

LAND OF ENTRAPMENT

by

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## ABSTRACT

“Land of Entrapment” is a colloquial pun on the state motto of New Mexico, “The Land of Enchantment.” Though not every story is set in New Mexico, all of these stories examine characters trapped by something. In some cases, it’s drugs or terminal disease, while in others, characters are manacled by their emotions and feelings. In almost every case, the characters are haunted by their past, an inextricable part of their story, their existence. The narratives explore how these characters cope with their inescapable past while under some kind of duress, and find that the space between acceptance and despair is not easily delineated.

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## SOME PLACE STILL AND WIDE

Had he lived to adulthood, Martin Campos might finally have been correctly diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome. But in 1991, the term wasn't even in the DSM yet, and everyone thought Martin's wild stories and outbursts were just part of an overactive imagination, on account of the other problem with his heart. When, in the third grade, Martin explained that the cat he'd seen lurking in the janitor's closet was really a robot housing microscopic monsters that were, at that very moment, planning to take over the cafeteria and poison the supply of Pepsi, as the reason he had thrown a tantrum and interrupted Mrs. Castaneda's review of the week's vocabulary words, she simply smiled, twisting the ruler she gripped behind her back, and asked Martin for more details, which he eagerly supplied and which she followed only slightly.

She, like Martin's other teachers, felt it was alright to indulge him a little. Martin had enough problems already. Born with an underdeveloped half of a heart, *Hypo-plastic Left Heart Syndrome*, and more likely to die from more open heart surgeries than recover, Martin's best chances were to avoid strenuous activity, take the low-dose prostaglandin prescribed to him, and hope for the best. Sure, his behavior was intrusive and even

annoying, but what could they expect from a kid who never got to just go run around outside? And since their school was too underfunded at that time for separate Behavior Disorder classrooms, the faculty mostly looked the other way. Martin was never violent or aggressive towards the other students.

Restricted from recess and Phys-Ed, Martin would spend the breaks reading the classroom's Britannica or narrating plays of violence, acted out on the arts and crafts tables with his muscular action figures, which he alone was permitted to bring daily to the classroom.

There turned out to be a real stray in the janitor's closet, resplendent with fleas, which were also discovered on Martin, along with scratches on his hands, which led to industrial shampoos and an excruciating set of rabies shots, which Martin, like every other injustice dealt him by the universe, handled with preternatural grace. Pain, doctors, long hours of nothing to do were just a regular part of life, to Martin. The distress signaled to him by adults, in their stammering voices and bloodshot eyes, left him puzzled. Martin felt bad for them. He wished he could make them understand that he was, in fact, a happy child.

But in the fifth grade, things changed for Martin. His teacher, Mrs. Rosenblatt was uninterested in extending him the usual deference of Martin's previous teacher's had. She believed in discipline, pure and simple, which she regulated with a demerit system she called "Color Chips." At the beginning of the school day, every student was issued a painted cardboard square. Each day of the week corresponded with a different color. Minor disruptions, such as speaking out of turn, were given a warning. More serious infractions, like failing to bring your homework, or playing fart-songs with an underarm,



meant an immediate forfeiture of that day's color chip. At the end of the week, Mrs. Rosenblatt collected the remaining squares, using the totals to compose a handwritten conduct note for the students' parents. By way of reward, she gave those students with no more than two missing color chips an extra recess on Friday. Those missing too many squares were sent to detention, which was really just the cafeteria, to be supervised by Cruz, the janitor.

Recess, of course, meant nothing to Martin. He'd spent his whole life in detention.

Most Friday afternoons, Martin spent in the cafeteria. Most often, he was alone. His peers had grasped the system better than he. Occasionally, Lelani Stoltzfus, who had an affinity for cursing, would be his compatriot in punishment. Though Cruz would never scold them for talking, Martin kept his head in his book when she tried to whisper to him or when she flicked notes to him from across the table. She was, of course, pig-nosed and smelly and had pimples and *a girl*, but she made Martin flutter something awful in his chest, something that made him feel like there really might be something wrong with him. Even more strange, it felt wonderful.

By the spring, and three Parent-Teacher conferences later, Mrs. Rosenblatt was at the point of exasperation. Martin was taking choir that spring, something she initially encouraged, until Martin took to practicing all the time, throughout the rest of the school day. Despite his lovely voice, his strange songs were a constant disruption to her classroom.

Martin could have cared less about Mrs. Rosenblatt, but the way his mother regarded him as he brought home week after week of dissatisfactory conduct reports

bothered him. She was on his side, he could tell, but he knew in some way he was disappointing her. Martin resolved to try his best to keep his stories, his songs (which, if Mrs. Rosenblatt listened carefully, she would understand were the soundtrack to the epic sci-fi adventure he was composing in his head), to himself.

By May, he'd brought home three good reports in a row, and his parents were so relieved they offered to take him to the UFO museum in Roswell, something he'd been begging for ever since he'd brought home the first good report. They were already planning on travelling to Roswell at the end of the month for a family wedding, and if Martin could finish out the year without any problems and behaved at the wedding, they'd go to the, as Martin now claimed it was, "world famous" UFO museum as well.

During that time, even though Martin had earned the extra recesses, Mrs. Rosenblatt couldn't let him loose on the playground, so instead she brought him a book from home. "I thought you might like this," she said when she handed the book to Martin. *The Truth: Roswell 1947*. On the cover was a black and white photograph of a man in a uniform, bent over what looked either like a blanket made of silver or some kind of wing.

Martin had taped the old *War of the Worlds* movie last summer, and since then he'd been obsessed with aliens. The majority of his disruptions in Mrs. Goldblatt's classroom were, in fact, concerns about some kind of alien invasion. Martin had watched and rewound the movie so many times it was unwatchable—the tape had been stretched so much that after every few seconds of playback, the tape lurched ahead in fast forward, making all the dialogue sound as if it were being sung by Alvin and the Chipmunks.

Martin didn't mind, though. He'd already memorized every scene, every line. He'd started watching other sci-fi shows on television, *The X Files*, *Star Trek The Next Generation*. But until Mrs. Goldblatt brought him the book, he had no idea about Roswell.

Each week he earned an extra recess, Mrs. Goldblatt brought him the book, which Martin poured through. The book claimed there were advanced creatures from other worlds living among us today. Some might even be part of the government. As Martin read, he felt like these were things he didn't quite know but had sensed, and the book was an affirmation. It took every ounce of his will to keep his excitement inside as the last few days of school ran out. Finally, the fifth grade was over and soon Martin would be on his way to Roswell.

*Accompanied by his parental stewards, the Dr. Campos, space-explorer, geologist, and ninja, races towards the scene of the crime, fifty years later, certain to discover the truth about the alien invasion of Roswell that began in 1947, Martin narrated to himself. He found that his stories made most sense inside his head. Whenever he tried to speak them, they became a jumbled, frustrating mess, and his voice would get too excited. Writing them down was a little easier, but sometimes the shapes of his cursive got confusing, blurring on the page, resembling some ancient and forgotten hieroglyphs. Their primitive vessel is at top speed, internal temperatures are rising, hull may be compromised. The parental stewards are unaware of the true nature of the mission. Soon, all will be revealed.*

“Who gets married in June?” his father asked from the driver’s seat. “In New Mexico?”

“Lots of people. My parents were married in June,” his mother said.

“I mean outside. Who gets married outside?”

The heat had come on sooner than normal that spring. The desert has two seasons: windy and inferno. It was the inferno part of the year. Though the A/C was blasting, Martin’s father was beading sweat. He’d been called into his office unexpectedly that morning, and now they were well late in getting on the road, fully dressed in their formal clothes, shooting across highway 285, across the expanse of Sonoran badlands pock-marked with stubborn mesquite bushes.

“Don’t get another ticket,” Martin’s mother said.

“We’re fine,” Martin’s father said flatly. Then added, “They’ll wait for us.”

Martin’s mother sighed and looked out the window.

*Mission in jeopardy. Parental Stewards unaware of crystals in vessel’s cargo bay. Captain Campos disengaging safety features for space-walk to investigate bay.*

Martin undid his seatbelt and climbed over the backseat of the SUV, where the wedding gift with white bows sat, and began undoing the paper.

“Martin,” his mother said, “what are you *doing*? Son, get out of there.” *Captain’s Log: Attempt to recover crystals failed. Make note to reprimand Parental Stewards during mission debriefing.*

“Martin, get back in your seat,” his father commanded. While turning his head around, Martin’s father veered to the shoulder. There was the crescendo of the rumble strip. Martin cowered in the rear, covering his ears. He’d always had incredibly sensitive

hearing. *Ship's hull integrity compromised by sound weapon of unknown origin.*

*Condition Red.*

Martin's father righted the vehicle. The gift tipped over with a gentle thud. "C'mon son. We're almost there," his father pleaded. Martin climbed back over the bench, strapped himself in, and was silent.

"At least we didn't get them anything fragile," his mother said.

They were late. The wedding was being held outside on the lawn of his Uncle Randy's home, nestled in between two long pecan orchards. The trees lent some shade, but the priest was not spared, having to continually stop and wipe his glasses during the vows, which he was well into by the time Martin and his parents found their seats on the back row of the bridegroom's side.

Martin looked around and could not spot any other children. From under one of the trees in the distance, he could hear the softened wail of an infant. Most of the attendees looked like geezers, men with silver hair or balding heads reddening in the sun, women with wrinkled arms underneath large hats. It wasn't that Martin didn't like his family; he hardly knew them. He just found most adults to be dull. Then he saw her. The bride's maid standing next to his cousin's future wife.

Lelani Stoltzfus she was not.

Martin was entranced. After a while, she noticed Martin staring at her from the back and she winked. Martin blushed and ducked behind the old woman in the chair in front of him. Finally, the ceremony finished and everyone made their way to the barn for the reception.

The barn was divided in two, with small round tables and chairs on one end, a bar and larger tables with steaming food on the other. There was a space for dancing and a DJ playing that kind of music Martin hated, with all the violins and accordions. Martin found his parents and accompanied his mother to the line for food. Martin was nearly dizzy with hunger. His father made for the bar and disappeared beneath the shoulders of other tuxedoed men. Above the noise, Martin could hear his father's voice saying things like, "Shit, no," and "*Put a la madre,*" and his father's distinctive laugh, like twigs snapping. Martin looked toward his mother to see if she'd heard, but she only piled brisket onto his plate.

There were speeches and dances. One of his cousin's friends stood with a microphone and told stories that were funny to everyone but Martin. The bride danced with her father. Martin thought she must be pregnant or really fat because her stomach stuck out like she was hiding the huge globe from Mrs. Rosenblatt's classroom underneath her dress. It seemed strange to Martin that there were no other children around. Maybe their parents had left them at home. Maybe they'd left them at the UFO museum, which was certainly cooler than being at his uncle's barn with all the speeches and dances.

Once his mother was distracted by chatter with some of the other women at their table, Martin made his escape.

*Mission delayed by primitive ceremonies. Scout surrounding area in meantime.* Martin wandered between the adults, some dancing, others grabbing their knees in laughter. In one corner he found a table with cookies and treats. He ate some and stuffed

others into his pockets. All after scanning them with his tie, to make sure they were safe for consumption, of course.

“What have you got there, little man?” Martin looked up and saw her, the bridesmaid, more radiant than ever. It was now into the evening, and the DJ’s lights outlined her shape with a glowing blue aura. “Don’t eat too many,” she said. “You’ll end up a *gordito*.”

Martin wasn’t sure what to do, so he offered her his tie. She laughed and took it from him, then tied it around his head. “May I have this dance?” she asked. Martin shook his head yes and took her hand.

She led him to the dancing area, and showed Martin where to place his hand on her hip, taking his other hand in hers, although he was barely taller than her waist. “I’m Olivia. What’s your name?” Martin looked up and then away. He was too embarrassed to say anything.

She led him slowly in a circle, making sure not to bump into the other couples languidly swaying to the music. The singer went on and on, signing lyrics Martin didn’t understand. Adults liked the weirdest things, Martin thought. Even though the music was far too loud, even though this whole wedding and reception were seriously delaying his mission, Martin felt pleased to be dancing with Olivia.

The DJ announced that the next song would be the Chicken Dance, and that everyone needed to get out there and shake it. Martin made to go find his mother, but the Olivia stopped him. “Here,” she said. “Just watch me. Do what I do.”

Watching the Olivia was quite alright with Martin.

The guests formed an oval around them, and Martin mimicked Olivia's every move, until the tempo of the music became too fast for him to keep up, and he had to make up his own moves, which she in turn tried to imitate. There were cheers from the crowd of adults. As the song ended, Martin's mother came over to the two of them.

"Ok, I think that's enough dancing," his mother said.

"He's just adorable," said Olivia. Martin was sweating. Though all the doors were open, the barn was stuffy with a mixed aroma of alcohol, food and conflicting perfumes.

"Wait until you get your own," his mother said. To Martin, she seemed upset. She wouldn't even even make eye contact with Olivia. "Let's go take your medicine," his mother said, bending down to look at him.

"Thank you for the dance, Martin." She knew his name! Martin nearly swooned.

"When are we going to the museum?" Martin asked as they walked away. His mother said nothing, retrieving the orange bottle from her purse and opening it, handing Martin his pill. The entire time she didn't move her gaze from the dance floor, where Martin's father was gyrating with the Olivia. His father was laughing so loudly it seemed like the branches of an entire forest were splitting in two.

Martin woke to the sounds of his parents arguing in hushed voices. He didn't remember getting in the car. He must have dozed off in his Uncle Randy's barn. His mother was driving. His father had his head out of the open window, like a dog catching a breeze.

"Jesus, Michael. After all this time. How embarrassing."

"It was just a few dances," his father said. Martin continued to feign sleep.



“And a kiss.”

“I’ve had a few too many,” his father said. Then after a moment, “It was only a peck.”

“It was a kiss.”

“We go way back. You know that. She’s like my sister.”

“That doesn’t make things any better. That makes them weirder.”

“Can we just forget about it?”

“I’m going to see Sandra. At the museum? She’s Olivia’s mother. And she saw the whole thing, too.” Martin had never heard his mother sound so angry at his father, or anyone, for that matter.

Martin opened his eyes a little more. His mother was driving quickly. The orange street lights of Roswell whipped by in the windshield. The lights reminded Martin of the alien ships in *The War of the Worlds*, with their distended necks ready to disintegrate foolish humans with fiery rays. He started making the sounds of laser blasts each time they passed under one of the lights.

“Your son is awake,” his mother said.

“Are we going to the museum now?” Martin asked.

“Tomorrow, Martin. Tomorrow,” his mother said.

“But I heard you say--”

“Tomorrow.”

By the time they reached their hotel, Martin was asleep again. Against his mother’s protests, his father clumsily carried the boy up the stairs, into the room, and gently set him on the bed.

Martin was up early the next day. *Mission reaching critical phase. Captain Campos must activate parental units.* His mother had slept in the same bed as him, and after some nudging she woke and went to shower. His father snored in the other bed, covers pulled up so that Martin could only see the top of his dark hair.

While they drove to the museum, Martin reviewed what he knew from Mrs. Goldblatt's book: The original spacecraft was there. The autopsy had taken place there. If there were aliens living among us, *case and point: Mrs. Rosenblatt*, plotting to take over the world, everything would originate there. But then why would she have given him the book on Roswell, if she was an alien herself? *Unknown. Proceed with caution.* Martin decided it was up to Captain Campos to uncover the conspiracy, save humanity, and if possible, run away with Olivia.

Martin had imagined a towering building of steel, heavily guarded, with a secret elevator leading to an underground bunker. Instead, the UFO museum looked like a dump. There were crude paintings of green alien faces on the windows, the kind with inverted teardrop heads and big eyes. On the window there was also an advertisement for bingo, every Thursday, 6:30 p.m.

They walked through the door and a bell sounded. Inside, a decrepit woman leaned over a newspaper on the counter, a cigarette burning in her right hand. She did not look up when they entered. She reminded Martin of one of the old women he'd seen at the reception the night before, with the large hats and who smelled like sour mothballs.

"Welcome to the Roswell UFO museum, home of the first evidence of extraterrestrial contact. Admission is three dollars. The next showing of the documentary

film is in half an hour.” The old woman’s voice was flat and brassy. She set her cigarette on an ashtray shaped like the alien heads on the windows and wrote something in the crossword puzzle. “Huh,” she said out loud. “‘Cylinder’. Can’t believe I didn’t see that one.”

“Hi Sandra,” his mother said. The woman looked up from her paper.

“Why Denise, didn’t expect to see you up this early. Did you have fun last night?”

“Loads,” his mother said, handing over three dollars. “Is it alright if Martin looks around for a while? I wanted to head over to the market. I can’t get any decent *mole* in Albuquerque.”

“Sure, sure,” Sandra said, with that peal of excitement Martin’s noticed old people get when they see him. “Make yourself at home. We’re pretty thin today.” She pointed to the museum’s only other patrons, an overweight couple wearing matching and stained shirts that read *NEBRASKA!* across the front. “See what I mean,” Sandra added.

The couple was taking turns standing in front of the photographs that lined the walls, taking pictures with the pictures. Sandra handed the money back to Martin’s mother and shook her head. “Family discount,” she said. Martin’s mother pursed her lip and said thank-you.

His mother gave him his pill and pointed to the water fountain off the hallway. “Have fun, sweetie. I’ll be back in about an hour,” she said. “And listen to Sandra.”

Martin started wandering through the foyer. In the photos on the wall, there were alleged UFO sightings captured on film that even Martin could easily see were fakes, models made from metal plates, pans and other kitchen utensils, foregrounded with trick photography. In one, he could even see traces of the fishing wire the photographer had

used to suspend the model slightly above the horizon line. All the photos were for sale. In fact, almost everything in the museum, from the T-Shirts to the alien head pencil erasers, probably even Sandra, was for sale.

“Excuse me,” Martin said, trying to keep the words running through his head in order, “but where is the alien ship? I need to see it.”

Sandra laughed and then coughed on her smoke. “Follow me, little detective,” she said and led him to the adjoining room. Underneath a glass case were variously shaped metal objects. Martin could tell some were parts of a dryer. There was also the “carcass” of an alien, poorly crafted from papier-mâché. There was a placard that read: Recovered from Roswell Crash Site, 1947. What crap, Martin thought. Sandra could see that he was agitated.

“No,” Martin yelled at her. “The real ones!”

“Take it easy, cowboy. Want to watch the movie? It’ll explain better than I can.”

Still frustrated, Martin shook his head “yes.” Sandra led him to a seat and pulled out a TV on a cart like the ones they used at school to show movies when there was a substitute teacher. The other couple came in as well, with several T-Shirts draped over their forearms.

The movie was in black and white, with a narrator who smoked a pipe and said nothing about Roswell that Martin didn’t already know. After a few minutes, Martin noticed the couple next to him had dozed off. He heard the entrance’s bell chime and loud voices in the front. He quietly moved to the doorway and there she was again, Olivia, still in her golden dress from the night before. Neither of the women noticed Martin.

“Look what we have here,” said Sandra.

“Good morning, mom,” said Olivia while she waved away smoke.

“Morning? Morning was hours ago. Are you still working today?”

“Yes, yes. I just need to change.” Olivia set her purse down on the counter. “I left my clothes in the back.” Sandra lit another cigarette and went back to her paper.

Very quietly, Martin followed her down the hall to a small bathroom. Through a small crack in the door, he could see in. Olivia looked like he expected; she wore the same types of undergarments his mother did. But as she rose from washing her face the sink, he saw the deep crimson markings under her lips and chin in the mirror. They were birthmarks, but to Martin they looked like alien skin. It was like that horrible show *V*. he’d seen late one night on television, where the aliens wore human skin over their bodies to hide themselves.

“Oh, hey Martin,” Olivia said. “Give me just a minute.” She closed the door and Martin bolted back to the front of the museum.

“What’s wrong?” Sandra asked.

His mind was racing. Had this all been a trick? Where was his mother? He had to think. *What would Captain Campos do?*

“Martin,” Sandra repeated. She stubbed out her cigarette and started around from the counter. Martin was hyperventilating, his eyes bulging with adrenaline.

Martin wondered if that was why he always felt so strange around other people, other kids, even his parents. Maybe he was the only one who was a human. Maybe they had made up all that stuff about his heart to keep him weak, to make sure he never ran

off. But why had they brought him here? Like the conspiracies he read about in Mrs. Goldblatt's book, things only made half-sense.

From behind him, he heard the Olivia calling out for him. Sandra was almost to him, reaching out a wrinkled hand. "Easy, Martin. Take it easy."

But he would not take it easy. He didn't understand everything that was going on, but something deep within him said, *run*. And he did. Out museum's door onto the lazy Sunday afternoon streets of Roswell.

For the first time, Martin felt his legs. He'd never sprinted like this before. He heard Sandra coughing and Olivia, or whatever she was, yelling after him. It only made him run faster. He knew he had to get away. At the end of the block, he hung a left and nearly ran over two more people. Once he was through the next intersection, Martin had the sense that he was beginning to take flight, that he'd reached enough speed to flee the atmosphere. His chest ached, like something heavy was being placed on it with each breath. Still, Martin ran. At the corners of his vision, he started seeing colors, then distinct shapes, making the streets in front of him seem like the surface of a distant planet, so that by the time his heart explodes, Martin is way, way off somewhere else, someplace still and wide.

## NOSE DIVE

It was a week before the storm hit that he first knocked on our door. This was before the withdrawals, the cabin fever, the broken glass. This was before the heat went out, before the shakes, before the pick axe. On the local news the night before, they forecasted the blizzard would miss us, skirt the valley entirely. My buddy, my partner in crime, Monsoon, was technically only a day over-due. Still, I'd secreted away enough dope to keep me sane three, maybe four days if I stretched it out.

Despite the weatherman's optimism, the Idaho sky was an intractable grey. The knock startled me out of my stupor, off the couch and onto the floor. The floor was tile, and its rigid cold was sobering. The furnace was in disrepair. I spent most days that winter under a pile of musty blankets. I had been working seasonally as a tech, actually putting my degree to some use, digging out at the Air Force base. The law being the military can't practice carpet bombing without making sure they aren't destroying an ancient and buried civilization. It was good money when the work was steady, but the ground had been frozen since Halloween.

I opened the door and looked down. The house had a large porch, but it had been made too low. Monsoon and I both had scars on our elbows from taking a dive off the overhang when we'd been high. The Evangelist, as I came to call him, was standing there, looking up at me. He wasn't tall, and I couldn't figure out if he was young or old. His beard was scraggly and grey, but he had the cheeks and the eyes of a child.

"Have you contemplated the universe today, brother?" he asked me.

In fact, I'd fallen asleep mid-morning after 'basing, watching a marathon of *Cosmos* on PBS, Carl Sagan's baritone drone fueling dope dreams of nebulous expanses.

"Every day," I said. He was dressed in a massive overcoat, and he wore mismatched mittens, one navy blue and the other green. "Brother," I added.

I'd dealt with missionaries before, but I'd never seen one dressed this oddly. Usually it was starched white shirts and black ties, if it was the Mormons. The Witnesses were a little more sneaky, dressing in conservative but casual outfits. I looked the guy over. He wore a gym sweatshirt full of stains and his chinos were quite wrinkled. But his black shoes were immaculate. They shined even though the sun only sputtered ashen afternoon light.

"Then you might enjoy this," he said and handed me a couple pages of paper. They were plain, typed pages. I didn't read them in the doorway, but they didn't look like any of the pamphlets and brochures the other evangelists left. There was not a single crucifix.

"Thanks," I said. "I'll give them a look."

He nodded demurely, like I'd made his day. I could see he had a whole ream of them in his satchel. "I'll see you soon," he said.



Sure you will, buddy, I thought. Most likely he'd wander downtown and get picked up by the cops. I shut the door and tossed the pages on the counter. I loaded another hit and dug in under the blankets, had a smoke and watched Jeopardy. I loved trivia. That night, during Double Jeopardy, I knew every question in Alcoholics Eponymous, but my dry mouth wouldn't move to form the words.

#### RECALL NOTICE:

The make of all human beings (GOD) is recalling all units manufactured, regardless of make or year, due to a serious defect in the primary and central component of the heart. Due to a malfunction in the original prototype Units (code named Adam and Eve), resulting in the reproduction of the same defect in all subsequent units. This defect has technically termed "Sub-sequential Internal Non-morality," or more commonly known as S. I. N., as it is often expressed.

This shit was great. I had to give it to this guy, he was original. I was reading the first page, slowly, the next morning. I wanted to get high, but Monsoon was now going on two days overdue. He was up in Canada, on the normal monthly dope run. If anything was wrong I knew he wouldn't be foolish enough to phone the house. Still, I thought it prudent to conserve what I had while I could stand it.

Outside, the sun was still hidden. The wind had picked up, and the trees moaned above the roof. Monsoon and I met eight years ago in Salt Lake. He'd just left the church and I'd just left Louisiana. Both of us were desperate for something new, and dope was as

good a pastime as anything else. Initially, I suspected he was queer. I'd come from New Orleans, and was shocked how much easier it was to score dope in Salt Lake. The land of the righteous was not exempt from pestilence.

He'd been attending seminary in the city, he said, but had run out of faith. He'd actually dropped out the year before but had been forging his transcripts to keep the money flowing in monthly from his parents. They owned a ranch in Montana, or something like that. His mother was part Shoshoni, but her family had converted two several generations before. His real name wasn't Monsoon, I just could never pronounce his Shoshoni name. He said 'Monsoon' was the closest translation.

We met up on the roof of Sparkle's building. Sparkle lived on South 2nd, near the Rose Park. She was in her forties, I think, but her skin had gotten so desiccated and leathery from years of booting that it was impossible to tell. She had good dope and was reasonable about prices and apparently owned the building, most of which was vacant.

Monsoon and I spent the first of our dope nights there, prone on the roof's chilled concrete, watching the stars lean into new positions in the sky, feeling the earth dip slowly backwards. Despite the city's lights, several constellations were visible. While we lied there, our minds drifting out into space, there was the continual sizzle of boots on piles of broken glass, of empty beer cans and old syringes rattling when the breeze struck.

The front end of a drug addiction is the sublime part. The part where you spend a week's wages to inhale a sliver of white smoke with a tube crudely shaped from tin foil, where you light three cigarettes at a time and forget them all. The part where you feel no guilt whatsoever about lifting a gram out of the right pad of Sparkle's bra while she's passed out in the stairwell, head resting on her shoulder and an elbow in her own vomit.

You race down the metal stairs, both hands on the rails to keep from taking a dive. You hit the sidewalk skipping, giddy, while the bells from the nearby train yard sing and the dawn is soft orange.

Those are the parts that seem correct, congruous. The parts that seem beautiful.

Then suddenly, those parts aren't enough.

**WARNING:** Continuing to operate the human being unit without correction voids any manufacture warranties; exposing the unit to dangers and problems too numerous to list and will result in the human unit being permanently impounded. For free Emergency Service, call on Jesus.

This was what he left in me two days later. The weatherman's forecast had been inaccurate: The blizzard would not miss us, and I could tell from the wind shaking the house that it would be here by the evening, if not sooner.

The Evangelist knocked politely, sensing I was home, but I didn't answer the door. Through the crack in the east window's curtains I watched him wait patiently, head up and expectant, only moving to adjust his cap in the harsh winds. Finally, he slipped an envelope through the mail slot.

That morning I was full of self-loathing. I'd burned through everything I'd put away in binge the night before. I couldn't help it. The night passed too slowly, quiet but not silent. The slow trickle from the faucet I'd let run for the pipes sounded like a cresting river. The occasional whoosh of a passing car rang in my skull. I turned on an Albert King record to fill the house with some other sound, but none of the notes, nothing from

his voice seemed real. I'd reached the point in my drug career that I could only listen to music if I was high. I burned foil after foil until I was just burning metal and coughing bile. I turned the volume knob higher. Finally, King's solos, his swooping bends, rich as butter, took me out of the house, out of Idaho, until in my mind I had a satellite-eye view of sunrise across a blue globe.

I woke up freezing and found the used foils on my chest. The storm would not miss us, and I was all out of transcendence. That afternoon, it started snowing. It fell steadily, straight down and heavy, except when the wind picked up and the flurries looked like ghosts. I could barely see across the street, barely make out the square of multicolored lights in the windows of the building across the avenue. I'd forgotten all about Christmas. The television signal came in fuzzy, but from what I could make out of it, this would be a harsh storm. I had cans of condensed soup in the cupboard and milk and bread in the fridge. I could hold out a few days, at least. It was when I was checking the expiration date on the carton that I first noticed the smell.

I'd heard that people going through withdrawals suffered from synesthesia, hallucinations. I'd been dope-sick a couple times before, hard times in New Orleans in the eighties when Nancy Reagan started her campaign and good dope connections dried up like a dammed river. Sweats, headaches, bowel-wrenching days oscillating between incontinence and the shits. But this smell in the kitchen wasn't imagined, and I wasn't in the throes of a serious withdrawal, yet. The smell was tangible, fecund, rotten, like it had its own personality. I'd worked a couple stints as a dishwasher in Louisiana, and compared to this stench, the grease traps and old mop water seemed like perfume.

Since we'd moved to Idaho and hooked-up with Monsoon's unconverted uncle, we'd been getting great shit on the reg. Problem was, me and Monsoon took too much, sold too little. This last run was almost purely business. We had to move some to pay the back rent. Monsoon was now officially three days overdue, and up north at the Canadian border, the storm was probably impassible.

I'd already felt the little thumps of want behind my eyelids that morning, tick, tick, tick. I could sense it was going to be rough, maybe rougher than it'd ever been before. Every addict fears those days, when the supply is gone and there's none in sight and it feels like you're taking a nosedive backwards off a sheer, narrow canyon. But it gets better. It always had. I had a joint in my nightstand to help me sleep, and I was pretty sure certain Monsoon kept an emergency stash somewhere in his room. And what was this, if not an emergency?

By nightfall, the snow had piled up on the porch almost to the door. The door was designed foolishly and opened to the outside. If the snow kept falling like it was then, I'd be snowed in by the next morning. The shovel was probably in the truck, Monsoon kept it there in case he needed to dig out the tires when he was up north. So I'd be trapped for a while. It was inevitable, fatalistic, I supposed. Being philosophical helped keep my mind off the tingling on my skin that I knew from experience would explode like fireworks into a gnawing and non-stop itch across my whole body if I didn't find Monsoon's stash soon.

I opened the door to his room. It was a little musty, but not nearly as bad as whatever was brewing in the kitchen. It was about as tidy as you'd expect from a dope addict, used fast food wrappers and cups, cigarette butts, some in the ashtray, some on the

carpet. Muscle car magazines with voluptuous women sprawled across the hoods of GTOs and Mustangs on the cover were stacked in one corner, a Nerf football that looked like it had been chewed on by a dog, or maybe Monsoon, in the other. I was barefoot and could feel the grit on the carpet. We didn't own a vacuum.

I started with the desk. The drawers were filled with ash and old bills. Nothing. Then I checked under the bed, between the mattress and box spring, still nothing. I opened the closet and checked the pockets of every jacket, shirt and pair of pants hanging there. I couldn't see, only reach around the closet's top shelf. I fumbled with something wooden and round, and a baseball bat rolled off the shelf and on my head.

I was suddenly very awake, very aware. The bat had hit me just above my left temple, and I could already feel a knot forming when I touched the spot. Fucking Monsoon, I thought. How dare he not make this easier on me. Then, behind a pile of boots I hadn't noticed before, a stack of pornos, on VHS. Jackpot.

The stash was inside a broken pornographic VHS tape. There was only enough for that night and maybe the morning, if I could get to sleep early enough. I took a pinch and set it on the foil, lit it up and chased the trail of smoke, feeling that sweet release as I breathed it in. The world stabilized. The pain from the lump of my head disappeared by my second hit.

I walked around the snow pack, smoking cigarette after cigarette, delighting at the crunch my boots made on the surface. When the daylight completely failed, I heard a branch from the old oak tree up the road shudder and snap under the weight of the snow. I had to dig out a little space to get the front door open. The stench from the kitchen was almost foggy in the air. My footprints were already icing over.

It turned out Monsoon wasn't queer. Wasn't queer and had great taste in women, actually. He first brought her by the little corner store in downtown Salt Lake, where I worked in the afternoons, grinning at me with his arm over her shoulder.

"This," Monsoon said, thumbing at me, "Is Rick. He's quite a musician. From Louisiana."

A middle aged woman with an enormous purse walked between us, chiming the bell on the door. If anyone wanted to walk out of here with merchandise, I wouldn't stop them. Probably wouldn't even notice.

She wiped her nose quickly, habitually, and extended her hand over the counter.

"Chandra," she said. "A pleasure."

"I'm Rick."

"I think we covered that," she said.

She was wearing a stone-washed denim skirt and a sleeveless black leotard. She wore bracelets that looked like over-shined slinkys that clung to her forearms. She had a little paunch that stuck out at the waist, and the deepest brown eyes I'd ever seen. Immediately, I was jealous.

"What do you play?" she asked me.

"Guitar, mostly. Not much anymore." I hadn't had a gig since Louisiana, and Monsoon was the only one who'd heard me play in Salt Lake, on the rare night I could feel my fingers and wanted to be productive with my high. I could never remember what I'd played, exactly, but Monsoon swore it was magical. Maybe he just wanted to make me feel good.

“Got any Funyuns?” Chandra asked, looking around the store.

“Third aisle, left-hand side. Can’t miss.”

Monsoon walked towards the counter, watching Chandra bounce on her toes towards the snacks.

“What do you think?” he asked, leaning in like it was a conspiracy.

“Good looking. Young, though?”

“Legal.” Monsoon seemed pleased and looked at her. “We’re going to Sparkle’s tomorrow night. Chandra wants to party. You in?”

“Shit man, you know I’m hurting right now.” My habit had become more expensive than my paychecks could cover. Monsoon was still getting funds from his parents, and was keeping me on the line. He knew this, but still wanted me to ask. He waited for it.

“Can you cover me?”

“Of course, man. Always here for you.”

I wasn’t sure why he liked me so much. It certainly wasn’t my sour temperament or poor hygiene habits or general apathy. I suspected it had something to do with the community of our abuse. That everything was okay if you had an accomplice. I was Monsoon’s. It seemed almost ridiculous, but I suddenly worried Chandra might replace me.

“We’ll meet at The Depot, nine thirty,” he said while he held the door open for her.

I watched Chandra lift a six pack of beer and a box of Oreos and I just smiled.



We met the next night, at The Depot, like we planned. The place was a dive near the end of the train yard opposite Sparkle's building. Blue collar guys, transients and dope heads were the clientele. Monsoon and I'd go there to get warmed up on a few brews before blasting off at Sparkle's. I felt almost normal sitting in a bar, drinking near-beer, like I was a regular citizen.

The happy hour crowd had cleared out by the time we arrived. There was a yard worker asleep in the crook of his arm on the far side of the bar, and a few junkies I'd seen around Sparkle's building were crowded around the pin-ball machine, drinking straight from their cloudy plastic pitchers.

"Nice place," said Chandra.

"Hey," I said, shrugging my shoulders, "it's ours."

Chandra and I found a squeaky booth under a low, amber glass light in the far corner while Monsoon grabbed drinks. I was already getting the anxiety, the rush before an upcoming high. I hadn't noticed, at first, how near to me Chandra was sitting.

"So you play guitar? What kind of stuff?" she asked.

"Blues, mostly." I hadn't played in sixth months, not since I'd pawned my axe for a fix.

"Do you like New Wave?" she asked.

"I don't really--" Truth was I hated all that new shit, overproduced and whiny.

"I just *love* punk. The Clash. Sex Pistols."

She was young, energetic. And foolish. I tried my best not to be attracted.

"I don't know if I've heard them yet." I fucking hated punk rock.

She giggled. “You’re cute,” she said, brushing her hand against my elbow. “Can you tell me where the ladies room is in this paradise?”

I pointed towards the hallway in the back and held up two fingers indicating the second door. She curtsied and was off. Monsoon set three pitchers on the table and then three glasses. He had monstrous hands.

“This Mormon beer,” he said, pouring the glasses. “Where’d Chandra go?”

“Powdering her nose,” I said, not really meaning anything by it.

“Jesus, that girl.” Monsoon took a long drink from his pilsner glass. “I can hardly keep up with her.”

“She blowing lines, too?” I asked.

“Like a vacuum. Seriously, she’s on her second eighth today.” Then he looked at me and leaned in. “She fucks non-stop. I think my dick might fall off if she keeps it up.”

“Lovely,” I said. “She wants to get off on dope tonight, too?”

There was a crash of glass. The bartender was trying to wake the drunk at the counter.

“Dope, coke, whatever,” Monsoon replied. And then he said real low, “This might be it, man.” Monsoon leaned back and smiled, raising his eyebrows.

“What do you mean, it?”

“Like, the one. Like I’m in love.”

“Easy there,” I said. I wanted to tell him that what he was falling in wasn’t love, that a girl like her was just using him for the drugs, that if he hit hard times one day, ran out of money, that she’d be gone. But that sounded too much like what I was doing, too

much like an implication. And before I could even say anything, Chandra was back at our table, one hand on her hip.

“Were you boys talking about me?” she asked.

“Of course,” said Monsoon.

“Good,” she said. “Which one is my beer?”

The fourth floor of Sparkle’s building was crawling with people. Apparently, it was her birthday, her thirtieth, if you asked her, which was a lie. We walked up the metal staircase to the fourth floor, Monsoon and Chandra ahead of me, me trying not to get caught looking up her skirt.

The hallways of Sparkle’s building were dingy, painted a beige color not quite real. Obscene and sometimes funny graffiti decorated the hallways: “Baby Turkey for Thanksgiving;” “Rejoice Ye Fucking Sinners,” and tons of poorly spray painted penises. What a place to take a date, I thought.

Some junky told me once it used to be a sanatorium, which made its current use fitting. On our way to Sparkle’s room a couple fell out of the door, tearing at each other’s clothes, mouths locked in a desperate struggle. I looked away.

Sparkle was wearing an unflattering tube top and a silver birthday hat. The tattoo on her arm looked like a smashed, blue jellyfish.

“Gentlemen,” she said when she saw us. Monsoon and I leaned in and gave her a kiss on each cheek, a ritual. She smelled of vinegar and cigarettes. “What will it be this evening?” she asked.

“The usual,” Monsoon said. “Plus one,” and he led Chandra forward.

“Well my heavens,” said Sparkle, “she is just a gorgeous little thing. And here all this time I thought you two were fags.” She cackled and lit up a smoke. “Have a good time. And don’t fall off the roof.”

There was hardly anybody up there. I cleared off some broken glass with my shoe so we could sit along one of the parapets. I pulled out my foil from my backpack. Monsoon pulled two syringes and a spoon out of his fanny pack.

“You’re booting?” I said. I’d never seen Monsoon shoot up before. I’d only done it once myself, back in Louisiana. It had been wonderful and frightening. At least when I smoked dope, I had some control, some motor function, some awareness.

“She wants to try, so I thought, what the hell?” Monsoon started cooking up the white powder on the spoon with a zippo. I loaded my own foil and heated it up.

Monsoon tied Chandra off first, then himself. She couldn’t look while he put the needle in, but I could see from her forearms that this wasn’t her first time.

Then there was that protracted silence when the dope hits your system. In the quiet I could hear feel the motion of people in the floors below, the whistle of the train yard a half-mile off, could taste the warmth of the yellow glow of the city below. It was bliss.

Monsoon leaned back and sighed. The needle was still stuck in his arm. I pulled it out and staunched the little bit of blood with my handkerchief. His eyes had rolled back, but he had a look of satisfaction and was breathing regularly, although slowly. A little drool was trickling down the left side of his mouth.

“I think he’s out,” I said to Chandra.

She hummed to herself and then smiled. “Lightweight,” she said.

“Want to see something?” and I led her to the north end of the building, where you could see the corporate buildings of downtown Salt Lake City shining with brightly lit windows.

“That’s pretty,” she said. “Are you from here?” She swayed a little, like she was dancing.

“Not really. Just passing through.” Drug addicts were migratory, following the supply.

“I’m from here,” she offered. “It’s a shithole. A pretty shithole, though. Sometimes.” She turned to me and her eyes watered. “Like right now,” she said, smiling.

A draft moved through the alleys, rising up and chilling the roof. Chandra shivered and tried to pull down her little skirt over her knees. I put my arm around her and she moved in closer.

She leaned a little over the parapet on her hands. “Whew. I need a pick-me-up or I’m going to be asleep like him. Want to go with?”

“And Monsoon?” I asked as she took my hand.

“He’ll be fine.”

We found an unoccupied room on the third floor. The bathroom was clean enough and the light worked. I dusted off the top of the toilet. Chandra broke up some massive lines and we went at it. Monsoon was right, she could put it down. My teeth were rattling when she wrapped her arms around my neck and kissed me.

I hadn’t been with a woman in months and months. My hands, my mouth, were on autopilot. I reached under her skirt and pulled down her panties. She was making sharp, little grunts and I felt her heart thumping as I mouthed her breasts. She told me to

take her and I did. On the counter I pushed into her as hard as I could, closing my eyes because the light and warmth of the room were overwhelming.

There was a little nagging thought in my mind that I was betraying Monsoon. He said he might be in love with this girl, and maybe he was, but I knew that was a delusion. At some point Monsoon would realize, like all addicts do, there is only room for one love in your life, and that love is your substance of choice. It was a tough lesson to learn, and I was just helping him, tutoring him. I was saving him some trouble.

After a few minutes I noticed she wasn't making any sound. I opened my eyes and she her head was back against the mirror. Her pupils were fully dilated. She was staring blankly at the ceiling, and blood was running out of her nostril. She was in trouble, OD-ing, but I was almost there.

So I finished anyways.

Afterwards, I pulled her off the counter and sat her on the toilet seat. Her thighs were already getting cold when I slipped her panties back on. I ran to the roof.

I nearly had to punch Monsoon to get him awake. I pulled him, stumbling, down to the third floor and showed him what had happened.

“Holy fuck. Holy holy fuck.”

“I know man. We were just doing some lines and then,” I held out my arms as if there was need for demonstration. “She starts like this.”

“Holy fuck.” Monsoon stared at the line of blood running out her nostrils, down both sides of her cheeks.

“We got to get out of here man. Like, now.” Tough love, I told myself.

“What, just leave her?”

“She’s almost gone anyway. We’ll call from the payphone on the next block. Then this place is going to be full of cops.” I started tugging his arm. “I’m sorry, man.”

He resisted for a moment, looking at the slumped girl on the toilet, her arms hanging down in regret.

We made it out through the back fire escape. I dialed 9-1-1 from the 2<sup>nd</sup> street payphone and said two things: overdose and Sparkle’s address, and then hung up. We caught the streetcar to Monsoon’s apartment and got in his truck. We drove north to Ogden and then kept going. Every mile or so, I swore I heard sirens. Monsoon said he had connections in Idaho, and we might as well go there. Neither of us had anything permanent in Salt Lake. We needed a change of scenery. After we’d passed the border on I-84 Monsoon took over the driving and I drifted in and out of sleep. Occasionally, the radio would pick up some preacher, some pre-recorded sermon. Mostly, though, it was long patches of static.

**DANGER:** The human being units not responding to this recall action will have to be scrapped in the furnace. The SIN defect will not be permitted to enter Heaven so as to prevent contamination of that facility. Thank-you for your attention.

The snow had been coming down four straight days. My windows were nearly blocked from the pile-up. I could only see out of a narrow gap at the top. There wasn’t much to see except large snowdrifts. Condensation dripped through from the sills. The door was completely obstructed. I was full on dope sick. The kitchen smelled of rot.

Monsoon was now a week overdue. Possibly dead. The highways were certainly closed. I couldn't get the furnace to fire, so I ran scalding water and tried to heat the place with steam. I couldn't believe how selfish he'd been, only leaving a tiny bit for emergencies. Times like these. Maybe he had more, hidden away somewhere else. Sneaky bastard.

I searched everywhere. The closets, under the sink, behind the toilet, *inside* the toilet, the fuse box, in every pot, every coffee cup, glass. Nothing. The whole time, the smell in the kitchen mocked me, rising from the floor to remind me of my own decay.

My limbs ached, but the activity kept away the shakes. If I could get out, maybe I'd go for a jog. Maybe go to a restaurant, get a big bowl of pasta. I hadn't kept anything down the last two days, and my stomach wrenched with a nauseating hunger. I'd been daydreaming a lot lately. My favorite involved my most recent evangelist visitor sneaking me dope through the mail slot. He'd come in and get high with me and we'd talk about Jesus and the universe and us robot people. He'd reveal he was an android from heaven, and that in heaven, people got whatever drugs they wanted. It was all love, man.

The phone finally rang.

"Monsoon?" I answered.

"What? No," the voice was low and garbled. "This is Johnson. Your landlord?"

"Oh yeah, ok."

"How long you been snowed in?"

"Two, maybe three days. The furnace is out."



“Can’t do anything about the furnace right now, this storm’s a bitch,” Johnson said.

Like I didn’t know.

“County is sending some guys out your way today. They’ll dig you out and take you into town for supplies.”

I doubted the supplies I needed were in town. Good news, I told Johnson and hung up. I killed the rest of my roach to settle my stomach. It got me cotton mouthed for the first time since I’d been a teenager. In the reeking kitchen I fumbled for a water glass and dropped it. That was probably the start. There was so much satisfaction in hearing it shatter that I tried another one. And another. Soon I was pulling all the glasses out of cupboards, holding them at arm’s length and laughing at the pop they made against the tile. I flung plates like Frisbees into the walls. I took Monsoon’s bat from his room and started taking baseball swings at coffee cups, fouling one off into the front window, where snow began to leak in.

It was as if I could cover up my sickness with damage.

I was sweating, covered in a sheet of moisture. In the bathroom, I filled my hands with the ice-cold trickle from the faucet and splashed my face. When I looked up into the mirror, the lines on my face and under my eyes made me look withered, ancient. And for some reason, this was funny to me. I laughed and laughed and laughed.

Then in the mirror, behind me, was Chandra.

Her nose was still bleeding. Her eyes had gone totally black.

I turned around and there was no one there. I searched all the rooms, the kitchen, the hallway, the closets, nothing. I went back into the bathroom and there she was again,

mocking me in the mirror. I knew this wasn't real, that it was part of the sickness, the withdrawals. Still, I took the bat and smashed the mirror. In the spider web of reflection, I no longer saw her. Just a kaleidoscope reflecting a burnt out dope fiend.

Then the power went out.

No one from the county arrived that afternoon or evening. I was truly trapped. Darkness came on fast, and I sat on the toilet. There was no heat, but I was burning up, and the cold porcelain felt good. My nose ran like a fountain. I can't say I slept. It was something just above sleep, though throughout the night I would startle out of it, thinking I heard Monsoon coming in the front door, bringing us what we needed, making everything better.

The smell was almost visible. Even though every pore, every vein in my body felt constricted, desiccated, the stench managed to work its way in. I didn't just smell it, I felt it, tasted it. Overnight, the snow had almost completely covered the windows, and the light was a strange grey, like standing in a cave near the entrance. I imagined that a small animal, a squirrel or maybe a raccoon, had crawled under the house and died there, and that was causing the stink.

In the kitchen, walking on the shards of glass, I gagged. I couldn't take it anymore. I had to get to the bottom of this.

In the utility closet I found my pick axe. I went to work on the kitchen floor, a metallic ping accenting every down stroke of the axe. Even though it was so cold I could see my breath in large puffs, I was sweating.

I'd dug dozens of trenches before. My swing was true. But my hands were weak, slippery. I'd finally broken through the tile, and some of the water leaking through the windows began to pool in the indentation in the floor. I brought the pick axe over my right shoulder, brought it down towards my target, but the handle slipped through my hands by about six inches, and the point went through my left foot, pinning me to the floor.

The noise was wet and solid, like snapping a young tree branch. And there was the noise of my screams.

Drug addicts aren't into pain. That's what the drugs are *for*. I fell backwards, my left foot stuck and my right leg twitching. I'd put the axe through my arch. There was so much blood. I felt the warm juice soaking through the seat of my pants. I pulled off my belt and made a tourniquet at the base of my knee. I would bleed to death if I didn't staunch the wound. I fiddled with the handle, trying to free my foot, but every twitch I made sent ripples of agony through my eyes down into my teeth.

You'd think this would be the moment where I reflected on things. Where I'd realize what a nosedive my life had taken. Where I'd maybe say a prayer, make some pact with a previously scorned god to get me out of this. That I'd get clean if I got through this. That I'd change my life, if I could only have this small redemption.

Instead, I passed out.

I didn't know what time it was when they found me. Looking up, I could see some of them were cops. I could hear the bleeps and belches of the patrol cars outside. Someone was looking shining a light into my pupils.

"He's alive," I heard someone say. "Just barely."

I felt them remove the pick axe and tried to scream, but no sound passed. I could feel hands on me, felt myself being lifted and taken out of the house. I was covered with blankets but the air outside still gnawed at me. It was so bright it was hard to see, but the storm had passed. Water ran off roofs and down the road. I couldn't make out the faces above me, but while they loaded me in the ambulance, I swore I saw my Evangelist walking away, his shining shoes unmistakable.

I would find out later he was the one who'd discovered me. He had dug down the snow drift and broke through the kitchen window, then phoned the paramedics. I didn't bleed to death because he'd refashioned my tourniquet. My Good Samaritan. You'd think that would have converted me. He and I would start our android church, and I could stand in front of all the sinners, give my testimony, warn others about the path I'd travelled. Though, I'm no apostle.

It should have hit me then, on the way to the hospital. That eventually they would connect me to Monsoon, who's body they found on the old highway thirty miles north, naked and dead from exposure. That they'd find a truck registered in his name, to our address, about seventy paces off with half a kilo of heroin in the glove compartment. That they might even connect me to Chandra, who we'd left to die three years ago. But in that moment I was sweetly sick with anticipation, like eating sugar for breakfast. I knew at the hospital they would give me something for the pain, something strong and pure, and for one more day, I'd be safe.

## BREECHED BIRTH

Leave it to her daughter, Della, the youngest and most sour-mouthed of her children, to speak first. For the past week, over and over Meredith had scripted this dinner in her head, the pleasantries during the meal, the clinical sterility with which she would explain her last wishes, the bittersweet toast they would all make. But her children weren't actors, and as they'd done so many times before, they ignored their lines.

"I mean, what the fuck *is* a sky burial?" Della asked. "Like, how the Indians did it?" Della laughed awkwardly and looked to her brothers for some kind of affirmation, but the two boys simply stared at their plates.

"Like I explained earlier, it's for forensic science," Meredith said. "It's true some Native American tribes practiced a similar ceremony with their dead, though it's more commonly associated with Tibetan traditions, but what the Center does is a little different."

Edward, the oldest child, finally spoke. "Since when are we Tibetan?"

It had been a mistake, Meredith now realized, to bring all her children together at once. As if the subject of her interment was some kind of communal dish she could portion out around the same table they'd grown up at, a dish they could sample and chew and discuss in an objective manner, commenting on its texture, its flavor. Just as she explained her terminal prognosis six months ago, she should have tried to explain her

decision to donate her body to the Forensic Anthropology Center to them one-by-one, individually. Alone, they were more likely to digest her final wishes.

“We,” Cody said, “aren’t anything.”

“We’re family,” Della said.

“We’re baptized Catholics,” Edwards said. “All of us.” Meredith knew this was directed at Cody more than her. Like most of their disputes, the disagreement over faith was just another on a long list of differences the boys had been compiling since childhood, and had little to do with belief and much more to do with brotherly opposition. The boys had been at war with each other since the death of their father, and despite Meredith’s attempts, she had been unable to negotiate a truce between them. She’d made peace with the fact her sons didn’t like each other, maybe even hated each other, but now, this evening, she wished they would do a better job of hiding it.

“I made your favorite pie, Mom,” Della interjected.

“What do you think Dad would say?” Edward asked.

Meredith wondered herself. She had loved him fiercely, but he had been a harsh and impatient man. Though it makes her feel guilty, over the years she’s considered that her children were better off without him around. As difficult as it had been, single, alone, raising three children, she can only imagine what kind of chaos would have descended on their household during Cody and Della’s adolescence. He would have simply kicked Cody out on the streets when he found the bag of pot in his jeans. He would not have felt the same relief she did when the condoms fell out of Della’s purse while they were at a restaurant her sophomore year. She decided long ago it was better for all her children she

had handled things on her own. Though Edward was so much like his father, the two of them would have gotten along just fine.

“Edward,” she said in measured voice, “your father hasn’t said anything for years.”

The week before, Meredith drove the twenty miles from Austin to San Marcos. The area had been getting a lot of rain, and the medians along the highway were flush with overgrown grass and wanton blue bonnets. From the exit on interstate 35, she found the Center easily. Though it was still morning, Meredith could feel the day’s heat coming on when she stepped out of her car.

Of all the waiting rooms she’d sat in during the past two years, the reception area at the Forensic Anthropology Center gave her the strangest feeling of all. Perhaps it was the absence of unruly or sick children, or that the magazines were no more than a month out of date, or that the room wasn’t painted in the greyish-blue theme that had come to replace the institutional lime-green. Instead, the room was naturally bright, creatively painted shades of maroon and auburn, highlighted by tall windows. Perhaps because, after her meeting and tour she would no longer have to sign papers or writs or memorandums of agreement or wills or DNRs. She’d made use of her material wealth, equal parts research and charity, and now would make use of her physical body. Since she couldn’t be an organ donor, she’d donate her cadaver.

Though her decision to donate her body hadn’t been made impulsively, Meredith couldn’t deny that if asked, her decision wasn’t entirely clear to her, either. Her body was

failing and her time left in it was short, she knew. For a period after her terminal diagnosis, Meredith was consumed with self-pity, a feeling she loathed. When she'd read about the Research Center, the idea of using her remains for forensic study appealed to something deep inside Meredith. It renewed in her a sense of purpose, and for the terminally ill, purpose was a blessing.

In the waiting area, Meredith heard her name called aloud. "Meredith Padgett? I'm Dr. Salazar. We spoke on the phone?"

Dr. Salazar wore a sharp, navy-blue pantsuit, but with mud-caked boots. She was also armed. Meredith rose and took Dr. Salazar's hand, but couldn't help staring at the pistol.

"Rattlesnakes and other critters," she said when she noticed Meredith's eyes slip down to her waist. "Don't worry, it's way too hot this time of day."

"It is getting warm," Meredith said and nodded in agreement. Dr. Salazar said something to the secretary, who reached into a small refrigerator behind the front desk and handed over two bottles of water.

"If you're ready, we can get going out to the farm," Dr. Salazar said. Meredith wished there was a better name for the place. Something about the term "Body Farm" still seemed inelegant, perhaps even crass, but Meredith reminded herself she was being frivolous.

Meredith followed Dr. Salazar out to the parking lot to a green Jeep, also covered in dried mud that looked like manic brushstrokes. Dr. Salazar handed Meredith a water bottle and started the ignition.



“And call me Alice,” she said as if finishing a thought. Then she added, “You may have already thought of this, but I have to warn you. There will be a smell.”

“Did you see Mom put Cody’s painting up?” Della asked while she served slices of pecan pie around the table.

“I hadn’t noticed,” said Cody. He seemed genuinely surprised. Though he still claimed to paint, his day job was as a garbage man. For the longest time, Meredith couldn’t understand why he seemed content to steward what others threw out. She always regarded Cody as the brightest, most talented of her children. She knew parents weren’t supposed to have favorites, but she also knew from experience that was simply impossible.

“Great pie, Del,” Cody said with his mouth full.

Meredith had only seen the one piece, the painting he made in high school. It was awarded first prize during the Senior Art Show, and had caused quite a stir. The school had transformed the cafeteria into a gallery, blocking out the light from the large windows with black construction paper and using the folded up tables as partitions between the works. Graduate students and faculty from the Art department at UT served as judges, and after an afternoon of deliberation, they would have a small awards ceremony in the evening to which the students’ parents were invited.

Cody hadn’t forbid his mother to come, but as they drove to the school that evening, she could tell he was reluctant to have her there. She told herself this was just part of a phase in Cody’s life: the sullen, rebellious teenager. The misunderstood artist. Still, it had surprised her that his mood hadn’t improved since Edward left the house, left

the state, for college. Meredith didn't want to admit even to herself that Edward's departure had felt like a relief, and yet it bothered her that she couldn't read the same feelings in her son. And, that week, she and Cody were already at odds with each other.

Without her permission, he'd pierced his mouth. A metal bar that ran through his lower lip and exited at the corners, like some kind of grotesque bridle. He had suddenly appeared with it at the breakfast table the week before, his chin so swollen he could barely speak clearly. They'd argued, though she couldn't even make out half of what Cody had said. It wasn't the piercing that bothered Meredith so much, as ugly as she found it. But he hadn't even asked, hadn't even thought that Meredith would understand. She knew that children grew up, became independent, autonomous, but in the past year her Cody had become a stranger to her. She also worried what the metal bar would do to the expensive orthodontic work in his mouth. The cost of children never ceased.

She did feel a small amount of pride that Cody had at least worn a tie to the reception.

When they arrived, Cody wandered off with some of the other students. The room did look nice, and did have the feel of a gallery, but Meredith was no artist. She'd always felt intimidated at functions like these, like everyone else was in on a secret that Meredith had no hope of understanding. Meredith walked along the west wall, taking in some of the abstract paintings, their patterning and colors seeming random and nearly schizophrenic. Meredith had gleaned enough from her son to understand realism was dead. In the corner, a sculpture crafted from yarn and rusting car parts resembled a penis.

"Mrs. Padgett?" It was Cody's art teacher, Mr. Zurich. "So nice of you to come. This is really great, isn't it?"

“Yes it is, though I have to admit, I’m a little out of my element. I’m no art critic.”

Mr. Zurich wore a denim shirt that was stained, and even though he was a few feet away, she could smell whiskey on his breath. “Would you like a guide, then?” he asked.

He’d made a pass at her before, after the high school’s parent-teacher conferences the previous winter. Then, too, he’d smelled of alcohol. At the time, she’d felt flattered, but now his glassy blue eyes that she’d found attractive seemed predatory and inappropriate.

“Thank you kindly, Mr. Zurich. But I think I’ll go commiserate with the other moms at the punch table.”

“Of course,” he said, and winked at her.

“Oh Mr. Zurich,” she said as he began to walk away. “Can you tell me where Cody’s piece is?”

Mr. Zurich pointed towards the makeshift stage at the other side of the cafeteria. There were large curtains draped over three easels, including one that was almost seven feet tall. “Cody was selected as a finalist,” he said. “You must be very proud.”

“Oh, I am,” Meredith said quietly. But Mr. Zurich had already walked away.

“The rain was fortunate for us,” Dr. Salazar said as she took the jeep on a sharp left.

“We can always use it,” Meredith said.

“Yes.” Then after a moment she said, “I meant for the research.”

Though air moved through the windows of the jeep, Meredith felt stifled. She'd had bouts of wooziness more and more frequently since she'd stopped treatment. A few weeks before, she'd had to lie down on the cool tile floor of the supermarket, a total embarrassment, in order to get the long parallel aisles and distant overhead lights to stop spinning in opposite directions. When the security guard found her lying in the aisle, she blamed it on low blood sugar and refused an ambulance. Afterwards, Meredith sat in her parked car for an hour, hands at the wheel, while tears of frustration ran down her face into her gnashing teeth. Though her disease was untreatable, she was determined not to allow the symptoms interfere with her final days. She would not let them. She would not.

In the jeep, she prayed she wouldn't lose consciousness in front of Dr. Salazar. The young woman might think her squeamish. Years as a nurse had made Meredith unbothered by all the body's functions, its deteriorating nature, on down to death. At least, someone else's death. When her husband died so many years before, his life insurance had guaranteed them financial security. Had she chosen, Meredith never needed to work again. Still, her job help fill the days, helped distract her from the crushing void of his absence.

Dr. Salazar took Meredith's concentration as apprehension and slowed the vehicle. "There is no requirement to come out here," she said. "We've just found that donors, for the most part, want to see, well, we use the term 'remains.'"

"No, I'm okay. It's just this heat." The she added, "I've been a nurse for years." Meredith put the empty water bottle to her mouth. "I guess I was thirsty," she said.

Dr. Salazar handed over her bottle from the console. "I don't have germs," she said.

“Oh dear,” Meredith laughed. “We all have germs.”

“We’re almost there, just a couple more miles,” Dr. Salazar said.

The road wound back and forth, the curves compressing and expanding like a spring. The rain had tamped down the dust, so Meredith could see clearly for miles across the grasslands. Against the blue horizon there was a barn and ranch house, dwarfed by the profiles of cattle grazing closer to the road, the perspective making it appear they could crush the structures underfoot if they chose. Meredith smiled, remembering the comic books Cody used to make in grade school, absurd tales of anthropomorphized cows and pigs, armed to the teeth, or cud, as it were, liberating their fellow animals from the tyranny of the farmer. Orwell meets Rambo. Meredith searched her memory for the title of the comics. By fifth grade, Cody was a vegetarian.

At that time, the vivid gore and violence Cody drew worried Meredith. Disemboweled hayseeds. A hand grenade in Ma Clementine’s plum pie. Decapitations. There was a darkness within Cody from an early age, amplified by his father’s death, that he only let show in his drawings and paintings, and then only in gurgles and spurts, like the rhythm of a severed artery. Cody’s works demonstrated great talent, but were unsettling. She worried this darkness would cloud his entire life, lead him further into himself, make him a morose boy. Her worries turned out to be well founded.

“Megafauna Squad,” Meredith said aloud, finally remembering the title of the comics.

“Pardon?”

“It’s nothing,” Meredith said. “Do you have children, Dr. Salazar?”

“Dr. Salazar is too formal. Please call me Alice. And no, I don’t.”

“Alice. I like that name,” Meredith said.

“My grandmother’s. I take it you do?”

They crossed a cattle guard a little too quickly, making the jeep’s chassis shake with a stuttering moan. In alarm, Meredith reached out and grabbed Dr. Salazar around the bicep.

“Sorry about that,” Dr. Salazar said. “Texas driver.” She shrugged.

“No bother,” Meredith said, releasing her grip. “What were you asking me again?”

“Do you have children?”

“Oh yes, three,” Meredith said. “Not that you are in a rush, but if you end up having any, let me give you one piece of advice: never, under any circumstances, think you know who they are.”

The road turned once more, and then over a small hill, finally leading to the facility’s entrance, which was blocked by a large steel gate. In either direction, twelve foot high fences, topped with rings of barbed wire, stretched to the horizon. The air was suddenly without breeze, and again Meredith felt flushed, nauseated. The quiet was engulfing, only intruded on by the muted ticking of the idling jeep’s engine and the buzzing of flies. Dr. Salazar pulled out her identification card from the plastic casing that hung from neon green nylon around her neck and inserted it into the ATM-looking console just outside the driver side window. The gate screeched as it pulled back.

“Last chance,” Dr. Salazar said. “If you want to go back, I mean.”

Meredith made a gesture like, ‘lead on.’

Ahead, the road was littered with divots, filled like lakes from the recent storms. Meredith could smell moisture and earth, and beneath that, something more sour, like spoiled milk. It took a moment for Meredith to name it: death. Here and there, cottonwoods loomed over the roadside. Then finally, about twenty yards off from the road, one of the coffins. Not a coffin, exactly, but a receptacle, a retainer, for the remains.

Dr. Salazar parked the jeep. "Sorry about your shoes," she said.

Meredith looked down. She had worn white sneakers, surely to be ruined by the mud. Not that it mattered.

"It doesn't matter," Meredith said.

"We're getting off subject, here," Edward said at the table.

"Jesus Edward," Della said. "Can't you just drop it?" Like Meredith, Della had tried over the years, with little success, to serve as a mediator between the boys. She was much younger than they were, only two years old when their father died. She could not comprehend the chasm their father's death had opened between her brothers.

"For some of us, this is important," Edward insisted. "You'll be excommunicated, Mom."

Meredith wanted to tell him that she hadn't been to mass in several years, that her faith had been diminishing since the death of their father, that life had a way of slowly, deliberately chiseling away belief until it was nothing more than dust and rubble. But that seemed cruel.

"I don't get it," Della said. "Why would Mom be excommunicated?"

“The departed are to be buried on holy ground,” Edward said, like he was quoting scripture. “And Mom should be buried next to Dad, I think.”

“I guess we could dig up Dad,” Della said, jokingly. Her brothers did not laugh.

“I’m not worried about my eternal soul,” Meredith said.

“Well, *I* am,” said Edward. “Am I the only one who takes this seriously?”

“I am taking it seriously, Edward,” Meredith said. “But to be frank, the decision has been made. I’ve already signed the paperwork.”

The room grew quiet except for the scratching sound of Cody circling his empty glass plate with his fork. “This is all too much,” he said. “I need a drink,” he said, standing up.

“Me too,” said Meredith. “I’ll help you, Cody.”

“Um, Mom?” Della said. “Should you be drinking, you know, with everything?”

“It’s past that mattering, either, sweetie,” Meredith said.

“And that leaves first prize, awarded to Mr. Cody Padgett,” Mr. Zurich spoke into the microphone at the center of the makeshift stage. The microphone was turned up too loud, and fed back every time Mr. Zurich spoke a ‘p’ or ‘b’ sound.

Two students removed the drape from Cody’s enormous painting. There was muted applause, and a few audible gasps from the crowd. Meredith realized one of those gasps belonged to her.

“Titled ‘Breeched Birth,’ oil on canvas.” The cafeteria echoed with feedback.

Because Meredith was a nurse, she knew her son had got part of it wrong. The painting’s perspective oriented the viewer looking up the birth canal, and although the



baby's feet were sticking out of the vagina, like a real breech birth, so was the baby's head, and the face was clearly Cody's. An adolescent Cody. She recognized his dark brown hair, slicked down in the style he'd been wearing it recently, and his worrisome brow was unmistakable. In reality, he'd been born with red hair that fell out weeks later. It was if the child in the painting was being born folded in half, born already broken. From the foreground, a gruff hand was pulling baby Cody out by the mouth, the lower lip. Two fingers were tugging at the same points real Cody had pierced himself with that awful barb.

The colors were stark, and the painting was composed in a kind of pointillism that blurred out of focus the closer Meredith got to the painting. If it was Cody in the painting, then the vagina was clearly hers. It felt like an indictment, an accusation. She suddenly felt flushed and dry-mouthed. Her son had chosen this moment, this public place, to show his resentment for ever being born. She sat in a nearby metal folding chair, not once taking her eyes off the painting. She could feel the stares of all the other parents running along her skin like insects.

Cody walked across the stage and accepted a small glass trophy, awkwardly shaking Mr. Zurich's hand. There was more applause, and someone from the school paper snapped photos of the two of them, the painting looming behind them, strangely reflected in the flashes. As the room dispersed, a few parents came by to express congratulations to Meredith, though she could see from their pale faces the painting had upset them, too. Yet there was something undeniably compelling in the painting's disturbing beauty. Meredith feared she couldn't ever understand art, and for the first time ever, felt she may never understand her son.

It was Cody who broke the silence during their ride home.

“You hated it,” he said, not turning from the window to face her.

“No, no, it was, it was,” but Meredith couldn’t find the right words.

Cody sighed.

“I thought you said realism was dead,” Meredith tried.

“*Art* is dead,” he said with exasperation. He fiddled with his piercing absentmindedly. “I mean, probably.”

She wouldn’t see the painting again until the next fall, when Cody moved out of the house. He was sharing rent with some fellow artists and writers in downtown Austin, and said he’d been hired by the city. Only later did Meredith learn he was a garbage man.

The day Cody left he and some of his friends loaded his belongings, his bed, dresser, boxes of books and his easels from the basement he’d turned into his room and studio into the back of a pick-up. He hugged her and let her twist his nose like when he was a boy. She thought the goodbye would be easier this time, since she’d already gone through it with Edward, and Cody was only moving thirty minutes away. Plus, she still had Della to keep her company. But as the truck rumbled out of the gravel driveway, Meredith had the impulse to chase it, to latch on to the bumper, to never let go.

She hadn’t been down to the basement in at least a year, and was surprised how tidy Cody left it. Then she saw the painting, leaned against the far wall. He’d left a note:

*Dear Mom,*

*Realism is dead. Art lives.*

*Love always,*

*Cody*

For years she kept it in the basement, hiding it by piling boxes of old records, photo albums, sewing supplies, and Della's baby clothes. On the rare occasions Cody visited, neither of them mentioned the painting. By that time, Cody was deep into drugs. Meredith could tell from his bloodshot eyes and his constantly running nose. Like the painting, Meredith was tacit about her suspicions. She would ask about his art and his job, but on both subjects Cody was vague.

Twice during that time she saw his name mentioned in a review of a local exhibit in the Arts and Culture section of the local paper, though none of the photos in the articles were credited to Cody. Both times she picked up the phone meaning to ask him how it went, and both times the call went straight to his voicemail.

The retainer was up at the bottom of a slight ridge, where some of the rain had pooled. The retainer itself was about three feet above the ground, supported at the corners by four sturdy metal poles.

"I thought I'd show you someone further along, first."

"Why is that?" Meredith was nearly panting from the effort of walking in the mud.

"There tends to be less, well, you're a nurse. I don't need to sugar-coat it."

Meredith had seen plenty of dead bodies, though she'd worked mainly in administration the last ten years. Bodies pallid and grey, the new permanent coolness setting in, the rise and fall of the chest noticeably absent, these things Meredith had even become used to. But it was true, she'd never seen bodies more than a month in decay

besides in pictures, and, she realized, in movies. She had never seen a corpse gone six-months, a year.

“Mrs. Libby Simpson-Trujillo,” Dr. Salazar read from her notebook. This close to the cadaver, the flies swarmed in thick, constantly moving clouds.

“You keep their names?” For some reason, this astonished Meredith. She thought anonymity would be one of the requirements and rigors of science.

“Yes, of course. Besides all the legal issues, we need to know her life, her story. Why do you think we had you fill out all those questionnaires?”

“I just thought, I mean, I understand the diet questions, the medical history.”

“We’re getting a fuller picture than that,” Dr. Salazar said, and then continued reading from her notebook: “Mrs. Simpson-Trujillo, born 1938, died 2012. Trujillo was her second husband. Much younger. No children by him, four by previous marriage.”

Dr. Salazar continued to read, but Meredith didn’t hear. She was concentrating on the contents of the retainer, at the brownish, leathery remains of Mrs. Simpson-Trujillo. Unlike the movies, the bones were not bleached white. There were still small dark patches of rot near her left radius and underneath the clavicle. Untouched by a mortuary, the body had recoiled into an almost fetal position, and the skeleton of Mrs. Simpson-Trujillo looked smaller than any adult she’d ever seen, smaller than any child. Without thinking, she reached inside the retainer, and cupped Mrs. Simpson-Trujillo’s skull with her hands. The day’s light gently reflected in the dental work, still dutifully intact. Around the orbital bones, there were chips and scratches from the buzzards that had eaten out Mrs. Simpson Trujillo’s eyes.

Meredith tried to imagine the woman's face, her mouth, the smirks she gave her second husband, the pleasure in her lips when she sipped the Manhattans she must have ordered. When Meredith had resolved to this course of action, that she would not be buried or interred in some place marked by sorrow, she had found satisfaction in her presumed anonymity. Complete erasure. Gladly, her last gesture would be one of utility, of usefulness. After all, what use was sorrow? Yet in that moment, she felt relief that some part of her would remain catalogued, not entirely evaporated from history's oceanic memory.

Meredith was so entranced she didn't hear the animal, a coyote, rabid, approach the two of them from behind. She looked up to the barrel of Dr. Salazar's pistol.

"Alice," she started. Meredith raised her hands.

"Don't move," Dr. Salazar said flatly. Meredith understood she was not the target, but something else, just behind her.

Meredith turned her head, and there it was, not seven feet from her. Its teeth were bared, browning at the gum line, tongue hanging loose to one side. The animal growled and whined intermittently, and its eyes betrayed a feral, confused rage. It was positioned to strike. This close, the animal looked huge, menacing.

Dr. Salazar fired, finding her mark between the coyote's eyes. The animal collapsed to the ground. One of its hind legs remained upright for a moment, digging into the dirt. Then all animation ceased.

At first, Meredith heard only hushed silence. Then her ears rang. Dr. Salazar holstered her firearm, and used gestures to ask if Meredith was alright. Dr. Salazar went to the jeep and spoke into a Walkie-Talkie set, presumably about the coyote, though

Meredith couldn't make out anything she said. Already, flies gathered on the dead animal. They gathered near the eyes and the entrance wound.

Dr. Salazar reached from behind and put her hand in Meredith's, and led her, like a parent leading a child, back to the jeep. During the drive, Meredith's hearing slowly returned, and by the time they got to Dr. Salazar's office, everything was louder, harsher.

"Normally, we let nature take its course out there," Dr. Salazar said as she slid paperwork across her desk to Meredith. "You'll just need to initial on the bottom right, and full name and signature on the last." She handed Meredith a pen. "I'm a notary, by the way," she added.

"I thought I'd already done this," Meredith said.

"We leave the final paperwork until after, well, the tour. If you're still wanting to go through with this."

It seemed to Meredith they were both shouting. Of course she wanted to go through with it. There was a finality as she looped the letters of her signature, like she was signing her death warrant, though that had been signed months before.

"I know all this red tape is a hassle. We've just had some problems in the past," Dr. Salazar explained.

"Problems?"

"Usually from next of kin."

"Oh, you'll have no argument from my children," Meredith said. "None at all."

In the kitchen, Cody loaded empty tumblers onto a tray. The tray had belonged to Meredith's mother, and her mother before that. It was rimmed in gold with two ornate

handles. On the tray's surface was a hand painted bouquet of daffodils against a black background. Somewhere in the past, a large chunk of the background had been scraped off, and the shape and shine of the metal beneath looked to Meredith like an abstract comet or shooting star. Meredith paused, wondering which of her children would take it, if it would be boxed and hidden away and forgotten, or out and out junked. She'd resolved to stop doing this; stop cataloguing the objects she'd leave behind. Still, in some moments she couldn't help dwelling on the future lives of her things.

"Mom," Cody started. When Meredith closed the freezer door, she could see he was crying.

"Cody, please." She rubbed his back, between the shoulder blades, like when he'd taken falls as a child, crying more from the shock than the pain. Then to busy him, she handed him the ice bucket. "No more tears for me, remember?" Meredith didn't say these things to sounds stoic or engender dignity. She'd already grieved for herself plenty. It was a terrible state in which to spend ones last days. How foolish she'd been to expect her children to do the same.

Cody wiped his eyes and poured the gin. "It's not that," he said after he finished. "It's just that, Edward is right."

"I thought you were an atheist?"

"I am," he said. "And I feel like I'm being cruel, here, is all." He cleared his throat and took a glass, then nearly emptied it.

"Cruel? To who? Edward."

"To you," Cody said. "Edward's right about the funeral. I mean, in principle."

"Cody, I don't understand."

“The funeral is for the survivors,” he said softly. He handed her a tumbler and then took the rest of the drinks back to the dining room. Of all the times for them to agree, Meredith thought. Of all the times.

Since her visit to the research center, Meredith had been reading up on sky burials on the internet. In the Tibetan tradition, the body is laid out for three days, wrapped in white muslin, while monks and family members recite incantations and sing melodies. On the third day, the cloth is removed, and together, they break apart the body with cleavers and hatchets, leaving the remains for the vultures, though in the Tibetan tradition, the vultures are called Dakinis; angels. The Dakinis transport the soul to heaven, while nurturing their earthly bodies. Like many of the rituals and beliefs of the Buddhists Meredith had recently read about, their cyclical emphasis, the efficient reasoning behind them, pleased her. She liked particularly the story of Sakyamuni, one of the first Buddhas, who fed his own flesh to a starving hawk. The altruism, the sacrifice of that story is one Meredith hoped her children would see in her final wishes, though when they left that night after dinner, after hugs and assurances that everyone was fine to drive, Meredith knew it would take them their entire lives, until they are able to see their own common doom approaching, that they might truly understand her. Edward, perhaps, never would.

But she could not expect them to now, no more than she could expect them to make the ritual incision on her back, and then chop her into manageable pieces, and feed her to the birds. Yet the paperwork was signed, finalized. There was only one direction to go. Whether they accepted her will or not, it would be impossible for her to ever know.



She watched her three children load into their cars, and drive off into the night. The lights from nearby Austin hid the stars. Della had offered to stay the night with her, but Meredith thanked her and declined. Della said she would be back on Wednesday to do Meredith's hair, their normal routine.

For a long while, Meredith stood at her doorstep, listening to the trees rustle and whisper out in the dark. Suddenly she felt very tired. She decided she'll have one more drink, a nightcap, and then fall asleep in front of the television.

Back at the research center, Dr. Salazar had told her about some of the other donors' final wishes. Some were seemed practical and others were odd: One man insisted that his photo remained near his cadaver at all times, in order to help the researchers understand the decay of his facial tissue. Another woman would only donate her body if she was clothed in a nineteenth century dress, petticoats and all. Meredith turned off the porch light and walked back into her house.

In her living room, Cody's painting looked different in the weak light. Meredith walked up to the canvas. That close, she could only see shapes and patterns. She held her arms out wide and pressed her body, her face, to the painting. The surface was rough, uneven. It scraped her cheek and reminded her that today, she was still here.

And tomorrow, perhaps she'll call Dr. Salazar and make her own addendum to the agreement. Perhaps she'll have this painting displayed next to her retainer.

Because if she could take anything with her, she would take this.

## NILDA'S ROOM

I wasn't upset about being left behind for the funeral. There would be all that crying and other strange adult things: eulogies, awkward hugs, muttering handshakes. I didn't even know my mother's friend, the one who'd died. And I hated wearing ties.

I did feel bad for my mother. She got the news while we were eating dinner, and after she set the phone down she said nothing the rest of the meal, even while my father asked her over and over who had phoned. Still silent, she took our dishes to the sink, where she broke down in short sobs that sounded like she had the hiccups. At the time, I felt embarrassed, and my mother's unusual quiet the following few days was just another reason I was perfectly happy to be left behind for a week while they flew to Chicago for the services. Though this time, I wasn't staying with the Dolan or Hernandez families like I normally did when my parents left town. It was the week after the Fourth of July, and both families were still on vacation. Instead, I was staying with The Millers, a family we knew from church. They had one boy who attended Holy Cross Junior High, and he was in my grade: Karl Miller. He told me he had dozens of siblings, but they all went to public schools. As for me, I was an only child.

It *was* a bummer I wasn't staying with the Dolans. They had their own pool, and Mark Dolan's older sister was in high school now, and all last summer she wore an orange bikini that had been appearing in my imagination on what seemed an hourly basis ever since. But staying with Karl Miller was sure to be awesome. He'd told me about his brother Eddie, who had a moustache and who could get us cigarettes and maybe even beer, and I'd also seen, firsthand, Karl making out with Penny McVaugh last month behind the Sacristy. I'd never smoked a cigarette or drank a beer or kissed a girl and I was certain, just by being in the company of Karl and Eddie, I'd get my chance at all three that week.

On the way to the Millers the morning I was dropped off, I couldn't help thinking about Karl's sister, Nilda. He only told me about her once, and that she had died before I'd moved to Las Cruces. Apparently they still kept a room for her in the house, and his mother claimed to see her ghost. I figured Karl was just trying to spook me out, but as we got close to their house, I felt like something bad was going to happen. I felt like going to Chicago with my parents.

The Miller's lived on the old part of town, a neighborhood filled with large, boxish post-war homes, several churches, including our own Cathedral, all surrounded by squat sycamores and looming cottonwoods. Some trees had been allowed to grow right up through the sidewalks, pulverizing entire slabs of walkway. In other places, the undulating roots had created pyramids in the paths, like a drawbridge made too long, unable to close entirely. I tried to make a mental note of these spots when we drove past. They'd make great ramps for our bikes.

Mrs. Miller was on the porch when we pulled in the driveway. She was short and wide, and she suffered from MS which made her knock-kneed. I'd seen Karl slowly, dutifully, walk her to the front pew every Sunday since we'd moved to town four years ago. Each week, I could discern her singing voice above all the rest in the cathedral, even though we sat near the rear, to get a jump on the traffic jam in the parking lot that followed every ten a.m. service. The way she moved made me feel guilty for having a mother who taught aerobics classes three times a week.

"Jump out," my father told me, motioning towards the door.

"Give her this," my mother said, handing me an unsealed envelope. Careful not to slam the car door, I snuck a look at the contents. It was emergency numbers and a check for one hundred dollars. "We love you," she added through the open window.

"Curtis, you're just in time. Karl and Eddie will be right back." Assuming I must be grieving, she put her arm over my shoulder and pulled me to her. I'd hit a growth spurt that year, and I was now a full head taller than she. I had to strain my neck and I tried to smile. We waved as my parents backed out of the driveway.

From behind the screen door, two girls, probably around five and seven, walked precociously out onto the porch. The younger girl looked Latino or maybe black, while the older girl was pale, with stringy, almost translucent, blonde hair. It looked like a deflated cobweb had landed on her head. They eyed me curiously and I winked, sending them squealing back into the house.

I always thought we lived in a large house, but the Miller's house was gigantic. Two-story and wide, five windows faced the front from the second floor. The lawn was patchy from the shade of the trees, and there were piles of dead leaves from the previous

fall, even though it was now the middle of the summer. There were tricycles in various states of disrepair, and a large, blue plastic slide resembling an elephant in one corner, its trunk faded nearly clear.

Behind me, I heard Karl whoop. He coasted his bike into the yard and then executed a perfect slide-stop, dragging his right leg in the dirt. He had plastic bags with 2-Liters dangling from his handlebars and when one slipped out, he caught it with his massive hand.

“What’s up Curtis my man?” He hopped off the bike to slap my hand and bump knuckles. Karl always bumped knuckles too hard, but I couldn’t let that show.

“Where’s Eddie?” Mrs. Miller asked Karl.

“Rounding up all the other runts at the park. Neto is there, too, if you were looking for him.”

Mrs. Miller nodded and started up the porch steps. “Come help me get the pizza ready, boys,” she called back to us.

It wouldn’t be until years later that I understood the Millers were a foster family. They housed children until suitable homes could be found. Some of the kids, like Eddie and Karl, hadn’t been taken in anywhere else, so the Millers adopted them. But Nilda was a biological daughter. Karl didn’t tell me that until we were adults, but even that summer, I could sense it.

My parents had been so busy packing that morning, we’d forgotten to eat lunch. Just hearing the word *pizza* made my stomach growl.

At first, when Mrs. Miller said we wouldn't be ordering but instead making our pizzas, I was intrigued. We never made pizza at my house, we always had it delivered. I imagined Mrs. Miller would teach us how to toss the dough, like they did in the TV commercials, that we'd chop up hearty tomatoes and grate the finest cheeses, and all the while Mrs. Miller would sing something in Italian.

But I'd never had a pizza like this. An English muffin covered in Prego, with your choice of cheddar or American cheese, baked into a hard layer. They did have peperoni, which reminded me of pizza.

Eddie, Karl and I, being the oldest, were allowed two muffins each, but we also had to wait until all the other children were fed. They filed down from upstairs steadily, mechanically, taking a paper plate from the table while Mrs. Miller pulled baking sheets from the oven, each then filling a cup with Big Red, and then returning back up the stairs, a constant motion. I counted seventeen, but I couldn't be sure.

We three boys sat with Mrs. Miller at the oblong table in the dining room. When I first walked into the house, I couldn't ignore the smell—something in between diapers and B.O. and somehow, *mustardy*, now overwhelmed by the aroma of toasted cheddar. The carpet was flattened and frizzled at the edges, and there were stains in several places. The front of the house was one large room, with sullen brown couches against two of the walls, forming an "L." The stairs were at the end of the narrow hallway that divided the house, like a windpipe. I could hear motion and voices while we ate, like the house was alive, and the rooms were vacuoles inside two enormous lungs.

“We’ve got you set up on the couch,” Mrs. Miller said between bites. I thought I’d be bunking with Eddie and Karl, but apparently not. “Karl showed you the bathroom?”

I nodded, crunching on the burnt muffin, trying so hard to swallow it my eyes watered. Mrs. Miller must have taken this as a sign of grief. “And if you need to talk, I’m always here.” I shook my head and chewed. I didn’t want to explain that I had no idea who my mother’s dead friend was.

There was a crash upstairs, then the soprano shriek of a child’s indignation.

“I got it,” Eddie said, getting up from the table.

“Other house rules: be in an hour after sundown, and its lights out upstairs at 9, so don’t wake the young ones.”

“And stay out of Nilda’s room,” Karl said.

I looked back and forth between the two of them, puzzled.

“Yes. Please. Don’t go in the room at the end of the east hall.” Mrs. Miller looked out the blinds vacantly. “Otherwise, make yourself at home.” So they did keep a room in there. I wanted to ask Mrs. Miller more about it, but Karl shot me a look. It seemed strange and almost silly to me that they still kept her room, but I kept my mouth shut.

Mrs. Miller wiped her lips. “House rules.”

From upstairs we could hear Eddie yelling, then a chorus of laughter.

“C’mon,” Karl said. “Let’s go to my room. You have to hear this tape I got.”

I didn’t sleep much the first night. The couch’s cushions were uneven, and no matter how I situated myself, I felt like I was being folded in half. The blanket was too

short, and there was a damp spot at the end of the couch the identity and origin of I tried not to imagine. All night, there was some kind of muted rustling from the floor above, a constant and wet cough, and the metronomic click of the clock and the wall. Every time I started to doze, a toilet would flush somewhere, speeding through the walls of the house in a choked gargle. Eventually soft dawn light incubated the curtains, giving their bilious shape an eerie glow.

I must off dozed sometime after that, and I woke to small feet standing on my chest.

“What’s your name?” It was a boy maybe five or six, with crusts around his eyes and nostrils.

“Curtis,” I said, straining from the pressure. My eyes felt dry, thirsty. “What about you, buddy?”

“That’s stupid!” he screamed gleefully, and then disappeared to the stairs, singing “Curt-is is a Burt-is!” Steadily, the house awoke.

I took my turn in the bathroom, where the showerhead’s pressure was minimal. The floor of the beige tub was grey with soap scum and dirt, like it hadn’t been washed in some time. Two Mexican women, Yolanda and Sylvia, cleaned our house every Friday while I was at school. I doubted Yolanda and Sylvia had ever been to the Millers.

Toweling off and going through my bag, I realized I had, thankfully, packed my swimming trunks, but had also forgot to pack any pants besides my pleated orange and purple Zumba pants. I didn’t have many clothes besides my uniforms for school and a few nice pair of slacks and shirts for church, and during my growth spurt my mother was reticent to buy things I’d soon outgrow.



As I left the bathroom, nodding to the line of children waiting in the hall, I saw the door to the east room, Nilda's room, ajar. I moved closer, and from the crack in the doorway I could see a made bed and an open window, with light yellow curtains fluttering with the gentle morning breeze.

"No, no!" I heard a boy's voice behind me yell. I had reached for the doorknob. "It's scary," the boy said.

I was ready to ignore the boy and open the door, but I heard Karl yelling duuuude let's go swim, and I backed away.

They didn't have an extra bike for me. At least, not an extra *boys* bike. Eddie was standing in the front yard, a pink banana seat monstrosity leaning against his hip. It even had those pom-pom streamer things coming out of the handlebar grips. No way.

"You want me to ride that?" I asked.

"s what we got," Eddie said, grinning. He had dark hair and light brown skin, and a vivid patch of peach fuzz growing on his upper lip that screamed of early pubescence.

"Why don't you ride it?" I said. For some reason, I felt I needed to try and be tough around Eddie.

"Not me, *ese*. I'll get beat up," Eddie said.

"Quit saying *ese*," Karl said from the porch. "He saw *American Me* last month and now he thinks he's in a gang."

"I am!" Eddie yelled. Then he turned around and around in the yard with his arms in triumph. "Westside Locos *por vida!*" he yelled into the neighborhood.

Karl rolled his eyes.

“Here *vato*,” Karl said, pronouncing it like fat-toe. “You can ride my bike, Curt. I’ll ride the Stinky Pink.” He and Eddie started laughing. Eddie jabbed me in the stomach inclusively, but I didn’t get the joke.

Once we were down the block, out of sight from the Millers, Eddie stopped and handed out cigarettes. I was nervous, I think that must’ve been why I coughed so much.

“Little virgin,” Eddie said.

We spent most of the next three days at the public pool in Young park. It was swarming with kids I didn’t know. There was a spring board and a high dive, and we had contests at who could make the biggest splash in three categories: jackknife, cannonball and preacher seat. Eddie always seemed to win. But that was just on the low springboard. I was terrified of the high dive.

Eddie and Karl were fearless, and when Karl nailed a one-and-a-half, Eddie responded with a full-gainer. I sat near the fence at the deep end in awe, happily worn out.

There were girls, too. Dozens, different each day. Eddie and Karl were even more fearless with them. One afternoon, I saw them from across the wide pool talking with girls that must’ve been in high school. Karl called me over, but I pretended to be asleep behind my sunglasses. I wanted so badly to talk to a girl, to hold her hand, to kiss her, but even the thought of walking over to one made my legs go noodley, my chest feel like it might split open.

Each of those nights, after we’d spent hours at the pool, I fell asleep on the couch with ease, but I could never stay asleep for more than a few hours. I would wake in the middle of the night with a start, momentarily forgetting where I was, the Millers house

now quiet. Once I gained my bearings, I thought I could hear talking, more like a chant, like someone mumbling a rosary. I was certain it came from Nilda's room.

Every night, lying there awake, I thought about Nilda's room. I began imagining what might be in there: Nilda's ashes? Nilda's corpse? Nilda's ghost? All of it seemed ridiculous and yet plausible. There was a presence in that room, leaking out into the house. I could feel it. Perhaps because it was forbidden, I started getting obsessed with Nilda's room. Each night, I crept closer to the door, but some noise from above or a creak in the floor made me chicken out and run back to my bed on the couch.

On Friday evening, Mr. Miller arrived. He worked Monday through Friday at some lab in the northern part of the state, three hours away. Again, like an assembly line, all the children funneled into the front room to greet him, and he either knelt to hug them or picked them up, giving each a kiss on the cheek and doling out a piece of candy. He was a thin man, with a rosy complexion hidden behind a frazzled white beard and hair. He resembled some kind of eccentric Santa Claus on a rigorous diet.

Mrs. Miller had made a mushroom casserole for dinner, and even though I loathed mushrooms, I ate it quickly. I was famished; all the swimming and riding made my stomach overrule my taste buds.

We older boys were allowed to stay up and watch movies. I brought a tape with Arnold movies dubbed from television: *Commando*, *Running Man* and *Raw Deal*. Eddie, Karl and I watched all three, eating stale popcorn. I felt pride as Eddie and Karl became engrossed in each film.

“We’re not supposed to watch movies with guns,” Karl told me. On screen, Arnold wasted seven dudes at once.

“What about *American Me*?” I asked.

Eddie and Karl simultaneously put a finger over their lips.

We finally got beer. It was Saturday night, and Karl, Eddie and I were allowed to stay out later. We walked down to the park where several teenagers gathered around cars parked in the grass. On the way over, I noticed Karl and Eddie had busted a sag in their badass Jnco’s. I tried to imitate them, but the elastic of my Zumba pants kept riding up my ass.

Eddie handed out cigarettes, then took the lead of our group. I inhaled the smoke shallowly; I didn’t want to look soft in front of all these people. The night was warm, and occasionally a gust of wind would rustle the branches in the trees overhead, sounding like a crashing ocean wave.

Eddie walked over to one of the cars and spoke in Spanish to some of the older boys. To me, they looked like men. For a moment, he disappeared behind one of the car’s open trunks, returning to us with 40s in hand, green bottles with a cartoonish hornet on the label. The beer was lukewarm and had a musty taste, almost chewable. After about a third of the bottle, I started to get lightheaded. I bummed a smoke every time Eddie came back to our area. He seemed to know everybody in the park.

I kept wanting to ask Karl about Nilda’s room. Some of it must have been the beer, but I couldn’t get it out of my mind. I wanted to demand he show me what was hidden in there.

Karl said that the day she died, he'd popped a tire riding after school. Walking his bike home, Nilda had met him on the ditch, saying nothing. They walked for a while in silence, but when Karl made the turn on to their street, Nilda was gone. When he got home, he found out Nilda was dead.

He had told a few us about it at school. For a short time, rumors went around that Karl was crazy or just a flat out liar. But I believed him.

"Hey man," I asked Karl. "Why is no one allowed in Nilda's room?" The three of us were lounging near the monkey bars. Eddie was lying on his back, looking at the narrow strips of stars visible between the branches overhead. Suddenly, he sat up.

"It's haunted."

Karl frogged him one. "Shut up, man."

Eddie slugged him back and kept going. "Once, in the middle of the night, we went in there and the vacuum started all by itself. Wasn't even plugged in."

"Really? Bullshit." I said.

"Serious. Ask Karl," Eddie said. But Karl was already up and taking a piss behind one of the trees. "Let's bail," he said.

We finished off the rest of our 40s and walked home, a little wobbly. Karl and Eddie went off to their room and I lay down on the couch, waiting for the house to finally fall asleep. I watched the lights from passing cars wash across the walls and heard the wind kick up the dead leaves outside. Karl never answered my question.

That night, once I was certain the house was still, I made my way to Nilda's room. I was feeling the beer. I walked lightly on the balls of my stocking feet to avoid

the groans from the hollow floor. At the end of the hall I hesitated and looked around. There was an opaque glow from the nightlight at the hallway's other end causing my eyes to strain, to see shadows deeper than were actually there. I took a breath and slowly turned the knob.

I expected there to be some kind of icy chill, to be enveloped by the presence of an otherworldly wraith. But the window had been closed, and the room was warm and smelled both putrid and sweet, like unaired laundry. There was a twin bed in the corner, neatly made, and a large chest of drawers. On its top sat a small porcelain music box and a framed photograph.

I slid across the room and picked up the photo. It must've been Nilda. She was young with high cheekbones and eyes that might have been green. In the faint moonlight from the window, it was difficult to make out true colors. The more I looked at the picture, the more Nilda's face seemed to fade away, her hair thinning, her skin retreating, decaying, transforming her beautiful face into a skull, a mortal thing, a dead thing.

I looked away. I opened a few of the drawers. The Millers had kept all her clothes, each garment carefully folded and fluffed, like sweaters stacked on a shelf in a department store. In the top drawer I found her panties, a bible, and a stack of letters. I picked up a pair of her underwear, though quickly put it down. It seemed shameful to rummage through her things like this.

At the same time, it amazed me. These objects once belonged to someone living, and they felt full of anticipation, as if their owner would someday return. In that room, I felt electrified.

I looked over the music box. There were florid engravings, but the porcelain was rough to the touch.

Slowly, I opened the cover. I knew I shouldn't make any noise, but I couldn't help myself. A tinny, metallic variation of Brahms' Lullaby began. The music sounded sharp and grating against the quiet of the house. After an iteration of the song, I closed the box. I turned around and saw Mrs. Miller in the doorway, leaning against the jamb.

She must have been watching me for a while. Without a word, she waddled across the room and struck me across the face with her palm. I felt I deserved it, but I was surprised when tears came anyways. Mrs. Miller grabbed me, pulling me to herself, and I could hear her crying too. It sounded the way my mother did the night she heard about her friend. I suddenly felt sorry for my mother in a way I still can't explain.

Mrs. Miller walked with me out to the couch, where I sobbed into the pillow messily. She rubbed my back, the way my own mother would do when I had a nightmare as a young child, until I fell gently to sleep.

I woke with puffy eyes and a head full of snot and a small ringing behind my eyes which must have been a hangover. Mrs. Miller was hustling children around the kitchen, filling plates with scrambled eggs.

"Get dressed Curtis, mass is at ten," she said to me. I realized I would be wearing my Zumba pants to church.

In the afternoon, after we'd sat through an especially long homily, Karl, Eddie and I wandered the neighborhood. We played a game of pick-up basketball at the park. We took turns on Karl's bike trying to catch air on the concrete ramps from the damaged

sidewalks. We chased down the ice cream truck and begged for free bomb pops. “You’re too old for this,” the ice cream man said, and then let us buy them three for one.

We were sitting in the shade from the large stone stairs at the front of the First Baptist Church, another of the large, holy buildings in the old neighborhood. Our mouths were red and sticky from the popsicles.

Eddie proposed a dare.

There were fifteen stairs, and a large, flat landing at the top that overlooked small, sloped patch of grass. Whoever jumped off first would get the last of the smokes. Whoever jumped last or didn’t jump at all was a big fat pussy. Eddie had already done it several times, he claimed, so he had no need to prove himself.

Up the stairs I went and without hesitation I jumped. From below I saw Eddie and Karl’s eyes wide. They never expected me to actually do it. Right before the ground met me, I thought I heard them yell.

I hit the ground feet-first, snapping my ankle. But the force from the rest of my falling body doubled me over, pushing my face into my bent knees, breaking my nose. The pain in my face and my foot were so incredible, they almost cancelled each other out.

I sat up and demanded the smokes.

“Easy now, Curtis,” Karl said.

“Oh shit, oh shit,” Eddie kept saying.

“A dare is a dare,” I said. I tried not to think about the blood running over my lips when I spoke. Karl took the smokes and lighter out of Eddie’s shirt pocket and handed them to me.

“Don’t move,” Karl said. “We’re going to go get some help.”



He and Eddie ran off in the direction of the Miller's house. My front teeth felt loose. There were only three smokes left in the pack, but while Karl and Eddie went for help, I smoked them all. They were mine. My lips were swelling so badly the cigarette fell out of my mouth a few times, and my head was pounding, but no cigarette will ever taste better.

When I saw Mr. and Mrs. Miller being led down the street by Karl and Eddie, and at least a dozen of the foster children behind them, I waved. I wanted to let them know everything would be alright.

## MONOLOGUE FROM THE WATERING HOLE

Ever since Sonny went in the ground last year, I've been coming to this cantina at noon. It'd been my watering hole, my local, from before, but when Sonny was alive, we'd come in the evenings, when there were good bands and dancing ladies and those dusty, multicolored globes overhead made the light soft, made you feel warm. Just like today, those windows by the pool table are too tall, let too much brightness in, like they're scolding you for being drunk during siesta time. You have to be dedicated to drink this early. I'm nothing much, but I am dedicated.

Back then, those nights with Sonny, things felt different. Those nights, with Sonny buying rounds for his staff and for me, it seemed perfectly natural for this old guy to dance with those pretty girls from town. Back then, they didn't seem to notice my bad smell or my crusty hair. They would oblige my bum leg and follow my lead, even when I was off the beat. When I had to rest, they would pour me a cool glass of water from the pitchers on the tables.

Right over the pool tables, in the cantina, there's a big photo. It's Larry Bird. As in *the*. It's from the year they played New Mexico State at the old Pan Am Center. State

won. It was a huge upset. Art, the original owner of this place, bought that picture from the paper, had it enlarged and framed. See how Bird is about to go up for what looks like a lay-up? Goodson, in the moment follows, swats Bird into the third row. The ball, that is. I remember because I was watching, here, on Art's old black and white TV. When state won, Art forgave everyone's tab. *Tabula rasa*. Me and Schmitt and Ortiz immediately added half a dozen tequilas to our clean slate. Poor Art, he was in the ground now, too.

Sonny used to own the restaurant next door. Damn fine food. It's a boutique now. What's the fancy name they got, *Nambe*? It seems like a waste to spend that much money on plates.

Some days I start drinking even before noon. I'll hole up in my camper down by the canal and drink Maneschevitz till I'm nearly blind and forget to wear clothes and wander over to the plaza and yell obscenities at tourists. Then I get to talk to Pena, one of the deputies. He's got a chip on his shoulder, some kind of entitlement, like he doesn't think he's Mexican.

We doing this again, Uncle Sam? Pena will ask.

I'll mutter something and he'll put me in the back of the squad car and deliver me to my camper. After he leaves I'll smoke and try to write "Uncle Sam Wants You" with piss in the dirt outside. Then I'll wag my dick at a car passing on the highway. The highway is about half a mile off from my little plot, so I imagine to the occupants of the cars I must look like a deranged man strangling my nuts. Which, maybe I am.

Sonny was a Mexican, too, but I didn't hold it against him. He was a hard worker. Back when his restaurant was open, during the heat of July, I'd watch him haul twenty

pound bags of ice up a creaky ladder to dump in the pads of the swamp coolers. After Vietnam, I don't mind the oven of the desert. It sure isn't wet. But Sonny wanted his customers to be comfortable, and he wasn't about to let one of his clumsy bus boys climb up there.

The day I met Sonny was a Saturday, I remember, because there was a fiesta. The square was noisy with vendors, their makeshift booths with multicolored blankets for roofs. Withered old Mexican women would hawk homemade Kachina dolls and pendants of veiny turquoise pebbles or icons of Catholic saints. In the gazebo at the center of the plaza, Mariachis in three piece velvet suits thumped their guitaroons and blew their horns and belted songs from their guts, sweet and melancholy. My hearing now is just about shot, but I can appreciate a good tune.

Twelve year old boys would call out, selling chile powdered corn cobbs on a stick that their fathers would dip dutifully in the fryer behind them. One year, there was a *matanza*, but the Health Department put a stop to that, for obvious reasons.

That day, there was no breeze. The air was static, still. Most of the vendors had given up and packed it in for the day. There was a line outside of Sonny's restaurant, tourists and vendors alike searching for some shelter against the day. It was hot, even for me.

And Sonny was on the roof, pouring sacks of ice into the cooler. The bags were more water than ice. Sonny was having difficulty keeping them on his shoulders as he went up the ladder. Twice, the bags slipped when he was near the top rung and exploded on the ground like giant water balloons. The flies from the Dumpster in the alley migrated to the puddles. He had a stack of the plastic bags hiding in a little nook of shade

against the cantina's wall, but with the time it was taking for Sonny to get up and down, the sun would evaporate them long before the lunch rush was over.

I walked over and started motioned for Sonny to stay on the roof. I started heaving the bags up to him, like a brick mason. Back then, I had good pills for my leg, and I couldn't feel my leg and could brace myself easily. We finished in no time. That's what I liked about Sonny, he could work hard but wasn't afraid to let others help him. Afterwards, he took me through the back door to the kitchen and we sat in the produce locker, drinking a corona. It was one of the coldest damn beers I've ever had.

On nights when the cantina was really jumping, when the neon lights called like Sirens, when there was a line around the corner for the band, Sonny would sneak in the underage bus boys from the restaurant. With a nod, he'd slip a twenty to the bouncer and in they went, yelling over the band for shots in a staccato bravado that betrayed their youth. The lights shone off their smooth faces, split sharply by their grins. Ahead of them, they had a lifetime of drinking and disappointment under a blue cloud of cigarette smoke, and they couldn't wait to start.

Sonny would spot me in my usual corner, right here, and always ask, What can I get you, Uncle Sam?

Year by year, the bands got noisier. I'm no square but I was here when the cantina hosted Canned Heat. That was '81. Man, what a show. The band let me sit in, play my harmonica. They had to play in a different key because I only have a cross harp, and I lost my breath when they gave me a solo, but there, on the stage, I wasn't just crazy old Uncle

Sam. I was somebody else. Shit, I wasn't even *old* then. Being around Sonny made me feel the same way.

And man, could Sonny pull some ass. Most of them were waitresses from his restaurant, little cunts so fresh you could smell 'em even over all the smoke. Me, in my dusty coat and worn down Stetson, me they regarded as a novelty.

Is that guy homeless? they'd ask. Or just some dirty cowboy?

\ No, it's Uncle Sam, Sonny would say. Let's have a drink with him.

And thus, we would drink.

They would all crowd in around me at the booth, the girls' tight little skirts making the vinyl moan when they slid in. If my dick still worked, I would've been rock hard. I haven't had an erection in twenty years, but that doesn't stop the want. The want never goes away.

Sonny must've heard my stories a thousand times, but he laughed like they were brand new. I always changed their endings, or stopped the tale before the bad things started happening. I had been a correspondent for the army during the war. I was supposed to report on what I saw. But back in Vietnam, and later on when with Sonny and his friends, I never mentioned that Samuels actually drowned in six inches of water out in a swamp after he left the whorehouse, never mentioned Clete had his balls blown clean off by his own Claymore mine, never mentioned Rick went home crazy and shot his wife and kids. No one wants to hear that part of it. I don't blame them. Had I written the truth, back in Vietnam, the army would have censored me anyway. The truth is too indifferent, too cruel.

On the nights I could barely keep standing, Sonny would give me a ride down to my camper. He drove everyone home, even if he was pretty tight himself. He knew all the deputies; his granddad had been Sheriff years before. He'd load up the girls in the cab, me and the bus boys in the bed, and we'd howl songs I made up on the spot, old tunes I changed the words on to suit my mood, most of them dirty. Songs the boys pretended to know, songs they echoed in slurs over the roar of the night's passing air, over the shudders the truck made when we hit a pothole.

Sometimes I'm too dedicated. I keep drinking right on through the afternoon, through the happy hour crowd, right on through dusk, and I find myself in the middle of an empty night. The place will fill up, sure, but these days I recognize fewer and fewer faces. These days, no one buys me rounds. No one says, Hey, Uncle Sam, tell me a story.

On those nights, I go down to the pool.

The pool is a few miles from the plaza, in one of the those little neighborhoods with too many cul-de-sacs. It's locked at night, but the fence is easy to climb, even with my bad leg, even if I'm pretty tight.

Around the fence are large trees and thick shrubs, and they hide most of the glow from the lone streetlight. Some nights, there'll be teenagers from the neighborhood horsing around or a couple fucking. If it's just some jackass boys I'll scare the shit out of them, put on my crazy old man act. I've lost a lot of weight but I'm still a big and weird looking son of a bitch, especially in the shadows. But if its lovers I'll hide myself away, listen for them to finish, listen for the scraping of the gate and the click of them locking up before I scale the fence. I'm ok with lovers.

Once I'm over I strip down to my skivvies, sit at the edge and kick at the water for a while. Then I'll get in and float on my back. After being on a boat for half the war I swore off the water, it's why I moved to this fucking desert, but I can handle the pool. Just me and the water and the stars. I ride home in my dripping underwear, night air drying me off.

Sonny had a woman, I mean a serious one, for a while. Leah. She was an accountant and she worked the night audit at a hotel by the highway and wouldn't get to the cantina till almost last call, when everyone was telling their same stories, their same jokes, young men scanning the room to find whatever girl was drunk and willing. It's a routine I've seen a thousand times over a thousand different miles. It makes the world turn.

Sonny would always play it cool, sitting there at our booth, like he wasn't waiting for Leah to get off her shift, walk through the door, put her ID in her purse and shrug back her hair. Why they would card her I don't know. Everyone knew she was Leah and she was Sonny's woman and she was old enough. Maybe the bouncer, like me, like Sonny, loved the way she shrugged. I have to admit, she could stop a room. Every time I saw her come in, I'd try to get a chance to look at Sonny, too, see the smile on his face.

Maybe that's why they didn't last. Both of them, whatever you want to call it, their presence, their personalities, were too big for each other. They were both huge planets all we others orbited around. They couldn't be each other's satellite. It was easy for me to circle around Sonny. I'll admit it, I wouldn't have minded getting caught up in Leah's gravity.



Rumor around the cantina was they got pregnant and then got not pregnant and their relationship couldn't bear the weight. Another old story, told again. I never pressed Sonny about it. He was stoic, always stoic. I'm not heartless, if he wanted to talk to Uncle Sam I would've listened. I've held grown men while they cried. But the cantina wasn't a battlefield, it wasn't the jungle. There are rules at the catina. There are some things you don't bring up in the bar, things you don't ask. We were men, after all.

The night Sonny died, we went to the pool. We'd done some damage at the cantina, and I was feeling it. Leah had stopped coming around by then. It was me, Sonny, some kid from his restaurant, and a couple of girls. It was a full moon and we got down to our underpants. Once they were in the water, the girls took off their bras and Sonny and the boy whooped.

They were all taking turns on the diving board, trying dives and flips and gainers. Olympians they were not. I watched and cheered from the shallow end.

After a while, I got tired and sat on the steps, smoked a cigarette and flicked ashes in the water. One of the girls, Melinda was her name, came over and bummed a smoke. Sonny offered everyone some grass, but Melinda and I declined.

Melinda was the uglier of the two, a little too much around the belly and ass, and she had a big birthmark on her shoulder, but I didn't care. How many guys like me get to be that close to a half-naked woman half my age at three in the morning?

She kissed me, and her lips were cool from the water, but her tongue was warm, she and tasted like beer and salt and chlorine. I've got bad breath from my missing tooth, halitosis they call it. Melinda didn't notice or didn't care. I wanted my dick to work,

badly. I slipped my hand down the front of her panties and she didn't stop me. But when she returned the favor, she found out.

Oh, she said. She looked the other way. Is it me?

No, no, I said. Old war injury. Uncle Sam can't salute anymore.

Then I guided her up to the pool's edge, had her lie on her back, and I slipped off her purple underwear and pleased her with my mouth. I knew guys back in the war, guys at the cantina, that boasted they never eat pussy. Those men are fools or liars or both.

She was loud and she pulled out some of my stringy hair. Afterwards, I could tell she was a little embarrassed. I wanted to tell her it was ok, that it was good, that no one heard. Instead, I smoked and told an old war story, not realizing till halfway through it was a story I'd told just a couple hours before. But this time I didn't change the end. The good guy didn't win. For some reason, I felt like being cruel. True stories, it turns out, are pretty cruel.

That's awful, Melinda said when I finished.

That's the real ending, I said.

Sonny and his girl came back then. They had dressed in the dark and looked it.

Time to go, Sonny said.

I looked at Melinda and she looked away and I told Sonny I'd march it home that night.

You sure? he asked.

I straightened up and saluted and Sonny laughed. He loaded everyone else in the truck and turned up the music and spun out in the dirt parking lot.

Next night I find out from Art: Sonny got the girls, who were roommates, back to their apartment. Sonny figured he'd let the kid sleep it off at his place and heads south, down old 84. Deputies say it must've been near six a.m. There's a little bend on that road, right before the pecan orchard, with a steeply banked irrigation ditch.

Sonny missed the turn. Missed it going fast. The truck went airborne, until it wrapped itself around one of the pecan trees, sideways. The truck was ten feet up in the branches. Those pecan trees are sturdy. The kid was thrown out of the bed when the truck hit the bank, landed about twenty yards over in the alfalfa field. He spent weeks in the hospital but pulled through. Sonny had a steering wheel in his chest and was gone.

Since then, the days have gotten longer and I've been drinking my dinner. You could say it's a rut, but all my life has been a rut, just in different locations.

Why should one man's death bother me so much? I sit and think of that night at the pool, the way I walked home not feeling my leg, tasting Melinda on my beard, thinking I was onto something good, while Sonny was dead in a tree five miles away. Maybe because I wasn't there to see him die, see the blood and the broken bones, the way I'd seen so many other young men perish, alone and confused, across the ocean.

I know what you're thinking. That I blame myself. That I should've stopped Sonny. You're wrong. Maybe if you got kids, then you can feel something like responsible for them. But not for other men. See, in war you learn it pretty fast, because you got to. In the bar, with the drink, we are dying a lot slower, but the lesson is the same. Grown men's stories are theirs alone, their own responsibility. That's the truth.

And the truth, like I said, is one cruel son of a bitch.

## WHILE THE WITCH BURNS

CHORUS:

Yes, it is late, but you have seen where justice lies

CREON:

Oh yes:

I have learned, and it is misery

Sophocles, *Antigone*

We called it The Whale. A 1959 Hearse, like the one in *Ghostbusters*, dorsal fins and all, except the paint was sand blasted down to the grey primer. Vinny, who was into death metal, had spray painted what he claimed was a Satanic pentagram with Beelzebub at its center on the hood. To me, the design resembled a mentally deranged elk inside a Star of David. The Whale was the most dilapidated vehicle from the fleet owned by Vinny's father. It backfired, burned oil, and stalled if the stoplight took too long. And that summer, it was ours.

The Whale was a standard, which only Spud could negotiate, and besides, Spud was the only member of our trio with a driver's license. I'd passed the written test in order to get a provisional license, but my father, who was from a big city and found driving an annoyance, didn't feel inclined to log the hours in the passenger seat to award me full privileges. Simply, I would have to wait until I was sixteen, a date only months

away on the calendar but that summer felt like an event somehow receding into the future, paradoxically getting farther and farther away with each passing day.

“So I’m at Reed’s, pretty tossed, you know?” It was early morning, and Spud looked as if he’d slept very little the night before. “We were shotgunning from the bottle, the trick with the straw.”

Vinny nodded in affirmation, wiping the sleep from his eyes. Outside, the sun had not yet risen over the mountains, still the light was intense, outlining the houses and trees we passed in an persistent indigo. We made an early start of it on Saturdays. Vinny rolled down the passenger window and lit up a cigarette. The smell of smoke and flat morning air rushed in, mixing with the aroma of Spud’s gas station coffee and the full tanks of gasoline in the back of The Whale. It was insane that Vinny smoked in the car, I realize now. Of course, most of what Vinny did could be labeled insanity.

“The line for the bathroom was miles, and I just need to piss.” While telling stories, Spud constantly looked away from the road. He needed to make a connection with his audience, and I always felt fortunate to be a member, exclusive VIP seating in the back of The Whale.

The rest of the car was filled with our equipment. The morbidly spacious trunk was perfect for transporting our mower, weed-whackers, shears and extra gasoline. The three of us were making a killing that summer, by teenager standards, landscaping in Las Alturas Hills, the wealthy side of town. What Vinny disdainfully called “The White End,” a golf course community obscenely placed in the desert. Every day I was out with Spud and Vinny I was secretly grateful me and my father lived in East Capri, still a well-to-do neighborhood, but outside the circuit of the grotesquely rich.

“So I do my business, turn around and who’s there but Whorey Lorrie.” We were passing Sena Manor, a property of multiple acres that sat at the entrance of Las Alturas hills. Near the west end of the property was an anachronistic farmhouse, dissonant from the nouveau architecture up the hill. Yet the manor’s transplanted palm trees and lush yards accomplished the goal of the Las Alturas developers: to transport the visitor to another world, one luxuriously hidden from the desiccated void of the desert southwest. The view from the road made it hard to see the headstones behind a small grove of cottonwoods, but we all knew they were there. When I’d moved here with my father four years earlier I’d been introduced to the myth of Old Man Sena, how he’d caught his wife with his cousin and put them both in the ground, right out behind his house, how the police were afraid of him, how he was two-hundred years old, how he breathed fire and feasted on the bones of foolish trick-or-treaters every Halloween. A modified version of *La Llorona*, told to frighten children. Kid shit, really, but every time we passed, I got the hiccups.

Needless to say, we never landscaped Sena Manor, never set foot on the property.

“So before I can even zip up, she’s on me. Down on her knees. And I’m like, well this is ok, this is *nice*.” Vinny listened rapt, with his mouth slightly open, a look of concentration he got any time girls or gore-filled movies were brought up. “And I’m thinking: no one can see us. We were behind that dog house of Reed’s, the one for those huskies of his.”

“Was she good?” Vinny asked. “You know?” and Vinny waved his palm downward towards his crotch.

“Patience, my friend,” Spud said, winking at me in the rearview mirror. “See V, that’s your problem. Telling a story is like handling a woman. Climax too soon and everyone is bored or confused and you sit there with a mess in your pants.”

“One-pump chump,” I echoed.

“Shut the fuck up, faggot,” Vinny said to me, suddenly. His expression was dead-serious and vindictive. There was one, two, beats of strained silence before Spud burst out laughing, and then Vinny, and then me. “Just fucking with you, white-boy,” Vinny said and smacked my knee with his palm. Ever since I’d met Vinny, he could switch between affability and venom, both sides of his personality equally believable and spoke of an imbalance deeper than teenage angst.

Spud continued his story. “Anyways, I’m into it. It was like, shit, what’s the word? The one we talked about in English last year?” Spud asked me. “Distended?”

“There were lots of words used in English class,” I said and grinned.

“Right, smart-ass. I mean the one about the hippy, the one who lived out in the woods by himself and wrote all that shitty poetry about trees and ponds?”

“Thoreau?”

“That was the word?”

“No. Thoreau was the writer. Of the poems? Actually, they were essays. Never mind.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Spud went on. “That guy. Like, the word to describe the experience of the birds and all that nature shit?”

“Transcended?”

“Bingo. So I was like, transcended. I mean, it was beautiful. I’m good and buzzed and I’ve got a girl on my knob and I just stare up into the sky and look at the stars. And that’s what I thought, that word. Well, not that word because I couldn’t think of it, but that feeling of the word.” Spud told this with an almost religious reverence, like he was imparting some universal secret. I’d met Spud in our English class, where he never seemed ashamed that the course was, for him, remedial.

“You sure you don’t mean ‘sublime?’” I asked.

“That band *sucks*,” Vinny shouted. “*Chu-pa, mi ver-er-ga*” Vinny sang to the tune of the song that had been all over the radio the past year. I started out liking the band myself, but after a few months hanging around Spud and Vinny, I learned to distance myself from music that only poseurs listened to. “The only reason anyone likes them is because their singer O.D’d,” Vinny added. “That music is for posers.”

“So *anyways*,” Spud continued, “I’m out there, with the transcended sublime or whatever, and I hear this laughing. Which at first seems normal because it’s a party. I mean, I’ve got my eyes closed, and I’m thinking like I’m so in key with the world I can hear joy.”

“Like trees laughing?” Vinny asked.

“Yeah dude. But then something flashes in my eyes.” Spud made an explosive gesture with his fingers near his temple. “And up on the roof, it’s Buck and Smiley and Reed and *everyone*. Reed’s got his Polaroid out, snap, snap, snap.”

I felt bad for Lorrie. Her reputation for promiscuity was probably mostly true, but I’d been attracted to her. Her hair was always messy and she wore too much make-up, but beneath her skin tight jeans and layers of eye shadow there was a vulnerability I couldn’t



explain, a vulnerability I wanted to protect like something younger and more innocent than me, though Lorrie was going to be a senior that upcoming fall.

“Dude, I *knew* Reed was pervy” Vinny said. Reed was a local legend, less for his brief stint as a professional skateboarder and more for the parties at his house in the pecan orchards where teenagers mingled in a haze of free beer with the town’s older burnouts. Spud always attended these parties, and Vinny had been to a few, but for me they remained a forbidden curiosity. My father didn’t disallow me to go to parties, as long as he could drop me off and pick me up and speak with the chaperones, which omitted any chance of going to one of Reed’s bashes.

“Nah,” Spud said. “You got it all wrong. Reed gave me the pictures. Besides, he’s got kids.”

“Oh, break out,” Vinny said, and then started rummaging through the glove box.

“Who’s pervy now?” Spud laughed. “You think I’d leave them around for you to find, V? A gentleman never tells.”

At the top of Las Alturas hill, the street forked. “Who’s first today?” Spud asked while we were stopped at the intersection.

“Let’s start at the Simon’s,” Vinny said. “Hopefully then we can get to Vieja’s yard when she’s out.” Vieja was what Vinny called Mrs. Esperanza, a withered widow who would continually chat Vinny up in Spanish while we worked, even over the drone and whine of the mower. Saturday afternoons she took dance lessons at the recreation center, something she told us many times.

We made a left and headed to the Simon’s, an estate really, a yard that took the three of us at least two hours. The Simon’s had a kid named Blake, and he obviously

didn't have to work on his own yard. Blake was a rich kid who tried to fit in with the skaters and freaks. He had expensive clothes that he marred with scissors or ran safety pins through. He was a bold kid, I knew. After school last year, he'd rollerblade along with the skaters in the parking lot, endure their jeers and insults like nothing happened, like we were all friends. The sun was over the mountains by then, light so strong I could feel my eyes already straining against the day's glare.

"Oh shit, speaking of posers!" Vinny yelled. Sure enough, Blake Simon was passing us on the sidewalk, riding on his expensive rollerblades.

"Get a skateboard, pussy!" Spud yelled out the window as we passed Blake. He gave us the bird, which we all reciprocated. I'd gone to junior high with Blake and, being the new kid, I caught tons of grief from him. But when high school came around, the tables had turned. Blake was now the kid who was constantly bullied. We stopped in the Simon's driveway, a concrete slab the length of an Olympic pool, one that if it were mine, I'd have turned into a skate park.

"Jesus, Princeton," Spud said to me, "Always with the hiccups." Spud called me Princeton because that's where he said I'd end up going to college. Laughable now, since I went nowhere.

We spent our Saturdays like this, working in the sun. Vinny had inherited the landscaping business from his brother, which one I can't remember. But his brother's voucher must have been the only way these people let kids like Vinny and Spud, kids with long hair and vulgar shirts and an eye-sore of a car with a quasi-Satanic emblem on the hood, anywhere near their property.

The other thing was, we did a damn good job.

As for me, I was trying to grow my hair out without my father noticing. I was pasty and had to constantly reapply sunscreen, which Vinny and Spud got a kick out of. We would finish the days pleasantly exhausted, maneuver The Whale back down the hill, back into town, where we parked it in the back of Vinny's father's funeral parlor. Because I was working, my father let me stay out until dusk, which during the summer in the southwest is usually after nine p.m. Vinny and Spud had made a gravity bong out of a plastic 2-liter Sprite bottle and a bucket that they hid in the utility closet and ritualistically took gasping rips from it after we'd finished unloading our tools. I'd tried it with them a few times, but mostly I spent my last hours of freedom skating in the back alley while the two of them giggled and called out tricks I couldn't possibly perform.

When Vinny first gave me a tour of the mortuary, I was terrified. I hadn't been in one since my mother passed almost ten years before, something I only recalled in flashes and scents. I wondered how Vinny could stand growing up around so much death. No wonder he was into *Cannibal Corpse* and *Sepultura*.

But when he took me to the back, past the stuffy furniture and thick maroon curtains and somber music that always seemed to be playing, to the embalming rooms, with their cool air and disinfectant smell, I felt calm. Sometimes on Saturdays, if the rooms were unoccupied, I'd sit inside the rooms alone until I shivered.

My father was neither overbearing nor intrusive, only protective. The death of my mother had imprinted on us a cordiality, a politeness that prevented us from fighting. A kind of respect that did, I realize now, kept us from the heated and violent arguments often found between fathers and sons. Though I always felt my mother's absence, I'd

lived with it so long it had become withered, not by repression, but by the natural erosive effects of time.

Still, he had rules. No drinking. No smoking. Some of these I'd already broken with Spud and Vinny, but he raised no suspicions. Home by ten, weekends only, of course. Dating, like driving, was something that would be allowed when I was sixteen. Not that the girls in school were clamoring for me. I was awkward and gangly, although my hands, cartoonish in proportion to the rest of my body, were strong, and the squares I cut along the hedges and bushes were true. Though he didn't verbalize it, my father was proud of me, something he showed by rising early on Saturdays that summer, his day off, to cook me breakfast before my own work day. He respected labor.

During the weekdays, with little to do, I tidied around the house, picked at the books assigned as summer reading for the upcoming fall's AP English class, and dozed off to episodes of *Saved By The Bell*, which that summer seemed to be on an infinite loop. On the occasional cloudy day I would go out and skate, but without a car, I couldn't easily get to any of the good spots in town.

Sometimes I'd call up Spud or Vinny, see if we could take The Whale out, maybe skate or spend some of our cash at Sonic. Vinny was always working with his father during the week, and Spud's phone rang and rang unanswered. I would let it go until the automated operator picked up and I would try again. Though I was scared to ask him on Saturdays, I was convinced Spud had given me a fake number.

As August wore on and the school year approached, I started to worry almost maniacally. Would Spud and Vinny even talk to me next year? Had the whole time just been like the summer camps I went to as a child, making best friends with your

bunkmates, only to return to school strangers, secret revelations of anxieties and of crushes left out in the woods? Or maybe the whole thing was a set-up. They'd let me start hanging around with their crowd to lure me in, and they had some horrible, embarrassing prank in store for me the first day of our Sophomore year? Vinny seemed easily capable of cruelty, but I'd known him longer than Spud. Surely they both liked me.

Then the worse realization set in: They only talked to me because they knew my mother was dead. I was their charity case. They were being Good Samaritans, as difficult as it was to reconcile that description with the two of them.

But they would have known how I felt about my mother. At the beginning of May I'd cut my last class of the day with them to smoke a joint with them. It wasn't my first time, but I would get chatty when I'm stoned. Still do.

Our school's low fence was a joke—students came and went as they pleased. To curb truancy there was an automated system that called your home number in the evening, but I always answered the phone and waved it off to my father as a telemarketer. My last class was Theatre anyways, and Mr. Miller rarely took attendance.

We walked about a mile on the embankment of the empty irrigation ditch until we reached a check. Spud, the strongest of us all, pushed down the massive orange lever, locking the check in place. We slid down the eight-foot bank, bringing down a mini-avalanche of dust and clods of adobe. After we smoked inside the tunnel, I let it slip about my mom.

Once I convinced them I wasn't pulling one over on them, they were silent for what seemed, especially stoned, like a really long time. We'd propped ourselves opposite

each other in the circular tunnel, and the angle of the light divided their faces in two, like they were hiding something from me.

“Sorry man,” they said, almost in unison.

I smiled at them. “I was really young. I barely remember” I said.

Which was true. My memories of my mother were unspecific, abstract. She always seemed like a person you meet in a dream, whom you’ve never seen but could swear you recognize. For a time I was convinced I had more concrete memories, but I realized what I had were old photo albums, pictures that helped me construct scenes in my mind that I didn’t really remember. Sometimes, in a crowd, I’d hear what I thought was her laugh, but like the photos, it was a mirage made possible by the distance of time.

“My mom’s just a bitch,” Spud said. “Still, I’m glad she’s alive.”

And I was fine with it. I’d of course been sad. I remembered the funeral. But, as my father always assured me, at least she was no longer in pain.

As I told Spud and Vinny this, the check slipped off its brace and slammed down over the entrance of the tunnel. We all jumped and bumped into each other in the new darkness.

“We are so fucked,” said Vinny. There was fear in voice, which I’d never heard before.

Spud flicked his lighter, weakly illuminating the tunnel. “Chill,” he said. “This runs like another hundred feet then curves to the right and comes out under Lohman.”

“How do you know that?” Vinny’s voice was getting strained, tight.

“Where, exactly, do you think I took Christina Alba’s virginity, my friend?” Spud gave me a look and I knew to keep quiet. If the check on the other end of the tunnel was closed, *then* we were fucked.

Slowly we crawled in the dark, Spud intermittently making a fart joke or snapping his lighter and saying, “just a little further.” I could hear Vinny breathing heavily behind me, and worried he might truly wig out, but as we started to feel the tunnel move to the right, light began to trickle in.

We emerged from the tunnel laughing, understanding how lucky we were. The checks were usually only opened every three weeks. It was the giddiness of cheating death, and though no one said it, we all felt it. Vinny offered to have one of his older brothers pull out some forties for us, to celebrate our great escape, but I turned them down. I already felt drunk.

Two weeks before school started, Spud called. He’d cancelled work the previous Saturday, and though it was nice to have a day off, it only fueled my worry that the friends I’d made were through with me.

“Dude.”

“Spud?”

“Roger.”

“Over under?”

“And out. Princeton, what’s happening?”

“Another day in the land of entrapment.”

“Not any old day. At least, not this Friday. Can you get out of the nunnery?” It was the only word Spud had retained from Hamlet, and he loved using it conversation whenever he could. “The party of the year at Reed’s. He finished the half-pipe. Three kegs.”

“I’ll have to ask the constabulary,” I said.

“Who?”

“My dad. Magic eight ball says chances are slim.”

“Tell him you’re staying the night at my place.”

“You realize he’s going to want to drive me over there. Talk to *your* dad.”

“Paul will cover.” Spud called his father by his first name.

“I’ll give it my best, captain,” I said, trying to sound nonplussed, even though I was feeling dizzy from excitement.

During dinner that night, while we watched a baseball game on television, I ran it by my Dad.

“We’ve been working hard all summer,” I said. “And, well, Spud, I mean Sam, his dad was going to have a little barbeque for us.”

I’d learn years later how fine an ear my father actually had for bullshit, but he played along.

“This isn’t some kind of wild party, is it?” he asked, not turning from the game. On the screen, Sammy Sosa struck out. “Damn-it,” my father said under his breath.

I laughed in forced chunks. “No, no. His dad will be there the whole time. You can meet him when you drop me off,” I said, completely overplaying my hand.

“Sure.”



It was so simple I was suspicious. When Friday arrived, I went as far as to pack up my Sega Genesis, which I hadn't touched in years, to maintain the façade of wholesome, sober fun. I'd never met Paul, Spud's father, personally, but from what I understood, he wasn't the most fastidious parent, which explained a lot of Spud's wild independence.

Spud's house was near the funeral parlor, a neighborhood not so much rough but fatigued. Like most of the houses on the block, it was an old colonial adobe, flaking paint and a flat roof that seemed to be bearing down on the entire structure, like a deflating trapezoid.

Paul looked like Jesus might, had he made it to retirement. He wore a half-open guayabera and you could see the outline of his ribs, and his hair was shoulder length, grey, and unhealthy. He looked more like Spud's grandfather than his dad. He met us in the driveway and shook my father's hand. I tried to listen to their conversation but Spud had followed out the door, swinging his wallet around with the chain attached to his jeans.

"Awesome," he said, appraising me. He put his arm around my shoulder and led me to the house. As I looked back at my father, he gave me a look that warned, *don't screw up*.

Spud seemed to have an entire wing of the house, including a massive bedroom, which he'd bombed with his tags. I'd never seen his pieces before. He was quite good. He must've had finished one recently because the metallic, chemical aroma of spray paint still lingered on top of the smell of dirty socks. On the end table near his bed, I saw some Polaroids face down, and I resisted the urge to pick them up.

“So, when’s the party?” I asked.

“You’re more impatient than Vinny,” he said. “We’ll kick here for a while, wait for your dad to call.” Spud handed me a joint and lit it once I’d put it up to my lips. I gave him a look like, *what about your dad?* and he shrugged me off.

“My dad?” I coughed.

“Shit, you got a runner,” Spud said and took the joint from me. He wet his finger and dabbed at the lit end. “The way you explained your dad, I’m sure he’ll call. In the meantime, if we’re going to get you any action tonight, we have to work on your threads.”

When I look back on old pictures from my childhood, I realize my mother’s absence was most noticeable in the ways my father dressed me. To this day, I still can’t believe he got me to wear that *Looney Toons* jean jacket in sixth grade. No wonder I got picked on. And the suit from my First Holy Communion was a conflagration of plaid that evoked nausea. Those days, I mostly wore plain T-shirts and jeans a few sizes too large.

Spud disappeared into his closet and returned with a black suit, tie and a gleaming white shirt. He and I were about the same height, but Spud had filled out considerably more than I had. He looked me and the suit over, then retrieved some suspenders. It was a sharp suit.

I changed in the bathroom, and when I came out Spud was dressed in almost the exact same suit. He threw his arms out to his side like, well, what do you think?

“We look like pallbearers,” I said.

“Dude, *Reservoir Dogs?*” He looked disappointed. I hadn’t seen the film.

“It is a nice suit,” I said. Inside the coat it read: **BACAS FUNERAL CHAPEL**. “Vinny has one too?” I asked.

“Right. I’m Mr. White, he’s Mr. Brown, and you,” Spud said and smiled, “You’re Mr. Pink.”

“Why am I Mr. Pink?”

Spud roared. “Just watch the fucking movie, alright?”

And Spud was right. My father did call. Paul actually had made us some hamburgers, and after Paul picked up the phone and spoke to my father, he handed it over to me.

“Hey, dad,” I said between chews.

“Just checking in. Having fun?”

“Sure.”

“OK, well have a good night. Love you, son.” It threw me a little bit. My father wasn’t one to verbalize affection.

Around ten, we left Spud’s house on our boards, in our suits. We were to meet Vinny down at the funeral home and pick up The Whale, then head out to Reed’s. I marveled in envy at the way Spud told Paul we were “heading out,” Paul not even turning around from the television but simply holding up his beer can in acknowledgement.

Under the soft orange of the passing streetlights, the clacking of our wheels on the sidewalks cracks, I felt like the coolest kid in the world, like I was heading towards something owed to me, like I deserved it.

When we got to Baca’s, Vinny was waiting for us in the back.

“Looking good, Mr. Pink!” he said. He hadn’t put on a shirt and tie. Instead, wore a T-shirt with some kind of gore and a band name I couldn’t quite read underneath his coat.

“No tie?” I asked.

“Have to maintain my own style,” he said, “but check it out.” Vinny produced a driver’s license. Sure enough, it was his. He’d bulged his eyes out in the photo so comically it was almost frightening.

“Finally,” Spud said. “I’m tired of being the only driver.”

We loaded into The Whale, but when I looked behind me, there was a full size coffin in the back. Before I could ask, Spud told me to open the lid. Inside were three pony kegs.

“We are the party!” Vinny yelled. “Sometimes, I love my brothers.” He reached behind his seat and turned on the portable boom box. The Whale didn’t have a radio. Sepultura blasted, Vinny peeled out in reverse, and like thieves we were off into the night.

Reed’s house was near the pecan orchards just south of Las Alturas hills. Along both sides of the dirt road leading to his driveway were lines and lines of cars. Parking stickers from our high school reflected in the corners of many of the windshields as we passed.

It was a hacienda style of house, two stories, and much larger than I’d imagined it from Spud’s descriptions. We pulled into the driveway, which had been left clear, presumably for us. As we got out there was a cheer from the crowds of people outside the

house. Two large guys, who looked closer to their twenty year reunion than graduation, stepped forward and walked to the back. We hefted the metal coffin on our shoulders and moved it inside. Teenagers with empty cups swarmed us. I started to wonder if there'd be any beer left for us when Spud pulled me back.

He pulled a flask out of his jacket and handed to me. I took a swing and it burned, rum probably. "Always bring backup," he said. Vinny had disappeared.

We went around the back and like Spud said, there was a full size half-pipe, lit up in the dark with flood lights, and whooshing back in forth, in a suit like ours, was Reed. There was the rumble of his wheels on the wood and the prolonged beat of silence as he caught air, pulled a 540, and the sharp ping of his trucks kissing the lip as he landed. I cheered.

When Reed finished his run, he came over to us and Spud introduced me.

"Welcome, Mr. Pink," Reed said and shook my hand with his sweaty palm. "You bring your deck?" Reed looked much younger than I expected. He looked a lot like the picture I'd seen of him *Thrasher* back in '86, but I knew he must've been close to thirty now.

"No," I lied. I'd never skated a pipe before, and wasn't about to face plant in front of all these people.

"Well, there are some extras in the garage if you want to take a run," Reed said. Just then a kid tried to drop in but leaned too far forward, dropping the seven feet to the bottom. An "Oooo" rose from the crowd.

"Otherwise, have fun. Oh, and three rules: no fighting, no puking inside, no peeing off the roof." Reed climbed the ladder, gave us a peace sign, and dropped in.

I'd never seen so many people packed into one house, though I had *seen* these people. Dozens of faces I recognized but didn't know, juniors, seniors, skaters, freaks, jocks, cheerleaders, kids who never spoke to me or even looked the other way in the halls were now shaking my hand, nodding *what's up* as Spud and I formed a two-man conga line through the kitchen, where everyone sat on the counter. Spud took the flask and poured some in every girl's cup we passed, then took their hand and kissed it. I followed with what must have been a goofy salute.

The living room had even more people, and on the coffee table this hippy kid I knew named Josiah was building some kind of sculpture out of beer cans. Stretched along the couch was another guy I recognized from school. He was completely passed out and had several poorly drawn penises marked to his forehead.

And girls. More girls than I even knew went to our school.

I followed Spud down a narrow hallway then up a set of circular stairs to the roof. At the top was Buck, a guy I'd seen around skating sometimes. He was short but as wide as a bus, with an enormous shamrock tattooed to his shoulder.

He stopped Spud at the top. "VIPs only," he said gruffly. Then he laughed. "Fucking with you," he said, and let us pass.

Spud was immediately surrounded by three girls, who hugged him and kissed his cheeks. I held back, embarrassed and envious. Spud told them to hold on, then tossed me the flask. "Good luck," he said, and disappeared down the stairs with the girls.

Not knowing what to do, I walked to the edge of the roof, and watched the skaters below. I was trying not to look as nervous or as out of place as I felt, but I kept looking around. On the other side of the roof, I saw someone I recognized.

Blake Simon. Fucking Blake Simon.

I turned around abruptly, hoping he hadn't seen me, wouldn't come over and give me shit. For a moment I wondered how cool this party could be if Blake Simon got invited.

"Hey, nice suit."

Only it wasn't Blake Simon. It was Whorey Lorrie. Lorrie Tuchfarber. Neither name sounded like it did justice to how beautiful she looked.

"Thanks," I said. "Spud seems to think it's a costume party."

"Well, you look good," she said and stood next to me at the edge of the roof. She leaned against me. "Got anything to drink?"

I almost dropped the flask fumbling it over to her. She took a long pull, then wiped her mouth with her forearm. "Thanks," she said. "I like rum."

Speechless, I nodded and took a pull myself, making sure I chugged more than she did.

"Do you blaze it?" she asked.

I nodded, trying to exude confidence, like I smoked weed as habitually as a Rastafarian. I padded my pockets. "But I'm not holding right now," I said.

She had the most intense, blue eyes. Her smile took its time, languid and slowly forming. "C'mon, I have a roach out in my car."

I followed her down the stairs, back into the roar of the party. We passed an open bathroom where some older guys were feeding each other beer bongs over the bathtub where another kid was passed out. In the living room a group was watching the slam

section of the *Welcome to Hell* video, screaming wildly as Ed Templeton continually wracked himself on handrails.

It took a little while to get to her car, a beige Civic. She clicked the security box on her keychain. “Get in the back,” she said.

From the ashtray in the rear of the console, she produced the roach and then took a bobby pin from her hair to make a clip. It was hard to see her face in the dark, except when a car would pass down the road. I was unbelievably stoned. I started to say something, nonsense really, but she put a finger to my lips to shush me. She leaned in and kissed me, her tongue warm and exploratory. Whatever reluctance I had about her, considering Spud and all, evaporated and she moved to kissing my neck, my ear, and slowly undid my zipper.

Even though her hands were a little cold, I came almost immediately.

“Sorry,” I said. “I mean, I--”

“Don’t worry about it,” she said. She reached over to the front seat and grabbed Kleenex to clean her hand. “Here,” she said, and straddled me. She took my hand and guided it under her skirt, inside her warmth. She began rocking back and forth, her breaths getting sharper and more frequent. When a car passed, I could see her eyes were closed, and her mouth hung open, almost in shock. Faster and faster she went, and her breathing got even more heavy and forced, like she was trying to clear something from her lungs. All at once she went rigid and let out a tiny squeak. She buried her face in mine, kissing my face and mouth all at once, like she was trying to devour me.

“Thank you,” she whispered in my ear.



We took our time walking back. It was getting late, and the party seemed to have quieted down. But as we approached, I could feel something else in the air. I could still hear shouting in the distance, but none of it sounded like the raucous joy we'd left. There were angry voices, and the music had stopped.

In the living room, Buck had Blake Simon's arms pinned behind his back. He had been stripped down to his boxer shorts. Spud stood in front of him, along with Vinny.

"Simple rules, toolbag," Spud yelled in Blake's face. I'd not once seen Spud angry before. "Don't piss off the roof." Spud slapped Blake across the face.

"Fuck you," Blake shouted. Spud slapped him again.

Vinny stepped forward with a roll of duct tape and ran it around Blake's head, covering his mouth.

"Make sure he can breathe," someone from the stilled crowd said.

Reed entered the room. "What's the deal?"

"This poser took a piss off the roof," Spud said. "On my fucking *head*." I hadn't noticed before Spud was out of his jacket, and his shirt looked wet around the shoulders.

"I don't care if you kick his ass," Reed said. "Just don't do it here."

Vinny smiled, like he'd been struck with inspiration. "Got any shovels?"

"In the shed," Reed said. "But hey, you're not going to?"

"I'm not going to *kill* him," Vinny said. "I least, I don't think I am. Hold his hands, Buck." Vinny hogtied Blake with the duct tape. The next few moments passed in waves, Blake being shuffled out to the garage, the sea of kids bottlenecking for a view, Blake being shoved into the coffin, the deep lines on his face revealing the intensity of his muted screams. Vinny shut the lid and everyone cheered like the village mob while

the witch burns. It was the middle of summer, and I yet I huddled in my coat, chilled to my toes.

“Princeton, *andele*,” Vinny said, and pointed to the coffin. Buck, Spud, Vinny and I hoisted the now much heavier coffin on our shoulders. I was going along with it because I didn’t know what else to do. You could hear Blake struggling in the plush velvet darkness, thudding his bound hands and feet against the lid.

We loaded the coffin in The Whale. Vinny was whooping like a madman. They all got in. I hesitated a moment, looked back for Lorrie, but couldn’t see her among the faces staring at me, waiting for me to get in the car.

“Today, princess,” Spud said and lit up a cigarette.

I got in, and we backed out, and I knew at that moment we were on our way to do something irrevocable.

In the car, we were silent except for Vinny. He kept chirping, saying “oh yeah, oh yeah,” over and over. I bummed a smoke from Spud but didn’t light it. I realized where we were headed. To Old Man Sena’s.

“What are we doing here,” I asked, trying not to sound terrified.

“We’re going to bury him,” Vinny said loudly. “You hear that, you little poser. You little rich, white faggot? We’re going to bury you *alive*.” Blake must have heard him, because the thumps on the coffin got louder, more desperate.

“Doesn’t the old man still live here?” I asked. We’d parked near the edge of the property, in a small, washed out gulley. Up a small rise, you could make out the

silhouettes of gravestones. The clouds from earlier had moved on, and the moonlight was clear and almost incandescent.

“Dude, that guy died like fifty years ago. Vinny’s grandpa did the embalming,” Spud said.

We hoisted the coffin out of The Whale and shuffled it to the wall of the washout and dropped it, and not gently. Vinny went back to The Whale and retrieved two square-point shovels.

“We’re not really going to?” I couldn’t believe what we were doing. I mean, burying him alive? Even if he had pissed all over Spud, this was too much.

“Princeton.” Vinny pounded the lid of the coffin with the shovel’s blade. “Do I strike you as the kind of guy that goes to an all-you-can-eat buffet for soup and salad?” He tossed the other shovel to me and said, “Dig.”

I kept expecting Spud to say something, but he just looked off in the distance, smoking his cigarette. Buck had returned to The Whale, rummaging around the back seat for something.

“Dig,” Vinny repeated, forcefully.

The shovels were cheap and the ground was mostly clay. After half an hour I was drenched in sweat and had gotten nowhere. I leaned on the shovel and caught my breath. Blake had stopped making noise for a while. Vinny was still working at a breakneck pace.

Somewhere during that time, Blake must have loosened the tape over his mouth, because as I rested I could hear him murmuring from inside.

“He’s saying something.”

Vinny stopped. “What? Oh yeah? You got something to say?” he yelled into the coffin. Though we could barely make it out, Blake was definitely calling out to us. Vinny unlocked half the lid, the side they use for open caskets. Immediately the smell hit us. Blake had shat himself.

“What?” Vinny yelled. “Last words?”

Blake had been crying, and it smelled like he’d pissed himself too. Last year, I’d helped Spud with *The Inferno*. He’d liked the idea of symbolic retribution, but now, in real life, he couldn’t stomach it. He’d retreated to The Whale, and was sharing a beer with Buck.

Inside, Blake was whimpering. At that moment, I should have taken pity on him, should have at least tried to put a stop to his, convince Vinny and Spud and Buck to take the kid home, let him get cleaned up. Even if they thought I was a pussy, kicked me out of the trio, out of our business, I should have stood up for Blake. We obviously were never going to work on the Simon’s yard again.

But as I saw him lying in there, his snot running down the loosened tape, I was disgusted. I felt, for the only time in my life, that I wanted to destroy something. That something as miserable and spoiled as Blake Simon didn’t deserve to live.

My hands were around his throat. I was slamming the back of his head against the floor of the coffin. Years later, the one time Spud and I got drunk enough in a bar to recount this night, he said I was speaking in tongues. It took all of them to pull me off him.

“Jesus, Princeton,” Vinny said. “We were just trying to scare him, not kill him.”

Before I could even protest, the report of the shotgun froze us in fear. To me, it sounded like the world had cracked in half.

We turned around, and there was Old Man Sena. He didn't point the gun at us, but held it down at such an angle that let us know he could quickly use the other barrel. Buck, Vinny and Spud scrambled to their feet, kicking dirt in my face, and ran to The Whale. Old man Sena kept his eyes on me, eyes deep and demonic in the moonlight. I heard The Whale start, stall, start again and accelerate down the dirt road.

The old man looked like a scarecrow, dirty overalls, ragged flannel shirt. He looked like someone who's gone without running water for quite some time. Then he pulled a cordless phone out of the pouch in his overalls and called the police, the whole time keeping me under the menace of his shotgun.

My father picked me up from the station at 4 a.m. There followed three interminable days of silence from him before he doled out my punishment. I spent my sophomore year grounded, was forbidden to even speak to Spud or Vinny. He even took away my skateboard. Considering what Blake did to himself, and to this day I'm certain somehow it had to do with us, I got off easy. Though my father and I were never very close again. It made things worse when I decided to go to the state college here in town, and then managed to drop out. Though he never said anything, I could sense his disappointment.

Somewhere during our senior year, Vinny decided he didn't want to work in a mortuary for the rest of his life. Then the towers came down the next September, and Vinny was enlisted and off to Afghanistan. Spud told me he did a couple of tours, got a

Purple Heart, and lives in San Diego. I've never seen him back for a visit, even on holidays.

Blake Simon was not enrolled at our school the next fall. He was sent to the military academy in the Eastern part of the state, which seemed cruel and unusual to me. He graduated and became an officer in the Army and was shipped to Iraq, then quickly shipped back. Discharged, the rumor went, because of a suicide attempt. The next Christmas, he finished the job with a belt in his parents' living room. That was almost two years ago, now.

Despite my father's objection, Spud and I remained friends. I should've have hated him for everything that night, for getting me mixed up with Vinny, for not stopping us. But I didn't. We only talked about that night once, and only sparsely, in vague details. On Fridays now, we share a pitcher of cheap beer at Hurricane Alley and listen to out of tune amateur rock bands.

Usually I leave early, weary from the week, and fall asleep to bad TV in my one bedroom apartment.

I went to Blake's funeral. I'd read the notice in the paper, although the cause of death in the obituary was "accidental." I'd heard the truth from Spud, who, even after all these years, seemed to know all the back channels and rumors of the town.

There weren't many mourners. The funeral was held at Immaculate Heart, and the vestibule's width and towering ceiling made me feel small and low. I stood near the back, hardly making out the eulogy, so enveloped in echo it had become.

It was a closed casket. At the end of the service, a gloved soldier took the American flag off of the coffin and folded into a triangle, handing it to Blake's mother. Even from the last pew, I could hear her heart break.

I'd meant to sneak out of the back before the end, but I'd been lost in thought, and it seemed rude to leave once the processional started. The cathedral's towering stained glass windows gave the vestibule an eerie blue and orange tint, and in the fractured beams of light, I could see dust floating, indifferent.

In the lobby it was inescapable. I couldn't leave without facing his mother, who stood by the door, gracefully thanking each mourner. Even though I look far different than I did at fifteen, I shaved my head the day before, hoping not to be recognized.

But now as I stood in line, I wanted her to know me. To beat me, to tear my eyes out, to eviscerate me. To give me everything I deserved.

When it was my turn in front of Mrs. Simon, I barely stammered out my condolences. Her eyes were tired, glassy, yet in them I saw a small hint of recognition. She smiled.

"Thank you for coming," she said, and I could not speak. "You were always such a good friend to him."

## LAND OF ENTRAPMENT

Through the kitchen window, Rudy watched the scissor tail swallows land atop the edge of the stucco planter outside, distracting him from his task. The birds were headed back north to Oklahoma, up from spending the winter in Mexico, and their return was just another reminder to Rudy that another year had past, and that it was April and he was behind, again, on the returns he did on the side during tax season. Rudy hated filing for extensions.

Not to mention, of course, that it was his son's fifteenth birthday. Today was his son's fifteenth birthday, and Rudy has ruined breakfast. The time since his son Alex's birth hung unbalanced in Rudy's mind, somehow distant and close, unevenly weighted by memory. What Rudy made from the extra work he put in a fund for Alex's college tuition. And if he and his son were able fix up, and sell, his parents' house by the end of the year, then there should be enough to ensure Alex could attend any college he could get himself into. While he watched the birds and calculated the penalties for unearned income in his head, Rudy over-poured the measuring spoon, spilling too much into the



mixing bowl, and when he looked down and realized what he's done, he dumped the whole spoon of baking powder into the bowl in reaction, like a clumsy reflex.

Overhead, Alex clomped around his room. There weren't enough eggs or buttermilk to make a new batch of batter, so Rudy just stirred everything and hoped the pancakes, Alex's favorite, turned out edible. The pipes hummed as Alex started the shower. The cakes, at least, looked normal when Rudy flipped them. He was not a good cook.

"Good morning," Rudy said when Alex walked into the kitchen, the boy's hair still wet. "Happy Birthday!"

"Thanks, Dad. What did you make?" The boy was thin, *flacco*, like Rudy's uncle used to call Rudy, and the baggy clothes Alex had started wearing recently seemed to almost swallow him. Alex audibly sniffed the air. "Something smells, um, funky?"

"These didn't go exactly to plan," Rudy said. Rudy microwaved some syrup in a coffee mug and handed it to Alex. It only took them each one bite to realize had badly Rudy screwed up with the ingredients.

"Tastes like metal," Alex said through tentative chews.

Rudy spat his bite on his plate. "Tastes like shit," he said, and they both laughed. "I should have let Tina make these." Tina was Rudy's girlfriend of two years, though she didn't live in Artesia but up in Cloudcroft, where she ran a bakery during the weekdays. "She'll be here tomorrow, for your party, by the way."

"Thank god," Alex said. "Finally get something decent to eat around here."

"Hey now, you're old enough to start cooking for yourself now." Rudy halfheartedly frogged him one. Sometimes Rudy can't believe how well he and his son

get along. Rudy began his own revolt against his father when he was just thirteen, for reasons Rudy couldn't actually name, even now. It seemed to be the natural course of their relationship. Thankfully, that wasn't the way it was with Alex.

"Put that garbage in the sink," Rudy said, pointing at Alex's plate. "We'll grab donuts on the way."

Alex set his dish in the sink, and in jest, made the sign of the cross. "*Vaya con Dios,*" he said.

At the Lujan Bakery, they ordered and sat by the window, in the booth painted bright yellow. The bakery had been around for generations, and its brisk, sweet smell of rising bread and steaming coffee always left Rudy with nostalgic flashes to his own childhood. In the corner nearby, three old men sat and guffawed and argued in Spanish. The man at the counter nodded at Alex in a strange way when he ordered coffee.

"Way better," Alex said between bites.

"Drinking coffee now?" Usually, his son drank milk.

"C'mon Dad, I'm fifteen."

"Yes, indeed." Rudy offered his own cup in a toast. On a bike rack out on the curb, another group of scissor tails landed and then dove down to the pavement, scavenging crumbs from the debris on the street. "Look, Alex. The birds."

Alex smiled. "You and those birds, Dad."

For a moment, they ate in silence. A passing car sent the birds airborne, their long tails separating in the updraft. "So, Dad, since I'm fifteen, I was wondering if you could sign these?"

Rudy looked down at the documents his son slid across the table. Rudy expected them to have something to do with driver's Ed, but instead, they were waivers for consent. Alex was old enough to get hired now, with Rudy's permission.

"You got a job?" Rudy asked.

"Demetrius said his dad will hire me at the wash," Solomon says.

"Demetrius?"

"Demetrius. D? You know, the guy who's spent the night like a billion times. Brings his Xbox?"

"Oh right, right" Rudy said. "He hasn't been over for a while."

"Well, *he's* been working at the carwash."

"What about school?"

"School's easy. And besides, it's almost over."

It was true, grades had never been a problem for Alex. Rudy knows Alex didn't inherit his study habits from him. Rudy had been an average student, at best, until he went to UNM, just barely getting in. But Rudy's plan for Alex didn't include an after school job. Alex was going to have all the free time he needed for his classes, plus time for extra-curriculars to strengthen that application to Brown, Stanford, or maybe NYU. And, on top of that, he would need the boy's help on Sundays this summer, restoring the old house.

He couldn't deny in some ways the jobs had been good for him, and for Rudy, they were an opportunity to get away from his old man. The thought that Alex would want to get away from him stung Rudy, even though, more than anything, Rudy wanted a different life for Alex. Wanted him to get out of Artesia, out of New Mexico.

“And what about Sundays?”

Alex sighed. “They’re closed. Baptists. That’s why Demetrius’ mom always picks him up like at six on Sunday mornings when he stays over.”

“Oh yeah.” Rudy can remember a well-dressed, stern looking woman at the door in predawn light. Rudy signed the form and handed it back. It was almost summer. Might as well let the boy earn a little of his own money. They could re-evaluate the job when the next school year began.

“Thanks Dad, awesome.”

“If you get one ‘B,’ I’ll retire you.”

“No problem.”

“So how are you getting there, by the way?”

“Demetrius will take me after school. You could drive me on Saturdays. Or I could walk.”

“Who knows, maybe I’ll have the old pick-up fixed soon. You could drive that.” It was an old Dodge, parked in the back of his parent’s house. Rudy’s plan was to use it to haul away all the overgrown brush they’d be clearing from the yard throughout the summer. First, he’d have to get it running.

“I can’t get my license for another eight months. You know that, Dad. And besides, I can’t drive that thing.” The pick-up was a column standard.

“When do you start?”

“Tomorrow at eight.”

“Till when?”

“Five. Then I’m supposed to go to Demetrius’ house after work. We’re going to swim, if it’s not too windy. I told you that last week.”

“I thought we were cooking out? Tina is coming to town. She’s bringing cake.”

Rudy felt his voice rise.

“I already texted her.” Alex swiped at his cell phone with his finger.

“You all text?”

To demonstrate, Alex pulled up Tina’s contact information on his phone, and showed it to Rudy. “She’s, like, part of the twenty-first century, Dad.” It looked like they communicated often.

“Well, I guess she’ll understand, then,” says Rudy. “Shit, you’re going to be late.”

Rudy was away at UNM when his parents had the accident. They’d been out on highway eighty six, returning to Artesia from the apple festival in Cloudcroft, a few hours away. The old highway was only two lanes, in fact still it was, and the coroner said there was enough evidence to theorize his father had a stroke, and his mother was asleep, and neither of them felt the impact of the oncoming semi when their car veered across the lines.

The thing Rudy has kept to himself every day since: He didn’t mourn his parents’ deaths. Not exactly. He missed them, but in a way that was unmoored, detached. For a time, he thought it might be shock. But as the weeks went by, Rudy began to know the truth, knew he was somehow relieved they were gone. Knew that once his parents’ affairs were settled, he’d be free of Artesia forever. Or at least, so he thought.

He put the house and property on 141 Crescent Road up for sale almost immediately. He made three trips from Albuquerque to show the house, finally getting an acceptable price. Rudy can remember the day everything was finalized, how light his hand felt while he signed the deed, how light his entire body felt as he drove out of town, out of Artesia, presumably for good.

In Rudy's memory now, he swears he felt some kind of nagging, like some kind of metal shaving dug deep into his brain, but that was a revision. On the road that day, driving towards the sunset, a mural awash in orange, red and indigo, with the shadows deepening behind him, Rudy felt restrained by nothing.

The next day, when Rudy got home from dropping Alex off at the car wash for his first shift, Tina was already there. Rudy knew he should feel flattered, but for some reason, he was annoyed.

"You're here early," Rudy said when he found her blowing up balloons in the dining room. She had already hung a childish "Happy Birthday" banner across the window.

"Nice to see you too," she said and let the balloon go. Its farting deflation sounded like a kind of commentary.

"Alex has a job now," said Rudy. Tina nodded her head. "Party is off," Rudy added. "He won't be here tonight."

"I know," Tina said in between exhalations into a blue balloon, "he texted me."

“I didn’t realize you two were so close?” From Rudy’s observation, Alex kept a polite and cordial distance from Tina. He was never obnoxious or even vaguely rude in her presence, but she didn’t seem like his confidant. Recently, neither had Rudy.

Rudy wouldn’t blame Alex if he maintained a distance from Tina. Years ago, Rudy had another girlfriend who’d actually lived with them. Rudy wasn’t exactly in love with the woman, but he thought it would be good for Alex to have some kind of mothering influence in his life, and he was old enough to understand she wasn’t his *real* mother.

Rudy had, rarely, employed corporal punishment on his son, but this woman struck Alex in the face, around the eyes. Children that age accumulated scrapes and bruises constantly, and it took Rudy a long time to realize what was going on behind his back. Too long, in fact.

When he arrived home early from the office on the afternoon before a Thanksgiving holiday, Rudy found the woman looming over Alex in the bedroom, one hand pinning him down, while her other made resonant slaps across Alex’s face, like confused applause.

Rudy was so angry he pushed the woman against the wall, knocking a hanging mirror to the floor. Alex sat on the bed and cried. Rudy managed to get out three words to the woman: “You must leave.”

She packed her things in silence while Rudy supervised, arms crossed, following her from room to room. Alex stayed out of sight, hiding in the large office chair at the computer playing *Math Blaster*.

Until he met Tina two years ago, Rudy had occasionally dated, but none of the women had moved in or even stayed the night.

“There might be a lot of things you don’t know about Alex,” Tina said. Her own daughter recently moved to California. “When they get to this age, they can get really secretive.”

In the past, Rudy had appreciated Tina’s insights about parenting. But that morning, they wore on him, like he was being lectured. “So what’s with all the decorations?” he asked.

“Like with babies, the parties are really for the parents. And besides, I like decorating. And any excuse to make a cake.” Tina did make wonderful cakes. “Want to help?”

“I’ve got to finish at least four returns today to stay on track,” Rudy said. “And besides, I’d just get in the way.”

At dusk, Alex called and said he be staying late at Demetrius’s house to watch a movie. Unlike Rudy’s adolescence, Alex wasn’t forbidden to stay out, although it wasn’t often he did. “Don’t wait up,” he said over the line.

Tina brought a *tres leches* cake and it was spectacular. Tina and Rudy sat on the porch, eating a slice and drinking coffee while the last of the daylight ran out. Rudy watched Tina eat. The delicate cake crumbled on her fork, and pieces of it fell on her chin before she could get the bite to her lips. She laughed at herself and this pleased Rudy. Somehow her beauty seemed sharper, more defined, in the twilight that covered the yard like muslin made of deep blues.



“Alex called. He’s staying out. Late.” Rudy handed her a napkin decorated with cartoons.

“Worried?”

“No, it’s not that.” Rudy could think of no better word. “It’s just, different.”

Tina gathered their plates and made for the door. “It’s always different with kids. Each birthday. Each year. I don’t know if it that’s because it happens faster as they get older, or that we just notice it more.”

Rudy and Tina cleaned the dishes and left the rest of the cake out for Alex. Rudy also set out Alex’s gift: new sneakers Rudy hoped were still the style Alex liked. In Rudy’s bedroom they watched a few episodes of *Breaking Bad* on Netflix, pointing out inaccuracies about New Mexico.

“That place is really a record store,” Rudy said. “Not a drug den. I’ve been there.”

“It’s just a show,” Tina said and rubbed his chest. Soon, they made love.

Afterwards, while they drifted off to sleep, Rudy was grateful Tina hadn’t brought up the issue that caused a row the week before. She no longer seemed insistent about moving in.

The sound of shattered glass woke them in the middle of the night.

Downstairs, Rudy found Alex, with one new sneaker on, standing over the remains of a glass plate and the cake. The cake was ruined, and it sagged into the carpet.

“Sorry, Dad.” Then with a little giggle, “*Whoops.*”

“It’s one in the morning.” Even from a few feet away, Rudy could smell the liquor on Alex’s breath.

Alex made a clownish gesture and repeated, “Whoops.”

Rudy took a step forward and smelled something else. Pot. So Alex was stoned. And drunk.

“Have you been drinking?”

“We had a little in the garage. No one drove. I walked home.” Then he said loudly, “I’m a working man!”

Rudy knew at some point his son might drink. His own parents had been so strict about it that when Rudy went to college he binged regularly. He could always focus for an exam, but once the weekends came around, he’d plunge into a thirty pack and rarely came up for air. Once, he went to a girl’s dorm with the intention of sleeping with her and instead fell asleep on her roommate’s bed, and then wet that bed. He passed out face first in his late night enchiladas at The Frontier restaurant so many times they stopped serving him.

“Go to bed. We’ll talk in the morning.”

Alex put his head down and turned toward the stairs, and then stepped directly into the cake with the new shoe.

“Fuck.” Alex took a step back, sloshing cake into the vent on the wall. He wobbled, reaching for something to steady him that wasn’t there. “Fuck.”

Rudy never explicitly forbade Alex to drink. He figured being open and unrestrictive would curb Alex’s curiosity and save his son some of the mistakes he’d made himself. He even shared a beer with him last year when Alex, politely, asked if he could try one. And yet with Alex drunk and weaving in the dining room, standing in his own birthday cake, surrounded by half deflated balloons and childish party favors, Rudy felt like a father who had failed.

Rudy grabbed his son's arm. "Just, *halt*. Take that shoe off and I'll help you upstairs."

Alex took off the shoe, and the off-white frosting from the cake splattered against the now-ruined shiny black suede looked almost stylish. Alex put an arm around his father and halfway up the stairs he nearly went limp, the zombie walk of the well-drunk. Rudy remembered being taken care of like this, he even had a scar on his forehead from the time his buddies lost their grip and he hit the pavement. But that was college, and Alex was just a freshman. Even still, Rudy was grateful he was here for his son, even more grateful Alex hadn't finished filling out with puberty as he slung his son's body onto the bed. Alex was snoring before Rudy even shut off the lamp.

Back in his bedroom, Tina was awake. "Was that Alex? What's he doing?"

"He's drunk."

"Drunk?"

"Drunk. And high, I think. Now, he's asleep."

Rudy climbed back in bed and Tina pressed herself against his back, wrapped her arms around his chest. Rudy could feel the coolness of his skin against the warmth of hers.

"You were right," he said. "That was different. Maybe this job thing isn't such a good idea for him."

"He'll be fine," Tina said. "He'll probably be so hung-over, he won't want to do it again."

The next morning, Rudy rose early. He considered making a racket in the kitchen or turning up the stereo, things his own parents did when he tried to sleep late. He should

march up to Alex's room and demand to know where the boys had got the alcohol, the pot. But the house was quiet, and Rudy had returns to complete, and Rudy decided some things the boy had to learn on his own.

For the next month, Alex worked at the car wash after school, and on Sundays, with Rudy at the property on 141 Crescent Road. While Alex mowed and raked, Rudy rebuilt the carburetor and by the second week of their project, had the old pickup roaring again. Each week, Rudy noticed the deepening olive tan on Alex's arms, his legs. More and more Alex's skin, his face, started resembling his mother's.

The property stretched northwards for nearly an acre on one end, and the west side widened then tapered north to meet it. Along the fence line, the sugar cane was wonton, with yellow and green poles choking each other out for space. Rudy remembered the long stalks feeling like the overcrowded bars of a jail cell door. When Rudy and Alex first began working the property, the grass was unwieldy and tall in some areas, gravel and dirt patches in others, but after a few Sundays, the lawn began to even out. The cane remained untamable. No matter how much they hacked, the next week, the stalks were back, stronger and greener, though they'd had no rain in Artesia. Rudy stopped seeing the scissor tail swallows. They'd moved on.

Rudy had inherited, then sold, the house and the property. But when Alex was born, Rudy rebought everything, at a higher price. Alex and the property were inextricably tied. He was conceived over a weekend Rudy was in town from Albuquerque, a month after the accident, while Rudy was trying to sell the estate.

Rudy had known Lynda Sanchez the same way you know everyone in a town the size of Artesia. You know *of* them, you recognize them on the street, you see them and their families lining pews at church and the booths at the diner, but you could reach adulthood without saying more than a perfunctory greeting to a person you've known your entire life.

She and Rudy had gone to the same junior high and high school, though she was a few grades behind him. He never had a conversation with her, but always thought she was pretty, and told her so, while bellied up to the bar at The Moosehead, where she was waitressing. She laughed and then gave her obligatory condolences; his parents' deaths were still big news in Artesia.

The buyer for the house had fallen through. His loan application was full of inconsistencies and the bank would not approve it. Rudy wasn't discerning of who made the offers, he just wanted to be out from underneath the weight of the house. Now, he'd have to leave Artesia and return again, a kind of migration he was growing weary of.

Rudy could put it away in those days. After closing, Lynda caught him stumbling out to his car, missing the lock repeatedly with his key, making small nicks in the paint around his target.

"Do you need a ride?" she asked him.

"Maybe a locksmith."

"You're drunk."

"Surprise," Rudy said, and took a bow, nearly falling over.

"Where are you staying?" she asked. Rudy was keeping a cot at 141 Crescent Road for his trips home. His stays were to be temporary. He'd gone through the clothes,

the furniture, and donated most of it. He'd felt numb doing these tasks, but that night, standing outside the bar, he felt guilty. He decided he couldn't sleep there that night, maybe not ever again. Sleeping in the parking lot sounded like a better option.

"I'm not sure," Rudy said. He shivered in the wind. Although it was only August, the night had a sharp chill, a sneak preview of winter.

"I've got a couch," she told him. "C'mon." Lynda took his arm and led him to her car. "Don't mind the mess," she said, and Rudy didn't.

The drive to her apartment was short, but Rudy had enough time to blurt things out. He was tired of Artesia. Its dusty flatness and one bar and all the rich bible thumper families that ran things. He was tired of everyone treating him like a tragedy, regarding him like some damaged burn-victim you can't bear to look at. By the time they arrived at her complex, Rudy was in tears.

She brought him inside and made a cup of instant coffee. The couch wasn't anything more than a love seat, and Rudy was too tall for it. She led him to the bedroom and he stretched out on the mattress. She began rubbing his back, and then his shoulders, then down his arms. Rudy doesn't exactly remember who's clothes came off first, but suddenly they were joined, thrusting and clutching, mouths trying to steal air from the other's lungs. He was making love to a stranger and a friend all at the same time, and in that blurred hour of the morning, it seemed the most sane thing in the world.

When he woke the next morning, Lynda was gone. She'd left him a note but no number. He had to return to Albuquerque that afternoon. He planned on seeing her the next time he came to town, which turned out to be two months later, when he finally

closed the deal, though Lynda was not at The Moosehead, not even in Artesia. He wouldn't hear from her for another year.

She called him in Albuquerque. Rudy was blowing off steam from his last round of finals. Dulled on liquor, he fell asleep not really believing what she'd told him. She was due in a month, but she was giving the boy up, unless Rudy wanted him. Even the next morning, as he aired up the tires on his car and filled the gas tank in the purple dawn, preparing to make the trip to Artesia once again, the Rudy felt like he was watching his life rather than live it.

Rudy had nearly forgotten her face until it started reappearing in Alex's over the years. Rudy watched his son empty cut grass into the bed of the pick-up, marveled at the way the boy sliced the cane, the way his pubescent muscles began defining themselves in the expansive sunlight. Occasionally, Alex would look up and catch his father staring at him. "Get back to work," Alex said. Rudy always laughed and mock-saluted, and went back to work.

"What I don't understand," Rudy said after the waiter brought their iced-teas, "is that he hasn't spent his money on anything. Six weeks of paychecks, nothing."

Rudy and Tina were at The Moosehead, now converted from bar to steakhouse. The new owners sold the liquor license to pay for the renovations, and Rudy thought it was a crime not to be able to drink wine with his meal. Still, it was the nicest restaurant and best food in Artesia, and Tina and Rudy were celebrating their two-year anniversary. "Not even a video game. He loves those things."

“Have you asked him about it?” Tina followed the path of one of the servers with her eyes. “I think that table got our salads.”

“No, I haven’t. I thought maybe it was for a car, but he doesn’t ever mention getting his license. But something is up. Something is bothering him.”

“Does Alex have a girlfriend?” The waiter reappeared with their salads. They were the wrong salads. “I can’t have gluten,” Tina says, sending the salad back.

“He hasn’t told me anything. All day on Sunday, he works like an ox. A silent ox.”

“Do you really think you can get a good price on the place?”

“The market is on the way back. Supposedly.”

“Do you really want to sell it? I mean, I understand and all. But it seems weird. It was your home.”

Usually, when Rudy thought of the house, he only thought of its restrictions, its unbearable, silent dinners, the yard’s endless upkeep that tethered Rudy to the property every weekend rather than playing soccer or baseball with the other boys in the neighborhood. But that night, looking at Tina, he began to consider keeping the place, or at least putting off the sale. A picture of he and Tina living there, under the shade of the enormous pecan tree, flashed in his mind. Then, Rudy was reminded of how much more work they still had to do. They were still working their way through the yard. They had barely touched the interior. Rudy knew the plumbing would be the worst part. They might not even finish by winter. And if he held onto the house it a few more years, the market might go up even more.



“Not that I don’t admire what you’re doing with it,” Tina added. The waiter returned apologetically with the correct salads.

“I don’t want him to have to worry about money when he applies for college.”

Rudy shook pepper on his salad.

“If he wants to go to college.”

“Why wouldn’t he want to?”

“His *fifteen*. He probably has no idea what he wants right now. And college isn’t for everyone. I didn’t go to college.”

“That’s different.”

“Why?” Tina was flushed. Rudy was embarrassed because he had no answer.

“He’s my son,” was all he could say. The waiter returned with their entrees. They took a moment to try their food and exchanged a few pleasantries about the meal with the waiter, who bowed and backed away.

“Don’t you always tell me you resented the way your father planned your life?”

Rudy couldn’t believe she was using that against him. And worse, was she right? Was he doing the same thing to his own son? His father hadn’t even wanted him to go to college, never wanted Rudy to leave Artesia. The old man had got part of his wish.

“I guess you’re the one who knows him better. You’re the one texting him.”

Instantly, Rudy regretted his tone. It sounded childish and petty.

“Does that bother you?”

“He’s my son.” Rudy repeated. “I mean, if something was going on, you’d tell me, right?”

Tina looked away, then down at her plate. “You need to talk to him.”

“About what? Girls?” Was she really keeping something from him? “What’s this all about?”

“I swore I wouldn’t say.”

“Goddamit,” Rudy said. “You’re not his mother.” Rudy was furious. But he could see the hurt he’d caused on Tina’s face. And part of him admired that Tina was willing to keep Alex’s confidence. But shouldn’t she be loyal to him, too?

“You’re right. I’m not.” Tina set down her fork.

Rudy couldn’t sort it all out, not right then. They finished their meal in silence. Afterwards, when they had left the restaurant and parked in Rudy’s driveway, Tina went straight to her car.

“I’ll get my things later,” she said. “I’ll call next week.”

“Hey, I’m sorry,” Rudy started. But Tina was firing the engine, and whether she heard or not, she reversed out and drove away, not once looking back at Rudy.

All the next week, Rudy tried to think of ways to talk to Alex. About girls, about whatever was bothering him. But Rudy couldn’t help wondering if all this worry was something he was manufacturing in his mind. And Rudy seemed to be the one with girl problems that week. He and Tina had spoken, but it had been brief and curt. But he had been right, something was up with Alex, and Tina had confirmed it that night in the restaurant.

The next Sunday, Rudy and Alex worked at the property. The bed of the pickup was filled to the point of overflowing with grass clippings, dead weeds and branches, several weeks worth of compacted debris.

“We’ve got to run to the dump before we load anymore,” Rudy told Alex. They tossed a couple rakes in the back, and Rudy started the truck. Out on the highway, clippings danced in the wind shear, and left a trail behind the pickup, like a cloud of yellow ash. It was a bright and warm morning.

Once they reached the dirt road that led to the dump, Rudy pulled over. “Do you want to try?” he asked, meaning try driving. Alex looked apprehensive, but he got out of the cab and walked to the driver’s side. Rudy opened the door and then slid across the bench seat to the passenger side.

“I’ve been moving the cars around the lot at the wash,” Alex offered as he climbed in. “But I’m not very good at standard. And this,” he said, pointing at the column shifter, “well.”

“It’s easy. Put the left pedal to the floor, and move the handle up.”

Alex followed Rudy’s instructions, and the gear whined a little.

“Old beast,” Rudy said. “She’s fine. Now, just let up slowly with your foot. When it feels like it might give, add a little gas,” Rudy says. The truck lurched forward but didn’t stall. “A little more gas,” says Rudy.

The pickup began to roll forward. “Turn, turn!” he shouted, and Alex corrected the wheel and they were back on the road. Rudy coached Alex into second gear, then third. At each shift, Alex appeared hesitant, afraid he might break the truck. But once he reached third, he relaxed, and so did Rudy. They were cruising, now. It was near noon,

and the day was almost overbearing with the kind of light you find in New Mexico, light that makes every color, every shape, every landscape appear as if it were crafted from delicate glass, and if you closed your eyes, you might shatter it all.

“Tina says I should talk to you?” Rudy said, as casually as he could.

Alex gripped the wheel. “Did she tell you?” he asks.

“No, she said she swore to keep your secret.” Rudy kept looking forward, watching dirt road, but there was no one else out there. “But you need to tell me.”

The road to the landfill had a sharp left before the entrance, and Alex looked at Rudy for instructions. “A little brake,” Rudy instructed. “And now, back down to second.”

They entered the landfill with too much speed, spraying gravel against the faded-white and unmanned toll booth. The dumping area sat on a high mesa, where waste was left below. They approached the edge and Alex hit the brakes, hard. Dust kicked up all around them.

“Next time we’ll work on downshifting,” Rudy said. “You’ll need to turn around. Press the clutch to the floor.” Then he stopped Alex. “Wait. Actually. Want to tell me what’s going on, first?”

Alex sat staring out at the landfill. “Do you remember Elisa Lujan?” he asked.

“No, not exactly.” Pete Lujan had several daughters, Rudy knew, but he couldn’t remember them all.

“I gave her a bloody nose in fifth grade?”

“Right. You got suspended?”

“Right. You had to take the day off from work, I remember.” Alex sighed. “Well, me and her? We had to have an abortion.”

At first, Rudy couldn't comprehend what his son, his fifteen year old son, was telling him. An abortion? The whole thing sounded ridiculous.

“Do you hear that?” Alex asked.

“What?”

“That noise. That, *buzz*?”

But Rudy was still lost. “An abortion? How?”

“The Lujans knew. They paid for it. Three months ago. I told Mr. Lujan I'd start working as soon as I could to pay them back.” Alex looked out the opposite window, past Rudy. “I'm sorry, Dad.”

“Pete Lujan knew?” Rudy almost screamed.

“Mr. Lujan, yes,” Alex said.

“Why didn't? Why couldn't you tell me?”

“We thought you might want us to keep it.”

His son's words ached in his stomach. Would he? Would he have wanted a grandson? Or would he have agreed, even insisted on, the procedure? Would he have made the same decision about Alex all those years ago, if given the choice?

“Switch,” Rudy said, and they changed sides again. Rudy executed a three point turn in the dirt lot, trying not to stomp the pedals in anger. Rudy wanted to drive back into town, punch Pete Lujan in the face, yell things at his daughter. How had he been left out of the loop?

Rudy parked the truck so that the bed hung off the edge of the small mesa. “Let’s get this done.” Then he added, “We’re not finished talking about this.”

The two of them stood on the pile, pulling the strands of dead foliage out of the bed with their rakes. With each layer they removed, the dull humming grew louder and louder, into a buzz. Rudy labored at a breakneck pace, like a madman, as if he could rip the past out of the truck’s bed and be rid of it, forever. Sweat ran down his forehead, stinging his eyes. The buzzing grew louder.

When they were near the bottom of the pile, Alex removed a patch of clippings and twigs and underneath, the width of the truck bed, was something moving, dark and undulating. Rudy’s eyes burned and in the full on light of day, he couldn’t make out what was beneath them.

Then when the buzzing turned into roar, Rudy realized what they’d done. Instantly, hundreds, maybe thousands of black bees, the ones that burrow underground everywhere in the desert out here, exploded into the air. Some landed on Rudy’s arms and began stinging him. How could he have not thought of this? The truck bed was the perfect nest. Rudy yelled and dropped his rake, swatting at the air and running away from the truck.

When Rudy got far enough away, he turned to back. The angry swarm rose out of the pickup in a dark swirling pillar, and against the pale blue sky, the thousands of tiny reflections of light off the bees’ exoskeletons looked like a whirlpool of water. Then Rudy spotted Alex in the cab, calmly putting the truck in gear. Alex accelerated forward about forty yards, and then slammed the gearshift into reverse with a metallic pop. Rudy heard his son gun the engine, watched the tires spin and kick up dirt before gaining their

traction. Ten yards before the drop-off, Alex braked full, and the truck slid towards the edge. The rebounding force flung the nest and the remaining mulch out of the bed, down into the garbage piles below.

When he walked back to the truck, Rudy realized he was smiling. Even this far off, he could hear his son's laughter through the cab's closed windows, a sound he knew he could never do without.