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This Is How You Burn Away

Taylor Lewandowski
Butler University

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This Is How You Burn Away

By

Taylor Lewandowski

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of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
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Pathology

I sit in the back between a fat man from North Dakota and some guy named Roger. We sit here among several hundred people under bright lights. We're gathered in this stuffy hotel conference room for the Annual Assembly of American Pathologists. This is the last panel of a week-long travesty. A snooze-fest. Everyone here looks dead or surely on their way to keeling over. The current, awe-inspiring panel, one that will keep them all on the edge of their seats, is entitled, "Reviewing Autopsy Protocol."

Dr. McMillion stands in the front, dwarfed by a huge board with three columns of text. He occasionally swats at sections of the text with a retractable metal pointer. I yawn and tap my polished leather shoes against the beige carpet. I am drifting in and out--a victim of conference fatigue: eyes fluttering, mind easing. You bend over and support your heavy sack of a head with your two arms and slightly rock back and forth.

The man from North Dakota taps me on the shoulder with his thick index finger.

"Hey," he says. "Are you alright?"

I sit upright. The panel is over. We are the last to leave. He still has an open notebook on his leg, filled with notes.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I respond.

I get up and don't engage in small talk. No time. Sleep is on my mind.

The cheap plastic telephone jars me awake. I want to rip it out and smash it against the wall, but I decide to answer it. It is my wife, Marsha.

"How are you, dear?"

We've been married sixteen years. We're actually the same age--a crisp fifty-seven. Martha was born in February near Omaha; I was born in September near Indianapolis. She teaches middle school strings. Violins and cellos and all that. Most of her students characterize her as a stern, unforgiving teacher. I have witnessed her up front in class, observing these children cradling their violins on their shoulders; her stern looks forcing them to correspond to each measure. When a student slipped up, she sauntered over and whipped her pen on the music stand and curtly told the child, "You could either play it right or get out of my class." Marsha is no joke. Seriousness and pomp effortlessly oozes out of her.

"I'm dandy," I say.

"There was a fire at the lumberyard today."

"That's not good. Did anyone get hurt?"

"Unfortunately, no. I was shopping at Meredith's shop when I saw the fire trucks and ambulances and cops barreling down Main Street. I walked outside and saw the smoke in the sky. When I got home, I turned on the TV, hoping to see pictures of destruction, but I was disappointed with the footage. It burned in a concentrated area, minimal damage. You want I wanted more than anything? I wanted it to spread to the bar next door. What a missed opportunity"

I stare at the reflection of myself in the black TV at the end of the bed. A small man in a murky room. This is the usual Marsha I know and love. If I do not outright share her passion to get rid of the "sinful" in her eyes, I do understand where it's coming from. She continues:

"I bet the fire was started by one of those hoodlums at the bar. I'm telling you, Frank, the children are getting worse and worse these days. Someone needs to strangle all this need to recklessly live your life straight into oblivion. I pray every night for this town to be wiped off the

map like Sodom and Gomorrah. There's only so much I can take. I can't handle seeing my own students swaggering in the streets with drug-addled looks." There's a moment of silence and then she asks, "How's the conference?"

"Not bad. About to meet up with some people for a late night drink."

There's another moment of silence.

"Don't drink too much, Frank. You have an early flight tomorrow. Well, try and have a good night."

Every year, a select few of us, meet up on the last night of the conference and display our most horrific autopsy photographs. It's become our tradition. Dr. Carter drags the wheel-busted overhead projector to the center of the room. He shoves a few chairs back with his feet and positions the projector snug between. The rest of the doctors are picking at the buffet table. Large platters of crab legs, oysters on the half shell. I can smell the warm butter from the doorway. At the far end of the table is a full bar. A pimply boy stands behind it.

There is no need to limit myself. The conference is over. Tomorrow all of us will return to our homes and continue as before. This is a night to relax, to indulge.

Dr. Miller from Louisiana spots me and welcomes me over with a wave.

"You look like shit," he says, picking a crab leg with his index finger and thumb to his plate.

"Thanks, a lot. You don't look so great yourself."

Dr. Miller has a consistent blotchy complexion. Red-rimmed eyes and a constant cough.

"Eat up, Frank," Dr. Miller says. "You could use some food in that slim body."

I want to use my fork and stick it between his eyes.

"God, this looks so good," says Dr. Johnson, farther down the table. His thick hands balance the mound of crab legs on his plate as he grabs his glass of wine from the boy. Tall and narrow--I always thought Dr. Johnson could be in the circus. A trapeze artist, of sorts. He works in Grand Rapids. He has one of those sickly faces with brooding eyes, but none of that characterizes his personality. Generally, a nice guy. Last year he showed us a photograph of a man impaled by an enormous needle sculpture. The artistic rendition was supposedly decrying society's dependence on vaccinations. Dr. Johnson said the man accidentally fell out of his window and straight on the needle. It was strapped down to a Ford pickup parked in the alley. We got a kick out of it.

I pick out a few oysters and some crab legs. I choose not to fill my entire plate, but pace myself. I order a glass of pinot grigio and watch the boy pour it. I grab the glass and sit in the back. Dr. Moore from Lexington sits in front of me and sucks up crab meat dipped in butter. Doctors start to show up more regularly and grab whatever they can from the buffet. We are scattered across the large conference room. No one sits next to one another. The metal chairs overpopulate us and we use the excess to rest our legs and extend our arms.

It's funny. I look over my fellow doctors and I know them all. We've been attending the conference for about ten years now and I know nothing about their personal lives. No one mentions a family. They aren't ashamed, per se. But it could be chalked up to an aversion to mixing the personal with the professional. I can't show these photographs or talk about how so-and-so was brutally murdered or the guy we used to see at the video rental store, naked and dead on an autopsy table to anyone. I can't explain the stench of a stomach exposed or the appearance

of a brain oozing from the skull. None of that is appropriate dinner conversation. But, here among these men, it is.

Dr. Carter, near the projector, attempts to get our attention with an awkward, "Hello!"

We just keep sipping our wine and eating our dinner. Dr. Johnson near the front lights a cigarette.

Dr. Carter continues, "I'd like to welcome everyone to our annual festivity. I think we have some beautiful photographs to show tonight. Congrats on another successful conference. Your endurance is awe-inspiring."

Dr. Carter is the guy you like, but rubs you the wrong way. A smirk or a side glance alludes to something fishy going on below, but no one knows what. A phony sort of happiness.

"Since I'm up here and I set this all up," says Dr. Carter, motioning around the room. "I'd like to go first."

No one cares who goes first. Dr. Carter fidgets with his open briefcase on a table next to the projector and pulls out a flimsy plastic sheet and places it on the bright top of the projector.

The cigarette smoke increases, as the doctors place their plates on neighboring chairs and switch to their drinks and post-dinner smokes. I kicked the tobacco years ago. Would've killed me.

The first photograph projects on the white screen. Dr. Carter calls for someone to hit the lights. Dr. Hansen gets up and clicks the lights off. The fluorescent panels pop off one by one. The photograph sharpens in the darkness. I edge forward in my seat and gaze at the black-and-white photo.

It is a man sprawled out on a metal table. His stomach is exposed. Ripped at the edges. A gaping hole with organs missing. His small intestines hanging out. A few ribs could be discerned.

"Male. 5'3". 213 lbs. Age, 29. Unemployed. Deceased on January 14, 1989 at 3:23 am," says Dr. Carter. "Lacerations in the stomach from a canine."

No one says a word. We observe the photo like a work of art. The dark contents of his stomach like scattered puzzle pieces. Caught in the hole, I try to decipher what is what and imagine what organs are missing.

I move my gaze to the man's face and that's where I lose it. Dr. Carter fails to close the man's eyes. They are wide open, gripping, and pulling me closer. They are so familiar. I am shocked. The man in the picture looks identical to Tommy, our son. We haven't talked in so long. This couldn't be him. It must be someone else.

He used to work at the Subaru factory a couple counties over. We thought it was good for him--a sign of change and fiscal responsibility--but I still secretly met his girlfriend at Wal-Mart late at night when he'd call me, beseeching me for more money. Complaining about unpaid rent, insurance, car payments. I would meet her in aisle ten where the bikes were hung. I'd fork over the twenties and follow her to the exit. She'd tell me about Tommy. He couldn't face us, not yet. Give him more time. He needed space. He needed to feel independent. I'd watch her pass the old man greeter and disappear through the automatic glass doors. Eventually Marsha and I decided it was enough. No matter how we framed it, he chose dope over us. And once that was fixed, we couldn't welcome him back into our lives. We loved him. We did, but he hated us. We were the ordinary couple, well-adjusted. We weren't special or interesting. We were normal. It wasn't our fault.

I'm lying next to Marsha in bed. She picked me up from the airport this morning. I'm still quite hungover. She's reading a romance novel. I'm staring at the ceiling. Her bedside lamp is on. My bedside lamp is off. I want to turn over and grab the phone next to me and call Tommy. I want to hear his voice. I want to listen to him talk about his day. It's sick. It really is. Life, you know. There's never an end, even when you're dead.

Frankie

I flip an order of over easy eggs. I'm almost done with my shift. I can't wait to get off. The toaster pops and I throw the slices on the cutting board and cut them diagonally. I scoop the sausage and burnt hash browns off the flat top and drop them on the plate. I finish with the over easy eggs and place the plate below the heater and shout over to Bettina on the other side, "Order up!"

I turn around and stare at the greasy flat top. "I divorced my husband seven days ago," I say to myself over the refrigerator fans and bubbling fryer. It isn't simple. Getting rid of his memory. His stamp on my life and my daughter's. She's only three, but I can tell she misses him. He's been in Iraq for the last two years. I am overwhelmed by images of our "American Heroes" in desert camouflage on the news. Soldiers speeding in their big Hummers. Men casually standing with guns pointed down, helmets on the back of their heads. Searching for their cloaked enemies of the state.

We were once high school sweethearts. But, of course, illusions fade and the person becomes the man you swore you would never marry. Jealous. Angry. Drunk and unforgiving. Abusive. We have a daughter, Carol Anne, who is now three. It has been her and I for the last two years. He left for the Army three months after she was born. He could not bear the responsibility, even if he won't admit it. I loved him. I used to think I'd do anything for him. I would wait for him to return and be a husband, a father, "a changed man," he'd tell me over a static phone at night. I'd think about the late nights in his Chevy pickup, or the way we entered the bar and the lonely men nursing their beers turned and stared with big envy, or the mornings I'd wake with a kiss. But he'd return with quick angry bursts, a fist on the table, or a slap across my face. He'd apologize later, crying over our bed.

I've had enough. Shit happens, people change, sure, but I'm not going to listen to him, or wait for him to return and be disappointed and dragged down to a depth I do not wish to feel again.

My cell phone vibrates in my pocket. I take it out and flip it open. It's Jill Hutchinson, my next door neighbor. She's temporarily taking care of Frankie, my ex-husband's dog.

"Hey, Tammy. I need you here a little early today. I've got a dentist appointment at two thirty."

I wish she would've told me this morning when I dropped him off.

"Ok, Jill. I'll be there around one. Thanks."

"Yup. Okay, bye."

We hang up. I don't know what to do with this dog. I can't keep leaving him with her and I sure as hell can't afford feeding him and taking care of him. Also, I can't stand staring at Frankie and remembering him as a pup when we were both together and we picked him out at the shelter. God, why does everything have to be so sappy?

I walk outside of the kitchen. I stare up at the clock--it's about that time. Bettina grabs some picked-clean plates from Charli and Sue sitting at the bar sipping their coffee and stretching their arms wide. They've got what I call post-brunch torpor. It's a joy to see bodies yawn and stretch and moan. They're both so young. I wish I was that young again. Eighteen. Aimed anywhere and everywhere. Their Jaclyn and Todd's twins. Cute kids. I walk over and lean against the bar.

"How was the grub?"

"Oh, it was wonderful, Tammy!" Sue says.

"Real good." Charli says.

"You coming to graduation this weekend?"

I forgot about graduation. Bettina's seasonal decorations on the windows usually remind me—autumn with orange black and yellow leaves, Easter with painted eggs and floral arrangements—but Bettina has a new baby and doesn't have the time to get up early and paint the windows grad blue, caps and happy faces.

"Maybe I'll go to see you two walk," I say but know for sure I won't be there.

"We'd love for you to be there." Sue says, pulling out her wallet from her pink purse.

"I know mom would love to see you." Charli says.

"You two sticking around? Help with mom?"

Jacklyn and Todd bought the old Sullivan Motel on the corner a few years back. They tore out the inside and replaced it with "modern decor." Cheap, slick wooden tables; white couches; bright lighting; smooth jazz over Bose speakers; continental breakfast with vegetarian options. Marketable to tourists, Jacklyn told me. Sounded like a bunch of bullshit to me. Sure, the old Sullivan was abandoned, derelict, a sure eye sore downtown, but did she really have to morph into some pseudo-fancy spot for romantic couples or get-away families?

"Hell no," Sue says.

"We're both going to New York City." Charli says.

Sue takes out two twenties and puts them over the check and pushes them forward. Bettina slides by and picks them up.

"I wish I was as lucky as you two--that's for sure." Bettina says while taking out the change from her apron. "Thanks ladies. Hope to see you again before you're gone for good."

"Thanks, Bettina." They say in unison.

"See ya around, Tammy." Sue says.

They both hop over the bar stools and skip out the door.

I return to the kitchen and throw a chicken breast and bun on the flat top, toss fries in the fryer. I spray the stainless steel table tops with disinfectant and place dirty knives and spatulas and spoons and anything else in the dish pit for Tony (he clocks in around two for the dinner shift).

So Jaclyn's kids are going to New York City. Hell, I've never left this small Indiana town. I've been here my entire life. I can't say I love every aspect. My cousin, who used to live in Muncie, complains about its "flat landscape and boring people and terrible weather." She now lives with my mom in Florida. But, I do love the feel of a bluegill squirming in my hand. The smell of autumn and the multicolored burning leaves along the highway. The cool dips in high creeks on hot summer days. The countless evenings sipping beer and watching the day fade and the night progress. I flip burgers and fry chicken tenderloins and slice onions. Hell, it isn't no glorious city job. It pays the bills. I do dream of dying in Austria though. I love the *Sound of Music*. Frolicking in the lush fields with the sunlight bright and the blue mountains beyond. I see myself in such a gorgeous place. Where I belong.

I scrap the chicken breast and bun off the flat top and place them in a to-go box. I put the normal fixings Nancy likes: ketchup, onions, American cheese, mushrooms, and apple sauce. Weird, I know. I try to make her lunch every Wednesday after work. It gives me an excuse to drive over and sit down and hash out my problems and receive some real advice.

I clock out and count my tips. Bettina leans on the counter next to me. I turn to her and she gives me that look I've known since high school, an otherworldly positivity. She says, "Tammy, I just want to let you know you've been doing a real good job. I'm really happy we're working together. I know it isn't easy, but I just want you to know you've been fantastic this last

week. I know starting a new job isn't the easiest." She gives me a hug. I half-smile and begrudgingly reciprocate. It is nice to work with her in a way, I guess.

I get in my Dodge Neon and hit the road. Why can't I stop thinking about him? He plays soldier. Sitting in camp, chewing tobacco, listening to Slipknot, cursing and pretending he's a macho guy with other macho guys. Iraq. Afghanistan. He came back once, a year ago, and couldn't cut it. Why can't I just forget about him?

The sun is harsh and the fields are dry. A combine shreds corn. Dust trailing. I drive down the familiar road, up and down over the hills, past the Donners', the Smiths', the Loudermilks', the Glazers'--houses with trampolines and Chevy trucks and manicured gardens. But when I see Nancy's white house coming around the bend I understand everything is okay.

Nancy's front yard is a collection of holiday decorations. The plastic lit Santa Claus smiling; the large bulbed Christmas lights around pine trees, house, fence; a blow-up Easter bunny; several candy canes jammed in the ground; a blow-up turkey on the other side of the yard, a bit droopy.

Nancy is your elderly woman who does not give a shit and I love it.

I park in her driveway and knock and open the front door. Her head pops out from the kitchen and smiles, "Hello, Tammy! Just a moment I'm making some tea." I am shocked she's doing anything. Usually she sits in front of her TV and watches *Fraser*. I place the box on the kitchen counter. She likes to take it out, smell it, and put it on a plate I'm sure isn't clean.

I walk in the kitchen and see that Nancy is making sun tea. She's mixing the concoction with a wooden spoon. She picks up the pitcher with painted flowers on it.

"Could you open the back door for me?"

I place the box on the kitchen counter. I follow her to the door and open it for her. Her backyard hasn't been mowed in a year. I'm sure there are tons of lost objects sitting in the high weeds. She slowly bends down and places the pitcher on the slab of cracked concrete. She comes back inside and I close the door. She goes to the box and opens it up. She takes the top bun off and brings the box to her nose and sniffs. She approves with a quiet grunt and nod.

I follow her into the living room with her fries and sandwich on a gold-rimmed white plate. The room is jammed with plastic lawn chairs. She collects them. She sits on her own Grosfillex Malaga--her prized possession. A small TV is on her least favorite chair, a grey folding chair from Menards. The news is on. The weather man is standing in front of a map. No clouds, just a sweltering heat. There are portraits of her family in gilt frames on the wall. Each of them display a large family in front of the farm house she's in now.

"Well, what's up?" She first eats the fries dipped in ketchup.

"I think I should move."

Nancy turns and stares at me. She stops chewing and says with a mouth full of French fries, "Don't kid around."

"I'm serious. Maybe it's time I leave and go to Louisville or Cincinnati. I've heard New Mexico is nice. Get a convertible, cook at some joint off the highway. Carol Ann could go to school there. It's not a bad idea."

She shakes her head and returns to her plate.

"You know you can't afford that shit. Also, you don't really want to move to New Mexico. Tammy, listen you'll get over him. You're only twenty-four. It isn't the end, honey."

She is right, but that's not how I feel and I'm not going to sit here and agree. I wish I had a mother like Nancy. My real mother, Meredith Rose Gibson, lives in a trailer park in Florida.

We haven't spoken in over ten years. It doesn't matter. She never cared about me. And my dad, shit, all I remember is the back of his Cadillac, inherited from his dad, winding up the dirt driveway. All he ever amounted to was a real big pain.

I sigh and stare at the TV.

“Yeah, well, I hate it, okay?”

Nancy took a bite of her chicken sandwich.

“Well, nothing,” she says. “I’m sick of hearing about this loser. Cast him aside and ride on.”

I'm driving fast down an empty road. I forgot about Frankie and the neighbor. I was supposed to pick him up an hour ago. I push my car to its limit. I can feel it shake. The rise and fall of the road. I like the way the speed makes me feel.

I hit the brakes. I see a plastic sign wavering in someone's lawn. It says, "Support Our Troops," with red and white and blue beneath. I stare up at the house and watch the American flag flap over their porch. They wouldn't understand, would they? I hit the gas but do not accelerate to an ungodly speed. I rest at thirty-five mph and see the Hutchinson's manufactured home with a porch cluttered with hanging rhododendrons and funky glass vases. I pull into the driveway and park near Mr. Hutchinson's white Pepsi distro truck.

I walk up the stone pathway to their porch and hear a whimper from Frankie. He's chained to one of the posts. A note is stuck in the post, "I had to leave. You were late." I stare at Frankie. His black eyes and wagging tail and beautiful black hair speckled with grey spots. He's a Belgian Malinois. But he reminds me so much of him. I retrieve his leash from the car. When I untie the rope from his collar he sprints off in the lawn running around in great circles. I watch

him and call out, "Frankie! Get back here!" He runs at me then sprints away. I yell at him, "Come back here!" I watch him run along the road, dangerously close to any incoming cars. Thankfully no one is barreling down the road. I run after him and keep yelling, "Frankie! Frankie!" It is hopeless. I see him pass our yard and disappear in the tall bushes that separates our property from Boswell's farm. I let him go. I stand on the Hutchinson's lawn. What the hell am I supposed to do? I walk back to my car and drive off. I can't deal with this shit.

I go where I know I am not supposed to go. I go back to where I grew up. It's a tiny house on a narrow road. The backyard is a cemetery. I used to play hide and seek with kids from the church across the road. I always won. The last to be found.

I turn into the black asphalt entrance of the cemetery and take its winding road up the hill where I overlook my old house. It's still there. I think the new Pastor and his wife and kids live there now. There's a swing set and sandbox. The house is white with black shutters. I watch the house for any movement, but there isn't any life. Only the two towering oak trees shaking in the wind. I don't get out of my car. I sit in the air condition. I try to relive the bright moments. The simpler times. The birthday parties and Christmas time. I recast these images and hope to resurface their comforting appeal. It doesn't work. It isn't any good to compare what was with what is. Who do I think I am?

I get the hell out of this place and drive back to town to pick up Carol Ann from preschool. I watch the houses pass by and know the dysfunction within. I do not envy their men with big dicks and big trucks and big money. I do not envy their excuses, their lies and secrets. I do not envy their silence. The landscape flat like their lives, their speech, their actions.

I picked up Carol Ann hours ago. She's sitting in front of the TV watching cartoons before bed. I'm sitting near flipping through a magazine on my lap. She turns to me and asks, "Where's Frankie?"

Fuck. I forgot about the dog.

"Oh, I'm sure he's right outside." I say. "I'll go check."

I get up and open the door. I yell, "Frankie! Frankie! I've got a treat, Frankie!"

Nothing. I try to find shapes in the night. I look past the road and field. Nothing is moving, all is still.

I come back inside and tell Carol Ann, "Frankie is taking a little vacation. Don't worry, honey. He'll be back."

I'm in bed staring at the ceiling hoping to fall asleep. I tucked Carol Ann in. Kissed her on the forehead. I turned on the blue crystal night light and left a crack in the door.

I worry about Frankie. I worry something might happen. I shut my eyes and release the tension in my back.

Frankie runs in the night. The cool wind soothes his frantic running. He barks without punishment. There's no leash tugging, no walls surrounding. Frankie grips the earth, the dirt, the dry husks. He morphs into a man draped in cloth running around a corner. Cell phone detonator in hand. He turns back and watches the hummer slowly encroach. He doesn't do it for Allah, he does it for her.

Block 16

Bee Martin stood next to his quarter horse, Stick, and held the halter for his other two horses, Dotty and Breeze. He watched the two men standing in the dim light, bickering to one another. He wished they'd make up their mind.

They were behind a rickety house, abandoned when the stock market crashed. Bee called it, "The Dark House." Its original paint job eroded by the desert sand. He usually sent word to the workers to rendezvous here--about seven miles out of Boulder City. Safe. Forgotten. Unnoticeable.

The Boulder Dam on the Colorado River was progressing, as Bee heard about it from the countless workers he picked up. Bee had never actually seen the enormous concrete structure, but some of the men complained about the labor, the deadlines, the strenuous work conditions. This probably had to do with their insistence to visit Block 16, thought Bee. Surely, a place to rest and unwind and distract the mind from the next day's arduous scraping and smoothing of runny concrete mix in large blocks. Bee could imagine the dam. One of the puddlers, the majority of workers who dumped the concrete mix in the model, described the mounting structure as an "eyesore of pipes and wood and cables."

The two men, Patrick Mason and Tom Kelper, both nodded and turned to Bee.

"We've decided we'll make the trip, but we've got to be back by tomorrow evening," said Patrick.

"Ok. Get on a horse."

Their clothes were matted with concrete and sweat. Bee thanked God the women made the puddlers wash before they entered their rooms.

Bee held a rope tied from his horse to the other two. Over the last six months he aimed to minimize errors, trip to trip. He'd already made enough mistakes, one horse stolen, another lost. His mother, when he'd return, would abuse him either with her fists or speech. Every trip was a risk. At first he'd pick up the dam workers with a rusted-out Studebaker he'd borrow from Pippin, the gas station mechanic, but that was a short lived venture. A posse, organized by the foreman of the Boulder Dam, cruised up and down the highway with a spotlight screwed to the hood. They were organized by the company and paid by the government to keep the workers within Boulder City. From the beginning of the settlement of Boulder City and the initial plans to construct the dam on the Colorado River, men visited Block 16, a place of where prohibition had no reign, whorehouses began to fill since the announcement of the Dam with women from all over the nation, and gambling houses were resurrected. But, when workers showed up late or not at all or even embroiled in murder and high gambling debts, the company decided to ban any involvement with Block 16. If anyone was caught he was immediately suspended a week's pay and if it happened again he was fired on the spot.

This posse caught Bee one night. One of the men still wore his hard hat in the backseat. It wasn't hard for the bright light to reflect off the bright blue hard hat. They pulled him over and pulled Bee out. Several men kicked him in the ribs. They took his wallet out and stripped him of his cash. A fine, they said. He swore at the highway, the Studebaker, and the ignorant worker. He forgot about the Studebaker and the highway. His mother berated him and told him he better figure out an alternative or he'd be shit outta luck. So, one hot summer day he etched out a route through the desert hills with Stick and learned the entire route by heart. He could close his eyes and know exactly where he was and where they were headed.

They ascended up the first slope. Their horses slowly climbed the bedrock, knocking pebbles down the mountain. The moon hung over them brightly. The silhouette of mountain peaks and the starry, naked sky enclosed them. Patrick and Tom were eager to get to their destination.

"How long is this going to take?" asked Patrick.

"Two hours."

"Jesus. I hope this is worth it."

"It will be. Trust me."

"Maybe, we should call it quits and turn back."

"I'm not spending another night in a smelly tent with you snoring and getting up every three hours to piss."

"Well, I just can't afford to get fired."

"Yeah, yeah. I know. You got a wife and kids to support. Same old story. If you want to go back to town and sleep with the tireless and overworked go right ahead. I'm sick of Mr. Jackman riding my ass every goddamn hour. I'm human. Give me a break. I need my whiskey, my women, my cards, my given right as a citizen to loosen the hinges and bark at the moon."

"All I'm saying is if I get fired I'm going to be after your ass."

"Just think about what you're going to do when we get there. Focus on the immediate future, Tom. Not your responsibilities back home or whatever might happen when we get back, which won't be nothin'. Bee's got us squared away. Ain't that right?"

"Sure," said Bee.

He couldn't guarantee it, but maybe if he went along with him they'd quiet up. It was during these trips to and from the camp that Bee did his thinking. He couldn't read or write or do

any arithmetic. He saw the newspapers hanging off tables, bartenders counting the night's profits on the bar. He didn't ask. He didn't know. He felt left out. Like everyone knew something he didn't. He tried to remember the first time he became conscious of this discrepancy, but couldn't. It was a gradual collection of mishaps and people in his life with confused stares and frustrated remarks. He blamed his mother, Madame Sarah Anne, perhaps the oldest and highest priced whore on Block 16. She didn't believe in education. She thought it spoiled and ruined the individual. She believed in hard work, hustling to make a dime, and never stopping till you got what you wanted. Bee smiled and curtsied her mother's customers. Never thought about no father. He was told countless times it didn't matter. Any old man could be his father. Just go talk to Tiny Tim, the bartender at the Arizona Saloon, and inherit him as soon father figure.

But one day several years ago when he was making circles in the sand with a rock outside the saloon, he noticed a peculiar automobile drive up and park. It was beautiful. Chrome wheel caps. A glimmering forest green body. A tall man in a pinstripe suit got out of the Studebaker and nodded his fedora to him. Bee followed him in the saloon from a distance. The man sat down and ordered a whiskey. Tiny Tim pulled a bottle and a shot glass from underneath the bar. The man knocked back the shot and refilled his glass. Tiny Tim returned to his newspaper behind him.

The man asked Tiny Tim, "You ever see the Pacific?"

Tiny Tim shook his newspaper to straighten it and replied, "Yeah, I've seen it."

"Well, I saw it this morning and it isn't any better than the Atlantic. That's a fact, jack."

Bee noticed Tiny Tim didn't like that, because he pulled his newspaper down again and glared at the man and said, "Don't you call me no jack."

"No harm meant. Just an expression."

Tiny Tim returned to his newspaper. The man took a long glance over the entire saloon and met Bee's glance at the end of the bar.

"Hey, kid. You ever see the Pacific?"

"No, sir."

"You ever see the Atlantic?"

"No, sir."

"Huh, you ever see any ocean?"

"I don't believe so, sir."

"Hey, cut it out with that sir stuff."

"Ok."

"You know how big an ocean is?"

"I reckon the size of this state."

He leaned back and laughed, filling the room with an abrupt noise. Bee jumped back.

"It's about twenty times the size of the state of Nevada. Oh, it's splendid, kid. Lots of fish and beaches where you lay out and suntan and swim. It's a swell time, but you see I'm from New York City and I prefer *my* beaches. More happening about. Better grub. Less likely to encounter a shark. It's just better. Take it from me."

Bee thought about being around so much water. What would it be like? How would it feel? What would it smell like?

Bee stared up at the balcony and there was his mother, Sarah Anne, staring down at them both. The man turned around following Bee's line of sight. Sarah Anne slightly nodded and he turned around and took off his hat.

"You know what kid, I bet you my life you'll see that wide mess of blue one day. Take it from me. You got something the rest don't."

Once they cleared the last slope, they saw the bright lights in the dark night.

"Well, look there, Pat. We've made it."

"Alright, yeah, I'm pretty excited myself," said Tom.

"Hey, Tom, what you going to do after this here dam is done?"

"Why you asking me a thing like that when you just said to focus on the immediate future?"

"Well, I might have a proposition for you."

"And what would this proposition be?"

"I've got a connection in California. An old cowboy who's been havin' one hell of a time. He's been working on some ranches, pickin' some fruit, drinking up a storm. Hell, from the letters I get from California seems like a regular Garden of Eden. A real American Paradise. How's that sound?"

"Well, I'd have to run it by Meredith. That's quite a move."

"Hell. Think about it. No goddamn poverty. A lush, wealthy place. Not a care in the world. Now, that sounds real fine to me!"

Bee pulled on the rope to move the horses a bit faster. He watched a few automobiles in the distance speed across the highway. He guided the horses in a long arc to the back of town, deliberately as far as possible from the highway. Bee pictured this California. It was hard to imagine himself there. This tiny town was his home and he didn't think he'd ever leave it. Why

couldn't he leave it? He looked back at the two men. He envied their approach into a town that wasn't their home.

They approached the saloons from the rear. They missed the spectacle going on in the front. The bright, sparkling lights and women leaning on tables and men drunk zig-zagging down main. Instead, Bee guided them to the livery behind the Arizona. They passed the back of each saloon. A prostitute would be in shadow smoking a cigarette. An old fat man would be sitting on a barrel spitting tobacco in the desert sand. Various trucks with crates of produce from California were sparsely parked, ready to be unloaded and turned around. The smell at times repulsive, wafting from the various outhouses connected to each establishment. Bee didn't mind. He was used to it.

"God, it smells like shit," said Tom.

"Ah, don't worry this is just the worst part of it, believe me," said Pat.

Artemis, the midget marooned here by a circus a year ago, ran out of the livery and met Bee and took his horse's reins.

"Well, Mr. Martin, good to see you back in good shape, aye? I've got it from here old boy. Yes, yes, come here ol' Stick, you nasty boy, you."

Tom and Pat looked at each other. Bee dismounted. They followed suit. Artemis took each horse in the livery patting Stick's neck.

"It's just over here through that door. Follow me," said Bee.

Bee knocked twice waited a beat and knocked again. The door cracked and a pudgy face with a moustache recognized Bee and threw the door open. Chuck was working tonight.

"How many you got tonight, Bee?"

"Two"

"Alright, boys. That'll be thirty cents each."

"Last time I was here it was only ten cents at the door," said Pat.

"Well, that was last time wasn't it?"

They both pulled out three dimes and handed them over.

"Just walk through that corridor and you'll..."

"Follow me, Tom. I know where to go. Let's hit the bar first then play some blackjack."

"Okay, yeah, I could see that."

Bee shook his head and watched them walk away. Chuck sat on a chair smoking a cigar.

He wore a stained white shirt tucked in jeans.

"You think those boys'll make it back on time?"

"I doubt it," said Bee. "Have a good night, Chuck."

He walked down the corridor and heard the familiar hard breathing, the muffled screams, the bed springs jumping.

"You too, man," said Chuck behind him.

He opened the door to the saloon. A man with a blue baseball hat was smoking a cigarette and banging on the piano. Christine, a wannabe opera singer, belted out a completely different melody from the song being played. Men hunched over the bar talking to one another in the thick smoky air. Prostitutes done up in fringed lingerie and peacock feathers were nudged against men sporadically down the bar. Their costumes contrasted with the cowboys' and railmen's dirty attire. Every man in the saloon wore a beard. Some were unruly, nasty and unpleasant, dripping with beer and saliva, others were neatly trimmed--they usually touched their beards and lauded their barber as a son of God. The beards down the bar ranged from black to speckled gray to an

all-out white. When a fellow walked in without a beard, he usually was regarded with skepticism or outright disdain, unless you stood up straight, wore a pin-striped suit, slicked your hair back, and shaved everything but a thin moustache on your upper lip, then you were regarded with respect and you generally did not go out of your way to make your presence known.

He saw Pat and Tom sitting at the blackjack table while Bingo, the one-eyed blackjack dealer, shuffled the deck and dealt the hands. Bee didn't think much of gambling. He didn't think much about any of this scene. It was all the same drab spectacle.

Bee weaved through the patrons, tapping shoulders, and pushing his way to the door. He waved at Tiny Tim behind the bar and said a few hello's to the girls. Once he penetrated through the crowd he escaped through the front door and felt momentarily relieved. He sat down on his spot on the porch--a barstool in a corner.

He watched the automobiles amble by. Men slouched over their wheels, passengers hanging out of opened windows staring at the brightly lit signs. Their autos caked with desert clay. It was like a parade every night. Autos mixed with cowboys pulling up the reins on their horses and depositing them at the public livery at the end of town. Groups of men off the railroad sauntering across the thoroughfare, ready to unload their paycheck. Across the street was the Rainbow Club, a place Bee didn't much care for. They were much of the same: gambling, prostitutes, drinking, etc., but the owner, Mikey Mike, had a past fling with his mother and he resented him ever since. He did like playing checkers with Suzie Q on Sundays in her bedroom.

Two men holding each other stumbled out of the Rainbow Club. They swung a left and knocked a railroad man down. The railroad man got up and it seemed to Bee he was about to lay one right in the drunken couple's jaw, but a bright light broke up their attention. Bee knew exactly what it was. It was the Boulder City highway patrol. The three automobiles were packed

with company men shouting, "Get out of the way! Official business! Coming through!" Bee didn't like the look of this. He jumped off his stool and turned into the alley. No way in hell he was getting caught this time. He peeked around the corner and saw the men park in front of the Arizona and stride inside. They pounded their billy clubs against their palms. He entered from the side door and meandered through the closed kitchen and watched through the porthole window in the door. The company men shoved the patrons and went straight for Tom and Pat. One of the largest of the group, Bee recognized as the man that kicked him in the ribs, yanked both of them to the ground and dragged them across the bar and threw them outside. Bee rushed back out of the kitchen and into the alley. He poked his head out of the corner and watched the men beat the living shit of Pat and Tom in the dirt road as bystanders watched. One of the men shouted, "Who the hell took you over here?" Another, "Tell us or we'll fire you right here on the spot. You lousy shitheads!"

Tom cowered and shouted, "Bee Martin! His name was Bee Martin!" The men relented and some of the others picked Tom and Pat up and threw them in the company auto. Mikey Mike was watching the whole spectacle across the street and noticed Bee in the alley. He whistled and the posse turned toward him. Bee saw him point over to where he was peeking around the corner. He turned around and ran down the alley. A few of the men were already chasing after him. Bee looked back and they were gaining fast with their clubs swinging. Their faces wild and angry. He turned back to take the turn behind the saloon, but ran straight into Lucy. He knocked her down. Her cigarette whipped out of her hand. He hit the ground and the men surrounded him. Lucy got up and dusted herself off.

"What the hell, Bee?"

One of the men stepped on his arm and said, "Didn't I tell you never to set foot in Boulder City ever again?"

Another man with blonde hair smiled and drove his billy club in Bee's ribs. Some of the other members of the posse caught up and hit his body. He heard a crowd stirring and could see the different boots and high heels surrounding all these men beating him senseless. He bunched up in a fetal position and cried in his arms. Nothing to do but accept the pain. He hated these people. He heard a scream.

"Get the hell off my son! Hey! Chuck! Get over here you worthless piece of shit!"

It was his Mother. Chuck disengaged from the crowd as his Mother made eye contact with him. He pulled out his pistol and shot in the air.

"Alright, boys, you've had your fun."

One of the men spit on Bee and they slowly disappeared into the alley. The crowd thinned.

Sarah Anne crouched down and touched Bee's shoulder. He removed his hands. His face was swollen, blood trickling from his mouth.

"Goddamnit, Bee. What did I tell you? You gotta play these men, you can't let them play you. Damn, I thought I raised a smarter boy. Why don't you get up and we'll get the doctor and clean you up."

"Leave me alone," he barely got out.

"Suit yourself."

Sarah Anne went inside. Chuck followed, shaking his head. Bee slowly got up. His adrenaline was still pumping. He staggered down the road. He didn't need a doctor. He didn't need anyone. I am worthless, he thought. I hate everyone.

After he rested near his mother's room and was able to go outside again, he knew what he had to do. One night he followed a produce truck from his bedroom window. He tracked its delivery on Wednesday evenings. The driver got out, picked up the boxes, and disappeared through the back door. It took him about five minutes to reappear.

He decided it was time. He didn't pack anything. He didn't say goodbye to a soul. He slipped out of his room and down the hallway and down the back steps. Chuck grunted when the door opened. He ran toward the produce truck and jumped into the back and opened the canvas tarp and slid between several empty wooden crates. They had tiny painted pictures of grapevines on them with a word below he couldn't read. He listened to the familiar commotion on Main Street. He pushed some of the boxes with his feet and laid out and found a comfortable position and slipped into a slumber.

The start of the truck jarred him awake and the blue faint light of day could be seen through the cracks of the tarp. The truck jolted forward. He moved forward and opened the tarp slightly and watched as the truck's back end entered the highway and the town became smaller and smaller until the desert landscape swallowed it whole.

This is How You Burn Away

"I don't know what to do," she says. "He's crazy. Like, not normal crazy. He keeps talking about passing from this life to the next by way of speed. He doesn't sleep. He rarely eats."

Susanna Fielder sits across from Peter Harrison. They're having dinner at a local cafe outside Dover, Delaware. Susanna pulls her black hair back into a ponytail. Her pale complexion is under duress in the dim lights. Peter, a portly man with thin, receding hair and small grubby hands, sighs and understands he must not tell her the entire truth. He hates this feeling. This subterfuge that has been inherited from Bush Clyde's inconsistent behavior. He was hired five years ago to be Bush's crew chief, not a mediator between the public and the private.

"Susanna, I'm sure he's just going through one of his moods. You know what he's like before a big race. I wouldn't worry about it."

Susanna looks down on her half-finished plate of steak and mashed potatoes and asparagus. It no longer looks appetizing. Peter's plate is scraped clean. He doesn't understand. He never did. He thinks she's being silly, overthinking the situation. She should've known she can't confide in him.

In between Charlotte Motor Speedway and Dover Downs Raceway, Bush took Susanna back to his house in Indianapolis for three days. It was rare for him to take time off in the middle of the series, but the crew and Susanna understood. He'd undergone a traumatic wreck two weeks prior in Sonoma. They could tell he needed to rest up. He was in poor shape. Crying. Unable to get behind the wheel. Shaking. Drinking more than normal. Susanna had never seen him in such a condition.

Bush's house was a rather large farm house with a tall, white fence around fifty acres. On the first night, they went swimming in his pool in the backyard. It was dark outside. The moon

behind clouds. They were naked racing against one other from end to end until Bush stopped and grabbed her by the waist and they kissed and separated and grabbed the concrete lip of the pool.

She felt the usual pang of Bush's mood swing from passion to impulse to vulnerability. An uncontrollable urge to sacrifice everything, she thought. It was that face. The one there dripping wet in the glare of the underwater halogen bulbs. An impossible friction between opposing forces. Always wanting what he could not have.

"I need help, Susanna. I feel like I'm breaking in two. I feel like I can no longer see myself without picturing myself. I watch reruns of myself being interviewed on TV. I see boys wearing t-shirt portraits of myself and I hate it. I can faintly see myself baling hay as a boy, watching late night talk shows with my next door neighbor, paintballing in the woods. Childish, I know, but somewhere in those memories is who I am even if I don't know what he looks like. I can't get that feeling of invincibility back. It's lost somewhere in that wreck. I'm afraid, Susanna. I don't want to die. Maybe all of this is a mistake. Maybe I'm living the wrong life."

He turned and faced her and kissed her. She loved him but didn't know why. She wanted to preserve this Bush Clyde, bottle him up, and store him in the basement. This was rare. This was special. But she did ask, after they took a shower, fucked, and he fell asleep, What do I mean to him?

Susanna's in the gigantic company bus. Phil, the bus driver with a mullet nods his head in front of her, she can faintly hear Van Halen. Bush and Peter are in the back with the door closed. She knows Peter's hiding a Bush Clyde situation from her.

Susanna looks over the entire bus. Bush's "48" is embroidered in blue on all the leather seats. The SPEED network plays continually, 24/7, on the muted TV's. Bush Clyde in victory

lane framed and drilled in the carpeted wall over the main table. Incidents in her mind still playing over: Bush crying in her arms, apologetic. Still drunk in the morning, confessing his infidelity the night before. Long drives from race to race where she listened to Bush talk about his need to win, his need to feel important. And herself, the first time she told him she was a part of an orgy back in Vegas and his hypocrisy when he smashed a beer bottle. Or calm Monday mornings drinking coffee, the race over, and the sun rising outside her window. Everyone asleep. This confined place meant a great deal to her. She couldn't decide if she loved it like a home or hated because it wasn't one.

She watches the suburbs of Philadelphia pass by her window. The white-paned exteriors and manicured lawns are just another version of America she wishes to forget. She'd rather spend time in cities like Nashville and Houston. Places where one can be country without actually being in the country. She unabashedly wears her shiny pink cowboy boots and silk embroidered blouse over tight blue Wranglers. She takes pride in the arousal she feels around her when she walks off the bus and onto the racetrack. They've got nothing on her and she has everything on them.

In the next room, Peter sits on the end of the unmade bed facing Bush at the tiny table next to the window.

"You need to toughen up, Bush. It isn't matter of trying to find yourself. It's a matter of winning. Giving yourself completely over to the car, to the crew, to me. You can get over this wreck. Trust the car."

Bush holds his head in his arms. He sits at the small table. A half-eaten cheeseburger and a PBR can rest in front of him. He isn't hungry anymore.

"I know, Peter. You're right. I will, I promise, okay? I know what I have to do. Will you just leave me alone for a goddamn second?"

"Alright, just remember what I said. We've got a big race at Pocono. You need to win this to jump over Roger Klimmer for the lead in the series."

"I know, damnit. I got it. Now let me try and get some rest and get this shitty burger out of my sight. How do you even eat this garbage?"

Peter gets up and scoops the burger and beer and leaves the room. Bush gets up and lays down on the queen-sized bed.

Race day. They enter Pocono. Susanna yawns and watches the sun slowly edge across the empty bleachers. Bush is sitting across the table, not looking out the window, but directly at her. His eyes are bloodshot. He didn't get much sleep. He looks deranged, possessed. Susanna doesn't question. There's a line of people stretching down the street, waiting to get in and get a good spot. The bus passes the security depot and descends below the racetrack and back up. A row of busy garages with slick cars and pit crews are rushing against time to double check every bolt, gauge, and fluid.

Susanna returns to Bush. He's still watching her. His hands are shaking. The sunlight exposes the pale face and dark short hair.

"You know I believed in God when I was younger. I was one of those holier than thou kids who thought the world was a wicked place. It isn't so easy. It isn't that black and white. Susanna, I'm going to be what everyone wants me to be. I've made up mind. I'll push the rest back and ascend to higher heights. Just you watch."

Susanna shakes her head. The bus stops.

"This is a mistake, Bush. You don't have to do this. You have a choice. Look at yourself. You're a mess."

The door slams open and Susanna sees Peter walking toward them.

Peter grabs Bush's shoulder and gives him a shake.

"You ready, champ? We got the car in tip top shape. Going to be a beautiful day for racing."

He smiles at Susanna. Bush leaps up and breathes in and out.

"Alright, Peter. Let's do this."

Susanna doesn't get up but watches them leave the bus. Before Bush exits the bus, he grabs the edge of the corner of the stairs and shouts back to Susanna still sitting behind the table, "Yeah, but I'm a beautiful mess." He walks out and reappears in Susanna's line of focus past the tinted bus window. Fans with pit passes crowd him for signatures. The process has begun and she can do nothing to stop it. He slides his sunglasses on, smiles, takes a few magazines, miniature car models still in their manufactured cardboard boxes and autographs them quickly. He disappears in the garage. She feels like she should do something, but knows it's impossible. Let him do what he pleases.

Bush Clyde accelerates to one ninety on the hot asphalt. It has been a close race. He's in second and closing on first. The number 89 car is in front, Roger Klimmer, of course. Bush should've pit stopped long ago. Peter frankly berates him on the intercom, "Bush, you're tires are going to explode! You need to pit stop, goddamnit! What are you doing?" Peter watches the monitor in front of him on top of the box. Susanna is behind him. She's wearing a headphone set and microphone as well. Peter pulled her from the stands an hour ago to try and talk some sense.

"Bush, listen to Peter. Don't be silly," she said in the headset. But there wasn't any use. Around lap 170, he began talking like a man possessed, "Watch me, Peter. Watch me, Susanna. I will win it all. I am a God. Can't you see it? I am passing everyone, everything." Peter tried to subdue him, but he sped quickly pass car after car. Nothing was going to stop him.

Bush struggles to pass Roger's. Three laps to go. He attempts to slide past on the turn, but Roger deflects and cuts him off. Bush trails right behind him. On the next stretch Bush turns to the right slightly, Roger goes to cut him off, and Bush pulls quickly to the left and accelerates past him. The crowd goes nuts. Bush is in the lead. Peter and Susanna look at each other. They can't believe it. It's going to be a close finish.

"You got this, Bush. You got this. Make us proud," says Peter.

A voice, almost disconnected, strange and far, erupts from Peter and Susanna's headphones.

"I can see the light. It is good. It is blinding. I wait for the sweetness at the end. I wait to be recognized. Like no other man."

Bush pushes further and further away from Roger. They stand in awe watching the monitor and hearing the roar of stock cars trailing far behind. Susanna no longer recognizes his voice. It is so far away. Gone and rough and shaky. It is not the voice of Bush Clyde.

"I am a God floating above the atmosphere."

The front tire explodes. Susanna gasps. She turns around and sees the smoke billow up in the distance. Bush's stock car is now on fire. She returns to the monitor and his stock car is swerving up and down the track. He's losing speed and Roger is catching up. The finish line is before him. It is so close.

Peter says into his headset, "Bush, I know you're listening. Let's ease up and straighten out. Let's finish this race. We've got this. I believe in you."

"I can't," said Bush. "This is where I must be. This is how it must be. This is how it all begins. This is how we burn away."

And in that moment his other tire explodes. Peter watches the car swerve up the last turn of the race. The car barrels straight into the wall. A blanket of silence hovers over them both. Waves of fire breaks from the front hood. A ball of fire racing and racing. Bush crosses the finish line with Roger trailing just behind. Bush's stock car slams into the wall and stops and the ambulance and fire truck burst out of the pit stop. Susanna still watches it on the monitor as Peter and the crew jump out and run toward the fire.

"No, Bush. This is how you burn away," she says to herself.

Trackers

Diane purchased a queen-size mattress for seventy bucks in Bozeman, MT at a thrift store. Diane and her partner, Aaron, decided to settle in Livingston, MT. She was beginning the initial stages of moving in. She drove back to town with the mattress in the back of their Ford Cargo van. This was the first mattress they owned together.

The past year they were living in this van Aaron inherited from his Grandma, sleeping in their individual sleeping bags and on their blow up pads. They drove all across the West, from Yosemite to Arches to Yellowstone and other random spots they found on the internet, usually under the headline, "10 Unique Spots That Will Change Your Life." They found odd jobs in the parks, until they stopped in Livingston, Montana and decided to rent. It was Aaron's idea, not hers. He had the idea to start his own roofing company. He fondly remembered the summers before college helping his Dad nail shingles on old manufactured homes.

Diane envisioned a stable life with Aaron in this small town. It seemed suitable to their present needs: great outdoors readily available, a vibrant drinking scene, and not too far from friends they met in Yellowstone. They rented a studio apartment off B Street. It was one room in a large Victorian home that was once filled with a large Catholic family forty years ago. Now, the rooms were cut off, angled in incongruous shapes -- closets became bathrooms, living rooms split in half, one side kitchen, the other a bedroom. It was the cheapest they could find. She moved the mattress in, placed it against the wall without a bedframe. They bought two cheap reading lamps from Target, and placed them on cardboard boxes on either side. She draped a white sheet over her box; he left his as is, exposing the green and orange of a U-Haul box. They both scrubbed and mopped, but the place still retained a dusty residue. It was an upgrade from their van, of course. They had a kitchen (oven, sink, counter space), running water, and a reliable

bathroom. Even if this wasn't spacious and only had one window that faced the neighboring house, Diane could settle for this studio apartment and imagine a life not continuously on the road, but one where they came home from their respected jobs and ate dinner and talked about each other's days. But, when Aaron received a call from his best friend, Kip, the following week, everything changed.

Kip and Aaron both attended Tom Brown, Jr's Tracker School in the Pine Barrens of New Jersey. Kip and Aaron shared the love of nature and animals, but they only amounted to marijuana dealers in college and really nothing else. They were aimless and they both thought Tom Brown was the answer. Kip, a college dropout, lived in the suburbs of Chicago, and hated every second of it. He barely held onto his custodial job at the hospital, where his cousin was a nurse. His only respite was his weekly visits to the Garfield Park Conservatory. He'd spend hours sitting on a bench in the misty greenhouse. He knew there was something more than getting drunk at an Irish bar and shouting Journey lyrics to a swaying crowd.

Kip called Aaron up several weeks ago and asked if he could stay with them for "just a few days." Aaron was overjoyed, he accepted without asking Diane. When Aaron and Kip busted into the apartment from the airport, they were talking about their nine months in the wilderness. Rehashing old allegiances, bragging about their endurance, referring to incidents they did not want to remember but shared regardless. Aaron introduced Diane, who just got off work (she got a serving job at the truck stop a week ago). Kip had a narrow face with a wild blonde beard and hair tied in a bun. He crouched a bit but had a wonderful smile and stared at you as if nothing mattered except that very moment. He focused on the present and nothing else. They sat down around the small wooden table and Aaron pulled three beers from the refrigerator and handed them out.

Kip cracked his and said, "You know Diane, Aaron and I use to walk into this grocery store not too far from camp. We'd look and smell like homeless people. It wasn't possible to shower or even look at ourselves in the forest. We didn't even have shoes. But Aaron had this magnificent idea to draw sandal lines on our bare feet and walk in the store like we weren't breaking any laws. Well, guess what? It worked! It's all a trick," he said, looking at Aaron. "Focus, distraction, awareness."

Those "few days" he mentioned to Aaron turned into three weeks. The whole roofing business had been put on hold as they both went tracking every day. Diane knew they were attempting to recreate their nine months in the Pine Barrens. At first, she didn't mind the end of the day dinner-talk about a hare's track ending or a mountain lion's paw prints or a baby moose and her mother, but she rarely had any time with Aaron. Kip had somehow placed himself in-between them. He cooked most of the meals, which was nice, Diane admitted, but he'd take over the conversation and she'd be left out listening to them go on and on about what they were going to do tomorrow, what they hoped to see, what fun and splendor they'd encounter! Kip even insisted he sleep with them. She gave Aaron a look of disapproval, but he waved it off and told him, "Of course, there's room for all of us." This sardine-like sleeping, packed Diane, Aaron, Kip, did not suit her at all, and the worst of it began when Diane woke up one night and heard them both talking in their sleep.

"Hey, Aaron, come over here! Check this out!"

"Oh, wow, that looks like bison tracks! Let's follow them!"

Diane would nudge Aaron and shout at the ceiling, "Shut up!"

Kip would wake up too and turn his back.

"Sorry. It's a reflex--that's all," Aaron would say and kiss her on the forehead and cuddle back into her arms and fall asleep.

The first night she understood, the second night she was annoyed, and by the fifth night she was pissed and exhausted. There was no other place to sleep. She whispered to Aaron one morning when Kip was still asleep, before she left for work, "He needs to leave. I can't get one good night of sleep. It's driving me fucking insane." He nodded over his cup of coffee, but nothing changed.

They all met at the bar one night. Kip and Aaron returned from Suce Creek. Diane just got off work at the truck stop diner. She served four nights a week. It was a job to pay rent, but she loathed every second of it and wondered how much longer she could hold onto it. She wanted to go back to school at some point. Maybe Montana State University in the neighboring town or possibly somewhere online. Before she met Aaron, she was enrolled in community college in Minnesota, studying Photography. She knew school wasn't her thing and that was partly the reason she jumped in a van and explored the country with Aaron, but now she was reconsidering. She couldn't possibly keep up this job, especially if Aaron wasn't going to keep up his half of the deal.

She entered the bar and saw Kip and Aaron already drunk. They leaned against the bar with their glasses of beer. A bluegrass band played on the stage while couples danced. It was packed and noisy. It had been a long, shitty night at the diner. Low tips and truckers commenting on her "sex appeal" and her coworker, Marlene, constantly complaining about her sore ankles in high heels. Diana ordered a vodka water and went over to Kip and Aaron.

She smiled and they both greeted her. They knocked their glasses together with a welcoming cheer, but then Aaron turned his back and returned to Kip, yelling in his ear about tomorrow's next hike. Diane sat down on the metal stool and watched the couples dancing in front of her. She liked a couple locked in each other's arms twirling around with finesse. The woman wore a bright red dress and the man wore suspenders with clear glasses. There was a time Aaron looked at her like that. She looked at Kip over Aaron's shoulders. His long blonde hair tied in a bun and beard and blue eyes, his energetic speech and drunken laugh, they all formed a portrait she loathed.

"Hey," Diane placed her hand on Aaron's shoulder, "do you want to dance?"

Aaron turned around and shouted at her, "What?"

"Do you want to dance?" She leaned in closer.

"No, I ain't any good."

He returned back to Kip.

The night continued as Diane kept drinking. Several guys with mountain resort logo hats and puffy Patagonia coats hit on her with silly questions and borderline offensive comments. She didn't care because Aaron didn't care. They were giving her attention. The bluegrass band was wrapping up their last song and the bartenders were collecting the tabs. Diane found Kip and Aaron outside sitting on a bench smoking cigarettes. They both could barely talk.

Diane stumbled over to him and whispered into his face, "What the hell is wrong with you?"

He staggered back confused and then angry, "What's wrong with you?"

"You can't talk to me for a minute?"

"No, Diane. I'm hanging with Aaron. He's only here temporarily."

"This is bullshit."

Diane walked off into the alley. Aaron followed her and grabbed her arm and pulled her around.

"Why are you being such a bitch?"

She couldn't believe it. She smacked him in the face.

"Why don't you and Kip get a hotel room?"

The next morning, Diane sat at the round table in the kitchen and ate oatmeal out of a bowl she had made in high school. Imperfect. The color of turquoise. She sipped tea from a mug. It was her day off. She was hungover and usually spent most of the day inside, "recouping," but this morning she was going on a hike. She wrote a letter to Aaron, since she'd be out of cellular service, on a piece of yellow legal paper she found in one of the drawers mixed with rocks and paper clips and chewed pencils and broken headlamps: "Aaron, I'm going on a hike. Please do not text me. I'll see you later tonight. Again, please do not bother me."

She grabbed her bear spray, water bottle, and put on her gloves and toboggan hat and jacket. She got in their van and drove out of town. The transition from small town to the big sky nothingness and opposing mountains began the initial clarity and unsettling feeling of being rooted out of herself. She accelerated down highway 89 and took a right toward Tom Miner's Basin.

She crossed the bridge and headed up the dirt trail. When she got to the campground, there was no one except an RV. She parked and began the hike. Aaron was far from her mind. There was still snow on the pine trees. Her heart rate picked up as she ascended the path. She

gained speed and kept a steady rhythm. Not thinking, but breathing in the wintry air and concentrating on the path ahead of her.

A raven above gawked, announcing her presence. She heard a branch snap and stopped and turned. There far past a few branches she could distinctly see the dark grey of a wolf. The wolf did not move but stared at her. She couldn't see the rest of the pack. She felt the cold wind press against her face. She trembled in the wolf's stare. The dark eyes and the snow and the dirt below her feet and the green pine collided in a portrait only she could grasp. No one else.

She took her eyes off the wolf and looked down at her own tracks. She would follow them back to her van and drive back into town and not tell a soul about her wolf in the forest staring back at her.

A year later, she stared at the mattress she once bought and asked her friend, Marlene, "Should I keep it or throw it away?"

Marlene, out of breath and sweaty, leaned against the wall and said, "You could always buy a new one."

Diane looked at the old mattress. It still retained the dark stains in the corners and middle sections. It wasn't a surprise Aaron was gone. She didn't know where, maybe one of the several cities he dreamed of going to: Los Angeles, Salt Lake City, Seattle. Who knew where he'd end up? But she was only moving a couple blocks over to live with Marlene.

"Help me move it to the dump."

Antoinette + Jim

"Kylie, I swear to God it'll be okay," says Belle, my girlfriend. We're in an upstairs room at the Sandy Beach Motel. We met at a taco joint off the strip a few summers ago. She's from Alabama. She waits tables at Denny's. I strip at Crazy Horse 3. Anyway, it doesn't matter. She wants to adopt a child and I am adamantly against it.

I stood in the restroom curling my hair and once again unloaded my complaints, my concerns, and my utter loathing for any kid. We could not afford a kid. We could not take care of a kid. (We both work full-time, night shifts at that.) We are not suitable parents. I did not tell her this, but I did know this and perhaps she did too. We do love each other. But it doesn't matter and I don't understand her constant need to have a child.

She tells me she has always wanted one. She tells me if I can't realize adopting a child with me we can't be together. It's that serious. We both cry and I storm out. It's time to go to work.

I drive to the strip club. I strip four nights a week. It's fine.

I park and pass the security guards yawning and sipping coffee, getting ready for the night. I enter and say hello to Megan at the front desk and walk through the corridor and into the open bar with the purple lit stage and Regina spinning around the pole. An older man wearing a suit is below her shelling out dollar after dollar. I continue past and through a hallway to a metal door and punch in my code and enter the packed locker room. Everyone's hanging out. Getting undressed and dressed in their own personal suggestive material; putting on makeup; scrubbing down their bodies with disinfectant, perfume; inspecting their bodies under the harsh fluorescent light for imperfections in the mirror. I open locker #15 and begin taking off my clothes.

*

I take the red eye to Las Vegas. I sit between two residents. One, an elderly man that looks like an oversized lizard with large, thin-rimmed glasses named James Dean, who ran an interior renovation company, and the other, a Filipina woman, Razi Russell, a recent real estate agent in Vegas. They both adamantly list off places for me to visit. I smile and thank them but I'm not going to visit these places and they get the picture. They forget about my presence and begin talking about a possible collaboration on one of Razi's recent acquisitions.

Several hours later, after I check into my hotel and eat dinner and walk around trying to understand why my brother loved this place so dearly I begin to not gamble but drink until it is midnight and I catch a taxi to Crazy Horse 3.

I walk in and order a Jim Beam on the rocks. Strippers stand in clumps talking to one another. Two women crouching on the stage shake their asses. They stand and hug the reflective pole with serious faces. Around the stage are booths set aside in dim light. Muscular men sit sipping their beer and holding their stripper of choice on their lap. The strippers bend over and whisper in their ears. In a corner a black man and a woman with a baseball hat watches the stage. They don't drink, but gaze and inadvertently smile.

A stripper edges up the bar and says to me, "How are you tonight?"

"Just hanging."

"Oh yeah? Where you staying?"

"Planet Hollywood."

"How do you like my hair?"

Her hair is matted back, caramel and black. I don't think she's pretty. Her nose looks overworked on coke. Her eyes are glassy and distorted. I try to deflect. I continue watching the dancers on stage. A black stripper with blonde hair hops onto the pole and slowly spins around. Music plays that I've never heard before. A candy-like music with a thumping bass. It's alright. It's captivating in its own way.

"It's nice."

"Oh yeah? Where you from?"

"Texas."

"Whatchya doing here?"

"Oh, just hanging around."

"Is that all you do, hang around?"

"No, I..."

I don't want to talk to her anymore. I want to watch the woman on the pole. I don't want to say anything but watch the dancer slowly spin upside down. Her eyes, accustomed to the observers, are blank and giddy. What is she thinking in the moment? The stripper next to me disappears, moving on to someone else. I sip my drink. I feel cold and shiver.

*

I could tell he's uncomfortable. He isn't the normal, self-possessed brute. He watches Jill on stage slowly spinning on the pole. He wears a black t-shirt and dark blue jeans and cowboy

boots. Where the other women failed, I naturally thought I could succeed, maybe ring in some extra dough.

"Where you from?"

He takes his eyesight away from Jill and focuses on me.

"I live in Texas. It's my first time in Vegas. Well, I'm from Montana, but live in Texas."

"Oh, yeah? My brother lives in Billings."

"Yeah, I grew up a few hours west."

"Whole lotta nothing."

"Yeah, something like that."

The last time I was in Billings my brother hooked me up with this cowboy that showed me "their version of a strip club." It was a trailer out of city limits with young girls with dyed black hair and snake bite piercings shaking their thin asses to pale-faced tweakers. I wasn't impressed, but I acted my part and talked to some of the girls and told them to get the hell out and come find me in Vegas.

"Whatcha drinking?"

"Jim Beam on the rocks."

"Really shelled out for that, huh?"

"It was the first drink that came to mind."

"Why don't you start by buying me a drink?"

I edge closer to him and give him a smile. He needs personality, someone to talk to. I can tell. I wave Paul, the bartender over, and I order my usual, vodka shot with a Redbull chaser. He takes out his wallet and pays for my drink.

"What's your name?" I ask.

"Jim. What's yours?"

"Antoinette. Nice to meet you."

"Where you from?"

He hesitates to ask this question, as if it broke some vague stripper protocol. I don't mind.

"I'm from San Diego. You want a dance?"

"How much is it?"

"Twenty out here and a hundred in private. You know in the private rooms I can give you whatever you want. I mean in reason."

"I'll take a dance out here to begin with."

I lead him around the stage and up an elevated platform with tightly packed leather chairs around tiny tables. I choose the back corner. I want him to feel comfortable.

"Sit down and open your legs."

I smile and push my ass in his crotch and move up and down, leaning toward the ground and back up. I turn over and bounce forward and back and hold myself up against the corner seat. My two high heels clack together to the beat of the music. I catch his glance moving up my body and smile. I try to give him a serious, affectionate stare. The same stare I perform every night, for everybody.

I stand up and he takes his wallet out and hands me a twenty. I sit next to him and take a sip from my glass on the neighboring table.

*

I like her. She's nice. She wears a thin black-lace bra and thong. Her black, sleek hair brushes against her shoulders.

Three weeks ago I wore a black suit at Tom's grave. Mother stood next to me, along with my sister-in-law, Susan. No one said much, except a few muffled, "Sorry's." It was hot. The sky, clear. Everyone knew that casket lowered in the grave was empty, merely a symbol.

On the way back to our house, I drove by the familiar white Baptist church caked in red dirt; the derelict trailers, now abandoned, along the highway; the rusted John Deere tractors and old water piping pulled out decades ago. It was spring and dry and the wind picked up the recently plowed clay dirt and swung it around.

I cried for the first time alone in my car. I imagined the life I had versus the life now ahead. The grinning, smart aleck older brother. Tough, but sensitive. A strange father figure. Ten years my senior.

Later that night, I sat at Mike's Bar off the highway. It was late, near closing, and I leaned over my whiskey and coke, intoxicated. I'd been drinking all night without any restraint. I was looking to bludgeon thought, logic, anything. The bartender, Roxy, understood. She'd seen it before. She poured the shots and silently nodded. She turned the music and the TV's off. There was only Roger at the end of the bar dressed in his predictable golf attire nursing a Coor's. He knew my father back in the day. They both served in the Navy. He ordered Roxy and I a shot. We took the shot in the silence, no cheers, no acknowledgement, only the sound of the empty shot glass returning to the bar.

I stared up at the pictures along the walls. Women in black leather leaning against shiny chrome motorcycles. Men with black beards and sunglasses. A pair of antlers attached to a

wooden block. The entire bar lit by neon beer signs. A warm, consistent glow revealing just enough.

I ordered another round of Jim Beam and wanted to break everything in the bar. I felt the edges coming loose. The guilt rising. I wanted to feel the release of something innate crumbling in my hands. I would never forgive himself.

*

I pride myself on understanding men. They aren't hard to decipher. I've heard them tell me everything you wouldn't want to know. Their failing marriages and countless affairs. Requests to buy my panties or snap a nude photo. Or the men that'll brag about their fetishes as if I'd totally understand and be willing to participate.

Jim orders another drink for both of us and returns back to the booth. He sits down and hands me my vodka and Redbull.

"What brings you to Vegas?" I ask.

He takes a while to answer.

"It was my older brother's favorite place and I never got the chance to go with him."

"Why not?"

"He died last month on an oil rig."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Sometimes it isn't a good idea to prod. I get myself in trouble frequently. I want to know everything about a person, especially if they're withholding. Belle likes to make fun of me, but she enjoys the stories I bring back. It's A+ pillow talk.

"It's fine. I loved him."

"I know you did. It's alright."

I probably should move on to someone else. It didn't seem he'd want another lap dance, but I remained standing there next to him, waiting for what I knew was coming, and also the possibility of a private dance. You never could tell who would shell out or not, especially after unloading pent up emotion.

"We were driving to an oil site near the border. A child in rags stood in the middle of the dirt road. Tom naturally slowed down, but you have to understand this is really dangerous. We were told several weeks prior to never stop for no one, even if it was a child. The Cartel had been luring trucks to stop and killing the drivers and stealing their trucks. I told him to continue on. I did. I really did."

I watch his dark eyes stare into a blank space. His shoulders slump to a rounded Q. I listen and sip my Redbull.

"As soon as he got out of the car and approached the child, a man rose from the dirt in desert camouflage with an M16. He fired directly into Tom. I didn't hesitate. I jumped into the front seat and gunned the gas and got the hell out. What a fool. I could've pulled my gun out and fired in his direction. We never fucking found his body."

He turns and faces me. He does not cry but his eyes hold the sorrow I've seen before. I can feel the anguish under the youthful, bright face.

"I'm sorry, Jim. That's awful."

He orders a shot from Paul and he takes the shot in one gulp. I picture the ragged child in the empty street. I think about this child, not his dead brother or even Jim next to me. Of course, it's important to him and I feel sorry about his loss, but it's the dirty child with an expressionless

glance. He stands there without any notion of what is going on. He does what he is told and he does not cry or yell or scream because he knows his father will beat him severely. He submits to the orders. He is in constant fear. He hates his father's knuckles on his forehead. His constant need to treat her like shit.

Jim hands me fifty bucks.

"Do you want another dance?"

"No, but I want to give this to you regardless. I'm heading back. Goodnight."

He staggers toward the exit and out. I'll never see this boy again, but I still wish him luck.

I return to the motel. Belle's car is gone. She has not returned from work yet. I walk up the staircase and open the door to room 202. I look over our room. Clothes are hanging on opened doors. Empty to-go containers are stacked in the tiny trash can. The two beds are neatly made. I turn around and look at the window and know what to do. I take off all my clothes and put on my bikini and slide into my sandals and wrap a towel around my waist and walk downstairs and across the parking lot and through the swimming pool gate. I stare at the blue water rippling. I take off my sandals and throw my towel on a recliner and jump in.

Grand Tempest Option

Detroit, 1964

Smile at these men and tell them what they want. Boardroom brawls among upright postures in tight suits, constraining the neck and wrist. Black conference table. Grey Chairs. One-sided wall with windows: blinds are drawn--no sunlight. Me, dressed in a yellow turtleneck and beige slacks. Me, a driving wedge in their American pomposity. Dale, the illustrious CEO of GM, reminds me of my father back in Chicago. An alcoholic surrounded by moldy sandwiches, unable to tell me anything but, "Give me, give me." Dale has a face like a mule. He's much too high on his goddamn horse. He's ruining the company. Next to him is his pet boy, Marcus. Pulls him on a short leash. Everyone else around the table are nondescript executives. I detest them, but like all of America, they are the ones I must please.

Before I walk into this mausoleum, I find a cozy spot in a public restroom stall and snort a line of coke. I walk out. Inspect myself in the mirror. I tell myself, "You are the greatest automobile executive ever born. You are better than them all. You will take everything away." I repeat this over and over again in my head. I don't think about the presentation at hand until I've left this sanctuary. I exit the restroom. I put on the cloak of confidence, charm, and spectacle. I am the man they dream and desire.

The poster board with specs and artistic photographs is already set up in the conference room under a red cloth. I walk in the conference room. I shake hands. Mention family, a sports score, and get down to brass tacks. Everyone sits and I feel the eyes on me. They want to feed. They are hungry, ready to partake. They can smell the possibility of profit oozing from my pores. Golf courses and airplane rides to Jamaica. Happy, spoiled children with big TV's and remote control cars. It's what they're thinking.

"This is the future of Pontiac, gentlemen. We will revolutionize the state of the automobile. I introduce the Pontiac GTO."

I pull the red cloth off the poster board and expose the magnificent photographs of my beautiful GTO. They melt in their seats. They try to contain themselves with stoic looks and eye rolls, but I know what's moving in their minds. The green gravy piling up. Each of them sucking it up with a long straw. Girth and merry laughs. Scotch on the rocks and yacht rides down the coast. And myself, a ruined, sleep deprived Saint of Automobile Glory. They still can't escape the days gone by. I don't blame them. But move over for the youth and the fast car with style that will make you slobber and lose your breath.

"An answer to all your problems, gentlemen...."

I walk into Pontiac Assembly. Mr. Simmons, the supervisor, pops up and smiles and reassures me, "No worries, sir. We're on schedule. Don't think a minute about it. I'll show you. It'll be a-okay, sir. Just in time for the show. No worries."

I open the doors to the factory, barely listening. I want to see my car. I have to see these shiny parts moving together, bolting and snapping and welding, until the final product looks me in the eyes and whispers, "You spectacular beast."

I love that sweet smell of oil, metal upon metal, the sweat of men and women on the line. I visit the factory once a week. It is important.

In front of us, three men, one with his shirt off, weld and screw in the engine. It's elegance of the finest order. The body of the car, glossy and smooth.

"You see, we are marching quite on time. There's nothing to worry about."

I stare down his chubby face. He rarely tells the truth.

"Why don't you cut the shit and tell me what's going on."

To understand any foreman, you must press them for any troubles because they will not willingly divulge and you will be screwed in the end by some random act of failure. To miss deadlines is the death of any man's career. The second I walked into Pontiac Assembly and saw Mr. Simmons demure behavior, I knew something was awry.

"Well, you can see we've been chucking them out with no huge problems, but, um, well, we've had some difficulties with the performance of the carburetor during multiple test drives."

These are the minutiae that I despise and expect. If I was an incompetent exec I would've lazily paraded around the Assembly, talked to a employee or two, made a joke on Mr. Simmons' expense, and left without any questions. Don't let them fool you. You are climbing that ladder to success and no man's incompetence is going to impede you.

"Fix it, Mr. Simmons. I don't have time for this shit."

"Yes, sir. I'm on it. We'll work out the bugs, no problem."

He scuttles off and I ease up to the finished product. It is a stellar design. I stare at my reflection on its shiny red hood.

Oh, Detroit. You devilish system of industrial waste. I love to drive your sacred asphalt. Your highways pull me to my center and bring me back dizzy. I drive home, far into the suburbs I love and adore. Quiet, peaceful. No, I joke. My cedar bungalow is barely discernible from the street. I have planted strategic pines. Privacy is of the utmost importance. I love to invite the social climbers to my raucous parties. I love to see them drunk staring in their glasses trapped in their silly lives. I open my garage and take one for a ride. We rip through the streets in my Ferrari 250 GTO. At the end, they love me and adore me and want to fuck me. They understand

my desire to surpass this tiny sports car. They slobber over my words. They bow to me and tell me, "You'll surely create something far superior. You'll be very rich."

I open the garage with my remote and park. I enter the house and Kelly is leaning over the kitchen island eating a Cobb salad.

"Hi, honey."

She exudes picture-perfect physique. No wonder she's a commercial hit. She's on TV holding up products and smiling and everyone gets a little closer to their TV. I'm proud of her. I give her a kiss. I think about the GTO. My reflection. God, it will be so grand.

"How was your day?" I ask.

"Oh, busy. Dreadfully busy. Talked to my agent and I'm set to shoot an entire TV show next month in LA. Think you'll be okay without me?"

V8 engine. Resting in a beautiful body. Dual exhaust. Hood scoops. Floor-shifted three-speed manual transmission with Hurst shifter. A machine worthy of a god. They think it'll only sell a couple thousand. They are wrong. Outdated. Caught in the old days. Grow up and watch the youth speed out on the highway. I know. I could fit into this lovely automobile and become accustomed to its feel and melt into its leather interior. I could be one with the car and we could enter America as a new species eating up concrete and spitting out exhaust.

"Hey, did you hear me?"

"What? Yes, of course."

"Did you hear one thing I said?"

"You're going to LA. Got it."

I sit in my Laz-E-Boy in the living room sipping my gin and tonic. Kelly is resting on the couch. The TV is on. A broadcaster reads off the local news. I stare, but do not watch. This room with painted tan walls and maroon couches and shag carpet. This large screen TV buzzing. I am exhausted. I feel my eyes drop and bounce back up. Is this me? Am I your executive? Am I your special breed of social upward mobility? Am I your example of a genius? Or am I no one? Look at my life and see its waste. My father back in Chicago can barely speak. He speaks with his fist. He is no human. He is mangled. Am I mangled? I watch the broadcaster. Pasty face, bland. His head floats in a special box. He cannot move. No one notices. No one tells him the truth. He goes on and on about events, tragedies, misgivings and he is unphased. He is far from the truth. Am I another version of this man?

I talked to my father two days ago. He recognizes my voice. Suggests I drink milk thistle. It's great for the liver, he says. Not once has he cared about my life. I don't care. I have this elegant, sleek GTO and they'll see my success and I will rise above. Listen to me. I hate this monotonous silence in my own house.

Once Kelly turns off her lamp and falls asleep, I slowly lift the comforter and get out of bed. I reach out and make sure I don't hit anything, even though I know where everything is. Kelly doesn't need to know what I'm doing. No one does. Don't tell anyone.

I tiptoe down the stairs. I'm in my blue-striped pajamas. I'm awake with energy. An idea. I slip into my Ferrari and barrel out of this somber house. I track down the empty highways under the sodium street lights. I play no music, but listen to the car slicking across the concrete. I feel the car underneath me and I accelerate. I hit one hundred and keep going. I feel light. I know my GTO will be superior. Every youth will go out and buy it and understand who I am and what

I am and who I want to be. We'll find ourselves addicted to the asphalt. We'll see our reflections in the mirror and think about our chrome cars in the garage waiting to be taken out and explored. It is this. The experience of speed cracking through the ordinary and pushing us to the top.

I reach the Pontiac Assembly. I push in my code. I enter the gate. I park in my reserved spot. I get out and walk inside. I turn on the lights. I see my GTO under a green tarp. I rip it off. I feel the body from front to back. I get in and observe through the windshield the enormity of the Assembly. It goes on and on. Machines, obeying. Individual parts for individual needs. I smile and rest in my seat. Everything shines behind the wheel.

Do Not Go Back

In those strange days when The Crusades ravaged the land and fought against the Ottoman Empire and the supposed "evil, pagan" ways, I got to know a certain, old man who was familiar with these times. I knew him when he was rather old and quiet and hunched over in his study reading philosophical works. I did not know this apparent creature that haunted the battlefields and preyed upon the dead. Elders of the village remembered his ill health and vulgar remarks, but they too are now dead.

It is with this, I present a portrait of not the man who the Elders banished, but that of a man who would later become the man I greatly admired. For in my youth, he showed me the shine of ideas, of argument, of poetry and rhetoric. One day, I will provide the world with his other, let's say more developed, writings, but I think it is crucial to understand the mind of what the people in our village used to decry as an "animal bent on upheaval," and not what he would later become, a distinguished man of letters and highly regarded person.

-Geoffrey of Chancey, 1334

Dear Self Resting on the Green Lawn,

I am not ugly. I am beautiful. I am filled with the purities of men. I have consumed them, piecemeal. Believe me, I am a multitude of selves. I am the blonde-haired lover writing her handsome soldier waiting to hold him in her hands and kiss his burly face. I am the young boy, rosy-faced and witless ready to fight for a cause I do not understand. I am the Elder perched upon his horse smiling at the end I so heartily wanted. These are the remnants I have found on battlefields upon soldiers deceased. I consume them and they become I. The purity of their lives ripples from the grave and I catch it and place it in my mouth and swallow. The purity of their

lives seeps into my body and I am full. They wrestle inside me and unleash the past. You know, memory works like that. A smell. A touch. A sound. It all comes back and reminds you of a particular self. You have to compare and judge. You are human and that's how one progresses. Not I. I spit in the past and do not wish to remember. I move forward and do not go back. I cannot and will not.

I sit perched upon my tree and watch the wind pass over the dried grass. The hilly pasture is filled with dead soldiers. An hour ago they were alive rushing toward each other with swords out and armor clanking together. They were stumbling children, like always, swinging heavy swords to a rhythm they did not understand. I do not like this display of men yelling and cannonballs exploding. I prefer the present. The peaceful wind and faint moans of men slain. I scurry down my tree and pop out of the forest and run onto the prairie. I am excited. I rush past the bleeding victims. Death surrounds me. Blood pouring like a fountain. Oddly shaped men with legs in strange shapes. A severed arm with a fist still firmly gripping a sword. Armor glimmering in the sun. A sword still lodged in the breast. I run up the hill and down, along holes from cannonballs, and jump over bodies. I love the freedom.

I stop. A body is before me and I know his contents will be fulfilling. My intuition is rarely wrong. I unclasp his armor and throw it aside. I untuck his mail and pull the ragged shirt up. The dark, tanned flesh against my white, dirty hand excites me. I search along his waist and find a dagger. I stick it straight into the ground. I dig further and find a bundle of black hair wrapped in a hemp rope. I sniff it. Smells like incense. I put it in my mouth and eat it. I pull his helmet off and black hair falls to the ground. His narrow jawline and thick eyebrows and eyes set in deep bags reveal to me a distressed man. He is no hero of any cause. He is the flailing human controlled by fear and power. I know him. He is me. No, he is not. I am pure with his lover's hair

inside my stomach and the sun warming my body. I pull the dagger from the ground and continue my run with it in my hand. I am him in his village. I feel protected with my dagger in my hand. No enemy will attack me. I am invincible.

I prance down a hill and trip across a body and fall on my face. The dagger dislodges from my hand and bounces somewhere in the grass. The body coughs and moves suddenly. I jump back and hunch over to a defensive stance. I do not like the still living. They are ugly and worthless.

“Who is that?” A voice comes from the body. I inch forward. I’m intrigued by this otherwise looking corpse.

“Why do you ask?”

“Well, I’m dying, aren’t I? Shouldn’t I know who it is that I shall talk to last?”

I notice a sword wound near his armpit. I carefully approach him from the front of his head so he cannot see me. I grip his helmet and pull it off. It is an elderly man. An officer, no less. He stares at me oddly. I do not like it, at all. A few seconds past. I hate this. He’s alive. I should leave. Why do I stay? His blue eyes carry an oddity. No. I don’t think. I am still the man with the dagger. I should find that beautiful dagger. Where is it?

“It’s you. Isn’t it?”

I will not answer.

“Mikael...Mikael. It’s you, my boy.”

That is not my name. It cannot be him. No. Stop. This is against the rules.

“What are you talking about?”

“Mikael. Do you not remember me?”

“No, you’re a lunatic. I am not Mikael. You are mistaken.”

“What have you become?”

“No. Leave me alone.”

I must go. I begin to walk away, to search for my lost dagger.

“Do not go, Mikael. Stay here with me before my last breath.”

“I can’t. I must find my dagger.”

“Mikael. Come back to me. You were such a dear boy. I think about you daily. You were so devoted. I still remember your prayers in the chapel. Those sweet incantations during mass. Those hours fasting for the sinners. Your discipline was awe-inspiring. Now, look at you. You are filthy.”

I am not. Do not let him tell you otherwise. Do not listen to him. You are beautiful, pure. He is the dying old man. He is the man without purity and youth. He is the enemy.

“Priest Ankle. I will not listen to this nonsense. I must find my dagger and go.”

I tell him and once I find this dagger I will move with ease and find my pure lives and consume them. I search the grass for my dagger.

“Mikael, rise and do not look for that dagger any longer. Face me and see that I am right and you are wrong. Find the life in you that I saw so many years ago. You gave joy to so many. You served God with a plentiful, pure heart.”

The images bombard me. I hate it. The burning candles. The angelic face of Christ pinned to the cross above the altar. Priest Ankle’s once young face speaking at the pulpit. No. I am fine. I am good. I am perfect.

“You are dead, Priest Ankle. I no longer believe in you. I no longer worship you. I am not yours. I am everyone’s.”

He smiles and I recognize that cold smirk along the wizened face.

“You are nothing without God, Mikael. He is the beginning and the end. You have confused yourself. You have manhandled your faith to a debauched pagan worship. You have been persuaded by Satan. You are not lost. Listen to me and bow down and confess your sins and walk back into the village and find God within the Church. Fight for his Cause. He shall conquer the land and bring peace among the downtrodden. Satan shall be vanquished and God shall shine bright among this land.”

No. I shall not fight. I shall not listen to this old man I once admired. He is no one. He is dirt. He will be dead and he will fall back into the earth. I refuse to see our village. I will not imagine our Church. No. I will not. I will not. He cannot make me. I scramble across the weeds and find the dagger. I pick it up and I crawl over and jam it into his throat and pull it out. Blood spurts out all over me. I am covered in red. His eyes enlarge and fade out. His last breath leaves his lungs. I smile at this lifeless body. I stand up. I dance around his body. I am triumphant over evil. I am pure. My past is dead and I can easily pass into night. I am victorious. I now must move. Continue and forget. I run and run. There is no end to this bloody, beautiful battlefield.

Love,

Self, Shackled by Thought

Take It Easy

Her Dad described the landscape as rocky, brutal, unforgiving. Since Kate was born blind, he felt responsible to map out the details of this place in such great detail--historically, socially, physically--to give Kate an advantage over the other kids at school. He wanted her to feel confident in this small town in the desert.

He'd mention the Rock Springs Massacre, as one example of many, at breakfast before school. He'd be reading the newspaper while the steak sizzled in the pan. He'd straighten his paper and set it on the table and say to a nine-year old Kate, "This town you've been so blessed to be born into, Rock Springs, WY, has a long, long history of racism and labor disputes. You mine as well know this at a young age. Get it in your head. I don't know what they teach you over there in that school, but this is the bottom-line. This town is built on the railroad, the coal mines, the oil--the backs of the unfortunate. Don't think for a second you or anyone can do anything about it. History is a cycle and we're continually pushed to the wayside. There ain't no superheroes or providential Father and don't you forget it." She'd nervously sit on her tiny hands and silently nod.

When she was twelve, he'd drive her in his Toyota pickup truck around town. He wanted to make absolutely clear what this town was all about. "There's the Toastmaster where I met your mom. A little dive with neon lights dangling from strings and full of coal miners and oil workers and reprobates. Next to it is Kelly's abandoned general store, the Mexican restaurant, a used bookstore, A-One Furnishings. They all face the railroad tracks." Kate felt the familiar corners of the truck seat: the piece of gum she stuck there two years ago after her Dad yelled at her to do better in school, the rip near her thigh where the cotton fluff was coming out. She listened to his raspy voice.

Seven years later, he'd choke on chew he'd leave under his lip every night and would pass into a coma and die a day later. It was the first time she heard the word, "grief."

Kate is at The Pour House Saloon. She turned thirty-eight four months ago. She hears Christian and George and Thomas next to her talking about a Corvette they're working on across the street in their shop. Their voices mingle with the Def Leppard song playing on the speakers above the bar. These voices are familiar. Their rough twang and harsh rhythms come sputtering out. Words like "hot rod" and "gearhead" and "rusted axle" and "corroded battery" float in her imagination as if the words themselves have color and their shape and size and weight, their tangible meaning, are separated and then clash together to form what she believes to be the shared idea these men so artfully articulate. But these voices are the voices she's been hearing since middle school. They were hostile voices carrying tones and speech she loathed, but over time, once they all graduated, or most of them and she met Johnny and he proposed to her with a tinfoil ring he made in the kitchen and they cheered their coffee mugs of wine, these boys changed to harmless jokesters with cigarette and beer breath. They were like the bar glasses themselves, a common fixture at the Poor House.

"Would you like another, Kate?" said Bridget, the bartender. She grabbed Kate's glass and pulled it off the bar.

"Sure. Why not?" Kate slumped against the bar and smiled. She was drunk and didn't care. Her daughter, Krystal, would pick her up around midnight, or at least that's what she said on the phone. Krystal danced several nights a week at the Astro Lounge. Kate didn't approve, but she liked to hear her talk about the lights and the music and the eyes watching her.

Christian's boots clacked on the wood floor. He sat down next to her. George and Thomas edged closer but were still a couple steps behind Christian.

"Kate, how you doing?"

She turned toward him.

"I'm doing just fine."

"We're thinking about heading over to my place for a smoke. Wanna join?"

"I don't know, Christian."

"C'mon, it'll do you good."

Bridget walked over to them.

"Why don't you leave her alone, Christian?"

"Aw, hell, Bridget. We're just having a little fun."

What did it really matter? A brief interlude to Christian's trailer could be fun. The excitement of the unknown. The surrender to a force she barely trusted. She wanted life to surround her and surprise her, to be abruptly carried away.

"If you drive me back, I'll come. I don't want to be gone too long. Krystal is supposed to pick me up in a little bit," she said.

Christian knocked on the bar with his knuckles and zipped up his leather jacket.

"Yeah, no problem. We'll get you back in one piece, safe and sound. George, help her to the car."

George walked around Christian. She got up and George put an arm around her shoulder and escorted her out the front door.

Bridget yelled after her, "Give me a ring if you need anything!"

Christian and Thomas were the first to leave. They bounded out the door.

Thomas shouted, "You aren't fucking driving, Christian! Give me your keys, you bastard!"

George and Kate were slowly walking towards the sedan. He told her, while Thomas and Christian ran around the sedan chasing one another, "We got to get Christian home safe and sound. He's had enough DUI's to last a lifetime." The keys hit the ground and Thomas yelled at all of them, "I got them! I got them!"

Christian sighed and opened the passenger door and got in. George opened the back door for Kate and ran around to hop in the other before Thomas peeled out.

The sedan had a faint aroma of McDonald's. Ted Nugent blasted on the radio. Kate felt the armrest of the door next to her. It felt like the carpet in her bedroom. Worn thin, bristle at the touch.

They were speeding on the highway. She felt the sedan accelerate and ascend the bridge.

"Why are we taking the highway? I thought you lived on the other side of town!" She yelled over the music.

George responded, barely discernible, "Better to avoid the cops!"

Kate recalled crossing this bridge with Johnny to their house in a suburban neighborhood called, "Pebble Hill." She felt the memory of him. His hand, calloused and large over hers, the other steering his truck. The warmth of the sun through the window. He would park. They'd go inside and the entire house would quiet. He'd guide her to their bedroom and slowly kissed her neck and belly and vagina and pull her up on the bed. He'd pull her close. And Kate would touch him, his face, his belly, his arms, his erection.

George lit a cigarette. Thomas lit a cigarette. The car filled with smoke and Kate coughed. The car slowed and turned off the usual exit and passed through town. They occasionally stopped at a light and continued, but it was late and she only heard one car pass them. It was dark because it was quiet. The buildings, the people, the coldness were a sign of sundown.

They parked and George got out first and opened the door for her and took her hand and said, "Watch for the step." She picked up her feet and got out of the car. Thomas and Christian moved in front of them. Thomas handed Christian his keys. Christian unlocked the fence gate. It creaked open. George guided her through. Thomas and Christian walked up the wooden steps, the keys jangled in and Christian knocked the front door open with a hit from his shoulder.

"Welcome to my beautiful pad!"

All the sudden, she felt queasy, uncomfortable in the thick arms of George. Thomas closed the door behind them. She stepped on the soft, hollow carpet of the trailer. George directed her toward the living room and leather couch. She fell down on the couch and felt the puffy, worn edge.

They all sat in the living room. Christian picked up his piece and packed it with weed from a ziploc bag.

"Hey, why don't you put some music on George?"

"Alright, what you want to hear?"

"I don't know. Ask the lady."

"How about The Eagles?"

"Hell, alright."

George turned Christian's TV on and typed in The Eagles. He chose a live rendition of "Take It Easy."

As they passed the piece around, and Kate rejected each round, she fell into another revelry, one that she did not want to indulge in, but was impossible to redirect. The emptiness and desire was still mangled in her body.

She held Johnny hard from behind. Her hair whipping in the wind. The motorcycle rushing in the warmth of a summer afternoon. His leather jacket. The stereo blaring.

'Don't let the sound of your own wheels
Drive you crazy
Lighten up while you still can
Don't even try to understand
Just find a place to make your stand
And take it easy' "

"Hey, George," she said, next to her, "Could you describe what's on TV right now?"

"Sure, Kate. Glenn Fry has long blonde hair with a moustache. He's wearing a University of Colorado t-shirt. He's playing a sunburst guitar. The stage lights are red. It's good, real good, Kate. Bernie Leadon shreds on the guitar. He's wearing a bandanna. They're having fun, just plain fun."

The day she got the call that Johnny died on an oil rig, she was listening to her daughter talk about the importance of pop music. Phrases like, "sweet as candy," "lost in the music," "so high you no longer think of yourself," she would never forget. Krystal's voice attached to that day. Johnny was the only one to die. The other three men were only injured. The oil rig was owned by Johnny's brother. His brother blamed himself for Johnny's death. He killed himself a month later. Kate didn't leave the house for half a year. She lost forty pounds. She spiked everything with vodka. Krystal moved back home. Their friends dropped them off crockpot

dinners. It was only four months ago that Krystal helped Kate outside. They drove to Wendy's and had a chicken sandwich.

In this room with George, Christian, Thomas, and The Eagles playing on the TV, and the smell of marijuana and the dry warmth of a wood furnace, Kate wanted to reach out and feel Johnny next to her. She imagined his hulk of a body and the smell of sweat. She'd put her hand to his face and feel his goatee and glasses.

George and Thomas dropped her off. She returned to her spot at the bar. There were two men at the end talking about choppers and life insurance. Her daughter would be here momentarily. She listened to the phone dictate, "Message from Krystal: I'm running a little late. I'll be there soon."

Cornelius in Repose

Cornelius woke up and sent a text to his mother: I just had a dream that you and dad and sister and brother died on an island from a volcanic explosion, like *Stromboli* or some shit.

In those waning minutes of morning, barely awake he felt the finality of that dream. It was a subtle dread like driving through a fog. He recognized his room: the bay window, the black curtains, the stacks of paperbacks, the loose papers on his desk, the film canisters gathering dust in the corner, the crooked portrait of Bakunin nailed to the wall; an AK-47 leaning on the wall and his Colt .45 next to him on his bed stand. In the doorway, he could see the edge of his workshop, the two duffel bags neatly stacked on the clean table. A small kitchen to his left separated by a breakfast table. Everything was in order and familiar, but they had a contorted touch, as if they were shaded a slightly faded color. But he looked out his window and noticed the elm tree shaking in the wind and the day's duties aligned and bombarded his mind and the day began: Shower. Get dressed. Drive to restaurant. Begin prepping for dinner. Pork. Burgers. Fries. Meatloaf. And then quit, walk out, never return.

Cornelius woke up and rubbed his eyes. The dream was there, but he couldn't access it. Only fragments: The brick side of the University library. The scraggly beard of his anthropology professor. A student in the classroom with an accusatory glance.

The air in his room was stale. The white walls, shrunken. The window blinds closed. He glided past undergrad with a degree in anthropology. His thesis was entitled, "Income Inequality: The Ruling Class v. The Enslaved Student Proletariat." Those were the sunny days stuck in claustrophobic study rooms. The blank walls, the air-conditioned silence. He enjoyed the

disciplined air of reading to a numbing energy. It was akin to a sublimation of the spirit. In these moments, he felt focused - the world clear and light.

Cornelius woke up and sent a text to his girlfriend, Rain: I just had a dream that I touched you on the shoulder at dinner and you turned black and kept saying to me, "Help me, Help me."

He was concerned for her, but it would be okay. Once it was done, the world would change and so would they. Recognition. Fame. Their faces on the TV, loaded smirks, and chained wrists.

Cornelius woke up and shook Rain awake.

"I had a dream where I shouted on the radio. We were back in college. You sat next to me. I was speaking about the wasteland of America. The utter disregard for the student population. The capitalist tendency to enslave us."

Rain faced him.

"Do you remember when we made love while you were on air?"

"How could I forget?"

Cornelius met Rain at a Midwest Anarchists meeting in the bookstore basement during afterhours. There were about ten of them in the basement sitting around a table. Each of them smoking and talking and setting up pseudo-plans to protest the upcoming hike in tuition. Cornelius sat quietly while he listened to the upperclassmen talk about the necessity to do something.

Cornelius chimed in, "Let's stage a week of no classes. A walk out to show them we're serious."

A few of them disagreed. It wasn't severe enough, but Rain interrupted and made it clear that this was the best available action. Nonviolent, but still communicated a strong message.

After this night, Rain and Cornelius were inseparable.

A window was open. The cool breeze wafted in and shook the closed blinds. They turned over and stared at the ceiling. It was no longer as simple as a week without class, a nonviolent protest. No one listened and something drastic had to be done.

"I'm no Merry with a stutter, Neal."

"Don't worry. We aren't going to kill anybody."

Cornelius woke up and wrote in his journal: This is the fifth time I've had this dream. I am sick of it. Hopefully, it will change after the act. The dream is me running in a fixed position outside the Wells Fargo corporate headquarters. The entire building is dark and quiet, but I can feel the explosion about to commence. Rain is in the parked van waving me to hurry up, but I can't. I'm stuck. And every time, before I wake, I have this single thought: We are spinning uncontrollably to a center of oblivion.

Cornelius woke up and noticed his room. Rain sat naked on the bedside, hunched over. Freckles on her back. Outside the window, the elm shook against the overcast sky. She shivered and turned to Cornelius. Her eyes were filled with tears. He pulled her closer. It was the day and they stared at the ceiling in silence.

"I love you," he said.

Cornelius woke up and searched the bare room. Rain, gone. He could not remember a dream. The fire still burned in his mind. The white walls and stainless steel toilet and the silence and his baggy orange jumpsuit. Here was his home. Brightly lit, covered in blank thought. Unshackled and weightless.

Why Are You Like This?

Jordan laid on her couch and stared at the ceiling. Lillian sat next to him flipping through a Maxim and drinking a High Life.

"I don't see what the big deal is. These women glistening and posing. You like this, huh?"

"I don't know. It's something to look at."

"Don't lie to me. You like to masturbate to these pages."

"Yeah, okay. Sometimes."

"Typical."

They were in Lillian's house. A house with a pebbled rock facade. It's about thirty miles from town, just off the highway. A neon light flickered in the night, "Psychic. Tarot Reading. See Your True Self Today."

Jordan just got off his shift at the NHRA raceway. They were getting the track ready for the new season. He scraped rubber off the strip with several other guys all day. His back hurt. The smell of burnt rubber still in his nostrils. He leaned over to the coffee table and grabbed his beer and finished it off. He'd known Lillian since sixth grade. They were once in love. They danced at the winter formal to Poison and Bon Jovi and Pat Benatar. He liked the way her eyes looked in the gymnasium light. She liked his smile. But that was a long time ago.

Jordan would drop by Lillian's place whenever they were both free. He liked to sit in the room where customers opened their palms and told Lillian sparse hints of their lives. He imagined the customer's gasping faces, their fidgety hands, and broken speech. The future unraveling in unexpected ways or a reassurance everything was heading in the right direction.

"Where did you even find that magazine?"

"I didn't *find* it anywhere. I bought it."

"You bought, that?"

"Yeah, why not? I want to be involved. I want to know what they're pushing."

He laughed at the ceiling.

"Cheri would burn that if she found it in our house."

"Good for her."

Cheri was Jordan's wife. His second wife. They were married at the courthouse two years ago. She worked in the ER at St. Vincennes Hospital. They met at the raceway and immediately kicked it off. She was hanging out with the EMTs. She was from Normal, Illinois. They both liked to drink and fish and swim. Jordan would still cruise his 1979 Harley Davidson Ironhead Sportster around town, but considerably less after the horror stories Cheri shared involving cut limbs and violent deaths. Jordan knew. He had a few friends ride off into the night drunk--later found face first in asphalt. It didn't matter then. He didn't want to admit it but since he met Cheri, life was no longer this fever dream, rock-n-roll fantasy to drive straight off into oblivion. He cared about her. He'd do anything for her. But now Cheri's gone again. Like last time, no note. No explanation. Nothing. Just gone one Wednesday afternoon—four days ago.

The last time she disappeared, she was gone three weeks. That was about a year ago. She finally came back one morning when he was working on his Harley. She had a tan and didn't tell him anything. He kept asking her what'd he done, what'd he said to piss her off. Why'd she abandon him? She explained, but he didn't listen.

"Still gone, huh?" Lillian asked.

"Yeah."

"She'll be back. She always comes back," said Lillian, turning another page of the magazine. They sat there in the silence listening to a single car rush past them on the highway.

Lillian closed the magazine and threw it on the coffee table and stared out the window. Jordan's Chrysler was parked in the baking sun.

"You going to race that piece of shit?"

"Yeah, that's the plan."

"How much longer till the strip is ready?"

"Near done. All we gotta do is finish up scraping, put new rubber down, and spray glue. Should be set for next weekend."

"Maybe, I'll show up."

"You should. That 'piece of shit' will be running without a hitch come Sunday."

Jordan took his flip phone out of his pocket and looked at the time. 4:38 PM.

"I better hit the road," he said swinging upright on the sofa.

Lillian was sitting on the large Laz-E-Boy with her feet up. Her black hair tied back in a ponytail. Her black glasses resting low. She gave him a smile and watched him go for the door.

"When you going to sit down for another Tarot reading?"

"I don't know, Lillian. Last time I wasn't too thrilled."

"Oh, don't be a bore. Don't ya want to know what happens next?"

Jordan accelerated down highway forty. He was born off this highway. A trailer in the forest with a swing hanging from a tree branch. A highway from New Jersey to California. A regular piece of concrete running from coast-to-coast. An artery of America. Of course, it ran through Indiana. This place entitled, "Crossroads of America."

Three nights a week Jordan worked the graveyard shift at the only gas station in town. His Uncle built it in the late seventies. There wasn't much renovation. Stale smell. Stained

linoleum. Poor plumbing. But it was bright as hell, his Uncle was obsessed with changing the bruised fluorescents with the new solid light, and the shelves were stacked with up-to-date supersized candy bars and reflective bags of greasy crunchy snacks.

The job wasn't too bad. Some of the kids were lazy, disrespectful, and plain wild, but so was he at that age. He couldn't blame them. There wasn't much to do in a town you could easily overlook on a map.

Once he arrived at the gas station, he noticed Ted's Ford Ranger parked on the side of the building. Ted was your ordinary town guy. An obsessed gun "collector," tattoos of Sonic the Hedgehog and barbed wire, a proponent of cell phone games you could purchase in an App Store. He was always holding and puffing his vape. Smoke erupted out of his nose and mouth and didn't dissipate until the fan clicked on. For some reason, Jordan couldn't understand, he wasn't allowed to smoke cigarettes inside the station, but Ted was allowed to sit in his own cloud of blueberry cotton candy flavored smoke.

Jordan noticed the change going on, the shift from old to young. All the shops catered to types like Ted. Storefronts once advertising cosmetics or record stores were now flipped into painted black shops called, "Vape Headz." There hadn't been a record store in town for the last ten years. The youth, Jordan thought, had been woefully influenced by the digital age. He remembered his time as a juvenile delinquent. Riding his Harley, blaring Kiss, trying on his leather jacket before a mirror, and not giving a damn.

He took off his shirt in the car and switched to the black polo with the Shell symbol on the breast. He didn't tuck it in. None of them did.

Ted greeted him with a wave when he entered. He didn't smile. Ted was always on it. He cleaned, stocked, counted the drawer, and cleaned up after himself. He didn't fuck around like the other workers who never mopped and left their leftover hot dogs next to the register.

"Hey, you got a phone call an hour ago. Some chick asking for you."

Jordan leaned forward on the counter.

"Did she leave a message?"

"No."

"Thanks, Ted. I'll see ya around."

Ted and Jordan switched places. Jordan watched him exit and disappear around the corner. Jordan picked up the phone and found the received call. Alabama area code. He pushed the call button and listened to it ring. No one picked up. Voicemail disconnected.

It was one of those cool summer nights. He watched the mosquitoes buzz around the fluorescent lights of the canopy outside. Across the street was Jack's Bar & Grill. The LED open sign blinked around its letters. Jordan liked to sit at the bar and stare at the same rusted street signs on the wall. He became accustomed to Jack behind the bar. His curly greasy hair under baseball hat. His fat gut sticking out. He didn't talk much unless you asked him about the Cubs. He'd been manning the bar since Jordan was a kid. It was rumored he came from Chicago for a lover he thought to be his wife. She eventually moved on; he did not. A casualty to love, thought Jordan.

Cars drove along, parking in front of Jack's, people getting out, coming back, disappearing. No one stopped to get gas, stop by, say hello, pass the time. He flipped on the tiny TV his Uncle kept near the register. A rerun of Seinfeld flashed on the grainy screen.

When he was young he'd lean against the wall outside chain smoking with his future wife, Trish Hamington. They'd buy fountain drinks and pour in the whiskey her older brother bought them. Peter Lewis, their high school pot dealer, was the gas station attendant then, an old Deadhead who loved to smile and stare at his own reflection in the dirty Plexiglas. He'd let them steal Fritos and Butterfingers. One night, Peter and Jordan argued about the greatest rock singer of all-time. Peter mentioned Janis Joplin, Elvis Presley, Jimi Hendrix, and James Brown, and when Jordan chimed in with Axl Rose. Peter replied, "Ah, the guy is a chump. He isn't the best rock singer of all-time, not even close." Jordan suggested, "He's got range, man. Real range." Axl Rose was the guy Jordan saw as the epitome of cool. A talented singer, a don't-give-a-fuck attitude, an ego the size of Texas. Plus he was a Hoosier. Sure, New Jersey has the Boss, but we have Axl Rose.

The next day he drove to the city. The scenery gradually transitioned from pastel-colored suburban homes to grey and blue skyscrapers, billboards advertising car dealers, fancy perfume, new cell phones. He looked down on his piece of paper to see what exit he was supposed to take. He printed out the directions from MapQuest at the library several days prior. He was heading to Bill's American Parts & Resale. He used to come to Indianapolis fairly often to see concerts at RCA Dome and Market Square Garden. Now, they were gone, replaced by larger structures he didn't much think about. He no longer listened to the music on the radio. He stuck to his CD's and cassette tapes. Concerts were a thing of the past.

The traffic hedged him in. He shifted his attention from exit sign to MapQuest to car ahead. He corrected his steering hoping not to veer into the other lane. He saw the arrows on

MapQuest directing him to keep right at the fork and take exit 101. He followed the exits: 98, 99, 100a, 100b. He gradually crossed two lanes and took the next exit.

He'd never been to this place before. A guy at the raceway recommended it. He drove over the highway and passed a bordered up church, a DQ, several town homes now abandoned. He noticed two men hovering over a green Mustang. The hood was popped and they were arguing with each other. He continued through the neighborhood till he came to a red light. He turned and made eye contact with a woman leaning against a pole waiting for the bus. She rolled her eyes and walked over to her friend sitting on the lip of the sidewalk. Her friend took out some French fries and handed them over. He stared back down at the map and didn't recognize a single street.

He tried to turn around and cut back to the highway. He found a relatively busy street, he thought he recognized moments before, so he took it. He passed several businesses: Crammed thrift store. Mechanic shop with stacks of rubber tires. A Greek restaurant going out of business. A boy in a baseball hat pumping gas into his sedan. The further he drove down the street, the more people he saw. He stopped to let a young couple holding hands cross. The woman had thick glasses on and wore a flower print dress; the guy had a buzz cut with rolled up jeans at the boots and a Chicago Bulls windbreaker the same design Jordan used to see jocks wear in his high school.

He noticed this intersection as a hub of social life. A cafe on one side, a Mexican restaurant, several bars, a music venue with a large awning announcing the next acts in chronological order. He found a parking spot. Exhausted, pissed off, he walked into the first bar he saw.

Everything looked pristine. He sat down at the marble bar. The bartender didn't notice. Jordan stared at himself in the mirror opposite and laughed. He didn't belong here. His haggard face. Short grey, black hair, once buzzed. Mutton chops. The bartender with tucked in button-up and slicked, well-groomed hair. The music was a vague track off some adult alternative station. He didn't recognize any of the bottles on the shelf. They looked foreign, unusual names, like, "Chartreuse."

No one else was at the bar except an older man wearing a tight navy blue suit talking to the bartender. Jordan thought about leaving, but he didn't. He was going to have a drink. He waited and stared at the bartender. The man with the suit was talking about his recent promotion in software development for a startup. After a lull in the man's remarks about what he's now working on, how tough it is, how difficult it is to deal with people, you know?, the bartender noticed Jordan and a shameless disturbed expression came across his face. Jordan got it, but didn't give a shit.

"Do you want a menu?" The bartender asked.

"No, I'll take a High Life."

"We don't have a High Life."

"I'll take a Bud."

"We don't have Budweiser."

"What do you have?"

"Well, what's on tap is an Upland American Lager from Bloomington, a Brooklyn black chocolate stout, an Evil Twin Imperial IPA also from Brooklyn, a New Day hard cider, and a War Pigs American IPA from Chicago."

"Just give me the lager and a shot of well whiskey."

The bartender grabbed a glass and placed it underneath the tap and yanked the lever. The bartender gave the man with the suit an exaggerated eyebrow lift in the mirror as if to say, "take a look at this guy."

The shot glass was empty and his beer was half gone. The bartender returned to the man in the suit. The servers began to come in and get ready for the night. Two young women in black, one blonde with turquoise earrings, the other brunette with a long ponytail, dressed the tables with grey napkins and shiny silverware. They started from the front and gradually made their way toward Jordan.

"I'm glad you hacked his Facebook," said the brunette with a ponytail.

"I read his messages to Joe. His man talk. I should show them to you. Talks about fucking me and telling me what to do and how it wasn't a big deal. He's fucked plenty of bitches."

"It isn't surprising."

"No, it isn't."

"What else did he say?"

"Oh, you know, Joe asked him for advice. How to talk to ladies. How to get laid. How to act with his dick."

"*God*. Does he know you hacked his Facebook?"

"Hell, no. He sent me like twenty text messages yesterday after I didn't respond to his 'goodnight' the night before."

"What about that other guy?"

"Jared? He's okay. He wants to go see a documentary about Truffaut over the weekend."

Jordan could no longer sit up straight and feign composure and defiance in these circumstances. He felt out of place and he was. He resented the city and this was why. This dense, populated, sidewalk jungle of liberal leaning, fancy walking, hip looking troglodytes. He wasn't a racist. He wasn't a Republican. He was a rebel. A man proud to be himself without any explanations or apologies. He didn't have anything in common with these servers or this bartender or this man talking about python. He needed space. He needed control. He liked walking into a bar where everyone knew your name, understood who you were, what you did, how you felt. A club where nothing was withheld and death could easily meet you in the next hour. But there was a doubt wedged between this gaining disdain for his surroundings, another voice struggling to surface. This romanticized version of Jordan injected with ego and power that flashed as pride was nothing but the clothes he put on. The leather and chains he presented to the world, the motorcycle he revved at a stoplight, or the Sebring he was about to buy parts for and race against time, was an image at once stripped down and laid bare, of a boy trembling in the midst of other intimidating men, even this innocuous bartender he didn't understand. He choked down this voice and stormed out of the bar to find some gas station and ask the attendant where this shop might be and the fastest possible route there and out.

The next morning he held the torch a few inches from the track and watched the rubber slowly heat up. Danny followed behind with a long pole attached to a metal blade he angled to scrap as much rubber as possible. David scooped up the flaming excess with a shovel and banged it into a barrel. They went back and forth through each section of the track. To get the drag strip in perfect condition for the bracket race that weekend, they scraped the old rubber to agitate the oils and chemicals they put down the year prior. When they first walked onto the track it was

smooth and slippery, now, once scrapped, the track began to stick and resemble what it used to be. Jordan watched the heat melt and smoke the rubber. He did not think but followed mindlessly along.

They ate lunch at the garage. Danny sat on the four wheeler eating a bologna sandwich. David was in his car drinking out of a thermos, Jordan knew wasn't coffee or tea. He sat on the open company truck bed eating a burger he bought down the street. His cell phone went off and he took the call.

"Hey"

"Who is this?"

"It's Cheri."

Jordan put his burger down and walked around the corner of the garage.

"Where are you?"

"It doesn't matter."

"How does it not matter? You've been gone almost a week. I'm concerned."

"No, you aren't."

"Are you coming back or what?"

"No, I'm not."

Jordan kept walking past the garage and further out into the expansive grassy knoll between the track and the bleachers.

"Why not?"

"Jordan, you only care about yourself. You only care about what gratifies you right now, today. I am not here to constantly listen to you, cook for you, take care of you, fuck you, and then you do nothing but work on your car or spend all of your time at the track where you barely

make any money and come home and boss me around like I'm your dog. Why are you like this? You just don't get it."

"What do you mean I don't care about you? I love you. I adore you. I do everything for you. Don't you remember all the times we've had? Swimming in deer creek, fishing the reservoir, riding my Harley, making love wherever we go."

"Jordan. None of that is about me. It's about you. What you want to do. What makes you happy. You never asked me what I wanted to do, how I felt about things. Sure, we had some fun, but how can you seriously think we can continue this? You barely know me."

"Give me another chance. I'll make it up to you. I'll do anything I swear, just give me another chance."

"No," she said and hung up.

Jordan pulled his phone from his ear. The bleachers before him were empty and large. The flags sporting oil companies and racing parts flapped in the empty blue. He was so small.

Cheri returned the phone to the hotel receiver. Her small suite was ten stories up. She was alone. She stood up and went to the window and stared at the ocean. She watched tiny people lounging on the beach. The AC kicked in. A lifetime of caring for other people, of rushing these bodies with wounds and fatal miscalculations to the ER, holding their hands, placating their woes, then coming home to Jordan's demands and objections, his distant attitude devoid of kindness and love, surfaced, as it did this entire trip, over and over again. There was a moment at the swimming pool a day ago where she had a panic attack and rushed to the restroom where an older woman named Roxanne soothed her and patiently waited till she was relatively calm.

She concentrated on the waves far out in the distance forming, crashing, and spreading back to the flat blue. She let the release of Jordan float above her. It did not crash below and spread thin. It kept moving until it vanished high above the ocean and the tiny people on the hot sand.

Cowboy, Cowboy

Goddamn cops. Let them try their best.

They've been trailing me since town. I, in my Chevy pickup, them, in their high-almighty Ford Explorers painted white with blue and black insignia. As soon as I saw one of their lights buzzing in my mirror, I gunned it. Put my foot on the pedal and beat it quick for the highway, barely passing trucks and sedans and innocent minivans.

I'm drunk, sure. I'm way past the limit. I've been drinking with no recourse. It's one am and I don't care. I wanted to feel the numbness and the light airy breeze of fuzzy lights and moon-filled night skies silhouetting the towering mountains. It's nice like that.

I'd been caught before. Last year. Slept in jail next to a one-eyed twaker promising me a free dinner and a school bus he stole last year if I could pay his bail. A lot of those suckers in there.

I panicked didn't want to feel the consequences. I knew where I was going. I was heading south to the ranch I work on. I could do something there. Make something happen. Take control of the situation.

I began to see the lights multiply behind me. A real bad guy, good guy fight. A real show for the pedestrian or easy driving son of a bitch. The cops know me. They know who they're trailing. I know them. Al. Brady. Michael. Simon. Those fucking idiots with clean-looking faces and shiny pistols. They waltz around town like they know what they're doing. What a desperate group of men. They stir up more trouble than they stop. It was only last summer Al shot a boy on the run in the grocery store parking lot when he thought he was going for a gun instead of his wallet. What a fucking waste.

I swerve around another car. I take a hard left and accelerate up a hill and around a bend. I'm nearly there. I can see the fence, the house, the horses standing idle behind jackleg fence.

I pull into the muddy driveway, almost flip my truck. I drive straight through the fence and hop out. The cops are pulling in, one, two, three, four, five. They're sirens loud in the quiet night. I feel bad about waking up Mark and Suzy, the ranch owners, but here I am. A man on one of the intercoms shouts, "Cowboy, Cowboy, Get down on your knees!" They're making fun of me. Ready to handcuff me and laugh in my face. A great bunch of buffoons. I ignore them, of course. I run to the nearest horse, which is a mare named Pickles, and jump on and take off. They won't shoot no horse. We gallop past them and I flip them off. It's all about flair folks. I aim her toward Emigrant Peak and we make great time. The cop cars try to follow but they separate and get pissed. I no longer hear their sirens, no longer see their lights. It's only us in the wilderness, in the darkness. I can barely see anything.

I grip onto Pickles and hear her heart accelerate. She feels my nervousness, my adrenaline. We keep ascending till there's no one around. Pickles bucks up, afraid of something, possibly a snake. I fall and knock my head against the hard ground.

I wake up to the blue sky. No Pickles. Nothing. Just pine trees and brush. I feel my head. My hand comes back bloody. How am I still alive? I get up and begin to walk out. I'll turn myself in. I'll change. I really will change.

The Body

The pathologist read the notes on his clipboard:

height: 5'9"

weight: 193

gender: male

age: 37

single or married: married

cause of death: automotive collision, asleep at the wheel

He peered over his glasses and inspected The Body on the stretcher. Bruises covered the pale skin. The Body's long, stringy hair was spread out on the stainless steel. His face was swollen. Narrow head with a pronounced jawline and a sharp nose. His cheeks blushed and bloated.

The Coroner across the table said to the pathologist, "You should've seen the scene. He managed to drive straight through an office building completely zonked out. I bet he didn't even wake up for his own death. Fine way to die, I suppose."

The pathologist slightly nodded and walked over to The Body's leg and popped it out of its socket and rested the ankle ninety degrees to the table.

"Guess he broke his leg along with everything else," said the Coroner.

The fluorescent lights buzzed and the two men stood in silence, watching over The Body. The pathologist scribbled on his clipboard. The Coroner sneezed in his elbow.

Ten hours ago, The Body passed a slow Buick Roadster on the highway. He drove his semi, a navy blue Kenworth, with an exact love. This was his home away from home and he knew his machine was his godsend, his money maker.

He felt the amphetamine he purchased from a trucker at the gas station kick in. He took a sip of his coffee from his oversize traveler's mug. It wasn't time to sleep. He had a deadline to hit. This was his fifth drop of the night and he was so close to home. He recognized the flat landscape. The corn fields and bean fields. The state of Indiana-shaped highway signs. The familiar names and locales. The Wabash River. Speedway Gas Stations. Terre Haute. Greencastle. Cloverdale. Their names on reflective green appearing out of the night like a guide. He pictured his future self-opening the front door and falling on his sofa. His wife and son running to greet him with kisses and hugs. He'd open a beer. Turn the TV on. Ask about their lives and gently fade out.

He hadn't slept in three days. Driving and driving. The highway a never-ending devotion. It's a way of life, he told himself. A commitment to travel. He loved the roadside gas stations. He'd take a shower and pick up a hot dog and immediately hit the road. He had no time for socializing, slot machines, and TV talk shows. There's a note pinned to his sun-flap. It reads, "Sleep when you're dead." His trucker pal wrote it down years ago. It's the mantra of every trucker. You can't make any money with your eyes shut lying under the covers in the back of your truck. So they pass out bottles of speed and stretch their limits on the highway and make bank.

The Body picked a CD from the pile in the dashboard compartment. He slipped it into the player and Alice Cooper's "Poison" erupted from the speakers. He wanted to be home. There was perhaps nothing else he wanted more. The last three weeks revolved in his memory as one

gigantic, fuzzy delivery: Back up semi. Open garage door. Talk to shipping assistant. Watch them pick up merchandise with their forklifts. Small talk and nods. Close it all up and hit the road. Again and again. The road and its stops were a seamless bunch of nonsense that he quickly put behind him. It now left him empty and drained. The countless sacks of greasy McDonald's and Burger King did not help to settle his stomach or bolster his health. Roadside grub was a fatal attraction.

He looked forward to seeing his son, Michael. The boy was in 4th grade. The Body wanted to put actual effort into his son. He wanted to try and be there. Help him with homework. Toss the football around. Watch cartoons. Listen to his juvenile problems. But, the erratic nature of his trucking schedule did not facilitate a smooth bridge over to domestic life. He imagined doing all these activities with Michael, but when he returned it took him weeks to shift to a normal sleeping schedule. Even worse was his attitude. He'd be emotionally distant, irritable at the smallest mistake. Yelling at Michael for knocking a bowl off the breakfast bar or berating him for not putting a screwdriver back in his toolbox. The highway, the trucking was as much a burden as a relief. He did see himself as a generous, loving father, but he also, from time to time, would question this portrait's accuracy.

The Body eased off the highway to a rest stop. No one was there except a few dark semi's. He approached the small circular brick building. Inside was the plaza with a state map and a bulletin board. His steps clacked against the polished marble floor. He entered the restroom and took a piss. A penny-sized drawing of a stick horse inside a box was above the urinal. He flushed and turned around and confronted himself in the mirror. The reflection did not resemble himself. He was shocked at the pale, undernourished mask in front of him. He hated it. He looked like his father.

The highway was blurry. He opened the windows and pumped the heat, hoping to wake himself up. No more coffee. The speed was wearing off. His eyes were heavy. His body needed sleep. He couldn't go on. He nodded off and fell upon the steering wheel. The semi veered right, straight into a fence, bumping and shaking across the hard ground until it hitched over the cement lip and entered an empty parking lot. The truck, in some mad trajectory, did not hit any light posts but barreled toward the ten-story business building. The glass facade exploded and the truck blasted through a wall and ate up cubicle after cubicle. The semi, still running stopped in the middle of the building. The engine steamed. Light bulbs popped. Loose paper floated down upon mangled computer desktops. The Body had fell out of the cabin. He laid over a gray cubicle board. He did not bleed.

Three weeks ago, The Body yelled from the semi-truck to his blue house, "Let's go! You're going to be late!"

His wife, Shannon, opened the front door. She matted her hair down with one arm and with the other slipped into a pair of high heels. Michael followed her out the door and slowly closed it. He jumped over the cinder block step with his plastic Batman backpack. Shannon leaned down and kissed him on the forehead and wished him a good day at school. The Body waved at Michael and yelled to him, "I'll pick you up later today! Have a good day!" Shannon jumped into the cab. They waited and watched Michael walk across the street to the brick elementary school, only a block away.

Whenever, The Body was in town for a stretch of time, he'd drive Shannon to work begrudgingly. He didn't enjoy waking up this early. She worked in the neighboring town at the

ketchup factory. She didn't can gobs of ketchup or supervise machinery. She typed up reports, copied memos, attended meetings. She sat in the air-conditioned office, staring at a computer.

They drove through town to slim county roads with wide ditches and corn fields.

Shannon stared outside the window.

"You're gone too much. How do you expect him to feel about all this?"

He didn't immediately respond.

"I think you should look for another job," she continued.

"I don't know. We'll see. I'm doing the best I can with what I got. It's good money."

He slowed down as they entered the small town. They passed a DQ and a couple narrow storefronts selling trinkets and sewing goods. He took a left and the factory appeared down the street. A massive metallic building stretching several blocks with semi-trucks lined up on the far side. He pulled into the office parking lot. Shannon sighed and swung her purse on her shoulder and gave him a quick kiss and stared him down.

"Please, think about it. That's all I'm asking."

She opened the door and climbed down. He watched her open the glass door and disappear.

Eight months ago, The Body sat at the kitchen room table. Michael sat opposite him. Shannon was in the living room watching a TV show. He stared at Michael and noticed the familial recognition of his nose and small ears. This was his son, alright.

They just finished dinner. Shannon had cooked tuna casserole. The dirty dishes sat in the sink. He'd clean them in a while. It was moments like these that he knew he was supposed to share nuggets of wisdom or stories about his life that would somehow shape his son, but he

failed to create any sort of small talk. Michael was playing his Game Boy. His face engrossed in the tiny screen. The Body sighed, hoping, like he'd done several times at a bar that it would elicit some kind of response from his neighbor. Michael ignored him. The Body did not want to be like his father. His father would never sit at the table like this and watch over him and even think about talking to him. Forget it. He had to say something.

“Did I ever tell you about my time in school?”

Michael didn't look up, but responded, “No, Dad.”

“Well, you know back then the elementary school was different. It was fairly brand new. The gymnasium was a recent addition. It wasn't like it is today. Run down. Peeling paint. Dank smells in the restroom. No, it was something. I remember there was this convocation one day where they brought in BMX riders. They set up small ramps all around the gym and flew around doing cool tricks. Do you have convocations? Or did they get rid of that? Budget cuts and all, I'd wonder.”

“No, they still have them. A few weeks ago a man talked about farming. It wasn't that cool.”

“New programming, I guess.”

Michael was engrossed in his Game Boy. The Body stared at the corner of the table and listened to faint laughs and jokes coming from the TV.

“Do you know about the basement behind the stage?”

This got his attention.

“I've heard about it. I've seen the custodian go back there a few times.”

“Now, this is kinda a secret and I'm not encouraging you to break any rules, but I used to go down there with a pal of mine after school and we'd dig around and find old pencils and

chairs and filing cabinets. I probably shouldn't tell you this either, but that's where I found my first porno mag. We found it in one of the filing cabinets."

"What's a porno mag?"

The Body smiled and said, "Oh, nothing."

"I wonder what's down there now."

"I wouldn't be surprised if it's full of the same garbage."

"I bet it's spooky."

"I wouldn't go down there if I was you. Safer to play outside on the playground."

"Yeah, but think what could be down there. Maybe a treasure of some kind or a dead body."

"Don't get too carried away."

"Maybe I'll go down there and find a dead body and begin searching for clues like Sherlock Holmes. It'll be the lunch lady who poisoned her lover and slipped him downstairs for the bugs to eat his rotting flesh."

"Alright, now. I don't think any of that is plausible."

The Body couldn't understand the boy's imagination. At times, like these, it seemed to grow and expand with each sentence. The Son would add layer upon layer of wild material. Where'd it come from?

Michael was confused by The Body's response. He went back to his Game Boy. The Body sighed once again.

Nine years ago, The Body stood over Shannon holding their son. In the light, their son screamed and squirmed in the tight blanket. He was in awe. How did this happen? Shannon was

crying, lost in the child before her. Sweat dripped from her temple, mixing with the tears. Her blonde hair matted to her forehead. He took their son in his arms and stared directly into his eyes for the first time.

Ten years ago, The Body drove his Dodge Neon down Main Street. This was the town he grew up in. This was the town he'd never leave. For the first time, while passing derelict garages with collapsed carnival rides and the post office and the Miller's half-finished, Tyvek house and the Brown's bungalow with Walmart-bought flamingos in the front yard and the Bentley's high fenced property and the QuickyMart Shell Station and the brick apartments laden with tweakers behind their cotton curtains, The Body knew for a fact this was where he was supposed to be. This wasn't always the case. He'd visit Chicago and Nashville and the state capitol, Indianapolis. He'd see commercials set in Hawaii, Tahiti. He'd dream about sitting on a beach. He'd wonder what his life would look like elsewhere, but he knew these Hoosiers and they knew him. It was unsettling at times when you caused a scene at the bar or found yourself in jail next to your former kindergarten teacher, but otherwise it was a community. He'd walk into WalMart and recognize most of its customers perusing with their carts. It had something to do with comfort, he thought. Or possibly control. He knew his environment. He knew the people around him. He knew what to expect.

The Body was on his way to visit his best friend from high school, Derek. He graduated from DePaul and landed a job with a marketing firm in Chicago. They hadn't seen each other in five years. Someone at the bar the night before told The Body, "Oh, he's set for life, man. He'll be richer than any of us in a year."

It was only a few years back when they were equals. They stood side-by-side at homecoming making fun of the football players and secretly drinking their whiskey & coke's. They listened to Pearl Jam in his basement and smoked weed far in the backyard, beyond Derek's property, in the undergrowth where no one knew who owned what. They talked cars and trucks and girls and rock'n'roll. The Body liked to come over and watch football with his Dad. They cheered for the Indianapolis Colts. The Body smiled, nodded and watched with a flat entertainment, as if he was a spectator peeking in the window watching a real family interact.

He turned into the driveway. The house looked identical to the one of their youth. A beige bungalow with a white-trimmed roof. There was another reason he stayed in this town. The positive memories were irretrievably attached to the unchanging locations and this immediate comfort was what he so adored.

He hit the doorbell and Derek's mother answered. She smiled and welcomed him inside. Derek was sitting at the breakfast table. The Body followed her through the hallway. They were both shocked to see one another. They hugged and stood in disbelief. Derek no longer had long hair, piercings in his ears, and a scraggly beard. He was now clean-cut, business-like, even athletic in shape: straight posture, muscled figure. But the house smelled the same. The artificial floral perfume mixed with laundry detergent. He easily slipped back into his younger self.

Derek guided him to the kitchen table and they sat down. The mother went into the kitchen and opened the oven.

“How are you doing, man?” Derek asked.

“Working, a lot. Wife's pregnant. Just bought a house out by US 40.”

“Good to hear. Good to hear. You play any music still?”

“Not much anymore. Kinda gave it up in the last year or so. What about you, man? Heard you’re up in Chicago living like a king,”

“I wouldn’t say that, but I’ve landed a sweet gig and I’m pretty happy with the situation. You ever think about moving out of this dump?”

The mother, from the kitchen, piped out, “Watch it. This town ain’t so bad.”

“Yeah, maybe if you’re a meth head or a farmer or a deadbeat.”

This was a stretch, thought The Body. In a lot of ways, he couldn’t believe what just came out of his mouth.

“Are you serious, right now?”

Derek cowered once he noticed The Body’s stern look. Derek forgot and he felt terrible.

“Oh, shit, man. I’m sorry. I didn’t meant that, I’m serious. I’m sorry.”

The Body shook his head and shifted his focus away from Derek to the screened-in porch. Outside the window, the sky was a flat blue.

“You really are different now, aren’t you?”

Derek stared at him and casually shrugged it off.

“Nah, I’m still your buddy, but life goes on. People change. People grow up. Not saying you haven’t or anything. I mean, you can’t tell me you haven’t changed. You’ve got responsibilities, a job, a wife, a kid on the way. These things inevitably wash that adolescence away for better or worse.”

“You’re right,” The Body said.

The Body demurred and nodded. His best friend was no longer his best friend. It was sad, thought The Body, but that’s just how it is.

Eleven years ago, Pastor Jeff pronounced them husband and wife and they kissed in front of fifty people in New Christ Baptist Church. The frail Sunday school teacher played the organ as they walked hand-in-hand down the aisle. The midday sunlight poured through the windows. Shannon's parents huddled in the front pew, smiling. The Body's high school friends jabbed each other and made quiet jokes. The groom's side was sparse compared to the bride's. Shannon's nieces and a few of her friend's children were pinned against the pews watching them exit the church. Everyone followed them out. It was humid and they both felt the immediate transition from AC to blistering heat, but they didn't care. They turned around and waved and slid into The Body's Cadillac. He kissed her and looked back at the crowd waving and hollering. He wished his father was there in the crowd.

Twenty-three years ago, he watched the familiar smoke slip through the creases of his bedroom door. He sat on his bed listening to Nirvana. He cranked the volume up. He didn't want to hear the racket coming from the neighboring living room. He didn't want to hear the casual banter and hard footsteps on the linoleum. It happened with greater frequency and The Body hated it. No wonder his mother left him. The pungent aroma of methamphetamine nauseated him.

The men and women his father brought in the house scared him. Ghost-like figures, itching and demanding. There was an awkward moment when he left his bedroom to go to the bathroom and noticed a group of high school juniors huddled around his father. The Body snuck around the corner and watched each of them pass the pipe and light it. Whenever The Body visited the high school or went to football games he'd admire these boys. He thought they were

the epitome of cool. Stronger. Confidant. Popular. Older. But, here they were sitting around his father fiddling with a pipe and coughing excessively. No better than the toothless regulars.

There was a hard knock on his door and his father's shrill voice, "Turn it down in there! It's too damn loud!"

The Body ignored him. Fuck him, he thought.

His Father kept knocking. "Turn it down! If I have to come in there myself, I will. You know I will. Turn it down. I have guests here!"

The Body sat on his bed. His bedroom was filthy. Dirty shirts and underwear and pants and socks littered the floor. In the corner under a desk, he barely used, was a ferret in a cage. The ferret's eyes were watery and his hair mangy. He looked deranged and The Body liked that about him.

The door busted open and knocked against the wall causing the door knob to catch in the already fist-size hole in the drywall.

The Body yelled at him, "What the hell?"

The ferret was screeching at his father, running around the cage.

"I told you to turn this motherfucker down!"

His father walked over to the stereo and turned the knob all the way down.

"If I have to fucking knock this door down again, I'm going to beat you silly boy. I've told you a million times not to disturb me when I have guests in this house. Why can't you understand this simple request?"

The Body sat rigid on his bed. He wanted to hit his father. He wanted to knock him out. He wanted to run away with his ferret and forget about this bullshit.

"You hear me?"

The Body lifted his eyes and stared his father down. His father's eyes were black and his skin tanned to a leather and he wore a Marlboro hat over his bald head. He was a frightening figure, but The Body knew he was aging quickly and before he knew it his father would be weak and would shortly die.

The Body said over his breath, "Yes, I got it."

"Good," said his father. He left the room and slammed the door behind him.

Twenty-nine years ago, The Body stood in aisle 7 in WalMart. He couldn't find his father anywhere. The last time he saw him he was near the soda aisle picking up liters of 7up and placing them gently in the cart. He decided at that moment it was a good idea to rush to the electronics and watch the TV's playing race car demos and Super Mario simulations. When he went back to the soda aisle he was gone and The Body began searching each aisle. He panicked. Mothers and grandmothers and fathers and young adults picked through shelves, but no one he recognized as his own father. The light jazz playing over the entire building trapped him. He felt the rush of adrenaline and wanted to cry out. He kept rushing from aisle to aisle. He gave up in the groceries and swung through the hardware section. Where was he? He rounded a corner and crossed over to Garden & Home. Maybe he'd be there searching for some clay pot or lawn fertilizer. The Body crossed each aisle. He was nowhere.

He walked over to the pharmacy and found him at the end of aisle 29. He was holding a bottle of pain relief. He went up to him and hugged him. He peered down at him and said, "Why don't you just stick with me next time?"

Thirty-seven years ago, his mother contorted in pain. She gripped the father's hand. The doctor nearby, said, "Push, push, push." His mother screamed.

The Body's head appeared. His mother pushed. The Body's arms and upper body appeared. The Body's legs appeared. The doctor held the screaming Body in his arms. His mother heard the snip of the umbilical cord. The doctor said, "It's a boy."