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The University of Southern Mississippi

DREAMERS: STORIES

by

Eddie Wayne Malone

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

August 2014

ABSTRACT

DREAMERS: STORIES

by Eddie Malone

August 2014

The short stories in *Dreamers* explore American masculinity in the twenty-first century. They also examine and complicate Asian-American identity at a time when decades-old stereotypes persist in the culture. In the title story, a war veteran returns home from Afghanistan to find an American landscape that has the feel and texture of a terrible dream. In other stories, men fixate not on women but on each other. In “Still Life,” the middle-aged main character is preoccupied with a friend who died over fifteen years ago. The main character in “At War with the Insects” pursues a man who was both persecutor and liberator at the lowest point in his life. Power and dominance are themes that surface in “From the Archive.” In the story, a visit to a childhood friend turns sinister as one man tries to blackmail the other. In “James Choi,” a young man of Korean-American descent marvels at the sexual prowess of his best friend while searching for answers in the aftermath of his mysterious suicide. The final story in the collection presents the private journal of a high school senior a couple weeks before prom. The Korean-American narrator of “The Great Unknown” is less concerned about prom than a friend whom he believes has the makings of another Seung-Hui Cho, the notorious architect of the mass murder at Virginia Tech in 2007.

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A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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INTRODUCTION

My aunt's husband Jim was a Vietnam veteran who served two tours of duty as a helicopter machine gunner. The family called him "Shorty" since he wasn't very tall. In a state known for its laconic men, Shorty was a band apart. He talked slowly, if at all, and had this hangdog face with puffy bags beneath the eyes. Actually, they were more like pouches of flesh than bags. My uncle always looked half-asleep, and he had these large lips that one family member in private referred to as "nigger lips."

On his return from the war, Shorty didn't let the fact of having a young wife and infant son keep him from the nightlife. According to my mother, my aunt would call in the middle of the night, frantic about Shorty who hadn't come home. My father would say reassuring things to his sister before getting out of bed. Then my parents would leave the house to look for my uncle. They knew where to find him: in one of Fort Worth's honky tonks, on a stool with beer in hand. Often there was a woman beside him. You wouldn't know it by looking at him, but Shorty was a lady's man.

My parents would try to reason with him. It was a weeknight. He had work the next day. His wife was worried sick. Shorty's hangdog face was unmoved, but his voice struck a note of resistance. "Can't a working man enjoy a goddamn beer?" he said.

Sometimes Shorty got off the stool, hitched his Levis and walked out of the bar. Other times, he just sat there, immune to reason.

As you can imagine, the marriage didn't last. But that didn't mean Shorty was cut off from the family. He was still my cousin's father. Shorty would show up to my grandparents' house on Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. He would eat at the adults' table, chewing slowly, never saying much. Then he would go out to the backyard for a

smoke.

Shorty was happy to exist on the periphery of things, but in middle age he found himself embroiled in controversy. By this time, Shorty was remarried with a 12-year-old stepdaughter. My aunt didn't relish telling the story in spite of her history with the man, her ex-husband. It pained her because, after all, Shorty was her only child's father. Still, there was lunatic energy in her voice, the kind produced by a sordid tale.

I was in my early twenties and in general didn't give a damn about anyone's story but my own. This one grabbed my attention.

At my grandparents' house, after dinner, my aunt said that Shorty had been arrested on charges of child molestation. He was due in court soon.

According to Shorty, he was at home one night, his wife at work. The stepdaughter was trying on a new pair of jeans and wanted his opinion. She walked across the living room to where he was sitting in his recliner. She spun around in front of him. Then he sat up and ran his finger along the waistband to see how the jeans fit.

According to Shorty, this was the sum total of what happened.

The stepdaughter took offense and fled to her grandparents' house, a few streets away.

The next day, the police picked up Shorty. A lawyer was hired.

A few months later, I got an update. The lawyer had advised Shorty to accept a plea bargain. As part of the deal, my uncle would avoid jail time. But he would have to register as a sex offender in Texas for the rest of his life.

Of course, Shorty's second marriage fell apart. He moved in with his son.

Years passed. I wasn't living in Texas anymore. I was in Los Angeles, trapped in

the corporate world. One day, bored at work, I was in my cube when Shorty popped into my head. A moment later, I was on Google typing the words “Texas sex offender list.”

It only took a few minutes to find Shorty’s profile.

There was the familiar hangdog face. His hair thick but fully gray. His eyes were barely open.

I browsed the profiles of other offenders. Like a baseball card, each profile provided physical stats plus a photo. You scrolled down to discover the crimes.

Indecency with a Child Sexual Contact. Victim Sex: Female. Victim Age: 9. Sodomy.

Victim Sex: Female. Victim Age: 5. Aggravated Sexual Assault of a Child. Victim Sex: Female. Victim Age: 13.

A few months ago, I started writing a new novel with three point-of-view characters. One of these characters was based on Shorty.

In the novel he’s been transformed. He’s no longer a man of few words. In fact, language serves him well. The character has an electromagnetic charge, which attracts people. He has this aura. But he’s not exactly a pillar of society. He has a reputation in the lower-middle-class suburb where he lives. Ten years before, the man was a suspect in the disappearance of two local girls, aged 8 and 10. They were never found.

In the novel, another young girl disappears. Fingers point in the man’s direction.

The man’s teenage nephew, another point-of-view character, becomes fascinated by his uncle. He can’t stop thinking about the rumors. He wonders if they are true. He spends more and more time with his uncle. The nephew starts hoping the rumors are true.

**

Flannery O'Connor argues in *Mystery and Manners* that fiction should be both "canny and uncanny" (79). It should braid together the realities of life with the mysteries of existence. She refers to Joseph Conrad whose "aim as a fiction writer was to render the highest possible justice to the visible universe" (80). According to O'Connor, Conrad was interested in the visible universe because it "suggested an invisible one" (80). Therefore, fiction presents the known and unknown in a dialectic that proves irresistible to the reader. The writer shows us a fictional world that resembles our own. We recognize facets of this fictional world as belonging to the material world we navigate each day. But at the same time the world on the page feels distinct: mysterious and yet charged with meaning.

The successful writer is obligated to create a world that feels tangible and alive: a visible world that the reader can "see." But he or she is also obligated to create a world that signifies. According to O'Connor, the writer's approach to this unique, two-headed problem must involve showing rather than telling. In other words, he or she must provide a dramatic action that evokes meaning. The story doesn't just make us see; it makes us feel. The thing we feel is that invisible world that contains the mysteries of existence.

O'Connor's thoughts on the canny and uncanny can be illustrated by looking at her classic short story "Good Country People." In the story, Hulga has a physical disability: she wears a prosthetic in place of a leg lost in childhood. She is an atheist and holder of a Ph.D. in philosophy. One day, Hulga is visited by Manley Pointer, a travelling Bible salesman, who appears to be an innocent. But soon Pointer demonstrates the exact opposite. On a date, he attempts to seduce Hulga with his cache of whiskey, condoms and sex cards. After she snubs him, Pointer confesses that he's an atheist as well as an avid

collector of prostheses. Then he steals her prosthetic leg.

O'Connor argues that the leg pulls double duty in the story:

If you want to say that the wooden leg is a symbol, you can say that. But it is a wooden leg first, and as a wooden leg it is absolutely necessary to the story. It has its place on the literal level of the story, but it operates in depth as well as on the surface. It increases the story in every direction, and this is essentially the way a story escapes being short. (*Mystery* 99-100)

If you look at it from one angle, the leg is just a leg. It's part of the physical architecture of the story. Looked at from another angle, the leg elicits a non-literal meaning. At the end of the story, Hulga is newly born as someone who both literally and metaphorically lacks a leg to stand on. Bolstered by her Ph.D., she once believed herself an authority on humanity. The encounter with Pointer proves her wrong.

The wooden leg isn't the only thing that signifies in the story. Pointer himself represents the canny and the uncanny. At first an innocent, he transforms into a con man and evildoer. There is the public face he shows to people like Hulga's mother. Then there's the hidden self that emerges only amid certain circumstances, amid certain people. The reader gets to "see" Pointer's dual nature. He's nice and charming. He's also predatory. Yet a full understanding of the character remains out of reach. Why does he collect prostheses once owned by the disabled? What is the attraction? How did he get this way? Things become known. Other things remain unknown. The canny and uncanny live within a single human being.

In *Mystery and Manners*, O'Connor suggests that fiction relies on characters like Pointer. In an anecdote, she tells of a neighbor to whom she sent some stories. The neighbor's laconic praise is telling:

A story always involves, in a dramatic way, the mystery of personality. I lent some stories to a country lady who lives down the road from me, and when she returned them, she said, "Well, them stories just gone and shown you how some folks *would* do," and I thought to myself that that was right; when you write stories, you have to be content to start exactly there—showing how some specific folks *will* do, *will* do in spite of everything. (90)

"The mystery of personality" is a phrase that resonates. It seems to gesture toward the unpredictable and irrational in humanity. The reasonable and self-righteous complain about people like Pointer who go around hurting others. They're mystified when it happens. But some people just don't respond to reason or "righteousness." O'Connor's country lady understands this. She proves sharper on humanity than Hulga. Some folks *will* do in spite of sense and morality and thousands of years of "civilization."

I find such folks compelling. My fiction is populated with characters evoking "the mystery of personality." Such characters exemplify struggle. They are in conflict with others or society in general. Often, the struggle is within. As O'Connor argues, these embattled characters are indispensable. The drama in a story depends on them.

In my story "Dreamers," the war veteran narrator, on returning home from Afghanistan, plans to reunite with his girlfriend in Indiana. He heads to Los Angeles instead, reuniting unexpectedly with a buddy from the war. In the beginning of the story,

the narrator appears reliable and mentally stable. But that changes as he describes the way he feels: as if he's literally dissolving. Then it's revealed that he was wounded in the war; presumably, he suffered a traumatic brain injury. The final sign of his mental instability is his decision to join his war buddy in a jewelry heist, alongside some twenty-something misfits.

Like Pointer, the narrator in "Dreamers" is a "personality" whose complexity gradually manifests itself. He's recognizable and even relatable. Sigmund Freud argues that the uncanny is tied to the familiar—a moment of recognition—rather than the alien. When a person encounters her "double" in a moment of self-recognition, the uncanny is produced:

These themes are all concerned with the idea of a "double" in every shape and degree, with persons, therefore, who are to be considered identical by reason of looking alike; Hoffman accentuates this relation by transferring mental processes from the one person to the other—what we should call telepathy—so that the one possesses knowledge, feeling and experience in common with the other, identifies himself with another person, so that his self becomes confounded, or the foreign self is substituted for his own—in other words, by doubling, dividing and interchanging the self. And finally there is the constant recurrence of similar situations, a same face, or character-trait, or twist of fortune, or a same crime or even a same name recurring throughout several consecutive generations. (425)

Of course, Freud is talking about real-life moments of the uncanny. But we can extend his thesis and apply it to fiction. A kind of doubling occurs if the writer does her job

correctly: the reader sees herself in at least one of the characters, often the protagonist. The reader shares with the character a trait or empathizes with a scenario, conflict, or set of circumstances. In other words, the reader becomes engrossed, which is what the writer wants.

With “Dreamers,” it’s my hope that the reader to some extent sees herself in the narrator’s plight. After the war, he is lost. His wandering takes place in a physical sense. More important to the drama of the story, he wanders psychologically as well. Don’t we all do this? We avoid the people and circumstances that could save us. We jump instead into the void.

So hopefully the reader is drawn to the narrator in some way. He’s knowable. But at the same time, over the course of the story, I would argue that the narrator becomes inexplicable, out of reach. True, the reader is given access to a number of his obsessions: his war memories, his feeling of unreality, and his relationship with his girlfriend. But you know intuitively that there’s more. A galaxy of thoughts and emotions. The drama of the story has to be so compelling that the reader wants access to this galaxy. The reader wants to know more. In her depiction of a compelling character, the good fiction writer shows restraint. She knows the power of mystery. So the writer doesn’t disclose all and probably doesn’t even know what that all is. To the writer as well, the character is an enigma. Like O’Connor, the writer understands that life is a blend of the canny and uncanny. It presents us with the visible, which we navigate on a daily basis. But we also feel that invisible world, containing the mysteries of existence. The reader wants to see this dialectic reflected in fiction.

A number of characters in this story collection rank as compelling enigmas to me. In “James Choi,” I want to know why the titular character committed suicide. I want to become familiar with that dark corner of his mind that spread until it was like a cancer, and there was no way back. When I think about the narrator in “At War with the Insects,” I wonder about the wrinkle in his brain that keeps placing him on the destructive path. Why can’t he be happy? Why does he want to be dead? In “Still Life,” why can’t the narrator let go of Greg, dead for fifteen years? Why is it that his feelings about the guy keep changing?

As I work on my novel, the character based on my uncle Shorty comes alive on the page and he’s not the answer to anything but, rather, a riddle in the flesh. Is he really a killer of children? What made him that way? Can it even be explained? What does it mean to be a killer, if anything at all?

And the ultimate question: if he’s a killer, why does he do it?

I can hear O’Connor’s country lady in the back of my mind: some people just *will* do. In spite of everything.

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DREAMERS

At the bus depot in Los Angeles, I switched buses and rode to the West Side because I wanted to see the ocean. The war was done with me, and I had no master plan.

The whole trip I'd been hearing a Van Morrison song in my head, the one Cass loved, and feeling guilty for having left. For having never arrived. I thought that once I got my hands on paper I'd write her that letter. The one I promised.

I started composing the letter in Afghanistan. It was in my head, never on paper. I was going to tell her about the time Jericho sneaked out to the neighboring village and stole a goat. It was a ballsy move, he could have been killed, but Jericho got his goat, so to speak, which we roasted that night. The story didn't end there. The next day, a village elder with a pointy red beard showed up, and of course no one confessed. Jericho went to the lieutenant who was listening to the village elder and said, "Mountain lion. Maybe it was a mountain lion."

**

In Venice, I walked down Ocean Front Walk with my duffel bag, the smell of incense floating on the air. A black guy on roller skates, wearing jean shorts and a turquoise tank top, glided past me as if he'd just arrived from 1986. A dance crew with boom box had attracted a crowd, and I watched a boy at work, his eye on the purses and wallets of tourists. I was scruffy with a few days' worth of beard, but I was still surprised to find the cops staring at me. I didn't feel like someone who would register on anyone's radar. The cops stood by patrol cars parked on the walkway and it would have made an interesting postcard: their grim faces against a backdrop of palm trees, sand and ocean.

My first day back in Southern California—I'd grown up there—and I napped on the beach, went for a swim. I bought a slice of pizza. The sun dropped until the sky around it turned pink and red, and I went into a kind of trance. Coming out of it, I found a dark world. I walked toward the cluster of shops, restaurants and bars on Washington Boulevard near the boardwalk. Earlier, I'd spotted an Italian restaurant that I wanted to try.

They sat on the sidewalk in front of a souvenir shop that had closed for the day. They were street kids, ruffians. I say kids but they were probably in their early twenties, just a few years younger than me. One kid had greasy black hair beneath a ball cap and wore a black jean jacket with the sleeves ripped off. The jacket was decorated with buttons with smart-ass sayings and the names of his favorite bands. He held a cardboard sign that said, "At Least Were Not Your Kids." The girl was overweight with a black Mohawk and wore a black wife-beater. Around her waist was tied a pink sweater. I passed them without a thought. They were a dime a dozen in Venice, but then I heard my name called out. I paused for a second then started walking again. The voice said my name again, louder. I turned around and looked at the kids and it was harder to see. The shadows around them were suddenly deeper.

"I thought you was deaf for a second," the voice said.

I saw a third person in that group. Somehow I'd missed him before. He was older than the kids and bald. I knew him but couldn't place him, and he read my mind.

"What's wrong with your brain, son?" he said. "It's Red."

It couldn't be. I pictured him in the Afghan mountains with his dark hair and Oakleys. Back then he smiled at me, his teeth coated with blood. Then he disappeared over a slope of rock and I never saw him again.

I walked toward the shadows where he was hanging out with these kids and I didn't have a million questions. Those would come later. Right then I was stunned and crazy happy to see him. We embraced. Red felt thin in my arms, less of a man in a physical sense. He used to be thick with muscle, having played football at Mississippi State, and was always talking about some physical challenge he wanted to take up. He wanted to try an ultramarathon or enter a strongman competition.

"What the fuck are you doin' out here?" he asked.

"I thought I'd try acting," I said.

"Bullshit. You've become a pussy liberal."

"What are you doing here?"

"I have a new unit," Red said and gestured with an arm toward the street urchins. "We ship out soon. They are killing machines."

I invited him to dinner, but Red couldn't leave his unit behind. After a moment, I said they could come along; dinner was on me.

I walked side by side with Red while the kids strutted in front of us. At the restaurant, the hostess looked at our group skeptically. Red stepped ahead of me and said, "Ma'am, can't you find a table for a war hero and his humble friends?"

Our waiter brought a couple baskets of fresh garlic rolls, but I didn't get a single roll from the first batch. The kids snatched them all up in seconds, and I wondered if it wasn't their first food of the day. The girl poured glasses of wine from the huge jug on

the table and was kind enough to pass me a glass. Red made a toast, with the kids abstaining. They were too busy chugging and eating. “To our comrades in arms, both living and dead,” he said.

I took a sip. Funnily enough, since joining the Army I hadn’t been much of a drinker.

“I didn’t recognize you,” I said.

“No shit you didn’t. That really hurt.”

“I thought you were dead.”

“Do I look dead to you?”

He wasn’t exactly virile, but I couldn’t say that. It seemed absurd that a grown-ass war vet was hanging out with street kids. How could drugs not be involved?

“Where’s your family?” I asked.

“They’re at home,” Red said.

“Mississippi?”

“Yeah. Where’s Cass?”

“Indiana.”

“How’s she doin’?”

“She’s good.”

“Don’t tell me she wanted nothin’ to do with California. It’s goddamn beautiful here.”

“She couldn’t get away from school,” I lied.

“There’s always a next time.”

I nodded.

“When are you going back home?” I asked.

“Don’t know. Triple Canopy wanted me in Iraq, but I’m done with all the shit. Let me introduce you to my new unit.”

The Mohawk girl was named Geena. She gave a solemn salute, munching on another garlic roll. The kid with the greasy black hair was called Sin, and I watched as he drained a fourth glass of wine, demanded another.

“Now I’m gonna tell you all about their lives,” Red said. “The tragedy of their lives. How they ended up on the streets and how I’m giving’em a shot at redemption.”

He looked all serious like he was about to pop a cap in someone’s ass. There was something reptilian about that look, which I’d seen in guys on their third or fourth tours. Now that Red was all skinny, he looked even more reptilian.

“No sob story here,” he said, grinning. “Just fine American youth.”

Red excused himself for the bathroom.

All at once, Geena and Sin paused in their gluttony to stare at me.

“So you’re some kind of hero,” Sin said. He smiled, his teeth purple from the wine.

“I’m no hero.”

“Red said you were.”

“He was kidding.”

“There’s no such thing as heroes,” Geena said.

“That’s some bullshit,” Sin said. “I know for a fact there’s heroes.”

He scooted his chair back, stood up then stood on his chair. “I’m a fucking hero!” he said. “I can fly!” He put his arms out like a plane.

“Get your dumb ass down,” Geena said. People were staring. A couple of them looked scared, as if this kid could go postal.

Back in his seat, Sin asked if I was joining the operation.

“What’s the operation?” I said.

“Don’t tell him about that,” Geena said.

“He’s a goddamn soldier. He can help us.”

“It’s none of his business.”

Red came back from the bathroom. He looked at Sin. “What stupid shit did you say while I was gone?”

“Nothing!” Sin said.

“What’s this operation you’re on?”

Red reacted as if I’d just shouted in a crowded library. He put a finger to lips, sat back down. He looked at the tables nearby but of course our neighbors were babbling away, no one listening.

“This is top secret shit,” he said.

“I told that idiot to shut his mouth,” Geena said.

“It’s okay,” Red said. Then he looked at me. “So you want in?”

They were planning to rob a jewelry store in downtown L.A. Downtown had garment, business and jewelry districts, and Red had singled out a store. The owner was a fat Jew who bought and sold gold jewelry. He was always on the premises. Based on their surveillance, he didn’t have any employees.

“So you plan to do this in broad daylight,” I said.

“Smash and grab. Like one of our raids. Just like old times.”

“Why?”

“For the fucking money, bro,” Sin said.

Red slapped him across the face as if swatting a fly.

“Shut the fuck up,” he said. In the next moment, he patted Sin’s cheek. It was affectionate, tinged with regret. Both cheeks were red because of the wine, but now on the left side was the mark of Red’s fingers.

“You in?”

“I don’t know about that,” I said.

Red shrugged, leaned back in his chair.

“Suit yourself.”

After we finished eating, I paid the bill. The kids grunted thanks after Red ordered them to do so. We went outside and everyone lit up smokes.

In front of closed shops, the homeless sat in clusters heckling the diners and bar hoppers crossing Washington Boulevard.

“What’re you up to now?” Red asked.

I lied and said I was seeing a friend in Culver City.

“Where are you staying tonight?” I said.

He turned toward the ocean and opened his arms.

“You’re sleeping on the beach.”

Red nodded.

“Why don’t you join us?” he said. “We’re gonna change the world.”

“I’ve changed the world enough.”

Red nodded then they walked away, toward the boardwalk. Geena tried to strut but was too tipsy. Sin made devil horns with his hand, headbanged the air and frightened a passerby.

“Flinch!” he shouted.

I imagined them sleeping on the beach. They were buried beneath the sand, with only their heads showing. They were like aliens resting in pods.

I went to a motel for the night.

**

In the morning, I found pens and a notepad on the nightstand, and I sat up in bed thinking of my letter to Cass. I wanted to tell her about the time that Smith and Barkley got caught together in the showers. The way guys talked about it, at the exclusion of all else, it was like the story of the year. The war faded to the background and what mattered most was the “faggots” in the shower. No one snitched. It would have been too embarrassing to bring up officially. The variations on the story were legion. One had Smith banging Barkley from behind. Others said it was the other way around. In one version, there was a passionate kiss. One night I was on guard duty with Ortiz, an ex gangbanger from East L.A., who claimed to be the lone witness. They were legion as well, the guys who saw it happen, but they were all alike in one sense, which I considered important. The so-called witnesses told the story with disgust on their faces.

Ortiz was different. He watched for half a minute as the two soldiers embraced beneath the spray of water. They did not move, much less kiss or fuck. They were like a statue, like something in a museum.

He said this with wonder in his voice, and I believed him.

**

A few days later, I met Red at a Venice bar. His recruits were missing, and I wondered if they'd left him. They seemed like drifters. Then Red talked about the operation, and I knew the kids were still around.

"We go in two days," he said. "The Jew locks up early on Fridays. He won't know what hit him."

Red had armed the kids with guns, which didn't sound like a good idea. But then none of it sounded like a good idea.

"What's the plan after that?" I asked.

"We're gonna move around. Maybe head up to Portland. You should come with us."

It was warm inside the bar and the sun was shining outside, but Red was bundled up in a cheap black sweatshirt with layers underneath. His baggy jeans looked like a handout from the Salvation Army. What's more, he stank like the homeless, and as we drank our beers and leaned on the bar, the bartender shunned us, standing several feet away.

"You look like shit," Red said.

"Thanks."

"This is what we fought for, man."

"What do you mean?"

"*This*. So we could sit here and drink our drinks. So we could go outside and walk the beach, look at the ocean."

"I could do this forever."

“Don’t be an ass.”

“None of this feels real.”

I held out my hand. I stared at it expecting it to dissolve. Then I touched my bottle of beer, which felt cold and solid enough. Still, I wasn’t convinced it was real.

“We should be back in the mountains,” I said and thought of the time we chased an Afghan rabbit through the valley. We were on patrol and he was either Taliban or working for them. But he moved like a rabbit, darting across the floor of that valley, from tree to tree. We would catch a glimpse of him, dressed in rags, but it was only ever a glimpse. We were desperate for contact after weeks of nothing, so we blindly chased. That’s how we ran into the ambush. Our retreat took hours.

“No more mountains,” Red said. “I don’t wanna see another goddamn mountain as long as I live.”

He started telling me a story. A couple weeks ago, he was walking the Promenade in Santa Monica on a busy Saturday afternoon. On the weekends, entertainers of all stripes performed along the Promenade, looking for donations and admirers. Probably all harbored dreams of being discovered. That day, the regulars were there: an acrobat and his young son, both clad in tight-fitting costumes. With their 80’s haircuts, they were likely immigrants from Eastern Europe. There was a breakdancing group with an old-school boom box as well as a folk-singing duo. Red loved the acrobats and thought of them often. He imagined a whole life for them. Of course, the boy didn’t go to school and didn’t speak English very well. The father was so focused on the purity of their art that he wouldn’t allow any distractions. As a result, they were isolated in a country that appreciated neither their art nor culture.

I told Red that he was an imposter. The old Red would never bother me with a story like this.

He was part of the crowd watching the acrobats when he noticed the guy with the Casio keyboard, setting up farther down the Promenade. The guy had a beard and glasses like a hipster. He didn't play familiar songs. He didn't sing. To Red, his keyboard sounded like music from outer space.

The occasional person or couple would stop for a second or two. They would make a funny face then walk away. His donation jar remained empty except for a few coins that were almost certainly contributed in the spirit of irony.

The Casio man was immersed in a task. So much of what we do is for other people. Red said that up to ninety percent of our behavior is directed at others. But we are most at peace when we act only for ourselves.

Red concluded that the Casio man was the happiest person on the Promenade. Happier than the acrobat and his son, the folk singers and the breakdancers. Definitely happier than the shoppers, hunting endlessly for shit they didn't need.

A week later, a wall of people stretched across the walkway. Not an unusual sight. Occasionally, the acts on the Promenade were so captivating that a huge audience would gather. Red broke through the wall to see what was happening. On the other side was a dead zone.

A man loped from one side of the walkway to the other, touching the glass at the Adidas store before turning around for Old Navy. He ran hunched over, his arms preternaturally long, scraping the ground.

Some in the crowd had taken out camera phones to record the act. Others looked horrified, a hand pressed to mouth.

The man's identity did not register at first. Red was used to seeing him upright, serene.

A cop appeared, making demands. The Casio man passed him by. The cop ran alongside threatening arrest. Still, he was ignored. Finally, the cop reached out, grabbed a long arm.

The scream was high-pitched: alien and animal at the same time. Red saw white fangs and bulbous eyes.

It was one of the most terrifying moments of Red's life.

The two men fell to the ground. As Red watched them struggle, he felt a kind of immersion. A removal from the world. Like combat.

Red walked away feeling light-headed. He could hardly breathe.

"I went and sat on a bench," he said.

"What happened to the guy?"

"Don't know. I'm guessin' they arrested him."

"Motherfuckers," I said.

"Motherfuckers."

I finished my beer and ordered another round. As he brought our drinks, I was sure the bartender held his breath.

I couldn't get the Casio man out of my head.

"He was happy, right?" I said.

"Who?"

“The guy on the keyboard.”

“He looked happy, man.”

“Then he wasn’t happy.”

“He was crazy,” Red said.

“They didn’t have to treat him like that.”

Red shrugged. “The shit I’ve seen.”

“What happened in the mountains?”

“I got shot.”

“I thought you were dead.”

“Do I look dead?”

I didn’t say anything.

“Why didn’t you visit me in the hospital?” I asked.

“I was convalescing myself.”

“And now you’re here.”

“And you’re here too.”

I couldn’t believe we were there.

**

How do you tell someone in a letter that you’re vanishing? It started on the plane back. I went to the bathroom and as I washed them my hands began to sparkle then break apart until at the last moment they were solid again.

In the airport, I played chicken with ordinary Americans. If they moved or ran into me, it meant that I was alive and all this was real. I held my breath for as long as I could, keeping my core tight—afraid that my body would go to pieces, float away.

I was supposed to drive the rental car to a college in Indiana where Cass was finishing her master's degree. Cass believed in me. Believed in the war. For ten months, she sent care packages, emailed daily. Cass the romantic sent letters too. I emailed her back, promising a letter in return. But after a while the letter felt like an impossible thing. The emails stopped. Not from her side. Cass was religious in her conviction, sending letters into the void. I believe in you, she wrote. I believe in this country. Do your best. Come back.

After my discharge from the hospital I finally wrote: The war is done with me.

I said I was coming her way.

But when the time came I drove south, out of Indiana, and kept going until Dallas where I turned in the car, got on a bus heading west.

In a perfect world, seeing Red would have grounded me.

Instead I realized that we were ghosts making only the faintest of impressions on the living.

**

In Venice, it was a beautiful spring day with a breeze coming off the ocean. After stopping at a café for breakfast and coffee, I headed toward the beach. During the walk, I thought about the assault. I'd buried it somehow, somewhere, for months.

The airstrikes were flashes of light followed by a cold, orange glow. We moved on the insurgent camp as it burned. The camp was nothing sophisticated or elaborate. Nothing ever was in this country. The crude shelters had been built into the side of the mountain. The insurgents were outside scrambling, dazed from the airstrikes. From a safe distance, we took them out: a turkey shoot.

In the morning, we picked over the camp. The dead were Arab or Chechen fighters. We counted upwards of fifty.

The survivors came out of underground bunkers like a wave of cockroaches. Armed with AKs and RPGs, they took us by surprise and pushed us back. I took a position behind an outcropping of rock, firing with my M4, but then got pinned down. With my back to the rocks, I looked to my right and saw Red about fifty meters away. He was behind a wide tree with roots that spiraled out of the ground like the tentacles of an octopus. The enemy found him and returned fire. Bullets sprayed around his position. Red looked my way and our eyes met. He smiled, his teeth coated in blood. Then he squirmed onto his belly, set his M4 on the spiraling tree roots and fired a burst. A moment later he got up, scrambled away from the tree and up a slope of rock, looking for higher ground. He vanished.

I didn't see him again till Venice. I thought he was dead.

A rocket slammed into the rock I was using as cover. I was thrown forward, the last thing I remember.

In the hospital, I told the doctors I felt fine.

**

On Ocean Front Walk, it was relatively quiet. Just past the public bathrooms, I looked at the beach and saw them. Red was a hundred meters out leading his new outfit through a series of calisthenics. A couple of punk kids doing jumping jacks in the California sun. Pointing with his finger, Red ordered them to drop down for push-ups in the sand.

Once upon a time, I was going to marry Cass.

Then a poor motherfucker bleeds out from the neck. Trucks take flight, killing their pilots.

I was dissolving. By coincidence or destiny, Red and I had reunited in California. We'd both survived the war. Now we were robbing a jewelry store together.

When I walked up, Red looked at me with a skeletal grin. "Welcome to the operation," he said.

AT WAR WITH THE INSECTS

The other night, I was shocked to see you on TV. You had changed. Hair cut short. You were wearing a suit, asking if I'd been hurt in a car accident. The phone number of your law firm appeared at the bottom of the screen, and for a moment I thought to call—remember me? Once, you pointed a gun at my head and I thought: gone forever.

After seeing your commercial, I was so angry I couldn't sleep.

The next morning I looked up the address of your law firm.

**

Seven years ago, I was at a house in the suburbs. There was no furniture, just a couple of blackjack tables.

I was up a thousand and stayed that way, more or less, for a couple hours. The dealer kept looking at me funny, as if he couldn't figure something out. Maybe he thought I was Mexican and not Asian, like the other players. I was sure he wanted me to lose.

I started to lose. In twenty minutes, I was down to my last fifty-dollar bet. The dealer's two cards added up to fifteen. He should have busted. The odds were in my favor. But then he turned over the next card. Twenty-one.

You materialized out of a dark corner. We went outside where you gave me a cigarette. A couple minutes later, one of your heavies knocked it out of my mouth with a fist. As I tried to get up, he kicked me in the ribs. You loomed over me, long black hair hanging down. Dressed in an expensive suit, with a boyish face, you looked less Korean gangster than Korean pop star. Beyond your face was the night sky.

Outside, the Asians were quiet, smoking in the darkness.

“You have a week,” you whispered.

**

Near the end of that week, I visited my grandparents. Granny and Papa entered the nursing home at the same time. Both suffered from dementia and both had become unruly. Granny would leave the house and wander the neighborhood at all hours of the night. She would knock on people’s doors and accuse them of stealing her frying pan or ironing board or even her house. Meanwhile, Papa embodied the cranky old man, standing on his front lawn to yell at women, children and animals. Once he grabbed my stepmother’s hair and shook her like a rag doll, shouting a woman’s name no one recognized.

The nursing home was not even a mile from their house. All I had to do was cross the street, cut across an expanse of field behind the elementary school, and I was there.

They lived in a secure wing for “at-risk” patients. Visitors needed a security code to get in and out. That morning, a black nurse named Clara was my escort. She was thin, even statuesque, and said with a vaguely Caribbean accent, “They gonna be so happy to see you.”

We walked down the corridor, which smelled of piss. I held my breath, hoping that my grandparents’ room smelled clean or at least like mothballs, like their real home.

I refused to look inside the rooms we passed for fear of seeing something horrific, something I might not be able to forget.

Two old ladies guarded the entrance to my grandparents' room. One was in a wheelchair and wore a flowery pink nightgown. The other stood tall and wore a black helmet, like she played hockey. Both looked at nothing in particular.

"Excuse us ladies," Clara said as we squeezed past them.

The room was large, with a couple of hospital beds. A window looked out onto the parking lot. Granny's favorite reclining chair was in the corner. On the wall were framed pictures of the family, including my high school graduation photo. I was airbrushed and looked contemplative, with bad hair and my chin resting on a fist. Granny and Papa were both moving about the room. When they turned to look at me it felt like I'd been spotted by two complete strangers. I began to shake. But then Papa said, "It's Jesse Damon! Come on in!" And everything felt kind of normal. My grandmother kissed me on the cheek and Papa shook my hand. They looked the same, almost. Granny had lost weight. Papa looked thinner too, but only in the face. His paunch looked the same.

"Are you hungry?" Granny said.

I wasn't, but Granny thought I should eat. She stopped what she was doing—cleaning the floor with an invisible mop—then moved to a different part of the room to make me an invisible breakfast. Granny told Sambo, her Australian shepherd, to be patient; he'd get the scraps. Sambo had been dead for ten years. While Granny put my breakfast together, Papa flipped through an invisible newspaper then asked how school was going. Then he wondered aloud if I was going to college. "You know, they got openings down at the phone company," he said. "You could work with your daddy."

I'd been out of college for three years. Finally, I said I was thinking about the phone company.

**

Granny and Papa woke from naps. They wiped the sleep from their eyes then took turns in the bathroom. Granny sat in her recliner. Papa's lazy-boy was on the other side of the room, and he sat down too. They wanted to know how my mom was doing in L.A. I gave them an update on my sister. Then Papa talked about the golf course and all his distinguished buddies. One was a retired Air Force colonel, another a retired neurosurgeon. Then the room went quiet, Granny rocking in her chair. Eventually she got up and went to her invisible kitchen. Papa joined her and that's when Granny pulled out an invisible gun. Her liver-spotted hand was shaped like a pistol, which she pointed at her husband. Papa sank to one knee, his entire body shaking. Granny pressed her finger against his temple. "Please, Mama! Don't do it!" he said.

"You son-of-a-bitch," she said. "You ruined my life."

I'd never heard my grandmother curse before.

"It was a mistake," Papa said.

"You should go live with that whore."

"It's over. I promise."

"I should kill you. I should kill us all."

Déjà vu swept me. The scene was familiar because it was family lore. My father would have never told the story, but my mother did. Years ago, Granny caught Papa cheating with his secretary. One night, she got the family gun and threatened to shoot him. The children witnessed it all.

The next day, Papa fired the secretary.

At the nursing home, Granny pulled the trigger. “Bang,” she said and Papa collapsed to the floor. Then she put the gun to her temple and pulled the trigger again.

For a couple minutes, they both lay on the floor. I did not call for the nurse because I felt it was a family matter.

When Granny got up, she announced she was making fried catfish for dinner.

**

I drove to your office this morning. It’s more like a brick schoolhouse than a standard office building. Your firm is the only occupant. In seven years you’ve gone from hustler to lawyer. Some might argue there’s little difference between the two.

You were not the first to arrive. A young woman in a skirt and jacket. The receptionist or legal secretary. Then a guy in khakis and tucked-in shirt. A paralegal. Not a lawyer. Then a woman in a dark pants suit with martial stride. A lawyer for sure.

Then you pulled into the parking lot, driving a black Mercedes. You were the most spectacular of the bunch. Your hair is black, no hint of gray. The suit looked expensive, tailored to your body. Like a Korean JFK.

The face was serious, confident, even peaceful. And why not? Things have worked out. The wildness of youth a phase.

You came out for lunch at one o’clock, alone. No fast food joint or Chinese buffet. You drove to a health food store ten minutes away. There was a dining area outside. You sat with good posture in the sunshine with a salad and large bottle of water. You wore sunglasses. No book on the table. No newspaper or case file to study. I wanted to know what you were thinking.

Since that day years ago, have you thought of me?

**

Papa was a Harley enthusiast. With his buddies, he rode all over the country and beyond. He would take my sister and me on Sunday rides, and I remember standing very still as he pulled tight the straps of my helmet. I would wrap my arms around his thick belly, and we would ride around town, feeling like outlaws.

As a teenager, I would show up for dinner and Papa would hold court. One of the things he talked about was his time in the service. He was a signalman in the Navy and served on the U.S.S. *Missouri* where the Japanese signed their unconditional surrender. During the Battle of Okinawa, he kept a running tally of the Japanese civilians that committed suicide by jumping off the cliffs. They'd been told that the American invaders would systematically rape and pillage. Papa showed me the old leather-bound journal where he kept his notes on the Japanese suicides. The paper was yellowed and brittle and his scrawl was hard to make out, but one of the lines said, "Family of nips took a swan dive today."

Talk usually turned to my mother. By this time, my parents had divorced, my immigrant mother trading Fort Worth for Los Angeles, which had the highest concentration of Koreans outside of Seoul. She was an entrepreneur and wanted to make it big. My father was a worker, a cog in the machine, and he was fine with that.

My sister and I were afraid of a big move. We stayed in Texas.

Papa slammed my mother for her greed. She could have made a nice life for herself if she'd stayed with my father, with us. But she wanted too much. According to my grandfather, she would regret leaving her family.

Granny would chime in. She wasn't a talker. But she was vocal when it came to my mother. "It's not all about money," she would say. "You kids needed a mother. Especially your sister. A girl needs her mama."

Granny's blue eyes would narrow, get cold and mean.

I listened to this without objection.

It wasn't always serious at the dinner table. There was plenty of laughter too. Papa made fun of everyone, and sometimes it was good-natured but other times it got nasty. He told us about my mother's first attempts at learning English. My uncle, a teenager at the time, acted as a kind of tutor but everything he told her was wrong. He held up a pencil and called it a penis. He pointed at a tree and called it a motherfucker, keeping a straight face. When my mother figured it out, she approached my uncle and gestured toward my grandparents' backyard. She led him outside where she punched him in the face, wrestled him to the ground. Barely a hundred pounds, my mother an Asian storm.

My grandfather loved to tell that story.

But he would also complain about Korean culture. He still struggled to understand my mother's English because of her thick accent, and he hated the smell of kimchi. He couldn't respect a society that ate dogs.

The gooks are a strange people, he said. "But we love you and your sister," Papa would add with a grin. "You're our little gookers."

**

Just out of college, I changed my mind about L.A. I went to live with my mother.

One day, she was out front tending her plants when a van pulled up to the curb. Two Korean men got out of the van and walked up her driveway. They were burly, looked like twins in fact. Their faces were young, stuck in adolescence. They said hello in Korean, in the most respectful way, then they picked up my petite mother and carried her to the van.

I can see it now, my mother struggling, her legs kicking at the air.

Inside the van was a Korean man with a pompadour. His name was Mr. Pak.

They took my mother for a ride. In English, my mother called them bastards and said they'd made a grave mistake. Mr. Pak laughed, cigarette smoke spilling from his mouth. He addressed my mother as "Harmony," which means grandmother in Korean. This only made things worse, for my mother felt perpetually young. "We're not going to hurt you," Mr. Pak said.

"What's this about?" my mother asked.

"This is about your son."

"Jesse?"

"Yes."

Mr. Pak told her that I owed ten thousand dollars. "I don't believe you," she said.

"Of course you don't."

A meeting was arranged. Then Mr. Pak delivered my mother back home safe.

In her garage, she smoked compulsively then slapped me across the face, begging for the truth.

I pled my innocence. "I have no idea what they're talking about," I said.

The interrogation continued for over an hour, my story never changing. I acted like a man who'd been wrongfully accused. The next day, we drove to a coffee shop in Koreatown. When my mother reached to open the glass door, I grabbed her shoulder. Past the glass I could see Mr. Pak and the Korean twins at a table in the corner.

"I'm sorry," I said.

**

Walking down the corridor, I held my breath. I passed the lady with the hockey helmet. Clara had given me the security code, and I used it to get out of the ward. In the foyer, I tried to breathe again. It smelled like someone had taken a piss.

Outside, the sun was low in the sky. It felt close, like it wanted to be touched. I put my hand out to feel it.

I turned my phone back on. A dozen new messages.

Jesse, it's you-know-who. I want my money.

I guess you've fallen off the face of the earth. I guess that means your debt is cancelled. Wrong, motherfucker.

Hey faggot. I want my fucking money. I'm coming to find you.

You low-life gambling piece of shit. I'm gettin' my money or I'm takin' my pound of flesh.

**

Today was my third time back to see you. While you worked, I listened to the radio. Mostly talk radio. I turned up the voices. Before lunch, a rent-a-cop coasted through the parking lot, looking my way. He left but to be safe I spent the afternoon

driving around. I ate at McDonald's then made my way back to your office for quitting time. The parking lot emptied but your car stayed. Again, the last to leave.

As I followed you home, it was completely dark. The commute was less than a half hour. I thought you might live in a gated community, and I was relieved to find that wasn't the case. Nonetheless, the neighborhood is tranquil, upscale. Your house is dark brick, two stories. The lawn is small but tidy, with traces of summer green. The Mercedes stayed outside in the driveway. You went through the front door and did not look tired.

I stayed next to the curb thinking of your life inside. You might have a wife. There was another car in the driveway: a new-looking Camry. You might have a son or daughter or both.

Is your wife Korean?

If I rang the doorbell, what would your eyes say?

**

Oozing charm, my grandfather asked Clara if he could have dinner with the retired "crew." Clara acted dubious at first. Then she gave her permission.

Papa invited me to join, but I wasn't hungry.

With Papa away, I sat in Granny's recliner. Granny was sitting up in bed, eyes closed. Her lips moved and she mumbled things.

I dozed a little. When I woke up, Granny was staring at me. She looked different, her face more gaunt. The hanging flap of skin on her neck was pink and angry-looking, like something on a lizard. There was a fuzzy dark growth high on her cheekbone. I'd somehow missed it before.

Granny's eyes were an electric blue.

"Jesse Damon," she said. "Come here please."

I left the recliner and sat in a chair by the bed.

"There's nothing more that can be done for you," Granny said.

**

When Papa returned from dinner, he was smiling. Then he saw me.

He clutched at his chest and backed up against the wall, eyes widening. I thought he was having a heart attack. Then Papa came off the wall and with conviction pointed a trembling finger at me.

"It's a goddam nip," he said. "What do I do? What do I do?"

He went to the corner and his whole body was shaking. I stood up not knowing what to do with myself. I looked at Granny but her eyes were closed. She was mumbling again.

In the corner, Papa opened up an invisible cabinet and pulled out an arsenal of guns, which he stockpiled against the wall. Then for a minute he made sure that each one was loaded, slamming a clip into what was probably a .45. He pumped a cartridge into an invisible shotgun. Then he turned his attention to me. He flung himself against the wall again. "You're big for a nip!" he said.

I was crying by this point.

Papa shouldered the shotgun. Or it could have been a semiautomatic rifle.

I was still crying when I came around the bed to face him. He pointed the shotgun and I pointed my own invisible weapon. I pretended to shoot my grandfather in

the chest, but he slid down the wall holding his gut. As I hurried past he said, “You got me you dirty rotten nip. I always knew you’d get me.”

**

In the corridor, three nurses surrounded a body on the floor. The body belonged to the woman with the hockey helmet. Now she wasn’t wearing it. Instead, she had a halo of blood growing larger by the second. Her eyes blinked uncontrollably and she gasped for air like a fish out of water.

I screamed at the nurses to do something.

The old woman in the wheelchair was on the periphery. She looked calm, with the black helmet in her lap.

**

I left the nursing home and drove back to my apartment not caring what happened to me.

In my apartment, I turned on the TV. I hadn’t eaten all day, so I scrambled eggs and made toast. A knock came at the door. I could have refused to answer, but I let you in. One of your heavies hit me in the face. As I held my jaw, another one threw me to the ground where they both roughed me up.

“Where’s my money, cocksucker?” you said.

I shook my head.

They put me in the backseat of a BMW X5, forcing me to lie on the floor. Your heavies used my back and legs as a footrest.

From the driver’s seat, you asked if I’d ever been to East Texas.

I lied and said no.

**

“I know this place,” I said. It was just past dawn and everything was ashen except for these shafts of sunlight, which came through the towering cypress trees. There was a body of water to my right, its surface covered by green scum or algae, and I saw lily pads too. The trees didn’t stop at the water’s edge. They stood out there in the water, looking thick and gray and ancient.

I was sure I’d been there as a boy. My father brought me along on a fishing trip. In the early morning, we fished for bass and crappie, and he told me about the alligator gar. The largest one ever caught was eight feet long and over three hundred pounds. That weekend, I didn’t imagine an alligator rising from the water to grab my leg. I saw an alligator gar instead.

We didn’t catch a thing. Mostly my father drank beer and we milled about the campsite. At night, my father told me about mossy, humanoid creatures that rose from the depths of the lake to feast on campers. He never laughed and said it was a joke. I didn’t sleep for two nights straight.

On Sunday, things took a dramatic turn. I was swatting a tree with a fallen branch, and I failed to notice the wasp nest above me. My father saw the angry wasps circling overhead and he ran over, grabbed me, then tossed me out of the way. My feelings were hurt as I hit the ground. I watched my father go to war with the insects. It was funny the way he swatted at them, like he was part of some African tribal dance.

As we hurried to strike camp, my father’s face and arms swelled from the stings. We were speeding toward the nearest hospital when the fear took hold. My father looked

like one of the beasts in his stories, his face a red balloon with a wispy mustache. His arms were sausages.

I didn't want to be near him and was glad when he disappeared. When he finally emerged from an ER room, he was still puffy in the face.

We didn't talk on the drive home.

**

The white guy looked like a football player. He was maybe a couple years out of high school. In the end, he would be stocky but have a gut too. My other assailant was Korean: well-fed, like an Iowa farm boy.

You wore a black trench coat that reminded me of Columbine.

In the swamp, it started to mist.

"I can get the money," I said.

"You've had a week," you replied.

"I just need a couple more days."

I looked across the water. There was something like Spanish moss hanging from the trees. A big white bird (an egret?) walked through the grass on the opposite shore.

"You're going to kill me," I said.

"What choice do I have?"

Seeing the gun, I started to march in front of them. I'd take a few steps, pivot and go in the other direction. At the same time, my arms flailed. I was a philosopher on speed, wrestling with a problem.

You and your heavies laughed. As if I were putting on a show.

The gun was a nine-millimeter. Jet black. It was in your hand.

I kneeled in front of you, hands clasped. I think I begged, cried.

It got quiet, no more laughter: killing a serious thing. The gun was in my face.

Your face was terrible because there was nothing in it. Flat like sand. I closed my eyes.

Hands scooped beneath my armpits, and I was carried to the water's edge. They dunked my head repeatedly, a junior high prank.

Then you left me in the swamp.

**

I was able to hitchhike most of the way home. A man in a truck who could have been my father stopped for me. A working-class hero. My hair was wet and I couldn't stop shaking. The man rolled up the windows and turned on the heat, though it was spring. I kept stealing glances at his face. In my state, I couldn't be sure of anything. Dad, we're in East Texas again. How did you know I needed saving?

The driver must have thought I was out of my mind.

I felt better the longer we were on the road. I warmed up. He cracked the windows again and the wind came through. The wind was so loud we couldn't talk. I started grinning. I was alive. How many people come that close to death and survive?

I thought you'd come back for the money, but you didn't show. No phone calls or texts. No visit in the middle of the night. You disappeared. A miracle.

My grandparents died about six months later. Within days of each other.

The world turned in my favor. I entered a program for addicts. Then I got a decent job in publicity and marketing at a large company. We created software for tax and accounting professionals. Located in a Dallas skyscraper, our office was quiet with

brown carpets. The hallways were long and empty, and you could hear the soft breathing of the air or heat, depending on the season.

At work, I was lodged in a place outside of time.

I didn't think of you for years.

**

I call in sick to work again. Then I drive to your office. Today is the day. *Have you been hurt in an accident?*

When you pull in, I open the car door and step out. The door stays open and I stand there like a beacon. You are slumming it, driving the Camry. How many black and navy suits do you own? There is no eye contact. You don't even look my way. I am rooted to the spot. You pass through the office door holding a briefcase and umbrella. Why bother with an umbrella?

It looks set to rain.

I get back in the car, my mouth dry. Nothing to eat or drink in twelve hours. Maybe longer. Not once do I have to piss the whole morning. The gray clouds shift above. Their fingers crawl across the sky.

You are out again at two for lunch. I don't follow. Instead I lower the driver's seat and nap. You have already returned when I wake up, feeling ancient and stiff. Enormously tired in spite of the nap.

You surprise me. It's still daylight when you skip out of the office, glancing once at the sky. For a second, I see my car not starting. I've been sitting here all day. There is no problem with the car and I follow, directly behind. I want you to see me in the rearview mirror. Do a double take. Remember my face. I watch for a tilt of the head, an

angling of the eyes. But you show no awareness of the things around you, looking straight ahead.

The Mercedes is not in the driveway. I think of pulling in next to you but instead park at the curb. There is no hesitation this time. No stage fright. The adrenaline makes me limber and alive.

Running up the driveway, I have only one question.

Why didn't you shoot?

STILL LIFE

The day Greg died was like any other. It started out at his parents' house where we picked up something, I can't remember what. Greg's older sister Janine and her knuckle-headed fiancé were there. Janine met Roy online and that summer we liked to torture him. Roy was from a small village in England and looked like Alfred E. Neuman from *Mad* magazine. After the couple's romance blossomed, Roy left England for Texas. The couple lived with Greg's parents. They were both unemployed.

It was already a hundred degrees outside. "Bloody hell," Roy said, shaking his head at the living room window, which was curtained, as if a dragon lay beyond it. He refused to leave the house.

"Take my sister to England," Greg said. "It's cooler there. Do my family a favor."

"You shouldn't talk that way about your sister," Roy said.

Janine walked into the living room. It was past noon but she was still in her pajamas. "Hey assholes, leave my fiancé alone," she said.

"We were talking about your future ginger children," Greg said.

Roy paced the room. He wagged a finger at us. "Don't talk about my future children, you cunts."

"Don't talk about our children," Janine said.

Greg had walked with a cane ever since the surgery to remove the tumor in his knee. The top of the cane was a human skull. Greg pointed it at Roy and Janine.

"Don't work too hard today," he said.

Then he pounded the air with his fist: “God save the queen! She ain’t no human being!”

We made our exit.

Growing up, Greg was always tall and thin but now he was beyond that; he’d wasted away because of the chemo. On the bright side, his hair had grown back. It was curly, wild and brown on his head. He had a thick beard on his chin only, like some pharaoh of ancient Egypt.

Greg owned a white Ford Bronco that looked like O.J. Simpson’s. He promised that if he were ever pulled over he would say to the cop: “What do you have against black people?”

Greg was white.

The air-conditioning was busted, so Greg drove fast with the windows rolled down, so we could catch some kind of breeze. It took ten minutes to reach the apartment complex.

I didn’t know how he dealt with the dregs of society. Greg was fearless. His network of customers had grown exponentially since the end of high school. I thought of him as a suburban kingpin in the making, and a few months before, when he morbidly offered his business to me—an inheritance of sorts—I was left speechless. Outside of accompanying him on transactions, I’d never shown any interest in dealing drugs. I was afraid of prison and not a people person anyhow. I turned his offer down. I said we were both going to live forever.

Besides, I wanted to be an artist.

The apartment was little more than a cave with furniture that looked taken from an abandoned house. The air was heavy, pungent and reminded me of science class. There was a chemical smell like formaldehyde.

“What’s up homey,” Greg said. We stood in the living room with a long-haired guy named Brad who’d been up for days. Behind him was a bedroom door, and I sensed the presence of people back there. I pictured a cluster of meth head zombies breaking down the door to make a grab for my brains. The image inspired me. I wanted to paint the scene at Brad’s apartment. I’d already tried to be a poet. Now I was trying out painting.

“You just wanted the weed, right?”

“Yeah, weed,” Brad said. “I wanna get hungry. I’m not hungry. I haven’t fucking eaten in days, but I wanna get hungry. Does that make sense? I’ve been picturing chocolate cake, man. I used to love chocolate cake, but when I think about it now it makes me goddamn nauseous. Maybe the weed will help.”

A big thump came from the next room, as if a fat person had collapsed on the floor. Brad and Greg ignored it.

“Do you wanna stay? Hang out?” Brad said.

I was tempted. Before I could paint those zombies, I would need to see them.

“Would like to but gotta go,” Greg said.

“How’s your health, man?”

“Gettin’ better all the time.”

I was disappointed and told Greg to take me home.

I lived with my mom and her young boyfriend: a thirty-something douchebag. Lately, Jeff and I had battled over the spare room, which he'd converted into a study. Thanks to inept design, it looked like a museum exhibit whose theme was the drabest décor of the late twentieth century. There was a cheap desk and word processor and a flimsy bookshelf with business titles promising wealth and happiness to their readers. Jeff never used the room and what's more it wasn't even his house. Once I decided to become a painter I turned it into my studio without so much as asking for anyone's permission.

When I wasn't around, Jeff would remove my easel and paints as well as the old bedsheet I placed on the floor to protect the carpet. I'd find my stuff just outside my bedroom, propped against the wall. When he wasn't around, I took everything back.

At my house, I moved art supplies while muttering curses about Jeff. Greg sat in my bedroom and turned up the stereo: Afghan Whigs. He flipped through a brochure for a bicycling trip in northern California. Six months before, I got confused when Greg handed me the brochure and said, "Let's go." He'd never cared about cycling or sports in general, even before the cancer. Since junior high, all he really cared about was drinking and getting high. All of a sudden, he wanted to sight-see along the Pacific coast with its elephant seals and protected forests. I thought he was kidding. But then he bought a mountain bike and forced me to buy one as well. We started cycling around the neighborhood as practice. Given his fragile body and the fact he smoked like a chimney, Greg struggled. His knee hurt him. But he insisted on training. We'd ridden together for two months now and gotten better. With the summer heat, we'd started riding at

sundown or first thing in the morning. Greg would light up as soon as we finished, puffing away as he stared at the changing colors of the sky.

The week before, we purchased the travel package that would take us to Point Reyes in northern California. In a month, we would spend four days and three nights camping and cycling. A couple of travel guides would show us around.

I was nervous about the trip. We'd be riding and walking a lot. I didn't think Greg's knee could take the strain.

I changed into my painting clothes: an old pair of jeans and a white t-shirt. Both were covered in streaks and strings of paint so that I looked like a Jackson Pollock. I picked up my palette and tried to paint Brad's desolate apartment, but the picture had already faded in my mind. Plus, the meth-head zombies seemed silly now and less urgent than the project I'd been working on the last week. I'd been painting my hand. Specifically, it was my left hand and half of my forearm.

I became interested in my hand the year before, after high school graduation. Greg was bedridden thanks to the latest round of chemo, and I was pretty much on my own. I remember walking to my car on a hot afternoon and reaching out with my left hand to open the car door, and I froze. I did not know where I was. Further, I did not know who I was or even what I was. My hand took on the shape and texture of something alien. I could not make heads or tails of it. Slowly, the world came back into focus, but it no longer made sense. The feeling persisted. I recognized the things in my life—the familiar objects and people—but at the same time they looked and seemed strange. All the certainties of my life fell away, and it felt like I was balancing on the edge of an abyss.

I didn't tell anyone, not even Greg.

The painting showed my hand and forearm bathed in a strange light. My hand and forearm were dissolving. Illustrating this effect was the most challenging aspect of the painting.

I called it "Still Life."

Greg didn't understand visual art. He would look at me in my studio, in my painter's get-up, and laugh.

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Three things happened to set the day in motion. First, Heather called to invite us to a motel party that night. Then, Brad called to warn Greg about his bodybuilder sister who was on the warpath. Finally, Brad called again wanting an 8-ball of meth.

I was kind of in love with Heather. We'd been close friends since high school when we'd show up to class drunk or on pills. Heather was tall and blonde and fun to be around. One year, we dressed up as Sid and Nancy for Halloween. Heather loved that movie about the Sex Pistols bassist and his junkie American girlfriend. Fucked up on pills, we stumbled around the party quoting the movie. "Sid! What about the farewell drugs?"

"We don't fucking care!"

"I look like fuckin' Stevie Nicks in hippie clothes!"

I tried to kiss her that night. She danced away from me with a smile.

"So we're going to the party," Greg said.

I shrugged my shoulders, trying to look indifferent. Then I picked up a thin brush and put paint to canvas, coloring my hand with gold, silver and flesh-colored dots.

“Heather personally invited you.”

“She invited *us* and why wouldn’t she?” I said. “We’re all friends. We’ve been friends since the dawn of time.”

Though he was no romantic, Greg tried to play matchmaker with Heather and me. His efforts, for the most part, weren’t embarrassing. He was more coach and cheerleader than anything else. He believed in persistence.

I gave in, usually did.

After that was settled, Greg got a call from Brad. Brad delivered a warning. His sister Maggie was coming after Greg, armed with a tire iron.

“I’m gonna kill that crippled motherfucker!” she shouted.

Maggie was a competitive bodybuilder with big arms, lots of veins, thick neck, no tits, fake tan and lots of steroid-inspired anger. She’d lost her shit at her brother’s apartment that afternoon. “The last straw!” she shouted and grabbed a tire iron from the back of her truck. Then she smashed the abandoned-looking furniture in Brad’s apartment. Maggie was tired of Brad’s junkie ways.

“She’s also got a gun in her truck,” Greg said to me. Then he began to cackle. I couldn’t help but laugh too. Then I got scared. Did she know where I lived?

Maggie and Greg were not strangers. In fact, she was one of his customers. On and off, he sold her Valium for anxiety and stress.

I went outside to get the mail, but really I was looking for Maggie. When I was back inside, Greg gave me a weird look. Then he looked terrified.

“Is she here?” he said.

“No.”

He pointed at me and cackled.

“I was getting the mail,” I said. My hands were empty. “Fuck you.”

“You’re afraid of a girl.”

“That’s no girl.”

“You haven’t even seen her,” Greg said.

“I can see her in my mind.”

“She’s like Conan the Barbarian.”

“Jesus. You’re on your own.”

“She’s kind of hot, actually.”

“You’re sick.”

Greg almost never talked about girls. To hear him talk about Maggie caught my attention.

“Did you fuck her?” I asked.

“What’re you talkin’ about?”

“Maggie. The steroid muncher. Are you having an affair with one of your customers?”

“That’s not funny.”

“You know what they say about mixing business with pleasure.”

“You need to shut the fuck up.”

“By God, I bet even her vagina’s got muscles.”

He rushed me, grabbed the front of my shirt. We were in the foyer and I remember clearly the bronze-colored wallpaper, which had this recurring design. The wallpaper was full of circles, inside of which were shapes that reminded me of a Chinese

throwing star. Greg shook me while I turned my head to stare at the wallpaper. When he let go, he limped past me and out the front door. Outside, presumably, he smoked. He could go fuck himself for all I cared.

I didn't know what to do with myself so I went back to painting. My hand shook, which made things impossible. I had to quit.

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Greg received another phone call from Brad. This time, he wanted an 8-ball of meth. The run-in with his sister had caused him stress.

Greg and I still weren't speaking. We sat in the living room watching MTV.

"We gotta go," Greg said.

"Where're we going?"

"My apartment. Then back to Brad's."

I didn't want to say it because I didn't want to sound like a pussy. In the end, fear trumped pride.

"What if she's waiting for you?"

"Maggie? She won't be."

But she was.

Greg said, "Oh fuck," as we drove past his apartment building.

"What?"

"She's here."

"No."

"Parked in front of my apartment."

I turned around in the passenger seat. A small pick-up truck was backing out of a

parking space.

“In the red truck?” I said.

“Yeah.”

“Fuck.”

She was coming after us.

His apartment complex was like a maze. So many different buildings that all looked the same and enough parked cars for a fleet. I'd gotten lost in that complex a half dozen times. Greg thought he could lose Maggie in the maze, and he took a couple of quick, sharp turns. No timid driver, she caught up and stayed up. I turned around in my seat and saw a Gorgon. Her face was twisted by anger and was...orange. Later, I found out she was addicted to tanning beds. Her hair was wild and brown and fried, as if she'd been on a bender herself.

“It's no good!” I said.

Greg made for the exit then we shot out onto the street. We zig-zagged through traffic. Then we took a couple of turns, staying on the big streets, but Maggie was always behind us. We passed our old high school, and this wave of nostalgia hit me. Hey, we graduated from there. Then the school was gone and I looked at Greg, his face a portrait of concentration. Even so, it looked like he was grinning too.

“Class of '96, baby!” he said.

We blew past an intersection, and I saw where Greg was headed: the on-ramp for the highway. He hit the on-ramp going too fast. It curved sharply around and for a moment I thought we would crash and die, but Greg touched the brakes and guided us like a bobsled through the turn. Then we landed on the highway and Greg accelerated.

I had an out-of-body experience as we hit seventy, then eighty miles per hour. I remembered that we were in a white Bronco, on the highway, and I saw us from a bird's eye view. We were like O.J. a couple years back, on the run, but it wasn't the cops or even Maggie we were running from. It was something more colossal, and we were winning.

I looked back, and there was no sign of Maggie. I told Greg so, and he took the next exit, drove over the highway and then took the on-ramp. We had reversed direction.

“Where're we going?”

“Back to my apartment.”

There was money to be made, Greg said.

“What if she went back?”

“She won't be there.”

He was wrong before, but I didn't say anything. My adrenaline was up, like his, and I was kind of looking forward to a second chase. I felt real and solid, and I looked at my left hand, which seemed to be vibrating. It was so alive.

“I'll be right back,” Greg said in front of his apartment. He was out of the car, limping quickly across the patch of grass out front, before I could say anything. What if Maggie showed up? But I was feeling bold too. I thought I might confront her, tell her ass to calm down—Greg wasn't to blame for her brother being a loser—unless she pulled a gun. I started looking for places to hide.

“Let's go!” Greg said, back in the car. His head swiveled all around, and he looked disappointed that Maggie wasn't lying in wait.

We drove like a bat out of hell. I don't know why. No one was chasing us.

Greg saw the flashing lights before I did.

“Fuck!”

I turned around in my seat. It was the cops.

“Don’t turn around!” Greg shouted.

“You gotta pull over.”

For whatever reason, I thought he might try and run for it, like O.J.

“What the fuck am I gonna do?” he said. “I’m not going to jail.”

We pulled over to the side of the road.

“Swallow it,” I said.

He reached in his pocket, got out the 8-ball. There was no pause. He swallowed the drugs, plastic baggie and all.

Greg’s body was a veritable pharmacy. He’d endured countless bouts of chemo. I thought he’d be fine.

“What’d you put in your mouth?” the cop said.

He wore the same black sunglasses that soldiers wear. He was clean-shaven and had a long chin, which seemed to poke through the window.

“Step out of the car, sir.”

The cop didn’t like it when Greg reached for his cane.

“Don’t touch that.”

“I have a bad leg,” Greg said.

“I don’t care.”

The cop told me not to move then bent Greg over the hood of the car, which was red-hot because of the summer sun. Greg cried out as he was searched.

“Go sit on the curb,” the cop said.

“What do you have against black people?”

“What’d you say?”

After the cop searched me, I joined Greg. The cop went back to his car to call for back-up.

Greg was finding it hard to sit. His left leg, the bad one, was stretched out straight and he had to lean to the side, with his hands on the hot sidewalk to support himself. Sweat dripped from his brow and his eyes fluttered as if he were struggling to stay awake.

“I don’t feel good,” he said.

I looked in the direction of the cop. When I looked back at Greg, he was lying flat on the sidewalk, motionless.

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It didn’t take long for the ambulance to arrive. The cops let me ride with him. I remember the voices of the EMTs: a man and woman. They kept talking to Greg who was on a gurney covered by a blue blanket with an oxygen mask over his face. Their voices were low and intimate. I couldn’t hear what they were saying. For a moment, I thought they were priests too.

My face was in my hands for most of the ride.

**

I thought the trip to Point Reyes was over and done with. I had no desire to go without him. But then I thought that Greg would have wanted me to go. What’s more, I thought it would be poetic if Heather took his place. I believed in closure. At the same

time, I was scared of my own nothingness. If I went on this trip, with Heather, I might become whole again.

I explained it all to her. I bared my soul like one does at nineteen or twenty. It even felt good, but still the bitch said no.

It was all too much for me: Greg's death and Heather's rejection. I didn't go to northern California.

I lost touch with Heather after that.

**

I was thirty-one when I found a lump in my right testicle. I ignored it, thought the swelling would go away. But a few weeks later I got scared and went to the doctor, hoping he would laugh at my paranoia and send me home. Instead he ordered an ultrasound and blood test. I set up an appointment for a biopsy.

As the doctor briefed me on testicular cancer, I pictured my hair falling out. I saw the children I would never have because the treatment made me sterile. Greg re-entered my life. He danced maniacally in my mind. His knee was better and he sang, "One of us! One of us!"

While waiting on the results, I went on a weekend-long bender in Greg's honor. Toward the end of his twenty years on this earth, Greg turned away from the void to inhale every substance he could. On Sunday, I woke up behind a hole-in-the-wall bar. The sun was shining and a stray dog—some pitbull mutt—licked at a cut on my face.

The next day, still hungover, I thought Greg was an idiot with a death wish. He used to mainline chemo then drink a six-pack of Natty Lite.

Fuck him. I walked around wanting to grab and shake by the shoulders every person I saw: “You don’t know how lucky you are!”

I felt nineteen again. I was dissolving, this time for real.

No one else knew. Not my parents. I didn’t have a girlfriend. Not my friends.

It was just me and Greg. Greg would stop dancing for a second to point:

“Swallow it, you said. Swallow it. Now it’s your turn.”

**

When the results came back negative, I threw a party.

I met someone and married. After Lauren got pregnant, she came up with a list of names for boys. Near the top of the list was Gregory. I looked at her like she somehow knew everything, an icepick jabbing at my chest.

I told her no. That name was out of the question.

These days, I’m no longer a painter or poet or any type of artist. My son is named Michael, after his maternal grandfather, and he turned six this year. There are times I look at his forearm. I’ll take it in my hand and study it, and my son will ask me what I’m doing, like it’s some kind of game. His forearm has always been solid as a rock, since he was born.

I won’t lie and say that Greg is gone forever. At times, he flashes into my mind before he’s gone again. Nothing I can do about it. He’s twenty years old and not exactly beautiful.

I think about how dumb I was back then. How careless. It’s not a history worth sharing with anyone. I should have told Greg he was ruining himself and others. I never

questioned the drug dealing. Where was my moral fiber? I was so weak about Heather. How long did it take to get over her? And we were never even together!

At Greg's funeral, I refused to leave his casket. We were at his family's church, which Greg hadn't attended since elementary school, and it was my row's turn to see the body. My legs felt weak. I'd been crying.

It looked like a shrunken version of Greg. His chin was tucked, his white lips pursed. His curly hair had been tamed. At least his earrings were still there. The line of people was moving but I had stopped. I was looking at him. Then I closed my eyes. A hand patted my shoulder. A while later, someone tried to lead me away but I wouldn't budge. The pastor had to talk to me, whispering about God's grace and mercy. I told him out loud to shove it.

I'm a better person now with strength in all the right places.

At least I can say that I'm past all that.

JAMES CHOI

After graduating from college, J.C. took a year off to contemplate his next move. He had an eye on law or business school but was burnt out and needed a break. Surfing the Internet, he discovered an exchange program, which granted recent graduates a six-month work visa, applicable throughout Europe. He'd always wanted to see Europe.

A few months later, J.C. swapped California for England. Without knowing a single soul there, he flew to London. Within a few days, he'd already found a job: at a pub in Bayswater, pouring beer for thirsty young travelers. Bayswater, in west London, was full of hostels catering to Australians, Kiwis, Europeans and North Americans. J.C. found lodgings there too. It was a good place to make friends. And the job was perfect too, in spite of the wages. J.C. made only seven pounds an hour as a barkeep, but then money was no matter. His family owned Korean barbeque restaurants in Southern California, which were bulletproof during the recession.

The fun started right away. That first week he spent the night with a Spanish co-worker at her tiny bed-sit. Days later, J.C. was invited to hang out by a group of people drinking at the pub. He ended up on a couch, sandwiched between an Irish girl and a South African girl.

I won't go into which one he chose and why and what happened after the choice was made. It's not the story I want to tell.

The real story concerns J.C. and a couple at a party. I think it might have something to do with J.C.'s death.

It's one of the things that keep me up at night.

**

James Choi (J.C.) was born twenty-four years ago at a hospital in Fullerton, California. He had a normal Korean upbringing. Certain things were emphasized: academics, family and religion. On the other hand, sporting prowess was not encouraged. Nonetheless, J.C. played on the football and basketball teams. He was gifted athletically. He was relatively tall and broad-shouldered, like many of his generation. At any rate, he was taller than the generations before him. Most of us tower over our parents. Growing up, we stuffed our faces with hormone-enriched beef and milk. It was the American way.

J.C. was good in the classroom, but that's not important. Scholar-athletes were a dime a dozen.

What set J.C. apart was his way with women.

It wasn't about looks. Say, for the sake of argument, he looked like the Korean guy from *Lost*. His story as a result would be less mesmerizing. It's no mystery that women appreciate pretty things, men included. Therefore, an attractive man can teach us nothing about the opposite sex.

J.C. had black hair, worn in different ways: short, long, messy. As a teenager, he buzzed his hair because of a temporary fascination with the military. He even experimented with a mullet. After his trip to England, he sported a faux hawk in tribute to David Beckham. J.C. had decent bone structure: good cheekbones and a strong chin. Let's say he was above average in appearance, in spite of slanty eyes. Remarkably, this feature did not hold him back with women.

Not just Asian women went for him.

Starting in elementary school, J.C. attracted girls of every race from all parts of the country and the world. A Kenyan classmate in fifth grade was smitten with him. A preacher's daughter, recently arrived from Oklahoma, tackled him on the playground in second grade. In junior high, he was the first boy we knew who circled most of the bases, with an aggressive brunette named Pepper. Later, Pepper got pregnant (not J.C.'s) and dropped out of school. J.C. lost his virginity the summer after ninth grade to a pretty Native American girl known by all as Pocahontas. Kids are cruel.

His exploits would not have crossed into the realm of legend but for one basic fact. J.C. was a universal hit with girls, including the popular white ones. Allison, a blonde beauty, invited *him* to senior prom. He was a *sophomore* at the time. While the rest of us were playing Xbox and daydreaming of teenage tits, J.C. was dancing among the seniors.

J.C. attended a classic American institution: the University of Southern California. There, concentrated in an East Los Angeles ghetto, was enough beauty and talent to fuel the country for generations to come. The parties were like something out of *The Great Gatsby*. J.C. was invited to rush but decided against it. Still, he was invited to frat parties. He mingled with the untouchables, girls so blonde and ethereal that from a distance they could have been a mirage. And he wasn't just the Asian guy they kept around to feel democratic and charitable. He conquered girls like some Mongol laying waste to their civilization.

Not to denigrate our group of friends but most of us would have latched on to a girl at some point. Men also appreciate beauty, do stupid things for beauty. J.C. resisted. He was never in a committed relationship, which is not to say he was a sociopathic

Lothario. Neither was he a narcissist. As a matter of fact, he frequently showed interest in the love lives of others. A good listener, he was happy to offer advice. Too bad for him, our group of friends provided scant material over the years. A yawning gorge existed between J.C.'s carnal experience and ours.

None of the above is apocryphal. I witnessed it all, as J.C.'s classmate and best friend. I even graduated from USC myself, though I'd like to forget those years.

**

J.C. settled into his London life. He made a couple of trips to the Continent to check out France and Spain, turning down an opportunity to run with the bulls at Pamplona because, I imagine, he felt no need to prove his manhood. Those who run, I imagine, have slept with very few women. He danced in London nightclubs high on Ecstasy and played the tourist by visiting Westminster Abbey and the Barbican. He even visited the London School of Economics and City University. He was so taken with the city that he considered doing graduate work there.

Known as the Californian, J.C. had many friends, both male and female. Some even called him Keanu (as in Reeves) or Ted (as in Logan, from *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*), though he didn't resemble the famous slacker, who moonlights as an actor, at all.

**

A friend invites him to a house party in Croydon, located in South London. It's the weekend, when the pub is busiest, but J.C. convinces a co-worker to take his shift. A bottle of Merlot in hand, he rides the Tube to Victoria Station where he switches to an overground train. Roughly an hour later, he disembarks at East Croydon station and on

foot follows his friend's directions, written on a scrap of paper. As he crosses a busy street, construction noise hammers at his ears. Suddenly he is very sure that someone is following him. Call it paranoia or a sixth sense. Or simply caution. In the city, J.C. has learned to be vigilant. He has heard too many tales of victimization. He doesn't consider himself a tourist, but is aware that he looks different. He can't just blend in, though London is full of ethnic types. On the streets, it's not hard to feel exposed, vulnerable.

J.C. forgets the scrap of paper, focuses on walking. He relies on peripheral vision to check for an attacker. He wonders what goes through the head of such a person: looking at him, gauging his suitability as a victim. Does this person wonder if J.C. knows a martial art?

The feeling fades and he returns to matters of navigation. The directions are simple, really. Less than a mile walk. A couple of turns. Then he's in a residential neighborhood with houses that all look the same. Much of the residential architecture in London is less than spectacular. Uninspired. The houses in front of him are two-story with plain, red-brick facades. The roofs are trapezoids. J.C. arrives at the right address feeling excited. He is not the kind of person to get nervous before a social occasion. He is at ease with people. Perhaps that's the key to his popularity. Comfort breeds comfort.

A guy answers the front door. He looks Nordic, with longish blonde hair, tucked behind his ears. J.C. does not know him. "What's the secret password?" the guy asks. "Jeremiah was a bullfrog," J.C. answers, with the first thing that comes to mind, a lyric that suddenly materializes from the unconscious. The Nordic guy appears delighted by this. He smiles, puts out a hand. His name is Alec. Then he opens the door and J.C. enters the party.

There is music on. It could be BBC Radio One. J.C. walks through the living room where people are sitting on a settee. They are talking and laughing, a beer or glass of wine in hand. J.C. does not recognize any of them, so he continues toward the kitchen to set his Merlot alongside the collection of alcohol that must be there. The kitchen is full of people, normal for a party. J.C. spots a couple he knows: Peter, who lives at the house, and his girlfriend Carrie. Both are Aussies spending their gap year in England. When they go home, they will attend university. A week ago, J.C. served them at the pub on consecutive nights. It was then that the couple invited him to the party.

Peter introduces him to a few people, and they stand in a semi-circle talking. The topic of conversation is Thomas's recent encounter with an Arab. Peter brings J.C. up to speed. The other day, Thomas got lost after leaving a Bayswater pub. It was late at night, and he wandered for over an hour, increasingly desperate. Finally, with the streets virtually empty, he came upon an Arab man who nodded at Thomas's question: "Can you help me get back to Bayswater station?" The Arab led Thomas down an alleyway where he lifted his tunic and pissed on a wall. Then he shook his member at Thomas as if it were a piece of bait.

"You sucked his cock, didn't you?" a ginger guy says. He has bum-rushed their conversation. Later, Peter tells J.C. that the ginger's name is Eric the Red. Eric the Red is an Irish electrician with a red goatee and bad attitude. Peter tells J.C. that Eric the Red is the only person in history to have gotten angry on Ecstasy. "Most people are on cloud nine. This fucker wants to fight," Peter says.

A can of Stella in hand, Eric the Red says, "You were gagging for it, weren't you love?"

Thomas looks irritated. Actually, everyone in the semi-circle looks irritated, except for J.C., encountering Eric the Red for the first time.

“Did you sleep with the enemy?” Eric the Red continues.

“I ran away,” Thomas says. “By some miracle, a black cab showed up.”

“I bet he was a fooking terrorist. I bet you Al-kadah,” Eric the Red says. “I would have smashed him in the bollocks.”

“I don’t think he would have fancied you,” Peter says.

Eric the Red doesn’t know what to say to this.

“That’s a story for the grandchildren,” says a young woman named Cara.

“Is it possible he was a terrorist?” J.C. suggests.

“I was terrorized,” Thomas says.

“Maybe it’s a new tactic by Al-Qaeda,” Peter says.

“Didn’t Bin Laden say he wanted to bring us to our knees?” J.C. says.

The semi-circle, minus Eric the Red, laughs. “Fuck this,” Eric the Red says and leaves. High-fives circulate around the group.

“Who invited him?” Cara asks.

Peter shrugs his shoulders. It’s a mystery.

“So you’re the Californian?” Cara says to J.C. She is attractive but not stunning. Not very feminine either. She’s wearing combat pants and a baseball-style shirt with three-quarter sleeves, which has Mickey Mouse on it. She’s wearing little to no make-up but can get away with it. Cara has a naturally pretty face.

The others quietly drift away, leaving J.C. and Cara to talk. They talk.

An English girl from Surrey, Cara studies law at University College London. She also works part-time at a law firm in Camden Town whose clients are mainly immigrants seeking asylum or resident visas. She tells the story of a Namibian woman who fought as a guerilla against South Africa in the 1980's. Now the former guerrilla is living in London with her young daughter. Now she's a client of the firm.

J.C. talks about Korean immigrants in Los Angeles. How many of them have lived there for years and refuse to learn English. How many of them won't budge from antiquated traditions while sucking the cock of the capitalist God.

Cara says, "It's extremely difficult moving to a new country which basically has no respect for your culture, which basically assaults your culture. How do you assimilate while also preserving your identity?"

An awkward silence slips between them. Turning his head, J.C. sees a new girl in the living room. She's wearing a tight red t-shirt and jeans. She has short brown hair. She does a quarter turn with her body and her eyes find him. For a moment, they look at each other. When J.C. turns back to Cara, he can tell that Cara is annoyed.

Unfazed, he turns back to the new girl, but she's gone.

"I need the loo," J.C. says. "See you in a bit?"

J.C. sets himself a new task. He will find the girl in the tight red t-shirt and jeans.

But it's like she was an illusion or the product of wishful thinking. He can't find her anywhere and so adopts a new goal. He will get drunk instead. Liquor offers the quickest route. J.C. finds dark rum in the kitchen. He mixes it with Coke.

“Your cheeks are so red!” a girl says. He has found a place on the settee. Indeed, his cheeks flush when he drinks. Everything is good. He’s met more people and even talked to Cara again, to no avail. No matter.

Then he sees the red-shirted girl again. This time, because of the booze, he’s even more inclined to think she’s an illusion. But she doesn’t disappear. She stands in the doorway of the kitchen, as if waiting at a bus stop. He has a chance to look at her. The front of her shirt has the classic Coca-Cola logo, written in cursive.

She looks in his direction. Their eyes meet again.

It’s strange, almost automatic, when J.C. stands up from the settee, thinking he will talk to her, offer her a drink, though he’s in the middle of a conversation. But it’s not much of a conversation. The girl is babbling at him, not very attractive.

But someone beats him to the punch. He’s tall and thin, with a large nose and earrings. The girl may not be classically beautiful but is very sexy. A great body. The guy is not attractive at all. In fact, his face is greasy with sweat.

The guy bends over and kisses her.

J.C. sits down, deflated. Finally, he turns toward the babbling girl whose new expression he’s seen before. She looks like Cara now.

The night begins to feel like a waste. J.C. is close to calling it quits. His head is full of negativity and abstractions before he snaps back to reality. He’s alone on the settee. The happy couple has left the doorway.

The party gets louder. Everyone has committed to getting raucously drunk. J.C. has rallied, joined them. He moves from group to group talking and laughing. He sees the tall bloke who stole the Coca-Cola girl away. The guy jabbars at a couple of people,

his hands gesturing with a life of their own, as if trying to break free from this buffoon. The Coca-Cola girl is missing. J.C. wanders away from a conversation. For the first time, he ascends the stairs to the second floor. It's quieter there, like a refuge. He walks down the hallway and sees a bedroom to his right, then the loo. Then, on the left, is another bedroom, which is dark. But J.C. can see a figure in there, sitting on the bed. He crosses from the light into the dark. It's the girl in red. Without a word, he sits next to her. They look at each other. J.C. places his hand on her hand and notices a ring on her finger, with a stone.

This is where I stare into the void. What happens next makes no sense. It defies the logic of seduction. J.C. and the girl exchange no words. They have swapped not a word the entire evening. They are strangers. Yet before long his lips are pressed against her lips.

I see the strangers side by side in the dark. I can hear them breathing, the smacking of lips and another sound—a kind of whimpering—associated with desire. Their heads tilt one way then, restless, tilt the other.

At some point, they talk.

The girl's name is Jude. The Beatles song plays in the jukebox of J.C.'s mind.

They hear footsteps down the hallway. Strangely, their reaction is one of calm. J.C. rolls off the side of the bed. He lies on the floor between the bed and the far wall. The footsteps stop at the doorway. Then they come in. J.C. barely breathes. Still, he feels calm. Jude and this new person talk. It must be the guy, her guy. Though he is a couple feet away, J.C. can't understand what they're saying. It sounds like murmurings.

Jude gets off the bed. Footsteps leave the bedroom, and J.C. considers staying put. He could easily fall asleep. But as soon as he thinks this, adrenaline flows through his body. He waits a minute then leaves the bedroom. He descends the stairs to find a strange scene. In the living room, a large circle of people has formed. In the middle of that circle stands a shirtless Eric the Red, shouting: “Come on you cunts!” An invitation to fight. Is he trying to fight the entire party? Of course, no one accepts the challenge.

J.C. joins the circle, standing next to Jude who is standing next to the tall guy with a big nose and earrings. J.C. brushes his hand against her hand. She returns the touch with one of her own.

As the crowd breaks apart (Eric the Red’s performance has ended; he’s draped across the settee, exhausted), the guy turns to J.C.

“I don’t think we’ve met,” he says. “I’m Drew.”

They shake hands.

“This is my fiancée, Jude,” Drew says.

J.C. shakes her hand, though he wants to kiss her.

Drew begins to tell the story of their relationship. They met at university, first year, at a party. There was instant chemistry, and they even slept together that first night. It had never been that way for him, he said. He’d never clicked like that with anyone. They became inseparable. It annoyed their friends who thought them too young for something so serious. The friends were ignored. “We share a kind of telepathy,” Drew says. “I can tell what she’s thinking. She knows what I’m thinking too.”

After university, Jude spent half a year interning at a theatre production company in New York City. She’d studied dramatic arts and though she’d taken roles as an actress

she wanted a career behind the scenes. If the relationship was going to fall apart, this was the time. But they survived, which is not to say that the separation was easy. It was particularly hard for him, stuck in dreary Sunderland while Jude experienced a great city of the world, surrounded by talented and beautiful people. There was even a time when Jude considered staying. A job was offered, followed by weeks of indecision. They cried together on the phone. "Come back to me," Drew said. Every night he reminded her of the things they'd been through. The good times and the hard times. In the end, Jude made the right decision. She said no to New York. Fate rewarded her with an offer from London: a West End theatre company. She took that job. No regrets. When she got back to England, the couple went on holiday to Paris where Drew proposed at the Palais-Royal. It was after a performance of Moliere's *L'Amour médecin* (he couldn't understand a word of French while Jude was close to fluent). The wedding was set for next year.

"How about you, mate?" Drew says. "You have a fiancée?"

J.C. looks him straight in the eye. "No," he says.

"Have you ever been in love?"

J.C. looks at Jude whose eyes dart to the floor. But it's like her eyes made a mistake. They lift again, looking at J.C.

"No," he says.

"It's amazing," Drew says and draws his fiancée close, long arm around her shoulder.

“I would die for Jude,” he adds. “I was never a traditional guy. I didn’t see myself having a family. But now I dream about children. They grow up before my eyes. They grow old and die. I wake up crying it’s so fucking beautiful.”

The young men enter the picture as if from another dimension. Three of them. All around Drew’s age. They are suddenly standing either side of Drew and Jude, looming large. They somehow escaped J.C.’s notice until now. Maybe they are late to the party.

The young men stare at J.C. with intensity.

“Love is a wonderful thing,” J.C. says.

The young men linger after Drew leads Jude away. They don’t say a word, either to J.C. or each other. They just stare.

J.C. turns away looking for anybody to talk to. When he turns back, the young men are gone.

He has a decision to make. He can leave the house and end this strange night. Or he can choose to go on.

J.C. goes to the kitchen and pulls a can of Stella from the fridge.

Later, he stumbles to the bathroom and doesn’t bother locking the door. Before he’s even unbuttoned his jeans to piss, the door opens and he has to turn around, not really startled because he’s so drunk. Like a ninja, Jude has slipped into the bathroom. She steps toward J.C., kisses him.

“Meet me at my flat,” she says.

“When?”

“Now. Take a cab. I’ll meet you there.”

J.C. looks skeptical. He points toward the party, indicating the fiancé.

“Meet me,” she says.

His vision isn't so good. He has to close one eye to see straight as he punches her address into his phone.

When Jude leaves the bathroom, he calls a mini-cab company. Then he says goodbye to Peter and Carrie, the hosts. As he's leaving the house, his vision clears and he sees the engaged couple talking in a corner. Jude smiles at Drew. It looks like an intimate moment, like something a photographer would want to capture.

J.C. looks outside for the young men, but they're nowhere to be found.

As the cab takes him north to Tottenham, J.C. has regrets. For one thing, the ride will cost a lot. What's more, he wonders if this is some kind of set-up. But what would they be setting him up for?

In Tottenham, he pays the cabbie and stands on the dark sidewalk in front of her building: a two-story with a white façade. There's a short gate blocking his way to the front door. Between the windows is a satellite dish mounted at a wild angle.

J.C. thinks, I don't even have her phone number. He imagines waiting for hours. He thinks of an Arab who guides him to a bus stop only to lift his tunic and flash him in a dark alley.

But Jude shows up. Dropped off by a mini-cab. Drew follows her out of the cab. Then J.C. blinks and Drew disappears. His mind playing tricks. Still, his heart beats fast.

Jude is grinning, and J.C. feels like a character in a European film. She looks to have sobered up. J.C. has sobered up too. Jude throws her arms around his neck. They kiss. It wouldn't be so bad to stay like this. In fact, I can see them as dawn breaks, their

shadows thrown against the white façade of her building. But nothing ever lasts, this moment included, and Jude brings down her arms. J.C. takes her hands in his hands, and he notices the ring is missing. J.C. rubs her naked finger.

“Magic,” she says.

They go inside and this is where the story runs out because J.C. wouldn't tell. A gentleman doesn't tell certain things, he said. I protested. A story can't end while there are unknowns. They must have talked, either before or after sex. What was said? Did she explain the infidelity? Jude was unhappy in the relationship. Or she was like a guy: terrified of spending the rest of her life with one person. So she acted out. Or maybe this was a last hurrah. She would settle down after this one last adventure.

Or maybe they didn't talk.

And what of the aftermath? The consequences. I'm sure Jude doesn't know what happened. She deserves to know. Maybe she can shed light on the situation.

J.C. didn't leave a note. No clues. Was it love? It had to be love.

Or was it something else?

**

After London, J.C. worked at one of the family restaurants. He decided on a law career and signed up for the LSAT.

He started “seeing” a girl who worked at Yahoo, in Santa Monica. She was Persian. It didn't last long.

We had lunch one day. J.C. was having second thoughts about law. London pulled at his imagination. Maybe he would go to school there.

“It's that English girl,” I said. “You've finally fallen in love.”

“You’re wrong about that,” he said. But then he smiled and looked at something or someone, just past my shoulder.

“Tell me what happened. In her flat.”

J.C. shook his head.

“It doesn’t matter, mate.”

He had an English accent or he affected one. I couldn’t tell the difference.

“Have you been in touch with her? Is she still getting married?”

“I don’t know.”

Because he didn’t like to talk about himself, he sent a question my way.

“What about you?” J.C. asked.

I was fully employed at an engineering firm in Tustin. A multinational. There was nothing more to tell.

I asked if I could go with him to London.

“Go have your own adventure,” he said.

**

The Vincent Howard Bridge is green and functional. It’s hardly an aesthetic wonder. Located in San Pedro, it’s 1,500 feet long and overlooks the shipping industry at the Port of Los Angeles.

It was spring, a clear day. The water was blue-green and sparkled on the surface.

A tourist was filming with her phone from a boat. A few hundred yards away. She thought the figure on the bridge was a stuntman. It was the best her imagination could do. The tourist posted her video on the Internet. I’m amazed at the steadiness of

her hand, even as her voice changes. It goes from curiosity to anxiety to panic. Before the video cuts out, she says “Oh my God” a half dozen times.

**

I finally took J.C.’s advice. Six months after he jumped to his death.

A week ago, I had an adventure.

It was after dark when I left work for Las Vegas. The trip was spur of the moment. It was the middle of the week, a Wednesday.

The drive took four hours. I gambled a while at the Mandalay Bay. I walked down the Strip, a ghost town with lights. Then I got back in my car and found a gentleman’s club.

The girls came from every direction, wanting to sit on my lap. They wanted to take me to the VIP room. I was plied with drinks. The girls stayed and talked. A couple of them were funny, like they were auditioning to be comics.

I won’t lie. It was the closest I’d ever gotten to sex: the greatest rush.

Then, like a dream, it was over. I left the club at three o’clock and puked in the parking lot next to my car. I nursed a coffee at Denny’s. No food.

A second wind got me through the drive. The desert was dark and empty like an infinite tunnel. I had time to shower and change clothes. Then I was back at the office on zero sleep.

Through the morning, it was my best day at work. I was productive, even euphoric. My colleagues looked at me like a different person. It felt like I’d discovered the secret. I was seeing into another realm.

But then my energy took a plunge. It happened after lunch. By the end of the day, exhausted, I couldn't wait to sleep.

The next morning, my euphoria was gone. I went back to feeling normal. I've been in this place forever: my life a version of the big bang. I keep getting further and further away from some starting point, some essence. Where I am, it's cold and quiet.

I don't understand this feeling or where it comes from. Sometimes I think I can see it: an alien parasite, burrowed inside me.

Since Vegas, I'm scared all the time.

If it were possible, I'd tell J.C. The adventure was no cure.

But I'm starting to think he already knew.

FROM THE ARCHIVE

I was back in Texas visiting my parents when I decided to drop in on a childhood friend. The friend's health was poor, according to my stepmom.

At the age of thirty-two, Neal was still living with his parents. Their house, just down the street from my dad, was different now. The siding was a different color. The trim was brown where it used to be green. There was a new car in the driveway, a yellow Ford Escort that glowed in a radioactive way. A honeysuckle bush used to sit in the front yard but was gone now. It once looked like a giant green afro.

Neal's mother answered the front door. She didn't expect to see me. "My God it's you!" she said. Jewell was middle-aged but youthful, with a quick smile. I believed it was bingo that kept her that way. For years, the woman had been addicted to bingo.

"I'm off to bingo!" she said then poked her head back inside the house. "Neal, you got company!"

I went in, hearing Jewell back out of the driveway. I shut the door behind me and stood in the living room. Family portraits and graduation pictures adorned the walls. There was a big TV and an entertainment center. I'd spent a lot of my childhood in that house. As kids, we used to sneak out of bed and soldier-crawl to the living room where the TV was always on. Neal's parents liked to watch soft porn on Cinemax.

I heard movement down the hallway, which led to the bedrooms. I sat on the blue sofa then heard a door open, footsteps. Neal walked into the living room shirtless. He never liked shirts. The sight of his ribcage, poking through the skin, took my breath away. His chest was sunken, his arms thin. Neal had always taken pride in his physique.

A gifted athlete, he lifted weights religiously. Then he was diagnosed with Crohn's disease. The last time I saw him—three years ago?—he still looked good.

I got up. We shook hands. His dog April, an old black and white shih tzu, had limped in beside him. I couldn't believe the bitch was still alive.

Neal sat in a wicker armchair on the other side of the room. I looked at his face, which was like a mummy's, all the life drained out of it, except for the eyes. They were blue and sharp.

"I knew you'd come back," Neal said.

"It's been a while."

"You're all Hollywood now."

"Not really."

"I knew you'd make it."

"Gettin' there."

"You got out of this shithole," Neal said.

"How've you been?"

"Can't complain."

"I saw your mom."

"The bingo-playin' bitch."

"How's your dad?"

"He's an old fool. Speaking of dads, I became one myself."

I thought he was joking. A beat later, I was glad I hadn't laughed. Neal pointed with a thumb toward a picture on the wall. I got up to see a disturbing family photo. Neal was holding a normal-looking baby in the front yard, his house as a backdrop. He

wasn't wearing a shirt. The woman standing beside him was emaciated too, and it was like they'd somehow emerged from a concentration camp with a baby in their arms.

"Shit," I said.

"The baby-mama's a cunt," Neal said. "But I love my boy."

"What's his name?"

"Adam. He'll be here in a while."

The mother's name was Lisa. She was a malnourished nerd, with glasses and a nose like a bird's beak. I wondered if she suffered from Crohn's as well—maybe they met through an online support group. But then Neal explained that she was a drug addict. She got hung up on heroin. What was the attraction? I wanted to ask but didn't.

After Adam was born, Lisa got thrown in jail for violating probation. When she got out a couple months ago, she was knocked up again.

"It ain't mine," Neal said. "You got a kid yet?"

"No."

"A Hollywood girlfriend?"

"I'm single."

"Are you gay?"

I laughed.

"I knew you wasn't gay," Neal said.

He examined his body as if seeing it for the first time. His eyes went over his legs, then his arms and finally his bare chest.

"I'm a fucking mess, right?" he said.

"The Crohn's?"

“Can’t work, can’t eat, can’t lift weights. Can’t even fuck.”

“Christ.”

“The doctors don’t care. The doctors practice voodoo.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“Tired of living here. They’re always on my case.”

“Doesn’t sound fair to me,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re sick. You’ve got no options.”

“I could go with you. Hollywood!”

Neal smiled.

April was lying on the floor in front of Neal. She panted so heavily I thought something was wrong, but Neal took zero notice.

“Tell me about life in Hollywood.”

I worked as an assistant for a screenwriter who’d written a series of teen horror movies. I was writing a screenplay myself: about a serial killer who’s also a successful Hollywood producer. His victims are the young actresses who descend on Tinseltown dreaming of stardom.

I’d read all the important books: Robert McKee, Syd Field, and Robert Evans’ autobiography.

I told Neal about some of the parties. I’d met Eli Roth. He was genuinely interested in my serial killer project.

“Then I started worrying that he might steal my idea,” I said.

I didn't tell him about the lowlights of the job. I was a courier a lot of the time, transporting scripts to actors and agents and producers all over the city. I dropped off dry cleaning and took my boss's dog to the vet. Consequently, I was acquainted with the city's infamous gridlock. I never got used to it. I tried all the methods: breathing techniques, books on CD, phone conversations, classical music. Still, I yelled at cars like a madman. It was a rite of passage, really, and I thought that one day I'd look back and laugh.

"I know why you're here," Neal said.

He looked very serious and I remembered a night in Dallas, years ago. We'd just left a club. We were drunk and Neal was driving a hundred miles an hour, weaving through traffic on the freeway. His face shone with the focus of a kamikaze pilot. We're going to die, I thought. Two cars raced in front of us. Before we could join the action, they both spun out of control. Neal cut the wheel and we shot past. Then he showed his teeth, and I thought: werewolf. I looked out the window for a full moon.

"I wanted to see you," I said.

"There's more to it than that."

April stopped panting and began to wheeze like an asthmatic. I heard a car outside. Then the car's engine stopped and a few seconds later a car door opened and closed, twice.

"The cunt is here," Neal said. There was a knock at the front door then Lisa came through holding the little boy. Her noodle arm trembled with the strain. Adam was chubby and red-faced. Looking at the three of them, I saw the plot of a horror film: the child a vampire sucking the life from his parents.

Lisa was pregnant, just as Neal said, but you could hardly tell. She was rail-thin, with a tiny bump of a stomach.

After wiggling his way out of his mother's grasp, Adam wobbled toward his father with a grin. Neal picked him up, sat him down on his lap.

Introductions were made. Then Lisa said she had to go.

"Where you goin'?" Neal asked.

"You can watch him, right?" Lisa said.

"Where you goin'?"

"The doctor. I'll be back."

"You're goin' to see him."

"I'm goin' to the doctor."

She said, "Nice meeting you," before ducking out. Lisa hadn't really looked at me at all, as if I were a mirror reflecting back an awful image.

I wished she'd stayed longer. I wanted to ask the questions that would flesh her out as a character.

The kid didn't like being in the same spot for very long. Soon, he was out of his father's lap, wobbling around the living room. He tried to revive April, a hopeless cause, and the dog growled at him. Amazingly the kid was smart enough to leave her alone. There was a coffee table with sharp edges and in my mind's eye the boy tripped and struck his head, opening up a gash. I saw us racing to the ER in my rental car, and somehow it felt like old times.

"He's a handful," I said.

"Does he look like me?" Neal asked.

I wasn't so sure. The boy had his mother's pointy nose while the rest of him was puffy. I looked for Neal's eyes or freckles on that ridge above the cheeks. I saw no trace of him.

"Spitting image, man."

"You're full of shit."

"Come on."

"He don't look like me. I don't trust that bitch," Neal said.

"Get a test."

"I ain't got the money for that."

"It'll cost you more in the long run," I said.

"True. Can I get a loan?"

"What?"

Neal smiled. It was ghoulish.

The reunion wasn't exactly what I thought it would be. I thought we would bullshit about things. Get a beer or lunch. If Neal left the house he might dissolve in the light of day.

"I know why you're here," Neal said again.

"Why am I here?"

"You're worried."

"About what?"

"You don't have to worry about Amber."

"Amber."

A name from the past. Her face got pulled from an archive deep in my memory.

“She’s dead,” Neal said.

“What?”

“Last year.”

I was quiet.

“She OD’d on heroin,” he added.

“Jesus.”

The moment took over. There was nothing to say.

I stood up. The boy wobbled over, cackled, then banged on my knee with a fist.

“I have to go,” I said.

“Look, we’re best friends, right?”

I looked toward the front door.

“I’m in trouble,” Neal said. “I need some money.”

“Are you serious?”

“Come on. Sit down.”

“I gotta go.”

“It wouldn’t be good for your career if people knew about Amber.”

I was out the door without a last look at Neal or his son.

**

As boys, Neal and I liked weapons, ninjas and the martial arts. In the eighties, our parents gave us the freedom of the neighborhood. Neal and I would watch Bruce Lee movies on VHS then re-enact the fight scenes in the yard. I was always Bruce Lee because I was half-Korean. Neal was white so he played Chuck Norris. It bummed him out that he could never be Bruce.

We bought weapons from the back pages of martial arts magazines. Chinese throwing stars and nunchuks, samurai swords and bo staffs. All around us there was talk of the world ending, but Neal and I didn't give a damn. We didn't even know the Russians had nukes. We thought instead about our own arms race. We wanted to perform with butterfly knives in front of crowds at the mall.

Neal got a job before anybody, when he was sixteen, working at Baskin-Robbins. I got a job there too but never worked a day. I chickened out, didn't show up to my first shift. Hours later, Neal rang the doorbell looking peeved, dressed in his uniform.

"Where the fuck were you?" he asked. He'd vouched for me and expected heat from the manager. I shrugged my shoulders. I didn't want to work, that was all.

Neal dropped out at seventeen to take a job at a metal stamping plant, alongside his father. He worked a machine. Flush with cash, he bought a used Honda CR-X. That car could move and we zipped around the neighborhood, feeling free and badass. In the summer, we drove around with our shirts off, the windows rolled down, looking for bitches.

**

In our early twenties, Neal befriended a group of teenage girls. They were all either fifteen or sixteen. One of the girls lived in a posh new neighborhood in Coppell, and her parents were always out of town, vacationing. I went with Neal to her house to hang out.

Amber was one of the girls. She bore an uncanny resemblance to Mariah Carey because of her long wavy hair and the bone structure of her face. She didn't have a belly

button, which had something to do with the way she was born. She was a premature baby or something.

Amber was always smiling. They were all like that. Teenage girls were balls of energy. Dervishes. They made me dizzy. Amber had just gotten her braces removed and she used to run her tongue across her teeth. I could see that tongue working back and forth beneath her upper lip. It made her look ponderous for a second, but I couldn't imagine the thoughts inside her head. I pictured her brain as goo. The goo couldn't produce the thoughts, feelings and pictures of a normal brain. Instead, Amber's consciousness looked like the swirling gases of a galaxy millions of light years away.

**

After dinner with my dad and stepmom, I drove to downtown Fort Worth looking for a bar. There were neighborhood ones to choose from, but I didn't want to run into an old friend or acquaintance. I was sick of home, ready to get back to L.A. I settled in at the Flying Saucer in Sundance Square, ordered a shot of Jack Daniels and then a German beer I'd never heard of. I thought about a script to write. It involved two old friends. The one holds a grudge against the other for a reason, which remains mysterious until the end of the movie. It would be a thriller.

I had a few beers and the bar filled up around me. The white noise of the crowd would have made me self-conscious in the past. I would have felt like a loser, all by myself at the bar, while others socialized. But I was different now. Arms in my periphery gestured toward the bartenders, trying to get their attention. People at my back occasionally bumped into me. I was in my own world and didn't care. Truth be told, I was pretty drunk.

Then I came out of my shell. The girls to my right had been my neighbors for half an hour, and though I expected boyfriends to show they didn't. The girls were flying solo, hoping to meet someone. Or maybe it was girls' night out. They laughed a lot, tossed their hair, and scanned the room with their eyes. One had her back to me. She had long brown hair and wore a satiny top, strapless and aqua blue. She slouched on her bar stool. The other girl looked to be an authentic platinum blonde. She had blue eyes and very white teeth. She had a young face and would be ID'ed until the age of forty. Other women probably hated her.

In L.A., girls got offended easily. You said a few words to them at the bar, and they looked at you like peasantry. They would ask about your career and I would tell a version of the truth. I had scripts in production, which wasn't technically true, but it would be true. I was sure of it. So why not talk of the future when you knew what the future held? Everyone did in L.A. They put forth their best future self.

I would mention the name of my production company and hand out my business card, which said "Screenwriter/Producer." If the girls didn't come home with me, they at least believed I was on the up and up. They handed over business cards of their own and talked about their ambitions. They petitioned for the roles I'd described to them. I said I'd be in touch.

When the blonde went to the bathroom, her friend twisted around on her bar stool. I looked at her profile. She was pretty, if not stunning, with a small nose and thin lips.

"Do you like movies?"

I said it twice before she heard, her plucked eyebrows arching up.

"Sorry?" she said.

I had scribbled some movie titles on a cocktail napkin.

“I’m trying to settle on a name for my latest film,” I said. “My name’s Ted.”

She shook my hand. “Jennifer. You’re in the movie business?”

“Yes. In town to visit the parents.”

I slid the cocktail napkin so that it lay between us on the bar top. I read off potential titles for my serial killer movie: *The Dream Killer*, *The Hollywood Madman*, *Killing Beauty*, *The Great Hollywood Slaughter*.

“It’s a thriller,” I said, “about a strong-willed woman from the Midwest. She moves to L.A. to make it big. She attracts the notice of a Hollywood producer. But here’s the thing. He’s also a serial killer. Would you go see something like that?”

“Maybe.”

“We’re thinking Reese Witherspoon or Zooey Deschanel for the lead. What do you do?”

“I’m a vet tech.”

“Sorry?”

“I work for a veterinarian.”

“So you’re an animal lover.”

“You could say that.”

“You ever thought of moving to Hollywood? We could use people like you.”

“Really?”

“Did you see *We Bought a Zoo*?”

“No.”

“It’s with Matt Damon. A family film. Lots of animals. They employed tons of people to take care of the animals.”

“Really?”

“Can I buy you and your friend a drink?”

The blonde had returned, with an inquisitive look on her face. She reminded me of the old family dog, which sat in our living room with its head cocked at an angle, just looking at you.

But the blonde wasn’t dumb after all. Once I bought a round, she touched Jennifer on the shoulder and left us alone.

“What’s it like in L.A.?” Jennifer asked.

I lost interest after a while. I started thinking about Neal and Amber. The memories came flooding back. I wanted Neal’s story, which would be his version of the truth. I thought about his threat to sabotage my career, and I saw the narrative possibilities.

**

I ate an early breakfast at IHOP. Then I went to Neal’s house.

It was nine a.m. and his parents had left for work. Neal came into the living room wearing a ripped up pair of basketball shorts, that was all. Neither Adam the son nor April the shih tzu was anywhere to be found.

“I want to see her grave,” I said.

From the passenger seat of my rental car, Neal guided us to a cemetery in North Richland Hills. Inside the cemetery, I parked at the curb. Then we walked across burnt grass, the late summer sun hovering like a heat lamp. The grave markers were mostly

flat, and I noticed that Neal took care as he walked. He walked between the markers, out of respect for the dead.

“Satisfied?” he said.

The marker said, “Amber Fussell, 1985-2011, Beloved Daughter.” There were no flowers to decorate her grave.

“We should have brought flowers,” Neal said.

Before her death, Neal had reconnected with Amber through Lisa. The two girls used to party together. Small world. Amber talked about the old days. She wished she were fifteen again. Or maybe it was fourteen or thirteen.

“We talked about that night,” Neal said. “I’d forgotten about it. But as soon as I saw her it was real again. If I hadn’t been so fucked up, I would have run away. She said, ‘I used to hate you, but it’s okay now.’ After that night, it never came up again.”

Back in the car, Neal said that he often visited her grave. “I talk to her,” he added.

The car idled at the curb. The air conditioning was cranked up. “How much money do you want?” I asked.

Neal took a few seconds to think. I looked out the windshield at the bleached day. In the distance, they had erected a canopy on the brown grass. Someone was going to be buried.

“Ten thousand dollars.”

“I’ll give you half that.”

“I want ten. Think about it.”

“Think about what?”

“You’re getting off cheap, in the long run.”

“Right.”

“Your career is taking off. You’re buying peace of mind.”

“Right.”

I turned in my seat to face him, and a blast of cold air struck my face. I tilted the vent.

“We should talk about what happened.”

“Okay,” Neal said.

That night we were at the house in Coppell, but the usual cast of characters wasn’t there. Amber was there, with the girl whose parents owned the house. That girl’s name was Robyn, a lightweight. She couldn’t hold her booze and would stumble to bed after a drink or two, a shot or two. Robyn went upstairs at ten o’clock. We were all laughing. Neal and I pulled on Amber as if we wanted her to see something extraordinary inside the guest room. We’d been drinking.

“You picked her up, took her to the room,” Neal said.

In the cold of the car, his dried up face looked like an ancient scroll, going to pieces.

I shook my head. The memory was a blur. When my eyes focused again I saw tears streaming from Neal’s blue eyes. A wonderful performance.

“We were a team,” he said.

On the drive back to Neal’s, I thought about the Midwestern heroine in my film, her backstory and how she got so strong. She was a girl like Amber. But instead of going Amber’s route she became a survivor.

Neal wasn't wearing a seatbelt, and he had his eyes closed. I thought of crashing the car. Neal flew through the windshield, soaring to his death.

At last, he opened his eyes.

"God gave me Crohn's. All the shit with baby-mama, that's God too."

"What about your boy? He's a good thing, right?"

"God has mercy."

Back at Neal's house, he got out of the car and I rolled down the window to say goodbye. Neal bent down, so I could see his face. He asked about the money. I said he'd receive a check in the mail, within the next week.

"Once I pay you, I don't want to see you ever again."

"That's fair."

I tried to peel out, but the rental was an automatic. I got up to fifty miles an hour on my old street before slamming on the brakes at my dad's house.

That night I flew back to the land of creation. The world's biggest manufacturer of dreams. And the next day I was back at work, a Hollywood assistant like hundreds of others but different. I had stories to tell, movies to make.

I had no intention of paying Neal any hush money.

I thought of finding someone to do the job. No one was going to ruin my career. Besides, I'd be doing people a favor: Neal's poor parents as well as that little boy who probably wasn't his son.

But then Neal died, on his own. Three weeks after my visit. It was said he died of natural causes.

I came back for the funeral, and I was even a pallbearer. When they lowered him into the ground, I thought of all the fake fighting we did as kids. We never got the chance to perform at the local mall. I chose not to think about the bad times.

I went on with my life.

THE GREAT UNKNOWN

May 7, 2012

Prom is a couple weeks away and I think that Eric Han stands to do something very crazy, very dramatic, to either win her back or make her pay. From the beginning, I thought the romance ill-advised. The two started dating over a year ago. Jeana Edgerton is tall and blonde and *involved*, with a very public profile. At the time, Eric was no slouch himself. He played football and baseball and was an academic stud, scoring close to perfect on his SATs. In many quarters, the couple was well-received. Here was a united colors moment, a twenty-first-century relationship. *Your babies will be hapas!* But the Council never approved. We understood that their so-called love was a dead end, and we told him so in a meeting, out of which Eric stormed, effectively ending his membership. He was my best friend and I watched from afar as if watching a bad rom-com. For a while, they were on top of the world, sharing smiles and winning admiration. I heard that they were a lock for homecoming king and queen and that they were applying to the same colleges. The honeymoon period stretched for months causing doubt in the Council. Could this possibly work? Change the paradigm? Warp the universe? But then came the inevitable decline. They were spotted apart wearing misery on their faces. There were whispers of a break-up, but nothing concrete was known. They survived for a time. It seemed that they might emerge from this darkness, stronger and intact, but then six weeks ago the text came like a news bulletin. The couple was done.

Eric showed up to our next meeting and asked to be reinstated. I acted as lead counsel for the Council, grilling him on a number of matters. “We would like to hear the petitioner’s grounds for reinstatement,” I said.

“Has the Council ever seen a case like mine?” he asked.

At the table, heads swiveled in all directions, and there was a low rumble of voices. No one could remember a case like this.

“So it’s safe to say that there’s no precedent,” Eric said.

“I have no objection to that,” I said.

“And there’s no law or bylaw which says a member can’t leave and then come back?”

Eric was right. For all our dedication to the Council, we’d never drafted a constitution. Our bylaws were intuitive, unspoken.

We all nodded in agreement.

“So there’s nothing formal or legislative standing in my way,” Eric said.

The chingu had charisma in spades. The vote was unanimous.

So Eric was back, but we quickly discovered he was only half of the old Eric.

The fun was all gone. On Fridays, we liked to play thespian and act out the main events of the school week. We were the football players and cheerleaders, sloppy drunk and groping each other in the dark. We were the mystery perpetrators of the stink bomb in C Hall and the creepy male teachers who obviously suffered from yellow fever. Eric was once a top performer, but now he was more of a bit player, taking minor roles at which he did not excel.

Eric was clearly in a funk, and in theory I understood. It was the toll of unrequited love. I tried talking to him man to man. We’ve been best friends since we were like five. But it was like talking to a wall. So I tried another angle. I told him to

man up. He could fuck any bitch on the Council. He just needed to fuck that round-eye out of his system. Eric didn't like that angle either.

I found out he wasn't talking to anyone.

May 8

I keep a scrapbook of Korean tragedies. It's a hobby of mine. In it are newspaper clippings featuring the downfall or rock bottom of some Korean.

A few months ago, five Korean youths assaulted a Chinese guy for patronizing a Korean restaurant. The youths were members of the notorious "Asian Mafia Assassins." Police called it a hate crime.

The next three tragedies all occurred in 2006.

Dae Kwon Yun, 54, once owned a thriving business in downtown L.A.'s garment district. When the business failed, his wife filed for divorce. Mr. Yun locked himself and his two children in their SUV and then set the vehicle on fire. Ashley, 11, and Alexander, 10, both died. Mr. Yun escaped with burns on 75 percent of his body. He now sits on Death Row.

Boon Joo Lee, 40, was the architect of a murder-suicide. The resident of Fontana, California, shot and killed his 5-year-old daughter Iris. Then he turned the gun on himself. The man was basically a degenerate gambler who saw no way out. Reportedly, he owed \$200,000.

In a Los Angeles suburb, Sang In Kim, 55, shot his wife, young son and teenage daughter. Then he killed himself. Somehow, the daughter survived. Police were still working to uncover a motive.

Then there's the granddaddy of them all.

On April 16, 2007, a deranged senior at Virginia Tech murdered 32 people on campus. Twenty-five others were wounded. The lone gunman Seung-Hui Cho was a Korean immigrant who sent a package containing photographs, video recordings and a written manifesto to NBC News. Cho blamed his actions on “rich kids,” “debauchery,” and “deceitful charlatans.” Before he could be apprehended, Cho shot himself in the head.

May 9

With prom coming up, I have everything under control. My tux is rented, the limo reserved, the corsage purchased. Most importantly, the Council all chipped in for a suite at the Sheraton where we will pre- and post-party.

My date is my girlfriend Rachel Park, a Council member too, of course. We have been in love since freshman year. Rachel is short and pretty with plenty of attitude, a wicked sense of humor. She’s smart in every subject, a good girl with a fair sprinkling of bad. By last count, we’ve had sex over three hundred times. Her mother is a butterball, astonishing. She eats tremendous amounts of food, American food included, which must explain her physique. I have heard that the mother is a mirror to the daughter or at least a preview. I don’t want to be married to a doong doong, but it’s expected by now. Our families are basically family. We get together for all the major holidays and go to the same church. It’s a goddamn festival of bowing when we get together. I get vertigo from all the bowing.

Rachel and I are both scheduled to attend UCLA in the fall. All the Koreans at school are either going to UCLA (You See Lotsa Asians), UCI or Harvard. There’s a few headed to community college or no college at all, and everyone feels sorry for their

families. But I feel kind of excited for them. I wonder what it would be like to face the great unknown, sans college. Sometimes I fantasize about dropping out. Leaving Rachel. A life of adventure. That's what the Council was supposed to be about. I wanted us to do wayward things. Instead, we act out the drama at school and hang out at Starbucks.

May 10

Three weeks ago, I gave a sophomore the task of following Eric. Ben Hwang desperately wants to be inducted into the Council. He does not know that I will dissolve the Council at the end of the year. I told Hwang to follow Eric's every move after school lets out. I knew Hwang was involved with after-school activities like math club, but he didn't object or mention a thing. Instead, he called me brother and even bowed at my request. "Hyeong-ah," he said, "should I keep a log of his movements?"

"Do I even have to answer that?"

A week later, Hwang handed me a leather journal, the fancy kind from Barnes and Noble. I disappeared at lunch and read the journal in my car. I was floored.

On Tuesday, Eric spent two hours at a shooting range in Brea. On Wednesday, he drove to a Dick's Sporting Goods and left with a large plastic bag of stuff. Then he went back to the shooting range. On Thursday, Eric visited a gun shop before going for more shooting practice. Friday was apparently an off day. He went to the mall where he bought a pair of shoes and drank an Orange Julius. I chastised Hwang for failing to do his job over the weekend. Didn't he think that that would be a good time for gathering intel? Hwang didn't protest, just hung his head. Then I chastised him for not coming to me with this sooner. This was important shit!

“Don’t tell anyone about Eric,” I said. “I mean it. Do you want to be a member of the Council?”

“Yes.”

“This stays between us.”

On one level, I worry that Hwang will go to the principal or something. All of us students attended an assembly at the start of the year. The powers-that-be said it was our moral and legal obligation to report cases of cyber-bullying. We were also to be held accountable for reporting incidents of “suspicious behavior” by our fellow classmates. But there’s no way in hell I would report Eric. For one thing, he’s my boy. We’ve been best friends since we were like five. In the end, I don’t think Hwang would snitch either. He could care less about his obligations. He wants to be a part of the Council and that’s it.

Here’s another reason I wouldn’t say a thing. I’m curious to see what Eric will do.

May 10 (continued)

In one picture, Seung-Hui Cho looks like your average gook kid. Pretty nerdy. It doesn’t look like he gives a second thought to his hair or general appearance. He’s wearing glasses and has an expression that’s part sullen, part intense. His forehead is greasy and pimply. He has a fat bottom lip which looks to have herpes on it. He looks about as far away from a psychopath as you can get.

In the photos he sent to NBC, he’s a changed person. Definitely psychopath material. The face is fatter, the glasses gone. In one picture, his head is shaven, and he looks disgusted and angry as he points a Glock at his head. In another pic, he’s got the

same expression but he's wearing a black baseball cap, turned backward. He's wearing a tan vest, black gloves and he's pointing two handguns at targets off-camera.

Now that I think about it, he also reminds me of a little kid that's about to cry.

From what I read, he was pretty isolated and didn't have friends. He wasn't close to his family. You could almost feel sorry for the namja until you remembered the murders and weird behavior.

At Virginia Tech, Cho freaked out the females by taking cellphone pics of their legs underneath their desks. He was kicked out of English for scaring the shit out of everyone with his violent stories, poems and plays. In class, he tried to hide away by wearing sunglasses and his hoodie over his head. Classmates called him the "Question Mark Kid" because he once wrote "?" on a sign-up sheet where he was supposed to put his name.

He paid an unwelcome visit to a co-ed after chatting with her on IM and then told an acquaintance that the girl had "promiscuity in her eyes." The campus police warned him about stalking.

Cho was even hospitalized because he was thought to be a danger to himself and others.

My um ma cried in shame when she heard about the killings. Cho was a blight on Koreans everywhere.

His clippings take up about half of my scrapbook.

May 11

Growing up, Eric Han played Halo and Call of Duty but wasn't addicted. He never talked about guns and wasn't a violent person. He was big and athletic for a gook

but he wasn't aggressive. He didn't impose his will on others or me, even when I begged him to do it. I had testosterone myself and wanted to wrestle, but he was never in the mood. He'd throw me off him like I was nothing, a plastic bag.

Our friendship was really harmed by a couple of things. In ninth grade, I started dating Rachel when I knew he had a crush on her. He'd talked about her since like seventh grade, but he was hardly the stud he is now. He was gawky and geeky, with pimples. He didn't start growing until the end of eighth grade and didn't really fill out till tenth. It was a stunning transformation. One of those ugly duckling things except it happened to a guy. I didn't really think about his feelings when it came through the grapevine that Rachel liked me. He finally confronted me about it by text, using the word "betrayal." There was no contrition on my part. I can be an asshole, especially via text. For close to an hour, we went back and forth, lobbing grenades. My fingers worked away like I was an old-fashioned secretary. It got pretty bad. Threats were made. He said he would give me a beating for the ages. I said that I would put both him and his family in the hospital. Eric said he would "fuk ur family 4 generations." It got ridiculous. Looking back, it kind of gives me the chills.

I stopped short of saying that Rachel wouldn't have given him a second look anyway.

I'm pretty sure that's changed. If I had a dollar for every time she's made mention of his "new" physique, I'd have a fair amount of don. It used to bother me.

It's strange and mysterious how we got past our troubles. I don't remember either one of us saying sorry. There was no sit-down. This was before the Council got created.

But it's what guys do. We don't make a big show of things when it comes to apologies or reconciliation or birthdays. Anything really.

But we weren't ever the same after that. Even the birth of the Council sophomore year couldn't resurrect our friendship. I thought there might be some kind of power struggle but it turned out he was happy to play the subordinate. His athletic career was taking off. So was his overall popularity, which kind of got under my skin.

The other event I've gone over. Eric started dating Jeana Edgerton junior year. Before it was even brought to the Council as an item of business, we fought about it. We were older and didn't use our phones as weapons this time.

"She doesn't have your best interests at heart," I said.

"How would you know?"

"I just know."

"You don't know anything."

"She's doing this for herself."

"What could she possibly gain? She's already one of the most popular girls in school."

"Maybe. But this puts her on the next level. A higher level," I said.

"What do you mean by 'this'?"

"Dating you."

"You mean, dating a Korean?"

"It's not right. It can't work."

"You sound like my fucking parents," Eric said.

"Hyeong-ah, our parents know what's good for us."

“Don’t call me ‘brother.’ I’m not your brother.”

I told him about Jeana’s plan to sweep the awards her senior year. Her goal was to do the double: win both homecoming queen and prom queen. She told friends that dating an ethnic was her “ace.” This bit of gossip was making the rounds.

“You’re lying,” he said.

“I’m telling you the truth.”

It was a lie, of course. I said I wasn’t the only Council member who’d heard this about Jeana. Then I promptly forgot that I’d made the claim. Eric brought it up at the next meeting, even though it wasn’t on the agenda. I tried to stop him, but he stood up and banged a fist on one of the tables. We hold all our meetings at a Barnes and Noble cafe where we push some tables together to make one big table. At the pounding of his fist, coffee cups bounced up and down. Eric wanted to know about the gossip. What was being said about his relationship with Jeana? The others looked at him all moon-faced as if staring up at a rampaging Godzilla.

Their silence seemed to be enough, seemed an answer of some kind, and Eric stormed out of Barnes and Noble. I was furious. No one walks out on the Council. I followed him to the parking lot: “You can’t just walk out.”

Eric gave me a look as if he could give a fuck. Then he started to get in his car, a piece of shit Corolla, the color of piss.

“There has to be a vote,” I said.

“A vote on what?”

“Your relationship with Jeana.”

Eric got out of the car like a crazy chimp with fangs bared. A goddamned sucker punch caught me square in the mouth. When I stood up, I had all my wits because the punch wasn't all that. I tasted blood watching him peel out of the parking lot.

May 14

I was supposed to meet up with Rachel after school, but I followed Eric instead. First he went to Thorogood Baptist Church where I guess he was praying to the god of war. Then he drove far and away to Koreatown, right next to downtown L.A., where I guess he wanted to act like some gaungpay, smoking and posing. I paid to park in the same strip mall where he got out of his car, but I stayed in mine, watched him go inside a kalbi joint. I couldn't see inside the glass because it was tinted or something. As I waited, the parking attendant came over, a hadabogee wearing a blue security uniform that looked like it would fall off his bag of bones. He spoke in Korean and I held up my hands like a retard. "I don't speak!" I said.

Eventually he went away.

Eric came out looking real pleased with himself and here's the thing. He didn't come out alone. The bitch was pretty, I'll give him that, with shiny black hair and nearly as tall as him. He put his arm around her shoulder and they were joined by a namja with a spiky faux hawk and sunglasses. They all lit cigarettes. I didn't know these people. They all got in the girl's blue BMW 335i and I followed them down Olympic to another strip mall where parking was a bitch. I parked on the street at a meter and saw them vanish inside a karaoke place. I wouldn't be caught dead at karaoke but I got out of the car anyway. I was tired of playing the waiting game.

Inside the place, a disco ball fired these silver streams of light, and for a second I was blinded. When my vision cleared, I saw an old harmony at the front desk. I couldn't believe they let her be the face of the business, but then the disco ball blinded me again. I closed my eyes then opened them, and at the desk now was a young thing and I felt even more disoriented, like the victim of a magic trick. "Can I help you?" she said in Korean.

I pointed down a corridor as if I were meeting friends. Then I walked down the corridor, which had closed doors on either side. Behind those doors was awful singing. I didn't know what I was doing. If Eric saw me, I'd have to shout "What a coincidence!" My heart was beating fast and when I made it to the end of the corridor I thought about going to the unisex bathroom but then turned around. I stared at the floor because I didn't want to be blinded by the disco ball again.

Waiting in my car, I wasn't hungry or tired. I didn't even need to piss. When they finally came out, the trio was like a bad beer commercial, all laughing and buddy-buddy.

I thought about going home, but something inside told me to keep going.

They drove back to Eric's car then both cars headed back east on the 10, then the 60. My bodily functions kicked in. I was hungry, thirsty and needed to piss, all at once. I was also sleepy.

I watched my exit pass by. They took the 57 and soon we were in Pomona, winding up a residential road in a cookie cutter suburb. They turned and I turned and we were on a dead-end street, a court. They circled around the court and I panicked because I was afraid of being spotted. Eric knew my car. Quickly I pulled to the curb, shut off

the headlights, and then hunkered down as they passed me and parked at the curb at the corner house.

After they went inside I turned the car around and parked on their side of the street for a better view. The house was nothing special and neither was the neighborhood. The lawn was patchy with grass. The house was white stucco or adobe and only a single story.

I got antsy because my bladder was full. I started looking for places to piss. The neighborhood wasn't exactly full of options, no bushes or trees, and the houses didn't really throw any long shadows. I searched my car, a mess, and holy Jesus there was one of those plastic water bottles you take to the gym. The kind with the plastic that gives you cancer. I didn't even think twice. I unbuckled my belt, wiggled my jeans down.

The bottle got warm as it filled up. When I was done, I opened the car door and poured out the contents.

Waiting there, I got calls and texts from all sources. I let the calls go to voicemail then listened. My um ma was panicking. Where was I? Why didn't I come home for dinner? Was I okay? Was I dead on the side of the road? Rachel called too and didn't sound happy about my disappearance. Her texts were short and blunt. *Need 2 talk bout prom. Where the hell r u?* What was there to talk about? We'd been preparing for this stupid night for months. The keejabay was a perfectionist, and I thought about the college girls that would be less than perfect, stumbling drunk in the dark, getting some frat boy's jizz in their hair. Ben Hwang texted too and wanted to know about the surveillance. Should he continue tomorrow? I saw him standing before me as still and straight as a new soldier, and I thought of smacking his face, screaming at him.

I was dozing when a door slammed. I snapped awake and looked toward the house where Eric's yeo ja was suddenly rushing across the lawn, looking like an actress in a horror movie. Was I dreaming this? In the moonlight, her hair did not look so shiny anymore. It was standing up somehow, as if she'd stuck a finger in a light socket. The girl was carrying her jeans in her hand. She was half naked, in her panties. She got to the passenger side of the BMW and looked ready to dive through the window, but then she paused, took a step toward the front end of the car and then screamed like a banshee at the house. She hurried inside the car, sped out of the court.

I glanced at my phone. It was just past midnight.

A moment later, Eric was standing outside, fully clothed, a cigarette dangling from his mouth.

May 15

I dreamed last night...actually I don't think it was a dream. I was in that in between state, neither awake nor sleeping, and I saw me and Eric arrive at prom in our tuxes with guns drawn, spraying bullets everywhere.

May 17

What goes through the head of a kid like that? Seung-Hui Cho saw everyone on campus in the flower of their youth. They were going to parties, hooking up, planning for their adult lives, and he was outside of that, brooding in his dorm suite, writing a play about a kid that kills his molester stepfather. He didn't want to be seen by anyone. What was it that he didn't want people to see?

Maybe he should have started his own Council.

Cho saw the world as a corrupt and decadent place where the strong preyed on the weak.

I pretended to look at the world through his eyes. Every person a threat, even your family members. Every person saw you as a piece of meat to be negotiated, mostly pushed out of the way or ignored. People were not civilized. They were animals. The place to be was a mountaintop with a stockpile of weapons, with a machine gun nest on all sides, pointed at the slopes below.

Or you could wage all-out war. Shove the illusions aside. You and I are not friends. Let's not play games. Cho was tired of pretending. He couldn't get what he wanted: the respect and warmth and adoration. So he destroyed them all.

May 22

Prom was a few days ago. We all met at Michelle Lee's giant house where we posed for pictures like Hollywood stars. Rachel wore a shiny, aqua-colored dress and she almost looked like a different girl. Eric was there for the pictures, a Korean Adonis, smiling and looking happy and all the assembled um mas doted on him. They felt terrible that he didn't have a date. Many of them offered themselves up then roared with laughter.

The limo was a goddamn tank, one of those Hummer limos you could ride into war. We all got in and drove to the Sheraton. The namjas had flasks of different things: vodka, whiskey and rum. The flasks got passed around and the bitches made ugly faces when they took a drink. The make-up on their faces made them look grotesque.

The suite was gigantic and everyone took turns twirling in that immense space and saying how great it was. In that moment, I could see them all as old folks or middle-

aged and boring. I kept watching Eric's hands. Would they reach inside his tux for a Glock or a grenade? No, it wouldn't happen there.

In the suite, there was an entertainment system where you could plug in your iPod. Music began to play, a "prom" mix full of hip-hop and party tunes. The Council danced, making a fair amount of noise, but I didn't join in. I saw the sweat forming on brows and didn't want to get all nasty before the real event. I didn't want swamp ass. A Council member's older brother showed up with plenty of booze to fuel the evening. I tapped my foot and sipped from a Solo cup half-full of Captain Morgan and Coke.

I watched Eric's every move.

Rachel danced with the girls, forming a circle in the middle of the suite. Then she slid over and danced with Tom Shin who was happy to put his hands all over her. Rachel giggled, didn't stop him.

Once or twice, she pointed at me all come hither, but I shook my head no and she pouted. When she realized I wasn't going to come over she got that look, which I knew by now. It was a promise to make my night a living hell.

Thank God the pre-party came to an end. Everybody freshened up then we left the hotel at six.

There was laughter and excitement and general frenzy in that limo. I told them it was important to make a certain kind of entrance. We had a reputation to uphold.

Instead of having prom in the banquet room of some classy hotel, the school had decided to step into a time machine. Prom was being held at the school gymnasium, as if it were the 1950s. Budget cuts had something to do with it. In spite of all the decorations, we would know we were trapped on school grounds.

As we waited in front of the school for our turn, idiots stumbled out of limos and fist-pumped the air. When the Council got out, we were all smiles and totally dignified. I wondered if I'd ever get the chance to praise them.

Photographers off to the side snapped our picture like it was the goddamn Oscars. The pictures would be available for purchase at the end of the night. We walked across school grounds to the gym, bathed in daylight. "It's perfect so far," Rachel said, "except for one thing." She was wrapped around my arm and very close. "Why didn't you dance with me?"

"I was saving it for later."

I imagined the suspicion on her face but didn't look. As we drew closer to the gym, my heart started to race.

At the gym entrance were metal detectors and a couple of security guards: a male and female. No way Eric would make it through carrying a gun, even a knife.

I almost lunged at him to let him know, to warn him, but of course he could see for himself. He didn't look nervous or frustrated, like the world was crashing down. He looked calm, like Eric.

He went through security first. The metal detector did not squeal, and the pat-down produced nothing.

It confused me but then we were all inside the half-dark gym. The prom committee had transformed the place. Clusters of balloons hung from the rafters and the walls had been covered with an indigo satiny material, which covered the scoreboard too. The basketball goals were decorated with streamers and balloons, and special lighting had been installed. You could see these multi-colored beams of light hitting the wood

floor. Tables and chairs had been set up for those who didn't want to dance or needed a rest. A DJ was pretty invisible in one corner of the gym, currently spinning a Nicki Minaj song that I hated with all my heart.

Of course, there was a staging area for pictures, with a background curtain full of glitter, stars and the words "Prom 2012."

We headed there first, joining the line of well-dressed cattle. I lost Eric to the crowd, and I craned my neck looking for him. "What're you doing?" Rachel asked.

"Nothing," I said and she gave me that look.

We took our picture then were free to roam.

"Let's get some punch!" Rachel said and we went to the table where they were dishing out tropical punch from a crystal bowl. A middle-aged parent was at the helm flanked by a security guard. On such a momentous night, they were clearly worried about contamination.

The punch was too sweet.

The whole time I was looking for Eric. Then I spotted Jeana Edgerton, and I hated the bitch but had to admit she looked stunning in her purple gown. She looked from another world or at least another century. Her hair was all done up in blonde curls, and as she passed through the crowd, no one could keep their eyes off her.

Eric was behind her, to her left. I thought: now is the moment. But nothing happened.

Jeana's date was by her side. Frank Knox was on the basketball team, tall but not very handsome. Not very smart either. He was just an accessory walking around with a dazed look on his face, like a regular joe who somehow gets the diva.

Everyone started to dance. This would normally be my cue to head for the bleachers, but I wanted to keep an eye on Eric who was in the thick of things. Rachel's face lit up when I stayed right beside her. She's a dancer and so she started to do her moves all around me, like I was some version of a stripper pole. For my part, I must have looked like a guy having a seizure, and normally I would have been self-conscious as hell, checking to make sure I wasn't being laughed at. But I was too caught up in surveillance to care.

Eric and Jeana were perfect really. Good-looking and smart and athletic. Charismatic. What's more, they could dance too. The dancing brought Jeana back down to earth, and she didn't look alien anymore as she glided across the dance floor. Her date tried to keep up. All over the place, people were dancing. They did the Bernie while others kicked it old school with the Dougie. Some people wobbled and some meechanomes were even popping and locking. Nerds did the Running Man. The gymnasium felt like a sauna. We'd gotten all dressed up to sweat like pigs.

When Rachel grabbed my face and stuck her tongue down my throat I almost gagged. "I love you!" she said.

"Ditto!"

There was a dance circle now with Jeana currently in the middle. Eric jumped in and Frank Knox, the date, took this as a sign. He deferred, moving off to the side to let these two share the spotlight, as if it were ordained. As if this was fairy tale land.

There's nothing else to compare it to. They were like animals doing a mating dance. The crowd loved it, but I was confused. There was no animosity in Eric's face.

He was a guy in love and Jeana seemed that way too, and I wondered if they'd planned all this. Performance artists.

The song changed to Adele's "Someone Like You," and people began to slow dance. Rachel threw her arms around my neck and pressed herself close, and since we're basically the same height her face was in the way, blocking my view of the reunited couple. I guided her hips, pivoting, then looked off to the side at Eric and Jeana in a lovers' embrace. Frank Knox was in the shadows looking stunned, awkward and half-witted.

"Look at me," Rachel said and I knew she wanted to have one of those moments to remember for the rest of her life. In four or five or twenty-five years, she wanted to be able to say: "Remember when we shared that dance at prom? I looked into your slant eyes and knew you were the one."

I shivered.

"Are you cold?" Rachel asked.

I shook my head no.

"It's going to be weird in the fall," Rachel said.

"What do you mean?"

"We'll be college students, living on our own."

"That's very true," I said.

"Will you still love me?" Rachel asked and her bottom lip began to quiver. I looked away to avoid her waterworks.

Jeana rested the side of her face on Eric's broad chest, a gorgeous baby at naptime.

I looked at Rachel who'd managed to compose herself. "I will love you forever," I said.

This pressure inside me began to build as the night wore on. I waited for Eric to act, but he refused to do so. From the sidelines, I was watching the couple dance when I lost my patience. I marched up to them and took Eric by the arm, leading him to the gym foyer where it was quiet. I said, "What's going on?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why haven't you done it? Why haven't you acted?"

"It's been coming for a while," he said, "but I think you've finally lost your fucking mind."

"She broke your heart."

"You ruin tonight and I'll kill you."

I stayed in the foyer for what I thought was only a few minutes, but when Rachel found me she said I'd been missing half an hour. She was pissed.

I felt drained and when Rachel dragged me back onto the dance floor I moved like a zombie. For the rest of the night, she bitched but I couldn't really hear. I saw her lips moving but it felt like I was underwater.

To me, it was a foregone conclusion that Jeana would win, but Eric celebrated like it was the greatest upset in prom history. As they placed that fucking crown on her head, he jumped up and down then split the air with a whistle. Then he got emotional like he might cry. I turned away at that point.

It doesn't matter who won king.

April 2013

The rejuvenated couple didn't last, as I predicted. They fell apart after graduation. The bitch used Eric to build her legend, and in the end it all worked out for her. In the Fall, Jeana matriculated to USC where I'm sure she's dating a frat boy with tons of real-world potential. I tried to talk to Eric over the summer, but his mother said he didn't want any visitors. As far as I know, he isolated himself for the next three months. Then, at the end of summer, Eric joined the love of his life at USC. A bonehead move. An act of masochism.

In October, the detectives showed up at my dorm. By this time, Rachel and I were both at UCLA. The detectives looked pretty ridiculous sitting on my roommate's unmade bed, asking questions about Eric Han.

"Is he dead?" I asked.

"Why do you say that?"

He was missing.

If he left on purpose, he'd taken nothing with him, no change of clothes. His suitcase and backpack were still in his dorm room. For the next hour, I told the detectives everything I knew. I left out prom and Ben Hwang's surveillance journal. An article about Eric appeared in our local paper. Then, a few weeks later, the *L.A. Times* picked up the story.

I added both to my scrapbook of Korean tragedies.

It's spring now and he still hasn't turned up. I see Eric traveling across the country, making sense of his life. While he's doing that, I'm stuck in college where

everything feels wrong. I stay in my room mostly. I flip through my scrapbook. I haven't been to class in a week.

It's hard to see the point. Everything here is how I thought it would be. The fakers with their weapon, the smile. At the weekend, there's drinking and drama and fucking. No one is ashamed. Then it's back to the books. Two different people in the same body. Maybe three if you count the person at home, bowing and praying.

Rachel won't leave me alone, keeps blowing up my phone with calls and texts, and she's knocked on my door but I haven't let her in. I could break up with her but it would set off a chain reaction. The families would get involved and I would have to smash my phone, but even that would do no good. The mothers would come here, and I would have to deal with all their voices at once.

April 2013

The detectives are coming to see me again. Who knows if I'll be around?

Leaving the Union today I looked at the sky and this white cloud was in the shape of Eric's face, the same jaw and cheekbones. It followed me all the way to Dykstra.