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Groundhogs

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GROUNDHOGS

by

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation contains a collection of stories that explore loss and grief, illness and disability, parent and child relationships, and marriage and its expectations within the gay community and the south.

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I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my committee chair, Professor Barthelme, who taught me the art of fiction, listened with an understanding ear and supported me and my work throughout my time at The University of Southern Mississippi. Without his supervision and constant help, this dissertation would not have been possible.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Most of the stories in this collection weave together concerns of the gay community while subsuming existential anxiety and crisis, themes that appear in the works of Oscar Wilde and Fyodor Dostoevsky respectively. Both "Fragments of a Time When" and "The Prisoners" make use of portraits or photographs, similar to Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*; however, in these stories the pictures represent the perspective of a secondary person, such as Matt in "Fragments of a Time When" and Emma in "The Prisoners," rather than the subject matter of said pictures. Moreover, the sitter in "Fragments of a time When," Colton, feels alienated from his picture and in "The Prisoners," Emma finds fault with the picture of her former husband, Willard. In the same way, Matt in "The Glass Bottle" experiences the despair, isolation, and alienation from society that marks Fyodor Dostoevsky's underground man, although Matt's physical handicap is the main source of his difficulty rather than any inability to deal with modern life. In fact, although on the surface these two writers appear radically different, with Wilde's genius wit and performative style marking him as an English comedian and Dostoevsky's passionate nature inscribing him as Russian tragedian, they had much in common, including socialist views, public humiliation, imprisonment with hard labor (Ellmann 479-480; Frank 6-68) and a belief in suffering as ultimately redemptive, exemplified through Christ (Wilde 904-957; *Crime and Punishment* 626-656). Wilde's "De Profundis" and "Ballad of Reading Gaol" as well as Dostoevsky's *The House of the Dead* capture these experiences and ideas, and "Groundhogs," with its thematic emphasis on suffering, attempts to render contemporary experiences of physical, mental and emotional anguish through the self-reflexivity and interiority found in Dostoevsky's and

Wilde's (later) works (Wilde 843-859; *House of the Dead*) . To this end, I explore loss and grief, illness and disability, parent and child relationships, and marriage and its expectations as entry points into the universal experience of suffering.

Ann and Colton in the story, "Groundhogs," experience physical problems: hormonal and genetic, which affect their identity and self-esteem, just as Dostoevsky's epilepsy and those ailments of his characters affect their identity and self-esteem. For instance, the fragile, Christ figure of Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* ultimately returns to a sanatorium because he goes mad, while the negligible, bastard son, Smirdyakov Karamazov, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, commits suicide (*The Idiot* 584). In each of these cases, physical illness signifies a weakness or issue in character. Although many of Ann's symptoms are psychosomatic, such as the rash, cold and stomach problems, she, too, suffers from a physical issue, perimenopause, that reflects a weakness in character, a tendency toward hypochondria. Perimenopause is a somewhat recently acknowledged transition period in which declining estrogen levels produce a variety of signs, including hot flashes and night sweats, increased severity of PMS, lower sex drive, fatigue, irregular periods, urinary urgency, mood swings and trouble sleeping, amongst others ("Perimenopause"):

> She could not remember when it began, only that the soaked mattress, the changes of night clothes, the freezer air against her hot face, the stiff, achy joints, the migraines…had crept up, a slow encroachment, hiding behind shifting seasons and weddings, birthdays and anniversaries.
>
> ("Groundhogs" 1)

Although the word masculinization is carefully avoided in contemporary literature, even scientific literature, the fact remains that declining estrogen and progesterone levels are associated with the expansion of the waist, decrease in hip girth and reduction of cellulite in thighs ("Perimenopause"). The decrease in waist-to-hip ratio signifies a decrease in fertility and is associated with the male body. Thus, women experiencing perimenopause, whose bodies are undergoing a metamorphosis, are often coded masculine by society. Moreover, this masculinization by maturation, although once considered desirable in the Victorian idea of the handsome woman, is considered unattractive in contemporary American society, with its emphasis on youth and beauty. Thus, Ann says to her son, Colton:

> Nature puts a cap on women. They're good for a certain number of years, and then Nature desexes them. Hips and face narrow to look like pre-pubescent boys. Butts disappear. Hair grows in unnatural places, on the upper lip and chin, sometimes the chest. By making us look like men Nature ensures that no man will find us attractive. (*Groundhogs* 14).

Ann acknowledges the physical signs of perimenopause, "hips and face narrow," "butts disappear," and "hair grows in unnatural places," and attaches them to their symbolic value, masculinization, or "pre-pubescent boys," revealing an awareness of her hormonal issue, even if, in denial, she attempts to escape that same interpretation through a grandiose disease like Ebola. Ebola, a deadly, hemorrhagic virus that resurfaced in West Africa in 2016, causes gruesome, unnatural transformations in the body, which has a similar symbolic value to menopause in that the entire body undergoes intense metamorphosis ("2014-2016 Ebola Outbreak"). This hormonal change is contrasted with

Ann's memories of Colton's birth, when she was at the height of womanhood and fertility, with old age via Eunice and her friend in the waiting room, and with Colton's body, which contradicts any sense of external masculinity by internal femininity: "There's a mass in your son's pelvis…a uterine mass" ("Groundhogs" 17). Colton's plight is not unrealistic, given two cases in which individuals walked into clinics as men and walked out as women (Dixon; Jaslow), and reveals the false binary of male/female. While Ann's body reveals gender fluidity through time, Colton's body reveals gender fluidity through space, and his participation in drag further ironizes his social status as male and the "truth" of his biological situation as female. Oscar Wilde, whose body was caricaturized as female by Alfred Bryan (Ellmann 427), who was often depicted with signs of femininity such as flowers, and who was dressed up as a little girl by his parents (Ellmann 46) could were he still alive, relate.

In "Chasing the Dragon," "The Glass Bottle," and "Tommy's Place," physical illness is subordinated to other themes, but the other themes are instigated or driven by this secondary cause. For instance, in "The Glass Bottle," Matt's mental state is significantly impacted by his former TBI, which is detailed in the story, "Fragments of a Time When,"

> When he was 10, he'd gone for a backflip on the double ramp at the skate park, done an air and grab with his left hand, cleared 90 degrees, but landed short on his neck and head; how he'd spent 1 week like an incubated baby, with wires and tubes plugged into a life machine and parents huddled over him… . ("Fragments of a Time" 48)

A similar brain injury happened to pro skateboarder JT Aultz, who was likewise placed in a coma until he could recover. He did recover and go back to skateboarding, however, testifying that results are dependent on the individual and it is possible to return to a normal life, even with residual brain damage. The only chronic, debilitating impact of Matt's fall is his subsequent deafness, though that is a challenge. If he could hear, Matt's ability to integrate into his new social and environmental situation would vastly improve. His TBI and hearing loss undergird his feelings of isolation explored in this story. Similarly, in "Chasing the Dragon," Tom's increasingly risky behavior, a sign of his midlife crisis, correspond to "andropause," or a decline in hormones, such as testosterone, associated with aging in men ("What is Male Menopause?"). Thus, his behavior is driven by a desire to recapture the adrenaline rushes of his youth, the "dragon." In "Tommy's Place," Tommy gets and ultimately develops AIDS, not from promiscuous gay sex, although he is gay, but from a blood transfusion, he received at the hospital after a gay bashing. In an ironic twist, violent homophobes are directly responsible for someone getting AIDS, which is fitting, for violence itself is a kind of contagious disease.

Aside from physical illness and injury, many of the characters in these stories, including Ann, Tom, Matt, Drew, Emma, and Silas, suffer from various forms of mental illness and/or personality disorders, which populate the works of Dostoevsky. It is interesting to note that mental illness in Dostoevsky's work is conflated with physical illness; for instance, Rogozhin in *The Idiot* kills Nastasha while suffering from a brain fever; Myshkin relapses into epilepsy when he suffers a nervous breakdown, and even Raskolnikov is sick when he murders Ivanova (*The Idiot* 583-584; *Crime and Punishment*, 109). Concerning personality disorders, the unreliable narrators of this

"Shakespeare of the asylum," including the underground man in his *Notes from the Underground*, demonstrate the signs of varying degrees of narcissism, much like the character Dorian Gray in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray (*qtd in Beveridge 32; Wilde 17-167). In fact, the name Dorian Gray has become so synonymous with the narcissistic personality, specifically its preoccupation with youth, that there is now a syndrome named after him (Brosig 279-283). In addition to depression and anxiety, Ann in "Groundhogs" is a hypochondriac, a self-aware one who, at various times, admits that her Ebola is imaginary and thus a shtick. At other times, however, her psychosomatic and hormonal symptoms convince her that there is something seriously wrong with her and that she may be dying. This thought, however, is quickly suppressed, and she returns to a more theatrical performance, which allows her to live in the world without giving way to her subverted paranoia.

If Ann feels she is dying from a comorbidity of airborne pathogens, Matt feels like he is dying inside from despair. "The Glass Bottle" explores the internal universe of a character who is cut off from the outer world by both his hearing loss and his new living situation, which has left him without friends and family who understand him, his body language, his facial expressions, his personal sign language and standard American Sign Language. The other football players on the Savannah high school team stand "at ease, like Iraqi soldiers during downtime" while he is "locked inside [his] soul, surrounded by a wall of glass" ("The Glass Bottle" 56). The first person narrator, a noted favorite of Dostoevsky for its access to interiority, reinforces the separation between Matt and the other players, whom he can see clearly but cannot hear. Moreover, the others are portrayed as a single unit, or "soldiers," while Matt is spatially standing alone. This

division is reflective not only of his loss of hearing but his loss of social identity due to his move from Highland Park, Dallas, to Savannah, Georgia. Both aural and spatial difference alienate and isolate Matt, reflecting social separation, and his subsequent depression becomes tangible when he spots a stranger in the garden with him (ultimately, Colton), and starts to cry.

Drew, Emma, and Silas also have psychological issues, although theirs stem from trauma: Drew witnesses his staff sergeant, Todd Haynes, being blown up by a bomb in "Dog Tags" while in "The Prisoners" Emma watches the gruesome wreck that kills her husband and Silas's best friend is stabbed to death beside him. Although their circumstances differ, with Drew in the military, Emma in the academy and Silas in prison, each character suffers survivor's guilt, which is then translated into behavior: Drew seeks oblivion through alcohol, Emma develops agoraphobia and Silas can no longer put his head under water. These phobias and behaviors dissipate once the character connects to another person. Once Drew finds and metaphorically adopts Terry as a surrogate for Todd, he ceases his self-destructive behavior. Similarly, Emma and Silas's connection and sharing of private experiences enable both to overcome their phobias. These stories differ from the other stories in that they have lighthearted endings, something found often in the plays of Wilde as opposed to Dostoevsky's novels.

Closely related to trauma is grief, and virtually all the characters experience loss. Loss and death are common tropes found in many of Dostoevsky's novels, from Svidrigailov's suicide to the murder of Ivanova in *Crime and Punishment*, from Rogozhin's murder of Nastasya to Hippolyte's death by tuberculosis in *The Idiot* (*The Brothers Karamazov*; *Crime and Punishment 98*; *The Idiot* 584). In "Groundhogs" Ann

loses her husband to another woman, her son to college, and her youth and femininity in the eyes of society while Colton loses his identity as an adolescent male. In "Chasing the Dragon" Tom likewise loses his youth and identity as a virile male and in "The Glass Bottle," Matt, having already lost his hearing, loses any sense of a social self after his move. In "Dog Tags" Terry has lost his father and Drew has lost his friend; in "The Prisoners" Emma has lost her husband and Silas has lost his friend; in "Tommy's Place" Blaine loses his lover and Tommy loses his life. Most of the deaths take place off stage since the focus is the psychological effects such deaths have on others, although Tommy's death, as a snapshot of the horror of AIDS in the 1980s, takes place over several paragraphs, in which signs of life, or daily existence, are contrasted with the signs of death, sweat, blood, fluid in the lungs. Oscar Wilde, who died of cerebral meningitis, the most common infection of the nervous system found in HIV patients and thought to be caused in Wilde's case by syphilis, passed away in a similar manner (Ellman 92).

In addition to Dostoevskian and Wildean thematic elements, the various stories employ symbols to further elucidate the characters without exposition. For instance, the groundhogs in the story by the same name represent Ann's retreat inside her house in response to her husband's abandonment. Her digging trenches and hunkering down corresponds to the work of groundhogs. The pleasure she takes in the animals is a sympathetic one, especially since they are destroying the land Tom once prized. Her fear of Colton become a groundhog signifies her anxiety about Colton being driven underground, so to speak, not by his own volition but by a society hostile to his ambiguity. Likewise, in "Chasing the Dragon" Tom's motorcycle, on the surface, suggests a midlife crisis, but also reveals his fear of a loss of masculinity. The feelings of

rejuvenation he experiences during the drag race point not only to his loss of youth but also to his loss, in his eyes, of manhood. In essence, the motorcycle compensates for this sense of loss, providing the "masculinity" that he fears has gone from him. This fear, too, drives him to Madelynn. By having an affair, he confirms his virility, and this enables him to perpetuate his denial. That said, his ultimate dissatisfaction, demonstrated at the end of the story, reflect a subconscious knowledge that such tactics are not working and will not work, and he must accept himself as he is.

In "Fragments of a Time When" Colton is, of course, associated with his own portrait, which he spurns as unrepresentative of himself, but he is also closely aligned with gay artist Sascha Schneider. In one particular work, Schneider depicts a young, nude boy hypnotized by a cloaked, muscular figure. The muscular figure shoots beams of light into the young boy's eyes, drawing the boy to himself. Thus, when Colton says, "It's like Sascha Schneider's 'Hypnosis'," he is lying. The comparison of the portrait with the painting of full-fledged figures is a stretch at best. The allusion is rather Colton's clandestine attempt to discover Matt's true feelings without risking his own. His expectation is that if Matt is gay, he will be familiar with Schneider's work and will agree to the comparison. If he is straight, he will not know Schneider and will ask for clarification. Of course, Matt has no idea who Schneider is. Matt agrees because he wants to make Colton happy and alleviate Colton's nervousness, which is palpable at this point. Ironically, though they completely misunderstand each other, this misunderstanding, rather than generating conflict, brings them closer together. Like Colton, Matt is associated with Colton's portrait; it is this sketch that discloses his true feelings to Colton rather than any words or body language. Moreover, his preference for

Ernst and Boccioni reveal his interest in the avant-garde, artists who produce critical work rather than emotional work. Colton's preferences, especially for musical theater and Schneider, signify a more emotional nature; Colton is a feeler, expressive and occasionally histrionic; Matt, in contrast, is a thinker who works hard not to reveal his emotions directly. In "The Glass Bottle" Matt's literary preferences for Sun Tzu, Marcus Aurelius, and Hesse also elaborate how Matt thinks; two of the three books are founded in eastern philosophy, and even Aurelius, a patently Roman and thus western philosopher, promotes stoicism, which itself has eastern leanings. Eastern, as opposed to western thinking, endorses both/and thinking as opposed to western either/or; in addition, like stoicism Buddhism attempts to bring the emotions under the control of mind, with an emphasis on detachment. Matt conquers his anger post-TBI using the practices and rituals of stoicism and Buddhism. In addition, Sun Tzu and Marcus Aurelius, both generals, provide role models for Matt as a quarterback.

"Dog Tags," "Tommy's Place," and "The Prisoners" also make use of symbols to explain character. In "Dog Tags," Terry, who wears the dog tags of his father, is the spitting image of dad and serves as a surrogate version to Drew, who hopes to save Terry as payback for the loss of his friend, Staff Sergeant Todd Haynes. When Drew gives Terry his own dog tags, he is essentially adopting Terry to serve as a living replacement for Terry's dead father. In "Tommy's Place," Tommy is associated with the club, Tommy's Place, which shuts down when Tommy dies, and also with the storage unit, which 20 years later Blaine is still unable to part with, a sign of stagnation in the grieving process. Finally, in "The Prisoners" Emma is associated with the big house and thus aristocratic, white culture while Silas is associated with the slave quarters, a sign that

slavery is a prison and, at the same time, that modern day criminals and blue collar workers are essentially the slaves of white-collar culture.

Two other things worth mentioning, briefly, concern style. I credit Steve Barthelme and John Gardner for teaching me to avoid adverbs, use adjectives carefully, and be thrifty and exact in word choice. "Fragments of a Time," is a deliberate departure from this general directive, however, for the purposes of experimentalism.

On a final note, music, art, sculpture and theater are referenced throughout these works. Art in all its forms plays an indelible part of our culture and Wilde, though not the first, recognized its power in his aestheticism. Even Dostoevsky's underground man spoke of the Romantic hero and Russian literature. These stories, in referencing art, recognize and celebrate the power contained in art in all its forms.

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GROUNDHOGS

Two weeks after her husband, Tom, walked in at lunch, announced he had fallen in love with the rental car representative, Madelynn Fox, an overweight, college-aged girl with beady eyes and a unibrow, and walked out with the last slice of quiche (on a plate) cradled in the crook of his arm, Ann had come down with the sniffles. The sniffles had progressed into the stuffed nostrils, the nostrils into packed sinuses, the packed sinuses into the lungs and the lungs up through the door of the mouth and out. She had succumbed, calling her professors at the nursing school to let them know both she and her husband were sick, although she did not mention the nature of their disease. Then she had dug trenches and hunkered down in bed to wait it out. Two weeks later she was still hunkered, but the enemy had grown stronger. What had begun as the common cold had escalated into chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, lupus, pneumonia and finally tuberculosis.

This is what she told other people when they asked. Truthfully she could not remember when it all began, only that the soaked mattress, the changes of night clothes, the freezer air against her hot face, the stiff, achy joints, the migraines and now a rash — had crept up, a slow encroachment, hiding behind shifting seasons and weddings, birthdays and anniversaries so by the time she realized it was upon her, her husband had become a stranger and her son had departed for Savannah State, across town. Then her husband left, and she stopped eating and sleeping and then the cough. The gym, which she had been faithful to for twenty years, was only a temporary fix. There was no cure for what ailed her except a bottle of pills or a gun, an option she kept open though thoughts of her son turned her away from it. That and the fear of Hell, if there was one

and if she was going to it, and if the Catholics were right about Cardinal sins for which there is no forgiveness.

On this particular night, she turned over in bed, grunted and rubbed at the red rash that had risen from the surface of her thigh a week ago. The small, angry bumps itched and though she squeezed each one, suspicious of any poison that might be gushing through her veins, nothing came out. Swells without a head. She reached over to the bedside table, popped the cap on the hydrocortisone, and squished out white relief. Then she measured out cough medicine in a shot glass and drank it, took two cyclobenzaprine and set the glass back on the night stand.

Across the rocking chair lay her robe and she fetched it, wrapped it around her before moving to the window and opening it. Out on the river, the water lapped lazily at the tall grasses, a curl of foam wound round their stalks. Some sailboats had dropped anchor earlier and were bobbing up and down in rhythm to the waves, and a pelican, fast asleep, perched on a pole at the end of the pier. It was autumn in the South, and the cool breeze off the river had a bite to it, a forewarning of the coming frost. It brought the scent of dead fish and a hint of the sea to Ann. Any other night she might have gone downstairs and out onto the marsh to look for the fish and shovel them into the river, but tonight she did not feel like it, just as she had not felt like uprooting the groundhogs last summer when they had sought shelter in their back yard.

They had returned after her husband left, as if they sensed his absence. Now they were working in the darkness, burrowing channels in the gentle, sloping hills that rolled from her house down to the water. When one of them popped out of a hole and looked at her, she stepped back, shuddered and shut the window.

Her eyes fell upon a lamp in the corner of the room, and she remembered she had promised to fix it for her son before she saw him again. The tools she needed were in the shed, a mini barn to the right of the back porch that her husband had built two years ago when their white brick and wood home was being renovated. She stumbled over to the closet, slipped on her slippers—still damp from the shower she had taken two hours ago —and went outside. The evening's humidity clung to her. At the shed she pulled out the wire cutters and wire nuts she'd bought last week from a cabinet, found a Phillips screwdriver, then locked the door. Back inside, she switched on the TV., settled down in the floor beside the window and began to fiddle with the lamp, removing the screws at the base before unscrewing the bulb.

On CNN, Rafi Diallo, a spokesman for Guinea's health ministry, was being interviewed about the Ebola eruption in Guinea as men in space suits hauled a gurney from a white tent. "Ebola kills 90 in Guinea," the caption read. She turned the sound up. As she worked, the lamp came apart in pieces and scattered between her legs. It had been easy to take apart with a screwdriver and cut with the wire strippers, but the wire nuts didn't seem to fit. Every time she stuck the spliced wires into the hole they fell out. She thought about supergluing them in, but wasn't sure superglue would conduct electricity. She held the fixture up to the light and tried to recall how to reconnect it, but nothing came to mind. This seemed to be happening more and more these days, this inability to think, to recall appointments or phone numbers.

Just then the phone rang. She flipped open her cell and said, "Hello?"

"Mom. You're not at work again, are you?" Colton was a freshman at Savannah State University but still called her every day.

She looked over at the clock. It was 9 a.m. "No, but I can't go. I'm dying."

"You've been dying for 40 years now," he said. "Why aren't you dead?"

Sometimes she wondered that herself. "Go ahead and mock me. I have Ebola."

"Last week you had Lupus. What happened?"

"I thought it was lupus but I don't have the butterfly rash," she said, shoving the lamp away from her. "There's been an outbreak of the Zaire strain in Guekedou and it has killed 90 people already. They say it incubates inside the body for at least a week, and then you get a fever, chills, sore throat and body pain. Next comes the vomiting and diarrhea, but the final stage is the worst. Your intestines melt into hot, mushy virus, then your brain. It's the Delta Force of viruses, turning everyday people into an army of zombies."

"No way!"

"I'm serious. The virus converts your brain into viral slush. It's like one of those parasitic aliens on the Sci-Fi channel, except there's no alien bursting out of your stomach, just some liquid sludge that used to be your organs pouring out of every hole. And the reason it's surging outward out of every hole is it's looking for another victim. If you ever see someone with red eyes vomiting black granules and bleeding from open sores, you run. That's Biohazard Four. CDC workers would prick themselves with HIV before getting within five feet of Ebola."

There was silence on the other end of the phone. "Mom, maybe you shouldn't go to nursing school."

"I'm not anymore," she said and coughed. "I was reading *The Hot Zone* for one of my classes about Ebola in Zaire. And oh, it's guano—bat crap, that carries it. That's not how I got it though. Your father gave it to me."

"Dad does not have Ebola, mom, and just stop it. I need your help."

She scooped up the lamp parts, dropped them in a brown bag and with a groan, stood up. "What's wrong, honey?"

"I'll tell you when you get here. Can you just come, please? I need you."

The sense of urgency in his voice was unmistakable. "I'll be there in a second," she said. Then she hung up the phone and went over to the mirror. The piece of brown hair that had hung down in her face since childhood and which would continue hanging down in her face until the day of her death now drooped over her right eye. She pushed it back but it fell again, stubborn. Around her eyes, black circles. She hadn't eaten much or slept much in a month, and her skin was now sallow and her collarbone protruded. Opening her mouth, she studied her teeth for discoloration and cavities using the vanity mirror, then shoved it back in the drawer, brushed her teeth, put on deodorant and changed her clothes.

Her old, beat-up Honda was waiting for her out in the garage. It was dented from backing into a pole and running into a police car, and the passenger's mirror was missing from a side swipe with she knew not what since she'd been sleep-driving on Ambien at the time. The silver paint on the hood had long since oxidized and rust trimmed the rear bumper. Some time ago the driver door had ceased working, so she slid in through the passenger's side and slid the key in the ignition. The New Car air freshener overpowered the rancid smell of milk, filling the air with noxious fumes that conjured up shiny BMWs

and dairy farms. Colton had spilt it on his drive to school one day, and though she'd made him clean it up, it was not something to be completely removed.

As she drove down La Roche Avenue, she realized there was not a street in Savannah that did not dredge up old memories. There was East Liberty Street and The Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist where they had gotten married; Southbridge Boulevard where Tom played golf; Tybee Island and its Light House and Museum, a favorite day trip of theirs. The city was swarming with her estranged husband. She would have to move —but there was Colton, and she could not part with him, not now. He was vital to her, like the blood through her veins. Oh, why had she married Tom? She knew beforehand what kind of man he was —"not the faithful sort" she had told herself whenever he mentioned an old girlfriend, but she had thought, at worst, he would cheat and that would be the end of it. An affair here and there without her knowledge, that she could tolerate. The benefits outweighed the drawbacks. Tom was handsome, charming, intelligent and funny, an extrovert who pulled her out of herself and made being alive fun. And she loved him. She had thought they would grow old together.

When she drove up, Colton was waiting outside his dorm, one hand shoved in a pocket of his skinny black jeans, other hand yanking up his white tee that kept falling off his shoulder. He was cute but skinny and little, and looked more like a 16 year old visiting his brother at college than a freshman. In high school his size had garnered him nicknames like "Lil Colt" and "Colty," as if he were a miniature horse, but his witty sense of humor had made him popular and the object of crushes on both sides, and even the football team had found themselves liking him against their will.

As soon as he saw her, he grabbed his book bag from behind a bush, opened the car door and slid in.

"So what's this all about?" she asked after he slammed the door.

Colton tossed his bangs out of his eyes. "I think I'm pregnant."

She laughed, leaned over and patted his knee. "Oh sweetie, you don't have the right equipment to be pregnant."

"Don't you think I know that? But look." He lifted his baggy shirt to reveal a smooth, round pooch.

She pulled some tissue from her purse and coughed into it. "Have you been drinking?" she asked.

"I'm in college. What do you think?"

"I think you shouldn't be drinking when you're underage. "

"…I know, okay? I'm talking about this," he said, pointing to his stomach. "I'm not drinking a six pack every night."

"Okay, well, maybe it's the freshman fifteen."

Colton rolled his eyes. "Uh, no. I have to watch what I eat. Nobody wants to see a fat boy on stage."

"What do you mean, on stage?"

"Nothing. Can we just go, please? I have an appointment at Memorial University Medical Center with a gastroenterologist at 11."

"When you say it's nothing, that means it's something," she said, turning the radio that had up to this point been blaring off. "Tell me what it is and we'll leave."

"I'm gay."

She coughed into the tissue. "Yes, I know," she said with a sniff. "What else?"

"You already knew I was gay?"

"You've told me that three times already. Besides, I found that porno under your bed when you were sixteen. I borrowed it, I hope you don't mind."

"Oh my God, Mom! Please don't tell me this right now. I can't handle it," he said, clutching his head with both hands.

"Okay honey, I didn't borrow it, but I think the brunette was much more attractive than the blonde centerfold. Why do you like blondes so much? There are no blondes in our family…"

"Mom, please."

"I'll stop if you tell me about what you're doing on stage."

"It doesn't matter," he said, tossing his bangs back. "Can you just take me to the doctor, please?"

"Not until you tell me what you're doing on stage," she said, waving her finger at him. "You're a stripper, aren't you?"

"No!"

"Well you're not enrolled in theater this semester, so tell me."

"Okay, but you have to promise not to freak out on me. There's this bar downtown and I go down there a couple of nights a week and pretend to sing, and people give me money."

"You go downtown to a bar and pretend to sing and people just give you money. And you're wearing clothes. Why would anyone do that?"

Colton shrugged, flicking a piece of lint off his jeans. "I don't know. Maybe they think I'm cute."

"So how much do these idiots pay you to pretend to sing?"

"Well, on a good night," he said, shifting in his seat, "I can make, um, 300 dollars."

"300 dollars!"

"Yes."

"Are you sleeping with them?!"

"No, no I'm not. I'm just pretending to sing."

"I'm having a hard time believing your story," she said, coughing into her hand.

Colton ran his hand through his hair. "It's the truth."

"Well, okay, if that's all you're doing, then I'd like to come and see you pretend to sing."

"You wouldn't like it. It's crowded, and there's a lot of smoke, and drinking, and just, you know, all kinds of people, stinky people, sweaty people, people bleeding from their pores, people with boils all over their skin —"

"So they have Ebola too, huh?"

"Well, not exactly, but yes, yes, a lot of them might, come to think about it. You definitely wouldn't want to go. Now, will you please get off my ass and take me to the doctor?"

"Fine." Ann faced forward, threw the car in drive and pulled out into traffic. They rolled past the dorms, the baseball field, the stadium and the gym where the cheerleading team was practicing their tumbles and summersaults. Once they were out on the road she turned to him.

"Now listen. I'm letting it go this once, but when the doctor tells you you're not pregnant, you need to find another gimmick."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean your pregnancy doesn't negate my Ebola. I can't have Ebola if you're pregnant."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about diseases. I can't have Ebola around a pregnant man. It won't work."

"Mom —"

"Find something else —a phobia for instance. Ithyphallophobia."

"What's Ithyphallophobia?"

"Fear of erect penises."

Colton showed his teeth. "I love erect penises. Why would I be afraid of them?"

"I didn't hear that. La-la-la-la-la" and then cough, cough, cough.

"Oh my God, you can be so immature. Why do you have to have to be sick anyway?"

"Your father has to know that he has destroyed somebody, and he won't know that if I get up and go to nursing school like nothing ever happened. He has to see it on the outside," she said, remembering the rash on her thigh and thinking he would never see it.

"Mom, dad doesn't think the way you and I do. He sees something and grabs it; he doesn't look back to see if it's right."

"Well if Ebola won't work then maybe groundhogs will."

"The groundhogs are back?"

She coughed and said, "I saw one the other night digging a tunnel in our yard. I think he waved hi to me."

"He did not wave hi to you. Dad will be pissed when he hears this."

"He won't hear. I understand why they do what they do. They burrow underground because they're afraid if they come out in the light, somebody will hurt them. Let them build the Catacombs of Priscilla under our yard — I don't care. "

It was a hot day and the sun burnt their head and shoulders as they left the parking garage to walk to the hospital. Near the entrance, an American flag on a high pole flapped and snapped violently in the breeze. Some children were playing on the front lawn, watched over by mothers who chatted away inside as they stared out the window. Ann studied the five floors of beige concrete and remembered the day her son had been born. Her water had broken around 10:30 a.m. that hot, August day. Tom had rushed home from his job as Aviation Program Manager and driven her to the hospital, where nurses were waiting with a wheelchair. They had wheeled her through the door and up to the birthing room. Except for occasional check-ins, Tom had hid in the waiting room while she spent the next two hours lying on a flat bed with stir-ups, not screaming but in agony, waiting for the moment she could receive medication through the epidermal they prepped in her back. While she waited, a nurse came to give her a massage. As she kneaded the hard muscles Ann thought of mid-wives and the wisdom of their hands. Ten minutes later the nurse left and another nurse came in. "Soon, just wait," she said, placing a tray beside the bed. And later, "Now." And Ann said, "Something's coming!"

and “How about the epidural?” But it was too late. She braced, pushed three times, and then a miracle. The body that had kicked and rolled and tossed inside her was out, screaming to Hell and back, and the twisted facial expression was the same as her husband’s whenever he was pissed off. “The pain must’ve been terrible, for you to go so quickly,” the nurse said. And so it was: a painful natural childbirth complete with an angry baby.

Now she studied her son, who stared from the hospital floor up to the signs with arrows and over at the receptionist. His face bore the stamp of the father: the cleft chin, wide face and high cheekbones covered in freckly warm skin, but all of this was undone, or at least softened, by the large blue eyes, the marble-like tip of the nose, and the protruding upper lip that made him look like a child. All of these were hers, and the effect was a confusion of mother and father, as if nature could not decide.

Colton went to the receptionist and returned with a map. “We have to take the elevator to the third floor,” he said. “Then a right, and an immediate left. Then we go halfway down the hall, take the double doors located on the left side, go through the door at the end of the hall, and down the staircase. We’ll exit through that door, turn left and then a right and follow that around past the endocrinology center to gastroenterology.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier to walk around the outside?”

“Yeah, but it took fucking forever to get the directions right. We’re going to follow them.”

“Watch your mouth,” she said, snapping the map away from him. She studied it for a minute before handing it back. “We’ll do it your way. Lead on.”

She followed him down the hall and up the elevator to the third floor. When the doors opened, a blast of turpentine and bleach and cold air. It was the infectious unit ward, and everybody walking around wore a mask.

"Uh. Maybe we shouldn't get off here," he said, holding the doors open. "It looks dangerous."

"Just don't touch anything," she said, stepping over the bucket of bleach directly in their path. "Come on. It's safe or she wouldn't have given us directions."

As they wandered down the hall two nurses in latex and masks wheeled a bloody patient out of a room and into another. Ann cringed and Colton folded his hands under his armpits until they reached the double doors.

"I said don't touch anything," she said, slapping his hand away from the handle. Turning around, she butted it open and held it for him. "That's the way you do it," she said. When the doors slammed shut behind them, he turned to her and asked, "What's wrong with you? You're acting weird."

She coughed and grabbed her chest. "What's wrong with me? My husband left me for a girl with a unibrow, I'm sick and my son thinks he's pregnant, and you ask what's wrong with me?"

"It's more than that. I know you. Something is going on. You don't drop out of school and hide inside all day. "

She pointed to the door at the end of the hallway. "Let's keep moving," she said. "You asked me what's wrong. I'm old, that's what's wrong."

"You're not old."

"Yes I am. Nature puts a cap on women. They're good for a certain number of years, and then Nature desexes them. Hips and face narrow to look like pre-pubescent boys. Butts disappear. Hair grows in unnatural places, on the upper lip and chin, sometimes the chest. By making us look like men Nature ensures that no man will find us attractive, that we won't procreate. And then She strips us of the power of pro-creation, and we cease being women altogether. Deprived of even the vestments of femininity but men are potent until the day they die. It's cruel."

"Mom, you'll find someone else."

"No I won't. I can't, don't you see? I'm spayed. Plus, a man would have to be an octogenarian to consider me, and I like the living when it comes to romance."

Colton opened the staircase door and they stepped out into another hallway. "It'll be okay. You have me and the groundhogs," he said with a smile and wrapped his arm around her.

She laid her head on his shoulder. "Yes, I have you and the groundhogs. Speaking of which, I forgot to tell you, I tried to fix your lamp last night while they were digging in the yard, but I bought the wrong wire nuts. They're too big."

They passed endocrinology, where a pockmarked receptionist was typing away furiously at the computer, and arrived at gastroenterology. "I have an 11 o'clock appointment with Dr. Johnson," Colton said to the heavy-set woman behind the desk.

She looked up from the computer. "Name?"

"Colton Lee."

She shoved a clipboard at him. "Fill these out," she said, pointing a fat, manicured finger at the papers. "I'll let the Dr. know you're here."

They seated themselves beside the artificial palm tree and began filling out the paperwork. There was one for Patient General Information and one for Medical Insurance, a Medical History and Pre-Existing Condition assessment, a Release of Liability to the hospital, a Release of Liability to the doctor, a Patient's Rights handout, a HIPPA Awareness handout, a Consent for Treatment by the doctor and a Consent for Treatment by the hospital, a Consent for Lab Work by the hospital and a Consent for Lab Work by the independent company responsible for processing the labs. Colton filled them out as if he were taking an exam with a fifteen minute time limit. By the time he finished filling in the boxes, checking off lists and signing his name, his hand cramped.

When he got up and handed the clipboard to the heavy set lady, she glanced up from her computer and said, "He's running a few minutes late. Have a seat."

"Big surprise there," Colton muttered under his breath as he returned to his seat beside his mom.

"It's like a deterrent from going to the doctor."

Ann crossed her legs and rooted through her purse. "What is?"

"All these forms, and then you have to wait forever. You'd think they don't want any customers."

"It's a rite of passage. They figure if you're willing to fill all that out and wait then you must be really sick."

After about twenty minutes the doctor entered the room and motioned for them to follow him. He was long-faced and white haired; soft grey hair covered his upper lip and chin; on either side of his nose, nasal folds spread down to just outside the corners of his mouth. His deep-set eyes were so dark that the pupil was undetectable. Ann and Colton

followed him back to the examining room, but just outside Colton stopped, turned to his mother and said, “I can do this by myself.”

She nodded in agreement, but felt anxious after they went in and shut the door.

In the waiting room, two old women were looking through *Handguns* magazine and talking about the various pieces they owned. The lady with the permed curly hair was talking about her Glock 17.

“Bought it a gun show,” she told the other woman. “I keep it under my pillow in case any rapists break in.”

“You wish a rapist would break in,” the other lady said, huddling beneath her shawl. “More n likely you’d be the one holding him hostage.”

“Now Eunice, why do you say such things? You’ve turned mean since you got old.”

“I got kidney stones, rheumatoid and gout,” she said. “I figure I’d got good reason to be mean.”

Ann considered this argument and found it to be sound. A person got old and they hurt all the time. It was bound to put anyone in a bad mood. It was a good thing that life was limited, that a specific amount of time was allotted to each person, so that if a person was suffering, they only had to live out a certain number of years. For them, death wasn’t something to be feared as the end of life, but longed for as the end of pain.

About an hour later Dr. Johnson appeared alone and waved Ann over. She followed him into the examining room where Colton was sitting on the table with stirrups. The doctor indicated he would return and shut the door, leaving them alone.

“They x-rayed my stomach,” Colton said as soon as the door was shut.

"And?"

"And he said he'd be right back, and then they went into the other room and started whispering to each other."

"What did they say?"

"I couldn't hear them and I was afraid to get off the table."

"Well he'll tell us soon. Don't worry," she said, taking a seat beside the sink.

When the doctor returned, he had some x-rays with him, which he clipped to the display board. Then he turned to look at Ann and Colton. For the first time she noticed he had a glass eye. It had escaped her earlier, but now one eye focused on each of them, and she worried because doctors should have two good eyes to see their patients with, not just one. But she supposed an exceptionally sharp eye could easily do the job of two, and since the good one was focused on Colton, she needn't stress.

"There's a mass in your son's pelvis," he said, pointing to one of the xrays. Ann looked but couldn't tell one thing from another. "I want you to go to the Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville for an evaluation."

She pulled some tissue out of her purse and coughed into it. "What is going on?"

"That is what I'm hoping they'll tell us."

"Look, you found a mass, you know something. Tell me."

The doctor sat down in his chair. "Without a diagnosis I can't say for sure, but it appears to be a uterine mass."

Ann looked over at her son and back at the doctor. "So, this mass is a polyp, tumor, fibroid or what? I'm in nursing school, so what are we talking about here?!"

"It could be a tumor or early gestation if there's a comorbid rectovaginal fistula that allowed the transfer of semen from the rectum to the uterus. But it's impossible to say for certain without understanding the underlying causes his condition. Everything from chromosomal to genetic abnormalities can result in the appearance of mixed traits —congenital adrenal hyperplasia with comorbid Klinefelter Syndrome or pure intersex. All things considered, he represents the best case scenario."

"I don't feel like a best case scenario," Colton muttered.

"Some people go their whole lives without knowing they're intersexed while others endure a lifetime of heartache and ridicule. Which would you rather do?"

"What is congenital adrenal…Klinefelter?" Ann interrupted. "Give me the facts."

"Congenital adrenal hyperplasia is a deficiency in 21-hydroxylase. The resulting low aldosterone usually results in salt-wasting disease and death, but since your son is not wasting away, I think it's the adult-onset form. Little to no aldosterone involved, low cortisol levels and increased androgens."

"Increased androgens, like testosterone?"

"Yes. Early puberty, increased body hair and large muscles are a sign."

"Have you looked at my son? He obviously doesn't have that."

"Gee, thanks mom."

"Sweetie, I love you but you're not exactly manly."

"He has the short height. Klinefelter syndrome and the extra X chromosome would account for feminization."

"So, you think he has this congenital thing with Klinefelter?"

"It's one possibility, but intersex covers a whole spectrum of conditions that manifest differently. Infinite variety."

The doctor sat down. "It's possible that it's a genetic mutation resulting from social progression…that the division of sexes was a biological necessity for the Cro-Magnon, but gender is no longer constituted through biological drive…

"What are you trying to say doctor?"

"It may be an adaptation to new social conditions."

"A new kind of human?"

"A new kind of sex. A third sex. Colton may be a new prototype in nature."

Ann thought about it for some time. "He's so young," she said, "and vulnerable. Once he's in the light, they'll hurt him."

The doctor raised a questioning eyebrow. "Yes. I suppose so."

"I need to go back to nursing school," she muttered to herself. "This punishing myself is stupid. He needs me."

The doctor set his heavy hand on her shoulder. "Are you okay Mrs. Lee?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Nothing wrong with me. Of course, I'll do whatever you say."

It was evening before they left. The temperature had cooled considerably, and it was balmy and breezy, the sky clear and bright with the city lights. The roar of traffic from DeLesseps Avenue could be heard over the sound of crickets chirping in the grass. Across the road, parking garage lights cast shadows in the shapes of cars. Ann and Colton walked in silence, each lost in thought, until they reached the Honda. Colton was the first to speak.

"Drag," he muttered as he slid in after his mother and shut the door.

Ann started the car. "Tomorrow, I need to call the Mayo Clinic, but first I need to call Armstrong State university to see if they'll let me go back into the nursing program. I'm behind a few weeks but I know I can catch up if I work hard enough. I've just got to focus. And I need to call your father about the groundhogs…and other things."

"Four inch heels and a red dress from Macys. Cutlets and a size 32B, hip and butt padded panties, some black stockings and a brunette wig. I saved for weeks for that wig. Lots of make up. $300 dollars in one night, and all I have to do is pretend to sing."

"We'll deal with this together," she said, squeezing his hand. "All three of us. It'll be okay."

A sob. "I guess it all makes sense." He wiped his face with his hands. "I'm a freak."

Anna stopped the car and looked over at him. "Well, at least you don't have Ebola."

Colton smiled. "Just groundhogs," he said. The stoplight changed and traffic began to move. The cars jockeyed for position as they turned onto La Roche Avenue.

CHASING THE DRAGON

At first Tom didn't see it, but when his high beams pierced the darkness up the hill, he perceived the lump in the center and knew it was not part of the road but something distinct in itself. He slowed his car, pondering whether to investigate the thing or simply drive on, and siding with his curiosity, pulled alongside it and stopped.

As he stepped from his Toyota, the glow of dawn made a grotesque silhouette of him, long and lean. Tom might have been wearing stilts and a tall hat to the thing in the middle of the road looking up at him with puppy-dog eyes, whose sudden panting caught him off guard. He stepped back before dropping his hand beneath the sniffing, wiggling nose of the skinny black lab with a white beard. The musty odor of Tom's cat repulsed the animal, but the dog made friendly, his tail thumping, and Tom petted his head and pretended he liked dogs.

Tom stood up and looked at his watch. It was just after seven in the morning. The country road, located between the river and a highway, was empty but the squeak and grind of school buses from the distant highway signaled Savannah Georgia was just waking up. The zoom of cars, the river lapping its shores, the smell of the marsh and marine diesel fuel collided. Blue and gold trickled through the trees, and the yellow road lines ahead faded behind the rising steam and foliage. Nearby, a tom cat pawed a bush and ran into the thicket after a bird.

He would be late to work.

That didn't bother him.

Being late to the shop did.

He opened the trunk of the car, got out an old yellow blanket and wrapped it around the dog. That's when he noticed the bloody wound on its leg; the animal had been guarding it the whole time. It was too clean a cut to have been made by a car—more like a trap, or maybe a knife. Abuse. He pushed it out of his mind, gathered the dog in his arms, being careful to avoid the leg, and carried him to the Toyota as the dog attempted to smell his crotch.

The veterinarian was located on Victory Drive, about a ten minute drive. Tom turned on the air conditioning and cracked the window to put the animal at ease. As they rode along the dog panted and shifted uneasily in the passenger's seat, his quivering nostrils sniffing at the stained upholstery, coffee cups and wrappers that once held donuts, and finally Tom himself. When the animal began eating the mossy donut hole he found wedged between the seat, though, Tom pushed its head away.

"What's wrong with you; can't you see that's disgusting?"

The dog whined and perked its ears.

"Don't act like you don't understand. You're smarter than you look," Tom said. "You smell a bitch ten miles away, but sniff my crotch."

The animal raised its good leg and began licking its balls. It reminded Tom of his teenage son. Not the ball licking but the perked ears and Colton's floppy hair, the expression of good-will and innocence coupled with foul tendencies. Tom didn't have to see it to know what nature drove them to do when no one was looking, but at least the animal could be bathed of dead fish, and whatever it ate was temporary. His son could not be washed clean from his inclination. It had been present since childhood; Tom had

seen the signs, and though Tom knew it was only a preference and not a crime, the thought still repelled him the same as a dog eating its own shit.

When he pulled into the vet's parking lot, the dog—who by this point was resting peacefully in the passenger's seat—raised his head and stretched his neck toward the window for a sniff. Tom rolled it up, scooped him in his arms, and headed towards the office. It was still closed, so they waited patiently outside, Tom cradling and rocking the dog like a baby. At 8 a.m. the receptionist unlocked the door, and by the time he set the animal down on the desk, the entire left side of Tom's head was slathered in spit and he smelled like dog's breath.

The red head who had met him at the door now stood behind the desk, smoothing the hair on the dog's head. "Hi there," she said, ignoring Tom. "What's your name?"

The dog sniffed and licked her hand. Behind her, several workers in lab coats were filling prescriptions and fiddling with equipment.

"He doesn't talk," Tom said, wiping off his face.

"I didn't know you had a dog, Tom," she said.

"I don't. I found him in the middle of the road. Thought he'd been hit by a car, but this," Tom said, uncovering the injured leg, "looks like something else."

The receptionist studied the gash. "It looks like he got it caught in something," she said, holding the leg up to the light. "He's dehydrated, probably been there for several hours."

"He told me he likes moldy donut holes and crotches, but not cats. He smells Bear on me, I think."

"And how is Bear the cat," she asked, sitting down and typing on the computer.

"Fluffy and fat," he said. "She needs exercise. Maybe I should take Romeo here home. That would make her exercise."

"There's no collar. After a search for the owner we can give you a call if you want."

"No, that's okay. A cat is enough. I just couldn't leave him in the middle of the road like that. An injured animal is an injured animal."

"Well we thank you for bringing him in," she said, handing paperwork to one of the interns.

"No problem," Tom answered, heading for the door but he stopped just short of it. He turned back to the nurse. "Don't put him to sleep," he said, pointing to the dog. "Call me before that happens."

On the way to the shop Tom stopped by the post office and then the coffee house for a shot of espresso and *The Wall Street Journal*, so by the time he drove into Savage's Cycles, it was after ten. Savage's was a renovated aluminum building wedged between a Speedy Oil and ACMO Center on Albercorn Avenue in Savannah. It dealt in used motorcycles, primarily Kawazakis and Hondas, although Savage was a connoisseur who occasionally produced Harleys and Ducatis. It was the latter that interested Tom.

Doc Savage was bent over one of the Kawasaki Ninjas checking the train drive when Tom drove in, parked and walked over.

"Come for the Ducati?" Doc asked without looking up. He was a thick-set, balding man whose lower face was obscured by a bushy grey beard. Tom stood behind him in his dirty khakis and shirt.

"Sorry for being late," Tom apologized.

"Suppose it couldn't be helped," Doc said, standing up. He noticed Tom's clothes. "What happened to you?"

"Dog."

Doc nodded with approval, and pointed to the corner of the lot, where the red and black motorcycle was parked. Tom had purchased the Ducati Panigale 1299 S with money he'd received from cashing in several thousand shares of rental car company stock that he'd bought at a discount as Aviation Program Manager at the Savannah International Airport. Larry Minter, a co-worker, had gotten one a month earlier and given Tom a ride around the airport. He'd fallen in love with it immediately, not just the bike but the feeling he got from riding it.

Doc handed Tom the keys and Tom straddled the motorcycle and turned the ignition switch. The Panigale, already warm from the staring sun, burned hot between his thighs. He squeezed the clutch and hit the start button with his right, releasing it as soon as he heard the engine engage. The motorcycle grunted beneath him.

"It's firm enough, the seat," he muttered to Doc, who said, "You won't stand up if you ride too long. Never ridden a Panigale myself, but they say it's hard on your ass. "The wife know yet?"

Tom had forgotten about her. He shook his head.

"If you're still alive tomorrow, give me a call. We'll get you licensed." Doc pointed to the display that read Wet Mode. "I've got you taken care of. This bike is now idiot proof; so long as you don't mess with it, it'll stay that way."

Tom raised an eyebrow. "What are you trying to say?"

"Nothin. For Christ's sake don't go fast."

"I didn't spend twenty-five thousand dollars on a moped. I won't go fast," Tom said, turning the throttle. The cycle roared, and a thrill shot through him. "I'll pick the car up tomorrow," Tom said, tossing Doc his car keys.

Doc shook his head. "Go straight home." Tom nodded, fastening his helmet. The men standing at the entrance of the shop waved as he drove out of the lot onto Albercorn road, thinking not of the dog or his family but of his newfound freedom. He felt light and springy and at one with the machine beneath him.

The midday sun glowered above, and heat waves rose off tar, metal and concrete as Tom pulled up to a traffic light. The noonday crowd on the sidewalks instinctively withdrew from each other to make room for any breeze. Tom flagged his blue shirt, creating a vacuum that cooled his body, and wiped his dripping face with the back of his hand. Then he glanced over at the car next to him.

A teenager with acne was looking at him out the passenger window of a Ford Mustang GT 500 with the cobra decal that indicated a supercharger. The driver, who he could not see, revved the engine, shifted gears and feigned an advance, which Tom took to be an invitation. Tom twisted the throttle and felt his front tire claw the concrete.

He had never drag raced before, but the idea stimulated him in the same way the bike had stimulated him when he first rode it, the same way flying had years before. He'd gotten his pilot's license in high school, gone into the military for college and been the primary engineer behind a new GUI for Boeing's AH-64 Apache helicopter. Now he was confined to the ground as Aviation Program Manager, but the bike gave him the same feeling he had when he careened down the runway in an ultralight Mustang.

He looked up at the light and then at his watch. A minute had passed. In another minute the light would change and he would lose whatever opportunity he had. He glanced over at the kid, who was staring at him harder than ever, then back at the bike's display. He held down the blinker cancel button, lowered wheelie control and pushed "race mode" and felt the bike shift slightly under him. Then the light changed.

The road ahead of them was clear.

The Mustang driver shifted into first gear, feathered the clutch and hit the gas, shooting forward into space and leaving Tom dumbfounded at the traffic light. Not to be outdone, Tom squeezed the clutch, pressed down the gear petal, turned the throttle and took off after him.

Tom quickly grasped that the teenager was the better driver and that he, Tom, was going to die trying to keep up with him. The kid was slipping the clutch, jamming it into the next gear, flooring and dumping it while Tom was doing his best trying not to fall down. When Tom hit 10,000 rpms, the high whine, he booted it into second gear and blipped the throttle as he had seen Larry Minter do on their ride around the airport. The front wheel lifted slightly, then the bike shot forward and Tom began to gain on the Mustang. The muscles quickened in his arms and legs like they used to whenever he shot a three pointer in basketball, and Tom felt as if he'd lost a decade in a quarter mile of road. And gained hair. With a shift into third Tom reached 95mph, passing the pock-marked teenager, but the driver, who had saved his best trick for last, released a shot of NOS into the engine, like cocaine straight to the heart. The Mustang began to shriek and raced past Tom as Tom looked down at his speedometer. He was going 100mph and for a brief moment, his life flashed before his eyes. Then he realized he was about to lose a

race to a high school kid with bad acne, squeezed the clutch and throttle-blipped it into fourth gear.

The NOS had worn off and the Mustang quickly cut its speed while Tom soared past him. Then he saw why it had dropped so suddenly: a truck was stopped at the light ahead. He gripped the brake lever and the back tire skidded a little, so he was afraid of highsiding, but the ABS system kicked in and corrected the bike and Tom came to a stop just short of the truck. Then he fell down. The bike crashed on its right, denting the red fairing, while Tom scooted as fast as he could out from under it. When he stood up his right leg burned so he rubbed it and felt himself all over to make sure he hadn't broken anything. The traffic light changed and the truck took off, then the familiar sound of a car, and the Mustang pulled up beside him. A kid with a dimpled chin emerged from the driver's side and then the passenger stepped out.

"You all right, sir?" the driver asked.

Tom removed his helmet and cradled it in his arm as he stood looking at his bike. "Yeah," he said, and promptly vomited.

"Dude," the passenger mumbled. "G-forces are wicked."

"It's not gravity, okay?" Tom replied, annoyed. "I fly fast airplanes; gravity is no big deal." He didn't want to tell them about the adrenaline spike and his coming down off of it. "I'm fine, thank you for asking. Don't you guys have school or something?"

The two guys looked at each other. "We're on lunch," they said.

Tom waited for some cars to pass by, and then he asked, "Which high school do you go to anyway? My son might go there."

"Savannah High," the driver said.

"Do you know Colton Lee?" Tom asked. His hand shook as he pulled a picture out of his wallet and held it up. It had been taken several years ago in Paris, back when they were happy. Tom, Ann and Colton were standing in front of the Eiffel Tower wearing matching berets, and Tom had his arm around Ann. Colton was much younger then, but his looks hadn't changed much.

The two looked at the picture and nodded. "Yeah, we know Colton," the passenger answered.

Tom waited for them to continue. "Why what's wrong with Colton?" he finally asked, stuffing his wallet in his khaki pockets.

"Nothing," the driver said. "He's nice enough. We just didn't figure you for his dad is all."

Tom waved the oncoming cars into the left lane. A man in a maroon Buick honked and gave him the birdie as he drove by.

"Yeah," the acne kid said. "Who knew Colton had such a cool dad?"

"I wish my dad was like you," said the driver. "Maybe I wouldn't have to book races to pay for this thing." He tapped the top of the car affectionately.

Tom reached in his pocket and pulled out a business card. For the first time he noticed he was shaking. "Here," he said, handing it to the kid with acne. "Call me tomorrow. We can all do lunch and talk about AMA Supersports and NASCAR."

The two guys looked at each other. "Okay pops," the driver said.

Then Tom righted the bike, strapped on his helmet and started down the road—slowly this time—and the two guys drove off in their Mustang.

On the way home Tom remembered that he had not told his wife about the motorcycle and now he would have to tell her about the dent in the fairing too. He did not know why he cared so much about what she thought of him; he had been planning to leave her for a while now. Their life together was a perpetual cycle of sameness: work and social gatherings, domestic duties and sleep. Taxes. Had it always been this way?

The sun had fallen twenty degrees in the sky by the time Tom pulled into the circle driveway. The two-story colonial style stucco home, painted a faded mustard yellow with burgundy awnings, they'd bought from a retired couple who no longer had the energy to take care of it. There was a garage off to the right, but he intended to make his stand front and center. To skulk off to the garage and come in the side door would suggest that he was ashamed of what he'd done, and he didn't want her to think that he regretted it even for a second. He would confront her head-on, self-assured, confident, arrogant, though he knew he needn't go to this extreme. She wouldn't say anything, but still he needed her to see him as she had always seen him, a man who never doubted himself.

Across the street a construction crew were building a house, and Tom could hear their voices, muffled and distant, and the sound of nail guns. He looked at his front door and the sun glinting off the copper roof, and wondered if she had heard him. Then the door opened and Ann emerged in a black shift dress and heels. She was a petite woman with short brown hair that was curled under, and she wore make-up.

She looked at him and then at the bike, and he could see her mind working to adjust to the new paradigm. "Is it yours?" she asked at last.

"Yes, I bought it today. It's a damn fine bike," he said, twisting the throttle. "You look beautiful, by the way. I've always loved that dress on you."

She nodded, studying his clothes, then pointed to the fairing. "What happened?"

"Oh this," he said, indicating his shirt and pants, "was from a dog I saved this morning. That, it came like that. The dealer knocked a thousand off the baseline price."

"A thousand dollars for a fender?"

"It's not a fender, it's a fairing, and yes, a thousand dollars. Why, don't you believe me?"

A jet plane roared overhead and disappeared in the distance.

"I believe you," she said before disappearing inside the house. "Colton!" he heard her holler. "Your father has bought a motorcycle."

A few seconds later, Colton emerged from the house. He was wearing a shiny purple suit, a skinny tie and make-up with his chin-length brown hair greased away from his face. He took one look at his father and the bike, rolled his eyes and went back inside.

Tom parked the bike, ran past his wife and into the house where he stood at the foot of the stairs. "What's that look for?" he yelled.

"Nothin. Can I ride it?"

"Absolutely not," Tom said, starting up the stairs. "It's dangerous."

"Then why'd you buy it?"

The bedroom door was partially closed but Tom could see his son sitting at the bureau, applying powder with a brush. He suddenly felt queasy.

"Because I wanted one," Tom said, pushing the door open and entering the room. "When you grow up, if you want one you can buy one too."

Colton swung around in the seat, crossed his legs and placed his hand on knee. "I don't want a motorcycle."

It's not that he's wearing make-up, Tom decided, it's that he looks good in it. A boy isn't supposed to look good in make-up. "Why not? What's wrong with a motorcycle?"

"It's crass. I want a Rolls Royce, a Luxury Phantom. Beige interior." Colton rotated back around in his chair, picked up a brush, dipped it in a jar and began to rim his eyes.

"Then I suggest you quit this theater business and take up engineering," Tom said, sitting on the bed. He watched Colton dot black spots under his lashes and connect them with a brush, and wondered why he'd thought his son was anything like the dog. "Learn to design the thing and you can have one."

Colton stopped and looked at his father in the mirror. "Dad, we've had this discussion."

"You'll never make any money in theater. You'll waste it all on drugs and die broke and alone with a sexually transmitted disease."

"I know," he said, smudging his eye liner with a sponge. "You've said that already. I have a lot of time until that happens."

Tom glanced around the room. He hadn't been in it for a while and things had changed. Gone were My Little Pony and the Atlanta Hawks, replaced by a large photograph of David Bowie performing as Ziggy Stardust, Velvet Goldmine and

Sweeney Todd movie posters, a homemade collage of High School Musical clips, theater posters for Spring Awakening, Hedwig and the Angry Inch and Fun Home, and a life size poster of Eminem. Tom no longer knew the person sitting in front of him. What happened to the toddler who liked to hide in trash cans and drink from empty beer bottles?

"I met some guys who go to your school today," Tom said.

"Who?"

"I don't know their names. One of them drives a Mustang GT. He's got dimples and his friend has some wicked acne."

Colton looked in the mirror at his dad. "Wicked?"

"Bad, I mean."

"That's Arthur. Gary owns the Mustang. Where'd you meet them?"

"Oh, uh, at the gas station. They liked the bike."

Colton brushed some powder off the dresser, but didn't say anything.

"You don't like them?" Tom asked.

"Yeah I like them. They're nice enough. Too bad they aren't your sons, huh?"

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to," Colton said, rising and brushing himself off. "I'll tell mom you're not coming tonight."

"I didn't say that either," Tom said, standing up.

"But you're not coming, are you?"

Tom opened his mouth but no words came out.

"Don't worry, I didn't think you would. Mom will be disappointed though. I'll tell her you have to work late. That's the excuse, right, you have to work late?"

"Colton…"

"It's no big deal. I'll let her know."

Colton stepped out of the room and down the stairs, leaving Tom standing where he was, uncertain of what he had just heard, uncertain of what he should do. So he went down the stairs, intent on making things up to Colton, but met his wife in the hall.

"You're not going," she said.

"You look nice," he said. "I have to work."

"He's your son, Tom."

"I know that," Tom said.

"I don't care about me, but he's your son."

"I know."

"It's opening night."

"I have to work," Tom said. "The FAA gave us 3 million to improve the airport thoroughfare, renovate two runways and three perimeter roads. They've blocked off a terminal and they're working on the Airways Avenue and Crossroads Parkway Intersection, but it's caused traffic backup and passengers are missing their flights. We're two days behind already."

Ann looked back at the kitchen, where Colton had fixed himself a sandwich, and then at her husband. "Do you know how long he's wanted to play Link Larkin in Hairspray?"

"Mom," Colton said. He was standing in the doorway with crossed-arms. "Leave him alone, okay?"

"I'll come if I can get away from work," Tom said over Ann's shoulder.

"He has to be there at five," she said. "The show starts at six-thirty. We're leaving as soon as Colton finishes his sandwich. Please, please come."

"Mom, leave him alone," Colton hollered, back in the kitchen. With a mouth full of food, his voice sounded muffled. "Bye, dad. Try not to fall down on your bike again, okay?"

Tom's heart stopped. "What do you mean?"

"Your right pant leg is ripped. You should probably change pants before you go to work."

Tom looked down at his pants and saw that it was true. "Must've caught on something," he muttered, checking Ann's face. He could tell that she didn't believe him, but then she didn't say anything.

By the time he left the house the sun had set. Light slanted through the trees, making shadows on the driveway. The breeze had picked up since midday, ushering in the cool air from ocean waters. Across the way, men in flannel shirts and hard hats climbed over mounds of brick and into the skeleton house.

Tom straddled the bike, ran his hand along the smooth skin. Monocoque aluminum. Stiff, hard flesh. He turned the ignition switch, grabbed the clutch and hit the button on the right. When the machine started, he felt himself come to life.

Down the road. Blurred vision. Warp speed. Rushing wind. The Bohemian on River Front. Drunk on the roof and into the room. King Size bed and Madelynn.

As he lay on the bed afterward, the shot and the high done and him withdrawing into himself, exhausted, fragile, dull, the sense of meaninglessness encroached upon him. He couldn't sleep. The chill of the room and the musky smell. The alienation of absolute silence. To kill it he hummed and turned his thoughts to the dog from that morning, before his mind leaped to the boys and then to Colton and orbited around its object. Something was wrong with his son—had been wrong with him for a long time—something more than his tendencies. He had first noticed it when he passed by the upstairs bathroom and saw, through a crack in the door, a skinny and naked teenage Colton staring at himself in the mirror. *The tight skin around his lean arms and chest, but below his waist, two hip bones: a skeletal hourglass.* Tom had closed his eyes and blocked out the vision, but now, in the nothingness of the moment, it came back to him, clear and alarming, the night it had rained and Tom had gotten up to close the windows and stopped outside Colton's room, listening to the petal-falls of water and the familiar fapping sound coming from under the covers, (remembering the night he, Tom, had first done it but the moon had been full that evening and his babysitter, Amanda, had forgotten to shut the door or maybe on purpose left it open for Tom to see her lying on the guestroom bed in her bra and jeans talking on the phone) knowing that rainy night that Colton was not thinking of Amanda and he was not thinking of Katherine or Samantha or Brittany but of Alex, their next door neighbor, whom Tom had seen outside that day, shirtless, working on the house, because Colton had stared at him through the blinds of his bedroom window while Tom was fixing the air conditioning unit outside his door. Tom had closed his eyes then too. *And then the hips —bones—wider than the waist, unnatural womanly hips but not soft. Hard like a man's.*

But he did not hate his son: he did not. He did not understand him but he did not hate him. He wanted to bridge the gap but it was too deep and too far for him and he didn't have the tools to build the bridge. Ann was distant too, and their mountain biking the terrain of the West Virginia mountains and their weekend camping trips to Appalachia, snuggled in their flannel shirts and parkas to keep warm by the fire, waiting for the chili to warm in the kettle as the wind gusted down the mountain top, wrapped around them, and died at the bottom of the foothills. Then had come marriage and work and Colton and work and there were no more trips to the mountain tops and the bikes had been sold and he had stopped flying planes. They had settled down in something that resembled death, and then he spent more time at work with Madelynn than he ever did with his family.

When the air conditioning cut on he shivered and turned to the woman beside him. She managed the Hertz rental company at the airport, and had worked with him on the redesign that allowed the company to move into the terminal, but she was not his type —a big woman with thick legs and a round stomach. He could not explain his attraction to her, and yet he was attracted, very. Their first night in a hotel room, gazing at her large and naked, he hadn't known where to start, but she had pushed him on the bed and mounted him, the weight of her body pressing him into the mattress.

She stirred now, as if she sensed he was staring at her, then turned over and opened her eyes.

"What?"

He shook his head. "Nothing."

She grunted and shifted under the covers. "Tell me."

"No. I don't want to talk about it," he said, irritated by her voice, by her very presence. "I have to go now."

He sat up and slid on his shirt.

"When will you take me on the bike?"

"Tomorrow maybe," he said. He stood up and slipped on his pants.

"You're being a real dick tonight. Is it Ann?"

Tom walked over to the dresser and picked up his watch. "My family is not up for discussion," he said, putting it on, "and I love you too."

"I thought I was your family?"

"You will be one day, but not now." The keys jangled in his hand. The air conditioning cut off, and he felt relief. Then he went out.

It was dark outside. The parking lot lights shone down on his motorcycle, illuminating it in a glow. He got on and fastened his helmet. If he took a right onto East Bay Street, he would arrive at the airport. If he took a left, he would end up at school. He sat at the lot exit for five minutes. Then the car behind him honked its horn.

FRAGMENTS OF A TIME WHEN

Early August. Into the classroom the students scuttled, heaving book bags and lunches, toward closed spaces in the middle with square chairs and round tables. Colton Lee staggered after, swaying side to side with every stomp of his Doc Martens, the pride and joy of his allowance, which bore the traces of Munch: a wavy head and mouth opened in a scream. Matt Leigh, the new star quarterback from Texas, at the front fidgeting a Popsicle stick—Tony Romo's, Angel, Matt's friend, had said, her father the chaplain of the Dallas Cowboys. Six tables under fluorescent light; abstract paintings draped corner to corner, the professor's table and desk, and outside a small, overgrown garden barred by brick walls with windows that let in the blonde light. The boys enveloped Matt while Colton soaked in a sea of girls.

They worked from their textbook, *The Artist's Perspective*, which featured a giant, sketched eyeball on the white cover. In the beginning they learned how to hold their pencil up and close one eye to gauge proportion and how to draw blindly by looking at the object rather than the paper, but soon they were drawing other things —hands, outlines, even each other. Matt sat silent, short but strong, muscles packed and bulging and from his blue jeans, his baggy jersey loose about his torso as he bent over his paper, left hand furiously moving back and forth, up and down, side to side, contouring, shading, cross-hatching. The quarterback didn't like to talk, Colton had heard, because he was deaf and feared the sound of his own voice, but he could read lips. The other guys at the table joked, whispered what Colton couldn't hear and elbowed Matt friendly to win him over, but he only nodded and smiled. When their monthly work was posted, everyone figured it out.

Matt had drawn The Alamo. Perfectly.

In September, their teacher told them, "Today we're going to work on faces." Football had begun, and Coach "Jimmy" Green, who had become the school's soothsayer when he told Savannah News, "Texas—they grow their boys to play ball. Breed em and feed em," was leading his disciples in a season, 2 wins to 0 losses. Matt, Savannah's savior, flagged and fiddled with his Popsicle stick to the drone of Mr. Connor's voice. "I want you to partner with someone not at your table," Connor said. "Take turns drawing each other."

Up Colton stood. Whitney and Courtney, his table-mates, upholstered in the latest fashion: bomber jackets with pleated skirts and Louboutin's bought on the side of the road in Kansas for half the price, confederated. Matt, though, was coming straight for him.

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Early September. Copper-haired, sky-eyed Mike, Colton's gay, Mormon friend slated to begin his mission work in Chile the following year and yoked to Colton by a common need to remain unseen, swung beside Colton after English class one day. He walked toe to heel, while Colton, arching his back, imagined himself on the 25 foot run to the vault, a former gymnast turned actor on the stage. *Mindfulness, balance*, Mike said, weighing each step. Colton wasn't religious, but he liked Mike's mysticism and his lack of evangelistic urges. *Patience and precision. Focus. Seeing things to the end. That's what you need.* Colton didn't want to walk a police line, especially in the middle of the high school hallway with book bags, heels and ties swerving around them. Mike singlehandedly congesting traffic. *But you need it. You cut off too quickly. You can do a*

standing backflip and compute the time it takes for two beams on a rooftop 10 meters above ground to bottom out but you can't fucking talk to the guy you like. It was true but Colton was hormonal. His mother had told him so when she caught him in the bathroom rubbing the strip of fur that had grown from his innie down his belly; also when he had told Mr. Brown, his social studies instructor, to go fuck himself. Besides, he was good at physics because he liked to draw; he hated math. *Look, I'm off to Valparaiso in a year,* Mike said. *Bohemia stripped down and naked, no running water, no electricity, no car. Walk ten miles downhill to buy a sack of potatoes and God help me on the way up. Going to live in a yellow shack, pray it doesn't fall. And when the sun comes up and I've defrosted, I'm going to tell those miserable fuckers about Jesus Christ.*

Mike popped the hair band of the girl in front of him. "Hey Heather, tell him to talk to the guy."

Heather spun on her heels. "Who?"

"Colton, tell Colton. I don't know who the guy is. He won't tell me."

It was a cruel move for the latter day saint. Heather was Matt's girlfriend and Matt was the guy. But he wouldn't tell Mike about Matt because it sounded ridiculous. And he wouldn't tell Heather about Mike because that was obvious.

Heather punched Colton's arm friendly like she always did. Colton liked her and her dimpled cheeks; she was on his level. "Talk to him," she said. "It can't hurt."

It can hurt. It can hurt a lot, thought Colton.

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Late September. The drawing centered a small collection of artwork displayed in the hallway as a demonstration of students' artistic talent. Noticeably absent was "The

Alamo," but in its place dangled a sketch of Colton. His eyelids hung at half-mast, giving him a seductive look, and there was an over-investment in his lips. Too much color had been supplied to them—from afar, his lips emerged from the drawing, succulent and slightly pursed to kiss the world. His eye color followed—one detected in them a shade of green. Though everyone recognized these nuances, nobody said a thing, for however exaggerated they were (his lips were full, true, but the upper lip topped a bulge more prominent than itself—yet here both were equally distended, as if they might burst) the difference was pleasant. Out of all the spectators, Matt's girlfriend was the most impressed. "He's hot," she said with a toss of her hair, to which Matt only smiled.

A day later Colton crossed the hall and found himself pinned to the wall, inflamed mouth ready to open and suck in the whole world. To hide his naked thirst! He could have torn it down, the uncanniness of his own image staring back at him with such narcissistic love, but the difference between his own lips and the lips of the wanton boy on the wall was Matt's clandestine desire. In the void between his self and his double, his friend's wishes grew and multiplied, and it was a wonder—at least to Colton—that nobody saw it but himself, or if they did see it, did not confess their secret.

All was terror and joy, and when he turned toward the warm breath that had a moment ago massaged his neck, his soul screamed the words.

"It's…" he said to the wavy hair, a muddy brown river under rays of light. "It's like Sascha Schneider's "'Hypnosis'" if you've seen it," he said.

Matt nodded, hands cryptic signing.

"I'm not the boy in the drawing," Colton said. "I'm the one with the black hood, but he looks more like you —if you wore a hood —I look like the boy —kinda."

The building was freezing and heat rose from Matt's skin - they were inches away from each other. Colton could feel the quickening of his pulse, and a blush surfaced till he looked like the boy on the wall.

It occurred to Colton that he had been cheated in life, divided from himself by the tight flesh around him and the other. Now, all he wanted to do was crawl inside his friend and disappear. Ah, to be consumed, piece by piece, until he was nothing —that is what he longed for! Matt was deep, the unplumbed depths. Could he not pierce the surface and sink happily to the bottom?

Colton hushed as the janitor cornered and made past them, the sweep of his arms sending bits of dust and chaff into the air, his neck craning to glimpse the boys that stood like still life against the drawings before returning to his work. Both shivered as the air conditioner clicked on again.

"You don't have to hear them," Colton said, "or see their faces or read their lips, if you don't want to. Not you —me. I hear everything. I know what they say about me though they don't know; they don't know for sure, any more than I do."

Matt eyes softened.

Colton pulled out his phone and typed, then handed it to Matt, who smiled and nodded — so they agreed. As Colton shoved his phone into his pocket, Matt grasped his hand for a second, squeezed it, then let go.

October. Matt's mouth tasted like Cherry Chapstick, and now they sat together in the rose garden not far from Colton's house, Matt's hand casually thrown over Colton's as if it were part of the ornate concrete bench they were sitting on, their sketch pads at

ease beside them, and both staring at the white stones of the small graveyard, lit up by the spotlight on the ground. Spiraled around the stones, rose bushes thick with thorns and dangling foliage grew, perennially flowering their pinnation and stipule. Colton's eyes scoured the names, though names are not intelligible to the eyes but require the mind, and his was not on the stones but perpetually caught in a loop of what happened five minutes ago and what replayed itself until a quarter hour had passed in silence. In that time, he managed to squeeze out of it thrice its worth: focusing first on how sounds had come out of Matt's mouth in the soft, light voice that could have been a minister's but which in fact belonged to the quarterback of the football team (and which could sound like the war cry of Zeus on the field), on how he, Colton, had ceased sketching, pencil resting between index finger and thumb, and turned his head, and how the dazzling blue light of Matt's eyes shut out as Matt, now inches from Colton's face, had closed his lids and moved in until their faces had become extensions of each other. This rehearsal had merged into another: Matt's round face half-cast in shadow, not unlike a putti angel in Colton's Renaissance art book, the parting lips and probing tongue, and his own mouth a heart pushing against Matt's. And then the finale: the moment Colton had realized what was about to happen (Matt's brow had relaxed and a look come into his eyes), the moment he had given his approval of what was to happen (the moment Colton was stricken dumb to Matt's already deafness, the same moment as Matt's look) and the moment immediately after the kiss, when his heart started again, singing terror and joy, terror and joy.

***

November. The approach of midnight in the rose garden, and all around, roses pushed forth from their fences, thrust their heads in the air, tumescent with bloom, and quivered. Colton now struggled like a bug on the bench to regain his position as Matt leaned over him, trenches between his brows. Before, as if in a dream, Matt had been a drop in an infinite sea that hurled itself against the sand, and Colton, remote and vague, a burrowed being beneath its retreating surface. Matt had lunged and surged, infiltrating his earthen will that strove to remain, and inch by inch Colton had surrendered, and when underground eruptions had swelled Matt's determination, he had greedily stolen whole cities—bamboo and blade, marble and statue, concrete and steel. Eons passed as Colton slowly shrunk away until the two were one.

"How long was I asleep?"

Matt's head ticked side to side. "Mmphf".

Colton held up his hand. Matt shook his head and pointed to the ground. Colton hid a finger at a time until only one remained. Matt pointed to the ground.

"Less than a minute?"

Matt nodded and held up three fingers.

"Three seconds? But we…but… ." It was useless.

Matt scooted back and Colton turned to the gravestones that marked the men who had once driven tanks over the former fairgrounds in World War I. A grandstand and a race track for war machines, once dozens of acres, now six that bore the skeleton of a stone amphitheater hidden in high grass where the hippie children had staged "A Midsummer Night's Dream" in long dresses and flower tiaras. Thickets of weeds nestled against outer trees, and a grey stoned trellis sliced up two overgrown rows of roses. A

forgotten fragment from the past entombed in the city's psyche. *It's wild and unruly*, his mother had said as she leaned over the sink washing dishes one May morning. *We used to go there after school to study, but nobody's been there in a while. Don't go by yourself. It could be dangerous*.

The rose garden, a space out of time, was theirs. Enclosed, neglected, wrapped in a yesterday lost to history, their love could thrive in the unknown. What did it matter if Matt was deaf? It only solidified the absence of the place. He was a great artist, a great football player, and an even greater friend. Matt was the one he had been waiting for, now present in the flesh, and Colton was proud of him.

Rain had fallen a few days before, and pools of water glutted the earth. The roses shook in the soft breeze.

December. The final game against Carroll from Southlake, the green beasts loomed large and powerful though Colton still towered above them, raised high in the bleachers so the Carroll Dragons looked like June beetles. Tucked behind the chain-link fence, hemmed in by her parents, who wore school colors and cheered with an enthusiasm incommensurate with their position, the blond-haired girl shouted and waved. Colton wanted to hate her, but all he felt was pity and sympathy. He, too, loved the boy on the field. He too, shared his love with another, but while she remained blissfully unaware of Matt's nature, Colton not only knew, but also took action. At some point things would work themselves out, would come to a head, and he wouldn't be the one surprised and repulsed to discover Matt's underbelly. He would be the survivor, the one who walked away unscathed—if he walked away, if. He wasn't sure he wouldn't stand

and fight for him, especially knowing Heather—that was her name—was not like his mother who drove him to the game and said, as they pulled into the parking lot, "I know you're going to meet a friend, sweetie. I know there's a boy."

Across the field, a forest speckled here and there, a red shirt or pink umbrella. No weapons, but threatening in sheer number. Colton started to count but got lost. The red shirt crossed the bleachers, the pink umbrella went up (Why? He thought. It's a clear day. Maybe allergic to the sun?) People climbed up and down, over and across, meeting friends or acquaintances, with popcorn, corn dogs, fries, sodas (no beer—Colton sighed), blankets, umbrellas, book bags, back packs, giant green hands with the index finger poked up, flags, pompoms—of course they were searched, had been searched, at the entrance, for safety and contraband (to drive vending sales). Beneath the bleachers hungry teenage faces twisted together, tongues snaked, trying to eat each other.

The blue jackets stormed the field to the roar of the crowd, Matt trailing last, burgeoning with pride as his chin strap dangled and danced. Colton knew he had come from Dallas and had played for Highland Park—he'd looked him up shortly after the drawing, found his Facebook page, and learned how, when he was 10, he'd gone for a backflip on the double ramp at the skate park, done an air and grab with his left hand, cleared 90 degrees, but landed short on his neck and head; how he'd spent a week like an incubated baby, with wires and tubes plugged into a life machine and parents huddled over him; how he loved to dance—thanks to the wooden floored porch—on summer days to the "Flying Purple People Eater" and "Short People" with his seven-year-old neighbor, who could do the worm and the Nae Nae better than him because she wanted to be a dancer, and how he was an only child to a father who worked on the oil rigs six months

out of the year, and to a mother who cleaned hotels. So different it was—the long separation, the oil slick boots that stained the carpet when his father returned, stern and silent, from the greasy concentration camp, the goodbyes on the front porch in the afternoon as Mrs. Leigh collected her buckets and brillo pads to clean the soiled toilets of rich people—from his own family, his father, a military pilot who fancied himself a daredevil, and his mother, a housewife with a master's hoping to return to school.

Though he didn't like football, he had an appreciation for the game—something reassuring, the limitations of the field, the scope of it (only four quarters), a rule book (he had never seen it, but he had been promised it existed) with specifics on how to deal with strange situations. When the referee took the field and said, "holding—number 29, defense, 1st down" everyone agreed and took their proper places. He had heard other people—older people in the kitchen talking, he listening upstairs—that football was like war and war was like life, and he'd been forced to read a book once—a terribly boring book but one he got through, because he was a reader—about football and nuclear war, but he thought the opposite, that football was artificial, something thrown on top of chaos to create order, organization, and stability. Nothing ever changed, and if it did—in that alluded to rule book (he wondered if it was kept in a high place, behind closed curtains), then the law givers would come forth and declare the new, and everyone heard and obeyed. Challenges to the rule book were rare, and almost always overturned.

The game began, and back and forth the ball went, attended by murmured prayer and supplications from the crowd. Colton brought his sketch pad forward and set it in his lap. How to represent dynamic, formidable forces in perpetual motion, shooting energy from their fingertips (but his fingertips were all that mattered)? How to fold into paper

electric potencies (here Colton reflected on mass and acceleration), which denied all form? Was condensation possible? He thought about Matt's favorite painting, Ernst's "L'Ange du Foyer," and Boccioni's "Charge of the Lancers," and drew some lines and curves in the center of the drawing. Inside him, the rippling current curled back into itself and lifted its lofty head. He let go and his hand moved freely; arcs and angles formed, lines intersected and crossed, curves collided and exploded, sent upwards spirals and strips. The wave crested, foaming, and bent its head toward shore. It was the fourth quarter with a minute left, they were 6 points behind, and congregated on their 20th yard line, 4th down. Matt would pass, his spiral an extension of his will that guaranteed the target. A vacuum opened on the page. Colton regarded the field and waited for the wave to break. The ball went into play; Matt stepped forward and wound up tight. The sky cracked - a broken light, but the blue wall held. Matt had all the time in the world. The moment expanded into an eternity in which Colton saw his own death.

Overhead, the clouds gaped, disclosing darkness. The ball took flight into a receiver's hands; the wave terminated mid-stream. Colton rent his drawing in two.

By the chain-link fence Colton waited, foot tapping the plastic grass, watching the people spiral around Matt, the fixed center. First the green Dragons, then Matt's own team, then his girlfriend and her family (his was working), then his friends. The coach, in his blue jacket windbreaker and team cap, revolved around the quarterback, eyeing Matt from a careful distance. For the first time Colton understood the attraction to this soothsayer, felt drawn to Jimmy by the gravity of his presence and knew (when their eyes met) that the coach knew (in his deep down places) about the rose garden and the drawing.

The devotees parted as Colton approached until he stood eye to eye with the quarterback. Matt's helmet drooped in his hand. He stared off into the distance. Colton glanced at the scoreboard, 15 Savannah to 21 Carroll, cocked his hip and waved his finger in Matt's face. It was treason, pure treason. He accused him of betrayal and sabotage; of fraud, tax evasion, money laundering and scientific experiments on humans, of ethnic cleansing and bombing of civilian populations; of serial killing, mass murder and possession of a Class A substance with intent to distribute, and of being a fugitive from justice, all the while wanting to sink into the ground and asking himself this question: *Who is saying this*? *It isn't me—there's someone else that hides inside until moments like this.*

With vacant faces, the others listened to him. Mr. Heather said something about football season being an annual activity, and there being—as far he knew, he wasn't God—next year for another try; Mrs. Heather mentioned that from her perspective, it was a beautiful throw and how unfortunate that the other cornerback caught it; their daughter said that one of the defensive lineman had committed a penalty, that the referee hadn't caught it, and technically the entire play was a safety. Several people nodded and began saying it was indeed a safety, and that someone should challenge it, should go to the referees, the coaches, the school administration and write their senator, if necessary. An outrage had been committed on their field.

Colton turned away and strode off. He knew his mother was waiting for him in the parking lot, and so he texted her, typing that he had gotten a ride home, that they were going to stop off for an after-party at Mike's house (though Mike knew nothing of the football game or the alleged party), that his parents were home, and not to wait up. He

did not know where he was going, but as he went he relived each moment, the grasp of the ball, the crook in Matt's wrist, the second where time stood still and it seemed like eternity passed in which—Colton realized it now—Matt waged war against himself and lost, and then at the last moment the shift, rotation and release, which sent the winged ball into the hands of the opponent, gentle as a dove.

For the past three months no one had existed but Matt and himself. All that had mattered to Colton—parents aside—was Matt, the scent of his jersey, the brush of his lips, the taste of his Cherry Chapstick. But there were other moments too: the night they got drunk on Matt's father's whiskey, and danced naked in the rose garden in the rain; the hours spent quietly sketching side by side on Saturday afternoons; the football practices during which Colton hid beneath the bleachers, pretending to do his homework, while watching through the slits (and a sliced up Matt, pretending to look at his girlfriend, who was sitting above Colton, winked and smiled). Now that all of it was gone, what remained? Love was a terrible thing—the worst thing in the world. It ate you up from the inside out and left you a hollow shell.

He would go to the rose garden.

It had rained hours before and the roses, grey with darkness, still hung low to the ground, their petals heavy with water. Dense with moss, the oak trees cowered and dripped. His step sunk into the soaked earth, and it seemed that all of nature had felt his sting and was in sympathy. With track prints behind him, he lay down at the foot of one of the pock marked gravestones, closed his eyes and thought to himself, *this is it—this is what death's like, but it won't stop. I'm dying but I won't die*. He tried to clear his mind, to feel the sweep of death's peace over him, but he couldn't. There was the ball and the

thumb—the thumb that determined the grip—and it wasn't where it was supposed to be. The rose garden had been their hedge of protection against the world; it had wrapped round them but now Matt was gone and only he was left, stillborn.

Colton turned aside and saw, in an eye-shaped rose leaf, the dormers, gables and tower, the widow's walk of a Victorian home and inside the bay window Matt, dressed in post-game jeans and white tee, seated in a high back baroque chair of cherry wood, sipping Gatorade, one leg folded in a right angle over the other, and rubbing the popsicle stick like a Talisman, as if mere friction could efface the score and change the outcome. Heather knelt beside him, her cheek against his leg, her arms embracing his calf in full faith. Mr. and Mrs. Heather rose from the sofa and, with the excuse of being tired and going to bed, went out. With the click of the bedroom door, Matt's eyes closed and his hand descended upon her head. Then the green eye appeared and the vision was over.

Colton raised himself up on his elbow and peered at the gravestone. *He should come here; he had duties to get rid of and now it's just a matter of when*. *He must be past the coffeehouse by now, into the neighborhood, running from that chained Pitbull. He must be on his way. He has to come; he has to know how I'm fading away into nothingness.*

A brush of the bushes drew his attention and he turned toward it. Matt had snuck in silently, and now sat, staring at Colton from the bench. His face, shaded by the trees, was unknowable.

Colton felt the spirit leave him. He had come back; perhaps all was not lost. Pregnant with hope, he saw the roses redden in the glistening light of the moon, felt the damp earth harden and the grass bristle beneath his touch. The fibrous leaves, heavy with

water, rustled in the wind, offering shelter to the evening birds, and even the gravestones, heretofore crumbled and stained, sparkled and glowed in the light of Matt's presence. He'd been acting foolish—stupid, histrionic, Colton thought. Matt should leave him. If he were Matt, he would leave himself.

Matt waved him over and patted the bench beside him. Colton sat down beside his friend and then suddenly, like a message from a bottle, it came to him, *there's a Dragon.* He'd done it out of loyalty. And suddenly Colton was happy. Matt was faithful, more faithful than he would be, and he was not alone; there were others like Colton who had been loved, other boys, and he was faithful to each one when he was with them, and the girls were required because of Matt's father (whose fist had collided with his son's face on more than one occasion), because of his position, but the boys he loved, each one. And now, he was the boy, and the other one—the *Dragon* —was nostalgia, a loss that Matt still could not betray. Somehow his friend had escaped his girlfriend, her parents, his coach, the fans, the team—all those naked boys showering together!—to come there to the rose garden, to be with Colton, the one who denied him.

A bird landed on bench the beside him and for the first time Colton noticed the among the robust roses and wrangling weeds a vine of passion flower, a purple head having thrust aside its fairer friends to emerge solitary, victorious. Matt made to pick it (*for me* Colton thought) but Colton shoved his hand away. "Don't," he said. "But you have to leave her. Can you leave her—just that?"

Matt looked down at his hands and nodded. A soft breeze blew; up jumped the roses and shook the wetness from their heads.

THE GLASS BOTTLE

An August day in Savannah. Heat sparkles off cars and chain link fences absorb light into dull paint. Draped in a blue jersey and tights, my body breaks out in a sweat courtesy of the unremitting sun.

On the field, they want to kill me. Eleven of them, cautious, hesitant and with pricked ears on alert now, having heard the crunch of turf. *I am the lion crouched in the tall grass. I am the blue-eyed jackal. Conduct me, oh Jove, oh Epictetus-Tzu, to fall like a thunderbolt, dark and impenetrable, upon my enemy…*

The silent snap. Look to the essence of the thing. Shotgun formation double-option read. Zone coverage defense, 4-3. Downfield the sound of my voice in my ears is what I tell myself. My running back, Brown, beside me: to hand off or not to hand off. Defensive end Jameson, a mountain of a man, barrels down on Brown. Into the running back's gut the ball sinks, he falls, but I have the ball and am running to the sideline. All war is deception. *I am the fierce lion, I am the howling jackal*, but my route is blocked by a large linebacker and a mean-looking cornerback. I cut back and through the defensive hole I go, my guard before me, another guard beside me. I dash toward the goal line. 10 yards, 20 yards, 47 yards. The defense in my wake. Touchdown.

Light flashes and coach beckons us to himself, a braille faced guru. His hand rests on my shoulder, grey lips shaping silent words I read. "Well-done, Matt," he says. A lie. To me they are condescending. "He's deaf" is what they think, or maybe Lamar has threatened them to "be nice."

Beyond the chrome bleachered perimeter from where I stand, two stories of red brick and cast stone, among a flatland of dead grass and dirt patches, comprises Savannah

High School. Today is my first day. Until now my brain has been a confusion of philosophy and thoughts of home. Confusion, a side effect of a TBI from a double flip at the skate park when I was ten. Anacusis and benign paroxysmal positional vertigo. The otorhinolaryngologist operated and declared me unfixable, and cochlear implants were too expensive. Philosophy, a handoff from my Buddhist rehabilitation nurse, as treatment for my "emotional lability," home, a place where I am understood. Reprieve allows me thinking moments; I jog over to my book bag on the 50 yard sideline and unzip it. Inside, my iPhone, a white, Highland Park sweat towel and a signed thermos by Tony Romo and Dez Bryant, done for charity, which I'd bought off of eBay. The cool cloth feels good against my face, and I take a slurp of Gatorade, turning back to the team. Dark skin stems from short blue, mesh sleeves. At ease, like Iraqi soldiers during downtime, while I am locked inside my soul, surrounded by a wall of glass, me and myself. If it weren't for reading, for the characters' voices, I would never hear: Aurelius' *Meditations*, my Bible. *The Art of War*, how to make it to the playoffs. The banned book of Highland Park: *Siddhartha*. Siddhartha=Buddha. *When I think of myself, I realize I am one moment behind myself, and so am not thinking of myself, but who I used to be. And who I used to be always changes, so there's no I that thinks, I think, only a me that receives. Throw the ball to me. Me throw the ball to you*.

My phone is rigged with a caption app, so I take it and head toward coach. Coach Green hangs over my head, the tremor of his hand the result of an old football injury against Clemson. His large brown eyes focus on my blue ones. "Don't let them go easy," I type. "I can handle it." The screen testifies to my thoughts. He nods, calls out to the players. He speaks too fast for me to know what he is saying. My caption app

registers non-sense because coach forgot about the microphone. He signs to me *Aurelius 7*, not in ASL like you might think. It's a no-huddle sign, courtesy of the Erhardt—Perkins system.

We assume the I-Formation for a play-action pass on a 4-4 defense.

Brown is 5'11 and 200 pounds, so he has to stoop some to see my counting fingers. The smell of halitosis and the stench of arm pits. If Lamar opens up downfield, he'll receive; if not, then anybody. My cleats dig into the earth as my body braces for the impact. Snap. Sunk. The ball my own intestines. I drop back and fake slip it to Brown. He shoots down the A gap, between center and right guard. Both receivers move to block then head downfield, Lamar on a slant. Beyond the field is a road, and beyond that road maple and pine trees speckle blue and green houses, but I see nothing but two stacked helmets, the farthest juking to open. Lamar. There's pressure down the middle, a blitz. Durant, as big as the Grand Canyon, has parted the offensive waters and is preparing for the takedown. Lamar may or may not be open; I'm blind, so I dump the ball off-side before I am smashed into the ground. Dizzy and in some pain under a giant weight, I wonder if this sack will leave a permanent imprint of my body in the turf.

Time moves quickly on the field, so I am relieved when practice ends. My book bag sags heavy as I trudge to my beat-up bronze Nissan, smelling fresh from the shower earlier. Skin wiped clean of sweat and dirt. My head throbs, my body droops, invisible arms dragging me downward. *My father begged her to let me play ball.* The parking lot is abandoned except a few stray cars, remnants from after school sports. A light wind sprays them with dead leaves. My Nissan is covered with them, but then a dent mars the

bumper and the radio's broken. Suddenly the wind ceases, and everything comes to a standstill.

Consciousness has its own time, different from world time says Dr. Kapoor, my former otorhinolaryngologist in in Dallas. Her eyes black holes to other galaxies. Sometimes time speeds up and sometimes it slows down, but it's united—unless you've had a traumatic brain injury, and then there's a before and after, and it's not like waking up after a long sleep; it's like waking up a new person. There's the before, the smoking of cigarettes in the empty lot behind the Texaco after school with your best friend Jay and the lighting up of some old firecrackers you found behind a tree. The whistle and splattered red glow in the bright sky. Next comes the eyelids slick with Vaseline, the stench of ammonia, and the coolness of crunched ice on your tongue. Finally, there's the bitter taste in your mouth, the dull throbbing in your brain and the discovery of the Baylor Hospital ER when you open your eyes. You don't remember the day you went to the skate park or what happened afterwards, except for one moment of semi-consciousness in the hospital when you begged for water. Your memory picks up some two to three weeks after the accident, at the end of rehab, and you realize somewhere in the dark gap of your mind your father started drinking heavily.

When you're deaf you also have a sixth sense, and I knew Lamar Walker was following me, his thick African braids swinging like ropes in the wind, a cloud of Irish Spring around him. I open the door and slump into the seat. Lamar drops his bag and squats down beside me. "You okay?" he asks, mouth phonemic transcription. Coach assigned Lamar to me as a mentor because he has a cousin who is hard of hearing.

Cattycornered from us, a squirrel absconds with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. His claws wrap around the bread as he looks at me and bares his teeth, then drags it into the trees. Even the squirrels here don't like me. When I turn back to Lamar, his fingers are licking the keys of his cellphone. Out of laziness I want to nod and run, but I haven't reached out much that day, so I grab my phone and open the text message app:

I went to a top notch school in Dallas. Highland Park. All white. Rich kids. BMW's and Mercedes. Back yard pools and tennis courts. Sprinkler systems. Trophy Wives. I cheated my way into it. I lived in Vickery Meadows and should've gone to Woodrow Wilson, but Highland needed a new QB. And I held the record in passing. We're poor but I was in, see?

Lamar scans the screen, eyebrows knit into a unibrow, lips pressed together in forced apathy. I realize I sound like an asshole, but I don't know how to say it, how I feel. "I got you brother," he says. Lamar is 6'2 and 210 pounds to my weeny, 5'10 and 172 pounds, with a jaw that spans the gamut of his face. A scar runs just below his right brow. His deep set eyes soften and he smiles, dried spittle at the corner of his mouth. The fact that he called me brother makes me want to cry, but I don't.

"Adopted brother," he corrects.

"Adopted?" I type.

He holds his brown arm up to my bronzed skin. "Hey, why do black people laugh at white people jokes?"

I shrug.

"Because we don't want to die when ya'll shoot up the school. What's the scariest thing about a white person in prison?"

I shrug.

"You know he did it."

I know what he's doing, making me laugh: making me forget. A glance in the rearview mirror reveals my three month old haircut, my Alice blue eyes. I wonder what the others see when they look at me, the new, white, deaf boy.

My t-shirt has started sticking to my skin. I pinch and pull it away, signing to Lamar that I have to go. Three years before, when his cousin was diagnosed with hearing loss, he'd made an effort to learn the basics: Hi, Bye, mom, dad. *I go home* involves three movements and was among the short phrases he'd learned.

Neuroparasite. I know my father is home. Without hearing his hoarse voice or listening to his prattle, I know. Sixth sense. After months of toil on the Texas oil rig, he will sink in the chair, finger a Fosters and review Houston's pre-game against the Colts to Chris, his cousin. Chris, tall and lean and unsure of himself, will hold on to every word as if it were a rare gemstone because my father has a star quarterback for a son. If Houston is winning by seven points, my father will rise and embrace me like the star quarterback son I am; if they are winning by less, he will nod and say hello, and if they are losing, I will become the excuse for every bad pass, interception, and fumble.

I sit for a good ten minutes in the car, studying the white box house with the grey tiled roof and black shutters built in the sixties. We live off of East Broad Street, not too far from the Frazier Homes public housing complex where'd there been a shooting the year before. Houses crippled with bowed roofs and pocked paint surround us. Behind Chris's house, in a used mobile home that Chris bought from an auction, we live. Old

aluminum siding and inside, to the left and to the right two bedrooms, an old swing set in the backyard when you look out the front, between the trailer and the house. My father would be in Chris's house, though, surrounded by a cloud of alcohol and smoke.

In my father's shirt and soiled baggy jeans, my mother stands on the porch. No flutter of birds or squirrels, everything still and secreted from the sun. Barbeque wafts from somebody's grill; the scent of death lingers, a cat or maybe a rabbit. She wipes her thin hands on her shirt and glances at me, fear in her crinkled nose and the tuck of her vivid yellow hair. Her arm rises to make a fist over her stomach. Our warning signal. She turns and goes back inside.

I should duck behind the house and retreat into my room, do my English writing assignment on *To Kill a Mockingbird* before I collapse in bed, but instead, I climb out and shut the door. My Nike Flynits are soaked with sweat from my car sauna; below them, ants scour patches in the grass for something to eat. My knee bends and I retie my shoe laces. Procrastination. *I am going in the house. I will not be afraid; I will be brave, like Aurelius. Remember, the people you deal with today will be meddling, ungrateful, arrogant, dishonest, jealous, and surly. They don't know good from bad.*

The edges of the rusty rail rough against my fingertips as I count five steps to the door. Its warmth shocks my senses into hypervigilance. *Conduct me, oh Jove, oh Epictetus-Tzu*, I whisper silently, *to fall like a thunderbolt, dark and impenetrable, upon my enemy*. Once inside, I see my future, my irredeemable and exigent destiny to fight. Coffee stains darken the beige carpet, and the walls wear the traces of rough days and rougher nights: crushed plaster the faint color of blood over the TV. Above, circles of light, the shape of lampshades. My father rests as expected in the chair, beer in hand,

skin like tawny stone. His nostrils flare against the spider veins of his cheeks. Red-rimmed yellow eyes strive to focus. He is bent as a can top.

When he rises he is surprised. I have grown four inches since we last saw each other. Now we stand eye to eye, his jeans sheltered by his bloated gut, my shirt straining against tight muscle. His weather worn face wrinkles in anger.

He sets his beer on the coffee table. "Where you been?"

Football, I sign. A simple weaving of fingers.

He nods, remembering. In the kitchen, mom is hacking a chicken into parts with a butcher knife, the pronounced rise and fall of her arm regular as an oil pump jack. Chris, who'd been sitting on the sofa, scoots back into its far corner and watches.

"You know why Braxton Miller missed that pass?" he asks, eyes flashing red-yellow-red. Though he's drunk, I can still read his lips. "Because Brock Osweiler overthrew the ball. How do you overthrow a ball ten yards from you, when the pocket's solid?"

My mother has come in from the kitchen, is standing in the doorway, butcher knife in hand. Chris has gotten up and stepped twice toward dad. Coward. I take sick pleasure in the coming pain, in imagining his sharp knuckles raining down on my head. *Don't go easy; I can handle it. It's better to receive than to give*. Then I catch sight of two books amongst the empty beer bottles and ash trays on the coffee table: *Max Ernst, A Retrospective*, and the black vinyl volume that is my sketch book.

They were under my bed. He has searched my room. *Contraband of truth*.

Away for months at a time, he has not learned my language, so when he shoves me against the wall, sour breath beating against my brow, I shake my head, wring his

wrists and push him away. Vibration beneath my feet registers his fall. It is total, this fall, spirit broken, not bones. He discloses his fractured soul with tears. *Rickety ramshack man was operating the crane. He was lifting equipment too heavy again. The boom cable failed and down it came.* Not the first time someone has died. I know all this not because my father tells me—he is on the floor, hands clamped over his red face—but because my mother is gesturing. *Oh father, my father. How the mighty have fallen.*

Shortly after I left rehab, my mother sat me down in our living room with a glossy photo album of my father. For the next hour she leafed through pages of pictures, father dressed in his Alabama uniform, his brown hair slicked back and his piercing eyes aimed at the camera. Sometimes he was kneeling with the team, and sometimes he was executing a play on the field. They had met during a fraternity party, and sober, he had driven her home after a guy named Kit poured beer down her dress. I listened patiently as her lips shaped the words that I worked to translate in my mind, and when she was through, I told her I didn't know who she was talking about.

My father is still blubbering when I slam the door behind me, me wishing I could hear it, the force of the wood against the grain and the spring lock, instead of just the feel. The car chokes and starts. Before my world fell silent, the last thing I'd heard was a Linkin Park CD and now it booms over the sound system. The bass, the dancing mirrors, the vibrations. The words, the melody I try to recall so I don't forget the sound, any sound, and it works. To remember, I tell myself, is to hear again.

I want to go to the park that had passed me by on my way home, to lose myself in its tangles and forget that I exist with the whiskey I'd filched from the cabinet. It takes me an hour, but finally I find it down a side road road past the Chevron station. A

crumbled amphitheater stands near the end, its lot riddled with cracks and grass. I park. The night is dark and cool, and the street lamps shine through the wiry vines that I thread through until I am hidden.

I slump against an old oak tree and unscrew the whiskey top, the stench mixing with the petrichor. I scrunch my nose. That's when I realize I'm not alone.

Not far from me, in the small clearing, someone stands with something in his hand. Roses. He has picked them and is placing them on the illuminated gravestones. A spotlight catches his face, and I recognize him from school. He'd been leaning against the wall across from me in the hallway before the bell rang, pretending to read a book, but he wasn't reading. When you're deaf, you notice things that escape other people. Through the thick brown hair he was looking at me, glancing away, looking at me, glancing away.

I empty the bottle and shove it in my pocket as the boy disappears behind a tree. It starts to rain, and then I realize I am crying.

TOMMY'S PLACE

It was five years after the CDC renamed the gay plague AIDS and one year before Tommy Taylor, my lover, would be diagnosed with the fatal disease he'd gotten from a blood transfusion. 1987 was the year of AZT and U2's Joshua Tree, the year a new sound straight out of Chicago would catch fire around the globe. The year before, the stocks I owned in a little known start-up company finally paid off, which is to say I quit my job as a mid-level electrical engineer and Tommy resigned from his tax accounting job. When I told my manager I was leaving to move across the country and set up my own business, he shook my hand and wished me well. Tommy and I spent our last night in Seattle toasting champagne and burning up the dance floor at the going away party they gave me at the Redmond Marriot. I still have the gold framed plaque they gave me tucked away somewhere in the attic.

We chose Fire Island for our retirement, a one-story stick style bungalow along the shore with a screened in porch open to the ocean. Surrounded by cherry trees with a single wooden pier leading down to the sand-rimmed azure, it was secluded and peaceful and we were lulled to sleep at night by the ocean song. During the day we played naked in the water, crashing bodies against waves and each other, buried salt in our mouths and sand in our rump clefts. But the romance passed day by day until we were left staring at each other across the table.

That's when the package from Chicago arrived.

"Listen," I said as soon as Tommy walked in the door one afternoon. He'd taken up consultant work to kill boredom and came home regularly dirty and tired.

As he threw down his briefcase and undid his tie, I flipped open the plastic cover of our Kenwood and hit play on the tape deck.

He listened about a minute. “What the hell is that?”

“That’s a Roland TB-303, baby, with a Roland TR-808 drum machine.”

“It sounds like bad disco,” he said, unbuttoning his shirt to reveal tufts of dark hair blooming from his chest, a gift from his Greek grandfather. I ran my hand under my shirt and felt the taunt, bare flesh.

“You need to wax,” I said. “It’ll make that heat rash disappear.”

Tommy pulled out a chest hair and held it up to the light.

“Not a heat rash; a mild case of seborrheic dermatitis according to Dr. Gillespie. He says I’m allergic to tall, Catholic Jews in glasses. Hey Blaine, if you pluck out a chest hair, do you bleed?”

“I don’t know,” I said, “I don’t have any chest hair to pluck. Stop changing the subject.”

“I’m not; I’m just curious. There’s blood on the end. Besides, I’m sure Darren turned you on to this.” He pointed at the stereo.

I’d met Darren, who was head of the Afro-American Studies program at UNY, ` at a bookstore shortly after the move. He’d been perusing a travel magazine while waiting in line, and I’d hidden my PC DOS 3.3 book under my newspaper and introduced myself.

“A friend in Chicago,” I said, fingering the package with the letter. It was a half-truth, since Darren was in Chicago visiting his parents, but I didn’t want to tell him that. Tommy didn’t like Darren, and every time his name came up we fought.

"Landscape or portrait painter…or is he an actor?"

"He's not an artist," I said.

Tommy glared at me for a moment. "It's Darren," he said. "It's always Darren. Well, go on. Get it out so we can go on with our lives."

I flipped the vinyl, dropped the needle on the record and then Chuck Roberts began to preach:

In the beginning there was Jack, and Jack had a groove, and from this groove came the grooves for all grooves. And one day while viciously throwing down on his box, Jack boldly declared, "Let there be house!" and House Music was born. I am, you see, I am the creator and this is my house, and in my house there is only house music, but I am not so selfish because once you enter my house, it then becomes our house and our house music. And, you see, no one man owns house, because house music is a universal language spoken and understood by all. You see, house is a feeling that no one can understand really unless you're deep into the vibe of house. And in every house, you understand, there is a keeper. And, in this house, the keeper is Jack. Now some of you who might wonder, "Who is Jack, and what is it that Jack does?" Jack is the one who gives you the power to jack your body! Jack is the one who gives you the power to do the snake. Jack is the one who gives you the key to the wiggly worm. Jack is the one who learns you how to walk your body. Jack is the one that can bring nations and nations of all Jackers together under one house. You may be black, you may be white; you may be Jew or Gentile. It don't make a difference in OUR House. And this is fresh.

Tommy snatched his tie and shirt from off the couch and headed down the hall. "Uh-huh. Every cult has its theme song," he yelled over his shoulder. "Helter Skelter, helter skelter…"

"..it's not a cult," I said, following him. He was in the bathroom, rubbing white cream all over his chest. "Yes, it's ontological displacement, but through the kick and the bass, a wailing diva…"

"…The Beatles had Paul and John …"

"You're missing the point. Shemitah's this year," I said. "You know what that means."

"Kirk Cameron comes out? I have growing pains every time I see him."

"Financial collapse according to some. 1929, the year of the stock market crash. America's on the edge of some great, fiscal apocalypse and we've been granted a reprieve. This music is the future, Tommy, and we've got an opportunity to bring it to the world. I want to start a club."

Tommy stopped rubbing his chest. "It's your money, rich boy," he said, capping the tube of cream. "You can do with it what you want."

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After a few days of listening to me preach a conversion sermon on the vivacity and virility of house music, Tommy finally succumbed, and agreed to join me in my latest enterprise. We settled on a one-story bar down from the Pavilion in The Pines, a beat-up joint with a filthy, cracked wall mirror and gutted toilets from the time a guy tried to flush several bags of coke down the drain. While the dance floor was tight, one of the urinals had been set up as a fountain, the bar was rotting and the floor was varnished with

a gummy substance so that your shoes stuck to it whenever you walked. After our clean-up the building inspector told us three months' worth of labor but the contractor told us six unless we let him subcontract, and then he'd do it in three and throw in the laser lights and flashing strobes for free. So we signed, and then came the licenses —the state and city business operation and name licenses, building permit, seller's permit, certification of occupancy, fire and police department permit, and liquor permit and that was just for the nightclub. We framed them all and decorated the office with other people's approval.

While we waited, we warmed the walls of nightclubs with our butts —at least I did. Tommy was a denim-jeaned electric force on the dance floor. In downtown Detroit he jacked his way to queen of Club Heaven and at The Music Box, formerly The Warehouse; in Chicago he earned the laurel and scepter over the men's toilet. While he was wiggling his way into wet dreams I was listening to Frankie-bang-that-piano Knuckles' smooth mix of disco and Europop at The Power Plant and listening to Ken Collier and Derrick May jabber about gain structure, filters and juggling.

After Detroit and Chicago we flew back to New York, where we spent Saturday night at Manhattan's Paradise Garage, located on King's Street, about a mile from where the Stonewall riots had occurred. Like The Warehouse, The Garage was a storage unit transformed into a gay Mecca, but it featured a Richard Long sound system, black walls, a single disco ball, a big dance floor, some strobe lights and a full-sized bar.

When we walked in the place was packed with plainclothes dancers and the speakers were pounding out a dubbed-up electronic funky jam that blasted the walls and drove itself up through our feet into our spines. Boom-ba swisha, boom-ba swisha. Up in the DJ Booth, Levan was working the equipment, cueing the records and adjusting the

knobs, buttons and sliders that filtered or squelched the bass, that amped the sound up or slowed it down. Tommy hit the floor and I made my way over to Levan and pretended to guard the DJ booth while I waited for Levan to take a break. That's when he sallied up next to me — a mustache blonde with a cigarette in one hand and drink in the other. He was tall and slim with a sizable package, but Tommy had a body on par with the statue of David I'd once seen at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Firenze.

"You see that guy on the dance floor?" I said to him, gesticulating toward Tommy wedged between two walls of dark, solid muscle. "I know him. He works for the IRS. He's here investigating someone for tax evasion, a federal case with jail time. Ask him about tax laws if you doubt me."

The guy took a sip of his drink, and looked at me with his bloodshot blue eyes. "Know who?"

"No," I said, and I shook my head like I regretted it. "I'm just visiting. After all, he couldn't take his wife."

I tossed a penny at Tommy but it hit the bald guy beside him, bounced off his shoulder and fell to the floor.

"Wife?" he said.

"Yeah," I said.

The bald guy picked up the penny and looked around. I could tell he didn't know who'd done it, so I stooped a little to make myself smaller, hoping he wouldn't notice me.

"He's straight as a board," I added, "but you can't go undercover as a straight guy at a gay bar. Some dissembling is necessary. Of course, I couldn't take my wife

either," I said. Baldie was staring at me, holding up the penny. I shrugged and pointed at Tommy.

"Actually, I came along because his wife asked me to make sure he behaved himself. He's a big pussy-hound, but what am I saying? I shouldn't be telling you any of this. Anyway, that's why I can't dance with you. It wouldn't be right."

He shook his empty cup. "No, I guess not," he said, eyeing the bartender. "You know, I'm gonna grab a drink. Do you want anything?"

"No," I shook my head. "My pastor wouldn't approve."

I looked back at the dance floor. The bald guy had left but Tommy was still standing there scowling at me, head tipped to the side, his tell-tale sign of his exasperation and annoyance.

That scowl would be something I would see a lot more of in the future, especially when discussing the club. We disagreed on everything—what to name it, who to hire and how much to charge and the few times he stormed out of the house and didn't return for the night, I was ready to move back to Washington and beg for my job. The situation came to a head a few weeks after our trip to Paradise Garage.

"You're the face of this outfit," I stated one Sunday morning as we sat out on the porch, reviewing our business plan.

"Why me?"

"Because you're the good-looking one." He was wearing navy shorts with a golf green shirt the reflected his eyes, the same color as the sea. I ran my hand through his curls and felt a rough, scaly patch of skin.

Tommy pushed my hand away. "You're attractive too."

"I'm Geek hot, you're Greek hot, a modern day Antonius for Christ's sake. There's a difference."

He tossed the cost sheet on the table. "I'm not a piece of meat to dangle in front of hungry animals."

"I never said you were. You know how much it turned me on when you did my taxes."

"You were being audited by the IRS. That was gratitude."

"Partly. Yes. Look, Tommy, there's got to be more to me than you, and this club, it's my American dream. Don't make me choose between my dream and you."

"It's always about you, isn't it?" he said, slamming his glass down on the table. "Well, fuck you and your choice." He stood up and stormed down the porch onto the beach.

I sat there dumbfounded, and then went after him. He was throwing seashells in the water when I got there, and I knew he wanted to throw them at me.

"Tommy — "

"This whole thing started with Darren, 'Mon grand verre de paddy', 'mon escalope casher'!"

I laughed. "You found the letter in my desk—I can't believe you went through my desk! Ever since we started this project you've been acting paranoid."

"No, *you* started this project," he said, picking up a big shell and hurling it into the water. "You and Darren and your late nights discussing gains and growths, back end loans and open end funds. I'm just the pretty face, remember?"

"We're friends!" I said, and now it was my turn to throw a shell. "I'm not the one whoring it up on the dance floor. It's a wonder you can stand up after you get down."

Something smacked my head and I planted back down in the sand. When I looked up, Tommy was bent over me, yelling something. Then I felt the blows. His hands were bony and soft but his knuckles did a real job on me. I slid around, trying to grab his arms to make him stop, but he was like a madman. I threw up my arms but his fists found my neck, chest and head. When one landed on my ear, I went to grab it and heard a crunch — and felt a shot of pain — in my nose.

God knows I didn't want to hit him —I loved him, but he loved me too, so I planted my right foot on the ground , and when he went for my face, I pushed off, thrust my hip up and threw him over so we were still struggling but I was on top with my knees on his thighs. As I grabbed his wrists, he slid out from under me and we wrestled, feet tossing up dark wet sand. My neck was aching, my nose felt like someone had stabbed me with a knife, and my right ear sounded like it was underwater. His energy was boundless, but then so was mine. I waited, and when he tried to roll me to the side, I let go with one hand and landed an uppercut on his jaw.

That stopped him. It stopped me too. The jar I felt when my knuckles collided with bone was nothing to the jar I felt inside me, like a heavyweight slamming me against the wall. I looked down at Tommy, and I could see blood leaking out of the side of his mouth, and then I wiped the sweat from my face and realized it was blood.

I fingered what remained of my nose and then stood up and held out my hand. He hesitated to take it and I thought *This is it; there's no way back*, but he grabbed it and I

pulled him up off the sand. I wanted to say something, but sometimes, when you want to say something monumental that will alter the course of your history, words don't come. So I took off my shirt and pressed it against the bleeding cut on his chin.

Tommy's opened up under a starry sky on July 10, 1987. The promotional work I'd done in Detroit, Chicago and New York paid off. They came—black, Puerto Rican, Arab, Jew, Portuguese, Vietnamese, in boats and cars, on ferries and foot, they came. On opening night, the line extended down the boardwalk out of eyeshot, a testimony to the religious reverence for the master of ceremonies, D.J.-cum-shaman Frankie Knuckles.

Dressed in a pair of too-tight, low slung jeans and a slim shirt, Tommy worked the door while I stood over a headphoned Frankie, watching him cue vinyl, turn knobs and work sliders up and down. When I realized it was futile and I'd need at least a year's lesson, I hid in the office and monitored the cameras, answering security's questions so I didn't have to think about Tommy in his too-tight, low slung jeans and slim shirt greeting other guys in too-tight, low slung jeans and slim shirts. About 1 a.m., though, the door opened and Tommy came in, motioning me to follow him.

"What?" I asked.

"I have to show you something."

"What?"

"Would you just come already?"

I didn't want to go, but I thought about the resolution I'd made to myself on the beach, so I got up and trudged after him. We walked down the dark hallway to the door that led up to the second floor, went up the stairs, and stepped out on the private balcony we had reserved for ourselves.

It was hot and humid, and the liquid ice that poured down from the ceiling obscured my view, but when it cleared I saw that the dance floor was packed. Tommy and I had paid for some Warehouse regulars to attend, and they were there, but so were our neighborhood friends, residents of the Pines, some Italian guys, several Latinos, a few Asians, a Russian couple, a handful of Arabian males and at least two Jewish sisters —at least they looked like sisters, but maybe they were cousins. And get this —they were dancing and *singing*. Frankie was spinning Ralph Rosario's "You Used to Hold Me" —some mix he'd done —and they were belting out the words, *You used to hold me, You use to feel me, you used to kiss me, you used to touch me* to each other and then with faces upturned and worshipful hands in the air, to us.

I looked over at Tommy, who was singing and dancing too, and with the flashes lighting up his hair and eyes, he never looked more beautiful. "You were right," I whispered in his ear, "it's a cult."

Tommy shook his head. "It's church."

"The Jubilee," I said, watching the crowd. "After Shemitah comes the Jubilee."

In 1993 Tommy passed away due to some infected blood he'd received during treatment. At the age of 25, he had been walking from the parking lot to his apartment when two guys had appeared from behind a car and jumped him. It was 1983: the world was afraid of gay people and their disease. It didn't matter that Tommy had lost his virginity to his steady boyfriend, that he didn't smoke or drink or visit the baths. All they could see was the pervert inside their imagination, so they attacked him and gave him the very disease they accused him of already having.

It was a warm sunny day in June when he died. The window was open and the pale sunlight, reflecting off the water, shone on the red cotton sheets I'd bought to conceal his blood from him. His curly brown hair, though thinner, was still beautiful; it cascaded over the pillowcase still damp with night sweat.

He had messed himself so his nurse, Wilma, and I cleaned him up, and then I sat down in the chair beside his bed and took his hand. Six months after his diagnosis they had told me I didn't have it. "The active partner," they said, "has less chance of contraction"—that, and the fact I was faithful meant my only risk factor was Tommy. When they told me, I felt so guilty I punched the wall, but Tommy, who sat beside me while the doctor read the results, wrapped me in his arms and said, "Thank God."

And now he lay here a corpse, but worse off for being alive and in pain.

Between the twittering of the birds and the clanging of the garbage can came the familiar rattling of the fluid in his lungs. I reached out and held his hand, and he squeezed it, his pulse beating in time with mine. We sat like that for five hours, then his stopped.

A week after I buried him I sold the club for $100.00. I'd kept it open during Tommy's illness because I thought if I closed it down it would signal the end, but after his death it no longer mattered. Nothing did. I moved into a hotel and put the house on the market, and when it sold, I transferred his belongings into a storage unit and relocated across the county. It's been 20 years since then, and I live in California with my husband Steve, who I met at a Microsoft convention. But I still have the key to the storage unit on Fire Island, where Tommy's stuff remains untouched at $700.00 a month.

DOG TAGS

On the fifth floor of the Villa Franchise housing project Terry sat listening to pots and pans clanging amid the slamming of cabinet doors. The sounds echoing down the hall made him cringe. It meant his mother had woken up from her long alcohol-induced sleep and was attempting a culinary feat in the kitchen. Dropping his wad of cash, he rose, walked to the bedroom entrance and hesitated, focusing on the scrapes and clunks of metal as a faint sour odor wafted past his nose.

Terry heard a thud and then all went quiet. Curious, he crept out of the bedroom, dodging beer cans and a pile of clothes on his way to the kitchen. Ever since his father died, his mother had taken up drinking as a recreational sport, and Fridays she was at her worst. As he peered around the corner, he saw that she was splayed on the floor, rooting through the cupboards in her dirty ripped jeans and bra.

"I got to find this pot," she mumbled, words trippin over her tongue. "We gotta eat." Gray hair fell across her bony cheeks as she lifted the copper frying pan and frowned at it.

The smell of her stale sweat and beer reached him and he wrinkled his nose. Bending over, he pried the pan from his mother's hand, setting it on the counter before pulling his mother, groaning and muttering, to her feet. "Mom, sit," he ordered, maneuvering her over to the wooden kitchen chair where she collapsed, arms hanging to the floor.

"Terry," she said, struggling to sit up, "I made you a cake."

In the frig was a pastiche of cake mix, icing and candy hearts shrink-wrapped in cellophane, leftover spaghetti and macaroni and cheese. He was afraid of the cake but

the macaroni looked fresh so he pulled off its plastic top and shoved it in the microwave. As he waited for it to cook, he looked over at his mother: her paralyzed face and eyes were focused on some distant, invisible realm.

When the bell dinged, he snatched the bowl out of the microwave, dumped it on a plate and set it before her. "Mom," he said, handing her a spoon and a napkin, "Thanks for the cake. Now go to bed. I mean, after you eat, you go to bed, okay?"

"I got to wait til your father gets home," she muttered, lifting the spoon. "Then I'll go." The way she mouthed her food reminded him of a baby. Half the macaroni tumbled over the edge of the spoon onto the plate.

"He's not coming home," he uttered softly.

"Yes he is; you just wait. He's comin."

Fiddling with the dog tags hanging around his neck, Terry pressed the cold metal between his thumb and forefinger. He glanced at the old photograph taped to the freezer door: military blues, a cap and green eyes shining beneath the rim. At seventeen, he was the spitting image of his own father, everyone said.

Maybe that was the reason his mother couldn't stand to look at him.

Maybe that was why she never cleaned. His first day back in over a week, and n the kitchen counter, a chicken carcass sat moldering along with brown bananas and a pork chop. In the sink, a thick scum covered the bottom. With his right hand, he reached in and pulled the stop, letting the filthy water drain before rinsing the sink and filling with fresh water and Dawn. The suds smothered the dishes and glasses.

In forty-five minutes he had tossed out the chicken corpses and rotting fruit, killed off communities and washed the dishes. Afterwards, he cleaned the bathrooms,

bedrooms and living room and scrubbed the kitchen floor, which was coated with something resistant to everything but bleach.

Three hours later when he was done, he stood before his mother, whose mouth was now covered with cheese. “I’m going to Jeremy’s,” he said. Backing away, he went into the bedroom where his fake fur jacket and boots lay hidden beneath a pile of dirty clothes, and shoved them into the bag.

That was the last of his stuff.

“Terry, you got to wait till your father gets home,” she said from the kitchen. “You gotta wait.”

“No, ma, I don’t gotta wait,” he replied as he rounded the corner toward the front door. He glanced back at his mother. She was lying in the kitchen chair with an empty Smirnoff bottle in her hand, staring at the ghost of Terry’s father.

Her head flopped to the side and she gaped at Terry. “Terry, is that you?” she cried, rising from her chair and pointing her finger at him.

She was hallucinating again. Terry reddened. “I’m not my fucking dad!” He clenched his bag tighter. “He’s not coming home, mom, don’t you get it?! He’s dead! Dead, dead, dead!”

Slamming the door shut, Terry waited. It took ten seconds this time for the crash of the plate and the shriek and the thud of his mother collapsing onto the floor...

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What had happened was his dad had gotten sucked up by an airplane engine.

Terry Scott Sr. was a member of the 82nd airborne division at Fort Bragg and was training for airborne certification in hopes of becoming a ranger. Like other soldiers, he

knew the Army leaves nothing to chance. For everything that happens or is supposed to happen, the Army creates instructions, or SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures), which are typed out on index cards that, were they placed side by side, would cover the earth. Somewhere, there is a Standard Operating Procedure on how to use the latrine.

He followed the Standard Operating Procedures. He stood in line like everyone else, he listened to the commander holler "Go!" like everyone else, but when it came time to jump, he did not deploy like everyone else. Instead, he dangled superman style from the airplane, and by the time he managed to disentangle himself from the line, it was too late. The wind had changed, and as he floated towards the earth's surface, the lower plane's engine sucked him up and turned him out a finely ground powder, spreading his atoms across the galaxy.

Nobody knew where Terry went. How do loved ones bury the dead when there is nothing left to bury?

They pretend. They have a funeral and invite all their family and friends. In the case of Terry Jr's father, they lined the tables with pictures of the deceased: Scott and his wife in tuxedo and gown; Scott and his mother, father, uncle and cousins in front of the rancher house; Scott and his newly born baby, Terry Jr.; Scott and the 125 pound mackerel he caught off the coast of Nags Head; Scott and his platoon buddies, seated before a C-130.

After the reception the service begins and the Army gives a shout-out to the departed, trumpets blowing like the seventh angel of the apocalypse. The family bows and prays, and watches as a marble block with a silver plaque naming the dead is settled

onto the ground. Then they pray again and leave, knowing that somewhere on Mars is a little bit of their loved one.

Terry Jr. was only ten years old.

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After leaving his mother hallucinating on the kitchen floor he had grabbed his duffle bag from the alley and hurried to McDonald's, where he changed into his work clothes and headed out the door. Now on the corner of Presa and Main, he felt like a traffic light in his red short shorts but they showed his Apollo's belt and made him seem sweet. Reaching into his bag, he dabbed bronzing powder on his chest and looked around him. San Antonio was waking up: streetlights flickered on and Rosey's neon sign lit up in pink.

Terry pushed up against the wall of Gary's Tavern, lit a cigarette and eased into position, knees bent, hips out, arms hanging. It wasn't long before his first customer arrived, a twenty-year old, one-eyed rusty Toyota. It drove slowly past Gary's Tavern and disappeared around the corner, emerging five minutes later farther up the street. Terry watched as it approached and came to a halt where he was standing. The driver was middle-aged but clean, with rolls of fat toppling over his collar.

"Excuse me," he waved Terry over, "can you help me? I'm trying to find General Boulevard."

Terry strolled over and narrowed his heavily lined eyes at him. "You don't need directions."

The man looked askance at him. "Yes I do."

"Uh, no. No you don't."

"Look it," the driver said, taking off his glasses and wiping the perspiration from his forehead. "I just want to know where General Boulevard is."

Terry shrugged, and pointed down the street. "Two blocks and a right, past the Hilton on the left," he answered as he started to walk away.

"Hold up a minute," the driver called.

Terry turned around. His customer had dropped a fifty-dollar bill on the ground and was staring at him with hungry eyes. As he stepped towards the Toyota Terry noticed a black Mustang drive up and honk its horn. Halting, Terry glanced over at his first customer, who was growing paler by the second. "Maybe next time daddy-o," he said, winking and blowing him a kiss. The man hurriedly shut his window and screeched off into the night.

Snatching up the fifty-dollars, Terry suppressed a smile and sauntered over to the Mustang. "Nice rim job."

"Quit fooling and get in," the driver said.

Terry nodded, prancing over to the passenger's side and sliding into the black leather seat. When he had shut the door, the driver looked over at him. "Why didn't you wait? I told you I was coming."

"Because you don't always show up," Terry replied, crossing his arms.

Loosening the stick shift, the driver threw it in first. "If I say I'm coming, I'm coming."

"Yeah, but sometimes you miss."

"Only when I have to work," he replied, pulling away from the curb and easing into traffic. "It's not predicable."

Adrian, who went by the nickname, Drew, was 25 years old, and a raging tiger when he wasn't caged properly. Terry had never seen the tiger and only knew about it because Drew had told him that he had one and that it stayed locked up inside him unless he needed it to come out. Terry was safe from the tiger, Drew said; most people were safe from the tiger but sometimes his job required him to unlock the cage. Drew admitted that's when he hated the beast the most and thought about killing it.

"Did you do your homework?" Drew asked, eyeing him.

Terry bit his dog tags. "Why do you care?"

"Just answer my question. Did you do your homework?"

Terry nodded.

Reaching into the right pocket of his jacket, Drew pulled out a wad of cash and tossed it to him. $650. "For your rent."

Terry slid it into his coat pocket. For a moment he gazed at Drew, then bent over and put his face in Drew's crotch.

Drew shoved him away. "What are you doing?!"

Terry turned and stared out the window. "You know you're a fuckin creep, right?" he said, watching the buildings slide past them. "I'm 17; you could go to jail for this."

Drew turned on the radio. "You could go to jail for turning tricks," he replied as then the speakers exploded with screaming guitars.

"I'm underage. They'd let me out," Terry argued over the bass.

"I'm not gay and I'm definitely not into teenagers."

"Right. You just like me for my good grades."

"There are exceptions," Drew replied, jamming it into third gear.

"There're never exceptions with freaks; that's why they."

"Listen, there are exceptions to every rule," Drew said, shutting off the music. "If there were no exceptions, there'd be no rules. Rules exist because there are always exceptions."

Terry frowned. "Oh, okay, so why am I an exception," he asked, crossing his arms. "Just tell me why."

At the traffic light, Drew hit the breaks. "I dunno," he answered, staring at Terry. "Maybe it's my job."

"And your job is? See, you won't ever tell me, and that's why I don't believe you."

"I'm in the military," he muttered. "That's all I can say."

"Well *you're* fucked. A creep in the military. When they find out they're gonna stab you in the shower—you should start running now."

At the next street, Drew pulled in behind a Bronco and parked. "Listen," he said, shutting off the car, "I just wanted to make sure you got the rent money and were safe. So, uh, you can go home. I'll see you tomorrow, maybe."

Terry swallowed hard. Glancing over at Drew, Terry saw that he was staring straight ahead, his eyes focused on some distant, invisible realm, just like his mother. Terry wondered if Drew could see his father and if so, if he could tell that Terry Sr. was Terry Jr's father. Then it struck him that Drew could probably see all the fathers, men from Afghanistan and Iran, Russia and Syria. Fatherdom was worldwide.

"I'm not holding you here," Drew said, looking over at Terry. "You can go."

Fingering his silver dog tags, Terry shifted uneasily in his seat. The car was getting warm, but he didn't care to budge. "I don't wanna go home."

Drew's expression softened. "Is it that bad?"

Terry nodded. "Most nights I just sleep on the streets." Truth was, he never knew what was awaiting him on the other side of the apartment door. On good days she was either asleep or hurling objects at the wall. On bad days she was lying naked on the living room floor in a pool of her own piss, arms and hand slashed and bloodied from a broken vodka bottle.

"What'd you have to eat today?" Drew asked, starting the car and revving the engine.

He couldn't exactly remember. "Uh, cereal, I think."

"That's not a meal," his friend replied, backing up and pulling into traffic. "Let's get you something to eat."

***

What had happened was a buddy had exploded from a grenade thrown at him.

It was around 8 a.m. in the morning after a two-day firefight. In the east the sun glistened on the horizon as the breeze carried with it the scent of apples from the west. High up in the atmosphere heat was building for a scorching day, but the dozens of red splattered bodies of the hajis on the ground were cold. The Delta tactical unit had lost no men but the enemy had lost all.

They were Haqqanis, Pakistanis who had crossed the border to Shkin in Paktika. Shkin was home to Afghanistan's very poor, a wasteland of bad soil with only three dusty trails for roads. For all practical purposes, it was the end of the world, but the most

dangerous end of the world of all. The silence, the abandonment belied the threat at the edge of darkness and over the next hill. The Haqqanis were not part of the land; they were the land itself whenever it moved, whenever it encroached upon the coils of razor wire guarding the "Alamo," Firebase Lilley.

Sergeant Drew Benedict pushed his helmet up, crouched down and ran his hand under the roots of a tree. It was hollow; a haji had been living there. The forest was still alive with them but then their unit knew that already. They had to reinforce their troops twice during the night and the earth was damp with the blood of sixty-five guerillas. The encampment had not been that large.

"Staff Sergeant Haynes, they're hiding in the roots," Drew hollered.

"And under rocks," Specialist Dixon called, running his hand along the rough edge of a rocky climb.

Staff Sergeant Todd Haynes walked toward Drew, slung his MP5 over his shoulder and took off his helmet. That's when it happened.

Hiding beneath another tree, a haji threw a grenade at Drew but missed. It soared through the air, over the sergeant's head and landed directly in front of Staff Sergeant Haynes. The staff sergeant blinked once and then flew like superman into space. When he returned, he rained down on his men in pieces. Now Staff Sergeant Haynes was part of the land too.

Sergeant Benedict had gone to the funeral and watched as the marble block with the silver plaque naming the dead was settled into the ground. He had then gone to Gary's Tavern to drink himself to death.

***

Boston Market was famous for its hot and juicy rotisserie chicken and newly baked hot rolls covered in butter. For this reason Drew had chosen it along with the fact that it was fast, reasonably priced and relatively healthy. When he and Terry went inside, the employees behind the counter took one look at Terry in his red hot pants and Drew with his crew cut and snickered. Drew glanced around and saw that everyone was looking at them.

"What do ya want, sweetie?" the server with the square glasses said, addressing Terry.

"Uh, the rotisserie chicken," he replied, pointing to one of the containers on the bar. "Macaroni and cheese and mashed potatoes with gravy."

Drew shook his head. "That's two starches; you can't have two starches," he told Terry. "You need a green."

Terry put his hand on his hip. "You're kidding, right?"

"No. Look, you need to eat healthy. Greens are high in fiber and packed with anti-oxidants."

"Why do I have to eat healthy just because you have to eat healthy? It's not fair."

Drew smiled at his little rebellion. "Because I'm paying, all right? So, you can get green beans or greens, it's your choice. Now which one do you want, the macaroni and cheese or the mashed potatoes?"

Sighing, Terry crossed his arms and glared at the server. "Green beans and macaroni and cheese, please," he said with a pout. Then he turned to Drew. "I'm not five years old."

"You're malnourished and underfed. Look at you. You're so skinny I could rack you and use you to bench."

Terry frowned. "I'm naturally thin."

"Maybe, but you're not naturally bony. Nobody's naturally bony," Drew said, poking his ribcage and hipbones.

"Stop. It hurts," Terry protested, turning away.

"Look, I got the drinks and I'm going to get us a seat. Just bring your tray over when you're done. And oh, by the way," Drew added, nodding towards another bar, "over there is Grandma's apple pie but you gotta finish your meal first."

"All right Daddy."

"Don't call me Daddy," Drew ordered. "I'll see you in a minute."

Stopping by the condiment counter, Drew grabbed a handful of plastic utensils and some napkins, which he shoved in his pocket, before heading for a booth in the back to sit down. As he unwrapped his straw, he studied Terry. The boy was leaning against the counter, knees bent, hips out, arms hanging, just like the night they had first met. It had all begun inside Gary's Tavern when Drew was poked in the back. "We're closing," someone said. Drew shoved his wallet toward the voice and when it was shoved back he wedged his fingers between the flaps to see if there was any money in it. There was. Satisfied, he slipped off the bar stool, clinging to the chairs for balance, until he made it safely outside the tavern. They shut the door and locked it behind him.

He stumbled a few steps before giving up and dropping to the ground. On all fours he crawled toward the wall, sat down and placed his head between his knees. How long he remained there he didn't know, but when he came to he felt someone standing

over him and heard a voice say “Are you okay?” He looked up at the voice. It was an angel. Thick, brown mane hung down over one eye. The boy asked him where he lived and if there was anybody he could call for him, but Drew was too drunk to remember. He lowered his head.

The boy searched Drew’s pockets for his wallet and removed it. The next thing Drew remembered was being shoved into a taxi by soft, thin hands. He felt the car move and knew that the angel was sitting beside him and that everything was going to be okay. He then passed back out.

When Drew awoke the next morning, the sun was shining through a slit in the blinds. Beside him, the boy lay fast asleep. They were both in their underwear. His head hurt and he grabbed his temples in pain. The boy stirred beside him, turned over, pushed himself up and opened his sad green eyes. They stared at each other for a few seconds. Then the boy got up, dressed, and left.

Afterwards Drew had grabbed himself to see if anything had happened but he couldn’t tell.

Drew watched Terry as he wandered his way through the restaurant and sat down across from him. The teen set his tray on the table and removed his food from the plastic container.

“This is nice,” Terry said as he bounced up and down on the booth cushion.

“You’d know all about that,” Drew laughed, “but we didn’t come here so you could ride the chair. Eat, man,” he instructed, sliding up against the wall and extending his legs. He sat with one elbow on the table, hand to mouth deep in thought, watching Terry tear apart his chicken.

As Terry swallowed his last bite, Drew said, “I’m moving.”

Terry opened his mouth and dropped his fork on the table.

“North Carolina, Fort Bragg. I leave at the end of the month.”

The teenager turned away from him. For a while nobody said anything. Overhead, the radio blared out an old Journey song, “Don’t Stop Believing.”

“It’s not like I had a choice,” Drew said. “I have to go.”

“I know,” Terry mumbled with his head hung down.

“You know they have a school there, it’s a special public school for really smart people. Two years of high school, two years of college.”

“I can’t move. What about my mom?”

“You’ve done all you can, Terry. It’s time to let someone else handle her for a while. I mean, you’re a kid—kinda—and you shouldn’t have to hustle to pay the bills.”

Terry hurled the fork at him. “What do you expect me to do?!” he said. “I can’t pay rent on bag boy tips! I’m trying, okay? It’s just me!”

“I’m not blaming you; I’m not blaming you at all. Hey, look-at-me,” he ordered, lifting Terry’s face up to his. “It’s not your fault, okay?”

Drew saw that the other patrons had stopped eating and were staring at them, so he shoved the rest of the trash on Terry’s tray and dumped it in the garbage. “Let’s take a walk,” he said, wrapping his arm around the boy’s shoulders. He guided Terry outside and around the corner to the back of the restaurant, where they leaned against the brick wall.

Drew withdrew some napkins from his pocket and shoved them at Terry, who wiped his eyes. He waited patiently for the boy to collect himself, and then he said, "I saw your father's file."

Thrusting his hands in his coat pocket, Terry turned to Drew. "How…" he started.

"It doesn't matter. What happened to him, Terry, those kinds of accidents, well they happen more often than not. Sometimes it's just a tree standing between you and death; sometimes it's just a line. It's all over in a matter of seconds, and you don't know why the guy in front of you died and you didn't. You can't stop accidents, Terry. You can't stop em and you can't plan for them, do you understand?"

"Yeah," Terry said, fiddling with some crumbled napkins in his hand. "I couldn't stop my dad from dying."

"You can't stop your mother from dying either. Sometimes in a fight you have collateral damage. Those are accidents too. Innocent people become victims. Come to North Carolina with me."

"I'll think about it."

"Come to North Carolina with me."

"But what if you deploy?"

"How's that any different than what you do now?" Drew asked, leaning sideways up against the wall to take a closer look at Terry. "So you go to school and you come home. I trust you to not sell my shit and hit the road."

Terry laughed, turning sideways toward Drew. "How do you know I won't?"

"It's not in you; you got that military pride; you can't take anything from anyone. That's why you attacked me when I gave you that money."

"Well what if you came home," Terry said with a playful grin, "and I'm fucking ten guys on top of your toothbrush with coke up my nose, and your sheets and towels are soaked in cum, and everything in your house is broken."

Drew bit his tongue and smiled. "Then you'll be scrubbing the entire inside of the house with my toothbrush, and afterwards, you'll brush your teeth with it. You're a little old for the what-if game, don't you think?"

"Yeah," Terry mused, looking at the dark forest that stood behind them. It was as black as the night sky.

"Listen, when I was stationed in Afghanistan..." Drew started, but he couldn't bring himself to say it. Then again, maybe it didn't need to be said. Removing his dog tags, he wrapped them around Terry's neck. "Let me make it up to one guy."

Terry fingered the new tags, and ran them up and down the chain. "I kissed you; that's it."

"What?!"

"That night, I kissed you but you were too drunk."

Suddenly Drew understood. He leaned back against the brick wall, closed his eyes and let out a giant sigh. "Come to North Carolina with me," he said. "There's nothing here for you."

Terry grinned. Leaning in, he placed his lips on Drew's. "Let me think about it."

THE PRISONERS

It was mid-summer in Mississippi, and Emma Williams was in the third story attic of her plantation home sifting through her husband's old clothes, beads of sweat pouring down her legs. She'd procrastinated doing it for several months, but now that her husband was dead, the only thing left was to determine which items were fit for a thrift store and which had earned the honor of being tossed in the trash. She held up a frayed shirt and examined it. It had been Willard's favorite on autumn days when red and gold leaves carpeted the lawn. He had worn it over a white tee as he raked, his dark brown hair covering his face whenever he bent forward with the wind. No, she wouldn't throw it away, but she wouldn't give it away either. Tossing it on the floor, she stepped back from the mountain of pants and polyester jogging suits. One pile done, another four to go.

She was standing there deciding which pile to attack next when she heard a voice singing outside. She walked over to the window and looked across the lawn. A young man was approaching the house. He looked to be in his early twenties, though she could tell by the weariness in his voice that he was older. Dressed in a blue plaid shirt, ripped jeans and brown boots he was every bit a farm worker, with broad shoulders and curly brown hair that he pawed at regular intervals in a half-hearted attempt to keep it off his face.

"Where did you park?" she yelled at him.

The young man jumped at the sound of her voice. "The circular drive, ma'am," he answered, shading his eyes as he looked up at her.

"There's a porte cochere on the side of the house. The entrance is between the two trellis arbors where you parked."

The man nodded, and took off running toward his truck. In the meantime, Emma hurried downstairs, picked up the mending clothes she had laid over the back of the sofa, returned a pile of books to the bookshelf and checked herself in the oval mirror. On the fireplace a poker whose end had been plied into the shape of a needle's eye retired against the brick. She snatched it and hooked the eye around the deadbolt, then waited for the man to knock.

Predating the civil war, the Williams Estate in Clarksville, Mississippi had endured burnings, abandonment and decay, but the family had always managed to rebuild it. The house stood at the end of road canvased with oak trees, with its token cupola, dual chimneys and gallery, but now water and electricity ran to it, and when the large dish in the yard worked, satellite broadband and TV. It had come to Emma by way of her grandfather. Relatives from the city and its suburbs had sighed about the manor while the old man lay on his deathbed. Only she had stood up when he had called out, "who will take it?" The hush in the room and the rattle of the dying as the meningoencephalitis, acquired forty years ago at a brothel in the Philippines, liquefied his brain had not given her much hope, but when the will was broken open and the scroll read, she had become the first female heir of the property.

Unbeknownst to her, the estate had garnered little attention from her grandfather, who cherished the idea of it rather than the reality. When they visited, Emma, now an English professor at Delta State, and her physicist husband had found the house in ruins. Crumbling bricks from the chimney littered the roof and ground; several boards on the

front porch had rotted beneath a leaky seal and the weathered paint peeled from the walls, disintegrating at the slightest touch. It had taken over a week for the lumber and materials to arrive, and they had spent several months pulling up boards and replacing them with new ones, leveling old masonry and rebuilding it with fresh red bricks and mortar. Swift attacks of afternoon showers and the hot July sun had driven them inward, where they had ripped out rusty plumbing and hung curtains above the French windows.

Under the attentions of the couple, however, the house revived, and for a few years they lived happily until Willard was killed in a car accident. That's when everything had stopped. After the funeral, she had retreated to the house, locked herself inside and refused to come out.

So, when the man finally came around and knocked on the door, her hands shook as she turned the deadbolt, and backed away from the entrance. "Come in," she said.

The man stepped inside and shut the door behind him. "Ma'am, I'm here on account of the job."

She looked him over. Round face with a late five o'clock shadow, strong nose, mountain slopes for a cupid's bow. His eyes….she went through her mental dictionary but could not find the exact word. They were blue, blue-grey; the level was extremely light… so rare in people. His eyes made suggestions to her that she didn't like, insinuated crude and obscene things…but no, they were not suggesting anything. The man was simply waiting for her to answer.

"Follow me," she said, aware that her voice quivered. She led him through the central hall into the living room. Dirt trailed behind him and onto the Oriental rug, but he

backed up and swept the dirt onto the hardwood floor with the side of his boot. At least he was considerate.

She pointed to one of the blue cushioned, high back Victorian chairs, and took a seat on the antique blue sofa across from him.

Wiping the perspiration from her forehead, she fanned her blouse. "Is it too warm in here to you? I can turn the thermostat down."

The man shook his head.

Emma blushed and asked, "What is your name?"

"Silas," the man muttered, staring at the mahogany floor. "Silas Adams. Everybody calls me Si."

"Well Si, I'm Emma Williams. Now, do you have a resume?"

"No ma'am. I don't know much about resumes."

"That's fine," Emma said. "I don't suppose a resume is necessary under these circumstances. So, what qualifies you for the gardening position, Mr. Adams?"

Silas shifted in his chair. "I, uh, well I helped out my granny a lot growin up, and I've been working landscaping for five years."

"Five years!" Emma exclaimed, rising and walking over to the fireplace, where she picked up a silver picture frame. It was a photo of her husband that had been taken shortly after they were married. His thick, wavy hair rolled away from his face, emphasizing his brown eyes, yet something in those eyes had changed. They were darker. Beneath the subtly arched eyebrows, they looked out at her skeptically.

Flipping the picture around, she returned it to its spot. She didn't want him watching her. "So what did you do during those five years, Mr. Adams?"

"Well ma'am, we did some leveling and grading and filling, and uh, we planted a grove of apple trees, and a line of cypresses, and uh, some oaks, elms, magnolias —I reckon I've planted just about everything there is to plant in the state of Mississippi."

His smile displayed perfect teeth. She wondered how a poor, uneducated man could come out with all his teeth, especially straight teeth.

"I think we can do business," she said, handing him a pen and a sheet of paper. "Now, if you will just give me the name and number of your former employer so that I can verify your work history we'll be done here."

Silas, whose leg had been shaking the entire time, suddenly planted both feet on the ground. He picked at the shredded denim strands that covered his right knee, then puffed himself up and looked her square in the eye. "It was Parchman Farm. Ma'am, it was Parchman Farm that employed me," he said.

Emma's mouth fell open, and she instinctively took a step back. Parchman farm, she knew, was another name for the Mississippi State Penitentiary. The hands of black inmates had built it back in the day when convict lease programs and private enterprise turned the prison into an economic windfall. But something good had come out of that public hellhole of corruption: the Blues. Bukka White, R.L. Burnside, Big Bad Smitty and Big T Williams at one time or another had been inmates there. But these were black artists and musicians: Silas Adams was white, and as far as she knew, a child murderer and rapist.

"Well then," she said, thinking of the loaded revolver she had upstairs in her nightstand and wishing she had it now, "leave me your telephone number and I'll get back in touch with you."

Silas's head drooped in disappointment. "Yes ma'am," he said, scribbling his number on a piece of paper she had given him. She directed him to the door.

No sooner had he set foot over the threshold than he turned around to face her. "Ma'am," he said with renewed vivacity, "please, I need a job—"

"—I can't have a convict working in my yard —"

"Emma, I'm trying to go straight but how can I when nobody will give me a chance," he pleaded, running his hand through his thick, brown hair. "I've been all around this town for five days now, and nobody will hire me."

Emma looked at Mr. Adam's boyish face. His eyes had faded to a dull grey. "Silas, how did you earn your time in prison?"

The young man scratched his chin. "Ma'am, I was on drugs," he said. "I stole some stuff. I was on drugs and I stole some stuff."

Emma cocked an eyebrow. "Did you steal some stuff or did you rob a place, Silas?"

"I reckon I robbed a place," he responded, looking straight at her. "I didn't have a gun. I just stuck my hand in my pocket like this," he said, shoving his hand in his pocket and pointing his finger forward, "and they thought I was carrying. But Emma, I'm as clean as a whistle now, I swear it, and I don't want to rob nobody. I just want to earn my money the old fashioned way."

Emma smiled despite herself. "Can you bring me something to verify what you just said is true?"

"Oh yes ma'am," he responded, a smile lighting up his face. "I can get my records, and my probation officer can write me a note."

"Good, you do that. Get your records and a note from your probation officer and bring them with you on Monday," she said. "If everything's in order, you start Monday morning at 7 a.m."

***

Emma peered through the curtains to where Silas kneeled, ripping up vines, weeds and sunflowers that had sprouted around the old slave quarters in the absence of a gardener. The buildings were collapsing beneath the weight of the years. The terrible thunderstorms that occasionally tore through the area had dismantled them until only the frame remained with a few boards in place. She had considered restoring the tiny houses for storage purposes and sent Silas out to do some preliminary work that morning. Now, beneath the ten o'clock sun, his muscles lengthened into foothills and tightened into peaks as dug up the overgrowth. She tried to reconcile it in her mind, this full-bodied criminal from Mississippi State and the farm workers that once toiled in the Sugarcane fields, and decided they weren't so different. Slavery had been its own prison.

And yet, hunched over on all fours, Silas hardly looked the part. As he bent forward to thrust his hands in the soil, the stress of his movement pulled his jeans down, revealing a shadow crescent. That, she thought, was more like a plumber, and she smiled, and then blushed. Turning toward the mantle that held Willard's picture, she whispered, "I'm lonely," to the back of the silver frame, aware that talking to oneself was the first sign of madness and talking to inanimate objects absolute lunacy. Then returning to the window, she pushed aside the gauzy curtains and looked out at the lush scene.

A few clouds dotted the otherwise deep blue sky as the August sun bore down on the dark green grass, the Oak Trees and the Crepe Myrtles. Everything was bursting with life, including Silas, while she stood imprisoned in her house by irrational fear. *Oh, to go outside!* She thought. *To kneel down beside Silas as he thrusts his hands in the moist soil! To reach into the earth and feel his fingers wiggling beneath its surface! She could do it!*

She looked over at the door that was her gateway to freedom. "I'm coming, Silas!" she shouted as she tore herself away from the window, "I'm coming!" And before she knew it, she had flung open the door and rushed toward him like a prisoner escaping the dungeon.

About halfway across the lawn, something hit her in the stomach and she froze. The pace of her heart quickened. *Not in front of Silas*, she thought, *not in front of him*, but these thoughts only gave way to visions of herself shaking and crying on the ground.

She took two steps back toward the house and stopped in her tracks. Sweat broke out on her forehead and arms, and then her heart stopped. She struggled to breathe before she fell face down onto the grass.

She could hear the thud of Silas' boots as he ran toward her. Next thing she knew he had swept her up in his arms and then she passed out.

When she finally came to, she was lying on the blue velvet sofa, her sweaty face plastered to the side of a cushion and her knees covered in dirt.

Silas was seated across from her, boots planted on the floor. As she tore her face away from the cushion, he leaned forward. "You all right?" he asked in a gritty voice.

Emma glanced over at him, then closed her eyes and drew her hand across her face. "I'm fine," she said as what had happened came back to her. "I…I have panic attacks."

Silas nodded but didn't say anything.

"I'm not crazy, you know," she continued. "I'm rational; I just can't go outside my house."

Silas nodded again, but didn't say anything.

Emma shot him an angry glance. "Don't just sit there, say something damnit —anything!" she said, propping herself up by her elbow. "Don't you stare at me like I'm a freak."

Silas sat up, put his hands on his thighs and nodded. "Well ma'am —Emma," he said. "I don't rightly think it has anything to do with intelligence."

Emma lay back down, the back of her hand against her forehead. "I suppose not." She wanted to crawl under the couch and hide, to save herself from the humiliation of having to be looked after by the person she wanted to impress. What would he think of her now that he knew she was an irrational agoraphobic? He would probably refer to her as 'that crazy lady that lives alone in the big house' and laugh about it. She would have to explain.

"Did you see those long, black streaks on the road in front of the house?" she asked, sitting up.

"Yes ma'am."

"Those are track marks from Willard's tires," she said. "That was my husband. He always checked the mail after work to save me from having to get it. It was in the fall

of last year —October 13th as I remember. He had just driven up to the mailbox when a logging truck came around the bend and smashed into him. I was watering the chrysanthemums when it happened. I saw the whole thing…"

She remembered the day Willard had been run over with the logging truck. It had been mild and sunny with a tepid breeze that rustled through the green moss on the Oaks. The old, yellow school bus had come and gone, and the abandoned country road was littered with excited elementary school children riding their bikes and playing beneath the October Glory Red Maples across the street. Emma stood at the end of her tree-lined drive, inspecting the red and yellow chrysanthemums now in bloom. They hadn't had much rain, and the water she'd dumped on them two days ago was already used up, leaving the hard, dry soil an impenetrable surface. Watering can in hand, she pushed aside the stalks and leaves and began to rain down a fine shower.

A crunch of gravel drew her interest and she glanced up. Her husband was coming up the road. He waved as he passed her and then switched lanes, slowing down as he approached their mailbox, located a quarter mile away in front of their neighbor's drive. Emma watched as the Jeep came to a halt and husband's arm reached forth to pull down the latch on the box.

A diesel engine shifted into high gear. Emma looked past the Jeep and observed a logging truck rounding the corner. It was loaded with pine trees cut down as part of deforesting project going on in the northern part of the county. It did not slow down. Instead, it plowed directly into her husband's car, the force of the impact propelling the truck over the hood and into the cabin of the jeep, which crumbled into a kind of ramp that collapsed beneath the truck's massive weight. The jeep retreated several feet. Its

screeching tires churned out smoke that carried with it the smell of burning rubber and diesel fumes. Then it burst into flames.

For a moment everything had gone quiet, and then rushed back to her like a roaring, mountainous waterfall: the screaming children, the scuttling neighbors, the blazing two vehicles, the burning fuel, and the sight of her husband's arm on the ground beneath the mailbox.

Then she was on her sofa.

Silas was leaning back in the chair with his foot propped up on the coffee table, studying her. "I think I understand," he said, rubbing his chin with his right hand. "I can hardly wash my hair these days."

Despite her fatigue, Emma smiled. How could a man like him possibly understand a woman like her? He was undoubtedly used to violence, but she had not witnessed so much as a store robbery. How could he grasp what it was like for her to watch her husband die?

"When I was at the Farm," he said, "I had a friend named Tyrone Gleeson. We were friends on account of our families being from the same part of Alabama. He was black but that was fine cause nobody took much notice of us no way. It's a good thing in prison if nobody takes much notice of you, ma'am."

"I can imagine."

"We were in the shower one day joking and carrying on like fools. Now, don't get me wrong, Emma, I'm not funny that way, I like women too much, but we were best friends.

He was teasing me about my hair cause I grew it out in prison. I've always had nice hair; my daddy has nice hair and my grandpa on my momma's side died at eighty-five with a full head of hair. So I figured I'd grow it out behind bars where nobody could see me.

Tyrone was joshing about how I care about my hair more than a girl, so I shampooed it up real good for him like one of them commercials on TV, and stuck my head under the shower to rinse it. That's when I noticed blood running down the drain. I got out from under of the water and asked Tyrone if he knew where it came from, but he couldn't answer cause somebody had cut his throat. He died right there on the bathroom floor.

It was an initiation hit, Aryan Brotherhood."

Silas cleared his throat. "I cut my hair off that day. I went straight to the barber and told him to shave my head. After that, I afraid to stick my head under the water."

Emma rubbed her eyes. "Maybe it was for the best. I can't image you with long hair."

Silas nodded and dusted off his boot. "Me neither."

Over the next several months, Emma increased Silas' hours until he was working eight to ten hours a day, five days a week. After very little thought she had resolved to rebuild the slave quarters, and ordered all the lumber, tools and equipment Silas needed to slave away under the autumn sun.

She prayed for hot days and was sad on weekends, but by Monday morning was excited and chipper. When not engaged in academic research, grading online student papers or writing for journals she spent her hours behind the gauzy curtains. In fact, she

spent so much time in front of the window that she got a nice tan, and decided it suited her. She also decided to take up exercise and bought a treadmill, on which she could be found running in the wee hours of the morning.

When the days cooled Silas put his shirt back on, and the view wasn't as exciting as before. Then she prayed for rain. When it showered she would meet him at the door with a towel and dry him off, then hand him some of Willard's old clothes, many of which were too small and clung to him like a second skin. She would then have him take off his boots and sit on the couch by the fire while she attempted to grade papers. The students were very happy with the scores they received whenever it rained.

As for Willard, he grew more morose by the week. His smile had long since faded into a scowl, and his brows now furrowed so much he could no longer see. Each time she picked up the picture he seemed to implicate her in a new crime until one day, irritated by Silas' absence, she threw Willard in a box and shoved him under the bed.

One frosty night in early March she heard a knock on the back door, loud enough to wake her up, but not loud enough for her to determine that she had heard it and not dreamt it, or mistaken the rattle for the shutter blowing in the wind. When it echoed again, this time stronger and exigent, she sat up and got out of bed. Feeling her way over to the high-back chair where her bathrobe lay, she slung it around her and slid her feet into her slippers. After a second thought, she opened the bottom drawer of her night table and retrieved her gun, sticking it in her bathrobe pocket before heading out of the room.

The knocking increased as she stumbled down the steps. It reminded her of the Civil War and how the politer Union Cavalry would furiously bang before entering and seizing a house.

"Hold on," she yelled. Reaching the back door, she felt for the deadlock and unbolted it, then threw open the lacquered oak.

At first she couldn't tell who it was, but then she saw clearly the outline of Silas Adams. He fell forward into her arms. She braced herself to support his body, but he was surprisingly light. "Silas," she whispered.

He struggled to regain his feet and pull himself off her, then leaned against the wall and clutched his shoulder where a dark spot was spreading across the length of his plaid shirt.

"Mrs…" he said. His voice was weary and tired.

Emma felt wetness against her body. There was blood on her gown. "You've been shot, haven't you?" she asked. She figured he'd done something wrong, nothing too terrible, but something that led him running to her for safety.

Silas nodded. "I'm sorry Emma," he managed to say.

Emma thought quickly. Whatever he had done, he'd been shot in the process, and that meant within the hour the police would arrive at her door. Only a few people in Clarksdale had a criminal past, and Silas was one of them. When they found he wasn't home, they were bound to visit her to find out where he was.

"Come with me," she said, helping him to the stairs and up the circular staircase onto the second floor. She steered him into the back bathroom and sat him down on the

toilet. After shutting the venetian blinds, she pulled the curtains closed and turned on the vanity light.

"Let me see, Silas," she ordered, peering at his shoulder. "I can't turn on the overhead light; it'll shine through those curtains."

Silas groaned and removed his hand from the injured shoulder. Emma grew close until her face was within an inch of the hole. "It was definitely a rifle," she said, "but it went straight through the meaty part of your shoulder. Any higher or lower, right or left and it would have been very serious. You're a lucky man, Silas Adams."

"I don't feel lucky, Emma," he muttered, leaning his head against the wall.

Emma remembered the police. "What did you do?" she asked. "Hurry up and make it quick. They're coming to my house."

"I robbed Mason's convenience store," he mumbled, looking down at the floor. "I thought he was gone but he was hiding out back. I weren't five feet out of the store and he shot me."

Emma stood up and put her hands on her hips. "But why, Silas? You were doing so well."

He shrugged as best he could with one shoulder.

"I don't understand you," she said as she retrieved a bottle of alcohol and some bandages from the medicine cabinet and slammed them on the counter. She wanted to strangle him with her bare hands, to push him against the wall and tell him what a stupid idiot he was for throwing away his one chance. She also wanted to run her fingers through his chest hair.

Ripping open two pads, Emma soaked them in the astringent and handed them to Silas. "Use this to staunch the blood," she ordered. He winced in pain as he applied pressure to the wound but Emma ignored him. "I need to change and make sure there's no blood on the walls and floor," she said, dousing some gauze. She then went out and down the stairs.

Willard had stored a flashlight in the umbrella stand in case of a power outage. She pulled it out and began sweeping the floor with it, flashing the pale light side to side. It was difficult to identify blood on a stained mahogany floor, but she found two spots where it had dripped, and a smear on the wall where Silas had leaned against it. She followed the trail out the back door and wiped down the doorknob and the steps just in case. Then on a hunch, she checked the new slave house for signs of blood.

Back inside the house, a second sweep confirmed she had not missed anything. Replacing the flashlight, she rushed upstairs and into her room, where she shed her bloody nightclothes, shoved them into the closet, and put on fresh pajamas. She then re-entered the bathroom where she found Silas holding the wet gauze against his shoulder.

"Let me see your back," she commanded, leaning him forward. A hole, slightly larger than the front, was just below the shoulder. It had stopped bleeding.

She leaned him against the wall, adding new pads to the old ones before wrapping the wound with medical tape. "I want you to give me the money you stole, Silas. When things calm down, I'll leave it for Mr. Mason. Hopefully he'll drop the charges. So where did you stash it?"

"You're fixin to be mad," he muttered.

She finished taping his wound, stood up and looked at him. "It's in the slave house, isn't it?"

Silas nodded. A series of bangs came from downstairs, and Emma knew that the time had come. She quickly washed and dried her hands. "Stay here. Don't move and don't say a thing," she whispered, shutting off the light and closing the door behind her. She stood outside the bathroom, rubbing and digging in her eyes until it brought tears, then rushed downstairs.

The red and blue lights of the police cars flashed through the windows and onto the walls and floor. As she turned the deadbolt, she pinched her forearm until her face crumpled in pain, and then opened the door. On the porch, Sheriff Carson was gazing into the decorative windows as two deputies lingered in the background. When he saw her, he retreated guiltily as the two deputies turned the other direction.

"Yes, sheriff?"

Sheriff Carson nodded and tipped his hat to her. "Emma. Everything all right?"

"Oh Sheriff," she relented, "I just got a call from the hospital. My brother is in the ICU. He's had a heart attack."

Sheriff Carson blushed and looked guilty for having knocked. "You mean Bobby-Lee? Is he gonna to be all right?"

She covered her mouth and with a concerted effort brought tears to her eyes. "We think so, but I've got to go to Alabama tomorrow, Sheriff Carson, just in case."

Sheriff Carson took off his hat. "Are you gonna to be okay to drive?" he asked. "I can't lend you one of my deputies," he said, nodding towards the two loitering by the car, "but I'm sure my wife Flora would be willing to take you."

Emma shook her head and clutched her hands together. "I'll be fine, Sheriff Carson. I can't think about Willard now with Robert in the hospital. But if I run into trouble, I'll call you. Is that okay?"

Sheriff Carson bobbed his head and coughed into his hand. "Now Emma, I hate to have to ask you this with Bobby-Lee being in the hospital and all, but have you seen Silas Adams this evening?"

"Silas?" she frowned as if the name didn't ring a bell. "Oh, Silas! No, why Sheriff?"

"Well, Emma, just be calm now, but we think he robbed Mr. Mason's store."

"Robbed George's store!" she gasped. "Are you sure it was Silas?!"

Sheriff Carson nodded. "George shot him."

"Oh no! Poor George! How's he doing?"

Sheriff Carson frowned and glanced inquisitively at his deputies and back at Emma. "He's a little upset, Emma, but it's to be expected."

Emma grabbed the Sheriff's forearm sympathetically. "Well you tell him if needs anything, to give me a call. I'm happy to be a character witness and donate to his legal fees."

Carson glanced back at his deputies. "I'm sorry; I don't understand."

"Do you not care about George, Sheriff?" she spat, suddenly furious. "What's going to happen when you find Silas' body lying in a ditch somewhere? You're going to take him to the coroners, and they're going to dissect him and figure out George shot him in the back. Now you and I both know it's illegal to shoot someone in the back."

The Sheriff opened his mouth but Emma did not give him time to speak. "You're going to arrest him, and then there'll be a trial. Silas' eight siblings and his mother and father, and his cousins and second cousins are going to come to town, and probably his stepfather's father, who is a high-powered attorney in New York. They will make a big scene, and soon Clarksdale will be swarming with reporters from other states, and his step-grandfather will take the case and bring down his entire law firm. George doesn't stand a chance against them, Sheriff. They'll fry him in the electric chair before the trial even ends."

Emma paused to let Carson's brain register the horrible picture she had just painted for him, but instead of frowning, he just smiled.

"How'd you know he was shot in the back?" he asked.

So, he knew. He had known the whole time.

"Why'd you let me go on like that," she protested, standing aside to let him in the house.

"Well Emma, I figured with Bobbie-Lee in the hospital," he said, stepping into her living room and turning on the light, "you just might need to talk to somebody."

"You know perfectly well Bobby-Lee isn't in the hospital," she said, but the Sheriff was too busy searching the room to notice her.

"Oh, a wet spot," he said, wiping a drop of congealed blood from the side of a picture frame that hung on the wall. "Now Emma, if Willard was here he'd be very disappointed in you."

Forget Willard she wanted to say. Willard was dead and under her bed, but Silas was still alive and bleeding upstairs in her bathroom.

Sherriff Carson motioned for one of the deputies to join him and they began a systematic search of the house. They searched under the couch, under the bed, in every drawer and cabinet large enough to hide a person while she looked on with a sense of powerlessness. As they climbed the steps, Emma raced past them to take up position against the far bedroom door.

On the second floor Carson looked at her once, then went to the bathroom door and tried to open it.

"I'm remodeling," she offered.

Carson fiddled with the knob and then knocked on the door. "Open up Silas!"

When no one answered, Carson banged harder and yelled louder, and when that didn't work, he kicked down the door. Inside he found the soiled gauze and medical tape but no Silas. Then he noticed the bloody slicks along the edge of the open window.

Carson shot her a critical glance. "He's escaped!" he shouted as he and his deputy poured down the stairs and ran out into the night. When they had left, Emma collapsed into a heap on the floor and stayed there until a stray dog appeared and she realized they'd left the door open.

In the months that followed, Emma heard various rumors regarding Silas' whereabouts. Some said he was a rodeo clown in Nebraska while others said he flew to Canada to work as a Mountaineer. Every few weeks a new report would emerge, and the town gossips would sit in the rocking chairs in front of Mason's store and talk about it. Then a bad storm came through and everyone forgot about Silas as they went through the wreckage, and tried to find the missing steeple of Calvary Baptist Church.

Slowly, Emma found her way outside again. When she wasn't working she spent her days wandering the estate, looking for opportunities to landscape or rebuild or plant. At first she avoided the new slave cabin as it reminded her of Silas, but one day as she was passing by a sudden impulse struck her and she went inside. The room was empty save for a navy baseball cap in the corner. Emma recognized it as Silas's. Picking it up, she put it on her head and went back out to check on the state of the Crepe Myrtles.

About a week later two fronts collided overhead, generating a storm with downbursts that tore off tree limbs and sent them flying against the windows. Safely inside the house, Emma listened to the moan of the old oak as squalls of heavy wind and rain roared against the walls. When lightning struck a red maple across the way, she thought about the slave house, and wondered if it would survive the ferocity of the elements. It was Silas's house. It would always be his house. The white paint that united the old boards with the new was a kind of skin to her, and the idea that gumball-sized hail, which now shot out of the sky, would damage it seemed a bad omen.

Walking over to the window, she looked out across the lawn to where the slave house stood, but the darkness and hail made it impossible to see. She would check in the morning, when the storm had subsided and the first rays of sunlight would illuminate any damage. For now, she'd send up a prayer for Silas and the house, and go to sleep.

A few hours later, she awoke. The clock read 2:13 a.m.nd she observed that the rain had stopped and it was quiet.

A man stood at the entrance to her bedroom with water pouring off him, a puddle forming around his boots. It was Silas. He was soaked. His hair had grown down to his shoulders and a thick beard covered his face. He looked like a vagabond, but for some

reason this did not alarm or surprise her. Without a word, she led him to the bathroom, gave him towels, and turned on the light.

He emerged smelling like her dead husband's old sports deodorant. His hair was shorter and slicked back from his forehead and he was clean-shaven. He wore the old t-shirt and bottoms she had given him, and they seemed to fit. He stood in the hallway awaiting her instructions.

"We'll talk in the morning. You have your pick," she said and pointed to the bedrooms.

"I may not be here in the morning."

"Oh you'll be here," she said. "You owe me that much." Then turning, Emma went back in her room, took off her robe, and got in bed.

In the morning, she would talk him into turning himself in to the police. As awful as it was to go to jail, when he was released he would be free, and wouldn't have to run every time he heard a siren. Plus, she could hire him again and keep an eye on him so he didn't screw things up.

She was almost asleep when Silas appeared in her doorway.

Emma propped herself up on her elbow. "What is it?" she asked.

"I just as soon sleep in here," he said, leaning against the doorframe.

Though he'd lost weight, he was still handsome. Even so, it didn't seem prudent for a respectable English professor to become romantically involved with an outlaw, although she could probably teach grammar in prison.

Emma shook her head. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Oh come on, Miss Emma," he said with a smile. "You don't think I saw you hiding behind those curtains watching me, and the way you used to pat me down with that towel —wooh-wee! It took all I had to stay calm, so don't play coy."

"It was a mistake," she offered, wishing he would go away and at the same time wishing he would come closer.

"No it wasn't. We've been fixin to happen for a while now, you and me, it's just I had a job and didn't want to ruin things. Now I don't have a job, unless n you want to count runnin from the police."

Sitting up, she frowned at him. "Why, Silas, why? I gave you everything!"

"Now don't take it personally," he said, plopping down beside her on the bed. "It wasn't personal. It's just, well, I'm really good at robbing stores. It's the one thing I excel at, and when I pass a store just begging to be robbed, I can't say no. I don't even need a gun, Mrs. Emma. That's how good I am." Then shoving his hand in his pajamas he pointed his finger forward and grinned.

As she fell back on the bed, she thought about Parchman Farm and R.L. Burnside, and the black hands of inmates who'd built the prison, and the white slave house, and Sheriff Carson and Silas. She also thought about her job at Delta State, and her house, and Willard and the car accident. She knew it wouldn't work, but since when did things like this ever make sense? Some things in life weren't meant to be analyzed and besides, there was always tomorrow.