

University of New Orleans  
**ScholarWorks@UNO**

---

University of New Orleans Theses and  
Dissertations

Dissertations and Theses

---

Fall 12-18-2015

## A Bedlam of Shenanigans

Andrew F. Kooy  
*University of New Orleans*, [andrewkooy@gmail.com](mailto:andrewkooy@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Kooy, Andrew F., "A Bedlam of Shenanigans" (2015). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. 2091.

<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/2091>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uno.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uno.edu).

A Bedlam of Shenanigans

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

Andrew Franklin Kooy

B.A. Simpson University, 2007

December, 2015

## Acknowledgments

To my Professors in the Creative Writing Workshop, thank you for challenging me to write more interestingly. Thank you for questioning my logic and giving me the tools to better question it myself. Thank you for showing me how to teach while helping me learn to create.

To my peers, thank you for supporting me when the challenges seemed too great and the questions too harsh. Thank you for showing me fantastic examples of what great writing looks like and daring me to make you laugh or cry or feel anything through my own words on the page. Thank you for being my friends.

To my wife, Jen, thank you for reminding me to eat and sleep and do all the normal things humans are supposed to do. Thank you for moving across the country with me and encouraging me to pursue a career in fiction even though I had only written one story. Thank you for being patient and loving me when deadlines turned me into a crazy person. Thank you for keeping me alive.

To my daughter, Adelaide, the stressful expectation of whom inspired many of these stories, but whose actual presence gave me confidence and joy, thank you for showing me how a new thing interacts with this world. That it's okay to bite and tear and destroy because the world is an interesting place. How else are we going to figure out how it all works if we don't take it apart? We're only new for so long, though, and I look forward to learning beside you how to figure out the world without tearing it apart.

## Table of Contents

### Part One: A Powerful Weirdness

Only Saints .....	2
Nature .....	17
Clap Your Hands .....	28

### Part Two: The Magical Mundane

All Things Hold Together .....	40
Perfection .....	58
Prep Work .....	72

### Part Three: How We Must Look At This Life of Ours

Big and Strong .....	87
Sleeping Dogs Lie .....	99
Eclipse .....	122
Vita .....	136

## **Part One: A Powerful Weirdness**

## Only Saints

Sister Mary Anderson told my Lalo I was a prostitute again today. It didn't make me as mad as it used to. If he knew the truth, if he knew I was dead, he'd be on his way to Tijuana to join the back alley shows I ran from.

I've seen the old fan mail he's stashed in his alcove in the barn. Offers of carnal pleasure, money. I don't spend too much time in my son's head anymore because his thoughts too often stray toward those letters. Right now, though, my Lalo is thinking about cake.

"Let us pray," Sister Mary Anderson said before Lalo got a chance to blow out the candles on his birthday cake. "Heavenly Father, thank you for giving Edward another year . . ."

"Happy Birthday Edward," the cake read. He wouldn't recognize my name for him. Never Lalo, always Edward. I knew what Sister Mary Anderson was trying to do: make sure he'd have no connection to where he came from. Keep him safe from men like Carlos. But I still wish she would allow him to learn a little Spanish. Fifteen years of only hearing my native language from passing strangers has caused me to forget, and I don't want to end up like the lost spirits I've seen who float around and mumble incoherently as if they don't remember that they were ever human.

The icing on the cake depicted Christ's triumphal entry, as had each birthday cake for the last five years, the Sister's yearly visual reminder to Lalo that he was a miracle. Sister Mary Anderson was getting better, Jesus and the donkey looked like two separate beings this year. She didn't try to depict the crowd, but she managed to pave Jesus's path with brilliant green palm fronds. The green made me hungry for the first time in years. I moved closer, trying to see what sweet green might taste like but pulled back when Sister Mary Anderson closed her prayer with

“And watch over Edward’s mother as she lives in the sins of the flesh. May your grace find her even as she sells her body. Amen.”

I looked into Lalo’s thoughts, but she called me a prostitute so often in the last few years that he was only staring at the cake hungrily. My son, the world’s first centaur, twitched his tail with excitement under his cloak as he hoped that the cake was chocolate for a change.

Sister Mary Anderson knows better. Knows I was never a prostitute. I’ve followed her into the confessional, and she’s never breathed a word. Sometimes she is tempted to confess that she’s been lying about me, but she always stays silent and doubles whatever penance Father Paul gives her, which is usually kitchen work. Father Paul believes that God’s grace and hard work are the only ways to avoid hell. Sister Mary Anderson hates the kitchen, hates washing dishes most of all, so she washes dishes every day. Tries to think of Mary Magdalene washing the feet of Christ but can’t shake the image of her hands as sponges filling with water. Sometimes she thinks about how when she was younger, she measured her hands after every shift in the kitchen, worried that the water would never drain from her hands, and they would distort and swell. I appreciate that she does something to atone for calling me a prostitute, even if she’s using it to excuse her own vanity.

When I first met Sister Mary Anderson, I thought she was the holiest person I had ever seen. She put her hand on my shoulder and welcomed me, her voice barely more than a whisper. She didn’t look me in the eye. It was as if she was not just God’s servant but mine as well. Once I got to know her better, once I died and could see her thoughts, I discovered that this act was the height of her vanity. She greeted everyone this way. Hand on shoulder, not looking into their eyes because she was admiring her smooth, clean skin against the backdrop of the dirty homespun shirts of the needy.

Nevertheless, I felt welcome. I was showing by the time I came to the convent. I was alone, but she didn't judge me until I told her about Carlos.

Carlos owned the donkeys and controlled the girls, including my sister, Marta. I came to his attention when Marta started saving up for my *quinceanera*. Carlos heard about how smart and beautiful I was. Heard I spoke English with only a hint of an accent.

When Marta brought the dress home, I knew she couldn't have afforded it. The color alone was a cream so rich it made me hungry to put it on. It fit perfectly and was trimmed with black at the top and billowed out like a soft cloud just above the floor. She said it was a gift "*sin condiciones*," but after my party, Carlos showed up at our shack. Said he had a job for me. Told me to wear the dress.

I didn't have to go inside with the other girls. He didn't want my body. He wanted my voice. I replaced Carlito, Carlos's son, as *boletera* for the show. Carlito was a big man who didn't know any English, barely spoke at all really. Drew people to the show with gestures and his ability to perfectly mimic the bray of a donkey. Carlito became my bodyguard.

It was simple at first. "Come see the amazing Marta," I cried and business doubled. It was simple but not easy. I knew what Marta was forced to do to feed our family. Carlos swore that the dress would be paid off soon and I would no longer have to work, but Marta got stepped on during one of her shows and I had to cover her medical expenses.

Carlos encouraged me to try different tactics to get people into his shows.

"*Debes ser mas inocente*," Carlos said.

So I played up my innocence. I sang to the people in the streets. Between my voice and my spotless dress, I liked to think I looked like an angel to the *gueros* who stopped. I feigned ignorance about what went on inside to tourists. Carlito would punctuate my peccadillo with a



well-timed bray, and I would jump and blush at the motion he made with his hand. The tourists poured through the doors.

Sister Mary Anderson looked at my belly in fear when I told her about Carlos's show.

"You didn't. You aren't. . ." she asked.

"No," I said wrapping my arms around my stomach, "I was—" The other *embarazadas* had stories of brutal men, so it was easy to join them. "I was attacked." A lie felt safer than the truth.

"It serves you right," Sister Mary Anderson said, grabbing me by the arm and dragging me to confession. "You were the gatekeeper to hell, inviting men to enter in and burn with lust. If you got singed, you only have yourself to blame."

Sister Mary Anderson waited outside the confessional, listening to make sure I didn't leave anything out.

I left my Lalo's papa out, though. I never confessed Carlito.

When the show closed up for the night, Carlito was in charge of stabling the donkeys. Sometimes I would keep him company. He would lay a blanket on the hay so I wouldn't get my dress dirty. I sang to him while he brushed down the donkeys. He always took off his shirt to work so it wouldn't get dirty, and I would admire his back as his sweat collected the fur that floated in the still barn air.

Carlito was much bigger than his father, so when the crowd got out of hand, he was called in to the show to settle things down. One night when Carlito went in, a group came out laughing.

"Hey chica," they called.

I was trying out a new song. I sang it slow and sweet like Carlos told me to, but the men

surrounded me and started grabbing at my arms. I looked around for Carlito, but he was still inside.

“Hey chica,” one said in a nauseating cloud of Carlos’s cheap mezcal, “I’ve got a burrito for you right here.” He grabbed his groin and then grabbed me and put his mouth on mine.

They were all laughing. I couldn’t breathe. I tried to pull away but couldn’t until the man’s head jerked back, and I saw Carlito’s fist in his hair. He threw the man down and started hitting him. The others stopped laughing and jumped on Carlito. I ran to the stable.

Carlito’s shirt was torn and his face was beginning to swell when he found me. There was blood running down the side of his head. I took off my dress and laid it on the blanket so it wouldn’t get dirty. I sang to Carlito as I cleaned his wounds. I sang to Carlito every night from then on.

The dress became uncomfortable as my breasts grew. Carlos leered. Said I was finally becoming a woman. Started inviting me to see the show. *Solo para verla*. Just to watch. I stayed outside, but when the day came that I could no longer wear the dress, Carlos realized what had happened. He attacked Carlito in the stable. Beat him long after he stopped moving. Said he’d beat me too if I didn’t come into the show.

That night I ran, and didn’t stop until I met Sister Mary Anderson.

After my confession, Sister Mary Anderson never left my side. She said she was called by God to save my soul, but I think she was afraid I would take my baby with me to the hell where she expected me to burn.

Sister Mary Anderson’s favorite sermons to the *embarazadas* all revolved around the theme that “the sins of the parents are visited upon the children even unto the third and fourth generations.” She quoted multiple verses from each of the first five books of the Bible that all

said the same thing. I never knew if this was a warning to keep us from going back to the men she thought had put us in this situation, or if she was letting us know that our children were damned because we didn't fight them hard enough. Either way, that was always her launching point to encourage us to fill out the adoption papers she kept offering us. One or two of the girls might have signed up hoping that a new family in a new country would help their child avoid the wrath of God, but I signed the papers because I thought they meant that my baby might have regular meals and a home.

Lalo came during the worst of the Spring floods. The road was washed out and the power was off. Two sisters who helped at the clinic and Sister Mary Anderson stayed by my bed as I screamed in pain. I pushed and screamed and bled. The world tore in half, and there was no more pain.

One of the nuns fainted. The other crossed herself, fell to her knees, and started praying. No one remembered to administer last rites.

Sister Mary Anderson took my son to her room. She washed the blood from his perfect arms and face. Cleaned his back and chest before moving on to the tiny horse body that was his lower half. Each hoof was my damnation. I could see her thoughts. She was sure I hadn't been just the gatekeeper to hell but one of its denizens.

I waited for pain and judgment. My body was cooling as blood soaked my bed in the other room. I looked for the flames of hell to warm me. I couldn't decide if it was Carlito's proximity to the donkeys or my job as *boletera*, but she'd been right. I had dammed my son.

Sister Mary Anderson swaddled him as best she could and got a bottle from the kitchen. He stopped crying as soon as the bottle touched his lips. One of his arms worked free of the blanket, and he grasped at the air as he drank.

He's almost perfect like this, Sister Mary Anderson thought. A perfect little boy and not a monster.

His hand found her thumb, squeezed, and held tight. Sister Mary Anderson nearly dropped the bottle, as in her mind his tiny little hand had reached up into her chest and crushed her heart.

She looked at him with horror. She looked at him with love.

When the bottle was empty and my son was asleep, she retrieved the paperwork from the office. I had signed everything for the adoption. It was easy for Sister Mary Anderson to fill in her information in the adopter section. When she got to the name of the child, she paused and remembered our conversation from the week before.

"If it's a boy, I want to name him Lalo," I said.

"Lala?" she asked. "That's not a name, that's a sound."

"Not Lala, Lalo. It's short for Eduardo."

"I guess," she said after a few minutes, "that's not so bad."

She wrote his name, Edward Anderson, on all the documents before sealing them in an envelope.

"Sister Mary Anderson," Father Paul called through the door, "I heard that the child, uh, is it. . ."

"Shh," Sister Mary Anderson hissed as she cracked the door. "The boy is sleeping."

"A boy?" Father Paul said, "but I heard he's—"

"He is sleeping," she said. "You can see him in the morning."

Sister Mary Anderson closed the door and knelt next to the bed. She prayed for wisdom and guidance. She prayed for strength because her love made her scared, and she never wanted to

be separated from my son.

My son. Her name. My Lalo may never hear his true name, but I could almost forgive her that because I could see that she was truly in love, and someone needed to protect him.

Before the sun rose, while everything was quiet, Sister Mary Anderson slipped her envelope into the outgoing mail on her way to the kitchen for a fresh bottle.

The earth did not swallow me up. No hell came to burn me. I started seeing lost spirits. They were senseless, repeating nonsense or making guttural noises. They would wander into my son's room as he slept, and I would block their path until they wandered back out. I wondered if it was damnation or release for them to forget what made them human. They scared me, though. I didn't want to become like them. But they didn't have something to hold onto like I did. They didn't have my Lalo.

There was something magical about my *nino*. I could understand why Sister Mary Anderson was smitten. When I looked upon his face, I knew nothing but love. But when I turned away to inspect the minds of the curious nuns or Father Paul, his four hooves and soft fur filled my mind, and I wondered what my sins had damned him to.

The magic worked on Father Paul to a degree too. He went along with Sister Mary Anderson when she said that my Lalo didn't need to see a doctor. That science didn't need to get involved just yet. He made the others promise silence. He even waited to tell his superiors. When he did contact them, they didn't believe him and sent a church official to check on Father Paul's sanity. The official's report brought a delegation to Sister Mary Anderson's room, but by the time they arrived, she had received the documents she needed to give herself leverage.

"He's not a monster. He's not a demon. He's just something new," she said.

They called for study. They called for prayer. They wanted to take my Lalo away from

her.

She quoted Bible passages of birds feeding prophets, a whale delivering a missionary, a donkey converting a king. When that didn't work, she showed them the paperwork. And that's when I realized how much she was willing to risk for my son. They said she broke her vows. They wanted to kick her out of the church.

All she wanted was a quiet place to raise him. She didn't want to leave the church, but she wouldn't leave her adopted son.

The delegation was torn, but in the end they decided that miracle or demon, the church needed to keep my son close, so they had to keep Sister Mary Anderson close. They set her up in a house in the wilderness of northern California. A place blessedly free of those senseless wandering spirits that scared me so. They sent a man once a month with food and water and fuel for the generator. My Lalo grew. Sister Mary Anderson didn't raise him to call her mother, though I wouldn't have blamed her if she had. She loved him more than I could. She thought about him all the time. When she closed her eyes at night she fell into dreams of him. When I wasn't looking at him, I still saw fur and hooves. My sin. Damnation.

She taught him how to play, how to read. She taught him the Bible stories where God sent animals to save his people. She taught him about miracles.

By age nine, my Lalo knew all the songs Sister Mary Anderson had in her head. She would tidy the house or clean up after a meal and he could play in the fields as long as he sang. The love she found when he first grabbed her thumb still filled her with fear, but it was all right for him to be out of her sight if she could at least hear him.

Sister Mary Anderson was sitting on the porch studying the Bible, and Lalo was singing and picking apples when he met his first stranger. The stranger had hiked into the wilderness

with a group of friends but was separated from them the night before when the drugs he took convinced him to run off on a spiritual quest. He came down enough to know that he was lost when Lalo's voice reached him. The stranger trudged toward the song but stopped when he saw the genesis of the voice. He was pretty sure the acid was having another go at him, so he took out his camera and snapped a photo as he had the night before of a fern that spoke to him and the rock he was sure was the oldest rock on earth.

Lalo stopped singing. "Hello," he said. "Would you like an apple?"

The stranger reached out, but Sister Mary Anderson came around the house to see why Lalo wasn't singing and started running at them, screaming for the stranger to get away.

The singing centaur had been pretty great, but a screaming nun was just about the worst thing he could imagine. The stranger turned and ran.

I tried to warn Sister Mary Anderson about the camera, but she couldn't hear me. Lalo was crying and asking what he did wrong. She held him and told him that she was just scared. It wasn't his fault. The stranger disappeared over the farthest hill, still running.

The man who normally brought supplies showed up a week early, but instead of supplies he had a whole team from the Vatican.

"The secret's out, Sister," the man said and put a newspaper with Lalo's picture on the table. "We've got a plan to get out ahead of this and control the narrative."

"Oh, don't worry," Sister Mary Anderson said. "He's ready."

She had caught a photographer two days previously. She threatened him with a rake, but he showed her the picture the stranger had taken. He told her the article was already written and was going to run in the next day's paper. Her mind was filled with fear, and I started to panic when Lalo, hidden in the house with nothing better to do, started singing. The photographer

looked in the direction of the house and smiled. The song took the edge off Sister Mary Anderson's fear, and the look on the photographer's face made her believe that the world might just love her adopted son as much as she did. I wasn't as convinced, but when I went back into the house and looked at him, I knew my Lalo could change the world.

For two years the world was a magical place where centaurs could actually exist. My Lalo was invited everywhere. At first he would just sing a few songs and talk about his favorite Bible stories. Sister Mary Anderson, the Vatican, and I were all proud. He was spreading the good news. Eventually, he started doing interviews and talk shows as long as the questioners agreed to Sister Mary Anderson's one rule: No questions about his parents. Fan mail poured in by the truckload. My son was the most important person in the whole world.

But then his voice began to crack and he stopped singing. His face broke out and he developed spots of mange. He stopped growing too, and it soon became evident that he was never going to be the half man, half glorious stallion everyone expected him to be. He was half teenager, half donkey.

Papers started calling him "the ass-centaur" and rumors circulated about donkey shows. The calls for interviews stopped. The Lifetime movie was canceled. Mexico ceased its petition to have my Lalo reinstated as a citizen. America deported Lalo when the details of his adoption came to light. Sister Mary Anderson followed him, still in love.

Father Paul welcomed them back, but Lalo had grown used to crowds and questions. He was angry that his voice betrayed him with squeaks and squawks when he sang, and there was no more fan mail to answer.

"This only proves that you are a miracle," Sister Mary Anderson said. "Only saints deserve miracles. The world is full of sinners, and sinners always try to explain miracles away."



It's a trick of the light or some sleight of hand. It's a scientific anomaly rather than the divine will of our Creator. It's no mistake that Jesus chose to make his triumphal entry on the back of a donkey. You are now and will always be a miracle.”

She tried to drive her point home on his birthday, but all he saw in the poorly decorated cake was an ugly ass-centaur. He refused to eat any of the cake and hid in his room at the back of the little barn.

Lalo started spending more and more time in his room. Sleeping. Dreaming. I liked watching him sleep. When he was awake, he was angry and bitter, but when he slept, he was my perfect little boy again. I tried not to look into his dreams, but sometimes as he slept, I could smell the stable where I used to sing to Carlito. I thought I was getting some of my living senses back, until the sour scent of cheap mezcal showed up one night. I looked around the barn in fear, but there were no bottles to find. I checked outside, but no one was about. I went back to my Lalo and looked into his dream. He was chasing a naked woman through a field. I recognized her as one of the last people to interview him. She laughed at him as she ran. Lalo was angry and filled with lust. He reeked of mezcal and cursed the woman as she stayed just out of reach.

I fled outside. I stopped watching him when he slept and stayed out of his mind as much as possible. The mezcal smell stuck to him during the day and when it was particularly strong, he would sneak back to his room and stretch and reach for his privates. Always coming up short. He never gave up, though. He tried to make use of the objects in his room, but his bed was a pile of straw and everything else offered hard, splintered edges. He even considered the other animals in the barn but was afraid their noise would bring unwanted attention. My Lalo was changing. No longer my sweet little boy, I almost couldn't stand to be around him.

He had read some of the later articles about him. Knew there were shows where women

pleasured donkeys. He wondered how much money it would take to pay a woman to reach what he could not. Tried to think of ways to escape and find the people who made disgusting offers in their letters.

Sister Mary Anderson couldn't see his thoughts, but she knew something was wrong almost as soon as I did. She started telling him I was a prostitute, which made me angry until I listened to her thoughts and realized that maybe the possibility of accidentally paying his own mother for sex might be enough to keep him from paying anyone for sex.

Lalo was in the habit of wearing shirts to cover his torso during interviews, but Sister Mary Anderson started insisting that he wear a cloak to cover the rest of his body when she saw how he looked at the *embarazadas*. How his body responded. He hated the cloak. Said it was too hot and it itched.

Despite the scent that clung to him, and his thoughts I could see if I wished, I wanted him to befriend the *embarazadas*. He needed friends his own age. He needed something to replace the world's attention he once held captive. Something to get him out of his room. But the *embarazadas* had read the stories about him too. They called him *burrito*: little donkey. Not just behind his back but to his face. They were wary of the way he looked at them and made sure to never be alone in his presence.

Sister Mary Anderson confided her concerns to Father Paul, and he put Lalo in charge of the garden. As an incentive, Father Paul said that Lalo didn't have to wear the cloak when he worked in the hot sun.

His thoughts still smelled of mezcal, but he didn't hide in his room and stretch as much.

~

The cake was white, not chocolate like Lalo hoped. The green icing was too sweet and bitter, though no one said anything to Sister Mary Anderson, and it turned everyone's teeth a grayish hue. Some of the senseless spirits wandered into the room as they ate. I chased them away. The bitterness, the lust, the moments when even I could barely recognize him, it didn't matter. He was still my *nino*. My reason for holding on and not becoming senseless like them. I didn't want them to disturb my son's birthday. After the cake, Lalo went outside to tend the garden as Sister Mary Anderson prepared herself to wash the plates.

Lalo took off his shirt and cloak. He strapped the plow to his body and started turning the earth. He strained at the straps and I could almost see Carlito in the muscles that flexed and the sweat that slicked the harness as he prepared the garden. I understood Father Paul's intentions. That the work kept him busy. Kept him out of trouble. But I hated that plow. It was a tool for beasts, and I wanted more for my son, especially on his birthday.

An *embarazada* who had only just arrived walked along the edge of the garden, singing. Her voice was beautiful. I wondered if anyone had forced her to use it for evil like Carlos did mine.

Lalo stopped and stared. She was beautiful, and her song reminded him of the days when he too used to sing. The days when the world loved him. Maybe she hadn't read about him. Maybe they could be friends. Fall in love.

The *embarazada* stopped singing when she saw my Lalo. Did she not know? Had the world really forgotten about him?

"*Olvidalo,*" another *embarazada* called through a window, laughing. "*Solo es un burrito estúpido.*"

Forget him, he's just a stupid little donkey.

The new *embarazada* shook her head and started laughing.

Her laughter reminded him of what the world had made him.

Lalo watched her turn and walk from the garden. She started singing again, but instead of calming him, the sound strengthened his rage. The world had been taken away from him and he was given a patch of dirt. He was laughed at and ignored. Rejected. He would take it all back.

Rage and lust poured from him in a stench of cheap mezcal. He began to unstrap the plow. She was alone, and he knew he could outrun her. He screamed as the harness fell, and he began to run. Sister Mary Anderson's "sins of the fathers" were not sermons but prophesy. It wasn't that I could no longer recognize my son, it was that I could recognize him all too well. He wore the face of his father's father and carried murder in his heart.

This was not my Lalo. This was not my *nino* who needed protection from the world but a beast the world needed to be protected from.

I turned to find help, but everything was slipping away. I ended up in a kitchen where a nun washed dishes, her mind full of worry. This was not what I was looking for. I moved outside where a girl stopped singing and started running from the sound of pounding hooves. I looked at the charging centaur. His face reminded me of someone I feared. Someone I ran from long ago.

I turned to flee the hooves that tore up the soil.

## Nature

I haven't been able to leave the house for over a month. I don't know how to work the doors, and nobody will leave a window open for fear that I'll end up like my sister, screaming and twitching on the grass near the curb while a truck roars off, turning up the street with blood on its wheels.

The raven started making fun of me the week after the accident. At first I wasn't sure if I was actually seeing him or if I was conjuring an image of nature honoring my sister because I wasn't able to handle the fact that she was dead. I was looking out the window, staring at the spot where she died when the raven landed in the middle of the street. He hopped to the curb and put his beak in the grass.

"Fucking tourist," I said and pressed my face to the window.

I wondered who had spread the word. Tragedy on this block. Come get your death fix. I muttered curses and imagined breaking his neck.

The raven did something really strange then, strange even for a raven. With his beak still in the grass, he spread his wings and brought them around to touch over his head, making himself into a small, black mound.

"Is that son of a bitch praying?" I hissed at the window.

I wondered if this raven ate one too many rotten hot dogs from the side of the road and was convinced he was a Valkyrie sent to bring the dead to Valhalla. But my sister was no warrior. Our ancestors preferred warmer climes where there were plenty of places to nap in the sun.

The raven brought his head up and started waving it back and forth, beak open to the sky. He twitched and shuddered, opened and closed his beak. I swear I could hear him saying "Yes!

Yes! Yes!”

That motherfucker was getting off.

I went to the next window to see if it was open so I could go sink my teeth into that feathered piece of shit, but a car zipped down the street. The growly blat of its messed up exhaust made my fur stand on end and reminded me that the outside world was dangerous. The second window was closed anyway.

The car had no effect on the raven. He just kept waving his head back and forth, mouthing “Yes! Yes! Yes!” to the sky.

I pressed my face against the window. I yowled and spit my curses. It felt good to hate. Sister’s death had left me with nothing. No appetite. I didn’t even sleep so much as lay on the ground and missed her. But this was something. I was teeth and claws and hate so strong I was sure that if I could manage to leave the house, I’d rip up the curb and smash all the ravens and cars that profaned my street.

The raven stopped his perverse dance and fell to the grass.

I stopped cursing.

My grief had given me superpowers.

I cursed at the next car and the next. Hating with all I had. I flexed my claws and felt them bite into the paint on the windowsill. The cars just kept driving. They were moving pretty fast, so I never had much time to curse at them. I was hopeful, though, that maybe around the next corner or the one after that, the cars would fall over and die like the raven.

I was pleased with my work, almost felt up to eating, when the raven hopped up. He picked at his feathers and rubbed his beak along their length until they shone with darkness. Then, despite my renewed curses, the raven flew off.

He came back, though. The raven came back every day and did his little dance where my sister died.

My girlfriend tried to cheer me up. She brought me a baby squirrel the other day. She's no good with doors either, so she brought it to the sliding glass door where I've taken to lying, hoping one of the big guys will forget to look down and accidentally crush my skull on their way outside.

The baby squirrel was still alive. It tried to fake death, but its panicked hyperventilation caused it to shiver and quake. I'd always wanted a squirrel, but those crazy little assholes are fast. I thought that maybe if I could catch one, we'd become friends. I'd have this tiny little sidekick who'd join me in wild shenanigans. Maybe squirrels could figure out how to work doors. Maybe they tasted delicious.

My girlfriend stepped back from the squirrel. It made a break for the garden, but she pounced on it and brought it back.

I wanted to ask her how she caught it. I wanted to pounce on it myself, hold it in my mouth, and feel its tiny little gasps. I wanted to lick it clean and tell it that everything was going to be okay. That it was my little buddy now, and no one else was going to mess with it.

Step back, pounce. Step back, pounce.

I might as well have wanted to be able to work the door. I couldn't move, or speak.

Step back, pounce. Step back.

The squirrel was dead. Its sides no longer quivered with fearful breath. My girlfriend rubbed herself against the glass.

"I miss you," she said. "Why don't you come out and play?"

I tried to find the energy for an explanation. I tried to tell her thanks for trying.

“Come on,” she said, her insistence growing shrill. “We all miss her. You can’t lie around all day. Your sister would have been the first to say you should come out and play.”

“Cut out that racket,” one of the big guys said. A shoe bounced off the sliding glass door and fell toward my head. My girlfriend ran for the fence. I prayed that the shoe flew with enough force to end it all. I tried to find the strength to just lie there and let it kill me, but my nature kicked in at the last minute and I scrambled out of the way.

“Oh sorry, buddy,” the big guy said. “I didn’t see you there.”

He picked me up and took me back to the couch. He set me on his lap and started a movie. As he stroked my fur, I managed to fall asleep.

My sister was always better than me. Just wanted to purr and play. Was always good for comfort when I was feeling down. She was sunshine, and I was shadow. Sometimes I wanted to hate her. The world was a wonderful place to her, or maybe the world was a wonderful place because of her. I just took up space.

Even as a kitten, I was prone to depression. It was like being stalked by a darkness, even though I knew it was all coming from inside me, was all my fault. Every moment of the day I waited for it to pounce, pin me to the ground, and sink its gloomy teeth in my neck. I’m pretty sure my sister could sense my insides were turning on me before I ever realized it, and she’d curl up next to me or sit and lick my head, and the darkness would sidle up rather than pounce. Her presence allowed me to sleep. Her comfort kept me from being afraid.

By the second week of the raven’s sick dance, I had watched him from almost every window in the house. The hatred got me through the day. Gave me something to look forward to. I made my way upwards each day he danced until I was in the highest window in the house. He looked both more despicable and more devout from that height. It seemed almost like he was



praying up at me, but the look of ecstasy on his face got me so riled up, I couldn't stop myself from lunging at the glass.

I watched him as he flew off. He grew small as he flew higher and higher. I thought about what it would be like to look down from up there. I pressed my face against the window. I wanted to jump. I wanted to defy my nature. No tail twitch or twisting body. No flailing paws to get my feet under me. Lean out and hold still. No hope for flight, just an end.

I sat back on the windowsill, then leaned forward again. The moment before my whiskers touched the glass was a dizzying rush. I could almost feel myself falling. I wanted to jump.

The loss of equilibrium, the desire to jump stuck with me all day, and the next. And the next. I was stuck in that moment before my whiskers touched the window. It was there when I lay down to sleep and when I got up to eat. I wanted to jump. I needed to jump. I was afraid.

“Come out and play,” my girlfriend said through the sliding glass door.

“Have you seen the raven in my front yard?” The desire to jump and the fear of jumping fought in my mind. Made me dizzy even on the floor by the sliding glass door.

“Yeah, he's super creepy. Even for a raven.”

I was sure I was crazy. What else would anyone call a cat who wanted to defy his nature? What else could I call any creature who wanted to kill himself? There was something wrong with my mind, but at least I wasn't delusional. The raven was definitely real.

“Next time he comes,” I said, “could you ask him what he's doing?”

“No way,” she said. “I'm not getting near that thing. He's huge.”

Another cat called my girlfriend from the other side of the fence.

“I'm going to go play,” she said. “You should really think about coming outside.”

I waited until the next day when the big guys were leaving. As soon as the door opened I

shot out between their legs, made a sharp turn, and ducked under the house.

They hollered and begged me to come out. They dangled toys I hadn't played with in a month.

"Don't worry, honey," one of the big guys said. "He'll be begging to come back inside by the time we get home."

They left a handful of food on the porch step before getting into a car and driving off.

I moved to the front porch to wait for the raven. I wanted to ask him what the hell he was doing with that stupid dance. I wanted to ask him why he mocked me. I wanted to ask him if he ever thought about tucking in his wings as he flew, defying his nature, and falling to the ground.

The morning sun warmed the front porch. I stretched out, the dizzying urge to choose to fall, my desire for death, could wait until I got some answers. I fell asleep in the sun.

"Yes! Yes! Yes!"

The raven's cries woke me. I stretched and nearly fell down the stairs, as the urge to climb the nearest tree and let myself fall nearly overrode my need for answers.

"Yes! Yes! Yes!"

His head waved in the air, neck exposed. He didn't see me stalking closer.

"Yes! Yes! Yes!"

I was almost on him when he shuddered and collapsed. His beak was still open. His life showed in the tremor of short, quick breaths. He was unconscious. He was at my mercy.

I moved closer and batted him with a paw. He didn't move. I leaned in and sniffed. I felt a slight tickle on my nose and then searing pain.

"Jesus Christ!" I yelled and jumped back. My nose was on fire. I clawed at my face and a small curled ant fell to the grass. I flicked my tongue up to try to lick the fire away. I rubbed my

nose on the ground. Tears streamed from my eyes.

The raven didn't move. Fire ants crawled all over his body. His feathers pulsed as they bit. The pulsing turned into quakes and then laughter as the raven hopped up, chuckling as he twisted his head around to crush the ants and eat them as he cleaned his feathers.

"What the hell are you laughing at?" I said.

"Oh shit," the raven said. "I didn't see you there, cat. Is this your ant pile? This has got to be the best pile I've ever come across. There's nothing like starting your day with a little myrmecomantic nap."

"What the hell are you talking about?" I said.

"You don't know about the fire?" the raven said between mouthfuls. "These ants are like living, crawling, cold fire. Oh man, you let them get all over you and when they start biting, the world just melts away. There's nothing like it."

My nose still burned. There was nothing cold about this fire, nothing ecstatic or fun, just pain.

"You're fucking crazy," I said, trying to puff out my fur and make myself bigger, ready for a fight. "My sister died right here and you come every day to dance around and get high on ants? Get the hell out of here."

"Whoa, cat," the raven said. "Your sister died here? Like, right here?"

"Yeah."

"Holy shit. That explains things. She must have really been something else."

I was waiting for him to clean himself so I could rip him to shreds without getting bit by ants, but his last comment caught me off guard.

"The fire ants, cat. The myrmecomany. It's like the perfect embodiment of the circle of

life. We're, like, all being consumed and consuming at the same time. You see, the ants are trying to eat me and I know it. I can feel it as the cold fire spreads. I feel like I'm soaring around the moon and becoming a part of the earth at the same time. At least, that's how I normally feel. But this pile. Goddamn. It's like liquid sunshine served on the rocks. It's like that cold fire is shot through with pure joy. Your sister. She was good, wasn't she? The ants bite with that joy. They taste like that goodness. It's about the best thing I ever felt."

I didn't know what to say. My nose burned with nothing more than pain, but he was right about my sister. She was good. She was the best.

"Listen, cat. Why don't you join me one of these days? You loved your sister, and she loved you too. I can feel it in these ants. But do yourself a favor and don't tell any other ravens about this pile. Shit will get crazy if word gets out."

The raven flew off.

I got as near as I dared to the fire ant pile. It was still going wild from the raven's disturbance. Maybe there was something to what the raven said. These fire ants weren't here when my sister died.

I went back to the sliding glass door. Ants swarmed over my pile of food. I took a bite. These were no fire ants. They added a citrus tang to the food. It was a nice change.

I was napping on the back steps when my girlfriend jumped the fence.

"Oh, you're outside," she said as she set a dead mouse in front of me.

I tried to bat the mouse around to show my appreciation, but all I could think about was that damn raven and my burning nose.

"Sorry," she said. "I accidentally killed it on the way over."

A big orange tom jumped to the top of the fence and started pacing.

“Listen, I thought you’d be inside,” she said. “I wasn’t sure if you’d ever come outside again and, well, I met someone else.”

I let out a half-hearted hiss at the pacing tom because it seemed like the thing to do.

“Don’t be like that,” she said. “He’s real nice, and he’s not even fixed. I know you’re sad and all, but I’m not getting any younger.”

I wasn’t about to absolve her, so I said nothing. She jumped to the fence and rubbed her face in his fur. Half her head disappeared. Of course she’d find someone who was ninety percent fur. My girlfriend—well, ex-girlfriend—and her bag of hair jumped down on the far side of the fence. I knocked the dead mouse beneath the steps. After a few seconds it got up and ran deeper under the house. I laughed. Who knew mice were better actors than squirrels?

I was still chuckling about that mouse when the big guys got home.

“Ready to come back in?” one of them said.

I managed a purr.

“Finally back to your old self?” the other one said as he opened the door.

I wasn’t sure if feeling like my old self would have been an improvement, but I did feel better for some reason.

I spent the night rubbing my nose on the corner of a bookshelf. When the pain fire finally abated, I was left with an itching fire. I slept fitfully as I had to wake and ease the burning and itching by rubbing my nose even though every touch brought a new pain.

I was dozing when the big guys left, so I waited for the raven at the high window. He saw me in the window and called to me, but the house was shut tight. I watched him dance and pass out. I watched him eat the ants and fly away.

I looked down and leaned toward the glass. I drew back when my nose touched the

window and my ant bite burned. The dizziness was gone. I didn't feel the urge to fight my nature. I didn't feel the need to fall. I just felt the pain in my nose.

All day I waited for the jumping thought to come back. I stalked it around corners and up stairways, but all I found was that bit of pain when I bumped my nose.

I woke the next morning ready for a day of food and naps, but as soon as I moved, I knew something was wrong. The dizziness was back. I wanted to jump. I scratched at my nose but nothing was there. The bite was healed. I watched the raven from the lowest window, but even there I wanted to defy my nature and kill myself. I cursed the raven. I clawed at windowsill. I lunged at the glass and struck it hard enough to see stars, and for a brief second, I didn't want to jump.

Pain. Physical pain was the only difference between yesterday and today. Pain was the only thing that pushed back at the jumping thoughts, the only thing that would hold off the urge to defy my nature. I knew what I had to do.

I waited at the door in the morning. The big guys let me walk outside. I was in the front yard when the raven landed.

“Right on, cat. So you've decided to join me. I'll let you go first, seeing as how it's your ant pile and all.”

I put a paw into the middle of the fire ants.

“Yeah, cat. Feel the cold fire! Feel the joy!”

But there was no cold fire, just burning pain. I couldn't feel what the raven felt. Whatever it was that the raven experienced had no effect on me. I didn't feel closer to my sister. Fire ants swarmed over my paw and bit and burned. I felt no joy. That darkness was still there, its teeth buried so deep I knew it'd never let me go, but the dizziness, the urge to jump was gone.

“Yes! Yes! Yes!” the raven cried.

The pain was excruciating. I looked at my paw expecting my fur to burst into flames. I felt my claws twist and crackle, my bones turn to embers.

The raven hopped from one foot to the other, mouth open, salivating for his chance to feel something.

I slipped another paw into the mass of biting fire.

## Clap Your Hands

Five knew two things about Brother Ted Gunderson: The man loved Jesus, and hated his own son. Five was never allowed to call him father or pa. Once Five was old enough to string the words together, Brother Ted Gunderson was Brother Ted Gunderson, and Five would catch a beating if he left off a single syllable.

Brother Ted Gunderson, on the other hand, had plenty of names he could call Five: demon, hellspawn, murderer. Five was born a murderer. He killed his mother when he came into the world, and Brother Ted Gunderson never let him forget it.

“Lord Jesus,” Brother Ted Gunderson prayed when they sat down to eat. Words as common to Five as the Lord’s own prayer: “I pray your comfort for my murdered wife, and I pray for your protection on those around us. May you keep this boy from murdering anyone else on his road to hell.”

Five liked it when Brother Ted Gunderson preached from the Psalms or the Gospels or anything that didn’t get him shouting about the end times. Five liked how Jesus was always feeding people and healing people and forgiving people. Liked how the Psalms felt like the wanted posters he saw on the building walls of each town they moved their revival tent to, only opposite. The Psalms didn’t call out Jesus for crimes he did, but thanked him for and hinted at all the good things he was going to do. And the words in the Psalms were so beautiful, Five could conjure up a picture of Jesus that was clearer than any wanted poster’s poorly drawn sketch. Five always watched Brother Ted Gunderson speak about Jesus from a dark corner of the tent because if the preacher’s gaze fell on Five, all the joy and miracles would slide from his words and the sermon would turn to judgment and the coming damnation.



Five didn't like hearing about the coming damnation. Growing up a murderer meant judgment was always on his mind.

Five was trying to cry quietly the day he first met the woman with the rotten teeth. He had been surprised by a snake as he checked around the back of the revival tent to make sure that it was properly fastened and stepped on a sharp stick in his haste to avoid the serpent.

"Are you okay?" the woman said. She gasped and held her mouth in pain as soon as she spoke.

Five held out his bare foot, and she knelt beside him. She wiped the blood away with the hem of her skirt and tore a strip to wrap his foot.

"Now that's better," she said carefully. "What's your name?"

"Five."

She smiled and Five stared at the twisted brown stumps of her teeth.

"Your name not your age, silly."

She covered her mouth and inhaled through her nose in pain. Brother Ted Gunderson had been spreading the word that tonight's service would be a healing revival. Five knew what she would be praying for.

Five was small for his age, but he wasn't a little kid anymore. Ever since he was old enough to hold a shovel, his birthdays were marked by Brother Ted Gunderson standing over him while he dug a rectangular hole. Five had to place something he loved into the hole before filling it back in. Three years ago he was forced to bury his last pair of shoes. The only precious thing he had for two years running was his supper.

The woman with the rotten teeth must have had bad eyes too because he could remember digging at least seven holes for Brother Ted Gunderson. Before the shoes he buried a worn hat

someone left in the revival tent, a twisted root that looked like a galloping horse, a marble given to him by a little girl whose parents were attending one of Brother Ted Gunderson's services, all the way back to the first thing he was forced to bury: a jet black chicken feather he stroked his cheek with to fall asleep at night. He liked to pretend it was the exact color of his mother's hair. By Five's count, he was ten or eleven, but Five knew a murderer had no right to correct anyone, so he showed her to the front of the tent. The woman hugged him before going inside.

Five liked healing revival nights. The miracles in the revival tent were never as exciting as those in the Bible. Cripples didn't get up and dance, but folks with limps walked out afterward a bit easier and with a smile for God.

"Make a joyful noise," Brother Ted Gunderson shouted as he whipped the crowd into a frenzy before the healings started.

People hallelujahed and amen-ed at the top of their lungs. They laughed and cried and danced on the tent's dirt floor. Five watched the woman with the rotten teeth from a crack in the tent. She didn't sing or shout with the rest of them. She clapped her hands.

Brother Ted Gunderson pulled the loudest from the crowd and prayed for their healing. Five watched the woman attempt a hallelujah when she was overlooked. She covered her mouth in pain and shouted no more. With tears running down her face she clapped. She looked at Brother Ted Gunderson and clapped. She looked to the heavens and clapped and clapped.

No one had ever bound Five's wounds. No one had ever given him a hug. Five prayed to Jesus for the woman. Prayed that her teeth wouldn't hurt her any more. Prayed that the rotten stumps in her mouth would become as beautiful as the kindness she showed him.

The woman's hand went to her mouth.

"I," she said, "I've been healed."

She shimmered in the dim tent lights. Brother Ted Gunderson heard her finally and parted the crowd to get to her side. He put his hand on her shoulder then pulled it back and inspected his palm.

“Gold dust,” he said. “Gold dust from heaven.”

The woman smiled and her teeth shone. Pure gold.

The revival carried on until the sun lightened the sky.

Brother Ted Gunderson’s revival stayed in town for an extra week. The tent was packed every night. Everyone wanted their own gold teeth. Everyone wanted gold dust from heaven.

At the end of the week, the woman with the golden teeth married Brother Ted Gunderson and the whole town said halleluiaah. She took the name Mary Gunderson and the town said amen.

The revival was packed in the next town and the next as Mary Gunderson told of her healing. Five watched from the shadows and praised Jesus. Brother Ted Gunderson explained to the crowds the act of clapping hands to bring the Holy Spirit.

Mary Gunderson was surprised to find out that the wounded orphan boy outside the revival tent was Brother Ted Gunderson’s son, but she learned quickly never to call him such. She learned that the boy was a murderer. She learned to hate him from the man she thought could perform miracles. Five wanted to tell her that it was his prayer that healed her, but knew she would never listen to a murderer. Though her golden smile stayed hidden when he was in sight, Five cherished her kindness back when he was still a stranger.

On Five’s birthday she stood with Brother Ted Gunderson over the boy as he dug his hole.

“Leave what you love in the hole,” Brother Ted Gunderson said.

“I can’t,” Five said.

“You can and you will.”

“But I love Mary” Five said.

Brother Ted Gunderson commanded his wife to cut a switch from the twisted manzanita. She gave Five his beating that night with a zeal that left him bleeding, his shirt torn to ribbons. His supper was buried once again.

Months out from the miracle and many towns down the road, people stopped believing that Mary Gunderson was healed by a miracle.

“You’re a charlatan,” they’d cry as they drove Brother Ted Gunderson’s Clap Hands Revival from town. “This is dentist work, not God’s. You just want our money for your own set of gold teeth.”

Mary Gunderson stopped showing her miraculous smile, and Brother Ted Gunderson preached in a tent devoid of miracles. Five tried to pray for more miracles, but the land was dry, the money was tight, and he could not find the same love he felt for the woman with rotten teeth.

“I thought Jesus told us not to lie,” Mary said when Brother Ted Gunderson told her his new revival plan.

“But it’s not a lie,” Brother Ted said. “You were healed by a miracle. And Jesus also said that our most important job was to spread his good news. You want to spread his good news, don’t you?”

She agreed and left while there was still enough light to travel.

Mary Gunderson wore a disguise and circled the town to come at it from the opposite direction the revival tent would arrive from. She grimed herself up, shuffled with a limp all hunched, wore rotten caps over her golden teeth. She begged for change and made sure the whole town heard her complain about the pain in her mouth.

Brother Ted Gunderson rolled into town and set up his revival tent a few days later. He introduced the few who came at first to the spiritual practice of clapping hands. He gave testimony that clapping brought the Holy Spirit. Talked about the people he'd seen healed, the rain that had come to dry lands, and the wealth that had poured from the heavens at the sound of clapping hands.

At first, all Brother Ted Gunderson needed was a bit of sleight of hand and the shavings from his last gold coin. He picked someone with a glimmer of devotion and a sheen of gullibility. Sprinkled some gold dust into their hair and slipped some into their pocket as he guided them through the holy practice. Once they discovered the dust, they brought in their families, and the town's new tooth-achey beggar made her way to the revival. She dropped the few coins she got begging into the collection plate and out-clapped every soul in the tent. When the holy fervor of clapped hands reached the right pitch, she popped the caps from her teeth and proclaimed the miracle.

"I've been healed," she cried.

Brother Ted Gunderson inspected her mouth and called for a baptism. The grime sloughed from her skin and she stood straight, not quite beautiful but no longer a crone.

"She gave everything she had," Brother Ted called out, "and the Lord healed her. She clapped and was richly rewarded."

One look at her shining gold teeth was all that was needed to bring the whole town to the revival. They filled the collection plate. Brother Ted collected enough that he didn't mind grinding a handful of coins and nuggets down to dust. The more dust he sprinkled, the emptier the townspeople's pockets became before he packed up his revival tent.

Five ran away after the third town visited by Brother Ted Gunderson's new Clap Hands

Revival. He couldn't find it in himself to pray for another miracle while Mary's miraculous teeth were being used to fill Brother Ted Gunderson's purse. He looked for the kindness of the woman with the rotten teeth. He looked for a place where miracles could happen. He found meanness and hunger. He found a gun.

The first man he killed was trying to rob him. The second was robbing a stranger. The third was beating his own son, and it took Five days to find more bullets though meanness and evil found him around every corner.

Years of survival went by, and he found a poor depiction of his own face on the wanted posters on the walls around towns. "Nickname 'Five'," they read, "Real identity unknown."

Five never really thought about the fact that he didn't have a proper name until he read that first sign and it got him thinking about Brother Ted Gunderson. Five earned his face on a wanted poster when he stopped looking for miracles and started stomping out meanness. He couldn't think of a meaner target than his own father.

He stole a horse and went looking for Brother Ted Gunderson's Clap Hands Revival.

The revival wasn't hard to find. Far out, Five came across poor towns whose folk would draw on him if he so much as brought his palms together more than twice. He knew he was getting close when the townspeople still clapped and sang and looked at the sky in hope.

The tent throbbed with the thunder of clapped hands. The revival must have been on its last night in town. Five could hear Brother Ted Gunderson's voice boom out above the applause.

"Clap your hands," he cried. "Bring the spirit of the Lord down upon us and clap your hands."

Five waited to confront his father until the last worshiper went clapping home to check behind his ears for gold dust.

“Revival’s done for the night,” Brother Ted Gunderson said when Five strode into the tent.

The preacher went still when he saw the pistol in Five’s hand.

“Listen, friend,” Brother Ted Gunderson said, “we’re doing God’s work out here. We don’t have anything to steal.”

“Bullshit,” Five said.

“Do not curse in the Lord’s house,” Brother Ted Gunderson said as he lifted his eyes from the gun and looked his son in the face. “Well look who’s come crawling back. Mary’ll never believe the murderer’s back with the revival. She’s outside. You can help her load the wagon if you want any supper.”

Five pulled the trigger, and Brother Ted went down with a hole in his gut. Mary Gunderson screamed, and Five turned as she rushed him. She didn’t deserve her miraculous teeth. She didn’t deserve teeth at all. He grabbed her by the throat and squeezed until she couldn’t breathe, couldn’t swallow. He hit her in the mouth with the butt of his gun over and over again and then tipped her face to the ground and fished out a handful of gold teeth.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Brother Ted Gunderson asked as he held his leaking stomach.

Five wanted to list the lies. Wanted to throw the names of the towns of dying poor he had been through to find the revival tent at Brother Ted Gunderson’s feet. Wanted to recount the beatings and terrible lessons his father taught him in the spaces between towns, but all that came out was “Why Five?”

Brother Ted gagged a laugh and retched blood. “Why’d I name you Five? I was a real preacher before you came along. And not in a tent either. Fought the good fight. Saved souls. But

as soon as I laid eyes on you clawing your way out of my dead wife, I knew all hope was lost. You were a pitiful little son of hell full of all the evil of the world. I took one look at you and realized that the end times were upon us. Pestilence, Famine, War, Death. The four horsemen had done their work and you were all that was left. A new evil to end our days with suffering.”

“I’m evil?” Five said. “You left a trail of dead and dying towns full of hungry people who will never believe in miracles or goodness ever again.”

“I was spreading the good news,” Brother Ted Gunderson said. “Jesus saw fit to give me but one miracle, and I used it as best I could. They left with lighter pockets, but they left with lighter souls too.”

“Your miracle?” Five said and held up the handful of bloody, golden teeth. “I prayed for this. It was me. I made this happen.”

“Prayed for vengeance?” Brother Ted Gunderson said as he coughed more blood and closed his eyes. “That’s not God. That’s another stamp on your ticket to hell, and confirmation that you are exactly the type of monster I always knew you to be.”

Five rode until his horse was exhausted. Rode west and south away from judgment, away from damnation. He rode until he found a town that had never heard of Brother Ted Gunderson’s Clap Hands Revival. Rode until he stopped seeing his face on the wanted posters.

He paid for several nights of lodging with a small gold tooth that was proclaimed to be the oddest gold nugget the town had ever seen. He no longer carried a gun. He didn’t want to be a murderer anymore. But without the gun he was easy prey.

Thieves ran him out of town when they realized he had a pocket full of gold teeth. Five kept walking south.

“*Ayudame,*” a man said.



Five looked around. He was at the edge a dusty town he would have thought was already dead if it wasn't for the man standing waist deep in a wide hole.

*"Ayudame, por favor,"* the man said again. His voice was weak. He sounded sickly.

Five didn't understand the words, but he understood the tone as a plea for help.

"Water," Five said and made drinking motions.

The man nodded and handed Five a nearly empty water skin. Five hadn't had anything but cactus water for three days. He took a sip but the man motioned for him to finish it off.

Giving the last of his water away before he even finished digging his new well, Five thought. This is a good man. This is the kind of man miracles are supposed to happen to.

Five took the shovel and replaced the man in the hole. The man walked to a wagon parked in the shade of the nearest building and began pulling it toward Five.

Horses must have all died without water, Five thought.

The man obviously didn't know much about digging wells. This was far too wide and shallow. Five picked a spot in the middle and pried out a shovel full of dirt. The mouthful of water was not going to last him long, so Five started praying as he dug.

Five prayed for the dirt to turn to mud, for fresh water to flow from the ground. Five felt dizzy from days without food and too little water, but he continued to dig. With each shovelful, Five prayed for water to save this dry town. He prayed that this would be the last thing he did on earth. That he would be remembered for this well and not the murders.

The dry soil turned dark. Water gushed from the ground. Five thanked Jesus, took a drink, and sat on the edge of the hole.

"Go get your family," Five said. "The water's good."

Five looked to the man to see his smile, but his eyes were wide with fear, and he prayed

in words Five could not understand. Five knew why the small town was so quiet as he watched the man cross himself again and again, standing next to a wagon piled high with bodies. Five heard a word that sounded like monster, another that sounded like demon as the man dropped to his knees and covered his head.

Five looked at the water and saw it for what it was to the man. A grave became a well, a lifesaving miracle to mock his loss. The man wasn't asking for salvation. He had nothing left to save.

Five turned back to the desert. Maybe no one deserved miracles. Maybe Brother Ted Gunderson was right and judgment and damnation were all that was left. Five started walking back the way he came, leaving the man next to the slowly filling hole that was meant for everything he loved in the world.

## **Part Two: The Magical Mundane**

## All Things Hold Together

I used to sit and stare at the window whenever I was grounded. Not to watch all the things outside that I was missing out on, but to stare at any fly that landed on the windowsill and try to destroy it with my mind. I stared at them as long as I could without blinking, and if they flew off in the moment I did blink, I would tell myself that I had destroyed them. I was just a kid. I wanted to be a Jedi. A wizard.

I had nightmares for weeks after they killed Osama Bin Laden. We are getting too good at killing our boogey men. There's something comforting about having a single being we can collectively point to and say "Him, there. That's our monster. That asshole's the worst of us." But who'd we have after Bin Laden? Kim Jong Il? Koni?

I don't worry about that anymore. I'm pretty sure the only reason I'm still alive is to be the person the world can focus their collective hate on. Once I figure out how to get the word out, I hope my powers cause people to hold each other tighter as they cower under their blankets. I know I'm a monster, but I hope that with the hate and fear of the world focused on me, the world can be a better place.

~

Two weeks before that maniac shot up the mall, I wrote a story about senseless violence. The details in my story were eerily similar to what happened, and my wife joked that I willed the tragedy into being.

“Don’t go writing about the weather,” Mary said. “You’ll end up causing the next ice age.”

“Oh, shut up,” I said. I knew she was joking. I knew feeling guilty about something that happened a thousand miles away was stupid, but I felt even more culpable hearing it from her.

“You’re going to have to work on your language before the baby gets here.” She caressed her stomach.

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. She had a half fu manchu of hot sauce dripping down the right side of her face. Mary was four days past her due date, and we were trying out all the old wives’ tales to send her into labor. Tonight was all about the spice.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Shut up,” Mary said. “I don’t want our son to speak as rudely as his dad. And get me some water. I’m burning up over here.”

“Isn’t that the point?” I said, filling a glass. “Make the oven so hot the bun evicts himself.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works,” she said and drained the glass I handed her. She wiped her face with a napkin but missed a dab of hot sauce on her top lip. “Why *do* you do that, anyway?”

“Rude or not, shut up is pretty common shorthand for stop talking. I thought you’d know that?”

“Keep up, will you?” she said and threw her dirty napkin at me. “I was talking about your stories. They’re always so sad with all the violence and tragedy in the end. Why don’t you ever write a happy story?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I guess I’m just trying to get all the bad ideas out of my head.”

Once they stop buzzing around in there, maybe I'll have a happy ending just for you."

"Oh God," she said. "I've procreated with a man whose head is filled with bees."

"Buzz, buzz," I said and kissed the hot sauce from her lip.

~

After my son was born, I had trouble holding him. He was so small, and I kept thinking I was going to drop him or break his bones. He was tiny and squishy, and I was sure that he would just melt through my fingers one day. Mary would ask me to hand her our son, and all I'd be able to do would be to point at the baby sized puddle on the ground, and Mary would divorce me for not supporting his head correctly.

I tried to exorcise that fear by writing a story. I wrote about a strong dad. A dad so strong he could lift his wife and three kids with one arm. Not only was he strong, he was kind and wise, everything I hoped to be. He was a wonder to his family and doctor and neighbors because even though he was getting old, he just kept getting stronger, but everyone in his family kept getting smaller. And although he was wise, he never connected the dots that the stronger he got, the more his family shrank. Every time he realized that his family was getting tinier, he just focused on getting stronger because their smallness meant that he had to grow stronger to protect them. Eventually they were so small that they could all fit in his shirt pocket, and he'd carry them to the park and lie on his stomach to watch them play in the grass. One day, when he got to the park he had grown so strong that he accidentally flexed and blew his shirt to pieces. He spent the rest of his life looking under every blade of grass in the park hoping to find his tiny little family.

Mary said she liked it but that I'd done it again. Written a story that ended in tragedy.

“Maybe,” I said. “But it’s more about the fact that strength isn’t the most important trait for a father.”

“Well,” she said. “What do you think *is* the most important trait a father should have?”

“I’m still figuring that out,” I said, double checking that the doors were locked as I’d done every night since we brought our son home. “Maybe self-sacrifice.”

“You know, I’m not completely against you getting stronger,” she winked as she said this. “Especially if it means you’ll magically help me shrink this baby weight. And I wouldn’t mind this adorable little guy staying small forever.”

I watched her as she rocked him to sleep and knew that I was lucky to have them, but worried that luck would never be enough to protect my family.

I woke up cold the next morning because my wife had stolen the blankets in her sleep. Our son was wailing, and I rolled over to wake her up and tell her that her penance for the theft was to take care of him. Her eyes were already open.

I grabbed her arm to shake her, and her whole body rocked under the covers. She was stiff and cold and her mouth was stretched open in a scream I couldn’t believe I slept through. I couldn’t believe any of this was happening. Her eyes were stuck wide with fear and pain I had only seen once before when the doctors told her that there wasn’t time for anesthesia, that our son’s heartbeat wasn’t sounding as strong as it should, that she had to push, now. At the time I felt helpless. I couldn’t do anything more than hold her hand and put pressure on her lower back when she pushed. As I looked at her body in bed, I knew I should do something, but there was nothing I could put pressure on to ease that look on her face.

I got up and picked up our son. Just my son now.

I sat on the edge of the bed and tried to keep the word “rictus” from my thoughts. I tried

to close her eyes, her mouth, but nothing moved.

My son wailed and wailed and then stopped.

I called 911.

~

“Sudden Infant Death Syndrome” the doctor said.

“How can it be SIDS,” I replied. “I was holding him and he was crying and then he just stopped. Doesn’t SIDS kill babies in their sleep? And how the hell can you call death a syndrome? It’s like you’re saying he died to death. What the fuck happened?”

A linebacker orderly came to stand by the doctor.

“I’m very sorry, sir” the doctor said, “I know you’re going through a tough time right now between your wife’s aneurysm and the SIDS, but I don’t know what to tell you. Sometimes even science can’t explain tragedies.”

I swung at the doctor. I wasn’t even sure what I was aiming at, but my fist bounced off his clipboard and hit him in the chest. I felt a crack, and I couldn’t tell if it came from the pen in his pocket or a bone in my hand. The orderly stepped between us, and I swung at him too. He brushed it aside like it was the easiest thing to do, spun me around, and pulled me into a bearhug that crushed my arms to my chest. I tried stomping on his foot but he trapped my legs with pressure from his knees.

“You need to calm down, sir.” He wasn’t even breathing hard.

I wanted him to hit me or crush me, but he let me go and wrapped his hand around the back of my neck and guided me toward the door.



~

I emailed my in-laws. I knew it was the wrong way to tell them their daughter and grandson were dead, but I couldn't say it out loud. I didn't revise or embellish. I repeated the doctor's words for the most part. I wanted them to hate me. I hoped my father-in-law could throw a punch better than me.

My phone started ringing ten minutes after I hit send. I let it go to voicemail. It started ringing again, but I left it on the table and went to the door when I heard a knock. It was the police.

One detective asked if he could look around the bedroom, and I pointed him to the right door. The other sat with me on the couch.

"Do you need to get that?" he asked.

I turned the ringer off.

His questions started out innocent enough: How was Mary's health in the last few weeks? How was my son's? I told him how my son's heart didn't sound very strong during the birth, but afterward, the doctors said he was healthy.

He asked me how my son slept. If I ever got frustrated.

"I didn't shake him or hit him or do anything to him if that's what you're asking," I said.

He told me he knew about what happened at the hospital. That the doctor wasn't pressing charges, but it was obvious I had trouble controlling my anger.

I watched my phone vibrate with calls from my in-laws. It was almost to the edge of the table. I thought about confessing that I accidentally wrote that mall shooting into existence. I

thought about telling him that Mary and my son's deaths were all my fault. That somehow my bad ideas were becoming real through my careless words, but instead I pointed to the buzzing phone.

"That's my father-in-law. I have to talk to him, and I need to make arrangements to fly Mary and our son back to them for the funeral. Is that going to be a problem?"

The first detective came back from the bedroom, locked eyes with his partner, and shook his head.

"We're sorry for your loss," the second detective said, standing and moving toward the door. "Unless we find anything that doesn't look right, our investigation should be over in the next couple of days, and you'll be free to take them."

My phone started buzzing again as soon as the door closed. I answered it.

"What is this?" my father-in-law said. "What's happening? Is this a fucking joke?"

"No."

I waited for the shouting or sobbing or whatever was supposed to come next. The silence grew awkward so I said "I haven't talked to the mortuary yet. I'll get things sorted and fly back with them by the end of the week."

I waited a few more seconds for a response. There was no sound. I couldn't even hear him breathing. I hung up.

The hospital must have sent word of my incident along with the bodies to the mortuary because I was shadowed by a security guard the whole time.

"Will there be a viewing of your wife?" the funeral director asked.

A viewing? For some reason I thought of this as a sort of film screening, and I imagined a camera installed in the coffin so interested parties could check in on the process of

decomposition from time to time. But then I realized he was asking me if the funeral would be open casket. I wanted to ask him how he planned to erase her look of fear and pain, but all I said was “I don’t know.”

~

I expected a hearse when I arrived at San Francisco, but the funeral home sent a large, dark blue van instead. Hearses aren’t made to carry two coffins, the driver told me, and they didn’t want to make a second trip.

Mary’s parents met us at the funeral home. Doug hugged me and asked me how I was doing. Linda glared openly. She had always been bitter towards me for moving her daughter across the country.

“Do you know when your folks are flying in?” Doug asked.

“No idea,” I said.

Linda turned red and for a second, I thought she was going to hit me. “How could you not know?”

I gestured toward the coffins.

Doug laid his hand on her arm, turned to me, and said “Don’t worry about it right now. Linda will call them.”

Linda stormed off. Doug pulled out a flask and we shared warm scotch. We sat and looked at the coffins. He cried and told stories of his little girl.

Apparently I was exactly the type of fuckup Linda thought I was because I had given my parents the wrong date for the funeral. Their flight arrived on the correct day, only five hours

after the service. I was fine with that. Everyone around me seemed to accept shrugs and nods as answers to their questions, but my parents would want explanations.

“*We know that in all things, God works for the good of those who love Him,*” the pastor quoted. This was not the time to put a positive spin on my family’s death. I wanted to hit the pastor. I imagined burning the church to the ground. I wondered if this was my life now: moments of rage at doctors with no answers and pastors with answers that don’t make sense surrounded by numbness.

The pastor justified my son’s death with a verse that said “*in Him all things hold together.*” He went on to explain that God was merciful for allowing a mother and her infant son to stay together in the afterlife.

All things? My rage pushed back at the nothingness. What about me? Contemplating arson during a funeral service wasn’t a real Christian thing to do, but how did that preclude me from being a part of the things that are held together by God?

The wake was a potluck at Doug and Linda’s after the funeral. Doug’s best friend parked himself next to me and kept my glass full. His wife died a decade earlier after two years with cancer, and he kept telling me it was a blessing that my wife passed in her sleep. He seemed to take a lot of comfort in my Mary’s peaceful death, so instead of telling him of the look the mortician was able to erase from her face, I just kept sliding my glass toward him for a refill.

After a couple hours, Doug left with a sober friend to pick my parents up from the airport.

“You’re switching to coffee,” Linda said as the door closed.

I opened a beer. “I’ll meet you halfway.”

Linda harrumphed around the kitchen, tidying up and muttering to herself until I opened

my third beer.

“You know, you’re not the only one in mourning around here,” she said. “I only got to see my grandbaby once while he was alive. Once. You may not care about family, but we do. It killed Mary to be so far away from her family. You took her across the country and killed her.”

I finished my beer on the way outside. I couldn’t argue with her. I wrote about bad things happening, and they did. I wrote about death, and people died. It wasn’t a coincidence. It was a cause.

I had my wallet and cellphone. I didn’t need anything else, so I called a cab and went to the airport. I changed my ticket and left on the earliest flight. I turned off my phone and dozed in the cramped seat at the back of a plane.

I turned my phone back on when I got home and listened to several tearful messages from my mom and one I think was from Doug that was just incoherent sobbing.

I hid in my apartment until I started to feel cagey. I tried to go out in public, but I was either too drunk or too sober, and I worried about what I would do if I made it past my front door. I tried to write a happy story for Mary. If my words could kill, could they also raise the dead? Destruction and creation go hand in hand, wasn’t that the explanation people gave to why forest fires are beneficial?

I created a faith healer in Mississippi who specialized in resurrection. The people he brought back from the dead could no longer speak, but they could hum the most beautiful melodies, so they formed a choir and hummed for the Lord. I started to hope that I would hear that Mary had risen from her grave, but the story turned when I tried to finish it. The congregation discovered that the preacher was actually skinning the newly dead, sewing the skins up, and filling them with flies. I burned my notes.

I was pretty sure why the story turned, how the flies got in there. Mary always had to remind me to clean or do the dishes regularly, so now that she was gone, the apartment was a mess. There were no clean dishes. Cups and plates sprawled on the counters waiting their second or fifth or twentieth use. I never finished anything I made to eat. Sometimes I wedged moldy plates into the trash among the overflowing bottles and cans.

I watched a few flies go into the mouth of a mostly empty beer can. I put a plate that was starting to grow hair on top of the can and put the whole setup in the freezer. I waited a few minutes and pulled the can out when the tinny buzz of the flies' wings against the side of the can stopped. I stabbed the can with a knife then twisted it in half, cutting my finger on the jagged metal. I picked out a fly and tied it to a piece of rose quartz Mary left on the windowsill above the kitchen sink. I waited for the fly to warm back up.

The fly twitched, cleaned its wings, then buzzed around at the end of its tether. I stared at the fly. I thought about the doctor and his lack of answers. I thought about the preacher and all the answers he claimed with assurance. I thought about smashing their heads together until faith and science, doubt and answers all mixed together with pieces of skull and brain and hair.

The fly landed on the sill and rubbed its forelegs together.

I tried to focus all my hate on that fly. I stared at it while slowly crushing his friend who never woke. I held my hand over a lit candle and tried to picture the fly bursting into flames. Nothing changed.

The rose quartz the fly was tied to had been on the shelf above our sink since Mary stole it the day she found out she was pregnant. We had been trying for a year when she suggested we go on a vacation to the coast. She said that we needed to stop focusing on making a baby and focus on each other, but she packed six pregnancy tests for a weekend getaway. We spent the

day on the beach before she dragged me into a gift shop even though I told her that the best souvenirs were found not bought. When we left, she pulled the small rock from her pocket and told me that stolen souvenirs were even better than found ones.

When our son was born, he was pink and perfect. His toes were the same shade as that little rock.

*In Him all things hold together.*

I started to cry.

I was always an ugly crier. The left side of my bottom lip started to spasm. Even alone, I tried to hold it back until I was hyperventilating, and it all came out in an embarrassing spray of snot and tears. The fly pulled at its dental floss leash as I blubbered. The blood pounded in my head, and I knew this was going to end in a migraine. All I could think about was the blood clot that killed my wife. My son who died to death. The time bomb whose countdown I had started with my stupid story. I stared at the fly tied to the rose quartz and thought about its stupid nothing life that was still more of a life than Mary had now.

*In Him all things hold together.*

This fly was a thing that was held together. Atoms attracted to atoms to make molecules and cells and structures for flight all held together by the will of the Creator. A Creator who would hold a wife and child together in death but would leave a husband alone. I questioned that will, that force that caused the fragments of existence to coalesce. The window exploded.

I must have blacked out for a minute because I was lying on the floor. I looked around for a brick or a rock thrown from outside, but then I noticed that there was no glass inside my room. The rose quartz still sat on the windowsill. It was pressed into the wood, leaving a slight indentation. The fly was gone. Only a few inches of the floss remained.

This destruction wasn't about rage or power. It was about finding the will of the Creator that holds all things together and prying at it until it unraveled. Who knew it only took a question, my question, to pry that will apart?

I froze more flies and exploded more flies. I began practicing with flies suspended in the middle of the room away from anything breakable. I hadn't noticed it against the window shattering, but when the will that held the atoms of the fly together blasted apart, it created a tight little pop that sounded like a miniature thunderclap. I had to get through the ugly crying every time to make the thunderclap happen, but those little pops cheered me up in a way. I had found my purpose. I was destruction embodied. All of mankind would hate me as much as I deserved. I just needed to let them know what I could do, that I existed.

~

The bar was filled with young idiots. I drank and listened as the bros sitting next to me challenged each other to games of darts, beer chugging contests, and all sorts of asinine competitions. The one who was winning at darts was drinking water. He took money from everyone who challenged him. Eventually he turned to me and said "You want to try your hand at some darts, or are you too much of a pussy?"

"Don't fuck with me," I said. "I'm dangerous."

"Oh yeah, buddy?" He held out his hand. The darts rested in his palm and a twenty was pinched between two fingers. "I bet I can take you."

"Not darts," I said. "I can destroy with my mind."

He laughed and laughed. He called his buddies over, and they laughed too. One of the



drunk ones slammed a shot glass and a beer soaked twenty on the bar in front of me and said, “I bet you can’t destroy that with your mind.”

I focused on the shot glass. The left side of my lower lip started to shake, and I could feel the blood rush to my head.

“Man, look at him, he’s gonna blow a fucking gasket.”

They were all laughing until the snot and tears started.

“Dude, what the fuck.”

“Listen man, if you can’t do it, you can’t do it,” dart champion said, and turned to the bartender to close their tab.

I finally focused down to the will that held everything together, sent my question into that space, and the shot glass exploded. The bros screamed, and dart champion grabbed my hand. It was bleeding from a shard of the shot glass, and he claimed that I smashed the shot glass when he wasn’t looking. The bartender threw me out for causing a ruckus.

The bros followed me out.

“You can’t scam me,” dart champion shouted.

I turned up the street. They followed.

“You hear me?” he said. “Come back here and I’ll break you, pussy.”

I turned and looked at the three bros. I focused on the will that held them together. I woke up bleeding on the sidewalk. I don’t know what I hoped to find, but I looked around for some evidence of their destruction. I felt like my head had been kicked in, but I supposed that if a fly made a little thunderclap, three bodies would make a much more significant shock-wave.

My hangover the next morning wasn’t penance enough for what I had done. I hadn’t meant to kill with my stories, but what I did last night was intentional.

I tried to turn my power on myself, but I couldn't see into the space between my atoms because the room was spinning. After vomiting, and a glass of water, I tried a fly again. It worked. I tried myself again, but I couldn't focus. I picked up an empty can from the counter and tried to destroy it in my hand. If I couldn't destroy myself, I could at least maim my hand. Nothing happened. I couldn't even cry. The gap between atoms, the will that held all things together grew too fuzzy to focus on in anything that was near me.

~

I tried to ignore the calendar when June rolled around. My son was born the day after the Summer solstice, and I didn't know what I'd do. I knew I should embrace who I was, but I didn't want to kill again. Each morning I woke up to a countdown. Twenty days until he would have turned one. And then nineteen, eighteen, and eventually one. Hiding in the apartment all month didn't help. I grew paranoid that if I cried at all, I would hurt something or someone, and I didn't like that I was equally excited and horrified by the prospect of destruction.

I was too drunk to drive, so I decided to walk the two miles to the old paper mill. It had been abandoned so long that I didn't think there'd be any security guards, and it still reeked so there'd be no squatters. I figured I could break in and destroy enough girders to bring the whole mess down on me, or if that didn't work, the building was sufficiently tall.

I was crying when I got dressed, and I destroyed a pair of socks and my keys without meaning to. I inflated some balloons to carry with me so that casual observers could blame the pops of incidental destruction on them.

The balloons bounced on the street behind me as I walked: three orange, two yellow, a

green, and a red. There was no blue in the half empty package. Blue was Mary's favorite color. I made it to the broken asphalt of the paper mill's parking lot without popping a single balloon.

*In Him all things hold together.*

Everything was padlocked. It was easier to get on top of the building than inside it. I sat on an ac unit and looked at the stars. I wanted to wait out the longest day of the year and see my son's first birthday before I said goodbye.

I yanked the balloons toward me and hugged an orange one. I screeched my fingers across the peak of the balloon and thought of my son. I pressed the balloon to my open mouth and hummed like he learned to do the week before he died.

My voice vibrated and bounced around inside the balloon. The balloon pulsed, and I hummed until my fingers ached. I let go of the balloon and instead of falling back down, it hovered in front of my face, now vibrating visibly. It lifted up until it pulled at the string tied to my wrist. I heard the clock tower toll midnight and stepped off the edge of the roof.

The other balloons were already vibrating just like the first one. They seemed to harmonize as they pulled me into the air.

Soon I could see the whole city lit up. I wanted to release myself from the strings and fall like I'd planned, but the knots were too tight. I thought about destroying the strings, but if I kept going, I would slowly suffocate or freeze to death. That felt right. I wasn't made for a quick death, a winking out of existence. And maybe this didn't count as a suicide. Maybe I'd see my wife and boy again. Maybe God would have some answers for me.

The balloons were humming the first note of the hymn we sang at the funeral. I didn't join them, but I couldn't help following along with the hymn in my head. "Leading onward, leading homeward, to Thy glorious rest above."

I doubted I would be seeing God. I didn't think I would be getting any answers. The air was still warm and sweet as the moon grew large, and I realized that stars were around me as much as above.

The trip was long and I dozed, waking up on a bed of gray dust. The balloons still hummed and floated but no longer pulled at my wrist, so I tied them to a rock and hopped around.

The earth was beautiful in the sky but much smaller than I expected. I bounced away from the balloons until the air grew cold and thin. I returned and licked sweet water that condensed on the outside of the balloons.

~

Living on the moon is not so bad. There's moon dust when I'm hungry. It tastes metallic, like dried blood. And the water that collects on the skin of the balloons is enough to quench my thirst. I don't have the energy write a giant note on the moon for the people on earth to see, and I can't know that they'll grasp how frightened of me they should be. Sometimes I bring myself to the point where I can see the space between the innumerable atoms on earth, but I always stop short of destruction.

I think God brought me to the moon to destroy the earth. Why else would the balloons have brought me up here? Who else but God would make their hum sound like the hymn from my family's funeral? Sometimes I think I'm crazy for still believing in God, but something's at work that I could never understand.

I like to strip down to my underwear and walk as far as I dare away from the balloons to

feel the cold. The balloons aren't floating as high as they used to. I've been thinking of humming into them again, but I'm afraid they will take me back to earth. Instead, I sit in the cold and imagine I can hear my son and smell my wife.

## Perfection

Adam leaned his temple against the bulkhead and looked out the window while the plane waited on the tarmac. He watched for any mistakes made by the people in the tower that would allow another aircraft to land where they were and smash into his plane.

The couple next to him had a dog stowed in a box under the seat. “Don’t worry,” the man said, “she’s a good flier. Didn’t make a peep on the flight out to visit my folks.”

Still, Adam tried to keep his feet from moving. His knees dug into the seat ahead of him, and he could feel his restless leg syndrome kicking in. He didn’t want to bump the dog and set it off.

Adam continued to scan the runways as the jet engines ramped up, and the plane sped toward takeoff. He tried to keep his body limp. He had read that drunks often survived car crashes because they couldn’t react fast enough to tense up before impact. He tried not to think of the front of the plane being sheared off. The screams. The fire. He tightened his seatbelt, only closing his eyes when they were fifty feet off the ground. At that point it didn’t matter how vigilant he was. If something happened up here, only a miracle would save him.

Adam woke as the flight attendant came by with the drink cart. He ordered ginger ale and stretched his neck. He had been asleep for barely twenty minutes, but his left foot was cramped tight with an ache that started at the base of his skull. These seats were almost perfectly uncomfortable. They must have been invented by an economist: No thought for comfort when money is on the line. Fit as many people on the plane as possible to maximize profits. Take the average adult male and calculate the smallest amount of personal space that can be abided for a

five hour flight, and then add one more row so they can sell six more tickets. Adam had four inches and fifty pounds on the average adult male, so there was no way for him to get comfortable. If the airline removed one row, there would only be about an inch more room for each remaining row. Even one inch would be nice, but this seat would still be torture.

There's got to be a perfect seat out there, Adam thought. A seat all others are modeled after. Perfect back support and a place to lay his head. The seat would be the perfect height so that his feet would be comfortable tucked under him or stretched out while lounging. Could a seat be comfortable for all people? He couldn't imagine how it would, but if it was the perfect seat he was sure it would find a way.

Adam remembered a college class that dealt with perfect forms, but he was pretty sure they used the word "ideal" rather than "perfect." Perfection sounded better to Adam. More solid. More final.

Would the perfect chair have three or four legs? Four, he decided as he dozed again. The perfect stool would probably have three legs.

Adam waited for his bag to come by on the luggage carousel at SEA-TAC. He stretched his back twisting left then right, trying to work out the kinks. A bag went by with a camping chair strapped to it. He wondered if that was the perfect camping chair. Somebody obviously cared enough about it to bring it to or from Colorado. He thought about asking the middle aged woman who picked up the bag, but his obsession seemed too strange to explain and besides, his suitcase was finally emerging onto the carousel, and he wanted to get home. He had to work in the morning.

Before going to bed, Adam sat in every chair in his apartment. The kitchen chairs were a bit too tall, putting pressure on his hamstrings. The couch was comfortable enough, but as he

reclined, he noticed that there was space at his lower back where it should be snugly pressed to support him. He lowered and raised his desk chair in an attempt to find the sweet spot of perfection, but soon realized that his tailbone still ached from the perfectly uncomfortable seat on the flight. He gave up and went to bed.

“How was the seminar?” Adam’s boss, Nancy, asked him the next morning. He was only in charge of data entry, but he had still taken it as an honor when she offered to fly him halfway across the country for training.

“The new software has a lot of the same problems as the old, but the reports it generates are real slick,” Adam said.

“Well at least it’s something,” Nancy responded.

The seats in Nancy’s office were too soft, which made sense. She met with high-end donors and the elderly men on the board. The plush faux-leather bespoke of success while still conveying need. Her desk chair looked pretty nice, though: good back support, it swiveled smoothly, and leaned back a little bit as well.

Adam went back to his desk and sat. His chair squawked as he shifted about, trying to get comfortable. Two of the wheels on the bottom of his chair were gummed up with age and he stopped moving when he heard a crack as a piece of the plastic wheel splintered off. Nancy had gotten one of the board members to cover the cost of the training seminar. Would she be able to convince one of the others to foot the bill on some new chairs? Maybe next year, he thought. The economy had everyone stretched pretty thin and he was only sent to the training because it was deemed a necessary expenditure. But if his chair broke completely it would become a necessary expenditure, wouldn’t it?

It will have to look natural, he thought. It will have to look natural and it will have to be



irreparable.

He spent the rest of the day installing the new software on all the computers and giving Nancy a walkthrough of the changes.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Can you still import the figures into Excel for me?”

“Well yeah, but the reports will be—”

“Good, then you can keep doing that.”

“But if you want to make any changes, I’ll have to input them manually and then send you a new report.”

“That’s your job, Adam. I’ve been keeping books, wrangling accounts, and running this business for twenty-five years. When I started, we used calculators, not computers, to keep things straight. I was forced to learn Excel and I’ll be damned if I’m forced to learn another program when I could be doing my job with a calculator and a pencil. You got the training, so you keep the program in order.”

Adam had hoped that the training meant he would be getting a raise or at least a slight increase in responsibilities so he could pretend that his job was more important than moving information between two computer programs. He went back to his desk to make sure the new program was installing properly and started jotting down a plan for a spreadsheet to track the disintegration of his chair.

The Platonic ideal, Adam realized as another plastic shard cracked off his chair. That’s what he had been trying to think of in the airport. But Plato thought that the perfect form of things existed solely in an abstract realm. Adam didn’t like that. It was beautiful to hope that perfection existed in the material world. He pretended to tie his shoes while he measured what was left of his fracturing wheel.

It was a rare, sunny afternoon in Seattle and Adam was happy to walk home without having to open his umbrella. He lived about a mile from work, and this was the perfect day to detour from his usual path home to walk around Green Lake. It was man-made and looked like a quintessential lake: unevenly round with a small island near one side. Can man craft an ideal form or must it occur naturally, he wondered. Man must be able to create perfection from time to time otherwise what would we be working toward?

He stopped to wait for some goslings to cross the path and jump into the lake. Stupid geese. The small island they were heading to was called Duck Island, but he never saw ducks out there. The geese probably drove them off. The foliage on the island was so shit upon and downtrodden that it looked gray. Adam wondered if there was a perfect form of goose. Some ultimate, aggressive shit-machine that attacked people and dogs even though its neck would be such a simple thing to break. No, he thought, there is no perfect form of goose because geese are only an aberrant version of a swan: A beautiful bird whose long neck is part of its grace. Maybe that's where their aggression comes from. Geese hiss and bite because they know they are shitty facsimiles of a bird that is praised in poetry.

He thought about the ideal form of swan and how its perfect grace would put to shame the common grace of common swans not to mention geese, but his revelry was interrupted by a sharp pain in his left thigh. Adam turned. An adult goose was flapping its wings and hissing at him. It was ugly and monstrous. It cracked him across his knuckles and he dropped his umbrella.

“Goddamnit,” he shouted as the goose charged him. He tried to circle around to give it access to the lake so that it would leave him alone and he could pick up his umbrella. Two more geese were coming toward him, hissing and waving their heads. A group of kids stopped to laugh.

“Could I get a little help here?” he pleaded as he tried to keep the geese from surrounding him.

More people were watching and laughing now. The first goose stood over his umbrella while the other two continued to attack.

Adam waved his hands and stomped, trying to scare the geese into retreating to the lake but they just kept hissing and snapping at him while the people pointed and laughed.

Just a fucking aberration, he thought as he decided to meet aggression with aggression. He ran at the goose standing over his umbrella and kicked at it to make it move. The goose stood its ground and Adam’s right foot connected soundly, sending the bird into the air to land at the edge of the lake and flop around in pain.

“Holy shit, that dude just booted a goose.”

He collected his umbrella and attempted to hurry down the path.

“What is wrong with you?” a woman pushing a stroller said and blocked Adam’s path.  
“You can’t kick geese.”

“I was just trying to get my umbrella,” Adam said. “Look, it’s fine. It’s swimming away.”

“Someone should call the cops. You’re a maniac,” she said to his back as he dodged past her down the path.

At home, Adam calmed himself by searching the internet for the perfect desk chair. He found lists of the top five, top ten, top twenty best desk chairs. The chairs were all beautiful and futuristic and extremely expensive. There was one chair he saw over and over: Aeron True Black by Herman Miller. He had heard the name listening to NPR. Public radio wouldn’t accept money from a bad company, would it? Plus, every single list put the Aeron chair in the number one spot. At nearly a thousand dollars, that chair represented almost two weeks’ pay. Clearly out of his

price range. A pipe dream. But a pipe dream with a breathable mesh back, fourteen points of articulation, and a sleek black finish.

At work, Adam's chair continued to deteriorate. He flopped into his chair as hard as he could without seeming obviously destructive and smiled every time another plastic shard broke free. According to his calculations, it should have taken nine to fourteen working days to destroy his chair. After six days, though, one of the wheels disintegrated completely and he tried to hide his pleasure when he informed Nancy that he needed a new chair, only to be dismayed when she got him a wrench and told him to take all of the wheels off because she thought the chair still had some life left in it. He had to be mindful of his balance in his crippled chair afterward. The tension of keeping himself upright throughout the day left him with a constant pain in his neck.

As the quarterly reports approached, Nancy became even more demanding. She continued to refuse to use the new software and eventually stopped using her computer altogether. Nancy would have Adam print out reams of Excel spreadsheets. She would mark them up by hand and give them to Adam to put back into the computer, only to have Adam print them out again the next day.

Two days before the reports were due, Nancy put a stack of papers on Adam's keyboard.

"It's all wrong," she said. "The columns are sloppy and there's no header. Make it look professional, Adam."

The papers Nancy left were covered with pencil marks. Little arrows and boxes and indecipherable chicken scratch. He knew better than to ask any questions to clarify what it was that she wanted. She never wanted anything specific; she only wanted something different than what he gave her.

Nancy left her pencil as well. Adam picked it up and was about to call her back when he

really looked at the pencil. Dixon Ticonderoga #2. No bite marks. Clean eraser. Sharpened to a point about three quarters of its original length. It was perfect. Adam closed his eyes and conjured up every image of pencils he could imagine. They were all this pencil. He opened his eyes and searched his desk for another pencil to compare it to, but there were none. He brought the pencil up to his nose and inhaled: it even smelled perfectly like a pencil.

His hands were shaking, and he set the pencil on his desk so he could gaze at it. What could he do? What should he write? This was the perfect pencil. This was an instrument to write sonnets and plays and things a man could call his magnum opus. This was the pencil that could sketch a modern day Mona Lisa. This pencil could draw the plans for architectural wonders or jot the note that inspired the cure for cancer. Ad agencies would kill for even one look at this perfect pencil.

A board member walked in and knocked on Nancy's door. The man was nothing but lines. Touching perfection had changed Adam. He knew that if he picked up the pencil he could draw the man with perfect skill. Through the pencil he could calculate where the man had been and where he was going to go. Everything was a series of lines and this pencil could connect them all. Adam looked at his desk and realized he could draw a map that led to the forest and the exact spot the tree was cut down to make his desk.

Adam reached out to hold the pencil to assure himself that it was real. His fingers slipped, and he knocked it to the floor. He reached down to the side of his chair and stopped. The lines were gone. It was only a pencil again. The tip of the lead had broken off and it was no longer perfect. In the shock of seeing something perfect become so mundane, Adam forgot about the precarious balance of his chair and fell to the right. He scrambled to find the pencil. Maybe he had been mistaken. Maybe it was just bad lighting that made the pencil look broken.

He found the pencil, cracked in half by the chair, and he started to cry.

“Are you okay?” Nancy asked as she peered over his desk.

He couldn't tell her about the perfection. She wouldn't understand now that it was broken. Adam lifted his hands to cover his tears and for a disorienting second, thought he now had two thumbs on his right hand. As he blinked, he realized that the chair and his weight had landed on his right hand. He had snapped his pinky finger at the base. It was jutting out sideways from his hand.

He raised his right hand to show Nancy and the board member, now gathered at his desk. “I think I broke my finger,” he said as he wiped his tears with his left hand.

On the way to the hospital, Nancy couldn't stop apologizing. “I'm so sorry, Adam. I should have gotten you a new chair when the wheels fell off that one. I'm ordering you a new one as soon as I get back to the office. What kind of chair would you like? You can pick out the color and everything. How's your hand?”

Adam smiled as he shifted the Lean Cuisine from the office freezer onto the backside of his hand. “Well, there is this one chair. Most online polls claim that it is the best office chair on the market. The company who makes the chair is pretty famous too. Their chairs are so well designed that they are even in the Museum of Modern Art.”

“Whatever you need. How's your hand feeling?”

“Well, it is kind of an expensive chair, but you asked and that would be the chair I'd want in an ideal world. Spending forty hours a week in a chair kind of makes you want it to be nice.” His voice trailed off, and he winced as he shifted the frozen box to another part of his hand. She would never get him the Herman Miller Aeron True Black chair. He had reached too high too quickly.

“Oh, of course, of course. You’re such a hard worker and it’s the least I could do. Tell me the name of the chair and I’ll have it for you by Monday morning.”

He had underestimated her shame over his injury. Was she afraid that he would sue her? She laughed and joked as she waited with him in the emergency room as if to make him feel that they were not only boss and employee, but friends. Adam was happy. He felt like Nancy was his friend. She was getting him the perfect chair, wasn’t she?

His finger wasn’t broken, only terribly dislocated. The doctors set it and taped it to his ring finger and gave him a protective cast that strapped to his wrist. Nancy dropped Adam at home after taking him to get his pain medication and told him to take a long weekend to recover, assuring him that he would have a new chair when he came into the office on Monday.

Adam’s weekend was a mix of sleeplessness and dreams made strange by the pain medication. He read every article, every advertisement, every blog comment he could find about the Aeron True Black chair. On Sunday evening, he dozed off at his computer and dreamed of a website that allowed users to create avatars of themselves that could sit in a simulated Aeron chair and fiddle with the settings in order to familiarize potential owners with the chair’s controls and help them maximize comfort as soon as their chair arrived. When he woke he spent the next twelve hours looking for this website.

As the sun came up on his fruitless search, Adam was pleased to find that he was full of energy and ready for work. He swallowed a pill for the pain in his hand and headed out the door. It was mostly overcast and cool: the perfect weather for a brisk walk to work. He could hear the geese out on Green Lake, splashing and honking and probably attacking some poor jogger. It didn’t matter to Adam, though. He was taking the most direct route to work and didn’t have to worry about any geese.

Adam hurried to his cubicle in the back. He could see the chair behind his desk but not clearly until he turned the lights on.

This was not the Herman Miller chair.

This was not a new chair.

This was Nancy's chair.

He sat down. The seat was too soft and sunk down to the point that he could feel the hard frame of the chair press into his right butt cheek. He leaned back. The back support was too short and did not even come all the way up to his shoulders. He swiveled. The wheels squeaked and he stood up to glare at the chair.

The light was on in Nancy's office. Adam hadn't heard her come in and didn't know how long he had been contemplating this imperfect chair. He knocked on the door.

"Oh hey Adam, how are you feeling?" She was standing next to her desk holding a wrench and the armrest to a Herman Miller Aeron True Black desk chair. His Herman Miller Aeron True Black desk chair.

"You look a little pale, Adam."

Adam focused on his breathing. You promised, he thought. My hand gets messed up because you were trying to save a couple of bucks, and you buy the chair you promised me for yourself.

Adam started to put his hands in his pockets to hide the shaking and winced as he bumped his finger. You wouldn't have even known about this chair if it wasn't for me, he thought. This perfect chair.

He cleared his throat. "Heh, so they make you put the chair together yourself? You'd think for that price they would assemble it for you."



“Oh this,” she said gesturing with the armrest, “I actually just took this off. I kept bumping my elbow on it when I answered the phone so I figured no armrest, no problem.”

Adam closed his eyes as he leaned against the doorframe and rubbed his brow with his left hand.

“Whoa, are you okay?” Nancy asked. “You don’t look okay.”

“I’m just. . . I think I’m still getting used to the medication.”

“Well why don’t you sit down a minute?”

“No,” Adam said a bit too loudly. The thought of sitting anywhere near the perfect chair, purposefully mangled by this idiotic woman, was more painful than his dislocated finger.

“Maybe I should just—”

“Go home and rest,” Nancy finished. “The reports are fine, there’s nothing pressing for you to do today. Just get some rest and come back tomorrow.”

Rain was lightly misting and he had left his house without his umbrella, but he still decided to take the long way home and walk around Green Lake. He felt like kicking a goose.

The piddling rain stopped as he crossed the street to the jogging path around Green Lake. Lying near the curb was a large orange tabby that had been hit by one of the drivers on their morning commute. Steam rose from the intestines that spilled out of its lower abdomen where it had been struck. A crow pecked at the offal, oblivious to Adam’s presence.

This seems like a good place to start, Adam thought as he took a couple of quick steps and drew back his right foot.

The crow hopped away and spun around to face him, spreading its wings and cawing at the disturbance. Adam fell to his knees next to the dead tabby as he looked into the crow’s yellow eyes. This was not a crow, this was Crow. The perfect form of crow that all other crows

were modeled after. He could see that now, with its wings outstretched. The feathers were perfectly arrayed and of a black that would make the moonless night jealous. Its beak was sharp and covered with gore, and the sound that came out of its pink mouth was pure poetry.

As he stared into Crow's eyes, Adam began to believe he could understand what Crow was saying. He had never truly really known perfection before: the pencil, the chair, they came close but were mere shadows when compared to the real thing. Perhaps man cannot make perfection. Perhaps true perfection was grown rather than manufactured. Adam thought of the perfect chair again. He did not see the Herman Miller Aeron True Black chair. His mind was filled with the vision of a lightning struck stump, carved by wind and rain to perfection.

Crow hopped toward its meal and Adam looked down to see a filet mignon steaming on the curb next to him. He could smell the garlic in the potatoes and the vinegar in the dressing of the salad that was arranged next to it. Crow bent down and pulled a cherry tomato from the salad, tilted its head back, and swallowed the beautiful red orb. Crow cocked its head to the side and cawed at Adam once more. This time he understood.

"Perfection," Crow said.

Adam bent over and joined Crow, stuffing handfuls of the glorious meal into his mouth.

"Perfection." Adam said between sumptuous mouthfuls and laughter and tears. "Thank you, Crow, this is perfection."

A man came around the corner of the jogging path with a wiener dog and turned toward Adam and Crow. Crow called out to the man and Adam laughed, waving for the newcomers to join in the feast. The man did not understand, could not see the perfection of Crow, gagged and bent over. The wiener dog saw Crow and heard Crow and understood. The man gagged again and a fountain of buttery popcorn shot from his mouth. The wiener dog spun and barked,

gobbling up the popcorn as it fell. Crow hopped over and picked at the kernels before inviting the wiener dog to the bounty in front of Adam with another cry of “perfection.” Next to Crow, the wiener dog was nothing more substantial than a balloon animal. It bounced over to the meal, trailing its leash. The dog sniffed at the mashed potatoes before opening its mouth and spraying popcorn across the salad.

“You didn’t have to bring anything,” Adam said as he laughed. “We already have all we need right here.”

## Prep Work

### Be Patient

The most important ingredient for good barbecue is patience. I bet you thought I was going to point you to a particular seasoning, or tool, or cut of meat, but baby, your daddy knows what's up. Patience is key.

Take brisket: you've got this big cut of tough meat, but if you commit to the low and slow—and I'm talking twelve to twenty hours here, ignoring the urge to turn up the heat or do anything you think might make it cook faster—you'll end up with one of the juiciest, tender cuts of meat you can imagine.

Baby girl, I'm trying to have patience, but your mom is making it mighty difficult. I don't know why she won't let me see you right now, but I suspect it's that jerk she's with. I hope she doesn't have you calling Steve, daddy. I hope you get to see your real daddy soon. I hope your mom's been paying attention to the signs because it's clear to anyone with half a brain that the end of the world is right around the corner.

I've begun to suspect that the Mayans were right. That they knew something we don't understand anymore. That their calendar ends when the apocalypse begins. Don't worry, baby, I've stayed strong. My eyes are open. I have a plan. If the worst happens, though, if the apocalypse throws a curveball at me I haven't anticipated and I don't survive, I want you to know what the world was like before it all went to hell. And maybe sharing some of my wisdom will help you survive.

It wasn't always this bad between your mother and me, though it was worse than this at first. A couple weeks after she kicked me out, I saw her at a wedding. I tried to talk to her, but

she had this wall of girlfriends she'd hide behind if I so much as looked her way. Mostly I just wanted to ask her how you were doing, but I admit that I missed her too. After the ceremony, once people had enough liquor in them to get their feet moving, we all started dancing. Everyone on the dance floor circled up and people would jump into the middle, paired up or single, to show off some moves as everyone clapped and hollered. When it was my turn, the DJ was in the middle of a 90's hits set, and I guess I was thinking back to better times. I decided to bust my two good moves and ended with a powerslide that put me right in front of your mom. She let out this little yelp like I'd snuck up on her and scurried around to the other side of the circle. I tried to play it off like it was nothing, but that made me feel pretty low. A couple of her girlfriends started dancing close to me, and I thought they were hitting on me, but their dancing turned sort of aggressive. It only took a couple of elbows to the ribs and stomped on toes to realize the dance floor was no longer safe for me, and I retreated to the bar.

I understand that they thought they were protecting your mom. Protecting those you love is one of the most important things you can do, but they could have just asked me to leave. They didn't need to attack me with dancing. Baby, I hope you never use something beautiful and fun to hurt someone else. That's like overcooking a steak for someone you dislike so they'll burn their mouth when they eat it, and that's just plain crazy, not to mention a waste of perfectly good meat.

I gave your mom some space after that. Even though I would have given everything to see you, I was patient. And just like with brisket, how you have to wait for what feels like forever as the internal temperature climbs from a hundred and sixty-five degrees to a hundred and eighty-five because that's when the meat starts to break down and get real tender and juicy, your mom softened to me bit by bit. I didn't get to see your first steps, but I got to play with you

in the grass on sunny weekends. I wasn't there for your first word, but I got to read you bedtime stories over the phone sometimes. Like I said, baby, patience is key, but patience isn't much different from waiting around doing nothing if you don't have a plan.

I was out of work for almost a year when I heard they were building a Big Jim's Smoke Shack in town. Work was scarce enough that it was big news when they announced that they'd be interviewing candidates for all positions at a hiring fair. Everyone was hungry for decent work. I knew it was a gamble, and that if things didn't go my way, your mom would probably cut me off from you for a time, but I borrowed money from your mom to prepare for that interview. I bet she thought I was going to buy a new shirt or something, but your daddy is smarter than that. See, baby, you've got to be creative if you want to stand out in a crowd.

I used your mom's money to buy a nice rack of ribs and got up before dawn to smoke it to perfection. I didn't have any experience working in a kitchen, but I know my way around meat. Over a thousand people showed up to interview for less than a hundred positions. Tons of them had culinary degrees from the community college. Most of them had experience. I had a tray of perfectly smoked baby back ribs.

I felt a little out of place as I was the only one standing in line holding a covered tray, but the guy behind me had a bundle of some sort tucked under his arm, so I wasn't completely alone.

"What you got there?" I asked.

"These are my knives," he said. "You can always tell a good chef by the quality of his knives."

He unrolled the bundle and there were at least a dozen knives of all shapes and sizes. The handles all matched with this reddish brown wood and shiny steel like he bought this whole set in one go. It didn't seem to me like a person who could afford such a fancy knife set would need

this job that bad, and I thought that the quality of food was a better way to measure a chef, but all I said was “Looks sharp” because the jackass in front of me turned around and started laughing.

“Quality of *those* knives?” the jackass said. “I’ve got a paring knife that’s worth more than your whole set. Besides, I beat you in every head to head competition at the institute and I’ve got a letter of recommendation from the head chef to prove it.” He waggled his papers in the air.

The first guy rolled his knives back up and accidentally rolled his resume in with them. I pointed out that he probably shouldn’t crinkle up his resume, and he got himself sorted out.

The jackass was wearing a pristine white chef’s coat that looked like it had never seen the inside of a kitchen. I almost wished I was still wearing the barbecue stained T-shirt I changed out of before I came to the interview, so I could show him what a man looks like when he cooks a proper rack of ribs. His name was stitched above the breast pocket of his fancy shirt. It looked hard to pronounce with all the squiggles and thingies over the letters, and I wanted to ask him if that’s how his name looked on his license, or if he had Frenched it up to make it look more culinary.

Now I’m not the type of person to begrudge a man his education—stay in school, baby, learn all you can before the world falls apart—but when a man looks down on everyone who doesn’t have an education, well, I just can’t let that stand. I had to knock him down a peg or two.

“The institute?” I said. “You mean the community college, right? How many community college trained chefs do you suppose they have at the Big Jim’s down the road? Or the one up the road? Or the one on the other side of the mountains? You know it’s a chain, right?”

“And what have you got there?” he said trying to lift the lid to my ribs.

“A rack of the most perfectly smoked ribs you’ll never taste,” I said.

“Ha,” he said, and boy could that motherfucker sneer. He was lucky the other guy had rolled up his knives, or I would have shown him exactly how sharp they were. “They’ll never taste that. It’ll be cold by the time they even see you.”

I was pretty worried about that myself. The line was moving real slow. I wrapped the towel tighter and prayed that I’d get to rub Fancy White Shirt’s stupid nose in an empty tray of rib bones once my interview was over.

Fancy White Shirt kept asking me stupid questions about where I trained and what restaurants I had worked at. When I told him that I didn’t have any experience, he threw that goddamned sneer at me again. Knives didn’t help me out even though I had done him a solid with his resume earlier. He turned and tried to talk to the line behind him once Fancy White Shirt’s attention was on me. I wished I had come earlier or later so that I wouldn’t be stuck in line next to this jackass with a fancy white shirt, but like I said, smoking meat is all about patience and I knew my ribs had to be perfect before I came to the interview.

If you want absolutely outrageous barbecue ribs, you’ve got to rub your rack down with brown sugar the day before you even smoke them. A lot of people don’t take the time to do this, but let me tell you that brown sugar soaked into meat is something special. After you light the coals there’s still plenty to do before you’re ready to start smoking. You’ve got to rub the rack down with spices, and common knowledge says to remove the membrane on the back of the ribs to allow the smoke to penetrate the meat and give you real tender ribs, but let me tell you a little secret: you don’t have to pull the membrane off. All you need to do is make a few shallow cuts and the smoke will penetrate just fine. Plus, the sliced up membrane will crisp as it smokes.

I tried to explain my process to the manager when it was finally my turn to be interviewed, but she got caught up on my first step.



“Brown sugar?” she said. “On ribs?”

“Trust me, it’s delicious.”

She didn’t look like she trusted me, but she picked up a rib and took a bite.

“Whoa, these are actually really good.”

“I told you.”

“But if we hire you on, you’ll have to follow Big Jim’s recipe.”

She took another rib from the tray, and I knew she’d be calling me in for a job.

I left the tray for her to share with the other managers, and when I got outside, Fancy White Shirt was standing there smoking a cigarette. I wagged the towel at him.

“What,” he said, “they make you throw out that nasty meat?”

“No, she said it was delicious.”

“Sure,” he said, “but you won’t be getting a job when she comes down with food poisoning.”

Baby, when you need a job as bad as I did, you’ve got to know the difference between standing out and making a scene. I walked away.

Sure I got the job, but so did Knives and Fancy White Shirt. Knives got yelled at on the first day for bringing in his own cutlery and Fancy White Shirt had to wear the same Big Jim’s T-shirt as the rest of us with its smiling pig splashing around in barbecue sauce.

My new job’s going great, and it’s giving me all sorts of skills that are going to be useful when things fall apart. Did you know that the secret to a great macaroni and cheese is mustard? I shit you not. It almost doesn’t matter what sort of cheese you put in there. With a healthy dose of mustard it tastes like you loaded it up with good sharp cheddar. Seriously, even the boxed stuff. It’s tangy and delicious. Piquant, the jokers I work with call it. They’re always using fancy

words like that for simple things. An oven isn't an oven, it's a cambro, a big rectangular pan is a hotel pan for some crazy reason, and I was showing one of those jackasses how to make the beans and he turned to me and said "shouldn't I start by putting a char on the charcuterie?"

I just stared at him for a while, wondering if he had to read a book or go to a class to learn to tie his shoes too when he said "You know, fry up the bacon and stuff."

Who the hell needs a fancy word for bacon and stuff?

Almost every single one of the jokers I work with has a culinary degree from the community college. It makes me laugh, spending all that money to learn some fancy words and still barely able to cook anything worth half a damn. I swear to God, the new guy they got on the fry station called himself a 'friturier' and no one looked at him sideways.

I don't have to see Knives or Fancy White shirt much as they were put on the line and I'm back in prep. I don't mind this at all. The jackasses on the line all call each other chef.

"Are the buns almost toasted, chef? This burger's ready."

"I need eight more racks on the grill, chef."

"Drop another bag of fries, chef. We're running low."

What pisses me off is that all those "chefs" treat us prep cooks like shit. We're the ones doing all the work. We smoke the ribs and the brisket and the pork butt. We make the mac and cheese and beans and pies. We're the ones cooking. All they do is put a sizzle on the meat and put the meat on a plate.

Baby, when you grow up I hope you never shit on people you think are below you. Hell, with the apocalypse just around the corner, I hope you get to grow up at all. Don't worry, though, you've got me. I put myself on a diet plan to stay fit to help you survive the end of the world. I get to pick whatever I want from the menu on my lunch break for free. I could get a big old

burger or a plate of ribs, but I always think of you and just get a salad. Plus the guy who makes the salad is about the only nice one on the line. He always gives me a double portion of meat. Some days, I can barely even see the lettuce for the pile of barbecued brisket he gives me.

### **Keep your eyes Open**

I always thought I would be a good teacher. Things just come to me naturally, and I've never had a problem making myself understood. But they didn't make me a trainer, at least not at first. They put Raul in charge of training any new prep cooks they brought in as people were fired or quit. This didn't make much sense to me. Sure, the guy knew his way around the kitchen, but he barely spoke a lick of English. Half of the trainees had to come to me to figure out how to do their job, so I didn't understand why I didn't get the title and pay raise right away. It's Big Jim's that will look stupid for this decision, historically speaking, as I'm pretty sure Raul was patient zero for the zombie apocalypse.

Now I know there's a lot of ways the apocalypse could break. The internet's damn near sentient, and robots are getting pretty advanced. An asteroid could come crashing down, or we could get into a nuclear war. We could run out of water or food or get attacked by aliens. I was keeping my eyes open for signs, though, and I saw one clear as day when I went to pick up my paycheck a month or two ago.

Someone must have called in sick because the manager was working the hospitality station, so I had to go up front for my check. Normally I love going out front and seeing people enjoy the meats of my labor, but this time was different. There was this little guy parked in a stroller right next to his parents' table going to town on a rib. This kid was little—younger than

even you, baby—so I thought this was pretty adorable at first, but then I took a closer look. The little guy couldn't have had more than three teeth, but he was taking care of that rib. He was chomping away and making this weird huffing sound. I thought that maybe the rib was too hot or the kid was just out of breath, but the more I listened, even over the sound of the manager mumbling the ABC's to find my name in the stack of checks, the more the sound seemed like hissing. I knew that kid wouldn't stop at the meat, would chew right through the bone if he had the teeth for it. I knew it was a sign. I started preparing for zombies.

The date of the Mayan apocalypse was just around the corner, so I kept an eye on everyone, but Raul caught my attention. He started showing up looking pale and moving at a shuffle. Just about everyone in the kitchen is on one thing or another, but Raul got worse and worse every day for weeks. He kept getting skinnier despite the double bacon cheeseburgers he'd eat on his lunch break. It all came to a head one day as we were checking the quality of the latest smoke.

“The first taste is with your eyes,” I said to the new prep cooks I was helping Raul train. “Does the meat look right? Is the seasoning even? Next, we check the smoke ring.”

Raul cut up the rack and everyone grabbed a rib.

“See that pink line? That's how a smoke ring should look. Now when you taste it, focus on the texture. If the meat falls off the bone, they're overdone. If it's too chewy, we have to run the smoker longer.”

Everyone tucked into their ribs and murmured approval. Raul was still chewing his first bite by the time everyone else threw their bones in the trash. When he finally swallowed, it looked painful and he just stood there holding his half eaten rib while the new prep cooks unloaded the smoker. After a while he looked up. His eyes were bloodshot and his pupils were

blown out. He stumbled forward, and I grabbed for a knife sure it was finally happening, but he turned and yakked all over the other guys and into the open smoker. He fell to the ground and started shaking.

The other prep cooks were yelling and cursing, but I kept an eye on Raul, waiting for him to get up and try to bite someone.

When the EMTs arrived I wanted to tell them that he'd been sick for a while. I wasn't going to call him a zombie exactly, but I wanted them to make sure to be careful around his mouth. The manager wouldn't let us speak to the medics, though, she just kept repeating that it was a seizure and put up a sign that we'd only be serving burgers that day due to a mechanical failure.

It took us all day to clean out the smoker, and the manager kept grumbling about overhead as we were forced to throw out over a hundred racks of ribs. But she promoted me to prep cook trainer, so it all worked out.

Baby, stealing is wrong, but sometimes it's necessary when you're doing it to protect the people you love. Ever since that day with Raul, I've been building up a stash of knives from work. Now most people would go for the twelve inch chef's knives, but I'm smarter than most people. Everyone knows you have to kill the brain to put down a zombie, and a paring knife will do that just as well as a big old chef's knife. Better, I'm guessing, as a long knife is more likely to break when stabbed into a skull. Plus it's pretty hard to hide a twelve inch blade, but a paring knife slips right into your pocket without anyone noticing.

Raul was the first, but soon there were others. The kitchen staff shrunk by half and aside from having to stop and clean up vomit every now and then, it wasn't so bad. I was getting tons of overtime. We ran into trouble when people started getting sick at their tables. The managers

couldn't hide that, and the county health inspectors are shutting us down for a few days to inspect for contaminations. I could use the time off. I'm putting the final touches on my go-bag, so I'll be prepared when shit really hits the fan. Plus, I figured out where your mom's been taking you to daycare, so I'm going to try to see you. I have a surprise for you that you are going to love.

### **Utilize Your Environment**

Goddamned Steve. Asshole nearly got me arrested. I just wanted to see if you could ride comfortably in the framepack I picked up at the army surplus. I wasn't going to take you anywhere. Maybe run a couple of laps around the park with you on my back. You were having a good time, screaming and laughing as you bounced on my back, when Steve ran up hollering about calling the police and that I had no right to see you. What a dick. He wouldn't even let you keep the knife I gave you. Baby, I know this isn't very nice of me, but I swear, when the zombie apocalypse happens, I will pay good money to see him get eaten.

I suppose I lucked out though, that it was Steve and not your mom who was picking you up. She's probably left me about eighteen messages where she's yelling so loud I can barely understand much more than that she's pissed at me.

Good news, though. The bags are packed and I've got almost all the supplies we'll need to survive. I even stole the keys to the bloodmobile.

I was at the bar after all that shit with Steve, ignoring my phone as it buzzed away in my pocket with messages from your mom. I got to talking with the guy next to me about how we're at the start of the zombie apocalypse. He didn't believe me, but he bought me a drink.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I think there’ll probably be a real simple explanation for people getting sick. My money’s on some weird form of food poisoning.”

“Oh really,” I said. “You some sort of doctor or something.”

“No, but I do work with them. I drive the bloodmobile.”

Baby, I couldn’t help myself when I heard that. I had to tell him about my blood pack harness.

“No kidding?” I said. “Well let me give you a tip that might save your life when it turns out I’m right and those zombies start attacking people. How do you think zombies can tell the difference between humans and themselves?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Smell maybe?”

“That might play into it,” I said. “I think it also has something to do with the fact that our hearts still beat. Our blood is flowing through our brains. Living bodies are warm. I think the zombies will be able to sense that and that’s why they’ll attack people. I’ve created this harness I can wear that will hold bags of blood right next to my skin. Say I’m getting chased by a bunch of zombies. All I need to do is whip out a blood bag and chuck it at a zombie. Boom, he’s covered in ninety-eight point six degree blood and the other zombies think they suddenly have a human standing right next to them. They turn and attack him, and I escape.”

“If the temperature matters,” he said, “why not just wait until a really hot day and the zombies will warm up and attack each other.”

“You’re forgetting about the smell,” I said.

We kept talking, and I bought a few more rounds. He didn’t even notice when I pocketed his keys.

## **Question Everything**

Baby, if there's still news when you grow up, I hope you have enough sense to question what you see. The zombie apocalypse has started, but that's not how the news is spinning it. Sure, the zombies haven't attacked anyone yet, and the CDC claims that it's all just a tick-borne illness that causes the infected to become allergic to meat, but I'm guessing this is just phase one of the transformation to zombie. Plus, there are two very questionable facts about what the CDC is claiming. How can we be allergic to meat? We're made of meat. What, are we going to start sneezing every time we accidentally bite our cheeks? This is such a joke and everyone is buying it.

Also, the CDC says that not all ticks are to blame, just this one from Tennessee—the Lone Star Tick—that's spread all the way to the west coast thanks to “global warming.” Now, I don't claim to be an expert in geography, but when you're as deep in the meat game as I am, you pick up a few things about where cattle is raised, and I know that Texas is the Lone Star state, not Tennessee. The CDC is either full of idiots or they're lying to us.

They're saying that if this tick bites you, your body starts rejecting the proteins in meat. One bite and even a little nibble of meat will eventually make you throw up, have seizures, or possibly die. They're even saying that the reason people are getting super skinny and walking around like zombies is because they're not getting any protein in their system. They're encouraging people to start adopting a vegan lifestyle. The CDC is full of morons.

I'm not crazy—I understand that the Lone Star Tick is dangerous, and I'm working on retrofitting some fishing waders to protect us from those bugs—but the CDC better start telling people the whole truth about this epidemic, or we'll be the only ones who are prepared.



The first thing we'll do when the apocalypse really gets going is head south. We'll take the bloodmobile, and I'll train you as we travel. Once you're good enough to hide from zombies and survive on your own, I'll stash you somewhere safe and go to that secret army base disguised as the big water treatment plant to take vengeance on those assholes for the rest of humanity. This CDC business sounds way too fishy. Smart money's on the government being behind this apocalypse. The government's real big on paperwork, though, so I'm sure I'll be able to find the files that prove they genetically engineered those ticks. Hell, I might even find the cure.

They let us open up the restaurant again. It's not as busy as it used to be, and even the kitchen manager quit because of her new "allergy." Claimed she couldn't even stand the smell of meat anymore. Me and Fancy White Shirt basically run the kitchen now. He's still the same sneering jackass. Keeps suggesting we add things like smoked seitan and barbecued tofu to cater to the zombies. Hell, why not just put a plate of brains on the menu? That's the only thing they'll want to eat soon enough. He's been looking pretty pale lately, so I figure it's only a matter of time before I am running this entire place.

Don't you worry, though. I'm always thinking of you, baby. When the world ends, when the screaming starts, know I'll be right around the corner.

### **Part Three: How We Must Look at This Life of Ours**

## Big and Strong

“One more set,” I said. “Just give me one more set.”

“That’s what you said before the last set,” she said. “Maybe we should hit the showers.”

My clients were always flirting with me. This one seemed almost surprised when I actually made her work out during our first private session. Everyone’s always trying to quit, but it’s my job to push them to their limit and then make them take one more step, do one more set. Muscle City would have fired me if they knew I was meeting clients at their homes for personal training, but who was I to tell anybody where they were allowed to tune their bodies to perfection? Besides, Muscle City didn’t pay that well and I needed the money. We were hammering her glutes, and I wasn’t about to let her give up. She was down to twelve percent body fat and it was all thanks to me.

“One more set,” I said. “You can do it. You’ll thank me later.”

“I’d rather thank you now,” she said.

She pushed me against the wall, slid to her knees, and pulled my shorts down. The professional thing to do would have been to stop her or at least get her off her knees and into a squat position to keep working her glutes, but she caught me off guard. I didn’t expect her to have this much energy at the end of her workout, and I made a mental note to increase the reps in our next session. We were making great progress.

My training regimen didn’t leave me much time for dates, but I was glad I always kept it tight down there. I was thinking about getting a full wax, though. Brad, another trainer at Muscle City, had been showing off his new full body wax in the locker room after work. When he first showed it to me, I was surprised because he always maintained a scruffy five o’clock shadow.

The more I studied him, though, the more I came to like it. The smoothness of his skin made his muscles stand out, and his dark stubble and spiked hair provided a really intriguing counterpoint.

Brad was always pretty stacked, but he had packed on some serious muscle in the last few months. I wanted to ask him if he had a new routine and what supplements he was taking or if he started taking steroids, and if so, could he hook me up with his supplier? I made it this far on my own, but I couldn't argue with the results I was seeing. Brad wasn't quite to the walking through doorways sideways level, but if he continued at this rate, he'd be there in a year, tops. I didn't get a chance to ask him, though because he had me inspect the areas he couldn't quite see for any signs of ingrown hairs, which is apparently a pretty normal problem to have while your body is getting used to being hairless.

My client knew what she was doing because even though I was disappointed when I realized I probably would never pull off Brad's look as his superior jawline seemed integral to the whole thing, I was still pretty close to finishing. I heard the front door open and I tried to push her head away. She latched a hand on each of my buttocks, pinned me to the wall, and kept going.

"Honey," her husband called from the front room. "Did you move the TPS reports I finished last night? I got to work and couldn't find them anywhere, and I had to drive all the way back here because you weren't picking up your phone."

I tried to squirm out of her grasp, but not too hard. I was right on the edge. She snaked her fingers in, spreading my cheeks apart and then pushed her finger deep into my butthole. I was not expecting that, but it was a pretty enjoyable surprise. I came.

"Here it is," her husband said, much closer now. "I can't believe I missed it."

She finally released me, and I pulled my shorts up. She grabbed her towel and wiped her

face. Her husband came around the corner.

“Oh, you must be the personal trainer.” He held out his hand. “I have to shake the hand of the man who transformed my wife. It’s like I’ve traded up for a newer model without the hassle of paperwork.”

I shook his hand. He smiled and laughed and told me that if I continued working miracles on his wife, he’d have to look into finding time to work with me himself.

“I’m always open to new clients,” I said.

His loose shirt made him look fatter than he probably was, but it would still take a lot of work for him to achieve any semblance of muscle definition.

“I’m going to hop in the shower,” my client said. She kissed her husband on the cheek and squeezed his arm as she turned to leave. “Could you pay him?”

“Sure,” her husband said. “Just let me find my checkbook.”

We both watched her walk out.

“Seriously, man,” her husband said. “You’re a miracle worker.”

I gave him my number and some tips on how to protein stack to get the best results if he decided to work with me. I also told him that I would tailor a routine to his specific needs in case he tried to weasel a discount rate by making me do sessions for him and his wife at the same time.

“You’ve got something on your shirt,” I said, pointing to his arm.

“Shit,” he said. He licked his thumb and tried to rub out the stain.

~

As employees of Muscle City, we're allowed to work out any time we want, as long as we're off the clock. On weekdays there's always a rush in the morning, but much of our training happens during the lunch hour. Business men and women forego an hour of empty calories to sweat and gulp down a protein shake on their way back to work. The real rush starts around six, so most of us start working just as everyone else is getting off. That leaves four or five hours where the trainers rule the gym, and we have the space to get our pump on. To push our bodies that much closer to perfection. These hours are the main reason most of us work here.

I asked Brad to spot me, which was just a formality in case any managers were watching. We were both strong enough to handle the weights on our own. What I really wanted to do was find out Brad's secret. A lot of guys get evasive when you ask them if they're juicing. Maybe it's because of the stigma that their testicles are shrinking, or maybe it's just because Muscle City has a zero tolerance policy on steroid use. Either way, I knew I'd have to approach the topic delicately.

I asked him how his wax was treating him while we worked our legs. How often he had to go, where he got it done, how much it cost, and if it hurt.

"Do squats hurt?" he said. "Did it hurt when you were finally able to curl your own bodyweight? Pain's just the price we pay on the way to perfection."

I finally got around to my real question when we transitioned to upper body. He denied it as we pounded our lats.

"Come on," I said. "You're huge. I just want to get there, you know? I think I've plateaued. It's like the weights aren't enough anymore. I feel like I'm just going through the motions and I'm never going to reach perfection on my own. I need something to get me to the next level."

I kept working him, but it wasn't until we were stretching our arms out after brutalizing our triceps that he leaned in close.

“Listen, man. You can't tell anyone, but I do have a hookup. This scientist chick, an old client of mine. She stopped coming here when she got pregnant, but now that she has the kid, she's been doing some crazy shit. She's been extracting HCG from her own breast milk and doing science stuff to it to combine it with her own blend of steroids. She sells me a couple of ounces of breast milk to drink in the morning, and that's supposed to prepare my body to make full use of the steroids when I inject them.”

“Seriously?” I said.

“Hey, man,” he said. “I've tried other stuff before now, too, but I've never gotten this big this fast. See these pecs.” He leaned in and flexed. “I could crush a man's skull with this definition. Pow. Pa pow pow!” He alternatively flexed his left and then his right pectoral with each sound.

“Damn,” I said. “Do you think you could hook me up?”

“I'll see, but it's pretty expensive, and if she jacks up my price you're going to pay the difference.”

We continued our cooldown. I'd have to find more private clients to cover the cost, but it'd be worth it to catch up to Brad's explosive growth.

I checked craigslist for side jobs after work, but I always ended up in missed connections because it's one thing to have your bosses and coworkers comment on your progress, but another thing entirely to have a stranger notice you're changing. It was mostly gay shit I wasn't about to respond to, but even those meant someone was noticing.

M4M--I've been watching you at Muscle City. You, a trainer getting seriously swoll. Me, a shy client wondering what your secret is. Drop me a line and we'll see if we can't work the kinks out of some of those muscles you've been growing.

I was pretty sure this was directed at me. Aside from Brad, no one was as big as me at Muscle City, but if this was written for Brad they would have surely mentioned his stubble. I mean, how could they have missed it? Once I got on Brad's regimen and my body got closer to that of a Greek god, there'd be dozens of these written to me. I scrolled down the page, clicking links to find more about me until I came to one that was clearly on the wrong page.

Come beat me up--I've been sad for so long that I'm not sure if I can feel anything else at this point. I will pay you to come beat the hell out of me. Please respond with a picture and bio and go to the Starbucks on Main Street on the first between 2-3 wearing a red hat. The ideal candidate will have some fighting experience as it is up to you to make sure that neither of us sustain lasting injuries. I'm not looking to get robbed or any weird sexual stuff. I will contact you if you seem like the right person. Those with cat allergies need not apply.

It seemed like a scam or a trap or something, but I needed the money. I did some internet searches to see if the cat allergy thing was code for weird shit, but I didn't find anything. I sent a picture and a description of myself. I fibbed a little and said I was a trained kickboxer even though I had only filled in for the cardio kickboxing instructor once or twice when she was sick.

There were a lot of dudes wearing red hats at the coffee shop on the first. Most of them



looked sketchy, and we all looked at each other suspiciously. No one talked to each other and no one gave a sign that they were the one who made the craigslist post. I was the biggest by far. I wrote the whole thing off as a loss and stayed late to get my afternoon workout in. Two weeks later I got an email.

“I’ll pay you \$200 to beat me up tonight at eleven.” There was an address and a picture of two one hundred dollar bills.

I left a note on my kitchen table in case anything weird happened, but I was sure I was stronger than whoever wrote that email, so I wasn’t too worried. The address brought me to a decent little townhouse. I knocked on the door, but no one answered. I heard the garage door start up and peeked my head around the corner. A squat little man stood by the garage door switch. He had the body of Danny DeVito. I stepped inside. He had to reach above his head to hit the switch, and the garage door rumbled closed.

“So you just want me to beat you up?” I asked.

“Here’s a hundred now,” he said, handing me the money. “And I’ll give you the other hundred when we’re done.”

His eyes were red like he had really bad allergies or something, and I could smell why: the garage stank like cat central. Boxes of litter were stacked near the wall where I entered, and there was a giant cat thing in the corner. Its front legs were worn scratching posts. There were carpeted alcoves in its belly and up its back. The highest platform was eye level with me and was in the cat thing’s open mouth. There was a pet door in the wall that led to the house and a blue kiddie pool full of litter.

I hadn’t actually been in a fight since junior high. I didn’t want to hurt my hand, but I really needed that other hundred. I didn’t think he could take a punch from me, so I slapped him.

“Come on,” he said.

I punched him in the gut and he doubled over. The guy must have had no ab muscles to speak of because it felt like fluffing a pillow.

“Harder,” he said.

I hit him again and again, and when he was on the ground, I gave him a few light kicks for good measure. Eventually he held up his hand, a hundred dollar bill between his fingers. He limped over to the wall, crying, and opened the garage door. I left. It was the easiest two hundred I’ve ever made.

Brad hooked me up with his supplier, but the steroids cost almost as much as my rent. I picked up a few new clients on the side, but money was still tight. Brad kept inviting me to go to the strip club with some of the other trainers after work, but I couldn’t afford it, price-wise or calorie-wise. I was seeing some serious results from my new breast milk and steroid regimen: my biceps were up an inch and my chest was up two.

Breast milk was way tastier than I thought it would be. It was so sweet that it almost felt like I was cheating on my diet. I was getting used to the injections too. I was really nervous at first. The syringe felt so small in my hand, and I kept thinking that I’d flex as I pushed the plunger down and my muscle would snap the needle off inside me. I wanted to ask Brad to help me, but I was worried that he would think I was weak.

I got another email from the little guy the next week. When I got there, all he said was thanks for not bruising his face. I gave him his beating and left with my money. This went on for a month. I was feeling pretty good. I was getting stronger every day, but I still felt like I was missing something. I needed to go out. Show off. I took Brad up on his offer to go to the strip club.

The bouncer rolled his shoulders and stuck his chest out as we walked by. He was tiny compared to Brad and me. We had to walk through the door one at a time, and I knew that if I rolled my shoulders like the bouncer, my elbows would probably bash into the doorframe. The place was called Jiggles, and the cover charge included a drink. I ordered a shot of vodka and a water and promised myself I'd do fifty burpees to make up for the empty calories.

When the dancers came out, I thought they had brought me here as a joke. All the dancers were overweight. They bounced around stage and none of them could hold themselves up for a whole spin around the pole. Brad and the other trainers all laughed as they threw their singles on the stage.

I was surprised that dancers kept coming over to our part of the stage. Brad and the other guys were pretty mean. They weren't wrong. One of the biggest dancers did have an ass that looked like a slab of raw bacon, and as she danced, each cheek jiggled and bounced like under that bacon floated a sea of melted cheese. It just seemed kind of mean to say that to her face. I slipped one of my business cards into her pile of ones before she left. I couldn't tell if she was sweating or had tears in her eyes.

"God, this is fantastic," Brad said. "Have to keep it all bottled up when we're on the clock, but we can say whatever we want to these fatties."

Brad ordered another round and checked his phone. "They used to have a bartender here who was real nice," Brad said. "One time, he mixed me a drink with some breast milk I brought in. It tasted just like a White Russian. He called it a Babushka. Oh man, you seen this yet?"

He held his phone out to me. There was a video playing. It was one of those videos where they take a news story and autotune it so it becomes a song. The video was a news conference with a chubby little man crying into an array of microphones. "Man's plea goes viral" scrolled

across the ticker at the bottom. It was the guy from the Craigslist ad.

“One of these tubbos was going on and on about this guy a couple months ago,” Brad said. “I told her I was his buddy, and she gave me a free lap dance.”

I held the phone up to my ear to hear better.

“Please,” the little man said. “Please, bring him back. Or at least come back and finish the job. I don’t want to live without Lord Byron.”

“Please, please. I don’t want to live,” Brad sang out of sync with the music.

“Dude,” I said. “That guy’s son was kidnapped? You can’t laugh at that.”

“No, man, no,” Brad said between fits of laughter. “That’s the thing. This Brian isn’t his son. It’s his cat.”

I looked at the phone again. Whoever made the song photoshopped cats rolling around underneath the bank of microphones.

“He wants to die because he misses his cat,” Brad said, gasping for breath.

When I got home I searched “cat man’s plea” and it didn’t take long for me to find a real article about him. The little man came home from work to find his house broken into and all of his cats dead. All except for Lord Byron who had won the Fancy Cat Cup the year before and wasn’t among the dead.

It all made sense: the smell, the kiddie pool full of litter. The guy wasn’t allergic to cats, he loved them. His eyes were red because he was crying.

I wanted to ask the little guy how he was doing during our next appointment, but I didn’t know how to begin. I looked around the garage as the door closed and noticed clumps of poop on the top of the litter in the kiddie pool.

“Oh, hey,” I said. “Did you get some new cats?”

This was apparently the wrong thing to say because the little guy started sobbing.

“I can’t,” he said when the snot and tears slowed down a bit. “I can’t bring myself to scoop it. One of those is Lord Byron’s last poop. It’s my last connection to him.”

He started crying again and I wondered if he still wanted me to beat him up, if he was still going to pay me.

“Maybe it’d help if you did something,” I said. “Fight back. Get stronger.”

I wasn’t sure how, but he’d already lost a lot of weight. Getting beat up didn’t seem like the best cardio, but I knew that if he was trying to hit me, I could get him to chase me around the garage a bit. Working out always made me feel better, and though I surely didn’t need any cardio, it would do him a world of good. Maybe even build a little muscle.

“I’ve never hit anybody,” he said. “I don’t think I can.”

“Sure you can,” I said. “Just pretend I’m the guy who has Lord Byron.”

He stopped crying, and his face got red like Brad’s does when he’s blasted his muscles but he still pushes himself to do one last set. The little guy rushed me, swinging so wild I knew he was telling the truth about never hitting someone. Still, his violence had me backpedaling until my butt hit the wall. I pushed him, and he fell on his ass. He hopped up and charged. I swung. He ran right into my fist and crumpled to the ground.

I sat on the cement and held him so he wouldn’t get cold. He must have lost at least twenty or thirty pounds since he was on TV. He was so small. I was glad I was making a difference. I did glute crunches while I waited for him to regain consciousness.

When he woke up he turned his head back and forth, eyes wide like he didn’t know where he was, and then he started crying. His body shook and shook. I held him as he cried and it felt nice. Holding such a small man made me feel big, and the sobs that shook his tiny frame

didn't move me and that made me feel strong. I held him and felt big and strong but not just in a physical way. Helping the little guy made me feel like I was taking steroids for my heart. We bobbed up and down as I flexed my glutes and he continued to cry. I didn't move my hands over his back or whisper words of comfort as he cried. I wanted him to carry on for at least five more minutes. The way they shook his body, I knew his sobs were giving his core a great workout.

## Sleeping Dogs Lie

Sam knew some of the rich farmers' driveways were as good as roads. Straight. Paved. They just didn't go anywhere but the farmer's house. The farmers with the nice driveways usually had thousands of acres of corn or orchards and a few acres dedicated to specialized crops like mint or garlic. One of Sam's friends had just gotten a paved driveway because the government paid his dad to grow sunflowers last year. A special harvester was brought in and it drove through the fields decapitating the tall flowers. Sam's friend said the government was trying to make cars run on mashed up sunflowers. Nobody believed him, and from then on, all the kids called him Sunny.

"You're drifting to the left a bit, kiddo."

"Sorry Daddy," Sam said and turned the wheel to steer the old Datsun away from the sagebrush on the side of the dusty driveway.

When Sam was real little, Daddy would let him sit on his lap and drive. Daddy still let him drive, but now Sam had to do it from way over in the passenger's seat. His arm got tired quick driving like this, and his neck got sore from trying to reach the wheel and peek over the dash, but he was eight now and couldn't fit on Daddy's lap to drive anymore.

"Don't overcorrect."

Sam aimed the truck at the middle of the dusty driveway. He had to be careful. Daddy would take the wheel if he wasn't being careful.

The truck bounced over a section of washboard road, and Sam gripped the wheel tight. The farmers who couldn't afford to pave their driveways—couldn't even afford gravel—grew hay or potatoes or were just trying to get ahead after a couple of bad years. This road ended at

Mr. Brown's single-wide. He was a potato farmer, and Daddy said that all the potato farmers had been through more than a couple of bad years.

As the road smoothed out, Sam saw a snake in the dust and jerked the wheel to swerve around it.

"Whoa" Daddy shouted as he grabbed the wheel. He steered the truck out of the sagebrush before slamming on the brakes.

"What'd you go and do that for?" Daddy said.

"I didn't want to run over the snake."

"Can't be afraid of a little roadkill when you're driving, son. What if there was another car, or someone walking beside the road? If you flinch when you're driving, you'll hurt someone. Besides, if that snake isn't already dead, which I suspect it is, it's either a bull snake or a rattler. You'd be doing Mr. Brown a favor if you killed one of them for him. In fact, walk on back there and take a look at the dead snake you almost crashed us for."

"But what if it's still alive?"

"It'll be long gone if it's still alive, but if you're scared, grab a shovel out the back."

Sam stepped out into the dust, boosted himself up on the rear tire, and pulled the shovel out of the bed of the pickup. He walked back to the snake with the shovel balanced on his shoulder, hoping that Daddy could see in the rearview mirror that his son wasn't afraid to kill a snake.

Daddy was good at killing snakes. Sam had seen him do it with a shovel, a rock, and once he even killed a snake that had gotten into the garden by grabbing it by the tail and whipping its head into the fence. Sam knew he wasn't supposed to kill a snake like that because bull snakes and rattlers looked almost identical until you were up close, and you should never get up close



with a rattler.

Sam could see that the snake was still lying in the dust. Daddy was right again, probably long dead. Still, he couldn't help gripping the shovel tighter as he moved in for a closer look.

Standing over the gray piece of hose made Sam feel like a fool. He almost crashed the truck to dodge a piece of trash. He brought the shovel down in an attempt to slice the hose in half, but the blade turned sideways as it hit the ground, and the shovel bounced from his hand. He kicked the hose into the sagebrush, picked up the shovel, and headed back to the truck.

"Was I right?" Daddy said when Sam climbed back into the truck.

"Well, it wasn't moving but it didn't look too dead to me," Sam lied.

"Rattler or bull?"

"Rattler. A big one."

"Then you did the right thing smashing it with the shovel. We'll have to work on your swing, though."

Daddy started driving again but didn't offer Sam the wheel.

As Mr. Brown's single-wide came into view, three dogs ran out of the sagebrush to bite at the tires. Daddy sped up so the two dogs on his side were right by his door. He steered toward them a bit, and then opened his door into the nearest one. Both dogs rolled through the dust yelping, and hightailed it to the trailer.

"Wallop that one for me," Daddy said.

"But Daddy, I'll fall out."

"You're belted in, you'll be fine."

Sam cracked his door and the barking grew louder. He looked down at the dusty driveway flying by and closed the door again.

“Just give him a little tap. We’re almost there.”

“I can’t,” Sam said. They slowed then stopped in front of Mr. Brown, who was sitting on his steps, smoking a cigarette and laughing at the two dogs Daddy hit that were hiding under the trailer.

The third dog had his paws up on Sam’s window. It was barking at him through the glass. Flecks of drool were making muddy trails down the dusty window.

“See those two dogs I whacked?”

“No, they’re under the house.”

“Exactly. These dogs don’t usually see anybody but Mr. Brown out here, so they think we’re intruders. You have to give them a little whack, teach them a lesson, so they’re scared of you and leave you alone.” Daddy turned the car off and grabbed for the door handle.

“But the dog’s gonna bite me.”

“If you don’t show fear, you’ll be fine. Maybe try to knock it down with your door on your way out.”

Sam unbuckled his seatbelt, held the door, and prepared to shove as hard as he could to knock the dog down. But as soon as Daddy opened his door, the dog ran around to his side. Mr. Brown stopped laughing and yelled, but the dog jumped and got Daddy by the hand. Daddy kicked and Mr. Brown ran over, grabbed it by the collar, and hit it until it let go.

“I’m sorry Daddy. I’m sorry.” Sam cried as he got out of the truck.

“Damn bitch,” Mr. Brown yelled. He dragged the dog over to the fence and tied a rope to its collar.

Daddy’s right hand was bleeding. He flexed it open and closed, turned it over and moved each finger as blood fell to the ground and settled in the dirt.

“Oh man, you all right? She’s never done that before else I would’ve tied her up. Come inside and we’ll get you cleaned up.” Mr. Brown opened his door and invited them into the kitchen.

The single-wide smelled of stale smoke, sweat, and motor oil. The kitchen table was covered with newspaper and pieces of a motor were lying about. Daddy washed his hand in the sink.

Mr. Brown pulled a rag out of an overhead cupboard and offered it to Daddy. “I’m real sorry about that. If you need stitches, I’ve got you covered now that the insurance finally paid up for that early frost of ninety-eight.”

“Only took them five years to make that right,” Daddy said as he wrapped his hand with the rag. “Don’t worry about this. It’s nothing time and a bit of superglue won’t fix.”

Daddy was good at fixing people up with superglue. He had used superglue to mend Sam’s thumb on his birthday when he cut himself on his new pocketknife. Mama hollered at Daddy, said he was going to give their son glue poisoning. Sam didn’t worry about glue poisoning, though, because Daddy did it all the time. Sam spent the next week touching everything with his newly armored thumb.

Sam thought about Daddy’s hand all armored up with superglue. Maybe Sam wouldn’t be responsible for opening his door on the dogs on his side of the truck. Maybe Daddy could just bop them with his hand and they’d go running.

Mr. Brown poured Sam a glass of water. He offered Daddy a beer, and when Daddy refused, Mr. Brown opened it and drank it himself.

“Sam here took care of a snake on the way in,” Daddy said.

“You don’t say. Rattler or bull?”

“Rattler,” Daddy said. “Big one too.”

“Damn. Well, I’d thank you for saving my dogs from a serious hurtin’ but I doubt that matters to you much, so I’ll just thank you for myself.” Mr. Brown clunked his can against Sam’s untouched glass.

“It was probably already dead,” Sam said.

“Oh, don’t sell yourself short,” Mr. Brown said.

Sam moved the glass around making rings of condensation on the newspaper and tried to keep from crying again.

“Mind if I come back and survey your field next week,” Daddy said. “I don’t want to chance leaking all over my equipment with this hand.”

“No problem. Money’s not going anywhere and you’re not gonna set my new irrigation system up ‘til harvest’s over anyhow. Just let me know when you come out so I can chain up the dogs.”

“Thanks. I’ll try to come by in a few days.”

As they left the single-wide, the dog started barking and pulling at its rope. The other two dogs were still hiding, and Sam thought about Daddy getting a job making dogs act right. He wouldn’t even need to get out of the truck. He could just drive around opening his door on them until they didn’t want to bite anyone.

~

“You need to go to the hospital,” Mama said when they got home. “You’re going to get an infection.”

“Oh, hush. I’ve been bit before.”

“Well you’re not gluing yourself up this time. I’ll get the bandages.”

Sam wanted to tell Mama that Daddy needed the superglue because Sam was too scared of falling out of the truck to open his door on dogs. Daddy wasn’t making a fuss, though, so Sam held his tongue as Mama mummified Daddy’s hand.

“How am I supposed to work with this mitt?” Daddy said when she was finished.

“Well maybe you should just take it easy for a couple of days.”

“You know I can’t do that until snow’s a foot deep. And even then there’s pumps to repair and new equipment to set up.”

“I know, I know. It’s just, school’s starting in a few weeks, and I’m sure Sam would like to spend time with you that doesn’t involve work.”

“I like going out to the fields,” Sam said.

“We’ll have to take a break from that while my hand heals. I’ve got plenty of paperwork to catch up on. I just have to figure out how to tape a pencil to this mess.”

Daddy stayed for lunch before heading back to work. While they ate, he told Mama about the rattler Sam killed. Made up a whole story like he was right there watching and Sam was a hero. Sam wanted to tell Daddy the truth, but he liked hearing Daddy brag about him. He decided that he’d go out into the sagebrush after lunch and find a snake to kill so Daddy wouldn’t be a liar.

After lunch, Sam got a piece of cardboard from the garage and drew a big old rattler on it. It was coiled to strike with its fanged mouth open, dripping green crayon poison, its tail rattling in the air. Sam tied his pocket knife to a stick to use as a spear and set his cardboard rattler against a tree for target practice. He backed up until he could just see the snake’s forked tongue

and threw. The spear turned sideways in the air and hit the tree. The knife flew off and landed in the grass.

Sam tied his knife to the stick again and halved his distance from the snake. He threw his spear again, this time gouging the cardboard but not hitting the snake. He picked up his spear, wiggled the knife, and saw that it was loose again. He added more knots and stepped closer to the rattler. Sam threw again, and this time, the knife stuck in the cardboard close to the snake's tail, but the stick fell off. He gave up on the spear and grabbed the shovel from where it leaned on the side of the house. Sam hacked the cardboard rattler to pieces, then pulled twigs from the tree and lined them up to practice cutting them in half.

When he was able to slice five sticks in a row without dropping the shovel, Sam decided he was ready. He marched across the front yard, past the Jones', to the field of sagebrush that marked the edge of town. Before he crossed the street, he heard Mama whistle her time-for-dinner screech he could have heard from the other side of town. Sam turned around and headed back to the yard even though it wasn't dinner time because Mama still had two fingers in her mouth like she was going to whistle at him again and a look on her face like he was about to get a whooping.

The whistle set off the Jones' dog. It wasn't big like Mr. Brown's beasts. Daddy called it a little yapper. The dog had lived in the Jones' backyard for three months, but they only started tying it up recently because it kept escaping, and Daddy said that he'd stop braking for it if he saw it in the road again. The dog wound itself up with a series of yips before it laid in with some long, high howls.

“Where do you think you're going with that shovel?”

“I was going hunting.”

“For snakes? Oh no you are not. Haven’t you had enough excitement for one day? Get back in the yard and while you’re at it, hunt me up some weeds.”

“Aw, Mama. Do I have to?”

“Don’t ‘Aw Mama’ me. Kill a snake, and you think you’re a big mean hunter? I want to see a pile of fifty dead weeds before supper, and that shovel better not leave this yard again.”

The Jones’ dog yipped and yowled. Sam stopped pulling weeds to watch it. The dog barked at birds flying overhead and a cat walking the yard’s perimeter and Sam and the grass and the sky. Sam thought about Daddy and Mr. Brown yelling at the dog that bit Daddy, tried to make his voice mean and big, and shouted “Shut up.”

“We don’t use that word in this house,” Mama yelled through the window.

“But I’m not in the house,” Sam said quietly as he bent to pick more weeds.

When he reached fifty, he went inside.

“Done already? Show me.” Mama followed Sam outside. “That sure doesn’t look like fifty weeds to me.”

“Some of them were small.”

“Small weeds don’t count the same as big weeds. Your pile needs to be at least twice this size before you can come in.”

Sam picked more weeds. The dog made more noise.

The weed pile doubled, but too quickly, and Sam knew that if he went in now, Mama would just tell him to make it bigger. He rearranged the pile so it looked like a dog lying on its side. The Jones’ dog switched from barking to howling again. Sam grabbed his shovel and decapitated his weed dog. The Jones’ dog switched back to barking. Sam hacked his weed dog to pieces, then gathered it back in a pile. It looked smaller than before, so he pulled more weeds

before heading inside.

The Jones' dog shut up for a little while when the Joneses got home but was barking again by the time Sam kissed Daddy and Mama goodnight.

~

Daddy's mustache was a snarled mess and a patch of stubble on his left cheek made him look dirty.

"That little shit barked all night," he said as he itched his hand through the bandages.

"Language."

"Sorry Mama, it's just that I heard that dog in my dreams, and I kept waking up because I could feel it gnawing on my hand."

The dog was in Sam's dreams too, except Sam was driving Daddy's truck and the dog was running next to it and barking. Sam tried to open the door on the little yapper, but the door swung right over its head, and Sam fell out of the truck. He tumbled and tumbled in his dream until he woke up on the floor.

"Are we going out to the fields today, Daddy?"

"I don't think so, Sam. I've got plenty of paperwork to catch up on, and my hand is still on the mend. Maybe tomorrow."

Sleep. Work. Daddy's hand. Dogs ruined everything.

"Don't worry, Sam," Mama said, "your friend's coming over. Remember?"

"I'd rather go with Daddy."

"No you wouldn't, you'd get bored sitting around the office all day."



“I won’t, I swear.”

“We don’t swear in this house,” Mama said.

“Don’t worry, son, you play with your friend today. You can tell me all about it when I get home.”

Sam was in the backyard making a copy of the Jones’ dog with dirt when Sunny’s mom pulled up. Sunny walked up just as Sam planted the shovel in the dirt dog’s neck.

“What are you doing?” Sunny asked.

“Practicing. My daddy got bit by Mr. Brown’s dog yesterday. If it comes at Daddy again, I’ll get it with the shovel.”

“You can’t chop a dog’s head off with a shovel.”

“Can too. I did it to a snake yesterday. A rattler. Big one.”

“Oh yeah, how big?”

Sam spread his arms as wide as he could.

“That’s nothing, I chopped a snake in half with an ax, and it was so big that each half was as tall as my dad.”

“Did not.”

“Did too.”

“You’re a liar, Sunny.”

“Don’t call me Sunny.”

The boys wrestled in the dirt until they were both spitting mud, then they drank from the hose and took turns seeing who could chop the biggest stick in half with the shovel.

The Jones’s dog woke up from the noise of the boy’s game and started barking. After a half hour of non-stop noise, Sunny leaned on the shovel.

“Doesn’t that dog ever stop barking?”

“Nope,” Sam said. “The little shit barks all night too.”

Sam and Sunny giggled at the adult word.

“Well maybe,” Sunny said, “we should take this shovel and shut that little shit up for good.”

They laughed again, but Sam looked at the biggest stick he was able to cut in half—barely as thick as two fingers together—and knew that he would never be able to kill a dog with a shovel.

“I thought you liked dogs,” Sam said. Sunny’s dog died last year around the same time the sunflowers were getting harvested. Sunny missed a couple of days of school, and when he came back, he would cry sometimes during recess.

“I liked *my* dog. Roger was cool, he could do all sorts of tricks. He had almost learned to play dead when I pretended to shoot him.”

“How’d he die?”

“It was those stupid harvesters for the sunflowers. One of the guys would drive down our road real fast, and he ran Roger over. Dad made the guy buy me a mountain bike, though, so I wasn’t even sad.”

“But you cried at school, Sunny.”

“Did not,” Sunny said, throwing down the shovel. “And don’t call me Sunny.”

~

Daddy was not happy when Mama told him that Sam and Sunny had been fighting. Their moms

had to pull them apart after the second scuffle, and Sunny and his mom went home early. Mama scrubbed the dirt from Sam's cuts and scrapes before Daddy got home. Sam felt raw.

"He started it," Sam said.

"It doesn't matter who started it. You can't go around fighting with your friends. You're going to call him up and apologize."

"But Daddy," Sam said, but Daddy was already dialing. Sam grumbled an apology when Sunny got on the line, and Sunny said one too.

Daddy let Sam eat a half portion of green beans with his meatloaf for dinner. Sam smothered the vegetables with barbecue sauce and barely even tasted them. After dinner, Sam got to watch TV with Daddy until the news came on. They could hear the Jones' dog barking the entire time. Sam changed into his jammies and when he came back to kiss Daddy goodnight, the news was talking about a singer who died.

"Daddy, what's an overdose?"

"That's when somebody takes too many pills and they die."

"Like vitamins?" Sam said, his eyes went wide. He had sneaked two extra gummy vitamins that afternoon after Mama cleaned him up.

"No," Daddy chuckled. "It's usually adult medication."

"Does it hurt?"

"Sometimes, but sometimes people just take a bunch of pills, fall asleep, and never wake up."

Sam lay awake in bed, trying to figure out if he was normal tired or if he had overdosed. The Jones' dog barked and howled. Daddy and Mama started arguing over the dog. Daddy wanted to go over to the Joneses and make them shut it up. Mama said that wasn't a neighborly

thing to do and that it would learn to be quiet eventually. Daddy said he'd give it a couple more days, but if the dog didn't shut up soon, he would have to take care of it just to get a good night's rest. Sam fell asleep and dreamed of dogs that barked and bit.

~

Daddy was in a hurry in the morning. He'd overslept and didn't even have time for breakfast.

"I'll just have some coffee at work."

"That won't do you any good," Mama said.

"I barely slept last night because of that damn dog."

"Language."

"If that dog starts in again tonight, the Joneses are going to hear some language, all right."

The little yapper was asleep in the sun when Sam went outside. He threw sticks at the dog until he woke it up. If the dog was going to keep Daddy up all night, it wasn't going to get to nap all day. Mama caught him when he switched from sticks to rocks and gave him a swat.

"No wonder that dog barks at all hours, what with you throwing stuff at it."

"I was just trying to keep it awake so it wouldn't bark all night."

"It's just a pup, it'll learn to act right soon enough."

No it won't, Sam thought. Big dogs, little yappers, none of them acted right unless someone made them act right. Sam would teach it a lesson. Daddy would be proud.

After lunch, Mama lied down for a nap. Sam waited until her breathing rumbled with snores and then scooted a chair up to the medicine cabinet. He took four of Mama's nighttime

pills, five of Daddy's allergy pills, and seven headache pills. He sliced off a hunk of meatloaf and pressed each pill into it. Sam went outside with his overdosed meatloaf and threw it over the fence next to the sleeping dog. The Jones' dog jumped up and growled at the meatloaf before sniffing it and gulping it down. It looked at Sam and started barking.

Sam ran inside to make sure the barking hadn't woken Mama. She was still asleep, so he turned on the TV and watched a show on low volume. Mama was still asleep when the show ended, and he couldn't hear any barking, so he went outside to check on the dog.

The dog was asleep again. Sam threw some more sticks over the fence, but the dog didn't move. Sam scratched his nose, smelled the barbecue sauce from the meatloaf, and panicked. The Joneses would smell the barbecue sauce on the dog's breath. They would know it was him, and he'd get in trouble.

Sam jumped over the fence. The dog didn't move. Sam picked up a stick and poked the dog. Its leg twitched and it whimpered in its sleep. Sam noticed that the dog had almost chewed through its rope. He took out his pocketknife and cut the rest of the way through. Sam picked up all of the sticks he had thrown and dropped them back over the fence, then he picked up the dog and went around to the front yard. Mrs. Jones usually pulled into her driveway real fast. She liked to whip around the hedge and slide to a stop in the gravel. He had heard Mr. Jones arguing with her about ruining their driveway.

Sam laid the dog down just past the hedge, so Mrs. Jones wouldn't see it when she made the corner. The dog was soft and warm. Sam rubbed its face with some grass and opened its mouth to make sure none of the blue headache pills were stuck in its teeth. The dog's teeth weren't sharp, and its reddish brown fur was nice to touch, especially the ears, which were the softest thing ever. Dogs wouldn't be so bad if they were like this all the time.

“Goodnight little yapper,” Sam said. Tonight Daddy would finally get some sleep.

Sam went to his backyard and turned on the hose. He scrubbed his hands and squished his toes into the mud. Mama wasn't making any sound in the house, so he let the hose run and stripped down to his underwear. Playing mud monster was a little kid thing to do, but it was hot outside, and Sam wanted to make sure that Mr. Jones or the mailman didn't come by before Mrs. Jones got home. He covered himself in mud and stomped around the backyard killing invisible dogs with the shovel.

As the sun dried him, Sam flexed his arms, bent his legs, and watched the mud crack and flake off him. He was covering himself in mud a second time when he heard a car slide to a stop on the gravel next door. He scooped the mud helmet he was building off his head and sneaked to the fence.

Mrs. Jones was out of her car. The door was open and she must have left her keys inside because Sam could hear the car dinging. She walked to the back and looked under car.

“No no no no,” Mrs. Jones repeated. Her words matched the ignition chime for a few seconds before speeding up and then dropping silent as she sat down and cried.

Sam's heart was thumping two times for every ding of the car's chime. His plan worked. No more little yapper to keep Daddy awake at night. Sam didn't want Mrs. Jones to catch him watching her, so he crept to the back door. When he opened it, Mama came around the corner and yelped.

“What do you think you're doing? Get back outside right now!”

Mama followed Sam out, cranked the hose full blast, and started spraying him.

“What kind of crazy child did I raise, thinking you could come in the house all covered in mud. Turn around and let me get your backside. And look at the backyard. You turned it into a

swamp. I close my eyes for a second, and you make a mess like this? Bend down. Why would you even put mud all up in your hair?"

The water was cold when it wasn't mixed with dirt sitting in the sun, and Sam was shivering by the time Mama stopped yelling and turned off the hose. The mud puddle had spread and Sam's clothes were on the edge of it soaking up water. Mama saw them and took a breath like she was about to lay into Sam again, but stopped and turned toward the fence where Mrs. Jones cried.

Mama shooed Sam inside. "Now you hop in the shower and clean up this hallway before your Daddy gets home. I'm going to go see what's got Mrs. Jones so upset."

The water warmed Sam quickly, and he stepped to the back of the shower out of the spray and covered himself with Mama's conditioner that smelled like coconut. No one would smell the barbecue sauce on him now either. He liked the way the conditioner made his skin feel all slimy like the salamanders that hid under leaves in the fall. Sam tried out a couple of different sounds he thought a salamander might make, but he couldn't decide if a salamander sounded more like a frog or a snake.

He hoped Mrs. Jones wouldn't cry too much. It was only a stupid little dog. Tonight they'd realize how much nicer it was without a dog barking.

Sam dried off and used the towel to clean up his wet footprints down the hallway and the mud by the door before throwing it in the laundry hamper.

Mama came in sighing and muttering. She set to making dinner, and Sam plopped himself at the table and watched her as she explained things he already knew.

Sam peeked out the window and saw Mr. Jones in the backyard digging a hole. It looked like he was shouting at Mrs. Jones as she cried and stroked a cardboard box.

“What’s wrong at the Joneses?” Daddy asked when he got home.

“The dog got out and Mrs. Jones ran it over when she got home,” Mama said.

“What a pair of idiots. They get a dog they didn’t even treat right, and now they’re sad it’s dead.”

“Idiots,” Sam agreed.

“We don’t call people idiots in this house, young man,” Mama said.

“But Daddy—“

“It’s okay, Sam, I shouldn’t have said it either.”

After dinner, Daddy told Sam to make sure to get his rest, they were going back out to the field tomorrow. Sam lay awake, excited about working with Daddy again, but it didn’t take long for the silence of the night to pull him under, and he slept.

~

When they pulled into Mr. Brown’s driveway, Sam was ready. He kept his hand on the door handle and eyes on the sagebrush, but the dogs never showed up. Daddy parked in front of Mr. Brown’s door and Sam saw why: the dogs were tied up at the fence. All three barked as Sam and Daddy got out of the truck.

“Stay out here, I’ll just go in and say hello.”

Sam walked toward the dogs. They barked and drooled. Sam taunted them and waved his butt at them. They jumped and snapped but were held back by their ropes. Sam picked up a handful of small rocks and started throwing them at the dogs.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Daddy hollered as he stepped out of Mr. Brown’s



single-wide.

Sam dropped the rocks. "I was teaching them a lesson."

"You aren't teaching them anything but hate by torturing them. You rile them up, and they'll be twice as likely to bite the next little boy they see."

"But you opened your car door on them."

"When I drove up here the other day, the dogs were excited and liable to do something stupid. Opening my door on them gets them to stop for a second, and I was teaching them that cars are dangerous, so they won't get run over. It takes longer, but you can also get dogs to calm down if they get to know you. With most dogs you just need to let them smell you, and they'll be your friends. If I had done that, I probably wouldn't have gotten bit. Dogs usually want to be your friend if you give them some time."

"But what about the Jones' dog? If it could have been so friendly, why was it barking all the time?"

"If you spent all day and night tied up in the backyard, you'd be howling too. A dog needs to be on a farm where it can run and play. It's sad what they did to that dog, and it'll be sad when they get another and do the same thing."

"I'm glad it's dead," Sam shouted. "And if they get another dog, I'll kill that one too."

The dogs started barking again.

"Whoa, don't talk like that," Daddy said. "That dog might have been annoying, but you shouldn't be happy that it's dead. You saw how sad the Joneses were. They would never wish that sadness on you, so why're you wishing it on them? Mr. Brown's dog here bit me, and I don't wish it any harm."

Daddy looked over at Mr. Brown. Mr. Brown ordered the rowdy dogs to sit. They sat.

Daddy offered his hand. Each dog smelled it and started licking him. Daddy pet the dogs and stepped away.

“Now you do it.”

Sam inched forward. Daddy wasn't happy that the Jones' dog was dead? It didn't make any sense. Daddy got a good night's sleep, and it was all thanks to Sam.

“Now reach out slowly. Don't flinch or they might get it in their heads to give you a nip.”

Sam raised his hand to the nearest dog. The Jones' dog was as bad as any rattler, Sam thought. I had to do it. He was close enough to smell the dog's breath. It didn't look as soft as the little yapper's but Sam decided to try and touch the dog's ear. Move slowly, Sam repeated, don't flinch. Don't flinch. The dog lunged forward and Sam jumped back, shouting. The dog hadn't used its teeth, hadn't done more than lick Sam's arm, but it took Sam a moment to realize this, and by that time, he had already wet his pants. The dogs started barking and jumping over each other.

“I'm sorry Daddy, I'm sorry.”

“It's okay, Sam. They won't hurt you.”

Mr. Brown got out the hose and they rinsed Sam's shorts. Daddy spread them on the hood of the truck to dry, and Sam helped measure the field in his underwear. Sam kept an eye out for snakes so that he could show Daddy that he could do something right, but looking for snakes distracted him, and he kept putting the marker flags in the wrong place.

“What you said before, that you'd kill the next one too. What did you mean by that?”

Daddy asked as they walked back to the truck.

Sam wanted Daddy to be happy that the Jones' dog was dead, but he wasn't. He'd made Sam touch Mr. Brown's mean dogs. Sam knew Daddy would be angry if he told him the truth.

“Well, you know that dream you had about the dog chewing on your hand. I had one too, but we were driving in the truck, and I smashed the Jones’ dog flat with my door. I woke up from that dream real happy because everything was quiet, and then later that day, the Jones’ dog died. It’s like it happened because I wanted it to happen.”

“Dreams don’t kill anyone, son. You can’t control what you dream, but you can control how you feel, and you still shouldn’t be happy that the dog died.”

They got to the truck, and Sam put his damp pants on. Daddy folded his arms across his chest when they got in the cab. “You tell me how much gas we need and when we need to brake,” Daddy said as he closed his eyes.

Sam wiped his hands dry on his shirt and leaned over to see if Daddy really had his eyes closed. Daddy yawned and pretended to snore as Sam guided them all the way down the driveway. Daddy’s eyes were still closed when they reached the stop sign where they needed to turn to head back home.

“Keep going,” Daddy said.

“But Daddy, it’s the road.”

“Nobody’s on the road this time of day. We’ll be fine. Just tell me if we’re going too fast.”

Sam had to use two hands to get the car to make the turn onto the road. It was easier to steer on the smooth asphalt.

“Ease off on the gas, Daddy. We’re gonna go down the hill.”

Sam’s eyes were burning. He hadn’t blinked since they got onto the real road. The little truck picked up speed, and Sam leaned into the slight turn at the bottom of the hill. He was very close to the side of the road but knew better than to make any sudden corrections. As they went

by some bushes, two birds flew up and hit the grill of the truck and then the windshield.

“What was that?” Daddy said as he opened his eyes and grabbed the wheel.

Sam held the wheel steady as Daddy’s sudden grip nearly sent them into the sagebrush. One of the birds was caught on the windshield wipers.

“Looks like a quail,” Daddy said as he turned on the wipers. The quail left a smear of blood across the windshield before its broken wings caught the air, and it landed on the road behind them. Daddy pulled a lever and the windshield was covered with soapy water and then fading stripes of red and then the road was clear again. Sam still held the wheel.

“I didn’t flinch Daddy. I kept us on the road. Those birds came out of nowhere, but I didn’t flinch.”

Daddy let Sam steer some more but kept his eyes open the rest of the way home.

~

“You’re going to choke on your food if you don’t stop talking,” Mama said during dinner.

Sam told the story of hitting the quail six times before Daddy told him to quiet down and eat. Some of the feathers had ridden in the grill all the way home, and Sam had one hidden in his pocket to prove his story.

“After dinner, can I call Sunny and tell him?” Sam asked. “I bet he never gets to run birds over with a car.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” Mama said, “And I don’t think that’s a good idea. You’re going to bed early tonight. We need to get you back on a schedule or you’ll sleep through your first day of school.”

Sam argued that he wasn't tired, but was yawning by dessert and was in his jammies before Mama had the food put away. Sam was in his bed on the edge of sleep when he heard Daddy say, "This may sound crazy, but I think we should get Sam a puppy."

Sam sat up. Daddy *was* crazy.

"What?" Mama said. "You always complained about the Joneses. Said a dog needs way more than a backyard."

"I know what I said, but you didn't see him today. He's happy that the Jones' dog is dead. He wet his pants when Mr. Brown's dog licked him. Sam's not just scared of dogs, he's terrified of them."

"And you think the solution for this is to get him a dog?"

"I think it'll do him good. It's not right for a boy to be that scared, that full of hate towards dogs."

Sam pulled the blanket over his head. What was Daddy thinking? It'll be loud. It'll bite. But then Sam remembered the little yapper's soft ears. He rubbed his blanket, his hair. They didn't come close to those ears. Maybe it would sleep, and he could feel that softness.

Sam fell asleep and dreamed of a dog with ears so big they dragged on the ground when it walked, but he couldn't get close enough to touch them because the dog's teeth were blue like headache pills and sharp as knives.

## Eclipse

### 8 months post-diagnosis

Jess leaves her car in the parking structure a block from the hospital. The park between her car and the hospital is her buffer zone. A space, she hopes, to separate life from death.

Two school buses sit at the edge of the park. Children laugh and scream and tumble through the grass. Many of the kids wear strange darkened goggles on their heads or carry odd helmets as they play.

A nearby woman with a clipboard checks her watch. "Not long now."

"Really?" a man says, looking up at the sun.

"Cut that out," the woman says. "You've got to set a good example, or we'll be bringing home a bunch of kids half blind from staring at the sun during the eclipse."

Jess sits on a bench and watches the adults herd the children into loose circles. A little blonde girl moves to the center of the nearest circle, shifts her goggles from the top of her head to her eyes, and spins around before calling out "Marco." The little girl holds her arms out and takes tentative steps toward the Polos.

Jess pulls out her phone. No messages.

Mom was asleep when she left. Naso-gastric tube in place. Not like the previous afternoon when Jess woke from a nap to Mom hacking and cursing.

"No Mom, that has to stay in." Jess grabbed the tube that was sucking Mom dry and sterilized it for reinsertion.

"I don't need that shit," Mom spat.

Jess held Mom's head steady and began feeding the tube into her right nostril.

"Swallow, swallow," she said.

"You're fucking killing me," Mom said between swallows. She tried to scratch Jess, but her fingernails had been kept short since the hallucinations started getting bad. One of Mom's machines clicked on, and Jess knew she was getting another dose of morphine. Mom blinked slow and started to nod off. "I knew you were going to try to kill me, you fucking bitch."

Jess turns her cell phone off. She usually sidesteps her gynecologist's rule and just puts it on vibrate. Every time it buzzes with a message, her doctor frowns and says, "No wonder you have the blood pressure of a seventy year old man. Can't you, like, ignore the outside world for a minute here?"

Today she will ignore the outside world. Her blood pressure will be low. She will get good news, she hopes. Jess puts her phone in her purse and starts walking, calling out, "Polo" as she passes near the little blonde girl.

The little girl pulls up her goggles and squints at Jess. "Hey, no cheating."

Jess laughs as the entire group of Polos scamper to the other side of the circle.

Jess wonders if there is a possibility of having a blond baby, but between Javier's curly black hair and her straight red, it doesn't seem likely. Dark hair and fair skin, she guesses as the park works its magic. The sun warms her skin as she crosses the street.

Mom's previous hallucinations had her thinking she was a little girl, giggling as she watched her husband's clothes take themselves out of the closet and dance around the room if Jess forgot to close the closet door when she put Mom to bed.

Jess's stepdad had been Tall Paul for two weeks now. Not honey or sweetie or love. It happened when Mom was no longer well enough to sleep in her own bed and had to stay in a

rented hospital cot. She was prescribed a constant palliative dose of morphine, but her marijuana prescription didn't go to waste and gave Paul, who refused to talk about his wife's death sentence, a convenient excuse for his red eyes the night Mom started screaming when he checked up on her. By day, Paul would sit next to her and listen to stories he'd heard numerous times in their eighteen years of marriage. At night, his looming figure frightened Mom.

Jess presses the button for the elevator and wonders who Mom thought she was yesterday afternoon. Jess had never seen such hatred in her mother's eyes or heard her spit out a curse with such vehemence. Dying by inches was making Mom a different person hour to hour. The week before, Jess checked on Mom in the middle of the night and found her sitting at the foot of the bed. Mom was a little girl, eyes wide with fear.

"Why did you let me fall?" she said.

Jess helped Mom back into bed and reinserted the NG tube. Mom struggled but didn't fight.

"Why did you let me fall?" was all she would say.

The elevator is quiet as Jess rides up to the eighth floor for her appointment. The sound of the motors and moving cables is disconcerting. Jess understands why buildings pump these little boxes full of smooth jazz and kitschy Muzak as her clicking creaking box ascends. The noises reduce to a whirring hum as the elevator slows for her floor.

### **6 Months 24 Days post-diagnosis**

When Mom was still getting treatment, she carried around her little bag of poison, strapped to her arm for forty-eight hours every two weeks. If it was quiet at the right time, Jess could hear a



little motor spin up and push the chemo through the port near Mom's collarbone.

In the first hours of treatment, Javier, Paul, Mom, and Jess gathered in the living room and smoked pot to help stave off the inevitable nausea.

"Ooo, get the hash oil, Paul," Mom said. Her June Cleaver voice and bald head combined with her request made Jess laugh.

"You're going to love this, Jess. It's so delicious."

Paul came out with a piece of foil, a small vial of liquid, a handheld torch, and a glass tube.

Mom insisted that Jess go first, and as she held in the sweet lung-full, the little motor spun up and forced some of the chemo into Mom's chest.

"Vvvvvp," Mom mimicked the sound, and Jess released a cloud of smoke in hacking laughter.

Everyone laughed as Paul made the rounds, operating the torch, until Mom moved to the bathroom and stayed there the rest of the afternoon, sitting on a stool by the toilet with a washcloth on her head.

"You're looking better, Mom," Jess said on the drive to Mom's next treatment. "Like you're holding onto a bit of your weight."

"Don't you call me fat," Mom said, laughing.

Laughter turned to coughing and then vomiting. What hit the dashboard was yellow and viscous. Jess' eyes watered from the acrid stench. Bile.

Jess grabbed the roll of paper towels from behind her seat. She considered the retaining wall as she curved around I-80 toward the hospital that would give Mom another bag of poison to wear for the next two days. I could end it, Jess thought. This slow death was not worth it.

They passed the wall as Mom grabbed the paper towels and started cleaning herself up.

A day of tests showed that Mom's lower bowels had shut down. She wasn't putting on weight, she was filling up. The hospital pumped Mom's stomach, and they left with an NG tube instead of a chemo bag.

"She's got days, maybe a week or two," the doctor said. "The NG tube will pull out any acid that builds up in her stomach."

Mom could even eat a little if she wanted. She could still go through the motions of being alive as the NG tube sucked her dry. Mom had been playing at living for five weeks now.

~

The waiting room is empty, and Jess is early. She fights the urge to check her phone by picking up a magazine but sits with it open on her lap while looking at the prints of the Bay Area skyline on the walls. She realizes that most of her life happened just outside those frames. She started school in a building just outside the left edge of the frame of one picture. Javier and Jess's second date was a picnic on a grassy spot just to the right of that picture of a redwood in Golden Gate Park.

Jess wonders where she was when those pictures were taken. If the photographer cropped out a girl playing hopscotch or a couple sharing chicken salad. Or if she was still a baby or grown and moved to Seattle when these pictures were taken.

**3 Months 13 Days post-diagnosis**

Paul and Mom decorated their room with prints of the city and photos of their wedding and Jess's childhood so that Mom would have something to look at when she was supposed to be resting. Jess tucked Mom in after bringing her home from the hospital with a shaved head for the first time.

“Oh, those are my favorite,” Mom said as she stared at the wall.

Jess followed Mom's gaze to a print of the Golden Gate Bridge at sunset. “I always liked that one too.”

“Really?” Mom said. “I thought you always liked the loud ones best. The ones that are just a strobe of light way up high and then the sound hits you. You told me once that you loved that feeling, like another heart beat inside you for a moment.”

Jess looked at Mom's eyes. Watched her track phantoms through the air. The doctor said she would be a bit loopy from the drugs, but hallucinations?

“I can't believe it's the Fourth already,” Mom said.

Jess sat next to Mom on the bed and held her hand as she oohed and ahed herself to sleep.

~

“The doctor will be with you in a moment,” the receptionist says.

Jess puts the magazine back on the stack and reaches for her purse. A quick check-in won't hurt. Jess has her thumb on the power button when the doctor walks in.

“It's off, it's off,” Jess says in answer to the doctor's frown. She puts her phone back in her purse and follows the doctor to the exam room. A clean, freshly shampooed scent trails the

doctor, cutting through the smell of sterilized tables and walls and tools.

### **3 Months 8 Days post-diagnosis**

Before the chemo could take her hair, Mom went in for one last haircut. She invited her two best friends and Jess. Insisted they drink champagne though she could have none. Could only smell the glass as they toasted each step. She got a trim and highlights. Her hair was curled and coiffed, and when she was done, the stylist took pictures of the four of them.

“Oh, I look good,” Mom said.

“It’s just,” one of Mom’s friends said as she touched a curl, “such a shame.” She dabbed at her eyes. They were two bottles deep.

Mom smiled and turned to the mirror. She bounced her curls and turned her head from side to side and her smile grew.

“Fuck it,” Mom said. “Get the clippers.”

The smile never left her face. The buzz of the clippers cut through her friends’ protests as she took the first swipe herself.

“I’ll make this look good too,” Mom said.

Jess started laughing. The pale strip of flesh peeking through her perfectly styled hair made Mom smile look insane, but her eyes were all confidence.

“Honey, why don’t you do the rest,” Mom held the clippers out to Jess.

“Hell no,” Jess said still laughing. “I don’t want you cursing me out every time you see your bald head in the mirror.”

The stylist took over, and Mom was still smiling when her eyes rolled back and she fell to

the side.

Jess picked up Mom's hand. "Mom? Mommy?" Her pulse didn't feel right.

The paramedics got them to the hospital quickly, and the doctors said that it was just a small stroke. No permanent damage. But as Jess looked at Mom in the hospital bed with her half shaved head and skinnier than she'd ever seen her before, Jess wondered what permanent damage would even mean at this point.

A nurse finished shaving Mom's head before the hospital discharged her.

~

"How are you doing?" the doctor asks. "Are you taking care of yourself?"

Javier had been pestering her about this same thing ever since he drove the truck down to Mom's house with their belongings. But when she wasn't taking care of Mom, Jess didn't want to do anything.

"I'm fine," Jess says.

"And your mom," the doctor asks. "Is she still. . ."

Wasting away? Dying? Conjuring hateful hallucinations as she grows bitter with the family that is holding onto her for too long? The doctor would probably finish her question with "alive" if she planned to finish that question at all, Jess thinks. But the question just hangs there until Jess nods, and the doctor moves on with the exam.

The doctor's bedside manner had been suspect from the first meeting. After Jess explained her situation, the doctor examined her and said "Oh my god, so many fibroids. You have, like, the worst uterus ever. We can totally fix this."

It wasn't just the brusqueness of the prognosis, Jess didn't trust the credentials of a doctor who spoke like a bubbly valley girl.

"She's the best uterine surgeon and fertility specialist on the West Coast," Mom swore. "Honey, I know I'm not going to get the chance to hold my grandbabies, but even seeing you pregnant would make me happy."

So Jess did it for her mom. Sat in stirrups for over two hours while the doctor babbled like a cheerleader and pulled fibroid after fibroid from inside her. Rested and went to post-op appointments only to repeatedly hear, "Keep resting. I'll know more when the swelling subsides."

This time, the doctor looks up after the exam with a smile.

"Well," she says, "good news. You're all cleaned out. Put up the vacancy sign because you're ready for tenants."

Jess's appointment is over and the elevator doors are closing before she processes anything past "good news."

"That bitch just called me a hotel," Jess says, laughing. She turns her phone on, but there is no signal in the elevator. Javier first and then Mom, she thinks. Mom will definitely think the hotel thing is funny.

## **Diagnosis**

When Mom called eight months ago, Jess almost let it go to voicemail. She had woken up to blood, and the doctors' insistence on the rarity of losing a child at twenty-two weeks offered no comfort. Made her feel like a freak. A failure.

Javier tried to help. “Next time,” he said. But this was her second miscarriage, and from before the tests even registered her pregnancy, Jess was sure she was carrying a little girl. Nothing now. Not even a body to bury. She felt stupid for not knowing how she was allowed to grieve and hated how everyone moved so quickly from “I’m sorry” to “better luck next time” like she had narrowly lost some sort of game.

Her baby was dead. Her little girl. Jess needed her mom, but when she took out her phone, she realized she hadn’t said any of this aloud, and she wasn’t sure how to form the words. Jess stared at her phone for twenty minutes before it started buzzing. Mom’s face illuminated the screen.

“Jess?” Mom’s voice was high and shaky.

Jess looked around for Javier, ready to accuse him of texting Mom because she wasn’t speaking to him and had been lying on the bed since they came home from the hospital. But Javier’s phone was on the nightstand, and he was in the kitchen making lunch.

“Honey, you’re not at work or anything right now are you?” Mom asked.

“No, Mom. I’m at home.” Jess said.

“Is Javier with you?”

“No. I mean yes. He’s in the other room.”

“Honey, I just. I have some bad news.”

Mom had a week of heartburn after Thanksgiving. She blamed her sister’s stuffing. Said a classic should stay a classic and not be experimented with. She went to the hospital the second week and, after a barrage of tests, went home with some antacid that never helped. When Mom went back in for the test results, the doctor gave her the prognosis without even so much as a good morning. Stage three pancreatic cancer, lesions on her liver, and scarring on her kidneys.

Two to three months without chemo and four to six with.

“You have to get a second opinion,” Jess said when Mom told her. “And you’re not going back to that doctor. What kind of cunt doesn’t cushion that news?”

“Oh, Paul won’t let me go back to her either,” Mom said. “He’s actually on the phone in the other room, trying to get her fired.”

Jess smiled as she could hear Paul shouting in the background.

“You’re coming up here to see a specialist, Mom. We’ve got some of the best hospitals here in Seattle.”

“Don’t worry, honey. I’m going to fight it. Not even cancer could keep me from meeting my grandbaby.”

“Mom, she,” Jess felt the bed drop through the earth, “I lost the baby.”

Mom flew up the next day.

It took a few weeks, but Jess got Mom an appointment with a specialist who confirmed her diagnosis. Jess quit her job and made plans to fly back with Mom. Javier would pack up their things and follow by Christmas.

Jess tried to force Mom to rest, but she wouldn’t hear of it. Always found something to clean and was adamant that she get to help Jess pack her bags. Mom insisted on cooking a nice dinner for Javier before she and Jess left even though she couldn’t eat much herself.

“Oh honey,” Mom said over Jess’s protest, “just let me do this for you two. Cooking is almost as filling as eating. It’s just a shame I can’t have a glass of wine while I cook anymore. That was always my favorite part of the process.”

Jess smiled and got a pipe from the bedroom.

“Oh, I haven’t done that since I was a kid,” Mom said as she washed vegetables in the



sink.

“Maybe it’ll help you eat some,” Jess said. “Think of it as your glass of wine.”

Mom refused to hold the lighter. Even made Jess hold the pipe as she delicately pursed her lips around the mouthpiece. Jess had trouble holding the fire still for Mom due to laughter.

Before Mom shooed Jess out of the kitchen she said, “I saw your specialist, now you’re going to see mine.”

“Mom, I’m just coming down to be with you. I don’t want to get caught up with anything else.”

“No discussion,” Mom said. “Consider it my last wish.”

“So, are you going to see the specialist?” Javier said as Jess joined him in the living room.

“Did you overhear that, or is this some sort of conspiracy?” Jess asked.

“I just suggested she wait to bring it up until after you smoked,” Javier said.

Mom walked out of the kitchen holding a knife, eyes wide with wonder.

“Is everything all right?” Jess asked, searching for signs of blood.

Mom looked at the knife in her hand, then back at Jess. “I don’t know what was in that marijuana you gave me, but that was the most perfect onion I’ve ever diced.”

~

Jess exits the elevator, but before she is able to call Javier, her phone starts vibrating with messages. The first voicemail is from Jaiver.

“Hey Jess, was Mom awake when you left?”

Jess steps out of the building and hurries into the park.

“Mom’s not looking good, Jess,” Javier’s second message says. “We called the nurse to come in early. Paul’s not doing so well. Come home as soon as possible.”

She picks up her pace.

“Jess?” Javier’s voice wavers in his third message. “Mom is . . . just get home soon.”

The park is quiet. Children stand around in groups, or lie on the ground looking at the sky. The light is wrong. Everything is shadowed in blue, and Jess sits on the bench as she is sure she is passing out.

“I knew you were going to try to kill me, you fucking bitch.” She hears Mom’s words.

Jess wants to call home. Wants to hear that Mom woke up and said goodbye to Paul. Wants to hear that Mom asked for her. Regained consciousness long enough to say something. Anything. But over and over again all she hears are Mom’s last words.

Jess looks into the cloudless sky. The light is still wrong, the shadowy blue color of everything makes her feel dizzy. She wonders if she should go back up and see the doctor.

Jess hears laughter in the nearby bushes and realizes that not all the children are lying in the grass. She wishes they would shut up and let her think. She wishes the light would go back to normal.

“I knew you were going to try to kill me, you fucking bitch.”

She hopes she hasn’t been speaking aloud.

Jess notices a pile of discarded goggles and masks on the bench next to her. She picks one up and realizes it’s for welding. She holds it up to her face. The park disappears. Jess tilts her head back until a fiery crescent comes into view.

More children grow tired of watching the eclipse. The bench clatters as they add their

masks and goggles to the pile next to her. The scent of the mask hits Jess in short bursts. It smells of sweat and oil and dust. A garage alive with work.

Jess watches the crescent thicken as the moon moves on.

## **26 Years pre-diagnosis**

The summer Jess turned six, Mom called in sick to stay home and watch the eclipse with her daughter. They spent the morning making a box that would reflect the light onto a piece of paper so they could watch the moon move across the face of the sun. As the time drew near, clouds rolled in and the box had nothing to reflect. Jess was angry at the clouds for ruining their magical day.

“It’s okay sweetie,” Mom said. “We’ll catch it next time.”

## Vita

Andrew Kooy received his B.A. in English from Simpson University in 2007. He is currently a stay at home dad to his one-year-old daughter, Adelaide. He looks forward to focusing on writing and being a father for a time but hopes to return to his third job, teaching, soon. "Eclipse" was published in the journal *Blood and Thunder: Musings on the Art of Medicine* in October of 2015.