BURNING DOWN THE TRAILER PARK

by

Timothy Owen Davis

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Timothy Owen Davis

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Mitch Wieland, M.F.A.	Chair, Supervisory Committee
Brady Udall, M.F.A.	Member, Supervisory Committee
Thomas Hillard, Ph.D.	Member, Supervisory Committee

The final reading approval of the thesis was granted by Mitch Wieland, M.F.A., Chair of the Supervisory Committee. The thesis was approved for the Graduate College by John R. Pelton, Ph.D., Dean of the Graduate College.

For Uncle Raymond

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ABSTRACT

This is a collection of short stories, all of which are set in High Point, NC.

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BURNING DOWN THE TRAILER PARK: A NOVEL EXCERPT

In a metaphysical sense, a city was born when Ellie May yawned and looked up at her cracked, white ceiling. She wondered if it was safe to come out yet, and then she heard footsteps coming towards her door – footsteps she recognized as her mother's. She waited for her mother to knock, and thought she would jump rope outside today. She looked out her window at the clear sky. *Yes,* she thought, *today would be a good day for jumping rope*.

The Instructor walked through the aisles of students passing out exams. He loved test days, and wanted to clap, but he would scatter the tests all over the speckled, white linoleum. He stared at that same linoleum, and looked at his students. Their cherubic faces refused to look at him. He was pleased, and continued what he had been saying. "If you're wondering what type of lesson these examples provide," the Instructor said, pausing to show his students how even he, at age 57, could pause for dramatic effect, "then you haven't been paying enough attention in class. Today's pop quiz will be on the comma. Oh, how I love thee comma," the Instructor sang out, and walked between desks handing out test sheets written in Spanish. The students looked confused, but they hadn't been listening, and they continued to stare at their test sheets until the bell rang, and they turned in their doodles—because that's all they could do, except for Carl, who was by far no genius, but was perhaps the smartest kid at High Point Central—and exited the

building: it was Friday.

Ellie May was jumping rope while her neighbor Kevin watched. She had no idea what he was doing there next to the curb; as far as Ellie May knew, Kevin never left his home. Anyway, her momma had told her not to leave the small patch of asphalt kitty-cornered beneath the great oak her great-grandpa had planted when he built the house. Kevin was forty, and he had a running website that featured clandestine pics of little girls jumping rope. He hadn't added Ellie May just yet. In Kevin's imagination, he and Ellie May lived happily-ever-after. Nothing ever interrupted their love. He watched her thin legs spring into the air, the summer sun baked his scalp, and he wondered if she would follow him to his house if he told her about the dolphin in his pants. He stepped beneath the tree, and stuck out his grubby hand. Ellie May stopped jumping. She threw the rope at him, and disappeared inside. Kevin looked at the screen door. It banged. He walked over to his house.

A tortoise walked down Van Buren Street. Ruminating on the merits of his liberal arts degree, the tortoise spied several grits dancing in their dirt yard. The muck created by their hose reminded him of his home in the Great Dismal Swamp, but then he remembered that he was a desert tortoise, and had only gone to college here in North Carolina. "I'm not from here, he said. "I'm not from here." He adjusted his glasses, and moved on down Van Buren Street while the grits played in their muddy yard.

Ellie May looked out the guest bathroom window to make sure Kevin was gone. He turned out to be a very bad man, just like momma used to tell her – all about the men who wanted to get between her legs. She didn't know what they would want down there,

she wasn't hairy like momma. Was that what men wanted: the hair? It made sense because Kevin was bald. She kept looking at the road and at the side of the yard when a tortoise walked up and stopped in the middle of the road. He was wearing glasses, and Ellie May thought he shouldn't be there because those Oxendine kids would be out to cook him if he stopped for longer than a minute. She could see the Oxendine children out there in their yard playing in the hose water. Momma would say that was a waste, but to Ellie May, it looked like fun. She silently prayed for the tortoise to start to move so he wouldn't get caught, and when she opened her eyes the tortoise was no longer there.

Carl was not as smart as people thought he was. He just wore glasses and a bow tie because he had thought about joining the Nation of Islam. He had been thinking about it since 9/11, but didn't want to give his daddy more encouragement to beat him. His mother was dead, and according to his daddy, she burned in the hottest fires of hell that were personally stoked by the devil. Carl didn't believe this, but his own religious beliefs were cloistered inside his head, locked away from the rest of the world – especially his daddy. He dreamed of going on pilgrimage to Mecca, and had bought a Koran, which he kept in his locker at school. His daddy was Baptist, but he didn't go to church. You didn't need to in the Bible Belt. This is what Carl realized early when he became aware that he grew up in the South. It happened when he went to California for a convention of youth groups. He had met Shalimar, a girl from Idaho who was really a Mormon, but she wanted to see California, and get away from an abusive step-dad. Luckily, she not only had a friend in Jesus, but also at the Calvary Baptist church in Boise.

It had been too quick: the trip. It was the first and last time he had touched a real girl. Shalimar, he would never forget her, but he doubted he would see her again. He was going to get a degree in Middle Eastern studies from Chapel Hill despite what his daddy wanted. And what his daddy wanted was for Carl to join the Army – to build a legacy. Carl's daddy had served in Desert Storm, and he thought Uncle Sam would do his son some good. That, or Carl could go to the mills, but Carl knew if he didn't do something he'd either be stuck on a line, wiping furniture parts or getting shot at; either possibility didn't sit well with Carl.

Kevin sat in his office chair and masturbated to each frame of little girls jumping rope. Despite his efforts, he remained limp. He needed Ellie May. He just had to bide his time, and she would be his. He looked at his cock. It was roughly half the size of a roll of dimes, slimy from his sweat and the lotion. "Well, Mom was right about one of us not adding up to much." Kevin laughed and used his ceremonial towel – a fluffy, white thing he'd ripped off from his job at the Stratford Community – and began the process of cleaning himself up. He looked at the girl on the computer screen, she was chunkier than he liked nowadays. "Nothing like Ellie May," he said, and sat back in the chair. He thought about Ellie May sitting on his lap after a summer afternoon of jumping rope. The towel lifted a little, and he seized the opportunity.

Shalimar still thought about Carl, even though the convention of youth groups had been a few months ago. She stood in line at the DMV trying to renew her license, and smacked her gum. A wrinkled shell of a lady, probably in her nineties, looked at Shalimar

with what she thought were Pekingese eyes, which Shales, as her friends called her, also thought turned red, but it was only a reflection of the fluorescent light on the geezer's glasses. Shales flipped the old lady off, and made her way to the counter. The deputy was cute. Her hair was cut like a man's, and the bullet proof vest beneath her duty shirt – tan, Shales's favorite color – made the deputy's breasts appear larger than they probably were. Shales wondered what Carl would think of the deputy. She knew where Carl lived – South Carolina or Alabama, somewhere in the South. All she did was smile, and hoped the picture would turn out ok once the cute deputy developed it.

Samson looked in the mirror. He traced the lines on his face that acted like draws, and led to the mountainous lump that was his belly. It wasn't his fault. Nothing was ever his fault. He had been blaming his problems on the wrong war. Today it was Agent Orange and his fifty percent. Yesterday he had never been in a war. There had only been a distantly repressed memory of pristine deserts, cordite, and the breath of dragons. The wife, Caroline, had been seated with blame from time to time – even posthumously – for she had saddled Samson with medical bills and a useless boy. "What are we going to do with Carl," Samson asked the mirror. His reflection was just as clueless and mute. He shut the light off and walked into the living room. Samson thought about getting the mail, but the sunlight gave him headaches, and he thought there may be a movie on one of the cable stations. Maybe *Band of Brothers* was playing? Samson didn't care. He needed a distraction from the noises in his head – those gears grinding away on the task of how to get some blood from the stone of his son. The boy was unmotivated.

Samson agreed that Carl had returned from his California trip different. Samson could smell it on the boy. “It’s your job as my son to carry on this legacy,” Samson had told Carl one day when things in the house were cool enough to allow conversation. Samson actually thought he had told Carl this before he left. Before California, Carl had not said anything, and had gone to the appointments Samson had made with recruiters. Though, the recruiters kept insisting Carl was too young to join. “I’d rather have my balls cut off,” Samson had told Carl just before Carl left for California. But it didn’t sink in. *Never does with that boy,* Samson thought. After California, Carl stopped going to see the recruiter.

Saunders found himself floating above Pennsylvania, despite his mother’s warnings about Yankees. *At least it wasn’t New York*, Saunders thought. He was travelling in a hot air balloon. The balloon was a college graduation gift from his father, which Saunders used – along with a few side jobs writing — to make money. He sold space on the balloon’s skin to advertisers, and thus he lived in relative comfort, and watched his bank account grow in an economy tinged by what his mother called the dark horse of the Apocalypse. *Everybody needs something*, Saunders thought. His current advertisement was for a brand of condoms that promised women a man who would “never let her down.” Saunders didn’t quite get what the “down” part meant. He had never slept with a woman in his entire life – so far, twenty-five years – and he thought he was happy. But he would be happier once he had a new sponsor. He had been contacted by Rick’s Meds – a local drug store on Westchester Avenue – with a generous offer. Saunders thought once he was back in High Point, he’d take it.

***

The Instructor sat at his desk grading papers. Every one of them was a black eye to his State College education. He'd been raised Baptist, and had left the Bible Belt to preach to the masses of heathens who waited beyond the borders of the South. This is what his mother had taught him. His father had taught him to look a man in the eye, and to always have a firm hand shake. On his journey, the Instructor found he didn't have the heart of a messiah, and he gambled away his savings at an Indian casino in Fort Hall, Idaho. He lived a Bohemian lifestyle for a few years – sucking down ramen noodles and ketchup packets he had pocketed from Maverik gas stations. If his stomach was full of ramen and ketchup, he'd sell plasma. When the Instructor finally earned residency status, he enrolled at Idaho State University, and began his new life as a college undergrad. Five years later, he took a job as an instructor, married a Mormon woman named Chantelle, and she eventually bled him dry.

That was the point when the Instructor found himself at a weird crossroads – the point between career educator with a four-year degree, and a career educator who maybe wants his or her master's degree. He didn't see the point – he was a penniless college graduate – but he needed to move on. Chantelle had left him for her lover named Skylar. The Instructor hated gender ambiguous names like that, but he didn't care. He enrolled with North Carolina State, and finished his master's in time to find out he was outdated, and overqualified.

The Instructor was unsure of why or how he got wrapped up in the education process – something about heathens or unwashed masses. He looked out from the stacks of blue books he made his AP students use, and thanked something up there – something

phantasmal and lucid – that he didn't have to teach at one of those colleges-in-a-box, but that he was actually certified by the great state of North Carolina. He breathed out, and resumed grading.

Johannah woke up and realized all her childhood heroes were dead or had never existed – all those people she hoped would someday "save" her weren't coming. That's what she called desperation. And it was within this darkness – this deep molasses – which Johannah found herself without even a splinter to paddle with. But it wasn't the death of her childhood heroes that bothered Johannah.

In her later years, after Ellie May had gone off to college or joined the Peace Corps or done some other thing to rid herself of Johannah's apron strings, Johannah would write in her journal that her desperation had been something like an anvil, and a child like Ellie May was much like a hammer. She would write this, sigh and then place her journal in the locked drawer of her nightstand. She would then take out the bottle of Irish Rose, and sip from it as she waited for her cell phone to ring. It never would. She would eventually place the bottle back in the drawer, turn her fan on high, and sleep hoping the "hammer" would call and invite her back into life.

Not even this future – this bleak light at the end of a seemingly endless tunnel – bothered Johannah. What really bothered her was that she had not been laid in several weeks. If there was one thing she could change, she would change her clothes, and get herself a man.

***

The tortoise cried, but didn't know why. He thought perhaps he had some repressed memories. He was alone in his hotel room on South Main, and had taken the revolver out of his shell – it had been giving him an itch. He wondered why a learned gentleman – gentle reptilian – a creature of letters – would result to such inane redneckary as carrying a revolver around. He looked at its dull, blue surface, and how the yellow room lights flickered off it. He set the revolver on the table in front of him and thought back to his college days. He was amazed he graduated with a 3.8 GPA; although, what this translated in the working world, he was unsure.

"Perhaps, if I were to go to the local billiards hall, I should perchance discover what seems missing," the tortoise said. His voice sounded like he had a mouth full of oatmeal. He reached for the revolver, spun it around on the reddish table and placed it back in his shell. He was still a respectable creature of academia, but if housekeeping discovered "Winona," the arrest following would ruin his reputation.

He placed the *Do Not Disturb* sign on his door, and left. He was unsure what time it was – only that it was dark outside, and it would soon rain.

Reyna Robles tied her orange scarf in front of the bureau mirror. She had never dated a co-worker before, and had never slept with any of her bosses. Life was full of possibilities, her mom used to say. She tugged at the scarf, and realized it really wasn't scarf weather. She set the scarf on the chest of drawers, and adjusted her shoulder pads. She whispered that she wasn't a loser, and ran her fingers through the silky material.

Jared walked out of the bedroom wearing only white boxers. He scratched his face, and smelled his hand. He smiled when he saw Reyna standing before the mirror already dressed. “What’s for breakfast?”

“You only have pop tarts in the cupboard,” she said, and straightened her hair.

“I feel like splurging,” he said, and stretched.

Reyna didn’t think she had made a mistake, but she bit her lip, and tried not to smear her lip stick. It was early still, and despite last night, Jared hadn’t given her the day off. “What did you have in mind?” she asked, and turned away from the mirror. She was as ready as she could be.

“We could have some Crux-Rubicon coffee followed by a sampling of jams, jellies, and multi-grain bagels,” Jared said, and yawned.

“Where are you going to get that?”

“I’m not getting it – I’m not even dressed,” he said, and walked back in the bedroom.

Reyna looked at the door, and grabbed her purse and keys. She thought about why she had been attracted to Jared in the first place. He had average hair, and he was too slim, but with the right amount of musculature to make it look like he worked out, though he never went to a gym and he ate whatever he wanted despite the fact he was pushing thirty-five.

“Don’t be late for work,” Jared yelled from the bedroom.

Reyna grabbed her jacket, and stepped out into the rain.

***

Kevin watched the rain turn the street outside his house into a river. It was a rain, which was, perhaps, inspired by the series of tropical storms passing close enough to North Carolina to augment the weather. Kevin loved the rain. He would go dance in it, but he wasn't sure if it was safe to come outside. Had Ellie May informed her mother? If she had, did her mother notify the authorities? In fact, he wondered as he stared out his window, were not the police making their way to arrest him? Kevin thought he heard sirens, but it was his heart. He slapped his cheeks, and continued to watch the rain, which had formed a brownish-red river on Van Buren Street. He thought he saw a kid floating – an arm outstretched in that ambiguous way, where Kevin could not tell if the kid were having fun or needed help. Kevin rubbed his eyes. They felt puffy, and the image of the bean pole child in the muddy rain river was gone. Kevin thought about how he could get Ellie May, and then his stomach rumbled. He turned from the kitchen window, and stirred his Hamburger Helper. He lifted the spoon to his mouth. It burned, but the Hamburger Helper was just right. Kevin smiled, and grabbed a plate.

Shalimar often wondered what it would be like to live anywhere else but here. She was watching the hot air balloons – daydreaming of her slow-paced airy getaway. Perhaps she could find Carl, and they could both tour the country. "That'll be the day,' she said, and wondered why she said it. *Because Carl's a catch,* she thought. *He's going places, and I'm going nowhere*. The Idaho landscape was her prison. She had never sent out applications for college. She was afraid they would say yes, and she would have to leave, and thereby miss Carl's return. He was supposed to save her, not an acceptance letter from a university. But she was not sure if Carl could save her from either her

geographical prison or her step-father. *Perhaps*, she thought, *this is something I have to take on my own?*

Kevin looked at the stain on the green and black tile flooring. He was standing in the atrium of the Stratford Community's main office building. This was a job he would have to take on his own. Of course, that was because he was the janitor, but there was something about the blotch on the floor. Not that it looked like anything he had ever seen in his years cleaning, but it didn't look all that alien either. Rain smacked against the windows, beading against the glass and streaking down in rivulets. Kevin felt he was underwater, but grabbed his mop and dunked it in the grayish water. His father, from what he could remember, had been a janitor for the school district, but that had ended badly. The principal had found his father hanging in the women's locker room. There had been no need for a note. The Powers-that-Be had examined Kevin and his mom and deemed the late Robert Lesters should have been put out of his misery some time ago. Kevin forgave his father after he graduated from technical college, but by then his mom, Grace, already needed a home, which led Kevin and his mom to the Stratford Community.

Kevin slapped his mop against the stain, and thought about Ellie May. How would he be able to get her to come over to his house? The mother was unapproachable. He thought that Johannah knew his little secret, but there was no way to tell if anyone knew what his true interests were. He never spoke with anyone at work, unless he had to. He stopped mopping, and waved to a pair of seniors who were speed walking through the main hall. "Watch your step, ladies," he said, and smiled.

They looked at him, but kept walking thrusting their arthritic hips down to the opposite end of the hall.

Kevin continued mopping; rubbing the stain with his mop. He loved the rhythm of work. Dip the mop in the bucket, squeeze the mop, slap the floor with the mop and rub a couple of times, and repeat till the stain was gone, but he hated sweeping. He secretly wished the walkers would slip and fall on his floor. He would choke them and teach them to pay attention to him, but he let this go and slid his mop and bucket over to the closet. He waved at the walkers, but they kept going, their puffs of white hair bouncing as they picked up their pace.

Ellie May didn't hate her mother. She was old enough, and had seen enough television commercials to know when her momma was going to bring a new man home. It started with the rampant cleaning. Her momma had come home, and ignoring her comments about the reclusive neighbor, Kevin, had told her to "get started."
"Get started" meant to grab a rag and the Simple Green kept in the laundry room, and pick a room to clean. Though Ellie May hated this aspect of her momma's personality, once she was done, Ellie May took immense pride in the cleanliness of whichever room she chose. Cleaning didn't take Ellie May long, but the moment after the house was scoured was what Ellie May hated the most. She would be confined to her room, and her mother would smile, and tell her that no matter what, she was not to leave her room. Ellie May would sit in the dark, and trying to fight the tears, and look out her window. She would wonder if she could run away before her mom got back, and if she did run away, where would she go? These thoughts would run through her head until she couldn't keep

her eyes open, and she would curl up and dream of a new life where she was a rescue swimmer for the Coast Guard. That had been the routine for most of Ellie May's life. Except on this night, after they scoured the house, and her momma tucked her away in her room, Ellie May began to pack for an adventure she hoped would take her away from this God forsaken town.

Saunders looked out from his basket at the red clay fields perched above his parent's home. He was off today because Rick's Meds needed to print their ad on his balloon. He needed a day off anyway. A recharge; however, flying for a living was exhilarating, and better – for all he knew – than sex. He also decided he needed to see his mother; she didn't have long according to his dad, but Saunders figured she would probably outlive God. He remembered his last visit. His parents had sat there eyeing him like a dog does a steak, and he didn't like it. He also didn't like the way their house smelled. Perhaps it was the carpet or the veritable feline menagerie or the fact his parents didn't dust, and were almost dust themselves. Saunders would never know. He took several deep breaths to prepare himself, and then exited the balloon basket. Somewhere, Saunders heard the distinctive "thunk" of an aluminum bat hitting a ball, and it reminded him of all the times his dad had failed to take him to a game or conveniently forgot to fill out the registration form he needed to play. Saunders had grown up hearing the other kids play, and now that he was an adult, he wondered why he was ever jealous.

***

Carl sat in the recruiting office, and looked at the posters. He wondered which one was his daddy. They all seemed the same, although the pictures were different. They had

either a singular person or a group posed like mannequins of patriotism, and either above or below them was a singular word like: DUTY. Everything, except the people posed as mannequins, was green, black and gold. Under the golden word, LOYALTY, Carl thought the soldier looked like his daddy. Carl sat back in the grey office chair, and breathed out. He didn't know why he had walked into the Armed Forces Center. Most recruiters knew him to be a "flake," but he could not control his feet today. He shifted his feet and patted the gray upholstery of his chair. He thought about getting up, and looked at the door, which seemed to have increased its distance. Carl looked back, and the recruiter, Staff Sergeant Stafford had returned.

"Oh good, you're still here," Stafford said, and laughed.

"Umm, yeah. So, when can I join?"

"Whoa. We have to get you signed up for the ASVAB first, and then you need to go to MEPS in Raleigh for placement."

"Well, I'm ready to do that."

"Again, whoa – let's just see how you do on that ASVAB. There are other considerations, but once you take the ASVAB, we can jump through those hoops. Have you thought about a date?"

"Honestly?"

"The Army is all about honesty," Stafford said, and pointed to a poster that showed a camouflage-clad soldier shaving during a snowstorm. The word INTEGRITY was in black to the left of the soldier.

"I thought I could just join. I didn't think I would have to take a test. Can't you just sign me up?"

"That's not how the Army works, son," Stafford said. He breathed out, took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

Carl watched the recruiter, and realized this recruiter looked more like his daddy than any of the posters at the Armed Forces Center. "You're not my daddy," Carl said.

"Excuse me?" Stafford said, and put his glasses back on.

"Nothing. My daddy's waiting on me," Carl said, and stood up.

Staff Sergeant Stafford didn't move. He seemed statuesque until he spoke. "Stay dry, son."

It had started raining when Saunders knocked on his parents' door. His dad, Jack, answered. Jack was bald and waxy looking, and he wasn't much taller than Saunders; however, in the time Saunders had been gone, his dad had ballooned to where he fit the door frame. His pajamas stretched across his great belly like a trampoline. Jack's current condition prevented him from leaving the house as much as he would like. And he could think of no good reason to leave other than to run errands for his wife, but these were rare, and most things could be accomplished online.

In fact, Jack had been spending much time online surfing Wikipedia, YouTube, and WebMD. He was certain he would find the cure for his beloved Gloria somewhere on the information superhighway if he stuck his virtual thumb out there long enough. Someone would pick him up, and take him where he needed to go. This obsession would eventually lead Jack to an addiction to porn – specifically, dwarves and African-American women – and he would begin to neglect his search, although that would remain

his cover. But, as of now, Jack's internet hitchhiking days were as innocent as a mockingbird.

"Son, it's been awhile." Saunders' dad sounded far away, as if he were speaking through a metal tube. Saunders scratched his ear, and tried to peek around his dad.

"Dad, I've been in PA, you know that. How's Mom?"

Jack breathed out. He did not fear senility or even nursing homes. He was a healthy sixty-four, and he knew that his son did not want to be troubled with the care of him or Gloria. Jack didn't like the inevitability of it all. It reminded him of the old days before his son was born when Gloria and he would argue over mundane things – like the dishes or money, but just as quickly make up the way young couples do. He still remembered the supple form of her body against his taut, athletic form. He worshipped her, and she had repaid his homage by having a kid.

The fact that it had been a boy did nothing to assuage his broken dreams. It had been their final argument. After the baby was born, Jack had settled into a relaxed, but strict, ennui of parenthood. He was essentially on autopilot, until his son's graduation, when there was a glimmer of freedom in Jack's peripheral vision, as if someone outside his dark prison had accidentally opened his utility port or flicked on a light switch, but then it was gone. When his son took the advertising job – an idea that Jack found absurd – he nearly celebrated, but then Gloria had come down with her "illness," and this shut his cell door, and Jack was trapped in the darkness of his life, again. "Your mother's not doing so good, son," Jack said, and stepped aside.

Saunders walked in. The smell wasn't so bad or as powerful as he remembered. He could hear the slight whirring of air purifiers, and feel his dad staring at him."Dad, did y'all get rid of some cats?"

"We never had any cats – talk about senile."

"Who said anybody was senile, Dad?"

Jack coughed and stepped past his son. "Never mind. Your mother is in the bedroom."

"Where are you going?"

"She's waiting," Jack said, and sat on the couch.

The smell was stronger when Saunders got to the back bedroom, but nothing like cats or death. It was more like a musty, briny smell – like he was at the beach.

"There's my angel," Saunders' mother said. She pushed herself up, and sat a book beside her. Saunders didn't recognize the book. As large as Saunders' dad was, his mother was just as small. She resembled an infant wrapped in covers, and her pink house coat. The yellow lamp light made her pasty skin appear greenish, as if she really were sick.

"Mom, don't call me that, please. I'm almost twenty-five."

"What have those Yankees done to you, son?"

Saunders thought about his mother's question, but he had stopped caring what his parents thought when he had left for college. For Saunders, his parents were a resource, and though not yet expendable, it was one he could control. And it was this singular thought, and his ability to escape in his balloon, which kept Saunders sane, and under control.

***

When Carl stepped outside, he felt lighter than usual. He adjusted his bow tie, and cleaned his glasses on his shirtsleeve. He didn't want to go home – his daddy was there. He had enough of lectures from his daddy, recruiters and teachers. His Imam had not been helpful. He had placed both his hands on Carl's head and said, "And your Lord has decreed that you worship none but him. And that you be dutiful to your parents. If one of them or both of them attain old age in your life, say not to them a word of disrespect, nor shout at them but address them in terms of honor."

Carl thought the man would be more understanding, more sympathetic to his cause. Carl decided he would go to the mall. He'd think things over at the Orange Julius or perhaps choke himself on a pretzel while he sweated through several rounds of Dance Dance Revolution. He'd see what the mall would bring him – it was full of possibilities.

Shalimar took off her sandals, and placed them in the gray plastic tub. She watched the tub slide down the conveyor belt. It disappeared into the X-ray chamber. She looked at the white-shirted TSA employee. He looked annoyed and concerned at the same time, and then she realized he was looking at her – they all were. She held her breath, and stepped through the metal detector. She slowly breathed out, and grabbed her shoes, purse and cell phone from the tub. Shalimar checked to make sure her boarding passes and ID were easily accessible. She realized the worst was mostly over. In eight hours, she would possibly be reunited with the only man whom she could possibly love.

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Ellie May looked out at Van Buren Street. The streetlight hummed and provided a circle of whitish light that attracted all sorts of flying critters, which were the kind of critters that also attracted bats. Ellie May wasn't afraid of bats – she just didn't like them. She slipped out from the house, and stumbled across the yard. She stopped, and stared at Kevin's house. It was black as pitch – not even the porch light was on. The entire neighborhood – even the Oxendine children and katydids – was quiet. She turned around, and took one last look at her mother's house. Ellie May adjusted her backpack straps one more time. She had all the essentials: her journal, favorite pens, favorite doll, a flashlight, extra batteries, a glow stick, *God's Little Acre*, some clothes, her momma's "pension," almost fifty dollars her momma won playing the lottery, some food and a bottle of water. She didn't know how long it would take her to get where she was going, but the food and money should get her part of the way there. She thought the railroad tracks would be the fastest. They ran from behind her mom's house all the way to High Point Central High. Then she saw a light come on in Kevin's house.

Ellie May pulled back into the shadows on the side of the house. She chewed on her lip, and waited for the "eye" of Kevin's house to shut. When it did, she ran, not caring anymore that she was heard or if every bat, bug and beast in High Point heard her and carried her off into the night.

Johannah leaned against the cherry-stained bar, and nursed her martini. She surveyed the Green Oak Pub, looking for a man. But there were only boys here tonight – grunting apes thumping their chests for a shot at her. It made her wet to think that men would fight to sleep with her. Except on this night, there didn't seem to be anyone

interested. She blamed all the young whores who had flooded the market at the Green Oak Pub. She stirred her olive, and made eyes with any man. No one among the disco beats, black lights and circular tables paid her any attention. Then she saw a lone gentleman with brownish hair, and an awkward way about him, enter the bar. He was tall, and had the look of money about him as if he had plenty of it, or knew how to hold on to it. She downed her martini, threw back her head, adjusted her blouse and made her way through the throngs of people – her gaze intent on the tall man with brown hair.

"Hey, handsome," she said over the music.

He turned toward her. He looked like a rabbit when it sees the lynx, and this look made Johannah's knees buckle slightly. She reached out and grabbed his arm, which was solid. "Are you okay, Miss?"

She resented the title, but she only needed him for the night. "Yeah, let's get out of here."

"But I just got here."

"You don't want to drink here – they water down the drinks. I've got something in my glove compartment, if you really want to drink."

"I just want to make sure you're okay, Miss – what was your name again?"

"Johannah. And you can ditch the miss act, fellah," she said, and pulled him by his arm out of the bar.

Johannah was conscious of how her heels echoed *click-clack-click-clack* as she stomped across the parking lot with her man in tow.

"Look, I don't need a drink – I just wanted to get away from my parents."

Even this semi-pathetic statement didn't dissuade Johannah. She had the urge – the need to fuck, which had plagued her all her life, and forced her – now in her mid-forties – to become the huntress. It was then she noticed Saunders had started to resist her pull. They were only twenty feet from her car. "Okay, we don't have to drink, but for my troubles you could at least make sure I get home alright."

"How are we going to do that?"

"My car is over there," Johannah said, and pointed to her white Buick Lesabre. It was a car that had seen better days, and Johannah thanked God Ellie May was no longer in a car seat. Johannah would always forget to take it out, and thus, lose her lay of the evening when they discovered their "hot piece of ass" was a mom; however, a small percentage of men were turned on by the fact. These men she would fuck in the car, and then literally kick them to the curb. She'd finish her night, at home, with "Big Jim" her vibrator, knowing that Ellie May would be asleep in her room – sealed away – unable to disturb her artificial love making.

"But how am I going to get back?"

"I can drive you back in the morning, silly," Johannah said, and eased in closer to Saunders. She could feel the heat radiating off his body, and loved the way he smelled – it was a woodsy odor that tickled her nose, and reminded her of Greg.

"I wouldn't want to impose."

"You really don't get it do you, champ," she said, and grabbed his arm again. She could feel him tense up, and his palms were sweaty. She placed her hands on his chest, and said, "Relax, I'm going to give you a night you'll never forget." She opened the car

door for him. He raised a finger, and then swallowed, but then sat down in the car. Johannah closed the door, and ran to the other side. *No*, she thought, *I haven't lost it yet*.

Carl sat in the unyielding desk, and chewed on a pencil already cratered and wrinkled by his teeth. Not that Carl did it out of nervousness – he would ace this test, he had to. This was his final final – the last hoop – though he felt this hoop was ringed with fire.

Carl's future hinged on this question:

> *With the advent of digital media, do you think that it, digital media, has had a profound impact on our culture?*

He thought about a future at Chapel Hill, which was bluer than the blue book he held in his hands. Carl drifted to the deserts of the Middle East, his life beyond the South in Saudi Arabia – in deserts hotter and more yellow than the Nags Head Dunes. This one question felt like an anvil in his hands as if he were Wile E. Coyote on the edge of a cliff. He had no answer, but only held up a sign that said "Yipe!" He let the image go, and thought about the question. *Of course digital media has had an impact on our culture*, he thought. Carl started writing what he hoped would be the ticket to his happiness.

The Instructor watched his students hunched over their uncomfortable desks. This was Sparta for him, and the Instructor was tired, bored and slightly aroused. He wanted a giant waffle from Waffle House, and then he wanted to dip his wife in syrup, and lick it off Cora, but then he remembered that she had died from complications caused by her diabetes, and he wanted to cry, but not in front of his students.

The Instructor felt that this was his last semester, and, perhaps, he was done teaching. He felt spent. Desiccated. And, now, watching his students, he realized he had never given up because of Cora, his second wife. He had been done with his master's and took the teaching job to put food on the plate, a roof over Cora's head and medical benefits to treat her disease, which would claim her anyway.

He had broken out the Jameson's that day, toasted to silly dreams and the fact he could go on living now that the wicked witch was dead. The next day he woke up, took two aspirin, and introduced his class to the joys of Faulkner.

What else is there to do, he thought, and walked over to the blackboard to write the time remaining. The "scritch-scratch" of pencils against paper increased its tempo, and the Instructor sat down to watch his play in motion. Moments like these truly made him happy.

The tortoise chucked his revolver into Oak Hollow Lake. It gurgled its animosity, and plunged to the murky bottom, leaving only a few silent ripples on the greenish-brown surface. The tortoise had thought about suicide. He watched the sky fade from cerulean to amethyst to cerise to black. He pulled a 50ml bottle of Cutty Sark from his shell, sipped the bitter drink and cried until stars developed in the cloudless, North Carolina sky.

The tortoise tossed the bottle, and jumped off the low, moss-covered bunker that formed part of the reservoir. He walked out of City Lake Park a different reptile, and laughed at the idea of ever needing a gun. But he still felt he was missing something. The tortoise didn't have many friends and he missed his family in Arizona. He knew his feet could bring him there much like Pheidippides, but he did not feel like dying in the

process; he had many more decades to live. He knew only one person: Mark Davenport. Last he heard from Mark, he was an instructor at High Point Central. The tortoise turned onto Lexington Avenue. He wasn't tired, and there were many miles to cover before he made it to High Point Central. There was a small glimmer of light in the tortoise's eye as he walked up Lexington. He continued to move steadily further and further up the road until he was only a spot of gray-black in the patina of the night.

Saunders listened to Johannah snore. He could still feel her body against his. She was less than an arm length away from him – naked and relaxed. He'd had no sense of the male orgasm other than that strange, spine shuddering moment when urinating. Saunders had never masturbated, but he had never had the inclination or imagination to. Of course, in college, it was a subject among all his male, and some female, friends. Saunders had considered it, but found it to be an impure act. Though, back in those younger days, there had been times when he nearly crossed that line, but he could never commit to the act. There was something completely barbaric about masturbation, and Saunders never brought himself to the task.

Now, having tempered his penis in the fires of such a woman as Johannah, Saunders worried if he would ever be the same. He thought that maybe he was wrong, and that life in a balloon wasn't happiness, but life with Johannah could be. At present, his penis ached with its swollenness, and he wondered if Johannah would like to "do it" again. She had passed out before he did, her hair matted with sweat, and her make up all over him and the sheets. He loved her 300-thread count sheets, and thought once he was done with Rick's Meds he could try to negotiate something with Martha Stewart or

whoever owned the brand. Saunders thought to whisper in her ear, but he was new to these things, and thought it best to wait until she woke up.

Johannah woke up with an achy feeling she had not felt in a while. She stretched, and then realized she was naked. She shivered with the memory of the boy she had met at the Green Oak Pub. *A virgin*, she thought, *what a silly notion*. When he had told her, she almost laughed, and she was glad she hadn't. Johannah knew a golden goose when she saw one, and when he disrobed, the gears in her head started clicking. She rolled over and was surprised, but not shocked, to see that Saunders had an erection. She loved these boys, and she began to stroke him. He smiled, and grabbed her breast. "Morning, lover," Johannah said, and climbed on top of Saunders.

Shalimar stared at the giant chest of drawers. She felt like she needed to touch it, to make sure it was "real," but she didn't want to look like an idiot. She walked back to her rental car, and merged with traffic in an unfamiliar town. She felt cold and sticky, and wondered if she was doing the right thing – if she had come here for nothing. She wondered if happiness was something unavailable to her; as if she were somehow isolated from a normal life inside the confines of her car. Shalimar brushed her hair back, and looked at herself in the mirror. She could see the fear in her eyes, and hoped no one else could.

Shalimar remembered when she first saw Carl at the hotel, and they connected. There had been a jolt, which started at her eyes, and it ran through her whole body, extending to the fluorescent lighting of the hotel lobby until she thought the whole room would either explode or melt away, and only she and Carl would be left in the brilliant

whiteness – their ash-covered bodies naked and entwined. Now all she had to do was find out where Sinclair Avenue was, and she'd find Carl.

Kevin was tiptoeing across the tile floor of his house, moving from room to room. He was trying to be quiet. He needed the quiet because he was hunting. He was hunting for little girls. He thought he had seen Ellie May leave her house alone. Before that, he had been woken up by a horrible dream. The end of his virtual world of little girls jumping rope had finally come. In the dream he had told the detectives there was nothing wrong with love. He spoke these last words before they placed him in a box like the Ark of the Covenant at the end of *Raiders*. No one ever heard him pounding, and he woke up gasping. He felt in the dark to see if he were truly trapped in a box, and when he was satisfied that he wasn't, he went into the kitchen. He needed a drink, and to see the light. From his kitchen window he thought he saw something like a child in the shadows. He had been certain it was she.

She will be mine, he thought, and finished packing his bag. He was only packing the necessities: a flashlight, digital camcorder, gum, trail mix, a pocket knife, condoms, hand sanitizer, latex gloves, toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant, a pint of vodka and a change of clothes. Kevin liked to be prepared. He knew Ellie May would be his ultimate conquest. All the other little girls had been like used baseball cards. He had either found them or paid a significant price. Ellie May would be the piece de resistance for his website. He could feel it in the air, which made his mouth dry. He opened the vodka, and took a sip. He felt better, and zipped up the bag. He turned out all the lights, and walked outside.

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The tortoise marched onto Ferndale Boulevard. He could see the school where Mark worked, and he was happy. He had not walked that far in a long time – ever since he left his home in the Arizona desert. The school was bigger than he thought a high school should be. Comprised of sandy-colored brick, it had the appearance of a prison or insane asylum. When the tortoise arrived on campus, there was nobody there. *Perhaps, I've arrived too early*, he thought, and took shelter in a stairway. He thought about what he would say to Mark, and fell asleep.

The tortoise did not dream, but this was common for him – it was his nature. Life was a dream for him. He often felt like the Oracle of Delphi – doomed to immortality, only to shrivel with age until there was nothing. He blinked and looked out from the stairwell. The campus was just as deserted as when he had previously arrived. He yawned, smacked his mouth, and thought about what to do next. He thought Mark lived near the school, but it had been many years since he last visited Mark. He was sure his feet would get him there – they knew the way no matter what year it was.

The Instructor spent his days off reading Harlequin romances, self-help books, the dictionary and those *Idiot's Guide to Everything* books. He also watched television, and updated his Facebook account on an hour-by-hour basis. He did not like to sleep because of the dreams.

In the dreams he remembered, he was in a courtroom with his wives, and they were both demanding payment for things he had never done. The judge was always his father; his mother the court officer; and his dead brother, the stenographer. Everything

had a greenish hue to it, and he would awake after his father banged the gavel. In other dreams he was running but “It” – the thing he was terrified of – would never show itself. He only knew, in the dream, he had to get away from It. These dreams were always dark, except for a small sliver of light. So he felt confined in a tunnel, but the light was at the wrong end – he was running further and further into the colorful darkness. So, he read, watched T.V., and played on his computer until he would collapse into an exhausted, alcohol-induced dreamless sleep, and this was how he maintained some semblance of happiness. The Instructor was grading final exams when the doorbell rang. He raised an eyebrow, set down the blue book, and adjusted his glasses. He wasn’t expecting company, but he should still look presentable, especially when he could possibly slam the door in an unwanted visitor’s face. When the Instructor opened the door, he saw a large, desert tortoise on his porch. The tortoise was cleaning his glasses. “May I help you?” the Instructor asked.

“Are you Mark Davenport?”

The Instructor could barely make out what the tortoise said. The tortoise sounded like a rusty hinge opening. “Who wants to know?”

“I’m an old college pal of his.”

“I never went to college with a turtle,” the Instructor said.

“Tortoise,” the tortoise said, and stuck his foot in the door.

The Instructor looked down at the tortoise’s foot. “What do you want? I’m very busy,” he said, and yawned.

“I have a proposition I think he’d be interested in,” the tortoise said.

“I’m not into bestiality – unless you count my last wife.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“Get to the point.”

“I need to get back to Arizona.”

“Well, go west young tortoise, I-40 is that way,” the Instructor said, and pointed towards Ferndale Boulevard.

“It’s not so easy when you’re my age. I’m no spring reptile, and I know if Mark were here, he’d help.”

The Instructor rubbed his chin, yawned and stuck his hands in his pockets. He wondered how long tortoises lived, and why he couldn’t remember ever having a class with a talking tortoise while at North Carolina State. “Well, you better come inside,” he said, and moved back so the tortoise could shimmy in – he almost didn’t fit, and the Instructor was worried that the tortoise’s shell would scratch the doorjamb.

The Instructor showed the tortoise into his study where he’d been grading papers. He sat down and offered the tortoise a drink, but the tortoise refused. “I guess you don’t smoke either.”

The tortoise shook his head.

The Instructor lit a cigarette, and stared at the tortoise through the smoke. “I’m sorry, but I can’t remember you from back in my college days. You did go to NCSU, right?”

“If it helps, we took Educational Theory together.”

“Honestly, I don’t recall,” the Instructor said, and put out his cigarette. He looked at the pile of exams, then at the tortoise and then at his empty glass, which his students had given him a few decades ago, before he was disillusioned. The Instructor licked his

lips, stood up and walked over to the bar. He tried to remember that educational theory class, but that was thirty-four years ago. He poured some whiskey in his glass, drained it, poured another, then poured another, then poured one more after that, and returned to his seat. He held the glass up to the tortoise and drained it.

"I can come back," the tortoise said.

"It's alright – I'm just mulling over this proposal. What exactly are you offering, and why do you need me?"

"Like I said, I'm not getting any younger, and I doubt I could complete the trip on my own. I've seen all I want to see – now it's time for me to go home."

"And your home's in Arizona?"

"Yes. I've been away too long. North Carolina has been good to me, but an educated reptile, like me, needs to return to his people."

The Instructor looked over at the bar again. He could use another drink.

"I need you to focus, Mark," the tortoise said.

"How do we do that?"

"We'll need a means of transport."

"You won't fit in a car – in my car."

"Then we'll need to contract with a local rental association?"

"I can't drive you across country," the Instructor said, and lit another cigarette.

"I need your help," the tortoise said.

The Instructor took a long drag, and then released, inhaling the smoke, keeping his body warm. He blew the warmth out of his body like he was exhaling his soul into the study's ceiling. "It just seems like a long way from here, and I have work."

“Please.”

“Tell me why, again.”

“Those other tortoises need me. You’ve been there, right? You’ve had a message or a mission at one point in your life that you needed to get out or else you wouldn’t be happy? That’s what we’re doing; that’s what I’m asking you to do for me.”

“Sure, but what about my job?” the Instructor asked, and put out his cigarette.

“Don’t worry about that. Are you going to help me or not?”

“It seems beyond my particular skills set.”

“I’m offering you a chance for growth.”

“I just don’t know,” the Instructor said, and scratched the back of his hand. He grabbed another cigarette, and opened his lighter. He looked at his reflection in the lighter. The cigarette hung from his lip, and there were lines scattered all over that he didn’t remember having. He put the cigarette and lighter down. “We’ve got a lot of work to do,” he said, and slapped the tortoise’s shell. Dust rose up and made the Instructor cough. He went to the bar, poured another drink and thought about how to word his resignation.

Shalimar pulled into the gravel driveway. She walked up to the house, almost falling over the uneven, white rocks, and knocked on the green door. The door opened, and a man in white boxers stood before her. His hair looked greasy. “Can I help you?”

“Is Carl White home?”

“What do you want with him?”

“Are you his dad?”

"Yes, ma'am, I'm Carl's daddy, but what's that to do with you?"

"Well, Mr. White, I met your son in California, and I thought I'd pay him a visit."

"Did he knock you up?"

"No – God, no."

"Don't take the Lord's name in vain. Didn't your momma and daddy teach you nothing," he said, and scratched his round belly. Shalimar watched him place a lock of hair in his mouth. He chewed on it and spat it out.

Shalimar looked away. "Is Carl here, Mr. White?"

"Nope."

"Well, do you know where he is?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Could you please tell me where he is?"

"Where'd you say you where from, Missy – California?"

"No, Mr. White, I met Carl in California. I'm from Idaho."

"What's a girl from Iowa want with my boy?"

"I'm from Idaho, Mr. White, and it's complicated."

"And he didn't knock you up?"

"No, he didn't."

"That's a shame," Samson said, and licked his lips, "because you sure are pretty."

"Excuse me?"

"Carl's gone to the mall – he was supposed to meet with his recruiter today, but he's probably messed that up as well."

"His recruiter?"

"You want to talk about complicated. My boy is going to join the Army just like I did – so, get," Samson said, and closed the door.

Shalimar stared at the door for a moment, and then walked back across the uneven gravel and drove away. She didn't know where the mall was, but she'd stop at a gas station and find out. Once she was at the mall, she'd finally uncomplicate things.

Ellie May thought she heard footsteps. She looked behind her – nothing but train track. She thought she should get off the tracks and take a break. The dust, the heat, and the humidity were playing with her mind. She was on English Road near Moon's Grocery. It was a convenience store, arcade and illegal gambling house. Her momma would sometimes take her here for a burger, and while Ellie May sat at the counter, her momma would go in the back. Ellie May would only catch a glimpse of the machines and the people, perched zombie-like before them, the bluish-white light of the screens flickering on their faces, feeding bills to the insatiable machines, and then her momma would disappear only to return with a flushed face and clammy palms long after Ellie May had finished her burger. This was where Ellie May remembered it starting with her momma.

She sat outside on a bench next to the payphone and watched the traffic go by. Ellie May was in one of the least populated areas of High Point. Old Thomasville Road wasn't very far, and she could take that to Thomasville, but that wouldn't be much different from where she was now. *Perhaps,* she thought, *I should get to the bus depot, and head off to Concord or Kannapolis or maybe Greenville?* Ellie May didn't know how much a bus ticket would cost. She breathed out and blew the hair from her face. She

felt sticky and didn't like it, but she knew she had to keep moving. If she followed English Road, she'd eventually get downtown, and then she could find out how much a bus ticket cost. She stood up, stretched and slung her backpack on. She looked up at the sky. A few clouds stained the sky. They reminded Ellie May of dark-blue chrysanthemums, which her momma used to grow around the edges of the house.

Johannah walked through her house inspecting for the slightest speck of dust. She had realized long ago that a clean house was the ticket to great sex. If her house was spotless then her mind could focus on her own orgasm, and simultaneously on the man she was with. Of course, outside of hunting for a man, her life was devoted to gold digging; she lived off those men: had married some of them, worked for some of them. Staying with or leaving them always came down to sex, and whether or not she was happy. The men eventually failed in one or both arenas. Ellie May's daddy had been the best. Before Ellie May, he had convinced Johannah to become part of his dream. He wanted to start a porn site with Johannah as the star. Johannah wanted to make Greg happy, she liked the idea of having a progressive man as a husband, but that was before the casting calls, and Greg put down the camera and banged one of the "head-liners," a girl named Brandy Sinclair. After that, Johannah couldn't go through with it. She stopped taking the pill, and allowed Ellie May to kill her happiness and Greg's dreams.

Satisfied with her inspection, she walked back to Ellie May's room. Ellie May had never stayed in her room this long, but the girl knew better than to come out. She had learned the hard way. Johannah had been riding a stallion of a man on the dining room table, and Ellie May came out in her Dora panties, and screamed. The boy had gone

flaccid instantly, and all the sweat on Johannah's body turned icy and felt like slime. *Get back to your room*, she had yelled. The boy grabbed his clothes and mumbled how he was sorry. She had stood there, naked in her dining room; her hands on her sultry hips, and watched him leave.

When Johannah opened Ellie May's door, she was surprised to find it empty, but she did not feel the maternal sinking of a child-gone-missing, but more of elation, like she had been exposed to helium or nitrous oxide – something lighter than the air she breathed. Johannah closed her daughter's door and went to her room. Missing daughter or no, she had to get ready for her golden goose. She picked out fishnet stockings, her finest black g-string, a jean mini skirt and a green blouse that showed her ample cleavage.

She looked at her trap, and sat on the bed. "How's a gal ever going to get laid with that girl running all over High Point," Johannah said, and threw her g-string across the room. It bounced off the bureau mirror, and Johannah looked at herself. "What am I to do indeed?"

Saunders checked his balloon basket. His vacation was almost over. Pretty soon the men from Rick's Meds would deliver his new balloon, and he would pull another tour. He thought this time around, he would masturbate while floating above the earth. That would be exhilarating, but not as fun as Johannah. She made his head dizzy. *What am I to do*, he thought, and threw the tarp back over the basket. He moved cinderblocks onto the tarp's edges. He patted the tarp, and walked back to his parent's house. He had to get ready to meet Johannah.

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Samson wobbled down the porch stairs. He had been drinking, which had triggered a flashback, which caused him to drink more. Soon he was sleepy and tottering, but had decided the garden needed weeding – only they had no garden. He blamed Carl, and raised his fist to the heavens for damning him to exist in an imperfect world. He beat his chest until it felt watery and cold, and his drunken howls walked the streets in search of homes to loot. He watched the sky for an answer, but there was only darkness, which threatened to fall on him except for a single pin point that seemed within his grasp, but only slipped away whenever he reached for it. Samson grabbed a garden hoe and struck the earth like the earth were Carl until he collapsed in a fit of rage, sweat, mud and tears, in the hole he had made, and fell asleep.

Carl walked up to the mall travel agency. Its stark, neon lighting was in the shape of a palm tree, and it flashed yellow and green. The word “open” curled inside a coconut that made up a painted beach scene that could have been the Outer Banks or Fiji for all Carl knew. Carl stared at the coconut, and tried to imagine how he would broach the subject of leaving the country. The church had arranged all the travel arrangements when he left for California. His youth pastor had handed out the tickets and told everyone to stick together and ignore the people in orange robes or anybody who tried to give them anything. It was unneeded advice, even though Carl and his group stood out in California, because no one had even looked at them when they arrived in LAX. He had hoped the Hare Krishnas would have been there, but there were none or at least none Carl had seen.

Carl walked in the office and a bell attached to the door tinkled. The lady at the desk looked up from her computer and smiled. She was Hispanic and Carl thought she

looked younger than he did. She was wearing a navy blazer with a pearl blouse and gray skirt. Her nametag said “Reyna” in gold letters.

“May I help you?”

“Well, I want to take a trip,” Carl said, and tapped the grey counter. He stopped, and looked into her eyes and then looked at the posters around the room. All of them described scenic and exotic locales—most of them in the South Pacific—which Carl thought explained the palm tree as their sign, but one of them was of Victoria Falls and another featured the Eiffel Tower, which was on the wall behind Reyna.

“Where would you like Crux-Rubicon Travel to send you, sir?”

“Crux-Rubicon? I thought you guys were in the warehouse business?”

“If you’ll forgive me, I’ve only been working for the company for about a month, but Jared, my boss, just gave me a promotion,” she said, and laughed.

Carl laughed, and touched his cheek. He looked past Reyna at the Eiffel Tower. It was a depiction of the tower covered in lights, surrounded by the lights of the city, and Carl wondered what anybody saw in such a sight.

Reyna cleared her throat. “I see you like our poster of the Eiffel Tower. Were you thinking of travelling to Paris?”

“I wasn’t sure. The truth is, I have never been out of the country, but I am about to graduate, and this is sort of a gift.”

“How sweet,” Reyna said, and touched Carl’s hand. “Where did you have in mind?”

“Saudi Arabia.”

“Are you pulling a prank?” Reyna asked, and rubbed her forehead.

Carl looked at her fierce, hazel eyes, and wondered if he should leave. “I’m serious about going.”

“You want to go over there?” she asked, and crossed her arms, which caused the shoulders of the navy blazer to almost engulf her head.

“Does your company go to the Middle East?”

“You sure you don’t want to go to Paris.”

“Just tell me if your company books trips to the Middle East.”

“Why do you want to go visit those sand niggers?”

“What?”

“You know, Muslims, rag heads, sand niggers, camel jockeys, etc., etc.”

“But I’m a Muslim,” Carl said.

“Honey, if you’re a Muslim then I’m Mother Teresa,” Reyna said, and crossed herself.

“I want to know how much it is to Saudi Arabia.”

“Okay,” she said, and typed something in her computer. She bit her lip, and looked up at Carl. “Waiting for it to finish ‘thinking,’” she said, and looked back at her screen. “Did you want one-way or round trip?”

“I don’t know – I guess one-way.”

Reyna placed her finger against her lips, and took in a long breath. She let it out, and crossed herself again.

“Well, how much is it?”

“I don’t know if I should tell you,” she said, and looked out the window into the mall.

“Why not?”

“You say you don’t like Paris – what about London?”

“I never said I didn’t like Paris. I said I didn’t want to go,” Carl said, and walked towards the door.

“Wait,” Reyna said.

Carl released the door, the bell tinkled, and he walked back to the counter. He looked into Reyna’s eyes. “What did you have in mind?”

“I’m sorry, really I am,” she said, and wiped her eyes with a tissue.

Carl held Reyna’s hand. She squeezed it, and then let go.

“If you’re still interested we offer a package that costs two-thousand and thirty-two dollars after taxes and fees. It’s through American Airlines,” she said, and sniffed.

Carl tried not to frown. He didn’t have anything near that amount, and he could never convince his daddy to relinquish any funds, especially if it meant Carl going to Saudi Arabia. He wanted to vomit.

He swallowed. “Let me think about it,” he said, and walked out.

The bell’s tinkle echoed in his ears as he raced for the nearest bathroom. He vomited in the sink and ran cold water, splashing it on his face and gargling with it. *I’m stuck here*, he thought, and turned off the water. He cleaned his face off with some paper towels, and placed his last piece of gum in his mouth. The minty flavor soothed his stomach, and he walked out of the bathroom and ran into a woman. She fell, and rolled on her back.

"Excuse me," Carl said, and adjusted his bow tie. He held out his hand, and the woman took it. Carl helped her off the floor, and then something started popping in his brain like a neuron had come loose. "Shales?"

"You do remember me," she said, and gave him a hug.

"What brings you out this way?"

"Honestly?"

Carl grabbed her elbow, and led Shalimar to a set of table.

"Do you ever think about our time in California?"

"What do you think I do to survive here?"Carl watched her blush.

She turned her face towards the food court. When she looked back, Carl stared into her eyes.

"I came here to be with you, Carl," she said.

"What?"

"But I know I am too late – You're leaving right?"

"How did you know?"

"I wish I had left Idaho sooner."

"It's okay, Shales – everything is going to be alright."

"Not if you get killed."

"Who said anything about getting killed? All I want is a vacation."

"Well, joining the Army is a weird way to go on vacation," Shalimar said.

"Why would I join the Army?"

"But your dad said."

"That's what my daddy wants me to do – he wants a legacy. I'm sorry you had to meet him that way," Carl said, and stood up.

"Where are you going?" Shalimar asked, and grabbed his arm. Carl thought her hand felt right on his arm, but he didn't know how to break it down for her – how to tell her that he wanted to leave the country.

"I need to tell you something," he said, and sat back down. He held her hand, and studied its minute details. Each vein was like a river that flowed towards her knuckles, cascading into slender, but strong fingers.

"You can tell me anything," she said, and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"My daddy's partially right," he said, and felt her grip tighten.

"You joined the Marines instead?"

"No—I want to travel to Saudi Arabia"

"What?"

"After our meeting in California, I became a Muslim."

"You're joking, right?" she asked, and let go of his hand.

"No, I was just in that travel agency over there," he said, and pointed.

Shalimar looked at the neon palm tree, and turned around. "When do you leave?"

"I didn't get a ticket."

Shalimar tried not to smile, and took Carl's hand in hers again.

Carl winced from the pain of her grip. "I still want to go," he said, and placed his head in his hands. He looked at Shalimar's feet. She was wearing plaid converse high tops, which made him smile. He looked back up, and grabbed her hands.

"Well, what's your angle," she said.

“My angle?”

“When we go to your dad and ask him for the money.”

“I can’t ask my daddy for money.”

“I’m not finished. You sell it like this: One: the money would be used to go to Idaho; Two: you’ll either start college within the year or join the Army,” she said, and clapped her hands.

“It won’t work,” Carl said. He could almost hear his daddy laughing.

Saunders knocked on the door. Flecks of white paint stuck to his knuckles, and he hoped they weren’t lead based. He hadn’t noticed that about the door when Johannah had brought him home the other night, but he hadn’t been looking at the door then. Her porch light was out as well – there was no bulb. He brushed the flecks off, and blew out what he thought remained of his nervousness. He didn’t know how he was going to tell Johannah that this was his last night; that he was leaving to peddle Rick’s Meds in the morning. He didn’t know what he would do without her.

“You’re just in time,” Johannah said, and shut the door after Saunders stumbled inside.

Saunders loved how she smelled. It was a cinnamon and light citrus smell like she had just cut a lemon. Saunders licked his lips; they felt chapped. “Just in time for what?” he asked.

“Oh, nothing – I don’t want to ruin the evening,” she said, and led him into the dining room.

He stiffened. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t want to be a bother,” she lied, and pretended to wipe a tear from her eye.

Saunders pulled a chair out for Johannah. She sat down, and he took a knee next to her. Her large chest pointed at his face, and he thought about ripping her blouse off, but shook the thought out of his head, and looked into her eyes.

“I don’t know how to tell you, but I need to tell you,” she said.

“What?”

“I have a daughter.”

“You have a daughter?” Saunders asked, and stood up. He felt dizzier than he had when he was covering his balloon. The room seemed to elongate before him, and Johannah became a blur until she placed her hand on his arm. He looked down at her, and she returned to focus.

“Well, I had a daughter.”

“What do you mean,” he said, and wiped his forehead. He looked into her eyes. They resembled golden light reflected off muddy pools, like the Yadkin River in summer.

“She’s run off, and I don’t know what to do.”

“What do you want me to do?” Saunders held in his breath, he didn’t mean for it to come out so harsh. He let it out, and placed his hand on Johannah’s shoulder.

She patted his hand, and looked down at the floor.

“She didn’t leave a note.”

“Is there anything missing?”

“Plenty, but that’s not important. She’s never done this before – left like this. Do I call the police or something?”

“Do you trust any of your neighbors?”

"Not really – there are the Nelsons down the road. I can't trust Kevin, but I don't think she went to a neighbor's house."

"We'll leave the police out of this," Saunders said, and pulled Johannah close to him. He was truly stuck, now. How could he leave with a little girl missing?

Johannah pulled away. "I guess we should start searching then?"

"Which way do you think she went?" Saunders asked, but all he could think about was flying away in his balloon.

Ellie May was more tired than she had ever been in her life. She was still kicking herself for having gone through her food supply as quickly as she had. Though her belly growled, she did not want to return home because it would ruin her plans. When she had arrived at the bus station, the ticket lady had refused to sell her a ticket or to suspend her disbelief about Ellie May's sick gramamaw. Ellie May had been forced to leave then or the ticket lady – Shaneequa – would have called the police, ruining Ellie May's plans. After that, Ellie May had swung back toward her house, and found herself in West End Park, which wasn't a bad thing except it was going to be dark soon, and she hadn't expected to be out-of-doors still by nightfall. She came out of the woods onto a red clay rise, and then she saw it, or what she thought she saw: the perfect hiding place.

She walked down the hill, and inspected her find. It was a blue tarp weighed down with cinder blocks. *But what's beneath the tarp?* she thought, and felt along the taut sections. She set her backpack down and pulled out the flashlight. She stared at the electric blue tarp with one hand on her hip, and wondered what she should do.

I'm sure whomever left this here wouldn't mind if I used it for the night. She put her flashlight away, and started moving the cinderblocks. Once, Ellie May had the cinderblocks off the tarp, which gave her a headache, she could see the brown wicker form of a large basket. The basket felt spongy, like steel wool, but once inside, she found comfort from the wind, and that's when she heard a scraping noise.

Kevin was the hunter. He had followed Ellie May, waiting for the perfect time. She would be his and only his; however, he was feeling the impact of a highly sedentary lifestyle. He thought he would take her in the woods, but she was too quick for him. And when he exited the woods on nearly the same rise as she had, he nearly yelled for joy, but he had come this far, and didn't want to spoil everything. He watched her messing with a tarp, and some cinderblocks, and he knew she would be his. *She's building a nest,* he thought, and caressed his erection. He could barely contain himself, and he jogged, nearly stumbling and rolling down the hill.

Ellie May peeked outside the basket, and saw Kevin lumbering toward her. He looked sweatier and greasier than usual. He stopped short of the balloon basket, and leaned his weight against it. The whicker creaked, and bowed in a u-shape depression.

Ellie may backed away from the basket.

"Glad I found you," he said, and coughed.

"Have you been following me?"

"No," Kevin said, and laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"Why don't you tell me," he said.

Ellie May shrugged her shoulders.

Kevin smiled, and smoothed back his hair.

“You scared the hell out of me running down that hill. There’s better ways to get a person’s attention without scaring them,” she said, and toyed with a loose weave in the basket.

“Well, I had to hurry.”

“Hurry for what?”

“I won’t lie – I have been following you.”

“I knew it,” she said, and stopped playing with the weave.

“It’s not what you think,” Kevin said, and put up his hands.

“What am I supposed to think?”

“It’s your mother. She’s worried about you.”

“My mother asked you to come looking for me?”

“Yes,” Kevin said, and smiled.

“That’s bullshit,” Ellie May said, and crossed her arms over what she thought were her budding breasts, but wouldn’t really develop until she was in college, too bitter and disillusioned to call her mother.

“You shouldn’t use that kind of language, young lady,” Kevin said, and pulled out his knife. “Why do little girls always have to be so difficult,” he said, and lunged for Ellie May.

Ellie May screamed, and dodged Kevin’s lunge.

He tripped on the tarp, and landed on a cinderblock.

Ellie May grabbed her backpack, and vomited. She wiped her mouth and put on her backpack. Kevin's inhuman moans chased her like wraiths as she ran through the darkness towards home.

Samson could hear the drill sergeants shouting for him to get up. He was cold and wet, and his back felt stiff against the hard earth. He didn't want to see the drill sergeants anymore, because he knew their snarling faces beneath those round browns. He knew they would devour his soul if he opened his eyes, and if they thought he was dead or near enough they would pass over him, and he could be happy. He shuddered, and tried to curl his body inward.

"Wake up, Daddy" Carl said, and shook Samson by the shoulders.

Samson opened one eye, and looked at his son. "Are they gone?"

"No one is here. Why are you in a hole?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're laying in a hole, Daddy – in the backyard."

"Oh," Samson said, and stood up. He brushed himself off, and stretched. "What are you doing home so late?"

"Have you been drinking?"

"Just a bit," Samson said, and belched.

"We need to go inside, I have to tell you something," Carl said, and guided his daddy up the stairs, and into the house.

"Did that girl ever find you?"

"Yes, Daddy, she's right behind you."

“Oh,” Samson said.

“Here’s the couch,” Carl said, and eased his daddy onto the teal cushions.

Samson landed with an *umph*.

Carl turned on a lamp, and sat down next to Shalimar across from the couch.

“I need you to focus, Daddy.”

“I think I may be dying, son.”

“It’s important,” Carl said, and looked at Shalimar. She patted his shoulder, and he looked back at his daddy. “What I’m going to tell you isn’t easy.”

“You know how I feel,” Samson said, and looked up at the ceiling.

“I’m not joining the Army, but...” Carl paused, but his daddy just stared at the ceiling. “...I’m offering another solution.”

Samson pointed a finger at his son. He stared back at the ceiling and rested his hand on his stomach.

“I have something better planned,” Carl said, and took Shalimar’s hand in his.

“What’s that, you want to dig for gold in my yard?”

“Mr. White, I have the best intentions for your son.”

“You’re nothing but a child – the both of you.”

“If you would listen to Carl – maybe you’d find out,” Shalimar said.

“That boy has nothing but moss in his head,” Samson said, and coughed. He wiped his hands on his shirt.

“I’m moving to Idaho, Daddy, but I need your help.”

“When I was your age, I didn’t need any help. Your grandpa gave me a boot in the ass, and where did I land?”

"Vietnam?"

"Fucking Kuwait City watching the damn oil fields burn. It was worse than tires burning – never knew if it was day or night, sometimes."

"We have a plan," Shalimar said.

"Moss, butterflies and cattails along the highway – all in your head," Samson said.

"If you send us to Idaho, I promise to either go to college by the end of the year or join the Army like you wanted me to."

"So, now you want to go to college – you're not good enough for the Army or for anyone in High Point, but you want to go to college? Why you're the king of Guilford County," Samson said, and slapped his knee. He laughed, which brought on a fit of coughing. When he stopped, he smiled, and wiped his hands on his pants. "You're not getting a dime from me."

"It doesn't matter. We'll find a way," Carl said, and stood up. Shalimar stood up, and hugged Carl. He took off his bow tie, and placed the blue, silky tie in his daddy's hands.

Samson looked down at the bow tie, and up at his son. "Wait," he said.

"What?"

"You can't just disappear – I'm making an investment, right?"

"Are you?"

Samson clutched the bow tie to his chest, and placed it in his pocket.

"I'll pay you back."

"I'm sure you will," Samson said.

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Kevin rolled over on his back. He tasted iron, and his mouth was dry. He had a dull pain in his head that made his eyes feel puffy. It was like a pen light in his peripheral vision. *I had been so close*, he thought.

"Get up," Kevin heard a voice say.

"Huh," Kevin said, and tried looking behind him, but all he could see was a pinpoint of light.

"That's right, get up."

Kevin scrambled on the ground like some monstrous vermin, and stood up. He removed his glasses, and rubbed his eyes. He was surprised to see an old man. "I was just leaving," Kevin said, and put his glasses back on.

"Don't lie to me," an old man said, and slapped his round belly.

Kevin patted himself looking for his knife.

"What are you doing?"

"Umm, nothing – I'll get out of your hair."

"Is that a crack?" the old man asked, and rubbed his head.

Kevin limped away, and stopped under a streetlight. He knew he couldn't go home, not now anyways.

Cars and trucks crawled across the great expanse of the Blue Ridge parkway. Among the headlights speeding into the dark around the curvaceous mountain roads and vast expanses of kudzu was a medium-sized rental truck. It's orange and gray surface was marred by road dust, bug splotches and the occasional scratch; however, in the dark of I-

40 it went unnoticed. The driver, a former pedagogical employee of Guilford County, looked out into the dark and wondered how his friend was doing. He had only travelled this far once, but that was many years ago. Up in the sky, many pinpoints of light cut through the darkness and gave the sky the appearance of a shattered window. His own headlights ate the surrounding darkness and seemed to propel him forward and away from North Carolina. The Instructor wondered if they would make it – as if their fate was in someone else's hands at that moment, and then he heard the tortoise shuffle and he knew things would be all right.

Ellie May thought about what had happened. She looked up at her cracked, white ceiling, and wondered what tomorrow would bring. *Would it matter if I told her*, she thought, and looked out her window at the dark, concentrating on the tiny points of light that she could see. Somewhere out there she thought people were racing in the night towards uncertain destinies. She thought about the tortoise, and hoped he had made it.

THE ITCH

Joe had felt the hands of cousins and uncles on his back; a mountain of father figures all culminating in weekend trips camping on Badin Lake or fishing at Oak Hollow after church. Joe would come home wet and muddy, and his momma would be waiting for him, barefoot on the cement porch. His cousins would wave bye as Joe stood there with his momma. He'd watch until the lightning bugs came out and his supper was cold. The trips never took the sting out of Walter's departure. None of that mattered now as Joe stared at the final notices scattered on the blue and white plastic tablecloth. The dining room's yellow light made it appear greasy, but it was something Joe had become used to. Under his left hand was a pile of lottery tickets – financial ventures that had failed. That was the only thing he wished he hadn't received from his father: the gambling itch. He looked at the oil bill, and wondered if he and Cheryl could survive the coming winter.

Cheryl, his wife, sat down, and sipped a cup of coffee. Occasionally, Joe would look up at her, and she would look away into the living room at her velvet portrait of Jesus on the cross. Joe hated that picture because it reminded him of his momma. It reminded him of her, because of her dedication to High Point First Baptist after Walter left. The church had done nothing for them; there was only a congregation of angry faces each week. Joe slapped the table top, and pushed away from the table.

"That's productive," Cheryl said, and set her cup on the table.

"What do you want us to do?"

“You can’t put your faith in the devil and expect to come out right,” Cheryl said, and stood up. She grabbed Joe by his shoulders.

Joe looked into her black eyes. For a moment, Joe thought he saw his momma in her face. “I don’t know how we can get through this.”

“Faith and hard work,” Cheryl said, and kissed Joe’s cheek. She held him, and then backed away.

Joe nodded his head. When Cheryl left the room, he picked up the lottery tickets. Tomorrow was Thursday, and he would have to go to work, and Friday as well, but Saturday was the drawing, and he would get a ticket and win the lottery. He could taste that money, and it tasted like molasses, which made his teeth itch.

Joe stood in front of the glass looking at each of the beverages. He could also see his reflection like it was a ghost. He reached for his reflection’s skeletal hand, and opened the door. The brisk air reminded him of summer when he would stand with the freezer open and a box fan blowing in the kitchen, and all through the house like a procession line of fans. Joe still found it hard to sleep without the hum of a fan, but Cheryl liked her bedroom warm even during the summer when the humidity seemed a living thing. Joe closed the door, and took his Coke to the front. He would be late today, but he didn’t care. He needed time to think before he went into Marsh, before he was stuck on the line and wrestling with furniture parts. Cynthia helped. Joe had rediscovered his elementary school crush at Marsh, and they had been taking breaks together whenever the opportunity came up. Joe wasn’t sure what her intentions were. He didn’t wear his ring at work, but it was one of the first things Joe had mentioned, and only because he knew

those break room walls had ears. Cynthia had never told him why she left, and he had been too busy with life struggling to climb out of the North Carolina clay to really think about her. Then Cheryl came into his life, and nothing else seemed important until Cynthia waved at him on the line one day. It was kites outside Oak Hill Elementary all over again.

Joe breathed in, and wondered what Cynthia thought about the lottery. He wondered if she would run away with him if he won Saturday. Joe shook his head at this thought, and set his Coke on the counter. He looked at the clerk. She was a young, Asian girl Joe had never seen before. He had been coming to this Philips 66 station every morning since he started work at Marsh five years ago.

She smiled at Joe, and he looked out at his truck. If he bought this Coke and a lunch today, he would have just enough gas to get to work and back. But he needed that ticket. He thought about his ghost, and wondered if it was worth it to skip another meal.

When you're a millionaire you won't have to worry about that, he thought, and pulled out his wallet. "How much was it?"

"Two-twelve, sir," she said, and flipped her hair out of her eyes.

Joe loved when women did that. Cheryl never did that anymore. "Lemme get a lotto ticket."

"How much?"

"One dollar quick pick."

"Comes to three-twelve," she said, and moved over to the machine.

Joe watched her punch in the numbers.

She handed Joe the yellow ticket.

He handed her the cash, and stared at the ticket. The numbers seemed to make sense in his head, like a set of tumblers rolling and Joe knew when and where they were going to stop. He looked back at the Asian girl, and she was surrounded by sunlight filtering through the door. Joe pushed through the doors. He'd have to hurry, but being late didn't matter, although it meant more points on his personnel record. *Cheryl won't be happy with that*, he thought, and looked at the ticket again. It was warm in his hand, and Joe decided he didn't care what Cheryl thought for once.

Joe sat in the break room and sipped his coffee. A bag of M&Ms was open on the dirty tabletop. The yellow bag stood out in the shadows, and Joe watched the door hoping no one would enter to disturb his moment. He looked out especially for line supervisors – being late this morning hadn't helped. Joe burped and felt the tepid coffee crawl back up his throat; he swallowed it back down and tapped his chest. He stood up and tossed the half-empty cup into the trash. The door opened, letting in the droning of the belt line, which returned to a low vibration like a bumblebee when Cynthia closed the door.

"I see you had the coffee," she said, and patted Joe on the shoulder. She was almost as tall as Joe was, and her red hair was cut close and kept frizzy by the humidity. She took off her safety goggles, and sat down in the bench chair. "I also see you're having the power lunch," she said, and pointed to the bag of M&Ms.

"Well, I'm trying to keep my girlish figure."

"I guess someone has to."

"Don't start."

"I'm just concerned."

“Concerned about what?” Joe asked, and rubbed the back of his head.

“I think you deserve better. Don’t you think?”

“I better go. I’ve got fifty-nine points.” Joe stood up, but then sat down. The truth was, he didn’t know, and probably never would. “I had a weird dream the other night.”

“You should be careful about dreams.”

“What do you mean,” Joe asked.

Cynthia sat there, bathed in the low light of the lounge, her hair, work shirt, and pants covered in sawdust and sweat. She was stretching her neck, her large eyes closed and long neck rolling back and forth.

Joe looked away. He turned back when he felt her looking at him.

“You should call me when you want to figure things out,” she said, and wrote her phone number and address on a napkin, and placed it in Joe’s hand. Joe felt something like a sting, as if he had touched an iron. She leaned in and touched his shoulder. He smelled sawdust mixed with figs and brown sugar, and he wondered if she could smell the mustiness he thought he smelled like, but then she backed away and left the break room, the door letting in the factory for a brief moment, and then closing it off once again.

Joe had forgotten that Friday was payday. So much money had been flowing out of his pocket that he stopped relishing payday. It had become just another day he was without money, and another day the mailman brought more notices. He coasted home after work, and washed the sawdust and sweat off with the backyard hose. The water stung, it always stung, but it kept him from tracking in sawdust.

He looked at his backyard, which had been his momma's. She had always kept a garden, but Joe let it grow over with poison oak, grass, dandelions and snake berries. He had no kids, and copper heads had as much a right to live as he did to breathe. Cheryl always took a hoe to them whenever she saw them anyway, and hung their bodies on the old woodshed that marked the end of his property. The rest of the backyard stretched off down a hill through a range of dogwoods, and ended in a white-graveled parking lot of the die-casting plant. Growing up, Joe had always watched the men and women scrabble across the gravel into the red-bricked building, and wondered if he would share their fate one day. Now, looking across the backyard that had been his momma's and was now his, he shivered and turned off the hose.

Inside, he toweled off and put on a pair of shorts. Cheryl stood in the kitchen against the stove, her back to him. Joe threw his towel in the hamper next to the large bin freezer, and walked in the kitchen making sure to dodge the ceiling fan.

"How was work?"

"Amen," Cheryl said, and turned towards Joe. She smiled, and hugged him.

Joe pulled back, but she held on, and kissed him. Joe broke her hold, and fell back into the washing machine. "What's gotten into you?"

"I'm just thankful."

"I could think of other ways to show gratitude," Joe said, and adjusted his shorts.

"Don't be vulgar, Joseph."

"Why are you thankful, then?"

"I was talking to Dewey today, and Janice is leaving," Cheryl said.

"Dewey?"

“He’s the office manager, but that’s not important.”

“What you want for supper?” Joe asked, and moved over to the sink. He turned on the water and took a drink from his hand. He wiped his hand on his shorts, and looked out through the curtained windows at the mud puddle he’d created around the spigot.

“Are you going to listen to me?”

Joe breathed out, and turned around. The sink rubbed his ribs, but he tolerated it.

“Janice is retiring,” Cheryl said, and grabbed Joe by the arms. She was smiling, which he loved to see because it brought out her eyes. Joe was speechless until she jostled him.

“I’m not sure,” Joe said, and grabbed Cheryl’s hands. They felt clammy, and he let them go, and looked at his own hands as if she had passed on some infection. All he saw was tanned flesh and calluses. He put his hands back at his sides.

“It means my prayers were answered – I’m getting a promotion.”

“Dewey said you were getting a promotion?”

“No, but I’ve been praying.”

“But did he offer you Janice’s job.”

“I told you faith and hard work was all we need, and I’m the hardest worker in my department. I deserve that promotion, and God is going to give it to me.”

“God hasn’t given us shit,” Joe said, and braced himself for the slap.

Cheryl walked out of the room, and Joe heard the creak of their bedsprings. He looked back out the window at the landscaping nightmare that was the backyard. Joe remembered the first year they were married. Money wasn’t important back then. Religion wasn’t important; although, in the end, that’s probably why he married her, but

not so she could save him. He didn't want to be saved – there was only the lottery. There were things he could do with that type of money. He watched the sun dip past the oak trees in Mr. Walker's yard. It was getting late, but this was his favorite part of the day: when the world died, and things slowly slipped into darkness.

From the position she sat on the couch, Joe knew Cheryl was still mad at him. She was watching television, and had been ignoring him all day, but that wasn't unusual. Joe had gone to see his momma's grave and Cheryl would have nothing to do with graves or cemeteries. "Don't disturb those sleeping souls," had been what she told him when they were only dating. Joe had reason enough to go. He wanted to show his momma the lottery ticket, and somehow infuse it with some kind of supernatural juju. In the dining room, now, Joe laughed, and patted his pocket where he'd placed the ticket and Cynthia's address. He walked out of the dining room.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"I thought I'd go hang out with the guys at Audrey's."

"Bunch of heathens. I'd suppose you'd be drinking, too?"

"Maybe one beer?"

"I don't like it—you know that," Cheryl said, and bit her lip.

Joe nodded, and felt the cold sweat trickle down his back.

Joe walked across the apartment complex parking lot. In the blurry, white light of the street lamps, Joe felt like the last person on earth until a car drove by. Joe looked at the red Taurus for a moment. When the car passed, he let out his breath, which came out

hot and sticky. The haunting scrape of its tires followed Joe up the sidewalk, and to Cynthia's apartment.

Inside, Joe was surprised to find the apartment nearly empty. The carpet was white and stained with indiscernible black spots. There was only a black futon and a television set on a milk crate in the middle of the living room. Joe could see through the living room to the kitchen and down a hallway, which he assumed led to bedrooms. There were no pictures on the faux wood paneled walls, and this surprised him because he had always thought of Cynthia as an artistic person – at least she had been when they were kids. The apartment was hot and stuffy, and Joe had trouble breathing.

"You should have a seat," Cynthia said from the kitchen.

Joe looked at Cynthia, and then at the dusty futon.

"It's okay, Joe, just sit."

"I'm not sure, Cynthia. Maybe I should leave?"

"Just sit," she said.

"I guess sitting wouldn't hurt anything, but I can't stay longer than a few minutes," he said, and sat on the futon. Joe looked at the TV. The news was on, and he licked his lips because he felt that tonight was the night he would be lucky in more than one way.

Cynthia laughed, and sat next to Joe.

"It's been awhile," Joe said.

Cynthia placed her leg against Joe's. It was smoother and darker than his. She leaned her body into his. "I remember when we used to fly kites at Oak Hill," she said.

“Does this couch really turn into a bed?” he said, and looked past her to see if they had announced the numbers yet, but Roy McCormick was still giving his weather report.

“I thought you had to leave?”

“I always believed Cheryl and I would be together forever,” Joe said, and leaned back against the cool fabric of the futon. The futon smelled like earth or pottery, almost like the creeks Cynthia and he had hunted for crawdads before she fell out of his life. He grabbed the pillow behind his head, and adjusted it to where he felt comfortable.

“Joe, I’ve been through two failed marriages, I live in the town where I grew up and work for a furniture company with one foot across the border. You know what I learned from all that?” She grabbed Joe’s hand.

Joe squeezed her hand, and looked at the TV. The balls were spinning, but nothing had spun on the screen.

“It taught me that you have to ask yourself what it is you want.”

“I never really thought about it that way,” Joe said, and watched the television. The white balls were rolling on the screen.

“Why live an unhappy life,” Cynthia said. She tapped his knee, stood up and walked down the hallway. Joe watched her heart-shaped ass until she disappeared through a yellow doorway. Joe stood up, looked down the hallway, which seemed darker now than when he had just been looking at it, and back at the TV. The final ball rolled on the screen, large and red, and Joe stared at the numbers – those six furies of fate that had ridiculed and eluded him all his life. He looked at the front. He felt watery – as if all his

guts had poured into his shoes. He whispered, “I can’t do this,” and walked out the door into the steamy night.

THE NIGHT SHIFT

In the morgue, the haze of dust, antiseptic and formaldehyde burns my nose. I shift my feet, feeling my toes rub against my boot's steel toe as each foot pops up from the sticky floor. It takes an effort, but I need to keep my knees loose. Our shift has just started, and there is already a dull throb behind my knee. I look up from the paperwork, and watch Lawrence, the new night shift guard, try to put the metal-slab gurney back in the cooler. He says this guy, Joseph Nelson, is a real mess: aortic dissection at 28. His point: all that's left with this unlucky bastard is the paperwork. Since it's his last night training, and my last night working, I have Lawrence fill out the paperwork. It's one of the things we do before escorting the body out of the hospital. We still have to cart the stiff from the floor. We throw a sheet over the deceased, and hold onto the side rails till we are in the service elevator. In the steel-walled elevator, you get the feeling that corpse is going to reach up from that gurney and grab you. Over the years, I spent a lot of time looking at my reflection in those elevator walls, watching it change like a time-lapsed photo. I knew once it stared back wrinkled and grey my time was up. I still never told anyone about Tera. Not in all those years, when I was thinking about things. It's when you get to thinking about things, like bodies rising from gurneys, the elevator dings and the doors open to the stark white floor tiles of the basement, and you push the waxen form under the sheet from the elevator towards the morgue and the freezer that will be its temporary home.

“Tell me what’s wrong with this?” I say, and hand Lawrence the paperwork. He scans it for a moment. I don’t think he’ll get it, but he looks up.

“I’ll take care of this, John.”

“You’re damn right.”

Lawrence leaves to go speak with the sixth floor nursing staff. It used to be easier. We didn’t need so many signatures or initials or triplicate forms. Dead bodies aren’t hard to deal with. It’s usually the first or second that are the hardest. Of course, it’s worse when a body is close to home. My sister, Tera was on a camping trip near Badin Lake when her kayak overturned in the Uwharrie. They Lifeflighted her out of the woods, and there was a point when we thought she’d make it; she spent three days in the ICU before I collected her.

Before 10 pm, we have to go into the Medical Office Building (MOB) and secure it. From the outside, the MOB is dark glass, lights and shadowed brick. On the inside, it is all beige wallpaper and reddish-gold carpeting. Ambient light comes from sconces strategically placed near the exits; they are shaped almost like torches, but are glass. Art, painted in neutral tones and washed out with fluorescent lighting, hangs on every wall, as if this were more a museum than a series of medical offices rented by doctors and nurse practioners.

“Are you going to tell me about yesterday’s incident?”

“It’s not a big deal,” Lawrence says, and jiggles another doorknob. “I should have known that prisoner patients require restraints.”

“That’s true, but you do know that. The cops dropped the damn ball.”

“Well, Dr. Flannigan had a point.”

“You don’t get it.”

“Don’t get what?” Lawrence says, and pauses in the hallway.

“You don’t understand how things work around here, newbie.”

“I’m starting to get an idea.”

“You don’t have a fucking clue. I wouldn’t have let that doctor crawl all over me like that.”

“Yeah, well some of us don’t have tenure,” Lawrence says, and continues down the hallway.

“Where do you think you’re going then?”

“Just shut up and help me with these doors.”

“Okay, but tell me why High Point Regional isn’t in the distant future for you.”

“Ever since my discharge, I’ve felt like I needed something bigger – don’t laugh,” Lawrence says. There was a stint before Lawrence came aboard when he served in the Army, and did underwater basket weaving or something more auspicious like that.

I nod, and cover my smile with my hand.

“I just think that this security thing is a step to something bigger.”

“What would that be?”

Lawrence leans against the wall, and places his hands on a fire extinguisher, checking the gauge to make sure it’s charged. He turns back to me. I am leaning against the opposite wall next to a portable AED.

“Fucking doctors,” I say, and we continue checking doors.

On the first floor, I see them out there by the park benches. Skateboarders, and my stomach tightens up, but they'll probably run as soon as they see us. I watch Lawrence go out the sliding glass doors. He yells at them, and they run off the property and into the night except for two. I watch Lawrence with these two, and feel for the scar grown over with almost white hair. The scar is thin, but there, and my hands go to my utility belt touching keys and searching pouches for items I know are already there. I wonder what would have happened that night had a guard like Lawrence been on duty or would it have mattered.

I touch the beige stairwell exit. The sign next to the door reads:

EXIT A STAIRWELL FOUR. NO ROOF ACCESS.

I push through the door slowly, and continue to watch from the shadows hoping I won't have to intervene.

"You kids forget how to read," Lawrence says, and points to the yellow, no-skateboarding-no-roller-blading sign posted on the sidewalk by the benches.

"Nope," one of them says. He is the only one standing and his brown hair covers his eyes, but doesn't hide the acne scars. He is shirtless with cargo shorts. He holds his skateboard against his body like a shield, but his friend just stands his board up.

"Then what are you doing here?"

"Look, man, we were just leaving," Shirtless says, and turns to walk away.

Lawrence grabs him by the arm and takes his skateboard.

"What the fuck, imitation bacon?"

"You're on private property, kid. I'm going to need your friend's skateboard as well until both of you are safely off the hospital campus."

“No way, man,” the other one says, and stands up. He is wearing jeans and a Quicksilver T-shirt. His hair is short, but colored green. Lawrence throws Shirtless at him and they collide, both kids rolling on the ground.

“Now, give me your board.”

“Fuck you,” Shirtless says from the ground. He wipes his face and spits dirt out of his mouth. Standing up, he puts up his fists and asks Lawrence for the board. I step out of the shadows and clear my throat. The skateboarders look over in my direction and Lawrence slaps Shirtless with his skateboard. The kid falls to the ground, and rocks back and forth holding his head.

“Oh, man, you done fucked up,” the other kid says, and lunges for Lawrence.

Lawrence places him in an arm bar and knees him in the face. Lawrence lets the kid go, and he stumbles into Shirtless.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“I was just instructing these kids that they are on private property.”

“Get them off the ground.”

“What?”

“Stand them up.”

Lawrence stands them up and I walk over to them as they are brushing themselves off. Shirtless has a glassy look in his eyes. I hand him his skateboard. “What are you two kids going to do?”

“I’m going to the hospital, ass face,” Shirtless says.

“No, you’re going to go to another hospital, understand?”

“We should call the cops,” the other kid says.

"Now, there you go being stupid out of season, boy. What's your name?"

"Evan, why?"

"Evan, you know what the police are going to do when they show up?"

"No."

"They're going to haul you and your friend off to the Guilford County Jail. As Officer Klein has told you already, you're on private property and I happened to witness you attack my fellow officer."

"But he hit us."

"If you had listened," Lawrence says, and moves forward.

I push him back. "Officer Klein, go secure the MOB and I'll take care of this."

Lawrence looks at me and goes back inside. The moon comes out of the clouds, and I can feel my pulse in the scar. The asphalt glitters while I stand in the shadow of these skateboarders. "Beat it," I say, and wait for the kids to leave. They stare at me and I focus on the street behind them. The skateboarders turn away and my stomach quits burning as I watch them walk up the hill towards South Main.

After the skateboarders leave, I tell Lawrence we need to wait. The streetlight buzzes, and it is almost 10:30. We still have eight-and-a-half hours until dayshift comes in, but we are almost to my favorite part of night shift. Lawrence crosses his arms, and asks what we are waiting on. I tell him the sprinklers, and I hear him blow out a heavy breath, but he doesn't leave. I tell him they are timed; they start outside the MOB, and move around the hospital campus in phases, almost like us. I hear the hissing that signifies the rise of the sprinklers, like nocturnal, mechanical flowers, and then another sound, like someone drowning or gargling. "Look over there," I say, and point at the

corner of South Main and Hospital Avenue, which is the boundary of the hospital's influence.

"What?"

"That geyser over there," I say, and hear Lawrence say *Oh* as he finally notices the small fountain of water squirting out of the ground.

"What do we do?"

"Call Maintenance – put in a work order."

"That's it?"

"Yep, pretty much. We've got to replace one of these heads at least twice a quarter," I say, and walk over to the bubbling geyser. I scan the bushes until I find it. I pick up the sprinkler head and shake it, but then put it back on the ground – Maintenance will need it. "Tell them it's on the front side of the MOB," I yell at Lawrence. He nods his head, and turns his back to me, one finger in his ear and the other ear covered by his phone. I think of Tera. The cuts and bruises criss-crossed over her face like a map. I think I didn't want to believe – the whole five stages mumbo jumbo, but I eventually stopped going to Oak Hollow Park. I just kept entering that elevator waiting for it to ding. I look back down at the sprinkler. My pant leg has become wet, the gray material dark, like granite, and I move away from the sprinklers. Lawrence hangs up his phone.

"Talk to me."

Lawrence scratches his nose and looks up at the moon, which is again covered by clouds.

"It's important to CYA, Lawrence."

"I know. You were there – you saw what those kids were doing."

“Did I?”

“Don’t give me that horseshit; you saw what those kids were doing, how they were acting on hospital property,” Lawrence says.

I cough, and stare at the hospital.

“How do you do this job?”

I stand beside Lawrence, and place my hand on his back. “I remember when I used to ask that same question, but then I found my niche in this hospital.”

“But the highlight of your shift is watching these sprinklers.”

“And what’s wrong with that?”

“I used to believe there was more to life—that there should be more,” Lawrence says.

The sprinklers stop hissing and go into hiding again – their job done.

“I don’t know, Lawrence, how is beating a teenager going to bring more to your life?”

Lawrence grabs his pager and holds it up to the streetlight’s light, and then places it back on his duty belt.

“We never used to have these pagers. There was a time when the hospital didn’t need security. We evolved out of the information desk, the hospital’s need for first-responders and catch-all-Morlocks – basically gorillas with badges. I think the nineties made security more respectable, or it could have been this generation – those kids you beat. They’re going to be running things, and that’s about the only thing that scares me anymore.”

“I never thought about it that way,” Lawrence says.

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Inside the security office, I open my teal locker and close it, and open and close it again. I don't need anything from it; I emptied it earlier this week. Lawrence is sitting, his back to the computer, and staring at the false ceiling.

I look at him for a moment, and then turn my attention to the cameras. "Did you ever write that report?"

"Yes," he says, his face still pointed towards the ceiling.

"Good, because Kevin would have a shit fit if that report wasn't done."

Lawrence spins in his chair, and then stops with his back to the computer. "It's done," he says, and rubs his chin.

I tap the counter, and run through the cameras one more time.

Lawrence clears his throat.

I look over at him, but he is only staring at the ceiling again.

"I'm looking forward to these quiet evenings," he says.

The burning in my stomach returns. "Don't ever say the 'Q' word, newbie – didn't I teach you that?" I say, and look at the cameras while holding my breath. They flicker through a series of hospital images – mostly darkened waiting rooms, a lobby in the MOB. I slowly exhale. Lawrence may be right for once, and then my pager goes off: *COMBATIVE PT, EMERGENCY CENTER STAT*.

Lawrence is a rocket of burgundy and gray polyester – his keys jingle as they slam against his nylon utility belt. He holds onto his radio, as do I, but the radio still rattles in its cradle. I don't have time to catch my breath, and Lawrence is through the

stairwell door – even though I am taking two steps at a time. My knees burn with each lunge, but I am through the battleship gray door, and into the hallway that leads to the Emergency Center. I can see Lawrence's back and I inhale deeply, and rush after the FNG.

I hear the yelling before I enter through the double doors that separate the main hospital from the emergency department. I pull on a pair of latex gloves and push through the doors. In the middle, by the nurse's station, standing on the dingy, speckled tile with burgundy and gray borders is a short, middle-aged man in a hospital gown. He has failed to tie the strings, his ass exposed. He is boxed in by Lawrence, Kate, the charge nurse, and a CNA named Rusty. The patient yells at Rusty and Kate. Everyone has their hands up at chest level, and I slip in beside Lawrence and whisper for him to never do that again. He shakes his head like he has a fly in his ear.

"I want to go smoke," the patient says.

"Sir, you can't smoke on hospital property," Rusty says, and then looks at Lawrence and me.

"Then, I'm getting the fuck out of here."

"You need to go back to your room, sir," I say, and block his path, stepping in front of Rusty.

"Get out of my way," the patient says.

"We can't let you leave," I say, and motion for Lawrence to stand next to me.

"What are you doing?" the patient asks.

"We're here for you," Lawrence says.

I can feel my eye twitch and the pulse in my scar returns.

“The hell you are,” the patient yells, and swats at Lawrence.

“Stop doing that,” Lawrence says, and grabs the man’s arms.

“Don’t,” I say.

“Call the police,” the patient says.

Lawrence looks around. The EC is silent, except for the hum of the overhead lights, which seem to push down on all of us until Lawrence lets go, and steps beside the patient.

“Sir, you have two options here,” I say.

“Fuck your options. I’m going to sue this place. Don’t you know who I am? What’s your name – I’m going to need everybody’s name.”

“I’m Officer Geist and this is Officer Klein,” I say, and point to Lawrence. The patient looks at Lawrence, and smiles. “Now, I need you to return to your room or we’ll have to restrain you.”

“You can’t keep me here,” the patient says, and waves his arms in the air.

There is a moment where I feel this pull – like the situation could go either way. It feels like a shock, like when you know the person on the gurney is dead, but you are still waiting for them to come out from the sheet. I stare into this patient’s eyes and I feel, for this one moment, that he is going to swing, but he lowers his hands, and I take him by one arm and Lawrence takes the other. We walk back to his room, and hold him down as the medical staff gives him ativan and a warm blanket.

“We good, Kate?” I ask.

She nods, which causes her blonde hair to cover her face. She moves it out of her eyes, and types something in the patient's chart. I tap Lawrence on the arm; we leave the EC and make a round through the main hospital floors.

Around twelve forty-five, Lawrence and I go back to the office to eat lunch. I open the mini-fridge, which is cluttered with plastic Wal-Mart sacks full of plastic containers and water bottles. I pull my sandwich and twinkie out, and grab a Coke.

"That crap'll kill you," Lawrence says, and places his frozen meal in the microwave.

"No worse than them frozen meals. Salisbury Steak tonight?"

"Turkey cutlet."

I take a bite of my sandwich, chew it slowly and say, "So, what were you – infantry?"

"Army Linguist."

"Oh," I say, and take another bite. I look at the clock. Not that time matters. Security is supposed to always be ready and available. The microwave beeps and Lawrence pulls his meal out. It slaps against the desktop, and he sticks his fingers in his mouth. "Be careful, that's hot," I say, and finish off my sandwich. Lawrence picks at his rubbery turkey with a plastic fork, and the office is quiet except for the scrape of Lawrence's fork and the hum of the CCTVs and server. I toss what was left of my lunch in the garbage, which needs to go out, and say, "So why'd you get out?"

Lawrence wipes his mouth and looks up at me. "I just thought it was time to go – I had put in my time."

"Another stepping stone, huh?"

"Kind of like that. I had served in Iraq and Afghanistan, and I was done."

"So are you glad you're out?"

"No, you put it best – the Army was a stepping stone for me."

"You thought about being a translator?"

"I'm done with that," Lawrence says, and pushes the plastic tray away from him. He rubs his fingers against the warm spot where the tray had been, and then looks back at me. There is something in his brown eyes that I can't put a finger on, something like choppy, brown water on a winter day, and I don't like it. I cough, and Lawrence's brown eyes change back to normal. He finishes off the gray turkey meat and greenish gravy.

"You going to eat your brownie?" I ask him.

"I told you that stuff will kill you," Lawrence says, and tosses the tray in the garbage. He stands up and stretches. I yawn, and tell him that we should do another set of patrols. He nods his head, and we leave the office.

By two am, we have patrolled the floors including the basement. Sitting at our first floor kiosk, I watch Lawrence; his head rolls back and forth like he has a broken neck. Every so often, he startles himself and almost falls out of the chair. I laugh and say, "Why don't you go in the bathroom and splash some cold water on your face." Lawrence stands up, and walks into the bathroom. I think I won't miss these long nights, but I don't know what else I will do. I can never look at an elevator as normal – it is more than a means of transport. My pager goes off: *OUTGOING TWENTY-FIVE*. I whisper that it's

about time, and walk into the bathroom to tell Lawrence. He is leaning against the sink with the water running.

"Mortician's here."

He turns off the water, dries his face and we walk down to the basement to grab the paperwork.

Outside, the mortician has parked his maroon van on the oil-stained ramp near the basement side entrance. Darryl is the mortician. He is a tall man with thinning, blonde hair and he always wears sunglasses. Darryl is standing outside his van with the gurney and its grey, quilted cover. I have always thought those gurneys too rickety to carry the dead, but they work even on some of the more obese cases.

"Evening officers," Darryl says, and walks toward us with the gurney.

"How's your night, Darryl?"

"Same as usual, John – sleeping till they called me."

Lawrence opens the door, and Darryl and I walk in.

"Who's the new guy?"

"Darryl, this is Lawrence. Lawrence, Darryl," I say, pointing to each of them.

"He teaching you everything he knows?" Daryl asks Lawrence.

"Yes, sir."

"Probably the quickest school you ever been to, huh?" Darryl says, and laughs.

Lawrence scratches his head, and we continue to walk through the basement to the morgue.

"Which cooler was he in, Lawrence?"

"Two," he says, and opens two.

Darryl pulls the metal gurney out, and we all stare, for a moment, at the gray husk of a man with bulbous veins on his baldhead.

"Let's load him up," I say, and put on a pair of gloves.

Lawrence and Darryl follow my lead, and we slide the body of Gary Mason from our metal gurney to the mortician's. Darryl zips up the quilted cover, and we get one last look at Mason before he is nothing but a gray slab of quilted material. I sign the paperwork, and hand Darryl his copies, and we walk him out to his van. He slides the gurney into the back of the van and slams the door. He yawns, and I tell him to have a safe night. Lawrence and I watch him drive off, and we go back in the hospital.

Inside, we swing by the EC. The patient, Charles Sanders according to Rusty, is still in his room, sleeping. I tell Lawrence we need to make a final walk through, but then my pager goes off: *UNLOCK FIRST FLOOR COMM CLOSET FOR IT*. After I unlock the closet for Lisa, I call Lawrence and ask him to meet me on the sixth floor for a final check before five.

In the office at five am, I look at Lawrence—he is focused on the computer, writing his log—and then at the CCTV, but nothing has changed. The hospital has finally calmed, but will soon fluster again with the influx of dayshift personnel. This is my least favorite time on night shift, the calm before the dayshift storm. It is the single, longest hour before we actually have to do anything. I look back at Lawrence and see myself for a moment. I see the John that took this job and thought he would never be here longer

than he needed to – High Point Regional was going to be my stepping-stone to greatness. I sit down and clear my throat.

Lawrence swivels in his chair and looks up at me. “Looks like you made it.”

“Looks like it,” I say, and run through the cameras one more time, but nothing is happening in the hospital. I look back at Lawrence’s waiting, angular face. Underneath the fluorescent, office lights, he looks pasty like a corpse. I blink and rub my eyes. My pager beeps: *LIFE FLIGHT ETA TEN MINUTES, TRAUMA ONE*. I tell him I will handle the morning unlocks. He logs off and leaves the office. I look at the empty office and it seems louder like I can hear each stroke of the clock’s second hand and feel the vibrations of the server that is in the communication closet in the hall next to our office. “Screw the unlocks,” I say, and leave.

At the helipad, which is basically a piece of raised asphalt that has been paved over, painted with a large, white “H,” fenced in and provided with a ramp for transport, I meet Lawrence. He takes his earplugs out and asks me what I am doing here.

“It’s my last helicopter,” I tell him, and pull a pair of earplugs out of my shirt pocket.

“What about the unlocks?” Lawrence asks, and sits on the gurney.

“They’ll still be there after the helicopter,” I say, and put my earplugs in.

“Kevin isn’t going to like that.”

I take a deep breath of the warm, muggy early morning air and let it out. I shudder for a second in the gray shadows of pre-dawn High Point and look to the mirrored glass windows of the main hospital. They are black now, but then the sun begins to peak and they catch the sun’s light.

The distinctive *thrum-thrum-thrum* of the helicopter's rotors matches my own heartbeat. I grip the handles of the gurney and close my eyes, waiting for the rush of air that signals its landing and the arrival of another patient to High Point Regional. I can feel the warmth of the sun and smell the engine exhaust as I am wrapped in a column of air, which whips through my uniform. I open my eyes and watch the skids of the blue and white copter touchdown. It looks like a bug, like a dragonfly on steroids, but I am waiting for the pilot to shut off the engine, bringing the rotors to a stop, which is our cue to move forward. I look back towards the Emergency Center and watch the nurses and doctors scramble out of the ambulance bay towards the helipad. It is a wave of scrubs and lab coats rushing to fulfill an oath to "do no harm." I hear the whine of the engine being killed by the pilot. Lawrence and I push the gurney up the ramp, and individuals more skilled in dealing with situations like this join us. I watch the rotors slowly spin until they stop, and we enter the helipad, fading into the sunlight that has lit the hospital on fire.