

LIMITLESS AND FREE

by

David Nicholas

A thesis

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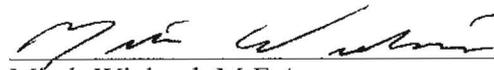
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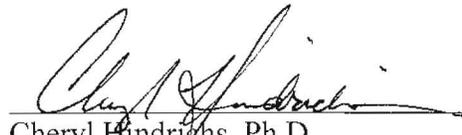
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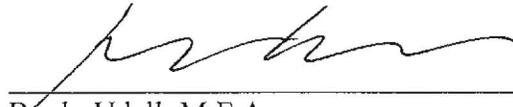
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DEDICATION

Dedicated to my wife, Shan, whose first three months of marriage coincided with the completion of this thesis. Thank you for the patience, support, and love.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you Brady and Mitch, for teaching me how to do this. Thank you Cheryl, for serving with them on my committee. Thank you to my classmates, for encouragement, motivation, and friendship. Thank you Mom, Dad, Jenny, Mike, and Tom—my first audience.

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LIMITLESS AND FREE

Every mission through time and space to save Jim Morrison's life failed. He always died, no matter what. Always at four-ten AM, on Saturday, July the third, nineteen-seventy-one. Each of Jim's many deaths—in Paris or L.A.; bearded or shaved; drunk or sober—reminded me of my father, at home in the year two-thousand-and-six, in a hospital bed at St. Luke's, who, like Jim in nineteen-seventy-one, had death written all over him.

People do crazy things when they know they're about to die. You hear about them—cancer patients or leukemia sufferers. Doctors give them a few weeks or months to live, so they go climb a mountain or circumperambulate Texas. My father built a time machine. I found it in his garage under a tarp, next to a stack of books about Jim Morrison. I put two and two together: Dad wanted to see Jim and his beloved sixties one last time. Death has a way of peeling life to the core, of stripping layer after layer of imposed needs and unnecessary wants, until your true center is exposed, until your one true desire is revealed for all, including yourself, to see. For my father, that center was the sixties. His relationship to The Doors and the music of that decade was always alive, even after he traded in his bellbottoms for slacks. I flew across three time zones and set out in my father's time machine to save Jim Morrison.

This was after I saw my old man for the first time in ten years—just a sack of a man, really, in hospital room 320. You think of those you have left behind and they are

frozen, motionless in memory. Life does not go on for them in your absence. Here in the hospital bed, tubes running from his wrist, nose, and chest to various hanging bags and silent machines, was someone else's shrunken father. *Must be*, I recall thinking: his curly hair gone; his strong hands motionless and empty. Here too, at his side, was someone else's mother: little knitting woman in the shaded room. Despite the long hours to myself on board the plane home, I had not come up with anything to say to my folks. When I saw these strangers who could not possibly have been my parents, I was glad. I would sit there, in hospital room 320, then get up, and fly back to my comfortable life, satisfied that I had eased some strangers' pain, satisfied in the knowledge that nothing had changed at all in my absence. I took one step into the room.

And then the old lady said, "Ray."

It was the same thing my mother had said to me the day I left home. We all were standing in the driveway next to my packed Subaru. It was morning. The sun had not yet cleared the mountains in the east, and the whole valley was shaded and cool. It would be another hot, mid-June day in Utah.

I stood there in sandals, convertible cargo pants, and a deadhead tee. In my hand I held a sack full of food from Mom's pantry.

"Where will you go?" Father said.

"Does it matter?" I said.

Mom's flowers were in full bloom: day lilies, lavender, and Indian paintbrush; purple clematis wrapped around an arched, cedar trellis Dad and I built two summers previous.

“Come by when you can,” he said, managing to avoid an argument, deflate my departure, and, I think, give his approval all at once.

I set the sack of food on the passenger seat and shut the door. I hugged Mom before my father could say anything else. A few faint wrinkles showed in the corners of her eyes; otherwise, her face was smooth and tan from hours spent on her knees in the garden. She said my name when we embraced.

The sun rose to the peaks of the mountains behind me as I drove off down the street, as if to light the path before me or to pull me back home with its warm arms.

In room 320, this knitting stranger, my mother, rose to feel me near her, setting her hooks and yarn on my father's chest. How short she was! Life had not paused in my absence; it had accelerated. She was wrinkled and gray, worn down and used up. Like gnarled tree roots, her arms fastened around my back, and her head reached only as high as my chest. I held her exhausted frame and looked beyond her to the picture of my father, prostrate in bed. He watched me. Beside his bed rested a paper grocery sack filled with colorful trivets my mother had been crocheting. There must have been thirty trivets in that sack.

I felt tears wetting my shirt. “He’s very weak,” my mother told me. “You may not hear from him this afternoon.” My mother was the only woman I had ever known who could cry and talk in a steady voice, as though crying were a common, involuntary phenomenon, like blinking.

“You can give him a hug,” she said.

I walked to his bed and leaned over him. I laid my head on his chest. He lifted his right arm over my back. My mother said I should talk to him.

“I don't know what to say,” I told her, standing.

“He's your father,” she said. “Say anything.”

I looked down at the old man. His eyes were half-open. He smiled, and I could tell it was killing him: the disease; the treatment; the stagnation; the reunion.

I asked again: “What should I say?”

Nothing! I said nothing to my dying father. As far as prodigals go, I wasn't ready to come home the penitent wretch; I thought I was still treading water on my own. But in that moment, when every thought in my head, every defense, justification, blame, every sentiment, came up selfish or untrue or both, I realized I had been drowning for some time, and now father was dying. I said nothing. Mother patted me on the back, and father fell asleep. I ran two stop signs in my rental car on the way home from the hospital.

The time machine—still wrapped in its blue tarp—stood roughly four feet in height, three feet in diameter, with tapered top and base. It looked like a slightly flattened egg and I found it in my father's wood closet three or four hours after arriving at my childhood home—the last rambler on a street full of remodeled two-story “mansions,” as my mother called them. I'd been wandering the halls and rooms well past my old curfew. The home hadn't changed at all. Everywhere inside were traces of me: the baseboard behind the living room couch where, as a fourth-grader, I carved my full name in cursive; a toad on the mantelpiece that lit up when you plugged it in—a gift from thirteen-year-old me to my father on his fifty-fifth birthday; a picture of me at two, holding out my long, never-been-cut, brown hair, next to my father, who held his curly locks out as well.

Once, I asked my long-haired father how the stars got in the sky. We were sharing a hammock out in the yard, staring up into the night. He said that God was a painter, and that he had dipped the ends of his long hair in white paint, and danced through his earth gardens by night, singing songs of creation. Millions of bright dots stuck to the dark sky. “We’re all tiny dots, son,” he said to me. “When we leave here, the lines of our lives connect one dot to the next, and tell our story.”

In my bedroom, posters still hung on the walls: Janis, Jimi, and of course, The Doors. The clock on my CD player told the correct time. My clothes still occupied the closet. Everything almost as I’d left it except for one detail: my father’s wool blanket sat in a wrinkled heap on my otherwise made bed. I studied it for several minutes before noticing on my desk, under a block of wood, a stack of papers. The top sheet came from a recent issue of *Woodsmith* magazine—step-by-step instructions for building floor-to-wall shelving. Below this, a few printed and paper clipped pages about constructing a ten foot trailer from angle iron and plywood. I flipped through the entire stack. How to make guitars, wooden chests, a kayak, meat smokers, a motorcycle sidecar; some were recent additions to the pile, others, not so recent. I grabbed up the pile of loose papers and walked down the hall.

My father wore his freak flag in the sixties, on the campus of the University of Utah, where freak flags were rare. The one-against-thousands attitude he adopted made it easy to like The Doors, and their darker interpretation of the hippie dream. He worked odd jobs after graduation; apprenticed with carpenters, electricians, and metallurgists. The sixties ended, and my father rolled with the changes. He married, and a year later, I came into the world. Only a few hippie holdovers remained by that time: the pony tail,

the love of sixties music, and the stubborn insistence on self-sufficiency: do it yourself; live by the sweat of your brow and by the strength of your hands. My father believed he could solve any problem with his hands.

There was one day, the summer after I turned seventeen, when my father and I were in his workshop, constructing roll-top bins from oak for food storage. My father's record player was on, playing some old EP from the collection he kept in the garage. The buzzing whine of various saws sounded over much of the music. We did not speak. My father worked on the complicated roll-top design with a router and jig—he could use any tool, create any project. I worked on the bin frames.

I followed the pencil line on the wood with a circular saw. My father had taught me how to cut a clean line, but there I was straying and not correcting. I heard my father shut off the router and come over to where I was.

“If you use a carpenter's square your cuts will be more even,” he said, standing over me.

“I know,” I said, and continued cutting.

Sawdust covered the floor below me. The sour stench of fresh planed oak filled the garage. I finished the cut and the scrap fell to the floor.

“These bins are to store food—they need to be crafted with care, son. Smooth those uneven edges with sandpaper.”

“Dad, I had other plans today.”

“What?”

“Topher got some devil sticks yesterday. We were going to go to the park.”

My father picked up the scrap and said, “When we've finished here. Work before play.” He handed me a square of sandpaper.

The sun was climbing higher into the sky; it was almost noon. I grabbed the sandpaper from his hand and rubbed it hard and fast along my uneven cuts. “There,” I said, tossing the wood aside, moving on to the next piece.

“Good, but let's do it the right way,” he said, taking the sandpaper from my hand and running it along the edges of the oak smoothly.

I stood there with my hands on my hips. I knew how to sand wood. “Okay, will you just let me do it?”

Focused on sanding, my father said, “Aesop’s ant was every bit the hippie the cricket was, maybe more so. To everything, son, there is a season. I’m a hippie, too, Ray. The park with Topher sounds like fun to me too. ”

I snorted. “Right,” I said, gesturing to the lathe, jointers, saws, and planer. “A hippie. More like my shop teacher.”

My father looked at the tools in the garage. “Sure, son. Just finish the sanding,” he said, handing me the sandpaper. He walked back over to his station and turned the router on.

When I finished, I walked out of the garage, down the driveway, and all the way to the park, where I eventually spent the night under a tall, live oak with some friends, just to prove my point.

How then shall I explain the sudden urge I felt, standing once again in my father’s wood shop, to construct shelving units at one-thirty in the morning? One moment I was looking down at his table saw, shuffling through the papers in my hands, and then I was

positioning two foot long sections of two-by-four in the brace and flipping the switch. The wood felt solid and smooth in my hands and I guided it through the saw blade three times. Fresh sawdust covered my shoes. Had my conscience settled anywhere near rock bottom yet? Yes, I think so.

So Dad thought he could mend us by making a few shelves, I thought. I would start them, then, later in the day, I'd go and see dad, get some advice. He'd love that. Thus it was I found myself standing in his wood closet, a small room at the end of the garage he called his inner-sanctum, staring at whatever lay hid under the tarp: my father's final project.

Probably a giant bird feeder or an upright bass. Perhaps I could complete it. I lifted the tarp. When it fell to the ground, and my eyes rested on the object before me, I laughed. Here was the strangest bird feeder I'd ever seen. It was a frog, a giant green and yellow frog. He had stout little legs that appeared to balance his rather precarious body, and tiny arms and webbed hands hanging unimportantly at his sides. From his closed jaws a rubber tongue dangled. Big, yellow snow globe eyes protruded from his head to the right and to the left. Across his belly my father—I presumed—had christened him, "Peace Frog".

Peace Frog looked completed to me. His construction plans lay on a workbench next to a stack of books. The plans were far more complex than the finished product led on; Peace Frog was full of wires, solar cells, and a gyroscope. I removed the frog's belly panel and saw that a cushioned space had been carved out from the wires and hardware for one person to sit. I sat down in the belly of the beast and a few levers poked between my legs—cozy. An eight track took up some space to my right.

The construction plans made no sense to me, but I continued to flip through them, until I came to a page which in part read: “Solar Powered Circumvolution Time Travel—Single Unit.” I laughed a second time that night. Here the instructions were very clear: “Manipulate time and destination levers; pull circumvolution lever into locking position; raise lever marked ‘Legs’; control balance levers to stabilize gyroscope during journey.” Someone—my father, perhaps—scribbled in the margins after step one, “Pop in eight-track.”

I tossed the stack of papers from my room aside; father wasn't mending us with shelves. I grabbed the workbench and pulled myself out of Peace Frog. As I did, I noticed the stacked books—every single one of them about Jim Morrison, except the book at the bottom of the stack. This book was familiar to me; it was my father's old photo album from the sixties. He used to show me these photos and tell me his wild stories. One of the pages was marked: photographs from a peace rally on the campus of the University of Utah. The sixties, Jim Morrison biographies, a time machine; seemed pretty clear to me then that Dad was fixing to see Jim and The Doors one last time.

One biography from the stack showed Jim on the cover in an altered state, staring through the camera, to another time. During my late teens I fought with my dad over what I thought was his desertion of the hippie lifestyle. I had seen his photographs; I grew up trying to be just like him. In my arrogant eighteen-year-old mind I was the true hippie, my dad the traitor. Ultimately, I had to leave to show him who was right. I tried to live the life I knew from Dad's stories and photos, but it didn't take; the realities of my apathetic generation couldn't live up to the fantasies of my father's. Pretty soon my life was confined to a series of cubicles. Pride kept me away from home nine more years.

Peace Frog looked surprisingly legitimate. The hippie in me—the one buried somewhere deep in corporate America—believed it could work. Of course, the thing sat only one, which ruled out bringing Jim to my dad or taking my dad to Jim. In my mind, there, in my dad’s inner-sanctum, with Peace Frog glaring at me, his tongue hanging stupidly from his mouth, the only option was to save Jim Morrison, to keep him from expiring in a Paris bathroom so that my old man could see him perform once more before giving up the ghost. Jim’s drugged face on the biography seemed to nod in agreement. Only the gift of Jim Morrison could atone for my neglect and pride.

Cradling books and papers in my arms, I stepped into Peace Frog, one leg after the other—slow, and situated myself, closing the hatch behind me. Light from the inner-sanctum’s fluorescent bulbs streamed through Peace Frog’s eyes, onto my smiling face. I adjusted the levers accordingly. Each ridiculous maneuver I made inside Peace Frog loosened my laughter until my belly ached and I started to cry. By the time I popped *Strange Days* into the eight-track, I fully believed the machine would work. “When the Music’s Over” came on, about eight minutes into it. I pulled the circumvolution lever into locking position, and the gyro below me lurched into slow revolutions. The whole frog shook; wires uncoiled from their neat, tucked-away places. Wiping tears from my face, I raised the legs and took hold of the stabilizing controls, one lever in each hand, like a tank operator. The Doors sang, “We want the world and we want it” and Jim’s splitting scream, “Now!” propelled Peace Frog into a spinning, psychedelic dimension.

My journey through the psychedelic spacecape ended in darkness. A door framed by pale light stood before me. Not knowing where I was, or even if I had traveled through

time and space, I huddled in Peace Frog until the gyro below me came to a full stop. I kept quiet, listening for sounds outside Peace Frog's hull. Then I figured anyone around probably would have noticed my entrance, and would also be huddled up somewhere, not making any noises, keeping two eyes absolutely fixed on the giant frog that just spun into their existence. I pulled the lever to lower Peace Frog's legs, and I opened the hatch.

Carpet under my feet—I wasn't in the inner sanctum. Complete darkness. I stood up straight, and immediately jumped back into Peace Frog—thank goodness I had lowered his stout little legs. I had brushed up against someone: the familiar scratch of wool on my face. I ducked behind Peace Frog. No one reached down to grab me by the collar. I stood again. Complete darkness, carpeted floor, wool coat with no one in it; I solved the mystery. Feeling along the walls of the closet with the palms of my hands, I stepped to the door.

A ray of soft light beamed through the closet door I held open a crack. No one was outside. I took a step, then another, and then one more. The light belonged to the moon, and it came in through a set of French doors that opened onto a small balcony cluttered with flower pots. No artificial light shone in the apartment. Even so, in that low light, I could appreciate the spare beauty of seventeen rue Beautreillis, the penultimate resting place of Jim Morrison.

A clock on the wall said three-fifty-four. The coroner's report in Jim's biography claimed five o' clock in the morning as time of death. I passed from room to room searching for Jim. I found some of his writings—the beginnings of a Dionysian rock opera—on a small ivory desk beneath a window onto Beautreillis. I pocketed them, as some kind of hedge against future Jim refusing to play for Dad. In another bedroom I

found strong-smelling cheese and an empty bottle of wine on a nightstand by the bed. This bedroom had a connecting bathroom.

I knew I would find him on the other side, in a bathtub, unconscious. I stood outside the door and thought of what I might say or do to save his life. Deciding that I had no clue, I pushed open the bathroom door. Prostrate in the tub lay Morrison. Here, too, moonlight colored the room in pale blue light. Jim was bearded. Traces of blood showed on his shirt, like he had used it to wipe a bleeding nose or mouth. A few empty bottles of wine stood on the cold, tiled floor, on the toilet next to the tub. He looked dead already. I called out, “Jim!” I put an ear to his face, his chest. I felt his wrist—a faint, slow pulse. I didn’t know what else to say. I said more to him than I had to my father.

I had never seen a dead body before—I had never witnessed a death. That day, split between Utah and Paris, the present and past, I had seen two near-dead bodies, but not a dead one, nor an actual real-time death. I wanted to see one—I thought I needed to. Father would die soon. This mission was life-preserving, but there, perched on the lip of the tub, morbid curiosity laid hold of me. I stopped calling Jim's name and trying to revive him, but I did not let go of his wrist. The pulse was so hard to feel, and sometimes I thought it had stopped altogether. The beats stretched the silence, and then I felt death happen. I didn't try to stop it. When nothing moved in Jim's veins, when the tub's cold transferred into my legs and back, I tucked his hand to his chest, and kind of let my hand linger there. That was how Jim Morrison, The Lizard King, died in a bathtub in Paris, France. First death I ever witnessed. The clock on the wall said four-ten as I walked down the hall and into the closet, shutting the door softly behind me.

Peace Frog whirred to life as soon as I sat down and closed the hatch. I hit play on the eight-track, and before I knew it I was bouncing down that kaleidoscopic space highway once again. Peace Frog took me back to the inner-sanctum at the exact moment in which I left. Froggy knew his way home.

I rounded up some supplies: smelling salt and aspirin from Mom's medicine cabinet; an air horn from Dad's first aid box in the garage; some beef jerky from the pantry; a watch. Tearing into the jerky, I hopped back into Peace Frog.

I walked straight out of the closet and down the hall to Jim's bathroom. I paused, turned back up the hall, and went in to check on Jim's writing desk. The Dionysian rock opera was not there—of course not, it was in my pocket—but something else was: a letter to fellow band member and longtime friend, Ray Manzarek. He described Pyrenees cheese in it, and closed with mention that he'd been writing some new material. I pocketed it, and headed for the tub.

There he was, just as I found him fifteen minutes previous, only—his beard was gone. My watch read three-fifty-nine, no time to wonder about time travel's little quirks. I knelt in front of Jim and called to him, "Jim, Jim." I slapped his smooth cheeks. The bathroom was small, not at all like American bathrooms, so it was difficult to put the considerate amount of distance between Jim and me before blowing on the air horn. The sound was worse than loud. Jim stirred. I blew it again. He opened his eyes a little. Mother's vial of smelling salts was in my hand, but I dropped it, because a voice from another room in the house called out.

"Jim?" It was a woman's voice.

I froze into a corner behind the open door. Jim was drifting back into unconsciousness. My watch read: four-o-six. I looked through the crack in the door, and then dove for the salts. Snatching them up, I hobbled on my knees to Jim's side. He caught a whiff of the salts, and then a few slaps, and he sat up. Footsteps sounded down the hall. I held Jim's head in my hands, smiled, and said, "You're going to make it, Jim," right as he puked all he had onto my lap.

That is how his girlfriend, Pamela Courson, found us.

"Jim? What? Who are you?" she said.

Jim's hot vomit seeped through my jeans. "I'm Ray," I said, looking at my lap.

Pamela wasn't entirely together herself. She leaned forward, holding the door frame with both hands. She looked at me through strands of hair. "What are you doing?"

Feeling like I had nothing to lose, I said, "I'm trying to save Jim's life."

"Jim's dead?" Pamela said.

"No, but he's going to be," I said, checking my watch. Four-o-eight. I slapped Jim a few times. He slumped over the tub's lip; a trail of spit connected him to the floor.

"You're going to kill Jim?" Pamela advanced into the bathroom. I held up my hands and said, "No, I'm going to save him", but she had put her wobbly body into motion, and now it was falling down on top of me. We wrestled on the slick floor. She clawed me with long nails and bit my shoulder; I managed to cram a few smelling salts up her nose. That distracted her long enough for me to check Jim and my watch. No pulse. Four-eleven. My efforts to wake him were useless.

I spun around to face Pamela. "Happy? Now he's dead."

“You killed him!” she said. Her nose ran and her red eyes ran too. She lunged for me from the floor.

I ripped a solid blow from the air horn right in her face, and she crumpled to the floor holding her ears.

“You killed him,” I said over the horn.

“Jim, Jim,” she said, rolling around, holding her ears.

“Was it heroin, Pamela? Too much booze? I should call the police,” I said.

“Oh, you killed him, you—he was beautiful,” she said.

Jim's dead body slumped over the tub. Pamela's wrecked body rocked slowly on the floor. I could fix this. I had all the time in the world.

“Jim's not dead,” I said, slamming the bathroom door behind me as I left. I stomped back to the closet, covered in scratches and vomit.

Peace Frog got me back home safely. I sat inside him for awhile, cooling down. *Strange Days* ran to the very end. Music is your only friend.

After I cleaned up, I found a new cassette for the eight-track, *Morrison Hotel*. With my eyes on the road and my hands upon the levers, I headed back to nineteen-seventy-one, more determined than ever.

Determination is no insurance against failure. Jim died a third time, and then twenty-seven times after that. Jim always died. Sometimes in the tub, sometimes elsewhere in the apartment, depending upon how far I could drag him. In spite of my warnings Jim drank, and when he keeled over I sat him upright and slapped him awake, but death came to him still, as he stared me in the face.

Each journey back to Beautreillis was like a trip into one of Jim's songs: weird scenes inside the gold mine. I met poets and aristocracy there, hustlers and drunks. Music and colors, silence and pale light filled the space of Jim's apartment. One time a mangy dog greeted me outside the closet. Most everyone I met was high. Some gave me a hand; some punched me in the face. One romanced me, unsuccessfully, and some ran for help. One guy, painted white from the waist up, spoke to me from under Jim's bed where he was hiding from the cops. The belligerent ones got the air horn; the nice ones cried with me in the bathroom. Twice I was moved to sing "The Unknown Soldier" at four-ten in the AM for Jim, as a kind of eulogy.

The beard came and went, as did the gut. Different documents showed up on Jim's desk. In addition to the rock opera, I have a collection of sonnets, personal letters to each member of The Doors, a screenplay for a bank heist film, and an acrostic poem titled, *ABSINTHE*.

I tried reaching Jim before the third of July. I warned him, ambushed him, abducted him, bribed him—anything to get him away from the Beautreillis, and France in general. Once, I had him all to myself for a whole week in a cottage as far away as Alsace. We trekked through old-growth forests, baguettes and cheese in packs on our backs. We discussed Nietzsche and Kafka, Rimbaud and hashish, and we debated the merits of corporal punishment. He died in my arms on the trail back to the cottage, the stars sharp above us, Saturday, the third.

I got Jim to follow me all the way to Placido, New Mexico once, because he believed me when I told him I was a Hopi Shaman, with nothing left to offer the world but enlightenment. "We're close," I kept telling him as we traveled further into the desert,

heading for my—our—ancestral home. Jim said, “This is it,” and I began to think so too. We moved by night. Outside a drug store on July the third, at four in the morning, he was vibrant and full of life. We wrote a song together, me, a sham shaman in beads and headdress, and he, a staggering rock poet sucking on a Coke. So caught up we were I didn’t check the time, nor did I see the station wagon full of lost and delusional senior citizens take a sharp turn down our hidden, little road. They jumped the curb and plastered Jim to the drugstore facade.

I sought Jim before he was Jim, back when the self-destructive gene in his body was just developing. On dawn’s highway I hitched until the Morrison family picked me up (it took four trips in Peace Frog, and I’m not sure why they picked me up on the fourth and not the first encounter). In the backseat I turned little Jimmy’s head from the carnage of the wrecked Indians and hummed “My Wild Love” in his ear. On many occasions Jimmy and I hid from Admiral George Stephen Morrison, when he had a mind for dressing down his son. When Jim went off to college I went with him, saying no for both of us when he was first offered pot. I replaced his Elvis 45’s with Gene Autry, and I got him interested in Engineering instead of film. The results of my efforts were remarkably consistent—Jim always died at the same time, on the same day; and yet remarkably different. Sometimes it took me days to find his obituary when I got back to two-thousand and six, because he died a school teacher or construction worker, not a rock legend. Efforts like these frustrated my own purpose: to save Jim Morrison of The Doors, not Jim Morrison of A-1 Heating and Cooling. Each time I had to go back and set everything right. I laid off on the formative years—they were exhausting and fruitless.

Once, in Vancouver, from the bowed middle section of the world's longest suspension bridge, Jim told me that the aim of all life is death.

“Can you elaborate, Jim?” We were lying on our backs, staring up at the stars, shivering against the wind and chill.

“Everything begins so that one day it can end, like a movie.”

“Only you don't know when it will end.”

Jim turned his head to look at me. It felt like we were in a movie, and in a real poignant scene, too. The bridge swayed and creaked. Then he stood up, assumed the position of the cross, right there on the bridge's edge, took aim, and leaned forward into the gorge below. In the wind his body tossed end over end once, and then his life collided with water and rock and death. The future is uncertain and the end is always near.

Morrison fatality number thirty: Seventeen Rue Beautreillis, in the bathtub. I stumbled into the bathroom, like I'd just had a long day at the office. I sat down on the lip of the claw footed tub, and pulled a sandwich from my pocket. Jim Morrison and I shared the small space of a Parisian bathroom for ten minutes, and I never felt so lonely in all my life. After so many failures I needed to see someone worse off than I was. I could think of only two people, and I couldn't bear to return to room 320. I came back to the Beautreillis because it was such a pathetic scene, the larger than life front man for one of the biggest bands of the sixties, slumped over in a bathtub, dying of alcohol poisoning or of a heart attack or of a heroin overdose. Mr. Mojo Risin' set to die alone, to watch his life recur eternally forever in the great theater in the sky. He told me once that death is just that, a repeating movie, so I'd better have some good incidents happen, and a fitting

climax, otherwise, what a drag to watch. Did he have some good incidents? Had I? And my father?

“What a climax, Jim,” I said, pointing my sandwich at him. And what a climax to my life as well.

As I sat there, picking at my sandwich, Jim lifted his head from the tub’s lip and stared at me. This rarely happened. He reached a desperate hand to a stranger. I took it.

“What do you want, man?” he said to me, as though nineteen-seventy-one stupor Jim Morrison was cognizant of having suffered thirty future deaths that never really occurred, and that I was responsible for each one.

My sandwich sagged and a piece of lettuce fell to the floor. Our eyes locked onto one-another. Jim might have described the connection as, “cosmic.” I saw his entire life before me, and I know he saw through me as well. It was almost four-ten. I had seen all the deaths I needed.

“Don't die,” I said.

Jim nodded and slowly tipped back into the tub.

I climbed in with him, and we lay there on our backs, staring at the perfect paleness of that room. For the second time in what seemed like the same day, I held his hand. My pulse beat with his, and then only my pulse beat. I rested his hand on his chest, knowing that this scene, like all before it, was to be replayed soon, in two-thousand and six.

After the longest night of my life, I finally slept a few hours in Peace Frog in Dad’s inner-sanctum. In the morning I went to the hospital.

Mother rose to greet me from the chair that was also her bed in room 320. She had completed a few trivets since my first visit, the night before. Her hug felt good, solid and real. We both looked at father, asleep. Mother sat back down, and I sat in a chair facing the bed.

Though she was present all through my life up until the day I left, I could not recall any specific memory of mother like I could with my father. I suppose she was disappointed when I took off, but like father, hoped I would come around. She had that way about her, with me and with Dad.

Mom's love for Dad was the enduring kind. She could sit there and crochet a thousand trivets while a disease slowly ate her sweetheart from the inside out. She could be witness to that, and endure that kind of pain. There Dad was, dying, and there I was, knowing it, and running around, performing all manner of craziness, and there was Mom, sitting in her chair, crocheting.

"You look exhausted," Mom said.

"I've been back in the garage," I said.

"What have you been doing there?"

"I'm trying to finish dad's last project, maybe it'll cheer him up."

"The frog?"

I looked up from the trivet she was working on. "Yes. A big green one."

"I thought he was done with that one. He said it was for you—said he had to get it done. I think he worked on it up until the day he came here. What's left?"

Dad's chest rose and fell. I stood up, gave my mother a kiss on the cheek, and rushed home.

In the inner-sanctum I flipped through dad's photo album until I came to the marked page. There was my father waving an American flag at a peace rally at the University of Utah. All around him were hippies—probably every last one in the state of Utah had shown up—chanting and sitting on the steps of the administration building. My father stood in the foreground, looking larger than anything else in the picture, waving that flag. He had long curly hair, and that same stubborn determination to do things for himself. The picture was cut from the front page of *Salt Lake Tribune*. On the backside of the picture my father had scribbled some notes: "Peace rally. U of U. Park building. 4/12/69." Maybe dad's stripped-away desire was not to travel back in time at all.

Peace Frog shook to life, and the colors came at me fast. I appeared behind a cluster of pine trees to the right of the Park building. The hippies were out; they packed the steps of the administration building. They sang "Where Have All the Flowers Gone." My father was easy to spot, standing in front of the building, where students who dressed like accountants passed between classes.

I crouched in some nearby bushes and took in my first peace rally. The hippies smiled as they sang. They swayed; they knew all the verses in the song. My year as a counterculture vagabond resembled the scene before me in absolutely no way. Woodstock '94 had nothing on this. Here was community. Here was what my teenage heart desired. I could hide no longer. Leaving the bushes, I approached the rally, wishing I had something on other than the oxford and slacks I had been wearing for what seemed like weeks. At least they were dirty.

I passed my father on my way to the Park building steps. He was breathing hard, from waving the giant flag and singing. I had spent enough time with Jim Morrison to

feel confident in a setting like this, so I walked right up the steps and joined in the singing. The hippies cheered when I did; I guess they thought they had turned one of the accounting students.

I swayed and smiled. Where my body odor ended and another's began, I don't know; we were a community in that sense, too. My father never stopped waving that flag. His hair was long and his arms were strong. The many verses in the song eluded me, but each time the chorus came around I sang loud and proud.

We finished the song. A few hippies hugged me, congratulating me. The day was drawing to a close. We milled around; some of us headed for the quad, to stretch on the grass. I hung around my dad, not saying anything. He acknowledged me, but also, said nothing. I watched him fold up his flag, and stuff it into a rucksack. A couple wearing beads and buckskin jackets stopped and chatted with him. They spoke of California. My father laughed and shook his long hair. They embraced and the couple departed, flashing a peace sign to my father as they did.

My father pulled a bulging handkerchief from the rucksack. Inside it was a sandwich and an apple.

"Need some food, brother?" he said to me.

I took the sandwich half he offered.

"You come up for the rally?" he said.

"Yeah," I said, wishing again that I'd worn anything but slacks.

We both nodded and watched the hippies on the quad.

"Do you think this will ever work?" I said.

"Will what work?"

“The protests and sit-ins. Do you think the hippies will win?”

My father finished his sandwich.

“Yeah, I do.”

A few administrators exited the building and the dispersed hippies broke into song.

“How long have you been a hippie?” I said.

“All my life.”

“How much longer?”

“All my life.”

This time the crowd sang “Blowin' in the Wind.” Down on the quad they joined in, but a beat behind, echoing the smaller group on the steps, as in a row.

“Do you like The Doors?” I said. “Cause I’ve got some original stuff Morrison wrote.”

“Far out.”

I showed my father the rock opera, which we both agreed was turning out pretty awful. Jim’s letters however, were philosophical, and my father liked them very much.

“Take them,” I said, handing him the letters and the opera.

“Far out man, thanks. Here,” he said, digging through his rucksack. “Here, man.”

He handed me a small wood carving. It was a simple sun image—my father was probably just beginning to work wood.

“Thanks,” I said, then, “man.”

“We’re headed for California, want to join us?”

I thought of mom back home crocheting, of father in bed dying. I thought of Peace Frog stashed in the bushes.

Here was my father, the hippie: long-hair, rucksack over his shoulder, heading for California. There was Jim in his tub, watching his life repeat over and over again. How many times did I show up in his movie? Thirty? How many times would I show up in my father's?

“Yeah, man,” I said.

“Alright. I'm Joel,” Dad said, holding out a hand.

“Ray,” I said.

I returned serene and bearded to hospital room 320 in the year two-thousand and six. From the doorway I smiled in on my mother, who still sat in her chair crocheting, next to my unconscious father. Same sack of trivets on the floor. Her hands looped and hooked yarn in a steady rhythm; they looked to me as though they would have pressed on no matter what, even if my mother closed her eyes to sleep an hour, even if my father never regained consciousness. I watched her, and as I did I thought of Peace Frog, snug and content in his new home in the garden, a couple of seed trays hanging from his eyeballs—put out to pasture, for I'd been to the Golden Gate, Monterey, and the Sunset Strip, and here was mother, not going anywhere.

“Ray,” Mom said, looking up from her work as I walked into room 320. She studied my beard.

Something else had had changed since my last visit: Dad's photo album lay on a nightstand next to his bed.

“What’s this?” I said, sitting down next to Mom.

“It was here last night when you got in; you know what it is—Dad’s album.”

I flipped through the familiar sights: shirtless guys strumming guitars; braided hair and long, colorful dresses; the Microbus—until I came to the Utah Peace Rally. There he was, exhausting himself waving that flag for peace and love. I turned the page. Stuffed in an envelope pasted to the backside was the Dionysian rock opera and letter to Manzarek. The singing, the smells, the feel of my father’s calloused hand in my own—all of it was so clear in my mind. I felt like singing or crying or both.

“Did you experience all of that, Ray? Did you find what you were looking for when you left?” Mom said.

Mom was crying, but I never would have guessed it had I not looked up from the album. “Yes I did,” I said, smoothing the album’s spine in my hands.

“Good,” Mom said. “Dad would have liked to hear about it.”

I returned the photo album to its place on the nightstand. I rested one hand on my mother’s knee, and with the other I took hold of Dad’s hand and counted the beats.

Days after the funeral my mother sat with me in my old bedroom, listening as I told her of my time away, when I drove to Haight-Ashbury in a gutted ’56 Volkswagen with six friends, sitting on boxes full of wood and tools the whole way, carving suns and poets and trees as we did. About how we worked our way down the coast and then west, trading our wares for food and shelter, the VW’s whining, twenty-five horsepower, four-cylinder finally giving out one night in the Mojave Desert off route sixty-six, the limitless space and silence intensified by its absence until we sang “Moonlight Drive” long enough to collapse into the cool sand from exhaustion and then look up and connect the stars.

Lying on my childhood bed, my father's wool blanket for a pillow, my smiling mother asked if I knew anymore stories.

GODSPEED, MR. BO JANGLES

Chapter One

My birth was a public event. People paid twenty cents apiece to see me after I was born. It's not everyday the Bearded Lady gives birth to a son, but for Paunch Hardiman of Hardiman's Rarees it had to be that day, the twenty-ninth of July, nineteen-twenty-seven. Paunch knew the route card; the thirtieth and thirty-first found us between towns, where my miraculous entry into the natural world would have shocked and amazed no one, except my mother and closest friends, and they wouldn't have paid Paunch even a nickel, on account of their everyday dealings with the shocking and amazing. Paunch hoped and prayed for an early birth, that I might come during the Chicago stand or even Kansas City, where we always sold out; but no amount of prayer or Castor oil would coax me from the womb. Lady Philistina, our palmist, foretold a July birth, which ruled out the August, dime-heavy towns, like Denver and Wichita, and so it had to be the twenty-ninth.

Paunch spent the night of the twenty-eighth in my mother's rail car, in a cloud of burning Cohosh, spoon-feeding my mother a half-teaspoon of Evening Primrose every hour, while our wild man, Togo of the South Seas, chanted in the corner. Something in all that did the trick, and I wanted out. The advance had done their job, for a modest crowd greeted us when we reached the station. A little while later, and Paunch's will was done: I showed my hairy face to the natural world at New Union Station, Salina, Kansas, on the

twenty-ninth of July, nineteen-twenty-seven, but when people ask me where I'm from, I say, "I was born on a train."

Thomas, the frog-vomiter, loved Shelly who had no legs. They married on the midway in Des Moines. Weddings were joyous occasions on the circuit. I saw fat ladies marry skeleton men, midgets marry midgets, and I saw the mule-faced woman marry three times, once to a successful banker; but Thomas' marriage to Shelly topped them all, because I shared the stage with them that day. On that day I turned twelve.

"Highpockets," I said, as the giant strode past me dressed for the wedding as Raja Highpockets, Turkish Prince. "Do you know where my tuxedo is?" I was to wear a tuxedo and play the piano for Thomas and Shelly, but I could not find my tuxedo.

"Have you lost it, Son of Sasquatch?"

"No, it's just that I can't find it."

"Would it be foolish of me to ask if you have checked the costume car?"

Ordinarily, yes, but this day, no. I started for the costume car.

"Son of Sasquatch," Highpockets said, laying a spider leg hand on my shoulder, "please hurry, you're up in fifteen minutes." He squeezed my shoulder, removed his fez with his other hand, and bowed, saying, "And happy birthday."

I smiled and bounded away.

Busy as they were, my fellow performers still found ways to celebrate my birthdays. Each year, Robusto gave me a slightly heavier kettle bell than the year before, and I usually got a knick-knack or two from the others. One standout gift is the spool of thin wire given to me on my seventh birthday. That year my birthday fell between towns,

so I had an entire day on the train to play with the wire. A prop hand's son, Joe, joined me; we constructed bridges, cars, and animals with the wire. We had a whole town set up. At one point, Joe built little figures to represent his entire family. "What are those?" I asked him. He told me, and then he moved aside the animals we had built to make room for his many siblings in our wire town. "Let's build some more animals," I said, but Joe, whose family tree it seemed ran on forever, only wanted to reconstruct aunts, uncles, and cousins. My wire badgers seemed so pathetic in comparison. I was not at all disappointed when Joe's father came for him.

That night, I pestered Highpockets about family, and if I had one, and where it was. Did I have brothers and cousins and a mother? He had planned an evening of celebration for me, but all I could think of was that rascal Joe, and his prodigious family. I brought it up after the happy birthday song, after the cake, and after Robusto performed seven feats of strength for my seven years of life. At last, when everyone had retired to their cars, Highpockets said to me, "So you want to know something of your life?" and I said yes.

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

"Those wire badgers you built are really quite fine; we could build some more of those instead?"

"No."

"And this present I got for you, I'll keep it for myself then?" He held a small box with a bow on it to his ear for a little shake. "Well, if that's what you prefer, a little bit of knowledge over what's inside the box."

Now I was unsure. I held out my hand to hold the box, to test it. Maybe it was better than family.

“No,” Highpockets said, holding the box up high, near his head. “Make a choice.”

“Tell me,” I blurted out. “Tell me something.”

“Okay, are you ready?”

I nodded.

“Are you sure?”

“Highpockets.”

He kneeled on the floor; we still weren't face-to-face, but closer. His giant's hands curled around my shoulders and down my back. I looked into his deep socket eyes when he leaned to within inches of my face.

“Son of Sasquatch,” he said, “your real name is, Monte.”

Monte? I was something, someone other than Son of Sasquatch? How fantastic. My little mind lit up with possibilities: I was an explorer, a deep-sea diver, an acrobat; my family—Monte's every one of them—drove Model T's and flew airplanes across oceans. Joe was just Joe, and I was happy for awhile, but soon I wanted to know more. I asked Highpockets follow-up questions, but his reply was always the same: “When you are older.”

Year after, when I was officially older, I would tell Highpockets, after the parties and cakes, “I am older now,” and Highpockets would unravel further the mystery of my life. Gifts of self-discovery are not the kind to sit on a shelf, gathering dust; they claimed a space inside of me where they rolled around like sticky dough, absorbing bits of forgotten memories, scraps of overheard conversations, and pieces of imagination, until

they grew so large, I could hardly keep them from bursting out my mouth each time I spoke.

What might Highpockets have for me on my twelfth birthday?

Less than fifteen minutes remained until my big part in the wedding. Off the midway, behind the attractions, I raced to find the costume wagon. Behind me loomed the big top, and a smaller tent next to it for the wedding. I passed wagon after wagon—each one containing its own share of the midway’s mystery. The wagons lined up front to back forming two rows that ran like a railroad straight into the big top. The space between was the midway, where dreams and nightmares mingled, and anything was possible. I ran along the outside of the midway, where nothing was decorated, so I could see the upper right hand mark on each wagon, telling me what it was. “CON” for concessions; “GAM” for games; “COS” for costumes, but I wasn’t seeing it. Some roustabouts lay on their backs in the shade under a wagon.

“Where’s the costume wagon?” I said.

One propped himself up on his elbows and said, “Ought to be down round the big top.”

I shook my head no.

“Chance it’s up front, with the pushers,” another one said.

A crowd milled around the entrance, craning their necks, making up their minds whether or not to enter the midway. Colorful banners and flags clogged the entrance, wagging in the breeze just enough to reveal a little bit of what lay beyond. The calliope was pumping its steam and song, and all around were clowns, pushers, and a few oddities—every one of them single-minded: get folks through. On a pedestal stood

Paunch, barking through a megaphone about the spectacle that was to be Thomas and Shelly's wedding: "Living amphibians and reptiles in his belly, that's right I said living. From tadpole to full-grown, he will spew them out for your amazement on this, his wedding day to the box girl." To the right, removed from all this, rested the costume wagon alongside the pie car.

Lady Philistina was inside digging through a chest on the floor. She wore no skirt, only a turban, a top, and knee-length flannel underwear.

"Lady P, I need my tuxedo, do you know where it is?"

"Tuxedo? What about my fotă? Am I to read palms like this?"

I sifted through clothes in chests along the wagon's wall. "I'm on in ten minutes." I tossed all manner of apparel and accouterments over my shoulder: swallow-tailed coats, cummerbunds, academics, muftis, regimentals, wigs, beards, pinafores, bustiers, pantaloons, rompers, mackinaws, negligees, scanties, and bowlers, but no tuxedos. "I'm on in ten minutes!"

Lady Philistina stood and placed her hands on her flannel hips. "Okay, I've got no skirt, but no matter, let *me* help *you*. What do you need?"

"A tuxedo."

"Tuxedo? Fleet Admiral Dan is wearing a tuxedo."

"Dan? Where is he?"

"Working the midway."

I jumped the wagon's stairs and ran for the midway's entrance. Fleet Admiral Dan was a midget, and one of the finest grapplers I ever knew. He was sly, always finding ways to catch me unawares with the flying submariner or the U.S.S. Backbreaker. Paunch

believed any good freak was one step away from becoming a great freak; all he needed was an added flair. He used to say, "Bring me your oddity, and I will enlarge it." Hence, Dan Merton, Woolworth's shop sweep, became Fleet Admiral Dan, highly-decorated Navy midget.

He was difficult to spot, but I found him, herding a pair of stupefied old ladies toward the ticket grabber. Without announcement, I launched myself, elbow first, into Dan's back. Dan yelled out, and one of the old ladies mistook me for a dog and pummeled me with her purse. I had fewer than ten minutes to strip Dan of his tuxedo and get to the big top.

While I had the advantage, I pulled the pants and shoes free of Dan's legs. By now a crowd had gathered, and I slowed down, realizing this was probably not the best way to get my tuxedo back. Dan saw an opening, and he took it. I caught a quick jab to the throat. He got up and encouraged the crowd. Standing behind me, he grabbed my wrists and pulled my arms backwards. Planting his feet square on my back he completed the maneuver: the deadly U.S.S. Backbreaker. The crowd was ecstatic.

Paunch rushed over. "Don't give it away," was something else he used to say, and Dan and I most certainly were giving it away. But Paunch knew an opportunity when he saw one.

"Son, son, what's going on?" he said to me, loud enough for the crowd to hear.

I could barely speak because of Dan's throat-jab. "The wedding," I managed.

Paunch leaned over me, cupping his ear. "What's that you say? The wedding? You have to make it to the wedding?" He stood up straight and addressed the crowd. "He says he's got to make it to the wedding, folks."

“Why are you in such a rush to get to the wedding, son?”

“The piano,” I said. Paunch knew the program.

“To perform you say? Ladies and gentleman, he says he’s got to get to the wedding because he is going to play the piano in a tuxedo as a gift to the newlyweds! Run, dog-boy, run feral child,” he said, stripping Dan as he did. “Run you Son of Sasquatch and amaze us!”

I did as told, and ran straight down the midway, my arms full of tuxedo.

The midway was the big top’s funnel; locals started at the top, where the space was, literally wider. They began with pockets full of money, and as the space shrunk, the attractions grew. The next one was always better than the last; the salty and sweet concessions came before liquid refreshments; and before they knew it, there they were, at the big top, with just enough money to buy a ticket, a program, and one last bag of corn.

As I ran I pulled on the tuxedo. The butchers, concessionaires, and game attendants shouted encouragement as I ran past; the locals stopped tossing rings and baseballs, and stared after me. I drew them with me all the way to the ten-in-one, situated outside the smaller tent where the wedding was scheduled.

Temporarily closed, the ten-in-one served as a changing station for the wedding party. I hurried into the rest of my costume. The ten-in-one was full and busy with rarees preparing for their wedding acts. Highpockets stood alone in the back. I knew he was preparing to officiate during the wedding, so I didn’t bother him. Highpockets was a religious and spiritual man; in stature he measured only a few feet closer to God than most, but in his heart no distance existed: Highpockets had God written there deep.

Looking at him I was reminded of my birthday. In my rush for the tuxedo I had almost forgotten I was a year older that day. Even a fifteen minute reprieve from these kinds of thoughts was rare; my little life had been growing more complex with each passing year, and the boundless energy I threw into my performances was evidence of the restlessness mounting inside of me.

Robusto was inside the tent, dressed as always, in his singlet, Atlas belt, and Titan boots. A whole group of midgets stood around him, as though the strongest man on the lot needed protection. Lady Philistina was there, in her fotă, with another made-freak, Issachar, the painted man. Thomas paced from one side of the tent to the other. When he passed to the far side I notice Iceman, standing alone. I watched him move like a glacier to the back of the tent where two boys' faces from outside peered in through a loose seam. The boys didn't notice him—his deliberate movements hid him somehow even though he stood right in front of them. With two cold hands he pushed their surprised faces out, closing up the seam as he did. I looked away when he turned and his tight countenance fell on me.

The ceremony began with Togo standing blankly on the stage while Paunch narrated his exotic history. When Paunch was through, Togo performed what Paunch called, "The Marriage Dance." After Togo a few made-freaks plied their trade on stage: contortionists, inked ladies and men, fire-breathers, and a metal-eater. Robusto came on next, pressing above his head a dining table with the midgets from the ten-in-one seated around it eating a five-course meal. Paunch noted that the dinnerware in use was a wedding gift from the rarees to Thomas and Shelly.

Now Thomas came on stage. Nothing about him singled him out as unique in any way, but I knew his merit grew inside his belly. Now Shelly joined him. Robusto carried her. She sat in a harness Thomas had built that tied round his waist and was supported with a pair of shoulder straps. They wore it on the train and along the midway all the time during their courtship. They held hands on stage and smiled face-to-face, six inches apart while Highpockets read from the Bible.

“Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh...”

Not an eye in the crowd was not fixed on the happy couple; not an ear did not hear Highpockets’ voice from on high.

“...cleave unto his wife and they shall be one flesh.”

A solitary freak in his tiny performance domicile appears singular and distant; seeing him like that, people can’t help but be reminded of what it means to be loved and not alone. This sight however, of two rarees on stage, in the open, embracing one another, had the power to shatter misconceptions and inspire.

“And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed. Amen.”

Thomas did not vomit even once during the ceremony, but afterwards, during the reception, he would vomit three frogs, one salamander, a garter snake, a mighty spew of tadpoles and small fishes—enough to fill a wash basin—and a pearl necklace for his bride.

Now came my part. I walked onto the stage in my tuxedo to applause and laughter. I sat at the piano bench. Highpockets taught me to play between towns on board the train. I knew “Froggy Went A-Courtin’” and “Mighty Is the Fortress of Our Lord.”

When Highpockets played his arms, wrists, and hands didn't move, only his ever-reaching fingers.

For my first number I played a piece Paunch wrote, titled, "Sasquatch's Hymn." The idea was to walk out as formal as can be, and then pound the keys right out of the piano, accompanied by some loud roaring. It went over well, and I was pleased by that. "Froggy Went A-Courtin'" was next; I dedicated it to Thomas and Shelly.

As I took my bow, all the rarees filed back on stage. They formed a half-circle. Paunch informed the crowd that it was my twelfth birthday, and on cue, my raree family sang happy birthday.

That night, after everything was dismantled and stowed back on the train, my birthday celebration joined the wedding reception. We took up two passenger cars. Through all the people, the congratulations, the pats on my mane, and good food, I sought out Highpockets.

He was in his own car. It was nothing like his performance domicile, which appealed to the Midwesterner's sense of how a Turkish palace ought to look: multicolored rugs on the walls; spear rack next to a stuffed cheetah; palm fronds reaching out of a clay pot on the floor; an elephant-tusked throne; all of it scaled down in size to aggrandize Raja Highpockets. By contrast, the sparse design of his rail car included objects scaled up in size to accommodate his frame: a four-poster made from the trunks of ten mature lodgepole pines Robusto had pushed out of the earth, canopied with a small boat sail, a gaggle of geese feathers for a mattress; two bookshelves filled with the classics and books on religion, small in his platter-hands; a rocking chair reinforced with

the leftover bed-pine, high backed by two planks, set atop a lettuce crate. It was from such reclined height he taught me to read.

“I’m older now,” I said.

“I’m glad you remembered, Monte.”

I smiled. Highpockets smiled too, he got up from his lettuce-crate rocker and walked the length of his car, almost bent at the waist.

“You are twelve now. I think I can tell you more. I mean, more than I usually tell you each year.”

I nodded.

“Can you handle that?”

“Yes.”

He could not stop moving. The smile on his face contradicted his nervous body. Finally, he stopped in front of me, handed me a photograph, and began.

“You were born on a train. You were born on this train, in this car, to the bearded lady, your very own mother.”

My mother lay on her iron bed, beneath the hand-casted headboard scene of Stephen's transfiguration. It was a beautiful old thing, the bed; a rare luxury for a show train, one my mother could claim as Paunch's top draw. She worked to control her breathing. Perspiration soaked the roots of her beard, braided expertly into two long tugs. In neat tresses her arm hair wound around her forearms. She gripped her bent knees with two woolly hands. The bed seemed to shake from the speed of the train, but my mother's exertion could also have been responsible.

Paunch sat on the edge of a chair next to her, one hand holding a censer filled with the burning Cohosh root, the other a teaspoon. The bottle of Evening Primrose sat on the floor in front of him. His suit jacket hung over the back of the chair. The cuffs of his pant legs stopped short of his ankles, revealing colorful argyle socks and an inch of thick, white leg. Paunch mumbled inaudibly with his eyes closed. Great drops of sweat rolled from his face onto the belly resting in his lap.

My mother's breathing and the tic-toc of Paunch's censer kept rhythm with Togo's chant. Togo was a shadow in the corner of the rail car, stepping into the light of a kerosene lantern above my mother's bed only when the birthing dance he performed pushed him so far.

Highpockets, Robusto, and Lady Philistina, the palmist, herbalist, occultist, and soothsayer midwife were also there. Lady Philistina sat at the end of the bed enunciating Latin phrases through cigar-clenching teeth. Over her airy robes she wore a purple Jupiter smock. Highpockets loomed over the whole scene; anywhere he stood he was everywhere. His wingspan stretched the width of the rail car and a few inches more. He appeared on the verge of gathering us under his arms for an embrace or to swallow us whole. Robusto sat with perfect posture in a chair against the wall. His bare arms were folded. Serious and strong, he sat completely unaffected by the scene around him, save for his black locks, wet with sweat, stuck to his face and shoulders.

The train rattled on. Paunch's mumbling, Togo's chanting, Philistina's enunciating—all rattled on, and Highpockets wearied of standing with his arms outstretched, braced against the walls. He lowered himself to his knees and then to the prone position on the floor. Robusto—thick-chested, broad-shouldered Robusto—rose

from his chair against the wall, threw his arms from side to side, and sat astride Highpockets' thighs, looking for all the world like a small, singlet-wearing child playing with his father, and pulled the giant's arms backwards until his vertebrae popped into place like massive lock tumblers. Leaping up, Robusto clapped his hands together, and said, "Like pulling tree from dirt."

"How is our girl doing, Philistina?" Paunch said.

Lady Philistina handed her cigar to Paunch and ducked under my mother's sheet. She said, "Uh-huh," and then, "Soon."

"Good," my mother said, breathing in quick sets. A flash of her impressive legs showed when Lady Philistina came out from under the sheet: intricate rows of downy hair woven into tight designs.

"Highpockets, if you please," Paunch said, motioning to a trap door in the roof.

Highpockets rose, unfolding his limbs like a mantis. He unlatched the trap door and fit his head and shoulders out into the night air. The wind swirled around his fully extended frame down into the car. Robusto smiled and lifted his arms above him to air them out.

"What is our estimated time of arrival?" Highpockets said to the prop hands and roustabouts who sat atop the rail car, waiting for updates.

"Thirty minutes," one of them said.

"Thirty minutes," Highpockets said through the trap door.

"Can you see Salina's water tower?" Paunch wanted to know. No, Highpockets said, and remained standing as he was, half in, half out of the car, periscoping for the close-quartered below.

“Thirty minutes, Philistina, what do you think?” Paunch said, still holding the censer in the air.

“Do you want a healthy baby or do you want a cash-grab?”

Mother looked at Paunch, but said nothing. She punctuated her breathing with a soft grunt.

“By all means, a healthy baby, Philistina,” Paunch said. “The welfare of my performers is something I keep close to my heart. If he—or she—refuses to come until tomorrow, then so be it, we welcome him—or her—to our menagerie on the way to Topeka. All I'm asking is if he—in all good health—can be enticed to show his sweet face to the good, staying-up-late, paying-us-twenty-cents-a-piece folks of Salina, Kansas within the hour?”

“This can't wait,” Mother groaned, “until tomorrow.”

“I'll see what I can do,” Lady Philistina said. She produced a vial from the folds of her robes and tipped a small amount of clear liquid into her palm. Back under the sheet she went.

Paunch turned his head to the corner of the car and said, “Double-time, Togo.” The wild man quickened his steps and chant. Sped up, his dance led him out of the shadows much more. He wore a small leather flap over his loins—not the grass skirt for daytime performances—and face paint no one in the rail car had ever seen before.

“Ha!” Robusto said. “Dance for babies?” The strongman stood, arms folded, and kicked his legs up high in front of him, one at a time. Each mighty leg—thick as a trunk—shook the car's floorboards when it came down. Robusto fell into his chair, laughing.

Paunch swung his censer in rapid revolutions. Between my mother's bent knees Lady Philistina busied herself. From the knees down, her legs stuck out from under the sheet, kicking and turning in time with Togo's tempo. She lifted the sheet over my mother's knee to breathe, and then ducked back under it. From outside the car came Highpockets' voice: "The water tower is in sight."

Paunch set the censer on the floor and got out of his chair. He tugged at Highpockets' trousers, and the tall man bent back into the car.

"Tell those roustabouts to get everything set up. I want ten men to join the advance, canvassing the streets. Make certain the newspaper men from *The Star* show up. I want the butchers out with light concessions—no sense in giving them the bellyache tonight, we just want to give them a sniff. I want the plugs pulled and the calliope uncovered. I want this car pulled up to the station."

Highpockets stretched himself back out the trap door and relayed Paunch's orders to the workers up top. The scattering sound of feet on wood sounded as the men hurried to prepare for my anticipated arrival.

Two cars back, lashed to a flat car, lay the calliope. This was the steam organ built into a carved, painted and gilded wagon. There were neither doors nor roof to the small wagon; the exposed interior sat one person, the calliope player. Behind the wagon driver's bench rose ten pipes ranging in width and height. The wagon driver wore wax plugs in his ears when he drove the calliope on the haul route, from the station to the yard. Paunch liked to uncover the calliope when the train neared town venues, to let the wind play upon its pipes, announcing our arrival.

It was uncovered now, and all its pipes unplugged. Gusts of wind sucked through the pipes trailing long strings of discordant harmonies. As the flat car shook and as the train rounded bends in the tracks, wind struck the calliope's pipes at different angles, producing different sounds almost every second. A stout wind pocket charged over the passenger car ahead of the calliope, and collided with its thickest pipes, releasing a burst of low flat notes.

Everyone on board knew the tune. The people of Salina, Kansas, knew the tune as well. They set down their papers, turned off their radios, quieted their dogs, rose from their tiny beds, and cocked their ears. Faces appeared in their second-story windows; screen doors opened and rattled shut. Out in their yards they gathered and listened to the sound. It swept through their streets, front rooms, cellars, fields, and attics, conjuring visions and smells everywhere it sounded. This was the call of summer evening, of spectacle, the big top, and wonder; it called down the length of the train, searching every car, finding my mother's car, snaking through Highpockets' legs, around Robusto's shoulders, in and out of Paunch's censer, up and down Togo's chant, and past Lady Philistina, into my mother, where it found my little womb ears, and called to me: come out and play.

“I see a head!” Lady Philistina said.

The car shrunk in size as everyone gathered around my mother's bed, everyone except for Togo, who continued to dance. The train rounded the final bend and hit the straightaway. The calliope howled. My mother pushed and pushed. She grit her teeth and almost forgot to breathe, or maybe she could not breathe.

“Push,” Lady Philistina said.

“Push,” Paunch said.

Chug, chug, chug went the train.

Mother pushed, and when my shoulders cleared, Lady Philistina helped me out with a tug. She performed her duty as a midwife and wrapped me in a towel for Mother. The train pulled in to the station.

“My little pup,” Mother said, for I was covered head to toe with fine, glistening hair. I struggled against the towel and tried to shake my limbs, but Mother held me tight, and soon I found a restful place beneath her chin, nestled between the tugs of her beard.

Highpockets said: “Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting,”

Togo finished his birthing dance and began to sing a low, plaintive dirge, as though I'd just died. It put me and my mother right out, as everyone else looked on, with tears in their eyes.

Outside the car, a crowd gathered. The butchers cried, selling their cheap concessions. Paunch said, “Lend me a hand, Robusto?” The strongman squatted, and Paunch sat upon his shoulders. To get Paunch through the trap door Robusto stood, and then extended Paunch upward, gripping him by the feet, until Paunch could scramble onto the roof of the rail car. It was done in a single motion, as though lifting round men like Paunch was part of the strongman regimen. From the roof, Paunch called down into the car, “Ten minutes, friends.”

The crowd outside hushed. “Ladies and Gentlemen,” began Paunch.

My rail car companions readied themselves. Highpockets removed his trousers, shirt, and eight-panel cap for checked pants, a striped caftan, patten sandals, and fez.

“Prepare to pass beyond reality and belief,” Paunch continued.

Robusto did side-bends and toe-touches. He remained in his singlet.

“Into the folds of fable, myth, and fear.” Paunch moved up and down the rail car, made eye-contact with many in the crowd, and spoke with his hands.

Togo slipped out of his loin cloth and into his grass skirt. He carefully wiped away his face paint.

“To tremble at the cry of the phoenix; to wonder at the ancient hippogryph; to dream with the kelpies; to witness amazing feats and shocking betrayals of natural science. To gaze into the eyes of Iceman, and feel the cold that blooms within him.”

Highpockets—now Raja Highpockets, Turkish Prince—sighed, and in a voice imitating Paunch's, said to those in the car: “To gaze upon my rarees and remind yourselves, happily, that you are average, ordinary citizens, utterly un-alone.” Lady Philistina woke me and my mother.

“You sir,” Paunch said to a boy in the front. “Have you heard of the sasquatch? The terrible beast of the Northwest? Skin like a bear, strength of twenty men, temper of a spurned woman? No? Well rub two dimes together, son, and pass right this way, for directly from the faraway land of Alaska, we have for your amazement, the Son of Sasquatch.”

A roustabout on top of the rail car unfurled a poster featuring an artist's snarling rendition of the Sasquatch. Robusto threw open the rail car's sliding door. A pair of workers hurried to the car with a ramp. When it was positioned, they ran up the ramp and lifted my mother's bed, with me and mother in it, high enough for Robusto to squat beneath it. “Okay,” he said, and the workers let it go. With the bed on his shoulders, he

squatted me and my mother and our bed high into the air, and walked us down the ramp, Highpockets, Lady Philistina, and Togo trailing us, to much applause.

The newspapermen from The Star were there; at some point in the night they photographed me and my mother, with Highpockets, Robusto, Togo, Lady Philistina, and Paunch standing around us. In the photograph my mother's eyes are half-closed and she is looking at me. No one is smiling, except for Paunch. I am looking directly at the camera, trying to see, as Paunch barked earlier, beyond.

Highpockets finished. It was now the day after my twelfth birthday. I continued to stare at the photograph that had occupied my attention from the moment I received it.

“Well, Monte, Son of Sasquatch?”

My one-word response was this: “Mother?”

ALAMEDA BANDIT

When I'm hiding in the canyons of the Big Tujunga I like to feed the legendary Overland mules we stole from the army. We've got all twelve of them in a little glade down West Chilao, hardly visible from up high on the rocks. It's our ace in the hole. I gather nopales, tunas; the mules whinny and honk when they see me coming down Pacheco Pass. Nothing makes me happier. There's been lots of talk about the mules, what we should do with them. They're legendary, says Pio. He wants to ride them to the mines and haul everything that shines out of that country, down to the last Chinaman's eye. Cushies and fried bacon will do a mule no good, but that yack Chorín thinks they're stubborn, so he's always pressing handfuls of grease to their faces. I'm careful to watch him. Bonifacio is taking his time, but he knows what I do, that these mules are marked bills.

The mules are standing in a row behind a crude fence built from wagon wheels. They eye us and our dinner: nopalitos and huevo. Despite the lovely grazing the glade offers and the feed I bought for them, they line up every night. They beg like dogs, and I blame the army. One of them raises his hind leg and stomps it into the ground. "Hey," he's saying, "I'm standing right here. Did you forget?" No, not me; I can't forget them. I push some guiso to the side of my plate with a corn tortilla, and hold the plate up for the mules to see. A few of them honk in response.

All ten of us are here, seated around the fire or elsewhere, on the rocks, under the junipers. After dinner we will plan tomorrow's Cerro Gordo holdup. Seated to my right is the newest member to the gang, Narciso, a hound out of San Francisco where it is rumored he killed two Germans and made off with their sheep. All night he has been telling the story to me and our youngest member, Chorín.

“What did you do with the sheep?” Chorín says.

“Led them to a cliff and kicked them over, one by one. A big, bloody pile of maggots. Funner than the Germans,” he says, and makes like he's sticking himself in the throat with his knife, his tongue out, eyes rolled back.

“Funner than the Germans,” Chorín says, slapping his wide thighs, and the two of them fall to pieces laughing, stabbing the air with their knives, double-killing those good-for-nothing German shepherders.

No better than Sydney Ducks, my grandfather would say. Back in the rancho days men were killed, but never with such casual disregard. Then gold began to shine from the earth and everything changed for us. Men from all over spilled into our borders staking claim with fist, pick-ax, and gun to whatever they could. Lucky for my grandfather then, to die without having to see what's become of his beloved California. He is at home on his rancho, and I am more there with him than I am here with these two.

“Gil. Hey, Gil. I have here one of their ears,” Narciso says and pats his breast. He looks like any town drunk: paunch; unsteady; thick-fingered; unkempt beard, soaked to the root in whiskey and bacon grease. But he is quick and sharp, and he has a killer's heart. I hold out my hand.

The ear looks like a dried peach and feels like any bit of warm, oiled leather. I don't ask if it was separated from a dead or a live German.

“That's just fine, Narciso,” I say, and hand back the ear.

He's beaming. Looks like he's a good fit for the gang. Maybe I'll point that out later tonight, and comment on Bonifacio's wisdom in picking Narciso over the other bandits that vied for our open spot. It's what I do: agree, compliment, say, bully for you, Pio! I never disagree or say what I really think, that we ought to give up banditry and farm our little glade using the mules, and raise up a peaceful town called Carbajal, for my grandfather. We could pickle nopales and chile.

“It looks like a peach, little and all dried up,” Chorín says.

I like Chorín. Despite his young age he is the biggest member of the gang. Unlike most of the men, he has no vile past, but he throws himself into the work with enthusiasm, and he is strong like a bull. That he too thinks the ear looks like a peach isn't surprising; he is an innocent, like me, an innocent with an appetite. His face has probably never felt a razor and his hat is enormous even for a man his size.

“It does,” Chorín says.

“Didn't taste like one,” Narciso says, snatching the ear from me.

They carry on like this as others emerge from the surrounding dark to sit at the fire. Pio stands by, listening, and then he says, “That's no German ear.” Narciso beat out Pio's cousin for the opening in our gang, and he's been on the outs with Pio ever since.

“Come a little closer and see for yourself,” Narciso says.

Pio spits into the fire.

In the silent bravado that follows, Bonifacio, our leader, appears. By our standards

he is a sharp dresser, wearing a black waistcoat and a maroon vest. His dusty boots and frayed black pants however, betray him as a man of the saddle, not of leisure. In his breast pockets he keeps a pair of beloved thefts: Sheriff Telford's gold watch, and his mother's spectacles, which he keeps in a small case made of mother of pearl. Around the glade Bonifacio uses a black oak walking cane; it accentuates his tall, slender build.

Bonifacio looks at Pio, then Narciso. He removes his mother's spectacles from their place near his breast, puts them on and says: “How many of you know the story of Tom Bell, the one-time physician turned bandit? The artist we all might thank, were he not deceased—bless his soul—for his pioneering work in highway robbery?”

This is what we do in our downtime: listen to stories. Bonifacio says they help us stay focused, and that it can't hurt to learn from the past. To be a better gang, he says. Some of his material comes directly from Sheriff Telford's publication, *The Pacific Monthly*, like the poetry he has been reciting and encouraging us to memorize: “I love thee with the breath, smiles, tears, of all my life! And, if God choose, I shall but love thee better after death.” It sells with the ladies.

Bonifacio begins Bell's tale. He stomps around the fire as he narrates; his legs bow under the conjured weight of Bell's six revolvers, nine bowie knives, and boiler-iron breast-plate. Bell robbed and killed, and his gang grew, until it boasted over fifty outlaws spread over five counties. The fire casts shadows across Bonifacio's lean Tom Bell-face. The climax: Bonifacio stops stomping, throws his head and arms back, and shouts, “I've been shot!” He clutches his heart and curses the traitor, Juan Fernandez, as he falls to the dirt. We applaud.

Stories like this are common in our gang, and each time Bonifacio tells one I wonder at him. I reconsider if he's more like me than I give credit. Maybe he longs for the rancho days, for cottonwoods and sycamores, shade in the heat. Perhaps as a grandchild he listened along an arroyo's banks to fantastic cuentos of Cahuilla hunting parties, Santa Anna and the boy heroes of Chapultepec, the bonanzas and the Murietas. Maybe this isn't his place either; maybe he, too, still has a place to go that is far removed from here. But then, he always smiles wide when the papers decry the atrocities of the Alameda Bandits, led by the charismatic Bonifacio Vásquez. And I know that days from now, I will struggle for sleep in a dark adobe along the Livermore; Pio and the rest will be full as ticks at Greek George's bodega; some whore will smile over the timid bulk of Chorín and call out to the other whores, "between hay and grass, this one"; Narciso will kick up a row down every street, endangering us all; and Bonifacio will open his door and his bed to three soft raps at his window, and he will long no more for the shade of a sycamore or tales along an arroyo's edge.

Dusting himself off, Bonifacio asks what the doctor's story teaches us. Chorín wonders whether too much iron on a person will tire a horse too quickly. Narciso suggests killing one person a week, to discourage traitors and the like. Pio curses the damn fool traitor Juan Fernandez, as though he'd been personally wronged by him. To this Bonifacio replies, "Pio, the lesson here is that large gangs create problems for everyone."

I feel foolish for having followed Chorín's line of thought, but smart for not opening my mouth about it.

The Bell method for robbing stagecoaches, which is all about numbers and anticipation, is explained. Assignments for tomorrow are made. I get rear flank with Narciso and Chorín. The men let out a whoop, and they're all up, clomping around the fire like Clydesdales, playing Tom Bell, taking bullets to the chest but clomping forward still.

I stack the men's discarded plates in my arms and walk them over to the mules. Some of the men leave for their own corners of the glade. The mules reach for the plates I offer with hairy lips. These were Farnsworth Holladay's mules, used to carve out the Overland Trail. Where a team of horse or oxen would kill themselves hauling wagons up a hill or through a rocky stretch, these mules found different routes. They led the entire outfit, from Julesburg on. The army leased them from Holladay to haul artillery during the war.

Pepino is the shortest at fourteen hands. He is a pepino-thief and our cook, Frito, despises him. Frito tends a small garden in the glade, one that he is forever protecting from Pepino and the other mules. He has relocated the garden and built fences, but the mules always find access to his sweet crop. A dark bay named Salto jumps the low fences Frito constructs, and the biggest of the bunch, Ogro, another bay with ringed eyes and a shaggy forelock, simply topples Frito's rag-tag fences with a nudge from his massive hindquarters.

These days Frito sits on a rock outside his giant, mended fence, keeping watch over his garden day and night with a long pole and a frying pan. When a mule comes near he makes a rude gesture, and says, "Here is your pepino, come and get it, ¡pinche burro!"

For my part, I hope Frito can keep up the fight, because he is an excellent cook, and although it gives me great pleasure to see a bandit thwarted at every turn by a team of mules, I would miss his frijoles a la charra and nopalitos were he to give up the garden. We enlisted Frito when Bojorques, our old cook, and a belly-cheater at that, deserted us. Bojorques served food but he did not cook it. He always said he had problems of his own to deal with. We found a note one morning that said he'd left, that he was GTT, gone to Texas, and that we were to tell no one. It's been butter-fried delights ever since: fresh eggs, bacon, sweet cushies, donuts, and seasoned meats with jellies.

The mules have licked the plates clean. I pat them down, checking to see how well they are eating. Their backs are flat and I can count their ribs, though it is getting harder. What they need is a plow to pull. Bonifacio approaches with a second helping of food. "I love Frito's nopalitos," he says, tearing strips from a corn tortilla to scoop the guiso into his mouth. When the guiso is all gone he soaks up the leftover juice on his plate with the remaining tortilla strips.

"You have a way with the mules," he says.

"My grandfather had a team of draft mules on his rancho," I say.

"Where was this?"

"Monterey County."

"I suppose he also had stock and pigs and goats?"

"Yes, all of that."

Bonifacio licks his fingers. Wiping them on his maroon vest, he says, "We all had something back then, but the times have changed, and we are wise to change with them."

The mules leave their posts along the fence. A few stand together with their compact heads turned towards camp, thinking perhaps, of the garden.

“For this reason you turned outlaw?” I say.

“Yes, at first out of anger, but there is so much more to banditry.”

I was too young to understand why my family had to leave grandfather's rancho, and I looked on the Yankees who set up tents on my grandfather's land with wonder, not anger. They spat more than anyone in my family did, and they spoke funny English. They were Sydney Ducks.

I understand now, but anger has not overcome me, like it has Pio and Narciso. I turn to sadness and longing, not to my gun and knife. It is nice to hear that Bonifacio misses the old way, too, but this does not comfort me. Beneath his charm and his words he is a killer. He has killed three men.

Bonifacio loops his wire-framed spectacles around his ears.

“Do you know the story of Joaquin Murieta?” he says.

I grip one of the tin plates. I am the only one here—this story is for me. Grandfather used to tell me stories of the Five Joaquin's who terrorized southern California. Their control of this territory lasted fifteen years. Four of the five were shot, hanged, and stabbed to death; but the last Joaquin, he lived on.

“Joaquin Murieta—the last one—was a famous *mujeriego*. He had an *enamorada* in every town. I don't have to tell you the man was handsome. It has been said of his pencil-thin mustache that it grew the very day he lost his innocence to a Spanish gypsy from across the sea, and that it never required razor.

“The women of California desired him for his bravado and his fame, but lover and bandit are two roles difficult to play together. The Santa Biblia says we cannot serve two masters, but the last Joaquin, he made the effort. For two years he kept a woman, the beautiful Elizabeth Morrow. She waited for him at his hideouts, she traveled with the gang, and she laundered his shirts with lavender soap. What do you think of that? His gang thought it unbecoming of a Joaquin. In place of holdups, the last Joaquin and Elizabeth took walks together in the hills, no gang members allowed! Unless they each brought with them a girl, a girl Elizabeth approved of, who wasn't to be 'entreated sexually', which was the worst part, because that's what gangs like most about women, entreating them.

“And so it went, robbing and killing, holding hands and kissing in the shade. He grew soft. When the job called for clubbing a man, he clubbed only a little, or he passed the clubbing on to another. I tell you, Gil, growing soft is a sure way to get yourself killed in this business, the gang knew it and so did the last Joaquin.

“One day, his right hand man, Sape, said to him, 'Joaquin Cinco, when was the last time you used your knife?' and the last Joaquin almost answered but Sape corrected himself, saying, 'For something other than carving little wooden hearts or little wooden rabbits?'

“The last Joaquin drew his knife from its place on his thigh. He turned it in his hand before his face. He saw that it was clean. Perhaps wondering if it still worked, he drew it an inch across his forearm, leaving a thin line of blood. He held the knife up once more and watched his blood trail down the blade, from point to handle.”

Bonifacio hands me his knife. It isn't filthy, but it isn't clean. There is a deep orange stain along the back edge, like burned-in grease. Where the handle connects with the blade there is dirt and grime. I don't have to draw it across my skin to know that it is sharp. Bonifacio's knife is heavy and it feels good in my hands. I have no experience killing with a knife, but I am good with one; I practiced with knives on my grandfather's rancho.

"In the week that followed, the last Joaquin was not seen at camp. Not even Elizabeth knew where he had gone to. After seven days he returned. His throat was dry and his stomach empty, but his mustache—sharp and fine. He ate sixteen fried eggs and drank straight from a trough. On his hands and knees he drank, and when he finished he looked up and saw Elizabeth. Without a word he took her by the hand and led her down one of their walking trails. The last Joaquin came back from the walk, Elizabeth did not. His beautiful mustache was thick and ragged. He never said her name again, and he never kept another enamorada. He threw himself into his work, vicious as ever. Some say too vicious, but that is why he is a legend today."

"What became of Elizabeth?" I ask.

"Who knows? Some say her body was found at the bottom of a deep, hidden canyon, shot twice. Others say the Spanish gypsy appeared and snatched Elizabeth away, raking her gypsy nails across the last Joaquin's mustache as she did, disenchanting it, and rendering it a thing subject to the toils and cares of life."

Somewhere in this there is a lesson just for me.

"You must kill the mules," Bonifacio says.

I drop my plate. It clatters on the rock below me and the mules turn their heads.

“We cannot sell them or trade them. They are too legendary. We can hide easy enough up here in the Tujunga for weeks and not be found—not even a trace of us. But these mules are like a signpost for lawmen everywhere, especially Sheriff Telford. They are driving our cook insane, and everyone here agrees, Frito is too valuable an asset to this outfit to lose over a few mules.”

“If I kill what I love I will not die, like the last Joaquin.”

“No, kill what you love and you will not die next week, but you will die. The last Joaquin died. I have seen his pickled head. His dense mustache pressed up against the jar, spreading in all directions. A lit candle behind the jar made his long hair to appear as weeds in a green pond.”

Bonifacio reaches down and collects the plate I dropped.

“He looked magnificent, Gil, like he had spent his final moments riding bareback through California’s hills, firing all his bullets.”

Drawn by the familiar sound of tin on rock, a few of the mules stand nearby, shaking their heads over the fence.

“The last Joaquin loved two things, but in the end you can only love one,” Bonifacio says, standing up. “The end of a rope waits for all of us. It will find you at home with your mother, at ease on what used to be your grandfather’s land, on the road to Mexico, in the mines up north, or here with us; but it doesn’t have to find you over a dozen mules. Narciso will kill them if you do not.”

I am hidden in the brush near the highway with Chorín and Narciso. The Cerro Gordo coaches will pass soon; we are to follow them, picking up jumpers and tumblers.

Riding south flank is fine by me, because nothing much ever happens behind the stage, but with these two, who knows. They hate south flank; it's the hind tit run, Narciso says. They have their horses high-stepping in place and pulling at their bits. Narciso is explaining to Chorín how to stick a man with a knife.

I could quit the gang and take the mules with me. No one here is keeping me against my will. It's really just a safety issue: I've got no place else to go where I won't be hanged for a murder I didn't commit. There are pencil drawings of me in courthouses, in sheriff stations, in Sheriff Telford's gazette; most of them show me with mustache. I've shaved it. They also can't seem to get my nose right, which is fine, I suppose, but really, it's not as big or as flared as they make it seem. Beneath my pencil face is the name, "Gilberto 'Lieutenant' Cordova."

They say I stabbed a Constable to death at a fandango, and that I did it with my friend Santos, as some kind of act against the Anglos who had come to live peaceably among us. It is true, he was stabbed that night, but not by my hand, nor Santos'. The Constable had stolen my dance partner—a pretty blonde—and I had to stand by, witness to his clumsy feet and sweaty face. He was always doing this. Did he have enemies? Yes he did, and one of them chose that night for retribution. I saw the Constable fall—it was the first time he moved with grace all night—and I ran. Santos did not. When I crept back into town, I saw my childhood friend, Santos, hanging from a cottonwood. The great tree's trunk was furrowed, and scattered drops of white cotton drifted from their burst seeds against the bright green canopy above. By torch light Santos stood on air, his hands behind his back, head bowed—like he was caught in the middle of a prayer.

Santos was guilty then, because he was dead, and I was guilty because you

couldn't say Santos without saying Gilberto, so I knew my fate, and so did my mother. She packed for me a small sack of cornmeal and frijoles, prayed with calloused hands and beads to Santa Blandina of the exiles, and shut her door on me in the dark, early morning. To the canyons I ran.

I could take the mules to Mexico, a place I've never been, but the road is well-known, and I'm scared to die. I have no real prospects outside of this outfit, I think.

We hear the coaches before we see them: hooves and wheels grinding girt, spitting pebbles to the left and right of the highway. I close my eyes and can almost make it sound like a river running full in spring.

Two coaches surge past us: four horses each, two men up top on both, five inside the first, six inside the second. As per orders, we watch the coaches pass and count to fifty. Narciso and Chorín count out loud, each number louder than the last. Fifty! they yell, and dig spurs to beat the Dutch, and I keep pace because it's nothing but dust to follow.

I can't see the coaches anymore—the road winds down and away, to Bonifacio and the rest. We fan out and train our eyes on the sage, the hillocks, looking for jumpers. Three quick gun shots sound from the coaches' direction, then one more.

We arrive at the designated spot. Our men are tearing up the empty coaches for anything of value, and Pio is leading the passengers away from the highway to some hills not far off. Chorín jumps from his horse and runs to join the pillagers. Our job was easy this time. Good for these folk from Inyo, who know not to run or jump. All save for one, it seems: a body lies in the grass.

Narciso and I dismount and head to the hills where we are to guard the passengers with Pio so they can be searched. I was paying attention at our meeting last night, so I know how this is supposed to work, but Narciso is taking charge, waving his pistol around, telling evil tales about his knife, and shouting for everyone to shut their damn mouths. I silently pray they do as told, because his knife really is all he claims, and he is crazy; they all are.

The rest of the gang joins us. They move through the seated stage passengers without saying anything, their hands patting down trousers, pockets, dresses, hair, and hats. When they feel something weighty or see something that shines, they snatch it. They are quick.

A pretty blonde girl screams when her pearls are snapped and the guilty party searches for more beneath her dress. Seated on the ground, a mutton-chopped old man near tears, her grandfather perhaps, starts a commotion, crying, "Isabelle! Isabelle!" She has a look that reminds me of the fandango girls I used to see years ago: perfect curls spilling out the back of her bonnet; white skin that I know is smooth, because I touched it years ago, dancing, and it was softer than anything my rancher's hands had ever known. The Anglo girls that came with the gold rush nearly redeemed it of its filth, greed, and hate. Santos and I frequented the fandangos just to see them. They wore their dresses to the floor, and once they removed their wide hats they began to dance, swinging their curls in $\frac{3}{4}$ time to el coyote and la malaguena. We danced with them when we could. We were better dancers than the Anglo men, who could not move their hips.

I watch Isabelle struggle with one of the men and I remember the dances. The old man on the ground is reaching out to her. I want to reach for her. I want to wrap my arms

around her and breathe in her rose scent, deep enough to take me from here, to my glade and my mules, to the fandango, to grandfather and his rancho. A shot from Narciso's pistol reminds me of my place, and the old mutton-chopped grandfather is wheezing, straining to clutch at the bleeding hole in his breast.

When Narciso showed Chorín how to cut a man, he said, "Just like that." Just like that, and muttonchops is dead. Just like that, and I could end the lives of twelve legendary mules, and join Bonifacio, Narciso, and Joaquin Cinco as a man undivided in word, thought, and deed.

Pio spits and says, "Damn fool Narciso!"

Narciso smiles at Pio. He draws his knife. Pio draws his knife, too.

"Damn fool Fernandez traitor!" Pio says. He does not cower.

The coach passengers scream. Pio and Narciso circle and feint; clearly, Pio is outmatched. Narciso laughs. One quick lunge and his knife is hilt-deep into Pio's gut. Pio's knees give, but Narciso holds him up and stabs him twice more. Finished, he wipes clean his bloodied hands and knife on Pio's clothes, and releases Pio's dead body to the ground.

Some of the passengers are weeping as Bonifacio and Chorín join us. Chorín's arms are full of Cerro Gordo spoils.

"Why are there two men here in the grass, shot and stabbed?" Bonifacio says.

The stagecoach passengers turn their heads towards Narciso.

"They were causing a stir." Narciso says.

"A stir?" Bonifacio says.

"They were stirring."

“Like a straw in a drink?”

“That’s right.”

“They were mixing everything up, were they, until it was right frothy back here, behind the hill?”

“You could say that.” Narciso is grinning.

Bonifacio folds his arms and rocks a little on his heels. He looks at a passenger and shrugs, and then pantomimes a straw that stirs a drink.

“A stir is caused, Narciso, when two stagecoaches are knocked over but five miles outside Inyo City. You could say that a stagecoach driver killed for raising his pistol against me might cause a stir. A raggedy-old dromedary come down from the canyons to drink water with the stock—that would cause a stir. An old man crying out to his—” Bonifacio gestures to the girl Isabelle weeping beside the dead man, but she doesn’t respond—“granddaughter? I don’t think so, but killing him for it? And then killing your compadre, Pio? You’ve stirred a big straw today, Narciso, bigger than we need.

“Try to remember, Narciso, the story of Felipe Soto, the murderer.” Bonifacio reaches for his spectacles.

The men and I sit down in the grass with the startled passengers. Bonifacio stretches his arms from side to side and then begins. He affects the accent he always does when performing before a non-gang audience. All of the story’s actions are exaggerated: Felipe in the mine when the braces split and the world collapses; Felipe in the center of the earth, dealing his soul to the devil for the chance to be born again, this time to stalk the earth’s surface in the devil’s employ, not to toil beneath it for gold and silver; Felipe above ground once more, resurrected and bent on killing. The story ends as it always

does, with the second death of Felipe Soto, this one caused by his own lust for blood—“the devil offers no insurance against that”—and the determined effort of an entire town. Before us Bonifacio acts out Felipe's second death, by burning, getting stabbed and shot, and by drowning.

“In the end,” Bonifacio says, his hair and clothes disarranged, “you reap what you sow. Felipe Soto overindulged his pleasure for killing—he grew daring and arrogant, and soon he was killed. Shot, stabbed, hanged, burned, drowned, and thrown back into his pit, never to be seen again. Kill and be killed, steal and lose all, love and be loved—that’s how the world works.” Bonifacio walks off and gives the story time to settle. He picks a fully-blossomed sprig of desert gold.

He’s wrong, I think. That’s not how the world works, not here anyway, in California. If the world’s so fair, why am I riding with bandits? Why is my grandfather dead and all his land stolen and spit upon? Why did Felipe, working the only way he knew how, have to run into the devil and become a murderer? Why must I kill my mules? I don't see Bonifacio's logic, but then, the story wasn't for me.

Narciso is fingering his pet ear.

Bonifacio picks his way back through us, like a player taking his paces on stage. He offers a wordy apology for the death of the old mutton-chopped grandfather. Bonifacio has the gift of a flannel mouth. He says his heart, though long in the saddle with the vicious and degrading things of the world, is not so numb it cannot feel pangs of empathy when a father falls, and is left for the coolness of the morning. For, he says, turning away from the played-out passengers, his father, too, tasted the lead plum, leaving a son to live off the world, and suffer at its hands. Then he goes quiet, and stares

out past the sage. Some of the folks from Inyo County are whispering, others stare; they have no idea what we, their captors, have next for them. Chorín's balled-up face offers them no clues. Isabelle has stopped weeping; she holds in her hand a fresh sprig of desert gold.

We mount and prepare to leave the overcome passengers in the dirt. Narciso approaches Isabelle with his knife drawn. She's screaming, but all he wants is her grandfather's initials.

Back in Tujunga I sit in the glade near the mules while the men hang around camp, recounting the events of the day. Frito is preparing a pork shoulder in a large pot. It boils and I can smell the meat from all the way over here.

Pepino idles by. He knows Frito is cooking, which means plates for licking. I hold out my hand, and he can see there is nothing in it. I sit because I do not think my legs will support me, and I hold my head in my hands because I cannot believe what I am about to do.

Pepino, the last Joaquin knows a place for you, at the bottom of a canyon not far from here, choked with mesquite and saguaro and bleached bones. His restless head bobs in pickled water. Ogro, what would the coward bandit, Noratto Sepulveda, do for you? Would he lead you out of the Tujunga or would he pat your shaggy forelock once, and turn tail? We'd ask, but he drowned in the river Pecos once upon a time. Salto, you and I know, we don't even have to ask, we don't even have to talk—let's not talk about what Narciso might do.

Santos, are you still praying? What do you pray for? I can hear hemp on wood groaning. I see the cottonwood still sheds cotton drops for you. Why did I have to leave my home for others to spoil? Why did grandfather die not a ranchero, but an old man in a dank adobe? I didn't even know the Constable, I barely noticed him at the fandango. I was stuck in one place all night, not moving, watching a girl like that blonde, Isabelle. I ran and hid because everyone else did. I am sorry, friend.

Bonifacio—what a liar! There is no justice in this world; there is no reckoning. What is his line? 'I love thee with the breath, smiles, tears, of all my life! And, if God choose, I shall but love thee better after death?' Is this a lie, too? I hope not. He is just playing his part. I wish there were a reckoning. How would Bonifacio and Narciso play out their final minutes?

This world has no need of stubborn mules, Pepino. Nothing but quarter horses here, fast and uneasy.

I rise and lay an arm around Pepino's neck. I lead him away from the other mules to the glade's bottom. My pistol is in my hand. I am running from death, not from the task at hand, and this thought makes me laugh, like Narciso did when he killed Pio, because I feel closer to death now than ever before.

These thoughts are grand; better I shoot the mules than Narciso.

I raise my pistol and fire a single shot into Pepino's head, just above and to the left of his right eye. Immediately, gun shots sound from all over the glade and camp, as though waiting for my signal. They have come for me! I am a killer! It must be Telford, on the trail of the stolen Overland mules. I can hear men screaming. I drop to my knees beside Pepino. His right eye blinks; his legs move but he cannot get up. His face and neck

are slick with blood. I remove my shirt and press it to the wound. With my free hand I stroke his right foreleg.

What have I done? The glade is exploding with gun fire. My shirt is completely soaked in Pepino's blood. With my bare and bloodied hands I try to cover the wound. Fewer gun shots call out now. It is difficult to steady my arms. Tears blur my vision. I can smell gun smoke. From behind me I hear a rifle cocked.

"Put your hands up, we've got the gang," a voice says.

I raise my arms.

The man with the rifle picks up my pistol where I dropped it, and removes my knife from my side. He looks down at Pepino, and then at me. Without a word he fires a shot and finishes what I started.

Back at camp I see that Sheriff Telford and his deputies have captured Bonifacio, Narciso, and two others. I suppose the rest of the men are dead, among them Chorín, but I don't see their bodies, only the bodies of three lawmen.

"Get over there with the rest," the man with the rifle says, and I am shoved in the back.

I am one of them now; I am Gilberto "Lieutenant" Cordova.

Our hands are tied and we are mounted upon five of the remaining ten mules—another must have been shot or slipped away during the gunfight. A long rope is tied round my neck, and the slack goes round Narciso's, then Bonifacio's, and then the necks of the other two. We are about to leave the Big Tujunga when Telford speaks: "Hold up just a minute." He dismounts and walks over to Bonifacio seated atop Ogro. Telford reaches his hand into Bonifacio's waistcoat pocket and pulls out a gold watch.

“Okay, boys,” he says, stuffing the watch into his own pocket, “let’s bring them in.”

Telford didn’t get all of the men; Frito escaped. Narciso says he’s GTT—saw him bouncing away to the south on the mule Salto. Maybe he’ll run into Bojorques, and the two can swap recipes.

Bonifacio, Narciso, and I are in the Santa Clara County courthouse for our hearing, on charges ranging from murder to thievery to evading the law. Narciso and I are seated on a bench in shackles; the court has made concessions for Bonifacio, who is acting as our defense—only his feet are shackled. He has use of his arms, and he uses them in wide arcs as he stands before the judge and jury, telling stories.

Narciso leans over, grinning, and says, “It’s all just a formality, Gil. They’re going to hang us. Sycamore blossoms in fall.”

I nod. This is a bandit’s fate, and I, like Narciso, am a bandit. We have given ourselves to the life, lock, stock, and barrel. Bonifacio, on the other hand, he is playing a role and nothing more. He is more like I was than I guessed—torn by two masters. The people of California will tell his story for years to come, but he will not hear it even once.

Bonifacio takes miniature, shackled steps across the courtroom floor to stand before the judge.

“If it pleases the court, may the defense wear glasses?”

“Do you need them to read?”

“Not to read, your honor, but to affect the proper mien.”

“Fine.” The judge rests his head in the palm of his right hand. Maybe this is how it works, one small concession at a time, until we wear them down.

Bonifacio scuffles back across the courtroom floor to Sheriff Telford, who opens the mother of pearl case, and places the spectacles around Bonifacio’s ears.

“Your honor and gentlemen of the jury. The defamatory and vilifying remarks you have heard in this courtroom today cause God’s very angels to weep, and I for one, a God-fearing brother of Christ, will stand for it no longer. Have you all heard the story of Epifanio María Astorga Gracido, the so-called pig-thief of San Jose?”

“Your honor,” the prosecutor says, “we have been seated in this courtroom for going on three hours, mostly listening to his pointless tales. He is a dead man stretching his final minutes to hours, to days if we let him. I object to this story.”

“Does the story have a point?” the judge asks.

“All stories have a point, your honor,” Bonifacio says.

“Yes, but will it ever reach, *the point*?” the prosecutor asks.

“Who can say? The story is the master, not the teller. I am not prepared for how the story and its point will manifest themselves each time I tell it, perhaps—”

“In that case, dispense with the story of Epifanio María Astorga Gracido, the so-called pig-thief of San José, and get on with your defense,” the judge says.

Bonifacio is speechless. He rocks back on his heels and says, “Alright then,” clapping his hands together. The Cerro Gordo speech was just a warm-up for this moment. He makes use of the space, the desks; he is on his knees, he is standing tall, his arms are outstretched. This will be the performance he is remembered for. Bonifacio empties his mind, heart, and soul of everything: ranchos, squatters, and greedy foreigners;

unreliable witnesses, jurors with personal grudges, and biased lawmen, who are in fact, foreigners themselves; Aaron Burr, Ulysses and Penelope, and the forbidden fruit; the Tower of Babel, and the Lord did not smite Cain dead, He merely set a mark upon his forehead; the gates of heaven, sycamore groves, and the Big Tujunga; Whittier, Emerson, how do I love thee, let me count the ways; black clouds of prejudice; golden chalice's to be filled with blood, crushed silver pitchers, and the bitter cup.

It is all just a formality.

The jury deliberates. The verdict is passed. Our lawless ways, our pillaging and our murders are denounced. Our names, the judge goes on, are synonymous with all that is wicked and infamous. We are scheduled to hang. Guards escort us to our cells.

We have the right to a priest, and so a priest named Prado visits with us. Prado is meek and lowly of heart. Our atrocities truly pain him, but so too does our scheduled hanging. He weeps when we sit with him in confession. Bonifacio confesses all, and asks Prado to admonish the parents of children everywhere to raise their babies aloof, as much as nature will allow, from the degrading, deplorable companionship of all things immoral and vicious. To Narciso, confession is a game; he makes up false sins to see how quickly he can get Prado to shield his eyes and say, "My brother, God loves you." This is what I tell Prado: I haven't been a good son; I have hatred in my heart for the outsiders who robbed California; I am a murderer. It feels good to confess.

"What do you think of my confession?" Bonifacio says.

"It was very fine, Bonifacio," I say.

"Yes, people will be talking about it, I think," he says.

"It will be a fine addition to your story when you are gone," I say.

Bonifacio looks at me with furrowed brow. “When I am gone?”

I watch Narciso carve a poem into the cell wall, and I get the idea to write mother. Prado transcribes what I dictate: “Mother, I’m sorry. I ran to the hills because I didn’t want to die, but now I am sentenced to hang. I am a murderer and that is the fate of all murderers. If there is a place for killers after this life, then I go there. If not, I will press for the companionship of grandfather, wherever he is, and if God wills it, there you can find me. I have confessed my wickedness to a priest named Prado, and he tells me that I am good. He teaches me to pray as you do. All the kneeling has bruised my knees. Adios.”

Narciso’s poem goes like this: “Kickin’ sheep is my itch, no one kills Germans faster; I’ll do it again, because I’m a son of a bitch, so hang me now, you bastard.”

Sheriff Telford reads our death warrants outside, behind the courthouse. The gallows are a short march away. He finishes reading from the prepared warrants and begins to speak from his heart.

“Today marks the end of three lives. It also marks the beginning of the end of lawless living in California. To the outlaws who have come today to see their own die, I say to you, get used to this sight. Get used to seeing your associates twist at the end of a rope, because I am sweeping your kind out of the hills, the valleys, and the woods of this state. You will feel the rope against your own skin even before I come to pluck you out of your hideouts and your waste places. This will be a new world, with a new way of living.”

As a Californio I lived in a rancho; as a bandit I lived in the Big Tujunga. Now I live a condemned man, about to see the beginning of a new world. All this in twenty-seven years, and without traveling even one-hundred miles from home.

Telford leads our procession to the gallows. The sky is blue without any clouds. I can see the men on the gallows working with ropes, tying hangman's nooses. They form a large bight for the head and a smaller eye four hands up for securing the knot. They wrap the loose end around the bight, creating tight coils—eight of them—that nearly hide the eye. What remains of the loose end slips through the eye, the bight is pulled tight, and the knot is ready.

It is a beautiful knot. My grandfather taught me to tie it when I told him of my plans to snare game along the river that ran through his rancho.

“What do you plan to snare, Gil?”

“A deer.”

“Oh? And how will you drag it home?”

“I'll drag it with the hangman's noose.”

“That knot isn't for dragging. Let me teach you the timber hitch.”

As a last request, Bonifacio asks if he may go first, and says something about his audience. He addresses the gathered crowd, but is cut short right after, “Procopio, Quarte, Escalante, and the famous travails of the One-Name Gang.” His lengthy defense is still too fresh in everyone's minds. The men position him beneath the crossbeam. He has a face for arithmetic, and his eyes scan the crowd, the horizon. He is pinioned and hooded. The hood rises and falls with his breath. The executioner pulls a lever and Bonifacio falls

through the trapdoor with less grace than I thought he might. Hemp strains against wood. I believe his last word was, "Wait."

"Pass the end of your rope, Gil, round the hind leg of your deer, then round the standing end of the rope. Wrap the end round itself three times and tighten the knot so that the three turns are gripped against the deer's leg.

"This knot is a good one, it will hold. But the deer on my rancho are large and healthy; will you drag it all the way home?"

"I have all day, grandfather."

"Show me, then, that you can tie the knot for dragging your deer."

"I wrap the end round the deer's hind leg and then round the standing end of my rope. Then I wrap the end round itself three times and tighten the rope against the deer's leg."

"That is right. You are good with a rope, Gil. You will make a fine rancher."

Narciso is positioned beneath the crossbeam. For a last request he asks to hold his knife in his hands. They won't allow it, but they give him a piece of its hilt.

"So hang me now, you bastard," Narciso says, gripping his broken knife, just before dropping through the trap door.

I am led to the spot. Because I cannot hang from a cottonwood, I ask to hang without a hood, like Santos. My hands and ankles are wrapped tight with leather straps. The noose is set around my neck. Its touch is careless and rough; now I know this is real, and that I will hang. The prayer Prado taught me for this moment is on my lips.

They will read my sentence. The executioner will pull a lever and the floor beneath my feet will disappear. I will slip through that hole, and the world of stagecoach

holdups, robbery, and murder will follow. My fall will end with a jerk, so terrible my spirit will bounce free of its body, high into the clear sky. And when I look back down at my tiny dangling corpse, I will hardly recognize it, for it will appear so hardened, grotesque, and dim.

I will soar above it all, until I can no longer see my body or the gallows or even Alameda County. Nothing but grandfather's voice will reach me.

"We will have an asado when you return, Gil."

"You will clean the deer?"

"You must do that before you drag it back, Gil."

"Perhaps I will let it go, then."

"Let it go then; we will eat when you return."

"I will pick tunas and nopales on my way back."

"You will bring back nopales and tunas?"

Nothing makes me happier.

QUETZALCÓATL'S LOVE SONG

The day, as in, “Today's the day,” began with this: Weepy Ramos on the floor of my cubicle at Starwood Reservations, shedding tears into his flossy beard for Lourdes. Me, I rocked forward and back in my new spine-friendly desk chair, listening only a little to his latest lament, fantasizing a lot about Sam, the new interpreter for the deaf in HR. I stood bare-chested on a rock in my fantasy, twenty slain ninja lords and one truly impressed interpreter at my feet, who was deaf—an impossibility for an interpreter, I knew—but it was sexier that way. I couldn't get to the part where she signed our passion words though, because Ramos started tugging at the crease in my Haggars.

“Watch the Haggars, Ramos,” I said.

“Oh,” he patted my left calf, “oh, Joshua, it's Lourdes.”

It was not uncommon for Weepy Ramos to get emotional around the call center, usually over Lourdes, his wayward wife, but sometimes over positive things, too, like a compliment or a patriotic office email making the rounds.

He wanted to know what I thought of his most recent sorrow. I'd heard a little, that Lourdes was at that moment blasting west through the salt flats in her LeMans with Gene, the airbrush instructor. I knew Lourdes from previous tales, and from a chance encounter at the Wonderbread warehouse downtown, where I saw her slide flattened packs of Twinkies down the back pockets of her jeans, winking at me on her way out the door past security, as if to say, “These could be our Twinkies.” I looked down at Ramos

and thought what I always thought in his moments of grief and despair: You poor man, what dark spell locks you to that troll? Love?

“Counsel me, Joshua.”

“She's a Twinkie thief. Did you know that?”

“Ah, the Twinkies! Those were happy times!”

Ramos balled his thick fists under his chin and beamed with the recollection of Lourdes' pocket Twinkies. I stopped rocking in my chair and marveled at him. He took up a third of my cubicle's floor space like a bum hogs a park bench. His full, white beard mingled with the alpaca sweaters he always wore, giving him a snowy, abominable appearance. Fifty-two years old, a thrice-failed business owner working with a bunch of teens and twenty-somethings, and smelling of cedar, Weepy Ramos sat against my cubicle wall, causing it to heave each time he sobbed. I thought my cork board might fall on his head, and with it all my “personal touch” items from home, including a scale Gollum cutout wearing a broken headset with a caption bubble that read, “Thank you for planning your vacation with Starwood, *hack! Gollum! Gollum!*” Pinned next to Gollum was a memo reminding me of the sexual harassment seminar planned for that day.

“Why do you do it, Ramos, why do you put up with her?”

“Have you ever loved, Joshua, truly loved?”

“No, I don't think so.”

“Well then, I can't explain it.” But in a second he was on his feet—how spry he was! The tension in the bowed cubicle wall must have sprung his bulk forward. “It's like—” he began.

“I thought you couldn't explain the mysteries of true love to the inexperienced.”

“—It’s like living inside of a ring—a wedding ring!—and every choice you make points you back to her.”

“That sounds terrible, Ramos.”

“Perhaps it is a bad analogy.” He had me by the shoulders and was staring up into the blinking fluorescent lights. “What I mean is, she is my one true love, Joshua. When I feel I can’t go on, love says I must go on.”

I grunted and turned my chair to face the building’s front doors. This kind of talk annoyed me. How could he be so stupid? I may have only been a direction-less twenty-six year old, with no history of girlfriends, but I knew that what Ramos had, or thought he had, was not love. It couldn’t be. And yet, I found his blind devotion endearing, inspiring even. He had something—happiness, optimism, naïveté—that no failure could overcome, and I wanted it, too.

At any rate, he was a refreshing change from my father, whose perspectives on love and relationships rivaled those found on the bathroom stalls of my high school. He never encouraged me to date; on the contrary, I was a target for him whenever Stover, my little brother, and his football friends were over. Our basement was like a frat house and a gym rolled into one, and if my little brother’s buddies were the frat boys, then my father was the perennial senior never to graduate, eager to initiate the newbs and dispense carnal wisdom upon anyone he deemed cool enough, or, “aces.”

At home it was always, “Kissed any girls yet? No? Any boys?” and, “Heads up, Joshua, I didn’t put the toilet seat down in the bathroom—I know how much you hate that.” High-fives all around. Then they’d all hit the two bench presses we had down there

or group-wrestle. I'd sit in my room practicing comebacks, and if they were throwing each other into the walls, picking up Legos and collected rocks that fell from my shelves.

By default, and by his own persistence, Ramos became something of a confidant. I suspect most of what he told me was pure bull, but it was good to talk with somebody.

Long before "The Day," I confided in Ramos my searing crush for the interpreter. Once I did, he began to scheme and leave little notes all over my cubicle, "to awaken in me the desire for love," as he used to say. Most of them were actually quotes he falsely attributed to old Aztec love gods. "And in the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make," was not Quetzalcóatl. Ramos was relentless, if not accurate, and I gave in. February 14th became The Day I would ask out Sam the interpreter.

The 14th came, and my attempt at "aces" with Sam bombed. I stumbled over my words, blushed like a clown, and gave Sam the impression I wanted a date with Holly. Sam obliged with a pretty little flourish of sign language, and, how about that, I had a date. My very first Valentine's Day date was with deaf Holly from HR. On my short list of dates I would have to say it ranks in the top third. It passed like my dates usually did, in total silence. We wrote at first with Post-it notes from the office, but we both knew we couldn't keep that up all night, so we enjoyed one another's presence, and the charming ambiance of Olive Garden, until I dropped her off early with a hug and no words.

February 21st became the new, "The Day."

Ramos sat on my desk, a little exhausted from the latest variation on his "Love Says I Must Go On" speech. Break had just ended; callers and other Starwood employees were coming back into the building. Ramos shifted his weight, and we watched the ten-thirty procession. There was Michael, who always wore a suit and said "Booyah!" after

completing a reservation; there was Philip, who kept cacti in his cubicle; the college guys—no one liked them; there was Tiny Sally, a secretary who I sometimes thought about, but not today.

Then Sam opened the door and entered the building. She wore her brown hair in a curly bob and didn't pause once on her way to the elevator bank. Her corporate dress—a navy blue pantsuit—revealed a slight preference to function over form, but what really caught my eye was the donut in her hand. Beauty, honesty, confidence, an appetite—she had it all.

Ramos nudged my shoulder and whispered, “Today's the day.”

“How about next week?” I said.

“Impossible! Do you love her?” He was on his feet again, bent slightly at the waist, hands on his knees.

“Love? Um, no? I think she's hot?”

“Do you want me to set the table for you?”

“No,” I was out of my chair. “No, I don't need that. I'll do it. I'll ask her out, right after sexual harassment training.”

“Good. And this time, do it when Holly's gone.”

As the conference room filled with Starwood employees, technicians from the sexual harassment people arrived and began to set up speaker towers at the back of the room. Our instructor for the day got after them when they didn't tilt the speakers in just the right direction. “Acoustics,” I heard him say, which seemed like nonsense to me; the room was not very large. The instructor was a short man, I guessed five-three, but he

wore a four-button suit and a headset microphone—like the one I wore at my desk—which I think he thought made up for the shortness. “Four buttons,” said Ramos, “this should be good.” The instructor began.

“True story: I was a sexual harasser. Yes. I liked to make suggestive comments to my female coworkers. I was fired. But the good people at Office Management and Consulting Services believe in rehabilitation, and I stand before you, Starwood Reservations Corporation, a changed man and employee.”

Light, scattered applause. The speaker towers could have been a speaker or two shorter. Then again, neither the message nor the messenger was subtle, and so, perhaps over-the-top acoustics was part of Office Management and Consulting Services' strategy. The instructor, he called himself Troy, paced so much I thought he might have been accustomed to larger spaces.

“A joke: As part of a remodeling project, two nuns in Italy are told by Mother Superior to paint the convent, and to make sure not a drop of paint touches their habits. The nuns decide to paint in the nude. Minutes pass and someone knocks on the door. ‘Who’s a-there?’ asks one of the nuns. ‘It’s a-da blind man,’ the knocker says. No harm in letting a blind man in, the nuns agree, so they open the door. ‘Mama mia, meats-a-balls!’ the blind man says, dropping his blinds and slapping his face. Question: Was telling that joke sexual harassment? Answer: Yes it was, but I did it solely for the sake of emphasis. It was also offensive to the religious and non-religious, and to people of Italian heritage.”

I turned my attention to Sam.

She sat up front facing the audience. Holly from HR sat in front of her in the first row. With enthusiasm Sam mouthed every word Troy spoke. When Troy finished, and the feedback from the speakers died out, I heard the faint pop of moving lips when no words are spoken. Before Troy started again, she smiled graciously at Holly.

Her hands. They moved like a child's on Christmas: exploring, unwrapping, crumpling, tinkering, tasting. Her fingers spelled out Troy's big words, and her arms expressed his smaller words with wide arcs and waves.

The whole thing reminded me of my mother, and how she used to read to me from "The Great Peanut Butter and Jelly Sandwich." With arms for knives she would scoop gobs of jelly from conjured pots on the floor to slather all over the bread baking in my clothes hamper. And when the wasps came to eat our sticky-sweet mess she would pinch me all over with soft, darting hands, saying, "buzz, buzz."

I got a little choked up. For a long time it had been just me, my dad, and Stover. I couldn't believe I was tearing up. At a sexual harassment seminar. On Weepy Ramos' turf, no less. Ramos couldn't believe it either. Even behind me he sensed my tears.

"What's wrong, Joshua?" Ramos said, with his head perched on my left shoulder.

"Nothing."

"But you're on the verge of tears." He got choked up.

"How do you know?"

"Oh, just let it out." He pulled me and the back of my chair into an itchy embrace with his alpaca-ness. There we were, right-center of Troy, fourth and fifth row, embracing. I was no longer choked up; Ramos was at full-bore. Crying, he declared, "The quest for love begins!"

Troy paused mid-sentence. He had been groping a dummy in a skirt—for emphasis only—so that we might learn to discern the touchable from the untouchable, and to understand that even the touchable could, in fact, become untouchable given the nature of the touch, and the intent of the toucher. He removed the dummy's arms from around his neck and seated her in a chair on stage, taking care to fold one of her legs over the other. He said something indiscernible to the dummy, and then he turned on me and Ramos.

“Question: What is so hilarious about this segment that you two are in tears?” Before either of us could answer he said, “Answer: Nothing.” Then, “Fact: Though not considered a form of sexual harassment, some find interruption to be just as offensive.”

Ramos released me. He said, “Noted, Troy. We will shed no more tears for the duration of your sexual harassment presentation.” Which turned out to be very easy. Troy wrapped it up in ten minutes, with a handy little sexual harassment prevention acronym he called, T.H.I.G.H.

Ramos and I remained seated while the room emptied.

“A hug? ‘Quest for love?’ Don’t you know where we are right now?” I said to Ramos.

“I respond to what I feel inside, not to my surroundings. I’d do it again, Joshua.”

“What an emotional rock you are, Ramos.”

“You could use a hug like that everyday—heaven knows you don’t get it at home.”

“From now on, restrain yourself until we get to the parking lot, OK?”

“Tell it to Sam; after your date she won’t be able to keep those talented hands to herself.”

Holly and Sam were signing over by a fake plant near the door. She was so pretty and tall. Holly left to use the bathroom.

“There! She’s gone! Make your move!” Ramos said.

I didn’t budge.

“Remember the plan. I’ll be right here,” Ramos said, and bumped me out of my seat onto the floor.

Sam noticed that, and we kind of made eye contact as I was getting to my feet. That’s it, I thought, I’m sunk, but she continued to look my way, so I walked over to her. I was thinking, *All you need is love, duh, duh, da, da, duh*. Before I knew it, there we were, silent. Then, as planned, I went into the routine that I had practiced in front of my closet mirror for hours. I began to sign. I pointed to my eye. Then I spelled out my first name with my right hand. It was Ramos’ idea; he thought it would be cute. Each letter looked like the got-your-nose-trick. I pointed to my eye again. Before I could get to the meat of my message she cut me short.

“I’m not deaf. This kind of crap happens all the time, but I’m not deaf. It would be impossible, you know, to interpret?” Sam said.

Hers was not the voice of the angel I had anticipated, but something closer to my father’s; it was the way she said the word *crap*—she owned it. I couldn’t remember where I was at in my signing. I looked to Ramos. He made the hand signs he too had been practicing just for that moment, but it was no use; I could make neither heads nor tails of the panicked butterflies and collapsible telescopes he drew in the air.

“Anything else, J-O-S-H-U-A?” Sam said.

At least she knows my name, I thought. The door to the ladies restroom was opening; Holly was returning. The image of Lourdes wagging her Twinkie-padded rear came into my mind—why, I don’t know; but it turned me into a fighter, and I blurted out, loud enough for those still in the room to hear, “How 'bout a date?”

Sam snorted and motioned for me to turn around. There was Troy, the rehabilitated sexual-harasser, standing with his hands on his hips—untouchable if they weren’t his own—shaking his head. I was an obvious hard case. Ramos was signing wild corkscrews from the back of the room. I wanted to run, and then Sam spoke: “That was gutsy.”

“What?” I said.

“I said, that was gutsy, asking me out after the no touching seminar.” I must have still looked confused so she gave me the sign for “gutsy.” She seemed pleased, that I had guts; I felt good about it too, and continued to smile like an idiot.

“Why not, right? Meet me at 7:30 in the Denny's parking lot on 13th, by the on-ramp. I'm taking the Fun Bus to Wendover, you can be my date.”

No way, I thought, *me*, be *your* date? I nodded, unsure about what had just happened. Holly had that blank look on her face from Valentine's when we gave up on the Post-its. I waved to her and returned to my seat next to Ramos.

“I've got a date on the Fun Bus to Wendover.”

“Wendover? Well, that's where Lourdes is!”

Passage on the Fun Bus was fifteen dollars, which included a seat on the bus, refreshments during the ninety-minute ride, a Wendover VIP coupon book, and a voucher for one free buffet at The Rainbow.

Sam sat in a window seat at the very back, and I sat next to her, looking out the window at the passing reflective mile markers, stealing an occasional glance at her toned, middle-arm-rest-hogging arm. Ramos sat four rows in front of us, next to one of the Denny's waitresses.

Five minutes into our journey and the fun commenced. Neil, the steward in the cowboy hat, sent a package of Double-Stuff Oreos down each side of the bus, and rolled an office chair with a cooler full of Shasta down the aisle. After he passed out the Bingo cards he retired to the lavatory. Sam grabbed a stack of Oreos when they came around. I sipped black cherry.

“We’ll hit the tables, then the buffet, then the slots, then a show,” Sam said. She licked an Oreo clean of all its stuff and flipped the bare chocolate disks out the window at a passing car.

I recalled the Looney Tunes where Bugs Bunny wins all of Yosemite Sam’s gold at ‘the tables’, and I said, “Twenty-One?”

“Yeah, but you say ‘blackjack’ or ‘the tables’.”

“I’m not much of a gambler.”

“I know. Warm yourself up to it with that Bingo card—dollar buy-in.”

Okay, Bingo, I thought, I can do this. I had some experience with the game from grade school. I used to win all kinds of prizes. I took a dollar from my wallet and

knocked on the lavatory door next to my seat, as I had seen others do. The door opened a crack and Neil's hand appeared. He collected my dollar and shut the door.

Sam preferred focused Bingo-talk to idle get-to-know-you chit-chat, so we didn't say much to each other during the eight rounds of Bingo we played, except to comment on the caller, who was a pig and a cheat, and to comment on the Bingo winners, who were all nasty, fatherless, and crooked.

The waitress next to Ramos won round-eight—nine-pack Bingo—and Sam tossed her card into the aisle, swearing to never eat at Denny's again. She hugged her legs up to her chest, and spit fingernail half-moons over the seats in front of us onto the laps, I guess, of the two old folks who had fallen asleep as soon as the bus took off. I retrieved her card.

"You weren't kidding about not gambling much," Sam said, leaning against the window, facing me. "Your bad luck continues and I'm leaving you and the Rainbow for the Peppermill."

The possibility of abandonment occurred to me after round six—four corners Bingo. I knew then, once the woman in the purple *Kansas!* sweatshirt had called Bingo that my window for making it with Sam was closing. Now it was all but confirmed. I began to prepare myself for an evening of Lourdes-watching in Wendover with Weepy Ramos.

"Maybe we could play one more round?" I said.

"No, save it for the Rainbow."

I returned her Bingo card. She looked me in the eyes and said, "Thanks," and then, "You don't gamble, you dress like you're at work, what do you do on dates?"

I remembered my date with deaf Holly. “Dinner,” I said.

“Dinner?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s it? You feed your women and that’s it?”

“The movies also, I take them to movies.”

I faked interest in the dispute taking place across the aisle between two Neil look-a-likes over who got the last Shasta. I knew what was next.

“Are you a virgin?” Sam said.

“A virgin?” I said, and tipped back the black cherry even though it was empty and had been since round five—Blood, Sweat, and Tears Bingo. “A virgin?”

“You are!” Sam said. “Oh my gosh, you’re a virgin! Ever even kissed a girl?”

What next, I thought, ‘How much you bench?’ There was no bedroom to run to, no tub of Legos to calm my virgin nerves, no collected amethyst or obsidian to heft in my virgin hands.

“Wow,” she said, propping her elbows on the middle armrest, “Never been kissed. How come?”

“I don’t know, it’s not something you decide.”

“Yes, it is. I decided I wanted to lose my virgin lips back in high school, and like that, I lost them.”

“Well, for a guy maybe it’s not so easy.”

“It could be.”

The slumbering old man in front of me wore a fisherman’s bucket hat. A number of odd lures were stuck to it. One looked like armpit hair bursting around a triple-pronged

hook. Sam's comment stiffened my back and froze my eyes to that hairy lure.

"I could kiss you right now and steal those virgin lips."

"Ha!" I said. Maybe it was armpit hair! His very own armpit hair patented lure! A voice in my head urged me to pop into the lavatory. For what, I asked the voice. *To practice your technique, stupid!* Practice? On Neil? *On the mirror, stupid!* Does that work? *It must! You've caught Stover doing it a thousand times!* I moved to get up and the lavatory door seemed to open for me, because it was opening; Neil was exiting.

"Did you skin a grizzly in there?" Sam said, holding her nose, "Dang, at least use the Febreze."

Over the loudspeaker our captain said that we had arrived, and that we were to return to the Fun Bus by two AM or else spend the night in Wendover.

"Come on, stud, let's get to the tables," Sam said.

She grabbed my hand.

Her hand felt a little dirty, from the Oreos, probably, and a little callused, maybe from all the signing. Whatever it was I didn't care; my window was wide open. It was just like one of those fables my mom used to read me, the one about the curious fox that comes upon a turtle. All I needed was to keep being my turtle-self and the fox wouldn't lose interest.

Holding hands, we walked to the Rainbow.

From "the strip," the Rainbow and Peppermill looked like bright Flying J's. The Rainbow's interior was no less romantic: dull, red carpet, unattractive people, noise. Like the Fun Bus through the desert, we made no digressions on our straight course to the

tables. Sam was deliberate in choosing one, because the dealer had to be a dude, he had to be pathetic—I offered no argument there—and the players at the table had to be up. We sat at table three. The dealer, who looked a little like me, smiled at Sam and dealt cards.

Sam didn't teach me to play the tables; she just played them for me. She said, "Double down" and "hit me"; she tossed chips onto the drink girl's tray each time she passed by. Thirty minutes and I was down a day's pay. I gave up my seat and waited behind Sam until she finished and said, "I'm up one-twenty-five, looks like your luck is changing. Let's buffet."

At least I didn't lose any money at the buffet. In line Sam told me, "Rare beef and crab cakes is the name of the game at the Rainbow." The man cutting the prime rib piled pink, marbled slices on Sam's plate until she said, "That'll just about do me," careful to balance the pooling meat juices on her plate. On a second plate she piled crab cakes. I opted for a sampling of some of the lighter fare.

At our booth Sam settled into a steady rhythm. Images of Stover and his buddies, two-fisting ham sandwiches and eating cereal from mixing bowls, came to me. I decided my family would like Sam; what an exciting and disheartening thought. Sam looked up from her plate to breathe. She closed her eyes and the light above us winked off of her drenched and glistening lips, and I imagined them locked to mine.

The second time through the buffet was soft-serve chocolate ice cream on top of a scone for Sam, and a slice of apple pie for me.

"Oh, sweet mercy, I'm going to start leaking at the seams," Sam said, lying flat on her back in our booth.

Leaning forward, over the dirty plates and half-eaten food, I could see the rise of her amazing, resting belly. I glanced around the buffet room.

“That was a fun ride, on the Fun Bus,” I said.

“What?” came Sam’s voice from beneath the table.

“The Fun Bus. I thought it was, after the Bingo, mostly fun.”

“After the Bingo,” Sam said, not stirring. “And what was so fun about that, Joshua?”

“The desert,” I said, pushing strewn crab around the table with my fork, “and just, talking.”

A busboy, a *busman*, really, was clearing the booth behind us. He stacked dishes into a gray tub and wiped food off the table with a cloth. I heard him say to the empty booth, to the table-stain he worked with his cloth, “. . . red meat will burn you out, will burn you raw.”

Sam groaned. She propped herself up on her elbows, and said, “What about the talking did you like, Joshua?”

“Oh, it was all nice.”

“Especially the Bingo strategy, right? That gets you going, right?”

“Gets me going for what?”

“Or was it the make-out talk you especially liked?”

We were flirting.

“Joshua, what would happen if I kissed you right now, here, in the Rainbow?”

I guessed at lots of things: hand-holding; chick flicks; candles; more kissing; walks; the upper hand back home, with Stover, the idiots, and my father; Lego-hearts;

Barry White; tuxedos and prom dresses; even more kissing; marriage; maybe love, the kind Weepy Ramos talked about. I didn't say anything. I was a turtle.

"Come here," Sam said, sitting up and sliding to the back of the booth.

Here's what I didn't guess at: the pins and needles attack on my legs as I got up, and the incredible struggle to keep from wetting myself. The possibility of wetting my pants, in front of Sam, was very real; I had lost all control; there was nothing I could do. I tried anyway. I bent my upper body forward, and pitched my rear backward. One knee knocked the other as I managed the short distance from one side of the booth to the other. My hands dug deep into my pockets.

"What's the matter with you?" Sam said.

"Too much to eat, I think." I sat down.

"Tell me about it. I'm set to give birth here—ready?"

I blinked. She said, "You're going to love this."

Grabbing my jaw, she tilted my head to the right and wrapped her mouth around mine. First was the tinny scent of canned tuna. Second was the tongue that slipped past my pinched lips and pried open my teeth. Sam was full of vigor and know-how; I tried to stay out of her way. It was like a visit to the dentist, such was the angle of my tilted head, the tightening of my stretched jaw muscles, the grip of my hands on the burgundy, pleather booth cushion. But what a fantastic feeling, having someone else's tongue in my mouth! Thoroughly slopped, she released me. I had lost my virgin lips, but I felt in possession of something greater. Happiness? Perhaps. Optimism? Maybe. Naïveté? Who knows. Of one thing I was certain: this was something I wanted to do all the time.

"That's the first time I ever kissed a VL," Sam said.

“It was good,” I said.

“Well, it was OK. You’ve got to do something, though—you can’t just sit there,” Sam said.

“Next time,” I said.

Sam laughed. “Sure,” she said, then, “No slots tonight, I’m too full. Let’s get to the show.”

She pulled me out of the booth, and I followed her, ready to go anywhere.

We each paid twenty dollars to see the only show at the Rainbow: “Gene Rungar: Rock ‘n’ Roll Airbrush.” The ticket man assured us the show would be spectacular, that Gene was a heavy among the I-80 corridor artists.

We sat in the back row of the Gold Room and the lights dimmed. A Dio song blasted through the speakers. A few puffs of vapor curled out of a fog machine, and a pony-tailed man in a sleeveless t-shirt, torn jeans, and backwards cap sprang onto the stage. He bounded and head banged to “Rainbow in the Dark.” A sleeveless female assistant followed his every step, pushing a cart for Gene’s paints and air compressor, which was attached by tube to the airbrush Gene wore in a holster on his hip. I heard heavy breathing over the song and wondered if it was a live version, and then I saw that Gene was wearing a headset microphone.

“Hello, Wendover! Are you ready to,” Gene panted, “ROCK?”

Even if we were ready to rock, we were only so many as to fill a third of the Gold Room—no way we could have matched Gene’s enthusiasm. But most of us, turns out, weren’t ready to rock, and our silence was squashed by another heavy metal tune.

In no time I figured out Gene's niche: rock out to heavy metal, throw paint on a large canvas, airbrush a few details, really get into the rocking out, spin the canvas around and reveal a hidden image. Most of the hidden images that night were bikini-ed women with swords and Camaros on the beach; they hung on the far wall of the room, waiting for bidders. When "Love Gun" came on Gene started a new canvas, and even before he spun it around I could make out the curve of the bikini. This one was a female fire fighter sprawled across the American flag. One all-night big rigger stood and snapped a picture with his cell phone, then turned and exited the Gold Room.

"Gene's kind of a perv, but he's good," Sam said. I felt the same way, but didn't say anything; I could relate, in a way, to his brand of fantasy.

When he finished the "Love Gun" canvas Gene called out for a volunteer from the audience. Sam was one of a handful of girls in the audience, and by far the prettiest—of course Gene picked her. I didn't want her to go, to be on stage for the viewing pleasure of thirty or so truckers and broke gamblers. I especially didn't want her anywhere near Gene, with his pants all torn up. I wanted her to stay next to me in the dark, and I wanted her to kiss me again.

A man on the front row called out to Sam as she walked onto the stage.

"Sam! Sam! Where's Joshua?" It was Ramos.

"Hey, buddy, we warned you last show," Gene said as he took Sam's hand.

"Yes, Gene. Sorry, Gene," Ramos said. He turned and scanned the audience until he found me in the back. He sprinted up the aisle and filled Sam's vacated seat.

Without removing his eyes from the stage, Ramos whispered to me, “How’s the date going?”

Couldn’t he see that it wasn’t going well? That my date was romping on stage with a sweaty man in ready-to-burst tatters? That he was dabbing blue paint on the tip of her nose? That she was singing along to “Gypsy Road”, using Gene’s head mic that was *still on his head*?

“I totally kissed her!” I whispered back.

“Oh, Joshua!” He embraced me. I didn’t mind the alpaca. “This is wonderful news! And yet, here we are, at the mercy of Gene and his airbrush.”

“What do you mean, ‘we’?” I said.

“That’s Lourdes there, wheeling the cart.”

Sure enough, it was Lourdes. The rear end was unmistakable. She was leaning over the cart; a few lines of brown hair stuck to her face. She breathed heavy. She could see what I was seeing: Gene making time with my girl.

“What do we do?” I said to Ramos.

“We have to wait. Gene dislikes interruptions.”

“And then?”

“We run to them and tell them how much we love them.”

“Ok.”

On stage, Gene guided Sam’s painted fingers across the canvas. Giggles sounded over the music. I was sinking. So was Lourdes. She took action for both of us. She whipped a wet paintbrush into the back of Gene’s head, spraying his ponytail with yellow paint.

Yes, I thought, fight for your man! Lourdes tried to get at Gene, but Sam stood in her way. I felt proud to be dating a girl so brave and so confident, but I also felt annoyed, that she would protect Gene. Lourdes gave up on Gene and focused her anger on Sam. I stood, ready and unsure how to intervene. Gene tried to separate the two and all three went down in a slippery, multi-colored mess.

The tube connecting airbrush to air compressor pulled loose and the hissing tank propelled the cart, and Gene's paints, off the stage and into the first row of spectators. Truckers cheered and guitars soared. Lourdes screamed and tore Gene's current creation—a long haired, naked man-god, tastefully positioned in the clouds. "For the ladies," he had said. Ramos jumped from his seat and ran to follow Lourdes out of the Gold Room.

"Gypsy Road" ended. Gene took a bow. He motioned with his paint-dripping arm to the drying gallery to his right, encouraging the truckers to drop an entire paycheck on murals unfit to hang even in the backs of their rigs.

This was my cue to run to Sam and tell her I loved her. I walked, and when I got to the stage I didn't have to say anything.

"Joshua, this is Gene," Sam said. "Gene, Joshua was my date for the night."

"Pretty skinny. How much you bench, kid?" Gene said.

"Joshua, I'm going to stay here for the weekend and be Gene's new assistant," Sam said. Dots of bright paint colored her face and arms. I looked down at the spilled paints and compressor. "You're cute, Joshua, and I'm glad we went out and that I could help make you a man and all, but I'm just not interested in dating you."

I was a turtle without his shell. I'd been sucked from my shelter by a curious fox, then discarded for the uninteresting worm that I was.

"See the guy out front about buying one of the murals," Gene said as he and Sam walked arm in arm off stage.

The Gold Room was empty—no one but me was perusing Gene's gallery. Up close I noticed all kinds of mistakes in Gene's art—streaks, disproportioned bodies, smudges, signatures that dominated the canvas—but it was performance art; judging one half without the other wouldn't have been fair. Besides, most of it was appealing. It reminded me of the bulging, over-sexed superheroes featured in the comic books I grew up reading.

I climbed the ladder next to the six-foot blonde hacking her way through a patch of demons. The paint felt dry enough. I rolled her up and kept her tight with a few clothespins. There was another one, of a redhead maneuvering a Camaro in outer space, alongside comets, headed for a ringed planet. I took that one, too.

The ticket man said nothing as I walked past him. Ramos and Lourdes sat on a sofa in the lobby, holding one another. Their eyes were closed. The smile on Ramos' face stretched his white beard upward and out.

I boarded the Fun Bus with a few minutes to spare. Neil was at the back of the bus attending to his steward duties, shaking a bag of ice into the cooler. The lavatory door was open, and Neil kept one eye on me until I sat down.

"Get lucky?" he said.

"Yeah," I said. "You?"

"Won twenty-five bucks on the slots," he said.

He finished with the ice and flipped a Bingo card onto each seat. Stretching his arms side to side, he headed for the lavatory.

“Hey, Neil,” I said, “brought something back for you.” I handed him the demon slayer. He unrolled it and whistled a low, appreciative whistle.

“Hoo-wee, that’s fine. I was at that show. That was some good music,” Neil said. With the half-unrolled canvas held up to his face, he walked into the lavatory and shut the door. I heard a knock from inside followed by, “Thanks, kid.”

The Fun Bus left Wendover with half of the passengers it arrived with, no Oreos, and a full cooler. I occupied Sam’s seat, and spent the one and a half-hour ride staring out the window at the glowing salt flats. I saw messages in the salt people had written using rocks to form words—like on islands—but the Fun Bus pushed through the desert too fast to read any of them. I saw more than a few rock hearts. I unrolled my canvas. There she was, hurtling through space, racing comets, searching for someone, hoping she would find him on the ringed planet straight ahead. Maybe she’d spy his rock messages and know where to land. If she punched a hole through the blackness and carved a path through the stars with her Camaro, and if that path led her to this desert, I’d unroll Gene’s art and let it fly in the wind outside the bus, and in that way she would recognize me as the one she crossed galaxies for. I rolled up the canvas and secured it with the clothespins. I leaned back in my chair, and sipped Black Cherry. Tiny Sally, the secretary I sometimes thought about came to mind.

ALGER IN STIRRUPS

In the grass near first base dugout, Alger Hornback completed a set of focused but clumsy practice swings, by leveling his bat in the direction of his squatted academic rival at home plate. Closing one eye and holding his breath, Alger targeted his colleague down the length of his Louisville Slugger. “Pop,” he said, and lowered the bat.

Simon Oliver Lewiston was not looking, he was catching. Bruce, the Philosophy Department Chair, was at the plate, behind in the count. This was the twenty-first annual St. Mary's faculty baseball challenge.

Alger walked back into the dugout, and took his spot on the bench; he was due up after the on-deck batter. He watched Simon manage quick smiles between pitches, and even a sly wave—Alger was sure—toward the first base bleachers, where Dr. Wallace, Dean of Humanities, sat, in smart casual dress, eating from a bag of peanuts. Alger knew exactly where he was seated. It had not been hard, when Alger entered the game for the first time in the top of the seventh, to locate him among the few administrators in the near-empty bleachers, who like Dr. Wallace, Alger assumed, had come looking for answers. The search committee for a tenure track professor of British literature—headed by Dr. Wallace, a Shakespeare man himself—had a shortlist; Alger and Simon were on it; notification was forthcoming.

Any edge over the competition was a plus. Both candidates came from good schools, had years of teaching experience between them, and similar evaluations to

report. The score was close. Only in publications did Alger acknowledge Simon's possible lead: Alger had three mid-tier articles out; Simon only one, but it was in the granddaddy of them all, *JOBAAL Quarterly*. Alger had waited five years for this job. He had endured four-three teaching loads—mostly composition courses; a divorce and developing lower back pain. Then Simon waltzed in, with all of Alger's credentials, one year before the ancient Brit lit professor died.

To make matters worse for Alger, in the third base bleachers sat his ex-wife, Brinkley, and his seven-year-old son, Donovan. Divorced two years, Brinkley made it a habit to show up for all of Alger's possible defeats, and to drag Donovan along, too. Alger had it from a grad student that Brinkley had been seen last month flirting over tapas at Asiago's with, who of all else, Simon Oliver Lewiston. Simon even got on base in the third inning—on balls—and scored a run. *Yes, Alger thought miserably, everything is coming up Simon, but he'll get his soon.*

In the dugout, Alger's hands were busy, tightening and loosening and tightening the Velcro batting gloves he wore, but his eyes kept still, never moving from Simon. It was the bottom of the eighth inning, and Alger's team, Peninsulam Amoenam, was down five runs to the Crimson Smelt. Things were getting desperate.

The prevailing mood among the struggling Amoenams was one of light despondency. The seventh inning stretch had just passed, with it the traditional Challenger's Toast, and many in the dugout sipped Rieslings and Cabernet while commenting on the amount of ringers the Smelt must have hired that year. To Alger's right sat a man and a woman—a Medievalist and a Spanish linguist. He only recognized them, and their titles he overheard more than once in the early innings. This couple, as

Alger thought of them, had begun drinking well before the stretch, from a bottle of Gatorade mixed with liquor the man produced from his gym bag like a rabbit from a hat—a trick that pleased the linguist to no end. Affection between the two had been growing as the game wore on.

“Do you suppose he’ll buy us snow cones after the game?” the man said, motioning with his Gatorade toward the Philosophy Department Chair.

“He’s captain, he has to,” the woman said, and then, turning to face the man, “I’m a blue raspberry girl.” A glass in her right hand was full of red wine.

“I’m a tiger’s blood man, mama,” the man said, taking a sip of tainted Gatorade and licking his lips. The top buttons of his jersey were undone, and his cap was on inside-out.

“El tigre,” the woman said.

At the plate, the Philosophy Department Chair took a pitch for ball two and an even count. Simon missed on the catch and had to retrieve the ball at the backstop. Alger squeezed one fist inside the other, and then tightened his gloves. He noted how short Simon was; how the ball arced high and slow when he threw it back to the pitcher. He noted how the woman to his right always touched the man's arm or knee when she spoke and laughed.

Alger's dugout neighbors stopped talking and regarded each other between swallows. Without their chatter the harsh sound of tearing Velcro grew loud and obvious in the dugout. A few heads turned. The Medievalist uncrossed his legs and returned to a forward-sitting position on the bench. He watched Alger go through a complete cycle with the gloves.

“You see,” he said to the woman, waving a hand in her face. “Hornback understands we're down five runs—we've got to rally. RALLY. We're not crazy.”

“Yes, you are,” she said laughing, sliding to a low slouch on the bench.

“Still with the hat? Here, I tell you what,” he said removing his hat, “Hornback, take my rally hat, you crazy, and get this thing started. For Ms. Vanessa's sake. Amoenams!” The man slapped his hands on his knees and stomped his feet on the dugout's cement floor.

“Right,” Alger said, still moving his hands, not turning to face the man, thinking all the while: *Simon, Simon, Simon.*

Bruce fouled off the next pitch. Alger took his eyes off Simon to track the ball into the third base bleachers where faculty wives and children sat. There was Brinkley, dressed to the nines, holding Donovan back while a scramble of children raced for the ball under the bleachers. Alger regretted that his son had to grow up this way, with two separate, but equally unsuitable parents. He spent too much time “at the office,” and she, too much time coating Donovan with suntan lotion, hand sanitizer, pre-teen acne cream, and so on.

A boy, Bruce's son, returned to his mother holding his father's foul ball like it was fragile and alive. Bruce took an exaggerated bow at the plate, the infield laughed, and his wife, standing on the top row of the bleachers, blew him a kiss.

“Good effort, Bruce, but she's still standing,” yelled the Medievalist in the dugout. “He's married, you know. I was married. Ever been married, Hornback?”

“What?” the linguist said.

“Hornback, I'm talking to Hornback. He's going to win us the game,” the Medievalist said.

“As long as we don't go extra innings,” the linguist said, reaching over and placing her hand on his forearm. The Medievalist leaned down and tried to kiss her, as she lay on her back, sprawled-out on the bench. He could not reach her, so he tried pulling her towards him by the shoulders. They tumbled to the ground, and he gave her one long, misguided kiss on the mouth. Like statues, they held each other and their kiss. Alger stopped his hands, stopped watching Simon, and looked at them. A steady drip of spilled wine pooled beneath the bench. Alger was staring. Brinkley had been sweet with him, too: in his office, around the park, at home over undercooked pasta. Did Simon cook pasta for her? Yes, probably, Alger concluded; and it was probably perfectly al dente.

The Amoenams grew tired of the affectionate display before them, and shouts of “Hey there” and “Come on now” filled the dugout. The two released their grip and returned to the bench. Alger's real memories could not stand up to his imagined ones, of Brinkley with Simon, Donovan with Simon, Dr. Wallace with Simon, and his focus returned once more to home plate.

Bruce, an easy out all afternoon, choked up on the bat two inches, and watched strike three pass across the plate. Acting outraged, he spun in the dirt, and pointed a finger at the old professor emeritus who was umpiring the game at home plate. The old man played along and everyone laughed. Like a composer, he made a motion with his arms and said, “Play ball!” after the charade.

Alger removed his rally cap and put on a helmet; he tightened his gloves once more, picked up his bat, and walked to the on-deck circle. Bruce passed Alger on his way

back to the dugout.

“Johansen is really throwing hard; watch his inside stuff,” he said.

“Okay,” Alger said, looking at home plate, wondering if he could break his bat over Simon's back.

Johansen was a new hire in the English department, and a lefty, too—brought up from a community college nearby, they said. He taught one survey course last semester, something called, “Contemporary Literature.” Alger heard that it comprised of reading Tom Clancy novels. Johansen divided his time between that and coaching the men's baseball club team. Foul play, some Amoenams grumbled back in the dugout. Alger heard them, and Bruce, too. What he thought about, though, was Dr. Wallace, tense in the stands, watching him at the plate, two feet from Simon.

The Undergraduate Advisor for the College of Humanities took strike one. Alger became aware of the growing number of students at the ball park—showing up for a club game following the faculty challenge. He felt a moment of self-conscious regret over the modest, nineteen-sixty-eight Tigers replica uniforms he and his teammates were wearing. He scratched his right leg with the cleats on his left foot. A gentleman's game requires a gentleman's uniform, Bruce had said when the uniforms arrived six weeks ago. Alger was given jersey six, Al Kaline's number—Dr. Wallace's favorite Tiger. Alger had done his research.

Alger took some practice swings in the on-deck circle. He caught a few surprised bits of chatter from the students behind him who had filed in late and were just discovering their professors in stirrups and caps on the field. He heard his nickname whispered—The Horn—for his lecturing style, and he heard Simon's, too, which was his

initials—S.O.L.—as in, I'm S.O.L. Tuesdays and Thursdays from one to three. Alger grinned for the first time all day: his nickname was better than Simon's.

The Undergraduate Advisor took strike two—she was not swinging. Simon lofted the ball back to the lefty. Simon got into his squat, and positioned his glove on the outer edge of the strike zone. Johansen was making a real show of it on the mound. Pitching from the set, with his toes pointing to first base, he stood tall and straight as he nodded and shook his head. The Undergraduate Advisor looked like she might cry in her oversized helmet that rattled on her head each time she moved. Johansen brought his hands together in front of his belly, hiding the ball in his glove. He shifted his weight to his left leg and raised his right knee high into his body. He held it there for a half-second, and like a train of cars that pauses at the top of a roller-coaster before hurtling ahead and down, he eased into his stride: right leg surging forward, pulling his body with it; left arm bent and trailing behind; shoulders squaring, left arm extending; release. Strike three, the Undergraduate Advisor almost ran back to the dugout, her helmet bouncing all the way.

The crowd at the ballpark emitted a small cheer when she struck out; it was a five-run game late in the afternoon, they had other things keeping them occupied. The wives in the third base bleachers struggled with restless children, and the male students in the first base bleachers, tired of taunting their professors, were hanging upside down off the tops of the bleachers and wrestling each other in the grass, impressing the girls.

Donovan sat like a sponge, soaking up application after application of Brinkley's spf fifty sunblock. Alger was glad his son was there.

Alger approached the plate. He did not pass behind Simon and the umpire to get to the right batters box like his teammates before him had done; he passed in front of

them, through the small space between Simon and home plate, nudging Simon's left knee on his way, causing Simon to lose balance in his squatted position, and fall back in the dirt. Simon got to his feet, looking at Alger, like he expected some kind of response, but Alger was digging in, getting ready to face the lefty. Simon stood there a moment longer, then settled back into his position. Alger continued to dig in, with force and purpose. He kicked a spray of dirt and chalk all over Simon's pants. Simon jumped to a standing position and raised his mask, letting it rest on top of his head.

“What the big idea, Alger?” Simon said, dropping his glove to the ground, brushing dirt from the bunched-up creases in his poly-cotton blend pants.

“What?” Alger said, his arms raised in question.

The old professor emeritus/umpire filled his role, hamming it up, like before with Bruce. The small man, who wore a cardigan and tie beneath his umpire's protective wear, pushed himself between Simon and Alger.

“I'll have none of it boys, or you'll get the thumb, hitching you a ride straight to the showers,” he said, looking up at the two taller men. He pointed a crooked finger beneath their chins. Those who were still watching laughed. Egged on, the old man faced the bleachers and flexed his old man arms.

“What are you doing, knocking me down, getting my pants all dirty?” Simon said over the distracted umpire's head.

“Your pants are dirty?” Alger said. “Well here, why don't you just *take mine.*” He began to undo his belt. “Yes, take *my* pants.”

“You're taking this a bit far, don't you think, son?” the umpire said over his shoulder, holding a Hercules pose.

“What is this all about, Alger?” Simon said.

“Your pants are dirty—probably *all* of your pants are dirty—I have a clean, fresh pair, so take them, like you do everything else,” Alger said. He couldn't help it, he looked to the stands. Wallace was watching, but how intently Alger couldn't be sure. There were a few jocks near him, engaged in arm-wrestling, and the couple from the dugout was trying to get on the dugout's roof.

“Okay, okay, we've had our fun,” the umpire said, herding Simon and Alger back to their positions at the plate. Alger leaned his bat against one leg and buckled his belt, holding Simon's gaze the whole time. Composed and ready enough, the umpire raised his arms over his head, then brought them down quickly. “Play ball!”

Johansen was taking his time. Alger spit a small loogie over the plate, a foot away from Simon. It was tinted pink from the wine, and Alger had to wipe his chin. Simon looked over his shoulder at the umpire, but was ignored. The first pitch from the lefty came in hard and high in the strike zone, and Alger knew he was going to strike out. He made hocking noises, and prepared another loogie. Simon stared at him until the second pitch came—another strike. Alger let his second loogie splat right across the plate. Simon said, “Okay, Alger,” and he opened and closed his entire fist between his legs twice. He moved his glove, offering an inside target for the lefty. Alger thought this was laughable; Johansen was throwing a perfect game, and here Simon was, asking for some chin music. Then again, Johansen was a mercenary, a ringer. Alger risked a quick glance towards the first base bleachers.

Seeing Wallace in the stands, and feeling Simon below him, Alger realized that for all his jealousy and ambition, he had not devised a clear plan. He knew he was headed back to the dugout, and his chances of batting again were slim, given the way Johansen was pitching. He couldn't just stand there, spitting loogies. Better to hit him right now, after strike three, or after, in the parking lot, is what Alger was thinking when the fastball hit him in the left arm.

“Oh,” Alger said. He took a few steps across the batters box, gripped his left bicep with his right hand, and leaned over. The pain was incredible. Immediately, the crowd paid attention again to the game. Alger lifted his head to look into the bleachers. He saw gawking students—some of them his—and he saw Dr. Wallace, five rows up, standing like the rest of them. He could feel his heart beat through his arm. Donovan stood, too, next to his seated mother. Alger knew he was earning points on both sides of the diamond. *Yes, he thought, this is what an employer wants to see, gumption. This is the knowledge every son needs: my dad is tough; he is a winner.*

Alger staggered about home plate, holding his left arm close to his body. Hit by pitch—this all but confirmed for Alger Simon's status as number one jerk. This was beyond mere academia now, this was Street, Alger thought, real Jets and Sharks stuff.

“Are you okay, son?” the umpire said.

Alger could hardly lift his skinny arm, but figured this was his best chance, knowing that real baseball players often charged the mound after getting beaned. What difference would it make if he charged in the opposite direction? He spun around and made for the plate, but Simon wasn't there. Simon was at the mound, calming his wild pitcher. He made eye contact with Alger, smiled, and shrugged his shoulders. The umpire

grabbed Alger by his good arm, said, “Player takes his base,” and escorted Alger to first base, reassuring him along the way that his arm would be fine.

“Showing him you're not really hurt will get him worse than any other retaliation would, son. You stay put,” the umpire said.

“What?” said Alger.

“How about our boy, the Southpaw?” said the first baseman.

Alger nodded. The Amoenams cheered loudly from their dugout and clinked their wine glasses—Alger was the first batter to reach base all day. No one was in the on-deck circle, and the next batter, a Latin American Studies Professor, caught off guard by the sudden positive turn of events, hustled to the plate, carrying his helmet with him.

“Play ball!” the umpire said, with a curly flourish of the wrist.

Alger did not want to be on first base, he wanted to be back at home plate, which was two-hundred and seventy feet away along the base paths. The crowd was getting back in to the game, particularly the students in the first base bleachers, led by Alger's benchmate, the Medievalist, who was dancing a waltz on top of the dugout.

“Get down from there, crazy,” Alger heard the linguist say.

“Give 'em hell, Hornback,” the man said. “It's a rally waltz, Ms. V.” He dipped an imaginary partner.

“Oh, I think I love you,” the linguist said.

Alger stepped off first and took a huge lead. There were two outs and Johansen wasn't concerned about the base runner. Alger took his mark in the base path like a

runner in a long distance race, and he thought of all the feathers in Simon's cap: he was a fresh face; he'd been given an upper level lit course in only his second semester at St. Mary's; Alger had heard, while eavesdropping outside Simon's office, a tenured professor of Romance literature suggest to Simon a collaboration project, saying those words Alger had so longed to hear: "Library after lunch? Where we can get our hands on some texts?"

The lefty hurled a nasty slider for strike one—he was just showing off now—and Alger dashed to second base. Simon tossed his mask and jumped up, but a throw to second, especially his throw, thought Alger, would have been late. Alger stole second standing up. The Amoenams were in full-rally mode. Taking a cue from their drunk colleague on top of the dugout, they danced the Lindy Hop and the Charleston below in the dugout.

"Admirable stuff, Hornback, taking that slug to the arm," said the second baseman.

"Do you think?" Alger said.

"Your team certainly does," the second baseman said.

Alger took another big lead, as Simon squatted down, waited, then lowered his mask. Johansen never looked away from the plate. Alger thought of all the possibilities: Brinkley had been seeing Simon in secret since the beginning of the semester, when Simon got Romantic Poets, and Alger got a survey course and two sections of comp; Dr. Wallace had been using him to get the best out of Simon; Donovan didn't care if he had a dad or not. Blasted Romantic poets! Fastball, strike two, and Alger was safe at third,

again, standing. Simon made a late attempt at a pickoff that nearly made its way into left field. The third baseman tossed the ball back to Johansen.

“Strike three's coming, Hornback, but at least you got some exercise, more than any other Peninsulam A-yawn-am, anyway,” said the third baseman.

Alger realized the third baseman was right. All Johansen had to do to end the inning was throw another heater. Then what, plan B? Lurk about the parking lot after the game? Alger looked across the diamond where Dr. Wallace sat. In the bleachers, young, happy, chaos reigned. Heads bobbed up and down, wine bottles stolen from the dugout passed hands, and the whole mess screamed with enthusiasm. He couldn't find Dr. Wallace. Below this scene, in the dugout, Alger saw his teammates still dancing their old-fashioned dances, locking arms and spinning round, waving their hands in the air. Behind him, in the third base bleachers, Alger imagined his son standing up, yelling for him to score. He imagined Brinkley standing, too, embarrassed and excited for the growing emotions inside of her.

Alger squared his eyes on home plate. He reviewed the signs and signals Bruce tested them on that morning. Steal, bunt, sacrifice; ears, forehead, crotch—he was confusing them; he couldn't focus.

“Oh, hell,” Alger said, and he sprinted for home, and for Simon. No Amoenam would have remembered the sign for suicide squeeze anyway. The first base crowd roared to an even louder mark, as Alger chugged awkwardly down the base path, his head up, his eyes locked on Simon, his arms pumping hard. Johansen hadn't made a move to home plate when Alger started running, he wasn't even set; he laughed and tossed the ball to Simon who maneuvered himself in the base path between home and Alger. The Latin

American Studies Professor realized what was happening and jumped out of the way. Alger thought of Dr. Wallace's smart casual slacks, as his one-hundred and sixty-five pound frame collided with Simon's smaller, equipment-fortified body. Alger's arms, tucked tight to his chest, exploded upon impact with Simon, like they were spring-loaded. Heads crashed. The ball popped out of Simon's glove, and rolled to foul territory on the first base side. Simon fell back in the dirt, and rolled over on his side, clutching his right arm. Alger lost his balance, and fell to his right, stretching his left leg to touch the plate as he fell, thinking: *hands on texts?*

“Safe,” said the umpire.

Alger lay in the dirt, on his stomach. He raised his head an inch and looked to his left, saw that Simon was on his side, slowly rocking his body, grinding a foot in the dirt. Alger lowered his head and smiled: *You did it; you really whomped that jerk.*

Alger was reliving his sprint for home, and preparing himself for a hearty slap on the back and good old boy wink from Dr. Wallace, when he realized the crowd was no longer cheering. It was quiet at the park. He sat up and saw that Simon was standing, with the help of the umpire, who was saying, “Part of the game, son, part of the game.” Simon's right arm bent at an unnatural angle; blood ran in two lines down his left arm from a gash on his elbow, and dripped off the tips of his pinky and middle fingers. Dirt stuck to the blood on his face from a likely fractured nose. Alger wanted to lie back down in the dirt on his stomach.

“You broke my arm,” said Simon.

“Broken?” said Alger.

“It's a stupid faculty game, you jerk,” said Simon.

Alger rose from the dirt and ducked his head under Simon's good arm. He wrapped his arm round Simon's waist and walked his colleague off the field. The crowd applauded, for Simon, Alger knew. He couldn't bring himself to look in Dr. Wallace's direction. The umpire called for a new catcher.

At the Smelt dugout some of the faculty wives flitted around Simon, dabbing here and there with tissues. Brinkley was among them. She kept asking Alger, “What were you thinking,” to which Alger had no reply. The Smelt gave him the silent treatment. Simon's stoic display on the bench was knocking the stuffing out of Alger's own display of grit, after Johansen beamed him earlier in the inning. Alger felt helpless, like everything was slipping away, but he couldn't leave. He leaned back on the bench, and took in the game.

The scent of the beach and the summer sun, of all things, filled Alger's nostrils. He turned, and there, on the dugout bench next to him, sat his own son, Donovan. Alger reached over and drew his finger down Donovan's cheek, leaving a streak.

“Why does your mother do this to you?”

“It's so I don't burn.”

“Do you have very sensitive skin?”

“What?”

“Do you burn easy?”

“It's so I *don't* burn, Dad.”

Alger considered asking Donovan what his friends thought of all the sun block, but instead, turned back to the game.

A new catcher took Simon's place, and the old umpire chopped the air with the edges of his hands and said, “Play ball!” Alger sat in the Smelt dugout with Simon, and with Donovan, and with the Smelt and all their wives, not speaking, until a few wives loaded Simon into a Volvo headed for the hospital. Johansen finished off the Latin American Studies Professor with one pitch, and the Amoenams took the field in the top of the ninth down five to one.

In right field the Medievalist sat in the grass, stretching. His Gatorade bottle sat next to him. Alger decided to stay put. The rowdy atmosphere in the bleachers resumed; the hurt man had been helped, and they had applauded, and now the hurt man was gone.

“Are you enjoying the game, son?” Alger said to Donovan.

“I almost got a ball.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, when the man with the beard hit it? Over here? It fell down under the benches, and all the kids ran to find it.”

“They beat you to it.”

“I didn't run, Mom said not to.”

On the mound, Bruce was struggling. Four pitches, four balls, batter takes her base. Johansen was up next. He walked to the plate swinging two bats, and then tossed

one aside; a Smelt bat-boy popped from the dugout to collect the discarded bat. Johansen was four-for-four on the day, with two doubles, a triple, a single, and three RBI's.

Community college, thought Alger.

Alger rummaged around the bench until he found a baseball. "Here," he said, handing it to Donovan, "take this one." Donovan held the ball with both hands and kind of kicked his little legs in the air where they dangled from the bench. Alger took his eyes from the game and admired his little son. He felt a measure of pride, watching his son turn the ball over in his hands.

"Do you like baseball?" Alger said.

Donovan nodded, still rocking his legs.

"We could play sometime, you know, you and I."

"Uh-huh."

Alger stood up and walked to the end of the dugout. Looking across the diamond he could see Dr. Wallace. He sat away from the crowd with a cell phone held to his right ear, his left hand covering the other. Alger walked back to his place on the bench. On the mound, Bruce tossed one in the dirt for ball one.

"Did you see what I did to that man, son?"

The catcher threw the ball back to Bruce, who chalked up his hands and stood there, studying the situation, like he stood a chance against the contemporary lit southpaw.

"Yeah," Donovan said.

“Do you know why I did that?”

“Mom swore at you.”

“I’m sure she did. I did it, son, because that man, he took a few things of mine.”

Alger watched his seven-year-old son think about that. He recognized the look on Donovan's face; it was the same look his nineteen-year-old students gave him after a half-hour, one-on-one conference. It was the look of understanding how things worked.

“But,” Alger continued, “that's not the right way to get your things back, is it?”

“No.”

“What would you do?”

“Tell Mom.”

Now Alger made a face. It was the face of frustration; the face he made after half-hour conferences with students who didn't leave his office understanding how things worked.

Alger patted Donovan's head once.

Bruce conferenced on the mound with his catcher. The catcher returned to home plate, and Alger wondered about Simon, if his arm really was broken, if he really was seeing Brinkley. Evening settled in. The lights at the park turned on and slowly grew in intensity, or maybe it just seems that way, Alger thought, because it's getting darker. On the mound Bruce nodded, went through his motion, and threw outside for ball two.

Brinkley appeared in the dugout. She walked up to Alger and Donovan, and said, “It's time to go, Donovan.” Without a word, Donovan hopped off the bench and took his

mother's hand in his own.

“We'll play sometime, then, son?” Alger said.

Donovan nodded. He said goodbye to Alger, and then turned to leave.

The solid crack of Johansen's bat sounded, and the crowd roared. Donovan looked and pointed up. The Smelt piled to the edge of their dugout, craning their necks to see down the left field foul line. Alger did not look up to follow the ball's path in the sky, high above left field. He did not watch as the Smelt poured out of their dugout, high-fiving each other, celebrating Johansen's cycle. Alger removed his cap and let it fall beneath the bench, where it soaked up spilled wine. Standing up, Alger followed his son and his ex-wife to the end of the dugout. He watched them until they got into their car and pulled out of the parking lot. Alger never saw Johansen rounding third, heading for home at a comfortable trot, up seven to one.

THE SOUTHERN GENTLEMAN

Kit Donnely is slapping himself.

“Stop slapping yourself,” Grunder Keegan says, but Kit cannot; he has no control over his reddening hands. Grunder's got him by the elbows, whipping Kit's skinny arms again and again so that Kit is indeed, slapping himself.

“Stop slapping yourself, stop slapping yourself,” Grunder says.

Kit gave up hope many slaps ago of overpowering Grunder, or of wriggling free of his locker arms and humid stench. Kit tries to ignore him, to pretend Grunder is not gripping his elbows and flipping his hands into smart collisions with his face, but is in fact, hanging upside down on the monkey bars, feeling sorry for himself because he has to make others feel sad in order to feel happy. But mother's plan isn't working either.

“Stop slapping yourself, stop slapping yourself,” Grunder says.

Kit fights the tears, but, of course, this only makes it worse. Where is the morning recess monitor? The good citizenship sheriff and deputy for the day? When Kit sat his mother down for a talk about the possibility of attending another school, she said no, because she had to work, and because Harvey Elementary was so close. “But I can memorize where the bus goes! I'll be home on-time everyday, I promise!” Which Kit meant truthfully, even though secretly, he knew the first bus transfer was outside Geronimo's, where the arcades cost only a nickel.

A few tears fall from Kit's face. Suddenly, the light around him, Grunder, and the recess on-lookers dims; everything is a degree or two darker, like when it rains. Kit hopes it will rain, then recess will be over, and he can return to Mrs. Buck's fifth grade classroom and the half-finished presidents of the United States mobile he started and left in his cubby. But this is no rain cloud blocking the sun. The children are pointing up, they are shading their eyes, and they are saying, "Wow!", "Oh man!", and "What is that?"

A hot air balloon hangs over Harvey Elementary's playground at the exact spot where Kit and Grunder stand. A sand-filled burlap sack trailing a rope pops out of the balloon's basket. It thuds against the asphalt. Then another pops over the basket's edge, and another. A rope ladder is lowered; the last rung sways just to the right of Kit's head. Kit looks up and sees a man dressed in white descending the ladder. The man's hair and suit jacket flutter in the wind. Kit hears the recess monitor telling the good citizenship sheriff to run and find the principal. At the last rung the man in white hops to the ground.

The small man stands to the side of Kit and Grunder, dusting his lapels, tugging once at the bottom of his white suit jacket. Despite the styled, imperial mustache and chin strip—white like his suit, shoes, and fine, shoulder-length hair—the countenance of the man is youthful. He wears a black plantation necktie and a gold watch in his vest. His right hand is gloved—white.

"Young sir," the man in white says, speaking to Grunder. He plucks the glove from his hand, finger by finger. "You disgrace this playground and you disgrace yourself. You are not a man." He looks at Kit and continues: "We demand satisfaction."

The man in white strikes Grunder across the cheek with his glove. It snaps like a flyswatter. Grunder is without words. He doesn't move, except to touch his cheek with

the tips of his fingers. The man in white slaps him again, and the recess children burst into cheers. Grunder takes another glove-slap, and another. Spittle forms on the man's lips. Kit sees the frenzied smile, the furrowed, white eyebrows, the perspiration; he hears grunts of pleasure escape through the man's clenched, white teeth.

Grunder just takes it all, standing there like a burlap anchor. The man in white halts his assault; the recess children refuse to move or speak or even breathe until he finishes Grunder off. The man in white gathers himself. He runs a hand through his hair, straightens his tie, controls his breathing. The children go, "Oooh", when he raises his ungloved, quivering right hand. It gleams like a fleshy Excalibur. One step back with the right foot, a pivot with the left, one big step forward with the right, and the man swings his right hand into a terrific splat with Grunder's face. He holds it there. The noise Grunder makes is this: "Bwaaaaaaa." Tiny ripples pulse through the man's right hand and forearm.

The man sucks his hand from Grunder's face. Pop!

"Have no shame, young sir. Go to, play."

Grunder rubs his cheek. He smiles. "Kit!" he says.

"Grunder?" says Kit.

"How about some hopscotch!"

Kit can't believe this. The man in white nods. "Okay," Kit says, and he walks with Grunder to the hopscotch courts, Grunder skipping around Kit's legs the whole time, like some happy park-bound mutt.

"What's your name, mister?" a child asks.

The man in white bows, curlicues his hand, and says, “The Southern Gentleman, at your service. Good day.” He ascends the rope ladder, pulls in his anchors, shoots a blast of hot air into his balloon, and lifts off.

The baby who would become The Southern Gentleman was born to Skeeg and Lady Colton. His was a natural birth, via midwife, Skeeg's great aunt Beryl. Great Aunt Beryl slapped the child on his tush right after the delivery. They named the child Barr.

Lady bathed Barr once a week in the kitchen sink. Skeeg forbade her to cut the little man's hair. Barr loved books. He loved to handle them and chew their corners. His was a normal infancy.

Skeeg and Lady fought all the time. Sometimes over Barr, but Barr could only understand them as babies do, which is to say, he understood nothing. He did not comprehend just how important Skeeg's factory job was. And when it was gone, how could Barr have known that so too was the life he might have lead, as Barr Colton, factory-man's son. How could he have known of the anger, tumult, and pain that would follow something as temporary as a factory job? If he had known, what could he, would he, have done? If you can trace The Southern Gentleman's existence, perhaps this is the seed from which all his roots spread.

Scrub Jenkins hops off his dune buggy and heads for the surf with his girl, Andi, and his pals, Jeff and Cougar, in tow. Behind them, Buggy Hill stands deserted. Scrub's blond shock of hair bounces as he runs in the sand, shedding tank-top, cutoffs, and

sandals. He is a beach legend around these parts. Andi smiles and chases after him. Scrub is wearing a green Speedo today, and he knows Andi likes it.

They splash and play, and then climb up out of the water to lazy-away the rest of the morning on the beach at their favorite spot, QT Cove.

“Someone's in our spot,” Jeff says, motioning to QT, where a couple sits in lawn chairs.

“It's freaking Bertolt!” Cougar says.

Bertolt is that theater queer who dresses in black and conceals himself in the wings during assemblies and pep rallies, alighting from the shadows on cue, to remove a chair, to stand a microphone, to pull the curtain—always with grace and nonpresence.

“Let's whomp his butt, Scrub!” Scrub's pals say.

“Yeah,” Andi says, “let's beat it red, and then tie him to Goner's Rock!”

The sun illuminates Scrub like a favorite child. He's got his pals, his girl Andi, and his dune buggy. Scrub can see that Bertolt has got himself a girl, too. They're just sitting there, a few feet apart in their lawn chairs, not talking, dressed in black, squinting at the sun, like a couple of theater queers in love, thinks Scrub. Why not let them have their day in the sun? “There'll be time enough for butt-whomping at school, Cougar,” Scrub says, taking Andi's hand in his. “Let's today let them be.”

Let them be. Jeff and Cougar exchange looks of confusion. Scrub nods his head slowly, like he is warming up to this new, merciful turn, when, from behind, a truck engine roars. With everyone else, Scrub looks, but he sees nothing. The deep revving continues. A loud country yell rises over it.

“Who's yelling 'yee-haw'?” Jeff says.

An old Chevy half-ton, with a three-piece band in back, comes soaring over Buggy Hill's peak. In midair—impossibly, the truck continues to climb—two of the three band members sit, but the third stands tall. With a crooked fiddle in one hand and a bow in the other, he points down below, to Scrub and his pals, and cries out in a demon's voice on fire: “We soar above you like gods, but we are angels cast from heaven. I am The Fiddler and these are my Cain Pickers.”

The truck clears the hill, and Scrub and his pals, too, and crashes into the surf, turning as it does to face the transfixed little group of dune buggy enthusiasts. The Cain Pickers stand at the ready with their instruments: a large, bearded man wearing a waistcoat and no shirt, slacks and no shoes, bears the leaning weight of a washtub bass; The banjo player, thin and hairy like pipe cleaners, wears an old army helmet and nothing else, save his banjo. He awaits The Fiddler's word. The Fiddler wears jeans and a tuxedo shirt with the sleeves ripped off, a red cummerbund, and a faded, rhinestone Stetson. His brown hair runs to the small of his back.

The Fiddler dips his bow once—a quick tease, and the Chevy revs. A plume of ocean spray jets up behind it. Scrub's got bad cotton-mouth. This is foreboding, he thinks. The Fiddler screams heavenward, slays his fiddle with a long, screeching pull on the bow, and says, “Pedal to the metal, boys!”

The Chevy spins her wheels, shooting water everywhere. No Clothes Banjo hops bow-legged and plucks a raucous tune; Big Papa Bass spins his upright once and hammers out a steady line. Everybody's a-hootin' and a-hollerin'. The Fiddler picks up the tempo as the truck gains the beach and heads for Scrub and his pals, who cannot move.

Right when collision seems imminent, the truck pulls into a brake-slide, kicking sand all over Jeff and Cougar. Without missing a beat, the band hops from the flatbed, and frenzies their collective sound to bear even higher notes at even faster tempos. The Chevy's passenger door kicks open and Scrub is startled to see a squat, potbellied man sitting there, adding another layer to the musical hurly-burly. Between Potbelly's legs rests a washboard he plays with a spoon, and in his hand he holds a brown jug for blowing sounds.

The music slows. The Fiddler plays low and close to Scrub, close enough Scrub can smell his burnt corn stink. If Scrub had his wits, he'd note the fiddler's scorched neck and face, round, scattered teeth, tree twig fingers, and blue eyes. But Scrub's not got his wits right now; all Scrub's got is nose and ears, and all he hears is the band shifting low, the jug and bass trading solos, and The Fiddler's hiss.

“Bertolt done squat your cove, Scrub. Go and fetch what's yours, Scrub. T'ain't right.”

Scrub repeating to the fiddler: “Bertolt done squat my cove. T'ain't right.”

The Fiddler raps Scrub's forehead once with his bow. Scrub turns to look at Bertolt. His breathing quickens and he tears at his blond shock. “Freaking Bertolt done squat my cove! T'ain't right, boys! Let's go!”

Scrub, Andi, Jeff, and Cougar charge down the beach. The band plows into another blistering song and follows in the truck. Running in the sand is hard work, and Scrub and his pals are nearly breathless when they confront Bertolt.

“You done squat,” Scrub pants, “my cove, Bertolt. T'ain't right!” Scrub kicks sand in Bertolt's face. “Hoo-wee!” yells the fiddler. Cougar kicks sand in Bertolt's face, then

Jeff, then Andi, and then Scrub once more. They tip him out of his chair and kick sand all over him with the reckless abandon of demon bluegrass pickers from hell. Bertolt's girl says nothing; a cry for help would be too obvious, too unhip. Once Bertolt is mostly buried, Andi says, "Hey," and she uncovers his rear end, drops his black shorts, and paddles him red. A fiddle string snaps. The song is over.

The child who would become The Southern Gentleman knew nothing of quilted tissue paper or spaghetti sauce on spaghetti noodles or toys to engage and develop the mind. What he knew was Pic n' Willy's recycled single-ply, Ramen and ketchup, and games around the wood pile. Sometimes he yearned for finer things. Sometimes his mother did, too.

"Where's Mom, Dad?" said the child at the dinner table.

"Well," the father said, wiping ketchup from his mouth with a square of single-ply, "looks like she left us, doesn't it?"

"Where did she go?"

"I don't know, boy, Timbuktu? If I knew would I be here right now? Heck no, I wouldn't; I'd be there, kicking some B-U-T butt, that's what I'd be doing."

"Why did she go?"

The father drops his spoon into his Ramen bowl. "Cause she thinks we're a couple of jerks! How about that, Mr. Question Man?"

The child thought that maybe it was because she didn't like the awful spaghetti.

The Southern Gentleman floats his balloon up Winsome Drive in the Gossamer Bay subdivision. His bulbous shadow passes over beige homes, neat, treeless yards, and quiet pools. With a brass looking glass he reads address numbers in the afternoon sun. He is looking for one-twenty-five.

The sound of screeching tires draws his attention further up the street. Through the looking glass the Southern Gentleman spies an ungodly truck full of rowdies careening down the street, smashing mailboxes and running over shrubbery. Each half-naked hooligan in the bed is playing an instrument. He readies a burlap anchor to drop on them as they pass below. He lowers the burner's flame, and pulls a cord to open the balloon's parachute valve. Slapping these cretins will be a pleasure.

The Southern Gentleman studies their faces as the truck approaches. The cratered face of the fiddle player is scorched red. His long, greasy hair whips all around him as he plays his fiddle. The face is not familiar, nor has the Southern Gentleman forgot his manners; he simply cannot look away. Sweat beads under his arms. A few drops roll down his side. Under its glove, his right hand thrums.

The fiddle player lowers his bow and looks up. His eyes search, search, and then, like magnets, they connect with the Southern Gentleman's through the looking glass. The Southern Gentleman jerks his gaze away. He takes a few deep breaths and looks through the glass again. The fiddle player has not moved; fiddle at his side, he stares directly at the Southern Gentleman. The others in the truck continue playing. They don't notice the balloon ahead of them gradually losing altitude.

The balloon is now a mere thirty feet off the ground. The Southern Gentleman leans over the bow to get a look at the fiddle player without the glass. The truck roars by,

and the Southern Gentleman moves from bow, to port, to stern, to hold the fiddle player's gaze. He forgets to drop the sandbag.

The truck takes a hard turn over someone's front lawn, and then it is gone. The Southern Gentleman's right hand stops thrumming. He notices how low to the hot asphalt he is flying. Using a pulley, he positions emergency bumpers under the basket. He tosses as many anchors over the side as he can, and braces himself. First contact with the ground is the biggest jolt, and then the basket skids to a stop, right in front of one-twenty-five Winsome Drive, home of Randy Pats, two-time Mr. Venus champion, and his wife, Rosy Pats.

With the image of a fiddle in his mind, the Southern Gentleman follows a pair of tire tread marks over the lawn and up to the front door. The front bay window is shattered. He can hear arguing from inside.

"Every woman in this crummy town has got her own little fantasy. T'ain't right," a woman's voice says.

"That can't be helped; it comes with the title," a man's voice says.

"Oh, the title. Blame everything on the lousy, good for nothing title."

"Let's not drag Mr. Venus into this, if not for that weekend we never would have wed."

"I see you flirting with them—Jackie, Gloria. Jesusa. T'ain't right." The Southern Gentleman hears a loud thud and then a series of hard slaps. He knows these sounds, and he fears the worst for Randy Pats—Mr. Venus' are known more for boyish builds and bon vivant than for strength and aggression; Randy doesn't stand a chance. The Southern Gentleman rings the doorbell.

The slaps stop. The front room drapes blow in and out of the shattered window frame. Burnt corn stink wafts out of the house into the front yard. Footsteps sound in the foyer.

Rosy Pats opens the front door onto the Southern Gentleman. His white frame eclipses the morning sun, shading Rosy's gaping face. Randy Pats' hopeful, bruised face peers from behind her broad shoulders.

“Can we help you?” Rosy manages to say.

“Madam, your brutality against this gracile wonder shames the fairer sex the whole world over.”

The Southern Gentleman is a man in command of his own aesthetic, a contradiction in white boots: old and young; powerful and small; flowery and concise. He is a sweet boy aged beyond his years. He is a man gently tugging, finger by finger, at the glove on his right hand.

“What? Whatever you're selling, we've got it already,” Rosy says, closing the door.

“Madam,” the Southern Gentleman says, sticking a foot in the door, “we demand satisfaction.”

The first glove-slap rocks Rosy on her heels. She steps backwards into the foyer.

Rosy doubles over with laughter. She says, “You call that a slap?”

The Southern Gentleman lowers his glove a little. This has never happened before.

Rosy's laughter is decidedly unladylike. She says, “Come on, let's see what you got, dandy-boy.”

A slow smile spreads across The Southern Gentleman's face. He bows once, loosens his tie, and unleashes a barrage of vicious glove-slaps upon Rosy's ample cheeks. Each slap advances him further into the house. Rosy's uncouth laughter continues. They pass from the foyer into the kitchen, from the kitchen into the dining room. Randy trails them. The Southern Gentleman's shirt has come untucked, his hair is wild with sweat. Rosy's face is a July tomato sagging on the vine. Her laughter is half-hearted now; she sways on her feet and mumbles, "T'ain't right, t'ain't right." The Southern Gentleman's face contorts to one of maniacal glee, and he finishes Rosy off with a furious slap combo. She falls back into a chair.

The Southern Gentleman lowers his glove and wipes a few strands of hair from his face. He is bent over, with his hands on his knees, sucking air. Randy whimpers in the corner of the room. Standing to his full height, the Southern Gentleman steps back, pivots and spins forward like a discus thrower, launching his bare, open right hand into Rosy's face.

"Bwaaaaaaa," Rosy says.

The Southern Gentleman shakes and his right arm throbs. He pulls his heavy hand away. Pop!

Rosy rubs her cheek. "Randy, I'm so sorry I slapped you! Can you forgive me?"

Randy crawls onto Rosy's lap and weeps. Too bruised for kissing, the Pats' sit in their dining room holding one another, as the Southern Gentleman bows, and says, "By your leave, sir, madam." He passes through the front door, closing it softly behind him.

Through his looking glass, up high in the sky, he can see a truck's torn up path, weaving through the city.

At Pic n' Willy's the child who would become The Southern Gentleman played make believe games. To him, the stripped-vinyl loading door in the back was a barrier that repelled spooks from escaping their alley behind the grocery store and spreading mischief inside. But now and again a tenacious spook got through. Lucky for Pic n' Willy's, then, that the child had plans drawn up for such events. He developed them right there in the store, in the cavity behind aisle one's cassettes-for-a-buck-bin. In that low light, with *Vagabonds of the Western World* his only sounding board, he planned missions. Like the suntan lotion mission that led to his gentlemanly powers.

“Dad, can we get this?”

“No, what is it?” said the father, wheeling a cart down aisle nine, junk food.

“Suntan lotion?”

“What for?”

“When I'm outside.”

“Don't need it.” The father tossed a tub of Stug's Jerkey into the cart.

The child did need it. He spent a lot of time in the backyard, which, for its tall weeds, dirt mounds, and wood pile, out-classed the hamburger-stink house. Out there on the wood pile he peeled skin from his nose and ears.

“You plan on being outside?” said the father.

“Yes.”

“Not inside messing around, noising out my TV?”

“Yes?”

The father grinned. “Why not two bottles, son?”

The child grinned.

“How much?” said the father, walking back to the lotions. “Eight-ninety-five? Sweet mercy, you put that sun oil back.” The father dug into the lotion shelf, removing bottles and standing them up on the aisle floor. Minutes later, he emerged from the deep shelf and said, “This one here, this is the one for us—‘Cap’n Southey’s’—ninety-nine cents. Lesson in ee-co-nom-ix for you right there, slim, free of charge.”

The winking, mustachioed old man on the bottle spoke into a caption bubble that read, “For a fine shine, coat it with Southey’s!”

Darting in and out of traffic on the boulevard, The Fiddler and the Cain Pickers search for trouble in the midday heat. They jump curbs and medians, drive on sidewalks, run down cats, and hang moons off the tailgate. Potbelly takes a hard right, and The Fiddler yells, “Left, boys, left!” The three-piece leans to the left side of the bed, keeping the truck—on two wheels now—from rolling into the turn. The Fiddler slaps the cab’s roof twice, and shouts through the sliding rear window, “Keep her straight here, Potbelly.”

The Fiddler jumps onto a wheel well, strikes a familiar chord with his fiddle, and says, “Now make them fingers bleed, boys!” The band rips into a steaming hot rendition of “Shuck’n Corn.”

“Pull! Pull! Pull!” The Fiddler says to Big Papa Bass, who stretches and slaps his strings harder and faster under the hot-breath glare of his captain.

“You!” The Fiddler says to No Clothes Banjo. “Strip that banjo like you done stripped your filthy body! Now pick! Pick! Pick!” No Clothes Banjo’s got no hands. He’s

got no hands, just blurred shapes from the wrists-down.

The notes are coming so fast now they lose all singularity, and blend into a solid wall of sound. In the truck's wake flowers wilt, sparrows explode, paperboys heave *Picayunes* through windows, and mailmen mace sleeping dogs.

“There!” The Fiddler says, pointing to the left. He slaps the cab's roof three times and Potbelly takes a hard left over the sidewalk and a small tree into a Pic n' Willy's parking lot. “Right, boys, right!” The Fiddler yells. The Cain Pickers hoot and howl, Potbelly screeches around the lot, ramming hatchbacks, chasing down shoppers, doing donuts. Finally, the truck comes to a stop.

Straight ahead, at the far end of the lot, two women—Rella and Nancy, oblivious to The Fiddler and the Cain Pickers—hug one another. They've just had a minor fender-bender and are apologizing profusely.

“I am so sorry I yelled at you, Nancy!” Rella—a little old red-headed lady—says. She rubs her right cheek which bears the mark of a furious glove slap.

“It was my fault Rella, I dinged your Buick,” Nancy—young, minivan driver—says. She also rubs a fresh, red welt on her right cheek. “Let me pay the damages.”

“No, I'll pay the damages!” Rella says.

“Let's both pay!”

They laugh and hug some more.

At the other end of the parking lot Potbelly revs the truck like a snorting bull. He releases the clutch, pounds the gas, and the truck rears up on its back wheels. Crashing back down, it speeds for the huggers. The Fiddler leaps onto the cab's roof and dances like he's got strings attached. Smoke rises from his bow as he slices it back and forth

across the fiddle. Potbelly throws the emergency brake, and turns hard left. The truck spins into an expert brake-slide, inches from the two women. The force of the slide throws No Clothes Banjo out of the bed. He rolls and tumbles along the asphalt, somehow managing to keep his banjo from hitting the ground.

“Rella, Rella,” The Fiddler calls, stepping down from the truck. “Nancy done despoiled your Buick, Rella. T'ain't right.” The Cain Pickers back him up with a slowed down “Shuck'n Corn.” “Nancy, Nancy. Rella done yelled you silly. T'ain't right.”

Rella stops apologizing to Nancy and turns to The Fiddler. “What was that you said, young man?”

The Fiddler stops creeping around the two women. He jerks up straight, looks back at the Cain Pickers who shrug their shoulders. Curious, he steps forward and raps Rella once on the head with his bow.

“Young man!” Rella says. She whacks him with her purse. “Have you got no manners?”

The Fiddler looks at his bow like there's a secret to it he can't solve. He holds his fiddle up to his ear and draws a note from it. Nancy and Rella get back to talking damages, all smiles and laughter.

With his arms folded across his chest, The Fiddler watches the two women, completely unmindful of him. “Tain't right, ladies!” he finally says, stomping one foot on the ground and throwing his arms up in the air. “T'ain't right!” and he dances a nasty little jig around the ladies.

Nancy and Rella step away. “We know a fine man in white who could teach you and your disgusting friends some manners,” Nancy says.

The Fiddler stops jiggling. "What'd you say, woman?"

"I said, I know a man in a balloon who could teach you a thing or two," Nancy says.

The Fiddler's red bubbling face snarls. "You say a man in white? A man in white going to teach me?" He looks up into the sky, shading his eyes, turning around to see in all directions. "Ain't no one can teach me! I'm the maestro here!" He raises the fiddle to his shoulder and the Cain Pickers ready their instruments.

He pulls a long, slow, wicked note from his fiddle. It lingers in the parking lot like exhaust. The Cain Pickers slip right in to what The Fiddler is laying down. Raising the tempo, their combined sound swirls into a discordant wail. The Cain Pickers hop from the truck bed, and with The Fiddler, circle around the two women. Like wolves, they lunge and feint for their prey, with a high note here, a nasty sharp there.

Rella and Nancy hold each other close. They have their hands over their ears, but the sound penetrates. Their defiant faces turn to fear, from fear to aggression. "T'ain't right," calls The Fiddler.

Rella tears off her red wig and throws it at Nancy. She says, "You mongrel idiot! Beautiful cars like this don't grow on trees!" She jangles her car keys, and then throws herself onto the hood of Nancy's minivan. "Eye for an eye, Nancy!" Rella says, keying the hood of Nancy's car.

Nancy screams back, "You smell like diapers!" and kicks the Buick's back bumper.

Their work complete, The Cain Pickers crawl back into the truck. They help The Fiddler in. Lying on his back, The Fiddler looks up into the skies as Potbelly guns it out

of the parking lot.

The child who would become The Southern Gentleman sat on the wood pile and frowned at the red coil of Southey's he had squeezed into his palm. The children at school used a different brand, not Cap'n Southey's. But no other child at school had a father who spit in the house, or flipped you the lazy bird when you asked him to change the channel.

The child hesitated, then slicked his face and arms. He really needed the protection, outside where the sun burned hot, away from his indoors father who drank and cursed and spit all day.

At first, his skin refused to absorb Southey's—it ran and dripped all over him and the wood pile. Then, all at once, Southey's took, filling his pores, pulsing toward bone and blood. The child stood on top of the wood pile and screamed. Backyard Varmint—the lonely child's pretend friends—cowered in their burrows and tunnels and nests. What tremendous pain for a child so young! But what a tremendous shine! He collapsed on the wood pile, his skin a fine white, a trace of Southey's red on his collar, and a sticky film over his face and arms. Above him the blue sky turned gray. He breathed deep. *Mom had the right idea*, thought the child.

He jumped off the pile and stomped to the side of the house with the terrible Southey's bottle in hand. The side of the house was where his father parked his beloved firstborn, the Chevelle.

The Chevelle was primer gray with a pair of imperfect yellow racing stripes the father added by hand. She wasn't much to look at, but her motor ran, as the father often

said, “like a lusty mountain cat”, and when that’s the case with your insides, “Ain’t no way else to look.”

The child opened the driver's side door and manipulated all of the car's handles and levers to raise the hood just as he'd seen his father do a hundred times. He closed the door softly behind him. He climbed onto the front bumper and looked down into the car's vulnerable guts. Those mixed-up metal guts, collected, purchased, built and rebuilt, made no sense to the child. But he had a sense of their worth. The child squirted a line of Southey's on the Chevelle's engine block. It felt good. He smiled and squirted some more. The child squeezed on the bottle until air was all that it released. Satisfied, he closed the hood on the bloodied, lusty organs, careful not to make a sound. The wind picked up and blew a drop of Southey's from the upturned bottle to the center of the windshield, a perfect red dot. The child buried the bottle at the bottom of the trash can, and returned to the wood pile.

The gray clouds and wind turned to rain, and a kitchen window opened. The father yelled through it, “Mind the Chevelle, boy! Get those windows up!” The rain pattered on the cement portion of the back yard. “Hey! You got deaf ears?”

The screen door slapped against its frame, and out went the father, headed for the Chevelle.

“Sandini boys come around here with their paint guns?” the father yelled out the driver’s side window. His right finger touched the inside of the windshield where the red dot was. The lever he pulled to release the locking mechanism on the hood went, ch-
CHUNK.

The child heard the lever. He hurried to grab up his secret belongings hidden around the wood pile. It was time to leave this place for good.

The child's father screamed from the side of the house. It was the best the child had ever heard. Better even than the time the coffee table cinder block fell and smashed his father's little toe and better than when the pepper spray his father was opening with a knife burst in his face.

“Sandini boys sure fouled up this time—I’m saving this crap in a bucket, going to pour it down their throats!” the father yelled. “Boy! Which way did they go? Mercy, this stuff burns! Boy! Barr!”

The father stomped through the mud to the wood pile. Thunder and lightning followed. The child heard him coming, and he tried to hide his sack of things. Southey's red dripped from the father's arms and hands. He pulled a rag from his back pocket, but the child could see that it would do no good; any minute now the Southey's would set.

“Why don't you answer when I call?”

The child shrugged.

“What is that?” The father said, pointing to the sack behind the child's feet. He bent down and inspected the sack. In it he found a few dirty toy figurines, some balled up clothes and a tin filled with cookies the child kept outside for when the father was gone and left the house locked.

“Going somewhere?” the father said, taking a cookie from the tin and nibbling on it.

The child tried to come up with an excuse, he even thought of telling the truth, but just then the father dropped his half-eaten cookie.

“What is that?” he said, pointing to a spot of red on the child's shirt. “What is that?” He grabbed the child by the shirt and shook him. “You did all that? What is wrong with you? Tell me what’s wrong with you! That car is the only thing I’ve got in this stinking world!”

Two houses down lighting struck; a static charge filled the air. The father screamed; Southey's was setting. With his left arm the father held the child at arm's length against the aluminum shed; with his right he stretched back and slapped the child. Hand and face—shining, brilliant and white—stuck together. They fought against it, but only the lightning bolt that zigzagged into the wood pile could separate them. When it did, they, with cut wood, earth and aluminum, cartwheeled through the air in opposite directions.

When the child came to, his right hand throbbed and the hair on his head was white. The father was nowhere to be found.

Up in the sky, the Southern Gentleman sits on a rocking chair in his balloon's basket drinking brandy from a crystal tumbler. He smokes a cigar and the Victrola is out. Next to him on a shelf sits a ham radio and the collected Poe. The sun is setting and the light is no good for reading. None of his friends are transmitting. A feather bed hangs above him, supported by a system of ropes and pulleys. The Southern Gentleman pushes aside his rocking chair and lowers the bed. He removes his clothes, except the glove, wraps himself in a white quilt, and sits on the bed. Not a single noise disturbs his thoughts tonight—not even the sound of wind, not at this altitude. The sun ripens as a plantation peach and from a distance the Southern Gentleman's balloon bobs with night's

emerging lights. He thinks of flying his balloon north, over snow-capped mountains, where everyone speaks Inuit.

In an orphanage, the child who would become The Southern Gentleman tried to fit in. He made a friend, Larry.

“Why's your hair white?” Larry said.

“Because I was struck by lightning.”

“That hurt?”

“Not that I recall.”

“How come you didn't get burnt?”

“I cannot say; nevertheless, I am indeed grateful for a shiny countenance.”

Larry and the child who would become The Southern Gentleman lay on their bunk bed in silence.

“How come you talk like that?”

“With each word my articulation expands.”

It was night and all the other boys had gone to sleep. The child knew Larry wanted to stay at the orphanage forever.

“Is all the hair on your body white?”

“Yes, all of it.”

The bunk bed's iron frame creaked.

“Can I see that?”

The child thought a moment, then said, “Good heavens, no, child. Have you no decency?” In this way they dozed off.

In the swamp, where moss hangs from the trees, and mosquitoes smear across the skin, The Fiddler sits in a bucket seat gutted from a Ford. He reads the *Picayune* under the light of a propane bug zapper. Around camp, dead animals stretch between poles and an old school bus rots into the landscape. The Cain Pickers are off belching fireballs with moonshine. They wait for possums to skitter along and then they blast them out of their trees and out of their ever-loving minds with home-brewed fire. Possums on fire don't know where to run, but run they do, and the Cain Pickers laugh so much they wheeze.

The Fiddler snaps the paper shut and yells in no specific direction: "Are we blasting possum or are we eating possum?"

From somewhere in the swamp: "Yeah boss, we eating possum."

"That a fact? How come I'm sitting here then," The Fiddler says, reaching for a tin pie plate, tin cup, fork and knife, "with good for nothing empty crockery?" He throws his dinner service into a tree.

"Yeah, boss. We got one here right crispy for you."

"Just see that possum makes it to my plate before sunup, you hear?"

"Yeah, boss."

The child who would become The Southern Gentleman spent his teenage years in foster care. These are difficult times for any young man, doubly so for the young man coming to grips with his own superpowers. The child grew white hair in unusual places and on his face. His voice cracked and adopted a Southern twang and lexicon. While

other boys played football, he had strong desires to own a seersucker suit and shoot dueling pistols at dawn. His foster father loved him anyway.

“Son, what do you say I teach you to shave?” Foster Father Rolen said.

“Is it becoming?” the teen who would become The Southern Gentleman said.

“Sure. You don't want to be the only Whittier Puma with a white mustache, do you?”

Rolen shaved his own face first, as a demonstration.

“Feel that, son,” he said, rubbing his wide jawline.

A slight magnetic sensation drew hand and face together, and held them that way for a second. A transfer took place. The boy was sure of that. Something inside of Rolen passed through his face and into the boy's hand. The boy could feel it for days, a tiny, aggressive speck of something searching out the tunnels and recesses of his right hand.

“What was that, son?” Rolen said.

“Who can say?”

Weeks later, the neighborhood mutt was off his leash and snapping at the boy's white, seersucker pants. With his right hand, he tried to push the mutt away. When his hand came into contact with the mutt's face a connection was made. Foster Father Rolen's tiny speck flowed out of the boy's hand, and a larger, coarser speck flowed in. Over the painful sensation the boy thought, “Miscreant mutt, why can't you just chase a ball!” The mutt immediately sat. He cocked his head. The boy collapsed.

When the boy came to he figured he'd been out only a minute, because the dog was still there, sitting like an idiot. The boy moved and the mutt moved with him. “Sit,”

the boy said, and the mutt sat. Every morning after, the mutt shadowed the boy on his way to school, the boy tossing an occasional tennis ball and the mutt fetching it.

The Southern Gentleman lights a kerosene lantern hanging above him. He fancies his balloon looks like a great wandering star to the people below, one that has dipped low from the heavens to bring a little light to the dark. A Sterno flame glows beneath a basin of water on a nightstand. The Southern Gentleman thinks about the strange scene he happened upon at Winsome Drive, how the woman repeated that burning phrase so common to his ears these days, "T'ain't right", how the home stunk of burnt corn, how he struggled to restore dignity and love to that woman. He thinks of the fiddle player's face.

The Southern Gentleman washes his face and left hand, with the warm water in the basin. He crawls back into bed, and puts out the lantern. Generally, he sleeps like a baby, cradled up high in his basket, alone in the night sky, but tonight he cannot. He worries that tonight his balloon might fall from the sky. His thoughts are heavy with the running phrase, "T'ain't right, t'ain't right, t'ain't right."

At school, the boy who would become The Southern Gentleman was something of a kiss-up. The other kids snickered when he raised his hand; they imitated his clucking speech in the halls; they groaned when he approached Mrs. Howbauer's desk.

"Why Mrs. Howbauer, you give the lilies of the field cause to worry."

"Oh Barr, stop." She loved these games.

"How does Mr. Howbauer stand it?"

"There isn't a Mr. Howbauer."

“If I leave Whittier having learned only that, I leave a lucky man indeed.”

The Southern Gentleman grew in charm and wit. He learned to trust and use correctly the powers he honed.

The remnants of a possum picked clean—the skull unbelievably charred—lie in a tin plate next to The Fiddler, who has resumed reading the paper. He grumbles at the headline about the missing scout troop found out on the panhandle. He turns the page. Most of the news in the *Picayune* is good news to him: fires, layoffs, road accidents, abuse stories; and so he remains a faithful subscriber. A headline on the bottom of page three catches his attention: “Man in White Sets Things Right, Disappears in Balloon.” An accompanying photograph's caption reads: “Local man says he is satisfied.” The Fiddler laughs until he rolls from his seat. Out in the dark swamp fireballs explode, illuminating the trees.

Morning's light filters through the swamp. At this early hour the swamp appears less threatening, though black bears and cottonmouths and other dangers still lurk in its cedars. The Southern Gentleman picks his way around rotting trees, Spanish moss, and knee-high water. He wears a pair of white lug-soled hip waders and a mosquito net over his head. In his hand he carries a white picnic basket. Next to a black gum tree he pauses to look up into the thick, impenetrable canopy. He wipes his brow with an embroidered handkerchief and proceeds forward. A swamp bird picks for a meal in a truck's rut. When The Southern Gentleman nears, it flies away through the swamp.

A half-mile away, the bird alights on a rotted-out school bus. Inside, The Fiddler sways gently in a hammock. He has never seen the swamp at its most beautiful; he is a late sleeper. Outside the bus, The Cain Pickers sleep, too. No Clothes Banjo lies chest-down on a large tree branch, his arms dangling in the air below him. Big Papa Bass takes up two gutted backseat benches, positioned to face each other. Even in slumber they make music: Big Papa Bass snores deep and steady; No Clothes Banjo explores the possibilities of each inhalation, snoring high, then low, and all in between like a torched, skittering possum. Potbelly dozes in the front seat of his truck.

The bird atop the bus takes to the air again, flapping past the tiny hillock overlooking camp, where The Southern Gentleman stands, picnic basket in hand. His suit is spotless.

No one stirs when he walks into camp. He inspects every foot of it, from the possum carcasses swinging on a chain, to the rusted car parts scattered everywhere. A stack of bald truck tires topped with a square piece of plywood stands to the side of the school bus. The Southern Gentleman removes a cheery checkered table cloth from his picnic basket and spreads it over the makeshift tire table. The picnic basket holds comforts the likes of which this swamp has never seen: fine bone china, silver tea service, flatware, and an assortment of swing-top clay jars. Last, but not least, The Southern Gentleman pulls from the basket a small, collapsible stool. He sets this up next to the table and sits down, crossing his right leg over his left. With his handkerchief tucked into his shirt collar he is ready to breakfast.

One-by-one, he opens the swing-top jars. Steam rises from each container and aromas blend: country ham and red-eye gravy; rolled cheese biscuits; mayhaw jelly and

apple butter; hot grits; sweet tea. A southern gentleman's fuel is a hearty breakfast.

Flatware clicks on china. The Southern Gentleman dabs the corners of his mouth with his handkerchief. Biscuit crumbs cling to his mustache. Sweet aromas carry through camp. No Clothes Banjo's nose twitches once, twice. One eye opens and then the other. When they rest on The Southern Gentleman No Clothes Banjo falls from his perch, and scrambles behind the trunk of his tree. The Southern Gentleman makes no move, except to continue enjoying his meal.

No Clothes Banjo peeks from behind the tree. "You that man come down in a balloon?"

The Southern Gentleman sets a half-eaten biscuit on his plate, swallows, and bows.

No Clothes cranes his neck to catch a glimpse of the spread. "That red-eye?"

"It is, and you may join me, provided you find a suitable covering for your haunches."

No Clothes' head snaps back, like he's been insulted. He steps from behind the tree, takes one tentative step forward, and then darts back. He paces and whimpers. A large stick on the ground trips him up; No Clothes picks it up and tosses it at Big Papa Bass. The stick plunks Big Papa Bass on the head, and he sits up so fast, the benches beneath him part, and he slips between them onto the dirt below.

"Possum! Possum! Got me in the face! You seen where he went?" Big Papa Bass says, scrambling in the dirt.

"Ain't no possum," No Clothes Banjo says through his teeth, raising his bushy eyebrows, motioning with a finger to The Southern Gentleman.

Big Papa Bass sits up and looks over to the table. “That red-eye?” he says.

“Of course it is,” No Clothes Banjo says. “Balloon man there, he says to me, he says, ‘Cover yon haunches and join me, No Clothes.’”

Big Papa Bass laughs, and tosses a burned-out tuna can in No Clothes’ direction. “That’ll just about do it.”

No Clothes scowls. He kicks the tuna can, and says to The Southern Gentleman, “We don’t want none of your red-eye. Got our own foodstuffs.”

“Indubitably,” says The Southern Gentleman, looking at the string of possum.

Taking courage, No Clothes walks out from behind the tree and says with a sneer, “Maybe we’ll be wakin’ boss now.”

“I’d be obliged if you would,” The Southern Gentleman says.

No Clothes Banjo and Big Papa Bass exchange looks. The Southern Gentleman sips tea. Finally, No Clothes stomps off toward the school bus, making sure to give The Southern Gentleman a wide berth.

The boy who would become The Southern Gentleman loved once. Her name was Beth Lampley, but the boy called her Bee, sometimes Sweet Bee. This was ironic, because Bee was actually very sour—something that attracted the boy, ignited his genteel soul. To him, Bee was a rough beauty, in need of a gentleman’s good love. To Bee, dating the boy who would become The Southern Gentleman was another stunt in a long line of attention-desperate stunts. Bee’s siblings played high school sports and served on student governments. Bee did none of these things, and so, was the overlooked Lampley.

When Bee turned sixteen the boy asked her about a debutante’s ball.

“A celebration of your blossoming into womanhood, Sweet Bee,” he said.

“I was thinking of TP-ing the neighbors, but this is way better,” she said.

The boy and Bee bought a suitable dress for the occasion—an enormously ruffled salmon pink gown—and accessorized it with tiara, scepter, and of course, long, sleek gloves. Bee wore it home that evening, the boy in tow holding her train, wearing his freshly pressed seersucker suit.

“Aw, crap,” said Stan, Bee’s father, when his daughter traipsed into the kitchen. He folded his newspaper over his leg and crossed his arms.

“Mom, Dad, I’m turning sixteen, I am on the verge of womanhood. I want a debutante’s ball for my birthday.”

“A what?” Stan said.

“A debutante’s ball, sir,” the boy began.

“Here we go,” Stan said, rolling his eyes.

“A coming out party, an introduction to womanhood. It is the unveiling of Beth the woman to the community.”

Stan bowed his head and laughed to himself.

Deb, Bee’s mother in an apron, said, “Well, that sounds nice,” and began to offer dozens of homespun ideas for the ball, many of them involving crepe paper.

“And your parents could come,” Deb said to the boy.

“Oh, yes,” Stan said. “We’d *love* to meet them.”

“Yes,” the boy said, looking down, fingering the hem on Bee’s dress, “my step-father, Rolen, would be honored.”

The ball would eventually be held, and Bee would be introduced to Beaufort subdivision as its newest woman. Bee's interest in a debutante's ball would wane as Deb's waxed: attention was only good in the getting, and having obtained it, Bee would return to her sour state. The boy who would become The Southern Gentleman would get dumped, at the debutante's ball, of all places, because the stupid ball was his idea in the first place, and because Bee's mother thought he was safe. Bee would go on to pursue a foreign exchange student from India. But gathered in the kitchen that night, the boy's love grew, and he knew his gentlemanly qualities were polishing his Sweet Bee into a lady.

That night, while Deb flitted around Bee in a rush of debutante-brainstorming magic, the boy who would become The Southern Gentleman sat at the kitchen table with Stan.

"How are your affairs at Carpet World, Mr. Lampley?" the boy said.

Loud cursing streams from the bus after No Clothes Banjo enters it to wake his boss. A boot shatters a window and lands with a plop in front of The Southern Gentleman. No Clothes Banjo comes high-tailing it out of the bus.

Behind him comes The Fiddler, slow and lazy. At the last step he stops, scratches his belly, and hocks a morning loogie.

"Good morning, sir. I've brought a country breakfast for four, but I'm afraid it's gone cold," The Southern Gentleman says.

The Fiddler hooks his thumbs through his belt loops and leans into the bus' accordion-style door. A smile breaks over his face.

“Come to watch me eat—is that it?” The Fiddler says.

“And to make your acquaintance properly. I am The Southern Gentleman.” He rises and offers his gloved right hand to The Fiddler.

The Fiddler stares a moment at the hand, then says, “The Fiddler. These here are The Cain Pickers.”

“You boys play music. I myself play the harpsichord. What sort of music do ya’ll play?”

The Fiddler steps down off the bus. “We’re pickers; we play bluegrass.”

The Southern Gentleman pulls his handkerchief from his collar and stands up. “Ah, mountain music. Bill Monroe. Earl Scruggs. A lively breed.”

“The liveliest,” The Fiddler says, now a few feet from The Southern Gentleman.

The Cain Pickers sit three abreast on the tailgate of Potbelly’s truck.

“Isn’t that true,” The Southern Gentleman says.

As the sun rises, so does the temperature. A warbler issues its sing-song call, and another answers.

The Fiddler takes a step toward the makeshift table. He glances once to the school bus, to the fiddle case propped against its front fender. The Southern Gentleman stands still, his right arm hanging at his side, his gloved fingers twitching.

In one fluid motion The Fiddler reaches forward, dunks three fingers into the red-eye gravy jar, and stuffs them into his mouth.

Wiping his fingers on his shirt, he says, “Love me some red-eye.”

“There is a spoon on the table,” The Southern Gentleman says, his right hand opening and closing into a fist.

“This here is a swamp, my friend,” The Fiddler says, opening his arms wide. “Ain’t no manners here.” The Cain Pickers belch their agreement.

The Southern Gentleman closes the swing-top lid on the red-eye gravy jar. He gently removes the glove off his right hand. In a voice so low even The Fiddler can barely make it out, he says, “This here is The South.”

As quickly as The Fiddler filched red-eye, The Southern Gentleman raises his arm and slaps his uncouth host once across the cheek. There is no fury in the slap; it is actually a rather dainty slap by his standards. It is meant to challenge, not correct.

“That it?” The Fiddler says, grinning. “That’s what you do? Slap ’em when they forget they ‘pleases and thank yous?’” In his best British accent he says, “Deepest apologies ma’am, won’t happen again.” Laughs so hard he’s doubled-over. The Cain Pickers laugh too, and Potbelly’s truck creaks under their weight.

The Southern Gentleman allows them their fun. This vision before him, a wild-haired swamp creature laughing uncontrollably at his expense, steels his resolve. Here is the thing so bent on tearing down civility and kindness in the name of crassitude and hate; his evil foil, comparable in terms of strength and will, and getting stronger everyday: the offending and offensive Fiddler.

The Southern Gentleman snugs his glove back over his hand. “Fiddler, I demand satisfaction. I challenge you to a duel.”

Coughing, straightening up, The Fiddler says, “What?”

He heard. The Cain Pickers—they heard. The swamp heard, too; the challenge sinks to its very roots, and the whole place is stunned quiet.

“Choose your weapon, saber or pistol, and meet me at Hamilton’s bend on the river, tomorrow, six in the morning. No fiddle, no slap, just two men, and a morning’s leisure to settle your offences.”

The Southern Gentleman packs up his picnic basket and leaves. A slow smile returns to The Fiddler’s face.

“Yes, I will be there, gentle man,” he calls out. “You bet your sweet mustache I will!”

The Southern Gentleman climbs over trees and wades through water to get back to his balloon. Behind him, deep in the swamp, he hears bluegrass music.

The boy who would become The Southern Gentleman became The Southern Gentleman the day his father died. This, of course, was not way back when the lightning bolt struck them both, charging the Southey’s that held them together so tight. No, the boy’s father died years later, on a mattress on the floor of a one-room apartment overlooking a razed gas station.

The boy received a letter in the mail. It read:

Dear Boy,

This is your old man talking. Bet you was thinking all this time you killed me back on the wood pile. No how. Stunt you pulled didn’t do me in, but it sure as hell did me something strange, and now I am set to die. I got nothing to leave behind. Mostly lousy is what you were anyhow, so I ain’t writing for that. Ain’t no one to bury me except you. I won’t lie around after I’m dead, stinking and rotting. Buy me a nice lot somewhere, and a

suit. And put the product in my hair. Fifty-five twenty-one North Alabaster, Nacogdoches, Texas, 75961.

Skeeg Colton

The boy bought a Greyhound ticket. When he arrived at fifty-five twenty-one the door was unlocked, so he walked right in, wearing his suit and his glove.

A single light bulb hung on a chain from the center of the ceiling. Directly beneath it lay Skeeg Colton, curled into a crooked “s” on a filthy twin mattress pad. A blue sheet covered him from the waist down. The boy thought Skeeg was dead. His neck, face, and shoulders looked like they'd been boiled; long, greasy hair covered some but not all of his shiny, pink skin.

The boy counted one-one-hundred and the body didn't move. He knelt beside it and pulled the blue sheet away from Skeeg's right hand. Skeeg's eyes opened, and the boy jumped back.

“Boy,” Skeeg said, taking in the image of his full-grown, white-haired son. “I ain't dead yet. Figured you'd a had the sense to give me a few days.”

Barr Colton, the boy who would become The Southern Gentleman, stood, right hand throbbing, over his old man. He resisted the feeling inside of him; even as a mere boy, yet to become The Southern Gentleman, he knew the good his slap could affect.

“You want another crack at killing me?” Skeeg said. He pulled his hands out from under the sheet and rested them behind his head. The boy saw Skeeg's right hand. It was splotchy, black and gray.

“You like that,” Skeeg said, holding it up. “This here is your handiwork.” He didn't catch his own pun. “Got it the day you destroyed the Chevelle. Looked for you all

over, but never did find you. Had it in my mind to fix you real good for what you done. Felt it strong, until one day, Sandini boys come round, so I grab one and slap him with my foul hand, and it felt good. My anger didn't calm none. Seemed though it was fed, and that kept me satisfied for a time. And that Sandini boy? Man after my own heart he was after that, I swear. I seen a little of me in him ever since."

The boy kept his right hand in his pocket.

"Whatever it was you done did it to me. I could turn 'em all like me after that."

Skeeg's voice was weak. Where his skin wasn't pink, it was pale enough to see through to the thick black veins beneath. The apartment smelled, surprisingly, of home.

"Doctor says my veins run thick with blood black as oil—ain't nothing can draw it out of me," Skeeg eyed his son, "so Doc says."

The boy looked out the window at the torn down gas station. Only the gas pumps remained. Were he still a child he might have liked to play around those pumps, like he played around the wood pile back home. But he was no longer a child; he was on the verge of something larger.

"What'd it do to you, boy?" Skeeg said.

The boy turned from the window and pulled his gloved hand from his pocket. He and his father gazed upon it.

"What'd it do to you?" Skeeg said.

"I was about to run away that day. Did you know that?" the boy said, still looking at his hand.

"Tell me, Barr," Skeeg said.

"In some ways, I guess I did eventually run away," the boy said.

Skeeg, on his hands and knees now, inching closer to his son, coughed three times, each one louder and more urgent than the last, and spit something behind him. Exhausted, Skeeg fell to the floor.

“But now I am here,” the boy said. He stood with his back straight, composed. Five feet in front of him, on the dirty floor, his father lay on his belly; one arm bent at the elbow resting in front of him, the other at his side. He was breathing heavy.

“I remember you killed my car. You did right to run away from me,” Skeeg said without looking up from the floor.

“This place is so much like home,” the boy said, looking around the room.

“You like it?” Skeeg said, looking up, directly at the boy’s hand.

“I used to believe I was a helpless southern boy,” the boy said.

The room’s single light bulb, suspended by a chain, flickered off. The only light in Skeeg’s dingy apartment came in through the window.

“What’s your opinion now?” Skeeg said.

The boy pulled at the glove on his right hand.

“After the bolt come and boiled me all over, I hunted you up and down. Swore I was going to finish where the lightning begun.” Skeeg said.

“I never thought it before, but I believe it now, standing here, that I am helpless no more,” the boy said. He pulled the glove from his hand. It emitted a faint glow, like a pearl.

Skeeg swallowed hard and reached for it, exerting himself. He held his arm out straight as he could, grasping, quivering, shaking, and then he tired, and his arm fell to the floor. He wheezed and shielded his face from the glow of his only son’s right hand.

In the distance that separated father and son, the boy held his hand a moment longer, and then he gloved it, allowing darkness back into the room. He turned and exited the apartment. The boy made sure to lock the door behind him. He descended the stairs, shedding tears as he did. His throbbing right hand felt near explosion.

At the bottom of the stairs a man was yelling. "Skeeg! Skeeg, you bum! Rent, plus back-rent is due! You bum!" This man wore a Mexican wedding shirt. His squat, little head swelled and turned deep red as he yelled for his rent. The boy took the remaining stairs in twos. Completely focused, he crossed the small patio, ignored the man when he said, "Who are you? You got Skeeg's money?", and in stride, slapped the yelling man hard with his gloved right hand.

The man protested, but the boy silenced him with another slap, and another. The boy lost count how many times he slapped his father's landlord. Soon, the man's face really was red, though he lay weeping on the sidewalk. Tears flowed from the boy's face, too. He removed his glove and pressed his hand to the man's cheek. The sensation rocked the boy's head back, and he cried out. Like malt through a straw, the landlord's pain, anger, and shame became the boy's, and the boy became The Southern Gentleman.

Pop!

Between sobs, the landlord said, "Thank you, thank you." Looking up to Skeeg's apartment, he said, "Skeeg? You just stay up there as long as you need to. You're good for the rent. I won't come by to bother you no more."

By then The Southern Gentleman was halfway down the street, headed for the bus station, his fine white hair dancing in the breeze.

Behind a row of river birch, along the bend in the river, The Cain Pickers solemnly raise their instruments. Down a fiddle, Potbelly, seated on a stump, fills in with a dobro. He plays a slow, mournful intro.

The Fiddler and The Southern Gentleman stand on the other side of the trees. Before them rests a small case and two scabbards.

“Pistols,” The Fiddler says.

No Clothes Banjo nods, and begins his part. He plays a simple three chord progression over Potbelly’s sped-up playing.

The Southern Gentleman unlatches the small mahogany case. Inside are two single-shot flintlock dueling pistols. They are identical: ten-inch barrels; walnut stocks; high relief butt plates engraved, “Exodus 22:6.” A charging rod, flask, oil bottle, turning screw, extra flints and musket balls are also stowed neatly in the case.

At the bend in the river a raised, grassy bank runs straight fifty meters. River birches line the bank, forming a canopied alley. From the alley’s center The Southern Gentleman measures seven paces in each direction, and marks the distance with a saber stabbed into the earth.

Big Papa Bass adds a deep layer to the song. One, two, one, two.

The Southern Gentleman removes his suit jacket. The Fiddler is shirtless; his long hair, wrapped into a tight ponytail, bisects his protruding shoulder blades. Each man selects a pistol. With the tools in the case, they load their shot, first The Fiddler, and then The Southern Gentleman. Black powder is measured, poured down the barrel; patch and ball follow.

The rising sun casts slivers of light into the dueling alley. Morning's cool temperature warms. Rushing water accompanies the Cain Pickers.

The Southern Gentleman and The Fiddler face each other at the alley's center. They hold their weapons at chest-level, pointed skyward. Eyes meet, breath is held. Hearts pump blood, one, two, one, two. On a heel they turn, back-to-back. The saber walk begins.

Big Papa Bass slaps a half-note faster; Potbelly and No clothes Banjo catch up. Sweat forms on their brows. Each plays from a place deep inside his soul, where he keeps tucked-away memories of loss and longing. Their limbs move and jerk behind the trees with urgency, but their faces betray nothing. Eyes fixed on The Fiddler.

Five, six, and seven, challenger and challenged, offender and offended, turn, and lower their weapons. They take aim: upper torso, neck, and head. Before me stands my challenger, dressed in white, struck by abandon, struck by lightning, struck by father, struck by need, desire, and terrible thirst, for satisfaction. Before me stands my offender, shirtless, beaten down, beaten alone, beaten scared, beaten to anger, to rage, and to beat all the world down to his own fear.

The music stops. Triggers are pulled; the cocks hit their pans. From out of a cloud of smoke, The Southern Gentleman lowers his weapon. The Cain Pickers rest their instruments on the ground and walk away, into the trees, like shadows.

The Southern Gentleman wears loafers and socks with his white, knee-length, one-piece bathing suit. Sitting in a lawn chair, holding a cigar in one hand, he sprays down his deflated balloon with a hose. He cleans the conveyance once a year.

It takes a whole day to clean and dry the balloon. He's got it stretched out on a grassy incline, so the water and soap will run over all the balloon, and all he has to do is sit. Next to him lie soaps and sealants. The Victrola is out and playing a cheery dance hall tune, circa eighteen-ninety-seven. In a small basket, The Southern Gentleman has prepared a picnic lunch: a jar of dill pickles; a loaf of fresh bread; a jar of slow-roasted pulled pork; pear butter; sweet tea in a pitcher; huckleberry cobbler. He'd start eating but a child—the hang-around type—has been on his heel all day, asking questions. The Southern Gentleman doesn't like sharing pulled pork.

“What's in the basket?” the kid says.

“My lunch,” The Southern Gentleman says.

“Oh yeah? What kind of food do you eat?”

“Pulled pork, my young friend. With pear butter and a pickle on the side.”

The Southern Gentleman motions with the hose for the kid to stand at the bottom of the balloon so they can flip it and clean the other side.

“How fast does this thing go?”

“As fast as the wind can bear, young sir.”

“So a bad guy in a fast car could get away.”

“That is true.”

The kid is barefoot. He's got his jeans rolled up to his knees. His face and arms are tanned from long hours spent under the sun. “Why don't you just get a fast car?”

The Southern Gentleman sighs and allows the hose to run where it may. It appears he has nothing to say. He slumps forward in his chair and holds his head in his hands—the right one gloved. He knows this is where his power comes from: bad men in fast cars;

drunken fathers; derelict mothers; selfish teens. He exists because of them, for them. In a softer voice than before he says: “The world brims with bad men and fast cars—that is a regrettable truth. There is no end to their kind. Even in the fastest car I could not apprehend them all. But I believe in my heart that the life of a genteel soul—your own if I may—can restore dignity to this land faster than any car ever dreamed up could.”

The child wrinkles his sun-burned and peeling nose. The Southern Gentleman sets down the hose. He unlocks the tops of the swing-top jars in his basket. One-by-one he breathes in their scents. Nothing satisfies like a hot Southern meal. With a shake and a nod, he holds the jar of pulled pork out to the child, as if to say, “It is alright child, have no shame.”