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Roadside

Lea L. Downing
University of New Orleans, leadowning@gmail.com

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Roadside

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing
Fiction

by

Lea Lawrence Downing

B.A. Sarah Lawrence College, 2007

May, 2014

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April 3, 2014

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SERAPHS OF EAST TEXAS

A flatbed truck sits in the middle of the fairgrounds. Big barrel lights hang above a drum set, guitar, bass, and mic stand arranged on the truck, waiting for their musicians. The instruments glint at June from between the heads of the dark crowd that's gathering around the truck. She is holding her mother's hand and looks up to see what they are going to do next.

The Tilt-a-Whirl is June's favorite ride, though she would only ride it if her mother agreed to ride it with her. While standing in line, June felt intensely anxious. Once the ride started and they howled with glee, together.

While the crowd gathers, June's aunt Helen and uncle Bob shift from one foot to the other, adjusting their clothes. Aunt Helen pulls at the bottom hem of the light jacket she is wearing and wraps the strap of her purse around her knuckles. She places her hand on June's head and turns to June's mother.

"June shouldn't be here for this. No sight for a five year old," she says. "We best be getting on home."

June's mother nods. "You're probably right. We best be getting on."

The group walks together back toward the parking lot. The crowd continues to grow behind them. June's aunt and uncle reach their truck first. They get in, slam the doors and drive out to the state highway that runs adjacent to the fairgrounds.

June's mother stops and turns toward the highway. Once the taillights of the truck have disappeared, she stoops, picks up June, and swings her up onto her hip. She begins to walk fast back toward the grounds.

"Mama, I thought we were leaving," June says, bouncing on her mother's hip with every stride.

"Shh, honey," her mother says.

June leans in closer to her mother, her face in her mother's dark curls. She inhales deeply, pulling in her mother's smells. Cigarettes, dust, Harbor Rose Perfume.

As they arrive at the back of the crowd, June's mother pauses for a moment, and then takes June right into the middle.

"Who's going to play music, Mama?" June asks.

"A young man named Elvis. He's been playing the county fairs this year and he's supposed to be good."

"Why didn't Aunt Helen and Uncle Bob want to stay and see him?"

"Some people say he's bad for kids to see."

"Why?" June asks.

"It's just silly stuff. Don't worry about it," her mother replies.

The crowd erupts with sound. Girls shriek and clap; boys look excitedly at each other. A young man with dark hair makes his way out to the microphone and the band roars to life. No one is standing still. Even though June knows she won't be able to see

the band, she asks to be set down. She wants to dance, too. June and her mother jump and twist to the music.

All of those feet hitting the ground work up a good layer of dust, and the only things June can see are the jeans, skirts, and boots of those who stand around her.

“I like him, Mama,” June yells up to her mother. “He’s really loud!”

Her mother doesn’t hear her. The dust shines gold around her as she turns, her dark curls tossing back and forth across her face. She looks perfect and smooth, just like the cherubs crowded atop the carousel.

Her mother, an angel at the county fair in Sweetwater, Texas.

June and her mother drive south out of town, toward the oil fields and honky tonks. It is late and they’re looking for June’s father, who is probably at a bar. The land around them is an inky black; the glow from their headlights is the brightest thing for miles.

June and her mother ride roughly along in their old Ford truck. The dim light from the console bathes their faces in a faint orange glow.

“I don’t want to go get Daddy tonight,” June says.

Her mother looks at her, then back to the road, and sighs. “I don’t know what else to do other than go after him.”

They ride on in silence.

The first bar they come upon is the Rusty Wheel. A neon sign runs over the entrance of the bar. The W is burned out, so it weakly blinks “Rusty heel” as June’s mother steers the truck into a spot toward the back of the parking lot.

“Stay here,” she says. “I’ll be right back.”

June slides down in her seat. She picks at the cracked vinyl that runs along its edge. Her mother always says that she wants back the man she married, but June doesn’t know what that means. In her experience, her father is a drunk, sloppy and quick to anger.

A man and woman exit the bar and cross to the back of the parking lot, where they stop at a silver Cadillac. The man pushes the woman up onto the hood, unbuckling his belt. It is only after the woman has wrapped her legs around him, drawing him in, that June realizes it is her father. She’s never seen the woman before. June slides lower in her seat, but she can hear. Her father’s belt buckle clangs rhythmically against the grille of the car.

The clanging stops shortly after it starts. She listens as her father walks back to the bar with the woman. They chat softly, and June’s father raises his voice briefly to exclaim, “You are some kind of sweetness, baby.”

June presses her hands against her ears.

A few moments later, the driver’s side door opens and her mother climbs back into the truck.

“Why are you sitting like that? You’re practically on the floor.”

June sits back up in the seat.

“June, I’m speaking to you. What were you doing?”

June takes a deep breath and says as fast as she can, “I saw Daddy with some lady.”

Her mother looks down.

“They were doing stuff,” June continues.

“Yeah,” her mother says.

“Why didn’t you make him stop? Why isn’t he coming home with us?”

Her mother ignores her questions.

“He’s still in the bar right now!” June cries. “We should go get him.” June reaches to open her door. “If you won’t go get him, then I will.”

June’s mother brings a hand down firmly on the back of June’s neck. June is hit so hard that she buckles, curling down and away from her mother. “I’ve told you June,” her mother says, in a low, trembling voice, “Your father’s making changes right quick. You have to believe me.”

June presses herself into the passenger door as they drive off. She thinks about opening the door, letting herself fall to the dusty ground below. Would she survive? She wishes that she wouldn’t. But she doesn’t open the door. She sits whimpering next to her mother as they drive on through the darkness.

June comes home the last day of sixth grade with a fistful of red, white, and blue ribbons. It was field day, and she’d done well in the races. June walks into the house and crosses to the rear where the kitchen is, leaving the screen door banging shut behind her.

“Mama?” she calls toward the kitchen. There is no answer.

The kitchen is empty. Usually at this time of day, her mother is beginning to fix dinner. There would be something sweet in the oven and something savory on the stove, coming together to produce a smell that June thinks of as “home.” But there aren’t any smells. Dishes are piled in the sink from last night’s dinner, and the newspaper is still scattered across the top of the small kitchen table. Her mother is proud of maintaining a clean kitchen, even if the rest of the house is a mess. Something is wrong.

June walks back through the living room toward the hallway that runs to the bedrooms. She stops when she comes to the bathroom. The door is closed, but light shines out around its edges. There are strange noises coming from behind the door: uhhs and errs. June tries to open the door. She is able to get it open about an inch, but then it stops. There is something blocking it. She puts her whole weight against the door and pushes; the door opens a few inches more. June is then able to see that it is her mother that is blocking the door.

She is lying on her side, wedged between the wall and the toilet. Her eyelids are fluttering, and she has light foam built up at the corners of her mouth.

“Mama?” June calls with hesitation. Her mother continues to moan with each shallow, exhaled breath.

June looks to the counter, where the contents of their medicine cabinet have been emptied and spilled. Bottles of syrups and tonics on their sides, dripping pools of liquid. Paper packets of medicine powders ripped open haphazardly. Pill bottles emptied and their lids cast into the bathtub.

Her mother isn’t dead, but she’s tried to be.

June is on the school bus, quietly sitting next to her friend Julia. She has been dreading coming home from school all day. Her mother is throwing her a thirteenth birthday party. June isn't interested in having a party, but her mother insisted, and before June could try to quash the idea, her mother invited several of June's classmates, who now were on the bus with her, heading to her house.

Julia is the only one of the people invited to the party that June isn't worried about. She's her best friend. The other kids that were invited, however, are not even really June's friends. Her mother knows their parents from church and invited them without asking June. When she first told June about the party, there were already confirmed guests, including some children June wouldn't even want to eat lunch with, let alone bring into her house.

Olivia is one of those. She lives a few houses down from June, in a two-story house that has columns lining the porch. Her brother just turned sixteen, and their parents bought him a brand new Mustang. But these aren't the reasons June doesn't like her. Whenever Olivia speaks to June, she always pitches her voice up an octave and calls her "dear," or "sweetheart," as if she is a young child. When June started at the high school, she had an English class with Olivia. After their first day of class, Olivia approached her and put her hand on June's shoulder, holding her away at arm's length. She looked June up and down and said, with saccharine sweetness, "We should be friends. I just love a new project." June has avoided her as much as she could since that moment.

The bus pulls up in front of June's house, and the group gets off. Other than Julia and Olivia, June's mother has invited the Jacobson twins and their sister Sarah.

June opens the front door to the house and stands aside to let the other kids in. She hears Olivia's laughter coming from the inside of the house and hurries to follow her. The living room has been generously decorated with cutouts of June's name. They're on the wall behind the couch, on the TV screen, stuck to her father's easy chair, hanging from the edge of the coffee table: there are easily a hundred Junes hanging about the room. While the sheer number of the decorations is shocking, it is what they are made of that Olivia appears to be laughing at as she fingers the cutout that hangs from the edge of the lampshade.

"Old contact paper?" she asks. "Wasn't this sitting out by the trash in front of the Williams' house, like yesterday?"

"I don't know," June lies.

"It is," Olivia insists. "I saw it there. Same pattern, see? The little blue flowers?"

June pushes through the group into the kitchen, where her mother is bustling about. The kitchen table is set up with place settings of paper plates, plastic silverware, and party hats. The theme of the table seems to be circus clowns. There is a cake in the center of the table, decorated with a giant clown face made of icing. Next to the clown, icing script reads, "Happy birthday, Junebug!"

June's mother is at the counter. She pours a can of fruit cocktail into a punch bowl filled with bright red liquid. There is a piece of contact paper stuck to the back of her right leg. It vibrates slightly as she shakes the last bits of fruit out of the can.

"Mother?"

“Oh, Junebug! Hello, all!” She makes a grand sweep of her arms. “Welcome to June’s birthday party!”

The kids murmur hellos and thank yous back to June’s mother.

“Why don’t you all go into the living room there while I finish getting things together. I’ve set up a game of Twister out there for you. Go on and play!”

From behind her, June hears Olivia whisper to Sarah, “Baby games.”

The Jacobson twins are hovering next to the table with the cake, shoving each other lightly. June stands next to them, unsure of what to do with herself, or the party she never wanted to begin with.

“No, you do it,” one twin says to the other.

“Fine,” the other responds. He then takes his right index finger and plunges it into the bright red nose of the clown on the cake. He retrieves it and sticks it into his mouth, leaving a large hole in the middle of the cake, going down to where the chocolate insides are visible. The boys scurry out of the kitchen and into the living room, where the others are milling about.

Olivia is telling everyone about her family’s last trip to Florida for spring break, when a shocked yell comes from the kitchen. June’s mother comes charging into the living room, carrying the cake.

“Who did this?” she screams at the group. Everyone remains silent. June’s pulse jumps in her ears.

“I asked you a question, goddammit,” she continues to yell. “Who did this to the cake?”

Again, no one responds. She lets out a yelp and wheels around. With one swift, uninterrupted movement, she pitches the cake against the wall behind the kitchen table. It hits with a terrific thump and falls to the floor. A multicolored smear is left on the wall, with chunks of icing slowly separating from the mess and falling to the floor.

The children all stand without talking, staring at June's mother. She grabs a paper plate from the table and walks over to where the pile of cake sits on the floor. With a clawed hand, she takes a lump of cake and plops it onto the plate. She comes back to the side of the table closest to the children, sits down, and begins to eat.

"Loon," June hears Olivia whisper to Sarah.

June looks about at the other children's faces, most of which read fear or disgust.

"Listen," Olivia says in a hushed tone, "we just got a color TV. Let's just go to my house. The Chipper Champ Hour is on."

"Yeah," Sarah chimes in. She looks toward June's mother.

June watches the other children begin to edge over to the front door.

June's mother gets up from the table and begins shuffling papers at the desk in the kitchen. "No, don't go! We're about to play a game! I'll make you a better game."

Olivia pauses. "Oh yeah?" she asks, hands on her hips.

"I could make you a pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey game, June! Just give me a few minutes." She starts feverishly cutting at an old newspaper.

"Come on," Olivia says, walking to the front door. June stays put. "You coming?" Olivia asks.

June shrugs.

"Suit yourself."

The children all walk out of the door and head down the driveway. Despite their departure, June's mother continues to cut at the newspaper, and a growing pile of irregularly shaped pieces mount on the table.

"Junebug," she says, "now don't give up on me. We're going to make you a nice birthday party."

June's mother's movements are erratic and her hands shake. The piece of contact paper is still stuck to the back of her calf. June looks down at her shoes, then back at her mother.

"I think I'm going to go to Olivia's," she says.

"I'm almost done, June," her mother replies. "Just a few more pieces to cut out."

June looks to the place where the cake had made impact with the wall. She thinks back to Olivia whispering, "loon."

"No, Mother," June says, "you're not almost done. You're never almost done."

She turns toward the door and the sounds of clipping behind her go quiet. As she walks out, her mother rushes up behind her.

"June, no!" she calls.

June makes her way down the driveway without looking back. Then she is walking past the neighbors' house, and soon she is halfway down the block. It is only then that she turns around to look at her house. Her mother is still there. She looks small, smaller than seems possible, nearly indistinguishable from that which surrounds her.

ROADSIDE

Someone knocked on the front door just as Wayne was moving the percolator from the stove to a trivet on the kitchen table. He wiped his hands on a dishtowel, slung the towel over his shoulder, and went to open the door.

“Sheriff,” Wayne said, extending his hand to the man.

The sheriff nodded and shook his hand. “Morning.” He was holding a manila envelope.

“What can I do for you?” Wayne asked. He squinted in the early daylight that shone from behind the sheriff.

“Can I come in? Got some things I need to talk over with you.” He tapped the envelope against the doorframe.

“Of course,” Wayne said. He stood aside to let the sheriff pass into the house. “I just finished making coffee if you’d like some.”

“No, thanks. I already had my two cups today.” He pointed to his chest. “More than that’s not good for my ticker.”

Wayne led the sheriff into the kitchen.

“Well if you change your mind...” Wayne said. He sat down at the kitchen table.

The sheriff nodded, taking a seat across from Wayne and placing the envelope in front of him.

The front of the envelope bore his name—Wayne Samson—and the upper left corner was printed with “Official Communication from the Enville County Office of Permitting and Regulatory Affairs.” A handwritten note stating it had been released to the sheriff that morning for delivery spread across the envelope’s sealed flap.

Wayne tore open the envelope and pulled out a stapled packet of papers, topped with a letter addressed to him. Code violation—cease operations immediately—illegal operation of a museum/attraction—inspection in 14 days. As soon as Wayne realized what the letter was, he was dizzy with the reality of what he was reading. The papers shook from the nervous tremor of his hands. Wayne was going to have to shut it all down.

The sheriff leaned forward, reaching across the table, and put a hand on Wayne’s shoulder. He gave it a little shake and a squeeze.

“It’ll all work out. Calm yourself,” he said. “The rest of the papers there have detailed information about what you need to do to reopen, if you decide that’s what you want.”

Wayne nodded and took a moment to respond. “I think I’d like for you to leave now. Shit, Sheriff. I need to sit with this for a while.”

The sheriff pushed away from the table and stood, adjusting his belt. “This doesn’t have to be a bad thing, Wayne,” he said. “Think about it. It could be a good chance to get back out there, maybe start working again. You know, clean this place up and move on.”

Wayne silently watched his reflection in his cup of coffee as the sheriff turned and walked toward the front of the house. He heard the front door shut and, shortly after, the sound of a car starting and making its way down the gravel drive.

Wayne's hands were still shaking as he brought his coffee cup to his lips. Wayne drained his cup, gripped it like a baseball and chucked it against the wall, sending pieces of white porcelain spinning across the kitchen floor.

Wayne had been collecting for almost twenty years. It began soon after his parents passed and left him and his brother Charlie the family home. Charlie, an advertising executive for a record company in Nashville, had little interest in co-owning a house in a rural area, so he happily agreed to let Wayne buy his half.

With the house and his inheritance, Wayne was able to take an early retirement from the cannery, and still live in relative financial comfort. Yet, immediately upon moving into the house, he fell into an overpowering depression. It wasn't Wayne thinking about his parents that made him sad—rather, he thought very little of them. Since he was a child, Wayne had the prescient knowledge that he would end up entirely alone in the world, and now loneliness held him tight.

One day, as Wayne made his daily trek from his bedroom to the leather armchair in the living room, he let out a great yawn, and the sour scent of his own breath almost made him gag. When was the last time he'd brushed his teeth? How long had it been since he'd showered? How many days had he been wearing the same clothes? Coffee

stains and orange bits of macaroni and cheese trailed down his shirtfront. He nauseated himself. What a completely disgusting mess of a man.

It was not a big revelation, not a moment when he consciously chose to edge himself more firmly into the territory of the living. Rather, he was so revolted by his own physical form that he had to do something. He brushed and flossed his teeth, spitting bloody toothpaste into the sink, feeling his gums pulsing, afire with irritation. A shower and a shave came next, then the quest for clean clothes. All of his clothes were filthy. Wayne made the immediate decision that he was going to throw all of his clothes away. He didn't want to see or smell them again.

The only clean outfit he could find was a pair of blue and white striped flannel pajamas he'd had since late high school, threadbare along the edges and seams. Wearing those pajamas, he got into the car and drove himself to Trinity Thrift, the thrift store attached to the Methodist church in town. He caught a few stares from the staff as he perused the racks, but paid them no mind. As he was about to check out, carrying an armful of jeans, sweaters, and plaid button-down shirts, he spotted a stuffed pheasant mounted to a polished wooden stand, tufts of grass and a few rocks attached around its feet.

"How much is that?" Wayne asked a pleasant-looking young woman standing behind the jewelry counter. She wore a kind smile, and the beginnings of lines crinkled around the edges of her eyes. The name "Bonnie" was embroidered on her Trinity Thrift apron.

"The bird?"

"Yeah."

Bonnie walked over and picked up the bird, turning it over and around. “Don’t see a price, so...seven dollars, maybe? That work for you?”

“Sure.” Wayne paid for the clothes and the pheasant and left.

Once back at his house, Wayne went into his room and placed the pheasant on the top of his dresser. Mounted on the wall behind it was a largemouth bass, curling as if in mid-jump, and a jar half filled with compact, well-preserved owl pellets. Dead things had always charmed Wayne. It wasn’t out of a cruel or morbid fascination; it was out of a desire to be impossibly close. He loved being able to get up next to something that was usually too skittish or dangerous to allow it. Taxidermied animals had always been his favorite part of the inevitable yearly school field trip to the Natural History Museum when he was a child.

“How else would you be able stand right next to a lion, look it in the eye?” a tour guide once asked Wayne’s third grade class.

No student offered an answer.

“You can’t!” the guide exclaimed. “There are some things you can’t get close to in real life. At a museum, though, you get right up to it and really see it.”

It became well known around town that Wayne was building strange collections at his house. As per Wayne’s request, Bonnie at Trinity Thrift began setting aside certain objects for him as they were donated—taxidermied animals, stereo equipment, used fish tanks. Occasionally people would stop by Wayne’s house and drop off items they thought

he might be able to use. Wayne had never thought of his house as an attraction, per se, though he had always kindly obliged a tour when local people stopped by out of curiosity, or to donate items.

It was when the young man from Chicago came through that things changed dramatically. He had been working on a guidebook (*Roadside Places: Finding the Bizarre and Fascinating America*), and in his travels had passed through Enville County and heard of Wayne's house. The young man was kind enough, and assured Wayne that he would get much more foot traffic after the book came out. Wayne had been a little confused by the young man's excitement.

"What do you mean foot traffic? Like visitors?"

"Yeah!" the young man responded. "You'll definitely get more visitors after this comes out." He tapped his notebook.

Wayne pursed his lips and stared at the young man's notebook, as if by gazing at it somehow what the young man was saying would make more sense.

The man continued, "I'll write you a great blurb, more people will stop by. You can ask for donations or something, make a little cash."

"But it's not like this is a real thing, a museum or whatever, like the other places you talked about putting in your book," Wayne said. "It's just my house, my family home. And I like to keep things in it."

The young man responded as if he hadn't heard what Wayne said. "The biggest thing you probably need is a name of some kind. 'Wayne's House' doesn't really sound too interesting."

"But it is my house. 'Wayne's House' is what it is."

“Your last name is Samson? What about, hmm. Oh! What about Samson Shack? I’d stop by a place called Samson Shack before I’d stop at Wayne’s House.” The young man opened his notebook and wrote “Samson Shack” in block letters at the top of a page, then proceeded to underline it several times. “Yeah, has a nice ring, don’t you think?” the man asked.

Wayne shrugged. “Guess so. I’m no expert.”

As the young man gathered his things, Wayne found himself experiencing a quiver of excitement. “Do you think,” he asked the young man, “that a lot of people will come?”

“You never can tell, but I can pretty much guarantee that more people will come by than come by now.”

“Well,” Wayne said, “that will do just fine.”

A little after four in the afternoon Wayne finally cleaned up the shattered bits of coffee cup. While running a wet rag over the floor to pick up the too-small-to-see slivers, Wayne heard a car come up the driveway. He looked out the kitchen window and saw a red minivan unloading its passengers next to his pickup truck. It looked to be a family: man, woman, teenage girl and young boy. The little boy clutched a copy of *Roadside Places* against his side. Wayne watched as the boy rushed over to the wooden sign by the front door that read “Samson Shack.”

“Dad! Hey, Dad! Take my picture with the sign!”

The boy's father crouched a ways away from the sign, holding a black camera up to his eye. He held still for a moment and adjusted the focus.

"Got it," he said, standing up.

Wayne walked toward the front door, opening it to the mother's raised fist, poised to knock. He stepped out onto the porch.

It was typical among groups that came by his house for only one of the crew to appear actively excited. During the tour, it would become clear who that one person was, and that he had more-or-less convinced his traveling companions to make a stop, despite group consensus or interest. The little boy had been the persuader in this family.

"Here for a tour?" Wayne asked the father.

"Yeah, if you don't mind. We're on our way to Memphis and heard that your place was a place to see," the father said. He placed a hand on his son's shoulder.

"Mr. Samson," the boy said, tapping Wayne on the arm, "can we start with the..." The boy opened his dog-eared copy of *Roadside Places*. "...the Dead Things Room?"

Wayne smiled and gave a little chuckle. "Sure, son. Right this way."

He led the family through the entry hall and into what had originally been his bedroom, where the walls were lined with shallow bookshelves. An island of outward facing bookshelves in the middle of the floor left the room with only a narrow path that led in a loop around it. The shelves were stuffed, many bowing toward their centers, with dead things. Stuffed animals were paused mid-leap, -flight, and -snarl. Jars containing stiff insects, grasshoppers, butterflies, cockroaches, with grass, pebbles, and small rocks glued to the bottoms of the jars, were arranged about. Series of shadowboxes showed the results of Wayne's painstaking resection of his owl pellets—mouse skeletons glued flat to

the backs of the boxes, looking as if someone had stepped on them, squashed them flat. Each shelf was a menagerie of frozen worlds.

The boy had found a shelf of hollow box turtle shells and was turning each of them over, looking beneath, then placing them back on the shelf.

“Mr. Samson,” the boy called.

“Hmm?”

Wayne worked his way around the boy’s family and came to stand beside him.

“Mr. Samson, there are spines in these shells. All of them have spines stuck to them. Why didn’t the turtle take it with him when he left his shell?”

“That’s not quite how it works,” Wayne explained. “Turtles can’t leave their shells. Their spine is part of their shell just like your spine is part of you.”

“But the shells are just houses, right? The turtle carries his house on his back. That’s what people say. He can leave it if he wants to.”

“The turtle’s shell is his house, but he can’t leave it behind. It’s as much a part of him as he is of it. It would be like someone saying you could leave your skin behind if you wanted to.”

The father spoke up. “How about we move to the next room,” he said, with a tone of excitement that didn’t match the apprehensive expression on his face. “What’s next?”

“The Human Instrument,” Wayne said, leading the excited boy and his skeptical family back into the hallway and down to a room toward the back of the house.

Wayne had built the Human Instrument in what had previously been his parents’ bedroom. He had taken nine subwoofers and arranged them in a rectangle on the linoleum floor, with two wooden shipping pallets placed on top of them. A large piece of

scrap carpet draped across the platform. The far wall of the room was a mismatched patchwork of speakers, amps, and receivers, all daisy-chained together to create what was certainly the largest stereo system Wayne had ever seen or heard. But what he was going for wasn't something that looked good or even sounded good. Rather, he wanted something that felt good.

He led the family into the room and handed each of them a pair of airport-grade earmuffs.

"In a minute you'll need to put these on," he explained. "It's going to get loud."

The mother shook the earmuffs and tilted her head at Wayne. "So why don't you just turn it down a little, and we won't have to wear these to listen to it. Whatever it is."

"Well, it's not so much playing the music that's important. It's more that the music is going to be playing you." Wayne's explanation was met with blank stares all around.

He described the way that the Human Instrument worked. A person would lie down on the platform, which was set up to be a very basic resonating chamber for the low-frequency sounds produced by the subwoofers. As there were nine subwoofers, the vibrations that passed through the platform into the people lying on it were intense.

"You're the instrument," Wayne said. "We all walk around with a little drum keeping a beat anyway." He pointed to his chest. "Everyone who's alive has got a pulse, and you've also got these bags of air in there, too." When he got no response from the family, he added, "You know, your heart and lungs. It's not that you're making any noises yourself, of course. But you can feel the music playing you from the inside out. It

reminds us that we are connected to our world. The lines aren't so defined as we might think."

The teenage girl spoke up for the first time since the beginning of the tour. "That's a really gross way to put it. Bags of air." She stepped forward and handed Wayne the earmuffs, then turned to her parents. "I don't want to do this. I'm going to wait in the car."

Her mother followed her out of the room. Wayne could hear them speaking in hushed tones, followed by a burst of laughter.

The father looked embarrassed.

"Can we do it now? Be the instruments?" the boy asked.

"Sure," Wayne said. "Put on your earmuffs and lie down on the platform. Flat on your back."

He put on his own earmuffs and walked to the end of the room where the giant stereo was arranged against the wall. It was a mess of speaker cones, foam, wood cases, some large, some small, jutting out from the wall at varying depths. Wayne wasn't exactly sure how it had managed to stay standing for so long without toppling over. The weight distribution of the stacks seemed to defy conventional physics.

He flipped red switches on three separate power strips in front of the stereo, and the mass hummed to life. At a volume that could only be described as obscene, *Stars and Stripes Forever* exploded from the speakers. The little boy's eyes opened wide.

"I can feel it!" he screamed. "Dad! Mr. Samson! I can feel it! This is awesome!"

Wayne thought back to the first time he realized that he could feel sound vibrating inside himself. He and his family had been downtown for the annual Labor Day parade,

munching on too-salty popcorn and drinking Coke from sweaty bottles. The parade had run smoothly past them until around dusk, when one of the leading trucks had broken down. The parade sat at a standstill, with the tail end of the high school marching band parked in front of them. After playing through a few songs, most of the band set down their instruments and milled around talking. However, the drum corps continued to play cadences directly in front of Wayne and his family.

Wayne stood with his arms crossed and was surprised to find a persistent vibration coming from within. He placed his hand against his chest and felt the rhythms. The beats from the drums were coming into his little body and rattling around, and it brought an impossibly large smile to his face.

Wayne shut off the sound wall as soon as the song was over.

“Mr. Samson, that was so cool. What’s next?” the boy asked.

“Well, I usually take folks to the Fish Bowl after this room, and then we end with a walk on the Fairy Trail. But really we can do it in any order you— ”

The boy’s father cut him off. “Mr. Samson, we probably need to hit the road.”

“But,” the boy protested, “we haven’t even been to the Fish Bowl yet! The book says that’s one of the best rooms!”

“No buts, it’s time to go,” the father insisted. He turned toward Wayne. “Thanks, Mr. Samson.” The man gestured around himself, “Good luck with...this.”

Wayne nodded and led the man and his son to the front of his house. He watched as their minivan turned around and rolled down the drive. The little boy climbed into the last row of seats and waved out the back window of the van. Wayne’s arms felt heavy, but he managed to wave back.

Wayne prepared himself the dinner he did most nights: a Hungry Man microwave meal from the freezer in the garage. He ate at the kitchen table, where he had left the manila envelope the sheriff had brought that morning. As he took a bite of his Salisbury steak, he aimlessly flipped through the documents.

It was evident that whoever had prepared the paperwork had taken one of his tours, without his knowledge that they were inspecting each of his rooms. Wayne had no doubt that bringing his house up to the county's standards would be prohibitively expensive. Any way that he looked at it, it seemed that he was going to lose his collections. He put the documents back in the envelope and tossed it to the side.

After Wayne finished his dinner, he threw away the plastic tray, walked to the rear of the house and out onto the porch, where he took a seat in a frayed green and white lawn chair. He looked out across the grass to the Fish Bowl, which stood at the back of the yard.

The Fish Bowl was the size of a small shed, eight feet square in ground area, with walls about as high made of empty glass fish tanks and a black tarp slung over its top serving as a makeshift roof. It had taken Wayne nine years to collect enough tanks for the small building. One hundred twenty-five tanks were used in its construction, none new, all hazy with calcium deposits, algae residue, or mildew dotting the sides of the glass. The Fish Bowl wasn't yet complete; its final incarnation was to have it completely full of fish and flora, fully rigged up with pumps and filters. Visitors would be able to walk into the Fish Bowl and look out through the glowing tanks—a makeshift alternative to being underwater, themselves.

As boys, Wayne and Charlie shared a small fish tank that they kept in the garage and regularly filled with things they caught in and around Farrowfall Creek, which intersected the state highway they lived on about a quarter mile south down the road. Mudpuppies, ring neck snakes, minnows, an occasional crawfish, the boys built small mounds of rocks for the reptiles, filled the surrounding area of the tank with water for the aquatic creatures. Many of the animals quickly died, of course, but some held on for a good while—most notable of which was a small strawberry bass they named Billy that lived for almost six months in the tank. The evening they found Billy dead, Charlie put an arm around his brother’s shoulders, pulling him close.

“Maybe we shouldn’t have kept Billy,” Wayne said. The fish bobbed across the top of the tank, its normally supple form caught in a stiff bow, eyes glazed a milky hue.

“No, Billy was happy to live here with us. I’m sure of it. He was probably just old.”

“You can’t know what he thought,” Wayne said, bitterly. “You don’t know what fish really think. Maybe he hated it here, and all he wanted was to get back to the creek so he could be with his friends again.”

Charlie grabbed the net the boys used to catch inhabitants for their tank. As he dipped the net into the water, swinging it toward Billy, he turned to Wayne. “Do you trust me?”

Wayne nodded.

“Well then trust me when I tell you that Billy was happy here. Trust me when I say that I know the real way fish think.”

Wayne nodded and looked away as his brother dumped Billy into a plastic sack, tied it up, and walked to the end of the driveway to drop it in the garbage can. There was no way that Charlie could know what fish thought. Wayne imagined he shrank down to a few inches tall, transformed into a fish, and was plopped into the fish tank in their garage. Would he feel trapped? Made the object of a child's entertainment? Would he like to have people come by and look at him? Maybe he would; maybe he'd enjoy showing them a flourish with his tail, or do a little jump out of the water. There was no way to know.

As it grew dark, Wayne found himself with an unobstructed view of the starry night sky. He was filled with the rare and peculiar feelings he often had while musing on stars: a sense of perception that allows the sky to be both flat and three-dimensional, that while the earth is most certainly moving it seems to remain static, and that one's own blossoming human soul is at once infinitely insignificant and yet still somehow possessed of all that has ever existed and ever will.

Wayne shook himself back to earth: sitting on his back porch in a rotting lawn chair, watching the stars. He thought of the little boy who had visited the museum that day. How excited he'd been and how eagerly he had listened to Wayne as they moved through the house. Mostly, though, he thought of the sadness he'd felt when the little boy waved at him through the back of his parents' van as they left. They were simple emotions that he was experiencing: when the boy had been there, he'd felt happy, after the boy had left, an overwhelming loneliness settled in.

Wayne went back into his house and found the manila envelope that the sheriff had brought by earlier, sat down at the kitchen table, and laid out its contents. He read the pages calmly and carefully this time, pausing to take notes on a steno pad. By the time he

made it through all of the documents, he'd compiled a full list of the changes he'd have to make to the museum to keep it open: a special permit to display the specimens in the Dead Things Room publicly, the Human Instrument would need to be completely rewired and outfitted for higher voltage use, application for nonprofit status, and as a nonprofit he would have to fully account for all donations received, be they monetary or material. Wayne pushed a hand through his hair and sat back in his chair.

He wasn't sure if he'd be able to come up with the money he would need. And yet he felt something deeper, a pressing up, a kind of excitement, that told him he couldn't shut it down.

At the back of the garage was a stack of boxes, and Wayne tore a flap off of one of them, then got a hammer and nails. He walked to the front porch, sat down on the steps, and with a thick black pen he scrawled, "CLOSED" in large letters, then nailed the cardboard across the "Samson Shack" sign next to the porch.

Wayne rolled the pen between his hands. After a while, he crouched before the sign and wrote "FOR NOW" across the bottom.

CONJOINED

Nora collected her belongings and stuffed them into a black tote bag. The community center was already closed, and she was the last one in the building. As the director of the city's largest non-profit, she had spent the afternoon wrangling fourth graders through a visit to the Children's Museum downtown. Even though she was burdened with stacks of administrative work every day, she still took time to be with the kids. It was what had gotten her into non-profit work to begin with.

Nora wasn't able to have children—she found that out a few weeks after Harrison proposed. Kids were nonnegotiable for him, and he wasn't keen on the idea of adoption. Nora's separation from Harrison left her clinging to the few things that were solid in her life: her job, her family, and the bar close to her house.

Nora was careful not to get too attached to the kids at work, but she still couldn't help but feel maternal toward them. She dreamed of adopting two children, with or without a man to help her raise them, and one day opening a non-profit of her own, geared at providing after-school programming for kids in her own neighborhood.

Nora shut off the lights, locked the front doors to the community center, and got in her car. She plugged her mp3 player into the stereo and started playing the Rolling Stones' *Exile on Main*. A light rain was falling, tapping gently on the roof of the car. She sat back in her seat, relaxed into the music, and began driving home.

Nora didn't see the cyclist before she hit him.

The Avenue was decorated for Christmas already—two weeks after Halloween, when the days were still warm—and the rain refracted the brightly colored lights strung in the trees that lined the street. Ahead there was a stop sign. But before she could stop, he was there, coming up alongside her. Startled, Nora swerved. There was a flash of sneakers and blue jeans, a red T-shirt, and the bike flew up onto the hood. Spider web cracks burst onto the windshield as the bike made impact and fell to the side of the car.

Her whole body shook with adrenaline as she got out. She saw the tangled mess of bike first; the front wheel curved into an oblong orbit while the rear wheel, unscathed, still rotated innocently on its axle. Rain whirled around her as she moved to the side of the road and saw the bicyclist.

He was an older man, at least sixty-five, lying face down on the road's shoulder. His right leg bent unnaturally at the knee, turning in a ninety-degree angle away from his left leg, and his hands curled limply at his sides. She knelt down next to him. Blood ran from the ear closest to Nora, where rain mixed it into a light pink stream that ran over the folds in the old man's face. His eyes were slivers, open just enough that Nora could see their pupils, fixed on nothing. She put her trembling hand out and held it beneath the man's nose. Nothing.

Nora stood and wiped her hands on her soaked jeans, as if to dry them. She looked down the Avenue and shivered. Raindrops fell hard against her scalp, trickling down through her hair and running onto her forehead and the nape of her neck. She looked again to the man.

His loose, grimy clothes were soaked through, exposing the rail thin body that they contained. Nora didn't know how long it had been since she hit him. Mere seconds? Ten minutes? Time slackened into a viscous thing, all slow flow and curves that made it difficult to put anything into the order it happened. She put two fingers against his left wrist and pressed gently. His skin was cold and wet. Though she strained to feel it, the light tapping of his pulse, there was nothing. The man was dead.

Nora stood in the diminishing rain and thumbed her phone in her pocket. She felt a wash of relief that the Avenue was so empty at that moment, and that her car shielded most of the man's body from the scant passing cars. She took her phone out and looked at the screen. A swell of nausea passed through her as she felt her immediate impulse. Get in the car and leave.

Certain aspects of her life came like lightning before her: the desire to adopt children, wanting to keep her position at the community center. But someone with something like this on their record wouldn't be able to do either of those things. She had barred volunteers from working at the community center when their background checks pulled up much milder offenses.

Nora walked to the driver's door and got back inside. In the car it was quiet, just a soft tick-ticking of the light rain. She punched 911 into her phone and held her thumb

over the “Call” button. But in one abrupt motion, she dropped her phone onto the passenger seat, shifted into drive, and sped away from the man and his bike.

About a mile down the road, she pulled up to a red light and stopped. While she waited at the intersection, a car pulled up behind her, and another came alongside her. She held her gaze steady. If she looked at them, somehow, they would know what she’d done. Nora continued on toward her house, focusing on the process of driving with the same concentration she used when she drove home after too many drinks. In defiance of her quaking body, she wanted to drive perfectly.

Nora’s hands eased up on the wheel and her posture relaxed as she turned onto her street. She parked at the curb in front of her house, got out of the car, and looked at the hood. It was heavily dented, puckered in like a piece of deconstructed origami. The busted windshield was cracked where the man’s head must have made impact. If anyone asked, she could say it had been vandalism: someone damaged her car while she slept in her house, peacefully.

Nora stood in front of her house, holding her keys, deciding whether she should enter. The last few drops of the passing storm fell onto her face and trembling shoulders, where they slid in downward in halting streams. Inside her house, she would be alone with what had just happened. The TV and internet would only distract for so long. If she went to the bar, she could numb herself, at least a little.

Young’s, her home bar, was a short two-block walk away. As Nora approached, she could hear the jukebox rattling the windows of the old place. The air conditioner window units for the bar blew a tart exhaust of cigarettes and beer out into the street, and Nora passed through it as she headed for the entrance. The bar had been painted many

different colors through the years and the paint outside was gummy and thick. Nora pushed against the sticky door to the bar, recently painted black, and entered.

It was a long rectangle of a place, with a polished oak bar that ran the length of the room. A burgundy ceiling of hammered tin reflected light from the few fixtures, casting the bartender and clientele in a warm, red glow. An old television glared from the corner, showing hazy football players crashing against one another.

Usually the regulars sat at the far end of the room, but tonight Nora took a seat on a stool closer to the door, where she could possibly avoid any involved conversation. Of course, there was also the possibility that sitting away from her friends would bring more attention than diverting it.

“Whoo—looks like you got caught in the rain.” Harlon said, strolling down the length of the bar toward Nora. He leaned over and grabbed a glass from beneath the bar. “Want a greyhound?”

Nora nodded, shivering in the bar’s air conditioning.

Harlon prepared her drink and brought it back to where she sat. “You doing OK? Looks like you’re carrying the weight of the world on those little shoulders of yours.”

Nora shook her head. “No, just a long day.” She forced a smile at Harlon. “Know what I mean?”

“Baby, you know I know.” He left Nora with her drink and walked to the other end of the bar.

Nora placed her hands flat on the curved edge of the bar and pushed back, stretching her arms. Someone had played a good dose of heavy metal on the jukebox, and

the songs rattled her. The action of the scene on the Avenue played out in her mind, sped up and synchronized with the frenzied music. And the words: hit and run.

“Nora!” called Mr. Joey, one of the regulars who sat at the other end of the bar.

“What are you doing all the way down there? Come on!”

“Hey, Mr. Joey,” Nora called back.

“Well,” Mr. Joey said, “come on down if you want to.”

The image of the dead man floated, a specter fading in and out of focus. The stream of blood from his ear, his hands coiled at his sides, his baggy clothes soaked and sucking to his body.

Nora caught Harlon’s eye. “You ready?” he called back to her.

She shook her head.

Harlon looked to Nora’s glass, reached forward, and tapped its edge.

“Is there something wrong with it?” Harlon asked, leaning on the bar in front of Nora.

“Huh?”

“You haven’t touched your drink. Taste off?”

Nora looked to a sign that hung on the wall behind the shelves of liquor:

“Bartenders are psychiatrists for the masses.” But, no. She couldn’t tell Harlon about the man. She couldn’t tell anyone.

“No, it’s fine,” she said.

Harlon cocked an eyebrow at her.

“I promise.”

“All right, then,” Harlon said, turning back to the end of the bar where the regulars were congregated.

Harlon then left Nora alone. He was that sort of bartender. He could tell when someone needed to be left to themselves. Nora crossed her arms on the edge of the bar and let her head fall on top of them, where she stayed, eyes closed.

A few moments later, she heard the creak of someone sitting down on the barstool next to her and looked up. Mr. Joey reached out and put his hand on her back.

“Let me buy you a drink,” he said, signaling Harlon over to their end of the bar. “Put her next one on my tab,” Mr. Joey said to Harlon, who nodded.

She wasn’t interested in talking to Mr. Joey, but he verged on royalty in the bar, and she didn’t want to disrespect him. He was pushing eighty and was the patron who had been coming there the longest—since 1951, he often boasted.

“Why you sitting over here all by yourself?” Mr. Joey asked, adjusting his peddler’s cap.

Nora shrugged. “Just felt like it.”

Mr. Joey laughed. “Guess I can’t argue with that.”

The two sat in silence for a moment.

“You’re coming with us tonight, right?” Mr. Joey asked.

“Huh?”

“We’re going to get the Christmas tree for the bar, remember? I talked to you about it last week.”

“Oh,” Nora said. A Christmas tree seemed absolutely unimportant at that moment. “I guess I forgot.”

“Harlon’s closing down early. We’re driving to the other end of the Avenue, to that church that’s got the tree lot. Then we’ll bring it back and decorate it.”

Harlon moved down to where Nora and Mr. Joey sat. “Come on with us,” Harlon said. “You look like you could use...something. Come on.”

Nora looked at her drink, still full. The others had been drinking most of the evening, she was sure of it. They probably all had a nice buzz on, and going to get a Christmas tree was going to be fun. She normally would have been excited about going with them. She shivered in her half-damp clothes, wishing that the guys would leave her alone, that the bar would stay open. That she hadn’t driven down the Avenue at that particular moment. She wished that something in her day had gone slightly differently, sending a ripple into the evening, causing her and the man not even to cross paths. All of the tiny differences that could have disrupted her trajectory, allowed her to come home to a quiet, relaxed evening. To allow the man to still be alive.

Harlon smiled. “You know what, I’m not taking no for an answer. You’re coming.”

Mr. Joey, Harlon, and Nora crammed into the front bench seat of Harlon’s pickup truck. Harlon started the truck and cranked the heat.

“Whoo, it’s turned chilly,” he said. “Give her a minute.”

Nora sat in the middle. She rubbed her hands together and held them up to her mouth, where she breathed hot air between them. Her still damp clothes felt stiff and cold against her shivering frame.

Harlon took off down the side street that Young's was on, and turned onto the Avenue, going in the direction of the site where Nora had hit the man. As they approached, Nora tensed. She wondered if there would be an ambulance or police officers there. Would it be a scene? Would the man's body still be there? No. Someone would have seen it by now. The location of the hit passed on the right, empty. There were no swarming paramedics, no flashing lights, no man. It was as if nothing had happened there at all.

Nora imagined the man being loaded into an ambulance, which would have sped to the hospital downtown. A few minutes of efforts at resuscitation, and he would have been pronounced dead. Someone would have tracked down the man's family, called them. Maybe his wife and daughter would be there. They would be hovering in the waiting room, frightened and worried. Something like hopefulness would pass over their faces as a doctor approached them with the news. But then it would be the howling, moaning sighs of the deepest sort of loss. His wife collapsing on the floor and—

“Here we go,” Harlon said, pulling into the parking lot of First Methodist Church. Mr. Joey took out a small oval flask and passed it to Nora, who brought it to her mouth and tipped it back, but blocked its opening with her tongue, not allowing any whiskey to pass. She handed it to Harlon, who took a swig and passed it back to Mr. Joey.

He tapped the edge of the flask. “Warm you right up.”

The three got out of the truck and walked to the side of the church, where the tree lot was located. There was a square fence erected in the parking lot, strung with large, white Christmas lights. Trees, wrapped with twine into long cones, were piled against the inside of the fence, arranged by size. Several trees were unwrapped, their lush branches reaching out and up. The lights glowed brightly, illuminating Nora's face, and a pop version of "White Christmas" came from a battered boom box sitting at the entrance to the lot.

"Usually get a small one," Harlon said, running his fingers up the front of one of the trees in the "Miniature" section. "But this year, I think the bar should have a nice big one. One of those over there." He pointed to the eight-foot section of the lot. They walked in that direction.

Nora looked over the trees. There was one that had sparse needles, making it almost possible to see through. Another was perfectly shaped, a regal triangular form, full and thick. Nora walked over to one off to the side, asymmetrical, with a deformed trunk. From the side of its base, a shoot came off and another smaller tree grew beside it, attached. She reached out and touched the branches of the smaller, conjoined tree.

Nora thought to how the dead man would have spent his Christmas, warm and festive with his family. She pictured him in the quiet glow of Christmas tree lights, moving slowly around a tree with his grandson, dotting it with ornaments. Maybe a few store-bought ones, maybe a few that his children had made when they were young—tattered and showing their age, but still his favorites.

A lot attendant came to Nora's side. "We can take that little bugger off for you. Don't worry." He reached out and began twisting and yanking at the little tree, but it held

fast to its larger counterpart. “Well, anyway, if this is the tree you want, we’ll chop off that extra part there.”

Nora shrugged. “Don’t know if we’re getting this tree. I’m not the one buying.”

Harlon and Mr. Joey walked over to where Nora and the attendant stood. Harlon put his arm around Nora and rubbed her shoulder.

“Think this is the one?” He laughed and tilted his head. “Looks a little raggedy. But it does come with a bonus tree!”

Mr. Joey took a swig from his flask and passed it around. Even the attendant took a little sip, after checking over his shoulder.

Harlon stood back, eyeing the tree. “You know what, let’s get this one. I like it.”

The attendant shrugged. “All right. Let me get it wrapped up for you. And I’ll cut this little guy off.” He tugged at the attached tree.

“Nah,” Harlon said. “Let’s keep it.”

Nora picked up a tray of orb-shaped ornaments spotted with snowflakes and went to the tree. Harlon only had two short strings of lights, so the tree was mostly dark, with a few clumps of brightness here and there. Nora tried to place the ornaments close to the lights, so that they would reflect their color and sparkle more. She concentrated deeply on the task at hand.

As she reached to the inner portion of the tree with a blue ornament, the wrist of her sweater snagged on a twig and the hook slipped from between her fingers. The

ornament bounced down through the tree branches with dull metallic thuds. It shattered out into mirrored slivers, the largest of which came to rest by Nora's foot.

She was frozen, staring at the ruined ornament. The image of the man came again, fully formed in her mind. The man alive and then dead, just like that. Because of her. The man's family at the hospital, wailing with grief. Nora walked to the bar and sat down.

Harlon had reopened the bar and was tending to a couple that had come in a few moments after they got back from the lot. Mr. Joey was sitting toward the end of the bar, and Nora took a seat next to him. Without her asking, Harlon brought her a greyhound. Nora looked to the mirrored back of the bar, where her reflection shone in the dim red light. The face of a killer.

She rapidly tapped her stir straw against the edge of her glass. "I did something bad, Mr. Joey."

He turned toward her, but didn't say anything.

"Like, really bad."

He sighed and looked up to the ceiling. "Guilt's pretty useless, you know. Doesn't really get much done."

Nora shrugged. "Maybe I deserve to feel it."

Mr. Joey closed his eyes for a moment, and then looked back at Nora.

"Do you believe in God?"

The question caught her. "Well," she began, "not really. Not in a conventional sense anyway."

“OK,” Mr. Joey said, drawing out the second syllable of the word. He looked about the room, his eyes widening as they passed over the deformed Christmas tree.

“How about trees? You believe in trees?”

Nora felt like he was screwing with her. “Sure, I believe in trees,” she said, turning back to the bar.

“OK, well, you know what aspens are?”

“It’s a tree I’m guessing?”

“It’s a really special kind of tree. You know how trees usually stand by themselves, not connected to anything else?”

“Sure,” Nora said.

“Well,” he continued, “aspens aren’t like that. A grove of aspens is all connected, each of the trees tied into an intricate root system underground. Kind of like that tree we got. So, in the fall, when one of the trees changes color, they all change. And if one of them gets sick, they all get sick. I heard somewhere once that the largest living organism on earth was a huge aspen grove in China.”

Nora turned back to Mr. Joey brusquely. “OK, so what’s that mean? It’s a cool fact, but what’s that got to do with anything?”

“On the surface they look separate, but really they’re all connected. They share more than you can see. The changes only seem coincidental, but really it’s all happening for a simple, unseen reason.”

“And if I’d said that I believed in God,” Nora said, “you would say that ‘unseen reason’ was God?”

Mr. Joey chuckled. “Well, maybe not that simply, but yes. In any case, guilt doesn’t help anything. And you might have been meant to do whatever you did for some reason, you just might not know the reason yet.”

If Nora was following him correctly, then there was some reason why she hit the man, some force that dictated their movements. On this particular day, it was already a foregone conclusion that her life and the man’s life would collide, leaving only one of them remaining. Nora wasn’t comforted by this idea. She was terrified of it. Her mind spun off into questions without answers. If she was meant to kill the man, could she have been meant to keep it a secret? What does it mean that her destiny was to be a killer of an innocent pedestrian? If she were willing to accept the unflinching nature of having a destiny, would she have to accept the existence of a force that controlled it?

Harlon walked over and leaned against the bar, looking at Nora. “Still not thirsty, eh?”

She forced a half-smile. “Guess not.” He moved back to the other end of the bar.

Nora cast her gaze on the TV, allowing her mind to settle into a blank, foggy state.

The news squawked away the tragedies of the day—a profound cut in teachers’ salaries, a young boy caught by a stray bullet, an overturned semi on the highway that caused a massive pile-up.

But then: “And now we have tonight’s Crime Crusher. At approximately seven-thirty this evening, there was a hit and run on the Avenue, killing one man identified as sixty-nine-year-old Brenton Harris. Any information leading to the apprehension of the perpetrator should be reported to Crime Crushers. 1-800-55-CRIME.”

Nora's stomach clenched. Her breathing quickened, and she began tapping her foot against the bar. It took a moment for her to realize that she hadn't been outed. It didn't appear that anyone had any identifying details on her: no license plate, no physical description of her or her car. She was safe for the moment. But the relief of that realization didn't last long.

Seeing that the time was approaching two in the morning, and Nora did have to work the next day, she called Harlon over so she could close her tab.

"It's on me," Harlon said. "Chin up, all right?"

Nora forced a smile and walked to the door, where she stepped back out into the cool night air.

When she got home, she took a shower, but found halfway through that she felt dizzy and sat down in the tub. The hot water fell hard on her, steam filling up the bathroom. It was there, crouched by the drain, that Nora began to cry. She wasn't sure what were tears and what was the spray from the shower; it all ran down her face hot and unrelenting.

Lying in bed, Nora played the hit in her mind. The details swam together, but she was able to assemble a series of events that seemed to approximate what had happened. She was driving home from work. *Exile on Main* came from the car speakers. And then he was there, upon her. She checked his pulse at some point; she remembered that. It was still raining. There was that moment when she almost called 911. And then there was the moment that she left the man behind.

Nora tried fruitlessly to fall asleep. The shadows on her ceiling played out shifting transformations, sliding and stretching when a car's headlights passed over the window.

She took deep breaths to calm her trembling and tried to convince herself that she was safe, that she wouldn't be caught. She'd still be able to live her life the way she had been, and the way she wanted to in the future. But then the man's contorted body would come, eclipsing other thoughts.

Five in the morning came and went, then six. It was as if the old man were in bed with her, blood still running in a stream from his ear. His dirty clothes were covered in grease and dirt. His wet hair was matted to his forehead. She felt his weight next to her on the mattress, still and substantial. As her bedroom lightened with the coming day, Nora felt the old man attach himself to her, quiet and unremitting. When she got out of bed to get ready for work, the old man came with her.

NO SIMPLE HIGHWAY

It started when Jackson answered the call.

The news was on, and we sat on opposite ends of the couch, its broken innards cradling us in shallow pits. The phone rang, echoing through our mostly empty adobe house—a shrill yell into a box with tile floors. Jackson answered. It was his sister, Monica. I was glad that I hadn't abandoned my dent in the couch.

His voice lowered and was pierced by a note of urgency. I heard something fall against the oven. Walking to the kitchen, I found Jackson on the floor with his head against the cabinet next to the stove. He was sobbing terribly, his feet flexing and pushing our purple rag rug into a rumpled pile in the corner. The phone was still pressed to his ear, his free hand frantically tugging at his dark hair.

I had never seen Jackson cry. Having only lived together for two weeks, we still barely knew each other. We'd met while working together at the Sunnyside Baking Company, where I was a waitress and Jackson made salads and did prep work for the kitchen. We hadn't been close work-friends, but I'd always noticed Jackson, and he was always friendly with me. He was beautiful: a tall man with serious eyes, he always

looked disheveled in that way that suggested his looks didn't matter too much to him. When one day in the break room I mentioned to another co-worker that I was looking for a new place to live, Jackson chimed in. He had been couch surfing after moving out of a living situation that, in his words, "didn't do it for him." We took the first house we viewed, a prefab on the south side of Santa Fe. We were two strangers, sharing a space, and not much more.

I stared at the crippled blinds hanging unevenly halfway down the bay window beyond Jackson and listened to the sound of sobs. As quickly as he'd started crying, he stopped, stood up and walked back into the living room, returning to his end of the couch.

"Jackson..."

He stared at the TV. It was as if the last ten minutes had never happened.

"Jackson?"

With precision and without looking at me he related the call from his sister.

"She said Mom had been sick for a while. She had stomach cancer." His sobs started again. "Not even Monica knew. Mom didn't want anyone to know." He paused and collected himself. "The funeral is in two days in San Diego. I didn't even know she was living in San Diego."

My stomach turned with the thought of his mother's private, tortured death. I wanted to hug him, or at least put a hand on his shoulder. But that sort of physical contact seemed too intimate, so I stood in front of him, useless.

"Are you going to go?" I asked him.

Jackson sat forward on the edge of the couch, leaning on his knees. "Alice, I don't have money for a ticket. Even if I used everything I had, I wouldn't even be able to afford

the bus.”

I sat down on the couch next to him, my forearm brushing against his. I looked at him, then away, back toward the TV, where the news still blared. We both watched as the news anchor explained that new speed bumps were slated to be installed downtown.

I wanted to help Jackson get to San Diego, but I didn’t have any more money than he did.

I did have a car. However, one of the few personal details I knew about Jackson was that he didn’t drive. Jackson had a driver’s license and theoretically could drive a car, but he hadn’t driven one in almost a decade. Right after he’d turned sixteen he’d had a car accident where the man in the other car almost died. No seatbelt, through the windshield. Jackson hadn’t driven a car since. If I were going to help him out, it would mean driving the 15 hours myself, after a full day of work. By the time we arrived in San Diego, I would have been awake for well over 24 hours.

I’d driven to San Diego once before, during college, for spring break. Two friends and I had decided at the last minute to get out of Santa Fe for the week, and we’d driven straight through the night to get there. I’d done it before and I could probably do it again. But that seemed like too large of a favor to offer Jackson. We barely knew each other. Fifteen hours together in a car would change that, though.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hrm,” Jackson grunted. He didn’t look away from the TV.

“I could drive you to San Diego,” I said. “I mean, I have to work tomorrow. It’s too late to ask off now, but we could leave after that, at about seven-thirty or so.”

He looked at me. “Are you serious?”

I hesitated. “Well, yes. We could split gas.”

“You know, you really don’t have to offer that. I wasn’t trying to fish for it or anything.” There was a slight tone of defensiveness in his voice.

“I know that,” I said. “I’m offering it because I want to.”

Jackson leaned forward again, putting his head in his hands. He sighed and then let his hands fall to his sides. “You know I can’t drive, right?”

“I remember.”

“So you’d have to do it all.”

I nodded.

“Just so you know what you’re saying,” Jackson said. He sat quietly for a moment. “Well, yeah, it would be amazing if you could do that.”

“I’d kind of like to get out of town for a few days, too,” I said. It was true. Santa Fe was feeling stale to me. Its lights were dimmer, its colors muted, and the mountains smaller. My days consisted of work and an occasional evening out with friends. For the most part I just stayed around the house, watching TV. “Yeah,” I said. “I could use a little break.”

“It’s not going to be some kind of fun vacation, you know,” he said, looking to me with mild confusion. “We would be going to a funeral.”

There I was, coming off as too eager. “I know, I know,” I gushed. “I just mean that it wouldn’t be such an imposition because a little time away doesn’t sound like the worst thing right now.”

Jackson looked at me, tilted his head, then got up and walked to the kitchen. A cabinet opened and closed, and I heard a glass filling up with water. He walked back to

the living room.

“Well I’m going to bed. You’ll be home at seven-thirty tomorrow night?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll be ready,” he said. His footsteps padded softly across the tile floor and disappeared down the hallway to our bedrooms. I turned off the TV and sat in the silent living room.

It wasn’t more than two minutes before muffled sobs came from the hallway. I wanted to knock on his door, to somehow comfort him in a moment where it’s impossible to be comforted. But instead I sat quiet and still on the couch, listening to Jackson cry.

Work at the bakery the next day felt long, my tasks disconnected. I repeatedly wondered what I had committed to. Not only was I going to drive Jackson to San Diego, but I was going to meet his entire family, and in a highly emotionally charged situation. By the time I got home that evening I already had a coffee-laced buzz of fatigued anxiety humming through my body.

Jackson had gotten everything together. I slid behind the wheel, and Jackson took his seat next to me. In the blue light of the console, he looked like a child staring at a hazy summer moon. His face was smooth and expressive, a concerned brow, full lips.

“You ready?” I asked.

Jackson nodded.

The sun was still setting as we drove south to Albuquerque. A broad, rippling

sunset spread and melted to the west of the car. At that moment, the sunset seemed to be a seducer, a flaming arch hovering above the path we were taking to California. It coaxed us, convinced me that there was indeed going to be something beautiful about all of this. We would need to continue, to keep driving. The sun finally slid beneath the jugged horizon, at last a shimmering puddle of orange that dissolved away the day.

“How was today?” I asked Jackson, as we moved past the Albuquerque city limits.

He shrugged. “You know, it was a day off. I didn’t really do much.”

I waited for him to ask me how my day was, but he didn’t. “The bakery was really slow today,” I said. “Only got about twenty bucks in tips.”

“Sucks,” Jackson said, turning to the backseat. He rummaged around for a moment and came back with two CDs—Nick Drake’s *Pink Moon* and Elliot Smith’s *Either/Or*.

“Which suicidal singer-songwriter would you prefer to listen to?” he asked. “Driver gets to pick the tunes.”

I didn’t really want to listen to either of them, but I figured that Jackson wanted to listen to melancholic music, and I was willing to abide. “Nick Drake. *Pink Moon* is a great album.”

“That it is,” Jackson said.

He put the CD in and turned up the volume. Nick Drake’s soft strumming and airy vocals filled the car. I wanted to talk to Jackson, to know how he was feeling, what was going on in his head. I had never lost someone close to me. The thought of having to deal with something like that made me dizzy. I didn’t want him to feel like he was alone with it, but clearly he didn’t want to talk.

It was disappointing to miss the land we were driving through because of the darkness. I knew that beyond the tunnel of dark blue-black around the car, there were mesas, mountains, and sweeping rocky plains. But it was only with my peripheral vision that I could perceive them. If I tried to look directly, they would slide into the night sky and disappear.

As we crossed into Arizona, Jackson sat up. “Alice,” he said, “are you happy?”

I’d been thinking about how I was going to be able to afford Christmas presents that year, whether or not my recently acquired community college credits would ever transfer to any school outside of New Mexico, and when the last time was that I’d gotten my oil changed. His question caught me off guard. “Do you mean right now, in this car? Or, like, in my life?” I asked.

“I mean are you happy with yourself? With your life?”

“I don’t know. I guess not. I know that I’ve disappointed myself and my family, probably more ways than I could tell you right now.” I took a deep breath and continued. “I was supposed to be a lawyer, like my dad. I was supposed to go to the University of Alabama, like everyone else in my family. I’m OK with the choices I made; I have to be. But even so, I always thought I’d be, well, someone else by this point. Doing better.”

Jackson nodded. “I can relate to that.”

“But, I don’t really feel sad too often,” I said. “I guess it just feels like my life has stopped moving forward. It’s hard to imagine that there’s anything beyond the horizon.”

“Hey, but we just drove past the horizon,” Jackson said with a smile. I laughed. He was right. We’d passed beyond the cradle of mountains that give boundary to Santa Fe—the familiar horizon of our home.

“I don’t think that I really believe in happiness anymore,” Jackson said. “It seems like a stupid way to gauge the status of my life. I couldn’t stand school, I’ve never kept a job for more than six months, almost everyone that I’m related to denies my existence. I can’t keep a girlfriend; I get bored with most of my friends after a year or so...” he trailed off, staring at the darkness out the passenger window.

“Maybe you just haven’t found the right job,” I offered, “or met the right girl.”

“No, I’m a total failure in those ways,” he went on. “I know that.” He stretched and put his hands behind his head. “I’m getting ready to face my dad, and all of his family, my mom’s husband, hell, even my mom, in a way. I don’t want to answer their questions about what I’m doing, about my future, because at this point in my life I don’t need their bullshit plans. I have my books and a jerk off job that allows me hours a day to think about whatever I want. I’ve learned how to be alone, Alice, and it’s fine.”

I silently disagreed with him. To think about oneself that way didn’t really seem useful. But I felt the distance between Jackson and me, the fact that we weren’t really friends. Instead of responding honestly, I said, “I didn’t know you liked to read.”

Jackson dropped his arms back into his lap and sighed. I was sure he thought that I’d missed the point.

The gas light had come on, and I had a reason to diverge from the conversation, as there was a gas station in sight. “Hey, we need gas,” I said. I settled my attention on the gas station, as if it were the last one we would ever see, and, if I didn’t concentrate on docking the car there, we would somehow miss it.

Jackson settled back into his seat and stretched his legs out.

It was a brightly lit place with two pumps, nestled back in the rocky cliffs that

lined the side of the highway. As I pumped the gas, I leaned against the back bumper of my car. It was dirty. I wrote my name in the grime with my index finger, then smeared it away and wiped my finger on my jeans. I didn't want to get back in the car.

I paid a female attendant whose nametag read "Strawberry" for the gas and a cup of coffee, and walked back to the car. Jackson was still staring out the window.

We rode in silence for fifty odd miles. We passed through Flagstaff and started heading south again.

"So," Jackson said, as if he'd been interrupted mere seconds before and was simply continuing a previous thought, "I just sort of feel like this funeral will be a good chance for me to have closure with my family. Like, a good chance for me to honestly tell them to fuck off because I have a life of my choosing. In that way, I'll have something they can never have." He ended his statement defiantly, as if he had something to prove to me.

"Good for you," I said, honestly. Though as I said it, I think it sounded more cynical than intended.

We fell into silence again. Jackson pulled a blanket from the back seat, a cheap woven thing I'd bought for five dollars in Taos the previous summer. He arranged himself with his head wedged between the edge of the seat and the door. I thought through what Jackson had said. He saw himself as a failure in all ways, but claimed that he was all right with that. It sounded like some truly juvenile logic. I felt my affections toward Jackson shift. No longer the strong, if somewhat harried, man that I thought I knew, Jackson seemed like a child living in a world of denial about what his life choices had yielded.

I found myself stewing, growing angry with him for what he'd said, growing angry with him for not being the person I wished he'd been.

Four came and went, five-fifteen, then five-thirty. My eyes were dry. My stomach cramped from the cocktail of caffeinated drinks. My back hurt from sitting in the same position for eleven hours. I couldn't recall what the last hundred miles of road had looked like. We crossed into California. Jackson barely stirred.

I counted down the hours. We had about four hours left, maybe a little more. I turned the stereo up, curled myself over the steering wheel, and stared down the road. The replay of Jackson's lonely words rattled my exhausted mind. I was angry at Jackson and at the never-ending road.

I knew I was swerving horribly, but I had to keep going. It was a gauntlet that had been laid down, a test. How strong was I, really? A haze of gray, black, and white and the car was violently vibrating.

"Alice!" Jackson yelled.

The sleep was shocked out of me and I was awake again—the car was half on the shoulder, half on red rocky dirt, going seventy miles per hour.

I overcorrected, throwing the car back onto the pavement, skidding halfway across the road. After regaining control, I steered the car back onto the shoulder, stopped, and turned it off.

I looked at him, trembling. "Jackson, I fell asleep."

"Yeah. You almost killed us," Jackson said, laughing. "Well, you know, take a minute. Get yourself together. We'll get you some coffee."

"What?" Jackson was laughing about this? I was so tired I doubted that I could

drive another fifteen minutes without dozing off again. “I fell asleep,” I repeated. “I can’t drive more right now. I’ve got to take a nap.”

“But,” he protested, “if we don’t keep driving, we’re not going to make the funeral.”

“I’m really sorry. I really am, but I just can’t. I could have killed us.”

He looked away from me.

“Jackson?”

“Hrm.”

“Jackson, you could drive.”

He shot me a cold glare, then opened the door and clambered out. He went to slam the door but caught it and stuck his head back in.

“Fuck you, Alice.” He then slammed the door and walked away from the car. I sat for a moment. Let him blow off some steam. I knew I didn’t want to talk to him while he was like that. However, once I realized that he wasn’t stopping, I got out of the car and jogged after him.

He was walking down the shoulder with long strides, arms flying out with each step, his hair jolting this way and that.

“Jackson, where are you going?” I screamed.

“Get back in the car, Alice. You need your goddamn sleep.”

“What are you going to do? Please stop!”

Jackson had turned and was walking backwards on the shoulder, facing the scarce oncoming traffic, his right thumb extended toward the sky.

“What does it look like I’m doing?!” he roared back at me. “I’m going to San

Diego!” His voice broke as he screamed. “I can’t fuck this up. I understand that you’re tired, but I can’t drive. Idiots can drive cars, it’s a simple thing to do, completely mechanical.” He kicked at the gravel on the shoulder and sarcasm pierced his voice. “But somehow, surprise, surprise, Jackson Williams, incredibly successful in every way, cannot drive a car!”

“That’s not you,” I said. “You’re not an idiot, Jackson. Come on.” He stopped walking away from me.

I went to his side. The sky was beginning to lighten, and Jackson looked gray and frail in the pale blue of the coming day. I felt small and exposed, standing next to my friend on the side of some random stretch of California highway.

He ran a hand through his hair and looked at me. His eyes were wide and teary. “I haven’t done it in a long time. Like, a really long time.”

“I know that. But you can just take it slow. It’s like riding a bicycle. I don’t think you ever really forget how to do it.”

Jackson looked back toward the car for a moment, then back at me. “Fine, I’ll drive.”

I handed Jackson the keys, and we walked to the car. He opened the door and sat heavily behind the wheel, sliding the seat back to accommodate his longer legs. I sat down in the passenger seat and covered myself with the woven blanket that lay on the floor. Jackson started the car.

He reached tentatively for the turn signal, began to accelerate on the shoulder, and pulled onto the empty highway. I curled up under the blanket and pretended to sleep. Not only could I not fall asleep, but I was entranced by the sight of Jackson driving.

After a few minutes of going about ten miles per hour below the speed limit, Jackson sped up and relaxed back into his seat. I searched in the backseat for his bag of CDs and pulled it to the front.

“What do you want to listen to?” I asked. “Driver picks the tunes.”

Jackson glanced at the bag and then looked back ahead. “Something good for being on the road.”

“You want the Elliott Smith that you pulled out earlier?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Something else. I think there’s some Johnny Cash in there somewhere. *At Folsom Prison?*”

I found the CD and held it up triumphantly. “Got it.”

The rhythm of the road fell in line with the rhythm of Johnny Cash’s music and we drove on. It was as if the self-dismissive and defiant Jackson from the beginning of our trip had been replaced with the Jackson that I’d thought I knew. He bobbed his head to the music, tapping his fingers along the edge of the steering wheel, singing along with Johnny’s baritone. I wanted to tell him that I didn’t think he was a failure. It was probably the fatigue and its accompanying reduction in good judgment, but it seemed like a good idea to tell him that I thought so.

“I don’t think you’re a failure, Jackson,” I said quickly. I turned away from him and looked out the passenger window.

He cleared his throat. “Well, to be fair, you don’t know me that well.”

I sat up. “Maybe not. But what I do know about you doesn’t at all show you to be a failure.”

Jackson shrugged.

“Look,” I said, “I told you some of the ways I let other people down in my life. But I wouldn’t say that I’m a failure. I’m doing *something* with my life. Even if it’s not being a lawyer or whatever.”

Jackson furrowed his brow. “It’s pretty simple. I think that if you try to do things and it turns out you can’t do them, then you are a failure. It’s kind of like the definition of the word. I’ve tried to do a lot of things, and I failed at most of them. So now I just do what I can to get by. I’m alone most of the time, and that’s OK with me. You’re probably my closest friend, and we don’t know each other at all.”

“And that’s OK with you?” I asked.

Jackson visibly clenched the steering wheel. With knuckles taut and wrists wrenching, he pulled himself forward and groaned.

“What do you want me to say?” he said. “That I’m not OK with it? That I’m lonely and wish that everything had been different?”

“Jackson, no...” I started.

“You want me to tell you that I’m not even close to being OK with how my life turned out?”

I tried to interrupt him again, but he pushed through my efforts.

“Well, you got it! Here I am! I’m a lonely, bitter person who’s probably held back by laziness more than anything else. I’m *not* OK with my life. I’m really not. But I have no idea how to change it. There. That better?”

We rode in silence for a few moments. Full, bright morning daylight was upon us. I braided the fringe on the edge of the blanket that was still wrapped around me.

“I wasn’t trying to get you to say something like that,” I said. It just seemed like

you were putting up a front. I'd like to get to know you better than that.”

Jackson pushed back into the seat and glanced at me, but didn't respond.

Signs of human life became more and more frequent, the open land more scarce. At last we entered unruly civilization, the San Diego city limits. I had braided the fringe of an entire side of my blanket, and now worked quickly at unbraiding it. My hands were restless bodies, unable to sit still and relax into the road. I shouldn't have said anything to Jackson. I should have left him alone with whatever sort of worldview he wanted to have. My hope of getting to know more about him, to see him as more than just a guy who I shared a house with, had faded away. He was far away from me, even though our arms almost touched.

The funeral and burial left Jackson quiet and withdrawn, even more so usual for him.

“You want me to drive?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “You mind if I do?”

“Not at all. Where do you want to go now?” I asked, as I handed him the keys and we got back into the car. “You want to get something to eat?”

“Not hungry,” he said. “I'll just drive. We'll end up somewhere.”

We turned out of the cemetery and onto a mostly empty residential street.

As we made it down toward the highway, we came upon a sign that simply read, “Beaches,” and had an arrow aiming toward the highway onramp. Jackson pointed at the sign.

“You want to go to the beach?” I asked.

Jackson nodded.

“Good by me,” I said.

We cruised through traffic, Jackson swerving to deftly move between cars, as if they were mere obstacles. Signs continued to guide our way, and soon, there was the ocean.

Jackson parked the car in a lot that sat a few feet above a lovely stretch of white shore. I took off my shoes and walked down to the beach. Jackson followed. We sat next to each other in two divots in the sand, facing the ocean. The late afternoon sun was sitting low and the light shone fragmented on the water.

We didn’t speak for a long time.

“You OK?” I finally asked.

Jackson shrugged. “As OK as I think is possible, all things considered.”

“You were pretty quiet at the funeral,” I said.

“Well, it was a funeral.”

Just before sunset Jackson walked to a café and bought coffee and grilled cheese sandwiches for our dinner.

“You know, grilled cheese is my favorite sandwich,” I said.

“I know.”

“How could you possibly know that?”

“It’s the only thing you ever cook,” he said. “At least it seems that way.”

I took a sip of coffee. “I do eat a lot of grilled cheeses,” I said.

“And you drink a lot of coffee, too,” he responded, with a mouthful of grilled

cheese. “I notice more than you think.”

After we ate, Jackson got up and took off his shirt and pants, and stood in his boxers in the cool, evening air.

“I think it’s time for a swim,” he said, already walking toward the water. The V shape of his torso moved back and forth slightly as he walked, the muscles in his back clenching as a breeze pushed its way along the beach. Before he reached the water, he turned and came back to where I was sitting.

“Come swim with me,” he said, extending his hand to me.

“I don’t know. Seems kind of cold.”

“Nah,” he said, “come on.”

“I’ll blame you if I get pneumonia,” I said. I took his hand and he pulled me up out of my spot in the sand. I took off my sweatshirt and shorts and followed a few paces behind, coming to the foam from a retreating wave. The water shot icy pinpricks into my feet and calves.

“Jackson, it’s really cold!”

“Come on, Alice!” he called from a line of breakers.

I inhaled deeply and steeled myself for the shock, then I took a giant step toward Jackson. The water rushed up around me and the cold pushed the air out of me and left me breathless. I fell into the water and bobbed along, treading in the waves. Then Jackson was there, in front of me. He dipped in and out of the water, intermittently visible.

He stood up and shook the water from his hair. “See,” he said, “not so bad.” He was caught golden in the light of the setting sun, his skin wet and glimmering.

“Not so bad,” I repeated.

I dipped along facing him. Caught between earth and sky, suspended, I waited for Jackson to speak again.

GREATER MONSTER OR MIRACLE

Eva hovered over a plexiglass-topped light box. Her brother, Ray, stood behind her, peering over her shoulder. White Christmas lights ran along the interior border of the box, giving the appearance of a cheap marquee. The object in the box was no larger than a playing card, irregularly shaped, pale yellow, with a smattering of black specks.

“So that’s it, huh,” Ray said, returning to an upright posture. “The Miraculous Mary Tortilla.”

“Doesn’t seem too miraculous,” Eva said.

“I mean, it’s pretty old now.”

He pointed to the wall behind the box. Pictures of the tortilla in its younger years had been tacked to the wall in protective plastic sheaths. Directly above the box was the largest image fixed into a gold-filigreed frame. It showed a smiling woman holding a red plate upon which was a portion of a corn tortilla. Several bites had been taken out of the left side of it, but a large, brown swirling pattern toward the center had been left intact. With a bit of imagination, Eva could see how the brown markings did resemble the

Virgin Mary, crouched, cradling a bundled baby Jesus. But, it really looked more like a burned tortilla.

Among the photographs were newspaper articles telling of the tortilla's appearance and the following it developed. Miraculous Mary had revealed herself to Emelda Ruiz, of Roswell, New Mexico, almost forty years earlier in the fall of 1975. Emelda had taken the tortilla with her to bible study at her neighbor's house, where the first healing took place. Emelda's friend, her hands knotted and contorted by arthritis, took her turn holding the tortilla. Over the course of the evening, her hands gradually relaxed, regaining near-full function by the time she went home. Three days later, the shrine was opened to the public. Visitors came from all over New Mexico—Texas and Arizona, too—often arriving in some state of sickness or injury.

Eva looked around the inside of the shed. Abandoned canes, braces, and walkers were piled in the corners. A few metal folding chairs were scattered about.

“Must have been disappointing,” she said to Ray, “for all those sick people to have to repurchase those things after the spiritual placebo effect wore off.”

Ray walked over to a nearby wheelchair, folded and covered in a layer of dust. He leaned down and blew on the armrest, sending up a cloud of gray. “You don't know what happened to these people after they came here,” he said.

Eva and Ray had set out from Austin the day before to make the two-day drive to Santa Fe to meet with Anita Jones, a renowned herbalist and healer. For several years, Eva had suffered from a battery of symptoms that didn't have a known source: swollen, seizing joints, numbness in her feet, migraines. At first, doctors thought Lyme disease, but she'd tested negative. Other autoimmune disorders and rare blood diseases were ruled

out, too. After two years of tests and second opinions, her doctors had begun to imply that her problems were psychosomatic. Her last visit had been to a new rheumatologist who gave her a referral for a psych evaluation.

“You seem depressed,” the rheumatologist said.

“Well, yeah. I probably am. I’m in pain all the time. I can’t do things that used to make me happy. But that’s not the main—”

“Go for the eval. Try to have an open mind.”

Eva never used the referral. She canceled all of her upcoming doctor appointments and resigned herself to the fact that, at least for the time being, she would be sick. She was too tired, too stiff, and too nauseated to put up with doctors. Her days echoed with pain, but that was better than being thought a liar.

Ray had insisted that along the way they make stops at roadside spots that sick people often made pilgrimages to: the Well of Healing Waters, Switchback’s Enchanted Sunset Spot, the Miraculous Mary Tortilla. Ray had long been a fan of such places. When they were young, he would scout out locations of roadside oddities along family road trip routes and beg to have them added to the itineraries. He fancied the odd (a model of Stonehenge made of rusted-out refrigerators), the oversized (“World’s Largest Hammer”), and the mystical (El Santuario de Chimayó, the church with “magic dirt”). Their stop to see the Miraculous Mary Tortilla had been wholly his idea.

“You see her?” a voice asked from the rear of the shed. Eva looked back to the doorway, where a short silhouette blocked the light coming from outside. The figure took a few steps forward and Eva saw that it was Emelda, the woman from the picture above the light box.

Ray smiled and nodded. “Yeah, we saw it.”

Emelda wore a blue flowered housedress that billowed as she walked toward Eva and Ray. “I know it doesn’t look like much now. Thirty years baking in here shrunk it down to nothing, almost.” She tapped on the glass above the dried morsel of tortilla. “She helps so many. Brings so much good into the world.”

Eva noted the expression of awe on Emelda’s face: lips pursed, eyes opened slightly wide, her gaze set on the glowing box. It seemed clear to Eva that Emelda undoubtedly still believed in the power of the tortilla.

“One of you is sick?” Emelda asked. “Or you’re just here to take a look?”

“Yeah, just for a look—” Eva began.

“She’s sick,” Ray interrupted.

Emelda put a hand on Eva’s shoulder. “I had a feeling. Seeing so many sick people pass through, I’ve got a sense about it. Sickness sits on people like a wet blanket.”

Eva ground her molars together. What did this old Jesus freak know anyway?

“Would you like to touch her?” Emelda asked.

“No, really, I don’t need to,” Eva said.

Emelda was already unlatching the case. “Not a problem,” she said, gingerly extracting the tortilla from its bed of cotton. “I don’t get too many visitors anymore. It’s nice to have young people. Where are you sick?” Emelda stood before Eva, holding in her open hand what would have easily passed for any random tortilla chip. “It seems to work best when touched directly to the problem area.”

Eva exhaled heavily. It seemed like she might have to play along. As much as she thought Emelda’s shrine to be bizarre and misguided, she didn’t want to hurt the old

woman's feelings. "I'm sick everywhere," Eva admitted. "But no one's been able to figure out why."

Emelda nodded. "I've had a few like you come through. Usually takes something a little different." Holding the tortilla in her left hand, she used the nails of her right thumb and forefinger to break off a minuscule piece. "I don't do this for many people." Emelda offered the piece, scarcely more than a crumb, to Eva.

Eva looked beyond the old woman's head to her brother. He shrugged and motioned for her to take the piece. Didn't Ray think it was strange for her to be eating a piece of a tortilla that was over thirty years old? How could Emelda, as devoted as she was, expect Eva to eat that?

"Oh, no," Eva said. "I couldn't. You have so little of the tortilla left anyway. You should keep it."

Ray nudged her. "Go on. Do it."

"It's what it's here for. It's very old, yes, but it still works. Take it." Emelda grabbed Eva's hand, turned it over, and dropped the crumb into her palm. "Eat."

Eva steeled herself and tossed the crumb into her mouth. It fell apart like chalk on her tongue, and tasted as much, with a note of corn. She swallowed and forced a smile.

Emelda reached forward and hugged Eva, pulling her in close. Eva could feel the woman's spine through her shirt. Though Emelda felt fragile, her arms were strong. After a few seconds, Eva tried to pull away, but Emelda held fast, bringing her lips to Eva's ear. "I can see you don't believe. But you don't need to. Miracles aren't only for believers."

Eva drove them north from Roswell. Ray pointed as they passed the movie theatre-turned International UFO Museum and Research Center.

“Want to stop?” Ray asked.

The triangular marquee that jutted over the sidewalk had had been plastered over with cheap-looking multi-colored signs, and a pair of tourists stood smiling in front of the building, getting their picture taken.

“I think I’ve had enough roadside culture for the day,” Eva told her brother and drove on.

She didn’t understand her brother’s awe at such strange human compulsions. It seemed like time misspent. Her experience with Emelda was the first roadside attraction that lingered. In a way, Eva was angry with the woman. Being nearly force-fed decades-old food had felt offensive. Beyond that, however, were the words Emelda had left Eva with. Miracles for all. Without belief, and of course the great power of suggestion, Eva didn’t see how “miracles” were even possible.

Eva and Ray continued in silence, passing by low, brown buildings, a handful of fast food restaurants, and a mall. As they crossed the Roswell town limits, signs of human life became scarce, and they came into wide, dry plains. Sun-bleached highway rolled out directly in front of them. Ray scanned the radio but found only static, some channels mixing in a distant-sounding ad for a car dealership or distorted reggaeton.

“Just put something on,” Eva said. “Or turn it off. I don’t care. But the static is giving me a headache.”

Ray dug through the glove box and came up with the Best of Frank Sinatra. “OK?” he asked, showing Eva the case.

“Fine.”

“How are you feeling? I can drive if you want.”

“No, I’m kind of queasy. It’s better if I drive.”

Eva set her eyes on the horizon. Her father had once told her that your equilibrium settles when your body knows its position between the earth and the sky. But as hard as she stared, Eva felt no relief.

“So what did you think about Emelda?” Ray asked.

“She seemed a little batty,” Eva responded.

“Do you feel any different?”

Eva shot her brother a surprised look. “Are you kidding? You’re kidding, right?”

Ray laughed. “No! You never know. I just think there are things in the world that we can’t really understand, but they happen.”

“I don’t go to church, Ray. Neither do you. You’re going to start throwing some God talk at me?”

“I’m not necessarily talking about God,” Ray insisted. “I’m talking about something bigger than us that sometimes breaks through in weird ways. Like through tortillas. And it might make things happen that can’t be explained in the normal ways that we explain things.”

Eva didn’t respond; she set her eyes on the road and didn’t look up at her brother.

“I’m just saying,” Ray said, “that it’s worth trying things even when they aren’t backed by the FDA. I mean, we are taking this trip to see an herbalist, after all.”

Eva clenched the steering wheel. “Yes, and I’m not even sure that I want to be doing that.”

“Look,” Ray said, “you’re sick with something that can’t be explained. Is it really all that far-fetched to think that maybe you can get well with something that can’t be explained, too?”

“I don’t think it works like that,” Eva said, turning up the stereo.

Ray spoke as they approached Vaughn. “You tired of listening to Sinatra yet? I think it’s on its third go-round.”

Eva looked to the CD player. “Guess I tuned it out. We should stop in Vaughn and get gas. I could use a snack, too.”

Ray nodded. “Sounds good.”

They pulled into the first gas station they came upon, Eva steered the car up to one of two pumps, and Ray walked inside. She started the gas and followed. A bell attached to the door announced her entrance, and a young man sitting behind the cashier looked up from a newspaper. Eva smiled at him and walked to the drink cases that lined the back wall of the store. After grabbing a bottle of water and a bag of Corn Nuts, Eva went to pay.

“This’ll do you?”

“Yeah,” Eva responded.

“Three thirty-five.”

Eva reached over the newspaper and handed him four dollars. Withdrawing her hand, she caught the banner headline that ran the width of the paper. “Vaughn Police Chief Resigns, Force Disbanded.” She read it twice to make sure she had gotten it right.

“This is real?” She pointed at the newspaper.

“Heh. Yeah. Chief was a criminal himself, couldn't hide no longer and turned himself in.”

“So there are no police out here? Like, none?”

“Guadalupe County Police is supposed to be patrolling,” he said, handing Eva her change. “But I’ve never seen them.”

Eva thanked him and walked back outside to the car. She hadn't seen Ray in the store, and he wasn't by the car either. The land around the gas station was impossibly flat. Sky met earth at a steady horizon in every direction Eva looked. Broad grassy plains, the color of tea with too much milk, unfolded and rolled out over the edges of what could be seen. Above, the cloudless blue was darkest at its zenith, lightening as it drew toward the horizon. Eva felt dizzy and leaned against the car's rear bumper.

“Eva!” Ray's voice came from the side of the building. He stood next to what appeared to be an unused auto repair garage with two bays, one of them with its door open. “You've got to see this.”

“Come on, Ray. Let's go. I'm really not feeling too good.”

“Seriously. This is really something.”

Eva righted herself and walked toward the open door. Ray retreated into the bay. It was dark inside, except for light that came from a doorway at the back.

“Ray?” she called.

He stuck his head out of the door. “Here.”

Eva walked through the door into a warmly lit, rectangular room. At the far end was a worktable where a man sat, bent over. The walls were lined with wooden shelves, floor to ceiling, displaying rocks. Eva took a step back. Rocks? This was what Ray had called her back for?

“Arnaldo,” Ray said, nodding toward the seated man. “He’s been working with rocks for years now. How long did you say?”

“Forty years,” Arnaldo said, looking up from his table.

Eva scanned the room. Growing up in south-central Texas, rocks weren’t anything new. Big, old, striated rocks were to be expected. But these were different. There were dark morsels, embedded with glint, and lighter fragments leaned against the wall, veined with iridescence. They didn’t seem like the kind of rocks that would come from the dry, pale plains that surrounded the gas station.

Ray sat on a milk crate opposite Arnaldo. “Your family owns this gas station?” he asked.

Arnaldo curled over his worktable. “Yes.”

“Do you sell these?” Ray asked.

“No,” Arnaldo responded. “They’re just for looking.”

Ray nodded. “Where do you get them?”

“Around here. Some were gifts, but mostly they come from here.”

It seemed unlikely that what he said was true. Eva had worked her way around the room, coming to a larger, flat rock on a low shelf that ran next to the door. About the size of a shoebox, the rock had highly distinctive markings, different from the rest. Dark reds

pressed beneath gray-blues. A webbed shape spread from the bottom next to a small square that almost looked superimposed. She traced the compacted layers of the rock with her fingers.

Arnaldo turned away from his table, looking in Eva's direction. "What do you see?" he asked, tilting his head.

Eva laughed. "Well, a very pretty rock."

"Anything else?"

She didn't know what Arnaldo meant, but she gave the rock a second look.

"That's the best rock," Arnaldo said. "My favorite. It's heaven."

"Huh," Eva said, entirely unsure of what he meant.

Arnaldo came to her side and lifted the rock, handing it to her. It was lighter than she expected.

"See, this here." He ran his finger along one of the rock's uppermost layers. "The sun is rising. And this, this is the tree of life." He touched the base of the fanned marking. "I will live here," he said, tapping the square shape. "This rock is a window of what is coming, after life. It's my paradise rock."

Eva followed his gestures and the image unfolded. Indeed, the rock appeared to show a small house, beneath a tree, caught in the expansive rays of a morning sun coming over mountains that lined the horizon. Never mind his assertions of its being a destined holy expanse, the rock was incredible. Eva placed herself in the image, living in cabin in the foothills of a majestic mountain range. She would have her coffee in the morning and walk outside where the early morning sun spilled over the mountains' peaks bathed her in a golden light. There would be no pain in a place like that.

“You see?” Arnaldo asked.

Eva nodded. “Yeah, it’s all there. I can totally see it.”

Muffled shouting came from inside the store, and a *crack-crack. Crack.* Eva, Ray, and Arnaldo looked up from the rock.

“That sounded like—” Ray started.

“Shut the door,” Arnaldo said. Ray did as he was told, pulling the door closed.

Eva hugged the rock to her chest, its rough surface chafing her arms.

“Should we call the cops?” Ray asked.

Arnaldo reached forward and flipped a switch by the door, shutting off the lights.

“There aren’t any cops,” Eva said.

“What do you mean ‘there aren’t any—’”

“Shh!” Arnaldo said. “She’s right. Get down,”

In the darkness, Eva could hear their breathing. Quickened, almost panting. There had been no sound from inside the store since the shots. Then came more, louder this time. *Crack. Crack-crack.* Still in Eva’s arms, the paradise rock snapped backward and Eva felt a rough spray, like dirt being thrown at her. A few seconds later, she heard a car start and squeal away.

Eva shifted the rock to one arm, and stood and pawed in the darkness for the light switch by the door.

“Jesus,” Arnaldo said, pushing past Ray and Eva, running out the door. Then came the faint clanging of the bell. Eva heard Arnaldo begin to wail.

She and Ray stood facing each other. What should they do? Who should they call? Eva’s gaze shifted to the wall behind Ray.

“Oh shit,” she said. “Look.” A small round bullet hole had pierced the wall shared with the store, close to the ground. “It came right at us.”

Ray knelt down and touched the hole then turned back to Eva. He stopped, his gaze set low.

She looked around herself. “What?”

Ray took the rock from her hands and turned it around, so the side with the scene was facing her. Just above the mountains was a bright pockmark that hadn't been there before.

“That’s...that’s so lucky,” Ray said.

Eva traced the fresh indentation with her index finger. Through the wall, Arnaldo cried out again.

“Luck doesn’t seem like the right word,” Eva said.

It took twenty minutes to get through to the police, and another thirty-five minutes for them to arrive. The ambulance took even longer.

Eva stood with her brother by their car and waited for the police to say they were clear to leave. They had both managed to avoid going into the store and seeing the dead body, but they could clearly see Arnaldo pacing the short aisles, weeping. Eva wanted to talk to her brother about what had happened, but she found herself without words, unable to take her eyes off of Arnaldo. He walked to the end of an aisle, turned, and came to a drink case, where he leaned back heavily and cast his gaze upward. Imagining the

immeasurable grief that Arnaldo must be feeling made Eva queasy. She looked away, out to the plains across the road from the gas station.

“Ma’am?” A police officer approached Eva. “Are you all right?”

Ray stepped forward. “Do you need anything else from us?”

“No,” the officer said. “You’re free to go.” He handed Ray a card. “If there’s anything else you remember, please don’t hesitate to call.”

“OK.” Ray took the card from the officer’s hand and put it in his pocket.

Eva looked back toward the convenience store. She felt glazed over, slowed down and stiff.

The officer turned and walked back to his squad car.

Ray put an arm around Eva’s shoulders. “Ready to go?”

Eva nodded. She stuck a hand in her pocket and dug for the car keys. “Do you mind driving?”

Ray shook his head, took the keys from her, and they got in the car.

Eva sat quietly as Ray turned back on the state highway and gained speed. Frank Sinatra sang, and Eva reached forward and clicked off the stereo.

“You want to listen to something else?” she asked. Without waiting for an answer she said, “I don’t. Can we just have the silence?”

“Sure. It doesn’t really seem right to listen to music right now anyway.”

Pulling her knees up to her chest, Eva curled into the passenger seat and fixed her gaze on the scrub brush that blurred as they sped by. Her hair had been in a tight ponytail, pulled smooth and firm from her face. Now it hung low, barely tied back. She pulled the

hair-tie the rest of the way off and let her hair fall around her shoulders. It warmed her neck and she retreated into it.

“Should only be about an hour-and-a-half from Santa Fe,” Ray offered. He nudged Eva. “Hey. Did you hear me?”

She pushed her hair out of her face and sat up. “Yeah, I heard you.”

“OK.”

A few moments passed. “What’s the next stop?” Eva asked.

“The hotel in Santa Fe, I guess,” Ray responded.

“No, what’s the next stop on your list?” Eva stretched her arms and legs out and turned toward Ray.

“We don’t have to stop at any of those places anymore,” Ray said. “Really. I don’t care. We can just go on to Santa Fe.”

“What’s the next stop on your list?” Eva asked again.

Ray leaned forward and fished a folded piece of paper from his back pocket. He handed it to Eva. “Take a look there and see.”

She unfolded the paper and ran her index finger down the list.

“After the Miraculous Mary Tortilla is the Circle V Ranch Mineral Pit. You wrote here that people make poultices with the minerals and then apply them to injuries.” She got out a map and found the location of the ranch. “Looks like we’re not too far away from it.”

“We really don’t have to go,” Ray said. “Especially if you’re not feeling well.”

Eva re-folded the map and list. “Isn’t that kind of the point?” she asked.

MARIPOSAS

Jake shivered as he fished out his uniform polo from a laundry basket heaped with dirty clothes and pulled it over his head. His water heater had been broken for almost two weeks now. As fall came into full effect, the cold showers he'd been enduring grew more and more trying. He'd call someone to get it fixed that afternoon, while he was on his lunch break. The shirt was wrinkled, and he tried to smooth it out, his hand passing over the left side of his chest where his name was embroidered.

Jake's official title at Quicko's Truck Plaza was "Customer Sales Specialist," but all he did was run the cash register in the convenience store section of the sprawling building. Quicko's was much more than a gas station: it also had a barbecue restaurant, an ice cream parlor, an automotive shop, full-service showers and a 24-hour gym. Beyond that, however, it was the only service station adjacent to the interstate for more than 75 miles in either direction. Billboards along I-40 counted down to its arrival—"30 miles from Quicko's!", then "23 miles from your last chance for gas!", and finally, in giant, neon text, "Wait's over, you're here! Exit now for Quicko's!"

State Road 15 intersected the interstate at the Quicko's exit and continued across to Marshall's small town center. Jake had grown up in Marshall. He'd only left the county a handful of times, mainly to visit his grandmother in Cranston. Marshall wasn't a place that people moved to; it was a place that people were born into.

Jake took the job at Quicko's earlier that year after his scholarship wasn't renewed at the community college. He had been studying a smattering of subjects, hadn't yet nailed down one to concentrate on. College made it clear to Jake that there was a great big world outside of Marshall.

Jake pulled into the Quicko's parking lot and drove to the rear of the building, where employees were expected to park. He entered through the delivery bay, stopping briefly to clock in and collect his cash tray before he continued on to the front. Jake smiled at Kimmy, one of the graveyard shift, who stood behind the cash register.

"What're you smiling at?" she snapped. "You're late."

Jake looked at the clock on the wall behind the counter. "Only two minutes."

"Two minutes I could be asleep, asshole," she mumbled as she took her cash tray out of the register and pushed past him.

Usually Jake would not be so disturbed by Kimmy's poor mood, but in that moment he found himself oddly affected by it.

He didn't know anything about Kimmy. They had worked at the same place for more than a year, and he knew absolutely nothing about her. For all he was aware, she could be dealing with a broken water heater as well. Instead of that thought making him feel comforted, less alone, it made him feel isolated. He couldn't even maintain friendly relations with a long-time coworker.

A young woman wanting ten dollars on number four shook him from his daze. Jake took her money and turned on the pump.

A few moments later, a pair of tour buses arrived and unloaded next to the front doors. Quicko's signs proudly announced it to "Welcome All Buses," but Jake didn't share their enthusiasm. Tours, especially ones made up of teenagers, came like tornados through the truck plaza. Lines in the convenience store would be ten-deep and the barbecue restaurant would be full, with only one waitress to tend to patrons. Shelves would be left in disarray and inevitably people would become impatient and angry at Jake's inability to check people out faster.

These tour buses were filled with a high school marching band, which, according to the matching T-shirts that most of them wore, had just won a state championship of some sort. They congregated just inside the doors to the convenience store, where one of their chaperones announced that they had one hour to spend at the plaza, then it was "wheels up" again.

Many of the kids went into the barbecue restaurant, some headed back toward the bathrooms, and the rest swarmed through the convenience store, pawing at souvenirs and grabbing sodas and bags of chips. Soon there was a line in front of Jake that stretched all the way to the back of the store.

He worked as quickly as he could to check out the line, but after a student found she had misplaced her wallet and the line got stalled, some of the kids began to grow restless.

"*Cough* loser *cough*," came from the rear of the line. Jake looked up to where it had come from. Some of the other kids snickered and playfully shoved the one who had

spoken. The girl with the misplaced wallet stepped out of line to search through her backpack and Jake continued checking people out.

The line diminished and the kids who had called out “loser” were at the register.

“*Cough loser cough,*” came again. The group of kids tried to stifle their laughter.

Jake had assumed they had been calling out to the girl who’d lost her wallet, but apparently he’d been wrong.

“*Cough jerkoff cough,*” a different one said.

Jake stopped checking the kids out and eyed the one who had just spoken.

Without responding, he began checking them out again, this time as slowly as he could manage.

“Aw, come on, man!” one of them said. “We were just kidding.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Jake said, “it appears that we have a technical problem here with the cash register. Looks like you can’t get your Funyons.” He looked over the heads of the kids to where an older woman was standing holding a candy bar and a Gatorade.

“Next.”

The kids moved out of the way and jostled over to the front doors. “You *are* a fucking loser,” one of them called. They broke out into laughter and left the building.

Jake scanned the woman’s purchases and said, “Five eighteen.”

She handed him six dollars and leaned forward over the counter. In a soft voice she said, “You seem like a nice young man.” She patted his hand, took her change, and left the store.

There was a possibility that Jake might be reprimanded for his treatment of the kids, but a certain boldness had come over him, and he found that he really didn't care if he was.

At lunchtime, Jake left his post and headed to the Bottomless Pit, the truck plaza's 24-hour barbecue restaurant. He ate there every day, and Marlene always had his plate ready when he took his lunch break.

"Afternoon, Marlene," Jake said, as he sat down at the Formica counter.

"Jake," she said, smiling as she set his food down in front of him.

He was taking a bite of baked beans when a man sat down next to him.

"Could I see a menu?" he asked Marlene.

It was a young man, no more than twenty, wearing a crisp white tank top and black jeans that looked spray painted on. His auburn hair was combed meticulously, parted on the side. He wore grubby, once-white jogging shoes. He wasn't a trucker; that was clear. He also didn't fit the look of a young road tripper. He wasn't with anybody else, so likely not traveling with family.

Marlene pitched a menu on the counter in front of the man, giving him a sidelong look as she walked away. She returned with silverware and a glass of water, which she smacked down, sloshing water over the side of the glass and onto the counter. The man looked toward the glass, then Marlene, then back to the menu.

"So?" she asked, leaning onto the counter, palms pressed flat.

"Lemon meringue pie," the man replied. "Please and thank you."

Marlene snatched up the menu and walked down to the pie case.

Jake eyed the man. His jaw was strong and his skin porcelain. His chestnut eyes held a relaxed gaze across the counter to where the chrome soda machine sat.

“I can see you looking at me,” the man said, pointing to the broad, mirror-like side of the machine. “Anything you like?”

Jake’s cheeks flushed, and he turned away.

“It’s OK,” the man said, “I know I’m pretty. You can look if you want to.”

Jake realized what the man was. The truck plaza, being a locus for semi drivers and other road-dwellers, had a robust and revolving population of female and male prostitutes: lot lizards, sleeper leapers, pavement princesses, asphalt cowboys. And while Jake could usually pick them out with ease, this man was different. He looked fresh, glowing, even—not as worn out as the others.

Marlene returned with the man’s pie and set it on the counter. She then turned away and walked to the kitchen, where she stayed.

“You can call me Ro,” the man said, with a mouthful of pie.

“I don’t know that I’m going to call you anything,” Jake scoffed. He immediately felt guilty for treating Ro with such rudeness. Jake bit his lip while several moments passed.

Ro shrugged and the two men ate in silence.

Once Ro had finished his pie, he took a crumpled five-dollar bill from his pocket, flattened it, and tucked it under the edge of his plate. “Tell her thank you for me.” He nodded in the direction of the kitchen.

“Sure.”

Jake watched Ro stride across the restaurant toward the front doors. Before he walked out, he stopped at the jukebox, dropped in two coins, and, after a brief flip through the possible selections, punched a combination of buttons.

“Sam Cooke makes everything better,” he called, winking at Jake as he turned and walked out the glass doors.

From the jukebox, Sam Cooke implored,

*If you ever change your mind
About leavin me behind, Oh!
Bring it to me
Bring your sweet lovin
Bring it on home to me*

“Sorry he was bothering you,” Marlene said. She had returned from the kitchen and was collecting the used dishes. “Want me to turn his music off?”

Though Jake wanted to turn back to the counter, he watched Ro, the fabric of his shirt caught rippling in the breeze as he crossed the parking lot toward the diesel bays.

“No,” Jake said. “Leave it on.”

The afternoon passed slowly for Jake. As the end of his shift neared, he saw Ro get out of the cab of a semi parked at the back of the lot. The semi shook itself to life and rumbled out onto the road, leaving Ro standing in its exhaust. He brushed himself off, tied one of his shoes, and walked toward the convenience store. Jake’s arms clenched. Something scurried in the bottom of his abdomen.

Ro entered without looking up at Jake and proceeded to walk to the back of the store, where the refrigerated cases were. He took a bottle of water out of a case and brought it back to where Jake stood behind the register passing time with his coworker Mike.

“You know,” Mike said, “my uncle can take care of that water heater problem for you. He works down at Harry’s Fix ‘Em. I can call him right now if you want.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Jake replied. He turned toward the counter, where Ro stood.

“We meet again,” Ro said, leaning across the counter with a kind of comical menace.

“Looks like it,” Jake said, pushing his shoulders back. He took the bottle from Ro’s hand and scanned it. “Two-oh-nine.”

Ro held out three dollars, and as their fingers met, he bent forward and touched Jake’s hand. “You got problems with your water heater?”

Jake pulled his hand back, flexing his fingers. He made change for Ro and placed it on the counter.

“Look,” Jake said, glancing about to make sure no other customers or employees were watching their exchange. Mike was occupied with a young, blond girl at the opposite end of the counter. “No offense or anything, but I’m not, uh, I’m not in need of your services, you know?”

Ro laughed. “You should be so lucky. I know a bit about fixing appliances.” He waved a hand back over his shoulder. “Did it for work back in another life. I could do it for you cheap. Cheaper than his uncle.” He gestured toward Mike.

Jake didn't know what to say. He wasn't sure that he wanted Ro in his house, but he also needed his water heater fixed, cheaply at that.

Ro pointed to where Jake's name was embroidered on his shirt. "Jake, right? Listen, when do you get off, Jake?"

Jake answered instinctively. "Half hour."

"OK. Meet me out back when you're done with work. We'll get you fixed up." Without waiting for a response from Jake, Ro took his water and strolled out of the store.

What had Jake been thinking? If he was lucky, maybe Ro would be late and he could slip off before Ro even saw him. But then again, maybe Ro would be waiting for him outside the delivery bay, wearing those perfect clothes and disgusting shoes.

Ro was standing behind the building, wearing a backpack, when Jake came out. A few of Jake's coworkers sat on the ledge of the loading dock, smoking cigarettes and watching them. Jake hadn't planned on having an audience.

"What's in the backpack?" Jake asked. It was a forest green, standard school backpack, threadbare in many places. Jake figured it was probably full of condoms and lube. He hoped he wouldn't have to touch it.

"My life," Ro responded, hitching up the straps.

As they walked away from the delivery bay, Hermán, one of the older men who worked in the automotive shop called out, "*Mariposa*." He then flicked his still-lit cigarette in their direction, hitting Ro on the back of his left calf. Ro didn't show any sign

of having felt the impact of the cigarette, though Jake knew he must have. He looked back at the group of his coworkers, who stood laughing.

“And proud of it,” Ro called sharply over his shoulder.

Jake led Ro to the back of the parking lot where his car was. After they both had gotten in, Ro put his hand out to stop Jake as he reached to shift the car into drive. Ro’s hand was warmer than Jake expected, rougher, too.

“I have an idea,” Ro said, reaching into his backpack. He took out a tiny bag of white powder, holding it in one hand while he flicked at its bottom with the other. “What do you think?”

“I don’t know about that,” Jake said. He pulled away from Ro a few inches. “Haven’t touched it since I was nineteen.”

Ro reached into his shirt and pulled out a key that hung around his neck on a thin, blue ribbon. He opened the bag, scooped a bit onto the end of the key, and brought it to his left nostril. Jake watched as Ro inhaled forcefully, then leaned back and shook his head, eyes closed. With little more than a few seconds respite, Ro took the key and scooped another small mound of powder from the bag, holding it out to Jake.

“Here you go,” he said.

Jake snorted the coke, followed by a burning sensation, and the bitter drip coating the back of his mouth. He stared at the speedometer before him, wondering how exactly he arrived where he was. Doing cocaine in his car with a male prostitute, no horizon beyond the moment he was in.

“Fuck,” Ro said. “Guy I got this from said it was good, but they all say that. He seemed like the kind of guy who would sell you stuff cut with shit. But this is good.”

Jake was struck with the need to drive, to move. “Where do you want to go?” he asked. “I want to be going somewhere.”

Ro looked at Jake. “Take me to the most beautiful place you can think of. The best place. I want to see the best place you know.”

“The best place...” Jake considered their options. There were the bars down 15, but he didn’t want to go there. He was feeling too good to put himself in a situation where some jackass could dim his high.

“Someplace where we can be outside,” Ro said. “I’d like to be outside.”

There was only one place Jake could think of that would allow them to be outside and not potentially cross paths with someone who would bother them.

“Well, there’s a state park just up the road, Coyote Trace. People camp there sometimes, and the gates are always open, but for the most part it’s pretty empty. There are some hills and a lookout where you can see all the way to Millsburg.”

“Perfect. Let’s go.”

Jake pulled out onto State Road 15 and picked up speed. It felt like going to Coyote Trace was going to be the best experience he ever had in his life.

Jake guided them to the park effortlessly, if a little quickly, and he parked near the campground pavilion, a dark mass in front of them.

“Let’s go to that lookout,” Ro said, zipping up his backpack.

Jake took a flashlight from the trunk of his car, and they set off toward the trailhead.

“It’s going to be so nice,” Jake said as they walked. “It’s one of those places where you can see really far and it kind of forces you to feel small. You know? Like you

see Millsburg, and it looks small, but you know there are a few thousand people there, inside that small space. Which makes you feel small too.”

“Yeah, I think I know what you mean. My favorite places are all out in the desert, with mountains and clear air where you can see really far. It gives you perspective.”

Jake felt strong feelings of affection toward Ro. He knew it was the drugs that made him feel that way, but that didn’t lessen the feelings.

The walk to the lookout took about fifteen minutes. As far as Jake could perceive, it could have been as much as an hour. It felt so full.

A steep incline dotted with loose rocks brought them to the top. Ro reached the clearing first, entering an outcropping of boulders. A dark valley spread out below. Small, bright grids of towns dotted the foreground. I-40 cut across the darkness. Cars moved along its predetermined path; the tiny dots of light came together as veins of red and white on the indigo landscape.

“That’s Marshall,” Jake said, pointing to a closer grid of lights. “That, over there, that’s Millsburg.”

“What’s in Millsburg?” Ro asked, tugging his baggie from his back pocket.

“Not much. It’s kind of like Marshall. That’s where my family lives though.”

“Do you have a girlfriend?” Ro asked, serving himself.

Jake shook his head. Ro extended the key to Jake, who gladly accepted it.

“Boyfriend?” Ro asked.

“Does that key actually go to anything?” Jake asked.

“To my home,” Ro answered.

“Where’s home?”

“Far away from here.”

Both men sat facing the valley. Jake worked the edge of his Quicko’s polo with his thumb. Ro fingered the key that hung around his neck.

Every time his high reached a lull, and before Ro offered him more, Jake fell into a brief realization of where he was, whom he was with, and what he was doing. He expected that it would shock him, but it didn’t.

Their conversation felt effortless. It floated back and forth between them like a baseball in a casual game of catch.

“There was this one man,” Jake said, “that hung around the plaza for a while. He was a traveler, you know, but also a little loose in the head.”

“I’ve met a bunch of those.”

Jake nodded. “Yeah. Anyway, he would panhandle every day outside the convenience store, and once he’d gotten enough cash, he’d go into the barbecue restaurant. He always had this brown paper sack. He’d sit down at a four-top and unload it. It was filled with troll dolls. You know, those raggedy naked dolls with the big hair?” He raised a hand above his head.

“Yeah. My sister had a bunch of those.”

“Well, he always ordered the same thing, ribs, and he would share it with his dolls. His ‘family’ he called them. He’d take little bits of meat and smash it against their mouths. Then at the end of the meal, he would wipe their faces off and load them back into the sack.”

Ro looked at Jake with gloom in his eyes.

“Now that I think about it,” Jake said, “It’s actually pretty sad.”

Ro told Jake stories from the road: how he'd been working it for almost two years, that he was tired of it but not sure what to do to break out.

"I've almost died a bunch of times," Ro confessed. "I mean, I've almost been killed a bunch of times."

Jake nodded.

"When I get into a cab, I never know what the guy is going to be like. He could end up being friendly, or he could be violent. Lots of them just want to be held, more than anything else. Lots of them cry."

Jake didn't know what to say, so he stayed silent. He imagined Ro naked, tangled in a lustful frenzy inside the cab of a semi. The image was shocking to Jake. Somehow he had a hard time placing Ro in such a scene.

"One of the most touching ones was actually a woman."

"A woman?" Jake asked, clearly betraying his surprise.

Ro chuckled. "Don't look so shocked," he said. "I'm equal opportunity. Anyway, she picked me up on her way out of Albuquerque. One of the first things she told me was that she had lung cancer. She wheezed when she talked. She said that years of smoking while driving her rig had finally done her in. That she didn't have but a few months left, most likely."

"Huh."

"Yeah. We talked for several hours, she told me about her family, where she'd come from. Eventually she stopped and said, point blank, 'I just want to be fucked one last time.'"

Jake choked a little. That's not what he was expecting Ro to say. "Did you do it?"

“Yeah, I did. We stopped at a little motel outside of Tucumcari. It was actually kind of beautiful. She seemed so grateful, just to be touched.” Ro flicked at the key and looked toward Jake. “More?”

“Sure.”

Jake wanted the nighttime to expand, to stop and open up and allow them to keep doing what they were doing, feeling what they were feeling.

He turned to Ro, who was already looking at him, his face closer than he’d anticipated. Ro reached forward and put a hand on the side of Jake’s face and stroked Jake’s cheek with his thumb.

Jake didn’t push it away. Ro leaned closer and kissed Jake, who parted his lips to speak, and Ro slid his tongue into Jake’s mouth, where it moved slowly against Jake’s tongue. Jake felt as though they had closed a circuit, made something whole. He welled with desire.

Jake pulled back, his body pulling away before his face did. His lips lingered.

“No,” Jake said, looking at Ro. Jake gestured in front of himself as if looking for the right thing to say. When nothing came, he repeated, “No.”

Ro nodded and pulled away.

Jake’s face burned with embarrassment. He wanted to say something to Ro, something that would make the previous moment funny, or lighthearted in some other way.

“Why not?” Ro asked.

“I’m not like that,” Jake said, knowing as the words came that he was unsure as to their truthfulness. “I just can’t.”

“You can’t or you won’t,” Ro said under his breath.

Jake didn’t respond.

Both men turned back to the valley. Its edges grew light. The stars flicked off, one by one. They were quiet. Ro didn’t offer Jake the key again.

They left the lookout just before sunrise. The walk back was easier as the ambient brightness from the early sky made it possible to see the path without the use of the flashlight. The drive to Quicko’s passed with little conversation.

“Thanks, Ro,” Jake said as Ro climbed out of the car. He leaned on the doorframe, looking out across the parking lot.

“Sure,” Ro answered.

“How much longer do you think you’ll be around?”

“Not long.”

“Well,” Jake said, “we should have lunch or something before you leave.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

At the other end of the parking lot, a semi flashed its lights three times.

“I should probably go,” Ro said, turning to walk away.

“OK,” Jake called after Ro, who gave a quick wave without looking back at Jake.

Ro crossed the parking lot and climbed into the cab of the semi.

As Jake watched Ro disappear into the vehicle, Jake wanted more than anything to return to the belly of the night before, when possibility was palpable and he and Ro were caught in the safety and security of the darkness.

SWIMMING LESSONS

Perry took the catalogue clipping out of his pocket, flattened it against his geometry textbook, and handed it to Weed, who sat across from him at the otherwise empty cafeteria table.

“Just look at it,” Perry said. “It’s like nothing else anybody’s got around here. And now Jenny Sanford’s got one.”

Weed smirked as he inspected the paper. “There’s the one over at the Y. And other people have above-ground ones,” he said as he handed it back to Perry. “It’s not that great.” Weed stabbed his milk carton with a straw and took a deep gulp. He was Perry’s oldest friend, his only close friend, really.

Perry took the paper from Weed and cradled it in his hands as if it were a scrap of a holy document. A banner across its top read, “Premium Pool Packages.” Below that was an image of a young woman in a red bikini, smiling open-mouthed, floating on a raft in a small, kidney-shaped pool. The water was Technicolor blue and, even on the cheaply printed beige catalogue paper, seemed to sparkle along its undulating divots and peaks. Around the perimeter of the pool were emerald ferns; lush greenery reached toward the pool with a wildness that reminded Perry of images he’d seen in *National Geographic* of

jungles in South America. To him, the pool, the plants, and the girl—they were perfection, a precise and luxurious manifestation of his own private idea of paradise.

It was Jenny who had given the paper to Perry. Well, not exactly *given*, but that's how Perry liked to think of it. She carried it around with her for months while the pool was being built, showing people and insisting she was going to have the biggest parties after it was completed. That everyone could come, and her parents might even let them drink. Jenny was a sophomore, but she looked like she was twenty-five, with brown hair down to her waist and a Victoria's Secret model body. To someone like Perry she was untouchable.

The day the pool was supposed to be completed, she showed the picture around one last time at lunch, then tossed it in the trash on her way out of the cafeteria. Perry had immediately rescued the paper, tucking it into a book, hoping no one saw him. For weeks now, at the end of their lunch period, once the cafeteria was mostly empty, Perry would take out the catalogue scrap and show it to Weed, insisting they sneak over to swim some night.

"I overheard Jenny saying that her parents were going to be out of town this week," Perry offered. "She's going to be staying over at her grandma's while they're gone."

Weed gave his friend an half-grin.

"I mean," Perry quickly added, "that's what I've heard around. We could go over there sometime this weekend? Saturday maybe? Come on, Weed, we've got to do it. It's the perfect time."

Weed had finished his lunch and pushed back from the table. "What we need to do is go to class," he said. "We're already late."

Perry nodded and stood up, draining as much of his milk as he could before they reached the trashcans toward the back of the cafeteria. They turned and made a cut across the gym toward their geometry classroom.

Weed was the tallest person in their ninth grade class—well over six feet tall—and his growth spurt showed no signs of slowing down. “Growing like a weed,” his mother would say. Weed’s nickname seemed prescriptive now that he’d reached high school and started smoking marijuana with a group of sophomore boys he’d met through the baseball team. Perry joined them sometimes, but his tendency toward waves of paranoia prevented him from really enjoying himself.

Perry was on the short end of average, squat, with a face round as a dinner plate. Weed towered over him, lithe and man-looking, patchy facial hair running along his jaw and upper lip. Perry had only the faintest shadow of fuzz toward the corners of his mouth. Nothing that warranted any maintenance. Perry was becoming aware of the possibility that, next to Weed, he looked even less attractive than he did on his own.

Perry and Weed had always been knitted together: Cub Scouts, Boy Scouts, swim lessons, summer camp. They had attended school together since kindergarten. They knew each other’s secrets and darkest fears. Weed knew that Perry had always had an intense fear of being murdered by a home invader, and Perry swore he would never tell anyone that despite his public claims to the contrary, Weed had never kissed a girl. And yet, that knitting was rapidly unraveling; Perry could feel it.

Perry sat next to his little sister at the kitchen table Saturday morning, pancakes heaped before them. It was all he could do to keep himself from jumping up to call Weed. Just wait until ten at least, he told himself. If he wanted his friend to come with him to the pool, he was going to have to play it down, like it didn't matter. Cool.

After he'd shoveled the last of his pancakes into his mouth, Perry dumped his plate in the sink, thanked his mother for breakfast, grabbed the cordless phone, and headed back to his room. He didn't even try to stifle his grinning as he called Weed's house.

Weed's mother called Weed to the phone. Perry knew precisely how Weed was moving through his house right then. Leaving his bedroom, coming down the stairs, entering the kitchen where his mom waited, holding the phone.

The boys exchanged greetings, and Perry wasted no time getting right to the point of his call.

"So, it's Saturday," Perry said.

"Yep. Day that comes after Friday, before Sunday."

"No, it's pool day."

There was a period of silence as Perry waited for Weed to respond.

"Look, Perry, I really don't think that's a good idea. What if she has an alarm? Or neighbors? Anyway, we'd have to ride bikes and it's really far away. It's not like we can ask for a ride there from our parents or anything. And then we definitely couldn't make it back tonight."

“That’s the great part of it,” Perry said. “We could camp there. Tell our parents that we’re staying at each other’s houses but go there instead. Do some night swims and stuff. It would be like we had our own private pool!”

There was another moment of empty air on the phone.

“Sorry,” Weed said, “I just don’t think I’m going to do it.”

“But it’s a perfect plan—”

Weed cut Perry off again, saying, “Sorry. Um, I’ve got to go, Perry. I’ll call you later, OK? Maybe my mom can give us a ride to Newtonville tomorrow, and we can go to the Y. Sound good?”

“Sure. The Y. Tomorrow.” Perry felt the air around his head swelling, pushing into his eyes, pulsing with a disorienting rhythm. Tomorrow was not OK with him. The Y was not OK with him. They always went to the Y in the summertime. The Y with its clots of hair in the filters, Band-Aids on the decks surrounding the pool, lifeguards that yelled at you if you ran down the length of the diving board too quickly. No jungle. No glittery blue.

Perry figured it was around ten miles to Jenny’s house. He’d never been there before, but he knew she lived on the property adjacent to Farrell Wilkinson’s farm, and everybody knew where that was.

He dumped out his school backpack and began to load it up with items for his trip: beach towel, swim trunks, sunglasses he never wore otherwise, flip-flops. He even snuck one of his father’s Stephen King novels, *It*. Perry wasn’t a particularly strong or interested reader, but to complete his image of the perfect pool afternoon, he had to have

a book. People always looked the most like they belonged beside a pool when they were wearing sunglasses and reading a book.

When he finished filling his backpack, only remembering at the end to add food and water, he called out to his mother. She came to his room and stuck her head in the door.

“Hmm?”

“I’m going to ride over to Weed’s for the night, OK? His mom is going to take us to the Y tomorrow. One of the last days they’re open before they close for the fall.”

“Oh that’s nice,” his mother responded. “It’s been a while since you two have spent time together outside of school. I was starting to think you’d had a falling out.”

“I just told you we’re going to the Y, didn’t I? Why would we be having a falling out if we were going to the Y together?”

“Hey now, little mister,” his mother said, pointing a finger at him.

Perry hated when his mother called him “little mister.” It made him feel like he was still five years old, as if he’d grown up and she’d somehow missed it. But to say so would probably just ignite a real fight—one that might prevent him from getting out of the house at all.

“Sorry, Mom. I just—there’s nothing wrong between me and Weed.”

“OK,” she said, ruffling his hair as she turned and left the room.

A few hills of gravel road took Perry from his house out to the highway, which was flat and paved. The sun faded in and out behind clouds passing overhead. The road rolled out in front of him like the poster in the art room that showed how to draw perspective.

At the outset, Perry imagined the ride shouldn't take more than an hour and a half at most, but as he found himself closing in on noon, he realized he might have underestimated. He pulled to the side of the road and took out a bag of Doritos and a bottle of water.

Perry's refreshments gave him a boost, and his pedaling quickened as he approached a hill in the distance. Farrell Wilkinson's farm was just past the hill; he was sure of it. And just beyond that was Jenny's house. And there: paradise. Sweat ran in rivulets down his forehead and stung his eyes. His T-shirt clung to his back in sweaty patches. Perry's breathing came shallow and fast as he worked his bike to the crest of the hill. Down below, he saw Farrell Wilkinson's place, and a ways past that, a black paved driveway that led to a large house with a broad front porch. The driveway was empty, the house dark; it looked like it was, indeed, unoccupied.

Perry zipped toward the end of the driveway, turning in and pulling up to the bushes that ran along the right side of the porch. He stashed his bike behind the bushes, weaving some branches through the spokes of his tires to really make sure it was camouflaged.

Perry slipped out of his backpack, letting it fall into his right hand, and strode to the side of the garage and around toward the back, where he assumed the pool must be. About halfway around, before the pool was in view, he began to smell the tang of

chlorine and the loose sweetness that clings to the air around a pool. Then he heard voices.

First he heard Jenny laughing. She had one of those machine gun laughs that cuts through any other sound.

“No, Ashton, no!” she squealed, before a large splash came echoing to the back patio. Blood *whooshed* in Perry’s ears. Ashton. He only knew one Ashton. “Weed,” Perry whispered, his voice wobbly.

Perry slid along the side of the garage until he reached its back edge, where he heard Weed’s voice.

Then Perry could see the pool. Both Weed and Jenny were naked. Weed sat on the edge of the pool, legs dangling in the water, facing where Perry hid. Jenny was in the pool, swimming slowly toward Weed. Perry trained his eyes on the two as they came together. Weed had an erection. Jenny, still in the pool, took it in her hands. And then, her mouth. Weed had one hand on her shoulder and the other clutching the hair on the top of her head. His eyes were set toward the sky.

Stunned, Perry dropped his backpack. It fell with a thud that rang through the pool patio. Instinctively, he leaned forward and grabbed it, causing his head to poke out from behind the edge of the garage and into full view of Weed, with Jenny working between his legs.

Weed’s eyes widened as they locked with Perry’s. His brow creased and he lifted the hand resting on Jenny’s shoulder to shoo Perry away. *Go away*, Weed mouthed. He shooed at Perry once more.

Perry stood unmoving, stupefied.

Again, Weed mouthed, *GO AWAY*, this time shoos Perry more animatedly. Jenny stopped and looked up to Weed. He said something to her in a soft tone that sent her back to her previous undertaking.

Perry wanted to run. He wanted to get on his bike and ride as fast as he could back toward his house, zooming under the oaks, taking the hill by Farrell Wilkinson's farm as if it were a mere speed bump. But an even more powerful inclination in him won out. He dropped his backpack in the grass and stepped toward the pool.

"Go away!" Weed called.

Jenny pulled back. Perry had moved to where he was able to see her face. She was livid. "What the fuck, Ashton?"

Weed shushed her. "Not you. Him." He pointed across the pool to where Perry continued to walk toward them.

"Get out of here, kid!" Jenny yelled, covering her breasts with one arm and sending a spray of water in Perry's direction with the other. Perry stopped.

He had come here for the pool. It was supposed to be a perfect place for him. It was not supposed to be filled with his best friend getting a blowjob from Jenny Sanford. The water was blue, almost as blue as the image from the catalogue. The plants around the perimeter of the pool deck were potted, and not so wild looking, but they were still full and bright, summer-green.

"Get the fuck out of here," Jenny yelled again.

"Come on, Perry, seriously," Weed called out. "Go home."

But Perry ignored the words they yelled at him. He bent forward, one leg in front of another, like a runner about to start a race.

“Screw you, Weed,” he mumbled.

His back heel slipped when he pushed off. Then he was running. His arms pumped at his sides. He crossed the twenty-five feet to the pool, coming full speed to its edge.

The foliage took over his peripheral vision. The dark greens swam in a blur as he launched off the edge of the pool into a fully clothed jump. His descent to the water seemed slowed down, taking longer than it should have. The water glinted like thousands of pieces of broken mirror rolling in the late summer sun.

With wide eyes and a resounding *thwak*, Perry plunged into the blue.

Author Bio

Lea Lawrence Downing was born and raised in Louisville, Kentucky. In 2003, by way of Santa Fe, New Mexico, she moved to Bronxville, New York. It was there that she received her B.A. from Sarah Lawrence College, while concentrating her studies dually on Creative Writing and Ethnomusicology. She moved to New Orleans, Louisiana in 2007 and spent the next several years working in both the nonprofit and publishing worlds. She has taken New Orleans as her adopted home and lives there happily with her two dogs.