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THE DOOR-TO-DOOR MORMON PEST CONTROL SALESMAN:

A NOVEL

by

John Charles Gilmore

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

English

Approved:

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Logan, Utah

2011

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## ABSTRACT

The Door-to-Door Mormon Pest Control Salesman: A Novel

by

John Charles Gilmore, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2011

Major Professor: Christopher Cokinos  
Department: English

This thesis consists of a critical introduction followed by a novel told in twenty-five chapters. The novel begins in the first person with the eighteen-year-old protagonist Kirtland Grant beginning a summer job as a door-to-door pest control salesman in Florida. Trained using Mormon missionary techniques, his office of relocated Utah boys, all of them Mormon, dodge angry homeowners and evade police in gated communities while insects root the brand-new houses from below and corrupt banking pushes the region toward collapse.

With his departure date for a two-year Mormon mission looming at summer's end, Kirt delves into Mormon doctrine and attempts to solidify his spiritual faith through a salesman's experiment in finding God.

As Kirt redoubles his efforts in faith and in sales in order to earn enough money to fund his mission, he finds himself in ethically dubious positions and comes to understand the questionable practices of the company for whom he has been selling. He simultaneously struggles to comprehend his own sexuality, and a sexual run-in with a

young woman, which Kirt interprets as serious sin, triggers additional trauma and spiritual flailing. God does not commune with Kirt in any way Kirt can comprehend, and as the novel ends he is beaten, alone, but nevertheless, alive. Perhaps most critically, he has effectively quit his position in the pest control company and made a failed attempt at reconnecting with the young woman.

The novel is an embodiment of the nature of belief, and examines our reliance on each other's faith to prop up our own, whether it be faith in housing markets, pest control products, or God.

(247 pages)

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

This thesis engages readers in a story about contemporary Mormonism. It is a novel that follows a fictional Mormon man engaged in a quirky summer job: door-to-door sales. The Mormon characters in this novel encounter a collapsing Florida housing market that stalls their efforts at peddling pesticide, while the main character experiences serious doubts in his personal religious faith.

Though Mormons are a small fraction of the United States' population, they have drawn considerable interest from the American public in recent years, in large part due to the success of the 2011 musical *The Book of Mormon* and the 2008 and 2012 presidential bids of Mitt Romney (who is a Mormon).

The national conversation about Mormonism indicates great interest in the religion, but there has been very little dialogue between the Mormon Church and this interested public. The true nature of Mormonism is that of any religion: official spiritual doctrines put forward by the Church compete with every adherent's personal practice of these doctrines, and among adherents one finds a broad range of ideologies.

I believe that it is the Mormon people's role to bring the complexity of their religion and their culture into this national conversation, and, having been raised Mormon, I aim to do just that with this novel. The expansive form of a novel provides the depth and breadth necessary to convey the complexity and the contradictions encompassed by Mormonism, and the plot in this novel carries readers through those complexities while engaging them with an interesting story. If readers, having completed the novel, feel less confident of simplistic views of Mormonism, I'll have succeeded in my aims to communicate the complexity of this American religion to the public.

## PREFACE

### 1. THESIS TOPIC

This thesis takes the form of a novel. The narration alternates chapter-by-chapter between first-person in the past tense to omniscient third-person in the present tense.

First-person narrator Kirtland Grant is eighteen years old and has been stationed in Tampa, Florida, with an office of Mormon boys to sell pest control contracts door-to-door. When he arrives he is planning to serve a Mormon mission at the end of the summer, but throughout the summer he has a crisis of faith.

The interaction of the Mormon boys within this novel provides a portrait of contemporary Mormon masculinity and also highlights the struggle of faith among present-day mainstream Mormons. Beneath the characters is a collapsing housing market, and because the vast majority of their sales are made to new homeowners in new homes, the boys are brought into the thick of the Florida housing implosion, seeing firsthand as entire communities go underwater and the banks begin to physically strip occupants and their property. The relationship between the pest control industry, the salesman's Mormonism, and the housing market is pivotal to the story: the novel is a layering of bubbles of belief—a successful salesman's company-imposed belief in product, the boys' culturally-imposed belief in Mormon theology, and the American economic and commercial beliefs that led to the housing crash. In this novel, Kirtland Grant experiences the implosion of all three bubbles and is faced with moral decisions as to what course of action to take. The layering of these three systems of belief provides a new angle on each for Kirt and for readers.

Another principal theme is that of interconnectedness and individuality. A hive

mentality imposed by successful salesmen upon those around them (whether coworkers, employees, or potential customers) functions as an illumination of the group mentality among religious believers and points to the irrationality of some of the culturally accepted beliefs of American capitalism. Actual insect behavior, critical to the pest control plot, serves as another reflection and contrast of these issues.

The novel provides a sympathetic and a complicated perspective of modern Mormonism and functions as a portrait of the loss of morality experienced in salesmanship through the justifications made by those who would push something unnecessary (a large home or a pest control contract) on another person. The novel questions our acceptance of technologies like pesticide, critiques our tendency to equate money with moral correctness, and highlights the subtlety of an individual's moral decline and the relationship between individual greed and systemic exploitation.

The form of the novel is slightly nontraditional. It uses a structural strategy similar to that employed in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), the novel I was re-reading when the central themes for this thesis first entered my mind. Kirt's first-person chapters alternate as mentioned with nonlinear, roaming chapters told by a faceless narrator, which give universal scope to the story and introduces the reader to information Kirt may not have. The abstract nature of these chapters heightens the relationship between the bugs and the boys and the culture at large, and implies that the specific story of Kirt is only a narrative through which a larger cultural tale is being focused.

These interchapters stay a slight step ahead of Kirt's narrative, serving sometimes as a foreshadowing of events for the salesmen, and other times as an indication that



events leading up to the housing-market crash happen mostly without the boys in the narrative being aware, and lastly to imply that our individual narratives are echoed in our culture whether we are conscious of it or not. To balance a slightly nontraditional form, the central salesman's plot is linear and driving. The timeline of the story is constrained on the one end by Kirt's arrival in Florida and on the other by his impending missionary date-of-departure.

## 2. LITERARY REVIEW

In a review of Brady Udall's *The Lonely Polygamist* for the online magazine *Slate*, David Haglund examines the debate over Mormon literature launched by early Mormon authority Orson F. Whitney, who, in an 1888 speech, predicted that the Mormons would "yet have Miltons and Shakespeares of our own." Haglund, managing editor of the journal *Pen America* and poetry editor of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, believes that "a great Mormon writer might change how the religion is perceived in the wider culture."

"If that writer drew on his own background in his work," Haglund adds, "—a Mormon Phillip Roth, say, rather than a Mormon Shakespeare—he could help humanize a group of people regarded by many as peculiar."

Haglund skirts slightly the issue of whether Brady Udall's recent *The Lonely Polygamist* as a candidate for Great Mormon Novel, suggesting that Udall doesn't wish to be thought of as a Mormon writer (Udall stated as much in an interview published in *Mormonstoday.com* [Udall]), while praising Udall's adroit craft and successful humanization of his polygamist characters. Whatever Udall's view on the subject, I can't

help wondering if his hesitation with being branded a Mormon writer stems from the tendency we who were raised Mormon before "leaving the Church" have to continually define ourselves as "not Mormon." In other words, even having left the Mormon Church, many of us still use its bipolar framework to define ourselves.

As *The Lonely Polygamist* is centered on a non-mainstream quadrant of Mormonism, it does not feel like what I might call a Mormon novel. It's true that many of the experiences of the polygamist youth—their censored vocabulary, their interaction with a large quantity of brothers and sisters, their occasional invisibility (for better or worse) to their parents—are quite relatable to a reader who grew up in suburban Utah in a family of ten. But *The Lonely Polygamist* still felt like an exploration of the fringe of my culture, as polygamy has so little to do with the contemporary Mormon experience.

Haglund argues that HBO's *Big Love* also does well to humanize polygamists, and in fact goes further than Udall's book in introducing viewers to mainstream Mormon culture by including much of the culture that surrounds the polygamist family followed in the series. I agree. But I also believe that both *Big Love* and *The Lonely Polygamist* may, on balance, convolute outsiders' understanding of the mainstream Mormon experience due to the two works' emphases on the Mormon fringe. The mainstream Mormonism exhibited on the sidelines of *Big Love* and *The Lonely Polygamist*, while accurately conveyed (leading to inside jokes for a reader or viewer raised in Mormon culture), is set as antagonistic to the polygamist protagonists. Though the antagonism of contemporary Mormonism toward polygamists is thus well explored, the complicated portrait of contemporary Mormonism is missing.

Frankly, there is a hole where a Mormon literary tradition could be. The religion,

despite having fourteen million members on the roles—and being founded by a book, no less—has lacked any significant literary representation. Mormon writers of genre fiction like Stephanie Meyer or Orson Scott Card have each failed to be taken seriously by the literary world, and writers who stay within the Mormon genre—that is, Mormons writing books about and for LDS readers—justifiably go unnoticed by the world outside of Mormonism. Writers peering in on Mormon culture, as John Krakauer did in *Under the Banner of Heaven* (2003), may capture particular Mormon threads perfectly, but fail to convey the entire experience (as that is not their intent).

Udall seems to me a strong example of the contemporary Mormon literary writer, even if he hasn't chosen to accept the title, and in spite of his decision not to take contemporary Mormon culture as a central theme in his novels. A few other Mormon writers have garnered notice in the literary world, including Brian Evenson, perhaps best known for his resignation from Brigham Young University over pressures from administration and students following the publication of his literary-horror *Altmann's Tongue* (1996). A profile in *The Believer* describes Evenson's writing as "Cormac McCarthy's Appalachian novels perversely bred with a Donald Barthelme yarn and fed raw to Gordon Lish" (Ehrenreich). Evenson is quoted in the profile as saying that "Religion and morality, if present at all" in his works, "are present in the reader's recognition of their absence." While I suspect that the anti-morality approach in Evenson's writing could be bred from a Mormon upbringing, I don't believe his literary horror experiments capture the Mormon experience—at least, not all of it.

One-time Mormon Walter Kirn published *Mission To America* in 2005, which pertains to the dying out of a small cult and their proselytizing efforts—a plotline that

draws obvious parallels to Mormonism both historically and today. The *New Yorker* noted that Kirn's cult members come across as "silly," introduced "only to illustrate the various themes" ("Mission to America"). It may be that Kirn's attempt at a critique suffered for his failure to humanize his cult, an easy mistake to make when the American audience is biased toward seeing Mormonism as humorous and odd. Terry Gross aired a 2005 *Fresh Air* in which *Mission to America* was described as "rooted in Kirn's personal experience," but the same radio interview (accessed here as an online transcription) notes that Kirn remained a member of the Mormon church for only "several years" after his family converted when he was twelve. The publication of the novel—several decades after Kirn's brief foray into the religion—perhaps illustrates the extent to which the peculiarities Mormonism can influence a creative mind. But again, the pattern of focusing on particular fringe elements of Mormonism emerges: In *Mission to America*, the cultish characters serve as a comment on Mormonism's historical absurdity, not its contemporary complexity.

Playwright and screenwriter Neil LaBute is a BYU graduate who has since left the Mormon Church, but the Church first limited his membership following the premier of his play, *Bash: Latter-Day Plays* (1999), in which Mormons commit atrocious crimes and calmly explain them to the audience. His 1997 film *In the Company of Men* seems to seek a more nuanced evil within human nature. A 1998 interview with LaBute noted:

As LaBute sees it, he's not creating reprehensible characters, he's merely giving voice to the unspoken. He takes those unflattering qualities we all share but somehow manage to suppress, amplifies them, and spreads them large as life across the screen. (Dickson)

The interviewer then writes that LaBute "used one word to describe his worldview: 'Despair'"; but Labute then defends his worldview as "skepticism, not

cynicism.” In a 2006 interview with Neal Conan on *Talk of the Nation*, Labute again defends himself as a skeptic, rather than a misogynist (as he’d been accused by critics). If it is LaBute’s skepticism that inspires the dark stories he writes, I wonder if it might be a skepticism adopted in recognition of the gap between the ideal cultures like Mormonism espouse and the faulty reality of those cultures. There is no doubt that the contemporary narrative of Mormonism involves a precarious balance on the edge of doubt, and it could be said that having been fooled once, many one-time believing Mormons adopt a barrier of skepticism. I think LaBute brushes at the heart of the contemporary Mormon experience with his skepticism, but it seems apparent, again, that his intent is not to capture the entire Mormon story. Despite the deserved literary attention LaBute and other Mormon writers have attained, the nuanced, complex Mormon narrative has simply not been written for the worldwide literary audience.

In 2003, Mormon academics John Rector and Kirsten Rector published an article confronting this issue. “Why haven’t we experienced a world-class flowering of LDS art and scholarship[?]” the writers ask (36). They note that Jews, while making up only about .2 percent of the world’s population—comparable in size to the Mormon population—hold over 17% percent of Nobel Prizes, and that while Catholics are underrepresented in their winning of Nobel and Pulitzer prizes (protestants are over-represented), Mormons don’t make a blip on the screen (36). “Are there factors inherent within LDS culture,” the authors ask, “which might impact academic and artistic accomplishment?” (36).

Intriguingly, the authors discover that

fully 17% of all Nobel Prizes have been awarded to individuals of Jewish background. Yet, not one of those prizes has been awarded to an Orthodox Jew. Orthodoxy in and of itself is unlikely to be the sole cause of this difference in achievement, but the disparity is striking. (40)

I disagree with the authors: I believe it may be orthodoxy in and of itself that causes the stifling of artistic achievement necessary to create the sort of great art that unorthodox Jews have created. Chaim Potok offered a 1986 lecture to the Southern College of Seventh-day Adventists that may provide some ideas as to the cause of the lack of artistic movements arising from orthodoxy. He discusses the reality of Jews being raised in tight knit communities, and the necessary cultural clash between orthodox belief and exterior cultural realities in his undeniably great literature:

When individuals are brought up in the heart of such a community or culture, they learn and commit themselves to its values. They usually understand the problems inside that community and are willing to cope with those problems. They see the world through the systems of values of that unique community. At the same time however, they experience important ideas or values that come to them from the general world outside their community. These ideas come to them from the core, the heart of that general world. When a person finds his or her own inherited values to be in conflict with those of the general culture, he or she experiences what I have come to call "core-core culture confrontation." All of my books are an attempt to explore the dimensions of this kind of confrontation. ... Do you throw out [scientific] truths in order to maintain our uniqueness, our allegiance to our particular "core"? ("On Being Proud of Uniqueness")

Potok's *The Chosen* (1967) was my introduction to Judaism. As a high school student, I couldn't have known that Potok's themes would play out among myself and some of my Mormon friends. Obviously the two religious groups have distinct differences, namely that Judaism is an ethnicity; but in the sense of which Chaim Potok speaks of community, the two religions run intriguing parallels. Some among my peer group ended up serving Mormon missions, marrying in the Mormon Temple, and continuing in Mormonism. On the other hand, others, like myself, despite growing up an extremely devout Mormon (a friend once dubbed my family "Hasidic Mormon"),

developed serious doubts about God and then the Mormon church and, through studying the sciences, adopted a belief system that lacked any of my former's supernaturalism. While in the middle of this "core-core confrontation" between my upbringing and secular truths, I experienced the sort of tension Potok's characters are caught up in. I believe this is the narrative required from Mormon culture: the exploration of the tension between secular truths and our unique religious core. The Mormon novel, rather than heightening stereotypes about the religion, rather than retelling a story of Mormon faith for other believers (and rather than spinning a story of teenaged vampires), must capture the most complex elements of contemporary Mormonism. This requires the novel to focus squarely on the conflict within the religion between individual beliefs and community beliefs, and the tension between community core and secular truths. The novel must avoid being simplistic either in its acceptance or rejection of the Mormon experience and Mormon faith.

Discussions among the rather vocal online Mormon community convey an argument for a more inclusive definition of the title "Mormon," especially in regards to artists and writers. A recent publication titled *Dispensation: Latter-day Fiction* is a collection of stories by "Mormon" writers published by a Mormon press, but included among them are such self-proclaimed non-practicing Mormons as Brian Evenson and Brady Udall. The editor of the collection, in a blog comment thread, makes no apologies for this (Angela H., comment on "Mormon Day At Slate"); rather, artistic and literary Mormons tend to be on the side of claiming non-orthodox Mormon writers for Mormonism—a move which would seem to be in the ballpark of claiming that non-orthodox Jews receiving Nobel prizes still qualify as Jews.

The reclaiming of such writers for Mormonism might result in an immediate flowering of Mormon art—and not just through redefining what Mormon art is. The believing Mormons have their rituals, their art, their sacred books, and their Prophets. Those of us who were a part of that community suffered a severe loss of those elements when we left the Church. To create a culture of secular Mormonism, that is, to broaden Mormonism into less-than-orthodox circles, unorthodoxy may need cultural artifacts. The shared experience among us would then strengthen our interest in and understanding of each other's art, and the growth of the body of work would strengthen a new culture. Shared experience alone, given the rather aggressive treatment of unorthodox Mormons by the Mormon establishment, is not likely to spark culture. The bridge of artistic work is almost certainly necessary.

The Mormon narrative has been controlled tightly by the Mormon orthodoxy. Mormon leadership have stifled dissent among members, have altered historical Mormon narratives to ensure they are "faith promoting," and have even arranged to purchase and bury documents that alter the established narrative. The Mormon orthodoxy understands the importance of controlling Mormon stories, but liberal believing Mormons contest the arguments and seem to be fighting, gently, to create a new Mormon narrative, one that is more inclusive, more open to individual experience. One popular spokesman of an inclusive Mormonism is Logan, Utah-based John Dehlin, who calls his podcast, in which he conducts interviews on wide ranging issues in contemporary Mormonsim, *Mormon Stories*—a sign, I believe, that he understands the necessity of shifting the narrative.

It is perhaps due to all this complexity that we thus far lack the "Great Mormon Novel," and mostly lack any Mormon novels at all. Those who argue for a Mormon



narrative that deviates from the orthodox story risk expulsion from the church, and once outside may have a difficult time painting the group who threw them out in a sympathetic light. Maybe this is what Wallace Stegner understood when he suggested that the Great Mormon Novel would come from a Mormon who had left the church, then come “part way” back (Johnston). The narrative needs the comprehension of that cultural core, that commitment to the cultural values Potok spoke of. It needs the tension that arises from recognizing the conflict between community core and exterior culture, and between community beliefs and secular truths. The narrative requires the loss of simple faith that comes with recognizing the realities of the outside world, or it will never reach the outside world’s readership. And Stegner’s prediction of a partial return to Mormonism suggests a mindset in the writer that may not be so much a *prerequisite* for writing the Mormon Novel as a *result* of doing so.

The greatest complexity of Mormonism is the reality that it works for so many of us in spite of the great amount of empirical evidence against its claims. This is a story that expands to humanity in general—the story of humans as beings of belief, as irrational and hopeful, and the confusing, dangerous beauty of this. Mormonism is a focal point through which we can view the beliefs upon which we build most of our lives—an irrationality paralleled in all religions, in the door-to-door sales explored in the novel that follows this introduction, in the housing market crash in the second half of the 2000’s.

Great or not, my thesis aspires to be a Mormon Novel. It will capture the culture through the quirky lens of door-to-door sales, developing the reader’s sympathy to the point that Kirt’s loss of faith will feel, I hope, like quite a blow. But the question of what is true and what is not has less bearing on us humans, for good or for ill, than does the

question of what we believe, which systems and patterns we subscribe to, which ones we challenge and usurp and overthrow, and which will destroy us. The questions are unanswerable, the facts difficult to prove, and the challenge of knowing what to believe—of knowing, in the most archetypal sense, whether we have been inspired by gods or by devils—only increase with time and thought and discovery. There is no firm foundation, no solid ground, and no resolution to our doubts. These questions and concerns sparked the novel, and the novel lead me straight back to them.

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## THE DOOR-TO-DOOR MORMON PEST CONTROL SALESMAN: A NOVEL

## CHAPTER 1

We landed in Tampa late enough to understand the difference right away, how the air held heat into the night, how in Florida the atmosphere could make itself a known thing, always encroaching.

I was eighteen and the darkened interstate made little sense to me when David McDonald whisked us away from the airport, used as I was to the straight shot of I-15 that cuts north to south through Utah—the only freeway I'd ever known. The Florida freeway bent on itself like a theme park ride, and every light shone sharp: red brakes, white blaring headlights, orange street lamps. In the months that followed I'd never see nor recreate the imagined landscape this first night's darkness afforded me. Ever after, the highway would be just a highway, less threatening, less violent, less opportune.

My friend and travel partner was my first-year college roommate, Kelly Crow. He was a guitarist, the son of a Mormon bishop, a former Mormon missionary, bitter and stubborn. He swore for effect and smoked our entire freshman year without my knowing. Kelly's throat looked to house a sharp rock and his nose jutted and carried sweat. His eyes were light brown and they bolted—like he was an animal capable of eating or being eaten in the next several seconds. Sometimes he fell to the floor when he laughed, kicking his feet.

Kelly would fail as a pest control salesman by mid-June and by the end of 2007 he'd be in small-town Utah shooting heroin in one arm and something else in the other.

That first night he talked goals in a white-walled living room in Lakeland, Florida. Lakeland was a city I'd never heard of, and was not, I recall thinking, Tampa Bay, as our location of summer installment had been described by David McDonald when he recruited me.

"If I sold three hundred contracts," Kelly said, "that'd be—" he traced his lanky finger down the chart we'd been using to calculate earning potential. For a month leading up to this day I'd been sitting up in bed, head full of dreams, spouting revised, ever more glorious estimates of total pest control contract sales for the summer. Kelly's overgrown fingernail found the total. He looked up, eyes lit.

"That's forty four thousand dollars."

I pulled out my phone and viewed the calendar: fifteen weeks until we'd go home to Utah in early September. Minus holidays and Sundays we had ninety-two days on the doors. I'd done this calculation a dozen times, knew exactly how many days there were, knew that the massive commission granted retroactively at three-hundred contracts calculated to a requisite 3.26 sales per day, but I still used the calculator to distract my mind till the numbers—multiplied by my commission—popped up on the screen like a jackpot.

"We could do that," I said.

I stepped out onto the dull cement balcony and into the mugginess that was central Florida's 1:00 AM. Kelly followed. The sound of insects carried from every direction, a full chorus pouring from the hot night. It was mystery out there, and the dark and the humidity multiplied it. Lakeland claimed at least one large body of water, and we wondered where it was. We could hear the frogs. Was some leg of the Everglades just

beyond our vision, teeming with alligators? All we could see was an orange-lit parking lot.

We didn't yet know that Florida is the ultimate Public Relations success story, that all the grade-school children in the world had been conned when they added it to their lists of places to go, that it is, in reality, one of few locations on Earth best summarized by its mapped appearance: Florida is a big, flaccid dick. Greater Tampa is mold on the under-parts.

We went back inside and knocked quietly on the bedroom door of David McDonald to ask him which way we ought to walk in order to arrive at the Walmart we knew was only half a mile from us. David was twenty-six and the son of my father's late 1970's Brigham Young University roommate. David and I knew each other only from awkward, every-half-decade, double-family-hangouts where the adults would play Mormon Bridge and eat homemade ice-cream while we kids tried to remember if we'd ever met this particular set of children paralleling us in a mirrored version of our own Mormon family. "The McDonalds," my father would remind us before they arrived. "The ones who served a family mission in Switzerland." This to distinguish from "The wealthy ones with the huge house in Idaho," and that third family, "Your mother's friends." David McDonald was always the age of the oldest of my older sisters. I had four of those—older sisters—plus one younger, and then three younger brothers at the end. What likely amounted to criminal child quantity in parts of this country was something less than notable in the suburbs of Salt Lake City. The result was a population-density trick in Utah: downtown liberals had their space; in the suburbs we lived on top of each other. I usually had the bottom bunk.



"If you'll just point us in the right direction," we said to David when he opened the bedroom door in basketball shorts and his Mormon garment tops, "we can get to Walmart, and you can go to sleep."

David eyed us warily and scratched his bulging upper arm.

Kelly and I had been schooling in an agricultural college town in northern Utah where reports of crime came in primarily two stripes: people stealing Xboxes (check with your eight siblings before you call the police), and about twice yearly, people having sex with other people's sheep.

David attempted to describe some sort of racial tension he believed existed in Lakeland, which, he suggested, made it unreasonable for us to walk to Walmart after midnight. He said there were both black people and white people in town. David was from Texas.

"I think we'll be fine," I said.

David's face, when relaxed, was tightly scrunched, his features half an inch too high. This inherently tense layout became slightly more so as he appeared to give the proposition genuine thought.

"No," he said. "No, I'll take you guys." He felt responsible for us because he had recruited me to come sell for the summer, and because my father knew his father, and my mother knew his mother. "If you got murdered on the first night that would look pretty bad."

David was good about making things look good.

Kelly continued to pester him not to put himself out for us, even as we drove to Walmart. Kelly's voice was melodic, his arguments rising to a wince and falling to a

laugh. Kelly: A boy whose funeral I knew I'd probably have to fly somewhere for even if his body had been found a month late and was half decomposed and neither of us by then believed in an afterlife anyway. In the coming September he'd swim as deep into a lake as he could in curiosity about drowning. "Did you know how very long it takes to drown?" he'd report to me, disheartened.

We got hand soap, cheap shampoo, Mountain Dew, and a number of other things from Walmart, then we returned to the complex, where Kelly carried the groceries in, his lanky arms hung with a half dozen plastic bags. "Look," he said to me as he lifted his wrists straight out to shoulder level. "Jesus goes shopping." I looked away while he chuckled. David pretended not to hear the blasphemy and disappeared into the master bedroom. Kelly took a second room and I took the third, which was laid out with two twin beds, a light brown nightstand, and exactly zero other things.

I fell asleep in the orange glow from the parking lot lights that poured through the cheap, busted teeth blinds.

## CHAPTER 2

The untapped land is defined by our efforts at restraint: a space reserved from suburban takeover, reserved for ticks and fleas and mosquitoes, reserved for German roaches and carpenter ants and wolf spiders and frogs, for lizards, gators, crows, katydids, millipedes, wasps, and owls. The trees hang with other living things, with plants through which the midnight humidity drifts; the floor is a bog, a drying up swamp, or standing water cradling baby snakes. The moonlight hits hard on the tops of the trees, but it's pitch black at the base where the buzzing crickets and cicadas and frogs fight for a frequency in a single dystopian chord.

When the sun comes up a tractor has already begun to tear off the trees at the edge. A pump is placed to drain the mud and murky water. A buzzing less audible—the spin of saws or diesel trucks—and then the muffled voice of a shouting foreman, the wave of his leather-gloved hand, the spray of repellent, the cussing at swarms of gnats and hornets and webs stretched five yards and built by spiders with bodies like AA batteries.

The dozers flatten the land and pull the plants and scatter the insects before them. The bugs scuttle and bury themselves in the muck; they jump and spin and fly in all directions. The humming of tractors and beeping of backing machinery grows louder and louder like an approaching scene; the men grow in number and size in their yellow hats and their leather gloves and their sweat-stained shirts and their boots. They sit on palates and hold fast-food bags and swat at the biting flies, kick spiders off their toes, crush them dead. Lunch over, they pull and clear and shove the land flat, and they do this day after day until the reserve has yielded a space, has unzipped its vines and trees and leaches to

harbor a pocket of mud, which, drained by the sun and the pumps becomes dirt, where the ants burrow up and pile their foot-high mounds. The digging tractors turn termite colonies; bugs scuttle with larvae held high, swarm in every direction, while above them the shadow of a panning steel arm, and the churning, scraping, spinning sound of cement, a slide of wet, the plop of it atop their nest, catastrophic for individuals, inconsequential for the queens. The cement spreads in a slab and sucks in struggling bodies—legs spinning, jaws clicking—thousands mixed and twisted and pulled into frozen eternal positions; and the slab will harden under the moon and the creatures will treat that night as each before it, pulling tunnels from solid earth grain by grain.

There is a first bug—there must be—whether roach, spider, or solitary ant, that touches the slab of cement and, finding it dry, scuttles onto the alien landscape in search of a meal.

## CHAPTER 3

I woke to the sound of blowers and parted the broken blinds. Sweat and mulch clung to the faces of Hispanic men working below. They turned back and forth on the grass, standing on platforms that followed mowers. The parking lot extended to the left, and speed bumps interrupted the asphalt at intervals.

There is nothing so odd as to wake in a place you've arrived at in darkness. A clubhouse shone with white siding. A highway I'd not known of lay straight ahead. I quietly squeezed past the front door to the cement platform outside in curiosity. My face held oil from sleep and was soft when I rubbed it. I stepped, barefoot, down the cool cement stairs to the ground floor, where everything was a blur. I realized I'd forgotten my glasses.

Behind the apartment complex I found a sudden forest with wild undergrowth. It was so quarantined by asphalt and cement and tailored grass that it had the appearance of painted scenery until I took another step and, squinting into it, was bit by a fly.

Until I'd left for college a year prior to this, I'd lived in a home planted just feet from hills that jutted suddenly and rolled into each other to become the Wasatch Mountains. Those grassy hills had been full of moths this time of year, and I'd caught them in nets and pinned them to balsa wood planks. I collected beetles and other bugs, and did so until I found a Tarantula. Having poured the alcohol into a jar with intent to turn the giant spider to specimen by dropping him in, I stopped, looked at the thing for a moment, then poured the alcohol out and built a cage. That was the end of my collection. Utah's commanding mountains started with those hills, a sort of purposeful growth out of the valley. Not like this place. Florida dropped on your shoulder and buzzed in your ear.

I walked quietly past the building adjacent mine, rubbing my cheek where I'd been bit, watching for Lakeland's lake. I passed a pond on a thin trail and I remembered the video I'd seen in church called "Spiritual Crocodiles," in which one of the Mormon leaders, Elder Packer, narrates a scene where a gazelle grown too thirsty moves toward shallow water and a crocodile bursts like a spring-loaded trap, crushing the animal and dragging its mutilated body into the mud. This was sexual temptation, Elder Packer said. The reel rolled again and again in my head as I hustled down the strip of grass, eyes to the pond inches from my legs. I looped around and trotted over hot asphalt to return to the apartment, rather than going back along that path.

I woke Kelly and we borrowed David's Civic and chased down a horrible old Buick from a classified ad; then, with twelve hundred dollars cash I'd borrowed from my mother in Utah, I bought it on the spot. We drove back to the apartments, the engine like a boat. At 11 a.m. we met at the office for Correlation meeting, which was to be held daily. The office was just another apartment in the complex, same as the one Kelly and David and I were in. In the living room, instead of furniture, sat metal folding chairs and a white board. I was introduced to J.J., the thirty-year-old owner of Premium Pest Control, a Mormon expanding his Texas business into Tampa. J.J. had been in Florida just three months, living alone in this apartment complex, charting residential growth and new neighborhoods in which to work, and arranging our living accommodations. He introduced us to Marcy, a twenty-year-old he'd met at the local Mormon single's ward and hired as a secretary. She lived with her parents only two miles down the highway and went to school in Tampa. Her face was pressed a little flat, and her over-curved body brought to mind a muddy African watering hole.

"Well," J.J. said with a toothy smile. "Welcome." His oblong skull teetered dangerously over a skinny body. His chin swerved aggressively toward his jutting collarbone when he spoke. He appeared not to know what to do with his hands, so he rubbed them together, then grabbed a marker and occasionally tapped the white board to his left. He wrote our names on the board: Kelly and Kirt. David was already listed along with his sales total to date: 14. Marcy paraded past us, hips swinging, to hand J.J. a sheet of paper, which he grumbled to leave on his desk. She strolled back to the other room, smiling. I didn't look at her for more than half a second. I was pretty careful about that sort of thing, considering the reason I was out here in the first place was to earn ten grand to fund my upcoming two-year Mormon mission.

"Now," J.J. said, "You'll learn the most from getting out and knocking, but let's do a quick overview of a couple basic things from the training manual."

I'd read through the training manual three times since I received it two months ago.

"Let's start," he said, flipping slowly through his own copy, "at that part about nonverbal communication." He gave up on the manual. "It's in there. Find it?" We found it, and J.J. began to summarize. There are physical positions to hold: feet apart, shoulders turned at an angle, all of this to be adopted after knocking loudly on the door.

"You've been on a mission?" J.J. said to me, combing down his hairy forearm with his other hand.

I shook my head. "This September."

"Ok." He lowered his eyebrows. "Kelly?"

"I've been," Kelly said.

"Ok," J.J. said. "Kirt, when you go on your mission you'll learn these skills for door approaches. You don't want to stand straight on to a person when they answer their door or they'll be intimidated." He turned away from us to illustrate. "If you're big, like David here, you want to be back from the door when they open it. Kirt, you can probably be as close as you want." As he talked, he sidestepped away and then toward us, a sort of dance. "Personally, I like to lean against a wall."

"J.J. plays it *real* casual," David chimed in, burly cheeks lifting in some thrill. "You'll see him in action. He's just the bug guy."

"I'm just the bug guy," J.J. said and shrugged. "Just taking care of these dang bugs. No big deal."

David shook his head. "I got to give that approach a try, I'm thinking."

"See," J.J. said. "You'll find your own way. David does it different. Everyone does. I knew a girl back in Houston who was all flirty, and a guy in Dallas who carried around a flashlight to be The Inspector. My younger brother used to wear a dirty shirt on purpose. I like looking sharp, nerdy, tuck my belt in and everything. I know a city kid who created an Idaho farm accent. You know, stupid Idaho boy, not a salesman. Do what fits your personality most. You want to come across as sincere. David plays it serious. Me, I'm just the bug guy."

"It says here," Kelly interrupted, his finger on the training packet, "not to say the word *just*. It says, 'Don't apologize for being on their porch. Don't downplay yourself. You are doing something very important. You are there to service their home for pests. Don't say sorry, don't say 'I'm just here—'" Kelly looked up.

J.J. shrugged. "I say just."



David said, "That's like—" he sat up and shook his head, annoyed. "That's one way to do it. The manual is only a starting point. Listen, you've served a mission. When did you serve?"

"I left in July, three years ago." He'd got back this past July. Kelly was the only person I knew who served the whole two-year mission and then quit going to church. It didn't make any sense to me how he could walk away from it after believing so long.

"So you saw the new missionary training manuals that came out," David said, then looked at me to clarify: "The Missionary Training Center in Provo changed their approach from memorization to, you know, trusting that guys will—that you'll let the spirit guide you to say the right thing to a potential convert at the right time."

"We're taking a page out of their book," J.J. said.

"It's a good book to take a page from," David said.

"I've never actually read this," J.J. conceded, holding up the packet.

Kelly leaned back in his chair. "Didn't you write it?"

J.J. and David looked at each other.

J.J. said, "It's basically a standard training manual we use."

"Everyone uses the same manual," David said. "Every company out there does essentially the same thing—it's not a big deal."

"Besides Terminex," J.J. said.

"Besides them," David said, "everyone does what Orkin does. One way or another."

This cast some doubt on the opening paragraph, which explained that "Premium Pest Control's Premium Training Program is the best in the nation." But I worried not

about the fact that my company had copied and pasted Orkin's manual and put their own name in it so much as that Kelly might point that out and drag this confrontation on.

Luckily he hadn't read the manual and didn't know the opening paragraph.

"Flip to the part about overcoming objections," J.J. said. "Let's read it. Kirt?"

I read. Objections are the things that cause people to not want pest control.

Sometimes there are big objections and sometimes there are small ones. There are always objections. A sale is made by overcoming them.

J.J. said, "No matter what, there is a sale. You sell them pest control, or they sell you a 'No.' Someone is going to get sold."

I laughed. J.J. and David looked at me. "I like it," I clarified. "It's good."

"It's true," David said.

"Kelly," J.J. said. "You read."

Kelly leaned forward. He read about safety. Overcome an objection about the safety of our treatments by assuring the customer the product is safe.

"Do we just have them leave while we treat?" he asked, brushing hair out of his face.

"Not even," David said.

"The stuff we use on the outside," J.J. said, "they shouldn't go roll around in till it's dry. Inside," he palmed the whiteboard with fingers spread as if in example, "it's all safe."

"Huh," Kelly said. He read on. Inform the customer that Premium Pest Control products are the safest on the market, that they are Derived Organics, and that our

technicians are certified professionals. Never use the word chemical. We treat with products.

"See," J.J. said, "an objection is never what you think. An objection is not an actual *No*. It will sound like No, but really, the customer is telling you their concern, and once you deal with it, they become a buyer." He stared at us as if waiting for input. "You have to listen close, because they are telling you what they need when they say No."

I nodded.

J.J. told David to take me with him; he'd take Kelly. I jumped into David's car and we merged onto the freeway toward Tampa.

## CHAPTER 4

The walls rose to close the new pockets off from the city: walls with front entrance gates and guards and codes. Brown, golden, bronze, black stones, irregular in exactly a regular pattern. Walls fifteen and twenty feet high, and signs, and colored flags lining the streets to announce the arrival: US Homes from the 190's; KB homes from the 220's; Meridian homes from the high three-hundred-thousands; townhomes from the 250's. Welcome, homeowners, to a thriving family community, reserve-front property, a view of the water, and the bank will pay the first month. Welcome to Oak Shore, Island Green, Sunny Palms, Golden Bay. Two hundred homes and a Starbucks, a FedEx Office—in the community! A Target right here! Ice cream, daycare, tennis, Publix, all in construction, all within the walls.

Welcome to Falcon Heights. Welcome to Pacific Palms. Welcome, Homeowners, to Seven Oaks.

Within the walls, where the signs and flags lead, is the dirt landscape pushed flat by tractors, and swarms of workers who poured concrete into slabs that hardened in the moonlight now pull wood across newly paved roads. The buzzing, humming, unyielding chord of saws and hammers and nail-guns and engines and tractors in reverse; the screech of enormous dumpsters shoved by forklifts across the dirt. Palates unloaded from trucks, trucks loaded with palates. When the steel garbage is lifted, a swarm of ants that had used the base as a ceiling erupts; sun-exposed, angry, red-brown bugs spin like television static, jaws snapping, and the workers point and shake their heads, shout over the noise:

*...that's nothin'...*

*...scorpions yesterday...*

*...you should have seen this mother fucker of a wasp...*

*...an underground hornet nest...*

*...a pocket of Black Widows...*

*...a goddamn python...*

And still the tractors dig into the ground and turn up the roaches and ants and millipedes and scorpions that scuttle from sleep and confusion. The workers dig and dig and lodge plumbing into the ground, large green sewage pipes leading to the paved street.

Their nests destroyed, the insects scatter, scurry, flip on their backs and dry in the sun.

The workers drive rods into the ground and hammer two-by-fours for the skeleton of a wall on Monday, lift the skeleton walls onto the cement slabs on Tuesday; on Wednesday the electricians wire the walls despite the biting ants; the plumbers route pipes to the bathrooms; on Thursday comes the poof, poof, poof of nails into drywall.

In the moonlight the ants and the roaches and spiders crawl up over cement and wood floors, crawl into the moist, humid, cramped drywall coffins, crawl into the safe interiors, where the pressure from a two by four and drywall keeps them comfortable. They move in and out of the electrical sockets and the piping gaps and settle in the hot, dark spaces.

Now the roof is attached, the carpet rolled out over the bugs that died fighting each other in the night on the wooden floors, the upstairs windows installed and the water flushed through the pipes.

The lights switch on.

Check.

The lights switch off. The bolts click.

The moving trucks roll down the interstate, coming from the north.

## CHAPTER 5

The first door didn't open.

I stood in my khakis and my Premium Pest Control polo for a solid minute before moving on in a bit of relief. The sun was hot in the early afternoon, and I had no idea where I was. I had stepped into the Civic and stepped out when David parked us thirty minutes down the highway.

The second door didn't open either.

So the third caught me by surprise when it swung back to reveal a man whose face was coated with shaving cream. A clean sweep of skin marked the progress on his left cheek.

"Hey-a," I stuttered.

He looked over my shoulder, moving only his pupils, and then back at me.

"Hey," I said as if I'd just rewound. "I'm a—with Premium Pest Control. If you're going to be around tomorrow we could, treat you?"

He blinked.

"For bugs," I said.

He looked Russian. Maybe he didn't speak English.

"Tomorrow," I said.

"C'mon man!" he shouted. He shook his razor in front of his face. "I'm shaving!"

"Right," I said and turned to leave but not in time to avoid seeing him swing the door at me. The doorframe performed a block.

I looked down the street and saw David on someone's front lawn, pointing at the ground, at the sky, as if alerting the homeowners of danger. He'd intentionally moved

several houses down in order to keep us separate. As a car drove past I opened my binder and stared into it, pretending to be engaged, trying to look busy. The sweat must make me look even more like a salesman. I decided it was best to keep moving. I strode down the sidewalk to the next house. The grass invited me to cut through but I feared eyes watching from windows, as if it might draw attention if I didn't follow the sidewalk's route. I walked to the porch and before I rang the doorbell I heard a dog charging inside. It scratched and whined and yelped at the door. I thought of its nails digging in, how the owner would stare at me and wonder if I'd been worth the destroyed paint job.

But when she opened the door she invited me in immediately. "Mom!" she called up the stairs. She was in her late thirties or so, Mexican or something, with crooked teeth. The dog growled at me from her arms where she squeezed its bulging body.

"Mom!" she yelled again. And then louder: "It's your bug guy!"

Great. I turned and stared into the adjacent living room. "You know, I can come back."

"No she's, she's—MOM!" she shouted. She rolled her eyes. "She's coming."

Above the railing appeared a fat woman. She called out in a wheeze, "The who?"

I practically shouted back, "Oh! Nobody really! Sorry to bother you. In fact, uh, is this even the Smith's house?"

"The who?" the fat woman called back again. She rested her arms on the banister, forearm fat spilling over the edge.

The daughter stared at me. "The Smith's? This isn't the Smith's."

"I think I have the wrong house," I said, laughing, and I turned to leave. "Really sorry," I called up to the woman, who didn't even move. I pulled the door open and



jumped on to the porch. For the first time, the heat felt inviting. “Sorry,” I said to the girl who stared at me confused. I waved my hand and closed the door myself.

I hustled toward the next house and realized I was going to keep walking as I imagined the girl watching me out the window, poodle in hand. I imagined the people inside that next home and how they might twist their faces and look at me. I walked past three houses and then finally, practically in a jog, approached the porch of the fourth and knocked on the door before I could stop myself.

It opened to a small child. “Hello,” I said. “Your mom or dad here?”

The child shook its head and spoke a full sentence of non-words.

“Wonderful!” I said as he shut the door. I stepped down the cement stairs. Behind me the door popped open and a shrill voice called out.

“Can I help you?”

I turned and stretched my mouth into a smile. The woman leaned out at me, using the door as a shield. The kid peered around her waist. “Hey,” I said. “Yeah, actually, sorry—”

I hopped back up the porch steps. “We’re doing pest control, for ants and stuff.” I pointed at my binder. “But I’m not, um, I’m not, *your* pest control guy, I mean, if you have one. You have one already, probably?” My brain felt squashed underfoot. “I’m not him, if you do.”

“You have a flier?” The woman held her hand out.

“Definitely.” I handed her one of the doorknob fliers David had had sitting in the back of his car. I’d forgotten about fliers. I could leave one on every doorknob from here

to Orlando and never speak to another stranger on their doorstep again. “Have a good day!”

“So you,” the woman looked confused. “What—” she flipped the flier over and finding it blank on the other side flipped it back. “What do you do?”

“We kill all the bugs.”

“Termites?” she said.

I told her to call the number if she was interested and they could answer most of her questions. I walked away before she could ask anything else. I realized I hadn’t written my name on the flier—to get credit for the sale if she did call—and I didn’t even care.

It was possible, I began to realize, that I was not cut out for this.

I heard a car roll up next to me slowly as I walked between houses. I sped up and tried to look like I had an agenda, like I was supposed to be here. I waited for a police chirp to burst into my ears. The car pulled forward. David. He rolled down his window.

“This place is crap. Jump in. We’ll find a better spot.” I got in. “You have any luck?” he asked.

“Maybe.” I said. “One lady was pretty interested. She asked for a flier.”

He nodded. “When people ask for a flier, tell them you don’t have one and get their number. They never call on fliers when they say they will. As soon as they have it they feel like you are no use to them, that they can call you at their leisure. They’ll say they will call and they won’t. People think they can lie to you because you’re a salesman.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I would have got her number but I really think she is actually interested, and I didn’t want to like, make her uncomfortable.”

“Maybe she’ll call then.”

David flipped around in the street and we drove toward the exit from the neighborhood.

“You get any?” I asked.

“I got one.”

“Wow,” I said. One sounded like an impossible amount.

“We’ll see if it happens,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t think it will go through.”

“Go through?”

“I didn’t get payment. She didn’t even have a debit card. These people,” he said, nodding his head toward the houses we passed, “they’re car poor. Look. BMW. BMW. Lexus. It’s a Mexican thing. They get a car way over their budget and live in crappy houses and can’t afford anything. The tech will show up and this lady won’t have money to pay and then it will never happen.”

“And you won’t get paid.”

“Nothing to get paid on if it doesn’t get serviced. Still,” he said, “it’s always good to get a sale, I mean good mentally, even if the service won’t go. The key is to get numbers—I can’t control if someone doesn’t keep their word after they sign to say they’ll receive the service. I can’t help if people are dishonest and have no self-respect. Some of these people, their word means nothing to them.”

David saw me reading the contract he'd filled out.

"Tanya Sanchez," he said. "Tanya will get serviced if we catch her the day after she gets paid by the government. I swear, they put their money in a jar and if you show up on the right day they'll hand the whole thing to you. That's this neighborhood. Adios."

He floored it as we merged with highway traffic. We came to a different neighborhood. As we approached the entrance, two gates swung down behind the car in front of us so we couldn't go in. A guard box stood between the sets of gates. David whipped the car to the right side of the entryway and stopped.

"Shoot," I said.

"Nah," David said, eyeing his rear view mirror. "There's no guard if you look. We'll wait here a second. We can walk in if we have to. Usually—yep." A car turned in and drove past us, and David nosed out behind it. He trailed its bumper and the gate just missed our trunk. I could feel my pulse in my fingers. David looked entirely relaxed.

This place was different. The houses were double the size of the earlier ones, two stories with decks over the front door, flat-faced stucco boxes with gold and marble frills, large driveways, turret window. A lake behind them peaked through their sideyards.

"These look brand new," I said.

"I hope so."

"That's good?"

"The best."

"I'd think they'd have less bugs than the older ones."

"The construction tears the nests up. And these are built by KB. They go up overnight and are built like crap. This is prime stuff. A lot of these people are moving

from out of state. We need to let them know that if they want to live in Florida, they've gotta have pest control—look,” he interrupted himself, pointing down the road to where a semitrailer had parked. The back door was open and workmen dollied boxes down a ramp and up the driveway.

He pulled over to the side of the road.

“You see that New Jersey license plate on the car in their driveway? That's money, man, right there.”

I wound door-by-door through the streets after getting yelled at miserably at the very first one (“You see that gate up front? How'd you even get in here?”). I got barked at by a man and animals. Finally, I knocked into a frail-looking, TV-dinner making, cheap shampoo-using, poorly dressed retired high school teacher who stared at me for four minutes while I preached the dangers of spiders and ants and roaches, pointing again and again at the webs congregated above her doorway like storm clouds, begging her with my body language to either save me or put me out of my misery. Eventually she leaned out and looked up at the spiders, her face unchanged as the Utah desert an hour after rain.

I finally stopped talking.

“Ok,” she said.

“You want it?” I beamed.

“Yeah.” She walked to the table and picked up a checkbook. “How much again?”

“Seventy dollars a service,” I said.

“Every two months,” she confirmed. “And it's a contract, right?”

I said it was. And I reminded her we'd be coming the first two months in a row to get a good handle on the bugs. "So that's seven services in the year total."

She wrote the check and handed it to me. I fumbled on my cell phone and realized I didn't know our office's number. I looked at the contract and pretending to be searching for something else, then I found it and dialed.

"Premium Pest Control, this is Marcy."

I cleared my voice. "Marcy. Kirtland Grant."

Five minutes later I was out the door and ready to skip to the next porch. David rolled up to me at the curb like he'd been waiting to see what house I was inside of. A cop without his lights on tailed him. David waved me in and I circled the nose of his car and opened the door.

"We're going to have to come back tomorrow," he said, and flipped around.

## CHAPTER 6

You're going to pay the termite company to dig down deep and pump product into the ground, and when the insects tear the walls to shreds regardless, don't be worried: it's coverage, not prevention. You prepaid for repair and congratulations, *a homeowner you are and still are*. Five, six, seven hundred bucks a year to keep things cheery *if or when* the house is chewed in half and it's *when* but it could be decades with the best of products pumped by the best of professionals.

You're going to need to pay a gal to power spray the stucco monthly, every other if you're patient, every three if you like the look of cobwebs draped from roof to foundation of your used-to-be yellow house. She'll bring a rolling compressor and take aim to clear the mess; for days and days and maybe a week your home will look like it isn't half-swallowed by spiders.

You'll have to pay a team of men to drench your soil and carpet with tricky toxins—nothing simply poisonous—something to grab to the legs of the things you're now living with, something to hold tight to all the feet that moved in a bit ahead of you, the feet that, more to the point, refused to move out. You're going to smell it when they spray their professional products; you're going to see it drip down your windows and wonder what you've done until you step across the tile in the night and crush an inch-and-a-half long American roach and feel its rigid legs scrape the uncallused skin where your foot meets your smallest toe. Then—then you'll love the smell of poisons like you did when you were a kid, when you opened the tin box in the shed to get a whiff of gasoline—you're going to love it like fertilizer on the Saturday, like coffee on Tuesday—its nose of mold, its trace of plastics, hints of pennies: all of it says success, says victory,

says a few more months of this at least, says the webs waiting for next week's spray-down are simply webs, not a long-view prediction.

The moving trucks arrive with a hiss and a huff and a wheeze and the neighborhoods bustle with the new families and their blue New York license plates and the squeal of babies and the awe of families who never—not in a million years—would have thought they could have homes built in this size, built in this color, built in this place. They stand in the front yards together and, and, and, Just look at the thing!

Would you just stand here and look at this place!

Palm trees, imported rocks, grass taking root, room to garden, room to grow, reeds in the back along the shore, safe water, gator-free water, chlorinated water, mosquito-free water.

The U-hauls and Penskes and Budgets roll under front gates and back into driveways and empty their contents and sit the hot night at the curb. The boxes are emptied and bare rooms made full. New couches are needed for all of this space, new end tables needed for all of these couches, new lamps for new end tables—new matching lamps shades! The new homeowners return from their job hunts to their new leather chairs and kick off their shoes and feel their new floors and watch new TVs and pour their new drinks while the bankers and the bugs in the wall and the boys sneaking under the gates collectively hold their breath.



## CHAPTER 7

By Sunday I'd sold four, one a day since we got there, and Kelly Crow had sold one. He admitted to me that J.J. had actually sold it for him when they were knocking together. David and I had yet to return to the neighborhood we'd been kicked out of. He swore it wasn't a regular occurrence, but then went on to say he'd been booted from that place two days before, and that he'd not been kicked out the next day only because he'd hidden behind a porch pillar for five minutes while a cop waited on the street.

"They can't do a thing," he had said. "Except ruin your sales. No one's going to talk to you with a cop over your shoulder."

"Do you just try to stay out of the gated communities then?"

"No way man. The more gated the better." The neighborhoods he stayed out of were those lacking No Soliciting signs. "They get crisscrossed by freakin' perfume salesmen and carpet cleaners and by the time you get to them, they're just pissed off and broke. No. By the end of the summer I'll have knocked every door in that Eight Palms community. Maybe two doors at a time before I get booted out, but I'll get to every porch eventually. That place is golden."

The Mormon church in Tampa could have been the Mormon church in Salt Lake City or Chicago or L.A. or Baton Rouge. Smooth cinderblock hallways hung with paintings of *Book of Mormon* heroes and Jesus's Second Coming, poster photos of the worldwide President of the Church with his First Presidency—compromised of a first and second counselor. There were photos of the Chorum of the Twelve Apostles, which was the second highest office in the church. In total there were fifteen men we sustained as

prophets, seers, and revelators, though seniority counted for a lot. The most senior, President Hinckley, was ninety-five years old.

Singles wards were designed for young adults, an effort at pairing us and moving us into the next phase of life—marriage and family—before we woke up twenty-five and alone. The first hour of church was Priesthood meeting. We boys studied in preparation for our two-year missions, though most of the older ones, those who were twenty-one, twenty-two, had already served theirs and returned. We discussed impending marriage and fatherhood, but I had at least three or four years before I'd be doing that. We discussed deeper Mormon doctrine, excluding Temple ceremonies, which were to be talked about within the Temple only. I'd be allowed to go through the Temple the first time just before I was to leave on my mission, and there I'd get the Temple Garments—a quiet marker of Covenants with God and the end of underwear shopping. I didn't know what those covenants were, didn't know what the garments meant, as I'd not yet been through the sacred ceremonies.

But in preparation for my mission I'd had my wisdom teeth pulled and I'd passed a physical. I was weeks late in completing the missionary paperwork. I needed to submit it to headquarters in Salt Lake City in order for it to be processed by my nineteenth birthday in September, but I needed signatures from the local leadership, from the Bishop and the Stake President above him. I needed to complete interviews to certify that I was abstaining from drugs, coffee, and serious sexual sins like masturbation or viewing pornography. I should have finished those interviews in Utah, but I accidentally masturbated on April seventeenth and cancelled my interviews rather than telling the Bishop about it.

Once I'd received my mission assignment around my upcoming nineteenth birthday, I'd be sent to the Missionary Training Center only an hour from where I grew up. Then they'd send me anywhere in the world to knock doors and set up appointments to share the restored Gospel of Jesus Christ with a world hungry for Truth. I could go anywhere. Except China. They didn't allow us in. Growing up I imagined God would open up China right before I was nineteen and he would need a flood of missionaries to get to all the Chinese people before the Second Coming of Christ. I always imagined me and everyone I knew would go to China. I imagined being the first one to get there.

Between Priesthood meeting and Sunday school I found the Ward Secretary—a Florida-fat man with a Band-Aid on his chin, and forced myself to schedule an appointment with him to meet with the Bishop. The earliest time he had open was Thursday, and I took it. If I didn't get those papers filled out, if I didn't leave right when I turned nineteen as you are supposed to, everyone would know I'd been masturbating.

Sunday School was the second hour, a mixed class of men and women that followed a worldwide lesson plan. Because I was late I took a seat on the back left edge. I rested my head on my hand as the instructor discussed the sections in the *Book of Mormon* on the schedule. An overweight red head, he was the aging returned missionary beginning to look desperate for an eternal womanly companion. He may have been as old as twenty-six, twenty-seven. He took no notice of a couple talking in the corner as he chalked away at the blackboard about a *Book of Mormon* story where a missionary in ancient America cuts off the arms of a bunch of bad guys.

“Single handedly,” someone commented. Witty.

The girl next to me wore a bracelet with a dozen small silver charms—little ants. Her wrist bone bumped out of her skin slightly and her hands were smooth; I was beginning to realize that’s how skin was outside the desert. I glanced at her face—sharp-chinned, thin, Sunshine State–tan—and looked away before she noticed. I’d become accustomed to thinking tan was unattractive. I’d decided that long ago. It had been hip to stay pasty in Utah—the place had a proclivity for plainness. But she was pretty. I could find no excuse to look at her again and left quickly after class.

I found J.J. with David in the hall. J.J. asked me, “Does Kelly not usually come to church?”

“Nah,” I said.

“He doesn’t seem to be doing so well.”

“You mean in sales?” I asked.

“In everything,” J.J. said. “But yeah, in sales.”

David joined in. “Well, come on. It’s all related. If you aren’t listening to the promptings of the Spirit”—he shrugged, his beady eyes fighting for space—“you’re not in tune with yourself, so you won’t be in tune with people around you, and if you aren’t that, you won’t sell.”

I suspected David was right. God talked through the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit spoke with a still small voice, and I knew Kelly couldn’t hear it. Sometimes I wondered if being born with the truth made it harder—for him and for me. I always wished to have been a convert to the Church, to have stumbled upon it while searching. Then I’d really know—I mean, I did know, but then I could know better—that it was true, that it was the fullness of God’s truth for mankind. I could be lost and found. I’d open my front door to

a pair of nineteen-year-old missionaries and hear the truth for the first time in my life and feel it burning in my heart and know it forever.

As it was, Kelly Crow and me, we'd been lucky enough to be born into the truth. I was so constantly immersed in the Spirit that I couldn't even recognize it sometimes. And greedily I prayed to God to give me something more definite, to show me again. I prayed like I'd been praying for six months—for that pure knowledge, for that burning feeling I could describe to a stranger, to someone who believed the opposite. I wanted more than anything to be able to say it, and mean it: I know the Church is true, and if *you* pray to God about it, he'll tell you the same as he told me.

I prayed as much through the Sacrament Meeting that followed Sunday School, paying little attention, I admit, to the various speakers who took to the podium. I prayed while waiting to take the bread and the water. I prayed while I chewed the bread, and I imagined all sorts of phrases being whispered by the Spirit into my head. None were definitely not my own thoughts. That was my struggle: Since I was young it was always difficult to discern which of the words in my head came from God and which came from the Devil—and which were just my own?

Joseph Smith taught, my dad once told my family in a devotional, that when we are visited by an angel, run a test: reach out and ask to shake the angel's hand. An angel of the Devil will attempt to shake and wisp right through. An angel of God will refuse the invitation, knowing his limits. I kept this instruction in my mind always and watched for angels. As I'd always felt destined to become the Mormon Prophet, I found it disconcerting that a situation in which I needed to know whether an angel was from God or the Devil had yet to arise.

We came home from church and I found Kelly with a Taylor in his lap. He said he'd got it at Guitar Center for eight hundred dollars. I knew he got it on credit. I told him he was stupid.

"I'm not fucking stupid," he said. "I need a good guitar."

It seemed like he always swore more on Sundays, as if to bother me extra on the Sabbath. It made my vision shake to hear someone say the F word. He said, all serious, he'd decided he was going to work harder next week than last.

I told him he was stupid.

David had dropped me off before heading to pick up two new kids at the Tampa airport, two who were going to join our sales team. I didn't know their names but they would turn out to be Payson Gray and Taylor Hatch. They would also turn out to have a delayed flight, so David wouldn't be back till evening. My family would have never flown on Sunday. Fly on a Sunday and you're making someone else work. If all eleven of my family flew on a Sunday we'd be making someone else work a lot. Making them break the Sabbath. I wondered if maybe the guys coming in weren't Mormon. They were.

Kelly picked a quiet blues line. At least he was good. He was an all-state jazz guitarist.

I listened to the buzzing of bugs just passed the sliding glass door. It was cracked open. I stood up and shut it. "Why'd you have that open?" I said.

"Because this apartment sucks, and when I'm in it I want to kill myself, but the outside is worse. So I split the difference." He tuned a string. I went into the kitchen. He said, "You go to all three hours of church?"

Of course, I told him. “Studying the *Book of Mormon* this year in Sunday School,” I said. “Which is better than last year—last year we studied the *Doctrine & Covenants*.”

“I was on a fucking mission the first half of last year. I know what we were studying. I taught the fucking lessons. The D&C. Now that’s always fun.”

The D&C was a collection of over a hundred revelations directly from God to the Prophet Joseph Smith. “It’s a little dense,” I said.

“Like where God tells Joseph Smith’s wife if she doesn’t accept polygamy she’ll go to hell? Pretty dense.”

“That’s not exactly right, I don’t think.”

Kelly said, “It is the most important scripture Mormons have, the D&C. You know that, right?”

“The *Doctrine & Covenants*?”

“Yeah,” he said. “It’s where all the beliefs come from.”

I opened the fridge and grabbed a Mountain Dew. I looked at Kelly over the countertop and made a face. I thought he was wrong. “Who told you that?” I said. “I’d say the *Book of Mormon* is way more important.”

“There’s nothing in the *Book of Mormon*,” he said. “All the core stuff is found in the *Doctrine & Covenants*. Think about it. The *Book of Mormon* doesn’t hold any of the meat. I mean, it even opposes core Mormon teachings. The three kingdoms of heaven are never mentioned. King Mosiah argues for a Trinity instead of three distinct beings in the Godhead. Start to finish the whole book is anti-polygamy—”

“It should be anti-polygamy. That was a temporary thing.”

“No it wasn’t,” Kelly said. “You still believe in a polygamist afterlife.”

“I don’t,” I said.

“Yeah, you do. If you’re a Mormon.”

I took a swallow of my Mountain Dew. “Whatever,” I said. “The *Book of Mormon* has Moroni’s Promise. That’s the pivotal scripture for gaining a testimony. And you know it.”

“Right,” I heard him say. “It has that.”

Moroni’s Promise was a verse from the later part of the *Book of Mormon*. The ancient prophet Moroni instructs the reader directly, inviting him, having read the book, to “ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true. And if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he shall manifest the truth of it unto you by the power of the Holy Ghost. And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things.” It was one of fifty sections I’d committed to memory as a child. It was the key to gaining a confirmation from God of the truth of the book.

“In other words,” Kelly said, setting down his guitar and standing up, “Read this book that has nothing to do with what Mormons believe, pray to God to see if you get a warm feeling, and if you do, that means that not only is this book true, the Mormon Church’s completely unrelated doctrines are also true. It’s like if I told you to read *Twilight* and if it makes you feel like an oversexed teenager then that girl who wrote it is a Prophet and she speaks for God.”

I opened the fridge again and stared at the shelves. Tortillas. Old lettuce.

“Stephanie Meyer,” I said. “She’s a Mormon.”



“Which makes my metaphor fucking awesome. And probably explains why her books are so sex-obsessed.”

The *Book of Mormon* was the Church’s core. The Keystone of the religion, we even called it. My dad explained it this way: All else rests on its validity and truth. If it fails, everything fails. If it’s true, everything is true. Kelly was digging at that very idea and he knew it. Kelly did this thing, ever since I’d met him two months after he got back from his mission, where he’d dig right at particular things, and dig and dig. He’d have a little grin on his face. Like it wasn’t enough for him to flounder and fall, he had to try to take others down with him. But I’d learned to read through reading that *Book of Mormon*. I’d read the 531-page book cover-to-cover in first grade and seven more times since. And when I read it, sometimes, I could feel the Spirit in the room, I could feel it strengthening me. More clear than that, though, was when I didn’t read daily: I was vulnerable, I was bombarded by immoral thoughts, I was likely to look at a girl improperly or worse.

And anyway, he wasn’t making sense.

“*Twilight* is about vampires,” I said. “There’s not one bit of sex.”

“It’s about Mormon vampires,” he said, and I laughed. “Obsessing over not having sex for two whole books. Like, it will literally kill one of them if they do.” He walked into view over the kitchen bar, stretched his arms over his head, and said, “I bet Jessica Meyer or whatever is absolutely fucking wild. Repressed Mormon girls—fuck.”

“Kelly—”

“No serious. I wonder if she has small tits. Two different girls I met at EFY when I was sixteen, holy shit. Mormon girls with small tits are the horniest girls there is.”

My stomach churned at his words and I wondered suddenly if anyone else was in the house before I remembered David was gone. I shook my head “EFY?” I said, “You’re awful.” EFY was the one place I felt sure of everything about Mormonism, the week-long hyper-active super spiritual co-ed teenaged youth camp for Mormons, where all the girls are modest and pretty and all the boys hold doors open and by Thursday night everyone is in tears bearing their heart out in front of each other about how lucky they are to have been born Mormon. Knowing my doubting mind, I’d written in my journal one of those nights: “I know I felt the Spirit tonight like I know I saw Weezer in concert last week.”

I reached for the Mountain Dew and missed slightly, bumping it and knocking it over. I grabbed for it and hit it off the counter onto the ground. Kelly swore and disappeared, then came back with a towel. While I used paper towels, he used his foot to mop around.

“This one girl,” he said as he mopped. “Met her at EFY, and the next month, we were in her parents’ basement, and we are just like, making out, right? And she takes off her shirt, like, immediately.”

A little part of my brain popped.

“And her dad calls down to her and she says, ‘Down here with Kelly!’ and she’s got, like, she’s completely topless, pushing her, her,” he cups his hands under his chest and looks at me with wide eyes. “You know? Her little horny Mormon girl tits. Like, in my face. Right when she calls up to him. I’m ready to run and hide, right? Her dad’s like, goodnight honey, and I’m not kidding, she puts her hand down my pants, grabs my—” he looks at me and nods. “And she yells goodnight to her dad and puts it in her mouth.”

Before we were born, back when we were spirits in heaven, one third of God's spirit-children decided to follow Satan out of heaven and down to earth, where they were to roam as evil beings without bodies. And the job of those billions of evil fallen spirits roaming the planet is nothing more than to attempt to make us all miserable like they and the Devil are, and if they can get us to commit sins and stray from the path, we'll end up missing the highest kingdom of heaven, missing our chance to be with families forever, missing the opportunity for eternal enlightenment and of progression toward infinite intelligence and godhood.

According to a calculation of how many people had lived since Adam, and speculation as to how many would live before Christ's impending return, there were seven of those evil spirits dedicated to every living human at any given time.

And right then they were cheering me on, urging me to bask in Kelly's story, to imagine a girl doing that to me, to ask him what happened next. The seven spirits were sitting on our kitchen countertops, crouched atop the range, perched like Spiderman in the ceiling corners above us. I'd been aware of their existence since I was fourteen. They showed up right then to turn me into a masturbator and keep me from going on a mission at nineteen.

"That girl and I would have had sex," Kelly said to me, face serious. "Like, real sex. We would have. But I didn't have a condom and she felt too guilty."

I swallowed. "How old. Were you?"

"Sixteen," he said.

To think of that—she *wanted it in her mouth*.

“Then I met Jenna at the next year’s EFY. Again, tiny tits, absolutely horny. She had bipolar. She would get depressed and want me to fuck her, then all manic and want to fuck me.”

“And you did?”

“No. We just went down on each other all the time.”

I was losing balance. My vision was a bit blurry, like I’d been possessed by one of the seven spirits—like I’d cracked my skull open and three had crawled in. Imagine it: Going down—going down, down, down—

“So tell me: Any hot girls at church?” Kelly spoke as if it were possible to carry on normal conversation under these conditions.

Smooth skin, thin face, ant bracelet. She’d had brown eyes? Blue? I’d hardly even looked at her. I wished I had. I wished I’d looked at all of her. I could hear the voices in my head, those demon pressures not in words but just ideas, in flickers of images—get her naked, hands up against some wall, reach around and touch her, get her moaning like those girls in porn from what you’ve done to her—and another part of my brain felt despair on crescendo, for the girl had now been ruined, by me, and I hadn’t even met her yet. I heard a voice in my head: Get away from Kelly. My mouth felt glued. I wanted to fuck that girl, be fucked by that girl—I forced my mouth open:

“I’m going to make a salad.”

Kelly sprayed the floor with cleaner. I stared at the head of lettuce. My feet were numb, owing to poor circulation amid intense conversation. I went to shower and to warm up my feet.

I could taste salty humidity on my lips for an instant before it washed away. My body was skinny, my chest speckled with a couple hairs, my naked thighs white and bigger than the rest of me. The seven demons had followed me in: they threw image after image of her imagined naked body into my head. I knew I was going to jack off. It seemed the worst of things to do, worse than thinking about sex, worse than looking at porn—although one Bishop had eventually told me that, in fact, porn was more damnable than masturbation. But I found disgust in the details: the imagined way I must look, the concentration, the cum and the cleanup. On a Sunday it was doubly awful.

When I was sixteen I tracked masturbation like a diabetic tracks blood sugar. It was obvious to me that everyone who saw me could tell when I'd done it. They could feel in me the absence of God's spirit. It made girls stay away. I assumed God was telling them to keep their distance, as they should. The first night I ever went on a date was a girl's choice Christmas dance. Earlier in the day I'd jacked off, and as we walked up the steps to the ballroom, as we waited in line for photographs, as I walked her to her porch to say goodnight, it entered and reentered my mind: She can tell you're a masturbator.

I wondered, in the shower then, whether it might destroy my salesmanship for the next week. It had been a month since I last did it. Seven days four times over at least. I tended to get hung up on the idea of seven days. I'd read in the scriptures one late night that the Devil's number is six and God's is seven, and I'd become convinced the scriptures were trying to tell me if I could just not jerk it for a week I'd find some greater strength to endure to the end and not jerk it forever. But I wanted to do it now. Now as much as ever.

The hot water washed all the salt off, and I washed my hair.

It will be worth it, I lied to myself. Do it quick and don't think about it.

But there were the mission papers I needed to submit. I had to talk to the bishop this Thursday. Of course I wouldn't do it. What is it today? May 15? 20? If I jacked off I'd have to wait three months before I could go be called on a mission, I think. Or was it six months? How far off was my birthday?

June, July, August, September—

I'd already started.

I told myself I'd stop in a minute. I didn't want to introduce myself to the bishop as a masturbator in my interview this coming Thursday. If I took myself to the brink but stopped before things really started happening, it wasn't enough to report, I felt. It was a mistake, a risky one, but it wasn't until I'd see myself shooting cum that I felt despair. That was when God left. Up till then he was in my corner, promising happiness if I'd bridled my passions and stop.

Stop. Stop. I stopped.

I heard of a kid who had to wait nine months to serve his mission because of watching porn. One boy got six months because he grabbed a girl's boobs when they were making out. I guess porn was worse. But I couldn't imagine confessing to touching a girl like that. At least with masturbation I didn't have to give details. I masturbated, bishop, I'd tell him. He didn't ask: What did you imagine? Did she have big or small breasts? Did you cum in her or on her? When you actually did something with a girl, I'd heard you had to report details.

Last semester in church the bishop stood in front of the Priesthood Chorum and wrote on the chalk board:

## HH K PK N M P DS HP SI

On left, he said, was Holding Hands, then a Kiss, all of which were just fine. Next was where he drew the line: Prolonged Kissing. Then there was Necking, and by now we were in trouble. Masturbation came next, as far as severity. Then Petting, Dry Sex, Heavy Petting, and Sexual Intercourse. I saw the same gradient in eighth grade sex-respect class. It left off masturbation though, and added “End of relationship” at the very end. When I’d seen the ranking system I was all the more convinced something was wrong with me, because I’d jumped in deep—I’d never even done any “Prolonged Kissing,” and here I was all the way over at M for Masturbation, and sometimes twice in a day. The Bishop circled from the N to the P and said, “Here you’re looking at three to six months waiting time before you can serve.”

But that was just that one bishop. And his circle had been so nonspecific. I started touching myself again. Maybe this bishop in Tampa would tell me I was ok.

If I just to wait three months I could keep masturbating till June and still leave on time for my nineteenth birthday three months later.

No. That’s a bad idea.

I could hear God’s Spirit in my head: Just not tonight. You’ll be rewarded.

But I wanted to get all the way there, feel my legs shaking, the thrill of it.

Couldn’t I get just that far and back out? Like sucking on candy and not swallowing?

Couldn’t I stop on the edge, save myself just in time?

Stop.

Stop.

Yes:

Her hands on the wall, she shoves her hips back at me and moans, I've got her breasts, she's looking at the ceiling—and when I come she's gone—I've tripped off a cliff and I've turned to see the black rushing up, and in the instant before I hit is unadulterated fear, a moment without God or anybody, an ecstasy all my own—building, building, building—

I leaned into the cold tile. The sound of the shower returned. I cleared my throat. The world spun slightly, everything getting louder and pushing me out of it. Even the seven spirits had taken off. I was alone.

I toweled off. I wiped the foggy mirror to scowl at myself.



## CHAPTER 8

They meet the neighbors and they put chairs on their porch and they drive to the supermarket, fill their pantry, fill their liquor cabinets, change their oil, change their address. They buy a lawn mower and bring it home in a new mini-trailer. They take the kid or the kids to the pool—a pool!—a community pool!—and the little boy squeals that it's free, and his father laughs, and his mother eyes his father.

Pretty expensive for free, she says. Better be a pretty nice pool.

Honey.

Two-sixty a month to the HOA? Better be a nice fucking pool is all I'm saying.

Honey, he says.

She glares. Don't honey me. Have you talked to them yet?

Who?

That firm. The job.

Yes. I told you that.

So not since last week you haven't talked to them.

Baby, we have—minimum—three months to work it out. It's going to take another couple weeks, max, and I'll be all set. If they don't need accountants someone else will. Hell, I could work for Disney. He chuckles.

She doesn't.

Three months, Baby, the bank is covering the house. And we can cover it for two or three more on top of that, just with what we've got in the bank right now.

She says nothing.

Did you know it's worth more than when we bought it? Did you know that?

She says nothing.

This house is worth three thousand more right now than when we signed three weeks ago.

We could sell it—Babe. We could sell it right now and *make* money.

## CHAPTER 9

When I walked into the living room in basketball shorts Marcy stood in the kitchen drinking a glass of water. What was she doing here? She'd never been to our place. She'd changed from church clothes into a green shirt with white stripes that seemed a little tight to be modest, I thought.

“What’s a girl doing here?” I said, stupidly, trying to be, I don’t know. Funny.

She set the plastic cup in the sink as Kelly said, “We’re going out. Get dressed.”

I was going to decline. It was Sunday, though it suddenly didn’t feel like it—with David’s TV blaring from his room, a girl in the kitchen, and Kelly sitting there in street clothes. Sunday was a day I’d never once been out on. We’d not been allowed to turn on the TV or take off our Sunday shirt and tie. The occasional family walk had been the extent of activity. Nothing that couldn’t be done in a suit.

Besides, my low energy from sin would carry the evening down.

But Kelly said, “Hurry, put something on. We’ve been waiting for like twenty minutes while you’ve been beating off in the shower.”

Marcy spit water into the sink and laughed, blonde hair curled and bouncing, and I left to dress before I turned red. Perhaps it was because I had just sinned the Spirit of God away that I was able to throw clothes on without thinking again about breaking the Sabbath day.

I squeezed into the back of Marcy’s coupe. When she turned the key, rap music blared and Kelly reached out and killed it like it was a mosquito. Marcy registered a brief complaint. I watched Marcy’s wrist jerking the stick shift around as she left the parking lot recklessly.

“Where we going?” I asked.

Marcy said, “First getting my friend Amy, then going to a sports bar.”

“A bar?” I said. And on Sunday.

Kelly looked back at me. “Are you serious? A fucking sports bar.”

Marcy slapped his hand. “Language!”

“Who’s Amy?” I asked.

When Marcy turned hard into a residential street it threw me across the back seat. I put a seatbelt on. We stopped in front of a three-level house. Marcy called the girl. The home was orange in the streetlight, with a cobblestone horseshoe driveway and what looked to be a five-car garage.

“So,” Marcy said, “Amy’s a girl I met at the gym a year ago, and she’s really nice, and she’s really pretty, and I invited her to come to church two weeks ago and she came two weeks in a row!”

“Oh, fucking hell,” Kelly said.

“Hey!” Marcy said.

I couldn’t help but laugh.

“So,” Kelly said, “we’re converting her.”

“I’m sure you won’t be any help at all,” Marcy said.

“Kirt,” Kelly said, “I’ll let you handle it. Flirt to convert.”

“That would be perfect,” Marcy said. “She’s really cute Kirt. You’re going to like her. She’s very cute. You two would be so cute together.”

“Right,” I said.

I imagined she would unattractive, but I was terrified she might not be. And part of me did in fact suspect it would be the girl with the ant bracelet—which, of course, it was. God’s punishment for imagining her as some sex object was to introduce us.

Kelly stepped out, pulled the seat, and was about to join me in the back when she began to climb in. I kept my eyes on her as she did. It was most likely her, I knew immediately from the shape of her face that I could just see in the streetlight. I squished my shoulder against the far window so she wouldn’t sit on me, but when she pressed her hand into the leather seat to crawl in, it was close enough to me to feel the pull of it. Marcy’s overhead light was dead, and I felt glad she could not see me well. I was a masturbator. She smelled like Winterfresh and berries.

Marcy introduced us as Kelly got in. Then she jerked the car back into the street then swung it hard reverse right, and Amy fell into me and planted her hand on my knee and didn’t say sorry. She snapped in her seatbelt, and as we went under a streetlight I saw she had the dark short hair. Her tight shirt squeezed her breasts. I looked away.

“So,” she said.

Marcy cut her off. “So I’m not allowed to play music because Kelly is apparently in charge.”

“Because it sucks,” Kelly said.

“So we will be driving in awkward silence.” Marcy swerved onto the main highway. “Welcome to the silent car.”

“You both sell the pesticide?” Amy asked.

“Kirt sells,” Kelly said. “I mostly fuck around.”

I heard Marcy slap his hand again for swearing.

Amy said to me, “Like, how much do you make? How much did you make today?”

I told her we hadn’t worked today, but I’d sold two the day before, in one hour. “Which is about, one-sixty an hour.”

“One hundred and sixty?” she said. “An hour?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s good,” she said. She hooked my elbow with hers. “Marcy, you can take that one.” My hand fell to her legs, which were together and bare—she wore shorts; I could feel both her warm thighs. I didn’t move a muscle. I didn’t deserve this thrill. I felt I should be treated as God would treat me. I felt some responsibility to inform her I was a sex fiend, as if by not wearing it on my face I was being a liar. We drove under another light and I saw the bracelet. I pulled my arm back from hers and put it in my own corner.

On the way into the sports bar her shoes clapped on the ground, and I looked down her legs—tan, smooth. I sat next to her while we ate dinner. I couldn’t justify turning all the way to her to speak, so I rarely looked right at her. She was shorter than me sitting and it was hard not to see down her shirt. She wore red lipstick. Man.

I’d never been to a sports bar. My family of eleven didn’t eat out, or at least, when we did, it was such a disaster, with three or four children crawling under and over the tables, others crying, that my parents remembered why we didn’t do it. So it’s true: I thought a sports bar was the same as any bar, the sort of place a Mormon never went. I was surprised to see tables of loud families, rather than smoke and neon signs. I couldn’t believe the number of people out on a Sunday evening, as if none of them knew what day it was. That would never happen in Utah.

Amy suggested we all go by her place after. “For drinks or something.”

“These guys don’t drink either,” Marcy said.

“I’d take a drink,” Kelly said.

“No he wouldn’t,” Marcy said.

Amy threw her hands up. “We’ll drink Coke or something.” She looked at me. “Do you drink Coke?” She was probably joking, not aware that some Mormons don’t because of the caffeine. I said that I did. I thought she was about to say something else because she stared at me. She leaned even closer. She had blue eyes. She slid my glasses off my face. “You have a spot on your eye,” she said. She touched my cheekbone with her finger. “That one. A black spot, right in the green.”

I nodded. “On the top part of my iris.”

“What is it?” She leaned a bit away from me.

“A freckle?” I said. “I don’t know.”

She leaned back in and looked close. She touched my face again. She made the noise like *hmm*. She did not put the glasses back on my face but folded them up and hung them on her neckline. I saw the ant bracelet dangling from on her wrist. She grabbed her purse and stood up as Marcy did. Kelly looked at me and nodded. The girls headed to the bathroom.

Kelly looked at me and nodded again.

“What,” I said.

“This girl actually likes you.”

“Nah,” I said.

“What’s wrong with you man. Where are your glasses? Right now?”

“Nah, I mean, look at her.”

He put his hand on my shoulder. “Your glasses are hanging on her tits.”

“I can’t believe this is a Sunday and everybody is out.”

“And look how blurry it all is! Because, oh, wait, you don’t have your glasses? Because that girl Amy, she just hung them on her fucking tits. I mean, hell, it was like, creative. Hey,” he said. “Hey.” I looked at him. He looked as serious as he sounded. “I know it’s bad for me to force this idea on you, and you want to go on a mission and all. And I’m conflicted about my role here, honest to God—hey listen, seriously.” He put his second hand on my shoulder. “At some point, you’re going to understand that the Mormon Church isn’t true. In the meantime, if this girl, Amy, if she wants to have sex with you—”

“You’re an idiot.”

“No,” he said and clenched my shoulders. “No. You need to aim for that. Aim for sex with her and she’ll like you. Aim for whatever it is you’re aiming for—a kiss on the cheek or whatever—and she’ll think you’re a freak.”

“Oh, right, so that’s what you are aiming for with Marcy then?”

He shrugged. “And every girl in this room. It doesn’t mean you have to end up there. But aim for it if you want a girl to feel normal around you.”

The girls were coming back. He saw them. “It’s a good thing, not bad.”

I put my hands in my pockets and we went to the car. I got in after Amy. But she did not sit against the opposite window. She did not put her seatbelt on or it would have held her further to the side. She still had my glasses. Her shirt was cotton or something soft, and I could see in the parking lot light that my glasses were pulling it down a little.



Could Kelly seriously believe all that? Aim for sex, and I'd be actively treating a girl as an object. It was the shallowest thing I'd heard. It scared me how honest he seemed, that he actually believed it was okay to let your guard down—or worse, to actively aim for it. He didn't understand how it would ruin him. Is that what happened to people who left the Church? I felt Amy's fingers brush mine as Marcy turned, and I balled up my hand. She folded her arms.

Marcy asked about Amy's dad when we walked into her house, and she said he was at work. Kelly looked at the clock and asked if he was a 7-Eleven clerk.

She laughed. "He works in New York. At a bank."

"He lives down here?" I said.

Marcy grabbed Kelly's arm and pulled him to a movie rack.

"There," Amy said. "Mostly." She still had my glasses hanging on her neckline, lenses out. Maybe she forgot she had them. Her living room was blurry but large, and I could see a winding staircase leading to the upper level and a railing circling the upper floor. She had a vaulted ceiling.

"So this is like your place?" Kelly asked from across the room.

"Eh," Amy said and shrugged. She said she would be back in school in Gainesville in the fall. I didn't ask what she was studying. She shuffled to the fridge—she'd left her heels by the door. My eyes scanned from her bare feet up her thighs. Her shorts wouldn't quite have passed the dress code at my high school. When she tiptoed to grab something from the top of the fridge I saw the dip of her back and her smooth hips. I felt myself squinting.

She was hot in the way girls in high school who I'd never let myself look at were hot. Like the girl in English who sat in front of me wearing a thong and leaned forward a lot, and who would turn and plant her arm on my desk and press her cleavage on her wrist when she had not been listening and needed me to tell her what we were supposed to be writing about.

She was hot like her.

She was not the sort of girl I was going to marry.

She twisted open a two liter of Coke, and when the lid spun off to the tile she bent directly down toward me to get it and I stared at her cleavage.

Didn't she deserve it, the way she was dressed?

My glasses fell to the floor. She picked them up and stood, looking at them, then walked toward me. It was as if she knew I'd been watching, but didn't seem to care I could have almost seen her nipples. She brushed the lenses off then reached up and slid the frames over my ears. Her palm caught my cheek, barely. Her finger brushed my ear. Her bracelet sparkled.

"Coke?" she said. "Or did you decide to spring for a beer?"

"So you were at our church today."

"Was that a question?"

"Uh," I said.

"Or did you see me there?"

"Um. I saw your bracelet there."

"My bracelet?" She held it up. "You sat next to me, right?"

I nodded. "But Marcy said you were there, too."

“Yeah, Marcy invited me.”

“Why’d you go?” I asked.

She shrugged. “For fun, I guess.”

“Fun?”

She turned to the cupboard and pulled several glasses out, then set them on the countertop. She said, “Well, you don’t run into fifty single guys in shirts and ties just anywhere.” She wore silver eyeliner. Mascara. “I have to admit though, you seem really odd.”

“I do?”

“No—well yes, definitely you—but you, as in *you guys*. You, nonspecifically.”

Her lips shined deep red. “Marcy tells me you’re almost for sure not gay, this is just like, how you are.”

“You—nonspecifically?”

“Um. Specifically.”

“Oh.”

“She’s right?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“You guess you’re not gay.”

“I mean—I’m not gay. I meant I guess this is how I am. Whatever that means.”

I must have smiled because she smiled and said, “Did anybody ever say you have good dimples?”

I nodded. “My mom always does.”

She laughed. “Your mom? Jesus.” She turned toward the bottle of Coke.

I'd always been determined to believe that girls looked better without makeup, and had verbalized it a hundred times in high school to all my non-beautiful, non-makeup-wearing female friends. I knew now it had been a lie. I'd spent so much energy staying away from beautiful; I'd rated girls down immediately for having a good body, for wearing heels, for knowing which colors they were best in. Kelly talked of aiming for sex. I'd aimed for the opposite. Some commitment to average, some hatred of beauty. Maybe just fear.

"I'll have a Coke," I said. It felt like a demand, so separate from her first offering it.

She poured a glass and I watched her. She picked up the bottle with both small hands and she tilted her whole body with it, as if willing the Coke to pour correctly. It was the first time I ever let myself watch someone beautiful. My circulatory system raved.

Kelly picked out the movie *Hi-Fidelity* and we turned it on. The only rated R movie I'd seen was *Mall Rats*, which I snuck while staying at a friend's for a weekend when they went out for two hours. Kelly sat down and Marcy plopped down right next to him, then reached across him for something and came up closer. I sat on the love seat by Amy, and she sat up cross-legged in her corner. Just minutes later I looked over at her and she was watching me. I smiled.

She pointed at the blanket on the couch-end behind me and said, "You cold or anything?"

I was about to say I felt just fine. But she was trying her hardest to help me out—I could see that. I had to start closing on buying signs. I grabbed the blanket, put it over

me, held it up for her, and held my breath. She ducked under my arm and the blanket and laid her head on my chest near my shoulder. I couldn't quite compute it, that I could feel her warm body, her left breast against my ribs, her shoulder into my side, her ear to my chest, her arm crossing my leg. I couldn't even think about it. I was rigid, staring at the screen. I was a chopped tree stump. I found breathing difficult. She adjusted her body and squirmed into me.

In a minute the screen showed John Cussak's girlfriend Laura naked, their neighbor having sex with her from behind, his hands wrapped around her body squeezing her breasts. I flinched and jerked my head away in reflex, and Amy lifted herself off me with a sigh. She stood up and said she would make popcorn.

I followed her to the kitchen.

She put a bag into the microwave.

I needed to say something.

"So, how many boyfriends have you had?" I asked.

"This is going to take a toll on me, I can tell," she said. She folded her arms. "I may not pick up when you call."

"Huh. But I will? Call?"

"Good point. You might not. Well—" She looked around. Then she grabbed a sharpie from a bulletin-board tray. "On the off chance." She took my hand and concentrated. It was unnecessary touching. She could have just told it to me. I could have put her number into my phone. I smiled. The popcorn started popping, slow at first.

"Is this how many boyfriends you've had?" Again I was trying to be funny. She was climbing into the millions.

“No,” she said. “That’s probably only half this. This is the number I’ve slept with. This year.” She laughed. “So that’s like, well, how many minutes are there in year?”

I said, “Five-hundred-twenty-nine-thousand-six-hundred. Minutes.”

“Really? I’ve been busy. How’d you know that?”

“Uh, Rent.”

“What?”

“You could have told me your number and I could have put it in my phone,” I said.

She shook her head, exhausted. “How many girlfriends have you had, Kirt? That’s obviously the more pressing concern.”

“I had one in sixth grade. I had one my sophomore year of high school.”

“Oh God. You’re like the little brother I don’t have.”

“That’s okay,” I said.

She laughed. “Do you find me repulsive? Then it’s okay.”

The popcorn was popping loud and fast. She turned and peered into the microwave.

“I,” I stuttered. “Yeah. I think you’re—”

Well, she spun on her heels from the microwave, so I froze up. She planted her chin on her fist, her elbow atop the counter. And she waited for me to say something. But I was frozen. She rolled her eyes and turned away.

I handed the words from my brain to my mouth and then I just said them. “I think you’re, uh, rather pretty.” I ran with it, like I’d knocked on the door once and there was no going back. Knock a couple times then ring the doorbell really quick after. “Today at

church I was scared to talk to you, or pretty much to even look at you. I thought your wrists were pretty.”

She was pleased. “You’re afraid to talk to girls who have pretty wrists?”

“No. See. I’ve never, like, I mean, I don’t hang out—”

“With a girl like me?”

“Right.”

“What’s a girl like me then?”

I put my hands in the air. She was tough. “For one. You’re prettier than girls I talk to.”

“Well,” she said. “Let me ask this, then. Do you think your girlfriend—your one, single girlfriend ever, because, for future reference, sixth grade doesn’t count. Do you think she was too pretty to be your girlfriend?”

“Oh, yes. She was.”

The popcorn beeped. She pulled it out and dumped it into two different bowls.

“But guess what. She was your girlfriend.” She threw the popcorn bag away. “So even if she broke your heart—”

“Well.”

She looked at me. “She didn’t. Did she.”

“I think it was sort of mutual. It was just, you know, headed nowhere.”

“You broke up with her—”

“I only started the conversation. We were kissing too much, like—”

She rattled her head back and forth like getting water out of her ears, and I stopped talking. She planted her elbows on the countertop again and put her chin in her

hands. She was grinning at me and then she started shaking with a laugh. “You broke up with her because she wanted to kiss you too much?”

“It was like, all the time,” I protested. “Like, nothing else.”

She shook her head. “Heartbreaker.”

“I’m going to sit,” I said, and backed toward the living room. She was grinning at me and I turned and circled the love seat and sat. She came soon with popcorn and she sat with her knees curled in the other corner and I looked at her and she was smiling at me and shaking her head again. I leaned to her once and said, “What?”

She shook her head and stifled a sigh. “You really are like this.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I think.”

She was sitting cross-legged again and she knelt on the cushion and scooted over to me, looking sweet. I put my arm out on the loveseat back and she curled up against me. My arm lost circulation; my elbow, wrist, hand, fingers went dead. I let them die, die, die.



## CHAPTER 10

Now Listen, she says. It isn't my fault your goddamn boss dropped your ass.

They fight in the kitchen, in the laundry room, in the living room, in the backyard, in the garage that has been converted to a bedroom, in the upstairs loft that is void of all furniture, walls white, months after they'd intended to paint them blue or green or yellow and hang them with prints bought at Target. They fight over the marker on the walls, the child, the children, the dog, the dogs, the lack of dogs, the child on the way.

It's this goddamn house. I told you—

You told me what? He yells. You told me nothing. We both signed for it.

I said it was a bad idea. I fucking said that.

You said it was a good neighborhood. You said you wanted a room for a piano.

I said I thought it was a bad idea. Why won't you call the bank? Call them and tell them the situation. They've got to help. Eighteen-hundred dollars and now they want twenty-six? Eighteen in April and twenty-six in May? I never signed for anything like that. It's crazy.

He shakes his head. I'm not calling the goddamn fucking bank.

She glares at him.

We'll do the garage sale like I said.

Should I make fliers then? Let the neighbors know that every second Saturday we'll be selling pieces of our home? And soon the cat. And maybe our son and then this one on the way.

God, you're a bitch. One fucking month. I'll be set by next. Jason's company, they need another accountant. He just told me so.

Jason's full of shit. You'd better call the damn bank.

But the man has already called the bank, and the banker has faxed him what they signed, and he has read what was highlighted, so he knows the bank can change 1800 to 2600 if it wants. He walks into the garage and he raises the garage door into the setting sun, looks out into the neighborhood at the beautiful homes, several still for sale, lots bare in a few places, unfinished. The plates on two cars he's just changed from blue New Jersey to Florida white with oranges. His boy playing with a neighbor's in the street. Another neighbor waters his lawn; another talks on his porch to a boy in a white shirt who flips through a binder.

The man looks at the cement below his feet, which is cracking like the brand new street. Sink holes. Dips and bumps and waves like some ocean, a new street and it's rolling like the lake behind his house, the lake that costs, according to the itemized list available from the neighborhood HOA, one hundred and six of his four-hundred and seventy three dollar homeowners association fee. The cracks in his cement flow with a trail of ants. They disappear into his home's wall. He stomps on several that have strayed from the crevice, then walks back into the garage. He grabs an orange from the fridge and he rips it open, the sticky juice on his hands. The live smell of it. He licks his fingers.

He eyes his garage shelves and picks up a drill, sets it in a separate corner. Fifty, he counts. A full panel of wrenches. One-hundred. He looks at tools hanging on the wall and counts them, overestimating. Two. Three-fifty. Five-hundred dollars. He goes to pick up the chainsaw he'd bought two weeks ago for the tiny shrubs he's planted. His hands are swarmed by a pain he doesn't comprehend for a full second, and while he tries to calmly set the chainsaw down it rises into his wrists, and then he gets it: fire ants, biting,

biting, dying to get a piece of him and to pump him full of venom. He sets the machine down and he scrapes his wrist against the shelf, but the pain comes stronger and stronger and finally he grips his wrist with his free palm, crushes every last ant. A small swarm of the tiny brown things spins in a maddening trance around the machine. Their crusty bodies pour out of its vent. He looks at his hand and can see twenty, thirty, forty tiny spots that will become welts. They aren't done with him. They are at his feet—entirely separate ants and all the same, a swarm around a rotting orange, something his damn son must have left sitting there. There are only several but his ankle is shocked at the assault. He backs up and stomps, stomps, backs up, trips and nearly falls over something—an awkward wooden rocking horse he knocks to the ground, ten dollars at Walmart—and he steps out of his shoe and pulls off his sock and squeezes it in his hand to crush any in there. He rubs his ankle. He stands the rocking horse up, then decides he'll take it inside.

He'll have to get something. Something to kill the ants. The sun reflects off a large pane of glass, chipped on a corner, which he'd taken off the table and replaced with a new pane. He shields his eyes, walks out to the driveway, watches his kid play, watches the boy in the polo carry his binder past the man spraying his lawn to knock on the door straight across.

## CHAPTER 11

The first four days of the week were a total mess—David was determined we sell in gated communities, and though we never again got the cops called on us, I couldn't settle down. Every door could be the pissed off, nasty, shouting man. Amy's number still showed light gray on my hand, a welcome ghost of Sunday, though I'd put it into my phone by now, and several times written a text message to her then deleted it. I didn't know how we'd gotten to her home and I kept imagining maybe I'd knock and she'd open the door.

I sold zero on Monday and just two through Thursday, while David grabbed three a day.

On Friday, Kelly and I walked into Correlation where the whiteboard advertised this week's soon-to-be failed office goal. We'd serviced just forty-two accounts as an office so far this summer: twenty-eight from David, six from me, two from Kelly, and a few from each of the new guys, Payson and Taylor. Payson was a six-foot-seven returned missionary with a poorly shaped goatee. The fact I was a foot shorter put me at eye level with the bad line under his chin. He stuck sticky notes all over the bathroom mirror upon arrival. I knew all his goals, in pest control sales and otherwise. Kelly had moved into my room, abandoning the other to Payson and Taylor. Taylor was something like Italian. He was covered in hair. It poured out of his polo neck, and when he sold three his very first day he felt his success was on account of that. "Housewives—they love it," he'd said.

We trained Friday on the ABC's of sales. ABC stands for Always Be Closing, which means that at all times, at every second, a salesman needs to be inviting the customer to buy. Never should a moment go wasted from the opportunity to be asking for

the sale. The ABC's dictated a certain amount of focus that J.J. felt Kelly and I were probably not yet showing.

"It's not that you are doing bad," J.J. said, hands up. "You aren't doing bad; I just know we can do better if we have our heads in the right place. You know, I had a Priesthood leader who always used to say, 'Always be in the right place, at the right time, doing what you should be doing,' and this is a lot like that. The sales are there, waiting for you, and you need to get yourselves to the right doorsteps, and at the right time, and do the right thing. And the right thing is to close, close, close. ABC."

David added, "Look, you put the customer to a test. You create a confrontational situation, which, I don't care whether anyone likes the sound of it or not, that's what sales is and that's how the world functions. And the only way to relax that situation is for the seller or the buyer to give up their position. The best salesmen can sit with that, forcing the customer to be the one. And always closing is like always offering a hand to the buyer. Continually giving them a way out of the moment. Economically it's simple: you make the cost of that confrontation greater than the cost of a pest control contract."

So we left the office on that. Kelly said, "This sales thing is evil."

We curved around the bushes in the heat that had grown while we'd been inside.

I shrugged. Sure it was a bad model of human interaction to adopt indefinitely. But this whole summer was an isolated event. The consequences and the ramifications and the results and every single thing that happened this summer, all of it was contained as if in some snow-globe—some superheated, snowless, snowman-less, bug-infested snow-globe. And I needed the money. I needed this isolated summer. I needed to feed off the sort of energy David was somehow creating. Frankly, I needed ten thousand dollars,

and for the first time since I'd arrived, I'd gone to bed the night before wondering if I should revise my goal of three hundred sales.

Payson ran up behind us with Taylor. They captured an enormous wolf spider in a jar. Her back was covered in what looked like a living mass of cells, a pulsing, vibrating, clinging pile of a hundred baby wolf spiders. Each of her eight knuckles was locked and ready to spring somewhere. There was nowhere to spring.

Payson and Taylor were freaking out. Kelly was disturbed. I thought it was beautiful.

"Look," Payson almost shouted, pointing at a fire ant mound. He kicked it hard and the dirt flew, and the small brown biting ants swarmed to the surface. It was a scene so violent the silence didn't fit it. I imagined at their level the noise, the frightening buzz of a million feet and all the neurons firing and the anger and the jaws.

"Ants vs. Spider!" Payson cheered, holding the jar out in front of him.

Taylor put his hands to his mouth and bellowed, like an announcer, "Who will win?" Taylor was exceptionally odd.

"Spider gets away," I said. I'd seen those things jump.

"No, watch, watch, ants will take it down," Payson said.

Kelly chimed in. "For sure. Ants destroy."

He dumped the thing into the seething pile of ants. It hit the surface like a lit firework and burst into the grass a foot away, shook a single ant off its leg, took a few more quick steps, and froze, plotting a move. The babies were undisturbed. Payson lamented. He reached to pick it back up with the jar, and with some difficulty got it in. He went to put it back into the ant mess.

“Hey!” I shouted. “No way. That spider got out.”

He laughed, but it wasn't funny.

He dropped her again on the pile, and the ants swarmed her. The babies on her back exploded in a hundred directions, taken instantly by the rabid insects, stung, stung, stung, and she was dragged into a ball, wrapped up so tightly that I lost sight of her, only a little bulge, a smaller bump, and then nothing. Only ants remained.

I walked right home. It was the worst thing that had happened this summer.

On the way, my phone buzzed.

J.J. wanted me to come with him on the doors.

In his purple sedan we flashed beneath the interstate toward south Lakeland. The AC was slow and sweat soaked through the tail of my shirt, my underwear band, even my back belt loops.

“I mean, look,” J.J. said, tilting his head. “You're selling just fine. You're selling well. It's your first month.” We flew past cars. “I think you can sell better, I think you will. It's always useful to watch someone else work. I think this will help.”

J.J. had found time outside his duties as owner of the company to knock on a few doors, he said, and he was taking me to a neighborhood he'd just discovered. It was much closer to our apartment complex—it turned out to be a quick five-minute drive as opposed to my usual hour-long hunt. The place we rolled into was ungated. Not even a “No Soliciting” sign. The yards sprawled, unlike the tightly cramped communities I'd been working in.

“Are these even new?”

“Brand new houses.” J.J. grinned like a run-over ferret. He tucked in his shirt. He cinched his belt. I wondered if I ought to do the same. “It’s not fantastic area,” he shook his head, “not like the stuff you guys are hitting.”

I shook my head with him.

He continued, “I don’t have time to drive to the best neighborhoods like you guys.”

“No,” I said, “I wouldn’t think so.”

He tossed his head left and said we’d head down the street a bit. He preferred to begin in the center. His arms swung and I finally grasped the image he’d been inspiring for three weeks: He walked like the creature adjacent the human on an evolution chart might, slightly hunched, head forward, teeth the first points to break any plane. We marched passed yards strewn with Tonka trucks, tractors, blow-up balls, tricycles, roller blades, a deflated rubber pool, a hose-fed sprinkler leaking.

“Here.” He pointed with the arm that held the clipboard, and we crossed the street to where a yellow SUV with Ohio plates sat in a driveway. A tricycle tipped on its side blocked the sidewalk. “Ohio,” he said and nudged my arm.

J.J. descended on the door as if to announce a hurricane evacuation. A knock bordering on vandalism.

He nudged me. “When I go on the doors with somebody it always feels like we’re tracting.” I didn’t know what tracting felt like, didn’t know how it felt to stroll through a neighborhood with my fellow missionary companion, how it felt to knock on a door wearing a suit and name tag that announced myself as a representative of Jesus Christ rather than of Premium Pest Control. “Oh,” J.J. said, “You’re a pre-me, I forget.”



“Yeah,” I nodded. Pre-Mission.

“When do you go again?”

“Fall. Probably.”

“Probably?” J.J. smiled. “How about definitely?” The door opened and J.J. slumped into the brick wall adjacent the bulky man who’d answered. He flipped through the papers tacked to the top of his clipboard without looking up. Then he grunted an acknowledgement as he glanced at the man, frowned, and returned to his paperwork. My heart thudded; I could feel the spurts through my neck. There was nothing for me to do, no instruction given. I locked eyes on J.J. to keep from cracking. He’d not warned me of this: two strangers on a porch and a man ignored in the doorway to his home.

J.J. appeared to be looking for something in his stack of papers. Finally—like an afterthought—he said, “The neighbors tell you I was coming by?” His face dripped with the boredom of a road-construction flagger.

The man shook his head. “No,” he said, but it almost sounded like a question. He turned his jaw and opened his mouth to speak, then shook his head again. “No. Who—?”

J.J. brushed his hand through the air and stopped the question. “That’s fine.” His eyes fell to his papers. “I can just let you know what’s going on.” He lifted a carbon copy and glanced at something I couldn’t see for several silent seconds. I swallowed hard.

“It’s tomorrow.” J.J. said, and then slowly, watching his paperwork, “tomorrow and Thursday.” He looked up and nodded. He had yet to look to me where I stood several feet to his right and slightly behind him. I had yet to look back at the man—I could not look back at the man or I’d laugh or cough or do something to break the discomfort. J.J. continued, “We’re just treating the neighbors. Just for the little ants.” He rubbed his

fingers together to suggest tiny. “And the little spiders.” He flipped through papers on his clipboard: “Let’s see. George, Caroline.” He waved toward the street. “Anne. Mike—” he stared at the man. “Do you know Mike?” His arm flopped in the direction of a hundred homes.

“Yeah, yeah,” the man nodded, wiping his palms on his stained yellow tank top. The shirt stretched past his gut to his thighs and his shoulders were stones on thick, uniform arms, tanned and freckled. “Yeah.” He seemed relieved. “I know Mike.”

“Yeah,” J.J. said. “Tomorrow my truck’s gonna be out here just treating. You’ll be here tomorrow or the next?” It should have been a question but wasn’t.

“Yeah.” The man looked out toward the street. “Yeah.” He looked at me and I at him, then he turned his eyes back toward the inside of his house. He looked back at me, then down at the company name on my shirt. I glanced at a car driving by. My hands couldn’t decide whether to grip my clipboard or dig at my pockets.

“Perfect,” J.J. said and slid an empty contract from the bottom of his papers to the top. I cleared my throat accidentally then stared off down the street. I leaned hard into the fake pillar on the porch, hand on my hip. My guts went heavy; the sudden urge to use the bathroom sounded through my abdomen and legs. The man glanced at me again. J.J. stared at his papers, flicked his pen in my direction, and said, “This is my bodyguard.” A second later he looked up, grinning.

“Oh. Haha,” the man said.

I laughed. “Yeah.” My voice cracked slightly. J.J. had a pen to the contract.

“What was your name,” J.J. said.

“Uh, Mike,” the man said.

“Mike—” J.J. didn’t look up. “Mike. You’re Mike too. Funny. And your last.”

I sucked a breath.

“So what is this for?” Mike asked, tilting his big head.

“Oh,” J.J. said, shaking his head. He pressed his lips together and shrugged. “Not a big deal. Just treating the neighborhood for the little ants and the spiders.” He paused.

“Did no one tell you what we’re doing?”

“No,” Mike said, more puzzled than ever.

“You didn’t get our announcement?”

“No,” Mike said. “No, no, we—”

“Oh!” J.J. said, hand in the air. “Oh—I’m sorry! Of course you’re confused.” He laughed and Mike laughed, eyes bright.

“I was gonna say,” Mike said, then made a puzzled look, then laughed.

I smiled and shifted my weight before pressing myself back into the pillar.

“Well,” J.J. said, bouncing a bit with his words like a dazed fighter. “I’ll show you real quick what we’re doing for the neighbors.” He pulled himself off the wall and took a step away from the house. Mike watched intently, nodded and folded his arms. He appeared to be making a vast and informed assessment. He thought he was thrown off-balance by some error made by this stranger on his porch, but that the situation had now righted itself.

My mind raced as J.J. waved his arms toward the nests above Mike’s head, lodged in the corners of the overhang shading the porch, comb-shaped hives with white larvae heads being tended by black-and-yellow-bodied, hard-tailed hornets. This playing stupid wasn’t in the manual. But J.J. was a bit dumb all the time. Perhaps he was just

channeling his personality. Did he really leave announcements? Would he have delivered fliers to these porches the day before? No way. I considered at all only because he'd sounded so convincing asking the man if he'd received it. No, I doubt J.J. would ever leave a flier, based on David's argument about them. I watched like I might watch a tightrope walker, afraid of his falling, my sympathy rising for him with my awe.

"My technician, tomorrow, he's gonna knock all those wasps down, and he's gonna spray there to keep them from wanting to come back."

"Those darn things," Mike said, shaking his head.

"And he's gonna pull the power sprayer off the truck," J.J. mimed throwing a hose over his shoulder like an army pack and marched three steps into the lawn. From there he took aim at the foundation: "He'll getcha 'bout ten feet out around the house, and about five feet up." His hand chopped the air above his head, making J.J. about four feet tall by that measure. I kept my eyes on J.J.—they followed his revolving arms that pointed and waved. "Then he's gonna kill all these nasty fire ants out here in your yard." He aimed his invisible fire-hose at the grass. "An' he'll do that about fifteen feet out from the house—obviously not all the way out," he said, scrunching his face and shaking his head. "We 'aint a lawn service of course."

"No, of course not," said Mike, stepping down toward the grass. "Those are fire ants, then? I keep killing them and they come back the next day somewhere else, building their hills. My son got bit."

J.J.'s eyes blossomed. "How old's he?"

"Four."

"I got a nephew who's two." He planted his hands to his hips.

Mike said nothing to this. He was staring off down the street. He looked at his watch.

I shuffled into the grass and stared at a fire ant mound. Something compelled me to break the awkward standstill, as J.J. seemed content not to. I mumbled that I'd found another ant mound.

Mike looked over. "Is that one too?"

"What's your boy's name?" J.J. asked.

"Um," Mike looked at the ground. "That was—" he looked up and held his hand to the sun. A single second seemed to drag on forever.

"Man I hate fire ants," I said.

"That one was Kyle," Mike said.

"Ah. Mine's Jayden," J.J. said. "Aren't they the best? Kids?"

"Yeah," Mike said, nodding his head.

"Well," J.J. said, "you obviously can't have him out here playing and getting bit. That's no good. We'll get these taken care of. If you can do me a favor," J.J. said, then walked to a fire ant mound a few yards away, "If you can do me a favor and mark these with a little flag for my technician when he comes so he can hit every one. Obviously we don't wanna miss any."

Mike nodded slowly. "Yeah, yeah." He cleared his throat. He clearly was not interested. J.J. couldn't, or wouldn't, see it.

"So you," Mike said, "uh, you guys get rid of them then."

"We use Termikill," J.J. said, like it was the local family cafe. "It's restricted to licensed professionals. It's so powerful that it used to be only for termites. You got about

two hundred thousand of these ants under your lawn, and their nest probably reaches across that street to your neighbors there. We'll make it so they'd rather pop up over there than in yours. Here," he said, waving the man to follow him into his own house. "I'll show you what we'll do inside."

I brought up the rear behind Mike, who shuffled up the steps behind J.J.. I waited for J.J. to stop, but he didn't—he pushed open the cracked door and stepped inside.

"Oh, uh," Mike started as J.J. began to step out of his boots. "You don't need to, uh, take those off."

"Been doing inspections all day," J.J. said. "Don't know what I've been in. Don't want to dirty the floors! What was your last name again?"

I stepped on my heel, eyes relishing the opportunity to stare at the floor for several seconds so as not to watch Mike act in what I registered as disguised panic at the events unfolding before him. I lifted my hot foot out of my sneaker. I'd heard J.J. explain getting into the house in training. Just walk in, he'd said. I'd never had difficulty being invited in, but I thought it would be too much of an intrusion, thought it would feel like an enormous breach, to walk in the way he had described. It felt worse than I'd imagined.

"Nelson," Mike said, nearly shutting the door behind us, then leaving it open a foot.

J.J. nodded and wrote on the contract. "Kids sleeping?" he asked quietly. I looked at a clock and saw it was close to 5:00. The home was cool and tiled white in the entry way, grout lines littered with crumbs from graham crackers, gummy bears bitten in half and left to die in stray nooks. The hallway ahead was lined with action figures and a slinky. A TV played around the corner.

“Oh no no, we’re fine,” Mike said. He seemed to be looking for something. He looked at his watch.

“Where was the kitchen?” J.J. asked.

“Oh, right.” Mike led down a hall like it was his idea. I followed J.J. past crooked photos of three young boys with Mike and his big-haired wife, whose smile appeared to have been retrieved from storage like a holiday decoration.

Mike stepped into the kitchen and glanced at his wife who eyed us all from the couch where she sat with a boy. The other two boys played on the floor with a pile of Legos and an electronic helicopter that didn’t work but made noise. Scattered on the table were newspapers and mail, most of it unopened. The kitchen sink overflowed with dishes and I ended up next to it. The scent of old barbeque sauce, tart and artificial, drifted up to my nose along with deeper tones of mildew.

J.J. motioned me away from the sink so he could kneel at the cupboard below. He pulled a mini Mag-light off his belt and said “Mind if I open this up?” Mike waved his hand through the air casually, then glanced again at his wife, who sat forward on the couch, her thick eyebrows furled. When he threw his hands up quietly and scowled back at her I looked away. Then I heard him say, as if she ought to know already, “Exterminators!” I looked down at J.J., halfway buried under the sink. He popped his head back out then stood and shut the door.

“They’re nesting in the walls.”

Mike put his hands on his hips and nodded. His wife moved slowly toward the kitchen. He looked at her. “They’re treating, um, Mike,” he said, pointing out the window.

“Who?” she said.

“Mike,” he said, “the guy on the, the one with the—down the street. Tomorrow.”

She stared at him, her dark curly hair laced with one stray Cheerio. If she’d answered the door rather than her husband, I realized, this scene would be playing out exactly in reverse—Mike would be frustrated with her and wondering what was going on, why she had let these strange men in, and she would be attempting to explain to him how it got to this point.

J.J. stole her attention. “Those little ants,” he said, rubbing his fingers together again, “the neighbors are seeing them right close to the sink because they’re building their nests by the water.”

The wife looked carefully at her husband and then at J.J.. “Tiny little things?”

“Hardly even look like ants they’re so small.”

She and her husband looked at each other. “Those things you saw running laps,” he said.

They stared at each other and J.J. let the silence happen. A whole conversation between their eyes, and in our favor. We had correctly predicted their problem. Among the litany of things I had not expected was the thrill I felt right then. Like my muscles had been flushed with energy, every one prepped and lusting for the sale.

J.J. didn’t flinch.

She walked toward the sink. “They were running laps right here last night when I came for a drink.” She drew a circle in the air around the sink and refolded her arms.

“And in the boys’ bathroom,” Mike said to her.

J.J. shrugged. “You know how it is in Florida.”



“No,” the wife said, and laughed. “No, we don’t.”

“You ‘aint from around here?” J.J. asked.

I was right there with him, watching from the winner’s side.

“No,” Mike said.

“Oh,” I finally chimed in, “where you folks from?”

Well. They’d just moved from Ohio.

“Ohio!” J.J. said. “Well of course you didn’t know!”

“No one told us about these dang bugs!” the wife laughed.

“It’s bad,” J.J. said. “Everyone in Florida has pest control. It’s like having air conditioning here. We do just a standard flushout with these new homes, otherwise they’ll nest in your walls and infest.”

“So this is part of the homeowners association fees?” The wife said, arms still folded.

“Sort of,” J.J. said, without a millisecond of delay. “The homeowners fee doesn’t actually “cover” the entire cost,” he signaled quote marks with his hairy fingers, “but, because we treat so many here, my boss does it half off for your neighborhood, if you can do it while the trucks are already here treating all your neighbors. Obviously,” J.J. said, his voice dropping a little, “we want to fill up our route to save money on gas for the trucks. Gas being so crazy.”

“I’m sure you can save a lot,” the woman said.

I was hung up on why J.J. had referred to his boss.

“So what’s the discount?” Mike asked carefully.

“How many bathrooms you got in here,” J.J. said and put a pen to the contract.

“Two and a half,” Mike said.

“No honey—” the wife said, “there’s the one upstairs.”

“Three and a half,” Mike said.

“I’ll put two and a half,” J.J. said hushed, and he wrote on the contract, though I knew there was no place for house size. “And square footage, what, about twenty four hundred?”

“Twenty eight,” Mike said.

“Under twenty five?” J.J. said, looking up from his paperwork and smiling.

“Perfect, that will keep the price as low as possible.”

On the counter was a two liter of Diet Coke, caffeine free. The wife saw me looking at it and she walked toward it as if to strip herself from the conversation. “You need a drink?” she said quietly.

“Sure,” I said. I hated Diet Coke. And I thought they only made it caffeine free in Utah for Mormons in the nineties—before we started living off Red Bull like everyone else and realized, one day, we’d be better off with Diet Coke. She filled a glass with ice and poured.

J.J. said, “Is tomorrow better, or Friday.”

“Um,” Mike said, and his wife looked at him.

After a few seconds, she said to him, “I’ll be here.”

“Yeah, tomorrow,” he said.

“Great, then you can get on the neighborhood route.” He jotted something down, and without looking up, said, “Usually, it’s one hundred sixty on the initial treatment for a house this size—”

The wife deflated. “Dollars?”

J.J. looked at her and nodded with a smile, like he’d completely misunderstood her reaction. “And then just ninety on the follow-ups. Tomorrow, I can do that first one for half off, like I was saying. Also, since the house is under twenty five hundred and less than three bathrooms,” he smiled, “I can do those follow ups for eighty instead of ninety.” Again, he was looking down, and without looking up from the contract, he moved the pen to a new position and readied it to write. “Is morning better, or is afternoon?”

The wife nodded and appeared to be over-thinking the question. “Afternoon? I guess, is better,” she said. She did not sound entirely finished, but J.J. began speaking after she paused for a reasonable second or two.

“I’ll just call my technician and hold that slot for you.” J.J. pulled out his cell phone. He opened it slowly, as if watching the couple in his periphery. I took a big drink and stared at the ice cubes in my glass, thick and air bubbled. Silence in the room. This was a huge contract. Eighty dollars every other month? The standard we did was seventy, seven times, a four hundred ninety dollar year. Usually we dropped the price to sixty-five per service if they’d agree to an auto-debit payment. Eighty would push that to five hundred sixty for the year.

“Hang on,” Mike said, sounding professional, “for just a minute. Let me just make sure tomorrow’s gonna work.” He looked at his wife and she looked at him. He breathed a big breath. “Do you all have one of those announcements you were talking about?”

“I don’t,” J.J. said. “Ran out.”

“You have a card?” The wife asked, holding her fingers up to mimic the shape.

“No,” J.J. said. “I would, but I’m just the route coordinator.” He shrugged. “They don’t give me a card. But I can only get you on that group discount tomorrow or the next day. We’ll get you while we’re out here, and just get those little ants and the fire ants and hornets taken care of.”

Silence.

I nearly panicked.

J.J. said, as if bored of working, “Which one of those little guys is, uh, what did you say his name was again?” He pointed at the boys playing on the floor.

Mike looked toward the boys who ignored the events in the kitchen, absorbed in their helicopter and their Legos.

“Kyle. In the red there.”

“Kids are the best, aren’t they?”

Sweat dripped down the inside of my arm. I tipped my glass but it was only ice. I sucked at the ice. To my left a stack of papers topped counter. On top was an application half filled out for Tampa Employment Professionals. Mike Nelson. Work experience—I scratched my head to dip my eyes toward the paper without being noticeable—Contractor, US Homes, ‘01 to February ‘07. He’s unemployed, must be. Beyond the papers was a pile of books and a Bible.

No.

Not a Bible.

I stepped toward the book and held it up, grinning.

“You guys Mormon?” I asked, the *Book of Mormon* held high.

J.J.'s eyes flashed.

"Yeah," Mike's wife said with a brief hesitation.

"We're both Mormon," J.J. said, motioning to me. "This kid, he's straight from Utah." J.J. didn't mention that he just came from Utah as well. "In fact," J.J. said, "the owner of this company is a Mormon too."

"What's his name?" Mike asked.

"Jeffrey Jacobs," J.J. said.

"He's from Florida?" The wife asked.

"He's originally from Utah," J.J. said in the third person. "But he's been in Florida, what—Kirt, how long has Jeffrey been in Florida?"

"Um, I'm not sure."

J.J. grinned. "We're all in the Tampa Fourth Ward," he said.

"We're in the seventh," Mike's wife said.

"Crazy," J.J. said. "Crazy. Huh. Listen, you know what? Let me make a phone call to my manager. I want to find out about something I might be able to do for you guys."

There was silence while J.J. began to dial, and the woman asked me, "What did you come from Utah for?"

"Oh, just to work."

"To work? To do this?"

I saw J.J. look at me and pull a slight face.

"Yeah."

“David,” J.J. said loudly into his phone with a smile like he’d called an old friend. “Listen, Kirt and I were just doing some coordinating of a route, you know, for that route we are running in south Lakeland for the huge discount tomorrow? Right. Is there still any room on that route anyway?”

J.J. looked to the couple and nodded, then almost whispered, “We’ve got space for you.”

Then back to David at full volume. “Listen, David, you won’t believe it—this couple, the Nelson’s, they are Mormon. I know! I told them we are in the 4<sup>th</sup> ward. They are in the 7<sup>th</sup>. Yep. Nope, they just moved down here—” he looked to them again, and asked cheerily, “When did you two move down here again?”

The couple seemed to appreciate the distraction and looked at each other. Like this might be an escape route.

“Let’s see,” the wife said contemplatively, “February? The very end of February?”

“Right,” Mike said as if answering an important question. “Basically the beginning of March.”

“They’ve just been here a couple months. Yeah, the seventh ward. Yeah—” he turned to the couple. “You go to that church downtown?”

“Downtown Tampa? No—we go south of here to Davenport.”

“Oh,” J.J. said. “Yeah, David, they go to the Davenport ward, which is why we’ve not run into them yet in the Tampa ward-house. Listen, David, I told these folks, because they wanted to get on that route tomorrow for the big discount, I told them that I would

call my manager and see if you could talk to Jeffrey Jacobs and see if he might be willing to work with them, to get them a solid discount.”

He hung on the phone a few seconds, thanked David, and hung up. His bass-like voice ground out a few comments about how odd it was, what a coincidence it was. And, “What was it you did in Ohio?”

“I was a contractor there,” Mike said with a nod. “Good work. You know, lots of growth down here, and the warm winters. Right Hon?”

The woman nodded. “Right.”

J.J.’s phone rang. “There he is,” he said with a smile. “David,” he said as he picked up the phone. “Excellent. Perfect.” He leaned his knobby chin away from the receiver and said to the couple, “It’s the Mormon discount,” then winked. The woman sat down in a kitchen chair.

J.J. hung up the phone. In another minute the couple were both sitting at the kitchen table, glancing coolly at each other and then smiling at us.

“Now,” J.J. said, sitting down and staring intently into Mike’s eyes. “You can’t tell your friend Mike down the street, but listen. The boss says if you can do this with a Visa card instead of a check, we can work out a sort of Mormon discount. He says he’ll do all these treatments not for one hundred and sixty initially and eighty every other month, but for seventy bucks initially and just seventy every other month.” J.J. nodded with big eyes the way one does to a friend after revealing some community gossip.

Mike nodded slightly along with him.

“It’s not technically, ‘legal,’ probably,” J.J. said, using his fingers again for the quote marks, “to give a discount based on, uh, religion—but, heck,” he shrugged. “You

don't strike me as a guy who likes to let the government tell you how to run your operations anyway."

"Oh, no," Mike said, "we don't care about that. Do we Honey?"

She looked at him, then shook her head.

I don't even know when J.J. filled out the entire contract but he slithered up next to Mike, shoulder to shoulder, pointed his chicken scratch instructions to the tech in a tornado of words—ants, fire ants, kids, bitten, allergic, swollen, spiders, roaches too, hornets, wasps—then slid the signing line under Mike's hand.

"We collect payment now of course, but in this case, I mean, I know we can trust you folks to pay the tech."

"Oh yeah, yeah," Mike said.

"But," J.J. said, suddenly tilting his head to the side, "I guess it would be more secure to collect now. Yeah, let's just do it now. Grab your Visa and I'll just call in to reserve the slot." He flicked his pen toward the countertop where, I noticed for the first time, a wallet sat. By the time I took that in he had the phone to his ear and looked perfectly content. Mike breathed deep, then motioned for his wife to grab the wallet. And she did. I thought I sensed her hand shaking slightly when she flicked through several cards and pulled out one. Mike shook his head. She pulled another and he took it from her then twisted it end over end slowly, like winding some chain. He had not signed the contract.

Marcy answered the phone and J.J. began speaking brightly to her. He looked over and noticed the unsigned line. He reached his hand out to the contract, picked up the pen he'd set by it, pointed it at the line, and said, as if correcting for Mike's slight



misunderstanding, “Oh, just your name right here.” He tapped the line several times with the pen then held it there till Mike took it from his hand, by which time he was already in the middle of scheduling with Marcy.

Mike stared at the paper in front of him. He began to sign his name, light, like practicing forgery. His wife stared at the fridge.

“Well,” J.J. said to Marcy, “Keep it on the down low, but we’re giving them an extra discount because guess what, they’re LDS. Seriously, I know.” J.J. looked over at Mike’s slow progress. His eyes held briefly on the paused signature. “Who’s your bishop?” he asked him.

“Carnell,” Mike said. “Bishop Roger Carnell.” He finished his name quickly.

“Roger Carnell,” J.J. said into the phone. “I know. We’ll have to get to know the other wards a little more. We should,” he said, and turned to the couple, “we should do some sort of a barbeque or something sometime.”

Mike’s wife pulled the corners of her mouth up and nodded briskly.

J.J. took the contract back carefully; then, phone to his ear, said, “The card. Right. It’s a—oh,” he looked at the credit card on the table. J.J. motioned casually for the card and Mike picked it back up and then reached it out slowly to J.J.. “It’s a Visa, Marcy. You want to speak with them? Sure. One second.” He held the phone away from his face. “Our secretary just wants to confirm tomorrow’s time with you.”

Mike nodded and took the phone. J.J. jotted the credit card numbers down.

He wrote my name where it said Premium Pest Control Representative.

We left two minutes later.

“Good work,” he said as he handed me the contract, all that hard-fought ink punctuated by a signature in a different hand at the bottom. We strode down the sidewalk. “The Mormon discount.”

I felt as though I’d just played a four-quarter game and was ready to go home.

“Nice folks, too,” he said.

I nodded.

“You know, you don’t want them to know you only came down for the summer, because if they suspect how much money you’re making,” he nudged me, “they’ll think you’re overcharging them. And I don’t like them to know I’m the owner because everyone thinks they should get a deal.”

We were headed to the neighboring house. The yard was immaculate, lacking any of the toys the Nelson’s had. “As tough as that one was, it’s always worth it to fight for that first one of the night. It’s easy now,” he said, and turned to walk up the sidewalk to the next house. On the top of his clipboard was Mike Nelson’s contract, signed, his name prominent near the top.

When the door open J.J. slunk against the wall and finally looked up at the woman who stood there. She was blonde and very pretty, with bangs chopped straight across.

“Just the bug guy,” J.J. said.

The woman burst out laughing. “The bug guy! You’ve resigned to be called what they call you then.”

“Oh yeah,” J.J. said. “This kid here goes by Goober.” He flicked his head at me and I smiled, because I was supposed to. The woman laughed again.

“Look,” J.J. said, “I don’t mean to bother you. Mike’s having us treat tomorrow—you know the Nelsons next door?”

“Oh sure,” she said. “They moved in just before us.”

“Right. He was telling us that a lot of this area is new.”

“Brand new,” the woman said, nodding deeply.

“Also, they were telling us that everyone is seeing tiny little ants by the sinks in the kitchen and the bathroom.”

“Really?” The woman gasped. She leaned out the door and looked at their house and then said, “They really said that? Honey!” She called into the house. “Come here a second!”

Her husband came walking out, a healthy thirty-year-old in workout clothes.

“That couple next door have those little ants too.”

He nodded and looked up at us. “You guys treating them?”

“Tomorrow at four,” J.J. said. “We can get you right after for half off. I’ll jot some info down now so he can get you in one shot. That way,” J.J. said with a shrug, “all the bugs won’t run to your house after we treat their lawn.”

The man waved us in and walked into the kitchen with his wife. We followed. By the time we made it to the table, he’d pulled out his credit card and handed it to his wife. He went into the other room.

It took the time it took to fill out the contract and we were gone. J.J. didn’t even call Marcy.

The next two houses each had a for sale sign. “Let’s cross the street,” he said. He knocked on the door. “Tomorrow, when the tech is here, you’re going to be knocking on every door within sight of the truck, OK?”

“Right,” I said.

“And just point out the truck to everyone. Walk them to the curb if you have to, but make sure they see the truck.”

The door opened. J.J. kept talking to me as if it hadn’t. “That’s the only way we’re going to be able to fit all these customers in, is if we do it back to back like that. I’ll tell the tech. Hey,” he said to the man in the doorway. “Bug guys. We’re treating for those sugar ants tomorrow. Be at Mike’s there at four and then Candy and Trevor’s right after. You going to be around?”

“Is this for the HOA?” the man asked.

“Nope. We’re the premium service most of the neighborhood uses. We opened up a new route to fit everyone in and we’re doing it for half off. Where, mostly, do you see the little ants?”

“They got in my damn speakers.”

“Right. Attracted to the electrical pulse in the wires. Where was that? Let me take a look.”

The man turned and walked and J.J. followed. His name was Justin, and we sold him in ten minutes and left.

At the next door, J.J. said, “This one is you.” He stepped down the stairs and walked into the lawn where he squatted at a fire ant mound like a scientist.

Across the street the garage door to Mike Nelson’s house opened.

This door opened to a middle-aged black man.

I looked across the street and saw Mike sit down in his garage. “Hey Mike,” I called out, and he waved. Then I looked to the man in the door.

“Just the bug guy. We’re treating Mike, there,” I pointed, “then Candy—the blonde?”

“Yeah,” the man said.

“Then Justin next door.”

“How much?”

I froze. “Umm, well, if you’re going to be around tomorrow, are you going to be around tomorrow?”

The man smiled. “How much?”

“Seventy?”

“No thanks.” He shut the door.

“Dangit,” I said to J.J. after I stepped down the steps.

He shrugged. “When they ask how much, ask how big their house is. You’re taking the next one too. Ask this one whether she’s seeing more little ants or more wasps.”

The door opened to a skinny woman with a Bud Light in her hand. She wore a tank top that advertised sharp bony shoulders and she had a smoker’s face.

“Hey. It’s the bug guy,” I said to her. “We’re treating the neighbors tomorrow for the little ants and the hornets and stuff. Have you,” I said, “have you, uh, seen, um, do you see more of the little ants or more of the wasps.” I looked up at her eaves, which were full of wasp nests. “More of those?” I said pointing.

“Everything,” she said, with a glare, but I was pretty sure it was meant for the everything, not for me.

“Where do you see the ants.”

“Everywhere.”

“OK. Maybe, uh, can you show me where?”

She stared at me and then smiled. “You’re a funny one.” She waved me into the house. J.J. followed. We tracked through the home and I ducked under sinks, knocked on walls, dragged my finger along grout lines, rattled her sliding glass door. She smirked at me the whole time.

“We can treat you tomorrow for half off while we’re treating the Nelson’s and Candy and Justin.”

“I don’t know a damn person.”

“The truck will be here.”

“Right. How much?”

“How big is this house.”

“No idea.”

I laughed, then she smiled. I said, “Can I get something to drink?”

This time she laughed and then we walked to the kitchen and J.J. gave me a thumbs up. I sat down at her table.

“I used to be married to one of you.”

“Bug guy?”

“Salesman,” she said. “Mother fucker.”

“Salesman?” J.J. said, as if guiltily charged.

“Oh, shut up,” she said and rolled her eyes. “How much is this going to put me out?”

“Will you be here tomorrow?” I asked.

“And every day.”

“Seventy tomorrow, seventy every two months after. In between we’ll treat for free every time you need it.”

She rolled her eyes and grabbed her purse. “Fucking swamp.”

I jotted her name down. Kelsey Lucci. She handed me her card.

“Is morning or afternoon better?”

She shrugged.

“How about right before four?”

She shrugged. “Are you the one treating?”

“No.”

“Is the one who treats going to be an ex-con and rape and murder me?”

“Not probably.”

“Oh God,” she rolled her eyes. “Of course he is.”

J.J. said, “Kirt, ask Marcy to send a non-rapist.”

“I’d really prefer that,” the woman said.

I wrote down her card number and called Marcy and Marcy confirmed the appointment with her and we left.

It was getting dark. Where had the time gone? I felt happier than I had since I arrived. I had four sales in a single day, all with payment on credit cards. Over three-hundred dollars. I thought of nothing as cars drove past, cared little what anyone thought

if seeing me from the window. Those windows, those cars, those people, they were money. It was more than that. I was here to help. I was here to solve their problem. I was the bug guy.

When we got back to the office I marked my Friday square on the whiteboard with a four.

“Tomorrow,” J.J. said, “You’re going to be there at three thirty when the tech is finishing the first house.”

I left the office and walked home through the buzzing night on my toes. I felt like Gene Kelly. I needed a lightpost and rain. The gator pond lay beside me and I walked on. The forest to my right swelled with the creaking and cracking and tweeting of a million insects. My phone rang, and it was the office.

Marcy said, “I forgot to tell you when you were here. Bishop Duncan called for you.”

“What?” I asked.

“The Bishop, from the singles ward. He wants to talk to you.”

My gut dropped. I’d forgotten my Thursday appointment.

“He wants to talk to you either tomorrow at noon or Sunday when we are at church. He said tomorrow is best, but I don’t know if he knows we are forty minutes away.”

My memory steamed up—had that been only this past Sunday when I’d jacked off in the shower? Could I really only be five days beyond that? Still entirely in the midst of it, as far as God would be concerned. And the Bishop. His urgency. God had prompted



him, had urged him to call, inspired him to bring me in for questioning. I could pretend I hadn't done such a disgusting thing, I could ignore it for days as I had; I could go about my week selling and laughing and meeting a hot girl like I deserved any of it, like I deserved to be happy. I could skip away from the office and saunter down Alligator Alley—as we'd been calling the thin path between the reserve and the pond—but my sins would find me out. I wanted to dive into the pond, sink into the muck that must line the floor.

## CHAPTER 12

The homes and the boys are waiting for the people to arrive.

On the stormy days the boys drive to the filling neighborhoods. They drive out to watch their development, to gauge the emotions of the street, to know when to knock the doors. The drives are long. There is time to talk.

I never lie, says the one.

I don't either. It's not necessary. The best don't have to.

That was the problem with my old company. The boss was a liar.

I worked with guys like that. They'd tell people anything to get the sale.

I don't sell as many as I could.

Me neither. It's worth missing some to keep my self-respect.

Absolutely. I mean, I'm careful about it. I mean, I'm not going to lay out every detail for them, I'm not going to like, you know, *highlight* the bad things. I'm not going to walk in and say, hey, guess what, you could be our first customer in this county. I'll tell them we're treating their neighbors. But what does neighbor even mean?

Exactly. Or I tell them the truck will be on their street tomorrow treating. See, that's a goal, not a lie. That's a statement of confidence.

Right. The truck will be treating here tomorrow. I'm going to graduate from college in a couple years. I'm going to retire in thirty. Can a goal be a lie?

I'm careful to never step over the line. I'll say, we'll be treating a few of your neighbors. Do you know Mr. Jensen two houses down? He's been seeing some of the ants. See, I never said I am going to be treating Mr. Jensen.

That's exactly what I do.

I can't help it if they assume I'm treating Mr. Jensen. I asked if they knew him, and I said we'd be treating their neighbors.

I hate it, though, when they say, so you're treating Mr. Jensen?

Nah, I just say this, I say: We won't be treating him *tomorrow*. I couldn't get him into my schedule. I only have a few specific slots left. I need to schedule him for a different day.

Oh, that's good.

And it's not a lie. It's true we won't be treating him tomorrow. It's true I couldn't get him in my schedule. I need to schedule him a different day—again a goal.

Right. Or when they ask for a flier. I never give them one when they ask.

Oh, a flier? I'm sorry, I don't have any fliers. I have announcements. And if they ask for an announcement: I left them in the car. Because I did, my backseat is full of them. I didn't leave them *all* in the car, but that's not what I said.

How many did you sell last year anyway—you know, with that other company?

Oh, I sold about two hundred.

Yeah, that's about what I did.

I had a few cancel, you know. Like normal.

Right. Me too.

The boys drive down the highway watching for the signs.

Welcome, Homeowners, the signs say.

Because what's a homeowner anyway? Who can really say?

How's this: The homeowner is the one who takes out the loan.

Welcome, Homeowners—that's a goal.

A beautiful house waits on the corner, windows shined, cobblestone sealed, palm trees trucked in and hoisted straight, a set of three on one side, two on the other. The wind is hard and heavy and the front yard is staked with three flags whipping. Red clouds swirl on the weatherman's radar—nothing too out of the ordinary, a tiny hurricane, dispersed pieces of sky racing up the coast broken by minutes of blue, a spinning flower's petals. The flags whip south to north, kissing each other in the wind. Orange, yellow, red flags, announcing the homeowner's opportunity. A sign beneath them with the hours of business. Closed. Call this number.

The boys drive past the model and down the street. They pass four more homes, all with flags, this one with a second story, this one with a second garage, this one with a third porch pillar and a deck above. This one with a brick strip like a belt on the stucco walls.

You're going to make more money next year.

This house will be worth more next year.

You're going to retire a millionaire.

Welcome, Homeowners.

They drive past the houses to flattened dirt with green pipes poking from the ground like snorkels. Dirt and evenly spaced light-posts as far as they can see. Dirt rising into dust. Dust sheets blowing. The roads that had been hosed down, dark and newly paved, are running with dirt. They approach a shiny red stop sign and look both ways. Empty empty empty.

He steps out of the car on the passenger side.

It's getting pretty messy out here!

He looks at the clouds. A swarm of ants in the gutter jumps his shoelaces.

It's going to be gnarly!

His ankles are bit.

Stomp, stomp, stomp.

He sits in the car and wipes at his ankle, takes off his shoe to make sure.

They flip around and leave the place and mark it on their map: *Come in August.*

## CHAPTER 13

In the morning at Correlation J.J. congratulated me on being top seller. The other boys had mediocre Friday's at best. Payson sold one, Taylor sold two. Payson seemed annoyed at having sold just one, but as the meeting dragged on I realized Payson was mostly annoyed—as usual—at being in a meeting.

We did a couple role-plays like when I first arrived. This time I shoved and pushed the guy into a sale, again and again. I realized, at some point, that there were no way for him to tell me no. He could close the door on me, but that was his only redress. I would not leave. I would require that he treat me poorly. Act in an inhuman way. That was the charge I was putting on him if he decided not to purchase my product. He could shut the door on my mid-sentence, smile on my face. That costs a person a lot, to have to do that. It isn't about need, or about product, or about service, or about closing at the right time. It's about building up the human element of the conversation and then forcing the other person to destroy it or to buy. Those are their two choices. I would lean on their empathy, exploit their inability to recognize the boundary between me and them. The more they believed I am sincere and unwilling to leave, the more likely they would be to buy. They won't buy if they think they can exit the situation without any damage to their view of themselves. The vulnerability of a salesman, then, is his great advantage. The heat, the humidity, the crappy shorts and polo. The doorstep and the fact that no one wants him there. All of that is what sells the product.

I left the meeting early to head into Tampa for my appointment with the Bishop.

It was a long enough drive into Tampa to make me ill. I almost convinced myself I'd rather be knocking on doors. I pulled into the church parking lot right next to the only other vehicle there, a black Suburban, the Bishop's, baking in the sun. He had a family of seven to pull around in that thing, all of them under 12. The church felt hollow without the couple-hundred young single adults, trios of boys in white shirts and loosened ties talking in the corner about ditching Sunday School to play Halo.

Every step on the purple carpet felt heavy. This man knew something was up, had seen it on my face. I constructed an entire imagined story for him: he'd seen that I was weighted with sin; he'd read my appointment in the book prepared by the Ward secretary and nodded his head at my finally coming to confess. He'd waited for me Thursday, reading glasses balanced low on his large nose, pen in hand, delving into a printed recent lecture from some or another religious conference he'd attended. The clock had advanced ten minutes past my appointed time and he'd sighed, recommitted himself to his studies. Twenty minutes and he'd frowned, pulled his planner from the right side of his desk, circled my name with pen.

I sat outside his office on a cold metal chair. His door was a shade open and he heard me. He walked to the door and it opened.

“Kirt?”

It was a question. He wasn't sure.

“Yep,” I said. I walked in like I was headed to some doorstep—cocky even. He didn't need to tell me to sit in one of the three orange cushioned chairs opposite his deep brown desk. Intricate spirals ran up the carved leg. I thought of a barber's pole.

He looked at his watch. I glanced at the clock. I wasn't late.

“Good to finally speak to you,” he said, “I mean, like this.”

I agreed. He continued, his voice meandering, slow, unintentional.

“Your extermination business coming along?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I just sell the contracts. J.J., er, Jeffrey, he’s the owner.”

“That’s right,” he said. He shuffled through a few papers, flipped a stapled page on its head and over its pair. “You’re probably wondering,” he said and set the paper down, eyes on it, before finally looking at me and smiling, “why I wanted to talk to you.”

“Well first off,” I said, “I’m sorry I missed that appointment Thursday.”

“Oh?” he shook his head. “I don’t think we had you down—did we have you down?” He stretched his eyebrows up and looked to God for relief. He flipped open his appointment book and ran his finger down the row. “You were inspired to forget,” he joked, after seeing it. “I’m sorry about that. Well, the reason I asked you in today is I’m looking for a young man to speak Sunday the 24<sup>th</sup>. When I talked to Jeffrey Jacobs, he mentioned your name. So I’m asking you: would you be willing to speak in Sacramento meeting in three weeks?”

“OK,” I said and shrugged. I was massively relieved not to be talking about masturbation. Though I knew I should bring it up. While I was here I should talk about it.

He perked up. “Fantastic. You’ll have ten minutes, and you’ll be speaking right before Brother Miller of our Stake High Council.”

“Sure,” I said. “Do you want to give me a topic, or do you want me to speak on anything?”

“I’d like you to speak on the Restoration—on some element of it. Joseph Smith’s First Vision, the delivering of the Priesthood Keys to Joseph by the angels Peter, James,



and John, early church history,” he waved his hand, “any of that. With ten minutes you’ll only want to choose one specific topic. I’ll leave that to you and you can leave that to the guidance of the Spirit. Brother Miller will be speaking about the Martyr of the Prophet.”

“Which was around this time, right?”

“June 27<sup>th</sup>.” He nodded.

“In 1844.”

“Yes.” He smiled. “Jeffrey was right about you.”

“Well,” I said, “the truth is this is not my strong point.”

“What isn’t?” he asked.

“The truth is I don’t have a strong testimony of Joseph Smith. I don’t have a testimony of early church things. Not like I feel I should at least. Not like I want to have.”

“Have you ever asked God,” he said, perhaps too tenderly, “for an answer? Have you ever prayed about it?”

“I guess not hard enough,” I said.

“Did you ever see the film at Temple Square in Salt Lake City about the pioneer journey?”

“Yes—*Legacy*,” I said. The film depicted early Mormon pioneers being persecuted and driven from city to city—including Kirtland, Ohio, the town for which I was named. The prophet Joseph Smith is tarred and feathered for claiming to have restored the truth, people are murdered by a mob, families die on the journey west.

“What did you think?”

“I cried my eyes out, every time.”

He smiled. “So, you felt something. Are you familiar with the verse of scripture called ‘Moroni’s Promise’?” he asked.

I recited it. He was impressed. It never made sense to me when people were surprised I knew the scriptures. Why wouldn’t I? But he wanted to clue me to the final line: “And by the Power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things.”

He opened his *Book of Mormon*. “You know,” he flipped the crinkly pages slowly toward some goal, “you obviously are ahead of your peers in doctrinal areas, I can see that already. Presumably you’re familiar with Alma’s discussion of faith.” He looked up and I nod. “But it’s worth revisiting, and really reading. Because this,” he closed the book and held it in both hands, elbows firmly planted on the desktop, “is the truest book, the most correct book the Earth has seen. And I know it to be God’s word. Because God has revealed it to me. And he’ll do the same for anyone who asks.” He set it down. “Let me tell you something else. Have you ever heard the phrase, ‘A testimony is to be found in the Bearing of it?’”

I thought that I had.

“To be clear, it doesn’t mean *fake it till you make it*,” he said, his deep dark eyes set on me. “If it weren’t true, you’d be faking it. But Truth—God’s eternal Truth as revealed through the Gospel of Jesus Christ—well, you bring yourself in line with Truth and behave with the understanding of it, and even if you don’t yet have a testimony of it, you soon will. Don’t take it from me. The prophets have said so again and again. Read Alma Chapter—” he flipped a couple pages.

I finished for him: “Chapter 32.”

“Yes, Alma 32. And go on the church website and read Elder Packer’s talk ‘The Candle of the Lord.’ The prophets cannot lie, or God will remove them. He’s said so. They don’t lie. There is nothing to lie about when you are dealing in pure truth.”

I took hardened candy from the jars he’d placed on his desk and I took off. I felt glad he’d not called me in to grill me about my mission papers, and preparing a talk on the Restoration of the Gospel through the Prophet Joseph Smith would be the best preparation I could do right now. It seemed certain he had been inspired to ask me to do it. This was what I needed. I breathed the air in the hallway on the way out and could feel that this would be a moment to look back on. These three weeks of preparing my talk would be pivotal ones: the time at which I began to make myself into a powerful tool in God’s hands.

I arrived at the porch of the neighbor to the woman I’d sold the night before, the divorcee of a salesman. I would sell this house, I could feel it. Their porch was crawling with ants and eaves were full of spiders.

A man opened the door looking jittery.

“Yeah?” he said.

“Just the bug guy.”

“Oh.” He relaxed. “Right. Sorry, I thought you were the Mormons.”

“Well,” I laughed. He looked at me odd. “No, I’m just trying to sell people stuff.”

“Thank God,” he said. “What are you selling.”

“Pest control.”

“Fuck. These bugs are bad as hell.”

“You’ve got them bad. Worst on the street.” I pointed at the ground and his eyes followed to a trail of ants carrying things into the crevice between the cement and his wall.

“Fucking figures.”

He followed my arm as I pointed out the hanging wasps and the massive spider webs. “You’ve been seeing those little tiny ants inside, right?”

“Oh, hell yeah. I poured gasoline all the fuck over them in the kitchen on the tile and they still came back.”

“Gasoline? Wow. Gasoline?”

“These buggars are de-term-ined. I’ll tell you what, it’s a constant battle in here. Come here.”

We walked into the house. He wasn’t kidding: an orange and red gallon of gasoline sat in the corner of the kitchen on the tile, bodies of small ants all over the floor. They weren’t the sugar ants I’d been talking about; they were the larger ants we’d seen marching into his walls on the porch.

He squatted down close to the ground and said, “The wife, she flipped out and all. I’m giving them hell.”

“How’s it going?”

He made a sound that didn’t indicate success. “Look,” he said, “you tell your guy across the street there if he comes and just sprays this kitchen to hell, every damn square inch of it, I’ll give him twenty bucks. Just for that.”

“Uh,” I stuttered. This had suddenly taken a wrong turn.

Ask a question.

“How long have you been seeing them?”

“Since I moved in four weeks ago.”

“The whole time?”

“Whole damn time.” He stood up and grabbed the kitchen fridge and swung it open. He pulled out something and held it out to me while still buried in the fridge. I took it. It was wet, cold, a beer.

“Oh, no thanks,” I said. It looked toxic to me, like a sweating urine bag.

He took it back and popped the top off on his new granite countertop.

“Let me tell you,” I said, in a flash of brilliance, “what’s going on with these ants.”

“Tell me.”

Okay. Tell him.

I said, “Well, you could see they were coming in on the porch.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Also, over here. This glass door. Look. Tracking in over it like it doesn’t fucking exist.”

I leaned to the door, popped the lock, slid it slightly open, and lifted it. It was clear that it lifted a full half inch or so, almost coming out of its track.

“Jesus,” he said shaking his head. “No wonder.”

“Yeah. That’s one thing.”

What’s the other. What’s the other.

“The other thing is this.”

I scanned the room. A table.

“Come sit down for a second and I’ll show you something.”

We sat. I pulled my binder open to a page with ants and their larvae and eggs pictured.

“You’re seeing these adults,” I said, pointing at a comically large sized image of an ant with jaws the size of garden shears.

“Them motherfuckers?”

“But this is a blown up image, not to scale.”

“Still,” he said. He was on my side.

“And see these little guys,” I said, pointing to the larvae. “These are hatched and waiting underground.”

“The larvas,” he said.

“Exactly. Now the thing about gasoline.”

He looked at me intently, nodding. I was about to reveal some wisdom to him. He was sure of it. I wasn’t quite so sure.

The thing about gasoline.

The thing.

“The thing about it is it doesn’t have a residual.”

“A residual.”

“That’s the thing that sticks around so when the next ants show up it kills them too.”

“Cuz the gasoline evaporates,” he said.

“Sort of,” I said, although I had no idea. “It’s more complicated than that. Only professional gels and baits like the ones we are licensed to use will do the trick.”

“I get that,” he said. “Totally. Listen man, tell your guy to come over here, I swear, I’ll pay him twenty bucks right now. Just for the kitchen.”

I nodded and immediately wished I hadn’t.

That won’t work to have him come over.

That won’t work because I require a contract to get paid.

“Here’s the thing. See, there’s one other thing here. The eggs.” I pointed at the insect eggs.

The man nodded.

What could the eggs do for me.

“The eggs won’t hatch for six to eight weeks,” I said, and now I had found something to follow. “And by the time you see them as adults, they’ve already laid more eggs.”

“Sheesh,” he said.

I explained that if my tech came over and drenched his kitchen he’d still get another batch of ants when they hatched. “And your wife will kill you.” The last bit was a stroke of genius and I was well rewarded for it—the man laughed loud.

“Can’t let that happen.” I flipped the page over to the contract. “Let me tell you how we make it not happen, and why all the neighbors are saving themselves from their wives with what we do. What was your name anyway?”

“Bryan,” he said. I began to write it down. “Kilpatrick,” he said as I got to the second half.

Something compelled me to continue with my pen to the address. “Let’s see, this house is—” I set the pen there and only had to wait a half second.

“1144 Orange Blossom,” he said.

I looked at him after jotting it down. “OK. Listen Bryan. I know it makes sense to have that guy over here and kill everything, but I have to tell you, he can’t do it for twenty bucks.”

“Well what about just the kitchen? Can he do just—”

“But they’d move somewhere else. The ants are in your walls. We have to flush them out all over the house or you’ll never stop getting yelled at by your wife.”

He looked at me, perhaps a bit resigned. “So what do you do, you drill into the walls?”

“I’ll have my guy over right now and he’ll do an initial flush out. He’s gonna get all the ones you are seeing now. He’s gonna dust with professional baits in your walls—he’ll get in there by taking off some electrical outlet covers. And he’ll bait with gels under your sink by the water where the bugs like it. He’s gonna go outside and build a barrier four feet up and ten feet out around the whole perimeter. He’s gonna kill all the fire ant mounds.”

“He is?”

“Oh sure. And he’s gonna knock down all those hornet and wasps that were in your eaves and awnings, and he’ll do it all around the house and he’ll spray up there to make it so they don’t come back. Obviously,” I continued, “you can see that if we do it just once the eggs will hatch and they’ll all be back and taking over in a matter of weeks. So naturally we come back the second month and treat a second time just to knock them dead. After the first two months he only has to come out every other month. And we



don't do two year contracts like those cell phone services or nothing, just a seven-service agreement. Two back-to-back and then five more. It's the seven service flush-out."

I liked that. The Seven Service Flush-Out.

"Alright," he said. He was nodding. "That sounds pretty good. How much is that."

"How big is your house?" I asked. "How many bathrooms?"

"Bathrooms? Let's see." He pointed in various directions. "Three and a half."

"Nice big house," I said.

"Real nice," he said. "And real expensive. More now than when I bought it. They jacked up the price on me."

"Huh?"

"They jacked up the price. I was paying twenty-two hundred and now they say twenty six."

"Wow," I said. I shouldn't have indulged this thread. His money issues could not have anything to do with what we were doing.

I needed to recover. Get us back on track.

"We never do that at Premium. Once you're on the route in this neighborhood, you get the deal your neighbors are getting, and the price never goes up. Let me tell you about that deal. Usually we charge a hundred and forty bucks, but we're doing it for half off. For seventy. And then those follow up treatments are usually one hundred," I heard myself say the words, and realized suddenly, although I usually say ninety, one hundred sounded better. "And we come out and treat anytime you need in between for free. You can put your gasoline away. But right now, because my truck is there, I can do all of those for seventy instead."

He paused. “I don’t know man,” he said. “I mean, listen, I think that sounds like a good deal, I really do. I just—like I was saying with the house and everything.”

“Totally,” I said. “Totally. I get that. Who can just shell out seventy bucks right now?”

“Exactly.”

Who can just shell out seventy bucks right now? Worst line ever.

“That’s kind of why we do things another way at Premium Pest.”

“Oh yeah?” he said.

Oh yeah?

“Yeah.”

I swallowed.

“See, we don’t make you pay up front like that. Of course not. I mean, in the first month, instead of seventy, we just have you pay thirty-five. And then in the second month just thirty-five again. And on like that until it’s all set.” I could just make him pay it for an extra month at the end. I could do that. He could get what he needs and I could get the sale.

He pauses again. “But I really don’t have even thirty-five, you know, like today. I mean, like in a week or so, for sure, just right now things are a little tight.”

I knew I could get this guy the service. I knew he needed it.

“Let me call my manager and see what we can do. I wonder if we can work this out. I mean, we’re talking about a truly premium service here, a huge weight off your shoulders, a major escape from the bugs. And your wife—”

“I know man,” he said, hands on his hips. “I know. You’re right. I mean, I really do want it. I just.”

“Let me call.”

I called J.J. and described the situation.

“Right,” J.J. said. “Do this Kirt: Tell him I said if he can do it on a Visa card we can work something out where he’ll just pay, like, whatever up front. And then the rest month by month. Like twenty, and forty a month after that.”

“Ok,” I said. “Down to...”

I waited for him to answer. “Down to zero,” he said. “Anything in the first month, just make sure the rest makes at least a four-hundred-ninety dollar contract, give or take.”

“So the owners will let us go that low? Right. I’ll tell him not to let the neighbors know. Thanks Jeffrey.”

“Hang on, don’t go yet. Set it up while I’m on the phone. Say we can do it for twenty. Then close it for tomorrow.”

“He was hoping to get it done tonight. The technician is at his neighbor’s.”

“Even better.”

I looked at Bryan. “Good news.”

He looked like he was holding his breath.

“You have a Visa right?”

“Oh yeah, for sure,” he said.

“As long as you can use the Visa and as long as you are going to be here tonight so my tech can come right over—they say they can actually do it for—” and I practically

whispered, “*twenty*.” I raised my eyebrows. Bryan’s arms were folded and he nodded, but he was frowning.

“Twenty?” he asked.

“Twenty to get rid of those ants. You’ll have forty-next month I’m sure, right? I mean, you’re working man, right?”

“Totally,” he said. “This is just a crazy dumb week.”

“Yeah, Jeffrey,” I said into the phone. “Hold that last slot today for us. Can you call the tech and let him know?”

“I will. What’s the address?” J.J. asked. “Ask for the payment right now, then just start filling out the contract. Just tell him to bring you his Visa.”

“Bryan, grab me that Visa real quick.”

“Perfect.”

I looked at the paperwork but could see Bryan was slightly frozen there.

J.J. said nothing, but I pretended to respond. “Yep, he’s grabbing that now. Yes, a Visa.”

J.J. had still said nothing.

“The name is Bryan, B R Y A N. Kilpatrick.” And I gave him the address.

I heard J.J. type some things but don’t know if he was even listening.

Bryan stood next to me. I looked up. He was holding his Visa. “Actually,” Bryan said, “you know, do you have, like, a card or anything?”

“I don’t,” I said. “Is it the twenty bucks that’s a problem?”

As I said it I heard the power in it. To be able to convince someone first to buy, and then to be genuinely put off when they struggle to pay. Like being some God.

“It’s a really crazy week, is all,” he said. “I think I just have hold off right now, and call you next week.”

But the Visa card was in his hand.

And I was sitting in his kitchen.

“J.J.?” I said. “He can’t afford the twenty this month.” I looked at Bryan and said, nodding, “But next month you can afford forty or even probably forty-five.”

“Absolutely,” he said.

J.J. didn’t even hesitate, “Just get the card number and tell him zero this month and then forty five for the twelve months after.”

I smiled. “Looks like we’ve got you taken care of, man.” I smiled and he could see how good I felt. It made him happy. This had been resolved.

“Listen,” I told him. “I just need the visa, and it will be zero this month—since we’re going to be out here already treating. We can do it for free this first month to accomodate your crazy week. Forty five for the months after.”

Bryan signed without allowing himself a thought, but I could see he was anxious. He had fallen silent. He had been sold. Still, his mind couldn’t wrap around it. He hadn’t paid anything. It was less painful. There was no immediate burn.

“Listen,” I said. “If there are any problems, call me. I’ll give you my cell.” I jotted it down on the contract. It was probably unnecessary. We’d been trained to refer them to the office number. It only takes one call from a customer to teach you never to make that mistake again.

The heat of the street and the burning clear was mine. The houses in their cookie cutter shapes were a sudden comfort, no threat. Not one of these was different from its neighbors on either side. All of them offered a way in for me, all of them held a sell. A hundred bulls eyes to hit. I knew I'd knock the evening out and I could do it with one arm. I could feel that when I saw their common porches, their similar window dressings, the way they tried to distinguish themselves with the similarly unique decor I'd see in house after house.

I sold four in the next two hours. I pointed to the truck and waved at the bees in their awnings and they gave me their credit cards. The cooling sky, the setting sun, the street lights threatening to dim on, these were all, for the first time ever, unwelcome. The receding heat signaled the end to an irreproducible day.

No. Every day can be today. Now that I've got it.

I pulled out my phone and called Amy on the number I'd saved. It rang to her voicemail.

"Amy," I said. "This is Kirtland. Grant. The bug guy. I wondered if maybe, well. Maybe you'll come to church again. Maybe I'll see you there."

A car turned onto the road, passed me, and turned into the driveway of the house I hadn't sold when I was with J.J.. The middle-aged black man who'd said No to me stepped out of the car. I was on track to catch up with him, and I didn't slow down as he bent into his car to adjust something. By the time he stood up, a head taller than me, and closed his door with a briefcase in hand, I was right there.

"Evening sir," I said.

At first he didn't recognize me. Then he did.

“Listen,” I heard myself say. “I’m treating that house,” I pointed two down from him. “I’m treating that house.” I pointed to his neighbors. “I’m treating her.” I pointed next-door on the other side. “I’m treating him, and I’m treating him. Across from you here, I’m treating the Nelson’s, the Anthony’s there, the Fernandez’s, and down a few houses, the Clays.”

He stared at me.

“I think we should sit down for a minute,” I said. “I’ll explain why they’re all onboard.”

He laughed a low, slow, laugh. He turned and walked slowly toward his door. I followed him uninvited, and when he got to the door, he opened it, looked over his shoulder at me, chuckled as he walked in, and left it open behind him.

I slipped off my shoes.

## CHAPTER 14

One female German roach has ten thousand descendents in a year. Forty-eight hatch at a time and begin to eat the sloughed exoskeletons of other roaches, chew through garbage, swallow anything they can find. They crawl around in the dark and they scurry in the light. They click their jaws. The residual sprays disperse them, fan them out within the walls of the home. Their eggs are in a grocery sacks or the canned food in the parlor or the newspaper on your porch.

“Needless to say, it takes time to get them under control. You understand. I hear you that he said they’d be gone, and they will be gone. Well, to me, to be honest, it sounds like there is some misunderstanding of the service, not necessarily a situation involving anyone telling a lie. Let me explain it to you so everything makes sense.”

The fire-ant colonies with single queens build mounds two hundred and fifty thousand ants strong—does the queen below control their thoughts or do they control hers? She lays two thousand eggs a day. To get at the whole nest you have to get at the ones on top. You have to get them to invite the poison down into the hive. The workers must track or carry it in. They carry it in and they place it on the larva who will liquefy it. The workers will later suck it up as a liquid—they cannot eat solids; they cannot do it alone. The workers forage one hundred feet and live nine months, the queen seven years. Seven years: as long as the dogs they will bite and sting and send, on occasion, into anaphylactic shock.



“Ma’am? I’m sorry, you’re cutting out a bit. Yes. Yes, that’s better. Let me explain: Did you happen to watch our technician treat? You will have noticed the professional baits and gels he used. Yes, in the little tubes. Yes, like a little syringe.”

The roaches have survived floods and meteors and quakes and famines and volcanoes. They’ve survived their flattened homes a thousand times, their poisoned skins for weeks, their cutoff heads for hours. When the first anatomical human crushed one underfoot they’d been here two hundred ninety-nine million eight hundred thousand years. When the first American poured cement for a Florida foundation they’d been here two hundred ninety-nine million nine hundred ninety-nine thousand. Give or take millions. They’ve survived disease by being it and death by eating it.

“He left a bead of gel in the spots where you may have been seeing the roaches. Now, the professional gels and baits are like candy to the roach. But as you can imagine, as I’m sure you can understand, we don’t want to kill the roach instantly. I can tell you’re an intelligent person, so I think this will make sense to you.

“At a minimum, we hope it takes about three days for each roach to die. Longer if possible. A week would be best.”

If the quarter-million ants are warned, if their mounds are sprayed up top or stomped on or threatened this way, the hive knows immediately and the hill attacked is soon abandoned. The hill is a silent mound by morning. The ants seal it off and put their efforts elsewhere in their universe underground. They mound the earth twenty feet or

forty feet away. In the spring will burst from the mounds thousands of winged males and thousands of winged females, wings like some afterthought, glued on with a dab and ready to fail. The wings are parts of the ant like the thousands of males are part of the colony, and every last one will dissolve into the earth after mating. Same for the females: all but a few die on their ten mile flights to find new ground to dig into and new things to eat and sting.

“You see, when that roach does die, it will be because we caused his exoskeleton to collapse. But they are social creatures. For that three days or a week or even longer in the best scenario, he’ll be happy and healthy and running his little roach hands all over his little roach friends and family. And those gels and baits carry a residual, which means that he’s going to spread the product. He’ll groom every little roach he meets and then those roaches will groom themselves, and because they nest in close quarters we’ll have gotten the whole group.”

When hired to kill what survives on death, one must provide a death that is untransformable. Find the way they connect, the link between them, the interaction from one to another, and turn it to toxicity. It is not their lust or their hunger or their ambition that destroys them. It’s how they lean into each other. A melting, rotting body carried off for a meal by its hive-mates is death that cannot be devoured, only spread.

“Yes. It is rather gruesome.

“But still seeing those roaches five days after we treated, that’s a wonderful sign, as I’m sure you now understand. I thought you would.”

“Stupid bitch. Second time this week. Let’s go back there and nuke the place. Douse the walls. Her cats would die but her damn roaches would sure die too.”

## CHAPTER 15

Amy sat in the back corner of the Sunday School room watching the door when I walked in. Payson and Taylor stepped past her. I sat on the close side of her.

I said hello, and she said hello.

Payson nudged Ben then said to me, “Do you know this young woman, Kirt?” he stuck out his hand to Amy. “I’m Payson.”

“Amy,” she said. “Kirt invited me.” She touched my knee. Payson saw.

“Kirt. I didn’t know you were doing missionary work out here.”

Amy turned to me, “Will they talk about the same stuff as last week?”

I explained how we move through the *Book of Mormon* all year. She asked if I’d read it.

“It’s pretty similar to the Bible,” I said.

She said she hadn’t read the Bible.

So I explained the *Book of Mormon* held an eight-hundred-year story of a tribe that came to America from Jerusalem in 400 B.C., split into two warring groups, and then was visited by Jesus after his death. One of these tribes was ancestral to Native Americans.

“Why do you study what some guy wrote a hundred years ago?”

Payson scooped up the question with a missionary’s answer. Payson went to Mexico on his mission. “It’s not that he wrote it. He translated it.”

“From the golden book?”

He nodded. “The good guys wrote their story on the golden plates and buried them when the bad guys were about to destroy them in 400 A.D. Joseph Smith recovered

the plates and translated the ancient language into English. We study the book because it confirms and clarifies of the nature of God and the divinity of Jesus Christ.”

“Okay.” Amy turned slightly toward me and smiled. She turned to me, tired of him. That wasn’t nothing.

Sunday School brought one of my favorite stories from all of scripture—a continuation of the previous week. The godless king of the land hears about the good guy’s cutting off all the bad guys’ arms and asks to speak to him. He is convinced the good guy, Ammon, is some God. When Ammon testifies of Christ, his words are so powerful that the king falls into a three-day vision and wakes testifying of God’s glory. The entire kingdom is transformed and converted.

In my bones I could feel it, in my head I could hear it, since I was seven and reading the story I knew it: I would be a missionary like Ammon. Minus the cutting off of arms. God’s goals were ambitious: He aimed to make me indistinguishable from Himself. He wanted to give me so much knowledge throughout the eternities that I would eventually become indistinguishable from Him. He wanted it for all of us, that we become Gods. It all made perfect sense—it’s what I would want for my children if I were God. The only thing I lacked was the testimony of it. I knew I was going to be that missionary. I knew I was going to amass that knowledge at the hand of God. I just didn’t know for sure if He existed.

But it was only a matter of time before I would know. And at that point I’d see how all my struggles to gain that testimony had worked together for my good, how they would give me empathy for others who struggled, for youth who doubted, for “gentiles” who had never yet even heard of God’s plan. This century would hold a massive

expansion of the fullness of the truth to the corners of the world as we came closer to the impending Second Coming of Christ, and I knew I'd be an important part of that expansion—once I knew for sure it was all true.

Amy was the first non-Mormon I'd invited to church, and I realized right then what she might be for me. God could have sent her to build us both up. If I witnessed her transformation as she came to know the truth, if I saw her convert, it would be all I'd need to know for certain that the Church changes lives. I could go on my mission to tell that to others in confidence. I would go like Ammon. She could be sent from God to get me there.

She put her hand on my shoulder and leaned into me and whispered in my ear:

“This is the hot teacher I was looking for last time.”

“What?”

“The teacher. He gave the lesson here my first time two weeks ago. Which is why I came to this class last time. But it was that ugly kid instead.”

The instructor looked like a golfer or worse to me. Too short of hair, too much gel in it, a head stuck still like he was about to swing. He was okay-looking. “They alternate,” I said.

“Did he tell you,” Payson whispered to Amy while leaning partly over her, “how many sales he made in the past two days?”

She looked at me. “How much did you make?”

“Like eight-hundred bucks.” I shrugged.

“God,” she said. “I should do this job.”

Two girls in front of us turned and looked at her than looked away.

“What was that?” she whispered.

“You swore. In church.”

“I didn’t,” she said. “What’d I say?”

“God. You said it in vain.”

“In vain?”

“Like, out of a holy context.”

She blinked.

After Sunday school Amy pulled sunglasses from her purse and wore them—dark with white plastic frames, buggy, trendy. She was everything I had decided I would never like. She was exactly what I wasn’t looking for. So, I reasoned, it was possible there was some higher purpose in our meeting. She asked me if I wanted to grab lunch.

“There’s still sacrament meeting,” I said.

“Shit.”

I laughed.

“Sorry,” she said and covered her mouth. She grabbed my hand. “Let’s go somewhere instead. It’s okay, I can bring you home later. You should take me to lunch.”

It seemed like a bad idea to skip Sacrament meeting. It was bad evidence toward her being sent by God. I didn’t say that, exactly.

“Please,” she said, and tilted her head to the side. “I can’t do the whole two hours.”

“It’s actually three—you missed the first.”

She widened her eyes.

“Well, if you don’t want to come.”

“Eh—but, I do—”

“Okay,” she said and took my hand. She pulled me toward the door.

An Audi chirped and she turned sharp and pulled the driver’s door open.

“I should probably tell them I don’t need a ride.”

“Can you text them?” she said.

Of course I could. I didn’t even need to do that. I stepped to the passenger side and got in.

“You know,” she said as she pulled out of the parking lot, “my dad had a bit of a get-together last night with a lot of food. We could, if you want, just go there. Warm up ribs or chicken or something.”

“Is he home?” I said.

“He’ll leave us alone.”

That’s not what I meant. I felt glad he’d be there. She pulled onto the highway. Her nails were painted green and they gripped the automatic shifter.

“You checking out my wrists?” she said. She looked to be eyeing the road straight ahead but I couldn’t see her eyes behind her sunglasses. She must be watching me out of the corner.

“I can’t believe I’m skipping Sacrament Meeting. You know, I’m a speaker for the meeting three weeks from now. This is a bad idea, skipping.”

“You’re giving the lesson in the class we went to?”

“I’m speaking over the microphone, in the last meeting. The big meeting.”

“You don’t even live here.”

“They needed a speaker,” I said. “It’s good preparation for my mission, anyway.”



“Your mission? Mission? You guys talk fucking code. Swearing, sorry. Jesus.”

“A mission. Where you knock on doors and talk to be people about the Church.”

“The boys who ride bikes?” She asked. “You’re doing that?”

“Everybody does. Every guy. For two years when they turn nineteen.”

“Two years. Good God. Wait, I mean—what do I say? Good hell?”

“You could try, ‘Oh, wow’.”

She laughed. “Oh, wow!”

The sun soaked into the black highway. Amy drove smoothly, or perhaps the car was just very nice. She stared ahead through the buggy sunglasses. Her nose was sharp, pointed. She had a freckle on the side of her jaw. Soon she had turned toward her neighborhood. I didn’t recognize the place in the light.

I said, “Do you think you’ll come to church again?”

“Who’s inviting me?” she asked. “Just so you know,” she changed the subject as we pulled up in front of her house, “my dad might assume you’re my boyfriend. You can go out back, if you want. And I’ll grab some food.”

We stepped out of the car. I looked at her over the roof. “I could go with that,” I said—and I heard that edge in my voice, that tone I’d found Saturday with my customers.

“You know, just so he’s not confused. I could pretend.”

“Oh?” she said. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know, tackle you to the kitchen floor.”

She laughed.

“Pin you down, tear some clothes off.”

“Oh wow! That would really trick him. That might trick me.” She pulled at her skirt, adjusted her V-neck, and looked around. “What if the neighbors hear!” she said, hushed, mock concerned. “Why don’t you pretend, pretend—” she stopped.

I wanted to coax her on. Pretend what? But I waited. Wait her out. Let her be the one.

She looked at me and smiled. She had the protection of sunglasses. “You’re not as bad as you seem at first.”

“I should pretend that?”

“No. You’re just not.”

We walked toward her opening garage door. We passed an SUV and came to the door. To my right the garage extended farther toward at least two more cars. It felt odd to step into a Florida home from the hot afternoon in something other than a sweaty polo shirt.

It felt normal to be monitoring behavior signals. I wasn’t going to lose this one once I got inside.

She shrugged off her shoes so I did the same. I looked up to her and she stood smiling, glasses on her head.

“When do you start pretending?” she asked.

ABC’s.

“I started already. I was pretending during church.”

“Oh? What did you pretend?”

“Hmm. That your lip gloss kept catching my eye. I couldn’t concentrate.”

She walked into her kitchen. “Good.” She set her sunglasses on the countertop and painted on more lipgloss while looking at me. She took my tie in her hands and pulled it.

“Does this make it easier to pretend?”

I cupped my hands on hers. “Harder. Careful.”

Ask for her Visa.

“It’s my best tie.”

“We could,” she said and shrugged, “like, date.” She eyed me curiously. “If you want.”

I didn’t move a muscle. I had to hold my breath—I admit that. The sound of her words, their pitch, their edges and lulls, her lips, the way she stood, everything was thrilling. J.J. came to mind. J.J., stoic while the customers turned in our favor. Hold still. Don’t flinch.

If she wasn’t so concrete, if I couldn’t feel the tightening of the tie around my neck, if I couldn’t feel her thumb and her forefinger and her middle finger on my hand, if I couldn’t see the peaks and ridges in her upper lip, the shine of gloss, if her dark hair wasn’t rolling off her shoulders, curling around her collar bone, if I couldn’t feel her squeeze my hands a little right then, I’d have not believed this. She could have been a ghost at the foot of my bed and I’d have known better what to do.

I considered words and I ruled those out. A half second had passed and she held her gaze.

“Or not,” she said.

“What would we do?” I asked. It would seem an odd question but didn’t faze her. She was perhaps getting used to my saying dumb things.

“We’d just,” she dropped her hands from the tie. “You know? You don’t know, do you?” she stood still and scratched her face. “It’s actually more difficult to communicate with an nice guy than a creep.”

I met her father when he came onto the back deck, draped in a flowery button-down and khakis, having just crammed his phone into a bulging pocket.

He stepped down and stuck out his hand. I stood up out of habit and shook it. Amy told him I was a pest control salesman. Not the ideal introduction.

“You sell to business or who?”

“Residential,” I said.

“You walk around with a bottle to demonstrate or what?” He held up his hand as if holding a bag. He was grinning.

“He makes like five hundred bucks a day,” Amy said.

“Just contracts,” I said, “I’ve never touch the pesticide. I sign the customers on for the yearly contract.”

“Commissions?”

“Only.”

He nodded. “Your boss, he’s a pesticide guy? He treats them?”

“Actually, he only provides the sales team.”

“Oh. So he’s the—he’s. Yeah. I see. Interesting business,” he said. “Good sized contracts? Hundreds?”

I told him they were near five hundred, and I took a commission close to eighty per.

“Interesting.” He nodded. “That sort of experience, a couple years ago you could’ve made a killing in mortgages. You two all dressed up for something?”

“Church,” she said.

“Where?”

Amy said, “Mormon church.”

“The hell? You from Utah?” When I said I was, he said, “The Mormon BYU out there, we hired more from there than from anywhere last year. Mormons, they work, they manage well, get managed well.”

“Where is it you work?” I asked him.

“Ardmore Baker,” he said. He waved his hand through the air. “It’s a bank.”

“He runs it,” Amy said.

“Not quite. Working on it.” He looked out at the lake behind their house. The sun was above us and the lanai over the back patio kept it mild. In the corners of the lanai water misted into the air. Amy’s face was lit with the glimmer of that misted water, and mine must have been too. The pool in front of us was slightly rippled from a breeze. Her father’s phone buzzed and he stood up and held it out. He stepped inside and closed the door. His loud voice moved away from the door and out of range.

“You going to be a banker?” I asked her.

“More like putting them in prison—I’m pre-law,” she said. She grabbed the neck of her shirt and pulled it off her skin, fanning her chest several times. “Or keeping them out of prison, if they can afford me.” She smiled.

“Is that bank he works for just in New York? I don’t think we had it in Utah.”

“It’s an investment bank,” she said. “Not like Wachovia or whatever. What about you? You always dreamed of being a pest control salesman?”

“Honestly, everything before my mission is sort of just, feeling it out. I may do sales. Obviously not this. I just took generals classes last year.”

“You’re really set on this two year mission thing. You’re not considering anything else. Like where you’ll be in school if you don’t go.”

“Heck no,” I said. “You can’t get that experience anywhere else. Going on a mission is the best preparation for things like being a good husband and father and all.”

She pulled her chin back. “Husband and father?”

I nodded.

“When do you start the mission?”

I heard myself say winter.

“Where will you go?”

“I don’t know. They tell me.”

“What if you were like, so far away no one could visit?”

That’s the point, I said. No one visits you. You write letters.

“Insane.” She shook her head, “How will I stop you?” She grinned, mock deviant.

If she took me by the hand, pulled me to a dark room, slid off her clothes and mine, and begged me to fuck her, it would stop me. Woah. She could ensnare me in sin, keep me from being eligible. She could push those lips into me and press her hips into me, roll her fingers down my spine, dig her nails into my back—

“You can’t,” I said, head spinning.

I grabbed my phone and looked at it.

“I think I have to—I have to get home. Pretty soon.”

She sighed and stood up. “I was just kidding,” she said.

“You were?” I said and stood.

“I think so,” she said, and she grabbed the keys to her car from a marble countertop.

The First Vision was the beginning of Mormonism and the story I’d always most loved and most wanted to believe. Imagine: God and His Son appearing in a forest to a fourteen-year-old boy, because he asked what religion on earth was true and believed with unwavering faith he’d be answered.

I opened the Bible to 1<sup>st</sup> James and read the first several verses. Amy’s stark collarbone, her warm fingers, her glossed lips dripped through my head. I couldn’t even make it to verse five, the one that had inspired fourteen-year-old Joseph Smith to go into the forest and pray. I couldn’t make it because my head kept spinning off. I lay back on my bed and closed my eyes and imagined her driving home in the sun. I lay there for two hours, tracing and retracing our conversation. It felt so fleeting. She had said it, though. She’d suggested she was interested. She’d made it quite clear. Still, it felt imagined. I pulled out a notebook.

*She likes you. Don’t talk yourself out of it.*

Monday I woke to a text from her at ten in the morning:

“I just got pulled over. Fuck.”

“Payson?” I called across the living room.

“Kirtland,” he said. He was doing morning Scripture study.

“What’s it mean if that girl from yesterday just texted that she got pulled over?”

“Did you talk after hanging out yesterday—did you talk last night?”

“No.”

“And she just texted you that she got pulled over? What else did she text?”

“Nothing.”

“What did you text her before that?”

“Nothing.”

He shrugged. “I think that means it’s on.”

“What?”

“I think she’s into you, Kirtland. I could have guessed that yesterday from how she was.”

I texted her back. I said, “Oh dangit.”

She texted back that I was funny.

Okay.

I texted back that I was sorry I left so fast. I typed it and closed my eyes and hit send and opened my eyes and saw it sent and held my breath until a text returned:

“Good.”

I sold and sold and read and read and prayed about my talk. Monday and Tuesday passed in a blur. I printed a copy of “A candle of the Lord” in the office Tuesday night and J.J. was pleased to see it.

It was Thursday when I tired of sales, took Kelly home, drove to Amy’s house, and joined her on her living room couch before the sun had even set.



She asked, “Is it against your religion to touch me?”

Her body was divided into various zones in my vision. Upper back was ok. Shoulders were ok. Collar bones: beautifully tempting. Stomach was dangerous; breasts and butt fatal. Hips, some wonderful mystery.

“Don’t you ever want to just pull a girl in?” She looked at me and then at the ceiling. “Don’t you ever want to reach out and grab me?”

David had talked in Correlation about Green and Yellow and Red signals from customers. A red signal was an objection that had to be overcome. A yellow signal indicated a need to continue carefully prodding and pushing the customer to the point where they’d be ready to be closed. A green signal, well—you see a lot less of those. When one comes, no matter how unexpected: close.

I slid my arm beneath hers, past her ribs to find her back. She leaned into me and pressed her palm into my chest. I lay back to the couch. She slid onto me and landed with her lips against my cheek, and then I just turned my head toward her. We lay there inches from each other, so I kissed her lips and they were the softest thing I’d ever felt. She adjusted herself on top of me. Her breasts weighed into my chest and I felt her shuffle her legs around my knees. She was light. She kissed me back. We both wanted the same things. Then she pushed her hips into me. A shock went to my toes. She pulled away.

“It’s nice not to be deciding what to let you do,” she said. She pressed her chin to my sternum and watched me. I felt my fingers slide onto the skin of her lower back. “It’s not the worst thing,” she said. “Kissing a Mormon.”

I spun my fingers in a little circle on her back. She put her ear to my chest.

“Your heart—” she said, and looked up at me, smiling.

## CHAPTER 16

One tree will blow right over in a hurricane. It might swing through the telephone wires or crash through your living room window or bring down your roof. It might break through a swing-set or block the street or crush a mailbox.

They teach the children in a small classroom in the basement of the Mormon church. It's a beautiful Sunday. This place has Sundays like no place does. Sundays that make the Mormon kids want to be something other than Mormon so they can go to the beach or go to the theme parks.

The roots in the wet ground, they don't stand a chance against that wind.

The children imagine the branching oak in their yard where their swings have been built. They imagine the terror of a hurricane, even the word, and the thrill of it, how it cancels class and how they'd hoped last September, secretly, for their roof to be torn off so they could go back to school and tell the other kids about it, so the others would circle them for the afternoon. They imagine the trees in their yard and see them tipped over with their roots like snakes blowing in the wind. The hole in the ground. The scurrying bugs. The crushed playhouse split in half, halves blowing away, maybe floating off like a balloon.

But—they tell them—when these trees grow together in what's called a Stand, well, beneath the ground the roots wrap like fingers interlocked. They clasp their hands and fingers and tell the children to do the same. You see? The roots of one twist around another and they hug and hold a third and a fourth, each squeezing each other tight. When the wind comes, it can't hurt a single one.

They hand each child a cutout of a stand of trees.

*Will you Stand for what is right?*

The depth of the roots goes undiscussed. The quality of soil is unmentioned. Any rotting of the inside is unnoticed and unimportant. For it's true: the risk of the storm falls on no individual, so the firmness of any single tree is a nonissue. The depth of the roots, the soil, some rotting inside—none of it matters. The numbers are the Security. The quantity is the backing. The belief is the reality.

Though an analogous reality.

A man and woman and their son have thirty days to leave the house they don't in fact own and never owned. The bank, the owner, will strip the remaining contents on day thirty-one.

Here a different analogy is necessary. A rotting of the roots. Some communicable toxicity. And how tightly they are tied beneath the ground.

## CHAPTER 17

The talk I'd printed was eight pages and by Elder Packer, the man who taught about spiritual crocodiles. Elder Packer was the third in line in seniority within the Mormon Church. He was still a prophet, though not *the* Prophet, a title reserved for the first in command. "The Candle of the Lord" was a talk he gave—later printed—to help missionaries share knowledge of spiritual things. He starts with a story.

"I found myself next to an avowed atheist on a plane," he tells near the beginning of the talk. The atheist was determined to trap him by questioning his claim to know there was a God. "You only think you know!" the atheist scoffed when Elder Packer stumbled attempting to describe how he knew. "If you really knew," the man said, "you could explain to me exactly how you know."

The prophet grasped for some way to explain. The atheist rebuffed his efforts. At the last moment before surrender, as he was about to drop his head in shame at not being able to defend his claim to know, God sent a thought into his head. He perked up. "Do you know what salt tastes like?" he asked the atheist.

Kelly wandered out from our room in jeans with no shirt on. He looked to have slept none or very little. He glanced at me and sat on the couch. He stared at the glass door leading to the deck.

I continued reading.

"Of course I know what salt tastes like," the atheist replied. "Don't be ridiculous."

The prophet asked the man if he could distinguish between a cup of salt and a cup of sugar.

The atheist barked that he was no fool.

“Well,” Elder Packer said, “if you know what salt tastes like, describe it to me.”

The haughty atheist attempted to.

It is not sweet. It is not sour.

“You’ve told me what it is not. Now tell me what it is.” The prophet was on the offensive and leaning in. “Of course,” the prophet reports to his listening audience, “he could not describe such a common experience as tasting salt.” He turned to the man and said, “I have tasted salt, spiritually speaking, and can no more explain how I know God lives than you can describe to me what salt tastes like.” And as the prophet got of the plane he heard the atheist mutter, “I don’t need your religion as a crutch.”

So that’s what it was about all along.

Kelly sat unmoved on the couch where he’d landed. His ribs jutted below his nipples.

“Hey Kelly.”

He was vacant. He maintained his stare. On the side close to me his hair was ratted.

“Hey Kelly, What’s salt taste like?” I said.

He scratched his slightly hairy chest. “Briney.”

“What?”

“Briney. It tastes briney. It tastes bitter. Terse. Acidic. Sharp. Like Sodium Chloride. That story is bullshit.”

“What?” I said and looked at my reading.

“The ‘What Does Salt Taste Like?’ story.” He stood and lumbered toward me, then pointed at the papers as if I wasn’t sure what he was referring to.

“I don’t get it,” I said. “Why doesn’t the guy on the plane know how to describe it?”

“Because he doesn’t exist. It’s a fucking story.”

“You think Elder Packer is lying?”

He laughed.

“You think he’s lying.”

He shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. He asks the atheist what salt is like—specifically what it tastes like. The atheist didn’t ask him what God is like. The atheist asked how he knew God existed. The more analogous question is ‘How do you know what salt tastes like?’”

His bloodshot eyes locked on me. His face hung where it wasn’t pulled up by a subtle smile. Stubble, in light tan, sprouted on his cheeks. He heaved a couple slow breaths. For a moment I was terrified.

“Ask me,” he said, “how I know what salt tastes like.”

He turned toward the kitchen, pulled open a cabinet, grabbed a salt-shaker, and walked toward me. He spun it in his lanky fingers like a drumstick. Salt dribbled to the floor.

“Ask me how I know.”

I said nothing.

He hit the shaker on his palm and the crystals spilled out. He licked the salt. His jaw rolled flavor around his mouth. His lips smacked and he slammed the shaker on the table.

“Because I just put it in my fucking mouth.”

He walked away and left the shaker lying on the table, crystals of salt in a ring around it on the wood.

My phone rang.

It was someone named Brian Kilpatrick. “You know, with all the fucking ants in my house. I was wondering how long, exactly, before these ants go away?”

“You’re still seeing some?”

“Yeah, man. Tons actually.”

I said I’d call a couple people. I called J.J. and his voice dropped four octaves after I told him. I asked if I should call Bryan back.

“It’s easiest if you let us in the office deal with it,” J.J. said. “Do you always give your cell phone out?”

“Not usually.”

“You don’t get paid enough to field customer complaints.”

“Does this happen a lot?”

“Only when they have really bad infestations.”

I told Payson about the customer’s call.

“You kidding me?” Payson said, eyes wide. “You know what? Yesterday, I went past my customer’s house from three days ago, and I knocked on the door, you know, he was a cool guy, and I wanted to check up on him. And there were bugs all over inside. Still.” He used his hands to talk. “There were bugs—everywhere.” He burst his fingers open and threw his hands out on *everywhere*. “As bad as when I’d sold it. I called J.J.. He said it takes several days to work. Your guy got treated a week ago? I’m bringing this up in Correlation.”

I walked with Payson and Kelly toward the office. Payson kept complaining. My stomach turned ill at the impending clash. We stepped into the office and Payson went silent; he sat back in his chair with his arms folded and his ankle resting on his other knee. He looked on as J.J. slithered around as he did when he didn't want to talk to anyone. Payson's face was stern, cold. The meeting started and I saw Payson's hand come up and saw J.J. not wanting to call on him. He finally did.

Payson sat forward. "Me and Kirtland have been talking. We've got something to sort out. When I'm out there, I'm telling customers these bugs are going to be *gone*. Are they going to be gone? Because I went by my customer's house and it was—" he swept his long arms in front of his chest. "Crawling. With bugs. Crawling. Three days after we treated." He looked at me. "And Kirt, his customer from a week ago—seven days—called this morning and his place is crawling with bugs too. What, are we treating with water?"

I felt nailed to a wall.

Payson barged back on. "I'm selling the best service in the nation. I'm selling the best service they can get. Am I a liar?"

J.J. shifted his weight from leg to leg.

David looked pissed off as usual.

J.J. put his hands out, fingers up. "Look. We're treating with the best stuff. There's nothing other companies have that we don't have. There's nothing they can treat with we can't."



“We need Termikill on the inside,” David said. He smiled his punched-in-the-face boxer smile and shook his head. “If we did like we did in Houston, there wouldn’t be those damn ants crawling up their walls inside. I’m telling you.”

“Wait, wait, wait, what?” Payson said. All six-foot-seven of him was in this.

David looked at J.J.. “These regulations. Man, I don’t know.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Payson said. “What is this? J.J.?”

David just shook his head like he might turn and knock one of us out if we interrupted his focus on being pissed off. J.J. looked like he’d been forced to stand on a box in a dress. He frowned. His voice dropped. “In Houston, we used this other spray inside. Texas lets us use it because of the invasion of these particular ants. Here we can only use it outside.”

“Great,” Payson said. “That’s just great.”

“Hey man,” David said, “We’re not arguing for this shit, so lose the fucking attitude. I’m serious man. Lose it.” He jabbed his finger at Payson. “We’re working as hard as we can, just like you are, and nobody in Florida does a better job than our techs, I’ve been with them. You wanna know if we’re selling the best? Go for a damn afternoon with the Premium technicians. They’re better than the ones we had in Houston. They’re spraying with the best they can and they are the best out there. You’re worried about being a liar? Go with those techs for an afternoon.”

“It’s true,” J.J. said. “The Premium techs are the best I’ve seen.”

David stood up. “I can’t take this shit. Give me the address of your customer—you too Kirt—I’m going to go nuke those bugs.”

“Love to,” Payson said, pulling out his binder. He dug for a carbon copy of the contract and handed it to him.

“I’m serious,” David said, as he took the contract. Kirt, give it to me.”

I hesitated.

He stood there with his hand out.

“If you want to complain about idiot customers acting like idiots.” He stopped and stuck out his hand. “Give it to me.”

I dug through my binder and handed him Bryan’s contract. He looked at J.J..

“You still got product in your trunk?”

J.J. pulled out his keys and tossed them across the room. David was gone.

The afternoon Florida sun was a million or billion miles closer to the earth than it had been in May. The hornets tripled in number and size. My feet, calloused now, still grew hot, itchy on the asphalt. The blacktops were a health hazard for the occasional nearly naked toddler who ran into the street barefoot and then froze, screaming. I pulled two of those back to grass that week. By luck, no mother threw open her door to find me with her screaming kid in my arms.

I couldn’t get back to the two or three sales per day I had in my first two weeks of the month. I began to forget why Premium Pest Control was the best way a person could spend their money, why the stuff they were getting at the Home Depot wouldn’t cut it. How long would the ants still be there, I wondered, after they’d paid me seventy dollars? On Tuesday I stayed at our apartment till 4 p.m.; then I could blame my inability to sale 3.26 or more on my laziness, on my failure to get on the doors early. I could tell the boys

that. I could admit that I'd gotten out late. To work my hardest and fail seemed dangerous. Intentional failure left room for intentional success.

Still, every day Kelly and I eventually headed out together. He laughed and laughed as we drove the freeway each day with a knot in our stomach, knowing we didn't know where we were going. We rolled through neighborhoods and judged them so stellar for our purposes we'd be wise to save their doorsteps for the energy we'd have after eating the late lunch we felt suddenly necessary, then for after lunch settled, then for after the heat faded, since it was so close to fading anyway, or till after that far-off storm cloud had arrived and passed—as the rain would bring out the bugs, giving us more to point at, more to steer the customers' eyes to, more to keep them from noticing us, the strangers set on selling them from the center of their porch. We'd be wise, in fact, to chase the rain, drive straight toward the cloud and into it; and we would, and we'd wait for the bugs that swarm in the aftermath, and we'd will the sun to fall faster while we waited.

At home I dug into the scriptures on the First Vision. Joseph Smith recorded the experience in the very back of the *Doctrine & Covenants*. Fourteen years old. Four years younger than me. I remember when I was fourteen my dad told me he felt I was worthy to receive such a message from God. I remember thinking he was right, knowing he was right, and watching for it. Instead, later that year, I'd discovered masturbation.

Joseph read in James that if you lack wisdom, ask of God, who giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not.

But ask in faith. Nothing wavering.

“Which version are you going to talk about?” Kelly said, as I flipped through the *Doctrine & Covenants* and the pages of another talk I’d printed, a talk by a different prophet, specifically about the First Vision.

I thought he was confused. “I’m talking about the First Vision.”

“Right. Which one?”

I looked at him and shook my head. He hadn’t been sleeping much and I wasn’t sure if he was acting strange on purpose or an accident.

He said, “Which First Vision are you going to talk about? The one Joseph Smith reported to his friends initially? With an angel appearing to him? Or the first one his neighbors heard years later? Where it was one God who appeared instead of three, instead of a trinity? Or I guess you could talk about the one the Church sanctions now, the one he wrote down twenty years later once the doctrines were established. The one with two separate beings, Yahweh and his Son—”

“Listen,” I said, my hand on my chin. “I don’t want to hear all your—ideas.”

Kelly waved his hand through the air. “It’s your call. Talk about the most popular one. It’s really nice. It offers the advantage of not fundamentally contradicting the church’s current teachings. Go with it.”

I met Amy at her doorstep Wednesday evening after dropping Kelly off, and she pulled me inside and kissed me. She pressed her hands into my back. She pulled me onto the couch and I crawled on top of her. Her purple shirt got caught and slid partway up and I saw the softness of her belly, Florida tan. I kissed her for a minute.

“You just keep kissing,” she said.

Prolonged Kissing. PK on the chart. I snuggled into her. I needed to slow down.

“You’re fun,” she said.

I saw the *Book of Mormon* on her end table.

“Where’d you get that?”

“Oh yeah,” she said. “I meant to tell you. Missionaries. They were walking through this neighborhood. One was from like, Canada and one was from Utah. I asked if he knew you and he didn’t. I was laying out in the side yard. They stopped to talk to me.”

“Of course they did,” I said.

“Yeah. I was in a bikini. It was weird. I think they were happy about it.”

“I would be,” I said.

“Well,” she said. “Then when are we going to jump in the pool?”

I lifted myself up slightly, and looked at her. I put my hand on her stomach where her shirt was pulled up. I was almost shaking, maybe from balancing all my upper body on my other arm. Her skin was warm, and I felt her body sink as she breathed. I slid my palm to her side, and her skin goose-bumped under my hand. She sat partway up, threw her arms over my neck, and pulled me down to her. I felt her legs wrap around my waist. She kissed me and said, “That would be fun. Let’s go swimming.”

“I can’t,” I said. “I don’t have anything. To wear.”

“We could find something.”

I couldn’t. It was too much to agree to, too obvious a concession toward her body, too blatant a dive into everything I craved as I felt her squeeze me with her legs. The urge to press back into her was palpable. I withheld. This is how it happens, this is the beginning of what ends at the end of the bishop’s scale of sins, I knew right then: I start pushing, she pushes back. Terrifying. I collapsed into her, my head over her shoulder.

Please don't press into me, I thought. Please don't do anything. I felt her lips on my neck, soft, just pressing.

“Swim?” she said quietly.

“No.”

“Okay.”

In some neighborhood I dropped Kelly off on a corner then went down the street and parked my car. The houses flanking the street looked tall and ominous in the perfectly blue day. My hands quivered at the thought of not working, at the freedom offered in giving up.

But I dragged my sand bag body from the car and strode up a side-walk. Everything in the heat was a bright blind spot. My head emptied. This was to be to my advantage, for before I could think or feel another thing my hand had lifted and thudded four times in quick succession against a door.

Seconds passed without a sound from inside.

I stared down the street. The only sound was AC units on full blast, a hum the communities radiated day and night. These homes looked three years old. Not ideal, as the bugs would have mostly settled, moved on, by now. But most of the brand new areas were sparsely lived in. We were waiting for new homeowners. We expected them by July, August at the latest.

I knocked again on the door because I didn't want to go to the next. At the window I saw fingers poke through the blinds, pull them carefully, and then disappear.

I am the man for whom the door does not open.

Kelly meandered down the street in my direction like a mirage. He didn't pretend to be on his phone, or pretend to be looking at papers, or even pretend to be working at all. He strolled. He waved. I waved, then walked down the porch and to the sidewalk. To see a second person quitting was an invitation to imagining all the places I could be. Amy's porch. Amy's couch. Amy's dark room.

"Can I have the keys?"

I dug for the keys.

"I can't deal with this today," he said, wiping his long bony forearm across his cheek. "I just want to sit in the car. Don't let me fuck with your day though."

Kelly had sold zero the previous week. "Did you even knock last week?" I asked.

"I always knock at least a couple doors."

I stared down the street. "Do you think we'd do better if we got some food or something?"

"Fuck yeah," he said.

We hopped in the car. "You getting sick?" I asked as we drove out of the neighborhood. I waited for the heavy traffic of a major street to subside.

"My voice is messed. I haven't slept."

We pulled onto the road. I floored it but a truck rode up on me anyway.

Kelly coughed. "You know." He coughed more. "I just don't care enough about money for this job. I'm too lazy of a lazy ass."

I laughed.

"I'm dead serious."

"I know."

“Hardest job I ever had. I swear to God. I wasn’t always so lazy.”

I stopped and waited to do a U-turn. Every main street in Florida had center medians of manicured grass and flowers and bushes, forcing U-turns.

“The money just doesn’t make up for it,” Kelly said. “I mean.”

He paused. I said nothing.

“It’s crazy, but it’s like against my morals or something.”

“Laziness is your morality.”

“Yeah, fuck you,” he said. “But something like that.”

We returned later to the neighborhood, but I sat in my car a long time with Kelly before finally, right at sunset, getting out and knocking on a few doors. I sold zero that day and went home telling myself I’d chosen that. The next day Kelly spent smoking under some tree in a neighborhood’s park. When we started the drive home at night, me having sold just one, Kelly’s throat was even more scratchy. “Cigarettes are ruining your voice,” I said.

“I haven’t slept in three days. I keep seeing these things run out in front of the car. You probably aren’t seeing them. I’ve noticed you’ve been just running them over.”

I wondered if the evil spirits Joseph Smith described could appear to one person and not another. Wisps of spirit split by the nose of my car.

The next day he stayed home and I came back with two sales. Both my scheduled services for that day, I learned when I got to the office, had been rescheduled by the customers. I sat to write, to recalculate my goals, given the disappearance of almost a third of my time and my total of only forty services, despite getting sixty-two sales. Could I still swing three hundred in the next ten and a half weeks? Two hundred?



I showered then pulled out the notebook I'd been using to prepare my talk. I looked at Alma 32, a Chapter in the *Book of Mormon* that's a sermon by a prophet in ancient America. He instructs the people that faith is not "a perfect knowledge," but instead "to hope for things which are unseen, which are true."

If we lack faith, he says, then God can work with what we do have: a desire to have faith. Let that desire grow into the beginnings of faith, let it grow and watch for the fruits of it.

Like the Bible says: after the trial of faith, then comes the witness. Elder Packer adds in his talk that if we bear our testimony, if we stand and tell listeners what we believe and what we know, not only as an experiment but with full faith, God promises to carry our words, to infuse us with the spirit and to confirm our belief to our listeners—and also, critically, to us.

"It isn't dishonesty," he writes. It's belief in something hoped for. It's the anticipation of success. "Oh, if you could understand one thing: A testimony is to be found in the bearing of it!"

I jotted down in my notebook: *root out doubt, plan the talk, speak the words, and then receive the witness. It must not be merely an experiment. Can't be any concerns or doubts about the outcome. Only one outcome is possible if I have enough faith: God confirms my words.*

Kelly sat on the carpet playing Halo. Again and again he confronted the same scenario, died, and restarted at a particular checkpoint. Again and again a group of aliens squealed and screeched as he killed them off, until more aliens came around the corner and killed Kelly in blazing firefight, a hail of lasers, fireballs, slime. I looked up only

once, but could hear the same minute long scene over and over, the silent few seconds following his death. Lasers, fireballs, slime. “Fuck,” he said.

Again: Lasers, fireballs, slime, fuck.

Suddenly, as if we’d been talking for ten minutes, he said, “I decided today I don’t believe in God.”

I looked up, but he was turned toward the TV blasting away. Only his dark head of hair and a Tom Waits tour shirt were visible. Lasers, fireballs, slime. Fuck.

I continued my notes.

“Did you hear me?” he almost yelled. “I said I don’t believe in God.” Now he had paused his game and was turned on his palm to look at me.

“You also haven’t slept in three days.”

“What the fuck’s that supposed to mean?”

“Maybe you shouldn’t make eternity-altering decisions when you’re so sleep deprived you think I ran over a hundred wispy people yesterday.

“Fuck that, fuck you. Whatever,” he said, and unpaused his game.

Lasers. Fireballs. Slime. Fuck.

I closed the notebook, grabbed the keys, and went into the Florida night toward Amy.

## CHAPTER 18

When they crawl over each other's bodies, is it the collective mind that saves them from their thoughts? Are they synced to the queen, their crisp legs rushing off with carcasses? Is it some insecty connection that lets an ant remember its crumb while a child's shoe scrambles the bodies of a hundred ants behind it?

They rush to their tunnels and rush out and rush back and attack what attacks them and carry each other away. It must be that they rely on each other, that the neurons in their heads are tied to one another, a chemical code that travels through the air, a chain of command. Such power in numbers, such power in behavior, such earth moving power in listening and obeying, in hearing the right signals and failing to hear the wrong ones, the ones that bode ill, the ones that tell of children's feet.

Or a salesman's shoe.

"Those were for free," he jokes, having smeared their bodies across the cement of the porch. The customer laughs.

But the competitors are approaching, other men in uniforms with different embossed company names. The swamp is calling them, the risen homes filled and credit for the taking. Who will get the money? Who will get the signatures? Who will squeeze the people dry before the homes collapse into the tunneled-out swamp and the houses split and the occupants scurry away? The gates of the communities are crashed and the boys unload from their four-door sedans and they march from door to door.

There is more reason to rush than they could possibly know. It is no rainstorm coming; it is no tropical storm. No hurricane clouds need to gather, no sirens need to sound. It is not external. It comes from inside, from the houses themselves. They are built

to collapse. There are bets on it. There was money in and there's money out. The termites have come from the ground and rooted their walls, turned their structures into the appearance of structure. The whoosh of wind from the collapse of one will be enough to bring collapse of another. Watch them fall: watch the destruction slide down the street, watch the horror spread from door to door, home to home, watch truth catch them. It cuts them asunder.

The door closes, and the salesman turns from the porch where lay the smeared bodies of the ants he crushed. A truck whips by.

Who the hell was that? That company with a blue truck? I've never seen them. Some sketchy operation, surely. Some lying, cheating rat.

He scrambles to reach the homes before the others. Which side of the street will he choose?

He knocks on a door to find the blue salesman has been there.

He'll explain to the customer: "You have precisely three days to cancel sir—the salesman you spoke to appears to have been a liar. Seventy dollars a service? Seven times a year? You didn't give him a check, did you? A credit card? If you call right now and cancel, they'd be up against the federal government if they charge it. It's your 72-hour right to cancel, and of course he didn't tell you that, though it's a federal felony that he didn't."

Is it the same salesman or a different one knocking streets away?

"That's how that company works. They send boys from across the country through every neighborhood and they shove these things on unsuspecting homeowners.

Me? I'm not actually selling. I was meeting with a few of your neighbors, our customers. You see, between services, I like to check up on them."

On the other side of the street, a salesman in green.

"Ninety dollars a service he's signed you up for? Outrageous. We can do it for forty-five. Yes, of course, we come out monthly—there's no other safe way to do it. Four times a year as you've signed up for is a very dangerous approach. They put so much of that toxin in your walls, they have to, since they come so rarely, and from there it mixes with the ventilation of the house. There is only so much your system can take. It's harmless, he said? Well I'm sure he said the government thinks it's harmless. As long as you don't get a technician who over-treats. As long as you trust the government."

"We're entirely different," says the boy or another like him. "Oh no, no sir. Those regulations are for the sort of toxins *that* company uses. Because they only treat twice a year, they douse you with the stuff. It's the principle reason we treat every three months. It allows us to treat safely."

The sky is blue, the air still, the street serene. Every fifth door is stuffed with pamphlets, a home either waiting to be purchased or waiting to be rented or waiting to be sold or waiting to be stripped. The boys see the other salesman have left their cards, their fliers, their doorknob-hangers. They remove them and replace them with only their own, stuffing the others under the welcome mat so as not to fill their pockets with trash.

## CHAPTER 19

Her house was dark. I called her phone. She answered somewhere loud, surrounded by friends. But then she shouted to me: “Don’t leave! Stay there and I’m coming!”

I spent thirty minutes feeling like a fool. Who was she with and had she even left? I imagined her out with six Florida surfers or golfers and looking at her watch and thinking that she’d better go soon. How long did she think I’d wait? How long, I wish I’d asked, would she be? It had been too loud to ask.

I turned on my car light and opened my notebook. Another week until I’d be speaking and I still hadn’t written the talk out. Kelly’s attacks on the story of the First Vision surfaced in my mind. He must have gotten into the literature anti-Mormons give out. I’d heard of anti-Mormon literature. I’d heard one of the two non-Mormon families in my childhood neighborhood had once been Mormon before the anti-Mormons had gotten to them. I still couldn’t imagine what sort of person would attempt to destroy a Mormon’s faith and pull them out of the Church. I didn’t know exactly what anti-Mormon literature looked like, but I imagined pamphlets like the ones the vegans in high school would hand out, the ones with tortured chickens in them. Lies, awful pictures, maybe even porn.

I read over notes I’d jotted in my notebook. We all knew the story of the First Vision. My task wasn’t to explain the story or to teach some doctrine. It was to strengthen everyone’s faith, to express my testimony of its truth, to say that I did know that God and Jesus Christ had appeared to the fourteen-year-old Joseph Smith in the quiet woods of upstate New York, that I did know that after the boy was smothered to the dirt, crushed

into the forest floor by Satan, who knew intimately of the young man's heavenly calling, who knew *this* was the hour God restores the Fullness of Truth to the fallen world, who knew that *this* was the beginning of the end for him and his minions—that Devil, he grabbed the boy's fragile soul and pulled with all the desperation of Hell. We are like a grasshopper before that power. Those were words preached my third-great-grandfather in 1850. Like a grasshopper. The boy was to be crushed, could feel his body collapsing, could hear his mind begging for death, and then: the Everlasting Father and his Son, Jesus Christ, descended in a pillar of light, eradicating the darkness, eviscerating evil, releasing the boy, releasing the world, releasing me, from the suffocating darkness known too long.

I knew the story. I loved the story. But it wasn't the story that converted a person; it was providing the moment for the Spirit of God to manifest to their spirit directly. Could I provide that avenue? Could my words be that conduit? I needed them to be—my mission would require two straight years of that. I needed to be able to say I knew it was true, and I needed to mean it. And this talk would be the moment I proved to God I had the faith to say it.

I'd jotted a line from Elder Packer's talk: "The skeptic, the experimenter," he says, "can never have this witness, because he will never fully qualify." The unquestioning belief is paramount. The faith must be unwavering, like James Chapter 1 verse 5 says. Like the boy Joseph had.

She knocked on my window. I turned the light off and she stood there, only a dark shadow. I set my notebook to the side, opened the car door, stepped out, and she hugged me. I was overcome with desire for the smell of her skin, for the softness of her body, the

smooth coolness of her neck I'd once brushed with lips. I turned her to the car and backed her into it and put my hands on her side and kissed her. She pulled her arms around my neck and I felt her ribs on my palms, moving. She slid her tongue through my lips. I pressed her into the car. I squeezed her thin body with my hands. She took me by the wrist and dragged me inside her home, through the living room and past the couch, up a stairway.

She pressed my hand to her hip as we climbed the stairs. She led. She pulled me into a dark room and clicked on a small lamp and pushed me onto a bed.

The covers were mixed up and half pulled on. She crawled on top of me and kissed me.

I felt her rocking on me. She was rubbing back and forth. Was this Dry Sex? DS? Oh dear. Oh no. Everything out of order. How deep were we in? We hadn't even done Necking, had we? Or Petting? What was it, exactly?

She dipped into my neck and kissed me and suddenly I felt her whole body fall into me as she took her hands off the bed and lifted her shirt. Then she sat up, pulled it straight up, and her breasts fell out in a black bra.

Was that on the list?

Her pretty face was buried in the shirt stuck for a moment at her neck till she ripped it off and threw it to the floor. My ears were ringing in the silence. The beginnings of a hundred words formed in my head, from God, from Satan. None of the words were completed. None of the sentences clear. I couldn't tell which were from who or what direction they'd come in from. There was so much going on, so much actual sensation and touch, so much to see.



The words stopped and we were alone. She unhooked her bra and I saw her white breasts tumble out. She kissed me.

I could feel them, her breasts, tickling my chest. She reached down and tore my shirt up to my neck, so I could feel all her skin on my skin. Her knee pressed my thigh and push outward, as she took my other leg in hers. I took off my shirt.

PK, DS, N, P, I didn't know where we were.

I slid my hand around the side of her back and felt her breasts on the side. My head like the core of a colony kicked, like the spider attacked by the ants. Paralyzed and bit in a thousand wonderful places, no sounds outside the immediate proximity, no sensations of all that I had just lost, no awareness of anything outside my touched skin. She was sliding her hands up and down my back. I was not afraid for my skinny body, I was not afraid to have hers in my hands. I grabbed her breasts.

Her hands slid down my hips, and she came in and kissed and kissed me as she fumbled with my belt and tore it off, then kissed my stomach, pulled my shorts off.

It was not an acronym. She put my dick in her mouth.

She moved her tongue on it and her mouth in and out. I tried not to make any sounds for fear I would cry or laugh and I would not be able to explain. Her breasts tickled my thighs. Her hand reached up and her fingers splayed across my chest, nails painted some shade I couldn't decipher in the dim light. Her fingers slid to my arm, down to my hand, and she lifted my hand to the top of her head. I could not have ever imagined the feeling. She was swallowing me up. I dragged my shaking fingers through her hair.

“You're going to—,” I heard myself mumble. “I'm going to—”

She spread her fingers over my mouth, covering it halfway.

My hips pushed into her face and my body went tight, tight, tight, tight, and I came. Everything down there was warm. Her hands, her mouth, her breasts on my legs. Everything above was cold. My stomach, my chest, my nose, my mind. I felt immediately bad for her, felt bad that I had done that in her mouth, but I knew she must have known that was going to happen. That was the first thing I felt before I felt terror and everything after.

“Oh,” I said, on accident, breathing loud. “Godammit.”

She crawled up my body and rested her head on my shoulder. Her hot breath to my neck, her arm across my chest. Fingers on my shoulder.

“You mean, oh wow?” She said.

Fear and the heat of her body pressed to me to keep me silent. I pulled her tight, her naked torso in my arm. I pulled again to feel her breasts press into me. Why did I feel so compelled to pull her? I slid my other hand down her side, past her breast, her ribs, into a soft recess and found the edge of her hip and her shorts. I planted my palm right there, on something firm.

“I know,” she said. “That was bad.”

The blue in her eyes was close enough to me to burn. Her lips lifted into the slightest smile. She pressed them to my cheek.

I closed my eyes. I saw the old bishop first, eyeing me over the imagined glasses he doesn't even have as I answer his questions.

*Did you ejaculate?*

*In her mouth?*

And my parents would ask me directly when they discovered I'd have to wait a year for my mission. Did you have sexual intercourse with someone?

And that future girl, the one I'm supposed to end up with for eternity, will God steer her away from me now? Or will I find her, and after we've fallen in love, one nightmarish and beautiful day, have to turn to her and say I need to tell what I did one night when I was eighteen?

Amy squeezed my thigh between her legs and I remembered she was really there. Maybe if I never let go of her, maybe that would be the best thing. To stay here and not let go.

But I did let go and fell through the Florida air to my car. I deserved empty and needed empty and I found it on a back road. I pulled over and got out. The wall of trees lining the highway screamed with a million voices that didn't give a shit about me, that could have seen me crushed by a sleeping semi truck driver and gone on singing. The ground was soggy. Amy was miles behind me believing she'd made some mistake the quiet way I left. She had, hadn't she? We had, hadn't we? I stood next to my car and leaned into it. Cold metal. Her soft body. So ephemeral. The whole ten minutes, how I'd passed right through it, eyes to the ceiling, her fingernails dancing across my skin, my body losing itself to her and then all of it becoming some nightmare in the past.

The angel from God, does he know the vulgarity of skin and thus refuse to touch when offered to shake hands? The angel from Satan, is she envious, craving a body she never received? Can she not resist the offer to touch, to feel something she can never feel? Amy and I, we had reached for each other—had we wisped right through? I woke the next morning, threw up, and scheduled an appointment with the Bishop.

## CHAPTER 20

He is packing their things to leave. A boy walking past tries to sell him something.

He's been debating whether to shove the fucking rocking horse his son doesn't ride into the moving van, the rocking horse he'd gotten him for his birthday months earlier, that stupid gift he'd thought classic and fatherly, fitting for their new home—what a dumb gift; his son hadn't even touched it—he looks at the thing, its red paint and black lines, the awkward mop of hair above its head adding a horrific third dimension to the flat paint job. He's contemplating it in the driveway when the boy walks up in his polo and shorts.

The boy opens his notebook to pictures of the ants that had been living in his house before he realized how very much it wasn't his house, that it was the bank's house. And the boy asks him where he's moving. "We treat all over south and central Florida."

This red rocking horse was what, fifteen dollars. It belongs in the pile to be taken to the thrift store, the growing pile in the garage that includes many of the new things they'd bought their first days here—a shitty orange end table that was going to match the modern couch they intended to get for the loft that stayed forever empty. For example.

The boy wears bent metal-framed glasses, smudged frames dirty as hell, as if he can't see anyway, as if he is blind and wears them for decoration. How can he walk around in this heat and look through those foggy glasses? He is freckled, naive with a round face. He does not want to tell him he doesn't know where they are moving. He won't tell him they will be staying with his brother in Macon, Georgia, and that after that he just doesn't know. He is relieved the company only treats in Florida. He says Georgia

and the boy leaves him with a doorknob hanger—maybe he could leave it for whoever is moving in? Sure.

He stuffs the red rocking horse, stupid thing, into the van.

## CHAPTER 21

Kelly did not come with me to sell Saturday. He lay on the couch and when I asked if he was coming he shook his head. I sold nothing. I struggled to get even out of my car. I fell into thinking of Amy, despite my conviction in the morning that I would loathe to see her ever again. I fell into the memory of her body, the warmth of all that skin. The bitter on her breath after she did what she did. I texted her and told her I was ill, that I needed to rest, that I needed to work on my talk for the Sunday after tomorrow. I said nothing of church.

But she walked into the Sunday school classroom in a blue sweater. She'd curled her hair up. She wore diamond earrings. "I was thinking," she said, quietly in my ear. Sunday School was over and we had the hour of Sacrament meeting to come. "We could go to Clearwater beach. After?" She seemed careful, maybe nervous.

"I actually, I can't. I have to meet with bishop after."

"Why?" she said. "For your talk? That's next week, isn't it. You know I'm going to come, right?"

I looked over my shoulder. Others were around us in the foyer, but talking loudly among themselves. "No. To talk to him. About what happened. With us."

Her face was blank, but then she suddenly understood. "What happened with us?" She grabbed my wrist. "Outside," she said, tugging me.

We were alone in the humidity and sun.

"You're going to tell that old man I sucked you off?"

Even though we were alone I looked behind me again. The words sounded out how sinful it all was. I couldn't believe I'd let her, that I'd let myself.

“Why?” She said. “Why? Why are you going to do that?”

“I can’t do things like that, like what we did,” I said. I shook my head. “I can’t even believe you did it. I didn’t know that was going to happen.”

“Oh fuck you—I’m some whore?” She squeezed her mouth closed. “I can’t believe you. Guess what. I thought it was great. I thought sucking you off, you, Kirt, *you*, I thought it was great. I thought it was really something.” She scowled. “But you—all you did was, you blew your load in some whore. That’s your problem, not mine.”

“I have to tell him,” I said.

“If you do, don’t call me,” she said.

“I can’t go on a mission until I clear it up—I have to tell him.”

“What are you talking about? This is about your mission again? I’m so stupid. You’re a child.” She glanced over her shoulder. “It’s not like we just got married. It wasn’t a wedding ceremony. You can go on your damn mission—you honestly think—”

“I can’t. I’ll have to wait a year. To go.”

“What?” she shook her head.

“Because of what happened.”

“Because I gave you a blow job? What are you talking about?” Her face held like an actor’s on pause.

“They won’t let me go on a mission for a year, maybe more. Maybe not at all. Because we did that.”

She pressed her hand to her hip. She looked to the side and then back at me. She looked like she’d just swallowed something gross. A man walked out of the church doors

and passed us, and she waited for him to get out of earshot. There were hornets crawling over a nest ten feet from us, hanging from the eaves.

“Look. I’m sorry,” she said. “I know how important that is to you. I’m sorry.” Her eyes were glistening. “I don’t get it,” she said, “It doesn’t make any sense to me, this whole thing. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—I didn’t mean.” She took my hands, both of them. “Please,” she said. “We should go talk this over. I mean, I like you, Kirt—you know that right? Don’t tell that man about me and you. That’s just not fair to me. It’s not right—I mean, think about it—”

“But you don’t get it. I have to tell him.”

“No you don’t,” she said. “You don’t have to. And I don’t want you to.”

“But I already decided.”

She dropped my hands and shook her head. She folded her arms.

I held steady. Nothing wavering.

She turned and walked away.

I walked toward the door. When I looked over my shoulder she was halfway to her car and then she got in, and I watched her check over her shoulder to back up, and without ever looking my way she drove off.

“This,” the bishop said to me, “is the very serious risk you undertake when dating non-members. They don’t share your standards, no matter how wonderful of people they are.”

My face was wet from tears. It was so awful, the thing that had happened. To describe it aloud made it all even worse. I could tell it made him uncomfortable just to



hear it. He asked, to know how bad of a sin I'd committed, where I'd touched her, what clothes had come off. I'd burst out crying when he asked if I had an orgasm. He had no comfort to offer.

“Oral sex, in some ways, is an even more serious sin, because it's unnatural,” he said. “It's sodomy.”

Sodomy? I hadn't known that. Why hadn't I known that? I was toast. I was a spiritual goner.

He asked when I turned nineteen, and I told him September. I cried again at that.

“It's important you start the process of repentance, but on the bright side, you have. You've talked to me. It's a long road ahead, but there's light at the end of the tunnel.”

I wished he'd tell me how long before I could serve a mission but I didn't feel I could ask. I didn't feel I could ever be worthy to do something like that, to be God's instrument. I'd gone from readying myself to be a conduit for his spirit to committing sodomy in ten minutes. He could never trust me again. How I wished for a herd of horses to trample me like the Antichrist Korihor was crushed in the *Book of Mormon*.

“I'm supposed to talk next Sunday,” I blubbered.

He nodded.

“You'll do fine.”

“Aren't you going to—don't you think you should find someone else?”

He put his elbows on his desk and leaned forward.

“Kirt, you go out there and find someone for me. Go find someone without sin.”

He smiled then, for the first time. “Find a perfect member of this congregation.”

My lungs were sunk so far down into my stomach that when I tried to make a little laugh of understanding, it just came out as a moan.

“If God was only willing send his spirit to the sinless, he’d have no one to send it to. I think you’re the absolute best person I could have speak next week.”

With that I stole out the back of the church toward my car. I was glad for the long drive home to dry my eyes and face. I couldn’t overcome the sensation that the bishop didn’t know how big a disappointment I was. That he didn’t know who I’d grown up as. He didn’t know me. To him I was any eighteen-year-old sinner. If he knew where I’d come from, how I’d had truth readily handed to me, how I’d been raised so well and taught in my youth, how my goals had all just been derailed and my dreams crushed, how God had such a plan for me and I’d now tossed it into the trash, that I’d desecrated it—if he knew like I knew that I could have chosen to stay away but instead chose her body, lunged for it, clawed at it, held to it, even afterward—then he would have given me some greater shame to carry, something I deserved a little more. If he’d known how badly I wanted to touch her again he’d not have let me leave feeling okay.

When I got home Kelly was packing. I stood in the hallway and watched, then walked over to the living room. David was sitting there reading scriptures.

“Kelly’s—” I said, and he looked up.

“He’s flying out.” He went back to his book.

I lay down on the bed next to his and stared at the ceiling. My chest was weighted heavier than my body. Like a string was tied to my sternum pulling me down into the bed, down, down. I was free, for the time, from the spirits, from everything. Even as

Kelly packed around me I was alone. The evil spirits had beat me and might leave me alone for months. The good ones couldn't even stand to be in my presence.

Kelly's bronze hair hung into his eyes and his face was bearded. He was on the way out the door.

"I'm going to fly back to Utah," he said.

"I heard."

"Yeah."

There was a silence that pained me. The manifestation of his failure this summer. A failure that didn't even compare to mine in the past days. Nothing compared to mine. I'd done as sinful of things now as Kelly had. And I didn't even dare own up to them in front of him. At least he didn't think they were wrong when he did them. At least he didn't pretend to be what he wasn't.

"J.J., he's being really good. He's not making me pay for the apartment. Even though I'm leaving early and the contract says I'll have to. In exchange for my back-end check."

"Oh." I just couldn't talk. It was the worst timing. And he was gone. I pulled myself up and quietly shut the door, then collapsed again into the mattress.

At Correlation J.J. pulled me aside. He felt Kelly had been pulling me down. "I don't mean just sales wise. Spiritually too," he said.

"Yeah. I know."

"So let's get you out there selling thirty this week," he said. He sent me with Payson.

When Payson and I got into a neighborhood and parked, he folded his arms and started praying before I had time to register what was going on. I folded my arms quietly as he broke into the opening of the prayer.

“Our dear Father in heaven,” he prayed, “we thank thee for this beautiful day, for thy blessings and the opportunity to be here, working, earning money. We ask thee to watch over us as we work today, that we may find those who are in need of our service. And also, if it be thy will, that we may find those who are searching for truth, and that we may share with them thy Gospel. Help us to be in tune with thy spirit, to be in tune with thy promptings always, and to do thy will. We say these things in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.”

I said amen but it felt terribly wrong to be praying about pest control. Besides I brought down the prayer’s potential just by joining in, I felt. God would have withdrawn to the corners of the universe when my tainted soul reached up and knocked at his door.

Payson stepped out of the car and stretched his arms over his head—he must have a ten-foot reach. His face dropped.

I looked where he was looking.

A young man marched from a doorstep back to the sidewalk, then turned our direction. He was writing something on a clipboard and when he looked up and saw us, he waved casually and continued our way. When he got close I could see his polo shirt had a yellow logo on it.

“Premium,” he said, reading my shirt. “You’ve been down a couple streets from here?”

“I have,” Payson interrupted.

His shirt said Oracle Pest Defense.

He looked at a paper a few deep in his clipboard stack. “Some guy named Rupert?”

“Why?” Payson said.

“I just switched him to Oracle. You know, a lot of the neighbors have been switching over to Oracle. They appreciate the flexible service schedule—not being roped into that long contract—the better value and that local-business service ethic.” The kid winked. “You two have a nice day.” He walked toward the house right in front of us. Payson motioned me to follow him to the other side of the street and I did. The kid called after us. “You may find that side’s a little played out. I serviced ten there Saturday.”

Payson waved his arm in the air as if brushing the words away. But he looked at me and shook his head. “I had a bad feeling about this place when we first pulled in,” he said. “I can’t believe my Rupert guy switched. I sold him just Saturday. Thought he was a really cool guy. Thought we hit it off. We talked about baseball. I had a bad feeling about this place.” He bit the back of this hand.

“No you didn’t,” I said. I wiped the sweat off my glasses. The sun was violent. The sky thoughtlessly blue, no breeze to be found. How I yearned for a category five hurricane.

“I did,” he said. “I had a bad feeling.”

We moved back toward the car. The salesman in yellow, standing on the porch in front of a closed door, waved as we got in. “Oh, we’ll be back,” Payson said, as he ducked into the car.

“Who the heck is Oracle?” he said as we drove off. He turned down the next street and there was a car on the side of the road with a Utah license plate.

“Wonder if he’s alone,” he said. “Love to slash his tires.”

We drove down the highway and pulled into another neighborhood. “Have you or Kelly worked here?” he asked.

“Haven’t.”

“I got a good feeling.”

We split the street and took sides.

The first door opened fast.

“You guys again?” a strong, bulky woman said to me. “You come every day now?”

“We uh—you’ve had somebody else knock on your door?”

She stared at my shirt. “It was you guys,” she said, and backed into her house.

“Knocking door-to-door or something?” I said. I was just trying to keep her from closing the door.

“Like you’re doing,” she said with a glare.

“Oh no, no,” I said. “I’m checking up on a few of my customers. Do you know Caroline Thomas? Down the street? She’s been seeing a few of the ants and spiders. Just while we’re out we’re getting everybody for half off.”

She put her finger up. “Hang on,” she said. She stepped into her kitchen and I waited as if to be executed. It didn’t matter what she brought back. Someone had been here. She returned with a flier I’d never seen for a company I’d never heard of. Fortress Pest. Apparently we all looked the same on a doorstep.

“I kept the flier so I could call the police. Different company, same company, I don’t give a shit which,” she said. “He said the same shit you did, and I’ll tell you the same thing I told him,” she said. “My husband’s a chemist and we’ve got better stuff than you’ll ever get, and for the record, this is a goddamned mother fucking No Soliciting neighborhood.” She slammed the door as hard as she could.

Because Payson was talking to someone on his porch, I walked to the next door rather than to the locked car. It was an empty house, yard still maintained, for sale sign up, and I only went to the door because it was stuffed with several fliers. I pulled one out, and it was the same company the woman next door had seen. The other fliers in the door were real-estate, lawn mowing, debt consolidation. Home security systems. A typo-ridden printout for “hurricane windos.” I scooted to doormat over. There were three there. Orkin, Home Team, Summit. Three pest control companies. I added the Fortress Pest flier to the pile, readjusted the doormat, and stuck my own door-hanger on the knob. Maybe someone would move in soon. I turned to see a cop with his lights flashing silently behind me at the curb.

I walked straight for him, my heart beating through the roof.

He rolled his window down and motioned to me, as if I wasn’t already coming.

“What’s up,” I said, trying to be cool.

He seemed hesitant. “Your license?”

I handed him my driver’s license.

He looked at it. Utah. He looked back at me. “I need your sales license.”

“Don’t have one.”

“You have to have one.”

“No,” I said. “Not in Hillsborough County I know that.”

“Look,” he said. “I don’t like it when these people call me out about you. Stay out of the ones with the signs, the no soliciting signs.”

“Is it illegal for me to sell in them?”

“Yes,” he said, but he wasn’t looking at me. He was lying, and he knew I knew it.

“You’re the third officer I’ve talked to in two months. If it’s illegal, we need to know. So we aren’t breaking the law.”

“Just stay out of these damn neighborhoods. I’m telling you to get out of this one.”

“Alright,” I said with a shrug. “That’s fine.” He drove off, fast. I’d beat him. But I felt like hell. My veins were stuffed full.

I met Payson at the car.

“What did he say?” Payson asked about the cop.

“He wants us out.”

“I wish the area was good,” Payson said, “so I could just keep knocking and when he tries to stop us ask what he’s going to do about it.”

“Well,” I said, then nothing else. That didn’t sound ideal to me. But Payson was blowing smoke and I knew it.

Payson said, “That guy I just talked to, he said I was the third bug guy this week. And when that cop rolled up across the street and turned on his lights, it was over. I looked like some con artist I’m sure. Would you talk to someone when there’s a cop on the road behind them flashing his lights?”



We sat in the hot car with the windows down until the air conditioner finally began to cool again and we could roll the windows up. Ahead the cop rolled down the street toward us. So he hadn't left. He'd gone and turned around. He sat on the other side of the street. But he didn't look at us.

"Sheesh," Payson said. He flipped the car around and turned onto the main highway. The cop followed us, and close. He was riding up like they do before they pull you over.

"Get off me, man," Payson said to the rear-view mirror.

I hated cops. How I hated them. The dumbest, the failed, the powerless egomaniacs. There was nothing like a cop to turn me into a sudden delinquent. "Slam on your brakes," I said.

"No way," Payson said. He put his blinker on to turn off the highway. The cop followed. "Come on!" Payson shouted. He slowed to the speed limit on the side street, then clicked his blinker on to turn toward a neighborhood. The cop followed. Payson rolled to a stop in front of a house. The cop stopped ten or twenty yards behind us. No lights flashing. Nothing.

"This is ridiculous."

I said we should get out of there. We did. We went to the nearest Wendy's. The cop stopped following us after we parked and got out. He rolled slowly by without even looking at us and he turned onto the highway and left.

Inside the air was painfully cold. Three other boys in polo shirts stood in line. One was turned our direction. Defender Security Systems, his shirt read.

"Defender," Payson said. "Who's Defender?"

The three turned to him.

“Hey! What’s up, man?” one of them said.

“Oh,” Payson said, recognizing them. “It’s Carson?”

“Carson.” The boy pointed at his two friends. “Trevor and Mike. I’m sorry, you were—”

“Payson.”

“Right. Payson was at church,” he said to his friends.

“Oh yeah!” said a second boy. “You were too, right?” He was looking at me and I nodded. “You two selling security systems?”

“Pest control,” Payson said.

“Pest control.” Carson nodded. “Yeah. Did that last year in Dallas for Orkin. Who’s Premium?”

“It’s a Florida company,” Payson said.

One of the two friends wore a Florida ball cap. He looked at me and asked, “Do you two work with a kid named—” he turned to Carson, “what was that kid’s name? From the U of U?”

“Oh,” Carson said. “Bracken. Bracken something. He was working for Frontline. Or no. Fortress or something. It wasn’t Premium, I know that.”

“Fortress Pest?” I said.

“Yeah. They’re here in Tampa, and, I’m trying to think who else has a team here.”

“We just ran into a kid working for Oracle,” Payson said.

“Nah, don’t know any Oracle guys. Not sure who that is. Fortress is owned by the guy in Utah County who used to do the door-to-door food storage stuff.”

“Don’t know him,” Payson said. “The Oracle kid did have a Utah license plate.”

“Don’t we all,” one of the others laughed.

Their Orlando office had collapsed. Defender’s national headquarters in Provo, Utah—the home of the Missionary Training Center—had moved the Orlando crew across the state. “Just five of us left of the twenty that started in Orlando. Too tough for most guys. Even returned missionaries quit this job. Security is an even tougher sell than pest control, in my experience. Pays better though.”

“How’s selling?” Payson asked.

“Real good,” said Carson. “Yeah. Down the street a crazy guy broke into a house and tied up a man, like, raped his wife in front of the kids and everything.”

I gasped.

“Seriously,” the boy said. “Just last Thursday. Trevor had,” he looked at his friend, “what, ten on that street on Friday and Saturday?”

His friend shrugged. “About.”

“And what’s your take?” Payson asked.

“200, give or take,” one said. “Fifty upfront, about one-fifty on the back-end check in October. You?”

“Well, like you said,” Payson said, “Pest control is a little easier to sell. It’s a one-year agreement instead of your three-year contract.” Payson sounded like he was selling a customer.

Carson said, “A good week in pest control is more like—”

“Twenty, twenty five sales,” Payson answered.

*Oh, come on.* Payson was selling ten a week. He dropped those numbers like they were his norm. Then he said, “I make 135. Same deal, fifty upfront. The rest backend.”

135? One hundred and thirty five dollars? It was his first year—he couldn’t really be making one hundred and thirty five dollars a sale. He looked at me and perhaps due to my face realized he had revealed information he was not supposed to.

“Yeah, a good week in security is just ten or fifteen,” the third boy said.

I felt ill.

“I guess we’ll see you in church, brethren. Kirt here is speaking.”

“Right on. Good luck.” They ordered and took their food to the corner.

We ordered and sat down away from them.

“You make 135?” I said finally.

Payson stuffed fry after salty fry into his mouth. He nodded. “What are you making?”

I didn’t even want to say. “You know. First year pay scale.”

His eyes widened. “Like, seventy five bucks a sale?”

“A lot more if I break 200,” I said.

“Sheesh, man,” he said. He swallowed his food. “Who recruited you?”

“Uh, David. Sort of.”

“What do you mean, sort of?”

I told him I’d called David and asked about coming.

“Holy crap man,” he said. “You didn’t talk to anybody else? You didn’t leverage their offers? Ho-lee crap. I wonder how much David makes off you.”

“Makes?”

“Like, per sale. Was Kelly making that little?”

“Uh. Yeah. Do you know what Taylor makes?”

“We worked together on it. We got our commission based on coming together.

That’s how it works. You bring numbers and they pay up.”

The sandwich tasted like hell. I threw the last half of it away.

Maybe I was the first door-to-door pest control salesman to simply call and sign up. Here I was fifty services in, looking at four thousand dollars, while Payson with almost the same amount of sales had earned seven. The way they paid, the fifty dollars up front with the rest in October, it made it look like we were all being paid the same week-to-week out here.

We spent two hours sitting there. I wanted to sleep or die. Then Payson drove in circles till sunset, knocked three doors while I sat in the car, angry. He discovered that yet again, the area had been hit, and went home early, both of us with zero.

“All but three of the ten people I just talked to said they were unemployed.”

“That’s impossible,” I said. “All in one neighborhood? These houses are huge.”

“Seven out of ten,” Payson said, looking at the notes he’d taken with addresses and names and a bunch of NO’s. “I don’t get it. They were pointing at their neighbors. *That’s Jerry, he’s unemployed, and Kelly there she’s gonna lose her house.*” Who the crap talks about that stuff with their neighbors?

I kept checking my phone. No texts. None all day.

The next four days were Monday again but worse. I made zero dollars a day. I deserved it. On Wednesday a cop came up on me while knocking, then followed me to

the next door after I told him I knew he couldn't arrest me. I rang the doorbell and a housewife looked over my shoulder at the cop then shut the door and bolted it.

When we finally ditched the cop and got into a neighborhood, it was like Payson had described. Overnight it had become okay for people to tell me they were bankrupt.

"If it was a penny I couldn't buy it," said a shriveled old black lady.

"Right," I said. "Times are tough right now. That's why the way we do things at Premium is flexible. Right now I can do these treatments for a killer deal because we're treating so many of your neighbors."

"Son," she said, smiling, "I don't have two dollars. This house is going any day. Sure we got bugs. But we don't got dollars."

The next door was the same. No hesitating, no pretending he might have money somewhere, that this week was just a crazy one, that if he could just get my card and maybe call.

One man went into the kitchen and came back with a stack of papers.

"These are copies of the job applications I've filled out in the past six months," he said. "Unless your company is hiring a surveyor we're wasting each other's time."

It was like some wildfire had caught and spread to the whole city, like suddenly it was *the* conversation to have with a stranger. Not the weather. Not the Orlando Magic. Not the Tampa Bay Rays trajectory toward finishing last in the American League East. Unemployment. Foreclosure. Bankruptcy. Eviction. One woman took me inside and when I closed her she pitched me on working for her. She couldn't pay me but she had a great idea that I could share. I could go door-to-door like I was doing. I could just do it part time, she figured, and make several hundred a week probably in the end if I worked

hard. She never did tell me what she wanted me to sell because I told her my friend was waiting and I'd give her a call.

We complained three days in a row to J.J..

“These people are out of money. These neighborhoods are crisscrossed by salesmen.”

David said, “Anybody who tells you they don't have enough money to pay thirty bucks a month to keep their kids from getting bit by bugs, I don't know man. That's ridiculous. Anyone can have a job if they want it. Look at us. Any of those people could sell door-to-door if they were willing to work. You can't let them give you that crap about not having enough money. That's the worst possible excuse anybody could have. It's a load of crap.”

Part of me believed David, because I knew it was my own fault I was failing. I wasn't working hard enough. I wasn't believing in my product enough. I'd let myself lose sight of my goals; I'd let my priorities slip. When I should have been focusing on God I was getting a blowjob, and when I should be focusing on solving these people's bug problems, I was letting my mind slip to her warm body. And then I kept letting myself doubt that it was worth their money, I kept believing they were saying *no* when they were really just offering objections. I kept wondering if maybe it was true that our service wouldn't be the best thing for them. And they could hear it in my voice. I didn't believe what I was saying. David was still selling three a day, or that's what he was reporting. His number of services was becoming less and less a percentage of his claimed sales.

We wandered through knocked-over neighborhoods, saw other boys in polo shirts, talked to one from Orkin. “They just moved the whole office here from North

Florida,” he told us. “We burned through Jacksonville, half the guys went home. You think it’s bad here—” he said, eyes wide, “in Jacksonville there was a dude on every half block.” He wished us luck. He said he was about to quit, fly back to Idaho. He told us exactly where he’d knocked and where he hadn’t. “You two both Utah boys?” he asked, and we said we were. He nodded.

Nothing from Amy.

That was what I needed, I guessed. I needed those blue eyes to disappear.

I asked Payson to take me home early Thursday. I needed to prepare for the talk, now three days away. I walked into the office an hour later, feigning that I’d worked the full day, and saw on the whiteboard that my service total had shrunk for the first time in the summer. I asked Marcy about it, and she timidly said two of my customers had called to cancel.

“I don’t even think it was them,” she said. “Both contracts were in the names of women and both callers were men. And they sounded young. And they said it was her husband calling. I think it was the salesmen from other companies switching them over. Same street, same day, same-ish voice?” she said.

J.J. said, “Dirty salesmen will trick the customer by offering to call in and cancel.”

“How do they cancel?” I stammered. “It’s a contract!”

“They have to pay the cancellation fee, which we’ll send them,” J.J. said. “But obviously no one gets paid on that.”



Marcy said she tried to tell the customers about the fee. “They didn’t respond, neither of them—that’s why I think it was a salesman and he didn’t want the customer to know they’d get hit with a fee for switching.”

“Dirty,” J.J. said.

I wandered back to the apartment in a haze—the sky was dark and cloudy. I kept my eyes on the thick forest reserve next to me. I thought of looking down at Amy—what she had done, what we had done. Her dark hair, her hot mouth. I felt I was being closed in on by the humidity and the dark and at imagining her I could feel the urge to get back to that, to feel her rubbing around on me and to roll over and throw *her* onto the bed, pull *her* clothing off, slide her skirt down past her ankles and toss it against the wall, and I jogged home and grabbed the scriptures and Elder Packer’s talk. I wrote down things I would say, things I wanted to know.

Joseph struggled through a prayer asking which of the religions were true.

The Devil knocked him to the ground and suffocated him.

The boy choked, squirmed, weighed by an otherworldly pain, the presence of pure evil, the emptiness of a damned spirit, the power of that against his skin, in his aching bones, and how he must have scrambled, clawed for relief, scraped at the dirt and the leaves and the undergrowth, and when he was about to give up, when he wished for death, he looked up at the face of God.

On Saturday J.J. stood in front of the wall sized map, now colored in highlights from top to bottom, yellow, red, green markings showing our advance from the not-so-centrally located Lakeland west toward Tampa. Taylor and David had already taken off for an area they were re-knocking with success—in sales if not services. It was only

Payson and me sitting there. Forcing J.J. to the point. We needed a new spot. We needed area.

He mumbled something about the likelihood that most of the neighborhoods were still pristine, that most of the ones we'd gone to early were still filled with buyers missed due to our lack of training then. Go back to those now, he said, and we'd sell three on every street. But we had gone back to most of them, whether he believed it or not. We'd revisited most of the better ones and all the new ones. And the houses we'd expected to be filled had not been filled. The neighborhoods planned had not been built. So he conceded and pulled out a tabletop map of a completely different area.

East.

He planted his hands wide on the table and breathed like a dog with a cold, hunched over the map. He hovered his finger over it, floated it around. Then, his finger dropped toward the paper with precision. He tapped.

"Here," he said. His face lifted to us but his shoulders stayed still. "Poinciana. I wanted to save it for August, but I'll let you two open it up today."

I leaned into the map. His finger was placed on a network of streets that looped and rolled, a sure sign of new development. Payson rubbed his hands together.

"It's a ways away, but every one of these loops, every little horseshoe, you could probably spend all day on. This stuff is brand new. It doesn't even show up on Google Earth. The streets aren't on last year's street maps. They aren't even named on this one."

"Where is it?" Payson asked.

"About half hour from here. East on the 4. Toward Orlando."

Payson rubbed his hands again. He looked at me. "What are we waiting for?"

I folded up the map and we headed for the door.

“The field is white!” J.J. shouted.

We cruised down the interstate toward Orlando. East for the first time. My stomach had butterflies from thinking of the possibility. I imagined the money waiting there, the untapped suburban sprawl. And as always, there was that potent fear of the first doorstep of the day.

Half an hour passed and Payson asked how much further. I looked over the map.

“We’re only half way there,” I said.

“You serious? He said this was a half hour.”

“Well, he said about half an hour.”

We drove on.

I asked Payson, if he heard J.J. say, “The field is white.”

“The field is white and ready to harvest,” Payson said. “D&C section 4. You don’t know that? It’s the missionary scripture.”

“I know what it is. I think it’s dumb he’s always making missionary comparisons to door-to-door pest control sales.”

Payson passed a slow moving bus. “It’s just a joke,” he said. “J.J. doesn’t think selling bug spray is the same as sharing the gospel.”

I said nothing, but he kept thinking about it.

“You know that feeling,” he said, “of not wanting to go out in the morning, of wanting to sit at home? That feeling of standing on a doorstep. The way you want to waste seconds and not move on. And how you have to get a person to listen to you when

they are set against you from the start. That's a bit of an overlap. It's a lot easier when you're talking bugs, not God."

A minute later, looking straight ahead, he said, "Some days, the bad ones, this feels pretty similar to my mission."

My mission, if they would even call me on one anymore, wasn't going to feel like a pest control sales job.

At an hour of driving we'd exited and soon the nameless Poinciana roads turned into named roads we drove along. We turned onto a small highway called Providence. On either side the trees maintained their wall. We turned left onto a road marked Brown off which, according to my map, sprouted dozens of horseshoe loops.

"These side streets are all horseshoes." I pointed at a green street sign. Chrysanthemum. And on the left: Hyacinth. On the right came Chrysanthemum again and then Hyacinth on the left.

"Loops," I said.

"But there's nothing down there."

"Just turn onto one," I said.

He took the car down Hyacinth and we rolled down a smooth and dark-paved road. On either side of us was forest bordering a perfectly laid out sidewalk. Short black lampposts stood every forty feet or so, curving like two-headed swans at the top to dangle two lightshades. The trees beyond them were webbed with vines. The ground was buried beneath blossoming bushes and shrubs.

Payson floored it as we came back toward Brown without seeing a single house. I stared at the map so as not to look at him. "There's at least fifty of these horseshoes, just

in this very spot,” I said. “Go down Brown.” I pointed. “There are maybe eight branching off Brown, and there are, oh, seven roads just like Brown with horseshoes branching off. That’s just in this couple inches of the map. There are more. This is a city of these loops.”

Payson pulled onto Brown and then turned onto Chrysanthemum. In the forty-five seconds it took him to race around the block there was only pavement, sidewalks, black glossy light posts, and the forest. And us. We were the distinct element, cruising the untouched asphalt.

Payson ran the stop sign entirely and we swerved down Brown to the next loop. He passed it, and he passed the next and the next.

I pointed out we’d be coming to another main road like Providence soon. He stopped at that stop sign. The neighborhoods thus formed like a ladder—crossroads like rungs, rungs with horseshoes running off them. We drove up the ladder and turned onto another rung, Princeton. He swung onto loop after loop. The sidewalks were ready for children and parents and dogs. The light posts looked ready to ease on at dusk. The forest appeared to be waiting to grow back over the street when we left. For ten minutes Payson drove in and out of horseshoes. For ten minutes the forest replicated itself on either side of us.

He pulled to a stop and looked at me. He looked at this transmission and put the car in park. He looked at his watch.

“We just drove an hour and a half.”

I stared at the map.

Then he jerked the car back into drive and swung it hard around onto a ladder leg, and another minute down the road we saw colored flags. He turned where they said to

turn. He looped on a horseshoe where there were flags on the corner, following arrows that pointed farther, farther down the road. He curved around the bend and on the right side of the street was a semi-permanent trailer.

It was nudged within a square cut away from the trees, blue siding, a black door. No sod had been laid—only dirt, and an outhouse stood in the back corner of the lot. Felt covered stairs lead up to the trailer. At least a dozen flags hung in the front lawn, striped yellow, orange, and pink. They were staked like makeshift fence-posts. Each flag hung straight down. They may as well have been skins of dead animals, lifeless, stagnant, speared like trophies. On every single limp flag were scattered black letters, illegible in the folds, but I knew they said the same thing the sign atop the trailer said.

Lamar Homes.

The trailer had a smaller sign above the door: “Sales Office: Welcome.”

Payson stopped the car and stared at the thing. I stepped out and closed the door. I waited for him to step out but he didn't. I stood next to the car, feeling the heat pouring out from under it, mixing with that heat rising from the asphalt.

The oscillation of the car was just loud enough to oust slightly another sound.

As I moved away from the car the engine's noise was overcome.

How odd to think the forest had been screeching this way for fifteen minutes of driving these roads. The air conditioning within the car had masked it—this noise like I'd never heard, like colorful radio static. It was as if I'd been tossed into the pile of fire ants. This was the sound of their rage. There was no distinguishable note, no one insect or even type of insect. Only a torrent of rhythms amounting to a high-pitched scream coming

from the trees all around me. Someone had exited an emergency only door with a pocket of diamonds. Someone had set a school on fire. I wanted to cover my ears.

I stepped toward the curb, then carefully into the dirt toward the trailer. Hills of fire ants rose every three feet. Trails of workers forced me to pick my spots carefully. I had to adjust my eyes to the size of the ants to see how they ran back and forth across the dirt like vibrating wires. The heat and humidity were like a trash compactor pressing down on me. A hornet blasted past my face. He swung back by, curious or angry, and I ducked.

The noise grew louder. It was alien. I looked over my shoulder to ensure the car was still there. Payson sat staring at me.

An oscillation rose in the sounds, whether in my ears or in the air I could not tell. The insects' calls leaned forward and back as if pumped through a wah wah pedal.

The trailer was dark, I could see that. The welcome sign over the door had a massive wasps nest hanging from it. Before I got to the porch I could read the smaller signs below the window. Hours: and below, it had been crossed out. Someone had written in pen still farther down but I could not read it. I eyed the hornets crawling over their nest just above the door, their hard yellow and black bodies pulsing up and down, and I stepped onto the green carpet, my head just a foot below them. The stairs were sturdy. I leaned forward: A phone number had been written and crossed out. Nothing else. No message. Nothing.

A buzzing hit so loud in my eardrum that I jumped off the steps—a hornet flew at my face and I slapped it out of the sky—it landed on the green felt and spun on the ground, half of it paralyzed, circling an unseen drain. I ran off the porch and ran to the

car, stepping in two hills of ants. I threw open the door, stomped my feet as hard as I could several times, and crawled in.

“What? What?” Payson said.

“Hornets,” I said. I felt ants bite my ankles. I squished them one by one with my fingers, my hands shaking.

“What did the sign say?”

“Uh. Nothing.” I took off my shoe but didn’t find any others. Then one bit my calf. I looked at him, how he was aimed into me and planning to die for it. I squished him. They’d leave small welts, little bubbles that burned.

“Nothing?” he said.

“Nothing.”

“I’m going to kill J.J..” He threw the car into gear and took off.

I eyed the forest as he drove out of the neighborhood, knowing the sound that Payson didn’t know, knowing of its million, billion eyes on us. I watched in the rear view mirror until it was gone.

I could not sleep. I locked the door to my room. I’d be speaking in a matter of hours.

I begged God, and I apologized for begging.

I thanked God and promised him I’d be his best missionary if I could just know it was true.

I apologized for bargaining.

I told God I wanted more than anything to be that instrument in his hands, to see lives changed through my expressions of belief.



I apologized for my pride, for envisioning myself and not God's Holy Spirit as the bringer of the truth.

You're talking to yourself.

You're talking to yourself.

I apologized, oh, I apologized for the words in my head. They were not mine. I was encircled by darkness, I was surrounded by evil spirits, though I could no longer feel them exactly—I was, as the scriptures warned for those who committed serious sins—beyond feeling. I was vulnerable, wide open. I had not anticipated their presence as I should have, and now they were here and their damn words were in my head.

I apologized for thinking damn.

I apologized for being unworthy.

You are not unworthy. No one is too far gone. No one cannot be fixed.

Yes. I believed that, I told God. I called out to him that I knew that Christ's atonement was sufficient for my sins. I wanted to be forgiven. I wanted to be clean again.

I told God I knew he would come through. I knew he would confirm the words I would say at from the pulpit tomorrow. I knew he would, like his prophet Elder Packer said, like he had come through for Joseph Smith, like he had done for the young Samuel in the Old Testament. At the final moment, after the storm, after the swirling madness, after the darkness, after all I'd fought against, after the trial of faith, he would infuse my words with power and fill my soul with light and confirm the truth of my words to me. I would know it and I would never forget it. I promised him I would never forget.

## CHAPTER 22

Here is the man who has been caught paying millions he does not have for air—for less than air, for poison, for the worst of assets: He looks behind him to the man who'd said he'd buy it all from him, who'd promised to back before the purchase had happened.

But that man shrugs his shoulders. You keep those, he says. You bought poison. You got poison.

Please, says the first, severely anxious, buy it, sell it to someone. As long as we keep buying, as long as it keeps moving, as long as it grows and spreads we can all be rich! He smiles.

No, the other says, you keep it. I don't buy poison.

He falls to his knees and watches the millions of dollars sift through his fingers, watches it all rot and spill from his hands. If they could have just kept it moving, he thinks. If they could all believe, if we could all believe, if we all were determined to believe.

Those others, the ones who sold the poison to him and were therefore not sunk by it, don't they look smart for not collapsing to the floor with the muck on their hands? Don't they!

What a fucking idiot. Leveraging his money 25 times to buy and sell shit.

But if we all believe then it isn't shit! The man has a point. Our belief creates a truth that did not previously exist. The belief is the backing. Did he buy poison or did he merely buy belief?

Forever he'll wonder how he got here, why he, of all of them, became the man on the ground. How it squished him, how it crushed him so catastrophically, how his body burst on the downtown sidewalks while the others scurry past.

## CHAPTER 23

I sat on the stand through the sacrament. Halfway through the opening hymn Amy floated in the back foyer entrance and sat by the door. She crossed her leg toward the wall and watched me sing.

I looked at my wrinkled notes. I'd determined not to write out something to be read. I gave myself markers, starting points, key words. A flowchart to take me from beginning to end. The details were absent, to be filled in by the guidance of the Spirit, though the back of the paper contained a list of the things I knew I wanted to know. I flipped the sheet.

Joseph Smith restored the gospel of Jesus Christ.

God and Jesus Christ appeared to him as a young boy.

The young man translated the golden plates into the *Book of Mormon*.

Christ died for my sins and yours.

He was resurrected and received a body and lives—as we will.

He will return in glory.

I know God lives. I know he loves me.

I know this because I've felt it, because he's confirmed those things to me.

The sacrament was passed, and the bishop introduced me to the congregation as the first speaker. He said I'd be followed by the high councilman.

He sat.

So that was it.

The air in the place was vibrant with the warmth of hundreds of believers, the light bright. I looked to the rafters above the congregation and thought of the faith held

here, the belief tying the congregation together, the strength of generations of Mormons, those who struggled and died for it and those who came into it later and found a life of joy. The rows of heads and eyes was welcoming, and yet as I stood up to the pulpit, I was afraid.

Amy watched me like we'd never met.

My legs shook behind the pulpit. Swirls of stained wood spanned the pulpit. I unfurled my notes and pressed them there and cleared my throat—the sound boomed through the hall.

I saw J.J., David, some girl with David. Marcy and her brother. Payson and Ben. I saw the security salesmen, Carson, the others. Everyone looked familiar, as if we'd all been knocking against each other all summer.

I began to speak.

I spoke of the early nineteenth century, the state of the fallen world, the lack of God's truth on the earth, the growing despair on a planet, the exponential chaos. The discovery of the New World by Columbus under God's guidance, the seeds of inspiration in the Reformers, the yearning for the truth best typified by the second Great Awakening.

A young boy in New York, inquisitive, unschooled but intelligent, searched his Bible for answers from a God he believed in but knew not the nature of. Was he to join the Methodists as his mother had? The Baptists as his father had? Another group? The upstate region was torn apart by these mutually deficient groups tugging at the community for members. In his room, perhaps by some candlelight, the young boy read 1<sup>st</sup> James 1 verse 5:

“If any of ye lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering.”

My legs wavered and I stilled them. I feared looking at Amy. Her eyes might hold some yearning for me, something I would want to lunge after—or they’d spark some slip of thought that would strip me of my effort to bring God’s Spirit into the room, to be led by it, to let God speak through me.

But I struggled to hear His Spirit over my own words. I balanced carefully my mind, kept it from questioning where the voice of God was while continually searching for it, reaching through the air that grew colder and thinner with every line. Where was it? I asked not in stubbornness, not as a demand, but as a continual determined search.

That is all, God. That is all I am doing. Not questioning. Searching. Where are you? Where is your voice?

A voice came into my head: You are unworthy.

“The Devil gripped him first as he prayed in the forest.”

The Devil grabbed him by the throat and threw him to the ground. He nearly killed him.

You are unworthy.

No, that’s the wrong voice. That’s the evil one. That’s the trial. That’s the storm. The Bishop said we were all sinners. God sends his spirit to sinners.

“When Joseph was about to give up, to surrender himself to the darkness,” I spoke into the microphone, my voice shaking, “at the last moment, a brightness came through the trees, a light as bright as the sun, and looking up the boy saw God and his son Jesus Christ—suspended in the air above him.”

I paused. The room was still. My ears buzzed with an eerie silence.

“‘Joseph,’ spoke the one being—our Heavenly Father. And pointing to the other, he said, ‘This is my beloved. Hear Him.’”

Jesus Christ spoke. He told the fourteen-year-old he must not join any of the churches. The truth had fallen from the earth after the apostles were murdered following Christ’s crucifixion. The history of the world since then, the discovery of the New World, the building of a religiously tolerant America, the reformation movements, all of it had been leading to this moment. The boy would restore the fullness of the gospel.

I glanced at her. She stared from the back of the room. She looked utterly peaceful. The room was silent. The whole place was tense.

But I had felt nothing, heard nothing but the sound in my voice, no spiritual testimony, no witness of truth. I wasn’t even positive what I’d said thus far. My mind may have wandered. Had I squandered some chance? Had the Devil successfully distracted me from my purpose with thoughts of my unworthiness? Could it be true? What if the spirit of God had been whispering and I had wandered off into my own guilt and missed it?

I glanced at the clock.

I saw a few members of the audience shuffle. I had been silent too many seconds. I was disjointed, I was a story with confused plot. I was a sinner and the bishop was wrong, he was wrong to have me here. I wasn’t ready for it. I didn’t have the testimony.

No.

Alma 32. The novice. The desire to believe. Let that desire work in you and grow into an experiment upon the word. See the fruits of the experiment: A testimony is found in bearing it.

How much desire I had.

How strongly I wanted to believe. Oh, God, how I wanted to believe. And He knows it—it hit me in a second and ran up my spine like a spark—God must know I want to believe. Of course he does. He wouldn't abandon me here.

He knows me better than I know myself.

“Now,” I said to the watching eyes, perhaps to their relief after my silence, “I'd like to bear my testimony of these things. I want to tell you what I know.”

The fear in my body didn't match that word: know. I didn't know the things I would say I know. What I did know, if I knew a thing in the world, was that God would confirm it to me when I said it. I knew that. That's the only thing.

“I know Jesus Christ and our Heavenly Father appeared to Joseph Smith in the sacred grove.”

I knew it would come.

“And that God sent his Son to suffer for my sins in the Garden of Gesthemane.”

She put her hand in her chin and her hair fell across her face.

“And I know He died for me on the cross.”

My throat was tightening.

“That He was resurrected three days later, that—”

My tongue was caught. I looked down.



A wrinkled paper, wood lines on the pulpit, the sound of air conditioner. Someone coughed. I tried to breath.

It was like Joseph described. How the Devil strangled him.

“I know,” I said, louder, forcing the words, “that Joseph Smith restored the Living Gospel.” Every syllable was a battle. Every line my neck felt choked. “I know,” I breathed, “that he translated the *Book of Mormon*. And that it is the most true book on earth.”

The constriction was growing worse. I could feel myself losing control. There was no hope. I could not break through. There was no light. No beauty. No glow in my body, no joy. I felt cold, empty. There it was, that desire he had spoken of—to give up, to die. Oh, to die at that moment, when it all felt so empty, it sounded like the best thing.

I stood in silence. I flipped the notes over.

The lines I’d written stared back at me. The things I wanted to know.

*I need this, God.*

*How I need this.*

*This is the only thing I need.*

I opened my mouth and I read. “I know God lives. I know he loves me.”

I read from the page. “I know this because I’ve felt it, because he’s confirmed those things to me.”

Not a doubt. Not a single doubt. Please, God, please.

“And I say these things in the name of Jesus Christ—”

“Amen.”

A Chorus returned from the audience: “Amen.”

I walked to my seat on the stand and sat. I stared at a single point on the light brown carpet for twenty-five minutes. The meeting ended.

“Kirt.”

There was a person speaking to me. He stood in front of me. He patted me on the shoulder. He said wonderful. He said, “really, wonderful.” He said it was no surprise.

There was Payson punching me in the arm. He said some things. I was going to throw up. I had lied to them all. My knee bent the wrong way and I almost fell but reached and found a bench back. If anyone saw they did not make it known. There were faces moving past.

“Kirt.”

It was Amy. She stood with her arms folded. I looked at her face and then at her body. She was a beautiful alien. The background spun slightly.

“Kirt,” she said, and reached for both my hands. She put her arms on my back and she pulled. I smelled berries in her hair. It was her hair. It was her shampoo, where the berries came from.

“I felt,” she shook her head. “I feel like I understand you better. When you talked.” She put her arms around me again and she said, “I am sorry, I am.”

She didn’t smell like winterfresh but cinnamon.

“Kirt?” she said. “Are you okay?” Her arms wrapped across her chest. Her blue eyes peered at me. Behind her a crowd of people were talking. One man had a mess of hair on the top of his head that he didn’t know he had, and no one had told him. Who was the older man and why was he in the single’s ward? He was the other man who spoke. He

was the high councilman. What had his name been? Past him there was a boy with his tie loosened. A red tie.

Her hands touched me.

“I don’t understand it all, but I know you believe it, Kirt. I get that much. I know you really believe it.”

I could feel my tongue swollen in my mouth. I looked at her breasts. I glanced at her forehead.

“Are you ok,” she said, suddenly very deliberate.

I looked at her face. I looked at the freckle off her jaw. She pulled on my hands. None of it mattered. The tingling in my shoulders. The numbness in my toes. The soreness in my heels from walking yesterday. The ugly chandeliers. The pictures of the prophets. I looked at her eyes and could tell she wanted something from me.

“I need to go home,” I said. I walked past her and to the door, walked to my car, and drove away.

## CHAPTER 24

The bankers do not come. They send hired hands, another level of remove from the ones who sold the house, who bought the debt, who bundled it, who traded it.

They tear the house apart—or that which hasn't been torn. This one is full of her things. She left them all. She carved a note into the door: Fuck you.

She left the refrigerator open for a week, a rotting stink. She dumped milk across the kitchen tile. It's swarming with ants and flies. Roaches twiddle their antennae, gorged in the refrigerator.

Three men swear in Spanish and pull the piles of shit into the yard, lift the couch out, hoist the box-springs down the stairs, scratching the wall the whole way.

One stuffs a closet of left-behind clothes into a plastic bag. He empties the dresser. He doesn't even joke to himself or the others about the ugly bras. He doesn't look at the tags and call out her breast size. He stuffs everything in quickly. He pulls pictures down and shoves them into a spare cardboard box, stomps them with his steel-toed boots, breaks the glass. He throws a lamp in, dumps the bedside nightstand drawers and their condoms and old lingerie into the box. The mattress against the wall is slid down the stairs, the broken electric piano thrown one corner first into the grass. The rug in the living room is rolled up, a bug bomb set in the Cloroxed kitchen, the fridge hoisted into the back of their truck.

Inside, the bug bomb slowly spreads a chemical cloud that sends the cautious insects back. They back and back and turn and run into the walls, slip over each other's bodies, burrow into the insulation and scratch at the chalky drywall. This one dies, legs twitching. That one finds the crack into the foundation and shoves its head into the dirt.

Those ones squeeze along the electrical wires and out under the yard and will never think of the house again. They tunnel beneath the electric keyboard and the picture frames.

A salesman walks past and sees a stray pen on her sidewalk, feet away from the rest of the things. He pockets it and knocks on the neighbor's door.

A larger truck pulls to the lawn days later and throws the rain-rotted shit into a compactor, bag by bag, box by box. Then the bed. Then the couch. The cushions. Good enough. That's fine, let the papers blow away.

## CHAPTER 25

It's our mid-summer promotion, J.J. said.

"Zero dollars for two months!" he cheered from the front of the room.

"We get paid on that?" Payson said.

"Absolutely," J.J. said. "Zero for two months, forty-five a month for twelve months afterward. A five hundred and forty dollar contract." He grinned and his eyes sparkled. "Obviously it's only possible on an auto debit."

An hour later I was stuck to the couch. Payson looked at me like I was crazy. "We can go make a killing this way. We can switch all those accounts from the other guys. Zero dollars."

"I can't do it," I said.

"Whatever Kirtland," he said, "I'm leaving." David and Taylor had been gone an hour.

I wandered through the steaming late June afternoon to the office. J.J. seemed hardly surprised when he saw me.

"I think I need to get out of here," I said, sitting on the carpet against the wall in his office. "Maybe I should get a flight and take off the first of July."

He breathed through his nose.

"You could do that, but then I can't pay your rent bonus for you, and as you know, you'd lose your backend pay. So," he counted on his fingers, monthly rent. "You'd get stuck about \$1,300, and you wouldn't have any more cash coming your way." He looked concerned. These facts had nothing to do with him or me; these were laws of nature he was describing. I stared at the wall.

“We could use another tech,” he said.

“To spray?”

“One of Premium’s techs, uh, he quit. I could train you to tech. That way, as I see it, I’d be able to keep your rent bonus for you and still send your backend checks. You’d be honoring your work contract.”

The air in the office was hot. I wanted to be on a plane. But I’d be leaving the state after all this work with nothing but debt. I’d go home to my parents with thirteen hundred owed and a year to wait for my mission because of sin.

“And,” he said, “you could sell while you’re at it. Take a technician truck around, you’d tear it up just knocking on doors and treating them right then. Knock with the backpack sprayer on. And sell them for nothing for two months.”

I didn’t have a choice. There was some comfort in the steadiness of the work. That I wouldn’t have to rely on selling someone. That I could just show up and spray.

“When can you train me?” I said.

“I can train you now. We’ll drive over to Premium’s headquarters in Tampa and get the truck. I’d suggested this to them,” he said, “Weeks ago. For Kelly actually. I told them I could get them a tech. They called Saturday and said okay but I told them he was gone.”

So we went.

On the drive he said, “Kirt, I’ve got to say, you’re a powerful speaker. Everything pest control–related aside, I want you to know, you’re going to be an amazing missionary. You were, what do they say, a live wire up there. We could see it, everyone

could see it. I've seen a lot of guys and I've worked with a lot and I've never heard a testimony like that out of a kid pre-mission. Just," he stopped. "Just really felt it."

He looked at me and I felt myself smile. How I gave up my feelings so quickly when someone wanted me to. I couldn't bear the thought of ever lying again, but here I was smiling, like I'd been complimented.

Premium's headquarters was a tiny building in an industrial part of Tampa. The white Premium pickup trucks—there were two sitting there—glistened in the sun. The secretary was on the phone when we came in. She was a middle-aged woman I'd never met and never spoken to. "Don't mention the zero dollar deal we are doing," J.J. whispered to me.

On the walls were maps of the surrounding counties, counties we had never sold in. Hillsborough and another two were blacked out—apparently because they were contracting only through J.J. for those. I wasn't quite sure. The woman finished her call and held up a set of keys. "Poisons," she said, holding one key, "in the garage next-door." She held the other key. "Truck."

J.J. went with me in the truck.

"I'll drive with you, and we'll go service a house right now. I'll train you as I'm treating."

When we got there he told me to sit tight for a minute, tore the top sheet off the paperwork, walked to the door, and knocked. I picked up the clipboard and looked at the office's carbon copy. It noted the customer needed to pay forty-five today. It said the contract value was six hundred and thirty. It said: "Contract cost: \$693." I flipped through the other carbon copies and found contract costs on every one, though the metric wasn't



listed on the top sheet the customer sees. There was a second, already serviced home with a contract value of \$490 and a Contract Cost of \$539. When J.J. came back I asked him what contract cost was.

He brushed his hand through the air. “That’s their deal,” he said. “Premium keeps track of all sorts of things for their records.”

But that wasn’t an answer.

“So what it is?”

“I’m not exactly sure,” he said.

I realized what that might mean. He wasn’t exactly sure what the contract cost was for this house. He wasn’t exactly sure what I meant by “it.” He was sure, but not *exactly* sure. “Do you know,” I said casually, as if I’d misunderstood that he’d answered, “what ‘Contract Cost’ means?”

He unscrewed a bottle of an industrial grade pesticide and measured some into the attached reciprocal. “Oh—what it actually means?”

So I’d force him to it. The creep. I said yes, what it actually means.

He pursed his lips and shook his head like it wasn’t anything. “It’s like, what they buy and sell them for. It’s their deal. It’s basically the value plus an administrative fee. I don’t exactly know. See what I’m doing here? This particular bottle is a little funky. Watch closely.” He explained what the product was for and how to mix it with water from the customer’s house-side faucet. But I’d gotten my answer. I’d forced him to it. I’d forced him to tell me the truth, as difficult as it was to dig for it, and even if I wasn’t exactly sure what he meant. I think J.J. was selling the contracts to Premium for that amount. He was selling them for more than a yearly value. He was selling them for—I

thought for a second—the yearly value plus fifty bucks. No, forty-nine. Ten percent. Sixty-three bucks on the six-thirty value. *Of course*—when the contract ended it automatically renewed month-to-month, so the whole bundle of contracts we sold over the summer would be worth a lot to Premium over the next several years. Why had he been so hesitant to tell me that?

“Now, this product is technically only for outside,” he said of a bottle. “But we used to use it inside in Texas, and we started using it a few weeks ago here, and it works much better.”

“Termikill,” I read. “What David was talking about.”

He acted dumb.

“The regulated one,” I said.

“Oh, oh, oh. Right. Did David talk about it? Well, we looked into it and discovered it was basically not much more than a patent dispute making it outside only. Still, technically, you won’t want to tell people you’re treating with it inside.”

He poured the product into the backpack sprayer. It was milky and thick. He screwed the pressure keeping lid back on. He seemed careful not to get it on his hands. He poured the product into a second canister, a small golden handheld one. We walked to the hose and filled both canisters with water, then he screwed the lids on tight and shook each one. “The backpack leaks a little,” he said. Then holding the golden one up: “If you don’t want to use the same stuff inside you don’t have to. Just remember that initial services pay you \$20, bimonthlies you get \$12, but for re-treatments when the customer is still seeing bugs, we can’t pay, of course, because we don’t get paid for those.” He was nodding and I felt myself begin to nod with him. I stopped.

“So,” he said, “using it might increase your efficiency. It’s up to you. Obviously, I’m the boss, so,” he laughed and put his fingers in the air for quote marks: “Don’t use it.” He grinned.

First he sprayed the Termikill all over outside with the backpack sprayer, and then he picked up a smaller golden pump-canister. “People do like to see a different applicator for inside versus out,” he whispered. I followed him in and he sprayed the corners of the rooms gently when the homeowners were in the room. It was like he had eyes in the back of his head. They’d step out of the room and he’d douse under the rugs, behind the furniture, everywhere he could. They’d step back in and he’d be dusting the corners as if with light perfume, and he’d joke and chat with them, his teeth bucking out. I watched it evaporate quickly. It wasn’t the liquid, it was the residual that attached to the bugs’ exoskeletons and caused their insides to spill out. It looked like nothing.

He dove under the sinks and left beads of gel squeezed from little syringes. He showed me how to do it. “Just a tiny bit of this is plenty.” It was all very simple. We left in half an hour.

He told me to take him back to his car. It was only about four. “Let’s head back, and I’ll get you a full route for tomorrow morning. The bad thing about technicianing is that unlike salesmen, techs start at eight.” We drove home, he in his car and I in the truck, its kinked stick shift jabbing me in the thigh. We drove right past the road I’d turn into to see Amy. If I was going to see her. Which I wasn’t.

That night I prayed only gratitude. I didn’t dare to ask anything. My mind was so mixed up I didn’t know who I’d be asking. I thanked God for everything and I said amen.

I tried to read the scriptures but the words frightened me, the promises in them scared the hell out of me. What kind of person would God not keep a promise to?

I apologized to God for thinking he hadn't kept a promise.

I rose to an early alarm on my phone. My stomach was anxious like it was hungry, anxious for the day of new work, anxious to make money I badly needed.

I rolled to a stop at the first of five appointments.

The amount this customer owed today: zero, according to the paperwork. Auto-debit on a Visa, the contract read. Value: \$630. Cost: \$693. Why all these contracts valued at six-thirty? Who was selling contracts for one-hundred and forty more than I'd been selling and how? That was another twenty bucks a service. I found Marcy's separate tracking sheet and read the header for information. Rep: Jeffrey. J.J. was selling seven services at ninety bucks a pop. Amazing.

I took the top sheet and walked up to the door. The yard was overgrown. I came around the corner to see the door stuffed with pamphlets, cards, fliers. Taped in the center was an eviction notice. I didn't even knock. The window blinds were cracked and I could see the living room was empty.

I got in the car and started it up and looked at the next address. A half hour drive through morning traffic got me four miles down the highway. I pulled up and to my horror saw a for-sale sign at the home.

Still. Maybe the owner would be happy to have it treated. Maybe while they were showing it. I approached the door and read the contract after ringing the doorbell. Another \$630. First treatment in April—before I'd even arrived in Florida.

I knocked again. The doorknob had a key holder hung on it. I felt the doorknob and it rolled. The door was open. I shouted a hello and then stepped in. Bare.

Two customers in a row that paid ninety dollars for back-to-back services then moved? I'd had customers who couldn't pay twenty up front.

A sign was taped on the wall, written in black marker on printer paper: "Remember to remove your shoes." On the ground was a pile of information sheets. *This is a home for sale by a bank. See reverse for important information regarding homes for sale by banks.*

"Fuck!" I shouted. It was the first time I ever said it.

"Fucking fuck!"

I drove to a third and a fourth. Both were J.J.'s sales. One was vacant. The second was not. They were home. They asked me not to treat.

I told them I could just treat outside.

"We have really liked the service," a Hispanic woman said. "But we think we want to cancel now."

"It's a contract," I said. I was not feeling diplomatic. "You can cancel but you'll have to pay the cancellation fee."

"Oh, no, no," she said shaking her head. "You are at the wrong house. We did not sign a contract." Her accent was thick. "You are at the wrong house. We did the trial."

"The trial?" I said and laughed. These fucking idiots.

"Yes," she said, "yes." She smiled and nodded. "We didn't do the contract."

She had this look on her face. Like she knew what she was talking about.

"Oh," I said. "Oh."

Oh, wow.

“The trial,” I said.

She nodded.”

“The two month free trial?” I asked. “Zero for two months?”

“Yes,” she said. “It was very good. But we want to cancel now.”

“I’m going to spray the outside,” I said. “And I’ll give you this paperwork and you can call the office to sort it out. It says here you don’t have to pay me today.”

In fact, they’d agreed to an auto-debit. We had their Visa. She was going to be paying forty-five a month, starting now. But she got the early-season promotion. J.J.’s zero-up-front contract value, the pricing he suggested the day before, was forty-five a month for twelve months—or five hundred and forty. The woman in front of me was on a \$630 contract. Ninety bucks off. Forty-five a month. She had been paying and didn’t know it?

“Okay,” she said and shrugged. “Whatever you want to do. Okay. Have a good day.” She closed the door.

I called J.J.. “Listen. This woman says she didn’t sign a contract. She says she did a two-month free trial.” I let the word hang there for him with an edge.

J.J. laughed. “Which customer?”

I gave him the name.

“We’ve got all her information. She definitely signed. These ones are easy because she’s on an auto-debit. Just treat outside.”

“Is that Visa going to run? She thinks she’s paid nothing.”

“It should. If not, there’s always collections. Look. They signed a contract. She might be crazy, because her account has been paid for the past two months with no problems. And as long as they get treated through the end of August, we get paid, and the rep, whoever sold it, he gets paid.”

“You sold it.”

“Oh did I? Well,” he chuckled. “I want to get paid.” He laughed. “Listen. Our responsibility is to get them treated and billed through the end of August. If we don’t, it’s on our shoulders and Premium charges us back for a cancel. We have to get these folks their July treatment today so we can run the card for July and August. I mean, we have a contract with them as much as they do with us, if you think about it. If you don’t treat, we’re reneging. We’re contracted to treat them this month. It’s on us to uphold the deal we made with her on our end.”

“If I sold a contract for zero upfront for two months,” I said to him, “and they wouldn’t pay anything till September, how in the heck am I going to get paid? I could sell this whole neighborhood for free but if they all cancel in September—”

“Sure, a certain number will cancel,” J.J. said. “We’ve worked it out so that we’ll get paid on those zero-up-front services. You’re golden. Sell away.”

“J.J., those contracts are shit.”

“Woah!” he said. Then silence. “Never heard you swear before, Kirtland, that was kind of a surprise—”

“They’re bullshit. The first two houses today, your sales, they aren’t even living there anymore.”

“Did you treat?”

“The houses were empty.”

“Did you treat? They were both on an auto-debit. Listen Kirt. You’re really overthinking this. The technician’s job, it’s not difficult. You gotta get your twelve bucks a house. You treat when it says treat. If they need to pay before getting treated, it will say so. If they are on an auto-debit, it doesn’t matter if they’re not home right then—”

“No, they weren’t not home. They were gone. The houses were empty.”

“Premium doesn’t care. They can still charge the card as long as you spray outside. It’s on the contract. And we can’t care, Kirt, because we get paid on anything that’s current through August. Listen, Kirt. This is the problem, I can see now, with having salesmen to tech. This is probably why they didn’t want Kelly to do it. These jobs don’t overlap well. You gotta stop over-thinking this and just do what a technician does. Otherwise you’ll make exactly what you’ve made today. Nothing. I can’t keep you out here living rent-free if you aren’t doing work.”

I chuckled.

“What?”

“Nothing. I’ll treat.”

“Call me if you have any other questions.”

I treated the outside and left the invoice marked PAID \$45.

J.J. was paying the first ninety bucks. Premium thought it was the customer. He was paying it out of pocket, maybe in cash, to Premium. They were buying the contract from J.J. for the customer’s future \$540 and J.J.’s out-of-pocket \$90—plus ten percent or whatever they overpaid in anticipation of future business. Customer’s \$540, J.J.’s \$90: \$630.



J.J. was paying ninety dollars to get six, seven hundred bucks. I was sure of it.

I turned on the radio in the truck. My body ached and I smelled of chemical. The sun was getting hotter and hotter, and with the heavy pack it had become unbearable—now my shoulders were sweat-soaked and bruised. I dreaded putting the backpack on again. The station was set to talk radio and I looked at the paperwork for the next house.

The name on the contract was Mike Nelson. 1151 Orange Blossom. Lakeland.

Mike.

Note on contract: “No More Reschedules!”

I rolled into his neighborhood and down the street. Occasional for-sale signs had been staked into homes where I didn’t remember them. On my left, a yard overgrew its sidewalk, a clear HOA violation. The door was stuffed full of cards and fliers and a couple doors I passed were taped with eviction notices. Ahead I saw Mike’ yellow SUV. Across from there I could see mounds of trash where his neighbor’s yard should be. I approached slowly, the radio playing...

*...and Lehman continues to assure us otherwise, which, if you ask me...*

I rolled to a stop in front of Mike’s place. His garage door was open. Across the way was Bryan’s home, looking as it had. Next door to him the yard was littered with furniture, a gold thread torn couch. A lily print mattress with a single stain on it angled over what looked to be a pile of kitchen chairs. Black plastic bag after black plastic bag, some of them spilling open to reveal clothing, books, wedding china. A wall clock tilted up against a pile of dead houseplants.

What was that woman’s name?

She'd been married to one of me. A salesman. Mother fucker.

The window shades were torn off and the inside of the house was bare. Nothing. A hole in the wall. The upstairs windows been shattered. One remained intact with a spider web crack from the left side over. The garage was wide open and empty. Anything that had been on the walls was piled on the grass.

I stepped out onto the rubber melting asphalt. I poured more Termikill into the pump canister, then did it again for the backpack, then strapped the belt on with all its heavy tools. I walked to a hose hanging off Mike's house, filled the canisters, tightened the lids. I took the canister in one hand and my work orders in another and I rang the doorbell.

Let it be his wife. Let it be a babysitter. I didn't want to be recognized.

Mike answered the door.

"Oh," he said.

I don't think he recognized me just then.

"Didn't we call and reschedule this?"

I flipped through the paperwork. It showed we'd serviced him in May after I sold him, but his June follow up had been rescheduled now three times, all the way into July. "I don't think so," I said. "It says that you rescheduled twice last week, but you're definitely on for today."

Mike wore a black shirt with a Nascar flag on it. One of his boys crowded his legs suddenly and he pushed him back with his foot, still holding onto the door as if to ward against me. "You know," he said, "the service has been just okay, we've still been seeing quite a few of the bugs and all—it hasn't been bad, just, you know, right now, with the

way things are with the economy and all, I think we probably need to hold off for a little while.”

I’d made \$12 today. It was after noon.

“Listen,” I said. “No problem. I’ll just treat the outside, and you can deal with the particulars with the office. Just while I’m out here already, I’ll get the outside. The reason you are still seeing bugs is because you haven’t been treated even more than once,” I looked back at the paperwork, “And not since the middle of May. That’s like seven weeks ago.”

“The truth is we’ve just been seeing them the whole time, even right after you treated,” he said, a pained look on his face.

“They are living creatures, constantly laying eggs. You have to do the Seven Service Flush Out to get a hold of them. It’s really the only way. You have to break up the life cycle.”

“Please,” he said, “just—”

I looked away from him and set the canister down as I said, “Let me call the office and see if we can work it out.” I needed the money. I was running out. The canister made a metal plunk sound on the ground. “Let me call them,” I said, pulling out my cell phone.

Mike’s kid continued to try to sneak out. “I’m going to shut this. Why don’t you knock when you figure it out. Okay?” He smiled and shut the door.

J.J. answered the phone.

I told him I was at Mike Nelson’s in Lakeland and he didn’t want to be treated. I asked him what to do.

“So,” he said, clearing his throat. “So right now, again, you’re looking at about \$12 earned today.”

“I know,” I said. “So frustrating.”

“Kirt. Obviously you have to treat the guy on the outside, and we’ll bill. He signed a contract. It’s twelve-thirty in the afternoon. You’re in ninety-six degree weather at ninety-five percent humidity. You’ve made \$12.”

“This is just a tough one,” I said. “Remember how hard of a sale it was?”

J.J. mumbled something, then, “Who is the customer again?”

“Nelson,” I said. “Mike Nelson. On Orange Blossom. You know, the LDS family from Ohio.”

J.J. sat in silence. “That old man whose wife died?”

“What? No. We worked it together. Remember?”

“Yeah, yeah, I remember.” I heard the sound of typing in the background. I heard J.J. cover the phone and say something to Marcy.

When I heard him come back I said, “The one with the three little boys, and the wife and all.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure. Did you sell them or me?”

“You did.”

“Yeah, yeah. Listen. You’re a tech. Spray.”

“I think he’s out of a job and all. I don’t think he has any money.”

“Listen Kirt,” he said. His voice was so calm, like he could go on with me all day without losing his cool. “These people will make you feel all sorts of things if you let them. Do you want to be manipulated by some guy you’ll never see again in your life?”

Do you want to stake your fortune or lack of it here on this man neither of us even know? I know I don't need to tell you this again: I can't keep you out here on my rent money if you service one house and make \$12 a day. I'm trying my best to help you this summer, but I can't do magic and make money appear to pay you for not working."

I looked at Mike's porch. Ants crawled across the welcome mat and hornets hung in the overhangs. He needed it. Those kids, the fire ants. He could really use it.

I hung up, put my phone in my pocket, and leaned toward the door to knock loudly. I picked up the pump canister and pumped it several times, then pumped the one on my back and heard it wheeze. I tightened the ever-loosening technician belt. I took off my glasses and wiped sweat from my forehead on my short sleeve. I rubbed my lenses on my shirt, smudged them worse, and put them back on in resignation.

The house was as still as the neighborhood.

I rang the doorbell and heard it chime.

I counted to thirty.

I stepped off the porch and looked toward the garage.

He'd closed it while I was on the phone.

Mother Fucker.

I unhooked the pack nozzle and jumped into the woodchips around the bushes and I sprayed. I fanned the poison back and forth across the ground, soaking every inch. I pumped the lever as hard as I could to keep the pressure up. I gritted my teeth. I pulled at the bushes to make way for the stream and hit the cement lift of their porch till it flooded the flowerbed. Spiders jumped inches into the air and ran up the wall, their legs shaking, till they fell over backwards and then burrowed into the flooding ground mindlessly. Ants

froze and rolled into balls. A nest of crickets fumbled out from under the chips and hobbled into the branches of the bush. I pumped the lever and I sprayed them down until they floated off. I saw large an ant running across the cement and I sprayed it and only it until it stopped moving.

I took to the porch, coating the cement with the poison, soaking the corners where the cheap yellow stucco rose toward the windows. I sealed off the windowsills with the invisible stuff. I pulled from my belt the bee spray and shot down ten hornets, two at a time, watched them drop and sprayed them again until they sat in the liquid moving their antennae side to side as if drunk and curious about dying. I knocked every one of them down leaving the white, bubbling larvae only, then I soaked the ugly nest with my pump sprayer, and it rained down on me. I ducked under my hat's brim and kept spraying. I relished the loud tin noise of soaking the garage door; I hit the motion sensor lights in the corner and watched their webs of spiders panic. One dropped all the way to the ground. I found fire ants and flooded their mounds until their bodies floated off.

In the backyard was a cement patio with the toys—big wheels, a tractor, a soccer ball. I sprayed everything. I was the technician and I sprayed. I waved the nozzle back and forth at the foundation, eight feet, ten feet out, four feet, five feet up, and the wolf spiders jumped up the walls, froze there, contemplating a move, until one by one, they simply fell. No protest. No great drama. Just death.

When I'd finished with the sprayer I grabbed the microencapsulated granules and I walked the perimeter of the house spreading them like a fertilizer machine. I blanketed the woodchips with them. I chucked them out over the driveway and all its cracks—a brand new driveway, cracking with the sinking land beneath it.

I regretted that it had only taken twenty minutes, that I couldn't find some other thing to do on the exterior. I opened the lockbox in the back of the truck and found more pellets, poison for rats, roaches, ants, something or other. They were bluish and looked wonderful against the house atop the glistening liquid spray. I emptied the box before I made it around the whole house. I tore off the invoice, scribbled that collections would be called if it happened that their card was declined, and I stuffed it into the doorframe.

In the car I could smell the chemical on me. I could feel the dust from the granules on my hands. My eyes itched and I knew not to touch them. My face dripped in sweat and I stretched my polo up to wipe it. I rolled the windows down and I imagined the sweat dripping past my eyes and what it carried. My face felt frozen in a scrunched sneer, as if to ward off sunlight and keep the sweat flowing wide around my eyes. I kept the window down for air.

There was a single last house on the route. It was twenty minutes away, not one of J.J.'s sales, as the contract value was 490, the normal amount. I found the name: Gray—it was Payson's. I searched the instructions briefly for anything to be concerned about. And when I pulled up to the well-manicured house, it was clear that there had been no foreclosing.

Even the name, Casey Jones, indicated this could run rather smoothly. What a relief.

I gathered my things and rang the doorbell. A woman answered.

"Hey there," I said. "Just the bug guy. Here to get the service done."

She bit her lip. "I'm pretty sure we cancelled the service."

“I don’t think so. It says here you paid as recently as last month, and that you’re on board for today.”

“Yeah, we paid. We were on the year-long contract. But we cancelled it. We talked to a man named Jeffrey, if you need to know, and he cancelled it for us.”

I let out a long breath. “Listen. I’ll just treat and you can work it out with Jeffrey. If it’s money or whatever, I think we can work with you on that. Jeffrey told me to come here and treat today.”

Her face strained into a half smile. “Of course he did. Of course he told you that.” She looked at the ground and then back at me. “Please don’t—” she looked like she didn’t know what to say— “spray anything.” And then she shut the door.

I walked to my truck and leaned against it. The heat was too much, even on the white paint, so I sat on the curb. I called J.J.. I told him where I was, what had happened. I wanted to cry from this. He told me the couple had some trouble with the previous technician.

“She obviously misunderstood. I can’t cancel the contract it any more than she can. I told her I took care of everything and I did. We fired that other tech.”

“You fired him?”

“We let him go. You know, the guy you replaced. We let him go a few weeks ago. Look, Kirt, this stuff happens all the time. It’s a constant battle to keep customers happy. Some of them are impossible.”

I wanted to know why the man was fired and I asked.



“He, according to the couple, according to husband, he was unprofessional and treating poorly. I talked to Premium about it and they said it wasn’t the first time. So they let him go.”

“What.” I said. “I want to know what he did.”

“He over-treated. Or at least they felt he had. You have to understand, besides you, most technicians are the sort of guys you’d expect to be spraying poison. They’re dumb as a box of rocks. This guy was spraying the crap out these houses, inside, outside, everywhere, apparently. It was a little bit of speed-bump this summer, and we took right care of it. We just let him go. This couple, honestly, I thought we worked things out. In fact, you said you talked to the wife only? She probably heard it wrong from her husband. He knows we are coming. He’s the one I talked to anyway if I recall correctly.”

I hung up the phone and I stretched my arms in the sun. It must have been psychological but the smell of the pesticide made my lungs feel contracted and my muscles ache. I seemed to notice more itching on my face because I didn’t want to touch it with those hands. I wanted to wash off, to run away. I wanted to knock on Amy’s door and have her pull me in and feel her body against mine, fall into a bed somewhere. I didn’t even have the energy to feel sorry for wanting it. I wanted to feel her against me, all of her, warm, sweet-smelling, blue-eyed and soft.

I thought of knocking on the door again. I rose from the cement and hiked toward a water spigot. I filled up my backpack and my canister and pumped them. I began pacing around the edge of the house, fanning the poison in a band that sent the spiders jumping up the tan stucco. I got to the backyard, which bordered a manmade lake around which the entire neighborhood had been planned. As I rounded the corner the man, Casey, the

husband must have seen me and come out from the back sliding door. My eyes were on the ground, on the dying bugs, but I looked up and he was standing there on his patio with his hands in his pockets, smiling in scrubs. He held up one hand as if waving at me, then sauntered toward me. He was young. He looked enormously friendly. A kind person. I stopped spraying. He stopped walking. I was scared.

“Hey,” he said. “Come inside and grab a drink.”

I felt a moment of hesitation. I froze.

He laughed. “Seriously,” he said. “It’s ok. Come inside, chill out for a minute.”

He turned halfway toward his door and waved me toward him. “Leave that shit out here.”

I swung the pack off.

What was the worst that could happen?

What. Was he going to kill me?

By the time I got to the sliding glass door he was pulling a bottle out of the fridge. I stepped in, removed my shoes, shut the glass door and felt the cold air shock my body. I looked to see him pouring white wine into glasses.

“You know, I actually don’t drink,” I said. “Not old enough.”

He looked at me, nodded, set one of the glasses back on the other counter and pulled open the fridge.

“Coke?” He said.

“Yes.”

He carried it to the glass kitchen table and set it there, than sat down in an adjacent chair, crossed his ankle over his leg, and looked out the window. “Fucking hot day. Gorgeous hot day.”

“Hot, mostly,” I said. “More so than gorgeous.”

We sat there in silence.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “My boss said I’m supposed to treat you. I just called him. He said you know I’m coming.”

He nodded. “Where are you from?”

I sucked down some Coke. “Utah.”

“You just move here?”

“Just for the summer for this job. I’m leaving in two weeks.”

“You come down here to spray this shit?”

“No. I came down, me and a friend of mine, and a few others, we came to sell it. I started spraying yesterday. Because I stopped being able to sell.”

He nodded and sipped his glass. He moved it around in his mouth slow.

“The guy who sold it to us. He seemed nice.”

“Yeah. Payson. He is.”

“He a salesman or like the manager or what?”

I told him he was just like me. Just came down. “The owner is Jeffrey. Or, I don’t know, he, he manages the sales guys. Jeffrey doesn’t work for the actual company. He just sells them the contracts.”

The man grinned. “What, so he sells *them* the contracts.” He tilted his head to the side. “Right. He gets new contracts and sells them up to them? I get it.” He sipped his wine, put his leg down so both feet were on the ground, and he looked at me. “What’s your name?”

“Kirtland.”

“I’m Casey.”

“I saw on the paperwork.”

“Right. So you just sell their contracts. And for two days you’ve been spraying their poison.”

I nodded.

“You don’t really have anything to do with the company. You don’t know, like, what happened here this month.”

“I never heard of you till ten minutes ago when I looked at the paperwork. J.J. told me the guy got fired because he treated poorly. Maybe I should go.”

“And the paperwork,” he said, “it says nothing about our dog, or anything.”

“No,” I said. “I don’t think there usually is a note about dogs.”

“Well, this was something different, which is why I wondered if it might be in there. The guy last time, same sort of kid as you, well, he sprayed the first time. And then they sent another guy a second time, I guess because we were still seeing bugs. Well,” he put his hands in the air as if holding some ball in front of his chest, and he shook his hands slightly, “see, I’m putting everything together now. Both of them were guys like you.” He shrugged. “It was a dog, not a kid or something. But when this second guy—after he sprayed again—it killed it.” Casey took a sip of wine. “He sprayed and then right when he left we found the dog on the patio in seizures. Run him to the vet but he was long gone. My wife’s dog, mostly. You met her at the front door.”

I wanted to puke. The smell of chemical on my face and hands was making me ill. I opened my mouth and then closed it without saying anything. I tried not to lick my lips and feared suddenly I would be overcome with an instinct to do so.

Casey shrugged. “This has nothing to do with you.”

I looked out the window.

“It’s not even this company,” he said. “It’s us for telling them to spray. For paying someone to poison everything. Right?”

I shook my head slowly.

“You don’t think so?” he said, and laughed. “You don’t think that when someone tells you to come spray their home with poison they’re getting what they ask for when it kills things?”

“J.J. knows about this,” I said.

“Who?”

“Jeffrey.”

“Yeah, he sure does. He knows.”

I heard the refrigerator begin to hum.

“Listen,” he said. “I just can’t have you spraying today.”

I shook my head. “No way. I’m fucking done. I’m out of here.”

He put his hands out. “Honest to God, chill out for a minute. Drink that drink. It’s got to be hot as hell working in this. You’re what, twenty?”

“Eighteen.”

“God.”

I looked out the window. “I’m getting out of *here*—the whole place. Florida.”

Casey drank his wine and then nodded. My Coke can was cold and sweating.

“It doesn’t have anything to do with you,” Casey said.

“Yeah,” I said. “I need to go.” I stood up.

“Take that Coke,” he said, pointing at it.

I shook my head. “Thanks. I’m sorry. I sprayed that side of your house. I’m sorry.”

He stuck his hand out. “It was good to meet you.”

“You too,” I said, and didn’t put my hand out. “There’s dust from these poison pellets and there’s this other poison all over me, all over my hand.”

I pulled on my shoes and almost fell over, and I opened the door and stepped out and slid it shut behind me. I turned and lifted my hand briefly at him and then marched to the backpack, which lay on the ground. It had tipped into the grass and had leaked through the lid that got knocked loose when it tipped. I picked it up. The shoulder straps were soaked in Termikill. I grabbed one strap and carried it and in the other hand picked up the pump. I fumbled to carry the clipboard. It fell to the ground.

I looked at the homes around the lake, how they circled it. They were like board game pieces, all lined up and the same. Alternating colors. Pink, brown, white, yellow. How many were empty?

I picked up the clipboard and ran toward the lake, and I hurled it like a disc. The invoices whipped in the wind and tore off and floated down. The whole thing landed with a slap on the water and floated out there. I grabbed the strap of the spray tank and saw Casey watching from the sliding glass door. He put his hand up to wave briefly and then turned around and disappeared.

I circled the house past the off-color shadow of where I’d sprayed the foundation. I threw the tanks into the back of the pickup and they crashed into it. The lid from the backpack cracked and I watched it empty out into the bed and drain out the back and into

the street gutter where a thousand ants were drowned. I breathed deep, my lungs tight, and I rested my forearms on the scalding metal. Then I pulled open the door, sat in the cab, slammed it shut.

In that oven I reached forward to turn the key. But my arm dropped. Down the street was another pile of rubble on someone's lawn, everything rooted and torn out and left their for everyone to see. And then another. Homes emptied and stripped. Next to Casey's a foreclosure sign on the For Sale post. Across from him an overgrown yard, a mess, grass going to seed, dirt in places, ant mounds sprouting and spreading. Earth piled up in hills, moved grain by grain. I watched a hornet fly by and another and another. I looked at the house, the window corners coated with hives, crawling and pulsing with tapping feet and flitting wings. I couldn't see the tunnels under the ground, the way they led into the walls and along the pipes, the lines of chemical laid out for minds to follow, the millions of flying things in the column of air above. I couldn't see the spiders crouched through the day and waiting to throw themselves across the entryway in the night in a desperate bid for a meal. I couldn't hear those clicking roach feet, no less content than they were two years ago when this was wilderness.

I twisted the key and the AC blasted air hot as hell, and in twenty minutes I was in front of Amy's house, on her porch, knocking on her door. I knocked, and I waited and I rang the doorbell. I knocked. I leaned against the brick. I fell into the pillar. I slid to the cement and it hit me, throttled my neck—I clawed for air and I swam for the surface. It squeezed me, clamped down on my stomach, and a muffled cry came from my throat, a moan, and the pain in my sides spiked as the air did not come back. I curled up.

There could have been cars driving by, there could have been anything. I knew only my collapsing body and the blackness atop me, emptiness, aloneness—the dark world curling in on me. *Please, please.* It was so heavy, it was too much for a human skeleton and skin to bear.

I knew my sides would split and my insides would drip out across the ground, and I would fall to Hell and feel this for eternity, and in the instant before I'd chosen that, when I was about to give up, in the moment before I surrendered—I breathed, I pulled the air into my lungs and I felt it scrape down my throat, and then I breathed again. The smell of poison. Cement on my skin. Her porch. I opened my eyes. And I looked up. But the door had not opened and it never did.

[END]