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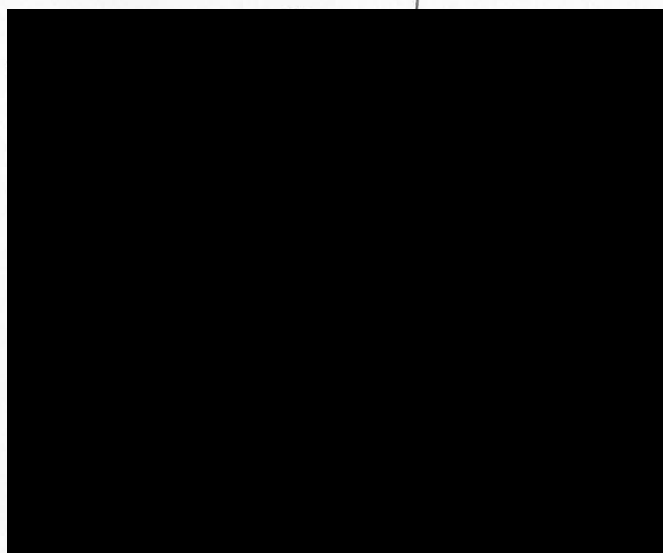
NO ONE REALLY KNOWS YOU

by

Andrew Charles Rhodes

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

Approved:



Dean of the Graduate School

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ABSTRACT

NO ONE REALLY KNOWS YOU

by Andrew Charles Rhodes

May 2012

This is a collection of five short stories that I have written during my time in the Center for Writers at the University of Southern Mississippi. The stories were written, revised, and workshopped in graduate classes over the last two years.

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INTRODUCTION

RASKOLNIKOV VS. PREDATOR

The title character in the movie *Predator* is frightening. His oddly arranged teeth are very sharp and he kills people in unusually painful ways. He can also become invisible, which is just one of his unfair advantages. On the other hand, in *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov is a young man who wants to come to an understanding of the world on his own terms. He is half-delirious from the desperate material circumstances of his life. His mind is on a selfish and wealthy old woman, a pawnbroker, who makes her money off others' desperation, and who is a generally unpleasant person. In a better world, her money would be with those suffering people who need it. Raskolnikov says that "...nature has to be shaped and directed, or we'd all drown in prejudice" (Dostoyevsky 64). Who would not agree with this statement, at least to some extent? Raskolnikov makes a decision to kill, but it is a decision which he truly believes will benefit everyone.

Both of these killers are obviously a threat, but the Predator is only a threat in the physical sense, whereas Raskolnikov threatens us more deeply. We are all safe from the Predator—spiritually safe—because our moral balance is never in danger, our beliefs and principles are never challenged, and we know that, in our relationship to the Predator, we are the spiritually superior party. The Predator does not make us confront ourselves and admit the ways in which we are similar to him. The horror of Raskolnikov is that he makes sense. Some part of us must admit that, according the reasonable logic laid out by the character, he is correct. The monster has explained himself, and he is no longer a monster. The moral distance between us is not great.

When I was thirteen years old my mother was attacked at gunpoint in a parking garage. It happened in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, at Methodist Hospital. A man put a gun to her head and told her to move into the passenger seat. Slamming the butt of the gun onto her head, the man accidentally shot out a car window. He ran.

At the hospital Mom had bloody stitches on her head. She was happy to see us and we—me, my sister, my dad—all cried and hugged. After that we didn't talk about the attack much, not for a long time. Without saying it out loud, we all decided that the man intended to rape and kill my mother. He wasn't there for the car.

All I knew about the man was that he was black and relatively young. If a black man was sitting idle in his car at the grocery store I was suspicious, and that suspicion could become terror if I allowed it. Parking garages took on new meaning and were a frequent setting for my nightmares. My parking garage nightmares were not all gun violence. I might be strangled or drowned. Or the pillars might collapse and the concrete debris bury me alive. One way or another I would end up alone.

Around the time of my mother's attack, I began stealing. I stole handwritten notes from girls at school. It was hilarious. I found out all kinds of juicy gossip. I helped spread gossip that gave girls bad reputations. It all began—the stealing—because the girls in my grade, the same girls I had crushes on, were suddenly no longer interested in me. It was junior high school and the girls had moved on. They were changing and now were dating older boys from different schools. My justification for committing these violations was that these girls had marginalized me. Ignoring my dedication, they had

cached in their improved bodies for something evil and flashy, and they deserved to be dishonored.

While stealing notes may have been typical adolescent goofs—and only once or twice was I caught and reprimanded—the hostility behind the theft was real and troubling. It was troubling enough that, at the time, I didn't want to question or face it. So this is how a person acts when they don't get what they want? Or when their possibilities for the future suddenly become limited. An opportunity for revenge—albeit a weak and bitter revenge—had presented itself and I had accepted.

Fiction looks for connections and form, and nothing should be off limits. It wasn't until years after junior high, a decade at least, once I was firmly entrenched in the world of fiction, that I had perspective on that junior high era. With fiction in mind, there was no reason not to face the fact that my mother's attacker and I were related. We were related in our inability to deal with our feelings. We weren't ready to face ourselves, to deal with our weaknesses. In the written word I can find a connection between two people who I would say—in other circumstances—had nothing in common. Fiction gives us the distance we need to view ourselves honestly. We can search ourselves for the darker impulses and selfish desires that we would rather not catalogue in an online profile or at a dinner party. In fiction, I could delve into this man's thoughts and motivations, I could speculate on his unfathomable mental state. I could imagine a wretched childhood free of any and all direction in dealing with impulses and longing. Fiction might make such a leap possible.

The example is extreme, but the leap is something I see in great fiction. Dostoyevsky shows us the crazy man's inner world. Graham Greene does it with his

irresponsible adulterers and (almost) faithless priests. Alice Munro and Raymond Carver do it with their complicated, searching characters. And it is a leap I hope to make in my own stories. In “Wizard of Oz” Stephen is a teenager who would rather pursue “sluts” than spend time with his dying father. The reader sees Stephen’s need for distraction and the claustrophobia that his father’s sickness causes. In “Your Skin Doesn’t Respond Well to Light” Gwen begins stealing large sums of money from her love interest. She keeps reminding herself of childhood in an attempt to find the ideals that she has lost. These characters are alone in ways that all of us are alone, and their actions do not always correspond to their more complex inner lives.

When I was an undergraduate at LSU, there was a serial killer about town. He raped, beat, and strangled women. He killed women of all ages and races, and left their bodies in places like Whiskey River or in the woods off the interstate. When my evening class let out Thursdays at nine o’clock, each girl would be escorted to her car by a security guard. Girls at house parties or bars were told not to venture too far from the crowd. One victim was an acquaintance of mine.

On May 27, 2003, the Baton Rouge serial killer Derrick Todd Lee was arrested. He was initially charged with the murder of two women, including my acquaintance, because the DNA match in those two cases was unmistakable proof. But he was surely the killer in at least seven other local rape-murders, and was even being linked to murders as far away as Atlanta, where he was apprehended. He was a forty-something black man with a dead look on his face. During my lunch break at Campus Federal Credit Union, I

watched the national news reporting on the capture. More information became available. He had buried bones in his backyard and covered the burial sites with concrete slabs.

What am I to make of this man? He is unknowable. I believe that. The title of this collection is *No One Really Knows You* because a person is not altogether knowable. In the story "The Spirit of Secret Lake" the main character Dub does not know himself. He is not sure what brought him back to his hometown and his attempt to pin his pain on something material falls flat. He is called out by his suicidal friend, Chapman, who does not buy his excuses. In "He Finds You Sleeping and You Don't Wake Up Blues" Clark is also unable to explain himself. He is trying to come to terms with his less-than-promising future—he has a dead end job at the Credit Union and a music career that is probably never going to take off. Later, when confronted with a situation of disloyalty, Clark acts out violently, a decision he cannot explain and immediately regrets.

The fiction writer must occupy the minds of people who appear nothing like him or her, and must give characters some justification for their states of mind. The only way for the honest writer to do this is to tap into his or her own hopes, wishes, secret vices, alienating feelings, bitterness, and everything else. The writer must find common ground. The character may be an angry cashier at Walmart or a self-obsessed industrial titan. Or maybe, in extreme cases, a serial killer.

Looking at this serial killer's mug shot on the television, I liked to think I could find something beyond his eyes. I could see that he didn't know himself. Because of my

immersion in the world of written fiction, I could see something in him that existed in me.

Months later, after the serial killer was apprehended, my mother told me something. She said when she first saw the pictures of Derrick Todd Lee on the news she knew it: "It was him." She had a matter-of-fact expression as she delivered this piece of information. The serial killer on TV was the one who tried to kill Mom.

Now what? What do I have? I have a story. Maybe I can tell a story. Maybe someone else can know my family's terror and relief. Maybe I can recreate the victims and their families and do a kernel's worth of justice to their loss and pain. And maybe I can reveal something of myself in the monster that caused it. Where else, but in fiction, can I speculate on the impulses of a rapist and killer who left so many grieving, so many without daughters, lovers and mothers? Hasn't he forfeited his right to humanity? Yet here is the fiction writer trying to speculate on the time and place the world inside him went so terribly wrong.

What is the use in this? Why not just say he is the Predator, a creature with huge, ghastly, and unnatural teeth, completely unlike us normal beings? Why reach for Raskolnikov, or reach even farther for Derrick Todd Lee? I cannot know him, so why should I reach for knowledge of his inner life? I do it because we are so far apart.

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WIZARD OF OZ

My dad was driving and holding a Styrofoam cup of steaming coffee in his left hand. A nearly finished cigarette was pressed into a notch on the ashtray. We came to a stoplight and Dad hit the brake and spilled coffee on his pants. He was still trying to dab his pants with a tissue when the light turned. "It's green," I said. We took a left onto Wooddale Drive.

"But he was always telling jokes," I said, keeping up our conversation. "I don't know how a person could remember that many jokes."

"Well, he was a redheaded fireball. Always has been," Dad said. He tossed his cigarette butt out the window.

We were on our way to visit Dr. Gowan at his house. Dr. Gowan no longer had red hair. For a few years he'd had a number of cancers, far advanced by the time of diagnosis, and the worst of it was brain cancer, or at least it sounded the worst. All the treatments had been stopped, and after chemo his hair had grown back sparse and thin and brown. My dad had been friends with Dr. Gowan for fifteen years, which was as long as I had been alive.

"Is Stephen in town?" I said.

"He wasn't last week, but who knows. Maybe he's back in town."

Dr. Gowan's house was in a nice neighborhood, back from the road, not quite hidden by pine trees. Dad drove the winding asphalt path and dipped down into the driveway. It was two-story house, red brick trimmed with dark wood and a high-angled roof. One summer, when I was ten, my parents went on a cruise to Mexico and I stayed

with the Gowans. Stephen and I rode our bikes to the Racquet Club every day to swim. At night we ate deer jerky and watched Rated R movies. Stephen's parents didn't care what the movies were rated.

We walked up the porch steps and Dad knocked. A nurse opened the door. She was a heavy lady wearing white scrubs. She led us through the foyer and down the hallway. "Seems like he's having a pretty good day," she said.

We stepped down the two carpeted steps into the office, which was where Dr. Gowan spent all his time. The nurse didn't stop, but kept walking so as to leave us alone with him. The office used to be a messy room, with papers and folders and books everywhere, but they had moved out the junk to make the space more clean and casual. Dr. Gowan was in a hospital bed, adjusted at an angle to see the television. The room was dim with the blinds drawn, and television light flashed off the far wall. There was a bedpan on the floor and a foldout chair where the nurse was supposed to sit. I couldn't tell if Dr. Gowan was asleep or not. Dad walked over and Dr. Gowan turned his head.

"Terry," he said. The way he cleared his throat sounded like he had just woken up. "Good to see you." He really didn't sound that bad. Not as bad as I thought he would. I somehow imagined him not knowing who we were.

"Hey friend," Dad said. "Mind if I sit here?"

"Oh allow me," he said, waving a hand in the air like he was holding a wand.

"Have a seat. Crack those window blinds, would you?"

"Will the nurse care if I sit here?" Dad said.

"No, she won't care. She's probably off somewhere eating. Crack those blinds, if you don't mind."

Dad cracked the blinds and let in light. The TV was sitting on a filing cabinet against the wall and tuned to a Braves baseball game. The season had just begun and the Braves were three-and-one, which had a lot of us hoping.

I stood in the middle of the room. There was a recliner in the far corner, but it was too far away from Dr. Gowan not to seem rude, and I couldn't see the TV from that angle. Dad shook Dr. Gowan's hand and kept holding it.

"Richard," Dr. Gowan said to me. He spoke carefully, and I could hear traces of his old voice.

"Hey. How are you?" I said.

"Doing well, thanks."

Dr. Gowan had taught Geology at the University, and Dad always said his voice could carry through a big lecture hall without a microphone. After the divorce, he used to come eat with us some weeknights. He would just show up for dinner unannounced. I didn't mind. All the loud jokes made a weeknight festive for me.

We looked at the TV and a minute later my dad turned his head and said, "Hey there, Stephen."

I looked behind me to see Stephen standing on the steps outside the room, shadowed by the dark hallway.

"Hey," Stephen said, nodding once. He stepped down into the room and stood by me, looking at the TV. "You need a haircut," he said to me.

"That's what I say," my dad said. "I've been telling him to get that mop under control." For the last eleven months I had refused a haircut, not for any particular reason, I just wanted to see. It was getting long to where I kept it behind my ears. People at

school were starting to think I was a musician and that I used drugs, neither of which was true.

“What inning,” Stephen said.

“Fourth,” my dad replied.

Stephen and I stood side by side, watching the TV.

“You boys can go on,” Dr. Gowan said, not looking at us. “You don’t have to stay in here with the decrepit.”

Stephen left the room—and I followed—taking the two steps on one hop and walking down the hall. We went up the stairway and into his bedroom. I knew this room. The four poster bed, a Braves baseball cap always hanging on the post closest to the door. The book shelves displayed Lego men, Stars Wars figures, and a few required reading books from elementary school. I imagined his bedroom in Florida to have a television, a nice stereo system, and posters of women in bikinis on the wall.

Baseball cards were spread out on the wrinkled bed sheets. Stephen picked up a magazine and sat on his bed looking at it. “What have you been doing?” he said while looking at the magazine.

“Nothing,” I said. I stepped over to his dresser and inspected his Sony boom box and the tapes stacked next to it. The Doors, Pink Floyd, The Beatles, and a bunch of rap that I didn’t know. I picked up the tape cases and looked them over. This was the same boom box he had when we were kids.

“When’re you going back to Florida?” I said. I knew it was a dumb question even as the words came out.

“Depends,” he said, looked out the window. “Oh shit, check it out.”

I set the tape case down. "What?"

"Look," he said, pointing at the glass. I walked around the bed to the window, which looked out on the backyard and a tall wooden fence surrounding the neighboring yard. Above the fence were two heads bouncing up alternately, hair flying.

"Who is that?"

"A couple sluts," Stephen said.

I already knew who they were because they went to my school, and I knew Whitney Fontenot lived in that house. The friend jumping with her was named Casey Allen, and they were both a year older than me. Stephen had been in with these girls before he moved to Florida. He had been popular when he lived here. I didn't know what people thought of him in Florida, but I sometimes imagined him walking along the beach offering up trouble.

"They're sluts, though?" I said.

"I know a guy who fucked Whitney on that trampoline, if that tells you anything. All she was wearing was her socks."

I nodded. I had heard the rumor, and I was glad it was about Whitney and not Casey.

"Let's go," he said. "Might as well."

We went downstairs and took the long way so as not to pass our dads in the office. We went through the kitchen, heading toward the back door. The nurse was sitting at the kitchen table reading a magazine and drinking coffee. She waved and said hello. I waved back but Stephen didn't look at her.

The backyard was covered in pine straw. The flower bed was full of weeds and held no flowers, and there was a big fallen pine branch on the ground. I could hear the springs of the trampoline as we approached the fence.

We came to the fence and Stephen knocked. "Room Service," he said.

"Who is it?" a girl's voice replied.

"You know damn well who it is."

"It's open, Steve."

As he opened the gate he said, "Better brace yourselves, y'all got company."

We stepped into the backyard and Stephen closed the gate. The girls were not jumping as high now. The trampoline creaked lightly with their jumps, but still alternately, in rhythm. The springs on the trampoline were half rusted. Their shoes were on the grass, a pair of Keds and a pair of flip-flops. They were both wearing lipstick. Casey was wearing socks.

"Ladies, this young gentleman is Richard. His friends call him Dick. That's what he's called."

I waved and they waved back, saying hey. Neither recognized me, it appeared, though Whitney looked at me closely for a moment. I felt like a guy with long hair should stick out, should be recognized. I specifically wanted Casey to know me because I passed her every day at school between third and fourth period. It was a significant part of my day, passing her in the narrow cinderblock hallway, and if for some reason she was not there—if she was absent or late or had taken an alternate route to her fourth period class—I was disappointed.

Stephen walked up to the trampoline and put his hand on the bar to jump up.

“Only two at a time,” Whitney said.

“Oh yeah, that’s right,” Stephen said, glancing at me.

“And you can’t wear shoes,” Whitney added.

Casey put her hand on the bar and jumped down gracefully. “Go ahead,” she said. “Let’s see what you got.”

Stephen kicked off his flip-flops and got up on the trampoline and they began jumping. He wasn’t jumping in the proper rhythm. He kept trying to land just before Whitney so that he could pop her up in the air, and she shrieked.

“Do you want me to break something? I’ll break my legs,” she said, but she was laughing.

Casey slipped her shoes on and watched them, laughing along with Whitney. Casey crossed her arms under her small breasts, like she was trying to prop them up. I was trying to laugh too, trying to share a moment with her since we were together, outside the action.

“So wait,” Stephen said, now giving up the sabotage. He and Whitney now jumped in harmony, though not very high. “If you broke something and couldn’t cheer, would you still be a cheerleader?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t think so, Whit. I really don’t,” Stephen said, feigning seriousness.

“If a football player gets hurt he’s still a football player, right?”

“But football is a sport.”

“And?”

“Cheerleading is a lifestyle.”

“You think I’m stupid, don’t you?” she asked, now having stopped jumping altogether. “You think I’m bimbo-town.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Cheerleading is an athletic sport. People die cheerleading all the time. More people die cheerleading than playing football.”

I was trying to follow this conversation, which must have been started on some previous occasion, when I felt a gentle tug at my hair. Casey had walked up behind me and was combing through my hair with her fingers.

“You have pretty hair,” she said. Casey had a loud voice. “It looks like a commercial. You know guys with hair like this make girls jealous.”

“It’s not all that long,” I said.

“I’m not talking about the length, I’m talking about the texture.”

“It is pretty long though, Dick,” Stephen said. They were both now just standing on the trampoline, hardly bouncing.

“Casey knows a lot about hair,” Whitney stated. “She’s a future stylist to the stars.”

Casey ran her hand through my hair, front to back, her fingernails lightly brushing along my scalp. I could smell her sweat mixed with a sweet fruit-scented deodorant. I thought my knees might give out.

“My cousin cut hers off to make a wig for charity,” Whitney said. She started jumping again.

Stephen stood flat-footed, legs apart and knees locked, stretching the springs so that Whitney could not jump very well.

"You're an asshole," she said, smiling at him.

"You have any cigarettes, bitch?" he asked.

"Not for you, asshole."

"You could use a smoke, though."

"You're probably right," she said.

"I know I'm right. Let's go."

They each got down and walked barefoot toward the house. Stephen was following her closely. She opened the door and Stephen looked back at me like he was going to make an obscene gesture, but Casey was watching so he just smiled.

Once they were inside, Casey said to me, "Isn't his dad really bad off?"

"Yeah. He's really sick. He's probably not going to live very long."

"Oh my God. Do him and Stephen get along?"

"I don't know."

"That's so sad," she said. "You can jump on the trampoline if you want."

"That's okay," I said. We stood there not saying anything. She started humming to herself as she pulled her hair back into a pony tail and let it fall. Somewhere overhead a bobwhite chirped its two notes.

A minute later they came back out of the house, Whitney in front, Stephen behind her, packing cigarettes against his palm.

"Alright y'all," Whitney said, smiling. She was holding scissors and a black comb. "Casey's going to cut your hair, Dick."

The scissors were small with pink handles, the kind second grade girls use to cut construction paper. There was a lawn chair by the back door—already folded open—and Stephen brought it to me. “Sit down.”

“No thanks,” I said, smiling as best I could.

“Aww,” Casey said.

“You could use a little trim,” Stephen said.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Y’all are messing with me.”

“No we’re not. Please, Dick,” Casey said. “I cut my dad’s hair all the time. I cut my brother’s hair once.”

Whitney was giddy with laughter.

“Then why does she think it’s so damn funny?” I said.

Whitney scoffed. “Because you’re a funny guy. It’s called a compliment.”

Casey touched my shoulder and gently pushed me into the seat. She leaned over and whispered in my ear, “Do it for Stephen. He wants you to.” Another series of chills ran and I was truly powerless.

Stephen passed a cigarette to Whitney and they started smoking. Whitney smoked like an aristocrat, holding the cigarette up by her ear as if it she was listening to it.

Casey immediately began cutting off chunks at a time, and I could feel my head getting lighter. It had taken me over a year to get my hair this length. She stopped cutting momentarily while Whitney showed us how she could French-inhale.

“Could y’all get me a cup of water?” Casey asked.

Whitney handed her cigarette to Stephen and ran inside. She came back out with a plastic cup and took her cigarette back.

“Oh shit, you’re going to love it, Dick,” Stephen said.

Casey nodded. “You don’t have to pay me. But just this once.”

When Whitney finished her cigarette she put it in a sand-filled vase by the back door and told Stephen to do the same with his. “The trick is to smoke the same kind of cigarettes as your dad,” she said.

“Does your dad wear lipstick?” Stephen said.

“Oops,” Whitney said. Casey stopped cutting and the two girls laughed and Whitney pushed her cigarette butt under the sand.

Casey moved around in front of me, bent over and looked at my forehead. Her face was inches away from mine, her mouth slightly open. Her lip gloss shined. Her t-shirt was tight around the collar. She combed my hair down wet and cut bangs straight across in three snips. Clumps of wet hair fell onto my shirt. She then cut all along the back of my head, ran her hands through it and cut some more. The back of my neck itched.

Casey was what I wanted, and I couldn’t have her. I was trusting that when I got older I could have more of what I wanted.

“Very nice,” Stephen said, walking around me, looking at my head from the back and then the side. He then went to Whitney, faced away from me, and said something in a low voice.

Whitney shook her head. “My parents will be home.”

“No they won’t.”

“They’re getting back at three, at the very latest. They’ll be here any second.”

“You’re loads of fun.”

“Shut up.”

Stephen shrugged and they both looked at me. They watched silently, watched my face. Casey stepped back and said, “I think I’m finished.”

“That was so fast,” Whitney said, laughing.

They all three looked at me, standing still and watching as I stood up and brushed myself off and walked toward the house to see my reflection in the window. I hoped this particular window was warped or that this whole thing was a nightmare, and I went to the next window.

“Dude. John Lennon,” Stephen said.

“Oh yeah,” Whitney said.

“Am I right? Early John Lennon.”

Whitney nodded. “We need to get Dick some of those little sunglasses.”

“Y’all,” Casey said. She was holding the comb in one hand and scissors in the other. She put her fists to her hips. Her expression was halfway between hurt and amused. “Are y’all making fun? Seriously. It’s just a regular haircut. I didn’t do anything crazy.”

I kept brushing myself off, forcefully slapping at my neck and shirt. I didn’t want to look anyone in the face.

“Oh man,” Stephen said. “Give the guy a cigarette or something. Give him a beer. Goddamn.”

Whitney handed me a cigarette and held up the lighter.

Casey said, "Y'all are gonna hurt my feelings." She walked over to me and reached up to ruffle my hair. "Lean down a sec." She brushed my bangs over to the side and tried to get my hair to stay down on top, like my mother used to do when I was five.

"There. See?" she said.

"It's great," Stephen said, but he was looking at his feet when he said this. Casey set the scissors and comb on the lawn chair and poured the water out. There were small piles of brown hair on the grass.

"Whitney," Stephen said.

"Yeah?"

"Let me have a couple cigarettes."

She took two from the pack and handed them to Stephen, who put them into his shirt pocket. He cracked his knuckles. "Alright," he said. "We're out of here. Y'all take it easy now."

I walked over and put my half-smoked cigarette into the vase.

"See you later," Whitney said.

"I'll see you at school," I said.

"You go to Lee, Dick?" Casey asked, tilting her head and smiling.

"Yeah," I said.

"Thanks for letting me cut your hair."

"OK."

We left, closed the fence, and walked through the backyard again. "Hey. Look at me," Stephen said. He took in the haircut and shook his head. We walked inside and

through the kitchen once again. The nurse was still at the table, still drinking coffee. She said hello and looked at her watch.

We walked down the hallway. Stephen walked up the dark stairway but I kept walking toward the office. I could hear the TV. In the office my dad and Dr. Gowan were focused on the game. I made sure to stand as far away from the two men as I could so they wouldn't smell the cigarette smoke. Though once Dad had his next cigarette I would be in the clear.

"Hey, Richard," Dad said. "Still got a no-hitter going into the eighth. Well hell, you got a haircut."

"Yeah, I know."

"What, did Stephen cut it?"

"No," I said, shaking my head and pointing my thumb back in the general direction of the trampoline. Dr. Gowan looked at me.

"It's a little uneven in the front, I'd say," Dad said.

"Stephen cut his hair," Dr. Gowan said.

I shook my head, but Dr. Gowan didn't understand. He kept staring at me, at my haircut, to see if he could be proud of his son's handiwork. Dr. Gowan looked very tired, and I wondered how much things change in an hour.

"Stephen?" Dr. Gowan said, and it seemed to take some effort to say this one word.

"He's upstairs," I said.

"Go get Stephen, Richard," Dad told me, nodding. "His dad wants to see him."

I walked out of the room and down the hall and up the stairs and into Stephen's bedroom, where he sat on the bed cross-legged looking at his baseball cards. I stood in the doorway.

"Dr. Gowan wants you to come see him," I said.

Stephen shrugged. It seemed like he had not understood me.

"Downstairs," I repeated.

"He's always calling me down there. Every five fucking seconds."

"He asked for you."

Stephen shrugged again. "You should probably just go on and shave your head," he said.

"Fuck you," I said, and walked back downstairs and into the office. I had meant those two words as a joke, a snappy comeback—or at least a friendly retaliation—but that wasn't how the words sounded.

The game was still in the ninth. The intensity of the circumstances struck me from the way the announcers were not talking—we could only hear a nervous murmur of crowd noise. Ozzie Smith was up to bat and he took the first two pitches, both strikes.

"Don't throw him anything in the zone," Dad said. On the next pitch from Glavine, Smith hit a grounder in the hole at short. Belliard backhanded it and threw on one hop to first but Ozzie Smith beat out the throw.

Dad clapped his hands once in disappointment and looked at Dr. Gowan, who didn't appear to realize what had happened. "A hit?" Dr. Gowan said.

"Ozzie Smith spoiled it. The Wizard of Oz. Goddamn Wizard of Oz. On an 0 and 2 count."

“Maybe it’s an error on Belliard,” I said. “He didn’t charge it.”

“No, no, it’s a hit,” Dad said. “He didn’t charge it because it was in the gap. He made a hell of a good play just to keep the ball out of left field. Now we just have to hope they can hold them off with the two runs.”

Dr. Gowan turned his head slowly and looked past me toward the hallway. He looked at the window with the blinds cracked and then looked at the ceiling.

“The Wonderful Wizard of Oz,” Dr Gowan said. And he said this like it was a good and important thing, his words hanging in the air. I felt like I myself was floating there with the words. It was my mind, floating. Floating above meaning, above what life was before now. But Dr. Gowan was very tired, and he let out an exhausted breath, which brought me back down to the floor. He was ready to fall asleep, it seemed to me. Maybe his medicine was kicking in.

“Is Stephen here, Terry?” Dr. Gowan said.

“Richard,” Dad said, not happy with me. “Go get Stephen.” I shook my head to show this task was beyond my capability, but Dad said, “Just grab him by the arm and drag him downstairs, for Christ’s sake.”

I walked slowly back up the stairs and again stood in the doorway to Stephen’s bedroom.

“Your dad,” I said.

He groaned quietly, running his finger along the price guide.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

He looked at me and then back at his cards. “For what?”

“About your dad.”

He wiped his nose with his short-sleeved shoulder. "It's not your fault."

"Still," I said.

Stephen still didn't look my way, didn't give any sign he would come downstairs. But I wasn't moving. I stood there waiting as he looked at the cards one at a time, inspecting them closely, front and back. And it was a good while, a few minutes maybe, before he finally gave in, and stood up.

THE SPIRIT OF SECRET LAKE

My new job had me working nights, and my second shift began at six o'clock on a Wednesday evening. At about six fifteen I was at the front desk skimming an employee handbook when from nearby came a dreadful moaning sound like a dying animal. The few of us in the lobby paused and looked in that direction.

"Is it DT's?" I asked.

"Who knows," Suzanne said. She said it was probably someone who was supposed to be in the closed unit but got pushed into a room off the lobby because of the renovations. "Just another one who doesn't want to be here. I say join the club, sweetie."

Singleton-Byrd Behavioral Health and Rehabilitation was undergoing renovations both in and outside. It was built in the nineteen-thirties and there was plenty of work to do all over. The smells were of sawdust and acrylic paint and a damp chemical stench that was hard to place. Every once in a while we'd get a whiff of sewage, which made for a lot of jokes. There were empty paint cans next to the front doors and piles of wood debris just outside. Suzanne and I stood in the lobby by the front desk. The desk was U-shaped, and we stood at the far end by the break room, where two employees chatted and laughed. Suzanne held out her bag of peanut M&Ms, and I took a red one.

"So how long were you in Louisiana?" Suzanne asked. She was a forty-seven year old woman and nosy, but nice enough. It was part of my training to shadow her. She was a nurse and I was an orderly, but at night the duties were roughly the same for both.

"I was in Baton Rouge five years," I said. "Then New Orleans for two."

"Goodness, I wouldn't want to live in New Orleans. It smells like sewer, doesn't it? Same as this place. So what brought you back home? Mama?"

"No, Mama's on St. Simon's Island with the new man. I just sort of drifted home."

"At least you got a job at the best employer in the state of Mississippi." She laughed. During my first shift, the previous night, Suzanne had told me all about this place. She told me I would push people around in wheelchairs or walk alongside them, and sometimes I would just baby-sit. I might be asked to break up a fight, though fights only happened a few times a year. "Most of the time we just stand around waiting for an emergency that doesn't come. You wait and wait and then it's time to go home," she'd said.

Suzanne also gave me the local gossip—which employees were definitely sleeping together and which employees were probably sleeping together. And there had been a scandal. One girl, a nurse named Rachel, had gotten pregnant by one of the patients. "I heard she got an abortion," Suzanne said. "She no longer works here."

At seven o'clock Suzanne got a call at the front desk and we walked to the inpatient wing where we were supposed to help an old man eat his dinner. The old man was an alcoholic who had been in treatment here before, Suzanne told me. His hands were too shaky to feed himself. His name was Mr. Albert. He had a few strands of white hair stuck to his head with sweat. I sat on a rocking chair next to the bed while Suzanne fed spoonfuls of tomato soup to Mr. Albert. His teeth clicked against the spoon. He told Suzanne to dip the bread in the soup and she did. I didn't know what drove him to this

place. Looking at the man you could see he had lost something, probably a long time ago, but I was not in a position to ask him about it.

After feeding Mr. Albert, we went back to the lobby and waited for more duties, but none came. We didn't have a supervisor tonight, because Jason was off and Cassandra had called in sick. Technically Suzanne was the supervisor. She said this happens sometimes. "Shoot, night's gonna come soon when you'll be the supervisor," she said. Around nine o'clock Suzanne told me the paint smell was giving her a headache, so she went out to her car and sat there for thirty minutes. I saw her from the lobby window. She was alone sitting in the dark car, playing with her cell phone.

Right then the only other person in the lobby was the second night nurse, and she was at the front desk reading a magazine. It was very quiet. Being suddenly alone, with no apparent responsibility, I wandered. It felt good to have no responsibility. The building was only one floor, but it was spread out and confusing with long hallways and various wings. A new person could get lost.

Walking past the closed unit, I saw down the corridor the line of heavy steel doors, rooms that housed suicidal patients or the chemically dependent in need of close monitoring. Off this hall was the security room where one of my coworkers stared at TV screens to see that each patient behaved. If they didn't behave the watcher would hit an alarm, at which time all free orderlies and nurses would sprint to the unit.

Further down the hallway there was a contractor on a ladder. His head was above ceiling level with the fiberglass square tile removed. I stood below and watched him for a moment, severing and reconnecting wires up there. I didn't say hello, just kept walking.

My brand new green scrubs were stiff and scratchy and made a swishing sound when I walked. I went to the outpatient wing, a dark and empty hallway this time of night. I called out and listened for an echo.

*

The following shift, my third, was on that Thursday, also beginning at six p.m. My supervisor Jason was leaned over the front desk talking to a nurse. Jason's scrubs had extra short sleeves to show his biceps. Jason would forbid people from using personal cell phones at work, but other than that he was very lenient. As long as we stuck around the front desk when we didn't have a direct assignment, we were fine.

"You're a tall drink of water, you know that? How tall are you?" he said.

"Six-three." I signed in.

"Six-three, about one-twenty?" he said.

"Shit. Where's Suzanne?" I asked.

"You're going to relieve her. Congratulations, you're flying solo being as we're short handed. We need you on night watch, room 1-5-6." He raised his eyebrows and nodded as if this explained everything and turned back to the nurse.

"What's 'night watch' mean?" I said.

He shook his head. "Well, Warren. It means you look in on a suicidal patient and make sure he doesn't finish the job."

"You want me to look at the TV screens?"

"No, no, this is one-on-one stuff. The old fashioned way. The deal is they're renovating three of the rooms in the unit and the other six are booked and if one more

suicidal fucker shows up tonight they're going to have to check into Motel 6 and we'll watch them there."

"All right."

"Sometimes we improvise around here, in case you hadn't noticed. There's an old observation room over in administration we can use." He rapped his knuckles on the front desk. "This guy, he won't be a problem. His name is," he said pausing to look at the clipboard, "James Smith."

"James Smith. Right. So I just sit there watching him?"

"Yeah. Keep an eye on him. If he goes to the bathroom don't let him stay in there too long. Sing him a song, that kind of thing. He shouldn't be a problem."

I walked to the administration wing. No construction was going on in this part of the building, but even here there was grit under my shoes. I found the hallway. The overhead lights were off. Outside one of the rooms Suzanne sat in a wooden desk that looked like it belonged in an elementary school classroom, a closed paperback book on the desktop. As I approached I saw the door to the room had a square window in it, no glass, and this door was not steel but wood. From the room came a soft light that shined dimly on the Suzanne's desktop. The light came from a safety bulb just inside the door to room 156. The light must have been there for the guard's benefit.

Suzanne put a finger to her lips. I looked inside the room and saw a guy asleep on a hospital bed. The room was empty except for the bed.

She whispered, "Hey Warren. Here's the key." She also handed me a remote control that looked like a garage door opener and told me to punch it if there was any trouble. "He's a real sweet kid, though. He'll probably sleep all night. Good luck." She

put the book in her purse and walked quickly down the hall. I looked in at the guy. He was lying on top of the sheet fully clothed. His shoulder rose and fell with breath. From here it seemed like easy breath, free of worry.

I sat in the school desk for a long time and saw no one other than the contractor holding a bunch of wires, walking down the adjacent hallway. It was quiet with only the air conditioner humming. The air conditioner periodically clicked off and came back on and clicked off again. In this part of the building the smells were not as strong. I was tired, but I stayed awake out of discomfort.

At about eight o'clock the room's light popped on. I stood up from the desk and saw the patient looking away from me, looking out the room's glazed window onto the center's front grounds.

The guy turned around. "Oh fuck," he said. He shut his eyes tight and opened them again as if the sight before him should not be believed.

His face was familiar but I couldn't call up a name immediately.

"Come on, man," he said, frustrated with my silence. It was in the quick twitch of his eyebrows that I saw it.

"Hey Chapman."

He ran a hand over his close cropped hair. "It's you, Dub."

"It's me."

He rubbed his eyes and breathed deeply. "It's you. Holy shit. What's it been, ten years? Probably longer. People still call you Dub?"

"Not in a long time."

"Shit. You're still tall, looks like," Chapman said.

"I guess. I thought my boss told me I was supposed to watch James Smith."

"Yeah, sure. James C. Smith. You didn't know that? What, do you work here? I thought you moved away. I thought you were making things happen in the Big Sleazy."

"No, I just moved back here."

"Why? Shit." He looked out the room's window again. The lamps along the walking track spotted the darkness, and headlights passed slowly on the street beyond the front gate. "You move back with your Mom?"

"No, just me."

He nodded. "So you here to counsel me? You a counselor?"

"No. Actually, I don't think I'm supposed to watch somebody I know. As a rule." This is something I'd read in one of the employee manuals Jason gave me.

Chapman looked at me like he'd just caught me stealing his bike. "Aw. Dude, don't tell. I won't tell. Don't tell them we know each other."

At that moment, as if on cue, Jason turned the corner coming toward us. He hit the light switch on the wall and the fluorescent bulbs flashed and hesitated, then lit up the hallway. Chapman came to the door and looked out the square window down the hall. "Don't tell," he whispered, and retreated into the room so as to act natural.

"How's it going?" Jason called out, and he walked directly to the door and knocked with one knuckle. Chapman half smiled and nodded at him. Jason agreed to stand there for a moment so I could go get coffee from the break room. Chapman said he wanted some too. I looked at Jason to see if this is an acceptable thing for me to do, and he made no sign otherwise. When I came back, holding two cups filled to the brim, Jason told me that he was out of there for the night, but Cassandra was up front if I

needed anything. "It's a long night, so keep awake, hear me?" Jason said and he walked away.

I handed Chapman black coffee through the window. Reaching for the cup the sleeve of his shirt pulled back revealing a tan-colored bandage on his right wrist.

"You eat dinner?" I said.

"My mom brought me a ham sandwich. She told them I was allergic to nuts and lactose intolerant and all this shit and they were like, 'Bitch, you bring his food.'"

"How is your mom, by the way?"

Chapman set the coffee on the ledge of the door's window and put his palms to his head like a vice, the right wrist showing. The other wrist was clean. "Not good," he said.

I looked down at my coffee.

"But, look. Thanks for not ratting, Dub. Rather have somebody I can talk to. Somebody I know, right? So tell me, man. What're you up to?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? Why'd you come back to the old pine belt? Speaking of which, you ever think about how many pine trees are in this town? It's like a fucking disease."

"I never really thought about it."

"Yeah. So what brought you back? What's your story?"

"No one reason," I said. "Just came back." I didn't like the question. The truth was I didn't really know my story, not in any way that I could make sense of it.

"Just a million reasons, right?" Chapman snorted a breath out of his nose. "Well. At least you're not in here. There's no door on the bathroom. Nowhere to hide."

Separated by years, we were being forced to tap into the past. I looked away from him. Finally Chapman turned and went and sat on the bed. He held up a deck of cards to show me what he was going to do and that was that. I sat in the desk again, not wanting to look in the window and stare at him even though it was my job. I looked at my watch. Five and a half hours to go. I hoped Chapman would go to sleep so things wouldn't have to be awkward for five and a half hours.

There was nothing to do but stare at the wall. I didn't bring food or a book. To pass the time I took very small sips of coffee. It was impossible to get a satisfying breath.

After about thirty minutes, Chapman was back at the window, apparently tired of Solitaire. "You know, Dub? When I see you I think of something," he said.

I was still seated in the desk. "Oh yeah? What?"

"Guess."

"I have no idea."

"From a long time ago. Guess."

I knew what he was referring to, but I deflected, "Lucas Drummond's house."

"What? No. What happened there?"

"I funneled a forty ounce of Olde English. Almost died."

"No man, before that. The lake. I think about Secret Lake."

We smoked cigarettes at Secret Lake. I had my first kiss there. But Chapman was referring to a very specific time.

"Oh yeah."

"I've lived twenty-eight years and it's my only encounter with the spirit world."

"I'm not sure we encountered spirits," I said.

“Yeah we did. Me, you, and Glen Charters saw it. Tell me you remember that. We left school in the middle of the day and went to my house and then went to the lake. What? Fifteen years ago?”

I laughed. “Fifteen years? I, honest to God...my memory is bad. I remember walking out of the school. I remember you firing off that gun.”

“I remember it like yesterday. It was a ghost. A spirit. I shot at it. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Chapman stood there waiting for me to reply, staring down at me in the desk.

“Well. It’s in the past.”

“You don’t understand. When you’re here. When you’re here in this room you can’t hide. You filter out all the bullshit and your life becomes clear. You cut to the moments that matter. You see a ghost, that shit matters. It matters. Talk to me, Dub.”

“I really don’t know. You shot the gun and then we left. I remember that. Didn’t Glen rat you out or something?”

“He told them about the gun, the little fuckface. He was such a little shrimp fuckface. Probably still is.”

“He was okay.”

“No, he wasn’t. And you’re acting like you didn’t see the ghost. Think back, man.”

“What do you want me to say?” I said. I shook my head and found myself picking at a piece of hardened gum under the desktop.

Chapman was asleep when I was relieved at 2 a.m. I didn't go back to my apartment. Despite my need for sleep, I knew it wouldn't happen tonight, at least not for a few hours. I was physically and mentally unable to fall asleep between the hours of two and six a.m., and something about seeing Chapman made me need to drive around. That's what I used to do in this town, back when gas was cheap. On that night I drove to the tennis courts by the zoo. The backboard where I used to hit was gone. I drove to the Dixie Youth baseball field that was no longer in use. Grass and weeds had crept into the infield. I drove to the elementary school playground where my friends and I used to burn time on weekend nights. We used to climb on the roof of the school and run around, making sure to avoid power lines. All these places are smaller, of course. The whole town's geography shrank in my absence. These locations existed twice, once in my past and once in the outside world.

Lying in bed at 7 a.m., trying to fall asleep, I felt the morning light. The day came back to me, that day we run away from school. Me, Chapman, and Glen walk out the front doors during lunch period. Just walk out the cold metal doors that swing closed when you let them go. This is Chapman's idea, Glen and I followed. Chapman isn't really our friend, but he is fearless and we want in on that.

We walk through neighborhoods to Chapman's house, walking in between houses to avoid the street. Chapman's mother is at work and his father is offshore for a two week stint. His father leaves guns in an unlocked cabinet, and Chapman takes the .38 and puts it in his pants. We leave the house and walk into the woods to Secret Lake. It is in the big patch of woods between 40th Avenue and the Interstate. It is not a lake—just a

pond, and it isn't much of a secret either. It is a place to burn time. It is nothing. Sometimes, usually on weekend nights, teenagers will come around and chase us off. But on this day we stand at the muddy edge of the water and do not speak. There are cigarette butts in the wet mud. I have never heard it so quiet—no birds whistling, no squirrels rustling, the pond perfectly still. Then we see something, something has formed over the water. Chapman points to it. It looks like some kind of person, hovering over the water like steam. It is in the form of a kid though, a boy. I wondered if it is a perfect cluster of gnats or a trick of the light. But—though it does not have discernable features—the ghost does appear to be staring at us. Chapman takes the gun and fires twice at the thing over the lake. The gunshot reverberates. We don't say a word, and the ghost remains. It stays there for a long time, I don't know how long, and then it seems to fade and I wonder if we have really seen anything at all.

Soon they show up—a policeman, the assistant principal, and Chapman's mother. As we hear them approaching Chapman tosses the gun into the water. But they all heard the gunshot and Glen tells them about the gun. They ask Chapman what he was shooting at and Chapman says, "A spirit." His mother begins to cry.

*

The next night I relieved Suzanne and within ten minutes of sitting in the desk Chapman was on me again. He started shuffling the cards and asked if I wanted to play Gin Rummy. I said all I knew was Go Fish, so he dealt me seven cards. His chin was covered in dark stubble and his face had gotten some coloring back. After the lake incident, Chapman was sent to boarding school and I would see him only in the summers. He would lie constantly about big money scams he was pulling off at school.

“So why did you move back here?” he said. Apparently Chapman was not going to give the subject up.

“People move. Does there have to be a reason?” I said.

“Yeah. Yes. Everything has to have a reason.”

“Everything? You have any Aces?”

“No. Listen Dub, talk to me. I swear, everybody around here, the shrink guy, everybody, they just go down the list. Give me someone human to talk to. I’m begging you. Tell me why you moved back. Was it a girlfriend or some shit? She broke up with you so you beat her to death and had to get away from the cops. You got an eight?”

“No, it wasn’t that.”

He slapped his cards down on the window frame and half the draw deck fell into his room. “Well, what the fuck? Tell me. You think I can’t relate to shit? Look at me.”

“Let’s talk about you then,” I said.

“What do you want to know?”

In this moment of truth, I couldn’t ask him about the suicide attempt. “I don’t know. What was boarding school really like? Not the lies you used to tell, but really.”

“Just terrible. Guys jacking off all over the place. Everybody sniffing glue. You see girls once a month or so. Terrible, okay? So tell me about why you moved back.”

“Why do you want to know about me so bad?”

“Fuck you. I’m just trying to talk.”

I tried to catch a breath. “All right, fine. Goddamn. The truth is...my girlfriend broke up with me.”

He looked up at the ceiling in his room and cackled. The sound ricocheted down the empty hall. “Really?”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t just that.”

“What else was it?”

“I don’t know. It was the city, too. I don’t know what I expected out of the city. I did everything you’re supposed to do. And I loved it sometimes, but, I don’t know. I guess I thought the city would be something different. I thought a city could make up your identity, or like, maybe I’d become part of it. I thought I could be resorbed into the Saint Louis Cathedral.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“It doesn’t mean anything. It’s nonsense.”

“So what happened with the girlfriend?”

“Long story.”

“Longer than four hours?”

“Way longer.”

“You’d better get started then.”

Don’t tell him this, I thought, don’t get into it, not with this idiot. Not at this time of night, this cinderblock hallway. I looked down at my cards—two twos, an Ace of hearts, a Jack, two sevens, a three. “She was pregnant at the time and she didn’t think I was going to be much help in her new life as a mom.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I lost my job and I was mooching off her. I wasn’t just floating around, not trying to find a job. I tried to tell her things could be different, we could go

somewhere else, and we had the same conversation every night for a few months running. It was shaky ground. We had some indefinable relationship, you know. Then she went into labor at 23 weeks and everything was fucked and she called me up to the hospital. Turned out the baby was not equipped to live on earth, born dead. The doctor gave us a moment alone with him. They had him wrapped in a sheet. I held him. His skull fit in my palm.”

“All right? Shit. Fuckin hell, dude. That’s fucked up.”

“Yeah.” I looked at my cards.

Chapman looked at me and then shook his head. “But that’s not the reason.”

“What?”

“I’ve known you a long time, man. You’ve always been that way.”

“What way?”

Chapman shook his head and tapped his closed card hand against the window frame. We didn’t say anything for a moment. Chapman sniffled and leaned his head out to see if anyone was coming. No one was coming. He whistled a high note. “See, this is good. I’m talking to a real live human being. Old friends being screwed up together. This is what it’s all about.”

“Glad to help.”

“You’ll be here tomorrow?” he said, nodding excitedly, wired from delving into another person’s sacred thoughts. “I got one more night after this, so they tell me.”

“I don’t know,” I said, even though I had seen my name down. They’d had to adjust schedules and Jason put me down for a midnight to 8 a.m. shift the next night.

*

I still hadn't unpacked my stuff in the new apartment. At four a.m. I left there and drove around without listening to music. Grocery store parking lot. Country road cul-de-sac. We would drink pink wine coolers and bust the glass bottles on the curb. We were trite in the way that all teenagers are trite. We all had big plans and the common thread was leaving town. I didn't ask myself why I kept driving around, going to these places. I wasn't trying to recapture something. There was nothing to recapture.

After the end came with Angela, but before I moved back, I started tailing her. I followed her around. To my knowledge she never noticed me. I saw her going to afternoon mass and going to the grocery store. Soon she started getting visibly happier. She began meeting up with friends and sitting on restaurant patios and laughing.

At the lobby desk Jason said I looked tired.

"I'm a little bit tired," I said.

"I can't imagine why. So how was James last night?" He said this casually in front of the desk worker and two others in green scrubs lounging around. I still didn't know everyone at Singleton-Byrd. It seemed each night there were a new set of employees.

"He was all right," I said.

"He was?"

"Yeah."

"Well, today he's been talking jive about spirits and shit, Suzanne tells me."

I hoped Chapman didn't mention our previous acquaintance. "He was okay with me," I said.

“You see what I mean? One minute they’re good, next minute they’re on the banana train. You just never know.” He widened his eyes. “All bets are off in suicide city.”

I stared at him, trying to think of a way to reply, and he laughed at me. “Joking, kidding, relax,” he said, slapping my shoulder with the clipboard.

I got coffee and walked to room 156 where Suzanne was sitting in the school desk. It was quiet. She told me she was about to pass out. “I don’t know how they expect us to stay awake with him sleeping while we sit in this lonely old hallway.”

“Coffee I guess.”

She punched me lightly in the chest and a splash of coffee spilled over the edge, hot on my fingers. “And you. I didn’t know you knew this boy. We’re not supposed to watch people we know. It’s against the rules.”

I sucked my fingers. “He told you?” I said.

She nodded. “Shoot. My lips are sealed, but... Oh my Lord, the boy keeps talking about you and him and some lake. And a ghost and a gun and all this babbling I can’t keep up. What’s this about ghosts and lakes and guns?”

“It’s just when we were kids. It’s nothing. We thought we saw a ghost once.”

“So you did see one? I thought he was pulling my leg. Shoot, I saw a ghost once. It was at a wedding reception. I’m sure it was a ghost.” Suzanne was no longer whispering, and she glanced into the room a final time.

At one-fifteen the overhead light popped on. I heard pissing and then the toilet flushed. Seconds later Chapman was standing at the door, wiping his eyes and smiling. His dark stubble had filled in thicker. He looked wired. He kept blinking.

“I can’t believe I’m still in here. I feel like the Count of Monte Cristo or some shit. At least they let me shower today.”

“Did you sleep?” I asked.

“Yeah, slept all morning and half the afternoon because my internal clock’s all fucked up. It’s your fault. If you would take the day shift I would stay up during the day and sleep at night.”

I nodded and looked down the hallway. We were not talking loud but the slightest echo of our voices was audible. In my state of exhaustion everything seemed to echo.

Chapman turned and looked at the window, the lights along the walking track. “Quiet tonight, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Man, I’ve been thinking a lot lately. I’ve been thinking I shouldn’t have shot that ghost. That’s some fucked up karma, man. That’s what’s wrong with me. Supernatural retribution. It’s the ultimate revenge because the ghosts infiltrate your mind. They make you do things.”

“And you don’t have any legal recourse,” I said.

Chapman laughed and kept talking about karma and ghosts, like he really needed to get into this topic tonight, get to the bottom of it. I’d brought a book for the night, and

I wanted to read it. The book was about Lewis and Clark. I nodded along to Chapman's spiel until it was over and sat down in the desk, opened the book.

"Talk to me, Dub."

"OK, I'll talk. Let me ask you something. Let me ask you. Why the fuck are you telling Suzanne about the lake? What good is that going to do? At this point in your life, what good is it going to do to tell people you saw a ghost at a fucking lake?"

"I don't know. Shit. You tell me. Why am I talking about the lake? You're the expert. I'm the one in here. Put the book down. Tell me what I'm missing."

I roll my head around and feel muscles popping in my neck. "What do you mean, missing? Missing from what?"

He stuck his head out the door window like he was going to take a bite out of me. "What the hell do you think? Missing from having shit figured out. Having stuff ordered in my mind."

The garage door opener alarm is sitting on my desk. I turn my Styrofoam coffee cup in circles. "Just tell me what you want to hear, man. I don't know. Maybe it's digestion. How's your diet?"

He rolled his eyes. "Shit. Ham on wheat. Ham on wheat. Every fucking meal. Ham on wheat. Ham tastes like rubber." He stood there looking at me for a minute.

"Well?" I said.

He laughed quietly. "Look at you, man. You don't look good at all. I don't think these night shifts agree with you. You look like you need some Z's."

"It's not the shifts," I said, avoiding eye contact. "It's an ongoing thing."

He drummed his fingers on the window ledge. "Because of the baby and the girlfriend and all that shit?"

"I don't know. Probably."

"Don't let it get you down. You should call the girl, get closure. Closure is what you need. Closure is life's spring break."

"No. Spring break is life's spring break. No, you know what? I've diagnosed you, Chapman. Your problem is that you believe in closure."

He laughed his cackle, an echo down the hall. "Look at this," he said. He stuck his arm out the window and pulls back his sleeve, showing the bandage on his wrist. It was a fresh, clean bandage.

"What about it?" I said, sharp so he knew I was not impressed.

"They think they got me pegged. They're going to tell me I'm schizo or some shit. Maybe they'll give me something to reroute the chemicals in my brain. I don't know what that means. I sure as shit wasn't feeling good. I was just sitting there scared as fuck and alone and I got the pocket knife and just started doing it. Like, my brain was sending the message to my hands to do it. And I was thinking to myself, I was actually thinking, I can't even find an original way to kill myself. Then I got scared and called my mom."

I know that feeling. That scared feeling when you want to call your mom. "What did it feel like?" I said.

He sucked air through his teeth. "It hurt like hell."

I shook my head and groaned, looked down the hall. Chapman was some part of my life and I was some part of his and there was no way to change that. And now we had

ended up in this place, together. Of all things that may have been true, this was true—we were here, together.

“Let me out,” he said.

“Excuse me?”

“Let me out.”

“No.”

“Please let me out for a minute, Dub. Just to walk around the track out there. I keep seeing that goddamn track and I got to get out of this room.”

“I can’t let you out, man. Are you kidding?”

“Please, let me out. There’s an exit right there.” He put his hand out the window, pointed down the hall.

“Fuck no. It’ll set off an alarm.”

“No it won’t. They turned off the alarm. Carpenters walk in and out of it all day. They’re going to start painting the doctor offices and shit.”

“I’m not letting you out of the room. You’re crazy. You’re schizo. No.”

“I’ll tell your boss we know each other and you knowingly watched me. And you antagonized me.”

“Go to hell.”

“I will.”

I felt his pressure on me like a headache. Was he serious? I couldn’t lose my job.

“Come on, Dub. Please,” he said.

“One lap,” I said. “One lap.”

“Perfect. That’s fine, let’s do it.”

I shook my head, knowing good and well how stupid this was. I pushed the key into the deadbolt.

The track was wet from a shower earlier that evening. It was humid and warm. Chapman moved slowly, taking short steps, and when I told him to speed up, he said we should take our time on such a peaceful night. Truly the night was calm, the street empty and our only company a very slight breeze.

We followed the asphalt track—passing the tire swings and the repelling wall—as it curved around behind the building to a heavily wooded plot of land. This part of the track was new, freshly smoothed black asphalt, the dirt along the track turned and bulky. This was part of the renovations, along with a new picnic area, and they hadn't yet put up lamps, so the only light came from the street split by tree branches. We walked in silence, and suddenly I didn't mind the slow pace. I felt light-headed, like it was me who was the prisoner and this was my getaway. For some reason this process was funny to me, walking in the dark, looking at Chapman's bare feet slapping the wet blacktop, and I quietly laughed against my will.

"What?" he said.

"Nothing."

"Shit, you got to tell me now."

"It's nothing."

I was ready for him to keep pestering me, but he went silent. He stopped walking, and so I stopped and turned to him. A stronger breeze blew, ruffling the pines in a loud

whisper. Chapman was perfectly still and making a face like he wanted to smile but couldn't quite do it. His gaze was fixed, staring past me into the dark woods.

"We can't take all night," I said, or meant to say, but my words came out slurred.

Chapman slowly put a finger to his lips and then pointed in the direction he was staring. I looked into the woods and saw someone standing there, a kid. It was a young kid, and even in the dark I could see he was too young to be an overnight patient at Singleton-Byrd. Likely he climbed the fence for a thrill, wanting to get a look at some troubled people. I was fine to be silent, let the kid see us and be scared away. But then he saw us, and he did not run. He stepped into a bit of light that washed over from the street and studied us.

I must now admit something. I must admit that the person before me was familiar, not just in appearance, but in some felt way. The way you can look at an old faded black-and-white picture and pick out your teenage grandfather standing among his friends. This kid in the woods. The long legs and big ears that he would eventually grow into. Wearing a baseball cap in the style we used to, cocked back with the bill angled up.

Chapman took a step off the path toward the kid. "Warren?" he said, and I knew, despite all reason, that he was not talking to me. "Warren. Dub." He motioned for the kid to come to us.

I couldn't say a word, couldn't feel my own hands. And I must admit also that there was recognition on the kid's face, or what I could make of it.

"Come here," Chapman said, waving again.

The kid seemed to consider this for a moment, but then he turned and ran. Ran into the trees. It was the same gawky run, the high leg kick. The loping run that got me the nickname Cricket on the baseball field. I had tried to forget about that.

“It’s you,” Chapman said, pointing. I grabbed Chapman’s arm. He looked at me, wide-eyed. “Hey,” he yelled, but the kid kept running, the sound of his steps fading on the soft pine-strawed ground. Out of the light sound darkness fading fading gone. The kid was gone.

I shoved Chapman in the back. He looked back at me, smiled. I said, “Let’s go.” We started walking toward the building. He didn’t resist, but I kept a hand on his back anyway.

“It’s you,” he said again.

“Some kid snuck out of his house,” I said, not looking back. “Time’s up.”

We made a straight line on the dirt, through the trees, to the side exit.

“What are you doing? You have to go. Tell them you have to go,” Chapman said.

“Shut the fuck up.”

Once the metal door shut behind us, Chapman asked me what I was going to do. “Nothing,” I said. He looked at me like I was crazy. “Don’t ask me anything else. Don’t say another word,” I said.

He didn’t say anything the rest of the night, and he went to sleep.

*

At eight in the morning Singleton-Byrd was busy, every office door open—doctors, nurses, and orderlies walking in and out. It was my first real experience with the

fully staffed morning shift. Chapman was asleep, but I felt like a bum sitting in the desk, so I stood up, dizzy and stiff with fatigue. My nose was running. I was entering a new stage of sleeplessness.

My relief came at ten—it was a guy I'd never seen before. His green scrubs were stiff and new. Chapman was up now, sitting at his desk reading. I looked in the window and told him goodbye. It was his final day in the room and tomorrow was my day off—this really was goodbye.

“Dub, wait up,” he said, jumping up from the desk. He came to the window. “I was just thinking. You know Secret Lake isn't there anymore, right? They bulldozed all those woods for office buildings or some shit.”

“Yeah, I've passed by there,” I said, trying to make this talk seem casual—the new guy is listening to us—but Chapman's tone made it seem like we were in a life or death struggle.

“The lake is gone.”

“Yep.”

“Hey, come here. Come here,” Chapman said, frantically waving me closer to the door. The new guy caught the hint and turned away, not wanting any part of this interaction. He looked uncomfortable with this whole situation, like maybe he should find another job.

“You're still out there,” Chapman whispered.

“I'll see you around, man.” I started walking away.

“We have to find you,” Chapman said louder, not caring who heard, and his words echoed in my head—down the hallway.

*

At the apartment I try to sleep, but it is bright outside. Even with the windows covered, blacked out with thick dark blankets tacked on the wall, I can feel the brightness of the day, and it gives me fits.

AN OLD FASHIONED VISIT

David Corinne took part in a performance art exhibition directed by Antoine Dominguez-Bryant, who was famous for his work in the field. The exhibition took place in the Black Box, and it involved David standing under a spotlight and wearing a three-piece suit while holding a briefcase. He had to stand still like a mannequin. His arm got tired holding the empty briefcase, and even though his expression was supposed to be relaxed—dead-looking—it was difficult to hold for the entire hour. The light overhead made him hot, and then his eyelid began to twitch.

There was not a large crowd coming through even though Antoine Dominguez-Bryant had come to Baton Rouge from New York City. This was a big deal, but not many people seemed to care, which was embarrassing.

Another guy, David's friend Bruce, was part of the exhibition as well. He was decked out in Native American regalia. A girl named Damini was wearing an American flag and holding a machine gun.

David's friend Jill came up and waved her hand in front of his face, trying to make him smile. David genuinely hoped Antoine Dominguez-Bryant did not see this because she might get kicked out.

When the show ended at eight all the lights came on and everyone stuck around the theater to talk. Jill claimed she had made David flinch but he denied it. Jill was wearing tight red pants and a shirt that hung off one shoulder. The black shirt was faded gray, and this look was supposed to be casual, but her makeup and hair were styled nicely, and he could tell she had spent time getting ready.

“You blinked. Also your knee buckled and you almost fell down,” she said.

“Bullshit.”

Everyone was supposed to meet up for dinner at a coffee shop and Jill asked if David was going to be there.

“No. I’m going to wash this makeup off. But I’ll be at Ottoman later.”

The Ottoman was the bar where everyone was supposed to meet after the coffee shop. The bar was just down the road from David’s duplex apartment. Antoine Dominguez-Bryant was supposed to be there.

“I’ll see you there?” David said to Jill.

“Maybe.”

“Are you gonna make me beg?”

She shook her head and mouthed the word “No,” and he knew that meant she would be there absolutely.

*

At his apartment, David looked at himself in the full length mirror on his bathroom door. He thought he might actually wear the suit out. It was a black suit with gray pinstripes. His parents had bought it for David to wear at his grandfather’s funeral. It might be a little bit uncomfortable and hot on this Louisiana Spring night, but he’d look sharp, and it was only for a few hours. It fit well, and not often did he have an excuse to wear a suit. Tonight he could chalk it up to the exhibition. Maybe Jill would like that. Something different. If he did sleep with Jill tonight, which seemed likely, he was going to make sure it happened at his place so he could record the sex with his digital camera. This is something he had done a number of times with a number of different girls. To be

specific there were eight. Sarah Bolton's video was the best. She made gentle demands. Michelle Morneau's video was awful. She complained that David was hurting her and kept rearranging him on top.

The girls never knew because the camera was small and simply sat on the computer desk among his pictures and books and spare change. The thin shelf above covered the small red recording light and the camera made no noise. David had done a lot of work with candle placement to see that lighting was sufficient.

David put these recordings on his computer, but he did not share them. He would never put them on the Internet. These were events in his life he simply wished to record. That's it. That's all it was. He was twenty-six and he wanted to record some events. He felt something for each of these girls and did not ever brag about exploits. And if any one of the girls came to him for help, he would help her.

Recording with the camera in this way had been good not only for the event captured, but also for what David had learned about film directing. He had learned about lighting, of course, and had learned about camera technique, how a shot can look if the camera is perfectly still and the action takes place off-center. He was a theater student, but David's true love was film. He loved seeing himself at film's distance of time and space. It was unoriginal to love the screen, and it was not something he would tell people, but it was the truth.

He burned incense in his apartment and often kept the windows cracked because the place smelled musty otherwise. Also to get rid of the pot smell which he didn't like lingering around because it was not appetizing. He ate nearly all of his meals in the

apartment because he was a good cook and it was cheap. For now he ate leftovers out of the fridge, some tofu fajitas he made the previous night.

After eating, David put some music on his computer and brought the speakers into the hallway so he could hear music while he showered. Before getting in the shower he looked closely at himself in the full-length mirror. He looked specifically at his shoulders, which his workouts had been focused on lately, doing extra sets and adding a third free-weight exercise. When he lifted his arm, rotated in a pitching motion, the tendons bulged nicely. He did this with both arms and felt relatively pleased. Not overly pleased, but relatively. The water had gotten hot and steam rose over the shower curtain and filled the bathroom. His cell phone dinged and he walked out to check it. It was Jill saying they had gone to Sammy's instead of the coffee shop. He texted back that he would see her at the bar and he dropped the phone on the bed.

He showered and dried off and wore the towel into his bedroom. The suit was spread out on the bed and he put on a clean white undershirt. He had put on the pants when there was a knock at the door. It's Jill, he thought. She drove over to force me out. Part of him hoped that they could just skip the bar because he didn't like to be at a bar if he wasn't drinking and he didn't like to drink if he was going to have sex. Then he figured he would go ahead and hit the record button on his camera, just in case, and he punched it.

He opened the front door and opened the screen door. Standing on the gravel two steps down was a man in a white t-shirt and jeans. The man had puffy hair and was looking down so that David couldn't see his face. When he looked up David could see that the man was burned. He was burned all over his face and neck, burned on his arms

and hands as well. It was perfectly dark out, but David could see the man in the light of the two naked bulbs outside his door. They were 40-watt bulbs and David had just changed them. The man's skin was a gray color in this light. It was uneven and patchy and shined like dull plastic.

The thought came to David, irrationally, that this man was here for help, that the fire was going on right now, and that he needed to call 911. A stupid thought, even as it appeared. But then the man's calm voice came out slow and even. "David? I need to talk to you for a second. You go by Dave?"

David shook his head. The man's white shirt was an undershirt. He was a big guy. His hair was light brown, thick and full looking. Weren't burn victims unable to grow hair? David did not know this person, he would have remembered him. The man's face was asymmetrical, one jowl hanging slightly lower than the other like it had bubbled up, a product of the burn.

The man walked right past David, right into the apartment. It was so sudden that David didn't even have a chance to question this movement in his mind. And there was a feeling that he shouldn't touch the man. Not only because he was unusual looking, but because—stuck in a cloudy frame of mind—David wondered if he would hurt him, if his skin was sensitive or something. And the man kept walking, his heavy boots clapping on the oak floor, through the kitchen into the short hallway, and right into David's bedroom. David followed. "Wait," he said. Once David stepped into the bedroom the man said, "Have a seat," and closed the bedroom door. The man stood by the door and pointed at the computer desk chair. David stepped to the chair but didn't sit. He turned and half-smiled, putting it on. "Hold on a sec," he said.

The man sat down on the corner of the bed closest to the door, right next to the suit coat and tie. He was well-built and the bed creaked when he sat and he rested his hands on his knees.

“Have a seat, Dave. Sit in that chair. Your loved ones call you Dave, I guess.”

His voice was low and scratchy.

“No,” David said. “No one calls me Dave. I think you came to the wrong place.”

“I’m not here to sell you something.”

“What?”

“You’ll know me soon enough. We’ll know each other starting now. I’m Nathan Hart but people call me Nate. I have a gun on me, which I will now produce to show I’m not hiding anything.” He reached behind him and pulled a handgun from his pants. The gun was black but the finish was faded silver along the edges. It looked like a set prop. “I’m not going to promise I won’t hurt you but we need to get some things out there. Now have a seat.”

David shook his head. Part of him felt this was a prank, something to do with art. Maybe Antoine Dominguez-Bryant had a sick sense of humor. But this guy was really truly burned all over. It was not a makeup job, and David didn’t have to see a fake actor burn victim to know this man was real. David could not stop shaking his head. The gun looked small in the guy’s large patchy hand.

“What? Hey. Excuse me, who are you?”

“Nate Hart. I’m here to see you. This is an old fashioned visit and I’m an old fashioned guy. You won’t believe this, but I don’t even have a mobile phone.”

“You need to leave, man. Let’s go outside so we can talk this out.”

“We have to talk in here because it’s the most intimate room in the house.”

David looked at him, made like he was going to ask a question but nothing came out.

“Sit down, Dave.”

“Nobody calls me Dave. You got the wrong house.” Nate gripped and regripped the gun as if to relieve stress and it seemed likely the gun would go off accidentally.

David held up both his hands. “I don’t know you. Is what I’m saying.”

“Well I know you. And you will get to know me starting now. But you are going to have to sit down first.” Nate held up the gun and looked at it as if he was studying imperfections in the metal. “Please sit down, Dave.”

David shook his head. “I can’t sit. I need you to leave.”

Nate shook his head in disbelief. “You see what I’m holding here? You ever heard about one of these? It could kill you.”

The door was shut. The doorknob was on the far side from David, closer to the man. To open it and leave would be a multiple step process. Was this a real threat? What was this? He had never seen this person before. He would have remembered. This was a weird joke, wasn’t it?

“This is a nice suit,” Nate said. Nate put the gun tip on the suit coat and jammed the barrel into the mattress and pulled the trigger. A loud wooden pop from the bullet passing through the floorboard. A light puff of smoke rose from the gun. There was a burnt smell. He did the same thing again on the pants, pulled the trigger. “You’ll have to patch it up if you want to wear it now. Now sit,” Nate said, gesturing the gun toward David.

David rolled his computer chair on the wood floor and spun it around and sat down, five feet away from the strange man. David crossed his arms and breathed out and tried to stare at this person. But Nate was not easy to stare at. The wig on his head looked ridiculous, the hair parted and puffy like a politician. It was impossible to tell how old he was. "I don't have anything," David said. "Nothing. Take what you want from here, man."

Nate bowed his head slightly as if preparing to pray.

"Tell me what's going on," David said.

"You're something else, Dave. I'm telling you."

David managed a smile from this comment. "Jesus Christ, man. Why are you here? Who are you?"

"You realize that's two questions you could ask of any man, woman, or child at any time any place. And they wouldn't be able to truly provide a sufficient answer? But that doesn't make life worthless, does it?"

David shook his head in disbelief. "Whatever you say," David said.

"Not whatever I say."

"OK."

"I don't think we are getting anywhere, Dave. I'm not achieving my purpose."

Nate stood up and put a hand on his head like he thought his puffy hair might fly away. He stepped toward David, and David leaned back in the computer chair, away from Nate. "Turn around," Nate said. "Face the other way, spin around."

David shook his head no, smiling awkwardly.

“I shot your pants leg, but if I shoot your real leg we won’t be able to have a conversation, so spin around.”

David spun and faced the computer screen, a screensaver of stars moving at him. Traveling through space and time like a movie. Behind him he heard metal clicking. He remembered now that the camera was on, this interaction being filmed. David’s face was in the camera shot but he made sure not to look at the lens. It was ridiculous to think about his facial expression, he knew, but there was a camera right in front of him and that is what he spent all his time thinking about.

Then he felt the gun barrel on the back of his head and was no longer focused on his facial expression.

“This is where your brain is,” Nate said. “This is where you make decisions that set a course for other people’s lives.” For a second the gun stayed there and David did not move but looked dead ahead at the coming stars. He heard a flint wheel scratch. In his peripheral vision he saw a hand by his ear and then felt a burn. It was a flame on his ear lobe and it burned like hell. Jerking his head away from the flame, David swung an elbow back thinking he would hit the man’s arm or hand or something but he hit nothing and then he felt the metal of the gun smack against his head. He felt the pain on his skull and inside his head too and the pain expanded with the passing split-seconds.

Nate got David in a head lock and kept the flame on the ear, and in David’s constrained movement the flame touched the back of his neck and burnt some hair. It smelled awful immediately. Nate let go and the Zippo clicked shut.

“See?”

David had his face down on the desk rubbing the side of his head. The ear lobe was red and pulsing and he didn't touch it.

Nate sniffled. "You can turn back around." David didn't turn. "You can turn back around." Nate didn't say anything for a while and David didn't move. "You fucked up my lesson but I want you to think about your ear in that moment. Go head, turn on around." Nate reached over and wheeled the chair back and spun it around without David's help. David groaned with his head in his hands. "Now imagine if your ear was your whole life and someone just set it aflame."

"What did I do to you, man? Did I do something?" David said without looking up. He was looking at the floorboards. Parallel beams of wood. This is where I live. This man came into my house.

The burnt hair smell permeated.

"Never mind me," Nate said. "You think I'm using fire because I'm burned. Because I want you to feel what I felt. That's not why. It's just a coincidence. I used fire because it's the most real thing you can feel. It is steady and relentless."

David finally looked at Nate. In this period of not seeing him David had forgotten how strange Nate looked and it felt like seeing him for the first time, the pain coursing.

"What do you want? Just tell me."

"I don't think you're getting my point, Dave." Nate sat down on the bed again, sat hard this time, bounced there for a second. "Take your pants down."

"No, I get it. Fire on my ear. It's real." David rubbed his head some more.

"There's quite a bit more nerve endings in the tip of your dick than in the ear lobe, you know?"

“Yeah.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time you had a burn down there,” Nate said. “Different kind of burn though.”

“Where?”

“In your pants.” Nate nodded at David while he said this, raised the gun from his lap and gestured it in circles. David shook his head. “No? I’ll remind you. You remember a girl named Jeanette Stoker.”

“No,” David said. But he did remember her. They hung out, fooled around while he was actually seeing a girl named Natalie Breaux. He was taking time off from school, working at a restaurant, three, four years ago. Jeanette, if he recalled, was not his type. Sort of a bumpkin.

Nate nodded like he knew David was lying but it was all right. “I’ll remind you then. Country girl from Kentwood. Blond curly hair. Kind, generous, excitable, kind of a squeaky voice.”

“Man. I’m just trying to remember. Listen.”

“Listen to what?” Nate said. “Listen to you lie to yourself. No. I’ll tell you something about Jeanette. Jeanette had a lot of male attention, but a year ago she chose a guy who didn’t look like other guys but who had a good heart. He was a guy who when he was twelve his older brother was using gasoline to burn an ant bed in the backyard and ended up burning the house down. Little shotgun house burned down in no time at all. The kid barely got out alive. But he did live, though he would never be the same. It was hard for this kid to face other people and it was doubly confusing how to deal with girls when the time came. Some years later Jeanette committed to a guy even though he didn’t

look like the man she envisioned seeing down the aisle when she was a little girl, nor was he in the big money. But she committed anyway. Isn't that a nice story?"

"Yes." David nodded as well. He stopped rubbing his head and breathed deeply and devoted his attention to Nate who was now holding the gun with both hands, lazily, hanging down in between his legs. It was the first time David noticed the silver wedding ring on his finger. Nate sniffled and looked at the gun.

Nate stood up and turned to look in the mirror above David's dresser. This was also being caught by the camera, this sudden dramatic move. With his left hand still holding the gun, Nate used his right hand to pick at his hair, going in a circle around his head. With David sitting here, the back of his head would be in the camera shot, but not blocking Nate fortunately. Still David rolled the chair an inch or two to the left just in case. He needed this on tape, whatever the fuck it was.

David thought to bolt for the door, but if Nate was a true threat the gun would get him first. If Nate was not a true threat, then it didn't matter if he bolted or not. He was not a threat, he couldn't be. It would make no sense to come over and burn someone and have this conversation just to kill them. He has a wife to think about, right? Plus the camera was filming something very interesting. Maybe something that could promote David's career. It was like a real life one act play. It was like nothing anyone had ever seen.

"Damn buddy, you don't believe in air conditioning or something?" Nate said. He removed his toupee revealing his bald head, the same patchy skin, though slightly paler. He rubbed a hand over his head and tossed the toupee on the bed next to David's suit and sat back down.

“Having my experience these last 29 years, Dave, it’s not so easy to think that a life can make sense to a person. What do you think?”

“About what?”

“Do you think life is set to some kind of order? Does it add up?”

“No. I don’t know.” David touched his ear lobe and felt the big blister that had puffed up there. David had always thought life was random and remorseless, even though his own life had been relatively pleasant.

“Why not?”

“All the needless suffering,” David said. He wanted Nate to feel that he was honestly engaged in this talk.

“Suffering by you?”

“Not necessarily. Just suffering. Looking at history.”

“You don’t have to tell me about suffering. By the way, I said ‘a life’ not ‘life.’ Do you think it is fair for you to judge your own life by looking at history? Shouldn’t you judge your own life through your own experience? Isn’t that, truly, the only thing that you can really judge? Isn’t everything else conjecture? And if you don’t represent your own experience, who will?”

David took this in and tried to concentrate. He replied, “You have to look at all things around you to understand life. You have to inhabit others to understand.”

“Well, anyway, Jeanette thinks a life makes sense. No one can convince her otherwise. She thinks her life is supposed to add up. So these days she’s in a real pickle and I hate to have to watch her struggle.”

Nate looked away from David and it seemed there was some bond between them now. As if David was his therapist. David folded his arms over his chest and leaned back in the seat, almost confidently. He was scared, but he wanted Nate to see that he was not going to give any other party pleasure in his powerlessness. It's what actors do, project something they don't actually feel.

"Tell me what you want from me."

Nate looked at David, a scowl with no eyebrows, until David looked away. "In my own time, I will. So Jeanette thinks she was put on the earth to do one thing, to make more life. To make it with her own fluids and organs and such. It's not a new idea, is it? Where there was nothing, now there is something. You understand me?"

"Yeah."

"It's old fashioned, isn't it? Nowadays the best of us try to think of all humanity as our sons and daughters. We maintain that we don't care if our own little old traits are passed down. We might think the world is better off without these traits—our little secrets and selfish vices and deformities—because we don't love ourselves. We are scared of ourselves. All of us people these days, we don't ever really face the uglier parts of ourselves, we don't come to terms with what we really are. We do our best to stay away from what we are because it doesn't look anything like the pictures on TV or the computers. It doesn't sound like the radio. We stay distracted so we don't have to look at ourselves. We drown our true questions in new and old habits. We hope we can stay distracted enough for the coming years until we die. Or we just say the earth is overpopulated, or that humans aren't going to be around much longer anyways, so what's it matter. You with me, Dave?"

David actually heard and understood everything Nate said, and for a moment he even forgot the circumstances of their meeting. These were interesting notions. But he was having a hard time organizing his thoughts. Nate's speech needed a reply, however.

"Yeah, but what's wrong with letting go of the old primal instincts that just put more strains on the world?" David asked. He thought about this conversation being caught on camera, even as his ear burned and his head pulsed. This real life play between two characters. And he was one of them. What was this? What would people say if they saw this? And Nate was touching on something true that David felt and often thought about. The earth was overpopulated. It didn't matter if anyone reproduced because it was all going to end one day, probably soon. What difference does any of it make, beyond finding pleasure in this life?

"It doesn't let you create. See, Jeanette wants to create on the biggest scale we are able to create on. You with me?" Nate gestured the gun in circles to as he asked this question.

"I understand that but...you said 'the best of us'..." David was losing his train of thought. He needed to express that the biggest scale of creation was an arguable notion. Art was creation that outlasted any life. "Art is more than life."

Nate looked at his gun, apparently ignoring David. "She can't create. She had an infection for three years and she didn't know it. The infection she got from you."

"What?" David said.

"Yep. Rendered her infertile."

"No."

“Yes, I know she should have gone to the doctor for her yearly checkups but she didn’t, for reasons that are not her fault. Monetary reasons mostly. Hell, she wouldn’t even have known she had it at all if I hadn’t got it from her and started feeling the burning myself. OK?”

“What infection?” David asked, but he knew immediately that Nate was referring to a case of Chlamydia he had gotten back then. He’d had it for a while, he wasn’t quite sure how long. He had gotten it from somebody or other, he didn’t know for sure.

“If you think I enjoy this, Dave, I don’t. This is ugly stuff. I feel sorry for you, matter of fact. It’s lonely to look at somebody like you.”

“Jesus Christ, man. What the fuck are you talking about? I’m trying to talk to you.”

David had felt the Chlamydia as a burning sensation and gone to the clinic to get tested. He took antibiotics and that was it.

“You had an opportunity to tell her about your infection and you didn’t do it, so now we can’t reproduce. And I have to watch her writhing around like a dying snake. Not kidding, the other night she was really on the floor rolling around.”

Nate went quiet after this, looking at David. David thought of the girl rolling on the floor but he couldn’t picture it. Was she whipping her legs back and forth like a snake’s tail? Was she rolling back and forth, crying? Was she rolling over and over in one direction? It was just hard to picture. It was truly sad to think of her not achieving her one goal in life. He felt for her. But so few achieve their goals. That’s part of our suffering.

Outside there was the sound of traffic. A car horn honked and another car horn answered it, farther away. That's where David needed to be, out there where the world was in motion, not in here in this violent stillness. This was no way to spend even a moment of a life. He needed to be undressing Jill. That was the only thing he needed to be doing.

"I'm sorry," David said. The camera on the computer desk shelf was now picking up Nate's reaction to this apology. It wasn't much of a reaction, just a simple nodding.

Now they were just sitting there together like people at a funeral. It seemed like this interaction was ending, and after the initial threat Nate was going to let this go. He was being so calm. Maybe the apology was all he needed and he didn't want to simply ask for it because that would make it fake. Truly David was sorry, not sorry that he had been totally responsible for Nate and Jeanette's dilemma—because by any standard he hadn't—but sorry that he had played some role, any role, in the outcome of someone not being able to achieve what she felt was her life's purpose. David wished no harm. And even though Nate had physically attacked him, he felt for Nate with his physical condition. It was not something a person should have to deal with.

But eventually they both had to move on, get on with their lives.

"So I tell you all this just to say that we got to find another way," Nate said.

David avoided the impulse to ask what precisely Nate meant, because the less he said the sooner Nate would leave. And that was where this interaction needed to go. Silence would be the best way to end the conversation. Truly there was nothing left to say. His ear was still burning but now it felt very dry, like it would flake away if he touched it.

And what would it feel like for an audience, Nate leaving? Would it be bitter? Would it be strangely uplifting? Would there be a sense that a friendship had developed between these two strangers?

There was a ringing—the sound unfamiliar at first in these circumstance with David's steady head pulse from the pistol whipping—but then it became clear it was David's cell phone. The phone was lying on the bed next to the suit, and Nate glanced back at it, picked it up. Blinked at the telephone's screen.

"It says Jill," Nate said. "Who is she?"

"Friend of mine."

"Jill? What kind of friend?"

"Just a friend."

"Yeah, I bet that's not the case, Dave. Knowing you, I bet you got other ideas for Jill." Nate laughed. "Just tell me. Be honest with me. She a special kind of friend?" Nate gripped the gun hard. "This is just two guys talking, mind you. I admire you mostly."

The phone stopped ringing, voicemail would pick it up. David shook his head and put his arms down on the armrest, palms upward to indicate confusion. David had nothing left to say to Nate yet Nate was dragging this out, almost like Nate had nowhere left to go. Like this was his final stop. Nate set the phone down.

"Sometimes we have to force the issue. We have to try to make life make sense," Nate said.

"We can't. It's not in our power."

Nate shrugged. "Well, I ought to go," he said. He stood up and stuck the toupee back on and pressed around his head so it would stick to the tape, looking at David's face all the while.

David was nodding casually to suggest that leaving was the right thing to do.

Standing next to the bed, Nate took a deep breath and raised the gun pointing at David. "You know why this has to be, don't you?"

David didn't reply, he stared at Nate trying to remain stone faced. Nate shook his head ever so slightly as if in regret. David jumped forward from the seat, head down to bull rush Nate, arms out like he was going to make a tackle.

The bullet went right through the top of his head, through his brain, out the back of his neck and into a floorboard underneath the computer desk. His head bounced off the mattress, heavy spatters of blood sprayed the comforter and suit jacket, and he collapsed on the wood face down.

For a moment it was quiet, and then live music began somewhere outside and the drum sound echoed through the wall.

The camera captured Nate opening the bedroom door and stepping out. The microphone captured his boots on the wood floor, softened momentarily by the hallway rug, boots again. Very faintly it captured the sound of the screen door creaking and slapping shut.

The bed was the camera's focus, though it was no longer occupied other than David's dress shirt and suit coat. David's corpse was motionless on the floor, well out of the frame.

HE FINDS YOU SLEEPING AND YOU DON'T WAKE UP BLUES

Clark would get to the Credit Union at seven-fifteen. It would be pitch quiet in the white-tiled lobby, and all alone he would turn on the florescent lights and unlock the vault and unlock his drawer and bring it out to the drive-through station and boot up his computer. This was when he could tell if the cash dispenser was working, which was the case about half the time. During the quiet half-hour alone he would think about songs he was working on. He would write song titles on Post-It notes.

On Thursday morning his phone buzzed while he was helping a customer, and when he looked he saw it was a text from Jessica. "Guess Ill just take blame again pile it on" the text message said. She was referring to the fight they had last night. "Its over forget it" he texted back. A moment later his phone buzzed again—a question mark. He texted back, "I mean the argument or whatever is over, let's just forget it move on."

The other tellers all showed up at once, right before eight. Paula got her drawer and sat in the drive-through station next to Clark. She was new—started last month—and Clark had his eye on her, though he didn't do anything about it, not while he was trying to work things out with Jessica. Still he had his eye on her.

"So when does your band play again?" Paula said, blowing on her fingernails.

"Tonight, but it's not a band, it's just me playing acoustic. I used to have a band."

"What happened to your band?"

"The drummer decided to start a meth habit, for one thing. We tried another drummer, but it didn't work out. There was other stuff." Clark turned side to side in his swivel chair.

“So you went solo. Just you and the old six-string?”

“It’s a seven-string, but yeah.”

“You sing?”

“Sort of. Not very well, it’s more just guitar.”

“Is it like Dave Matthews?”

“Not at all. You ever heard Kurt Rosenwinkel?”

“No.”

“It’s more like, you know, my stuff is kind of jazzy. Jazz and rock. Some blues, too. I don’t know, it’s hard to explain. You should come out. You and your husband should come out.”

“I’d like to, but Jeff’s always got games going on. And he doesn’t really like music. I don’t know why, he’s just funny about music.”

A customer pulled into the first lane and Clark said, “Good morning” into the small microphone.

Clark wanted to tell her more about music, and it seemed she was willing to listen. That’s why he and Jessica had gotten in a fight, because Jessica didn’t care about his music anymore. That was the ultimate reason.

They had broken up once, just after Christmas. Jessica had moved in with a friend for two months and lost a bunch of weight, and then they got back together and she moved back into his apartment. Clark had had a few girlfriends, but this was the first time he’d had a second go-round with a girl, so he didn’t know what to expect. There were a few of the same problems, though. She put no effort in when it came to his music, his true passion. She was good at spreadsheets and shit, and she could probably help with

the logistical side of starting a label, but she showed no interest at all in what he was doing. Jessica could only focus on law school. Last night she had run the blender even after Clark specifically told her that he was going to be recording a song in their bedroom. The blender fucked up his recording.

Clark's band had been called Strange Motion and had toured all over the Southeast. The reason he now lived in New Orleans—he actually lived in River Ridge—and not Jackson, was because of music. Because he wanted to be away from his Baptist parents—who had never supported his music—and because it was New Orleans. Maybe the city was a false idol, but still it was far better than Jackson. Over the course of their five year existence, the band had sold over four hundred CD's. Clark's old bass player, Bradley, had once said that they were only 999,600 short of going platinum.

His phone buzzed, another text from Jessica. "Fine by me its always a fresh start with you."

Neil walked into the lobby fifteen minutes late, wearing a suit, and didn't say anything to his employees. Neil was Clark's boss, the branch manager, and he often came in late, but this was overlooked since his dad was Vice Chair on the Board of Directors. Neil walked into his office where the wall was glass and his consistently bored expression could be seen daily. It was something to behold, Neil's attitude.

There was no one coming through the drive-through for the moment, so Clark took a minute to balance his drawer. Paula was digging through her purse.

"Hey," Clark said.

"What?"

"Gum."

Paula nodded and spit her gum into the small trash can on the floor. Neil didn't care if they chewed gum, but it was a rule sent down from the administrative half of the building. The building contained many departments.

"Hey, Clark, come here a second," Neil called, leaning out the doorway of his office.

Clark locked his computer with Ctrl-Alt-Delete and walked into Neil's office. Neil told him to close the door.

"Here's your CD," Neil said. He had borrowed an Elmore James CD from Clark. Neil was one of the few people Clark knew who genuinely liked Blues music. Even his old band mates hadn't liked Blues much. And Neil liked Clark's music. Neil himself was a mediocre guitarist and he seemed in awe when he came out to watch Clark play. He asked Clark questions about technique.

"Did you like it?" Clark said.

"It was all right. I don't like it as much as the Wolf."

"You have to be in the mood for him."

"Yeah. Hey, listen. I need you to do me a favor. A huge favor."

"What?"

Neil snatched a tissue and blew his nose and looked past Clark at the doorway of his office. "It's too confusing to explain right now, but I need your help with something. You have lunch plans?"

"No."

"Okay, good. It's fucked up. I'll tell you later."

Clark went back to his station and unlocked his computer with the usual key strokes. A car pulled in and he and Paula watched it round the corner, but the car went to the ATM machine.

“Cash money,” Clark said.

Paula smiled. “God I know, right? Get your cash from the machine, asshole. Avoid human error.”

It was not even 10:30 and Clark was already rolling up the sleeves on his dress shirt.

Paula looked at him. “What time do you play tonight?”

“Seven.”

“Maybe I’ll come out. Jeff has a game so maybe I’ll just come out by myself.”

“Hell yeah. Do it.”

*

Clark didn’t take his lunch break at 11:30, as he normally would have, because Neil had said that thing about a favor. But it wasn’t until after one o’clock that Neil called him into the office. Neil was standing up, rattling the keys in his pocket. He was a tall, slim guy who went to the gym most days. He had a strong jaw and was balding so he kept his head shaved close at all times. He was 34, but often would talk about things he did in college making him seem younger. Neil had just gotten his license back after a DWI, something he had explained to Clark over happy hour drinks. Neil could explain anything during happy hour. He liked having drinks with Neil.

“Okay. Here’s what I need from you,” Neil said. “I need you to come with me somewhere. It’s serious though. Just come on and I’ll tell you.”

They walked down the hall to the break room—Clark got his sandwich from the refrigerator—and out the back door into the humid day. Smokers were gathered under the awning out back. They walked through the grass of the building's big back lawn, Clark eating his sandwich as they walked. Once they got in the car and Neil cranked it and turned the AC all the way up—blowing hot air—Neil said, “We’re going to bust Michelle. We’re going to bust her ass. I’m ninety-nine point nine percent sure she’s cheating on me right this minute, as we speak.” He looked at his watch even though the digital time was on the dash. “It’s one-fifteen.”

“Where is she?”

“At her mom’s house.”

“She’s with a guy at her mom’s house?”

“Yeah, well, her mom’s sick and lives in Lafayette with Michelle’s sister, but she still owns the house. We’re supposed to fix it up to help her sell it, right? So Michelle goes over there every once in a while. So the other day I’m on lunch and I drive by there and her car’s there, in the middle of the day. And that night I asked her all about her day and she didn’t say anything about her mom’s house. Turns out Michelle’s not too creative with her email password. All kinds of emails, going back months. I know exactly who this guy is. They used to work together.”

“Yeah?” Clark said, trying to follow Neil’s story.

Neil backed the car out and drove out of the parking lot. Clark took another bite of his sandwich and sealed up his Ziploc bag and put it in Neil’s cup holder. Neil nodded and slapped Clark’s arm with the back of his hand. “So what we’re going to do is, I’ll knock on the front door, and you’re going to stand at the corner of the house in the back,

right? And you'll look to see if someone comes out the back door or whatever. If he doesn't come out that means he's hiding in the house. Either way I'm going to bust her cold. No accusing and denying, just bust her ass cold."

"What are you going to do to the guy?"

"I don't know. Kill him? I don't know. I could give a fuck about him. Look, one of the emails he wrote to her—I read all of them—one of them he wrote said, 'Maybe next time you can elevate yourself again.' What the fuck does that mean? Elevate yourself? She's got some new positions for him or something? They probably got one of those sex swings hanging from the ceiling. I haven't been in the house for a while. You think they're snorting Adderalls or something?"

"Could be," Clark said and looked ahead at the road. They went down Airline and took a right onto Dickory. Neil punched the stereo power and hit the scan on his radio. It stopped on a familiar song.

"You like this stuff? John Mayer?" Neil said.

"Not at all."

"Really? How come?"

"I don't like the way it sounds."

"I like it all right. It's catchy."

Neil was talking about popular music while his wife was elevating herself with some guy, but maybe it was not all that strange. Because Neil had his own stuff on the side. He was always talking about hooking up, always sizing up the new girl tellers, and he had told Clark of one recent occasion where he banged a girl on a vacation cruise during a friend's bachelor party. He even gave Clark the logistics of positioning on the

cramped quarters of a ship. How did someone get to that place, where they didn't worry, and they only got their heart rate up if it was time to bust somebody cold?

The car slowed as they turned onto Farrier Avenue, and Neil pointed. The mother-in-law's house was light blue. Neil rolled the car slowly and nodded toward a red Malibu that was parked on the other side of the street. "That's his car, I bet."

Neil stopped the car on the street in front of the next-door neighbor's house. "Be quiet. Don't slam the door."

Clark shut the car door and Neil led the way to the back of the house. The yard was overgrown and weeds grew in cracks on the driveway, and in the carport was a white Camry. Neil took a step into the backyard to get a look at the door. He then handed Clark his cell phone and whispered, "Get a picture if he comes out." He patted Clark once on the shoulder and jogged back around the house to the front.

It was mostly quiet out other than the high buzz of crickets, and somewhere in the distance a hammer was pounding. There was a birdbath in the backyard but no birds. Sweat had collected on Clark's hairline, and he wiped his forehead with his sleeve. This was an old house, raised off the ground with casement windows, the blinds closed on each of them. Up against the house was a metal rack where a few pieces of firewood sat. Fires could be useful about ten days out of the year in Louisiana.

Clark heard Neil knock loudly, then the muffled ring of the doorbell through the wall. Neil's voice called out, "Michelle, it's your husband." Nothing happened though, nothing immediate, and Clark wondered if she was taking a nap. It was hot out here. Neil kept knocking the door with the same force, then the knocks got louder. Clark thought about his own relationship, and how did he know what Jessica was doing in her

spare time? A bead of sweat dripped down his cheek, tickling his face, and he wiped it hard. He was already wet under the armpits. He was thirsty. Still nothing happened.

A moment later the blinds inside the window silently rose up, one quick tug, and the casement window opened slowly, swinging outward. A bare foot appeared on the ledge, then disappeared back inside the house. Neil was right, a guy was escaping. Clark walked toward the window, he couldn't help it, soft steps on the grass. One leg came out, then another, bare feet and khaki pants, the guy sitting on the window ledge but leaning back. He was about to jump down, a short jump to the pine straw flower bed.

Clark was standing right there beneath the guy. He could reach out and slap the guy's knee if he wanted. And then it occurred to him—they were busting this guy out of the blue. Clark just standing there with his only weapon a cell phone. What if the guy lashed out, chose fight instead of flight? Clark dropped the phone and leaned down, grabbed a block of firewood. The block was a solid piece of an oak branch. And the guy, not realizing he was being watched, jumped right down onto the flower bed soundlessly, like this getaway was no inconvenience at all. The guy had short dark hair, muscular, about Clark's height. He had on a white polo shirt, untucked, and was holding his socks and shoes in one hand. He even had a smile on his face, as if he was remembering a joke. This was all just a joke. Everything is a joke. The sky's blue, that's a joke. It's hot as hell outside, that's a joke.

Then the guy turned, and he faced Clark head-on. He froze, still smirking. They locked eyes and Clark swung the firewood like a baseball bat. The oak block hit with a hard thud, clean on the left temple. The guy's head snapped sideways, and the rest of the body went limp and collapsed to the ground in one simple motion. He lay there, half in

the flower bed, half out, looking like a dead leaf on the ground. Clark held on to the firewood with both hands, staring at the motionless body. The knocking had ceased. It was all quiet now, and the guy didn't move.

Seconds passed, maybe a minute, and when Clark looked up she was there in the window, the wife Michelle. For all he knew she saw the whole thing. She looked at the body and looked at Clark and looked at the body again. She was kind of pretty, especially with the shocked look on her face. She had dark brown hair in a pony tail and red lipstick, and there were spots of mascara smeared on the corners of her eyes. She opened her mouth but no sound came out. No sound anywhere, not until Neil's voice rang out behind her. She must have let him inside. He said loudly, "What're you doing, honey? Why's the window open, honey?"

"Shit. No." She turned to look at Neil.

"Who's this?" Neil said, and Clark could not tell who he was talking to. Clark finally dropped the firewood on the ground.

"What're you...what happened?" she said.

Neil stuck his head out the window too, his tie hanging down over the ledge. "Who is this? Who is this guy on the ground?" They were both looking out the window, side by side, their heads together like a loving couple.

"Call the police. Hurry," she yelled, pointing at Clark, but she wasn't making a move to do it herself. For some reason she wanted Neil to call.

"That's my buddy Clark. He's my employee. What happened, Clark?"

"I don't know, man." Clark ran his hands through his hair and then put them on his waist. He squinted in the bright sun.

Neil slapped his hand on the window ledge. "All right, listen. Who's this on the ground? You gonna tell me?"

Michelle looked at Neil, her head inches away from his, and didn't answer.

"So this guy dropped by for tea? Is that what you are saying? Is that what you're telling me?" Neil's voice getting high and angry, spitting his words in her face.

"Yeah, because you're perfectly innocent, aren't you?" Michelle said.

The guy started to move. First it was just a leg. He took in a ragged breath and turned his head slightly, faced upward, and opened one eye, a slit in the sunshine.

"I'm taking him to the hospital," she said. She left the window and Neil looked at Clark, shaking his head. "What happened?" he said. The guy groaned through his teeth and reached for his head but didn't touch it. Michelle came running around the corner of the house, knelt down by the body, and she held up fingers in front of the guy's face.

"How many?"

He bent his other leg and put a hand over his eyes to block the sun.

"Is he bleeding?" Clark said.

"Oh my God, you're in an ant bed," she said. She tried to get him to sit up, but the guy just groaned.

"Just roll over so I can get the goddamn ants." She turned and looked up at Clark, who still hadn't moved. "You're gonna pay. I don't know who you think you are, but you're gonna burn."

"Shut your fucking mouth," Neil said from the window, but she wasn't paying him any attention.

She finally got the guy to sit up, his eyes half open, and she slapped ants away from his shirt and his neck and his head. She reached up under his arm and Clark stepped over to get the other arm.

“Get away from him,” she said. But Clark did it anyway, helped the guy up, unsteady on his feet.

“I’m taking you to the hospital,” she said to him. Then to Clark she said, “And you’ll pay. That’s attempted murder you sick fuck.”

She had an arm around the guy’s waist and walked him toward the white Camry. She opened the passenger door and guided him in. Clark picked up the guy’s shoes and socks and put them on her car hood. She took them and tossed them onto the guy’s lap.

*

On the drive back to work there was no music. Neil kept taking deep breaths. When they came to a stoplight he glanced at Clark. “This is it. She thinks I don’t know how her mind works. She never gave me credit for that.”

Clark didn’t reply. He felt like he had just woken up in some foreign place where he didn’t remember arriving.

“Goddamn, man. Is she serious? Goddamn. And what the hell were you doing, anyway? Did he get in your face or something?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what happened. He crawled out the window. I don’t know,” Clark said, glancing behind him as if there was someone in the back seat.

Neil was driving slowly down Airline and cars passed on the right. “Well, fuck. I’m just asking. I didn’t think you’d crack anybody’s skull.”

“I know, man. Oh, Jesus.”

“You saw her face? All that fucking makeup caked on. I swear to God. Does she know how a man gets payback for this? This is when a man finds his woman sleeping and she doesn’t wake up. I’m just saying, it happens. You can’t go a week without seeing something like that on the news. That’s what all the old Blues songs are about, right?”

“Yeah,” Clark said, without considering the question. He Finds You Sleeping and You Don’t Wake Up Blues.

They pulled up to a red light and Neil looked at him again. “So what the fuck happened? He said something and you clocked him with a block of firewood?”

“No, he didn’t say anything.”

“He didn’t. You just hit him. What, did it happen in slow motion?”

They passed a new restaurant Clark had wanted to try with Jessica, but now restaurants didn’t matter. He was feeling for the lever to lean the seat back but couldn’t find it with his hand. “What?” Clark asked.

“Was it like in slow motion?”

“No, it was in fast motion.”

Neil looked at the road with both hands on the wheel. Clark gave up on the seat lever and looked in the side rearview mirror. He couldn’t look at anything for more than half a second. Everything was farther away than it appeared. His half-eaten sandwich was still in the cup holder. For a little while, a few blocks, they didn’t talk.

Neil veered into the turn lane at the intersection by the Credit Union. “All right, you can go home,” Neil said. “Go home.”

“What if he died on the way to the hospital? What if something popped in his head and he died? That can happen. It happens.”

“He didn’t die. People like that don’t die. He had a concussion.”

“What if he died, though?”

Neil waited for traffic to pass, then turned into the branch parking lot.

“What’s the guy’s name?” Clark said, wiping his face with both hands.

“His name’s Anthony something. Fuck that guy. She won’t even come home tonight. I wouldn’t if I was her. That’s the end,” Neil said.

“What’s his last name?”

“She threatens divorce five days a week so now I’ll give it to her. She can listen to her Catholic mom cry about it. Hey, you got my phone? You got my cell phone?”

Clark felt his pockets and shook his head. “It’s in the backyard.”

Neil breathed out heavily and pushed the button to unlock the doors. “Okay, don’t worry about it. Go home. I’ll get Paula to take care of your drawer.”

Clark got out and went to his own car. He waited a moment in the quiet before turning the key, watching Neil walk in the back door of the building. Clark drove home and walked three flights up to his empty apartment and sat on the couch. He turned the TV on and then turned it back off. He lay down on the couch without taking off his shoes.

Would a hospital be able to tell him how many Anthony’s were there so he could narrow it down? No, there were privacy issues, right? Maybe he could just walk the halls until he found the guy, to see if he was alive.

*

Thursday was Jessica's late day, her night class didn't end until eight, so she was not home at six-fifteen when Clark left for his gig at JJ Lagers. It was a restaurant and bar in Metairie, and the stage was basically a black wooden box with a stool on it. He could hardly play tonight, hardly move his fingers. He didn't feel like singing so he played instrumental stuff, just slowly strumming major-seven chords up and down the neck, never stopping a song to start another one because these weren't songs. Tonight he felt so limited, felt like the guitar was a dumb instrument. An insufficient instrument.

He drank two free beers which didn't loosen him up at all. He didn't notice until halfway into the gig that Paula was here, sitting at the bar with a friend, and apparently they were the only two people paying him any attention. It was an extraordinary effort just to wave at them.

A lady sitting at a table near the stage turned around and requested "anything by Van Morrison." Clark said he didn't know any Van Morrison, and the lady said, "You played some last week. What was that Van Morrison song you played?" He could only shake his head, pretend he was someone else.

After the gig—he wrapped it up fifteen minutes early—Paula came over to talk. She asked why he left work and Clark said he was feeling woozy. "Glad you're better," she said. She was made-up, wearing jeans instead of the slacks they all had to wear at work. The friend stood there looking unimpressed. Paula said his music was good.

"It was terrible," Clark said.

"No, it wasn't terrible at all," Paula said. The friend nodded in agreement.

"It wasn't good, but thanks," he said. He put the guitar in the case, closed it, and flipped the clasps.

“What are you doing now?”

“I got a friend in the hospital,” he said. “I got to go by and see him. I’m sorry. I have to go see him. Thanks for coming, really.”

When he said the words to Paula, Clark really did think he was going to the hospital to find Anthony, even without the last name. But then he didn’t know which hospital to try first, and his motivation quickly died. Instead he drove down Clearview, skipped the turn for his apartment, and kept driving. He drove to the Credit Union, his workplace, just because it was familiar, and parked in the big lot around back. The building was dark other than a few dim safety lights in the lobby windows. His was the only car on the long row of empty parking spaces. Occasionally a car would pass through the drive through ATM. At 9:57 his cell phone rang—it was Jessica and he didn’t answer.

If Anthony died it was manslaughter, if he lived it was assault—that was Clark’s best guess. He turned the key one click to power the battery and hit the stereo button. He scanned to the classic rock station, “Take It Easy” was playing.

Clark thought about music. All his guitar playing, guitar magazines, trying to write songs, ever since he was what, thirteen? He never cared about school or sports, music was the only thing. But now with this dusty dashboard and this cup holder and this car radio playing three decade-old songs on this clouded night when you couldn’t see a single star—it was all so ridiculous. It’s not going to happen. It was never going to happen. The false images of his future sped at him one after another and died like gods. It was all too fast. He tried to slow himself down, all his thoughts, but he couldn’t.

Music. Do people even care about music? No, they never did. They never cared about music or anything else. They're just like me, Clark thought, they use music to elevate themselves. Just like they use everything else to elevate themselves. People, once they secure food and shelter, focus on elevating themselves. That's what it's all about, isn't it? People want money and power to elevate themselves, but if they can't use that, they can use something like music. Or sex. Why stop there? People use their religion or their atheism to elevate themselves, and philosophy and politics can elevate you too. People use anything and everything to elevate themselves, whatever advantage they can grab. Their education, their struggles. The elevated people wave their fingers at everyone else. It is your right to wave your finger once you are elevated. Even when people help others they are simply elevating themselves. Yes, there are true moments when you forget yourself, but where do those moments go once they've passed? The good moments suffocate and die. People only care about one thing—elevating themselves. Isn't this true?

And then what? And then one day Death comes. He comes into the flimsy structure you call a life and he points his crooked finger at you. He finds you sleeping and you don't wake up. There is no preparing. Death finds you sleeping.

Clark felt like he had grasped something true about life and, for a moment, it seemed a good idea to turn himself in, to admit publicly the violence he had performed. To de-elevate himself by showing how low he really was. That's where the truth lies, in de-elevation. But the moment passed and Clark drove to his apartment.

*

“Gig went a little late?” Jessica said when Clark walked in. She was at the kitchen table with her laptop open and books and papers and note cards strewn about. Her hair was in a pony tail.

“Yeah.”

“Encore, encore,” she said without looking away from her laptop screen.

“Yep, you got it.”

She stopped typing and looked him over. “Where’s your guitar?”

“In the car.” Clark walked past her to the fridge and opened it. Skim milk, block of cheese. He closed the door.

“What’s wrong?” she said, turning around in her seat to look at him. “Are we still fighting?”

“No.”

“No? Come on, Clark-after-dark. What’s the story?”

Clark stood in the middle of the kitchen. “Why’re you in such a good mood?”

“I got an A in Torts. Seriously, what’s going on? You look pale.”

Clark didn’t answer. He walked into the bedroom and sat on the corner of the bed and looked at the framed pictures on the dresser. One picture was of Strange Motion playing a gig in Athens, Georgia. In the picture he was looking down at his guitar, in the middle of something that had mattered. Jessica walked in. She was wearing blue pajama pants and a big white t-shirt that advertised Sea World.

“Tell me.”

Clark told her. She sat down on the bed as he was talking, as he was trying to get the story out. She stared stone-faced, listening. He went over the moment of impact again and again—the way the head snapped, the body going limp like a corpse.

“He was right there and I swung.”

She said, very calmly, “Why would you do that?”

Clark massaged his temples. “If you want to leave, just leave. Leave me here. It’s fine.”

“I didn’t say that, Clark. Look at me. Why did you do that, though? I mean, how? Why?”

“I don’t know. I just got sick of it. That guy, climbing through the fucking window. He had this look on his face. It just...what if he’s dead?”

“He’s not dead if he got up and walked off.”

“I don’t know. He wasn’t walking under his own power. I don’t know why I did it.”

“It was a momentary lapse. You took it personally, you were defending your friend,” she said. She put one leg up on the bed and turned more facing him.

“If they filed charges would the cops be here by now?”

“Not if they didn’t know your name. Well, maybe. But there’s no way he filed charges. I bet you he didn’t. Even if he did, it’s such a clusterfuck. I don’t think any judge would touch it.” Jessica continued to reassure him. She asked how JJ Lager’s went.

He took a long shower and when he got out he saw that Jessica had gone down the three flights to get the guitar from his car. “I don’t want it to get stolen,” she said.

Clark did not sleep well that night.

*

At 7:48 am, Clark sat at his teller station looking out the window at the empty grass lot next to the bank. No cops were waiting in the parking lot this morning. Soon his coworkers showed up, slouching in one at a time. Paula got her drawer from the vault and sat down at her place next to him. "Hey. I liked your music, but you need to sing more," she said, as her computer was booting up.

"Thanks."

"You looked bored to me. We agreed that you looked bored."

"I wasn't bored," he said.

Paula was chewing gum but Clark didn't say anything. At eight twenty-five Neil came in, wearing a tie but no sport coat, and walked directly into his office. He sat at his desk and started eating a cereal bar, watching his computer screen. Clark tried not to look at him, tried to believe everything was over and forgotten. Customers drove through making their requests and waiting while Clark and Paula performed the transactions. When Clark wasn't with a customer the minutes passed slowly on his computer clock.

Paula groaned. "Oh crap. It's not even ten o'clock and I'm off twenty bucks. What did I do now?"

A sudden noise like a siren shocked Clark out of himself, and for a split second it seemed like they were here now, here for his soul, and things were never going to be the same. But it was only the fire alarm. Clark locked his drawer and followed the line of people out of the teller station. It was a drill.

Outside everyone was gathering, people from all departments. The whole building housed over one hundred employees, and they were moving slowly, huddling in clusters on the large back lawn and in the parking lot on this bright, hot day. Clark walked up to Neil who was standing by himself on the grass, typing into his cell phone.

“Thanks for letting me go home yesterday.”

“Yeah, no problem.”

Clark nodded and Neil put his phone in his pocket. “Hey look,” Clark said, looking behind him to see if anyone was nearby. People were in their huddles talking. And there was a big bird circling overhead, a hawk or something, and some people were pointing at it. “So what’s the deal with everything? With Michelle?”

Neil rolled his head around like his neck was stiff. He didn’t look like he slept too well either. “With me and Michelle? Shit, I don’t know. She actually came home last night, if you can believe that.” Neil spoke calmly.

“Really? What about the guy? Anthony or whatever?”

“Anthony? Oh, he’s dead.” Neil shook his head slowly and looked at the ground as if paying his respects.

Clark did not respond. He was trying to think.

“Poor fucker,” Neil said.

“Dead?”

“Oh yeah, his head blew up in his sleep. Burial’s at three. Shit, I’m kidding, buddy. He’s at home, I guess. Guy’s married with four kids or something.” Neil took his phone out of his pocket and glanced at it.

“Really?”

“Something like that. He wouldn’t let Michelle take him to the hospital. I’d love to hear the excuse he told his wife about the fucking hump on his head.”

“You sure? He was okay? He went home?”

“Yeah, yeah. She took him home.”

“You’re positive?”

“I’ll tell you something. That guy won’t be jumping out a window anytime soon. You clocked him good. He was out like a light.” Neil said this last statement without looking at Clark—he was looking at the building, at the warning light that was still flashing.

“You think?” Clark said.

“I think he shit his pants or something. I swear I smelled something when he was laying there.”

Clark looked up at the hawk, which came to a halt on a pine branch high above.

“So she came home? Y’all are going to work it out?”

“I don’t know what we’re going to do. She came home and we didn’t really talk.”

Neil was about to say something else when the warning light stopped flashing.

Neil walked quickly toward the building—Clark following behind—and looked back at the crowd of employees, all of them still chatting, not yet realizing the drill was over. Some of them still looking up at the tree, at the hawk. From here Clark could see the line at the drive-through backing up. The customers would not be happy.

“Hey everybody. Hey.” Neil put two fingers in his mouth and whistled. “Back to work, please.”

Clark watched them. The employees started making their way toward the doors. Some walked on the sidewalk and some on the lawn. They walked slowly, the hot sun shining down. Drills were that way—just when you got used to being outside, just when you found something worth your attention—it was time to go in. It always took a long time for everyone to get back inside.

YOUR SKIN DOESN'T RESPOND WELL TO LIGHT

If you were over thirty there were only a few places you could go out past midnight and not feel like a desperate novelty, Gwen told people. And ten years ago she never saw herself going to the Old Hickory.

Sitting at the bar, Allen talked about his separation. He told Gwen it was funny being single after five years of marriage, you had to laugh. Gwen could relate. She offered to buy him a shot to celebrate, but he said a beer would be better. So far he'd bought all the drinks, which worked out well because Gwen was beyond broke.

The weather was nice, crisp and clear. Gwen's hands were cold. Gwen and Allen were at the deck bar outside, which was just as crowded as the one inside, and people were squeezing in between them to get the bartender's attention. Gwen scooted her stool closer to Allen block the other patrons. There were sandpaper strips on the deck for traction. The moon was almost full, but heavy clouds passed under it. Country music came out of the speakers.

"God, I love this song," Gwen said.

Allen listened for a second with a curious expression. "Ah yes, Fancy," he said.

"I hate country music to hell, but I've always loved Reba."

"Really? All this time I've known you I didn't know you were a fan of Reba. I like Reba too."

"Oh hell yeah, I love that bitch Reba."

Allen held up his beer for a toast. "And this song in particular," he said. "It's a song about Fancy's one chance. She gets one chance and one chance only. That's it. That's all she gets. If she screws up her one chance you might as well bury her."

Gwen laughed. "No, but you're right. Fancy, she gets one chance and then you might as well put her on the chopping block. Pull her hair away from her neck so the executioner can see his target."

"Fancy gets her head cut off," Allen said.

"She gets her head cut off and then gets fucked, probably."

Allen made like he was going to spit out his beer but swallowed it. "Well...yeah. Sure. What difference does it make after Fancy's been decapitated? Bunch of sick old bastards screwing her headless corpse."

Gwen leaned back and looked toward the sky laughing. Allen smiled at her while she did this. "Poor Fancy. Men would do that, wouldn't they?" she said.

"Do what?"

"Violate a headless corpse. If you caught them in the right mood." Gwen had a few divorced friends and making generalizations about men was a game they played. She didn't mean to get into talking about men tonight, but Allen seemed to understand she was mostly kidding.

The bartender picked up a two dollar tip next to Gwen's elbow. "Are you guy's still talking about this stupid fucking song?"

Allen drove Gwen to his place in his Audi C7. The neighborhood was for college renters, cars in front yards. Allen said his front door was permanently stuck, so they went under his carport to a door that had a dent with shards of wood sticking out.

“Lost your temper?” Gwen said.

“Landlord did. This house is temporary, by the way,” Allen said. “As a warning.”

Allen had lived with Brynne in a very nice two-story house west of town. Allen’s family owned jewelry stores. He had money. Gwen had three-thousand dollars of credit card debt, no savings, a mortgage she couldn’t afford.

Gwen always wondered if this would ever happen. Not that she needed it to happen, but she certainly didn’t mind. They were good friends, and there had been nice tension between them. Allen clearly waxed his chest and it was kind of prickly which would have grossed her out in other circumstances, but tonight it didn’t matter.

Gwen wanted to get up and stand back against the wall so he could see all of her. She spent a lot of time working on herself, but that’s not something you do on the first encounter. Still, he needed to see. Her body was what people commented on. Her mother always said she had a nice figure, but no one said anything about her face.

At ten o’clock in the morning they had coffee in his small, cluttered den, and Gwen wondered if they were going to hang out. Maybe a matinee movie.

“Have you seen the new Bourne movie?” she said.

“Which one?”

“There’s a new one.”

"I must have missed it." Allen stood in the middle of the room, while Gwen was seated on the couch, legs crossed. The room was a mess with folded clothes stacked on the couch and half-unpacked duffel bags on the floor. Allen was using a bedside table as a TV stand. He took a sip of his coffee.

"I haven't seen it yet," Gwen said.

Allen nodded and looked at the news, some problem involving US troops detecting landmines.

"Did you see Chris when he came back?" Allen said, referring to Gwen's ex-husband. He had gotten two weeks leave before having to go back over there.

"Hell no. Did you?" Why was Allen bringing up her ex-husband?

"Briefly."

There was no reason for Gwen to see Chris. Allen should know that. "I'm sure he gave everyone the long version of his travails," she said. She didn't know what Chris was doing over there, but whatever it was she knew he would come back and milk it with some PTSD vibe.

"Maybe. I'm sure it's no picnic."

Gwen shook her head. "I'm sorry, that was a horrible thing to say. I don't mean to be insensitive. I'm sorry."

Allen frowned and shook his head. "Let me give you a ride home." He went on saying something about Home Depot and doing some project for his mother.

Gwen did not have a damn thing to do today. It was Saturday. Of course Allen would have to go to Home Depot this morning. It couldn't wait. Build his mother a deck or something. Build her a fucking birdhouse.

Gwen went in Allen's bedroom to get her shoes. As she put on her shoes she noticed on his dresser a big pile of junk mail and loose papers. On the edge of the dresser, though, was a Mastercard stuck to a piece of paper. She picked it up, brand new debit card, the expiration date three years away. The small print explained that the card did not require activation. She looked at the doorway of his room and folded the paper around the card and put it in her pocket.

Allen's outwardly beautiful SUV was cluttered just like his den, something she hadn't noticed last night. There were balled up receipts and half-full water bottles rolling around on the floorboard.

"I had a dream last night," she said, remembering her dream at this very moment. "I was in this big muddy field and I was holding one of those grim reaper things. The pole with the blade on the end."

"Scythe," Allen said.

"Yeah, I'm holding the scythe. And I just stood there holding it."

Allen nodded and turned the wheel, turned onto Prince George. She didn't like that she was getting closer to home. "Hmm. That's deep. What does it all mean?"

"Great question. Maybe it means love stands strong forever."

Allen made a face at the windshield, a face like—what is she thinking. He then laughed and said, "Maybe." But Gwen had seen the face. She didn't mean it like that, she just was saying something funny. She didn't mean to say anything about love.

He stopped the car in front of her house. She put the purse strap on her shoulder. Gwen realized then that she had left her makeup bag at Allen's, but she didn't say anything. The debit card was in her pocket.

“We will talk soon, my-lady,” Allen said. Gwen smiled once and opened the door. She stepped in the yard and looked at her brick house. The driveway that needed edging. It was a gray day and almost cold. Beyond the roof were low clouds barely drifting, thin and unformed like gray smoke and somewhere in the distance she could hear children yelling like they were playing tag. Voices far enough away to love. Overall it was an ugly day.

She took a few steps but didn't hear the car leaving. She wondered if Allen was staring at her ass, but then she turned and saw that he was leaned across the seat to close the passenger door because Gwen had not closed it.

“Sorry,” she said through the window.

Allen waved and took off. She walked through the yard to her front door.

That afternoon Gwen called Jenny, her friend from book club, but Jenny couldn't go to the movie. Gwen knew it was because Jenny was hot and heavy with some new guy who owned a liquor store. Finding herself utterly bored, Gwen used Facebook to look up Allen's birthday and also found Allen mother's page and her birthday—the date but not year. She wrote down some other simple four-digit combinations to try. 0000, 1111, 1234, and so on. It was a personal project, just to see.

At night she went to an old country gas station on Highway 49 and tried out the debit card on the ATM in the corner. No one was in the gas station, and the old man behind the counter was nearly comatose. The powdered donuts looked a decade old. Sure I'll accept the three-dollar fee. She got in on the first try. Allen's stupid pin code was 0313, his own birthday, and it was a great thrill to get in so easily. She took out four-hundred dollars.

Gwen was a tech at the hospital and she had to work Sunday. She had two newborn babies come in and she pricked their heels to collect blood for a bilirubin check. Gwen used a pen needle, and she would push the trigger button that would pop the needle into the baby's heel and immediately retract it. Then she had to squeeze the heel around the wound to coax the drops of blood into a thin vial. Today both babies had been sleeping beautifully until Gwen pricked their heels. Then they screamed like hell.

Other than that there was nothing to do. Gwen got to talking to Mandy about the weekend. Gwen and Mandy didn't see each other outside of work—being that Mandy was a happily married mother of two—but they talked about everything at work. Gwen didn't say anything specific about her night with Allen until Mandy really started to press. Mandy was always starved for details, so Gwen went ahead with the whole story.

“Allen Barrett from Gautier?” Mandy said.

“Yeah.”

“That's the Allen you've been telling me about? I didn't know you knew him. He's getting a divorce from Brynne?”

“Small world.” Gwen thinking she would not have said anything if she'd known Mandy knew him.

“I always liked him. My brother and him were good friends.”

“Really?” Gwen said.

“I remember him, driving his BMW all over the place. He was scandalous back then. For a little while, he was.”

A supervisor walked through the sliding glass door and Gwen stepped behind the cubicle wall until he passed. A lady followed close behind him with a newborn baby saying she needed the blood checked. Mandy told her to have a seat and they would call her back momentarily.

“He was scandalous?” Gwen asked quietly.

Mandy told Gwen about how high school Allen had gotten a girl pregnant and that the girl gave the baby up for adoption.

“Doesn’t sound very scandalous,” Gwen said.

“Maybe not now, but back then it was.”

Monday evening Gwen went to Yoga. She felt good afterward, and on the way home she tried to call Allen but he didn’t answer. She drove by his place and his car was not there. If it was there, she would have knocked on the door so Allen could see her in the yoga pants. She went home and ate grocery store pizza while watching the five episodes of Jeopardy recorded on her DVR.

At three in the morning the weirdest thing happened. Gwen woke up thinking she was in her childhood bed. She imagined the dark room being laid out like her childhood bedroom. The impression soon faded and she knew where she was, but the associations from her childhood room all came back to her. Her stuffed kangaroo Callie on the miniature rocking chair, her cat Bea sleeping at her feet, being scared of the dresser mirror on the far wall, praying. It was an eerie feeling, this vision, and Gwen felt a strange impulse to pray. She prayed to be free of anxiety and for patience. She didn’t

think about what she was praying to, she didn't want to have a picture of it in her head, but she prayed.

Gwen was off the next morning and she went to Walmart in her yoga pants and a cap and bought one hundred dollars worth of groceries and some makeup, paying for it with Allen's cash. She went to another gas station ATM south of town and withdrew another four hundred dollars. How could she do this so easily, steal from Allen? She asked herself the question and didn't have a good answer. That being said, at least she would be able to pay her mortgage with cash this month.

Gwen called her friend Phillip, who was also good friends with Allen. She wanted to feel him out about Allen, to see if he let on that Allen had said anything about sex or money. Phillip was the kind of guy who would not keep quiet on those topics.

"Seen Allen lately?" she said.

"Not in a few days. Why?"

"No reason, I just ran into him at the Hick the other night. First time I have seen him since his separation."

"Allen's weird."

Gwen changed the subject and they both decided they were not going out tonight. They both had work early. "We're getting old," Phillip said.

"Oh, one thing," Gwen said. "Did Allen knock somebody up in high school?"

Phillip hummed, then laughed. "Yep. The girl was his next door neighbor. Gave the baby up for adoption."

"It kind of came up in conversation, but I didn't want to pry," Gwen said.

“Well, that’s the story in full. Blast from the past.”

That night Gwen was trying to read one of the Sue Grafton alphabet mystery books—she was on D—but she couldn’t stop thinking about last New Year’s Eve when she and Allen had talked well into the night. They were at a Phillip’s house and Brynne was out of town. Gwen and Allen sat on the back patio while others went in and out of the house. Music was loud inside the house, and people in the yard—their friends—tossed bottle rockets in the air to fire in all directions, which was also loud.

Gwen and Allen had to watch out for stray bottle rockets, but they talked for hours—literally hours—talked about all kinds of things while the others came and went. They talked about dying and childhood. They connected, it seemed, and Gwen opened up to Allen about how things had been so terrible with Chris. She talked about how Chris only cared about video games and pornography, and said she could never have children with Chris. Gwen had to pause a moment to keep from crying. Chris would watch pornography right in front of her, throwing it in her face, like, “Get with the program, bitch.” Delicious Teen Dreamsex—that was one of the actual sites. Guy was thirty-four years old and Delicious Teen Dreamsex was the highlight of his day. Gwen told Allen that when she was a little girl, this had not been her picture of marriage.

“I tried and tried but I couldn’t pull anything real out of him,” she’d said to Allen. She told Allen how she could never get a feeling of something crucial from Chris. What was it, this “something crucial” that Gwen so desperately needed? She thought about it. It was expectation. That’s what she needed. Him looking up at her face, at her face only, to feel his expectation.

Allen had nodded and looked at her like he really understood. It was right before Gwen quit smoking and she must have smoked a thousand cigarettes that night.

It seemed odd to Gwen that, throughout that discussion, and a few others like it, Allen had not brought up the child. Not that it mattered—it wasn't a big deal, in a sense. But it was his flesh and blood out there somewhere. That seemed like a big enough deal.

On Friday the hospital waiting area was packed. Gwen drew blood on babies with her pen needle. One baby's foot was really cold and the blood simply would not come out. Gwen squeezed the heel hard and put her hand around the thin ankle and tried to squeeze the blood out from there. The tiny baby screamed louder and louder, a strange wail with its thin tongue vibrating in its mouth, and the mother looked at Gwen like she was crazy. "It's OK," Gwen said. "It's normal. These little veins are stubborn."

Collecting all that blood at work made her think about blood a lot. She and Mandy went for lunch in the cafeteria. Gwen got a salad but splurged for the fattening dressing, which defeated the purpose. They walked around with their food trays until they found an empty table.

"Oh," Mandy said. "I saw Allen the other day. Yesterday. No, Wednesday. Yeah, Wednesday. I saw him out to eat with Brynne."

"You saw him out with his ex-wife? Like a romantic candle-lit dinner?"

"No, at Subway. They were together. I mean, I don't know if they were together in that way, but they were eating Subway together." Mandy looked down at her open burger. Gwen wondered how many more packets of mayonnaise she could possibly squeeze out.

“What was the nature of their conversation?”

“Good Lord, I don’t know. I didn’t talk to them. So awkward. You aren’t seeing Allen for real, are you? No, you’re not seeing him.”

“No. Not at all. But doesn’t divorce mean anything anymore?”

Mandy smiled but looked annoyed.

“I’m joking,” Gwen said. She shoveled the salad in as fast as it would go. The bacon bits were like rocks.

At three o’clock she took her break and went outside. Two of the transporters were standing out by the water tower smoking. One of the guys was decent looking. Gwen had seen him around. She bummed a cigarette from him. Just like that, eight months without smoking and she bummed a cigarette.

“Have I seen you out?” the guy asked.

“Where?”

“I don’t know. Where do you go?” he said.

“Sometimes I go to the Hick, unfortunately.”

The guy laughed. “Yeah.” He wanted to sleep with her, she could tell. “So what do you do when you go out?” he asked.

Gwen rolled her eyes on purpose. That was the kind of question you ask to someone you want to sleep with. “What do I do? Well,” she said, playing along, trying to think of something funny. “When I go out, crazy things happen, for sure.”

“Like what?” the other guy asked.

Gwen took a drag, it was so easy to smoke, exhale. “The stars burn out. The predator becomes the prey. A total eclipse of the heart.”

The guys looked at each other. "Huh. All right," the decent looking one said.

Gwen bummed another cigarette and took the long way back to her station. On her way back she ran into Mandy.

"Where the hell have you been? We're backed up. Everyone's waiting for you."

Gwen looked at her phone. "Sorry," she said, but still walked at the same slow speed.

"What the hell is wrong with you lately? Jesus."

Mandy turned and stomped down the hall, her hair swinging side to side.

Gwen tried to relax. She called Allen at seven. He didn't answer. She called him at eight. After four rings he answered.

"Hello," he said.

"Hey weird Al," she said. "Just calling to see what's on tap for tonight? Some country-fried steak for the gentleman, possibly? My treat."

"Oh, I can't. Sorry. I'm at my mom's. Had to come home for the weekend."

Gwen waited for further explanation but none came. "Is everything OK?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah. Fine."

Gwen would bring up the makeup bag when Allen was in town so she could go by there and they could talk. It was a good reason to drop by. She would find a way to bring up the subject of adoption in conversation and see if Allen would reveal his secrets.

She went to another mom-and-pop gas station ATM and took 400 dollars out. Jesus, how much money did Allen keep in his checking account? This was getting out of

control, but she kept doing it. Maybe I want him to catch me, she thought. Maybe that's why I keep taking his money. She bought a carton of cigarettes.

On the phone Phillip said he was going to the Rod Stewart concert in New Orleans. There were four people going and Gwen was welcome to join. "You could make us an even five."

"I thought Rod Stewart was dead."

"Nope, alive and thriving. He's got a new twenty-two year old wife and a baby."

"Good for him."

Phillip sounded mildly concerned when he asked if Gwen was doing all right.

"Sure, why not? I'm just going to cook a huge meal and eat myself sick, maybe watch a movie. Maybe two movies." She laughed for his benefit.

While making dinner, Gwen made the mistake of turning on the news. Soldiers walking with machine guns, talking to Afghans. Sand must mix with everything over there. Gets in your hair, the tap water, your eyes.

She drank wine with dinner, and after she ate she gave into an impulse. It was a sudden and ridiculous impulse, but she gave in. She called Chris's sister Rae. The number was still in her cell phone.

"Well, hey Gwendolyn. How are you?"

"I'm fine. Look, I know this is weird, but I just wanted to ask how Chris was doing. I just wanted to know if he's OK, really."

"Chris? To the best of my knowledge. I got an email from him, I don't know, not too long ago."

“OK. That’s good. That’s all I wanted to ask.”

“I can give you his email if you don’t have it.”

“No. I don’t want to talk to him. I just want to know he’s OK. I have no desire to talk to him. Ever.”

Gwen could feel Rae’s quizzical look on the other end of the line. “OK.”

“Good to talk to you, Rae. Give my love to the kids.”

“OK, Gwen. I will. We should get together for lunch sometime.”

“Yes. Absolutely.”

There was no particular reason that Gwen should have a hard time falling asleep. She was not sick. She was thinking about things but not overly obsessing, nothing out of the ordinary. She prayed for harmony and evenness in her life, and she apologized for her selfishness and her lack of concern for others. Give me some sign, she prayed. Sleep didn’t come, and she found herself thinking about her night in bed with Allen.

She rolled over and, in a short while, gave herself a weak orgasm. She held the pillow tight. The night she was in bed with Allen he gripped her ass and squeezed unusually hard when he came. Like he was trying hold on for dear life, or something. Like his need for her was fundamental. That moment had a feeling attached to it. Not that she needed that feeling from Allen or anyone else, but she gave in to it anyway. Why give in to that? It was a lie. Then in bed afterward, Allen was snoring. She didn’t know for sure but it sounded like blissful sleep.

After another sleepless half-hour, Gwen got up out of bed and went into the bathroom. She looked at the sink that needed to be cleaned and looked at her face in the

mirror. You might be able to shoot something in your skin to smooth out a wrinkle but there was no changing the texture. Something about your skin's texture changed when you got older. She was only thirty-three—that is not old—but she could see changes in her skin. Maybe it was all the smoking. Her skin didn't respond as well to light. That was a good one. At thirty-three, your skin does not respond as well to light.

It was after midnight, and Gwen put her hair in a pony tail, then put on jeans and a hooded sweater—looking rough—and walked out to smoke a cigarette. Then she figured what the hell and got in her car and drove around. She went past the fully lit parking lot at the Old Hickory, drove past the hospital and then went to an Exxon in the middle of town and hit the ATM. She drove by Allen's place and saw that his car was not there. After thinking about it for a few blocks, she turned around. She parked the car in the apartment lot and walked across the street to Allen's house. She remembered how he said the front door was jammed, so she went to the carport door—the cheap plywood with the dent—and tried that. It was locked but the gap between door and frame was wide so that she could see the latch.

Back at her car, Gwen opened the trunk and found a coat hanger among the junk, put the hanger under her sweater and walked back to the carport. She shimmied the hook to push back the latch and opened it. She tossed the coat hanger on the carport floor and locked the door back.

The light was on in the den and everything looked the same. The unpacked suitcases, laundry baskets full of electronics and wires, her makeup bag on the coffee table. A nasty smell coming from the trash can. Gwen checked out the rooms she had not seen the other night, one room was full of unpacked boxes. Gwen opened one of the

boxes and it was full of books and shoeboxes. In one of the shoeboxes there were pictures, some in frames, some not. She picked up one picture. It was of Allen, probably from high school. He was skinny and standing with his parents outside Ripley's Believe it or Not in Gatlinburg, probably around the time they gave up that baby for adoption.

In another room she flipped on the light. There was a Bowflex and some free weights and random junk thrown all over. Just junk. DVD's and magazines. *Maxim* and *GQ*. A printer. On top of the printer was a snow globe with a castle inside. She looked at the snow globe, a castle and the word "Neuschwanstein." German castle. She threw the snow globe on the hardwood floor but it didn't break. With both hands she picked up a twenty pound free weight off the floor and brought it down on the snow globe. On the first hit it cracked, the second it shattered. The puddle of snow-sprinkled water spread under an old computer tower. The castle had broken off the wooden base and she dabbed it on her jeans and put it in her pocket.

In Allen's room the pile of loose papers was still on his dresser. She slid his debit card into the paper pile so that half of the card was visible, like it had never left. The laptop computer was on and she shook the mouse and looked at his internet search history. She clicked on some of the sites. Sports, political blogs, movie reviews, pornography. She looked through his dresser drawers but there was nothing hidden in the clothes. When Gwen was a girl she would hide important things in her drawer, but no one hid anything in drawers anymore. Nothing was the same anymore. It was odd to Gwen that, if Allen died tonight, and someone searched his belongings, they would not see any evidence that Allen had a biological child in the world. It just seemed odd, in a way.

She heard something—a door, a voice. She stepped out of the room and heard a door shut and clear laughter. She should have known Allen was not at his mothers. She did know. This was not surprising. She quickly hit the bedroom light and stepped into the closet and pulled the sliding door almost shut. In the pitch black she stepped on some paper and it crackled and she tripped on something solid and fell against the wall. She stopped breathing and listened. The TV was on. They had turned the TV on and probably didn't hear the thump in the closet. She stood in the pitch black and waited, not moving at all. She didn't have her watch on and had left her phone in the car. She probably waited ten full minutes.

The bedroom light popped on, and a line of light seeped through the crack in the closet door. "I know," a voice said. It was a girl, a woman, and the woman called loudly back to the other room, "Is that weird?" She laughed. It wasn't a voice Gwen recognized. She sounded particularly young, college-age maybe. "I'll shower real quick and then we can leave, OK?"

Allen said "Yeah" from the next room.

Through the closet wall Gwen heard the shower start up, and moments later the steady stream of water being interrupted by a body. Gwen leaned forward and peered through the crack in the folded closet door, keeping her breath soft. She heard Allen's voice outside the bedroom. Then Allen walked in. He was on the phone.

"Shit, well, I thought we could handle this like adults," he said. He took a deep breath and paused. "That's yours, this is mine...no...I know you did, Brynne. I'm reading the statement in my hand. I know for a fact you did. Sixteen hundred dollars.

Now I have to move around a bunch of money to pay the mortgage on your fucking house. Not my house, your house. You hear me?" he said, and waited for a response.

Gwen kept still. She held her breath. Somehow it was all so funny. She felt like she could bust out laughing any second, but the laughter stayed just in her throat. It was like being a little kid and playing hide-and-seek with your best friends, the ones you loved and relied on. Even so close, five feet away, your friends didn't know you were hiding there. They couldn't sense you. The anticipation, the expectation, the knowledge that people didn't know where you were or what you were thinking or when you were going to act. The truth that no one really knows you.