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DEAD COOKS

by

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B.A. May 2013, The University of Texas, Austin

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirement for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

ENGLISH

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY

May 2016

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ABSTRACT

DEAD COOKS

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Old Dominion University, 2017
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Dead Cooks is a collection of short stories set in the cities of Austin and San Antonio Texas. Some recurring themes throughout the collection are class exploitation, addiction, and cycles of abuse. Characters often feel trapped in their own lives as they try to resist the cycles in which they are trapped. They mostly fail, but sometimes find moments of strange grace, solidarity, and connection.

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PREFACE: LOVE & ANGER

So, I wrote a book. I'm not sure how it happened. The past year of my life has been overwhelmed with pain, loss, and heartache. I feel like I've been smashed and rearranged, and it's hard to look back and see any kind of linear, rational progression. I felt sometimes on the verge of hallucination, trying, and often failing, to hold myself together. I don't recall accomplishing anything, and the idea that I could have been at all productive sounds absurd. But here's this book, all book-shaped, all eighty or so pages bound in a green three ring binder. It's strange and bleak, sometimes obscene and outrageous, absurd and cruel, with small moments of grace. Not a lot of hope, but plenty of scorn for fate, and solidarity with those who suffer. I'm not sure what to make of it. If it offered hope and salvation, I would worry about myself. Those types of people become cult leaders. I see all of these stories in a light bent through the lens of a warped time in my life. I'm on the other side of something, and I hold an artifact. I'll try to excavate what went into writing some of these stories.

*

I moved to Norfolk from Austin for a fellowship at Old Dominion University. The school's annual literary festival, which occurred during my first semester, was themed *The Hungry Heart is Telling You* and featured a lot of food-centric writing. Authors read from culinary memoirs, chef memoirs, and restaurant memoirs. Prior to graduate school, I had spent almost twenty years of my life working in kitchens as a chef and a line cook (I started my first job at fifteen, around the time my father started going to jail). Coming here was my big break, my escape from a future of stagnation and decline, so seeing my old life reflected back in such a glowing light left me feeling more than a little disjuncted. None of it resembled, even in the most

distant sense, a culinary memoir that I would write. The visiting authors wrote about the love of food, the joy and beauty of preparing and experiencing it, and romanticized the chef as a life of passion and creativity, hard work driven by a masculine sense of competition and an unending quest for perfection. I saw this all as boosterism and justification for a brutal industry, one that takes advantage of the most vulnerable people—those who have no other choice—and treats them as replaceable cogs that can be discarded when they wear out. Few I know in the industry watch or read any of that chef bullshit, except with a sense of hardcore irony, so I decided I would write an anti-culinary memoir and call it “Dead Cooks.” Anti-culinary, because it would be about people and not food or the service industry, and anti-memoir because it wouldn’t be one person’s story, and it would be fiction.

It took me a while to get around to writing it (my creativity was sidelined by depression brought on by an assault which left me on crutches for three months), and it was an emotionally wrenching story to complete. I based each character on somebody I knew who had died. The story could have been much longer. Compiling a list of everyone I could write about, I felt overwhelmed at the realization that I had lost so many people. Which ones should I choose, out of all these deaths? They all deserved to be remembered. In the end, I went with those stories which I felt most able to tell, those with scenes and an arc I could best visualize, and felt some guilt over the people I left out.

In writing each of these deaths, I had to remind myself that I was writing a story and not a eulogy. I had to push through the sentimentality into tragedy. So in an episode in which the character Stevie has died of a drug overdose, instead of ending with her former lovers in her room mourning her loss, which would have been sentimental, I have the second person character steal her journal, become disillusioned with Stevie, and become ashamed of the revelation. As

much as I would have loved to memorialize my friends, the story had a job to do, and this was sometimes difficult.

I had recently read Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, in which each section is a portrait of a different imaginary city. The book works more like a poetry collection than a traditional narrative, and I thought this approach might work for my story, as a series of portraits that point to a larger whole beyond themselves. For the narration, I shot for a simplified version of the narration Gabriel Garcia Marquez employs in *Autumn of the Patriarch* (simplified because I'm no Marquez). In that book, the sentences sprawl on, sometimes for pages, shifting tense and point of view within the same sentence to give a whirling, panoramic, decentered view of a Central American country and its dead dictator. My sentences aren't as long, and I keep everything in past tense, but I do shift freely from first person plural to second person singular. I chose this decentered, collective narration to emphasize that "Dead Cooks" is a story about a group and not about individuals. If we look at each character individually, as this person's story, we could moralistically conclude that each person should have made more healthy decisions and call it a day, but if these sorts of lives and deaths are endemic to a culture or a social strata, if "cook" becomes a stand in for the working poor, and if the list of the dead does go on, we have to look at socio-economic structure and class exploitation. Perhaps being exploited by a system that treats people as replaceable, feeling trapped without an alternative, causes some degree of existential despair. Perhaps it is hard to value your life when you are not valued. Perhaps people manage that despair and push back against it in different ways. I see this as a kind of heroism.

For all this collectivism, I wanted to avoid everyman characters, or characters who fit into or represented any given type. I think Everyman is boring and nobody I want to read about. Maybe this is why I write about people I know. I meet so few typical people. I want outrageous,

self-aware, unrepeatable people. These characters don't represent anyone but themselves. They were my friends and people I cared about. They cannot be replaced.

*

“The Showers & the Nails” follows the four year old protagonist, Pierce, as he learns two fundamental truths of the world—sometimes one person will hold another person to a piece of wood, drive nails through his wrists and feet, and hang him to die, and sometimes one group of people will herd another into gas chambers, then incinerate the bodies *en masse*. He struggles to reconcile the horror of human cruelty to the innocent world that he knows, and cannot understand how people live mundane, happy lives with this knowledge. I struggle to understand the same thing.

I wrote the story when I was at The University of Texas, and there was a lot of buzz, with prominent guest lectures, on the topic of personal and cultural trauma in critical theory. If I recall, some of the ideas floating around ran along these lines—identity and difference, on personal, cultural, and historic levels, originates from traumatic ruptures that cause an irreconcilable break from one cultural or personal system. This rupture then becomes a point of orientation for a new personal or cultural worldview. To use an example from The Bible—the children of Jacob went into Egypt as a part of one culture and people, and emerged from the horror and trauma of slavery a new people, the Israelites, a foundational event that is sanctified at Passover. I'm not sure if I entirely agree with the theory, or if I'm even getting the arguments right, but I decided to explore the notion by looking at two foundational traumas of modern Western culture—the Crucifixion and the Holocaust—and seeing how these traumas are transmitted and how identity forms. I also liked the irony of the religious aunt trying to “save” an innocent, and how this attempt causes a fall from grace.

Writing with theory can be tricky. If you go into a story with a theoretical idea or point to illustrate, you will probably wind up with something that feels reverse engineered—characters who do and say unnatural things because they are being forced to prove an argument. Also, why write a story to make a philosophical point, when you could say what you mean more efficiently without all the baggage of setting, plot, and character? Still, I am a theory head. In fiction, I try to approach it the same way musicians talk about music theory—learn it and forget it. If you are playing out or composing a song while calculating things like the circle of fifths or counterpoint, your performance will sound contrived and lack heart. Don't think about it, and trust that all of that knowledge will find its way in. A lot of theoretical ideas go into prewriting, the notes and sketches I make before I start writing a story. Those ideas whirl around in my head and may make their way into the setup of a story, but I try not to write toward a point or to prove anything. I set up a problem, and I'm as interested as anyone to see which way these characters go and where we land. In the case of Pierce, he concludes that we fake our lives. We are all actors, and he learns to perform.

*

I sometimes feel like a broke-ass Scott Fitzgerald (in sentiment, not in talent or importance)—*the middle class are different from you and me*. I come from hardcore, broken family-style poverty, and it wasn't until I was in my thirties, when I finally made it to the university, that I found myself in a primarily middle and upper class environment, steeped in middle class values. You people are weird. I could go on and on about the middle class and their peculiar world view and value system, but that would be a separate essay. I will say that the whole idea of privilege being invisible to those who possess it is dead right on. I was blown away by the level of privilege and entitlement displayed by these university kids, how they took

for granted, and even complained about, things I could never imagine for myself. As off-putting as this sort of thing can be, I tried not to hold it against them or to work up any class bile. I tried, instead, to be a curious observer, to understand these strange people and how they saw the world. I'm still not sure that I do, and I feel out of place in most environments, but I try. Maybe that's why some of my stories are so strange—I want to make everyone feel out of place, so we can all relate and talk to each other on equal terms. That's one theory, anyway.

One thing that interests me, in my role of reverse class tourist, is the different way lower and upper class people approach and read fiction. One of the first stories I wrote that looked and felt like an actual story was called "Laundry Day." I didn't put it in the book, but in it I projected all of my fears of becoming a lonely, middle-aged burn-out onto a character named Dwight. I exaggerated those fears to make things as bad as they could be. Dwight is a sexless, underemployed alcoholic who spends his nights looking up porn and conspiracy theories, while obsessing over a younger woman who lives in his complex. I made him forty-one years old, exactly ten years older than I was when I wrote the story (yikes!). I then destroyed the guy by giving him exactly what he wanted. It gets gross and painful. I did sympathize with the character, but it felt cathartic to crush him.

The upper-class people I knew at school seemed to like the story, in a general way, but found it incredibly sad and depressing. Some asked me why I would write such a thing. My lower class friends, on the other hand, loved it and thought it was hilarious. They got a kick out of how low it went and how dirty it got. I think the difference is that lower-class people could see themselves, or parts of themselves, reflected in the character, and they understood the exaggeration. On some level, they too were afraid of becoming burnouts, but they could look at Dwight and think, *at least I'm not as bad as this guy*. It's satisfying to laugh at your fears and

insecurities. I've noticed a similar discrepancy with writers like Kafka and Dostoyevsky, how they are read and received differently across class lines (again, making the comparison by position, not talent). Most upper-class people find them bleak, hopeless, dense, and difficult. I was surprised, as a literature student at a prestigious university, how few students read or cared about either of them. We lower-class people find Dostoyevsky and Kafka funny. Our lives are already bleak, so we understand all of that and it doesn't bother us. We get a kick out of the absurdity and the exaggerated characters. Anyone of above average intelligence who feels at a dead end can understand the Underground Man. We've all had those thoughts and feelings, even if we didn't articulate them. But we're not as bad as that guy. When he can't dig himself out of his hole, let go and love the prostitute, we laugh, even as we feel for him. *I would have loved her.* To someone with a life full of opportunity, the book seems dense and philosophical, ultimately a downer, but we lower-class folks dig it.

This class divide, with different modes of reading, makes me a little leery of this business of treating creative writing as an academic discipline. The university is an ideologically middle class institution, and everything operates through that filter. The literary publishing industry, too, caters almost exclusively to an upper-middle-class, left-leaning white perspective. Even if this isn't you, your writing still has to be understood and accepted by those gatekeepers. I am a lower-class anti-capitalist leftist (yes, we do still exist). What do I care about a bunch of rich white liberals? Do I have anything to say to them, or want their approval? I don't know those people. If I write something that ridicules the middle class, in a way poor people would understand, would that story be picked up by a major literary journal? If I wrote a book that made middle class readers feel confused or unsafe, would it be nominated for a major award? I'm not sure how to negotiate these factors, writing in this venue. Maybe this all falls back into

learn it and forget it territory. If I'm juggling too much class and audience consciousness while I try to write, my characters and plots will feel forced and clunky. Best to run on instinct, and trust all of that to make its way in, somehow.

*

In "Dead Cooks" I wanted to write about Orestes, but I chose not to, out of respect for my brother Thomas. I only knew Orestes as an acquaintance, but Thomas looked up to him as a mentor and was broken up for a while over his death. I think Thomas wants to write about Orestes, and I didn't want to take that away from him. Maybe I'm not as mercenary as a writer should be. Orestes cooked at Casino El Camino, a punk bar off 6th that makes famous burgers. He died at forty-three of pancreatic cancer. Had it been caught in time it would have been treatable, but no one who works in kitchens has health care. He was a first generation Cuban immigrant who grew up in East L.A., raised along with his brother and sister by a single mother. To make ends meet, his mother provided charms and curses to members of the local community as a Santeria priestess. Orestes remembered people coming to their apartment at all hours with strange problems and requests. He got into the local metal scene that was happening in Los Angeles in the '80s, and toured around in a few bands. Dude could shred.

When he died, we couldn't convince the coroner to release the body. You need a family member to sign. His mother, brother, and sister were dead. Orestes had no one. After appeals and red tape, runaround, and vain attempts to contact distant relatives in Cuba, several of his friends drove to the morgue. They stole the body. The three of them loaded him into the car, freezer bag and all, and drove to the crematorium so we could give Orestes a funeral. This is love. An absurd love which cannot win, yet refuses to capitulate. This is the heroism I want. This is what I want to do with my writing.

*

For about a year and a half, somewhere around 2010-2011, before I applied to The University of Texas, I faced a slow, unraveling crisis. I was alone, not in love and not interested, working a job that left me feeling dead and without any prospects, feeling jaded and uninspired to create. My spark was gone, but I had no idea what else to do. I wondered if my life had peaked, and this was the beginning of a long decline. Beneath it all, I felt I had wasted my potential. I had nothing to show for my thirty-odd years. I had never gone all in and committed myself to anything—not to a relationship, a job, a skill, or an art. This book is my first attempt to do something like that. In the course of writing, I've left my home and everyone I loved, been robbed and had my bones broken, nearly lost my mother to suicide, lost my uncle to an accident, had my heart broken, and lost my father to a suicidal bender. Now here is the book, like a strange lump from somewhere else. It is imperfect, often bent and ugly, and probably in bad taste. Hopefully, it's not too much like the fucked up kid who keeps you in a bad marriage, but I feel, running through it, strong currents of love and anger, often entwined. I think it's a book that wants to do something. I'm not sure what, but I want to let it do whatever it will. I think it's all right.

DEAD COOKS

—*Set in and around the kitchens of Austin, TX.*

Jesse died of everything, which is how a lot of us go. By forty-three, he'd survived two heart attacks and had developed hepatitis, cirrhosis, and diabetes, as well as a host of other maladies that battered his body one way and another before the cancer tipped him over, but to know him and work with him early on you wouldn't have guessed any of that. We knew he had problems, but the man was such a force, especially when he returned to work only a week after his second heart attack, that we assumed through an act of will he could transcend his body and his failing organs; like he could eat any disease, digest it, and expel the death from his system. We couldn't believe when he came back from that heart attack and bounced into the chaos. His body hummed as he commanded it around us lesser cooks with the grace of a master. His eyes shone through a sly squint above his wild orange beard like he'd been laid—like he had fucked that heart attack and sent it home in a taxi.

Nothing slowed him, at least not at that time, and you always loved watching Jesse work. You remember him through his movement: the way he became a fluid, streaming part of the machinery as soon as he punched his number and stepped onto the line; how, in spite of his bulk, he became a dancer in front of the flattop or the six-burner; you remember how his freckled arms stretched like striking pythons when he reached from the burner across the grill to flip a ribeye with his right hand as he sautéed and omelet with his left; you remember him twirling on his big legs as he spun to deliver a plated linguini or a tenderloin to the pass bar. Through everything, he never slowed, not through working nine or ten hours on the busiest days with only a ten minute

break, not through the heart attacks, the diabetic malaise and the fluids that swelled his ankles in varicose purple streaks above his dirty sneakers, not through the two bowls and five beers it took to get him through the shift, not in spite of the pain and exhaustion that buckled him under each night after work and left him incapable of anything but whiskey, cigarettes, and mumbled conversation, not through the low pay and redundancy of the job. He pushed through it all, as one of the best. He even had something like a catch phrase—when a server botched an order and needed a re-burn, when a new kid didn't show for his shift or when a ten-top walked in when we thought we'd killed the dinner rush, Jesses would breathe a deep, ironic sigh, force his beard into a grin, and say through his teeth, "Oh, the joy of it." Because cooking is joy.

Jesse finally slowed about eight months after the second heart attack. He came to work dragging his foot in a shuffling limp. We were in the swampy part of the summer, over a hundred wet degrees in the galley. The flames and the grills had us all brining, but sweat poured out of Jesse like his head was under a tap. His face looked like it was melting as sweat soaked his beard dark and sprayed off in drops when he shook his head. He'd removed the lace from his shoe, and his dirty sock swelled in a gelatinous lump beneath the tongue. He winced and lumbered through his shift—trying to work even though he wasn't worth a damn—until it seemed like he would pass out. We sent him home. After spending the next day in bed with a fever, Jesse went to the hospital, where they cut off his foot, and Jesse became one of those wheelchair guys at the front of the bus who's always drunk before noon. You saw him once on the #10 when you were on your way to cash your paycheck at the Kwik-Stop. It was a bright late morning on the cool end of autumn, when the breeze tasted orange and brown, and seeing Jesse in his red power wheelchair, secured with belted hooks and straps, slumped over with an old scarf falling across his shoulder, a thin white fleece draped over his stump, cracked your heart. His beard had gone

gray, and his fat belly pooled over the sides of the chair. He resembled one of those giant bullfrogs that sit around in puddles of themselves. He didn't seem to recognize you at first. When you said his name, his head jerked and his bleary eyes stared through you with a sad smile. You asked him how he was, and he may have remembered you or he may not have, but either way he moved his head from left to right, as if to judge the world through the dirty window, and croaked with a sing-song inflection, "Living the *dreeeeam*, hey hey, living the *fucking dream*." His eyes sparked a tiny flicker, then went dull. His head flopped to his chest. He had left before the cancer took him.

We went to see him once on his deathbed, out of obligation. It was hard to tell what we were looking at, seeing him slabbed out, bald and beardless, the loose flesh that had been his gut folded beneath the powdered blue sheet. His cold eyes, like two shucked oysters, stared at the florescent medical lights and seemed to register nothing. His stump twitched beneath the sheet.

The ashes went to his ex-wife. Even though they'd been divorced for over a decade, they had managed to stay pretty good friends, and she'd helped look after Jesse during his decline. He had no other family. Jesse wound up on a shelf in his ex-wife's living room, inside of a cardboard box a little smaller than a shoebox, papered on the outside to look like deep, glossed mahogany. She was a bartender downtown, and we would go over to her house for drinks to pay our respect. A few months after his death, we stuck two large, cartoon googly-eyes to the box so Jesse could see us and hang out. At first, we thought the eyes were endearing—we all waved to Jesse and raised our cups and bottles—but after a while, those googly-eyes unnerved us, and his ex-wife had to peel them off.

*

Ian died jerking off with a belt around his neck, which was great. Not that he died, but how he did it. It's how Ian would want to be remembered. Ian was a crazy ball of sexual subversion who loved to push the edge and make a big joke out of everything, so the idea of reaching back from the grave to make people uncomfortable, of dying the one death more shameful than suicide, would have tickled him. He was the type of guy who would film himself going out in the worst possible drag to straight-bait in the most threatening places, like the video of him dressed like a nun at a Waffle House in the redneck outskirts, trying to talk to an old man at the counter while holding a string of anal beads like a rosary. He was a big man, too, not fat but barrel chested, and we always got a kick out of watching him channel Divine in his tent of a sundress, or his extra-large flight attendant uniform, with a Dallas-sized blonde wig topping his bald head.

He wasn't a great cook, but he was a blast to work with, so we all covered for his mistakes and picked up his slack so he wouldn't get fired. He didn't work in drag—that was to get a rise out of normies—but he was fun in the kitchen, like the time he showed up for his Sunday brunch shift carrying a twelve inch dildo. He stepped onto the line, slapping the rubber cock against his thigh like a riding crop, and stood tall at attention. We knew he had something planned, so we stopped setting up the lowboy and fucking around with prep to watch him.

“Fall in,” he said with a military bark, and we went along with it, all of us standing in line with our chests out and our shoulders back. He slung the veined hunk of silicon over his shoulder and paced the floor mat like General Patton addressing the Allied Forces.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” he said, “welcome to brunch. This is where we separate the men from the boys, because we can't trust you men around the boys. Seriously, what's wrong with you? Leave those boys alone!” He barked it out like a real order, and dressed us down with

his eyes to let us know he was serious. We knew he had to have a GoPro hidden somewhere, so we played along, held our military composure, and pretended the reprimand stung.

“The time is nigh when you will be tested by fire, by water, and by other fluids,” he went on, without breaking character. “Rest assured, as you undertake this great endeavor, you will be in our thoughts, our prayers, and in our fantasies. As the battle rages, when it seems like all is lost, as the last beads of lube run dry, dig deep, fall back on your training, and remember why we do this—for the love of food.” He stared into the distance like an Eagle Scout lusting after an American flag. A few snorts of laughter shot through the kitchen, but for the most part we held our shit. “And if we love our food,” he said, with his voice rising to an effeminate lisp as he switched characters, “then we must learn to pleasure our food. If you do not pleasure your food, your food will leave you for someone who better understands its needs, and you’ll all be lonely, shitty bastards who creep out your nephews.” He pleaded with us, like his mission in life was to stop us from creeping out our nephews. We started to lose our shit. “For this purpose,” he said, “I introduce you to our secret weapon—ladies and gentlemen, meet Little Boy.”

At that, he unslung the dildo from his shoulder and turned a knob at the base that sent it into huge, jiggling vibrations. We lost our shit at the sight of that huge rubber cock rippling through the air, and the kitchen cracked into cheers and laughter. Ian pleased the scrambled eggs, which were sitting in a cold bath by the six burner. The yellow goop lapped up the sides of the container in concentric waves of ecstasy. He pleased the pancake batter, then the French toast, and throughout the shift we all took turns with the dildo. No food left the kitchen unpleasured that day.

We could never parse out Ian's sexuality, couldn't distinguish between joke, subversion, and true desire, and maybe it didn't make sense with him to draw those lines. He would sleep with pretty much anyone who wanted to sleep with him—male, female, outside, or in between—but we never saw him pursue anyone or heard him express sincere longing. He never had a steady partner, but then again most of us didn't do relationships so that may not be unusual, but with him it was always things like that pseudo art film he shot on Super 8, which he insisted on showing to any new people who came over when we used to hang out at his house. "Social lubrication," he called the screenings. The film was called *Henklöwn*, and it featured Ian in a clown costume with crusted white face paint dancing to industrial noise. Two men in hazmat suits bent Ian over, pulled down his pants, and inserted a lubricated egg into his asshole. He held it as the camera zoomed in on his asshole, then the egg reemerged like a white stone poking out of wet soil. The film jump cut to a chicken flapping around in slow motion as the noise swelled, and then it faded to white. The best part of the film was when it cross-cut to Ian's face as they inserted the egg. He kept giggling and didn't look like a scary clown at all, and Ian's face at his house as he showed the film looked the same way. Ian loved that video, and he kept making fake accounts to post it to YouTube so it could live for all to see, for a brief moment, before it got banned. It wasn't the kink that got Ian off, not the egg going up the ass, but having the video—being able to expose people to something shocking, hilarious, and bizarre. Everything was performance, like he'd pierced the veil early on, had seen sex as nothing but people rubbing each other—a boring thing to cause so many problems. If the world was a joke, it may as well be a good joke. A provocative joke. Life and desire were jokes Ian made good, and he invited you in to laugh along and love it all. Ian's death, slung up by his neck to a bedpost with a bottle of lube in his hand, was the final joke. You miss him, but you get it.

They didn't get the joke in Lockhart, where Ian's family held the funeral. It was a nondenominational church service, and they'd dressed him like a Republican to put him in the casket. Ian had not had anything to do with his family since he left home, and they looked at us through harsh, sidelong glances as we filed into the back pews after the viewing. It made you angry, how unnatural it felt to see Ian dressed like that, surrounded by fake looking flowers, all of these aunts, uncles, and cousins who didn't give a shit about him mulling around in their black suits and dresses. The wake was worse, and everyone kept mumbling about how unhappy Ian must have been to take his life. His parents must have lied about his death. That lie betrayed all that Ian had been. You wanted to shout and scream, to trample the flowers and dance on Ian's grave, yelling to them—"Ian died chasing an orgasm! His death was a climax we the living could never know. He lived and died happy. He lived a better life and died a better death than any of your small brains could dream!"

You wanted to say that, and you could feel Ian's memory sitting beside you, urging you on, but you didn't say anything. Everybody kept mumbling, wearing stiff suits that made their bodies look fake. You left early, swallowed your anger, and digested it on the ride back to Austin.

*

Stevie was a drug overdose, though some speculated it might have been suicide since she often seemed withdrawn and carried a copy of *The Myth of Sisyphus* in her purse, so maybe she did suffer from that temptation, but we all had that kind of sadness. She seemed resolved to it, and carried it as well as the rest of us, so there were no flags that she might do something desperate. She'd had a thing with heroin when she was younger. By her report, it was severe, and she'd gotten into some legal trouble which kept her from getting another job and left her slaving

in the kitchen. She was solid—the kind of worker who could get everything done without you noticing—and she had been clean for the last seven or eight years, barring the occasional relapse. Stevie stayed detached from the world, like she watched people and events pass in front of her through a mist of quiet humor, as if from across the mouth of a broad canyon, but from that distance her face still flushed with interest and curiosity for whomever happened to pass, and that endeared her to everyone. She got it, whatever *it* happened to be, and you could trust that, whatever your frustrations, whatever your strangeness, she understood and was there. You wanted to be there with her too, but as you approached, asked questions, showed interest, she ebbed away and returned to her silence. No one really knew her, and that's why this question of suicide lingered. Nothing changed with her that we could tell, but suicide is like that—a gunshot in the dead air—no warnings before or reasons after. Still, it's better to think that when Stevie took the OxyContin, she didn't realize how strong it would be, that her death was an accident.

If you wanted to sleep with Stevie, you had to say you were with the band. That's the joke she liked to make, but it was more or less true. Since she'd lost her virginity to the guy from Goldfinger at seventeen, she'd always had a thing for rock stars, but in her thirties she joked about it like it was more of a whim or a personal nostalgia rather than star-struck desire. To be honest, if you weren't in a band, Stevie would probably still sleep with you—especially if you were a woman—as long as you weren't overbearing or weird about it. Stevie chose who she wanted, and that's how it was the first time with you. She'd invited people over to chill after a late shift. The blue and red Christmas lights in Stevie's room blurred purple in the marijuana haze as the night wound down, and the record player spun a slow, melodious drone. Your mind unwound with the music. Stevie slid beside you on the couch and rested her head on your shoulder. Your tired muscles relaxed as she ran her hand across your back and your arms. She

curled her fingertips under the hem of your shirtsleeve, and that was it. Without a word or any other flirtation, you were hers for the night, as if everything had been written. The few others who were left saw what was happening and said goodbye, leaving the two of you alone. You felt a coldness you didn't know you had, a frozen chunk inside you, begin to thaw. You drew her face to yours and ran the back of your palm across her pale cheek and your fingers through her dark hair. Her gray eyes reflected deep blue in the light, and still seemed far away. You teased the ridge of your thumb across her lips, and her mouth opened as if she would speak. No words came. You kissed.

Nothing felt wrong as you lay in bed and gazed at her bare shoulder and back above the comforter. She said she couldn't sleep with someone touching her, so you gave her space. You didn't feel like you had been used, nor had you used her. You also didn't feel the usual anxieties about where this would leave you in the morning and what would come next. What had happened felt as natural and innocent as an honest conversation, like the weight of morality had dropped and left two bodies to speak. The conversation had been light and satisfying, and no one possessed the other. You didn't know if this would happen again, but that was not important. It was important to register the scent of the smoky air and the taste of sweat on your tongue, to feel how the sheet and blanket clung to your damp chest, to remember the shade of her skin in the dull light, and the shape of Stevie's body beneath the blanket.

The body went to Louisiana, where Stevie was born. Her roommates had everyone over for an informal service, since no one could go to Louisiana, and we wouldn't know what to say to Stevie's family if we did. We sat around Stevie's room and looked at each other—men, women, mostly Stevie's lovers—and we felt our own absence. None of us could speak. We

averted our eyes and wondered if there was anything we could have done, if this were somehow our fault, and wished one of us had found a way to cross through the mist, over her canyon to where she lived. From where you sat on the bed, you saw a black notebook on Stevie's nightstand. When no one was looking, you slipped it into your bag.

Later, at home, you opened the journal, hoping to find that part Stevie had kept hidden, that faraway wisdom, like a cool light from the depths. The writing was awful. Overwrought, angsty stories filled the notebook, like something from a spoiled teenager. Glib, shallow quips and commentary about herself and other people, mostly selfish and unfair, ran through the thing. There was nothing written about you, and you weren't sure whether to feel slighted or relieved, but as you read you felt something go cold in your loins. Is this who Stevie was? Had you been romanticizing her? You thought back on the time you spent with her, remarks you'd taken as jokes that could have been sincere, silences you'd interpreted as understanding, and it all seemed to fit. Had you misread everything to make her who you wanted her to be? Was the Stevie you knew a projection of your desire? Looking back, you couldn't help but see her as this glib, shallow person from the notebook. Had she been this person all along?

No, she hadn't. Stevie never gave you permission to read her book. In the end, you did violate her, and the journal poisoned your memories. You couldn't bring yourself to destroy the notebook, so you hid it beneath the bottom drawer of your dresser. When you think about that black book, abandoned under your socks, you feel ashamed.

*

Corey didn't die, but for a while we thought he was dead. He was an ugly little man with bug eyes, horse teeth, and long, tangled hair—fast and fun at work, but moody. We knew him from the diner off Lamar. He left the diner to take a job at some shi-shi place on Congress, but it

didn't work out and nobody heard where he went after they let him go. That's when a rumor started that Corey drank himself to death in Barcelona. It made sense—you remembered Corey talking about Spain and wanting to go, and you knew how the guy drank, so death in Spain sounded like a reasonable way for Corey to die. It was sad, but kind of romantic. You imagined him curled up on cobblestones under an ancient statue in some medieval plaza, wasting away in sight of Gaudi's melting cathedral, a sky full of Spanish stars above him, as he raised the bottle for a final pull and expired. There were worse ways to go, and you hoped he'd found some kind of peace. We poured our drinks on the ground for another fallen comrade, imagining the Mediterranean air and his final vision of beauty.

He really was dead for a few months, and we felt his ghost wafting in the air every Wednesday when we ran the stuffed trout special that Corey had designed, but soon our mourning passed, except for the heaviness that hangs over everything, so when you saw him board the #331 while you were on your way to buy weed, it was as if existence had turned on a fulcrum and pressed you into another dimension. He had the same bug eyes, horse teeth and tangled hair, but you couldn't believe this man was Corey. You assumed, instead, that your memory must have gone haywire, that the face pegged to Corey in your mind must be wrong and couldn't have belonged to the person laughing with the bus driver while paying his fare. You tried to look away before this uncanny stranger noticed you staring, but he nodded in your direction. You weren't sure if you should nod in return—if he might have been looking at someone in the back—but he held eye contact, walked to where you sat, and took the seat beside you. It was Corey. This was the Ghost Bus. You were dead, with Corey, in purgatory, forever on your way to buy weed. Hot panic, dry and horse, scratched through your throat, but that settled down, and you'd begun to accept your strange afterlife when Corey spoke.

“Are you all right?” he asked. The floating pieces of the world drifted into place. You and Corey were alive in the earthly purgatory of the #331. You said you were fine except for a hangover, which was true, but you played it cool and acted like Corey had never been dead. Seeing those big teeth and baggy eyes back in the world made you smile. You told him he looked good, and he did, considering he wasn’t a bag of ash or rotting bones. He had been working in a food truck off South First trying to save money for a car, which was why he hadn’t been around. But who was in Spain? Did somebody else die, and did whoever started the rumor get the names mixed up? You couldn’t think of anybody who’d been missing, but line cooks come and go. Anyone could be dead in Spain. You shook off these questions and the vertigo of the encounter, and made small talk. The bus stopped in front of your dealer’s house, and you invited Corey out to drinks later at the ’04 Lounge.

You didn’t tell anyone you’d seen Corey, so when he sat down on the bench at the greasy picnic table behind the ’04, it became the Ghost Patio and we were all dead for a hot minute. We tried to play it cool, like nobody had come back to life, but after a few drinks it got to be too much. We broke down and told Corey he was dead. At first, he thought it was great. He laughed his ass off when we told him how the trout made us sad and how happy we were to see him. We bought a couple of rounds of shots to welcome him back and to celebrate Corey’s life, but as the shots sank in, something changed in Corey’s face. His smile drooped into a low scowl, and his bug eyes narrowed to two beaded bags with slits across the center.

“Wait a minute,” he said with a long slur. “Y’all thought I was dead, right?”

We laughed and told him that it was all right, that we were happy, but his mouth hung open like he had bitten into something nasty and wanted to spit it out.

“If y’all thought I was dead, then why didn’t any of you motherfuckers look for a memorial or an obituary or anything? Didn’t anyone care? Y’all motherfuckers didn’t go to my funeral!”

We thought he was joking, and joked back that it was his fault for not inviting us, but the booze had a hold on him. He slammed his hands hard on the table and stood up, closed his eyes, and wobbled as if floating between worlds. He slowly opened his eyes, which somehow looked clear and sober.

“Nobody cared enough to find out.” Corey no longer slurred his words. He stood up straight and steady. “Not a motherfucking one of you tried to contact my family or look up anything. Y’all don’t give a fuck.”

His brown face went pale and his eyelids fell back to a squint, as if the waves of intoxication he’d been holding at bay had run over the levy and washed him under. He stumbled forward, then back, and as he turned to leave he tripped on the edge of the wooden deck and fell to his knees. You went to him and took his arm to help him up, but he shook you off and stood on his own. Corey looked like he could vomit as you smiled and tried to calm him down. He told you to go fuck yourself then stumbled across the patio into the bar, and you were ready to let him fuck right off, but you felt sorry for him and worried, so you followed into the hot stale air of the ’04 Lounge, pressed through the sweat of crowded bodies, and found Corey in front of the bartender closing his tab. The bartender set down two shots as Corey signed off and pocketed his card. You tried again to cheer him up, to convince him to stay, as he threw back one shot, and then the other. He winced and belched while the booze settled, then mumbled something you couldn’t understand. He stumbled along the wall to the door. Before he left, he said over his shoulder with whatever focus he could find, “Y’all motherfuckers didn’t go to my funeral.”

You knew it was pointless to try to follow or stop him. Corey knew as well as anyone that there usually weren't funerals—either there was no money or the family took the body somewhere else—but he got pissy when he drank, and it was best to let him have his tantrum. Apparently, someone found him unconscious on the sidewalk around the corner from the bar and called an ambulance. Corey still didn't die, but he was pissed about the ambulance. That's a \$1,500 taxi, and Corey wasn't able to buy the car he'd wanted. The whole deal took him a long time to get over, and he brought it up for years afterward whenever he got drunk and angry. "Y'all motherfuckers didn't go to my funeral."

*

Damien died riding his motorcycle. Actually, he died flying off of it, over the handlebars, into the rear windshield of a parked police car. According to the officer who was in the car and others who came to the scene, Damien came over a short, steep hill with no visibility. The officer had stopped under the hill to fill out paperwork after writing a ticket. A broken sprinkler head in the grass by the road had wet the pavement, and Damien couldn't stop. There was nothing he could have done, and they say he died on impact, but in spite of the violence, when you picture his lanky frame hurtling through the air, smashing through the glass in a broken heap, you can't imagine him without that gentle smirk and those amused eyes. Damien was one of the most pleasant, affable people we knew. The life didn't faze him, and he seemed immune to the sadness and futility that washed over the rest of us. Even when we were slammed in the weeds at work and everyone felt ready to tear out each other's eyes, Damien never lost that subtle smile and grace of motion that made you feel like everything in his world was all right. He helped you get on, made you feel like you could carry whatever was dragging you down. He was well read, too, and could talk about almost anything. We loved getting him in the break room, where he

could go from Marx or Foucault to joking about some crazy Lizard People conspiracy, or geeking out on a trashy sci-fi novel. When he died, the body went east to Rhode Island, where he had family.

As per usual, we improvised a wake for him at the '04 Lounge. Damien had never been clear about his past or where he'd come from, but he had dropped some clues here and there, at different times with different people. As we talked, we tried to piece it together. An odd picture emerged. Damien had earned a graduate degree from Dartmouth, and had held an academic position. He'd lived for several years in France doing research, and had authored several books. There was an ex-wife in Rhode Island. A teenage daughter, living with relatives, whom he hadn't seen in five or six years. He'd lived this other life in a different world, alien and remote from the man we'd come to know. Who was he? We loved him, but it puzzled us. What drove him away from his old life; from what did he escape? And of anywhere he could have gone, of all the things he could have done, why did he come down to our world, to sweat in our kitchens, to share our liquor and our jokes? It didn't make sense, and we wondered about a dark secret in Damien's heart, something terrible that had driven him away from his career, his studies, and his family. Perhaps a tragedy he couldn't face—some death, heartbreak, or betrayal. If it was anything like that, it didn't seem to weigh on him. You thought back to all the times you saw Damien ride up to work on his motorcycle, each time he punched his number and stepped onto the line, all the time you spent with him—the drinks after work, the get-togethers—and you can't see him without a smile and that lightness. In spite of whatever happened in his old life, whatever secrets he held that drove him down to our world, Damien may have been happy. You wanted to believe that Damien was happy. It was important to believe that Damien was happy.

*

You didn't choose this life. Few people do. Nobody wants the job, and even the culinary school brats usually burn out after a few months and go home. The work is hard, the pay is shit, and it leads nowhere. You started cooking out of need. You needed to pay rent, and nobody else would hire you. At first it was a stop-gap to tide you over, but life is crazy and years pass. Fifteen or twenty, and now you don't know anything else. You've worked at different places, but one kitchen is every kitchen, and you see the same faces on the circuit. The job gets harder with age. You feel it in your body and mind—can see it wearing down people you've known for a while. It seems about once a year you're all out drinking for someone who's died. The bodies add up. They die young.

You worry about yourself. You haven't been to a doctor since you were a kid, except for a couple of patch-ups, like that time early in your "career" when you worked the overnight shift in that diner and you were alone, hosing down the floor of the walk-in, and you must have slipped and hit your head, but you don't remember. One minute you were standing, holding the hose by the lime green spray nozzle, and the next you were on the ground, looking through a long dark tunnel at the nozzle as it danced across the red tiles like the head of a snake. The snake flicked its wet tongue across your face as if you were the object of a secret ritual, and you remember feeling like you had done something wrong and would be punished. Without knowing where you were, you tried to move, to stand, but your limbs weren't working, so you flailed your arms and legs like the air should be water and you were trying to swim. You tried to scream, but the snake sprayed water in your mouth and no one came. You stopped flailing, stopped screaming, and began to resolve yourself to your new condition, to accept that, from here on, life would be cold, wet, and snakey. You could live like this. It would be as good as anywhere. The snake blew a cold blast up your nose. You choked to your senses and clawed your way up the

speed rack, onto your feet. You needed a couple of stitches above the eyebrow, and you had to stay home for a few days to watch for concussion, but they didn't do any tests or blood work to see if something else might be wrong. They didn't pay you for those days either, and you were screwed for rent.

You went in for another patch up years later when you boiled your arm, but that time it was all right. You had to take a week off of work, but they gave you eighty of the big Vicodin on the company's dime so you had seven days to lay around high and love the world. You made up some of the lost cash by selling pills. Again, the doctors did the burn but didn't check for anything else. You wonder what might be going on under your skin. What worms of disease have burrowed in—what eggs were they laying in your organs? You also worry about your head. You know something's not right. Whatever it is eludes you, like a lead weight in the back of your skull that vanishes when you think about it. You catch a glimpse of it, too, in the eyes of your friends. During lapses in conversation at the bar, you see that wrong thing flick across their faces, too brief to be terrifying, but something like terror. Then, somebody makes a dick joke and you laugh and the night rolls on and rolls into sleep and rolls into sunshine and work again. It all rolls on, and you pay the things you need to pay. What else?

Some nights, walking home late, when the air is quiet and you are alone, your thoughts merge with the world and you feel the sidewalk become liquid. You bob and float across the surface of the earth, and feel the concrete surge like ocean waves. The waves lift you along their crests, above the streetlights and telephone poles, and then you slide back into the troughs beneath the grass. Floating, rising and falling, the tiredness lifts and the world is clear. On what reef or sandbar will these waves break? When will the concrete crash over your head and suck you into the earth? And again, what else? You can't answer these questions. Your mind is this

narrow sidewalk, straight and brightly lit, but lined with locked houses and buildings. The minds of people you know are narrow sidewalks. There is nowhere to go but forward, toward the vanishing point.

TELEVISION STATIC

The boy knelt on the doormat and tried to tune his buzzing mind to whatever spirits might be wafting in the air, to see if the doorknob could work as a crystal ball, to give him a vision of what might be inside the apartment. The LSD was wearing off, but with the way the porchlight threw glints and halos off the cool bronze luster of the knob, he might be high enough for it to work. He'd stayed out past two on a school night, and he was terrified of his father catching him sneaking home. The dark windows did not console him. His father sometimes sat alone in the dark. With the state the boy was in, he feared a confrontation with the man could break his mind. He leaned close to the doorknob, watched the light fly, like he could see each photon packet or wave passing through each other, colliding into the doorknob, losing some spectral energy to the cool bronze glow. He tried to see it, to open his mind to whatever cosmic principle would let him know it was safe to go inside. The concentric grooves on the metallic surface of the knob seemed move on a conveyor belt, these particles of matter absorbing energy, churning and throbbing in atomic motion like a swarm of bees he'd seen a man wear as a beard on *Seeing is Believing*. He couldn't see into the apartment, and couldn't touch this squirming, living mass of restless atoms. All matter—squirming like a beard of bees. The doorknob, the doormat, his body.

A wave of nausea overtook him and he collapsed with his back against the door, pulled down by the horror of his father and everything that existed. He wanted to know he was safe, to see that he was safe, but how could he know, with everything moving and nothing clear? A heavy dread wove through his nerves, into his gut, and out to the rest of his body. It was like this every time he came home—the same flutter in his stomach, the twitch in his jaw and neck—even sober in the daylight. He never knew when his father would be waiting to explode. He could feel

the man looming behind the door, could sense his manic pacing and those busy, deep-socketed eyes. The boy began to hyperventilate, and the world shut itself out, save for the churning throb of all matter.

Something tickled his shoulder, and the boy leapt. He sprinted away from the door, into the parking lot, arms flailing like broken propellers, trying to swat the tree roach. He jumped, squirmed, and squealed, feeling the waves of dread and panic, the nausea, dissipate into laughter. He imagined a neighbor watching, how he must look. He hoped the neighbor was getting a kick. He would, if he were the neighbor. His nerves calmed, and he stared up at the one star twinkling through the dirty San Antonio sky. He felt calm. He thought about the light years behind this blue-white speck, these particles or waves radiated a thousand years ago, crossing billions of miles of nothing, pressing through the atmosphere and persisting even through the rust red din thrown up by the city lights, finally coming home in his eyes. Here was a thousand years. He could hold it in his pupils.

His mind uncoiled along the light years, and the dew of the night tickled his skin in the easy breeze. His muscles relaxed into goose bumps, and the hair on his neck stood up in an ecstatic peace. For a moment, all was well, but gravity found him. Even though he had transcended time and space, he still did not want to go into the apartment. It didn't matter what he wanted. He had to go inside. He resigned himself to whatever would happen. He walked back to the now still and solid doorknob, inserted the key with a slow, even thrust, and gave the knob a silent turn that he knew from sneaking in many times before.

He braced his shoulder against the door and gave it a slow, even push, to keep the hinges from creaking. He heard nothing from the darkness of the apartment. He slid from the dancing light of the porch into the darkness, and closed the door behind him. He held his breath, watching

swirls swim through the dark as his eyes adjusted. The swirls merged into an empty leather sofa, and the boy let himself breathe. If his father woke up and caught him now, he could say he couldn't sleep and had got up for some water. And if his father was asleep, it meant he wasn't high, so the boy didn't have to worry about anything crazy.

He relaxed and let his mind regress. He loved LSD for the way it made him a child, like his imagination was the world and his mind held nothing evil. He watched the play of lights through the windows, from the porchlight and streetlamps, the rays streaming in, casting shadows through the curtains. He imagined those rays were alarm lasers, like he used to with his friends when he was eight, and he was a jewel thief tasked with stealing a diamond at the far end of the room. If light touched him, an alarm would sound and he would be caught. He plotted his path through the shadows, leapt from one shadow to another, then ducked and shimmied along the wall beneath another ray of light, to a deep shadow in the corner. He stood, almost to the end table where he imagined the diamond to be, when a car drove by in the parking lot, its headlights flooding the living room through the glass patio door. The boy was blinded and he knew he'd been caught. When his eyes adjusted again to the dark, he saw his mother's face looking in from the patio, and he thought he really was eight, like he'd slipped back in time and would have to live everything again. He moved and his mother moved, and he realized it was his reflection, looking so much like his mother the last time he saw her, waving from the window of a Greyhound bus. His hair looked the same as hers. The guilt he carried in the back of his mind moved, and he knew he wasn't a child. The laser game was over and he felt heavy, older than his seventeen years, as he walked to his room.

In his room, he turned on the light and marched through the trash, clutter and broken things that piled on the floor. He was the only one who could walk in here without stumbling and

stepping on things. He could tell if anyone had been in his room, if his father had been rooting for money, by sensing disturbances in his trash heap. Finding a pair of scissors beneath some crumpled papers and a dirty dish, he stood in front of one of his many mirrors and hacked at his hair. The clippings fell across his boney shoulders. He liked his mirrors. He hoarded them, whatever he could find in thrift stores and abandoned buildings. There was a large, heavy mirror lined with dry-rotting wood. Hand mirrors, flat frameless mirrors resting on nails, dozens of cosmetic mirrors, and broken shards covered the wall. A girl he'd been in love with hated them. She didn't like being around mirrors. At sixteen, she dropped out of school and left him to get knocked up by a twenty-six year old line cook. Good for her. In San Antonio, sixteen seemed late to start a family. Good for the babies. He watched his hair clippings drift to the floor in his reflective field. It felt like an aquarium. His hair was food for the living coral reef. He threw down the scissors and ran his hands through the chaos on his head, laughing at the odd angles as smaller clippings sprung out and caught the light in a hovering nebula. He liked this wild look, like a human train wreck. Some people liked babies, but he would rather be a train wreck.

Aside from the mirrors, the only thing else on the wall was his father's Master's degree. He hung it to make the bastard feel ashamed when he stormed in, violent on a crack bender. It sometimes worked. Life in the apartment, life with his father, hung as a heavy field, pregnant with passive aggression, broken by sharp crises of violence. Sometimes, the boy provoked the crisis, when the tension was too much and the weight of the atmosphere suffocated him. Other times it came without warning, as a devil breaking out of his father's drug-rattled mind. The boy drew close to the mirror. He stared into the dark brown of his eyes and the wisp of mustache on his lip. It was that feeling, of being in an aquarium. The boy was tough and quick, and he punched hard. He'd been in fights, but when his father went into a rage he felt like he was

underwater. His fists moved in slow motion and did nothing as they fell against his father's fat chest and belly. The man would take him in a bull rush, throw him around, and toss him down to the floor with the clutter and trash. Then, after the outburst, sometimes with a fist raised, his father's body would go limp. The man became small and pitiful, and he sometimes cried. That shame—the degree on the wall helped with that. His father would retreat to his room, and the two would avoid speaking until the next crisis.

Feeling heavy and aquatic, the boy collapsed into bed. His mind felt spent in the acid comedown, but that image of his mother's face in the bus window chewed at him. It had been four years ago that she left for the treatment center, and he remembered his parents talking about how much better things would be, his father acting like he should be happy, but the boy felt a deep unease. She waved goodbye through the bus window on the way to rehab, left the center early to stay with her sister, then disappeared. That's when things got bad with his father. The man started staying up in the dark, crying and talking to himself, and then the hard drugs. Although his mother had left, the boy felt guilty, like he had abandoned her. He hadn't called his aunt, or made any effort to try to find her. He thought she must be dead. That thought, and not knowing, hung over everything. All he had was this face looking out from a bus.

He was sinking into a bad place, and with the way his mind still raced, he knew it would be a while before the acid let him sleep. He liked to watch television static late at night, when he was tripping and sometimes when he was straight, as a way to scramble his thoughts to help him relax. He rose from bed, and his mind seemed to hover somewhere above him. He felt like a puppeteer to his body, pulling strings, moving his legs at odd, marionette angles as he walked through the trash heaps and down the hall, into the living room. He collapsed onto the cream

colored leather sofa like a jumble of wooden blocks. Running his hand between the cushions, he found the remote control and pressed power.

A roar blasted the boy back as the studio audience cheered. His thumb scrambled for the volume button as his heart raced for fear of waking his father. He turned it down all the way and held his breath, listening for any sound from his father's room. He heard nothing. The television was an old tube T.V. without cable. His father had broken the antenna to use as a crack pipe, so any station was mostly static. Exotically colored ants swarmed behind the screen, throwing out light that reflected off the coffee table and the sliding glass door. The movement of the ants formed a grainy image of a man in a suit in front of an audience, and they all acted ecstatic about an egg scrambler. Faint, ghost images doubled and floated next to the man and the audience as their enthusiasm swelled for yet another demonstration. Seeing these ghosts, the boy felt like all possible lives, all the lives he could live, were really the same life, which he would have to live again and again. He couldn't think about that. He changed it to channel three.

A silver and white blast of pure static blew the thought away. The boy stared hard at the static. The walls, the room, all of it melted in the white noise and flurry thrown out from the screen. He watched shapes shatter and disintegrate. His mind drew out images—spirals, patterns, fractals that erupted, shattered and exploded, shifted to hurricanes, then to uniform nothing. The screen ebbed and flowed as the outer atmosphere of some gaseous world. He thought he saw the surface of Neptune, then it was nothing. His lips quivered as his eyes drank it in, ecstatic as his thoughts blew away in the pulsing roar. He felt his mind melt through his eyes, ears, and mouth and release into the ether as the hair on his neck rose. He watched his wide-eyed face, flickering with silver and white, reflect for a moment in the glass patio door, then his face swept away into nothing.

Blown out of his thoughts, floating in static, the tight spring of the boy's life uncoiled. He felt he could take down his defenses, rest, maybe sleep, but his guilt twitched again and a thought crept up. He remembered an episode of *Seeing is Believing*. A man claimed to have discovered a way to summon, through television static, the faces of the dead. Relatives claimed to recognize them. Was it true? Did death leave an impression, somewhere in the electromagnetic field? He tuned his mind to the spirits in the air, focused on the screen, and felt the eyes of all the dead gazing out. Could he summon her, that face in the bus window, if she was among them? He pictured that face, that distant expression. Were these her eyes, coming forth through the shimmering pixels? Around those eyes, this had to be her hair, so much like his own. Her chin, nose, and lips, pulsing in silver and white. Was this really her, proof that she was dead? If that were true, somebody would have told him. If there was a body, they traced dental records. But what if there was no body? It was her face. The boy knew she was dead. Her lips moved, her mouth opened, and the boy strained to hear her voice.

He heard the lock turn and the doorknob rattle. His mother's face melted into nothing and the boy tensed. He didn't see his father enter the room, but he felt his presence moving. He knew, coming home at this hour, the man would be high. He hoped, if he kept his eyes on the screen and didn't acknowledge him, his father would do the same and pass by. He watched the static, which no longer resembled anything, and listened to his father rummage through the kitchen, probably looking for a crack pipe. That was good. His father had ignored him. He heard him close a drawer and walk back into the living room. The man sneezed. The boy jumped and looked over against his will.

His father jumped, like he'd been caught, and bounced his big frame as if ready for a fight. His face shone with the sweaty sheen of a drug bender, and his eyes, set far back in their

sockets, searched for a place to rest. The boy half stood from the couch, shifting his weight to his feet in case he needed to move. The boy spoke first, hoping to shut down whatever craziness his father was about to pull.

“Trouble sleeping,” he said, feeling accused. “Got up to watch T.V.”

“Driving,” said his father, in the same defensive tone. “Couldn’t sleep. Went for a drive.”

The boy sensed his father teetering on the edge, still ready for violence, like anything could set him off. It wouldn’t matter what he said, so he sat silent, ready to get to his feet if the man made a move. The man looked from the boy to the television, and then back to the boy, looking more confused than angry.

“Are you watching television static?” he asked, the defensiveness leaving his voice.

“Yes,” said the boy. “Visual noise. Helps me sleep.”

“I drive,” said his father, “but T.V. static, that works?”

“For me it does.”

“I’ll have to try some time,” said his father as he drifted to his bedroom. The boy let himself sink into the cool leather and shook off the tension of the encounter. He tried to allow himself to be enveloped by the calming frenzy of the flickering light, tried to relax his mind. He wanted sleep, but no sleep came. Even though he’d avoided an explosion, his father’s presence skewed something in the air, made everything on edge. He knew his father was getting high in his room. Who knew what sudden rage or crackhead delusion could set him off?

It wasn’t long before the boy heard his father leave the room, and smelled an alkaline smell, like a burnt circuit board, wafting from the hallway. The boy balled his fists and got ready for what would come. His father approached with rapid, shallow breaths, and looked again from the boy to the television. A manic, perplexed look, traces of rage, crawled across his face. The

boy was ready to jump. The father clenched his fists and the boy half stood up. His fists opened and relaxed, and the man's expression turned soft, almost pleading, in a way that confused the boy.

“That really works? It helps you sleep?”

“Yes.”

“Do you mind if I try it?”

“No. Sit.”

The father fell limp into the couch. The boy didn't want him here, but he didn't know what else to say. If he left for his bedroom, his father might take that as a provocation. His father stared hard at the television, tensed and leaned forward, rocking as if agitated, and then sank back into the cushion. His jaw clenched and relaxed. The boy looked away from the man and fixed his vision to the screen. He felt his neck tense, afraid to look over, until he felt his father relax, and he knew he was safe. The boy couldn't say for how long he sat next to his father before a certain calm crept in behind his eyes, which drank in the light.

LILA DOBSON & ME

I wanted the Junior V.P. spot at Shattuck and Squea, and they wanted me. They offered me lesser posts, but the Junior V.P. slot wasn't open, and I wasn't moving for less than I was getting at my company. Fortunately, someone died. Roy Dobson, one of the senior V.P.s, passed away. They moved Bob Hayward, one of the Juniors, up to the Senior slot, and moved me in to replace Hayward.

Lila, Roy Dobson's daughter, worked as a project manager. You could tell Lila knew how sexy she was—especially when she wore the green dress that brought out her curves and made her eyes pop—and she messed with it. She loved to work up a man, turn on the coy allure and doe eyes, and as soon as she made his heart flutter, she would take out her false teeth and lay them on the table. She got a kick out of how quickly a man's face changed when he saw her gummy grin.

Lila told me she thought someone murdered her father, and the murderer worked in the office. I thought it unlikely—I'd heard Roy's health had been in decline for a while—but the gleam in her eye and the way she bit her lip when she thought she'd found a clue convinced me to go along with her investigations. We stole scraps from Henry Kaiser's paper-shredder basket and reassembled them like a puzzle that might be evidence. We dug through Meredith Bloom's pill case to look for anything that could be arsenic. Stuff like that. In truth, Lila later admitted, she didn't believe her father was murdered. Murder investigation was how we flirted. We were falling in love. We quit investigating our coworkers and got married. Our love felt like a slice of secret knowledge—something on the other side of normal understanding.

*

It turned out Roy Dobson *was* murdered. Bob Hayward had been slow poisoning his coffee for years. Hayward's ex-wife, after a bitter divorce, went to the police and told them everything. They put Bob Hayward away.

*

The news hit Lila hard, and left me feeling dirty and off-center. We couldn't look each other in the eye, or speak directly about anything. The real murder made our marriage feel like a sham. Like we were close to something true, but instead we got married. We didn't divorce, but we did get cold. We each kept to our own side of the house. At one point, I had an affair. I'm pretty sure Lila had one too. Sometimes, Lila would spend whole days at home with her teeth on the kitchen counter. That's how I knew she was angry at me—when she didn't put in her teeth.

THE SHOWERS & THE NAILS

I write these hopeless stories that do no one any good. I can't help it. Aunt Eden ruined me when I was four years old. I remember sitting and bouncing on the maroon cushion of the big bench seat in her old car. I remember the damp air from the vents. I remember the light brown of the glove compartment, marked with fake wood grain, and running my hand across the hard, shining plastic as Aunt Eden searched the back of the seat for my seatbelt. These are my earliest memories. I'm not sure if this is normal—not to remember anything before the age of four. It could be the trauma of that car ride that blotted out everything that came before, or it could be that four is about the age people start to remember. I don't know, but everything before feels watery and melts away—like an image of my father, tired in work clothes, laughing as my mother thumbed through a magazine, or the cold glow of fluorescent lights in a waiting room somewhere—and everything after resolves into clear, linear resolution. I remember that sundrenched spring day in San Antonio, oversaturated with color. The sky was too blue, and it hurt my eyes. I remember pushing the silver bulb of the cigarette lighter to watch it pop out again. Aunt Eden pulled my hand from the cigarette lighter.

We were going to an Easter pageant at Aunt Eden's Church. Her eyes seemed to sing as she put the car in gear and coasted out of the driveway. Aunt Eden was young then, around twenty-three, and perhaps to spite her lukewarm Catholic upbringing, which is how I remember my grandparents, Aunt Eden had discovered the love and salvation of Jesus Christ. She had joined the Evangelicals. I can imagine my parents humoring her by letting her take me to church. I'd never known them to be religious, and they were probably glad to have me out of the way for the morning, but I was happy to go. I liked Aunt Eden. She was a tiny woman, and I saw her as

less huge, more approachable, than other adults. I remember something like the pale light of salvation radiating from her dark eyes and hovering around her face, like she had something vital to tell me, something that couldn't be contained. As she pulled onto the main street, her joyful air filled the car and projected onto the cedars and telephone poles that cruised past our windows. Beaming joy into the world, she looked down to me as the car slowed to a stop at a red light.

“So Peirce,” she said, with the familiar tilt to her voice that the preschool teachers used when beginning a lesson, “have you heard the story of Jesus?”

She asked the question with perfect-pitch reverence, like she had been rehearsing. I stopped playing with the black shutters of the air vents. Jesus? I knew the name, but I wasn't sure what his deal was. He was somebody famous, or maybe someone silly from my father's work? I remembered my father laughing about the name, but Aunt Eden seemed to like the guy, so I listened. The light changed, and she recited her condensed and combined version of the Gospels, all the while weaving through traffic.

For the most part, I found the story unimpressive. Son of God? There was no God in my house, so I didn't get it. Same for the virgin birth—what was a virgin? The miracles were kind of neat, but at four, the laws of science had not yet crystalized my view of the world. Turning water into wine and raising the dead worked on about the same level as my mother, when, in her miraculous abundance, she would place dry noodles and cold sauce into an oven and transform it into a lasagna, or when the smooth, silent doors of the elevator closed by themselves, to open again to my father in his polo shirt and khakis, happy to see me. So when Aunt Eden said Jesus walked on water, it inspired the same sort of awe and wonder as saying Jesus rode in an elevator. The teachings also fell flat. Love your neighbors, be nice to each other—this was well and good, but we all did that anyway. It was like saying “ice cream is good.” Of course it was true, but why

did He need to say it? Aunt Eden reported these things as profound truths. I didn't understand, but Aunt Eden seemed happy to talk, so I kept quiet. I liked watching her smile as the breeze from the window floated her dark hair in a cloud around her head. For some reason, people didn't like this Jesus—this unexceptional, ordinary man—so they crucified him. I'd missed the point.

“What's *crucified*?” I asked, as if it were a new flavor of crayon.

“They held him on a cross and drove nails through his wrists and feet. They hung him until he died.” She downshifted into the slow lane as she said it, so she must have been distracted.

“*Wha?*” I said. Not a question, but air forced from my lungs. My spine went ridged as my muscles clenched. I squeezed my tiny fists, and the thick fabric of the seatbelt bit into my palms. The world whited out, and I tugged hard on the seatbelt, trying to tear it in half. Trying to rip it out of the seat.

“During a crucifixion, you die of suffocation,” Aunt Eden said, as if the world weren't evaporating in front of me. “You have to pull yourself up by the nails to breathe. After a while, you can't do it. You can't breathe and you die.”

I couldn't breathe. Did she think the scientific explanation would calm me down? Maybe she thought the suffering was pivotal, like she could spare no detail of The Truth. Or it could be that she was distracted by driving and forgot she was talking to a baby, but she kept talking. I guess to distance her new faith from the Catholic crucifixes of her childhood, she even threw in the bit about the nails going through the wrists and not the hands. If they went through the hands, the flesh would tear and Jesus would fall. My world was still white, and I couldn't see. My fists went numb, and something tingled across my scalp as if the top were being lifted off my head.

She realized she had skipped ahead in the story. She had forgotten Pontius Pilate and Barabbas. As she backtracked to the moments before the crucifixion, when the soldiers brought Christ before Pilate, shapes emerged through the whiteness and I saw the world again. The trees that had been full of joy looked unnatural in their leaves and the angles of their branches. I watched the telephone poles rush forward and hurtle past us, one after another, black and pitch stained against the too-blue sky. In an endless procession down the highway, as far as I could see, this unbroken stream of crosses stretched from far behind us out to the tiny, distant future. I let go of the seatbelt and pinched the fleshy part of each hand as hard as I could. I pinched my wrists in the space between the bones. I imagined those bones separating as a hammer struck the head of a nail. I felt flecks of bone splintering and flaking off as the nail bore through. I imagined a warm gush of blood bursting through the vein. Each telephone pole was a hammer strike, down on my little wrists. Who held the handle of that hammer? Who swung it down on the nail? While Pilate pleaded with the crowd to not execute an innocent man, while he washed his hands before the seething mob, my nerves turned to hot lead, and my mind rolled up and hardened into a question.

“*Who?*” The word felt hot and blood-soaked.

“What?” Aunt Eden sounded confused, like she was coming back from somewhere else. She must have forgotten I was there.

“*Who wanted him crucified? Who did it?*” Venom rose through my throat and leaked into the air.

“The crowd? They were Jewish people.” She hesitated before the word *Jewish*, like she wasn’t prepared for the question and realized mid-sentence she might be saying the wrong thing. I narrowed my eyes as fire blew through my lungs.

“I don’t like Jewish people!”

I said it with more honesty than I have said anything since. Aunt Eden panicked. Instead of delivering her tender nephew into the light of Christ, she had created a toddling neo-Nazi. What would my parents think?

“No, you shouldn’t,” she said, stumbling over her words, “you *must* not say that. It wasn’t all of them! Jesus was a Jew!” She looked from me to the road, no longer serene and glowing. She hit her brakes when traffic slowed, and seemed to collect herself a little. “Listen, you can’t hate Jewish people. It’s horrible to hate. There once was a man named Adolf Hitler.”

Aunt Eden told me about the Holocaust. All of it. I don’t know what was wrong with her. My anti-Semitic outburst must have thrown a switch in her circuitry—a switch embedded by documentaries, field trips, memoirs, movies, yellow roses, and names carved into stone—a switch that said *“Never Again. This Story Must Be Told.”* She told me about yellow stars and families herded into boxcars. People tattooed and separated. Emaciated and starving people. She carved it into me. I remember her saying, “when they went into the showers, instead of water,” and I somehow knew what was going to happen. I put my fingers in my ears and shouted no no no over and over, but it wouldn’t stop. I heard everything. They all died, and it was my fault. I was the one who hated Jews, and now they were dead. After the gas, after the ovens, I stopped protesting. I stopped crying. I went limp, like the blood had drained from my body. I lay slack with my head against the window, feeling the bass and treble hum and thu-thump of the tires as images washed over me. Piles of bodies already skeletons, with thin flesh stretched over bones. The walking skeletons, lurching toward their liberators. I stared at a white, wispy cloud. Its shape resembled nothing I had seen. The thu-thump stopped, but I didn’t move when Aunt Eden put the car in park and unbuckled my seatbelt.

“But he came back,” she said. “Three days later, Jesus rose from the dead. He forgave our sins. That’s why we’re here. For forgiveness.”

Forgiveness meant nothing. I didn’t move. She lifted me from across the bench seat. My limp arm dangled as she carried me through the parking lot.

*

Aunt Eden’s church was a giant dome in the center of a vast expanse of asphalt. The white walls tapered up to the roof, like a revivalist tent exalted and amplified by a hundred, a structure that dwarfed the parked cars and surrounding satellite buildings. The Easter crowd filled the parking lot and hurried in their nice clothes from their parked cars toward the massive glass doors of the church. Aunt Eden set me on the ground and led me by the hand. I floated across the asphalt, unaware of my feet or the ground beneath them. We walked through the towering doors along with everyone else and massed toward the tiered stadium seating. These alien people—suddenly closed and cryptic—bore down with sinister smiles and unnatural movements. I tried to imagine my mother, in all her warmth, moving and smiling like that. I couldn’t picture her, but how was she different? Through this swarm of bodies and faces we drifted across the white tile and red carpet, up some stairs to our seats on the balcony.

The nave was a teardrop amphitheater bathed in soft floescence. The sightlines converged on a stage adorned with potted ferns and ficus trees. On the wall behind the stage rose a flat gold cross, glowing in reflected stage light. A band with drums, guitars, and keyboards played off to the side of the stage, and words to the songs scrolled in man-sized letters across a colossal television screen which hung from the ceiling above the cross. Something about the place reminded me of a hospital. The clatter from the band refused to resolve into anything like music. The chords wouldn’t harmonize. Melodies of unrelated tones and disconnected rhythms

echoed in the dead air beneath the dome. The singer made sounds I couldn't hear as words, but people swayed, sang, and mumbled. One woman with orange hair and a blue dress stood with one hand on her heart and the other in the air. She moved her torso in slow rotations, one way then the other. Her lips moved without a sound.

The band stopped. A man stepped onto the distant stage, said some words, and the lights went dim. Red, yellow, and blue stage lights came up, giving the leaves of the potted plants an unreal, electric hue that vibrated on the screen. A man in a robe, with thick hair and a beard, stepped into the light. Aunt Eden said it was Jesus. He looked miniature on the stage, but he was huge on the television. Other men and women in robes joined him and began to speak and move. I realized what I was watching. The terror seemed to come from everywhere, drifting in through my skin, but something colored that terror with curiosity and anticipation. This was it. They were going to do it. They were going to crucify Jesus, and we had all come to watch it happen. We were the mob, the gathered masses, and we demanded it. My heart beat faster as the play progressed, and my hands tightened on the padded armrests. Pilate washed his hands again, this time wearing a gleaming silver helmet. The lights went red as Jesus emerged with his cross. The centurions laid him down and held him. The hammer struck at one wrist, then the other, and again at his feet. Each strike shot through me and stopped my heart. They hoisted him up, and Jesus moaned. I couldn't see much on the stage, but his anguished face filled the television. Seeing that face, the pain-wracked contortions, and hearing those breathless moans, cracked open my heart. My clenched muscles slacked, and out poured an unrestrained flood of empathy. I felt it for everyone—for the man on the cross, for Aunt Eden, for my mother and father, for all the strange faces of the world. These nails and this wooden cross, this helpless man in his suffering, it was the truth of the world. I loved him. I loved them all. My love and pity welled

into the world until the camera switched angles, and I saw the man holding onto two wooden pegs, standing on a wooden platform.

My heart closed again, and I pulled back to a faraway place. It wasn't real. What were those faces he made? How could he moan like that, when everything was fake? As my tide of empathy pulled away, I could no longer see him as human. He was like a robot, programmed to act a certain way. The same with all of them—the massed congregation—a lot of moving statues. The play ended. We stood and walked again through the throng, back to the car. I felt like I was watching myself, seeing an actor on a small and distant stage. Who was this strange thing of a boy, holding a hand I called Aunt Eden? Who was it that moved this body that didn't feel like me? We got into the car, seatbelt secured, and drove to Grandma and Grandpa's for the egg hunt.

*

The knotty, sprawling oak in my grandparent's front yard seemed to hide intentions, and the scent of mulch that lined the walk up to the door smelled of dank allure. Everything felt full of secrets as I approached the house with Aunt Eden, like I could open a hidden door to an underworld and slip inside. I still felt the familiar warmth of a visit to Grandma's buried somewhere, but those feelings didn't belong to me, like I could extract them to hold at arm's length. Aunt Eden looked the same as ever, the same weird joy like nothing had happened, as she opened the door to the clamor of conversations, children's screams, and laughter from the cousins, aunts, and uncles who filled the home. We were a big family, typically Catholic in that sense, and I didn't know how I could face the people who swarmed to the door to greet us. My father's big face, stubbled and smiling but somehow threatening, emerged from the swarm and looked down on me. He lifted me to his shoulder.

“How'd you like the play?” he asked, with a sly hint in his voice. I didn't say anything.

“He’s tired,” said Aunt Eden, “but he liked the play. Didn’t you, Peirce?”

I didn’t answer. My father carried me to the living room and set me down on the beige carpet, then returned to the dining room where the grownups talked around the table. I looked for my mother, but I wasn’t sure how I could face her, so I stayed in the living room. My cousins tried to play with me, but I didn’t respond. I drifted and tried to avoid everyone. I tried to hide behind the couch, but before I could get there, one of my cousins pulled me by the arm to a corner where she had set up a toy kitchen. Blue and orange plastic frying pans sat on top of plastic burners, and in them she flipped plastic bacon and plastic eggs. She handed me a yellow plate. With a toy spatula, she dished out the fake bacon and counterfeit eggs, sunny side up. I stared at them, not knowing what to do. I set the plate on the carpet and walked away. What good was a plastic breakfast when sometimes gas came from the showers, and sometimes the nails were real? I retreated to the hallway to be alone.

I saw it in the hallway, hanging halfway up the white lacquered wall. I must have passed it a hundred times. How did I not notice? There on the wall hung a polished wooden cross. Nailed to it hung a golden man. My stomach turned heavy and pulled me down to the floor along the opposite wall. Thorns circled his head, and his starved ribs stuck out above his flat stomach. The nails went through the hands. That was wrong. They were supposed to go through the wrists. I hated myself for knowing that, and could no longer look at the crucifix. I pressed the white tip of a coiled doorstop into the carpet and watched it spring back. This golden man had hung here all along, had watched me pass, and I hadn’t seen him.

A revelation hit like a jolt to the spine. I jerked my head up and stared hard at the golden Jesus. This *had* been here all along. Everyone passed it on their way inside. They saw it, and recognized it. *They all knew*. Each of them in the house, in the living room and the kitchen, my

grandparents, my parents—all of them knew *everything*. They knew about the hammering and the suffocation, the boxcars and the gas, the ovens, the walking skeletons. They knew about the long line of crosses down the highway and clouds that looked like nothing. They understood it all, but they went on laughing, joking, talking—playing at plastic stoves. I didn't understand how they could do it, but I had a theory. I peered around the corner to look at everyone. Their mouths moved. They made faces. They seemed sincere, but how could they be? I had found them out. I was the camera that had found a new angle. I could see the wooden pegs and the wooden platforms. They were acting. All of them. I didn't know why, but they were. I watched these people, felt amazed, and tried to imagine them moving through the world while keeping up the ruse. How did these aunts, uncles, and cousins do it? I was lost in awe. When my grandmother put her hand on my shoulder, I jumped.

“There you are,” she said. “We’ve been looking all over. The Easter egg hunt is starting. Let’s find you a basket.”

She picked me up and carried me to the kitchen, where she handed me a wicker basket filled with cellophane grass that glowed in the light. She ushered me through the dining room, out the back door. I didn't want to go, and I tried to pull away.

“Your cousins are starting,” she said. “Hurry.”

I pulled away again and tried to go back in the house. She stepped in front of me.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “Don’t you want Easter eggs? There’s candy.”

I didn't know what to say. How could I tell her what I had experienced? I couldn't explain that I was a camera, that I had found the wooden pegs. Her face looked hideous as she smiled through her makeup. Unable to speak, I went into the yard.

At first, I stood listless in the stiff crabgrass, not knowing what to do. An older cousin took me by the hand and led me, crunching through the grass, to an egg hidden between two flower pots by the patio. I picked it up and put it in my basket. Other cousins ran by laughing and pushed me to follow. Soon, I was part of the herd, running from one corner of the yard to another, finding eggs hidden by rocks, roots, and bushes. I had to play along. There was nothing to do but act the part. I even held up a well-hidden egg I'd found, and laughed in triumph. I didn't feel like laughing or celebrating, but people were watching, and I didn't know what else to do. I felt my mother watching from the patio, but I still couldn't look at her.

As the hunt wound down, and we scoured the yard for the last of the eggs, I noticed a flash of pink in a hedge at the corner of the fence. The egg sat far in the underbrush, so I had to lean in deep and reach. I got it with my fingertips and rolled it into my palm. As I lifted the egg, I felt the back of my palm knock something off a branch. It was light and dry, like cardboard, with a ticklish buzz. I pulled out my arm and found a red and black wasp clinging to the back of my hand. It didn't scare me. I looked closely at its segmented legs, the black thorax, black paper wings, and the red abdomen that pulsed with strange breathing. I watched the stinger sink into my skin, a little hole-punch. I can't remember if I somehow didn't feel the sting or if the pain didn't bother me, but I didn't move. I watched this amazing machine, enthralled by the mechanics. Another wasp landed next to the first, and then another on my arm. I felt one on top of my head, and another on my cheek. They all stung, over and over, but I didn't scream or move. More swarmed from the bush, and they tried to cover me. I heard a child scream from across the yard, and then more screams rushing toward me. Soon, my cousins surrounded me at a distance, afraid to get close.

Someone picked me up and ran across the yard. It was my mother. She stood me on a wide tree stump, grabbed a baseball cap from one of my cousins, and swatted. I could see the panic on her face, and I knew the wasps must be stinging her, but she kept up the wild swatting across my head, back, and arms. The frenzy of her love covered me with fury, and the button of the hat scratched my cheek, but she kept swatting in a crazed whirl, until finally she picked me up and held me to her cheek. I felt her tears on my face, her quick breath and heartbeat, and her arms squeezed me hard. I didn't understand.

When her breathing and heartbeat slowed, she set me down and stepped back to examine me. My aunts, uncles, and grandparents had joined my cousins, and everyone surrounded in a wide circle, some jumping and dodging the last of the wasps. Their eyes fixed me on the stump. I could feel their worry. I don't remember any pain from the stings, so I stood calm, as if nothing had happened. I dug my shoe into the spongy, rotting wood and felt all of those eyes looking at me, expecting something. When I didn't react, the crowd began to mumble, to ask each other what they should do. My mother took a half-step back, like something might be wrong. Grandma asked if she should call a doctor, and someone told her to wait. Aunt Eden moved her lips in silent prayer. I turned on my stump to see everyone, and they went quiet. I could feel the tension, the anticipation, as they waited for my suffering. I knew what they wanted. I let the tension build a little longer, felt it get taut like a thin sheet pulled in every direction, then I closed my eyes, threw my head back, and wailed. I stomped and shook my fists in the air. I screamed and screamed, as loud as my little lungs could, and that thin sheet tore as relief rippled through the circle. Everything was as it should be. I even cried wet tears, all of them false, as my mother picked me up and held me to her breast. As she carried me into the house to treat my stings, I kept moaning and screaming, playing to the crowd, numb to my mother's affection.

AIRPLANE JIM

I couldn't stand these fucking hotrods. I was stuck on South Congress on the #1, late to work, pissed and heartbroken, so of course the hotrod festival had to come to Austin. Muscle cars, racecars, weird cars—every type of dick on wheels money could dream had traffic at a standstill. They roared, sputtered, and squealed, belched fume from their huge, shimmering chrome engines, and went nowhere. People crowded the sidewalks—mostly attractive young people—out to see the cars. It was early summer, already hot, and the shining chrome made it hotter. I hated everything—the cars, the summer, the crowds. I hated the women in translucent sundresses. I hated the way those sundresses inflated and danced around their bodies in the breeze. I hated my job. I hated going to it. And most of all, I hated riding the bus. I didn't usually ride the bus. Melanie used to give me a ride to work, but not anymore. Last night she had informed me that we would no longer be seeing each other.

A bright yellow car with blue flames on the side spun its tires beneath its enormous fenders, sending out an abrasive squeal and a cloud of harsh white smoke. Inside the bus, I could taste the burnt rubber on the back of my tongue.

“Aw,” I said to the person sitting next to me, “his giant cock must have fallen down his pants and landed on the accelerator. I bet that happens to him all the time. Poor guy.”

I didn't mean to say that out loud, but I didn't care. The person sitting next to me was a middle-aged woman with tight curls. She wore a white dress shirt with embroidered patterns, buttoned to the neck. The woman stared straight ahead, with a blank, rigid expression—making a point not to acknowledge me.

“I'm sorry,” I said, “I didn't mean to say that out loud.”

Her lip stiffened. Now she was being rude.

“But you get what I mean, right? About the giant cock? That’s why these men do that. They all have dicks like you wouldn’t believe.”

Her rigid chin and lips resembled the face of a lizard frozen in the sunlight. I leaned a little closer.

“Every cock in every one of these cars is a thing of terror. You ought to check one out sometime.”

That did it. She snapped her head around to face me, just as the yellow car laid hard again on the accelerator. The intensity of her eyes knocked me back as her glare screamed through the smoke and burn of the power-braking yokel. I think she was about to tell me off, when a pink-skinned fat man sitting across the row lost his shit over the showboating hotrod. He jumped up and pressed against the window between us, and shouted in an ecstatic growl.

“Do it! Yea! Do it baby! *Burrrrrrrrrrrn!*”

The light turned green. The car shot ten feet across the intersection, then stopped with the rest of the traffic. The bus lurched forward, and the man’s flabby arm pressed against my face as he stumbled. The man stepped back and left some of his cold sweat on my cheek. The woman had moved to stand at the front of the bus, and I could feel her sharp glances whipping against me. I should have felt bad, but I didn’t. I was pissed about Melanie.

The thing of it was—I mean the Melanie thing—I didn’t see it coming. We’d gone out the day before—we went canoeing on the lake and then to a show—and had a good time. Not a hint that anything was wrong. She had to have made up her mind. How could she laugh and kiss me when she knew she was going to drop me the next day? Was I really that small? I guess we didn’t have the most thrilling relationship, but it had lasted two years. I thought we had a

comfortable thing going. Maybe I should have seen it coming. She had graduated from college four months ago and was starting a real job in graphic design. She expected things for herself. Dating a dishwasher could only last so long before real life took over. Melanie never said, but I should have known. And she was so goddamn cold, like it didn't bother her at all. That's what hurt. She acted like she'd been doing me a favor for these past two years, and expected my gratitude.

This was always how it went. College girls love their bohemian boyfriends while they're in school—they swear that your poverty and lack of career don't matter—but as soon as school's done they ditch out for something “more serious.” The kicker is, it doesn't go the other way. College boys hold on to their dishwashing, table-waiting bohemian girlfriends as part of some bullshit Prince Charming fantasy. These boys love to whisk in and sweep poor pretty girls up the economic ladder, to live happily ever etcetera, while we poor boys are left drinking dishwater. This wasn't my first pony ride, and maybe I had no right to expect any different with Melanie, but I had hoped that somehow things would be different. I was tired of being thrown away.

Of course she gave me the same old cut-and-paste bullshit about how she cared about me and valued what we shared, how she needed to move on, but—thank God!—we could still be friends. Being friends would be great. I couldn't wait to be friends. She even offered to keep giving me rides to work—what a friend. I told her to fuck herself. We wouldn't be friends, and I didn't want anything from her. I'd heard this record before, and the next song was about maturity and “being adults.” I didn't want maturity. Maturity meant she got everything she wanted and didn't have to feel bad, while I got to trail along like a puppy, begging for scraps of “friendship.” That was “being an adult.” Fuck adulthood, and fuck maturity. I would be a child if it got

Melanie out of my life, if it showed her she couldn't have everything. I would be a child and ride the bus.

I got to work twenty minutes late, but everybody saw what kind of a mood I was in, so nobody gave me shit. Work was a small café with outdoor seating and a tiny kitchen. We were all on top of each other, and if one person was having a bad day, it was a bad day for everyone. I was a pain in the ass, and hearing those growling metal cocks from the festival rumble by all day didn't help. The cooks gave me as wide a berth as they could in the small space, as I stomped and banged the metal pans as loud as I could in the dish basin. Nobody had any fun, and I didn't care. Like I said, fuck maturity. The one bright spot was when Marcus, the barista, came into the kitchen.

“What's with the dark and stormy, Mattie?” he said.

“Melanie dumped me last night.”

“I'm sorry,” he said, massaging my shoulders. “You know you'll always be first with me, babe.”

That made me smile. I wished I had a master switch that I could flip from hetero to homo. That would fix all of this bullshit with Melanie and girls and everything. If only. The shift wore on, and I scrubbed away at the scraps and waste left by these rich gear-heads, but by closing time I was far behind on my dishes and cleaning. Marcus offered to give me a ride, but I had at least an hour to go and I didn't want to make him wait. It was a quarter after one when I called a cab. Since it was the weekend, and there was a festival in town, it would be an hour before they could get a car out to me. Fuck you, Melanie. I grabbed a beer from the cooler, locked up, and sat down at one of the patio tables. The night had cooled, with a clear sky and a big moon. It was nice to find a moment without the rumbling of engines and the crowds and the hustling and the

banging. I took a deep breath to hold in the wet, dark scent from the tall hedge that ran along the patio, and my heart emptied a little as I sipped my beer.

I heard a rustle from behind the hedge. Another rustle, and the bushes moved. If it was an animal, it had to be something big. The bushes rustled and moved again, and from behind the hedge emerged a white straw hat, its brim toward ground. Behind the hat was a pair of lanky arms that ended in long, crooked fingers. And then a hunched back, and long legs with bent knees, squatting. The fingers grasped a discarded cigarette butt. The man stood and placed the butt between his lips. He didn't seem surprised to see me. In fact, he acted like he knew me, like I was the man he'd been expecting.

"Well hello there!" he said, with a slight twang and a cracked voice, "You wouldn't happen to have a light, would you?"

I did, and he thanked me. The flame brushed the tip of his nose as he lit the short stub of tobacco.

"So what are you doing out here?" he asked.

I explained that I had just closed the shop and was waiting for a cab.

"Good." he said, as he sat down at the table. "Me and you can have some conversation."

He opened a small pouch he wore on his belt, and pulled out a Sprite bottle filled with brown liquid. I'd finally found a breath of peace, and now I'd have to end the day with an hour long conversation with some drunk from the bushes. He offered me a sip from the bottle. I refused.

"I've been wandering around, looking at all them cars," he said. "Love them hotrods. This one fella gave me a lift in this sweet souped-up Bel Air. It was *nice*. Done to the nines! Best thing of it was, he made his bitch sit in the back! 'Bitch, get in the back!' That's what I'm talking

about! Love seeing them cars and them women. See them flimsy dresses? Goddamn! Course, once I dick ‘em, they fall in love.”

His nose was smashed and crooked, like it had been broken. Deep wrinkles fed into each eye, and bushy eyebrows hung low over his lids. He had a few sores and splotches of dead skin on his forehead beneath the brim of his hat. All that, along with the cracked lips and toothless grin—I could see how they would fall in love, once he dicked ‘em.

“I guess I don’t have your dick,” I said. “My woman left me.” I liked to counter bravado with self-effacement. It usually shut down machismo assholes so I didn’t have to listen to bullshit, but this guy kept on.

“That don’t matter,” he said, like he wanted a protégé, “You got to treat them like shit. Treat a bitch like shit and she won’t leave you alone. I’ll make a bitch sleep on the floor. Let her up in the bed when it’s time to fuck, and then ‘back on the floor, bitch.’ They fall in love. Can’t help it, but I ain’t got time for that shit. I just want to fuck. It’s ‘spread them pussy lips, fuck fuck fuck, then get the fuck out.’ Back when I was good-looking and had a whole lot of money. Used to be a pilot. American Airlines, eighteen years. They call me Airplane Jim.”

Jim rummaged through his pouch, dug out a laminated card, and handed it to me. It was an old pilot’s license. The man in the picture was much younger. Though time had not treated him well, it was unmistakably him. He was clean-cut, with clear eyes and a well-drawn, square jawline. He looked commanding in his pilot’s uniform. In his youth, Jim had been a good looking man. I felt a little sorry for him.

“And let me tell you,” he said, “I was sent there to fuck up that airport.” Jim went on about his adventures, flying from city to city, and all the degrading things he’d do to women. He said it like it was advice to me, like when Jim was having an affair with a woman and her

eighteen year old daughter without either knowing. When the woman wanted to leave her husband for him, he gave the woman a Polaroid of her daughter with his dick in her mouth. Or how he'd coerce stewardesses into sex in the bathroom during flights and rip their pantyhose so they would have to work the rest of the flight with no underwear. He even talked about his "pussy alarm clock," how he would stick his thumb "up there" with a woman he liked while she slept, so if she tried to leave, he'd know. It was fucked up, but I liked hearing fucked up shit, and with the state I was in because of Melonie, Jim was cathartic. Maybe I should have done more to put Melonie in her place, make her respect me. Refusing her offer of rides and puppy-dog friendship was the only time I had stood up to her. When you date someone more rich and entitled, you always feel like you're their toy or experiment. Always back on your heels. "All that changed a while back," Jim finished up. "They caught me with a bottle in cockpit. Some bitch reported me."

His mood darkened. He had downed half the Sprite bottle while bragging about his exploits, and the booze was hitting him. He asked me for a cigarette, and I gave him one.

"Thanks, friend," he said. "You're all right. You help me out, and I'll remember that. People who help me out, I help them out. People who cross me—say, you know what you really don't want to cross? A chimpanzee. A chimp will rip your arm off just as easy as shaking your hand. You piss off a chimp and, boy, you're done for! They go for the face first, and then they rip you apart, limb for limb. By the time that chimp gets done with you, you'll have one arm over here, a leg over there, half your ass over on that rock, and your penis hanging from a tree. I always got along with them chimpanzees, fortunately. Say, I didn't tell you about Tyrone! But I'm sure you're tired of listening to me."

I didn't know why he suddenly cared about whether or not I wanted to hear him, but this weird, dark monkey turn, with the tree penises and all, had me hooked. I was already looking forward to telling people about this crazy guy I'd met—I had been working on the impression in my head—and I wanted more material. I asked him about Tyrone.

“Tyrone was my best friend. Probably the only real friend I ever had. I this one stu in Houston took me to this chimpanzee habitat. I loved seeing them chimps roping around, hopping all over the place. Dropped the bitch once I fucked her, but I kept going back to see them chimps. This one, he'd get so excited about me. I'd walk up, and he'd start jumping and hollering and making noise. That was Tyrone.”

Jim's face spread into a gummy grin.

“I gave a lot of money to that place. Shit, why not? I was making enough. They let me get back there with him, showed me how to handle him, even let me take him out and around when I was in town. They even let me name him! Well, Tyrone picked his own name, but I helped. I put down a bunch of cards with Jamal, Cedric, Tyrell, all those. Said them out loud and he didn't do nothing, but when I put down that one card, Tyrone, he put his finger right on it and started hollering! Me and Tyrone, tooling around! We understood each other, naturally. That ape had a nose for pussy, too!”

Jim lit up talking about his adventures with Tyrone, like a seven year old cousin talking about the stegosaurus. Everything about that ape excited him—the way he ate, the way his lips curled back in a chimp-laugh, how he interacted with folks at the bar when they'd go out. He told me about all the pussy he'd pull from women wanting to pet the monkey. He told me about how once, drunk as shit, he gave Tyrone the controls of a two-seater propeller plane. “Shit, he can't do this! Should of seen that plane jerk!” I didn't know how much of it was true, but I didn't care.

If everything in my life went wrong from now to the end—and I had no reason to believe anything would go right—I could always be this guy as a fall back, some drunk dude who wanders around bullshitting. Melonie had made me feel like garbage. What if I quit trying for all of that, college girls and shit, and embraced it, became this garbage person? I could make up shit about being a ship's captain with a wombat, drink shitty whisky, and sleep wherever. Add character to the neighborhood. Rock bottom didn't seem so low. How far could anyone sink? Although he was getting more drunk and harder to understand, I forgot about Melonie and gave myself over to Jim's story, let myself believe it, because someday I might need to be believed.

“But the best thing about Tyrone is that he kept me out of trouble. I've got a hot temper, you know. It don't take much to set me off. But the thing was, if I was out with Tyrone, and I started getting all pissed and worked up because someone looked at me the wrong way or whatever, Tyrone would start getting all worked up, too. He'd start jumping and squealing, showing his teeth. That's when I knew I had to cool it. If Tyrone went off, he's liable to tear someone's head off. I had to keep myself in check. He was good for me.”

Jim sat for a moment, swaying in his chair and looking around. He was very drunk. His eyes wandered, looking at something lost in a cloud above me. His head drifted as he spoke.

“There was this one time.”

His voice was weak, coming from a distant place, and it broke. He caught himself, and stopped. A look of confusion, as if something were rolling around in his mind, looking for a place to stick. Some resolution must have passed. His eyes went hard, and he sat up tall and stern. With a calm, even breath, he began again.

“There was this one time,” The twang had left his voice. “This bitch had fucked me over. This cunt. I lost my job because of her. I lost a lot of things. Everything. Because of this cunt. She fucked me. She hurt me bad. You don’t do that. You don’t fuck me.”

He brought his hand down on the table with a thud, like a judge leveling a sentence. Even though we were outside, I felt claustrophobic.

“I made a plan. I invited her over to settle things. Told her she owed me at least that. She didn’t want to come, but I convinced her. Told her we had a few things to settle. She should come over, then she wouldn’t hear from me again. I convinced her.

“Now, this bitch, I knew how to push her buttons. She had a temper, and I knew how to get her mad. I had Tyrone hide in the closet. She showed up, and I started pushing those buttons, doing everything I could to piss her off. She started yelling and screaming, making all kinds of threats, and I yelled and screamed back at her. I kept egging her on, doing everything I could to get under her skin. She’d get up in my face and start snapping at me, like she wanted to bite my nose off, and I’d snap right back. It got real loud in there.

“I heard Tyrone in the closet. Getting excited, screeching and banging on the door. I started stomping around the room, hitting the walls, kicking and breaking things, while she chased me around. She had to yell loud over the noise Tyrone was making. He was in a frenzy.

“I turned and squared up to her, like I was going to hit her. That did it. She got up in my face, saying things like ‘what, you going to hit me, Jim? You just do it! I’ll have you put away!’ But I didn’t raise my hand. I just kept walking toward her, moving her back. She wanted me to do it, wanted to have me arrested. Bitch kept shoving me and talking shit, trying to get me to snap, but I kept walking forward, moving her back by that closet. We got right back by that door. It sounded like Tyrone was ready to kill himself, tearing shit apart. She shoved me, then squared

right up to me, saying ‘what you going to do, Jim? You a big man? Want to hit a woman? Try it, and see what happens! Come on! Let’s see what a big man you are, Jim! Do it!’

“I opened the door.”

Jim took a drink. He lit a cigarette from the pack on the table. Through his story, his voice didn’t waver. He kept the same low, cold tone. His glare fixed my eyes, and I wished I could look away.

“It was fast. It happened real fast. Just a big tangle of arms and hair. Screams. The bitch was on the floor, her elbow bent back the wrong way. I saw Tyrone get at her face with his teeth. There was one spurt of blood. Just one, and not even a lot of blood, but it came out hard. Like a spray from a sprinkler. I’ve never seen anything like it. I saw that blood, and knew I had to go. I left, shut the door behind me and locked it. I stood out there for a minute, listening to her scream, and then I got the fuck out of Houston. Never been back.

“I don’t know if Tyrone killed her or not, but if that bitch is still alive she probably needs about four wheelchairs to haul around the parts of her!”

His voice rose to an apocalyptic timbre as he brought both hands down on the table. He didn’t move. I couldn’t breathe. Nothing about him betrayed any remorse. His lips pursed into the righteous scowl of a southern preacher assuring the congregation that God’s will had been done. I tried hard to look away, but I couldn’t.

His eyes softened to the dim glow they’d had before. He let out a long sigh as his shoulders sloped, and he sank back into his chair. With a soft smile he contemplated his hands, which now rested on his navel.

“I guess now you know my secret.” He said, still looking at his hands. His voice cracked, and the twang returned. “I guess I ain’t never told no one all that.”

He looked down at his feet, and then gazed off at something on the ground. His head rolled back, his face soft and pleading.

“Please don’t tell anyone. I think they probably still want to talk to me about all that, down in Houston.”

My eyelids felt heavy and wanted to close. I looked at a potted cactus and said nothing. His fingers brushed against my wrist with a timid, gentle touch, as though he were afraid. He almost started as I looked back up at him. He leaned over the table, and mouthed the word “please.”

Against my will, my head nodded. The corners of his mouth turned up as he nodded back. He hunched on his elbows and fiddled with his bottle. I was tired and wanted to go home.

“I sure do miss Tyrone.” He said. “I wonder how he’s doing. All that was a while ago, he must be pretty old by now.”

If what he said was true, the chimp would have been put down. I didn’t tell him that.

“Yep. He must be an old man by now. Them chimps, they don’t live as long as people. He may even have passed on. I hope not. If I found that out, I think I would cry.”

A tear welled up in his eye. He choked back a sob, like a pitiful, bleating hiccup. The cab arrived, and I left him bleating and hiccupping.

*

I didn’t sleep that night. Every time I drifted off, I would see that spurt of blood. There was a white room, full of light. A fine, red mist sprayed from somewhere. One by one, the tiny globules alighted in delicate, crimson patterns on the wall. When blood had almost covered the wall, I would jerk awake. So it went all night.

*

I saw Airplane Jim again the next day. I was working the afternoon shift when I overheard Marcus complain to one of the cooks.

“...he hasn’t bought anything, and he’s just sitting there, obviously drunk. He keeps leering at women and making people uncomfortable. It’s too early to deal with this.”

I stopped him, and asked, “Is he wearing a straw hat?”

“Friend of yours?”

“He was up here last night after you left. I’ll deal with him.”

I walked outside to find Jim, sitting back and smiling, drinking from the same plastic bottle. He waved as I approached the table.

“How you doing, friend? Beautiful day isn’t it? I love that sunshine,” he said. “Have you got a cigarette?”

“Sure.” I gave him a cigarette. “But listen, Jim. You can’t be here.” He looked worried. “It’s just that you haven’t bought anything, and you’re drinking. If the inspector comes, we could get in a lot of trouble. They could shut us down.”

“It’s just that,” he said with relief. “Of course. That’s no problem. I’ll just see myself out.”

As he stood he leaned in close and whispered,

“Are we cool?”

“What was her name?” I whispered back. His eyes hardened into that angry scowl.

“You thinking about reporting me?”

“No. Make up a name. I don’t care.”

“Diane,” he said, sounding confused. His face softened.

“We’re cool,” I said. He nodded and left. I pictured her as the woman from the bus. She needed to have a name.

I saw him again several days later. It was early evening, and I was walking to the bus stop. Jim and some other bum were having an argument a block and a half ahead of me. Jim screamed and flailed his arms. I hurried to turn onto a side street before he saw me. As I turned the corner, Jim shoved the man hard in the chest.

*

I felt I should reconcile with Melanie. I thought, even if we weren’t best friends, we could at least not be enemies. We had to form an alliance against the forces of darkness. If nothing else, I hoped her offer to give me rides to work still stood. I didn’t want to risk running into Jim on the street. He thought we were buddies. I didn’t need him reaffirming our strange, secret monkey bond. I asked Melanie to meet for coffee.

I arrived first at the coffee shop, the one down the street from where I worked. I found a table on the small patio and smoked a cigarette while I swirled my espresso, watching the patterns that formed in the crème. She came soon after. I felt my chest cave in as I watched her approach the table, with her erect posture and superior, mocking grin. I could tell she was trying to appear casual and friendly, but the ruse wasn’t holding. I braced myself as she sat. We talked, and the conversation felt like rubbing a pumice stone against a brick wall. She was *so glad* that I had come around and that we could handle this like adults. I bit the inside of my cheek and held it between my molars. I apologized for my outburst before, and suggested we make a go at this friendship thing. She gave me a “sorry you feel” apology without admitting that she had done anything wrong. I wanted to say something, but I couldn’t. The part of me capable of argument had been amputated. I felt smaller than ever, but she agreed to give me rides to work.

I never got comfortable with the arrangement. We didn't speak much on the trips. She had a new gold Camry, a graduation present from her family, of course. I was stain on the beige upholstery, and my dingy work clothes offended the new car smell. When she played my favorite bands on the stereo, it felt like she was mocking me. I felt more out of place than I ever had with her, but still, I needed to be in that car. I stared out the window on those trips, watching for Jim.

*

I saw him one other time. I looked up while bussing a table at the café. Jim stood in the parking lot across the street. He noticed me before I could look away, so I had to acknowledge him. He smiled his gummy grin, bowed his legs, and squatted. Then he spread his lanky arms out to his sides and arched them in towards his torso. He bounced up and down a few times while his fingers scratched at his armpits in a monkey dance. Then he stood up, turned, and walked away, smiling in the sunlight.

WAY TO GO, EILEEN

Talking to Conrad left Barbara in a knot. What was wrong with her? A ten minute conversation about their son needing money shouldn't leave her [insides so twisted]. The sound of his voice stuck like a sand spur in her heart, and she knew she would feel it all weekend if something didn't happen. She needed the musk of bodies packed close and sticky in a hot room, and a whiff of wild emotion to untie her. She needed the donkey show. She would invite her sister Anette when they met for cards later. Anette had been stressed over work. A donkey show would do her good. They would have to be careful not to tell Eileen, or she would try to tag along. Eileen ruined everything.

Eileen began hosting Thursday night Pinochle after Anette's youngest left for college, ostensibly to help her sisters cope with their empty nests. Barbara saw it as a forum for Eileen's childless need and passive aggressive superiority. She and Anette only went to prevent Eileen from visiting their homes.

"Conrad called today."

"Jesus, he needs to quit doing that. How are you hanging?"

"I'm worked up. I shouldn't let him get to me like this, you know? I feel stupid."

"You're not stupid. He's a jerk who mistreated you. You're going to feel it."

"Yes, I know. But still..." Barbara's eyes sparked as she leaned closer. "Hey, want to go to the donkey show tomorrow night?"

Anette perked up and said too loudly, "I love the donkey show!"

"What donkey show?" said Eileen, standing in the doorway. Barbara and Anette traded eyes. Anette spoke up.

“It’s not even a real donkey show. The place isn’t dirty or anything like you want it to be. They keep it real clean.”

“It’s more like a lame drag show,” said Barbara, grabbing her cue. “They have two guys in a donkey suit, and the performer is usually a man in drag. There’s not any real sex or bestiality or anything.”

“College students go, so you know it can’t be good,” said Annette. “I have to go for a work thing. Barbara’s being the sacrificial goat and coming with me so I don’t lose my mind.”

“It’s like vegan food,” said Barbara. “It makes you want the real thing even more. You probably don’t want to come.”

“It does sound pretty bad,” said Eileen.

“It won’t be a good time at all,” said Annette.

“I don’t want to go. I’m only doing it for Annette,” said Barbara.

Eileen nodded as she sat down at the coffee table and gathered the deck of cards. She began to shuffle. She paused to look up at her sisters.

“It does sound pretty bad,” she said, “but it would be nice to spend some time with you two outside of the house. We never get out, or do anything together. I’ll come.”

Barbara and Annette got out and did plenty together. Barbara suspected Eileen knew this. Eileen would have to come along. And the place they were going was *dirty*. The show happened in a windowless shack on the outskirts, where the patrons pressed in so tight the body heat could pull you under. The thick air reeked of sweat, piss and donkey balls. There was danger in the way the donkey thrashed around in the crowd when it became aroused, and in that danger some people became violent. You couldn’t leave the donkey show without a few bruises and a layer of dirt stuck to the sweat on your skin. And the performer, a girl from up north named Katlyn, knew

how to go to town on that thrusting hunk of donkey cock. She took it all inside her, and she loved it. It was a *good* donkey show. Eileen would see this, and know she had been deceived. She would spend the night systematically dismantling and destroying all of the fun. Barbara knew she wouldn't have a good time, and she would leave still twisted up over Conrad. Way to ruin the donkey show, Eileen. Way to go.

MOTEL HALLWAY

My mother burned down my apartment about a year after I moved to Austin, a couple of months after Andrew moved in. It had been a good year. I'd moved from San Antonio where I'd been stuck dealing with some crazy family shit—addictions, suicides, all that fun. That kind of family's a sinkhole. Every time I thought I'd scrambled my way out and could make a getaway, my brother would get arrested and need bail, or my sister would eat a bottle of Tylenol, and I'd feel the dirt slide away and the earth would suck me down. Mom was the worst. Every time we had her situated—and by *we* I mean me, since I'm the least crazy—whenever we got her sober and set up with a job and an apartment and thought we could get on with our lives, she would fall off the wagon and spread her suicidal mess all over the place. She'd been sexually abused as a child—had a rough life all around—but her mess was getting to me. With my crackhead dad living off of some crazy chick in Amarillo, there was no one else to take care of things. That shit wore me down, and I could see myself becoming a twenty-four year old burn out. I'd seen bad situations turn friends into people you can't stand. Not for me, so as soon as Mom found a retail job and was paying rent on her own, I went to Austin to “visit friends” and never went back. The move to Austin was a way to pull the rip cord and avoid splattering into a jaded asshole-shaped stain on the pavement. Of course, she blew the job and the apartment, and I did have to tough through the guilt for not being there, but I'd decided she wouldn't be my problem. She couldn't take my soul. After bouncing around and fucking up my brother and sister's lives, she took a resort job in Big Bend. I was free to live.

Austin dug me, like the city had been waiting dreamy-eyed for a handsome guy like me to say hello. Within a couple of weeks I had a job cooking at a hip-late night diner that paid more than I'd ever made, and I signed the lease on a one bedroom. It was off East Riverside in the

barrio—big, with a huge closet—and I could afford it with cash to spare. Another thing about Austin—as soon as you became a resident, the city sent you an official notice in the mail telling you which bands you were in and what instruments you played. Not really, but pretty much. I played guitar in Weird Beard, clarinet in a noise deal called Thrown Amps (you can make ears bleed with a clarinet), and drums for The Whiskey Poodles. Nothing serious, but fun as hell, and it felt good to see people excited and moving to my weird sounds. So lots of friends, cool job, great place, and I got to be a rock star, all easy, like it was given to me. For the first time, my life was mine, like without anyone fucking me up, *life* was a thing I could do. I wondered if *future* was something I could do. I'd always been into history, so I thought I'd move into a cheaper place and enroll at ACC, maybe try to be a teacher or whatever you do with that. Mom changed those plans.

Blame it on timing. She called at one in the afternoon. I'd worked the overnight shift, so one in the afternoon was the same as three in the morning to a normal person. Who could wake up from stone sleep and make solid decisions at three in the morning? I think it was a Sunday, and Saturday nights were rough at work, with the bar crowd and all. I'd got home at eight, too tired to shower, so I was asleep, happy and dirty, covered in kitchen scum when the phone rang. I didn't know what was making that sound. I think I was having a hospital dream, and the phone sounded like an ambulance. I shambled over in bed and picked it up, and as I did I thought I shouldn't answer. Anyone I'd want to talk to knew my schedule. I wedged the phone between my head and the pillow and mumbled something.

“Ethan?” said the voice, in that pleading tone that triggered my acid reflux and made my shoulders tense. My eyes opened. My big bedroom felt small, and I considered jumping out the window. It was my mother, and she sounded drunk. I could almost smell her breath through the

phone. I didn't say anything, like if I stayed very still, the predator might overlook me and move on to other prey.

"Ethan? Hello?" she said, "Are you all right? Say something, please."

I knew it had to be bad. When there was a disaster with her, she acted like there was a disaster with everyone, like she felt justified making others deal with her shit if we're all in it together. I tried to prepare myself, to get sharp, ready to deflect whatever it was she wanted, but my thoughts were mushy with sleep. She kept asking if I was all right, if she needed to call someone, get the police to check on me. I couldn't think.

"I'm fine," I said.

"Are you sure?"

"No."

"Do you need me to call someone?" she asked. I don't know why she always wanted to call someone. Maybe she thought calling the authorities legitimized her disaster, like getting the Mayor to declare a state of emergency.

"Don't call anyone," I said. I heard her long, slow breaths, her smoker's rattle. I tried to prepare myself for what she was about to ask, but I could only imagine the smell of her breath—that warm, stale sourness I had feared since I was a kid.

"Ethan, I have nowhere to go." I knew this was coming, but hearing her say it made my rib cage tighten, like my body was closing in. It was the feeling of the lifetime of abuse she'd suffered being dumped onto me. I thought about the window again. How badly would I be hurt if I jumped from the second story? She couldn't ruin my life if I were in a coma. But she'd probably stand by my side to nurse me back to health, then use that as leverage to manipulate me. I had to stay strong.

“You have somewhere to go,” I said.

“Thank you!”

“No, not here! I mean the world, it’s big.”

“There’s nowhere else,” she said.

“It’s full of places, the world,” I said. “You can go to a lot of them.”

“I have no one,” she said. It was true enough. Her sisters had cut her off years ago, and her other two children had their own train wrecks, but there had to be something else, some other resource she hadn’t strip-mined.

“I know you’ve had it rough,” I said, and I did feel for her, “But I’m moving out in a few months. I want to go to school.”

“I’m sorry. I have no choice,” she said. The remorse sounded genuine.

“Not the VA? A shelter?”

“No.”

I knew there must be a solution. I could sense it floating around somewhere in my heavy head, the perfect thing to say, the right suggestion to divert her trajectory and send her away from me, but my mind was groggy. I couldn’t find it. I thought about hanging up and going back to sleep without answering, like nothing had happened, but she might call the police to check on me, and I had left my bong on the coffee table. I gave in, but with conditions.

“One month,” I said. “You have one month to get a job and find a place. No bullshit. I’ve got plans, and you’re not fucking them up.”

“Don’t change your plans for me,” she said, sounding more annoyed than grateful. “I’ll be out in a month, I promise. Thank you. I’ll be there in a week.”

She had already bought the bus ticket.

I spent the week before her arrival pacing around the apartment, looking at my furniture, the artwork on the walls, my big bed and my bookshelves, the life I'd built with the year of freedom that I'd had, trying to live in my space before it became her space. I couldn't sit still, and wasn't sleeping. Sleep was already rough working nights. I started treating people badly at work, blowing up at every little thing, and there are a lot of little things in a kitchen. When a week passed and she didn't show, I started to wonder if I was crazy, if I'd dreamt the whole conversation.

She arrived after a week and a half, her hair a tangled nest with an inch of gray at the roots below the dye job, and a glazed expression on her face. After hovering in the doorway and looking confused, she drifted into the living room, put her arms around me, and started crying. Between sobs, she told me she had been arrested at a bus station in New Mexico, where the cops found her passed out drunk. She swore it was because of her medication and not the pint of vodka they found in her purse. She was going to sue. "They made a spectacle of me," she said, with an edge in her voice, "but wait until I find a lawyer. They'll see." As she cried and told her story, I wondered what kind of person I was to feel so unmoved by my mother's tears, and then I wondered if that's why I never related to country music. She let go of me and rambled on about lawyers and shitty cops as she sat on the couch, took a large plastic flask from her purse, and drank. She soon fell asleep with the open flask in her hand. I took the flask and closed the lid so it wouldn't spill, and covered her in a blanket from my room. Seeing this lump under the blanket, rising and falling with her breath, made me feel like I was eleven years old, coming home from school, frightened and powerless. She would be on her feet in a month. Sure.

The way Mom drank, it was constant, like she was never really asleep or awake. She got a monthly check from social security or veterans' or something, so she always had vodka money.

She'd rouse herself, mix vodka with ice tea and sip it until she dozed off, and kept that going, all the time, day and night. She wouldn't eat unless you put food in front of her, and even then, she would pick at it and leave half. You couldn't talk to her about anything—she would pass out and forget the conversation. I couldn't find peace, or feel comfortable in my home. As soon as I thought she was really asleep and I could relax, her head would jerk with a bobble, her lips in a drunken pucker, and she would start rambling the same stories about the navy or growing up in Nebraska that I'd heard since I was a kid. And always, about the abuse. The situation erased the progress I'd made over the past year. It knocked me straight back to that angry, helpless spot.

At first, I avoided her and avoided my apartment. I tried hanging out at friends' houses, but I wasn't much fun, so to avoid annoying people I hung out in bars. There isn't anywhere else to go at night. As the month wore on and she hadn't done anything, and I was drinking too much, I started setting ultimatums. That's when the fights started. I tried to be reasonable. I told her that, while she didn't have to be out in a month, she needed to get sober and at least have a job. That sparked outrage, and she came at me with the manipulative force of someone who doesn't care if she dies.

She glared at me, and asked in a cool, even voice, "Do you have a gun?"

"Why would I have a gun?" I asked. I knew how this game went.

"Answer the question. Do you have a gun?" I didn't want to answer. I already knew I was beat.

"No," I said, following the script, "I don't have a gun. Why do you ask?"

"Because I feel like killing myself."

With or without a gun, if I pressed the issue, I knew she would. There was nothing I could do. Things got nasty after that. I would yell at her, tell her stop draining me, to let me live,

and she would say I reminded her of my father, which hurt, because dad was an asshole. Other times I would wrench the bottle away from her and throw it in the dumpster. She would scream, hit my chest with her bony wrists, and claw halfway into the dumpster to retrieve the bottle. I gave up. I would get home, walk through the living room without looking at her, and hole myself up in my room. I was angry all the time. My friends and bandmates got tired of me and stopped hanging out. I had resolved myself to bitterness, thought it was a fate I couldn't avoid, when I got another phone call.

It was Andrew, a friend from high school who'd moved to Dallas with his parents. I hadn't seen him in years, but I remember him as a fun guy you could trust with secrets. He said he was sick of Dallas, and wanted to start again in Austin. He asked if I, or anyone I knew, could use a roommate. I had an idea.

"I do have a living situation," I said, feeling guilty before I made the suggestion, "but you probably don't want it."

"Tell me," he said, "I like adventures."

"It's Mom," I said.

"The Mom who was so drunk she didn't notice we stole her cigarettes?" he asked.

"That's the Mom," I said. "She's on my couch. She drinks. She kills herself."

"Staying true. That's good."

"I want her out. Here's your job, if you want it. You probably don't, but you could move in here and help me pressure her. Make her uncomfortable and help get her out. When the lease is up in a couple of months, you and I could get a two bedroom." I felt terrible asking, but I was desperate.

“Sure,” said Andrew, without taking a minute of thought, “I can do that.” Dallas must have been pretty lame.

“You should think about it,” I said. “If you come down here, you’re going to be in on some nasty shit. Heavy shit that doesn’t involve you.”

“That’s fine,” he said, “I’ve got your back.” He said it with a subversive flair, like he was getting a kick out of the strangeness of the situation. We made some logistical plans, and it was settled, simple as that. What a cool guy. As I hung up the phone, I wondered what was wrong with me.

Andrew came down later that week with nothing but a duffle bag. I got him an air mattress, and we made a little room for him in the closet, which lent itself to all the predictable jokes. I would tell him how brave he was, finding the courage to come out of the closet every day, and he would tell me I ought to be ashamed of myself for keeping a gay man in the closet. He found a job waiting tables at a TGI Friday’s, and pulled his share on rent and bills, but more than that, I had an ally, someone to share my struggle and put up a united front against Mom. She would go on about killing herself or some shit, and Andrew would quip back with something like, “You’re killing me with your drunk mess. The same stories, get a job.”

She hated him. The plan was working. Once, when Andrew was out, she leaned forward on the couch and said in her usual slur, “You queer?”

“Why,” I asked.

“He’s queer.” Her mouth hung open, like she was more confused than offended.

“He is,” I said.

“He’s queer. He sleeps in your room,” she said, as if it were a cosmic mystery. “So you queer?”

“If I was, would it make you uncomfortable?” I asked. I was enjoying the edge I had, “because if you’re uncomfortable, I could be. Would you have a problem sleeping on a fag couch? I’ll fuck a man, if that’s what it takes.”

She didn’t have anything to say, and you could say things like that because she never remembered, but we were chipping away at her. At this rate, I could see us making it unbearable and her leaving for somewhere, anywhere, by the time the lease was up. We’d talked to the apartment manager about a two bedroom, and it looked like I’d be able to afford college after all. Moreover, having someone to relate to at home brought me out of my funk. I was fun again, and people were happy to see me. The City even assigned Andrew to play in a couple of my bands, and we had a great time. Things were still tense in the living room, but I felt a spark of optimism.

It a Thursday at around noon when Mom passed out drunk with a lit candle and set the couch on fire. I woke up to heat and crackle from the living room. When I opened the bedroom door, a cloud of smoke bellowed in and spread across the ceiling, and a burnt tire stench blew me back. I somehow thought to grab my wallet from my jeans on the floor, but I don’t remember feeling or thinking anything, only the tire smell closing my throat as the air left the room. I plunged through the smoke with a flash of heat and sizzle of singed hair, into the clearer air near the front door. My shirt felt hot on my skin, like I had put it on from the drier. As I patted myself to make sure I wasn’t burning, I saw Mom, unmoving and ghost-eyed, standing in front of the couch with a broom in her hand, staring at the flames as they spread up the wall and licked the ceiling. A minute later and I would have been trapped. She hadn’t called out or tried to save me. I couldn’t find the extinguisher, so I grabbed Mom by the shoulders and led her out the door and down the stairs. The flames trailed after us down the breezeway and spread to other apartments.

Alarms went off, and people rushed out, but Mom was inert, like if I didn't guide her she would stop and burn to death. She still held the broom with both hands.

I walked her out to the dusty courtyard, where other residents were gathering. They were poor, mostly Latino migrants. I felt nothing as panicked Spanish fluttered around me, and we watched our homes burn. I heard sirens as the trucks arrived. Everything seemed far away, like I was in a theater, watching events unfold on a stage. Glass exploded as my bedroom window erupted in a fireball, and I snapped into reality. My hand shook as I grabbed the arm of the man standing next to me.

"Is anybody in there?" I asked, "Anyone hurt?"

"Lo siento," he said, as he fingered the pearl snap on his cuff, "No Inglès."

His voice sounded despondent, like it was an automatic response. His glazed eyes mirrored the same unreality I felt. I tamped down my rising fear and tried to focus, to find my Spanish. I asked again, "¿Nadie en el interior?"

He blinked, and some clarity came into his eyes, like he'd realized the weight of the moment.

"No," he said, "Nadie."

"¿Herrir a nadie?" I asked.

"No. Estàn seguros."

Everyone was safe, but I kept shaking. The man put his arm around my back and held me, but I couldn't stop. I thanked him and stepped away. The firefighters were going at it with the hoses and rushing into the building as ash floated down. I turned to find Mom. She was standing where I left her, calm and checked out, holding the broom. She had her back to the scene, and bits of white ash hung in her hair beneath the gray roots. Something slipped in my

head. Seeing her, not registering anything, staring across the courtyard at the office as if she were watching television, knocked something loose. I felt tingling waves run across my scalp, and everything became funny. That stupid broom, the clumps of ash like huge flakes of dandruff—it was too much. I had this feeling, like until now, with Mom on the couch, I'd been staring at my hand, picking at a splinter. The more I tried to dig it out, the deeper it went. I almost thought I had it, when I realized my arm wasn't attached to my body. I felt stupid, worrying about that splinter, when all the while I didn't have an arm. Who gives a fuck about anything, when you don't have an arm? I laughed and felt evil as I approached her.

Standing behind her, I said into her ear, "The show's this way. You're missing everything. It's your production." She didn't move or say anything. I don't think she knew I was there.

"Turn and look at it! Fucking look!" I said, screaming and laughing. I couldn't stop laughing, and I felt like doubling over. Finding joy in cruelty, I grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her hard. She nearly fell, and I kept screaming look, look, look as I jerked her body. I spun her frail, light frame around, yanked the broom out of her hand, and waved it at the burning building. With my face close to hers, I said in a growl, "You fucking look!"

Something softened in her eyes, some flash of cognition, but she said nothing. I broke the broomstick over my knee and threw the pieces. The other residents had cleared away from us. I stomped across the courtyard, kicking up dust, over to the metal mailbox. I punched it. That felt nice. I hit it again and again, laughing more and more. My hand bled, but I didn't care. I wanted to keep hitting that mailbox, until both of my hands were bloody stumps. I heard a voice behind me, and felt a hand on my back. It was the apartment manager. I pulled myself out of it.

"I know," I said, "I'm sorry." I was still laughing.

“Honey,” she said. I didn’t know her well. I think she called everybody Honey. I tried to get a grip on myself, but my head buzzed.

“I know,” I said, “I’ll calm down.”

“But Honey,” she said again.

“I got it. I’m sorry. I’m calm,” I said, and I tried to be.

“I know, Honey,” she said, in a voice that would placate a toddler. “It’s okay. You’re all right, but come with me. Your ass is all hanging out.”

I had on the ratty jean shorts I’d slept in, with a big tear across the back. I knew everyone was looking at me. I stood tall, and followed her, with what dignity I could, to the office. She gave me some track pants and a pair of shoes.

*

The Red Cross gave us vouchers for a motel. I put Mom in a cab and sent her over, to get her out of the way. The fire had destroyed eight homes. The building was structurally sound, so they let us go in to salvage what we could. The walls were charcoal black, without a trace of the art that had hung on them, and the carpet had melted into a hard volcanic mass. A few embers and burnt metal springs were all that remained of the couch. The fan drooped from the ceiling, its charred blades curled under like the legs of a giant spider. I felt like I’d always had that spider hanging over me, and no matter what I did, it would be there. In my room, I saw the embers that had been my guitar and clarinet next to the charcoal box spring that used to be my bed. My giddiness had passed. I had slipped onto a higher plane. I felt like a New World explorer discovering a continent, cruel and smelling blood, oblivious to the lives of those around me.

Although the door had been open, the fire somehow left Andrew’s closet alone. I learned later that this was a thing with house fires. They left random objects and spaces untouched. The

deflated mattress, duffle bag, and pile of clothes—though covered in soot—were on the floor as he'd left them. I grabbed a blazer, another shirt, and a pair of jeans from the hangers, because track pants aren't my style. They were singed and sooty, but wearable. I went down to the laundry room, washed the jeans and shirt, and tried to dust off the blazer. The clothes still reeked, but I didn't care. I caught the bus to Andrew's work.

Andrew worked at the downtown Friday's, in the Radisson. I guess I looked kind of crazy walking into the dining room. Andrew gave me a weird glance, and I realized I had ash in my hair. I brushed it out as he sniffed my jacket.

"Did you run really fast to get here?" he asked. "You smell like burnt rubber." He seemed more curious than concerned, ready to hear something crazy.

"About that," I said, feeling ironic and outside the world, "how long until you're done?"

"Forty-five minutes or so," he said.

"Tell them you need to leave now," I said. "I've got good news and bad news." I had practiced how to tell him during the bus ride.

"What's the good news?" he asked.

"We don't have anything left to move," I said. "That's all taken care of."

"Really? That's awesome. You did all of that?"

"Not exactly," I said. "Mom did. We don't have anything left to move because it burned the fuck down."

He didn't react, but he did hold the same half-smiling face for a long time. I let it sink in before I went on, "She lit a candle or some shit. It's all gone." I felt again like an explorer, ordering my men to burn the ships. There would be no return to the Old World.

“What. The. Fuck,” he said, his face in the same unchanged expression, “Everything? You’re telling me, right now, that I have lost all my earthly possessions?” At this, his eyes widened, as if on some level Andrew enjoyed the ideal of losing everything, like a purification. I felt sorry to disappoint him.

“No,” I said, “your stuff’s fine. You have a magic closet.” He looked confused.

“Wait, are you fucking with me?” he asked.

“No, I’m not,” I said. “Your stuff’s fine.”

Andrew looked around the restaurant, as if to make sure the rest of the world was still there. Something between a shudder and a shrug went through him. “We’re getting wasted, right?” he asked.

“Yes, Andrew,” I said. “That is exactly what is going to happen.”

Not a lot of people know this, but there’s a trick to getting free drinks in Austin. It’s an insider thing. All you have to do is tell the bartender that your mother burned your apartment the fuck down and drinks are on the house. We went a lot of places that night. We hit up Lovejoy’s, Casino, The Ritz, and more I don’t remember. I don’t think we paid for a drink. Of course Andrew, honest guy who he is, always had to clarify. “Not me. My stuff’s fine.” But they gave it to him anyway.

I still felt like an explorer, an aloof Spaniard trudging through the jungle, liberated from morality. I no longer cared about being a good person. I didn’t fear bitterness, or becoming jaded. I embraced something beyond that, like I could grab and skin a Mayan boy out of disinterest. The world was cruel, and I wanted to watch it bleed. Nothing mattered as shots washed over. I took them like the New World gold that was my entitlement. Andrew shambled after, tipping and apologizing, but I didn’t care. I had a confrontation with an inferior culture.

Some derp kid in a backwards white cap. I didn't like the way he looked at my scorched jacket and sniffed, so I knocked his hat off as he walked by. He turned, and I shoved him. He came at me, and Andrew jumped between us. The derp kept yelling and trying to hit me while Andrew yelled about the fire, and I kept trying to hit the derp but Andrew had me by the wrists. While I struggled to break away, dude hit me with a cheap shot over Andrew's shoulder. The world went hazy, something pushed me back toward the door, and Andrew's voice asked what the fuck, over and over. He led me outside, onto the street. My vision clarified, and it was Andrew's face in mine, like his face had swallowed the world.

"You need to go home," he said, sounding like every dad ever.

"Tell me about home!" I said. "Fuck you."

"All right, I'm sorry," he said, his voice even and placating in a way that pissed me off even more. "We need to go to the motel."

"I don't want to go to the motel," I said. "She's there. I hate her."

"Come on," he said, "we have to go."

Andrew waved for a cab, and I pretended to be pacified, but as soon as the cab spotted us, I tried to walk away. Andrew grabbed me, and I shoved him.

"Don't fucking touch me," I said. "How could you let that guy hit me? Fuck that derp. What's a frat boy doing in a punk bar? What the fuck is wrong with you?"

The cab pulled up and Andrew opened the door. I tried to make another getaway, but I was wobbly. Andrew grabbed me and shoved me into the cab, then climbed in and shut the door. I accepted the situation. He sat stiff and refused to look at me during the ride. I tried to talk to him, to get him to loosen up and smooth things over, but he wasn't having it. The vouchers were for a grungy Super 8 off the highway. I tried to get him to laugh as we pulled up.

“This is what they’ve got for us?” I asked. “They named the motel after a porn camera?” He didn’t react. I tried again. “Is this the best they could do? Fuck the Red Cross. Clara Barton was a whore.”

He stared out the window and didn’t say anything. Who did he think he was, sitting there all superior? We paid the driver and checked in at the front desk without speaking. The lobby was predictable—stained carpets and plastic plants. I didn’t want to be here, and I didn’t want to see Mom. I wished this place would burn. I felt sick of Andrew’s superior bullshit as we waited for the elevator. As soon as the doors opened and we were inside, I laid in on him.

“You had one job in all of this,” I said. “Get Mom out of the apartment.” He didn’t look at me or say anything, but I saw him tense. I knew I was getting to him. I pressed further.

“You’re a real fuck-up, you know,” I said. “You fucked it all up.”

That did it. Andrew turned like he wanted to hit me. He started yelling. “Do you think this has been a party for me? I wanted to start a new life, but instead I’m balls deep in your bullshit. I have been a fucking *saint*. Putting up with this shit. Sleeping in a closet. Dealing with her. I could live anywhere. I put up with this because I care about *you*. I worry about *you*.”

“Some fucking martyr,” I said. His face flushed, and I thought he really was going to hit me when the elevator stopped on the second floor. The doors opened on a woman who looked to be in her thirties, with nice features, but a little worn and haggard, with a tall, awkward kid who couldn’t have been more than nineteen or twenty. He seemed startled to see us, like we’d caught him doing something wrong. She took his hand and he jumped as she pulled him into the elevator. With his nervous look, I imagined he had either just lost, or was about to lose, his virginity. I didn’t like this woman, taking advantage of a kid who had no idea what he was doing.

She looked Andrew and me up and down, and said with a gregarious tilt, “What are you fellas getting into tonight?”

“My mother burned down my apartment,” I said, in an exaggerated, mock-casual way that I hoped showed contempt. I sounded kind of like a valley girl. “I lost everything. The Red Cross put me, Andrew, and Mom in this shitty motel. Andrew’s stuff is fine.”

The woman smiled. I don’t think she knew how to take my attitude, or if she caught the contempt. The kid looked terrified. I winked at him. His face flushed, and he looked away. The woman slid next to me.

“I think I want to come party with you boys tonight,” she said, lowering her voice as if there were someone else in the elevator, and she didn’t want them to hear. She nudged me with her hip, and that set me off.

“You want to come party? Let me tell you, it is a fucking party!” I said, feeling near hysterical, like my mouth was moving by its own crazy will. “We’re partying, aren’t we, Andrew? You know what, lady? Why don’t you come party with us? If you want a real party, the room’s 308. Come on over! We’ll party!”

My hands shook. She kept smiling, like she wasn’t sure whether I was serious or not. The doors opened and Andrew stepped off. I turned to follow, but I couldn’t leave the elevator. If I left the elevator I would be in the hall, and then I would be in the room with Mom. I held the door and turned back toward the woman and the kid. The kid’s face flushed a deeper red, and he squirmed like my eyes were needles. The woman brushed her hand across my chest and her green eyes sent a wave of heat through me. I thought I should go with her, get her to ditch the kid, and fuck her until my body was hollow—empty everything into her. Andrew pulled me into the hallway. I turned and shoved him as the elevator doors closed behind me.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” he said. Maybe he was getting used to being shoved, because he didn’t come at me or anything.

“It’s a party, right? All one big fucking party!” I said, feeling the same kind of laughter I felt with the fire, with new heat and malice. “I can’t go to the room. I can’t see her. I don’t know what I’ll do.”

“I’m past my limit with you,” Andrew said. “Stay out here and cool down if you want.”

Andrew stomped off, around the corner to the room. I paced the hallway, not caring about my life, my loss, or anything, like I could live off of anger and cruelty and never care. My head hummed to the rhythm of the air vents. I wasn’t cooling down, and didn’t think I ever would. I was ready for the world to consume me as I turned the corner to room 308 and opened the door. Andrew was laying on one of the beds, facing the wall with his hands over his face. Mom sat on the other bed, bottle of vodka in her hand, staring at the television. She looked over at me, and mouthed *sorry*, with sad eyes and a sloppy half-smile.

“Don’t talk to me,” I said. I sat on the bed next to Andrew and she looked at me with her drunk frog-face. “Don’t look at me.”

She turned her foggy eyes to the T.V. as I trembled on the mattress. I shook harder as her lip quivered and a tear wet the gray bag under her eye. She took a pull from the bottle and my circuits broke. I lunged at her. She didn’t resist as I tore the bottle from her, took a swig, and slammed it on the ground. It didn’t break, so I kicked it against the wall. She kept her eyes straight ahead. I’m not sure if she realized what was happening. I wanted to scream at her, but I couldn’t find any words. My fingers twitched. There was a knock at the door.

My head churned as I pulled back from the brink and opened the door to the hooker from the elevator. She must have finished the kid quick. Either that, or he had chickened out. The

woman was all bubbles. She ran her hand across my chest like she had before and shook her hips into the room.

“Hey-a fellas,” she said, then stopped when she saw Mom. Her professional charm left, as if she’d walked in on an unexpected surgery. She gestured into the hall. I went with her and closed the door. She said in a raspy whisper, “You didn’t tell me your mother was here.”

“Yes I did,” I said. Pressing the point was somehow important. “I said, ‘the Red Cross put me, Andrew, and Mom up in a room.’ I thought you were cool with that.”

“What, you want me with your *mother*?” Her face reminded me of the kid from the elevator. A laugh huffed in my throat.

“Do you have a problem?” I asked, feeling giddy. “You said you wanted a *real* party.” She looked around for somewhere to go, but she was in the corner. “You in, or what?”

“No! I can’t,” she said. She drew herself as tall as she could. I had at least six inches on her, but she held her ground as she said through her stiff jaw, “You’re disgusting!”

Her pride twisted my cruel joy to a new level. I wanted to hurt her. Giddiness spread like a current through my bones and into my fingers. My hands twitched.

“*I’m* disgusting?” I asked, as I grabbed her shoulders and backed her into the wall. Her eyes were wide, clear, and afraid. I squeezed harder. I slid my hands toward her throat, and something else flashed across her green eyes, a spark like she felt the same kind of hatred. Her lips turned into a kind of smile, and a tremble ran through her into my hands and down my arms. With that tremble, something broke, like something in my head shifted again. I felt a heavy wave wash over, and my muscles relaxed. A sob caught in my throat as I let go and stepped back. In her hand, I saw the knife she’d been about to plunge into my gut.

“I’m sorry,” I said, over and over, through deep moans as tears soaked my collar. She held the knife in front of her and rocked on the balls of her feet. Shame pulled me to my knees, and I held my throat for her to slit. I couldn’t live as this person. Whatever she had, she could purge. She moved toward me like she might, even put the blade to my neck. It felt warm. I didn’t move as she looked into my eyes, then I saw that same wave run through her. She stepped back with tears, looked at the knife and looked at me. She ran past, around the corner, back to the elevator.

I knelt in the hallway and cried until my body was empty. My legs felt new and weak when I finally stood and went into the room. Mom’s eyes were closed, in her stupor that’s never asleep or awake. She had retrieved the bottle from the floor, and it hung loose in her hand. It’s funny, I’d felt a blade on my throat, knew how cold steel could feel warm, but my first thought was of Andrew. He should get his own place—leave me to my mess. I lay on the bed next to him and wanted to put my arm around him, but I didn’t. My mind relaxed, and I tried to find compassion for Mom. She had been beaten, molested, diminished—tossed aside since she was a girl. She had endured real pain. I tried to find it, to feel for her, but the way she’d hung all of that over me and used me all my life made compassion impossible. I couldn’t feel it. I thought about the woman from the elevator, felt shame. I had this fantasy that we could have talked, somehow made up. I would like to have invited her in, to sit down for a minute. A whore’s life is hard. Maybe sometimes you want to be allowed to sit with some people, relax and watch T.V., without anyone asking you to do anything. I would have liked that, but it was impossible.

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Education

MFA in Creative Writing, Department of English, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA. Emphasis on fiction. Thesis: *Dead Cooks*. Advisor: Professor John McManus. May, 2017.

Bachelor of Arts, English, The University of Texas, Austin, TX. Minor in Education. May 2013.

Associate of Arts, English, Austin Community College, Austin, TX. May, 2012.

Honors and Awards

Perry Morgan Fellowship, Old Dominion University, \$12,000/year, 2014-2015.

Old Dominion University, Full Tuition Waver, \$21,500/year, 2014-2017.

Parker Prize for Fiction, The University of Texas, \$1,000, 2012.

Elena R. Burke Fellowship for Creative Writing, The University of Texas, \$500, 2011.

Krugman Prize for Creative Writing, The University of Texas, \$800, 2011.

College Teaching

Fall 2015	Introduction to Creative Writing (ENG 305), Old Dominion. Teaching Assistant.
Fall 2015	Introduction to Science Writing (ENG 362), Old Dominion. Teaching Assistant.
Fall 2015	Craft of Narrative (ENG 453), Old Dominion. Teaching Assistant.
Spring 2016	Advanced Fiction Workshop (ENG 460), Old Dominion. Teaching Assistant.
Fall 2016	Introduction to Creative Writing (ENG 305), Old Dominion. Teaching Assistant.
Spring 2017	Writing Center, Old Dominion. Tutor.
