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The University of Southern Mississippi

WE'LL HANG OURSELVES TOMORROW

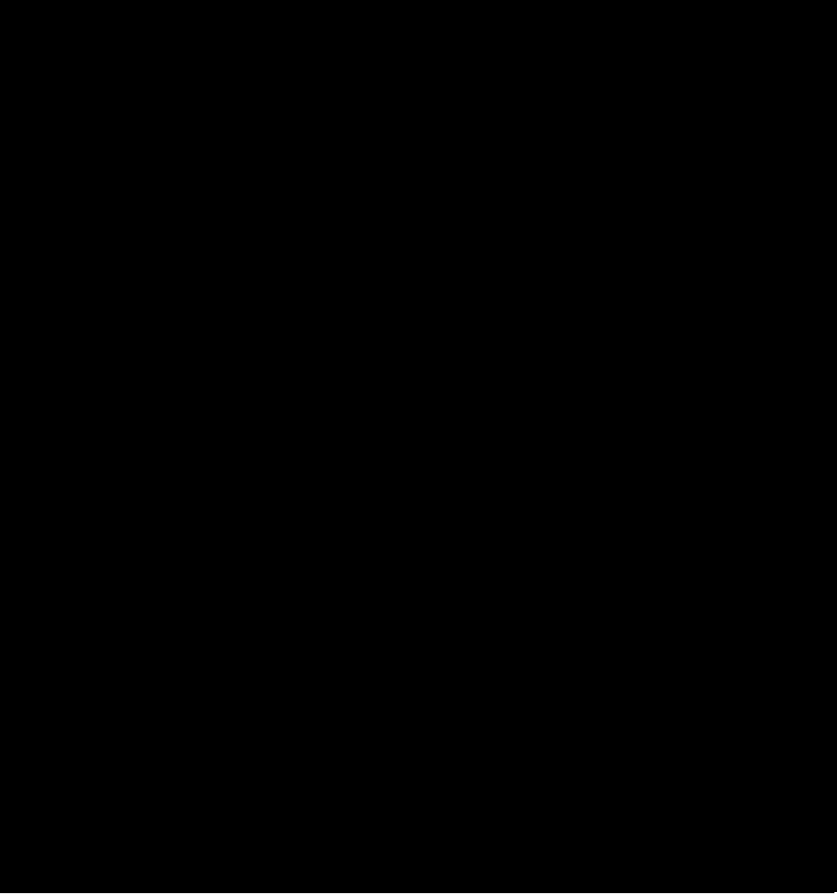
by

Samuel Brendan Ruddick

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Studies Office
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Approved:



May 2008

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2008

The University of Southern Mississippi

WE'LL HANG OURSELVES TOMORROW

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Abstract of a Dissertation
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ABSTRACT

WE'LL HANG OURSELVES TOMORROW

by Samuel Brendan Ruddick

May 2008

This is a collection of short stories. They are all first person narratives. Most of them are told by men in their late twenties to mid-thirties. A couple of them are told by boys on the verge of adolescence. I can not tell you what they are about. I can tell you that they are very sad. I can also tell you that they are full of hope and wonder. Hence the title, a line taken from *Godot*. The reference to suicide might sound grim, but I would argue that if the world were without hope, we would hang ourselves today.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank Frederick Barthelme, Steven Barthelme, Andrew Plattner, Angela Ball, Julia Johnson, Jameela Lares, Ken Watson, Melanie Barthelme, Michael Mays, Deja Earley, Rie Fortenberry, Richard E. Ruddick, Mary Frances Ruddick, Marc Baretz, and the Joseph F. McCrindle Foundation.

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INTRODUCTION

WAITING FOR ROTHKO

ESTRAGON: I can't go on like this.
VLADIMIR: That's what you think.
ESTRAGON: If we parted? That might be better for us.
VLADIMIR: We'll hang ourselves tomorrow. (*Pause.*) Unless Godot comes.
ESTRAGON: And if he comes?
VLADIMIR: We'll be saved.

– Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*

Anybody can direct. There are only 11 good writers.

– Mel Brooks

In the spring of 2007 I read a story called “Pigtails” to a crowd of my fellow graduate students at Café Night, the monthly reading sponsored by the Center for Writers here at the University of Southern Mississippi. There was a great deal of laughter throughout the story and, at the end, thunderous applause. I hadn’t expected it. I had no idea my work would be so enthusiastically received. I knew there were some funny parts, but I didn’t know they were *that* funny, and there was some business in the last scene about pedophilia that I half expected to be lynched for. In fact, I sort of *hoped* to offend *someone*. But the audience loved it, and I was overwhelmed.

I didn’t go to the after party, but a few days later one of my colleagues told me that people were talking about the story all night. An exaggeration designed to make me feel good, I’m sure, but an effective one; I can’t tell you how good it made me feel, and not just because of my ego. I won’t deny that there *was* that, that I *love* that shit – the

prestige, the acclaim – but my principal interest is in making art, producing good work, and writing something that will thrill the reader. I’ve always wanted to write something that would matter, and that night, I *entertained* those people. I gave them something to laugh about. I might have even given them something to think about.

I don’t mean to suggest that I changed anyone’s life, left them pondering the great mystery. In fact, I think it’s probably more accurate to say that they didn’t ponder at all. But that’s just the point: they *accepted* it, and that was something of an accomplishment in its own right. They were delighted when I used a pedophilia fantasy to supply my happy ending, and that said something. It said that I’d fulfilled my function as an artist, that I’d inverted reality somehow, offered an alternate way of looking at it. Not to say that pedophilia’s okay, but to blur the lines between true and false, recontextualize something we would normally consider abhorrent in a way that’s lovely. I don’t know how to describe it, exactly – what art is or what it does, what it means or how it works – but that reading was my finest moment.

After the applause, a colleague asked whether or not “Pigtails” had been published, and it was my privilege to say yes, it had, in *Gulf Stream*, the little magazine out of Florida International University, edited principally by their MFA students. It’s funny, actually, because – after being rejected by upwards of 42 other magazines – “Pigtails” was initially rejected by *Gulf Stream*, as well. An assistant editor named Joe Clifford, God love him, dropped me an e-mail saying that he loved the story, that the end was one of the best he’d read since he’d been working at the magazine, but that (unfortunately) there were one or two people on the staff who disagreed, so he couldn’t accept. It wasn’t until a few weeks later that he sent word he’d been promoted to Editor-

in-Chief, and was now in a position to print the story. “Pigtails” was officially in the world.

But here’s the rub; like me, Joe Clifford was a student. And let’s be honest. Aside from students and teachers in MFA and Ph.D. programs, who reads *Gulf Stream*? Not that there’s anything wrong with us. I mean, we’re okay. But we’re an esoteric bunch, at best, and the fact of the matter is that the people who laughed so uproariously at “Pigtails” the night I read it aloud were *hearing* it, not *reading* it, and *reading* is an altogether different matter. Some of the things that are funny aloud don’t present as jokes on the page. A lot of it’s in the dialogue, people swearing at each other, et cetera, and – while some of it’s meant to be funny, and some of it would be if you were reading – much of it was intended to be aggressive and hard-core. Shocking, or something. I was delighted when I got laughs, but I can’t say I was pulling the strings like a puppet master. And the response to this stuff is laughter when hearing it after an hour and a half of listening to dead serious work by your fellow graduate students, most of them mumbling and nervous, looking at the page rather than the audience. The response when *reading* it, and reading next to Miranda July: BFD.

That’s why she’s in *Harper’s*, and I’m in *Gulf Stream*.

This isn’t self-pity, either. I mean, I have a good eye. I’ve read for *The Mississippi Review* prize, and if I’m not mistaken I was among the first to spot the 2007 winner. I was the fiction judge for *Appalachian Heritage*’s 2006 Denny Plattner Awards. I’m teaching an upper level undergraduate course in fiction writing this semester, and – for my own work – I won a Henfield Prize worth ten thousand dollars. I think it’s safe to say that I know what I’m talking about, and I’m telling you, I can look you in the face

and tell you quite frankly, with no small measure of certainty and some degree of pride, I have a well developed and sophisticated eye for quality fiction, and I'm looking at my own work, and I'm saying: BFD.

And I keep getting rejection letters from places like *Harper's*, from *The Atlantic* and *Esquire*, and that's what they say, too. Reduced to their basic formula. I'm getting personalized notes from the editors themselves, which I guess is a good sign – especially given that these magazines sometimes get a thousand submissions a month – but the letters are still rejections, and what they say is basically, “These are well written, but they're not quite right for us,” which means they're short of excellent, or, when they have nothing to say except that the work *is* excellent, they say, “It's not ambitious enough.”

That was really promising the first couple times it happened, because I thought, “They'll take the next one.” But they didn't take the next one, or the one after that, or the one after that, and this has been going on for a couple years now, so while it would still be promising if I were twenty-two or twenty-three and I felt like I was only beginning to realize my potential, I'm thirty-seven, now, and I know that's not old, exactly – I'm still relatively young – but I fear I might be about as good as I'm going to get, and I fear I might be screwed. Because I've put my whole life into this. And what do I have to show for it?

“Not ambitious enough.”

*

Miranda July, on the other hand, there's a writer. Two years my junior, her writing stirs things in the reader – or in me, anyway – that go beyond laughter. She does what, honestly, I never really thought you could do in a short story. She moved me. I

mean, obviously moving someone to laugh is moving them, but she broke my heart, and heartbreak is what we're going for, yes?

We talk about it in Creative Writing Workshops, about breaking the reader's heart, about eliciting an emotional response, but I never actually believed you could do it in ten pages. I thought you could *sort of* do it. I thought you could do it intellectually. You could make me think, "Yeah, I feel just like that." But in order to Break My Heart, you'd need to get me involved in a character over the course of an entire novel, then, on page two hundred and seventy-three, you might be able to make the heart swell or sink in a tangible way, and maybe, if you were really ridiculously good, bring a tear to my eye, like Hemingway did at the end of *A Farewell to Arms*, the first time I read it, when I was fourteen. But to do it in 10 or 15 pages? Please. Impossible. Might as well try to break sound barrier.

They *did* that, though.

Miranda July did, anyway, and without getting an MFA or Ph.D. in Creative Writing. I discovered her book of short stories, *No One Belongs Here More Than You*, on a recent trip to New York. I'd never heard of her before – which tells you, first of all, that I'm woefully out of the loop – but I saw the book sitting on a table at The Strand and I picked it up and read a few pages of the first story and, struck by the strangeness of the narration and amused by a sentence or two, I decided to buy. I'd read about half the thing before I got back to Mississippi. I missed a lot of New York because I was reading it.

There is a story called "Majesty," which she begins by saying that she is not a person who is interested in England's royal family. In the second sentence, she tells us that she has been in chat rooms full of this kind of person, and they have small worlds.

She's only interested in one member of the royal family. The Prince. After we follow our narrator through a series of odd and apparently unrelated adventures, one of which involves the death of a dog named Potato, there's a passage about her sister. Her sister's a bit of a slut, she says. She calls the narrator to talk about her over-the-top sexual exploits. Our heroine, of course, has no interest in these exploits, but she listens. Then, when she's done masturbating, and her sister can hear that she's finished, they get off the phone, and the narrator reflects that the world is broken; she is crazy to hope for anything else.

My heart sank to the bottom of the Mariana Trench, and at the same time it swelled. It was like Miranda July was sitting next to me, patting my hand and whispering in my ear: "Shhh. I know. It's okay." And how did she do it? Through her oddness. Masturbating on the phone with her sister. Admittedly, all this stuff could happen, so – in a way – you could say this is still sort of what I do. It's representational. But the voice is fresh. And there's something weird about the prose. There's very little attention to the physical world, for example. The dialogue seems to take place between disembodied voices. There's no regard for the conventions that I've always held in such high esteem when it comes to dealing with emotions on the page, either. Chekhov says don't sigh over your own work, and Miranda July sighs. God, she sighs. She sighs and gets away with it.

I've tried to, and I can't. I've said to myself, "If another writer can successfully ignore the conventions I've assimilated with respect to the idea of 'sentimentality,' perhaps I can, too. Perhaps, as artists, we *should* be working in opposition to the established ideas about how to evoke emotion in literary work."

But when I do it, it's stupid. Believe me, I read it later, and it was stupid. Maybe because I didn't go far *enough*. Maybe because I misunderstood the trick. How it worked and why it worked. I read somewhere that Malcolm Lowry, One of the Great Authors of the Twentieth Century, said he didn't really understand literature, so maybe there's hope for me, too. But, then again, I've read *Under the Volcano*, and my impression is that Malcolm spoke the truth. He really didn't know what the hell he was doing. He knew how to write about being a drunk, because he *was* a drunk, and inasmuch as that book is a success, it's a success when he's talking about being a drunk: having a drink, not having a drink, needing a drink, seeing bugs on the walls and such. The residual mass of the novel kind of drags, and – while I don't feel so self-assured putting down the other Great Writers of the Twentieth Century (I worry that the problem is mine, that I just don't get it) – I feel pretty comfortable voicing my opinion when it comes to Malcolm Lowry. I'm less reverent, because I used to be a drunk, too. Me and Malcolm, we understand one another, and I think it's reasonably clear that we're both lost when it comes to James Joyce.

Malcolm wanted to write a symbolic masterwork on the level of *Ulysses*, but we remember him primarily because he pegged DTs. *I* could have been One of the Great Writers of the Twentieth Century, too, if Malcolm hadn't covered that particular subject matter before I came into the world. I've seen those bugs on a thousand bathroom walls, and I can describe them in minute detail. Nobody cares, anymore. They read about it in *Under the Volcano*. They saw it on TV.

And in the end, does it really break your heart? I don't think so. Not like Miranda broke mine. Maybe I'm just devoid of sympathy; Malcolm and I have spent too

much time in the same bathrooms. But, like I said, I think I have a pretty good eye, and I think he falls a bit short of the mark, as do I, and one of the possible explanations is that we just don't get it. We look inside to find it, and it just isn't there. We aim for heartbreak, and we get, well, "Cookie Comes to Town."

I mention "Cookie" because it's probably the most quote unquote moving story I have, in the sense that it carries an emotional punch. It made my Dad cry, anyway, but he's my Dad, so go figure. It's a quiet little thing (read: dull) about a guy who's had a heart attack (I did). His ex-wife comes to visit him (an old girlfriend came to visit me), and he hopes she's going to come back for good (again, I did), but he knows she isn't (she wasn't). The autobiographical business is a problem, I concede, though it's not *that* much of a problem, because I don't really write a lot of autobiographical stuff anymore, as a rule. I used to (see Lowry, drinking too much, above, and a host of older stories for evidence of this), but I'm glad I don't have to worry about being limited that way, anymore. I like making things up, because you have more opportunities to tell the truth when you lie. So the autobiographical element is not a problem with my work, in the general, over-arching way that it used to be. I've broken the habit.

Usually when something that happened in real life shows up in one of my stories, it's substantially deflected. In "Cookie," for example, the narrator goes to a cash machine and finds his account overdrawn. That used to happen to me all the time, so I know what it feels like, and I was able to write about it in a way I thought convincing. But it didn't happen when I had dinner with my ex-girlfriend, after my heart-attack, and it probably wouldn't have mattered one way or the other if it had. Much is made of the money issue in "Cookie," and much is made of children, and none of that stuff had

anything to do with what was going on between me and my ex-girlfriend. There is nothing of me, nothing of her, and nothing of us, that remains in that story, because I wasn't writing about us: I was writing about two characters and their failed marriage, and as I wrote, I learned that issues of finance and family were important to them. Upon revision, I made adjustments to highlight that.

As a fiction writer, I spend a lot of time fumbling around in the dark, trying to figure out who my characters are, what they think. The problem with autobiographical fiction, generally speaking, is that it's so busy working in service of the writer that it neglects the *writing*. But everything that was based on fact in "Cookie" was distorted and rearranged to serve *the story*, not my desire to work out my feelings about my heart attack or my ex-girlfriend. In other words, its marriage to real events is not its real problem. It's not married to anything.

The *real* problem is that there's a part in there where I say, "She still had dancer's legs, even though she'd abandoned dance years before, when we were still married." There's some wonderful subtlety here, especially considering what happens later in the text: they go to a ballet (dance!), and there's some indication that the problem with their marriage had only been that its *officialness* had killed its spark. In other words, once their relationship was set in stone, it died. The implication, therefore, is that she'd given up dance *because* they were married. And yet, she retains her dancer's legs without him. Without her, he has a heart attack. I know, it sounds sentimental when it's summarized this way, and it's a little over-simple, but as a piece of writing it was all sort of beautifully done, if I do say so myself. And I do. But, ultimately, who gives a fuck? She

shouldn't have had dancer's legs. She should have had peg legs, with plungers for feet.

Then maybe somebody would have been awake for the second page.

Somebody other than my father, who wept, God bless his soul.

*

Mark Rothko is my favorite painter.

I have six prints, matted and framed behind non-reflective glass – color studies of sublime beauty – because I think Rothko hit it: what we're supposed to do in art, visual or otherwise. His paintings are evocative. They seem to have an almost religious significance, and if they say nothing other than, "I am," that is enough. But they seem to say more. There's an emotional complexity in the simple division of yellow and blue.

Yet when he began his career, Rothko was a figure painter. Granted, the figures looked a little weird, but they were figures nonetheless. Then suddenly something clicked, and boom, let there be light: Floating Rectangles. It probably wasn't like that in real life, but it looks like that from the outside, and – either way – it's really only the color studies that you see hanging in the museums. And I keep hoping I'll come up with something like that, something that matters. Something that someone will care about *today*, of course, but something that will be worth putting in the museum when I'm dead, as well. One minute, I'll be writing the stories I'm writing now, and then *boom*, let there be light, I'll figure it out: I'll start doing something new, and I'll be a Great Writer. An Artiste. A Maker of Floating Rectangles.

Beckett's the one who got me thinking about this. At least, he's the one who got me thinking about it recently. I've been thinking about it on and off for a long time. But I watched a film version of *Waiting for Godot* the other night, and I thought, "See.

There. He was doing something new.” He’d assimilated Modernism, the hopelessness and futility, the absurd meaninglessness of life, all that business, and then said, “Look! Over there! It’s a bear on a unicycle!”

Not literally, of course. There’s no bear in *Godot*. But you get the idea. He caught on to what was being done and pushed it a step further, made a joke out of it along the way, and made it possible for us to laugh at the disordered universe, the feeling of futility, the idea that each one of us is radically alone in the world, and that kind of makes you feel, well, not so alone, after all. Gogo and Didi had each other, at any rate, as lonely as that may have been, at times, and Beckett gave us that. And *how*? By breaking with convention. With the accepted idea of What A Play Should Be. And when I watched it I thought, “God, I’d like to do something like that.” Something innovative. Something new. Something other than these representational stories about ordinary life I’ve been writing for the past twenty years, since I was in high school, really, working my way towards becoming a Professional Writer and A Serious Literary Artist.

All this, I thought, while watching *Godot*. Because my work doesn’t do enough to distinguish itself. My best stories are about as good as the stories that are being produced by the thousands of other writers currently enrolled in the God knows how many other Creative Writing programs across the country, which is to say that they’re mediocre. And that’s not even mentioning the writers who have already graduated from said programs, or the ones who are already publishing in *The New Yorker*, which is also often mediocre. Furthermore, everything I’m doing is pretty straight-forward. It’s representational. None of it breaks with convention.

And I found myself wondering: once you know the art you're making isn't art that matters, isn't it time to start thinking about doing something else? The dishes? Taking out the trash? Paying more attention to your students? Being nicer to your girlfriend? Learning to whittle? Because you can't keep going and going, doing this shit and acting like it matters, like it's important, being mindful of the aesthetics of Ezra Pound and Joseph Conrad and publishing ten page stories in magazines that nobody reads. Can you?

Predictably enough, the answer to my question was also in *Godot*.

When Estragon said, "I can't go on like this," Vladimir said, "That's what you think," and I laughed out loud, because I thought "That's exactly right." I will go on like this, whether I think I can or not, because even though I don't know why I'm doing it anymore, and I don't know how anyone could possibly care, I can't stop. This is what I am. I've been writing all my life, and I don't know who I am without it, and if it sounds melodramatic or flaky or self-important, like a load of overly deterministic, divine mandate bullshit, it's still the truth: I've *never* felt as though I had a choice in the matter. It's like being born male. I'd have to have surgery to get the writer removed. A mentor once told me, "If you want to be a writer, please think like one," and it really pissed me off, because the problem is that *I am writer*. I'm just not a very good one. I'm not good enough. So as Vladimir waits for Godot, I wait for Rothko.

Because if he comes, I'll be saved.

BULLY

When I was about twelve years old, a year after my mother kicked my father out, I decided that I wanted to try out for the football team. I saw the football players around school and most of them were bigger than me but they weren't tougher – I was short, wiry, like my father, but I had muscle and I could run – and I figured if I could prove it I could have all the friends they had, the girls swooning over me, the whole deal. My mother didn't want me to play. "I dated a football player in high school," she said. "Such a bully. I'd rather you didn't have anything to do with guys like that."

We were fighting about this one night around midnight, well after my bedtime. She stood with her back to the bay window in our living room, cornered and trying to reason with me. Her long black hair tied back loosely, little frizzy tendrils of it falling around her shiny cheeks, she was still young, still pretty, though I didn't know it. I was at the other end of the room, in the archway that led into the kitchen, afraid to get too close to her because I could tell we were about to start yelling. "All you care about is yourself," I said. "If you really cared about me you'd find a way to do it."

I got away with a lot since she'd kicked my father out. We had this routine where if I wanted something I'd scream at her and tell her she was cheap and we were poor and that was why I didn't have any friends, and when it got so bad she didn't know what else to do she'd threaten to call my dad and I'd say go ahead because I wanted to see him, anyway, and there was always a chance he'd take my side. Even when he didn't, he never really hurt me, so it was a calculated risk; if it went my way

the pay off was huge. If it didn't, the losses were minimal. I screwed up my courage and shouted: "You never let me do anything! You're such a bitch!"

She came across the room with her hand back, but her boyfriend, Gavin, walked through the front door without knocking before she got to me, and he was all beaten up – black eye, fat lip, the works – and it was like I didn't exist anymore. She sounded like she was reprimanding another kid when she looked at him and asked, "What the hell happened to you?"

He sat down on our old blue couch and said, "Some guy jumped me at work."

She told him to stay put, went to the kitchen and got some ice, put it in a Ziploc bag and brought it back wrapped in a dish towel. He took the ice, held it to his eye. "Let me get some hydrogen peroxide," she said, and left the room again.

It looked like the football conversation was over for the moment. I'd moved out from under the archway into the kitchen, sat down in the big leather chair across from the couch. "How ya doin', sport-o?" Gavin asked.

"A whole lot better than you," I said.

"That wouldn't be hard."

"I thought you were like the security guy at your job."

"I am."

"Don't you have to be able to fight to get that job?"

My mother came back in the room, then, snapped my name. She sat back down next to Gavin with a roll of toilet paper and a bottle of rubbing alcohol. "I don't have any hydrogen peroxide," she said, tipping the bottle to put a little alcohol on some tissue she'd torn from the roll and wadded into a ball. "This is going to hurt a little."

"That's okay," Gavin told her. "I don't really need anything."

"You're a tough guy, aren't you?" she asked, like she might have been talking to me, raising the tissue to the cut above his eyebrow.

"Fuck, Paige," he whined, flinching away as soon as the alcohol made contact with his skin. "That hurts."

"Jeez, Gavin," I said. "I can take that better than you."

"Shut up," he said.

"Don't tell him to shut up," my mother said. "Olly. Go to your room."

I went back through the kitchen to my room but I didn't close the door. I sat just inside and listened to them talk. Gavin said, "If I don't figure out how to get these guys under control I'm going to get fired."

"You'd figure if he assaulted you they'd kick him out."

"They might," Gavin said. "But this isn't the first time I've had this kind of trouble. They're starting to think it's me, you know? Christ, Paige, what am I going to do? If I lose this job I'm fucked. You know no one else is going to hire me."

Gavin, I knew, had a history with drugs. He'd gotten clean through this rehab place that was somehow associated with the place where he was working, now. He wouldn't have been able to work anywhere else with a record like his. Not even 7-11 would have touched a guy like him.

"I'm going to call L.K.," my mother said. "He'll know what to do."

"I don't think your ex-husband's going to want to help me, Paige."

"He'll do it," my mother said. "For me."

*

When my father showed up I heard him laughing at Gavin and figured it was okay to come out of my room. I stood in the archway unnoticed as my mother tried to get my father to stop making fun of her boyfriend. "L.K.," she said. "Stop. It's not funny."

"I'm sorry," he said. "Seriously. What happened, Gavin? You get in an argument with a nine-year-old girl?"

"Don't be an idiot," my mother snapped. My father kept laughing.

Finally, she said, "If this is how you act when I let you come in my house we can go right back to the way things were before," and he stopped. He sat down on the couch next to Gavin and my mother sat in the leather chair across from them. No one said anything. My father scratched his dark stubble. He wore a flannel shirt and a blue cap with white lettering from the landscaping company he worked for: "Larry's Lawn Service." His jeans had holes in the knees. He was shorter than Gavin but he looked a lot tougher. Lean. My father was powerful. If my mom ever had trouble in town my father could fix it. One time she was having trouble getting her car fixed. The mechanic wanted more money, or something. My father went to see him and we had the car back the next day. I don't think it was because my father paid the bill.

"What happened to you?" he was asking Gavin.

Gavin was about to answer when my dad saw me standing in the entrance to the living room and cut him off in favor of talking to me. "Hey, kid," he said. "How's school?"

"I want to join the football team but mom won't let me."

"Why not?"

“We can talk about that later,” my mother interrupted. “Listen, L.K., we need your help.”

“You want me to pick him up from practice or something? I can do that.”

“It’s not about Olly.”

“What’s it about, then?”

“It’s about Gavin,” she said, her voice level and assured.

“This guy?” my father pointed to Gavin with his thumb.

“You guys have met. You know who he is. Don’t be smart.”

“Want me to kick his ass?” My father winked at me and I smiled. It made my chest feel big and my stomach warm.

“L.K.,” my mother whined. “Can you be serious for just a minute.”

“I am serious,” he said. “I’d be happy to kick his ass.”

“I wish you wouldn’t clown around in front of Olly.”

“I don’t mind,” I said.

My mother looked at me crossly. “That’s what bothers me.” She turned back to my father. “It sets a bad example.”

“You say bad words all the time, Mom,” I complained.

My father turned on me, then. “Don’t talk to your mother like that,” he said.

“Listen,” Gavin interrupted. “This is all my problem. I mean, I don’t want to cause you guys any problems.”

My father looked at him, then. “Shut the fuck up, Gavin,” he said. “I want to hear this. Go ahead, Paige.”

“Gavin works over at Stepping Stones.”

"I know the place," my father said.

"Well, Gavin's a C.A. there."

"Blood pressure bitch?"

"What?"

"He's the guy who takes your blood pressure in the morning," my father said.

Gavin spoke up again. They'd been talking about him like he wasn't there for a second and I don't think he liked it. "That's part of my job," he said. "But I also—"

"I thought I told you to shut the fuck up," my father said, and I giggled.

My mother raised her voice. "L.K.," she said. "If you can't even watch your language in front of your own son I don't know that I'm going to want you coming around here anymore. Now will you listen to me, please?"

He looked over at me, then back at her. He hadn't been taking the situation seriously until then. He was quiet and attentive, now. "Go ahead," he said.

"The other part of Gavin's job is to keep the patients under control."

"We don't like to have too much security around," Gavin explained. "Like if the patients see a guy in uniform they're less likely to stick around and get well, you know? So I'm supposed to kind of keep an eye on things, be there."

"Just look tough?"

"I guess."

"You don't look so tough," my father said.

"That's the problem. Normally it's enough just to look a little healthier, but sometimes we get a guy who's as big as a tree and doesn't want to be there."

My mother cut in, then. "There's someone like that, now," she said. "He says that Gavin provokes him."

"Do you?" my father asked.

Gavin shrugged.

"I bet you're the kind of guy who lets it get to his head," my father said. "You get thinking that they can't fuck with you, and you start fucking with them, and this one got pissed and kicked your ass."

"I wouldn't say that."

"And this ain't the first time, is it?" my father asked.

My mother said. "If Gavin can't get this guy under control, he might lose his job."

"So you want me to go into a rehab center in the middle of the night and scare the shit out of this guy so he won't fuck with your new boyfriend anymore, is that it?"

My mother shrugged, fidgeted.

"This is crazy," Gavin said.

"You'd be doing us a favor," my mother said.

"Fuck you," my father muttered, shaking his head slowly from side to side. "I can't believe this shit." His voice was quiet, like he really couldn't believe it.

"L.K.," my mother said.

He put his thumb and index finger together, pinched the top of his nose, closed his eyes. Then he scratched his head, leaned back and looked at the ceiling. "I'm your hit man, eh?"

"L.K., it's not like that."

“Yes it is,” he said, standing up. “But that’s okay. That’s life, right.” He turned to Gavin. “Come on buttercup. Let’s go kick some ass.”

“He can’t look like he’s been beat up,” Gavin said nervously. “I mean, if it looks like I actually hurt him—”

“We’re just gonna scare him,” my father said. “He won’t fuck with you no more.”

“He’s pretty big.”

“Big ain’t shit.”

*

My mother didn’t make me go to bed, even though it was three in the morning when my father and Gavin left. She made a pot of coffee, instead, even offered me a cup. “You’re old enough to drink coffee, if you want,” she said. I took a sip of hers and made a face. She told me to hold on, poured a cup just for me, filled mostly with cream and sugar. Then I liked it. We sat at the kitchen table across from one another, the sliding glass door open, only the screen door between us and all the insects swarming against it, trying to get to the light. The voices of the crickets rose and fell and my mother tuned the radio to the public broadcasting station. They were doing a special on Miles Davis. I’d never heard him before but the sound of his trumpet seemed made for that time of night, that kind of heat and humidity, the strings of the standup bass making a clacking noise whenever an especially deep note would hit.

“I like this music,” I told my mother.

“It’s nice for this time of night,” she said.

“I was just thinking that.”

She smiled at me, reached across the table and put her hands on mine. "You know you're starting to grow up," she said. "You're going to be a man, soon."

I smiled back at her. I felt myself blush, but at the same time I felt like a grown up, drinking coffee even though she'd put a gallon of cream in my cup. It occurred to me that now might be a good time to work on her about the football team, but before I said anything she brought the conversation back to the table. "I can't believe you called me a bitch," she said. "That's not the way a real man talks to a woman."

"I'm sorry, Mom," I said. "I was just really mad. I really want to try out for the team."

"That's not the way to get what you want. Especially not from a woman."

"Dad talks like that all the time."

She sighed, leaned back in her chair without taking her hands from mine. "Your dad isn't a real man."

I pulled my hands away. "He's better than Gavin."

"At least Gavin has manners."

"But he's a wimp. He can't even do stuff for himself."

She made a gesture with her shoulders and her head that was half shrug, half nod. "The point is that Dad does it for him. Your Dad acts tough, but when it comes down to it he's always working for other people. I can get him to do pretty much whatever I want."

"That's stupid," I said, looking down at the grungy linoleum floor.

"That's what I'm saying."

"I didn't mean Dad," I told her. I was angry, but I was trying not to get too excited. I wanted her to feel bad about things, not provoke her. "It's dumb to say he'll do anything you want. Just because he does things for you doesn't mean he has to. If he'd do anything you say you wouldn't have had to kick him out. You always want everyone to do whatever you say, and he doesn't have to, so he left. When I don't have to, I'll leave."

"I'll be sad when you leave," she said.

"I wish Dad still lived here. I wish you wouldn't say bad stuff about him."

"Maybe I shouldn't. I just don't want you to end up like him. Mowing lawns for a living, getting in bar fights, going to jail every five minutes."

"Gavin's no better," I said. "He's just a pussy."

"Don't talk like that."

"I wish I had a Dad. I don't know how to do anything. I can't play football. I can't fight. All I ever do is hang around with you."

"Am I so bad?"

"You can't teach me how to play football, Mom. I'm a boy."

She looked away from me, then, bit her lower lip. "I try really hard," she said, choking up a little. "You don't know how hard it is, trying to do this alone. The reason why I bring guys like Gavin around is for you. God knows I could do without him." She sort of chuckled at that last part, but she was still too busy trying not to cry to really laugh.

It seemed like the right time. "Why don't you just let me try out for the football team?" I asked. "I know you don't like those guys, but you ought to trust me not to

make friends with bad kids. And the coach is a good guy. Coach Alger. He's got kids, too. He doesn't curse or anything."

I could tell I just about had her. She bit her lower lip and looked over at the sink. There was a drip. She sighed, turned back to me. "Okay," she said. "You can play in one game. Maybe two. But that's it."

"I promise," I told her, realizing that she didn't understand, didn't know that once I was on the team that was the end of it.

Just then we heard the front door open and she looked up through the archway, into the living room, where Gavin was coming in alone.

She stood, went to the cabinet to get another coffee mug. When he came into the kitchen she filled it for him, put the pot back on. She turned and he leaned forward to kiss her cheek, but he didn't get far. She blocked him with the coffee cup, holding it right to his chest so if he'd moved any closer he would have knocked it, spilled coffee all over her. "Thanks," he said, taking the cup.

"How'd it go?" she asked.

"It was amazing," Gavin said.

"What do you mean?"

"That ex of yours is one bad dude," Gavin said. He seemed as nerdy as any of the worst nerds in my class, right then. "This guy from the treatment center is twice his size, but L.K. crept up to his bedside and straddled him so he had his arms pinned with his knees. He put his hand over the guy's face, covered his mouth and pinched his nose so he couldn't breathe or make a sound, and when he struggled L.K. took his other hand and stuck his fingers in the guy's eyes. Well, he just sort of pressed on them a little,

really, and he goes, 'You want these?' with that hillbilly accent he's got. The guy just nodded. Pretty soon he was turning blue. L.K. took his hands off the guy's eyes and told him to take a good look at me. 'This here's Gavin,' he said. 'You don't fuck with Gavin, or I'll come back here and poke your eyes out.' Then he put his fingers back on the guy's eyes and really pressed them. I mean, he was really hurting the dude. I started to get scared, but it was amazing. There was never a second when he wasn't in complete control."

"L.K. can be a mean son of a bitch," my mother said.

"I can see why you divorced his ass. He's out of his mind."

"He takes care of things."

"What's that mean?"

"It means what it means," my mother said.

Gavin polished off his coffee, then looked at me. It was the first time he'd looked at me since he'd been back. "What's he still doing up?" he asked.

"We were just talking," she said.

"So what's going on?"

"With me and Olly?"

He turned back to her. "With me and you," he said.

"I think maybe you better go home."

"Come on, Paige." He approached her but she shook her head. It took him a minute, but eventually he said he'd call her later, turned around and walked back into the living room. When he got to the door he stopped and looked back towards the kitchen but my mother had her back to him. She wouldn't turn around. Gavin walked

out and when she heard the door shut behind him she closed her eyes. She looked thin, worn out, like she could have slept for a day if someone would have let her.

“Olly,” she said. “Why don’t you go on to bed?”

ASTRONAUT

Six months after I got clean, the most basic human interactions were still the only ones I could handle. I'd buy a pack of cigarettes, take my change, say thanks, and that was it. I felt like an astronaut with the cord cut, floating around disconnected.

I went to see Steve's family, trying to touch something.

Steve and Emily were my oldest friends. I'd met their son, Zareck, the day he was born. I could remember marveling at his eyes and hands, a little human not much bigger than a football. He looked like he had a bunch of extra skin.

I'd thought I was going to be part of his life: Uncle Bill. But as Steve got more grounded I got further out there – lost my job, moved away, went through all the typical phases of the typical story before I got my shit together. By then, Zareck could talk and Steve had bought a townhouse in the DC suburbs. The idea of their family had become an ideal for me; they were doing it right, I thought.

It was early afternoon when my flight arrived. I took a cab to Steve's place. I could tell Emily had been straightening up when she came to the door. She wore a baggy white sweater, so except for one rose showing through the hole in her jeans, you couldn't see her tattoos. She smiled and invited me in, her long red hair tied back in a bun. "Steve's not home yet," she said. "He should be back in an hour or so."

An oversized rosary hung on the wall above the white leather couch. It was the same couch they'd had at their old apartment. The rosary was new. They weren't religious, but Emily was into icons. On the opposite wall, a wooden mask of the blue,

elephant face of a Hindu god stared over its white tusks at the rosary. The hardwood floor was dusty.

I wanted to tell Emily not to worry about rushing around at the last minute making things look nice on my account, but it didn't seem like the right thing to say, and anyway she spoke first. "You've met Zareck."

He sat in front of the television, watching some men in bright t-shirts dance across the screen. He'd grown. Three or four years old, now, with dark hair, if he'd been standing he would have been up to my waist. When Emily said his name he turned his head and looked at me suspiciously, almost fierce, dark hair and eyes.

"I don't think he likes me," I said.

"He's just tired," she said. "Come on, baby. Time for your nap."

She told me I could smoke downstairs in the laundry room and took Zareck upstairs to bed. I went down. They'd set up some folding metal chairs and an end-table for the ashtray, making a smoking lounge out of it. There were shelves with canned food against the wall opposite the door, boxes of Christmas tree lights in the corner.

Emily came down a few minutes later and sat across from me. She was tired, dark semicircles under her eyes. I wondered if she thought I was a hassle. There was a time when we'd all been tight.

The floor creaked and she looked up sharply, narrowed her eyes. "I'm terrified of waking him," she told me. "Mama needs a break." She moved a few stray curls out of her face, took a drag off her cigarette.

"You must be exhausted," I said.

“It’s like you’re always on. There’s never any down time for Emily.” She sighed. “And Emily likes her down time.”

We were quiet for a minute and she took off her sweater. The tank top underneath revealed the bouquet of roses tattooed on her sternum. They were very red, the stems green and covered with thorns.

“Have you been talking to Steve much, lately?” she asked.

“Not much,” I said.

“Has he said anything to you to make you think...” She hesitated.

“Think what?”

“That he’s unhappy?”

I looked at the shelves of canned food and thought about it, tried to remember the things he’d said. Mostly our conversations had been short. We’d talked about me. Getting sober, adjusting, all that. The only thing he’d mentioned was how expensive it was living in the DC area. “He’s said a few things about money,” I told her. “That’s it.”

“He’s been on me about turning lights out when I leave the room,” she said.

“Little stuff.”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Why did you decide to quit getting high?” Emily asked.

I hadn’t expected the question. It was abrupt. I shrugged and she said, “You never seemed like you really wanted to quit before.”

“I don’t know that I really wanted to,” I told her. “But I had to. I couldn’t keep on the way I was going.”

She had that restrained look, like she didn't know whether or not she could tell me what was on her mind. I felt close to her. Not the way Steve was close to her, but something like it. I knew her. "This morning I left a cup of coffee sitting on the kitchen counter," she said. "I walked into the living room and I guess Zareck was going to bring it to me. He likes to do that, you know? Well, he knocked it over, spilled it all over himself. I was so scared that he'd scalded himself. I got him out of his clothes, though, and he was fine, but I felt terrible, and Steve was really *on* me about it. I mean, he wouldn't let up. 'He could have been scarred for life,' and all this melodramatic shit that just made me feel worse, and I wanted to ask, 'why are you doing this?' But he had to go to work. He called a while ago to see if you were here yet. Sometimes I think he hates me. Hates our life, I mean."

I didn't say anything. She looked down, picked at the frayed threads around the hole in her jeans. "Oh well," she said. "I'm sure he'll be happy to see you."

*

Steve came home a few minutes later, came straight downstairs to the laundry room. Short and wiry, with dark hair and eyes like Zareck's, he looked as tired as Emily did, older than I remembered. Older than he should have been. I stood. He smiled and loosened his tie. We shook hands, embraced with one arm. I sat back down and he leaned against the old washing machine by the door, lit a cigarette. "How ya been?" he asked.

"Good," I nodded.

"I should wake Zareck," Emily said, rising.

"He's sleeping?" Steve asked.

She nodded, looking away from him, toward the door.

"You know he's gonna be up all night, now," he said.

"He was tired, honey," Emily said, half whining.

Steve rubbed an eye with his knuckle. "Whatever," he said.

She left the room.

"I hate it when she does that," he said. "She doesn't want to look after him so she puts him to bed, then later he can't sleep. He gets scared at night and comes into our room, wants to get in bed with us. Keeps me up all night. Then I have to go to work on two hours of sleep."

I didn't know what to say, didn't want to take sides. We were quiet for a minute, then he asked me how things had been in Mississippi. "You like it down there?"

"I've been thinking I'd like to move back up here," I said.

"Why?" he asked, hopping up to sit on the washing machine.

"Make money, I guess."

"You can't save anything," Steve said.

"I don't know," I told him. "Maybe it's not about money. Maybe it's just that I grew up here. Everything I know is up here."

"Listen," he said. "Is it going to bother you if I have a beer?"

"No," I said, surprised because it was the truth.

"What about drugs?"

"What about them?"

He looked down at the floor for a second, looked back up at me. With the fluorescent light and pale green linoleum, the smoke hanging in the air made the room grungy. "Are you using?" he asked.

"No."

"I don't mean to be a dick," he said. "But you remember last time."

The last time I'd stayed with them, when they were still living in an apartment in Dupont Circle, downtown, Emily and I had gone to score pills on New York Avenue, near the bus station. Steve wasn't happy. He came home and I was sprawled out on the couch. She was on the loveseat. "Where's Zareck?" he wanted to know. He was with Emily's sister, but she couldn't tell him that. She was out of it. "Where's Zareck?" Steve shook her. I remembered being semi-conscious, hearing her try to talk, and it was like she had glue in her mouth. I wondered how I'd managed to make myself think that was okay at the time, how I'd convinced myself that Steve was overreacting.

"I'm clean," I said.

He picked at a cuticle, asked, "How are you doing, anyway? I mean, are you adjusting?"

I thought about it for a second. "I don't know," I said. "I never used to clean my apartment. Sometimes when I get home now, I look around and it's like I don't live there. Like it's somebody else's place."

"I know what you mean."

"Do you?" I asked. It came out sounding like a challenge. I hadn't meant it that way.

"I got a kid," he said. "I don't know what the hell's going on."

*

After dinner, Steve asked me if I would mind dropping by the sports bar up the road. It was obvious he wanted to talk about something away from Emily, and I was eager for that. It wasn't that I wanted to get away from her, but I'd always been the talker when I was drinking; Steve and I would go out for drinks and I'd talk and talk and after we'd parted ways I'd realize that he hadn't uttered more than a sentence or two all night. Sometimes I felt like I didn't even know him, he said so little. The idea of being a confidant made me feel good, especially after he mentioned the business with the pills, my last visit. I'd been self-focused for years, I thought, and wondered why he was still my friend. I wanted urgently to tell him all this stuff, but I kept my mouth shut. I was afraid if I started talking I'd ruin the opportunity to listen, and I thought if I listened for a while I could get a sense of whether or not they were really in trouble. I wanted them to be okay. It was important to me.

We got a booth far from the television sets, where we could hear each other well enough to have a conversation. "I think Emily's using again," he said.

He waited for me to say something but I stayed quiet, so he went on.

"Her mother had surgery on her knee about a month ago. Emily could have swiped some pain killers. A few days ago I was going through my check book and there was a check missing from the back."

"You think she took it?"

"Well it wasn't Zareck," he said. "And I don't know who else would have. She knows how to forge my signature."

The waitress came to our booth, sat down beside him. She had blonde hair tied back in a ponytail under a baseball cap with the name of the bar, "Sports Grill," written across the front of it. She wore a matching jersey. "Hi guys," she said. "Welcome to Sports Grill. Can I start you off with a couple beers?"

Steve and I stared across the table at each other and her smile vanished. It was obvious that we weren't there for a good time. "Budweiser," Steve said. I ordered a coffee, and she slinked away.

"I think we hurt her feelings," I said.

Steve shrugged. "Fuck her."

"Have you talked to Emily about this?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I'm not sure how to handle it."

"If she's using," I said. "She'll get defensive. I mean, I know I would."

The waitress brought our drinks. "Would you like cream or sugar?" she asked. I shook my head and she left.

Steve looked over my shoulder at the television sets above the bar. "What if she's been taking Zareck down there with her to cop?" he asked.

I tried to imagine myself with a kid, wondered if I would have taken him with me to cop. I didn't have to think about it long. The answer was yes. "I don't think she would do that," I said. "It doesn't seem like something she would do."

Someone must have scored on TV, because the guys sitting at the bar raised their voices suddenly, some cheering, some protesting. It was in, it was out, all that. "I wish I could care about that shit," Steve said.

*

I couldn't sleep that night. I lay awake in the guestroom for an hour or two, waiting and thinking and worrying that if I made a sound I might wake Zareck, then finally went out to the living room and turned on the television. There was an old black and white horror movie on the classics channel. The son of Frankenstein was trying to find a new brain for the monster. At first he'd planned to dismember the thing and put an end to it, but his father's ghost made an appeal on the creature's behalf.

I sat there watching for a while before I saw Zareck at the base of the stairs, watching me. "Are you supposed to be up?" I asked.

"Yes," he said.

"Well come over here and sit down," I told him.

He climbed up onto the couch and sat close against me. I moved my arm so he could get closer. "What's happening?" he asked.

"Frankenstein's trying to put a new brain in his monster," I said.

"Why?" he asked, digging between the seat cushions for something.

"I don't know," I said.

He looked up at me, his hands still between the cushions.

"Do you think it'll work?" I asked.

He slid off the couch, onto his hands and knees, apparently looking for something underneath. The floor had been swept. I thought Emily must have done it while Steve and I were at the bar. He looked up at me. "It looks like a little airplane," he said.

*

The next afternoon, Steve and I sat in the living room with Zareck and Emily, watching a kids' show I'd never seen before about a young girl with pink hair. I wanted us to be talking to each other – it didn't have to be substantial, it could have been about the weather – but we hardly spoke at all, and I wondered if I was the only one who felt like it was tense in there. When Steve's cell phone rang, it was almost a relief.

He hesitated for a second before he answered. He didn't say hello, just, "It's Saturday." Then, after a minute, he started to say okay. "Okay, okay." He got off the phone, told me he shouldn't have answered to begin with. "I'm sorry about this. The server crashed. Hopefully, I won't be more than a couple hours."

He put on his shoes, took his keys from the coffee table, and kissed Emily on the cheek before he left. As soon as he was gone, Emily said she wanted to run a couple errands. "Can you watch Zareck for an hour or so?" she asked.

"Sure," I told her.

"Where are you going?" Zareck asked.

"Mama's gotta run a couple errands, baby. That's all."

"Downtown?" he asked.

"No, baby," she said, getting up off the couch. "The grocery store."

"I wanna go," he said.

"No, baby," she told him. "Not today. Uncle Bill's gonna play with you."

I was glad she called me Uncle Bill, but Zareck started crying, making a real show of it, stomping on the hardwood floor and hitting the sides of his legs with his fists.

"Okay," Emily caved. "Okay." She picked him up with one arm and held him at her side, his legs wrapped around her.

"Where are you going, really?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You're not really going to the grocery store," I said.

"Sure I am," she said.

"Let me go with you," I said, standing by the door now, figuring it would force her to either admit or abandon the score.

"Do you want me to bring something back for you?" she asked.

"No," I said. "I just want to go to the store with you."

She shrugged, acquiesced. Her car was a red hatchback. I tried not to step on the M&Ms littering the passenger side floor. A cardboard Virgin Mary hung by a string from the rearview mirror. It smelled like pine. Emily's jaw was tight, sweat on her brow.

"You gonna be okay?" I asked.

"I'm fine," she said. "Why?"

"Listen, Emily. I know what's going on. I can see for myself. I've been there."

"Please don't tell Steve," she said. I looked at the houses up and down the street. They were peaceful. I wondered about the problems of the people inside.

"Steve knows," I said. "He was the one who told me."

"I need something to take the edge off, you know?" Her voice was fine but she was starting to tear up. "That's why I wanted you to look after Zareck."

We stopped at a red light and I looked in the rearview mirror. Zareck was strapped into the safety-seat in back, staring out the window, not really paying attention to us. "You know if you get busted you'll have problems with Social Services," I said.

"I know, Bill," she said. "Please don't give me a hard time. I know you must think I'm a horrible mother."

I shook my head. The light turned green.

"I'm gonna be sick before too long," Emily said, putting the car in gear.

I didn't want her to be sick, but I didn't want her to risk getting arrested, either. I could only think of one other way to handle it. "Go downtown and drop me off up the street," I told her. "I'll make the buy. But when we get back, you gotta talk to Steve. Deal?"

"Bill," she said. "You just got clean. I can't ask you to."

"You didn't," I said. "I volunteered. I'm not gonna take the shit, anyway. I'm only making the buy. I don't want you buying drugs with Zareck in the car."

Zareck spoke up. "Downtown?" he asked.

We didn't go to the store.

*

She dropped me off at the Greyhound station and I started walking. It was a dirty part of town, a narrow street littered with cigarette butts and empty plastic bags, the occasional syringe lying in the gutter. The air crisp and cold in the shade, warmer in the sun, and I stayed on the sunny side of the street, noting with wonder that if I'd been copping for myself the light would have seemed harsher than the cold.

Around the corner, two people stood about twenty feet apart by a chain-link fence, their hands in their pockets. One was an older woman. Emily had told me, years before, "Never buy drugs from a woman," and I'd followed her advice without asking why. I went straight to the tall black man halfway down the block. He had crutches, wore a dingy gray overcoat, sunglasses and a winter hat over his ears, a fuzzy ball on top. "What you need?" he asked.

"A couple 80s and some Xanax."

"Got Clonipin," he said.

"Clonipin'll do. Give me four."

He looked up and down the street, said, "Money first."

I reached in my pocket, handed it to him. As he was shaking my hand, placing the pills in my palm, the police car came around the corner, turned on the lights, hit the siren long enough to let us know he meant business, then let it go, the pitch going down as the sound dropped off. I thought about running, but I thought too long. The cop on the passenger side was out of the car before I could make a move. He was about my height, black, and very muscular, his head shaved. The dealer dropped his crutches and took off running. The driver, a wiry black man with a mustache, got out of the car and took off after him. The bald man pushed me up against the fence, mashed my face into the chain links. "Don't even think about it," he said.

I looked down the street. The other cop had the dealer face-down on the ground. I saw Emily's car going by. The cop still had one hand on the back of my neck. He was saying something into his walkie-talkie. Emily sped up. She drove away.

*

Once they'd searched the other guy, it was clear that I wasn't worth the hassle. They would have let me go immediately if it hadn't been for my driver's license. The cop who'd pushed me up against the fence took a look at it and said, "You're a long way from home. You in any kind of trouble in Mississippi?"

I told him I was clean but he cuffed me, anyway, shoved me in the back of the car while he called it in. The cuffs tightened every time I moved, so I didn't move. I wondered why that solution had been lost on me every other time I'd been arrested. Emily and Steve, their problems, their house, it was all far away. I thought if I could have lived a junkie's life without a junkie's need, I would have been alright.

When they threw the dealer in the car with me he sneered. "Fucking white boy. This is your fault."

The cop with the shaved head pulled me out, stood close behind me as he took the cuffs off. I could feel his breath, and it occurred to me that what we had together was a kind of intimacy. I didn't like it. "Don't let me catch you around here again," he said. "You best get back down to Mississippi."

COOKIE COMES TO TOWN

The first thing Cookie wanted to do when she got into town was take a walk. She'd packed light, just a backpack, and once I'd put it in the guestroom for her she was ready to go. She stood by the door in jeans and a plain black t-shirt, her curly brown hair tied back, and said, "Let's go," like she was a parent trying to wake the kids for school. She was pretty. I'd forgotten how pretty she was. Her skin was unblemished and she still had dancer's legs, even though she'd abandoned dance years before, when we were still married.

I think she could tell from the look on my face that strolling around the neighborhood wasn't something I'd thought to do before. It seemed artificial to me, probably because it was. I was supposed to be walking regularly, so it was part of the post heart attack regimen, and she'd come – she said – to make sure I was taking care of myself, but I had a treadmill; I guess I figured that if I was going to walk and I *wasn't* on the treadmill, there had to be a destination. Did people take walks around their neighborhoods anymore? I wondered. It seemed outlandish at first, but then I felt like there was something hopelessly wrong with me and the way I looked at the world if walking on the treadmill seemed more natural than walking outside.

All this in the moment after she said, "Let's go," the same moment she spent staring at me, guessing how I felt and what I thought, because the next thing she said was, "You need to walk, anyway, and it's nice out. Better than the treadmill."

Once we got outside and started walking she said, "I love the South. The weather is phenomenal." It was about seventy degrees in December, sunny and not

particularly humid, though it still had that swampy smell. "See what you would have been missing if you'd sat around indoors all day?"

"I'm supposed to walk faster than this," I told her. "Get my heart rate up."

She sped up a little, and for a minute or two I paid attention to my breathing. It wasn't so arduous. Eventually I stopped noticing, looked around at the neighborhood. I'd seen some colorful houses driving through – yellow cottage looking things and blue box-like houses here and there – and I wanted to show her, to get her to remember that it was a nice town, even though I'd always bitched about hating it when she was still living with me. I thought maybe if she moved back, I'd like it better. I'd know how good I had it. We went down a couple blocks and I pointed out a few places.

She said she liked them. "Remember Vickie?" she asked. "My roommate my freshman year?"

"She was the blonde one, right? From Pennsylvania?"

"She lives in Denver now, says they're tearing down some of those little houses, building McMansions on the land." We passed a white brick house on the left, a pecan tree in the front yard, Christmas lights hanging from the eaves. I tried to picture one of those huge houses in its place, couldn't.

"What was the name of that guy you were stuck on in college?" I asked. There was one in particular I was thinking of. She pined for the guy. It nearly killed me. If he'd been into her I might have felt better, but he didn't care. I spent a year wondering what the hell was wrong with me, why she wanted him, why I wanted her.

"You're thinking about Scott," she said.

"The nerdy guy?"

An ice cream truck played tinkly carnival music from somewhere in the neighborhood, maybe a few blocks over. Cookie looked over her shoulder. "He was sweet," she said.

"I'm sure he was," I said. "But I remember I was so jealous whenever you talked about him. Then when I met him I couldn't believe it. Thick glasses. That stupid bowl cut. I kept wondering how the hell a guy like that beat me out."

"He didn't beat you out. I married you."

"You divorced me, too," I said.

We headed west a few blocks. Across the intersection up ahead, Kay's house came into view. There was a man standing in the door, presumably her new husband. One of her kids was playing in the yard with another boy. I touched Cookie's arm, gestured toward a side street with a nod. "Let's go this way," I said. "That's Kay's house. Her kid's in the yard. I don't want him to see me."

"Why not?"

"I don't know," I said. "But let's go this way."

We turned and a big black dog barked at us from behind a fence. "Cute dog," Cookie said. "Look at that tomato bush." I never would have described the dog as cute until Cookie did, but in spite of its bark, it was wagging its tail. I never would have noticed the tomato bush, either – it was scraggly, a weak green thing like Charlie Brown's Christmas tree, weighted with yellow fruit – and when Cookie mentioned it I felt this weird rush of gratitude, like she saw everything more clearly, and I didn't want her to leave.

I had to explain the Kay thing, though. I could tell she wanted an explanation, wanted to know why I was anxious not to be seen. I'd dated Kay briefly after Cookie left. Maybe she thought I didn't want Kay to know she was in town, thought I was still trying to keep my options open. Maybe she was jealous. That would have been nice, but it didn't make any sense. "I got more involved in her kids' lives than I should have," I said.

"You only dated her for a few weeks though, right?" she asked.

"Right," I said. "And at first it didn't seem like anything weird. I mean, I liked her kids and it was kind of fun. Then Kay told me her daughter wanted to know when we were gonna get married."

Cookie shrugged. "Kids say things."

"It was still too much," I said. "I mean, I guess I saw how invested they were in the whole thing. How they were looking for a daddy. Kay was looking for a daddy, anyway. I didn't want to be daddy."

"It's okay," Cookie said. "You can stop explaining."

After a while, we'd come full circle to my house. The sun was going down and it was starting to get cold. "That was thirty minutes," Cookie said. "You wouldn't have stayed on the treadmill that long."

I'd forgotten about the treadmill by then. "I don't think it counts," I said. "I'm not sure my heart rate went up."

*

We'd made plans to see *The Nutcracker* in Mobile that night. Cookie wore black tights and a black skirt with a low cut, tight fitting grey sweater and black, thick-

heeled shoes. She had a silver necklace. I wanted to kiss her neck, right at the base of it, by her shoulder. The ballet started at 7:30, though, and at a quarter to six we were just leaving the house. We hadn't eaten and with Mobile at least an hour and a half away I was afraid we were going to be late. Cookie'd always been uptight about that kind of thing; not only being on time, but doing things the way they were supposed to be done, everything by the book. She got mean when she was hungry, too. As we got closer to the civic center, I worried that things would go south. Then I realized that I'd forgotten the tickets, and I was doubly afraid. Headlights flashed by.

"I forgot the tickets," I said.

"Oops," she said, as if it wasn't a big deal. "It's too late to go back now."

"I think they'll let me in," I said. "I have season tickets, so they probably have me on file somewhere."

"No big deal."

I couldn't believe how calm she was. I wondered why she'd never been that way when we were married. By the time we got to the auditorium and parked it was seven o'clock. We got out of the car and started towards the doors. "It starts in a half hour," I said. "I'm not sure we'll have time for dinner if we want to catch the first act."

"I've seen the first act of *The Nutcracker* a dozen times," Cookie said. "Let's go eat."

"You sure?" I asked.

"Yeah. Unless you really want to catch the first act. I mean, I don't mind either way."

"I'd rather eat," I said.

She took my arm, turned me around, and we headed across the street into Old Town, where the restaurants were. "The one thing we planned on is the one thing we won't get to this weekend," she said. "It's just like us."

*

A few blocks over from the auditorium we passed a big brick church, giant white columns, big wooden doors, the works. A little girl stood on the front steps. She was about two and a half feet tall, maybe seven or eight years old, fat faced, glaring at Cookie as we walked by. When Cookie waved, the girl looked away. She stood at attention for a second, not looking at us, then marched back toward the doors and turned, stood with her back to the entrance.

"She doesn't like you," I said.

Cookie smiled. "Who knows what's going on in her imagination? When I was a girl, I used to pretend I was in charge of neighborhood security. You couldn't come in or out without my permission. Maybe she's guarding the church. That's why she stands at attention."

Cookie had never wanted children and as a teacher I was around kids all the time. I'd never really thought it was necessary to deal with one at home, but towards the end I wondered if it might have made a difference. Not that I wanted the kid to keep us together, but I wondered; if we had been a family, would it have kept it from getting stale? It was the staleness that killed it, after all, more than anything either of us had done.

I was about to wonder about it aloud – what difference a family might have made – when I heard the church doors open and looked over my shoulder to see what

was happening. The girl's mother came out and grabbed her by the arm. They looked alike, the same small eyes in the same fat face, and I remembered a woman I'd dated years before, while Cookie and I were split up in college, who'd gotten drunk and weepy one night and told me that all she wanted out of life was to be a mother, to have a baby who looked just like her. The woman from the church yanked her daughter back inside, scolding, "I've been looking all over for you," and I remembered that crazy girl I'd dated, said, "Fuck that."

"I was a good little security guard," Cookie protested.

"Not that," I told her. "I was thinking about having kids."

"Oh, heavens no," Cookie said. "No kids."

*

There was an Italian place right past the church, across the street on the corner. The space was big, concrete floors, posters of Italian landscapes on the walls, candles on the tables even though it was brightly lit. We shared a pizza, talked for a minute about how quickly the temperature outside had dropped. Then she said, "I shouldn't be letting you eat this kind of thing. All that cheese. The cholesterol can't be good for your arteries."

"I think I'll survive," I told her.

When the check came, I took out my credit card. The waitress was a red-headed college kid, maybe twenty years old. She looked like she was afraid I would be angry when she told me they didn't take credit cards. "I know most places do," she said. "But the owner's old fashioned."

"That's okay," Cookie said. "I have some cash."

“No,” I said. “Let me get it.” She’d paid for a lot of things when we were married. I didn’t want her to pay this time. I wanted her to know that things were different. A woman on the other side of the restaurant cackled, and I thought she was laughing at me. “There’s an ATM down the street,” I said, and told Cookie to wait there a minute.

I walked down the street in the cold. There were trees planted along the sidewalk, strung with Christmas lights. Two soldiers in desert fatigues stood smoking cigarettes by the door of a bar a few doors down. They looked too young for the bar. I tried to take a hundred dollars out of the ATM, but it reported insufficient funds. I tried for twenty and it said the same thing.

Back at the restaurant, Cookie said she didn’t mind. They’d dimmed the lights. A busboy walked past, dropped some silverware and picked it up. He set it down on a table nearby, and Cookie said, “I wouldn’t want to use that.”

“I must have made a mistake,” I said. “It’s not normally like this. I mean, I get paid next week.”

“It’s no big deal,” Cookie said.

“It’s embarrassing,” I told her.

“Don’t be embarrassed,” she said, slipping some cash into the leather folder the waitress had left with the check. “I always thought it was outrageous, how little teachers get paid.”

“That’s not how you felt about it when we were married.”

“Things were different then,” she said.

“How so?”

The waitress came, took up the folder and said she'd be back with the change. "Keep it," Cookie said. When the waitress was gone, she turned back to me. "Shall we?"

"You didn't answer the question," I said.

"What question?"

"Why is it different now? I mean, not just the money, but everything. You don't mind being late. You don't think I'm a mess for being overdrawn."

She stood up, leaned across the table to kiss my cheek. "I didn't say I didn't think you were a mess."

Part of me wanted to press her about it, but I knew what she would say – that it was different now because we *weren't* married, because the pressure was off. The same type of thing she used to say when we were splitting up and she was tired from crying and shouting and trying to explain: that after everything else it was just a mind-fuck. Once we'd made it official, it seemed like nothing would ever change, like nothing would ever happen again.

*

I don't know what other people talk about after sex. Cookie's nipples were hard. She pulled the blankets up over her chest and said the house was cold. It made me think about a story my father told me, something my mother had said to one of his friends. Lying on my back, I told Cookie how it went.

"My father had this roommate when he was going out with my mother," I said. "Greg Hughes. He was wild. Disco. Drugs. Orgies. All that. Always wanted to shock my mother, you know? Nice Catholic girl, he figured, but she wouldn't go for it.

He showed her a picture of himself, naked on the beach, one time. She took it out of his hand and looked at it, I mean really scrutinized it. My father was starting to feel uncomfortable. Then she gave the picture back to Greg and said, ‘*Wow*, the water must have been really *cold*.’ That’s when my father knew he wanted to marry her.”

Cookie didn’t say anything. It seemed creepy, suddenly, telling a story about my mother and some guy’s cock right after sex, but I kept talking anyway. “The guy ended up marrying a woman named Suzie. They were swingers in the 70s for a while, but my dad said Greg couldn’t handle it anymore after one night when he was with this other guy’s wife and he couldn’t get it up because he could hear Suzie banging him in the next room.”

“My parents were pretty straight laced,” Cookie said. “If they have stories like that, they didn’t tell them to us.” She rolled onto her side, curled in tight against me. “They taught us how to budget. My mom’s luxury item: one spice a month. Every month, she would splurge a buck or two on a spice. Cumin, tarragon. Whatever. I could help you with your budget, if you want. I know you have a hard time keeping track.”

“That’s okay,” I told her.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m annoying.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Trying to tell you how to run your life.”

“I know you’re trying to help.”

“Why won’t you let me?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, smoothing the covers over my chest with the flat of my hand. “I guess I don’t want to depend on you.”

The whistle of a train sounded, more like a car horn pitched low than a whistle, really. It sounded like it was fifty yards away. My house was less than a mile from the tracks and for a long time I’d thought it was a bad investment because of that.

“Sometimes I miss this place,” Cookie said. “The trains blowing their horns late at night. I never realized I liked it until I’d already moved away.”

We lay in the dark, listening to the train, to the dogs barking a few blocks away, the occasional car driving by. It seemed like I could hear everything with her there beside me, but even as she laid her hand across my chest, I knew she wasn’t coming back.

YOU USED TO BE FUNNY

Pam and I sat at a white Formica table at a coffee shop near the security gate for a few minutes before I had to catch my flight. It was noisy, names and flight numbers being announced over the P.A. system, people walking by. None of the people walking together were talking to each other; they talked on their cell phones if they talked at all. I wanted to talk to Pam but I felt like I didn't have anything to say, like I was empty and boring, and she was too pretty for me, with the black scarf wrapped around her long throat, her hair pulled loosely back from her face, so little tendrils of it curled around the dangling earrings that looked like miniature wind chimes. We were quiet. She didn't look at me. It seemed like there should have been something to say, even if it was only going to be a couple days. It was one of those moments – I'd been having a lot of them – when everything seemed unlikely; me in a business suit, with a beautiful wife, waiting for a plane in the middle of the afternoon, smelling like aftershave.

A little boy about seven stood crying just beyond the x-ray, an overweight guard with a shaved head and a goatee pointing a chubby finger in his face. The boy's pockets were inside out, and in his other hand the security guard held a small Swiss army knife. I couldn't tell whether the kid was crying because the guard took his knife or because he was afraid.

"That's awful," Pam said. "They have no right to bully that little boy."

"Actually, they do," I said.

"He's obviously not planning to blow up the plane."

I glanced over at the boy, the guard. The guard was really coming down on him. He looked like a guy who got into security because he liked picking on people, the kind of guy who picked on little boys when he was a little boy, too. "Where are the kid's parents, anyway?" I said. "They should have told him he couldn't just walk onto a plane with a knife."

"Who cares, Paul? You're picking a fight."

"I just don't think it's right to blame the guard. He's just doing his job."

"Is this what you were like when you were still drinking?" she asked. "No wonder nobody wanted to be around you."

"What do you mean?"

"You argue with everything I say. I know you too well to believe you're honestly defending that guy."

I thought about that, wondered why I'd started it, why I needed the chaos. "I'm sorry," I said. "I'm just bored."

"Well, don't take it out on me."

A sudden burst of voices spoke Spanish behind me. I looked over my shoulder, saw a Hispanic family, a fat woman, three or four children and a short, middle aged man, obviously the father, with a mustache. With the exception of the father, who stood back, smiling, they were all talking at once, crowding around a very old man in a straw hat who sat at the table next to ours. He stood slowly, struggling to support himself with a wooden cane, and when he got all the way to his feet he was still hunched over, reaching out to touch the top of one the little girls' heads with a shaky, spotted hand. They walked away in a clump, the children surrounding him, holding

onto his arms, the mother walking beside him, the father following behind, carrying the suitcase.

The old man had left a hardcover book on the table. Pam got up, took it, and returned to her chair, across from me. More flights were announced over the PA. I listened for mine. "You're just gonna keep that?" I asked.

"I'm done talking to you, Paul. I don't want to argue. I'm reading."

"You can't read Spanish."

She set the book down on the table and opened it to a random page. There was a photograph of an old woman inside. She was standing by a fence, wearing a purple dress with white flowers. There were rocks behind her, mountains in the distance. She was hunched over but she smiled like a young woman, a little devilish, it seemed to me.

Pam bit her lip for a second, then snapped the book shut and got up from the table, her long yellow skirt trailing just behind as she spun, rushed away after the old man and his family, calling after them, toward the gates. "Wait," she was calling, one hand in the air, the other clasping the book against her breast. "You forgot your book."

Even weaving her way through the crowd she was graceful. She didn't bob up and down the way people do when they're jogging, hurrying after something. She looked like she was floating, like it was effortless, and when she caught up to the old man she didn't show him the picture, she didn't make a show of it all. She just offered it to him and smiled, and after he'd taken it and nodded his thanks she came walking back to me, not smiling anymore.

*

The flight was depressing, full of couples. They leaned against each other. They held hands. They slept. I looked out the window. It was all white. The flight attendant was pretty, young and blond with make-up and blue eyes, and I imagined Pam sitting at a stoplight somewhere back home, looking across at some other man in some other car, thinking he was nice looking, wondering what life with him would be like, if it wouldn't be so hard.

When I got to my hotel in D.C. I sat on the bed, turned on the TV, went through the channels. I looked at the room service menu, read the descriptions of the meals, the steaks grilled to perfection, all that. I went into the bathroom, examined the little bottles of shampoo and skin cream in the basket next to the sink, read the labels: propylene glycol. It was a nice room, classier than I'd expected, and I didn't want to be there. I lay down but couldn't sleep.

Finally, I looked in the phone book to see if Chloe was still there.

*

She was surprised but friendly, so I invited her for dinner. We met at a cheesy franchise near her apartment in the Northern Virginia suburbs. The booths were green. She smiled at me from the other side of the table; she had a new hairstyle, which shouldn't have surprised me, since I hadn't seen her in five years, but it still kind of threw me off. It was a black bob. It looked much better, much more, I don't know, together, than when it had been long and tangled, its natural blonde. And I'd forgotten about her eyes. They were a shocking pale blue. They didn't look real. Her left front tooth, which used to be dead, was bright white. The others were still yellow.

"I never expected to hear from you again," she said.

"I never expected to be here on business."

"What's with that, anyway? Paul with a job? Travelling on business? You used to be a mess. I didn't think you were going to live another five years."

"I quit drinking," I said. "Good things started happening."

She glanced uncomfortably at her glass of wine, then took a drink.

"How have you been?" I asked.

She gave me a puzzled look. "What's this about? Why did you call me?"

"I wanted to see you."

She nodded toward the ring on my finger. "You're married," she said. "How's that going?"

"Not so good."

"So you thought you'd give me a call."

"No."

"Remember Dean?" she asked. "That guy I used to see sometimes? He got married not too long ago. Wanted to have one last fling, so he called me. We were planning to go out of town, stay in a nice hotel over the weekend, but he had a sudden attack of morality and cancelled. Then, the day before the wedding, he changed his mind. Called me and said he was going fishing. He wanted me to meet him by the river, take a stroll in the woods."

She tapped her fingernails on the table. They were painted bright red. Through the window, I saw a car pull up in front of the restaurant. The driver honked three times, and a young woman at the bar got up and walked out. When I looked back at Chloe, she

was staring at me like I'd been the one to ask for a tryst by the river, and she couldn't believe I didn't have better manners.

"It's not like that," I told her, and when I got back to the hotel, I called Pam.

"How's DC?" she asked.

*

My business meeting was boring. Federal markets. Managed care. Title Five. I kept thinking about Chloe. Eventually, I called, asked her to dinner again, told her I'd take her to a nice place this time. She agreed, and I made reservations at L'Auberge, the best French place in the area, out in Great Falls. I wanted to spoil her, show her a good time. I wanted her to dress up and do her hair, and – in spite of everything I'd said to the contrary – I wanted her to take me to bed after dinner.

She came to the door dressed in sweatpants and a coffee-stained t-shirt. Her hair was greasy. She had dark circles under her eyes. She smiled at me, touched my arm. "You look nice," she said. "Come in."

I sat on the couch, and she sat close beside me. "As you can see I'm not quite ready yet. I would apologize but I figure you can stand to wait half an hour. Do you want something to drink? I'm going to have a glass of wine while I get ready."

"No, thanks."

She had a box of wine in the refrigerator. She didn't take it out, just rinsed a glass, then held it under the spout and poured.

"I guess I'd better hop in the bath," she said.

She took her glass of wine and disappeared into the bathroom, leaving the door ajar so I could see the dim yellow light on the ceiling, the wall tiled Pepto-Bismol pink.

"Come on in," she called. "Sit down and talk to me." When I didn't get up she said, "Relax. It's nothing you haven't seen before."

I went in, put the lid down on the toilet and sat leaning forward with my legs apart, my hands folded, elbows resting on my knees. There were tampon wrappers and used tissues wadded up on the grungy linoleum floor. On the sink, an empty beer can sat where a bar of soap should have been. The wastebasket was overflowing. Chloe was lying in the tub. I didn't look long enough to see more.

"So," she asked. "What prompted this sobriety thing?"

"I don't know, Chloe. I guess I just got tired of it."

"Look at me when you're talking to me, Paul. You're making me feel uncomfortable."

"Sorry." I turned my head and took a long look at her face. She smiled, batted her eyelashes, and I surveyed the rest of her body. Either the wine-box lifestyle had taken its toll or I'd been so drunk in those years that I'd deluded myself, but I remembered her as an incredibly sexy woman, and she wasn't. Her skin was splotchy and red. She had a little pot-belly. Her legs were long and thin, purple veins showing beneath the too pale skin, and her hips were boney.

She'd never been so human to me before. She'd been a drinking partner, a robot that malfunctioned half the time. And I think the sudden humanity was what made me want to touch her, really, make her feel good, give her some relief from what, looking around the dingy apartment, appeared to be a pretty shitty life.

"Like what you see?" she asked, trying to pitch her naturally high voice low and sexy.

It didn't come off very well, but she was doing it, and she was doing it for me, and even if she wasn't – even if she just wanted to prove to herself that she could still make me want her – I wanted her to believe it was true, so I nodded, and she laughed, told me to go get her another glass of wine.

*

She wore a black see-through shirt cut diagonally with a black tank-top underneath, tight black dress pants and black heels. Her hair was a black bob, a bobby pin holding the bangs away from the left side of her face, letting the rest hang over her right eye. Fashionable and sophisticated, she had gone from greasy to classy in less than an hour. I took advantage of the opportunity to put my arm lightly around her waist as we got on and off the elevator. I couldn't get a read on whether or not that was okay with her. She let me touch her but she didn't smile, didn't relax into me.

We didn't talk much in the car. In the restaurant she ordered a bottle of wine. After the second glass she started talking. "So, this wife of yours, what's her name again? Pam? What's the problem between you two?"

"I don't know, exactly," I said. "Typical marriage stuff, I imagine. I think we thought we were in love. Maybe we were. But we didn't think we were ever going to have any problems. Then things got old, and all the little things became issues. She doesn't like my cat. I don't like her dog. I don't do as much around the house as she does. She spends too much money. We get on each other's nerves. We fight about what's on TV."

The elderly couple at the table next to us spoke to each other in French. The woman wore a gaudy necklace of marble sized pearls. She seemed a little disgusted, her lips pursed as she poked at a slab of red meat with her fork.

“You mean you’re an NYPD Blue guy and she’s a Law and Order type of girl?” Chloe asked.

“No. It’s more like I think the Law and Order guy should go to jail and she thinks they should give him a break, and the next thing you know we’re arguing about euthanasia and it becomes this big thing where we have irreconcilable differences in our life philosophies, and we don’t have sex for a month, and when we do I either get off in five seconds because it’s been so long or my dick won’t get hard because I’m so pissed at her I can’t imagine being affectionate.”

“Affectionate? Is that part of the new Paul? I don’t remember sex and affection being in the same zip code in Paul’s world. In fact, I seem to remember being pushed down in the parking lot, having my face shoved in the asphalt. That sort of thing.”

There was nothing I could say to that. I could have told her *I* didn’t remember it, I guess, but that wouldn’t have made matters any better. She polished off a full glass of wine in a few swallows, without removing the glass from her lips, then filled it again and took a small, civilized sip.

“Chloe, I—”

“Seeing you again makes me want to drink, you know? I hope you’re planning on taking care of me when I’m stumbling drunk. I remember lifting your face out of your own puke many times, just to make sure you didn’t suffocate in it when you were passed out on the floor.”

“I never should have put you through that. The fact that you kept coming around, it means a lot to me. I never would have made it, otherwise.”

“I had low self-esteem at the time. I didn’t think I deserved any better.”

The waiter brought out a plate of frogs’ legs. They were the color of boiled chicken, covered with parsley, drenched in green oil. It was a shame, I thought; so many of them for one appetizer.

*

I didn’t try to touch her again, help her into the car, but I did open and close the door for her, and I took her by the convenience store to get a bottle of wine on the way back to the apartment. I was looking forward to getting back to my hotel room. She opened the bottle of wine in the car, with a corkscrew she apparently kept in her purse, and started drinking right from the bottle. She spilled down her chin, giggled, then leaned the seat back, looked out the passenger side window, up at the street lights and the trees as we passed them by. I could remember doing the same thing, from time to time, when she drove me around. I could remember the way the lights left trails, the way it all seemed so beautiful, the way I was always so sad.

After a while she sighed, reached over and rested her hand on my leg. “You know, Paul, I remember some good times, too. I remember we used to go to the beach every other weekend or so. We’d get a hotel room and just drink and have sex and drink and have sex, and you’d go out and pick up some Chinese food, and you always brought flowers back with you. I remember that. I remember other stuff, too. You used to put on that hillbilly accent and read to me – all that old romantic poetry. You were so funny. You made me laugh. That’s the trick to keeping a girl, you know?”

She looked over at me. "Maybe you should try that with your wife. Make her laugh. Don't be so damn serious all the time. You know you haven't made a single joke since you've been here?"

I wanted to tell her I was sorry. I wanted to thank her. I wanted to beg her to stop drinking, but I just shrugged. "I don't remember being funny."

"You never remember anything," she said.

I looked ahead at the yellow lines down the center of the road, remembering ocean air on winter mornings, sharp and damp against the whites of my eyes as I waited for the liquor stores to open on the boardwalk.

I'd be back in the hotel by eleven.

MANNEQUIN

I'd only been at my desk for a few minutes when Tammy called. It was nine o'clock in the morning, and she was still a little groggy, slurring like she was drunk.

"They raped me," she said. "And you watched."

I didn't think I'd heard right. "What are you talking about?"

"In my dream," she said, insistent now, lucid. "They raped me. And you took numbers."

"*Who* raped you?" I asked.

"My ex-boyfriends."

I knew, more or less, what this meant.

She'd told me about her ex-boyfriends a couple weeks before, and when I noticed some inconsistencies I grilled her about it. It turned out she'd left every one of them for the next one, always with overlap, and she'd lied to me about it. She hadn't even finished with the last guy until six months after we'd started dating. She didn't stop sleeping with him until she asked me to move into her house. It had been a year since then, but I was still pretty upset when I found out, and I let her know. She stopped having sex with me, and now she'd had this dream.

"Stan?"

"I'm here," I said. "I just... I don't know. How did we get here? This is who I am in your head."

I looked out my office window, through the trees, over the highway. A squirrel jumped onto the window sill, jumped back off, onto a branch, then disappeared. "I'm

sorry,” Tammy said. “I don’t know what I expected you to say. It was just a dream. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“It means something.”

We were quiet a second, then she asked when I’d be home. She knew the answer – I always got home around six – but it was something to say, something to wrap things up. “Same as usual,” I told her.

“I’m working ‘til nine,” she said. “Probably won’t come straight home. I’m having coffee with Omar.”

She worked as a program coordinator at a center for at-risk youth, kids from poor neighborhoods, a lot of them immigrants. Omar was one of the counselors. They’d been having coffee a lot.

I said, “Sure. Have a good time.”

*

Someone had set a mannequin’s head on a window sill in the second story of the abandoned house across the street from our place. From Tammy’s, I guess. The window had been broken, so there was no glass, just an open space, and that night I sat on the front step, smoking a cigarette, looking up at the head while I waited for her to get home.

The ashtray I normally kept out there was gone. It was a big ceramic thing shaped like a canoe, a gift from an old girlfriend, and I wondered whether or not Tammy had thrown it away. She didn’t like me smoking, worried about the way I woke up coughing every morning.

The air was clear and warm, the sky lit by the moon, and I was still staring at the head in the window when an old white Nissan pulled up to the curb. After a second, Tammy got out. Omar didn't. He drove away. I watched the car go down the street, a John Kerry sticker on the bumper. Tammy was crazy about John Kerry. Everybody was.

She stood there on the sidewalk, brown hair falling all around her shoulders. She only wore it that way when she was trying to look good. She wasn't wearing her glasses, either, and she stared at me for a second – like I'd insulted her – before she started up the walkway to our door. "How was coffee?" I asked.

"It was fine," she said, a note of hostility in her voice. "Were you waiting up for me? Making sure I didn't get home too late?"

"What am I? Daddy? You're not a teenager. I'm just having a cigarette."

She sighed, sat down next to me. "Sorry," she said, and I put my hand on her knee. She leaned against me, her head on my shoulder. "I don't know what's wrong with me," she said.

"Bad dreams," I said, and pointed at the mannequin's head in the window across the street. "Check that out."

She sat up, squinting, then put her glasses on. She wore the kind with thick black frames. Nerd chic. "What the fuck is that?" she asked.

"Serial killer," I said.

"She's creepy," she said.

"Come on," I told her. "It gives the neighborhood a little character."

"It's fucking creepy," she said. "Makes me feel like I'm being watched."

“And we know how much you hate that.”

“I’m taking that thing out of there,” she said, and started across the street.

I got up and walked after her. “Leave it,” I said. I tried to take her arm but she jerked it away. “The place is condemned,” I said. “What if the floor falls in or something?”

“It can’t be that dangerous,” she said. “Someone put it up there.”

I watched her cross the street, try the door. It wouldn’t give, so she went around back. The next thing I knew she was up there. She smiled at me, like it was some kind of triumph, then pushed the head forward through the window. It dropped soundlessly into the overgrown grass. When I looked back up she was gone. I stood there watching until she came back around the side of the house.

“Nothing to it,” she said.

*

When I got home from work the next day she was on the phone. She smiled at me, kissed my cheek, then walked into her office. I was right behind her, but she closed the door without looking back. I stood there for a minute, listening to her muffled voice, her laughter, and I knew she was talking to Omar. I’d been thinking of taking her to dinner. To a movie. Something. I decided to go for a drive, instead, thinking maybe when I got back she would be off the phone. I could talk to her. I didn’t want to sit there in the meantime, trying not to get uptight about it, trying not to listen, all the time straining to hear every word.

I drove down York to Colfax, took Colfax to Broadway. I passed 7-11s and donut shops, a couple Chinese places. As I got further from Lower Downtown, the

buildings got older, the brick storefronts faded tan. There were adult theatres, video shops, red lit signs reading "XXX GIRLS" interspersed with hardware stores and furniture outlets. I turned around when I passed an army surplus place. The sun was going down. The sky turned purple.

About a half hour later it was dark out and I was on our street again. I pulled up in front of the house and the lights were on in her office. I could see her through the window, still on the phone, still smiling, laughing here and there. She twirled a strand of her hair around her index finger. It was a nervous thing she did when she was flirting. She'd done it when she was flirting with me, anyway. In the beginning.

I drove back into town, parked across the street from a bar on Colfax and went inside. I'd been there once before, taken Tammy to see this poet. He was a junkie from New York City. He talked about nodding out. He talked about dreams. We argued about it, after. She said it was pointless. She liked political stuff, calls to action. Didn't I understand? I didn't. I knew she liked poetry, so I took her to a fucking reading. I didn't know the guy had to be Gandhi.

The bar was a dive. The walls were dirty yellow and the lights were low. The whole place felt kind of wet and sickly orange. Smell of stale beer. Old guys sitting at the bar, smoking cigarettes, drinking draft. When I came in, they looked up from their drinks, stared at me a second, then looked back down. I was a disappointment.

I took a seat and the bartender asked me what I'd have. He was short, dark hair and eyes, pointy little goatee, his face deeply lined, pock-marked like he'd suffered from acne something awful in high school. When he smiled it seemed like sarcasm. I ordered a cup of coffee. He looked over his shoulder, down the other end of the bar. I

followed his eyes to the coffee pot. There was a little bit left in the bottom. He turned back to me, tilted his head to the side, the bar rag still in his hands.

“You sure you wouldn’t like something else?” he asked. He had an accent that sounded English to me.

“You English?” I asked.

“South African,” he said.

“You came all the way from South Africa to work here?”

“It pays the bills.”

“I’ll have coffee.”

He went down, poured a cup, brought it back to me. “Cream and sugar?” he asked.

I took a sip but it was foul. It might have been sitting there for hours. “I could take it black if you’d make a new pot,” I told him.

“I’ll get the cream and sugar,” he said.

The guy sitting next to me was a fat man, maybe sixty years old, no eyebrows, a big, fleshy nose. “Don’t mind Jan,” he said, pronouncing it “Yon.” “He’s been grumpy ever since they got rid of apartheid.”

“Go fuck yourself, Richard,” Jan said, bringing the cream and sugar. “I was in a bad mood long before that.”

He went back down to the other side of the bar and Richard, the fat man, turned to me. “Why don’t you have a real drink, kid?” he asked “Grow some hair on your chest.”

“I think the coffee’s gonna do that just fine,” I told him.

"What are you doing in here, anyway? What are you? Thirty?"

"Thirty-five."

"You should be at the young guy's bar," he said. "Getting the young pussy."

"College chicks don't go in for the businessman type," I said. "Not with the grey hair."

"Not *that* young," he told me. "You need one of those professional girls. The power-suit broads with the briefcases. The ones your age are newly divorced and ready to go. I bet they fuck you like they hate you. Nothing better than a woman who fucks you like she hates you."

"I got a girlfriend at home."

"Does she hate you?"

"I think so."

"Then why aren't you fucking her?" he asked. Before I could answer, he whistled to the bartender. "Hey. Jan. Get this kid a beer and a shot of tequila. Put it on my tab."

"No," I said. "Thanks. Really. But I've got to get back soon."

"Just one drink," he said. "It's on me. And anyway she'll hate you more if you get home late. You'll get better sex."

Jan put a mug of beer and a shot-glass full of tequila on the bar and stood there staring as I knocked back the tequila, winced, and took a sip of beer. "There you go," he said. "All better." And he took the shot-glass away.

Richard smiled. "Now. Tell me, son. Why does the little lady hate you?"

Jan came back with another shot. "This one's on the house," he told me.

“Thanks,” I said, and knocked it back, too. It didn’t burn so much, this time. My head was starting to go a little fuzzy. These men, I felt like I could trust them. “She had this dream,” I said. “I sat there taking numbers while her ex-boyfriends raped her. I don’t know how she came up with that. I mean, even in her sub-conscious. It’s not something I would do.”

Richard shrugged, and Jan held up a finger.

“Correction,” he said. “You did do it. In dream life.”

Then he picked up Richard’s mug and drank.

Richard stared at him, mouth half open. “That’s my fucking drink,” he said.

“I own this place,” Jan told him. “Everything in it’s mine.”

“Dream life isn’t real,” I said.

“My fucking drink isn’t yours.”

“Dream life isn’t real,” I repeated, louder this time.

Richard turned to me. “Will you shut the fuck up, kid? We’re having a discussion here.”

“I’ll get you another beer,” Jan said. “On the house.”

“Dream life isn’t real,” I muttered.

Jan shrugged and went to the tap to get Richard another beer. Richard turned to me, rubbed the fleshy end of his nose with the palm of his hand. It made a squishy noise, like someone jerking off. He said, “When you drink as much as I do it’s hard to tell the difference between dreams and reality.”

“It’s pretty easy for me,” I told him.

"Either way," he said. "You need to figure out why you let those guys rape your girlfriend. Even if it was only a dream. You need to figure out why she had it. Why she imagines you that way."

"What are you, a shrink?"

"I used to be a priest," he said. "It's close enough."

"He's a real fucking holy man, this one," Jan said, returning with the mug.

"Direct fucking line to Jesus."

A young couple came in, maybe in their early twenties, maybe underage. A guy with a black, spiky mohawk and a goth chick. She had a spiked collar with a leash attached to it. He was holding the leash. Jan smiled at them like they were regulars and went to meet the guy at the other end of the bar. The girl walked over to the jukebox, her leash stretched tight, and slid a dollar in. Patsy Cline came over the speakers. "I fall to pieces."

"That's what you need," Richard said. "A girl on a leash."

"I'm not like that," I told him. "I don't keep her under lock and key. And a year ago if I didn't ask about every little part of her day she thought I didn't care. Now I can't even ask her how she's doing. She thinks I'm interrogating her."

"Are you?"

I looked at the counter, resigned. "We had an argument a while back," I said. "She'd lied to me about a bunch of stuff. Her past. I got pissed."

Jan was back with refills by then, and he must have overheard, because he sneered like Sid Vicious and said, "I bet you dragged her through the muck. I bet you

made her tell you every little detail. 'Did you fuck him? Did you suck his dick?' You fucking Americans. You make me sick."

"South African guys don't mind when their girlfriends have been with half the guys in the city?"

"South African women aren't sluts," he told me.

The punk rock kids were making out in the corner by then, real graphic, like teenagers at a house party. I nudged Richard, gestured toward them with a nod. "Will you look at this?" I whispered. "Right here in the bar."

"You got a problem with that kind of thing?" Jan asked. "People kissing? I bet you're a cold motherfucker. I bet you haven't laid a hand on her since you called her a whore."

"I didn't call her a whore."

"But you won't touch her."

"I've tried," I insisted. "I bought her lingerie, for Christ's sake."

"Oh, that's the ticket," he said. "Shame her, then make her play dress up. I bet you went with the virginal white, too. I bet you like the virgins. I bet you're the kind of guy who hangs around high schools in a trench coat."

I stood up, the bar stool falling behind me. "I don't have to listen to this shit."

He laughed, and everyone stared at me. Even the jukebox went quiet, and the kids stopped kissing. The guy with the Mohawk said, "Chill out, man. We're trying to have a moment over here."

Jan smiled at me. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'll get you another beer. On the house."

Richard got up and set my stool right. I hesitated for a few seconds before I sat down. Jan went back to the taps, and Courtney Love came over the speakers. She sang "Doll Parts." I could remember the first time I'd heard the song. Some party I'd been to in college. The girls loved it. They sang along, took jello shots, lime green. It had been a simpler time. "Yeah, they really want you, they really want you, they really do."

And Richard turned to me, spoke very earnestly, almost like a father. "Have you tried flowers?" he asked.

I told him, "We're way past that."

*

I drove home more carefully than usual, didn't run any lights, blow through any stop signs. A little alcohol made me a better driver. A more conscientious one, anyway. The house was dark. I turned my headlights off before I parked. I didn't want Tammy to know I'd come home, didn't want her to see me.

The mannequin's head was still in the tall grass. I picked it up with both hands, turned it over in the moonlight, looked at its face: full lips, unpainted. Petite nose. Colorless eyes. I took her around back and crawled into the kitchen through an open window. The moonlight cast shadows on the counters, on the floor and the walls.

I followed a hallway to the front of the house, to the foyer and the stairs. They didn't look very reliable, but I'd made up my mind. Anyway, Tammy had been up them. I figured I'd take it slow. About halfway up, I walked through a spider web. I wiped my face, sputtered and blew, then went the rest of the way, to the top. The street lamps shone through the broken windows, and I could see a few empty bottles in the

corner, cigarette boxes, crushed beer cans. My ashtray was sitting there. The one shaped like a canoe, overflowing with butts.

I walked over to one of the windows, set the head down on the sill so it faced our house. Tammy's house. I imagined the panic, the paranoia she would feel in the morning, walking out the door and seeing that head staring at her. The thought of her heart pounding and her hands trembling put me at ease. I only hoped that I'd be there with her, that I'd get the chance to see her eyes, wide with fear.

I stood watching the house for a minute, then headed down the stairs, but when I was almost to the bottom, one of the steps gave way. I heard a crack, and my foot went through the board, halfway up my shin. I couldn't see very well in the darkness, but well enough. My leg was all cut up, the flesh torn and bloody. When I tried to pull free, I could feel jagged wood scrape against bone.

LEAK

I was telling Peyton about a friend of mine who'd seen a documentary on polar bears one day and quit his job in marketing the next, how he'd moved to Alaska and gone to work for an environmental non-profit organization, and how I thought there must have been something wrong, because he'd always been so business minded, and the polar bear thing came out of nowhere. I was on my back and she was on her stomach, one leg bent so her foot was in the air, and at a little after two o'clock in the morning in the dark she looked like one of those two-page black and white ads in the front of Vogue – head on the pillow, high cheekbones, angular jaw, everything in shadow – and when I told her I thought maybe my friend was crazy, maybe it had something to do with his father being sick and his feeling like he couldn't do anything to help, she said you couldn't pin things down that way. She said it was like that sometimes. People just did things.

So I smoothed a few strands of her hair with my finger and asked if she ever thought about leaving her husband, and she closed her eyes and said, "No. Besides, suggesting divorce to a married woman you've been sleeping with for a couple months is like proposing to a single girl on the third date. I read that in Cosmo. Don't you read Cosmo?"

"Missed that issue," I said.

She touched my stomach, brought her face close to mine. "Anyway," she said. "I'm happy the way things are. How can I be unhappy when I come over here and spend the weekend in bed with you?"

I knew she was stroking my ego, trying to change the subject, but it was working. I liked her. She was funny, and it was still new enough to be romantic. We'd met at the National Gallery, and we were both crazy about Barnett Newman. She was nothing like my ex-girlfriend. Nothing like Stacy. She wasn't broke, working in a bar, staying out late and acting crazy, so when she said spending the weekend in bed with me was enough to keep her happy, I thought to hell with it and kissed her.

Then someone knocked on the door.

"Company?" Peyton asked.

I shook my head, and whoever it was knocked again, louder this time – the way people knock when they're not going away – so I got out of bed and pulled on my jeans. Peyton sat up, looking concerned, holding the sheet over her chest with one hand, and I crept to the door, but when I looked through the peephole there was nobody there.

"Who is it?" Peyton whispered.

"Nobody," I said, and opened up to take a look down the hall.

Stacy had been standing there out of sight, leaning against the wall to the side of the door, and before I could stop her she walked right in and started talking like it was perfectly natural for her to show up unannounced. "You would not believe the night I had," she said. "My boss is a cretin."

She made it all the way to the dining table before she saw Peyton, stopped for a second, then said "Hi" like it was no big deal and went into the kitchen. It was just an alcove, really, a tight white space carved into the wall. "You got anything to eat?" she asked. "I'm starving."

“Who’s that?” Peyton asked, still whispering.

“Stacy,” I said.

“The crazy one?”

Stacy poked her head out of the kitchen. “I’m not deaf,” she said. “And I’m not crazy.”

Peyton didn’t say anything.

“Did he tell you I was crazy?” Stacy asked.

“Not in so many words,” Peyton said.

Stacy ducked back into the kitchen, started opening cabinets, banging around.

“All you got is pasta,” she said, then raised her voice, calling out to Peyton. “All he ever has is pasta.”

Peyton got out of bed, the sheet still covering her, then picked up her clothes and disappeared into the bathroom.

*

I stood in the entrance to the kitchen, looking at Stacy. She didn’t look at me. She stood at the sink, filling a pot with water. She was wearing black jeans and a tight little t-shirt. The black beret, the dyed red hair in pigtails. I loved the pigtails, the little girl thing. Lollipop, lollipop.

“Peyton’s a looker,” she said, hefting the pot of water from the sink to the stove.

“You didn’t tell me she was so pretty.”

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“Making pasta.”

“You knew she was—”

I didn't get a chance to finish the sentence before Peyton came out of the bathroom. She'd put her tan skirt back on, the cream colored silk blouse. Usually it was just pretty, but now it seemed out of place. I was in jeans, Stacy was in jeans, and Peyton looked like she was going to a job interview. I mean, she'd come over that way, so there was nothing deliberate about it, and she probably would have preferred to be in jeans, too, but it was still weird, like an assertion of class. Not money, but style.

She took a seat at the dining table, where she had a clear view of Stacy, still in the kitchen. I walked over to her, put my hand on the back of her chair, and she looked up at me over her shoulder. I smiled. She didn't.

"You know your faucet's leaking?" Stacy asked.

"Hadn't noticed," I said.

"It's like Chinese water torture." She raised her voice again, like she had to shout to be heard above the din of a few drops of water. "You guys want some pasta?"

"I'm all set," Peyton said.

"Stacy," I told her. "You need to go home."

She turned to me like I'd insulted her. "I'm just gonna make something to eat real quick," she said. "Christ. Is that okay with you? Do you know what kind of night I've had?"

I was about to say I didn't give fuck what kind of night she'd had, but Peyton spoke first. "Let her stay a minute, Oscar. After all, she's had a rough night."

They smirked at each other.

"So how 'bout it?" Stacy asked. "Let me stay?"

Peyton looked over her shoulder at me again, stern, like she was a school teacher and I'd been caught passing notes. I was in enough trouble as it was, and she hadn't even read the note. I'd have real problems, depending on what it said, and that was up to Stacy. Kicking her out would be as good as telling Peyton I was fucking her, which – in truth – had not been the case for at least a few weeks.

So I sat down. I told Stacy, "Don't make a mess."

*

Stacy sat with us at the table while she waited for the water to boil. Peyton reached up to pull the cord for the light on the ceiling fan, turned it on. I wished she hadn't.

"So what's going on here?" she asked.

Stacy said, "I had a lousy night at work and I wanted to meet you, anyway."

Peyton nodded. I'd told her about Stacy, but more as a thing of the past. She didn't know we were still talking. At least not that often. "You guys talk a lot?" she asked.

Stacy winked. "Don't worry. All he ever talks about is you."

Peyton wasn't buying it, though. She raised her eyebrows.

"We used to date," Stacy said. "On and off for years. Relationships like that are hard to let go of, you know? So we're still friends, but believe me, that's it. I couldn't be with him like that again."

"You're not exactly helping my cause," I told her.

In the kitchen, the water boiled over. It made a sound like static when it hit the stove. Stacy got up and went in. "You guys sure you don't want any?" she asked.

"I'm sure," Peyton said.

Stacy opened a box of bowtie pasta and dumped about half of it in the pot.

"More for me," she said, then came back to the table and sat down. "Don't get me wrong. Oscar's a sweetheart, but you know how it is."

"No," Peyton said. "I don't."

Stacy shrugged. "Things kind of fizzled out. Like with you and your husband, I guess."

"Fizzled out?" I asked.

"You don't know anything about my husband," Peyton said.

"The passion's still alive?" Stacy asked.

Peyton stood up, grabbed her purse and keys. "I'm going home."

"Peyton," I said. "Wait a minute, will ya?"

I got up to follow her, but she was already out the door.

I looked at Stacy. "Fizzle-fizzle," she said.

*

The parking lot was full. All different kinds of cars, circles of light from the lampposts reflected in dazzling white on their hoods. The lot itself had been repaved in sections over the course of the past few months, and the colors reminded me of something out of a children's book; the blacktop too black, the yellow stripes too yellow.

Peyton didn't look back on the way to her car. She got in without saying anything to me. I opened the back door on the driver's side and put her bag on the seat, then put my hand on top of the car and leaned down by her window. She started the

engine, sat there for a second, then opened the window. "Why did you start something with me if you still had something going with her?" she asked.

She nearly ran over my foot backing out of her space, and she didn't check behind her. Tires squealed and a black SUV smashed into the back of the car. It pushed her front end into the Chrysler parked next to her, behind me. My legs would have been broken if I'd been standing a few inches to the left.

Car alarms went off all over the place. Peyton's car. The SUV. The car behind me. The lady who'd been driving the SUV got out, started cursing and hollering. "What the fuck were you thinking?" All that. She was short, stocky. Gray hair. A white sweat shirt with a Christmas tree on it, in the middle of June.

I looked all around, at the lights coming on in the windows up and down the building, at the clouds moving too quickly across the moon, taking it all in, standing firmly in the moment for the first time all night.

*

It was a couple hours before everything was sorted, the police reports, the tow trucks. An ambulance. Stacy heard the commotion and came out, started flirting with one of the cops standing back from the scene. He was a young guy. Thin, with close cropped hair. He looked like one of those army kids I'd seen on TV, the nineteen year olds patrolling Baghdad, getting blown to bits by car bombs and guys with grenades strapped to their chests. There was a cop questioning me, and he had to repeat every question because I kept looking over his shoulder at Stacy, chatting that kid up like she was going to get his number right there. If they'd been in a bar I wouldn't have put it past her to take him home, just to piss me off.

Peyton leaned against the side of the ambulance with her arms folded, the gray headed lady inside, presumably on a gurney with some kind of big collar around her neck to keep it straight. She'd calmed down. She stopped yelling when they gave her something for the pain.

After a while the ambulance left, along with the cops, and the cars were towed away. It was just the three of us standing out there at four o'clock in the morning. The sky had cleared, no more clouds, just the moon, and it was too bright to see the stars.

"I'm calling George," Peyton said.

"Do you think that's a good idea?" I asked.

"You got a better plan?"

I'd been wanting her to tell him, but not like this. "You can stay here," I told her. "Stacy'll go home."

"Not unless you give me a ride," Stacy said. "I took the bus here from Pentagon Station. It's too late to catch one now. The Metro's closed, too."

"I'll just call George," Peyton said. "I want to get out of here."

"Can't you spare me the drama?" I shouted. "The last thing I need is your fucking husband over here. He's gonna freak out, for Christ's sake."

"Oh, grow up," she said. "You think he doesn't know about you?"

"You told him?"

"I told him I wanted something on the side before I even met you," she said. "It's not like he hasn't had his share. I told you he didn't know because it made you feel good. You were getting such a kick out of being the bad boy."

"He loves that shit," Stacy said.

Peyton took out her cell phone and dialed. George must have answered on the first ring, because it wasn't more than a second before she was talking to him. "Hey hon," she said, her tone matter of fact, like she was going to ask him to pick her up at the shop, not her lover's place. "I need you to come get me."

I could hear him talking on the other end, but I couldn't make out what he was saying. "It was fun for a while," she told him. "But things went south. He's got a girlfriend."

George laughed. He was loud enough for me to hear him when he said, "You've got kind of a boyfriend yourself."

"Yeah, yeah," Peyton said. "Listen, though. I want to get out of here."

Stacy gave me a satisfied grin, like she'd won a bet, and George lowered his voice again. "No, honey," Peyton said. "There's a little problem with the car. I'll tell you about when you get here, okay?"

Then she was giving him directions.

When she hung up, we went back upstairs to my apartment and sat at the table again. The leaky faucet was the only sound, a steady drip. "God, that's annoying," she said, then went to the kitchen and turned the faucet on and off, trying to make it stop.

*

It wasn't long before George got there. He knocked and Peyton answered, her bag in hand. She was obviously disappointed when he came inside instead of taking her away directly. He was a regular looking guy, more or less, but dressed like a mechanic, like he'd just come from the garage. Cheap blue slacks. Blue and white

striped shirt with a name tag embroidered on the front of it. "George," lettered in red.

There were grease stains all over. On the shirt. On his face and hands.

I'd been expecting an accountant. A lawyer.

"Working late?" Peyton asked.

"We got this old Mustang," he said. "The transmission's kaput. I'm having fun with it."

I stood up and he extended his hand. "You must be Oscar."

I looked down at his hand. "Oh," he said. "Sorry."

He went to the bathroom, left the door open while he washed up. "I've always like these little studio apartments," he said. "Great for a bachelor." Then he came back out and offered his hand again. We shook. "Nice to meet you," he said. "Peyton told me a little about you."

"What did she say?"

"She said you like the modern art. I never could understand that stuff myself. Looks like a bunch of scribble to me." He turned to his wife. "What happened to the car?"

"I wrecked the car," she said.

"How'd you manage that?"

"It's a long story. I'll tell you on the way home."

"Come on, now, Peyton," he said. "There's no reason to get bristly."

"Yeah, Peyton," Stacy said. "Lighten up."

"You're the girlfriend?" George asked.

"Yup."

"She used to be," I said.

"Used to be, used to be." He was still jovial, a regular Santa Claus. "You're a darling," he told her. "I love the little girl look."

Stacy made a kissy face.

George made a face like he smelled something.

"What's the matter?" I asked. He shushed me.

"You hear that?" he asked. "What is that?" He stood there a minute, then followed his ears to the kitchen. "You know you got a leaky faucet?"

Peyton dropped her purse, slumped her shoulders and looked at the ceiling in surrender. "He knows," she sighed.

I walked over to the kitchen. George knelt down and opened the cabinet under the sink. "We've got to have a look at this," he said.

"That's not really necessary," I told him.

Peyton raised her voice. "Can we please just get out of here George?"

George stuck his head in the cabinet. "This is an easy fix," he said, then pulled his head back out and looked up at me. "You got a toolbox?"

By that time Peyton was standing next to me in the entrance to the kitchen. The sleeve of her blouse brushed lightly against my arm.

"It'll just take a second," George told her.

I went to the closet to get the toolbox. My mother had given it to me when I moved out of my parents' house, nearly twenty years before, and I don't think I'd opened it but once or twice in all that time.

HERONS

April was 48. Ryan was 16. I was 27, closer to his age than I was to his mother's, so I was surprised by the dignity and grace with which he handled the situation. He was a kid I might have smoked a joint with, behind the carwash where I worked, if he'd worked there, too, and I hadn't been sleeping with his mother. And he was a kid I might have punched, had the situation been reversed – had he been 27 and fucking *my* mother, when I was 16 – but he acted like I was any other guy his mother brought around; he looked at me with scorn but, for the most part, said nothing, and I was grateful for that.

I could never have imagined how he felt, of course, because my mother was still married to my father, which probably bothered me almost as much as I bothered him, albeit for a whole different set of reasons. The thing with my parents was that, in spite of an almost desperate craving for his approval, I'd never really liked my father, very much, and I sort of hated my mother for staying with him.

When I was a freshman in high school, he'd encouraged me to get involved with sports. "Sid," he said. "You ought to get involved with sports. You ought to play football. You ought to join the wrestling team." So I joined the wrestling team. I wore yellow tights that made me look like a banana with matchstick arms, and when my father came to my first meet, he saw me pinned in six seconds. We drove home in silence. I kept looking over at him, wanting to say something, but he wouldn't take his eyes off the road. He had a thick, gray beard and a red splotch on the right side of his

face, spreading out over his cheek like a spider web of capillaries, and every time I looked at him, the red splotch was looking at me.

That night he told my mother that she'd overcooked the roast, then left his plate on the table and went up to his room with a glass of vodka. I watched her do the dishes in silence, imagining that she felt terribly oppressed, wondering how she put up with it, feeling guilty for being a part of it, but I didn't get up to help. I just sat there.

Aside from the differences in our family histories, I figured Ryan was probably a little like I'd been. He wasn't athletic at all, and he was kind of a strange kid in other respects, not the kind of kid who fit in, his face covered with pimples, his head shaved, in spite of the wispy pubescent mustache he was trying to grow. He wore baggy jeans, and he had a black t-shirt that said, "Hillary Sucks. Monica Blows." I didn't know what to make of that. Was it supposed to be rebellious? What did his mother think? I'd never asked.

April and I didn't talk politics. Maybe we should have. It might have been nice to know what she thought about life outside the bar. We'd met in the bar, and we spent most of our time in the bar, unless we were in bed, in her trailer, Ryan in the next room, playing video games, watching MTV.

*

One weekend, when Ryan was staying with his father, April and I got out of bed late at night and went outside to have a cigarette. It was nice, April in her pale green bathrobe, sitting on the cinderblock steps up to her front door, me standing there listening to the crickets, looking at her bare feet in the dirt, thinking we had a good thing going.

“Remember the night we met?” she asked. “At the bar? You were still going out with that young thing. What was her name?”

“Deirdre,” I said, and when she shook her head, I thought we were headed for trouble.

Deirdre was 18 when I met her at the local dive. I got her drinks all night long, brought them to her at a table in a dark corner, away from the bartender, away from the bar. I didn’t know she was under 21 until the next morning. I just thought I was doing really well with her. I couldn’t believe it, because she was so beautiful. The long red hair. The angular jaw. Green eyes. Perfect complexion. She wore a red v-neck t-shirt that showed so much cleavage I thought I was going to die.

When April brought it up that night on the front step, I thought she was about to get jealous. I thought she was going to ask me if it was better, being with a woman so young. I thought I was going to have to reassure her, maybe even lie, tell her that the sex wasn’t that great. I was already practicing it in my head; she didn’t know what she was doing, I’d say. A girl that age.

But April said, “Ryan dated her, too.”

My face must have dropped pretty hard. It felt like she was making fun of me. I was a joke. “A couple years ago,” she went on. “When he was 14. She was 16, I think. Just a couple years ahead of him in school. She kept calling and calling. It was pathetic.”

“Does he know I went out with her?” I asked.

She nodded, laughing out loud, now. “I told him,” she said. “Oh, Sid. You should have seen his face. I’d have given anything if you could have seen his face.”

I thought it was going to be impossible to show my face around there again, I was so embarrassed, but April kept inviting me over, and I wanted to see her, so I kept going, surprised by how normal it seemed, how everything went on, as if nothing was out of place. The way Ryan treated me. It didn't change.

I'd get up before work and he'd be at the kitchen table, eating a bowl of cereal, and I'd say, "Good morning," and he'd look up without saying anything, and every time I left I felt like I should have apologized, like I'd done him some horrible injustice. Not because of Deirdre. Because of his mother. But as I walked out to my car in the morning, she'd be standing in the doorway in her bathrobe, smiling, her short brown hair a mess, a cup of coffee in her hand, and I'd think "this is my life," and I was happy, because – whether I'd admit it or not – I kind of imagined that when I was growing up, when my father went off to work in the morning, if he had looked back at the door, he would have seen something the same.

*

Part of the reason Ryan tolerated me to the extent that he did was no doubt that he'd hated Romulus, the guy who'd been with his mother immediately before me. Her older brother, Dan, didn't mind that I was 27 at all, for precisely the same reason: in his view, I was an improvement over Romulus. He was the one who told me not to worry about Ryan. He was the one who told me what Romulus had done.

One afternoon, when April was working at the hospital, Dan and I were at a bar called *Skipper's*, on James Island, near Charleston. It looked like a big white boat from the outside, but inside it was an ordinary dive. The only exceptions were the wooden rafters, the walls that curved upwards and out, like we were really below deck, in the

hull of a ship. The bartenders kept the lights low, and they sold glasses of Icehouse Beer for 50¢ at happy hour. It was happy hour when I saw Dan at the bar. He'd finished a job early, and he was there with a pitcher of Icehouse, sawdust on his t-shirt and jeans. He'd been cutting two-by-fours all day, building a bungalow in some rich guy's backyard, and he was very drunk by the time I ran into him, by the time he told me that I was okay. "You're okay," he said. "I like you."

"Thanks. I just wish Ryan felt the same way."

"He likes you alright. I mean, you could only be a step up from Romulus. That's not saying much, but it counts for something. He was a weirdo. I mean, he was into some weird shit."

*

A couple weeks later, Dan invited Ryan, April, and me to watch the Superbowl at his place on James Island. I'd been there a few times before, and I liked it a lot. He had a townhouse with a deck out back that looked out over the marshlands, and the herons would land there, sometimes, disappearing into the tall yellow grass, the marsh grass, and no matter how many times I saw it I was always surprised by the way they would burst out again, lifting off into the sky and gliding overhead, over the row of townhouses, off to wherever they went, whatever they did.

But we didn't go out to the deck, that day. We sat in the living room, which was small and cluttered, a couch and a love seat with clunky wooden coffee tables in front of them. An old TV, complete with antennae and knobs for UHF and VHF, sitting on a milk crate against the opposite wall. I hadn't seen a TV like that in years. It buzzed like a fluorescent light off the ballast, and every once in a while the picture would

fragment into narrow lines and static over, and Dan would curse, get up and hit the top of the set with the flat of his hand to make the picture come in again. It was like my parents' living room. It was like we'd traveled back in time.

Dan sat on the couch. April and I sat on the love seat. Ryan was on the floor, watching the game, more interested than I'd expected him to be. Like I said, I hadn't taken him for a kid who would care about sports.

Dan kept offering me things. "Can I get you a sandwich?" he asked.

"I'm okay," I said.

"Another beer?"

"Thanks, but I'm set."

I wanted to tell him to relax, to stop fussing over me, but I didn't want to be rude, so I finally said yes to chips and salsa. He got up quickly, stumbling on his way to the kitchen. He was drunk again. April looked at me, and I shrugged. When Dan came back with the dip, she asked him if he was alright. "I'm fine," he said, and set the chips and salsa down on the coffee table in front of me.

Ryan was quick to sit up and grab a chip.

When I grabbed my first, he looked at me suspiciously. "Don't double dip," he said.

I ate the chip without salsa, then got up to use the bathroom. Dan pointed. "In the hall," he said.

It was nasty in there, walls papered yellow, linoleum grungy and pale green. It was clear that Dan didn't clean much. When I finished up and came out, Ryan was standing against the wall. We stood there looking at each other for a second.

"Are you a drunk?" he asked.

"No."

"My mother's a drunk," he said.

"She seems alright to me."

"Romulus was a drunk, too."

"He probably still is," I said. "It's just that you can think of his drinking in the past tense, now, because he's not with your mother anymore."

Ryan paused a second, then said, "That's an interesting point."

"I know a lot about grammar," I told him. "I used to be an English teacher."

I'd taken an intensive, four week course, to get a certification to teach English as a Foreign Language. It was a quick and easy alternative to college, and I'd thought it would give me the opportunity to travel the world. As it happened, I went to Milwaukee. I taught Mexican immigrants. I wasn't a very good teacher, and even if I'd taught them to speak perfect English, they'd have been lucky to get jobs as busboys back then, in the early 90s.

Eventually I ditched it, moved to South Carolina to start a new life at the carwash. Washing cars wasn't nearly as disheartening. The work was inconsequential, but at least I could see the results; the cars came in dirty and left clean, and I had the sense that I'd accomplished something, no matter how irrelevant, no matter how small.

It seemed important, this revelation I'd had, like stuff I should have told Ryan, but while I was standing in the hallway, lost in thought outside the bathroom at Dan's place, Ryan was having thoughts of his own, and he wasn't afraid to tell me what they were.

"You don't care about football," he said.

"No," I told him. "Not really."

"Isn't it a tad duplicitous, then, on your part, coming over here for Superbowl Sunday?"

"The alternative was to be rude."

He looked at me with what could only have been the utmost sincerity and said, "Don't think you can eat chips and salsa with impunity."

I was about to say that he might have been misusing the word *impunity*, but there was a crash from the living room, then a short scream, stifled immediately. It sounded like Dan. "Oh, Fuck," he said. "It hurts."

April said, "Are you okay?" and he said, "No, I'm not okay, you fucking moron. Obviously I'm not okay," and she said, "I think it's broken." Although I wasn't sure, at that point, what she was referring to – it could have been one of the coffee tables, for all I knew – April was a registered nurse, so I figured if it was an arm or a leg, she was qualified to make a diagnosis.

I couldn't see what was going on from where I was standing, in the hall with Ryan, but when he started for the living room, I grabbed his arm and said, "Don't."

"I could help," he said.

"They'll take care of it," I told him. "You'll just embarrass him."

I felt wise and grown up, for a second, but then April shouted, "Ryan, Sid, get in here," like we should have been there already, and the feeling was gone.

In the living room, Dan had tripped over the coffee table. His leg was broken, alright. Very broken. Broken in a way that seemed disproportionate with what you

would expect, when someone had only tripped over a coffee table. April had rolled up his pant leg, though, and it looked like if his shin had been any more broken, it would have torn through the skin, like Stevie's shin, in *The Deer Hunter*, or Joe Theisman's, when he got tackled that time, maybe in the 80s. I remembered it abruptly, how my father had been so satisfied, how I'd thought there was something sick about him for that.

We had moved to Washington DC from Chicago, and my father didn't like living in DC, didn't like his new job or our new neighbors. He missed Chicago and his Chicago friends. He missed Chicago food, Chicago sports teams.

With Dan there on the floor, his leg broken almost like Joe Theisman's, it became suddenly clear to me that my father's hatred of the Washington Redskins and his resentment of their success was rooted not in a general negativity, but in his longing for Chicago, and at once the satisfaction he took in Joe Theisman's broken leg was not mean-spiritedness, but profound sadness.

Joe Theisman, by the way, was the quarterback for the Washington Redskins in their heyday. Stevie was the guy in *The Deer Hunter* who said, "Do as your heart tells you."

*

In the waiting room at the hospital April stood by the reception desk, talking with the woman behind the counter, while Ryan and I watched the rest of the game on a television they had on a ceiling mount in the corner. It seemed to me we hadn't missed much since Dan's fall, but it was clear that Ryan's team was losing, and that Ryan was losing hope.

He sighed and said, "I don't care about this game, anymore."

I didn't say anything, and he leaned forward, elbows on his knees, hands folded in a triangle, finger tips to his chin, almost meditative. "Why did you say Dan would be embarrassed if I saw him?" he asked.

"He's drunk," I said. "And he's your uncle. He probably thinks he's setting a bad example."

"If anything it makes me want to stay away from that shit,"

"He probably doesn't want to look weak in front of you either," I said.

A fat woman stood with a doctor at the other end of the room. She wore a pink t-shirt and cried out loudly: "My baby," she said. "My poor baby." The doctor was a young guy. He looked like he didn't know what to do, like maybe he *was* her baby, or at least her baby's age, and when he touched her shoulder she shoved his hand away. "Don't you touch me," she seethed. Her t-shirt said, "I kissed Justin."

"The drinking shit isn't news to me," Ryan said. "I've seen my mom plenty wasted."

The fat woman was crying into the doctor's chest, now. He had his arms around her. He looked pretty uncomfortable, patting her back, like the whole world was upside down.

"My mom says you're a good guy," Ryan said.

"I'm not a *bad* guy."

"Didn't you work with starving children in Mexico or something?"

"Milwaukee," I said. "And they weren't children. They were Mexican."

"But you worked with starving kids and shit."

"Most of these guys were older than me."

"So why did my Mom act like you were some kind of philanthropist?"

"I think you're misusing the word philanthropist," I said.

"What's a philanthropist?"

"A guy who gives money away."

"What were you?"

"I told you," I said. "I was an English teacher."

*

After a few minutes, April came over to us. "You guys don't have to hang around here if you don't want to," she said.

Ryan said, "Good, let's get out of here," and I said, "Um."

I said "um" because I felt like I was being thrust into a parental role, like I'd be responsible for Ryan for two hours, and one of the things I liked about working at the carwash was that I didn't have to be responsible for anything. Not really. I mean, I was responsible for washing cars, but I wasn't responsible telescopic antennas, power antennas, loose chrome or mirrors, bug shields, luggage racks, sun visors, running boards, non factory installed equipment, or valuables left in cars, and I certainly wasn't responsible for 16 year olds.

But April said, "Go get something to eat," and Ryan said, "Let's go to that diner on Savannah Highway," so what could I do?

"Don't you want to watch the rest of the game?" I asked.

"It doesn't matter, anymore," he said. "We're doomed."

I decided that I was hungry, anyway, and that any emotions I felt about being responsible for Ryan could be attributed solely to that, so I agreed. It seemed like the rational position thing to do, and since I was a rational man, I figured I was capable of looking after a 16 year old for a couple hours. It didn't occur to me until much later that at 16, Ryan didn't need a lot of looking after. He might have needed discipline and school and advice, but he didn't need it from me, and he certainly didn't need help going to the diner.

*

Outside, the night was like the inside of a cloud. Inside, the diner was bright and ugly, green and white spotted Formica tables, seats so squishy you could feel the springs pressing into your ass. I'd been there before, because it was one of the only places in town that was open late night, but I'd forgotten that, before midnight, it was a teen hangout, too.

There were high school kids all over the place.

I figured that was why Ryan wanted to go, that he was probably hoping to hook up with some of his friends, but – while he nodded to a couple guys when we walked in – he didn't make any effort to talk to them. He didn't talk to them. He didn't go over to their tables. He acted like they weren't there, the same way I would have, if we'd run into someone from the bar.

“Have you played Delta Force?” he asked.

“What's Delta Force?”

“Never mind.”

I found out later that Delta Force was a video game about shooting people – terrorists, I think – but at the time I had no idea, so I really didn't know what to say to him. I just looked around. There were little wooden signs on the walls, engraved with sayings like, "No pants, no service." I'd never thought they were funny before, and I didn't really think they were funny, now, but I pretended to, just to make conversation.

When I tried to joke about them, Ryan said, "I hate these signs."

"Why?" I asked.

"They give the place personality," he said. "I hate personality."

"I know what you mean," I told him, but it felt dumb and insincere, and I didn't want to say anything else. Ryan was way ahead of me.

"The first polygraph," he said, "was tested in a sorority house. I heard about it on NPR. The man who invented it married the first woman he tested it on."

"She must have been honest," I said.

"She was ten years younger than him," Ryan said. "He was in his thirties."

"I didn't think about that."

"All the people who've tried to perfect the polygraph have been men," he said.

"Is that so?"

The waiter came over. He was crazy good looking, in his early twenties if not younger, with a blonde mop of hair and thick, full lips. His skin was perfect. His eyes were blank. He was like a pretty robot. He looked from me to Ryan and back to me as he recited the blue plate specials. "Chicken fried steak," he said. "Chicken fried chicken."

"Do you go out with older women?" Ryan asked.

"Not generally," he said.

Ryan ordered a hamburger. I ordered Huevos Rancheros. Once the waiter had gone, Ryan said, "Women don't need to use polygraphs. They can tell you're lying from the look on your face."

"My face?" I asked.

"Anyone's," he said. "That's why it's always men who do the research."

"Does it bother you that I'm with your mother?" I asked.

"It bothers me that she goes through a lot of men. I'm just taking it out on you for now. I'll take it out on the next guy, when he comes along."

"Okay."

"And, in some ways," he said, "I'm glad she's with you. She used to get hammered with Romulus."

That's when I looked to my left and saw Deirdre. It was an unlucky coincidence, but not that surprising. As big as Charleston was, we were in West Ashley, which was basically a suburb, and the diner was the only place that was open all night. Every one ended up there, eventually.

Deirdre was exactly the way I remembered her – stunning – the red hair braided on either side of her young face, and everything in my chest sank, everything in my stomach tightened, because even though April and Ryan knew that she was a girl we had in common, they didn't know what had happened between us; that she'd been the one to get bored with me.

Ryan was startled when he saw her. Even more startled than I was. Almost afraid. "Deirdre," he said. "I didn't see you come in."

“What are you doing with Sid?” she asked.

“Having a hamburger.”

“I don’t see any hamburger.”

Just then the robot brought his hamburger, and Ryan was vindicated. Deirdre walked away. “Nice to see you, too,” I mumbled. My Huevos Rancheros looked a little green.

“I used to date her,” Ryan said, explaining as if he didn’t know his mother had told me.

I couldn’t let it slide. I wanted to confess. I didn’t know why, exactly. It could have been that I didn’t want him to pity me. It could have been that I wanted him to know it was okay. Maybe I just wanted to get it all out in the open, clear out any bullshit that might have been between us. So I told him: “So did I.”

“Isn’t she a little young for you?” he asked.

“Isn’t she a little old for you?”

“I have a thing for older women,” he said.

“I think we’re on the same page, there.” I thought that would get a laugh out of him, but he wasn’t listening. He nodded in Deirdre’s direction. “Check it out.”

Another young woman had walked in and taken a seat beside Deirdre. Her hair was curly brown. She had a button nose and a full figure. A low cut shirt that left little to the imagination. “I like her nose,” Ryan said.

But I was thinking about those nights months ago, in the bar, when Deirdre and I would sit kissing in the corner, and how I’d thought it was because we had some passionate thing going, because she couldn’t keep her hands off me. I’d bring her a

beer and she'd bite my earlobe. It wasn't until we bagged it that I figured out that was just how she was. She liked public displays of affection. April wasn't much into that sort of thing. I kind of missed it.

"I broke up with her," Ryan said.

"Deirdre?" I asked. "Oh. She broke up with me."

*

I wanted to make love to his mother that night. I kissed her mouth, then her breasts. She pulled me on top, and soon I was inside her. We moved slowly at first, and she moaned and moaned and told me to do it harder, and when she sounded like she was about to come, she just quit, pushed me off and rolled away; gave me her back.

A minute later, her voice was soft when she said, "It's okay, baby. Just forget about it. Just go to sleep."

I couldn't forget about it, though, and I couldn't go to sleep, because I kept thinking that in the end I didn't really know that much about her. I knew she had a son, and I knew she was a nurse. I knew she made me feel good, brought me sandwiches at the carwash, won every game of backgammon we ever played, but that was all textbook shit – shit that anybody could have known – and it didn't really tell me anything about *her*, what she liked, what she didn't like, what she wanted or needed. Not just in bed, but in general. I didn't know what she thought about the world, and it made me wonder why she kept me around.

After me, there'd be a guy named Theodore, or maybe Calvin, and he'd be big and dopey looking, but he'd be an accountant, so he wouldn't actually be dopey, he'd just look dopey, and I'd wonder why she kept him around, too, because he'd be nothing

like Romulus, and nothing like me, and he would never really know her, either; the only thing he'd know would be her favorite song. It was the one that goes, "The only one who could ever reach me was the son of a preacher man," and she would dance around her trailer listening to it, and Ryan would say, "Mom, please stop," but she would just ignore him, spinning and spinning like an angel, and Theodore or Calvin would just sit there and stare, wondering what was coming next.

WOLFMAN

My brother didn't mean to stick a knife in my eye. We were playing, rolling around on the carpet wrestling, and Charlie, who was older by four years, managed to get on top. He had the rubber knife in one hand and I was trying to hold him off but I couldn't do it anymore. I was in second grade, about seven or eight, and weak, and when I let go, the rubber knife came plunging down into my face, below my right eye.

My brother said, "Holy Shit, Rob, are you okay?" and I cried, and he cried too.

"I didn't know you were gonna let go," he said.

My mother came home from work about an hour later and when she saw the blood and black around my eye she rushed to me, knelt down and asked, "Baby, what happened?"

We were in the kitchen and it was getting dark outside so there wasn't much sun coming through the window. The lights were off. My mother had that straight-mouthed look on her face like you didn't know whether she was about to smack you or take you for ice cream. I didn't want to tell her what happened, but my brother stepped forward. He had braces. His hair was messy, his face freckled. He didn't look so strong anymore. "It's my fault," he said, and I was grateful for his bravery even though I thought he was stupid. "It was an accident."

"What did you do?" my mother asked, her thumb pressed to my face just underneath the cut, pulling the skin down a little to see how bad it was.

"I stabbed him with a rubber knife," my brother said.

She stood up and slapped him upside the head once. Twice. "Another inch and he would have been blind," she shouted.

I felt bad for Charlie. He didn't really think a rubber knife could do any harm. And how could he have known I was so weak? How could he have known I was just going to give up and let go?

*

I had a teacher named Sister Anne. She wore a white habit and she wouldn't let me wear my gloves in the classroom. They were brown gloves and when I wore them I could pretend I was the Wolfman, my hands like his, but I didn't want her to know that. "Put your gloves in your cubby hole," Sister Anne would say, and I'd do as she said because I was already in trouble on a regular basis; I didn't need any more.

The thing that got me in trouble was that I kept running off school grounds, out towards the street during recess. There was a blonde kid named Matt, huge and fat, and he'd chase me in that direction every day. He liked it when I got in trouble. He'd chase me around the parking lot until I was tired from running. I didn't know how such a fat kid could keep going like that but he could and eventually to get away from him I'd have to get off the playground. I'd stand out by the street, cars whizzing by, some of them honking, and Matt would say, "If you come back on this playground I'm going to kill you."

He'd keep me out there, threatening me until Sister Anne saw and hurried over. Then he'd start shouting, so she could hear him, "You're not allowed to leave the playground. Come back. Hurry. You're going to get in trouble." Sister Anne would come out onto the sidewalk, pull me back toward the building and make me stand by

the door until recess was over. When we got back into the classroom she'd make me sit in the corner, facing the wall.

I hated her. When one day on our spelling quiz she told us to turn over our papers and write down our favorite colors, I wrote that mine was black.

*

The neighbors' cocker-spaniel was kept in the backyard, fenced in, but sometimes he managed to get out. He would chase me down the street, barking. Charlie told me that dogs had germs and that if one bit your leg you'd need to have your leg cut off. Some days I'd run home, the dog barking at my heels.

One day when I got home Charlie was already there, sitting in my dad's chair, drinking my dad's beer. I thought about telling him he wasn't supposed to be drinking it, but I didn't say anything, just set my backpack down on the floor and sat on the couch.

He looked at me.

"Were you running from that dog again?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You shouldn't be so scared all the time."

"What am I supposed to do?" I asked.

"Just turn around and kick the damn thing."

"But you said if it bit me—"

"I was just kidding about that," Charlie said. "Christ, can't you take a joke?"

He took a swill of beer, burped and offered me the can. "Want to try some?" he asked.

I got up from the couch, walked over to my father's chair and took the can. I was surprised by how flimsy it was, how light it felt. It smelled bad. I took a sip, didn't want to swallow, didn't like the taste. It foamed and expanded and felt like fur against the roof of my mouth. My brother must have known what was coming because he said, "Don't spit it out! Don't spit it out!" But the only other way to get rid of it was to swallow, and that seemed unthinkable, so I spat.

My brother ran to the kitchen to get some paper towels but it had already saturated a section of the carpet by my father's chair. He tried to soak it up but he couldn't get rid of the smell. "You idiot," he said. "Do you know how much trouble we're going to get in?"

"I didn't know it was gonna be gross," I told him.

He went to the kitchen, came back with a can of Lysol, but my Dad came through the front door before he was finished, stood there with his briefcase in hand, a giant of a man, looking from my brother to the spot on the carpet to me with the can of beer in my hand, then back to my brother before he said: "What the fuck is going on in here?"

"I gave it to him," my brother confessed.

My father set his briefcase down, snatched the beer from my hands and drank the rest of it. "Go to your room," he said. I headed for the stairs as my father turned to Charlie. "And you," he said. "Take a seat."

My brother was shaking. I'd never seen him shake like that.

*

Sister Anne called my mother in to speak with her. I sat on the curb outside while they talked in the classroom. It was sunny that day, and warm. My uniform was hot. I wanted to unbutton the stiff collar of my shirt, but I was afraid. Even though school was out, I was still there, and we were supposed to wear our collars buttoned to the top, our ties tied. Cars went by, the other kids getting into them to go home. I was torn between wanting to go home and not wanting my mother to come back out.

When she did come out, I was surprised by the look on her face. It was the same look she had when my brother stabbed me. I didn't know then that it was a worried face; it was just a look she got sometimes. I never knew how she was going to act. She could have knelt down in front of me and kissed my hair just as easily as she could have slapped me and demanded to know what I was thinking.

She walked over and offered me her hand. "Come on, kiddo," she said. "We need to talk."

I got up and followed her to the car, carrying my book bag over one shoulder. It seemed heavy, just then.

Once we were on the road, my mother said, "I thought your favorite color was green."

"It was," I said, not wanting to change my story.

"Why did you tell Sister Anne it was black?"

"I don't know."

"She's worried about you," my mother said.

"She's mean," I told her.

“Seems like a nice enough lady to me. Were you trying to make her angry when you left the playground?”

“No.”

That was the end of the conversation for the time being, but I worried about what would happen when she told my father.

*

My father came home that evening with a bottle of vodka. He didn't change out of his suit and tie, just went to the kitchen to fix a drink. He drank the first one standing at the kitchen counter, then poured another and took it into the living room. He switched the TV on and sat in the big leather chair next to the couch to watch the news, like he always did. I followed him in, sat down on the floor just in front of the chair. There was a commercial for a carpet store called Empire, pictures of beautiful carpets, an invisible choir of women singing “five-eight-eight-two-three-hundred... Empire!”

“How you doing, tiger?” my father asked.

“Okay.”

“How was school?” he asked, but before I could answer the news started.

“Fucking Dan Rather,” my father muttered. “Commie pinko faggot cock-sucker.”

My mother came in, sat down on the couch. “I wish you wouldn't talk that way in front of him,” she said.

“Sorry.”

“Robbie,” she said. “Why don't you go up to your room and play? I want to talk to your father.”

I left the room, but lingered at the top of the stairs so I could hear them. "I talked to Robbie's teacher this afternoon," she said. "Sister Anne."

"Fuck Jimmy Carter," my father said.

"Carl," my mother said. "I'm talking about Robbie. He's having problems at school."

I heard the television go off. "What kind of problems?" my father asked.

"He told his teacher his favorite color was black."

"So what?"

"It used to be green."

"So what, Mary Alice," my father said. "What's the big deal?"

I smiled at the top of the stairs. My father was cool.

"It's kind of morbid, don't you think?" my mother asked.

"He's a morbid kid," my father said. "Always moping. I was the same way."

"But that's not all," she told him. "He keeps running off the playground during recess, practically out into the street. It's like he goes out of his way to break the rules every day. She thinks he does it to get attention."

"None of this stuff sounds like it's worth making a fuss over," my father said.

"He doesn't like school. What are we supposed to do?"

"We should do something."

"Like what?"

"Take him to a counselor."

"You want to take Rob to a shrink?"

"It's worth a try," my mother said.

There was a long pause. There was a clinking noise, like the ice cubes in my father's glass. I could picture him sitting there, holding the glass by the rim, shaking it gently, watching it swirl around. Finally he said, "It's bullshit, Mary Alice. Robbie's fine."

On the school bus the next day, I asked Charlie what a shrink was.

"It's like a doctor for crazy people," he said.

I wondered if I was crazy. I sort of liked the idea of it.

*

Charlie managed to get a bottle of Puerto Rican rum. One day after school he invited me into his room to share it. He never invited me into his room, so it was always a place of mystery and wonder for me. He had a record player, a Led Zeppelin poster on the wall, and bookshelves stocked with "Choose Your Own Adventure" novels. He had a desk where he did his homework, and an extra chair, so he sat behind the desk and I sat in front of it, like you would for a job interview, while he administered one shot after another.

He seemed very grown up pouring rum into a shot glass, and when he gave me one I was surprised by how easy it was to drink. It wasn't like the beer. It was sweet and smooth and it went right down. After I took the first shot, my brother said, "Listen, Rob; I want to talk to you."

I sat listening. He poured himself a shot, took it, poured another for me.

"Is your eye okay?" he asked.

"It doesn't hurt anymore," I told him.

"I'm sorry about that," he said.

"I know."

"I really didn't mean to do it."

"I know."

He gave me another shot. He looked at the desktop as I took it, then looked back up at me. "Sometimes I feel like I'm not a very good big brother," he said.

It was an opportunity; he was weak then, and he would give me whatever I wanted. "Can I have some more?" I asked.

"Sure," he said, and poured me another shot.

"I shouldn't have told you that thing about the dog, either," he said. "That dog is just a dumb old thing. It can't hurt you."

"Okay."

"Is that why you run from the kids at school?" he asked, slurring a little.

"What do you mean?" My head was tingling. I felt like I was outside of it – the part of me that *was* me floating around a few inches above and a couple feet in front of my face. I didn't know until then that there was a part of me that wasn't trapped inside.

My brother was drunk. "I need to lie down," he said, getting up from the desk and going over to his bed. He lay on top of the red linens and moaned, holding his stomach. I poured myself another shot, took it.

"No more," he said. "You've had enough."

Back inside my body, I was full of energy and life. My chest felt full of air, my limbs strong. I wanted to do something. "I'm gonna go ride my bike," I said.

"No," my brother said. "What if you fall?"

"I won't fall."

"I can't get in trouble again," he said.

"You won't get in trouble," I said.

"I'm always getting in trouble because of you," he told me, but he was too sick to stop me, and within a few minutes I was careening down the street, doing loops around the cul-de-sac. It was a grey day, a little cold, and I remember squinting against the wind in my face. I remember the neighbor's cocker-spaniel barking at my heels, but I wasn't afraid. When I stopped pedaling and let the bike glide I had the feeling that nothing could touch me, nothing could go wrong. And nothing did.