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Bottomfeeders

William Linn
University of South Carolina - Columbia

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Bottomfeeders

by

William Linn

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Accepted by:

Elise Blackwell, Director of Thesis

David Bajo, Reader

Robert Brinkmeyer, Reader

Julia Elliott, Reader

Lacy Ford, Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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Abstract

Bottomfeeders is a collection of short fiction. It includes stories concerning life, death, hoboes, wrestling, videogames, and cropdusters, among other things. It is both very serious and impossibly dumb, as is the way of things.

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1. Seventeen Neck, Thirty-Four Sleeve

They have us living in dorm rooms for the conference. When you turn the lights off, messages from teens shine down from the ceiling. Embrace it, they say, in discount glow paint. You're in the future. I'm not sure how I feel about the first part.

Pendleton likes the arrangement. He feels like it gives him license to drink. I'm already retreating to hard pharmaceuticals. When I time them right I can make eye contact with a few people here.

The aptitude test told me to be a park ranger. I always liked that idea, sitting in a tower with big, big binoculars. I could see things that way, and there would be things beneath me. They'd pick out my clothes for me and there would be fires. When I tried out for the job, it was like trying to find the wiper switch in someone else's car.

So instead I sell things, and I'm sleeping in a loft bed at thirty-eight years old.

•

In our first session, they put us in what they call klumps with a "k." They wrote it on a white board. They gave us instructions.

"Tell your neighbors two truths and a lie."

I give them three lies and keep my head low.

Pendleton's at a point where he can't tell the difference.

Neighbor number one stands up and he says, "I grew up in Oklahoma. My great-grandpa once met Jesse James. I'm certified on both skill and miter saws."

Neighbor two gets adventurous. He says, “My favorite pizza is a Hawaiian, extra sauce on the side and I’m a second level green-belt in two types of karate. Once, I stole my dad’s car to see Rainbow open for Speedwagon.”

I think, my god, even these fantasies are secondhand.

Three is a woman with a paisley briefcase that she pulls behind her like a reluctant child. She says sometimes her dog pins her down and sleeps on her back. She says she won’t move him because he seems so comfortable. This year, she claims, she saw a live taping of Ellen. She also says that her husband is a doctor without borders. Guatemalan children getting their palates uncleft, landmine legs getting stitched back on, that sort of thing. Pendleton stands up and reads from a card.

“One,” he says. “Your God is nothing but palliative care. Two: morality exists as a crutch for the weak.”

“Also,” he says, “insemination and suicide are the only true forms of biological agency.”

Neighbor number one raises his hand.

He says, “Is it the second thing maybe?”

I am howling inside.

•

This is all mandatory, in case that’s unclear. Professional Development, Continuing Ed. They make us do sixteen hours a year, and Pendleton and I only had this one left to pick. All we have to do is sign up for a few seminars, ignore a few lectures. We register, wear name tags, and then we go home with a slip that tells everyone that we’re now much improved.

And if we don't, performance reviews, then termination, unemployment, delinquent child support.

We're not proud or pleased, but we're here and that's something.

•

Two women make themselves known at dinner that night. Together they're scolding a jaunty bartender.

"What do you mean you're fresh out of rosé? Are we in Chechnya?"

The bartender uncorks a bottle of store-brand Prosecco. "I guess the word fresh is throwing you off?"

"You're loving this, aren't you?"

There's Melinda grinning, picking her nails. And then there's Candace, splendid, seething good hate. Together with the bartender, they are a perfect match, slapboxing their way through what should be an empty exchange, a glass handed off and a greasy tip jar.

"You realize you've changed the direction of our night now," Candace says.

"Now we'll be forced to drink hard liquor with the proles."

Melinda reaches over the bar, takes a green bottle of respectable gin. Candace tucks a large wad of cash into his jar.

"You're like a petty border guard," she says. "Please never change."

Melinda kisses the bartender on the cheek, and they take the bottle outside.

Pendleton and I feel that we should network with them. They say friendships are the key to lasting relationships. We are nothing if not game.

•

There's a seminar titled "Customer Acquisition: How to Effectively Leverage Sales Intelligence." It was buried at the bottom of page three of the pamphlet so I'm surprised how many people show up at Hall F, so many that they send a conference staff lackey to fetch two more sleeves of small paper cups. I pass Pendleton and the women a handful of pills.

The women put their purses on the two outside seats for imaginary friends, so have a whole row to ourselves in the back. A man with his sleeves up takes the floor proudly. I've decided that I'll be calling him Steve.

Steve begins talking, enunciating well with firm eye contact. His gestures are practiced and demonstrative, and he paces the room to make us all feel included. He always keeps his shoulders open.

"In this seminar," he says, "we hope you'll join us to discuss the best practices in customer acquisition by leveraging sales intelligence and fresh business data on people and companies. We'll discuss key topics that drive sales and marketing productivity and revenue such as how to leverage sales intelligence on the micro level," and so forth.

Steve is lovely. Steve is handsome, boringly so. Steve, in another life, is an assistant baseball coach who makes everyone wish the real coach would die or get fired for kissing some underage girls. Magnificent Steve. New Head Coach Steve.

Pendleton reaches over and clutches my knee.

"This is the most compelling thing I've seen in my life," he says. "Are you feeling this too?"

Somehow Melinda has tied her sweater around her waist without leaving her seat. Candace vigorously moisturizes her calves.

Steve has taken on a lavender aura. As he gestures, his hands trail endless copies of themselves. Pendleton clenches the knee of my pants. This intensity is something we have never felt before.

We pull it together in time for the closer. Steve brings us home with some lovely new buzzwords, baubles from the Orient to twirl for our clients. He doesn't bow, just waves to the applause.

"Now," he says. "Do you have any questions?"

Pendleton asks quietly, under his breath, "Can we please just stay here forever?"

And I swear that I think I can hear Steve say *yes*.

•

That night we lurk in an old cemetery. The women, we think, have brought us here to smoke joints and fool around. Instead we smoke joints and take rubbings from strangers' headstones. We rake crayons across some dead family graves, collecting lost names in unspoken competition.

Melinda and I already have Druscilla and Mauve. No way we can lose.

Melinda asks, "Do you think there's a point where our names get retired?"

Candace is twirling between a pair of obelisks.

Pendleton says, "Name a nine-year-old you know that has the name Candace."

Melinda says, "When I have a girl, I'm calling her Candace."

Candace falls down and kicks up her feet, making cute flattered noises.

"And the next one I have, I'm calling Druscilla." Melinda falls back and looks at the sky. "I swear on the graves of these lovely dead folks."

There's a calm here right now. There's something good in this.

I don't want to say that we're not awful people. We are most certainly, definitely, perfectly awful. It's the easiest path to avoid being boring. But this very second I think maybe we're close to alright.

Then there's blue lights and I'm struggling to swallow the roach.

The officer says, "What are you folks doing out here?"

Melinda says, "We're enjoying the night. Honeysuckle's blooming."

Candace asks him, "What are you doing here?"

"You folks are trespassing here. Cemetery closes when the sun goes down."

We're due for a problem, so the gin bottle falls out of Pendleton's hand. We all look down at it.

"Seems about right," he says.

We haven't been arrested in a while, not together at least.

He asks to see our identification.

"We left it," Candace says. "Back in the dorms."

"Mary Mother," Pendleton says. "That's the first time that excuse has ever been true."

"Car only fits two," he says. "You gentlemen are going to come in with me."

We put our hands out, but he doesn't let us have the cuffs. He asks Melinda and Candace to give him their names.

"Druscilla," they say. "Druscilla and Mauve."

•

There's something to be said for loving your misery. It's easy obtain, always reliable. It's an unkillable houseplant in the corner of your mind.

•

Druscilla and Mauve have sent bail for us but it seems that they have left us for good. In the morning we get our belts and wallets returned, then catch a bus in the too bright sun, back to the outside edge of the campus. They let us off at a stop near the Admissions building. A clean-faced kid in a tucked-in green polo stands in front of a cluster of teens. He passes them lanyards, weasels a smile.

“I take it you’re here to learn a few things?” He gives us each a lanyard.

We shrug and decide we’ve got nothing but time.

He leads us through the storied facilities.

Civil War bodies were housed in this one. Doctor Rosenthal named two herpes simplexes in *that* very lab. This one was donated by a wealthy eccentric whose family owned half the state’s mineral rights. It’s called Froederick Hall, after his favorite dog. Legend has it he’s cremated and used as mortar for the cornerstone. We should all be so lucky. He tells us more things and I’m sure it’s all fascinating, but we’re both done to death and hankering for more.

Pendleton says, “We should go to the room and eat all the rest.”

“All of it?” I say.

“All of it,” he says.

The guide starts in on another one now, about how, yes, it’s called Carnegie Hall, and no he can’t show it, they’re setting up a keynote for a professional conference, very important.

“They named it that way because one of our deans was a serious jokester. He really hoped that a student would ask him for directions one day.”

I drag Pendleton by the sleeve back to the dorm, because if I have to hear another asshole's delivery of "practice, practice, practice" I fully intend to be out of my mind.

•

There are five bars left, so we take two and crush one, then follow those up with an adderall each. I take a swig from the bottom of a derelict Coke and straighten my tie in the window's reflection. We hurry down the steps two at a time and somewhere along the way, the pills kick in. Our feet go numb and we become acutely aware of our tongues in our mouths.

By sheer force of will my signature ends up on the registration page. Pendleton makes an X, like he's a comic strip sailor. The only seats left are right up front, second row from the stage. I push Pendleton across the laps of maybe twelve strangers before we successfully lock into our chairs.

Two different speakers plow through remarks. One of them actually throws his notecards away, but he keeps looking down like he has another set. They talk about things being actionable and the importance of being above-board on things. During this, I've discovered how delightful my keychain feels.

Then everyone is applauding and standing for something. I pull Pendleton up with me. Steve appears in jeans and a ball cap. We are besotted.

His presence expands and fills the whole room. He is a noble gas, a shimmering goldfish, expanding to fill whatever his container.

He speaks of the importance of presence of mind, of connecting with clients on a base human level. Know them, he says. Love them, he says. For too long we've thought of them simply as numbers, potential new paths in our revenue stream. We should learn the name of their ugliest child. We should think of the human as much as the resource.

The crowd is applauding even as he's still speaking. He then lowers his voice and we all quiet with him. He hits a crescendo and we're on our feet again.

Steve isn't smiling; it's more radiant than that, and I mean that in the very most literal sense. The light of his essence throbs through the room. Melinda and Candace descend from behind him and each rest an elegant hand on his shoulder. The cemeteries are adorned, our best dogs immortal. The police are polite and the bartenders cheeky. We drink all drink rosé when we earn our black belts, and the landmine children have regrown their legs. We are ascendant. Our names are eternal, etched into stone.

I look over and see that Pendleton is weeping. I am sedate, serene, at peace.

I hear him muttering, "One day we'll get to be one of those guys."

Guess what, I'm thinking. We already are. Our certificates shine in the luminous sky.

2. Genesis Kids

My friend Kevin always called himself a Genesis kid.

Here's how he put it. Genesis kids had dads who smoked. Genesis kids had older brothers with dirtbikes and porno mags and gnarly fireworks with racist names. If you grew up with a Sega Genesis, odds are that you grew a mustache earlier than your classmates, and you fucking kept it even though it made you look like a cartoon otter. Your parents felt bad about getting divorced, and they were too tired to confront you about pocketing the pizza money. Genesis kids played shit like *Altered Beast* where you got to be a Roman centurion who could turn into a tiger and kick fireballs through a satyr's face. When the apocalypse came, you were going to have a leg up because you had that raw 16-bit violence to harden you up. Those weak-ass Nintendo kids were going to get eaten, day one.

Nintendo kids grew up in houses where the pantries were stocked with apple chips and rice crackers. They had to get their two posters framed and hung at harmonious angles with the proper drywall anchors. They didn't cut their own lawns, and they had a second twin bed in their room for friends that could stay only with prior parental permission. Nintendo kids wore jeans that had creases from where the housekeeper ironed them. They wrote thank you notes, even to family members.

I was a Nintendo kid. I didn't think about myself that way at the time, but as it turns out those sorts of arbitrary tribal lines get drawn when you're not looking, and more often than you realize.

It makes perfect sense that I met Kevin in a fight. One of the Genesis kids had started telling everyone that Zelda was a butt-pirate, which to a twelve-year-old nerd is the equivalent of landing armed forces on sovereign soil. The offense here wasn't the sexual overtones—everyone and everything was a butt-pirate at some point or another. The problem was the conflation of Zelda, the titular princess of The Legend of Zelda series, with Link, the perpetual hero of Hyrule.

Everyone read the same magazines, and we all peeked over the fence at what the other side was playing. Even Nintendo kids knew that Knuckles was an echidna—look it up—so there was no way the Genesis kids could make such a basic error. The struggle between trolls and pedants long predates the internet. There were principles at stake here.

So we lined up on opposite ends of the playground to chuck rocks at each other. Kevin knocked out four of my teeth, and we were best friends until the day he died.

•

For knocking my teeth out, Kevin got sentenced to a month of after-school janitorial work. For my part in the incident, I got the same. The school got creative and decided that we would serve our punishments together, alone.

Our first afternoon together, we blasted out garbage cans in silence. He worked the hose while I slung the bleach. It was late spring and hot as hell, so we didn't so much mind it if we got hit with the water.

I didn't take the punishment well. The labor didn't bother me so much—I was scrawny, but I ate—but having to stay after school two hours each day was a constant reminder to my parents that I had done something borderline delinquent.

Kevin, on the other hand, took his lumps like a mobster taking a prison bid, completely stoic about the whole thing. I suspect he evaluated what the sentence would be as he picked up the rock and decided the proposition paid off no matter what happened.

By the end of the afternoon my clothes were flecked with faded dots from the backsplash. Kevin threw his shirt in a dumpster before he walked home. I got yelled at for not being appropriately attired for my job.

On the second day, we cleaned the gym floor. They gave us these big floppy mops and we walked long overlapping zags down the court like we were lacing an enormous shoe.

At first it was a pretty zen process, but at a certain point the tedium set in so I started jogging with the mop and before we knew it we were racing. We finished up a half hour early, so we walked over the vending machines and bought RCs. We sat on the brick barrier surrounding an air conditioning unit, waiting for our rides to show up.

“About the whole Zelda thing,” he said. “You know we were just bullshitting, right?”

“I figured,” I said.

“My cousin has that game,” he said. “It's kind of alright.”

“Yeah,” I said. I thumped my drink cap off into the parking lot. “Sometimes when you’re in a cave, there are these gross-ass dead hands that come down from the ceiling and crush you to death. I almost pee every time.”

I still regret saying that bit about the pee.

“You want gnarly,” he said, “you’ve got to see Doom. Demons, dude. From hell. On *Mars*.”

“No way,” I said.

“I’ve got a floppy of it at home. My dad got it in the mail.”

“No way,” I said.

“There’s a rocket launcher,” he said. “It looks like it’s coming out of your dude’s junk.”

The whole ride home I was fixated. Space hell. Crotch weapons.

On the third day, we had to scrub out an old electric fryer. I was ninety percent certain that the school had no intention of using it again, that they were just dumping old fashioned make-work on us. The smell of that thing hung in a cloud with a twenty foot radius. It saturated your hair and pores the second you set foot near it. A layer of sludge festered in the bottom of the grease trough that hardly sloshed as we rocked the fryer out the back doors. When we finally got the thing out back of the cafeteria, huge bugs descended from the nearby treeline to founder and drown.

Kevin offered me a dip. I had never touched the stuff before, but anything was preferable to rancid peanut oil. For some inexplicable reason it was cherry flavored. It burned on my raw gums, but at least it was self-inflicted.

We spent forty minutes trying to rake the grease out with putty knives and spatulas before we realized we were making zero headway.

“Fuck this,” he said. He threw his spatula into the woods.

We both stood there spitting in the heat for a few minutes.

“Those woods are pretty dense,” I said.

“Hella dense,” he said.

“You could hide a body in there,” I said.

“Yep,” he said.

We rocked the fryer about thirty yards into the woods and threw some sticks on top.

“Done,” he said. “You want to check out space hell?”

We never spoke of the fryer again. To this day I don’t know how else to make friends.

•

Kevin’s house, his dad’s place, was only a couple of miles from mine. It was well within biking distance, but I had no idea because it was down an old service road that led out toward the water treatment facility. It fell just outside of city limits which seemed like a deliberate choice. It was never entirely clear what the appeal was, though I suspect it was some combination of tax code and gun laws or a general aversion to shared property lines.

Kevin’s dad—I realize now I still don’t know his name –was a self-employed electronics repairman. He started off in the eighties fixing arcade machines. He’d travel around the region fixing Defender and Galaxian boards or rigging score machines for

bowling alleys. I only ever saw him wearing a denim jumpsuit and there seemed to be a box of grounding bracelets within arm's reach no matter what room he occupied.

The arcade crash hadn't fully sunk yet, but business had started to taper off in rural areas. Kevin's dad spent most of his time smoking Winstons and "working on projects" in the garage. Walking through that door was like stepping into the nightmarish cyperpunk future I have always prayed for. The lines between clutter and garbage had ceased to exist. Computer parts were strewn everywhere—motherboards on workbenches, CPU fans and thermal paste in open bins, bundles of every cable standard known to man in every length imaginable. There were repurposed cardboard boxes of all shapes and sizes lining the walls, though I couldn't imagine what they held as it seemed that at least four of everything that held a current was out and visible. In the corner, two televisions played at once, different channels, neither watched. I later found out that one was for satellite and the other for cable, both of them free.

His dad glanced up from the mess of silicon and plastic he was prodding with a screwdriver as we walked in.

Kevin waved.

"You've got a friend," he said.

"He wants to see Doom," Kevin said.

"I uninstalled it last week."

Kevin shrugged. His dad stubbed his cigarette out.

"Second box." he said, pointing to the wall. "Found some codes for it. They're written on the sticker."

We took the floppy disk inside the house proper and waited as the PC booted to a DOS prompt.

“I’m going to get very grounded for this, aren’t I?” I said

He just stared at the screen, grinning, as I sat down to chainsaw demons and imps and possessed space marines well into dinnertime.

•

I got very grounded for that. My parents never found out about space hell, but they didn’t buy the pretense that I got caught up doing afterschool work. They took the Super Nintendo and stashed it for an indefinite window high on a shelf in their closet. One afternoon I hauled the ladder from the garage, down the hall and through their bedroom, only to chicken out at the last minute when I heard the neighbor’s car door slam.

So mandatory school labor became the closest thing to fun I had for the weeks that it lasted. We edged sidewalks, scrubbed showers, helped plant rat traps under the bleachers. We were so frequently unsupervised that most of the time, so as long as there was a marginal improvement and plausible deniability, we’d blow off the work and go bullshit and play Gameboy until it was time for us to go sign out. That was most days.

Some days, though, they’d drop something extra dirty on us. One day we were charged with disposing of the remains of dissected fetal pigs from the science lab. The carcasses were in varying degrees of disrepair from the amateurish work of ninth grade biology. Worse than that, these were pigs that had been unsealed, carved open, and allowed to sit at room temperature for nearly four hours before we got to them, so the formaldehyde had plenty of time to open up and oxidize in a way that put it in direct competition with the deep fryer for the grossest thing I’ve ever handled.

The biology teacher showed us how to pack one up. “Like a pot roast,” she said, “but, you know, for the dumpster.” Then she tossed me a pack of two gallon freezer bags and a huge ring of keys. “Lock up when you’re finished and leave the keys when you go.”

We haphazardly plopped the pigs in bags, then threw those bags into a giant contractor bag which we tossed out behind the science building.

“Good enough for government work,” Kevin said. “We should probably take these keys back.”

“Probably,” I said.

He poked his head back into the darkened school hallway. “But maybe not right this second,” he said. “Follow me.”

Kevin grabbed his backpack and led me down the hallway into the library.

The Clinton years had treated a few alumni kindly, and the school had just bought a whole fleet of new TVs which were kept under lock in a library back room. We slipped through the doors, making sure to lock each one behind us.

Kevin wheeled one of the TV carts over near an outlet and plugged it in. From his bag, he produced a Genesis console and plugged it into the TV’s back ports.

“I want to see if I can rip your spine out,” he said, pushing a Mortal Kombat cartridge down into the machine.

I had never seen the Genesis version before. All I had experience with was the nerfed Nintendo version where the copious blood was recolored to pass as sweat and the signature Fatalities had to be toned down or cut entirely.

He picked Sub-Zero and I picked Scorpion, two ninjas with identical character models aside from a palette swap. We traded flying spears for ice beams in the darkened room as blood cascaded all over the screen like it was shot from a sprinkler. We each won a round, but he bested me with a cheap shot sweep trap in the third and then rapidly keyed in a button combination. I watched in awe as Sub-Zero grabbed my throat and ripped my head clean off, pulling my spinal column out with it as the blood pooled at his feet.

“Get worked, son,” he said. “Get worked.”

It was the greatest thing I’d ever seen.

•

This all leads up to me being a grown adult man who plays video games for a living. That’s something I’ve spent the last twenty years learning how to explain to strangers, and somewhere along the way I managed to create a few justifications that don’t sound like utter horseshit.

Here’s one I got some pretty good mileage from: people keep telling me that I should grow up. When they say grow up, what they think they mean is that I should put away childish things in order to accept some sort of responsibility. To them, what I do is strictly escapism, as though I go home, pull the blinds, and pretend I’m a gnomish thief so I can ignore how dirty my sweatpants have gotten.

There’s a kernel of truth in that. There’s a degree to which this whole thing lets me avoid my day to day reality, and sometimes I do wear sweatpants one day too long. But what I’m trying to step outside of isn’t myself, usually. I’m more concerned with this tacit agreement of what they mean by grown up: compromised dreams, choice by convention, and an active hand in a broken system.

That one tends to play better with a younger audience, when they're still working their way through a stack of punk EPs, and the part of me that still believes that line is still kicking around somewhere. But there's probably a reason that it comes across as a little defensive too. Unfairly summarized, I make money telling people whether the toys they want to buy are worth their money or not. I'm not exactly not throwing firebombs at loan offices. There's a operatic sneer to the whole thing that I appreciate, but it's a weak argument with a slick coat of paint.

Here is what I can say definitively when faced with these doubts: there is virtue to letting children rip out each other's spines. There is merit to dumping appliances in the woods. There is moral fiber to be found in the process of putting dead pigs in the spare well of your mother's car, because you know you were right to keep punching the demons of Mars. And when your accomplice in all this dies far too young, you will realize that he's the only one who taught you anything of value, because you will survive the apocalypse, at least for a week.

3. On Rails

He deloused his beard with kerosene fumes. His favorite sound was crunching glass. He felt that alternating current would be the downfall of mankind, but the idea of cremation mesmerized him. He whiled time in a Muskogee prison, and he felt that the calliope was an unfairly maligned form of instrumentation. His wife sometimes painted. He relished the fact that he found her work frightening.

My grandfather was a tramp, and I know this now. Scant details about my bloodline would find their way into family meals when I was younger, but it was always oblique. I was chided for disliking meals from a can. I was told my family was built on potted meat product. People would compare something pleasant to a sun-warm trough. No one ever bought rugs or kept the ones they stole. We only ever lived in depot towns.

None of this felt odd until truancy court. The man from the state made a point of telling us the consequences. They'll grow into lives of calamitous crime, he said to the judge. They put us in schools, kept us from home for a while. They said things about stability that made us all laugh.

School was like chores, from what we could tell. We got shoved into patterns in which we had no investment. Our readers got dingier, mildewed, and we got stuck doing grades over. They tried to hose us off once. I always thought we did better when our faces were smudged.

We could pass on a good day, and eventually we cleaned up and took the like the others. We could say back what they wanted us to say back, but most goddamn times it seemed like the state of Missouri just wanted people to smile til they steered them into a hospital gown. Still, we grinned our way through to stay out of the courts. I even weaseled my way into a college or two, just to see what it was like. It turns out, they love things like me. They like to poke me with sticks and see how I squirm.

I was living near a campus when his journal appeared. No knock at the door, just a bundle in the mailbox. They say not to act like an object can walk by itself, but I think when the past and future turn up on your doorstep you can maybe allow for wandering boxes. I tore off the newsprint and threw it aside. This was a man I knew in concept only. A specter had laid the seed of my existence, and I had gained the means to shade in the outline of his ghost.

From the first page:

“The stars are shining through the clouds this year,” he wrote, “like they’re hanging along down the God-wrong side. My worry is that if a man can see all he does at all hours of the day, a time comes when he can’t sleep for watching himself.”

That bit stuck out to me, as it’s a feeling that comes near with alarming frequency.

At the time I was sweated and living with a boy from Cheyenne whose parents invested in futures and bonds. I lived among hypothetical money and pipe-smoking theory. I looked at my fingernails before I went in public. I knew the proper arrangement of silverware.

He wrote about the bluffs out west, scrub pine in the hills, about near dehydration from bad cactus water. He stole books from men in Peoria and read them in a coal car up

to Naperville. He set them on the banks of Lake Michigan in hopes they'd get lapped up by a true tide or burnt by a drifter with a need to keep warm.

"We all leave our stains in various forms," he wrote on a wax-stained page. "I pray that this ink is as bad as mine gets."

This coming from a man who didn't know I'd exist, couldn't possibly foresee how my life had unspooled. For whatever reason, I needed to put a body to the man. If I was going to be a disappointment, at the very least it wouldn't be to the concept of a man.

I threw a few items into a grocery sack and headed for the train to show my father the book, unsure whether to take my keys when I left.

•

My father moved lumber from one place to another. He cut it sometimes, and sometimes he sold it, but mostly he put it on pallets, raised it and lowered it, counted and bundled and marked it with numbers. He threw it on trucks. He measured things twice. He breathed sawdust and his hands were calloused and all of his pants had loops to hang hammers.

When a screw gashed down to his orbital bone, he still waived out of wearing goggles at work.

"Any child of mine," my grandfather wrote, "should be of no consequence. The notion of legacy finds no quarter in my heart. Sons, if you read this, know that I wish for you to make nothing of yourself."

Between the buzzing of lumberyard saws, I asked my father if he'd ever seen the journal before.

He nodded toward the band saw table. "Go ahead and put that book right there."

I stashed the book back in my sack.

My father shrugged and lined up another plywood sheet.

“Where’d he end up?” I asked.

The saw whirred to life and my father guided the sheet along a steady curve until the sheet split into two rounded halves. “You’re the one with the book,” he said. “You’ve got about as much as I ever did.” He put the halves into two separate stacks.

“He was a real son of a bitch, then,” I said.

My father look off down the rows of lumber, where two-by-fours and particle board lay stacked in piles, suspended by overhanging painted-steel arms.

“Sure,” he said. “But he knew more than anyone I ever met.”

We walked side by side toward his forklift.

“I’m not saying he was right all the time or all that smart, even. But he had thoughts that were bigger than him, which is more than you can say for most people,” he said. He brushed the sawdust off of his seat. “That’s going to be your problem right there.”

•

My grandmother was more than just a jilted woman, though it was a recurring pattern in her life. At sixteen, she left home, wandered down the Susquehanna until she hit the tidewaters and found Havre de Grace. There, an actuary from Baltimore made designs on her for months until she slept with him, then crept off for St. Louis under a blanket of night. But this man kept his books too well, and my grandmother was nothing if not industrious. She found record of his travel out west and hopped a steamer the very next day.

She shot the man dead a river lock with an old sheriff's pistol. She paid a gravedigger nine dollars from the dead man's wallet to bury him beneath a freshly laid coffin.

When my grandmother passed, we drove her body from east Pennsylvania to rest in a grave that overlooked his, in a spot she had selected long ago. Her plot sits atop a hill that sprouts in perilla mint with direct line of sight to the actuary's grave.

In my grandfather's journal, he wrote that she wanted someone to plant a headstone at the site and mark her true name. She claims that she wants to keep an eye on the man, to study his type and keep them in check from the grave. My grandfather suggested she simply wanted to look down on the Lutherans.

"She told me about him the day I proposed," my grandfather wrote. "I suppose we both knew that I'd hop towns as well. I think we also both knew I married her because she was the kind who'd quarry and kill me."

I went to plant the stone as she'd requested. At the top of the hill, the city had built a water tower that straddled the plot. The ladder to the tower sat where the marker should go, so I rested it instead two feet to the right. I thought it was better that way anyhow. There the shade wasn't blocking her name.

I walked down the where the actuary lay. His gravemate had a marker with no ornamentation, just a name, a date, and routine inscription. It read *Beloved Father, Husband, Son*.

My grandfather had thoughts about the role of the man. He wrote, "A fair portion of him, she saw in me. The difference was I knew where she secreted her gun."

•

The first time he left her was seven months in. They had been drinking hot gin from old soda bottles and my grandmother had passed out halfway through a mural. He took a dollar from her pocketbook and left her a note that said “back in a while.”

For three weeks he rode through the lower Midwest, mostly soft angles through flat Oklahoma. In Norman he watched a barnstormer crash. In Tulsa he kissed a tobacconist’s wife. He stole two mandolins from traveling musicians on a stopover in Bixby, and in Muskogee he got locked up for vagrancy.

“Policemen are lower than the bottom of an Antarctic well, but the one who nabbed me has my utmost respect,” my grandfather wrote. “Clemency is a skill we both have little use for.”

His name was Burnham, and I found him in assisted living in a veteran’s hospital near Oklahoma City. He wheeled an oxygen tank and smoked USA Golds.

“Burnham. He’s lousy at all forms of poker,” my grandfather wrote of him. “A Cardinals fan who loves nothing more than cleaning his gun. He eats tuna salad every day for lunch and wishes he could get rye bread like he got back East. In another time maybe, I’d pass him a drink, but I hope that I never return to this place.”

Burnham said he remembered arresting my kin. He said my grandfather had run through four different warehouses, climbing up scaffolds and jumping between them. He knocked a pallet of whitewash down from above and broke the dad-toes of two men in pursuit. He dipped out of sight, and for the rest of the afternoon, six men with dogs pried open crates and drums to see if he had somehow stashed himself inside.

“All this for a vagrant,” I said.

“At this point it was more a matter of pride than anything else. We didn’t have much oversight on all this and frankly we were all more than a little bored, you see.”

Burnham’s room at the VA was lined on each wall with banker’s boxes, marked in a code I couldn’t decipher. He noticed I was studying them.

“I had all of my things in a storage uptown,” he said. “Then a tornado came and snatched half the building up. Took the boat and all the army gear, left me with 46 years worth of taxes and arrest report carbons.”

I peeked in a box and saw an old binder of mint baseball cards. I found solace in the fact that if nothing else, this man had his Topps and a nice Ozzie Smith.

“I want to say in our defense that your grandfather was a particularly haggard looking vagrant. He had at that point the beard of a ninety-year-old wino in a world with no whetstones. The man was ahead of the curve on tattoos as well.”

He shuffled to the sink, splashed his face from the tap, adjusted the tube that ran up to his nose.

“Your grandfather was about as strange a man as I ever put cuffs on, all due respect. I say that not to make you feel unusual, though you do have an air of him about you. I only mean that it’s not that many men who I can call remarkable, in whatever sense of the word.”

I gave him a sip from my hip flask. I told him my grandfather spoke pretty highly of him too, that for police, he wasn’t bad people.

“Jail,” my grandfather had written, “is in essence the bum’s social club. The police just make for much sterner hosts. I’d imagine likewise that sometimes the folks in black ties befriend a waiter in one way or another.”

Burnham began digging through a box at the top of a stack of more boxes.

“He wrote a letter to me once, as odd as that sounds.” He tossed papers aside like he was skinning an onion. “I’m thinking I kept it in one of these files.”

He shucked the box off the stack and opened up the next one.

“Here it is,” he said. “Always thought it was the strangest thing.”

He handed me a torn envelope postmarked from Shreveport. Inside the letter was a photo of my grandmother. All the note said was, “Swell meeting you. If my body turns up in a depot somewhere, know that I do not wish to see this woman charged. In all likelihood, I deserved what I got. See to it that they burn all my parts.”

I thanked Burnham and shook his hand. I supposed that I could count him as a friend, as far as that would take me.

During his time with Burnham my grandfather wrote, “You couldn’t fill a cigar box with all of man’s decency. But tamp down hard enough and you might fill a rifle shell.”

•

The time he’d already spent in jail was twice as long as he would’ve been sentenced, so they gave him back his shoes, his belt, and the mess kit he carried. Somehow he ended up with a mandolin as well. They sent him on his way with instructions never to return.

“A feather in my cap, if you ask me,” he wrote. “Muskogee is about as much a town as I am a preacher. I have as much use for it as it does for me.”

When he hopped from the train into reedgrass two miles from the St. Louis station, my grandmother was there, drinking alone. He asked how she knew which train he’d be on. She told him she’d been waiting to jump on one of her own. She wanted to

see down South but he could come if he wanted. He tucked two dollars in her pocket and kissed her on the crown of her head.

They rode a barge down instead, my grandfather laying rivets and cleaning the floors in exchange for passage, while my grandmother played dice and drank with the crew.

“I find her tremendous,” he wrote from the deck of the ship. “She gives me a sense that I’ve not known before: a sense of proportion for how things can feel.”

•

I spent two nights in Vicksburg where there boat took repairs.

There, my grandparents wandered, searching out ghosts. The antebellum homes loomed far from the roads with their wraparound porches indistinct in the fog. These pockets of moisture hung in the low places, and as my kin staggered about drinking port from a thermos, they’d list into one and get instantly damp.

“We’d bound into a pocket and our hands would slip apart,” he wrote. “Our clothes were dewy when we came out the other side. If we swung our arms fast and true, we could nearly slice off a chunk of the cloud.”

They came across a cotillion ball at the edge of a warm cedar grove. They lay on a hilltop watching as the silhouettes of debutantes danced the foxtrot in a gazebo backlit with a bloom of lamplight. The tempo would change and the figures would shift, exchanging partners with identical shapes. They varied in height and width, to be sure, but their exact dimensions were smeared in the haze. These figures circled and entwined in indistinct loops as the strains of violas rang through the air. Eventually, the band packed away their instruments, and the elegant silver was carried away. Only two figures remained in the mist, and my grandparents watched as the couple sat down in the center

of the floor. They looked off in the same direction, in the exact same posture for some time until the lanterns gradually extinguished on their own, and finally the figures then dissipated into a breeze.

Without comment my grandmother led my grandfather by the hand, carried him down the back side of the hill. They laid down together in the warm cedar grove and slept through the night near the base of a tree.

•

“Children,” he wrote. “Like stones in your pockets.”

•

From there journal entries become less and less frequent. He ran off again, rode freight cars up to Ohio. Two weeks unrecorded. He boxed in a basement in downtown Columbus. Another three weeks. He stole and sold whole sides of beef. He lost the first digit of his pinky. The railroad police arrested him twice. Until the last page, these incidents are related in less and less detail. His commentary becomes minimal. He feels and seems unwise, unwell.

“Bloomington.” he wrote. “Slept under a truck.”

This information has brought me very few answers. I’ve visited every town mentioned by name, expecting at some point for something to coalesce. Instead things only become more elliptical. In public records, little exists beyond a few more arrests. My eyes are bloodshot and my fingertips are raw. I’ve learned how to pronounce the word microfiche.

What few times we spoke of the man, my grandmother referred to him only in absences. I’d hoped to triangulate some sort of presence. Instead, there were words to the

effect of “it was really only ever your father and me.” In her take on the story, he was erased.

She had my father alone in New Orleans. For two years, she hemmed dresses and hung laundry out in the Garden District. Along the way I visited the storefront where he was born. It was a bookshop back then. Two women had helped her into the manager’s office where she then gave birth.

She said my father was a heavy child. She struggled getting him on and off trains.

•

The final entry is scattershot, elliptical. It appears to be written in multiple inks. It reads as follows.

“The world can’t figure quite what to do with me. I can sympathize with her, at least on that front. I have crawled through the windows of life in ways that don’t neatly parse. More times than not, I watch my mind in pursuit of my movements, knowing good well I have that order reversed.

“Last week, a man put a pistol to my cheek. He said to me, ‘Get on your knees and make your peace.’ My God, that tickled me. He ran away, I laughed so hard.

“People assume that men like me live without regret. I would wring every drop of light from the moon if it would make that true. We stay moving to avoid, we keep doing to forget, but that moving and doing only lathes deeper grooves to gather the past.

“I am both fearful for my son and fearful of my son. I am fearful of watching myself in him and I cannot watch him in myself. I know this will give him no measure of comfort. I hope my wife knows well enough that she ought to omit me.

“The train hits town four hours from now. I’ve gone and completely exhausted myself. I would like to say I’ll stay there for a while but it’s foolish to make such guarantees. Things are so hard to stop once they’re set into motion.”

•

I’m unsure what I have learned from this process. As I hoped, the sketch has become somewhat more clear, but the picture remains an indistinct blur. I have added more pushpins in my map, but I’ve only become more aware of how many more places there are, that the bounds of my map are only the limits of paper. I have not seen enough, or I have seen just too much.

I myself am fearful that this writing will end as his did, full of consequence but devoid of meaning. I am unsure what of him exists in me, other than a painful need to go chasing phantoms. But my hope is that I’ve retained an equal share of his wife. I suspect that she is somehow the reason I wound up with his book. I like to think that she thumbed these same pages and ferreted out where he hid himself. My grandmother had a way of keeping men still, and oftentimes for more than a moment.

4. *The Waters of Oblivion*

Three weeks before Christmas, Michael Forsberg realized he could leave Mississippi or find himself slowly eaten away. He was sitting in on settlement talks for a wrongful death suit with a senior partner. A young boy, ten years old, had entered the property of the defendant—his firm’s client—and was found the following morning floating face-down in the shallow end, next to a pool noodle. It was unclear whether the boy fell or jumped in of his own free will, but his family was initially pursuing damages in excess of the defendant’s insurance coverage.

Talks began civil as such things can be, both wives staring despondent at the conference table, both husbands bridling sad accusations. The roof was drafty. Someone had brewed decaf by mistake. Michael had forgotten his watch but kept pulling his sleeve back for the time. As the senior partner was presenting a number, swirling non-dairy creamer with a swizzle stick, the mother’s eyes widened. She sat forward in her chair, breathing heavily.

The discussion escalated from there.

Why didn't you have the goddamned gate closed? My boy is ten forever because of you. What was he doing in our backyard at three in the morning? How can you put the blame on him, ten years old? Why would you get in a pool when you can't swim? All you people care about is the money. All we care about is money? You and all the rest of you. All you

care about is money. Well how come none of y'all teach your kids how to goddamn swim? You lowdown piece of shit, I'll cut your throat right now.

And so on, until Michael couldn't understand any more.

He quietly rose from his chair, unnoticed, and left his briefcase on the table as he slipped out the back. He went home to do the only thing that made sense. He packed all of his things into a sixteen-foot Budget truck and headed north along the river, through the night to the Twin Cities, then due west for the shores of Lake Minnetonka.

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Minnesota welcomed him not with soft pillows of comforting white snow, but a sullen gray pallor and a spitting rain. Sipping scorched truck stop coffee from a new chrome Love's mug, Michael tried to remember the last time he had seen his Uncle Rainer. He had seen him sporadic holidays growing up, an Easter here, a Thanksgiving sometime under Reagan. Always in Minnesota, but always in the city. His mother, Rainer's sister, had refused to go to the cabin—"out Deehaven" as they said it there—claiming it was a dismal shithole with no good heat.

"There's a woodstove," Rainer always countered. "And it's my dismal shithole."

Rainer indulged his sister and visited in the city, but Michael knew Rainer prided himself on the cabin. The property had been in the family name since before the Civil War, before incorporation even. With his father's early death, Rainer had inherited the cabin in his twenties and had ridden it out through the unconscionable bloat of waterfront real estate. His cabin stood in the gap between two multimillion dollar homes with private docks, and Rainer liked icefishing in red long johns and a ragged plaid kromer while the neighbors held fundraisers. It was the family retreat, he told Michael on the phone. He should come on. It was there for a reason.

Narrowly surviving the fresh frozen highways, Michael pulled the moving truck through a tight gap in the split rail fence. He began to see his mother's point. Bowed-in white oak siding flanked the outside of a two story mess of uneven saw-work, shoddy beam placement, and a nonexistent slab. Each of the exterior walls held a concave warp that brought the corners of the roof to sharp peaks so they looked as though they had been pinched. The yard was littered with automotive parts and repair equipment—corroded batteries, dead taillights, a rusted hex wrench. From the southwest corner of the cabin, a satellite dish hung inverted three feet below the roofline. It collected icicles.

Rainer walked out from the porch, smoking a cigarette.

“How much crap did you haul up here with you?”

“More than enough.”

Michael noticed the neighbors to the north had stepped outside, both husband and wife. The husband pointed at the moving truck excitedly.

Rainer handed his cigarette to Michael and cupped his hands to his mouth. “You fucking wish, guy,” he yelled. The neighbors went back inside.

“Right then,” Rainer said. He left Michael holding the cigarette. “You’ll be wanting a drink.”

They walked into the kitchen. The sink overflowed with dishes, as did the trash with Molson cans. Rainer pulled a lowball glass from the dish pile. He wiped it on the tail of his flannel shirt and set it out in front of Michael. He pulled a handle of cheap Canadian whiskey from below the sink and poured four fingers into the glass.

“You want ice?” he asked.

Michael nodded.

“Toss your bag down in the corner there and walk with me.”

Out the back door, the deck stood overlooking the property. About seven or eight yards of ground covered in refrozen snow stood between them and the water’s edge. Thirty feet more of ice had formed out from the bank but the rest of the lake remained unfrozen, the color on the black end of blue exempting a few white peaks from the stiff breeze across the surface. Rainer swept some fresh snow from the railing and dropped it in Michael’s glass.

“Neighbors seem friendly,” Michael said. He sipped at his whiskey. The old snow tasted like water from a stagnant tap.

“Flathead yuppie Finns,” Rainer said. “Every six months some new complaint gets filed. When they’re not trying to edge me off, they’re trying to buy me out.”

“How much are they offering?”

“One-and-a-half so they can flip it for two,” Rainer said. Michael turned up his whiskey. “It’s funny they still think it’s about the money. Probably bulldoze the place and put in a heated driveway.”

“It’s always about the money,” Michael said. He slung the amber snow from his glass. Above, two northern cardinals fought in mid-air, screeching and going for the eyes.

“Does the lake not freeze over?”

“It’s late this year. There’s something unsettling about a mild winter up here.” Rainer lit another cigarette. “Don’t get any wise ideas about walking out there just yet. Seems every year they have to fish some idiot popsicle out of the water.” He changed the subject. “How’s your little brother?”

“Yeah,” Michael said. “He’s alright.” He bit off his mittens. “Started college this year, I guess, at Sewanee.”

“That’ll take some getting used to. You and him, you’ll always be about this high to me,” he said, marking up to mid-thigh with his hand.

Michael nodded and took a cigarette from the pack.

They smoked in silence for a while. There was a clarity in the air from the cold that Michael didn’t quite understand, but it focused his thoughts in an unpleasant way. They watched the sun fall to the top of the treeline, and the cold started to settle in on them.

They went inside and Rainer began loading the woodburning stove with split logs. Michael went to the pantry to figure out dinner.

“You’ve only got lutefisk and beer,” he said.

Rainer didn’t look up. “There were pickles this morning. Take the cash from my wallet, pick something up. We can do hot-dish.”

Michael headed out to the truck and scraped the frost off the windshield. He got the truck started after a few tries and tried to retrace his route back into Deephaven. The roads were poorly marked and the only landmarks seemed to be giant houses, none of which was remotely distinct.

Crossing an unfamiliar bridge, the truck hit a patch of black ice and Michael barely managed to slide the truck across at a diagonal angle, off the bridge into a shallow ditch full of snow.

He spun tires in the snow for ten minutes but only dug himself deeper with the weight of the truck. The engine sputtered out and he swore and punched the dash, the

steering wheel, any flat surface he could find. He opened up the cargo bed and looked through his belongings, an entire life of accumulated nothing, searching for anything that might be of use. From the side he pulled an old end table and smashed it across a tree trunk. He wedged the pieces of particle board under the rear tires, and got back into the truck, his fingers raw but damp from the snowmelt.

As he went to crank the truck, a heavy thud hit the hood. A silhouette the size of a child spread open tremendous arms wider than the truck. It seemed as though it was able to consume the whole cab. Michael flipped on the cab light and the head of a snowy owl spun completely around to stare at him with dull yellow eyes. From its beak hung a small hare, neck bent at an unnatural right angle. The owl dropped it on the hood, and the rabbit's legs kicked from late-firing nerves. The bird dismounted the hood and flew off, southbound under the cloudy night sky. Michael sat there watching as the near dead animal tried to run with its feet in the air.

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He pulled into Wayzata at a quarter to eleven. The only grocer in Deephaven was a mom and pop venture, closed before he made it to town, so he had driven the fifteen miles north to the twenty-four hour drugstore. The night clerk stood dead-eyed, surrounded by cigarettes and desperation gifts—Chinese teddy bears, plastic whistles, half-priced gimmick chocolate. Michael wandered down the grocery aisle, past canned ravioli and potted meat product. Empty-headed, his eyes drifted to the cookies, Nantucket, Sausalito, on to Milano. His eyes fixed there and he remembered how well into his mid-teens he thought the cookies were called “mulattoes,” that he thought the epithet somehow came from the cookie or the opposite, something to do with the chocolate inside the light cookie, that Pepperidge Farm was some sort of plantation, odd

free-associations of baking and miscegenation. The shame of old ignorance washed over his exhaustion. He decided he needed to leave, and quickly.

He grabbed the bag and headed for the register. He bought the cookies and a lighter, two packs of Newports, and a one-eyed teddy bear so the clerk wouldn't give him the mandatory sales pitch. On the drive home, he ate three of the cookies, threw the rest of the bag out the window, followed by the bear. He ignored a radio sermon and drove ten miles over the limit until he skidded to a stop in the cabin's front yard.

Back inside, he headed straight for the whiskey under the sink. He slapped Rainer's cash on the counter.

"You get sidetracked?" Rainer asked.

He swigged from the handle. "Just order pizza, alright?"

"No luck," Rainer said. He reached for the bag lutefisk. "Nothing here delivers."

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He woke up later that night freezing, hungry, incapable of sleep. He bundled himself in his camouflage hunting coat, a high-end Realtree the firm had given him last Christmas that he had worn exactly twice up to this point. He opened the fridge, sniffed at the lutefisk, put it back. He took two Molsons, put one in his pocket and drank the other. He went outside to smoke a cigarette in hopes of curbing his appetite.

Outside, the wind carried light snow through the trees and stirred up the lake. Clouds seemed to cover every inch of sky, and the only source of light was the low-watt motion bulb on the back deck. Michael walked down the stairs from the deck out to the water's edge. The ice had reached out and formed a peninsula out past any shoreline on the lake. Small, choppy waves lapped against the peninsula's edge. He tested the ice with his boot, pressing soft at first, then hard like he was testing tire pressure. It seemed firm

enough. He stepped out onto the surface, gently shifting his weight from one foot to the other, listening for a telltale crack or groan but heard none until he reached the beginning of the peninsula. He took two steps back and lit a cigarette with some effort.

He stood looking into the black water, and it seemed opaque, as if it contained nothing but the will to subsume. He stared for what seemed like ages, until at last the motion light went out and he was left alone with his thoughts in the dark. He slowly backed toward the shore and listened for the crack. It had only been minutes, he thought, but there was more to it than that. As he edged further back, his heel caught a slick patch and he fell flat upon his back, cigarette still in his mouth. He just lay there for a while and smoked the last few drags, staring up at no stars and no moon, just a relentlessly barren flattened-gray sky.

•

Two weeks passed and he still hadn't unpacked the moving truck. There was no use. Michael figured if the rental company wanted it, they could try to come find it. In that time, he and Rainer had exhausted every ounce of empty talk. The temperature had dropped dramatically since he had arrived, and the rain had turned to snow that faintly fell in clumps like cotton across the northern states, freshening what was already there. They resigned themselves to drinking beer and watching pirated satellite until a melt and refreeze pulled the dish from the roof. It fell to the asphalt below where it shattered into bits. Rainer dug his ice fishing gear out of the closet and had started to untangle lines and retie knots. Michael split wood for a few more days, but when they both agreed that the cabin walls seemed bow in further than before, they figured it was time for a change of scenery.

They took the truck into the city to catch the football game. Rainer was a hockey man, but the pros were up in Canada for the week and the Gophers were off for winter break. They figured with the Vikings at two and twelve, already out of playoff contention, they stood an outside chance of scalping cheap. Downtown they found they had four dollars cash between them, so Michael found a teller machine. His card declined twice for a hundred before it occurred in that the truck company must have hit his account with any number of fees. He got out the thirty it would give him. He looked to Rainer, who shook his head.

“Off the grid,” he said. “I keep my cash elsewhere.”

They were still thirty short for the pair of tickets, so they headed into a bar across the street to watch. Rainer sidled up to the bar and ordered two boilermakers, Pabst cans poured into pint glasses and double shots of well whiskey. They had missed the first quarter. Michael figured they could stretch the thirty at least through the third quarter, then prey on the kindness of strangers if somehow the game managed to get good.

The bar was empty so the bartender, the owner, started chatting them up. He was a local who had been dragged south to Memphis chasing a Vietnamese girl he met in college. It hadn't worked out. Her family was strict and didn't care for white boys, especially Polacks, and especially him. Too much sex and booze, not enough money and ambition. He couldn't argue with their logic. He had come back and set up shop here. He liked that he could snowmobile, but he missed the ribs.

“I'm detecting a bit of that twang on you,” he said to Michael.

“It's the Mississippi in him,” Rainer said. “I take no responsibility for anything he says.”

“We don’t go much for no book-learning,” Michael explained.

“You know what they call a goat with its head stuck in a fence down there, don’t you?” the owner asked, big idiot grin smeared on his face.

Michael dropped the shot into his glass. “Fucked,” he said.

“You beat me to it, you sandbagging motherfucker. You two are drinking on the house.”

They downed their drinks and the owner pulled down a bottle of Maker’s and poured another round. Rainer hadn’t seemed so pleased since Michael had arrived. They knocked back drinks and watched as Drew Brees proceeded to pick the Minnesota secondary apart. Approaching the half, the game had turned into a full-on skulldragging, and the owner’s mood was visibly soured.

“I swear, one of these days we’ll have us a decent quarterback again,” he said. “There must be some old Viking curse or something.”

“Loki playing tricks,” Rainer said.

The owner squinted and scratched at his goatee but kept facing the television.

“How about that Webb kid? He looked pretty good last week,” Michael said.

“There’s a point.”

“He did, didn’t he?” the owner said. “I never thought I’d hope to have a brother back under center. That boy did seem to have a good head on his shoulders.”

Michael downed another boilermaker. “Again,” he said. The owner refilled his glasses.

“We didn’t realize how good we had it with Moon,” the owner said. “That boy had a level head too. Even Daunte-fucking-Culpupper looks good compared to this.”

The names were familiar but Michael hadn't followed sports since he started law school.

"Those boys know how to run with the heat after 'em. They been doing it since they were kids."

Michael put back his drink, too close on the heels of the last one, and his gag reflex flared. He stared down into his lap and realized he couldn't stay here. He rescued the shot glass from the bottom of the pint and looked over to his uncle. Rainer sat on the stool, eyes glazed in drunken reverie, fixed on a giant elk's head mounted about the bar.

"I need to take off," he said.

"What?" Rainer said. "Why?"

His uncle looked more curious than betrayed.

"I need to take care of some things," Michael said. He looked to the ground. "I need to take care of some last minute shopping. Are you good here for a while?"

The commentary crew solemnly announced another New Orleans touchdown.

"Are the drinks still free?" he asked. The owner nodded.

"Hustle back," he said. "I don't expect this hospitality to last much longer."

Michael took the truck down the interstate, cutting across lanes in the fresh fallen snow. Several times the truck lost traction on unsalted patches. Michael was unsure where to go, so he simply followed his excuse. He went south, on into Bloomington proper, following signs for the Mall of America.

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As he pulled into the parking complex, the scale of the whole thing staggered him. He realized it was the biggest mall in the world, or the second biggest, or something like that, but that somehow hadn't translated in his mental image of the thing. This was a

place that had twice as many employees as his hometown had people. He felt tiny and ineffectual. Somehow that was comforting.

He pulled through row after row of parking garage, each complex named after a state in the union. There were no spaces open anywhere for the entire back half of the alphabet. Countless cars filled Wyoming all the way through Missouri. Michael pictured the swarms of people waiting inside, at least one for each vehicle he passed.

He finally found an uncovered spot on the upper deck. He parked the truck diagonally across three spots, fully expecting slashed tires when he returned.

He had nothing in specific in mind. He wandered through the department stores, through housewares, linens, women's lingerie. He watched men in referee shirts tie the shoes of anxious preteens while their moms made them check the toes for growing space. He tossed change into the fountain and ate an oversized cookie while sitting cross legged outside a boutique soap store. Thousands of people swarmed around him, frantically crossing items off crumpled lists, wrangling children into various lines, praying for the day they could do this from home. All this chaos, ornamented with miles of garland and spray-on snow. He sat there marveling at ignoring and being ignored.

Eventually he wandered into a bookstore, the only bookstore, and started scanning titles and covers with no intent to buy anything. There were CDs for sale. How bad had things gotten that even CDs seemed more profitable? He made his way through the labyrinth of aisles, romance, crime, teen romance, horror. He picked up a few titles and read the flap copy, then put them back in their place on the shelf. A cover somehow caught his eye.

A reproduction oil painting on the cover of a discount reprinting of Lovecraft stories. A man, tiny in scale to the rest of the canvas, clung perilously to a shelf of rock at the edge of cliff which was itself situated at the top of a waterfall. He was shirtless and straining, desperately trying to lift himself over the ledge where he would find only more water and more rock, a surrounding canyon of igneous rock rendered in copper and sienna and chemical red. At the focal point there stood the entrance to a cavern, its contents obscured by a shadowed rim. From inside though, there came a spectral glow, and Michael stood looking at that light for a while.

Sadak in Search of the Waters of Oblivion. That's what the jacket called the painting. That title stuck with him, and he wondered what it was those waters did, whether the oblivion belonged to waters or the other way around. But he felt like he knew why Sadak was going through such trouble to find them. Michael thumbed through the pages of the book, more putting his eyes on words than actually reading, and again found himself in the company of a casual racist. Characters named their pets with slurs, equated Africans with various kinds of wildlife, and the Chinese were presented as a devilish horde. He shoved the book back on the shelf and left the store in a hurry.

He decided he should buy presents. He needed to get presents for his whole family. He ducked into the Hallmark store, sure that there was nothing troublesome there. He took comfort in the wash of beige and pink, green and red. There were words here that meant nothing, organizations of letters that stood in for emotions that one was expected to feel, occasions that one was supposed to honor or at least acknowledge with cardstock and a stamp. He pulled cards for all his relations and envelopes too. He was

satisfied. He felt this was honest and good and he knew he was right, or at the very least not wrong. As he rounded the corner, he froze, confronted with a gondola display.

From the pegboard backing there hung two columns of hooks. The left column was empty, the hooks naked and protruding. It was the former home of an apparent hot seller. From the right column hung nearly a gross of African Santas. They came in various elaborate costume, gold suits, green suits, purple and red. Some wore the traditional bob tail hats while others had kofias to match their dashikis. He was transfixed. They gleamed beneath halogen track lights. He pulled one clad in purple and gold from the rack and cradled it in both hands.

He made his way to the counter, staring at the figure. He found a pretty, round-faced Somali girl working the register. Michael tried his best to force a smile as he reached for his wallet. She returned the smile, suspicious and polite, and ran his items through the scanner. When she came to the Santa, she stopped and looked at him.

“What do you want him for?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I thought it might help.”

He spread the last of his cash on the counter for her and walked away without his change.

He made his way out through the masses of people, wading through the crowds, past the photobooth Santa. He rode down escalators, watching as couples fought with each other, as fathers struggled to carry the coats of whole families. He cut through the amusement park in the center of the mall and waded through seas of stomach-high children. They screamed for their lives from the tops of the coasters. They coughed and

sneezed and ran and cried. When he made it outside, he found the truck as he left it, parked in three spaces at the edge of the Mississippi garage.

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The sun had gone down by the time he got back. The cabin was empty and no lights were on. Rainer was stuck in the city for the night, just like he had been when Michael was a kid. He had the dismal shithole all to himself. He went through the kitchen and took the last Molson from the fridge. He walked outside to the shore of the lake. The wind blew more fiercely than it had all winter. Snowfall had covered every visible surface. The flakes came down now in misshapen clumps, too heavy to break into delicate figures.

Michael stood at the edge and looked out at the surface. It had frozen completely, or at least it appeared that way. The gray ice stretched from his shore to the next for hours beyond that in every direction. He lit a cigarette, on the first try this time, and stepped without hesitation out onto the ice. It strained under his feet, but he walked with a purpose out beyond where the peninsula had reached only a few nights prior. In his pocket he felt his black Santa totem and he knew he had bought the first and last one.

When he reached the very center of the lake, he set the figure down in front of him. He lay down beside it and faced up to the sky. He made snow angels for a while and he thought of the boy he had left back at home. He pictured him there, standing at the edge of the pool, peering down into the infinite dark. He imagined the boy with a slow creeping smile that made it look like he had just heard a secret. Michael imagined all of this as he lay on the ice, and he smiled too while the ice groaned around him. There were miles of difference between him and the boy, but at the very least, they had something in common.

5. Fresh Ghosts

Donnell is like me, a fresh ghost hunter. We pop in on new tragedies, poke around corners, sniff out just why the sadness still lingers. We try to beat good feelings back into the place.

Donnell is a veteran, since before we were married. He's been at this ever since his uncle died, since he woke up one night to his dead uncle weeping slowly in the corner of his bedroom. The man was grabbing his own ankles in a full squat, asking the wall why he was put back here, why he couldn't just leave the way that he wanted. He said he'd been sad for so long it had ceased being tragic. Donnell reached out to touch his uncle's shoulder, on the part of the shirt where an epaulette goes.

"I figured my hand would go right through," he said. Donnell rested on his uncle's shoulder for a good thirty seconds before he could believe it was real. "Instead I had to turn him around. His body made contact, but I don't think he could feel."

Neither of us very much liked that idea. That's how we got into this business.

There's all this talk about the banality of evil, rightfully so. But what we don't talk about is the evil of banality. I've come to think that maybe we should.

Donnell and I figure that's where most hauntings start, out of those doldrums. The ghosts want to break that sad tedium, so they start hovering lamps and flipping breakers. They play around with the new rules, get up to shenanigans, start putting their tongues to electrical fields.

Then they get jealous and take things out on the living. They start petty, shifting objects to places where they don't belong. They decalibrate thermostats just into new seasons. They unhide sex toys when company is over. They disappear important mail. They're what your mother would probably call a nuisance, like a neighborhood brat or an untrained dog.

If you don't intervene it escalates from there. We try to make sure it doesn't get to that point. We go and we make things shimmer again.

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Like so many of the others, this job is in high-end suburbia, more along the lines of an Alpharetta than a Wellesley, the newer, less-storied kind. These houses have ambient heat in the floors. The kitchens have what they call pasta arms on the stoves even no one eats noodles out here. When I park at the curb, Donnell points out the recycling bin. These people, they even wash out their garbage.

I give Donnell the pre-job rundown.

The client is named Denese, with three *e*'s. She contacted us through the website. She ticked the boxes for *husband*, *recent*, and *accidental*. In the notes field, she had entered some details about a plane crash and links to several newspaper stories. The husband's name was Ray. He was forty-one years old, an orthodontist. The couple had two children. When I followed up on the phone she seemed unusually calm.

Denese answers the door promptly when we ring the bell. It's a chilly day so she quickly invites us inside. She offers us tea.

She asks whether I am some sort of medium. People tend to assume that the wife is a psychic. Donnell deflects with his usual line. "She's actually a small," he says pushing his glasses up for effect.

We all force a laugh. Denese seems comfortable. It almost feels genuine.

In the foyer she tells about her husband's crash. There were no survivors, but no fireball either, just a crumpled wad of aluminum alloy. She was caught off guard seeing photos in the paper. She said it was as though someone had thumped a ball of foil out into the woods.

"They call those planes dentist killers," she said. "Even for death he picked a cliché."

Now his ghost sulks in the converted spare room. He carves strange pictures into the attic wallpaper, reticulated patterns and arcane symbols. We've seen it before. He's trying to redecorate.

"How long has this been going on?" Donnell asks.

"About forty days."

Donnell scribbles a few lines in his notebook. He thinks that it makes him look more official. I'm mostly of the position that people want this to feel scammy, like we're trying to sell them the last bit of asphalt before the batch goes bad. When we actually go and pull off the work, they get to feel as though they've gotten away with something. I think we provide them as much adventure as service.

Donnell wants hire a graphic designer. He says a proper van logo will make us legit.

Our push and pull over this whole thing is probably what keeps the clients intrigued.

"I'll check out the room," Donnell says. "You two can sort out the unsavory details."

He takes a deep breath and then walks up the stairs. I produce our latest brochure.

As I tell Denese about our most thorough package, I imagine what her refrigerator must be like. I suspect it's all brushed steel and full of chèvre. She is airy, chipper, carries her shoulders professionally. She talks with wild gestures, even touches me once before reaching for her pocketbook. She is personable, but practiced. She smiles at pauses as if it's ingrained. She holds the notes in the middle of words and I anxiously try not to fill in the rest.

She seems largely unshaken that she has a ghost. We are just another service for her, as common as a decorator or landscape architect. She tells me that the kids went to stay with an out-of-town aunt. She told them that they had to fumigate the house. This half-truth comes without self-satisfaction.

We settle up and Denese asks if I'd like the grand tour. As we walk she tells me what her husband was like. Kind and unremarkable, complacent but decent. The bedrooms are decorated in clean modern lines and the paint appears fresh, as if rotated often. The each have corresponding bathrooms and walk-in closets. The second floor has its own linen storage.

She tells me his presence was tolerated more as a matter of course, not out of any lasting affection. A balcony overlooks a large open living room and I wonder where they've hidden the load bearing columns.

She says when he died, she was sad but relieved. She had thought that she could do something new, maybe finally go to Taiwan. And now he's here, back in the house.

I pull a stick of gum from my purse. While she looks away thoughtfully, I secret the wrapper in a decorative plant.

We walk past a wall of built-in bookcases. Most of the hardbacks have their jackets removed, though I can't tell if it's for a reader's convenience or strictly for aesthetic convenience. What's certain is they aren't collectors. A row of thumb-ed over paperbacks lines the bottom shelf. She picks up one with the cover worn off.

"I like to buy them new," I say, "so you can tell the ones you like by how run down they are."

She smiles and reshelves the book.

We carry on through the rest of the floor plan. It is tasteful, thought out, engaging, but ultimately all too familiar. Donnell meets at the second floor landing and tells us this should be a piece of white cake. Down the stairs we arrive in the kitchen, where all the appliances are bright stainless steel.

•

Back at the hotel, Donnell shucks off his jacket and drapes it over a desk chair identical to the one from our room a week ago.

"So what was he like," I ask. "The husband, I mean."

He sighs and sits down on the ottoman. "Seems like your average return-for-closure," he says. "Nothing scary."

"Is he friendly?" I ask.

"Confused mostly."

"Did you give him the spiel?"

"You know my method," he says. "Ease them in slowly. Explain things first."

"Then you can start rationalizing. Making compromises," I say.

"Exactly."

He bends down and reties his shoelace. “Come on,” he says. “We should go get some food. We passed a few places on the frontage road in.”

I doodle absentmindedly on the hotel pad. I find that if you connect the letters of the hotel logo, you can draw a fair approximation of a cross-country bus.

“Do you ever wish sometimes things would go wrong?” I asked. “Just for variety?”

His squints at me a bit. “I want things to go as easily as possible,” he says. “So I can finish up quickly, and I can get back here to this hotel and be with just you.” He runs his fingers through my hair and kisses my neck. He just barely misses a curling iron burn.

I see where he’s coming from, but the whole thing is frustrating. There are things you don’t get to say as a ghost hunter. You don’t get to say “Your problems aren’t unique. Your problems are, in fact, quite ordinary. The fact that your problems are the same as everyone else’s problems is exactly what makes this job possible.” Your clients want to feel like they’re part of some revelation.

“Come on,” Donnell says as he hands me my bag. “You can pick what we have. At this late I know you’ve got to be starving.”

“I’m not really hungry,” I say. “But I’ll come along with you.”

•

The next morning Denese looks a good bit more ragged.

“He must have come down from the spare room,” she says. “I just had that couch reupholstered.”

She points outside through the sliding glass doors. Pillows from a cream-colored sectional bob in the shallow end of a swimming pool.

“Shoot,” Donnell says. “He’s figured that out already.”

The owner chews at the tip of her nail. “What does that mean?” she asks. “Is that bad?”

“Nothing to worry about,” Donnell says. “Not just yet.”

What it means is that we’ll be here at least two days longer. Two more days of small talk with this local news anchor, two more days of family dining food, two more days of free premium cable which means I will inadvertently watch *Demolition Man* soon.

“So what do we do?” asks Denese.

“Let me go see what’s what,” Donnell says.

He says he’ll be back down in a few and marches up the staircase.

Denese asks if I want to go have a cigarette. I’m so accustomed to agreeing with clients that I say yes before realizing that I’ll have to smoke.

We walk outside through the sliding glass doors. We sit on a wrought iron bench and look out over the pool full of furniture. The metal reminds me how thin my pants are. She taps an extra-long cigarette from a soft paper package and puts it in between her lips, then taps another one out for me. I haven’t smoked in nearly five years, but today I don’t exactly care.

“You don’t cover the pool for winter?” I ask.

With her sweater cuffs wrapped around her knuckles, she strikes her lighter a few times but can’t get it to take. “It’s salt water,” she said. “There’s not many leaves blowing around here, so we just leave it open.”

From where we sit, we can hear the muffled sounds of the men talking upstairs through the thin dormer windows. She strikes the lighter again and swears. I stand

upwind and fan out my jacket. She manages to get a steady flame, so she grabs my cigarette from my lips and lights them both at once, puffing to keep the embers going.

“Thanks,” she says. She hands me mine back.

“So what sort of time frame am I looking at?” she asks.

“Honestly,” I said. “Probably a few more days at least.”

“I guess you guys have to make your money somehow,” she says.

She’s not wrong. Tougher jobs translate into longer hours which turns into a longer invoice. Complications are what keep this business going. Still, I don’t much appreciate her tone.

“You know,” I say, “Donnell didn’t always do this before. There was a time there where he was a lab worker. He took blood from kids’ fingers and ran it through the centrifuge to see if they had early onset leukemia.”

She looks down her feet. “I’m sorry,” she says. “He seems decent enough.”

“He is, I suppose,” I say. “He gets the job done.”

“I can’t imagine working with my husband,” she says. “Especially doing what you do.”

“It was great at first,” I say. “Like we got access to something outside the known world.”

“Sounds exciting,” she says.

She’s right, I suppose. But those new boundaries don’t do much for me now. It’s like I purchased a neighboring lot so I could add some more shrubs.

“Can I tell you what I’ve realized about this?” she says.

“We’ve got nothing but time,” I say.

“Here’s what I’ve learned,” she says. “There’s a good list of reasons why I should have left Ray while he was still alive. Modeling that sort of flat dissatisfaction for my kids is probably near to the top.”

She ashes her cigarette into a decorative wheelbarrow.

“That’s not why I stuck around though,” she says. “And it wasn’t because I worried what other people think. This day and age, most people aren’t shocked when you’re unhappy. They aren’t shocked when you cheat, or when you embezzle, or when your kid ends up in jail for possession or hitting somebody with an undeserved car.

“It’s that next layer. The layer of when they have to tell that bit to other people, where they put on the show of pretended to be shocked and superior because they’re worried what other people think about what *they* think,” she says. “That’s the bit I can’t stand, because then they pass that idea back to you, and you feel like shit over a second-degree perception that’s not even real.” She stubs her cigarette out on the sole of her shoe. “I stayed with my husband because all of that.”

Christ, I think. That’s not my problem at all.

“You’re smarter than you seem,” I say.

She flicks the cigarette nub into the pool.

“That probably came out wrong,” I say.

“You’re just as judgmental as you seem,” she says, “but I think I like that about you.”

I follow as she walks back through the glass doors and enters the kitchen. She opens the fridge and pulls a bottle of pinot gris from inside. From the wet bar, she pulls down two white wine glasses and sets one on the counter in front of me.

“It’s eleven in the morning,” I say. “And I’m on the clock.”

“I’m paying you,” she says. She pours me a glass.

Then we hear a loud thud from upstairs, like someone has turned over a heavy wardrobe. Donnell comes running down the staircase, rolling his ankle as he reaches the bottom.

He brushes himself off. “Denese, I think we’d better come back tomorrow,” he says.

“What is it?” I ask.

“Nothing that time won’t fix,” he says. His eyes are frantic. They tell me more about what’s upstairs than I thought possible. “Grab your bag.”

I don’t. Instead I take my glass of wine and slowly make my way upstairs. There’s a breeze coming down the hallway, as though someone left a window open. From the spare room I hear a low crackling sound, and I swing the door open quietly.

Ray sits by the window with his legs crossed beneath him. He doesn’t look up when I sit down beside him. He has no smell, no warmth, no color about him. The breeze causes the curtains to flutter but he seems to look past them without even noticing. On all four walls he’s carved identical patterns that join on the ceiling at the centermost point, like he’s trying to communicate something, establish some kind of order.

I rest my hand on his room temperature knee.

“Ray,” I say. “We both have our problems.”

The good news is I know how to solve his.

6. *Driftwood*

The bulk of people, I suspect, went out of morbid interest, that impulse to watch a disaster unfurl—just how does one throw a divorce party? Take a friend out for solidarity drinks after they sign the papers sure, but throwing one with the husband *and* wife, plus all of their families, friends, and what have you? On a yacht, no less? What are we, not going to go? What are we, monsters of with hearts made of stone? Those are the thoughts I imagined folks having, though I found myself compelled for different reasons. I set about the task of finding a date, one whose heart could handle such fare.

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In retrospect, I can see how this was not an ideal location for a date. But my options were limited and I think I had a craving to shade in my days with a certain turbulence to stave off the boredom of steady employment. That's not a noble feeling, or even an interesting one, but I'm cognizant and hope I'm more complex than that suggests.

There's also something about Bethany that gave me the impression that this sort of thing might draw her in, that dancing in the shadow of an imploding relationship would cast in relief our own attraction, that it might give the impression we were somehow exempt from that sort of tragic impermanence.

She appeared sullen at first, a person of few faces. Her expressions were slight, and pulling even the mildest grin from her felt like an accomplishment.

“You’re an odd one,” she had said when I asked her to come, but she had also written down the date and the time.

To be clear on this: nothing is more repugnant to me than a mercenary approach to these things. Matchmaking, from where I sit, is about as erotic as corporate accountancy, and I think that men who approach dating as a problem to solve are as good an argument for sterilization as any I’ve heard.

But I’ll also say this. When she closed her datebook and the corners of her mouth receded just slightly, I felt like I’d gotten away with a crime. That was the feeling I had to pursue.

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When we were all aboard and wearing our finery, Geoff, the husband, gathered us around. He perched atop a barstool that lilted softly with the sway of the boat, and he clanged on a glass with a bronze seafood fork. “We wanted to thank you all,” he said, holding his scotch, “for joining us on this momentous occasion. As you all know, Lily and I, after nine years together, decided that it was time for us to take the next big leap and hire separate attorneys.

“We realize that the circumstances here are a bit unorthodox, but I think that there’s a perverse sort of sense to this whole thing, don’t you? If our wedding reception was an occasion for us to gather our kith and kin to wish us well as we moved forward in life and gave everyone a chance to meet the folks they’ll be forced to cross paths with on sporadic occasion, then think of this as the severing of that necessity, your chance to take that sense of obligation and tear it to bits, to say ‘goodbye and good riddance!’ to the odd strangers that we’ve forced you to share oxygen with.”

The boat shifted and Geoff squatted on the stool, apelike, to catch his balance. He stood again and grinned at the crowd.

“I think that’s a sign I should wind this down and let things take their natural course. That only seems appropriate, given the occasion. Once again, we thank you all for coming out, and we invite you to drink yourself blind on our dollar, and help us do justice to the enormity of untying this tempestuous knot.

“Captain Scovel,” he said. “Take us to sea.”

A man in a blazer nodded to Geoff and proceeded to make his way up a staircase lined with brass railings. The crowd dispersed and made for the lower deck bar where men in white gloves ladled punch from large crystal bowls.

I looked anxiously to

As the boat pulled away from the spotlight harbor, a magnum of champagne flew in an arc from over the rail of the boat’s upper deck. Bethany managed to dodge it, only narrowly, before it splintered onto the makeshift dancefloor. The crowd all turned to seek out its source, when Lily, the wife, appeared at the railing. She leaned over and kissed her hands as she spilled from a gown draped with onyx organza.

“L’chaim,” she said. “To life, or something else.”

The crowd cheered and the music started up. I’m not sure that it was the most appropriate toast, but in moments like these you must take things in stride.

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Bethany and I watched as Geoff made his rounds on the deck below us. For nearly an hour he wandered the boat, glad-handing the elderly and flirting with the late-middle aged. He was at his finest amongst older crowds. He had an exact sense of how much off-

color humor would thrill his audience while demonstrating an awareness of where the line might be drawn.

“Watch this,” I told Bethany.

Geoff put his hand through a woman’s graying hair. Her husband jokingly pulled up his sleeves as though ready to fight.

“He seems to be loving this,” she said. “Seems to be.”

Despite her suggestion, I got the distinct impression that Geoff did none of this with a sense of irony, and he looked as happy as I had ever seen him. I wondered which one of us was a poor judge of things.

We walked over to the upper-deck bar where Lily had relieved the hired barman and poured champagne into sparkling wine coupes. The younger crowd had gathered around her and she seemed to be holding court quite naturally.

Bethany and I sat at the curve of the bar, watching and listening like everyone else.

“Here’s the secret behind fancy drinks,” she said. “They create some elaborate backstory for the process. ‘It’s stored in barrels rubbed with ash from a Danish royal’s funeral pyre’ or some such nonsense. They put a nondescript label on the bottle, but then disseminate the story among people who are eager to impress and ingratiate themselves into a new social circle.”

She poured herself a glass and set it on the bar.

“At a certain point, all those swirling insecurities add up to a new kind of mythology. People will pay through the nose to drink that essence of the past.”

She raised her glass and looked through the bubbles.

“Here’s the thing though,” Bethany said, mostly to me. “The guy who comes up with the story? He doesn’t get to enjoy that myth. He always knows. He ends up drinking nice, but ordinary booze made from nice, but ordinary plants that sat around rotting until they could get him drunk.”

If I were a quicker, more thoughtful man, I might have said something like, “But doesn’t the man who came up with the myth get to enjoy the fact that that the myth could take root? A winemaker may not be able to believe that the grapes grew just above Napoleon’s tomb or what have you, but at a certain point, doesn’t the story of the story become its own kind of real?”

But instead what I said was, “Isn’t it more important that the wine just tastes good?”

Lily came over and filled up my glass. “It’s more important that the wine gets you drunk,” she said. “Without these things would seem interminably long.”

At the end of the bar, a man in a gold cummerbund started to clap, then slowly trailed off when no one joined in.

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You may wonder, why the divorce? What did the couple in? As they drink pisco sours and dance against an ardent black sky, they look so happy, so pleased with themselves, so full of whatever it is that sustains a marriage into the years where people crawl into beds and die with each other. How could they be the ones to torch that bond? How could they do this to us? They make a promise to each other and made us watch, and isn’t that, in itself, a sort of promise to us? I feel cheated by all of this. I want compensation.

You can find the answer in this very party: Geoff and Lily died as a collective unit from a lack of originality. They followed the steps to contentment and found that it was a bit like sleeping on an over-soft mattress. And while we all enjoyed stepping into Geoff and Lily's world for temporary jaunts—who doesn't like to play tennis on an unsplintered court every now and again?—living there resulted in an existence with very little challenge. And that festers.

I don't mean to imply that Geoff and Lily were the sort of vapid, idle rich that make up the most villainous sector of the country. They are, in fact, quite the opposite—it's precisely because they were bright people capable of critical thought that living surrounded by ochre and brushed linen and outdoor furniture sets made of teak meant a world without daily conflict. And an active mind without conflict will create its own, elevating the most minor annoyances to the importance of daily survival. This is the sort of comfort that leads to modern convenience, like the self-starting coffee pot, but it's also the comfort that treats unclosed blinds as an egregious offense. An unwatered ficus becomes the topic of a whole journal entry. A litany of frustrations like this go unaired because they all seem so petty, and that all solidifies into a new level of self-loathing.

So to see them as they were, slow-dancing and singing along to a Jimmy Ruffin song, you could see how their minds ate away at themselves, how they chewed their way through their diminished souls, until they became effectively hollow. You could see that this was the way out for them.

•

Bethany and I made small talk with strangers. They asked what it was that we did, how we had met. We began with the truth, but Bethany seemed to grow tired of that quickly. She began challenging me to expound on a lie.

“We met in Kansas,” she said. “I was a storm chaser.”

“That’s right,” I said. “She found me pinned beneath some rubble after a tornado.”

“He was hunkered down in a bathtub under a mattress.”

“I was fifteen miles from where I had started.”

“That alone was remarkable enough,” she said. “But when he pulled two kittens from inside of his jacket, I knew there was something special about him.”

There were several iterations of this. One involved the dictator of a tropical island sending love letters through coded telegrams. Another had me falling into a zoo pen with three Bengal tigers an hour before feeding time. They all seemed to involve some sort of elaborate peril, and our audiences seemed to enjoy them with a healthy dose of skepticism.

She ended them all with the same closing line. “We were two strangers brought together by tragic misfortune,” she said. “It’s a wonder that both of us are even alive.”

•

The ship dropped anchor at half past eleven, the gibbous moon waning as it climbed in the sky. Captain Scovel announced that the crewmen would gladly row those interested out to a sandbar, where we could dip our toes in and enjoy a few drinks.

Bethany and I rode out in a small johnboat rowed by a deckhand dressed in all white.

“I’d say it’s impolite for you to be dressed like that,” Bethany said to man, “but I suppose it’s actually appropriate in this case.”

The man smiled politely, and as we neared the sandbar we could see that a small bamboo structure waiting for us, lit by torches and candles.

“Beer and wine only, I’m afraid,” the deckhand said.

“Unacceptable,” I said. “Who is in charge here?”

I looked to see if Bethany grinned, but instead saw the wan glow of the moon on her cheeks and wondered if this night was the wrong kind of memorable.

When we set foot on the sandbar, I realized that while the tide was low, a few inches of water stood above the mushy surface, so I rolled the legs of my suit pants just up my shins to stop them from getting ruined by the brine.

Lily, though, waded full deep in the water. She let her heavy black gown drag behind her. It pulled a wake across the entire sandbar as she clapped guests on the shoulders and continued to thank people for attending that night.

“There’s some cabana chairs off somewhere,” she said, pointing out to the leeward side. “And if you stick around we’ve got ourselves a treat arriving soon.”

Walking to the chairs, Bethany said, “I like how she says stick around, like it’s a matter of choice.”

“Planning escape routes?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “Are you getting insecure?”

“Getting?” I said.

“I’m an excellent swimmer.”

For some time, we sat there quietly, digging our toes into the sand, letting the wet heft collect on the insteps of our feet and listening as it clopped off in lumps.

“You know, it’s strange,” she said. “It’s not as sad as I thought it would be.”

She seemed almost disappointed in the way she said it.

“Give it time,” I said.

•

We were gazing off as the moon fell. We weren't quite dozing but nearly there when from behind us, a woman gasped, and we turned to see if it was the positive kind.

From the yacht, a small boat like the one we had ridden drifted toward the sandbar, glowing in the light of flames.

"Rest his soul, the Prince of Denmark," joked the man in the cummerbund.

Bethany swatted him with the back of her hand. We watched as the boat bobbed its way closer, slowly coming into focus. A man in a chef's coat held a torch aloft as he escorted an enormous six-tier cake draped in black fondant. He supervised as two of the deckhands carried the cake ever so gently to the bar inside the bamboo hut.

Once again Geoff gathered us all around. Lily joined him at the cake and brandished a knife. She held it high and smiled. The crowd laughed nervously. She cut out a generous wedge and held it on a napkin. We all waited, fully expecting her to smash it in his face.

But instead she did nothing of the sort. She took a pinch between her fingers and tossed it into her mouth with a shrug. She passed the piece to Geoff who did the very same thing same. It was remarkable, and having no precedent, no one knew how they were supposed to react. They stood there dumbfounded, expecting a cue. All except Bethany whose face showed the slightest hint of a smile.

7. *Luna*

Crystal Hammond would not be allowed to have her baby on the moon. She lay dejected in her cell, staring at the floors of the most immaculate jail she'd ever seen. The concrete was flawless, toothbrush scrubbed or pressure washed, free from any flecks of grime or stains of urine, blood, or worse. Excluding hospitals, the Cape Canaveral jail might have been the cleanest place she'd ever slept. Under different circumstances she might have held Florida in higher regard.

Across the room, the jailer rocked in a sleigh-back chair upholstered in green, thumbing the pages of a drugstore paperback which she read through a pair of dog-chewed glasses. She had a sandwich on the desk before her, pimento cheese most likely, if the unfolded waxed paper was any indication. The jailer had eaten the corners off first. Past her, a radio sat silent on the nearby filing cabinet. Its antennas pointed toward the exit. Crystal looked at it anxiously, knowing it was mere hours before the countdown.

Her plan had been to stowaway on Apollo 11 under cover of night. There hadn't been much plan beyond that. She didn't know the layout of the facility. She didn't know there were patrols that made irregular patterns, especially on the night before launch. She didn't know what the cabin would be like, or if she would even have a place to hide. She did know that they would likely find her, but if she could make it through she could make her case. Houston would have to let her come. She would tell them just how important it was. There had to be another way.

“Ma’am, this place is spotless,” Crystal said through the bars. “Do you clean it yourself or do they hire that out?”

The jailer turned the page and took a bite of her sandwich with practiced disinterest.

“I don’t mean to say that you look like a janitor. Or that there’s any harm in being a janitor for that matter. I only mean to say that if you do clean it yourself, you do a wonderful job of it. If you were to drop that sandwich,” Crystal said, “I wouldn’t turn my nose up if you picked it up and went right back at it.”

The jailer blotted her mouth with a napkin and switched the way her legs were crossed.

It was unusual for Crystal to not get a response. She had a way of prodding people into conversation regardless of their disposition. If she could get people talking, she could get her way. It was one of her few talents, and while it was not particularly marketable, it had kept her arrest record far shorter than it ought to be. Her father, in their brief shared time, had told her that if you poke a reptile long enough it’s bound to wake from hibernation. She liked the half of that thought that was about persistence. She didn’t trouble herself much with the other part.

“No,” she said, pacing the cell. “You look more like the librarian type. My grade school librarian wore glasses just like that, slid damn near halfway down her nose.”

The jailer turned to Crystal and put one finger to her lips, shushing her perfectly.

Crystal laughed. “I always liked librarians,” she said. “They have simple rules. They make sense to me. Both the rules and the people. One of the few sets that do.”

Crystal sat back down and rubbed her belly, then her swollen feet. She was due any day now, and she figured there was strict protocol for a situation like hers.

She spoke up again. "Talk to me," she said. "Please. Just for a minute."

Somewhere in the distance an air conditioning unit kicked on and began to hum.

"I'm scared in here," she said.

The jailer put her book down and sighed. "I was a guidance counselor," she said. "But the librarians were decent enough."

"Guidance counselor. Didn't get one of those until ninth grade at the school I went to," Crystal said. "I never made it that far. You would've hated me as a student anyhow."

"And you're planning on being a model prisoner, I'm sure."

"Well they already caught me," Crystal said. "It's not like I'm gonna start picking locks and throwing tables. Look at me."

"I should hope not," the jailer said.

Crystal sat down on the mattress, ignoring the springs jabbing her tailbone. The constant pressure on pelvis had reached a point where other discomforts came only as mild awareness. "I grew up in Huntsville," she said. "They call it Rocket City. Growing up, I always wanted something to do with the rockets. They make the boosters for the Apollos there. They made the booster for today's launch."

"That's where they keep that Nazi fella, too, isn't it?"

"Von Braun," Crystal said. She got up and started pacing again. "It's also where we kept a whole heap of rockets and bombs that blew up Nazis in the war, though, so I figure it comes out in the wash."

The jailer smiled. "Did you ever see him, say, out walking his Weimaraner when you were a little girl and yell 'Eat lead, Fritz!' at him?"

"No, I never saw him out. They kept him cloistered up in there, like some kind of crazy rocketry monk. Praying night and day for a way to blow the Russians up. Then came the almighty Apollo program," she said. "He had a Yorkie, by the way. I figure they made him get it, try to soften up his image a little. 'Our pet Nazi's not so bad after all. Look at cute little dog!' you know? Stuff like that."

"They are cute dogs," the jailer said as Crystal lay back on the mattress. "Still a Nazi though. No coming back from that."

"I suppose not," Crystal said.

The jailer picked her book back up. "You on the other hand," she said. "We might still be able to do something with you."

•

Below November clouds she conceived the child, in a layby near a hayfield in the north Missouri plains. The father was a gentle man of no regard she found attractive enough and conveniently placed. He was wandering a wholesome fair when she turned his pocket inside out and pulled him by it through the crowded streets.

"Come on," she said. "I need your help with something."

She drove them to the outskirts of town where she pulled the car beneath onto the dirt. She put the gearshift into park, and he fumbled with her blouse and bra, all elbows and armrests, thumping against the squeaky leather. He was awkward and anxious, thrusting hopelessly with his entire body until she took him outside the car and reclined across the hood, her finger hooked through the ornament and her eyes cast skyward.

Afterwards he kept apologizing.

She drove him back to the fair and dropped him without a word back among the people and drove off past the fields into a rising harvest moon with a knowing smile across her face.

•

Crystal stood scratching the place where her hipbones once jutted out, jagged and severe, now paunched and striped with stretch marks. It looked as though she had a patterned scar, as though a mountain lion had raked each side. The marks had faded to the color of a clamshell but the pores within these marks were stretched long and inflamed from sweat and oil. Her nails raked dead skin away, and it occurred to her that the body she wore was in constant rotation.

Crystal looked to the radio again. It was hours since she had heard the time, but she assumed the launch must be approaching soon.

“What’s the drill if I go into labor?” she asked. “Do you take me out of here?”

“We’ll have a nurse in later on tonight,” said the jailer. “Right now pretty much the whole county is shut down on account of the launch, so unless you’ve got a twenty minute cruiser ride to the emergency room in you, I’d suggest you hold tight.”

“What,” Crystal said. “They didn’t teach you midwife skills in jailer school?”

“I watched a shoat get born once.”

“What class was that for?”

“I grew up on a farm in South Georgia. We raised pigs for a living—not usually to sell, mind you—this was back when subsistence farming was still a thing. We didn’t call it that though. We didn’t call it anything really, we just did it. I saw a sow birth a litter once, right there in the slop. Just a flood of red and lavender bags falling out into

the muck. All of them dead except for one. Point being, I don't do well with childbirth and fluids and all, so to answer your question, no. I didn't learn any midwife skills."

"You're just a bucket of comfort."

"I'm here to keep you in jail and make sure you don't die," the jailer said.

"Those are my simple rules. Don't try to get out of here and don't die on me. We can chat like we're at bridge club all you want, but don't take that to mean we're anything we're not. I don't regularly make small talk with pregnant women who try to stow away on a rocket so they can have their babies in outer space."

The jailer shook her head and walked back to her desk and picked up her book.

Crystal paced around her cell, scraping her calloused heels against the concrete. She tried to look through the wall, to envision a window where there ought to be one. She couldn't see the launch pad even if there was a window, but if she were facing east and the sun would cooperate, she might have a chance at seeing the shuttle rise above the bending pine and mangrove trees, the plumes of throbbing smoke, and watch it trail a candleflame as it rose into the atmosphere and vanished into the sky.

"It was the moon," she said. "Not just outer space. It was the moon."

People told her it was just a rock, but Crystal always knew better than that. She knew that the moon controlled the tides. It could take the sun and cast it back. There were land formations untouched by men. She knew that from up there, the earth was just a rock too, only one full of people stuck in their place.

She sat back down on the bed and tried as best she could to pull her knees to her chest.

The jailer turned the radio on, found the Ronettes on the dial.

Crystal pinched the skin on her knees. If she couldn't get out, the judge would be lenient. He'd have to be. She'd smile and cry and explain how she couldn't have her baby in prison. Thinking of the future, that was crucial. Should our children be born into cages or born of the skies? Only the most callous man could condemn her thirty weeks along. They'd even let her keep the baby.

Ward of the state. Anything but that. Back to Huntsville before that. She had grown sweaty, and the pressure she felt turned to more of an ache.

"So your dogs?" Crystal asked, pacing again. "What breed are they?"

The jailer looked at the wall, puzzled, and put her book down again.

"A corgi and a mutt. Beverly and Belinda."

"Bev and Bell."

The jailer fought back a smile. "How did you know?"

"Your glasses tipped me off."

The jailer took them off and looked. The ear pieces were gnawed and pocked, and the nose pads were missing entirely.

"You know they did that years ago. Frankly I'd forgotten."

"Had them a while then."

"Bev is six and Bell is four."

"The glasses I mean."

"Oh. Three years or so."

"Pretty nicked up I bet."

The jailer folded and unfolded the frames. "Try getting bifocals on this insurance, telling them your dog ate your last pair."

“Let me see them?” Crystal said.

The jailer passed them through the bars.

Crystal turned them over in her hands. She held them up to the light, examining the lenses.

“Rub a little toothpaste on them, the baking soda kind,” she said. “I read that in a book somewhere.”

Crystal put the glasses on, tried to see her reflection in one of the framed certificates across the room but her vision blurred through both halves of the lenses and there was a blinding glare.

“Not for your face, child,” the jailer said. “Give them here.”

Crystal took them off, but held them beyond reach of the woman.

“One condition,” she said.

“That’s not how this works.”

“You have an optometrist on call?” she said. “He working today?”

“You’re not getting out of here, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

Crystal went and held the glasses over the toilet.

“Put that radio on the launch,” she said. “Then you can have them back.”

The jailer arched her eyebrow. “That it?”

Crystal paused for a moment. She felt the ache again, only stronger. “A piece of paper and a pencil,” she said.

“We only have pens.”

“So long as it writes.”

The jailer tore a slip of paper from a small note pad. She took a pen from her desk and handed both items between the bars.

“That’s it,” Crystal said. “Nice and slow. Now the radio.”

The jailer rolled the dial, stopping on the stoic voice of a radio newscaster.

“Done,” Crystal said. She handed the glasses through the bars.

“You’ve had your fun,” the jailer said.

“Don’t act like you haven’t always wanted to do that.”

The jailer sat back down at the desk. She adjusted the antenna of the radio to shake out the last few bits of static. “It won’t be long now,” she said.

Crystal sat on the bed again. The pressure became an ache once again, and this time she felt all the way up her back. She jotted a note onto the slip of paper. She clutched it in her clammy palm. “No,” she said. “I guess it won’t.”

The newscaster began to detail the final preparations the team of scientists was undertaking to ensure that everything was in order. He soberly reminded the audience of the tragic fate of the Apollo 1 test crew, a mission never even designed to leave the ground. He described the crowd at hand, from toddlers to geriatrics wheeled-in from, people from every state. Parents held their children on their shoulders to see over the crowd. The rest of the nation tuned in through the airwaves, watching to see their country achieve what was once a comic book fantasy.

Crystal could no longer concentrate on what the man was saying. “Ma’am,” she said. “We need to go right now.”

The jailer stood to look Crystal in the eye. “Don’t joke like that,” she said.

“Ma’am,” Crystal said. “I have told many lies. This is not one of them.”

The jailer rushed to the door and fumbled for her keys. “You understand that I’m choosing to believe you,” she said. “If you pull anything funny, I lose my job and you’re left to fend for yourself out there.”

Crystal grunted and tried to swallow but her mouth was dry.

“I’ve got to cuff you,” she said. “You’re going to have to deal with that.”

Crystal said, “Do it in front at least.”

The jailer nodded and clipped her wrists loosely with enough space to swell.

She led her through the empty jail, past unoccupied holding cells, unfilled reception chairs, the barren waiting room.

“It really is just you and me,” Crystal said.

The jailer pushed her gently into the back of the cruiser, guiding her head under the rear-seat roof and helping her lift her dampened leg as Crystal slid into the seat.

Crystal propped herself against the door and breaths became shallow. She clutched.

As the jailer pulled the car onto the highway, Crystal asked which way they were headed.

“Northbound,” said the jailer. “Why?”

Crystal turned and faced the opposite direction, putting her feet against the passenger side window. Out it, the sky was vacant and blue. Low along the horizon, she could see the spacecraft begin to rise, exactly as she pictured it. It thrust skyward, up in a bending arc, dragging behind it a white streak of vapor like a chalk mark drawn across the sky. As it passed through the clouds, it threw its shadow across them. The shadow

seemed to skate across the clouds toward the car and crossed over its path, casting them in a brief second of coolness. Crystal shivered as it passed over them.

She had seen photos of the lunar surface, the craters and the empty seas, but had imagined that the view up close was something different. Until now she had been positive they would find something else up there, the indescribable, but as she dug her nails into the leather seats, she hoped that it was just rocks and dust against blackness and a lack of air.

“What are you going to name her?” asked the jailer.

Crystal let the small slip of paper fall from her hand down to the floorboards. “I don’t even know anymore,” she said.

8. Prayers for Stone Cold

Aunt Flora

We need to pray for Stone Cold Steve Austin, he knows not what he's done. T-John is nearly toothless, more so than he should be in the third grade. It's because of that beer-swilling heathen that T-John gums his Chex. And the worst part is? He still shows up on TV, Monday night, Thursday night, every season there on pay-per-view, not giving a hoot what he's done. T-John just sits there, watching with his cousin, rubbing on his gums with a lime flavor otter pop.

The way it happened was, Kevin—my only, bless his heart—put a folding chair straight into the boy's face and whoops, there go some incisors and canines. I come outside and T-John's sitting there wailing, picking white studs of bone out of the grass like Chiclets, the yard-stickers jabbing all into his kneecaps. He comes running up to me and he says, "Aunt Flora, Aunt Flora, I can't find Shovelman."

"What now," I say, "is a Shovelman, babydoll?"

And he says, "Shovelman is my friend and he's gone." He wipes the blood from his chin onto his t-shirt.

Kevin tries to make for the inside and but I catch him by the shoulder strap of his A-neck. I ask him, "You want to tell me what his Shovelman is?"

"He's got names for teeth," Kevin says. "And he can't find his Shovelman."

He tries to break for the patio again. “You help your cousin find his tooth this instant or you’re off that four-wheeler two months,” I said. “Two months?!” he hollers, like it makes a difference.

“It’s already one,” I say. “You want to double down with me?”

“No ma’am,” he says, and he goes down to his knees, grass stains on his jeans.

I swear one day I’m going to lose it. My own sister, leaving me in the lurch with this boy. He lost his daddy, then his mama by her very own hand. Now he’s lost his Shovelman, and I’m left to pick up the pieces while that heathen Stone Cold flicks me off through the TV.

•

Mrs. Thibodeaux

When he told me that his mother died, I couldn’t grasp a word he said. It came out more as a jumble of mushy whimpering, but walking down the hall to lunch he grabs my hand and he says, “My mama died this Saturday.”

And I can’t hear him, all those sixth graders hollering and wrapping streamers around their head like they’re trying out for some Vegas show, so I ask him to say it again.

Again he says, “My mama died this Saturday.” And I thought I heard him right, but my brain didn’t want to believe him then and there, so I figured it had to be something else he said, like “I almost fried this Saturday” or “All this cried inside of me.” Anything but what he said. I just kept walking and hoping it was nonsense but knowing that it wasn’t when he told me, “I found her in the toolshed.”

So you tell me, when later that day, the other boys in class start throwing Skittles at his head and calling him a “toothless ass-nugget,” what am I supposed to do? Am I

supposed just sit there and let them pelt him with the candy? Do I not stick up for him? Does calling more attention to it alienate him more, make him realize he's getting special treatment because his mother died? As a disciplinarian, am I not entitled to grab the little bastards by the ear—let's not be mistaken here, some of these kids are bastards—and haul them down the hallway past the Historical Pumpkin Exhibition? Can I not tell them that yelling “taste the rainbow, dicklord” at a boy who just found his mother with a hole in her head might not be appropriate? That they ought to be ashamed of themselves? Do I not ask them how would they feel if they had seen their mother's skull broken on a bag of Miracle-Gro? Is that not what I'm supposed to do? Is that not the decent thing?

You tell me.

•

Kevin

He saw some shit. Saw some real shit, alright. That's the shit that'll make you go nuts, or make you into a real hardass. One or the other. I mean, I can't imagine walking in on my mama having blowed her goddamn brains out. I used to think about it, living without my mama, just living free up off the land like one of those Boxcar Children. Except not all weak as hell, with that rich old grandpa. But much as she can piss me, I don't want any part of that shit if it means I gotta see my mama's head all blowed up. That's some real shit.

He says he didn't know what to do, he just stood there looking at it all, just staring, not able to make any which way of it.

“I picked some of her skull up,” he said.

I couldn't believe it.

“It wasn’t like nothing else. It was just some skull. I figured I’d pick it up and say, ‘that’s like a rock’ or ‘that’s like a egg’ or something, but it was just some skull.”

I said, “You want to watch some wrestling or something? Mankind’s fighting Triple H?” and he said alright.

So we’re watching Monday Night RAW and Undertaker takes a chair and whacks somebody right in the face with it, I think Mr. Ass, and the little dude just goes wild like it’s the greatest thing he ever saw, like they don’t do that every week.

I go, “You wanna try that out?” Thinking he’ll chicken out. Thinking if he doesn’t maybe it’ll harden him up, keep him from crying every night of his life. And he says yes.

I’m the Undertaker and he’s Mr. Ass here. I throw him toward the fence like it’s the ropes, and he bounces off like it’s the real deal, pretty impressive. He comes running back at me, and I’ve got this chair mama brought home from Sunday school ready, sort of leveling it like a baseball bat. I think, maybe I ought to give him one for real. Maybe that’ll help. So I swing and catch him right upside the teeth, not with the springy middle part, but that nice hard brown metal edge.

And his teeth go flying, man, hot damn I’m telling you, and he’s got blood coming down his chin real bad.

He’s crying, so I say to him, “In the business, boy, that’s what they call drawing some color. You earned yourself the crimson mask.”

•

Mrs. Thibodeaux

Same day as the Skittle incident, I’ve got recess duty. The kids are up to their usual tricks, there’s kickball here and swing-set gymnastics there that I probably

shouldn't let happen but usually do, a couple of boys off on the sidewalk playing Gameboy in the shade.

I'm drinking my morning Tab, trying to tune out Mr. Kellerman's tirade about welfare politics, looking out at the fort. I'm hoping I don't have to break up another dirt clod war, but I suspect I will.

T-John is sitting alone on top of the monkey bars, which again, against school rules, but do you tell the kid with the freshly dead mother he can't climb on something that he just wants to climb? I can't imagine what that helps.

Then I see the little bastards come over to him from the fort, tossing dirt clods up in the air like they're greasers from the fifties flipping a coin to look nonchalant. I wonder where they learned that trick. Bugs Bunny, I suppose, or maybe they just know it.

I hear them yell something in a not-so-friendly tone, so I start walking somewhat in their direction, but not a beeline so as not to draw their attention until I'm close enough to do something.

One of them throws the dirt clod at him, hitting him square in the chest. It's a good shot. I know it hurts T-John like hell, but he doesn't say a word, just looks off across the playground into the field across the road.

I'm halfway there, almost to the jungle gym, that rust-covered monster dead center of the lot, when Tattletale Angie comes running up to me.

"Mrs. T," she says, breathless. "Brenden fell out the magnolia tree."

T-John stands up on top of the monkey bars.

"He's hurt real bad," Angie says. "He's squirming on the ground."

T-John pulls his shirt up, on up around his head.

“The big tree or the little one?” I ask.

“The little one,” she says.

T-John throws his shirt off into the dirt.

“Mrs. T, you’ve got to do something.”

“Go tell Mr. Kellerman,” I say.

T-John does a flying headbutt into the biggest bastard’s head.

Well T-John, I think, now I guess I can’t just do nothing.

•

Kevin

You ever heard of a scalene triangle? Me either until that day. A scalene triangle is a triangle that has three unequal sides. I don’t usually give a shit, but that one stuck out to me because when that kid Brenden fell out the tree he had a bone sticking out of his arm. Scalene goddamn triangle, right there. Looked just like Kellerman’s diagram only with blood and grass on top.

I say that only because that’s why I wasn’t there with T-John. I don’t abide my little cousin getting beat on like that. What kind of man would I be if I did?

I wish I could’ve seen it though. They said he looked like Chris Benoit, like he was flying off the top of steel cage headfirst. I never liked Benoit, but that move was hot shit.

I asked him about it later, sitting up on the rooftop. He said, “They called me pussy boy, Kev.”

I said, “I bet that must’ve pissed you off.”

He said, “What do you think Stone Cold would’ve done?”

I said, “I suppose about what you’d done. Maybe drank a beer first.”

He took a sip off his juice box.

“Hey man,” I asked. “You say anything before you did it?”

He picked a scab off of his kneecap.

“I asked ‘em, had they felt a skull before?”

He said that before he brought the thunder. He put the scab in his mouth, chewing it, toothless. That kid might could make a great heel one day.

•

Aunt Flora

I never thought they’d pull me into the office again, not after I threatened Kevin with the military academy. When I got the call I thought to myself, Lord give me strength, I’m sending my only child off to some forsaken desert.

T-John I didn’t suspect. Frankly, after the Shovelman incident I thought he might settle down for a while. That Stone Cold though, he is insidious.

Principal Varner’s office was warm, the windows shut tight even though the air was out. “Froze up,” he said. “Compressor’s post-ex-dead-rigor mortis.” It felt warmer than a snake farm in there. Varner sat thumbs tucked in his suspenders, an absent look upon his face. Mrs. Thibodeaux, that stubby little divorcee, dabbed her forehead with a neckerchief. Like always she avoided eye contact with me.

“Miss Flora,” he said. “Might I first say that I’m very well aware that you have been newly charged with the care of this boy in the stead of your dearly beloved sister, God rest her soul.” He took a sip of his tiny can of diet soda. His words came out candy-tinged and full of judgment.

“T-John presents us with a dilemma, you see. Having suffered so recent a trauma, it is understandable that the boy might exhibit some,” he said, “irregular behaviors.”

In the corner, Mrs. Thibodeaux adjusted her bra strap.

“In that regard, we are sympathetic to such an outburst, especially considering the provocation you know, at hand, vis-à-vis and what have you.”

“We were taken a bit unaware,” said Mrs. Thibodeaux. “Not that it’s your fault,” she said, saying that it was, of course. “Nothing of the sort,” she said, with her smug little haircut.

Mr. Varner cleared his throat. “However,” he said, “You understand that a violent outburst cannot i.e., you know, such as this one, cannot therefore go without admonition from the administration. What if the parents threaten legal action, et cetera.”

“What if the parents threatened legal action?” I said.

Mrs. Thibodeaux cut in, “We’re concerned about T-John’s well-being, that’s all.”

I should say so. Legal action. I bring an orphaned boy into my home, and legal action? Lord help me.

Mr. Varner says, “Why don’t we go ahead and bring T-John in here and have ourselves a little talk, what do you say?” He squirmed in his chair and sipped at his ridiculous little soda pop.

And I said, “Yes, why don’t we?”

•

Mrs. Thibodeaux

When T-John comes into the office, he’s carrying his shirt under his armpit. His nose is bloody, his mouth a toothless gash. He looks like someone made a mess out of a snapping turtle. For the first time I notice that on his bare chest, he’s scrawled “Austin 3:16” in black sharpie. You can tell he’s done it himself since the “n” and “6” are backwards.

Varner says, "Come on in, son. Sit yourself down."

I feel pretty awful that it came to this. Varner, like many men his age, tends to send down summary judgment on boys that seems both excessive and stupid. At that point I'm praying for mandatory counseling, maybe in-school suspension. T-John takes a seat in the folding chair across from him. He scratches at his crotch a little.

"Son, you understand that you've posed us with a predicament," Varner says.

T-John stares down at the floor.

"You understand, in my day they didn't particularly mind two boys having a scrap. Two of us got caught in a tussle, coach would put a chalk circle in the dirt, tell us we couldn't come out until somebody quit. We had the same kind of punishment for a lot of things to tell the truth. Get caught spitting, you got put in a circle and you spit until you're right spitted out." He looks out the window wistfully at this point, like he's staring at some far off point in the fifties.

T-John hocks up some spit, swallows it down.

"My point here, son, is back then violence seemed to have a way of building character. Those two boys would fight like the dickens, but they'd end up shaking hands there in the end. That's a far cry from boys throwing dirt bombs and getting a flying headbutt to the face. There isn't any decency in that."

The boy's aunt clutches her necklace. "A flying what now?"

"A headbutt, ma'am. It's a wrestling move. Professional," he says. "Not Greco-Roman."

"What are you going to do to me?" T-John asks.

Varner laces his fingers. “Son, we think it might be in everybody’s best interest if maybe we kept you out of the way of other students for a while.”

“Meaning what?” asks Miss Flora.

“Meaning we’ll be sending him home for a few weeks. Then we can reevaluate again.”

T-John looks to Varner, then over at me.

“Those boys said I was a pussy,” he says, eyes welling.

Miss Flora is unsettled. “And what am I supposed to do with him?” she says.

“Do with him what you normally would. We feel that T-John should be at home so that he might better grieve his mother,” he says.

And at that, T-John tosses his shirt aside and drops his pants to the floor.

“Okay,” Flora says. “Okay now.”

“Whoa, son,” Varner says. “You keep them things away from me.”

T-John steps out of his pants and climbs up on top of Varner’s desk, just nude as can be, and he waggles himself around everywhere. Then squats bare-assed on the desk and kind of scoots around, making sure he touches every object with his tiny white ass.

“T-John, you get down this instant,” Flora screams.

Varner stands in the corner of the room holding up a ruler in self-defense.

T-John, bloody and toothless, just straight nude as hell, thrusts two stubby middle fingers skyward.

Varner and Flora can only stand there, horrified.

T-John picks up Varner’s tiny soda and downs it. He looks over at me and asks in what I assume must be his wrestling voice, “Now can I get a ‘hell yeah’?”

And at the time I didn't give him one, but now I wish I had.

9. Public Access

Our studio space didn't clear until about fifteen minutes before our time slot, so right now we're holding our shit together with a few rolls of gaffer tape and sheer force of will. J.P. got the lights somewhere close to correct, but none of our marks got taped in advance so in all likelihood people will be getting framed and reframed, focused and refocused throughout the whole night. The air conditioning has been out for the last sixteen days, our new live-stream goes up for the internet crowd, and no one has heard whether the guest is even going to make it tonight. Things on public access are almost inherently fucked, but I can't imagine doing this any other way.

There's a bigger turnout than usual for the studio crowd so they're all gathered cross-legged like kindergarteners, eyes at shin-height, looking up at me as our house band, Black Elephant, plays us in. Imagine, if you will, fifty-some-odd weirdly shaped misfits who gather once a week, who sit around and sing a theme song with your name in it, and then watch while you talk to strangers and generally make an ass of yourself. Imagine that afterwards some of them come up to you and say that this thing you're doing is the best thing in their life. That some of them might have killed themselves were it not for this show. Imagine bobbing for Lean Cuisines in a Fresca Jacuzzi for "Stepmother Night" and then getting that response.

That is my weekly reality here. There's six days of prep, one hectic hour, and a lifetime of how this is your thing.

From his usual spot next to camera one, J.P. waves for my attention and counts down from five. He points to me and then we're live.

"Welcome everybody," I say. "Thanks for coming out to what is sure to be the biggest waste of your time this week, and potentially your entire life. I'd also like to preface this episode by saying that I had the most impressive panic attack of my life yesterday. I'm feeling pretty good about it."

Somebody from the crowd yells, "What about?"

"I had an audition for a real-life show biz job, guys, and I straight-up wiggled out, stormed down the street to a sub shop, and ate a footlong roast beef with extra mayonnaise while weeping behind a dumpster in an alley. That's where I'm at right now. What I'm saying is, it's going to be a great show."

I thank Black Elephant for playing us in. They wave to the crowd and camera with trombones and kazoos. Then it's time to introduce the panel, which left to right consists of: my oldest friend and militant Gonzaga fan, Kim Humphreys; Ernie Petro, sometimes known as Grecian Ern; and our stage manager, a sweetheart through-and-through, Melanie Drysdale. They are, in order, the meanest, grossest, and nicest people I know. This is my spiel, almost verbatim, every episode.

Tonight's theme is "Animals: Fucking Bonkers, Right?" and I'm leaving it to the viewers to call in and answer that question, because really, that's the whole point. I firmly believe that the calls make this show. They steer us down tangents that would never occur to me, into weird backwoods, bum-fucked paths of thought that more often than not crystallize into the strongest bits of the show. The more control I pass on, the more I abdicate the throne, the better things get, the more this is theirs.

So when Double Craig calls from a payphone at Wawa—as is his way—to tell how he once raised a family of feral raccoons, I genuinely cannot contain my excitement.

“Craig, buddy,” I say. “You’ve got to tell me more on this. Let’s get this shit kicked off right. You found a bunch of raccoon babies?”

“That’s the cutest thing I’ve ever heard,” Melanie says.

“A gaze,” Craig says. “That’s the collective noun: a gaze of raccoons.”

Double Craig is killing it with the collective nouns.

“So you find a gaze of raccoons, what, like in a box behind Wawa?” I’m only part joking when I prod Craig like this. This man has led a fascinating life.

I’m not entirely certain of this, since our phone audio gets piped through the studio monitors and the fidelity of the sound is borderline garbage, but it sounds like Craig is chewing on chips on the air.

“No,” he says. “In a bush behind the woodshed when I was nineteen.”

The crowd laughs. I give them a second. Camera three goes live, which should be a wide shot of the audience assuming that everything is laid out correctly. Several of our fans come in costume, and it’s not uncommon for us to be joined by a man in a scaled-up Alf costume. Tonight he is sitting under camera two, the one nearest to our soundboard equipment. The level of detail on his costume is downright impeccable. I find it terrifying and I am so glad to have it be part of our show.

“Double Craig, you just scooped up a bunch of raccoon babies from a random ass bush? That’s what you’re telling me?”

“Correct,” he says, and lets the beat hang.

“Alright, Double Craig. What happened with these raccoons? You, what? Took them inside and fed them milk from a saucer?”

“Pretty much,” he says. “Sometimes I’d give them a can of sardines.”

“Just a straight up can?” asks Ern. “Did you even open it?”

“They have fingers,” says Craig. “They did fine.”

“Double Craig, I’ve got to say. You’re a braver man than most of us.”

“Let me tell you what happened,” he says. He seems impatient. The crowd loves it when callers get assertive with me.

“Go ahead, Double Craig,” I say. “I’m waiting with bated breath.”

“So one day I come home, and this is maybe ten weeks after I’ve brought these dudes under my wing. They’re getting pretty big. I come home and I notice that their cage is open. And I’m thinking, *oh shit*, right? There’s a nursery of raccoons on the loose in the house. My mom is going to be furious.”

“A nursery?”

“That’s the other collective noun for raccoons. Gaze or nursery,” he says. “So I’m looking around the house, checking under the futon and such, when I notice that my wallet and passport are missing.”

“You noticed your passport was missing? How do you even notice that? My passport is like, locked away in a safety deposit box. I don’t even know where my passport is.”

“I was going to Vancouver, which I can’t discuss for legal reasons, but it was sitting out on the counter.”

“Of course,” I say. “Proceed.”

“Anyway,” he says, “wallet and passport: gone. And I see there’s, like, all these ashes around where the fireplace is?”

“Double Craig,” I say, “are you telling me that a group of raccoons—”

Kim leans in. “A gaze of raccoons.”

“Or a nursery,” says Melanie.

“—that a gaze of sad little orphan raccoons, that you essentially fostered *from birth*, straight up robbed your shit, absconded with your identity, up the goddamn chimney and out into the wide world of sports?”

“That’s what I’m telling you.”

I’m so giddy, I can’t help but kick my feet in the air. I can’t imagine a better moment to end a call on.

“Double Craig, as always, it’s an absolute pleasure. Call back any time.”

J.P. gives the signal for our first scripted bit. In keeping with the theme of the episode, we’re rolling out a whole series of new animal and animal-themed characters. The first of which is the dumbest of them all: Josiah, the Electric Eel Who Is Also Amish.

“Since birth,” I read from the raggedy prompter, “Josiah has been torn between his instinctual drive to produce bioelectric fields in order to more efficiently hunt pray and his deeply ingrained cultural belief that said electricity is pathway to sinful material want. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Josiah, the Electric Eel Who Is Also Amish.”

The crowd stands and claps as he enters the room. I hope we cut to camera three so that we can get his ridiculous entrance. His movement reveals that his costume was

made with a budget of twelve dollars I found in my glove box this morning. It is among the most public access things I have ever seen and I've been doing this for years.

Josiah takes a mic and makes a few awful jokes, the worst of which was not explaining the “extreme shock” he felt upon first feeling the urges to use his powers. Then there's a whole bit about eel rumspringa including a half-minute where Grecian Ern and Kim chase Josiah around and mime different fellatio techniques on the eel costume. It doesn't wear through the premise so much as light it on fire and dance on its corpse, which luckily manages to not only push two steps beyond funny but then loop back around to be funny again. At least it does to the people in this room. As the crowd noise dies down, JP gives me a series of hand-gestures I've come to know well since we decided to expand to the internet crowd.

“Folks, they're telling me that the livestream is down,” I say. “I'd apologize for that, but anybody that's affected can't even see me right now, so there's not really a point. Sometimes, you get what you pay for.”

Which is true. This show has been, is, and will always be free. Part of this is propped up by state and city grants—that much funds the studio and the network staff who run the infrastructure end—but our show runs entirely on the goodwill of about two dozen people who for no good reason believe in me and the project. Nobody gets paid, there are no ads, and the t-shirts we sell offset about only half of our costs. I fully expect to be evicted this month.

“Metro area,” I say, “this means I need you to step your call game up. If you've got any bonkers animal stories, call us up and let's talk about it. If you've ever had rabies,

I want to hear about it. Shark attacks, emu rides, let us know. Otherwise I'm going to drag you back through a costume and pun-filled hell. You know we live for that shit."

Grecian Ern chimes in. "I once slept in a dog crate."

"Grecian Ern, I'm going to stop you right there. As desperate as we are for content on this show, I'm pretty sure that's a story that we don't want to hear," I say.

"But I'll tell you one thing that we do want to hear is tonight's musical guest. Ladies and gentlemen and everything else, let's get up and lose our shit for The Void."

Musical guests are a godsend for the show. They give us a few minutes to work on any technical problems, get a feel for time and recalibrate the segments, and they let me check in with J.P. to see how we're doing.

"We're probably, most likely, completely fucked," he says, which is typical for this conversation. "There are blackouts hitting all over the city. Our network node across town got hit, which is why the livestream went down. It's coming back up now, but I'm more concerned we're going to get hit with an outage in the studio."

"There's a backup generator though, right?"

"Allegedly," he says.

I can barely hear him over the band. The Void are a Japanese noise-punk trio from Osaka who speak very little English. Their vocals are nearly incomprehensible on the album, which coupled with our pawn shop PA system means that I can't understand word one they've sung tonight, none of which matters because the bass is mixed so far to the front that I'm starting to experience severe indigestion. The kids in crowd are dancing their faces off. Some of them are wearing costumes of their own favorite animals. I count three separate bullfrogs. There's also one guy wearing full bondage gear with a

commissar cap. He's off in a corner slam-dancing with Alf. Not a single person here cares if they look cool, and they're on television.

"We'll figure it out," I say. "Worst case scenario, we do this shit by candlelight."

J.P. has his face down, mashing his palm into the bridge of his nose. "No open flame in the studio," he says. He puts his glasses back on and starts to walk away.

"Then we'll do it in the dark," I say. "We've dealt with worse."

I'm not sure I believe that, but half of this show is managing expectations. The other half is giving people the impression that if nothing else, I know that things are going to work out. Both involve heavy half-truths and a lot of blind luck. More than anything, this show requires the ability to ignore some crushing realities, which is a skill that doesn't do much for your personal life.

Fifteen seconds and we're back on the air. I find some approximation of my mark and look to camera two.

"The bar has been set tonight," I say. "Double Craig gave us my new favorite raccoon-oriented story. In a minute I may get the panel to share some stories, but right now I want to see if another caller can top that."

The prompter reads Finn from Abilene.

"Finn from Texas, what's going on tonight?"

I hear that exact sentence repeat back, only muffled and distant.

"Finn, I'm going to need you turn your computer down, buddy."

I hear myself again. The phone makes a sound like a modem and then cuts out.

"Finn if you're out there, get it together," I say. "Also, are you watching this shit on dial-up? Is that even possible? Call us back and explain yourself."

J.P. gives me the signal that the stream is back up.

“Alright,” I say. “Caller you’re on the air. Who’s this?”

He says he’s Jake from Minnesota and he’s got a dog story. “It’s not a funny one, though,” he says.

“That’s alright, man. Not everything has to be funny. If you’ve seen the show, it’s frequently not funny. Sometimes painfully so. As long as it’s animal related, you’ve got the floor.”

“So me and my brother grew up around Wayzata,” he says. “Cold as shit, nothing to do. A lot of wandering around throwing bottles at signs, right?”

“Jake,” I say. “You are talking to the king of bottle throwing here. You’re preaching to my soul. Tell me about these dogs.”

“Hold up a minute,” he says. “It’s a slow burn.”

Sometimes an aggressive caller is the best thing that can happen. You just back off and let wild shit pan out.

“I like you already, Jake,” I say. “It’s all yours.”

“Me and my brother are walking down the road one day after taekwon-do, passing a ginger ale back and forth, like you do. There’s sort of this half-snow on the ground, the kind where it’s mostly just refreeze and road sludge, so everything is both shiny and filthy looking at the same time. We’re walking down the street and we bomb up next to the Walmart near Broadway.

“There’s this lady there, sort of ragged looking, set up next to the employee spots, the ones farthest away from the entrance. She’s selling puppies out of the back of a station wagon, right? Cardboard sign. Thirty dollars each, the whole deal. And they’re

these ratty but cute little terrier mixes, like a Boston terrier went out on the lam for a while and got knocked up by a spaniel. Snub nose, long hair. They're maybe eight weeks, something toward the early side of when you should be selling them, but this lady looks like she needs the money quick."

This kid has the specifics of this thing down and everybody seems on board so far, so I just let him go. I'm into it, at least, but he goes quiet for a second.

"You guys still there?" he asks.

"We're here, buddy. We're at that Walmart with you."

"So we're looking at these puppies even though we don't have thirty dollars between us, sort of playing with them, letting them chew on our fingers, when this guy pulls up in a really nice car. So nice I don't even recognize the make. He gets out and starts asking these questions about the dogs, if they have their shots and all that. The lady gets all formal and sort of deferential to the guy, really playing into his whole slick asshole routine. She produces some paperwork from the vet, but the guy doesn't even glance at it, I guess so he can feel all generous for acting like she's trustworthy.

"Then he pulls a hundred dollar bill out of his pocket. He says that it's all that he's got at the moment, but the lady says she doesn't have change. Nobody else has bought one, she said. To this day I don't know if she was telling the truth, or if the guy had planned on this from the get-go, but he looks over to me and my brother playing the puppies and says he'll pay for one for each of us too.

"So we lose our minds, right? We know that our mom is going to kill us for this, that having one dog, much less two puppies, in the house without asking is grounds for

getting our asses kicked, but her shift doesn't end until late and what's she going to do? Make us return them to the long-gone station wagon lady?"

Kim butts in. "Jake, if I was your mom I would put you up for adoption and keep the dogs for myself."

"That's probably fair," he says. "So me and my brother are going through this unspoken debate, and we thank the suit guy as he walks off with his dog. The lady is all happy, grinning and pointing out the differences in the remaining pups. You know, this one has really big paws so he'll grow up to be strong and tough, but this girl you'll notice has a cute birthmark on her tummy."

"And then we realize that suit guy hasn't gotten back in his car. Suit guy isn't even heading towards his car. Suit guy is carrying his puppy down the hill and he's heading down towards the highway."

The room has gone quiet. Melanie has her hands to her face. Kim is looking down at her lap. Ernie is rubbing his moustache and deliberately looking away from the camera.

"Jake, are you still there, man?" Dead air. "Jake. What happened with the suit guy?" No response.

J.P. signals me from behind the camera that we've lost the call.

"Folks, it looks like we're having some technical difficulties at the moment," I say, "so we may very well never know what happened with those puppies. Melanie, how are you feeling about all of this?"

She looks both queasy and angry for me putting her on the spot. "I'm hoping the suit guy went and gave that other puppy to another stranger," she says.

“I’m thinking he probably punted it into traffic,” says Ern. “I mean, I’m hoping he didn’t. But that’s clearly where the story was headed, right?”

“I think you might be embellishing on the punt, but that puppy is definitely fucked,” Kim says. She clenches her hands as she talks. “I’m hoping that scumbag at least had the decency to walk into traffic too.”

I’m siding with either Kim or Ern on this one, but I say, “We don’t necessarily know that. Maybe suit guy was just giving up all his material possessions. Maybe he was walking out to a cabin in the woods to go all Thoreau on everybody with his new dog pal, Murf.”

“You named the dog Murf?” Kim asks.

And I’m thinking we might have salvaged this from being an all-encompassing bummer when an intern walks into frame with a boom microphone.

“All the lapel mics are dead,” she says. “And camera three is down.”

I try to act as natural as possible as the intern dangles this giant black phallus above my head like she’s watering a hedge. “Murf is a great name for a dog,” I say.

Kim shakes her head. “Murf is a great name for a pedophile.”

Conversations like these make me wonder what my life even is. I am actively trying to facilitate these moments. “What’s the weirdest name for a dog you’ve ever heard?” I ask.

Melanie doesn’t hesitate. “My neighbors had a cat named Tugboat,” she says.

“You grew up with a cat named Tugboat?”

“No,” she says. “This was like five years ago. I was in college. There were two cats. Tugboat and Dumptruck.”

“I mean, I was thinking dogs primarily,” I say, “but we can include all kinds of animals.”

The intern is frantically trying to shift the mic over our heads as we each talk. I’m sure the show sounds like shit, so I try to direct the questions to give her the time to react.

“Kim,” I say. “You’ve probably had some weird animal names.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asks. “My parents tried to give them boring names, like Lucky or fucking Murf or something,” she says. “But those idiots worked all day, so me and my sister through pure bull-headedness renamed them after our two favorite things.”

“Meaning what?” I ask.

“Pizza Party and Taco Night,” she says.

“How do I not know this about you? You’re saying that when your parents went to call them inside, they had to yell Pizza Party and Taco Night?”

“Oh definitely,” she says. “They dug under the fence and got out one night, so my whole family went around the neighborhood screaming Taco Night for like six hours.”

“But you found them?”

“That time, sure. But they kept getting out. We had to put up flyers around the neighborhood that said Pizza Party with a picture of a dumb, smiling retriever and our phone number on them. That whole week we’re getting phone calls from idiot kids who want to come eat pizza and play with dogs.

“They both eventually had to get put down, because they were some dumb fucking dogs, but it was really sad. I think I might have liked them *because* they were so dumb. I don’t like dog that’s too smart or too well behaved. It’s creepy to me.”

The intern seems to be getting tired and her arm is starting to waver a bit. The boom mic is almost definitely in the shot because J.P. is signaling to find a new angle.

“We put up these grave markers,” Kim says. “These carved wooden crosses that say Pizza Party and Taco Night in the back yard. It looks like someone’s mom had gotten fed up with cooking and was sending a message to the family.”

I’m grateful that she tagged that dead animal story with a joke. This show has a way of getting incredibly dour and morbid sometimes, which usually I love, but tonight I think we’re approaching the limit.

J.P. gives the signal for twenty minutes left.

“Before we throw to our musical guests again, what have you got for us Grecian Ern? Do I even want to know your animal stories?”

“I always preferred to not learn their names,” he says. “It’s more sensual that way.”

“I do not want to know your animal stories,” I say. “Ladies and gentlemen, from Osaka, Japan, welcome back to The Void.”

The Void start up with this impossibly heavy sludge that sounds like it belongs at a terrifying funeral. Somehow I think they’ve managed to get the bass levels louder. J.P. looks less tense than when I talked to him before. His shoulders have fallen a bit, and aside from the earplugs he’s wearing, it seems like he has mostly unclenched his ass.

“Decent, right?” I ask.

“We’re almost in the clear,” he says. “There hasn’t been a blackout in the last fifteen minutes or so.”

“What do you think so far?” I ask.

“It’s alright. I’d rather not bring out another one of those fucking animal characters if we’ve got a choice, but it looks like the snake wrangler guy probably won’t make it. People got crazy when the power went down.”

“Do we still have the phones?”

“I don’t think we ever lost them. I think that Jake guy just hung up.”

“That was a weird one, man.”

“We’ve had weirder,” he says. “If they want to get bleak, let them get bleak. You’re more depressing than you are funny anyway.”

Someone in the band hits a pedal that pitches the guitar up like three octaves and there’s a painful shriek crying out from the amps when all the lights go out.

J.P. yells for the interns to fetch the big box of flashlights.

The band keeps playing as if it’s part of the plan. Apparently all of our recording and broadcast gear is still up, but everything on the light board is dead.

J.P. is kicking things and shouting in the dark. I feel my way back toward center stage, groping around blindly, bumping into all of these sweaty kids, dancing aimlessly in the dark, jumping and shoving and grinding on each other. The room is pulsing and for a second we’re all this seething wave of disgusting bodies before I get pushed out and land on the floor right in front of my chair.

The band hits their final note, wailing on this low power cord and beating the crash cymbal relentlessly. A dozen or so flashlights come on in sequence. The crowd goes back to sitting cross-legged on the floor and the lights make their way through the group. One finds its way to the front and I take it.

“Welcome back to public access,” I say. “Where we fucking make do with what we’ve got.” I’ve got the light squeezed between my thighs, pointing directly up at my face from my lap. It’s my imagination, but my body feels warm wherever the light hits. I try to stay focused but I can see my own nostrils glowing a deep orange. “It’s a shame that we didn’t make tonight our ghost story night.”

More lights make their way through crowd until nearly every member of the audience has a light and they’re pointing up at their faces. It’s both the raddest and most horrifying sight thing I’ve ever seen. Right then I realize I’m not going to sleep tonight.

“We had a snake handler scheduled to come in for our big finale tonight, but I don’t think he’s going to make it. Given the whole light situation, it’s probably for the best that we don’t have an eight-foot python crawling around in the dark.”

Some of the kids squirm as though it’s there in spirit.

“I’m thinking maybe we want to take one last call for the night. Caller, I have no idea who we’ve got on the line, but you’re on the show. Welcome.”

“How’s it going?” he asks. His voice is high-pitched, pubescent. I’m imagining myself at thirteen, staring at the mirror shirtless, working up there nerve to make this phone call.

“We’re in the dark trying to make television,” I say. “Not so great. You?”

“Not good, man. Listen, you know how you said this show doesn’t have to be funny?”

“Of course, man. I want this show to be all kinds of things. Funny is one of them, and I’ve got some dumb fucking dinosaur suits we can trot out, but frankly we were just

trying to justify this storage unit full of costumes we bought. You take it whatever direction you feel like taking it, kid. The lights our out. Blank canvas.”

And this kid, whose name I don’t even know, tells us how his betta fish died tonight. I’ve seen a lot of television in my day. By most people’s standards, I don’t think this constitutes a climax. There’s no fanfare, there’s no drama. I kept expecting the fish to have been a hand-me-down from a friend with leukemia, like the last remaining tie to this person, and that it became symbolic of the transience of life. That he started neglecting it and his shortcomings caused the loss of that tangible link. That’s how you make this into good television, but that’s not what this is. The fish didn’t die in some tragic way. It didn’t get snatched up by a cat or sucked through the filter. A mean older brother didn’t flush it down the toilet, and it didn’t die from overfeeding or neglect.

This is just a kid without any friends, who didn’t have a complex relationship with this fish. He really liked it and he’s sad, and he needed to tell us about it. And I’m sad for him too. I genuinely am. It’s scary out there when the lights all go out, but there’s something about it that’s useful too. I tell him that, and he asks what I mean. I tell him the phones are still up even when you can’t see.

10. Greenwater

We stood out in the hail the year Greenwater died. It was heavy and it hurt, but at the time it seemed as normal to do as anything else. The only thing that struck Kyle and me as remarkable was the fact that it was sunny while hailstones like golf balls broke half the county's windshields.

Greenwater worked on a Christmas tree farm about fourteen miles north of Choctaw, Mississippi. The first time my brother and I ever saw him, our mother was alive. She drove us out to the farm, and we rode by the rows on the back of a trailer pulled by a Polaris through November mud. We were amazed by how many trees there were, the way the needles stood in front of more needles, and how you could look through one tree to another and they'd dip off to a point in the distance like two mirrors facing.

He walked with us through all the trees, steering Mom toward the more modest blue spruce. "You'll want the smaller ones," he said. "They hold the ornaments better." My mother smiled and thanked him, and we ran off through the columns of trees screaming, mad idiot grins spread all on our faces.

That next year our mom got diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease. She had trouble buttoning her work shirt, but she didn't tell us for a while. Then her legs went, then her voice. She wound up with pneumonia and lasted two months past that. It took her less than a year. They tell me that's unusually fast.

Greenwater was there that year too. Our dad drove us that time, and the three of us walked wordless through the fir and pine trees. It was cold and our breath was showing. Dad stopped to check the tag on one of the shorter Douglas firs. Thanksgiving had been hard on him that year, so Kyle and I went on to give him the space, hands tucked inside our hunting coats. When we came back, Greenwater had already sawed down the tree and was tossing it onto the back of the trailer. Kyle was upset that he hadn't gotten to choose, but Greenwater distracted him by reminding him of the candy canes and hot chocolate at the end of the ride.

They had this big machine that shook out the loose needles and made a tremendous noise I used to love. While you waited you drank down as much powdered cocoa as you could before you lost your taste buds, then you drank one more. The concession stand was staffed by young high school kids, guys who hadn't moved on to truck repair or farm labor and cute girls too young to wait tables. Kyle was fascinated by the whole operation. He got his hot chocolate and stared as the girls brewed cheap drums of coffee and the boys hauled boxes of non-dairy creamer.

Even at ten I was more into the girls. Most of them were four or so years beyond my own age, but their bra straps and braces drew me in with near magnetic force. One of them, a stocky pale girl with reddish freckles in a too short gray sweatshirt stooped to open another package of styrofoam cups. As she bent over, her necklace dangled and caught the glint of a fluorescent shop light. That image has always hung with me because as this was happening, one of the boys tripped on the small concrete threshold of the door to outside.

The box he carried flew from his arms, exploding when it hit the ground. Red and green candy canes poured from both ends and the younger kids rushed in as if a piñata had burst. One of them pushed Kyle to the side and he fell against the particle board concession stand front. The board, softened by an especially damp winter, gave a few inches and the concession counter bowed inward, toward the employees. This caused the stainless carafes to wobble and fall backward, spilling into the employee area. One of these carafes, a freshly brewed batch, emptied its contents onto the back of the girl with the necklace. We found out later that the coffee had soaked into her sweatshirt, which in turn soaked through her shirt, and before she could get everything off, she was severely burned on most of her back.

Kyle cried as we watched Greenwater put a cold six pack of soda on her back and wrap her in a blanket. He loaded her into his raggedy truck. They sped off for the hospital. Our dad didn't say much, just grumbled as he walked us over to the main cash register. He unrolled two twenties, paid the man in the coveralls, and together they loaded our shaken tree into the bed of our father's white pickup truck. Dad put Kyle in the cab, and I climbed over the tailgate to ride with the tree. I could hear Kyle crying, then our father saying, "That sort of thing happens," before cranking the truck. He backed out, and I rode quietly in the back, thinking about nothing and trying to keep warm.

For a while after, Kyle refused to touch the stove or even microwave his own dinner. With dad at the plant all day, the kitchen duties fell to me. I made chicken spaghetti, regular spaghetti, and a lot of macaroni. Mostly though, we ate square-cut ham on wheat bread with mustard. Whatever it was, I let it cool before I served it.

He skipped the tree farm that next year. Dad tried to talk him into it, even bribe him with hunting trips, but our dad only had so much patience for hypersensitivity so we drove out to the farm to pick a tree without him. The drive from our house was about half an hour, and we rode it out mostly in silence. I remember the heat feeling damp like a dog's breath and wondering what it was that made the heating coils work. I rolled the dials on the vents, the ones that looked like tan Oreo cookies. Dad fiddled with the radio, dialing past the Baptist call-in shows, another thing he had small patience for. He stopped on the local rock station, heard it was Styx, and turned it off again.

"Your brother," he said. "He's going to need help at school. Keep an eye out for him please."

I told him yes sir and thought on that the rest of the way. As we were parking, I could see inside the aluminum building that housed the farm's office. They kept the shop doors open on harvesting days and I could see everyone's breath inside. They all held styrofoam cups. We left the truck and walked through the mud, scraping our boots when we reached the front steps.

The concession stand was set up as it had been before, with two minor changes. The first change was obvious, as the frame was now comprised of heavy steel posts. Moreover, the girl who was burned was gone, as were her coworkers, replaced by a new class of young teenagers, as if they'd inherited it. While they worked diligently and happily, they seemed to move a bit more cautiously. They were steadily occupied the whole time we were there.

Dad and I climbed into the back of the trailer and rode through the usual route. This time Dad led me over to the more pricey spruce trees. I asked if we could afford

them and he muttered something about a nice bonus and gift horses. I kept my mouth shut after that. He picked out a short one again, this one with a thick base. Greenwater seemed pleased with his choice. He shook his hand, tagged it as ours, and drove us on back to the aluminum shed. We waited while they shook our tree out and then took it home to Kyle, who promptly dug the tree skirt from storage. He made sure it got plenty of water.

After the holidays, Kyle made us keep the tree, longer even than most people did. Dad waited until one night when Kyle slept over at a friend's house. We drug the tree down to the end of our drive where the county would come pick it up the next day. They came in the morning, and two men in jumpsuits threw it in the back of a garbage truck that chipped yard trash into mulch. Then they drove away. Dad picked Kyle up that afternoon. When he walked in the door, he looked to the corner where the tree had stood, then quietly walked to his room and shut the door. I asked Dad for the pumice soap, since the regular bar couldn't get the sap off my hands.

Two more years passed like this, Kyle staying home as Dad and I picked out the tree. After we brought them home, Kyle tended to them closely, checking the water level every few hours. I could hold his attention for brief periods of time, a game of checkers or a four-wheeler ride, but he would get visibly anxious if we were away from the house for long. By this point, I was driving—illegally, but driving—and on several occasions Kyle made me leave service stations before I'd pumped a full tank of gas. Some nights I'd wake up to use our bathroom off the hall, and I'd find him asleep on the living room couch, knuckles white around the watering can.

Kyle was still very sensitive about our disposal of the trees. We kept one until mid-January and the next until Valentine's. Both shriveled into messes of burnt orange needles that fell to the ground and lodged in gaps of the rough hardwood floor. The first one Dad snuck out under cover of night, without my help. The next morning, Kyle followed the trail of needles out the front door and stood by the mailbox for a while, scratching his neck and the small of his back.

The second year's tree, the one that survived well into February, required a different approach. Dad had started to fade out in the evenings, sagging into his chair and leaving us be. He was tired of Kyle. I could tell that. He couldn't say it, but he struggled to appease my brother. The extra shifts he had picked up took what little patience he had, so when it came time to get rid of the tree, he didn't have it in him to take it from Kyle.

It bothered me. I didn't like keeping something dead in the house, not something that didn't have any use. I didn't like it reminding me that our dad had given up, either. It was too bulky to move alone, so I had to convince Kyle to let it go.

I went to his room and told him it was time to get rid of the tree. He ignored me, buried his nose in a hunting magazine.

"It's a fire hazard," I said. "We've got to get rid of it."

He looked up at me. I could tell he hadn't bathed that day. "Did Dad make you do this?"

"No," I said, and I was glad it was true.

He put his magazine down. "Is it dangerous, really?" he said, and I told him yes. It was full of dry resin and if it caught enough concentrated heat it could go up in seconds and take the house down. Plug something in wrong or drop a paper clip against an outlet,

let the sun hit a double pane window right and we could be torched in our own living room.

“Greenwater told me,” I said.

He put his pants and gloves on and helped me drag the tree down to the edge of the street where we partially propped it against the old iron mailbox. He watched during breakfast as the men in jumpsuits hauled it away, and he slept in his bed for the rest of the year.

When late November came again, our dad had mostly lost his job. Demand had slowed and shifts got cut back, and he had been on bad terms with both supervisors. He’d spend some mornings driving, looking for work. He found a few shifts at the lumber yard, but I think mainly he’d park to save gas and smoke cigarettes somewhere. In the afternoons, he’d go to the library so he could use the internet to look at boat parts for sale. He’d talk about building a fishing boat with big leather seats and a live-well to hold all the bream we would catch. He would bring home print-outs of used trolling motors, outboards, a sonar fish-finder. He’d complain that the printing cost five cents a page.

A tree seemed farther than our dad’s thoughts extended. He had started leaving me with the truck in the afternoon, and after I’d dropped him at the library, I’d pick Kyle up from school and we would get food at Sonic. Dad had started giving us odd pocket money, so we paid for our hot dogs with fifty cent pieces and two dollar bills that smelled like they’d come from someplace leathery and damp. Since Mom had died, I had been stashing small bills in a box I kept under my dresser. I tried to keep the total around two hundred dollars, and my success there depended on how much of the gas I had to buy. I

had enough to buy presents for both Dad and Kyle, plus the forty I'd set aside to buy our tree for the year.

One day, I picked Kyle up from school and drove straight past the turn on the way to our house. He looked over to me and I could tell that he knew we were headed north, on past Choctaw. Part of me expected him to give me some push back, at least tell me he was done going out there.

Instead he said, "Dad's going to be okay, right?"

I told him I thought so, but I had no evidence to back that up. It seemed like the time for me to tell him something important, but I was fifteen at the time, so I said that he could pick out the tree.

As we pulled down the pea gravel drive, we noticed the trees had an off-color hue. Patches of yellow and brown marred the sweeping rows of evergreen trees. Kyle said nothing as I parked the truck and we headed inside of the main office shop. It was a warm winter that year, and it was uncanny to see the crowd of people talk without vapor rising from their lips.

We walked out to where the trailer picked customers up. We waited a few minutes, picking dirt from our nails. When the Polaris pulled up, I was surprised to see that Greenwater wasn't driving. In his place, a rough-shaved blonde man with strange eyelashes waved us aboard. He drove us down a different route and as we passed all the saplings he slowed down to ask us what type of tree we were hunting.

"Scotch pine," I said. Kyle nodded in agreement. "What's with the brown splotches?" I asked.

The driver looked confused. “They didn’t tell you?” he asked. “We caught needle blight this year. It hit about eighty percent of our crop. All the clean trees are already gone. Everything we’re selling, we’re selling half price, as-is. There’s still some good ones out there though.”

Where I expected concern, Kyle seemed excited. To him this meant we could afford twice as much tree. The driver put us off in the younger pine growth. Kyle immediately angled for the thicker, old trees. We walked up and down the rows, Kyle evaluating the girth of the trunks, the breadth of the branches. He looked very thorough in his assessment, though I knew he was simply walking past the same three or four trees, again and again, trying to decide which one was bigger in sum.

We spent the better part of an hour pacing back and forth between these few trees until finally Kyle decided on one. He caught the attention of the rough-shaved man, and pointed out which one would be ours. The man looked to me for approval and I shrugged, so he marked it with a bright yellow tag. We rode back to the main office. Kyle grinned the whole way back. He was nearly thirteen and I hadn’t seen him outwardly happy in a very long time.

Back inside the aluminum building, the wait for the shaker had backed up quite a bit. The needle blight had made people cautious, and everyone was asking the men operating it to run their trees longer than usual. Kyle went outside to walk through the rows while we waited, so I headed to concessions to get a hot chocolate.

This was the year my classmates took it over. Guys I had played tag football with since kindergarten were now the ones hauling non-dairy creamer, and multiple girls I had long-standing crushes on were now loading coffee filters and setting the percolators. One

girl, Heather, I'd gone to Sunday school with for about as long as I can remember, and I was working towards working up the nerve to ask her out. It was a long-term plan.

She was restocking the cups when I got through the line. In the quiet gap between tree shaker runs, another girl took my order, one I didn't recognize. I asked for a large coffee, black. The girl told me it came in one size and it was always black until you put something in it at the condiments table. I said that was fine, and stood waiting for my drink, leaning against the counter and hoping to catch Heather's attention. She stood up from behind the counter. When I started to talk, the shaker ran again, drowning me out. We stood awkwardly, stuck looking at each other for entirely too long.

"What?" she said.

"Nothing," I said. "Just saying hey."

"Oh," she said. "How have you been holding up?"

I realized I was scratching at a bump on my chin and forced myself to stop. I told her I was fine and she said that was good to hear. I'd come with nothing to talk about, so grasping for any sort of common ground, I asked her where old Greenwater was. She tilted her head just slightly to the side, with her chin pitched inward. The angle cast shade on her face in striking ways, setting her cheekbones in contrast under the light, highlighting her freckles and sharpening her eyes. I remember this moment so vividly because I realized then something could be, at once, staggeringly pretty and still immensely sad.

"Greenwater died," she said, looking down at the counter. "Four months ago. I'm sorry. I know Kyle seemed to like him a lot."

I was probably the first person she'd had to tell about a death, and I felt guilty for making her do that for me. The other girl handed me my coffee and Heather tried to busy herself by stocking the cups. I was about to ask her how it had happened, when Kyle walked up to counter. I didn't have it in me to tell him. I sipped my coffee and hated the taste.

"That's our tree about to go on the shaker," he said. Two men in thick leather gloves heaved the tree sideways out from the back of the trailer. One of them used an old augur bit to bore a large hole in the base of the tree, unspooling thin peels of pinewood that fell to the ground. The other then helped him tilt the tree to a diagonal angle, and they guided the new hole onto a peg in the center of the shaker. They stood the tree straight up. The top of the tree leaned into a large metal crook and the first man helped to hold it in place. The second stepped on a pneumatic pedal that controlled the intensity of the machine's shake. It was loud enough to mistake for a gas motor, and it shook the tree furiously.

First the brown blighted needles sifted down to the ground. Kyle had picked a tree with only a few brown patches, mostly at the bottom, so I had expected to lose the majority of those. As the shaking continued, some green needles started to drift away too. Again, this was to be expected since most trees have weeks' worth of needles caught in their branches. Shortly after, though, we started losing more. The branches became embarrassingly thin. Whole limbs fell from the center of the tree and large empty patches where no needles remained appeared in several spots around the outside.

I stood watching on, not sure what to say. The shaker operators looked puzzled. The machine had done its job, they supposed, and they looked to me for further

instructions. I turned back to the concession counter, hoping that Heather hadn't seen my tree's shameful state. She had turned her back, graciously, and had gotten to work on another batch of coffee.

The man in coveralls that worked the main register approached Kyle and me, hands shoved in his pockets.

"Boys, you go on and pick another tree," he said. "I'm not sending you home with that sad piece of crap."

I thanked him. I couldn't imagine Kyle trying to nurse that tree back to health.

"Your family's been coming back every year when most people buy theirs pre-cut from the grocery store. I appreciate that. I remember your mother. She was a sweet lady."

I thanked him again and gestured to Kyle that he should do the same.

"No," Kyle said. "We're taking home this one."

The man looked to me for the final decision. I didn't feel qualified to make that choice. I had told Kyle he could pick which tree we would get, so I went with his instinct. I told the man we'd take the sad, naked tree, and he motioned for the men to come help load it up. They raised it up and over into the truck bed. A good four to five feet of the top stuck out over the tailgate, so they gave us some twine to tie it down. Kyle hopped in the bed and tied some amateurish knots.

"Go on," he said. "I want to ride back here."

When we pulled in our drive, it seemed our dad wasn't home. Sometimes he'd catch a ride or even walk the three miles back from the library, but all the lights were off from what I could tell. I put the truck in park and walked around back to help Kyle untie the tree. As we undid the knots, I looked up to see that the sky had taken on a strange

yellow tint. Thin, angry cloud shapes had formed up above us, and as I looked up at them it started to hail. When we had the tree loose, we pushed it out from the back of the bed. We lost a few limbs, but the tree was so heavy that we didn't have much choice.

Kyle hoisted the top of the tree over a shoulder and I lifted the base with the heels of my hands and walked behind him in an awkward half-squat. The hailstones came quickly and thumped on the ground. They were small at first, but then larger ones began to fall just as often. We needed to move quickly. A fair number of needles remained around the base and as I staggered on behind the weight I could hardly see around the tree. Kyle got to steer us while I had to fly blind.

I yelled that we'd forgotten to open the front door first.

"Don't worry about it," he said.

Kyle started to veer us off target to the right. He picked up his pace and it was all I could do to keep up with him. The ground was mostly firm, but some patches of muck still lurked in the occasional low spot. As our path aimed us further off to the side, I could see half of our house come into view. He was clearly not taking us in the front door and I yelled after him that he was screwing us up, but he didn't answer.

We carried that tree maybe sixty yards out, all the while getting hit with heavy hailstones. We went far enough out into the pasture behind our lot that it seemed like our house was even smaller than before, and we dropped the tree in the center of a dry patch of dirt. I asked Kyle what the hell he thought he was doing but he just ran off to the lawnmower shed at the seam of our yard. A thunderclap hit, and the sky became brighter.

Kyle came running from the shed carrying something small and bright red. By the time I realized it was a gas can, he was already emptying its contents onto the tree. He

pulled a match from his pocket. Where he had found it before I don't know, and don't know how long he'd had it with him, but he struck it and tossed it onto the tree.

The tree combusted in a thick wall of flame. The gas burned up blue and then the resin fueled a clean orange blaze. We stood there watching, not sure what to do.

"Dad's not going to be happy," said Kyle, stooping down to sit on the dirt.

"Dad will be okay," I said, not sure if I meant it. I picked up a stick and tossed it in the fire. The hail bounced off my shoulders and neck.

"Is it weird to you that the sky is yellow?" he asked.

"I don't know. We're in a hailstorm," I said.

"Yeah, but isn't the sky supposed to be dark?"

I told him sometimes it rained when there were no clouds around. People called it the devil beating his wife, like raindrops were made of the devil's wife's tears.

He asked if that didn't mean that the devil's wife was in heaven though, since the tears would be falling from the sky somewhere. Wouldn't the expression make more sense if people said it was God beating his wife? Why did it have to be anybody beating anybody's wife? People cry all the time without any help.

I spat in the grass. I told him I didn't know why. I told him that sort of thing just happens sometimes.

11. And So My Grievous Angels Come

Let me explain it like this.

There's this family back in let's say, the fifties or sixties, somewhere in there. They're stranded off in the country, all straw-mouthed and coveralled and shit, and they're out of contact with pretty much everybody outside the workday because they didn't have a phone. Hadn't ever even used a phone.

They're sitting out at their house, frying okra and shucking corn or whatever a stranded-ass family during the time before cable and lo-and-behold they've run out of lye or some other nonsense, so they pile into the beat-up Ford truck that I figure looks like one out of those rusted-out Coca-Cola signs you see. The one's people like to buy because it makes them feel folksy and rustic and in touch with their heritage. They pile up into that truck and they drive into town taking the old back way down Kinlock past the dilapidated railroad bridge we all used to get drunk by in high school after they cracked down inside the city limits. My uncreative ass imagines that they're whistling all kinds of songs along the way since they don't have a radio, and there's hawks circling and hound dogs baying and everything else you'd figure.

So the engine sputters out along the way, and the husband, Butch—let's call him Butch, for ease of use here—Butch gets down under the truck and starts to tinker while his wife Virgie sits in the cab ignoring the sweat and lack of air conditioner because she's never known different. Their two boys are sitting in the back. They take turns pulling their

peckers out and whizzing over the tailgate. Butch doesn't care for this since he's down there at ground level, worrying about the incline. But he doesn't have the time or the patience to yell at the boys while he's pulling at belts and gears or whatever you do to fix an engine, I don't know, and Virgie tells the boys to quit making a fuss, they'll wake their sister.

Also there's a baby sister.

Meanwhile there's this factory down the road making fertilizer or pesticide—farm chemicals is the point—and the supervisor the night before was drunk off bad muscadine and spent his whole night in the can. He just signed off on shoddy work at the end of his shift, figuring his boys got the work right eight hundred times before. I mean, what could go wrong this time, right? But see, he didn't know that his boys had got a hold of the same batch of muscadine from the same creep down the road with the hole in his pocket. And these boys had got the same batch of bubbleguts and left some pressure valves unlet. And then whoosh goes a chemical spill.

The night supervisor, scared out of his pants, runs straight to the sheriff, knowing he's fired already, but he might at least keep himself off Parchman Farm if he helps contain everything. The sheriff, all chest hair and sunglasses, browbeats the supervisor for a good half hour while he's thinking up what he ought to do, but he's fresh out of ideas so he figures maybe it's best to just call up the governor and see about the National Guard or something.

But back to our family out in the heat. Butch has got the truck up and running again. As he pulls back onto the road Virgie starts talking about the way he's been acting lately, staying out all hours of night, smelling like corn whiskey and worse.

Butch goes to fidgeting in his seat, but keeps his eyes locked on the dirt road ahead. He thinks about all the days he spends fixing tractor parts and combine heads, and you know what? Maybe every now and again he deserves to chase a little ass. Maybe once in a while it's nice to wipe the engine oil from his palms and stumble into possibility. Just once in a while is all.

And Virgie's right, but maybe so is Butch, and while they're arguing in the cab, the older boy is dangling a lizard over his brother's head and pinching the younger boy's nose shut with his free hand. When the boy can't hold his breath any longer he's got to open his mouth and boom, there's a lizard in it. Big brother gives little brother's arm an Indian burn until he starts to chew and baby sis starts crying.

The night supervisor and the sheriff are in the meantime chewing Red Man loose leaf and waiting for the Guard to show and tell them what's what. They're spitting on the ground and talking about the Cardinals game when they see the cloud rise from the chemical plant and feel the breeze coming down, and they realize they better clear the town before people start growing extra limbs.

Then all the way down in Jackson, you've got the governor in his mansion making angry phone calls to his Ag secretary and departments of, you know, chemicals and all that. There's some overexcited Reserve Generals off in the corner suggesting this might be a communist plot by Soviet sleeper cells. Just shit ideas, all around, until one of the governor's more ambitious boys suggests that they use cropdusters.

The governor's all, "Shitfire, son. That's using your noggin."

Meanwhile Butch thinks if the conversation's headed this way then maybe it's time Virgie starts accounting for the little girl's red hair, since his whole family's heads

are dark as police station coffee and that girl looks like she fell straight off a potato wagon. Maybe Virgie's been off getting more than groceries when she runs into town. Maybe there's nobody in the goddamn truck that's all that holy. Maybe it's a matter of figuring the spread of sins and answers and hoping at sundown they measure out.

The night supervisor and the sheriff, not knowing what else to do, load into a flatbed from the armory they've rigged up with a bullhorn on the roof, the kind that gets all squawky and feeds back when you pull down the trigger, and they head for the heart of town to get the evacuation rolling.

Meantime, the governor's boys rally up these cropdusters and ex-Air Force guys, a bunch of unshaved drunkards, and load up the planes with neutralizer and I figure they get a real gung-ho Johnny-get-your-gun type speech about how this isn't just cleaning up somebody's mess, it's about saving the lifeblood of a community, and these boys get fired up with the vision of Christ and Patton in their hearts—the type of shit that gets your uncle hard—and they throw those propellers with all their might.

Little brother is crying because he's never killed anything bigger than a mosquito before and big brother is laughing because he never thought he'd have so much fun with a blue tail skink. Baby sis is crying because all she's ever felt is hot and sweaty and loud and hungry. Virgie's crying because she's stuck in a truck with a man she can't not love, and Butch doesn't even make a sound.

And the governor's biting his nails like a grown man shouldn't and his wife is frowning at him like an unfed mule and their schnauzer is running circles around their ankles and jumping on and off the ottoman because holy hell this is before real safety boards but if he mucks this up he'll be up to his balls in unionizers.

Then the town starts to empty as the night supervisor and the sheriff herd the weary people from their milo fields and board meetings and ice cream shops, telling them maybe they ought to go visit an uncle in Vicksburg or see about picking up some shrimp from the coast. It might be time for some folks to visit the city for the first time because they sure as shit can't stay here when the breeze wafts the chemical fog downwind. So everyone piles into their cars and what few flatbeds they can scrounge and they head on out the highway for safe havens and a respite from home.

And the cropdusters thrust off for the sky as the sun begins to sag into the horizon and they pull formation to a giant V of orange-chrome, leading vapor trails toward the bottomless sun.

Now the town is slap damn empty and the storefronts clang with their entry bells as the breeze blows their doors out and back with no one to batten them down, when our family in the truck pulls into the town. They roll to a stop in the middle of the street.

Virgie is the first to talk.

She says, "Where's the people, Butch? Where's the people?"

And he wonders where the people are and so do the boys.

And she says, "Where's the people, Butch? Why isn't there people?"

And he says, "There isn't no people. They're gone."

So she says, "Where'd they go, Butch? Why'd they leave?"

And he doesn't know, Christ he doesn't know, and then a stray bitch heeler wanders into the vacant street, and then he knows.

The dog sits down in the road and it stares, and her teats sag down like overripe fruit. Butch says, "Lord no." He turns off the truck and puts his head on the wheel. He

stares down at his greased-up hands. He says, “He came and took them. They got took and we didn’t and we’re the only ones left.”

And he just kind of sits there and lets the world hang down around him for a while.

And that sinks in with Virgie. And the boys go quiet because they can tell something got said that’s important in a bad way and baby sis keeps crying and the fog starts to come.

They climb out of the truck and they stare into the cloud as it drapes itself across the town, falling on buildings like a line-dried bedsheet. Shops and houses drop into a shroud that glows like a tangelo in the sunset. The courthouse goes, then the church goes, and the stray bitch heeler, she goes too. And then they hear the roar from above and they fall to their knees.

Butch starts to shriek a thousand scriptures like a street-crazed fervorman, dog-cussing the Lord with His own words. Virgie starts to wail into the evening sky. The boys cry out for the lizard because they both know what they did they shouldn’t have done and baby sis can’t shut her eyes hard enough. The sheriff and the night super cross their fingers and cup their balls in the next county, and the governor drinks himself to sleep off sour mash and his cropduster pilots laugh like jesters on fire as they bring the rapture down, and the family’s skin starts to itch like it’s crawling with weevils and all the milk in town starts to curdle and I’m pulling this out of my ass as we go like a magician with a handkerchief, but the point is Jesus God I feel like all of them tonight.