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Mule: Fifteen Autobiographical Tales

Nic Green
nicholastobiasgreen@gmail.com

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Fifteen Autobiographical Tales

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Nic Green

Mule:

Fifteen Autobiographical Tales

by

Nic Green

Approved:

_____	_____
Professor Peter Selgin, Chair, Thesis Committee	Date
_____	_____
Dr. Julian Knox, Committee Member	Date
_____	_____
Dr. Kerry Neville Committee Member	Date
_____	_____
Dr. Kerry Neville, Graduate Coordinator	Date
_____	_____
Eric Tenbus Dean, School of Liberal Arts & Sciences	Date

For Kaitlyn—

wherever you are.

CONTENTS

Mountains, West Virginia

Black pine. Snow and wind.
Stars. More stars than you could count.
Pissing under the moonless sky, my piece in my hand,
feeling like a noble savage, like a thousand
generations of hunter-gatherers must've felt when they
held their pieces and pissed against a tree.
The sprawl, the scope of space and time.
The smallness of me.
The notion of non-existence if I'd been
an abortion,
the way my mother says I ought've been.
Yowza.
My boy. His non-existence had his mother
aborted him
like she said she was gonna.
Yowza.
Gas and dust and ice and light
and dammit, man, I never wanna leave life.

Gentle reader, as you bump into the people in my head, tell them, "He still loves you." I do, though I have no plans to see them again. Tell them, "He's sorry." God knows I am.

0.0 KM

Caffeinated. Hydrated. Motivated. It's time. The first step is not the hardest. That's trash perpetuated by non-hackers who were never gonna do it anyway. That's the sort of thing a man who can't make his own bed says. The last step is also not the hardest. The hardest step is number 100,351. You don't know that ahead of time. You only find out when your runner's delirium is broken up by the searing of that last toenail separating from your ruined right foot.

For now, I think about the cul-de-sac at the west end of the Oconee River Greenway where I'll spin around and start my trot back toward the Georgia Military College grounds in about ten minutes. The U at the end of the trail reminds me of a ghoulish ride I once took out into the country with a pretty brunette. The year was 2015, or else, it was 1961.

—The Loop—

Boog rested his head on Frankie's stomach while she read from *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. Her words were liquid, a slow, passing stream. Boog's thoughts lived miles away, turned to Frankie's breast which brushed against his clean-shaven cheek.

"Boog, my eyes are tired," Frankie said.

"All right, babe. Let's sleep, then," Boog said.

"No. *I'm* not tired, just my eyes. I don't want to read anymore."

"All right. I'll read."

"No," she said, "my ears are tired, too."

They both laughed.

"What do you want to do, Frankie?" Boog said. He placed his hand between her thighs.

"Not *that*," she said. "You *bad boy*."

"Whaaahhht," Boog groaned.

"Not just yet, I mean," Frankie said.

Their eyes seared through each other's clothes.

Boog's dad was out of town. His mother abandoned him, his older brother, Georgie, and his father when Boog was a small boy. She lived rough for a while. Ended up in a looney bin in middle Georgia where she drowned herself in a toilet the year Boog turned 13. Boog's dad was always leaving on the weekends to hunt or camp or fish with his buddies from the First Marine Division who he referred to only as "the boys." Boog's dad got a Silver Star for something he'd

done with a Browning Model 1919 on Guadalcanal with "the boys," but he was quick to change the subject or leave the room whenever this came up. He'd wave his arms, say "No, no, that was nothing. Pass the beans, would ya?"

The trips up to the Tennessee mountains with the boys meant Frankie and Boog had lots of nights together. More than any of the other eighteen-year-olds in their graduating class at Rigby High. Their peers were relegated to cramped calisthenics in the back seat at The Bluff, a favorite lovers' lane on the north end of town.

"Well, what, then?" Boog said.

"Take me for a ride. I wanna ride," Frankie said.

"A ride? To where?"

"Any-old-where will do, Boogaloo."

"You know I don't like it when you call me that."

"Shush," Frankie said, kissing Boog's forehead. "I know, I know. You don't dance that way."

"That's right. Anyway. It's kinda late, sweet girl," Boog said tugging his sweatshirt sleeve up to study his Girard Perregaux Seahawk wristwatch. It had been an early graduation present to him from his grandparents. The case back was engraved: *Congrats Boog - Class of 1961*. The dial was white and clean with sharp, black lines marking the hours. It was five minutes until 3:00 AM.

"It's not that late, is it? Plus, we're young and full of life. Sleep is for old, sad people. They might as well be dead," Frankie said, revealing two rows of straight teeth tinged a creamy white by a steady diet of coffee and filtered cigarettes.

"Couldn't we just," Boog said, pawing at her chest.

"Oh, hush. Come on, grab your keys, stud," Frankie said. "Your bed will still be here when we get back."

Boog sighed and yanked the keys to his older brother's Studebaker from the peg next to his bedroom door. Georgie had left him the car while he attended West Point earlier that year. *Two coats of wax, twice a month,* Georgie said. Boog had waxed it just twice in three months. He supposed he should feel a little bit bad about that.

Boog cranked the ignition and crept out of the driveway. He pulled the headlamp switch. They started off and came to the end of his street.

"Left or right, my lady?"

"Pick a number between 1 and 100," she said, grinning in the dark.

"42."

"Left!"

"Left it is."

Going right would have taken them past two closed mom-and-pop shops and into town by way of modern, paved, city roads. Going left took them somewhere else.

The farmhouse on the right was the last thing Boog recognized. He realized then just how little of the surrounding area he'd explored. Frankie craned her neck to watch the farmhouse fall out of view. At first she thought it was gone, but then she turned back toward Boog, and there it was, slipping out of the red glow of taillights and into the country night.

The road tapered down to a single lane, then narrowed to a sliver. Boog let off the throttle. The tires ran into gravel on Frankie's side, then Boog straightened out, rolled his shoulders back. Frankie opened her mouth to say something, then stopped.

Southern marsh fog swallowed the Studebaker whole. Frankie and Boog buzzed through chalky white tufts like clouds at 30,000 feet.

"Piss. Shit. Piss," Boog said. "I can't see a thing."

Frankie swatted the top of Boog's hand. "Boog! Watch your filthy mouth. Jesus."

"Well," Boog said, "it's true. I can't see the hood in front of the damn car."

Frankie swatted him again. "Oh, you're being dramatic. Of course you can."

Boog peered forward, squinting. "Oh, all right. Yep. We're coming out of it now," he said. "It's thinning out, see? Baby, can you see now? Can y—"

Thud.

Frankie and Boog both jerked upright in their seats.

Boog smiled, squeezed Frankie's hand. "The pavement ran out. That's all. Dirt roads have a certain… charm, don't they?"

"They do. I know just what you mean. They're… rustic? Is that the word?"

"You'd know better than me, baby," Boog said. "You've always been smarter than me."

"I love you," Frankie said soberly.

"And I love you," Boog said.

He wished they were older, wished to be done with college, to be a practicing lawyer who could afford to marry Franchesca, change her last name to Birdsong, and give her the life she deserved. He knew she'd be a good teacher, though she'd also be a good pianist or a good biologist or a good anything, really. Most of all, he knew she'd be a good mother. He ached to build her a house on the water, to surprise her with a dog called Dorothy—all the things she always talked about. If only they weren't so young.

The dirt road ran long. Too long. They bumped along it for mile after mile. No houses. No structures. Just the night and the overgrowth, the fog and the moon and the stars, Frankie and Boog and their Studebaker full of leaded gasoline. They came to a rickety wooden bridge. Boog tapped the brakes, brought the Studebaker to a creep. The motor moaned low and thick. The croaking of boards flexing beneath them filled the cabin like a basket of bullfrogs as they rolled across the wooden bridge. Frankie and Boog plunged into another pocket of heavy fog, this one thinner than the last.

"Ooooh, this is just a little spooky, isn't it?" Frankie said.

"Not at all," Boog said, but he wasn't sure he believed himself.

They crossed the bridge, continued on down the unpaved road at a steady 30 miles per hour. Boog removed his right hand from the wheel, slid it inside Frankie's skirt, over her tights, resting it on her thigh. She cupped his hand inside of both of hers, rubbed her thumb back and forth on his wrist.

They came to a heavy bend in the road, nearly a full circle. The road turned and turned for much, much too long. Neither Frankie nor Boog said so, but it seemed like an impossible turn—too sharp to make sense, too long, too circular. Certainty that Frankie and he were no longer on a road at all clobbered Boog. He didn't know what it was, and neither did Frankie, but they were both wise to the oddness, the wrongness of it all.

After much, much too long, the tremendous, round circle gave way to straight, smooth dirt.

"Boy, that was weird. I don't think I've ever seen such a thing. Have you ever seen such a thing, little Frankie?"

"Not ever in my life. Sincerely—not once. How odd."

A large triple fence loomed up ahead, each layer of chain link topped with rusting barbed wire. A large metal sign hung on the first gate.

DANGER

DO NOT ENTER

TRESPASSERS WILL BE SHOT

"Just what in the hell is that, little Frankie?"

"Oh, geez-louise. It looks almost like some sort of prison or, uhm, what do you call it, an, uhm… asylum."

"Well, I don't think we're getting in, anyway," Boog said. "Think there's a guard? I bet there's no guard. No lights. Shit. I bet nobody's been in there since Roosevelt died."

"Let's not find out, Boog."

"Maybe next time," Boog said. He threw the Studebaker in park, kissed Frankie's lips, her neck, felt inside her blouse.

"Let's head back, make sure your bed's where we left it," Frankie said.

"What—this ain't Ritzy enough for ya?" Boog said, motioning to the back seat.

Frankie tilted her head, rolled her eyes.

"Well, okay, then. Baby gets what baby wants," Boog said.

Boog wheeled the Studebaker around in a nifty little three-point turn. The tires kicked up rocks as he swooped into and out of the ditch.

"Easy, speed racer," Frankie said.

"I've got a need—a need for hot, nasty, greasy speed. Yowza!"

"You're a riot," Frankie said. Her laugh was all youth and daisies.

"Did you know," Frankie said, "that after the battle at Gettysburg back in 1863, Rigby didn't celebrate the 4th of July for more than 80 years?"

“No. You’re a genius, baby, I swear. How do you know this stuff?”

“Oh, Boog.”

— — —

Sleepiness overcame Frankie and Boog. Calm crawled into the car with them. The only sounds were those of the whistling wind whipping through the Studebaker’s windows, twirling around its cabin. The ride out of the enormous elliptical was quick heading back. Too quick. Both Boog and Frankie noticed, but they said nothing. They hoped it would go away, the weirdness. The Studebaker moved like a jet airplane around the loop. Accelerated. Wrong.

No fog. The early morning had gone clear. The road went on and on and on, each section indistinguishable from the last. Brush. Stars twinkling above the pine forest on either side of the car. Something stood out of place in the ditch. Boog spotted it from one hundred yards out. He released the throttle. He was positive it wasn’t there, that he wasn’t seeing what he thought he was seeing. As he drew nearer, awful certainty slithered in through his ear, into his brain.

A pristine white rabbit stood there in the middle of the ditch. Five feet tall, illuminated somehow, like a giant nightlight. The creature’s long, skinny arms came down below its waist. Human-like hands dangled just above its knees. Its ears hung low on its shoulders. Its eyes were big and deep like coal mines. Black sadness glowed there in its massive pupils. Its features melted and sagged. The rabbit’s alien face looked almost dead and stuffed, except for the dim pits of its eyes which moved with its head as it tracked the Studebaker’s headlights. Its downcast expression communicated horrible regret, rotting guilt.

Boog wrenched his head out Frankie’s window to watch the rabbit as the Studebaker rolled past. Boog snapped his eyes to the road in front of them. Frankie picked at her hands. She plucked at the skin around her fingernails. Pick. Pick. Pick.

Boog's face tingled like he was going to lose consciousness, like when Georgie would put him in a headlock and ignore his cries for Mercy, Mercy, Mercy.

"Frankie... I need to tell you something. I mean, I think that I may have seen something."

Frankie said nothing.

Boog glanced over to see her staring forward into the night with tears galloping from her green eyes. Emeralds. He always called them emeralds. Frankie cried and heaved. She struggled to breathe. She kept picking at her fingers. The tears were bouncing off her round cheeks, pouring out all over her lap.

The road ahead smeared at the edges. Boog slapped himself hard across the face, once twice, three times. His eyes went wide. He crushed the gas pedal into the floorboard with his boot. The Studebaker tightened, gnarled, thundered against the dirt.

"Quick, baby. Roll up your window," Boog said.

"Okay," Frankie said, snapping out of her trance.

The icy chill that had almost paralyzed Boog left, sealed out by the thick glass that divided him from the world outside.

"Something's wrong. With the air. Out there. Don't breathe it, baby."

"What did you see, Boog?" Frankie asked.

"You aren't going to believe this, but I'm sure I saw it, so just… listen, okay?"

"Okay," Frankie said. "I will."

Boog told her what he'd seen. The white rabbit. His height. The tragedy in his bulbous, charred eye sockets. He told her how he nearly lost consciousness.

"I didn't see it, Boog, but I believe you. I believe you did. And I felt something, too. Something cold and incapacitating. Yes, just that. And then I was sobbing. Sobbing and sobbing.

I want to go home, Boog. Take me home," Frankie said, her voice cracking.

"Comin' right up, darling," Boog said, but there was no sand in it. He was all out of toughness.

Boog held the Studebaker at 55 until they hit pavement.

"There, the farmhouse" Frankie said, pointing out her window. "We're back."

"Baby," Boog said.

"Baby… baby, that farmhouse doesn't belong there. It belongs across the street."

"Oh, no. Oh God, no."

"No. No. No. This isn't happening, Frankie. We've just scared ourselves. That's all."

"I don't think that's it at all."

"Dammit. It is. And I'll prove it to you," Boog said. He stopped cold. "We just spun ourselves up. Got spooked. It's nothing. We're rational creatures. I'm turning us around. We're going back and we're paying attention this time. There's no rabbit. None of this is happening."

"Boog, pleas—"

"No. Dammit, Franchesca. We're doing this. We're not crazy. There are no ghosts. No rabbits neither. Don't be a crybaby. We are going back, if for no other reason than to know we aren't looney. Not like my mom. Not us."

Frankie buried her face in her hands, wiping away tears. "We always do things your way," she said.

"Trust me, would you sugar?"

Boog reached for Frankie's hand, but she wrenched it away.

"Let's go. If we're going. Let's go."

The Studebaker drifted back down onto the unpaved, narrow road. Tense silence settled

over Boog and Frankie, then Boog slid his right hand over to the warm safety of Frankie's upper leg. She let all the air out of her lungs. The tips of her thin fingers worked inside the sleeve of his sweatshirt. Boog's right hand exploded back onto the wheel of the Studebaker. Frankie didn't look. She covered her face with her arms in an act of instinctive protection. Boog mashed the brakes and the car slid as he strong-armed the steering wheel right, then left, then right again. A large whitetail buck leapt in front of the Studebaker. There was no missing it. At the last possible moment before impact, the buck jumped. Its hooves scraped along the hood as he glided over the car. Boog came to a full stop, watched the buck's bushy tail bounce into the pines.

"That's it. We're going home," Boog said.

"No," Frankie said.

"No?"

"No. It was just a deer."

"How would you know? I saw you hiding your face."

"Shut up. It was just a deer. Don't be a crybaby," Frankie said. "There's no ghosts and we're not nuts like your precious mummy. Remember?"

"Fine," Boog seethed, "but don't you think that maybe *something* is trying to stop us from going down this damn road? Trying to warn us?"

"Don't be absurd," Frankie said. "It was a deer."

"Frankie…"

"It was just a deer."

Frankie and Boog made it to the triple fence where they stopped and sat.

"Windows... down?" Boog said.

"Windows down," Frankie said. The words crunched like glass in Boog's ears.

He turned the car around. They hit the loop. It wound and wound, but not endlessly, and they came out of it before too long. Boog let himself believe that it was true, that he'd just given himself a case of the willies. Relief settled in his stomach.

Cold wind whistled around Frankie and Boog. Frankie shivered like a housecat.

"Windows… up?" Frankie said.

"Windows up," Boog said, relieved that she suggested it so he didn't have to.

The couple buzzed down the road at 45. Pavement came up underneath the Studebaker. Frankie jolted, but only a little.

"There goes the farmhouse," she said.

"It's just a road, Frankie. Like I said." The words tasted like spoiled milk.

"Oh, great. More fog."

"That's probably what had you seeing things. The fog, right?"

"Could be," Boog said, but he knew that wasn't right.

After a beat, Frankie's neck stiffened. "Boog," she said, "I don't remember dirt this close to your house Isn't this supposed to be paved? Everything past the farmhouse, paved? Or have I misremembered?"

Boog's mouth hung open.

"The turn, Boog. Boog. The turn. The turn."

"I see it. What do you want from me? I see it. You're the one who wanted to keep going, after the deer almost—oh, dammit, what's the use," Boog shouted.

"Boog…"

"I'm going to get us home. You trust me, Frankie. I'm going to get us home, and we are *never* coming back here."

“Never, ever, ever,” Frankie said. Her lips trembled. She was so kissable, Boog thought, even then. Especially then.

“Hold my hand now, Frankie,” Boog said. “Squeeze it if you get scared. Squeeze it just as tight as you can.”

“Mhmm,” Frankie managed, stuffing her fear down.

The turn was long again, longer than it had been. Boog whipped the Studebaker around and rocketed back into the loop which wound and wound and wound, and the opposite direction as it had before, though neither he nor Frankie had the heart to mention this. Frankie’s nails dug into Boog’s palm. The pain focused him and filled him with purpose.

The steady tick-tick-tick of Boog’s Seahawk marked each second. The ticking fell into the grumble of the Studebaker’s motor. The two noises fused into a single metallic rhythm.

And then, something else crept in. Soft. Barely audible, but there. Certainly there. Voices. Human voices. They talked over each other. They whispered and giggled. Five or six at a time, talking over each other. Serious, mad, silly. Little blurbs, one over the next.

Seek first the kingdom of God—

Carpentry tools make for excellent implements of torture, pierce her flesh with—

Push me. Higher, daddy. Push me, higher, higher, high—

Knock out the Sun. Insects need no light. Knock it out. Knock out the Sun.

The merry go round! The merry go round! Aha! The Ferris wheel, poppa!

Frankie and Boog slung out of the endless bend. Boog found 75 and held it there. He listened to the car, to its tires grumbling over sand and tiny rocks. He tried to purge the voices. He prayed that they were only in his head, prayed Frankie wasn’t hearing them, too. They

hummed together now in an incoherent chant, barely audible over the sound of the Studebaker's engine bellowing.

"Please tell me that's the radio. Boog, is that the radio? Boog? Boog? Why aren't you answering me? Is that the radio? Boog, talk to me. Talk to me."

Boog said nothing. Furious tears flooded his eyes, blurring the road ahead. He spun the radio dial to be sure. On. Static. Off. Voices dancing through the car. On. Static. Off. Giggling.

"Boog… Boog, take me home. Please. Take me home."

Boog punched the accelerator.

80. 85. 90. 95…

That was all the Studebaker had. Its engine raged and rattled. Boog prayed to God to guard against a thrown rod. The loudness of the overworked motor made the voices impossible to hear, or at least harder to hear, and that was a good thing. Frankie's nails broke the skin on the inside of Boog's hand. Warm blood trickled down his wrist. He winced and shifted his eyes to Frankie's hand as her nails impaled the soft skin of his palm. Wrinkles. Veins. Sunspots on her wrists. Her hair, black and silver. Her face, her breasts—so weightless just an hour ago—all of her, sagging and old.

Boog pulled his bloody hand from Frankie's. He patted at the top of his scalp. A ring of bald flesh in the center. A donut.

"This is your fault," Frankie said. "You just had to take us back down here, didn't you? Had to have it your way. We're going to die here on this road, you stupid, stupid man."

"I wanted to turn around. After the deer."

"Don't you dare," Frankie snapped.

“I know. I know. You’re right. When I get us home, I promise you, I’m gonna make love to you for a week straight, and we are never, ever coming back here.”

“If.”

“If?”

“If you get us home.”

“When.”

Beautiful pavement popped up under the Studebaker. The farmhouse wisped by Boog’s window, a blur of beige and burgundy. Frankie looked back to see it fall away in a cloud of dust. Boog let off the throttle. Sweet relief. Frankie was herself again. He felt for the bald spot. Gone, too, replaced with thick, blond hair. Boog’s face couldn’t decide if it wanted to laugh or cry. Frankie kissed his hand. A dozen times, she kissed his hand, paying no mind to the crusted blood.

“We made it, baby. We made it.”

“You did it. You saved us.”

Boog’s thoughts shifted to his driveway, his home, his room, Frankie’s skirt on the floor, her smoldering nakedness against him. He thought he’d never leave the safety of his bed again. Boog pointed ahead, grinning. The morning’s first orange embers caught against the base of the tree line. The road kept coming. His smile flattened. The smell of burning cat urine filled the Studebaker. Boog palmed Frankie’s knee, said, “Baby.”

“No,” she said. “No.”

Up ahead, the loop.

Distance: 5.1 KM

This is not a sanctioned thing. No trophies. No spectators. If I finish, if my body holds up, if my mind doesn't crumble, if I don't give in to the weak boy who lives in my skull whispering, Quit, Nic. You've earned a rest, well, then, there will be no friends or family at the finish line. Nobody will ever know what I've done unless I tell them.

Nobody knows that I can't do long division by hand. The tall, blonde, and beautiful Mrs. Smith tried to teach me in the 4th grade. I'd take any punishment that came my way. I would not be taught. I survived my youth and young manhood with a third grader's math skills. I have somehow been allowed to exist for 30 years without learning to divide large numbers on paper. Nobody knows I fear umbrellas. They conspire to blind me, I am convinced. Nobody knows how often I revisit in my mind the morning before the office party a long way from home, buried beneath the pollen of many Southern springs, where I was supposed to be her date, where things could've been different.

—Stroking the Elk—

Under a moonless sky l sit in the ditch on the side of Route 91. Warm elk blood soaking my lap. I look down at my trembling, useless hands and wonder how this happened.

— — —

Barreling down I-35 West, juiced to the tits on black coffee. Sun's setting, painting the road ahead of me pink and gold. Been driving two hours, so I figure I've got fifteen more to look forward to. I don't speed.

I never had much luck. That's old news. Yesterday morning, I won tickets to Game 7 of the World Series. First pitch, 7:40 PM, Central. Game 7, the greatest sports spectacle on earth, a once in a lifetime shot to see it all go down in person and in color. Braves/Twins for the '91 crown at the Metrodome in Minneapolis.

I won't be there.

I'm gunning for an office party in Logan, Utah. The office is not mine. Neither is the party. None of that matters. Katherine Beck, this firecracker, bouncy red hair, bottomless green eyes. The party is hers. Some kind of departmental thing her grad school is putting on in the dining hall. Music. Dancing. Veggie trays, all that. I wouldn't miss it. Not for all the tea in China. Not for all North Carolina.

I barely know Katherine. I can't wait to fall in love with her.

— — —

I live in New Ulm, the county seat of Brown County. It's always cold in Brown. *Always*. You don't know cold like we know cold. Gets to be where you think cold is normal. Warm catches you on your back heel. 25 years old—tomorrow—and this is my first time leaving Minnesota.

We've got all I need. A Food Lion. Two diners. A pizza joint called Fatty's. There's a gun shop and indoor range where a sort of attractive counter girl shows me this Remington and that Colt. She pretends to flirt with me. I pretend not to know she gets paid a commission for sales. It's a fun dance. There's a bowling alley that ain't half bad when they oil the lanes—a service the proprietors provide once a week, on Mondays, which is dollar bowling night. It's not the Jersey Shore, but it is mine.

— — —

I got the tickets off the radio. Lynda, the station's call screener, picked up and told me I was the lucky thirteenth caller. "Now, you understand that these are tickets for Game 7, should the game be necessary, right?" she asked. "Right," I said. I knew the Twins would win Game 6, force game 7. I knew something else, too. The answer to the only question that mattered. *Who is the only player to lead baseball in home runs without hitting a ball over the fence all season?*

I asked the jock to repeat it. He did. His words, industrial, harsh, impatient. A sticky, nervous film formed over my forehead. Slime. Not sweat. Calling had been a mistake. My brain microwaved itself. I didn't know the answer. I was wrong. Stupid. Wrong. Hang up, Joe. Hang up. End this call. End this conversation.

Ding.

Neurons fired. Synaptic receptors did whatever they do.

"Ty Cobb," I said. The words were out before I knew I was saying them.

But I was right. Ty Cobb hit more home runs than anyone in baseball in 1909, and he did it without hitting a ball over the fence. All inside the park. Speed over power.

For a century the line went quiet. Presidents came and went. Wars waged on, one after the other, right on schedule. Old Glory waved. Generations of Americans got married, bought homes, had children, died of heart and lung disease. Then the jock spoke.

"Yowza! That is *not* the correct answer."

My ears burned. Stupid tears hugged the corners of my eyes. I was twelve years old, searching for words to explain the stash of *Hustler* magazines my mother had found under my bed. I visualized chucking the phone at the wall, the thing exploding against sheetrock, breaking into plastic splinters. I was about to let it rip when sound poured out of the handset.

"Just jerking your chain! Congratulations, son! Stay on the phone. Lynda is going to get your information, and enjoy the free tickets! Whew, Ty Cobb, ladies and gents, and good on that young man for knowing his history. I say, a-YOWZA!"

Lynda told me to pick my tickets up at the station the next day *if* the game was to be played, *if* Atlanta lost game six that night.

4-3, Minnesota. Final score.

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The only thing wackier than winning free tickets to the World Series is not claiming them. The guys I work with at the pawn shop will never let me live that one down. They'd never believe that a 17-hour road trip to Logan, Utah was a better offer than free tickets to Game 7.

After winning the tickets, I went to Fat Fedor's Pizzeria. I'm supposed to be on a diet, the low carb thing, but this was special. I called in my favorite—a large pineapple and pepperoni thin crust pie with extra cheese—what I always called a Redneck Hawaiian. I'm waiting for them

to finish cooking it up, and in walks Bethany Collins. Bethany went to college with me. I met her in a Sea Fiction class. She sat next to Katherine Beck. They were friends. So, right there in Fat Fedor's, my luck having turned once and for all, I asked Bethany for Katherine's number. She gave it to me. No hesitation. Not very considerate of Katherine's privacy. Downright rude, but that's what she did. About like anything else—doesn't make sense. Everything held together by chewing gum. It's just people being drunk or stupid or drunk *and* stupid and selfish and horny and careless, but kind. Mostly, people are kind.

I rolled two stop signs, kept my truck moving the whole way home. The Redneck Hawaiian got cold. Grease soaked through the cardboard box all over my green particle board kitchen counter. I had more pressing business. I called Katherine long distance. Got her on the first ring. Must've been standing right by the phone. Destiny.

She remembered me, thank God. The conversation came easy. We talked about nothing. Then she mentioned this office party for her graduate school's English department out in Logan. Said she was going stag.

"My ass you are," I said. "I'll take you."

"Joe, if you can make it to Utah, you can be my date," Katherine said. That little laugh told me she was half-kidding. But only half.

"I'll make it," I told her, already crunching numbers in my head, trying to figure out whether I'd overdraft my bank account buying gas or not.

Twenty-seven minutes later, I was on the road.

To hell with the Twins.

— — —

Sun's down now, amethyst night sky, clouds made of jagged grey rock. Highway's clearing out. Just me and the truckers for the most part. They run 5 or 10 below the limit. I slip in and out of the center lane passing them. I wonder where they're headed, what they're hauling, how they sleep in those rigs, if they miss their families. I wonder if they know I'm on the way to the rest of my life. I wonder if they're jealous, if they're rooting for me. I choose to believe they are.

Wind whistles around in the cab of my truck. Cold. Caffeinated. Good. I could drive to Mars. The power steering pump whines as I pass a semi with Oregon plates. I tilt my face to the driver of the rig. I imagine he nods like men do. I nod back, slide ahead into the night.

Five hours in. Eleven to go. A sphinx moth flies in through my window, hits me in the forehead. He does not splat. He clunks. Bugs are tough. We're lucky they aren't big. They'd rule the world. The little moth flops into my lap, dead man's float. He shakes himself around, whips his wings back and forth in pissed off futility, then, finally, flips himself over. He looks around, decides my lap isn't his jam, flies right back out the window.

Bye, friend.

Snot freezes in my nose. Ice boogers. The night chill and my milk jug full of black coffee keep me between the lines. I'm hanging in at 65 miles an hour. I'm hungry and lean, cold and nervous, young and full of hope. My best self.

Katherine Beck. What's she got that's worth driving 34 hours round trip for? Beautiful guts. That's what. I heard a story about her once.

Some guy copped a feel in the hall when she was in high school. I wasn't there, didn't even know she existed yet. I only heard about it years later, when we were in college. Anyway. Guy reached up her skirt and grabbed her ass. Another girl might've screamed or reported him.

Katherine, though, she spun around and elbowed him in the face. Didn't knee him in the crotch. Didn't gasp and slap him. Elbowed him right in the mouth.

I saw the same storm in that Sea Fiction class we had together. I mean it. She'd shut you down, tell you if she thought your analysis of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* was jacked up, tell you you'd obviously not given it the attention it deserved. It's like I said. Mettle.

I always wanted to know her. She had a boyfriend when we were in college. George… something. Brought him into class one day. Didn't seem like anything special to me, but they acted happy. I was sure it'd break off. I plotted. Loomed and waited like an ambush predator deep in the jungle, waited for Georgie Boy to mess up, and when he did I would be carnivorous and quick and lethal. But he didn't. He never did. The semester ended. We never had another class together. It ate me alive for a while, and then I forgot all about Katherine Beck. It should have burned off. Except, it didn't. Not all the way. Grease hardened to the pan.

She worked her way into dreams that came most often on nights when I ate canned tuna. Visiting me in my sleep, her lips plump and red, looking like they wanted to be kissed, moving into a smile, saying: "Coward."

That's all I was. For not taking a shot. For letting her go back then. I can't deny it, though I'd rather drink molten nickel.

Time blew by. Other women came and went, leaving behind questions along with their discarded hair ties that'd turn up in my sheets weeks after they'd gone, lavender body lotion in my bathroom, Danielle Steel novels on my nightstand.

— — —

I switch on the radio, find the game, the one I'm supposed to be at. No score in the sixth. John Gordon, the voice of the Twins, reports a sold-out crowd of 55,883. Might be true if I weren't

freezing my balls off in this truck on the way to Logan. I listen for a while. Nothing's happening. I can't focus anyway. I turn it off, listen to the wind and the road.

Midnight now. Happy birthday, Joe Marris, you lucky sonofawhore.

Zigged when I should've zagged. Cost myself an hour. I'm doubling back through the eastern edge of Idaho, a state I should have never crossed into. Now it's a six-state trek. A maze of maize. Or something else. Some monocrop. I can't tell in this light. I'm no farmer. Whatever it is, it's everywhere. Idaho.

At the party, my tie will match Katherine's dress. Forest green. It is written. I think of her legs, her skinny pale ankles running into calves and up to sculpted thighs, a scar on her right hip from an auto accident. Dammit, I am trying not to get ahead of myself. I'm trying to manage my excitement. But it's so easy to get ahead of myself, ahead of everything. Here, in my little truck, only half a night's drive from the rest of forever, I'm in front of it all.

I'll take Katherine camping. Maybe she's never been. I'll build her a fire. Make her soup. I'll cheat, of course. I'll put one of those G.I. Vietnam-era compressed trioxane fuel tablets at the base of my fire to be sure it stays lit. Flames will rise and keep rising. She'll never know. She might not even finish her soup before we bail into my pop-up truck bed tent.

Easy, killer. Sip.

Thin shards of ice slosh around in my coffee jug. I pull over, smell barley. Unzip, leak out under the stars. Cock in hand, no one in sight. I am a man. A noble savage. Pissing in the tradition of a thousand generations of nomadic hunter-gatherers. My pee stinks like Folgers.

I zip up. No moon. More stars than you could count in two lifetimes. I head back to my truck, wondering if Katherine's the sort who'd spring for heated bathroom floor tiles.

— — —

Utah. My abdominal muscles bunch. My heart jumps around under my coat. I can smell Katherine's perfume. Peaches. In two months she'll introduce me as her boyfriend, as her fiancé in six, as her husband in a year. Should we marry in a church or outdoors?

The Rolling Stones cassette I've been playing on repeat all night hangs up on "Gimmie Shelter." The hook: *Rape, murder!* Screeching wheels in the tape deck, then the chorus again. *Rape, murder!* Wheels clicking. I hit eject. Nothing happens. I hit eject again and again. More screeching. Clicking wheels.

Rape, murder!

I smack the tape deck hard with the back of my hand. The rest of the hook spills out.

It's just a shot away, It's just—

Then everything crashes together. The road and the tape deck and my dash and the brown mass standing broadside in the middle of the road all fall into one composite image, a single dry, ugly color. Metal crunches. Glass splits. This is dying.

My head smashes into the roof. The bed fishtails behind me, left, then right. I go from 60 to 0 in two seconds flat. I stop in tall, dead grass. Breathe.

Coffee all over. Clicking in the tape deck. I kill the motor, thank Christ I put my seatbelt back on after that piss. Flashes, still images, a tangle of hooves and hide. I unbuckle, force the driver's side door open. It takes a good shove. Stiffness gives way in my neck and legs. I step down out of my truck, out into the world.

I walk over to this motionless heap of meat on the roadside. A young elk. Guts spilling out. Clear sky. The blood, black in the moonlight. It almost looks pretty. Damnit, Joe. The little elk makes a hoarse *breeeee* noise as I draw near, looks up at me with eyes like black gumballs. They ask me, *Joe? Is it you? Will I never get to be a bull, Joe?*

The elk's legs are smashed to hell. Shards of white bone like carefully sharpened Nordic spears poke through his fur. Blood drips, hisses and pops like hot grease as it falls to the snowy asphalt. Damnit, Joe.

Panic stabs me in the face. I've got to make that office party. I've got to get back on the road. There's no time. I pray to Jesus and Muhammad and anybody else who'll listen that I can still make it to Logan. I look back at the truck, mangled and sagging in the ditch.

I've gotta try. Gotta try. "Sorry, pal," I say to the elk calf.

I jog back, jump in, slam the door shut behind me. I turn the key. Sputter. Again. Sputter. Come on, you greasy whore. I punch the gas, hit it one more time. *Vroom*. I put it in gear and pray I can limp to Logan. I make it all of 10 feet before the motor stalls out. I turn it over again. Starter clicks. Again. Again. *Vroooooom.*

Something solid settles in my belly. I hit the dome light. In the rearview mirror, my own beaten, wind burned face. I understand everything.

Katherine Beck. I don't know her and I never will. The whole trip was an idiot's errand. All that dreaming for nothing. I was headed here all the while. My dreaming got some innocent critter killed. All roads carry me here, to this empty desert.

I throw it in park, kill the engine, get out. I walk back, kneel down beside the calf. Even if I hit him across the street from a 24-hour animal hospital, he'd be done-for. He's gonna die here on this stretch of arid road. It ain't his fault. Ain't mine either. If reincarnation exists, maybe next time he won't be born an elk. Maybe I won't be born Joe Marris.

I fetch a green army surplus blanket from my truck's toolbox. Scratchy, but it's wool and warm. I walk around to the passenger's side door, snatch my 1911 from the glove compartment. Not to use on the calf. I don't want to put him outta his misery. I've done enough damage for one

night. I only grab the pistol in case of coyotes. They can smell blood in the air two miles away, my pops used to say. I can't save the calf, but I can be sure he isn't picked apart by feral dogs while he's still alive. I owe him that much.

The elk shows no fear of me as I drape the blanket over his broken body. Too banged up to fuss, too close to death to care, maybe. I choose to believe that he knows I mean him no harm.

— — —

False dawn. I'm sitting Indian style in a ditch by the roadside. Haven't seen a single car. Utah.

The calf's head rests in my lap. I pet his nose. Look up. Two lemon-yellow orbs glow in the hazy predawn. Eyes, bouncing, unblinking. The coyote comes to within a hundred or so feet of where I'm sitting with the calf. Stubborn guy's clung to life for hours. He's breathed deep all the while, puffs of vapor darting from his nose, steady. The coyote creeps nearer and nearer. Mangy. Thin. Winter, already, has taken its toll.

I jerk the .45 from my blue jeans and sweep off its safety with my right thumb. Get a solid sight picture, aim at the space between the two glowing balls of light as they edge closer and closer. I lead the animal a little, accounting for his pace on approach. I apply slow, firm pressure, straight back, find the trigger's wall. Easy. Easy. Let it surprise you. Sights aligned. Good fundamentals. Breath and trigger under control. Couldn't do better. The slug zips off the rocky floor, cracks against something in the distance.

The coyote doesn't move. He just stares back at me, dares me to shoot again.

"Don't make me," I shout. "Go on now. Git!"

He turns back the way he came, no urgency. Disappears into the early morning desert.

I shove the .45 back into my bloody jeans, slide my hand over to stroke the top of the elk's head. White specks reflect in the black bulbs of his eyes, a miniature universe of galaxies and star

systems and planets trapped inside, praying to get out. Praying to pieces.

An hour later. The skyline warming up, I stroke the elk's face.

It'll be okay.

Distance: 10.56 KM

I've got A$AP Ferg's "East Coast (Remix)" on repeat. Cruising. Unsafe levels of testosterone enter my bloodstream when Busta Rhymes hits his verse. Old school. Savage.

A run like this is checkers, not chess. Simple. Built for tough idiots like me. There's only one rule: Don't quit. Cry. Crawl if you have to, but don't you dare goddamn quit.

Smokey, everyone called him. At my great grandfather's 86th birthday party, I begged and begged him to play chess with me. After he qualified for the 1932 Summer Olympics, and after he'd been a war hero in the Pacific, and after he'd made himself a millionaire building cancer research centers in Indiana, Papa Smoke had been a city chess champion. He boasted of not having lost a game in thirty years. I was nine. I wished Smokey was my father.

"In a bit, sport," Smokey croaked around the spit-soaked cigar he chewed on.

I wandered into his trophy room while family and friends mingled around the kitchen munching on this, sipping on that. Stuffed pronghorn, water buffalo, elk, bison, deer, glass eyes and preserved hides everywhere. My favorite was the tiger. He'd killed it with his Winchester rifle in India in the 1960s.

While we set up the board, I asked him about the tiger hunt. He said you can't sleep in the jungle. Too hot. Too many bugs, like on Iwo Jima. He couldn't sleep there either, he said. He told me that it took three days for him to track the animal.

I asked how many tigers he saw in India.

“One,” he said.

And how many times did you have to shoot him?

“One.”

—Good Enough for Sammy—

June 6th, 2005. We wake up to Vicky sobbing in the living room.

"This goofy twat," Sammy mutters in the hallway.

We step out into the early morning light. Before we can ask what's wrong, we see the banner along the bottom of the 60-inch TV Morris, Sammy's dad, bought Vicky for Christmas. Ronald Reagan died last night. Vicky tries to speak. "He—he—he…" is all she manages. She buries her face in her hands. We stand there, watching the news coverage.

"There's cereal in the cupboard, boys," Morris says from the kitchen.

Sammy and I sit at the dining table. Shovel bowl-fulls of Cinnamon Toast Crunch into our faces. Morris goes to his wife. He's got twenty years on her. He puts his arm around her shoulder. Kisses her forehead. Sammy scoffs.

On the screen the camera pans to a flag-draped casket being loaded onto an airplane by four young Marines. "There goes a great man," Morris says. "A true conservative who loved his country. Man stood up for liberty. Our rights."

I consider bringing up the fact that Reagan signed the Gun Owners Protection Act of 1986, despite its title a piece of *gun control* legislation. I want to say that at best Reagan was a lousy conservative and probably a conman. I think better of it.

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Less than a year from now, in a dingy motel room in North Florida, a shitfaced Sammy will stick his father's 12-gauge Remington Wingmaster in his mouth and pull the trigger. Today, he's the

coolest guy I know. Seventeen. I'm almost fifteen. When he was my age, Sammy dropped out of school, got a job working construction for his father's company. Always has money in his pocket. Also has an incredible athletic nack for picking up chicks. No fancy talk. Walks up to them, hits a standing backflip. Crosses his tanned, muscular arms. Makes his mermaid tattoo ripple and dance along his bicep. Says, "Gimme your number." They always do.

In the couple years we've been hanging out Sammy's had a hundred girls. Sometimes, one of his girl's less attractive friends holds my hand in the movies. Not often. I'm tall and skinny and bad looking. Acne and a wacky hairline. Sammy shines me up some. I am cool by association. Sammy can fight, too. Nobody messes with me. Being around him also forces me to confront my own inadequacy. My biceps don't yet exist. I cannot do a backflip. Nobody gives me their number with lightning in their eyes. I am obsessed with Sammy's cousin, Brandy. She's got this short, white skirt that makes me drunk in Algebra. She is much more interested in at least two—and possibly three—basketball players than she ever will be in me.

— — —

Today, the plan is to go out into the woods down the Bluff and shoot beer bottles in Bud's back yard. Bud died in 2002. Lung cancer. His trailer home has remained unoccupied since. Stacks and stacks of yellow-paged paperback books line the walls inside. The door is unlocked. Bluff boys are welcome to tour the place at their leisure. It's a white trash museum of the old chain-smoking mill worker who raised banana trees in his front yard, a memorial to his life.

Morris gives us a ride into town. For eight bucks we buy a 550-round bulk pack of .22s for our shooting session. By the time I am 30, this will increase to $55, if you can find it at all. We bust bottles in Bud's back lot until the sun dips behind the sea of pines that seal us off from the outside world. We walk back through the woods until we hit the main road. A Sheriff's

Deputy stops to speak with us. We tell him we'd just been target shooting in Bud's back lot. He nods. Offers us Cajun boiled peanuts. Doesn't ask for ID. Doesn't freak out about the rifles slung over our shoulders. This is home.

Back at Sammy's, Vicky's fixed a cake with red, white, and blue icing. "RIP Mr. President," it reads. It's a silly gesture, but it tastes okay. We jump into the river to shake the BO from a day spent sweating and shooting in the woods. We re-dress. Morris rides us out to the movie theater where I am reminded why I look up to Sammy the way I do. While we linger outside the complex, a slender brunette in the lobby catches his eye. Skin-tight Abercrombie jeans. Sammy marches right up to her, taps her shoulder, hits his backflip, and there she is, smiling, laughing, writing her number on his open palm in blue Sharpie.

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Spring, 2006. Morris catches me coming off the bus. That's where I find out.

"Sammy shot himself in the head over the weekend."

I don't say anything. I just stand there, stupid mouth hanging open, waiting for flies to land on my tongue or something.

"My Wingmaster," Morris says at the bus stop.

I think about asking if he's okay. I don't. It's a dumb-shit question. Of course he's not okay. This was not too much NyQuil. This was not a cry for attention. A 12-gauge shotgun to the face at point blank range? Forget about it. Game over. Do not pass Go. Do not collect $200. Report immediately to your closed casket service at Woodbine Baptist.

Then Morris says something impossible. Haunting.

"He's at UNF. Intensive care. Looks like he's gonna live."

"How?" *But of course. It's Sammy. He's un-killable.*

“My boy was so drunk, the barrel slipped out from under his chin. Pellets took off most his jaw. No bottom teeth. Nose, a damn mess. But they all missed his brain. So, he’ll live.”

“Can we go see him?”

Morris ignores my question.

“He hated Vicky. That’s why he left home. Couldn’t stand the idea of someone trying to take his momma’s place. That’s why he got shacked up with that evil bitch.”

The “evil bitch” was Sammy’s 32-year-old girlfriend, Jessica, who he argued with endlessly.

“I should’ve never married her, Nic,” Morris says.

He almost lets himself cry there on the street. I imagine him holding it together until he crosses the threshold of his front door, and then collapsing in his living room, bawling on the rug, pure agony for his only son.

I don’t know what to say. What to do. I want to reach out, touch Morris’s shoulder. Hug him. I don’t. Wouldn’t be possible. Not then. Not there.

“Come by the house. We’ll see about making a trip to Florida to see the boy.”

“Yessir,” I said.

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Sammy’s chin ended up being more wire than jaw. Dentures. He lost a lot of weight because he couldn’t eat much. Gone were his tanned, toned muscles. His mermaid tattoo looked like a sad shriveled raisin. The day they discharged him from the hospital, he told me, “Don’t be like me, man. Be anything else.”

I didn’t listen. A week before my sixteenth birthday, I dropped out. Got a job unloading trucks. Hell, it was good enough for Sammy.

Distance: 16.66 KM

It's too early to start banging caffeine. Never mind. I stop at my truck where I have stashed supplies. I replace the round Band-Aids on my nipples. Chafing is hell without them. I down a mason jar of black Cafe Bustello—a dark Cuban espresso stronger than anything else I've tried. I've got 11 more mason jars of the stuff. I push some water, too. My bladder swells.

"On Iwo Jima, I don't think I slept for three months. The Japs moved beneath us in tunnels they'd dug beneath the island, all night long, scrambling under our feet like rats, moving men and weapons into position so they could kill us at dawn," Smokey said.

While Papa Smoke talked about war and tigers, I carved up the board with my eyes. Battle burned between us. I studied the possible maneuvers for Papa Smoke. I realized I would win in three moves. Awful anxiety entombed me. Impossible. Surely I'd missed some escape, some elaborate trap so sophisticated I couldn't see its spring-loaded door closing behind me.

—Storage Auction—

I'm running down Highway 40, sweating and cramping, breathing in swampy Georgia air that's gotta be 90% water. I've got $400 in my jeans. The auction started five minutes ago. My left Achilles' tendon ruptured about three miles back. I've got a mile to go. For all I know, my unit's already sold. Most of what's in there is junk I could live without. Somewhere in that dusty sheet metal room is a sugar bowl with panda bears and sea turtles painted on it. Inside that hideous sugar bowl is my salvation—my girl's engagement ring.

Rachel Preyaphorn. She's a nurse. Tall, Thai, real thin. Looks like she could be a model if she made better choices and had better luck. I'm one of those bad choices. I'm glad she's not a model. You'd never guess she was a mother, or that she was almost thirty, or that she was slamming H hard a few months back. Genetics, man.

Rachel's given me all the chances I deserve plus a few I didn't. Stayed when I got busted for possession of stolen property. Wrote me letters for a year while I was locked up the first time, kept money on my books. Refused to go against me in court for stealing her Mazda Miata after she got clean and dumped me.

Tell me that ain't love.

Me and Rachel started with pot when we were kids, cheap vodka. Then, Oxy, the year we turned 20. Opioids are like Pringles. Once you pop, the fun don't stop.

We have a daughter, Meredith. She's three. She's gonna start remembering things soon. I need to be one of those things. I'm out. I'm clean. I've got a line on a job laying sheetrock with

my cousin in North Florida. Me, Rachel, and Mere-bear, we're supposed to be a family. But Rachel won't go for it without the ring. She thinks I pawned it for dope. If I don't prove to her otherwise, we're done. She swears.

I have to make this auction. I have to win. I have to run.

— — —

Yesterday, when I got out, I went to see Rachel first thing.

I said, "Baby, I'm out. I'm clean."

"You ain't clean. Even if you are, you won't be for long."

"This ain't like before. I'm working with my cousin, laying sheetrock."

Rachel's tired eyes rolled back into her skull.

"You stole my microwave."

"I pawned it. We got off with that money. I bet you don't remember though."

"You didn't ask me if you could pawn my microwave. *That's stealing*."

"I was gonna buy it back before you noticed."

"You stole my Miata."

"You said I could borrow it."

"You didn't bring it back. *That's called stealing,* Jorge."

"Come on now, sugar. You know what it's like."

"I'm going back to bed. I work tonight. Jesus."

"Rachel, baby. I'm telling you—"

"Good for you. You're lying. Same as always. But good for you."

"Rachel, baby, it won't be like before. You're clean now, too."

Before, when I got out riding a 9-month clean streak, right with God, doing my burpees every morning, abs popping, all that, Rachel wasn't there to pick me up from the jail like she said. Wouldn't answer her phone. I ended up walking back into town. The clerk at the Kangaroo Mart gave me a free soda. I thought that must be a good omen. It wasn't.

I found Rachel late that night. We argued. She apologized, said something came up, said she'd make it up to me, said she had two OC's, the blues, one for her and one for me. We were high as Russian space monkeys 12 hours after I got released. I reminded her of this.

"So it's my fault?"

"No. I'm just saying."

"Jorge. Say less."

She closed the door in my face.

I left a note.

I've got a phone with minutes on it. Our daughter is still young enough that she might not remember a time when we weren't together and living right. I still have your ring. I pray you'll call me.

With all of me, everything,

-Jorge Castillo

— — —

The phone rang that afternoon.

"You still have my ring? You didn't pawn it?"

"I would never."

That was a lie. I would have. I'd have pawned my soul if Chip down at the Pawn Palace would've loaned me $20 on it. Rachel knew this about me. I knew this about me. I took

precautions. The sugar bowl. Under the Skittles. I hate sweets. I knew her ring would sit there until rapture, safe from the werewolf me, the junkie me who'd say, To hell with it, and bang his girl's ring into his favorite vein.

"Bring it to me then."

I called the storage place. They told me the unit was going to auction the next morning, nothing they could do about it. They suggested I register. The minimum bid was only $50 and that was way, way less than I owed. Figured I might get it back for next to nothing.

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My bones move like I'm six-hundred years old. I remember I've wasted my twenties and my looks and my potential. Sweat blurs my vision. It oughta be illegal for it to be this hot before 10:00 AM. Tiny cuts on the tips of my nipples from wet cotton chafing against them smolder under my t-shirt. I pass the Rigby County Jail on the left, a brick one-story building, my home until yesterday, where I've wasted almost two of my thirty years on this planet.

Late. Late. Ten minutes. Eleven. Half a mile to go.

I pray the $400 I got for my banged up 1984 Jeep down at the Pawn Palace is enough. The only thing in the unit anybody might possibly want is an antique spinet piano that belonged to my grandmother. Was that worth $400? More? Positive thoughts, Jorge. You're gonna make it. You're gonna win. Mere is gonna have the childhood you didn't with parents who stick together and pay the bills, who never pound the groceries into their arms, who never, ever hit her until she can't stand up for school in the morning from all the bruises.

I pray for a runner's high.

No. Not that. You don't get high. You're Jorge. Not Jorge the pill freak. Not no more.

You've changed.

— — —

I look like a bank robber whose getaway driver lost his sand by the time I bust into the front office. I don't smell right. The girl at the desk flashes an uncomfortable smirk when I ask her about my unit. She points, says, "It's right down there." I take off to where she pointed. She stops me.

"Sir, your paddle."

58 in green letters.

5+8=13. Positive thoughts, Jorge. Manifest good. Good.

It's chaos from the jump. I lockdown my thoughts, try to figure out what the hell is going on. Two old guys are going at it. $50, $55, $60. One of them bids with the most obnoxious roar, like an old-timey car horn.

"Arooga!"

$120. I've got my bearings. One of the geezers loses interest, wobbles off like a dusty, grey penguin. I'm ready to enter a bid.

"$150," I say.

But this guy, he won't let it go. Every time he raises, it's this splintering "Arooga!" like a paddle steamer in my ear. I don't know what he thinks he sees. It's all junk. I wish he'd take his obnoxious mustache, the giant gold crucifix hanging from his neck, his disgusting Hawaiian shirt with its mess of wiry white chest hair pouring out, and go bid on some other locker full of some other loser's trash. Leave my trash alone, man, please. I need this trash.

I take him to $300 and he lets it sit there, lets me believe.

"Once, Twice," the auctioneer jabbers. His pants are too short. His tie, too long. He's got too many chins to forego a beard. I'm dizzy.

“Arooga!” the Walrus Man cries.

“$325, do I hear $350?”

I take it there, and the deafening, sonic crack of “Arooga!” gashes into my skull like a rusty hatchet.

“$375, $375, we’re at $375. Do I hear $4?” He missed a spot shaving his chin. I’m gonna be sick.

Walrus Man grins, reveals a mouthful of gold caps. I try to look sad, try to make him understand my desperation, try to make him know that this $400 bid I’m about to make is all I’ve got, and that if he takes it beyond four, I lose something so much more than this auction. I beg him with my eyes, Let it go. Please. Let it go.

“Twice, $375 going two times. Three times, last chance. Going, goi—”

“$400,” I say. I turn to Walrus Man. I lean in. I say the words. The only words.

“Please, man.”

He gives me a look like I’m some creature, some thing that just crawled up out of the black lagoon. I stiffen my lip. Tears aren’t far off. He gets it. He’s gonna let it go. He’s not so bad as he looks. Like most people, given half a chance, he’s good. People are goo—

“Arooga!”

Cursed number thirteens, 40 feet tall with big, red middle fingers held out dance all over my grave.

Tears pool in the corners of my eyes and I’m too tired to even cry. I take a step toward the exit. My feet weigh 7,000 pounds each. Behind me, the auctioneer booms:

“Once! Twice! Three times! Sold! To the man with the magnificent mustache.”

— — —

In the parking lot, I wait in ambush. I chain smoke Camel menthols. I'm about to call it quits, call Doomsday, my pill guy, and go get numb. Then I see it—my granny's piano being loaded onto a trailer.

I'm on my feet, sprinting to the trailer like I'm 17 and still on the cross country team, like I've never popped Oxy or hammered H, like I've never been to jail, like I'm a kid again who's still got his whole life to ruin.

Two stocky boys with thick blond hair are strapping the piano down. I start to ask them where the Walrus Man is, and then I see him with two pieces of pizza pressed together like a sandwich in his hand.

"Sir," I say, "my name is Jorge."

"Whore-hey?"

"Jorge. It's Cuban. Call me George if it's easier."

"George?"

"Never mind. Listen, I was bidding against you on the unit with the piano your guys are loading up. Remember?"

Walrus Man takes a large bite of greasy double pepperoni. He exaggerates his chewing like an alpaca, sips from a Styrofoam cup.

"You ain't getting that piano," he says between swallows.

"No, sir," I say. "Not the piano. But there is a sugar bowl in there that's very important to me. My family."

"Why?"

"It was mine. The whole unit was. Dumbest thing. I got locked up for stealing a Miata. Only I didn't steal it. It was a big mix up."

“Miata? That’s a girl’s car.”

“Yessir. It’s my girlfriend’s.”

“Well, I don’t see what that’s got to do with m—”

“Sir, listen, please. It is critically important that I go home with that sugar bowl. I don’t know how else to put it. Walking out of here without it is as good as shooting me dead right here where I stand.”

Walrus Man throws his pizza sandwich into the dirt and marches over to the trailer. He finds the sugar bowl with the sea turtles and the panda bears painted on it in a cardboard box. He holds the bowl like a baby bird, studies it carefully. He lifts it above his head to see the marking on its base.

“Made in Vietnam. Ha! Junk!”

“Yessir. It’s got sentimental value’s all.”

“Uh-huh,” Walrus Man says. He rolls his fingers on the lid of the sugar bowl, tapping, pinky to index, pinky to index. He lifts the lid.

“Skittles!”

“Yessir. The bowl—”

“Well,” Walrus Man says, gold teeth twinkling in the tangerine evening, “What’s it worth to ya?”

I whip out my phone and search eBay for “sugar bowl with panda bears and sea turtles.” I show Walrus Man the results.

“Look there,” I say. “Buy It Now for $16.99, free shipping. I’ll give you twice that and then some. I’ll give you forty dollars. Okay? Forty bucks, man. Come on.”

“Forty, you say?”

“Yessir. That’s almost three times what it’s worth. I’d even go... sixty dollars... seeing’s how I interrupted your dinner,” I say, motioning to the pizza in the dirt.

“Four. Hundo.”

Walrus Man tucks the sugar bowl behind his back and wraps his chapped lips around his straw. He pulls in brown liquid. Dr. Pepper sizzles in my nostrils.

“$400! That’s madness, that’s robbery. How could you possibly think tha—”

“You bid four-hundred against me. I remember. I was there. I’m fat and I’m old. I ain’t *seeee-nile*. Four-hundred is what you’re willing to spend because it’s all you have in your pocket. Am I right about this?”

I can’t argue.

“And to look at you, I’ll bet you’d spend four-thousand if anyone would loan it to you. Am I also right about this?”

There’s no mystery. Nowhere to hide. He sees me.

“You say you need this ugly bowl. I don’t know why you would want it. It is a hideous thing. Oriental junk. I would’ve probably just thrown it away. What does a panda bear have to do with a sea turtle? Idiotic. Tasteless. But never mind. You say you need it. Fine. You need this bowl—this disgusting bowl—I believe you, *Whore-hey*. I need four-hundred.”

I pull out a wad of damp twenties that I got for my Jeep the day before. I count four-hundred exactly and extend the pile of cash to the Walrus Man.

“And the Skittles,” he says.

“No, I need the candies,” I say. “For my daughter. Her name’s Meredith. She’s three.”

“No Skittles, no deal.”

“Sir—”

"No Skittles, no deal," he says, pushing the stack of bills back at me.

"Fine," I say. "Take the Skittles."

What else could I do?

Walrus Man shakes a handful of Skittles in his hand, tosses them into his mouth, wads them up in his cheek like chewing tobacco. That's it, I pray. Let me go. Let me leave with the bowl and the candy and Rachel's ring at the bottom.

"Want some?" Walrus Man says.

"Yessir," I say.

"Four-hundred per." He cackles, coughs, slaps my shoulder.

I force a smile.

He steps over to a pile of dishes, dumps the Skittles out into a green plastic cereal bowl. The little colored candies rattle against each other in super slow-mo. It sounds like a landslide coming down on me. The boulders keep coming. When I'm sure there is no end to the rainbow stream of sugar spilling out of the bowl, Rachel's ring flops out on top of the pile. It's got a purple candy stuck to it, but it is an unmistakable treasure with its halo of chipped diamonds and ½ karat center stone screaming in the swampy twilight. It cost me a grand. I had Chip throw it in the ultrasonic cleaner and polish it up all nice, then I paid him $50 more to put it in a Tiffany box with some fake papers he printed from the internet. I think Rachel knew it was a pawn shop ring, but she was cool about it. Gorgeous rock, second-hand or whatever. Anybody could see that.

Walrus Man chomps on the ball of dissolving candies in his mouth, way over-the-top, full-blown camel. He picks up Rachel's ring, studies it against the setting sun like it's an alien life-form.

"Please," I say.

Walrus Man shakes his head. I shut up. I will myself to grab it and take off. Nothing happens. My brain screams at my hands to snatch and dash. Snatch and dash. Nothing. He pinches the ring between his forefinger and thumb, reaches into the breast pocket of his Hawaiian shirt, produces a handkerchief. He spits on the handkerchief, polishes the sticky gunk off the ring with care. He reaches back into his breast pocket. The handkerchief and the ring disappear.

My heart drops. I make my mind ready to kill this man—this Walrus Man—with my bare hands. I ball my fists, set my feet.

"I am leaving with that ring."

Walrus Man tilts his head to the cloudless sky, cackles and coughs.

I shove him hard in the chest. He falls on his round butt, rolls end-over-end. He sits up and the sonofabitch is still laughing. I'm about to feed him his gold teeth when the four-click symphony of a Colt Single Action Army cocking against the back of my head stops the show.

"On your knees, boy," one of the stocky blond guys says.

I've never been so low. Even when I was cold and shivering, waiting for dawn so I could piss without breaking an ankle in that floorless, un-electrified trailer when I was a small boy, my mom passed out in the recliner with a needle in her forearm, even then.

My eyes drop to the sandy ground. I fall to my knees.

"Just do it, man. Kill me," I say. "Without that sugar bowl—without my girl's ring—ah, what's the use. Pull the trigger. Tell 'em I pulled a knife. Plant one on me. Call it self-defense. No one will blink. Do it."

Walrus Man stands, smug boomer-fudd grin, huffing and puffing. He wipes dirt from his khaki shorts, walks behind me. The lid of the sugar bowl opens and closes. Clanking, porcelain on porcelain.

“Get up,” says the Walrus Man.

He shoves the sugar bowl into my stomach.

“Go on now, Mr. Whore-hey. Take your ugly bowl and git.”

The muzzle of the .45 peels off the nape of my neck. My first step reminds me about my blown Achilles’ tendon. I limp off like a beaten stray. Anger falls out of my eyes, blacks out the sky. I throw the sugar bowl into the ground. Sea turtles and panda bears frag out into a thousand shards of dusty glass nothing. My upper molars try pushing through my lower molars. I release my jaw, study my mess.

There at my feet in the powdery white crater of the sugar bowl’s impact with the gritty Georgia ground, an impossible sparkle. It makes no sense. I’m seeing things. I must be. Rachel’s ring? No. Could it be? I pick it up. I half-expect it to fall to pieces as soon as I touch it like everything else in my messed up life. It holds. It’s real. I shove it down deep into the pocket of my blue jeans the way you might stuff a found twenty into your pants in the toilet paper aisle at the Kroger.

I take off running back to the trailer. Tendon be damned. Blondie sees me coming. He pulls the revolver out again and holds it down at his hip, thumb on the hammer. I show him my palms. “Easy, easy,” I say. He doesn’t move. His bead-blasted-metal-grey eyes follow me all the way in. I stand in front of the Walrus Man.

“You gave it back.”

We don’t nod. His hairy, orange sausage fingers do not close around my right hand. We do not shake like men. But he knows, and I know, and he knows I know.

“Go on, boy,” The Walrus Man says. “Get the hell away from my trailer.”

— — —

That evening, Rachel picks me up from the auction grounds. She's not alone. A pink car seat on the passenger side pinches my knees to my chest. Our daughter, asleep in the back.

On the way back to her place, we roll past an ocean of purple pine trees. We plan to watch The Land Before Time and eat some pizza. As Rachel drives, I watch her hands on the steering wheel, the diamond ring on her skinny finger fracturing the lights of every passing car.

Distance: 28.08 KM

My waist narrows, my hip bones protrude... I think. Whether this is psychosomatic or not, I can't say. But I am the lightest 200-pound man who ever lived. I could run until the tricentennial.

I moved my queen forward two spaces, then feigned despair as I pretended to realize my mistake. Smokey took the bait, captured my queen with his knight. What he didn't see in his eagerness to cripple my offense was that his own king now sat unobstructed, pinched in the crosshairs of my two rooks with my bishop sliding forward to cut off his only other avenue of withdrawal.

"Check," I called.

I didn't have the balls to say what I knew: that it was, in fact, checkmate.

Smokey's grey-blue eyes sharpened like a sniper's. He peered forward, unblinking. He studied the board for several tense minutes. He settled back in his seat, closed his eyes. I marveled at the wiry white caterpillars above his eyes. I thought maybe he'd died there in his green, leather chair. He snapped back to life, drained his scotch, stood, and left the house. Abandoned all the guests at his own birthday party without a word.

We never played chess again.

Back home in southern Georgia, nobody cares about chess. It's all about beer pong or corn hole—drinking games I don't partake in since I no longer drink.

—Hallie & the Crawfish—

Hallie has herpes. She's had it for years. She doesn't tell the guys she takes to bed. Why should she? Caveat Emptor. Don't ask, don't tell.

She pounds another Redbull-vodka. She drains the glasses as fast as the waitress can bring them out—not the most conservative approach for a first date. Hallie can't be bothered by archaic Victorian custom. The date is with a boy named Mogie. Stupid name. Setup job. Mutual friends put them in touch. Texting was okay. Little stiff. Mogie typed everything out. No "idk." Always, "I don't know." When he picked Hallie up in his Chevy Cruze, he tip-toed to the door, flowers in tow. She turkey-peeked out the window, saw the car in her mom's driveway.

Christmas piss. What kind of guy doesn't drive a truck? Did an internet search tell him to bring flowers? It isn't sweet. It's an inconvenience. Where was she supposed to put this jar of dying foliage?

Here at Fat Fedor's, Rigby's greasiest pizza joint, Hallie can't believe she's on a date. Dating. What a lost cause. She feels gross. She's on her period, bloated, doesn't want to be here, doesn't want to be wearing pants that squeeze her skinny-fat belly and little love handles over her belt. Muffin top. Hallie hates her muffin top. Mogie makes it worse. He keeps asking Hallie about herself. She's sick of deflecting, beautifying her responses in order to sound put together. Look, I don't work. I don't do much of anything. I watch makeup tutorials on YouTube, I smoke too much grass, I shoplift at Ulta. I don't tell the guys I bone that I have herpes. In a town this

small, I figure dudes oughta know. You oughta know, Mogie. But you don't. You brought flowers. You don't know anything.

She waves the waitress over. Another Redbull-vodka.

Hallie snags a couple fries off Mogie's plate, stuffs them in her mouth to kill the taste of her drink. Mogie rolls his eyes a little, grins. She shrugs, takes two more, chews them up with her mouth wide open so Mogie can see the mush swim around in there.

"You know Sylvester Stallone won an Academy Award?"

"No," Hallie says.

"You know what for? I mean, if you had to guess."

"Uh. I don't know. Being Rocky?" Hallie says.

"No, it wasn't for acting. Sly, that big old muscle-bound juicehead, he won an Academy Award for *writing*."

"Uhhh-mazin."

"You'd never guess that Sly was a writer. Right? I mean, he actually wrote *Rocky*. That's his original screenplay. Isn't that something?"

"I don't really like those kinds of movies."

"Boxing movies?"

"Testosterone movies."

Mogie's eyes find his shoelaces.

"I'm gonna go piss," Hallie says. Indelicate. Whatevs.

"I'll be here."

Mogie's stupid, crooked, white teeth light up their booth.

Hallie sits down on the closed toilet. Her skinny jeans dig into her hips. She would kill and eat a human baby for sweatpants right now. She drops her face in her palms, the layers of makeup over her skin thick against her fingers like the peel of an orange. She pulls a small, twisted-up plastic sandwich bag from her jacket pocket, smacks it against the stall three times. She pours the crushed up blue Oxy powder out onto her uncased iPhone with its cracked screen, lines it up with her expired student ID, sends it home.

Mogie is mopping up mayonnaise with his fries and guzzling them down.

"That's sick," Hallie says, maneuvering herself back into their booth.

Mogie laughs, swallows, tells her to give it a try.

"Hell no." Hallie leans forward, gives Mogie an eyeful of cleavage. "You wanna get outta here?"

The thin, outer ring of Hallie's nipple slips out of her blouse. Mogie flags down a waitress from across the room, not their waitress, some other waitress, does that stupid waving thing with his finger.

— — —

Back at Mogie's place, one of those rinky dink "tiny houses" slapped together in his grandfather's back yard, he and Hallie are getting into it. They're kissing like a gunfight, trading rifle fire and mortar coordinates, lobbing grenades in each other's general direction. Like a firefight, their shots are missing with alarming frequency.

Hallie's on top of Mogie, legs spread. Her skinny jeans whittle into her hips. She gets tired of waiting for Mogie to do something. She can't take it anymore, unbuttons them herself, lets the zipper go down halfway. Sweet relief. Mogie lifts her blouse up from beneath, stretches the fabric over her face. He stops, so she's wearing a shirt-mask. She pulls it the rest of the way

off. Hallie's pissed. Wonders why she's undressing herself. She rockets her shirt across the room, comes back to him. Her tits flatten against his chest. She grinds into him. The small twin bed creaks like a thousand-year-old floating dock. The mattress sags. Springs squeal. The whole thing sounds like it's about to come apart. Hallie's face burns. She's pretty sure she's gonna puke.

Mogie bends at the waist, performing a sit-up. His stomach muscles dance. What kind of an adult man has abs? Eat a cheeseburger, dude. He's sucking on Hallie's nipples, left then right, right, then left. Hallie does not think this is hot. Mogie tugs at her jeans. He doesn't miss a beat pulling for phantom milk with his big, powerful, Mick Jagger-type lips. The room's spinning. Hallie wrestles away, falls off Mogie. She rests on her back, eyes on the ceiling fan above. The blades whirl.

"Can you cut that off, man?" Hallie asks.

"Oh, yeah, sure, bro," Mogie says, all sarcasm.

"Sorry."

"It's okay. Just. I don't wanna be your friend. You know? I asked you on a date for a reason. I don't need any more "bros"—especially not ones I want to sleep with."

"I understand, Mogie. Will you please turn that off?"

"The fan? Yeah. No problem. Are you cold?"

Hallie nods. Kisses his cheek.

The fan slows, stops. Hallie's stomach settles a little.

"That's better."

Mogie is on her again, tongue down her throat, tugging at her jeans. She kisses back, but she's over it. Mogie slips a cold, skinny hand inside her panties, grabs her ass cheek, pulls her

pelvis forward into his.

"Stop, Mogie."

"It's okay," Mogie says. "You're okay, baby." He's kissing at her neck.

"No. I said Stop. You stop."

"Oh."

"I'm on my period and I feel super sick."

"Oh. Oh, okay. Totally. That's totally okay. Can I get you some water or something? Like a Mentos? There's a 24-hour store on the corner."

"What in Christ would I do with a Mentos, Mogie?"

"For your cramps."

"Midol."

"Right. Midol's what I meant. I was... distracted."

Hallie laughs, pulls Mogie's arm around her, rests her face on his chest. Little flakes of flesh-colored foundation rub off onto Mogie's black-and-grey flannel. Flurries.

Sleep.

Morning.

The bed's empty. Good. Tiny-ass bed. Hallie's halfway asleep again when the smell of bacon beats down the bedroom door. Hallie realizes how hungry she is. She stands up, finds the bathroom, pisses dark brown. She leaves her jeans on the floor, raids Mogie's dresser, finds a black T-shirt.

"Morning, sunshine," Mogie says as he flicks off the burner. He passes Hallie a plate with bacon, scrambled eggs, and wheat pancakes.

"Syrup?"

"Yeah. Please. And some juice or water."

"Which? Juice or water?"

"Both. My piss looks like mud. I'm super dehydrated."

"K. Nice shirt," Mogie says.

"Thanks. I have excellent taste." Hallie looks down at the shirt. Hootie & the Blowfish. "What's that?" she asks.

"Band. From South Carolina, where my family's from."

"Oh. Any good?"

"No, not really. It was my older sister's shirt."

"Stealing from your sister? Shameless," Hallie says, digging into her breakfast.

"Nah. She died. When I was a kid."

"Man. Come on. I'm sorry. I didn't—"

Mogie raises his hands from the breakfast table, facing his palms to Hallie. "It's okay. Couldn't have known."

"Can I ask—"

"Yeah. It was forever ago. It's kind of a crazy story. My sister, her name was Keelyn. She was always depressed. Depressed 'cause she was fat, depressed 'cause she had acne, depressed 'cause she didn't have a boyfriend. Whatever. You know how miserable being a teenager is. Anyway, Thanksgiving, the year I turned seven, my family went for a hike on Pike's Greenway in South Carolina. Keelyn was on a jogging kick that fall, always jogging, trying like hell to lose weight, to look like one of the magazine girls. She ran up ahead of us. We'd tired ourselves out, mostly me. I was small and I didn't eat enough. I've always been skinny. We went back to the van to wait on Keelyn, but she didn't come back, not for a long time. So, my folks start to worry,

right? And that's when they see it. A note pinned under the wiper blades. Saying she's sorry, that she loves us, that it'll hurt less this way, stuff like that."

Clouds choke the sunlight. The dining room goes grey. Temperature drops a couple degrees. Hallie doesn't know what to say, what to do. She just keeps chewing her bacon. She stuffs a shovelful of eggs into her face for good measure, this way she won't have to speak.

"So, my dad, who was a sheriff's deputy at the time, takes off. Me and Momma ran behind him. He ran and ran. Finally, he catches up to Keelyn. Then we catch up to him. Keelyn sat with her back up against a tree. 'Baby, baby,' Daddy says, 'I'm so glad you're okay. What is this?' And he pulls an orange flare gun from her hands. She'd snagged it out of the first aid kit Daddy kept in the van. 'Hunny,' Daddy says, 'baby, this wouldn't have done nothing but burn your face anyway. Come on, let's get you home, get you to a doctor.' Daddy turned back to us, shouted, 'It was just a flare gun!' He stood up, turned away from Keelyn, waving the orange break action flare pistol in his fist. 'Just a flare gun!' he said again. 'I know,' And Keelyn snagged his .45 from the holster he wore in the small of his back. Glock. No safety. There was no time then to appreciate the forethought, the design of the thing, how she'd mapped it all out. It was perfect. I mean, it was awful, but very deliberate."

Hallie's mouth hangs open, full of half-chewed meat and eggs.

"She was fourteen. But she knew what she was doing."

Hallie drops her fork. Emotions, uncomfortable emotions. Her mom. Her dad. The stove. The smell of melting face. She stuffs it all down. She wants more bacon, something to fill her mouth so she doesn't have to say anything. She's cleaned her plate. "Jesus," she manages after some time. She shakes her head, looks at the shirt, shakes her head again. She reaches across the table, holds Mogie's hand in hers. She kisses his bony knuckles.

“Do you want to go to the crawfish festival with me, Mogie?”

— — —

Downtown, there’s food, jugglers, little shops with crappy art for sale, a guy who’s swallowing swords, all kinds of weirdness. Hallie and Mogie walk the streets which are closed down for the vendors. Mogie holds Hallie’s hand. She doesn’t mind. He’s a squirrelly little prick, but he’s warming on her. Hallie and Mogie munch on crawfish, dropping the red and orange shells in the street.

“They’re all crunchy when you catch ‘em,” Mogie says. “But then you boil ‘em up and the meat inside gets all smooshy.”

“Gets all delicious, you mean,” Hallie says, sucking down the last one.

“Gator tail,” Mogie says, pointing.

“Yeah, that’s Captain Dan’s gator tail. That’s Captain Dan behind the booth.”

“Who’s Captain Dan?”

“He owns Captain Dan’s,” Hallie says. “It’s a little country bar and restaurant on the north end of Rigby.”

“Oh. Never been. Is he really a captain?”

“Was. Army. Nam.”

“Oh,” Mogie says. “It’s pretty cool that you call it Nam. Being a woman and all. I’d expect you to say Vietnam. It’s just cool.”

“You... are a strange boy,” Hallie says.

Mogie frowns. Hallie lifts up on her toes, kisses his lips. The frown inverts.

"And that's Jon-Bo's gator tail down the way. Damn good eating. But he's outta North Florida. Surprised he's all the way up here. He was a gypsy, before he opened up the Gator Pub down there in Big Pine Park."

"War of the gator tail plates," Mogie says.

"No, that's good," Hallie says.

"Huh?"

"War. That's good. I would love to see Captain Dan fight Jon-Bo."

"He's so old," Mogie says.

"Bull," Hallie says. "I bet Captain Dan whips old Jon-Bo."

"Guess it's like that old game we played when we were kids… who'd win in a fight, Batman or Superman?"

"No," Hallie says. "It ain't like that at all, 'cause I'm gonna get those dudes to throw down."

"How would you even do it?"

"Wait here," Hallie says.

— — —

Captain Dan hoists some trash bags in the dumpster. His wrinkled arms are veiny, strong. Hallie grabs him by the shoulder.

"Captain Dan. Captain Dan. You know Jon-Bo is down the way talking about telling everyone about the time he nailed Lucy."

"Which time?" Dan asks. "He's bagged my *whooo-ore* wife about a thousand times. Nobody knows—hey—how do you know?"

"He's got proof," Hallie says.

"What proof? Nobody's gonna believe a damn gypsy over me," Dan says. "I'm a man of importance in Rigby."

"I don't disagree with you, Cap, but he says he has video on his cellphone. Something about a footjob."

"And he's gonna show that filth? For what? Oh, no. Oh, hell no. My fat ass he will."

"He's down there saying he's gonna upload the footjob video to Pornhub. He says there ain't a damn thing you can do about it. Says he'll whip you if you even try to stop him."

Captain Dan slams the dumpster lid down. "We're gonna see about that, missy."

— — —

Hallie runs hard, fast. She's breathing heavy when she finds Mogie sitting on the curb. "Come on, come on, you're gonna miss it."

Mogie lets Hallie lead him by the hand to the front of a crowded circle of onlookers.

Captain Dan rips off his apron, throws it on the ground, points a long middle finger at Jon-Bo. "You motherless hobo," he says.

"Hey, asshole. I had a mother," Jon-Bo says.

"I had your mother." Captain Dan shrugs, frowns. "Not impressed."

Jon-Bo takes a step forward, puffs his chest out. Captain Dan matches him move for move. Jon-Bo nods. Dan nods. The two charge at each other, collide, clinch up. The mob of country bumpkins goes apeshit. Shouting. Waves of Oooooohs and Aaaaaahhhs. Somebody screams from the back, "Kick him in the balls, Jon-Bo! The balls!"

From the clinch, Jon-Bo gets in some short punches. Dirty boxing. Captain Dan takes the body shots and looks for an opening, then, boom! Hatchet elbow to the jaw and down goes Jon-Bo. Down, but not out. Captain Dan gets on top, starts to strangle Jon-Bo. Then Jon-Bo takes the

heckler's advice. He shoots his knee straight into Captain Dan's nuts. Dan howls, rolls off Jon-Bo. Jon-Bo gets on top, slaps Captain Dan in the face. Left, right, left with an open hand. Slap, slap, slap. Captain Dan cranks his hips out from under Jon-Bo and spins. Jon-Bo falls back. Now Captain Dan's on top. Wham. Wham. Wham. Jon-Bo grabs at his nose. Bloody snot-missiles launch out. Captain Dan reaches to his right ankle, yanks off his right tennis shoe, whacks Jon-Bo over the head with it. Whack, whack, whack.

Lucy, Captain's Dan's 4'8" Thai wife, yanks him off Jon-Bo.

"Put shoe on, hunny. Shoe on," she says.

Dan stumbles to his feet, hits Jon-Bo over the back of the head with his shoe one more time.

Jon-Bo gurgles, "Enough."

Dan sits down flat on his ass, breathing hard through his nose like a bull. He pulls his tennis shoe back onto his soggy yellow sock. He stands up, takes a few steps, turns, sucks in a deep breath.

"How'd ya like gettin' your ass whipped by a 67-year-old man with a damn Sketcher?"

The crowd erupts, whoops, hollers. Somebody starts a slow clap. It catches. Booming applause echoes down the empty street paved in red and orange crustacean carcasses.

Hallie's doubled over, laughing so hard she can't breathe. Mogie's never seen anybody look so happy. She's gasping for air, howling, crying. She looks like she just hit the Powerball.

"How the hell'd you do that?" Mogie asks.

"Oh, oh my God." Hallie can't breathe, can't do anything but laugh and laugh and laugh.

"Seriously! How'd you make them fight?"

“Oh, balls.” Hallie says. “Oh. God. Oh sweet nutsack. Mogie. Mogie. I’ll tell you all about it later. Let’s go back to your place. I’m off my period now. I can tell. I can feel it.”

“As you wish,” Mogie says.

— — —

Hallie and Mogie shower together. He’s sweet. He scrubs her armpits with his Old Spice body wash, doesn’t seem to mind the faint stubble. They dry off in the small bathroom, wrap towels around themselves. Mogie brushes, spits, offers his toothbrush to Hallie.

“That’s sick,” Hallie says.

“Sorry,” Mogie says. “I was trying to be polite.”

“Give me that,” Hallie says. She brushes.

Mogie tickles her ribs, picks her up. He’s stronger than he looks. Skinny thing. He carries her to his twin bed, throws her down. He lets his towel drop to the floor, climbs on top of her, pulls the covers over their heads.

“Do you have a condom?” Hallie asks.

“No,” Mogie says. “That’s not sex. But it’s okay. I’ll pull out.”

“Okay, good.”

Jesus. Crash this train.

Mogie touches her, loosens her up. He yanks her legs apart. Primal. Unexpected. Good. Hallie stops him.

“Mogie,” she says. “Mogie.”

Hallie squirms away.

“Mogie. I’ve… I’ve got herpes.”

Hallie crosses her arms over her chest, waits for shock, horror, disgust, rejection.

Mogie smiles. Kisses her forehead.

“We’ve all got something,” he says and pulls the covers over them.

Distance: 34.00 KM

Losing light fast. Started too late. Gonna be running overnight, which I knew going in, but I'd hoped to get further before dark. Getting cold now. Wind blows stiff and steady. I pass crusty-looking dudes hanging around their beat-up Tahoe, smoking grass and talking tough. Their eyes are all over me. I learned years ago to listen to the thunder. Its roar is the harbinger of violence. There are other places I can run. The only fight I want tonight is with myself.

Central City Park is a mile down the road. They call it The Pit. It's pretty well-lit, adjacent to apartments filled with undergrads. When I get there, I lay down flat on my back in the dying, brown grass. "Ten minutes," I say. I'm on my feet in seven. Stretching. Everything's tight. I can't imagine running another 66 kilometers. I want to stop right now, to admit I'm just not tough enough, that I'm made of pudding. I'm no athlete. What was I thinking? Nobody will ever have to know. I'll hide it under my floorboards with all the terrible umbrellas and worksheets filled with basic math problems. I can be showered and snuggled up in bed with a Snickers in twenty minutes. I'll never have to admit the failure to anyone other than myself.

But I'll know I didn't break. I'll know I quit.

I'd rather saw off my own penis and eat it.

Keep moving. Never stop moving.

—The Trunk—

This is a story that can never be told. It is narrated by a dead man under fifteen feet of water in the trunk of a Cadillac at the bottom of a manmade lake in southern Nevada.

Call me Brock Lowe.

— — —

To begin with:

Black darkness. Nothing else. On my side, bunched up. Can't straighten my legs. Hands behind my back. Zip-tied. Okay. Feet bound together. Duck tape. Not *duct* tape. *Duck* tape, so called due to its original purpose—to seal ammunition cases transported across the ocean during WWII, keeping the precious people-killers inside dry just like the oily, hydrophobic feathers of a duck. Duck tape. Duck.

Wow, daddy. Can't think straight. Head feels several sizes too small. The knob of a goose egg on the top of my grape bumps against some cloth-covered hardness. Throb. Throb. Throb. Something sticky in my beard. I lick at it. Blood. Tangy, crusting.

Gasoline and motor oil fill my nostrils. Something else. My cologne. Polo Black, only I stopped wearing cologne six months ago, right after I moved to Vegas. Can't afford it. Cost of living is psychotic. Slum lords. Cheats. Anyway, I lost my last bottle of Polo Black in the move out here, and that pissed me *all the way* off. It was virtually full. I know I packed it. I kept it in a purple Crown Royal bag, the one with the golden drawstring.

A motor belches to life right here in the dark with me, revving high, then low, trying to settle into a rhythm—the pistons and belts, all that racket. Beck pours through in muffled tones, all bass and rhythm, no coherent lyrics. “Loser,” my favorite song of his, the song I’d been listening to on my way to my dish pit shift at Saigon Tokyo, this little greasy hibachi joint I work at—

Disco. By which I mean, *Bingo.*

Everything clicks. The tunes. The cologne. I’m in the trunk of my 2001 Cadillac DeVille. Of course I am.

“Turn that off,” a voice paved with gravel says over the dull hum of the idling V8. Stereo dies. No more Beck. No more *I’m a loser, baby, so why don’t you kill me?* I rock and roll as the Caddy backs up and pulls forward. Stupid car. Cost me $1,700. Pearl white with a burgundy ragtop. Burns oil. Won’t run on anything but premium. Head gaskets are blown. Only okay for short trips. Overheats.

Somebody should tell whoever’s driving.

We hit a pothole. Thud. Stars.

Darker darkness. Brain downshifts. Fuzzy sleep.

— — —

Brock Lowe. A jock’s name, I guess, but I never dug on sports much. Too busy disappointing my parents. October. Weird, even before this trunk business. First, I lost my internship with Mystic Vic, the hottest prop magician on the Vegas strip. Stupid. Overslept. Ended up 12 minutes late to rehearsal. Vic is notoriously intolerant of tardiness. I tried explaining to Vic, it wasn’t my fault, I’d set an alarm, but Vegas Electric cut me off while I was asleep. What kind of prick cuts service for four days past due? “Not my problem. Kick rocks,” Vic said.

Then there was my little brother, Cornfed, dead at 25.

Cornelius, a magician's name, but he never liked magic. Too busy making Mom and Pop proud. Wrestling state champion. Quarterback. Baseball—starting varsity shortstop as a freshman. Honor roll. You name it. 6'2" by age 13. But that's not how he got to be called Cornfed. That happened at a trailer park party 10 years ago when I was 18 and he was 15. Donnie Griffin, Frankie Griffin's drunk ass dad, called this fat ginger kid, Richie, a "Fruity beached whale." Richie let it go—Richie always let it go—but Donnie Griffin kept at it.

"You got some big ol' titties, boy, golly. You ever think about pole dancing? Put them big ol' titties to work—make 'em earn! Some dirty trucker would milk them puppies!"

Richie was 15, and sensitive, you know? Nice kid, but soft—played the accordion. Started crying. So, Corn told Donnie to get gone, and when Donnie bowed up on him, Corn cracked him in the face with an empty beer bottle I hadn't even realized he was holding. Heineken. Glass erupted and Frankie's dad went down like a sack of hammers. Corn followed him down, mounted him, and beat him unconscious with two big, bunched fists like mailboxes. After Corn fixed Donnie Griffin's bad attitude, the backs of his hands were peppered with tiny splatters of blood that browned as they dried. His mitts looked as though they'd been sandblasted with crushed walnut media. I stood there like a punk, watching, still unable to move, even though it was over.

Everyone worked to get their story straight before the cops came. *Frankie's dad was beating on a minor, and that's how he got his face broken.* It wasn't complicated. That was a good thing. Simple was better, an easier script for drunk kids to stick to. Problem: Richie looked fine. Solution: Corn said he'd have to sock Richie in the mouth.

"Nobody's gonna believe he was beating on you if you're not beat up a little, Richie. I don't mind taking up for you, but I ain't gettin' locked up for it."

"Okay, but not too hard, promise?" Richie asked, pinching his eyes closed tight.

“Look at me, Richie,” Corn said.

Corn stared at Richie with sympathy. Then, without warning, he uncoiled a straight right that snapped Richie’s head back. Richie looked to the sky, eyes rolled white, wobbled on his heels. He was out cold, just for a second, but he stayed on his feet. He rejoined consciousness as quickly as he’d been separated from it, came back down onto the balls of his feet, back to earth. Corn clapped him on the back and bent his knees so they were standing eye to eye.

“You’ve convinced me,” Corn said. “The Oscar goes to Richie McGregor.”

Richie smiled, looked proud, showed his red-stained teeth. His chubby face held back tears. He bit at his split bottom lip. He did not cry. We waited, but the cops didn’t come. Not for a long time. Country living.

By the time they rolled up in black Tahoes, Frankie’s dad had dragged himself home, and nobody seemed to even remember the truth. We told that lie a thousand times, at first just rehearsing. We kept drinking the made-up version until it became more real than whatever had actually happened. Makes me wonder if truth exists, and if so, whether or not it matters.

Two cops, 500 pounds between them. One rail thin. One a comical walrus. The skinny cop didn’t say much. The fat one talked to Corn, scribbled something in his notepad, and then he talked to me since I was the oldest person there.

“Y’all been drinking?”

“I ain’t gonna lie to you. You know we have. But nobody’s driving. We all live here, in the park.”

The fat cop considered this, then waved a hand and licked his lips. He rested his open hands on his large gut, looking like he was trying to contain whatever bulbous beast lived inside. He exhaled, groaned.

"Mr. Griffin's a real piece of work anyway, between you and me."

"Yup," I said, "I've seen y'all over there a few times."

"Mhmm. We picked him up a bunch of times. Drunk and disorderly. Domestics. Stupid sumbitch stole some flowers from a gravesite downtown one time to give to his kid daughter for Valentine's Day. Somebody's gonna shoot him one of these days."

"Jesus," I said.

I could tell everything was going to be okay. The cops *wanted* to believe us. That made all the difference. They liked the narrative we built.

The fat cop rested his right hand on his holstered Glock. His fingers like bratwursts dangled on the plastic handle, and I counted them twice. I was sure it was the beer, my buzz, whatever. I counted a third time. Sure enough. The fat cop had six fingers on each hand. I will always remember the second pinky, half as long as the first and just as meaty. He caught me studying his hands. His gaze sharpened, a crisp warning. My eyes came back to his. He licked his lips again.

"Born loser, is what I'm saying. Don't surprise me none he was over here showing his ass. Guess Cornfed over there gave him what-for," the fat cop said.

Cornfed. It stuck.

Corn joined the Marines after high school. Got a Navy Cross for his handiwork with a light machine gun in Nippur, Iraq back in '05. Intelligence reported Al Qaeda were burning civilians alive one at a time in the courtyard. Intimidation. Fear. Corn gathered the rest of 3rd Squad and, against orders, led a suicide charge into the courtyard with his M-249 SAW. I picture 5.56 erupting from his mailbox hands, every fifth round a blazing tracer painting its trajectory in red as the pyrotechnic built into the base of the bullet burned out. I picture everyone else behind

him, following his lead. His guys trusted him. They'd follow him into hell's boiler room, which, I believe now, probably exists in a courtyard with stacks of charred villagers piled high in Nippur, Iraq.

11 confirmed kills. Saved close to 100 civilians, mostly women and children, glad to be spared from the burn pit, ready to embrace capitalist democracy at last, certainly. Made national news. For his uncommon bravery, Corn had been put up for a Congressional Medal of Honor. Command kicked it down to a Navy Cross, the nation's second highest commendation for valor in combat. He didn't quite earn the big kahuna on account of only taking eight rounds from a Kalashnikov during the firefight without quite having the sack to die taking them. The Corps likes their Medal of Honor recipients dead.

Six months later, Corn was sewn up and pumping iron again. He was magnetic. All-American. A hero, and not just to me. The whole town adored him. The whole country. I looked up to him. Only, that's too frail. I envied him. I loved him.

My mom wrote me with the news he'd been killed earlier this month. She tried calling, but my line's been disconnected for a while. Priorities. It happened on a Sunday. He should've gone to church. Some kind of freak accident while helping a friend move a couch. Stairs, tripped.

I didn't go home for the funeral. I told my mom how sorry I was, but that my magic career was really starting to take off with Mystic Vic and I couldn't afford to lose all the ground I'd gained. Thing is, Vic had already fired me. For reasons I can't quite articulate here, now, in the trunk of my own car, I didn't *want* to go.

That was the weekend before last. He's buried less than a mile from the now defunct Miriam Green Memorial Hospital he was born in back home in Blesshammer, Alabama. Funeral must've had a good turnout. Everyone thought the world of Corn. Broke a lot of hearts falling

down those stairs. Mine, too, but I'd be lying if I told you part of me wasn't relieved. When I first got here, right after Mystic Vic agreed to take me on as an apprentice, we were standing around talking in his office. I studied him, his green mohawk, his tight jeans and large bulge. He caught me eying his crotch and laughed.

"It's fake," he said, reaching into his pants and yanking out a plastic banana. He tossed it at my face. I ducked just in time to avoid the yellow blur of his banana dick. It flew past my lips, filling my nose with his sour aroma.

"Why?" I asked.

"You don't know? Drives the guys wild."

"The guys? You're gay?"

"No, but I bet you are, homo."

"No, I ain't," I said.

"Well, hell's bells, Brock. I didn't figure you were. Jesus. But most of my audience is. It's *subliminal messaging*," Vic said like a wise spiritual leader. I was pretty sure it wasn't subliminal messaging. I also never got the impression that his audience was significantly comprised of gay men. I kept my suspicions trapped behind my teeth as I shook my head in amazement.

"It's a crock," Vic said.

"What is?"

"Magic. Phony bologna, plastic banana, good time rock-n-roll."

"This plastic banana business. Where's that from?"

"Rush Limbaugh. Says it on his radio show. You a fan?"

"He's okay. Little nuts, but—"

“Rush is a real patriot. A true American. Fighting the good fight.” Vic paused and popped his neck, cranking his head around, first left then right.

“Anyway. Magic is a crock?”

“God, yes, Brock. Sometimes I wish somebody would hit me with a school bus.”

“Ha. Why?”

“Life’s a crock, too.”

— — —

Doors open and close. No way to know for sure how long I was out. The gravel voice and another are talking in a conversational tone outside, all drowned out by passing traffic. Nobody stops. Nobody cares. The other voice almost sounds like Cornfed. Corn’s voice wasn’t so much unlike anyone else’s. Just a man’s voice, the way you’d expect a man to sound. The voice of a guy who’d pull over and help you change a tire if he saw you stranded on the side of Old Tuscaloosa Road, but also the voice of a guy who’d probably break your nose if he had to.

Minutes drop off the clock. I can’t see my watch but I can hear it ticking behind my back. Loud, cheap quartz movement. Tink. Tink. Tink. I count 410 tinks. I’m trying to do the math to figure out how many minutes that is when the doors open and shut at just about the same time. The Caddy growls back to life. Vroom. The tranny slips into gear, the tires bounce back onto the road. I fall against the side of the trunk as whoever’s driving cranks a quick, dirty U-turn. Gravel, I decide. He’s driving. I know this for reasons I can’t specify, and I’m out again.

— — —

Water rushing all around me. Cacophonous. Sounds like rain trying to rip a hole through the sheet steel trap I’ve found myself in. Car’s sinking. I picture it dropping, inch by inch, into some lake or

another. Calm car taking a bath while I rage in the trunk. Cold wetness seeps into my socks. I'm not wearing shoes. Ice water rushes in, enveloping me, soaking my backside. I scream.

Let me out! I'm a human being! Stop! Please!

My screaming collapses into sobs broken by sharp, trembled breathing. I arch my back and smack my forehead against the top of the trunk. *Ouch.* I wrestle, flopping around in a few inches of rising water. I kick at the lid of the trunk, but it's no use. My feet are taped together. You can't get any leverage or thrust or whatever. Water fills the tiny trunk, rising to my ears. I launch my head up, smacking it again. I breathe in sharp and deep. The water swallows my lips. I suck in one more deep breath through my nose. I hold it. The water stops rushing in. We've sunk. I'm in a dark aquarium, a watery tomb.

The women I've slept with—all nine of them—race through my brain. Brandy's skinny legs. Aubrie's perky breasts. Emily's razor sharp nails on my shoulder blades. The ones I never had. More interesting. I wonder what might have existed beneath those mini dresses and skin-tight designer jeans from Abercrombie and DKNY.

I stay calm, keep my heart rate low. Each beat thuds in my skull. Thump. Thump. Thump. I think about my parents and about my dead brother, Cornfed. I think about my last conversation with him. It was about the Marines. He was trying to talk me into joining.

"You should go to the mall and see a recruiter, dude. I know the guy who's on recruiting duty. He won't bend you over if he knows you're my brother. Give you structure, routine, and some direction. Get you laid, too."

"I don't wanna kill and I don't wanna die, and yeah, it scares me, okay?"

“It ain’t the blood and the guts you gotta be afraid of,” Corn said, closing his eyes, laughing. “It’s all the dicks!” He howled. I wasn’t in on the joke. “Brock, I’ve seen more penises in the Marine Corps than all the middle aged prosts in Birmingham combined.”

“What?”

“Showers, man. Like a prison. Six shower heads on a little tree, three trees in a big tiled room. 65 guys trying to wash up in six minutes. Dick and balls everywhere you look. 360 degrees of cock.” His laugh descended into a scratchy cough. He doubled over, tears in his eyes, wheezing and smiling. He sounded a thousand years old.

That was the last time I’ll ever see him.

My mother. My father. They did their best. They never hit us. Pale Southern summer skies, hot, dry days spent playing sandlot baseball. And isn’t it quaint, the way breasts sometimes approximate the size and shape of baseballs? Isn’t the world sometimes symmetrical and pretty? I recall that first sip of wine I cribbed from my grandfather’s cabinet when I was eight. I smell the charred flesh of Iraqi citizens being barbecued. I see Corn charging in, poorly placed copper jacketed 7.62 MM slugs tearing into his flesh, slowing him not at all. I can imagine him dying there, in the sand, shot full of holes, a pile of perforated American beef. But the couch scene? No way.

I imagine crustaceans making their way into the trunk through rust pockets in a week or three—however long it takes for a car to rust out in a lake—the little sea spiders feasting on my eyeballs. Rich in protein, no doubt. A crab’s delight.

My thoughts go black at the edges like one of those Instagram filters chicks throw on their pictures.

I’m floating, somewhere between the sun that gives us life and the days that grind us out. I breathe in water. Everything tenses up. I can’t wiggle my toes. The images in my mind all

converge, competing for airtime. The voices shout over each other, desperate to be heard. It occurs to me that if you've got to go, it's better to go in a Cadillac than in a Toyota.

No time. Keep running. Never stop moving. You can run for hours. Run for days. Don't be a coward.

How many feet from the ground? How high in the air?

Blue air. Thick air.

Not going home. Ever.

Never going home.

Buzzing. Daydreams. Long legs. Hand grenades. Chunky peanut butter.

Distance: 40.99 KM

Right around here is where a marathon runner crosses the finish line, guzzles a beer or a chocolate milk or whatever, and goes home.

This ain't that.

I'm closer to 0 kilometers than I am to 100. What a horrific thought.

All I do is piss. All that coffee. Every ten minutes, under the moonless January night sky, I bail off to leak out behind an enormous oak. Its side is not dry from my last visit before I'm circling back around and emptying out again. Misty rain blasts my pale cheeks. I consider how close I came to never existing. Smokey could've died on Guadalcanal or Peleliu or Iwo Jima or at Midway. The tiger could've got him. Before all that, even, I narrowly escaped nothingness.

Jacob Levengood left Aarwangen, Switzerland for New York in 1720. There, he labored as an indentured servant where he tarred ships at New York Harbor for 13 long years. With his transit and board debt paid at last, he settled in Berks county, Pennsylvania. He farmed, married, and raised two daughters and one son. In 1758, Jacob and his wife were scalped in their home. His two daughters were kidnapped by their attackers, never to be heard from again. Jacob's son, also named Jacob, somehow escaped the assault and made a life for himself. Jacob Jr. left his Pottsville, Pennsylvania home to fight for American independence in 1779. He beat that, too. All these years later, on this long run, I can say he was my great, great, great, great grandfather. I exist.

—Mudboy—

The day I agreed to blow myself up was a warm Friday back in 2003. $1,800 from a Pakistani dude named Nadeem, that's all it took. I was small. Thirteen. I was Mudboy.

— — —

The war hadn't gone stale yet. People still cared. I'd been hanging around Nadeem and his boys for a year. They were older. 20's, 30's. I started coming around after a coalition airstrike leveled my school. The planes were aiming for the poppy fields at the eastern edge of my village. The rebels, they'd harvest the opium and swap it for weapons. It was big business in my small village. Sometimes, strangers came with planes and bombs and men. They disrupted the fields. Other times, strangers came and defended the fields. Nobody ever knew why, least of all the strangers, I suppose.

The poppy fields are there still.

It was my school that got hit, reduced to bricks and half-walls. An unexploded shell rested, doing nothing, looking mean in what had been my classroom. Ali and Amir, the lunatic twins in my village, they poked at the shell with a stick, tried to lift it out of the hole it sat in. Me, I stayed away from the school and the shell. I'd never been suicidal or even reckless compared to the twins and others in my village.

The bombs killed nobody. Night raid. With no school to attend, though, I had a lot of time on my hands that spring. I spent every second I wasn't doing chores at home hanging

around with Nadeem and his boys. They were tribal. Connected. Tallie. Our version of the mafia in New York City. Scorsese should make a movie about us.

For my birthday that October back in '03, Nadeem gave me a rifle. In his apartment, after the baklava, he handed it to me unwrapped. He said, "You, Mudboy, are thirteen. You are a man. A man needs a rifle."

"Kalashnikov?"

Nadeem nodded his head yes, handed me a sling and a leather four-cell magazine pouch with four loaded magazines inside. I studied the rifle as though I would become responsible for manufacturing samples from memory alone. MADE IN HUNGARY stamped on the receiver in jagged block letters, a blonde wooden pistol grip, its buttstock, a thin piece of steel wire with a checkered metal pad. When I fired the AK, its metal folding stock bruised my skinny shoulder. The rifle rattled when I walked and stunk like a box of rusting tools. The Kalash always went bang. That's its virtue on the battlefield.

It is shameful—shameful, but also true—that I liked the little gunfights we picked with Afghan Army dudes that summer. They were U.S.-trained dudes. I doubt I ever hit anything. When it cooked off, I found it almost impossible to focus on my rifle's sights. To be fair, the Afghan Army dudes didn't know what they were doing either. We wasted lots of ammunition. But the noise, the fear of dying in the sand, the way everything slowed down—it was chaos and poetry. In those exchanges, my instinct for self-preservation shattered. The two-way rifle range. *That* was life. When we opened up on each other and everything was noise and madness and euphoria, a shadow crept up into my ear, whispered, "Make war, Mudboy."

Even my shadow never found an honest use for my given name, Mani. Mudboy. Always, Mudboy. Ever since the rainy summer day when, at seven, while jumping in puddles with my

friends, I fell into a sinkhole. It was the worst sinkhole any of us had ever seen. Deep. Wet. It was there, in the sinkhole, where I knew I would die. When my friends pulled me out, I was caked in orange clay. “Mani, The Mudmonster,” Ali said. “No,” his psycho twin brother, Amir corrected, “Mani, the Amazing Mudboy!” So, from then on, I was Mani, the Amazing Mudboy, a real mouthful. Before I knew it, I was no longer amazing. I would never be amazing again. Just Mudboy.

“Mudboy, don’t you love your family?” Nadeem said that Friday night back in ‘03.

“Yes,” I said, “I love my family.”

“Think about 1,800 U.S. Dollars. Could they do many great things with it?”

“$1,800 is more than our home cost.”

“Don’t you also love your people and your Allah?” Nadeem said.

“I do.”

“Then take this.” A brown paper bag. American 50’s inside. “And this, too.” A chest carrier with pouches across the front. Olive green. Heavy. Full of explosives wrapped in wax paper. A matching green bag to store it in.

“Give it to your parents, Mudboy. Spend the weekend with them. Hug your mother. Shake your father’s hand. Tell your parents you love them. Your sister, Bano, too—she is so innocent and pure. Hug her especially tight for me.” His eyes went wild, white and red. He hit his cigarette.

I wondered how he knew Bano’s name. He’d never met her, never met my parents. But, of course. These people knew everything about everyone along the Durand line. They owned it. We just lived there.

“Monday,” Nadeem said, “I will come to your village. We will talk more about your glorious purpose in this struggle.”

When I got home, I put the money at the bottom of a ten-pound bag of rice in the store room. My mother will find the bills in a month or two, I thought. Her heart will crack open. She’ll know her only son left this world for something.

Friday, I hugged my mother. Saturday, I shook my father’s hand. Sunday, I told my parents, I love you. I kissed Bano’s small head. Nobody asked what had gotten into me. I did not tell them.

Sunday night, I sweated in my bed. I listened to Bano snore and I sweated and I thought, God wants me dead. I can’t stop it. Can’t slow it down. Sleep sprinted away from me. I was too terrified even to cry. I stared at the ceiling, waited for a missile, a great bomb made of hellfire and death to rock our hut. Nothing came. Then, morning, too long, too dry, and Monday which lasted eight-thousand years.

I waited for Nadeem to pick me up with my butt in the sand outside my family’s home, the sun in my face. I wanted to run, to cry. I didn’t. I only sat. Dark came. Nadeem didn’t. Neither did rest when I went to bed. Sweat. Demons crawling across the ceiling. Bano’s snoring. I counted her snores. I got to more than 1,000 before I lost track.

Tuesday morning torched the sky. I hadn’t slept in two days. Eating, drinking, I had no energy for these things. I waited again with my butt in the sand. I longed to disappear, to puke up my guts one more time before the vest made me into hamburger, to be anyone else anywhere else.

God is real. God is good.

Nadeem never came.

Wednesday, word spread to my small village. Nadeem and a half dozen others were killed over the weekend in his apartment where I had eaten bread and smoked cigarettes so many evenings, where I would have been sitting and eating bread and smoking cigarettes when the building came down if I hadn't been saying goodbye to my life.

A bomb, the lunatic twins said as we stood in the street.

"Whose bomb?" I asked.

"The Americans?" Ali said. He didn't know or care.

"Oh," I said.

"You shouldn't hang around with people like that, Mani," Amir said. "Life here on the line is dangerous enough without you needing to go and seek out the worst killers around."

"You're right," I said. Something about being called reckless by someone I'd always thought of as a madman sobered me up.

"We have to go work in the fields."

I waved goodbye, turned, and Amir stopped me.

"Mani?"

"Yes?"

"You're still Mudboy."

He and his brother laughed and they left me there.

I floated home, grabbed the vest from under my blankets. Dehydrated. Malnourished. I weighed nothing. My legs cramped. My stomach cramped. I ran.

I threw the vest down a dried-up well in a farmer's field.

I sat with my back to the well. I sobbed. "Thank God," I said. "Thank God Nadeem is dead. Thank God I am alive."

— — —

May. The rice ran low. Like every May, the U.S. green card lottery winners were about to be selected. Millions apply every year. Around 55,000 are picked. God is real. God is good. We won the lottery. We were going to America. Minnesota, if we could only afford to get there. My father had applied knowing we would not be selected, just as we were never selected. Now that we'd won, the question, *How will we ever get the money to make it to America* cut into each of us.

I understood everything.

Nadeem, the gunfights, the vest, the $1,800 at the bottom of the rice sack—all His plan.

"Of course I don't know where it came from," I said when my mother found the bills in the empty sack. A lie I still resent. But I couldn't tell her. I couldn't let her know how close my insides had been to covering the walls of some government building, to being splattered all over a convoy of military vehicles, whatever. "God is good," I said.

"Alhamdulillah," my mother wept. "Alhamdulillah."

In the room I shared with Bano, the night before we left for America, I said to my shadow, "I am done with you, bastard. I won't make war with you again. Go away. Go away and stay away." My shadow said nothing to me then. He shrunk down to a sliver of dark, weak and inert, a powderless Kalashnikov cartridge. I'd beaten my shadow back. I slept like I did when I was a baby, when I was Mani.

— — —

In America, I grew tall and strong. Too much food in Minnesota. I made friends. Black friends. White friends. One friend of mine was even from Canada. The kids on my soccer team called me Money. Whenever I scored a goal, they'd scream, "Money!" Everyone else called me Mani. Mudboy and his crimes, forgotten. Almost.

Three years after we immigrated, my father was promoted to foreman at the commercial appliance factory he works in. In only five years, I learned to read and write in English, made my high school soccer team, and kissed three different girls: two blondes and one brunette. This year, I turned 19. I graduated high school in the top 20 of my class. My father said to me, “Mani, this is America. Here, you can be anything. I can find you work in my factory, or you can go to college. You can be a doctor or a school teacher or a policeman—anything you want. You will decide before summer is over.”

— — —

May is gone in one breath. June in two. July comes. With it, numbness. Boredom. Endless masturbation and repentance. Then, late at night, a voice, low and steady. Familiar, but at first, I can’t place it.

“You’re the same. I see you,” the voice says.

My shadow.

“Mudboy. I have been trying to put on weight this summer. You have grown strong while I have withered these long, cold years in this fat, safe country. I am well enough now to ask you to remember. Remember the blood in your head, the motor in your chest, the way your toes curled when a bullet snapped as it passed over your head.”

“No,” I say. “I don’t remember. I don’t know you. I don’t know what you speak of. Go away now. Go.”

“Mudboy.”

“No.”

“Make war with me, Mudboy.”

I tell my shadow I won't. "Go away, bastard," I tell him. I think of Nadeem. The vest. The American life that almost never happened.

"My hands have forgotten the rifle, you fool," I tell my shadow. "I couldn't disable the safety now if I tried."

It's no use. My shadow bulks up. Lean muscle ripples all over.

"I know you're lying," he says.

It's true. My hands have never forgotten the rifle. The pocket of my shoulder has never forgotten its purple kisses.

"That was another boy, another life. Please, go."

"We will speak again soon, *Mani*."

— — —

The next morning, I suggest to my friends that we go to the mall. *Why*, they protest. Everything we might want to buy is on Amazon. Just to look around, I say. To meet girls, I say. We pass by a deserted JCPenney, some shoe stores, a GameStop. Recruiters offices mean the end of the road at the south end of the mall. We turn around. That's when he shows up.

"Go in, Mudboy," he says.

I push his words away.

He says it again, "Go in, Mudboy. Say hello."

Then I see it, the sign.

The poster is taller than me. It reads:

FIRST TO FIGHT.

A man wearing the sharpest blue uniform on earth stands behind the words with a sword in his hand.

"I'll catch up with you guys," I say to my friends.

I dummy over to the bathroom even though I don't have to go. I breathe hard. My shadow peeks up over the wall of the stall, a pervert's smile on his charred face.

"Say hi, Mudboy. Introduce yourself."

I look in the mirror. I say to myself,

"Okay, Mudboy. Okay. Say hello. Just hello."

A man jerks on the doorknob. Knocks hard four times. "Somebody in there?"

That gets me moving. I walk into the small office. A skinny red-haired man sits at a desk with a chest full of medals.

"Hello," I say. "I am Mani."

My shadow hisses, "*Mudboy*."

— — —

I train and I test and I wait. I work at a gas station down the road from my house. Then, I leave for boot camp at Parris Island in South Carolina. Here, My hands learn a new rifle, this one a long, black vixen with a 20-inch barrel and a tritium-illuminated scope. I call her Shannon, after the first girl I ever kissed, the brunette.

At boot camp, before we hit the rack one night, my Senior Drill Instructor asks me if I am a terrorist. "You tryin' to infiltrate my beloved Corps, boy? You a Hodgie?"

His question stings. Reminds me. Nadeem. The boys. The desert and the wire stock bashing into my frail shoulder.

"Sir, this recruit is not a terrorist. This recruit loves America, sir," I say.

"You look like Osama's teenage daughter."

"Aye, sir," I say.

"Bullshit, girl," he says. "Don't look at me."

Sunday mornings, there are church services. Jewish. Catholic. Islamic. Buddhist—all that. I have no use for them. I stay in the squad bay. I clean and I write letters to family and friends. I tell them it is hotter than hell on the island. I tell them the mosquitoes are as big as birds. I tell them that even though everyone complains about the food, I've never eaten so well. Still, I lose weight. All the running and sweating. After the Sunday services, we drill on the blacktop. We drive our heels to the deck until our bones ache. Then we have evening chow. Dinner, you'd call it. Hotdogs and hamburgers with fries. Every Sunday.

This is truly the greatest country on earth.

I graduate from Parris Island in July. I cry when I am awarded my citizenship on the parade deck. My mother takes many pictures. Bano hugs me tight, begs me to let her wear my dog tags. My father's never been so proud.

My shadow is pleased.

— — —

The C-130 grumbles above the ocean. The other Marines fart and snore in their sleep. I look out the window. Plum-colored sky. Clouds like sea sponges. I'm twenty years old and going home. *We* are going home. Mani and Mudboy, headed back to make poetry in the desert once more.

Distance: 51.11 KM

This is outer space. Every step marks a new personal record, the furthest I've ever gone at once. This is the unknown. You don't run 100 kilometers to train for a 100K. You run lots of 5's and 10's, a couple half marathons, maybe a 20-miler overnight to gauge your mental and physical preparation. The truth is that distances much beyond 20 miles break your body down in such a way that you really have to save them for the real deal. Your body can only go to those dark, brutal places so many times before the risk of lasting injury looms heavy. I tell myself, You can stop right here and it'll still be the greatest run of your life. You could be proud of that. The words, rancid in my mouth like uncooked week-old venison.

Stop looking for a way out. Coward.

You're right where you belong.

—New Ways To Live—

The flea market kitchen knife clangs on the grimy tile. Unglued, one of its wood handles slides into the room that Skelly, Benji, and I share. The maternal figure in the doorway slinks back into the darkness of the hall. Footsteps trail off. The front door opens, slams. A Volkswagen sputters and moans to life. The motor stalls, starts again, farts down the country road.

The redneck noise alarm (an aluminum bat balanced on the door knob), my brothers, the yelling, (*What are you doing?*) the shucking of shells into chambers, (*Stop, stop*) the clicking on of flashlights fastened to rifle barrels with black electrical tape, (*Drop it, drop it, drop the knife*) everything melts. Squirmy silence. Stress hormones drilled into my belly like wood screws. My legs go to pudding beneath me as I stand on top of the bare twin-sized mattress I sleep on. My hands seize-up around my Winchester 1300 Defender like the world's rustiest anchor bolts. I keep the shotgun trained on the vacant doorway, unable to make my eyes focus on anything else. My first conscious thought is: *I am not wearing any pants.*

— — —

Summer, 2010. I'm nineteen, the oldest. Mom's always been a nutcase. Hippie-type for a while. Took us all over the country in an old VW van with no AC and no radio when I was little to catch Grateful Dead and Phish shows. I learned to read on those long drives thanks to the steady stream of billboards advertising sex shops, our lord and savior Jesus Christ, and restaurants we never ate in. She's been using for a couple years now, too. This isn't the first time. It won't be the last. The knife isn't new either. Emily, my younger sister, has a nasty scar on her forearm

from grappling with mom for the knife earlier this year when we tried forcing her *asshole* boyfriend, Jack, to get high outside rather than in the living room.

Me, Em, Skelly, Benji, and Rose live in a run-down one-story place out in Woodbine, Georgia, just down the street from what had been the Floyd Plantation prior to the Civil War. I've got four other siblings scattered across the country. By the time we moved in, the antebellum rice fields had been transformed into a fenced-off, inaccessible 7,600-acre piece of swampland deemed "super toxic" due to the Thiokol Chemical Plant explosion of 1971. Magnesium used in the production of flares earmarked for the war effort in Vietnam caught fire, jumped the conveyor line, and simultaneously set off more than 50,000 flares inside the floor-level storage building. Boom. Thirty dead. Fifty more injured. Body parts flew more than 400 feet. The town never recovered. Woodbine, now, is home to less than 1,300 people.

This is home.

It's been five years since our dad left for Iraq. He made it back from the sandbox, but not really. The best parts of him are somewhere across the Persian Gulf. He abandoned our family the year I turned sixteen. In the time since he took off, our momma, who had always been kooky, re-discovered substances along with a few state-of-the-art methods of abusing them. Me and my brothers and sisters discovered new ways to live, such as:

1.) When your mother drinks up the groceries, you can score around 80 cans of expired off-brand Pringles from the dumpster behind the corner store if you time it right. You can stack them along the walls in the closet Benji sleeps in. They'll hold y'all over until the next emergency. When it happens again, Benji and Skelly will load up their pants with gas station Italian sandwiches and Snickers bars while you run interference by flirting with the counter girl. You can switch UPC codes, snatch and

run, gut and return. There are a hundred scams and we run them all. Greens are proud people. Thieves. Not beggars.

2.) When the water gets shut off, you can rig an outdoor toilet pretty easy. You just dig a good-sized hole in the backyard. Then you drag an old trampoline frame from the neighbor's trash out back. Sit on the frame, hover over the hole. Bombs away. Wipe with TP stolen from the Walmart men's room. When the hole fills up, scoot two feet over on the frame. Dig a new hole. You can also steal showers for you and your siblings. All you've gotta do is wait 'til dark, then run a garden hose up to the side of the neighbors' place. Hook 'er up, then run that hose under the fence and into your backyard. Line up your younger brothers and sisters. Hose them down. "What about winter?" Listen, just because it's cold doesn't automatically mean the bills get paid. You tell Skelly and Benji and Rose and Em, "I'm sorry," and you try to keep it quick.

3.) If the power's on, you can put leftover pizza or whatever in the freezer. Not the fridge. The freezer. This way, the cockroaches won't get to it.

4.) You'll call DFCS after your dad leaves, right when things start falling apart. You'll call a second time because you just can't believe the inaction or incompetence. Neighbors and mailmen who notice things aren't right because none of the kids go to school, because there's thirty malnourished cats running around all over the place, because there's no glass in the windows, will also call. Nothing will be done. Your mother is able to subdue her psychosis in the daylight for short periods of time. She'll sweet-talk the lady investigator who interviews her. She'll douse the house in bleach when they come out for site visits and all the kids, myself included, will dummy up and lie to protect our little slice of hell when the lady investigator questions us. We'll

say, “Those cats aren’t ours.” We’ll say, “The kids are homeschooled.” We’ll say, “The house was burglarized. That’s how come the windows are all busted.” When we’re asked if we’ve ever experienced violence in the home, we all say, “No.” We’ll say lots of things to stay where we are, together. Greens come equipped with a deep-seated mistrust of authority and anti-snitch software.

5.) Once you realize how explosive a violent, psychological disturbance combined with a steady diet of mind-altering drugs can be, you’re going to need to reinforce your sleeping quarters. Don’t whine about it. This is your life now. What you wanna do is get a couple aluminum baseball bats. One for the boys’ room, one for the girls’ room. You lock the doors when you bed down for the night, then you balance those baseball bats on the doorknobs. When she makes it home all tore-up and pissed off on account of she hates herself every time she remembers who she is, you might sleep through the phantom arguments she’s holding with no one in the living room. You might not wake as she shoves the furniture all over the place at all hours of the night singing Rage Against the Machine lyrics. You *will* wake up when she smashes out all the windows in the house with pots and pans and bowls and plates. It’s gonna sound like plastic explosives blasting out the exterior wall in the living room. Don’t investigate. Stay where you are. You can’t talk to her. She won’t listen. She’s wildfire. She’ll burn anything in her path. *Stay. In. Your. Room.* If she comes for you, she’ll turn the knob, bang on the door like a cop. The bat will fall and bounce around on the tile. The racket is tremendous and specific. You won’t sleep through it. You’ve learned to associate that sound with grave danger. You’ll wake up with the metal-on-tile ringing in your ears. You’ll have a couple precious

moments to get ready before she forces the door open. You'll need those moments. Guns, too.

— — —

My eyes find Benji at the far side of the room. He sets his rifle down on top of the pile of sleeping bags in the closet he sleeps in. His sad, chubby face shakes back and forth. He wants to cry. He doesn't. He's stronger than me. Stronger than any ten-year-old boy oughta be. I hear Skelly before I see him. He's laughing his smoker's laugh. He's thirteen, tall, real thin, hair so blond it's white, and already saddled with a pack-a-day habit and a keen taste for Natural Light.

"Put your ballsack away," Skelly says. "Ballsack ain't tactical."

Benji chimes in, "Yeah, Nic, you think the Marines cap terrorists with their nuts jangling around?"

"Sure, you gotta air them things out," I say.

We laugh ourselves breathless.

We have shared these last several years the incommunicable experience of violence and extreme poverty in a prison whose warden we defend for reasons we don't understand. We swim in and out of dire seriousness and humor often. We have to.

After the cackling dies down, I remind Skelly that I always sleep naked. He reminds me that it's weird that I always sleep naked since I share a room with two other men. At thirteen, he already thinks of himself as a man. Benji too.

My younger brothers take turns accusing me in various, inventive ways of having unrequited homosexual crushes on them. We howl like banshees.

It's a little after four in the morning. We've got to be at the farm for work at seven. I put on gym shorts. The laughter falls away. Our adrenaline burns off. Terrible post-fight jitters set in.

Sleep is impossible. Em and Rose pile into our bedroom with us to talk about what happened. Having all us kids together is always big after a bad night. There's strength in numbers, in each other. The girls sit on me and Skelly's mattresses. Everyone has a can of expired salt-n-vinegar knockoff Pringles. Me and the boys sit on the floor with our rifles in our laps. We know mom won't be back until afternoon, but the long guns give us comfort, let us believe that we have some control over what happens to us. There's agency in iron and wood. Plus, we use them for work on the farm dispatching pests. We talk, laugh. We're young and we have each other. That's enough.

I catch Skelly sliding rounds into the tubular magazine of his Marlin.

"Your gun was empty?"

"I forgot to reload it after we went out in the woods earlier."

We'd been shooting cans with some neighborhood kids until dark, passing time, seeing who could hit from furthest away, who could hit the fastest, whatever.

"Listen to me, man. You have to be more careful," I say.

"I know," Skelly says, embarrassed.

I resist the temptation to drive the point home. He's hurt. He's thirteen. He just had to hold his crazy zonked-out momma at gunpoint, and he's beating himself up worse for his lapse in attention than I could with my tongue lashing anyway.

We watch Seinfeld DVDs until the sun comes up.

— — —

Me, Skelly, Benji, and Em get to the farm just after sunrise. I manage the place while the owner, a retired professor of agriculture at UGA called Dr. K, is off doing whatever it is he does. It's a job I'm unqualified for. At 19, and with only an 8th grade education, I am the most literate person on site, unless my mom shows up for a day's pay—something she does here and there if

she needs the beer money. She's smarter than me. Reads classics for fun—'least she used to. If she wasn't nuts, if she wasn't a junkie, she could've been anything. But she is nuts. She is a junkie. So, I handle payroll, distribution, and workforce management day-to-day.

Bossing my mom around when she shows is like doing a handstand on Mars in my underpants, but it's satisfying. I make it a point to give her the least desirable assignment I can. Crawling around in the blackberry bushes with their many thorns, pulling weeds, fertilizing the baby bushes, whatever. I should feel kinda bad about that. I don't. Everyone wants a little retribution.

My brothers are my eyes and ears in the fields. They make sure everyone is staying safe and focused while I run the packing shed. They tell me who's drunk (Carlos, always Carlos, though it never affects his performance) and who's showing signs of heat injury (everyone but Carlos, it seems). They run water to the crew every 45 minutes. They take turns firing shotguns into the pines that surround the farm to scare off swarms of migratory birds who will devastate the crop if we let them. Frustrating as all hell. We can't kill the birds, Dr. Krewer says. We just have to shoot over the flock and scare them off to the other side of the field. We chase them back and forth from dawn 'til dusk. Sometimes, a bird will get clipped by accident. Sometimes, it ain't all that accidental.

Every couple hours, I rotate workers from the field to the shade to help me pack fruit for delivery to retailers. Em is sixteen. She stays in the sun all day by choice. She has mastered some precious, unteachable technique for rapidly pulling buckets of ripe berries from the bushes in the fields. Something to do with her long, skinny fingers. She's a wizard. The best. It ain't even close. She outpaces every man on the farm by double. Triple. Compensation for pickers is piecemeal, $5 per bucket. She makes more money than anyone else working out here—including me.

Two years ago, when we first started working for Dr. K, the Green kids burned easy.

Irish-Scandinavian. By now, our necks are leather. It's as though we'd been farming for 400 years, as though we'd been born farming, as though we knew nothing but farming.

I won't see another summer on Dr. K's organic blueberry farm. I've been trying to get into the Marines for a while, and I think they're finally gonna take me. It's not some brave thing. I'm not some brave guy. I have some romantic ideas about war and patriotism, but I look upon those ideas with suspicion. Already, I distrust them. The military is my escape hatch. Going, for me, is a coward's choice. I'll be leaving Em and Rose and Skelly and Benji behind to deal with momma and the farm and The Bluff without me.

The closer I get to shipping out for boot camp, the dirtier I feel about the whole thing, and the more I am forced to confront what it is that I am actually doing: abandoning my family. I worry they won't make it without me. That's my ego. I wanna feel special, important. Greens are endurance maniacs. They'll make it. They've needed to be so strong for so long with so little that they are now equipped to handle anything with nothing forever.

Still, I hope they won't hate me for running off. I pretend that isn't what I'm doing. I say, I wanna serve my country. I say, Marines, 'cause they're the best. The hardest. I regurgitate all the *Honor, Courage, Commitment* crap from the recruiting commercials. I fake like I'm doing something commendable, but I know what it is. I know I'm just not tough enough to be a Green in Woodbine for the rest of my life.

— — —

Quitting time. I sit at the packing shed with my soaked sweat rag hung around my neck. The sun's down behind the pines. I can finally breathe. The crew lines up in front of where I sit with a stack of signed checks Dr. K left for me. I pay everyone out for the week. Em has, once again, made almost twice as much as the second highest-earning worker. I finish just before full dark

sets in. I'm as tired as I've ever been. Me, Em, Skelly, and Benji leave the farm, link up with Rose at the house. Momma is back, hung over. She knows she needs to act meek and ashamed, but I don't think she remembers why. We all pile into the Volkswagen and head on down to the sandwich shop.

The van's full of smiles and memories. Nobody mentions the night before, the knife, the rifles, my nudity. Things aren't good, except sometimes they are. Em buys the whole family tuna subs. Nothing tastes better than anything after a day spent working in 100-degree Georgia heat. We eat half, save half for tomorrow. Momma jacks a couple thick stacks of TP from the restroom. Back at the house, me and Benji and Skelly don't make it ten minutes into the Soup Nazi episode. Sleep comes quick and easy and tonight it lasts. The aluminum bat doesn't fall from the door knob. Our rifles are allowed to collect an evening's worth of dust.

Tonight, there are no dishes. And still no windows to throw them through.

Distance: 55.55 KM

Pissing against my oak, it occurs to me that when it comes to most of my mistakes, I'd make them again, if you gave me the option. One I wouldn't repeat is joining the military.

At the Marine Corps School of Infantry in North Carolina, Sgt. Chamberlain gathered his platoon of privates and privates first class, the odd lance corporal. At 22, I was the oldest in the barracks. "So," Chamberlain said, "Who has questions before we hit the rack?"

Private Townes asked about killing. Right to the point. You have to admire that. Chamberlain told us, then, about his first tour in Iraq back in 2003 when he was 19. He had been manning a machine gun when a small four-door sedan emerged from the boundless desert, racing toward his convoy at great speed, bouncing over the dunes like mad. One of his guys fired a smoke grenade. Booop. The car kept coming. Chamberlain was ordered to fire a burst of warning shots. The sedan sped up. Got to within 100 yards, 75, and then Chamberlain let his 240 rip. Shredded the windshield with .30 caliber slugs. EOD checked the disabled car for explosives, found several, along with two bodies. The driver, a man of fighting age, and a girl of perhaps seven in the back seat, his daughter, they guessed, both ruined by Winchester ammunition assembled in American factories by American workers.

—Meat—

Meat, me and the rest of Platoon 3048 called him. The reasons were two. First, he was dumb, real dumb, dumb like a slab of meat. But that's not why it stuck. Warren was "Meat" because he had the biggest cock you'd ever seen in your life. I had developed, reluctantly, into an expert on the matter. Thanks to the USMC, I have seen more than my share of penises.

In bootcamp, an entire platoon of as many as a hundred recruits showers together, sharing eight or ten showerheads in a stall. Within that small space I saw cocks of all kinds. Big cocks and small cocks and funny looking cocks. Garcia, the palest Hispanic kid who ever lived, he had this sad little nub, really nothing more than a big clitoris. But Warren had a monster dong. A real raging log. Maybe that's the order of things. Maybe dumb guys always have the biggest rods. Maybe God realized that Warren had been shorted in the brains department, and decided to give him an extra helping of pecker as compensation.

I met Warren on the bus to Parris Island. Pale. Dark hair. Big fish lips. His mouth always seemed to be hanging half-open. We teased him about that on the way to PI from Jacksonville. Said things like, Warren, if you don't close your mouth, flies are gonna start laying eggs in there.

Warren might've been a real mouth-breather, but I figured he'd be okay. No worse than me. He told us on the bus that he was from Griffin, Georgia, "Where Doc Holliday was born." He was proud of that, being from Griffin, Georgia, a place where a dentist turned gunfighter popped out of his momma's vagina 200 years ago. I guess that makes about as much sense as being proud of any of the other accidents surrounding a person's birth.

Warren didn't look smart. Warren didn't act smart. He was the village idiot. Every platoon has one. Ours was Warren. He suffered from an unfortunate sort of social anxiety so severe that his service in the U.S. military probably should have been blocked well before he got to Parris Island. I know why it wasn't.

The Marine Corps spends more on recruiting than any other branch of the U.S. military despite being by far the smallest branch of service. This is because being a Marine sucks. All other branches have eight-week boot camps. The Marines do thirteen, plus a month-long mandatory attendance at the School of Infantry where they earn an associate's degree in slaughtering human life. After all this, Marines enjoy slower promotion than any other branch due to the smallness of the Corps as well as the relative average physical excellence of individual Marines. Being fit, being skilled, being tough—it's not enough to stand out in the Marines because everyone is fit. Everyone is skilled. Everyone is tough.

Couple the advancement crisis with the increased likelihood of death and dismemberment, and the only thing the Marines really has to offer prospective recruits is the romantic mythology *of* the Marines. The vague idea of greatness, superiority, that handsome dress blue uniform you can be proud of forever if you don't get your balls blown off in Afghanistan. This is why the Marine Corps spends so much of its annual budget on recruitment. This is also why the Marines end up with so many idiots. Who, other than a dimwit, would sign up for a miserable existence that has the audacity to bill itself as a miserable existence? That's how the Corps ended up with Warren. That's how they got me. That's how they get all the poor kids from Nowhere, USA.

When Warren met some moderate stress, like when a Drill Instructor screamed and spit commands that were supposed to be executed with speed and precision, Warren clammed up. Froze. Lost the ability to speak. He forgot his own name. He became a useless clump of

shivering, ugly mud. We were all thrilled to have him. He took the focus off of us. Not being Warren also had this calming effect on me. If I knew I wasn't Warren, if I could draw some meaningful distinction between him and me, then I was going to be alright. He was dicked.

— — —

One time, during a drill period, Warren, who was something of an aircraft aficionado in his civilian life, got caught tracing a plane that flew over our platoon as we paraded around the blacktop perfecting our close order drill movements. Our Drill Hat—a brown-eyed killer called Sgt. Rios—noticed Warren's attention wandering, tracing the chemtrail of the bird overhead.

"Warren!" Rios shouted.

No response.

"WARREN!"

"Yes, sir!" Warren shouted back. Too late.

"What kinda plane is that, Warren?"

"Sir, it's a—"

"Shut up, faggot. Go chase it."

Warren took off running. He had forgotten the obligatory "Aye sir!" that communicated his understanding of and willingness to comply with an order, though.

"Forgetting something, girl? Get back right now."

"Aye sir!"

Warren fell back into formation.

"Okay, now go chase it right now."

"Aye sir!"

Warren sprinted after the plane, eyes turned up to the piercing sun.

"Un-uh, bitch. Flap your wings," Rios said.

Warren tore off the blacktop, toward the tree line, goose-stepping through tall grass. He flapped his arms up and down, head jerked to the hard summer sky overhead. He chased the plane into the woods. We lost sight of him. It was among the most absurd—and most hilarious—things I have ever seen in my life. Here we were, training to earn the title, United States Marine, to be the hardest warfighters on earth, and there was this guy, an adult human man, chasing an airplane overhead while he flapped his arms like a bird. It took all of me to keep from laughing as Warren stormed back out of the tree line toward the platoon, still flapping.

— — —

Another night, after our drill period, the recruits of 3rd Battalion, India Company, Platoon 3048 lined up. We did this every night after our shower to be counted like inmates before lights out. This was done again at 0400 to be sure nobody had taken off overnight. The Marine Corps. Jail. There is little difference in my mind.

They counted us constantly. There was nowhere to go. All the same, every so often, some recruit would get scared, decide they couldn't hack it, and run off. An alarming number of these runaways drowned in the marsh or else were eaten by swamp monsters. Miles of alligator-infested nothing surrounded the island in every direction. Most of the would-be escapees spent a night in the wilderness before being discovered or coming back on their own to face the music—military prison. Hard labor. Dishonorable discharge. Anyway. We were naked for the evening count-off, save the tiny brown towels that covered us from the waist-down.

Our Drill Hat, Rios, saw something from his station at the front of the squad bay as we counted off. He stopped the count. He walked toward the back of the squad bay with murder on his face, his brim pulled down low, his fists and jaw clenched. His dark eyes bulged out of his

gaunt, brown face. He looked like a caricature of a DI, a silly embellished tattoo artist's drawing. His nostrils flared. His black corframs clicked and clacked against the floor, accelerating like the motor on an old bobber motorcycle. Warren's towel had fallen off. No big deal. This sort of thing was bound to happen in the mad rush to undress, wash off—all of us—and make it back to our places on line in less than five minutes. Guys lost their towels all the time. The thing was to maintain your *bearing*. To act as though everything was fine until you were permitted to move again.

This was something else. Rios burst into flames. He came to Warren, jammed a knife-hand into his chest, shouted.

"Warren… WHY ARE YOU HARD RIGHT NOW?"

Warren could not respond. That social anxiety thing. Our Drill Hat was in the mood for exactly 0 of Warren's bullshit. Lights were due to go out complex-wide in 4 minutes.

"WARREN, I am going to ask you one more time—and so help me Jesus, if you don't answer, I am going to murder you in front of everyone with my bare hands here, now, in this squad bay. And when I'm done, when you're a dead pile of mushy, bloody garbage on the floor, I'm gonna go home, do my wife in the ass, and sleep like a baby. Last chance, Warren. Last chance, you ugly retard son of a bitch. WHY. ARE. YOU. HARD?"

Crickets.

We all knew that we were set to die for Warren, again, as we had so many times already. It was gonna be worse this time. It was gonna be as bad as it could get. Whispers abounded.

Pssst. Say something, Warren.

Speak, idiot.

Warren. Answer.

He did.

"Sir!"

That was something. A start. At the least, it stopped Rios from murdering Warren with his bare hands right then and there.

"Just tell me one thing, Warren. Was it the drill, or the shower that got you all excited? If it was the drill, well, hell, hombre. I can understand that. Close order drill is some erotic-ass-shit when you're driving your heels and cracking that barrel, turning on a dime, looking all sharp and nasty. I get myself hard when I rip a tight-ass about-face. I get it. So, what was it, Warren? The drill, or the shower?"

Silence.

Tense whispers flooded the squad bay.

Oh, Jesus Christ. Say Something!

Drill. Drill. Say it was the drill.

More silence.

Drill. Drill. Drill. Say it was the drill, you jackass. Drill.

Drill. Say it was the drill and you're off the hook, dummy.

A cruel Polish boy named Konecny spoke.

Psssst. Warren. Shower.

Konecny had a linebacker's build. Actually played a bit of college football before flunking out. He bunked with Warren. Big, authoritative. Guy had sway in the squad bay. His words cut through the room. Warren tied himself to the anchor he imagined was a life jacket, spoke those inevitable words:

"SHOWER, SIR!"

He didn't know what he was saying or why he was saying it. He had no idea why his giant penis stood erect. Didn't know where he was or what he was doing. Lost in the sauce, as usual. This time, nobody could contain their laughter. We lost our *bearing*. The penalty for an entire platoon cracking up like this was gonna be bad. Real bad. A sleepless night, for sure. Pain and sweat and blood all day. Minimum. We knew. We had no choice. We laughed and laughed. Certain forces, having gained sufficient momentum, are unstoppable.

We would have died for it. Should've. One thing saved us.

Sgt. Rios, our Drill Hat, a portrait of roughness and discipline, a man I never saw eat or drink anything in my 13 weeks on Parris Island, tried and failed to conceal a large grin beneath the brim of his Smokey Bear campaign cover. Rios had lost his composure, too.

Once Rios knew the jig was up, he let it out. Erupted. Bent at the waist with his hands on his hips. Laughed like a child for a solid minute. Finally, he put his hands in his pockets. Shook his head.

"I'm gonna get you for this, girls," he said.

He never did. Wouldn't have been just. He'd lost his *bearing*, same as us.

— — —

By the end of the second phase, about eight weeks in, the guy still wasn't getting it. He still wasn't fitting in. He was, however, developing exceptional pectoral muscles since he lived on either the quarterdeck or in the sandpits, doing push-ups until beckoned to do high knees or mountain-climbers or crunches, and so on, into eternity. He managed, to my total astonishment, to shoot so poorly on table two—an easy, short distance rifle range—that he was nearly shed from our platoon. Nothing but luck saved him. He was shooting another recruit's target, scoring

hit after hit while his own target remained untouched. His rifle jammed. After clearing the obstruction, Warren came back down to his scope, sighted in on his own target, and finished the stage. Just enough rounds remained in his magazine to save his run. It wasn't a marksmanship problem. It was a Warren problem.

Rios harbored a special slice of hatred for Warren by the end of the second phase of boot camp. The hardon incident, the way Warren had cracked Sgt. Rios's stone exterior made him a favorite and frequent target.

— — —

"LEFT. RIGHT. LEFT. TO THE REAR!"

Our heels drove to the deck in one single, sharp clunk.

We all recited the word "PAUSE," in our heads indicating a period of anticipation before we were commanded to execute the movement, to the rear.

"MARCH!"

Warren tripped over himself. He did this type of thing all the time. He fell down on his face. Scraped his nose on the pavement. Dropped his M16. Warren scrambled to his feet, hoping nobody had noticed. DI's see everything. Rios picked up Warren's M16.

"Huh? Look what I found. Nice rifle. Oh, property of the U.S. Government? Dope. Hell yeah. Tiiiiight. Whose gun could this be, I wonder. Who's the suicidal cocksucking moron who threw this fine metallic death stick on the pavement?"

Silence. 49 of us had rifles. Only Warren stood empty-handed.

"Goddamnit, Warren. You just don't want to be here, do you? That's it. You don't wanna be here. I finally understand. You want to go home, eat snack cakes, and finger bang your kid sister's little teeny girlfriends, don't you? You're a disgrace to this entire platoon. Why these

guys don't beat your brains in with a padlock after lights completely illudes me. Warren. Look at me.

Warren stared back at Rios, dazed.

"You suck," Rios said. "You're ugly. Like a rat. I hate looking at you."

Long pause. Silence. Then, confused,

"No, sir..." Tentative. Unsure. No balls.

"Let's take a poll, then. Who wants Warren to get dropped," Rios said. "Show of hands. Go on. Who wants to see this loser go home? Because you are all becoming a pretty sharp platoon—might set a new final drill record—but this dumbass is dragging you all down. So, who wants to vote Warren off the island? Hm?"

I stood up front. Second squad. This is the price of tallness in the Marines. I didn't raise my hand. I thought the question was rhetorical. We had no say in who got cut. Plus, I had assumed nobody else would raise their hand either. Warren was a disaster, but he was *our* disaster. We had some responsibility to reform him. It was a matter of loyalty, of honor, I thought. Warren was just an anxious boy who didn't know what he had gotten himself into. I thought of myself in similar terms, though I was better at hiding. Much better. What I didn't know, what I couldn't know from where I was standing at the front of formation, was that mine was the only hand that didn't shoot up when Rios asked who wanted to vote Warren off the island. There I was, alone, out of position, and unarmored.

Rios smirked. He came right up to me. Jammed the brim of his campaign cover into my forehead. His breath, onions and assholes.

"You don't think Warren needs to go, huh, Green?"

"No, Sir, this recruit believes that it is the platoon's responsibility to reform recruit Warren and not to dispense of him. He needs help, sir!"

The third person stuff is something all recruits are bound to on the island.

Rios considered what I said. He looked like he'd maybe let it go or maybe stab me to death there on the blacktop.

Rios sucked snot up into his nose, turned his head, spit a magnificent lemon-lime glob onto the pavement.

"You need help, girl."

"Yes, sir!"

That night, back at the squad bay, Rios forced Warren inside of a garbage bin. I was made to stand next to the closed dumpster. When a recruit or DI or whoever approached us to throw trash away, I rapped on the side of the trash bin with my knuckles. This alerted Warren, who would pop up out of the trash like a smelly Jack-in-the-box. He'd greet the trash-bearer, read the clock I held in my hands.

"Good evening, sir! The time on deck is 1650 hours! Good evening, sir!"

He would hold his outstretched arms open until he was handed the trash, then he would drop down back inside the dumpster. This went on for hours. Long enough to humiliate Warren more than he had ever been humiliated, long enough to make me wonder if he wouldn't be better off if he had been dropped, voted off the island, whatever. Sent home. I wondered, too, if I had been right to take up for this boy who did nothing right. Nobody else had. I realized then that Warren and I were more alike than I knew—more alike than anyone knew. I could hide. That's all. I wondered who else was hiding. Everyone, I guessed, except maybe Jones who could do 30 pull-ups and Latimer who ran a 16:30 5K. But then I remembered that it was me, an imposter,

who'd taken Platoon Top Shot honors. We were, all of us, fakers and nonhackers, boys playing war.

— — —

Warren became a United States Marine with me the morning we humped back from The Crucible—a three day simulated battle that will see recruits travel more than 50 miles on foot with 100-pound packs and rifles. We'd started with 50 recruits. 39 of us earned the title. We lost some to injury. Others to weak hearts. My own heart weakened at least once—on day two of The Crucible when I didn't have the starch in my body to drag my friend from the beach head as our landing got drilled on by enemy machine gun fire. I tried and I tried. Pulled and pulled. He only weighed what I weighed. Maybe a couple pounds less. Smoke and gunfire filled the morning. I couldn't move him. I thought I'd pass out or else let my inner loser get the best of me and quit. I never did get him off the beach head. I left him there for someone else to drag. We were all just crawling, slithering, screaming chaos. Nobody noticed.

Our last night on the island, Sgt. Rios cut the newly-promoted Private Warren one more time. Deep. On the quarterdeck, after awards were given out for highest Physical Fitness Test and Combat Fitness Test scores, both to our guide, PFC Haskins, after I got my Platoon Top Shot award for out-performing everyone on the 500-yard rifle range with the M16 service rifle, right before lights out, in front of everybody, Sgt. Rios said,

"You slipped through the cracks, Warren. Hope you don't cost any of these guys their life. They probably have family and friends back home who actually like them."

Warren laughed it off.

Rios stared back at Warren, no smile, no kindness. He shook his head.

“You slipped through the cracks. You don’t deserve to wear the same uniform as me and the rest of these guys. Get outta my face.”

And I realized then that no matter how many 5.56 MM holes I could put in human-shaped pieces of paper from ¼ mile away, I’d slipped through the cracks, too.

That night, I lay in my rack, staring at the ceiling, knowing I’d never see this island or its concrete ceiling again, knowing I’d be gone in a matter of hours, wondering what I’d done all this for. I thought back to the night we had a school circle with Sgt. Louis, our Kill Hat, a muscle bound black man who wore gold jump wings on the outside of his utility breast pocket. His whole job was to break us. To make us strong by making us suffer in the sandpits and on the quarter deck. Occasionally, he and the other DIs would hold little workshops where they’d teach us stuff about war or uniforms or USMC history. The lesson that evening was one of combat care, a sort of field first aid.

After teaching the recruits of 3rd Battalion, India Company, Platoon 3048 how to treat a sucking chest wound, Sgt. Louis told us in thunder, "After you bandage that bitch, you apply pressure, you tell him 'buddy, buddy, you're going to be okay.' Just like that.”

His dark face hardened, contorted, wrestled with itself.

“You look your buddy in the eyes, and you lie to his ass. Tell him he's gonna be okay... but, really, you know he's smoked. Say, *It’s gonna be good, bro*, but really, you know he’s toast. Man don’t need to die that way. Afraid. Scared he’s never gonna get another piece of ass, worried about his momma boxing him up, stressed about his kids back home. That ain’t the way a Marine dies. You tell your homie, *It’s okay, bro*. Let him go, easy-like.”

Sgt. Louis paused a long while.

He snapped out of his trance. “You understand?”

We all bellowed in unison, "Yes, Sir!"

“Scream outcha face!”

“AYE SIR!” we yelled, indicating that we knew what it was like to help a friend die.

We didn’t.

Something in the man’s face told me that Sgt. Louis knew that someday soon, some of us would learn, which meant some of us would have to do the lying while others did the dying.

I looked around, wondered who was who, told myself:

You’ll be okay; you’ll be okay.

Distance: 69.47 KM

Up and down the hill. Round and round in a big circle. Coffee. Piss. Coffee. More piss. Will it never end?

Private Townes asked a follow-up question.“How’d that make you feel, Sergeant?”

Sgt. Chamberlain rolled his head back on his shoulders, looked to the styrofoam ceiling tiles, cackled. Me and the other young Marines, untested in battle or adulthood, looked around at each other. None of us had any problem with what Chamberlain had done. War’s hell. He had to do it. His callous attitude before us regarding something so tragic as the death of a young girl at his own hand rubbed every one of us wrong, though.

Chamberlain laughed and laughed. Finally, he said this:

“Shouldn’t have gone for a drive with Daddy.”

I became a conscientious objector that night.

It took me a while to admit it to myself. Longer still to raise the issue with my superiors. Two duty stations and one year later, I’d get myself kicked out of my beloved Corps. Nothing in my life has been so shameful or so necessary. I will dodge the subject of my discharge for all time for fear that I will be thought effeminate or soft—unsurvivable sins where I’m from. If pressed, I will resort to telling the rare lie. I will never speak to anyone about it. Not lovers. Not family. Not friends. No one but you, here, now, gentle reader.

Call me a coward in your heart if you like. I won’t quarrel.

—The Subway Job—

The .25 is small and silver with imitation ivory grips. It's an early 20th century job. I purchased it from Mark Ingersol's older brother on the train tracks behind the movie theater when I was 14. I carried it everywhere. It wasn't legal. I didn't care. This far south, many laws function as suggestions, enforcement being practically impossible for rural people who hate and conspire against all authority but that of God.

— — —

Skelly and Lemay wait, watch. The parking lot's almost empty. One car left. One customer, a large man.

"Go time," Lemay says. "Fatso, twelve o'clock."

The fat man steps out. Hikes his pants up. Unwraps his seafood sub. Takes a bite. Fidgets with the radio. Backs out. Flips on his blinker. Turns left toward I95 North.

Skelly reaches into his pocket. Thumbs back the hammer. Shivers. It's real now.

This's his first retail joint. He's robbed drug dealers before. Like Speedy who slings Oxy. Speedy's in a wheelchair. Has no legs. Anyway, Speedy ain't pressing charges. Not like the clerk. The girl behind the counter is a civilian. Makes minimum wage. She'll be on the horn. Five seconds after they leave. Black-and-whites, all over the place. Skelly's going to get caught. He knows it. He's going to spend the rest of his teens in lockup.

Stop. Breathe.

Skelly steadies his nerves. His bones won't move. Lemay's breath, all Four Loko.

"Come on, dude. It's time."

Skelly snaps out of paralysis. He pulls down his gorilla mask. It's a relic from Halloween. From before his dad left. From before he'd started smoking. Lemay has no mask. Just a paper bag. Two holes for his eyes.

Skelly and Lemay rush in. Skinny and half-drunk. Adrenaline dumps into Skelly's bloodstream. He reaches into his hoodie. Wraps his fingers around the pistol. Skelly stole it that morning. Took it from my dresser. Skelly's about to pull it. Bury it in somebody's face. Shout the words he's rehearsed.

"Empty the register."

But there's nobody at the counter. Skelly and Lemay freeze up. Look at each other. Look at the door. Nobody moves. Nobody speaks, not for a long while.

He takes a deep breath. Draws the chrome .25 caliber automatic.

Be a man.

He jumps the counter.

— — —

A decade later, when I ask my younger brother what the plan was, Skelly scratches his forehead with his leathery construction worker's fingers. He drags on his cigarette and tells me, "The plan was to rob the Subway." He has a matter-of-fact way of speaking that offers no apologies, no explanation, no excuses. He was who he was. He did what he did. I admired that about him when he was thirteen, coked-up, robbing people. I admire that about him still.

When pressed to give me more, "For the book," Skelly is reticent.

"Man, come on. Let's shoot some guns or ride some motorcycles. I don't wanna talk about this. Just write whatever you remember. Or make it up."

“That’s the problem, buddy. It was ten years ago. I’ve forgotten more about it than I remember.”

“Well,” Skelly says, “It was ten years ago for me, too.”

“But it happened to you. You did it. Come on. Tell me the whole story, from the top, take me back there to that day. What was on your mind? What did you do before? What did you do after? When did you take the .25 out of my dresser? What did you and Lemay talk about? How’d you decide on the Subway? Just start talking.”

“Goddamnit, Nic. You know I hate you sometimes?”

“I know, brother. Me, too.”

— — —

In the kitchen, washing large stainless steel containers, stands the counter girl. She’s 20-something, Hispanic, a little pudgy. She’s too focused on scrubbing and rinsing. She doesn’t notice Skelly standing there with the little chrome auto in his hand. The plan is already coming apart at the seams. Skelly momentarily considers turning around, hopping back over the counter, running out the door, throwing off his gorilla mask and sprinting down The Bluff back to his home while he still can. He moves against this impulse to quit. The words get caught in this throat. All he manages is, “Hey.”

The girl doesn’t scream, doesn’t say anything. Just turns and stares. Skelly tips his head to his right hand, to the small, shiny pistol. He follows her back out front. Lemay stands there, looking unstable, which is easy for Lemay since he is, in fact, unstable. He’s there, a silent threat like a nuclear warhead in its silo, ready to do some wild *Lemay shit* if needed. The Subway girl empties the register of its bills. The plan is coming back together again. It’s like they thought,

late, 25 minutes before closing, the drawer is stuffed with fives and tens and twenties from the dinner rush that haven't been safe-dropped yet. There's no time to count it, but it's a solid score.

Skelly and Lemay pour out of the store, jeans stuffed with messy stacks of cash, some banded, most not. They run hard and fast up the road, back toward The Bluff. They make the tree line and wade into the marshy woods. They ditch their masks. The night is overcast and cool, no moon. Skelly and Lemay make it a few hundred yards back into the pines before they hear the sirens in the distance. Skelly expects to panic at the sound. He doesn't. He rejoices. They've already gotten away. Lemay produces a flask. Svedka. They celebrate there in the forest, passing the vodka back and forth until it's drained. Lemay and Skelly dizzily march in the dark in what they are pretty sure is the right direction. Worry is beyond them. They'll get home when they get home. For now, things are good. There's nothing like being young and drunk and loaded with someone else's money.

Panic catches up to them all at once.

"Shhhh," Lemay says, planting a hand in Skelly's chest. Both boys stop cold. Footsteps, crunching twigs in the distance, and, no. Oh, no.

Dogs.

"Run!" Lemay shouts. If the cops didn't know for sure that they were on the right trail already, they knew now.

Lemay takes off in one direction, Skelly in the other. The darkness of the pine thicket takes over. Skelly realizes he doesn't know where he is, doesn't know how long he's been running. Symbols bang together in his head. The purple swamp around him spins. He doesn't hear the dogs anymore. His ears are full of his own labored breath, his heartbeat's echo, and nothing else. Did they get Lemay? Would Lemay rat him out if they did get him?

Skelly pukes on his red Converse All-Stars.

He trudges forward, makes a concerted effort to put one foot down in front of the other in a straight line, tries not to stumble over uneven ground. He hears the main road, the odd car speeding down it, and walks to the sound. He comes to the treeline, gets himself oriented, starts back toward his house, careful to stay a few yards back in the woods just in case. He comes to the trailer park, decides to stash the cash there under a community dumpster. He disappears back into the woods, walks for about a half a mile, his own vomit wet between his toes.

Out of absolutely nowhere, a roaring white light drowns Skelly's face. He goes stiff, stares back into the white beam. The light stays trained on him. He's caught. It's over.

Static crackles over the police radio. The cop scans left, right, covering Skelly with each pass. He moves forward from the road, toward the treeline. Skelly realizes that the officer doesn't know he's there, that he's somehow missed him standing there, that he's accidentally masquerading among the skinny pines. Skelly takes a deep breath, drops into the rivulet that runs the length of the main road for several hundred yards. His splash is muted by a little waterfall nearby. Cold water sobers Skelly up. He swims with the flow of the rivulet, away from the officer. Over his shoulder, Skelly sees the cop half-ass searching the treeline with his light. Skelly laughs to himself at the clumsiness of it all. He was done for, caught, dead-to-rights, except for dumb luck. He drifts down the road with the small stream until it runs shallow enough for him to stand up.

He walks, dripping, down the road, not even bothering to tuck back into the woods now, emboldened by the near-capture. He comes to the house he shares with his brothers and sisters and his mother on nights she comes home from boozing. He sits on the porch, realizes he's lost the gun he stole from his older brother somewhere in the woods.

Skelly's body is ready for sleep, but his brain isn't, not yet. Fatigue zips through his skinny arms and legs and his mind whips him back into the night. Over and over, extreme tiredness gives way to nervous energy in nauseous waves.

Lemay stumbles out of the woods across the street, falls down, picks himself up, and staggers over to where Skelly sits.

"Dude, we did it."

"Yeah."

"How much you think we got?" Lemay says.

"Not sure. I left my half down at the trailer park in case I got caught"

"Where'd you leave it?"

"Under the dumpster."

"We gotta go get it. Tomorrow's trash day."

"Shit. But we can't walk. Cops all over the place."

"Call Sylvia."

Sylvia, better known in Woodbine as The Virgin Slayer, is the county's only female registered sex offender. She's twenty, on parole for statutory rape, and actively engaged in statutorily raping Skelly, who doesn't mind. He's thirteen going on thirty. Sylvia's thin, short, DDs. Looks like sex and murder with a cigarette between her lips and tight, acid washed jeans pulled up to her bellybutton. Gives Skelly a ride whenever he needs one.

Half an hour later, she's in the driveway honking and cussing.

Lemay and Skelly hop into Sylvia's Civic, tell her to drive to the trailer park. Sylvia is being a real bitch about it, says she doesn't want to get caught loitering there, waiting for them. She has half a point. The conditions of her parole preclude her from being in the company of

anyone under the age of eighteen. It's decided that Sylvia will drop Skelly and Lemay off at the entrance, continue on to the gas station next to the Subway for smokes, and pick them up on the way back after they fetch the cash.

"Keep your blinker on so we know it's you," Skelly says.

Half an hour goes by, and The Virgin Slayer is nowhere to be found. Finally, Skelly and Lemay decide to just walk to the gas station. When they get there, Danny and Smalls are in cuffs on the curb.

"What's up with it boys?" Lemay says.

"They think we robbed the Subway," Smalls says.

"What the hell. Did you?"

"Hell no."

Skelly sees Sylvia taking to a cop in the store, pointing out to him and Lemay. He resists the compulsion to run. Sylvia and the cop come out with Small's girlfriend, Penny. Penny starts going off. "It was them. Nah, miss me with all that. Baby, you ain't going to jail for these punk ass kids who wanna rob a damn Subway. Hell nah."

"Penny, sweetheart, baby, Sunshine of my Love, Shut. Up."

Smalls is a G. Arrest sheet seven pages long. Birdshot lodged in his back from a deal gone wrong. Face tats. All that. An officer comes over to where everyone is gathered outside.

"So, how about it boys? Y'all the ones who robbed the Subway?"

Skelly and Lemay deny it. Danny and Smalls deny it. The cops separate everybody. Take Skelly and Lemay and the girls inside, leave Smalls and Danny outside with a female officer.

Skelly knows what's coming, knows he has to get ahead of the search. "I've gotta go to the bathroom," he says. "I'm serious. I'm about to shit all over the floor."

The cop walks him to the bathroom, says, “Don’t lock the door.” Skelly stands on the toilet seat, lifts a Styrofoam ceiling tile, hides the wad of bills inside. He sits down on the toilet and is surprised to realize that he really does have to go.

When he comes out, they’ve already searched Lemay, found a couple 20-count stacks of $1 bills with Subway branded bands around them. It’s all over.

— — —

Because they’re kids, Skelly and Lemay are released to their parents’ custody pending a court date where they will both be sentenced to probation until their eighteenth birthdays.

That night, Skelly comes clean, tells me he stole my pistol and lost it in the woods during the getaway. Tells me he’ll buy me a new one.

“With what money, jackass?”

“From the robbery. Take me to the store.”

I do, and Skelly disappears into the restroom. Sure enough, he comes out with close to $200 in mixed bills, offers it to me for the lost gun. I hand him a flashlight.

“Show me where you ran. We’re gonna retrace your steps.”

We’re out there all night poking around the woods. False dawn creeps over the marshland and there it is, a gleaming silver handle in the pine straw not far from the rivulet he dove into.

“I don’t even care about the robbery, not that much, anyway,” I tell him. “I’m mad you stole *from me*. You understand?”

He nods.

“Keep your money. You paid a lot for it. Five years of probation is no joke..”

“It’s rusting,” Skelly says, pointing to an orange ploom on the barrel.

“It’ll buff out,” I say, by which I mean “I love you.”

— — —

While we sit at the bar he's built in his backyard out of surplus construction supplies for the first time Skelly tells me about Shaniqua, his probation officer, who gave him a break when he broke down crying during his first drug test because he knew he'd pop positive for coke.

"I owe that woman everything," he tells me. "She gave me the complete schedule for my drug tests so I wouldn't piss hot, showed up in court a couple years later when I got arrested for fighting. She saved me."

I never knew this part of the story, but Skelly is adamant. He wouldn't be a father to his baby girl or a husband to his wife now if not for the grace of Ms. Shaniqua.

"So you got away with *some* of the money."

"Right."

"And I made you keep it."

"So?"

"What'd you spend it on?"

"Food, mostly. Buncha footlongs from Subway."

— — —

Skelly works underground laying pipe, rides motorcycles. Mostly, he spends his nights at home with Aubrey and their daughter.

The .25? I sold it to a stocky farm boy dressed in overalls in Blackshear.

Two days later, I left for the Marines.

Distance: 72.22 KM

Whipping gusts scuff my face. My lips, my big, flapping Dumbo ears, my nose, everything's all wind-burned by hours running up and down this hill. Bruised lungs. Painful breathing. I haven't seen anyone else out here in the cold tonight. Don't blame them. I'd be somewhere else if I had a choice. Unfortunately for me, I said I'd do this thing. That means I have to.

Know what I think?

I think I've spent most of my life in Dixie going bananas for gorgeous girls.

The rest, I wasted.

— The Three-day-long First Date —

I met Aubrie because she was the longtime best friend of a chick named Bridgette I'd gone out with a few times back in 2014. One night we all got together at Bridgette's apartment for movies and board games. I said, "Hey. I'm Nic." Maybe I thought about going for the old switch-a-roo or the three-way. The thought burnt out.

I was handsome in those days. A wannabe James Dean. Passable for backwater work. Wouldn't have played in the city. Even so, Aubrie was out of my league. I boxed. She was a gymnast. Different sports. Different worlds. Let me paint you a picture:

5'2". 115 pounds. Straight, shoulder-length red hair. Fair skin. DDs. Sounds impossible. That's how she looked. Impossible. Slim and bursting at the seams all at once.

In her apartment that night I slept with Bridgette. While we worked, I thought of Aubrie sleeping on the couch in the living room. After, I couldn't sleep. Too hot. Just drove myself nuts until, finally, I went out into the living room where Aubrie was still awake watching *Catfish*.

"What's this?" I said.

"A show about online dating. The people are usually lying about who they are."

"Sounds horrible."

"Total trash."

"Can I watch it with you?"

"Free country," Aubrie said.

From across the room I studied her legs until 5:00 AM, then I fell asleep there in the recliner next to the couch.

The next morning, Bridgette seemed annoyed. Wanted the kitchen to herself. She sent Aubrie and me on an errand to grab coffee and bagels. On the way back, a motorcyclist smashed into the back of a Prius. Flew 20 yards. Died there in the street. Traffic stopped. We sat there, so still everyone killed their engines. We studied each other. I imagined what she looked like naked. Imagined her imagining the same about me. 30 minutes it took to go three miles. When we got back with cold coffee Bridgette eyed us with suspicion. She microwaved the coffee. We told her about the motorcyclist. The morning broke off.

I wasn't halfway home when I pulled over at a rest stop to message Aubrie. *Aubrie, I like you. I think maybe you like me, too. Have a date with me.*

She said no. *But not because I don't like you. It's Bridgette. She'd be crushed. She'd hate us both.*

That's fair. But do you like frozen yogurt?

Who doesn't love froyo?

I had her.

Then let's just see if there's anything here. If there isn't, no harm, no foul, nobody even has to know. If there is, we'll take it to Bridgette together. And I'll take all the blame. Okay?"

We met that Friday. She got plain yogurt with graham cracker crumbs. I had coffee-flavored with Heath bits. After, I asked her to come back to my brick duplex, to talk, listen to music. I'll forever associate her with Jason Isbell and Shane Smith records and hazelnut candles. We jammed to West Texas tunes and snuggled on the couch. I tilted her chin up, kissed her once, twice, three times. Was going for the tongue move when her phone rang.

Bridgette, I thought. She knows.

It was Aubrie's mom telling her to turn on the news, to look at the weather channel. Heavy rainstorm. Tornado warnings through the night. Home, for her, was ninety-nine miles away. Her mom asked to speak to me.

"Now, Mister Nic, I am worried that the road is just gonna be too darn dangerous for Aubrie to drive home tonight. I'm asking you as a Christian woman to open your home to my daughter."

"Yes, ma'am. No problem. She can have my bed. I'll take the couch. Hopefully the weather lets up tomorrow. Y'all be safe up there, okay?"

"Now, Nic, no funny business tonight. Not a single hanky in a panky! Promise?"

"Yes, ma'am. Here's your daughter."

Aubrie's mom gave her the same sage wisdom about hankies in pankies, to which Aubrie responded: "*Mommmm*…"

It rained all night. Heavy. Wind screaming. Lost power. Lit candles. Talked about baby whales and deep space. Kept warm. Hankies be damned. By the time the lights came back on, I hadn't seen Aubrie in a stitch of clothes in close to 24 hours. We switched on the TV, saw that the area was free of storms for the rest of the night. She gathered her things. I walked her to her car. She wasn't going home. Not yet. Tree branch fell on her windshield overnight. Smashed.

Aubrie became my house guest for a second evening. I couldn't get sick of her. She was fun and stunning. She wore my boxers and t-shirts. We ate crackers and peanut butter, felt each other all night. A three-day first date. Never had one before or since. On the morning of the third day, as we lay next to each other, out of breath, she said this to me:

"You didn't… get any in there. Did you?"

"Just all of it," I said.

"Oh. That's. No. I can't have a baby."

"You said you were on birth control," I said. "Are you not?"

"We still have to be careful. Can't risk it. Please don't do that, or we're gonna have to switch to condoms next time. If there's a next time."

"Don't be silly. And okay. I'll pull out. Do you want me to get you something? Like Plan B? Or the morning after pill or whatever it's called?"

"Thank you," she said. "You're sweet. I'll make breakfast." She kissed my fingers.

At the CVS, I said to the clerk, "Say a guy had a careless night. Could that guy buy a morning after pill here? Is that something you sell?"

Her face. "We sell them. But you need to bring the woman with you. You can't just buy it and make her take it."

"Huh? My girlfriend—my *fiancée* (dramatic and untrue, but why not?) is home making us breakfast. Bacon. Eggs. Crepes. I'm glad to bring her here if that'll satisfy your suspicions. Better yet, is there a manager around?"

The manager corrected the young lady. Rang me up. $59.99 for one pill. Jazzy stuff.

After breakfast, Aubrie got sick from the pill. Rested her head in my lap on the couch while she waited for the nausea to fade. Later, her insurance towed away her Camry, got her a rental. She left just before sunset on the third day.

There was something with Aubrie and me. A spark. I loved how she looked, the way she moaned, the way she made pasta with this tangy, spicy-sweet sauce. We told Bridgette together. Said we were sorry. It just happened. That we didn't want to sneak around or deceive anyone,

that we respected her enough to not keep it from her, that we were gonna give it a try. Bridgette took it on the chin. Said she saw it coming. We all stayed friends.

For the next two months, Aubrie spent weekends with me. She'd leave me with a batch of spaghetti to get me through the week. Played country folk records. Smoked menthols in bed after we'd screwed. She was the sexiest woman anywhere in Georgia. Legs crossed, one hand behind her head, lying on her back under a haze of sweet cigarette smoke. That trenchant line from the knob of her hip bone, up her rib cage, skin pulled tight over her mountainous breasts, up her delicate collar bones, to her thin lips. Virginia Slim.

Never mind cancer, all that noise. Smoking *is cool.*

We had a good thing going.

Might've worked out, too.

— — —

But I killed it. Something stupid. That Fear of Missing Out thing. That I Wonder What Else is Out There thing. That What's the Story with the Half-Korean, Half-Irish Chick Named Rachel thing. Young and dumb. I could've been happy with Aubrie. By the time I realized it, she had hooked up with some dentist. Saw them together at a minor league baseball game, not long after she told me she wouldn't come and make me spaghetti anymore.

The dentist isn't as goofy-looking as he seemed that day at the ballpark. It's just Aubrie. She'd make any man look bad next to her. I guess the dentist makes a good living. Dentists are doctors, I think. They have a nice life, I think. I like to imagine he's good to her.

If he ain't—if he loses her—me and the dentist should become pals. Go bowling. Drink beer. Get fat. Talk about what we had when we were young men. And what we lost.

Distance: 79.71 KM

I'm sick. Sick of coffee, sick of the dull pain in my feet, sick of pissing everywhere all the time. Sick of the dark, sick of The Pit, sick of reading, sick of writing. I pray my son chooses to be anything other than a writer or a damned soldier.

—71 Days, 72 Nights—

Fake tits, but you'd never know. Went from an A to a medium C, a sensible upgrade. The job was so good, I only noticed after a month. We were in bed. I was kissing her stomach, working down. My eye caught a scar underneath her breast.

"What's that?" I asked her.

"What's what?"

"There's another one. The scars. Under your boobs."

"Oh. I had them augmented when I was 22."

"Huh. I'd have never guessed."

"That's kinda the point."

Rachel worked as a substance abuse counselor. Held a graduate degree in psychology. Talked about going to med school. She was half-Korean, half-Irish, which is the perfect mix of everything. Smooth, tan skin. Light freckles, dark black hair, a hint of red when the sunlight caught her just right. Short. Thin. Big teeth, which I have always had a weakness for.

— — —

On our first date—a tour of the Fort King George Site in Darien—a hippie lady took a bunch of pictures of us, candid shots from afar. We didn't know what she was up to. She slipped a note under the windshield wiper of Rachel's Miata. There were no other cars in the lot. It said this:

"Hey! It's the hippie lady you saw walking around with a baby carrier on her back and a camera in her hands. I took some pictures of you and your boyfriend being all adorable. You two

are just too cute. Text me if you want them. P.S. This isn't weird and I'm not crazy!"

I have one of those pictures still. Probably, I shouldn't. Probably it's poisoning me from the bottom shelf of my gun safe where it radiates memories of a thinner, less bald me who once loved a girl for 71 days and 72 nights.

— — —

Rachel and I made dinners together. Watched the sunrise in the spare room of her condo which she'd turned into a little library. Fitzgerald and Steinbeck and Hemingway and Salinger. We dressed up and went out on walks downtown, showing off, being gorgeous people, turning heads, making everyone sick. That was kinda our thing.

Rachel said some things. Three weeks in, she told me she loved me.

"Don't say that," I said. "Or I'm gonna love you, too, then we're really screwed."

Rachel believed in me, my passion, my writing, my work ethic. "And you're really crazy, dude," she said. "You wanna be this old man walking a tortoise around on a leash—like, really, what? But I can see myself doing it with you. Being this weird, old, eccentric, couple. And we'll be happy. We'll be happy. I love you and I love the life we're gonna make. I love our kids who aren't born yet and I love our tortoise. Yep. I just love you and this and all of everything."

I told her I loved her, too.

Just like that, she became the second woman I'd loved in my life. For seventy-one days and seventy-two nights she was mine. In that time, we went on trips, went on hikes, screwed by the waves on the island, saw rock concerts together, and, at least once, got drunk in a Target in Orlando in the middle of the day. Vodka. Water bottle.

Then there was this book. I had just got out of the Marines. Last grade I finished was 8th. But I wanted to tell stories. Didn't know what else to do. So I started writing this book. I was

sure I had something, that I knew what I was doing. You can go a long way on confidence and determination and nothing else. But confidence doesn't write good literary fiction, and, as you are by now doubtless aware, neither do I.

The story was about a recently discharged Marine with a traumatic brain injury who becomes obsessed with a pair of old, polished black leather shoes worn by a three-star general. Our goofy protagonist kills the general, steals his shoes. The ensuing investigation maps the DNA of the general and finds that he is the biological son of the infamous Zodiac Killer. Figuring out who this person's dad is would solve a dozen murder cases, cold since the 1960s or 1970s. Sounds pretty stale and awful, right? That's because it was. And she told me so because she wasn't a liar.

We sat in my stupid small bed in my stupid small house. She read and I watched her read. Watched her heavy, brown eyes move back and forth, up and down the manuscript. I couldn't wait for her feedback. Everyone wants honest until they get it. Even me. Especially me.

"I'm not sure what I'm supposed to be paying attention to," she said. "It's not… like, focused. It's *disorienting."*

I'd never written anything before. Never showed anyone anything I'd written. I didn't expect to care, I didn't expect it to gut me. It did. I took the pages from her hands. Kissed her forehead, walked to the kitchen, tossed them in the trash, smashed a double shot of Irish whiskey. Said:

"I'm going for a walk."

Took the bottle.

She found me on the train tracks, a blubbering, nasty mess. A scorned boy with no real tolerance for alcohol. She sat on the rail with me. Didn't say anything. Just sat there, rested her

head on my shoulder. The moon was full and bright. We didn't see or hear anything. Then, there it was. An adult doe standing in front of us, not four feet away. We met eyes with the creature. She pointed. I stared. The doe looked back at us, decided we were neither threatening nor interesting, kept walking down the line. Rachel and I kissed. Laughed about the doe, something about how it was a shame we weren't deer hunting. Went back home.

She put on Coldplay records and we got no sleep.

I knew then that it was over.

She called it off over the phone later that week. I said no, that she was wrong, that I needed to see her. Come over then, she said, so I did, and we reconciled on the kitchen counter. I couldn't sleep that night. Something plain wrong in my gut. Went to her spare room, the little library, tried to write. Nothing came, nothing good. Went to the kitchen where her panties still lied against the dishwasher. Found a box of Nilla Wafers in the pantry. Ate the whole thing. Tossed the box in the trash can. Inside, something treacherous.

A banana peel, and underneath, the wreckage of our relationship. Love letters. The Swiss watch, the orchid, the Salinger short story collection we read aloud to each other on the beach, concert ticket stubs.

She woke up while it was still dark out, found me on the couch in the living room, asked why I wasn't in bed. Said she was cold. Said to come cuddle her.

"I ate all your Nilla Wafer cookies," I said. "I'm sorry. I'm a great big giant fat person."

She laughed. Sat on my lap. Kissed my lips. Put my hands on her ass. Told me it's okay. Told me we'd go for a run later to make up for it. Told me we could get some exercise now if I wanted. Winked. Asked me:

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Why would anything be wrong? I've got my girl. Belly full of cookies. What could be the matter?"

"There's… I don't know. Some sadness in your face."

"I threw the Wafer box away," I said.

"Um," Rachel said.

"Saw the trash. Under your banana peel."

"Shit. I was upset. I didn't mean it," she said. "Shit."

Rachel hopped up, wiped junk off the pile of artifacts. I came to her, pulled the letters from her hands, put them down on the counter. Kissed her. Picked her up. Carried her to the spare room, the library.

We made love there on the desk in the early morning light. June. Hot already by 7:00. On top of her, after we'd finished, a bead of sweat fell from my forehead. Landed in her eye. She looked back at me, disgusted, said nothing. I laughed a little. More nothing.

"I love you, Rachel," I said. The face staring back at me remained a guilty, repulsed corpse. Rotting flesh stung at my nostrils.

"You don't have to say it back if you aren't sure. I know this all happened kinda fast."

She didn't.

We got dressed. Had coffee together. She walked me downstairs. It rained hard overnight. Puddles everywhere in the lot. Rachel wasn't wearing shoes. She had the cutest little feet, toenails painted canary yellow. She kissed me on the curb, told me to call her that night. I walked to my car, opened the door, and turned so I could see her ass—her perfect ass—walking back up the stairs to her condo. But I didn't see her perfect ass. I saw her perfect freckled face,

her eyes, looking at me from the curb, saying, I'm sorry. I know this is gonna hurt you, Nic. Saying, Goodbye.

I faked a smile, got in the car, and there she was, standing in a puddle of water up to her shins, pulling the driver's side door open. She kissed me again. Hard enough to hurt. It wasn't an act of kindness. It was an act of hideous violence. She walked away then without another word.

— — —

I never saw Rachel again. Never spoke to her. Traded a few texts in the days after the night of reconciliation. That's all. She mailed my USMC sweatshirt back to me. Eight months later, she married a millionaire in South Carolina. One of her substance abuse clients. Beautiful ceremony. By the sea. Live band, open bar. Five-hundred guests. A half-dozen big shade canopies. I sent my regrets.

Distance: 83.00 KM

On the steep incline at the rear of Central City Park, my headlamp goes dark. It's still a while before sunrise. A slender blonde girl in yoga pants and a track jacket jogs toward me headed in the opposite direction, a small dog on a leash waddling and panting beside her. I hope she sees me without my headlamp, I hope I don't scare her, I hope she knows I mean her no harm. I thank God for her, for letting me see another person after such a lonely night.

Dad started calling me Mule when I was small. This went on a while before I asked why.

"You're not naturally great, Nicholas. Don't bitch about it. Most people aren't. What I mean is, you ain't smart, boy. You're not strong either. Or fast. But you're tough. Stubborn as hell, and you can take it, and that makes you great." So, I was Mule.

When I got ejected from a city league game for arguing with an umpire, I took my licks. It's true that he went too far that night. It's true that the scar above my right eye has never faded, that the black and purple welts on my ass kept me out of school for a week and off my bicycle for a month, that not long after I underwent hernia surgery. I didn't complain then. I don't complain now.

Back at my truck, while changing the batteries in my headlamp, I forgive my father.

Will my boy ever be able to forgive me?

—Mildred the Wolf—

I didn't love Mildred Gordon while we were together. Never really knew her. Still don't. But I do love her. I have to. She's family.

Mildred is five feet even. Impossibly thin. 90 pounds. 95? Skin and bones and C cups. We met thanks to my kid sister, Emily. Em and Mildred played together when they were young. When they started shaving their legs, they stopped playing together. I blinked and I was twenty-four. Mildred was nineteen.

It was 2014, fall, cold, and overcast all the time in our small, Southern town. I made a terrible mistake. I asked Mildred on a date. Then she made a terrible mistake. She said yes.

Our first date took place on Halloween. Mildred met me down by the ocean at sunset. She showed up on a motorcycle—a jet black demon from hell that roared between her milk-white thighs. October sea breeze cut into her skinny hips and made her shiver as we walked and talked. She was covered in black ink. No color. Color, she said, was ugly.

"My daddy died in a motorcycle crash when I was eleven," she told me.

"That's why you ride?"

"That's why I ride."

Mildred wore black leather pants that hugged her small legs and black boots that came up to her knees with all kinds of zippers and buttons on them. She scared me. Still does. Something irresistible in terror. She was a pharmaceutical-grade narcotic. Hooked me early. Lust and fear.

We argued about whether to have the date, who would plan it, when and where we would meet. She never let me win. If I said the earth was round, she'd say, "It's actually kinda oblong, and you're a selfish, inconsiderate loser-idiot for saying otherwise." My Mildred.

During our first date, on St. Simons Island, we walked, talked, and made out by the beach. I pushed her on the swings. Gave her my red jacket to keep the howling sea wind off her. The jacket was a rip-off of the one James Dean wore in *Rebel Without a Cause,* and I was a rip-off of James Dean. Looked pretty slick. My coat swallowed her petite frame, hung low on her thighs like a dress. I stood behind her, rubbed her shoulders, looked off the pier into the ocean. I told her, "The waves sound angry."

She looked at me, confused.

"Think they're coming for me," I finished.

She turned to me, perched up on her toes, kissed my lips. Then Mildred said the most murderous thing anyone's ever said to me on a date:

"I can't be your girlfriend."

"I disagree," I said. "I think you can. I think you should."

"You're cute. But no. I can't."

"Well, why the hell not, Millie?"

"It's not because I don't like you. I do. It's just—damn. There's no time."

"Say what you mean," I said.

"I'm going to jail," Mildred said, burying her face in her hands, crying. I held her small hand in mine. Her icy, thin fingers bunched into a fist.

"Explain," I said.

"My uncle gets out in a few months."

“Uhm,” I said.

“He’s in prison.”

“For?”

Mildred ignored my question.

“I’m gonna kill him.”

I’d known killers in the Marines. Not warfighters. Killers. People who’d be killers no matter where you put them. Mildred had that same killer sharpness. You just knew.

“Don’t kill him. That way you can be my girl. Disco. Problem solved.”

“I’m gonna put his nose through his goddamn brain, sweet prince.”

She always did that—called me sweet prince.

I had questions. She made me understand. Her uncle needed killing on account of he was a sorry pervert who’d ruined her childhood. Well, hell. Mildred was off. She planned to kill her uncle. She was gonna do it. She was a nutcase. Dangerous. That’s it and that’s that. I should have kissed her goodnight and blocked her number. But I didn’t. Truth is, I liked it.

Mildred was all my favorite black metal music. I wanted to kiss her, rip her clothes off, and keep her until she cut my head off and put it on a stick.

After she outlined her murder plot, we got in my car down by the water, turned on the heat and kissed like teenagers, which, I guess she was, being nineteen. She grabbed at my crotch. Felt something. Grinned. Licked her lips. Flicked her black eyelashes. Said, “What’s that?” I produced from my jeans a stupid .32 automatic, an unlicensed Hungarian copy of the Walther PPK. Fakeass James Bond gun. Fakeass James Dean coat. I was a real fraud. It didn’t matter. All I had to sell was confidence, or the illusion of confidence, what my 24-year-old self imagined a man should be, and it was enough. I was enough.

"That's hot," Mildred said, stroking the right grip panel with her soft finger tips.

We kissed some more.

I unbuttoned her jeans. She told me no. Said she was on her period.

"I don't care," I said. Felt her smooth, hairless pelvis. Kissed her neck.

"No," she said. "No, I don't like to on my period. It hurts. Take your cock out." I unzipped my pants. She stopped me. Grabbed my hand, pulled it to her lips, sucked my fingers, said, "You want my mouth, baby?"

I said I did. I said I needed it. She smiled her killer's smile.

"If you want my mouth or anything else, you're gonna have to take me on another date, sweet prince."

"Okay," I said.

Balls. Purple. Swollen.

I walked Mildred to her car. Said goodnight. She was unstable. Intent on perpetuating violence. Plus, she wouldn't let me take her clothes off. I never expected to see her again.

— — —

I was at McDonald's a few nights later with my teacher friend, Bri, watching her inhale burgers and nuggets, trying to soak up alcohol and sober up.

Mildred texted me, told me then that she was on the island, St. Simons, that she just needed to get away for the night, that she was holed up in a hotel, a fancy one. She gave me the room number.

She *was* a total walnut. But she was also a ten, a real knockout, terrifying, sexy goddess on a motorcycle with a flat belly and perky tits and dark hair and wild green eyes. It was more than that, though. The chaos. The storm. I grew up in a meat grinder: violence, addiction,

instability. She felt like home. She told me she wanted me. What was I gonna do? Stay in Woodbine? I never had a prayer.

I dropped Bri off at her place, told her to wish me luck.

"Have fun," she said, squinting, wagging her drunk finger in my face. "Be safe. Use *condoms*."

"You don't use condoms," I said.

"Shhhhhhhh," Bri said the way I imagine she'd *Shhhhhhh* her third grader students. "You use them."

"Condoms suck," I said.

"They do suck." She laughed. "Goodnight, Nic! Good Luck! Have fun!"

She shut the door. I waved, put the car in gear, and my teacher friend was back, tapping on the window. I rolled it down. "Yeah?"

"No condoms!" she yelled, stumbling away toward her front door.

I smiled. Shook my head. And I was off. Raced up 95 doing 95. I found the place, this ritzy two story job on the ocean. One look and I knew I had no business being there. When you're poor, white trash, you know when something's too good for you. I parked. Jumped the curb. Found her room on the first floor, thought about texting her to tell her I was outside. Nah. That's beta. Knocked three times, firm, so she'd know I was there, so she'd know I was a man.

She came to the door in pajamas. Soft eyes. She'd been crying. It was almost two in the morning. But this *wasn't* a booty call. The night had broken Mildred, you could tell. I wrapped her up in a hug, wiped the crusty black eyeliner from her cheek, told her she looked beautiful.

We played Scrabble in bed. I won (I always win).

"I'm sleepy," Mildred said. "Hold me."

We turned out the lights. Got tangled up. She stopped me before we really got started. Said she didn't want this. "Okay," I said. Tried to talk to her, to see what was going on in her head. It unraveled in four seconds flat.

"You're a shitbag," She screamed. "You just wanna drill me and leave like they all leave. Just wanna cum in my ass and book it. I hate you. I hate you all."

"That ain't true, I just want to understand why you stopped, why you look so mad. Why are you so crazy all the time, sweetheart?"

"You don't care about me or how much pain I'm in. I'm still in love with my ex and you're just trying to bang me."

"Oh, Jesus, Millie. Then what the hell did you call me out here for? Huh? Call him. Don't call me. This is insane."

"I just wanted you to hold me," she said.

"Okay! Fine! Then I'll hold you," I said.

"No, now you ruined it."

"I ruined it?"

"You ruined it. You're an asshole, and you ruined it," she cried.

"Oh, enough. I can't deal with you. I'm leaving."

"You're such trash," Mildred said.

"I'm going. Don't bother me again," I said.

She buried her face in the sheets, cried and cried. I got my wallet and phone and fake James Dean coat and left. Slammed the door on my way out. My ears burned in the cold night. Coming there had been a mistake. I couldn't wait to get on the road, to buzz down 95 with the radio tuned to 104.5, listening to the whackjob conspiracy theorists on Coast to Coast AM

talking about how the pyramids were probably built by prehistoric Martians. Couldn't wait to forget all about the crazy, beautiful, skinny girl with black hair who wouldn't agree with me about anything or let me take her clothes off.

I got to my car.

Oh, no.

Oh, Jesus. God. No.

No.

I stood still in the parking lot, staring at my beat-to-shit white Impala, one tire rolled up over the curb. I patted my pants pockets, my coat. Nothing. I left my keys there in her room on the nightstand.

I thought about leaving my car, walking home. But it was 40 miles. I thought about calling a friend. Tried Cameron. He was asleep. We talk sometimes about what might have happened if he picked up the phone, came and got me.

I was so mad, so embarrassed, I couldn't remember which room was hers, knocked on the wrong door. A middle-aged man opened up, scowled at me, said nothing. Rubbed his beer belly through his tank top.

"Sorry. Wrong room," I said.

He slammed the door in my face.

I tried the next one. No answer. Not for a long time. I was about to knock again when Mildred opened the door. She was in an untied white robe now and nothing else. She fell into me, bawling. Heat poured from her chest. She said she was sorry. Took me by the hand, pulled me into bed. I didn't even get to explain why I was back, that I'd left my keys. She just took it

for granted that I was there to make nice. So we made up. We made up and made up and made up.

I woke up before dawn. I watched her, studied her face, her freckled shoulders, her endless tattoos. Blacks and greys all up and down her spine. A howling wolf on her back. The words *Beautiful Disaster* across her stomach. She woke up then. Asked me why I was staring at her. We made up some more. Had breakfast in bed. Waffles and orange juice with sausage links.

— — —

Had I not forgotten my car keys, the next five weeks wouldn't have happened. Wouldn't have bought each other presents celebrating a month together. A typewriter for me. A 9MM pistol for her. It occurs to me now that buying a handgun for a woman who's confessed her plot to murder her uncle may have been shortsighted.

If I'd had any sense at all, we wouldn't have gone camping.

That's where it happened.

I met her Saturday night after my pawn shop shift. It was already dark by the time we made it to our campsite. No problem, not for me. I put the tent together without any light. I'd practiced this in the backyard. I built a respectable fire in minutes. Cheated, used a Vietnam-era trioxane compressed fuel tablet to get the thing started. That stuff would burn in a glass of ice water. But she never knew. I looked like a real mountain man. She loved it. Me Tarzan. You Jane. We were dumb and young and perfect that night.

I made her soup over the flames. She never ate much. Had two bites. Took my hand, led me to the tent, undressed, pulled me on top of her, whispered in my ear,

"Do whatever. I'm yours. I'm all yours."

If I live to be 8,000 years old, that'll still turn me on.

The night was bitter cold. In the teens. The coldest night of the year. We had just the one sleeping bag and a couple light blankets. Kept warm though. Never stopped moving.

— — —

On our third date Mildred told me that she couldn't have kids. That she was angry at God about it. That it wasn't fair. It would've been stupid to believe her, if I believed her, but I'll level with you, gentle reader: I never really worried about it. She said it wasn't possible, and if it is, well, that's okay. It's the South. You get a girl pregnant, you just marry her. No big deal. Millie was beautiful and mad and interesting. I figured I could do that for the next 50 years. It's what degenerate gamblers think of as a win-win without understanding the rules of the game, without recognizing that they're playing Russian roulette with a semi-automatic weapon.

I got Mildred Gordon pregnant in a grey tent that had been a Christmas present from my boss at the pawn shop the year before. It was mid-November, 2014. I knew before she did. I knew the next morning. We had breakfast at the Waffle House where she picked at some hash browns and drank sweet tea. I asked her if she planned on drinking at all during the week. She rolled her eyes. Asked why that was my business. I said it wasn't, that I was just curious. No, she said, she didn't plan on drinking any alcohol that week. Relief spilled over me. I ate 12 eggs, a double patty melt, and triple hash browns with cheese, mushrooms, and chili. I ordered a piece of pecan pie, too. The waitress thought I was bullshitting, but I ate every bite.

"We camped out last night. Worked up an appetite," I said. "Tell this one she needs to eat, too. We were *burning calories* last night, miss."

We all laughed.

I could tell I'd embarrassed Millie a little. Her pale cheeks burned bright red and she kept burying her face in her hands, laughing through her fingers. I was an ass. I didn't care. I was so damn happy, high on sleeplessness and sex with a beautiful, dangerous woman. I ate and ate.

Victorious morning.

— — —

The next weekend, Mildred and I were in a cheap hotel room, the kind I could afford. She brought an Xbox machine. Asked me to play games with her. I did. She won. I got us hamburgers and chili dogs to eat.

Millie and I made love on the rickety bed. It was sweet sex, not the wild, un-evolved violence we usually shared. I picked her up in one arm. She weighed nothing. I carried her to the shower. She was in before me, warm water beating on her back. I spun her around, pulled her close, kissed her neck from behind. She freaked. Screamed. Tried to slap me.

Wait. What. What the hell? Why? What's happening? Am I dreaming? Did I step on your little toes with my caveman feet? There was no time to say anything. She was slipping and sliding, swinging at me with small, clenched fists. Her shots smacked against my chest and shoulders as I jumped out of the shower. She followed me, murder in her eyes. Dripping wet, I stumbled out into the cold room. She slammed the door. I stood there, staring at the particle board, completely lost. I tried the handle. Locked. I heard her in there, crying over the sound of running water.

I stood next to the air conditioner, shivered myself dry. I imagined her in there, sitting with her head in her hands and the water beating down on her slender back. I got in bed. Ran my fingers through my hair. Waited on Millie to come out and talk me through whatever had just happened. An hour dropped off the clock. 90 minutes. Then I was out.

I woke up to Millie diving under the covers and pressing her frozen little body against mine. She shivered. Her teeth chattered.

"Don't do that," she said into my armpit.

"Do what?"

"*That*. The shower. Don't come up from behind me like that."

"I was hugging you in the shower after we had sex. It was sweet. It was supposed to be sweet."

"It reminds me of something that isn't sweet, and you can't do it."

"How am I supposed to know, Millie? You don't tell me anything. You just start swinging on me. And how do you think it makes me feel? I'm trying to enjoy a shower with my girl and she freaks, yells at me, tries to hit me? Like I'm some kinda monster? Like I'd ever lay a mean hand on you? What is that, baby? You can't start punching me for kissing your neck."

It descended into madness right away, like it always did. Yelling. Name-calling. She didn't explain and I didn't understand. We never communicated.

Then I messed up. I'd bottled up so much anger and frustration as I tried and failed to navigate her frequent, violent mood swings. It all came out there.

"If you don't know the goddamn difference between me—your boyfriend who just wants to love you—and a rapist, then why don't you just go on and git? Why don't you leave? Get outta my shitty hotel room. Get outta my shitty life."

"You want me to go?" Millie asked.

"Yes. Go. Get out of here. It's over. Forget I exist," I told her. I didn't mean it. Didn't think she'd really go. I thought we'd say sorry and screw until sunrise the way we always did.

Mildred stood up. Gave me one last look at her nakedness—a vicious parting shot. She put on her jeans, leather jacket, and motorcycle boots. Slammed the door.

That was the end of us.

— — —

January.

She told me she'd missed her period. Took three tests. I told her it was okay. That I'd come see her. We'd fix this thing, get back together, get married as soon as we could arrange it. It seemed like the right move. She was crazy as hell and we didn't understand one single thing about each other, but I'd marry her if she'd have me.

I believed then and I believe now that kids need parents. Plural. My home life growing up was ruined by divorce, addiction, poverty, and violence. It's gotta be better if parents stick together, if they find a way to model love and companionship. Me and Millie were going to find a way. That's what you do. You make it work. For the kid, for each other, you put away your weapons and figure out how to love each.

"I'm getting an abortion," Millie said to me around Valentine's Day.

"No," I said. "Don't. Please, don't. I'll raise him. You don't have to be involved if you don't want to be," I told her. "Don't murder my boy. He wants to live."

I expected an argument. Something about women's reproductive rights. An argument I'd lose. That's not what happened. Millie threw me nothing but curveballs.

"How do you know it's a son?"

"I've always known," I said.

Any time I thought about my destiny, about my purpose on earth, about my ideal life, there was my boy with big ears and squinty blue eyes just like mine.

“You’re so stupid,” Millie said. “I hope it’s a daughter so you can disown her like I know you want to.”

She didn’t let me go to most of the appointments. Didn’t tell me what was going on. Kept on threatening to abort him until she was around 600 months pregnant.

I went to the baby shower. Millie gave me a tie to match her dress, a black and blue thing that hugged her big belly and made her look less dangerous than she was, like she wouldn’t hack your face off with a rusty hatchet and feed it to you.

Mildred asked me to take pictures with her and her giant belly. She cradled her stomach. I stood in front of them with my rifle in my hands, ready to protect them, her idea. Made for a good picture. Don’t know if a copy survived. We fought throughout her entire pregnancy about everything. I wanted to get back together. She didn’t. I started seeing someone. Then all of a sudden, Millie wanted to get back together and I didn’t. She told me I wasn’t going to see him when he was born, told me I was, told me she wanted me at all the appointments, told me she never wanted to see or speak to me again. We never understood anything each other said. As often my fault as hers. We were both wrong all the time.

The only thing Millie and I have ever agreed on is that we’re both glad she chose to give birth to our son, Walton. Born in August of 2015. Came out furious, flailing his baby hands and screaming, pissed off, bright red Irish-Scandinavian face, big ears and blond hair and a silly hairline. As an experiment, I’ve mixed baby pictures of me into a stack full of Polaroids of him and shown them to friends, family, anyone who will look. Nobody blinks. We’re the same. He looks like he was made by me and me. Paternity: Solved. If only we could figure out who the mother is.

After he was born, I saw him a handful of times. We’d go for walks in the park. I’d hold him. She’d walk alongside, watching us. She told me once that he was never so well behaved

when someone held him. She kissed me on one of those walks. Said something crazy. Said, "Give me a daughter." I think she was already pregnant. Not mine.

She married him. I'd visit our boy at their house for the next few months.

Having him lit a fire under my ass. Let me know I had to do something other than work the gun counter at a pawn shop. I went back to school. As a student, I was broke. She couldn't get much out of me—dirt poor. We fought about that and everything else. I stopped seeing him on weekends. She snipped me out. Asked me to sign away my parental rights. Said her husband wanted to adopt him. Said he deserved a regular family and a real dad, said they were leaving for Alaska and I'd never see him anyway, that I might as well just sign away my rights since I couldn't do a decent thing for him otherwise. Told me I didn't deserve him, couldn't afford him. Cut me up. Let me bleed out.

I made another unforgivable mistake. Signed her lawyer's papers. Forfeited my rights to my only son. Told Mildred to keep his life simple, to not tell him about me, ever. I sold away my rights to my only child. There's no legal provision in Georgia to get them back.

After less than a year she divorced the guy. She's had one boyfriend after another ever since.

— — —

A few times I've told Mildred we should try again. That she should move to Milledgeville, live with. Date me for a year, then marry me and raise our boy together. It makes perfect sense to me that I should have a life and a family with the mother of our child. It's the most logical, rational, honorable thing. We'll just be a family. It's obvious. It's necessary.

It's also crazy. It'd never work. Mildred and I don't have the first thing in common. She hates me anyway. God tells me to love her every day, but I might hate her, too.

“I’m not interested in that with you,” she said.

Good call, Millie.

What else?

I could tell you that the whole thing rakes my guts out, makes me feel like a boy who will never be a man. I could tell you that it pokes holes in my heart every day. I could tell you about the time I drove four hours to take him to the fair last year only for Mildred to cancel on me last minute.

I’ll tell you this: If it weren’t for me, if it weren’t for Walton, Mildred would be serving a prison term for murder. By the time Uncle Creepy got released, she’d been a mom almost a month. He saved her.

My boy is a stranger. He doesn’t know who I am. He calls Mildred’s ex-husband Dad. I guess that makes me Nobody.

— — —

On my son’s fifth birthday, I called Mildred in the morning. Blocked.

I went to work.

By sunset, the day got too heavy. I put it down. Cancelled my evening class. Figured my students wouldn’t mind. Fixed myself a steak dinner with potatoes, greens, cornbread, and a glass of milk. Settled in on the couch to watch *The Place Beyond the Pines* for the twentieth time. It always reminds me of the time in Manor Park.

— — —

Walton was about six months old. Fussy. He balled his fists, screamed, cried, howled into the midday sky. Mildred said she was going to have to cut our visit short.

“Don’t, Millie. Just wait here. Please. I’ll fix it.”

I didn't know anything about babies. I sped down the street praying for a sign, something, anything. I saw a Dairy Queen, whipped my Impala into the drive-thru, and bought my boy a vanilla soft serve. I raced back to the park. I handed Mildred the ice cream cone.

"Thanks for waiting. Try this."

"Babies don't ordinarily eat ice cream," Mildred said.

But it worked. Walton gummed his vanilla sugar cone. He stopped fussing.

— — —

Back on my couch, the scene where Ryan Gosling gives his son his first bite of ice cream played. I sobbed over my steak dinner. Soaked my cornbread. Rewound.

Distance: 87.11 KM

Sunrise, thank Christ. Cold, wet, windy night that, it seemed, would never end—good riddance. I lose the headlamp back at my truck, toss it in the toolbox. I push Gatorade. No more coffee. I resume my run with a stick of beef jerky in my left hand. I tear pieces away with my teeth while I move. I focus hard on chewing and swallowing. I haven't made it this far to choke to death on processed beef.

I consider as I run and chew my jerky what it might be like for alien beings who process time non-linearly. They could see everything that ever existed in every space it ever occupied all at once, like Vonnegut's Tralfamadorians. They could see me finishing this long run later today. At the same time, they could see me and Kaitlyn on our first date a couple years gone—a picnic down by the lake on a sunny October day, the apple slices and eggs and coffee I prepared for us, her black tights and burgundy dress bright against the lawn, the turtles and geese soaking up the light.

To be a Tralfamadorian.

—February 26th, 2019—

I was supposed to marry you yesterday. It's finally true. We didn't make it.

— — —

The 25th is an important day to your family. Your grandparents' anniversary. Your parents', too. It was always going to be February 25th. My idea. I cared about your heritage, your dead dad, the mythology surrounding your family, all that. Maybe because mine was such a mess. Either way, the 25th of February became an important day to me. I wouldn't have it any other way. You freaked out when you looked at the calendar.

"That's a Monday. No one gets married on a Monday."

"Little Pumpkin," I said, "we can't *not* get married on a Monday. Unless you wanna wait another year. I do not."

"I know you want to do it on the 25th, and it means a lot to me, too, but I worry no one will show up."

"To hell with anyone who doesn't love us enough to take the day off work. We're getting hitched on February 25th. You can plan everything else for the wedding. The venue, the colors, the time of day, my suit, the works. But that's our day."

You sat with it a second, then proclaimed, "I actually love that. *Screw 'em* if they don't care enough about us and our wedding to make it a priority. I love it, and I love you."

Yesterday came. We didn't get married at the Buie Barn in South Georgia like we'd planned. I think that if I'd have made one, maybe two fewer mistakes, we would've.

— — —

You are my dream girl. Here, the choice of the present tense matters. I haven't seen you in close to a year. Still, it's you. It's always been you. It could never be anyone but you.

Ever since I met you in Dr. B's senior 20th Century American Lit seminar. You had a boyfriend, a skinny, kind-looking guy with no beard. I had two or four girls I saw when I wanted to. Nothing regular. I waited for y'all to break up. For months and months, I waited. All semester, I waited. I graduated. Waited some more. It didn't happen. You stayed together.

I reached in my toolkit. Saw it was empty, except for a big, red brick. I threw that big, red brick right through your relationship's window. I apologize. Not to you. To him. If I had it all to do over, I would again wreck his relationship with you. I would again be sorry there wasn't another way.

Yours was the sharpest tongue on campus. Your wit was quicker than mine. Your red hair and green eyes and freckled nose pave my dreams—nightmares which, themselves, have nightmares all the time. I had to have you, Kaitlyn.

— — —

Remember how I went about it? Added you on Instagram. Then, radio silence. I didn't *slide into your DMs*. That's gross. I waited for a real opening, some kinda sign. I put all my eggs in that basket, that a sign would come, that I'd get a nudge from God to go for it. He lit my path and made it clear.

A week after I added you, you posted a picture of a .45 Colt cartridge pinched between your little fingers, nails freshly done-up, like always. Highland green in the picture, I'll never forget. The caption: "Going to shoot my father's guns this weekend. RIP Daddy, we love you!"

My chance.

I liked the picture, then dropped down, commented this:

"I've got a couple boxes of .45 Colt I'm not gonna use. Don't even have the gun anymore. They're yours if you want them."

I'll tell you something now that you never did know, sweet girl. I didn't have those bullets. When you agreed to meet me, I went out and bought them from Sam down at the Oakwell Armory off Scrubby Bluff. With a bottle of solvent, my tab came to $56 even. No change. I took that as a sign, too, a harbinger of good things to come.

You asked me if you could get the bullets before the weekend.

"Yes," I said. "They're out in my truck. Want to get lunch?"

Lunch, you said, would be fine.

My scheme worked. It was a date. Only you didn't know it.

We met by the lake behind my work at noon. Sat on a blanket under an oak, felt the sun on our faces, sipped coffee, ate boiled eggs and apple slices, watched the turtles and the geese. We talked for hours there by the water. My office thought I'd been captured by ISIS or something. Chemistry, baby. We had it like Walter White.

About 3:00 PM, I clamped down. Said,

"You've got a boyfriend still. Don't you?"

"Yeah," you said. Seemed like you wanted to run away then. There was no un-firing that shot though. I dug into the hillside. Prepared for siege.

"Listen, I respect you. I do."

"Uhm. Okay," you said.

"I want you to have a date with me."

"Oh," you said. "That's. Hm. That's bad for you."

“Bad how?”

“If I were single, I’d be into it. But I’m not.”

“I know that,” I said, “but if I don’t try with you here and now, I’ll regret it when I’m old and crusty. I want you. Okay? I intend to pursue you. Think about how you’d like to handle that.”

“How I’d like to handle it?”

“Whether or not you’d like to tell me to piss off.”

You gave me the craziest look, like I’d done some unimaginable acrobatic trick.

“Okay. I’ll think about it,” you said.

We packed up our picnic. I went back to work, explained to Holly and my boss, Cindy, what had happened. Told them I’d stay late to make up the hours. Apologized for going MIA. Told them the truth: I couldn’t have come back any sooner if my job depended on it.

I’d engineered a chance. I let fate take over. Days ran away like an old, smart buck who’s seen friends disappear winter after winter and smells the hunter upwind. October marched on. I figured you decided to handle my direct, purposeful declaration of interest by not handling it at all. The modern way. Ghosting. Then, a text came.

“Thanks for the bullets,” you said. Nothing else.

“You’re welcome,” I said. “You think about what I said?”

“Some,” you said.

“Can I see you?” I said.

“What are you doing right now?”

“Nothing that can’t wait, Kaitlyn,” I said.

I was at work. Figured I'd beg off to be with you, or else, I'd quit on the spot. I am a man obsessed with logic and responsibility. This wasn't that. I didn't care what made sense.

"I'll meet you at the college in like 20 minutes," you said.

"See you in 20," I said.

I ran over to my boss, Cindy, told her the truth, that you wanted to see me. Asked if I could come in early or stay late or breakdance for her amusement or do anything at all to leave early and be with you. Cindy, the best, most reasonable, compassionate, patient boss a person could ask for, she told me to go and see my lady friend. Said we'd figure out the hours tomorrow. Wished me luck.

You roared up alongside my truck in your silver Mazda, rolled down the window, said, "Get in. I'm driving."

"Are we robbing a bank or something?"

You rolled your hard, green eyes to Mars and back.

"Get in or don't. I'm leaving."

I got in. You wore that black and orange Halloween print dress. You drove like an escaped mental patient to St. Simons Island. We got out, walked the pier. You talked about nothing, mostly. Your classes. Your work. You were off somehow. Aggravated.

"What's up with you?" I said. We sat on the same bench down by the waves that I once sat on with my son's mother, Mildred, before she was my son's mother. I could've told you then about Millie, about my boy. I didn't. Big mistake. I didn't know it yet.

You ignored my question.

"Hey, Kaitlyn. You okay?"

"No. My boyfriend, whose name is also Nick, but with the 'k'."

"What about him?" I asked.

"He plays video games all the time. We never have sex anymore, and I'm wondering, like, why don't I go on a date with this guy who seems super excited about me, who I am pretty excited about myself?"

"I'd like to know why not, too."

"It's out of loyalty. Nothing else. He's a good person. He is. And I've been with him two years, but it's like we're not in a relationship. It's like we're friends. And it's BS. I respect him. But..."

"Kaitlyn," I said, "Look at me."

"I'm looking."

"Listen: I'll never play video games. I'll screw your brains out every night. I never want to be your friend. Give me a shot. I won't blow it."

How I wish that last part were true.

"I don't know," you said, softening.

We got ice cream, walked and talked some more. You told me you lived in a three-story house out there on the island, so you were a *real* islander, not some poor-ass shack-dwelling poser. I told you I didn't care about any of that. That I'd been a shack-dweller most my life, and never anywhere as pretty as the island, either.

We went back to the college. Night settled over us, chilly. We stood between your Mazda and my single cab pickup. I said, "Goodnight, Kaitlyn. Talk to me soon. I want to see you again."

You wouldn't leave. Kept stopping just short of jumping back in your silver sports car. Kept prolonging the conversation. I gave you one more chance.

"It's after nine. Won't he wonder where you are?"

"Probably," you said. You made no motion toward your car door.

I put both hands to your pale pink cheeks, kissed your lips. You kissed me back. Soft. Slow. We pulled apart, looked at each other. You said just one word to me:

"Goodnight."

You drove off then, less aggressive, back to the island.

Left me standing by my truck wondering what the hell had happened.

— — —

Nothing. Two days. Nothing.

I didn't want to press. Didn't want to smother you. I'd made my intentions more clear than any reasonable person ever would. Maybe that was the problem. I had not behaved like a reasonable person. Maybe you wanted a reasonable person. Maybe you needed time.

By the third day, I couldn't take the silence anymore.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," you said. "Was wondering when you were gonna text me."

"The way you left the other night. Wasn't sure if you wanted to hear from me."

"You surprised me is all. Scared me. I've never been around anyone so direct as you are in my life, except maybe my dad. It's kind of a shock."

"I don't know how to do anything else," I said. "Don't much want to either."

"Neither did he."

"What was his name?" I asked.

"Kevin. Kevin Paulson Brown."

"How'd he die?"

"Ass cancer, when I was twelve."

“See Brand New with me on the 27th. It’s my birthday. I have tickets.”

“I can’t. Can we do something next weekend?”

“We can,” I said, “but only if you’ll have lunch with me during the week, let me read you a story by our tree.”

“Our tree?”

“Yes. Our tree.”

— — —

I went to the concert by myself. Nosebleed seats. A chubby, old, lady ticket usher came to me, asked if I was alone. I couldn’t just say, “Yes.” I always give too much information. Not out of nervousness. I enjoy talking to people. It’s why I refuse to use the self checkout at the grocery store. For one thing, I don’t work there. For another, I value those micro-interactions with strangers. The whole human experiment depends on that kind of random kindness.

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s my birthday, too, but the girl I’m chasing has a boyfriend she hasn’t broken up with yet, and like all modern people, I have no friends who are available to do anything social with me ever even once.”

“Bless your heart, sugar,” the chubby, old lady usher said. “Want to upgrade your seat to VIP? There’s one available down there, right in front of the stage. So close you can smell the band.”

“Oh, no, ma’am,” I said. “I can’t afford that, I’m sure.”

“It’s free, sugar. Happy birthday,” she said.

Another omen.

— — —

You came over that Friday night. The idea was to play Scrabble. We got halfway into a game. I was winning, but I couldn't keep my hands off you. Kissed you on the couch for hours. Put on a Clint Eastwood flick.

"I should get going," you said at around 10:00.

"No, you shouldn't," I said. "Lay down with me."

"God, I would, but I can't. I can't."

"You can. Or I can walk you out. You choose. But know that I want you to stay. Even if you prefer to keep your clothes on. I want you to stay."

"I guess I could lay down for a little while."

"Good," I said. Picked you up. Carried you to my bedroom down the hall.

We must've made out for the next six hours. Lips chapped. Chins rubbed raw. Kiss me for a month straight; it never could bother me.

At around 5:00 AM, you told me you really did have to go.

"I'll make you breakfast. Coffee."

"No, I've got to go. I'm screwed. How am I going to explain this?"

"It's gonna be tough. But it's gonna be tough at 9:00 AM, too. Let me have the morning with you."

"I need a shower," you said.

"Do you also need company?" I asked.

"Yes."

We made love there for the first time under the warm drizzle. I lifted you up in my arms, wrapped your legs around me. The last thing I'll ever forget when Alzheimer's eats up my brain

like it ate up my grandfather's is the way your hips glowed in the candlelight that Saturday morning. Magic.

We had coffee. No breakfast, you said. No appetite. I told you I understood the darkness that must be hitting you, the guilt. I made sure you knew that this wasn't a hit and run. That I meant to be with you.

"I really oughta go break up with my boyfriend now," you said. Tight lips. Sharp smile.

"Yes," I said. "I'm going to go run a 10K."

"Shouldn't you sleep?"

"No. I need to run. Will you come back tonight? There's a fight. GSP versus the current Middleweight Champ, Michael Bisping. There's this great, greasy pizza joint down the street with 100 inch TVs we can watch it on."

"I don't know what any of that means," you told me, "but I will come back tonight. Yes."

You did. We ate pepperoni and pineapple pizza. You had margaritas. We saw GSP fight for the first time in four years. He beat Bisping by rear naked choke in the third round to capture the Middleweight strap, solidifying himself as the greatest to ever do it.

You told me that the breakup wasn't as ugly as you thought it'd be, that he didn't yell at you, didn't pick a fight. Just said he'd move out. You told me your mom was furious at you. That she already hated me.

— — —

We were in your three-story mansion on St. Simons late one November night. You and your mother purchased the place with the insurance money after your father died when you were 13.

You and I went through some old boxes of your dad's stuff, talked about who he was, about how he'd have liked me, about how he'd have scowled and pretended he didn't at first.

Kevin. He collected baseball cards and guns and watches and all the other stupid man stuff I was into. We flicked through your dead dad's cards. I told you everything you could ever want to know about Reggie Jackson, about Nolan Ryan, about Omar Vizquel's legendary defense at shortstop, about the time Fernando Tatis hit two grand slams in *one inning*, about what a grand slam was. Then we found it. In a long, tubular piece of cardboard. A wooden bat stained black, signed in silver Sharpie by Ken Griffey Jr. who I'd watched play center field in Seattle and Cincinnati all my childhood, who was the consensus greatest ballplayer of my generation. Something hit me then, there, in one of the unused rooms of that giant island house. I told you,

"Kaitlyn, I'm gonna marry you."

"Because of the bat?" you laughed.

"No. Because you're who I'm supposed to make a life with."

How I wish now that were a lie.

"Oh, okay," you said. "Wait. You're serious?"

"You're going to be my wife, Kaitlyn," I said. "I've never been more sure of anything in my life."

"How do you know?"

"When you know, baby, you know. You know?" I said.

We'd been together only two weeks. I meant what I said.

— — —

By early December, the island house had been for sale for three years. I mentioned something about the Catholics, St. Joseph, the patron Saint of house selling.

"Yeah, they'll bury a statue of him in the lawn or something," your mom said.

So I bought a St. Joseph statue. We buried it in the front yard by candlelight in a super ritualistic ceremony one night. There were pictures. Creepy. Nine days later, y'all had a cash offer on the place. The same night, you were rummaging through my phone the way you did. Jealous. Never bothered me. But if you knew how crazy about you I was, you'd know how silly you looked combing through my messages under the covers in the middle of the night. For the duration of our relationship, no other woman existed. Taylor Swift could've walked by naked. I wouldn't have even noticed.

You found a letter in phone that I'd written to my estranged son. You confronted me about it. I told you everything. Apologized for omitting it from our conversations. Said it hurt. Said I didn't want to scare you off. Told you I'd understand if you wanted to break up.

Instead, you asked me to move into a rental house in Brunswick with you. Five bedrooms, two stories, ridiculous. Your mom lived on the top floor. We lived downstairs. The house number was 123. Perfect location. Five minutes from my office, ten from the school you taught at. We showered together before we left the house to start our days. I washed you, told you I loved you. You made me coffee, packed my lunch with sweet notes hidden in the brown paper sack.

We'd have picnics three days a week by our tree with the geese and the turtles and the sunshine. I read you stories, talked to you about how great our lives were gonna be. I walked with my arm around you always. I was proud of you. Proud to be seen with you. You know how everyone's definition of love is a little different? If I'd rip myself and anyone else to pieces to keep you safe, that's it. I have to be willing to kill for you. I have to be willing to die for you. That's my definition.

Lord, I love you.

We went too fast. My friends, my co-workers, they said, “Nic, you might wanna slow down. Protect yourself a little bit.”

I’ve never listened to anyone about anything in my life. And if I had it to do over, knowing how it’d end up, I’d again go too fast with you.

— — —

We went on weekend trips to Disney. Orlando. North Georgia. Museums. Art galleries. I took you on dates every Friday if we weren’t out of town. I never got comfortable. Never wanted to. I was never not in pursuit of your affection. Monday nights, we played trivia at Ember, this little bar and restaurant. Won a couple times. The staff got to know us. Jeff, the trivia dude, announced our engagement to the whole restaurant before the game started one night. Applause. Comp’d dessert. Everyone adored us because we were young and beautiful and real.

— — —

You knew I didn’t have a real childhood, so you made sure our first Christmas together was perfect. “Nicmas,” you called it. Gave me a present every day for a week. I got you a solid gold necklace with her birthstone surrounded in chip diamonds. I got you fire opal earrings surrounded in chip diamonds. Those you actually liked. Wore them every day.

Do you still? Do people continue to wear and use the things they love when they no longer love or use the person who gave them those things?

— — —

Sunday. February 25th, a year and one day ago.

The week before I talked to your mom. Since your dad was dead, I asked your mother for permission to marry her daughter. She granted it. Said she couldn’t wait to call me her son.

I had the ring. I'd sold my Colt 1911 to help finance the purchase. Paid Cunningham's Jewelers cash for the thing. It was important to me, to pay cash, to save up and buy it outright instead of charging it to my Visa. I got your ring from the same shop your father used 30 years earlier when he proposed to your momma. We had it set with the same diamond your late father had proposed to your mother with in the 1980s. Your mom gave it to me. Said her husband would be glad it was going to me, said he'd love me, the man I am, the way I treasured his only child.

The morning came early for me. You slept while I ran my first half-marathon. Lap after lap around the lake where we had our first date. Passed by our tree every 10 or 15 minutes. Reminded me of my purpose, to be your husband, to build a life with you, our kids, everything. How I'd survived my childhood, the abuse, the violence, the Marines, how I'd waded through an ocean of mud and came out clean on the other end for this, to make something beautiful with my person. I gave thanks to God for giving me legs and a heart and a body and a mind that worked. I called you after it was done, told you, "Baby, I did it. But I ran out of water. I feel dizzy. I don't think I should drive. Can you come up here?"

A ruse. I had plenty of water.

You came up to the lake with a Gatorade. I met you on the path, tossed the drink in the grass, took your hand. Walked you over to our tree. When we got there, I got down on a knee, and said, "Kaitlyn, I mean to spend the rest of my life with you. Marry me."

You cried. Came down on top of me, wrapped me up in your arms, kissed my salty lips a thousand times. Said, "Yes, yes, Nic, yes."

I didn't know anything then about distance running. 13.1 miles seemed like an awful lot. I had no anti-chafing gear. That's how I got engaged with bloody nipples.

We celebrated at a fancy Italian joint that night. Told everyone everywhere we went that we'd just gotten engaged. They were happy to shower us with free wine, free pastries.

April. I had applied to grad schools a few months back. We vetted the programs I'd been accepted to in Georgia and Tennessee, visited the schools and towns all over, decided together on Milledgeville. Decided that's where we'd make our family. You got a job teaching 8th grade English up there. We started looking for houses in the country. Booked a venue. Bought a dress. You must've showed me about 600 different wedding decoration ideas.

It wasn't all roses. We fought, same as any other couple. Sleeping in the same bed was a challenge. You ran cold. I ran hot. Scandinavian. Can't help it. You hated my fan. I'm huge and our bed was only a queen and you mostly didn't use your side. But you know, manageable stuff. We could've beat it. We didn't and I'm going to tell you now that it wasn't the fan or our disparate sexual appetites or anything else like that. It was me. I was the problem. I can admit that to you now if I couldn't then. I was selfish. I told you two lies during our relationship. You saw through them both.

The first was that I didn't sleep with your married friend, Bethany, before we got together. I did. I was a Tomcat before you. I had that reputation. You knew I did it. She told you about it, I guess. Still, I lied right to your face when you asked me on the way down to Orlando. We were still green. I was scared I'd lose you. That's no excuse.

Listen: I knew she was married. I did her anyway. I lied to you about it. I was a bad man in those days, Little Pumpkin. I hadn't suffered enough to change yet.

The second lie I told you was that I didn't need you. You said you wanted to stay. You said you didn't wanna go to Milledgeville. That you'd miss your mom. You said, "It's me or

grad school," and I told you, "If you'd make me choose, I can do without you." You called my bluff. I lost you for nothing.

— — —

The last night.

It was Thursday. May. We hadn't been intimate in almost two weeks. Your idea. I noticed you leaving. I rolled over, made you my little spoon, kissed the back of your neck, reached inside your night shirt. You pushed me away. That cut me. Confused me. Frustrated. Mad. Everything had been going so well and now it was a dicked-up disaster and I knew it was my fault. You cried, shivered, told me how you were sad about your dad, about how he wouldn't get to see you graduate college or get married, about how he wouldn't meet our daughter and son who we'd already picked out names for—Indiana and Kevin.

"Hold me, Nic," you said.

And I made the worst mistake. I sulked. Felt sorry for myself, for my stupid half-hardon.

"Talk to me, baby, please," you said. And I didn't do that either. I just lied there on my back, pissed off.

You left our bed, slept upstairs. No coffee in the morning. No kiss before I left for work. No texts throughout the day. When I got home, you weren't there. I left a note saying I'd gone to the Georgia Coast Rail Trail, where I'd ran that morning after our first night together. Told you that I loved you, that we'd talk about everything when I got back.

I got back. We talked.

You caught me as I came in. Blocked my path. I stood in the entryway to our home, sweaty and stinking like a thousand unwashed Neanderthal scrotums. I was so, so thirsty. You

told me you wanted out. Wanted me to leave the house. I *did* fight you. I told you, No. I said, This is not happening. We are not failing. We are not giving up.

You were already gone, but there was one last ditch. I've wondered most of the last year what might have happened if I'd played it just a little bit differently. I asked you, "Why does everybody always leave?" That got you. You said, "Tell me why you love me. Right now." No words came. You left me downstairs. Shut and locked the door behind you.

I was too dehydrated to cry. All I wanted was a glass of water.

That night, I slept in the bed of my truck out on Jekyll Island. I rested on my ISOmat—"lost" gear from my time in the Corps. The night was warm and wet. Mosquitoes. Then, at around 4:30 in the morning, I woke up to a man's voice booming through the loudspeaker.

"Testing. One, two. Testing."

I thought it must be a dream. I thought I was delirious from the shock, the heartbreak, the dehydration, whatever. I dozed, and again I was disturbed by the loudspeaker.

The annual Turtle Crawl Island Triathlon. The guy announced the names and numbers of the racers. I stood, rolled up my ISOmat, stuffed it in my truck's toolbox. I jumped down to the concrete parking lot and met eyes with a normal looking, middle-aged woman. She smiled at me. I looked back at her with my skinny, sagging, tired black eyes. Broken by the night. Maybe she thought I was on drugs. Maybe I should've been.

I drove to my office. Slept under my desk. Drank some water. Let myself cry.

— — —

The woman, the one from the parking lot who I stared at, who looked at me like she knew I was dying, I saw her again. Monday. In the paper. She drowned in the surf during the Turtle Crawl. Her and a teenage boy.

I don’t like to think about that.

— — —

I never would’ve asked for a place to stay. Too proud. Thought about blowing town. Nothing left there for me. Thought about blowing my brains out too. But a funny thing happened after you left me. I learned that I’ve lived my life in such a way that people, dozens of them, don’t want to see me suffer.

I didn’t sleep in my truck or under the desk again after I moved out of our place. Holly and her husband put me up for the first week to see if the split stuck. Then Cameron and his wife gave me the spare room in their house until the move to Milledgeville in August. I never asked for anything. I never had to. Mine are the best friends anyone has ever been blessed with.

I wish that was the end. But you know it’s not. Like all modern breakups, ours was not clean. We slept together a handful of times after the split, well into June. Talked about getting back together, but you didn’t mean it. Oxytocin. It bonds people together. That’s all it was.

I moved away. You stayed with your mom.

— — —

I wrote to you recently.

I’d been hunting deer all day. It was the last day for rifle season in South Carolina. Hadn’t seen a thing. Not so much as a squirrel or a lizard or a beetle. Nothing. The sun dipped below the tree line. I pulled out my phone, found the notes app, which I never use. I had an idea for a story title, “The Kid Who Couldn’t Scream,” and I wanted to write it down before I forgot. Then I saw it. A note you left me nine months earlier that I’d never seen. It said this:

Hey, baby. I know you're on your business trip right now and I am missing you very much. I want you to know that I am so proud of you and how much you've done for us. I think back to that letter you wrote me at the beginning of this month, and how you told me that you hated the thought of this trip and sleeping without me. Well, I hate it just as much. Thank you for asking me to be your wife. Thank you for choosing me to be the person that you lie next to every night. I love you with my whole heart and I can't wait to see you when you get home. I thank God every day for giving me that class with you.

Yours forever,

Little Pumpkin

I forgot all about my story idea. Put my phone back in my pocket. Scanned the tree line some more through my scope. Saw nothing. Heard nothing.

I texted my hunting buddy, a 65-year-old chain-smoker named Phil. I told him I was gonna call it if he wanted to meet me out by the access road.

"Don't give up!!! 15 more minutes," the old man replied. Okay. Fine.

The last little splash of orange light dipped down below the pines. The temperature dropped sharply. Then, rustling. Rustling. More rustling. 20 yards in front of me, an enormous, antlered buck crept out of the tree line. I looked through my scope. Put the crotch of its glowing red chevron on the buck's throat. Brought my finger to the trigger of my stupid, overpriced Austrian rifle.

The buck looked right at me. He didn't see me. Too dark. He knew I was there. Smelled me, I guess. Sensed me. Looked right at me, stared, the way I must've looked that night in the

parking lot to the middle-aged woman who drowned. He wouldn't break eye contact. I wanted a deer. I wanted good, clean, organic, wild meat that I'd taken with my own hands from the forest. But not like this. This wasn't *fair chase*. There was no honor in shooting this animal in the dark from throwing distance.

— — —

The Tralfamadorians know that in October of this year, I will write a difficult letter to your mother. In it, I will confess my eternal love for you. I will apologize for who I've been. I will tell her that I believe it's God's will that we speak again when you and I patch things up, that I'll see her then. I'll mail it with a $5000 check to pay her back for investing in what was supposed to be our future. She will cash the check and email me saying, "I don't know how to respond." I'll tell her she doesn't need to. I will promise not to make unsolicited contact with you or her again. I am not a creep.

I will write you hundreds of letters over the next several months. I will keep them in a journal in case you come back. On New Year's Day, 2020, I will stop writing. I will drive out to the lake. I will walk over to our tree with a gardener's shovel. I'll bury your ring there in an Altoids tin with a note wrapped in plastic asking anyone who finds it to please leave it because life is strange and we might need it someday.

You'll marry someone else in April.

Sometime later, I don't know when, I will see you again. In a year or three. In the sporting goods store in Brunswick, maybe. You'll be home visiting your mom. I'll be around, doing whatever. We'll notice each other in the camping aisle. You'll think about pretending you don't see me and getting the hell out of there. But, no. That ain't you. You'll say, Hello. I'll pray the sound doesn't break me. I'll roll my shoulders back and face the world. You'll tell me where

you've moved. I'll tell you I've finished my master's. Hopefully I have a job to talk up. I'll shake your husband's hand. I'll wish you both well.

I'll walk out to my single cab pickup alone on my own two feet. I'll dig into the tool chest that rides in the bed of my old truck, see if I don't have a brick left in there somewhere.

— — —

I released my finger from the trigger, pried my face from the cold, hard buttstock of my rifle. The buck continued to stare at me. I shook my head. My stiff neck cracked. The buck kept staring. Get out of here, man, please. Get out of here or you're gonna get shot. The buck stood his ground. I stomped my boot hard on the metal floor of the tree stand. He turned then, darted off back into the pines. His white and brown tail bobbed and disappeared into the wooded night.

Icy tears, streaming.

Distance: 96.99 KM

Every step I'm sure is gonna be the last one my body lets me take. The morning's too long, too bright. I take another step. 97 KM. Step number 150,351, and something gives in my right shoe. A slip. That's all. Then, stinging, debilitating pain jilts through my calf up into my brain where it pulses, echoes. I fall to my knees. This is it. I've found the ceiling. It exists not at 100 kilometers, but at 97.

Those final three kilometers are locked away in a rusty steel vault at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean with replies to letters I've sent Kaitlyn begging her to let me be better in the months since we split, down there on the seafloor where sunbeams dare not travel, lit only by the bioluminescence of so many underwater aliens, right beside Smokey's congratulatory hug after our chess game back in 1998.

I hop on one foot to my truck, plop down on the tailgate, pull off my shoe. I peel my bloody, puss-soaked sock away. I'm moved to sickness by the swollen, destroyed remnants of my foot. The afternoon air, napalm on my red flesh. My right pinky toe looks like it's falling off. The nail's gone, lost somewhere in my sock. My soles are one giant blister. The puss seeping from the yellow hole where my toenail belongs stinks like roadkill.

It's over. I'm over. Finished. Slit my throat. Dance on my grave.

I look to the white sky above. I wish I was anyone else.

Go home, sissy. Your nightmares will have nightmares about who you never were for the rest of your loser life.

No.

You're empty? Nothing left? Really? Very well, then. Die. Get up, run to your coffin.

No. Breathe. You can hack it. You can hack it.

I fetch from the center console of my old pickup the L.T. Wright field knife my good friend John Blount got me for Christmas the year before. Its drop point blade slices through my bubbled-up soles. Foot juice spills on the concrete, clear and viscous. There's nothing else to do. I pour peroxide on everything. Twist my pinky toe back around. Duck tape my feet back together. The fix is quick and dirty and it won't last.

I don't have to hold up long now anyway.

Balance has its place and time. Its place is not here; its time is not now.

99. I need it to end. I hate the way I smell. I hate the sunbeams in my face, the sour taste of Gatorade and beef jerky in my teeth. I'm sure every step is the one, the last one. I have visions of hearing, "Distance, 100 kilometers," dropping to my knees, sobbing, praying. I trot on mangled feet for 600 years. I hear nothing.

Finally. Finally. Finally. 100. After more than 21 hours, it's over. I rocket both fists into the air, hold them there high above my head. I beat my chest like a wild chimpanzee. I do not drop to my knees. I do not pray. I keep running, all the way back to my truck.

—Simple Men—

I offered my home to my mother in the women's shelter back home on Sunday, her 51st birthday. Part of me immediately regretted the kindness. How could I be so foolish?

It started with a phone call.

— — —

I hate when my phone rings. I almost never answer. Just text me, please. But it was Em. My sister. She's three years younger than me, and out of my eight siblings scattered across the country, she's the one I'm closest with. We talk on the phone a couple times a week. She's the funniest person I know. I always take her calls. I stepped out into the Milledgeville, Georgia midday Sun. I have never enjoyed talking on the phone indoors.

"Nic, they found Mom in an abandoned building this morning."

I sat down on my red brick porch. I'd always known this call would come. Maybe not from Em, but I'd known for years that one day I'd get news that something awful had happened to Mom. A call like this was guaranteed by the hard, drugging, boozing lifestyle she'd lived for the last fifteen years.

"County Sheriffs stopped by the house a little while ago," Emily said.

The Sheriff's Deputy explained to her how, in the old, condemned Sunrise Motel in Kingsland near the interstate, squatters discovered Mom unresponsive that morning. Her head had been caved in with a bedside lamp.

It was September 24th, a Thursday, three days shy of Mom's 51st birthday.

Em went on to say that EMTs rushed Mom to the city hospital where she regained consciousness long enough to tell them who'd done it: her methmonster boyfriend, Timmy. He punched her several times in the face. While she writhed on the floor, he said, "I'm sorry, but I can't go back to jail. I'm sorry, Guen. I have to kill you."

Then, the lamp.

"He only left when I stopped moving," Mom told the EMTs, and then she was out again.

"She's in intensive care. We're going to the hospital now," Em said. "You should think about driving down. I know y'all have had your… issues… I mean we all have. But if she dies, you'll wish you were here."

"What about Timmy? They get him?"

"They issued a warrant for his arrest. We're going now, Nic. At least think about making the trip."

"Okay. I will."

— — —

I hung up. Sat there on my porch. Checked my watch. Little after 1:00 p.m. If I packed nothing, got in my truck, left right then, I could be back home in Woodbine by 5:00. But I had a class to teach at 3:30. Personal narrative and storytelling. On a good day, a tough lesson to make 18-year-olds care about. I spaced out. Confusion. Sadness.

Timmy hadn't just beaten up a 50-year-old junkie who'd double-crossed me a hundred times. He'd nearly murdered the woman who sang Skynard's "Simple Man" to me every night before bed when I was a small boy, before her husband left her and her children for a 19-year-old Saudi oil tycoon's daughter, before she let amphetamines and alcohol drag her and her family to hell. Anger bubbled under the skin in my forearms. I thought of my fists, my sharp elbows, of

smashing those dense bone clubs into Timmy's face, into everything and anyone who'd ever hurt me. I snuffed the thought out. Reminded myself, *Anger is of no utility to you. It only hurts. It never helps.*

Okay. Cancel class. Then what? Haul ass? Do you need to be there right at 5:00? You don't want to go at all. You don't wanna see her and think about the time she tried to stab you or the time she bailed you out of jail. But what if she dies?

What if she doesn't?

What could you even say to her at this point? And what about Timmy? What if they don't catch him? What if *you* have to do it, you and your tough guy brothers? You know what that means. What it'll have to mean if they don't lock him up and keep him there. Mom, the debt you owe her for your life, the disrespect to your family name, to you as a man—that someone would have the audacity to hurt your mother, like they don't take you seriously, like they don't think that sorta thing gets answered for where you're from.

— — —

You go there for a moment, to a marshy pine forest outside of town. You, Skelly, and Benji dig a hole. Three of you with shovels and strong backs. Doesn't take long. You line the hole in black plastic. You mix Quickcrete in a wheelbarrow. You pour a two-inch layer of wet cement along the floor of the hole. You roll Timmy's lifeless body in. You pour more cement over him. This creates a stone tomb. Keeps the animals away. You bury it all in three feet of dirt. You drag the trunk of a fallen tree over to cover what you've done.

You drive the truck back to town. Skelly and Benji drink Heinekens. No real talking. Radio on low. Tyler Childers. You smell the bonfire in Skelly's back yard where you dispose of the clothes and shoes you were wearing. Charred leather lingers in the air the next morning, the

smell of burned work boots. The shovels go back into rotation at Skelly and Benji's work. Like half of all murders in this country, Timmy's is never solved. You are never arrested.

You'll always know though. You'll never teach another class, read another book, make love to another beautiful woman, or play catch with your son again without knowing you're a killer.

Snap out of it. You're still on the porch. They'll get him. They have to.

— — —

Nobody had seen or heard from Mom in months. She'd been living rough, homeless-ish, in Missouri last we knew. I hadn't had a real conversation with her in about three years since she stood me up for breakfast on the morning of my 27th birthday. I'd asked a woman to marry me, and I wanted her to meet my mother. We drove an hour to meet Mom at Denny's. When she no-showed and didn't call to explain why in the days that followed, I said to myself and my then-fiancé, "It's finished. She is only capable of breaking my heart."

Me and my siblings didn't even know she was back in Southern Georgia, where we grew up, until she turned up in the hospital beaten half to death, eyes swollen shut, head split wide open, rust-colored slime leaking out, her teeth chipped, her nose shattered, and her entire face stained black and purple.

— — —

Back on my porch, my gut tightened. Paralysis by analysis.

I lied down flat on my back, clear, blue sky overhead. Closed my eyes. Brought my palms together close, didn't let them touch. Thumb to thumb. Fingertip to fingertip. The prayer:

Nic,

You are not your thoughts. You've never been your thoughts. Your thoughts have never given you right answers, and they never will. Doubt those thoughts. All of them. They're gifts from Satan. Refuse them. Surrender. You are not in control. The past is gone. It's over. The future does not exist. That leaves you with this moment. In this moment, you know nothing, except that God loves you, and you love God. You ask for nothing. You have more than you deserve. You give thanks. You trust that your purpose will be revealed to you. Think about your hands. The good they're capable of. The bad. The scar on your middle finger from the pit-bull who bit you two summers back. The weight-lifting calluses. Thumb. First finger. Second. Third. Fourth. Now, you sleep.

— — —

I woke up, showered, went to work. Overwhelming gratitude drilled into me. For *work*, for its unwavering ability to alleviate my pain and uncertainty, to make the choice for me, to delay the trip, to buy the bulls time to arrest Timmy, if nothing else.

— — —

When my evening class let out, I found a bench downtown, sat, watched good-looking undergrads walk up and down the strip, laughing and touching each other, cussing and not caring, ducking into bars where servers didn't ask for ID. The day ground down to a nub of pink light behind a hill. My phone rang again.

Em.

"Don't say anything," she said. "Just listen."

— — —

Skelly and Benji have worked underground as part of a local construction company's pipe-fitting crew since they were teenagers. The work is dangerous, wet, rough. They leave their phones in

the truck while they're in the hole so they don't get smashed by falling rocks or drowned by swelling groundwater. As I sat watching pretty undergrads move downtown, Skelly and Benji climbed out of the earth and knocked off for the day.

They hopped into the F150 their boss lets them use as a take-home work vehicle, Emily told me. They turned their phones back on. That's when they found out about Mom. Dozens of texts and missed calls. My hometown of Woodbine has a population of 1,200 people. In the nine or so hours since they found my mother in the Sunrise Motel that morning, the Sheriff had taken to the county government Facebook page to ask the community for assistance in apprehending Timmy Long.

Skelly and Benji raced to the trailer park they live in outside the city limits. Skelly declared himself to be "King" of the park five years ago when he moved in. That is what the other residents call him when they come to the bar he built in his backyard to visit and watch football. That's what he is. King of the Trailer Park.

Skelly and Benji grabbed the guns they'd gotten from me—Skelly, a Colt 1911 with double-diamond rosewood grips. Benji, a full-sized .40 caliber Glock. We shot together often before I left for grad school. Now, when I visit, they buy me lunch. In exchange, I clean their pistols while we watch TV and yap about the old days.

Skelly's girl, Aubrey, who he's been with since they were 13, begged him not to go hunting for Timmy.

Skelly held her hands in his, and said, "Baby, he beat my mom with a lamp. Almost killed her. You do that, you don't give me a choice. That's it and that's that. I love you."

"Benji, don't let Skelly kill him. He's your brother and he's got a little girl to raise here. Don't you kill him either."

The boys left the trailer park in the F150.

— — —

They went to John Lemay's house. John sounds like Steve Buscemi's Mr. Pink in *Reservoir Dogs.* Kinda high and nasally, the way a weasel would talk if weasels talked. Before he got on dope and started stealing shit out of our garage, John Lemay had been a childhood friend of Skelly and Benji's. Skelly told John, "We're going after Timmy. You heard what happened."

"Yeah. I heard. Whatcha gonna do to him?"

"Nothing," Benji said, tapping his Glock on the dash one, two, three times.

"Good luck," John said.

"Bullshit, John. You're coming."

"No I ain't," John said. "I'm on probation. I can't be riding around with you goons and a bunch of guns and shit. No, man. I'm sorry. No."

"John," Skelly said. "You stole from my family. We clothed you. We fed you. We gave you a place to stay. You were our brother and we loved you, and you repaid us by robbing our tools and motorcycle parts from the garage."

John hung his head. Didn't say anything. He didn't walk away either. Skelly knew he had him.

"You wanna redeem yourself? This is your one and only shot. Get in the truck."

"Fine. But I don't know where he is."

"No. But I'll bet you know where his brother is, don't you?"

— — —

John and Timmy's brother, Lawrence, get high together sometimes. They found Lawrence, drunk and on foot near the Five Points in Kingsland. Skelly sprung the master plan on him,

nothing short of brilliant. He said, “Hey, man. We’re looking for Timmy.”

“What for? Oh, hey, John. Wassup?”

“I owe him $20,” Skelly said, leaning out of the truck’s window. “Plus, I told him I’d change the oil in his truck.”

“Awe, shit. You owe him $20? He don’t owe you, but you owe him? That’s different.”

“Yeah. He lent it to me so I could buy diapers a while back.”

“Well,” Lawrence said, “You could just give it to me and—”

“No, no. I better give it to him myself. No offense. Plus, the oil change.”

“I tell you what, man, I know right where he’s at. Hell yeah, I do. And I’ll tell you what else: I’ll take you right to him if you give me a ride to the liquor store up the way.”

Just like that, my brothers were in. They pulled up to a trailer in the boonies. Lawrence told them to wait there while he went inside and got Timmy who, he said, was sleeping one off.

“John, you go around back in case he makes a run for it,” Skelly said.

“Naw, man, I ain’t getting involved in whatever this is. I’m on probation, dude. I shouldn’t even be h—”

“Okay, fine, shut up, *baby girl*. I’ll do it myself,” Skelly said. He pulled his 1911 out of his waistband, jacked the slide back to put one in the chamber, and started around back.

“Okay, okay man. Jesus. Put the gun away. I’ll do it. I’ll go around back.”

Skelly sighed, put his pistol back in his pants, “Thank you, John.”

Lawrence came back outside smoking a cigarette with his hands in the pockets of his filthy cutoff jean shorts.

“Sorry, Man. Ahhh. You just missed Timmy. He was just here when I left, but now he ain’t. You can wait, or maybe come by tomorrow or Saturday? I’ll tell him y’all was here

anyway."

Skelly was having none of Lawrence's bullshit. He'd seen two shadows in the front room. He'd heard two men's voices. He pushed Lawrence aside, opened the front door, grabbed Timmy by the shirt collar while he sat on the couch. Skelly shoved the .45 to his face.

"Come on, Timmy. You know the drill. Hands behind your back. Let's go. Come on, hurry up, or I'mma have to split your coconut right here in the living room."

Timmy stood up, put his hands behind his back like he was giving up, and took off running like the scumbag he was. He scrambled down the steps, into the lawn, past the F150. Benji, who is around six feet tall and close to 300 pounds, jumped down off the tailgate, pointed his Glock at Timmy's chest, and said, "Stop."

Timmy stopped. Gave up cold. He dropped to his knees, put his hands on his head. Skelly caught up to him and flattened him out on his stomach with one work boot, which he kept on Timmy's back.

"You know what happens next, twig boy. Don't play dumb with me now. You been here before. You know exactly what this is. Interlace your fingers. Let's go. Behind your back. I ain't asking, bitch, I'm telling."

Lawrence—drunk, confused—rejoined the conversation.

"What you boys doing to my brother? Hey, hey, you can't stand on my brother."

And Skelly, in another stroke of genius you wouldn't expect from a guy with a third grade education, shouted back at Lawrence:

"Sir, could you please shut up? We're trying to do our jobs here. We're bounty hunters. This guy has an active warrant for attempted murder. We're taking him into custody."

Timmy said they weren't bounty hunters, that they were, in fact, Guen's sons. Skelly cut

him off. He pressed the muzzle of his .45 to the back of Timmy's head, pushed his face down into the ground. Said, "Eat sand. Do. Not. Speak. Again."

Lawrence threatened to go inside and get his rifle if he didn't see some paperwork. Benji put all of his nearly 300 pounds in front of Lawrence, fist wrapped around the black plastic handle of his .40 caliber Glock. Said, "Sir, we're licensed bounty hunters. I am going to strongly encourage you to not go inside for that rifle. I don't think you're going to like what happens if you try for it."

— — —

John Lemay had seen enough.

"I'm outta here guys. Good luck. I ain't going down for no murder or whatever this is. I'm on probation, y'all. Man, I gotta go."

He took off running back toward the dirt road they'd come down.

Lawrence was still bitching about wanting to see paperwork, bounty hunter's licenses, something. Benji grabbed some random raw materials order sheet from the truck, waived it in Lawrence's drunk face with indignation, and said, "Here, you stupid bitch. See that? All legal, just like we said. Now sit down. Right over there by your dipshit brother."

Lawrence sat down. Skelly hogtied Timmy while Benji kept the Long boys where they were, a pistol in each hand. And then they did the only thing that surprised me about all this:

Skelly dialed 911.

— — —

As Emily told me all this, I sat on the metal bench, shivering and sick with anticipation for the reveal: My brothers were now murderers. When it didn't come, when I realized that they'd somehow had the restraint to see the pictures I saw of our mother's smashed face and split skull,

and then not kill Timmy when they had the chance to ride off with him in the back of the truck, whack him, and dump him in the swamp, when I realized that they'd spared his life, turned him over to the Sheriff's Office, I wept proud tears. Gifts I gave myself for somehow managing to have heroes for brothers.

I called them. Got the story all over again. I was too glad to hear it a second time with all their excitement and detail. I told them, "Boys, you did everything perfect. I'm so proud of you I could break dance all the way to Canada. I love you."

And Benji said to me, "It's what you'd have done."

He's wrong about that. But he couldn't have paid me a higher compliment.

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Over the weekend, I grappled with a strange cocktail of emotions. Incredible pride in my last name, in belonging to this clan of serious, capable, hard people. Gratitude for my brothers' grace in not killing our mother's attacker. Regret that my mother—the same woman who'd sang to me when I was a boy, who spoke French and played the violin Sunday mornings on our porch before she discovered heartbreak and meth—now lay in a hospital bed with eyes that wouldn't open and a head full of staples. Shame that I hadn't been there with Skelly and Benji to make the citizen's arrest. Hideous emasculation for the fact that I was a graduate student in a *fine arts* program for crying out loud while they were out in the boonies getting justice. I belonged on that hunt. I owed it to my mother. To my brothers. To myself. Regret carved into me. I wanted to beat myself bloody. Pure rage. And then, something else. Warmth. Stillness.

I remembered being sixteen and no longer having a dad. Pops left for the war in Iraq. He made it back, but not really. Left our family. Skelly was ten. Benji was seven. There was perhaps no one *less qualified* to finish raising them than me, but I was what they had. Rotten hand. I'd

been kicked out of school the year before for my inability to stay out of serious trouble. Much of what they learned in their youth and young manhood, they learned from me as we navigated our new life where groceries were scarce, where the lights were out every other month, where running water was a luxury we went without when we had to. I taught them how to steal, how to scam, how to lie, how to make something with nothing.

I didn't show them the best ways. I didn't show them the second-best ways. I showed them the ways I knew. Somehow, in spite of me, these boys had built themselves into good, strong, able men. Family men. Men of power, love, restraint, and grace. I realized what this meant. Even as I tried and failed to fill our father's shoes while our mother descended into addiction and madness, I'd managed to do some good, or, at least, to avoid doing so much damage as to wreck the humanity of those young boys. And here they were, delivered, now, as men I was proud to know. Gratitude mauled me. Gratitude like I'd never known.

Peace replaced whatever else I'd been struggling against. I spoke with my mother on Sunday, her 51st birthday, in the battered women's shelter where she was recovering from the vicious assault. It was the first conversation of any substance we'd had in years.

"Happy birthday, Mom," I said.

"Thank you, Nicholas. I'm 51. I'd say I look pretty good for 51, and it would've been true... last week... but now. Well."

She managed a laugh, winced a little.

"I love you," I told her.

And then I did something I might live to regret.

I told her that I have a three-bedroom house in Milledgeville. I told her that, if she could commit to getting clean and staying clean, she could stay with me. I hadn't planned on this. It

didn't enter my mind until I said the words.

Looking at her broken face, I remembered the time she drove eight hours to get a baseball for me when I was 13. We were in Miami for a baseball tournament. I didn't go anywhere back then without the game ball from the City League Championship where I'd thrown a no-hitter. After the tournament was over, after we'd gotten our ass kicked by some hotshot team from St. Petersburg, as we were unpacking and getting ready for bed, I realized I'd left my prized game ball in the hotel. I cried and cursed myself for being so stupid. I have never been sentimental, not for material items, but that ball. That ball represented the only time I ever got to be truly great in my whole life. My mother knew how much it meant to me. She phoned the place. They said they had the ball at the desk. Without any anger or hesitation or drama, Mom loaded us back in the VW van my family traveled everywhere in. She drove all night, back to Miami, to get my precious City League Championship game ball. That ball sits on my work desk even now, almost 20 years later.

I made the offer to a woman who no longer resembles the mother who made that long drive for her son's baseball either physically or temperamentally. I did it because it meant another chance to be a man, to be responsible, to care for someone I owed my life to. I told her we could find her a job and a church and maybe a second-hand violin at one of the pawn shops. I told her to come, if she was ready. She said she might. That scares me.

The psychological literature is pretty clear about what happens when weak people lash themselves to strong people. It's usually not good. Example: A problem employee whose productivity is low is placed with a rock star crew of hyper-productive workers. The idea is that the slower, less capable worker's performance will be improved by virtue of surrounding them with hotshots, thus improving the business overall. That's not what happens. The vast majority of the time, the problem employee gets better at a rate that is incommensurate with the rate at

which the hotshot crew they've been placed with gets *worse*. I can't afford to lose what little ground I've gained on my shitkicking, loser past. But I made the offer, and I made it with sincerity and optimism. What else could I do?

I worry, of course, about what will happen if she accepts my offer to live here, and what will happen if she doesn't. Another phone call, someday, with more news. For now, I force myself back through the years. I close my eyes. I open my oversized ears. My mother sings.

She tells me to forget my lust for the rich man's gold, tells me all I need is in my soul, tells me to be something I love and understand. Calls me baby. Implores me to be a simple kind of man. Won't you do this for me, she says, if you can?

No, Mom, I want to say. I can't.

But I tell her, "Of course. Of course I will."

Distance: 100 KM

Back home, I run a salt bath. Thick, brown motor oil piss. Bruised lungs ache with every breath. I pass out there in the bath and make myself get out so I don't drown. I'm the hungriest person ever to enter an Olive Garden. Unlimited soup, unlimited pasta. They'll regret that.

In the days that follow, I will experience crushing post-achievement depression. It always happens. I spend days and weeks and months and years working toward a goal, and barely taste it before sadness overcomes me, a mourning of the challenge murdered by my efforts, a bitter acknowledgement that despite my furious labor, nothing has been resolved. It's still here. It's still now. I'm still me. It's gonna hit and hard. For now, I am proud of my limp as I leave the restaurant. It's mine. I've earned it.

Home. Sleep. Peace.

Until three in the morning. Then, rest gives way to dreams about running in an endless desert. Dreams about redheads and weddings and saying goodbye forever. Dreams about the Marine Corps, about hand grenades and the misplaced sense of sexual arousal I felt while throwing them. Dreams about long hikes with my true friend Nethers, about the time he saved my life, about how I haven't talked to him in over a year now. Dreams about being young and handsome and happy. My eyes snap open. Black. My heart fires in the dark like a piston-driven automatic rifle. I sit up, bury my face in my hands.

Now I sob; now I pray.