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Junk City

Issac J. Coleman
Northern Michigan University

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JUNK CITY

By

Isaac J. Coleman

THESIS

Submitted to
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This thesis by [Your Name] is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Associate Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies.

Committee Chair: Russell Prather Date

First Reader: Jennifer Howard Date

Second Reader: [Name] Date

Department Head: Dr. Raymond J. Ventre Date

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NAME: Coleman, Isaac James

DATE OF BIRTH: November 28, 1979

ABSTRACT

JUNK CITY

By

Isaac J. Coleman

This is the tale of two punk-rock brothers and their struggles as narrated from the perspective of various objects with limited omniscience. Jerrod, the younger brother, is a painter who wants to be enrolled in an alternative art academy that recently rejected his application. Feeling that he didn't receive fair consideration, he has decided to illegally paint a mural on the side of the institution to gain recognition. Jake, the older brother, is a drug dealer who becomes addicted to his own product after he finds out that the woman he has been seeing is pregnant with his child.

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2010

This is dedicated to Johnny Mild. Thanks for going lawn ornament swapping with me.

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Special thanks go to Russell Prather and Jennifer Howard for their willingness to explore this peculiar world with me. Thanks to Nancy Gold for all the stimulating discussions, on and off the beach. Thanks to my wife for always supporting me.

This thesis uses the guidelines provided by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Body:	
Chapter One.....	9
Chapter Two	11
Chapter Three.....	16
Chapter Four.....	18
Chapter Five	20
Chapter Six.....	27
Chapter Seven.....	32
Chapter Eight.....	35
Chapter Nine	44
Chapter Ten	51
Chapter Eleven.....	53
Chapter Twelve.....	57
Chapter Thirteen.....	60
Chapter Fourteen	62
Chapter Fifteen.....	70
Chapter Sixteen	78
Chapter Seventeen.....	87
Chapter Eighteen	93
Chapter Nineteen.....	104
Chapter Twenty	112
Chapter Twenty-one.....	123

Chapter Twenty-two	129
Chapter Twenty-three	138
Chapter Twenty-four.....	141
Chapter Twenty-five	147
Chapter Twenty-six	151
Chapter Twenty-seven.....	154
Chapter Twenty-eight	161
Chapter Twenty-nine	172
Works Cited	201

INTRODUCTION

For my thesis, I have written a novella, *Junk City*, which combines both a traditional and experimental narrative. Each chapter simultaneously involves two perspectives: one of an object and one of a human. The objects have their own consciousness, and they also have limited omniscience over one human character per chapter. The perspective could be called limited double omniscience.

In various ways, each object is an object of desire. Most of the time, the objects are desired by the owners; other times, the objects are desirous of the human characters. One object that exemplifies mutual desire is the red die that Jake found. He rolls the die to make decisions for himself. He desires answers from it. And because Jake rescued the die from the street, the die desires to give Jake what he truly desires. The die cannot move itself to make a particular number turn up, but its consciousness roots for Jake to get the number he wants.

The concept of using objects as an integral part of narration isn't radically new. In the novella, *Jealousy*, by Alain Robbe-Grillet, the story is told from the perspective of a narrator who never appears in the novel. The narrator is jealous of the men who interact with the female owner, but it is merely an objective

observer of the actions taking place around and within the premises. It is argued that the narrator is the house itself.

In the novel, *Skinny Legs and All*, by Tom Robbins, some of the central characters are objects. Through the use of magic, several items, (spoon, sock, stick, can-o-beans, and conch shell), have become “alive,” that is, they have acquired the powers of self propulsion, and the ability to “speak” to one another. These objects are sentient characters, but an omniscient third person maintains control over the narrative as a whole.

My approach is slightly different from previous works of fiction. Unlike Robbin’s novel, my novella is narrated by multiple objects with different points of view. My objects are not capable of acting on their own. They are capable of communicating with one another, but this rarely happens in my story as I wanted to keep the focus on my human characters. Most of the time, the objects are more interested in their human counterparts. These objects of obsession know the thoughts of the people who handle them. They absorb the consciousness of their handlers through a kind of telepathy.

In part, my goal was to challenge myself and to experiment. I wanted to play with how people react to fictional narratives. We tend to view third-person narrators as infallible, godlike voices. Readers disassociate these voices from the fallible human who created them. So I am asking the reader to accept that the

authorial voice in my work comes from an object rather than a mysterious third-person.

My other ambition for writing from this perspective was to add minor parallel stories to the overall plot. A good example of this occurs in the chapter when the reader is introduced to Pam. She is entangled in her sheets and dreaming about her lover, Jake. Simultaneously, the sheet, the narrator of this chapter, discusses how it longs to be in contact once again with Jake's leather jacket.

I certainly didn't want my story to appear gimmicky. And I didn't set out to trick my reader. I didn't want the seriousness of the story to be dismissed because of the perspective. I wanted to add a layer of interest. Books that I admire, anything by Vonnegut for example, embrace the absurd. I wanted to do that too.

Most chapters start with ample clues to immediately inform the reader which object is doing the narrating. At times, the identity of the object is cryptic. It is not, however, always immediately apparent why I chose which particular object. Often times, the reason for my choice is revealed in subsequent chapters as described by different objects. For example, the novella begins with a sprinkler that desires to pop up and spray Jerrod, the only person who seems to step on it. While the sprinkler is narrating, it discusses having a broken valve. Later in the

novella, from the perspective the nightstick, it describes a sprinkler that pops up and sprays Jerrod and the cop as he is hauling Jerrod towards his cruiser. The sprinkler creates enough of a deterrent that the cop is forced to stop, altering his course long enough, to give another character, Stanley, a chance to catch up with the officer and question his proceedings.

Another goal for writing from these unusual perspectives was to give myself greater poetic freedom in telling the story while retaining the authorial integrity of a third person narrator. Ideally, I wanted each chapter to have its own unique voice. The scene narrated from the perspective of the painting of the deceased daughter of the headmaster of the art academy is haunting because it cannot clearly disassociate its identity as an object from that of a human. And I feel that the rhythms of the language of the sprinkler mimic the cadence of a sprinkler in motion. Often I found my objects slipping into a homogenous third person voice. This could have been expected because my priority for these objects was for them to retain the authority of a third person narrator, to remain objective.

The content of the story revolves around two brothers, Jake and Jerrod, who belong to a group of the city's punk rock subculture who refers to themselves as The Filth. They live in a fictional town, Junk City, from which my thesis derives its name. Much of the focus within this community revolves

around Bookcliff Academy, a kind of long term artists' colony. This institution caters to many media such as painting, pottery, and sculpting but does not cater to other art forms such as music or film. This school is home to various artists who are selected through an application process. This is the first point of conflict encountered in the novella.

The story begins with one of my protagonists, Jerrod, dashing across the lawn of the academy to set up a ladder to continue painting a mural on the side of the building. He has applied to the academy several times and has been rejected. Since he is a high school dropout, he is concerned that his art is not being considered because of his lack of credentials. He wants to make sure that the headmaster of the academy has a chance to see his work. But before he has a chance to complete the mural, a cop shows up, having received a report of vandalism.

The other conflict in the story pertains to Jake. After their father died in a motorcycle wreck, Jake was left to take care of his younger brother. The only way he could manage was by dealing crystal meth. He never uses the stuff himself, preferring the "non-addictive" qualities of various hallucinogens, and as a last resort, alcohol. But the night he finds out that the woman he is romantically involved with is pregnant, and she kicks him out of her house, all of that changes. As he wanders through the orchards on his way home with a pocket

full of crystal meth for sale, he decides to dabble into the product, and it is a downhill slide from there, even if his intentions are pure.

Stylistically, the authors who have greatly influenced my novella and perceptions of the possibilities of what fiction can do are: Richard Brautigan, John Hawkes, Alice Munro, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Kurt Vonnegut and David Foster Wallace. To the reader who is familiar with all of these authors, the name Munro might seem strange to include here. After all, she is usually regarded as a realist writer. This is not to say that strange things cannot happen in her work, but it is not the work of the fantastic and experimental. From Munro, I have earned a great appreciation as to how a story can be structured for greater dramatic effect. She is a master of the circular plot. I admire her book, *The Beggar Maid*, most of all because it is a series of vignettes that can potentially stand alone, but also connects with one another to make a whole.

These are two moves I have attempted in my novella. I wanted each chapter to resonate on its own while contributing to the overall plot. Also, many of the incidences that occur in *Junk City* are viewed from not only multiple perspectives but are presented in a nonlinear timeline. The scene when Jerrod gets arrested is viewed again later in the novella in present time from the perspective of Trent, a reporter who observes the interaction while hiding behind a lilac bush.

From the other authors mentioned, I admire their fearlessness. I wanted my thesis to be as ambitious as Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. I wanted to develop a unique voice, something that would resonate with the reader long afterwards, much the way I feel after absorbing the words of Vonnegut. I wanted to be as bold and experimental as Hawkes. His book, *The Lime Twig*, stands in direct defiance of the tropes of classic mysteries, and yet, it is a mystery unto itself. The significant impact that perspective has over a story, as seen in Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy*, prompted me to reflect on the potential for new forms of narration. The possibility that the absurd can not only be playful but beautiful is wonderfully illustrated Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America*, a novella that incorporates the concept of trout fishing in America as an entity capable of writing letters.

But above all, I wanted to write a story about characters on the fringe of society. I wanted to write something experimental and sprightly. I also knew I was creating a tragedy. This is the story of two brothers struggling to better their lives. No matter what good comes to them, no matter their own convictions, they are not impervious to the pitfalls of living in Junk City.

After I completed my novella, I realized there were many similarities between my story and an admired story from my youth, *The Outsiders*, by S.E. Hinton. Both of the stories are about young males torn between two worlds where they have to find their own moral code. Both stories revolve around

protagonists without strong adult influences. Both have characters raised by older brothers. Both stories are about the massive impact of unintentional homicides. Both stories are about subculture. I would be proud to have *Junk City* compared to *The Outsiders*.

Chapter One

He steps on me. It's cool, pre-dawn. It's risky for him now. His schedule is chaotic. No set rhythm. I'm not set to pop for another hour. The illegal mural in progress has generated plenty of comments—complaints, compliments.

When he steps on me, he is panting, running with a grocery sack of paint supplies in one hand and a folding ladder in the other. I belch up and down with the repercussion. I too am a painter. I understand his desire. My job is to paint life into the field.

I'm set. Locked, triggered—busted valve and all—ready to spring. He sets up the ladder, pries the lids off two cans, pours the contents into a bowl, and mixes them with the brush handle.

Jerrod looks straight up. Overhead, above the candescent orange, the dormers spike into the night sky, silhouetted triangles, much like the green spikes that grow from his head. He sees something up there.

Did the gargoyle on the corner move? Is it his imagination or a bird? Perhaps it is the headmaster's cat, loose from the belvedere? The quatrefoil adornments and festoons in the shadows between windows are almost invisible. If he didn't know they were there, he might think they are smudges, loose bricks, clumps of darkness.

There isn't time for this. His pupils flicker adjusting to the mural.

The first night he painted he was thankful for the two angles of light, the large, orange fluorescents overhead—the row of tiny greens shining from the sidewalk. No shadows. Solar powered.

Part of him realizes he needs to get caught, but he needs a couple more sessions after this one. He wants the image to have a chance. Incomplete, it's just graffiti, grass without water. He feels trapped in a spotlight he is uncertain of ever really wanting, bound to its completion.

The blending lights makes the twilight eerier. The annual display of purple, yellow, and red tulips growing in the planters next to the building seem somehow morbid, blobs of suffocating color. The wiry hyacinths are electrified. Clumps of lilacs, not yet in full bloom, cling from the heart-shaped leaves, a pall of purplish smoke puffs, globular fingers touching outward perversely, frozen in crepuscular time. None alive without me.

I've tried spraying him, especially when he's painting, but I can't quite make it. I am not intentionally pernicious; it is my nature to water things down. Naturally, I follow a pattern. Set by my own mechanism. About to break. A recalcitrant for effect. Effusing a chaotic element.

Chapter Two

This is filth. That's just how it is. Everybody contributes to this mess. Everybody's part of it. There's no escape. And if someone thinks that they're above it, if they think they can escape it, then they've been down in it too long

In Junk City, I belong to The Filth punks. That's what we call ourselves. I give myself to them because they embrace me.

Jake flicks his lighter, a black Zippo with a silver skull painted on the side with metal spikes driven through the top to create a macabre mohawk, inhales the burning fume through the cigarette tip, snaps it shut, crushes the empty pack of Marlboros, and tosses it to me. Now I know where he's been. That pack contributes to my collective understanding of Jake. After all, I'm his mess.

I get the story in bits and pieces. A delayed effect. He kicks through the filth—kicks an old Burger King cup containing a soured vanilla milkshake, popping off the lid. The remaining slurps of coagulated dairy product slogs between old wrappers and through a worn-out sock and drips to the matted carpet, brown with grease and dirt.

My consciousness constricts and explodes temporally and spatially, but my heart is in this house. Mostly, this putrid circulatory system pulses with waste consisting of beer bottles, tin cans, and fast food wrappers. Cigarette butts, packs. Ash. A spreading mold. Used condoms. Dog hair. Vomit. Ripped out

pages of porno, just the good parts. Smashed dishes. That's just the substratum. Rightfully, the shredded couch and cinderblocks should be listed as well. That's the mainstay, reoccurring objects of filth, but the kids bring home the peculiarities. The broken: cuckoo clock, lawnmower, doll house, porcelain pig, lawn globes, gramophone, canoe. Rubber ducks. Decoy ducks. Three large truck tires used as recliners. One of which currently holds Wanda and Robby curled together in sleep. There's a lot of stray automotive parts: fenders, gear shifters, steering wheels, hub-caps, batteries, a transmission, and a sundry of gears, nuts, and bolts. Syringes. Spray cans. Flags. The Filth Punks steal every flag they see. Flags for any place or anything, but most contain the stars and stripes. Fist and head sized holes riddle the graffiti covered walls.

The Filth House is beyond the wrong side of the tracks between the junkyard to the north and the river to the south. To the west is the highway, bridge, and viaduct, the latter two attracting plenty of transients, a place where they set up camps. To the east, more shitty houses. The air always smells of creosote from the switch yard.

Oh yeah, Jake's tweaked out. The crumpled pack reeks of meth sweat. It tells all. He usually doesn't do the shit, hates how addictive it is, how paranoid he gets. But everybody is out of everything. A fucking hard luck spot, so he *cracked* into his own product. He doesn't usually use, never buys, just supplies,

ideally selling enough to make rent, but he trades plenty for other hallucinogens. His drug of choice? L.S.D. Cheap and to the point. Loves to trip. Lasts for hours. He'd say any hedonistic pleasure that's non-addictive will do, but when done with such regularity, it's hard to tell how to make a distinction between addicting or not.

He's been sitting under the bridge, chain smoking and watching the languid muddy water. Sat until the horrendous bug crawled along the concrete retaining wall toward him. It didn't look like any insect Jake ever saw. "What the fuck are you?" Jake asked and hopped to his feet. The insect lifted its disproportionately long gray-brown neck. Serrated jaws chomped randomly. Antennae wavered. The elongated gray-brown body maybe resembled a skinny praying mantis, but the legs were not as spindly — and no combative front limbs.

Jake spent all of his twenty-two years in Junk City without seeing this species. The insect was horrendous enough in its own right, but it takes more than that to put Jake at unease. He once hallucinated that his fingers turned into snakes and disappeared into this filth, at which he just laughed and said, "Now how am I going to smoke?"

What upset Jake was that the bug was an anomaly. A fucking enigma. He quivered from his throat to his coccyx, gagged. He lifted the flap on the pocket of his metal studded and spiked, black leather jacket with the word 'Filth' spray

painted in red on the back and withdrew the pack of cigarettes. Despite the smoke, he could smell the murky bog from whence the creature came. The fetid, alkaline laden soil rich with the decomposition of river debris—moss, leaves, and decomposing scuds and crawdads. The city's effluvia coagulating in the riparian zone around the bridge.

Why would this thing show up now? Jake stopped at the river under the bridge to recoup from the evening. Some mornings, he meets his brother there. He felt safe there. It may be a thoroughfare for the transients, but this isn't where they stay. It's too close to the street. And the transients are less conspicuous during the lighted hours.

All of the Filth has tagged something to the retaining wall. Jake admires his brother's work, a catfish with leather jacket and mohawk. A cigarette dangles from the fish's fat lips. One fin curled into a middle finger.

Jake took a drag and blew the smoke on the hideous insect. The plume caused the creature to lower its gray-brown body to the concrete and lash its elongated neck and head back and forth, pincers constricting slowly. "You like that, you wicked little fucker? You better. You better like it. I don't know where in the fuck you came from, but I can tell you a couple things. Junk City doesn't evolve. Junk City doesn't like chaos. If you're gonna make it, you better get used to the toxins." Jake blew another puff of smoke at the insect.

It took Jake most of the night, but he made it back across the river, back from Peach Bluff. The day before, he walked across the bridge, walked the ten miles through suburbia and orchards and the catholic graveyard to get to his ex's apartment—started off drunk. It was the two forties he drank, the liquid inspiration, that fueled his voyage. He thought she'd let him in again, let him screw her brains out one more time, give him another ride home in the morning.

Chapter Three

There is enough of a base coat now covering the stone blocks that I move smoothly. The paint fluidly wipes from my hair, spreading shadow into the pine trees, accentuating a three-dimensional effect. His work will be efficient tonight. The wall radiates warmth from the previous day, so the paint extricated from my hairs sets quickly.

It is a multidimensional painting, an image within an image. A tromp l'oeil design. The frame is of an old, leather bound book with gilded writing down the spine. On the cover is a painting of a man sleeping on a piano in the middle of a mountain stream. A ribbon of notes dreams from his head. Above this, a hideous jester springs from a window painted on the bricks and pulls the strings on the song of his sleeping marionette.

Jerrod continues adding detail to the trees, flicking his wrist up and down, dabbing the walls a few times then back to the bowl holding the gooey pigment. The two colors of lights make it difficult for him to determine if the shade of green is really what he wants. The painting always looks different to him the next day, from a distance, trying not to look at it too much while waiting for the bus. He turns me over and mashes the color out of my split ends on the other side.

He wonders if he can account for the color spectrum on such a scale, with such conditions. Wet. Dry. Day. Night. The mural so far has been created in the same lighting, the consistent hue of the evening.

The cop car cruising smoothly up the street, creeps over blacktop as slick as the acrylic I spread. Perhaps Jerrod is camouflaged in the tromp l'oeil, the painter within the painting. A cop wouldn't know to look for him, not at the Bookcliff Academy—where the bizarre is quotidian.

Typically, Jerrod is gone before sunrise. He likes to watch the sun come up over the purple plateau from under the bridge next to his home. This is where he likes to rinse my fibers, release the color of the evening into the murky water. Sometimes, if he's not too tired, he will work on the mural of the punk-rock catfish on the abutment.

Chapter Four

It's slow again tonight. We're creeping down Park Lane, cruising by the artists' colony, Bookcliff Academy. Meier wants to keep the peace, but it's been too peaceful, and he wants to keep his job, and to hell with parking tickets. There might be better places to patrol than Park Street, but it is usually good for an M.I.P. or drunk in public ticket.

Park Street meanders between the wooded campus and old neighborhoods. It's well lit. Most of the private mansions have security systems. Most have been annexed by the school. The trees in the park are sparse enough that they don't allow much coverage for criminal activity; although, occasionally, muggers will hang out in the branches waiting for drunk students. There's been several reports of muggings, but the perpetrator is still at large.

It's my job to beat back the belligerence, and I want to do a good job. Lieutenant Meier feels the same way. He likes to wield me like a major league slugger. But principle is built from a pliant matter drastically affected by time. And we are two different materials. This is all I have. Meier, whether he believes it or not, has potential. Meier needs to learn to control his conviction, at least keep it tempered between too much and too little.

This town is teeming with parasites on its' private parts, and it's like there's nothing to do but wait to arrive too late, arrive with a can of Raid to find

dead bugs. There's nothing to do. Somehow Meier hasn't pulled over the right vehicles, been in the right subdivision at the right time. Not even for an assist.

Shift is over in two hours. Don't want to come back empty. Every unproductive shift gives the fucking bigots that much more leeway to get in their digs. And they're so fucking cliché about it too. *You smoking pot, Meier? Find a nice place for a siesta?*

I'm not racist. I'll smash anyone. They want stereotypes? I'll make them look like a piñata after Jose Consecó's birthday. Swing me into action.

"Man, these college kids got it too good," Meier says, leaning on his wheel to see the top of the academy through the windshield.

Be advised any units in the area: we received an anonymous report of vandalism taking place at 1123 Park Lane. Any officers in the area, please report. Perpetrator is described as having....spiky, green hair. Male. Caucasian. Late teens to early twenties,

Thank the sweet merciful lord the call is coming out and we're in the right place. Even a vandal will do on a night like this. Meier snatches the CB. "This is cruiser 1360 responding. I am pulling into that location as we speak." Meier glances at me, reaffirming my shiny black presence in the passenger seat. Time to conduct business.

Chapter Five

It must have been after four in the morning as he was stumbling through a muddy peach orchard, trying to shave some distance off his walk home, when he decided to break into his personal stash. The half moon provided just enough light for him to scoop a tiny amount of the pink powder out of the baggy. The air was calm enough. He extracted his knife, a pearl handled stiletto, from his jacket pocket, pressed the release button. The double edged blade sprang into place. Jake slid the tip of the stiletto into the baggy, gingerly lifted the substance to his nostril.

Immediately after the burning itch in his sinuses subsided and trickled a rancid chemical taste down the back of his throat, the paranoia began. "What do you hear? What do you see? Aren't you scared like me? What you see. What you hear. This is my fear." Jake wanted to sing the root to his new song as loud as he could, but he was certain that the farmer whose orchard he was walking across would hear him from his house, even hear his whispering. After another minute, he was certain that there was a farmer behind each slender, twisted peach tree, each farmer holding a shotgun. After another minute he stopped for another toot. "Goddamnit. Where's the tequila when you need it?"

He pulled out this pack of cigarettes, extracted one, rolled the butt around in his teeth before lighting it. Jake wrestled with his fear of the meth monsters.

He made it out of the field, walked a few well lit streets, pulling on every car-door handle he passed. Always, he knew, someone was watching, someone in every window, behind every mail box. The irony, he realized, was that when high on methamphetamine, it makes one think that everyone in the world is whacked out the same way, everyone maniacal, sleepless, soulless criminals. Everything is a potential threat, or at least some existential test. The wind chimes on the side of a porch swaying behind the support looks like somebody's hands trying to pull the clip from a grenade. Satellite dishes become secret agents crouching on roofs holding bionic ears.

This rural suburb developed in the overlapping orchards. The flora varied as much at the construction. The stucco houses were surrounded by olive trees, yucca plants, and cacti. The brick homes tended toward Ash Trees, lilacs, and hyacinths. Bugle vines interspersed the chain-link fences separating the houses. Most of the wood houses grew cottonwoods, rose bushes, and honeysuckles. Amongst this disparity, Jake realized, the Elm Trees permeated all the yards, the trees thrived in all the landscapes, and for that, the locals have deemed them weeds.

He continued down the sidewalk, entranced by the plant life on display under the half moon and streetlights. He zigzagged on the sidewalk, as though

feigning drunkenness, swerving to snatch at the handles of cars parked on the street, cars parked in the driveways.

When the door on the blue Sentra hitched open, he almost didn't notice. Every other handle popped back down as he hap hazardously yanked at them. The Sentra clicked just enough to make him alert. Jake turned, twisted his head around. His gesticulations trying to articulate to some imagined audience that he was shocked that a car door might pop open on its own as he passed. He twirled under the orange streetlight, like looking for the prankster who may have pulled this stunt on him. A string must have been attached to the door. He admired his silhouette for a moment, the mohawk in liberty spikes stretching off his head.

He paced around the car, bending his head side to side. The driver's side door was also was unlocked. He turned one last time and hopped in the car. The throbbing in his neck felt like two turkey basters about to explode. Victory, the ashtray was full of coins. He emptied them into his side pocket. Time to take inventory. He was feeling calm. Jake lit a cigarette and replaced the ashtray to stub out the butt. He laughed as this sinister gesture.

The car had been parked parallel with the small ranch house. It was in a good position. Should anyone look out of the house with the weathered gray siding, they wouldn't be able to see much. The streetlight was almost directly overhead, creating a glare on the side windows, keeping the interior dark. And a

large hyacinth in bloom partially obscured the view. I have time, he thought and returned this pack to his breast pocket. He flicked open his stiletto and began unscrewing the paneling to get to the stereo.

In his super-focused, spun-out state, teeth gnashing, pupils dilated to optimum acuity, he was prying at the anti-theft bars when he realized the morning light was piercing through the back hatch. He sucked a couple gasps through the corners of his cheeks. "I gotta get the fuck out of here." He snorted. More than anything, he was ready for another bump. A light in the house flicked on and he realized his folly. He could stash the stereo someplace, but the coincidence of a Filth Punk walking back from Peach Bluff at the *crack* of dawn, after a vandalism/theft gets reported wouldn't go unnoticed. Chances are, he thought, he'd get fucked with anyway. Goddamn.

He lit another cigarette. How long had he been there? The ashtray now contained three cigarettes. The stereo wasn't budging. No matter what, just for wearing a spiked jacket, just for having a red mohawk, the pigs would fuck with him.

"Goddamn." He kicked at the console holding the radio, hopped back in the seat for more thrust and kicked again and again. The plastic console broke loose. The stereo dangled. He grabbed at it. Still attached. Another light came on in the house. He torqued the stereo. Something snapped. Another light came on

in the house. The stereo yanked loose. Out came the stiletto, sliced through the electrical wires. The front door of the house flung open. "Fuck." A fat man cleared the steps and was barging across the yard. He looked like one of the refinery workers. Red flannel, greasy pants, brown steeled toes, mustache, puffy trucker's cap.

Jake had the advantage of being on the driver's side, the side furthest from the house. The man was at the side of the car by the time his rubber soles hit the concrete. "You son-of-a-bitch." The man's words were already sounding strained through huffing.

Jake laughed. He felt relieved. Now he knew the face of the monster that he feared, or at least the man gave him a focal point for his paranoia at the moment. This was the real high—getting so whacked out with anxiety that when the serious trauma starts it's so surreal the weight of its significance comes across as an obscure joke.

Jake ran and looked over his shoulder. The man lagged behind by twenty yards. "Come on, you fat fuck, you're not even making this interesting."

"You," the man spoke, "mother," each word between deep gasps, "fucker."

"Come on." Jake waved the radio over his mohawked head. "You want your stereo back, don't you?" Jake laughed, which made it harder to run. He got

a stitch in his side and grabbed it with his other hand. "Shit, do you have a cigarette I can bum?" He yelled and laughed again.

"You....mother....fucker."

"Jesus, you old cock, come up with something else to say."

"You....mother....fucker."

"Goddamn, that's funny." Jake turned the corner, heading toward Peach Bluff Middle School. After another block, he turned to check on his pursuer. The man didn't make the corner. Jake laughed. He wiped the snot from his nose on the back of his wrist, leaving a shiny wet smear on the leather.

Hesitating for a minute, he leaned, his forearms on his knees, and spat a few times. "Goddamn, that's funny." He grabbed this pack and pulled a cigarette out and placed it in his mouth.

As he fished around in his jacket pocket for his lighter, he felt something, the extra room, the absence. "Goddamn!" The fucking stiletto. Gone. "Fuck." Jake slammed the stereo to the concrete. Plastic bits splintered from the interface. The screen shattered. "Fuck." Realizing the ignorance of his action, he lifted his foot and stomped on the stereo. Stomped it, and stomped it again with the heel of his boot. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuckety fuck fuck fucking fuck." He kept stomping. The inside parts showing more and more through the spreading slits cut for

ventilation. After he was thoroughly satisfied with destroying all that he had destroyed, he paused to survey the neighborhood he had turned down.

Chapter Six

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees the headlights approaching. Jerrod grips my varnished handle like a knife, holds my bristles still on one point. He quits moving, attempting to blend in with the three-dimensional illusion, hoping his white shirt dissipates into the clouds, his blue-jeans fade into the stream.

Everything else looks flat in the dull green and orange glow; then bursts of red and blue jab a new definition into the world. No sense in wasting time now. Rather than acknowledge the lights, we daub paint onto the trees, betraying the façade of the still life. He doesn't have a choice now but to keep going. Back to work. We smooth green acrylic back and forth.

Holding his flashlight like a baton, the cop approaches. The beam flares across Jerrod's back, across the mural. The cop steps on the soft earth. A sprinkler gurgles.

The officer presses a button on the CB on his shoulder and speaks into it. "This is officer Meier. I have visual confirmation of the suspect."

Jerrod keeps working. He smiles. In a perfect world, he thinks, the cop would come up to ask him if he has seen anybody vandalizing the building.

This is his final movement. Jerrod doesn't care. He doesn't know what else to do. He's done his best. He cannot exist in the social construct of his

contemporaries. He can see the perfection in nature and cannot understand why he cannot exist on equal terms.

“Hey,” the cop says, “Get down from there.”

Jerrod turns and points me to his chest. It’s hard for Jerrod to register the pertinence of the cop’s presence under the artificial film of oblique light. “Is there a problem?”

“Yes. Get down from there.” The cop says and takes several steps closer.

Jerrod swashes me through the paint, turns, and pats my loaded strands on the trees, my bristles flaring. “Sorry, sir, I’m behind schedule on this mural.”

“This isn’t a joke. Put the brush down and get off the ladder.”

Jerrod contemplates the benefits of being compliant: being coddled, not having to think—the easy answers spoon-fed to him. The rebel, on the other hand, at least leaves himself the freedom to speak, to take an active role in his fate. Although, both lead to physical submission: one peacefully, one violently.

We dab more green onto the pines. This is the best time to create, the intensity of this definite moment. A limited couple seconds, no thought, just that much more paint before he is discovered. At least the trees will be near completion. Perhaps this isn’t all bad; Jerrod feels like he spends too much time on his paintings, adding layers to the point of distraction.

His mind's made up. He's caught. This is it. He won't overdo this painting, won't get the chance.

"Get off the ladder, now." The cop flicks off the light and stores it in his belt. He takes the last couple steps up to the ladder. "You're being detained. Get down from there. You do not want me to assist you."

Jerrod is too engrossed to care. He's creating art. This is his only desire. He's performing under pressure. Never mind the contempt for authority engrained into his consciousness by his older brother, Jake.

The cop grabs Jerrod around the middle and pulls him from the ladder. The bowl of paint falls from his left hand and hits the top step. The coagulating liquid splatters up his arms and onto his shirt. He feels a cool, wet droplet land below his eye.

The violent action causes Jerrod to flail. A natural reaction, but it summons a vigorous response from the cop. They roll into the tulips. The thick leaves squeak, bending and rubbing against themselves.

Jerrod kicks free for a second and lunges ahead a few feet before the cop grabs his leg and tumbles forward. He stabs my handle into the soil. He won't let go of me. He doesn't want to physically resist, but the cop's action came as a shock. Now if he can get away by running, he will. It wasn't the plan. The jig was up when the cop arrived, no use running. Jerrod believed he could talk himself

out of the situation. In the back of his mind, he is already holding court against the cop.

The cop pounces on him. The knee to the back knocks the wind out of him. He grabs Jerrod's arm and yanks it behind his back. When the cuffs cinch around his wrists, it feels like thousands of syringes injecting his tendons with boiling water. But Jerrod won't give him his right arm so easily.

The cop grabs his triceps, pulls on his skin. Jerrod can feel himself bruising. His flesh burning. Jerrod doesn't care about the pain. Being so violated makes him want to cry.

Jerrod tightens his grip on me. "Let go of the brush." The cop shakes Jerrod's forearm. Jerrod won't let go of me. He struggles to jam my handle into his pants pocket, but the cop jabs his thumb into the tendons between his wrist. The combat move forces his hand open. I fall to the lawn. The cop latches the other cuff, tugs at the chain, hyper extends his shoulders, pats his ass and rubs his groin. "Where's your identification?"

"Where's yours, man?"

The cop pants deep a couple times. He touches his CB. "This is officer Meier. Suspect is now in custody." He releases a button on the CB and speaks to Jerrod. "You want to tell me why you couldn't cooperate?"

Jerrod surveys the ground, the tiny world at eye level in the flower bed.

Things look nice down here. "I was busy painting a mural."

"Then why are we receiving reports of vandalism taking place at this address?" The cop guides Jerrod to a standing position.

"Artistic differences," Jerrod responds.

Chapter Seven

Jake holds me between his thumb and forefinger, rotates me, and says, "A one, I keep going. A six, I go back."

I bounce at an angle off the asphalt, hitting on the edge between the five and three. I am not yet a matter of the filth, but I will be, as luck will have it. Luck. Doesn't matter. I have a lot of it. Sometimes it's good.

The cigarette pack will enviously report my story, but the quote unquote filth is not yet omnipresent. Like it or not, the filth is growing omniscient. However, there are still two kinds of filth in Junk City: the collective and the independent.

Jake rolls me to determine what he should do. If I am a piece of chaotic fate, then the way my molecules have been clumped for these moments may somehow mean more than the other little morphed chunks.

I have numbers engraved on me, hello?

I land on the corner of the six, five, and three and spin, as if I can gain my own momentum. I'm always rooting for Jake, but we're not playing for money.

A six, he goes back. A one, he keeps on.

Any other number? I don't want to talk about the idiosyncrasies of gamblers.

I am The Red Die. I like that. I like living in Jake's jacket. Nothing else is stored in the polyester pouch. I'm sacred.

Gamers rolled me on the felt tables of the Tropicana. Blown on me. Shaken with all the hope one person can muster in the bumptious pursuit of petty wealth.

I won the house money. I won some individuals some money. After I was thrown off the table by a drunkard named Isaac, I was packaged and placed in the gift shop. Never to be used for casino play again.

I was bought in a pack. A roughneck and his girlfriend bought me in a box of 120 with the promise of drilling tiny holes in each of us and somehow, process uncertain, turning us into Christmas lights. Christ save my comrades.

Some of us fell to the cushion while Bea leaned over to perform fellatio on Harry.

The next occasion for an intimate encounter came in the rest area next the river by The Filth house. Harry and Bea squirmed together. I spilled off the floorboard of the F-250.

In current time, I ding on the edge of the one and two.

Bea had opened the door and pulled on Harry's hand. "Let's do it outside." She pulled on his arm several times, shifted her pink cowboy boots for

leverage, and shoved me out the door by accident with her heel. I bounced directly under the engine. Bea yelled, "Shit I dropped one of them dice."

And Harry responded, "Screw it; I'm about to screw you."

Thank God. The world felt brutally real at that moment, just how I expected. But when picked up and examined by Jake, I knew I would be preserved for further ventures of fortune. From fingers to felt to macadam back to fingers.

Pricked on several edges, I am no longer pristine, but even as I glowed in the sun, feeling as though I had escaped several horrible fates, I felt dirty for knowing Jake would use me for answers that are clawed deeper into the human psyche than monetary concerns. A six point order of the universe.

This street too is a long way from a felt table in a climate controlled casino, but I give the kid what he wants, God bless him. Six! He's going back.

Chapter Eight

It's almost my time to rain. They stop beside me while the cop answers his CB. I gurgle, bobbing in the water I'm leaking. I make Jerrod's foot wet through his black Converse. "Did one of the neighbors call?" he asks, "Who called? One old guy came out here the other night from across the street asking what I was doing. I think he's senile."

This is partly true, and it fits. The old guy sounded crazy but definitely didn't come from one of the mansions, one of the boxcars if anywhere. Jerrod smiles with half of his mouth. Part of this can now be considered humorous. He nods at the overgrown houses on the other side of the street, most of which have been annexed by the academy for everything from faculty housing to the dining hall, but there are still some private residences—the owners unwilling to relinquish their property to the institution. "They get so excited in this neighborhood," Jerrod continued, "You'd think I was painting mutilated babies on the sides of their homes."

The cop pushes on Jerrod. Jerrod plants his foot on me and leans back. The cop yanks back on Jerrod's arms. "All right, sir, calm down." The two of them stand and stare at each other for a moment.

Jerrod speaks, "I don't appreciate being treated like a criminal." Jerrod looks at the mural from this distance. He needs to touch up a couple trees on the

right side of the stream, to keep things balanced. It's irking him having one side detailed and the other side not.

The cop asks, "Who can I phone to verify your story?"

Jerrod responds with a question. "Can I get these cuffs taken off?"

"Give me a name, or we can go to the station."

"Man, I dealt with one of the clerks. I have everything on paper at home. Let's just begin the bureaucratic process." Unfortunately, Jerrod cannot recall the headmaster's name. He feels like a royal fool right now. He uses the headmaster's name in casual conversation practically every day. It's amazing how some humans can forget things like their age when pressed for the answer. Because the library of human memory is amorphous, it can be difficult for the librarian of the mind to quickly track down the desperately needed item. Everything I can remember is imprinted on me, serialized — codified.

The cop shoves Jerrod and takes a step, but then he balks. "What's your name and date of birth?"

The cop presses on his CB. "This is officer Meier. Can you run a check on Herstrom, Jerrod. Date of birth March 1, 1989." The cop repeats the information and dispatch repeats it and tells officer Meier to wait a second.

The cop glances back at the academy. "What the hell is this supposed to be, anyway?"

"I'll explain my art to you if you explain to me why you ripped me off my ladder while I was working," Jerrod said.

"You were unresponsive. I don't know your mindset. I don't need you to explain anything other than what you're doing out here at 4:30 a.m."

"It's the coolest time of day. Do you realize how hard it is to paint with dry paint?"

"Are you a resident of the academy?" the cop asked.

"No." Be as honest as you can. "Can I get these cuffs taken off?"

"Maybe, if you cooperate."

"I am cooperating," Jerrod says.

"Why can't you tell me who gave you permission to paint this here?"

"Permission?" Jerrod fills the word with as much laughter as possible to help sell the lie. "I was hired to paint this mural." Jerrod is really banking on the quality of his work. But that's what he was counting on before he began this project. He's trying to be as truthful as possible. If this stunt even gives him the chance to talk to the headmaster, he'll be grateful. Talking to Dr. Winslow would be payment enough.

Dr. Winslow. There it is. Jerrod thanks the librarian in his mind for finding the name in the return bin.

A voice comes over the CB. *"There is no criminal record on Herstrom, Jerrod. Age nineteen, approximately 140 pounds..."* The cop turns down his CB.

"Since you don't have identification on you, and it's five in the morning, and you have no way to substantiate your story, I'd feel better about taking you to the station so we don't get another call about you tonight, or more likely, have to come find you later."

"Winslow," Jerrod says, "Dr. Winslow hired me." So he has to lie to try saving himself, and vandalize to get a proper introduction.

"Why would the owner of this joint hire you to deface his building when he's paying for a couple hundred artists to come to his school?"

"I put in a bid," Jerrod laughs and says, "A low bid."

The cop asks, "Why don't you have out tarps and lights, maybe some scaffolding? Something to indicate to the neighbors that you're legitimately working here? Not just some whacko." The cop leans close to Jerrod and shines the light in his face. He feels the abrupt sting of his pupils constricting, winces and tries not to look away; he knows the cop is checking for intoxication.

"Don't need to." Jerrod shrugs and nods at the rows of lights.

"What number can I call to verify this?"

Jerrod can't decide whether or not to give him a fake number. Although the academy is rather cozy with the staff living on the premises alongside the

students, it's hard telling if anyone would answer, not to mention anyone to answer the phone would tell the cop to arrest him and press charges.

The cop takes out his cell-phone. "I tell you what. I'll call information and get the number from the directory. If nobody answers, I get you a place to sleep for the night."

Jerrod focuses on the quickened throbs of blood rushing through the artery in his neck. He hopes the cop doesn't notice. I hope the maintenance workers don't notice that one of the valves isn't shutting down all the way. I love bobbing up and down, with the fluctuating pressure.

The atmosphere grows pale as the sun nears the crest of the looming plateau. The indirect sunlight vanquishes the fluorescents. Natural tones emanate from the stone building. Across the yard, from behind the cop, two strange forms with flashing heads walk up the sidewalk. They hesitate at the corner and walk toward the cruiser.

Jerrod gulps when the cop speaks, "This is officer Meier with the Junk City Police Department. I have a young man here by the name of Jerrod Herstrom who claims to have received payment from you to paint on the side of your building located at 1123 Park Lane. Please give me a call back at your earliest convenience to verify this information. My number is 101-888-6210."

"Can I get these cuffs removed now? I should really be working."

The cop presses the button on his CB. "This is officer Meier." He releases the button and sighs. "Can you contact the person who reported the vandalism taking place at 1123 Park Lane?"

All these numbers have me excited. It's a countdown now. Twenty minutes until I get to hop up and paint the yard and any inhabitants. I hope Jerrod can prolong his detainment a little longer.

"Please," Jerrod says, "these cuffs are causing damage."

"Report was anonymous."

"I've been cooperative, officer. Could I get these cuffs taken off? I could be utilizing this time."

Jerrod hears the two people saying something indistinguishable through the boxes over their heads. It frightens and amuses him. It's early enough that no cars have passed by yet, but here comes two simian creatures in black robes with square heads. Eyeballs are painted on the sides. Colored plastic wrap covers the pupils. A light inside flashes. The heads rotate.

The cop speaks into his CB: "This is officer Meier. Suspect claims he was hired by the academy to paint on their building." The cop releases the CB to laugh. "I tried contacting the main operator. Nobody's answering this time of morning. Could you look up any other possible number for me, see if we can't get somebody to verify his story?"

A flock of sparrows twitter as they burst from the lawn into a disjointed, flapping blob. Their primordial cries shatter the morning. Announcing the light. It is their esoteric ritual, begging the sun into the sky. The aubade of the audubon.

“I could be painting while you do this,” Jerrod says.

“We could be heading to the station right now too.”

“I already told you to do that.” Jerrod taps my top with his toe. I gurgle. The suction pulls me under. I feel congested.

The two costumed people with the flashing box heads zigzag through the yard. Judging from their voices, one is male and one is female. They might be tweaking their voices, but they speak in some Eastern European accents, repeating: “What are you looking at, block head?”

Jerrod nods at them. “Why don’t you arrest them? It looks like they’re creating art too.”

“I haven’t received any complaints about them.” The cop clears his throat.

“Well,” Jerrod says, “Can I get back to my painting? Technically, the damage has already been done.”

“Now how is it going to look when the academy calls me back and tells me they want to press charges, and I let you go?”

The people in costumes angle toward the officer. "What are you looking at, block head?"

The cop extends his free hand. "I need you to step away from me. This is the scene of an investigation." Multi-colored lights flash from the blockheads as they waddle toward the corner of the building. The cop shakes his head and takes out a pen and paper as dispatch tells him another number.

"Let me get back to my painting?" Jerrod asks.

"Be grateful you're not in a cell."

"Nobody is going to know. You can just call me, and I'll come down. No need to tackle me this time, huh? No need for more brutality, huh?"

The cop raises his finger to Jerrod. "Let's try this number."

"Can I at least pick up my supplies? Get the lids on my paints?" The incomplete trees are bugging him.

The cop's phone rings. Jerrod sits down as the cop answers. "Sorry to disturb you Mr. Archer. This is officer Meier. There was a report of vandalism taking place at your building located at 1123 Park Lane. I've detained a young man here." The water soaks the rear of his pants. As the cop turns to check on his cruiser, Jerrod rolls back and slips his feet through his locked arms and dashes toward the mural.

I'm bubbling up and down. This is more than twisting off a spigot. One of the gaskets is blown. Jerrod steps on me and slams my head down and water sloshes up his legs.

Chapter Nine

He rattled this pack, reassuring himself that he had enough cigarettes. All the houses looked quiet. Lights were on in most of them but revealed nothing, no life. Some sprinklers were running, probably set on a timer. The newspapers were still on the front steps of most of the homes.

Jake slapped his right hand to his face and slid it up his skull, tracing the hair line of his mohawk. Nothing else to do now. Fuck. He kneeled there in the street, replaced the die and fished out the baggy of amphetamine.

With the Ziploc seal squeezed between index and middle finger, he flicked the baggy with his ring finger. He balked for a moment, uncertain now how to retrieve the loose chemical product. He slid the baggy top open and looked into the pinkish granules. He jammed his thumb into the nook of his index finger, creating a little bowl around the thumbnail. He tapped out a little powder and quickly sniffed it. Some of the substance clung to his skin. He sniffed again, focusing on using the other nostril then licked at his nail, vigorously rubbed his finger on his top gums.

There was no way he was going home without his stiletto. That motherfucker. Jake walked back up the block. A man wearing work-clothes and carrying a thermos and lunchbox together in one hand walked out of his house

with blue siding towards his Dodge Ram. The man smirked and nodded at Jake. Jake nodded back. That's right, you fuck, just another day on the job. Glory day.

Jake neared the corner. A line of juniper bushes blocked his sight down the intersecting street. He stopped, took a breath, stepped around the corner. There was the man, several blocks down the street, pacing around his car, probably talking to the cops on the phone.

No matter now, the cops would be looking for any conspicuous punk. Jake walked up the sidewalk a ways and kneeled behind a pickup to finish his cigarette. Everything is in vain, but everything feels better with the vanity of a stiletto. Jake had the knife for too long, had too many memories with it to give up on it now. Not to mention they were just hard enough to replace that it would be worth it to at least look. He stubbed the butt out on a W bumper sticker and continued up the sidewalk.

The man turned to face down the street, and Jake rolled into someone's yard behind their hedges. He rolled his eyes up to see if the tips of his liberty spikes might be extending above the vegetation. This was the one moment, while playing secret agent, that he lamented his mohawk.

He started running through the scenarios. Fortunately, on Peach Bluff, being on foot was to his advantage. While there's large developments of subdivisions, there's still plenty of undeveloped lots to cut through, orchards

separating micro-neighborhoods, bike paths, canal roads, drainage ditches.

Places where the pigs would have to get out of their cars to follow. Evading the cops wasn't the real concern, getting the stiletto back was.

Unconsciously, Jake rubbed his hand back and forth over the manicured grass, moist with dew, waiting for some kind of internal alarm to ring, indicating that it's safe to proceed. The bang of the aluminum screen door brought him to attention. That, and the child's yell.

The girl couldn't have been more than eight. Her hair was pulled up in pigtails by ties with sparkly looking plastic marbles on them. She wore a yellow backpack with the face of a female cartoon character on it with big eyes, hair also in similar pigtails. "Mom, there's somebody in our yard."

Before Jake was quite to his feet, the mother flung the door the open. Jake raised his hand, as if giving an honest testimony, and spoke quickly to the woman wearing peach colored Capri pants, "Couldn't quite keep my footing there. Lovely morning for a tumble, eh?"

The woman grabbed the back of her child's backpack with one hand and put the other on her hip. "Get off my yard."

Jake clamped his jaw. He was ready to let the pretentious bitch hear it, but he was already on a dangerous mission. "I'm on my way," he spoke as he stumbled around the hedge.

The man had left the street, left his vehicle. Jake speed walked. Now was his chance. The morning traffic was picking up. The workers of the world were stirring, pacing like drones to their vehicles, to the shackles of their social construct. Sleepy eyed bits of the unquestioning assembly, ineluctably perpetuating the state of order.

Unless, for some reason, there was a patrol car cruising Peach Bluff, chances were he'd have a moment until one arrived from Junk City, but they were coming, no doubt. Jake stood for a moment two houses down from where the Sentra was parked. The house between the one where he stood and the one behind the car was protected by a chain-link fence taller than him. The property he stood next to was barricaded by a thick row of equally tall shrubbery.

Jake picked up one of the round, fist sized river rocks spread around the perimeter of the house and praised himself for having the presence of mind to do so. What if the you-motherfucker man locked the doors this time? And he had. Damn. Jake glanced to the horizon. The sun rays sliced over the purple plateau and blurred his vision. It felt like his irises were torn from the corneas as his pupils rapidly constricted.

The glass didn't smash. Shards of abrasive particles remained at the source of impact. The rock skittered into the street. Jake turned to grab it and was

alerted by the oncoming Buick's resounding horn. The maroon colored car swerved and hit the rock sending it into the gutter on the other side of the street.

"That's it, you motherfucker. I'm going to shoot your ass." The man disappeared into his house, leaving his door wide open.

Jake grabbed the rock, looked both ways before crossing back, and saw the red and blue on top of a white car speeding up the street in the distance, the lights not yet twirling, though, just coming for the report. More bureaucracy, more paperwork. "Fuck." He ran at the car and flung the rock as hard as he could.

The world was slowing to a dream like frequency now. He knocked away the excess of crumbling glass with the elbow of his leather jacket and lifted the lock. He pulled open the door, and just after he bent to search for the stiletto, a blast took out the two passenger side windows. "Jesus Christ!" Jake fumbled on the seat. Glass shards sprayed down from the other side. The distinctive sound of a shotgun being pumped emitted from the front steps. From somewhere behind him, across the road, a man shouted.

"What the fuck are you doing, Paul?"

"This cocksucker is breaking into my car."

"You're shooting at my goddamned house."

Between the seats, Jake spotted the tip of the stiletto. His hands shook violently. He got hold of the blade tip with his two fingers and retrieved it. It slipped and landed on the seat. He clinched the handle, pushed the release, and used the hard, powder blue plastic of the passenger door to push the blade against to retract it.

The neighbor's yelling registered, coming into Jake's consciousness like a vinyl 45 being played at 33 speed. "Don't do it, Paul. It's not fucking worth it."

Jake turned to see the barrel of the shotgun pointed at his face. Nothing can counteract the pendulum of fatalistic momentum. Fate or not, there's no turning back. Jake turned his head. The cop car would be on the scene in seconds. He turned back to the shotgun, locked eyes with the man—fierce green eyes scrunched within crow's-feet—assessed that he was cognitive enough with the approaching cop not to pull the trigger. Besides, now who looks like the criminal? Jake thrust the stiletto into jacket, grimaced, said, "Like a car is worth having this on your mortal fucking soul." The man snarled, and Jake spoke, "Fuck you," and turned and ran toward the cruiser.

There was another shot, but he felt nothing. "Holy shit." He turned. The man lowered the gun barrel from the sky. He turned. The patrol lights, now on, twirled. The cop car swerved into the oncoming lane—was partway on the sidewalk. Nothing to do but try to get through the thick grove of hedges. Jake

ran past the end of the chain-link fence and dove as hard as he could through the raspy intertwining branches. The twigs scraped his face, tore at his mohawk.

He rolled into the yard and sprang up to assess the new surroundings. Some kind of foliage was definitely tangled in his red liberty spikes. He ran his hand over the gluey hair, felt the crunchy strands bend and flop on his skull. Bits of twigs and greenery fell in front of him.

He had a clear shot to the backyard of this brick house. A regular wooden fence, two railings between posts. Bugle vines were taking over the posts. On the other side, the canal, and beyond that, an orchard. Then the river. Then home.

Jake laughed, shook himself to his feet, and spoke, "Jesus Christ, and I'm the fucking crazy one, right?"

Chapter Ten

No use stopping now. Wee ha. It's too much for me. He stops just long enough to pick me out of the grass. I've been out of his grasp for a while.

I'm clenched in his teeth as he picks up the ladder and finds his paint bowl in the tulips. He clammers up the ladder. Held in both hands, we make tiny strokes that successively move farther from his body. The image of himself lying in a clump on the floor of a prison flutters through his mind.

Jerrod hears the cop speaking, "Excuse me, Mr. Archer. I have to call you back."

The paint has been mixed. We diligently add more detail to the pine trees. At least Jerrod knows that his work is complete now, that is, he's done. He swishes me around in the filmy paint in the bottom of the paper bowl and makes outward strokes. This might be our last movement. This is the course of flow. He's glad that he's ending with the trees, giving life to the trees. The painting is close enough. The sound of the birds has died down. The pressure is off. The sun is in the sky. The day is on its own now.

There is a sudden burst stemming from his ribcage. A crushing, tingling sensation spider-webs throughout his body, paralyzing his side.

He falls. I fall. The officer rams the baton across his neck, pinning him down. I land within a fold of the elongated tulip leaves, brush side up, looking like a hairy green flower.

The cop laughs, "Boy, you had your chance. Very nice try, but you just created a whole world of shit for yourself. Let's go." The cop jerks Jerrod's arms, pulling backward so hard pop sounds emit from the shoulders. The grinding of tendons and bones wracks his shoulder-blades, sending a fiery surge down his spine. Jerrod screams. He kicks with his feet to try and stand and keep up with the officer dragging him across the yard but cannot.

Chapter Eleven

Some think they're above the filth, like the bastards in the houses on the other side of the river, on Peach Bluff, overlooking Junk City. They're only physically above us. The commuters complain to the city about the squalor they have to endure as they pass by, sipping their lattes in their climate controlled cars going to and from work or their kids' soccer practice.

They've written their letters to the editors about the condition of this part of the city. I have a couple copies of *The Daily Shrapnel* crumpled up around here. They complain that this area is an eyesore. But what they don't realize is that everybody is part of the filth. They think Peach Bluff is the cleanest, most economical, suburb of the city. The truth is that rather than complain about their neighbors on the other side of the river they should be building their own community.

Peach Bluff is far enough removed from the city, separated by the river, but it doesn't have the gumption to be its own town. They have their church, grocery store, and bar, but that's about it. Their identity still depends on Junk City, and then they have the audacity to complain about the filth they have to drive by to get to it—complain to *The Daily Shrapnel*.

They're bluffing themselves. They're all part of the filth. In another ten years, when next they remodel their kitchens or bathrooms or whatever, all that

material, all that new linoleum, new carpeting, new laminate, it's all waiting for an all expenses paid, one-way ticket to the dump. New or old, it's all squalor.

And filth scatters.

This is where the Filth has come to gather. Until everyone is equally free, Jake realizes, he's witnessing a special moment in his life. He has his brother and fellow punks. All of them living together, almost outside the system. A heterodox.

Jake flicked open his stiletto. Contrasted against the backdrop of the silt filled waters flowing under the shadow of the bridge in the early morning, the oranges and traces of blue embedded in the opaque mother-of-pearl handle glowed. It was the blade that appeared pall.

Jake pinched the end of the handle with thumb and forefinger and dangled the point over the insect. He lowered it to the thorax. The bug lifted its front legs, lifted its elongated neck, snapped its jaws. "Ugly little fucker, aren't you?" Jake lifted the knife point. "I should squash you." Jake slid the blade towards its mouth. The pincers snapped onto the metal. The bug dangled from the blade, opened up its wings as it was raised. "That's right. Fight to survive you mean little fucker."

The legs writhed in the air. The wings opened further. Jake carried the insect towards the other side of the sloped retaining wall, the side away from his

neighborhood, back to the undeveloped riverfront. Jake stopped in the middle of the sloping concrete covered with graffiti and turned toward the large square cement pillar and flicked the knife toward the muddy waters.

The bridge overhead hummed with the now constant traffic. He flicked the knife and the bug slid down the blade but did not release. Jake held the knife upside down, lifted the creature level with his eyes, and watched it struggle to grab hold with its fumbling legs. When it looked as though the bug was about to move up the blade, he flicked again, and still the insect remained. Jake walked the rest of the way to the far side of the abutment. He scraped the bug free on one of the slick red branches of a tamarisk bush where it grabbed hold with its legs and reared its neck back, chomping defiantly.

Jake wondered how many of these bugs might be out there, how many he may have rubbed up against on his hike home after he dove through the tightly intersecting juniper bushes, jumped over the wooden fence behind the brick house and followed the drainage ditch to one of those isolated orchards, cut through it, found himself on the bluff overlooking the river, slid down the loose soil, clinging from tree to tree, forged a trail through the tamarisk, cottonwood, sage, cactus, and then climbed back up the embankment for the risky proposition of crossing the bridge.

Chapter Twelve

Meier slides me from the metal loop on his belt, grips my side handle, my shaft protecting his forearm, as I smash Jerrod's ribcage. He convulses to the side, falls off the ladder into a clump. Meier is on him like a rabid dog. Seizes him now. We can't afford to let anything slip past us. We're behind, but we're catching up. We'll take any of these pukes off the streets, no matter how petty they are.

It's good that his first instinct is to strike. He needs the reptilian blood here in the high desert, needs to be as deadly as the rattlesnake without the warning. The perpetrator is detained with one swift blow. I didn't break his bones, but it feels good to get out and have an impact.

Meier is on a high. His jugular is twitching with his rapid pulse. If nothing else, Meir needs the experience, the exercise. This is good for his morale. Maybe he'll take this punk to the desert. He shoves me against Jerrod's neck as he retrieves the handcuffs.

Meier replaces me to the loop and yanks on the punk's bridled arms. Meier is exhausted and pissed that this arrest took so long. He pulls Jerrod across the yard. Yanking his shoulders this way has to be excruciating for him. Meier makes sure to walk just fast enough that the kid can't quite get his footing.

The sound of water pressure in the buried lines builds. Sprinkler heads pop up, one after the other, cascading toward Meier as they spray in their chanting rhythm. The sprinkler nearest him is set on course that follows him at the exact pace he is dragging the green haired freak. The droplets collect on my cylindrical body, making me slick.

Meier stops to offset the pattern. A male voice shouts, "Excuse me, officer." Something in the sprinkler breaks. There's a snap sound. A stream of water hisses out of the top. The main bead remains in one place, saturating Meier's crotch. The punker is floundering, torquing his head around to avoid the spray. Water trickles down Meiers arms. It's ditch water. He can smell the sediment, knows it will leave him itching. Jerrod struggles to stand. Meier turns to see a gangly man in a white shirt with black cuffs walking down the sidewalk. Meier shoves Jerrod and steps out of the spray.

The well dressed man calls again, "Excuse me, officer. There's been a mistake."

Meier looks down at the kid. The beam of water arcs over his spiky green head. Meier says, "This is the person responsible for defacing your property."

The man looks up and down between them. "There's been a misunderstanding."

Meier sucks in his breath. Here it comes. He needs to get out of there. Fuck having a discussion. He doesn't answer to the public. The public answers to him. This teary eyed babe has already caused Meier too much hassle, too much time. It's time to let out a little frustration and brag to the station about how the kid put up a pretty good fight—take him to the desert and beat him a little.

“Yes, sir,” Meier says, “I responded to a call that there was vandalism taking place at this address.”

“Yes, I believe I was misinterpreted. I'm Stanley Archer, Dr. Winslow's secretary, you talked with me on the phone. We wanted him detained so we may speak to him.”

“Sir,” Meier turns and gestures to the building. “He's the one who is responsible for the graffiti.”

“We're aware of that now, thanks to your prodigious efforts. We would like him released now. We have no desire to press charges at this time. My boss, Dr. Winslow, the owner of Bookcliff Academy, would like to talk to this young man.” The thin man in the suit glances to the kid lying under the beam of water then back to Meier. “We have something in store for him.” Stanley Archer winks at Meier. He doesn't know what to read into that bat of an eye, but I suddenly feel perverse in his hand. Meier releases me, allows me to fall into the ringer.

Chapter Thirteen

This is the information added from that last pack added to this filth. Jake, home now, fills one of the empty beer bottles with water from the facet. He looks at his cigarette. Two puffs left. He walks back into the living room. He sucks down the rest of the tobacco, holds it. The smoke doesn't feel like much in his raw lungs. It's his throat that feels strained from all the snorting, the sinuses draining, swallowing the repugnant chemical drain. "Get the fuck up, squatters." Jake throws the bottle at the wall with a cemetery scene painted on it. There's a ghost that Jerrod painted there because the hole that Jake punched out one night makes for a more three-dimensional mouth.

"What the fuck?" Wanda covers her head well after the glass shards and water explodes to this filth. She moves to get up while keeping her hand over her pink hair. "What the fuck's wrong with you?"

"I need cigarettes."

"Get 'em yourself." Wanda lies back down on the tire.

Robby still hasn't moved. Topaz bottle shards glint around the side of his freshly shaved, red bi-hawk. Jake kicks his boots. "Get up you worthless fuck."

"I heard you the first time." Robby speaks without moving. His mouth is smashed against the black rubber. His words are garbled. "You're a hard man to ignore."

"I need smokes."

"Then go get them. You know I don't have any fucking money."

"I'll give you money. The cops are looking for me."

Robby rotates his head. The other side of his haircut is broken down. He opens his eyes. He fumbles around in his pants' pocket. His hand digs, searches.

Jake figures he looking for something, but the gesture continues to look perverse. "Why don't you have Wanda help you with that?" Jake asks.

"Here," Robby flips a cigarette into the air. "You fuck. Chill for a fucking second and tell me what the hell you did while I fucking wake up, asshole. I finally go to sleep and all hell breaks loose."

Jake tells him the story, and in his telling, also leaves out the interaction with his ex-girlfriend. It's not that we don't know what happened. He doesn't want to relive that. And it's not my story to tell, to tell the truth, not yet anyway; although, I know it, and even if nobody believes the filth, they will.

Chapter Fourteen

The swamp cooler makes her skin mucilaginous. She doesn't want him to come back, but she is dreaming about him. I am wrapped about her, and she is dreaming about him. We are sticking together. We can almost smell him outside the door, the same scent: cigarettes, beer, leather, grease, and sweat. It permeates the candied smells in the room: potpourri, Obsession perfume, detergent, Neutrogena body lotion, and the black licorice on the bedside table.

She whimpers a little. She smiles, her large canine teeth always quick to be revealed. Calloused fingers massage the pelvic bone. Subconscious arousal palpitates around her frontal lobe.

She yearns for him still but wishes she didn't, wishes she wasn't carrying his child. The preternatural sensibility of maternity foments. I desire his leather jacket. It's not often that an Egyptian cotton 1,000 thread count sheet gets to rub against a spiked leather jacket, just as it is not often that a reputable woman would copulate with a Filth Punk.

There's something about that tanned, black hide slick against me. It's a sensation like no other. Pam sees something equally appealing in Jake: his world view, his appearance, his uninhibited, vulgar thrashing method of foreplay. They both reek. They're both from the fringe of society. They are filth in this sanctuary for slumber. They are exotics in this domestic place.

There's two kinds of filth in Junk City: the personal and the objective.

It is the calmest part of night. The door knob shakes a metallic rattle. She stirs, pulling me into a bunch between her legs. It's them. We entangle.

My dream is to be sewn into the jacket, to be its new liner. The jacket and I long to be together, to be inseparable, married. But I have a better chance at being torn into pieces and used to dust off a golden sphinx.

Pam doesn't know if she'll tell him that she's pregnant. She is forever tied to him by the breaking of one condom. It doesn't matter. She won't have an abortion. What good would it do to tell him? Would he change his clothes, change his appearance, get a job? Walk the line, as he refers to it? Her life has been cut up by him. She is sewn into the fabric of his existence whether he knows it or not.

She had quit her job as an apprentice tile setter for the union because of him. He bolstered her confidence, made her believe she could start her own business. Now that she knows she's pregnant, she's distraught about her decision, but what can she do? Move back to Oklahoma? Move back to her parents? If she still had her job, she wouldn't be able to work manual labor for much longer anyway.

Jake hasn't been around for almost a week. It was the vigor of his tenacity that made her believe so fervently in herself, believe that she could go out on her

own. He made her believe that there was a place for her custom mosaics in this community. He convinced her that she should never work for anybody else, that her designs were too good for Junk City.

She's a great tile setter, a real artist, but things don't happen so easily in Junk City, not so quickly. But she was tired of laying down squares, making repetitive cuts. She's paid her dues, completed her stint at the Bookcliff Academy.

It's ironic that some of her fellow academy students were envious of her medium. They told her that her work was not only artistic but pragmatic. She heard that there would be a place for her in any community. Ironic that she should choose to stay in the place that helped develop her craft and now cannot find a place for her craft. The rest of the city isn't as receptive to works of art as she was hoping. Just because this city has an alternative art school in the middle of it, it doesn't make the citizens welcoming of the artists.

Ironic that she should fall for a piece of trash. He even calls himself Filth. She went after him despite her friends' advice. The forbidden always looks so alluring.

She knew building up a customer base would take time, but she couldn't work any longer for the unions. She was miserable taking orders from middle-

aged, male assholes. Jake made her realize it's okay to fail. Jake exemplified defiance, fearlessness—survival in a competitive world.

She was willing to take a chance on herself. But now she has returned to being an apprentice for an independent contractor that is a bigger prick than the union guys and pays less. Since she walked out on her contract, the union won't take her back.

Her tile designs would look fabulous in any home. She has designs for every motif, for every room in any house. For the bathroom, she has rainforest designs filled with tropical birds and vegetation. For the kid's bathroom, she has zoo animals, giraffes and lions. Her designs can be as intensely detailed as the backyard magnified—dewy blades of grass teeming with ants and beetles with flowers looming overhead. For the kitchen, she has a sundry of vines and flowers. For the floors of most any other room, she has compass roses.

But no contractor wants to give her a chance, too worried about time and the bottom line. The individual homeowner doesn't want to give her a chance, too worried that they'd be sacrificing durability for creativity. That a mosaic would take too long.

Sometimes she asked for too much, sometimes for too little.

The alarm clock is set to go off in another three hours and seventeen minutes. She is in the rapid eye movement stage of sleep. From her dreams, she

can almost feel him standing there. She visualizes him, though, out of his element, away from the litter and concrete, away from the buildings. He is sitting in a tree. A family tree. She is calling for him to climb down, but he acts as though he cannot hear. Workers in hardhats are showing up with aerial lifts and chainsaws. His nonchalance is attractive. His domineering brow accentuated by the spiked, red mohawk, sides freshly shaved, indicate a grandiose indifference. The commanding gesticulations of his smoking habit, his only concern. His tough leather jacket with the metal spikes renders him impenetrable.

Her rough fingers twitch faster, scratching at the nylon panties. The door knob jingles again. She rolls over and we entangle tighter, sticking against each other.

A knocking comes on the door. In her dream, they're chopping down the cottonwood. She moans from pleasure and despair. A light orgasm flutters to the surface, wanting to spread, somehow suspends itself. In her somnolent mind, she knows it is him. She knows she will let him in one more time, but she will deny herself his sensuality. He is thorough in the way a man can be when he believes he may not get sex again. She blinks.

The knocking comes again, louder. She is fully awake. She realizes what her hand has been up too, her rough, dry hand that should be too tired to move, should be cramped shut. A hand that can barely unfurl to grip the steering wheel

to drive herself home at the end of the day. A hand that spends its days crimped around bucket handles and trowels.

No matter how much lotion she uses, no matter what brand, it's never enough to ease the damage caused by the grout, thinset, and sealer.

She wants to make him knock for a while, but she knows he won't stop until he gets an answer. That's just the way he is, she would say sober or otherwise, but she's only seen him otherwise. But lately, otherwise has meant roaring drunk. When he was just high, she could at least reason with him, could feel like more than a sexual object. But he only shows up drunk now. He told her that's why he likes tequila; the drunk is closer to a hallucination than any other alcohol.

She wraps me under her arms, over her breasts, around her lower back. She walks to the balcony door, and I am un-tucked from the far side of the bed but do not slide out from the near corner. Between her folded arm and the bed I dangle, draping to the white carpet.

She twists the lock. He hears it and pushes the door open and takes a step inside, but Pam shoves the door back on him. His greasy boot is on my hem. It's violating. I have no love for his other appurtenances. This is the lowest way to treat a sheet, stepping on us with a boot.

"C'mon, let me in," he says.

“What do you want, Jake?” Pam’s voice is groggy. She notices that he’s standing on me.

“I came to see you.”

“Get off of my sheet.” She pulls on me, but not hard enough to do anything more than stretch the fabric. She doesn’t want me tearing, doesn’t want me, essentially, wiping his boot. “This is Egyptian Cotton. You have no idea how much this costs.”

“I didn’t know you were such a materialist.” Jake speaks slowly before lifting his boot. It’s sweet relief, but I sense he left a smudge. “I just use a sleeping bag on my bed.”

Pam recoils at the smell of booze. “I told you last time I wasn’t going to do this again.”

He pushes the door open and steps inside. “We’re not doing anything.” His forcefulness used to be sexy to Pam, nothing like a man who knows what he wants and takes it. Perhaps that’s why so many of these late night visits ended with him having his way with her. It’s so easy to relax under his vigorous fawning.

But she made her resolution. No more. He reaches out to her shoulder and leans in for a kiss, but Pam slaps his arm away and jerks her head back.

His obstinate ardor is why she even gave him a chance. I've heard her tell this story over the phone to her friend back in Oklahoma:

Chapter Fifteen

We were at The Uranium Station, this sleazy bar designed like an old train station. The first thing I see as I'm leaving is this total punker — mohawk, black jacket, chains, all that crap—he's sitting on top of the newspaper stands next to the trolley stop, banging his boots into the glass. It looked like he was trying to break it.

I'm glad Kerri and Courtney were with me, Kerri mostly. You'd like both of them. Courtney's a ditz, and Kerri is this totally stoic gym rat. She was raised on some military base.

Anyway, when he sees me, he smacks at his chest with both hands and flails backward. I thought he was going to fall off the backside of the stand. I'm wondering if he's overdosing.

Kerri and Courtney ask me what's wrong with him. That's when he starts screaming, "My heart, my heart."

You should have seen Courtney. She was up on the toes of these braided, white, vinyl high heels that look really cute with her black and white floral pattern dress, taking these little pigeon-toed steps and repeating, "Oh my God," in her mousy voice while the guy, Jake, continued yelling about his heart.

Kerri nodded at the two of them and asked me if I thought it was a match made in heaven.

Courtney's screaming, the punker's screaming, and then there is this big guy, looks like he just got out of the shower, wearing a black and fluorescent green windbreaker, walks up the sidewalk. He asks us if we know the punk, if we know what's wrong with him.

The guy yells at the punk, "Hey, dipshit, what's your problem? Do you need an ambulance?"

The punk leans up with his hands on his chest. It's at that point that I notice that he has had a lit cigarette in his lips the whole time. He says, "My heart, it works. I saw her." He pointed at me and proclaimed that his heart just started beating for the first time, says something about having been a loveless zombie.

The weird workout dude called him an asshole and turns to Kerri and asks if he would like for him to walk her home. She tells him no but ends up taking his phone number.

So as we're walking away, I turn to see the punk following us. I could hear him following, all the chains on his jacket and jeans and around his neck jingling as he picked flowers out of the planter.

It was just after last call, so there were a lot of other drunks milling around, so we just tried walking a little faster, figuring we'd lose him in the crowd.

It was sort of amusing. He looked like a harmless little boy with a mohawk who was walking along the winding edge of the brick flower bed, stopping and leaning over,

precariously plucking flowers. He didn't act real drunk. I tried not to watch, but I could hear him catcalling after me, asking if I like purple snapdragons.

One of the last mosaics I made at the academy was a six foot tall snapdragon on a six foot tall obelisk. Purple. I'm really not conceited, or at least, I'm less so now. But the coincidence messed with me. When he asked if I like snapdragons, it felt somehow personally significant, like he knew me or something.

Maybe I did just want the attention. I wasn't feeling that hot about myself. I had decided to crimp my hair, which usually, you know, makes me feel either fucking rocking, or really awkward. I was bloated. I felt like my ass was bulging out of my skirt. It was way too tight. I didn't want to wear it, but Kerri and Courtney agreed that it was 'super cute.'

And my last excuse is that all the guys I ended up talking to were totally lame: engineers, business majors, or weathermen. You know? This punker at least seemed interesting.

So, I turned around and yelled back at him, asked him if he needed the number for a good cardiologist.

Jake looks intimidating but goofy too, you know? And there is something charming about him. I yelled at him that picking flowers is a crime.

He retorted that he would commit much more heinous acts for me if I asked him to. He would commit much more heinous acts on me if I let him. That's when Kerri

turned around and asked him if he would stop following us if I asked him. He responded that he wouldn't, and do I like daisies?

All this got the attention of some real frat looking guys, you know — pastel polo shirts, bleached hair, gold necklaces. They asked Jake if he's messing with us. We kept walking, thinking that he would be preoccupied. These stupid frat guys seemed more interested in fighting than defending our honor or chasing after us. They kept asking him what he was doing, and he kept telling them that he was picking flowers. They called him a faggot, etcetera. He was standing on the planter above them.

I turned around to see them grabbing at the chains on his leg, so he kicked one of the guys in the face. I know it's wrong, but it turned me on. I know. I'm awful.

So, before any of them register what's really happened to their pal wallowing on the sidewalk, Jake runs down the planter in the opposite direction and hops off and disappears down the block. Obviously, the dude who just caught a boot to the nose is making a big commotion and drawing a crowd, but the punk is long gone. Or so we thought.

As we were nearing the other end of the block, he stepped out from the side of the Shale Theater. I could hear his chains rattling before he turned the corner. He walked toward us, still holding the bouquet, and stopped under the marquee. We stopped where we were, and Kerri told him to leave us alone. He said that he can't, said he doesn't usually fall for normals. That's what he said. Hypocrite. Said he didn't know what to do

or how to act around us, but he's willing to learn. He wanted to give me the flowers.

Kerri told him that we didn't want to get caught carrying a bouquet of misdemeanors.

He repeated that he doesn't know how to treat a normal girl. Like I'm that normal.

Then he asks, "Am I not supposed to bring you flowers?"

Kerri says, "They shouldn't be stolen from the city."

Well, it's too late now, he says and starts walking toward us.

Kerri asks if Courtney has her pepper spray with her. She does. She pulls it out and gives it to Kerri. She holds it up and threatens the guy.

He stops and says, "You could spray that shit in my eyes, but I'd still be able to see how beautiful your friend is."

Kerri tells him that he's pathetic. He responds by asking me my name. He asks if I was sure that I didn't want the flowers. I told him no.

He looked sexy standing under the lights of the theater. He has these really pale blue eyes. There's something strong, I'd say austere, about his features. They're especially set off by the mohawk, which is pretty hot in its own right, you know. That, and, there was just something about a gnarly looking guy dressed in ripped jeans and leather jacket holding a bouquet in the middle of the night under lights shining on him like a spotlight on a cement stage. It was sexy.

By this time, the frat guys have spotted him. I hear their steps running up the sidewalk behind us. The punk throws the flowers into the air and promises me that we

shall continue our conversation momentarily and runs off again with the frat boys chasing after him. We kept walking toward Courtney's house.

I figured that was it for him for the night. We turned off of Main Street and had turned down a couple side streets. I was actually kind of disappointed.

We were walking past the steps of the old courthouse building when I hear someone say, "You're not even going to say hello to me after all we've been through?" I looked up the steps, and there he was, leaning back on the inside of the concrete steps. He ran down the stairs and followed us.

We were far enough from Main Street that there was nobody else around, and less street lights. The traffic was dying down. Kerri turned around and flipped open her cell phone and told him that she was going to call the police.

He just ran into the street and sort of sidestepped alongside us, saying he wasn't going to touch us or anything. He just wanted my name and number. I couldn't understand half the things he was saying. His words were coming out so fast, talking about wanting to take me places. He asked if I liked corndogs. I think he even said something about pawning a television set to buy me dinner.

Kerri pressed a couple buttons that made a high pitched beep. She told him she was dialing 911.

Jake lifted his hands into the air and ran around in front of us and walked backwards. He apologized and told us his name. He said that all he wanted was my name

and number. He just wanted a chance with me. I told him my name, and Kerri nearly lost it.

She pinched the hell out of my arm and told me not to give any street freak my real name. So I said, "You shouldn't pinch me, Kerri."

Then Courtney started freaking out and saying, "Let's turn around and get the hell out of here. I'm calling a cab. Let's just call a cab."

By this time, Jake still has his arms raised, but he was kneeling on the sidewalk. "Look, I'm harmless. I just want to talk to Pam."

Well, Kerri said, she doesn't want to talk to you.

This wasn't necessarily true, but I was going along with everything. I wanted to see what would happen next. The punker didn't disappoint. He said, "All right, you don't have to turn around or anything. If Pam won't talk to me, then all I ask is that she gives me the pleasure of stepping on me as she passes."

Then he stretched out flat and began pleading for me to walk on him with my high heeled boots. For some reason, this really disturbed Courtney. I was bemused by the gesture. It was like, way too surreal for her. She actually started crying and begging us to explain to her why this was happening and wanted to know what he wanted. Kerri shook the hell out of her and told her to quit it. You know, typical drunkard melodrama. Kerri turned toward me and said that we should just turn around and call a cab.

I told her no. I said, "I'll stomp my heels into this freak." It actually sounded like fun.

Jake lifted his mohawked head and said that I have the voice of an angel and said that I should walk all over him, because that's all he wants from me.

Courtney walked out in the street. She was sniveling the whole time. Kerri held onto my arm to help me balance. I stepped on his neck. He moaned with pleasure, even as Kerri kicked him in the ribs. He yelped, "Oh yes," was telling us how great it felt, said it was erotic. That was disturbing.

I finished walking down his back . I stepped on his thighs and calves and continued up the street.

Jake yelled after us to wait. That's when Courtney lost it. She screamed a bunch of obscenities, told him that he got what he wanted, and he should leave us alone. It was really funny how freaked out she got.

"Hey," he yelled, "I already proved that I'm harmless. I let Pam walk all over me. I just want her phone number."

I scribbled my digits on a receipt and crumpled it up and threw it into the gutter. Kerri couldn't believe that I gave him my phone number. In a way, I can't believe I did either, but I was curious to see what it would be like to go on a date with this lunatic. Besides, I didn't think he'd call. It seemed like such a game to him.

Chapter Sixteen

"I just want to talk for a minute." He steps toward the window and turns around. I can still feel the greasy boot print.

The fluorescent street light streaking through the mini-blinds casts a lambent haze over the wicker shelves and chest of drawers. The low light illuminates his acanthoid outline. He is a jagged silhouette with a blue-green aura.

"Listen," he gesticulates, and in the shadows, he looks like a marionette, arms swinging from joints too loose. "I walked all the way from my place to see you."

"So? Big deal. That's what you say every time. I don't even know where you live, Jake."

"I know. And you wouldn't want to know. Do you really need to know?" His smell has permeated the candied scent of the room. The fusion of smells, alcohol, tobacco, and garbage, with the sweet synthetic aroma is nauseating.

"Once, yes. I'm not sure I care now." Pam pulls me about her in clumps. I'm off the floor. She wads me up, embraces the clumps.

Jake steps close and extends a hand to a bare spot on her waist. The leather cuff brushes against me. It's rough and slick at the same time and

exhilarating. Pam pushes on one of those sensuous lapels. "Not tonight, Jake. You can sleep downstairs on the sofa."

"Hey, I can sleep outside too. I walked up here for you, not your couch."

"I don't care. I'm not your call girl. You can't come to my house in the middle of the night any time you're horny and expect to screw me. There are men who want to be with me during the day, too, not just at three in the morning. Men, not boys."

"Baby, come on, I want you all day and all night." Jake takes off his coat and slings it into the corner. How will it get up? How will it come to me?

"Hey, don't get too comfortable; you're not staying here tonight. You *can* sleep outside for all I care."

"I already told you I would, just let me make you feel good first."

"I'm on my period," she lies.

"So? That might scare off these pretentious bastards you speak of worshipping you, but I want your blood. I love your blood. I want all of you." Jake grabs at her waist and makes a pass at her. Pam turns her head. Jake sucks on her neck, licks her ear. Pam shoves him backward with both hands. I fall, draping over the mattress corner, clumping up at her feet. I'm a little closer to the jacket.

Jake crunches into the wicker chest of drawers. The photos and jewelry box clatter to the floor. The venetian blinds rattle as he grips about for balance. Pam is surprised by how hard she shoved him. She didn't mean to push so hard.

"What the fuck, Pam? What's your problem?"

"You want to know what my problem is?" Pam stares at him. She knows telling him about the pregnancy is futile. But she has a list: being pregnant, the father, her job, the water cooler on her van, the spot in front of the television where he puked.

"Yeah, what's your problem?"

"Remember the last time you showed up for a piece of ass in the middle of the night?" Jake opens his mouth to speak, but Pam cuts him off. "Remember what I asked you after we finished, I won't even call it making love, after we finished fucking? I asked you what you were thinking about, and do you remember what you said?"

"Yeah," Jake says, "I said—"

Pam finishes the sentence for him. "Catfishing. You finish screwing me, you're lying in my bed, you've got your arms around me, and I ask you what you're thinking, and you fucking say catfishing? You're cuddled with me in an intimate moment, and you're thinking about the ugliest fish on the fucking planet."

Jake raises his hands and says, “Catfish aren’t ugly—”

“That’s not even the fucking point.” Pam says.

Jake responds, “I know. I’m sorry. I answered honestly though. Do you want me to lie to you?”

“No.” Pam sighs. “I just want you to be thinking about me, about us, especially after you finish screwing me for Christ’s sake.”

“C’mon, Pam. My mind was wandering. I answered honestly. I thought women liked honesty. Let me hold you.” Jake tries again to grab at her.

“No. Stay the fuck away from me.” She punches him in the chest, kneels, and pulls me over her shoulders.

“Ah, c’mon, baby.” Jake pulls his black t-shirt over his head, making the spikes of his mohawk quiver. Gluey red flecks puff into the blue-green glow.

His torso is gaunt. His ribs protrude. The paleness of skin is obvious in the low light.

Jake crawls towards Pam. His crunchy hair prickles and chafes at her legs. He kisses at her toes. “I’m groveling, okay? I’m sorry. I’m graveling. Let me kiss your divine toes.”

Pam wants to laugh, and has, but it isn’t funny this time. She needs more than a callow playboy. She flicks her foot at his face. He reels back and cries out,

“Goddamnit. What’s your problem?” She doesn’t kick hard, but the impact releases something wet, snot or slobber.

“I’m not sleeping with you. I don’t want you touching me. We’ve played this game before. I’m not doing it again.”

“What’s the big deal?” Jake stands, holding his cheek. “Are you seeing somebody else?”

As easy as it might be to lie, Pam tells the truth. “No. I just want something more from you. I want an adult, somebody who has their shit together. I want to know that you want me for more than a nightly sexual escapade. I’m not your plaything anymore, Jake.”

“Pam, you’re not my plaything. You’re so hot. I really want to be with you. I’ve never felt this way before. I’d do anything for you, but I don’t lead a stable, nine to five type lifestyle. I function outside the boundaries of normal society. You knew how I was when we met. What do you want from me? I sling dope, Pam. You know I want to be with you. I walked all the way out here for you. It’s like ten miles.”

“I don’t care. You should have called first. I would have told you not to waste your time.”

Jake steps forward and Pam raises her hand to ward him off. Jake grabs her wrist and sucks on her index finger, swirls his tongue around the phalange.

She curls her hand tight and gouges her nail into his submandibular duct. He yanks her hand away and her knuckle scrapes on his incisors. Jake grabs at his mouth. Pam grabs at her wet finger. "What the fuck?" he mumbles and holds his chin.

"I'm calling the cops." Pam walks toward the portable phone on the bedside table, dragging me behind her. Jake steps firm on my corner. Pam turns and tugs on me. "Get off of my sheet." She yanks hard, and I slip a little. Jake steps towards her on the fabric stretched at an angle between his boot and her hands drawn tight to her chest. Instead of risking having me rip, she lets go, stands there exposed for a moment before turning and picking up the phone. The phone beeps, and the dial tone is audible. She presses another button, then another.

Jake steps closer. "Fuck, Pam, come on."

"If I press this one more time, the cops will be on their way, okay, so get the hell out of my house, and get off of my goddamn sheets."

Jake snatches the phone from her hand and flings it into the door. Pam shrieks. She's lost her capacity to formulate words she's so outraged. Jake dances around violently, his boots pound on me. His arms swing dangerously close to Pam's face. She winces. "You care more about this fucking sheet than you do about me."

“Stop,” Pam screeches and shoves at him. He grabs at her wrists, but she thrashes. They fall to the coverless bed and continue their struggle. Jake pins her wrists down above her head. His grip stings. The blood drains from her hands.

He licks at her neck, slides his tongue down her chest, sucks on her nipple. She quits bucking, lies still, and takes a deep breath. “Fine. Go ahead and fuck me. It’s not like you can get me pregnant again.”

Jake releases her wrists and sits up straddling her waist. In the refracted glow, she can see his eyes blinking. He draws in a long breath and says, “You’re pregnant?”

“Yes. What does it matter? Aren’t you going to fuck me?”

“Is it mine?” Jake pauses between each word.

“No, Jake, I’m a raging slut. It’s probably the other guy who shows up at midnight to fuck me.” Her hands tingle as the blood flow returns.

“What are you going to do?” he asks.

“What are *you* going to *do*?” she retorts.

He rubs the side of his shaved head. “I suppose I could scrape together some cash for a scraping, you know?”

“Very clever. Fuck you and get off of me.”

Jake leans back on his knees. He swings his leg away as though dismounting a motorcycle and steps on me. "What do you want me to do?" he asks.

Pam turns her head and sees him standing on me with his boots. "Get the fuck off of my sheet." She swings her feet over the bed and shoves him. He falters backward a step but remains on me. Pam bunches me up and yanks to free me. A section of my body separates from my hem. For me, it sounds like the snapping of ropes, one at a time.

"Get the fuck out." She balls me up and shoves me at him. He's passively accepting her violence, looking stupid. "Take this sheet you fucking ruined like my life and get the fuck out."

He wraps his arms around me, an automatic reaction as he stumbles and falls backward under her attack. He fetches his shirt and jacket while he's lying on the floor. She kicks at him.

Jacket and I are mashed together again. Our love is meant to be. She kicks at him and he scrambles up, knocking into the wicker furniture.

He drops me to the floor, but she rapidly picks me up and shoves me at him again. "You ruined this." She's crying. "You fucking keep it."

And he does. He does keep me.

He carries me to the dumpster behind the apartment. He caresses me between his fingers, feels my fine silken quality. There's no way he's carrying me across Peach Bluff to his house, but he feels as though he should do something symbolic with me. He extracts a knife with a pearl handle, presses a button, and the blade snaps out.

Once again part of me is stood on, trampled into the oil on the pavement. Stretched tight between foot and fist, he makes his incision. He slices up the other way, freeing this ratty swath, not large enough for much, but at least a section of me gets stuffed into his breast pocket.

Chapter Seventeen

Trent manipulates me in short hand, observing the cop and the kid with the spiked green hair. The kid is one of the Filth punks, no doubt. There's two kinds of filth in Junk City, the subculture and garbage surrounding them.

Trent had already taken a picture of the kid painting, flash off of course. I long for flowing prose but only produce the quick flicks of fleeting notes desperately trying to be articulated, completed only by the competing keyboard.

The 3x5 spiral landing pad and I do the real work, the field work on the battle field. Without me, nothing turns up on the porches of the masses folded in the newsprint of The Daily Shrapnel. I plant the seeds for thousands of words. The camera can only snatch one thousand at a time, and it doesn't handle dialogue.

He leans around the coarse bark and watches as the punk is tackled in the flower bed. The details of the flowers will go un-noticed in revision. It can fit in the picture, the beauty un-noticed if not in color.

The painting in progress has been a spectacle for quite a few in Junk City. It is of particular interest to the students of Bookcliff Academy. Word has leaked out that the mural was never commissioned, but there are uncertainties, vagaries, surrounding the work—such is the world of creative form.

It is Trent who called the police. He needs this story. This will bump him up from the status of Cub Reporter. He snaps a photo of the cop cuffing the kid while kneeling on him.

The cop asks for identification. The punk kid asks for the cop's. They get up and the kid tries telling the cop that he was commissioned to paint this mural. He's a good liar.

Somewhere on the landing pad are the details of the painting of the man on the piano in the stream, but now Trent is too busy with dialogue. I'm rolling crazy over the paper, smashing ink into the pulp.

The fury with which the cop handles the kid is a potential bonus, another insight into the violent handling of suspicious citizens. It's Trent's job to remain objective, but there is certainly a commentary here. He's watched the school's wall for several nights. The artist works sporadically. Trent considers himself a pragmatist, but during the late nights sitting in his Fiaro, he has jotted down more than a few chimerical lines.

Trent has made friends with a few of the residents, few ever being from Junk City, as though Bookcliff Academy has made up its mind to only solicit external talent. The bureaucracy disinterests him. Not that he too couldn't flourish in an artistic community, but why bother when he knows he desires to

be a journalist? He realized some time ago that if he's going to be a good journalist, he's going to have to find his own stories.

The human interest stuff he gets assigned isn't going to cut it. If he has to interview another restaurant owner about how their steaks are somehow tastier than the last place, he's going to stab me into his heart. Then there will be discussion of the old adage about the sword and me. He can just see the headline, something trite: Reporter Writes His Heart Out.

The cop violently jerks the kid to a standing position. Trent can barely make out the discussion taking place between the officer and the offender. The painter is yelling, but the cop's words are inaudible. His voice is so deep it just sounds like a bull gargling.

The officer moves his detainee toward the squad car, and the kid starts shouting that he wants to go. In fact, the kid with the spiked green hair is practically dragging the cop as he shouts that he wants to speak with a competent officer.

Hunched over, he stalks after the two of them. He suddenly feels foolish. The words of the kid, if not the belligerently self-righteous attitude of the kid, resonates with the cop. They both stop. The cop lets go. The kid turns around.

Trent dives behind a lilac grove. He's concealed low to the ground where the grass grows long in the haven of spindly lilac stalks, safe from weed whacker

and lawnmower alike. Heart-shaped leaves lean, as though straining, pointing toward the earth. For a moment he is hypnotized by the fragrance of lilacs and dewy grass, the lucent backdrop as seen through the organic louvers, the crepuscular skyline cascading upon the colonnade, the open field, the cottonwood trees, and the cop and the kid on the sidewalk. Trent takes short, gasping, nose tingling half breaths, the precursory wheezes to a sneeze that would dislodge the cobweb from his nose, disclose him from his clandestine location. He drops me, drops the landing pad, wipes at his entire face with both hands. He is arachnophobic and can now only see tiny red hourglasses dancing around the dark of the branches.

Trent rolls to his back and stares into the apogee. The firmament looks like an eye. It is the darkest, the pupil center, filled with twinkling stars. Strands of light crease through the receding bands of night, a dancing dilation of day—the iris.

Trent reaches up around his head, rubs through the shorn, prickling blades of grass with the backs of his hands until his finger tips bump into my stainless steel side, finds the spiral on the landing pad, grabs hold of us and continues recording what is being said.

The kid is presenting a pretty convincing case that he was actually hired by Bookcliff Academy to paint the mural. To make things better, the cop has an

armory of quips to shoot back. The cop tells the kid that he's not painting a mural, he's a graffiti artist, and didn't they teach him that in art school? Graffiti artists use spray cans.

Trent is laughing to himself about the current moment, leading a gonzo journalistic life while thousands are paying for degrees that are teaching them, essentially, that they need to go into the field and find their stories, do the very thing he is doing.

Strangely costumed people with flashing boxes on their heads appear. The weirdos walk across the lawn mingle around the cop and the punker for a moment before the cop threatens them. Trent lies still as they pace around the side of the building.

The cop is calling the station, getting numbers to the academy, trying to verify the story. So far, the only loop-hole has been that Jerrod is out here at night without much equipment; that, and there isn't anyone around to say otherwise, a sort of ad hoc ergo propter hoc.

The cop answers his phone as Jerrod slips his feet through his cuffed arms and runs across the lawn to set up his ladder.

There should at least be a comedic, human interest, editorial in this. Despite all the late nights, despite the horrible poems, despite being soggy,

despite the spiders, Trent is thankful he's here. He's even more thankful when he sees the cop approach Jerrod with his truncheon drawn.

Trent crawls to the edge of the lilac bushes and snaps a photo of the cop using excessive force. It's going to be a good day. It's time to play the part of traditional journalist, time to ask some questions. The sprinklers gurgle to life. One saturates the cop's midsection. It turns as though it is following him.

Trent rolls onto his knees, before he gets to his feet, he hears the shouts of another man, importuning the officer. The story keeps getting better.

Chapter Eighteen

Stanley, my father's assistant, gives a brief reminder about the applicant from last year before ushering in the boy with curious hair. Really, his head looks like some kind of seed pod from the belladonna family.

As though finally at the podium, my father gestures, palm upward, *allegretto*, conducting the boy to the captain's chairs upholstered with burgundy leather. They set, pushed tight against his mahogany desk at the opposite end of the room.

He clasps his hands on the back of his chartreuse, velvet suit jacket and watches as the kid with the spiky green hair takes a seat and tries to speak, "Sir, I—"

My father scoffs and holds up his hand. As he turns his back on the bright end of the room, Jerrod licks a nine volt battery. It's curious. I'm uncertain as to why he does this. He is an appealing anomaly.

If love too is a representation of form, an ideal far removed as artifice, such as myself, then there is no love. I pine for this boy. I swoon. For him, my grayscale petals bloom. But this is all in the past now. I am her likeness refracted off his iris.

My father paid Gebhart to paint her in absolutes: black and white. Gebhart couldn't see her that way in front of the Koi pond. She squirmed in her

gown, repeating that *this shit isn't natural, not for this century, not ever*, as she picked at her sequins and pulled at her gloves twisting around her wrists.

But enough about representation. I don't want to have to sound as Elizabethan as father wanted me to be. He stressed those two notes. I should be Elizabethan and black and white. But when I came back in grayscale, father was furious. *Black and white, like the keys on a piano*, he screamed, shaking his fingers at Gebhart. It's all in the past now. We all survived my inception, her ideal form as exposed to canvass by brush in achromatic scale as refracted off the artist's eyes.

"I presume, Mr. Herstrom, judging from your application, that there is no need for me to introduce myself." My father looks down at the stone globe with gold inlay. "This incident is peculiar, even by my standards."

The truth is, this is a great opportunity to take advantage of this aberration, to justify to himself, to the boy, and most of all, to Gebhart and the rest of the board, that they should take him in on probationary terms. There's always room in the staff quarters. Give the boy some chores to "pay" restitution. He had assumed the boy might ask questions regarding his rejection letter. He had counted on seeing another application the following year.

My father judges his appearance. He thinks that the boy clearly needs guidance and discipline. "My belief," my father says, interested in picking his brain, embodying his dominant role. He raises his voice. "My belief has always

been that the artist should, and often must, work outside the confines of logic and reason. Mr. Herstrom, surely you realized that your approach was most unorthodox?" He paces around his office, occasionally placing a hand on the spine of a book. He touches the horrendous, gold, filigree frame ensconcing me. Pulls his hand away as though shocked. Father walks to the side opposite of Jerrod and looks out the window to the lawn, stares for a moment, raps his fingertips on the interior pane.

He likes this kid. His art resonates from another dimension. A living, symbolic dimension that needs to be mined for clues to our universe.

Father was enthralled, if not a little wiggled out, by the mural. When he first saw it, out strolling the grounds, he was sure it appeared as an abiogenetic secretion from the academy.

He turns to face Jerrod, who opens his mouth, cuts him off and continues, "Our acts must beseech more than just attention. Our eccentricities must draw from the foundation of form and theory." Father sees Jerrod's talent as either divine, or highly specious. "We do have a responsibility. Even at times, I find that a hearty rebellion against order, is, well, in order. But, my boy, tell me, surely you are more than a simple recalcitrant."

Father pauses to breathe, and Jerrod's throat makes a squeaky gasp sound indicating he is about to talk, but is cut short. "This is all very cerebral,

understand. We should pursue insanity to shed light unto the sane." I am pleased that my father is so garrulous and narcissistic. I had wanted a better view of the boy with the spiky green hair who dashes across the lawn at night. "We should dabble in the gray tones in order to define black and white. In order to fully rationalize our boundaries. But you cannot stand and shout fire in the theater anymore. It's been done. What, precisely, was the impetus for your painting out there?"

Jerrod has been waiting for father to finish his diatribe. Jerrod waits a fraction longer. Each time he has opened his mouth to speak, my dad has blurred the moment.

I want to see the kid get matriculated. We are destined to be together. But I'm afraid—as much as I can be—that my old man is scaring Jerrod. He sits there, blinking his green eyes. Oh, to be seen by those eyes, taken in full scope of those convex lenses. He doesn't speak, just holds my attention.

"Look," father says, "I sent out my performance artists to help you. Technically, if law and order worked accordingly, we wouldn't be having this conversation, certainly not today anyway. But now we have a peculiar situation." Father is flustered. His fingers rap the table in volatile manner.

He flicks his hand into the air—all five fingers spread wide. He's endured his own beatings. He hates any bully. His disdain for authority stems, of course,

from any base power struggle. Somehow there should just be enough order to move things along, avoid stagnation, to anneal.

Thus was his love of the piano—a harmonious marriage between the analytical and the creative, or one might say order and chaos. Without the creative, there is no daring spark, without the analytical, no consequence. What makes a classic? What melding of forces inspired father to get up from his chair where he had once again fallen asleep while reading, and look out the window to see a cop on his lawn?

Father has grown a bit mad over the years since my death. In his mind, he plays a rarefied selection of rhapsodies that swing through brittle highs that burnish the joviality. This sensation is how he feels about starting the Bookcliff Academy—notes that tickle his diaphanous existence. Then there are the warping lows that close him off, buries him in his past and the troubles with funding the academy. These lows shroud him with a heavy grief. He locks himself in the confines of his office during these times. This is one of those occasions. Espousing pompous gibberish is his therapeutic way of coping, ask mother.

If not for the officer and the boy with green hair, he may well still be sitting in his burgundy brocaded chair staring at the cold ashes. What is worthy of consideration is the way in which his mind mechanically maneuvers through

symphony after symphony from beginning to end. He tries to separate the notes, but in a way, they exist in an ubiquitous form. In only that magnificent, extrasensory way by which a mind culminates and synthesizes all forms of information do the notes of these symphonies simultaneously appear in his mind. As each note on the scale, name of the note, sound of the note, and finger positioning on the keyboard metacognitively appears, it causes his fingers to twitch to hit the notes of a missing keyboard with such frequency as to look to have Parkinson disease.

Mainly, he quit playing, or went on indefinite hiatus, after my ideal half consumed too many diazepam. The note repudiated a world too daunting for her own art, her watercolors, but it certainly didn't leave daddy unscathed either.

Father realized that he had gone crazy trying to compose. He achieved success performing throughout his life and acquired the money and connections that comes with it. After Riana reconnected with the ideal form that *is*, and he really had a reason to go mad, he couldn't anymore.

The music didn't stop. It changed. The melody of our song resonated. He couldn't stop the rhapsodies from playing, the soundtracks from Riana's childhood. Through the music, he heard her song. Harboring creative souls is his redesigned art form.

And here sits a soul that is screaming from the seams of his ripped denim for some kind of help. Jerrod's odor repulses him. His attire is offensive. His denim jacket, spiked and spray painted, is a metaphorical, and almost literal shield. The spiky green hair appears stale. Strands of cobwebs stretch between several points.

Jerrod's head, the first time I saw it, looked as though a clump of the lawn mutated, elongated, grew into a spherical sheave, attached itself to a body, and ran across the lawn holding a ladder.

Father described the mural to me during one of his ravings one night as a man sleeping on a piano in the middle of a mountain stream. He has worked hard to keep his history a secret in Junk City. The Daily Shrapnel has done a pretty good job of delivering some "facts."

He knows a little something about Jerrod as well. He knows he's a local boy. Winslow read his file. Jerrod's somehow surviving with his older brother in a slummy house by the junk yard next to the via-duct. There was no doubt that the small auto-body shop attached to the house is a front for their drug dealings—another reason for his rejection. A point, given my likeness, that he could not refute. Perhaps, before Jerrod's father died, it was a legitimate shop. But no longer.

Father doesn't know how to respond to the mural. He's impressed by the kid's gusto. The quality of his work received high enough scores from the panel to put him in the running. The quality of his work was interesting enough. Stylistically, his portfolio very much reminded Winslow and Gebhart of Diego Rivera—only surreal, dreamlike.

What Jerrod doesn't know, and may never know, is that his application vied with one other application for the final slot. Winslow gave Jerrod's work slight preference, but he has a certain aversion recruiting local talent, as though convenience leads to apathy. Jerrod may need a place to go more than the other painter, Olivia Hornbrook, but she has the accomplishments. She has a B.A. from Columbia. Her work has been featured in several exhibits. Her paintings have been selected to fill the pages of some prominent literary journals. She's shown initiative. Jerrod's application was riding on proximity and a particular aesthetic. He doesn't even have a G.E.D. Not that formal education is the emphasis.

Naturally, the basis for selection is foremost excellence, but after learning about Jerrod's personal life, the choice was made. A small body of work cannot constitute excellence. Where is the motivation for self promotion? An application to the institution up the road is hardly making a showing for oneself.

Father takes off his spectacles, holds them at arm's length, and winces through them at the tin ceiling tiles. He adjusts them back on his nose and turns

to face Jerrod, “Was not the officer the least bit curious about the people in the costumes shouting, ‘what are you looking at?’” He sent two of his residents, Galina and Branik, to mess with the officer, to try and get temporarily detained, see how many people could get arrested for making art on private property. Such is their agreement—quid pro quo.

Galina and Branik are a young couple, street performers turned performance artists. They live for public spectacles, and so they were matriculated in accordance with the possibility of having to do improvisational acts for him at his command. They, in essence, may be the academy’s court jesters. So far, they have been two harmonious high notes in this requiem to Riana.

Acting in disarray for Father’s pleasure has become an etude they have embraced. However, since they have taken to documenting their work in film—another part of the reason they were accepted—has lead to some discontent between the two. Often Father hears the couple bicker over who is responsible for the camera and who gets the privilege of indulging in the shenanigans.

In addition to the cop harassing the kid with the green hair, Father noticed the unfamiliar lad crawling around the yard with his pen and pad. The situation was too much. It simply sang out for performance art of the most absurd kind.

This was Galina's and Branik's finest displays to date. They both wore black gowns that covered their bodies from the neck down. Concealing the head of each was a large box. Each side was painted a different, primary color with an eyeball painted over it. For the pupil, they cut out a hole through which to see but covered them in different shades of cellophane: red dots on blue irises, green dots on yellow irises, and etcetera.

Somehow, the blockheads were fashioned to rotate. The blockheads were large enough that they were able to hold their cameras inside and take multi-colored flash photos of each other, thus alleviating the need for one to be left out, and both remain inconspicuous, at least as far as artistic device was concerned.

They paced the perimeter this way. Colorful flashes emitting from the holes on the four sides of their rotating heads. They bumbled around the sidewalk this way, unprovoked.

Jerrod shrugs his shoulders, and my father asks again, a bit louder, "Was not the officer the least bit curious about the people in the costumes?"

Jerrod snickers. "He ordered them to leave, but they just kept saying, 'what are you looking at, block head?' over and over." Jerrod stands up. "They had some kind of accent. I asked if he was going to arrest them for creating art." Jerrod walks towards me, around the globe. He sticks his tongue out the side of

his mouth and bites on it as he reaches toward me. “The cop said he didn’t receive any complaints about them.”

Father makes an exclamatory gesture, waving his index finger above his head and says, “You see? The modern person has become so desensitized to the outlandish—the contemporary mind so impervious to eccentric acts—it somehow takes something more to mesmerize these philistines. At least, I’d like to see something besides the vulgar do it.”

Father watches, bewildered by why Jerrod traces his fingers along the corner of my frame so casually. Father does not intervene as Jerrod places his hand on my glass covering. Now I have his consciousness as we are pressed together.

Chapter Nineteen

I know now why he bites his tongue. He licks a nine volt battery, currently an Energizer. Stolen from Target. Now I know why. It's his passive statement. He licked the energy out of a Rayovac taken from a remote control. But he wants to portray the ideation of addiction.

He has to. That's the logic of his act. It's his addiction. He doesn't want to get caught. But he can't stop, not until he convinces someone that he actually has a problem. That he needs help. That's the fun of it, to keep things going—just like the advertisement: *it keeps going and going and going....*

He absolutely does not want to get caught today, but he is caring less for his struggle to get into this institution. The director is aggravating him with his idealistic jabber which won't quit—in this way, he too is similar to the battery slogan. Jerrod wants to speak. He has so many things he wants to say so much he has learned and even rehearsed. The anger needs to be released by connecting negative and positive battery terminals on his moist tongue. He needs his masochistic fix. "She looks really angry," he says and presses the terminals on the two calluses on his tongue, the two, yellow, festering dots. Jerrod's response, his cover story, which all good addicts have, is, I must have bit my tongue.

The electric tingle feels to him like it is slowing, but he is building a tolerance. The shock is feeling like less of a sensation through his tongue and is

becoming more like a taste, the flavor of copper. He pulls it away and curls it in his palm.

Father is silent and stares at him through those damn tiny oval frames. His blue eyes demand some particular answer. His thinning gray hair combed in strands over his head distracts Jerrod. The light green velvet suit seems contradictorily clownish, foppish, in comparison to his serious demeanor.

It's interesting that they are so quick to judge each other's attire.

Father cannot decide to be completely unnerved that an art student would interact so inappropriately with a piece of work, like some kind of heathen, and at the same time, it is this intimacy with this object of ideal representation that feels too coincidental. Too fateful.

"What I have come to create here," Father holds back the tears and continues his digression, "is a kind of insular environment, a place where genuine talent may generate, flourish, and commune with peers without consideration, or fear of survival, of imposition or expectation of and from the outside world."

Jerrod wishes that he had been hauled to jail instead of trying to make sense of the academy director's spiel. Jerrod may be the culprit of the mural, but contrary to what he thinks is being said, Jerrod isn't an artistic criminal threat.

His visions are pure. The designs are of course figurative, but he literally wants to paint himself into a new dimension.

An arc is created, zapping his hand. The sweat, more conducive than spittle, connects the terminals. A charge pulsates through Jerrod's thumb. He lifts his fist to his mouth, removes the current of sweat, and conjoins the negative and positive again on his tongue. Clasped in hand, it is concealed, unsuspected.

The morning sunlight invades the room and reminds Jerrod to enjoy the air-conditioning for the moment. I pity him for his home, The Filth house.

Jerrod sits in the loveseat pressed against the wall below me. He watches the warm glow spread in a rectangular pattern. It grabs at a portion of the desk, paisley wallpaper, and Persian rug. It slices across: the leaves of the plant, the piano trophies, the marble Foo Dog. But the beam cascading, elongated, up Jerrod's thigh and shoulder seems somehow brighter, accentuated, as though the window has formed a lens to highlight his odd presence.

Father walks away from the fireplace to the bookshelf, temporarily cutting the light. His head is directed above the sofa, toward this impression of the forlorn looking young woman painted in monotone. "The joy of creation should be inspiration enough to live, and without this purest of pursuits, art will not be able to set us all free. To be able to fully appreciate the joys of creating, partaking as a member of the audience should be equal in the heart of the artist. I

could sit and listen to symphony for the rest of my life, but if music ended with the piano, Mr. Herstrom, what would that say about the human condition?"

Jerrod knows he will not be given the chance to answer. It's ambiguous who he is talking to.

"I believe there is a new symphony out there, one beyond my grasp."

Father clutches his flitting fingers into a fist as he draws a rasping breath. He releases a rhapsodic cry moving in the animal tones ranging from the sob of vicious despair to the resounding of hopeful, fervent joy. He turns around and Jerrod sees tears trickling down his face. "How," he shouts, "how, Mr. Herstrom, does one decide whose art is worthy of some reward, to be held up to the light? I cannot save everyone. In fact, if I am distracted by every artist out there clamoring to get into this academy, my responsibility to keeping this place running will fall by the wayside, and I will not only not be able to help anyone, but I will have failed those yet to come." Winslow rubs the bridge of his nose, just above the oval frames, raises his hand, pinches his thumb and finger together, and says, "What aesthetic, what standard of measurement, should one choose by? Which artist or medium is most worthy of most consideration?"

Jerrod, thinks about his brother, Jake, how he would handle this situation. Without any profanity, and with half the belligerence, Jerrod interrupts, "Sir, I'll be honest with you, I haven't understood half of the things you've been saying,

and more importantly, I don't understand why you're telling me all of this. You sent one of your staff members out to save me from the law, for that I'm thankful. All I've wanted since you opened the academy was to be a part of it, to be in a place that nurtures artists, a community, as you've said, but right now, I don't know what you want with me.

"I'm sorry if I've offended you. The reason I painted that mural out there was so I could have the chance to talk to you. I apologize that this is how things turned out. I planned on turning myself in to the academy once it was finished. I've spent most of my life painting and studying other painters. That's why I dropped out of high school, among other reasons, because all I care about is painting. Society can keep their algebra and chemistry. I'll keep pursuing art till it kills me. And I may not be that well versed, but sorry to say, I spent time memorizing words like *trompe l'oeil* to impress you, but I realize I can't do that. So if you want me to wash my painting from your building and be on my way, I will, just give me a bucket and a wire brush." He is immediately sorry for what he just said.

"Why do you think I've allowed the progress of your piece to remain intact on my building, Mr. Herstrom?"

Jerrod set out with such blind determinism, that no matter how many times it could have been erased, his mind was set so he would return and do it

over until caught or completed. He never stopped to think about *why* it survived, other than the fact that it *did*, as art on an art building.

Jerrod and Winslow stand, squinting at each other through the morning light. Winslow's fingers dance back and forth on the sides of his chartreuse slacks. "This place isn't running itself, you know. Some volunteerism from some of the residents seems to be in order. As far as I am concerned, you can work to repay me, or I can simply return you to police custody and press charges. I believe in the great order of things, there was a reason why you were caught last night. I want to accept you as an apprentice of sorts, conditionally of course. Your first creative assignment will be to finish your mural."

A tickle runs up the back of Jerrod's esophagus, and he gags back the uneasy contents of his stomach. "I...just....want," the words trickle out. He babbles, "to paint the marionette popping out above the mural, like a, a jack-in-the-box," Jerrod snaps his fingers, "trompe l'oeil style, and instead of the strings pulling on the pianist's limbs, they would be plucking notes from his head." His throat constricts. He wipes his eyes with the back of his arm.

Father cuts through the light again, this time to place his hand on the black Foo Dog in front of the fireplace and waves his other hand in a dismissing gesture, "Fantastic! I trust where you're going with the mural. More importantly, my boy, I can find a place for you in the staff quarters. Of course you'll have

access to the studios, and you may bring whatever materials you wish to your room. We serve all your meals. You can enjoy all the amenities, but I expect you to do some handy work for me, starting with cleaning the potter's studio. Stan can go over all the details with you."

Jerrod nods yes, but internally, he's not certain if he's prepared to disconnect from his current path. He doesn't know if he can get away from The Filth.

Jerrod has been processing all of the pragmatics of his future as Dr. Winslow talks into an intercom on his desk, giving Stanley specifics to add to the contract. Everything's happening too rapidly. He wanted to join the academy to freely create, no constraints. If he has to work manual labor, he might as well get a job, but he wouldn't be in this environment, with all the facilities and like minded individuals. Having a full time job and one's own place requires more time and work than spending a week cleaning a studio. That's why he hasn't gone that route yet. This is, in a sense, a success.

But there are limitations. If he went home, it would be the same runaround helping Jake sling dope. The thought of climbing through the filth just to make it to bed makes him tired. Given the choice to devote the same amount of time to committing felonies and cleaning another's mess seems equally debasing.

Despite living in the nastiest garbage capable of filling a house and questionably supporting life, he has kept his private room in order, if not necessarily clean. It is his fold within the fringe. The thought of transplanting all of his sentimental items into a new, sterile environment seems like a fantasy.

He visualizes the contents in his room: his mother's lamp with the stained-glass lampshade; his Marshmallow Man piggy bank; his wind-up alarm clock that resembles Felix the Cat; his collection of snow globes, most containing mythical settings with trolls, pixies, wizards, and dragons; he visualizes the toy train set on the shelving near the ceiling; his yellow-starburst pattern quilt; his ceramic clowns, all in their whimsical positions; his comics, mostly Disney. All these items he has suffered great humiliation for having kept intact over the years. He cannot quite fathom removing them from the dirty room. The brown carpet. The oak wainscoting and torn, Western wallpaper. The window panes replaced with cardboard.

The idea of moving this to a fresh start glares in his mind. The new room looks to him too shining and bright to define. He merely sees all his objects in a new white light.

Chapter Twenty

Sherri's right hand dangles over the side of the bed and caresses my neck. Her left holds open the pages of *Skinny Legs and All*, by Tom Robbins. Sherri's view is transmitted through me because even without the wine, I intoxicate her—our elegant submission to its possession.

I could tell some tales, but she is so delicately distracting. Her fingers trace the contour of my mouth. All I have is the present moment, so I enjoy it. She hoists me up and pours some of my wine into the frightened young glass.

She's reading a passage where the newlyweds, Ellen and Boomer, the human characters, are in a cave fornicating. Ellen demands that Boomer call her Jezebel. If it were up to me, she should return the favor and call him Dionysus.

I have my own stories. I have a past. Suffice it to say, I'm just glad to be out of the antique store, and before that, the china cabinet for five years. It's not that I am unwelcome in any circle, but I, like Sherri, am not part of a collection—always the afterthought. She is the only poet at the academy. Sure, she works with multimedia, that's what bolstered her application, but for her the written message takes precedence.

Among her possessions, I'm the most precious. There are two kinds of filth in Junk City: the intoxicating and the sobering.

Her hand drops to my belly, making me feel robust and somehow simultaneously elegant. It is a seductive touch. Right now, today, I am half full. Mildred Bailey is playing on the record player. The slow moaning of the trumpet accompanies Bailey's seductive voice. The clarinets hypnotically curl around each note. She continues reading the sex scene. It seems to her that hetero male writers are so preoccupied with female sexuality that when they are writing from a woman's perspective they believe that by making them slightly too lustful, too lascivious, too wanton, that they may breathe more credibility into the female, on account of fact often being stranger than fiction. Authors would be better served to focus on any other form of desire.

Nonetheless, with the jazz and the thought of wild love making, the allaying scent of lavender from the candle, and the vibration of the mattress from kicking her legs—clad in rainbow striped tube socks—back and forth, there is a warm tingling feeling creeping around her hips. She turns her right hand over and delicately raps on my body with her fingernails. Her smooth nails slip around my curves. Then her hand drops away and she grabs the wine glass.

This wine glass has been pleasant enough to talk to, but she is terrified every time she is lifted. Every time she is lifted, she knows she is one sip closer to being broken; her assailant, as she calls Sherri, comes one sip closer to intoxication. Wine glass knows the script. All will end in destruction, probably

sooner than later for us, but that just makes matters worse, so I quit mentioning that. I simply encourage the glass to revel in the voluptuousness of being handled as designed, but glass is really attached her current shape. I remind glass of the sanctity of the liquid we share. But it doesn't matter. She is terrified.

Sherri keeps her place on the page with her fingertip, rises up on her elbow, rolls to the side, and brings the glass to her mouth. The red fluid pours toward her lips. There's a knock at the door just as she is about to taste the wine. She convulses at the knock and pulls the glass away. In a sense, I cringe on behalf of the glass—now shrieking in its inanimate way that this is it, this is the big one, and I try to comfort her, reassuring her that she is over the quilted bed, but she will have none of it.

"Shit," Sherri hisses. Drops of wine fall to the white knit comforter. She pulls her hand from the book and wipes her chin. "Shit," she says again, realizing she lost her place. She's up on her knees, examining the front of her white blouse for stains. "Come in." She takes a quick sip, a couple droplets escape the corner of her mouth. She sets the glass down beside me. The liquid sloshes, the base rattles, and the glass moans with relief as it settles. Sherri wipes her mouth with the back of her hand then pulls on the hem of her denim skirt, making it look trapezoidal, and searches for stains. It's okay, but she thinks she'll have to do something about the stain on the bed later. No one needs to know that

she got a little sloppy. Just as Howard enters the room through the curved top mahogany door, she closes the book—her place lost anyway—and sets it on the stain.

She leans backward on both hands, legs bent, her buttocks resting on her heels, assuming a more prudent position. She glances to me and the wine glass, reassuring herself of our proximity. Howard takes several deliberate steps into the room, snapping his fingers in time with the clash of the cymbals. “Nice,” he says and turns back to ease the door shut. “Is this Mildred Bailey?”

“Yeah,” Sherri habitually strokes at the blond hair around her ear. “You’re getting the basics down. I think you’re about ready to graduate onto some Marion Harris or some Lovie Austin,” she pauses, “and Her Serenaders, of course.”

“And here I thought by coming to the Academy I might be compromising my educational background as a whole.” Howard raps his fist on his skull. His curly black hair looks damp. The musky scent of his cologne wafts through the room. Sherri observes that by these factors, along with the cleanliness of the light blue shirt tucked into his slacks that he is freshly showered, not to mention that he is wearing his house shoes—customary footwear for all the residents in the evenings.

Sherri extracts her feet from underneath her haunches, turns away from Howard, and gingerly taps her toes around on the hardwood floor, as though she must first ensure its stability. “Well, you probably would have if you didn’t make friends with the right people.” Sherri laughs and picks up the wine glass.

“What do you think about the new resident, if that’s what he really is?”

Sherri speaks over her shoulder, “Oh, Howie, I came up here to avoid all that squabbling. You want a glass of vino?” She gives her glass a swirl that causes it to shriek in the tones beyond human apprehension.

“Absolutely. Maybe it will help me dishevel the uniform, geometrical stacks alphabetically catalogued in my mind.” Howard says this and slumps into a lime green chair upholstered in a kind of corduroy material. A few of the bulbs in the overhanging floor lamp with various colored lampshades—Sherri refers to it as the octopus lamp—are illuminated.

“If you simply *must* have my opinion,” Sherri smiles and visually holds Howard in a deviant, sidelong glance, “I’ve written my messages on some buildings in my day, you might even say it’s what I am designed to do, but it never came out so beautifully.”

“Yes, nothing like the scent of outside competition to bring the pack together. They’ll be down there arguing all night, but at least they’ll do it together.”

Sherri grips me in her right hand and holds the wine glass in the left. "I'm sorry, I just wanted to say that in front of somebody who can listen. What's going on with your geometric alphabet?"

"Never-mind that." Howard crosses his legs and shakes his heel out of his house shoe. "It's not like I could get away with welding one of my statues to the rain gutter."

"I know, right? How long has he been getting away with it?"

"Two months? Where's that wine?"

"Oh, right, sorry."

Sherri sets me on her desk, one of my usual resting places next to the alarm clock and ceramic pot used as a pencil holder. There's a pot holding a vine, from my perspective, growing at breakneck speed, and still, too slow for Sherri to discern its movements. And of course, the lavender scented candle is ablaze. Sherri is not displeased with the ambiance of the room at this time of dusk, not that she's after Howard. She just likes to be a good hostess, if not a little flirtatious, because it's fun.

Howard clears his throat before he speaks, "I guess he's going to be staying in the staff quarters. Casey talked to him in the cafeteria."

Sherri walks to her armoire where she has dedicated one shelf to her wine accoutrements: corkscrews, glasses, rack—usually empty, tea towels, ice

bucket, stoppers, drip rings, and decorative thermometer. She opens the door, blocking Howard from her vision as he continues speaking, "He said he's a total punker—spiked hair and all that." This peaks Sherri's interest.

She had known that it would take a special kind of vandal to paint such a mural, but she never would have suspected a punk rock kid. There's something too quaint, or homey, or even peaceful about the painting for her to have imagined the artist to be a punk.

She thinks he must be a poser; after all, the two thousands are almost over. Nevertheless, it will be nice to see a real colorful person. Sherri is disappointed in the lack of personal freakishness at the academy. There are some weird outfits on occasion, but the artists themselves usually look disappointingly average.

She adjusts her unnecessary, leopard print, horn-rimmed glasses. She doesn't want to seem too interested. After all, she honestly left the parlor because she was tired of hearing the circular arguments. Nothing like a glass of wine and a good book.

Sherri shakes her head and considers the present moment. "What's going on with this geometry clouding your mind? You realize this isn't a technological institute, right?"

“Yeah, jeez.” Howard rubs the side of his freckled face. “I’m not used to working this way.” He waves his hand at the window which overlooks the quadrangle that is generally reserved for the sculptures. “I’m used to looking at heaps of scrap. Usually, a design just kind of congeals in front of me after examining enough odd shaped pieces of ‘wrecked’ metal. Everything I get to work with around here is prefab, perfectly stacked, uniform pieces of new metal. Nothing is scrap. I’d be better off waiting for some other welder to show up, bend and cut a bunch of those links out there, and then try to make sense of their leftover mess. I’ve never had to be this deliberate with my designs.”

Sherry grabs a glass, this one less paranoid than the other, holds it to the evening light, examining its cleanliness. “Why don’t you spend a day cutting and bending pieces at random?” She determines the glass is fit for use and hands it to Howard then grabs hold of me.

“Trust me, I’ve considered that, but—”

“Hold it steady, darling,” she says as she tilts my opening toward the sturdy glass. Sherry likes to try sounding charming and old timey, even slightly whimsical, like Holly Golightly, from *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, but less flighty and insensitive. “Now go ahead.” She tops off her own glass and returns me to the desk.

“The problem is I’d just end up with chunks of the same material. There’s not enough variety, not enough weirdness.”

“How did you get your material before?” Sherri asks.

“My dad owns a salvage yard back home.”

“Why don’t you go to the reclamation center here? After all, this is the great Junk City.”

“Yeah, I know.” Howard rubs his temple with one hand. “I guess, in part, I’m taking this as a challenge, but mostly, I don’t want to interrupt the flow of things around here. I was asked what kinds of materials I wanted to work with when I first got here. I helped order all of the lengths down there. The academy has already spent a wad of money on me. And now, with all this other stuff going on, it seems like a bad time to impose.”

“You’re here to create your best work, remember? This is it. No worries. Worry free production. Creating is your only real responsibility. Who knows what the future holds. You should have the kind of experience you deserve. If you are not provided with the materials you need, how are you supposed to feel inspired?”

“I know.” Howard swirls the wine and examines the streaking before taking a sip. “This isn’t bad.”

“Now there’s a refined compliment.”

“Well, I’m just saying, this doesn’t taste like it came from the last box.”

Sherri laughs. “I know. I know. I sprang for a bottle of Chianti. I haven’t been feeling too inspired lately either.” She holds the fearful glass in her left hand and fingers through the stack of records in the wooden milk crate.

“Yeah? At least I have a fancy crutch of an excuse to lean on. What’s your problem?”

“That’s just it, I don’t know. At least you have a fancy crutch of an excuse to lean on.” Sherri squints at the slender spine of one of the albums. “Have you heard Sarah Vaughan?”

“You should know better than to ask what I’ve heard. I am a babe in the woods of jazz.”

“Or woods and brass as the case may be. This isn’t as vintage as Lovie, but it’s good.” Sherri brings the record to the player in the corner across from the octopus lamp. “I think you should just tell Winslow that you need some other sort of scrap metal.” She unfurls her index finger from the glass to presses the button on the turntable to lift the needle. The glass’s paranoia is reverberating at such a pitch I’m surprised she doesn’t shatter herself.

“I know.” Howard uncrosses his legs, sets the glass between his feet and rubs his face with both hands. “But even so, it’s a process. My father’s materials used to become a part of me, you know? I’d walk by the same pieces of scrap

every day, never really distinguishing any one piece from another, and then all of a sudden it would hit me. If I took this dented gas tank from over here, and combined it with these fenders and hubcaps over here, track down some rebar, I'd have the makings for a cool ladybug-like monster. I could track down an axle and make it mobile. This may sound like an oxymoron, but my process, working with scrap metal, used to be more organic."

"Tell this to Dr. Winslow." Sherri sets the glass down and removes the Mildred Bailey album and sets it beside me on the desk.

Howard lifts his glass and sniffs at the alcohol. "Yeah, but again, I'm trying to be more deliberate now, really fashion my pieces from a more pure beginning. It's like drawing out there. If I start with one, pure diecast, I don't want to blend it with any other dies. In a way, I want to simplify, like Mondrian. I want the challenge, to some extent. I just lack the inspiration. And again, I couldn't even go shopping for parts. I wouldn't know what I wanted until it integrated into my conceptual framework." Howard holds his glass with both hands and bends over it, putting his eye right up to the opening. "I need to get better. Quicker."

Sherri drops the needle into place. The dormitory fills with the crackle of the record, the hiss from some other silence. Sherri picks up her glass and admires the orange hue of the sky through it. "Maybe this will inspire you."

Chapter Twenty-one

It had not been easy for Jerrod to leave the Filth house. No matter the moral and sanitary decline of the place, it has been his only home. Jake, his brother, has not made the transition as easy as it could have been.

Jerrod and Jake had snuck through the salvage yard the night after he made his bargain with Dr. Winslow. They took their usual route between the stacks of scrap metal, past the heaping mound of worn-out tires, walking over the oily earth to the back fence where they climbed atop their usual roost—a rusted, dented '57 Chevy pickup set atop two rows of similar smashed vehicles. Jerrod lifted my charge to his tongue whenever he thought Jake wasn't looking.

They sat, one on each side, on the wide, round front fenders, using the hood as an arm rest as they gazed toward the river, a stretch of water just visible through the cottonwood trees. The clamor of cars crossing the bridge echoed off of Peach Bluff. The lights in the houses on the other side were turning on, illuminating squares in the dusky skylight hovering on the hill.

The metal of the truck body felt warm under Jerrod's pants, almost too hot on his bare arm. It had been another squelcher in Junk City. The orange sky on his right pleased him, the darkness melting toward Earth.

Jake was drinking a bottle of tequila. Jerrod was periodically pressing me on his wet blisters. He had told Jake that he wanted to talk to him, to get away from the rest of the Filth kids for a while. As the sun sank downstream, Jerrod finished telling Jake the details of his bargain. The only other sounds were the hum of vehicles traveling over the viaduct and the random chirps of crickets.

Jake made a gasping sound as he pulled the bottle away. The yellow liquid sloshed up the glass sides. "It sounds like you're getting fucked."

"I kind of don't have a choice now."

"Yeah. You took a ballsy approach." Jake grabbed a lock of his red mohawk and pulled it down over the side of his head. The gluey fibers made a brittle crunching sound.

"This is the one thing I have wanted more than everything else put together throughout my life, and now that I have it, I don't know if I really want it." Jerrod squeezed me tight and wished that he could press me into the side of this old Chevy, to magically restore it to mint condition. Make it hover.

"You don't owe them shit. You gave them your art. Don't go out of fear. Fuck that."

Jerrod extended his foot to the bumper and studied the swirling design he drew on the white rubber toe of his black sneakers. He pressed me to his tongue.

“You might as well just stay here. I’m thinking about starting up the shop again.”

He pulled me away. “Really?”

“Yeah, you know that girl I’ve been seeing? She’s pregnant.” Jake takes a drink. A long drink. Three bubbles gurgle through the upturned bottle.

Jerrod watches as a crane flies parallel with the river, rising above the cottonwoods heading West. They sit for a moment. The smell of the river and creosote mix in the hot evening air. Jerrod rams my terminals into the tear running down his cheek. The buzz makes his eye twitch.

“I won’t ask you not to go.” Jake raises the bottle, squints his left eye and looks at Jerrod through the yellow liquid. “But if you don’t, it could really help me.” Jake frowns half of his mouth.

Jerrod pulls me away and admires the side of his brother’s head for a minute. The dark red spikes look like two dimensional sun rays plastered on the dark purple mountain. The sunset makes his skin glow.

“I have to go. I have to do something with my life, Jake. I’m not leaving town. This is my opportunity to be in a community filled with other artists.”

“Oh, and what’s The Filth to you then?”

“I’m not talking shit about—”

“You’re one of us, you’re one of us more than you are any of those fucking art snobs. This is your community.” Jake kicks the bumper. The metal reverberates. He waves his hand at the skyline. “We are your like-minded individuals, not those pretentious fucks. You think what I’m trying to do with the band is bullshit?” Jake stared at Jerrod. His blues looked somehow hollow—his pupils, pinpricks in a circular. It was getting dark fast.

“You know I don’t,” Jerrod said.

Jake asks, “You don’t think we’re artists?”

“I’m talking about painters. You know I...” Jerrod couldn’t speak. His throat constricted and stung. He pressed my terminals into place.

“We have our own art community here. Fuck them.” Jake jerked his thumb over his head. “Fuck those elitist bastards. Those are the snobs who perpetuate the status quo.” Jake took another drink. “They don’t want to have anything to do with us unless we’re mopping their floors. I’m sorry. I know how bad you’ve wanted this, but fuck them. What are you going to get out of this? It’s not like it’s a real school or anything. It’s not like they’re going to get you a job afterward. Look at me and the band. It’s not like there’s some school for us to go to. Nobody is recruiting punk rockers. We have to try and make it on our own. But at least we’re free. What are we supposed to do? I can tell you I’m not going to be anybody’s bitch.” Jake brought the bottle down on the hood of the truck

with enough force to cause some of the alcohol to slosh out and splatter onto Jerrod's arm. He could smell the earthy fumes.

It wasn't anything that Jake said that made Jerrod cry. It was the fear and difficulty of having to tell his brother that he could no longer live in The Filth house. He wanted to try something else, do something different for a while. Maybe even be somebody else. My arc cooked the meat of his tongue. Jerrod bit down, denting my casing.

"What the hell are you doing?" Jake turned toward him and squinted.

"What are you putting in your mouth?"

"Nothing," he said and pulled me away.

"Are you crying?"

"No." Jerrod wipes his eyes on the shoulder of his t-shirt.

"Was that a nine volt battery? Is that why you have those dots on your tongue, you moron?"

"What's it to you?" Jerrod snapped. "Why are you drinking?"

Jake laughed. "Because my life is filth." He voice broke. Jake put the bottle to his lips and tilted his head back. Several bubbles gurgled through the liquid. Jake coughed a spray of alcohol and saliva. He lowered the bottle and wiped his mouth on his bare shoulder next to the straps on his muscle shirt. "I tell you

what, you design a flier, and I'll put together a show for you." Jake threw the bottle down, shattering it on a crumpled car.

Chapter Twenty-two

The door bangs open and she drops the wine glass. In object time, the glass pleads for some kind of intervention, utters several prayers on her way to the floor—shatters. Dean, a guy with blond hair brushed down flat on his head, walks into the room.

The fragments chatter. It's too much for me. But it seems as though things are going well for the former glass; although gone, it is hopeful, yet annoying to hear. *This isn't so bad. This isn't so bad.* Hundreds of pieces chant. *I am sharp. I am jagged. My purpose is to cut.* The pieces are assembling their new consciousness.

Sherri staggers backward as she turns to address the intruder, "Damn it, Dean"

"Oh, be careful," Howard gets up and rushes to Sherri's feet. He sets his wine glass down besides the remnants of the paranoid one. This wine glass is reverential. It offers a eulogy.

The shimmering particles squeal, *I'm going to cut you*, as Sherri and Howard gently pick them from the floor.

"Do you ever think my door's closed for a reason?" Sherri asks.

"Well, I think if you really wanted to keep anyone out you'd lock it." Dean closes the door behind him and walks up to Howard and taps him on the shoulder. "You have a cigarette for me, pal?"

Howard stops picking up the shattered remains and turns his head and stares at Dean for a moment before responding, "Not on me."

Sherri stands, her hand full of glass fragments. "I'm going to go grab a broom." She drops the pieces into the wastebasket by the door before exiting.

Dean walks to the lime green chair and sits down. Howard finishes picking up the rest of the large chunks of glass and stands and walks to throw them in the basket. While he does this, Dean retrieves a cigarette from the pack in his pants' pocket. He pulls a lighter out of the other side, sparks it and brings the flame to the tip. "This is bullshit," he says in a mumbled way out of the corner of his mouth. He puffs on the smoke and snaps the lighter shut and replaces it.

Howard dusts his palm off on his slacks then raises his hand. "What are you doing?"

"What?" Dean snaps.

"Didn't you just ask me for a cigarette?" Howard sounds bemused.

"I'm almost out. I don't want to have to go to the store again today," Dean says.

"Yeah, so smoke mine. It's easier for me to go to the store, right?"

Howard retorts.

"Jesus, Howard, I'd give one to you if you asked."

"Then give me one," Howard demands.

“Like I said, I’m almost out. What are you two doing up here?”

Howard says, “We were drinking wine and listening to jazz.”

“The wine part sounds good.” Dean walks to the armoire and grabs another glass, and continues muttering, “This is such bullshit. Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit.” He slithers his hand around me and sloshes a disproportionate amount of wine into the glass. “What are they going to do? Accept every homeless freak who vandalizes their property into the academy?”

Dean looks down at the scene of the crime. A streak of wine is following the contour of the wood toward the door. “You have to admit, it is excellent work,” Howard says.

“Oh, bullshit. I’m talking to a welder.” Dean plops back down and takes a drag and blows the smoke at the ceiling.

Sherri re-enters the room with the broom, dustpan, and rags. “Dean, put that out. You know I don’t smoke in here.” Sherri doesn’t horribly mind the smoke, but she is upset about the glass, and even more, about the last few sips of wine—now making its way to the door.

“Where do you want me to put it?” Dean takes a drag and extends the cigarette. He twitches his fingers and the ash falls to the floor.

Sherri sweeps up the gray matter, adding it to the pile of glass fragments and wine. “At least open the window.” She sweeps the mess into the dust pan

and empties it and throws the rags over the remaining liquid. "Oh, help yourself to some wine." She would much rather play hostess and pour it for him — pour less than a full glass too. Time for her own refill. She paces to the armoire.

"This is total bullshit," Dean gets up and turns the handle to open the window. He turns around, arms in the shape of a W, the left holding the wine, the right holding the cigarette.

Howard walks to the door. "You're not leaving, are you?" Dean asks.

Sherri turns around. "You can't leave yet, Howard." She doesn't want it to sound like a plea, but it is. She doesn't want to be left with Dean.

"I'm just turning on the fan," his voice raises an octave before he flips the switch, "for the smoke."

Sherri spots her ashtray in the back corner as she grabs her fresh glass. She grabs both items and offers the ashtray to Dean. "Here, use this."

He takes the ashtray and continues speaking, "Don't you two feel like it completely undermines everything you've done to get here?"

"Um, no." Howard laughs and leans against the wall. "Mostly, all I've done with my life is work to pay the bills and create sculptures."

Sherri grabs me and sloshes the wine around. "You want some more?" Sherri asks Howard.

He uncrosses his arms. "No," he rocks his glass back and forth. "I still have some."

She wants to tell him that she has some brandy stashed away if they want it, but that can wait until Dean has left. She pours the end of the batch into her glass. Remaining droplets dribble down my neck and body. It is the ticklish part of the process before the itching coagulation in my base.

There's something about the way Dean flicks through her record collection that makes her nervous. It's quick and commanding. He's searching for something specific, something that he won't find here.

"Yeah, you've worked, supported yourself, and have been practicing. What if I would have told you that you could have gotten in here five years ago by dumping one of your statues off on the front steps?"

"You know, I wish it worked that way, because if I was smart enough to think of it—which I wasn't—and if I had the brassies to execute it, I bet it would have worked. After all, my art was good enough to get me here the conventional way, wasn't it?"

Sherri giggles at how Howard analytically broke down Dean's argument. She knows her input will only stir the pot, but she needs to say it again. "If I drew one of my poems on the building, I would have been hauled off to jail."

Dean sets down his glass, places his cigarette in his lips, and grabs his shaggy blonde hair with both fists. "Exactly! That's what's even more ridiculous about this. The punk was in the process of being arrested when Winslow sent Stanley out to get him."

"Why does this bother you so much?" Sherri asks.

"Because, it undermines our own residency. For one thing, the mural is conceptually cliché and technically inept."

Howard raises his drink, "It's not completed yet."

"You have to hand it to the guy. Art should be daring."

"It puts us on par with graffiti artists. Is that what you want? I realize the privilege of being here is being here, but say goodbye to any possibility of being viewed as completing a stint at a credible establishment."

Boy, Sherri thinks, he certainly chose his words carefully. There isn't the belief amongst anyone, at least as far as she knows, that this experience will culminate in a high paying career. This isn't an accredited university. This isn't about credentials. It's about the art. He should be in a traditional university from the sounds of it. She sits down on the bed and leans against the wrought iron filigreed headboard.

"What are you listening to?" Dean asks.

"Sarah Vaughan, right, Sherri?"

"You're learning," she says.

"Maybe you should offer a class," Dean says.

"Isn't it weird that Dr. Winslow has all those awards for music but doesn't have a music department?" Howard brings up the speculative, recurring topic.

"Isn't it weird that he would enroll a person into the academy the same day he catches them defacing his building?"

"It's not like he spray painted 'Fuck You' over the windows." Howard says this and casually strolls back to the green chair.

Dean presses a button on the stereo that cuts the sound. "What are you doing?" Sherri yells.

"Trying to play the radio station." He sets his cigarette in the ashtray.

"We were listening to that," she says.

"Sorry. I don't know how to work your radio," he says as he walks into the middle of the room. "So, I think we should petition against him."

"And do what? Threaten to quit getting free food and shelter and the opportunity to create art in exchange for the condition that we're expected to create? We're upset because someone who is generous has acted benevolently?"

Howard asks.

Dean picks up the book from the bed, turns it over, lowers it to his side, and remains focused on the bed. "Nice, lushy, how much wine have you spilled today?"

"Whatever," Sherri says, "why don't you go paint a picture about it?"

"If this is the kind of stunt he'll pull to get noticed now," Dean says, "think about what else he might do? How else do you think he'll put us in jeopardy? Set fire to the building to take a picture of it?" He turns the book over in his hand. "Think about it. We have a criminal in our presence." He tosses the book down on the stain. With an enormous gulp, he drinks the rest of the wine and sets the glass down on the bedside table on his way out the curved top door.

I feel parched.

Howard stands and finishes stubbing out Dean's smoldering cigarette.

"You want to get something playing?"

"Hell yes." Sherri hops up, steps over the rags, and finds a record to play—Marion Harris is the first satisfactory choice she happens upon. The music sounds a bit like opening a jewelry box, only tinnier and with female vocals crooning.

They both sit down, Howard in the green chair and Sherri on the bed, facing each other respectively. "He's so jealous."

Sherri follows up on his sentence, just a beat behind, "He's so jealous."

They both laugh. Sherri rolls back on the book and kicks her rainbow striped tube socks in the air. She realizes the impropriety of doing this and quickly lays down flat, smoothes down her denim skirt, and rolls on her stomach and searches the floor on the other side of the bed for the brandy. I hope like hell she decants it; I hate this empty feeling.

Chapter Twenty-three

Jerrod looks at my terminals, sees them as two eyes. In an anthropomorphic way, we are making eye contact. I am his victim. He is slowly killing me. If he had a walkman—assuming it takes a nine volt—he would forfeit licking me for my use in an electrical device. I die either way, but I do feel bad for his tongue.

He surveys the potter's studio. He's on his own. The fluorescent lights seem to be illuminating the dark exterior world and is doing little for the clay covered interior, as though lights don't work as well at night. Jerrod presses me to his tongue. I fill his mouth with the metal taste and buzzing sensation.

In a fawning sort of way, like an eager puppy, he isn't altogether disappointed by having something expected of him. Something else to do. Someplace else to do it. It goes against the ideological grain instilled in him by his older brother to follow orders. But forget that, this is a change. A positive exchange. Following orders once in a while accentuates the chaos. The only real disappointment has been that the studio is one consistent kind of filth, dirt.

The electronic current surges over the raised blisters. My top buzzes. I don't like closing my own circuit. His bumps are forming to my receptacles. He thinks they feel like scales. The dead skin barely relays the message to Jerrod that he is frying his taste buds. He has to cook himself for a while before the heat

sinks in deep enough to register on a nerve ending. Jerrod shrugs and puts me in his breast pocket.

The papiermache items dangling from the ceiling disappear from view under the fold of the pocket. There are odd designs, a lot of pop culture, but some organic stuff too. A lollipop. Dinosaur bone. Key pad with a message on it. A book being opened to a page with a television mounted inside it.

He realizes the irony of complaining about anybody else's mess, but this is a shared creative space. It is supposed to be sacred. The top of the potter's wheels are clean, and there are various spots wiped clean on the tabletops, but every other surface, when he started out, was covered in caked on clay, broken remnants, and pieces in progress. The room looked more like a desert landscape.

The top of the trashcan is overflowing with construction paper, chicken wire, and wood strips jammed into the clay. In his zeal to get rid of the dirt, he didn't realize how heavy it would make the can. He surveys the room: the shelves yet to be organized and the tools yet to be washed. "Shouldn't take more than a week, my ass." Jerrod grabs the plastic handle to drag the red trash can, and he almost dislocates his arm. It doesn't budge. As feared, after scraping, peeling, chiseling, sweeping at the floor, he overfilled the can with clay. He kicks it with his combat boot. Sure enough, it's solid. He knew he was overfilling it,

but he just wanted to get the initial sweep out of the way. He tugs at the handle, leans back with all his weight.

Chapter Twenty-four

A female's voice calls from the far door.

The woman is dressed in a pleasing, psychobilly style. She's wearing a kind of black bowling shirt with cherries on it that is tied in a bow just below her breasts. She has on some kind of denim Capri pants and high-heels. Her blond bangs are rolled up. There's a matching black and red cherry print bow on her head holding her pony tail. She's wearing red lipstick. Jerrod's ninety percent certain the mole is drawn on. He doesn't see any glare from her horned-rimmed glasses.

Somehow, through all the intensity, despite the adrenaline rush, the blood thrumming in his ears, despite abandoning classic rock for punk years earlier, he hears *Heat of the Moment* playing. This is his kind of girl, gorgeous.

"So you're the new kid?" She asks.

Jerrod pulls himself upright, lets go of the trash can. He dusts his breast pocket, reassuring himself of my presence. She's beautiful, and she refers to him as kid, and there is a guy with curly hair with her who stumbles across the hallway, walks back and grabs hold of the woman. They giggle together. "Look," she says, "It's the mysterious new kid."

"Oh, hey," the guy steadies himself. "How are you?" He's wearing a black cowboy shirt with pearl snaps and black jeans.

"Fine," Jerrod mumbles and rubs his throat.

She winks at Jerrod as she descends the stairs and Jerrod thinks he's going to melt, even if this is another game. With her, he's willing to play. "I'm Sherri," she says and extends her hand.

Jerrod walks away from the exterior door, across the room, zigzagging between the tables filled with various forms. The most interesting object, Jerrod thinks, is the cheese headed octopus. All the sculptures are in various stages of the drying process. He realized this when he lifted the plastic on the table nearest the interior door. Its dark brown color denoted the moisture not seen in the beige candlestick holder on the other quadrant of the table.

Jerrod takes her soft, voluptuous hand, squeezes, raises it, holds it. Organic, curvaceous, sensuous, soft, pleasant, not at all like me. They introduce themselves.

"I'm glad I got your name," Howard says.

"Yeah," Sherri says, "We've heard so much about you from people who don't even know you."

Jerrod can't help it. He lifts the flap on his breast pocket. Light floods onto the blue and white stitching as he lifts me just enough look me in the eyes. My rectangular casing makes him think I have a smile. I drop back into the dark, a receptacle of energy over his heart.

Because he can't place his hand on the back of his head in the cliché gesture of exasperation because of the gluey spikes of hair going in all directions, he grabs two spikes on each side of his head and pulls them down. "Yeah, I think a lot of people are weirded out by me being here."

"Howard," Sherri giggles. It seems a touch arduous, but it is enduring and rises in pitch until she says, "what is the sophisticated way to say *no shit?*"

"Uh, well, that would be," Howard sounds studious, "that would be *to lack in fecal matter.*"

Sherri laughs. "Yes, that's what his statement does. Thank you, my dear Howard."

Jerrod smiles but cannot suppresses his laugh. It would be nice to get some help taking out the trash, but Jerrod won't ask them, but it won't happen without help, not without emptying half.

"Hey, let me get you two some fliers for my brother's show this weekend. They're over here in my backpack." Jerrod opens the green canvass bag and grabs a few fliers. "Do you two like punk rock?"

"Like what? Like some thrash, or like poppy commercial pogo punk?" Howard asks.

"It's pretty brutal." Jerrod smiles.

There's a picture of a shivering, nude man, covered only with an American flag wrapped around his shoulders. He is crouching, warming his hands by a stack of money set on fire. "Come check it out, his band is The Filth. He's the guitarist and vocalist. They're playing with a couple other bands. It should be a good show. He sort of put it together for me for getting accepted here."

"Very cool," Sherri says as she takes one. "Did you draw this?"

"Yeah." Jerrod says.

"Nice." Howard says and studies the flier for a second.

Jerrod grunts as he tugs on the trashcan with both hands.

"You want a hand with that?" Howard asks.

"Of course he does." Sherri hits Howard in the chest with the back of her hand. "I admire your mural by the way. It reminds me of a cross between Hopper and Dali." Sherri says.

"Thanks." Jerrod grunts.

"Oh, jeeze is this heavy," Howard moans as they struggle up the stairs toward the glass door, Jerrod having to waddle backwards up each step. "I didn't paint it," he groans, "to make enemies. It's not done yet. Set it down for a sec." Jerrod opens the glass door to the large, cinderblock veranda where the academy keeps the kilns. A moth flutters in from the warm night.

“Well, it’s a fantastic design, literally and figuratively,” she says.

Howard gasps a couple times. “Very bold. It’s cool to see an artist really take a chance. I don’t mean to cheapen your work,” Howard shifts his voice to sound girly, *“because you are literally and figuratively fabulous.* But I am glad to see a sort of gadfly around here, if you will.”

Jerrod knows better than to show vulnerability, but he speaks before he knows what he’s saying. “Thank you so much. I’ve been worried that I’m not talented enough to be here. I notice how people stop whispering when they notice me looking at them. I’m almost convinced that I don’t belong here.” Jerrod locks eyes with Howard and jerks at the handle. “Ready?”

“Hold on,” Howard says. “You’ve got the talent. Everyone here does, but after you’ve been here a while, you learn most of the residents are narcissistic assholes.”

“Yeah, like Dean.” Sherri says and pulls a cigarette from her red purse.

Howard takes a couple deep breaths. “Okay. I’m ready now.” They lift the can with harmonious grunts.

“What does he paint?” Jerrod asks in a strained voice.

“It’s surreal, dreamscape stuff, too, but much blurrier, more impressionistic.”

The two of them lug the trashcan to the end of the patio. Sherri walks ahead of them to open the gate.

“So,” Howard says, “the word in the halls is that you have to clean the studio as part of your retribution, for lack of a better word.”

“Yeah. I didn’t paint it to piss anyone off.” Jerrod realizes that he might actually be a threat to somebody.

“Well,” Sherri says and takes a drag. “Good art always elicits a reaction.”

Chapter Twenty-five

Always has a part of me been in this studio. Always will be a part of me in this studio. But this solidified quantity has been Dean's concern—a stress reliever and source of frustration—kept under wraps.

Dean feels threatened; of course, I don't know this until he removes the plastic and manipulates my tentacle. Dean has been fretting about me; of course, I don't know this until he removes the plastic and manipulates my tentacle. Dean worried about me breaking, as if I could be broken. He doesn't want my shape maliciously altered.

Occasionally, he slips away to patch me as he can. He's not a sculptor. It's too precise for him, too pains taking. He wants his brushes to do the work. Painting is his focus because the edges blur into distinction. The subtle nuances of how to load a brush and allow it to land in a controlled explosion alleviates his stress.

Painting is not a hobby; it is something he has to do. But his intent is not altruistic. He doesn't see a reason why he shouldn't be able to carve out a lifestyle for himself through painting. Why shouldn't he get paid for his talent?

He came to Bookcliff Academy to give himself four years to produce a large collection, four years to network. Also, he thought the academy would give him a chance to promote his work to collectors. But there's already plenty of

competition here without the green haired kid whose style is frighteningly similar. Dean's work is impressionistic surrealism, or as he likes to tell people, his work is a blurry paradox.

It wasn't like he was blessed with this style. This is something he cultivated through years of school. This new expression has been a hard won style. He's had to face his fears, let his guard down, to explore these dreamscapes, but only after spending years studying craft and theory. His approach is not unfounded. He's not a hack. Six years he studied at the Art Institute of Boston. Only through bravely shucking his insular casing and stepping into the experimental with all that background, has his new approach come to fruition.

The last time he worked on me, he was trying to add pre-formed suction cups to my spindly parts. He had used too much water to limber up my particles. My surface kept slipping and slagging over his fingers. It's difficult to spend years mastering a craft then break the rules and still be taken seriously.

There's too much tension in Dean's shoulders when he tries molding me. I keep slipping through his fingers. If he would just acknowledge this fluidity, then our nature could become pliant. But he needs to distance from his *real* work, if just by a brush length worth.

As for this particular clump of clay, there is very little of himself in me. I may be Dean's concern, but he's preoccupied with thoughts of the new kid, and he's worried about how close Sherri and Howard have become. Even if the rumors are true, even if Howard is queer, it doesn't mean he likes seeing how friendly they are. After all, he's shaping me because of her. She challenged him. She said his perspective was too narrow, not only in concept, but in medium as well. Why not explore other forms, be experimental?

Dean wanted to explain to her that day that this wasn't how you cultivated mastery. But he didn't want to ruin the moment in the small orchard on the south side of the academy. They were standing between two rows of apples trees, petals from the pink flowers in full bloom delicately fluttering on the spring wind. His intent was to dismiss her comment entirely.

Instead, that night, he became haunted by a crawling, mechanical amoeba. It almost looks like me. The top part is shaped like a melting block of Swiss cheese. He didn't have too much trouble with that. But the legs, they won't stay propped up how he wants—suspended mid-air. The suction cups won't stick. He doesn't even know if he wants to make enough, tapering in size, to adequately complete his design.

He hasn't caught up with the punk yet. Dean knows his name—Jerrod—but refuses to use it. The potter's studio is closed to the rest of the students from

nine to five, just as each studio is exclusive during this time frame. Dean has arrived three days in a row, looking for him.

Nobody seems to have seen the kid. The potters commented that the studio was looking better. Advancements have been made on the graffiti. But nobody has seen much of the green haired weirdo since that first day.

So, even though Dean has tired of detailing the spindly bits of me representing tentacles, this struggle has become a serendipitous impetus to visit this studio. I was begun under sincere auspices. If anybody asks, he has thought, he will say he's been concerned with his design (as is his conceit, as is the human condition). Originally, he set out to distract himself, prove himself to Sherri. Sculpting seems too easy to him, and somehow, it is so difficult. It should be easy to define the dimensions of something in the round, but it must be exactly so.

Chapter Twenty-six

Jerrod and Howard hoist the trashcan over the edge of the Dumpster. The scrap rattles, hitting the metal. The compacted soil slogs out. A cloud of dust rises. Their hands jerk away with the release of weight

“I can’t believe how nasty the sculptors allow their workstation to get. I stack all my scraps and tools at the end of each day. Not to mention sweeping. What a mess.” Howard coughs and claps his hands.

Jerrod laughs. “That was my first thought.” Jerrod tugs on one of the green spikes coming off the side of his head.

Sherri kicks the empty can with her pointed toe. The container makes a hollow plop sound.

Jerrod looks to the stars, opens the flap on the breast pocket. White dots punched in the black. “The sky is so clear tonight.” Jerrod waits until their heads are turned upward to take a lick of me.

Sherri jerks her head to the side, “What did you just do?”

“Nothing.” Jerrod jerks me away and puts me in the dark denim.

“What was that?” Sherri asks.

“Yeah,” Howard asks, “Are you holding out on us?”

“What was that?” Sherri asks again.

“Nothing.” Jerrod kicks a piece of gravel.

"Come on, no secrets." Howard says in a kind of cartoon voice.

Jerrod pulls me out. I lie, exposed on the palm of his hand. He's been caught by two strangers.

"A nine volt battery? Do you just go around licking that?" Sherri asks.

"Ooooh, kinky. Do you get off on electrocuting yourself?" Howard asks.

Jerrod just shrugs, puts me away, kicks the rubber trashcan.

The evening air is humid and smells rich with the scent of ditch water.

The orange lights coruscate on the windshields of the parked cars. The crickets are in full swing.

"How can I repay you two?" Jerrod asks.

"Get me some weird pieces of scrap metal," Howard says.

"What do you want? Bed springs, gears, small block engine, tractor rims, I beams? That sort of thing? Or something weirder, like the lamps from the old theater?"

"Yes, yes, yes," Howard says, "all that sounds great."

"Come over to my brother's house. He has all kinds of scrap."

Howard feigns a cry. "Is that it?" He grabs Jerrod by the shoulders and shakes him. "Can it be so simple? You, sir, are my hero."

"He needs to get rid of that stuff anyway. We live next to the salvage yard. We've been dragging home weird junk for years. It's a sick game. Although,"

Jerrod rubs his chin, "I appreciate whoever rolled the back-ho tires into the living room."

Sherry laughs, slaps both her thighs, her purse handle catches between her palm and pants. "You can't be serious. I want to see your house."

Jerrod picks up the trashcan and tells himself the first thing he is going to throw away will be his addiction, no matter how much life I have left.

Chapter Twenty-seven

He wants to finish me, fire and paint me in all the splendor he envisions; he wants to demonstrate to Sherri that he is capable of working in multiple mediums, that he isn't narrow of perception.

Tonight, as he descended the stairs, he saw across the studio and through the glass door to the veranda where Howard was embracing the green haired kid in a hug. Sherri stood nearby, her laughing inaudible, her hands on her bare hips below her shirt, black with cherry prints.

Dean descended the carpeted stairs, noting the poor construction choice, the mauve design in the green carpeting all but dissolved from the matted dust. He likes the smell of this studio—earthy. He does get tired of the scent of chemicals.

He grabbed the square metal stool—speckled with mud spots—pulled it, grating it across the floor, and sat down. He lifted the plastic, and we *are* in contact. He tests one of the spindly parts. His fingerprints return fresh. The squeeze, testing my pliancy, should tell him I'm soft, but setting up nicely. Leave well enough alone, Dean. My slender limb crackles. Stop, Dean. He bends and snaps it off.

Dean holds the soft, curving cone shape, and realizes he's shaking. I am as malleable as I should be, but he's going to get more water.

He zigzags between the square tables, carrying the detached piece in his open palm. Extending through the center of each table is a pole, from the top, stretches fine cables to each corner. This dissection separates workstations. Around the poles, there is a sundry of objects, but each collection is identifiable by style. There are cups with lips that sway upward to represent fire. The handles are jagged. One table holds a diverse representation of animals done in cubist style: bear, rabbit, eagle, and trout.

He focuses on not noticing Sherri. Dean opens the locker where he usually finds a sponge and bowl. Tonight it is filled with a block of fresh clay with tools sticking in it through the plastic wrap: straight picks, curved picks, x-acto knives, miniature margin trowels, forks, spoons, melon-baller, cheese slicer, and toothpicks—enough to make it look hairy.

A vacuous sound emits as the glass door is pushed free of its rubber pad, the suction is broken. Dean can hear Sherri laughing. It is the best sound in the world when it is because of him, and it is the most debilitating sound in the world when it is not. He slams the locker shut and opens the next.

Sherri's laughter subsides. He blinks. This locker is filled with cans of paint, brushes, and rags, but no sponges. No dish. He knows they're going to ask what he's doing. He wanted me to be a surprise to her, but he also wants her to know he's trying. He slams the door and turns toward the glass door.

Sherri stands at the top of the doorway. The green fluorescent light enshrouds her shoulders. Howard is on the step below her with his hand on the denim jacket shoulder of the green haired kid who is on the next step. Beside the stair case, on the rack, Dean sees a stack of sponges. The Tupperware containers have been cleaned and piled next to them.

Dean looks at Sherri when he says hello and walks to the shelf. The room suddenly feels like a sinking pit, even the papiermache dinosaur bone suspended by chains from the I beam is at risk. Concrete sloping toward the center drain pulls on the room, and Dean can't help but feel the tragic sensation that he's just slightly missed his chance to escape the event horizon, pulling him to a one point dimension, but it takes a whole lot of little blots to make up a painting. The smears and streaks between palate and splatter point doesn't matter.

The green haired kid holds a large, red, plastic garbage can in front of himself with one arm and slides it on the metal railing.

Sherri asks if he has met Jerrod. He is forced to play nice and shake his hand. The green haired kid's irises are too pale. His pupils look too black. The way the green haired kid defers to the side and glances sideways at him is unnerving. Dean is disgusted by the way the kid keeps biting at the side of his tongue. Dean despises Howard's curly black hair.

The kid sets the can down, nods hello, and walks past him toward the sink. Dean hears water run. Howard says hello and steps between him and Sherri to grab a plastic bag. He stands there for a moment, trying to unfold it.

“You like live music?” Sherri asks and extends a flier in Dean’s direction.

He drops the piece of tentacle into the tub with the sponge. “Of course,” he says and grabs the flier. The design disgusts him. One dimension, political gore. Just what the world needs more of Dean thinks.

“Jerrod, the new guy, designed it for his brother’s band.” Sherri says.

“Isn’t it a great concept?”

Dean resists the urge to crumple the image of the shivering nude man with the American flag draped around his shoulders warming his hands on a stack of burning cash. The image is trite to Dean. “Is his brother’s band punk?” he asks.

“Har har.” Sherri says. And for a moment, she looks despicable biting her lip and slowly pumping her fist in the air.

“What do you have there,” Howard asks, snapping open the plastic bag.

“Looks like a turd,” he says and he and Sherri snicker.

“Wow, that’s almost as clever as having to wear an American flag and burn money for warmth.”

“Whoa there, tiger.” Sherri scratches at the air.

Howard excuses himself for stepping between them and fiddles with tying off the can liner. "So whatcha workin on, huh? Huh?" Sherri winks at him through her horn-rimmed frames without glass and makes the gesture that she is going to elbow him.

Dean wants to tell her how he reflected on their conversation from that day next to the apple trees, how nice it felt. He wants to paint that image a hundred times.

Instead, he rolls the tentacle tip between his fingers and says, "I need to reattach this to my sculpture."

"That's pretty small. You should use a piece of toothpick to reconnect that." Howard leans in close. Dean didn't notice him being so close until he saw Howard's finger with its coarse black hair point at the tentacle tip.

Dean hesitated, wanting to say something smart-alecky, dumbfounded that he didn't think about that. He wishes they would just leave. Sherri speaks, "Let me see what you're working on."

Dean lifts the plastic. "Wow. Very bio-mechanical," Sherri says and lowers her glasses on her nose. "And it has great movement. I like the suction cups you're adding to the tentacles. I can't wait to see it when it's finished."

"Yeah, I should get back to work on it."

Howard walks to the sink where the green haired kid is emptying the muddy water from one of the splash pans and asks, "You about ready to go, Jerrod?"

"Nah, I'm going to finish up these potter's wheels."

Sherri says, "We can hang out and wait for you"

Jerrod wipes his hands on his bleached out jeans. "Go ahead. I'm going to get some work done on my mural once I'm done here."

"Let me help you, it'll go twice as quick," Howard says.

Dean walks to the crowded sink, turns the silver tab on the other facet and asks, "Where are the toothpicks?"

Jerrod jerks his head to the side. The green spines of hair vibrate, releasing miniscule greenish flakes. His eyes roll upward. He walks to the center table and pats around on the shelf below. "Aha!" He rattles a small yellow box.

Dean grabs it from Jerrod and walks back with the items to reattach my small cylindrical piece. He sets the bowl down, drops the sponge in the water. He pinches one of the toothpicks from the box and breaks it in half and slowly inserts it into the tentacle tip.

"Seriously," Jerrod says, "this isn't your problem." Dean turns to see Howard scrubbing at something in the sink.

Dean looks to the three people. Jerrod pulls a tub from Sherri's hands. Sherri averts her eyes and says "Let us help, and you can get to painting sooner."

Jerrod turns to his left when he hears Howard removing the tub on one of the other wheels. "Stop," Jerrod says, "I won't let you help me. It doesn't make sense, really. The sooner I get this done, the sooner Winslow finds something else for me to do."

"We can spend our time here however we want." Howard grunts as he lifts the tub full of silt.

They're protecting the green haired kid. It makes him sick. They wouldn't help him if he was the one who defaced the building. He pushes the toothpick into my upper limb, but as he pushes, he realizes the folly of inserting the sliver of wood into the small end first. It crumbles. He slams his fist on the metal. They turn to him. "That piece, it fell apart."

Dean spends an hour fashioning a new tip onto the end of my tentacle, holding the flaccid clay in place, wiping at it with the sponge, smoothing it down, trying to warp it back into position as Howard and Sherri help Jerrod with the components to the potter's wheels. Dean's frustration with the wilting limb and not being able to confront the kid about his graffiti transfers back and forth until the three of them walk out, wishing Dean luck with me.

Chapter Twenty-eight

My nature is the art of affliction. I know all the adages about being double edged and cutting both ways. I'm in the slicing business. I'm illegal because of my spring loaded response. Too quick to act. Not allowing the user time to question—ideally less time for the victim. But I am two sided, both tool and weapon.

Jake is trying to change. The toss of the red die will reconfirm or obliterate his conviction. He halts next to the ice-machine outside the gas station. He's ready to make the phone call, but he's committed to chance. He hopes for a six as he unzips the breast pocket on his jacket and withdraws the six sided plastic composite from the dark polyester pouch. Close to one, he'll abandon any sense of love and commitment and keep going like he has. In his heart, he wants to at least try something new. Close to six, he'll make the call. He wants to try. This is a form of deviation from the norm, he tells himself. Roll a three, and he'd do something random, hitchhike to California, no explanation or excuse. Tell nobody. This is a big roll. The die is his random number generator. From ten feet away, he tosses the gambling cube underhand against the bricks of the convenient store.

His brother, Jerrod, is moving on with his life—off to the academy. Jake kept paying the bills the only way he knew how, but now his motivation is leaving. The game continues, but the rules have changed.

The blood cube geometrically dances back toward him.

It is sweltering. Another broiling day in Junk City. The cars sound louder. The creosote and diesel smells thicker, heavier. It is like drowning in tar fumes. Somehow, the cigarette purifies the experience, the smoke soothes Jake's lungs. The tobacco cools his throat. It takes the taste from his mouth, the scent from his sinuses.

The six sided gambling device skitters left, alongside the building, away from Jake. In his heart, he wants to call Pam, he wants things to be right, but he wants to be sure. He doesn't want to do something non-sequitor, but everything, he thinks, is chance.

The die stops. Jake takes a drag. His fate has been determined. He walks over the grease spotted asphalt. The die is glowing under the noon sun. His shadow looks like a spiky blob. The glare makes it impossible to discern which number is on top. He picks up the die, careful not to rotate it.

Four. Not a six, but not a three either. Glorious four. The powers that be agree with his decision. The die is dropped back in the breast pocket, and he walks to the front, to the payphone. Time to try.

Expertly, he extracts me from the side pocket and presses my release, ejecting my fatal part and dips it into the coin slot. My edge tickles the lever, tricks the sensor. He tucks the receiver into the crook of his neck. With his other hand gripped around me, index finger extended, he jabs at the numbers. They beep in his ear, but he doesn't care. It rings.

He rotates me back and forth, and I glint under the high noon sun. The mother-of-pearl glows fiery, pinks and blues. Blade edge glints. The sun is directly overhead, but Jake conceals me within the aluminum casing around the front of the payphone. He presses my release button, pushes my sharp tip into the shiny metal of the phone. This grates on me, not being used as a weapon or tool—just a pastime.

He likes the image of the two points coming together. It's annoying. It dulls. The mindless attrition. If only he could hear my spring moaning and feel the miniscule flecks of rust sloughing. Rust, particles of deteriorated metal. The meth accelerating the transaction.

He pushes the blade all the way into the handle but keeps the release pressed, keeping it from locking into place. He holds me, retracted, suspended, waiting to shoot out, tip barely sticking out, twists it there, and then slowly releases under his steady control. My spring gives a protracted squeal. Pam

answers, "Hello?" His hand pauses then resumes pushing my sharp metal back into the handle. "Hello?"

For a second, all he hears is the whirl of traffic behind him. The draining of chemicals trickling from his sinuses causes his throat to constrict. He is queasy with the innerving high. His mind flits over everything he has been thinking about. He wants to tell her about his band, how it is the only other thing he has cared about besides his brother in his entire life. Now he feels that way about her, and if she would just come to the show, then she can see he's capable of putting things together. Not everybody likes punk, but this is life's work. He's fought the good fight. Shit happens. But he loves the band. Loves her.

He visualizes her pregnant and knows he needs to discuss all the other things: jobs, diapers, aluminum siding, central air, solar powered lawnmower, Pinto Wagon, cleaning supplies, deep freezer, dry storage, wardrobes, shoes, closets, parks, Frisbees, grilled meat, red checkered table cloth, doctor's appointments, toothbrushes, Aquafresh, box-springs, sheets, welcome mat, ottoman, furniture, book cases, yo-yo's, plastic eye-balls, trick-o-treating, plastic tarantula rings, jack-o-lanterns, Smarties.

Jake rubs his nose at the thought of crushing and sniffing Smarties as a kid. Was he destined for this shit? Will his kid be as fucked up as him? Can he

help it? How long has it been? *How long has it been?* Maybe he should just get to the part where he asks her to come to his show tonight.

“Okay, I’m hanging u—”

“Wait. It’s Jake.”

Jake focuses on the fact that his mind is scrambling. He wishes there was a way to say everything he has to say all at once. For that matter, he wishes he could say everything he will ever have to say all at once to everyone who is going to hear it—one mind blowing song. And furthermore, to be completely understood. It’s hardest to appear sober when he knows it is essential.

He jabs me into the concentric fibers of one of the logs wrapped in bundles stacked for sale below the window with a flier advertising soda. My tip wedges in and his sweaty hand slips away. He looks around. Customers exit the store. It’s the middle of the day. Everybody is too busy with their own worlds.

He tells her he needs to see her though he’s not sure if this is actually true; that is, he’s realizing he might be too strung out. Jake isn’t even sure what his mouth is saying. The thoughts behind them revolve around things being better in person, that he’d do anything for her. Out of respect, he chose to call. He’s making an effort. He wants to change but needs help. Things are better in person.

With a tug, I am extracted from the log. He collapses my blade several times, point against the aluminum. He is still speaking. Everything is exciting,

the prospect of a new world, if she just gives him a chance to talk with her in person.

She says she doesn't want to see him for a while.

I am released, snapped open, set on the aluminum wrap—a bit forcefully. He grabs his lighter in his right jacket pocket and grabs his cigarettes in his left pocket simultaneously. He withdraws one of the two cigarettes with his lip, holds it in his teeth, sets the red and white pack down, snaps open the Zippo, strikes the flint, and holds the flame to the cigarette. With a flick he puts away the Zippo in our communal pocket that reeks worse than usual during these warm days.

Jake snaps the lighter shut and returns it to his pocket. He has a couple dollars. Jake asks if they could get malts from the drug store. It seems like a nice way to spend some time before he needs to get ready for the show. Smoking cigarettes and sipping on a chocolate malt in the air-conditioning. Admire the retro '50's throw-back style drug store with the green and yellow VCT tiles and tin advertisements imprinted with Hollywood stars from the past. Listen to the rattles and beeps of somebody playing the pinball machine.

"Jake, you're not listening to me. I do not want to see you."

He didn't want to do this now, but he tells her about his parents. How his father had to raise him and his brother. How the abusive prick told him so many

bullshit stories about what happened to his mother he doesn't know if any one of them is any less true than the others.

He thanked him for teaching him about cars. His old man was all right, just drank too much, would get crazy. Jake chokes up. He picks me up, presses the release, and pushes the blade in and out with his palm. Jabbing at flesh is much better.

He tells her that his old man killed himself drinking and driving. Jake was almost eighteen. He wasn't in school anymore, just trying to tolerate enough of the old man's belittling during the day, working on cars, to save enough to do something. Jerrod was fourteen.

He admits to her the condition of his house. His house is filth; therefore, it is The Filth house.

He tells her that he never wanted to be like his old man. He's calling it quits on all the alcohol if that's what's upsetting her. He recognizes that this excuse is paradoxical to the fact that he's tweaked, but this is it. He's done with this too—never meant to start. He's getting through tonight's show, and he's off this shit.

He doesn't know why he's telling her about his father over the phone, a phone that he grips like a lifeline. A suspension cord strung over Junk City. He tightens his hand. He just wants her to come to his show. Even if it's not her kind

of music. It's something that he's proud of. It's something redeeming about himself. His music is about changing perceptions, and although violent sounding, is proposing real freedom. Not storybook American freedom. But real freedom. And not anarchy either. Something scarier. Something between freedom and anarchy. Something to make the future better.

There. He's said it. He tells her the show's in the Fair Building. It's a celebration concert for his brother. She knows how hard it is to get into Bookcliff Academy.

He's happy to be sober—that is, off the alcohol. He isn't going to do the meth for much longer, just through tonight. It makes him feel so damn sober. He's high on life, doesn't need drugs to feel this good.

He doesn't have to wait for an answer. He's crossed a line—over the edge. He's in the clearing. The positive energy he exudes can fix anything. "It's not like you have to get into any moshpits or anything. I just want you to see me doing something I'm proud of. I'm sorry about the other night." He drops the cigarette to the ground and grinds it into the concrete with the toe of his boot. It's to change. He doesn't know how to be a daddy, but he's willing to try. There's no choice. The die has been tossed.

And at that moment, as he rolls me back and forth to deflect the glare between my two edges, he swears if she says yes, he'll really do it—he'll quit all the shit. No die roll necessary.

Jake is excited about it. It's a new hope. A rejuvenation. This is his new fuel. He can do it. He just needs help. He needs support. He still hates the world and needs to scream his belligerence in his punk band. He needs this outlet too. He can't work for anyone else, but he'll give the auto-body shop a chance, or if Pam wants, she can teach him to set tile. The future is full of promise for two people in love. With her, he can do it.

And all she can come up with is, "How do you want me to respond to all of this?"

"This is why I want to see you in person. Get a malt with me. Come to my show. I want to see you. We need to talk."

"Why now? Why couldn't you respond with this answer three nights ago? Why did it take you three days to figure this out? These are things you should have been telling me all along."

"I'm telling you now. Please, come and talk to me. Come to my show"

Pam sighs into the phone. "I'll think about it. I'll see if Kerri will come with me. I have to go. I have other things to deal with now." She hangs up. A metallic clicks and then silence.

Jake continues holding the receiver to his ear. He turns and surveys the station. Cars line up in front of the stop light. A blue Suburban pulls up to one of the pumps. Jake retrieves the baggy of pink powder.

He picks me up. We are really going on a ride this time. I slide into the delicate plastic. The light inside the baggy is glorious, tinting the sun. A rose colored world. Crystalline mountains that I swish through, harvesting the rocky mounds. This quick lashing in object time releases a catastrophic crushing sound on a particle level, thunder echoing over a mountain range. He flagrantly lifts me. This is extravagance. A clump plumes in the breeze. Most of it is suctioned into his nostril. The substance quickens our attrition—causing me to rust, punching holes in his brain. Up it goes. I plunge again into the silken pink world and hoist another bump to the other nostril. Up it goes.

I'm collapsed against the phone, locked into place, and returned to the front right pocket beside the lighter. Darkness within darkness. He extracts the last cigarette from the pack. He throws the container in the trash can. It will not add to The Filth house's consciousness, not yet anyway. It is properly disposed of as of now.

He smokes his cigarette, uncertain of what just happened. Flips the butt into the parking lot. Some kid with a buzzed head and wearing grody t-shirt with the picture of a skull with its eyes looking up toward its exposed brain

approaches him and asks if he's in a band. Jake tells him yes, come check out the show tonight. No, they don't need a new front man. Want a bump?

Chapter Twenty-nine

And now this filth takes on a human form. Devoid of soul, this body brings a new consciousness of the waste. Curled around a swath of Egyptian cotton soaked in life blood, he gives me a new consciousness. There's two kinds of filth in Junk City: the dead and the dying.

Jerrod walked into the Fair building with Howard and Sherri. The building is an elongated room, twenty feet wide, brick walls, wood floors, and ornamental copper tiles cover the ceiling. Along the left side is the bar with copper countertop that further narrows the lounging area filled with matching, chest high tables. The stage and lavender curtain extends across the back of the room with stairs leading up the side. A glass chandelier hangs above the dance floor. Abstract paintings in primary colors adorn the walls.

The first person Jerrod saw as he entered the hall was Robby, the bassist for The Filth. He would have been hard to miss. Even though the majority of the crowd was clad in leather and flannel and most had colorful hair, Robby, with his red bi-hawks fully charged—like wheel wells for his ears—wearing his spiked leather jacket, still stood out due to his size. Everything about him seemed enlarged: his head, his hands, his thighs, his stomach, his boots. And he was spinning on a barstool, stopping every third rotation to take a sip from his glass

of soda. The person nearest him—a guy with hair parted on the side, wearing horn rimmed glasses and a black t-shirt—was two stools away and kept glancing over at the spinning punk. The guy kept pulling his beer bottle closer to himself, leaning more and more to the right.

“Man, I’m so thwacked,” Robby told Jerrod when he said hello. Robby’s voice sounded as though he didn’t have enough air in his lungs to compress words. Jerrod asked him where his brother was. “He’s geeking out behind the curtain.” Robby leaned over and took a pull from the straw and pushed off the counter to give himself another spin. His legs flailed, and Jerrod jumped back, bumping into Howard, just dodging the boots.

Thrash music playing from the PA was just audible above the murmuring of the crowd. It was a good showing for The Filth. Jerrod told Sherri and Howard that he would be right back, and he weaved between the tall tables and people holding drinks, careful to avoid the cigarettes being lifted to lips. The smoke wafted toward the tall ceiling. A few people were gathered on the dance floor. Nobody was near the stage.

Walking up the steps, Jerrod felt the glances penetrating him. He didn’t want anyone looking at him. He wasn’t the rock star. He was tired of being scrutinized. With hunched shoulders, he scuttled across the stage, peeled the curtain from the wall, and slipped behind it.

Jake sat on an upturned bucket amongst the instruments and sound equipment, cables entangled around his boots. He hunched forward, breathing heavily, throwing the red die he found. Picking it up and throwing it again and again in rapid succession while mumbling something. Jerrod could make out the pronunciation of the number rolled, but not the frantic chanting between each roll.

Jake looked like a worn out version of his usually tattered self. The tips of his mohawk drooped. His skin looked pasty, his eyes dull.

The die rattled, caroming off the wall, rattling around the coiled cords, and before it finished skittering, Jake snatched it in his fist and jerked his head to the side. "What? Oh, it's you. Is Pam here? Have you seen her? I want her to see this. My show," he sniffed and wiped his nose with the back of his jacket, "it means nothing without her seeing it. I mean, I'm throwing this concert for you and everything, but I want her to see that I'm not a complete fuck up, you know? And now I'm so nervous I'm not sure I can remember all the lyrics. Have you even met her? I'm glad you made it. How's life at the academy? I need a Coke. My throat is burned out. Are any of the members from Death Rape here yet? They're supposed to kick things off, you know? Nobody has come back here to tell me what's going on. I just want to get psyched for the show. I didn't mean to lose it on the band, but fuck, man, nobody knows how freaked out I am. I'm

going to have a kid, man. I just want this show to annihilate. I want Pam to see this." Jerrod didn't know when or how to respond. He had seen his brother on a lot of junk, but he has never seen him looking this poorly. Pimples had developed on his forehead. His mannerisms were twitchy.

Jerrod felt momentarily fearful for his physical well being when Jake jumped up and stomped toward him, one hand still closed in a fist around the die. Jake wrapped his arms around Jerrod in a hug. The familiar scent of Jake's leather jacket reminded him of home. "I'm so glad you're here. I'm glad you made it." Jake released his brother and patted him on both shoulders a couple times. "You're so awesome, you know that? You're like an....an....an enigma, you know? So peaceful and punk. What the fuck? I'm so stoked about this show. We're going to pulverize bricks and shatter glasses. I want Pam to be here to see this. Somehow, I think if she can understand this, who I am, what I do, who we are, that we're like a community, then she won't have to worry so much about us. I just want my music to speak for me. There're things I care about, you know? Like churning the waters of chaos. Leading the revolt. Inciting riots. I want her to see our crowd go ape shit. I'm willing to change. I'm ready to do it for her, you know? I never thought I'd love anyone. Well, maybe I don't love her, but whatever this feeling it, it's good, and I want to keep taking whatever this is. I can't be furious forever, can I? I'm running out of luck I think. Like, we only get

so many chances at a good life. Well, this is the first time I've seen my chance. I can't do it alone. I really need her. I don't know why. I guess out of respect for the old man. If that miserable old fucker could stick it out, then so can I. And maybe, just maybe, I can do it without being such a surly prick to my kid, you know? I just wish Pam was here. That would make me feel better. I'm not sure if she even gives a shit about me." Jerrod was frightened. Jake punched the brick wall. He hissed and shook his fist. The flesh on his knuckles was torn and bleeding. He sucked on his the back of his hand. "Nothing like the taste of blood."

"Pam will show up, man." Jerrod patted Jake's back. "Let's go get you that Coke. You can meet my friends from the academy."

As they walked out from behind the curtain, the members of Death Rape were hauling their equipment down the stairs through the back door. Jerrod and Jake waited for two of them lugging a half-stack up the stairs before walking toward the front of the hall where Sherri and Howard were talking to Robby, who was still periodically spinning on his stool. Gob, the drummer for The Filth, slapped at Robby's boots as he spun past.

Jerrod introduced his brother to Sherri and Howard. Jake turned to Robby and asked him if he had seen Pam.

“Pam. Pam. Pam.” Robby leaned over the bar to sip from the straw. “I keep telling him that we’ve never even met this chick. As a matter of fact, I wonder if she even exists.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Pam, Pam, Pam. She’s like a figment of his imagination,” Gob spoke rapidly, the gap in his teeth producing its usual hissing.

“Fuck you,” Jake shouted and slapped Robby’s glass. It didn’t break, but it rattled across the bar, spilling liquid and ice-cubes on the copper surface. Everyone in the bar was momentarily silenced as they turned to examine the source of the sound.

Sherri clapped her hands twice. “Yes,” she shouted, “that’s punk rock.”

The bartender turned toward the commotion. She wore a camouflaged hat over her long eggplant colored hair. “Who did that?” She pointed directly at Robby.

Nobody said anything for a moment. “I did,” said Jake. “So what?”

“So what? You do that again and I’m kicking your ass out.”

“You can’t kick me out. I’m in the band.”

“Yeah, and that’s why you’re getting one warning.” She turned and grabbed a bottle from the cooler.

“Come on, Jake.” Jerrod grabbed his brother. He wrapped his arm around his shoulders and walked him to the end of the bar. They watched as Death Rape

adjusted their instruments. The drummer, a muscular guy with his shirt off, arms, neck, and chest covered in tattoos, situated his cymbals, snare, and hi-hat. A guy with long black hair draped over his face tuned the strings on his guitar. Another guy with dreadlocks did the same for his bass. The lead singer, with shaved head and white muscle shirt, growled several times into the microphone.

“Man, fuck that,” Jake said and flapped his arm, jerking himself free of his brother’s grasp, and walked into the bathroom.

Jerrod spent a moment admiring the crowd. By then, most of the people of legal drinking age were clustered around the tables accumulating beer bottles and cocktail glasses—the glass ashtrays having gathered mounds of orange and white butts. And the dance floor was filling up with the younger crowd. Almost all were male. All of them wore some variety of black leather, or denim jackets with spikes on the shoulders and band logos painted on the back. One mean looking kid with a buzzed head wore a red flannel shirt. A girl with pink hair wearing a black hoodie, miniskirt, and black tube socks with red skulls leaned against the brick wall—beneath one of the abstracts, that, if anything, looked like sunbeams shining through somebody’s intestinal track—arms folded across her chest, looking bored with the guys’ efforts to slap one another in the nuts.

Jerrod particularly liked the look of a woman at the table nearest him, with her neck length, straightened, black hair. She had on fake eyelashes. A

beauty mark was painted on her cheek. Gold rings around her neck. She looked like an Egyptian goddess. She was with some big guy with the face of a pugilist. His muscular arms were sleeved in vintage sailor designs. His bowler hat was tipped forward.

Jerrod looked back down the bar to assure that his friends were getting along all right. Sherri was laughing at something Howard or Robby or Gob had said. The four of them seemed engaged.

“I thought I might find you here.” Jerrod heard a male voice say this close to his head. Jerrod saw Jake exit the bathroom, smearing his hand over his face. The room was getting crowded, so he didn’t turn around until he heard the sentence repeated, a bit louder—the second time followed by a tap on the shoulder.

Jerrod turned to see a guy who looked like a cross between some early Hollywood actor and a trumpet player for a second wave ska band. He held a pen and a pad of paper. In the breast pocket of his white shirt were a couple extra pens. He wore a black tie and black fedora.

Jerrod asked if they had met before, and the guy responded, “No, no we haven’t. Name’s Trent. Trent Rich. Reporter for The Daily Shrapnel. Say, aren’t you the fellow who painted the mural on the side of the academy?” The pen he held stood erect, tip pinning down a point on the pad.

“How do you know that?” Jerrod asked and felt a slap on his shoulder.

“Don’t answer any of their questions, man. Plead the fifth. Freedom of speech, freedom of press, freedom to remain silent. Our government will tell us when to speak. Is Pam here yet? Oh yeah, that’s right. Nobody knows what she looks like.” Jake leaned up on his toes and swayed back and forth surveying the crowd.

“I was there the night you were arrested.”

“What?” Jake shouted. “And what the fuck did you do about it? Take notes?”

Trent slid the pen around in his hand, holding it over his thumb and middle finger, folding his index finger over the top, and gesticulated for Jake to stop. “Take it easy there, friend. No harm. No foul. Right? I just wanted to ask some questions. Weren’t you accepted into the academy?”

“Hey man,” Jake said, “I don’t like you asking all these questions. Who sent you? Who are you working for? What do you want from my brother? Why don’t you get the hell out of here?”

“Yeah, you saw me that night? Where were you?” Jerrod felt odd that an outsider would say this. “How did you find me?”

“I recognized you from that night.” Trent laughed. “Your hair, it stands out. Anyway, I told you that already. And I saw this flier,” the reporter held up

the picture of the naked man shrouded in an American flag crouched over a stack of burning money. "I'm just using good reporting skills. I figured from your attire that you might turn up here."

Jake rubbed the side of his face with the sleeve of his leather jacket and made a sucking sound. "I don't fucking stereotype *you*, man." Jake shoved the reporter in the chest. "I don't assume you're a fucking dork because of the pens in your pocket." Jake shoved him again.

"Ease up, man, I'm just doing my job."

Jake said he didn't give a shit and fuck his job. "Go report on the war. I don't trust in any syndicated piece of shit who doesn't have the balls to help my brother out when he's getting brutalized by a fucking pig." Jake shoved Trent with both hands. As he fell, he reached toward the copper tabletop to steady himself and pulled a glass ashtray off the table as he tumbled into the legs of the bar stools.

The man that Jerrod had observed earlier in the bowler hat asked, "Do you need a hand."

And Trent, sprawled out on the wood floor, pen and pad laying by his side, responded, "No, I'll be fine."

"I wasn't fucking talking to you, pal," the pugilist faced man says. "I've been to every Filth show, and I've never seen you here before."

The gal with the golden rings around her neck propped her elbow on the table, placed her cigarette to her lips, and held it there, smoke streaming upward from the tip for a moment before inhaling.

A voice resounded through the PA system, "What's the commotion back there? We're about ready to rock your brains out. Save some of that shit for the pit."

"Yeah, assholes," the drummer shouted and hammered out a drum roll on the snare.

Trent kneeled, gathered his items, stood, doffed his fedora, told Jerrod that maybe later would be better, and worked his way through the crowd and out the door.

Jake walked to the bar and slammed his fist down. "I need a beer." The bartender was at the other end. "I'm thirsty," he yelled.

Jerrod didn't want to witness what might happen next. He'd seen plenty. He liked to mosh, but unadulterated violence deserved a buffer zone. At that moment, he wasn't sure what Jake was really capable of, or who could stop him.

Jerrod walked to the front of the bar to rejoin his friends. Howard looked as though he was conducting with his lit cigarette as he spoke, "Exactly! I can't know my true identity because I have always lived under the influence of

somebody else's ideological construction." He lifted the cigarette to his mouth, a thin mustache tracing his upper lip.

"And what's scary, man," Robby lifted his fresh glass of soda, "is that it all stems from our parents. There's a connection, you know, it's like, why do we call the government 'big brother?'" Robby reached out and grabbed hold of Jerrod, tweaking his shoulder. "That's why I love this guy. He was raised by that crazy fucker. No bullshit parental control for him, and looky, he's the most normal of all of us." He jerked his bi-hawked head backwards. Jerrod looked in the direction of the nod. At the end of the bar, Jake was finishing the end of his beer. He forcefully set the glass down, wiped his mouth, turned, and ducked into the bathroom.

"Wow," Sherri said, "You were raised by your brother? He's something else, huh?"

Jerrod hesitated for a moment, to decide if he should make an apologetic or explanatory comment. He stared at the swirl designs he drew on the toes of his shoes. The silence was broken by Howard. "This is great. I'm already having more fun and have seen more punk antics than I expected, and the music hasn't even started."

And as if on cue, the lead singer growled. The bass drum thumped, steadily gaining momentum, vibrating the atmosphere. Only after the guitar slid,

whining to life, did the bass drum maintain its hammering rhythm. The bass thrummed to life, playing a steady repetition, but its sound was distorted, turning each note into a reverberating mush, each successive note echoing off the next. The guitarist warped the slide into a solo of humming, stinging notes. Then the drummer hit the cymbal, indicating the shift, and the music took on a pogo effect and the singer chanted his lyrics, "Bounce fuckers, bounce. Bounce to the beat. Bounce fuckers, bounce to the sounds of the street. Bounce fuckers', bounce fuckers' heads on the concrete. I grit my teeth when I speak." The singer jumped in place. With his free hand, he dribbled an imaginary ball.

"Dude," Robby slapped Jerrod on the back and shouted, "time to fucking mosh." The kids in the pit slam dancing encroached on the lounge area, displacing the drinkers who grabbed their glasses and clustered toward the front of the hall to avoid the flailing limbs. Jerrod looked to the crowd, already in pandemonium, then back to Howard and Sherri.

Sherri lifted her beer bottle, frowned, and shrugged her shoulders. "I just got this drink. Better sit this one out. I'll hang on to our seats."

Robby moved Jerrod to the side with both hands as he passed, pumped his fist in the air and shouted a battle cry. Howard dropped his cigarette to the floor and stepped on it. "Hell yes. I'm ready." Jerrod observed his new friend, his

thick curly hair, his blue plaid cowboy cut shirt, his black corduroy pants, and wondered how long he'd last.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Gob hissed. "Let's tear it up."

Jerrod slipped between the drinkers at the tables and fought into the mosh pit. To the song playing, the crowd was jumping and fist pumping. A couple kids near the front clambered onto the stage, sang a verse with the singer, and dove into the crowd. The group of bodies rocked and jabbed Jerrod. The room already smelled of body odor, enough so to permeate the heavy leather, alcohol, and tobacco smell. Jerrod shoved back, jumped around, thrashed, slammed into people into an open space that was created, and he ran in a circle, arms in a pinwheel.

The song ended. He had lost sight of Howard, and Gob, but Robby's head was easily located—the protruding, red, spiky ear fenders. Robby stood at the front. Jerrod ended his chaotic dance near the back of the crowd.

"That's what I'm talking about," the lead singer spoke between heavy breaths, "bringing anarchy to Junk City. I want to see that again, this time, twice as fast, twice as furious!"

This comment received a few cheers from the audience. The person standing next to Jerrod, some young kid wearing a black Misfits shirt, lurched forward, uncontrollably slamming between several people on his way to the

floor. Jerrod turned to see his brother. The red mohawk drooped worse than before. Jake winked at him, smirked, took a drag and shouted something that was lost in the onrush of crushing music. It was a constant driving song without intonation shift or breakdown, just full throttle bashing.

Jerrod rapidly banged his head. A circle pit opened up before them. Anybody who got too close was shoved away by Jake. He wedged his smoke between his lips and lunged at every person to spin by. He kicked at one guy's legs.

There was only a second of silence to denote that the song had ended and the next one began. Jake flung himself into the crowd. He wasn't moshing for fun, or to even expel excess energy. He was moshing to do damage, skanking, but exaggerating each move into a full on swinging kick and punch. Jerrod feared where Howard might be in this mix. He wanted Howard to get a taste of the local scene, but he didn't want him brutalized by Jake. Jerrod wasn't going to get on the floor with his brother. He was attacking blindly. But it didn't matter. The crowd had recognized the assailant for what he was. Some of the elbow jabs were thrust with more intention. The shoves tended more toward a downward trajectory. Cupping his left eye, Jake wandered past Jerrod, out of the pit and into the bathroom. Jerrod jumped back into the mix, slamming through the crowd.

After the set ended, Robby asked Jerrod what had happened to Jake and lit a cigarette. Jerrod shrugged, watched Howard walking from the stage. His curly hair glistened with sweat. Wet spots gathered around his blue plaid armpits. "That was really good," he panted.

Recorded punk rock played at intermission volume through the sound system. Jerrod couldn't tell if it was because of the murmur of the crowd, or because his eardrums had been bludgeoned that the music sounded barely audible. The members of Death Rape rolled up their cables and replaced their instruments to clear the stage.

Jake approached the three of them. His eyes looked sunken. A bruise already emerged below his right eye. His pupils engulfed most of the irises. The blue was a barely visible ring. "This is just great. I'm going to have a shiner when Pam shows up. I wonder if she's here yet?" He turned toward Robby. "We have to wait for Pam to show up, man. I want her to see our set. It's super important. I promised her a great show. I don't want her to miss it. She needs to see me wield the fucking fury, you know? I want to impress her. I need to impress. Maybe she's having a hard time finding the place? I need to find Pam. We can't start without her."

"All right, man, chill. We can chill for a while. No hurries. No worries."

Robby took a drag and blew the smoke at the chandelier. "Yet."

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Gob hissed and rubbed his blue buzz cut. “We have time. We have time. Chill, man, chill.”

“Oh great,” Howard said and extended his chin, “look who did show up.”

Jerrod turned and saw who Howard gestured to—Dean, standing there talking to Sherri. Jerrod sighed. “I really didn’t think he’d show up here.”

“What’s this guy’s deal?” Jake asked Howard.

Jerrod tried catching Howard’s eye to give him a head shake to discourage saying anything. But the words were spoken, “He’s this pretentious douche bag who doesn’t think Jerrod’s good enough to be enrolled in the academy.”

“We’ll see what that fuckstick has to say after I kick his face in.” Jake turned from the group.

Robby grabbed Jake’s arm, spinning him back around. “Hey, chief, let me field this one, you’ve done plenty of damage already tonight.”

“Don’t you ever tell me what the fuck to do.” Jake wagged his finger. “I’ll gut you and everybody else who tells me how to live my life.” Jake turned.

Jerrod reached to stop his brother, but Jake yanked his arm free. “It’s cool, Jake. I can handle it,” Jerrod spoke and followed after his brother, but the crowd of people shifting to get their drinks cut him off. By the time he weaved around the tables, Jake was standing in front Dean. Jake’s red mohawk quivered as he nodded up and down. Dean was not aware that he was being surveyed, but

Sherri noticed Jake standing there and slowly backed around the corner of the bar. In reaction to Sherri, Dean turned to see Jake.

“You don’t look so fucking talented to me.” Jake said.

“Who are you talking to, rooster boy?”

Sherri curled her hand around her bottle on the counter and adjusted her shiny black purse by rolling her shoulder. “Dean, why don’t we go outside to have a cigarette?”

“Yeah, Dean, let’s go outside so when I gut where you it won’t get on the floor.”

“Jake,” Jerrod said, “It’s cool, why don’t—”

Jake whipped his hand into the air. “No, I want to hear this no talent ass clown tell me what the fuck his problem is with you.”

Dean looked over to Jerrod. “Mr. Muralist here? You know this poser? I don’t have a problem with him besides the fact that his work is conceptually gimmicky, stylistically unrefined, and he’s nothing more than a showy dilettante who has duped—”

Jake made a quick motion to his pocket withdrawing his pearl-handled stiletto. The death click seemed audible to Jerrod over the murmuring crowd.

Jake drew back the blade and Jerrod wrapped his arms around his brother. "Don't." Jerrod spoke as his brother twitched under his submission. "He's not worth it, man."

Dean stepped back and laughed. "You're all so fucking cliché. What kind of pussy has to use a knife?"

"Come on," Sherri grabbed Dean. "Don't be stupid. Let's go."

Jake may very well have broken free if Robby didn't latch on to him. Gob stepped in front of Jake. "It's cool, bro. It's cool." Jerrod looked to see how many people were paying attention to them. Fortunately, the bartender was too busy dishing ice into cocktail glasses at the other end of the bar to notice the commotion. "Put it away before somebody sees you."

By then, Sherri and Howard were pushing Dean out the door. Dean was cussing and feigning resistance, occasionally thrusting his shoulders. Jake too was struggling against Jerrod and Robby, but with the vigor of commitment. "Dude, you don't want to get kicked out before Pam gets here. Put it away and calm down."

"Fine." Jake retracted the blade by pressing it against the side of the bar. "Let me go." He jerked away and raised both hands. "I'm cool. I'm done. Nobody fucks with my crew. Ever." He turned and walked back through the

crowd gathered in the lounge, most of who clamored for a spot at the bar. Jerrod saw, between shifting bodies, his brother enter the bathroom.

“Hey, man, you got to talk to your brother,” Robby said, “He won’t listen to me, you know. He’s done too much of that shit. Somebody needs to tell him to chill until after the show. He’s going to fucking over dose.” Robby placed his finger on the side of his nose and sniffed several times.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Tell him to chill. We gotta play a good set. He’ll listen to you. Enough sniff sniff.”

Jerrod didn’t want to have to deal with this. He slipped between tables and bodies toward the bathroom door. He’d seen the meth crazed maniacs that his brother dealt to. Perhaps Jake is part of The Filth, but there’s a reason to it. He has a moral code. No matter how subculture his thought process, he has a rationale. He has a soul. Jerrod had seen meth houses, horrible places. The worst resurfaced in his mind. The house was filled with dog shit. Most of it was drying up, but it was nevertheless horrible. Piles had been scooped into the corners. So much dog shit everywhere. There was merely a narrow trail cleared leading between the primary locations needed to function in a home: fridge, faucet, couch, bed. Jerrod remembered asking the old man, the bearded, greasy, toothless old man what kind of dog he had, trying to make light of the situation; after all, it was an anomaly to see that much dog shit and no dogs. Go see for

yourself, the man had said, directing Jerrod to the widow. The man laughed and wheezed. Jerrod tiptoed through the scat and leaned forward over the mounds of fecal matter to prop himself up by the sliding glass door. Outside, on the compacted clay soil, containing less poop than the carpet, under the summer sun, lie the dog, a brindle, breathless lump of protruding skeletal system. Jerrod told the man that he thought the dog might be dead, and the man laughed louder which caused a coughing fit, and then he boasted that he starved the dog to death as punishment for it shitting all over the place. Tried feeding the dog its own shit, putting it in his dog bowl, but the dog wouldn't eat it, chose to starve.

The fact that his brother would deal with this squalor disgusted him. The fact that his brother contributed to this wickedness disgusted him. The fact that his brother had witnessed the same atrocities and still chose to partake in Satan's substance disgusted him the most.

Jerrod slowly turned the handle to see if it was unlocked. It was. It was a single toilet bathroom. He silently twisted the latch free then swung the door open. Jake flung around, dropping a plastic baggy and plunged the knife forward.

The blade slid inside his chest. It felt cold and hot at the same time. It stung, and yet, it relieved the infliction of some agony, some unbeknownst built up pressure. His ribcage suddenly felt solid, as though his blood was congealing.

He looked down and saw the pearl handle in his chest, slipped neatly between ribs.

“Fuck, man. Fuck. What the fuck?” Jake cried. “What the fuck are you doing?” He scooped up the baggy from the hexagonal, beige tiles.

Jerrod stepped inside the small bathroom. “I don’t know.” Each breath burned. Each word wrenched his chest. “What do I do?”

“Fuck. This is no good. Why the fuck didn’t you knock? Why did you barge in here?” Jake grabbed his brother by the collar and pulled him in the bathroom and closed the door.

Jerrod slipped his hand around the knife, holding it between thumb and forefinger next to his shirt. The blood trickled over his knuckles. “I don’t like blood.”

“Fuck. Why the fuck did you have to fling the goddammed door open? Shit shit shit shit shit shit.” Jake paced the two steps between the urinal and sink. He grabbed the sides of his head, punched the wall.

“This is no good.” Jerrod was even more startled by the color of his blood, such a dark purple.

“Fuck. I can’t have this. Pam’s coming. How will I explain this fuck-up to Pam? We gotta get you out of here.”

“I need to go to the hospital.”

“No.” Jake grabbed his brother by the lapels on his denim jacket. The look in his eyes: crazy, desperate, fearful, mad. “We’ll figure this out, all right? We can’t get the cops involved.”

“Take your knife back.” Jerrod wanted to laugh, being a good sport, but the jostling felt like it might be tearing more tissue inside. “Take it out. I can’t do it.”

Jake gracefully reached out and extracted it in a quick pull. It was a relief. A relief like dislodging a corn kernel from his molars that had been there all day. The removal of something so agitating that it could no longer harm. But this did not carry with it the soothing effects. A squirt of blood erupted. It felt like something greater was torn free during the removal. His side cramped up and he folded over it. The warm fluid seeped into his shirt. He felt the drops trickling down his stomach.

“Here,” Jake reached inside the breast pocket of his leather jacket. “I knew I kept this for something.” He pressed a piece of peach cloth to the wound. “Keep this bunched up over the wound so nobody sees you’re bleeding, man. Keep it on there until the bleeding stops. It’ll be fine. You can’t go to the hospital. There’ll be cops and bullshit. They’ll ask too many questions. Fuck them, right. It’s going to be cool.”

“I’m not going to rat you out. I should go to the hospital. I won’t tell them anything.”

“No,” Jake hissed. “The cops will hound you for information, set up traps. Ask for details. Compare stories. Ask for witnesses and locations. They’ll verify your story. Sooner or later, they’ll catch you in one of their mind-fuck-traps. Then they’ll piece it together. Shit, man, that fucking reporter saw you here. He tracked you down. The cops will find you. They’ll find out. They’ll find me. I can’t start my new life like this. Just go home. It’s safe there. This isn’t that bad. We can figure this out later, after the show. I have to perform. I have to play for Pam. Please, bro, don’t blow this for me. Our set isn’t that long. I’ll be home soon. Shit, man, I’ll put duct tape over it. That fixes everything, right? Don’t worry about it. Look at my arm.” Jake pulled his sleeve back to reveal the scar running up side of his forearm. “Remember when the old man threw that saw blade at me? Look at this. It cut the shit out of me. All he did was tape it up, remember? He didn’t want to have to explain how I got hurt, and he was afraid that I wouldn’t keep my mouth shut. That’s just like this. It’s going to be okay. Look. My cut is like five inches long. How wide is your cut? Like half an inch? It already looks like it’s clotting. Just head home. Go home. I’d go too, but I told Pam to meet me here, see me play. I’ve got to make things right with her. I’m

done being such a fuck-up. I just need some help, you know? Help me, bro. Help me.”

Jerrod wasn't going to argue with his brother. He wasn't going to disappoint his brother. Jerrod rushed through the crowd and out of the Fair building and looked west. Only the faintest green glow striated the atmosphere.

The scent of lilacs imbued the rancid smell of smoke and alcohol trickling from the hall. The sweet scent pervaded even the diesel and creosote.

The laughing and murmuring and clanging of glasses echoed off the buildings. Jerrod turned the corner and walked alongside the building, turned the next corner and leaned against the back wall next to the dumpsters and rear entrance. He stared across the vacant parking lot. The heat, radiating from the day, seeped through the denim into his spine.

He felt drops of blood flow down his stomach. This cloth, it was not saturated at that time, much of it still pink when Jerrod looked at it. He needed to look at the wound. Should he go home? Each breath made him want to gag. The taste of iron rose on his tongue.

With a shaking hand, Jerrod lifted this rag. The bottom half of this wad was soaked red. He pressed this sullied cloth back down. He needed to take a better look. He turned to see if it was clear as a cop car cruised down the street.

He leaned back fast. Tried to slow his breathing. Looked out of the corner of his eye.

He would go home he told himself. Not to the academy, not the place of judgment. Not the place of expectations. Not the sterile environment. Home.

But the wound was too deep. He needed a doctor. He would give his life to his brother, but he wasn't going to die because of him. Dead, he would be more of a burden. There were many more murals he needed to paint.

Jake wouldn't have to know he went to the hospital. He'd plead the fifth if anybody questioned him. Is there a law against *being* stabbed?

Jerrod coughed and spat blood. He looked south, across the tracks toward The Filth house. Going there now would be a death trap. He was losing time. He'd go to the hospital.

He saw the cruiser slowing almost to a stop in the street next to him. He decided not to look up, just walk slowly, hand tucked inside the jacket, turn and walk back up the road, north to Mesa View Hospital.

The gasps for air were making him lightheaded. He staggered. Bumped the corner.

The bullhorn on the squad car popped a couple times. The squad car stopped. Jerrod recognized the cop's voice by his Mexican accent. "Jerrod, what's going on tonight? You been partying?"

“Yeah, I’m painting the town red tonight.” Jerrod felt a droplet trickle down his inner thigh, down his calve, and seep into his sock. He kept walking.

The officer called after him. Jerrod heard the car door slam. He glanced back to see the cop walking toward him, hand on his baton. Jerrod spoke over his shoulder, “What did I do this time?”

Before the officer finished speaking to the effect of suspicious activity and acting intoxicated, Jerrod ran, heading in the direction of the hospital. During his stride, he lost his grip on this rag that fell in a clump on the sidewalk. Jerrod had a substantial lead as he bolted across the street.

Blood congealing and crinkled on the sidewalk, Jake was the one to find this swath. He slipped out the back door. Pam never showed. He had to get away. The cops had arrived.

He had deflected playing the show for as long as he could. Robby told him to channel his angst into every note, release the hate through his screams. That was a hard suggestion to argue.

It was getting late. He kept telling his band that he wouldn’t be able to play without Pam. The bar tender insisted they start their set or pack it up. Jake was twisting the knobs on his guitar when the cops showed up.

Several squad cars parked in front of the building with their lights going. The flashing blue and red glared through the widows, pulsating over the room.

Jake didn't need a reason to evade the police. Never did. It was his nature, the clash between predator and prey. The dynamic always sent him scurrying.

He set his guitar down in his case and looked at Robby and Gob as the police entered and dispersed throughout the building. One headed straight to the bar tender. No matter what they were after, he was leaving, but he heard the words 'homicide' and 'stabbed' murmur through the hall. The word 'dead' echoed in his mind. It couldn't have been that bad. It couldn't have happened. It was a joke, a bluff. He told everyone that Jerrod left because he had diarrhea.

Jake spotted this clump of bloodied tissue on the sidewalk as he leaned around the corner checking for other cops. Immediately he recognized the cloth. This imbued wad of cotton looked to him like a rose growing from the concrete.

He plucked this morbid blossom from the cement and carried it clutched to his chest. He walked past the bust depot. The transients whistled and whooped after him. Cockroaches zigzagged in front of his boots, scurrying from the dewy grass as he passed the park. Under the effects of the amphetamine, with his heightened sensual acuity, the world of objects seemed alive—the sprinklers chanted and the stoplights winked knowingly. The lampposts pouted, crying electric tears stinging the plant life.

His pointed shadow arced, stretched out ahead, curved to his side, and disappeared behind him as he crossed the tracks. The transformer station

snapped and hummed. Tears filled his eyes when he saw the vacant building with the glass block windows that he and Jerrod shattered, throwing rocks over the chain-link and barbed-wire fence. Towers of wrecked vehicles loomed like a mechanical mountain range. Water towers and power poles spiked the dark sky. The smell of creosote and diesel melded with the putrid decay of the river as he neared the viaduct. Cars rushed past. The whine of train brakes squealed. The buckling of the knuckles on the coal cars linking together banged.

Jake staggered through his dirt yard around the bench seat, tires, fenders, television, filing cabinet, trough, barrels, record player, and splintered piano. Jake walked up the steps littered with bottle caps, cigarette butts, smashed cans, and shattered glass.

Before he pushed open the door to this filth that he kicked through until he found a syringe left over from one of the junkies who he allowed to shoot up in this house, before he emptied the remainder of his methamphetamine into a twisted serving spoon, before he injected the fatal load, on his way into this filth, he saw the enigma, a disturbance that rattled his primordial core, reaffirming his decision—the hideous gray insect with an elongated neck and pincers, the bug that doesn't belong.

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