sheets beside him, Jesse remembered that Gin had to be in early to do the cash office at the grocery store. She always jumped up the second the alarm went off, but Jesse was a snooze button guy. He wished she wouldn't leave without waking him, but he didn't know how to bring it up without sounding needy.

When Jesse sat down at the computer with his coffee, he saw that his girlfriend had left the admissions page for The University of Akron open. They had been going around over this for a month. Gin wanted him to get a degree. His position, officially, was that they couldn't afford it. Ten grand a year, plus books, fees, parking, and he'd have to cut his hours at the Gojo plant. She remained unmoved; there were loans, she could get an extra job waiting tables. He had tried to turn it around and encourage her to go instead, but she'd tried once already and all she had to show for it were student loans.

Before he left, Jesse scribbled out a note letting Gin know he'd be late that night. He didn't want her to wait up for him if she had to be in early the next morning. After his shift at the plant, he was going to cover the bar at Thursdays. It felt shitty to leave a note about it, but part of him was still glad not to have to tell her in person, because every time he mentioned the place Gin's eyes narrowed and she looked out the nearest window. He didn't know quite what that meant, but he knew it wasn't good. There was something between Gin and the old man that Jesse had never understood. The day he met her, Gin had come to the bar to pay her father back some money he'd let her borrow. There had been yelling in the office and then Gin had stormed past the bar, tossing twenty dollar bills into the air as she passed and throwing hard looks at the twelve o'clock drunks that turned on their stools to stare. "Drinks are on me, you sorry sons of bitches," she'd said, but when her eyes met Jesse's there had been the briefest look of confusion, her sneer softening for a moment before she turned away and kicked open the already dented metal door. She'd never told him what the fight was all about, other than that he wouldn't take the money back.

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Gin wasn't the first or last person to abuse the door at Thursdays. Twenty years of hard use had left the front door rippled with dents on both sides, red paint peeking through the deepest dents like blood. Jesse's boss said he was too much of a cheapskate to replace it, but Gin had told him that the door was the first thing her dad had bought for the bar. Over the door a metal sign read "Thursdays, established 1974," though this

claim was also not entirely true. Danny, “the old man” to most, bought the place in 1974, after getting home from Vietnam to find both his parents dead of heart attacks, but there had been a bar in that place for as long as anybody in the neighborhood could remember. According to the old Italian men who gathered in the morning to nurse draft beers and peck at the free peanuts, the owner at the time had hung a hand-painted sign in the big front window that said simply “Liquor” the day after the repeal of prohibition and that had been sufficient until the mid-sixties, when it had been replaced with a sign that bolted to the brick facade and lit up with big blinking white bulbs, advertising the same promise.

In the early 90’s, Danny hung a new sign in the window, “The worst food in Akron,” after a reviewer for the local newspaper mentioned Thursdays in an editorial about the lack of fine dining options in Akron. Danny, who was bartender, manager, bouncer, server, dishwasher and cook in addition to being the owner, took the snub as a personal challenge. The menu now included such favorites as onion rings covered in melted Velveeta served on a bed of either corn chips or Cheetos and the Combos Casserole, a concoction involving the aforementioned snack, peanuts, cheese, instant pancake batter and the microwave. Danny had a policy that he would make anything the customer asked for, so long as he didn’t have to leave the bar to get the ingredients. He was cool with people bringing in ingredients from the convenience store across the street, too. The review that had sparked it all was still taped up on the wall behind the bar, stiff and yellowing.

Jesse’s feet echoed hollowly over the scuffed wood floors as he walked past the bar. Wilson, one of the regulars, was sitting at the bar sipping at a pitcher of beer that glowed with late afternoon sun like stained glass. In the back two younger guys were

playing pool. Lately more college students had been coming in. The old man couldn't have been happier, since the kids were willing to pay six dollars for a shot of Jägermeister and half a Red Bull. Danny was covering the bar when Jesse came in. A tall, egg shaped man, he just barely fit in the narrow alley and when he served a drink his belly would hang over the bar, threatening to upend any unattended glasses in his way.

"How's the beetus, Danny. Doctor's cut your foot off yet?" Jesse asked as deadpan as he could manage. Technically, Jesse's boss was only pre-diabetic.

"Godamnit, I can still wiggle most of my toes. Shit, is it four o'clock already?" Danny said, easing himself back onto a stack of straining milk crates.

"Three-fifteen. They got me short-scheduled at the plant all week," Jesse said.

"Fuck them, then. I can always use an extra hand around here, Jess."

"I've seen what you've got on that computer back there, I don't think I want to be your extra hand."

"You couldn't handle that job any-fucking-way."

"I appreciate it. It's not just me getting screwed, though. There's been talk about closing the doors over the summer to make up for shitty sales this quarter."

"Shit. What are you and Ginny going to do?"

"Beats the hell out of me. It might just be for a few weeks, nothing's official yet," Jesse said and poured himself a cup of coffee.

"You can have all the hours you need here, you know that. Anything you or Gin need, I'll help out."

Jesse stared into his coffee and frowned to keep from laughing. He wasn't privy to the books at Thursdays, but he knew that on a good week they were just barely making

it into the black. In the mirror he could see Wilson watching them with a half smile like he was part of the conversation.

“How’s Ginny doing, anyway?” Dan asked, the skin around his small blue eyes puckering despite his perpetual grin.

“Still comes three times a night like clockwork, Danny,” Jesse said and set his coffee on the bar.

“Long as you’re taking care of my little girl,” Danny said before punching Jesse in the shoulder hard enough to make his whole arm tingle. “Is she still on you about going back to school?”

“We’re still discussing it, yeah.”

“*Discussing* it. Does she make you wear the leash around your dick all the time, or just at home?” This time Jesse slugged his boss in the shoulder, surprised as he had been before by just how much it felt like hitting a heavy bag.

“I just don’t know, Danny. I have trouble seeing myself sitting in a room full of kids like that,” he said, gesturing with his coffee cup towards the guys playing pool.

“Kids, right. You’re what, all of twenty-five?”

“Twenty-six, and it’s not just age, I mean, I don’t even know what I’d major in,” Jesse said. Outside a truck was backing up and Danny jumped up.

“It’s about damned time. That’s got to be the Budweiser guy, take over for me.”

Before happy hour it was just Wilson and a handful of young guys getting an early start on the weekend. Wilson had been inherited from the previous owner. Slumlord by occupation, he had once made waves in the local art scene. When interest in his work faded, he declared that he would “live his art,” though he still had a basement full of

unsold paintings. For money he'd fallen back on some property his parents had bought in Akron's most fashionable neighborhoods circa 1939.

A man with a close cut half ring of hair, a precisely cut beard, and oval glasses sat down on the opposite side of the bar and ordered two fingers of scotch. Jesse poured the drink and was about to walk away when the man held up his hand for him to wait.

"I was wondering if you could help me with something?" the bald man asked.

"Shoot."

"I'm looking for someone who might be interested in a certain business opportunity."

"Does it involve a Nigerian prince?" Jesse asked with a good-natured smile.

The stranger stiffened and his jaw worked for a moment before he continued in a lower voice, "No. Shit, I don't know how these things work, but I'm looking for someone to fix a problem for me. I've got money."

"Did somebody put you up to this?" Jesse said.

"No. I'm as serious as a heart attack," the stranger said.

"Then cut the shit. What are you asking me?"

The man sat quietly for a moment seeming to shrink under Jesse's glare, but suddenly he straightened up and cleared his throat.

"I want my wife dead. Think we can make that happen?" It sounded like something he had practiced saying and he seemed happier now that Jesse had given him permission to come out and say it. A smirk broke across the stranger's face and he said, "I want the bitch dead. I don't have a good reason, no affairs on either side, she's too lazy

to divorce me. I'm just sick of looking at her, ya know. She'd do the same to me I let her get her hands on enough cash."

Jesse had been enjoying watching the man, just some overdressed suburbanite come slumming, when he'd thought that all he was after was a hooker or some drugs. It didn't seem funny anymore. Before Jesse could formulate a response, the other man laid a pair of hundred dollar bills on the bar like a poker hand.

"Think about it. Consider this a retainer, you know, like a deposit," the stranger said and stood, smoothing his khakis before turning to leave. Jesse hesitated, then snatched the bills off the table when he saw that Wilson was looking at him over the rim of an empty beer.

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Gin was slumped on the couch snoring when Jesse got home. He was late because he'd been driving around the neighborhood trying to make up his mind. Part of him wanted to forget the whole thing, but every time he resolved just not to think about it anymore, he wondered what would happen if the man found someone who would help him.

While Gin was getting ready for bed, Jesse folded the bills and hid them between two cards in his wallet. From the bathroom, his girlfriend told Jesse about her day at work. There was drama brewing in the back room because the boss was looking to fire some people, but Gin wasn't worried about it because the managers were only supposed to be getting rid of people who didn't work. That was half the store to hear Gin tell it.

“Yeah, that’s just the start, though. This lady came in today with a little boy, maybe four or five years old. He wanders off as soon as she’s not looking, climbing on shelves and getting into shit. Me, Sheri and Bev all had to bring the kid back to her, at least three separate times that I know of. So, meanwhile the store is crazy and an older woman comes in with the shakes and I have to go to the break room to get her something. When I finally get back on the floor and guess what I find?”

“Kid get into some cookies or something?” Jesse said. He was only half listening.

“Better. Way better. This brat takes a great big dump in the middle of the freezer aisle and he’s got a little plastic tugboat he’s running back and forth through this huge smear of shit on the floor. And he looks up at me and says, ‘I’m playing in the mud.’ I didn’t even know what to say.” Gin came in out of the bathroom as she finished her story, easing stiffly into bed with a tired smile.

Jesse decided that if the man came back, he’d worry about it then. People didn’t just walk into a bar and hire a hit man. He’d tell Gin about it and they’d both have a laugh. And two hundred dollars. Gin rolled over and curled up on Jesse, her head resting against his naked chest. He ran a hand over her dark hair, feeling the bumpy contours of her tiny skull in his hand. He could get her whole head almost in his hand.

“I love you,” he said. He wanted to talk about the money and the man in the oval glasses.

Gin only muttered something unintelligible back and her leg twitched the way a dreaming dog’s does. Jesse lay pinned to the bed listening to the slow, grinding rhythm of her snoring, not able to sleep. When she rolled over, Jesse sat up and reached for the alarm clock. He had been laying there for half an hour and didn’t even feel tired anymore.

After drinking half a beer, Jesse fell asleep watching *Poker After Dark*. He dreamed he was little again, on the bus with his mother. It was nighttime and the windows were all blacked out. The lights on the bus flickered lazily on and off a few at a time. They were sitting on one of the side-facing benches near the back and the bus was crowded. Jesse tried to count the number of people on the bus, like he really did when he was a child, but he kept counting out of order. His mother was young again too, younger than he could remember her except from pictures, her shining blonde hair running long and straight down her back. Across from them a man sat and stared at his mother. He had long, greasy hair and wore a stained child's winter coat. The skin on his face was dry and white, like a stiff mask of cracked paper-mache. Two red, hound dog eyes stared from ragged, puckered lids dug deep into his face. Jesse stared back at the man and squeezed his mother's hand, his thin nails digging a neat row of red semi-circles into the pink flesh. The bus stopped and Jesse stood. Without taking his eyes off the man, Jesse tugged at his mother's arm, jerking at her harder and harder with each pull. He strained against her immovable weight like a horse at the plow, yelling at his mother to get up but still watching the man in the seat across from them. The man took a hand from his pocket and held a small, black, oval-shaped object like an oversized pill. Pressed against the thin shell of smoky glass, something dark heaved and squirmed. Jesse wanted the thing in the overwhelming way that children sometimes want things, but his mother would not stand and would not look at him. She covered her eyes with her free hand.

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That weekend a busload of Akron U kids getting ready to take a trip to Cleveland for a pub crawl piled into Thursdays to prime the pump before they hit the road and it was busier than Jesse had ever seen it. Tired from not sleeping and working a seven day stretch between the plant and the bar, Jesse snapped at the kids, drew beer with too much head, and after a couple of hours stared daggers at anyone who approached the bar, but the invaders took it all in stride, smirking like it was all part of the experience. Danny's concoctions covered most of the crowded tables and the clack of billiard balls sounded periodically over the dizzying white noise of laughter and jukebox music. The crowd had chased off all the regulars except Wilson, who was still at his post. Wilson seemed to have absorbed some of the collegial atmosphere and kept trying to strike up conversations with people as they squeezed in to get their drinks.

Jesse turned away from the bar to settle a tab and when he turned back around, Wilson was splayed out on the floor. Grabbing the aluminum baseball bat from under the bar, Jesse hopped the counter and put himself between Wilson and the table of young guys who were standing there trying to look ready for a fight. Rattling the concrete filled bat for emphasis, Jesse shouted the kids out of the bar. The noise brought Danny out of the kitchen and he took over crowd control, along with a tall black-haired woman who turned out to be the tour coordinator.

Jesse knelt down, took hold of Wilson under the arms and lifted him off the floor the way you might a child. He walked the drunk man into the bathroom and wiped the blood away from his mouth with a wet paper towel, scouring the deep wrinkles that were set like dry riverbeds in Wilson's olive skin. Then Jesse led him into the back office and sat him down behind the L-shaped metal desk.

“Can you remember your phone number, Will?” Jesse asked, taking the phone from the corner of the desk and setting it in front of Wilson.

“I was just talking,” Wilson said.

“I know you were, but I think we ought to call Regina,” Jesse said.

“I don’t remember.”

Jesse only shrugged and flipped through the green pocket notebook that Danny used as a rolodex. When he heard the ring, Jesse held the phone out to Wilson, who looked down and pretended not to see.

“It would be better if it came from you,” Jesse said.

When Jesse got off the phone with Wilson’s wife, he went back into the bar. A few kids were still standing around waiting to see if anything else would happen and they all turned to look at Jesse as he poured two cups of coffee. Danny, who was settling up with the tour conductor, asked if Wilson was alright and Jesse nodded before retreating to the office.

“What did you say to those assholes, anyway?” Jesse asked as he set a cup down on the desk in the spot designated by a cluster of brown rings for the purpose.

“We’re never really free, Jesse, until we kill our fathers. The Greeks got it. They had this grove, you know, where their high priest lived. If anybody wanted to take this guys job, see, they had to kill him. That’s how it’s got to be, Jesse. That’s why it’s all fucked up, now, Jess. Everything’s fucked.”

“I know it is, Will, I know,” Jesse said as he wiped the sides of his cup with his free hand and sucked the coffee off his fingers. He’d spilled the coffee because he

couldn't keep his hands still, though he wasn't sure if it was anything Wilson said or just the night catching up with him.

"They called him the King of the Grove," Wilson said.

"That sounds familiar," Jesse said and it did, though Jesse couldn't place where he'd heard the story before. He'd been interested in mythology once, the twelve labors of Hercules, Set cutting Osiris into pieces and throwing him in the Nile, Pazuzu the snake-penised demon, they had all been more interesting to Jesse than the subjects he was supposed to study in school.

Jesse sat on the curb with Wilson and got another cup of coffee in him while they waited for Regina to get there. She pulled up in their brown and beige LeSabre, which Wilson kept in perfect condition. The white-walled tires looked like new and the chrome bumper was polished to a mirror finish. Wilson liked to call it his pimp-mobile, but it was mainly Regina's car and she got mad at him if he stayed out late with it. Jesse helped him into the car and explained what had happened to his wife, who sat quietly in her curlers and only smiled and nodded when Jesse was done.

When Jesse came back in, the man from before was sitting at the bar. Jesse saw him as soon as he opened the front door and hesitated. Nobody was working the bar but the man still had a glass in his hand. Then Jesse started. Sitting at the nearer end of the bar was Gin, smiling up at him and holding out a plastic grocery bag. Jesse let go of the door and without looking at the other man crossed to Gin and gave her a hug. Jesse was a hard hugger, it had pissed most of his girlfriends off, but Gin squeezed back hard until she couldn't breathe and then smacked him sharply on the arm to tap out.

"I brought you some dinner," she said, handing him the bag.

“Thanks, babe,” Jesse said. He took the back without looking in it, watching the man out of the corner of his eye. “So what’s up? Get off work early?”

“What you mean what’s up? Can’t I bring you dinner? Anyway, I don’t want you getting fat eating the shit Dad makes.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“You need a hand tonight? The place is a wreck,” Gin said, waving a hand at the disaster of overturned glasses and congealing grease behind him. Jesse didn’t look.

“No, it’s okay, you go ahead. It’ll be slow for a couple of hours anyway.”

“I think Chester the Molester down there needs a refill, babe.”

The man was looking at them, his eyes concealed by the glare of the track-lighting on his glasses.

“I should take care of that,” Jesse said.

“Okay. Is Dad in the back?” Gin asked. The “Dad” pulled Jesse up short for a second, but he wasn’t even sure it had been Dan or Dad when he thought about it and he didn’t have time to think about what the distinction might mean.

“I think he’s closing down the kitchen,” he said.

Jesse walked around the bar, took up a half-empty bottle and poured the man a finger and half of something without looking at him or the bottle. When Gin was gone, Jesse slammed the bottle on the counter and looked the man in the eye for a long time.

“Drink it,” Jesse said.

The man smiled like it was some kind of private joke between them and looked at the glass of amber liquid. Jesse was breathing heavy, the muscles in his jaw working like snakes under the skin. The bald man took the drink, still smiling, and waited for Jesse.

“Now, pay and leave.”

“I don’t think so,” the man said after a moment, pushing the glass back towards Jesse, who filled it automatically. “I’d like an answer.”

“Yeah well, shit in one hand and wish in the other.”

“Then I want my money back,” the man snapped back.

“Fuck you. How did you think this was going to work? You’d just walk in, wave some cash around and I’d open my bartender’s little black book of killers.” Jesse took the glass off the bar without looking away from the man’s bloodshot eyes. He looked different from before, his hair less neat, his movements sudden and jerky.

The man stuck his finger in Jesse’s face and said, “You took it. That means you’re implicated, too.”

“*Implicated*. Right. Call the cops then, college boy,” Jesse said, wrapping his hand around the man’s index finger the way an infant might before bending it back just slightly past vertical. The man’s eyes squinched shut in pain and he tried to pull away, but Jesse was the stronger of the two. It felt good to hurt someone and Jesse would have liked to keep hurting the man, but he was afraid of taking it too far. He laid the bat across the bar and let go of the man’s finger. As the defeated man walked away, Jesse knew what it was he’d seen.

When the man was gone, Jesse started cleaning up. It looked like the new girl had run off on them, or else Danny had sent her on some fool’s errand. Jesse was glad to be alone though, it gave him a chance to think. There’d been no reason to get angry at the man. He was just another idiot. There was never any shortage of those. He wanted to compose himself before Gin came out.

Gin stepped into the bar and Jesse set down a tray of dishes to watch her cross the empty room. Her crisp black slacks, one leg stained halfway up the knee with gray water spots, hugged the curves of her hard, square calves and slim hips as she tread lightly across the scratched and dusty boards. She slid down into the chair across from Jesse and met his eyes with a smile.

“So, I’ve got good news,” she said.

“I could use it.”

“Dad says he can lend us the money if you decide you want to go back to school.”

“Wait, I thought we were still talking about this. Why the hell are you going to Dan and asking him for money?”

“Dad wants to help, and we’ve both got money saved up now.”

“Your dad can barely take care of himself. How long do you think he’s going to be able run this place, anyway? I just don’t know what the hell you’re thinking.”

“I was thinking about our future, Jesse. What the fuck are you thinking about?”

Jesse didn’t have an answer, but she just kept looking at him anyway, her green eyes fiercely pleading as the stillness hardened between them. Standing, he picked up the tray of dirty dishes and carried them to the kitchen, where Danny was running racks of glasses through the machine. The humidity was stifling and the thrumming, banging noise of the dishwasher made conversation impractical. Jesse helped load another rack of glasses and when he went back out, Gin was gone.

Business trickled in and between pouring drinks Jesse tried calling Gin on her cell phone a couple of times over the course of the next hour. When the old man finished with

the dishes he came out to pour himself a beer and survey his domain before going upstairs, as he did most every night.

“I think I fucked up,” Jesse called across the bar as Danny started to pour himself a Guinness.

“How bad?” Danny asked, not looking up.

“I don’t really know.”

“Pretty bad then.” Danny eased the lever back into place and gently set the pint glass on the bar. He hunched down to watch the swirling tan cloud separate and despite himself Jesse stooped to watch too.

“Maybe, yeah.”

“Well, if there’s anything two divorces have taught me, it’s that it ain’t over till it’s over. And then it is,” Danny said.

“I got to go,” Jesse said.

“Hold on, wait,” Danny said, gesturing for stillness with one enormous, sausage-fingered hand before taking up the glass again and topping it off. He set the glass back on the bar with the slightest bang and waited, crouching before the bubbling glass. Like an inverted sunrise, the darkness rushed from the bottom of the glass, leaving only a perfect dome of dense, creamy foam at the top. Danny nodded to his glass with satisfaction and smiled broadly as he held the glass out before him. He smiled broadly, a look of perfect bliss that made Jesse think first of a child, then of some drunken medieval friar.

A yellow half-moon was the only light in the parking lot. Jesse’s little red rust bucket was the only car left in the lot besides Danny’s old Blazer. When Jesse got home he was going to tell Gin everything. He would start at the beginning. They would make

things work. They would find a way into the future. He could only hope that she would wait for him just a little bit longer.

Jesse stopped at a gas station on the way home. He wanted to buy flowers for Gin, because he had never bought her flowers before. The pickings were slim at the Holland Oil and he left with a bouquet of droopy red daisies and a Milky Way Midnight, her favorite chocolate bar. As he was getting into the car, Jesse's cell rang and he answered it without looking. A voice he didn't recognize asked him his name and if he worked for Thursdays Bar and Grill. He started to say that nobody called it that, but the voice on the other end kept going. There had been an incident and Jesse was the only person in Danny's emergency contact list who was answering. Dan had been shot and was about to go into surgery. They needed any information Jesse had about his medical history. He didn't know much. Jesse set the phone down without closing it and gripped the steering wheel with both hands. He had to remind himself to breathe as he pulled the car out into the dark, empty street. The gas station lights receded in the rearview mirror until they were a white beacon bobbing in and out of view in a dark sea.

## ON CLEANING DAY

It had been about a month since James had heard from his mother. She'd last called to congratulate him on graduating and he'd said not to congratulate him yet, since he still had to pass the bar. She'd been disappointed that he wasn't coming home that summer, but she understood that he had to study and that he was going to be interviewing at firms in the city, so he wouldn't have time to be running back and forth. She was proud of him, her son the lawyer. She still had it in her head that he was going to be a trial lawyer, putting bad guys behind bars or defending the defenseless. He'd been explaining for years that he'd be helping companies sue other companies. When he'd hung up the phone, he'd been annoyed with his mother.

Since he'd moved out six years before, they'd talked every week, or else she sent him an e-mail. She was always the one who made the first move, called or wrote or, once during his undergrad at Kent State, showed up at seven in the morning on a Sunday with coffee and donuts.

It was a dream, of all things, that made James realize something wasn't right. He dreamed his mother called him, crying into the phone, calling his name. As soon as he woke up, James knew it had only been a dream, because in the dream his bedroom had been dark, a bottomless blue-black darkness that you only get in dreams. James never went to sleep without turning on the desk lamp next to his bed. It was a habit he picked up in undergrad and now he couldn't sleep in a dark room. Still, there was something in her voice, a childlike, almost animal whine that had stayed with him. He'd sent his mom an e-mail and, the same evening, left a message on her voicemail, both the same: "Hey, Mom. Call me."

He was determined not to freak out or make a big deal about it. He didn't believe in prophecy or intuition or the unconscious. His mother was probably just busy at work. She was supposed to be getting a promotion to manager at the grocery store soon. So he kept going like everything was normal, got up early, ate his cottage cheese, drove to the gym, came home to shower, packed a Tupperware container of cold chicken and broccoli into his briefcase, caught a train into the city, sat in his carrel in the law library and tried to study. James had a regimented schedule. He had to. His freshman year he discovered that there were only three things he could be counted on to do without parental harassment, drink Mountain Dew (with or without Jack Daniels), masturbate, and watch old movies on TV.

He went to a bar in the city that night with his girlfriend Shauna and some guys from school for two-dollar shots and got up the next day to start it all over again. He had 77 days to study. When he got home he tried his mom again, but didn't leave another message.

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Three days later James was sitting on a Boeing 717 at LaGuardia, agreeing with the small, gray haired woman next to him that it was nicer to fly on a small plane. James didn't see what difference it made, but he wanted to be agreeable. What had made up James's mind was this: when he called his mom's work he found out that nobody there had seen or heard from her in three weeks. She was using up some vacation time before

starting the new job. They said she'd seemed fine though, even though he didn't ask how she was, just where.

He hadn't told anybody he was leaving, just got online and bought a ticket that night and left the next morning. He sent Shauna a text before he boarded the plane, juggling the phone along with his shoes and keys. It read: "Going home. Dont know when ill be back." They were dating, but this wasn't the sort of thing he could share with her. It hadn't even occurred to him to tell anybody else, and sitting on the plane he realized that probably wasn't normal. He knew she was going to be pissed at him. They might even break up over it. She had already taken to accusing him of "withholding." He loved Shauna, but it wasn't all that hard to imagine his life without her. She was going into international law, human rights stuff. She'd already interviewed with a few NGOs and she was hoping for an interview with Amnesty International. James was interviewing with firms that specialized in corporate litigation, mergers and acquisition, shareholder suits. Shauna didn't think it mattered. She wasn't an idealist, she would say, and anyway, we aren't our jobs. James wanted to believe this, that they could live happily like yin and yang.

James drove out of the Canton-Akron airport into a dishwater-colored morning. It was the third time in as many years he'd driven a car and he was constantly aware of all the little movements involved, the pull of the wheel, having to keep pressing on the gas. Traffic on I-77 was worse than he expected. He turned on the radio and set it to 88.9FM, the heavy metal station he'd listened to as a teenager. The station had been shut down his senior year and he was curious to hear what had taken its place. It had always been a hard station to get in. You had to know to look for it. To all but a chosen few it was just static,

a blank space between a country music station and the religious channel run by a local televangelist. People rigged up contraptions of wire coat hangers, tinfoil and stolen car antennae to get it, kneeling in the dark before twisted metal idols. There was a kind of fellowship in those moments he hadn't felt since. James had a moment of anticipation, a faint, irrational hope that his old station might still be there.

It wasn't. Just some alternative rock station. He felt stupid for being disappointed, tried to laugh at himself. Twenty-five and already indulging in nostalgia. The loss he felt was so out of proportion to its object—just a fucking radio station—that all he could do was push it down, focus on what was in front of him. The buzz of tires on the concrete highway droned on, drowning out everything else.

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James' mother didn't answer the door. He knocked again, three firm blows with the bottom of his fist that rattled the windows. A little girl with wide brown eyes poked her head through the curtains in the next door apartment. James didn't look at her. The eyes of children, scared, pleading, bottomless, unnerved him.

The building used to be a motel and the apartments were set up on three levels. When nobody came to the door, James climbed the gray wooden steps to the superintendant's apartment. He remembered which one was the super's because he had a confederate flag hung in his window. They'd met three years ago when James helped his mom move in. The super was about his mom's age, a rangy guy, graying at the temples.

He had just moved to Akron from what he'd called the asshole of the universe, known to others as Cincinnati.

"Your mom's a real nice lady," the super said with a strange tenderness in his voice as James followed him down the stairs. To James it sounded like a scolding.

"Yeah."

"She keeps to herself mostly, but we talk."

James didn't have anything to say. The super's sun-burnt, stubbly face turned back towards him for a second. He had a funny look, like he was anxious and like he was just about to say something. He'd had this non-conversation before, recognized its veiled affection and awkward silences. He was her type, James realized. She liked big personalities, wannabe rock stars, failed poets, unabashed rednecks. He made an effort to be happy for her.

They kept walking up the stairs and the man who was fucking his mother, trying to sound friendly, said, "She's real proud of you, though. That you're going to be a lawyer and all. Said you were the first in the family to go to college."

This wasn't exactly true, but it was the sort of thing his mother would say. James' grandfather was a chemical engineer who'd worked thirty years for Goodrich, but that wouldn't count the way his mother reckoned things. As far as she was concerned, the family line started with them, the mother and the son. James only met his grandfather when his grandmother died. After that, they'd sent him one of James' school pictures every year, and he'd been at James' high school graduation, a stiff, square-jawed old man in a plaid shirt.

He'd never known his father either. James' mom used to tell him she had wished him into existence, that she'd dreamed him. And the reverse was true, too. James knew almost nothing about his mother's life before he was born. She'd been a hippie, been in the crowds at Kent State when the National Guard opened fire. James only found this out on move-in day, when they'd passed one of the memorials, one of the smaller ones, a rectangle of black lampposts that filled up a parking space. His mother wasn't a student then, and said she didn't know anybody who'd been shot. She had traveled after the shooting for a long time, James didn't know where exactly, but when she got pregnant she came back to Akron.

The super had a big key ring, like the kind medieval jailors have in movies. Every key had a piece of paper with a red number held on with scotch tape. He had to bring each key up to his face before he flipped to the next one. James kept his hands shoved deep in his pockets to control the urge to snatch the keys out of his hands.

In the apartment the air was oppressive. A wave of heat and stink rolled over him as soon as the super opened the door, a sour, gritty smell hitting the back of his throat. There were dirty coffee cups and two full ashtrays on a table covered in a faint smudgy gray film. Stepping into the room, James could see the little white blooms of mold floating in a half-full cup of coffee. The carpet was dotted with hard black burn marks. There were stacks of newspapers, magazines and old *TV Guides* stacked against the walls and next to the couch, mixed in with books, junk mail. There were flies.

The smell seemed to be coming from the galley kitchen. Dirty plates and crusty bowls of cereal were stacked up on the counter, along with empty take out boxes and Styrofoam clamshells. James stepped lightly through the room, lifting up dishes and

pulling open cabinets with one finger. He didn't want to disturb anything. Worse than the disgust or the embarrassment was the sense James suddenly had of being an intruder, of snooping through a stranger's things. The cabinets held cereal, cream of wheat, three boxes of Rice-a-Roni and some other odds and ends. He had been the cook in the family from at least thirteen or fourteen on, something that had just evolved slowly from birthday and Mother's Day breakfasts. There was nothing in the refrigerator except a swollen milk jug and a chunk of cream cheese with a black skin like an eel's. James turned off the coffee maker. There was about an inch of coffee left and a black, flaky ring had formed at the bottom of the pot.

Her bed was empty, but he could see his mother's outline like some ancient shroud in the yellow-brown ringed stain on the white sheets. She was so much smaller than in his memory. The floor was covered in dirty laundry. That was maybe the hardest thing to believe, because she was always yelling at him about that when he was a teenager, how it would make the carpet smell like dirty clothes forever. Growing up, every Sunday had been cleaning day. They would pull the stove and refrigerator out to mop behind them, vacuum under the beds. He always thought of his mother when he felt like his discipline was flagging, when he needed to motivate himself to do better, stay on task.

Somehow, he knew that it had started as soon as he'd moved away. Freshman year at Kent he'd had to live in the dorms, it was a rule. Even if it was just a county away, he'd liked the freedom and so he stayed away, drifted further and further out. Then it was New York. He'd come home the first Christmas, but after that he'd always been too busy. People were so much work, always changing, never staying where he left them.

Taking a step backwards into the hall, he realized that the building superintendent was still there, standing with one foot in the door and the other outside. James felt like everything in the apartment was touching him. He wanted to gouge the other man's eyes out.

For every slow, deliberate step forward James took, the super took an identical one backwards. They looked like dancers, until the super reached the railing and slid along it to the stairs, destroying the odd symmetry that had made James want to laugh. When James reached the railing he leaned over the side and took three heavy breaths.

"She must be at work," the super finally said.

"Yeah," James said, pushing away from the railing and walking past the other man. "I'll come back."

James got in his car and opened his cell phone. He tried calling his Mom's cell. He'd made her buy it while he was still at Kent. They had lost track of each other the morning of 9/11. His mother was off work that day and spent the entire morning feeding ducks in the park.

The building superintendent was still standing at the top of the stairs, watching him. He wondered if it was a shock to the other man too. James stopped himself, turned on the car and pulled into the street.

He had no idea where to look for her. He supposed he could just wait for her, but he didn't like the thought of sitting there with that man watching him, so he drove aimlessly, hoping to see her car parked somewhere or for something, anything, to happen. It was starting to sink in how different Akron was from what he'd gotten used to, how empty and open it was, how you were always going up or down a hill.

The phone buzzed in James' pocket and he pulled it out. An animation of a heart swelled and burst red sparkles onto his screen over and over again until the phone finally went to voicemail.

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James grew up in Elizabeth Park, a public housing project under the Y-Bridge. Technically it was the "All American Bridge," but nobody called it that. Growing up it had just been "the bridge." It was the bridge people used to commit suicide. The OH-8 bridge was tall enough too, but there was no sidewalk. James had never seen a jumper himself, but neighborhood kids had talked about it all the time. It was like lying about your virginity, everyone pretended they'd seen at least one body, or even seen guys jumping, even though it usually happened in the middle of the night and was cleaned up before they were even out of bed. All they ever saw was the police tape.

He turned on to Glenwood and slowed down as he passed under the bridge, rusted rebar showing through the tall, cracked pillars on either side. The bones of giants. That's how he'd thought of them as a child. "Our nation's failing infrastructure" was the phrase now. It was one of those things he could get worked up about in the bar or the coffee shop. The apartments were a block up, surrounded by new chain-link fence. His mom had told him that they were knocking down the old apartments to make room for new development. "It's about time" was all he had said.

James pulled the car over just ahead of a no parking sign. A scarecrow-thin woman stood on the sidewalk across the street, bent double with her arms dangling in

front of her, perfectly still like dancer holding a pose. She was wearing black tights and jean shorts with a shapeless, striped long-sleeved shirt. Bleach-blond hair like straw hung down in front of her face. In a little bit, she snapped upright and walked past, her upper half swaying as her legs marched mechanically back toward the bridge. James turned off the car and got out, watching the woman.

“Well, that’s new,” James said. It was something his mother said.

The housing projects that James grew up in were made up of rows of two-story brick apartment buildings fronted by crumbling brick porches, or sometimes poured concrete stoops where the original porches had completely fallen apart. Each building had at least four apartments. Some buildings had little flower beds, overtaken now with weeds and the dry, spindly sticks that must have been flowers. The rows faced away from each other so that they shared a backyard. These were dirt lots with iron clothesline hangers spaced out every six or seven feet in a line. Kids used to play on them, hanging on the lines and pretending they were swinging in the jungle or riding down a zip-line. There was a playground at one end of the complex, but the swings had always been broken and everything smelled like pee.

His old apartment was one row back from the street. For a while James stood staring through the fence at the dark brick buildings. It was the last chance he was going to have to see the place where he grew up.

Jumping a fence was more difficult that James remembered. Afraid of cutting his hands, he had a hard time getting a grip on the top of the fence. Finally, he clamored over and caught his shirt as he dropped down on the other side. He was suspended in mid-air for a fraction of a second and then dropped to the ground, his landing coinciding with a

long ripping sound. His white dress shirt, part of the standard uniform he'd worn for the last three years, was torn along the seam halfway to the armpit. He was too nervous to even swear about it, but just pulled the shirt off and tied it around his waist, so that he was walking around in a sleeveless undershirt and khakis.

The screen door was gray with a few patches of white paint and still had the crescent shaped dent in it from when he kicked it closed on their last day there. White tapes with red lettering crisscrossed the door: "Danger Asbestos" and on either side a little skull and crossbones. That figured.

The front windows had been taken out and the hole was boarded up. He was probably already guilty of trespassing just by jumping the fence, what he was about to do would add breaking and entering, maybe criminal damaging. He kicked a hole in the plywood and tore the rest away in splintering chunks. It made a lot of noise, but it felt good. If a cop came, he would just say he was looking for his mother. That would make perfect sense. James tried to slow down and make himself think about the consequences, but he just kept coming back to "fuck it."

The apartment was gutted down to bare plaster and floorboards. He climbed through the window and walked around. The housing authority had pulled up the linoleum. The particleboard felt mushy under his feet. They'd taken the sink from the kitchen and all of the copper pipe, too. The cabinet doors were gone.

Their first night in the old apartment, someone threw a brick through their window. The welcoming committee. James was in bed. He remembered how cool the sheets were, and how strange it felt when he closed his eyes, like he was in two places at once, still at the shelter and here in the new place. There was breaking glass and then,

outside, laughter. James got downstairs just ahead of his mother. She was right behind, trying to get hold of him. She must have been afraid someone was breaking in. James had never thought about what she must have been feeling that night. There had been a chunk of brick sitting in the middle of the bare room. In the dark parking lot, feet crunched and skidded over the broken asphalt. Somewhere out in the dark, a shrill laugh.

The boy wants to chase after them, to hurt them back. He imagines tearing at them with his nails, biting their faces like a dog. The boy spits with rage as his mother holds him tight to her. He is almost too strong for her and her nails dig into the back of his neck. There will be blood under her nails. When the boy is calm enough to speak he says, "I hate them. I hate it here. I hate . . ." James gave a little laugh at the thought of it now. The sound bounced off the bare plaster and back at him, flat and hard. It was in that same living room he'd first said he wanted to be a lawyer. He'd been watching TV with his mother, James turned to the spot where the couch used to be, and she had asked him what he wanted to do when he grew up. Everybody was always asking that question and it usually seemed incomprehensible to him. But he said he wanted to be a lawyer, because then they would have lots of money. A week later he'd wanted to be a race car driver, then a video game designer, a rock star, and so on.

He climbed the stairs to his room, but he couldn't go in. They'd taken out all the flooring so that his room was just bare joists, stained and splintering. There was no light in the room except the dim halo that seeped in at the edges of the boarded-up window. The other rooms were the same. They'd taken the mirror out of the bathroom.

When James was in high school, his mother had developed a cyst on her back. It was a little smaller than an egg and at first she had been afraid it might be something

more serious. She had surgery to remove it and then they packed the wound with antiseptic gauze. The doctors had said to leave the gauze in for forty-eight hours and then pull it out. James had to help. He pulled the bloody gauze out gently, one hand on his mother's hard, freckled shoulder. Her skin had felt thin. After that he had to help her clean the wound every day, squeezing out the pus and applying a new bandage. He hadn't minded it.

James climbed back out the window and looked around to make sure no one had seen him.

He stopped at drive-in for dinner, partly because he hadn't eaten in twelve hours, but mostly for the delay. He needed a chance to slow down, think. But the only thing he could think was that everything was fucked up. James ate half his burger, then threw it back in the greasy brown bag and left. He would go back to her apartment and wait. It was either that or get back on a plane, which he tried not to think about, because it sounded so much easier.

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This time she was home. He stood in the doorway looking down at her. He'd expected her to look different, something that would explain the rest, but she wasn't any different, not even any new gray hairs that he could tell. Same petite, but strong shouldered woman she'd always been. They hugged after a hesitation and James saw over her shoulder that the room was full of open black garbage bags and the vacuum cleaner was out. She had the windows open.

“This is such a surprise,” his mother said as she pulled away from. “Here, sit.” His mother sat on the dusty couch and kept a hand on James’ arm as if to pull him down next to her, but he stayed standing.

“Mom—”

“Are you hungry, we could order a pizza,” she said before he could speak, still pulling on his arm.

“No, Mom. I’ve been trying to call.”

“I know. I meant to call, it’s just, I don’t know, I lost track of time.”

“What’s going on, Mom?”

“Nothing. I’m fine, honey.”

“This doesn’t look fine.”

“I know it’s messy. Things just get away from me sometimes, you know. It’s just me here anyway,” she said, looking at the blank television screen.

“But Mom, this isn’t how people live.”

“What do you want me to say?” she said, her voice hardening. It was a voice he’d never heard before. She let go of his hand. “What you want from me?”

He knelt over her, pressing his forehead to hers, hands resting on her shoulders. “I just want you to be okay. Normal.”

“I’m trying,” she said. Her voice was sharp.

“I know you are,” he said, his hands gently curling around her neck, small and cool. Her heart throbbed in his finger tips. “I know.”

James stepped away from his mother and stooped to pick up a garbage bag. He swept a stack of yellowing newspaper into the bag. Sitting down with his back against his

mother's legs, he set about separating out the bills and credit card advertisements from the stuff that could just go out on the curb. His mother's hand rested on his shoulder, light like a bird.

## NIGHT PEOPLE

Under the white halogen glare of the gas station's lights the woman's skin reminded Noah of cheese, colorless, full of faint blue veins. The ugliness of it excited him.

Noah needed the woman to keep an eye on him while he ingested an untested research chemical. This was Noah's hobby, human test subject for (hopefully) psychoactive substances. During the day he implemented technical solutions for today's rapidly changing information economy, which mostly amounted to getting people's e-mail to work. A few nights out of the month, though, he was a psychonaut, an explorer of inner space, who chronicled his experiences for a blog he hosted on his own computer on an anonymous network that could only be accessed with special routing software. He had a few devoted readers, and vendors sent him new chemicals that nobody had good information on.

On his blog, he called himself the slug, always lowercase, a name inspired by a poster he'd help put together in elementary school. "Drugs are for slugs," the poster had read, with a pile of multi-colored slugs squirming in agony under a massive salt shaker held by a strangely wizened hand. Their melting bodies had spread towards the viewer in a psychedelic swirl of magic marker. Even as a child, a certain subversive reading had offered itself. Only the teacher, beaming proudly, seemed to miss the joke.

"How much?" he asked, trying to sound amused, like he just wanted to know for the hell of it. This was always the hardest part. If he got this wrong, the whole night would feel off. He had to get himself into the right headspace to play the slug.

"Depends on what you want?"

“Well, what comes standard?”

She stared at him and for a minute and Noah thought she might walk. “Straight sex is a hundred a pop. Anything weird is extra. Double for bareback.”

Noah thought about asking her what she considered “weird” but decided not to push it too hard this time. She told him her name. Tonight she was Natasha. He liked that. He paid half up front, crisp bills. Out of the bad light she was pretty, he decided.

She would have much rather he just came to her apartment like her other clients, but this one was different. He always had to have this game, picking her up in strange places, late at night. When he’d first explained it to her she’d almost told him to fuck off, first because she had misunderstood what he meant when he said he needed a sitter, then again when she found out what he wanted was for him to keep an eye on him while he did drugs. This was not as original a scheme as he thought, she informed him during their first meeting. She’d had a man OD on heroin in her bathroom when she first started working and she tried to avoid druggie clients. The novelty of having a human guinea pig for a client appealed to her, though. But she hated the pick-ups, going out in public in the costume, especially hated the shoes. It wasn’t even just that it was dangerous. When she worked at home it felt okay, just a private thing between two people who met on MySpace.

A misty rain had started and Noah flipped on the windshield wipers as he pulled out of the parking lot. The wipers only had one setting and he kept having to turn them on and off. It was more annoying somehow with her there to see it. She stayed in a motel down the street. He could see the red NO VACANCY sign from a long way off, a spot rubbed clean on a dusty picture.

As he waited for her to get out of the car, he noticed her shoes for the first time, plastic platforms crusted with pink glass jewels. The swollen flesh of one foot spilled over the edge of the shoe and Noah kept glancing at it as she unlocked the door. First thing, she sat down on the bed and pried the shoe off, rubbing her foot a little before taking off the other shoe. The angry red crease in her foot made his own foot curl up in his shoe.

The room was a magazine cover, only the woman in the middle of it didn't smile up at him invitingly, but rather bent over a calloused, swollen foot. A furry white rug that made Noah think of shaggy sheep on green hills took up most of the floor and the big bed was heaped with pillows. The layout was like every other motel room, though, and in the long mirror over the sink he saw himself, matchstick thin. He tried to look less startled.

"You smoke?" Noah asked as he produced a dented pack of Luckies. Nobody else knew he smoked, and really he wasn't sure if he could even be called a smoker, since he only went through three or four of them a day.

"No," she said, with a conscious effort. "Just crack a window." She set an ashtray in front of him. She'd bought the ashtray with him in mind, a brass turtle she'd found in an antique store. Noah slid the window open and immediately the air conditioner rattled on. Lighting a slightly bent cigarette, he looked around. He wanted to see it again, like it was really the first time. There was no television in the room. The particleboard wall unit was full of books instead. The drapes were made of a gauzy blue material that Noah didn't think came with the room.

"You wanna take a shower first?" she asked.

"Do I need one?" Noah meant it as a joke.

“Some guys like to shower first,” she said. Noah thought she had it backwards but didn’t say so.

“I’m cool,” he said. They went through this every time. Not the exact same thing, but he always turned something into a negotiation.

“Look,” she hesitated, looking at her hands, “it’s just a thing, for me, okay. You know,” she trailed off.

Noah looked at her. She sat with her legs and arms crossed, her head down, like one of those plants that snap shut if you touch them. He did not read people well, but he knew he was close to a line.

“You know, I’ve had a pretty long day. I could use a hot shower.”

The bathroom light came on slowly. He took off his tie and hung it across the door knob, but it slithered off and landed in a looping pile on the linoleum. The mottled beige floor shone under the light and Noah could see ghostly reflections of the toilet and the wastebasket stretching out at his feet.

He unbuttoned his shirt and folded it like new, a habit he’d picked up working retail during college. He didn’t care if his shirts were wrinkled or not. It was something about the folding, the orderliness of it, that mattered. He set the shirt down on the toilet and got out of his shoes without untying them. Most of his shoes were scuffed to hell from this habit, but he couldn’t seem to make himself not do it.

Standing shirtless in the narrow bathroom, he took a plastic baggie out of his back pocket, labeled in blue pen “2C-E-7, 20mg.” The guy he bought it from had called it a promising new member of the 2C family. He took a white plastic tube out of his other pocket, measured out what he judged to be 5mg of crystalline white powder across the

back of his hand, and proceeded to snort a line of completely untested research chemical up his nose. As with most members of the 2C family, even the unpromising ones, this hurt like hell.

Besides experimenting on himself and recording the results, Noah was a part-time reseller of various recreational chemicals as well. He stuck strictly to the cutting edge stuff. His rule was that if high school kids have gotten wind of it, it's over. This was a good way to stay ahead of law enforcement, too, but he took other security measures. Everything had to be delivered to a PO Box, a little mom-and-pop place on the bad side of town, which he'd opened with a fake ID. He took cash payments, but he preferred to take payment in electronic currencies, anonymous bank accounts set up in foreign countries and backed by gold.

All this business was managed through anonymous, encrypted e-mail accounts. For added security, he kept a hidden, encrypted partition on his hard drive, a computer within his computer, that he used for all his illegal business. He needed a special program that he kept on a flash drive to even see the virtual drive, and a five word pass phrase to open it. Spend ally dirty lamb nine. It was randomly generated by using dice and a list of words compiled by cryptography geeks. He'd had to repeat it to himself for weeks before he could remember it, but the repetition had always been comforting. In crowded elevators, lines at the grocery store, he found himself thinking the words over and over again—spend ally dirty lamb nine—until he almost said them out loud.

Noah had no idea what to expect from 2C-E-7. Most phentylamines were mainly hallucinogenic, but some were also stimulants, opioids, empathogens. It might be

completely inert. Some were even extremely toxic, or active at doses less than a milligram.

Noah left the bath curtain part way open so he could see the door. The shower was hot but the water pressure came and went. He tried not to get his hair wet because he didn't want to use the Natasha's shampoo. The steam felt good, especially for his nose, which continued to throb. When he was done, he stood dripping in the tub for a while, not wanting to use her towels, either. He was starting to feel the drug. A faint, purple tint was creeping into his vision, like someone had thrown a veil over his eyes. Nearly immediate onset of mild visual abnormalities, he noted mentally.

Natasha, meanwhile, was pretending to read and listening to Noah in the bathroom. She didn't know what to think of him, his games. The door shook, and for a moment there was a banging sound, like somebody stomping or something. She found herself wanting to check on him, or use the excuse of checking on him to see what the hell he was doing. She couldn't decide if she liked Noah or not, but he was the only one who interested her, the only one she thought of at all when he was gone. She did like the thought of being a Natasha, though.

They had met not quite a year ago and fucked eight times. He was GB in her account spreadsheet, short for Game Boy, because he liked to make it a game. Also, he gave her the heebie-jeebies sometimes, at first. She had nicknames for all her clients, TB (The Breather), TBG (The Big Guy), MC (Mr. Clean), and so forth. Noah had found her through her MySpace profile, which she had set up under a fake name. The profile was full of pictures of her from the neck down, some in clingy dresses, some in lingerie. There was one she liked where she was wrapped in yellow caution tape.

As Noah appeared wreathed in steam, she looked up and set the book aside. Only her mouth smiled. He took the condom she gave him and let her pull down his underwear. Her humid breath traced a path up his stomach. Her lips caught water droplets rolling down his chest, leaving sticky pink smears on his pale, hairless skin. She liked this part, even if the rest was a chore. He rolled the condom on. The woman pulled him down onto the bed.

He kept his eyes on a framed print hanging over the bed. It was a black and white photo of a group of girls sitting on a long bench between two men. One of the women had a girl crying in her lap as a third woman whispered into her ear. She looked shocked at whatever she was hearing. Others were looking off at something out of the frame. On the far end, only half in the frame, a man was trying to read the newspaper.

“Oh,” she breathed, about as convincingly as one might expect.

“Don’t do that, please. Please.” He looked down as he spoke and saw her looking at him. It would be alright if she would just stop looking at him. He tried to go back to the picture, but it was no good. He could feel her eyes.

“Why’d you stop?” she asked. He hadn’t realized he had.

“Hey, how would you feel about wearing this?” He tugged at a cream pillowcase.

She didn’t say anything. He knew the rule, no negotiations once they’re out of the gate. He felt bad for having said it, but he could see it, the featureless outline of a face straining against cotton. He kept that picture in his mind.

Her hand pulled him closer. He tried to pull away but his feet just slipped against the sheets and another arm wound around his neck, crushing him in warm, sour skin. And then it was over. She let go and he got off the bed.

Noah had no idea what to do with the condom that hung from him like a half-sloughed snake skin. There was a thing he was trying to remember, an object or a procedure. Partial aphasia, he thought to himself and then tapped out a note on his phone. When he looked up, he realized that the woman was staring at him, her neatly shaped eyebrows raised. Noah pointed to the dangling spunk and grinned apologetically.

“Oh, yeah, just a sec.” She twisted around and dangled over the edge of the bed. Noah wanted to run his finger along the deep seam in her back. She came back around with a wastepaper basket full of crumpled tissues and withered latex and he slid the condom off into it.

Noah went into the bathroom to get dressed and had to come back out for his underwear. She was reading again, propped up in bed with the covers pulled all the way up.

Buttoning up his shirt, tucking it in, then untucking it, squeezing back into his shoes without untying them, all the time he was thinking how he didn't want it to end. He reasoned that he needed someone to keep an eye on him for a little longer, in case the aphasia got worse.

“Hey, you hungry? I could go for some breakfast,” he called from the bathroom. There was no answer. He wondered if she'd fallen asleep. Coming around the corner, he saw that she'd put the book down and was staring at the wall, her mouth scrunched like she was getting ready to spit.

“Look,” she started with a sigh, “this is just business, okay. And, I've had a really long night. If you need to stick around I can set up the cot for you.” She'd had guys get sentimental on her before, want to save her. It was not what she was looking for.

“I know, I know. I get it. I just thought I’d ask, you know.” Laying two crisp bills on top of her book, he added, “Eating out alone is just weird. Like you’re intruding or something.”

Noah walked around the bed and turned for the door without looking back at her. The woman made a gravelly noise, halfway between contemplative and irritated, “Fine. But this is just . . . it’s”

“Two people having breakfast.”

“Exactly.”

She shooed him out so that she could get dressed and he wondered if she was just trying to get rid of him. It seemed strange to him that she’d be shy about putting her clothes on in front of him, but he supposed there was something more pathetic about being half dressed. He waited to hear the door lock behind him, but it didn’t.

It startled him to see a woman posed like a mannequin in the window of the next room over, a fraying pink robe draped over the angles of her shoulders and hips. Her dark eyes looked right through him. She seemed to him like a woman waiting for a ship lost at sea. Noah leaned against building and waited. He could hear the hum of traffic. Someone was beating on a door on the other side of the building. Robins chirped.

Natasha came out with a big white purse over her shoulder. She’d changed into a pair of faded jeans and a black tank top. Her shoes, ordinary heels, sounded like tiny horse’s hooves behind him as they crossed the parking lot.

Noah got in first and opened the door for her from the inside. They agreed on a place up the street, on the other side of the highway. As Noah drove, the pass phrase he used on all his encryption software drifted through his mind: spend ally dirty lamb nine.

He looked over at Natasha, suddenly not sure if he had said the words out loud or only thought them. She was staring out the window.

They drove past an old church, the stones blackened from the soot of factories that closed before Noah was born. Two angels with sooty faces held up the tower. Noah gave short, halting answers to her questions and didn't know what to ask in return. They passed the graveyard where he'd played hide-and-go-seek with his mother.

"I used to play there," he said. "In the back there was a blackberry bush, and my mom and me would lay in the grass and eat blackberries. The berries were huge and sweet. It was unreal how good they were."

"My dad tried to plant blueberry bushes once. They grew alright, but we never got any berries. The birds always got to them first."

It was shift change at the Country Diner. The very last of the night crowd was still holding on as the first of the breakfast crowd filtered in. The host, a tall guy with knobby elbows, finished seating a group that looked to be dressed for church at the big round table nearest the door and then asked them if they wanted smoking or non. Noah looked to his companion, but she only shrugged. He led them to a booth in the corner of the smoking section, which was unofficially reserved for the night people until the sun came up.

The place was lined on all sides with booths and plate glass windows framed with decorative curtains covered in a repeating pattern of chickens, eggs and bacon. At a small table near the kitchen a bearded guy in a flannel shirt sat with a cup of coffee and a paper. In another booth there was a group of kids, two long haired boys dressed in all black smoking and drinking coffee and a skinny kid with short cropped hair who looked like

they might have kidnapped him. He was gesturing with spindly-fingered hands like dancing spiders while a girl with pink hair slept soundly beside him. An old man in a red sweater stood by the old folk's table, his hands behind his back. He had a jowly face and made Noah think of the Queen's Guard.

"So, you want to tell me what was up with you earlier?" Natasha asked after the waitress had left with their drink order.

"What do you mean?" He was wondering if she'd heard him snorting the 2C-E-7. He felt like everyone in the room knew there was something wrong with him. He could feel their disapproval. The police were being summoned as they spoke. Heightened anxiety? Paranoid ideation? Noah made more notes on his phone.

"I mean, you were being weird earlier. You know, during."

"I just don't get into the acting, all the fake stuff. I don't see the need."

"You don't, do you? Hard-nosed man of the world. No illusions, huh?"

"It's not like that. I just don't need my ego stroked." He knew this was a lie and realized perhaps for the first time that her indifference was part of the fantasy as much as her being a stranger.

"Uh-huh." She said, looking out the window. She couldn't explain to him why the faking mattered to her. It had nothing to do with pleasing him.

A man outside was screaming into traffic. They watched him march up and down the sidewalk, beating his chest, his mouth a wide, black O. He had on a winter coat that was stained with dirt and sweat so that they couldn't tell what the original color was.

"Can I ask you a question?" Noah said.

"You wanna know how many abortions I've had?"

“What? No. I was just curious why you always want me to take a shower first.”

“I already told you, it’s a thing.”

“I know. Forget I brought it up. We all have stuff,” Noah said, but he wanted to know even more now.

“You really want to know?” she asked, half smiling.

“Only if you want to tell me.”

“I like the way men smell when they come out the shower. And how they taste. It’s a little bit like good leather. It’s not even really sexual.” There was a silence Noah knew he was supposed to fill, but he didn’t know with what. All he could do was lean closer, listen to her breathe. She added, more matter of fact, “It also helps cut down on yeast infections. And some guys just get off on being nasty and making it as unpleasant as possible. If a guy gives me shit about washing up, it’s kind of a red flag.”

He smoked and watched her reflection in the glass as she drank her orange juice. When their food came, he watched her eat, only tearing small bits off of his bagel and popping them in his mouth. The 2C-E-7 was making him mildly nauseas, something he had come to expect of hallucinogens generally. Natasha had a serious look, like it required concentration. She went after the eggs first, cutting away the whites with her fork and raising them to her mouth. Next she drizzled the sausages with one of the four kinds of syrup the waitress had brought, they all looked the same to Noah, and ate the links one by one. Noah could see that one of her back teeth was missing. The puckered, pink flesh of the empty socket fascinated him.

Methodically, she broke the egg yolks so that a thick yellow pool spread over half her plate and she dredged thick triangles of pancakes through the mess. Her mouth glistened with fat, tiny clots of yolk at the corners. She looked up and saw him staring.

“What?”

“Nothing,” he said, smiling what he thought was his easygoing smile.

“What the hell is your problem?” She grabbed a hold of her purse and started to slide out of the booth. Sitting there, she felt exposed and humiliated.

“Hey, I’m sorry,” Noah said, looking around and seeing that everyone was staring again, if they’d ever stopped.

“What are you looking at fuckface?” she said to the red sweater guy, who was edging towards them, before turning back to Noah, “And you. Are you getting off on this? Staring at me like I’m some kind of freak?” For emphasis she took a handful of hash browns and jammed them in her mouth, chewing the sticky mass with wet, smacking bites.

“Is everything alright here,” the host said in a tone that indicated it wasn’t really a question.

She was at the door before Noah was even able to get up. He pushed past the host and ran after her. Noah didn’t tell himself to chase her, it was an instinct. Possible risk of impulsive behavior. He chased her across five lanes of traffic, raising a wail of car horns and some whoo-hooing. They plunged into an empty lot, waist-high in grass. Noah could feel the wet soaking through his pants. He was almost within arm’s length and she turned, something small and black in her hands. His first thought was “gun,” but before the word

had even formed in his mind they were both enveloped in a white, burning haze. The pepper spray mostly hit his chest and the resulting cloud sent them both into the grass.

“I’m sorry,” Noah said between coughs.

“It’s my fault,” she said, wiping at both eyes with her fists.

“My name is actually Eugenia. My parents are Greek,” she said after a while, her voice thick. “But I liked Natasha. It sounded exotic.”

“Eugenia,” he said, rubbing his face into his sleeve.

The first orange light of morning cut through the wet, green blades. Shining, cold drops of dew clung to the grass and to them. They both lay wheezing in the tall grass, not quite touching. They tried to laugh, but it only made them cough.

## ECHOES

Staggering up the front steps, Scott Smollett found his front door hanging open, the whining screen door. Crossing the dark living room was like walking in a rowboat and he had to stop for a minute to try to calm the heaving of the room, clutching the arm of his chair and reeling. It would have been much easier just to fall into the threadbare recliner and sleep it off. He'd reached the point where it wasn't fun anymore. Pushing off the chair, the drunk man let the momentum carry him forward. He wanted to see his son.

Finding the bed empty, his first thought was that the boy had gone to bed with his wife. It was a habit he had been trying to break the boy of. Janet was undermining him again, turning their boy into—they'd agreed he was too old for that shit. Stomping back towards the bedroom, the drunk man could feel anger bunching in knots up and down the muscles of his back, could feel its hot glow filling him, and at the same time he felt the hollowness of it. But, when he threw open the sliding doors into the bedroom, no one was there. The thought swum up from the murk that his wife had, finally, like everyone else, left him. He had no idea where she could have gone. Janet hadn't spoken to her parents in fifteen years and didn't have any close friends that he knew of. That he knew of. Could there be someone else? The thought gave him a focus for his anger, someone to blame besides himself, but it didn't seem very likely. It was all too much for him right now. He just wanted to sleep.

Looking at the king-size waterbed, his stomach churned. Scott deferred a decision on where to sleep while he emptied his bladder for what he hoped was the last time that night. As he stepped out of the bathroom, he finally noticed the dirty old man sitting at his kitchen table, drinking his beer.

“Hey!” the drunk man shouted down the hall, his voice a tinny echo.

The drunk man swatted at the intruder’s beer, but somehow missed. Grasping handfuls of threadbare cloth, he tried to lift the old man out of the chair, but it he didn’t budge. The old man didn’t even look at him. The walls of Scott’s kitchen were covered with the nervous, black wings of fireflies. He could almost feel their dry scraping against his skin like panic.

“What are you doing here? Get out!” Scott, feeling sobered, shouted at the man sitting at his kitchen table, who only made a small noise that might have been a expression of contempt or only a belch.

This man must be responsible for everything, Scott thought. He knew how to deal with him. The gun was in a lockbox at the top of the closet. It took him three tries to get the combination right. He could never remember if it was his son’s birthday or his anniversary. Pulling out drawers and raising a storm of underwear, he finally found the box of bullets. Janet must have moved it. She was always moving things. She hated the gun. Hated him for having it. He loaded the nickel-plated thirty-eight with trembling hands. It seemed to take a long time, and he almost laughed at how different this moment was from how he’d always imagined it.

“Where are they! What did you do with my family!” the man screamed, suddenly near tears, the revolver, aglow in moonlight, dancing inches from the old man’s craggy face. “Say something, you son of a bitch!” He was barely able to hear himself over the rush of blood in his ears.

He squeezed the trigger, but nothing came, not even a click. He pulled back the hammer and tried again, spun the cylinder and squeezed again and again. Only when he

stopped did he realize he'd been screaming, and now in the heavy stillness he felt small. Finally, he dropped the gun on the table and got a beer from the refrigerator. Scott Smollett sat down and regarded the hooded man over his beer.

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Janet Smollett watched through the kitchen window with a tentative sense of relief as her husband peeled out of the gravel driveway. Repetition had drained his exits of their dramatic force. It all felt so stupid and staged, like a trashy talk show she tuned into once or twice a week. This wasn't really her life. Now it was time to cut to commercial and set the stage for the next scene.

There was something sad about the tinkling of glass and china falling into the empty trashcan. Going over their checkbook in her head, she concluded that they didn't have money for bail if he got picked up for DWI. She pushed the thought aside. She was done worrying over him. She wanted to enjoy her few hours of peace.

Janet started by pouring herself a tumbler of wine from a box of merlot she kept hidden in the crisper. Setting the glass on the computer desk, Janet realized that her husband had left the front door open, the aluminum screen swaying in the night breeze. Something in the carelessness of this gesture, the way it left their home open and vulnerable, infuriated her.

"Worthless son-of-a-bitch," she said through clenched teeth, feeling like she didn't really mean it.

Janet closed the door, locked it and sat down at the computer. Taking larger and larger sips of wine, she waited for the operating system to load, and with it her other life. With ten-year-old photographs, a fourteen dollar scanner she got on eBay and a few glasses of box-wine she could be, for a few hours at least, Janet Novak, the Janet who had never gotten pregnant, never left college to raise a nervous, unforgiving child. She told herself that none of it meant anything. It was just a way to kill time.

Halfway into her glass, she was closing superfluous programs when a bug lit on the screen, smooth and black with a red head. It walked aimlessly over the screen and then, antennae working. She waved the thing away, but it returned again and again, drawn to the sole source of light in the darkened house. Exasperated, Janet ran and opened the door, thinking to let it out, only to discover the old man waiting to be let in. To Janet he looked like any other homeless guy, black hooded sweatshirt coming apart at the edges, layers of unraveling denim hanging about duct taped boots. The inside of his hood crawled with small, black and red bugs.

She wanted to slam the door on him, but her feet carried her backwards. She backed into a wall and the shock was enough to freeze her in place as the extravagantly creased face came towards her. She could feel his hands, like stone beneath their worn-out gloves, gripping her head, but she wasn't afraid. His hand rose solemnly before her like the hand of a priest preparing to give benediction and darted out of sight. The hand reappeared with a few lank strands of brown hair pinched between two bare fingertips. The old man lowered the hairs into a pocket and let Janet's head fall forward.

She was in her son's room. Running her hands though the cold sheets as if she might still find him in there somewhere, Janet called her son's name—James, James,

Jimmy—her voice sounding to her like an old recording. The phone felt cold when she picked it up. The voice on the other end sounded like a fly in her ear. Or was that her voice she heard?

“Where is he? Where’s my son? Answer me!” The old man only cast a blank glance at her from her husband’s recliner. She ran at him, but as her hands closed around his neck it was as if there was nothing really there. It was like squeezing a half filled balloon. She let her hands fall to her sides.

“Please give me back my son.”

The old man only made a sour face. Janet went to the open door. She could see her breath.

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The buzzing streetlight flickered above him, its dirty glow filtered by the orbit of moths. The boy looked back at the house just as the kitchen light winked out and receded into the night, indistinguishable from the other faceless structures sprawling along the winding street. The night made everything different, like a dream of being lost in a place you know should be familiar. The color-drained houses and broken sidewalks stretching into darkness belonged to some other neighborhood and some other child. He clutched the ragged plush dog, Argos, to his chest and walked away.

He had no idea where he was going, just away. He imagined someplace quiet and small where he would be left alone. He thought of warm nights on the swing on his aunt’s

small, concrete porch and long afternoons playing War with Grandma. His parents would miss him when he was gone, and maybe then they wouldn't fight anymore.

The night air already raising gooseflesh on his arms, the boy pushed on to the end of the street. Standing on the corner, he was faced with an obstacle. He had never crossed the street without somebody holding his hand. Presented now with the expanse of blacktop, he felt an invisible wall in his way. The harder he pushed, the harder his heart pounded. Flushed with frustration, the boy wanted didn't know what to do. A sulfur-colored moth drifted past him, fixing his eye as it floated across the street and was swallowed up by the night. He grit his teeth, squinted hard, and sprinted across the street, his whole body unclenching with the release of flight. Dully, he felt his foot catch the curb and he stumbled forward, but, he didn't stop running until he reached the next corner.

This time he turned left, following a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire. On the other side of the rusted chain lay the naked skeletons of cars and stacks of old tires. The boy wondered if the fence was electrified. His dad had told him all about electric fences. With one outstretched pink finger he poked the fence, jumping back reflexively despite the lack of current. The whole fence wobbled and rattled as the boy took hold and shook it. He liked the sound. Woken by the racket, a mange-ridden black Chow crept from underneath a pickup, its blue-black tongue long and curled as it yawned. The mass of muscle and scar trotted up to the child and pushed his head against the fence. With two fingers, the boy scratched the exposed fur through the warped wire diamond and the dog's hairless, knobby tail whipped back and forth in time. Carefully running his fingers through the dog's matted fur, the boy felt lighter.

Standing in the frosted grass, crystalline blossoms of pain began to creep into the boy's feet. As he withdrew his fingers, the black dog opened its mouth and licked the back of his hand. The dark tongue felt like a splash of boiling water and though the pain had faded before he even had a chance to flinch, the long, red mark remained, seeming in the boy's imagination to sink down to the bone. The watchdog withdrew to his oily cave, warm hazel eyes following the boy as he walked away.

The boy didn't feel afraid anymore. The shaking house, the screams, the breaking glass, all like something scary he'd seen on TV now. The boy didn't notice where streets began or ended. He wasn't cold anymore. Everything beyond the tunnel of amber streetlight was a flat, gray smear, but at the end James could see an island of humming white light, growing larger with each step. The light felt like home.

There was no disappointment when he stepped into the ring of light and the orange gas-pumps appeared, bathed from above by row upon row of impossibly bright lights. A sign loomed over him, a faded cartoon moon smiled broadly, its eyes squeezed into slits. The boy stretched out a hand to touch the chubby face that remained just out of reach. The store was still lit up inside, but he didn't see anybody. He would have liked some candy, but he didn't have any money anyway. The boy moved on, making his way down an alley and to a patch of woods whose dense and tangled trees looked like a crowd of hands raised to the sky.

Curled up in the damp leaves, the boy felt himself sinking as if into his own bed. He pulled the leaves around him, drowsily burrowing further into the damp heap until only his face remained. The boy closed his eyes, cheek to cheek with his loyal Argos.

There is an old man. He eclipses the swollen moon as he stands over the boy, his face hidden in the shade of a fraying hood. Flakes of his clothes seem to rise into the well of moonlight. He is covered in covered in dark, flitting bugs. Fireflies stir, smoldering like sparks over a fire. The old man holds out a gloved hand, the first two fingers poking through the gray wool and snatches up a few thin strands of the boy's brown hair.

The boy and the old man gone, Argos remains, a black plastic nose peeking from beneath the slick, dark leaves.