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Red, Yellow, Blue

Lauren Elizabeth Eyler
University of South Carolina

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RED, YELLOW, BLUE

by

Lauren Eyler

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Georgetown University, 2005

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Accepted by:

Elise Blackwell, Director of Thesis

David Bajo, Reader

John Muckelbauer, Reader

Agnes Mueller, Reader

Lacy Ford, Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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ABSTRACT

Red, Yellow, Blue is a hybrid, metafictional novel/autobiography. The work explores the life of Ellis, Lotte, Diana John-John and Lauren as they wander through a variety of circumstances, which center on loss and grief. As the novel develops, the author loses control over her intentionality; the character's she claims to know fuse together, leaving the reader to wonder if Lauren is synonymous with Ellis or if Diana is actually Lotte disguised by a signifier. *Red, Yellow, Blue* questions the author's as well as the reader's ability to understand the transformation that occurs in an individual during long periods of grief and anxiety. Redemption drifts through the stories, but the conflicting accounts of the main characters leave the reader wondering if anyone will find a way out of the chaos caused by life's uncertainty. By the last story, they will wonder if the author will discover a path, which leads out of the labyrinths she has created.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2: LAUREN, YOUR EX-LOVER IS DEAD	7
CHAPTER 3: KILLING LOTTE	10
CHAPTER 4: KILLING LAUREN	37
CHAPTER 5: THE BATH	67
CHAPTER 6: (0-9).....	76
CHAPTER 7: PERISCOPE (HART CRANE).....	82
CHAPTER 8: GREY ALPHABETS	89
CHAPTER 9: BENT BLUE	108
CHAPTER 10: UNTITLED.....	133
CHAPTER 11: DETAIL OF THE LAST SUPPER.....	151
CHAPTER 12: LIFPURSUIT.™	167
CHAPTER 13: GREEN CAR CRASH.....	179
CHAPTER 14: LAND’S END.....	185
CHAPTER 15: DIVER.....	204
CHAPTER 16: WATCHMAN.....	227
CHAPTER 17: CONCLUSION.....	232

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Four years ago, a French author by the name of Laurent Binet sat down to write a book in which he lays out Jozef Gabčík and Jan Kubiš roll in the 1942 assassination of Reinhard Heydrich, notorious for his participation in the Wannsee Conference, infamous for his treatment of the Czechs as the Acting Reich Protector of Bohemia and Moravia. The Czech government-in-exile assigned Jozef Gabčík and Jan Kubiš the task of killing The Butcher of Prague. And yes, the book, HHHH, is an account of Gabčík and Kubiš, but Binet disturbs the reader with intermittent comments throughout, which address his inability to accurately portray the two assassins.

Binet wants the work to be a memorial to the men, but he argues that it is impossible because he must make up inner dialogue, conversations with fellow members of the resistance, the direction the wind was blowing. He is distraught that he does not know the name of the tram that Gabčík hears as he falls asleep at night. He cannot know what goes through the men's heads as they die in a firefight with the Nazis. He yearns to write a piece of non-fiction that pays due respect to the men, the heroes, but alas, he feels he fails because he includes artifice, the color of coffee mugs, the barking of dogs, the way Heydrich's Mercedes 320 looked through the eyes of Gabčík and Kubiš. Things he could never know. We'll never know.

In Binet's attempt to accomplish this wholly non-fictional account, he actually writes a piece of non-fiction: the account of Binet's struggles with the artifice of writing. The plot, an author fighting to write an historically accurate book about an historical event when it is impossible because artifice and subjectivity guide every word written by the writer.

Do I dare call Binet's work non-fiction? Yes. Do critics call it a novel? Yes. Post-modern? Yes. There is what they might perceive to be a metafictional element. Is it? No because the writer is writing the account of how artifice plagues the truth.

I will not use the space here to chronicle my attempts to strip Binet's book of its Prix Goncourt du Premier Roman. Let us say that the French are confused about what is and is not a novel. Let us say that the French are silly. Perhaps, I should say that after three years I'd never received a response. I'd spent close to eight hundred dollars on the various letters and packages I had sent. Finally, I realized that I was writing those letters instead of my next book. I stopped caring about categorization, about artifice and, most importantly, the French.

The letters I was writing at the point that I stopped caring about Binet did not consist of complaints or invectives. I had filled them with my own grief. I did not possess any sort of grace when it came to the art of losing. Most of the letters were in blue ink and filled with large splotches from letting the pen rest too long in one place. Some had been soaked in beer.

When the blue pen ran out, all I had left were ballpoints filled with black ink. I was five beers into the day at eleven in the morning and I looked at what I was writing and found the metaphor.

Here my own history had taken whatever color I had and turned it into black and white. I was capable of smoking and drinking and, at the time, if I were a poet, I could have described my pulse as being the pulse of a thousand dead men. But fortunately, I was not a poet.

Three people died. Three, all in one year, which may not seem like much, but these were people I knew and the first was suicide. You get that call at eleven at night. You are twenty-three and all of your grandparents are alive. This man, who is forty, gets a gun. You can't possibly believe this happened, the grief of that one and, in the same year, the grief of the others weighed too much.

And with the weight of the two coffins and ashes comes the heaviness of the girl leaving you. You stand next to her looking at the Pacific Ocean you've never seen before. You look at the waves and walk up and feel the water. It's too cold to get in. You never look at her and she doesn't look at you, but in that not looking you know that you will get on a plane in Oakland and fly back to Washington, D.C. and everything will have changed. It has changed for the worse.

I sat down in the fall of 2009 and I wrote the first story I'd written in two years. And the story was true. I named it 5150. I wrote about the way it feels to ride in handcuffs to a hospital. I wrote the color of the walls were sky blue. I wrote about my roommate who discussed the ways in which she was going to kill herself once she was discharged. I wrote about the psychiatrist who broke the Caduceus in half and slept with me. When I was finished, I shared it with a few friends. My fellow writers informed me that it was cliché and boring. *This stuff happens all the time.* They told me no one wants

to read stories they can find in newspapers. “But this happened to me,” I said. “How can I tell this story?” The answer: fictionalize it.

When I calmed down, I called a friend who writes creative non-fiction. She was discussing her latest book in which she meditates about her evangelical background and the abuse of her stepfather. I commented that it must be nice to write about such things directly. She asked me what I meant by this. I answered that writers of non-fiction can write about rape or murder or dying of cancer. When a reader picks up a novel and finds these elements, she thinks “Oh how cliché.”

“Well submit it as a piece of creative non-fiction,” she said.

But when I went back to edit it, I did not remember the exact words of the man who was tackled after punching a nurse. I also didn’t remember if I had a hat with me or not, or if my roommate said she wanted to kill herself by jumping off a bridge into the Charles with a heavy weight or if that was me or maybe it was Quentin Compson. Did they serve the coffee in Styrofoam cups or plastic mugs? And here I was back with Binet. And I understood his battle with artifice. I do not know how honest he was with regard to his distress, but I felt a terror in not being able to remember everything. When I called my friend back, she laughed. “Of course you don’t remember those things, but it doesn’t matter. The experience is grounded in truth. The experience is not invented. That’s what makes it non-fiction.”

I told her thanks and hung up and considered whether or not the people in my friend’s book were people or characters. Could Jozef Gabčík and Jan Kubiš as written by Binet be Jozef Gabčík and Jan Kubiš or were they characters that Binet created. The first

line of Binet's book reads, "Gabčík—that's his name—he really did exist." But there was something behind the necessity of its insistence.

And if Gabčík can't be Gabčík, can anyone be real on the page? Can creative non-fiction be non-fiction since it claims to be authentic, but at its very best can only be somewhat accurate?

Over the next few days, I made myself crazy reading creative non-fiction. I would pause after I finished a book and ask if I felt any different than when I completed a novel. No. The author proclaims what they write is true, but the whole entire time she is imagining conversations and the color of coffee cups. She describes what a man wore to the theater or the way the sun looked on a specific day thirty years ago. She never breaks down like Binet and writes that she has idea what that a car or pillowcase looked like. I cannot remember the color—the subtext being, this is wildly inaccurate.

After finishing my seventh book in four days, I stopped. The narrators of these "real" events did not know the truth, but something that was a truth to them. They were the unreliable narrators of "real" life. Every word that was written was morphed by the writer's emotions so that feelings served as a veil, which distorted people who existed in this writer's life.

I threw out every book of creative non-fiction I owned. I threw out every copy of HHHH, of which there were five. I tore up the short-story/non-fiction piece about my time in the hospital because it wasn't as interesting as fiction and I couldn't make it true. Then I quit punishing myself, went for a walk, and stopped worrying about how artifice was a plague.

On the first page of his novel, Binet states that he finds naming characters a sickening attempt at verisimilitude and challenges other authors to write about people who “existed.” I can’t tell how much of this statement is self-righteousness and how much of it is guilt since Binet writes about Gabčík, but has to make up thoughts and actions which are of equal artificiality as another character’s name. But after much reflection, I can say to you and to myself that I will not fall victim to my own chicanery. Each character/person I write about can only speak lines that I can imagine being said. I cannot form a sentence and place it in a character’s mouth without these words filtering through the past and the present of my own experience.

I have chosen to call myself Ellis in this book, to call myself Lotte and John-John, Z, E., narrators that have no names, giant blue oxen, and a bear. This is my art of losing, the creative non-fiction that I have lived these past three years.

All characters appearing in this work are not fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is not coincidental. They are me.

Lauren Eyler.

CHAPTER 2

LAUREN, YOUR EX-LOVER IS DEAD

It's strange to have an introduction to a book that's been on the shelf for two years. In fact, it's strange to have an introduction to a book that was not well received in the literary world and sold only three hundred and twenty-one copies on its first run. Perhaps, more accurately, it is strange to have a second edition of this book at all. If the literary world is to seriously reconsider this text, it can only be after Eyler's death and amongst a culture that appreciates self-indulgence as well as narcissism.

Having read all of Eyler's work, including her juvenilia, this book fits well in the vein of her attempts at seventeen to explore overwrought misery and an obsession with the failure of her suicide attempts. It's like someone stuck a knife in her early work and whatever blood came out lies behind the few pages that I write. For the readers, who have had the privilege of reading these early pieces, the only facet that they haven't seen before is Eyler's admission to alcoholism, which if they had been around her over the past ten years, has become more and more obvious. Perhaps it would have been best for the world if she had died while drinking and driving. Then, there would have been just one story printed in a literary magazine with an acceptance rate of twenty percent, a story written in first person plural about an elephant hanging in Kingsport, TN. Of course, Eyler hacked this story from Harry Crews' non-fiction collection, *Blood and Grits*.

But, unfortunately, she did not die while drinking and driving and we have this sprawling collection of rehashed experimentation: a dilettante's attempt to explore human existence.

Lauren is kind enough to give herself an alias. Ellis. Ellis, who still obsesses about an ex that she dated almost ten years ago. She did not, however, bother to give me an alias and I crept into the few book reviews as my surname, Wirtz-Krause, is not at all common. If one searches the name on the Internet, the first thing that appears is a short story in which I am the villain. Lauren hides behind the disclaimer, "Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead is purely coincidental."

I can produce the letter that she quotes in the text. I can produce the photos of us in San Francisco with the dates still on them—dates that precede these writings. I can produce the telephone records that list the number of times she called me in one night, the most being twenty-nine. I can even produce a picture of her toe, which she broke kicking a metal planter when we were fighting in the middle of Berlin at two o'clock in the morning. What's best is the receipt for the amount spent on alcohol that night, primarily at the Gaffel Haus. What I do not have is all the more incriminating. I will comment on only one of these items—the absence of a photograph of the Eiffel Tower. It is absent because she would not leave the hotel room due to a panic attack—the panic attack being induced by my refusal to marry her. There are not many people who vacation in Paris for a week and a half without seeing the Eiffel Tower.

Yet, it is Lauren who exposes herself as her own antagonist on the page. This book serves to prove she lives in the past and cannot move forward. The most damning evidence in the pages: the preoccupation with my name. It has been ten years since our

relationship ended. I have spoken to her only once since then and it was to say that if she continued to call me I would file for a restraining order.

Supposedly, Lauren is happily married, but as I have heard through mutual friends, she proposed five times to five different people before someone relented to her suffocation.

After five years of marriage, Lauren is still trying to kill off Lotte Wirtz-Krause. Lauren is married, with three children, but refuses to let go of her anger and bitterness. We know that anger is not the opposite of love. The opposite of love is apathy.

Is her unhappiness my pleasure? No. What is the line she often quotes...”to smile and smile and be a villain?” I’m not certain that she smiles much, but when she does it is with malcontent. The pulse and throbbing of these smiles travel from South Carolina to Germany—miniature earthquakes in the heart of Berlin.

Lotte Wirtz-Krause.

CHAPTER 3

KILLING LOTTE

That morning Ellis' friend, Jill, got a call from her brother, John-John. Jill and John-John's grandfather had passed away a week ago. While he and Jill were in Kansas, listening to taps and a ten-gun salute, John-John's roommate, E., had slept with his girlfriend. Neither his girlfriend nor E. had confessed and he hadn't asked. He knew because he'd watched the infatuation between the two of them grow into the necessity of fucking.

John-John said it was a shadow dating thing, a concept that neither Jill nor Ellis was familiar with. John-John said it was sort of like a third wheel move where E. had hung around the two of them all the time and managed to convince his girlfriend that E. was, at the least, worth sleeping with.

Jill wondered how John-John had figured it out. Little things, he'd said, like his girlfriend wouldn't let him pay for dinner. She'd started staying up with him at the library instead of going to her dorm and waiting for him to come home.

He informed Jill that he was thinking about transferring to a public college in the South, away from all the kids from New York and New Jersey. Jill told him to think about it and he said he would, but from stories I'd heard impulsivity was his blood's dominant component. John-John had a propensity to conflate expectations with dreams. Jill told him to lay off the alcohol for a while, then got off the phone.

While listening to Jill's side of the conversation, tears surfaced in Ellis' eyes. Ellis looked around the apartment that wasn't hers. She'd taken to sleeping at Jill's after the break-up. Warhol and Johns covered the walls. She shrugged off the Warhol, one poster with his repetitious flowers that looked like pansies on it. Beneath it read Andy Warhol, Flowers. The multiple Johns distracted her from her pretend study of biochemistry. The words *Red, Yellow, Blue* reminded her of San Francisco, a trip to the SFMOMA. It was there that Lotte became fascinated by the word yellow painted in red. The word blue painted in yellow.

Lotte'd started reading books, autobiographies of Johns, books discussing art objects in the 20th century. She became enamored with the Dadaists, telling stories about the art of chance. One day over the summer, she told Ellis that she'd been accepted to London College and would be starting her PhD come October. Ellis didn't know she'd applied and she began to see the omission in Lotte's eyes.

“What about marriage? We talked about this, Lotte. We named our kids.”

“Ellis, it was a lark. We were dreaming.”

“So you don't want to marry me?”

“Not right now,” Lotte said, and Ellis could hear that she was trying to soothe her, a smiling tone that promised soft touches on Ellis' cheeks.

Constant fights. They went on forever each evening. Lotte would say she'd had enough and pick up a book about Gerhard Richter. She'd sit in the mauve chair in the corner of the living room with the reading lamp over her head. Ellis wondered if she could even read the words. Ellis would flick on the TV and think about Lotte's lie. Lotte's betrayal. When Lotte went to bed, Ellis cried. She crawled into the coat closet

and cried, Lotte's pastel raincoat reaching down to her eye level and the broom handle digging into her back.

A month and a half before she went east, Lotte moved in with one of her friends. Now, Ellis didn't have to cry in the closet, so she cried in the kitchen, in the shower, in the bedroom with a picture of Lotte looking at her.

The third night after Lotte moved out, Ellis started throwing up. Her emotions reached down her throat and grabbed the water she'd managed to keep down. She asked Jill if she could stay with her for a week.

“Sometimes he's so stupid,” Jill said.

Ellis closed her book. The cover was a picture of proteins dyed white. Above it the words Lehniger Principle of Biochemistry. “Yeah, well, love makes you stupid,” Ellis said.

She looked at the yellow pencil with a tip too dull to write anymore and thought about how she called Lotte at least five times a day, on average more like eight. Occasionally, Lotte would pick up and they would have the same circular conversation between Ellis' classes. The phrase ‘not right now’ repeated over and over. Three days after she'd started staying with Jill, Ellis stopped going to class.

In September, a month after Ellis had started class, the university began construction of a molecular biology department. Since then, Ellis hadn't been able to locate Dr. Farquhar, her advisor. Farquhar's office was in the same place as it had always been, room 203 on the second floor. The microbiology department was on the third floor. For four days in a row, she'd searched for his office, but all she managed to find were 204-245 and the man who delivered nitrous oxide.

The day of John-John's phone call, she failed again to find Dr. Farquhar. With a throbbing headache, she retraced her path out of the building along the concrete walls and white tiles with black spots meant to make scuff marks blend in. The inability to find Farquhar mimicked her inability to find interest in what she was studying. She couldn't decide if she'd ever liked chemistry or biology. In undergrad, the classes were a competition. She watched as hopeful doctors changed their majors over to English or History. She got an A in Orgo, better than ninety-eight percent of the class. With her score on the MCAT, her matriculation into med school was a certainty. She enrolled to continue her winning streak.

She walked through the quad, which was encompassed by tulips. Their pink and yellow comforted her, though she and her fellow classmates joked that the majority of their tuition went into buying out-of-season flowers, which would last, at most, three weeks.

Once in the classroom building, Ellis headed for the gross anatomy lab. When she entered, nobody was there. Formaldehyde hovered in the room's air. Her headache's pulse increased and nausea crept in. She looked at the fourteen sealed black body bags. Her cadaver, Belept, whose meant "alive" in German, was on the left, farthest from the door. She was glad she'd never see him again. He'd had a tattoo before she skinned him. Something about love.

It was the combination of scraping off his tattoo to view his bicep, Lotte's leaving, Dr. Farquhar's illusive office and John-John's call that led her to call it quits. She went over to her locker, which held two clean lab coats, beneath which she'd buried a book with a solid green cover and a tawny spine that read Rube.

She'd stolen it from Lotte with the intent of forcing her to meet in order to give it back to her.

She received a voicemail while she was in the lab.

It was Lotte and she wanted her book back.

"It's just like you to steal that, she said." "I know I packed it. The box was in alphabetical order. Probst, between Pamuk and Proust. Leave it in my mailbox." She left her address.

Ellis called her twice. Lotte didn't answer, and the computerized voice asking her to leave a message felt its way through Ellis' body. Surrounded by tulips, she sat on a bench considering Lotte's order. The imperative sentence transformed her pathetic attempt at reconciliation into contempt. The contempt lasted only a moment. Ellis's phone rang.

"Ellis, give the book back."

"Okay. Where do you want me to meet you?"

"Nowhere. I want you to leave it in the mailbox. I gave you the address."

"Look, I'm sorry I took it," Ellis said. "I just wanted to see you again."

"Ellis." Lotte's tone softened into "I feel sorry for you." "Maybe before I leave. I can't handle this right now."

"When do you leave?"

"I'm moving in three weeks."

Ellis picked up a small rock and tossed it out onto the red brick of the quad. "So at the end of September?"

“Yes, give me a few days to think this over, but it’s not happening unless you give me the book.”

“Okay,” Ellis said.

“And Ellis,” Lotte said. “Don’t wait for me outside my door. Don’t come over uninvited.”

Ellis had told her about the stalking incident. She followed her sophomore year girlfriend, Alice, around, even chased her down a back alley. She met her after class, Ellis crying, Alice demanding how in the hell she’d figured out her class schedule. Ellis didn’t tell her, but she had used Alice’s password to get on her student account.

“I understand,” Ellis said. The feeling of shame was on her tongue. “I’ll leave it in your mailbox tonight.”

Before she left campus, Ellis stopped in the medical administrative building slunk back to the copier and copied the first ten pages of the book.

Ellis took the metro across town. The green line and then a switch to the yellow. She walked three blocks on gray pavement, passing the row of parallel-parked cars. They looked old and tired. She took a left onto Madison where Lotte’s new place was. When she reached the mailbox and took the book out of her bag, she felt her pain mix with anger. She went to grab a pen out of her bag and scribble “good luck you’ll need it,” knowing that even if it would not hurt Lotte, it would at least make her angry.

Lotte never wrote in her books, never highlighted or underlined. When she gave them as gifts, she didn’t write “I love you” or “Christmas ’99” inside them. She always wrote her message on a piece of sky-blue stationary with a blue ink pen to avoid diminishing the book’s value.

Ellis wanted to believe that anyone looking at the situation would vindicate the destruction, and some might, but in a few hours she herself would regret it. A copy of *Rübe* was not easy to find. There had been one print run. Book collectors couldn't determine how many copies existed. The only edition was in German.

Collectors did know that Emma Probst, the girlfriend of Kaspar Marz, had written it. Kaspar Marz was responsible for the Wild West craze that swept through Germany in the late 1800s. His character's Hanootu, an Apache Indian, and his white blood brother, Steady Joe, fought together against the American Army. As history credits Goethe for the somber suits and an increased suicide rate in the late 1700s, so it credits Marz for the cowboy hats and boots that adorned his country men at the end of the 19th century.

Turnip was not about cowboys nor was it about women attending a luncheon. Probst had taken on American Civil War mythology, writing the story of Fredrick "Turnip" Taylor, the twenty-two year-old who'd saved the town of Chamblee, Georgia from destruction. He'd outfoxed a company of cavalry with a concoction of moonshine he swore he'd made with turnips his great-grandmother had grown. The Yankees slept for three days and when they awoke Turnip told them how long they'd been asleep. The company's captain ordered everyone to mount up. He didn't want the generals to think they'd deserted. They didn't have time to burn the town. During reconstruction, the captain and some carpetbaggers came back to find Turnip, but he'd disappeared to Mexico.

She sat on the curb and pulled a piece of notebook paper from her bag. In between the first sky-blue line and the second she wrote, I miss you. She slipped it in the book and placed the book in Lotte's mailbox.

Back at the apartment, Jill was cooking dinner, grilled cheese and tomato soup. Ellis' stomach turned when she smelled the butter against the pan.

"John-John took off. Just left," Jill said.

Ellis sat her bag on the chair. "He's probably in Kansas."

"I should have known he would just pick up and leave. He wasn't ever going to apply to another school. I knew it."

"I'm sorry, Jill." Ellis said. She walked past her and into the spare bedroom where she was sleeping. She took out a piece of paper. On it, she informed Jill she was going down to Chamblee, that she would call her once she got settled.

Ellis had around five thousand dollars. It was what was left over from her financial aid after tuition. Six months and she would have to start paying it all back, but for now she'd enjoy it without the smell of formaldehyde. Without his tattoo about love. The skin with the words in an incinerator. Fire melting the ink.

As she drove, she felt the photocopy of the pages from Rube that she'd jammed into her back pocket. In the passenger seat sat the old turquoise sports bag that Lotte had left behind. Ellis had crammed two pairs of jeans, a fistful of t-shirts, underwear, two sports bras and ten books that she felt she should have read by now including *Anna Karenina* and *Moby Dick*. She'd also packed, *The Postman always Rings Twice*, because she loved the non sequitur-title, and a few of Hammett's novels.

Ellis stopped twice on the way down, just at rest stops. Both times she thought about the serial killer who'd murdered ten truck drivers in the early nineties. At the North Carolina Welcome Center, she'd shuffled through brochures that advertised white water rafting and the hiking trails in North Carolina. When she hit Georgia, she found one that

promised authentic nights in a covered wagon. But there were electric lights that undermined this attempt at the authentic.

She pulled off at exit 103. A white, left arrow with Chamblee beside it rested against the government green background. Once she turned, she saw a gas station called *Cowboys* on her right. It was half-brick with large windows on one side, which displayed towers of Coke and energy drinks. A For Rent sign hung on the door with the neon orange rent crossed out by a black sharpie. The other half of the building was made of white aluminum siding and a roof covered in asphalt shingles built up like a pyramid. On its apex stood a weathervane with a large metal rooster that leered at the parking lot. As Ellis got out of the car and got a better look, she saw the name Rudd etched into its side.

The door chimed as she came in. Ellis walked over to a cooler with sandwiches in it and grabbed a pimento cheese bound by plastic wrap. She pulled three water bottles out of the refrigerators, a couple of forties, and a Coke.

When she got over to the counter, the bottles' necks stuck out of the basket she'd made with her arms. The man behind the counter grabbed a few of the bottles and Ellis was able to set the rest of down without dropping anything on the floor.

"I.D.," he said. Ellis looked up at him. The man was balding on the top, but had a beard, a light brown with a red twinge.

"You'd look twenty-one without that cap."

Ellis touched her green beanie, which had Antihero printed across the front.

"It's too damn hot outside for that. You from the Middle East where eighty degrees is cold?"

"No," Ellis said, as she handed over her driver's license.

She studied him as he looked for the date. His white nametag read R. Houston.

“Is your first name Rudd?”

The man handed the license back to her and crossed his arms. He clenched his teeth so that his beard locked in place.

“The weathervane?” she said, raising her index finger toward the roof.

“I know what you’re talking about,” he said. He studied her face. She saw in his eyes that she didn’t belong there. She wished she hadn’t worn the hat.

He shook his head and sighed.

“No, it’s Robert.” He turned to the register and started punching numbers in.

“The gal whose grandfather owned the place made me promise to keep that weathervane up there. Thought her grandfather’s ghost twisted it around at night.”

“His first name was Rudderidge. Last name Posey. When half the place burnt down a few years back, the woman had four of her boys build that white siding to replace the brick. Two years later, she wanted it sold and I bought it. The weathervane was in the contract. Twelve ninety-five.”

She pulled a wadded twenty from her pocket and handed it to him. He flattened it against the glass counter. Beneath the glass she saw around twenty-five types of tobacco.

There was a red package with an Indian on the front wearing a war bonnet, a blue that read Savage and Co. and a yellow that read Ampers.

The drawer popped open, and he counted her change. She stuck it in her pocket and picked up the bag.

“Have a nice day,” she said.

He waved a dismissive hand at her. She pushed the door open with her back. Robert had already disappeared from behind the counter. The bells slapped against the door as she left.

Ellis cruised the town for a hotel. On the main road, she saw a movie theater called the Ritz. Its marquee asked her to come watch a movie at the best theater in town. The tiles rose above its white lines, a maroon dotted with yellow lights composed two skyscrapers that reached into a black sky. Stars, white and glowing, dotted the black. Someone hadn't told these folks that there weren't stars in the city. She found it optimistic.

The rest of the street had tiled walls as well. Green tiles surrounded by black announced the Chamblee Deli, red enclosed by a turquoise, Haskin's Stationers. Ellis took a left. The residents had given up on this part of town. A couple of rundown pizza places dotted the road. A mechanic's garage had tiles hanging from its ledge. She saw a motel, but she couldn't imagine staying there. The thin green bedspreads dotted with tears. The rails on the second floor were rusted and ready to fall, and the parking lot was empty.

She'd imagined Chamblee as something else. Quaint and easy to fall into a rhythm. People waving at her as she drove by. A few bed and breakfasts that served grits. Quilts by a sewing circles, hanging in antique shop windows. But no one was on the street. There weren't even magnolia trees, trees that appeared in every novel, every short story set in the South. Grey buildings grew out of the ground instead.

She thought of driving on to Savannah, but it wasn't Chamblee.

As much as the place felt like a rotting forest, she knew that something was hiding in the dilapidation. She turned and headed back to *Cowboys*, Rent etched into her mind.

Houston was on his knees in the first aisle. He was setting cans of soup on the shelf. When he looked up, he grimaced and then turned his attention back to the soup.

“Are you renting something?” she said.

He went back to looking at the cans, their labels white in the middle with the red stripe around the top. “Why would you think that?”

“There’s a sign in the window that says rent.”

“Oh that,” he said. “Yeah, it’s Wieland’s place. He’s in the state pen for two years for cooking meth.”

“What’s it like?” she said.

He used the floor to push himself up. “It’s a shack made out of wood. A bedroom with a deer head hanging from the wall. Laminate floors. A living room with a couch yellow as phlegm and a busted black and white TV. A kitchen with a gas range and a fridge that has one cabinet full of mason jars.” As he talked, he moved back behind the counter. “What’s your name?”

“Ellis,” she said.

“You have a last name?”

“I have cash.”

He laughed. “Well Ellis or Ms. Ellis, I’ll rent you the place on the condition that you don’t wear those stupid hats and you get a hair cut, short and a bob so you half look like a woman. There’s a place called Billy’s on Main.” He gestured behind himself using a loose fist with his thumb sticking out.

“How much?”

“Two hundred bucks for the month,” he said. “And, then you’re out. It’s hunting season. You can get the key after the haircut.”

When she came back, hair up to her ears and curled under, Houston smiled.

“I didn’t expect you to be back. Don’t look like the type to take orders from men.”

“I’m not, but right now I’m too tired to care.”

He reached under the register and pulled out a thin white pamphlet. It had grey writing on the front, but he flipped it onto its back before she could read it. He scrawled the directions to the shack in pencil.

“Place is this sky-blue color,” he said. “Swear to God that guy’s a fruit, but he’s a good guy all the same.” He slid the pamphlet toward her.

“Let me go get you the key,” he said. He turned and opened the door to the room that had bundles of tobacco pouches stacked up.

Ellis turned the pamphlet over. *The Story of Fredrick Turnip Taylor.*

“Where’d this come from?” Ellis said to Houston’s back. He looked back to see what she was talking about.

“Oh. That thing was written by his niece, Charlotte Turner. She called it a collection of ghost stories. And all the stories are true.”

He handed her the key and pointed to a line beneath Charlotte’s name. *And all of them are true.*

“Ghost stories?” Ellis said. “Did she write them before or after he saved the town?”

“Saved the town?” Houston said. “That baby was a stillborn. His mother had him the day the Federal Troops took the town.”

“Why’d they call him Turnip? There’s no liquor involved.”

“Why in the hell would there be liquor?” he said. “Baby came out the shade of a white turnip. He was a bad sign, but, according to Charlotte, a good ghost.”

“Did you...”

“Here’s the key. Now look, I’m not a walking history book. You’ve got questions go ask Ginny Posey herself.”

“The same person as the weathervane.”

“Yes,” he handed her the key.

She slipped it into her back pocket. “Where does she live?”

His lips curved into a smile. It vanished as fast as it appeared. “Why, she’s dead,” he said. “Now you take care.”

“Oh, and if I catch you smoking weed, I’ll kick you out faster than Jack Robinson.” This time he left the smile on his face. It was hard with touches of his threat. “But feel free to buy all the liquor and beer you want.” He pointed to the back wall of his store, which he’d stocked with rail liquor.

“Sure,” Ellis said and walked out the door.

Ellis forced herself to unpack before she sat down to study the pamphlet. She stuck her books on the shelf that hung above the busted TV. She took a step back and noted that the screen was cracked from the upper left hand corner to the bottom right. Aside from the books and TV, the room’s only other inhabitants were the couch that Houston had accurately described.

The color of yellow phlegm and a wooden TV stand that had an uncountable number of nicks.

Ellis took the brown bag into the kitchen. There was a mini-fridge and a gas range, white with black coils. She was used to electric, but had lived in a number of old houses so she knew how they worked. She would have to get matches.

She opened the fridge. The last person who'd stayed had left a coconut on the bottom shelf. She shoved it back and placed the bottles of water in front of it. She fit the forties on the top shelf by placing them on their sides.

She took the sandwich to the couch and unwrapped it. She set it down on the cushion making sure that it didn't touch the fabric. Sitting Indian style, she opened the pamphlet.

In the beginning was the Word and when the Yanks came the beginning was Frederick Taylor. He came out before he could draw his first breath, his head, his body weren't red, but white the color of grandma's turnips. So he was blessed as Turnip Taylor and before we lay his body to rest, he said he was not the light, but came to spread it. And Turnip has spread a light, a sheen the color of cotton and travels with me. Turnip is my map. We never stray from the Town of Chamblee. I am home here. Turnip is home here. Turnip.

Ellis pulled the photocopies from her back pocket. She compared the English with the German. Probst hadn't translated the word Yanks and the word lay in an almost identical place in the two texts. Rot and Weiß and their corollaries in Charlotte's text were in the same line. Where there was a Frederick Taylor, there was a Frederick Taylor. Five Rübe and five Turnips and the fifth was the last word in both paragraphs.

Ellis thought that it could be explained.

Charlotte Turner's tales would evolve into Probst's. Somehow the specter would morph into Probst's version. Turner would reimagine her brother, the savior of Chamblee. Lotte must have skipped that part.

As Ellis read further, Charlotte never swayed from the idea that Turnip was a ball of white light. Turnip sat through Church. Turnip said his prayers at night. He also helped in the garden. When Charlotte was at the women's Bible study, the ghost left for fear he would be privy to some matter that was not his. This was the only time he left her.

Then the story took a turn and morphed into what Ellis knew to be the Gospel of John, but where the words Jesus, God, or John were supposed to be, Charlotte had placed the word Turnip there. Ellis thumbed through the pamphlet looking for the words Mexico, moonshine, Reconstruction. Instead, she found the names Simon, Nicodemis and place names like Samaria and Judea. When she looked at Probst's piece, she found those same words. She wouldn't have to get the German dictionary out of her car. She placed the copied pages on the couch next to Charlotte's work and took a deep breath. She wanted to call Lotte because she wanted to know why she'd lied, but she didn't want to cry into the phone or scream or accuse her of anything. She did call Jill and leave a message with her Chamblee address and told her she would be back in a month.

Ellis glanced around the room. She wanted to hear voices more than anything. The dial on the TV moved and the TV was plugged in, but it wouldn't make a sound. She hit the side of it and a hollow pop burst into the air.

Ellis glanced up at the books, at the fiction she'd brought along. She hated all of them for their ability to pretend well enough that the reader might think she was reading about somebody who existed. The presence of the books caused something to fall from her throat and into her chest. Whatever it was lodged in her throat and she gagged. She dropped to her knees. Her mouth did not water, but a stomach spasm took hold of her insides. Her hands pushed into the sticky laminate while bile poured out from her throat. And the thing that pulled the liquids from her insides, was the fact that those books and *Rübe* had something in common.

When she picked up her phone again, this time to call her parents, it chirped, letting her know it was about to die. Ellis searched her bags, the trunk, beneath the car's seats, but she couldn't find the charger. She sat in the front seat of the car, door open, her head hanging between her knees. The man on public radio talked about the stock market. A woman came on and discussed the Red Tide with a fisherman from Massachusetts. When dusk turned to night, Ellis went in the house, got into the bed, without taking her clothes off and willed herself to sleep.

She woke up mouth dry. Lotte's face a smile, the smile flowing into the red of her cheeks. Brown curls. Blue, blue eyes. She was a bobbing head, no context.

The deer over the closet peered down at Ellis. She got up and draped a coat over its antlers so she could no longer see its eyes. She stood as the coat swayed until it stopped. She forced herself to believe that the pamphlet and the book were one.

Ellis had driven down to Chamblee believing that if she translated the German she would somehow find the words that would convince Lotte that they were meant to be. Something right along the line of the Brontës.

The act of reading Charlotte's work in English had been a different act of discovery. Now she had to reconcile Lotte's and Charlotte's fictions.

Ellis bit down on her thumb and looked at her jacket hanging from the antlers. What could she do? A bender seemed like a reasonable reaction. Ethanol, CH_3CHO . The model she'd constructed during Orgo, looking like a poodle to her, the red oxygen, the head, the two gray carbons making the body and the hydrogen forming both legs and a tail. She could go over to *Cowboys* and see if Houston wasn't leaving anything out.

The bell dinged when she walked in the door. Houston wasn't behind the counter or stocking the shelves. The door behind the register was wide-open, Indians smoking peace pipes looked at Ellis from the shelves.

"Houston," she said, but heard nothing. "Houston?"

When she was sure he wasn't there, she went behind the counter and bent down. There was a stack of around forty pamphlets. Ten of them had a picture on the front. The only words beneath were *And all of them are true*. Ellis pulled one of these out and stuck it into the back of her pants and pulled her shirt over it.

Ellis heard a door close in the back. She went to the front door and opened it and let it fall closed behind her.

"Well, Ms. Ellis. What a surprise."

"Just had to grab some food. You have eggs?"

"Sure, in pink cartons over there in the fridge." He took his place behind the counter. "Is that all you're looking for?"

Ellis felt the book slipping down into her underwear. She nodded and turned to the fridge where he'd said the eggs were.

“Trouble is,” he said, “the eggs are on the bottom shelf and I don’t think Ms. Turner’s book will be safe where it is. You bend down, I’m pretty sure it’ll come out.” He tilted his head and smiled at her. “You’re amusing. Show up to town looking for some big secret when there isn’t one and then I tell you to get a haircut and you go get a haircut. Then, you come in here and play detective and you take something not given to you, which is what I’d call stealing.”

Ellis removed the book and brought it over to the counter. She laid it in front of him and she slid it toward him. He sighed.

“So who is it?” Ellis said. She jammed her finger against the black and white photo of the man.

“Do you think that Posey’s ghost is up in the weathervane?” Houston said.

“What does that have to do with this?”

He laughed without making a sound and rubbed his hands through his hair. “It’s not Turnip. It’s Jessie James.” Houston got a rag out from beneath the register and started wiping down the counter. “Charlotte read all those dime novels and got herself convinced that Turnip headed over to run with their gang. By that point, long after her stories were run, Charlotte started seeing him as a man, not just as a light.”

“How do you know all of this?” Ellis said.

He looked at Ellis. “The weathervane told me”

“Ms. Ellis, I’m no sage, but whatever you think you are going to find in those books isn’t there. I suggest looking for something else.” He motioned to the refrigerator.

“Eggs and a forty are on me.”

The next few days were sour. She thought about Lotte and the book and wondered how Lotte'd decided on the story to tell. She wondered if she'd read it in another book and imposed the plot on Charlotte's text.

Twice a day, she made eggs. She went to *Cowboys*, but Houston wasn't there. A bearded man stood behind the counter reading men's health magazines. Ellis bought a forty each time she went in. She thought that the man must think she was an alcoholic, but Ellis hadn't had one since she moved in. There were now six in her refrigerator.

Those first three mornings, she sat with a pad of notebook paper. She began drawing Cycloalkanes. The conformations of cyclohexane were beautiful to her: chair, half chair, twist boat, half twist boat, planer. She used the edge of a piece of paper to ensure that the straight lines were straight. She pressed lightly on her pencil to sketch the equatorial bonds, harder on the axial, even though this made her work inaccurate.

In the afternoon, Ellis drove out to Bullock State Park. She found the brochure that promised clean trails, untouched wildlife, even a waterfall, though Ellis didn't want to walk the five miles there and five miles back to see it.

At the park she could stand on the banks of the Cliegshead and listening to children play, mothers talking about town. Both the children and the adults kept an eye on Ellis. She knew she was an outsider—an outsider with a beanie in her back pocket, her hair too short now to stick out the bottom.

On her third afternoon, Ellis waded out into the water and let herself float. A fresh water spring that lay upstream mixed with the water heated by the sun. She floated atop the jumble of cold and living decay. The current carried her upstream so that when she got out she had to walk twenty minutes to get back to the beachhead. When she

returned, a small woman in a moo moo walked over to her and told her the river wasn't safe enough to swim in. Five people had drown that summer. Ellis assured her she had had six years of swimming lessons. The woman shook her head and walked off.

At noon the next day, the rain started. It went light, then hard. The drops ticked against the window. Ellis picked up the notepad and started a letter to Lotte. She used words like betrayal and wrote that she hated her so much she knew she still loved her. She told Lotte how sick it made her to think that she would be with someone else. After she finished writing, Ellis felt fear—the fear that her pathetic longing would result in years of chasing Lotte or obsessively calling and writing letters. Of touch-and-go sanity. She would again turn into a stalker. And weren't her actions those of one already, driving to some town out of a book of fiction that Lotte loved. She saw the image of herself at the copy machine and self-hatred grew in her stomach.

She finished the note and picked up the copied pages and the letter. The burner clicked two times before the blue and yellow flame leapt up. Ellis watched the papers' slow burn. When she finished, she threw the blackened remnants into the yard so that the water would melt them.

Thirty minutes later, *The Thin Man* in her hand, she smelled gas and went into the kitchen. She turned off the burner and wondered how long it would have taken for the gas to asphyxiate her. The rain poured down on the house and a leak sprang. Before she went to bed that night, she'd emptied three pans of water and hoped the rain would taper off in the morning.

Ellis woke to the slap of the screen door. She figured it was Houston making sure she hadn't smoked weed, but she heard Lotte's voice call "Ellis."

Something frozen ran through her chest.

“Give me a second, Lotte.”

In the bathroom, she turned on the cold water full blast. She knelt down on the floor and rested her forehead against the sink’s edge. Jill was the only one that knew where she was. She wouldn’t have told Lotte. And then she thought that maybe Lotte was back for good. Who drives eight hours to see someone just to say hi? Lotte came down to get her back.

In the living room, she sat on the couch. She was flipping through the notebook of confirmations.

“You dropped out of school.” Lotte smiled. “I never thought you were the doctor type.” She wore a light blue and white-striped shirt, the same shirt Ellis had taken off the first day they’d had sex. The top of her breasts peaked out through the v-neck. That bone-white skin that Ellis had held close, kissed.

“Yeah, I was miserable.”

“You might like being a chemist.”

“How did you know where I was?” Ellis said. She took the drawings out of Lotte’s hands all the while staring at her blue eyes that Lotte insisted were green. She was the first girl Ellis had dated whose eyes weren’t brown.

“You called me, Ellis.

“No, I called Jill”

“I’ll play it back to you,” she said, and Ellis realized that Jill and Lotte’s voicemails went straight to computer recordings, which said to leave a message after the beep.

“I meant to call Jill.” Elli said, and buried her hand in the crook of her arm so she wouldn’t have to look at her.

“So you aren’t happy to see me?” Lotte said.

“Do you want to get back together with me?”

“Ellis, just because I missed you enough to drive down here doesn’t mean we should be together.”

“You should leave,” Ellis said. “I don’t want to see you.”

Lotte stood and walked over to her. Her index finger slid from Ellis’ neck to behind her ear. She pressed her lips into Ellis’.

Ellis kissed her back, but then pulled away. She was dizzy.

“You have anything to drink?” Lotte said.

“Water or beer?” Ellis said.

“Beer,” Lotte said. Lotte hugged her. It was a long hug. Ellis let go first and went to the kitchen to retrieve two forties.

Lotte took a long pull from her can. She hated hot beer and thought forties were a waste because they weren’t cold once you reached the bottom. Ellis sipped hers. She wasn’t planning on drinking the whole thing. She wanted Lotte gone.

Ellis couldn’t sit down next to her. Even when Lotte patted the couch, she shook her head.

“Lotte,” Ellis said. “Why did you lie to me?”

“Because I knew I wouldn’t be able to fill out applications if you were upset with me.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” Ellis said.

She went over to the bookshelf and pulled the pamphlet that was sandwiched between *Bleak House* and *Catch-22*. Ellis handed it to her.

Lotte opened it and read the first two pages. “It’s nothing like Probst,” she said. “Isn’t this the Book of John?”

“Yes,” Ellis said, “but it’s the same as Probst.

“You’ve never seen the original. You never wanted to?”

“What would’ve been the point since I couldn’t read German?” Ellis said. Her eyes dropped to the floor. “You made it up.”

“I read what Probst wrote.”

Ellis was about to say that she’d photocopied the book, but Lotte would find that disturbing. She’d say that Ellis was crazy and that she’d known she shouldn’t have come. Lotte would tell her she ought to see a shrink before she ended up with a restraining order. Ellis wished she’d never told her anything about college and her girlfriend.

“I’m sorry,” Ellis said.

“How could you even translate it without my book?” Lotte stood up from the couch and hugged Ellis again. “Maybe you should come back to D.C.”

“Maybe.”

They sat and drank until they ran out of beer. Ellis poured out more than half of the three that she drank. Lotte finished hers off.

She pulled Ellis to the floor and they had sex. Ellis faked it, on the verge of throwing up the whole time.

“I want to show you the park. There’s a waterfall. You have to see it,” Ellis said.

She was pulling on her jeans.

She left Lotte sitting in the car and went into *Cowboys*. The bearded man stood by the counter. No sign of Houston. Ellis said hi and headed over to the fridge where the cold beers were. She grabbed two thirty-two ounces, a German beer that Lotte and Ellis drank while they were together. On the back shelf, Ellis found a bottle of vodka that contained about six shots.

After she paid, Ellis asked the cashier if she could use the restroom and he nodded. Once inside, she opened one of the forties. Ellis took two large gulps and then reached over to the paper bag and took out the vodka. She poured half of the vodka into the open beer and poured the rest down the sink. When Ellis got to the car, she handed the open beer to Lotte.

“Is this skunked?” she said, after taking a sip.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have bought the imported stuff out here. You can throw it out if you want,” Ellis said, but Lotte kept drinking it.

Ellis drove the exact speed limit. The two-lane road was hard to navigate even when sober. On her first trips over to the park, Ellis had gone ten, twenty over not minding her recklessness, but now she didn’t want to get pulled over.

Pine trees and oaks surrounded the parking lot. The oaks’ leaves were at their peak, the darkest green they would see before they began their decay. There was one car parked in the spot farthest from the entrance. Ellis pulled into the first spot, fitting the car between the yellow lines.

“Well, are you going to drink that or not?” Lotte was taunting her.

It reminded Ellis of the occasional drinking games they played while watching movies.

The most egregious were called wizard sticks, where they drank cans of light beer and duct-taped them together. Whoever's stick was the longest at the end won. Ellis used to wake up with duct tape stuck to her fingers, her shirt damp from the beer that had run off her chin. Even with hangovers rattling in their heads, the winner would rub in the loss.

“You haven't grown soft on me down here?” Lotte said.

“No,” Ellis said. “I was driving.” She pulled out the other beer and opened it.

They clinked the necks together and began chugging. Ellis felt the alcohol in her toes rising up into her head, making her thoughts lighter. Ellis had to stop before she finished, before she drank enough to go sentimental and lose her resolve.

Ellis didn't hear her bottle hit the ground.

“Yup, you're soft,” she said and she moved over and took the beer from Ellis' hand. She let it fall to the ground and kissed her, but Ellis didn't let her pull her in.

“Let's see this waterfall,” she said.

That was the point, if there ever was one, in which Ellis could have turned around and stopped everything. Ellis could have called Farquhar and told him she wanted back in, gotten a psychological evaluation and had them diagnosis her with a depression that excused her absences. Maybe Ellis could even convince him that she was too damaged to finish gross anatomy with a cadaver.

Lotte gripped Ellis' hand and squeezed it. The pressure ran from her fingers into her heart and she thought of Turnip Taylor, of Charlotte, and Probst. These thoughts returned a strength in her hands that would make choking anyone as easy as picking a flower. Ellis could look at her hair, those brown spinning curls and she could look at

Lotte's eyes and feel her hand on her shoulders, but Ellis was conscious enough to know that turning them into anything but images and sensations would only harm herself.

They walked along the path, Ellis sipping her beer. The dirt trails had turned to stiff mud over night. When they passed the white sign with an arrow pointing to the falls, Lotte asked why they didn't follow the trail.

"I know a faster way." Ellis said. "Trust me."

Ellis walked in a circle. If she hadn't, it would have taken them ten minutes to reach the riverbank. Ellis wanted to make certain that the alcohol had a chance to settle into Lotte's arms and legs. When Ellis felt her own legs weaken, she took Lotte's hand and returned to the trail.

They stood on the shore of the river. The brown water had transformed into one perpetual silver wave. Even if Lotte weren't drunk, Ellis believed she would have agreed to the race. To the rock wall that rose ten feet above the water and back to the beach pebbled with bits of glass.

When she said go, Ellis ran into the river until it smashed against her knees. She watched Lotte dive, her arms in an arc. She came to the surface, her face in the water, her hands cupped reaching above her head, attempting to push the water away from her. The current carried her out of sight.

Ellis heard a voice further up stream and screamed for help. When the man reached her, now back on the shore he looked down at the bottle of beer and screamed "you fucking kids are a bunch of fucking idiots."

Ellis didn't know if the missing would have hurt more if she'd gone out to California, but the pain she caused herself was enough.

CHAPTER 4

KILLING LAUREN

The kids did cannonballs, jackknives, belly flops off the sides. Yells of bonsai and watch out, the unnatural way their bodies hit the water, the loud smack that accompanied them. She was used to clean entries and silent flutter kicks. The pool at Pepperdine was only for the swim team. There were whistles and echoes of coaches' instructions, but no screeching. No splashing. No boisterous play as her coach put it.

“You're going to get heat stroke, Diana.” She looked down from the stand and saw Gary's head, bald and dotted with freckles. He was the manager of the pool. She'd known him since she was four and joined the swim team.

“You've said that every summer for eight years, but here I am, heat-stroke free.” She wanted to make a backhanded comment about how he'd help her parents in their quest to force her into therapy. They'd grown concerned when she'd begun swimming in shorts and a t-shirt at practices and meets. When she refused to tell them why and told them she'd drown herself before she talked to a shrink, they'd convinced Gary to tell her that he would kick her off the team if she didn't go.

Gary sighed. He looked up at her, shaking his head. “Well, just remember to...”

“Keep hydrated. I got it, Gary.” She picked up a water jug and shook it so the ice crunched against the sides.”

He smiled and raised his hands to block the sun. “You still want Sunday nights? Just you and no one else. This isn’t some big rich people country club that can handle lawsuits.”

She gave him a thumbs up.

Alright sister,” He walked away with a slower step than last summer.

“Hey, no running,” she said to a boy, the bottom of his swimsuit stuck to his knees. He stopped, but walked as fast as he could, shoulders hunched forward. She enjoyed whistling for the next rest period. For the last ten minutes of each hour, everyone under sixteen had to vacate the pool. There was a collective moan. She watched the little boy, his ribs visible beneath his tan, slam his hands on the water, heard him whine, though she couldn’t make out what he said.

Adults got into the pool. Diana watched as some donned goggles and swam laps. Others peeled off their cover-ups and dipped their bodies into the water. Few women would go underneath, like her mother, they didn’t want to get their hair wet.

During the fourth rest period of the day, Diana saw her. Lauren was the only one that wasn’t doing flip turns in the water. Lauren’s mother had forced her to do swim team. As pay back for the coercion, Lauren refused to learn how to do them. Instead, she touched with the wall with one hand. It always left her in third place behind Diana and the other team’s best swimmer.

Diana and Lauren were the only girls at Taylor High School who received athletic scholarships—Diana for swimming and Lauren for soccer. Diana remembered the cameras flashing as they sat at a table in front of the school’s yellow-and-blue seal and signed their letters of intent. The black-and-white photograph of commitment day was

still pinned to her corkboard at home, along with pictures of friends and signs made to wish her good luck at meets. She and Lauren had dressed up in button-up shirts. They both wore glasses and had the picture-taking smile plastered across their faces. She hadn't seen Lauren for over three years. She hadn't seen her swim for five, but Lauren still had the muscle memory from her ten years on the club's swim team. Diana stood ten feet away and watched her so as not to interrupt. Lauren executed freestyle with perfect form. The bottom of her green swim cap cresting the water's surface, arm extending from her shoulder, body pivoting to facilitate the extension, the curve in her hand pulling back toward her stomach. When she turned her head to the side to breathe, Diana saw her yellow goggles, the same pair she'd worn when they were younger.

During her break, Diana sat reading a book about the SS Leopoldville, a Belgian cruise-liner-turned-troopship, sunk by a U-boat on Christmas Eve of 1944. Her uncle, Carol, and seven hundred and sixty-two other soldiers, had drown that night. She'd just received the book in the mail the day before. It was the first account published about that night. The United States Government had classified the tragedy, as it was the fault of the Allied Forces. It had finally released the documents in the sixties, but it took almost forty years for anyone to gather enough information and eyewitness accounts to publish a worthy account.

Ever since her mother had told her about Carol's death, she'd become obsessed with it. The nightmares started at nine and continued to plague her. She drowned, not just in the ocean or the pool, but in the bathtub, the sink, a rain puddle. When she swam now, she felt like Carol's death was chasing her. She thought drowning was in her blood.

As she read, the words turned into shapes. The dream that haunted her most found its way to the surface. There was Carol in the ocean, trying to tread water, to fend off the weight of his clothes. There was the rope just out of reach and Carol warped into her. She could hear herself saying it's cold. It's cold. She knew she would drown in the dream, but she always woke up before it happened.

The chair next to hers slid out and the metal grated against the concrete.

"Nice shirt." Lauren said. "The Pepperdine Waves. She sat down next to Diana, a towel draped around her neck. Lauren sat a thick book on the table.

"That's where I go to school," Diana said.

"Do you think I forgot?" Lauren said. "The Waves. Pretty tough mascot."

"What's yours?"

Lauren bit her lip. She looked at the pool. "I'm on break. A one-year medical leave of absence. I'm mascotless."

Diana followed her gaze and saw dusk rising. She'd watched many sunsets on the coast at school. She'd come to the point where they had all merged together. Every sunset looked the same, the same pinks and oranges. They'd become less real, the skies of painters more than photographers.

"What are you reading?" Diana asked.

"I don't know." Lauren flipped the book over. "*Every Man Dies Alone.*"

Diana closed her book. "Sounds uplifting."

"So you still wear those?" Lauren was studying her shorts, her T-shirt.

Diana looked down and nodded.

She could feel Lauren looking at her. “I don’t wear them at school. It’s not allowed. I come here on Sunday nights and swim without them.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything.” Lauren reached out to touch her, but withdrew her hand.

Before Lauren could say anything else, Diana stood up. “I have to get back to work,” But, she felt bad leaving Lauren like that her hands clasped on the table, frowning. “Do you want to swim some laps after I get off?”

Lauren looked at her and gave her a half-smile. “As long as we’re not racing,”

“I promise,” Diana said.

When Diana returned to her stand, she saw Lauren sit down in a chair that was in Diana’s line of view. She was wearing sunglasses. Her book was open and Diana watched her turn the pages. It took a girl’s shriek as she jumped off the high dive for Diana to realize that she hadn’t looked at the pool since she’d been on the stand.

A few weeks later, they were walking toward their houses together, surrounded by porch lights and the flashes of television screens. Diana looked into kitchen and living room windows. Her shorts and shirt were still wet, but it was hot enough that it didn’t matter.

“You remember all those games we played after practice?” Lauren said. She was kicking pebbles down the road. There were no street lamps so they disappeared in the dark that lay ahead of them.

“Yeah. When Gary dyed ice cubes.” Diana said. “He’d throw buckets in at a time.” Spots of blue, yellow and red bobbed on the surface. The coaches would dive in and scatter them so that they floated from the shallow to the deep end.

It had been her favorite game until she'd heard about Carol. The churning water, the number of thrashing bodies, her teammates struggling to swim with ice cubes clutched in their fist mirrored what she imagined the ocean to be like that night. There were too many arms and legs, too many bubbles beneath the water. When a boy's elbow struck her in the back, she'd lost her breath. She swam to the steps and had to use the rail to get out, the place where the boy's arm had struck her began to grow into a bruise. After that, she found her way to the bathroom when she saw Gary hauling out the buckets.

Lauren kicked another pebble, her sandal scuffing the pavement. "There were those idiot guys that used plastic handcuffs to play "Houdini."

"I always wanted to try that," Diana said, "but didn't want to get kicked out." When the boys were caught, Gary suspended them for the rest of the summer. Diana was always afraid she'd do something to be suspended from the team. She made certain to walk, rising up on her tiptoes so that she would go slower.

"And Green River," Lauren said. "The adults made us change the name once they realized it was named after a serial killer."

"Fishes underwater." Diana said. "The Green River Serial Killer."

Lauren pulled her hand from her pocket. "It sounds like a ride at the state fair." She bent down and picked up a rock and heaved it down the street.

Diana could hear the rock bounce before it rolled to a stop somewhere in front of them.

"Every time I was in the middle, I'd go after Brad. I'd go under and pretend I was trying to tag someone else, but I watched for him to jump in. If I caught him, I'd pinch him on the back of his legs and arms."

“That’s how I broke my nose. He kicked me underwater.”

Diana stopped. Lauren’s rock kicking had led her out into the middle of the street, and Diana couldn’t see her face. “I didn’t know you did that.”

“What else could I do? You told me not to tell anyone.”

“You didn’t have to do anything,” Diana said. “I didn’t ask you to do anything to him.”

“You started wearing clothes in the pool. I thought if I scared him away, you could go back to wearing your swimsuit.”

“It didn’t matter. I could still outswim everyone.”

She heard words catch in Lauren’s throat.

Diana veered off into her neighbor’s yard without saying anything. When she got to the front door and looked back at the road, she expected to see Lauren, but there was nothing except the magnolias and oak trees and the mailbox.

The next day, Lauren invited her to see a movie. Before they went, they stopped for coffee. Diana had a green tea. She had enough trouble sleeping without caffeine. Lauren ordered an espresso, four shots and didn’t wince at what Diana imagined was incredible bitterness.

On the way to the table Lauren said, “So what’s the Leopoldville?”

Diana glanced at Lauren. “How do you know about that?”

“Well it was in big bold letters across the cover of the book you we’re reading.”

As she pulled out her chair, Diana felt her hand shaking. She’d told the therapist that Carol’s death was the reason she wore the clothes. If she practiced with the weight of soggy cotton and polyester, it wouldn’t be what killed her in the end. Even though the

therapist told her that it was irrational, Diana said that she had to wear them. One session, her parents came and she told them about Carol too. The therapist asked Diana to leave the room. Through the closed door, she heard the therapist tell her parents that it was a phase and she would grow out of it.

Diana steadied herself by focusing on a poster with a sky-blue mug on it. White letters outlined in black read, “We Serve Fair Trade Coffee.”

She told Lauren the same story. When she finished, Lauren’s brow furrowed. “So that’s why you wear your clothes?”

“Yes,” Diana said and she got up to go to the bathroom before Lauren could ask anymore questions.

Diana stood on the platform top and looked out over the pool. There were no lights built into its sides. The darkness had settled on it, making it appear deeper than it was. She thought of it as a man-made pond.

The trees behind the four-foot chained link fence were shadows. Their leaves were still. To her right, the deep end’s water was undisturbed by the children crashing into it from the diving boards. Further beyond the pool’s confines was a small forest that huddled over a branch of the Little Harpeth River. The river ran shallow unless there was a heavy rain.

She dove into the water, swimming beneath the surface, her dolphin kick propelling her until she reached the line that marked where the stroke had to begin. She kicked and drove her body through the water. Her hands reached above her submerged head and pulled along her sides. Her next kick thrust her shoulders, neck, and head out of the water. She took a breath and plunged her arms back in.

She swam a four hundred and then got out of the pool. A breeze brushed along her biceps, along her thighs, which were now free from the strictures of the t-shirt and shorts.

When she'd mounted the platform again, she noticed a light on in the clubhouse. It poured out of the office's open door and reached fifteen feet until it fell over the shallow end.

She looked around and saw nobody. Everything was silent except the cicadas, their hum rising and falling.

"Not bad."

She turned to see Lauren sitting behind her. She could make out the bill of her hat.

"Toughest stroke. I've always been impressed with your form."

Diana said nothing. She wished she'd left her clothes on.

Lauren took her shirt off, exposing the top half of her bathing suit. "Care if I join you?" Lauren said.

Diana turned again to see the light spilling from the door. "Did you break in?"

"Just to see if I could. There was no alarm."

Pressure gathered behind Diana's eyes. She took a deep breath to help ease the tension, but she could feel a wave of light-headedness in her temples. "You aren't supposed to be here. You need to leave."

When Lauren didn't move, Diana wanted to get out and punch her. She wanted Lauren to understand that this wasn't a game. Yet, Diana knew that Lauren was just as strong as she was.

Diana had seen the muscles in her arms and legs as she did laps. “Gary made me promise that I wouldn’t bring anyone with me.”

“Well, you didn’t bring me.” Lauren got up and walked toward her still wearing her shorts.

“Get out.”

“All right. Take it easy.” Lauren walked along the edge of the pool and through the open door. The light went out.

Diana waited until she was sure Lauren was gone, and then swam to the ladder and climbed out of the pool. She ran across the concrete, her wet feet slapping against it. Dressed, she hopped the fence. She ran through the backyards until she reached her house. She let herself in.

That night she lay in her bed and wished that the dream would come. In it, she hoped there would be endless breakers, multiple currents sucking at her skin. She wanted to feel herself drowning. She wanted the moment where her arms were too heavy and the searchlights flickered. That water. The numbness. She wanted to slip deep into it all and land in the soft, frozen sand.

The first Sunday was not the last. She could sense Lauren staring at her from behind the holly bushes, behind the trees, her fingers touching the damp ground.

Diana wore her clothes. She dove into the water and when she surfaced the t-shirt and shorts felt heavier than usual. She couldn’t breathe normally. Her strokes were off. Her legs wouldn’t kick the way they should.

After two weeks of this, she gave in.

“Lauren, you can come out.”

She emerged from behind a bush, dusting off her pants. She hopped over the fence without having to use the railing. She jumped and landed on two feet. The soles of her shoes hitting the pavement reverberated across the pool.

Diana swam over to meet her at the side. "I asked you not to come."

Lauren pulled a chair up to the edge of the pool. "I thought you might like company."

"I told you Gary doesn't want anyone else here. You need to stop doing this."

"I'm not going to leave," she said.

"This is the time that I practice. I have to have my times down by the time I go back in the fall."

"I'll watch."

"You'll leave," she said, but Lauren didn't stand up. She didn't say anything. She smiled at Diana.

Diana lowered her body, her head under the water. She could call the police or leave. But she didn't want to do either.

There was a crash and she saw Lauren's body tearing through the water. She had her jeans and t-shirt on, hadn't taken off her cap.

When Diana came to the surface, she saw Lauren's arms extending over her head. She splashed her way across the pool, turned, and headed back in Diana's direction. Lauren stood up before she hit the wall. She slogged her way toward Diana, dragging her jeans along. "I don't know how you do it."

Diana pushed off the wall. Her ankles locked together. On her second stroke, she opened her mouth and sucked in all the air she could.

As she made the turn, she saw Lauren's face. She was standing there, the water coming up to her jeans' waist. She forced her eyes back to the black line in the water.

Lauren's hair was shorter. She'd grown into her ears. Her braces had been removed. Her arms were muscular. Yet, she still looked the same as she did standing in the locker room doorway.

On that day, Diana had seen her before she spoke. Lauren's swimming cap was still on, her goggles resting on it.

They were fourteen and the boy was ten, this boy who had slipped into the women's locker room and jerked back the curtain of the stall Diana was showering in.

He paused, but his eyes were wild. They examined each part of her body.

She waited for him to realize that she wasn't his mother, his sister. He realized this, but he didn't slink away embarrassed. He reached up and touched her right nipple. The touch turned into a pinch, then a twist. He didn't let go.

Water from the shower flowed down his arm, slid down his hairless chest. He was smiling. When she looked away from his face, she saw Lauren standing in the doorway. Their eyes met, but Diana turned away. The boy was pinching, pinching and twisting.

"Hey," Lauren said. It echoed off the bathroom walls.

Lauren said hey a second time, but the boy didn't let go. His eyes were now locked on Diana's. His smile opened to a grin. It exposed his overbite. His upper canines had not fully emerged.

Lauren broke into a run and she yelled at Diana to hit the boy, but Diana couldn't move. There was the curtain thrown open wide for everyone to see and the water pouring

onto her hair. And Lauren's eyes were terrible. There was a fury in them, but one born from the same fear that kept Diana still.

"Brad," Lauren said and she jumped over a bench and tried to grab him, but missed. His naked feet smacked against the tiles as he ran out the door.

Diana reached up and closed the curtain.

"Are you okay?"

Diana stood beneath the water that was now cold. "I'm fine."

"I can go get Gary."

"No," Diana said. "Don't tell anyone." Horror coated those words. All she saw while beneath the water were flashes of things, the off-white curtain, the boy's canines.

"Can I help you at all?" Lauren said.

Diana did want her to stay, but she felt nauseous. Her breaths grew shorter. When she didn't say anything she heard Lauren's footsteps recede toward the door, which Brad had just run through.

Her arms emerged from the water, fingers pointed downward, elbows locked in place. On the next stroke, she breathed late. By the next, she swallowed water. She switched from the butterfly to freestyle. When she reached the wall, she pushed up and out of the pool.

She sat on the platform and looked at Lauren, who was standing in the middle of the pool. It was dark and she could not see her expression. The way the water surrounded her made her look lonely. All of the water and she the single person in it.

"Are you okay?" she said. It was loud enough for Diana to hear, but quiet enough that it didn't breach the confines of the fence.

“I’m glad you came,” Diana said.

Neither one of them moved.

The summer solstice came and went. Diana sensed the days growing shorter, even if it couldn’t be measured with the watch on her wrist. Lauren in her sunglasses, a book open. The black cover *Every Man Dies Alone*, the author’s name in silver, capital letters on the spine. Fallada. A name she’d never seen before.

Sundays changed. Lauren came out permanently from behind the bushes. Sometimes she’d swim. Other nights, she would sit in a chair looking up at the sky, casting occasional glances at Diana.

After the first few nights, Diana had stopped wearing her clothes. She swam in her orange swimsuit, last years uniform. Her shoulders, unhindered, eased in and out of the water. Her dolphin kick natural now that her legs were unfettered by her shorts.

Afterward, the two of them walked home. Lauren hid six packs of beer beneath the magnolia tree in her yard. The flowers were in full blossom. White and wide open. A clean lemon smell blended with the heat that never died, never cooled at night.

Diana lay next to Lauren beneath the tree, their faces only inches away from the first leaves. They were so thick that they couldn’t see the sky. The glow of the streetlight reached beneath the branches, touching the person’s body closest to it.

Diana talked about the women who’d swum the English Channel, training in the cold, building endurance. For the first time, she said she wanted to swim it.

Lauren talked about school. How much she’d miss it over the next year, but she’d piled up books to read and she’d hired a trainer to work with her, to keep her in shape. She said the team would redshirt her this season.

She'd probably stay for a fifth year, picking up a Masters in English.

They drank their beer lying down. Diana spilled most of it on her shirt. She walked into her house smelling like a dive bar with a wet spot that had expanded during the conversations. The beer seeped down around her breasts.

“So this Sunday is it,” Lauren said.

Diana had to be back at school the following week. She hopped she would make the Olympic trials this year. Her coaches said she would have a chance.

“Would you mind bringing a stopwatch so you can time me? We can see if my times went down at all.”

“I've looked at your eyes all summer,” Lauren said. “They've gone from the color of the pool to the coldest blue I've ever seen.

Diana heard the cicadas hum between them. There was no wind and the night was still. Her body shuddered in the humidity. “Lauren, they're green.”

“No. I've been looking. They're the color of cold, the temperature of the ocean in winter.”

For a moment, Diana wondered if the dreams had somehow made them blue, all the time she spent sleeping in the water. But it was impossible.

Heat built in the air around them. The leaves were stagnant. Diana shut her eyes and felt the stickiness of dew, which was growing on the grass around her. She heard Lauren's body shift, heard it brush the lowest branches of the tree.

Lauren had turned on her side so that she was facing Diana. Her eyes held Diana's, and, before she spoke, Diana knew what she was going to say.

“I’m sorry. I’ve thought a lot about that day and I should have done more. I should have told Gary. I should have strangled Brad, chased after him, hit him.” She reached over and rested her hand on Diana’s shoulder.

Diana’s body had gone rigid. Lauren’s hand felt heavy. Years ago it may have made a difference, but now her words were nothing but intrusive reminders.

Lauren moved closer. Her hands slid up to Diana’s neck.

Before she could say no, Lauren’s lips were on hers. Diana tried to push away, but she was too close to Lauren to get any leverage.

When Lauren turned away, she picked up her bottle of beer. She lay on her back and tipped it so it flowed slow enough for her to swallow without getting any on her shirt. She looked up into the trees. “I just wish I could’ve saved you. That’s all.”

Diana stood on the platform. She looked up at the quarter moon. It’s light floated on the water. The smell of the honeysuckle that grew on the fence hung over the pool. It was silent. Diana could hear the water bobbing against the wall, the sound discernable when the cicadas faded into the background.

“On your mark.”

Diana grabbed the front of the platform. Her biceps taut, her knees bent ready in anticipation.

Lauren said beep, but her voice was far from the electrical sound used in meets. She jumped before the beep ended. Her coach always praised her timing. Even during practice, Diana had never had a false start. Her body never hesitated, never questioned itself.

“2:13.76”

Diana held onto the side, trying to catch her breath. “It’s a second from my best time.”

“Well, my timing isn’t as good as the electronic thing you touch in the pool.”

Dian walked toward her towel, taking deep breaths. The inside of her chest and neck felt raw. “That’s true.”

“Are you quitting already?”

Diana unfolded her towel. When she turned, she had one of the handcuffs on her index finger. The chain and the other bracelet dangled in front of her body. She clasped the key in her other hand. “I thought we would give this a shot.”

“Are those real?”

“Yes. No plastic.” Her fingers curved around the chain. She let the bracelet drop and it clattered against its companion. “There’s one rule.”

Lauren crossed her arms and waited.

“You can’t leave the bottom until your hands are free.”

Lauren followed her to the diving well. They stood with their feet in front of the tile that was embedded in the pavement. White surrounded a black twelve. This was where they’d played Green River.

Diana dropped the handcuffs on the concrete and jumped in. Her pencil dive cut the water and she was at the bottom in seconds. She let her weight fall evenly on each foot. She used only her arms on the way back up.

She got out and took off her swim cap. Her goggles slipped off with it. She shook her hair, a ringlet falling in her eye. She raised her eyebrows and offered Lauren her wrists.

“You want them in front?” Lauren reached out and placed her index finger on Diana’s wrist. “Isn’t that a little easy?”

Diana held the key in her palm. “No one said we were just doing this once.”

Lauren’s fingers lingered a moment on her wrist. The tips traced the drops of water present from her last jump. “So you’re going easy on your first try because you think I can’t save you.”

“Exactly.”

Lauren laughed and placed Diana’s wrists in the cuffs. She was gentle and left an inch between the metal and Diana’s skin.

Diana plunged twelve feet down, holding her hands above her head. Unlocking the handcuffs only took a few seconds. She was able to maneuver her wrists and press the key into the lock.

Once she was standing on the deck, Diana held the cuffs out to Lauren. “Would you like to try?”

“Time me.”

“Why?”

“Why not make it a game?” She forced the stopwatch into Diana’s hand.

Diana handcuffed Lauren and left the same amount of room between her skin and the bracelets. Diana placed her index finger between the metal and flesh.

Lauren didn’t wait for her to remove her finger. She turned while it was still between the cuffs and Lauren’s skin. The pinch left a mark.

Diana had to grab the left strap of Lauren’s swimsuit. “Are you jumping without the key? There are no rules that say I have to save you.”

“Thanks.”

Diana watched her enter the pool in the same way that she had. The metal and flesh sunk and then disappeared as Lauren began to fidget with the key. Diana could see Lauren’s shadow struggle. She’d give her a minute before she went down after her, but Lauren managed to remove them.

“Forty-three seconds,” Diana said.

“Go again. I want to time you.”

Lauren reached out and grabbed Diana’s right wrist. She closed the bracelets tighter this time.

Feet on the bottom, Diana removed the cuffs. After doing so, she tucked the key in her swimsuit and then drew another out, which had rested above her right breast.

“Thirty-eight,” Lauren said. She shoved her wrists toward Diana.

Diana tightened the cuffs to the point where they bit into Lauren’s wrist. In the moonlight, she could see the redness from the pressure.

Before she jumped, Lauren turned to her. “I have the key this time.”

“Then you’re well prepared,” Diana said.

As she stared into the pool the only thing Diana could see was Lauren’s hair, which floated above her head and reached away. Bubbles lifted it, making it wave. She counted, letting the numbers take shape on her lips. By the time Diana reached forty, Lauren’s head was jerking back and forth. At fifty-five, Lauren began her ascent. Her legs, solid from weight lifting, allowed her to reach the surface. She kicked to keep her head above water.

Between breaths she said, “I dropped the key.”

“It doesn’t matter it’s not the real one.” Diana removed the key from her suit.
“This is it.” She placed it on the edge so it was in Lauren’s view.

“Help me.”

Diana stared down into Lauren’s eyes. She didn’t smile, just stood watching.

“Please.” Lauren swung her legs up so that she could float on her back. “You win this one.”

Assuming Carol had not been sucked down by the sinking vessel, this is what she’d imagined him doing. He’d had fatigues on and he’d lain on his back, tilting his chin down in an attempt to see what was happening. His dog tags had begun to freeze against his skin.

As the cold set in, his movements slowed. The rescuers threw him a rope, but he’d already reached the acute stage of hypothermia. His fingers had frozen. His legs could barely kick to hold his head above water.

Unlike the ocean, the pool was clear. The moon shone bright enough to see Lauren’s face. Her eyes were filled with fury, but this time it grew from desperation. Lauren managed to stay on her back for thirty minutes, kicking, handcuffs resting on her stomach. She panted and kept asking for Diana’s help, telling Diana she one and Diana did not move.

Finally, the only noise in the pool was Lauren’s kicking. Her were only nudging the water. Lauren said nothing. She stopped struggling and her chin dropped down to her chest. She began her descent.

There was a moment when Diana found herself staring not at Lauren’s sinking hair, but at her eyes in the locker room.

She heard her say hey, reach for him. *Hey*. Lauren missed the boy, but what they would have done to him.

She grabbed a handful of Lauren's hair and yanked, lifting her face out of the water. In the pool, hands beneath Lauren's armpits, she forced Lauren's hands, head, and neck onto the deck. Diana climbed out of the pool and dragged Lauren's body onto the concrete. She heard her skin scraping the ground.

When Lauren's feet were a few inches from the ledge, Diana unlocked the handcuffs and situated Lauren on her side. She picked up the cuffs and wrapped them in her towel. As she put on her swim cap and goggles she heard Lauren cough. She mounted the platform. When Lauren cried out it was a high-pitched noise with no words. The hot agony made Diana smile. It was more beautiful than any stroke could be.

I thought of Alan two days ago. When I saw him, I pictured him sitting with his hands politely clasped on a wooden table waiting for a meeting to begin. Alan is a simple man. He doesn't dabble in philosophy. He doesn't watch foreign films. He enjoys a cigarette before and after his meetings. On days when he doesn't work, he likes to speed on the interstate while listening to grunge rock. Angst still visits him, even though he's forty-five. It's the one vice he allows himself, having cast off impulsivity, dishonesty, anger, and regret. Yes, he lets these things flash in his eyes, but blinks them away before they settle.

A man who is never angry. It's hard to believe he exists, but I felt along his muscles and bones, shifted through his grey matter, and Alan, for the past four years of his life, has solved problems with patience and a smile.

Those that know him know he is a good man.

Two principles govern Alan's actions. They hang from the wall in the meeting room. He hears them read every day. *There is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself*, and, *The primary purpose of an alcoholic is to carry his message to the alcoholic who still suffers*. God for Alan is a carved Giraffe that sits on his bedside table. The message he carries is that the alcoholic will know a new freedom and happiness if he or she admits his or her powerlessness over alcohol. His God has served him well. His own experience proves the message is infallible.

When Alan heard that his friend David had gone back out, he was a bit surprised. David went to two meetings a day, the meeting Alan attended at noon and another that took place in a Methodist Church at seven. David had eight years of sobriety. But that was the cunning of alcohol. All Alan could do for David was pray to the Giraffe and ask that he keep David safe and bring him back to the rooms.

Alan received many garbled texts from David over the next two weeks. Some said "I'm sorry," some announced that he'd scored, and others asked Alan to come and meet him for a beer. After receiving the fiftieth message in three days, Alan deleted the rest without looking at them.

After two weeks of praying, the meeting's chair announced that David died in a car accident. Thankfully, no one else was hurt. The news did not surprise Alan. As people around him discussed the news, Alan sat with his hands politely clasped. Perhaps if he'd risked his own sobriety, but if he lost that then he would not be able to carry the message. His fingers curled into fists. The fists were a physical manifestation of the phrase "carry the message."

Alan went to the funeral, as did most of the group. He dropped a rose in the open grave and said a prayer to the Giraffe wishing David well. He also asked the Giraffe to give Alan the serenity to accept the things he could not change, the courage to change the things he could, and the wisdom to know the difference.

A week after David's funeral, Alan began going to detox centers to share his story. Before he talked, he studied the room looking for a possible iteration of David. One night he discovered her. She arrived in the room, her bright pink hair catching David's attention. She sat down at the table and started showing the woman next to her the bruises on her arm. Heroin, not Alan's drug of choice.

When the woman, Lauren, shared her thoughts regarding powerlessness, Alan noticed that she rubbed her hand on the table. David rubbed the table in the same way, as if he were erasing a chalkboard. Alan fabricated the common denominator: the circular motion. He decided while listening to Lauren discuss her two-year-old that Lauren would die if he did nothing. A new principle entered his life. Alan concluded that he could see death in the movement of hands. Unlike his first two principles, this conception was false, but he swallowed it whole and let it burgeon.

He approached a man in a red shirt. The lanyard on the man's neck was yellow, his name was written in blue on the card, which hung from the lanyard.

He asked the man if he could speak to Lauren. The man shook his head. It was against the center's policy. Before Alan could explain, the man turned and followed the last patient through the door. Alan reached out for the metal doorknob. It was locked.

On the following Monday, he watched his group's members place elbows on the table, sit with their knees resting against its edge. His acquaintances held onto coffee

cups, drummed their fingers, rested their forearms so they hunched forward. Others kept their hands in their laps. After two weeks of observation, Alan realized that nobody had David's or the heroin addict's affliction.

With his Giraffe observing from his nightstand, Alan knelt down and prayed. Though the Giraffe spoke to Alan, Alan did not listen. The Giraffe could not speak over Alan's voice shouting, "carry the message." Alan asked the Giraffe what he should do, but did not give him time to respond. After Alan finished praying, he thought he heard the Giraffe tell him to go to the Methodist Church. The Giraffe sighed, but did not protest. The Giraffe realized what Alan could not: signs are created by humans not gods. Humans see what they want to believe. When Alan left at seven that night, he sealed his fate.

I have grown to know Alan quite well, and I can see Ellis coming. Alan cannot save himself. Some authors allow their characters to leave a tale happily. Shakespeare's comedies come to mind, but why is it that passages from tragedies are the most quoted? To be or not to be.

I put myself in the Giraffe's camp; humans make their own signs. They follow these signs because they want to confirm what they feel—an invented conformation. Ellis is a lesbian and she's encountered men's reaction to her sexuality in a variety of ways. During her first semester, when she'd tried to pass, she dated a man who sent her flowers and told her that she'd made him a better person. When she finally informed him she was gay, he explained that Ellis was the third girl he'd "made bat for the other team." A friend of a friend grew up with two mothers. He wore pink shirts that said Vagina and was one of three men in the campus's feminist organization. One of the guys who'd

lived across the hall had told her that he wanted to have a threesome with Ellis and her girlfriend. No, he'd said, he wanted to have a foursome, a fivesome. Her junior year, a linebacker on the football team had trapped her in a dorm bathroom and raped her. As he'd zipped up his pants he'd said, "You fucking dyke, you just needed a little dick to straighten you out."

Ellis hasn't succeeded in narrowing her personal beliefs as far as Alan nor has she rid herself of her personal defects. Her anger, desire for revenge, and inability to see how much pain she can cause others thrives. I imagine this a result of her unwillingness to believe the greatest truth of human existence: Life is unfair. This is how I might explain her actions if she were the protagonist of this piece.

Alan walked through the door and fixed a cup of coffee. He saw a woman wearing a green hat that said antihero. The woman's hand was moving in circles. Alan sat down next to Ellis. He introduced himself. While shaking her hand, he felt the warmth of her palm. The warmth was from fiction.

During the meeting, everyone laughed about the most irregular things. Yet, Alan did not find this strange and laughed himself. DUIs were funny. Time in jail. Blacking out and sleeping on the neighbor's lawn. Keying someone's car at the age of twenty-six. The room harvested laughs from sober alcoholics.

And then the sayings. This to shall pass. This is not a hotbed of mental health. Your ego is not your amigo. Would you like to be right or happy? Principles before personalities. There is a God and it's not me.

This is what Alan heard at his regular meeting. He had heard it for two years. He knew that laughter, and the sayings bolstered his belief in the two principles. Yet, at the

Methodist Church, there was a difference, the rubbing hand and the giddy feeling in his stomach. Here was Ellis, who needed him to save her life.

Alan took to Ellis, and Ellis took to him. When the group said the closing prayer, Alan enjoyed the way she squeezed his hand twice, and then the strength in her grip throughout the prayer. The connection was made. This grip was its manifestation. Ellis explained that she was new to the program. Alan gave her his phone number and told her that if she ever needed someone to talk to she should call him. “Before you take the first sip,” he reminded her. After that he couldn’t do anything for her.

Alan began to receive at least three calls from her each day. He smiled when he saw her name flash on his phone. When she said she was frustrated, Alan told her that when he started he too was frustrated. When she said that her parents were driving her crazy with all their support, he asked her if she would not be enthusiastic if someone she loved decided to save her life.

The Giraffe heard the phone calls. He heard the excitement in Alan’s voice when he spoke to Ellis. The Giraffe stopped listening to Alan’s prayers. Spite was not the cause. The cause was disappointment. The cause was pain. Alan didn’t converse with him. He performed soliloquies. While he was on the phone, Alan forgot that he was not God. Alan overlooked his fallibility. Once Ellis and Alan started meeting for coffee, the Giraffe left. His figure remained perched upon the nightstand, but his spirit fled. He moved to the closet meeting room and sat on a podium waiting for someone with willingness.

I let him forget Alan. Most gods are so scarred by betrayal that suicide is not far from their minds.

At his third meeting with Ellis, Ellis said she had something terrible to tell him. Alan said that there was nothing she had done that somebody in the program hadn't. Alan took a sip of coffee, proud he had become her confidant.

Alan couldn't believe that she was holding his hand. It felt like the squeezing during meetings, but her palms had a cooler touch. She didn't rub her hands on the table at the coffee shop. Alan listened as Ellis explained the guilt that was haunting her. Three months ago she'd gone out with someone and he got drunk. She didn't take his keys. She should have driven him home. The man died.

Alan tells her about the drunk version of himself. Drunk Alan had wrecked his car and didn't remember what happened. Drunk Alan had punched his fist through windows. The police arrested him three times for drunk and disorderly. Sober Alan had forgiven himself his trespasses. Sober Alan told Ellis that she too must forgive herself or she will pick up again.

When she stopped crying, Alan asked her if she would come out to dinner with him tomorrow after the meeting. She said she'd love that. She'd really love that.

I would like to get something straight before I continue. Ellis starts with an E. I realize that Eve does to. Some may think that Ellis hands Alan the proverbial apple. My choosing the name Alan does not mean that I have called Alan to play Adam. Ellis is Ellis. Alan is Alan. He came to me while I was having a discussion with a friend in a coffee shop. This is all he can ever be. The moment I saw him clasp his hands.

Alan arrived at the restaurant. His table for two was ready, but Ellis wasn't there. The maître d' asked if he would like to wait at the bar. Alan declined. Five

minutes later, Ellis appeared. The woman on Ellis' arm surprised him, but he said that three would not be a problem.

Alan learned that Lucy was Ellis' partner. All he said was "That is wonderful." The waiter came to take their drink order. Lucy ordered a glass of wine. He ordered tea. Ellis ordered sparkling water.

Alan dropped his napkin. Its color was a red that verged on purple. While Lucy talked about being an addiction counselor, he folded it and placed it back on his lap. The stemware hung on the table as shadows did on walls. Alan flipped the glass in front of him over, the bowl a suction cup on the lacquered wood. He wanted to be far away from this, but he listened to Lucy talk. She thanked Alan for helping Ellis. He told Lucy that his work with Ellis was part of carrying the message. Now that Ellis was sober, Lucy felt it was time to have a child. "That seems reasonable," he said and excused himself from the table.

In the restroom, Alan locked himself into a stall. He was aware of the man standing by the door who offered mouth spray to the patrons. Alan sat on the toilet and prayed. It doesn't matter what he asked for because no one was listening. Not even his creator.

He tipped the man a dollar as he left. The man gave him a mint, a shrunken candy cane with green stripes. Alan slipped it into his pocket.

Back at the table, Lucy said she had ordered them something to celebrate. Alan tried to think of excuses to leave—needing to take out a dog he didn't have, a sudden nausea—but Alan was too polite. He laid his napkin across his lap and thanked Lucy. He glanced at Ellis. Her hand rested on Lucy's. His heart sank into a hole. He had

thought he would be holding Ellis' hand. He could not look anymore. Tears stretched to the corner of his eyes. Go, he told himself, but the waitress was back. She had a smile with no lipstick.

She sat an IPA by his plate. She delivered a glass of wine to Lucy. He saw a domestic beer in a bottle and Ellis reached out for it before the waitress had a chance to set it down. He tried to quiet his mind, which had started its rebuke. But he heard it say how stupid he was. Stupid. Alan knew how to silence it.

For a moment, the IPA tasted unfamiliar, but soon the metallic tinge was his old friend. He forgot everything that had disappeared in the last two years. His freedom, his anxiety, his impulsivity and anger. The twenty years, the years of his drinking, emerged from his taste buds. It submerged his disappointment about Ellis, but not everything. Floating in the very middle of his beer was the small voice in his head that asked if he remembered his powerlessness.

After dinner, Ellis and Lucy wondered if he'd join them for another drink at a bar down the street. It was one of his old haunts. On a stool, he realized how much he had missed it, the way the bottles lined up in front of the mirror, the way the bartender tilted the glass to ensure that there was not excess head. This familiarity was soothing. He had three shots and four beers. Now there was no Alan, only Drunk Alan.

After the bar, he got in the backseat of Lucy's car. The women laughed and put on hip-hop. Ellis knew every other line and spat them out. The words cycled through the air conditioning.

When they walked into the house, Ellis threw her keys on the side table. This room is called a foyer, Drunk Alan said to himself.

Foyer, a word that has risen up to the alcohol's surface.

Drunk Alan asked for a scotch. He didn't see Lucy and Ellis exchange looks. He took what Ellis handed him, a plastic cup with a bear on it, the bear that he'd watched on Saturday mornings running around a national park stealing picnic baskets. A bit of nostalgia went down with the scotch.

In the bedroom, he was hard before they could take off his clothes. He didn't notice Lucy's smile, a kind of congratulations to Ellis for thinking to weaken his drink. Drunk Alan could have been another one that ended up soft and full of apologies. Drunk Alan didn't mind that they left his tie on, didn't know they did this to deprive him of dignity. They finished with him and after everyone was dressed, Lucy drove him back to his car.

Why show him drunk and stumbling? After all, nothing he thinks sticks.

CHAPTER 5

THE BATH

The Daniels, God bless them, still kept their key in the fake rock. They were almost never home. They spent the majority of their retirement at their beach house in Hilton Head. When I used to live across the street with Lotte, I often found myself staring out of our dining room window thinking it was strange, a dark house with a trimmed lawn, round bushes and the pastels of azaleas. Neatness mingled with abandonment. They never bothered to set up automatic timers. When they were gone, they were gone. Everyone was welcome to know.

I stood on their porch looking at Lotte's house. Dusk had settled behind it, a light orange passing into the color of pink carnations. Lotte had left the light on in the kitchen for the cat like always.

Memories of our quick dinners came to mind. She'd taught me her German succinctness, bread being buttered with French cheese. She laid a spread of deli meats and peculiar cardboard crackers. I drank German beer with my meal, a Kölsch that I'd fallen in love with in Berlin. The beer was her father's favorite. She hoped our mutual appreciation would soften the blow when he found out her lover was a woman.

There was a saying he'd always railed off, "Career, Husband, Children." For all I knew as I stood on the porch, she was moving down his well-lit path.

The boards complained beneath my feet with all the promises of horror movies come to life. There was no one home to hear them, to become suspicious or scared and I was cognizant enough of my surroundings to be unconcerned by the noise, but I decided to be cautious. I sat down with my back against the house's front in the shade of Daniels' azaleas.

John Daniels had dedicated five years to the purple and white azaleas that cast shadows on the porch. He checked the nitrogen levels once a year, laid enough mulch so that the street smelled like manure. Frequent watering and constant grooming and there they were the perfect height for me to sit behind without being seen.

It was seven and the trains would come howling through the city at eight, at ten. My body clock felt their whistles in the moments before the engineer released them. That pitch in my ears created anxiety. It crept up into my back muscles and manifested as spasms below my neck. Lotte could sleep through them because they were a part of her South Carolina childhood, the eight years she spent before she moved back to Germany for high school. I begrudged her for the time I spent in our bed awake. Lotte was there, but I was alone staring at the ceiling unable to go back to sleep.

I want you to understand this. I don't slink in the grass. I don't follow her around town and try to overhear what she says to her friends. I know where she works. I don't drive by hoping to catch a glimpse of her. I don't want her to see me still searching for her. So this night was not ordinary. It was an event, a remembrance of the day she told me she did not love me anymore. This was three hundred and sixty five days after I found out I wasn't her cup of tea. I could morph, I'd told her, from English Breakfast to Earl Gray from Dragon Well to Silver Needle or if tea wasn't her thing I could become juice, milk, Coke. But she relegated me to be a piece of ice that she let melt in her glass. You should leave, she told me that night. It would be best for both of us. But, before I really understood what she meant, I started pointing. Here, I said. Look at all of these things we have in common. Look at what we share. We possess patience at the galleries. We tune down the noise of crowds to white color. We don't sketch. We go to meet the

paintings and who can say that they truly know a painting, know it as they know close friends. We understand the love song that is a rubber glove, green ball and head of a Roman statue juxtaposed. De Chirico composed it for us.

Look at the secrets we know about each other, I said. The shower has to be on cold so you don't get a rash. I huddle on the floor with my towel wrapped around me, moments of empty space floating through like clouds.

And this, I said. Your body fits inside of mine so we wake up in the same position, your head beneath my chin. I pointed and pointed before I understood that her eyes were out of focus. The fact that her father wouldn't approve had dilated them. Her pupils were big and round with his expectations. That was something even an ophthalmologist couldn't fix.

She said she was a coward. Back then, I said, no love, no you're not a coward because I wanted to believe that. I wanted to believe that she couldn't be plowed under by something so superficial when this was the rest of her life we were talking about. But she is craven. I can see that now. She is a coward. Did it take me a year to figure that out? I don't know, but that night I went out to see what she did with her life used for hiding.

A whistle, and it was ten. The apartment I moved into was close to the tracks. There I could hear the metal grinding to a halt on metal, engine tearing the air, but on the Daniels' porch there was nothing but the whistle, long, long, short, a pitch higher, the moan permission to extract the key from the rock.

I stuck the key into the lock like I always did when I went over to water the azaleas, to put their newspapers and mail on their kitchen table, to be a neighborly

neighbor doing neighborly things. It'd been a year since I'd done it, but I didn't feel like an intruder. Just a visitor getting something to drink.

In their parlor, where they kept their malt scotch, my fingers traced the names along the bottles: Cragganmore, Dalwhinnie, Obran, Talisker. John and Patrice and I took our liquor on the rocks. The warmth on the tongue was enough to make you sweat even in a Carolina winter. As we swirled the liquid around the ice, I learned about the azaleas, how to trim them, provide the right nutrients. That's when I earned John's trust, when he told me where they hid the key, when he granted me the privilege of caring for his flowers.

Patrice would reach into the past and talk about the riots in Chicago. The shelves surrounding us held books about The Black Panthers and the deaths of Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner. She'd let me borrow a few and our dialogue drifted from its one-sidedness.

John and Patrice were an unusual breed blooming in the fake smile friendliness of the South. Things would change they'd tell me. 'Times they are a changin,' John said. Patrice laughed and I tipped my glass back and finished what was left, letting the ice hit my teeth.

After tracing the names of the scotch, I moved on from the liquor cabinet. Drinking it without the two of them would be an unforgivable sin. As I reached for a bottle of club soda from the mini-fridge, I realized how much I'd missed them, how Lotte had taken them away from me. I had to walk away from those moments because it was too much to see what was once our house, too much to bump into each other. It was too often to feel angry and lost.

Back on the porch, I took a swig and let the bubbles pop on the tip of my nose. My thoughts ran back to her. Where was she and who was she with? I know now, but then I was still keeping her romantic, off by herself in some theatre, sitting while the credits poured over into the clicking of the reel. Black, then the lights coming up, bringing her out of lives that didn't exist.

Her habit was to wait until the theatre emptied. Even when we were together, I left with the crowd and waited for her to walk out the door. Maybe now the movie was over and she had stopped on the way home to have a beer. She never minded drinking and driving. What was life without taking stupid chances? What was life if you weren't willing to ruin it?

At eleven, another whistle. I finished the last bit of club soda and stared into her house. I thought about all the crazy things I'd wanted to do just a few months ago. Coming in the middle of the night and chopping all the heads off her flowers, throwing a brick through her window, taking a handful of azaleas and placing them where the cat would find and eat them. And I wanted to do things less violent, wanted to sneak in and pour out all the milk so she wouldn't have any for her coffee in the morning. Nothing pissed her off more than not having milk for her coffee.

I hadn't decided if I was going to stay or go when I saw the headlights. I stood up and moved toward the flowers. My head was visible, but who would think to look at the porch of an empty house to see eyes staring at you.

His car. It was his car. And here I had to smile. I had to think what a perfect show this would be because he would come inside, he would come inside her house and I would know he fucked her on the bed that we had both paid for while I stood looking in

the windows. Him. Chandler. Chandler and his pink pants and polo shirts. His BMW 62-184XQW or whatever it was. But the lights shut off. The doors didn't open. I could see the two of them, but only as shadows.

I saw him shift. His head skimmed the roof of the car and then he settled again. His chin tilted upward. His eyes away from her, shut, looking at the place where things felt good. Her head came forward and then down and then up and then down. I watched it bob looking through the window. She'd transformed into obsequiousness something she had never done in bed with me.

He stiffened for a moment. His hand held her head in place. I imagined her brown eyes watering, holding off the gag reflex, giving that one hundred percent effort. His shadow mouth opened as he oozed into her. Then, he let loose her head. He was shifting, zipping. Did he pat her on the knee and tell her what a good girl she was?

"Do you want to come in?" That was the first of her voice I'd heard in a year, but she wasn't asking. She was pleading. I knew. I'd heard it before while she was on the phone with her father. But Papi, I don't think I'm meant to be an accountant.

But she was. And now, she's an accountant in that big building downtown, the same one that Chandler works in with his yellow shirts and purple pants.

"Chandler," she said, "are you sure?" He waved. He wasn't looking at her, but at the road. The car started. She bent down, asking for another date, telling him she'd had such a wonderful time. He was pulling away while she closed her door.

There she was with her hands free and searching for something to hold her up. Five steps and she was at the mailbox, her arm over it like they'd been pals for a long time. Almost midnight and she was crying on the street. She didn't cry when I'd left for

good. Parts of me swirled, the parts that possessed love for her still, the parts that still thought of fairy tale endings, the parts that had forgotten Guinevere. But the rest that she had bruised refused to sway.

There she was deep breathing, tears soaking into her shirt. Her body started to drum the stuff up. Glottis. Larynx. Esophagus. Diaphragm. The muscles in her stomach squeezing, ringing her out. The curls of her hair jerked. Her mouth opened. He, mixed in with her spit and her trying too hard, became a pool in the blades of grass. After the last tightening and constricting, she turned to the house. Straight as a line, she walked to the door, opened, shut it and the lights in the bathroom came on.

I imagined her stripping down to nothing, pale thighs, a nude in a Renaissance painting. She was letting the water run into the tub. In the dark, she found her way to the kitchen, the water rushing. She pulled a bottle of champagne off the marble cabinets, a bottle her father sent from his collection he gathered on his biannual trips to France. The cork popped, the bubbles streaking down her throat in gulps until she began to feel full and dizzy, a combination good for erasing. She put a record on so she felt like someone else was with her. I could hear the scratching so prominent before the first note was struck.

In the tub she felt the heat, the liquid pushing against her legs. She felt the elixir flowing into her desert stomach, through to her intestines and forming little oases that sailed up to her head. She shut the door to the bathroom. The light hummed. Two doors between her and me.

I went back into the Daniels' house. I headed straight for the malt scotch and chose the Talisker. Talisker made on the Isle of Skye. Talisker, full-bodied with a

smooth beginning, burgeoning intensity and a long thaw of a finish. John and Patrice, I knew, would understand. With scotch in hand, I left their house.

I crossed the street, the street I used to cross to come home to her. I would put the mail on their table and lock their door and return to ours. She would be there with a kiss, a beer, a kind word. This crossing was different, bottle in hand and nobody waiting.

I knew that no one would notice the figure brandishing the bottle. The cops didn't go back in the burbs that late at night. They didn't go into the neighborhoods of normalcy where all the wives and husbands were sound asleep at one in the morning, where people didn't bother to set up timers when they were out of town.

Ants crawled through the white foam, over the bent blades of grass. I pulled the cork out with my teeth and tilted the bottle. I poured handfuls at a time, let it punch the ants, drag them off into the darkness. Everything became strands of amber drool. Rivulets of him and her and liquid from the Isle of Skye.

For a moment, I thought of going to her. I thought about slipping through her front door and washing her from head to foot like I was Jesus at the last supper. Afterward, I would disappear into the night with the hope that I might have reached her.

Instead, I gripped the bottle by the neck, shoved the cork back into place. I stepped over the pile of slime mixed with the liquid that was burning out all of the feelings the froth encased. I walked past her bedroom window, through her backyard, toward my apartment. I knew the next train would be whistling in three minutes.

All this just to say that I spent a night thinking about hiding. I spent a night thinking about why people hide, how people hide. I thought about it during the train's busiest hour, three to four.

Whistles, curt and verbose, shrill and contralto, cut all around me. All of them sounded like a reckoning.

CHAPTER 6

(0-9)

0). The beginning of all this, maybe. This woman that insists I could have loved anybody. We saw the Atlantic from Normandy. We saw the Pacific from San Francisco. This is not my love is like an ocean. We'd been through that already.

I know and on looking, knew that I'd never seen the ocean's shapes from these angles. But I was well aware that their immensity and depths would swallow anyone up without remorse. After she left me, I felt like I was skimming the bottom of the Pacific with rotting whales and polar bear bones.

I rose out of it, but was infused with the way these things decayed. I made my own home brew with this decomposition as its base. I drank cases and cases. I floated in the Atlantic, but from the coast of South Carolina. Now as I float, I understand why she left, but when I dry off my dryness causes me to forget.

I have a picture in my mind, but I don't know if the smiles we had on our faces were real. And if anything exists in 0-9, it must be true.

1). I'm standing on a street in Amsterdam leaning against the canal wall, staring at row houses. I can't discern which building was Otto Frank's store.

"Which one is the annex," I ask my best friend. "They all look the same."

"No," she says, they don't." She crosses her arms. I look again.

One house has a triangular roof. Another nine windows. The last concrete steps that lead up to its entrance. The sun is setting now.

“The dusk sets over them all the same,” I say.

We stand for a minute that turns into two. I’m looking into the canal and see the building’s reflections. I’m not looking close enough. I feel I have committed a crime. This not knowing.

Looking back upon where I found this image, I realize that it came from a postcard I’d bought in the gift shop. I’d used the postcard as a bookmark on and off for a year until I’d set it down in a coffee shop or the University’s library. Perhaps I’d left it on a patch of grass under the tree I sat beneath in the commons.

The image on the postcard was easy enough to find online. The answer to my question was easy enough to find. A blogger had taken the time to highlight the store in blue, the horrible blue of a highlighter. That blue revoked the sun. It revoked the water in the canal. And it revoked the black and white photographs of the movie stars that Anne had hung while in hiding.

2). I’ve read two memoirs in my life, one being Primo Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz*. In Europe, they call it, *If This is Man* and it is man. Man is a pretty pitiful thing to be.

I’ve read *Survival in Auschwitz*, but not *If This is Man*. I won’t be able to read it until I can read Italian. I can guess why it’s altered. American books need heroes and since Levi survived, he was good enough to be named one.

Our publishers wanted to tattoo the name Auschwitz on the cover. A title with Auschwitz in it is far more interesting than some philosophical meandering. We want the

details that make us grimace, but also produce titillation. So in the way that Americans do, the publishers pushed aside Levi's title. This is not for us, this philosophy.

But don't you think he earned the right to name the book what he wanted.

3). The second memoir I've read is Mary McCarthy's *Memoir of a Catholic Girlhood* in which she writes, "This record lays a claim to being historical - that is, much of it can be checked. If there is more fiction in it than I know, I should like to be set right." McCarthy is one of the few who took the time to acknowledge that there is fiction in non-fiction. She invites correction. She wants her fiction set straight.

What is the difference between fiction and non-fiction? The non-fiction writer chooses subject matter from the real world. It's defenders say that the story being told does not originate from invention, but from people who once lived and are living. These people are not characters.

But, what if I put the written words, the things I have recorded and place them in a tiger's mouth? It is subject matter from the real world. The words that the tiger speaks are not fictional. I have them recorded on a Dictatphone.

You can have your mother speak, your abusive step-father scream, but they are reconstructions in your head. They are primary players. They are the actor's you set in motion in your play.

The tiger speaks truth.

4). Non-Fiction from found autobiographical moments (note: not created)

Tara, my ex, experienced suicide at the age of twelve. Steven, her boyfriend, had tied a sheet around the metal bar in his closet and hung himself, leaving his little brother, Robbie, and his mother, now half-crazed, behind.

One Christmas, long after Steven died, Robbie gave Tara an ice cream scoop with a polar bear handle.

At the age of sixteen, Robbie went quarry diving. He and his friends made it through the first jump. And one of them said, "Let's go one more time." Of course, we know what one more time means. We've seen this before. Robbie broke his neck. Robbie drowned.

My uncle went to a park and shot himself in the head. However, he pinned a piece of notebook paper with his name and phone number on it so that the police would immediately know who he was. But what is interesting about a man shooting himself? Similar stories like this have been suffocating me since my uncle's death. Here's the proof of the suffocation.

Three weeks ago, a classmate of mine sealed herself in her car. She took sheets and jammed them in places where air might find its way inside. When I heard she was dead, I thought of her at the end of a rope, a bloated face, her glasses fallen off. But she lit a small gas grill and suffocated as the carbon monoxide gathered in her car. A friend told me what my classmate looked like when she found her lying dead in the backseat of her car. She'd made a small bed and was lying on her back. My friend said she looked like herself, but her face was a bit purple.

5). Fiction that is non-fiction

See all of the above.

Also known as realism. *Madame Bovary*, etc.

Also known as *This Way to the Gas, Ladies and Gentleman* in English or *Farewell to Maria* written by Tadeusz Borowski. The stories in the text were inspired

by the author's concentration camp experience, inspired meaning historical subject matter chosen from the real world.

6). Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

7). Primo. Weisel, on the day of Levi's death, informed his audience that Levi died forty years earlier in Auschwitz. If Weisel is correct, Primo Levi's writings are an act of a living corpse. I could write this six different ways, but why bother with oxymora.

Primo threw himself down the stairs (according to the coroner and three of his biographers). He fell (according to one good friend and an Oxford sociologist). Why two possibilities? Memory, survivor's guilt, aging mother-in-law, no suicide note, discussions of feeling dizzy, plans for the future. He was a chemist, his friend said. It would have been a hell of a lot easier for him to poison himself. "You stupid fucking bastards, it would have been easier."

8) I will map out the last year.

Uncle's suicide

Grandfather's death

Grandfather's death

Classmate's suicide...

My mother's mother had a stroke right at Christmas. A few weeks later my mom wrote me a note with two cards in it, one for my father's mother and one for hers. *On Grandma Carolyn's write a note telling her how you are, how the weather is. Tell her to have a Happy Birthday. On the one for my mom just write hi and your name. I'm not sure she's with it.*

I did what she asked and turned back to her note. This note with a bit of commentary could make a good short-short.

I can't write that story though. We are used to hearing that our loved ones have forgotten. There has to be a metaphorical way to fictionalize it, but I would rather meditate on what has happened. She does not remember me—I remember her—When I think about calling I remember that she has forgotten me.

What is this gap between her erased memory and mine that is intact? “It just happens when you get old,” my wife said. “People get dementia, get Alzheimer’s.”

You can call it these things. You can provide the scientific explanation. But, what is the name of that space between choosing to forget and a seizure choosing for us?

9). Now the question is, does it mean more if Primo Levi committed suicide? Do his books mean more that is? Or if he accidentally fell down the stairs, does the fall stem from the weight of memory? Did he choose to forget and only knew one way to do this? Or did he want to remember and accidentally fall down the stairs? It's more moving, more tragic, if Levi made the choice. No it's more moving if we listen to Wiesel. Levi died forty years ago at Auschwitz.

Elie Weisel (*Night*)...living/ Bruno Schulz (*Street of Crocodiles*)...killed in the Warsaw Ghetto/Robert Desnos (*État de veille*)...killed in Theresienstadt/...Tadeusz Borowski (*This Way to the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*)...suicide after the war. Primo Levi (*Survival In Auschwitz/Se questo è un uomo*)...suicide?accidental?suicide—

CHAPTER 7

PERISCOPE (HART CRANE)

Dear Lotte,

A small one-bedroom house with a foyer, a bathroom and a courtyard. I have called out “is anyone here,” and received no reply. My voice does not echo, even when I try to imagine it doing so.

You would wish me to continue the description of this Zone, of this small one-bedroom house with a foyer, a bathroom, and a courtyard. You have never been inside a government-sanctioned area where an individual is allowed, on his/her fourth day of residence, to commit the act of Selbstmord. Why should I evade the listing of nouns with preceding adjectives to describe the room that I sleep in? After all, the government will mail anything that I write and address.

You, like myself, have read descriptions of various Rehabilitation Zones in magazines. You have photographs that you can pick up and study and place me in. So many have pointed out that description can never be an exact replication. A statement like “there are three guns resting atop a blue cooler filled with German liquor” can be interpreted in various ways. Even if I were to go into the minutia, you could never imagine even a bullet, the way it takes shape in the house or the way its existence forces the house to mold around it. I am sorry if I have disappointed you.

And after I finished the description of the Zone that I have refused you, you would want to know how I lived out the three days before I made my decision. I must have wandered around the house or paced or lumbered or shuffled or pranced. I could have listened to music or smelled strange things. Perhaps, I lay in the bed on sheets that felt the same as my mother's touch.

Most of all you want to know why I did it, why I decided to carry this or that out. What does a person you love think before performing a voluntary murder of the self? Again, you can open a magazine and read these types of thoughts like we did as children.

We played, while pouring over these letters, Thumbs Up and Thumbs Down. We created seven categories: had become a burden to family/friends, was of a philosophical bent that called for such action, had exhausted the reasons to live, boredom, belief that one is a failure, unrequited love, and illness, whether physical or mental. After reading each letter, we tore it out of the magazine and placed it in the folder labeled with the reason. Boredom, philosophy, exhaustion and illness received a thumbs up. On the rest, we wrote arguments against the writer's perception.

The look on my mother's face when she found them beneath my bed. She forced me to burn them one by one. I placed them in the oven until they withered into a gold that soaked the print from the paper. This is why I no longer wanted to play. Then, I could not admit to you that I had been foolish enough to hide our work in such an obvious place. Moreover, there was a feeling of loss. I would never be able to read them again. In those moments, when desolation overwhelmed me, I would go to the library with a pen and paper and try to recount some of my favorites. I knew I could never reproduce them, but spent hours trying. When finished I would fold these attempts and

hide them in a book called, *If This is Man*. When I looked before I left for college, my drawings were still there. I left them, hoping someone else might see them and take heart in my renderings.

Later, in a college art class, I was to be reunited with the genre. My professor handed out bits of letters that described the interiors of various zones and ordered us to create a rendition of each. Unfortunately, at that time, I was a realist. My paintings lacked imagination, but, now, I believe that my realist period led me to my current abstract ways. Thankfully, I had a professor that was willing to indulge me.

How a dilettante begins an artistic practice: by imagining that she is are worthy of doing so.

I cannot recreate the paintings with words. I cannot reproduce colors on a page. I go as far as saying I created a color that looked like that of single malt whiskey or, going farther still, I could say that the end result was more the color of a single malt whiskey's residue. What does that mean? Again, the same problem of the bullets arises. This makes me too tired. I can search high and low, but I will never make you understand the color of single malt whiskey. And if I were to place a myriad of colors on the page with such specificity, your mind would run over them and only see what you wanted. You wouldn't take the time to consider Grand Hotel Awning, Lost Atlantis, Roasted Pine. For that matter, if I were in your place, neither would I.

The paintings no longer exist. They were a cycle of three, one painted over the other. Although I won't discuss my composition, I will leave the pieces of the letters that I memorized to assist in my artistic endeavors. Perhaps this is the last gift I can give you, another's words.

“They let me in here and took all my smokes. Not one in the bastard house and they knew I was a smoker. Out in the courtyard I dug holes. Hole after hole. Not one goddamn cigarette. I’ve got twelve hours left, and I’ll hold out for you. I promise. But fuck me. Where’s my last request?”

Then there’s these guys. Two days ago they just showed up out of nowhere. Four guys, on bikes. They were wearing these goofy goggles that went back to god knows how long. Their shirts said JB and Louvet. All of em were smoking. When one of em finished a cigarette, one of his pals would light him another. Once the cigarette was lit and in place, the guy with the new cigarette would say “Merci, Merci.”

I thought these guys would help me out if I said “s’il vous plait,” so I walked over and started repeating it and they kept saying thank you, thank you and me please, please. Not one of em stopped, so I threw myself at em and slammed into an invisible wall. I kept at it. Not one of em slowed down.

Now I can’t drink the gin and tonics in my room. I can’t drink them without cigarettes. I’m bloody, bleeding on the sheets, the concrete porch ripped me up. I look out the window of my room and see those guys pedaling with their cigarettes and infinite thank yous and damn it. I know laying here that it’s the only thing I’ll see out of any of the windows. They come and don’t go.”

“You know I came to get away from your alligators. Anywhere there is water in the house you have planted their eggs. Four beady eyes in the toilet bowls. One full-grown in the bathtub. It was the coffee pot that drove me to this place. Every morning I’d go to make coffee. Every morning I’d find eggs in the pot. I’d watch them while they

broke their shells with their egg teeth. For a while, I could watch because I love you. Then, the days came when I couldn't.

During those days, I dreamt of caffeine. I dreamt of cold showers for heat rash. I dreamt of unoccupied water glasses or an empty ice cube tray. You managed to turn even the trays into swamps.

By that point, I couldn't drink anything anymore. I avoided the refrigerator at work. I shoved my cart past the rows of liquid at the grocery store. Water fountains were things to fear. The pipes in the walls, in the ceilings, could burst.

When I arrived at the RZ, I wasn't afraid. In a note on the table, they assured me that the house was alligator free. They said drink and I did.

They'd stocked the house with coffee pots, ice trays, and bathtubs. I drank water cooled by ice. I haven't done this since I moved in with you. I haven't touched water. I have not swallowed water. I was surprised in all that time that I still had tears to cry and I wasted the water I had to spill on you.

After drinking my fill of water, after rubbing ice cubes down my arms to my hands, down my legs to my knees, I went outside. An Olympic-sized pool. Over our two years together, I'd tried to forget about swimming. I'd try to forget my trip to the Olympic trials. I'd thrown away my bronze metal. Here, I let myself remember these things. I thanked them for putting the pool here. I said a little prayer to them. It was the same pool from Barcelona. The lanes sectioned off by metal with buoyant pieces of plastic: red, yellow, blue. But in the lanes, I saw the bumps, the certinous scabs, the arch for their heinous pupils.

The alligators are doing laps. I've been sitting here for ten minutes and they've completed two. All of the lanes are occupied. I hope they die from the chlorine before they kill me."

"I know I've seen them on TV. The host raises the authors from the dead. The authors kill themselves all over again. Well here, it's a live action show that never stops.

Hart Crane jumps into the ocean saying "Goodbye, everybody." Along side him, John Berryman hits the west bank of the Mississippi and drowns in mud. David Foster Wallace strings himself up. Kane joins him. Plath opens the oven. Sexton starts her car. Hemingway shoots his favorite shotgun.

There is beauty. They go all at once, they jump, swing, slit, asphyxiate, and they do it again and again and again, but I am wasting time with this. I am wasting the novel. This is just a letter. It is addressed to no one. It will go where I go wherever that is."

An egg tooth, Sexton's suicide, bicyclers say thank you. But, you won't see those paintings now. I slashed the canvas and moved on. I recognized the need to paint the magical: patio furniture, trees, Jesus on the cross. You can imagine all of these things. The strength of magic, an exhale into the cold.

I know I have left you wanting. You will crawl in and out of the Kübler-Ross model. You are howling and demanding me to start over, redraft, add this and that and perhaps take something or another out. Make it clear. Be kind to you. Give you access to my motivation. You want me to say it's not your fault, but you wouldn't believe me. Either way you'll sit with your lips stuck to a martini glass and drown yourself everyday. Or maybe that's projection, writing what I would do, what I did do when my uncle disappeared into a Zone much like mine. I don't know. You've been watching all this

time since the day of his funeral. Since the funeral, since this process became streamlined. Since this act became legal and the government gave us homes and there was no God to care.

This is the last bit of palaver that I have for you. Where is this going? Why did I write you nothing and throw in pieces of stories that DO NOT belong to me? I can sleep a bit easier tonight because I know that when you see an alligator swimming in the public pools or bicyclers or cigarettes you will not see those things, you will see only me. The signified.

Ellis.

CHAPTER 8

GREY ALPHABETS

When Ellis entered D Block, Herson, my desk mate, clapped me on the shoulder. Ellis was the most notorious of the Fighters' cryptographers. He alone was responsible for the creation of Benjamin, a language composed by the intermingling of the Cyrillic and Greek alphabets. When spoken, it suggested Izmet, a Turkish dialect, and Tsakonian, the only extant language with its root in Doric Greek. It took Leuven's department of cryptanalysis, of which Herson and I were members, eight months to decipher the written language. It took a little over two years to understand it when spoken. It was the Fighters' most successful cipher yet.

"Here's our worthy opponent." Herson turned on the radios that carried the inmates' conversations to our work area. He lay back in his chair and placed his feet on the desk.

"Whisper to me, you son of a bitch." As he said this, he punched my shoulder. I was used to Herson's physical displays of excitement and answered this one with a smile. I grabbed our mason jar of teeth from the desk's shelf. It was a ritual to shake it before we began our next assignment. The clinking of dead Fighters' upper-left canines against the glass was the sound of our past success, proof that we'd been able to decipher critical information before anyone else in the department.

The over-director brought the tooth straight from the dead man's mouth.

Its roots still yellow, broken into sections by veins that carried drying blood. Herson and I had earned over four hundred. We had the third most in our department, which wasn't bad considering that there were one hundred and fifty other teams to compete against.

It's not hard to explain the circumstance that we, the citizens of Leuven, live in. Leuven took policies from the various governments of dystopian novels and went from there. None of the dictates are original. In fact, the professors at University spend much of their time pouring over these novels looking for the origin of laws and traditions which the government keeps secret to give the academics something to do. Professor Avery Everhard won the first Lebon Award for Research upon her discovery that teeth collection had its roots in Zajdel's *Kelly Country*.

As children, we learned how to read from the great historical tomes of Western Literature. Once we learned how to read, the only other course we took was a study of governments whose founding principals derived from Fascism and Totalitarianism. By the age of twelve, we realized that the word rebellion meant nothing. One could try to rebel against Leuven, but all he could achieve was trying. The Fighters, who assumed this position in our society, were aware that they fulfilled a role that the government had granted them. By accepting this role, they also accepted the knowledge that the government would find, torture and kill them.

Herson and I worked for Leuven's government. We were Loyals and satisfied with our careers. I never felt the calling to defect and work for the other side. The hours at my desk scribbling letters and words in order to understand other letters and words sated the intellectualism that the government took special care to develop in children like

Herson and myself. At that time, I wasn't torturing or being tortured, though I understood that I could be killed. We could be replaced, but anyone could be replaced. Since I liked putting on my uniform each morning and saluting and carrying a gun, I stayed. Although it was a delusion, placing the visor cap on my head made me feel official, like ratty jeans and torn up t-shirts made the Fighters official. I'd been wearing the Greys since middle school.

The other role left open for us was Bystander. These individuals were caught up in an excessive desire to acquire as much money as possible. Upward mobility did not exist, but they enjoyed the cunning it took to rip food out of the mouths of others.

I placed the teeth back on the shelf and picked up my pencil and notepad. A small screen sat in the middle of our area flanked by black-and-white postcards of men we didn't know. They were there when Herson and I arrived at our desks fresh from University and we left them.

The screen fed us the happenings in D block, which housed the cryptographers. I watched Ellis, the crowd shaking his hand and asking him questions in Benjamin. Were there windows in the buildings yet? Had he seen Muted Father, Meadowlands, Dubliner, Ackermann? He said nothing, but when he did I was ready to write it down. Rumor was he'd created a new language.

Ellis was tall and lanky, but his pecks stretched the front of his white t-shirt. I could see the grooves that outlined his biceps and forearms. Underneath his jeans, I imagined the same taut muscles, quads, calves, he'd built in an attempt to defy his capture.

But Ellis had a soft look in his eyes and a quiet bend to his lips.

His thick-rimmed glasses, like those in black-and-white pictures, announced his intelligence. By watching him, I could tell that he wasn't a violent man. He placed his hand on the shoulders of the men around him. But Herson was right about him being a worthy opponent. Ellis didn't answer any of the Fighters' questions. His lips remained fixed in what I could only call a sardonic smile.

During the first two hours he was in the block, he didn't say a word. He patted shoulders and nodded hellos. After all this, he went and sat in the back corner on the right against the white padded walls, which were filled with touch sensors in case the inmates tried something similar to Morse Code or the codes used by prisoners in Russia before they went up for their show trials.

Both Herson and I watched. Ellis took his glasses off and wiped his brow. He rested his head in his hands. His legs stretched out in front of him. He scratched the side of his face with a sweep of his shoulder. The grizzle was beginning to accumulate on his chin and cheeks. He'd have a beard shortly. We did not allow them to shave.

The government removed me, at the age of twelve, from one of its public schools and placed me in the Academy of Cryptology. There, we learned to break code, and speak, read, and write French, German, Spanish, and English. After we mastered these languages, an instructor would assign five more in a specialty area. I knew Russian, Ukrainian, Serbian, Buryat, and Benjamin. My duty was to watch D block and find prisoners speaking my specialty languages. For the past two years, the only language that the Fighters had used was Benjamin, which made the staff in the department angry. The Fighters weren't making an effort to play their roles. Granted they used a variety of ciphers, ADFGX, Vigenère, even the ancient Polybius Squares and Caesar Shift, but it

would take specialists like Herson and me two or three days to decode their half-heartedness. Hence, all the canines that had been harvested from the dead.

Three days passed and Ellis said nothing. The prisoners began to ignore him. He slept most of the day, and while he was awake, he drew things with his fingers. Herson and I hoped that he was writing letters that corresponded with our languages, but our over-director sent a memo around the office announcing that Ellis was drawing trees: oak, birch, chestnut, peach, and magnolia. After reading the memo, Herson muttered a few expletives and got up to get a cup of coffee.

A few months ago, a professor had written an article about a novel by London, *The End of Mr. Y*. In this novel, Lin, the protagonist's lover, and a khepri artist, drew pictures of trees in response to the government's demands that she draw the diderm bacteria that, when released, would cause the population to reenact acts of resistance including those by The White Rose Movement, The Singing Revolution, and Народная Воля.

Even though Ellis' drawings didn't fall directly into Herson's and my sphere, we decided to play with the words in the memo. Herson and I translated the names of the trees into the languages we knew. We ran them through the ciphers. Oak meant Tuesday in Benjamin. Peach, the fruit, was the code name of a cryptographer that had been killed three months ago. His tooth was one of the four hundred in our jar.

I took a sip of coffee and looked at the two words scribbled on my page and the corresponding code. Herson threw his notebook and pencil on the desk. In the process, he cracked my pencil jar causing sky-blue flakes to scatter on the manila folders that rested beneath it.

“I’ll grab you a new one on the way back. Want it to be blue?”

“Sure,” I said, as he walked away. I looked back at the monitor. Ellis was sleeping. I watched.

The first words that Ellis said were, “Moons stung through burrows.” He said them in French. The innocence of the soft ending took me by surprise. I hadn’t heard the language since school, but it went deeper than that and it sank into my heart much like a murder’s knife would. My mother’s voice.

My mother was killed in an action when I was thirteen. At the time, I was learning Czech. The government hadn’t held any mass killings in two months. A decree had come down that all people who spoke French, excluding children in the ciphering schools, were to be rounded up. The Loyals turned in those who didn’t come forward on their own accord. They gathered them in an office building, locked the doors and threw Molotov Cocktails through the windows. They hadn’t let the workers out before they lit the building on fire. Nothing too exciting. Something out of a Dick novel.

Since this action, the government and their Loyals hadn’t heard French. Eighteen years had passed without so much as a *oui*. The government believed that the language had died out due to the slaughter, but here was Ellis talking about moons in French. The sweetness of the words caught in my ears. For a moment, I heard nothing more but the r’s that blended into nothingness. The sound was the sonority of my childhood. This was the language my mother had taught me, pointing to colors and numbers, coaxing me to repeat the words. I never thought its disappearance from the streets a loss until I heard Ellis utter the sentence.

Herson slapped me on the back of the head. The force drove my forehead into the jar of teeth. It didn't break, but I'd have a bruise.

"You are an asshole," I said.

He flicked the bits of blue off of the manila folders and placed the jar with an identical color in the other's place.

"We've got work to do. And you can be replaced. I'm doing you a favor," Herson said.

I took a new pencil from the jar. Herson had sharpened it. The point was so thin that it broke upon contact with paper.

"He's speaking French," Herson said. "I wish I could pull that motherfucker's teeth out myself." Herson's adrenaline had kicked in. He said the last line every time we got our hooks in a guy.

We both knew that this was the new language. It wasn't French. It was something else. Everyone in the department knew French. Ellis was the Fighters' cryptographer. The prisoners knew this too. Ellis was the center in their circle.

The consonants and vowels that fell from Ellis' mouth were simplicity. All of the cryptographers could discern his words. I imagined the looks on the other Loyals' faces. Mouths open, staring at their monitors, pictures of our desks and our teacher's reading *La Planète des singes*. Ellis kneaded soft into phrases. His sentences became the oceans' currents slipping in and out of each other.

"Canale," he said. "The Brothers Ensslin. Oblonsky. Phases of Night." They slid from his tongue without caution. Those he named were Fighters who worked as saboteurs. They killed Bystanders and Loyals, they didn't differentiate between the two.

“You bunch, fakes, don’t speak about Canale. He is a bird sleeping in gutters, rubbing off quilts’ patchwork. Brothers Esslin let them keep your spent liquor for life. These mindless automatons, heads stuffed with bread and butter, make Oblonsky’s eyes gleam like a Tigress’s pupil. Oh Phases of Night, go from coffee cup rest, onward toward rebuilt factory districts white hot charcoal sketches. We are all wondering horses, wandering zebra’s looking similar to canoe playing fields, well-filled rivers. Alligators swimming sewers.”

“We’ve got to crack this first,” Herson said.

“Damn right,” I said, but with no conviction.

My enthusiasm had flagged. My mother. My mother spoke this. And my mother cooked for me. And my mother hugged me. And my mother kissed my head while she tucked the covers tight around me. I was a Loyal then. She was too, but something about her speech fell outside of this role. It was only after listening to Ellis that I realized I should have turned her in.

“All right, Herson. What’s your angle?”

We ran the redundancy and frequency analyses on the computer. Ellis had repeated a few pronouns and articles and the letter e occurred the most frequently, but this would be little help.

“I’ll start out with the easy stuff,” he said. “Just to make sure.” Herson would begin with the Caesar Shift and Polybius Square then work his way through the Trimethius Tableau. Since French was a Romantic language, we had these charts memorized. It would take Herson about four hours to get through them all.

My instincts suggested something more along the lines of the Navajo Code talkers, but I did some practical things before I headed in that direction. I felt like his French must mirror Benjamin in some way. I changed each letter to its Cyrillic and Greek counterparts, but this produced a bunch of nonsense. Not a word in Benjamin. This also meant that he hadn't translated it from any of the languages in my specialty. Then I took the Cyrillic alphabet and began to see if any of the words from Benjamin translated into English, German or Spanish. Nothing. By the end of this process, I'd chewed the eraser off of my pencil.

My instinct had been right. The Navajo Code. I'd seen it in Benjamin, but as I said, it had taken them eight months to solve the cipher. One word could stand for one letter. The Navajo word "wol-la-chee" meant "ant," so "wol-la-chee" could stand for the letter a. One word could stand for another word. Like the Navajo word hummingbird stood for the English word airplane.

I looked up at the poster on my desk. In big block letters it said, "Perseverance and Patience: The Cryptanalysts Primary Tools." I sighed.

I turned to the screen. Ellis had returned to his corner to sleep. The inmates chattered. They wondered what he was trying to tell them. Some sat on the white padded floor and wrote out what we had already typed up in Benjamin. They attempted the same translations as I did. They defaulted to Benjamin. Not one of them was making any headway.

"Herson, can you hand me the headphones so I can listen to him again," I said.

"Yup." He passed them to me without looking up from his work.

I listened to Ellis' words. I rewound the tapes over and over. Every time I listened, I had to concentrate so that memories of my mother wouldn't creep in. After the thirteenth time, I noticed Ellis' tone. He spoke the words and they slipped into my ears with an unsettling familiarity. The tone was my mother's—something joyful, something completely alien to Benjamin. I sent Ellis' video along with my attempted plaintexts to the over-director. From there the over-director would send it out to the rest of the cryptanalysts. The members in our department knew all 7,891 languages that had ever existed on the planet. After sending the memo, I began working with the other languages. French to Benjamin, then Benjamin to English to Czech. I had rows and rows of nonsense that looked like something off a kid's cypher ring. After four weeks, Herson and I had nothing.

Herson suffered from long bouts of muttered invectives interrupted only when one of the inmates, in his attempt to solve Ellis' cipher, accidentally revealed information we had been waiting for.

But, the new teeth that the over-director handed to us didn't appease Herson for long. There was a pile of broken pencils in his corner of the work area. He'd destroyed so many that pink erasers and bits of lead and yellow wood began to accumulate beneath the monitor.

I was far from frustration. I'd memorized long passages that Ellis had spoken. *Long, long ago wind shuffled through the towers of weeds saying do you want a sky, a plan to cling to. Hope for the mere mittens of codified breakfasts. Barnacles that you've got as ears and you can still hear me. Right? Splay sections of coughed up temples and*

shrines. Slash the tips of unlit cigars and lay them at alters of nothing. His words went and went.

But one phrase stuck to my ribs. When the guards came to extract a Fighter for execution Ellis said: *That Letter is Our Life to Come.*

One night, I tossed off my sheets and abandoned my bed in order to look out on the street, but there were no windows in my house. Ellis had turned my mind. I was forgetting things that the government had enacted years before I was born. If I tried, I couldn't conjure the image of a window in my mind.

I went to the kitchen and poured a cup of Leuven's official beverage, water. I took sip after sip. Had glass after glass, until the bottle was empty. *That Letter is Our Life to Come.* The government trafficked in messages, reports, and memos. Our department decoded flyers, graffiti, tracts, ciphers. The word letter had one meaning, the meaning we used as cryptanalysts: alphabetic character.

I looked at the empty glass bottle and remembered the tale of a man stranded on an island. He had one piece of paper and a bottle. He wrote a message on that paper, stuck it in a bottle and threw it in the ocean. This was a tale my mother'd told. She'd called the message something else...a letter.

The second meaning of the word was extinct and had drifted into obscurity. I'd read a few dystopian novels on and off. In almost all of them, the outlawing of words, the removal of meanings occurred. It happened in almost all of them: *Flow my Tears, Said the Police Man, Gathering Blue, The Handmaid's Tale.* Axiomatic that Leuven killed. Axiomatic that Leuven disappeared objects, words, people.

The uniform on my shoulders felt more official as I buttoned it in the morning. I believed I'd stumbled upon something that would thrill Herson. We would get the tooth. Letter. The word reverberated inside my skin. It felt like an itch, the coming blossom of a mosquito bite.

Herson was not in the office when I arrived. I flicked on the monitor. Ellis was still asleep, back arched.

I looked at the man, who slept with his glasses on. A hunger overwhelmed me. I'd never felt this type of voracity. It was a lust for the tooth. I realized that this was what Herson felt. An unadulterated ravenousness for the canine. His excitement. I should have felt this all along. To celebrate, I grabbed my coffee mug, the national slogan etched on the side: To Not Be is to Be.

When I returned, Herson sat rubbing his hand through his buzz cut as he looked at the screen. I could see the redness of his scalp.

"He's asleep," he said.

I sat down in my chair and put my feet on the desk.

"What are you so happy about," he said and seized my calves. He ripped my legs off the desk with enough force to knock me out of the chair.

"That Letter is Our Life to Come." I picked myself up and readjusted my uniform. "What type of letter do you think he means?"

"I haven't decoded that word yet," Herson said. "I feel like it must have to do with some religion he participated in on the outside."

"No, not what the letter was cyphered to stand for."

"Herson didn't look at me. He sat frozen in his chair. "What are you saying?"

“You know like the letter, a love letter.”

Herson shook his head. He glanced around the room to see if anyone was watching. “A love letter?” “You can be replaced,” he said. He picked up his pencil and began translating the French into Urdu, his tenth language.

“Do you know what a love letter is, Herson?”

Herson threw his pencil so it traveled end over end before it hit the far wall of our work area. He picked up his national slogan mug. He shoved his chair back. He raised the mug. Water was all he said. That was the last thing he said to me that day, but I didn’t think too much of it.

When he left, I turned back to the monitor. Ellis was awake. His white t-shirt hung around him. His glasses were bent. Their lopsidedness made him look unstable. He began to talk. And then one of the men next to him repeated what he said in French. Ellis kept going, saying line after line of indecipherable words. The men around him repeated his lines. For the next three weeks, the men wandered around repeating various phrases that Ellis had spoken. By the fourth week, they’d started talking to each other. Ellis would say something and one of the Fighters would reply. No one spoke Benjamin or any other language. At the three-month mark, the other prisoners began to interact with him. They’d cracked it before us. I sent a memo to the over-director asking if our wires had picked up French in the street. I received a curt note back saying no.

A month later, the over-director sent us a memo. He reminded us that no cipher except Benjamin had taken this long to translate into plaintext. We had two weeks to crack it. He had confidence in us, but reminded us that we could all be replaced.

Two days after the memo, Herson asked me to stop speaking French.

I hadn't realized that I'd been repeating Ellis' phrases out loud. I apologized.

"Put on the headphones," he said. "I don't want to be hearing the shit out of Ellis' mouth either."

At the end of the day, Herson packed his briefcase and left our work area. A few minutes later, he returned dressed in his visor cap and grey overcoat, which still needed buttoning. The wool sleeve of his left arm rubbed against my cheek as he jammed his finger on the sheet of paper in front of me. I looked and saw that I'd been copying *That Letter is Our Life to Come*.

"I'm going to ask the over-director to relocate me."

I put my pencil down and looked up into his face. The shade from the caps visor hid his eyes, but I saw his mouth locked in a straight line.

"We can all be replaced," he said.

I didn't say anything. I knew we could all be replaced.

On the way home, I stopped at the liquor store to buy some more water, not so much for the effect it would have on me, but to have something to do while I thought through the night. As I muttered the phrases to myself. As I thought about letter.

But while I was sitting around the table, pouring water into a highball glass, Herson popped into my mind. Was Herson burying himself deeper into his role? Was he reporting me? And was he reporting me because it was something a Loyal did every once in awhile, even if there was nothing to report? Or was he doing it because he was afraid? Herson knew better than to be afraid. Furthermore, his repeating that we could be replaced seemed to suggest that he was afraid for me.

I had one drink that night and then lay in bed.

I was never afraid for myself. I was never afraid for Herson. We weren't different than the Bystanders and the Fighters. Eventually, we would all die. Should I turn Herson in? Was he playing the role, the informer, or was he actually succumbing to a fear that no rational human being should have? I'd made the mistake with my mother. I didn't want to make the mistake with Herson. This would all cave in if we didn't play our roles correctly.

I didn't see Herson the next day, though I heard that they'd found another partner for him, someone that spoke my specialty languages. I threw away his broken pencils while listening to Ellis and the Fighters. French. My mother. I'd felt like I'd hit a dead end.

But Ellis was acting strange that day. He was awake when I turned on the monitor. He usually slept for the first hour that I was at work.

He wasn't wearing his glasses and he was sitting with his legs crossed. One Fighter sat in front of him while the others waited.

The Fighter's hand rested on Ellis' palm. Ellis traced the lines of the Fighter's hands. He shut his eyes as he did this. After a few minutes, Ellis declared that the Fighter would live a long and healthy life.

"You will have five children by your wife and two by your mistress. You will eat sweet toast and taste cold coffee during the summer months. You will live to be eighty and still be strong, your muscles as virulent as the ox on the paths that roll through the mountains. You will object to the heavy hand. You will reside in peace."

What else could I say but Ellis was sibilant? And the joy. It was wrong. The joy. There was no joy in Benjamin, in English, in the languages Leuven had taught us. I

remembered a novel I'd read right when I graduated from school—the only dystopian novel that discussed the emotion. There was joy in what seemed like a utopia, but a child had to be tortured in order for the joy to exist. I sat there and watched Ellis on the monitor. His hand holding the weight of another's, fingers traced his fellow Fighters' palms. There was something else to it, at the heart of the joy. Love. No one bothered to love anyone else. Everyone died. It was excess.

The ear bleeds started the day of Ellis' palm readings. Men in the department reported that they'd woken to large amounts of blood on their pillows and sheets. The over-director sent us a memo stating that the ear bleeds were a product of exposure to French.

As the cases of the endemic multiplied, the over-director became more concerned. If cryptanalysts began dying from what he called infections, our department would be rendered useless. If it reached this point, we would all be killed and the government would bring in replacements. The over-director sent everyone home who was having ear bleeds. There were four of us in the department who were unaffected. I assumed that all of our families had spoken French and this rendered us immune.

The four of us slept very little. On my breaks, which lasted thirty minutes, I'd go to the bathroom and splash hot water on my face. My beard filled out, grizzle more than an inch in a few days. The other three men that I saw had beards of various lengths.

Their eyes were the same strained red as mine. I heard them more than I saw them, their opening and shutting of bathroom doors, their clinking of coffee mugs against the pot made of glass. The whole office had turned into sounds more than sight.

Dizzy with fatigue, my notes had turned into a hybrid of Greek, Cyrillic.

The Latin alphabet. The alphabets had transformed into one.

Two days later, they came for me. I felt a hand on my shoulder.

“Herson,” I said without looking up, “I’m glad you’re back.”

“It’s not Herson.”

Two men stood before me in their greys. They were without hats and had the insignia of a different department.

I smiled at them. “Thank God you’re here.”

They said nothing, but reached over and turned off my monitor. They bade me follow them. I stood up, but stumbled over the trashcan filled with Herson’s broken pencils. The pieces spilled over the blue carpet, which covered the concrete floor beneath. The men kicked the yellow wood out of the way and held me up by the inside of my arms. They let go when we reached the door of the over-director. They opened the door for me and the over-director motioned me in.

“I have called you in to discuss a comment you made a few weeks ago. Your desk mate Herson reported it to his supervisor, who relayed it to me. You said something about a love letter?”

“I told him the story of the bottle.” I told him that I should have reported my mother, reported myself.

“And Herson,” he said.

“And Herson.” I nodded

“You haven’t sent any ciphering attempts in two weeks.” His chair creaked as he lay back and kicked his feet up on his desk. I wondered if he felt satisfaction in knowing that I would be killed. “In fact, it appears that you have been making your own cypher.”

He opened a desk drawer and pulled out copies of the non-sense I'd written. He tamped the bottom of the papers down so that they straightened and set them in a pile on his desk. The papers, a pen-set and one of the government issued mugs were the only things on the desktop.

"You know something, don't you? It dawned on me last night." Here he smiled.

"Dawn has three different meanings in our language. There is one you are familiar with: to begin to be perceived or understood. It used to mark the beginning of something, a phrase like the dawn of history. Occasionally, it was a woman's name. It also meant the rising of the sun. The ending of night and the beginning of day."

"Yes," he said, looking at my face. "Think about it for a moment."

Although I was sick from fatigue, I nodded. Alternate meanings.

"In literature, they used double meanings, word play. Something that does not occur in the dystopian novels that you've read. It's axiomatic that the government removes meaning from words."

He reached into the same drawer that he'd pulled my notes from. He handed me a hardback book with the name Desnos on the front. *Mourning, Mourning*.

"Open it," he said.

"When I opened it, I saw words written in French.

"Ellis," I said.

"No, keep reading it."

Someone had broken words into four lines, each line ending with the phrase, "*I write your name.*" Ellis' had said that on a number of occasions.

"Poetry," he said, taking the book from my hand.

“It’s a form of art. The government believed it had killed off this practice some time ago, but Ellis speaks it.”

“What do you mean?” I stood staring at him.

“This is all I can tell you and I had to ask the overtop-director for permission to say what I’ve said.” He gestured toward the door. “You may go. When you return to your desk, destroy all you have written down. It’s of no use to us anymore.”

At my desk, I began collecting papers. I didn’t turn on the monitor right away. I knew that Ellis would no longer be there. I knew his canine would be on my desk when I came to work the next morning. I’d throw it in with the rest of them. I’d succeeded in my role. I’d continue to wear the greys and drink glasses of water. I’d sleep off Ellis’ words, though it felt like they had drowned my brain.

When I turned on the monitor, there was no one left in the cell. It had never been empty before, but it would be full soon enough. And we would start over with a new batch of Fighters. Leuven would reprise our roles.

The next morning, there were fifty-nine canines on my desk. I opened the jar and placed them in it. I shook them. I let my voracious hunger, which my fatigue had tempered, awake

A few moments later, another man in greys came to my desk carrying a box. He sat it down and reached his grey-clad arm out to me. Our palms touched. Durrand was all he said. The first thing he pulled out was a coffee mug.

CHAPTER 9

BENT BLUE

Ellis heard the sound of John-John's keys clinking together. He listened as John-John cursed and kicked the door of their dorm room as he tried to unlock it. The sound of metal on metal crushed into violence and Ellis got up from his desk and walked to the door. As he was reaching for the knob, John-John threw it open, hitting Ellis' hand. "Christ, John-John."

Without apology, John-John shoved past Ellis and dropped his bag on the floor. "It was raining, so of course God was crying. Everyone there said it except me. All the old people, the kids." He tried to jam his bag underneath his bed with the side of his shoe, but it smashed up against a suitcase and waded up clothes. "If it were sunny, God would have been smiling because he'd taken another sheep into the fold. What would have been best? Sun or rain?"

Ellis looked at him. John-John's eyes were bloodshot and had bags underneath them. He smelled like rail liquor and Ellis had the urge to push past him, to run, but he took a deep breath and crossed his arms and watched as John-John flopped onto his bed. He landed on loose pages of his Ancient Greek homework. The sound of the paper meeting his body was a splash.

John-John lay upside-down. His shoes rested on his pillow, his head on the navy comforter crumpled at the bed's foot. "Rain or shine?" he said. "Rain." He balled up a

piece of paper and threw it and hit Ellis on the shoulder. “Or shine?” He tossed another, but toward the trashcan. It landed a foot short.

He jumped up as if to pick the paper up, but instead he stood, straight and rigid. He lifted his index finger into the air and began shouting. “On the plane home, I remembered an essay I read freshman year in high school. A survivor of Auschwitz went to visit the place fifteen years later. This guy, this guy could not believe that the sun would dare shine on a place like that. Oh, how could the sun show its face?”

Ellis wanted to point out that he was being a dick, but there wasn’t a point. John-John’d forget by morning. And he might try to punch Ellis. He’d done it before on walks home from the bar. John-John would swing his fist and his body followed into the nearest plant or building.

John-John placed his hands over his heart. The blue stone in his football state championship ring looked gaudy. He had told Ellis he’d hit a guy once. He’d said that he could feel the stone sink into the kid’s eye.

“This guy actually thought weather cared. Like a little man with a gray beard sat up there and would dim the sun or hide it behind clouds or whatever.”

“They want you to be the man. The one that holds everyone up and makes them feel better. Take charge of the family. Handle things. My grandmother picked my arm to hold because she didn’t have any sons to prop her up. I’m not her son, not her prop.”

Two doors down, Ellis heard a girl yell, shut the fuck up.

John-John raced to the door. “I’m going to fucking kill you. I’m going...”

Ellis slid past him and slammed the door. “You’re going to get the RA in here.”

“I’ll kill him too,” but John-John sank back onto his bed.

Ellis walked to his desk and pulled out the bottom drawer. Beneath some letters from his ex, he had a bottle of Tennessee whiskey. He poured three fingers for John-John and one for himself into glasses he'd stolen from the cafeteria. Ellis handed one to John-John. "Take it easy, huh." Ellis tipped the glass toward his mouth and tried not to taste it. The whiskey still hot in his cheeks he asked, "Have you called Lotte?"

"Yeah, after I got off the plane. Told her I wanted to sleep." John-John tossed the cup at Ellis and he caught it, but not without a sip of whiskey landing on his jeans.

Ellis rubbed the spot, making it worse. "I'm going to go to the library." Ellis took his Stat textbook off the shelf and jammed it into his backpack along with a softcover copy of MCAT practice questions. His phone vibrated in his pocket. It was Lotte.

She'd called earlier that day and said she wanted to meet up with Ellis before he went to the library. She wanted to meet up, he thought, because girls need to talk about everything instead of leaving things alone. He thought they'd settled it all the night before. It's better to let sleeping dogs lie, he'd told her. She told him they were the ones lying. He rolled his eyes at the pun.

Lotte insisted that they tell John-John. John-John would know either way. He would sense it. Ellis told her to take a shower. He'd already washed his sheets.

"You're such an asshole," she'd said. "John-John and I have been dating for a year. I think I know what's best."

"And I've roomed with him for two." Ellis stopped short of telling her that he'd talked about things with John-John that she'd never know about, namely that there was no way in hell John-John was going to marry her.

He was going to stay with her until college was over. When he got home, he would call her and tell her everything was off.

Ellis looked over at John-John, his legs sprawled on the bed, shoes still on his feet. Ellis said, as he slid his arms into the straps of his backpack, “You need anything?” John-John rolled over and faced the wall. “No.”

A painting hung over John-John’s body and Ellis stared at the impressionist man standing alone in front of a pool table. A while back, John-John had pointed at the man. His index finger touched the wall, touched the painted face. The clock in the painting was stuck at 12:15. Everyone in the café was huddled at their tables, looking like they were whispering so the man couldn’t hear.

“That’s me,” John-John said. “Right there. That’s me.”

“Ellis.” It was Lotte. She was standing in front of the library without her books. She wasn’t carrying her purse either, the bright yellow leather thing she’d hidden the vodka in the night before. It was her idea to sneak the bottle into the bar so they wouldn’t have to pay for drinks.

“What do you want?” Ellis said. “I’ve already told you what we should do. Case closed.”

She glared at him. Lotte was still in sweatpants and a shirt with the university’s bulldog mascot on it, but her perfect curl fell on her forehead.

“Have you ever heard that confessions are a way to absolve your own guilt?” he said. “They don’t make the other person feel better.” He put his thumbs between his straps and chest. He looked at her. “If you didn’t want to do it, then you should have said so last night.”

Ellis thought she might slap him. He deserved it.

“Ellis, I’m going to tell him.”

Ellis wished they were in bed again, him pulling her shirt over her head.

“He needs to know.”

“He needs to sleep. You need to shower.” At that, she got as close to his face as possible, close enough so that their lips could touch. She reached up and jammed her index finger into his chest.

“You are a bastard. You don’t even feel guilty do you?”

He couldn’t see her eyes, just the blurry outline of her nose. His muscle clenched where her finger was. His skin would bruise.

“I do feel guilty. I feel like a dick, an asshole, a bastard,” he said. He took a step back and Lotte’s finger dropped down to her side. “And I wish to hell we weren’t standing here having this conversation.”

“But you know how he is, Lotte. I don’t want to set him off.”

She shut her eyes.

Ellis wanted to know what she was remembering. There were too many times to count. John-John brandishing the broken neck of a beer bottle at them, John-John ripping a windshield wiper off a truck on the way home from a bar, shouting Rilke’s Duino Elegies in German on the second floor of the library, using a can of spray paint in an attempt to dye his hair. And these were only a few things they’d seen together.

“And that stuff happened because he got a B+ on an exam or he missed an open net in a rec soccer team,” Ellis said.

Lotte sighed, looked at the ground.

Ellis felt guilty about what had happened, but he felt even worse for Lotte. She dealt with John-John in ways that Ellis never had to. His neediness, his volatility, his suicidal ideations. At the beginning of the semester, Ellis had gone out of town. When he got back, John-John was locked up in the university hospital. Lotte'd told Ellis about the white walls of the place, how John-John was the only student there.

For a moment, Ellis thought that maybe they should tell him. If they did, John-John might break up with Lotte and she wouldn't have to babysit him anymore.

"You're right," she said, before Ellis could say anything else. She shook her head. "You're right."

She placed her hand on his arm. It slid down to his elbow. She smiled, but it wasn't a smile. When she turned to go he felt her touch, not the warmth, but the way it had pressed his shirt into his skin.

He should have hugged her, wanted to, but he didn't. He watched her walk down the grey cobblestone toward her apartment.

When she was about halfway down he heard her say, "And I did take a shower."

Ellis smiled and hated himself.

When Ellis got back to his dorm, John-John was still asleep. The empty glass of whiskey lay next to a bottle of pills. Little green circles had spilled on the carpet. John-John called them his anti-hangover pills. His phone sat next to the bottle. Ellis saw that Lotte had called him.

Ellis collected the pills, dropping them into the bottle one at a time. He didn't know how many John-John had taken, but he'd told Ellis once that he'd tried to commit

suicide by swallowing them and drinking a bottle of gin mixed with ginger ale. Seventy-five pills and the only consequence was a straight forty-eight hours worth of sleep.

John-John laid facing Ellis' bed. He wore a hat that Ellis had never seen, a faded royal blue with a bill that was flat and dotted with watermarks. The leg of a K curved into a C. The bill extended down over John-John's forehead, over his eyes. All Ellis could make out was John-John's open mouth. He held his hand close to John-John's lips. The breath felt steady.

Ellis took off his shirt and pulled off his jeans leaving on his boxers. He sat on his bed. The streetlight showed through the window and he could see the little man. He thought about his sister, how she'd forced herself to eat after her husband, Lee, shot himself. Ellis had watched her take a fork and stab a piece of lettuce. When she closed her mouth around it, she gagged, but she forced herself to chew. He'd had to look away because he it would hurt too much to watch her swallow.

He lay down and brought his phone to his ear. He let it ring, waiting for Lotte's hello. When she answered he said, "He's all right. Just asleep." He wanted to say more, but he didn't want to wake John-John.

Lotte said thanks and he told her goodnight. When he hung up he closed his eyes, but his sister's open mouth rested behind them.

When Ellis woke up, John-John was sitting on the edge of his bed.

"E," he said. "Check this out."

John-John was still wearing the hat, but Ellis could see his eyes now. They were absent any redness. He was already dressed, a white t-shirt and a pair of jeans. He would throw his sky-blue winter coat over it before he left.

He held a beige shower radio. A cartoon dog with a brush and towel stood in sunglasses with a toothy smile on its face. The dog rested its back against a red treble clef taller than him by an inch.

“It only gets AM,” he said. He handed it to Ellis.

Ellis could feel the metal beneath the plastic. The antenna was light grey. It was about twice the size of walkie-talkies he’d played with as a kid.

“I got this for Christmas when I was twelve and I left it at my grandparent’s house. I totally forgot about it.” He took it back from Ellis. “It was on a wooden shelf in the basement.”

“Is that where you got the hat?” I noticed the dog’s eyebrows floated over its head.

“No, the hat was in the bottom drawer of my grandfather’s dresser. He was a big Royals fan. I found it when I was ten and asked if I could have it. He said no, but maybe when I got older.” John-John was staring at the radio. “Everyone was out of the house. I went in and took it. I’m not sure anyone knew it was there but me.”

“Twenty is probably old enough,” John-John said. “I don’t think my grandpa would mind.”

Ellis felt like he was asking for permission, wanting someone to say he could have it. Ellis said, “No, I’m sure he wouldn’t.”

“You mind if I put it in the shower?” John-John said. He held the radio out toward Ellis.

“That’s where it goes right?” Ellis said.

John-John nodded his head. He stuck the radio back in his bag.

“I’m going to the gym. Instead of his usual yellow shorts, he left wearing jeans and a T-shirt. He didn’t put on his coat.

At four, Ellis came back from government. John-John was in the shower. Ellis could hear the radio, but the water hissed over the voices and he couldn’t make out what was being said. He was surprised that that radio with its stupid dog could get something other than mariachi bands.

The words *summum malum* and *summum bonum* spun in his mind. Greatest good. Greatest evil. So society was founded on an individual’s willingness not to kill someone lest he be killed. And Hobbes and his professor believed that hope was nothing more than an appetite for a thing combined with opinion that it could be had. This all sounded about right to Ellis. When he was sitting with a clean sheet of paper in front of him, he wished he could go to the dean, tell him he’d thought about Hobbes that he was sure this is what he believed and would the dean consider letting him skip the rest of the class. Ellis was over social science. He preferred the realm of the natural.

He untucked the small piece of yellow cardboard that kept his colored pencils from spilling in his drawer and mixing in with pens, all filled with blue ink. The sharpened tips of the colored pencils met him. He selected the black and began to draw a rectangle, which he then proceeded to divide into squares. The lanthanoid series began with the atomic number fifty-seven and ended with the number seventy-one.

When he finished writing the numbers and shading the squares with orange, he realized that John-John was still in the shower. He put the colored pencils in the top drawer of his desk and went to knock on the door.

“I’m almost finished,” John-John said.

“You’ve been in there for an hour.” Though John-John was listening, Ellis felt like he was talking to the door. “You didn’t slit your wrists or something did you?”

“No, I’m listening to baseball.”

Ellis placed his ear against the door. He heard a man say, “Orta takes a swing and misses. Strike two.” Then, the man started spouting off specific statistics for the guy, his batting average, his number of RBI’s.

“Plus I’d blow my head off if I was gonna do that,” John-John said.

“Good to know.” Ellis returned to his desk. He took a pair of tweezers and used them to lift the right corner of the page he’d begun to draw on. With his left hand, he pulled out a forest green binder that he’d taken the clips out of. The cover read Gov. He placed the piece of computer paper over other various drawings of the periodic table.

Just as he was stuffing the green binder beneath his desk, John-John emerged from the bathroom dressed. He had a pair of jeans on that sagged below his waist. His shirt was black. The words Russian Roulette stretched across his chest. There was a silhouette of a guy with shaggy hair and a gun to his head. Ellis had never seen it before. John-John always wore white T-shirts so that he could show off his pecks and biceps.

“E.,” he said. “You’re not going to believe this. The radio picks up a signal from a Kansas City station.”

“You’re right. I don’t believe it.” Ellis shook his head and started rifling through a pile of books closest to him on the floor, all of them about the German colonization of Western and Eastern Europe during World War II.

John-John came over to his desk. He picked up the black-colored pencil that Ellis had missed when he was putting the pack away.

“Are you drawing the periodic table again?”

“Fuck off, John-John.”

John-John put Ellis in a headlock. “You could probably wallpaper our room with those things.”

Ellis didn't struggle. John-John had more muscle mass than Ellis had ever had even when he was lifting and playing soccer. Ellis felt the pressure of John-John's forearm on his Adam's apple. Right before Ellis began to panic, John-John let him go.

“I'm going to Lotte's.” He went over and started shuffling the papers on his bed. John-John had slept on top of them two nights in a row. The sheets he stuck in his bag didn't look any different than the others on his bed.

“Can you take the shirt off,” Ellis said. “It's going to bother her.” Ellis had his back to him, a book open.

“So you're worried about Lotte.”

Ellis was, but couldn't say it outright. The way Lotte had slumped against his shoulder on the way home two nights ago, the way her right arm hooked through his.

“I wouldn't wear it around anyone,” Ellis said. “They've already locked you up once.”

“What are you going to do, turn me in to the shrink department?”

Ellis could see the smirk on his face, could feel his hands resting on the waist of his jeans with elbows pointing out. Ellis could see this without looking at him, but he turned because he was afraid of what might happen if he didn't look.

John-John stared at Ellis. He didn't move. The smirk was now a grin and John-John looked on the verge of punching him.

Instead of hitting him, John-John took off the shirt and put on a plain white one. He didn't say anything to Ellis when he walked out of the door, but two seconds later he was back in the room. "Have you seen my Greek book? The blue one?"

Ellis shook his head. He wanted to tell John-John to lay off the baseball stuff too, take off the hat, but he let it go.

The more John-John threw clothes and paper around the angrier he became. Ellis heard him murmur fuck under his breath. A few seconds later, he screamed it and he kicked the leg of Ellis' bed.

Ellis got up and looked for the book. He wanted John-John out of the room as soon as possible. Ellis stood on his bed and rummaged through his stuff on the long shelf that held a box of moon pies, his swimming towels, goggles and packets of little noodle things his grandmother sent, thinking that he would eat them.

"Damn-it." John-John was trying to close the door to his closet. It wouldn't shut so he started banging into it with his shoulder. After a minute of this, he pounded the door with the bottom of his fist.

There was a small book, a copy of the New Testament that the Church of Christ left around the campus, blocking the door. Ellis didn't point it out. He didn't want to feel the fake stone in his eye.

John-John punched the door once more and then turned and walked out the door, slamming it shut behind him. All Ellis could do was hope that John-John would chill out before he got to Lotte's.

With John-John gone, Ellis placed the colored pencil back in its box. A copy of Grey's Anatomy lay beneath his desk against the left corner. He picked it up and placed

the binder beneath it. He pulled *The Leviathan* and his first-year Biology book from the shelf and placed them on top of his copy of Grey's.

Ellis waited for five minutes before he went into the bathroom. He pulled back the curtain, but didn't see the radio. It wasn't in the medicine cabinet. He got on his knees and reached his hand behind the toilet. He looked under the sink. Finally, he looked through John-John's closet, where he found the Greek book that they had been looking for, but that was all he found.

Ellis' phone rang. He checked and it was his buddy, Houston.

"What's up," Ellis said. Houston was having a few people over before they went to the bars. "I'll be over in a while."

Ellis drank whiskey from the bottle and got in the shower, which wasn't even lukewarm. He tried to make it hot by thinking that it was.

Ellis didn't see John-John again until the next Tuesday when Ellis returned from German. He couldn't speak it worth a damn or understand what other people were saying. The first two semesters of German had been fine. The professor reminded him of an aunt and had offered him a position as copy editor of an English language journal that discussed German literature. He had to turn it down because of Orgo.

The professor this semester was an old German named Jankowsky. When Ellis didn't understand what the man was asking, Jankowsky yelled as he repeated the question. Most of the time, a girl, who was fluent, saved Ellis by answering for him. Jankowsky said she was Ellis' Rotkäppchen, even though the tale was clear that it was Rotkäppchen that needed saving.

That day, Jankowsky had chastised him for his inability to answer questions about the Berliner Mauer. Rotkäppchen tried to save him, but Jankowsky said, “Schweigen bitte,” and returned to shouting at him.

When Ellis walked into the room, he could hear the radio over the water’s splashing. He pulled his comforter over him and stuck his head beneath his pillow, but the radio grew louder. He heard the announcer say, “...up to bat for Kansas City. He takes the first ball. Strike one.”

Ellis caught himself thinking that it might be Orta at bat. He became angry with himself. He didn’t want to buy anymore of John-John’s bullshit. It was eleven in the morning. Even double headers wouldn’t start that early, but he got out of the bed and pressed his ear to the door. The man was talking about George Brett. Then, the other announcer began discussing the St. Louis pitcher, who the manager had called up from the bullpen.

Maybe Ellis was wrong. He’d heard of people getting stations from Eastern Europe on their transistors.

The water shut off and he got back into his bed. He put his head beneath his pillow again.

He heard John-John come out of the bathroom followed by paper tearing and books thumping as they hit the rug.

“The Royals are going to the World Series, Ellis.” Ellis didn’t move. “We just beat the Blue Jays in the ALCS.”

Ellis had heard the announcer talking about the Cardinals, the pitcher. Maybe they had switched games.

“I know you think this is weird, Ellis, but it’s true. It’s happening. It’s a sign. My grandfather dying and me getting the radio broadcasts from Kansas City. And Kansas City is in the World Series. It’s a sign.”

Ellis threw off his covers. He couldn’t stay in the bed. John-John was standing and Ellis needed to stand. “Just like the sun and the moon.” It was out of his mouth before he could stop it.

“Sun and rain” John-John said. “It’s not the same. My grandfather’s dead and now the Royals are in the World Series.”

“Fine,” Ellis said. He went over to his bookshelf and tried to seem like he was looking for something. Primo Levi’s *The Periodic Table* was the only book that he had that wasn’t for a class.

“Have you talked to Lotte recently?” John-John said.

“No.”

“Do you know her mother has cancer?”

“No, I didn’t.” Ellis was surprised that Lotte hadn’t said anything at the bar. It was a topic he couldn’t imagine her omitting when she was as drunk and sad the way she was that night. “When did she find out?”

“Three weeks ago.”

“Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“I figured Lotte would tell you when she wanted you to know.” John-John turned and walked out the door.

Ellis sat outside the library underneath a tree and watched the airplanes fly in over the Potomac. He imagined the places they were coming from: Phoenix, Spokane,

Detroit. He wanted to leave, but there wasn't a place he wanted to be. He began to believe what his psychiatrist was telling him: his grief would follow him wherever he went.

His phone vibrated in his back pocket. He closed his eyes and listened to a pick-up football game on the other side of the lawn. The come on mans and touchdowns and throw its reverberated against the old stone building that served as walls around the grass.

He swallowed thinking about his sister. She said she'd had the gun destroyed, but there had to be something left: screws, springs, a fleck of metal. Where were the pieces?

His phone vibrated again. He adjusted and his elbow slammed into a root. He bit his lip.

"Hey Lotte," Ellis said.

"Ellis, why didn't you tell me?" she said.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"We were out and drunk and you didn't tell me your mother had cancer?" she said.

"John-John," he said.

"You didn't tell me because of John-John. What does..."

"No. He just told me your mom has cancer." He heard Lotte sigh.

A silver plane flew above him. Could it be from Oklahoma City? Or maybe it was the exact one that had carried his uncle's body there. "He just left our room? Is he on his way over?"

"No," she said.

"Let me know if you get ahold of him."

After Ellis got off the phone, he went to the library. He took the elevator to the fourth floor where they housed untranslated fiction. He walked the rows, wove in and out of them until he was in the German section. He took out books and looked at their pages. On each page, he saw a few words that he knew, but didn't know the meaning of many of the sentences.

He took a handful to one of the cubicles and stood them up with the titles facing him. The covers were hard reds, yellows, and blues with scuff marks in random patterns on the fronts and backs. He stared at them for a minute, put them in alphabetical order by title, then by author. When he'd done this four times, he made a square with one arm over the other. He let his forehead fall to the desk, let it thunk against the wood. He breathed and felt the wet heat rise back up to his face.

What would he feel like if his mother had been diagnosed with cancer? Shocked. The same shock he'd felt when his father called to tell him about Lee. No, he couldn't feel that kind of shock again. It wasn't something that could ever be replicated.

Tears mixed with the condensation on the desk.

Orta was at bat. The announcers voice woke Ellis up from a Saturday afternoon nap. The water wasn't running.

"John-John, please." Ellis said. He didn't feel like getting up to bang on the door. John-John turned off the radio.

When he came out of the bathroom, he had shaving cream on the tip of his chin. He wasn't wearing a shirt, but still had on the hat. Its brim angled upward. Ellis could make out John-John's eyes. He wasn't looking at Ellis. He was looking at the man in the painting.

“So,” John-John said. “Here’s the good news.” He used his index finger to wipe the spot of white off his face. “The Royals pushed it to a game seven. I think they’re going to win it. George Brett is a hell of a player.”

“Were you listening to game seven?” I said.

“No, they were replaying game six.” John-John took off his hat. His hair had grown two inches and stuck straight out. He never let it get past an inch. He’d had it buzzed at the shop every two weeks.

“I’m playing a rec game up on Kehoe at six,” he said. “You should come by.”

“I’m studying. I have a physics exam on Monday.” Ellis lied.

“Well, I’ll see you later.”

After he left, Ellis wanted to call Lotte. He wanted to tell her about the roulette shirt, but it would have been as bad as him wearing it. And John-John was still playing soccer. He hadn’t quit that. Baseball season would be over soon. This would all stop.

Before he left, Ellis went into the bathroom, rummaged in the cabinet, dug through John-John’s travel kit. Ellis found six neon green condoms, but no radio.

Ellis was over at Wills’ apartment. He’d had a shot and two beers. He was talking to a sophomore from Germany. He tried to speak to her in German. Without a hint of condescension, she’d told him he was cute and that she liked it when American boys attempted to speak it even if they were bad.

“Wie heißt du?” he said. She looked at him for a moment. He noticed her green eyes.

A vivid amber encircled the pupil.

“Diana” she said. The i sounded like an e.

“Hast du einen Freund?” he said.

She laughed. “Nein. “But, what business is it of yours?” As he was about to reach for the hair tucked behind her ears, his phone rang. It was Lotte. He had to answer it. He told the girl he’d be right back.

The music was blaring so he went outside. He’d forgotten his jacket and it was cold. He answered his phone and jammed the other hand in his pocket so his arm hugged his side.

“Can you please come over?” Lotte said.

“Where’s John-John?” Ellis looked back in the window. He saw nothing but the back of some guy’s football jersey, the number eight in blue.

“He’s crashing at a friend’s house. I guess they went off campus and everyone’s too drunk to drive back.”

“Look, I’m kind of in the middle of something.” Ellis said.

“You found a hook-up. Congrats,” she said.

“No. It’s not like that. I’m not like that,” he said. “She’s German. You know I could use the help with my homework?”

“I understand,” she said. “Give me a call whenever.”

“You should go out,” Ellis said. “Talk to some people other than John-John and me.”

“How can I go out in good conscience? My mother’s got cancer.”

Ellis laughed. He heard her laughing over the phone.

“I’ll talk to you later,” she said.

Ellis went back into the party. Diana was talking to a girl dressed up in black pants. She had an orange shirt that looked slick. He went over to grab three beers, one

for each of them. As he was pumping mostly foam into the plastic cup, his back started aching. He placed the half-filled cup on a table littered with empty plastic bottles that had once contained liquor made in a bathtub. Lotte was still laughing in his ear.

Ellis looked for a piece of paper and a pen. All he could find was a piece of cardboard from a pack of beer and a red dry erase marker. He wrote his number down on it and handed it to Diana.

“Maybe we could have coffee sometime,” he said.

“Vielleicht,” she said.

On the way out the door, Ellis looked back at her. She had folded the cardboard and held it in her right hand. He was glad she hadn’t dropped it or thrown it away.

He pressed the button next to the number five. He could hear it buzz. The lock on the metal door clicked in and he opened it. She was waiting for him at the top of the stairs. He walked into the place she shared with three other girls.

Warhol’s hung on the yellow walls. Marilyn Monroe, flowers, a can of Campbell’s Black Bean Soup and pairs of Converse. He knew there was a black and white print of a car crash in the bathroom that Lotte’s roommate Anna wouldn’t take down.

He’d been there before, but only with John-John. Ellis looked at the futon that the girls had dressed up with a purple cover and pillows that had maroon and yellow stripes. He’d slept there one night. He and Anna had folded the futon down and had sex. In the morning, he woke up with his arm wrapped around her. He left it there and shut his eyes until Anna woke up. . She hugged him before he left.

“The only reason we’d be dating is because John-John and Lotte are,” she’d said to him.

Ellis nodded in agreement even though he liked her.

She was an English major and he liked to listen to her talk about books. Sometimes he took her suggestions and checked one out of the library so he would have something to say before the drinking games started. Shortly after he'd read *Wuthering Heights*, she'd started dating some guy prone to wearing pastel button-ups.

Lotte came out of the kitchen with two cans of beer in her hand. "What should we do?" she said.

Lotte sat down and he followed suit. "Do you like John-John's new hat?" Ellis said. "He's driving me crazy."

"What hat?" she said. Ellis could feel her eyes on him. She shifted until her knee and foot of her left leg were on the couch. She was facing him now. Ellis hung his head.

"You haven't seen a blue hat with the letters K and C on it."

"No," she said.

"Great," Ellis said. He shook his head. "John-John is insisting that this radio with a dog on it gets the Kansas City Royal's baseball games. Apparently, the Royals are in the World Series."

"What? The World Series is over. The Red Sox won. They broke the curse. Haven't you heard everyone yelling, 'Yankees Suck?'"

"I'm from the South. I don't care about baseball. Tennessee's lost three in a row. I can't care much about who wins the World Series." Ellis put his beer down on the cheap wooden table. They were the same in every apartment.

"Who in the hell is Jorge Orta?" Ellis said.

She shrugged, got up and went into her room. She brought her laptop back. When Ellis looked at it, he saw that Orta had played for the Royals in the '80s.

The Royals had won the World Series in 1985.

“Lotte, I don’t feel good,” he said. He looked away from the screen. Bile was collecting in his throat. His mouth watered, but he kept swallowing so he wouldn’t throw up.

“Why didn’t you look it up and say something to him?”

“Did you ask him why he lied about your mother?”

“No.” She shook her head.

“That’s why.”

She didn’t say anything. She stood up and took their beers into the kitchen and poured them down the sink. Ellis heard her run the water. The garbage disposal whirred. She came back out with two glasses of water.

“Do you want to stay over?” she said. Ellis nodded. She got a sleeping bag out of her closet and unfolded a quilt her grandmother made.

Ellis took off his jeans and slept in his t-shirt and boxers. The quilt was thin so Ellis ended up unzipping the sleeping bag. Once inside he could feel the heat of his body warm the air trapped inside.

When he woke up, Lotte was next to him. He had wrapped his arm over her and was holding her hand.

Ellis left Lotte’s promising to call her later in the day. He wanted to walk off some of his anger, wanted to figure out what to say to John-John. In twenty minutes, he hit M street. He remembered the sports store there and crossed to the other side where he passed a fancy deli and mannequins in argyle.

The hats sat on shelves behind the cash register.

They had Yankees hats in every color including a soft pink with sequence. A man walked up to him.

“Can I help you with something?” The guy was wearing a shirt that said obey. He was meaty like John-John.

“Yeah. Do you have any Royals hats?”

“Where are you Midwestern sons of bitches coming from?” He rested his elbow on the counter and snapped his gum. “A guy came in here and bought the only one we had a few weeks ago.”

“What’d he look like?”

“Son, are you a detective?” Ellis shook his head. “I’m not up for an investigation.”

Ellis said he was sorry and walked out of the store.

Though he was wearing jeans, he jogged home. He thought about how stupid he looked, but stopped caring when he started breathing hard. He counted the bricks beneath his feet. He almost ran into a tree that wasn’t in a planter.

When he got to their dorm room, the door was unlocked. Ellis didn’t want to open it. He thought about getting their R.A. and telling them what was going on. He knew John-John needed help. He closed his eyes and saw the hole in the back of John-John’s head.

He heard the game blaring. Orta was at bat. Strike one. Orta chokes up resets himself in the box. Ball one. The noise was louder than it had ever been. He started banging on the bathroom door and screaming John-John’s name. No one answered, except the announcer, “The Cardinals are up one. Royals trailing in the ninth.”

Ellis kicked the door by the lock. The force of his foot rattled the doorknob. Three more times and he'd bent the latch. On the fourth kick, he broke it. It banged open. When he looked up, all he saw was the radio hanging beneath the showerhead. It was silent in the bathroom.

"John-John."

Ellis heard doors opening on the hall. A guy yelled for someone to go get the R.A.

Ellis couldn't breath. His head was killing him. His adrenaline was wearing thin. He wished he had a paper bag. Those things were supposed to work. He went to his bed and started to lay down when he noticed that his drawings of the periodic table had been stuck to his wall with masking tape. Each one he'd sketched had black lines covering them.

He turned around to look at John-John's wall expecting the same thing. Instead, he saw that John-John had circled the man. He had drawn a speech balloon. *I'm going to Kansas*. An arrow stretched to the small window, the only one that was in the painting. Ellis looked at it. There was fire in its panes.

When Ellis saw the hat on John-John's pillow, he laughed. The voices were getting closer. He went and got the whiskey from his desk. There was barely any left. John-John had been drinking it on the sly.

Ellis stood in front of the painting. He wound up like a pitcher and imagined Orta standing there. He took a step back and his hands went over his head. His leg was in motion, the glass bottle coming forward when his R.A. grabbed his wrist.

"I'm twenty-one," Ellis said.

His hand was bleeding and he didn't know why. His phone was vibrating. He figured it was Lotte.

The R.A. took ahold of his shoulder and pressed his palm into Ellis' bicep. "Calm down. Hey Parker, I don't think we need security."

Ellis looked down. The papers and their ancient Greek lay on the bed. But on top of them there was a full sheet with five words written in permanent marker. *You should have told me.*

CHAPTER 10

UNTITLED

I eyed the bricks piled next to the building. The dust of plaster and concrete blocks covered them. A few metal rods jutted out of the pile, bent and rusted. It was clear that the owner of the property had demolished the building that once stood there in order to make space for a parking lot. Yellow lines ran out from beneath the apartment building, where I was looking to rent a place, and the laundromat across from it. But the workers had duped the owner. The width of the spots wouldn't fit a compact car. Your regular four-door needed three. An SUV, five.

I picked up a brick and dropped it. It shattered into three pieces. Emma glared at me. I shrugged my shoulders.

"Let's take a look inside," the realtor said.

"What the hell," I said, and put my arm around Emma. She reached over and covered my sarcastic grin with her hands.

"I wish you hadn't had the beer at lunch," she said. "It makes you seem jaded."

"And who says I'm not?" I said.

"Half the time you're anxious and worried that what you're painting isn't going to mean anything," she said. "You're a fake nihilist."

She moved my arm off her shoulder and held my hand. She squeezed it. I didn't want her to leave me in this city that had a pile of dusty bricks for a heart.

Inside, a brick wall flowed from the foyer and into the living room. The long, narrow sides of the bricks showed. Their sides overlapped with the courses of bricks below and beyond. I traced the mortar lines and inhaled a faint hint of the street I had once lived on in Boston. Pasta, cannolis, the harbor and old men playing bocce.

“The beige accentuates the brick,” Emma said, looking at the other three walls. My desk could go next to the window overlooking the parking lot. A row of folding chairs could line the windowless wall. I’d place my easel to the left of the window. For now, I would leave the walls empty, but change the color to something more suitable for a studio. When Emma moved here, we would discuss what to hang. I knew what would go up. Old maps of DC and a photograph of an elephant’s shadow swimming through the ocean. These I would allow as part of the compromise that accompanies marriage.

At the hardware store, Emma insisted that the bathroom be sky blue. Since she was a kid she’d dreamt of having a sky-blue bathroom. Every day she’d woken to an uninspired yellow that made her nauseous.

She picked up a card that was a god-awful blue. Wandering Haze, the card said. It looked like a wandering green hangover.

“Beautiful,” I said, reluctant but hoping things like the bathroom’s color would convince her to move to Columbia until I finished my MFA.

“But I’m picking the paint for the bedroom and the living room.”

“That’s fair,” she said, her hand cupping my cheek.

I watched the machine squirt a string of dye into the white base. As it turned blue, I flipped through a number of paint color cards. I knew what I was looking for: a grey that was two parts black, one part white, Night Train, the hue of the engine barreling

through its headlights, the other What's Left, the residue in the bottom of a glass of scotch. Since I couldn't mix the paint myself, I'd have to do with what they had. I was still looking twenty minutes after the machine had mixed Wandering Haze.

That afternoon and into the early morning, Emma and I painted the rooms. I let her wipe Wandering Haze on the bathroom walls. I coated the living room with Night Train. Large drips ran toward the floor. When Emma commented on the imperfection, I said everything needs an artist's touch. She rolled her eyes.

"An excuse for carelessness," she said. I smiled at her. She turned back to the wall she was working on.

At four in the morning, we finished the bedroom. With the last bit of What's Left, Emma painted the words, I love you, on my hand.

In bed, paint fumes tinged our breath.

"Tomorrow, let's find a restaurant where I can go when I miss you."

"Okay," she said and kissed me before she rolled over to face the wall.

I woke up the next morning to what sounded like basketball shoes squeaking on the floor. It took me a moment to figure out I was in South Carolina.

I glanced at my watch. It was one o'clock. I rolled over to wake Emma, but she wasn't there. I arched my back and got up, expecting to find Emma reading the New York Times in the kitchen, but the table was empty. The squeaking had now turned to screeching. It was coming from the living room.

Expecting to find Emma reading the New York Times on one of the folding chairs, I found, instead, a large metal cage with a small bird inside. Its head bobbed back and forth giving me the once over.

The bird's face was peach. The lower part of its neck verged on ghostly white. Its breast matched its face. The back of the bird's head and its wings were a primary green mixed with two parts blue. The upper tail contained streaks of black. The lower tail came closer to sky blue than the bathroom wall.

A number of hanging masses surrounded the bird. Hemp ropes supported blocks and buttons. The most absurd toy hung in the cage's center, a ribbon that held miniature watering cans.

Next to the cage sat a range of bags. Luvbird Pellets, silver millet and flax. An envelope on top of the millet bag read, To Bro—Bro being the evolution of a pet name. In the note, Emma said she was leaving on an eleven-fifteen flight. The Bobbies had caught three students shoplifting on a trip. She had to be at DCA to pick them up and shuttle them to their parents.

The bird, it said, which she had named Untitled—knowing that I hated artists who wouldn't sack up and name their paintings—was a lovebird. She bought it to keep me company until she moved. She wrote out a list of instructions: keep the bird entertained, buy it fresh vegetables and fruits, let it out of its cage. She noted that the birds form a strong attachment to one person and that lucky person was going to be me. *When I come in the summer, we will buy another bird. Untitled will bond with Untitled #1 and he will forget about you so I can have you all to myself.* The line sounded loose and stupid. What a sloppy way to leave.

Three days before school started, I met up with the first-year MFA kids at a place called the Saucer. It sold over two hundred different beers. Five of us sat at a table for ten. Waitresses ran around in short Catholic school skirts carrying beers that varied in

shade from dehydrated urine to Oklahoma red dirt. We talked about where we were from. Two had gone to undergrad at SC, Z and Maddie. One was from Georgia, Wilmut. One from New York, Jill.

“So you’re here to make Jesus paintings?” I said to Z, whose beard made him look like the Son of God. “Maybe a Howard Finster type.”

“Nope,” he said. “I’m a map-maker. Rand-fucking-McNally is my mentor.” He finished his beer and thumped the bottom against the table never taking his fingers from around its neck.

“I can show you how to get from here to there unless you already know.”

I shook my head. He held his free hand up signaling for two more.

“What about you? Are you a Banksy type? Sell nothing, then sell out. You look like one of those punks who still plays at being the street artist.”

“No.” I finished my beer and pushed the glass toward the middle of the table.

“Just sat behind a desk too long and felt like dying. Picked up a brush again after a family suicide.”

“You sound like a cop from one of those shows,” he said. When the beers came, he slid one over to me. “Anyway, I’ve got your back.”

Z turned to Jill, the one from New York, and asked if she knew who Henry Darger was. No, she didn’t.

“Fuck all that stuff,” he said. He slipped his arm over her shoulder. I drank the rest of my beer wishing Emma was there.

On the first day of class, I saw them all, Z, Jill, Wilmut and Maddie. It was then I realized we were in an artist’s hell for the first semester. We weren’t going to be painting

or sculpting or etching or even doodling with colored pencils. Our professors thought it best we have an incubation period, something they failed to mention before we arrived. In class number one, I read through a syllabus blocked into days by words like inorganic pigments, undertones, and the color wheel and the additive primary. In my other course, days would pass discussing art manifestos and theory, the long-term goal being our own manifesto that would serve as the basis for our artwork over the next two and a half years.

In the manifesto class, our prof asked each one of us what successful art was. Z started.

“Success is a loaded term. I don’t think it can be linked to the word art in a way without undercutting art’s real intentions.”

“Okay, well why are you here?”

“My guess is that you all thought my work could be successful.”

“Well that’s one way of looking at it, Zack. And you, Ellis, what is your definition of success?”

“I think if I touch one person, if one person can feel the way that I felt while I was making it, could see their feeling in my feeling.” I paused. “That’s success.”

As we walked out of class, Z stopped me. He had no pencil, no papers in his hand, not even the syllabus.

“So you’re one of those.”

“One of what?” I said as I moved out of the doorway to let the next class in.

“Oh, you know,” he said lifting his index finger and thumb to his face as if to conceal his smirk. “I can already start the construction of your city. Foundation’s naiveté.”

“Fuck you,” I said.

“Don’t worry the foundation of mine is a mixture of asshole and prick,” he said.

He turned and walked off toward the stairs.

“But you believe that,” Emma said. “That’s what you wrote in your personal statement. I think it’s noble.”

I sat looking out at the parking lot. I stared at the lines, imaging a clown car with thirty clowns waiting to pour out the door, white face paint, one with prescient tears in blue.

“That’s not what’s important. This guy’s an asshole,” I said.

“How’s Untitled?”

I glanced over at him sitting on top of his cage, eating a piece of apple that I’d cut up for him.

“Well he’s not untitled anymore. His name’s Moby Dick, after the Pollock.

Anyway Emma. Like I was saying this Z kid’s an asshole. I don’t belong here.

Wilmot’s married, Maddie’s in a three-year relationship with a guy that moved with her.

I’m thinking of quitting, coming back to you, to D.C.”

“You can’t quit, but you could have a better attitude,” she said. “So are you feeding him fresh vegetables?”

“Who, Z?”

“No, Untitled.”

“Yes, for fuck’s sake. Are you listening to me?” I stood up from the desk. “The bird’s name is Moby and I hate it here.”

“Look for the positive. Make a list of what you are thankful for,” she said. Moby looked at me. He bobbed his head up and down.

“I don’t have anything else to say,” I said. We mumbled I love you.

Moby screeched and flew over to my shoulder. He bit my ear.

I tried to avoid Z, which meant I came straight home from class. The walk was a walk of empty storefronts and dilapidated restaurants. I passed a place that had a chicken painted on the front in Easter yellow with carrot colored feet. Drake’s Duck In. If I took up eating there, I knew it would be over. I’d become loneliness personified, sitting there in wooden orange booths. The place hadn’t been revamped since the 1970s. I’d be the updated version of Hopper’s “Nighthawks.”

So I hurried past Drake’s. I chased away the loneliness by analyzing colors, drawing lines back and forth in color wheels. I practiced mixing on a computer program because they wouldn’t let us use paints. I printed off exercises from the computer, but the ink was never precise enough. Moby’d sit on my shoulder his head flitting left then right like he was studying along with me.

“Those aren’t colors, Moby,” I’d say. I’d feed him a piece of cantaloupe then eat one myself. Primary, Secondary, Tertiary. Orange-red. Yellow-Orange. Yellow-Green. The machine mixed the paints at the hardware store, but at least somebody bothered to call them something worth imagining. Why wasn’t I mixing things like “Broken Arm,” “When We Help Little Girls,” “Space in between Lint and Pocket”?

I’d drink a beer as I picked through manifestos and histories. I wondered what it would have felt like to have had Breton’s dream, to be the first to think, “A man cut in two by a window.”

The next night, I read about Arp and his art of chance. I looked out the window. How do you create a whole movement by throwing pieces of paper into the air? How does that denounce a war? I tossed the papers on my desk, got a beer and headed for the window.

I looked out at the mini-parking spaces. In two months, I'd never seen anyone park there. There had to be something that would fit though. They had to have some purpose.

"Moby, there's a car for them, right?" I rubbed his neck even though he had a tendency to bite.

I stared at the lines, peered through them, but the more I let the lines exist, the more the answer crawled away. Moby walked across the desk tottering over a book on Fauvism. His claws scratched along the printouts of color wheels. I thought about Warhol painting beers instead of soup cans. I thought of him making multiple prints of Francis Farmer instead of Monroe. I stared at the parking spaces. One line is part of one whole while simultaneously one line is part of two wholes.

"For fuck's sake, Moby," I said. "I should be fucking painting." I threw the can of beer against Night Train. Glass would have been more satisfying, but I could imagine Moby with his throat full of shards, the edges of glass tearing up his vocal chords.

Emma was waiting for me on the curb at the airport. She had a bouquet of red carnations, though she knew I thought red flowers were cliché. I kissed her and placed her bag in the trunk.

"Thanks for the flowers," I said as I opened the car door for her.

"You're welcome, but they're more for Untitled than you," she said.

“Lovebirds like fresh flower petals.” I started the car without looking at her, then put it in drive. “He hasn’t had them before has he?”

“No.” Moby and I had simple tastes. I ate frozen food or pasta for each meal, skipping breakfast each day. Moby had his choice of pellets, wild rice, and sesame seeds. I’d feed him fresh fruit and vegetables while we worked, but that was as exotic as we got.

“You aren’t mad, are you?” she said. I shook my head and paid the toll to exit the airport.

“I want to give him something that he hasn’t had before,” she said adjusting her seatbelt. “I know you’re his, but it couldn’t hurt to curry his favor. They’re much more to his taste than yours,” she said. She paused waiting for me to laugh.

When we got back to my place, she went straight for Moby’s cage. I waited to give her the university T-shirt and a framed piece of paper that Moby’d walked across with paint on his feet.

“Kinda like how they have elephants paint,” she said.

“Kinda,” I said, as I took her hand and led her toward the bed.

“Shouldn’t we make sure Moby’s cage is locked?”

I kissed her, wiping the remains of the question from her mouth.

At the end of the day, we sat outside a restaurant drinking beer. Emma ordered a hamburger, but I wasn’t hungry.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have moved,” I said. “Maybe I should come back to D.C.”

“Give it a little more time, Bro,” Emma said as she peeled off the bottle’s label.

“It’ll take you more than a few months to get adjusted. It’s like the first semester of undergrad,” she said.

The waitress brought out the food and Emma sat back in her chair to give the waitress full access to the table.

“It’s just...vacant,” I said. Tears came to my eyes. I held the neck of my beer between my index and middle finger and lifted it to my mouth trying to gain self-control.

“I’m going to need another one of these,” I said to the waitress’s back.

“Emma, I miss you. I can’t do this without you here.” I drank the rest of her beer. I knew she wouldn’t finish it.

“Honey, you’re going to be okay.”

Two weeks later, while I was waiting for Emma to answer her phone, I opened the window. Agitation ran through my elbows into my hands. My hamstrings tightened. I cracked my toes. I’d finished reading Oldenburg’s manifesto five minutes before. He wanted an art that spat, that grunted, that lit cigarettes. He had my stomach growling.

Action beyond reading. Action beyond printing imitation colors. Action above calling someone who lived eight hours away from me. Something instead of shouting things into the phone.

I looked over at Moby. He was more of an artist than I was. His screeching had grown on me. He was composing orchestras with ferocious staccato interludes.

She didn’t answer her phone until an hour later.

“I’m going stir crazy here,” I said to her. “I want to see you. I want to fuck you.”

“That’s lovely, Bro. Very romantic.”

“Come on. You know what I mean. You’ll be here for my birthday right?”

“About that...”

“You’re not coming for my 30th birthday?” I said.

“Something’s come up at work,” she said.

“What something? What could have possibly come up?”

“I don’t want to get into it right now.”

“Is there a super villain attacking you that week? Is there a pre-planned fire? Are they nominating you for president of the world?”

“You are being completely irrational,” she said.

“Irrational is not coming for my birthday. I turn thirty once. Once. You can’t make that up.”

“I can try if you’ll let me.”

I looked out at the parking lot again. A shadow had spread to its middle. Dusk.

“Look, this isn’t working out.” The air pulled me toward memories of warm water and fear of sharks. I closed the window.

“What are you doing?” Emma said.

“This isn’t working out,” I said. Emma paused. I imagined her sitting on her bed, her favorite candle lit. The odor of smoldering campfire that smelled much more like burnt hair.

“Didn’t you hear me? I don’t want to be with you anymore.” She was thinking of some way to calm me down. I wanted to be calmed down.

“You’re right,” she said. “This isn’t working.”

“That’s it?” I said. “I painted the bathroom Wandering Haze and you’re not going to come down here.” I looked toward the bathroom, but couldn’t see it.

“Why don’t you call me when you calm down? We can have a rational conversation.”

“Emma, Wandering fucking Haze,” I said, but she was already gone. Oldenburg was bleeding through my head. I punched Night Train until it bruised my hand. When my knuckles had finished swelling, I found myself picking up my phone, paging through my contacts and calling Z. He answered on the first ring.

“I was just thinking of you,” he said.

“Really?”

“No, but that’s the nicest thing I could think of saying.”

“I need someone to talk to.”

“Awww, hold up Ms. The World’s Gonna Feel What I’m Painting. You sound like you’re going to cry.” I wiped away tears with the back of my hand.

“I’ll see you at the Saucer in ten,” he said.

Before I left, I turned on the radio so Moby would feel less lonely.

He had a beer waiting for me. As I walked up, he nodded his chin. He had his arms stretched around the two chairs next to him.

“She’s gone, huh?” I nodded.

“All right, drink your meds and then we’ll chat. I got a map out of heartbreak.”

I chugged the beer in front of me. He threw up his two fingers. When the waitress brought them, he thanked her. He raised his bottle and toasted “to being on the way out.” We clinked the necks together. Z upended his beer and signaled for two more.

“Look I’m going to be very direct here. You’ll probably cry and won’t listen right now, but I’ll give you some advice.”

“First,” he said, looking me in the eye. “Fuck her. You don’t need her.”

He leaned back in his chair to let this sink in. “Second, fuck her. You’re too young to get married.”

The waitress came back. I still had half my second beer left. I took a sip and then I told him. I told him how pissed I was. Wandering Haze. Red Carnations. Untitled. He didn’t interrupt, just poured two more beers down his throat and leaned back in his chair, watching me.

When I was finished, I emptied the rest of my beer. It was lukewarm by this point, not worth drinking. So was the third, but I drank it anyway. Now, I was drinking to feel sorry for myself.

“Remember the first night we met?” he said. “You asked if I copped to that Jesus shit, if I painted my evangelical heart out.” He stared right into my eyes.

“As a citizen of Cola, I know about preaching,” he said. “I was one of them for a while, proselytizing, condemning people to hell. I don’t normally talk Bible or Christian bullshit, but I’ll tell you something you might want to think about.”

“You know those promise rings. You sign a paper, say you won’t fuck anyone until you’re married because you’re now married to Jesus. And being married to Jesus, kept us from hell.” He laughed and sat back again.

“Now, listen,” he said. His fist pounded the table. “Marry your fucking art. Make a vow. You have three years to be real faithful. This shit isn’t for the masses. This shit is for you. So the two of you better become soul mates.”

By now, he was on his sixth beer. He picked his bottle up and pointed it at me.

“If you want, I’ll fucking marry the two of you. ”

I shook my head, put my hands over my face. Z grabbed my wrist.

“I got your back. I told you that.” He let go and he smiled. “Now let’s talk about some orange-purple and reddish-green.”

When I got home that night, I wobbled in. I took a deep breath thinking that I could pasteurize my blood with fresh air. Moby sang a little ditty and I opened his cage. I gave him my index finger. He side-stepped up my arm until he reached his perch on my shoulder. I went over to the fridge and pulled out a container of broccoli. I fed him a piece. Then I ate one.

I opened the window again. October and it was still in the 90s. Christ. There was a slight breeze. It knocked the first page of Oldenburg off the table. “Art that does something other than sitting on its ass in a museum.”

“All right, Moby,” I said. “All right. I’m doing this tomorrow.”

The next afternoon, at the hardware store, I bought every can of fluorescent spray paint, three hundred and twenty-seven dollars and eighty-eight cents worth. It took five trips to get it up the stairs. When I finished, I looked over at Moby.

“Hey big guy, it’s time to get off your ass.”

I drank three beers. Buzzing, I tore off packaging and threw it into the bathroom so Moby wouldn’t choke on it. Wandering Haze glowered at me.

“I’m going to fuck you up,” I said to the paint and then slammed the door. I wasn’t showering until I got rid of that damn color.

I wasn’t worried about the cops. I knew most of them were down patrolling a conglomeration of bars known as The Cook House.

My first trip down, I carried three cans of fluorescent pink. I popped off the lid of the first can. When I pressed down on the nozzle, the paint hissed out. I shook it and the

beating of a penny echoed against the walls. When the can was kicked, I popped off another lid, unleashed more spray. The ugly color started eating up the concrete. I emptied the three cans and went back up for orange and blue and green. Each time I returned, Moby met me with a screech. A flat one note.

“It’s going to be fine, Moby. I promise it’ll be fine.

I fired line after jagged line, but it wasn’t killing the concrete fast enough. So I sprayed two at a time and the hiss turned into a hum that cut the air. I made x’s and sliced circles through their middles, shaking the cans over my head, letting the rattle out into the street. The ends of my index fingers cramped, but I pushed not caring if I lost them. Strangled American Flags, butted up against tire streaks from a wild flight. A mash-up of *The Sun Also Rises*, and Stein and Toklas fucking. You could hear all the important works smiling through colors. They screamed *you’re way out of bounds, but it’s a good thing to be out of bounds*.

Thirty cans in and the air began burning my lungs. I spat paint until I finally ripped the nail off of my index finger. Blood ran down my white shirt. It soaked in and then rusted. By the time it showed as chocolate, I was exhausted. I gathered up the cans from the parking lot and had them all in the bathroom by midnight. Two hours spent like a wolf’s howl. I could hear the police chief blundering over an explanation of gang signs. Headline: Ten Gangs Tag Parking Lot in Single Night.

I let Moby out of his cage and stuck him on my shoulder. We both walked over to the window. In South Carolina, the air never cools. Not even at midnight. I sat Moby on my desk and peeled off my shirt. I rubbed his neck until he bit me for the fourth time.

I woke up with a hangover. Moby screeched in his cage. I thought about Emma, but I felt calm, the thudding in my head cooling anything fierce.

In the bathroom, I kicked the cans out of the way so I could reach the toilet. Screeches joined the clattering. He was still singing when I came into the living room with some broccoli.

“Let’s see,” I said to him. I looked out onto the parking lot. A volley of dilapidated brightness. No Night Train. No Oppression of a Working Man. Just this wretched pile of fluorescent colors. It slashed at my eyes and yelled electricity, but over it all I saw the lines. The yellow lines were still there.

“I’m stupid,” I said. But the word stupid echoed in my head. The Oldenburg. “An art stupid as life itself.” I laughed.

“I think I have it, Moby.” I pulled out a piece of blank computer paper, but a coffee cup that Emma had given me sat on my desk. I needed to take it to the sink. On the way, I saw a postcard she sent me that I’d pinned on the wall.

“We’re almost ready, Moby,” I said. He rode on my shoulder while I grabbed an empty box. I collected all the things that Emma had given me: letters, pictures, a few books, coffee mugs. I carried the box to the table near the door.

I plucked the bird off my shoulder and stuck him in the coffee mug that said, “Forgive quickly. Kiss slowly.” I sealed the box with packing tape. In the space for the return address I wrote, *Untitled*.

I took the piece of paper out into the parking lot and put it on the ground. With my foot, I pressed it into the concrete. It tore in random places. The color of fluorescent gravel and dirt rubbed into the space between the holes. Parts of a skull’s flesh. Licks

from a dog tongue. A dictator's hubris. The last lines of great novels. Breeds of unknown monsters.

I walked over to the pile of bricks and picked one up. I threw it at the page. It busted into a million pieces going to a million places. Wandering Haze. I was going to break this city's heart.

CHAPTER 11

DETAIL OF THE LAST SUPPER

I sat with Hayes, flinching every time a bullet zinged over our heads. We were laying low behind a barrier the company'd built, waiting for the Yanks to come on. I couldn't hold my rifle still and was resenting the Sargeant for refusing me sniper duty. Since I was corporal now, he wanted me to be with the men in the trenches.

Hayes laughed. He reached over and steadied my Enfield.

"Don't worry too much about the bullets," Hayes said. "It's the stench off the dead that gets you. Much more acute than any lead or shell shot by the Yanks."

"And boy," he said, wiping his hand over his beard that showed grey, "it's not just the trots or pox you got to worry about. That effluvia will seep into your bones and smother any moral sense you've got. It'll take those wings you were saving to fly to Heaven and weigh them so heavy that they'll sink you into hell. The bullet's the easy way to go."

Two days later, Hayes died. The doctor on staff said it was dropsy. I wished a bullet had got him. Instead, I knew it was the miasma that prowled amongst the corpses, the rank smell rising out of decaying wood and horse manure. Noxious fumes that sheltered disease and depravity. I prayed for Hayes that the dropsy had killed him before he'd lost his morals.

All night it'd been drizzling. I'd taken my post in a tree right after supper, my Enfield spread across my lap. When it rained, I'd sleep high up, away from the poison the rain stirred up in the mud and pretended to be looking for Yankee scouting patrols. The boys gave me a hard time, but I was going to be away from the mud that the rained churned up. When their taunts got to be too much, I pointed to the twenty-three notches on my rifle's butt, each standing for a Yank I'd picked off.

My back rested on the base of two limbs. My feet were propped up against the tree trunk. I was half asleep.

Eyes closed, I was startled by a whisper.

"Ellis, hey Ellis." I thought it was my sister and I was back in bed in Tennessee.

"Sarah," I said. "We got another hour."

"Ellis, it ain't Sarah. It's Carver," he said, edging up to the base of the tree. The fool didn't even have a hat on.

He'd enlisted at sixteen and our officers were taking anybody that came. He was a tall boy, but had a bulk to him I imagined a railroad worker would have. He was eighteen years now, five years younger than myself. I'd stayed away from him on account of all the boys saying that something wasn't right in his head.

"Weather's no good," he said, leaning against the base of the tree.

"Well shit," I said. "Is that what you came over to tell me?" I raised my cap up to make sure he saw my scowl.

"Keep having dreams." His eyes shifted back toward camp. He hunched down in a squat and put a stick in his mouth. "Keep having these dreams that I don't want."

"Why are you telling me this?"

He held his hand open so he could catch the rain. “You can’t sleep either.” He turned his head up and looked at me. The stick pointed out the center of his mouth. The rain that had fallen on his face gave him an honest look.

“I’m on duty, so let’s not get confused.”

“These dreams,” he said. “Can’t shake them. It’ll be all nice, the boys in camp around the fire singing Bonnie Blue Flag or God Save the South. The Sargeant.” Carter faltered. He looked higher up into the tree. “Look, I’m not afraid of dying. I’m prepared to meet the Lord. Made my peace.”

“Sure, Carver. I’ve seen you praying and reading your Bible.”

“That’s right,” he said. He plucked the stick from his mouth and tossed it underhand back toward camp. “I’ve got the whole of John memorized. ‘That which...’”

“I trust you.” I said. Hearing too much of the Bible reminded me of Sundays and Preacher Boone’s voice thick as a shepherd’s staff. The bacon crisp. Eggs shoveled from a pan. Memories made the corn meal and acorn coffee all the worse.

Carver hustled off into the dark. I couldn’t yell after him. Might sound the alarm in camp. Nothing like having the company groggy and running like their heads had already blown off, so I settled back into the tree and shut my eyes, hands still on my Enfield.

Two minutes later, Carver was at my feet. He had a journal in his hands. Still looked new, a navy blue leather like the Bible Boone carried around with him. I could see Boone shaking hands blessing folks on their way out the church, his Bible tucked in his palm, it resting upon his slight paunch.

Carver started talking, but he wasn’t looking at the book.

“The company’s always in formation, lined up in four rows, one behind the other and I’m in the middle. A load of canister rips into the boys’ guts, tears off arms, erases lips so a man’s whole face turns into a gaping mouth.”

I’d seen this all happen in the six battles I’d been in. The Rebel Yell and then it’d sound like the clouds and blue of the sky were falling on your shoulders.

“I can’t hear the shot, the snapping line of Springfields. I can’t see the smoke or the enemy. The only thing I can hear is the way skin cracks as bullets tear through it. There’s thuds of bones and sloshing intestines. I march and I crunch skeletons. The Rebel Yells are only gurgling in men’s throats.”

“I make it as far as the command to fire, as far as kneeling and ramming the powder and bullet. But once the ramrod’s out, the shot of canister hits. It’s like a silent wind that rustles nothing. But behind me, I can hear the men open their mouths to swallow bits of my skull. The men gnash their teeth and eat chunks of my chin. My eyes shoot through the air, seeing everything, heat from the end of rifles, men’s canteens, bloody hats. Then my eyes see a colonel with black sideburns his mouth as big as a yawn. The officer’s teeth cut my eyes up and its dark as the place they laid you in the ground.”

“But Ellis,” he said. He closed the journal. His fingers clinched around the binding so tight I imagined his knuckles red. “Ellis, it may look like grave dark, but I’ll never have a resting place where I can be at peace with God. Those men will carry me around in their stomach, carry me to their homes after we win. They’ll kiss their sweetheart, but I won’t ever feel Mattie’s lips.”

Carver leaned his weight against the tree.

The whole of what he'd said made my stomach tremble. The only sane thing of it was the fear.

"Anyway, I figured you'd understand."

"Well thanks for the stories," I said, "but I got to keep a look out." The drizzle had kept up through the whole of our conversation. The thought of the damp earth made me feel sour.

"You want me to bring you a cup of coffee."

"That'd be good, Carver." I said. "I'd appreciate that."

News was a battle was stirring. The scouts had seen movement, had bumped into the enemy behind our lines. Shots were exchanged in the dark. All cards had been put away on the Major's orders. No tobacco. No songs. No cooking fires.

Carver and I lay on my blanket, which he'd made the point of shaking and arranging for us at night. He'd lost his to a man who'd said Carver'd stolen his tobacco.

Carver swore it wasn't him, but if the man needed the blanket, he'd hand it over. Since I slept in trees most of the time, I said he could use mine. The others weren't going to share. They found his writing queer, and I'd heard someone say more than once that he'd gone mad—that his dumb smile was a sign of his insanity.

The nights when I felt it was dry enough we shared the blanket. I slept even less on these nights. Carver's pen scratched a page he couldn't see. He'd lie to me the next morning saying he was writing to his wife or his sister, but I never saw him hand anything to be mailed off.

Those nights insomnia settled in. I tried counting. I tried repeating the books of the Bible, but right around Isaiah the debate started.

Did I smell something? Was I imagining?

I often prayed that God would make the air pure as the night's sky I was staring at. I'd pray that Carver'd stop writing. I didn't pray for the war to end. I could only pray against the effluvia. Even if I managed to get out of the war, the effluvia would always be there. Even at home I could catch a whiff and I'd be dead even if I lived. I'd rot until nothing but badness was left and would roam the earth a demon. Or I'd simply shit or cough until I died.

I swore some of those nights I'd have a fever. And I would feel all the contagions in the air conspiring against me, holding meetings, planning their ways of killing me. One night, my patience for Carver's scribbling expired.

"Damn-it Carver, you writing about that stuff again?"

He didn't look up.

"What does it matter," he said. The pen continued its dancing and the diseases continued to scheme.

I sat up and grabbed the pen from his hand and tossed it into the dark. He wouldn't be able to find it tonight, but in the morning we'd be able to make it out.

"What the hell, Ellis," he said. He slammed his notebook shut and knocked me in the head with it. What looked like a slip of paper fell out. He grabbed it up and held it against the sky searching for the light of an absent moon.

"If that tore," he said.

"What's she look like?" I said.

By that point, he'd placed the picture back into his journal.

"It's been two years. I wouldn't know."

“What’d she like then?” I lay back onto the blanket with my eyes shut trying to envision her.

“I only knew her for a month, before we got married. A month later, I left.”

“So all you can tell me is Mattie’s her name,” I said.

“Ellis, Mattie’s her name. She has a yellow mutt named Adal—German for noble. And she never kissed me but on the cheek.” He shook his head.

“She was too scared to kiss her husband,” he said. “Me.” He put the book back into his jacket where he kept it in a pocket over his heart. “What about you?”

“I had one, but she passed,” I said, although I never actually had one. “Had a boy by her though. Lives with my mother. He’s just about four now.” This was all according to the picture I carried around with me, which I stole off of a Yankee before Hayes explained everything.

I rolled on my side. Carver murmured an apology. I’m pretty sure we lay there awake all night, him dreaming of his body roaming in another, me sniffing the air.

The next day began as another sitting day. I was itching to march. Carver kept on writing.

A plug of tobacco in my mouth, I turned to him. “Do you wish she kissed you?”

“What?” He looked up and stopped writing, but he held the pencil in his fist. I’d have to fight him for it.

“Do you wish Mattie had kissed you before you left?”

He shook his head and closed up the notebook.

“Ellis, she’s my wife. I was hoping when this all started that I’d go home and she’d kiss me up. But now...” he pointed at the notebook.

He reached over and picked his cap up. He worked it down over his head until it was snug.

I couldn't see his eyes through the bill. "You'll get there, Carver. "You should write her."

He sat there and didn't say anything.

"I'll make us some coffee," I said.

"There's a pile of acorns that the boys gathered up over by Wilkes' tent."

Around midnight, the Sargeant came over to Carver and me. He had fifteen other men with him, though I couldn't make out who they were.

"Boys," he said. "Burying detail."

I stood up from the blanket and as I did I felt my soul and body part. I was looking at the blanket and looking at myself from where I stood lined up behind the other men. One of the boys handed me a canteen and nodded. I lifted it to my mouth and smelled a sweet sourness. I took my fair share, three good gulps, let its punch ring in my throat, let the unburned charcoal sink into my cheeks. I handed it to Carver and he took his share.

At the edge of camp our contingent collected ten shovels that the last detail had used. I stayed away from them knowing there would be mud stuck to them from deep in the earth. I'd been smart and grabbed my Enfield before we left. I'd find a good tree far enough from the bodies and look out for the enemies' lit pipes.

We walked in a line, one behind the other, though calling it straight would be a flat out lie. The walking was stumbling and there was a lot of tripping. We sure as hell didn't sound like Indians treading along in moccasins. I watched Rucker, the man in

front of me, stagger over brush and flat ground. I ran into three trees. Carver bumped into me every time, knocking my head all the harder against the trunks.

But when we smelled the bodies, the whiskey's scent absconded. The odor drove us back as good as any solid line of Yankees would. It was unclean sick rooms, one built on top of the other. Some of the boys fell out and vomited. My body froze, every mechanism in it. I knew it would be better to throw it up, to get the effluvia out and clear of my blood, but I didn't even gag.

The Sargeant handed the canteen to the soldier behind him and had us sit for a minute. When the canteen reached me I took a swing and then tilted my head back and poured some down each of my nostrils. I coughed and choked a bit, but hoped it might catch what had managed to drift in. After all the boys had another nip, the Sargeant told us to move.

By a half moon, we saw piles of bodies. I guessed about a hundred. They'd been stacked one on the other, but they weren't a wall, just lumps and smells. I'm sure a hound could have picked up on the scent of each man, but the gasses and decomposing blood, the curling fingers all melded into one for us.

"Damn," the Sargeant said, as we got closer. "Our boys are on the bottom." He was right. Whoever had dragged them together had placed all the Union boys on the top. We all knew the whoever was the Yankees.

"Well, then push'em off and light them on fire. Let's get our boys in the ground," said McKenzie. He was always growling like a dog to get into battle.

"No, we can't do that," Rucker said. "It ain't right. You want your brother to be treated like that?"

“That’s how they treated Hinsdale,” McKenzie said.

In a skirmish, a Billy Yank had thrust a bayonet deep into his Hinsdale’s stomach right in front of McKenzie. *I hope he suffers*, the son of a bitch had said as he retreated back to his lines. Hinsdale’s calls kept McKenzie from chasing him. McKenzie sat with him through the night and into the day. The company would have left McKenzie had someone not remembered where’d he’d seen him last.

When they got to him, he was coated in blood and had dead leaves all over him.

The Sargeant’d approached him slow. “How’re you, McKenzie?”

McKenzie sat there cradling Hinsdale’s head. The Sargeant ordered one of the boys to fetch a shovel. A burial service took place with a few prayers. Most everybody joined in, including myself. That hell that McKenzie was feeling spread through the men praying. They had that hell, but that hell had caught McKenzie. All that was left of McKenzie was a snarling fox that would eat eggs, chicken, even their shit.

“Bury them,” the Sargeant said. “We are doing God’s work. And check for letters to their families. We’ll send them with the postmaster.”

He gave us permission to start a fire so we could get our bayonets hot enough to bend into hooks. The hooks let us move bodies without touching them. My Enfield didn’t have a bayonet, but the Springfields did. The Sargeant gave shovels to seven of the men and ordered them to start digging as wide and deep a trench as they could.

“Corporal Ellis,” he said. “Take Carver, Rucker, McKenzie and Tully and head back about a quarter of a mile from that tree there. I saw another twenty-five or so.”

Tully, McKenzie, and Rucker grabbed the three remaining shovels. With wooden handles resting against their shoulders, they began to walk in the direction that the

Sargeant had signaled. The moonlight did not reflect off the metal. Whiskey bled down my throat as we walked.

We passed a house that'd been abandoned during the battle. The owner'd left a well-built cabin. The door had been left open by whoever had taken shelter the night before. A few hundred feet from the door stood a well, a circle of limestone rocks fitted together as best as the chunks could be. There was no bucket, nothing attached to haul the water up. Two hundred yards to the west was a garden bed. Men had rooted through taking even the seeds and left it looking like the gardener had decided to grow jagged holes.

McKenzie, who was the lead, stopped. That's when the smell wrapped around us. I wanted to run to the nearest tree, but Rucker was at my back with a hook I figured he'd stick through my neck.

Filled with whiskey, all our heads had gone loose. I watched as McKenzie approached the bodies. When he reached the piles, he jumped on top of them. You could hear what sounded like sighs coming from beneath his feet and then the stench grew worse. There was a groan, someone not quite dead.

"They're all Yanks," said McKenzie. "Every last one of them. I ain't going to dig holes for these wretches."

No one objected to his statement, but Rucker walked up, grabbed him by his shoulder and jerked him off the pile. Rucker made sure he was firmly on the ground before he hauled back his arm and punched McKenzie in the face. McKenzie hit the ground laughing. He came up with blood running from his nose.

"Well Rucker. You did well," he said. "Got blood in my eyes."

While McKenzie was talking, Tully started digging about a foot away from where I stood. Nobody had ordered him to.

It was Carver that said it. “We should haul them back to the well and jam them down.”

No one said anything, not even Rucker. The only noise was Tully’s shovel cutting the dirt and the stones clinking against each other as they fell into the pile. Everybody stood watching Tully.

“All right,” I said. “Just make sure you check them for letters before you drop ’em,” I said.

I ordered Carver, McKenzie, and Rucker to start dragging. Tully kept shoveling. I stood there, observing him. His automatic movements created a raw space in my throat. I heard Carver curse and turned to see him staring at an arm that had fallen off the body he was pulling.

When the others were out of earshot, Tully stopped digging. He went over and picked up his rifle and pointed it at me.

“Look you son of a bitch,” he said. “I don’t care if you can shoot the eye out of a cat from two miles away. I don’t care if you’re a corporal. Go through the boys on top and find the letters home.” He didn’t realize his gun was pointed at a tree, which I’d been considering climbing. With the rifle’s neck, he motioned me toward the bodies. I looked at him.

I took a step toward him and he fired the gun. The bullet exploded two inches from my feet. I felt it reach down deep and disturb the plagues that slept beneath me. I felt the shudder of the bodies, heard it resound in the ears of decapitated heads.

Tully threw his gun to the side. He reached down and picked up a clump of mud with grass still attached. He moved toward me.

“I know all about your craziness. About the mud and the bodies and the air. You can’t keep it quiet. Carver told us all.” Tully had me by the throat. “Open your mouth you bastard.”

Carver, McKenzie, and Rucker’s boots pounded the dirt, their running asked for whoever was around to shoot all of us. I thought I heard the dead men pulling themselves up, forming into a regiment of headless, armless ruffians coming with their poison and rotting feet.

Rucker was the first on the scene. He took the butt of his rifle and thrust it into Tully’s ribs. The earth he held in his hand shot everywhere. A clod landed on my boot. Tully fell gripping his side.

Carver ran up to me asking if I was okay. A groan came from the pile.

“The angels are upon us,” Tully said.

As Rucker helped him up, Tully wiped dirt from his uniform. We were all still looking at him. He stood slanted in a way like I’d never seen a man stand. He had powder on his lips from loading his gun. Looked like he’d been eating it.

“The angels are upon us, so I’m planting an Eden,” he said. “And that coward,” he was pointing at me, “that goddamn tree monster ain’t allowed in it.”

There was silence. Tully stared us all down, daring somebody to say something, but the boy was too far-gone. Even clear-headed Rucker stood there.

McKenzie was the first to move, except he didn’t head for Tully. Instead, he turned around and moved toward the bodies as if to continue the mission. But when McKenzie

got to them he raised his rifle over his head like a man would an ax. The butt came down and all we heard was a splash of loose blood and gas. He kept on hacking at the bodies. Bones shattered. Evil thumps of hollow stomachs and snaps of breaking skulls and arms. A sluice of blood ran toward our feet.

Carver was the second to move. He joined McKenzie. Rucker followed. Tully lay holding his ribs and pretty soon loosed blood found its way to him. He let it sink into his uniform. I stood and took a deep breath, taking whatever the air harbored. There was no sense in it now. I felt myself lifting my Enfield by the barrel. I advanced toward the pile.

Best I figured, we'd all inhaled the effluvia when we'd neared the first pile of bodies. It had swung up through our nostrils and found our moral center. Now, we had goblins rolling through our veins.

I became nothing but an axe and crooked bayonets. Me and the boys boiled with outrage, each its own brand. I was part of the howling. The smell drifted toward the woods where it would be soaked up by the living leaves. The trees would become mad from the poison and refuse to blossom. The cabin would crumble to the ground. After we left, nothing would grow in the garden. We were freeing something wild. The swoosh of our rifles sounded like songs out the mouth of the Angel Gabriel.

Eventually, we used our fists, blow after blow upon bodies. McKenzie took to looking for the live ones, jamming his thumb into open wounds. He howled as the Yanks screamed.

With all the beating, the bones, my knuckles close to broken, I paused to catch my breath. Hands on my knees, I saw Carver wrench an arm from a man.

He threw it over his shoulder. There was too much noise to know if the man was dead.

I wanted to look away, but couldn't. Carver's uncut hair was down in his eyes. He bent over the face lying halfway off the pile. He got down on his knees. He inched in. Inched then tilted his head to the side. I didn't see him touch lips, but the way he rose up and wiped his own surely meant that he had. With those same fingers, he reached down and ripped an eye from the man's socket. I swore I heard a crunch in Carver's mouth.

When we met up with the Sargeant and the other men we must have looked like sulfur and brimstone. No one said a word to us. No one asked us where the shovels were or if we'd taken care of all the bodies. Our hair was caked in blood. What must have puzzled them most were the smiles smeared across our faces.

When we got back to camp, the Sargent told the five of us to wait outside. He found the Major who looked at us and then looked into the trees as if he hadn't seen anything. He said something to the Sargeant and a few minutes later ten or so men came out of camp. They carried blankets and wood and a pound or so of corn meal, but set them down a good ten feet away. One pointed to a tree and told us the Major wanted us to move over there. The same one told us that if we tried to enter camp, the sentries would shoot us. We walked to the tree and looked back at camp. Fires were going. Men were rolling out their bedrolls.

That night I slept deep, deeper than I'd been able to go since I'd talked to Hayes. The sun woke me. Tully and Rucker were sitting up. The blood had turned solid over

night and they were itching it off their faces like it was a rash. The tips of their fingernails turned a cold red.

I heard scratching in the dirt and looked over to see Carver. He had a stick and was writing faster than I'd ever seen him. I shook my head. At least, I'd been cured of my fear.

Two days later the company left. We knew we weren't to follow. When they were gone the five of us looked for a stream and found one an hour or so later. We washed our faces and hair, our uniforms and laid them out in the sun to wait for them to dry.

Carver looked the best of us all, the glint of fresh murder in his eyes. He'd felt lips and knew he would do the carrying now. His chin, his eyes were free. And his journals would take to the theme of creating men from men, one after the other.

CHAPTER 12

LIFEPURSUIT™

I work at a place called lifepursuit.™ It's housed at a small med school in Oklahoma, but we farm bodies for every med school in the Bread Basket. We need as many bodies as we can get. A good year would be about five hundred. Every year since Jerry, my boss, started working here, that would be seventeen years ago, lifepursuit™ has made its quota, though sometimes by the skin of its nose. That's what Jerry says. Sometimes I wonder if he collects skin off the corpses' noses. He would keep it in a jar in his bathroom if he did. Jerry's like that.

The office consists of Jerry and the four of us: Z, Elizabeth, Richard, and me. Jerry is the director. The rest of us work as intake coordinators. There's a water cooler and free cokes. There's a pay candy machine near the restrooms. And we even have a janitor who comes and cleans despite the fact that the office isn't much bigger than a shack in the woods. I leave bits of paper on my floor to give him something to do. It's nice to arrive and find a freshly vacuumed carpet every morning.

Jerry let's us decorate our cubicles however we want minus nudity and sexist or racist stuff. Elizabeth has Jesus quotes all over her wall and little paper-mache angels with wire halos. Richard, or Dick, as I call him, has pictures of his boy playing t-ball. He has a picture that some passerby took of him and his wife and his kid at the beach.

They're sitting in front of a mountain of sand that I heard him tell Elizabeth was a turtle. Typical shit for a typical forty-year-old white guy.

Z has a few black-and-white pictures of poets. He has poems pinned to the wall as well. He hand printed them and they are legible, but a million dreams away from calligraphy. Most of them are Hart Crane's, though he put up a few by Elizabeth Bishop and Rilke. Between the poems hang postcards from American towns no one has ever heard of. Z calls these places the only frontier we have left.

I've hung up all the New York Times crossword puzzles I've finished, including two Sundays. Going to college where the tuition was over thirty thousand dollars got me those. In the middle of the puzzles sits an oversized postcard of the Mona Lisa. I don't care what she's smiling about or whatever people want to pretend they see in the thing. I do know that a guy went to the Louvre and blew his head off in front of her because he'd somehow managed to fall in love with Mona. So I guess I keep it around to think about that guy. I've read about all the artists that have blown their own heads off, but this is the first guy I've heard of who's killed himself over art he wasn't tortured to create.

We aren't the only ones that work for lifepursuit.™ There are people that go fetch bodies from airports and drive out to homes in the area, but neither they or the corpses come to the office. The bodies go straight to the school to get embalmed. We aren't allowed to go and see the bodies because it isn't respectful, but I wonder what people look like that are willing to let twenty-four-year-olds sort through their intestines.

I can't even stomach the idea of being an organ donor. If your heart or kidney gives out, it's your time to go. I don't even believe in lifeguards. Sink or Swim. You have got to sink or swim.

So why work here? I found this article in the newspaper about a biology/med school professor who died of a heart attack. When med school started in the fall, some first year pulled back the sheet and it was Dr. Whoever and Dr. Whoever was her sophomore year biology professor. All hell broke loose. People wanted people fired. The first year went to therapy. But the important thing is, did the guy do it on purpose? If he did, man, he put a lot of forethought into that. I clipped the article and carried it around in my jean pockets.

Six months after I started as a paralegal, I got fired for drinking on the job. After I had a few beers down the street from the firm, I stuck my hand into my pocket, and boom, there was my future. I looked around on the Internet and found lifepursuit.™ I had to move from D.C. to Oklahoma to do it, but there wasn't anything else I wanted to do and I wasn't in the mood to keep seeing friends I'd stopped talking to.

As an intake coordinator, at lifepursuit™ I answer questions from people who aspire to become cadavers. It's a nine to five. I make sixty thousand dollars a year, which is enough to put about a thousand dollars a month in the bank. It's more than any of my friends make. They are sinking deeply into the debt ocean while on their way to becoming lawyers and doctors. And they actually have to do work. They all bitch about staying at the library until one in the morning. Not getting sleep allows them the title of 1L or first year.

Anyway, working at lifepursuit™ is legit. We're allowed to drink at work if nobody catches us. I usually drink vodka out of a flask with a Confederate flag on it. I got it for my 21st birthday as a joke and when Z asked me about it, I said I was being ironic. Plus I share with him and he brings weed for us to smoke up on Fridays. I drink

about two shots an hour. This rate keeps me decently buzzed, but clear-headed enough to answer questions.

Answering questions is what I do most of the day. People call and are like, *hi I'd like to donate my body to science. What do I do?* And I say, well we send a form you need to fill out and return to us. Make sure you have a witness, blah, blah, blah. I don't tell them that sometimes these things get forged and some people who wanted to be stuck in the ground intact end up on a slab with a first year digging away to get to their aorta. The people on the phone want to donate so these facts don't concern them. At least, that's what Jerry says.

Sometimes they try to ask me other questions like if my body is autopsied can I still donate it or if I move to another state do I have to fill out another consent form. The answers are no and it depends, but I tell them the same thing I tell everyone—all of that information will be provided in the packet and if you have any further questions please visit our website at www.lifepursuittm.com. We should have an automated system that says all this crap. Then, someone could go through the messages, record addresses and send out the packets. But, that's not good for business. Or at least that's what Jerry says. The reason that lifepursuit™ doesn't do the whole automated thing is so the “client” on the line can talk with a person who is compassionate and reassuring, who will tell them they are doing a great thing for mankind. Jerry likes to think that I'm soothing and can win people over to our side. I like to think of myself as a fire fighter that forgets the ladder.

Having your face scraped off makes you look like everyone else unless you have a tumor or cancer cells somewhere in your head, then you look like everyone else except

for the extra goods you're carrying. Jerry says people still want to know that they are individuals after they die. That they will be treated respectfully. Some of the bodies go off to the body farm where forensic scientists stick them in mud to decompose or jam them in a bucket of acid so that they can play CSI without having to actually kill someone. So I guess we mean respectfully in some scientific way.

There is one question that I will answer because it doesn't seem all that soothing to me. A lot of people want to know if lifepursuit™ notifies their next of kin when the med school or whatever is going to roast them. I say, "No, lifepursuit™ does not. Most of the bodies we accept are used during the fall semester for Gross Anatomy. We here at lifepursuit™ believe that notifying families over the holiday season would be insensitive." But look, you basically get your answer. We are going to smoke you sometime between Thanksgiving and New Years. Tell your family to expect a late Christmas, Hanukah or Kwanza gift. When I hang up the phone, I like to think of someone with a spoon full of cranberry sauce halfway to his mouth. Right as he's about to bite into it, he thinks of his family member on a barbeque.

Z is not like me. He takes questions, but the answer is no every time. No, you can't donate kids. No you can't donate babies either. No, there are no extra fees for cremation. No we embalm the body upon arrival. Z explained that he reconfigured every question that a future cadaver might ask so that he can answer it with a negative. Z's a poet. He likes the word no better than yes. He's also a happier drunk and doesn't mind being on the phone for more than ten seconds.

Jerry likes him better for this. Jerry likes him better for this because the more people who donate bodies to our company the more Jerry gets paid. And Z has a

substantially higher number of people who agree to dump their bodies with lifepursuit™ than I do. So far Jerry has chalked my low stats up to the short time I've been at the company. Someone should tell Jerry that everyone would be a lot better off if they recorded the conversations like those systems where that woman computer voice says your call may be recorded for quality assurance. I'd lose my job, but whatever.

Jerry might like Z okay, but he loves Elizabeth and Dick. They have high numbers. They answer all the questions. Words slip through their mouths like they're already at the funerals condoling the relatives. We will take care of you. Needless to say, they score big. Elizabeth has snared five to six hundred corpses since she started working here. How do I know this? Because she keeps a white piece of paper with tally marks on it. She has an intricate system where she monitors the mail that comes in and sorts through the consent forms looking for the names of the carrion she spoke with on the phone. How do I know about the tally sheet? I got here one day an hour earlier than everyone else. I forgot to change my alarm for Daylight Savings. Here's the thing, Elizabeth's like that church an old relative joins at the height of senility and ends up giving his whole savings to. Hell, she probably hooks people like this in her spare time. Dick I stay away from, but I'm pretty sure he's having an affair on the side. He puts pink envelopes addressed to a Dolly Mae Jessup in the outgoing mail. His last name is Westing as is his wife's. I've seen him use the company stamps on these, but I've kept my mouth shut. He knows about the flask. When he saw it, he rolled his eyes like that's the next generation for you. Sometimes I want to walk up and say, "You don't know me. I hope a shark bites your kid when you go to the beach next time. And I don't just want his arm bitten off, I want him to bleed out." If that doesn't happen, I'll just wait until the

boy's old enough then start pushing drugs on him. He can be part of the next generation too.

Another reason that Jerry's practically in love with Elizabeth and Dick is that they have agreed to become body donors. Z has VD. I've got hepatitis. That's what we tell Jerry anyway. We've read our manuals and know what diseases you can't have if you want to donate your body to science. Jaundice, TB, and AIDS are also disqualifiers. I wanted to have VD, but Z and I flipped for it on a break. We are two carcasses that lifepursuit™ won't ever put in the system.

So the day goes something like this. I spend about ten minutes on the phone for the whole day. During the extra time, I write eight status updates on Facebook, one per hour, that begin, "In other news." Then, I record all the responses. The best status/response so far has been, 'In other news, I would like to be an illegal gun dealer.' One of my high school friends wrote, 'I'd like to be the guy who decides when its time to put zoo animals to sleep.'

In between all this, I surf the Internet. Pro-life forums are the best, especially the ones that have shrines to people in jail who've killed abortion doctors. Those are great because the people who post are swimming around near the water that falls off the edge of the world.

After I get tired of this, I look at wedding websites where people bitch about the gifts they get. That means everyone: the brides, the grooms, the attendants, and the guests. Some girl complained that her bestie gave her a pair of cowboy boots for her bridesmaid gift. She wrote that she wished the bitch had given her a dime bag.

I check Katie's, blog twice a week.

She's my most recent ex and I read everything she's ever written on there in case I missed something. I consider it studying up for my next relationship so I don't make the same mistakes. Most of the posts are character sketches of villains in novels. Every one of them has some habit that she nagged me about like says pretentious things, talks too much about politics, is selfish, doesn't think about other peoples' feelings. I've stopped doing the first two. I'm selfish as hell still and at my job I do think about other peoples' feelings, but not in the way that she meant.

The only deviation is a post she wrote about Hamlet. She asks if he is a villain for not killing himself. On top of this, he screws up the revenge part and ends up killing pretty much everything. Fortinbras is Hamlet's foil. Her conclusion: Hamlet should have done better.

In the place to respond, I wrote, "But it's a tragedy and that's the way things go. All the protagonists fuck everything up in tragedies or else they wouldn't be tragedies." She never responded to my post. It still sits there looking back at me.

While I'm on the Internet, Jerry will come in and check on me. How's life? How's your family? What did you do last night? Got plans for the evening? What's your vacation schedule looking like this year? As we go through all of his questions, I can't help but feel that he is sizing me up. He's invisibly licking his lips. If I told him I really didn't have hepatitis, he'd rip that contract out of the back of his pants like a plainclothes carrying.

Jerry's the kind of guy that wears Santa hats during the ten days leading up to Christmas. Occasionally, he wears ties with cartoon characters on them and has one covered in trombones that plays a Souza march.

When he wears that, I can tell where he is in the office because he has a tendency to press it every thirty seconds.

I've been in his office once on accident because I'd had too much to drink one day and took a wrong turn. I swear he had twenty of those posters, which have nature scenes and animals on them with words like perseverance and teamwork, plastered to his walls. One day, when I'm fucked up, I'm going to ask him if he's donated his body to lifepursuit.™ I think this will stop him from asking me so many questions. I've looked through the files and never found his name.

At the end of each question session, he tells me what a great job he thinks I'm doing. If I ever need to work on my technique, Elizabeth will happily help me. He pats me on the shoulder as he turns to leave and says attaboy. If we had an HR department, I would complain that he's sexually harassing me, but here at lifepursuit™ Jerry is the HR department. No one has any complaints. Ever.

Then, because some type of God exists, the place shuts down for an hour. Z and me hang out together. He doesn't have weed every day and that's fine, but the days he does we go to the apartment complex that belongs to the university. We sit on the railing that overlooks the river. He pulls a spliff from a regular pack of cigarettes and lights up. We pass it back and forth. I don't really talk. Z discusses his girlfriend. He talks about the girls he's having sex with on the side. He picks co-eds up at the college bar he goes to when his girlfriend is traveling on business. It's not something I'd do. That would be just one too many flaws for me, but whatever Z needs is cool.

"Look," he says to me maybe once a week. "I know I should be faithful or whatever, but the truth is it helps me creatively. And I wear condoms. If Amy ever

asked me, I'd tell her, but she doesn't ask." He reads her a lot of poetry. He reads her poems he says he writes for her, but they're written by someone else. He doesn't write them himself because he's not sure he's in love. And getting married at twenty-four is a stupid idea. The statistics I've read back him up.

Z is going back to school to work on his poetry. He says it's three years to fuck around and why not piss away government funding while doing it. As a parting gift, I'm planning on giving him the flask. Eventually, I'll just keep a bottle of vodka in my drawer that has a lock on it. When he leaves, he says he'll give me whatever is left of his stash and the number for the chick he buys it from. "But, don't try to fuck her," he says, "cause her boyfriend will beat your ass."

Once in a while, when we are too fucked up to think of our own words, he recites poetry. He knows some in German, elegies, he tells me. When he speaks, the words blend into the river. My thoughts go numb and perhaps for the first time in days there is nothing racing around. Katie's not there. Her blog's not in front of me. I can sit and swallow a mouth full of vodka and think yeah this will get better just keep reeling in the bodies. Try a little harder to bring in the bodies.

When I come to, I laugh at myself. I don't want any "client" that I speak with signing a contract. Before I quit, I will figure out who has and tear up their forms. I'm not going to be responsible for something like that. While I'm at it, I will tear up Elizabeth's tallies and the posters on Jerry's wall.

I eat my lunch in my cubical around three. I wouldn't call it eating so much as trying to swallow bits of food. Even on days when I've smoked, I don't have much of an appetite. Most of the time I can only eat nicotine and alcohol, though sometimes I get

half of a Slim-Fast down. If I did become a cadaver, that's what they'd find in me. And the student, maybe one of my friends that's a first year would say, "somebody else should have lived this life. His blood can't tell us anything useful. It yammers on about ways to forget, but you can tell it never figured out how." Then, they would take my heart out and toss it around like a beanbag. The professor would participate.

Whenever I finish eating, I go to the bathroom and lock the door and fall asleep on the tile for twenty minutes. I haven't been able to sleep at night since I moved to Oklahoma and the twenty minutes on the tile floor has to cover me for the other twenty-three hours and forty minutes of the day. Sometimes when I go back to my cubicle after I've slept, Katie's body is slumped in my chair. The hole she blew in the back of her head is visible. She's not wearing the ring I'd given to her. Her mother never liked me and wouldn't bury Katie with it on her finger. I know the body is not there. I walk to my chair and sit down. Someone will call soon, I tell myself.

The last hour of the day, I spend addressing packets to send out. If I go over forty minutes, I write Wally Cass/1500 Main Street/Salina, KS 32985 and place a sticker over the return address. None of them have come back. At the end of the day, I make sure that I have my flask so I can refill it and, if Z and I aren't going to happy hour, I give him a slap on the back and say "wunderbar" cause that's what Jerry says to everyone when the body count's high.

So as I said, working at lifepursuit™ is legit. It will continue to be so until Jerry finds another, bigger university to scavenger bodies for. I look forward to work everyday. I look forward to the phone ringing and Z's pot and occasionally breaking one

of Elizabeth's angels. I look forward to Dick's glares, the way his pupils narrow to tell me he wants me to die.

Somewhere deep inside of me something is rising.

CHAPTER 13

GREEN CAR CRASH

I'd just dropped out of med school, but I hadn't yet gone for the powder so I was poor on account of being unsure of who I was. Then, I mostly slept to escape the body I inhabited, but every third dream showed me the ways that the girl who had left me could torture me from afar. In those dreams she called and asked me to help her move. When I got to her house and rang the bell, she never answered. But every time she called, I went. Something I would've done when I was awake.

In the basement that I rented, I spent my waking hours chewing on pencils. Thinking, then, thinking some more. By the time I ruined fourteen erasers and cut my lip twice on the metal that held them in place, the thought came through the door to hound me. How would my going forward progress? The question urged me to move backward into my life where she had never been. The place where I had lived without her was verdant with squirt gun fights and basketball hoops, the many slips into my parents' bed at midnight when the black-and-white faces would gleam behind my eyes and scare me beneath their daisy-splotched bedspread.

So I took graphite to the paper and started an autobiography. The first pages grew, tearing up and spewing out my past between the blue notebook-paper lines. They burgeoned into forty pages, then fifty. On the next page, I would matriculate into high school and bear the first anguish of my heart. The pencil wavered. It knew before I did

that her scent inhabited every heartbreak. The unrequited love would acquire the characteristics of her way of saying no—that brown curly-haired no. After I realized this, avoiding myself became the game. Fact upon fact etched into paper. As the stack grew taller, a reassurance found its way to my palms, dripped down to knees, ankles, feet. I would never have to speak to her, to speak her name again. I became addicted to this succor. Obsession and desire for statistics and histories became lust. That pain could be tamed far easier than any wayward thought of her.

When I awoke, I was thinking about my sixteenth birthday. All my Northern friends in college laughed when I told them I had celebrated by going to the reenactment of the Battle of Franklin. Then, came thoughts of the two Confederate generals that haunted various pizza places in the town. Five generals had been killed, but what were their names? What I'd learned on my first tour of the Carter House, the Union headquarters during the battle, was two things: a child, now a ghost, had fallen through the balustrade and broken its neck on the hardwood floor and the Carter Family couldn't get out of the basement after the battle had ended because bodies blocked the doorway. I remembered looking at the bloodstains on the steps that lead down to the basement. One hundred-and-fifty year-old blood pooled on the concrete. The blotches, one on every other step, I could picture, but I could not remember the generals' names. Carrying an umbrella that wasn't needed, I went to the library at the university I dropped out of to find a book about the battle.

Maybe it was getting sun. Maybe it was the way cars stopped for me as I crossed the street. I started thinking of stories I could write that had nothing to do with me.

The Civil War generals. What would they be thinking in the here and now?

Their faces, the setting came to me. Ten of them would be sitting on folding chairs in a room. Their legs would be crossed. The carpet would be orange. And on the room's walls, TV screens would be playing a continuous feed of The Falling Man. As The Falling Man fell, the generals would discuss matters of polite society. Is Lincoln really in love with what's his name? Where is President Davis dining this evening? The generals would not wonder at the steel building. Neither would they be concerned by the smoke thicker than any they'd seen in battle nor the figure falling from a height at which they believed men could not breathe. But why?

If my story were discussed in a classroom, some tired student would posit that the generals were all blind. That student would complete my story. And if there were a second student who guessed this, she would also complete my story. The story would then be endlessly completed. If the student also suggested that the generals could not leave the room because janitors of the building had piled bodies outside, then that student would not only complete the story but also understand the author. The professor in that classroom would take that student's idea and write a paper that the committee of the American Journal of Literature would accept. The published article might be enough for the professor to get a tenure-track position.

By the time I walked in the library doors, I'd decided that the professor would ultimately lose out because the story and the author would be overlooked when the next cannon construction took place. The professor would wither into an old woman housed at a satellite campus in Idaho. She'd never teach the story again.

At the library computers, I typed Battle of Franklin into the database and chose the second book that the search pulled up. I hadn't brought paper with me so I took a

notecard from a pile and with a pencil two and a half inches tall wrote E468.9 .F385 2008.

As I was riding the elevator down to the third floor, I realized I held a card from the library's dismantled card catalogue. I flipped it over thinking, wouldn't it be a story if the card held the location of the book that I was looking for? It didn't of course.

No. The author of the book on this card was Wirtz-Krause, Lotte. She had entitled her book, *Hand in her Pockets: The Abridged Memoirs of Lauren Eyler*. The call number read PT 2687. E85 S7 1996. This number indicated that the book had been translated. Since I knew Ms. Wirtz-Krause hailed from Dortmund and I had spent a number of years of my life with her, I knew the book had been translated from German.

Before I returned to the elevator, I retrieved the book on Franklin. I thought over General Hood, who'd had an arm and a leg amputated during the war. In the black-and-white photos I remembered, he looked no better than the Army of Tennessee that he had spent the entire war destroying in an attempt to win. He had gone about planning battles as stupidly as a general could and for this I took a strong disliking to him as a child. For me, as a Tennessean and uninformed youth, he lost the war for us. This was a bad thing when I thought about it then. Here I am obliged to say that I don't think of it as a bad thing now. In fact, it is a fine thing, a fine thing what General Hood had done in trying to win because he had lost.

Envision a library, a college library. Imagine a forest. Allow the shelves to become trees and the trees to become shelves. The experiences are now one. In both places, you never know what you might find, a flower that leads to a stream that leads to a hill—the book you stumble across whose index leads you to another that leads you to a

magazine in which you encounter a phrase that defines you at that very moment in time.

I strode across the carpet of the library's sixth floor. The sense of merging urged me forward. I felt the same tears flow together, the exact same tears I cried when I read the line *you haunt me* from a letter I had received from Lotte two years before.

I did not find a book. Instead, I found a piece of paper. The paper looked as if it had been jammed in a bag full of rocks before it had been shelved between two titles of which I feel ashamed to write the names.

The title of the book only existed on the card. The ink was blue, the only color she wrote letters in, but the handwriting was as unfamiliar and insignificant as the font of any book worth reading.

She lived nineteen years before she discovered me, she the conquistador and I from Aztlan. And though you want this to be from her perspective because of this volume's title it is not. She does not understand herself as what she trod upon and left. In her mind, she is a character in a novel. She is the character who disappoints her crowd and then won't go home again.

We went to Normandy. She walked out onto the pier and stood above water where the remnants of 10,000 men soak and float. There she put her hands in the pockets of her long black coat. Her posture said I am looking at myself as a person who is looking at a tragedy. Later that night, she said she should have died weighted down by a helmet and bullets before arriving at the beach. She also told me she loved me, but she told this to too many people and the words were no more than soaked and floating skin.

I am the non-existent victim of the car crash she had. I am the one who would have landed her in jail for the rest of her life.

I am also the police officer who would have given her the ten DUIs she had snuck by.

Tell her when you see her that she wants answers to questions that cannot be answered. She wanted to know over the phone why I could not answer them. I never answered those questions because if I had she would have attempted to live them. She could not have lived those answers any more then she could have died on D-Day. No more than she could have ever died for a cause.

If she wants to know if I will talk to her please tell her I will not. Wreckage cannot speak.

And if she finds that this is overwritten tell her it is not more overwritten than her account of her life.

Do I write that I never left the library? No, the truth is more important. I left. Do I say I learned that liking General Hood left me looking like him? No. I will still say that I will be like Pollock and will kill people when I'm drinking and driving and leave my wife a widow. After I have died, she will make mediocre art. She will think she has gotten rid of me, but I will hang across from her in the Tate Modern next to a can of Campbell's Soup.

CHAPTER 14

LAND'S END

The kid walked through the door of St. Joe's wearing tattered jeans and a ball cap patched up with duct tape. He headed for the snack table. I watched as he took a red plastic bowl from his backpack and filled it with steaming coffee. Bowl in hand, he went over to the milk and sugar, but instead of adding anything, he raised the edge to his mouth and poured the contents down his throat. He got back in line and went for seconds.

After thirds, he came over and sat next to me with his coffee-filled bowl. Without looking at me, he started talking.

"You're wondering about the bowl?" He gazed around like he was looking for someone that was following him. "Nothing makes me sicker than hearing some non-alcoholic talk about the ambiance of meetings. You pick up a book and some idiot who hasn't ever stepped foot into the rooms starts describing what a meeting looks like. It's like they got together and made a list: dark church basement, folding chairs, stained carpet, males with balding heads sipping out of Styrofoam cups. Look around."

Most people were holding Styrofoam cups, but a few had mugs. An HD-TV hung on the moss-colored wall. There were four windows. Posters of Jesus flanked the TV. There were a few bald guys, but the people with hair outnumbered them two to one.

“Then, they all have a protagonist named something like Janice. The first thing she says is, ‘Hi, my name is Janice and I’m an alcoholic.’ And then the authors try to shove some horrible story into one of the bald guy’s mouths and Janice leaves feeling uplifted and proud of herself and happy she isn’t in prison. He paused. “You know she could’ve ended up there”

“Anyway, I’m E.”

I shook his hand. “How do you drink your coffee that hot?”

“Pour it directly down my throat just like I do beer.”

“Do?” I said.

He put the bowl to his lips. He opened his mouth as wide as he could. Although I couldn’t see it, I knew the liquid passed through his mouth without so much as touching a tooth.

“Well,” he said. “I’ve admitted that I’m powerless over alcohol, but I can’t find a power greater than it so I’m stuck at step one.” He jerked his cap around so that the plastic snaps rested against his forehead. “I turn around and I find myself in a bar with a beer in my hand. The beer just sucks me right in.”

The chair of the meeting started reading the preamble. E. got back up and emptied the last bit of coffee into his bowl. He grabbed a filter, dumped in the grounds, and flipped the machine on. It rumbled through our moment of silence.

I shut my eyes and listened to the readers, all people I knew because of the allergy we had in common. The passages were familiar. It didn’t matter who read them. I’d heard them eighty, ninety times. Read them about half as many. I’d replaced happy hours with these people, their voices, the book’s steady words.

I'd found a serenity that my old self would have called dull.

Don't get me wrong. I still thought about alcohol. I still had cravings, especially during baseball season or the fall. Pumpkin beer was by far my drink of choice. There was a brewer up in Rhode Island that I ordered four cases from each September. Every September for twenty-five years. I got a Christmas card from the head brewer and a letter that asked where I'd gone when I'd quit ordering. I didn't respond.

When it was my turn, I read but didn't comment. I listened a lot more the further I got into sobriety. In the beginning I never did, which was why I was surprised when E. passed without reading or saying anything.

After the meeting, I was helping Joe, our stutterer, put the books away. On my way over to pick up my stuff, E. came up to me.

"So," he said. "I think you should be my sponsor." His red bowl hung by his side, empty. "I mean maybe sponsor is too strong of a word. If you could just get me through steps two and three, I can power through the rest."

I'd begun to count the number of duct tape pieces on his hat. There were seventeen in all. I couldn't tell if a hurricane had spit him out or if he was the hurricane, but whichever way it was, I'd crossed his path.

No was on my tongue, but as much as I wanted to, I didn't have the heart to tell him to find someone else. It was our mission to help suffering alcoholics and there was no clause that said we were responsible to do so only if the alcoholic is an idiot. So I said sure.

"Great. That's great," he said.

He glanced over at the coffee pot, but he'd managed to kill the second round in the last fifteen minutes of the meeting. Without wiping out the bowl, he jammed it in his bag.

I followed him out of St. Joe's. The parking lot was empty except for my beat-up Datsun.

"You understand I can't do this for you," I said, but he didn't turn around to look at me. He was ten feet in front of me and heading toward Chretien Street. His black backpack was slung over his right shoulder. The bill of his backwards hat covered his neck.

"Thanks Pops," he said and walked over to the street, which he crossed without looking. There was some screeching. Five or six horns blared. Not that E hadn't dragged the foreshadowing with him, but he seemed bent on generating as many omens as possible.

"Alright," I said as we sat outside the local coffee shop. "So you admit that you're powerless over alcohol."

"Yeah. Like I said, that shit is cunning. Lures me in. The whisper of the beer slipping into a glass." E. pulled a can of soda out of his bag, cracked it open. He chugged all of it. His Adam's apple didn't move in the process. He picked up another, cracked the top, and let it sit there.

"Here's your first problem: romanticizing beer. It doesn't slip, it doesn't whisper. You pick it up. It doesn't say anything. You drink it."

"Okay Pops," he said, "but I'm a fish and that hook is always ripping my cheek."

“Open your book to the second step stuff,” I said. I had mine on the table, a paperback with the blue marble cover. I’d gone through and highlighted all the parts that resonated with me. Sticky tabs in red, yellow, blue marked key pages. I opened my book to the yellow label that I’d written two on.

I started reading the section to him. I got two sentences in.

“No, no. I get that. There’s a higher power. There’s probably eighty gods running things. Fine. But I’ve prayed to Buddha, to Jesus, to Allah, directly to God himself. Nothing.”

He chugged his second can and pulled another from his black backpack. He flipped this one sideways.

“Can I borrow your keys?” he said. Hoping he’d shut up, I handed them over.

He took a key and jammed a hole in the bottom of the can. With his thumb, he covered the hole until he got it to his mouth. When the can was vertical, he opened it and moved his finger. Not a drop missed his mouth. His Adam’s apple didn’t move. He crunched the can in his fist when he finished.

“I always wondered if that worked with soda,” he said. “Pretty cool.”

I stared at him wondering what had just happened. The boy chugged soda from a hole in side of the can. I hadn’t seen it in my drinking days, let alone in sobriety.

“Don’t do that again,” I said. He got up and dumped the empty cans into the recycling bin.

I went back to reading the book. I explained as I went along. “You don’t have to understand or adhere to anyone’s conception of God,” I said. I ignored his tapping, the little metal thump as his index and middle finger hit the edge of the table.

Then, he started in with both hands. He paused to pull another soda out and open it.

I thought about punching him in the face. Maybe a broken nose would get his attention. I'd been helping people through the steps for ten years and this kid was a new breed. He drank soda like it was a six-pack. "Stop hitting the table." I said. I reached over and grabbed the can. "Watch this." I took a drink and then sat it back down. "In four or five minutes, I'll take another drink. You know, enjoy it for more than three seconds."

I'd put my book down at this point. He'd gone as far as he could today. As far as he could was ten sentences.

"When I came to AA ten years ago, I felt the same way. Jesus and God were out, but I watched the people in the rooms. I saw what worked for them. Not taking a drink. So I admitted that there was something floating around in the meetings that kept people from drinking. I never named it, just trusted it and it's worked," I said.

No response.

"E., we can all have a different higher power. You just have to find something that works for you," I said. "It can be anything, a character in a book, a next door neighbor, a light bulb."

"Anything?" he said.

"Yes."

He took my soda and chugged the rest of it. "Can't let it get hot. See you tomorrow." He started walking through the parking lot, his backpack hanging from one shoulder.

“Hey, do you want a ride?” I said.

“No, I like to walk.”

When I had gathered my book, pad of paper, and pen, and started for the car, I didn't see him. I figured he'd walked into the grocery store. I looked up at the sky thinking just keep him out of the beer aisle.

At the Friday night meeting, E. sat next to me with his bowl of coffee. In front of him, he had a small figurine that looked like a cow. Someone had painted it blue. Paint was a strong word. The cow had fur so the color didn't settle in certain places. There were blotches of the original cream color here and there. Some of the sections that were blue stood straight up like they'd been licked.

“Where did you get the cow,” I said, not really wanting to know.

“It's an ox,” he said. He grabbed its middle and bumped it along to make it look like it was galloping toward me. I rolled my eyes as it jogged on my left index finger.

“Did you find it in a trashcan?” I wrapped three fingers around my Styrofoam and took a sip of coffee.

“No. I bought it over in Five Points. I was on my way to a bar and I felt it, this ox staring at me. It was like he was saying don't get a drink. Come with me. Then, a light started glowing around him. Stopped me dead in my tracks. So I went into the store and bought it. Didn't go to the bar that night.”

“Did it come that way? With the blue paint?”

“No Pops. I painted it.” He'd finally stopped banging it against my finger. It sat in front of him facing me. “You aren't going to believe me, but that ox is Babe. You

know, Bunyan's Big Blue Ox. The ox ordered me to paint him blue and once I finished he said he would help me out."

He began to discuss the benefits of the thing. Before he could get into the details, the chair began the meeting. He read the rules and then we opened our Big Books. Kevin, a doctor with a chubby face and a round chin, started somewhere at the end of Bill's story, the part where it said we didn't need a utopia anymore now that we had the rooms.

While we were reading, E. picked up one of the group's copies of the Big Book and went over to sit beside the oak desk that comprised the coffee station. He'd left the ox. As much as I tried to listen, the ox was a distraction. A toy. But, I'd told him it could be anything. And if it worked, whatever.

After the meeting he flipped the back cover open. He'd taken a pencil and written bullet points that stated why Babe was powerful enough to be his higher power. He'd put so much pressure on the pencil that he'd created furrows in the cardboard.

Hooves left a trails that would turn Minnesota into the Land of 10,000 Lakes.

Slammed rocks around with horns until he was satisfied with the Grand Tetons.

Harnessed, he pulled a crooked river straight to break a logjam.

He and Paul's wrestling is responsible for the Northern Lights.

I paid our treasurer fifteen bucks for the book. Before I started for my car, I dropped it in the trashcan at the top of the stairs where no one was bound to look.

When I walked outside, E. was standing in front of the passenger side door of my car.

The toy was on my hood.

“E., I need a break,” I said. “I want to shake the living hell out of you. That’s the antithesis of serenity.” I opened my car door and got in. E. hadn’t moved. Neither had the ox.

“You should be happy for me. It found me, power and all. The Big Book says everything happens for a reason.”

“No, it’s the Bible that says that.”

“Well whatever. I’m on my way to have a drink and boom, there it is.” He pointed to the animal on my hood.

“E., you can’t go around writing in books that belong to the group. The next thing I know you’re going to start spray-painting his name on the walls and end up in jail.” I shut the door, but he came around so he was looking at me through the window. If he’d been in front of me, I would have run him over. And, the ox was still standing on my car, gnarled with blue paint. E. started knocking on my window. I rolled it down.

“This weekend I’m going to spend every moment praying to him, praying that he’ll keep the alcohol out of my system. I’m going to turn my life and will over to Babe, and he’s going to kick this disease’s ass.”

“E., I’m happy for you. We’ll do the fourth step when I get back. I have my phone if you feel like taking a drink.”

“No offense Pops, but I think Babe’s got this. It’s smooth sailing from here.” He went over and took the toy off of my hood. He put it in his front pocket, but adjusted it so the eyes peered out.

When I got home, I noticed that the ox had bled four blue spots on the car. I used everything I could think of, but they wouldn’t come off.

In my room, I packed up a duffle bag with some shorts, t-shirts, and swimming trunks. I went to the garage and found my sleeping bag covered in dust. One of my buddies in the program had a ramshackle house on Murray Lake. It had a stove, a bed, a fireplace, and a few chairs pocked with holes and a couch the color of phlegm. I started toward the kitchen to get my cooler, but stopped. Even after being in the rooms ten years, there was an urge to bring the cooler along so I could fill it with beer. I could sit out under the trees on a rock and drink alone and listen to the washing of the water against the shore. Drink a morning brew and listen to the trill of the purple martins popping out of the trees. One day at a time, I thought. That's how I got ten years and that's how I'll pick up the eleventh.

I woke up hungry and half on the cot's dirty mattress. I hadn't remembered to pack any food. I thought about not eating for the weekend, but decided to get into the car and drive over to Z's place, a little convenience store at the end of a dirt road.

When I opened the door, I started for the aisle where the chili was. Z said hi and I waved. I'd been dealing with E. for two weeks now. In his off time, Z wrote poetry. He was a little off-center and I wasn't in the mood for his philosophizing.

There were only two cans of chili on the shelf. There was nothing on the two rows below it. On the next aisle, I scanned the shelves. All the way at the end sat two yellow and red cans of baked beans. When I picked them up, my fingertips left prints in the layers of dust. I walked over to the counter and set the cans down. Z took his time walking down the s'more and candy aisle, which was stocked to the gills.

"Good to see you bud," he said. He slapped my back too hard. He was wearing a pair of purple overalls with a bright pink shirt beneath. "Staying for a while?"

“No. For the weekend,” I said. “Just need some fresh air.”

He stood at the register and punched in numbers while he talked. He picked up each can and examined the white sticker with the price on it. The prices were the same and I was sure there was a multiplication button on the machine.

“So, did you notice the last couple nights?” He entered the prices while he talked.

“Notice what?” I said.

“The Northern Lights are out. Like somebody flipped the switch.” He frowned at me like I’d done it.

“I didn’t know you could see the Northern Lights from here,” I said.

“Well, most people can’t. They don’t know the secret.”

“Oh, a secret,” I said. “Of course, there’s a secret.” He moved the cans to the side of the counter. He placed his elbows and forearms in their place. Z got as close as he could.

“You want to hear the secret?” He didn’t give me the chance to say no.

“There’s a rock that juts out into Lake Murray on the very southern tip. On a clear night, you can see the sky over Norway. If the sky over Norway is clear, you can see the lights.”

Whatever serenity I’d gathered from last night’s sleep, Z managed to smother with his secret. “Can I have a pack of cigarettes?”

He stuck the cans and the cigarettes in a brown bag. “I could come by your cabin tonight and get you. Maybe they’re back.”

“No thanks,” I said. “I have some work I need to finish.” I placed a ten on the counter.

He grabbed a piece of paper and started to tally up what I'd selected, even though the register read nine-fifty.

"That will be eighteen dollars and twenty-nine cents."

"But the register says..."

"Do you think secrets are free?" he said. "Because they're not."

I took two tens from my pocket. He gave me fifty cents back.

"Look forward to seeing you again," Z said. I waved with my back to him. I got in my car and shook my head until I arrived at the cabin. I didn't feel much like eating so I headed over to the water.

I stood ankle deep in it and held a lit cigarette between my fingers. The lake's bottom was muddy, the water lukewarm. I thought about going out deeper to see if the top inches of the lake were hiding the cool, but I stood and smoked the cigarette, happy with the mud between my toes.

But, after five or six puffs, the lake grew hotter. Everything was quiet. No cicadas. No wind. Not a mockingbird. The strength of the sun made the trees look waxy and artificial. Z's revelation plowed into my thoughts. The empty shelves of the store, poetry he'd written that I knew was there, the ten-dollar secret of a man who lost his mind.

I thought about beer. I thought about holding a bottle in my hand. The sturdy brown glass. Lifting the bottle to my lips, a soft pour. I would chug the first one, a bottle that looked like a miniature barrel. Five of those, then off to the cheap stuff, the Champagne of Beers with its three-inch neck. I could hold that bottle with a thumb and my index finger. I started to imagine how that stuff cluttered in your veins pushed the bad

blood out, took the anxiety, the annoyance, the anger, eased every muscle to the tips of the fingers.

You can have one, I told myself. One and done. And then came the voices: “Can you really have just one, alcoholics three stages: impulsive, compulsive, repulsive, the first drink gets you drunk, remember, once you are a pickle, you can never be a cucumber again.” I knew, when I started thinking about cucumbers, I needed a meeting. I didn’t have a computer to find anything local so I found myself in my car, sleeping bag on the seat beside me, heading to St. Joe’s.

The parking lot was empty when I pulled into the church. The clock in the car read six-fifteen. The meeting started at six.

I went down to the room anyway. The coffee pot was off, the chairs pushed beneath the table. The books were stacked in the cabinets. The plastic case with the chips in it rested on top. All the chips I’d collected. They meant nothing and meant everything. They marked my time in the program. It would be a bitch to pick up the surrender chip and start over. I wasn’t sure I could start over.

All the possibilities lurked in the corners of the room. My skin would turn a jaundiced yellow. Cirrhosis of the liver. Heart failure. A stroke. And really I didn’t care too much if I rotted away or my head got torn off in an accident.

But there’s always the others. Someone’s brother you hit on a sidewalk. The guy who dies because you slam his head into the pavement one too many times. The family you nail on the interstate, dead bodies thrown or crushed against the window. Play the tape through, I told myself. You know what you’re capable of.

It was enough.

I could go back home and throw on the TV, catch the end of the Carolina-Clemson game. I could read a bit, take a shower. Rest up so I could deal with E. He needed to stay the hell off the streets, too.

I met traffic on the Gervais Street Bridge. I sat for five minutes before I noticed there wasn't a driver in the car next to me. When I got out and looked at the rest of the cars, they were all driverless.

Down the block, I saw the Saucer, which carried at least two hundred beers. Something had crushed it. The roof rested on the foundation. I wondered if there were people dead. And the kegs of beer that were gone. Those pretty bottles. I shook my head, but smiled at how pathetic I was. Even though I didn't drink, I was still a good alcoholic.

The Irish pub and the place that mimicked the New Orleans daiquiri bars had met the same fate. Smashed. What kind of giants were roaming around Columbia. The only giant I could think of was the Jolly Green and this seemed out of character for his green bean-loving heart.

But when I looked beneath the bridge, I saw a group of trees crushed like the Saucer. Embedded in the dirt and splintered wood, I saw the hoof print. It was even-toed, with a tiny slit in the middle.

My mouth went dry. I tried to suck saliva from my cheeks. No luck. I pressed my tongue against my gums. They were hard and sticky.

It can be anything you want. Anything. The book said it. I'd said it to fourteen sponsees. A few had found the anything, a few held on for their lives, white knuckled. Then, there was me, walking into the rooms at twenty-nine, an ex-southern Baptist. I

wouldn't pray, but after the car accident, I did believe. I didn't have a choice. I believed in the steps and the people in the rooms.

After a few blocks, I found the crowd. They pushed toward Finley Park. I could see something blue when I stood on the tips of my toes.

There was an overweight woman in front of me wearing a polka dot shirt and a visor that read Southern Miss. She was holding a paper cup with sixty-four ounces of soda in it. I doubted it was diet.

I tapped her on the shoulder. "What's going on?"

"The Whig's been destroyed," she said. Her chin drooped. It looked like it was made out of Jell-O. "Every bar in town, smashed like a Coke can."

A bunch of male students wearing pink pants and different colors of pastel button-ups, pushed up behind me. I heard them saying Five Points was in flames. Cans of malt liquor had disappeared. The brewery in Spartanburg had been destroyed.

They rushed the crowd and I followed them. People hit the ground. I jumped over some. I stepped on a hand and fingers broke beneath my shoes.

There was a line of cops blocking the steps to get down to Finley Park. I didn't try to push through them. I saw what the trouble was and I couldn't do anything about them, the moving statues of Babe the Big Blue Ox.

The first stood about twenty feet away. It was lapping from the very top of the fountain where the water splashed down what looked like layers of a birthday cake. The ox had black horns and was painted a light blue, what people would call sky, even though it was unnatural and bordered on fluorescent. There were divots in the grass, muddy

holes. I could see E. talking to one of the Babes. It had black horns and a black square nose. A piece of what I assumed was Paul Bunyan's hand stuck to its back.

"May I please get through," I said to one of the officers. "That's my kid."

"You guys are gonna have to pay for all this," he said.

"That's fine," I said.

"And he slugged Officer Peteroy, assaulting an officer, but when Peteroy tried to drag him off, one of those things snorted at him and got ready to charge."

"Not good," I said. "We'll take care of it."

He let me through.

When I reached E., I didn't say anything. I looked at him in his duct taped cap and his holey pair of jeans. The little ox stuck out of his pocket watching.

"This is impressive," I said.

He nodded his head, satisfied. "It's amazing what prayer will do."

He'd prayed, he told me. For eight hours straight, prostrate on the ground with his toy on the bed, gazing down at him. He'd asked the ox to restore him to sanity. Over and over again. Oh, he was powerless. Oh, he could only string together three days of sobriety. And finally, Babe came through. All the Babes came through.

"That one did a helluva of job." He pointed up to an ox that had yellow eyes.

They were round like he was shocked to see where he was. He bent down and ripped up a chunk of the park's grass and was satisfied standing there chewing it with his wooden, white teeth.

"He drank up the four lakes that bordered Canada and built a thousand foot wall along the border."

“Did the same at the Mexican border. Drank the Rio Grand. Built the fence.”

“This is not what’s supposed to happen,” I said. “You can’t rid the world of alcohol because you can’t handle yourself.”

“It says in the book that it’s supposed to be a higher power of my choosing. And this is what happened.”

I reached over and grabbed his cap off his head and put it on mine. Our heads were the same size and it slipped on. “You know they’re going to arrest you for assault.” I remembered my time in handcuffs, the brief bit that I was fully conscious in the cop car, the leather of the seat against my fingers. The tightness of the metal.

“I’ll just walk out with them.” He pointed to the oxen.

“What’s your plan,” I said.

“We’ll sleep here for a few days. Then, we’re swimming over to Europe. We’ll take care of Germany, the Netherlands, Belgian breweries. No more Trappist Ale. The Russians can forget their vodka.”

“What about the stills. There are stills all over the place.”

“We’ll sniff them out.”

“Well, do you want to work on your fourth step sometime next week.”

He stuck his hand out and I shook it. “No Pops, I believe I’ve got this one.”

“Keep the hat,” he said. “Oh and let Babe escort you out so the cops don’t bother you.”

“Which Babe should I ask? So many to choose from,” I said and walked away.

St. Joe’s was quiet for a couple of days.

We read the Big Book and didn't comment on what we read. Whoever made the coffee made it too strong so mugs and cups alike were empty.

Most of us were in mourning, especially the old-timers, the folks over ten years, but didn't want to say it out loud. We still loved it, the alcohol. It was an estrange abusive ex-lover, who we never quite got over even though it'd beat us black and blue and worse.

The majority of the younger members were excited and walked around with big smiles on their faces. In the face of solemnity, they kept themselves from high-fiving each other, yet their glee still shined in their eyes.

I was sitting before a meeting, staring at the blank television screen and heard a kid who'd been in for less than six months say, "Now, we're the same as everybody else. They can't drink and we can't drink. All's well that ends well."

I wanted to tell him that it didn't work that way. He'd really miss it because it was a crutch, the self-medication that most of us had taken in an attempt to stave off the misery that lay at our foundations. I didn't waste my breath though and when he and other's like him stopped coming, I didn't miss them. They'd find drugs. As far as I knew Johnny Appleseed or Pecos Bill hadn't been through the country burning up crops of marijuana and collecting meth and coke from the dealers.

The rest of us kept on meeting. We kept on talking about alcohol like it still existed, like the bars were still around and they were stocked with bottles and kegs, with temptation. We worked on our character defects, on emotional sobriety. We still picked up chips and medallions and when we clapped to congratulate someone, we clapped just as loud.

I never saw E. again. He and the Babes tore across Europe. Even got the sake in Japan. I wore his cap every day, to the office, to bed. E., the Saint of Alcoholics. The year I picked up my twenty-year chip was the year I retired from work. My buddy, who owned the lake house, passed away and had given it to me because he hadn't talked to anyone in his family for twenty years.

I moved out to Murray Lake and found a meeting nearby. I went every afternoon and, on the way home, often stopped at the farmers' market to pick up vegetables and fruit. I still visited Z to grab a couple cans of chili. I'd gained the patience to listen to his poetry and that of a German poet, which Z recited in the poet's language.

About four months after I moved in, he knocked on the door.

"You should come with me," he said.

I turned the stove off and followed him along the shore of the lake. All the way there I knew what we'd see. The Northern Lights. We clambered over the rocks to the lake's southern tip. They were burning the sky.

CHAPTER 15

DIVER

It was like all the lights at the state fair. He whirled around Ellis, around her cart. As soon as she turned down another row, he was there looking at her, his hat backwards, his red fleece exposed by his unzipped jacket. He wasn't looking at the bags of instant rice, the cans of stewed tomatoes. His eyes were on Ellis, examining her fluorescent orange jacket, her beanie, which had antihero sewn across the front. When she felt the painkillers take hold, the man faded. The only thing left of him was the black wrapper of his jacket. He became an extension of an aisle, an ever-moving display.

She tossed frozen dinners into her cart, boxes of instant mashed potatoes, sacks of caramel rice cakes. At the end of an aisle, she ripped an energy drink out of a four-pack. Ellis chugged the drink. She stood and waited for the caffeine to infuse the opiates so that they would stay longer in her bloodstream. When the carbonation settled in her stomach, she put the can on the shelf and continued down the aisle.

When she'd found out that Lotte wasn't coming that weekend, that fall break would stretch from a respite into three days of attempting to read and missing Lotte too much to concentrate, Ellis stopped by the student health center. They found an opening for her with a Dr. Carter, a forty-five year old man with unclipped nose hairs, who bumbled more than he talked.

Ellis told him about her back pain, the muscle acting up. She described it as wrenching open and then clamping shut. She cried while he felt her back, asked if she had any numbness in her arm. When she said no, he prescribed twenty Percocet and a three-month prescription of muscle relaxers. Although she had no use for the latter—they didn't make her feel relaxed let alone high—Ellis filled them along with the painkillers. She would get her classmate, Z, to sell them.

In the cleanliness and presence of the black jacket, she wondered if she felt lonely, if she felt like a failure for dropping out of med school with a semester to go. Lotte hadn't understood that the scent of Ellis' cadaver followed her through the hospitals, sat with her in the classrooms. Ellis had started sleeping from foot to head because she felt upside down. She'd told Lotte her head was always south. Lotte slept that way as well, holding Ellis until she fell asleep. Ellis asked her to try and understand. And Lotte tried, and then began to worry. She told Ellis to find an occupation that would make her happy. Ellis spent the next two months putting a portfolio together.

But no, she didn't feel like a failure with the calm skimming her ears, with the cart's front wheels sliding across the floors like they were on ice. Air curled into her lungs. Her eyes felt open and closed at the same time. There wasn't a way that the store could have been cleaner that she could have felt more relaxed. At the end of the soup aisle, she waved at the black jacket and turned to go back to the open box of energy drinks.

As she swallowed her second can, she felt her throat go soft. The liquid slid down her esophagus. When it got to her stomach, it bobbed and she saw boats in the Boston Harbor, flakes of snow descending upon them. A smile turned in her mouth, a glad

quietness that she was there. Not somewhere else, with someone else, but there. She returned the can to the box and moved her cart toward the registers.

When she walked out of the store, her fingers holding the handles of the plastic bags, the black-jacket stepped out. He pulled out his badge. His face materialized. The softness and quiet left her.

The man escorted her back into the store. He showed her to a lacquered door, opened it and pointed to a plastic, blue chair.

The room was all white. A laptop sat on a desk made of cardboard that looked like wood.

There was a tan rotary phone and a sky-blue coffee cup. The walls were filled with sheets of paper lined with numbers. There were no signs with the stores name on it.

The man sat on a stool, one legged propped up the first rung, the other on the floor.

“What do you do?”

“I’m an MFA student in Visual Arts at the university.”

A boy with red hair, his roundness accentuated by his pastel green apron opened the door. He was carrying the open package of energy drinks. He handed them to the man and stood there, looking at Ellis.

The man shifted and the stool creaked. “Did you accidently leave these on the shelf?”

“No,” she said. She stared at the badge around his neck. She couldn’t tell if he was a policeman or not.

“Well, why didn’t you pay for them?” he said. “You paid for everything else.”

She shrugged her shoulders, but the truth was she’d been stealing ever since gross anatomy.

The smell of formaldehyde had made her feel dead and the possibility of handcuffs and their shame had chased off the smell.

She'd started with magnets that tourists bought in the city, pictures of the Lincoln Memorial and the White House. At the Hirshhorn, she stuck magnets of Warhols, Johns, and de Koonings in her pockets. In New Orleans, drunk on a Hand Grenade and six Dixie beers, she'd walked out of a store with a one hundred dollar candy skull. And finally, she'd taken to preying on an independent bookstore that was part of a restaurant. She'd walk in steel-eyed, pick up three books and carry them out in hand. There were too many people to notice and no cameras. Her best night, a Friday, she'd brought a bag and jammed it with paperbacks, walked out with four hardbacks tucked in the crook of her arm against her hip. And here she was caught, six dollars worth of energy drinks her downfall.

"Why didn't you pay for them?" he said. "You paid for the rest of this stuff."

"I don't know," she said.

The man pulled a camera from the bottom drawer of the desk. "Pick up the two cans and hold them next to your face."

The camera flashed three times. He reached and grabbed a cord connected to the computer and plugged the camera in. His phone rang and he stepped outside to take a call. She heard him say something about a BMW and a car garage.

Her faced popped up on the computer screen, her fluorescent jacket, her hat that read antihero. Her eyes were red with tears. Her cheeks, which had been round when she moved to Columbia, had shrunken. Ellis looked and she saw the face of a twenty-eight year old shoplifter, a petty thief, who had finally been caught.

The man came in and handed Ellis a form and a blue pen. “If you enter this building or any others owned by this company, you will be arrested for trespassing and will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.”

Ellis signed the paper and dated it. As she was handing it back to him, she said, “So the police aren’t coming?”

She met his eyes and she saw his lips pressed together. She wondered if he was silent because he was waiting for them or because he was one of them.

The man bent down so that his face was close to hers. He licked his lips, and then wiped them with his index and middle finger. “This is a Christian company. Do you know the Ten Commandments?”

“Yes, I know them.”

“Did you momentarily forget them?”

She paused and remembered her Baptist friends. They had written her verses of scripture with their own personal asides about how she was going to hell. She went to school in the North and tried to shove it all away. “I haven’t forgotten.”

“Think about church next Sunday.”

She nodded. “I will.”

He stood up and she was left staring at his knees. “You can go.”

“Are the police waiting for me outside?”

“No.” As he shut the door behind her, she heard him say, “I’ll be praying for you.”

Ellis wanted to go back and tell him not to bother, but didn’t want to provoke him.

The automatic doors opened.

She walked out into the October night. She felt warm and took off her hat.

When she got home that night a black veil covered the rooms. The zebra backed chairs in the kitchen, the couch. The TV screen appeared darker somehow more off than the buttons could make it. Even when she switched on the three lamps, Ellis was still in shadow.

She popped a few percs and walked to her fridge carrying a box. She stripped off the magnets one at a time. A tiger from the National Zoo. A baseball that had Chicago written across its middle. Various guitars. A statue standing next to the copse of trees, the high-water mark of the South. She took down the Rembrandts, the Klees, de Koonings, Picassos, Waterhouse's *The Lady of Shalott*, only there because it was Lotte's favorite painting. Ellis felt there was something weak in the Pre-Raphaelites.

She left Van Gogh's *Night Café* because the man next to the pool table never seemed finished staring at her. She took down Johns' *Flag*, but left *Grey, Hatteras, Periscope (Hart Crane)*, the words red, yellow, blue stenciled in gray. Crane's arm stretched across the magnets, the last thing the passengers saw before he disappeared into the ocean.

There were seventy magnets in all. When she pulled the books she had stolen from the shelves and piled them up, she counted fifty of them. She put everything in a box and mailed it off to Abilene, KS without an address. Her grandfather was buried there.

She sat on the couch, in the film of the light's haze. Her tongue felt twice its size. She turned on the radio and a reporter was speaking in German and another voice began to translate, she heard the words Berlin, bus and Tegel. She'd flown into Tegel to visit

Lotte. She remembered walking alone to her apartment on Bruderstrasse with the Berliner Dom at her back.

“Oh, Ellis,” Ellis said. Oh, Ellis—the words Lotte used when Ellis asked if she was in love with her.

A week later, sans percs, she received a letter from the headquarters of the chain. They reminded Ellis of the evidence they had against her, the photograph, her signature. Ellis owed them one hundred and fifty dollars for her “transgression” as they called it. However, if she paid the penalty within the next week, they would accept seventy-five. She wrote the check and sent it off.

Ellis played the whole thing to her advantage. She went to her shrink and confessed and cried while she spoke. The tears were genuine because she was twenty-eight and she’d never expected to be one of them, a thief tucked away in a computer file. Anyone could find it if they hit the right button. The proof was there.

“But now,” Ellis said, “I’m sitting on my couch and I think I hear a banging on the door. It’s him. It’s the man in his black jacket. And he’s got handcuffs and he’s got four police officers with batons.”

Ellis was bent over and holding on to the chairs legs. She knew she looked strange doing this. She squeezed and her knuckles turned white. “Then the letters start coming and they ask me for ten more dollars and twenty. All the way up to a thousand.” Ellis looked up at her. She made sure to blink a lot.

Probst was wearing a green sweater with ruffles on her wrists. She had a necklace that was a horseshoe, diamonds embedded in it. Her mouth was closed hiding her big teeth. Ellis did like her, but couldn’t help thinking she had a horse face.

“What part of what you said sounds realistic?” Probst said.

“Any of it. All of it,” Ellis said.

“You’re blinking a lot.”

“So what?” Ellis focused on a poster, men on bicycles wearing strange goggles and drinking beer.

“It’s a sign of severe anxiety,” she said.

Ellis had never told Probst she’d been a med student, had seen patients have panic attacks, suffer from severe anxiety. A patient couldn’t go to the doctor and say he had a stroke if he hadn’t, but he could fake his way into convincing the doctor that he had one of a good majority of mental illnesses. Shrink couldn’t prescribe painkillers, but they could dole out schedule III’s, the benzos that Ellis sold.

Probst rolled her chair back to her desk and took out her script pad. Ellis watched her as she wrote, the loops of her L’s dipped off the page and onto a desk calendar, which was empty except for lines and dates. Probst finished it and then sat it on her desk. “I want to try something. Is that okay?”

“Sure,” Ellis said. She didn’t mind being late for her art theory class.

“Can you hand me that pillow over there?” It was faded a yellow, dwindling down to white.

Probst held the pillow between her two palms. “This is not a pillow,” she said.

“It is now a container for all of your anxiety.”

Ellis wanted the script. She nodded her head.

“I want you to hold this pillow,” she said.

“This container. Hug it tight against your chest. Breathe out, let your skin breathe and seep into the container. Shut your eyes and let your feelings fill it. Let me know when the anxiety is gone.”

Ellis held the pillow, wondering how many people had used it as a container before. She hugged it tight to her chest. She crushed it deeper into her neck, let her chin fall over it. Ellis wondered how long she should hold it so Probst would think she'd actually tried. One last squeeze and Ellis was done.

Probst took the pillow back. She waved her hand over it and said the container filled with Ellis' anxiety was again a pillow.

“Thanks,” Ellis said. As she walked toward the door she stopped to hug Probst. She did this after each meeting to make Probst think she cared.

Dr. Probst had been kind enough to give Ellis a three-month prescription for four Benzo's a day—to be taken as needed. Ellis kept thirty for her and Z's private consumption. Z slung the other ninety to undergrads for five bucks apiece along with the muscle relaxers bringing in around seven hundred dollars a month, which they split between the two of them.

One afternoon, while she was sealing baggies, she smelled formaldehyde. She chewed a benzo and the smell dissipated, but still hung in her apartment.

When she finished packaging it all, Ellis sat down on her couch. Books of theory spread across her coffee table, which was missing knobs and had a few staples sticking out of it. She thought of the Dadaists, rebels to a certain extent. Tomatoes being thrown at them, boos and taunts from the audiences. When World War II broke out, the Nazis went looking for them.

She remembered Hans Richter's bitter comments about Lichtenstein, but his praise of the happenings. She couldn't start fires on top of buildings and shout down from artificial towers built of trash and she didn't want the cheapness of spray paint. She'd get some more percs off Dr. Carter and think for a while longer.

Later that night, Ellis went out to a bar with the first and second years. Z was torturing someone's wife who had been ensnared by his assertion that no black people ever went fly-fishing. Ellis listened to Z, watched as he drank two beers, itched his beard in between harangues. Ellis couldn't take much more of it and was about to lean over to and tell the woman he was full of shit and that his favorite conversation starter had to do with exterminating citizens of various countries.

Instead, Ellis dropped a quarter into Z's beer, which meant he had to chug it—a little game they played that reminded her of undergrad. He gave Ellis the middle finger and she started over to the bar.

Once there, Ellis turned over her license so she could rent a set of darts. Betsy had followed her there. Ellis liked her and they shared many of the same neuroses. They also shared the drugs given to them by their shrinks.

“Mind if I play?” she said.

“No, not at all,” Ellis said. “Have you played a lot?”

She placed a twenty in front of the bartender and said she wanted two shots of German liquor. “Let's say I'm better at it than pool.”

“Keep the money,” the bartender said and smiled so his dimples showed. Betsy gave him a passing smile, turned to Ellis, and they clinked their glasses.

There were three darts.

They were steel tipped and the flights were made from fake feathers that were gnarled and speckled with yellow flecks.

“Cricket okay?” Ellis said.

“Of course,” Betsy took the darts from her hand. She hit the eighteen and nineteen on her first go.

Ellis hit the twenty her second turn, but it didn’t stick. When she finally hit a number, she enjoyed the chalk’s touch as she crossed it off.

A few more shots and a beer and Ellis started to hurl the darts at the board like a pitcher. She kicked out her leg, swung her arm around and followed through. They started missing the board by feet, but slamming into the wall. She could see the paint crumbling.

“Okay, time to stop,” Betsy said.

“One more. One more.” This time Ellis held the dart in an invisible glove and checked the runner on first base. Then, she wound up and held the position. She kicked and followed through, but she lost her balance and spun around knocking into the table where Ellis’ and Betsy’s beers were setting. The glasses fell and smashed on the ground. The moldy carpet wasn’t thick enough to cushion their fall.

The waitress came over with the broom.

“Oh, you aren’t going to be able to get the glass up with that,” Ellis said. “It’s carpet.”

“Get out,” the waitress said. She was on the floor with her hand two inches up on the handle. Betsy pushed Ellis toward the front door. Ellis nodded at Z. He mouthed, see you around.

Ellis woke without a hangover. The benzos took care of that. She drank a glass of water and began dressing. A pink polo with nice fitted jeans. A belt with the South Carolina flag on it. Palmettos in white. She put her hair up in a ponytail. The pink bow topped it all off.

She walked into the Greek store whose windows were covered in the Greek alphabet. Ellis had taken ancient Greek in undergrad because she was convinced she would be a youth minister. Then, the whole gay thing made it pointless.

In front of her, stood two girls in green shirts with their sorority letters in blue. The blond unhooked a decoration from the fake evergreen. The decoration was outlined in blue glitter. Ellis could tell they were glass and made by a company that sold them for at least sixty dollars a pop. Her brother had grabbed one he'd been given for Christmas and it broke and sliced his palm. He had to get four stitches.

The woman behind the counter asked Ellis if she needed anything, but before Ellis could speak one of the girls had bounced up to the woman to ask if she could put the decoration on lay-away.

Ellis wandered away from the register. She went down an aisle that had letter shirts in the official colors of the frat or sorority. The next aisle was packed with pens and bumper stickers, window decals and paddles.

The Christmas tree was at the end of the first aisle. She heard the door ding twice. Two sets of mothers and daughters entered. The lady behind the counter was quick to meet them. The parents had the money.

Ellis walked to the tree and untwisted an ornament, a Delta Zeta, which was rose colored.

The manufacturers had used a strong glue to affix the pink glitter. One second Ellis was holding it, the next it was in bits and pieces on the floor.

The cashier ran toward her.

Ellis felt her cheeks flush as the mothers and their daughters stared at her. As the woman approached, Ellis began to panic. “Oh my god. I’m sorry. I’ll pay for it.” The clerk was bent over picking the pieces up with her fingers. Ellis knelt to help her and the woman said it was okay. She smelled like washed flowers and something sank deep into Ellis. It didn’t smell like Lotte, but it was close enough. They’d stopped talking two days before. Ellis began crying.

Finally, the woman was standing. “Oh, sweetheart, it’s no big deal. I’ll take care of it.” The fluidity of her southern accent enhanced her sincerity.

Ellis hadn’t heard anyone talk to her that way since she moved. She wanted to ask the woman if she might be able to come over for dinner. She imagined the woman’s house, a white tablecloth, a pasta and chicken dish. She imagined a fireplace flanked by bookshelves filled with hardcover book. The books would be first editions dated all the way back to the fifties.

The bell dinged behind Ellis as she left the store. The whole thing was a failure.

Ellis left her house at eleven. She was going to Betsy’s at noon, but she wanted to sit behind the wheel, drive around, let her head clear before they met up and spun records and smoked weed.

Ellis drove out past the gym, through the part of town where the yuppies lived and turned onto a two-lane road. She passed a dilapidated gas station with its rusted pumps

and wooden signs that were no longer legible. She drove past fields of cotton and finally pulled off the road next to one that was not fenced in. She'd never touched raw cotton. It had looked soft to the touch from the window of her car, but it was rough and there were seeds in it. She spit in the dirt and wiped her sandal over the splotch.

A light wind blew the plants and they rattled against each other. She took a deep breath and beneath the clean air she could smell the gross anatomy lab. Since the incident at the grocery store, it had been present off and on. She'd thought she'd found the solution the night the glass broke, but Ellis' attempt to reinvent the stealing as breaking had failed. If the thing was broken, it had already lost its value. The only risk there was having to pay for what she'd destroyed.

When Ellis returned to her car, she picked up the phone to call Lotte. She was ready to say that Lotte was right, that'd Ellis would be dropping out of the MFA program. She would tell Lotte that she would talk to the psychiatric department about the cadaver, the smell. They would readmit her and she could pick up where she left off. But Lotte didn't answer. What Ellis wanted to say didn't belong on an answering machine. She hung up.

As she started her car, she received a text from Z saying that Betsy had the flu.

They were doing Saturday at his place.

Ellis knocked on Z's door. He yelled hold on and she sat on the porch. A few minutes later, he came and sat next to her. He was smoking.

"I got busted for shoplifting," she said.

"You're like twenty-eight." He flicked the ash off the end of his cigarette.

“That’s exactly what I thought,” she said. The grass in the yard looked like pieces of hay. Empty forties of malt liquor and a few beer cans that had faded were the only type of flowers that were going to grow.

She told him about the black jacket, the picture the man took. She told him about the Christmas decoration.

“It didn’t feel the same. I apologized for it and she accepted the apology. I didn’t walk out feeling like I’d done something wrong. I felt like I’d made a mistake.”

He threw his cigarette into the yard. “Maybe you picked the wrong person.”

She looked at his beard. It was barely more red than brown. “Do you remember the Margritte painting we read about in an essay early in September?”

“Why do you ask me this stuff? I don’t read for class,” he said.

“Well, Margritte labeled everything something that it wasn’t, a horse, a door, but then in the last section he labeled a valise, a valise.” Ellis pressed her palms together. “And, well, it’s like I’m the horse that’s the door or…”

He burst out laughing. “Are you going to sit here and make some kind of metaphor?” Z said. “Christ.”

He stood up and clapped her on the back. “I just want you to know you’re an idiot.”

“Z, I already feel bad enough,” Ellis said.

“No not for stealing. That book stuff has got your brain fucked up. You are using this painting as a metaphor and metaphors are gone, extinct because they are tired bullshit. How are you going to make art with all of that in your head?”

Z went inside, letting the screen door slap behind him.

Ellis followed him in, but went to the kitchen and drank a glass of water. She heard him turn on some low-fi and when he came back into the kitchen she said, “Do you think it was the wrong person?”

“Sure,” he said.

The front door slammed and they heard Z’s roommate, Houston, throw his boots off on the way to the kitchen.

“What up,” Z said to Houston.

“You guys in here discussing marital problems?” He looked over at Ellis and pulled a cigarillo from his pocket. “Ellis did I see you wearing a polo and a pink bow the other day? You almost looked like a girl.”

“Thanks,” she said.

He pulled the pair of sunglasses off of the top of his bald head and placed them over his eyes. “So I heard ya’ll were going to be here today. I brought extra weed in case we needed it.”

Z reach out and they slapped hands.

“One rule though,” Houston said. “No talk about art or whatever you’re studying.” He placed air quotes on the word studying.

Ellis stayed for two hours and watched football and lay with smoke in her head. After the game was over, she headed to the front door.

“Magritte,” Z said and he smiled that faded smile of a man coming down.

Ellis called it the dry run, even though they had a few beers at a bar across the street before they went.

Devine Food and Café doubled as a restaurant and a store that sold imported food, wine, and expensive cookware.

Z was wearing a suit and a teal tie. He had insisted on the color even though Ellis had told him the point of this game was to blend in. Red would blend, but not teal. He ignored her.

Ellis wore clip-on fake pearl earrings, a pair of khakis and a loose green shirt she'd borrowed from Betsy, who said it would look very New York.

Z walked in first. He went over to the cookware and started picking up coffee mugs and various kitchen utensils. A few minutes later, Ellis entered and approached the girl working behind the counter that housed expensive stuff that rich people felt like they needed to eat.

The girl had on a white apron. Her hair was braided down the back and she looked Amish.

“Kaitlin, is that your name?” Ellis said. Ellis had read the name off the girl's nametag.

She wiped her palms on her apron. “Yes, ma'am. How may I help you?”

“Well, I need a few things.” Ellis pulled a list from her back pocket and began rattling off meats and cheeses.

“Hold on one moment,” the girl said and yelled for a man named Greg. Greg was already bald in his early twenties. When he arrived, he asked Ellis to proceed. He pulled out a small notebook and began to write down what she was saying.

When Ellis finished listing off the food she wanted, she asked Greg if he would mind if she looked around the store

“Not at all.” She saw him pull out a piece of foie gras. It looked like putrid ham. She found Z. He was kneeling on the floor across the room, holding an oval shaped cast iron pan. He opened it, stared in it for a minute and closed it. It was an unnatural orange, too red for anything except wall paint and the cookware. It had a black knob in the middle.

Z positioned the pan on the floor, a few feet away from a shelf full of plates, teacups and mugs. He was now looking at the pot that had been behind it. It was black and circular, much smaller than the oval.

Ellis looked at the metal shelves. Each had a piece of oak that fitted into the moldings and was the surface for all the merchandise. The shelves were screwed into the floor so they wouldn't fall over even if Ellis had given it a running start.

The toe of her shoe struck the dish. When she hit it, the dish slid a foot in front of her. She felt her ankle bend the wrong way right before she crashed into the shelves, but she was able to turn so that she hit the shelf with her back and upper shoulder instead of going face first. Even though the shelf didn't fall over, Ellis' momentum knocked the coffee mugs from the top shelf and China splashed around her body. The mugs smashed into her ribs and the back of her head.

It hurt worse than she thought it would and she could feel lumps forming all over her body. Pieces of glass lay on top of her and she heard Z tell her not to move. Ellis heard a holy shit come from the direction of the deli. She heard Greg's shoes thudding toward her.

Both Z and Greg began apologizing. Z stood with his hands out shouting that he got caught up looking at the round cocotte. Greg apologized to her and asked if she was

hurt. It took her a moment to catch her breath. Ellis took some photos of the mess. So many broken plates, coffee cups without handles.

Ellis heard a shrill voice and out came the manager. Her curly hair bounced on her head. “Call for an ambulance.”

That was Z’s cue. He picked Ellis up, driving slivers of glass into her skin.

“I’m taking her to the hospital.”

“Did she just take a picture?” Ellis heard the manager say. She heard her start talking about a lawsuit. Both the manager and Greg followed them to the car with their hands on their hips. “How can I help you?”

Z opened the passenger door and helped Ellis sit down. He slammed the door and jogged around the front of the car and opened the door. He told the manager and Greg to get the hell out of the way. When he began to pull out, they moved from behind the car.

“You feel like a horse or door now,” he said. Ellis didn’t answer.

“We’ll stop by and get some tweezers and ice packs. That was amazing,” he said. “Just so you know you fell over a coq au vin that was worth three hundred dollars.”

Ellis had a hard time breathing, but she smiled. She was sure a rib was broken.

When she lit up, the THC filtered through her body and found all her wounds. When it settled in, her bruises and cuts tingled and the ice became a throbbing.

“So this is the price,” Z said. He took another hit and pointed the pipe at her. “Half of the percs you’re up for next week and all the money from next month.”

“It’s a deal,” she said. “It’s all yours.”

He patted her knee and she winced. He patted it again.

Ellis couldn't go in, not even to the parking lot. The idea of being arrested terrified her. The orange jump suit, a mug shot.

She parked in a lot next to the store. She watched as Z took out a screwdriver and wrench and loosened the front tire of a shopping cart. He pushed it forward then backward. She could tell if he put half his weight on that side of the cart the wheel would break off and the cart would skid and friction would take hold.

Houston was going in with him. He had to go because Ellis didn't want Betsy or any of their other classmates to know about the shoplifting and someone had to be there to take pictures. Houston had his phone. He would walk a few feet behind Z and when Z crashed, he'd be ready to document.

Twenty minutes after they'd entered the store, Ellis heard the ambulance. The EMTs jumped from its back and when they came out Z was on a stretcher, Houston following still taking pictures. The manager in a white button-up shirt with suspenders was yelling at him to put his phone away.

Houston turned on the man, half-lunged at him. He was bigger than the manager, width and height. Houston's grin was big enough to shut the man up.

When the EMTs began shutting the door, Ellis started her car. As she pulled out of her spot, she saw Houston yelling at a man dressed in a suit. With her window down, she heard him shouting about serving as a witness and how they'd better fix the goddamn carts.

Ellis followed the ambulance. There were about five cars doing so which she thought was strange.

When she got there, she saw Z sitting in the waiting room.

The EMTs had bandaged him up, but he couldn't stand.

“What did you do?” Ellis said.

“I went for it. I got two shelves full of the stuff. The cart got stuck on the bottom, the inch between the metal and the floor. It sort of bounced back and hit me in the chest. I fell flat on my back, except I landed funny on my knee.” He sat back and nodded his head. “And I got all the French Champagne. A bottle of Veuve Clicquot smashed on my face”

Ellis saw that his nose had swollen. There were four layers of bandages on his forehead.

“My man.” Houston had come in behind them. “Way to tough it out.”

He flipped open his phone and handed it to Ellis. She looked at a pool of liquid that was dark and oily and full of broken bottles. Z lay in the middle of it. Bits of a clear bottle rested on his arms and his face. In the very corner of the picture, Ellis made out the wheel that had fallen off the cart.

“They passed out the percs on the ambulance and told me to sue the hell out of the place,” Z said. He reached up and touched a bandage on his chin with one on his finger. “Ellis,” he said and lowered his voice so that no one else could hear, but she and Houston. “Ellis, I am the horse and I am the door and the valise being the valise.” His beard curled up on his cheekbones.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Houston said loud enough so that most of the people in the room could hear it.

Ellis saw the man. He was in an argyle sweater and jeans. He wasn't wearing a badge.

“Sir, is this man bothering you?” he said. He pointed to Houston.

“No. He’s an old buddy of mine who I happened to run into,” Z said.

He whipped out his badge and showed it to Z. “I can take his phone. He has pictures of you that don’t belong to him.”

“No, he can keep his phone. Everything’s all right.”

The man looked at Ellis and Ellis smiled at him.

“Sir,” Ellis said to him. “I’m glad to see a holy man like yourself here. Was it in Matthew? ‘Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying; give without pay.’ I’m sure you have heard all that being a good Christian.”

He ignored Ellis and asked Z again about the photos. Z ripped the bandage off his head. His gash was black around the edges and inside the circle something had congealed and looked like steel. The man walked off, his hands in his pocket. Ellis looked out the window and saw him approach the man in suspenders.

They sat waiting for Z’s name to be called. When it was, a nurse came out with a wheel chair and took him back to the doctors.

“You got everything taken care of?” Houston said.

Ellis stood up to shake Houston’s hand. “Yeah, I got it.”

As Ellis watched the door close behind Houston, she heard a mop splash on the floor. A man was scrubbing beneath the chair that Z had been sitting in. When she inhaled, she expected to smell bleach. Instead, the stench of formaldehyde hit her. Ellis checked her pockets, but she didn’t have any pills with her. She went outside and bummed a cigarette off of a man hooked to an oxygen tank.

She'd been standing there a minute when he asked, "Do I look dead already?"

"Sir," she said. "I'm not a doctor."

As the words left her mouth, she knew she should have said something else. The man was no longer looking at her. She ignored the impulse to say she was sorry and finished the cigarette. When it had burned out completely, she studied the butt, thought about chewing on it. She placed it into the trashcan and realized there wasn't anywhere left to go but inside.

CHAPTER 16

WATCHMAN

The first inhabitants of the house planted the green giants in order to cloak the happenings in their backyard. Two trees along with the house made the first side of the square. The others consisted of fifteen trees each. After ten years, the trees stood twenty-seven feet high. At this height, the full spread of the branches obstructed the view of their neighbors. The couple retired from their jobs as nurses. In the quiet of their backyard, they watched the first of many marijuana crops grow. After the harvest, the couple sold their product to ex-patients.

The bear watched as the owners dug holes for marijuana seeds. The man told his wife they were called Alaskan Thunder Fucks. Ten years later, the police came and arrested them. The government put the house up for sale. The little girl's family purchased it.

At first, the little girl made the bear nervous. She came out into the backyard daily. She had red hair and wore dresses that fell below her knees. These dresses did not hinder her from playing in the mud or jumping off trees. The bear saw her pick up and examine a number of bugs. He thought this unusual since the Alaskan Thunder Fuck woman always called for her husband to kill whatever insects she saw. The little girl had no fear. She was bound to investigate the saplings of his forest, to turn rocks over in

search of centipedes and earthworms. It was a matter of days before she would discover him and he would have two choices: to scare her into running away or eat her.

A month passed and the little girl did not venture in. During this time, a group of six men entered the backyard and took her place. They wore baseball caps and jeans and used red spray paint and rope to create a rectangle. The bulldozer arrived and flattened the grass.

The yellow machine came each day with the men. It placed layer upon layer of dirt on the forest's border. In the morning, he'd wake to find the pile gone and the men producing another.

The men poured concrete and laid tiles and put up a bar along the pool's stairs. It had been almost six weeks since he'd seen the little girl. He missed her, her laughter, her skipping, what she thought were invisible conversations with the air. These things filled his heart the same way that the water would soon fill the pool. But, he had heard the little girl's mother telling her that she was not allowed in the yard until the men finished. It was verboten.

The word struck a memory on the bear's insides, tales his mother told of the Grand Bears of Berlin. His ancestors guarded the people of that city. They were a brave and brutal bunch. They fought off armies of bristled rhinoceroses, scab-ridden crocodiles, even their brethren polar bears. His ancestors took no prisoners. "Can't you feel the knife," they roared as a warning to their assailants. If one took arms against the Grand Bears of Berlin, swift death by claw and teeth was inevitable. For their loyalty and resoluteness in the face of the city's enemies, the mayor painted their likenesses on the coat of arms.

The bear ate dead pine needles.

He imagined them huckleberries, blackberries, raspberries, grapes. He chewed the milky brown lines and felt sweetness and a stab of sourness on his tongue. When he could not sleep the legends of the Great Bears drifted through his mind. He let these tales and the remnant of his mother's touch gnaw at his loneliness. He slept with what remained untouched squeezed in his arms.

He awoke one day to find a chain-linked fence around the pool. The bear understood that certain things must be kept out: dogs, small children and the deer that appeared in autumn. If the owners' knew of his presence, they would have built a fortress. This fence could not keep the bear out.

The bear heard the sliding door open. Out came the girl with red hair. She was not wearing a dress. Instead, she wore a blue two-piece swimsuit that was more flesh than material. He saw her tanned belly and arms, legs moving with certainty. The suit announced her breasts, pointed to the parts beneath her hips that must be covered. The girl had grown since the bear had last seen her, not so much taller as more pronounced.

As the bear watched the movements of the girl, his arms fell by his side. What domesticity his mind possessed shrunk from his conscience. He realized that the fence was meant to hold one within as well as out. The suit acted in the same way. Its restriction caged her restless curves in an artificial bobbing. The restraint he'd lived with for over twenty years, curled at the back of his throat, but the bear swallowed this growl back down.

The girl mounted the diving board, its synthetic whiteness asserting itself over the artificial pond. She hopped on the edge of the board, but the whiteness was there to serve as a prop, not to give the girl the freedom of momentary flight.

The bear felt the blood freezing in his veins. Savagery made his bones rigid. His claws curled. His voice readied itself to say, “Can’t you feel the knife.”

The girl pivoted and looked the bear in the eye. She stuck her chest out and pulled her shoulders back. Her tight lips, her steady gaze, informed the bear that she had known he was there all along. She had known he was there the first time she skipped in the yard. Yet, she had never spoken to him or anyone else. Animal control had never arrived with tranquilizer darts or guns housing bullets. He remembered then that she possessed no fear. He nodded his head. She returned his nod. Then, she spun and dove, breaking the surface of the water.

This became a ritual, the girl stepping on the board, so that she could peer over the fence and look into the bear’s eyes free of the chain-links. He would nod. The girl would nod and then she would dive into the pool. Even when her friends came over to play games, eyes shut a lonely Marco met by a volley of Polos, she entered the pool in the same manner.

One of her friends, a little girl with dirty blond hair came over every day. She wore a pink swimming suit, a one-piece with fake silver jewels running up one side. This friend watched his girl nod at the bear and jump off the diving board. The bear worried about this one much more than his girl. She would not chase the rings to the bottom of the deep end. She wore goggles so the chlorine would not redden her eyes. When she found dead bugs floating in the water, she shrieked.

His girl would toss bugs out on the concrete. His girl would dive in the shallow end, body never sinking below a foot. His girl would swim in the pool even when storms passed through. The bear admired her as the wind blew the rain sideways into his face.

He heard the thunder, observed the cracks of lightening. And his girl, when the other asked what she was looking and nodding at said, mind your own business. That night his girl spun like a tornado in his heart.

He knew it was coming, the day when they would understand each other. When that day came it was just another day. The bear heard the scratch of the sliding door. He heard the pop that meant she had shut it.

She mounted the board, turned. Their eyes settled into each other. Then, a long, gentle stare commenced, the kind with which one reads books. Her eyes in the softest way took things that had lumbered in his body for so long. She took the stress from his shoulders. She took the rotten air of his sighs. She blew the rust off the steel from his insides.

His girl turned and her fingers undid the knot that governed her breasts. She slipped the elastic that had fenced in the other things meant to be private. When she finished undressing, she again gazed into the bear's eyes.

Before his ferocity fully awakened, he nodded one more time at the girl. With this he gave her a love that others would never give her.

CHAPTER 17

CONCLUSION

About two weeks ago, I received a letter from Lotte. I hadn't had any contact with her in over a year. The outside of the envelope looked no different than the others. The blue background of the Luftpost sticker, Luftpost in white, in red Par Avion Prioritaire, a quote underneath the return address, her staple: *To be an artist is to believe in life*. The idealism she still bartered with.

In the last phone conversation she'd said, "We can be soul mates, but not lovers." "I've got plenty of soul mates." I threw my phone across the room and didn't sleep for two days.

I put the envelope aside and looked at the wall above my desk. It had been covered with picture frames made of black wood. The frames had stretched past both sides of my desk. I'd fitted every postcard she'd ever sent behind the plastic panels. Houses toppled during the San Francisco earthquake. The bold colors of Rivera. African masks. An early Pollock working its way toward action painting. But, I'd saved a special place for her favorite painting, Waterhouse's *The Lady of Shalott*. I'd taped it at eye level and it was with me instead of captured in the frames.

After she told me she was not in love with me, never had been, I took them down and packed them into a box and sent them to Houston, Texas where she was living at the

time. A mutual friend had told me it upset her. It was a small victory, knowing that I still had the power to hurt her.

And then, even though they were all gone, the scuffs and the remainder of the tape that I'd tried to clean off reminded me of her as much as the postcards did.

From the top drawer, I removed the only postcard I'd kept: Russian soldiers on patrol at night. But the night was not dark. It was the time of year when it was light in Russia twenty hours a day. These soldiers walked along a stream, guns slung over their shoulders. They looked like the sleep they'd never had. There was something more honest in that photograph than anything else she'd sent.

I went to my kitchen and opened the fridge. The jar of olives stood next to an unopened bottle of mustard. Before I reached for the jar, I thought of the promise I'd made not to drink on weeknights. This echoed in my mind as I lifted the bottle. One or two wouldn't hurt. The assured stance of the yeoman on the label of gin affirmed this. I'd drink plenty of water before I went bed. Steeled by the first drink and the second in hand, I picked up the letter opener.

Inside there was a postcard. I looked at it and hated her. The Eisenhower Library in Abilene, Kansas. I knew she'd never been there in person. I'd shown her a picture I'd taken when I was a kid, an act of attempting to explain where I'd come from.

There was nothing beautiful about the photograph. It had been taken in the seventies. The yellow tint present in the photos of that decade made the sky and grass look fake. The building was made of Kansas limestone, an off-white mortar holding the grey rocks together. It had five columns in front of the entrance. The rectangular shape of the library made them look like teeth with large spaces between them.

I flipped the card over. In blue pen, the kind that bled ink to make the letters thicker and more pronounced, she wrote, *Meet Me By The Water*.

There were no bodies of water at Eisenhower Center. There was Ike's childhood home, a chapel where he and Mamie lay side-by-side, the library and the museum. There were rivers around Abilene and fishing holes. Lone Tree Creek. The Solomon River. I dumped the rest of the martini down the drain and went to bed.

Except I didn't sleep. She knew that my grandparents lived in Abilene. She also knew that my grandfather was dead. He'd died a few years ago in November right before Thanksgiving. The day he died was also the day that Lotte stopped saying she loved me.

What she couldn't know was that a few miles from Eisenhower Center, my grandmother lived in a nursing home. She didn't know that my grandmother had forgotten me. She didn't know that my grandmother insisted that my grandfather was alive. She'd talk about his cowboy boots and his hands wet from car grease after a long day at the shop.

I looked at the books on my shelf, the streetlamp shining on their titles. I read the spines, and stopped at Ford's *A Good Soldier*. It's first line: *This is the saddest story I have ever heard*. I'd been struck the first time reading it that Ford would write such a bold statement within the confines of a genre where nothing is true.

In the morning, as I was buttoning my coat it started creeping in, the hopeless feeling that I had when I thought of her. It all boiled down to one scene: her and I sitting in the back row of auditorium, which bordered the San Francisco Bay. The presenter was discussing the benefits of nuclear energy as a means to end global warming. There was a screen, and graphs and percentages flashed on and off of it. I didn't think about it, just let

the light illuminating the fire exit sit along my leg. I was biting my lip so I would not cry, but the tears came anyway. They were the heavy kind, the kind that appears when unaccompanied by sound.

What makes you call into work and lie about a death in the family? I did it. My other grandfather passing away, even though he'd died of cancer before I'd even started working. It gave me five days of paid leave.

Why did I do it? Have you ever felt like you lived in a novel? Your tragedy would be someone's entertainment for a week. The thought, the only thing that kept you going, was the idea that someone controlled you, an author's hand and you went with that author and let her have you. It's a pretty way of saying that you've lost your mind.

I'd printed a map, not directions, but a map that had only the veins of the interstate highway system. As I looked at it I saw the way the parts wrapped into each other. Here I had a map of interstates and I was driving toward Eisenhower's grave and his dead library and Eisenhower had pushed through the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 and the last letter that I'd received from my grandmother was about all the people driving to Abilene to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Act and Eisenhower had modeled his interstates after the Autobahn and Lotte drove on that Autobahn every day. I could change any of these parts. I could be sitting in a Mercedes on the Autobahn with Lotte. Or I could be reading the newspaper on the Federal Aid Highway Act and clip it and seal it in a letter to her. Or I could be completely insensitive and say that Hitler wasn't such a bad guy, I mean he gave Germany the autobahn. Or I could have been driving to Abilene to celebrate as well, standing next to my grandmother.

I could be writing a poem. To her. The Autobahn and the Federal Aid Highway Act metaphors about how my love could travel. Travel where? Travel on roads, sink into pavement, skip along little yellow lines. Run through words like building, authorization, public works.

I was looing at the map in my driveway. I needed to get onto I-70, but all the routes I could take seemed infinite. I could drive all the way to California. From there, I could take I-80 to I-25 to I-70. Or I could go up North taking I-5 to I-90 to I-15 to I-70. Since I was living in South Carolina, it would have been most practical to take I-40 to I-35 to I-70 and skip California and Colorado. My parents drove I-65 to I-70 from Nashville when they went over to visit my grandmother in the home.

I drifted. When the exits suggested I-90, I took I-90 until another interstate came along. I stopped at the welcome centers when I coasted across the state lines looking at the brochures in the omnipresent racks lining the walls. Historic homes, seven houses in Ohio for its seven presidents. In Kentucky, there was one for Mammoth Cave. The brochure said that the remnants of an old tuberculosis ward sat in one of the caverns. Colorado wanted me to see Pike's Peak. There was San Francisco and its sixty-degree weather and the miserable time I'd had there with Lotte. While I was pushing toward North Carolina, I knew it was time and I took the ramp that led to I-65.

I went from sixty-five on to Old Hickory Boulevard. The speed limit was forty, but I was going sixty and the sixty felt like forty from all the driving I'd done. I took a left onto Kingsbury Drive and at its end, pulled into the driveway of my parent's house. It was four in the morning. The street was dark, not a light on in the neighbors' houses. All of the porch lights were off.

As I stretched, I noticed that my parents had taken down their K-State flag, the purple-faced wildcat with its white background. Willie the wildcat. My mother's voice on the phone a few months before. *We bid on a foreclosure and won. We're moving out at the beginning of September.* It was mid-October. Fallen leaves covered the yard. The blinds in the windows of my old bedroom were closed. I drove back to I-65. I would see my parents later.

At six in the morning, my eyes were numb. I pulled off of the interstate a few exits after Memphis. There was a motel, a chain with an eight on the sign. The metal railings and the doors' faces called out to me. I silenced them with images of broken hinges and the used knife of a serial killer. I got back on the interstate and waited until I found a suburb and a hotel. I fell asleep wearing only a silver chain, its charm, a gun, resting on my clavicle.

Junction City. Salina. Abilene. I pulled into the first gas station off the exit and bought a pack of cigarettes with a sunflower on it. I didn't smoke anymore, but I needed them, this brand specifically, with the sunflower on it. The week I was in Abilene for the funeral, I'd spent the majority of the time in between meals smoking and drinking forties, which I'd hid behind the tool shed.

Eisenhower Center had closed three hours before I arrived. There was one car in the parking lot, a mauve sedan, empty. I got out and looked over at the museum. Its side was cut from the same stone as the library. I took my lighter out and lit a cigarette. This was the weather my grandmother wrote me about. The wind and the chill—she'd have summed it up by saying my grandfather needed a blanket while watching reruns of gunslinger shows or a Royals double header. I hadn't brought a coat

I saw the lights of the sedan flash. I heard his footsteps before I saw him emerging from behind the lamppost at the parking lot's periphery. I took another drag on my cigarette and watched him walk toward me. He had a briefcase and an umbrella and was wearing a brown jacket and brown suit pants. A brown fedora rested on his head. I'd seen pictures of my grandfather wearing similar clothes after World War II.

When he opened his car door, the interior lights shown on his face, erasing the darkness that was there a mere second before. He was in his late twenties or early thirties, his countenance without lines. He flashed a boyish smile and winked, and then he ducked into his car and placed his briefcase, jacket and umbrella in the passenger seat. He pulled a maroon cardigan from under his dashboard.

After pulling it on, he shut the door. The light between us disappeared.

He placed his forearm on the car roof. "Got an extra," he said. He touched his index and middle finger to his lips.

I reached for my back pocket and pulled the pack out. It was bent and I had to tear the side to reach one. "Do you work there?"

He jerked his finger back toward the museum. "There?" he said. "Sure. I help set up the exhibits."

I'd never thought about someone having a job at the museum. There were volunteers that took admission, two women that'd worked there throughout my childhood, Verna, a woman in my grandmother's Bible Study and Lena, who my grandmother pointed out was Catholic each time we saw her. Over the summers, I'd watched their skin grow looser and their hands shaky.

He walked toward me and extended his hand. I placed the cigarette inside it and began to pull my lighter out.

“No need,” he said, and slipped his own from the front pocket of his cardigan. The base was a cylinder and he pressed a button and a flame shot out the opposite side. With the cigarette lit, he tossed the lighter in the air. He caught it and it smacked his palm. He dropped it back into his cardigan. He took a long pull, arched his neck and blew out smoke. “It’s good to see you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, sometimes I think that everyone has forgotten.” He flicked his cigarette and looked up at the sky. “He was the mastermind behind D-Day.”

He looked toward the shadow that was Ike’s home growing up and gestured toward it.

“You want to sit?”

I nodded and followed him. The grass wasn’t dead yet and the dew I kicked up found its way onto my ankle.

He sat on the front step and patted the place next to him.

I sat down, leaving my shoes on the bottom step. “Will they mind?”

He wiped a piece of tobacco from his tongue. “Unfiltered. I smoked a lot of Lucky Strikes in my day.” He bent down and put the cigarette out on the tip of his left shoe. “No they don’t mind. I don’t leave cigarette butts lying around. Anyway, I’ve been around for a while.”

“Working?”

“No I grew up here. Graduated from Abilene High.”

“You’re too young to know my parents. They moved away right after high school”

He walked over to the edge of the porch and looked out onto the space between the museum and the library. “Yes. But, I know your grandfather. My dad took his car over to the shop when he needed it repaired. And John had a picture of you hanging up.”

I sat looking at his back, then past him trying to imagine myself as a kid, standing there staring at the library. As a child, I never understood why I couldn’t check out books. My grandfather would tell me it wasn’t that type of library.

“Hey, you want to look through the museum? I have a key.”

“All right.”

“You know it back and forth don’t you. You’ve been so many times.” He didn’t turn around. “Or I’m guessing you have.”

“More than I can count,” I said. I put out my cigarette on the bottom of my sandal.

On the walk over to the museum, he handed me his sweater. It smelled like my grandfather’s aftershave. As I child, I imagined it was what the sea smelled like. For a while, it had belonged to my grandfather whose body was ashes somewhere. Now it was this man’s.

He didn’t turn on any lights in the museum. Both he and I had it memorized. The red lights of the fire alarms showed in the display cases.

He stepped up to the glass and placed his index finger over the light. “Sort of looks like a boat far out on the water.”

I stood a few feet back my eyes unfocused, imaging the museum illuminated by florescent lights. “That’s where the door to Eisenhower’s grandparents house.

He turned and looked at me. The only thing I could see of his face was his forehead where a red spot rested. “That’s not the real door.”

“What?”

“You didn’t know that?” he said. “All museums put objects on display that aren’t the things listed on the cards.” He turned left and started down the hall where Ike’s West Point uniform hung. “There’s a stuffed dog at the Smithsonian from a cartoon popular in the seventies. It’s set in front of a photograph of the Vietnam War Memorial. The sign says that someone left it, but the museum bought it at a thrift store in the 80s.”

I hadn’t moved. I looked at the red light reflected on the glass. I put my face up to it and tried to see the door, but I couldn’t.

“If it makes you feel better, it’s what the door looked like. You can see it in photographs.”

I watched him turn and I was alone. He was walking into the room where there were maps of the Normandy beaches and uniforms.

When I caught up to him, I could see the orange end of a cigarette. He had it between his lips, but hanging from the left side. Ash was accumulating on the end and the light grew weaker.

“Are the uniforms real?” I said.

“Yes,” he said. “The uniforms are real. Everything else is real.”

“Except the desk.”

“Except the desk. It’s not his desk from the oval office.”

We walked through the museum in silence. We passed cases not seeing, but knowing what was there. A car that Ike and Mamie drove, Mamie's dresses, one a canary yellow, World War II guns, and a parachute used on D-Day.

The man let his index finger trail along the walls, across Eisenhower's car, even the paintings that Churchill had sent to Ike after the war was over.

I wondered if he had left streaks, which people would see in the morning.

It was strange walking into the last hall, a hall usually filled with neon signs, words flaring, "I Like Ike." The displays of buttons and the hats that used to be worn at conventions. The loud voices on campaign commercials were silent.

"I like Ike." His voice filled the space around me. A tenor. He sounded like the men in old movies that my mother watched. "You like Ike. Everybody likes Ike. Hang out the banners, bang the drums, we'll take Ike to Washington."

As his words disappeared into the space beyond us, he placed his hand on my shoulder and guided me to the exit.

After he locked the door, he walked into the grass. He stood in the middle between the library and museum. He pulled a cigarette from his jean pocket and lit it. He stared at the library. His head did not move. After a minute or so, he removed it from his lips and held it between his thumb and index finger.

"I thought you didn't have any cigarettes."

He didn't look at me. "It's still the same one you gave me. I like to take my smoking slow."

"Thanks for showing me around." I said. I moved to take his sweater off so I could return it to him, but he interrupted me.

“Before you leave, I want you to come stand with me a second.”

I hesitated.

He must have seen my mouth open, searching for the words to decline. “After all of this, you’re going to decide you don’t trust me?” He laughed and shook his head.

“I know why you’re here,” he said.

Now he turned and faced me, the cigarette still burning between his fingers. With the same hand he took off his fedora, his palm resting on its top. “All of this,” he said, the hat in his hand sweeping in front of him, directing my eyes. “All of this and you think, well Eisenhower is buried here and the town is dying.”

I looked down at the ground. His words had cut into me. I stood there exposed and cold.

As his voice grew deeper, I knew he was no longer smiling. “Your grandfather is dead and your grandmother can’t remember anything. You’re angry because she erased you while she’s still alive. So you get in your car and drive.”

Here, he placed his hat on his head and jammed the cigarette in his mouth and didn’t inhale before he removed it. “You came here thinking you were broken, thinking Lotte didn’t love you and you wanted to end this chapter of your book here. This bit of it, at least. I know what you want to say.”

The Bread Belt’s autumn had settled into the night. The hair on my arms was standing on its end.

“You came here to say, *This is the loneliest place I have ever been.*” He released those words into the air and they became a cliché. It was a phrase that no one had invented. It was understood.

I hugged my arms around my chest. In the moment, I thought we looked like lovers fighting but when I looked him, I saw a glimpse of myself. “Do you know where the water is?”

He dropped his cigarette in the grass and rubbed it out with his toes. He bent over and picked it up, sticking it in his pant’s pocket. “Yes.”

He started walking toward the library, he hands swinging at his sides. His shoulders were erect and he took long strides.

It wasn’t until we reached a side door and he began to unlock it that I caught up to him. My lungs burned. I’d given up working out because I hated to go to the gym and look at people with their headphones on, listening to the TV or radio.

I followed him down a set of stairs. It appeared that the stairs had been updated as there were emergency lights two inches above the floor. Below me, the man’s shoes scratched the dark grey concrete. I heard him flick on a switch and by the time I reached the bottom, a light was flooding into the hall.

Rows upon rows of shelves filled the room. There were no books just silver cases with movie film inside. A wooden bench sat at the front of the room with a projector at its side. There was a white wall in front of it, bare, not a scuff.

The man motioned for me to sit. Once I was settled he turned the projector on. Each frame clicked as the film rotated. The lights went off and I felt the man sit down next to me.

The first image on the wall took me a moment to place, but as it flickered I saw three familiar buildings. I realized the camera was recording on a street in Holland. The fading sunlight showed in the water of the canal. I’d stood in this exact place years ago

with a friend. We couldn't say with certainty which one was Otto Frank's store. I hadn't thought to look it up.

The image dissolved and the film flashed black splotches and then a Jasper Johns' painting came into focus. I'd seen the painting at the SFMOMA, *Land's End*. For reasons, I wasn't sure of at the time, I had an eerie feeling while looking at it. Johns had painted the word, yellow, blue and grey, the word blue was red and black with the e comprised of a royal blue. I'd pointed it out to Lotte and we stared and she wondered why the hands and arms were there. Later, I found out that they belonged to Hart Crane, symbols of the night he threw himself off of a cruise liner and died.

A poem to Lotte that I'd never read to her. **Hollandsche Schouwburg**. Behind the abandoned theatre/we sat/amidst a tempered rain/and we let our backs/rest against the concrete walls/history besought the silence/that whispered between us/It was thick amongst the brown/curls of your hair/and the stillness of my hands.

My uncle, a man who was always smiling, looked into the camera. His lips were bent upward, but his eyes were not smiling. They were tired and hopeless. He killed himself twenty days after it was taken.

Two photos at Normandy, mine of her and hers of me. It was cold, and she was in her red coat, her cheeks rosy with the air of spring that was not near summer yet. *Rotkäppchen*, I called her. I in a long wool coat, for once without a hat, peering into the ocean. My hands were in my pockets. A quick flash of a letter from her that read "you with your hands in your pockets. You want them to be held, but inside, when I hold them, I can't feel your bones."

The film spun and it flickered from different photos to different words. My car bent against a telephone pole and picture of the church where my paternal grandfather's service had taken place. I hadn't gone. The picture of the last birthday card I had bought to send him, but I hadn't sent it. I had wanted to see if I would feel guilty when he died. When I saw it, I still didn't know if I did.

Someone who looked like Lotte drowned. Someone that looked like me drowned.

A line from a letter Lotte wrote to a friend: "She says she has the answers, but I really just don't know."

Letters I wrote to her: Your eyes are the coldest blue/ Tell me where it all went wrong/I'll be gone in a day/No need to cry at all/You know what I mean/When you build your house, call me home/You maroon your dreams in the darkest places/Träume/When you go I'll be the only one who cares/believe me when I say it's real/We can go to Paris/Your letters.

Letters from her to me: Art isn't a real city/I'm sick of always letting you down/the same old story/Dann ist alles beim Alten/Home is where I want to be/Stop trying to pretend everything is still there/I can't go to Paris/und ein Kuss and ein Zug nach Berlin/I've thrown them all away.

The words they flashed and kept coming and then it was a white wall. I got up to leave before he could put anything else on.

"You've forgotten the water," he said. He placed another film into the projector. The sound of water bobbing. There was a red light that turned white and a shape that looked like a man. A hand came from behind the camera. Someone was yelling "*It's Cold. Goddamnit it's cold.*" Something made a slapping sound. A rope. A hand reached

from behind the camera. It reached, but the rope was too far away. A few gurgles, perhaps a man saying help. Heavy panting. The hand again tried for the rope. Although the film was black and white, I could tell that the fingers were purple. The man behind the camera unzipped something and the view sunk until the boat was a horizon on the tip of the iris. The boat disappeared and all that was left was a blankness a shade lighter than midnight.

He stood and I stood. He leaned toward the projector, which cast enough light so I could see his face again, so I could study it. When he felt like the time had been sufficient, he snapped the projector off. We were feet apart looking at each other through the dark.