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Major Professor

Cary Holladay, M.A.

Brad McAdon, Ph.D.

Accepted for the Council:

Karen D. Weddle-West, Ph.D.
Vice Provost for Graduate Programs

MONSTERS AND WEDDING FLOWERS

by

Andrew Narinder Sall

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Major: English

The University of Memphis

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Abstract

Sall, Andrew Narinder. M.F.A. The University of Memphis. August/2010.
Monsters and Wedding Flowers. Major Professor: Thomas Russell, Ph.D.

This narrative comprised of short stories, essays, and sketches, serves as the culmination of my work as a fiction writer in the MFA in the Memphis creative writing program. Although the materials in this text form a single, cohesive plot, each individual portion should stand on its own merits. I have attempted to establish certain themes that resonate throughout the collection and inform the emotional tone of the story.

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Please Don't Believe Any of What You Are About to Read: A Note From the Author

Well, I'm happy to report that I made it back from Breaux Bridge, a city within America that feels like a landmass apart from my United States. I have a few new marks across my face, a little soreness in my ribs, a peppery burning sensation over my tongue that I'm starting to like with the taste of my food, and a notepad of memories that I'll be able to laugh about for the rest of my life as soon as the burning and the soreness have gone.

I have, scribbled across coffee stained pages, a portrait of the figure of Martin Mazerolle, a man who, after completing his long prison sentence, returned to Breaux Bridge, boiled the best crawfish in the world, simmered up the best etoufee in the world, and then went on to perform a few other miracles: he gave a fatally ill woman a few minutes of health so that she could reconcile a lingering family dispute; he made hail fall from a full-blue summer sky because he needed some ice. According to an unreliable witness, lighting struck Martin, who died but then got up again, Of course, Martin wanted only to perfect his blend of Cajun spices and to get on better with his mom. I met the guy, and I'm certain that he never wanted to perform miracles, but the people saw miracles in Breaux Bridge, and when they recited the myths of these miracles at groceries, churches, dinner tables, bars, they included Martin's name. They mixed into the strange legends some of Martin's flesh-and-bone characteristics and created a figure separate from the man. Still, I believe that Martin, the performer of miracles, has a lot in common with Martin, the guy I met who sells boiled crawdads. I don't think he'll ever forgive me for writing this. Sorry, Martin.

Most of the folks I met in Breux Bridge spoke to me in slurred, Creole vowel sounds connected by a stream of lazy consonants. Most of them have so thoroughly perfected the craft of telling a story that they don't even realize they are in fact performing a craft. I have to guess that as children, Breuax Bridgers watch the adults as the adults tell stories: the children watch story tellers become at once actors, narrators, and authors of local plots; they watch as the story tellers take on the voices and the mannerisms of their characters; they see the story tellers pause in anticipation of a climatic event, as if what follows is unknown to the narrator; they see the audience drawn into to the fiction.

And now, I have to make marks across a page to represent these performances. I've written a deeply flawed translation. Yes, I spoke with many Breuax Bridgers, and yes, I made as many notes with as many details as I could. These coffee stained, beer stained, mystery stained pages loom over my desk. I look at them now; I see that these pages and pages of wobbling shorthand are the basis of this text, and I cringe because I see that language is imprecise and that I'm less like Michelangelo handling fine brush and more like slow child fumbling with a wad of Play-Doh.

There were many times when I couldn't understand a damn thing those people were telling me in their damn Creole voices. I often heard different versions of the same story, and, sometimes, these different versions came from the same story teller. Many people would call these differences "contradictions," but such people are too honest to be writers: I call these differences Parts of The Story Open to Interpretation. When I retold the events of the story, I included the parts that seemed to make the most sense, or that sounded the best.

Worse still, even if my sources provided me with reliable accounts, I can't promise you, the reader, that I recorded these accounts without error or omission. I got drunk a few times while I was visiting. I know how bad this must sound, but I wasn't completely out of my mind, and I'll think that after you read my work, you'll see that I was coping with a lot of stress and that I was entitled to relax a little, but drinking never makes anyone *more* reliable. And sometimes, I just forget things.

Language doesn't always explain things too well. Even if I could pretend that the stories I heard provided accurate details, and that the version I wrote was an accurate recording of such stories, these stories live in Breaux Bridge. Unless you've lived enough years in taking in the Creole voices, the food, the dances, the ceremonies, you'll have to recreate the events of the stories using images and faces that are familiar things to you.

So, reader, please don't believe any of what you're about to read. This is just a foreigner's account of a fantastic place in his memory. This is a collection of myths, and I'm a lover of myths. In fact, at the time I was working on this document, I made a living selling myths. I should explain what I mean.

1. About What I Did For a Living: An Apology

Look for *American Phenomenon* the next time you're at the bookstore. Go soon, because I think we'll only be on the shelves for a few more months. It's bigger than most monthly publications--I mean "bigger" in terms of page size--but my family, especially my fiancée, always told me that they have a difficult time finding it on the magazine aisle. So here's the best way to go about searching for *American Phenomenon*:

Start with the news section and move towards the sports and lifestyle. You see, magazine sellers tend to arrange their publications in order of relevance. You'll begin with front page attention grabbers about President Obama's plans for the economy. Then, you'll move towards features about the New England Patriots and How to Six Pack Abs. When you get to the half naked female bodies adorned with tattoos and new strands of sexy Marijuana leaves, you're close. Look down. They usually leave our magazine in a stack next to the green sheet ads and gothic fetish publications.

Most of our staff works out of Houston, Tx, but we have freelance writers who send contributions from all over the country. I've written about UFOs, sasquatches, sea monsters (there are many species other than Nessie) ghosts, the weird chucacabre critter that runs around in Mexico, and even a few vampires.

When I told people about my work, people usually wanted to know if I believe in the monsters that I publicize, and people usually want to hear "yes" or "no". I start with a "no" and quickly interject a But, you see, the thing is... Of course, once most people hear the "no", they'd looked at me as they would look at a used car salesman who puts fresh paint and wax on lemons. Some people have accused me of feeding delusions to vulnerable minds, and ultimately, planting the seeds that will yield more monster stories. Some people have told me that this paranoia-fuelled industry of which I am a part draws people away from reality and sets them in children's fairy tales and that the whole effort of documenting paranormal sightings is a criminal waste of time. When I say "some people," I'm referring mostly to my fiancé. She's makes a strong case, but she's wrong about almost everything.

News journals report the events that shape our civilization. Sports magazines, beauty and fitness mags will show you the modern American version of the Greek Statue of the Nude, Ideal Human Form. Many of these publications contain alcohol ads, reminders that people will seek intoxicating substances, because all the things between the ads can bring about terrible anxiety. However, to understand what motivates people to build and maintain such a civilization, one needs to see what the American citizen's mind creates when left to dream, so one needs to look at the monsters he or she invents.

In six years of paranormal reporting people snicker when I utter that term, so if you're snickering now, please stop and give me a chance to explain. I've seen no proof that any of my subject matter is living, breathing, or flying around in spacecrafts. But I see patterns in these myths. Myths are made of stock images. Even if you haven't seen the Loch Ness monster, you have in your mind a picture that is similar to the image described by some of the people I've interviewed for *American Phenomenon*.

Now that you're thinking about sea monsters, maybe you'll find one when to go to sleep. You'll probably see a dagger toothed, serpentine creature writhing through the water. You probably won't be able to see all of the creature. The water will be dark and bottomless, because you'll be facing an abyss of unknown things that frighten you and confuse you. Have you ever thought about the prospect of living for 60 or 70 years, then wrinkling up and dying?

Have you thought about watching this happen to all the folks you love? Do you believe in God? Are you sure? I mean, really sure? These are the concerns that make up the black, boundless water that your mind shapes into monsters.

Monsters, like real animals, have common habits and traits. Alien creatures from distant galaxies generally appear to people as one or a combination of several species. This is true of sea monsters swimming through boundless waters, and of the bigfoot trampling through the forest. The reason that we see many of the same monsters is that our minds face common anxieties, and when we confront these anxieties, we grasp for the same stock images. The other reason is that bigfoot creatures you see captured on video are guys running around in gorilla suits and gorilla suits all look pretty much the same. Yes, I've put it in print: those bigfoot videos are hoaxes; yes, I mean all of them. Apologies to any of my readers who are sasquatch fans. Please keep sending me your stories. And please, no more gorilla suit videos. I've seen so many of them that they aren't even funny anymore. If you need something to do, ghosts have become rather fashionable recently.

I started following the story of Martin Mazerolle because Martin didn't fit any of the stock images I've described. Stranger still, he was quite accessible. Unlike the lights in the sky that linger only minutes in front of cheap home cameras, Martin was a guy I could actually visit and ask if he could really summon rain or hail storms. You'd think that some writer would have knocked on his door, but I was the first. I'd read the stories I stay on the internet, you see- and I could see that the Myth of Martin was a myth constructed of fears and curiosities separate from those that make up the stock monsters of *American Phenomenon*. When I examined the myth of Martin, I realized that I was examining a culture unknown to me and that this culture was only about a three hour drive away from Houston. I decided that I needed to visit Breaux Bridge. My editor didn't like the idea: Martin couldn't be summarized in catchy, palpable phrase. I

suggested the Weather Man, or the Hail Storm Man, but my editor just said No, and my fiancé didn't say anything at all.

Then, on a Thursday afternoon, I was at the magazine aisle where I met James, one of Martin's best friends. I've no problem writing about this event, because I believe in unlikely meetings and improbable coincidences.

2. I Meet James. He Hates My Magazine.

He has broad shoulders and a squared, Spartan jaw. Hair grows over his arms, his shoulders, up his neck, and through the collar of his shirt. In the morning, he spends just enough time in the mirror to make himself presentable, because, in his mind, to spend an additional second grooming himself would be unmanly. His hair is hastily combed into a benign, Clark Kent shape. He shaves the hair across his face when he wakes, and by noon the shroud has returned. He wouldn't shave a second time because doing so would require more time in front of the mirror.

When he's thinking, that Spartan jaw shifts left and right, his eyes narrow, and he takes on the look of a hunter setting a bead over the heart and lungs of a deer. I saw him reading a copy of *American Phenomenon*. The cover featured a comic bookish portrait of a stock fisherman in with a stock hat cowering in his stock fishing boat as giant anaconda emerged from the stock tropical swamp. Giant anacondas are real, real in the sense that you can see them as the zoo, but particularly giant anaconda, one hundred foot serpents gliding through the boundless waters, are things of myth. This story that I wrote in a few hours was, I believe, a good way to introduce any reader unacquainted with *American Phenomenon* to our publication. The reader can start by entertaining that story that a thirty foot snake was a fifty foot snake and then turn the page to alien space crafts.

I like to see how people respond to my work, so I sat there watching James, shifting Spartan jaw and probing eyes.

-Good to keep up with the really important news, huh? I said.

When I look for feedback, I start by trying to see how the reader feels about myths and monsters. James heard me. I was standing a few feet away from him, and he ignored me. I learned later that he ignores the people and the things that he dislikes. I tried to get another response. Two weeks had passed since I'd seen anyone browsing the pages of our magazine, and I wanted some recognition, positive or otherwise, for my work. Helen, my fiancée, refused to talk about *American Phenomenon* with me. She certainly didn't tell her friends or her mom what I did.

-They also cover ghosts and UFOs, I said. Ghosts are in these days.

And he kept ignoring me.

-What did you think of the cover story? I asked. Part of it seemed kind of thrown together, you know.

He answered without looking to me.

-So you write for this newsletter?

-Oh, well, yeah. I write most of the magazine's cover stories.

-But it's not really a magazine, he answered. It's printed on a different kinda paper. It's like the greensheets.

-Well, no, I answered, smiling. It's not like the greensheets. It's a monthly publication with a staff of writers and editors.

-Like the green sheets, James said, pointing to a stack of them. They put the *American Monster Stories* next to the green sheets.

-See, we're called *American Phenomenon*, I replied. Our magazine, which is located in the magazine section, is about encounters with things people can't explain

-But the green sheets are in the magazine section too, James answered. They put greensheets in the coffee shop, but you wouldn't say that they're made of coffee.

-No, I said, resigned to agree. They aren't made of coffee.

-God, James said, people are stupid.

-I guess they can be.

I laughed and waited for him to start laughing with me, but he just sat there shaking his head with a look on his face like he was fighting back nausea.

-No, you don't understand, he answered. I mean, people are really, really fucking stupid.

-Because they believe the stuff in there? I asked.

-Because they spend time and energy on this.

-But do you ever wonder why so many people, many of whom are respectable folks with respectable jobs and respectable lives, report seeing so many of the same phenomenon? Do you ever wonder what informs ghost stories and UFO sightings?

Yes, I've rehearsed this speech. As soon as I get an offer, I'll be ready for my local TV station interview. I wanted to see James pause and think about the profundity of what I'd just said. My plan was to use the pause to transition to my speech about how man's deepest fears and curiosities engender the monsters you read about in *American Phenomenon*. But James answered too quickly.

-No, he said. I'm not interested in the reasons why people are stupid.

-Why do you call them stupid?

-Because they waste time and energy. Every stupid thing has a price that someone has to pay. That's why we call it "stupid."

-But if you were a writer, wouldn't you take interest in this kind of modern mythology? Don't you think that someone should take the time to document these people's experiences?

-No, he answered. I think that someone should tell them to stop being stupid. They should just pick up the Green Sheets and find something better to do.

I did what most people do when they start to feel uncomfortable: I spat some the tell-me-about-your-work-and-about-yourself chatter. Most people will go through the routine, even if they really don't like you. James grunted a few disinterested responses: He was born in Riversdale, Alabama, a place he described as rural and "Kind of shitty." He was bouncer, a job that he said was "Kind of dumb" at a place in downtown he described as "Kind of alright." He was a college student seeking a degree in Chemistry. I was surprised to hear this. I grew a little more interested in what he had to say. He went back to ignoring me, but, after a few more questions, he mentioned that he'd lived in a Breaux Bridge for two years.

I told you that I have no qualms with unlikely coincidences. I hope you feel the same way.

I spoke a bit about the story of Martin Mazerolle. James finally looked up from his magazine.

-Oh, I know that guy, he said.

-You've met him? I said.

-He's one of my best friends, James answered. He's a little crazy, but everybody in Breuax Bridge is a little crazy.

-This is really amazing, I said. Look, I know I just met you.

I finally extended my hand and we shook and introduced ourselves.

-...but, I went on, I don't suppose you could ask your friend to talk to me just for about half an hour or so?

-Maybe, he said, tossing our magazine back to the pile, I dunno. He really doesn't like all the attention. A lot of weird people started hounding him since all that stuff went up on the internet.

-Let's talk sometime, I said. Do you live far from here?

-Sure, why not, he said as he searched his pockets for his keys.

-Uh, I asked, do you live far from here?

-Huh? Not really, James said. Where are my keys?

-We should meet up sometime, I said. If nothing else, I bet your friend would like to dispel the myths.

-Could you move your foot? he asked, still searching. I know I had them with me when I picked up your newsletter.

-Can I give you a call? I asked.

-Here they are, James said, drawing a set of keys from his back pocket. Ok, well, good luck with...with whatever it is that you do.

-So can I give you a call?

-What? he answered. I haven't seen any flying alien ships.

-Not about that I said, laughing.

James shook his head.

-Well, I don't swing that way, he said, but you're not a bad looking guy. You'll do fine in this city.

-No, no, I stammered. I wanted to meet your friend.

-Martin? Maybe. Probably not. I don't know.

-Let's just talk about it.

He finally gave me his number. We didn't speak again for nearly a month because he didn't return my calls.

3. My Life is A Series of Disasters, and I Make Travel Arrangements to Breaux Bridge

During this period, nothing was right. My editor informed me that *American Phenomenon*, like most fringe magazines, had never really made anyone any money. Within six months, it would soon become a website without a staff of salaried writers and editors. I was free to keep writing for *American Phenomenon*, my editor explained, but I wouldn't get any pay.

So I decided that the rest of the people on this planet were too dim to understand my work and why it was important. Almost everyone who has failed at an artistic endeavor seeks refuge in this belief. I remembered James saying that people are stupid. Yeah, I thought, he's right. Then I remembered that he was referring to my readers and my contributors. I was hungry so I went to get a Ruben Sandwich. Sandwiches make me feel better. You always win when you get a sandwich, I told myself.

Then, I had a cell phone argument with Helen that degenerated into a fire-at-will exchange of insults before she accused me living like a squatter. She was right about

that. My apartment is cheap; it provides everything a primate needs to survive, except when one of the water pipes blow, but there's nothing aesthetically pleasing about it. To punctuate Helen's remark, a well fed cockroach crawled over the kitchen wall and on top of the Ruben sandwich I'd left on the counter. The refrigerator hadn't been working for about a week, you see. A frightening stench of mayonnaise and death was creeping through the apartment; I was afraid of what I'd discover if I opened that stained, off-white door to the unknown.

I saw that cockroach crawling over my Ruben, and I saw all my frustrations. I stood less than ten feet away from where that smug little bastard was gobbling up something that I'd desired, sought out, and paid for. I took up a chef's knife. Please don't ask why I tried to kill a roach with a knife. The reason, I think is that the knife fit a scene in my mind: the climax of the cheesy movie when the hero cries out in slow motion after the bad guys do something like throw his mom off a tall building, and the hero has ample reason to kill people. The chase began.

I'm glad that I didn't cut myself. I did, however, manage to break my coffee table, knock over a lamp, and sprain my ankle. As I crawled through wreckage left in the wake of misdirected passion, I saw what looked like the same roach crawling over my sandwich, mocking me as he enjoyed it with impunity. I cursed him, his family, and I decided that Helen is a fool who has no idea of what qualities she should look for in a mate. Almost everyone who has failed in a relationship seeks refuge in this belief, I think.

Then, my car broke in an expensive way. On that same fine morning, James called me and said that he'd be willing to introduce me to Martin. I met him outside of the bar where he worked, which looked, as he'd aptly described, kind of alright.

The place, Sullivan's, or maybe Sicily's, certainly wasn't dangerous. James didn't even card most of the patrons. For the most part, he just nodded to the people who walked through the door because they were regulars, meaning that they were drunks. Fortunately, they were weeknight drunks. This was a Thursday, so they weren't celebrating anything because a trip to the bar was part of their routine. There was no reason for zeal or enthusiasm.

-Yeah, so I've been talking to Martin, James explained to me. For some reason, I mentioned that you'd asked about him.

-So you told him about *American Phenomenon*? I asked.

-Well, I didn't remember the name of the thing, he answered, but I told him that you work on a bigfoot newsletter. Ya'll have a pretty good circulation right? I mean, they sell your stuff at big magazine stores.

-Sure. I said.

I wasn't quite lying. Not yet.

-Ok, James said, Martin really, I mean, really hates all this publicity he's getting. People have tried camping outside his house. He chases them off with a shot gun. They send him weird letters and weird emails. He's tired of it. Now, you know that all the stories about him making hail fall and rain are bullshit, right?

-I guess that depends how you look at it, I said.

-Uh-huh. Well, here's the deal, James said, Martin wants you to write an article and tell your readers that he doesn't have any kind of super powers. But he knows someone who does have, uh, powers. And Martin says he can prove it.

-Who is Martin talking about? I asked.

-I have no idea, what the hell he's talking about, James said. He probably found someone else who wants attention, and they've probably come up with some wacky story. The point is, I think that you guys can help each other out.

-Now this is interesting, I said. I think my editor is going to love the idea.

My editor didn't love the idea. Martin, he said, probably didn't have any real magic at his disposal. He said that he'd found only a handful of eyewitness accounts of Martin's doing something supernatural and that the story wasn't of great interest to anyone, other than people of Breaux Bridge and to me. My editor is a true believer. He doesn't see ghost stories and alien encounters as tales in collection of modern mythologies; he's out to find monsters. He told me he wouldn't run any kind of story, and that I should focus on circulating my resume before our magazine went online. I realized then, as I was standing in his office, that he was possibly an idiot, and that I'd despised him for years.

I wanted to explore this mythology. I wanted to explore Breaux Bridge, a town that I knew nothing about and that even James, who swiftly branded everything he saw with simple adjectives, said he couldn't really describe. The phenomenon of Martin, along with the entangled stories that comprised his myth, waited about three hours away from Houston. Still, Breaux Bridge seemed distant and for some reason, I felt that if I traveled somewhere distant, I'd find a City of Gold or a Holy Grail or a Fountain of

Youth that would resolve the problems of my home, where I fought with vermin over scraps of food, and where Helen called me an asshole and refused to have sex with me.

I called James and told him that the story was green light and full speed ahead. When I tell lies, I get a bit nervous and start regurgitating clichés.

James was driving to Breaux Bridge to attend the wedding of another close friend, a guy he called “Birdy.” He agreed to introduce me to Martin. Of course, as I explained to James, I’d need a ride to Breaux Bridge since I wouldn’t have a car for the next few days. He shook his head, paced around, shifted the Spartan jaw for a minute, and then agreed.

-But I’m going to be there for at least three or four days, he explained

-I don’t mind some time away, I said.

4. We Drive a Few Hours. James Spits Tobacco Juice into a Bottle Right Next to Where I’m Sitting.

James dips only when he’s on a long drive or when he’s drinking. He sets a lump of tobacco against his lips, and he places an empty plastic bottle in the cup holder of his Dodge Ram. After a few minutes of pushing that lump of tobacco around with his tongue, he presses the bottle to his lips and spits a coffee colored fluid.

I should probably explain to you the change in landscape one observes when driving from Houston to a Breaux Bridge; however, the landscape is not the most vivid memory of my drive to Breaux Bridge. That bottle of tobacco spit--I don’t know if tobacco connoisseurs have a term for it, and I don’t care--was nudging against my left for the duration of the entire trip. I didn’t look at it directly, but it rippled and glimmered sunlight.

James spits roughly one-and-a-half inches of juice per hour. At around the two inch mark, we reached a point on interstate ten that is surrounded by swampland. We passed Chanooka Creek, Marpa Creek, and Watanawga Creek. James kept spitting, and I started to really hate his spitting, so I asked about Martin.

-Do you know about his family? I asked.

-I know all about his family, James said. Well, I can tell you what I heard.

-Is what you heard true? I asked.

-What I heard is what people will tell you, he answered.

To understand Martin's story, you need to know a little bit about his dad, the Cajun restaurant owner, and his mom, the school teacher who, in spite of watching her son go to prison, enjoyed many happy years until sickness began to take her.

I believe that I've produced the only written record of this brief family history. Much of it is embellished. Oh boy, I hope you don't believe any of this.

5. The Story of Sarah and Hunter Mazerolle

The shotgun house in Artoix, in South Louisiana where Sarah Agnes Coleman was born stands next to hundreds of acres of crawfish farms. Sarah's mother gave birth to four boys before God answered her prayers for something delicate and refined and made her last child a girl. Sarah's mother was a school teacher who, for reasons she never understood herself, had married a mechanic. Sarah's father was a man with many friends; his sons all played football at Marthis County High School, where he'd led a short, legendary career as a wide receiver.

But Sarah's mother had received private schooling, dance lessons, piano lessons. She could read Latin. Her parents had been poor, but they'd wanted to give their only

daughter an opportunity to mingle with Refined People, a term that Sarah's mother often used. Refined People were thinking people who made their livings as Lawyers or Professors or Doctors. They enjoyed the same sort of food as everyone else, but they used proper French names rather than muddied Creole sounds to describe the food. As they enjoyed their food, they spoke about artistic things like paintings and symphonies or things they'd read in the news section of the papers.

Sarah's mother was brilliant at every task her family gave her, and even as a girl she perfectly fit her family's image of a Refined Person, and her family believed that the next generation of Colemans would give up living in shotgun homes, partaking in moonshine-inspired barefoot walks through the creeks. Her life, they believed, would be a life of white collared work, proper grammar, and art discussion.

Then, she turned seventeen and wanted to marry a boy of twenty, a highschool football star who worked at Robby's Auto Shack. The Coleman's despised him even more when they discovered that he was handsome, that he loved to make people laugh, and that he was kind to children, cats, and dogs. Disarmed of any reason to oppose a wedding, the Coleman's accepted the unrefined man as one of their own. They were married, and children soon occupied a shotgun home in Artoix, just five miles away from the Coleman's.

Sarah's four brothers came home from the Marthis football field coated in layers of sweat and mud. His father came home with grease smeared over his clothes and his face. They loved Sarah's mother more than they'd ever love anything, and she exhausted herself keeping the home clean, and pull the boys off each other when they brawled like fighting dogs. Never at the dinner table was there a discussion of art until Sarah was

fourteen years old. Sarah's mother trained her daughter in the habits of a Refined Person, even as the four boys embarked on barefoot walks through the creek.

Sarah learned to sit upright at the table. She learned which fork was for the salad and which fork was for the meat. She learned the proper way to utter phrases like Mwir-phaw, Chateau, and names like Monet.

-When you look for a man, her mother explained, you're at the market. Don't simply bring home the first thing you see. Browse, look to see what everyone has to offer you. Of course, it's of great importance to present yourself in a certain way so that you'll find a man who is a Refined Person. Say Monet again.

-Monet, Sarah, age 14, repeated.

-Excellent. Now you want to whet a fellow's interest in you so that you'll have these options, but you don't give yourself to anyone unless he can prove his worth. Men are often a great deal like barnyard animals, and they'll try to take advantage of you if you aren't smart. A smart girl keeps a line of suitors who will go through great lengths to impress her.

Sarah mastered her mother's teachings, just as she'd mastered Latin, and most of Beethoven's best known sonatas on the piano. At least ten men offered their hands in marriage to Sarah, at least that's what most people in Breaux Bridge report.

Her brothers tormented her without pause. They threw mud at her when she put on a summer dress. They booed and tossed apples when she practiced the piano. Sarah found satisfaction in the idea that one day she'd share a home with a refined man while her siblings continued to live like a gang of pirates.

She never left her home without dressing up to be seen. She was a pretty girl, but Breaux Bridge produces many pretty girls; Sarah's face lingered in the minds of so many young men because she presented herself as a perfectly groomed figure in a perfectly cut summer dress who was always close, and yet always just beyond their reach. She never went downtown to the movies with a boy more than once before she'd take up the offer of another hopeful young man. If she took a particular interest in a boy, then she made certain that said fellow would catch a glimpse of her while she out on the town arm-in-arm with another. She was ruthlessly effective at getting young men to pursue her, and more than once, these suitors came to blows over her. When this happened, Sarah, verbally repulsed and secretly excited by the spectacle of males dueling for her hand, would slowly walk away from the Dirty, savage fools.

She was outside of the Cinema Six Theater, walking away from a fist fight between two young men whom she'd never liked all that much, when she first met Hunter. They knew of each other's reputation. Hunter was the son of a Marine. He'd had a great deal of success as a bareknuckle boxer in Breaux Bridge. Once or twice a month, he'd go to Saul Stella's gym, wrap his hands with tape, and fight for sometimes hours at a time. The rules of these bouts were vague and often left to dispute, but the only way for a fighter to lose was to stay down for the course of a thirty second count, during which time the men in his corner were free to revive him. These bouts probably weren't legal, but the sheriff enjoyed them, and he didn't feel like taking the time to consult the written law over something that other residents of Breaux Bridge seemed to enjoy as well.

The scar tissue across Hunter's mouth and eyebrows formed in the most handsome way possible. Sarah's first reaction to him was an unintentional smile. Hunter saw her dueling suitors rolling around on the sidewalk, and he saw an opportunity.

-Hey, he said to her.

-Hey, she answered back, already a little offended.

-I can give ya a ride home, he said.

-I don't even know you, she answered.

-I'm Hunter, he said. Bet ya heard of me.

-Oh, she said, you compete in the....the....

She made two fists.

-Kinda like that, he answered, but you wanna keep them thumbs outside yer fingers. You'll break your hands that way. You Dean's daughter, right?

-I am, she said, suddenly feeling a bit awkward.

-Yea, he used to help coach football, Hunter said. Ain't seen him in forever.

How he doin' these days?

-He's fine, Sarah answered. He's in good health.

-Alright, he said, I'm parked over there.

-No! she cried. Just because you've been acquainted with my father doesn't mean that I'll let you take me anywhere. I don't know what your intentions are.

-My intentions are to give you a ride and then to go an' get myself a burger 'cause I'm hungry, he said. Come on, how you gonna get home?

-I hadn't thought about it, she said. I just had to get away from...from them.

She pointed down the street to find that the contest had ended and that the victor, bearing a black eye and a bloodied nose was searching for her.

-Walk with me! she said. I don't want to deal with him.

-So now you givin' the orders? Hunter asked.

-There's no time for games! she shouted.

-There ain't no game, Hunter answered. If we gonna be friends then you gonna have to start being nice to me. You gotta ask me things properly. Please and Thank You and all that.

-Please walk with me so that I don't have to deal with that fool, Sarah said, taking him by the arm and walking down the street. Thank you.

They made their way to Hunter's car, which was waiting just a few blocks away.

-You're very difficult, Sarah said as she worked to adjust the layers of her dress in the passenger's seat.

-What you all dressed up for? Hunter asked. Is it your prom night or somethin'?

Sarah paused and thought about getting up and leaving.

-No, she answered. It's not my prom night. Some of us like to put on our best when we're out. I've already graduated. I was second in my class at St. Agnes.

-Was that a private school? Hunter asked.

-Yes.

-So it wasn't a really big class huh? he asked. There were probably 'bout seven other kids there, huh?

-Will you take you me home or should I scream for the police? Sarah said.

-I'm takin' you home, Hunter said. All the cops around here are my buddies, by the way. If ya started shouting, they'd just try to talk some sense into ya.

He started the engine and drove away from downtown Breaux Bridge, passing Swiney's grocery and butcher shop and Saul's gym. Sarah feigned ignorance of bare knuckled boxing, but her brothers attended the fights and spoke of them at the dinner table while Sarah's mother coached her on proper manners and French pronunciation.

-So what do you when you're not hitting other men in the face? Sarah asked.

-I'm out lookin' for more men to hit in the face, Hunter answered. Your boyfriend beat me to it today.

-He's not my boyfriend, Sarah snapped. He's an...acquaintance, and I won't be speaking to him again because I hate fighting.

-I don't meet lots a people that say they hate fighting, Hunter said.

-Well, I do. It's disgusting. It's absolutely disgusting to watch people beat on each other like that.

-Lots a' fun though, Hunter said. I work in the kitchen at Marque's.

-Very nice restaurant, Sarah replied. So you're a cook?

-Can't really say I'm a cook, Hunter answered. I'm learnin' though. I wanna get real good at it, and I get plenty a practice. Culinary school's expensive.

-You'd like to be a chef? Sarah asked.

-Somethin' like that, Hunter said. I like Cajun food, so I just stay around what I like.

They finally arrived at Androix. Hunter steered down a twisting dirt road. He did this slowly because the sun was falling and there were no lights, save the stars and the glowing windows of the riverboat homes and shotgun shacks.

-Real pretty out here, Hunter said as he pulled up in front of Sarah's house.

-Thank you again, Sarah said.

-'Course, Hunter answered. You ever play cards?

-Sometimes, Sarah answered.

She played gin rummy, hearts, and spades with her mothers' friends, and she'd gotten skilled enough to play with ladies who had more years handling cards longer than Sarah had been alive.

-I play with Chris Caldoune over at Alderoun's on Friday, Hunter said. You should come along.

-Alderoun's? Sarah said. You'll be playing poker?

-Just five card draw probably, Hunter answered. Real simple stuff.

-I don't gamble, Sarah replied.

-You don't got to, Hunter said. I'll give you some chips.

-That's a very thoughtful offer, Sarah said. But I really don't think that my mother and father will allow me to go out and play cards at a place like that.

-Let's ask 'em, Hunter said.

-That's probably not a good idea, Sarah answered.

Before the argument could run its course, they turned to the sound of someone knocking on the passenger's side window and looked to see Sarah's father waving.

Hunter stepped out of the car to greet Mr. Coleman, who pat him on the shoulder and congratulated him on his last fight.

-My youngest was there, Mr. Coleman said. Way he tells it, ya'll really went at it, huh?

-Think it was an hour, Hunter answered. I don't really remember much after the first five minutes. Got hit pretty hard early.

They laughed. Sarah watched as her father playfully waived his fists and shoved at Hunter, who shoved back.

-You havin' dinner with us, right? Mr. Coleman asked?

-He's got....Sarah stammered.

-Man, I'm 'bout to starve to death, Mr. Coleman, Hunter said. What we havin' tonight?

-My wife's makin' stuffed peppers, he answered. Oh boy, can she cook.

-Man, I was just lookin' for a burger, Hunter said. I didn't know that I'd be eatin' five star.

-Ya'll just come on in when you ready, Mr. Coleman said.

Hunter placed his hand on Sarah's back as they walked inside. She glared, but she didn't push him away.

The boys greeted him as a celebrity. In the kitchen, Mrs. Coleman heard an uproar of brawling cheers and barroom chants. She asked Sarah, who had retreated to the kitchen to decide how she felt about the situation, about the visitor. Then, she asked why Sarah was allowing a caveman to court her about town.

-What about that college boy, Bobby Foudeoux? Mrs. Coleman demanded. What about the one who works at the bank? Robert, I think that's his name.

Sarah didn't want to explain that the two boys whom her mother thought to be fine stock had been brawling on the streets just a few hours earlier.

-As it turns out, Sarah replied, Hunter was the most civilized of the three.

Mrs. Coleman set her stuffed peppers on the table, along with brown rice, broccoli, and a pecan pie. Sarah's brothers demanded that Hunter tell the story of his bout with a black fellow from New Orleans who was foot taller and a hundred pounds heavier than Hunter. Hunter tried to decline, but the boys, and the father, insisted.

Sarah would learn years later that Hunter was much more complicated than he appeared. Hunter knew that most Breaux Bridgers thought him friendly and dumb, but he'd discovered that most people were quick to give their trust and their love to someone who seemed friendly and dumb. He had rare ability to understand human beings after exchanging just a few words.

That evening, Hunter realized that he had taken a seat in the middle of a dilemma: most of Sarah's family wanted to hear a story of cuts, fractured bones, and swollen faces, while Sarah's mother, the one who would be whispering in the girl's ear, would not think the story pleasant conversation.

So Hunter did his best to present a less graphic version of the story, omitting details about a broken nose, six rounds of spitting blood, and about dislodging his opponent's tooth from the from the spot between his knuckles where a scar remained.

Sarah was the only one sitting at the table who recognized that he was practicing diplomacy.

-I still keep in touch with that big ole' boy from N'Oleams, Hunter said.

Mr. Coleman put his hand on Hunter's shoulder.

-You're a real gentleman, he said.

Mr. Coleman paused and smiled as he imagined sitting at the dinner table, addressing Hunter as "son."

-A gentlemen, he repeated, and a refined person.

He looked across the table to his wife, who looked back suspiciously.

-By the way, Mr. Coleman, Hunter said.

-Dean, Mr. Coleman interrupted.

-Sorry, Dean. Sarah and I were thinkin' about going up to Alderoun's this Saturday...

He didn't finish his sentence.

-Ya'll want me to give you a ride up there? Mr. Coleman offered.

Sarah looked to her father, her eyes wide, her mind puzzled by a series a unexpected events that seemed to set in motion more unexpected events that, for some reason, felt unavoidable.

-Oh, sorry about that, Mr. Coleman said. I forgot that ya'll ain't little kids. You don't need an old man chaperone.

-There won't be any big money games, Hunter said. Nothin' like that...

Again, he wasn't able to finish his sentence.

-'Course not, Mr. Coleman said. I used to play there all the time. I'll give ya some money to throw 'round.

-I didn't know that you went out to play cards, Mrs. Coleman said, looking to her daughter. Is this a new interest?

Everyone turned to Sarah, who chewed slowly to give herself time to think of what to say. She suffered every bite.

-I'll go and try something new, she answered. It might be fun.

-You picked a great boyfriend, her youngest brother said.

-Yeah, followed her oldest brother. I'm surprised you ain't gone an picked up another sissy.

-Stop embarrassing your sister, Mr. Coleman interjected. Just keep quiet, hooligans.

But Sarah was red with embarrassment. Hunter knew that he'd succeeded. He enjoyed his stuffed pepper.

-I can't thank ya'll enough, he said. I can't remember last time I ever ate good like this. I'll be famous if I can learn to make anything half as good as this, Mrs. Coleman.

-You're interested in cooking? Mrs. Coleman asked.

-Oh, yeah, Coleman said, leaning towards Sarah's mother. Culinary arts are my real passion.

Mrs. Colman grinned at the young man. A desire to flee the room prodded at Sarah, while a stronger desire to watch Hunter befriend her mother kept her seated.

Before he went home that evening, Hunter and Sarah sat on the porch looking on the narrow waters of the creeks where farmers raised their crawfish.

-You have a method to everything you do, don't you? Sarah said in an accusatory tone.

-I can't help bein' friendly, he answered.

-You do, she continued. I bet you even have way of hitting. I bet you think about all these things when you're chopping vegetable or washing dishes.

-Well, I ain't had too much of the brain damage, he said.

-No, she answered. I can see that now. But I'm going to beat you at cards. You, and your friends.

He chuckled.

-Sure you are, little girl, he said. You sleep well now.

-Goodnight, Hunter. You made it interesting.

She didn't say anything to her mother that evening beyond a few short, mandatory responses. She didn't mention Hunter for the rest of the week, even when her brothers asked if her new boyfriend had broken anyone's face recently. Mrs. Coleman wanted no drawn out discussion with her daughter: she assigned Sarah chores, assisted her with her homework, and coached her on her Latin.

Friday evening arrived, and Mrs. Coleman found her daughter, wearing a summer yellow, full skirted dress and stiffened neck petticoat, waiting at the dining table for Hunter to knock on the front door. Mrs. Coleman sighed. She decided that she'd spend the evening reading in bed.

-You'll have a wonderful time, Mrs. Coleman said to her daughter before leaving the room. I'm sure of it.

Alderoun's stands on a dock over Whiskey creek, five miles away from streetlights, paved roads, or any other place of business. It's the size of small home, and it offers two pool tables and three card tables. A single light outside illuminates a dense cloud of insects that hovers over a wooden sign reading "Ald un." The owner, Mark Butler, sits behind the counter reading hunting and fishing catalogs, although he's been seen placing an order. Over the course of thirty years, Mark and his bar on the water have softened and changed shape, but Alderoun's is the same place it's always been, and Mark, looking up from his catalog, greets mostly the same patrons who have allowed him to enjoy a quite life of leisure.

Hunter and Sarah took their seats across from Christopher Caldoun. Chris was a first rate card player and a decent cheat. When he played, he smoked two dollar cigars that sprinkled ashes across his brown beard. Hunter was still a young man when Chris was learning to hustle. He'd spend most of his life in New Orleans making his living at pool tables and card tables, fleeing town every few months or so when with a death threat, always returning when he needed more money. He'd never retire.

They bought their chips, and Sarah excused herself to the restroom.

-You brought in a pretty one, huh? Chris said.

-She's alright. Hunter said.

-Yeah, I bet, Chris answered, lighting his cigar. I won't clean her out too quick.

-I think she's a smart one though, Hunter warned.

- Sure thing, man. Christopher said. She followin' around your dumbass, but maybe she just ain't realized what a mistake she's makin'. Don't matter though, I don't think women really cut out for cards.

-Why you say that? Hunter said.

-‘Cause you got to be focused like you out tryin’ to kill somethin’. Christopher said. The ladies just aren’t wired like that, you know?

Sarah returned. They started, and the first hour’s worth of hands was unspectacular. Hunter was focused on not driving Sarah out of the game; Christopher was focused on learning how Hunter would play in the company of a date so that Christopher could clean him out, and Sarah was learning to play poker.

She understood the rules, which were far, far simpler than the games she’d learned at home, but wanted to know how to win. The best player, she decided, was the player who could best read the others at the table. To act “properly” for seventeen years of her life, Sarah had to focus on the most subtle details of how she presented herself, and so she’d learned to observe how others presented themselves. Like Hunter, she was an expert at interpreting human behavior, and, like Hunter, she’d become so skilled that most people never noticed.

Once she’d gotten comfortable with the rules and the mechanics of the game, she set her thoughts to conquering the table. She could see that poor Hunter was trying to coddle her and that Christopher also thought her naïve. So she put on her best naïve face, the kind that she knew would give men a surging feeling of dominance and put them in the proper state of mind to act boldly and lose money. She played a poor hand and lost a small pile of chips to further encourage the other players. She then won four rather large stacks.

Christopher was the first to accept that Sarah aimed to win, and that she might have the opportunity to do so. Hunter became frustrated. He played more aggressively

and lost most hands. He grew reluctant to raise. Sarah pressured him to fold repeatedly. He stopped focusing on cards and on human responses and started to wonder if he wanted to see Sarah again. The people of Breaux Bridge will say that Hunter is kind to everyone he meets, that he enjoyed fighting because he saw fighting as a game and not because any malice dwells in his soul. They'll also say that Hunter did not want to lose to a girl in a summer dress and petticoat.

But he lost his entire stack, and Christopher finally quit after he couldn't endure watching Sarah's piano player fingers take away any more of his chips.

-You got yourself a pretty good ringer there, he said. You know, it seems to me that women have got a natural talent for cards. To be a good player, ya got to know how to not get too excited, an how to tell lies. That's why they shouldn't be allowed to play.

He finished his cigar and left.

-Now this was fun, Sarah said, counting her chips. I'm so glad you went through all the trouble of bringing me out.

-I'm tired, Hunter said. An' I've gotta be in that kitchen early tomorrow.

-Well, just let me count all these. Oh, here. You should reimburse your father. I will keep the rest.

They made their way home as Sarah browsed the radio station while Hunter looked into the graveled road in front of him without offering his date a word or a glance.

-I know we can pick up a country station out here, Sarah said. Maybe, no, that's not it. I know you can hear it clearly once you find it.

-I've got a few preset, Hunter said.

-Yes, but you have poor taste in everything, she said.

-In girls too? he said.

-I'm sure that's generally true, she answered. What's the matter? At last, you look serious.

-Ya kinda embarrassed me, he answered.

-I told you that I'd win, she said. And besides, I beat your friend too, so there's no shame in it.

- You knew I didn't believe you, he said.

-Well, now you know to listen, she said. You're mad because I won? Should I take it easy on you next time?

-No, Hunter said quickly. You just didn't have to go an' gloat an' make a scene.

-I didn't make a scene, she said. What did I do to make a scene?

-You were...Hunter paused, you were countin' up all those chips when we were done.

-Of course I counted my chips, she said.

-But it's the way you counted 'em, he said. You counted 'em real slow.

-You do strike me as a slow counter, Sarah replied.

Hunter's friends will say that few people have ever challenged him, and that he remembers those who have. After the first time he lost to Sarah, Hunter was infatuated.

-You really hard to deal with, he said.

-I'd say the same of you, Sarah replied. You're too full of yourself.

-You callin' me arrogant? Hunter shouted. Ain't that somethin'. The prom queen say I'm too full a' myself.

-I try to carry myself well, Sarah shouted back. You walk around, with your...your caveman walk like you own everything you see.

-That's just how I carry myself, Hunter said. It's different for men.

-Because men are vulgar, she said.

-Yeah, Hunter said, we vulgar, an' we big, an' we dirty, an' you love it.

-Fine, she snapped. Why don't we head to the zoo and find me a better male specimen. I bet we could teach an ape to sit with his elbows at the table better than you. I'm certain that we could teach one to play cards better than you.

Hunter shouted again.

-I will drive this car into a swamp, he said.

-Oh, it looks like I've hurt your feelings again, Sarah said. Do you need me to drive us home?

-Sure, he said, removing his hands from the steering wheel and placing them behind his head. You get us home.

-That's a brilliant idea! she hollered. You're going to kill us both just to prove a point. Here's something else that I love about men.

She crossed her arms, and looked to Hunter. They began their test of resolution. Hunter's car gradually made its way off the dirt road and onto grassy bank of Whiskey Creek.

-This is your car, you know, Sarah said.

-Hey, I ain't been swimmin' in a while, Hunter said.

-You...

Sarah was interrupted as the car took a sharp turn. Both passengers scrambled to grab the steering wheel. They bumped heads, bumped hands and elbows, and the car landed two wheels in the creek. Hunter managed to lift Sarah out of the passenger's seat without getting her dress wet. They silently walked towards Sarah's home, which was about two miles away from where the lights and front bumper of Hunter's car was completely submerged in muddy water.

They looked to the sky and to the pebbles under their feet as their pulses slowed.

-We'll tell my parents that the steering of your car went out, Sarah said.

-Ok, he answered. Thought you'd be mad.

-Why would I be angry? she said. Again, it's your car. If you feel the need to go and destroy all your personal belongings, I won't protest.

-I mean, you coulda gotten hurt, he said, looking down.

-Then let's not do that again, she said. I don't think you'd try to hurt me. You seem domesticated enough.

-'Course I am, Hunter said. I'm high school educated. I'm baptized.

-Oh, really? she said.

-Yeah, he said. My mom baptized me in the tub, in a lake, and twice at a church.

She worked hard to get the devil out.

-And you cook, apparently.

-I'm gonna learn to cook, he said. And I'm gonna be good at it.

-I'm sure that you will, she said. I wouldn't be surprised if you already are.

They arrived home, where Hunter called his tow truck driver friend. As soon as he'd stepped out the door, Mrs. Coleman asked her daughter how the evening had been.

Sarah answered that the evening had been a delight and that she wouldn't be seeing Hunter, the bare knuckled brawler, again.

Sarah's remaining childhood friends say that she did her best the following week to forget the excitement of knowing Hunter Mazerolle. She focused on her daily routines: each day, when she returned from school, she went directly to her room and reopened her books. She scored higher on her biology exam than anyone else in her class. She learned new words in French and new lines of Chopin. She washed dishes, dusted, and folded clothes to help her mother keep their shotgun home in order. Then, Friday afternoon, Hunter came to her door, and on Friday evening she put on her favorite blue gown. Her mother didn't ask where her daughter was going when she found Sarah on living room couch made-up, and perfumed, reading a book to pass time. She remarked only that she hoped Sarah would have another wonderful evening.

Mrs. Coleman found a book of her own, and sat at the dinner table until her daughter returned and Mrs. Coleman was able to sleep. She asked how the evening had been. "Silly," was Sarah's answer.

-I've had my fill of that boy, she said.

And the following week, Sarah took up another suitor who sat with her in French class at St. Agnes. She told her mother how he was the sharpest in class because his father was a native speaker, how he'd traveled from Italy to Germany and that he wore the finest shoes she'd ever seen.

Saturday arrived, and as Mrs. Coleman was walking by the bathroom, she saw her daughter standing at the mirror, applying foundation.

-I told dad I was going out, Sarah said.

-I know, Mrs. Coleman answered.

Sarah avoided conversation with her mother the following week. Friday evening, as Sarah, with her finishing school posture, waited with a book in her lap for a knock on the door, Mrs. Coleman took a seat next to her daughter.

-So, Mrs. Coleman asked calmly, are you going to be seeing him on a regular basis?

-Yes, Sarah answered without looking from the pages of her book.

-Will you marry him? she asked.

-Mother, please, Sarah said.

-That's a fair question, replied Mrs. Coleman.

-It's too early to even think about that sort of thing, Sarah answered. A girl should take her time when making those kinds of decisions. I don't even know if I'll see him again next week. I'm not sure he's what I've been looking for. He's very irritating sometimes.

-Yes, Mrs. Coleman said. Irritating in a way you can't forget.

-I'm not sure about that, Sarah said.

-You'll be terribly happy, Mrs. Coleman said. They'll be mud and grease and Lord-knows-what everywhere. You'll feel some days that you're feeding and grooming savages. You'll pray, as I did, for a daughter.

-Mother, you're so dreary sometimes, Sarah said.

-I didn't mean to be, love, Mrs. Coleman answered. Happiness is the strangest thing. Have a wonderful time.

She got up and paused.

-I expect there will be no children until you're married, she said. I'll have no scandals in this house. He's a nice boy, but I can tell he's the type who will take liberties with a young lady if given the opportunity. Before I married your father, I had to practically keep him at bay with a stick for the first month until...

-Mom, please stop! Sarah shouted. You're making me nervous.

-Have a wonderful time, dear, she repeated.

Mr. Coleman, who had been in the kitchen, approached his wife, and kissed her on the cheek.

-You braggin' about me again? He said.

He turned to Sarah.

-I don't think I ever told you about how you were conceived, little girl, he said.

-Dad! Sarah shouted.

-I do believe that was a Wednesday, he said, smiling. Came home with a lil' extra spring in my step. Your mom made those stuffed peppers. That's why I still love me some stuffed peppers.

There was a knock at the door.

-You're both disgusting! Sarah cried out. That's why you get along so well.

Mr. Coleman opened to door to Hunter.

-How you doin', big man? he said. We discussin' some family history. You oughta come in an' listen. Ya might learn a few things from me.

-We're going, Sarah said, taking Hunter by the arm. I love you both. I'll be home in a few hours.

-Just remember what your momma said! Mr. Coleman shouted. You keep off that good-lookin' boy 'till he gives you a ring. Hunter! Don't you let her take advantage of ya! Stay honest!

He closed the door.

-You are quite incorrigible, dear, Mrs. Coleman said, fighting a grin.

That evening, Hunter took her to play poker again, and again, she drove Christopher to quit and took away all of Hunter's chips. In time, he'd learn some of her tricks and win a few games, but she'd learn more tricks, misdirect him again, and their rivalry would endure. They played cards, argued, went to movies, and ate together for a few months before on Friday night, Hunter stopped his car, took a knee on the bank of whiskey creek, and offered Sarah a ring.

-Oh, of course dear, she said. But I'll have to finish school first. And you need to get a better-paying job before we even talk about children. I'll show you my ideas for the wedding when we get home.

At home, Mrs. Coleman smiled and kissed her daughter when she heard the news.

-You'll have boys making a mess a everything, she said, laughing.

-You don't know that, Sarah answered.

-Anything so ironic is bound to happen, her mother said.

6. I Get a Great Deal on Crawfish: How Some People at the Crawfish Shack Tricked Me

The Red Shack has no real name. Nor does it have a menu. A composite wood wall divides it into two sections. In the back room Martin and his staff drop handfuls of pots crawdads, onions, garlic gloves, corn on the cob, sausage, and red potatoes and drop them

into boiling pots along with a blend of spices that he discovered after spending months alone in his kitchen. He bundles his seasoning in cheese cloths and he holds each bundle to his nose to reassure himself that each ingredient plays its part in the melody at the right volume and pitch.

Martin learned ambition from his parents, and he wouldn't wait a minute longer than needed to start boiling and selling crawfish. He decided that he'd take the time to invent a name and pay someone to make an attention-seeking sign whenever business slowed, but his patrons kept forming lines, and he never had such an opportunity. He neglected his plans for a menu for the same reason.

The shack stands in at the end of a dirt road in the middle of grassy field, less than half a mile from where Interstate Ten overlooks Apalache Creek. We came during the spring, when the leaves of the bald white cypress that grow along the banks turn pale. James parked his truck in the dirt lot behind the Red Shack at the peak of lunch time. The regulars, along with a few visitors, had found their seats around the tables in the shade of hideous, green umbrellas that, each week, Martin vows to replace and then forgets his vow amidst a torrent of other concerns.

With learned motions, patrons peeled the tails away from the lumps of meat and dropped empty shells into tin pales. They passed around rolls of paper towels, pitchers of iced tea, pitchers of water, and a few pitchers of beer. In the very center of each table, there were slices of white bread next to jars of jam. I commented that the bread and jelly didn't seem to fit. James said that he'd explain later.

-This is my favorite food, James said as we stood in line. I don't see Martin. He might have gone to grocery store or something. We might have to come back after they're closed if you wanna talk to him. He never stops moving when they're open.

-That's fine, I said. I like the smell of this place.

-Could you find us a seat? James asked. I'll order.

I found one of the few empty places at the picnic table and fumbled with one of those red, insect-looking things as I tried to learn how to peel a crawfish tail. Two guys who looked to be in their early twenties moved from another table and sat across from me. James knew them. They rose when they spotted him in line. They shook hands and hugged.

Later, I would hear many, many stories of Tim and Nolan. I'm certain some of these stories contain exaggerations, but if I'd heard these exaggerations I'd have had some idea what to expect from those two.

They introduced themselves as the ambassadors of Breaux Bridge. Yes, they used the word "ambassadors." They asked where I was from and if I'd ever had crawdads. I explained that I been to a few boils in Texas.

-I think you gonna love it here, Tim said.

-You seem pretty alright, Nolan said. I think we can hook you up with the first time special.

Nolan has a face that draws trust, but he bears a grin suggesting that he knows how others perceive his face, so my first impulse was not to trust him. I believe that he's used to this response from the people he meets, and I believe he knows that he can usually get the response he wants from people, in spite of their suspicions, if he puts the

trustworthy image of himself on display long enough for people to forget their inhibitions.

Tim's face draws fear. He isn't large, but his presence can shake you. He shaves all the hair of his head. His ears are battered wads of cartilage lacking any symmetry. He earned these cauliflower ears from dozens of high school wrestling matches. He has wire arms of tendons across strands of muscles. I saw scar tissue across his face, and the colors of bruises that had almost healed along with the colors of bruises he'd just received. His eyes open just a little too wide.

I can't stand the way he smiles. His mouth extends as far as he can stretch it; the tip of his tongue slithers across his teeth and his lips. His face beams with a deranged sort of joy, the look of someone who has suffered greatly but still thinks that the world will offer only blessings. I saw in his smile a beast who believes himself to be a playful creature. I saw in his eyes that, given the right situation, he'd be ready with a blessed-by-the-world smile and two clinched fists to march away from all standards of human decency.

This is probably why Nolan talks for both of them.

-We want ya to get the right impression about Martin's World Famous crowdads, he said waving his hands as if he were trying to coax me to buy insurance. Go up there and tell 'em that Nolan said you can try the first time special.

-What is that? I asked.

-It's all you can eat, man, he said. Just five dollars.

-Five dollars, I said, that sounds great. Thanks.

-You don't gotta thank me, Nolan said, you just gotta love what they give you.

I went to the line and told James that I'd be placing my own order. I asked for the special, and less than ten minutes later, a young fellow with a red pepper stained apron set a plate of crawdads and vegetables in front of me. Nolan and Tim stared at me, their eyebrows perked with anticipation, as I stared to peel at the crawdads.

James had taken a seat next to me with his own stack along with a pitcher of beer.

-Do they have good beer? I asked.

James shrugged.

-It's good enough, he answered. It does the job.

I took my first bite, and as the spices ran over my palate, Nolan leaned towards me and whispered.

-Just be careful what ya say 'bout the food, he warned. Some folks here take it real serious. Specially the folks who been livin' here a real long time.

He pointed to a white bearded man in a cowboy hat, a cowboy shirt, and cowboy boots who observed me with a look of mistrust as he sipped a cup of beer.

-Make sure you finish the plate too, Nolan whispered.

He slapped me on the back, sending me into a fit of coughing.

-So how you love it? he shouted.

-This is great, I said.

And it was great, but it was spicier food than what I was used to, and the burn of the spices lingered on my lips.

-This is some good crawfish, I said.

The cowboy outfitted old man set his beer down and spoke in his cowboy accent.

-There is no finer crawfish in the world, he said. Have you found better crawfish?

-I haven't had a lot of crawfish, I answered.

-I didn't think so, he said.

He went back to his beer, but he continued to silently observe me as I kept eating, making sure to smile and display my thumbs up in approval. I finished the plate; I sipped iced tea and dabbed my eyes and my nose with paper towel. Tim used this opportunity to set another plate of crawdads and vegetables in front of me. Steam carried an aroma of peppers that drew more tears from my eyes.

-You got yourself a deal today, he said as he took a seat across from me.

He stared at me, as did Nolan and the cowboy hat fellow who apparently took crawfish quite seriously. James, with red fingers and lumps of vegetable across his face, was pushing as much food into his mouth as he could, and he had no interest in anything beyond his plate and his pitcher.

I realized then that they were pressuring me and that I was probably the butt of a joke. I was born a coward, so even though I'd had enough to eat, I began peeling at another crawdad to the approval of my new acquaintances in Breaux Bridge.

This batch hurt more. At the first bite, I felt the lingering burn of the pervious batch ignited across my tongue and the inside of my cheeks. Tim was biting on his bottom lip to repress laughter. Nolan whispered to me again.

-Remember, he said, don't waste anything. That ole' guy over there's gonna throw a fit.

That white haired, mean-looking bastard was still looking right at me. The world around me suddenly appeared bizarre and difficult to explain. More so than usual, I mean. I'd driven just three and an half hours from the domino skyline of Houston and

taken a seat in a dreamscape of impressions: tears made everyone's faces into blurs along with the smudges of pepper red, corn yellow, beer gold, potato white, and more and more red. The voices surrounding were a mess of southern noises stewed together with an accent that had been born long ago in France, crossed the ocean, and rowed through the damn mud to get there.

For some reason, I focused on the pale blurs making up a beard and cowboy hat. And for some reason, I thought that I could defy him by doing exactly what he wanted me to do.

He didn't think I had the stomach or the soul to endure this burn, I thought. Stare at me all you want, I thought, and sit here as long as you want! I've a lot more time left on this earth than you!

Bravery becomes easy when the world seems like an abstraction. I finished that second plate. Well, I thought I'd finished before Tim picked up one of the tailless shells that I'd discarded and explained that I was throwing out the best part.

-You gotta suck on the heads, he said. That's where all the best stuff's at.

He pressed the crawdad to his lips and sucked, making a terrible, terrible sound of a vacuum cleaner and an animal dying.

Of course, I followed his lead. I didn't really taste anything, but tears obscured Breaux Bridge once again.

They put another batch in front of me. I shouldn't have been surprised that it was hotter than the previous two. Each bite sent throughout my face a scorching sting following by a period of numbness interrupted by another sting.

The old face laughed.

-He'd had enough now, he said. You boys need to stop torturing him. This is starting to get downright inhumane.

-You alright, Tim said. Most folks quit after the second round.

I gave him another thumb up as I dabbed at my lips with a beer dampened paper towel. A bit of drool flowed from the side of my mouth. I was rather proud of myself.

-My face doesn't feel right, I said to James.

James dislikes sympathy as much as he dislikes excessive grooming. He ignored me.

-Hey, he said to Nolan and Tim, is Martin around?

-Nope, Nolan answered. He went off to find his brother.

-Oh no, James said. Why's he looking for his brother?

-Don't know, Tim said. But he looked madder than usual. Maybe he'll kill 'em and carry off his wife.

-Was he really that mad? James asked. Is he gonna go and do something crazy again?

-That's what we watin' to see, Nolan said. I think he's just gonna smack that boy around with his hands. You know, nothin' serious, just a legit ass whoopin'. Now Tim thinks that Martin's gonna break out a club or something.

-Oh no, James said. You think so?

-Yeah, Tim replied, you could see in his eyes that he was thinkin' 'bout killin' something. Always liked Martin.

-Oh no, James repeated. You didn't try to stop him?

-Well, we gotta wager, Nolan explained. If he beats him up barehanded, Timmy gonna buy me a handle a' whiskey.

-You both think he's gonna make it physical? James asked.

-Yup, Tim said. He looked kinda like he did last time when he busted up Frankie. It's a safe bet that there's a beating on the way. The question is how it'll go down.

-Seriously, I said, my face is hurting.

-You're fine, James said. Just don't touch your eyes. We don't have time to go to the hospital. I need to go find Martin.

I complained on the way to James' truck. Again, there was no sympathy.

-Why did you keep eating? James asked as he put another lump of dip in his mouth. If you didn't like it, you shouldn't have done it.

-They were, I stammered, they were all pushing it on me.

-So push the plate away, James said. Jesus, this isn't the Spanish inquisition. Sack up and don't let people bully you.

-I had to prove something, I said. I had to get that moral victory.

James shook his head and started the engine.

-A moral victory, he said. Yeah, well, in a few hours, when you're taking the most painful shit of your life, the moral victory will seem very far away.

In the glove box mirror, I could see that the skin under my eyes was swelling, as were my lips. I'd brought a cup of water with me, but the cup was empty within minutes.

-I can't get these spices out of my mouth, I said.

My vision still blurred, I reached for a plastic coke bottle, and nearly set it to my mouth before I realized that this bottle held a few inches of James' tobacco fluid. The outside of the bottle was wet.

-I'm gonna need that back when you're done, James said.

-Oh, I need a napkin, I said, raising my contaminated hand away from my body. And some soap. You weren't going to stop me from drinking that, were you?

-Why would I? James answered.

-How are we going to find your friend? I asked.

-I can guess where he'll be, James said, because I can guess where his brother will be.

-Is this Martin guy violent? I said. He's been to prison, right?

-See, it's easy to get the wrong idea, James said.

-But your friends back there said that he's going to beat up his brother.

-Well, I know it sounds bad, James said, but you have to hear the story.

He told me a bit about Martin. Later, I learned more details regarding Martin's life from other Breaux Bridgers. The story in print is a combination of these accounts. I filled the gaps of what I didn't know with scenes of my own imagination.

7. **hh** The Story of How Martin Learned to Get Along with His Father

Martin's friends say that the owner of the Red Shack seldom discusses his childhood, his teenage years, or his brief life in college. He believes that there is no way to leave the places you've been, even when your memory fades to impression that start to bleed onto each other. Still, Martin prefers not to reflect too long on the young man he was, a happy fool happily making his way to a prison cell.

On Saturdays, when he meets his five or six friends in his garage to boil shrimp with peppers, onions, garlic cloves, and potatoes, Martin talks about his ideas for seasonings, about the new, paved roads making their way along Watachabe creek, about the new shops downtown, about the construction going on at Martheux Elementary school, and about other developments shaping Breaux Bridge into a place where people will find comfort and safety.

One of the only things he did right, Martin will say, was getting on better terms with his dad, a man who is easy to love, difficult to get along with, and perhaps impossible to understand. Martin has told the story of how he learned to get along with his father often enough that every version I heard was almost completely the same.

Sarah Mazerolle gave birth to two boys, Martin, then, two years later, Frankie. Her mother's predictions turned out to be accurate. Sarah decided to stop conceiving after the second little boy. Her friends speculate that although she would have liked a girl, Sarah feared that if she'd kept giving birth, she'd keep making little men until she had enough to fill every position on the Marthaw County football team. She believed that begetting males was what some people would call destiny because, as her mother had warned, God found it ironic.

She taught elementary school. She fed her children and her husband, who at twenty-seven years of age, borrowed money to invest in a Cajun restaurant in Lafayette. She acquired her mother's habit of sending her boys to play outside of their home located just a few miles from Whiskey creek, where the boys were free to be savage and could do no serious damage. She kept the floors and the walls clean; she opened the windows of

the house, even when the summer's heat peaked and her husband grumbled and complained. She insisted that they savor the lovely weather, not shut it out.

Hunter spent most of time awake at his restaurant, Epice, where, according most Breaux Bridgers, they serve the best crawfish etoufee ever mixed. Epice consumed Hunter's hours, his money, and his energy. For three years, Hunter left his home at dawn, and returned home after midnight, poor and exhausted. Eventually, he would make a great sum of money, and he could have retired long ago, but relentless work had become a habit, and he still gives most of himself to Epice.

During the first three hard years, Hunter needed working hands but had little money, so Martin and Frankie became servants to the restaurant. As boys, they worked at their father's pace, a pace that drove many employees to quit mid workday. They also suffered the temperaments of Hunter's pendulum mood swings, which also sent employees fleeing through the back door, cursing the restaurant from foundation to rooftop.

A successful fighter can be a man full of love who shows kindness to his wife and children, but he must also be a cruel son-of-a-bitch. Hunter never lost a fight, save a match in New Orleans in which the police chief paid off the referee. A few hours after the fight stoppage, he dragged that referee behind the auditorium, grabbed him by the hair, and battered him until the official offered an apology and a wad of sweaty bills. Hunter applied this kind of pitbull tenacity, the mindset that had yielded success in fistfights, to his restaurant. Martin learned from his father to work beyond the point of exhaustion, to speak the truth, and to act cruelly when necessary.

Martin describes his early life by describing endless towers of dirty pots looming over him in the kitchen of Epice. The restaurant has always offered a broad selection of Cajun dishes, most of which require at least a few pots or pans. Many of the larger utensils, such as the pots that Martin could have fit inside, needed to be washed by hand at the end of each business day. Some of those pots still invade Martin's dreams: rows of armored vessels bearing forks and knives march towards him in Roman infantry formation while Martin, equipped with only a damp rag, awaits the ordeal of scrubbing and rinsing.

He didn't mind the labor of chopping green onions, celery, and green peppers for his father's Holy Trinity Mix. The act of preparing food, breaking down ingredients, fusing them together with fire and creating a new flavor in a process that felt like alchemy, always calmed Martin and set him into a state of meditation. His father often chopped alongside him, and Martin listened as Hunter explained what made a decent plate of Cajun food and what made a plate of Cajun food that a customer would remember. Martin watched as his father stirred vegetables into oil over stove fire. He watched him add pinches of seasonings to pots of gumbo while taking sips through a spoon to see if the flavors were balanced. He saw a man devote himself to each plate of food while disregarding everything else around him.

When his father grew tired, his Cajun accent thickened, and the syllables that came from Hunter's mouth fused together in a flowing mess of sounds that baffled his employees, even though most of the people working at Epice grew up close to Breaux Bridge. When he found that no one understood him, Hunter turned more agitated, less focused, and his language morphed into something even more cryptic. Sometimes, when

Hunter shouted a set of indecipherable commands to his staff, his employees would look to Martin and Frankie, hoping that they could provide a translation. The boys would shake their heads and shrug; they offered the others in the kitchen assurances that their father would probably forget most of his incomprehensible decrees so long as the plates of food kept coming.

When he was twelve years old, Martin was an expert at taking a chef's knife to vegetables. He soon found that he performed every chore at Epice better than his brother but that Frankie was far better at taking credit. Frankie would steal piles of Martin's diced vegetables to convince their father that the younger brother was moving faster. He would move some of the dirty pots he was supposed to clean over to Martin's section of the kitchen. He had a talent for knowing when to appear busy and focused, and for years, he tricked his father. Some days, Frankie would simply leave the kitchen and walk out back to draw shapes in the dirt. Martin would shout at him, repeating all the threats he'd learned from the adults. Frankie, who family friends agree was never as tough as his older brother, would eventually go back to the kitchen, where he'd find a way to get more praise than Martin. The boys never played sports together; at home, they threw rocks and mud at each other.

Martin was fifteen years old when he started to complain. The kitchen and the towers of pots in need of washing were common to him, so he never thought to question his situation until, through conversations with his friends, he discovered that although many of the boys his age worked as waiters, dishwashers, or kitchen hands, his friends usually worked just a few times a week rather than almost every day, and his friends received money. Based on the way his friends described their jobs, Martin got the

impression that they enjoyed more pleasant working conditions than he did. He spent most of his hours outside of school by his boss, a retired pugilist, and his brother, a prodigal slacker.

One evening, Martin asked his father about a salary.

-No, his father answered without looking up from the pot of chicken and sausage gumbo that he was tasting.

-But I spend all my time here, and I got no money, Martin said. I can't get on the baseball team 'cause I'm always workin'.

-No, his father answered, still tasting the gumbo.

- I don't think it's even legal for you to make me keep workin' like this without givin' me anything.

His father looked up, dropped his spoon with a clang, and then glared down at Martin. Dark circles had formed under Hunter's eyes.

-Are you an' your brotha formin' a union? He asked.

Martin didn't know how to answer. He'd never negotiated pay before.

-I guess not, he said, unsure about what he and his father were actually talking about.

-Well, I'll tell ya' what, Hunter said, I'll figure out how much you make an hour. Then, we gonna figure out how much you owe me for housin' and food. Go finish choppin' them peppers.

So Martin returned to his cutting board to find that his stack of uncut green bell peppers had grown, while most of his pile of neatly chopped peppers now sat next to Frankie's cutting board on the other side of the kitchen.

-You keep that up, Frankie! Hunter shouted. Marty! You stop tryin' to organize unions and do like yo' brother.

Martin clenched his teeth and started cutting.

Later that evening, when the customers had left and the boys found themselves in the kitchen amongst dirty pots and tired employees, Martin noticed that, as he scrubbed, his brother was counting dollar bills. He had only five or six dollars, so Frankie was probably gloating.

-Where you get that money? Martin asked.

-You mean this money? Frankie said. I got a tip from that table a' old ladies for takin' up all their dishes.

Martin paused his scrubbing.

-Them old laidies in section one?

-Yeah, Frankie said, that sounds right.

-You didn't take up their dirty dishes, Martin said. I did.

-I guess you got most of 'em, Frankie said.

-I got just 'bout all but two of 'em, Martin said.

-But you went to take out the trash, Frankie said.

-Dad shouted at me to take out the trash, 'cause you didn't do it, and shit was fallin' all over the floor, Martin said. You picked up two dishes and got a tip.

-I don't remember all that, Frankie said as he counted once again. You know, it's hard to keep track a' what's goin' on when this place gets busy.

Then, he slid the money in his pocket, took up a damp rag and started washing. Martin didn't see his father standing behind him.

-Are you gonna get anything done today? Hunter said to Martin.

Martin grinded his teeth and started to breathe audibly through his nostrils.

-I'm quittin' this job! Martin shouted.

To make his point, he searched the room for a rag, picked it up, and then tossed it to the kitchen floor.

-What's wrong wit' you today? Hunter said. Are you on the dope now?

-I'm quittin' alright, Martin said. You must owe me twenty thousand dollars for the all the work I done here.

-Are we gonna go through this again? Hunter said. Hurry up with them pots.

-You a tyrant! Martin shouted. I'm risin' against you!

In history class that week, he'd been studying America's revolutionary war.

-You outta complain less and get more done in here, Frankie said.

He'd continued to scrub.

-I'll break one of these pot's up on yo' head! Martin shouted at his brother.

-Hey! Hunter shouted back. You stop actin' crazy or I'll smack some sense into you.

-Aw, just shut up! Martin said to his father. I'll bust your head too!

Silence took hold of the room. Frankie stopped washing. Hunter started to unbutton his chef's coat; Martin waited to see what would happen.

-We goin' outside, boy. Hunter said. Right now.

So they made their way out the back door, Frankie tried to follow, but Hunter ordered him back into the kitchen.

-I'll stay later if ya let me watch, Frankie said.

Hunter pointed to the kitchen.

-Go and finish, he said.

-You shoulda' heard what he was sayin' about you earlier, Frankie said to this father. Said he was gonna toss you around like a little girl.

-Get the hell outta here! Hunter shouted.

Outside, Hunter stripped down to a seasoning-stained undershirt and started stretching his arms and his back. Martin stood motionlessly, again waiting to see what would happen.

-If you gonna run your mouth like you a bad man, Hunter said, then you gonna owe up to it. We gonna have this out. Hope you ready, 'cause I'm commin' for ya.

Martin was as tall as his father, but he was rather thin. Hunter hadn't performed any exercise outside Epice in almost ten years. He'd acquired a belly; sharp bursts of pain often hit his lower back. Still he was, and remains today, rather strong.

Martin needed no further incitement to attack. He ran towards his father, red eyes and flailing knuckles. His father punched him in the belly and pushed him to the dirt where Martin remained on his knees, struggling to draw breathe, conjuring visions of warfare. Frankie had opened the back door and stuck his head through to watch the ordeal. He snickered; Hunter turned and hollered.

-I ain't gonna tell you again to get back in there! He said.

Martin took a handful of damp soil and tossed it at his dad's face. Hunter moved backwards, blinded and stumbling. Martin drove his knee into his father's groin.

The fight really started at this point. Frankie disregarded his father's admonitions and took a seat on the back doorsteps, reasoning that the show would be well worth any

measure of punishment to come later. He had a habit of carrying a bag of peanuts in his pocket; he took it out, opened it, and enjoyed as he watched the spectacle before him.

Martin held his father down and bloodied up his face until Hunter regained his faculties. The two rolled through dirt trading fists and profanities. They came to their feet; Martin found a pile of shattered cinder blocks and started tossing fragments at his father. Martin could throw a ball fairly well. He painted Hunter's neck and forehead with swelling. Hunter closed in on his son.

Time couldn't be measured. After a series of lingering seconds, their faces swelled and their hands ached. Fatigue sapped their ambition to fight; they started to feel the pains that had been concealed by a surges of adrenaline. The warm copper sensation of blood filled their mouths. They stopped swinging to survey the damage they'd done.

Without any exchange of words, they established a ceasefire and a truce. Hunter nodded to his son, who started to walk back inside.

-That was great stuff from both of ya'll, Frankie said through a mouthful of peanuts.

Martin and his father glared at him, sweaty and reeking of aggression. Frankie scurried through the door to the kitchen.

Everyone finished his chores and then went home, where Sarah was keeping herself awake with a cup of tea and a copy of Reader's Digest. She said nothing when Martin and Hunter walked through the door soiled in dirt and bloodstains on their clothes. Behind them, Frankie entered with the grin.

-Great day at work, mom, Frankie said.

Martin and his dad sat at the kitchen table holding bags of ice against their faces. Sarah decided to go to bed and to wait until morning to ask what had happened.

-Irony, Irony, she said, making her way up the stairs. All is irony.

A discussion over payment took place in the kitchen. Epice was finally starting to yield a substantial profit. Hunter could afford to hire new employees, and to give his sons five dollars an hour.

-I'll let ya work some tables and get some tips too, Hunter said.

They shook hands and never raised their voices to each other again.

Many years later, Hunter would be the first in his family to forgive his son, and the only one to offer him help. No one is certain if Sarah ever found a way to accept the person that Martin became, nor is anyone certain if Sarah ever had the ability to do so later in her life. At least, Martin will say, he got one thing right with the family.

8. The crawfish was really, really spicy. I can't feel my tongue.

Seldom do the settings and the characters you hear of in stories closely fit the places you visit and the people you meet, but Alderoun's, the bar on the creek, was almost exactly the bar I'd imagined when James told me where Sarah and Hunter used to play poker with Christopher Caldoun. Mark Butler sat on a stool behind the bar with his fishing catalogue. An overfed golden retriever, a girl, lay across the floor. To indicate excitement, she wagged her tail, shuffling around dust and wads of trash, as the rest of her body remained inanimate.

Alderoun's was one of Frankie's hangout spots, and we needed to find Frankie, although I still wasn't certain why.

-You know, James said as he stood at the door, scanning the room, you really want to know a lot about these people.

-That's part of doing my research, I said.

-I didn't think that was the sort of writing you did, he said. How much personal history stuff are you gonna put in the article?

-I need to just gather materials at this point, I said, resorting to my emergency cliché language. I'll work out all the nuts and bolts of it later.

He addressed Mark, who looked up from his catalogue and came out of his stupor.

-Jimmy boy! He shouted as he extended his hand. You back, big man.

-Yes sir, James answered.

-You in town for Birdy's wedding?

-Yes sir, James said. But right now, I'm tryin' to find Martin.

-He out lookin' for his brother again? Mark said.

-Yup. Martin said.

-Man, oh man, Mark said, I bet those boys gonna kill each other. It's funny, funny stuff.

-Sure is, James said, frowning. Funny every time.

-Your boy Birdy's over there at the pool table.

-Didn't even see him, James said.

-That's 'cause he's hidin' Mark, explained. He'll come out, but he's a little scared a getting married. Usually it ain't what you expect, you know. Funny, funny stuff.

James insisted that we go and say Hi to the groom.

-I just need to wash this hand, I said.

Mark pointed to the restroom, but I couldn't see it.

I tried not to think about touching James' tobacco bottle, but the more I tried not to think about it, the more I wondered how much of the moist stuff on my hand was saliva, how much was tobacco excretions, and how much of it was an unidentified fluid. I tried not to think about the fact that I almost drank the stuff. My mouth had gone numb.

Birdy, a thin fellow with curly hair flowing out of a baseball cap, was shooting pool by himself. He stood reflecting on the balls over the table until he saw James.

-Oh no! he shouted as he extended his arms for a hug. Trouble's here now!

They embraced and pat each other's shoulders as I searched for the restroom.

James introduced me as his friend, because, I think, he didn't feel like taking the time to explain why I'd come. Birdy greeted me, and I replied, rudely, with a nod and a grunt. I'd just found the restroom door.

-He's a tough boy, huh? I heard Birdy say as I walked away. No handshake or nothin'. He's got kinda like an intense face.

-Sure. James answered.

I certainly never expected anyone to describe me with a word like "tough." Let me explain: I couldn't play sports because I was afraid to catch the ball because the other kids threw it too fast. I didn't want to get tackled. I didn't like running because running made my stomach hurt. I didn't like going camping because bug bites hurt and the ground isn't a comfortable place to sleep. Heavy lifting scares me. So do most insects.

Once, in the fifth grade, I pushed a bigger kid, who pushed me back. I fell down and started crying. Before I came to Breaux Bridge, this incident made up both the sum

of my fighting experience and the sum of my experience of taking a stand. So people usually don't put a word like "tough" around my name.

I washed my hand and rinsed my mouth. I got some feeling back across my tongue and my cheeks, but my face was still, as Birdy said, "intense" with redness and what looked like swelling.

Birdy and James were chatting at the pool table as I walked out. A girl entered through the doorway and gave Mark Butler a friendly sort of kiss on his cheek. She was fairly young, and she had dark hair that drew my attention. Birdy saw my reaction.

-Not bad, huh? he said to me. I'll put her next to ya.

He'd paused his conversation to watch as the girl spoke to Mark.

-Don't say nothin', Mark. Birdy said in a hushed voice. Don't you tell where I'm at. Don't you tell her just 'cause you think she's pretty. Aw, hell!

Mark pointed to our table in the back of the room. She made a little jump and waived.

-You know, Birdy said, pointing to an unlit neon sign on the wall, I pulled the plug on that so that I wouldn't have to deal with any kinda stress. Well here it comes.

She made her way towards us, using her fingers to brush some of that hair behind her ears.

Birdy returned a clam, tilted smile as he whispered to me.

-Alright, he said, you just follow what I say, alright?

-Huh? Was my response.

I looked to James, hoping for an explanation.

-Just roll with it, James said. He knows what he's doing.

-But what's he doing? I asked.

She arrived at our table, and gave hugs to Birdy, and then to James. She turned to speak with Birdy, but he put his hand on her shoulder and turned her towards me.

-This my boy Randy, he said. Randy, you lucky to meet Aldara.

-Hey, she said, scanning me up and down.

Randy is not my name. Birdy knew that this isn't my name. I went along with the ruse because I felt pressured and, as I said before, I usually back down from everything.

-Randy you from...uh...Birdy said.

-Houston, I answered.

This also wasn't exactly true, but I thought it would make our story simple as possible.

-Houston, right, Birdy said. This wedding got me forgettin' things. Now, this boy got kinda an intense face huh? He one of those guys who looks tough, in kind of a not-tough looking way. You know, you wouldn't see it commin.

Aldara was starting to look as confused as I was.

-Something wrong with your face? she asked.

-He's a fighter, Birdy said.

Even James almost lost his stoic face at this point. Aldara didn't see my look of you-can't-really-expect-anyone-to-fall-for-this because she turned all her attention to Birdy.

-He is? she said, projecting an appropriate level of disbelief as she pointed in my direction.

She looked back to me, and it was my turn to run with the lie.

-What kinda fightin' you do? she asked. It looks pretty nasty.

In the dim light and in the distorting fog of suggestion, I could convince someone that I'd been hit in the face.

-Cage fighting, I said.

Birdy nodded without falling out of character. He really was good at this.

-Really? Aldara said, scanning me up and down once again.

-He fights lightweight, Birdy said.

-Really? She said.

-Lighter than that, actually, I said. I do uh, the pillow weight division.

-You said the feather weight division? Birdy cut in.

-That's what I said, I answered. Feather. Like feathers in....featherweight.

-Well, I'm about to get outta here, Birdy said. You be sweet for Randy. He's still kinda busted up from his last match. You won, right?

-Yup, I said.

-How'd you win? Aldara asked.

At this moment, I wished that I'd had some chance to rehearse.

-With...

I paused and made a choking gesture like the one I'd seen on TV.

-A choke, I said, one of those nude chokes from behind...

-You said a rear naked choke? Birdy interjected.

-A rear naked choke, I said. I put it right on him. It wasn't nice, but I had to it.

Yep.

-Well, are ya'll stayin'? Aldara said. Some friends a' mine are gonna be here in a minute.

-We've got some things to do, James said.

-Randy's commin' to my wedding too, Birdy said. He's got a few days to heal up. Wait till you see him dance.

-Be safe then, she said, as the three of us walked out. Bye, Randy. Don't choke nobody out there.

-I'll try, I said.

Aldara waived as we left.

-So you wanna come to my wedding? Birdy asked.

-What is all this? I said.

-Man, Birdy sighed. I broke it off with her right before I got engaged. Now, she won't leave me alone. I'm tryin' to behave.

-Why would you invite her to your wedding? I asked.

-I didn't, he said. My fiancée did. They been knowin' each other since first grade.

-Does you fiancée know that....

-Hell yes, she knows that that girl still trying to hook up with me. Birdy answered. That's why this is really causin' me some anxiety, man. But they in this big group a' friends together.

-Even now? I asked.

-Well, Birdy said, they kinda hate each other, but they still friends. Look, I never really figured out how girls think. Not really.

-But why the fake name and the fighter story? I asked.

Birdy speaks in a seamless rumble of low tones when he's trying to persuade you.

-Cause it's perfect for you, Birdy said. Aldara likes Cajun guys, and rough-type guys, and I can't pass you as a Cajun guy.

-I don't look anything like a fighter, I said.

-You do now, Birdy answered. She is pretty much gonna do anything I ask her. I already tried to pass her off on someone else, but, well it didn't work out. James don't want her 'cause he got this rule about friends' ex-girls. But hey, she don't even know your real name, and James says you're going to be in town for just a few days.

He put his arm across my shoulders.

-This is a gift from God, man, he said. There's nothin' to tie you down. This ain't gonna cost you anything. All you gotta do is just show up and it's a done deal. You've had bad luck before, right? No one ever explains to you why you get hit with bad luck. So when you get some good luck, when you roll the dice, and God gives you the numbers you want, you don't ask questions. Just take the free booty and thank God later.

-But I'm engaged, I said.

-What? Birdy said. Is it really serious? I mean, how come you went along with all that?

I didn't have an answer.

-Just come to the wedding, Birdy said. I don't expect you to do anything if you don't want to. Just get yourself some free drinks and some great food and have some fun.

-We'll see, I said.

This was a lie. It wasn't a direct lie, but I wasn't honest about my intentions. I wanted to see what I'd find at the wedding. Some of the stories I'd heard might take shape in front of me.

-We'll try Jerry's, James said when we were in the truck. I hope Martin hasn't gone off yet.

-Would that girl really make eyes at your friend at his wedding? I asked. I mean, at his wedding?

-I've got some strange friends here, James answered.

-But they seem pretty amiable, I said. I mean, they kinda mess with you, but it's like they mess with you because they want to be friends.

-Maybe we can teach you a Cajun accent, James said, taking up his bag and his bottle.

9. The Fog of Suggestion: How to Make a Fence Post into a Sea Monster

Please believe this story. This story is true, and if every other word outside of this section is a distortion, at least you'll have a reason to forgive me. About six years ago, the British Broadcasting Company set out to resolve the mystery of the Loch Ness monster. Some of my readers will always loathe the BBC for this reason. A research team spent a terrible sum of money, and they used laser satellite technology to scan the depths for the exhalations of a sea monster. They persisted for days, and they found absolutely no evidence of any creature large enough to be the fabled monster of the Loch Ness. Sorry, faithful readers; I published as many of your angry letters as my editor allowed.

But if Nessie lives in the boundless waters of the mind and not at bottom of a Loch in Scotland, why, the folks from the BBC wanted to know, have so many regular people with no signs of mental illness and who stand to gain make no money from telling wild stories keep reporting sightings of a creature that resembles the infamous black and white silhouette?

You must know what silhouette I'm talking about here, even if you think that trading sea monster stories is the basest of all human interactions. You've seen the image of the serpentine neck emerging from the water. When you hear or read the words Loch Ness Monster, I'm willing to guess that this is the image you imagine, unless you're among the group of people who have witnessed creature in person, or if you're among the smaller group of people who have never given monsters any thought.

The photo was a hoax, probably, in my opinion, the greatest hoax of all time because we know it's a hoax, and yet it shapes the way people see the world. You don't have to believe in a monster to see it, just as you don't have to believe in the things you find in your dreams to experience them. The BBC people, bless their meticulous souls, stuck a fence post, just a straight slab of wood in the mud in view of where ferries carry tourists on guided tours of the Loch Ness. At the end of the tour, the reporters ask the tour-goers if they had seen anything unusual coming from the water. About nine out of every ten people said that a wooden object protruding from mud looked a bit out of place. The rest of them described a creature shaped liked the silhouette of the black and white picture, the one that we all know is a hoax. Of those who reported to have encountered a sea monster, about half of them didn't believe the BBC people who later explained that the fence post was part of an experiment. They'd seen a monster, and about half of the

true believers said they didn't believe in the legend of the Loch Ness before going on the tour.

A fence post can morph into a monster once the silhouette swims into your dreams. A girl can look at me, a frightened little guy, and see a brawling hero.

You ought to stop believing me at this point. I'm going to give another story about Martin and his family. Most of it comes from what I heard, what I saw, what I know must be true.

10. The Story of Martin's Imprisonment and Sarah's Illness

Both of the Mazerolle boys earned scholarships to attend Louisiana State University. Patrons were lining up for more than an hour to visit their father's restaurant, and Hunter had enough money to start buying homes to rent out in Breaux Bridge, but the father believed that boys needed to overcome hardships in order to become men.

Martin worked for his opportunities much harder than Frankie, who studied the night before his tests, slept in class, and graduated Marthaw Country high school at the top of his class. Once enrolled in college, Martin declared Mechanical Engineering as a major and tainted the pages of his textbooks with oil from his fingers. Frankie, an accounting major, frequented bars and staggered to his classes to continue earning the highest marks in his class.

While the Mazerolle boys were still college students, they'd gone drinking around the LSU campus, and then gone out to a parking lot fist fight with two other LSU freshmen over a money game of pool. Frankie had been the one who had gone to his truck, pulled out a handgun, and fired in the air, but after his rivals went running, Frankie drove off as Martin, bloody faced and inconsolable, chased them down the road where

the police eventually tackled them all, and, in the bout of confusion, Martin took the fight to the officers, grabbed one of their guns and pushed the barrel against one of the police man's forehead. They clubbed Martin, cuffed him, beat him, and carried him off.

Two days before Martin went to trial, he'd sat across the table from his mother. She'd spread some marmalade jam on an English muffin as he'd explained that he might be gone for a while. Sarah took a bite of the muffin, then wiped her mouth and started to scream and shed tears. Martin had no answer. She'd wiped her face, taken another bite and said Well, Marty, this is the person you've become.

Sarah had started to forget the names and addresses that had always been at the tip of her pen when she sat down to write her keeping-in-touch letters. She lost her keys and her purse. The azaleas in her garden withered and perished because she was drenching them with water six or seven times a day. She went to the doctor after she took her once-a-day heart medication three times in one hour, and she learned that her mind was sick and fading.

As her friends turned to strangers and Breaux Bridge became an unknown place, Sarah made sure that her house was in order. She labeled every box, alphabetized every book and every herb and spice in her kitchen. She moped, vacuumed, dusted, and swept. She crawled over her wooden floors to inspect every corner of each room, fearing that even a spec-sized contaminant might set everything in her home into a storm of confusion like the sort that had already taken over the world outside of her immaculate walls.

Her older son, Martin, went away. Her younger child, Frankie, who had been born with a talent for numbers, learned accounting and found a pretty lady to marry. Sarah tried to remember the face of this pretty lady, hoping that before all the memories

faded, Sarah would be able to hold a pretty newborn and know that the baby was her own grandchild.

When Martin returned years later, his face had changed. His hair was turning gray. He spoke in different voice. Sarah didn't know him; he was a stranger in her house that stood just a few miles down a pebbled road where Martin had rented out a shotgun home by Whiskey Creek. He embraced her; she trembled and whimpered as if he'd taken her captive in his arms. Martin watched her retreat to her room and sighed Well ma, I guess I ain't your son no more.

Frankie walked in the door a while later; Sarah hugged him, sat him down at the coffee table to play a few hands of a card game unknown to everyone but her. She set jars of strawberry jam in his lap, kissed his forehead, and exclaimed Here's my college boy!

She set her cards in front of Frankie while Martin spoke to his father, who wrote a check for seven thousand dollars.

-This is a loan right here, Mr. Mazerolle explained to his son. You go and be an honest man. I ain't ever gonna ask you to repay me, but you gonna have to if you really wanna be honest.

As he spoke, he could hear Sarah, who had left her card game to enter the kitchen where she mumbled half sentences and half words about berries and seasons and grandma's recipes. She clanged her pans as she shuffled through the cabinets to make another jar of strawberry jam. Each day, she added two or three jars to the pantry. Strawberries were in season, but in a few months, molasses colored rows of apricot would line up in the kitchen followed by golden rows of marmalade. Her husband gave

as many jars as he could to neighbors and friends and to the Baptist Church of Marthaw County for bake sales. Still, the jars were taking over the kitchen and making their way to the laundry room. She'd been making jam since she was a girl; the only other way she knew to spend the hours of each day was to play cards. But her husband never knew what game Sarah was playing when she sat before him, jittering eyes, and dealt random numbers of cards across the table stuttering, I win, I win, you gotta play that hand better now; I win. She was no longer playing gen rummy or hearts or spades, the games in which she'd bested her husband for thirty-two years of their marriage.

Martin thanked his father and left with eight strawberry jars and a seven-thousand dollar check and returned to his shotgun home where he sat drinking coffee and staring into the jars as he wondered what to do with his freedom. He went to his kitchen where he chopped up green onions, green bell peppers, along with celery to make up a Holy Trinity the way he'd learned when he was boy working in his father's Cajun restaurant in Lafayette. He dropped the mix onto a skillet with some margarine, added spices and herbs, tasted his concoction, tossed everything in the skillet away, and then started chopping more vegetables to try a new mix. He worked all night, slept a few hours, awoke to drink a few cups of coffee and then went back to testing his seasonings. Two days later, he'd found the right blend; he jotted it down in his notebook and then left his home to examine an old shed that stood in a field by a pebbled road less than a mile away from I-10. The place had remained empty and neglected since Robby Foudeaux and his wife had stopped selling burgers out of the shed five years earlier and retired in a boat house a few miles away. Robby wore a cowboy hat, a cowboy belt buckle, and snakeskin cowboy boots. He started drinking beer promptly at eleven each morning until about four

when his wife drove by to bring him home. Martin knew where to find the old man who always sat at the same barstool.

He told Robby that he wanted to sell crawfish, but that he wanted to do it the right way: he'd make sure to buy it from the right farms and not from those sloppy sons-of-bitches up north who peddle the bitter stuff, and he'd purge the crawdads, and boil them twice, the way a chef like his dad would do it, and he'd use his own mix of spices to make sure that anyone driving over I-10 who stopped by his shack would know a little bit of what Breaux Bridge was about.

-So, he asked Robby, how much you want for that heap over there?

Robby laughed as the younger man talked about money and plans for the future and replied, Son, just go boil up your crawdads, and if you do 'em right, if I can and walk down that road and get quality cuisine, then you can have the place, and I'll have another reason to wake up.

A week later, Robby made his way down the pebbled road and through the field to discover that his tired-red shack now stood fresh red, fuming with smoke that carried the aroma of Martin's spices. Martin gave him a pound of crawdads and vegetables free of charge. When Bobby had finished, he wiped his white beard and said, Well, sir, this is the best boiled crawfish since people boiled crawfish; I'll let everybody know; make sure you get one of them licenses ya need to sell some beer, and you'll have yourself a valuable patron.

Martin knew that he'd need a name for his business as well as a sign displaying this name, but the people of Breaux Bridge started arriving in long, demanding lines. Martin had to hire a few high school kids for help, and he never found the hours he

needed to make his place official. The people of Breaux Bridge knew it as a Red Shack in the field by the interstate where Martin Mazerolle, a reformed sinner who kept his sorry brother in line, boiled the best crawdads in the world.

11. The Story of How Tim and Birdy Became Friends

The patrons who sit around Martin's picnic tables at lunch time care for Tim and accept the trouble he gives Breaux Bridge because Tim, like Martin's blend of seasonings, is made of the elements unique to their home. If you ever visit the Red shack to try the best crawdads in the world, you'll probably find Tim among the other regulars who nudge together and dampen each others' shoulders with sweat. Even if Tim is absent, you'll probably hear stories of Crazy Tim, who set the Marthaw Country High School wrestling team record for the most pins in a season, or Timmy the Mad Dog who drinks Louisiana moonshine right from the damn bottle until his eyes go red and a stench comes through his pores, or Moccasin Tim, whose best friends are pits, who fights at weddings, and who likes classical music and Greek art.

The newest, least revised Tim story passing back and forth over Martin's tables is that of Tim's friendship with Birdy Thompson Bradley. Martin's customers can think of only a few circumstances in which such dissimilar creatures might grow so close so quickly: a war, a prison, or natural disaster. Some claim that, perhaps, Birdy and Tim share a trait that most people can't see.

Most of the story comes from Tim, who is always honest but never reliable. If Tim reports to have seen a fourteen foot alligator in Whiskey creek, those who know him know that the alligator might have been about seven feet or that, maybe, there was no alligator at all, but something with the shape of an alligator was rippling the muddy

water. So when Tim offers a story, listen for details that resonate, and perhaps you'll have some idea of the shape of that set the ripples in motion.

Tim was a strange child who had few friends and spent most of his after school days walking the fields and the creeks barefoot. He likes to feel the cool mud between his toes and to watch how living things compete and cooperate without human intrusions. On more than a few of those afternoon walks, he accidentally frightened a water moccasin and gave it reason to strike. He'd return to his mother and lie sick with venom for a few days. Before he was a teenager, he'd received enough of the moccasin's poison to develop a tolerance, and he started carrying in his belt a hunting knife. Then, one afternoon, he came to his mother with a pale tone in his skin indicating that he'd be ill from venom and a jar bearing the head of a water snake. His mother ordered him to bed, and shouted for him to throw the nasty thing away in the back yard. She knew then that God had given her a peculiar son who wouldn't mature quite like the other boys of Breaux Bridge.

He was born strange, Breaux Bridgers say, and then, venom flowed through his veins into his mind and changed him into a different sort of animal that preferred the ruthless environment of the natural world over the rules of men and women.

When he was twelve years old, two older, bigger boys found Tim riding his bike through the park behind St. Peter's Church of Peace. They waited for him to stop at a water fountain, where one of the boys pushed him down while the other straddled his bike and began circling him and taunting him.

Tim took up his bike helmet with both hands, and something took hold of him. Many of his friends say that it was serpent's instinct to attack when threatened; other's

claim that a demon occupies Tim's body when the boy grows angry. He broke one boy's nose. He knocked the other off the bike, and brought down the helmet on the other's body until a few adults managed to pull Tim away. Mike Butler, a superstitious fellow, will still claim that some of the devil's essence must flow through Tim's body, because no boy, according to Mike, could be that strong.

Tim's father also witnessed the incident. In view of the crowd, he told his son to remove his shirt and lean both hands against a tree. His father took off his work belt and lashed his son until his lashing arms burned from fatigue and streaks of red, and purple colored Tim's pale back. The boy never flinched or cried out. His father took him home to the back yard, where he again instructed his shirtless son to find a tree. Again, the father couldn't endure the labor swinging the belt or the image of red and purple over pale skin, so he quit. The next day, brought his son to Marthaw County Wrestling practice, hoping to give purpose and discipline to the boy who now frightened him.

The wrath that controlled Tim was, at first, an untamed thing that more experienced wrestlers could outmaneuver and defeat. Still, Tim's coaches had never seen any child with such a desire to knock over the others, who had such a disregard for pain and exhaustion. They trained him into an athlete.

At fifteen years old, Tim had learned to focus his instincts and attack his opponents with measured explosions. In competitions he inflicted on the others the sort of cruelty that he'd observed during his ventures through the creeks. He pushed their heads to the mat and grinded his elbows against their faces. He full-nelsoned them and torqued their necks with as much force as he could summon. He dislocated elbows and knees. He fractured a few arms. Rival parents demanded that Tim be prohibited from

competing, but Tim never once broke any rules, so parents began pulling their children off the mats to avoid an encounter with the little monster from Breaux Bridge.

Tim counts his pit bulls as some of his closest friends. He looks for fighting traits in his acquaintances. Each time he visits Nathan Antoline, the dog breeder, in Baton Rouge to take a pup, he takes up one by the ear to see if the creature yelps. If it does yelp, then Tim drops it back into the litter; he looks for the pups that growl. Tim would never send his dogs to fight because Tim loves his friends, but he doesn't want to keep company with a cur that would retreat in a fight.

Most of his human friends wrestled for Marthaw county. He and Nolan Marquart, who grew up in Lafayette and moved to Breaux Bridge after high school, were opponents at a division meet. Nolan lost two matches his high school career, one loss being a disqualification. He believed himself to be the meanest wrestler in the state of Louisiana, while Tim believed himself to be the most terrible of all God's creations. Tim won the match in overtime, and the two were friends as they walked out the gymnasium.

He works at Swiney's grocery a few nights a week and coaches wrestling at Marthaw County High. He still makes his walks through creek. A stack of library books about the ancient sculptures of Greece sit in his room along with texts about the artwork of the Renaissance. Nolan, who eventually shared a house with Tim, asked why.

-'Cause it's funny how we shape things, Tim answered with his hand on a picture of a Greek statue. It's funny how we make things look like us, 'cause we don't know what we really made of or what we are. And you got to know something about art or people gonna say you a coonass.

Nolan never asked again, nor did he ask about the selection of classical music that Tim listens to every morning and evening. But when they sit on their couch, which is missing the left arm, drinking beer and moonshine, Tim articulates his thoughts.

His favorite composer is Wolfgang Amedeus Mozart, who was, in his opinion, one of the best specimens mankind has ever produced, along with Albert Einstein, Thomas Jonathan “Stonewall” Jackson, Ghengis Khan, and Dan Gable.

He despises the music of Ludwich Von Beethoven, because he was “An arrogant sumabtich” whose music “too damn dramatic” and “just boring sometimes.”

But he loves the compositions of Richard Wagner.

-I like what those Germans do, he explained to Nolan, who was drunk and fading to sleep. So much art and music and good ideas. And cars too. I like just ‘bout everything that country does. Except for that one thing.

Tim and his sister have the same hue of green in their pupils. This is probably the only trait they have in common. Gina is a pretty girl who spent few waking hours away from the company of girlfriends or boyfriends. She acquired her mother’s body when she was fourteen years old.

Her father saw how the young men of Breaux Bridge looked at her and recalled his own adventures with blossoming ladies that he’d enjoyed as a young man. He hoped that Tim would take on the role of a guard dog, but Tim had no common interests with his sister and saw no reason to defend a girl would could, according to him, fight for herself if she wanted. The father’s hands started to shake whenever he held up a magazine to pass the time as he awaited Gina’s, late night, weekend returns through the back door.

When she became engaged at eighteen years of age, her dad thanked the Lord for making Breaux Bridge a righteous place of Christian values. He didn't even mind that Gina had chosen Birdy Thompson Bradley as a fiancé, despite Birdy's reputation.

Birdy cannot speak to a female, regardless of her age or his relation to her, without putting on a subtle performance. He will speak in his baritone flow of calming syllables and put on a tilted smile that, many years ago, he rehearsed until it was no longer an effort, but an impulse. He winks, pinches, grins, leans close, whispers, and teases just as some people will bite their nails or scratch the back of their heads.

Like most young men, Birdy wanted exploration and conquests, and, once he'd tasted enough, he wanted a safe home and a wife who could offer comfort rather than thrills. But unlike more men, Birdy had tasted enough adventure by the time he was twenty years old, embarking on new conquests felt like floating through dreams of old conquests. He took girls by their hands to Jerry's, to Alderoun's, to the Red Shack, to the upstairs of his parent's garage where he always kept a clean sleeping bag, to his room, to dorm rooms, to sorority houses, to bars in Lafayette that he entered with a fake driver's license, to church, to his car, to hotels, to restrooms, and, once, to a barn. He found excitement in the approach and the pursuit. When he discovered a new face, leaned close, winked, pinched, smiled, grinned, whispered and teased, his heart pumped quicker as his blood warmed.

But when he first met Gina, Birdy had noticed that new faces and new pursuits no longer quickened his pulse or warmed his blood. He was courting three other girls when he first took Gina by the hand to a pool hall in Lafayette, where the doorman, whom Birdy had introduced to a few other young ladies, allowed them to enter. Gina did

everything he knew he liked as well as a some things that Birdy never knew that he liked. She returned all his quips with laughter, all his smiles with kisses.

When he pulled by the hand or by the arm, she resisted before she gave in, so that Birdy was always in pursuit, even after he'd known her for months. She giggled and always put on a look of wonder when he brought her out down town or back to his room, but he learned that she had experience placating boys, and he thought of her more than other girls, all of whom he eventually stopped calling.

After they were engaged, Birdy learned that Gina was a better performer than he'd ever been. He discovered this after they'd found an apartment together, and, without discussion, she decided what should adorn each wall, and how the furniture should be arranged. Birdy didn't mind her leading him to pick out flower arrangements, leading him to church with her family, or leading him to whatever restaurant she'd selected for a given evening, but one night, he awoke and realized that he been lead for the last four months of his life.

Within a few months of their wedding, Gina announced one evening that they would not make love again until after the wedding so that the honeymoon would be more than common routine in a different setting. Birdy agreed without protest, believing that his fiancée would surrender, just as she'd always swooned and disrobed after feigning resistance. He was wrong, and the world as he perceived reshaped.

Birdy decided that he would entertain Gina's proposal for a week before having his way again. He picked a Saturday, and told his friends that he wouldn't be able to meet them at the pool tables because his fiancée wanted him to stay home. That night, Birdy found her on the sofa, snuggling a blanket, watching a movie. He moved close; she

nudged him away. This skirmish continued until Gina stood, crossed her arms and told him to go out to into the winter night and take a run. He leaned in and started his performance; her shielding arms and her posture did not falter. He knew then that he could charm her only when she wanted to be charmed. He took a step back and grew very afraid.

Birdy did not want to betray his future wife. He had a weakness for overindulgence, but Birdy was born without any cruelty in his soul. Of course, there were temptations, and Birdy knew of himself that his habit was not to fight temptations, but to surrender to them unconditionally. Not all of the girls that he'd given up were willing to give him up in return. His strategy, a wise one, was to keep himself as far away from these temptations as possible. He purchased a new cell phone with a new phone number. He severed his contacts with almost all of his girls, all but a lovely, confused girl named Aldara Alderon.

As a young girl, Aldara didn't speak to boys, unlike Gina, her friend since the first grade. She had braces and oily blots across her face. Her father was something of a stranger; he would stand in his bedroom all night and then collapse on the floor. He would take walks around the block in his pajamas, his arms extended like a bird taking flight, and he wouldn't answer his wife when she shouted at him from her minivan, so he was taken away. At school, Aldara remained in her flock of girlfriends, listening to their conversations. At home, she shut herself in her room, sometimes to study, and sometimes to look into her bed sheets or her ceiling.

She grew older and worked to be a pretty sight. Boys noticed her, but she didn't know how to respond to their invitations, so she usually returned to her room, alone, still

dressed and made up. Birdy was the first one to take her by the hand out of her room; she made a mistake common to many lonely people and convinced herself that his hand was the only one that could guide her out of solitude. She also made the mistake of believing that she'd fallen in love with Birdy, when she'd fallen in love with his performances, just as a girl in a theatre might believe that she loves an actor after watching a character move across the screen for a few hours.

Aldara probably knew that Birdy ran with other girls. Most Breaux Bridgers knew this of Birdy, but Birdy knew how to help Aldara push her doubts and her fears aside to somewhere she could ignore them. On a Thursday night, while she was spreading foundation over her face, Birdy called to tell her that he was engaged. He'd rehearsed his speech for an hour or so, and already delivered it to four other girls whom he left laughing through their tears. They'd all wished him the best.

After he'd finished his speech, some of which he improvised, Birdy waited for Aldara to react with a similar outburst of sobs and affection. But he heard only calmness in the receiver.

-Congratulations, she said. I hope it works out for ya'll.

-Thanks, Birdy said.

There was a pause as Birdy ran his fingers through his hair and Aldara applied more makeup.

-Hey, Birdy said, you know I'm serious about this, right?

-Talk to you soon, hun, Aldara answered.

She hung up before she heard any of Birdy's protests.

This was when Birdy went to get a new phone. He placed the memories of Aldara and his other girls in a compartment his of mind with recollections painful experiences that he didn't want to look in the face. He was far more concerned with Gina's brother, someone he would have to see at Church, and at Gina's other family functions. He'd heard of Tim, the demon of local legends, since high school, and he'd spoken to Tim a few times. Tim was always polite, but Birdy got the impression that Tim didn't like him, probably because Tim really didn't like him.

Tim found in Birdy none of the pitbull traits he admired in living things. He watched Birdy cast a charm on every individual Birdy met, and Tim saw someone who avoided conflicts and confrontations. One evening on the couch, while he was sharing a bottle of moon shine with Nolan, Tim's doubts about his future brother in law took shape. Nolan didn't have to broach the subject; they were both slumped over, breathing through their mouths as the effects of the moonshine reached a peak, when Tim, jolted to life by a revelation, sat up and said I'm not gonna get along with that Pretty-eyed boy.

-Who you talkin' about? Nolan said. Ain't nobody else here. You goin' crazy again?

-I'm talking about that brother in law of mine. Tim said.

-How come you don't like him? Nolan said.

Tim's eyes shifted left, right, up, and down as he considered how to vocalize his thoughts. Nolan regretted asking the question.

-Because, Tim finally said. He's like a little lizard.

-Man, Nolan said, when you start drinking you don't even try to make sense, huh?

-I was watching this nature show on the nature channel a few days ago, Tim said. They were showin' how, in the Amazon forest parts, they got two types a' lizards. They big lizards, who go and get the females by bein' bigger and tougher than the other male lizards. Then, they these little male lizards. See, these lizards are so small and girl-like that the female lizards mistake 'em as females. So they get close to the girl lizards that way, and then jump up on 'em, and then, you got a whole new generation of bitch-made males. It's like they cheat the whole system.

-So you think that you a big lizard? Nolan asked.

-I would be big lizard, Tim said. And I wouldn't be friends with little lizards.

-You would definitely scare off the girl lizards, Nolan said. So you hate the guy 'cause he's gotten lots of girls. Man, of all the reasons to hate a guy.

-I might have to mess up that pretty eyed boy once or twice before the wedding, Tim said. You know, test 'em.

-I hope you forget about all this, Nolan said, closing his eyes.

But Tim had passed judgment and assigned Birdy a label. The next time he saw Birdy at the Red Shack, he shook his hand and asked how the plans for the wedding were going. But after they had exchanged goodbyes, Tim accidently bumped his shoulder into Nolan in a way that was not an accident. Birdy grunted and reeled back from the blow.

-Careful, Tim said. You don't wanna get all uglified up before the wedding.

Later, he decided to take a seat next to Birdy at the picnic table. Tim sucked the juices from a crawfish head, producing a slurping sound that drove off Birdy's appetite for food of any kind. Birdy didn't respond, but he wondered if, maybe, fortune would deal him a winning hand and send Tim to the military or to prison within the next few

years. Then, a girl walked past their table, and Birdy saw Tim's face, the expression of a dog in biting range of a raw steak. Birdy came up with a plan.

-So what's up, man? Birdy said. You find some talent over there?

Tim nodded.

-That's Lisa, Birdy said. I've been knowin' her since my sophomore year. I can introduce you.

-Well, Tim said, ok.

-Just don't be so scary, man. Birdy said.

-Whatcha mean? Tim asked.

-I mean you look like a serial killer sometimes, Birdy said. Girls would probably get more comfortable around you if they weren't always fearin' for their lives.

Tim peeled another crawfish tail and took a minute to decide if he was going to stand up and punch his future brother-in-law in the face. After some consideration, Tim found his answer.

-Ok, Tim said, so what should I do?

And the coaching session began. They stayed at Martin' all afternoon, Tim asking questions and Birdy providing anecdotes as examples, until the sun neared the horizon and Martin and his employees started picking up trash and hosing off the tables. They shook hands before they left, and this time, Tim made no attempt to test Birdy's courage.

The two continued their discussion the next day and for the rest of the week. At first, Birdy feared that offering Tim advice would be a chore of drudgery, but he found that, like any effective teacher, he wanted to see his pupil grow and succeed. He wanted

the safety and the comfort of marriage, but Birdy's adventure seeking instincts still engendered in him a desire to explore and to find new conquests, a desire that the groom knew might never leave him. Maybe, he thought, he could live through another man's stories.

He hoped that Tim could bring to Martin's tables each week tales of glorious debaucheries. They would celebrate each victory with drinks and obscenities, Birdy thought. They would laugh and shout, and Birdy would be able to enjoy those blood-warming thrills of his past by following a hero through a narrative landscape occupied by nymphs of Birdy's imagination.

At first, Birdy's plan yielded blessings. When Birdy returned home after an afternoon session of beer and life coaching, Gina thanked him for making friends with her peculiar brother. She kissed him and then slapped his hand when he tried to remove her dress. She left for the grocery store, and Birdy fell back into the sofa, rubbing his stomach, savoring the feeling of life without aggravation or turmoil.

A few minutes later, Aldara knocked on his door. She was dressed in an evening gown that adorned her shoulders, neckline and chest with silky blue.

Of course, Birdy realized, she knew where he lived. She's known Gina since kindergarten. She embraced him, moved her hands across his back. Birdy silently repeated his vow to remain faithful.

Stay righteous. Stay righteous, was his mantra.

-I was up on this side of town, she said, and I need your new number.

-My number, he repeated.

She pulled his phone out of his front shirt pocket, where she knew he always kept it.

-You're callin' me right now, she said, his phone in her hands.

-Aldara, Birdy said, you remember what I said...

-So when we gonna play some pool?

He didn't have enough time to answer: his fiancée had forgotten her check book and returned to find Aldara still dialing on Birdy's phone.

Something froze his muscles. He experienced the sensation of falling towards a concrete floor without any idea of how he'd lost his balance or where he'd land.

The young ladies greeted and hugged.

-I was tellin' Birdy that we all gonna be at Robby's Billiards on Friday, Aldara said.

-Oh, you were? Aldara said.

-For sure. Ya'll oughta come.

-We'll see, Birdy said. You know, this wedding's like a full time job.

He laughed, but they didn't join him.

-You stop your whining, Gina said. We'll let you know if we can make it.

-By, gorgeous, Aldara said

-You take care, honey, Gina said.

-Yeah, take care, Birdy repeated.

She left and the couple went inside.

At this time, Birdy wasn't certain if his fiancé knew about his involvement with Aldara. They shared common friends, and Aldara visited the Red Shack a few times a

month, but nearly a year ago, Birdy had convinced Aldara not to reveal the details of their encounters to anyone, even close friends, claiming that he wasn't comfortable sharing his private life with the entire community.

He found the crevasse on the coach that, just minutes earlier, had been place he could sit without any concerns. Gina said nothing, and went to find her check book.

-How 'bout we try someplace new for dinner tonight? she asked.

-Hey, you the one with all the brains, Birdy said.

She headed to the door, but stopped next to where her fiancé rested.

-So, she said, looking into her purse to make sure everything was in order, does that Aldara girl come over a lot?

The falling sensation took him again.

-Who? he said. Aldara. You mean her, huh? No. Nope. I was real surprised that she showed up.

-Did you invite her? Gina said.

Birdy wondered what she was looking for in that purse.

-No. he said. I don't even know how she found our place.

-Well me and her been friends forever, she said. You know that.

-Sure do. he answered. So I guess that's how.

-She wanted your number, huh? Gina answered.

-What you lookin' for in there? Birdy asked. You drop something?

He started to rise from his seat; Gina made a traffic-directing, stop motion with her hand.

-You just stay where you at, baby, she said. You all comfortable down there.

-Right. he said.

-So she wanted your number? Gina repeated.

-Well, yeah, Birdy said. We used to...we all, a big group of us, used to chill over at Alderoun's.

-So she had your old number, Gina said.

-Right.

-You didn't invite her in, she said.

-No! Bird said. He paused after he realized that he raised his voice. I'm just gonna rest for a while.

-Well, let me know if she wants to stop by. Gina said. Kinda funny she didn't just give me a call.

-Oh, she kinda crazy, Birdy said.

Once again, he failed to make his fiancée laugh.

-What you mean by that? Gina asked.

-You know, Birdy said. She just goes and does...spontaneous things sometimes. You know.

-I guess you know her real well, she answered. Be back in a while.

Like most people with a weakness for overindulgence, Birdy hated to worry and worked and planned to avoid worrying about anything. Two days later at the Red Shack, Birdy had some news for Tim.

-I think I found ya' a girl, he said.

-Yeah? Tim answered, beer dripping down his chin. She ain't ugly, is she?

-‘Course not, man, Birdy answered. I’m not gonna introduce you to no scallywags. You gonna like her, and she’ll like you once I put in a good word for ya. All you gonna have to do is not scare her off.

He watched Tim suck the head of another crawfish.

-Ok, Birdy said, we’ll come up with a plan of what to do. And what not to do. How ‘bout we start with what not to do?

So he enumerated a list of Tim’s habits that could possibly ruin the deal: at the top of the list were sliding his tongue around, rambling on about fighting dogs or lizards, and shifting his jaw around as if he were preparing to fight. Birdy devoted around half an hour to this list.

-Napkins, man, Birdy concluded, Napkins are like your friends.

He devoted an additional hour to instructing Tim on what Birdy called a “game plan”: a meeting somewhere causal, followed by a meeting someplace casual but quieter, followed by, God willing, music in Tim’s room.

The next phase of Birdy’s plan was to wait for Aldara to contact him. He had to wait just one day until she knocked on his door again. Fortunately, Gina had gone shopping with her mother, but Birdy insisted that Aldara walk with him outside, fearing that if he invited the girl in, she’d leave some evidence of her visit or that Gina might return home while Aldara was stalking him in the living room.

They took a walk that summer afternoon; they squinted in the sunlight and their clothes grew damp with sweat. Aldara was in heels while Birdy wore flip flops.

-You want us to stay friends? Birdy said.

-What do you mean? Aldara said. Why couldn’t we be friends?

-We can, Birdy said. We can still talk. Maybe hang out. But you gotta do something for me.

-Ok. Aldara answered.

-You gotta get to know someone for me. Birdy said. You'll like 'em. He's an athlete. He's tough. He's real smart, but you have to talk to him for a while to see how smart he is.

-I'm not sure, Aldara said. What are you asking me?

-We don't have to talk at all, Birdy said. My wife's actin' funny since you came by. Easiest thing for me would be to lose your number and just act like I hardly know ya.

-Hold on, Aldara said, staggering in her heels.

Birdy knew by the panic in her voice and by the way that fear shook her off balance that she would agree to what he'd ask.

-Now, he said, I hope I can make this all work out. I hope I can make everybody happy, but I need you to do me a favor. All you have to do is make friends with somebody.

He told her to wait for Tim's call, and gave Tim her number, instructing him to speak of nothing beyond meeting arrangements. Birdy believed in his plan, and he believed that Aldara and Tim were flawed in ways that made them compatible for each other.

Tim followed Birdy's advice, and, to his credit, he succeeded through most of the evening. They met at Ralphie's for chicken wings, because, as Birdy had pointed out, Aldara would have no reason to feel threatened if the occasion was chicken wings. Then, Tim suggested that they go someplace that wasn't so noisy; Tim drove them a few

minutes to Madleline's coffee shop where they spoke, faces inches away, across a narrow table.

Aldara found in Tim traits that disgusted her and frightened her but that also excited her. They spoke of Mike Butler who, whenever shouting matches or fights erupted at Alderoun's, waived a police baton but never left his seat behind the bar. Tim hadn't moved his hands over a woman in a few months, and, without a proper name for the burning in his chest and stomach, he regarded it as love.

They spoke also of Martin and his sorry brother Frankie, and the injustice of Frankie's marriage to Sophia. They argued about a new story that Martin had, on two separate occasions, clapped his hands and commanded the sky to stop sending rain. Aldara called it ridiculous; Tim wasn't certain and claimed that Martin was gifted in ways that most people didn't understand.

Birdy had put into their minds the suggestion that they would drift towards Tim's room as the night progressed. This suggestion set them in motion, and at around ten o'clock they stood by Tim's bed, entangled arms and open mouths. The problems started when Tim decided to play some music.

He'd set a list of songs to play on his computer. Birdy suggested that put on something to dispel any anxiety out of the room. Somehow, Tim had mixed up one of the lists, but he didn't realize this until the first song ended with Al Green's falsetto wail fading to silence, and then, opened with an eruption of string instruments and horns.

In the imaginations of most American's Aldara's age who are familiar with the piece, Wagner's Flight of the Valkries elicits two sets of stock images, neither of which is conducive to love-making. The first is Third Reich boots, wheels, and tank treads

moving to conquer new territory. The second, less terrifying but equally as harmful to Tim's plan, is cartoon popular among elementary school music teacher's entitled "What's Opera, Doc?" In this short feature, Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd, both in Viking-themed clothes, continue their ongoing rivalry while singing along to a classical score. The most enduring scene of the cartoon is probably Elmer, in bronze, horned cap and golden chest plate, singing Kill the Wabbit/Kill the Wabbit to tune of Wagner's famous melody.

The story teller can't be certain if Aldara, as Tim kissed her shoulders and neck, visualized the march of a German army, a duel between cartoon characters, or, worse, a horrifying juxtaposition of both, but whatever images Wagner brought into the room sent her back a few inches away from Tim. According to Tim, she vocalized some of what she was thinking: she was thinking about how she'd feel the following day, an exercise that tends to kill an erotic mood. She thought about her reasons for letting a boy she didn't know coil his arms around her waist.

Tim hadn't expected any of these hurdles, so he let his instincts guide his actions. He'd heard a few of his friends talk about using their teeth to tease and to remove a girl's clothes, but Tim had not yet mastered this technique. He bit too hard; she yelped and jumped away as the orchestra reached an exploding climax.

The rest of the evening consisted of regrets and feelings of injury. Aldara searched for her purse, Tim asked her not to go. She found her purse and announced that she couldn't do this because she and Birdy would soon be together.

She went to her car as Tim went to his moonshine bottle. He sat outside, drinking himself blush-faced and blood-eyed. After a few hours, Tim decided that he would

blame Birdy, as well as the entire nation of Germany. He went to the kitchen, shuffled through the cabinets, and then went out to find his future brother-in-law.

Tim knew that on Friday, Birdy usually shot pool at Alderoun's. He parked in the dirt lot, pushed the door open, and ignored Mike and Lucy, his golden retriever as they both greeted him. Frankie Mazerolle was sitting at the bar. Birdy was standing in his corner enjoying the illusion of sanctuary when Tim slapped him on the shoulder. Birdy saw that Tim was drunk and that Tim had in his left hand what looked like a bundled up napkin.

-We've got business outside, Tim said.

Birdy complied, and they made their way out the door as Mark, Lucy, and Frankie watched.

-He gone crazy? Frankie said after the door slammed.

-He was born crazy, Mike said. Now, I think he's in love.

-Aw, hell, Frankie said.

In the parking lot, to the humming and fading and humming of the old lights in need of replacement, Tim unfolded the napkin, dropping two forks and two knives at Birdy's feet.

-You pick up two of those, Tim said.

-Again, Birdy did as he was told.

-What the hell are we doing? he asked.

-You and me need to resolve a dispute, Tim said.

-Dispute? Birdy shouted. I've been helpin' you out.

-You went and grabbed up my girl, Tim said. And you engaged to my sister.

-I sent her to you, man! Birdy shouted. What the hell happened?

-I think you changed your mind, Tim said. I think you wanna keep her around a little more.

Birdy spoke with the conviction of someone representing himself at a murder trial.

-Aldara? I want you to take her! I want you to take her out and have your way with her. Please! Take her!

-She said that ya'll back together. Tim said, silverware in his hands.

-She's gone out her mind again! Birdy cried. I've haven't seen her in a year, and I ain't wanted to since.

-So you set me up with crazy girl you tired a' seeing? Tim said.

-It's not like that, Birdy answered. I figured ya'll would be a good match.

He paused and realized his mistake.

-Well, Tim said. That ain't the only issue. You....you got a little bit of curr in you.

-Huh?

-Ain't no curr gonna marry my sister, Tim said. You pick up those weapons and get ready to prove yourself.

-Weapons? Birdy said. I think these are butter knives. And this a salad fork.

-I was in a hurry to get here, ok? Tim shouted. We don't have much silverware utensils. And I've been drinking since 'bout nine o'clock.

-Tim, look....

He shouted as Tim sent the knife towards his chest.

-You got any blood on you? Tim asked. You feelin' this?

-No, Birdy answered. I told you, these knives ain't very sharp. But that hurt, man!

Tim attacked with the fork. Birdy cried out again, and then swung back, leaving a red abrasion over Tim's collarbone.

-See? Tim said, we just gotta bring it out of ya.

Streaks of metal glimmered in over the parking lot. Tim and Birdy ended up rolling over the gravel, scratching their faces, necks, and arms. Tim ended up on Birdy's chest with his finger around Birdy's throat. He raised his salad fork to the sky.

-You go and do it, you crazy bastard, Birdy said. I'm tired a dealin' with your shit anyway. I tried to help, but you can just go off and die alone.

Tim dropped the fork and stood up.

-Alright, he said. Least you did what you could. Guess you're not all bitch.

Birdy came to his feet and charged at Tim, who shoved him down again.

-Nah, Tim said, I think that's good for tonight.

He offered his hand.

-Thanks, Tim said. Maybe I got too worked up, you know. It wasn't really your fault. It's those damn Germans.

Birdy was confused for many reasons, but, for the first time, he saw his brother-in-law offering what looked like a friendship rather than a co-existence. He took his hand.

-Yeah, he said, those damn Germans.

They went inside, marked with bruises and red scratches.

Both were still marked when they sat at the Red Shack the next day. Weeks passed until Tim started to tell the story of how he'd gotten close to his brother-in-law. Until then, the mystery was the allure of the legend.

Still, some of Martin's patrons say that Birdy and Tim are more similar than they appear to be. Both acquired a talent for gaining leverage over others and imposing themselves on others. Both discovered these talents while they were boys, before they'd matured enough to realize how their games might injure people.

Birdy still faced the concern of Aldara, who had started to call him every other day, but, eventually, he'd find another plan.

12. The Story of How Martin Worked to Make Things Right With his Family

The trouble started right after the white rose and Texas Bluebonnet wedding, where Sofia was slender in her gown although she was with child. They kissed: she loved the imperfect man in her arms and the home and the family in her imagination, while Frankie loved the feel of his wife's body in her gown, and in a spell that lasted only a few hours, he was unburdened of fear

But for weeks he and his fiancée had endured the final stages of preparations that deprived them of rest and put shadows under their eyes. The marriage had already started. Even when there were hours left until Reverend Howard made the union official before friends, relations, God, and all His kingdom, Frankie sprinted about Breaux Bridge to complete the final list of tasks that had to be done. His pants needed to be hemmed. He needed to find the disc with the song that was *their* song so that they'd have proper music for the photo album dance. In-laws were waiting at the airport.

Sitting in the passenger's seat, helping Frankie stay brave through the last dash, was his brother, Martin. He'd left his prison cell about four weeks earlier, so he gazed through the window at all the folks working and talking on cell phones and laughing and going through the motions of their daily habits. Outside was beautiful; he loved watching all the commotion even though the open space frightened him.

All that worry was worth it, Sofia told her mother after the ceremony. The married couple would later look through their binder of wedding photos and say that everything had been right with the service, the first married kiss, and that everything had been right with the ballroom reception in Lafayette until Timothy and Nolan had gotten into a fight and knocked over a tower of champagne glasses that had shattered over the floor and sent a speck of glass into the Reverend Howard's eye.

The incident was a popular story around the Red Shack: Tim and Nolan had been close friends for a few weeks after Tim had pinned Nolan at the competition at Labraunch County High School. They'd just sat through what they complained had been a boring service that lasted too long, so the boys rejoiced when they found themselves in a ballroom among glasses of wine, bottles of beer, ten stories of campaign glasses, and a flock of Sofia's bridesmaids. Nolan and Tim's parents had granted the boys freedom on that special evening, and the boys had indulged in this freedom until they were drunk and feeling all the more liberated.

-Good stuff here, man, Tim said as he looked across the room.

-Yeah, Nolan answered.

-We outta do some damage here tonight, Tim suggested.

-Yeah, Nolan answered.

So Nolan found a bridesmaid who was alone and smiling, while Tim found a bridesmaid who was dancing with another young man who was Sofia's brother, Edward Frederick. Edward had been dating Molly, the young lady with whom he was dancing, for a few months; they would be engaged a year later. Tim grabbed Molly by the wrist and pulled. She resisted, so Tim lifted her up onto his shoulder. Edward, who was currently in the police academy, intervened, and the melee started.

Reverend Howard heard the commotion. He turned to find that Tim brawling with two other boys in fine tuxedos while Nolan was kissing and fondling the Reverend's daughter, who was only fifteen but had already acquired her mother's body. Nolan let her go to join the brawl next to the tower of glasses, and Howard ran towards the ordeal.

As soon as Martin had taken Nolan and Tim by the collars and dragged them out the back door, the reception attendants had mopped and swept away the mess and a paramedic in attendance had removed the glass from Reverend Howard's eye, and Frankie and Sofia went back to creating scenes for the photo album.

The reception ended peacefully. The couple went to their wedding suite. Bellhops in their bellhop red-and-blacks and caps brought to the suite clusters of Texas Bluebonnets and whites roses with a million star baby's breath from the wedding, along with clay pots holding sweet basil, gifts from Sofia's mother. The husband and wife stripped naked and sat in the hot tub for an hour until they went to bed to make love for the duration of just a few frantic breathes. Then, they released each other, fell on opposite sides, and went to sleep, exhausted from the ordeal of the ceremony.

Frankie awoke sweating with fever. He spent the morning in the restroom vomiting, and he continued to vomit even after there was nothing in his stomach left but the clear fluid dangling from his open lips as he cried out Enough already, I've had enough of this.

Sofia called the airport to postpone their first class honeymoon flight to Hilo. She could hear her husband crying in a voice she'd never heard before. For three days, he sat up in bed nibbling at his wife's tuna sandwiches and apple slices and sipping lemonade through a straw; he didn't look at her or answer her when she asked What was wrong or If he'd go to the doctor or Why he was acting this way or Where was his ring.

On the third day in bed, he couldn't tolerate the aroma of the wilting bluebonnets and roses mixed with the basil, so Frankie left his wife at the wedding suite and drove back to the new house that was still eggshell walls and unopened cardboard boxes inside. Sofia rode a taxi to find him in the driveway, placing boxes in the back of his truck. He ignored her as she cried out and pushed her aside when she stood in his path. She ran inside and called Martin, remembering how he'd restored order to her wedding as everyone else had either frozen into mannequins or scrambled about in a panic.

When Martin arrived holding a little league baseball bat, his brother had just finished setting the last box in the bed of his truck. Martin stood in front of the open driver's door; he raised his bat; Frankie took up a tire iron, and the standoff began. There were threats and curses and Mr. and Mrs. Rodriguez, who were walking their golden retriever down the street as the confrontation took place, would later instruct their children to never go within a block of the Mazerolle house. Sofia was in the living room unpacking vases and picture frames because she had no other plans, and she hated the

feeling that came over her when she sat still. Martin found that he couldn't threaten his brother with any act of violence that was violent enough to convince Frankie to calm the hell down and go on his beautiful motherfucking honeymoon with his beautiful, pregnant wife. So, knowing his brother's mind better than anyone, he shouted, Fine, just tuck your dick and drive off, you little bitch; I'll stay here, and I'll fill in for ya, and if the baby is a boy we'll name 'em Jean Pierre; the other kids'll pick on him like in the Johnny Cash song, and he'll be tougher'n hell, and we'll put him on the wrestling team; he'll be one terrible little bastard, and one day he'll come after ya for what you did to his mama, and when he starts whoopin' your ass, I'll be there with a video camera and a water bottle to coach him and to record the memories; if it's a girl we'll name 'er Thelma, 'cause I never met a stripper or a cocktail waitress named Thelma; and hey, ya know what? A few weeks after Sophia has the baby, she'll be healed up and I can start knockin' the dirt off her, and 'fore ya know it, I'll have a whole tribe 'a little munchkin's out here doin' yard work.

Frankie shouted, tossed his tire iron towards the street, sending Mr. and Mrs. Rodriguez running with their golden retriever. He and Martin moved the boxes back into the living room where Sophia was setting a frame over the fireplace. The newlyweds enjoyed their honeymoon. Sophia never had a chance to discuss the incident with her husband because she was too busy furnishing the house and planning the baby shower.

Seven months later, Sofia gave birth to Chloe. For the next week her home was the home of her imagination until she woke up on a Saturday morning to discover Frankie packing his truck again, and, again, she called on Martin, who arrived with his little league Slugger, and again, started by threatening violence and finally sent his

brother back inside when he began making plans to take Sofia's kids on summer time canoeing trips to Arkansas.

After that Saturday, Frankie stopped packing his truck and started taking vacations three, four, or five times a week to places like Jerry's and Alderon's bar, where he drank whiskey and played Texas hold 'em with younger, single men, and, mostly, with Christopher Caldoune. Christopher was a decent card player and a world-class cheat. When he played, he smoked a three-dollar cigar that scattered ashes across his beard each time he leaned over the table to take away stacks of Frankie's money. Some nights, when Sophia knew that her Chloe couldn't hear her, Sophia cried into her pillows and moaned Lord, why can't we just write that ole' man a check every week an' be done with it so that he can spend some time at home?

Sophia knew that Frankie would fall asleep in the bar or in the parking lot and miss work, so she called Martin, who wanted peace in his family. He'd go to find his brother, threaten his brother, and follow his brother home to make sure that he made it back to his wife and child. After a few months, she felt guilty for only being able to offer thank yous in exchange for her husband's return, so she gave Martin dinners on plastic plates. Martin noticed that Sophia put more time and more love into the food as her husband returned drunker with each passing month. She knew that meatloaf and mashed potatoes with gravy was his favorite. She perfected the recipe. Her next gift was Chicken Cordon Bleu with asparagus, followed by baked salmon with mango salsa, Texmati rice and buttery green beans prepared the way she'd learned from her mother. She didn't look at her husband when he staggered past the windmills on their front lawn to make his way inside at the end of the night, and she didn't speak to Martin until she

heard the screen door close. There were evenings when Sophia had gone days without talking to anyone the way she liked to really *talk*, and, wearing the jogging pants that she'd had since high school along with an oversized sweatshirt, she was comfortable when she sat close to Martin's tired face and his graying hair. She told him about the noises Sophia made and about the little girls at the ballet school where Sophia gave lessons and Lily Robertson, the most talented girl she'd ever instructed who would go on to Broadway, Hollywood, or somewhere where regular folks become famous. One evening, after she'd given Martin a plate of pork chops and sweet potatoes, she kissed him on the cheek twice before she went back in, leaving Martin to stand on the porch, watching the windmills turn as his food went cold.

Martin didn't keep many friends, but Breaux Bridgers saw him at the Red Shack sweating and swearing and taking their orders; they saw him at Swiney's market buying his spices and his sausage. He was familiar to them. They trusted him and thought of him as a friend, but he ate alone and drank alone. When he wasn't at his Red Shack, he spent most of his time alone at his kitchen table trying new blends of spices and writing down his thoughts about Creole seasonings along with his thoughts about why people acted the way they acted and how people could live in the world without fighting each other or cheating each other. With red marker he scratched out most of these thoughts, but he drew question marks next to a few ideas that he believed might work in practice.

13. The Story of James Discovering Breaux Bridge and the Myth of Kentucky

Karl

James remembers the colors of the fall season across Huntsville, Alabama, the aroma of decaying leaves, the melody of his mother's voice along with the low rumble of

his father's interjections, and the feeling of comfort that passed over his mind on the strange Sunday Morning. On the previous day, he'd celebrated his tenth birthday at his uncle's pool along with his cousins and a few friends from school.

James Kendrick II watched the hills and the cotton fields through the window of his parents' car as the family made their drive to the morning service at the United Trinity Church of Christ. His mother explained that God took a paintbrush to make the fields of cotton and tobacco that grew along the highway. When he finished with the dabs of brown and white, he added brighter shades across Huntsville until he reached the hills. Then, each morning, he made the sky.

Then his father spoke:

-Jeannine, he said, he's a young man now and you need to stop with the nonsense.

His mother calmly replied:

- Why does it have to be nonsense?

And his father said, you know what I mean; don't pretend to be a fool. He needs to learn how to grow up.

-He'll learn, his mother said, I'm not worried for a minute that he'll learn from you, dear.

She said nothing for the rest of the trip.

Later, James sat with the other children in his Sunday school class. They chattered and he carefully read verses from the book of Psalms. Pastor Albert, who led the weekly discussions, was late, and after ten minutes, the children had left their seats and started to repeat the gossip they'd heard from the mouths of their parents. Martha Bryant, a young lady who assisted Pastor Albert, sat watching the children as they

giggled, shouted, pushed and jumped about. A pencil flew across the room, but Martha said nothing. The women of United Trinity had no authority over even the youngest men because the book of Timothy, Paul instructed them not to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to remain in silence.

Martha knew these instructions well, but after half an hour watching the children run wild and toss wads of paper across the room, she took up her Bible and called the children to their seats. Pastor Albert arrived five minutes later to find Martha discussing the Gospel of Matthew. The scene froze his muscles. Martha continued with the lesson, unaware that the Pastor was glaring at her with as much contempt as he could summon on a lovely Sunday morning.

He placed his hand on her back and spoke into her ear; Martha left the room, looking to the floor as she scurried off.

Without acknowledging the children's expressions of confusion, Albert took Martha's vacant seat and told his students to turn to the book of Luke.

News of the scandal echoed through the church as soon as the morning's service ended, and James' parents knew enough about the ordeal to complain about it on their drive home.

-Nice people, his father said, but backwards in some ways.

He listened to his parents as they discussed the problems with United Trinity, the place where every written and spoken word was truth to James. They were tired of the congregation's hateful gossip and bickering. They were tired of the stories of Pastor McHennly having his way with the ladies of the congregation, the stories of Pastor

McHennly having his way with the girls of the congregation, and the stories of Pastor McHennly having his way with the collection plates.

-Oh, but it's the only place close except for the Pentecostal church, his mother said, and I won't go to the Pentecostals.

-Heck no, his father said. I'm not getting dressed up to go sing and dance with poison snakes. And the women there aren't right. I don't want James running with any of them when he gets older.

In a dream that night, a serpent with a body of ice coiled around him and constricted. He was alone; he couldn't see; he couldn't scream. Then James awoke, relieved that he could draw breathe into his lungs. He didn't sleep again that night.

His mother often said that he was a good learner. His parents never bought a television, and his father supplied him with books of literature, history, and magazines about firearms and hunting. James learned the stories of the Old and New Testaments, and he learned that these stories were truth. After he'd witnessed the scandal of Martha Bryant, James started to wonder why his Bible study group discussed only a few verses from each book, and why the Pastors couldn't answer his questions about certain verses in ways that made sense to him.

A few years later, he started attending the regular services with his parents. He kept his head down each Sunday, reading from the Bible as new questions came to him. There were doubts in his mind about the truths he'd learned, but he never expressed these doubts as words. He seldom slept more than a few hours at a time.

When James sat in the classrooms of Marthaw Country Elementary School, he didn't like to listen to the teachers. The things the teachers said were simple things to

James, and as he heard the teachers repeat these simple things, he squirmed in his chair and bit his fingernails. He searched through the pages of his books for pictures or stories or truths that would take his mind away from the lectures. When the teachers insisted that he listen, James ignored them, and if they bothered him again, he shouted, threw his books, or ran sobbing out the door. Most of his instructors gave in to the protests and allowed the boy to sit outside the class room and read alone. He became friends with a few children who were too slow or too quick to play with the others.

He didn't squirm or bite his fingernails as much in middle school or high school. He took the pills that his mother placed on the breakfast table each morning, and when he got to school and sat at his desk, he listened to the simple things that his teachers explained to him. James filled his notebooks with different ways to explain these ideas, along with birds, airplanes, dragons, fish, race cars, deer, lions and insects that appeared when he felt that he wanted to shout and flee the room. The school desks were ugly, and class was dull, but James made no noise.

He'd been a pudgy child who bumped into desks and ran behind most of his classmates in Physical Education. He grew to be a teenager, and his body matured. His family had never seen a child who ate more than the men at the table. His mother gave him all the meat from his father's hunting trips and all the biscuits from her oven that he wanted. His father gave him chores: James carried bags of mulch to the garden and the rose bushes for his parents; he cut trees and split logs with an axe for his grandfather; he moved furniture for his aunt whenever she had an urge to redecorate a room; he helped roof the house, put tiles on the floor, lay bricks and cement across the patio, and build a

fence across the back yard. Muscles grew around his limbs and his torso. Black hair sprouted from his arms, chest, shoulders and face, and he started to resemble his father.

When he was seventeen, James earned some of the highest standardized test scores in Marthaw County High School's history. His parents spoke to him of college, but James refused to speak back. He hated school because school was a place where he sat at an ugly desk suffering a classroom lecture, the worst feeling he'd ever known.

-No, he told his father, I won't go back to school. Even if you throw me out and make me go live in the woods.

His father was sitting at his garage table sharpening a hunting knife when James made this declaration. His father didn't flinch or look away from the blade.

-Go on and see what the world has for you then, he answered. Go find your adventures and make your mistakes. It's what young men do, I guess. You'll come back to where you started though. You might be older than I am, but you'll drift on back.

He also told his son that attending the United Trinity Church was no longer an obligation. James didn't know what to do with this kind of freedom. He'd never objected to going to morning services because they were parts of his routine like showering and dressing for school, chopping wood for his grandfather, or shoveling mulch so that his mother could grow squash, tomatoes and broccoli.

Later that day, James moved twenty bags of fertilizer from his father's pickup truck to the garage and thought about his reasons for going to church twice a week with his parents. He finished, drank some iced tea, ate some biscuits that mother had left on the kitchen table, and decided that he'd rather sleep or read a magazine than go to the United Trinity.

Huntsville is a place where the young people share the few, simple routines of their parents. There is one major road that runs past the main places of interest: Mark's Smoke House, Edgar Robertson's Gun range, the Wal Mart, and a row of fast food restaurants. Children travel across this road and visit these places until everything to be seen in Huntsville is as familiar as their living rooms. Most of the young men and women will find comfort in the same faces, voices, and routines, and these people will stay to live in the safety of this comfort. A few of them will grow to despise everything familiar, and they will run off as soon as they have the means.

James discussed with his parents his ideas of leaving Huntsville when he was seventeen years old. He'd visited his relatives in Brownsville, Kentucky, Fable, Tennessee, and McKenzie, Alabama. When he thought of these places, nothing in his memory excited his blood enough to inspire him to begin packing his books and his knives into boxes.

But he'd never been to visit his Uncle Roland in a place called Breaux Bridge, a town in Louisiana between the interstate and the great creeks. His father said that the people of Breaux Bridge ate spiced foods that existed nowhere else in the world, drank moonshine made from an unnamed fruit, and danced to strange music that enchanted their bodies and set them in motion to fight and smoke and gamble and laugh and kiss in ways that outsiders could not understand without allowing the music, the spices, and the drinks to possess them.

-It can be a terrible place, his father said, but I know people who found a way to love it.

Uncle Roland lived in a large, empty house, and welcomed company. James drew in his notebooks silhouettes of the people of Breaux Bridge that his father had described. He drew also cauldrons of spiced seafood and teardrop shaped bottles of moonshine. James spoke to his Uncle Roland on the phone and agreed to help with chores in exchange for a place to live.

One week after James graduated high school, his mother kissed him on the forehead and told him that he was always free to come back to Huntsville if Uncle Roland was too much to live with. With his father, James placed in the bed of his truck a study desk, a cushioned chair, a stereo, and three boxes of books. His father patted him on the back and instructed him to drive away, warning that James' mother might wrap her arms around her boy's shoulders and refuse to release him.

-Call me when you get there, he told him, and call twice a week.

Uncle Roland had been married for three years before his wife left him to live with an architect in Spain. He'd remained alone for seven years in the same two story house that he and his former wife had planned to fill with children, dogs, and cats. Roland stayed occupied with his work as the co-owner of Gilliard's Roofing Co; he immersed himself in paper contracts and phone numbers and order forms that surrounded the desk in his office. He spent little time in his empty home.

James parked his truck in Uncle Roland's driveway seven hours later. He hadn't seen his uncle in eleven years. He had no friends in Breaux Bridge. He was hungry from a long drive, so Uncle Roland put in James' hand a ten dollar bill and told him how to find Martin Mazerolle's Red Shack:

Off Paris Street, an unmarked road that runs from riverboats along Whiskey creek to Interstate 10, is a wooden shed surrounded by picnic tables in a grass field where Martin Mazerolle boils the best crawfish in the world.

He arrived at the Red Shack almost an hour past noon, when most of the regulars had already given Martin their orders and found their places at the picnic tables. James stood in front of the shed, searching for a menu or someone in a uniform, unaware that Martin sold only one dish.

Around him, people sat at picnic tables beneath umbrellas sharing piles of crawfish, red potatoes, corn on the cob, boiled sausage, and garlic cloves. They placed empty crawfish shells in tin bowls and passed around rolls of paper towels. James smelled the blend of spices that were new to him; he heard people speaking with unfamiliar accents.

Just a few tables away, Crazy Tim sat with his friend Nolan, whom he'd met over the course of his high school wrestling career. Tim was watching a muscled out-of-towner who looked to be about Tim's age. He saw that the stranger was trying to learn about the culture of Red Shack.

-Let's go help 'em, he said to Nolan.

They approached James, who was hungry, confused, and ready to give his ten dollar bill to anyone who promised food and guidance.

-Do ya'll work here? he asked.

-Naw, man, Nolan said. We kinda like the ambassadors here. How many pounds a' crawdads you need?

-Do they come with vegetables? James asked.

-We'll take care of ya, Nolan answered. Put your money away.

Nolan went to give his order to Martin Mazerolle while Tim spoke to James and observed him to see if they could be friends.

-I've never had crawfish, James confessed. You're gonna have to show me how this works. I don't know how to eat them.

-Where you from, Tim asked.

-Huntsville, Alabama, James answered. I was born in Kentucky, but didn't really live there. I think I'm gonna like crawfish. It smells good here.

Tim nodded, rose from the table, and went to make a deal with Martin Mazerolle.

-We got somebody new here, Tim said to Martin. He's gonna be with me and Nolan. Give him somethin' special.

-Who is he? Martin asked.

Tim hadn't asked the stranger his name yet, so he imagined one.

-He's Karl from Kentucky, Tim answered.

He liked the sound of the words.

They made a deal to initiate Karl to Breaux Bridge: Tim gave a wrinkled five dollar bill to Martin, who agreed to boil as many pounds of crawfish, sausage and vegetables as they could eat. But Martin would put three fold the amount of spices in each batch.

-He gonna be sweatin' in a few minutes, Martin Mazerolle promised.

James waited at a picnic table and drank a pitcher of beer with Nolan and Tim, who asked what it was like in Huntsville. James replied that there was no crawfish in Huntsville, but that they drank beer.

Martin set a place of crawdads in front of James.

Tim showed him the proper method of removing tail meat from the shell, and James learned to peel after just five or six crawdads. Tim waited for James to react to the extra seasoning as the stout young man stuffed lumps of tail meat into his mouth along with potatoes and sausage.

-It's real good stuff, James said with a bit of corn dangling from his bottom lip. Both Tim and Nolan had tried to eat a few of the special crawdads. They were sweating; they ate slowl between long sips of beer, but James continued to peel away at the crawfish, stopping only to assure his new friends that it was real good stuff.

James finished the crawdad in a matter of minutes while Tim and Nolan wiped the burning spices off their lips to stop the burning.

James approached the counter at the Red Shack to request a second batch of what was now his favorite food. Martin Mazerolle shook his head, asked for the Lord's forgiveness, and boiled another helping that had twice the seasoning of the previous batch.

Tim and Nolan peeled a few tails before they announced that they were full. With juices dripping form his fingers, James ate every morsel of food in the pail and went back request another helping. Martin Mazerolle added what he thought was an inhumane amount of spices. When James returned again ten minutes later, Martin delivered what he decided would be the final helping to the table where Tim and Nolansat opposite of the stranger.

So you brought in a ringer, Martin Mazerolle said. You little hustlers.

No, Nolan insisted, we just met this guy. We want 'em to see what we're about.

No more special deals for you, Martin answered. This is the last scam you'll ever run here.

Although he wasn't sure what he'd done wrong, James decided to leave. He was sluggish from the pounds of food in his stomach, and he knocked over a pitcher of beer as he stood.

Man, I'm 'bout ready to chase ya'll off with a stick, Martin said. Finish eating and go home. And if one of ya'll starts chokin' to death, I ain't giving you no help.

Thanks Mr. Martin, Tim said, smiling. I love what you do here, man.

Martin pointed at James.

-And you, he said, you don't come back here.

So James decided to sit and eat a bit more before he left. Crazy Tim watched as James chewed away at a red potato.

-Man, Crazy Tim said, you legit. You want a job?

Ten miles outside of Lafayette sat Jerry's, a bar with pool tables and dance floors. They served drinks there until five in the morning, in spite of state laws. The staff at Jerry's often enjoyed sometimes two or three consecutive nights without witnessing a brawl, but these evenings were uncommon blessings that came with perfect weather.

Tim, along with a few other young men, most of whom had been on one of the local high school wrestling teams, worked as security enforcers for ten dollars an hour.

Crazy Tim explained how he and his teammates worked together to pull drunken, fighting patrons apart and drag them out the doors. This was a casual topic for Tim, who spoke of restraining depraved alcoholics the way Uncle Roland spoke of roofing a house.

When James listened to these stories, and he was overjoyed and terrified as he visualized himself standing at the door of Jerry's.

James agreed to take the job. He returned home and begged Uncle Roland not to tell mom and dad. Roland congratulated the boy on finding a job so quickly. He poured to glasses of whiskey to toast the occasion.

In the back yard overlooking the moonlit creek, they sat in lawn chairs, sticking wads of dip into their mouths, sipping whiskey, and swatting at mosquitoes. Uncle Roland spoke about his fishing trip in Canada during the winter before his wife had left; he told James about the labor of drilling a hole through the ice and waiting for days to see the rod bend as your fingers and your face go numb with coldness. They finished half a handle of whiskey before Roland announced that he would attend church the next morning. He stared at his nephew for minute.

-Your dad said that you don't like going to church, Uncle Roland said.

James had no answer.

-It's alright, Uncle Roland said, you can tell me why. I just wanna know.

-I get, James stammered, I get bored sometimes.

Roland refilled his glass as he spoke.

-You don't gotta go with me if you don't want to.

-I don't mind, James said.

- You read lots of the Bible, huh?

-Yeah, James said.

-You believe what you read?

-Well, James said, I mean, you know, some things are just stories.

-They all just stories, Uncle Roland said, they probably ain't real like you and me are real. Maybe somebody makes somethin' up, or maybe they see something they can't explain. Then they tell their buddies, and their buddies tell their wives, and their wives gossip, and then you got a story. It ain't a lie, but it ain't real like this glass is real.

-So are you a Christian? James asked.

-Yeah, he answered, why the hell not?

-So you think you go to heaven when you die?

-I dunno, Uncle Roland answered. That might be one of them stories. Might not be real like this chair is real.

-What kind of Christian are you? James asked. Why do you keep going to church?

-Everybody got their superstitions, Uncle Roland answered.

He pulled his keychain from his pocket.

-See this? This my lucky fishin' lure. Didn't have hooks when my dad gave it to me, so I just put it on with my keys and decided it would bring good luck. Sometimes, it works.

-But goin' to church is different, James said.

-No it ain't, Uncle Roland said. It's somethin' I do that don't make any sense, but it helps sometimes. Cheer up now. You look all glum. This new job is gonna be good for ya.

The following Thursday night at Jerry's was the sort of catastrophe that the security team encountered a few times each year, but it was James' first evening there, so the incident shaped his idea of what was common at Jerry's.

Frankie Mazerolle, Martin's younger sibling, brought trouble to Jerry's that evening. The people of Breaux Bridge witnessed Frankie's savage night life and told tales of his drinking and his scuffles with the police. The man of these stories became more real to Breaux Bridgers than the man himself. Frankie was notorious. His pretty wife, Sophia, usually only left her home to go to Swiney's Market and to the ballet school where she taught young girls. She smiled for everyone she met. She kissed and cuddled her newborn girl. Every Breaux Bridger who talked with Sophia loved her and despised Frankie, the man of the awful stories. They felt a sting when they heard about an ungrateful fool enjoying all the blessings that the earth can provide.

Frankie was drunk and eager to lay his cards and his money across the table when he arrived at Jerry's on the first night of James' security career. James was standing next to the bar wiping the sweat from his palms into his pants as he watched the crowds of people. They drank, chatted, danced, embraced, screamed, and laughed and liberated themselves from civil behavior in a way James hadn't witnessed. James had never been among so much noise and movement; he feared that the storm of bodies, smoke, and music would carry him off if he lost sight of Crazy Tim, who stood at the opposite end of the room.

Neither the security team nor the two men playing Texas hold 'em would be able to explain how the dispute started, but everyone near the card table heard Frankie shouting at an old pool shark who'd come from someplace in Florida and ended up fighting over a thirty dollar wager. Frankie and the stranger began the ritual of staring violently, bumping chests, cursing, and, finally, throwing their fists. James followed Tim; the two shoved their way through the crowd and were the first of six security men to

intervene. Because of where he stood in the dim light, James could not see the gun that stranger produced, and he didn't hesitate like Tim, who was facing the barrel. He tackled the stranger, and as they hit the concrete floor, James saw the pistol sliding away from the stranger's flailing arm.

Four other bouncers carried the stranger out the door. Tim gave his new friend a few hard slaps on the back and once again proclaimed that Big Kid from Kentucky was legit. Deaf to Tim's praises, James walked out the door to vomit by a dumpster.

One of the bartenders called Frankie's wife. Frankie stood in the parking lot next to Tim and James who made sure that he didn't fall or wander off or try to enter the bar again.

Sophia didn't look upon her husband when she arrived. She offered thanks and apologies to the boys as Frankie faded away to sleep in the passenger's seat of the car. Tim explained how his friend had ignored the fear of a loaded gun and beaten the hell out of the hustler from Atlanta, or maybe Arkansas. Sophia listened to the first recital of the story of James' defeating an ugly foreigner. She observed the hero of the tale as he stood before her, his mouth opened and his eyes reflecting fear. She kissed him on the cheek, returned to her car and drove her unconscious husband home. Crazy Tim gazed at the hero of his story.

-Aw man, he said, you good with them ladies.

James returned home and slept for a few hours before the snake with the skin of ice returned for him. He sat up in bed reading a stack of car magazines until sunrise.

Roland was in the kitchen pouring coffee when James approached him to ask when he was going to church again. He didn't answer at first; he poured slowly and wondered what had taken hold of his nephew.

-There's a late service tonight. Roland said. And an early one Sunday. You can go without me. How was your new job?

-It was exciting, James said. I'm gonna stay with it.

That afternoon, Tim sat with Birdy Thompson Bryan, his future brother-in-law, at the Red Shack. Having engaged Tim's sister, Birdy sought to explain everything he'd learned about courting and seducing girls in hopes that Crazy Tim would one day bring tales of conquests to the lunch table. In this way, Birdy could celebrate the rush of new victories even as his own life grew more domesticated.

-Don't be so hungry all the time, Birdy said. You can't look like one of them pitbulls lookin' at a pork chop.

-I get you, Tim said, I get you. Oh, hey, you meet that new guy Karl?

-Who?

Karl. From Kentucky.

He'd decided to keep referring to his friend as Karl because he enjoyed the sound of the name when he recited his tales. He'd not told James about this new title.

This was the story: a hustler with tattoos over his arms and his neck had come from Virginia, or maybe South Carolina, to Jerry's where he played a game of Texas Hold 'em with Frankie Mazerolle. The drifter had probably been to prison, because, according to Crazy Tim, the ink across his skin looked like the work of an inmate. Frankie, according to Tim, was a damn, damn idiot, but he didn't let anyone boss him,

except his brother of course, so he didn't back down from the hustler when the hustler tried to cheat.

Tim illustrated the fight by swinging his fists over the table and stomping his foot against the ground to signify each blow. Tim confessed that he'd been scared when the hustler had pointed a gun at him; Tim was young, and he wanted to better understand God and to know more girls before he passed on.

Karl, whose shoulders were as wide as one of Martin's tables, did not fear bullets, prison tattoos, bleeding or even death. Karl had already come to understand God as well as anyone really could, and he'd known many, many ladies, so he just didn't give a shit about whatever death had planned for him. He'd lifted the hustler up and thrown him down. The enemy had gone limp and surrendered the pistol.

Then, Frankie's wife came to carry off her unworthy husband. Tim reported that Sophia was very kind that evening, and that her butt was as perfectly formed as anything in Breaux Bridge. Karl looked upon one of the most desirable creatures to walk to earth, but he didn't feel the need to say anything to her. Instead, he grabbed her and kissed her. Frankie, who'd come to the Red Shack to argue with his brother, listened to Tim's story. He'd had too much to drink to recall most of the details. He remembered only arriving at Jerry's and then arriving home with Sophia in the driver's seat. Frankie didn't remember Karl. He saw a table of listeners grinning as Tim described how Sophia hadn't resisted Karl's advance.

That evening, Frankie watched his wife prepare pork chops and green beans for Chloe, their daughter. She wiped the baby girl's face with a napkin and giggled, her face

mimicking the looks of her daughter, to whom smiling and laughing were still simple things.

Frankie didn't know if the story of Karl and his wife was real, but he knew that the people who judged him each day would recite it. Another man's stench lingered at the dinner table.

-I won't take it, Frankie said. I ain't gonna stand for it.

Sophia looked to him, still mimicking her daughter's joy.

She answered with love in her voice.

-Whatever you talkin' about, she said, grinning, whatever crazy thoughts you cookin' up right now, you tell me later. Or don't tell me at all. But not around her.

-Nobody is gonna do me like this, Frankie said. I don't care who he is.

His wife rose, knelt by her husband, and embraced him, brushing her lips against his cheek.

-I'll take her to my mom's house right now if you don't stop, she whispered.

They finished dinner without any other discussion.

Days passed, and the people who sat at Martin Mazerolle's picnic tables of repeated Crazy Tim's story of Karl. They also told the story of Karl tricking Martin Mazerolle into selling him ten plates of food for five dollars: Martin had banned him from the Red Shack, so Karl threw a pitcher of beer at him and overturned a picnic table before he left.

No one, save Crazy Tim, had ever seen Karl. Nolan didn't frequent the Red Shack enough to dispel the myth. No one knew where he'd been born in Kentucky or his reason for coming to Breaux Bridge. No one knew just how thick or hairy his arms really

were, or how much weight he could carry over his head. So in their minds, they created his body, his thoughts, his emotions, and his past adventures. The act of telling the story was an act of creation: the events of the story were usually the same, but each recital of allowed the story teller to recreate the myth with a new voice.

The pastor at the First Methodist Church of Breaux Bridge was a thin man with a mustache that concealed most of his upper lip. He spoke very little about hell or sinners, and he said nothing to suggest that the world was a wretched place deserving of God's cruelest treatment. The pastor usually started each service by praising his wife's cooking; when she made pot roast, his favorite dish, he raised his hands to the ceiling and thanked the Lord for life and for those meat and vegetables waiting at home.

The congregation smiled and celebrated with him. James took to his habit of reading verses from the Bible in front of him. He feared looking up from the pages and addressing the others: he did not share with them the feeling of the spirit that allowed them to cheer and raise their hands as if they'd never known suffering. He hated lying, and, in his mind, to mimic their motions of adulation would be a lie.

James usually attended church twice a week. He told Uncle Roland that the rituals made him feel better about the world, but he wasn't sure if this was true. But after he started attending the services, he didn't spend as many hours in his bed each night staring at the curtains thinking of what it was to be dead.

He always arrived early to work at Jerry's and always walked in a few minutes late. In the parking lot, he'd sit alone in his truck reciting the words Have mercy upon me, Oh Lord, for I am weak; Oh Lord, heal me, for my bones are vexed. For five nights

a week for two weeks, he cried as he prayed in the parking lot, but it was dark inside the bar so no one saw that his black shirt was damp.

James never paused when the fights started. He went with the other bouncers as they ran to carry off drunks who were entangled with other drunks. Many of the customers who had be removed didn't fear James because he had such a young face. Sometimes they shouted at James, threatened him, and sometimes they assaulted him with wild punches and with every curse insult common to the English language.

After a month of this treatment, James was able to return from work each morning and, after a thorough prayer, quickly fall asleep. The threats, the brawling, and the pugilists' stench of cigarettes, sweat, and alcohol had become routine like the chores his father used to assign him.

His best friends, Tim and Nolan, had been out of high school for less than a year. They'd saved their money and made plans to find a house where they could live away from their parents.

Brandon Allastar rented one of his single story homes to Nolan and Tim. He was reluctant to deal with tenants who had no credit history. He wasn't well acquainted with them, but he did remember Sherriff Perkins telling him about the time the young fellows trespassed on a private range to harass bovine with a pellet gun.

He'd promised Nolan's father a favor in exchange for auto repair. Hunter Mazerolle was a stubborn man who expected everyone to honor his or her business agreements regardless of whether these deals were inscribed on paper, sealed with a handshake, sweet, bitter, or utterly sickening. Hunter was also a man with great faith in

his intuition, and he cursed himself twice as Nolan and Crazy Tim signed the legal papers without reading a word of the contract.

After they'd signed, they realized that they needed to furnish the house. They searched the classified section of the Breaux Bridge tribune. The next morning, they drove across a dirt road to a wilting house next to a barn where Jesse Alexander Jaroquex was selling everything he couldn't fit in his minivan. Jesses wore overalls, and his neglected silver hair touched his shoulders. Earlier that week, he'd sat in front of the television as his wife had filled every suitcase in the house with everything she considered hers and left Breaux Bridge.

Nolan and Tim searched through the remains of Jesse's domestic life that were scattered across the field. As they searched, Tim heard an odd calling and looked to find a young goat with a chain tied around his neck; the goat had uprooted the spike that had anchored the chain, and he used the opportunity to sniff a pile of work boots.

Jesse pulled the chain. The goat resisted. With his palm, Jesse struck the animal across the face. The goat bit him on the arm, and Tim started to adore this creature. He knelt before the animal, the two regarded each other, and they became friends within a few minutes.

The boys handed Jesses a pile of bills that they'd earned at Jerry's. They drove away with a goat, a couch that they planned to push against the wall to conceal the exposed stuffing that dangled from its left side, a patio table with a crooked leg that Nolan said he could fix, and all the iron pieces of an authentic horseshoe game that Tim thought would make good entertainment in the absence of a television or stereo.

-How bout we call him Dan Gable? Tim suggested, as they drove home.

-Man, you got lots a' good ideas today, Nolan said.

They arrived to their home where James met them to drink cans of beer. James rubbed Dan Gable behind his ears as Nolan took a hammer to the new patio table.

-This is gonna work out great, I think. Crazy Tim said. We'll just let him eat up the grass on the front lawn, and we won't have to mow it.

James shook his head.

-I don't know, he said, my granddad had goat when I was a little kid. I don't think they'll just eat the grass all even like you want it.

-Naw, Tim answered, Dan'll take care of it. You know, Gable was the meanest wrestler ever. The best too. The Russians tested him for 'roids five times when he was kickin' their asses at the Olympics.

-Alright. James said. You must know goats better than me.

Dan Gable was eager to graze. Within a week, there was not a blade of grass left on the front lawn, so he started chewing at the roots entangled in the soil. The young men's house guests, most of whom were fellow bouncers, fed Dan carrots as they talked about the bizarre events at Jerry's and learned the game of horseshoes. Nolan placed wrestling mats across the garage floor where they drank and practiced new ways to handle unruly customers.

Eventually, Hunter came for a routine check of his property. He was upset when he saw that there was no lawn in front of his house. Instead, there was a dirt field of empty beer cans where James, Birdy, Nolan, and Crazy Tim were playing horseshoes. There was also a patio table resting sideways in the dirt; Brandon found that it was

missing a leg and that the boys had stuck in the severed leg into the ground to mark the spot where they pitched horseshoes.

Hunter was further upset when he walked into the garage: there were craters and holes in the walls that surrounded a set of wrestling mats. He stepped over more empty beer cans. Then, he entered the living room where a goat with an American flag bandana around its neck was sitting on a couch. A wad of roots from the front yard dangled from the animal's mouth.

As Hunter spoke to the boys, he made sure to carefully choose each word. The tenets would replace the grass in two weeks time, and they would find Dan Gable a new home. If the tenets had not met these conditions, Hunter would return to shoot the goat himself and to drive the boys off his property and away from the civilized world.

Tim and Nolan discussed the matter later that night over the game of horseshoes. After Nolan took the first inning, they figured out how they'd replaced the grass in the front lawn, and the two shook hands. But there was still the problem of what to do with Dan Gable. Tim was standing at the table leg taking aim at the stake when he got the answer:

-How 'bout we just send Dan to live with Karl? Tim said.

-Who the hell's Karl? Nolan answered.

-Our boy, Tim said, our new boy.

-You talkin' about James. Nolan said. Nobody calls him Karl. You need to go and get your head worked on. Will he take Dan?

-'Course he will, Tim said. He likes animals. He grew up on a farm in Kentucky.

-He grew up in 'Bama, Nolan said. You know, you confuse the hell outta people.

You need to go and ask God for a new brain. Hurry up and pitch.

Tim thought for a minute.

-His birthday's in two weeks, huh? Crazy Tim said.

-You talkin' about James? Nolan said. Yeah. That's what he said. Pitch already.

-We'll give 'em to Dan for a birthday present. Tim said. Dan can trim his grass for 'em.

Tim pitched, scored a ringer, and shook hands with his roommate again.

The next morning, Nolan rubbed gel in his hair, put on the collared shirt that he kept clean for church and for dates, and went to knock on Hunter Mazerolle's door.

Hunter had indigestion; he rubbed his stomach as he opened the door to Nolan.

-What are you here for? He said.

-How you doin' today, Mr. Matterelle? Nolan said, smiling the same way that he'd practiced in the mirror.

-It's Mazerolle, Hunter said. What do you want?

-Well, sir, me and Tim were talking about how to fix your grass yesterday.

-That's very good, Hunter said.

-Well, and, the thing is, it's gonna cost some money, Nolan said. Now me and Tim both have some experience painting houses, and, well, we figured that your house could use a fresh coat.

Hunter's stomach burned and rumbled.

-It's been a while, he said, but I don't really need new paint.

-Well, we think you do, Nolan answered.

He extended his arm to reveal a handful of eggshell paint chips.

-These came right off the side of your house. Nolan said. I didn't hardly have to pick at 'em. Watch this.

He leaned forward and used his fingernails to pry a loose fragment of paint off the door panel.

-Stop! Hunter shouted. Jesus Lord!

He closed his eyes and shook his head.

-So, I guess there's no other way ya'll can get the money? He said.

-Probably not, Nolan said. We don't make all that much. We're not old and rich and responsible yet.

-So you want me to pay for the grass that you fed to that sheep? Hunter said.

-Sheep? Aw, you mean Dan Gable.

-What?

-I thought you heard. The goat's name is Dan Gable, Nolan said. We named him after the meanest wrestler ever. You know, that guy coaches the Iowa Hawkeyes? He's sixty years old and still nobody can pin him.

-I know who he is, Hunter said. I'm not gonna live too long if you keep stressin' me. How much will the grass cost?

-Well, we'd like a little extra too, Nolan said. You know, for the labor.

That evening, James was standing at the door when he saw that Frankie Mazerolle had returned. Frankie was scanning James' body the way that men will when they drink and start to conjure thoughts of fighting. He'd learned not to grow nervous around men who assumed threatening postures because the most vicious men, men like Crazy Tim,

had no interest sticking out their chests, shouting, and putting on menacing stares. Those who wanted to brawl would attack without pause and would have no concern outside of damaging the other.

-You new here, right? Frankie said

-Pretty new, sir, James answered.

-So you know some guy who works here named Karl?

-No. James said. Haven't met him. But I don't know all the guys. Lots of people quit here all the time.

-So you ain't friends with this Karl guy?

-I don't even know him, James said.

-Real big guy, Frankie said, raising his hand above his head. You'd know him.

Wide shoulders like that door over there. Tree trunk arms.

-Maybe he comes in when I'm not here, James said.

-Alright, good, Frankie said.

He took out his wallet.

-How'd you like to get some quick money?

Now James was nervous.

-What do mean? He asked.

-This Karl tried some things with my wife a while ago, Frankie said. Put his hands all over her. She almost had to fight with him. Now she ain't comin' here again, 'cause I set her straight and told her this place was off limits, but this Karl is gonna learn some respect.

-I don't think I want to be a part of this. James said.

-You're gonna make two hundred dollars for doin' pretty much nothing, Frankie said. You look pretty tough, and I might need some help to straighten this boy out. He ain't no friend of yours.

-Please, no, James said.

-Three hundred dollars, Frankie answered.

He stuffed the money in James' shirt pocket.

-I heard your boy, Tim, say that he's gonna be here Friday, Frankie said. You get here early, about seven, and we gonna wait until he comes in the back door.

-I'm not great at this kinda stuff, James said.

-You already got paid, Frankie said, so don't you cheat me. Seven o'clock.

Friday.

-So he's a real big guy? James said.

-Real big, Frankie repeated. But he ain't gonna see this comin'. All I need you to do is just make sure he doesn't get over on me. Seven o'clock.

He resolved not to think about the matter until Friday. At dawn, Uncle Roland shook James awake. He told him to get some leftover biscuits or some scrambled eggs from the kitchen and to put on some working clothes. He handed James a shovel, and as the sun rose, they dug two holes for two oak trees in the back yard. The trees, still resting in plastic containers, were not yet as tall as James. Uncle Roland wanted to watch them grow and extend their limbs across his lawn; he hoped that in a decade or so, he could sit and drink his whiskey and spit his tobacco in the comfort of their shade; he hoped that he wouldn't be sitting alone.

They sweat into their clothes, into their wooden handles of their shovels, and into the soil. After they'd placed the oaks into the ground along with the mulch, they drank from the garden hose and admired their work.

-We'll give 'em some fertilizer tomorrow, Uncle Roland said.

-Sure, James answered.

-I guess I'll need to run down to the ole' Home Depot again, Uncle Roland said. I might need you to carry some things. Good to have a strong guy around for help.

-Sure, James answered.

-That one looks like it might start to get a little crooked. We might just have to tie it to a rod or somethin' to keep it straight.

-Alright, James said.

Uncle Roland took a long drink from the hose and wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

-I saw a ghost last night, he said.

James didn't answer. They stood there quietly for a moment, still admiring the two oaks.

-I got up real late, Uncle Roland said, I think it was eleven or twelve. I saw a little girl. She had on a dress, a real old-looking dress. Like something somebody woulda worn a hundred years ago. She was really pale, and she kinda glowed like the moon glows. She said something to me, but I couldn't understand. It wasn't English. It was a weird noise. Then she was just gone.

They were silent.

-Yea, James finally said, I think that tree is kinda crooked, now that you mentioned it.

-So you probably think I'm crazy.

-No, no, James answered. I meet plenty of crazy people. You don't seem like them at all.

-Well, I didn't think you'd believe me. I've seen the little girl before. Three times. Last night was the fourth. She always talks in a strange voice before she leaves. I just wanted to tell you because I figured if you'd seen something, you might be afraid to tell anyone.

-I'll let you know, James said. I mean, if I see something odd like that.

-Thanks, Uncle Roland said. Maybe you aren't done with everything after you die. Maybe you got more chores to do and more people to visit. Or maybe I've been in this house by myself for too long.

James grew friendlier with Birdy, who started bringing to Tim and Nolan's house a paper bag of Red Shack crawfish, vegetables, and sausage with him so that James could have his favorite food. James was dismayed that he'd been banned from Martin's lunch tables, but his friends assured him that Martin would forgive anyone after enough time had passed.

James shared his allowance of Martin's food with Birdy while Tim and Nolan pitched horseshoes and made wagers that neither of them ever reconciled. When Birdy listened to a friend, he had a way of nodding and running his hands through his hair that inspired others to reveal whatever burdened their minds. James revealed to Birdy concerns that usually remained secrets. Nolan was the only person that James told about his contract with Frankie.

-I'm kinda worried about this Karl guy, James said.

-Makes sense that you all worried, Birdy answered. I know all 'bout Karl. He nasty alright. Martin banned him from his place 'cause he started throwin' tables around and breakin' things.

Birdy saw that James was chewing the inside of his mouth and that James was afraid. He didn't say anything else about Karl that day.

Later that evening, he spotted Sophia carrying her girl outside of Swiney's Market, where everyone with good sense bought their fresh cuts of meats. Birdy saw an opportunity to help his friend, so after he'd said hello and made little Chloe laugh, he alluded to Frankie's upcoming confrontation with Karl. Sophia demanded to know more. Birdy shrugged, said that he'd thought she'd heard, and explained that he'd already revealed too much. Sophia crossed her arms, frowned, and addressed him by his first and last name.

-Oh, you better let me know all about this, she said. I don't wanna tell that pretty fiancée a' yours that you keepin' secrets with those dirty boys you run around with.

Birdy told her that Karl had broken up Frankie's poker game, choosing not to repeat the detail of Sophia's fabled kiss because he didn't want to draw any more anger from the lady. She heard only that Frankie had commissioned James to rough up another bouncer at Jerry's, and she didn't want to learn any more.

When he visited the Red Shack the next day, Birdy found an empty seat close to where Martin was having his lunch. He recited the story of Karl and the hustler, and mention Frankie's grudge with Karl, making sure that Martin Mazerolle was close enough to hear every word. Martin placed his hand on Birdy's shoulder.

-You better tell me what those fools have got planned, Martin said.

Martin had heard many of the stories of Karl, Tim's friend whom he'd banned, but he told Birdy that he didn't know anyone from Alabama named James.

-Is that boy tuff? Martin asked of James.

-Yea, Birdy said, but he ain't big enough to mess with that Karl.

Neither Martin nor Sophia spoke to Frankie about what Birdy had reported because they knew that Frankie was the sort of man who would agree with his family on any matter so that he could enjoy few days of peace and then run off to find trouble as he pleased.

That afternoon, Nolan took advance payment from his landlord. He took the money and purchased beer and plastic cups for James' birthday celebration that would take place that Saturday.

Friday night came. James sat in his truck, waiting for the dashboard to show nine o'clock so that he could step out into the parking lot, meet Frankie, and face Karl, who had tree trunk arms and linebacker shoulders. James tried to recite the verses of Pslams, but he'd lost the words. His hands shook. He pressed his head against the steering wheel and said Oh Lord, Oh Lord, I hate being so scared all the time. Oh Lord, I get so scared when I'm alone.

He was late. Frankie paced about the back parking lot with crowbar in his hand. Martin Mazerolle had arrived in hopes of keeping his brother out of jail that evening. He found Frankie, slapped him across the back of the head and shouted:

What you doin' out here, you dumb sonofabitch?

-I'm dealing with somethin' personal, Frankie answered. You got no business here.

-It's gonna be my business when that poor wife a' yours calls me again, Martin said.

-You go on home, Frankie said.

-Sure. I'll go home, Martin said, and when they take your dumbass to jail, I'll make sure that Sophia don't get lonely.

Frankie raised the crowbar.

-I don't got the patience for you, Frankie said

-Don't swing too hard now, Martin said. Sophia outta wake up next to somebody handsome.

The brothers exchanged threats, while on the opposing side of Jerry's Sophia arrived to find James standing outside.

-Have you seen Frankie? Sophia asked.

-No, James answered.

-I don't care what he paid you, she said, you better not get mixed up with this.

-Did you see that Karl guy? James asked.

-Karl?

-That guy who kissed you.

-Sophia crossed her arms and frowned.

-Kissed me? She snapped, Ain't nobody kissed me outside my house. You think I'm scandalous?

-No ma'am, James answered.

-Ma'am, she repeated, so I look that old now?

-Oh, damn it, James said, as he saw Frankie and Martin make their way towards him. I don't think I'm ready for all of this.

They met. There was confusion and silence among the four of them.

Martin Mazerolle addressed James:

-You, he said, I don't like you at all. But you got a lot a' sack.

Then, he addressed Frankie.

-Don't do nothin' stupid now, he said. Where's that James boy you paid?

Where's he hidin' out?

James raised his hand.

-That's me, sir, he said.

Martin rubbed the stubble over his chin.

-Huh. Ain't that interesting, he said. You done pretty well in Breaux Bridge so far, and you don't even know it. You ain't banned from my place no more.

He left. Sophia looked to her husband.

-He took care of it, she said, pointing to James. He took care a' that Karl fellow, and Karl won't be here no more.

-I know it's all bullshit, Frankie said. But I know you an' Martin aren't gonna stay out of this.

He turned to James.

-You keep that money, and we're gonna tell everybody that you whopped Karl real bad. Knocked out his teeth and everything.

-You could have whooped him, James said.

-Nobody'll believe it, Frankie answered. Whatever the story is, I just want him to get beat on. Folks will think that you're really somethin'.

-I'm not picking you up again, Sophia said, walking away.

James left Frankie alone in the parking lot. He entered Jerry's, uncertain what had happened and uninterested in learning the truth of the ordeal.

James birthday celebration was like most of the evenings he spent at Tim and Nolan's house, except that there were dozens more people drinking and more damage was done to the house.

Some of the guests were friends, some high school acquaintances, and some were neighbors who heard music, saw a crowd, and decided to join. Following many plastic cups of beer and several requests from those who'd known them in high school, Nolan and Tim agreed to have another wrestling match in the garage. Tim had won the first match two years earlier at a meet in Labbranch County High. That night, the duel ended with a draw after the boys made a hole in the wall that was roughly Nolan's height and width. Somehow, they also shattered a window. They hugged and agreed that that match had been enough to please the audience.

There was also a small fire on the couch; no one could say just how it had started. Nolan used a pot of water to smother the flames and then turned the cushion over so that only the head of the seat was visibly singed.

In the back yard, Tim kissed Dan Gable on the forehead, gave him a carrot, and told him that he was a nice guy and a scapper. He led Dan into the bed of his truck, carefully making sure that Dan didn't bump his head on the aluminum cover. In the bed,

there were five buckets of blue paint for the landlord's house still. The festivities continued as Dan Gable chewed at the tin buckets.

The police were patient enough to wait until after midnight to stop the party. They received two complaints of noise and a third complaint of young man jogging nude around the block: Tim explained to the officers that the streaker was not out of his mind, but that he was paying the wager of a horseshoe match.

Nolan drove James home. With Dan in the bed of his truck, Tim drove ahead of them and waited outside of Uncle Roland's front yard. When he opened the door of the bed, Dan stumbled out, dripping with blue paint. He let Dan explore the front lawn, hoping that his friend would get acquainted with his new home.

Ten minutes later, James and Nolan arrived.

-What the hell? James said, spotting Dan in the front lawn. Why'd you bring him here? And what did you do to him?

-That's your present, Nolan said. We figured that you liked Dan, so you can keep him.

-No, James said. You're not bein' serious. Take him back. My uncle ain't gonna let us keep a goat.

-We thought you'd like him, Nolan said. You know, he can trim your grass for you.

-Take him back, James repeated. Don't wake up my Uncle. He goes to sleep real early.

As they argued, Dan made his way to the back yard. He had swallowed paint, and he began coughing and making noises unfamiliar to Tim. The racket was enough to wake

Uncle Roland, who sat up, looked through the translucent blinds of his window, and saw a shroud that glowed with the moon's light as it moved across the yard. In darkness, he reached for his glasses. Outside, James and Crazy Tim coaxed the animal back towards the truck. Uncle Roland pulled up the blinds and stood there for a few minutes, looking upon his two small oaks. He went to bed feeling a bit less lonely.

In the driveway, Dan was beginning to shake.

-Did he get into some paint? James said.

-Yea, Tim answered. He can handle it.

-I don't know about that, James said. Ya'll should take him to a vet or something.

Crazy Tim drove his friend back home, and when he looked into the bed of his truck he found Dan slumped over in a blue puddle. His body was still warm, his eyes were open, but he had no pulse.

Nolan wrapped the body in a blanket in the garage, and then sat the mat, crying and running his hands over white sheets stained with blue.

Tim drank all the liquor in house, a quarter bottle of the local moonshine, and went out to fight. The bartenders at Jimmy Alderon's place had dealt with Crazy Tim many times. As he made his way across the room, they saw that he was caught in a spell: his eyes were half closed; he breathed through his teeth. They saw that he'd come to hurt others and to hurt himself. They told him to leave, so he waited in the parking lot where he watched two fellows, each of whom much larger than he, step out of a car with a Mississippi license plate. He shifted his lower jaw to the left and then to the right so that the joints would be less likely to break when he took a hit. Tim walked up to the strangers and slapped one of them across the mouth. The other shouted and cursed.

-You can stop makin' noise, Tim said. We gonna do this now.

He slapped the larger fellow again, and they started. All three of them had bruises on their faces; blood came from their mouths and noses and trickled to the pavement. The strangers beat Tim with their fists until their hands ached and their arms burned, but Tim wouldn't stop. Their desire to hurt the smaller man faded as they tired out and grew sore. They ran, leaving Tim to stagger to the driver's seat of his truck where he fell asleep.

His friends didn't ask what had happened to his face at the funeral service. After he'd offered his words of praise to Dan, they bowed their heads and prayed silently.

-Is he gonna be alright? James asked Birdy after they'd finished the ceremony.

-He ain't never gonna be alright, Birdy answered, but he'll be smilin' tomorrow.

The young walked along the creek towards the path that lead to the clearing along with interstate where Birdy had parked his car.

-I didn't know you were religious like that, Birdy said to James.

-Used to be, James said.

-You still pray an' go to church and all that? Birdy asked.

-Sure. James answered. There's good times for it.

Birdy, Nolan, and James had agreed not to speak of what had caused the death. They'd packed the soil into hole so that there was only a short mound. They'd left nothing to mark the grave, and they wanted Tim, whom they loved, to keep with him stories and memories that gave his mind comfort.

14. The Story Of How Martin Tried to Make Things Right

Birdy Thompson Bradley made sure to invite Martin to his wedding and to his wedding rehearsal. He did this because he liked Martin, but also because he had already invited Sophia, whom he thought of as a friend, and Frankie, whom he thought of as a curse upon his friend. He knew that Frankie could be trouble. Moreover, Tim had invited Nolan. Gina, who was Tim's sister and Birdy's fiancée, remembered in painful detail the trouble that these two had brought to the Mazerolle wedding. She feared that the problems at the ceremony had sparked a series of problems in the marriage that would continue until divorce, death, and maybe even into the afterlife where all people would be reunited.

Adding to her concerns were the stories she'd heard about what Tim and Nolan had done to poor Hunter Mazerolle's house. Evidently, the boys were supposed to paint it to reconcile a debt, but the project had gone terribly wrong: the blue paint was contaminated with debris, including what Hunter described as lumps of some kind of animal hair. More, Tim had been acting stranger than usual. He'd acquired a new set of bruises and cuts on his face, most of which would be gone in time for the wedding. He drank the cheapest, plastic bottle whiskey available in Breaux Bridge. He told his sister that he was trying get over the loss of a close friend.

So, with just over a month before the ceremony, Gina cornered her fiancé in the living room of their apartment, crossed her arms, and said I don't want your weird friends and my weird brother to mess up the wedding.

-That ain't even gonna be a problem, Birdy answered.

He tilted his head and smiled the way he had smiled on the first evening he'd taken her out, when she'd nodded each time he spoke and laughed and kissed him each

time he pulled her towards him. But in the living room of what would be their home together, her arms remained crossed, she frowned.

-Tim's a sweetheart, Birdy said. He can act right when he really wants to.

-An how 'bout Nolan? She answered. Those two get double stupid when they together. We gonna get 'em drunk and put 'em in a room with my girlfriends.

-My boy James will be there. Birdy said. He's legit.

-Oh, he's shady, she answered. I heard all about how him an' Frankie got into with that big ole' guy outside of Jerry's. Oh yea, then there's Frankie! You know he's shady. An' he's gonna get free drinks too.

-But Martin'll be there, Birdy said, although he hadn't yet sent Martin an invitation. C'mon now, my boy Martin is legit. Ya gotta trust the crawdad king, baby. You know he can handle his dumbass brother. He handled Crazy Ole' Boy at Frankie's wedding. He even handled that giant dude from Kentucky who tried to start shit at the crawdad shack.

-I guess he's legit, Gina answered. He done jail time, but I still trust him more than most a' your friends.

-Everybody trusts my boy Martin, baby girl, Birdy said. I'm gonna talk with him. I'm gonna talk with Timmy, and there ain't gonna be no issues.

-And Nolan, she said, her arms still crossed. You talk with James too. An' talk with any other barroom boys or thugs you wanna bring to our wedding.

-I'm tellin' you, Martin can hold it down, Birdy said. Hey, he's available. I bet you can still marry him instead.

-You can be funny and cute after we get through this wedding, Gina answered.

Later, Gina decided to invite Sofia's brother, Edward, who was now a part of the highway patrol, to both the rehearsal dinner and the wedding. She even invited his partner, Officer Bradley Hopkins because he had a nice face and because she took comfort in the thought of having two officers of the law at the ceremonies.

When Birdy handed Martin the invitation he mentioned that his friend, James, was looking for work. James was saving the money he made at Frankie's, hoping to move out of his Uncle's house and move in with Nolan and Tim, who enjoyed more freedom than any young men he'd ever known.

Martin no longer despised James, and he'd allowed the thick boy from Alabama to sit at his tables once again, but Martin believed that James was a slow minded sort who bumped into people, knocked things over, and set disasters in motion. Still, somehow, James had won friends and become a figure of ageless stories. Martin couldn't understand how James, who stuffed as much food into his mouth as his cheeks could hold, and who starred off at the clouds and the interstate as bits of corn and potato dangled the young man's face, was hero of these stories. But Martin felt obligated to trust his patrons in return for their willingness to trust a convicted felon, so he offered James eight dollars an hour to help out at the Red Shack.

He was rewarded for his faith. James learned the proper ways to purge the crawdads, boil the crawdads the first time, clean the pots, operate the register, boil the crawdads a second time to infuse them with seasoning, and the other chores necessary to produce the best crawdads in the world faster than anyone he'd ever hired.

And he certainly enjoyed the Red Shack food more than anyone Martin had ever hired. At the end of each working day, Martin usually had at least a few pounds extra,

and even after a month at the Red Shack, when every other employee had long gotten tired of eating the same stuff, James was just as ready to sit down in front of a pile of Martin's cuisine and make certain that nothing was left to be wasted. Empty crawdad shells and corn cobs flew across the table. Some of the fragments actually landed in the garbage can that James set next to the table for convenience. Martin would watch, shaking his head, saying That ain't normal for a human being, you know. Within a month, he decided that he liked James, but Martin kept shaking his head and never told anyone.

In a shed by the woods, about one hundred steps away from the red shack, Martin kept his extra pots next to stacks of unused items. Standing next to the forgotten Christmas gifts and photo albums was a shelf holding the books that he used to carry to the Louisiana State University. These books were the only things he'd taken from school that he could see and touch, and he'd decided to never throw them out. One evening, he opened the shed door to find James scanning the page of a text that Martin recognized as Introduction to Thermal Mechanics. Martin said nothing, took up an extra pot, and walked away chuckling at the sight of a boy meddling with a man's things.

But three days later, when Martin returned for another pot, he found his Thermal Mechanics text resting on the floor, and he noticed sheets of notebook paper dangling from between the pages of the book. He examined a long set of notes and equations inscribed in child's handwriting, and after reading over the notes, he went to find James.

James was sitting on a wooden stool behind the shack. With his bare hands, he was eating what looked to be roughly a pound of boiled sausage links.

-Did you do all this? Martin asked.

He tried to answer, but all that came from his mouth was a mess of vowel sounds along with bits of sausage that landed on Martin's pants and shoes. Martin threw a towel over the young man's head and repeated his question.

-Yeah, James answered after he'd finished his links. I got bored, you know. So just started flipping through some of those books you got.

-Where did you go to school? College, I mean. Where did you take classes?

-Aw, I never went. James answered. My parents wanted me to, I think, but I kinda hated school. Seemed like the people there could be a buncha assholes. You went to college for a while, right? Oh, I mean, I don't mean that you're, well...

-Show me how you did this, Martin said. I'll give you overtime. I'll give ya all the sausage n' taters you want, but I want to see this.

So they walked back to the shed where James opened the book and explained his work. Martin watched quietly.

-You just figured this problem out? He asked.

-Yep. I just looked at it for a while and it started making sense. I got pretty good test scores in high school.

-Pretty good. I bet. You really don't wanna give school a try?

-I've been thinking about it. I get bored sometimes. Hey, you said I could have more sausages, right?

-'Course you get bored. You're brilliant, you idiot. You drag people outta bars and boil crawdads. It's knucklehead work. It's 'tard labor. It's what I do, damn it. I thought you were dumb as a box a' rocks. You need to go to school before I get mad. Is it money? Is that it?

So James explained: he didn't want his parents in Huntsville overseeing his work and criticizing and supervising and offering praises or scorn for his grades. He didn't want his Uncle, who was spending much more time in church since he'd started talking about ghosts and life after life few weeks earlier, taking on the role of a parent either. He didn't want to be a boy. Martin understood and addressed James as an equal.

-You can go on down to the library in Lafayette, he said. I'll give ya directions if you want, Martin said. And if you want, there's a big ole' book there with lots and lots a' scholarships. I got a few of 'em myself. That was a long time ago, but I remember how to go through all this if ya want help.

He accepted his friend's offer. For weeks, at the end of each workday, Martin approached James and asked his friend so what are you workin' on to get into school?

James made thirty page list of every scholarship that he qualified for and sent off essays, letters, and transcripts. Then, one morning, when Martin was pouring beer for Robby Foudeaux, James arrived to explain that the Southwest Heritage Foundation had liked his test scores and his essay, and that a few members of the group wanted to meet for an interview to discuss a full-ride scholarship. The interview would take place the day after Birdy and Gina's wedding rehearsal dinner.

-Do you got any black socks? Martin asked.

-No. James said. I've never done any kinda interview like this.

-I was always good at the interviews. I'll do some homework. I know some people who can give us some pointers. But get some blacks socks to go with your shoes and your belt. The more you're gonna bullshit, the better you have to dress.

Martin was always at his work or thinking about his work. He would drive to his mother's home each day after work, hoping that his mother, like most Breaux Bridgers, would grow to trust him once he'd become familiar. He would play Sarah's card games; her hands would shake as she dealt cards face up; she stammered each time she announced that she'd won and that he ought to play them better next time. She would mumble on her way to the kitchen and return with armfuls of jam that Martin offered to his customers along with slices of bread. When he hugged her, she didn't tremble as much as she used to. Frankie didn't protest when Martin came by Jerry's or Alderon's to escort his brother home. Sophia was always waiting for him with a grocery bag holding a three course meal and dessert. They would sit on the porch for hours talking and watching the tiny windmill arms spin. Some nights, she rested her head on his shoulder. Martin spent hours in his kitchen reviewing the notes he'd taken on scholarship interviews.

In his kitchen, he would toss new blends of spices into his skillet; he would scribble in his notebook, crossing out most of the ideas on the page but drawing a few question marks each night. When he went to work, he saw affection in faces of the people around him. He felt tired throughout each day, but he laughed more and cursed less than he had since before he'd gone away.

15. Lacking a Clear Plan, I Visit the Bars

Martin doesn't own a cell phone. When James asks him why he won't move along with the modern world, Martin usually answers that he doesn't want to deal with contacts and with those hidden charges those phone salesmen who are just like car salesmen try to sneak into fine print. James told me that Martin needs solitude more than

most people; when he was young, he wanted to experience whatever life could offer, but he was confined to a prison where he had to find refuge in his own thoughts. His meditations became habits; he needs his time alone each day just as he needs to sleep and to dream.

After hours of mixing his spices, supervising his boiling pots, prodding his employees, sweating, working to give the line of patrons the best crawdads in the world, Martin wants goes to his refuge: he unplugs his phone, sits at his kitchen table, cooks for himself, and adds ideas to his notebooks. Sometimes, he'll drink coffee at Cezonne's, and sometimes, he'll sip whiskey at Alderoun's, watch the sports on the TV mounted on the wall, and offer Lucy a rub behind the ears while Chris browses his catalogs. If you really need to find him, or if he really needs to find you, don't worry, because you won't travel far across Breaux Bridge before you encounter someone you know or someone you hear about in stories.

But some days offer few opportunities. Some days bring weather that hinders your journey. We enjoyed a spotless sky at noon, but at around three, rain poured on Breaux Bridge. We didn't find Martin or his brother. James called his home phone. The phone rang, but no one answered. No surprise, James said, because if Martin had been there, he'd have unplugged it.

We visited just about every setting crucial to the myths I was gathering. At each stop, James ordered a beer, and I did the same. I spoke to a number of Breux Bridgers, and I made notes in my binder, collecting parts of the stories that eventually came together on my desk in Houston. Drinks were spilled over some of these notes, making some aspects of what I'd heard difficult to understand. One of my new resolutions is to

be honest with my readers, so I must make it clear that I was drunk early in the afternoon, right after the rain started drumming on the roof of Jerry's. By nightfall, James and I had achieved a state of disorientation beyond what the word drunk encompasses.

-Well, why not? James said, pouring beer from the pitcher into my glass. Nothing else to do. I work hard during the week. Sometimes.

We were seated at a table at some place called Arthur's. Or maybe it was Arlene's. My notebook lay next to my glass, absorbing some of the drinks we'd spilled across the table. I put it away (the notebook, not the beer) because it was a depressing reminder of how I often put myself next to papers and pens and books in hopes that if I take on the appearance of a productive writer, real work will eventually be done somehow.

-I like this beer, I said, wanting to avoid any relevant observations. What kind did you get?

-It's good enough, James answered. So you want to go to that wedding?

-Maybe, I said. Not sure if I want to think so much about weddings, you know.

-You'll need something to wear if you do, James said. I know a guy here who can get you a tux for cheap. Everything's close and easy here. Houston is just freeways and traffic jams and people running all over the place and it takes like an hour just to get to the grocery store. God, what a pit. God, I can't wait to leave.

-We've got great restaurants, I said

-Yeah, but you have to get there first, James said. You'll spend fifteen, or maybe, twenty percent of your life driving. No thanks.

We poured more and spilled more. The pool tables surrounding us were empty except for two elderly men playing a game with red balls that was unknown to me. We got to talking about girls. I'm not sure how we started, but we followed the usual routine of exchanging stories, each one more graphic and deviant than its predecessor. Eventually, James started mumbling on about pulling hair and sweat and fowl smells. I don't recall what narrative brought him to this description, but I know we started laughing ourselves red.

-Huh, you know, James said. Your stories are all kind of the same.

-Huh?

-Well, kind of, James said. Seems like all your stories end up with a big fight.

Like you get into a fight with some guy over a girl, or you and the girl end up shouting at each other.

-Yeah, I said. I didn't really think about it. Maybe...maybe. I don't know. Maybe that's not good. You know. If you start thinking about girls and you end up talking about some kind of brutal struggle.

-Right, James said.

He'd lost interest in what I was saying.

-What are you writing anyway?

-In my notepad book of papers? I said.

-Yeah, James said. You've been making all these notes and asking everybody about the city and the people.

-My magazine, I said. It's coming along. Just getting the bare bones of it.

-No, no, James said. I call bullshit. I call Shenanigans. Shenanigans! The kinds of things you're asking everybody have nothing to do with the stuff I saw in the pamphlet-magazine-whatever-the-hell-you-call-it.

-Ok, I said. I don't really know what I'm working on.

James stared at me.

-I'm not sure how to explain this to you, I said.

Then, I realized that I'd never really decided what my plan for the weekend was, which meant that I didn't actually have a plan. I could see that James wouldn't accept another mouthful of tired phrases, so I stopped lying.

-There's no article, I said. I mean, I'm writing something, but it's not going in *American Phenomenon*.

I explained. He closed his eyes and shook his head.

-So...so what are you writing then? He asked, eyes still closed.

-I haven't started writing anything, I said. I don't know how I'm going to put it together. I don't know what it's going to be. I don't know. I needed go off someplace else. Someplace different.

-Oh, James said. I think I get this. The engagement has you running around, acting spastic?

I didn't answer.

-All of my married friends got a little nervous before the wedding, James said. I mean, not nervous like you. You get real...real.

He waived his arms and legs in epileptic spasms to illustrate.

-There's no fiancée, I said.

-Sweet baby Jesus, James said. You've haven't shut up about her.

-She was supposed to be my fiancée, I said. It didn't go like I'd planned.

I don't know how well I illustrated the scene for James. Here it is for you:

16. Monsters and Wedding Flowers

I shelf the memory in a library of myths, the compartment for sea monsters and flying saucers, and usually regard it as fiction or dream. When the memory emerges, when I'm forced to acknowledge that events are not myths, it draws me into the disaster as it is happening in the living room of my apartment.

I have a fold out table, two chairs, a champagne bottle, two glasses, plates, forks, knives, and a takeout order of Italian food. I've lit candles to illuminate the room, partially to create a cliché atmosphere, but also because I want the roaches and the water spots across the walls to remain hidden. Two pink candles sit on the table.

I've read somewhere most men drop the engagement ring into the champagne glass, but I wasn't certain of the proper time to make the symbolic offering. I think I can just sort of improvise. We finish a bottle of wine before we sit; she's winking and leaning close. You can find Italian food in Houston that makes up for all the other hassles of the city. She's almost finished with that last bit of ravioli, and as soon as she chews, swallows, and dabs her lips with a napkin I'll offer the champagne. The wine has us laughing. She gets up to use the bathroom, I drop the ring in the glass and pour. She takes a seat; she's really laughing now; my smile makes her laugh, she says; she tilts the glass back. I raise my hand to protest, but what do I say? Do I just say Oh, hey, watch out for that? That would be an awkward way to start the life-long partnership. I hadn't expected this. I'm just sitting there, raising a-little-bit-too-polite-of-a-gesture finger.

My mouth is open. Still drinking the champagne, she looks to me with a why-are-you-raising-your-finger-and-letting-your-jaw-hang expression. She doesn't see the ring. It goes down with the Champaign. Now she's coughing, coughing, coughing.

Oh dear. You can't panic in situations like these, even as her face turns colors. Ok, but now she's pointing to her throat, and now she looks angry. She has a look of why-are-you-still-sitting-there-with-your-mouth-open-and-your-finger-still-raised-could-you-please-hurry-up-and-help-me-not-die? Ok, so remain calm here. I learned the Heimlich maneuver in the eighth grade. Maybe it was the ninth. Alright, she really looks angry now, angry, and desperate for oxygen. Time to take action!

From behind, I pull my arms into her stomach. That didn't work. I think I need to move lower.

Is that the right spot? I ask.

But, right, she can't answer me, because if she could, she wouldn't need the Heimlich. Oh, yeah, sorry, I say. Really sorry.

This is the spot. One. Two. Pull! That sounded like it hurt. Now try again. Pull! We just knocked over the table. And in a puddle of saliva and marinara sauce, out comes the ring!

She pushes me away; she still looks angry, but at least she's not choking, so I think I can still salvage this evening. I did save her life, but that was probably the gentlemanly thing to do since I'd almost killed her. The candles on the table are setting the carpet on fire. I stomp and fan the flames, then run to the kitchen to fetch some water. The alarm sounds off. I return with a pitcher of water to find her rolling across

the carpet, working to extinguish the flames that have caught her dress. Smart girl! Our kids will be honor students for sure!

The fire leaves a watermelon sized burn over the carpet. I find the ring with a thin coat of ashes and whatever else had been in her throat. I rinse it off in the kitchen and then return to take a seat next to her on the couch.

She's panting. Her legs weren't burned at all, but I'm afraid that she'll miss that dress. She isn't looking at me. I need to say something:

Totally my fault, I say. But this is an evening to remember, huh?

She still isn't looking at me. I turn on the lights. A roach scampers across the wall. She saw it. I hold up the ring.

Nearly asphyxiating her wasn't my big mistake, nor was setting her dress on fire. My mistake I learned, was putting in my mind the suggestion that I had a fiancée. I believed that the ring would just be a formality, but, actually, as she explains, she's not looking for marriage or any other kind of binding engagement. And, she continues, it's time to go.

She walks out, the scene ends.

Later, I called her until she finally returns a call. She accepts my apology, agrees to meet up sometime, and I never see her in person again.

But I'd already constructed a home in my imagination. I'd decorated the living room and most of the kitchen. I'd already taken some boxes from the grocery store; I was going to pack my belongings and leave my apartment to the rodents. I'd bought a suit, not a cheap one, but one for photo albums and bedside picture frames. I'd called mom and dad to announce that I'd be setting a wedding date within a few weeks.

Every few days I called to ask when she would like to meet up for coffee to chat and to work things out. Sometimes, she'd call back to answer that she couldn't make it, and I'd answer that it was no problem; we'd find some other time.

I kept planning for the wedding. I asked my friends about flower arrangements and cakes and caterings and all those other get-ready worries, worries that kept me awake through the night. At work, they would ask why I looked so worn down, and I would answer with a reply that the wedding was driving me crazy or with some other stock response.

Our ceremony would be the greatest and the most sleep depriving in our families' history! A list of concerns about the wedding, the house, finding a job, deciding when to start making children, and how to start a college fund made me sweat and lose nine or ten pounds. The myth of my wedding sent daggers through my stomach. It wore down my features. I immersed myself in the myth, expanded its boundaries, decorated my photo album scenes with more candles and more flowers. Wedding flower colors usually adhere to a thematic arrangement. I went through stacks of books and magazines to study these arrangements, and then tested each arrangement in my imaginary ceremony. My favorite was Texas Bluebonnets with white roses and silver baby's breath.

I'd dreamed up an island of marriage scenes, family of four at home scenes, kissing and love-making scenes. In the middle of this island, on a wedding cake pinnacle overlooking the entire landscape, stood a stock bride and groom. Surrounding the island was black, bottomless water, the abyss, the source of my creations. I averted my eyes from the water, but it loomed in my peripheral vision, even as I stood atop the cake platform, holding my stock bride in my arms.

When I faced the water, I saw nothing and heard nothing. I felt alone in a way that most people can't tolerate. Life brings you to the water eventually; most people acknowledge this fact rather early, and most people don't want to sleep without another body to warm them and to offer them relief from solitude. I think that most people imagine monsters and wedding flowers to draw attention away from the abyss. Some of these creations take physical forms; some inspire dreams that eventually take physical forms themselves.

17. James Offers Me Some Beer and Some Words to Inspire Courage

He understood most of what I'd said, or at least he understood the events I'd described.

-You lied about the fiancée too? he asked.

-I wouldn't call that lying, I said. But it wasn't the truth.

-What does that mean? James said.

-It was really what I saw, I said. You know, like that old picture of Nesse that everybody sees when they go on the Loch Ness tour.

-What does *that* mean? James said again. Never mind. Never mind. Don't tell me. Just pass me that pitcher, ok? This is too much to think about.

He poured beer into both of our glasses.

-I'm still going to write about your friend, I said. I'm still going to try and take back his story.

-Yeah, James said, but he wanted something that people would actually read.

-Let's be optimistic, I said.

-Let's get another pitcher, he answered. You're going to have to explain this to Martin. He might still work with you. He might chase you off with a stick. We'll see.

We drank a bit.

-You know, I said, I think this might have been the first time I've told anyone that I don't have a fiancée.

-This is a whole lotta neurotic behavior, James said. I think you need to go on and try some new things. Why don't you just come to the wedding?

-You don't mind if still hang around? I said.

-No, James said. I try to help people. I think you need some help.

-Maybe, I said. Maybe I should forget about her.

-That's a great plan, he answered. And maybe you should stop acting like a pussy.

We were quiet for a moment.

-Sorry, he said. I guess you just told about some painful ordeal and I should be...no. No. I'm not sorry. You have to tell people what's up to help them. So stop acting like a pussy. Go find another girl. Find more than one.

-You think, uh, Aldara, yea, you think she'll like me? I said.

-Do I think she'll...James stammered and let his head fall to the table. He looked up.

-That's what I mean. he said. Be less like...like...oh you write things...like John Keats.

-He wrote some great love poems, I said.

-And he died a virgin, James answered.

-Oh, that's not fair, I said. He was sick.

-So stop being like a sick, dying virgin who writes love poems for a girl who won't put out. Every once in a while, try to be more like...like...

-Like Hemmingway? I said.

-No! James shouted. Damn it! Like Genghis Khan. He didn't have time for love poems because he was conquering land and impregnating young girls. Go and try to conquer some shit. You have it in you.

-You think? I said.

-Sure, he said. Maybe. Genghis Khan. Ok, I'm dizzy.

So we found a hotel room with two beds and fell asleep. I'd filled a stack of pages with stories. Some of them involved James, who, as I learned, arrived at Breaux Bridge a timid boy. His years in this city had molded him into a different sort of human being, because the character in the stories was nothing like James, who had slammed his forearms over the table and instructed me to seize new territory. He told a few things about where he was born, but James talked mostly about his time with the people in Breaux Bridge who remain his true friends.

18. We Find Martin

At around 1:00 in the afternoon, James pounded on the door until Martin answered. Martin had no shirt. His eyes weren't all the way open, and we could see that he's just gotten up from bed. He grumbled. James and I followed him back inside.

He hangs his pots from his ceiling and keeps his knives on a magnetic set to the wall, the way most restaurants keep their cooking utensils. He makes sure that no grease or bits of chopped vegetables soil the floor. All the years spent in his father's kitchen

taught him to keep his workspace clean. I didn't see any sort of notepad on his table. We shook hands, but made no introductions.

-Hey big man, Martin finally said to James as he took a seat at his kitchen table and rubbed his eyes with his fingers. Glad you made it.

-We were out looking for you yesterday, James said. You didn't murder Frankie, did you?

-Nothin' like that, Martin answered. But if you see him, tell him to come find me. My mom's real sick.

-She's not feeling well? James said.

-She's real, real sick. Martin said. My dad found her lyin' on the floor. They took her in. She's hooked up to a machine.

James nodded. I looked to the floor.

-I didn't hear anything about that, I said.

-Dad hasn't really told anybody, but me and Sophia, Martin said. Don't know where Frankie's been. Don't tell nobody, ok?

-Ok, James said.

-I don't need everybody giving condolences and sad faces right now, he said. I've already got people sending me weird letters askin' me for...for spiritual advice and for miracles. Some guy was sleeping out there for a few nights. He wanted to me make his tumor go away.

Martin pointed to the kitchen window overlooking the ferns and shrubs growing in front of his home. He looked to me.

-Are you the guy who writes the bigfoot newsletter? He asked.

-It's a magazine, I said. Yeah.

-Do I look like a saint? He asked. Aren't people who do miracles supposed to be long hair, John Lennon type guys?

-I guess, I said. I'm not an expert.

-Well, he said, if I tell you that I can't change the weather, will you put that in your magazine.

-I'll write it, I said, but I don't know when anyone will see it.

I explained my situation, excluding my reasons for traveling to Breaux Bridge, which I still didn't understand myself. I waited for an outburst, but he just rubbed his eyes again.

-So you just writing about all sorts of people here? he asked.

-I'm not sure how it will come together, I said. But I definitely want you to be in it.

Martin got up to brew some coffee. He returned poured two cups for us and then one for himself .

-Think I slept about two hours, Martin said. I got an eighteen year old kid running my place for the next few days. He's a smart kid. Maybe a pothead though. I try to hire smart kids 'cause the only folks willing to boil crawfish for money around here are kids and old drunks. At least kids got a cute way of being dumb. Just hope they don't burn the place down. Nah. They pretty smart kids. Some of the beer will go missing. Hell with it. Ya'll like this coffee? Bag says it tastes French.

-It tastes like coffee, James said.

Martin took a sip and looked to me.

-So you ain't been completely honest? he asked.

-Nope, I said.

He looked to James.

-He your friend? Martin said.

-Sure, James answered.

-Thought so, Martin said. Don't matter. Hell with it all. Well, I'll still work with you. But I want you to do something for me.

-Ok, I said.

-You said that you're writing about different people here? he asked.

-I'm taking notes, I said.

-Can you write something about my mom? Martin asked. Maybe my dad too. Maybe you could write some things about their lives here.

-What sort of thing did you have in mind? I asked.

-Whatever you want, he answered. You don't have to type up a bunch of flattery for a sick, old woman. It ain't like that. I'll tell you all sorts of unflattering things. I'd just like to see something written about her. I mean, *really* about her. My dad would like it too.

I took out my notebook.

-Tell me whatever you like, I said.

So Martin told me about his mother, and about the stories of his mother. James sipped coffee and listened. Our session lasted a few hours before James interrupted.

-Hey, he said. Sorry to cut in, but I got a text from Birdy. He says that Gina wants to talk to you.

Gina? Does she wanna shoot me? Martin said.

-Probably not, James replied. He wants to know if you're going to be home.

-For a few hours at least, Martin said. I'm going to visit mom in the hospital later.

James sent a text and then waited.

-He says that she'll be here in a while, James said.

-Well, Martin said, you can restrain her if she goes buck wild.

He told me more about his mother and father while we waited for Birdy's fiancée to arrive. I also learned why Gina didn't want to speak to Martin or look at Martin until that afternoon. Some Breaux Bridgers will say that Martin took a club to his brother, put his hands on his brother's wife, and started a brawl at Birdy and Gina's Wedding rehearsal dinner. While I believe that these events are true, I would not brand him a villain. Martin is a sinner learning to be a righteous man. He has no teacher, so he'll stumble sometimes.

19. The Story of How Martin's Plans Fell Through

On the night before Birdy and Gina's rehearsal, Martin came to Sophia's door to return a bag of plates and Tupperware containers. He saw that she'd been crying; they took their seats on the porch but said nothing.

-Do you want me to pick him up? Martin finally asked.

-Nah, she said. I'll just forget all about it right now.

They stood up and faced each other.

-Well, he said. I got my suit for the dinner.

-I've still got to go pick up a dress, she said. I know, I'm terrible.

-You've already got plenty to wear.

-Sure, she answered.

Then they kissed, hips to hips and chest to chest, and Sophia pushed him away. She took a few steps back and said I have to go; I have to go to my daughter. She went inside.

Martin drove home. He went right to bed but slept just a few hours.

He awoke, legs and toes twitching, belly down on an erection, but he was alone and resigned to brushing his teeth, showering, shaving, and trying to make a cup of coffee even though the coffee machine was unwilling that morning.

-God damn everything to hell, he said, slapping the machine. God damn, why can't I buy something that isn't made in China? Here's what you get from country of slave labor; son-of-a-bitch, God damn.

He drove to the Red Shack and threw salt into a cooler of crawdads who squirmed in protests as he showered them with salt and sprayed them with a garden hose to purge them of excrement. But the water stopped pouring before he'd finished, and he found that the plastic hose dispenser had broken and dropped the hose in a heap. As he searched to find where the hose had folded over on itself, he grumbled Made in Mother Fucking China; why do we fight wars if we're just gonna give all our money to slave labor countries that sells us shit that breaks so that we have to buy more shit to keep bankrolling the slave labor?

Hungry patrons found their seats at the table around noon, and James informed Martin that they didn't have enough seasoning to make the usual three batches. So Martin instructed the young man to drive to the store. James reminded Martin that spices cost money; while Martin shuffled through his wallet and his pockets for bills, he

muttered Jesus Fucking Jesus, the Chinese will just buy this country one day, and then they'll merge with Wal-Mart and everything will be cheap and shitty, and everybody will smile all the time an' nobody'll be able to speak English for shit, or even Chinese for shit, and nothing will make any fucking sense, but everybody will have to smile and wear name tags; here, this should be enough; get back here quick before the old timers get drunk and bitchy; by the way don't forget that we gotta review some things after the ceremony for your interview tomorrow.

Other problems arrived without any regard for Martin's troubles.

-Ice! He shouted at the sky. Why are we out of ice? I need some damn ice.

Twelve people present that day, including Uncle Roland and Robby Foudeoux, say that lumps of hail fell from a blank June sky, battered the umbrellas, shattered over the roof of the shack, and knocked Robby's cup of beer to the ground.

The witnesses say that the event lasted seconds. Martin looked up and then looked around at his patrons. The strangest thing, Martin believes, is how quickly they all accepted that they'd have no way to understand what had fallen over them and resumed their eating, their drinking, their talks with their neighbors. Martin worried about his seasonings.

James was not a skillful driver, and in his rush to get spices for Martin, he cut off another car that swerved and caused a three vehicle collision that caused an argument that provoked an older man to brandish his pistol. James didn't notice any of these adventures; he was trying to read the messy letters on the note that Martin had given him. The first officers on the scene were Edward Frederick and Bradley Hopkins. Edward saw

the mess in front of him, sighed, and called Gina to let her know that he would probably be late to the dinner that evening.

-Ya'll can just come on by when you ready, she answered, you don't even have to change if you don't want to.

There were more problems at the Red Shack: some of the potatoes were rotten; Martin wrestled with the stubborn lid of a container of cayenne pepper that eventually gave in and sent pepper across his face and in his eyes. His face and eyes turned cayenne red. A burning sensation lingered as he worked through the day.

The register wasn't working properly. Martin examined it while Robby Foudeaux sat drinking his cup of beer. Robby saw that Martin would be behind counter for a while, so, happy to have an audience, he told a story of the time he'd gone with a friend in a fishing boat to catch gators by using empty milk jugs tied to raw chickens to lure the reptiles into shooting range.

-Now that alligator was twelve feet long, Robby explained. The gun we used, I believe it was a .38, wasn't of a sufficient caliber to kill him. We just knocked the son-of-bitch out, and then dropped him in the boat. He was not pleased when he woke up.

Robby drank more and examined the dirt under his fingernails.

-Well, Martin said, what happened? With the gator.

-Huh? Oh, well now, we were forced to relinquish control of the boat. Yep. Had to go and use a hunting rifle put him down.

He finished his beer.

-The best way to prepare gator tail is to stew it with tomatoes, Robby said. You have a good day, sir.

And Robby walked home.

Martin closed the Red Shack and drove to his mother's house to give Sarah a picture that he'd found in his shed. In the photo, the mother and her son were posing for the camera at Arthur's restaurant in Lafayette after Martin's high school graduation ceremony. She had her arm across his shoulders as he gave her rabbit ears.

Sarah let him in, but she took a step away from his red face and red eyes. He tried to give her the envelope that held the picture, but she kept drawing back. He tried to gently pull her by the hand; she cried out, fell backwards, and scrambled to her room.

-Well ma, he said, I guess I ain't your friend no more, Martin sighed.

The dinner was less than an hour away when Sophia called Martin. She sobbed as she explained that Frankie had gone out again, and that she'd just got on her new dress. Martin drove to Jerry's, cursing everything he saw along the way. Frankie wasn't there, so Martin cursed a bit more and drove to Alderon's bar by the creek, where Frankie was losing a Texas Hold 'em hand to Christopher Calderon. Frankie didn't want to leave his chair, so Martin took up his little league slugger, and used his free hand to pull his brother by the hair out the door. He left all the money on the table, but as the brothers made their way out, Christopher assured them that he'd count the money properly and give back the right amount next time.

In the gravel parking lot outside, Frankie slapped Martin across the cheek and the eye. The slap burned where the spice had touched Martin's face. Frankie laughed, but then, he saw that it wasn't the usual weekday-night frustration that had taken hold of his brother. Martin took him by the neck and raised his club.

The Breux Bridgers who follow the sad comedy of Martin and his brother are certain that Martin whooped Frankie swollen faced and drizzling blood. No one can reconstruct the events to put together a clear scene: Frankie blacked out, and Martin can describe nothing more than the impressions of the seconds that lingered in mind:

He didn't remember how he'd arrived on that pebble driveway by the lights dense with insects that, for part of a second, seemed to dance to the rhythm of the humming and fading and humming of the power generator in need of repair. Then he began to swing into his younger brother. He made sure to try and bring his arm *past* the other's body, the way they told him to in those Karate classes that mom used to bring him to when he was a kid and mom was still *mom*. Each swing was a *real* swing with the right effect, a club thumping and thumping into a slab of meat.

Frankie was face down, softly breathing as Martin used Frankie's cell to call an ambulance. Martin went home. According to the bedside clock, he was already late, and there was not enough time to shower, so he used a towel to soak up the blood and some of the other perspiration. He dressed in his suit and tie. The white shirt turned wet as he fastened the buttons, and he wondered when they would take him to another cell with peeling paint walls and a concrete floor.

Birdy had started to chew his bottom lip when he discovered that Tim had showed up smelling of liquor and that Martin had not showed up at all. Before the rehearsal ceremony at the church, he whispered to Tim, You know, we're gonna have drinks at the restaurant.

-Yea, Tim answered with a grin, but I got real thirsty.

Still, everything went right with the ceremony, and for an hour of drinks and laughter, everything went right at Marquart's Restaurant, where, at a long table, friends and relations stood up and shared embarrassing stories about the bride and groom. Then, Birdy's best man stood to recite the tale of using illegal ID's to buy liquor, Martin, red faced, red eyed and sweaty haired, entered the room, and the problems began to take shape. Martin avoided eye contact with Sophia as he went to an empty seat.

The best man finished and toasted. The guests applauded. Birdy rose to tell a story to make everyone laugh and to explain why Gina was the finest thing in his life. He hadn't quite gotten to the laughter portion of the anecdote when Officer Frederick and Officer Hopkins walked into the room, still clad in their police outfits. Martin saw them approaching, ducked, and crawled behind the table to where James was sitting.

He nudged James, who was laughing and listening to Birdy explain why he wouldn't feel whole with his bride.

-They're gonna take me off, Martin said in what he believed was a whisper.

Birdy paused, but then went on.

-You gotta listen, Martin said, his voice growing louder as the police grew closer.

Tomorrow, make sure you don't try to talk on about things ya' don't know. It's ok not to know everything. Make sure you got them socks. I have a pair if ya don't. Take my keys. Take 'em!

Birdy had stopped again. Tim stood and approached Martin.

-Now, you gonna have to cut that out, Mr. Martin, Tim said.

-Shut up, Tim. Martin shouted. Go away.

-Hold up now, Mr. Martin, Tim answered. The Lord ain't gonna like it if I whoop on somebody when my sister's havin' her wedding party, but this is about to get real.

Birdy left his spot at the head of the table to speak with his quarrelling friends. The other guests watched and listened. Gina's face was changing colors. Birdy addressed Tim, James, and Martin. He pleaded Oh man, ya'll don't even know how hard you makin' my life right now.

Officer Hopkins came to them and asked if there was a problem.

-This ain't your problem, Tim said.

He pushed Officer Hopkins, who pushed Tim back. Tim double-legged Hopkins to the ground, James fell backwards and ended up on top of Officer Frederick, and Martin fled the room. The police put both of the young men in handcuffs, and as they escorted them out, Tim looked to Officer Frederick and said, Oh, hey man, I didn't recognize you with your cop haircut; how you been doin'?

Martin waited at his kitchen table for a knock on the door. Morning came; when Martin finally heard the knocking and answered, he found his brother swollen and bandaged. Frankie waited at the kitchen table as Martin stirred some instant coffee.

-I owe ya twenty bucks, Frankie said.

-For what? Martin said.

-You got my tab at Jerry's. Remember? Frankie said. You just wanted me to leave, so you threw 'em some cash. Here.

-Don't matter. I forgot about it. You keep it.

-No. No. Take it.

-Fine. Martin said. Appreciate it.

-Good. I told them that a big, nasty bastard from Kentucky beat up on me 'cause I'd beat up on him a while ago.

Martin nodded. He took a sip of coffee and then started to rub his face, saying Oh hell, oh hell, oh hell.

-What's wrong? Frankie asked.

-I messed up everything for everybody, Martin answered.

-I heard about it. Frankie said. You should probably stay away from that Gina girl for a while.

-Oh hell. I can't go outside again, Martin said.

-You gonna be ok.

-They ain't gonna trust me, Martin said. They ain't gonna want to be around me.

-Come on, man. We live around good people, Frankie said. They even invite me places. If a convict wants to be a saint, they'll give him a chance, even if he ruins things once in a while. Do your work, and they'll let all this go. But I've gotta move now. Sophia's at her mom's place. It's bad this time.

Alright, Martin said. Go take care of that. But I'm not getting' involved anymore. I'm stayin' at home and at my work. I'm never gonna hurt anybody again.

'Course, nobody in our family is good at keepin' promises.

When Martin returned to his Red Shack, he met with James and learned that James had been released, that Tim was still locked up, that the police understood that James had done nothing wrong, and that he'd missed the interview. Martin apologized every way he knew. He offered James food, money, drinks.

-It's ok, James said, I called them.

-What did you tell 'em? Martin asked.

-I told them that I couldn't make it because I got arrested. They thought the story was funny. I'm going into the interview tomorrow.

-You're amazing, kid. Martin said. But I'll stop talking to you. I'm afraid you'll listen.

-It's really all right, James said. I've been around strange people my whole life. You folks just have a strange way of loving each other.

They finished their chores, and then discussed the upcoming interview. Martin went back to his kitchen where he wrote down his mistakes and the mistakes he saw others make every day. He crossed out a few ideas and then added a few ways to mix his spices and a few things he could do to help the people around him enjoy their lives in Breaux Bridge.

20. The Bridge Requests a Blessing

Gina walked through the door and took a seat at the kitchen table. She said No thank you, dear, when Martin offered coffee. I introduced myself. She'd mastered her palm-up, girl's handshake, just as she'd perfected her back straight, legs crossed and hands folded seated posture.

-Randy, I said. Good to know you.

This was not the name I'd given Martin. He glanced at James who shook his head to signal that no questions needed to be asked.

-Do you need some, uh, privacy? James asked.

-Ya'll stay, Gina said. This'll work out even better.

-What works better? Martin said.

-Well, I'd like you to attend our wedding tomorrow.

-Alright, Martin answered. Didn't really expect that. Huh. Kinda expected you to roll up here armed and ready to kill.

-Ain't like that, sweetie! Gina said. She'd perfected her laugh and her squeal as well. I'm not gonna hate on you forever. I still think you can keep everybody in line. You do good most of the time.

-Glad to hear that, Martin said. I'm really surprised though.

-That ain't no thing, Gina said. But I need you to do a little something for me.

-Of course, Martin said. Name it.

-I want you to say a little prayer with me. She said.

-I don't get it, Martin said.

-This will sound really stupid, Gina said. I can get superstitious, and there have been just all sorts of problems around here lately. You know? I know this is stupid, but I would just feel better if you gave a prayer for our little wedding.

-I'm not a reverend, Martin said. I'm not even religious.

-Well, you believe in God? Gina asked.

-Most of the time, Martin answered. Be straight with me though: why are you asking me to do this?

-Because... Gina said.

She took a breath and flipped her hair past her shoulders.

-This is going to sound so dumb, she continued. I've heard that you can...do some things that most people can't.

-Good Lord, Martin said. You aren't talking about those stories about me...

-Could you just give our wedding a prayer? she asked.

-No Martin answered. Sorry, but no. I got some things to make up to you, but I'm not doing this.

-Why not? she cried.

She'd lost her practiced composure.

-Because I don't want any more rumors about me playin' witch doctor, that's why.

-I won't tell anyone if you do, Gina said.

-You'll tell somebody, Martin said. And that somebody will tell somebody else, and before you know it, I'll have lepers sleeping on my lawn.

She frowned and crossed her arms.

-You really made a mess last time, she said.

James spoke.

-You sure that you don't want some privacy? he said.

I was about to ask the same question.

-Not at all, Gina said. We about to have a group prayer here. Martin, let's do this so that you can come our wedding. We'll have some amazing food. We'll have all ya can drink. I got a cousin you can meet. She's real cute. Just say it.

-You really believe this nonsense? Martin said. I thought you were a pretty smart gal. I mean, I'm not calling you dumb, but you really think that if I fold up my hands and ask God for help, he's gonna look after your wedding?

-I don't know, Gina said. I don't know at all. It would make me feel better, ok? I told you it's stupid, but it won't cause you no harm. C'mon. Let's pray.

-I don't even know how to lead a prayer, Martin said.

-You don't need scripture, Gina said. Just tell God Hello and ask Him for some help, ok?

-Fine, damn it. Martin said.

-And don't start cursing, Gina said.

-Alright! Martin said. You really are getting superstitious. Let's bow our head then.

We did as he asked. He started.

-God, he said, I know that I don't really talk to you very often. I know that when I do talk to you, sometimes I don't have very nice things to say. I know I've called you some names and said some other things I bet we both regret. Now, I'm not going to say that I take back everything. You do come off as a real dick sometimes, and I'm not the only guy who thinks so. I think that most folks are probably too scared to tell you to your face. Maybe you just need to get some honest feedback.

-Stop! Gina said. What are you doing? Just give a normal prayer.

-It's my prayer, ok? Martin said. If there's a God, and I think there might be, then I can't go and lie to Him and act like I've become a holy guy all of a sudden.

That'll just piss Him off even more.

-You're horrible at this, Gina said.

-I know! Martin said. I told you! Can I stop?

-No! she answered. Finish the prayer, and stop insulting God!

-I'm not insulting Him, Martin said. You ever hear of constructive criticism?

-Stop criticizing Him and bless our wedding! Gina said.

-Alright. Martin said. Please, Lord, help us out here. I'm trying to do the right thing. Damn it, I'm trying to be right about things. I don't want to do miracles; I don't want people coming to me and asking me to cure diseases or bless their weddings. I just want to help out the people around me. Gina is upset because that dinner was important and I messed it up. I messed it up, and I'm sorry. I want her wedding to be perfect for her even though she's a bitch sometimes. You probably don't care much about weddings. I mean, I don't care much about weddings most of the time, but I'd like Gina and Birdy to get the wedding they want. Thanks.

Gina scowled a bit, but Martin's benediction must have satisfied her. She nodded and stood up.

-Well I'll be seeing ya'll tomorrow, she said. You behave now, Martin.

-That's always the plan, Martin said.

The day turned even stranger. I need to travel more! Martin wanted us to join him on his visit to the hospital. I could understand why he wanted a friend to stand next to him by the hospital bed, but I had no idea why he wanted me in the scene. I was writing about Sarah, but Martin explained that she wouldn't be able to speak to me. No one, save her husband, had been able to communicate with her for the last three months. She wouldn't even be awake.

Martin said that since I was going to write about her, I should see her so that I could describe her. Of course, he could have shown me some pictures of his mother as a healthier woman. I didn't ask why he really wanted me to witness the sight of illness taking Sarah. A jolt of fear went through my core, and the feeling remained there as we drove to the hospital.

We arrived to find two gentlemen sitting in the waiting room; they held bouquets of flowers; they had been waiting all morning for Martin. James later explained to me that unexpected visitors were his Uncle Roland and Jesse Alexander Jaroquex, neither of whom had been close to Sarah.

I heard fragments of Martin's conversation of whispers with Uncle Roland.

-Appreciate it, Martin said, but I didn't expect ya'll here.

-We'd thought it'd be a nice gesture, Roland said.

-Sure is, Martin replied, but really, don't mean to be rude, but why you here?

I couldn't hear what Roland said when he leaned towards Martin, who raised voice to answer.

-What do you think you'll see? he said. What do you think I can do? You believe every wild tale you hear?

-We just want to visit with her with you, Roland said. Please. Just this one time. We won't bother you again.

Before Martin grows angry, he covers his eyes with his palm and tilts his head downward. He looks up once he's decided whether to forgive or to cast insults and threats. On that afternoon, he invited Roland and Jesse to join us in the room where Sarah lay with tubes in her arms and tubes in her nostrils.

Her lips were parted. Nothing in the room moved at all, save the portion of her hospital gown over her chest; it rose and descended slightly with each silent breath. Skin drooped from her arms and her neck; her face had acquired the features of a skeleton, and although we could see that air was moving through her, there looked to be no life in her body.

We stood there quietly for twenty minutes before Martin leaned over her bed, a gesture that was against hospital regulations. I was looking at the flowers, putting arrangements together in my mind, but apparently, Jesse and Roland saw her turn to Martin and whisper something in his ear. Martin believed it too, I think.

We were on our way out to the parking lot when Jesse called to Martin.

-What did she say? he asked.

-Thanks for visiting, Martin said. Ya'll take care.

-Thank you, Jesse said.

Roland thanked him as well.

-Don't go and make a lot of noise about this, Martin said.

-We won't Jesse said.

-Never mind. Martin replied. See you at the wedding.

The two visitors left, content to have witnessed what they would call a miracle. Loneliness had compelled them to search Breaux Bridge for ghosts and feats of resurrections, proof that their time of solitude on this world was a passing phase, proof that when their bodies failed, a guiding hand might save them from the abyss. I confess that I walked into the hospital room hoping to find a miracle. I'd lost the shelter of my mythical wedding and gone looking for new phantoms.

21. I Love Dumb Jokes.

That withering body sustained by tubes was not separate from Sarah, who outplayed hustlers at cards and who, with her ruthless wit, jabbed at her husband until he fell to a knee and took her as a wife. Perhaps in her mind there remained blurred impressions of impulses, maybe she could still hear an echo of the final note of one of the

sonatas that she once played by memory. Maybe her husband's face seemed familiar, even if she couldn't find a place for it in time and time. Maybe she recalled, at least, something about the texture of the skin of his hand, guiding her through Breaux Bridge.

These are the things you want to believe

James went out for drinks. I returned to my hotel bed where I cried a bit. I realized that I loved stories and myths and that I'd loved them since I was a child because when your mind dies and your memories fade, the impressions of the events you've witnessed and the characters playing the people you've known remain amongst the living, shape new stories, and set people in motion.

I've been able to think of one reason why Martin wanted me to visit his mother in the hospital. He wanted Sarah's story to include who she was during the last portion of her life. Of course, her story would be a more flattering without the final scene of the lady waiting in a hospital bed for her husband to tell the doctors to detach her from the machines and let her pass, but it would exclude something real, and even myths should echo something real.

I don't understand what it is to die. I can give no shape to the abstract notion of fading into nothingness. When I look into the bottomless waters of my dreams I see only manmade notions of death. I can't fear dying since I've not any idea what dying is. I fear the sensation of blind solitude, the feeling of descending into an abyss without a guiding hand or a voice to tell me my destination.

The day had tired me; I leaned back on the bed without pulling up the sheets or removing my shoes. On the TV I found Elmer Fudd in his Viking hat performing his rendition of Wagner's classic. Kill the wabbit! I sang, Kill the waaaabit! The song

makes me laugh when it doesn't conjure images of Nazi aggression. Actually, it always makes me laugh.

I realized that I'd loved dumb jokes since I was a child and that I loved them even more now. I'll have library of them by the time I'm an old man.

22. I Try to Make Friends at the Wedding Reception

The bride and groom had all the impressions they needed for wall photos, bedside photos, greetings card, and albums. Yellow calla lilies and cherry red hypericum berries colored the church and the ballroom in Lafayette. A silver-haired man in a tuxedo took brides maids' pictures, grooms men pictures, newlyweds kissing pictures, newlyweds feeding each other cake pictures, close friends pictures, relatives-who-scarcely-know-each-other-or-perhaps-don't-like-each-other pictures.

I think the silver haired photographer probably did a fine job, but he missed a remarkable moment during the ceremony: the Reverend Howard recited the words till death do you part; the sound of the prospect overwhelmed the young, tuxedoed men on the groom's side and the young, pink bridesmaid dress bridesmaids on the bride's side. Some squirmed about uncomfortably, while some blushed and grinned.

We made our way to the ballroom where I poured down glasses of champagne and wine as I watched a cast of characters, most of whom I'd never seen in person, at their celebration. James identified some of them, while I recognized others from the descriptions of the stories. Martin was speaking with Frankie, who was drinking soda. I overheard a bit of their conversation and I think that Frankie got around to visiting his mother in the hospital. How strange, I thought, that a man would fight and protest with such defiance while being dragged towards a happy life.

Then, Sophia came to Martin; they embraced. For Martin, denial is penance. He's given up his late night porch conversations with his brother's wife, and he seldom reached for the bottle of Frederick moon shine, except, maybe, two or three, or, at the most, four times a week after he arrived home in the evening and needed to warm his throat and dispel the storm of strange thoughts that often kept him awake until morning. Martin set himself in motion towards the distant aim of refining himself into a righteous man. Of course, when the workday had ended, and he was alone in his kitchen, his leg jittered, and he felt the urge to take up his moonshine along with some whiskey and drive with his brother to one of the bars in Lafayette where he could take up more drinks, raise his voice, impose himself on a young girl who was looking to be imposed on, and maybe, swing his fists a bit and experience some of the blissful rage of his youth. I think that he takes satisfaction in knowing that frustration he felt for denying himself these sorts of adventures was part of his refining process. Martin had left only one temptation that might have ruined him, but this temptation rested in a hidden place.

I spoke to Hunter. I'd noticed that throughout the ceremony and the festivities he never stood far from a conversation. I suppose he didn't want to feel alone, and I suppose that he's taken to the habit of grinning through pain.

I introduced myself as Randy. He'd heard of me.

-So cage fightin', huh? Hunter asked.

-Yes sir, I replied. I come from a family of cage fighters.

The champagne was delightful that summer evening ! The bubbles were having a party of their own. I downed another mouthful and carried on.

-My dad was cage fighter, you see, I said. And my grandfather too.

-Yo granddad? Hunter said. He was fightin' in cage back then?

-He was a resourceful man, I said. He labored in a West Alabama dust bowl under the West Alabama sun. He used fence posts and chicken wire to construct a makeshift arena.

-You mean like an octagon? Hunter asked.

-Well, I answered, he didn't have the money for anything that elaborate. He put together what they called a square-a-gon.

-A square-a-gon? Hunter asked. What's the difference between that an' a square?

-A square is just a square, I said, but the square-a-gon is where men do battle. It has spikes! He wrapped his hands with the fabric of potato sacks and brawled with the negroes who endured the dust bowl with him. After a dozen seasons of working the fields and throwing coarse, fabric-bound fists with his dark skinned peers, he was virtually indistinguishable from the negroes with whom he shared the gladiator ritual. That's why they called him Negro Ned Robertson.

Hunter nodded, froze, then laughed until he sweat and gasped for air.

-Boy, oh boy, oh boy, he said. You full of it man, but you somethin' alright. Good to know you, Randy.

He left laughing harder than I'd ever seen a man laugh.

I remained alone for a while, wondering if I'd correctly identified all the characters, wondering if what I'd heard had been true at all. I've made mistakes in the

fog of suggestion; I get a bit frightened when I recall how certain I was of things that were illusions, dreams and stock images.

23. I Try to Ruin the Wedding Party

I had, that evening, a collection of stories impressed in my memory and across the pages of my notebooks, but I hadn't examined these images; the memories remained unexplored, the pages still undiscovered. So I stood there, taking in Champaign, browsing the tales of Hunter, the bare fisted cook, Tim, the pitbull boy, Birdy, the adventurer. There was also my own story of Randy, who chokes his opponents until they quit or go limp.

I saw Aldara standing across the room, flipped her hair behind her shoulder and winking for Tim. Those two, I realized, would stumble about Breaux Bridge until they came together. They were lost people, strange people, and Birdy was right to pair them. I'll leave them to discover each other, I thought.

Then, I remembered what James had said. Enough meditation, I thought, enough dreaming. Would Ghengis Khan leave territory unconquered to avoid hurt feelings? Would Hunter have let the pretty girl outside the theatre go home with another fellow to avoid offending her? Would Randy stop hitting a man without a team of referees prying him off his toppled, squirming foe? I would not be a docile writer there tonight! I would be a blood soaked conqueror; my savagery would repulse women, but they would acknowledge that I'm the sort of guy who topples cities and rebuilds them to my preference, and they would disrobe and ask to bare my progeny!

Nothing about my life made any sense at the moment, damn it. I couldn't tell silhouettes from monsters, myths from people of flesh. The world confused me when I

was a child, so I played with my toys and had Oreos and milk. I'm an adult now, apparently; I don't have toy. I've grown lactose intolerant. I needed other diversions.

-I'm going to drink more and to get laid! I said.

The Revered Howard, who had been standing behind me, turned.

-So, he said, you found a girl you liked?

-I guess so, I said, she's good enough.

-Best of luck to you, he replied. I was a young man once. I don't always miss it.

I marched to the bar where I tilted another glass to my lips as I put myself in a scene wherein I lead a hoard of Mongolians. I rode atop a back horse and pointed my sword at the territory I aimed to take as my own. An orchestra was playing some Walkner as I approached Tim.

I shoved him.

-You! I shouted.

He was surprised, as was Aldara. Amidst the dancing and the racket of dozens of conversations, no one else noticed the outburst. I stood there with my conquering finger pointed at Tim, and I realized that I'd focused so much on getting myself to that point in the ballroom that I hadn't considered what I was actually going to do. It got awkward.

-You! I repeated, trying to afford myself time to make a plan.

-Outside! I shouted.

-You get what you want then, Tim said.

He was all calm and cruelty. We went through the back door; Aldara followed, pulling at Tim's coat and squealing protests.

We found a sandy lot by a dumpster outside.

-So what you wanna get into? Tim asked.

-I'm taking her! I said. I'm carrying her back to Texas with me!

-You sure ain't, Aldara said. You better change that attitude.

-I didn't mean that, I said. Sorry, I mean, that was too forward, huh? I just got a little fired up. You know, champagne at weddings. I really didn't want to offend you. We should talk later.

Tim loosened his tie.

-We'll do this, then. He said.

I hadn't expected things to escalate so quickly. Maybe, I thought, I should just run off and hide in a closet or under a car for the next few hours. Then, I summoned my image of courage.

Tim was taking off his coat, both hands behind him, when I ran forward and hit him across the jaw. Aldara shouted and ran inside. Tim shifted his head left, right, and left again. His lip was swelling. He smiled that awful smile as he folded his coat and setting it over the dumpster.

-Alright now, he said. You get your licks in, 'cause when I'm comin' at ya, I'm coming for your soul. I'll punish you. I'll punish your family. I'll drive ya back into God's soil.

He was fast; he ducked inches away from the ground and shot towards me; he drove his shoulder into my stomach. I fell, and then, he was sitting on my chest with his fingers against my throat as his fist came down on my nose and my mouth. My eyes watered up, warm pockets of swelling bundled my face. I heard another voice shouting. I looked to see Martin.

-Stop it! he cried.

-Just need to get in a few more, Tim called out. This boy hit me once. I owe him 'bout twenty or so. That's the rate.

-Stop! Martin cried again.

Tim struck me again, chipping away a granule of my front tooth.

A bolt of lightning came down through a spotless sky and passed through Martin's body. This is a guess. I saw a flash and heard a thunder retort. Tim got off of me and to his friends.

Martin was sprawled across the ground, his suit and tie singed. A flame danced over his front pocket. He sat up.

-Did that just happen? Tim said.

Martin coughed.

-I guess so, he said. Ya'll stop fighting.

-That's fine with me, I said, wiping blood from my mouth. If anyone asks, just tell them that Karl showed up and started wailing on me. Tim took care of him. Thanks, Tim.

Tim looked to me.

-Sure, he said. You alright.

-The picture! Martin said. I need to be in the picture in a moment. So do you, Tim! My suit!

-Just take mine, I said. It's cheap.

-Will it fit? He asked.

-Sure, I said. Could you tell James to come out here?

So I stripped to my boxers and undershirt. When James opened the door, I heard from inside rumblings about Karl from Kentucky. I did my best to explain what had happened.

-You started a fight with Tim? he asked.

-Tell everybody...

-Yeah, I know, but you started a fight with Tim? James said. Do you want to die here?

-I took your advice, I said.

What do mean?

-You know, I said, trying to be a little more Ghenghis Khan.

-I was just drunk! James said. People just...here are my keys, I think there are some clothes in the truck.

I found a T-shirt and jeans. I waited there, bleeding, swelling, and more excited than I'd been in months. They'd all missed the miracle, or maybe the accident-that had taken place outside. They were still discussing Karl, and he and Tim had grown in stature.

The silver-haired photographer's last portrait featured Birdy, James, Tim, Martin, Frankie, and Hunter. Tim's lip was swollen, and the sleeves of Martin's jacket were too short for his arms.

24. The Story of Martin and Frankie's Last Visit to See Mom

Sarah passed away about a week following the wedding. Martin and Frankie saw her the day before Hunter decided to remove his wife from the machines that fed her and

breathed for her. Prior to their visit, the brothers hadn't seen each other in while. Martin told James all about it over the phone.

About one week before Frankie came to Martin's door at nine in the morning when Martin was chopping green onions, celery and green peppers, Martin had found his brother at a card table at Alderon's and made an announcement that Frankie probably didn't remember.

-You're free to neglect your home, Martin said. I'm not draggin' you anywhere anymore. Sorry for spoiling you so bad.

Frankie didn't answer or move in any way to suggest that he'd perceived his brother's voice. He tilted his cards up to look at his hand and took another sip from his glass.

-Mom's going, Martin added. That's just the truth. I'm not gonna ask you to come see her with me. You can miss her. But you a lucky guy, and you probably gonna live a long time.

But Frankie ignored his brother. He'd grown content with his weekly routine of losing money to Christopher and drinking the cheapest whiskey and beer Jerry's offered until Martin forced him to march past the windmills across the lawn, into his house where dinner was on the stove, his daughter was resting in her crib, and his wife was in bed. He heard Sophia's warnings that she was getting fed up; he noticed her scolding looks at the dinner table; he felt deprived when he arrived late to the bedroom and Sofia turned away and took her crossed arms and crossed legs posture when he moved to embrace her. These were concerns to Frankie, but they were the sort of concerns like next month's mortgage payment, or dying, or the bald spot spreading across the crown of his head:

they compelled him to occasionally pause and chew his lip while he sat at the bar; they surely took the forms of monsters in his dreams, but they remained phantoms floating around his peripheral vision, chilling the room when he was alone and without indulgences.

Then, one Thursday night, he lost one hundred or maybe two hundred dollars at Jerry's, and he arrived home to find that his bed was empty. Sophia had gone to her mother in Baton Rouge and taken Chloe with her. She hadn't left a note. Her mother told Frankie not to call again for a while. His fears had taken shape. He was alone, and he thought himself useless as a man when Martin invited him into his apartment.

Frankie's eyes were red with fatigue. He smelled of cigarettes. His hair was a flowing mess because he'd rolled across his mattress for hours without sleeping more than a few minutes at a time.

They said nothing to each other. Martin poured them both some coffee and went back to preparing his Holy Trinity, waiting to hear what his brother wanted. Frankie drank two cups of coffee and started to drink a third until the anxiety was too great for him to remain silent.

-I don't wanna see mom hooked up to them machines, Frankie said. I don't wanna see her with tubes in her arms and her nose.

-Then don't see her. Martin answered.

Frankie rubbed his faced.

-Are you goin' today? he asked.

-Sure am. Martin said.

-Well, I ain't going with you.

-I can hear fine, Martin said. You don't have to repeat yourself.

-You ain't gonna force me to that hospital, Frankie said. You aint' gonna make me go. I'm ready if you come at me again.

- I'm not gonna make you do anything, Martin said. How come drunks always repeat themselves? You know, you got a terrible personality.

- I won't go. Don't try to boss me like I'm a little boy.

-Damn it, Martin answered, I'll break one of these pots on your face.

They exchanged hostile glances. Frankie went back to his coffee, Martin to his stove. When it was time to go and visit, Martin went to the door, Frankie went after him, and they walked to Martin's truck without speaking. The day felt like the warmest of July; the jagged pebbles in the road glowed white, and both men squinted and shielded their eyes with their hands.

When they arrived in the hospital parking lot, Frankie remained in his seat, still buckled. Martin got out and walked off.

He heard his brother calling to him when he'd reached the hospital doors, but Martin didn't stop or turn around. Frankie came to Martin's side as Martin stood at the reception desk signing a visitor's form. Frankie was panting and his clothes were damp; he'd gone running to catch up.

-You go in first, Frankie said between deep breathes.

So he followed his brother and a nurse to the elevator and down the hallway; every shadow across the floors and the walls frightened him and compelled him to look straight ahead at Martin.

They entered the room where their mother rested by the table where visitors had left roses, marigolds, and a gift card that remained in a sealed envelope. Sarah didn't look very alive at all. Her lips were still apart. He sprawled out, palms-up. Frankie leaned over her to try and hear her breathing. After a while, a nurse leaned through the doorway and said that she was really sorry but that time was up.

Martin and Frankie left as quietly as they'd arrived. The racket of the igniting engine startled Frankie, who had walked out the hospital looking as if he had gotten lost in a dream. He grew very nervous again and felt the need to talk.

-Sophia won't call me back, he said. She's at her mom's.

-Yeah? Martin answered. I thought everything was peaches and cream with ya'll.

-Maybe she's been talkin' to another guy, Frankie said.

-Maybe, Martin replied. I seen her chattin' with some dude who just started takin' dance classes at her studio.

-Really? Frankie said. Do I know him?

-Not sure, Martin said. She talks about him all the time. It's like they best friends. He's a kinda young, athletic lookin' guy. He's got dark hair and an accent. Never understood why girls like accents so much. He's Italian, I think. Or maybe Mexican. I don't know. But he's better looking than you.

Frankie was quiet again.

-But, Martin added, so are most guys. You know, I wouldn't even worry about it. Hey, I'm gonna make up some etoufee when I get home. Stick around. Sounds like you ain't got much else to do.

Frankie was quiet and still nervous.

-Let me off on Sycamore, he said.

-Ok. What you got planned?

-I'm gonna walk off into the creek like the kids do, Frankie answered. I'll find a quiet place in the shade where I'll stick my head in the mud until I drown.

He waited for his brother to speak, but there was just the engine and the air conditioner. He went on.

-I'll wake up in hell, somewhere, Frankie said. I'll be with all the other cowards who quit and ran off.

He waited again. Martin turned on the radio. Frankie continued.

-You know, the thing a coward hates most in the whole world is another coward, he said, 'cause part of being a coward is not fessin' up to it. You imagine that you got a soul like a lion or a bear, but when you all alone you know that, really, you're like one of them little yip-yap dogs that yips and yaps all day but pisses himself whenever he takes on something big and scary. So when you see someone like that, like a yip-yap dog, you see what you hate about yourself. I'm pretty sure God just throws all the cowards together and let's 'em punish each other.

Nothing was said until Martin reached a Sycamore Avenue, just a few miles away from his apartment. He stopped the truck, unlocked the doors, and waited.

-Here you are, he said to Frankie.

Frankie looked down and chewed his bottom lip.

-Well, he said softly, are you gonna take care of Sophia and my little girl?

-Absolutely not, Martin answered. I said I'd give you a ride. I didn't say nothin' about raising your damn family. I'll take that watch though.

So Frankie unhooked wrist watch and dropped it in Martin's open hand.

-Maybe I'll get to talk to mom, Frankie said.

-Doubt it, Martin said. You probably are going to hell. I bet you'll get to see most of our family though. It's gonna be terrible for the both of us.

-Right, Frankie replied. Is there anything you'd like to say?

-I'd like to say that gas isn't free, Martin said, and you smell bad. Hurry up.

Frankie stepped outside and made his way through the grass and the tangled limbs of the Bad White Cypress. Martin drove home, dropped a lump of margarine in a skillet and added his Holy Trinity. He chopped, stirred, smelled, and pondered for more than an hour until Frankie arrived at his door once again, soaked and covered with mud and debris.

-If you're gonna come in, Martin said, strip down out there.

Frankie undressed as Martin went to his bedroom to find a towel and the oldest, ugliest clothes he owned. He took his time, and then handed Frankie the garments.

They went inside where Martin poured his mix of Crawfish etoufee across some brown rice and set the plate in front of Frankie. His brother had gone a day without eating. Frankie took a few small bites and then remembered how hungry he was; he slumped over his plate and shoveled etoufee in his mouth, smearing it across his lips and his cheeks.

-This might be the best I ever ate, Frankie said. You might wanna give some of this to dad.

-I will, Martin said.

-This your recipe? Frankie asked.

-Yeah, Martin said.

-How long you been working on this?

-A few years, Martin answered. It takes your mind off things. It keeps you moving instead of just worrying.

They finished their meal. Frankie calmed down a bit and fell asleep on the sofa. Martin sat at the table to consider every note of flavor on his palate as scribbled in his notebook.

25. I'm Thrilled to be Breathing. My Mouth Still Burns from the Crawfish

James wasn't angry at me for the trouble at his friend's wedding. I suppose he'd grown used to this behavior. I was ecstatic all night in the hotel room, and I chattered all the way back to Houston. I was examining the stories I'd gathered, those on my notebook pages and those of my memory. My tongue was still burning, my head throbbed. Still, I'd had the best gumbo of my life at the ceremony; Hunter stewed it. He showed me how to drop a few spoonfuls of potato salad in it for more flavor. This is how you do it when you're here, he said. It was strange, but I ate three bowls of it. There was nothing for me at home; I wanted to get at my work. I wanted to inscribe myths I'd discovered: they'd battered me up a bit and got me laughing again.

