

ABSTRACT

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The Things We Know is a collection of six short stories that revolve around the basic reality of white, male, suburban rage: what it means to feel culpable, responsible, and, ultimately, ineffective. The collection's protagonists, all but one of which is revealed through the first-person, range from the pre-adolescent to the middle-aged and offer up, rather than answers to the questions that plague this state of being, glimpses into the mind of the storyteller himself, examining what is revealed, what is known, and, perhaps most importantly, what is utterly unknowable.

THE THINGS WE KNOW

By

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Spring Hill

In the summer of 1985, when I was between the fourth and fifth grades, my sister, Betsy, began sleeping in my room at night. It happened suddenly, and then, in a similar way, stopped.

One thing that is important to understand about this story, and something that I still think about occasionally (now that I am older and comfortable), is that summer nights in Spring Hill, Oklahoma were unbearably hot. And at this time our little house on East William was one of the few still without air conditioning. Heat is still one of my earliest memories. Often my nights were spent wearing nothing but underwear as I lay on top of my sheets, turning and twisting to achieve a cooler position. Sometimes I slept so little at night it felt as if sleep were only a slightly different way of being awake. It didn't feel like rest, but rather, work—work just to keep from running barefoot into the night for relief.

Still, whatever misery I suffered in my downstairs room was nothing compared to Betsy's loft, which was really just a portion of the attic, separated off from the rest and made somewhat livable. The heat-absorbing shingles from the roof above and the rising heat from the kitchen below made the upstairs excruciating during the hottest months, and just like everything else, Betsy *fought* the heat. She had oscillating fans in each of the room's four corners and thin white drapes designed to reflect the sun while at the same time allowing the breeze. Nonetheless, even Betsy had a breaking point.

We had been out of school for a week—the heat was already there—and in my tossing and turning that night I was looking ahead to the premier event of the summer, the Fourth of July, and all that it would bring. My mind was envisioning floats and decorated bicycles when I heard a dry creak outside my room. I immediately thought it was a ghost; one that I had feared for years was lurking in our house. Rumor had it that in the fifties a young woman had killed herself by jumping out in front of the train that ran through town and back out behind our house. Though many were skeptical of the reality of this event, I was convinced that her spirit had somehow been carried along the train's path until finally landing somewhere near our home. Ever since I was small, I had attributed all mysterious sounds at night to her tormented soul.

I sat straight up in bed and had a very clear thought: *This is it.*

Instead, it was Betsy.

She leaned the door open and whispered, “Can I sleep down here tonight? My room's like an oven.” She spoke calmly, ignoring the fact that practically the only time she spoke to me during the day was to tell me to stop being annoying or to ask me to get her a coke from the fridge.

I was willing to forget, yes. Or, even better, keep what I felt was a secret between the two of us. I laid back flat on my bed and pulled the loose sheet up over my face to hide the grin that was forming. I was joyous, excited. If there was anything I desired more than to once and for all see an apparition, it was to feel close to my sister in some way. I feared that Betsy would think I was ridiculous, and to

hide my delight, I feigned anger, saying, “Yeah, fine. But you better not snore so loud I can’t sleep.”

“So that’s a yes?” Betsy said.

“Yeah,” I said, turning on my side, away from Betsy so that she wouldn’t see how happy I was.

She pulled out the old mattress we kept under my bed for guests or friends and laid out a single sheet she brought down from her room. She tossed her pillow at the top and sank down into the old, springy mattress with only the thick air for cover.

She didn’t say good night, nor did I. Instead, she said, “Thank you, Will,” letting it out with a sigh, as if the phrase had escaped. But to me this secret, quiet *thank you* with my own name attached at the end was like a prayer.

I barely slept that night, although it was no longer the heat that kept me awake, but rather my imagination running wild. Her intimate presence released something inside me, and it was as if everything that I had always wanted to know or see was available to me simply due to her closeness. In life, Betsy and her friends’ words were soundless to me—the soft, changing expressions on their faces were vague and indistinguishable and often from a distance. But now, in my mind, I heard them. I saw them.

I became fixated on an image of Betsy and her friends out behind the high school, where I had once seen them pressing white paper cigarettes to their lips and slowly exhaling clean ribbons of translucent smoke. Now, lying in my bed, I heard them laugh and joke about the boys they liked and the ones who liked them. Betsy laughed in bursts. Another laughed with a silent, open mouth. And still another

laughed in uncontrollable giggles. I saw them graze each other's hairless arms with fingertips and whisper into each other's ears, their cheeks gently touching. I imagined Betsy slowly turning the giggling one by her shoulders, then running her fingers through her friend's hair, dividing it, and then braiding it carefully, perfectly.

Though I took enormous pleasure in watching the group of teenage girls in my mind, the image I truly wanted for my own was that of Betsy in her space upstairs, where I was absolutely forbidden and, naturally, all the more wanted to see. But I had no reference point, I had been up there so rarely. Even with Betsy here in my room, I had no way of moving her up the stairs and into that space.

When I awoke the next morning to the sounds of my mother in the kitchen, Betsy was gone. I hopped out of bed and examined the spare mattress, expecting a trace of her, something. The mattress was back under my bed. There was no sign of her presence, and I couldn't help but wonder if it had all been my imagination, a mirage caused by the heat. At night, after all, reality was less certain, or at least was my perception of what was real.

Betsy sat across from me at the table at breakfast that morning, and though I looked for one, there was no sign of any secret alliance between her and me. She gave nothing away, but still I harbored the feeling that there was some clue I was meant to find.

You should know that the town we grew up in, Spring Hill, was nothing but the crossing of two roads. Running north-south was Chamber Street; east-west, at an almost perpendicular angle, was Wentz Avenue. Where the two met was a small

driving circle with a statue in the middle dedicated to General Douglas Macarthur. The Fourth of July parade would begin at Spring Hill's northern most point where Chamber ceased to be Chamber and became Route 33. People on floats and children in wagons and old men on old bicycles would head south until Chamber would again become 33. The parade always went from north to south, never east-west, never south-north, and never hesitated or gave credence as it passed Wentz on the way.

Our house was four blocks east of center and one south, across the street from Spring Hill Methodist, a stone castle of a church where my family attended every Sunday and where Pastor John preached sermons of guilt and conditional redemption. Three more blocks east and you would be on the town's periphery where small clusters of homes give way to giant squares of farmland. The last building was Mr. Gilroy's brick, single-story bingo supply factory. "Bingo" was written on its side with red block lettering, like you'd come to the right place. The bingo factory was the final monument to our town before the land turned long and flat and lifeless, save the black, seesawing oil cranes dotting the panorama. Mondays were bingo nights at the factory, and I would go with my parents and Betsy but sit with my best friend, Henry Tine, at one of the back tables. Henry and I sat so that we could see everyone, observe, as we always did. We would always listen attentively to every call until we became frustrated and started playing tick-tack-toe.

Our parents were normal as far as Spring Hill was concerned—quietly religious and conservative. Our mother taught kindergarten at the K through eight, and our father was an accountant and had a practice with a partner in town. If anything, we had a little more money than our parents let on. They took after the

generation before them and saved tirelessly. There were a lot of those in town, and consequently Spring Hill gave off the illusion of having only a single economic class, an indefinable and meaningless middle.

All this to say Spring Hill was a place where mystery was found in common and ordinary things and places. The summer I am speaking of, I found it in my sister. She had always been an ordinary sibling, but too old to be considered my friend. I ignored her generally, and she treated me the same way. We had moments of closeness, rare instances of camaraderie, but they were never sustainable, and I never felt as if it offered any long-term benefit. However, this particular summer began quite differently, and it would end differently. I knew this at the time, or at least now I believe that I did.

To an outside observer, the summer might have appeared unremarkable. Each day Henry or I arrived at the other's home and we would begin exploring possible forms of entertainment. We had ongoing projects—the construction of a fort in my back yard, for instance—but our days would best be described as episodic. Henry's family lived in an apartment above the Tine Grocery, a convenient but somewhat unnecessary market that most everyone in town patronized in an effort to keep it in business. We had been friends since the first grade, when we seemed to come together almost out of necessity. We were both relatively quiet and small, and when we were together, other children our age who might have normally bothered us in some way, left us alone. Henry wasn't my only friend, nor was I his, but we were comfortable around each other for a number of years, for a period of time. Before

school let out, I imagined nothing more than Henry and I building our fort and finding various temporary activities to occupy our time. But after the night Betsy first entered my room, something changed, though I didn't quite know why or how. I felt strongly that there were things I needed to see and pay attention to. And this is what the casual observer would miss: my attentiveness to things beyond myself.

The day after Betsy spent the night in my room, I rode my bicycle to Henry's apartment like any other day. The air was fresh and the familiarity of my ride was comforting in the face of what felt like an altogether different existence. At this age, I don't believe that boys talk much, and we didn't. We simply did things. This day we went from one thing to the next, but at every turn, as I have said, I was watching for something else.

When Betsy ran out to the street to hop in an awaiting car, I paused my hammering of rusty nails and scrap plywood to see who she was with. Were they girls or boys? When Henry and I rode down to the ice cream shop in the afternoon, I scanned for Betsy and her friends and wondered what they might think of me if they saw me eating ice cream with my best friend. And later, when she returned in the evening before dinner, I noticed as she walked up to the house with Peggy Swinson, who was a cheerleader at the high school.

The entire day a single question plagued me softly and incessantly. It asked whether Betsy would be back, confirming my suspicions, confirming my urgency. If she had not returned the next night, none of this would matter. I wouldn't remember any of it. But that night Betsy came down her stairs and into my room exactly as she had the night before, without a discussion or an explanation. She simply creaked the

door open and said, “Can I?” It was as if we were already familiar with the custom. And just like that, she was there, my sister, a myth to me during the daytime, asleep on the floor of my room. Though I slept eventually, time became nothing, as sleeping and dreaming attached themselves seamlessly to my real world. My thoughts in those moments of darkness became my dreams. And then by definition, dreaming became less like dreaming and became more real.

After these first two nights, Betsy continued her routine. Over and over it happened. It became wordless. She would come down almost silently and enter, both of us knowing and understanding each other perfectly. And in so doing, I felt as if we had stumbled upon the most remarkable and open form of communication that had ever existed. Something like ESP came to my mind then, but now I wonder if it wasn't my own mind performing both ends of the conversation. Either way, I was speaking, and I heard responses in return. I would ask her how her day was, and she would reply, stressful, but all in all a positive experience. I would ask her what she had learned, and she would tell me that she had discovered kindness and generosity in the most unexpected places. And I heard her asking things of me as well—about my summer, about the projects Henry and I busied ourselves with—and I was more than willing to share every last thought with her.

When I became exhausted by my own imagination, I watched her. She always fell asleep very quickly, as if her days were so filled with things that she needed to recover. And I watched the gentle curves of her chest fill and soften inside her button-up cotton pajamas over and over again. Her rounding breasts mystified me

as they pressed up against her clothing and released with every deep breath. When she breathed, the buttons on her shirt rose, and the seams they held in place fluttered ever so slightly. With only a vague conception of the female body, I studied these seams as they moved, and wished that I wasn't only making out indistinguishable shapes in the dark. I sometimes resolved to wake myself early, just as the sun was rising, to see what Betsy's sleeping body looked like in full view, but I was never able to wake before she did. Still, I imagined her every move was code and she was explaining in great detail the compassion she felt for me. How much she wanted to be kind to me but that she was trying to teach me with tough love. I made deals with myself interpreting her movements: if Betsy flipped on her right side before I could count to one hundred, it meant that she would speak to me at breakfast. Sometimes she would speak to me at breakfast or in town, which would confirm my suspicion that I was receiving the stories of her life in the night, even if they were my own interpretations.

During the day, Betsy seemed to take no interest in me. Obviously to call what I felt towards Betsy *interest* would be absurd. Her presence at night was like a drug, and I couldn't be without it during the day. I needed doses to tide me over until I could soak it up when she returned once more to my room at night. To do this, I took to getting very close to her upstairs room while she was inside. I would hear the faint sound of music or a telephone conversation and know for certain that she was home. The first time I did this, I snuck up the narrow stairs very quietly, right up to the closed door at the top, and pressed my ear to the door. What I heard was strange

music. Music that I had never heard before and what I would later find out was Madonna and other popular music during that time. It sounded fast and new, and I liked it because of how different it was to the country music and oldies that my parents listened to. It wasn't even that this music was not allowed—my parents never even mentioned music—it was that it didn't even sound like music at all. It was a new invention.

And just as the heat of summer became more oppressive, and just as Betsy continued to visit my room at night, I visited her closed door during the day to hear the life that was on the other side. Sometimes it would be music like the first time. Sometimes it would be a phone conversation. Either way, when I heard faint sounds coming down the narrow stairs to Betsy's room, I always had a sudden illicit urge and would sneak up them to listen.

The music outside Betsy's door gradually became more and more familiar, and I memorized the words I understood. The ones I didn't, I made up, and I hummed and sang these songs to myself throughout the rest of the day. When I heard a phone conversation on the other side of her door, I listened as well, perhaps even more closely. I kept track of who she spoke with and what they talked about, making up the other end of the conversation myself. Betsy would say, "Did you hear what Jenny said?" And I would fill in, *No, tell me*. And then Betsy would say, "She said she wanted Mark Spivy to ask her to the homecoming dance." And I would I think, *Mark Spivy, really?*

I started noticing the boys and girls that she spoke to around town and kept track of them, too. One afternoon Henry and I were working on our fort behind the

house, and I saw Peggy Swinson walking past the church. I knew that Henry wouldn't care or know who Peggy was, but I wanted him to know that I knew who she was.

I stopped hammering, pointed and said, "There goes Peggy Swinson."

Henry said, "Who? How do you know a high schooler?"

"She's one of Betsy's friends." This was true, but in reality we'd never met. Betsy never introduced me to any of her friends.

That night when Betsy came down to sleep on my floor, I asked her about Peggy because I wanted her to know that I was paying attention to the people in her life.

I said, "I saw Peggy walk by the church today." I thought that if she knew, she might want to share more with me.

"What are you talking about?" Betsy asked.

"Nothing, I just saw her," I said.

"So?"

"Nothing, I guess," I said. "I just saw her is all."

"Well, OK," she said.

At that point, I decided it was best not to speak, and I was sorry that I had.

Henry had five brothers and sisters. They all looked alike, auburn-headed and freckled. Henry was one of the middle children and the closest to my age. I could never tell the many Tine children apart, so I always avoided addressing any one of

them directly. The Tine apartment was small compared to their large population and we never spent much time inside the three-bedroom above their store.

Henry shared a bedroom with his two older brothers and slept on a top bunk that was the object of both my envy and adoration. When I saw Henry's high, lofty bunk bed, I thought of Betsy and what it would be like if we had our own room to share, a way to make permanent the way we spent many nights. Her room was still largely a mystery to me, and I continually wondered what it was that I was missing, what it was that I only had a glimpse of when Betsy visited my room. What was Betsy keeping from the rest of us?

I always suggested we stay and play inside his apartment (which I found fascinating if only because it was so different from my family's own single-family house), but Henry always wanted to leave. Most often we would only be inside long enough for Henry to lace up his sneakers before running back out into the dusty summer and away from his family's store like a grand escape.

I would sometimes mention to Henry that I was jealous of his bunk bed and the room that he shared with his brothers. Henry thought that this was stupid, wondering why I'd want to share a room or have a bunk bed. "Besides," he'd say. "You only have a sister, and you can't share a room with a sister."

It was in these moments that I felt Henry and I moving slowly in different directions. Not because he didn't know that Betsy was sleeping on my floor at night or because this wasn't even a possibility in his mind, but because I was beginning to realize that Henry wasn't the person that I wanted to share my thoughts with. He

wouldn't want to know them, and I was now more interested in people and things that *would* listen.

Both of Henry's older brothers worked at the grocery. We had no idea that we were on a short leash, or on a leash at all. We had no concept of anything other than roaming free and doing as we pleased. It would have surprised me to know that the very next summer, when Henry turned eleven, he would start taking shifts at the grocery, and although he would suddenly have more money than any other kid in Spring Hill, that I would see less and less of him from then on.

I saw them when I was on my way home from the post office. I was mailing a package for my mother, a birthday gift for one of our cousins who lived in Illinois. Teenagers would often sit around the stone base of the Macarthur statue and talk and laugh with each other. Usually they were boys, sometimes athletes, and sometimes Henry and I would spy on them from around the corner with binoculars. I wasn't spying today, but I saw them, and there was Betsy as well, sitting on a bench next to Mitchell Tine, one of Henry's older brothers. They were all together laughing at something, and for some reason I wondered if they were drunk. They were all shifting their positions, like no one could sit still. Betsy pulled her shins up underneath her on the bench, and then Mitchell ran his arm around her shoulder and touched her bare arm. Then she touched his hand with hers, interlacing their fingers. This happened only for a second before they shifted again, but I knew then that they weren't drunk and that these things they were doing were important, that touching of hands and arms were things to be noticed. Then a strange thing happened (and by

strange I mean that it didn't happen often and was therefore totally unexpected):

Betsy looked at me. I was probably fifty yards away, on the other side of the turning circle, but she and I made eye contact, and when we did, she seemed to be telling me something. That *something* I took to be the tangible secret that I'd been waiting for this whole time. I took this look to mean that I wasn't supposed to tell anyone of this. This is what I understood, and I liked it, and perhaps this feeling is what kept me from feeling any jealousy towards Mitchell, which I could have, for being so close to Betsy.

As soon as I discovered Betsy and Mitchell, I told Henry, thinking that he would be just as interested as I was. But he said that he didn't care. To Henry it seemed as if there was no life but what was happening right at this moment. I don't think he ever thought about his older siblings in relation to himself, or that he, too, would be like them at some point. I cared tremendously. And I wanted to be a part of Betsy's life because it seemed like a future life, a better life. Henry never thought about where he was going, if he was going anywhere at all.

Over the next few weeks, I saw Betsy and Mitchell many more times. As I've said, I had had difficulty distinguishing the Tine siblings all my life, but now that Mitchell was around Betsy, his face was suddenly clear and recognizable. It was this way with all of Betsy's friends, who I now could easily identify anywhere with or without her presence.

One morning I went over to see if Henry was home and found that he wasn't. It was Thursday and Henry had his piano lesson, which I had forgotten. On my way

out of the store, Mitchell, who was working the cash register, called out to me, “Will. Hey, Will. Wait a sec.” I was surprised. Henry’s brothers never spoke to me. Being noticed excited me.

“Yeah, what?” I said, trying to sound nonchalant.

“Hey, buddy. Listen,” he said. “Do you think you could put in a good word for me with your sister?”

At the time I didn’t know what a “good word” was, and I didn’t answer out loud for fear of sounding foolish. I just nodded stoically and left.

From then on Mitchell Tine began noticing me whenever I came into the store. Calling my name, asking how I was doing. I enjoyed the attention that I received even if it was indirectly pointed at my sister. Mitchell would ask me questions about Betsy that I didn’t know how to answer. He would ask me, “Is she seeing any other guys?” And of course I didn’t even know what *seeing* meant at the time and said, “She sees lots of boys. Girls, too, I guess.” He got a weird look on his face, and then forced a chuckle like maybe I was telling him a joke.

Another time, when I was leaving the Tine apartment, I saw Mitchell and Betsy together in the store. Mitchell was at the register, leaning over the counter and watching as Betsy walked around and took various items up to the register and asked how much they cost. No matter how much he told her she would then shake her head and put it back on the shelf, but not where the item belonged, someplace where it entirely did not belong—cereal with the medicine, milk with the bread, cookies with the cheese. Then, after each time, they would both laugh like it was the funniest thing a person could do.

When I walked by, leaving the store, neither acknowledged my presence, but I smiled to myself, aware that it was all choreographed and that Betsy couldn't say what she wanted to me in public. It was enough to watch her breathe and toss and turn at night. It was enough for us to split the day and night. I was fine with these things for now. These were the secrets that we shared.

A week later, I saw Mitchell working the register again. He greeted me. Then he pulled me aside and said that he had a favor to ask of me. He said, "Hey, buddy. Listen, I'll give you five bucks if you can get a hold of a pair of Betsy's panties for me." I almost laughed out loud at the idea. The concept was silly to me, as if it were part of a joke. Initially, I took it as such. As if this were simply a prank. The fact that Mitchell was including me in the operation felt like an honor, and without thinking I said, "Sure, OK."

On the way home, however, I poured over the idea. There was something attractive and mysterious about performing such a task. Something was lurking beyond my scope of experience, and I wanted to know what. I went over the scenario many times in my head, weighing the consequences of getting caught, while on the other hand thinking about all the baseball cards five dollars would buy. But these calculations were a distraction. What thrilled me most were inclusion and the possibility of discovery.

I went up to Betsy's room one afternoon when I knew that she would be gone. It was a Wednesday, and she and her friends were at the matinee movie in town. Mom was working in the kitchen, washing dishes and singing hymns to herself—

enough noise that I was sure I wouldn't be heard climbing the creaky steps. Betsy's room was never locked, as was the rule, but when I turned the knob to her door, I felt as though I'd cracked a safe. And it surprised me how easily I was able to move from where I usually sat and listened secretly to inside her room, where I had so desperately wanted to be for what seemed like forever. Nothing physical happened when I crossed the threshold. No alarms sounded. No rush of wind or temperature change. I felt something on the inside difficult to describe, though I've never forgotten the feeling to this day. It was, in a sense, an unveiling.

There were posters of bands and boys that I didn't know tacked up on the wall. There were pictures of paintings and famous places like the Eiffel Tower and the Roman Coliseum. Various memorabilia was strewn about, tacked to the walls, dangling from string or yarn. Though I didn't know exactly the significance of these objects—a twig tied by some dental floss to a lamp switch, a snow globe shaped like Texas—I knew how close I was and felt satisfied by these still-unknown details.

A boom box sat on the top of her dresser, the device that had lured me to the stairs so many times. And her phone was on a nightstand next to her bed, the source of so many conversations that I had partly overheard and partly invented for my own pleasure. Alone in her room, and perhaps feeling more safe than I should have, I hummed to myself while slowly doing what I thought looked like dancing. I moved my weight from one foot to the other and spun around and around. I went backwards and forwards, from one side of the room to the other—the space was all mine.

I danced with myself until a drop of sweat rolled down my cheek. It surprised me, and for the first time I noticed the room's warmth. The room radiated with heat,

but I stayed. I sat down at the foot of Betsy's bed and thought about what it must be like to fall asleep in the hot loft. I laid back and then flipped onto my stomach. I breathed in through my nose the sweetness of the slept-in sheets. Then I smelled her pillow, the delicious scent of hair. I rolled onto my back and placed my head square on her pillow. I looked straight at the low ceiling and felt a peculiar sense of satisfaction. After a few moments I sat up. I looked around and settled my gaze on her closet full of brightly colored clothes. Without deciding to, I began to imagine her trying on different outfits, dressing and undressing over and over again. I imagined her sliding in and out of cotton and linen dresses. I saw her twirl and pose in front of her vanity mirror while softly singing a Madonna song called "Angel," which I knew only for the chorus that went *you're an angel* over and over.

Then I noticed a small pile of dirty clothes in the corner. On the top was a pair of thin white panties. I went from the bed to the floor, and on my hands and knees I crawled over and buried my face in the entire pile of clothes. I took a deep breath. The smell was bitter and intoxicating. I wanted more. I put my hands and arms underneath the pile and pressed my face deeper and harder. And only when I began to suffocate did I release.

I sat up and put my legs Indian style. I leaned forward for a careful examination of the white panties that were on the top. They were in a ball, and I carefully picked them up and unfolded them like a piece of origami. I was careful and gentle and flattened every crease with a solitary finger. I sat back and admired the shape, the narrow V in front, the rounded, fuller back. Then I carefully slid the panties onto the palm of my right hand, the crotch just touching my wrist. I closed

my eyes and imagined Betsy, here in her room, wearing the underwear in my hand and the button-up nightshirt she wore every night in my room. Her body was tanned evenly all over except for the mysterious, goose-bumped crescents along the edges of her underwear. I moved my eyes up her shirt, up the seams and buttons. I imagined her chest rising and falling as it did in my room, the space between buttons opening ever so slightly. I wanted to know these small spaces, and I began imagining Betsy unlatching the buttons one by one, sliding the nightshirt off and onto the floor.

Then something made me open my eyes. My heart was racing. And that's when I realized that I had become slightly aroused. I felt wrong and out of place, and I was worried I'd be caught. But rather than returning the panties to their pile, I was reluctant to give it all back, and I placed them in my pocket before sneaking back down the stairs and into the safety of my room. I hid the panties the only place I could think of, underneath my pillow. And when I pulled them from my pocket and quickly slid them back out of sight, a shiver ran through my body, as if I'd suddenly come back to life. And I liked this, this being gone and returning.

The following week was the Fourth of July, and everyone in town became suddenly devoted to constructing floats and decorations for this one day of absolute celebration. Henry and I did our part by tearing up an old white sheet that my mother gave us and painting the pieces to make decent sized American flags. We attached them to old broom handles we found in the garbage behind the Methodist church and taped them to our bicycles, which we had covered in red, white, and blue streamers.

We rode around town all week this way because we loved the idea of the holiday so much and because one day seemed like too little time.

Nearly every block in town built something to wheel down the parade route, and Henry and I rode our bikes around to every construction site, volunteering to spray paint or hammer anything that anyone would let us. Sometimes we were given something in return, lemonade or a few cents, but really our only motivation was the sheer child-like excitement.

Though the holiday was in many ways a distraction from life as we otherwise knew it, my dedication to following Betsy's habits was not deterred. Our routine at night went on uninterrupted, and during the day I charted her path in my head, and sometimes due to particular patterns, I could even predict her next move: from the soda shop to the park; from the park to the record store; from the record store to the football fields. Sometimes I would guess where she and her friends were headed and find a way to suggest to Henry that we go to the football fields and watch the team practice in hopes that she and her friends would later show up and I could have a seemingly coincidental encounter.

Though I wanted to be near Betsy and see her, I had become wary of Mitchell and kept my distance for fear that he would inquire about the panties. Did I have them? Did I even try? Though he knew nothing (and would never know) of my excursion to her room, every time I saw him I was reminded of my trespass, and the feeling was like wearing nothing at all.

The morning of the Fourth it was hotter than ever, and after breakfast, Henry and I went out and rode along the parade route, watching the volunteers pegging miniature flags in the grass next to the road. We sang and hummed the national anthem as we rode because it was the only patriotic song we knew. Later, as crowds began to gather, Henry and I rode back to where we knew our families would be setting up their chairs and blankets to watch the show.

With both sides of the street completely full, the parade began at the end of the street and marched towards us at a crawl. As we were with most everything, Henry and I were impatient, and before the parade began Henry and I would move about within the crowd. We would sit with my parents and eat the treats my mother had prepared for us, and then we would become restless and go up a block to where Henry's parents had a small set up outside their store, which was of course still open and serving cold drinks to the crowd.

While sitting with Henry's family, he asked his mother if we could both have a soda from the store, and she obliged, telling us to let Mitchell know that she said it was OK. As soon as I heard Mitchell's name, I froze. I didn't want to go into the store, but when Henry hopped up and told me to come on, I couldn't argue. I tried to stay close to Henry, thinking that Mitchell wouldn't approach me if we were together. But while we were waiting in line to get our drinks, Henry told me that he had to pee and was going to go upstairs to use the bathroom.

“Just tell Mitchell that Mom said that you and me could have the sodas,” Henry said.

What could I do? As I waited for Henry, I tried to not make eye contact with Mitchell. I pretended like I was looking for something else. I wandered up and down the aisle, aimlessly and nervously trying to focus my mind on the items—Band-Aids, Aspirin, Colgate, Listerine. I walked with my head down and was startled when I got to the end of an aisle and Mitchell was standing right in front of me, wiping his hands on his white apron. He pulled out a wrinkled five-dollar bill from his pocket. He shook it at me and smiled. My heart sank. He said, “Do you have them?” I shook my head and looked away. “Come on, man.” Mitchell smiled like he knew something, which made me angry. I left the grocery without Henry, without even letting him know I was leaving. I went back to my parent’s blanket and tried to calm myself. When I left the store, Mitchell had called after me, “Will, look, no big deal, man. Forget about it.” And even though I understood exactly what he meant, I had the paranoid feeling that he knew and that he would tell someone, maybe even Betsy.

Even though I knew I was wrong, though I felt wrong for having done it, my visit to Betsy’s room was all I thought about. I wanted to go again, and not only that, I wanted to be in Betsy’s room without the possibility of being caught. As a result, I decided to fake an illness the following Sunday to avoid church and allow myself time in the house alone. It seemed like the most brilliant plan because there was absolutely no possibility of being discovered. I would be safe.

That Sunday I played the part best I could. I moaned that my stomach hurt, and I periodically dashed down the hall to the bathroom and pretended to throw up. (Really I was just scooping water with a cup and pouring it back into the toilet.) I

wasn't sick often and I gave Mom and Dad no reason to believe I was lying, so they said I could stay home if I promised to stay in bed. Oddly enough, Betsy wasn't fooled. She accused me of faking, and of course she was right, but I was so struck by the reality of it—as if she was trying to tell me something. Still, there was absolutely no reason to believe that she suspected any of the things that I had done (or was intending to do). If she had, she wouldn't have been coy or smart about it. She would have let loose on me, which, I realize now, would have been entirely deserved.

As my family left the house (Betsy was still calling me a faker underneath her breath), I obediently shut my eyes. I intended to wait until service was in full swing to be safe, but when I closed my eyes I fell back asleep, though only slightly. And the next thing I heard was: “*This heat is nothing compared to the fi-ers of Hell!*”

Pastor John's voice was ricocheting off the thin, wooden slats of my room. My bedroom window faced the church, and with the window open, its sounds were suddenly in my room. The breeze that before had been a gentle relief became judgment fire that I was sure was intended specifically for me.

Rather than accomplishing the mission that I had set out to, I listened attentively, nervously to Pastor John's sermon, which traced the Ten Commandments. After reciting each commandment Pastor John slapped his meaty fist against the mahogany podium so hard that it sounded like a mallet pulverizing a hunk of raw meat.

“Thou – *slap!* – shalt – *slap!* – not – *slap!* – c'mit – *slap!* – A – *slap!* – DULT – *slap!* – TER – *slap!* – EE – *slap!*”

The tone and judgment in Pastor John's voice was clearer than the words themselves. I didn't have to know what he was saying, or even be inside the church, to feel the judgment that radiated from Pastor John's pulpit. Though I was present every Sunday, it was as if there in my room I was hearing something unfiltered and authentic in a way that I never had. Stinging tears welled up in the corners of my eyes, and I prayed out loud for God to forgive me. I prayed the same prayer over and over again until Pastor John's sermon was finally over. I was sure that a direct line of communication with God would prevent Satan from enveloping me in the eternal flames. It was the first time, I believe, that I truly wanted for God to hear my voice.

For the next few days I pretended to be sick and didn't go to the grocery to see Henry, partly because I was afraid to see Mitchell, afraid that he knew my secret. But also because I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to do what Henry and I had always done: simply act.

With a few more days, however, I began to feel as though the worst was over and that I could continue on. My guilt, as it often does when you are young, subsided, and when I began playing with Henry again, I felt as if nothing had happened to me, at least for a little while.

Only a few days later Henry and I were at my house. We were working on plans for a camping trip that we wanted one of our dads to take us on. We were sitting at my parents' dining room table eating apples and making lists and notes when we noticed some boys driving by in a truck. They honked their horn at a pair of

girls on the sidewalk. Henry and I didn't think anything of it at the time—it happened several times a day—but something told me to keep watching. I got up from the table to get a better look. I realized who the two girls were. One was my sister. The other was Peggy Swinson. They were headed into town. I could tell the truck belonged to Jimmy Hall, a football player at the high school. He had a friend in the passenger seat. Both hung their browned elbows out their windows trying to impress the two girls. The boys rode slowly, talking to Peggy and Betsy, just as if they'd dropped their feet below the flooring of Jimmy's truck and were walking along, too. The girls grinned and giggled to each other, pleased at the attention. But all the same, I got an eerie feeling like I was watching a movie or a play, something already set in motion.

Then something changed. Jimmy Hall threw his truck into neutral and hopped out of the cab. He swaggered over to Peggy and started grabbing at her purse playfully. But eventually he became more forceful and pried it away from her and threw it to his buddy in the passenger seat. Peggy looked bewildered as though without her bag none of this made any sense. Jimmy stood there with a big grin on his face and his hands on his hips. Betsy was startled and began looking around. When Jimmy opened the passenger door in an attempt to coax Peggy in, his buddy hopped out. He was familiar, but it took me a second to place him. It was Mitchell. It was Henry's brother. I instinctively looked over at Henry, but Henry was glued to the scene and silent. Even Henry knew.

Jimmy motioned for Peggy to hop in the cab, gesturing like a gentleman holding open a car door. Meanwhile Mitchell approached Betsy, and he seemed to be

offering to take her bag as well. Then Jimmy took Peggy by the arm. She twisted him loose, but Jimmy grabbed a hold of her with his other hand. She continued to struggle, but he only clenched tighter and began pulling her toward the open passenger door. Peggy dug in her heels. She stumbled and dropped to her knees. Jimmy hoisted her back up with a jerk of his wrist. Then he called over to Mitchell to help him with Peggy.

Between the two of them they lifted her into the cab. Then Mitchell went back over to Betsy. I could hear Jimmy in the background screeching, "Get her in here." Mitchell reached for her wrist with one hand and he made a calming gesture with the other, as if he thought there was still a chance that she'd go with them on her own accord. But Betsy screamed for help and wildly wrestled free of the boy's arm. Mitchell stumbled backwards and then jumped back in the truck with Jimmy and Peggy, leaving my sister alone by the side of the street, screaming and yelling for help.

Henry and I ran for the door, and we were out in the middle of my front yard when we saw what we saw. The boys made a U-turn, and just a few seconds down the road, the passenger door swung open. Peggy's arms dangled out the open window of the open door, her body hanging somewhere between the cab and swinging door. One foot dragged the asphalt, while the other remained in the cab. Then, Peggy disappeared. The door was shut and Peggy was gone. Had she escaped? Had she been pulled back in by the boys? I realized that I had been holding my breath and exhaled. For a moment everything felt all right, as if I had imagined the worst of it.

I almost turned away when I noticed a swirl of dust along side the truck. It blew like black exhaust. It was Peggy, caught in the undercarriage.

There must have been a million things that Henry and I should have done, but all we could do was watch with half-closed eyes. Did we know then that this would be a scene that would haunt us? Peggy Swinson must have been dragged twenty feet before she came loose from the truck. I looked at Henry, hoping that he'd have an answer, that he'd know what two kids like us should be doing.

Henry began to sob, and then he took off, back to his family's grocery, back to live with whatever it was that had just happened. But I stayed, unknowing and entirely unable to even make the decision that Henry had, to run. My silence, my stasis, I don't think would ever be broken completely, only interrupted here and there. I would need someone to tell me where to go. I would need direction. I don't know how long I waited, I hope to God not long.

Then, like the voice of God himself, familiar, "Get some help, boy!" It was Pastor John. He said this while attending to Peggy. He had a blanket and was doing what he could. I had barely even seen him arrive on the scene. He was trying his best to help Peggy while Betsy, my very own sister, wailed and screamed in tones that were unfamiliar even to me.

Pastor John held a prayer meeting that evening for Peggy Swinson, who had been taken by ambulance all the way to Tulsa and was in critical care. Everyone in town was there and ministers from all over town said prayers, though the only one I remember was Pastor John's. His voice was high and shrill, and it echoed inside my

brain. He quoted scriptures and asked for things like compassion and justice and mercy. And that word, *mercy*, made a particular impression on me. The only word that meant anything to me. I wanted it for myself, even though I knew he didn't intend this mercy for me. I dreaded making eye contact with him, but I lost my focus when he said Amen. There he was, looking at me as he descended those red, carpeted steps. There was something angry in his eyes, and even though I believe that his anger had a great many sources, I felt at the time complicit with what had happened and that his anger was directed at me alone, perhaps I wanted it to be. His gaze stirred within me a sensation of anger and weakness. I was sure that he knew something that I didn't. I started to cry like the kid I was. I plunged my head into my mother's lap and sobbed, and she held me there like it was the most natural thing in the world.

That night was so dreadfully hot that I could feel the sweat ring around my body, and I couldn't help but make the connection between extreme heat and eternal damnation. A big, milky moon hung above the Methodist tower and illuminated my room. It looked like a great eye. A nervous relief came over me when I finally heard Betsy stirring upstairs. She scaled her steps softly. But instead, of the soft hum of my door opening, I heard the light in the kitchen flick on. Running water in the sink. The light went back out, Betsy returned to her room upstairs. All the while, I pretended to sleep and laced my fingers through the cotton panties underneath my pillow, praying to her to forgive me.

Speaking With Strangers

Sal and I were curled up on the couch watching late night TV. I had a handful of her dark curls and was gently pulling them apart. It was something of a nightly routine, waiting for the wine to take effect before another attempt at conceiving. We had been married five years and lived in a neighborhood teeming with kids, though we had none of our own. We had been trying off and on for a year but so far had had no luck. We both still very much wanted a child. I knew it every time I drove past the middle school soccer field and saw Bobby Wisecomb running wind sprints with his team. And I was sure that Sal knew it every time we visited her sister and her little nephews, Jim and Michael, who were now four and two. We were both still on our first glass when we saw the emergency lights flashing silently through our living room window curtains.

Sal immediately sat up from my embrace and went to the window to see what was going on in our boring little neighborhood. She said, “Oh my god” and waved me over to have a look. I was reluctant, assuming it was some non-issue: a minor car accident, a malfunctioning smoke detector, maybe even a domestic dispute. I was sure that it was either overkill or something that I wanted no part of, or both.

When I looked out the window I saw what Sal had seen, a crowd of neighbors huddled under a street lamp on the sidewalk in front of the Fenton’s home, three houses down from our own. They were all people we knew. Our next-door neighbor, Mindy Wilson, wore a pink bathrobe and knitted scarf and was talking to Rachel Cavanaugh, a divorced mother of three who lived down the block. Several other women were similarly dressed, something thrown on with a sense of urgency.

Richard, Mindy's husband, and Bobby Wisecomb were the only two men. All appeared curious and concerned.

Mrs. Fenton was an old widow whom no one knew well, and her adult son, Mitchell, had what everyone referred to as "health issues," but in reality he suffered from a severe case of autism. Because it was this house and not another, it was serious, and this is what caught me off guard. In times such as these, I am surprised by how different the world is from my perception of it.

"Looks bad, Sal."

"I wonder which one it is," she said.

We were already getting the sense that one of the two had died. You can tell these things. The ambulance wasn't using its siren, and the paramedics didn't look like they were in a hurry. One was working on crowd control while two others were busy wheeling a gurney up the front porch ramp that Mrs. Fenton had commissioned a few years ago when she became confined to a wheelchair. Aside from the spinning red light, the scene possessed a surprising calm. From our distant, closed window, it was an image of complete quiet: The mouthing of words in the cold, clean winter night.

From the look of things Bobby was trying to take charge of the situation. While most members of the small crowd were content to clutch at their robes and jackets and await a verdict, Bobby scurried about asking questions and getting in the emergency workers' way. This busy mentality was part of his character. He never stood still, which is one of the things that made him a good youth soccer coach but obnoxious at all other times. We played volleyball once a month at the park. We had

a block party with fireworks on the Fourth of July. No matter what the occasion, Bobby's keen ability to be everywhere at once was ever on display, talking to everyone without listening to anyone.

"How old is she? Or was? It's ridiculous not knowing," Sal said.

"Wow," I said. "I don't even know. She's looked ancient for years. Had to be in her late seventies, at least."

"That would make Mitchell, what? About fifty?"

"Something like that," I said.

A squad car drove up, carefully slowing and coming to a stop at the curb in front of the Fenton's. Two police officers stepped out. One began speaking with the crowd, allowing the paramedic to join up with his buddies inside. The other officer approached the house, tugging on his utility belt and looking weary. He spoke into his walkie-talkie. Even with his very own police officer to talk to, Bobby still looked alarmed and fidgety, as if he wished he were also an emergency worker presiding over the situation. In actuality, Bobby worked in the financial office of a big firm across town. Sometimes I would see him leaving for work when I went out to fetch the paper before making my way down to my modest attorney's office. He always wore expensive, tailored suits, and carried a leather brief case, a stark contrast to the athletic attire he wore around the neighborhood. And he would always say something quippy like, *Hey bud*, or *How's it going sport?*

"Should we do something?" Sal asked. "Should we go outside and see what's going on?" She bit her lip and squinted. I knew she felt guilty for staying inside while the rest of the neighborhood shivered in the cold.

The crowd had acquired two new members since we started watching. Mary and Kyle Martinez from across the street stepped outside wearing matching ski parkas and grey sweat pants. The social pressure was building. It wouldn't be long before the entire block was out. But despite this obvious fact, I still couldn't imagine myself out there like Bobby Wisecomb, anxious to fix, ready to help.

"I don't know, Sal," I said. "It looks like they're just standing around." Our marriage was filled with moments like this where I rationalized a situation to avoid action. I saw it as my duty and thought that she generally appreciated the gesture. It was my way of telling Sal that she didn't have to do whatever it was.

Sal was silent. I wondered if this time it was only something *I* didn't want to do. I wondered what I would do if Sal insisted on paying homage with the rest of the neighborhood. Neither of us belonged out there with our worried neighbors, but was I willing?

Sal leaned over, placing her folded arms on the windowsill. She wore one of my thin, plain white V-neck undershirts. It was too big and the V hung low when she bent. In the window's reflection, I could see Sal's small breasts dangling gently inside. I wondered if the neighborhood had this same view or just me.

"What does it mean that the police are here?" Sal asked

"I don't know except that I think it pretty much confirms that someone died. They usually send someone for that. Don't they?" I wasn't sure about how police handled death when it wasn't a crime. I defended people who were, most often, guilty. But it didn't bother me. It was just a job for me, just like it was the police officers' job to stand outside in the cold on a night like this.

“Or domestic abuse,” Sal said flatly.

It took me a couple of seconds to realize that Sal was joking. But at Sal’s prompting, an image flashed into my brain. It was old Mrs. Fenton, sitting in her wheelchair, beating Mitchell’s bare ass with a belt. I smiled and chuckled a bit through my nose. “Really, Sal?” I said. “You have absolutely no control, do you?”

Sal turned her head towards me and made a dramatic frown with her bottom lip, pretending that she was remorseful even though we both knew that she wasn’t. Sal was like that sometimes. She could switch it on and off—from one emotion to another. Consequently, she could make jokes at the most inappropriate times. At my cousin’s wedding, for instance, instead of paying attention to the ceremony, Sal spent the whole time trying to make me laugh. She did this when she could see that I was getting a little choked up. While everyone around probably thought she was whispering sweet and affirming words of love, Sal was actually saying, “This kid is disgusting—but incredible.” I turned and saw one of the two knee-high flower girls eating her boogers like there was no tomorrow, one right after the next.

She had always been the comedian between the two of us. I think most couples have one—though in my experience it’s usually the man. The man is usually the cut-up and the woman laughs at all his jokes. It’s just one of those ways of the world. Sal had never been what I’d call an all out comic, but she definitely made me laugh. I was the straight man you could say. Sal’s humor could cure our uneven ground. Sometimes it was welcome because I needed to laugh and not take myself too seriously, but other times it would come as an indictment, indicating my faults.

Rather than argue, Sal would make fun of me. I would laugh, but inside I felt the irony, knowing the slight degrees in Sal's humor and its purposes.

Sal and I both looked back at our wine glasses on the coffee table. The television was still on and making what now sounded like an incredibly jarring hum of crashing cymbals and studio audience applause. On the show there was an actor-guest who I recognized but couldn't name. I thought about asking Sal if she knew who he was, but I was embarrassed not to know. Her professor friends always found me out of touch with cultural phenomena like books and movies.

The TV went to a commercial.

It was unusual for us to have an entire evening to ourselves without work being a part of it. I was currently between cases and Sal had just finished grading her midterms. I felt our evening slipping away. I decided to feel it out.

"What do you say, honey?" I nodded towards the coach. I wanted to break away from the scene at the window and find a way back to our Shiraz.

"Really?" Sal made a plaintive look of surprise, one that took me off guard. I had misread her. Despite her jokes, her ability to make light of the situation, she clearly felt something genuine about the emergency. Was it for the loss of life? Or was it because of that scene outside, the neighbors all glancing around, taking attendance?

If it had been any other house, Bobby's for instance, perhaps I would have felt concern for his children, for his wife, for the potential loss that might affect the family structure. But as I juggled the possibility of Mitchell and Mrs. Fenton alone in my mind, I felt absolutely no compassion for either. I didn't know how to feel about

such a revelation except that it was achingly uncomfortable, like all of my clothes were suddenly too tight.

“You think we should pretend like nothing’s happened?” Sal asked.

“Not pretend, but not lose ourselves in it,” I said. “Whatever happened can’t be helped.” I stepped toward her and went to touch her bare arm. It was goose-bumped from the cool pane of the window.

She pulled away from my reach, which hurt.

“Someone has probably just died.”

“Honey, look, don’t be upset,” I said. “I just don’t feel like they’re doing any good out there.”

She gave me a look of disgust. It was salvage time.

“If you want to go out, I’ll go,” I said. “Let me get our coats.” I stood up and went for the closet, but had no real intention of going outside. I took pride in such acts, meant only to project a sense of compliance. Something that said, *I feel the same way you do*. It was my way of shaking free the blame I felt coming my way.

“No, don’t do that. I don’t want to go outside anymore.”

She still sounded upset. It hadn’t worked as well as I’d hoped, but at least we weren’t going outside. I released the coats that were in my grip and shut the closet door. I stepped back towards the middle of the room. Sal had gone back to the couch, but not like before. She sat in the back corner, with her legs underneath her. She looked small. Sal was still turned towards the window, but no longer seemed concerned with what was happening outside. She looked despondent—cold.

Just as I was starting to accept the calm, she continued, “I just find it impossible to believe, and entirely inappropriate, that you wanted to pick up where we left off.” She nodded her head in the direction of the half-consumed bottle of wine.

“You’re right, honey,” I said. “I’m sorry. I’m a jerk.”

“That is correct!” she said, sounding somewhat satisfied with herself, not my apology.

“Let me put this stuff away,” I said. I made a little grin to show her that I wasn’t interested in pursuing any kind of a disagreement. I gathered the glasses and bottle. I put the stopper in and put the bottle in the fridge. All things considered, it was not a complete loss. Sal was unpredictable in a way that I had never mastered or been able to track. Wiggling out of a misstep had become, over the last several years of our marriage, a kind of success for me.

Sal and I had moved into the neighborhood a few years after we had been married. Within a week, about everyone on our block had introduced themselves or brought over some kind of house warming gift, but we didn’t see Mrs. Fenton or Mitchell for nearly a year. When I finally did, she acted as though it were the most normal thing in the world, as if she knew me. Mrs. Fenton, who was still walking at this point, said, “Good afternoon, Mr. Davenport.” She was on her way out to a car that had come to pick her up for some reason. I was simply walking down the street, enjoying the good weather. I had never seen her before and didn’t know what to say. She had already climbed into her waiting vehicle when I said, “Mrs. Fenton, hi.” That was one of only a few encounters I ever had with her.

Stepping into the back corner of the kitchen, out of Sal's line of sight, I downed the last bits of wine in each glass. When I reentered the living room, Sal was already upstairs brushing her teeth.

I went back to the window.

The squad car and the ambulance were still present, but the crowd was gone. Only Bobby Wisecomb was left, chatting with the cops—just one of the boys. The thought of Bobby Wisecomb running around giving orders and asking questions infuriated me to no end.

Last summer we had a neighborhood picnic and softball game. Not surprisingly, Bobby appointed himself in charge of organizing and officiating the game. He wanted to be team captain, umpire, and coach all at once. Bobby and I were on opposite teams, so I tried not to let him bother me even though I secretly criticized his every action.

Near the end of the game, we finally came to blows. I was on third and went for home on a slow grounder that somehow got past the pitcher. From the shouting I could tell the throw was coming, and I slid. Bobby was the catcher. I knew I was safe, but Bobby said otherwise. I jumped up and acted surprised, even though I wasn't. I said, "Bobby, you can't be serious. I was safe by a mile!"

Bobby chuckled, as if to show that he couldn't take me seriously if he wanted to, and said, "No, no. You were out, Ted."

My teammates were encouraging, but had no interest in arguing Bobby's call. They said, "Nice try." And, "No big deal."

I trudged back to the dugout and kicked over the bats leaning up against the dugout. Everyone was embarrassed and pretended not to notice, but the air was thick with judgment. Sal came over from the bleachers and told me to cool it, to let it go. She said this in a loud voice, which made me feel stupid and angry at myself because my faults were completely on display.

Bobby and I had never gotten along, but I had always been certain that he was the antagonist; that he was the one who had a control problem; that he was a deceptive, manipulating man; and that on the inside, he was laughing at everyone who believed his ruse. Meanwhile, I was the overlooked victim.

Two of the paramedics came out with the loaded gurney. The body was covered, and from my view, you couldn't see who it was. It was too dark, too far away. Bobby and the policemen stopped talking for a second and turned towards the approaching men, as if paying their respects. Then Bobby looked around, as if suddenly surprised by the fact that he was the only one still outside. He shook hands with one of the policemen and the other slapped him on the back. It was as if they were old friends.

Bobby started home, and I wondered for the first time whether maybe Bobby really was just a guy with a good job and a nice family? What if he's just an unflappable guy trying to help? It made me sick in my stomach.

I turned off the TV and the lights and went upstairs. I brushed my teeth in the brightly lit bathroom. Not wanting to look at myself in the mirror, I glanced around the small space to distract myself. I noticed the small trash can next to the toilet, and I saw two narrow, cylindrical rolls of toilet paper—one with fresh, moist patches of

red. I sat down on the toilet seat and somehow knew that I would never quite be what I wanted to be. Without realizing it, I began to cry very softly. Not for myself, but for Mrs. Fenton or Mitchell, whichever one was left alone and helpless in this world.

The Things We Know

“Let’s get moving, pal.”

“OK, Beat,” I say, which is how people call Dad around town and how I call him when Mom’s not around to say it’s disrespectful. They call him Beat because he plays drums at bars in town for the country singers, though I’ve only seen him play in the garage. Sometimes musicians come over to play and they let me sit on a bucket in the corner and listen.

I think that this time I’m going to go, out to a bar or wherever, but really it doesn’t matter. His blue Ford F150 is in the drive, and the rain’s ruining the gopher hole excavation I’d done the day before with my spade. I just want to be in that truck, tracing my finger along the brown edge of the styrofoam cup in the holder.

Just as I reach for my slicker and boots, I hear, “It’s not your Dad. It’s me, bud. Keith.” That’s when I remember where I am. I’m in a dream, and Beat’s been gone two months without a word. That’s why I’m here, because Beat’s gone.

I rub my eyes. It’s still dark and Keith is smiling so that all his somewhat crooked teeth are showing. He gives me a soft-punch in the arm and says that we should get moving. Then he yawns really big, doesn’t cover his mouth, and I can tell that he hasn’t brushed his teeth yet, which would be really not OK for anyone except for Keith. Would this fly for me? No way, so I head to the bathroom with my toiletries and the change of clothes in my backpack.

I spent last night on the Reynolds’ living room couch because this morning Keith and I are going fishing. Keith is seventeen and has his own car, and sometimes

when I go with Mom to ladies Bible study and play with Mrs. Reynolds' cockatiel, I see him come or go from his room, which is in the basement. And Keith doesn't ignore me like most teenagers. He says, "Hey there, Burt," even though Burt's not my name. It's Henry, same as my dad, his real name. But I like Burt because it sounds a little like Beat.

For my tenth birthday in March, Beat got me a fishing pole of my own and said that we'd go out on Greer Lake after it warmed up a bit. The pole is red and I keep it in the corner of my room, propped up so that I can see it from my bed. But the only fishing I've done so far is with my friend Freddy in the backyard. The two of us just take turns pressing various buttons and switches and flinging the pole out towards piles of leaves that we gathered just for that purpose. Freddy claims he goes fishing every time he visits his grandpa at Virginia Beach, but from the looks of things, he doesn't know much more than me. One day I asked him how come he doesn't know how to cast the hook any better than I do, and he said that it's because my pole is cheap and not anything like his grandpa's poles. I punched him in the arm and told him to get off my property. Freddy told me to ef off and went home, but I let him back on the next day.

Mom says that we shouldn't get our hopes up about Beat coming home any time soon. She says we can't wait for him and that we have to be our own team. Mom's the one who asked Mrs. Reynolds if Keith would be willing to take me out to the lake. But I know she wants him back just as bad as me. Sometimes when she thinks I'm not looking, she goes to the closet and breathes into his old jackets just for the smell of him. I think it's her way of getting that same feeling I have every

morning when I hear my clock-radio come on and I see him in the kitchen, sipping on some coffee and tapping his fingers on the table to the music.

When I come out of the bathroom, Keith's in the kitchen and says that the juice he's pouring is for me. He's making coffee for himself, which he says we can take to-go. We eat a little cereal and load Keith's Taurus, then we get going.

After just a few minutes, we stop in front of Sarah's house. Sarah is Keith's girlfriend. I hadn't known Sarah was coming until now.

Keith says, "Don't worry, Burt. You'll like her. Hop in the back, will you?"

I hop in the back. I'm not so much worried as nervous. Sarah is blond and one of the prettiest girls in town. At the pool, Freddy pokes me whenever he sees Sarah walking around or sunning and tells me to look at her things, which I sometimes do, but only really quick looks, hoping that no one, especially her, will notice.

I'm a little peeved he hadn't said anything about Sarah before, but I don't want to be a wet blanket, so I say, "Cool."

Without Keith having to honk or go up and get her, Sarah hops off her front porch like it's nothing and trots up to the car waving and glancing in the backseat like she's not sure what's back there. I worry that maybe Keith didn't tell her I was coming, like he did to me only vice versa. When she gets in she says, "This must be Henry." Even though she says it a little sing songy like maybe I'm five, I'm relieved that she knows who I am.

I say, "Hi."

She offers her hand through the two front seats for me to shake. She smiles and says, “Nice to meet you.” We shake and I get the shivers because I’ve never touched a girl like her before. I hear Freddy’s voice in my head saying, *Hey, look at the things on her!* I blink and try to shake his words out because I’m afraid she’ll be able to tell what I’m thinking. I don’t want to be like Freddy who only thinks about dirty stuff. Even so, I know Freddy will be jealous about my getting to go fishing with Sarah. He’ll ask if we went skinny-dipping and of course we will not have, but he’ll still be jealous all the same. He’ll say *That’s nothing* or *Who cares?* And because I’ve known Freddy since second grade, I know that the more times he says these things, the more jealous and angry he actually is. Usually it’s him who’s telling me things to make me jealous—stuff about his vacations and Christmas presents—so I plan on milking this for all it’s worth.

We start moving again, and having the backseat all to myself, I lie down and close my eyes. I start thinking about Beat, where he might be right now—maybe on the road or in a hotel. I think about what it would be like if Beat were the one taking me fishing and not Keith and Sarah. Beat’s turning the dial on the radio—fuzz, fuzz, more fuzz, then something good, all of a sudden, like Johnny Cash, like out of nowhere, like he made it happen. No one finds music the way Beat does. The music finds him. Beat drums on the wheel and on the stick shift. I sing the words I know and hum the ones I don’t. At the end of the song Beat rubs my head with his rough hands, whistles and tells me that I’ve got some golden pipes, which means that I can sing. I love thinking about how I can sing. I don’t sing in front of anyone but Beat.

I open my eyes when I hear some music, but it's the kind that I don't know: new and loud. Keith and Sarah are talking about some band and how it'd be killer to see them in concert. I flip over on my side. I prop my head up under my elbow and pick a little at the ragged vinyl of the seat. There are stains in the fabric part, and I scratch my fingernail at them to see if they're permanent. They are. Then I wonder whether Keith and Sarah have done it back here on this very seat. Freddy says sometimes that happens. Right there on the backseat. It's hard for me to believe, but I guess it's possible.

I haven't even seen a girl's things, not counting the women in the pool locker room when I was really small and had to stay with Mom. Freddy says he's seen real things and that the ones I've seen don't count. I say why not, but Freddy says because it's all like the wrong age group. The ones that I've seen counted for like our grandpas. Freddy says how would I know anything, I'm younger by almost ten months.

The car stops and Keith shuts the engine off. It's an old car like Mom's and continues to idle and cluck even after you take the key out. I sit up to see if we're at the lake, but we're not. Definitely no lake—only a small shack by the side of the road. Keith goes inside, leaving me and Sarah in the car.

Sarah says, "So you been fishing before?"

"Only a couple of times," I say. "Like once or twice when I was younger. I've got a new pole." I reach over the back of the seat to the station wagon trunk and hold up the red handle for her to see.

“Looks nice,” she says and nods. “So, your mom and Keith’s mom know each other?”

I nod. I’m embarrassed that Keith and I don’t *really* know each other. I’m embarrassed that maybe she knows my mom asked Keith’s mom to do this and that it wasn’t Keith’s idea.

“Well, Keith sounded pretty excited when he told me you were coming. He said you were a cool kid. I think we’ll have a pretty good time.”

I’m really happy to hear this. I’m probably blushing, and I don’t know whether to say “thank you,” which would probably sound stupid, or to say something else, which would probably be a lie. Before I can come up with anything to say, Keith comes out of the shack. He’s carrying a brown paper grocery sack. I point and say I wonder what he’s got. Keith gets in and Sarah asks what’s in the sack. Keith smiles and says, “Worms.” He rummages around in the sack and hands me a coffee can. Inside it’s full of fat, wiggly worms.

“Don’t let any of those guys escape, you hear?” Then Keith leans back and rumples my hair and probably messes it all up. I worked on my hair pretty hard this morning, putting water on it and trying to get it to stay down in the back where it’d been imprinted by the pillow in the night. But it’s probably not cool to worry about your hair like I do, so I pretend it doesn’t bother me.

We hit the road again, and the scenery changes quickly from small-house neighborhoods to no neighborhoods and bigger country houses to then finally just hills and woods, and, at last, water—at first between trees, between hills, in flashes; then in a big burst, all of a sudden, all there. The sun is just starting to get up in the

sky and the reflection of light on the water is like music I can almost hear. I know if Beat were here he'd show me what that music was. He would take the light or shadows or anything and put it into motion, like it hadn't known where or how fast to go until Beat came along and told it. I miss it—the music coming out of things that aren't normally musical, the secret rhythm and sound.

When we get down to the dock, Keith boosts me up onto the roof of the car and lets me untie the knots on the canoe. He says to Sarah, "Hey, this guy's handy." He loosens some of them, but some I get on my own. Then Sarah and I stand at one end of the car and Keith at the other. Keith says *when*, and we all lift the canoe from the top of the station wagon to the ground. Sarah's taller than me, but not by much, so I'm able to do my part. Sarah says thanks for the help. I like Sarah quite a bit.

In no time we have our poles out of the back and Keith hands me the brown bag. He winks and says, "No peaking." Keith has the tackle box, and Sarah has our lunch. Just before we get into the canoe, Keith tells me that I have to put on a life jacket. Neither he nor Sarah have one, which makes me feel like a kid, which I hate. But Keith says what would my mom do to him if he let me fall into the lake never to be seen again. Keith says it's really important for at least one person to wear one, and I say fine and put it on even though it smells like mildew sweaty feet.

When we get out far enough, Keith shows me how to bait my line with one of the shiny wigglers. Sarah says, "Keith, I think you're going to kill it."

Then Keith looks my way with a smile and winks. He says, "No, come on, he'll be fine. Right, Burt?"

I'm in on the joke, which I like, but I can't keep it in and let out a chuckle.

After I give the joke away, Sarah catches on and says, “Keith! Look, now I can tell that’s not true.” Then we all start laughing because Keith starts tickling Sarah until it looks like she’s had enough. Keith gives me another wink and I wink back even though I’m not totally sure what we’re winking about this time, but I’m pretty sure it has to do with the tickling and, like, maybe because we’re both guys.

After we all have our lines in and we’ve been waiting a little while, Keith starts whistling a great little tune, and I start tapping my foot, keeping the beat, just like my dad, and this little something is almost as good as having him here.

Then Sarah says, “Oh, oh Keith, I think there’s something happening.” She points to her bobber and she’s right. When we pull it in, she has a little tiny nothing of a fish, but a fish all the same. He isn’t much of a keeper, but before Keith can even start to take the hook out, Sarah starts pleading for Keith to let it go.

Keith gives me another sly wink and says, “Well, I don’t know Burt, what do you say? Looks like a pretty fine catch to me.” I try to play it cool even though I find a smile coming over me. It’s so hard just to keep my face still, but I do. Then Keith says, “As a matter of fact, I don’t think we’ll find one finer this whole day.” He says this with all seriousness like we’d just caught a big twenty-pounder. He makes his voice sound proper, like a gentleman or someone really old, which I find hilarious. I start laughing, and then Keith does, too. And then I let my laughter go completely because I figure the jig is up and that there’s no reason to hold in.

Sarah punches Keith in the arm, which makes me laugh even harder, and I feel myself starting to loosen up and feel more comfortable. Trying to be funny, I say, “Watch it Keith or you’ll be in the doghouse.” Which is something I’ve heard Mom

say about Beat. Sometimes at breakfast when Beat is still asleep, or in the evening when he's out past the time that Mom thinks he'll be out. She'll say, "Your dad is really in the doghouse now." I never understood exactly what it meant, but the look in Mom's eyes always says that Beat's in some sort of trouble.

Keith gives me a look like I've done it again and says, "Yeah Burt! That's it, the doghouse. Is that where I'll be? See Sarah, this guy's full of 'em. What'd I tell ya?"

Sarah smiles at me and says, "Yeah, and maybe you, too, if you keep egging him on."

I'm glad that I made Keith laugh and that Sarah likes me, but I'm disappointed in myself for using Mom's words as a joke. I know that to her they aren't funny at all. And I know that when Beat comes back it really will mean trouble.

After things calm down a bit and we've done a little bit of fishing, catching a thing or two not worth keeping, Keith takes us to a place around a bend where we can get out, rest, and eat some lunch. There are big draping trees that hang over the edge of the water, and we paddle right up into them and between the low branches to the inside where it's like a big green tent with tiny holes that let little shapes of light through to the ground.

We pull the canoe up onto the dirt so that it won't get away, and then we all pull off our shoes and lie down on the mossy ground and eat the sandwiches we brought. Even as we lie there eating and enjoying the shade, Keith keeps saying funny things that I try not to laugh at too hard because I think that maybe laughing all

the time isn't the coolest thing to do. But despite my best efforts, sometimes I let out a little snort and other times I let it go and blurt loudly. But even the times I'm able to hold it in, it's always a firecracker in my belly ready to go off.

After I finish my sandwich, I lean over and close my eyes. I don't want to fall asleep this time, but I'm tired and began to dream without realizing it. I'm lying on the moss, and so is Beat, talking and telling me about bait and tackle. He shows me how to loop the line twice over and embed the hook so that the fish doesn't get away. I ask Beat where he's been, and he tells me that that's not important. Then all of a sudden he gets up and heads for the woods, which is how it almost always goes. He turns and says that I should listen to Mom, then he jumps over a fallen tree and dashes away. I hop up from the moss and try to follow him, but it's too late. He's already gotten away, heading out into those woods in the middle of nowhere.

I wake up and have a little drizzle of spit coming out of my mouth. I wipe it discreetly with my hand so that no one will see. I sit up and realize I really am alone. The canoe is still there, but Keith and Sarah are gone. I've been left, and I'm angry. Angry with Keith and Sarah for leaving me, and angry with myself, too, for falling asleep when I should have stayed awake and played it cool.

I wait for a little while and try to occupy myself. I practice whistling for a while, and after that I decide to climb one of the dangling trees. I get up about halfway, but there isn't anywhere else I can go, so I go back down and lie on the moss. This time I don't close my eyes. I'm tired of being left behind.

I feel my day slipping away, and my anger building. I go over and get my pole and try to cast from the shore, but it's no use. It's too shallow, and the trees are

too low for me to get a good cast. “Ef, ef, ef,” I say under my breath. I decide to take the canoe out just far enough to cast my rod. I figure that when Keith and Sarah finally came back I’ll have a big fish to show for it, and Keith will say something like, “My God, Burt. You’ve done it again.”

I put on my life jacket and paddle out a little ways. I take a big meaty worm from the can and thread it onto the hook nice and deep so that it won’t fall off. I practice my casting motion a couple of times and then let it go with some real zip. It’s my best cast all day.

I watch the bobber until it seems like it’s no use waiting any longer. I reel it in nice and slow thinking that I may be able to entice some fish with my slowly dancing worm. I imagine my worm at the bottom of the lake, skimming along with a trail of little fish behind, all wagering on who’s going to bite first.

Even though I feel like I’m doing a pretty good job, not a single fish takes the bait, so I make another cast. To my surprise I really let this next one fly, too, and it gets me thinking that maybe I’ve finally gotten the hang of it. Wow, will I really have something to show Freddy tomorrow.

Then, I feel it. A little something pulling. My whole body goes ablaze. My very first thought is, *You’ve done it!* And then I say out loud to myself, “That’s it, Burt!” It just comes out even though I’ve never called myself that. Then I give my pole a tug with my arms, raising the handle back a little bit over my right shoulder the way I’ve seen the pros on TV do when bringing in a big one. I put my foot up on the edge of the canoe for balance and better my grip. I about laugh out loud I’m so happy. It resists, so I pull harder.

My line breaks. I lose my balance, and my momentum sends me flying backwards. I go straight into the water. I'm only under for a second. I pop out of the water and spit the part I've gotten in my mouth. The water is cold and thick, and my head is securely lodged between the two bars of the life jacket. That's when I start to think about what I've done. I think about my clothes, how I'm wearing my favorite shoes and how they're ruined. I think about Mom and how upset she'll be if I end up losing my brand new pole. I think about how young I am compared with Keith, and I feel like laughing at myself, my silly way of thinking that I was really somebody important to him.

It feels like waking up from a stupid dream. One where you can barely remember a single detail except for the fact that you were a lumber jack and were in trouble for cutting down all the trees in all the forests of Davidson County. The entire day has been that dream, and now I don't even know what I'm doing here in the first place.

After bobbing up and down for about a minute and feeling absolutely awful in every way, I hear a splash. It's from the shore. Sarah is kneeling at the edge. She has a towel wrapped around her like maybe they've been swimming. Where's Keith? Then I notice the shoulders pumping and head dipping in and out of the water. He's coming after me.

Waiting for Keith is excruciating. Part of me wants him to hurry and get it over with, but another part wishes that I could just float out to the middle of the lake. Never look at him again. Never have to go home and face Mom.

When Keith reaches me I start crying. I blubber, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” I say it over and over again, and each time it comes out more choked and gaspy.

Keith doesn’t say anything. He grabs a hold of me by the strap on my jacket and tugs me in.

When we get to shore he pulls himself out first. He’s completely naked. I see his backside, and then as he puts on his shorts, I see his penis in a nest of dark hair. I realize how little I know—about Keith, Sarah, about Beat.

I didn’t even know Beat was leaving when it happened right in front of me. There was a storm that night. The big sycamore in our front yard had blown over, and I was thinking about how deep its roots were. I heard the tree fall outside my window. It creaked like an old door and then fell over, taking nearly our entire front yard with it. It was my climbing tree, and I had carved secret messages and notes into the upper branches. Now, I thought, everyone will be able to read the messages. They’re on the ground where everyone will be able to read them. This is what I was thinking about when I saw Beat leave the house, get in his truck, and drive off. I thought it was a normal night. That Beat would go into town for a gig and be back in the morning when I woke up. I would ask him how the gig was, and he would always tell me they killed. But I was thinking about the tree and my messages when I should have gone after him and told him not to go.

Keith goes back in to retrieve the canoe, and Sarah and I wait on the bank. After a minute or two of silence, Sarah says, “Henry, are you alright? Are you hurt?”

I tell her that I’m fine even though I’m shivering.

“Henry,” she says. “It wasn’t your fault.” I want to believe her.

Keith comes back with the canoe and my pole, but we don't do any more fishing. We just gather our things and head back across the lake towards the car. Keith eventually shrugs off the bad mood that I put him in. He even calls me Burt a time or two, saying things like, "You sure did give us a scare back there, Burt." He chuckles, but it isn't funny. And I don't laugh. I think about how awful it felt to see Keith swimming out to save me. And I think about what Sarah said to me while we were waiting. Whose fault was it, then?

In the car on the ride home we listen to music on the radio. About half way home a song comes on that I know. It's one that I've heard Beat play in the garage with some of his musician friends. Keith looks in his rearview mirror and says, "You like this one, Burt?" I do. I love it. I want to hum along or tap the seat with my hands, but before I can answer, Keith turns the radio up so loud that for a moment I really do believe that nothing was my fault—not this, not the fact that Beat may never come back. I lose myself in the music. I start tapping my foot. My mind starts to wander. I think about Keith, how big he is, how his muscles looked in the water. I think about Sarah and her face, surprised, worried, alone and small on the shore. I think about how she was probably naked under her towel. I start to wish that she'd shown herself to me, that she'd opened her towel and that I'd taken a good long look. I wish that she had done that. Sitting there in the backseat of the car, eyes closed, I try to imagine what Sarah looks like without her clothes—but I can't.

I open my eyes and there's Keith, both hands on the wheel and eyes on the road, and next to him, Sarah, flipping through a magazine. Me in the back, as if I were their child.

Assault

I

Quentin cranks the manual window down, leans his head out over the quickly passing pavement, and vomits. Two bright yellow headlights behind them swerve. After a summer rain, the night is cool, and for a moment Quentin wonders if he is breathing.

“Shit,” Rake howls from the driver’s seat. “Did you just have to puke all over the side of my car? You’re going to be the one cleaning that shit up when we’re through.”

“Whatever, Rake,” Quentin says, angling back inside and wiping the vomit from his lips and cheek with the sleeve of his sweatshirt. He looks over his right shoulder and notices that indeed his vomit has splattered against the back window. It looks like one of the pour paintings his sister did in community college ten years ago. No one, including Quentin, had understood what was artistic about pouring a bucket of paint down a canvas. Their father had told her this one night over dinner, this thought that was on everyone’s puzzled faces. Quentin wished he hadn’t. This he remembers, but he can’t remember the last time he threw up.

Quentin feels something warm and moist on the back of his neck and realizes that his vomit caught the wind and sprayed back inside the car as well. Quentin chooses to keep this information to himself. Vomit on the inside of Rake’s 1978 Camaro should be the last thing on his mind—he has never killed before.

Rake had come to him because he knew that he needed money. Everyone at the garage knew this from the overtime he had been discreetly begging for. As if by reflex, Quentin had asked *who?* Rake laughed and said, “Fuck if I know. The only thing I ask is *how much?*”

Quentin rolls the window back up and looks at his own reflection in the glare created by the dome light. Rake keeps it lit to read the little piece of paper on the dash—the address. Quentin imagines seeing his reflection the way his head actually feels, like the taught rubber of a ball squeezed between two strong hands. But when he blinks, it’s still just his face, the same one he saw this morning and this afternoon. He places his forehead against the cool glass and looks into his own eyes.

Rake has the radio on a station that plays popular rock songs from the eighties, and he sings or hums along enthusiastically to every one. Quentin’s headache throbs in beat with Rake’s music, which makes Quentin hate Rake even more. Two weeks ago Quentin would not have imagined even riding in the same car with Rake. Rake refers to women as *cunts*. Rake masturbates loudly in the middle stall during his lunch break. Rake is an asshole.

“Walk this way!” Rake screeches in a shrill falsetto as he thumps the steering wheel with the base of his palm. A cigarette is balanced between his index and middle fingers, ash fluttering with every beat.

When the song is over, Rake turns the radio down to an unintelligible hum and says that he needs to make a pit stop. He pulls into a 7-11 parking lot. “You want something? Beer? Red Bull? Hotdog?”

Quentin shakes his head and stays in the car. Rake goes inside and walks to the back where the toilets are. They're occupied and Rake paces back and forth, glancing around like a criminal weighing his options. Then Quentin realizes that Rake is looking at the woman behind the cash register. She's middle-aged and bone-thin. Her blond hair looks like teased-out straw. Rake looks at Quentin from inside the 7-11 and wiggles his tongue between his teeth and lips.

When Rake finally gets into the men's room Quentin takes off his sweatshirt and wipes the vomit from his headrest. He opens the door and stands next to the car. A man comes out of the store with a Slurpee and a bag of Cheetos and gets into his truck. His plates are from Missouri, out of state. Could he ask to go with this man? Before he has time to think, the man is gone.

At the corner of the 7-11, to Quentin's right, two teenagers smoke and drink cokes.

Quentin gets the sudden urge for a cigarette, though he hasn't smoked since Julie became pregnant. He calculates the time—one year and a month.

Quentin hesitantly pushes away from the car and towards the teenagers. "Can I bum a cigarette?" he asks.

The teenagers look at each other skeptically and then back at Quentin. One says, "Dude, you're standing outside a fucking 7-11."

Quentin is embarrassed and angry. He walks silently back to the car and gets inside. The two teenagers are laughing at him, but he tries not to look.

The driver side door opens and Rake falls in. He says, "Got you something to read." He laughs and tosses a *Hustler* magazine into Quentin's lap like it's a joke.

On the cover a blonde woman wearing a tiny brown bikini gropes her massive breasts.

“Fuck you, Rake,” Quentin says.

“Just thought I’d try to lighten the mood is all,” Rake says as he pops open a Bud Light can. He takes a loud mouthful.

Rake pushes the cigarette lighter button in. He opens a new pack of Reds and offers one to Quentin.

Quentin looks for the teenagers but they’re gone. He takes the cigarette and hates himself for doing so.

A few minutes down the road, Rake says, “OK, let’s get down to business. You need to visualize what it is you’re going to do. Don’t take my word for it, but I will say from personal experience it’s helpful. Say what it is you want to get done. But don’t forget at the same time you should be using your imagination to picture these things that you’re saying. So, let’s have it. What’re you going to do, big fella?”

Quentin removes the iron crowbar from the backpack between his feet.

“Looks like it’ll do the trick,” says Rake, slapping Quentin in the middle of his chest. Quentin wishes that Rake would call his own wife a cunt right now: Julie, who’s surely wondering where he is, wondering why he hasn’t come straight to the hospital after work. Quentin knows how quickly he could swing the crowbar around to strike Rake in middle of his forehead. They would sail into oncoming traffic. Even this feels like a viable option.

Quentin gathers himself. He studies the weight in his hand and tries to visualize not what he wants to do, but what he needs to do. He submits to Rake’s

advice. He closes his eyes and imagines walking up behind a man and striking him across the side of his face. His ear collapsing. His skull crushing and splintering like thin ice under a weight. The crowbar penetrating deep and leaving a misshapen indentation when it is removed. In his mind blood is absent. He knows there will be but doesn't know what the blood will look like. Will it drip or spray or simply ooze?

II

Tully has bowled well tonight. Well enough that a few of his friends treat him to a pitcher of beer. They drink and chat until one by one his friends look at their watches and declare it time to head home. Everyone leaves except for Tim, another divorced and lonely soul. Finally, Tim decides he had better head home as well. He says it's been a long day. Tully stays.

Tully used to bowl once a week. Tuesday nights. Then he made some additional friends and began bowling twice a week. Both Tuesday and Friday nights. Tully would be open to adding a third.

Tonight is Friday.

Tully has become friends with some of the employees, especially Frankie, who closes and lets Tully stay even after everyone has left. Tully bowls a few more frames while Frankie quietly runs the lane machine up and down each lane like he is walking a slow old dog.

Tully is glad when he sees the custodians arrive. He pauses while they shuffle in with their supplies. Tully says hello to each one and waves. Hello, Ricardo. Hello, Betty. And to his favorite: Hello, Susanne. The custodians do not stop to chat

but hurry about their business, cleaning quickly and efficiently with spray bottles, rags, brooms, and mops.

Tully is pleased that he knows the custodians by name. Though he must remind himself that their names are, after all, embroidered on their workshirts. Tully admits that their friendship is slightly less remarkable because of this fact. But in the end how wonderful it is to have one's name embroidered on one's shirt. Everyone is immediately your friend!

Tully continues to heave the ball, using a little bit of extra flare—extra spin, more dramatic form. Tully strikes nine pins, leaving the lone number seven. He looks up, slightly disappointed, but no one has noticed.

Tully has only been staying late like this for the past few weeks. The first night had been by accident. He had fallen asleep right there in the scoring seat. When he awoke Frankie had already begun the lane machine and the custodians were silently scurrying about. It was a remarkable sight. No one seemed to realize he was there. The next week he simply decided not to leave.

Susanne makes her way down the alley spraying each plastic chair with the bottle in her left hand and wiping it with the rag in her right. She moves with rhythmic precision, never raising her head to look around. Tully watches her as she get closer and closer, never looking up at him or anything else. Only at the seats she is cleaning, quickly and quietly. Tully calculates his releases so that when Susanne finally approaches his lane, he is poised and lets a real beauty fly. Tully says hello and smiles. Susanne looks up and smiles back but does not say anything.

Susanne is Tully's favorite because she always smiles when he says hello to her. She has long, dark hair that she keeps tied in a ponytail. She is small and perhaps twenty years old. She is half his age, but Tully believes that she inspires something within him. Tully suddenly wants to say something like, Susanne, you remind me of my ex-wife when she was young. But in reality he never really knew his ex-wife when she was young, and in pictures she looked nothing like Susanne. When Flora was young, she was an old-looking young person. Tully has no idea why he would like to say to Susanne that she looks like his ex-wife except that maybe it sounds nostalgic and romantic. Tully is neither nostalgic nor romantic, but he would like to be. Sometimes he believes that Susanne is the key to this new beginning.

Tully is sure that if he were able to spend more time with Susanne they would get along well. He imagines taking her across the street to the all-night diner, sitting in a booth and discussing their lives, learning about each other. Tully is sure that if they were in a booth, face to face, with hot plates of food in front of them, they would finally be able to get to know each other in this way. Although he would need to color his own life in such a way that it would impress her and not scare her away. But really, what's the use? Susanne is always busy with her cleaning and Tully never has time to say more than hello. Besides, Tully is sure that a woman like Susanne has a husband and a bunch of wonderful little children. This is why she is always in a hurry. They show up at eleven and are done by eleven-thirty. Remarkable! Only a sweet family with sweet little babies could inspire somebody to clean like that. Tully wonders what it would take for a man like him to become someone else's inspiration.

Tully wonders if Susanne might know, but before he can even begin to put the question into words, she has moved on to another lane without saying goodbye.

Tully lets another ball go. And another. And another, until he has sufficiently drowned out his silly notions with the pleasing sound of ball striking pins.

Before Tully knows it, Frankie and the lane machine are upon him. Tully asks Frankie if he would like to go a few frames, but Frankie says that he'd better call it a night. Maybe next week, he says. Tully tosses one last strike before calling it quits, and Frankie tells Tully that he's developed quite a stroke. Susanne and the other custodians have finished and left without Tully noticing.

Tully walks out into the deserted parking lot and fumbles with his keys, feeling for the right one. The rain has stopped and left the evening cool and pleasant, though Tully knows tomorrow will be muggy as a consequence.

Tully reaches his truck and holds his keys up to the street lamp to make sure he's got the right one. He unlocks his truck and is about to climb inside when he hears a car roll up in front of the alley. He turns and is surprised to see two men exit the car and head inside, one carrying a crowbar. Tully is stunned, and before he can decide what to do, the two men exit the building, dragging a motionless Frankie by his feet. They drag him out into the middle of the parking lot, directly under the round glow of a street lamp. The one with the crowbar takes a one-handed golf swing at Frankie's temple, and a silent poof of blood rises like a mist and then gently falls.

Tully buckles at the waist and drops his unzipped ball bag to the ground. He vomits. His ball rolls underneath his truck. The two killers look up, and the one with the crowbar begins jogging towards him.

Expendable

With the current state of things, Stanley's been on the lookout for places to cut back. When times were good, this was not the case. When times were good, Pendleton Home & Hardware was the place to go for employment. *Could we use another man in Garden?* Yes we could. *My cousin is wondering if we have any job openings.* Yes we do. *My cousin has a deformity.* That is not a problem. We will give him a job that he is perfectly capable of doing.

I asked these questions and more. Stanley was the one answering. These days the answer is most certainly *no*, deformity or not. These days anyone who does not serve a definable purpose in Stanley's opinion is considered expendable. This applies to anyone past, present, or future aside. You might be an expendable and not know it. You might be an expendable, know it, and want to hide it. You can't. Stanley means business. Stanley's been sending a few more expendables home every couple of weeks ever since the arrival of corporate America in our little hamlet in the unholy form of Home Depot. Our numbers started going down the tube the moment the big orange sign appeared approximately one-quarter mile off 85. It gives me a headache every time I see it in my periphery. I want to look the opposite direction but don't for fear of dying in a blaze right in front of that which I hate.

All that to say it's 7:50 AM on a Monday, and as I have become accustomed to doing, I brace myself. Stanley begins Motivational with role. He holds a clipboard in one hand, a neatly sharpened No. 2 pencil in the other. Stanley reads off our names alphabetically, one at a time, last name first. He does this, instead of looking around

the Break Room and seeing that there's only seven of us sitting in a tight circle of folding chairs.

"Larry, Abrams," Stanley shouts.

Larry's from Nuts/Bolts/Screws. He lifts his head just enough to look at Stan's shoelaces and to give a marbled *here*. Larry's our oldest member and has a perpetual layer of white stubble and a limp. He Obstructs Uniform every day by wearing cover-alls instead of the issue khaki and tries to tell you about his grandchildren should you wander into his ten-foot radius.

"Creech, Fleming."

That's me. I work in Lumber. I say *here* without skipping a beat. I look at Stanley in the eyes when I say it so that he also hears me say *I'm no expendable!* It's the little things that make the difference. The little things keep a roof over our Foxhall Manner split-level. It's the little things keep my Cindy happy.

"Hanover, Debbie."

Debbie's from Bath & Indoor Lighting, which used to be two Sections, but was recently merged. Debbie's an athlete. She rides her bike to work and showers in one of the samples using an opaque curtain. She lifts a hand-weight to signify her presence.

"Legger, Kenneth."

Kenneth's in Large Appliances. Kenneth's been here as long as me. Once upon a time, Ken and I were both up at Register, two acne-faced farts without a care in the world. Since then Kenneth's been divorced three times and now has something like twelve stepchildren. I think about what my own measly paycheck looks like after

taxes and the mortgage, and it makes my heart hurt to think about Kenneth and all those mouths to indirectly feed. Kenneth says *here* and gets back to his whittling.

“Macabee, Jill.”

Jill sits next to Stanley in the front of the Break Room. Jill is Stanley’s new squeeze. She has short brown hair and a full figure. She’s been at Registers six months and is already thinking upward mobility. In ten years I’ve gone from minimum wage to a salaried position that pays slightly more than minimum wage. Am I jealous of Jill’s determination to get ahead? You bet. Do I feel threatened by her frequent come-ons? Even more so.

Just last week Jill caught me dozing at the helm of the table saw and woke me up by screaming and running a figure eight with her right arm pulled inside the sleeve of her maroon polo. Aghast with visions of carnage, I almost fell off my stool and came very close to severing my own arm. Then she accidentally on purpose angled her hidden arm out the neck hole of her polo and showed me a boob. She adjusted herself accordingly and said that there was more where that came from if I’d play ball.

I spent the next five minutes repeating *I am faithful to my wife*. But Cindy and I have been on the rocks and even my fidelity chants couldn’t drown out my yearning for a repeat if you know what I’m saying.

Jill says *here* and grabs Stanley’s butt a little bit. When he looks back down at the role to mark her off, she gives me a squinty look that says *This could be you if you wanted!* I look away, fearful that such looks could cost me my job and more.

“Stevens, Reginald.”

Reginald raises his hand and says something that sounds like *Testes*, but says don't worry it's a foreign tongue. Reginald's our resident academic. He's about twenty-five, still lives with his parents, and spends most of his free time collecting credits at the junior college, though towards nothing in particular.

“Warkowski, Rick,”

Rick is from Interior, but he's nowhere to be seen. Stanley looks up from his sheet of paper where he's been checking off names and says *Warkowski* one more time the way he always does, emphasizing the *kow*. Still no Rick. We all silently wish Rick the best but are also glad we're not him.

Stanley says that there's bad news. He says last quarter earnings are nowhere near the color black. Stanley waves a few loose sheets of paper in the air as a visual aid. He makes a grimace with his face that reminds me of a duck trying to smoke a cigarette.

We tense up.

“No one is exactly to blame,” Stanley says, making a calming gesture with his hands. “But then again, no one is completely innocent. I'm not going to lie, Pendleton here is running on fumes. And when I say fumes, I mean money. Like, a lot less money than you would normally need to run an automobile, hardware/home store, et cetera. Other than that, I don't have very much to say this morning. We don't have anything on special. We can't afford to. If any one of those cheapskates comes in looking to haggle, stand your ground. Let's maintain our dignity. Please. The price is the price. You can tell them that. You can tell them Stanley said that. All the same, if someone's offering a price for a certain item, especially if it's large,

go ahead and let me know what price they're offering. Don't let on that you're doing this. Stand your ground, like I said. Just also find a way to let me know what's happening on the Floor. Maybe a special code would be sufficient. There are always exceptions to every rule, which is a good rule. Let's add that. Write that down, Jill. Remember that, all of you. Nonetheless, there are but two things left for us to do: Pray like the dickens and be as gosh darn entrepreneurial as possible. And by entrepreneurial, let me remind you, I mean an individual with a better attitude who happens to sell more fixtures, lumber, appliances, heavy machinery, et cetera, than his or her competitor."

We all raise our hands, wanting to ask basically the same question: What kind of job security can he offer us at this point in time and what about our annual raises? But Stanley says that he's not taking any questions this morning, which means that that about does it for the Motivational. I can put two and two together, therefore I get it that our job security is completely *not* and that we might as well kiss our annual raises goodbye. Stanley raises his arms in the air, which is the sign for us to de-circle the chairs in the Break Room and hit the Floor and make sure our individual Sections look pretty good and are appealing to potential customers.

I head back to Lumber and get to thinking about how I can increase my daily production so that I've got a shot at meeting Quota this month. As I walk past Bath & Indoor Lighting, I say hello to Debbie and practice my smile a few times in the wealth of vanity mirrors. I make sure there's nothing stuck in my teeth. I pat my hair down in the back as best I can. I pause at the mirror with all the light bulbs around it

and the special magnifying portion and notice that I can see about every pore on my face and think that that can't be a good sign.

When I get back to Lumber, I tidy up the Scrap Bins and give my countertop a wipe with my shirtsleeve before I wander towards the adjoining Large Appliances to see how Kenneth is taking the news that Pendleton's basically in free fall, which is not really news unless you've been living under a rock.

Kenneth has his pocketknife out and is going to town on what appears to be a three-legged baby Jesus. It's a known fact that Kenneth whittles each one of his children a Christmas tree ornament every year. He says that this year's theme is common Biblical mistruths.

"How does the leg thing apply?" I ask.

Kenneth says, "Just something I heard, or maybe made up, but it sure isn't true. It's hard to portray such things as the stone being rolled away by the disciples of Jesus on a small, lightweight, and easily manipulated piece of wood.

I say, "How about God as a woman?"

Kenneth says, "Good."

Kenneth and I agree that this morning's Motivational was anything but. To add insult to injury, he says that he found a note in his mail cubby saying that if he fails to reach Quota this month, he'll be in the mix when cutbacks come around again, which, he quotes, "could come at any point in time and as frequently as necessary."

I think about what a note in my own cubby would mean. I think about the fragile state of mind I would surely be thrown into. That little piece of paper would

threaten everything I hold dear: my Cindy, my nice house and yard. I say, “If it didn’t mean Leaving Section, I’d pat your shoulder or something.”

Kenneth says, “That would be nice in theory, maybe better.”

I go back to Lumber to wait it out. About a half hour passes before I see my first customers: a man and his son walking past Lumber quickly. They walk past again. I ask if I can help them with anything. The man tries to avoid eye contact and says that they’re price checking. I say for them to let me know if they find that at some point they need some assistance with their efforts. The man jots down something on a piece of paper and then grabs his little boy by the arm and says that they need to go someplace where they have better overhead lighting and a more standoffish sense of the term *customer service*.

I want to tell this guy and his kid off but instead say, “Have a nice day.” But they’re already out of earshot, so what’s the use?

A few minutes later, I hear the front door bells jingle and Jill at Register shouting “Come On Down!” into her gooseneck microphone like the announcer from *Price Is Right*. I go to the edge of my Section and see Rick scurrying for the Break Room hoping Stanley won’t catch him before he can doctor his time card with fine-point Sharpie. Jill’s wanted a Section Manager position for some time now and is therefore clapping and jumping wildly in her two-by-two-foot Standing Zone and asking nearby customers what their closest bid without going over might be on a variety of items.

Kenneth steps up to the dividing tiles and says, “His alarm clock might be broke, but I doubt it. Marriage is twenty percent ‘glad you did it,’ eighty percent ‘dealing with a difficult woman.’”

Rick’s been married six months. He met his wife met on *Gotcha*, a site that boasts the ability to match anyone with their bona fide soul mate. For weeks Rick went around saying that *anyone* must include him as well, thrilled by the prospect. We all agreed that this was most likely accurate, though Rick by no means is what women refer to as “a catch,” and his authentic soul mate was hard to envision. Reginald had a semester of psychology and predicted from the start that Rick and Rhonda’s marriage would be fraught with communication problems due to their initial meeting in the digital world. Reginald routinely says that these modern advancements only seem the way of the future, but in reality they’re tearing us apart. I tend to agree. If it were up to me, I’d take us back in time and do it all over again. No computers to find women. No credit cards to buy your everyday essentials. No Harold Dinkus, who gave my wife a cell phone and calls her every night before she goes to bed so that they can read the Scriptures to each other. My Cindy says he is helping her find her spiritual gift. I cover my ears with my pillow and do my best not to lash out.

I say, “And you can only have so many bad ones in a row before you feel it getting worse than eighty-twenty.”

Kenneth gives a glance in either direction and crosses into Lumber. He puts a reluctant hand on my shoulder and says, “It never hurts to keep count. I used to do so

on the inside flap of a matchbook. The empty, marked up matchbooks I put in a coffee tin underneath the bed. At the end of each marriage I do a tally.”

“Something to think about,” I say. My own difficulties get me thinking about poor Rick and how happy he was the day he got married. The ceremony was on a golf course. Rhonda and he both drove up in separate golf carts, then drove off together in one. I tell Kenneth that I’m going to take my Ten and see if Rick’s having a good day or a bad day, so to speak, and support him in his time of need. He says that that’s a good idea and that he’ll watch Lumber if I get him a coke.

When I get to the Break Room, I find Rick fiddling with his locker but having some trouble. He’s wearing a homemade splint on his little finger and what I think might be a birch twig is poking out from behind his left ear.

Rick says that boy is he glad to see me and not Stanley, but before I have a chance to get a concerned or sympathetic word in edgewise, Jill bursts through the door with Stanley right on her heels. She points to Rick and says, “There he is. That’s the one.” She proceeds to put her thumbs in her armpits and do some sort of line dance back and forth between the vending machines. Rick drops to his knees and begins sobbing and wailing about his mortgage and his wife and his cousin who has cancer, which no one really knew about until now. He pleads for mercy, but there’s none to be had.

Stanley looks down at Rick and says that he’d better wash and return his maroon polo by close of business or he’ll dock \$19.95 from his final check.

Right after Stanley leaves, Jill says, “Look hard, you two might just be witnessing the rise of the next Section Manager of Interior. I’ll give you both a tip. I

only take Fives instead of Tens. Facts such as this do not go unnoticed.” Jill comes over to me and takes my arm. She says, “Maybe you’re next if you don’t start paying me more attention, if you know what I mean.” She glances at her watch and hightails it back to Register. A few minutes later, she starts singing nursery rhymes into her microphone except that she inserts the names of Pendleton employees into all the mini-narratives. I end up running away with the spoon. Rick ends up being attended to unsuccessfully by the king’s horses and men.

I do a silent fidelity chant, then I help Rick up to the table and try to console him, but it’s no use. I look down at my watch and notice that I’ve only got a few more seconds before my Ten is up. I break it off and tell him to have a good one and that he knows where to come if he needs any lumber in the foreseeable future. I’m walking out the door when he says something about having wanted to start building a tree house for his forthcoming children’s enjoyment but doesn’t know if he can still afford it. I think about how Rick had better not come to me looking for an employee discount.

By the time I get back to Section, I’ve forgotten Rick’s plight. I am a man with a plight of my own—unstable work environment, Harold Dinkus, and Jill, just to name a few.

Kenneth is at the Dividing Tiles. He says, “Hey, where’s my coke?”

Cindy and I live in a development called Foxhall Manner. The name is supposed to be reminiscent of an English estate, which was a selling point when we were touring the models. A woman named Judy Jeravicious worked for the

development as a Host and showed us around. She said that she lived in Foxhall, though she didn't specify where. She wore a navy pantsuit and bright red high-heeled shoes. Cindy was immediately taken with her. She was glamorous and confident, and she told us everything we wanted to hear. She told us it was a community for people on the rise. It was a community built for success. Cindy and I were young and wanted both of those things.

Judy introduced us to some of the neighbors who already had what she called "beautiful estates." They all knew each other by their first names and asked us ours and looked as if they were playing name-remembering tricks. Everyone was friendly and athletic-looking, and I remember looking down at my already-growing gut and thinking, wow, could I ever fit in here? I don't know how to play volleyball. I don't own a bicycle. I'll never remember all of these people's names. But I could tell right off the bat that Cindy wasn't asking herself any such questions. Her answer was an unequivocal *yes!*

Our first few years in Foxhall were the best Cindy and I ever had. Everything seemed like it was just as Judy had told us: block parties practically every weekend, a monthly newsletter in our mailbox, neighbors walking dogs on fancy leashes, kids playing at the end of cul-de-sacs without any fear of being run over. It was a vibrant community of people on the rise. *We* were on the rise. Cindy was right after all. It was as if everyone in the entire development felt as though moving into Foxhall Manner was the single greatest decision they had made in their entire lives. This was the feeling I got when Cindy and I went for walks in the evening when I got home from a good day's work as a recently promoted Section Manager. This was the

feeling I got when I proudly mowed my lawn every Saturday morning with my Toro 2.0 automatic. This was absolutely the feeling I had every night as I went to sleep next to my lovely wife with the windows open and a breeze that felt as if it were sent from God himself swayed through our home.

But now as I pull through Foxhall Manner's sentry-like gates (with moat and all), I feel undeserving of its majesty. If I don't make Quota, if Jill does me in, if I can't negotiate a balance between eager customer service and an understanding of the autonomy of our current society, I'll be packing up my locker and my arrival at Foxhall will not be triumphant. Goodbye sentry-like entrance. Goodbye endless loops of weaving cul-de-sacs. Goodbye homes cozily squashed together so that when you open the blinds in the bedroom too early in the morning and you get a big dose of Mrs. Donegan bathing her elderly mother next door; and open the blinds in the master bath too late in the evening and there's Ed McQueen with a pair binoculars pretending that he's bird watching despite the fact that there are no trees big enough to sustain wildlife in our neighborhood.

When I pull into our drive next to Cindy's maroon Chevy that I got her three years ago for her birthday, all trepidation fades. I think, you've survived another day. It's OK to love what you love. I love this neighborhood, and so does my Cindy. I look up at all that beige stucco and all those brown shutters and that roof that I re-shingled myself and still looks pretty damn good. This is what it's all about. Our house is by far not the worst looking split-level in the neighborhood, we've got a fixed-rate mortgage that I somehow manage to pay off each month, and our retriever,

Bartholomew, who I can hear softly yapping in the fenced-in backyard, is the sweetest dog I've ever had.

My Cindy is on the couch painting her toenails and watching *Maury*. She's wearing a white *Save the Manatees* T-shirt, but no bra. She's not wearing any pants. She's already a few coats in because her nails are a dark red. I've gotten to where I can tell these things. Even before Cindy and I were married, sometimes she and her mother would come over to the apartment I was living in and the two of them would sit in front of the TV watching *Maury*, the both of them painting their toenails. I remember thinking back then that this could very well be my future, watching toenail paint dry, which is more dull than regular.

Her pre-school class ends around noon, then she has the rest of the day to herself. She usually spends it studying her Bible, going to Bible study, painting her toenails, or some combination of the three.

Unfortunately, ever since my paycheck started dwindling and Harold Dinkus entered the scene, she's been holding out, which makes me anxious and angry all at once. Cindy is perfectly aware of these feelings but says that the Word condemns all sex that is not primarily for reproduction purposes. Cindy says that my seed is holy. She says that until I get right with God I won't be able to advance in the world of industry. And until I advance in the world of industry and make approximately an extra buck seventy-five an hour, which she supposes is enough to support a youth and put some away for college, my holy seed will not come within a few feet of her holy womb. She has informed me of these details enough times in a row that I don't have to ask if she's come to feel differently. I don't tell her that at this point it's all I can

do to stay gainfully employed. I don't tell her about Rick getting canned or the looming cutbacks. I don't tell her about Jill and her boob that I think about more often than I'd like to admit. All I can say is, "Cindy, make sure you put on another coat. I think you missed a spot."

A little later, Cindy gets a call from Harold Dinkus on the cell and begins to pray aloud. As I've become accustomed to in times such as these, I round up Bartholomew and go for a walk around the neighborhood that will take approximately the length of one chapter of the book of Luke.

Over a dinner of frozen pizzas, I ask Cindy how her day was, and she tells me about the one kid who picked someone else's nose and another kid who sat in a friend's lap and proceeded to pee his pants. But she never takes the hint and asks how mine was. Still, I think about how I'd describe it if given the chance—a step closer to something, though I'm not quite sure what.

Next morning at Motivational, no Kenneth. My guts are thinking *cut backs!* Without so much as a decent explanation for Kenneth's absence, Stanley says that the first order of business is a new system called Break Buddies—he says it like this is the upside. Stanley says, "Due to some sparsities, we're going to begin a system of coordinated breaks in a rotating fashion. Everything regarding break time procedures is to remain in place, but now individuals in adjacent Sections will cover each other rather than calling over your assigned Helper. We've been out of those for some time, and I commend you on getting along till now. For instance, Lawn & Garden and Bath & Indoor Lighting are right next to each other. Therefore, Reginald and

Debbie are automatically Break Buddies. Whenever Reginald chooses to take his break, Debbie will cover his Section and vice versa. Essentially, when either Reginald or Debbie is on Break, Lawn & Garden and Bath & Indoor Lighting become one giant Section. If it wasn't too confusing, you could even call it something like 'Lawn & Lighting.' For once you can finally ignore the Dividing Tiles and roam freely between Sections. In many ways this should be very exciting and fun. When and how you coordinate your Breaks is up to you and your Buddy."

Debbie raises her hand and when called upon says, "Can we trade Break Buddies?"

"In a word, no," says Stanley. "I have partitioned the store into two-Section Sectors. If someone were to trade, it would throw the whole damned thing off its axis." Stanley holds up a hand-written chart. "Besides, if it makes you feel any better, you don't actually have to spend a tremendous amount of time with your Break Buddy. What I mean is, 'buddy' is just a fun way of putting it. You don't actually have to, like, pal around with him or anything. And if you do want to pal around or whatever, you'll have to on your own especial time. Because when you think hard about it, which I have, this 'buddy' is the one person who you will absolutely not see while on personal time at Pendleton Home & Hardware—that person's minding your stuff."

Debbie appears pleased, probably due to the fact that Reginald has been trying to take her out for something like two years. He makes her hand-constructed cards for every major holiday with some sort of romantic/sexual spin. For President's Day, Reginald drew a picture of Lincoln entirely nude except for a top hat covering his

crotch. Aside from the beard and top hat it looked nothing like Lincoln. You had to sort of put the pieces together if you know what I mean.

Then Stanley says that a few of our number have left us but have moved on to bigger and brighter things. He says that those of us remaining have some juggling to do and that some of us may be asked to fulfill roles that they have not traditionally filled. “Jill, for instance,” he says, “will be filling in at Large Appliances until more permanent solutions are decided. I’ll be splitting my time between Interior and Registers because we’ve all got to pull our weight around here and besides, it looks awful to leave a two-by-six-foot HOW CAN I HELP YOU? sign unattended past mid-morning.”

After we de-circle, Stanley pulls me aside and says that he’s sorry for my loss but that he had to let Kenneth go on account of Inappropriateness.

“What kind?” I ask.

Stanley says, “The kind towards Jill.”

I say, “Who else.”

“My feelings exactly,” Stanley says. “That’s why I had to let him go. Couldn’t have a guy like him around here. After all these years, it surprises me the lack of loyalty some men have.”

“I wonder the same thing,” I say. But really I’m thinking the opposite. I know Kenneth wasn’t the disloyal one is what I mean.

Stanley says, “If he were here today and were a slightly better person, Kenneth would be your Break Buddy no problem.”

“I understand,” I say. Really, I wish I understood less. Does Stanley know how much I understand? He does not because next he tells me that he thinks Jill and I will make a really terrific professional-only team.

When I get back to Lumber, I find Jill not in her own new section of Large Appliances, but sitting on my workbench, wearing a miniskirt. I can see her bright pink panties without much trouble, which I try to avert my eyes from but find it difficult. I’ve heard neon colors naturally draw attention to one’s eye. *I am faithful to my wife. I am faithful to my wife.*

Jill says that she’ll be my buddy more times than just during Break.

I say, “I’m not sure that’s allowed.”

Jill says, “Who the hell do you think I am? I make my own rules, bub. If you don’t pick them up fast, something bad might happen. Maybe a note in your cubby. Maybe worse.” She hops down off the counter and lands awkwardly on one of her Uniform Obstructing high heels. She hikes her skirt up an inch or two and says, “Speaking of cubbies.”

I say, “I’m not sure what you have in mind.” Though I do. In addition to her skirt and panties, I also notice that Jill’s maroon polo has recently gone down to zero buttons buttoned, which is exactly one button below minimum for women like Jill who wear a C-cup or higher.

Jill looks at me as if we haven’t been talking about anything in particular and says, “Isn’t it hot in here? I think it’s hot in here. Super hot.” She widens her neck hole so that I can see the lacey part on the top of her bra. I feel my penis move about

a half inch to the left. I try to remember my fidelity chant but can't remember how it goes.

Over the loud speaker Stanley says, "Open for business!" I'm relieved.

Jill tugs her skirt down and goes back up to one button buttoned and says, "There will be consequences for your inaction."

Why does this not surprise me?

Jill spends the rest of the morning confined to Large Appliances but tries to coax me into looking down her polo on multiple occasions by pretending to drop something microscopic on the linoleum and then not being able to find it. Do I look? Only once.

Zero customers cross the Lumber threshold all morning, and at 12:30 I ask Jill to cover our sections per Break Buddy regulations. She says that she'd be more than happy to, struts over to my workbench, and begins scooping up handfuls of sawdust and sprinkling them down the front of her shirt. I say I'll be back in thirty. She says for me to take my time and continues with the sawdust thing, which I admit is weird but kind of sexy in a rugged way. I do half chant and head for the Break Room.

In the Break Room, I take my bologna and Swiss from the fridge and flip through a magazine, which follows the surprisingly complicated lives of celebrities. There's a photo spread of an actor who used to be in a sitcom as a child trying to load all six of his ethnically diverse children into the backseat of a corvette with zero safety seats. The big banner at the top of the page reads, "NOT SO FAST P.J. HOUSEMAN! THIS ISN'T THE 80'S OR SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA!" The next

spread is a series of middle-aged female celebrities losing their tops with big arrows pointing to where interested readers might be looking for something to pop out.

Reginald comes in and sits across the table. I close my magazine. He opens up a pocket Russian dictionary and begins practicing his vowels.

“Why Russian?” I ask.

He says, “*Coats Pneumonia!*”

“What?” I say.

Reginald says, “The junior college has a wealth of very attractive Russian faculty who might want to marry an American in order to stay long term.”

“What about Debbie?” I ask.

He says, “Break Buddies has placed a wedge in our relationship. Debbie remains at the extreme edge of Section and won’t come near Lawn & Garden until I prove that I’ve cleared the area by hitting two screws together in Nuts/Bolts/Screws. On my way back I’m going to pocket a couple of screws so that I can clang from anywhere in the store.”

I say, “I’m not sure that’s the best idea I’ve heard all day.”

He says, “You’d better take a look at my card.”

“Maybe I’d better get back to Section,” I say.

On my way out of the Break Room I run into Stanley, who’s holding a mini bag of Pita Chips and looking disgruntled.

“Good morning,” I say.

“How are you and Jill getting along?” he says.

“Fine,” I say.

“How are sales?” he asks.

I think, *Look around, zero customers. What do you think?* But instead, I say, “Fine.”

Stanley gives me a look like I just tried to steal one of his Pita Chips and says that I’d better start thinking about more than just the here and now if he were me. I want to tell Stanley that if he were me he’d of already turned down an opportunity to get in Jill’s pants this morning. Instead I ask would he like to hear about my five-year plan. He says maybe another time and scoots.

When I get back to Lumber, no Jill. I’m worried she’s abandoned our Sections and Stanley will blame me because I’m the more senior. I think this is what she meant by *worse*. I hear a ruffling behind a big stack of plywood. I go over to have a look and find old Larry in the fetal position clutching a pair of bright pink panties and saying to no one in particular, “Becky’s the best swimmer in her junior high school. Michael’s the most improved of his entire Boy Scout troupe. Maureen couldn’t have raised a more satisfactory pair,” repeat, repeat, repeat.

I keep my distance and wait for the cavalry to arrive.

Not thirty seconds later, Jill shows up, clutching Stanley’s arm. Her hair is sort of frizzed out, and her eyes are wide open and focused on something off in the distance.

“Flem,” Stanley says. “Where were you when all this happened?”

“Lunch,” I say.

“That checks out, I guess,” Stanley says.

I point to the stack of plywood. Larry's still repeating his spiel. Stanley peers around the stack and says, "Oh my God. How'd he get a hold of those?"

Jill gasps and then does a bogus faint like the horrible memory of old Larry Abrams forcibly removing her underwear is too painful to relive. Stanley tells Larry that he'd better leave the premises immediately and maybe turn himself in to the police. Jill is suddenly revived and gives me a look that says both *This is your fault!* and *This can stop whenever you want it to!*

When I pull up to my house, I find an unfamiliar car in the drive. I'm forced to park on the street, and when I walk through the door, it's worse. There's my Cindy clasping hands across the dining room table with a man I immediately take to be Harold Dinkus. Their eyes are shut, and Harold Dinkus is mumbling underneath his breath. I'm in no mood, to say the least. I shout, "What the hell is going on here?"

Cindy doesn't look up, but whispers, "Harold's praying. Show some respect."

"I won't show respect," I say. "As far as I can see, there's a stranger groping my wife, which, I might add, doesn't seem very Christian."

Harold Dinkus amens and looks up with a big smile. He looks about any age imaginable. He could be prematurely gray or a youthful-looking fifty. "You must be Fleming," he says.

"I am," I say.

Harold extends a hand that he wants me to shake, but I won't shake hands with a man who's touching my wife in my own home. He looks like he probably

wears hand lotion but calls it something else like *moisturizer*. I walk past Harold and over to Cindy and say, “Once again, what the hell is going on here?”

“Don’t curse, Fleming. Harold and I were praying to the Lord.”

“Good God,” I say.

“Exactly,” says Harold.

“That’s not what I meant,” I say.

“Doesn’t matter,” Harold says. “What does matter is that we’re all here, and ‘wherever two or more are gathered in His name, there too are the angels of the Lord.’”

“That’s not why I’m gathered,” I say. “This is where I live.”

“Just need two, so still applies.” Cindy says. “You’re in on it whether you like it or not, Fleming.”

“Philippians 3:12,” Harold says. “I bet there’s an angel sitting on your counter right there.” He points right between the coffee maker and the stand-up mixer. There’s some quiet, and I use the time to do my best to look disgruntled in Harold’s direction. It eventually works because he’s the next one to speak and says, “Well, I’d better be going.”

“You don’t have to, Harold,” Cindy says. “We still have memorization exercises.”

Harold looks at his watch and says, “No, I really should. I have some errands to run. We can go double on memorization next week.” He makes a sort of eastern-looking bow and heads for the door. Before he shuts the door I think he says, “Lord willing.” Either that or, “I’ll be back.”

I think to myself, Harold Dinkus probably has a Quota, too, and is having no trouble at all filling it partly in thanks to my Cindy.

The rest of the week gets progressively worse. By Friday, we're hanging on by a thread. Regulars are being let go in droves, and to everyone's surprise, mostly due to a sudden wave of Inappropriateness. One of Reginald's dirty cards finally finds its way into Stanley's cubby. Someone finally puts some batteries in the security camera and discovers Debbie's morning showers. Jill continues to remind me that I have a choice in the matter, but I say I don't. The ends never justify the means. I stick to my fidelity chants and add a special clause: *I am faithful to my wife and am an honest employee!*

Staff becomes so scarce that Stanley has to nix the hiring freeze just to maintain a staff capable of handling even the small number of shoppers we still garner on a daily basis. Break Buddies system is expanded to where if you are within sight of another Section, you're technically managing it. Not unexpectedly, Jill is suddenly managing nearly every Section in the store. On several occasions Stanley confides to me that he is troubled by his inability to maintain a small but wholesome workforce despite the Six Sigma conference he attended last year.

Cindy's still in bed when I head in for work Saturday morning. I tell her I've got to pull Saturday Shift because of staff depletion. She says no problem and that she and Harold will pray for a plentiful harvest on this Day of Rest. I bite my tongue.

I get to Pendleton a few minutes before 8:00 AM. I head back for Motivational, but there's a sign on the door that says, MOTIVATIONAL CANCELLED ON ACCOUNT OF LOW ATTENDENCE. HAHAHA. (STRAIGHT TO SECTIONS). On my way back to Lumber I count a total of three employees, all new faces, all yawning and looking less than enthused.

Lumber and its adjoining Sections are all empty. No Jill, no nobody. It's a lonely Saturday morning, and eventually I get restless. I begin pacing the edges of my Section, looking for signs of life: zippo. I expand my pacing to include a little bit of Large Appliances: nothing. I expand a little bit more, and a bit more after that. At the far edge of Large Appliances, almost up against the back wall, I find a pair of bright pink panties on the linoleum next to a combo washer/dryer. I think, *that's something*. I wander a little farther, a lacey purple bra. I know where I'm wandering. I know it's dangerous territory. I know I should do a chant and get the hell to safety. Do I? I do not. Next it's a high heel. A tan cardigan. A jean skirt. A maroon polo. Then, exactly what I'm looking for: Jill, wearing nothing at all and reclining behind an auxiliary freezer.

She says, "Took you long enough."

Do I have sex with Jill behind the freezer? I do.

Afterwards, Jill tells me nice job and same-time same-place tomorrow, OK. For a moment, I feel good. I feel strong and think why'd I wait so long to do what I did. But shortly after that, I remember why, and I feel sick. I feel sicker than I've ever felt in my life. I think about my Cindy, probably at home or at Bible study or at

home studying her Bible and how much I like her and that home of ours. I hate myself for doing what I've done because it jeopardizes what I really love: a little house and a family in a nice neighborhood.

I ditch Section and tell Stanley that I need to take a personal day. Stanley says that's fine but oh by the way those are no longer freebies.

When I pull onto 85, I can't help but see the bright orange Home Depot sign in the distance. It's there, it's always there, letting us all at Pendleton know that we're finished. We may not be finished yet, but we're certainly on our way. I think about my tenure at Pendleton. How much I loved knowing that I'd worked for years to get to where I was, a manager of a small section of a small store. What would it mean to start all over?

I pull off the highway and onto Home Depot Parkway. It's a Saturday and the parking lot's near full. I have to circle around several times before I find a spot. Once I do, I sit and wait. I watch the happy shoppers about to enter the great seller of home supplies. They're looking for paint, for tools, for lumber. They have lists and brochures and coupons. For a while I think about what it means to be valuable, and how it's been a while since I've felt that way. Did I feel valuable in Jill's lusty arms? No. I felt wanted, but that's not the same thing.

I go inside. I walk up to Information and get myself an application. I fill it out right there on the countertop and give it back. I tell the seventeen-year-old attending to me that I'll be anxiously awaiting their response. He says that it could take up to two weeks until my application is reviewed, and after that, maybe another

two weeks before I can expect to hear back. I say that's fine and that I'll have a look around.

I walk away from Info and head down the promenade of aisles, all perfectly labeled with big orange signs that hang down so you can see them and easily determine where possible items might be. The ceiling is high and vaulted, but the lighting is terrific. Everything is absolutely enormous. There are people everywhere. There are employees everywhere. They look swamped, but content. They're happy to be swamped because it means no one's an expendable. They're all wearing bright orange aprons with their names written in magic marker on the front. The employees are young and old; men and women. I am taken by it. I let my imagination run, and I start seeing Pendleton employees walking around in orange aprons, too. I see myself. We're all so happy to be here, which makes me sad because Pendleton wasn't a special place after all. All those years for nothing, and I suddenly have to get out of Home Depot because the thought is overwhelming.

Back in my truck, I think about Cindy and the house we live in and the future child that hopefully Cindy will eventually want once I'm hired and able to adjust to a new work regiment. I tell myself that I can do it and that it will all be worth it.

When I get home, Harold's car is in the drive. Does he normally come over in the afternoons? I tell myself don't lose it. I tell myself it's just another Bible study and that there's nothing to it. I tell myself that if they're praying, I won't interrupt. I'll quietly go about my business and maybe even say one for myself, for our family. But something tells me it isn't right. Something tells me that no God in heaven

would send a Harold Dinkus into another man's home and slowly but surely steal that man's heart from his chest.

I brace myself and go inside. It's bad. Worse than bad: I hear a ruckus upstairs. I think *isn't this perfect*. I think about how I was doing something quite similar not two hours ago. We're all sinners, but nothing's coming to save us. And if everything in this world is lost, I'm bringing someone with me. I head straight for the kitchen and get the cleaver. When I throw open the bedroom door, Harold Dinkus jumps off my wife and says, "Good Lord!"

I call him a motherfucking bastard and tell him to put his hand on the Bible on the nightstand and tell me the truth for once. I say, "How long has this been going on?"

Harold Dinkus says, "I plead the fifth Commandment."

So I hack off his hand just below his watch.

Yes, there is blood. Lots. Yes, there is screaming—mostly from Cindy. She's backed herself into the corner and is screaming and crying and wrapped up in a blanket. I want to tell her not to worry, that I've got everything under control and that can't she see that I'm doing this for the both of us, that we can't continue to live the way we do. If only she could know how much I love her and our life together. But I know anything I could think of saying isn't worth it because I'm holding a cleaver over the man who's been sleeping with my wife. Whatever it was I should have said is long overdue. Harold Dinkus is curled up on the floor, not moving and slowly breathing and shivering in a red pool on the carpet. I'm thinking *Not the periwinkle natural wool fiber wall-to-wall*.

I grab a towel from the Master Bath and wrap up the severed hand in it and head back out to my truck. Ed McQueen from next door has his binoculars around his neck and asks if everything is OK in there, and I say absolutely. Then he gets a scared look in his face and sort of runs away very quickly. I toss the hand in the passenger seat and pull out onto my wonderful street, all the houses so cozy together like a family with a ton of kids all squashed into a somewhat smallish home. I look at all the wonderful mailboxes and street lamps. Wonderful children playing in the street without fear of someone like me running them over. Husbands and fathers are out watering their lawns or mowing them. I drive down each cul-de-sac only to turn around and drive back up and down another. I do this again and again. *Foxhall is a beautiful place to live*, Judy Jeravicious told us as we were signing our lease on the coffee table in her office. Foxhall is a beautiful place. I think about how much I'm going to miss it. I drive and drive, up and down looking at all the beautifulness. All the beautifulness—with sirens chiming quietly in the distance, coming for me, but always a few blocks away, and never closer.

Heathens

Even before, Dad was something of an outsider. He wouldn't say hello to people in town. He wasn't interested in community activities. He was the only man in Cotton Chase who didn't go to church, which confused people more than anything else. I'm sure if things had been different, people would pay visits and bring fruit baskets. But they aren't, and I tell him sometimes that if they were, we'd eat our proper food pyramid. He'll look across the room like there's been a noise or something that he can't quite place, and I'll say, "It's me, Dad. Nothing's wrong, I was just talking to you." Though I know something is wrong.

People say that it serves him right. And it makes sense in a way, this illness, a belated justice. I don't feel this way, but I don't blame those who do. It's not my responsibility to make excuses—the reasons I might be able to give for why it's not his fault. My responsibilities are simple: make sure he doesn't starve or fall down the stairs.

Most days I stay home with Dad, and we spend a good deal of our time sitting in the living room. I work on my books and newspapers, my way of staying in touch. He stares out the window, waiting for something I suppose. He'll sit that way for hours, each moment like he just sat down. At first it amazed and distracted me. He would stare out the window, and I would stare at him in wonderment. Thankfully, I've gotten over it, along with many other things, and I can do a fair share of what I consider "real things," which mostly consists of reading and cooking meals for the three of us, me, Suz, and Dad.

In many ways Mom made up for Dad. She was the one who paraded us around town shopping for school clothes in the late summer. She was the one interested in our sports and knew to act interested and involved around other adults. Cotton Chase largely forgave us our association with our father, and perhaps even forgave *him* his minor faults. Dad was little worse than anti-social. Later, when forgiveness was necessary, people were far less willing.

That's not to say that Katie's and my childhood was strange or tortured. Children are blessed with urgency, and urgency demands one set aside all things other than the present. We were never aware of what our friends' parents thought of us, if they thought of us at all. To us, we were like any other family. We knew nothing outside of our small world and were content.

All growing up Mom took Katie and me to Cotton Chase Baptist, which is how she was raised. She said it was important even though we didn't understand why. And to her it was important, and not only for the social aspect. We were normal children and didn't want to go. We wanted to sleep in on Sundays. We tried to enlist Dad's help since he appeared to have beaten the system, but he refused to intervene. He wouldn't have anything to do with going himself, though Mom tried to convince him on most religious holidays. As far as our church attendance was concerned, he always said, "That's your mom's business. Besides, it's good for you." Which Mom particularly appreciated, and we didn't understand. Later we understood that he was advocating the concept of doing something you didn't like, not the

churching. I never got the impression that Dad was an unhappy person, only that he was aggravated by people and things that most tolerated or even enjoyed.

Dad's closest ally in town was his friend Shep—which meant something, and later would become a curse. But when I was young, Shep was a buffer between our father and the rest of town. Shep was a minor celebrity and would walk through town smiling and cracking jokes. And though he and Mrs. Shepard had no children of their own, Shep attended every high school baseball game because his nephew, Jake, was a star on the team. I can still hear Shep cawing in the bleachers at Jake's every move.

Shep lived down the street in a little ranch-style identical to our own, only it was flipped the opposite way. Same L-shaped living room. Same stem of a hallway with bedrooms sprouting off to the left and right. It was like looking at our lives in the mirror.

We used to see Shep and Mrs. Shepard a lot growing up, though more of Shep. He'd come in through the back door like he owned the place and swipe a beer before biting the cap off with his teeth and heading out to the garage where Dad was. They'd borrow each other's tools and work on cars, turning their big paws black underneath pieces-of-junk. They smoked like chimneys out in that garage, the one attached to our house, even though both Mom and Mrs. Shepard wanted to believe they had quit.

I didn't mind his constant presence except that every time Shep would see me, he'd make like he was trying to cut off my ear with one of the big pocketknives that he kept the back pocket of his jeans. He'd reach out and holler, "I'm gonna cut your

ear off, boy.” He sounded crazed. Mom, with her big heart, would tell them to leave me alone, but he and Dad would always ignore her and laugh, holding their guts in pain as I ran to my bedroom for safety. I was convinced he’d get me one of those days—cut off my ear and put it in a jar like he said. I was genuinely afraid of Shep, I realize this, but I was also (and perhaps to a greater degree) attracted to him. There was something about his jovial manners, having a magnetism that my own father lacked. It was intriguing—but at the same time dangerous. And to the extent that Dad was standoffish in relation to my everyday life, it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that it felt as if I had two fathers, neither of whom participated directly in my life, but were always there asking me to choose who I wanted to be.

When I’m feeling nostalgic or need a cigarette of my own, I go out to that garage and sit amongst the tools and ashtrays where Dad and Shep spent so many hours of my childhood. It always smells of fresh sawdust, though the table saw in the corner hasn’t been run in fifteen years. I haven’t begun to imagine what I’ll do with it all when Dad’s gone. I don’t want to. I enjoy the eerie feeling I get when I look at the black iron and steel apparatuses that line the walls on pegs or nails. When I do it right and it’s quiet enough, I feel like I’ve exited my own body and that if I’m not careful I won’t be able to get back—won’t be able to climb the stairs back into this house where I know there’s an old man who barely knows his own name and a woman who loves me enough not to leave.

Memories are important, Suz and I have found. They perk up every now and then—good ones more often than not, which I’m thankful for. Usually it’s Mom or

Shep. Something about what's for dinner or the hammer he thinks he's loaned out. But sometimes, on rare occasions, there's another more exciting type. He'll shout something like, "Go Hoosiers!" And we'll know exactly when and where he is, and it's all we can do to stop what we're doing and listen, see how long it will last, witness a chain of coherent thoughts—or at least what we take for coherency. He used to talk about that game like he was making those jump shots himself, though now a lot of the time he doesn't say anything at all. This is the way things work when you're on the outside. You take what you're given and shape it into something that you can recognize—whether you're right or not you'll never know, which is something you become surprisingly comfortable with in time.

Still, we get excited about the semblance of normalcy. A comment or question from Dad that coincidentally matches a present moment feels like a gift, or the illusion of one. Just last month I asked Dad what he wanted for lunch. (I try to speak to him normally, which is how the doctors say we should do things.) He looked up and, as if with absolutely clarity, shouted, "Gimme a hotdog!" It knocked me off balance, and more than anything else I wanted to put a hotdog in front of him. It sounded like magic in my mind. Suz and I ransacked the fridge, but we couldn't find one. Without thinking, I went to the store. Driving home, I crashed carelessly over the parking lot's new speed bumps with the franks trampolining in the passenger seat. In my mind I kept picturing Dad, in the summer, barefoot, standing by the grill in the backyard, using one of Mom's good oven mitt's to pull dogs off the charred metal and onto our paper plates, mine and Katie's.

When I got back, he was comatose in the easy chair, but I cooked a hotdog in the microwave anyway. I put it in a bun and stuck it under his nose like smelling salts. He awoke, startled and hack-coughing, but instead of devouring the hotdog or thanking me, he looked at me and yelled, “I don’t want no goddamn Frankfurter!”

Maybe a year or two ago I would have been disappointed, or maybe felt like he was playing a trick on me. (There was a time where Dad might have done something like this, an elaborate rouse.) But not now. I ate the hotdog myself while we watched the afternoon soaps alone on the couch.

Suz works regular hours as an assistant in a dentist’s office and has become friends with many people. She did the same job when we lived together in Knoxville, and she’s good at it. She moves files from here to there and makes cleaning appointments—and other types of appointments, too, I suppose. It’s a good job, and she likes it.

I used to work as a high school math teacher in the city, which is what I went to college for. Now I substitute, which is incredibly easy but barely pays at all. I can only sub days that Suz can stay home with Dad. It works out well enough combined with Dad’s pension and savings. We do fine with money, but in other ways we feel impoverished. There is little joy inside the walls of my parents’ home. And when there is joy, it’s only between the two of us, and we feel it echoing throughout the rooms so that we’re self-conscious of it, and it dissipates before we’re truly able to relish it. This can’t be helped.

I wish I didn't have to leave Suz at home with Dad by herself on the days I sub, but then again she's better at it than I am because she doesn't have to think about what she sees when she looks at his confused, slack-skinned face. Mom would have loved Suz for the way she takes care of Dad. Not many women would live in a house with a troublesome old man who doesn't know his own name, but she does, day in and day out and doesn't complain. Besides, she knows that the subbing is good for me. Any school, any classroom—a tiny but necessary moment to pretend I'm a certain type of person.

I should mention that Katie is still around and does her part. She comes down to give Suz and me a break, a night out once a month to catch a breath not permeated with oldness. We drifted apart for a long while. It happened about the time when she became an adult. I had moved away for college and stayed. She may have resented me for this. But now I don't think she does.

It's not easy for Katie to come out to Cotton Chase, but she knows how crazy we'd get if she didn't. Sometimes that little time off is the only time I feel like I've got anything between my ears. Katie will stay the night and deal with whatever fuss he might make, while we have dinner on Dad and drink till we're good and sleepy. By the end of the month we start looking like zombies, and I'm surprised we're able to pass for normal when we go out to Rudy's or wherever. People who recognize us will try to remind us of who we are. They'll say things like, "Oh, hey, good to see you. Are you doing alright?" And we know they are dying to ask, but we don't acknowledge their obvious hints because we think that if they really wanted to know, they'd come over and see the old man for themselves. Our brains would explode

without those Corona beers. We'll drink straight out of the bottle, the way you're supposed to, with limes wedged into the narrow top. The drinks make us feel smooth and seamless. We don't talk too much, and after a few hours the rust starts falling off, and I see Suz looking lovely, without a worry, like she's supposed to be. When I see her shake off a month's worth so easily, I'm glad, but I dread going back, knowing how it builds thicker and thicker. I fear one day it'll be too thick, and it'll be part of her the way it's part of me.

Shep's still around, though he's changed as well. He walks by the house occasionally, usually with his golden retriever, Martha, which was Mrs. Shepard's name. To some, the fact that Shep named his retriever *Martha* is odd. But to me it isn't because I never imagined her with a first name. In my memory she will always be *Mrs. Shepard*, and I am always seven, sheepishly asking her for a second piece of cherry pie. For every way that Shep intrigued and spooked me as a child, Mrs. Shepard was reassuring and was his perfect compliment, and, over the years, I've gotten the impression that others felt this way too. This is impressive to me now, that even as a child I could see the way they were—how good they were. Or maybe it's just that as a child you understand a great deal more than you realize. When Shep walks by with his dog, Dad usually asks who the hell that is. I don't answer and lift a hand to say hello, wishing that I could grant them both, Dad and Shep, peace in some way, though I know the rift is beyond control any one person's will.

When I was a kid, Shep had the best looking yard in town, and whenever he wasn't over at our house, he was out watering or trimming something on his property.

He had this wide-brimmed straw hat that he'd wear to shade the sun while burying himself in shrub and grass clippings. He was the first one in town to get a riding mower, a little tiny one that looked more like a go-cart than anything else. Shep was all skin and bones except for his perfectly round belly—he looked like he was smuggling a coconut. When he first got the mower, me and the other kids in the neighborhood lined up on the sidewalk, sitting cross-legged, just to see Shep and his strange contraption. Riding that little-wheeled mower with a bar for a steering wheel, he looked like a circus clown, spinning donuts on the front lawn for our entertainment.

Shep always wanted Dad to try the machine, telling him that once he tried it he'd never go back. But Dad said he'd never scoot around on no go-cart mower looking like a fool. Instead he'd stand out on our front lawn every Saturday pulling on our old mower's dumb cord, looking like his arm would sail across the yard at any minute.

That was Dad.

There are surprisingly few children in this neighborhood now. When I was a child, this subdivision was filled with young couples, and this surely was part of the appeal. There were children all over the place, running through yards and riding bicycles down the streets and to the community pool.

One of the first things that Dad did when we moved in was build us a swing set in the back yard. And when we were little, Katie and I would play this game on the swing where you'd go as high as you could stand. When you got to where you wanted to be, you'd take a deep breath and jump with all the guts you had. Mom

would yell when she'd see us from the kitchen window, telling us it was too dangerous. God knows she was right. We'd get so high without any fear at all. The pollinated air looked thick enough to hold on to. Katie was fearless. She couldn't have been more than six, and we didn't have any concept of danger or the fragility of life.

One summer day we were out swinging, just the two of us. We took turns holding the stick to mark where the other would land. She wore a little yellow sundress with a pattern of tiny flowers on it. She had a closet full of those simple, little sundresses that Mom made for her. When she'd fling herself into the air, sailing, her sundress would spread out in a big "A," like a tiny parachute on its way to the ground. She swung and swung, laughing every time she reached the bottom, her toes scraping the dusty brown spot below the swing. I could calculate the moment her belly would tickle like she couldn't stand it, erupting in laughter. When it looked like she couldn't swing any higher, she gripped the raggedy twine like she'd let herself go. I stood, with stick in hand, anticipating her jump where we'd make eye contact. And just when she was poised for release, she fell, backwards, her little sundress fluttering like a tangled parachute, unable to catch air. I couldn't help but think that she was falling faster and harder than she normally did. She must have fallen eight feet, and I was too far away to do anything but watch. Her wrists were huge and swollen by the time Mom came out screaming. It was the only time I thought Dad might hit me right across the face, the way you might a dog that had just eaten your shoes.

Before all of this started, Suz and I used to make driving trips whenever we had time off. It wouldn't matter where. We'd pick a direction and drive for a day without even looking at a map, though we had a backseat full of them. Riding with the windows down (the air conditioning was broken when I got it), Suz's black hair would flow in great ripples, and we'd cup the wind in our hands. I loved her profile, and I'd glance over whenever I could—that hooknose, looking strong and important and natural.

Since we moved in with my father we haven't been able to drive like we used to. Katie only gives us a day or so at a time, which puts us on a pretty short leash. We'd have to drive in a big loop so that we'd be back in time for Katie to pick her kids up from school the next day. Suz and I like straight lines best, so we bide our time. We've even bought a few maps ahead of time. We've never been much for planning, but we want to make a big trip out West one of these days and see all of the big stuff. Sometimes I'll spread out a map on our bed and we'll look at all the roads running like veins and arteries. I'll say I want to go one way and she'll say another, but we don't get sore because we know that the moment we hit the road it won't matter.

When I was small, Dad and Shep worked on our old Chevy van, remodeling the inside. They turned it into a camper with all sorts of stuff on the inside: an oven, a stovetop, a toaster, a mini fridge, a table. The tabletop comes right off, and you stash it away somewhere so that you can fold out a mattress. Dad planned out big, elaborate trips to the Grand Canyon and Yellowstone, but we never got outside of Tennessee.

Now the van sits in the drive—undriven, useless—and sometimes Suz and I feel like it’s mocking us. But it still gets inspected regularly, and it’s ready if we decide to leave everything and hit the road. We’ve thought about dragging Dad along too, strapping him down, kidnapping him in his own van. But we’re getting too old and he’s already old, and it’s harder to do things that make life more difficult. We haven’t gone through with any of our escape plans yet, but I’m still hopeful.

I should say something more about Jake, Shep’s nephew. After high school, he went away, and we didn’t see him for a few years. You don’t think about these things as a child. People moving in and out of lives and places don’t necessitate a reason. All I knew at the time was that Jake was there, he was gone; then he came back again before the accident. When he returned, I didn’t recognize him. It had been a few years, and I had probably changed as much as he had. It was at a BBQ for the junior college baseball team. They were called the Broncos, and they had just won the conference title. I remember thinking that Jake was one of the players because, like I said, he looked new. I was sure that he was one of the beautiful, joy-filled players with short, fresh haircuts. I was thirteen. At that age, all I wanted was to play ball. Not in the majors like my little league teammates. They spoke of Nolan Ryan and Lou Whitaker. All I wanted was to play right here in town. I wanted to be Jake—although it wasn’t until later when I found out his name that I realized who he was and where he’d been.

Jake had looked incredibly like a ball player that day at the BBQ, and indeed he had been. At the BBQ, Jake looked like a man who could play the hell out of that

game. He wasn't big, but he was lean and strong-looking. And most of all, he was confident in his body, the security of it. Try to recall what that looked like at thirteen, when everything about you feels stretched out of shape. But it wasn't just me. Everyone at the BBQ gravitated towards him, and this is what made me think he was our new star.

Later, of course, I found out a great deal more. More than I'd wanted to know and under the wrong circumstances. Jake had been in the navy. He'd been gone for several years, and I guess that's why I didn't know him that day the way so many other people seemed to know him. He'd been on a ship the Indian Ocean, and that day at the BBQ he'd been twenty-three years old. Nearly thirteen years younger than I am today. But on that particular Sunday afternoon he went to a BBQ that wasn't especially for him and made a young boy believe that he was a star ballplayer.

When we heard that Mrs. Shepard was sick again, we took to praying every night. Mom would come into our room and we'd all kneel by the bed and ask God to make her well. That was the only time that Dad didn't say something sour when he heard us praying.

After she died, Shep quit clipping and trimming his yard. He started letting it all go to hell like he wanted his jungle of a yard to bury him beneath its huge, exotic shrubbery. Everything got so big and bulbous that when you saw it on the way to get the mail you couldn't believe someone lived there. The house looked like a prison, no door or windows, only vines, crawling and squirming all over its brick front, and

as a child I thought maybe Mrs. Shepard's spirit had taken up residence in that massive, creeping foliage.

A couple of weeks passed without a sign from Shep. He ignored anyone who tried to help, even Dad. The church people brought food and tried to pray with him, but he wouldn't even open the door to shoo them away.

Shep knew it was too late for prayers, and he didn't need food either. He just wanted to sit back and not be bombarded by a slew of busybodies. But Dad knew what Shep needed, and one Saturday afternoon he pulled out that old mower of ours and wheeled it squeaking and moaning all the way down to Shep's place. He spent the whole afternoon out there taming that forest.

After Mrs. Shepard died, Dad and Shep became more isolated, insular. This happened over time, but it happened steadily. First, they spent more and more time at Shep's house and away from us. Then it became apparent that they were both drinking more than they ever had before. Often there were days and nights when I didn't even see my father.

By the time Katie and I had both graduated high school Mom and Dad had grown entirely apart, which feels odd to put that way. All growing up it was a given that my parents were intrinsically linked—love was not something I even considered. Still, everything felt absolutely permanent, and I know this is why it is so devastating for young children when their parents separate. To them such a thing seems impossible, and when something impossible happens it is not good for the mind. After Mom left (I was an adult, mind you), I realized there was little that held them

together in the first place and that it was remarkable their marriage lasted as long as it did. This was actually the more natural thing, for her at least.

The motivation for her leaving is both simple and complicated. Besides his eccentricities, Dad was also not a good man, in the sense that most people use the term. He was not violent, but he was not kind, and though I have no proof or reason to believe this, I suspect he was not a faithful husband. Mom was not a sweet or overly caring woman (how could she be?), but she was honest, and I think she had finally decided that she had had enough of what might have been a somewhat unhappy life.

When she left, she told my father that she had met a man and that she was going to live with him in Arizona. She told me this over the phone. I was already in Knoxville, though I didn't know Suz yet. Mom was never able to meet her. I drove home and met Mom at a diner to have lunch. While driving the three hours home I rattled through a series of emotional postures that I considered taking. I was angry, which is perhaps the most easily explainable. I was sad that something I had known was dissolving. But I was also excited, which surprised me. It was not a secret that Mom had been trapped in a difficult life. As a person, not a son, I was intrigued by her bravery and was hopeful that she would be happy. At lunch, however, nothing presented itself—nothing to make me angry or sad or joyful. She told me about the man she was going to live with, and I presume, marry. He was an engineer and divorced himself. I was glad that she didn't say much more—where they met, how long they had been interested in one another, how this whole thing came about.

No matter who you are or how you see things such as this, Mom is not to blame. Her life, and how one might judge her, is another story. But this is where I begin to trace a series of events, real things that have shaped our lives since then. Sometimes I think that if I hadn't left, if I'd stayed, everything would be different. But for me, someone who doesn't love and cherish guilt, this is a fleeting thought. It was Dad's drinking. It was his truck. It was simple. Jake was on a motorcycle and probably going too fast. The police were involved, but didn't bother to check if Dad had been drinking.

First, I hated my father. Later, I hated everyone else for hating him. Then finally, I felt neutral. I feel this way now. I don't hate. But I don't love very much either. I suspect other people feel about the same towards me.

Even though I feel that Dad deserves the treatment he's received—the excommunication, the bitter neglect—for a while a part of me entertained the idea that one day he and Shep would reunite out of sheer need.

The mind's deterioration is slow and unpredictable, and even now, he doesn't seem to notice that his memories are leaving. Eventually he started forgetting that Mom was gone, and now sometimes he'll spend an hour looking all over the house for her. It's heart wrenching, but we let him do it. It's more than just the easiest thing. It's merciful. He's found some way to rid himself of his most painful memories, and we don't see any reason to remind him. We'll say something like, "Oh, she's around here someplace." He's never able to come to the grand conclusion that she's missing because he'll forget what he's doing every few minutes. People

who are young or don't know my family's difficult past think we're cruel. People who do know probably think the opposite. But we make our decisions based on a different field of logic—it's our own and difficult to explain. But I will say this, cruelty is more difficult to identify than most people think, as is kindness.

One night Suz and I decided to try the place out by the highway. I'd seen it when taking Dad to the doctor's and thought it looked quiet and about our speed. It turned out to be the right kind of place for us. No crowd to speak of and not a single familiar face. There was a bartender with a crippled arm, so he made up for it by tossing most things in the air before catching them and pouring your drink. We each had a burger and two or three Coronas, all while humming along to the clip-clop of the country music. It made me feel good, and I felt more in love with Suz than I'd felt in a long time, maybe ever. These were the thoughts going through my brain right then and there. I wanted to say something, but I didn't know what. I even got the feeling that I might propose to Suz—like it might come out and surprise me and her both. Neither of us spoke. We were past talking for the evening. We just looked at each other, trying our best to take it all in. She looked so wonderful. I started to cry, so I sniffed hard and said I had to go pee.

Suz drove us home because I'd had a little bit more to drink than her. And when we pulled into our subdivision, my childhood home, I looked at each house and wondered what kinds of specific lives were being lived inside. By the time I had a chance to guess, we'd already passed, and there was another and another.

We pulled onto our street and there on the corner was Shep's place, the first one on the right. As we turned, our headlights panned his front door and porch, and it was like for a very brief moment we were shining a flashlight into his cave. As if we were looking for him and thought we knew where to find him.

Suz refused to come with me. She thought Shep was mad after hearing all those pocketknife stories, and she thought I was crazy too for going. But I knew better, and I made my way down there, taking my time, going over what I might say, or not say. I didn't have anything in mind, which almost felt like the right thing to do in the first place. I had a feeling that Shep would be able to sniff out something planned and wouldn't like it. I wanted to be better than that.

From a distance, it looked like complete wilderness. His yard was covered in crab grass and the beginning of a few cattails. In the backyard where he had had a modest garden, you could still detect little hollows in the ground by a perforation in the high weeds. Still-thriving trees surrounded the immediate area around the house and had overtaken the remnants of his old, prize-winning shrubs. They were just tumbleweeds now, stuck in the ground like skeletons.

I went down the drive and up to the house. I saw footprints of broken, tall grass, the kind you make when walking through a field so thick with brush that you can't see the ground below. They seemed to lead around back. I followed them to the back porch, which was swept clean and had a little threadbare broom next to the door. There was a truck in the grass, driven out into the yard past the end of the

drive. It was old, but not deserted, and it, too, had footprints that you could see when you got right up on them.

I suppose Shep hadn't been getting a lot of visitors, but he must have heard me coming because by the time I had climbed the back porch he had already leaned open the storm door, whining with old metal springs. Shep spoke first.

“Well, come in boy.”

I went inside and the familiarity was startling. It conjured up memories of bridge nights and dinner get-togethers. But it was also so similar to our own house, even now, that it gave me the eerie feeling of being in two places at once. He sat me down and got me a Coke.

I didn't know whether mentioning Dad would be the right thing or not, but I felt like I needed to clear the air.

“Dad's not well. He forgets who we are most of the time.”

Shep nodded and sipped his Coke. She asked me why I'd come.

I told him that Suz and I had been driving home last night and that when I saw his house, I felt like I needed to. Not for any particular reason except that it seemed right.

He said that sounded pretty fine, like maybe he'd been testing me and that this was the right answer. As if had I come with any real purpose or message he would have thrown me out immediately.

We didn't say anything for a while; we just kept sitting and drinking our Cokes. I wasn't uncomfortable because it looked like Shep was glad, and I was glad too. At some point Shep perked up in his chair and slapped his knees with his big,

wrinkled hands, and I thought it might be the signal for me to leave. But instead, he started to grin some.

“Can I show you something?” Shep asked, looking younger and happier than I’d seen him yet.

“Yeah, of course,” I answered, and put down my empty can.

He led me out back, the same way I’d come in, and we walked out past his truck to a little shed, nearly hidden by undergrowth. Either the shed had begun to sink or the ground had begun to swallow it because the bottom of the door was a little bit below the dirt. Shep grabbed the door handle and began wiggling it back and forth, wedging it open slightly more every few seconds. It made a racket as the aluminum bent in and out of itself, but he had the look of someone who knew what he was doing. He didn’t groan or curse but just kept wiggling. He got a few inches and then a few more. Finally, he was able to stick his arm in, and he pulled out a half-size spade. Shep moved the spade like an expert digger, burrowing a shallow trench, allowing the door to swing unobstructed.

Shep made a signal indicating for me to stay put, and he went inside, pulling the door almost closed behind him. I heard him pull a string, illuminating the inside. There were a few minutes of silence, and then I heard a little cluck cluck cluck, and then a vroom. At that, he came barreling out of the shed, popping the door open with an extended foot, seated on his old go-cart mower. It was quicker than I remembered, and he did two laps around his yard of age-old weeds, blazing a perfect little trail, before heading straight for me, stopping only inches from my shins. The old man was ecstatic, and so was I.

Shep gave me that old mower that afternoon. He handed me the keys like we were best pals, and he was really glad that I wanted them. I told him that Suz and I would have him over any time, even though I knew he wouldn't come.

I rode the go-cart mower all the way back, humming and bumping along that gravel road. I rode fast as it would go, and it was pretty fast. It felt like I was driving, even if only for a few minutes.

Suz must've heard my noise coming down the street because she was already standing in the yard when I pulled up. She almost busted a gut when she caught a glimpse of me sitting atop that little mower like a kid too big for his tricycle.

I got off and Suz took it for a spin; she looked great.

"Put the blades down," I called to her. "Make yourself useful."

She gave me a sneer of contempt and shrugged her shoulders, releasing her hands from the bar and almost losing control of the mower. I mimed in the air where the lever was, and she pulled it down, activating the methodic hum of a spinning propeller.

The noise was furious and Suz and I both laughed like we hadn't in a while. She kept making turns around the yard, over and over, waving me off jokingly every time I signaled that I wanted back on. I sat in some of the freshly cut grass, the clumps sticking to my palms, and I watched as she'd come towards me, smirking, holding that belly-laugh in tight. Then she'd turn sharply, away from me, igniting in laughter and looking over her shoulder, smiling with mouth wide-open and nose scrunched up in a knot and she was a beautiful girl.

As Suz mowed, I saw Dad out of the corner of my eye, standing in the window. I left Suz for a moment and ran up to the door and flung it open. Dad fell back into his chair with fright, but I went over and grabbed him up, pulling him to me, my arms underneath his armpits. I waddled him outside and straightened him up with my hand at his lower back. I waved Suz over to give Dad a turn.