

The Things a Body Does When It Thinks It's Going to Die

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THE THINGS A BODY DOES WHEN IT
THINKS IT'S GOING TO DIE

A Thesis Presented

by

AARON HELLEM

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
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For Judi
who makes the world sing
and sane

*Don't let us get sick, don't let us get old.
Don't let us get stupid, all right.*

--Warren Zevon

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INTRODUCTION

The stories in this collection were written over a period of five years and draw from a variety of influences diverse in scope, damn near impossible to reverse-engineer to a seminal origin, other than that they all came from my head. For this collection, it was nonfiction mostly that inspired many of the premises of these stories: the quantum physics of Steven Weinberg, the neuroscience and “theory of the mind” of Steven Pinker, the evolutionary biology of Richard Dawkins, and, without going into any embarrassing detail, my own trip to the urologist. Quantum mechanics, French symbolists, and Blind Willie Johnson: all of these elements interact with each other throughout these stories.

I like to think that this collection concludes my apprenticeship as a writer and graduates me, not only from a program, but to a status of novice craftsman. But that isn’t right, either, I don’t think. Dizzy Gillespie said you never really learn your instrument. I like to think then that I know enough things about the craft of fiction to make something special happen, to move somebody from where they are.

I used to consider my work experimental, but only now do I understand more completely what that actually means. Experimental not in the literary sense, which suggests the possibility, or, as John Gardner put it, the inevitability, of failure, but rather experiments in an empirical sense, borrowed from the sciences. These stories are tests of my hypotheses and ideas I have of the world, truly scientific in the sense that even a disproved hypothesis is still considered a successful experiment.

At the University of Montana, Bob Pack told me that I would never understand the body of literature until I understood quantum mechanics. What he meant, or what I’ve come to understand, is that great fiction, when done right and honestly, doesn’t just include characters and scene and dialogue and plot, but encompasses the totality of everything.

As the title of this collection suggests, these stories share a common endeavor to explore the conceits we construct when we find ourselves terrified of the ephemeral. These stories, I hope, discover in the possibilities of death the potentialities of life.

PART ONE

*Our ears were once the serpent's jaw,
and our eyes once the lizard's shield.*

THE WORLD BORN OUT OF AN EXPLOSION

Because the world was born out of an explosion, we can't stay together forever. You know it, too; I can see in your eyes that you understand. That you feel us drifting apart already and you know we'll continue to drift farther apart, an expanding rift that began as a crack in the paint.

At night, when you ask me to sing you to sleep, I tell you about the beginning when the world could fit in your hand, but was far too heavy to lift over your head. About when a nuclear explosion occurred and propelled everything away from everything else, when our parents stood on one edge and waved goodbye.

I tell you when the world reaches its limits, it will contract back towards the center, and we won't need our car anymore.

We can stop our newspaper subscription for it won't help us anymore, won't be able to offer us anything we can't see for ourselves when we look out the skylights.

You say dreamily, If in the beginning there was light and radiation, what will it be in the end?

Cold, I imagine. Cooler. Cooling. There may even be a moment when matter stops moving, or at least slows down to the point where motion is impossible to measure. Or detect. The final moments, when the world is big enough to fit inside your pocket.

But where will I keep my keys? you ask.

I tell you, You won't need them where we're going. The world will be too small for locked doors and moving vehicles. I promise we'll be able to go down the street and be in China. Not Chinatown, but real, bona fide China: Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong.

Like when we were young and all it took was an afternoon of shoveling in the sandbox.

In the end, you ask, what color will it be?

I don't know, I say. Stroke your hair away from your face. I have to imagine that in the end there will be surprises we can't know about now.

TRIES

Attempts, endeavors, essays, sets his eyes on, test drives, takes a whack at, a crack at, undertakes, makes a go at, flies it up the flag pole, walks it around the block, runs it up the clock, throws it on the floor to see if the cat will play with it;

Tries things beyond himself: opera music, poetry, a woman's brassiere, side salad with a salad fork, New York Times Sunday Crossword, public radio, public speaking, two girls at once, chess with his eyes closed, phenomenology with his hands tied behind his back, hummus, hubris, heroics, honesty, I Love You sincerely;

On the television: he sees a man bend a spoon using only the power of his mind, and thinks how much easier everything would be if he could just do that;

For the first time, just once, he'd like to impress a girl, first date, by ordering dinner for the both of them in a foreign language: Italian, Spanish, French, perhaps;

"If, at first, you don't succeed..."

It's supposed to be hard, he knows, the way of the world, the nature of the beast (and nature is, unarguably, an indifferent beast), it's what makes a man a man, what shapes the present generation, problems to solve, obstacles to overcome: he owes his effort to subsequent generations, strengthens the gene pool, passes on his experiential knowledge so that what he gains through empiricism, proceeding rug rats inherit as instinct, all thanks to him, it's supposed to be hard, he tells himself, but maybe, just maybe, couldn't it be a little easier, just a little, and not hurt so badly;

He knows it's hard to: find a job, the right job, get a promotion, a bigger office, a retirement plan, find the right girl, love the right girl right, raise the right kids in the right house in the right part of the suburbs, make the right decisions by foreseeing the right

applicable consequences, do the right thing all the time, time and time again, tell himself that tomorrow's another day, tries telling himself that;

Tries: He tries.

DARK WAS THE NIGHT, COLD WAS THE GROUND

*"It sure seems lonesome, Lord, where the sun goes down."
--Blind Willie Johnson*

Tired tires making tracks and losing tread across an open desert highway steaming in the afternoon heat. The car bends around corners like a snake. Somewhere out there are real snakes, hiding in the shade with eyes closed. He's driving, but he makes me steer and shift as he accelerates. He's satisfied with no speed limits. As fast as the old bitch will fly, he says. Everything misses the windshield; the car rides in between insects. If it steams from under the hood, then it is a frothing horse, he says. I always thought it would be white, had always been told it was white, believed it was white like the angels in my dreams, those same angels who, when I need them now, are shooting dice against the pearly gates, drinking bourbon from sacramental flasks. The lights of heaven are a thrown seven.

The car speeds through dust storms, but neither of us is dusty. He smiles like a rankled picket fence. Has neither eye on the road. Where are we going? I can tell in his cackle he has designs on a place to die, in the way his one eye looks at me and the other through me.

I just got in because I needed a ride, you remind yourself, remind him: I just needed a ride.

From one hell to another, he says, and smiles at you in between the shifting and the steering through the bright barren sands of New Mexico. It was once a land of horses, but now there's nothing but crows.

Would you believe him if he said you were redeemed?

It was a white horse in the old days, he says. Giants what waited for it to strike fire from stone with the force of its gallop. You could hear it then, thundering across the desert laying to waste everything in its wake. He can cross his heart all he wants, swear upon his mother's maiden name, but you know as well as I do he has no mother. My mother always said to trust the angels with my life, he says. If I wanted to know disappointment, then I should search for my father.

If the devil is bifurcated in the tail alone, then it is man who's split in the soul. Split in the brain, and split in the soul. One of his eyes cries while the other watches the prize, stretched out before us in the guise of a horizon. The way the earth bends gently ahead, we can drive off the face of it and into the ether of heaven if we accelerate now.

He's in charge of the speed, and I'm in charge of the steering. What do you say will happen to us: four eyes with no focus, two heads with no hair, four lungs with no succor, twenty fingers with no fists, two hearts with no beats? Two brains with four halves dreaming the darkness of a lonely grave in a cold ground. The plaint of the whole world resonates in the low hum of a blind man's moan. In the hollow whimper of a hungry dog. There are reasons why everyone always sympathizes with the devil, he says. It's not just a guitar. Nor merely the charm of a cunning couplet. It's because he was so *human*, he says.

Do you believe that under our coats we all have tails? That under our hats there are horns? That in our dreams there are desires to break seals of virgins and fresh bottles of whiskey?

He thinks we're driving to Los Angeles, but we're heading towards no heaven. Neither real nor rendered. Which one of us *is* driving?

They were afraid of it in the old days, he says. When it made them covet their neighbor's wife, their neighbor's daughters, and yes, sometimes, even their neighbor.

If you believe we dream of bursting hymen because we are wicked, shamefully wicked, then you're ready to accept a fated fetid hole where you'll lie for endless years

and dream of dreams, when dreaming was safe and dulcet. How does the open road and open horizon lie to you from the backseat? You've been here all along, with no control over any controls save for the flip top ashtray. Flip it open. Flip it closed. Perhaps this is the right time to start smoking and stop breathing. Your eyes watch each other. I know your hands aren't used to idleness.

He says, If dying was easy, everyone wouldn't be so damned afraid of it. It's what makes us so *human*.

The crows, when they light on the ground, look to the sky. The half finished dreams of fading faces, fading places, fading points of reference.

THE EFFETE OF EMPIRICISM

Show me an electron and I'll admit the outlines of the illusion. Show me one, pulsing in your palm worth more than a thousand birds in a thousand hands. To see it circle on itself for want of something to spin around would be enough to convince me of the greater things contained within great things, like sounds of oceans trapped inside windshields: a final brick through a final pane of glass. I'm ready to see it pulsing like a breathing bird, ready to see it for the blurred field of its manic motion. Ready to see the faint outline of its shadow when you hold it to the light. Ready to see the sparks when you smash it against another like it.

During a midnight nick in a bedroom half-filled with half a moon, like a dream of a poet half asleep, you stepped out from behind the partition in seven veils, all of which were as thick as an onion's skin. The parts of you opened like flowers: the petals of your peony blossomed to make me blush. The half lit bedroom smelled like flowers, as did you, half lit by the other half of the moon. With you, I say, there is never enough. Never enough, never enough. After shedding our skins, you show me what happens when electrons collide.

It happens in an evening reverie when you sweep up the dead ones and drop them into my glass of tawny port. Here are your electrons, you say, decayed from the left side of this world. Dead electrons to go with your dead grapes. It was never anything you could touch, you say. Never anything you could see. I know love by how it sleeps, you say, how it breathes like a beating bird. I know it by how it tastes like cherries, apples, peaches.

Does everything decay to the left, spinning in contracting concentric circles all the way to our private hell? I never held it against you there were bees and the bees stung and the stings spoke with the words of snakes. It was never the reason I made you sleep on the floor.

I've been shedding you for years, you say, like layers of dead flaky skin.

The electron was a trick. So were our smiles. Metaphors we used to forget there'd come a time when, after the echoes of our orgasms waned and our bed sheets went cold, we'd wish the other mauled by a bear. Exeunt, followed by a bear. There's a story that explains what happened to their tails, as there are stories that explain how we fade out of each other's field of vision and field of feeling.

WHEN THEY YELL WYOMING

Her boyfriend was a warrior, but he was in jail down in Cheyenne. I was the only one she knew who had a car and I told her I'd drive her down there to bail him out. It was right around that time that I decided I'd rob a bank for her if she asked me to. She said it was up to her to save him. She had three hundred of the bail money and I loaned her the rest. If we drove straight through, we could get there in a day.

We didn't pack any clothes or anything. She got the call and got the money together. I picked her up in the early morning and we were on the highway when the sun came up. We had the windows down. It was the beginning of summer and was already hot. Her long black hair whipped around in the wind, but never got in her face. I thought it might have been because it was trained not to, all those years of her ancestors riding on the backs of horses. I wondered what she was thinking behind her sunglasses.

He didn't even call me himself, she said. He had his brother do it. She lit up a cigarette and tossed the match out the window. His brother said he tried to fight three of them, and got two before the police got to him. He was born to conquer, you know.

I asked her two of what.

White men, she said. She blew her smoke out the window. She'd gotten his name tattooed across her belly as a way to show him she was his, that he had conquered her, too.

They'd met in South Dakota one night when he beat up the white man she was going with. She said she fell in love with his dark skin and his quiet torment. His father was Sioux and his mother was Mexican. Across her belly, in delicate lettering, it proclaimed: Alejandro. I could see it when she leaned back in the seat. Her tank top too small and two sizes too tight, left her middle bare and her breasts scrunched up

together. Her body was all curves and locomotion. I always imagined she rode a man like a horse, her thighs wrapped around him tight, her rump raised, her hips moving in a galloping motion, giving him little squeezes to let him know when to go faster.

He never lets it out, she said, unless he's beating up on somebody. I told him a warrior fights the big battles, not the bar brawls, but he never listens. Not to me, anyway. I told him not to go down there. He could stay with me and find work. She stared out at the land drifting past us. It sounded like she might have been crying behind her sunglasses, but I didn't want to say anything. You know something, Billy, she said, you're all right for a white boy. She reached over and squeezed my arm. I started to accelerate. She knew what it did to me every time she touched me. I slowed down. I wished she'd ask me to rob a bank for her, or move a mountain. If she wanted me to ride a horse and be a warrior, I could do that. I'd burn in the sun out in the open prairie, but I didn't care. I'd do it for her.

We stopped in Sheridan for something to eat. In a little diner, I had a hamburger and she got a milkshake. Said ice cream helped her when she was worried. I glanced down at her stomach. His name arched over her belly button like a rainbow. A permanent rainbow of skeletal letters. She had to know deep inside her that having his name on her would leave her vulnerable. She ordered another milkshake for the road and I paid the bill. She said she wanted to pay her half, but we both knew she didn't have enough money and that she needed to save what she had in order to save him.

Back on the road, the sun was already down. I wanted to keep going for her, tried to keep going, but I was fading and needed some rest. She said she was tired, too. Said, We both could use the rest. I pulled over to the side of the highway, off the shoulder and into the gravel. Turned off the car. Shut off the lights. She slid over across the seat and laid her head on my shoulder. The engine ticked, but other than that it was quiet.

I said, Just for a few hours. We'll be there around noon tomorrow.

She snuggled herself into me. Put her arm around me. It's all right, she said. He'll wait. She sighed. I settled into the seat. Tried not to smell her or feel excited about being so close to her. I can't tell you how much it means to me, your driving me down and the money, she said. Alejandro will appreciate it, too, even if he doesn't show it.

I didn't say anything. I was sure she knew I'd do anything for her and all she had to do was say the word. What are you, Alisha? I asked her.

What do you mean? she said.

Which tribe? I said.

Crow.

And he's Sioux?

Half Sioux.

And half Mexican.

His mix has always been his curse, she said.

How did that work between you? I said. For your families, I mean. I could feel her smiling into my chest. She got a real kick out of the white boy who was trying to figure it out, how she gave herself to a wandering warrior and tattooed his name on her belly and went down to bail him out in Cheyenne, how she opened herself up, how her exposed flesh was rubbed raw and codified.

Things like that don't matter anymore, she said. Not to us, anyway.

I stared out through the windshield, up at the stars littered in the sky.

What about your family, white boy? she said. Would they let you bring home an Indian girl?

If I loved her, I said.

We were quiet. I knew she wasn't sleeping. You're something, white boy, she said. You're really something. I felt her hand in my lap, unzipping my pants and reaching in. Pulling me out. Felt her mouth wrap around me and take me in. I didn't

know if she felt that was something she had to do to pay me back, but I didn't want her to. Not like that. I said, Alisha, but she didn't stop. I ran my hands through her thick black hair. I closed my eyes and pretended I was inside her for real and she was treating me like a horse, squeezing me with her thighs to get me to go faster. I wanted to erase his name from her belly. Alisha, I said, but she didn't stop. I never wanted it like that, as compensation, thought if I gave her enough time she would choose me, come to me, on her own. Alisha, I said, but she didn't stop.

She didn't say anything. Neither did I. We laid in the dark, closed our eyes eventually, and fell asleep.

We woke up with the sun. Didn't speak. Rolled down the windows. She smoked cigarettes and I sped down the highway, speeding, trying to get us there soon. It felt different between us and I didn't know why, but knew enough to blame her for it. I never asked for anything in return, would've robbed a bank with her and never demanded a cut. Would've got on a horse bare-chested and screamed across the prairie without ever asking her for sunscreen. I had never felt so white in my life. I glanced over at her and she looked back at me with a tired, deflated smile. She was eager to save her warrior.

We were in Cheyenne before noon. She knew exactly where to go and told me how to get there. It didn't look like a courthouse or a jail, except for the flag flapping in the breeze. This is it, she said. I parked, and we went inside. She did all the talking and I stood back, under the fluorescent lights with my hands in my pockets. She told the guy behind the desk that she was there to pick up Alejandro. The guy behind the desk didn't say anything to her, but just nodded and pushed some paperwork at her. She filled it out and I watched her, confident in a strange familiar way like she'd done it before. The guy behind the desk looked up at me. Can I help you? he said.

I'm with her, I told him.

She gave the guy the paperwork and the money for the bail. He stamped some of the papers, took the money, gave her a receipt. Have a seat, he told her.

We took a seat against the wall. It was bright in there, like a doctor's office. I could see all the lines in her face, the scars and the wrinkles and the wear from the road. Her hair was greasy and looked damp. They're going to bring him out, she said.

I nodded.

She reached over and grabbed my hand. I squeezed it, held it tightly. I still didn't know what to say. How to make it better.

They're going to bring him out, she said again. They're going to get him.

I could tell she was nervous to see what kind of condition her warrior was in, if he was lost and defeated, or strong in the heart and legs with just a broken nose to show for. She'd said last time when she bailed him out in Rapid City his nose was broken, and the time before that in Billings his nose was broken, too. She'd said it was because he always left himself open, didn't keep his hands up, and led with his face and not his fists.

He'll be all right, I told her.

When they brought him out, his nose was broken, swollen to the size of a fist. One of his hands was wrapped up in gauze. There were bloodstains down the front of his shirt and all over his pants. She stood and went to him. She hugged him and he wrapped his one good arm around her and held her. He kissed the top of her head. She kissed him softly on the lips. His whole face was puffed up and swollen. Under the lights, I could really see where he'd been worked over. One of the guards escorted him to the desk.

Alisha backed up across the floor, stood next to me. Alejandro loomed over the guard, tall and unmoving. He had at least six inches over the guard. And me. Alisha was trying not to cry. Didn't I tell you about his nose? she said. I nodded. That damn nose has been broken more times than I can count, she said.

Alejandro signed papers and the guard handed him an envelope. Alejandro tore it open with his one good hand and his teeth, dumped everything inside it on top of the desk. His wallet, his watch, a box of wooden matches. He stuck his wallet in his back pocket, slipped his watch on his wrist, pulled out one of the matches and pinned it in his teeth. He nodded at the guard and walked over to us. Who's this? he said, and pointed at me. Stared me down like he was considering using his one good hand to beat the hell out of me.

This is Billy, she said. He drove me down here to get you. You should thank him.

He stared at me, but didn't say anything.

You're coming with me, she said to him. You can stay with me for a while.

He nodded.

Do you need to stop anywhere and pick up your things? I asked him.

Let's get going, she said. He doesn't have any things.

Alejandro sat in the back, and Alisha sat up front. Both of them stared out the window with sad eyes, like someone young had just died. I watched the road, knowing we wouldn't stop anywhere on the way back. Straight through all the way up to Billings. She smoked a cigarette. He unwrapped his broken hand. After a while, she said, He helped me with your bail, too. You should know that.

He looked at me in the rearview mirror.

You should say something to him, she said.

I hoped she wouldn't say anything about the night before and about what happened between us. I was trying to forget it myself, knew it was the first and last time anything like that would happen.

I told you, she said to me. She turned around. You could say something to him, she yelled at him.

He didn't respond.

She turned back around. Stared straight out the windshield.

I put both hands on the wheel, kept them there, my eyes on the road. We weren't stopping at all. Straight through the heart of Wyoming where the war cries of warriors were only echoes.

PLAYING THROUGH

Murphy can't sleep and it's not because he's Catholic or his wife snores. It's something bigger than that that makes him quit rolling over, gets him out of bed, downstairs, into the kitchen. Doesn't turn on any lights, doesn't need them to find his way around, into the cupboard for a glass, into the freezer for ice, into the pantry for scotch. Never thought he'd ever be someone with a pantry, would use it to keep his scotch and cans of soups, his wife's bottled water and tubs of dietary supplements. When he was sixteen and getting stoned, could've never imagined then that, in the midst of his thirty-fifth birthday, he'd actually own a house with a pantry, be seeking solace in that pantry in the middle of the night, would go in there looking for something to help him sleep.

His birthday's in another week. He's ready for his mid-life crisis already, would love a sports car for his birthday, one that did zero to seventy in under five seconds, but, in the midst of his thirty-fifth, there are more pressing issues at hand: his thinning hair, his rotting teeth, his swollen testicles. He's got another three years for his hair, at most, before he's going to have to start shaving his whole head, take control of the situation, the bull by the balls, as his father used to say. Not much else he can do about it, except hope his head, when bald down to the base, doesn't reveal any strange lumps or bumps, hope for a smooth, round, aesthetically pleasing shaped conk, much like that of a cue ball. Yes, he thinks, he would be extremely pleased with a cue ball head, would smile if called by that particular nickname. His teeth he could surrender to a dentist and tell him to do whatever it takes to make them white and straight again, even if that meant knocking them out and putting in fake ones, would rather the dentist put him under, put him out, punch them out. His testicles, however, are a different matter. He

can feel them down there, even when he's just sitting there, can feel them throb, pulsate, where before he only felt them if something extremely good or extremely bad were happening to them. His doctor said it might be an infection, probably was an infection somewhere, in the prostate for instance, can happen like that, his doctor assured him, an infection somewhere else in the body that's felt and detected in the testicles. But, his doctor said, it could also be a mass or cyst of some kind, and even the mention of it, testicular cyst, still makes Murphy cross his legs. Cancer in the balls. Is that what he gets for his birthday this year: a nice juicy malignant testicular mass? His doctor referred him to an urologist.

Murphy has definitely crossed a threshold, is of the age to know what an urologist is and why he needs one. Knows when he goes to schedule his appointment, the secretary's going to make him say it over the telephone: my testicles are swollen, the epidermis heads are out of control, and, brace yourself for this, lady, there may be a testicular mass floating around in there playing pinball with my nuts. What the hell is he going to say to a secretary over the telephone? My balls are trying to tell me something.

Murphy considers running into a seventeen-year-old girl, somewhere sometime, with cropped blonde hair, a short skirt and one of those bra tops, who wears lots of lipstick to try to look older than she really is, wants to go for a ride in Murphy's new sports car. Goes like this: Steps up to the side of the car, rubs her hand along the side of it. Hot, she says. Funny, he says, I was just thinking the same about you, and she blushes because she's only seventeen, thinks it's flattery when a boy compares her to an automobile. I'd love to go for a ride, she says, and he says, Well, here's the deal, sweetheart: you can't have my kidney and you need to steer clear of my liver, but, with that said, you can ride my rod all the way to Florida and back if you've a mind and body to do so. Doesn't open the door, but hops right over it, plops down on the passenger side, her rump right on the leather seat, like she's done it a hundred times before, and hopefully she's done it a hundred times before.

What worries Murphy is not that he'll never have that kind of opportunity again, but that he will have that opportunity, there really will be a sports car and a seventeen-year-old girl with a hot body ready to go with him all the way to Florida and he won't be able to do anything about it and not because of his marriage or his morals, but because his equipment will no longer operate. He worries of stammering in front of the hypothetical nymph, looking down at his shoes when clearly she wants him to look at her, look her over, already half-way in the passenger's seat, waiting for the OK from Murphy, and Murphy having to say it out loud, having to tell the girl he can't give it to her good because he can't give it to anyone good anymore, including his wife. What's worse is the girl won't understand what he's saying, will say something like, I don't care if you're married, I just want to go for a ride, if you know what I mean, and Murphy will have to shake his head and explain to her that he can't take her for a ride on account of his car isn't running right, if she knows what he means, and the poor girl, bless her heart and other parts too, just doesn't get it, will say, But you're driving it right now, aren't you? and he'll say, You don't know how bad I'd like to be, and the girl will say, The car's running right now, and Murphy will say, It might look that way, but it's a false alarm, and the girl won't know what to do, get in the car or walk away, and Murphy will wish she gets the drift, walks away, doesn't make him explain it all outright, in black and white, loud and clear, Do not make me dot my I's and cross my T's, girl, because my t these days is incapable of being crossed, if you catch my drift.

Murphy sits down in the dark living room. Notices how much it changes, or seems to change, when all the lights are out. His birthday is out there somewhere in the shadows, getting ready to pop out and yell, Surprise! hit him across the forehead with a frying pan. Thirty-five and he's already at that age of needing an urologist, specialists, ultrasounds. Never thought it would happen this soon. Maybe if he exercises more, he thinks, meditates, or eats more vegetables he can get another fifteen years out of them before they shrivel up and retreat into his stomach. He glances down at his package.

Looks like something you'd pull out of turkey before stuffing it and sticking it into the oven. Shrunk, wrinkled, deflated, dehydrated. Enough to make him cry, in light of his thirty-fifth, and he would cry if he didn't have scotch to help ease the pain, ease the transition from virility to, well, not-so virility. It is best that things like this take place in the dark, with no one else around.

Murphy's wife, Marie, knows his birthday is right around the corner, already has a party planned, a caterer hired, guests invited and already RSVPed, too late to cancel anything without risking a deposit. She knows he's going to be thirty-five years old, but passes it off as though it isn't a big deal, just another day, even though she notices his thinning hair, his rotting teeth, says, Suck it up, old man, next year you'll be thirty-six. She can say things like that because she's still twenty-eight and doesn't know what it's like to get older and to get old. Her body is still in fine shape, everything still right where she left it when she was twenty-one, can still pass for twenty-one, still gets carded whenever she buys liquor, still looks exactly like her pictures of her when she was twenty-one. She'll know it soon enough, some day, and will recant all of her Suck it ups and old mans. She doesn't know about his testicles, or his appointment with the urologist. He hasn't told her yet, is afraid to, afraid to admit defeat and deficiency, doesn't ever want to hear her say, We'll find other ways to express our love, which is euphemism for her having to bag a younger man to satisfy her needs; she has needs too, needs that need satisfying. Like hell we will, he thinks. When he wants to make love to his wife, he wants to make love to her without constantly worrying about whether his parts will malfunction, misfire, or even come to party at all. There's got to be something he can do: yoga, hot baths, horse pills.

His party is on Saturday. All of their friends will be there.

Dr. Sung comes highly recommended. Murphy lies back on the examination table while a nurse squirts goo onto what looks like a microphone, then runs the microphone

over his testicles. The goo is cold, really damn cold. The nurse says, Just try to relax, but that never works. Murphy stares up at the ceiling instead. There's a poster taped up there so you can read it while recumbent on the table. It says: How Well Do You Know Your Testicles? Murphy thinks, Well enough to know a mutiny when I feel one. Did you provide us with a urine sample? the nurse asks.

I tried, Murphy says. He was nervous and somebody had knocked on the door. I went just before I came here, Murphy says.

The nurse shakes her head. Murphy wonders what the hell that means, that she doesn't believe him, or perhaps that his testicles tell her a different story, one that contradicts his, reveals his lie.

It says here you've got 400 cc's of urine in your bladder, the nurse says.

OK, Murphy says. Still doesn't know what she's hinting at.

Did you get stage fright? she asks. She looks down at Murphy with a very gentle, understanding expression, like she's seen this a thousand times and there's no reason for Murphy to get embarrassed. She has seen this a thousand times, won't believe him one bit if he tries to assure her that it wasn't like that, that he'd tried but nothing came out, that he'd just had coffee and would try again, would be able to fill the whole damn cup this time, could piss at the drop of a hat whenever and wherever he liked with anyone else in the bathroom with him or on the outside knocking relentlessly on the door.

Can I try again in a little bit? he says, and it sounds, even to himself, like an ashamed five-year-old boy who knows he's done something wrong.

Of course, the nurse says. If that doesn't work, though, we'll try the catheter. She smiles at him, but he doesn't like the sound of that one bit. The sound of the word alone--catheter--makes him sick in the bottom of his stomach. Just try to relax, the nurse says, squeezes more cold goo onto the microphone-looking thing.

Murphy closes his eyes, tries to remember a time when he was happy and didn't have to worry about his balls blowing up on him. The nurse rubs the microphone all over his testicles, top to bottom, and even though he should be worried about getting overly excited, getting a woody is the farthest thing from his mind. The machine the microphone's plugged into beeps a couple of times, and the nurse wipes off the cold goo from his testicles. Murphy jerks, but she's careful about how she handles them.

The nurse says, Dr. Sung will be with you shortly.

Murphy sits up. Covers himself with his paper gown. The nurse writes down something in his file, smiles at him when she notices him watching her. He hopes she'll leave the file so he can read through it, read what she wrote down about him and his testicles, but she takes it with her.

It'll just be a few minutes, she says.

Murphy nods.

The nurse leaves the room. Murphy hops off the examination table, takes a seat in one of the chairs. The leather is cold against his bare ass. Tries to sit so as not to squish or squash his testicles. They feel like ball bearings hanging down there without any underwear on. He tries his best to cover his goods with the one-piece paper gown they gave him. Glances down at his hairy legs, pale and sickly under the examination room lights, sickly, walking-dead kind of sickly. He sighs, heavy and loud. Leans back. Stares up at the ceiling. There's another brochure taped to the ceiling tiles. The brochure says: Are Your Testicles Trying to Tell You Something? Illustrated instructions on how to check yourself for bumps, lumps, cancer. Murphy says it: Cancer. He's not too young anymore; if his testicles are trying to tell him something, he's ready to start listening.

The door handle jiggles, turns, Dr. Sung walks in. Closes the door. Reads through the file. Doesn't look up. Murphy? he says.

Dr. Sung, Murphy says.

What do we have here? Dr. Sung says.

Probably just a strain, Murphy says. Or I popped something, something out of whack, or tore something, however these kinds of things happen.

Dr. Sung reads over the file, shakes his head. Oh no, no, no, no, he says. This is definitely orchitis, or I'm not an urologist.

Murphy wonders if that's something they could entertain for a moment, if it's possible, albeit improbable, that this man purporting to be an urologist, displaying credentials demonstrating his specialization in urology, hadn't completed the necessary training or particular residency so as to discredit his title, disqualify his expertise, invalidate his diagnosis. Not to take anything away from Dr. Sung as he seems like an all right guy and comes highly recommended, but couldn't they pretend, just for the moment, that Murphy doesn't have orca-whatever and confer that the problem in his testicles really is only a slight strain, a minor pull, something a little out of whack?

Dr. Sung has the file, the facts, the ultrasound report. He says, No tears or lesions. No focal testicular mass or cyst are noted, he says. The testicles themselves are within normal limits.

Murphy crosses his legs.

Dr. Sung shakes his head. Oh no, no, no, no, he says. Don't do that to them.

Murphy uncrosses his legs.

Dr. Sung continues: The epididymal heads are also within normal limits in size, appearance, and texture. In addition, no discrete varicocele, spermatocele, or hydrocele are demonstrated, distinguished, or differentiated. Dr. Sung glances up. Do you wish to know the size of your testicles? he asks Murphy.

Murphy doesn't know how to respond, wants to cross his legs again, ensure that his testicles are not in sight while their particulars are openly discussed.

The right one, Dr. Sung says, points right at it propped on the chair, measures at 13.5 cubic centimeters, and the left measures at 12.9 cubic centimeters. Pretty good size,

but, more importantly, a good normal size. Dr. Sung claps Murphy on the shoulder, a gesture that seems to have the intention of cheering Murphy up, making him more comfortable with the situation, from one guy to another guy. The file says that the pain doesn't seem to be due from any testicular swelling, Dr. Sung says. Closes the file, kneels down in front of Murphy. Puts his hand between Murphy's legs, with a finger pokes at each one. Murphy jumps, but tries to sit still. They look bloated though, don't they, Dr. Sung says.

Murphy can feel the doctor flick at his testes with his finger.

Dr. Sung pulls out, resumes standing. Notes in the file, says it as he writes it: Minor testicular swelling, most notably on the left side.

Orchitis, Murphy says, finalizes it, makes it real and ready for discussion, willing to explore options.

That's what it looks like to me, Dr. Sung says. Where I'd put my money.

Murphy regards his testicles, sad and saggy on the chair, scrutinizes them to see if he notices any symptoms of orchitis, whatever it actually is, swelling or discoloration, anything that makes them look any different from the other times he's stopped to inspect them. It's strange, Murphy says, but for the most part, you never really think about them down there, do you. I mean, day to day, going about your business.

Dr. Sung nods, notes: half-listening, it seems.

They just hang there out of sight out of mind until something happens to make them hurt, Murphy says. When you roll one trying to cross your legs. Or a little kid rams you with their small concrete like head. Or you get orchitis. There they are, between his legs, plopped down like a change purse. No discoloration. No loss of hair. Sags, sadly like a blown-up balloon days past its prime. It's my birthday, Murphy says. On Saturday.

Dr. Sung closes the file.

I'm not going to die, am I? Murphy says.

Oh no, no, no, no, Dr. Sung says. This is something minor.

Murphy wonders how it might affect his performance or his reproductive abilities; even though Marie and he had postponed children, they haven't ruled them out completely for the future. For how long will they have a future? Murphy thinks.

I can tell you're having difficulties with this, Dr. Sung says.

It's the first problem I've ever had with them, Murphy says.

Dr. Sung nods slowly. Understandingly. I know, he says. The first always takes the legs right out from under you.

What are my options? Murphy said.

First things first, Dr. Sung says, we have to figure out what's causing it.

Murphy nods.

There hasn't been any physical injury realized recently, right? Dr. Sung says.

Right, Murphy says.

It doesn't have to be a major injury. Sometimes it's something minor that develops into blinding pain.

Blinding? Murphy says.

Anything like that? Dr. Sung says.

I'm not in any blinding pain, if that's what you're asking.

Any pain during urination?

Not that I've noticed.

You'd notice, Dr. Sung says. Trust me. What about intercourse? Any pain or discomfort during ejaculation?

I don't think so, Murphy says. Tries to recall when it was the last time he ejaculated: on Tuesday, after dinner. Doesn't remember there being any pain then.

Dr. Sung adjusts his tie. Says, Orchitis is most often caused by a low-grade infection somewhere else in the body. The prostate, for example.

What does that mean?

It means I'm going to ask you to stand up, and bend over, Dr. Sung says. I'm going to see what's what.

What happens is the doctor covers his index finger in a lubricant, then shoves it right up your ass without any kind of warning or sweet talk. Sometimes they'll tell you to relax, but it always has the opposite effect.

Yet, yep, yep, yep, right there, Dr. Sung says. Feel that?

Murphy feels him poking the left side of his cavity, makes him feel queasy, like Dr. Sung has stuck a whole stop sign up there and twirls it around, massaging the inside of Murphy's ass with the points of its edges. Yeah, Murphy says, coughs.

It's kind of mushy right there, Dr. Sung says. I don't like that one bit.

Well, I'm sorry, I'm sure, Murphy says. What else does Murphy say with somebody else's finger up his back end?

Right there, Dr. Sung says. He pokes it and a humming pain shoots up into Murphy's throat, makes him cough again. That's it, Dr. Sung says, let it out. He pulls out his finger, gives Murphy a wipe. Your testicles are trying to tell you something.

What is it? Murphy says.

They're telling you there's a bacterium in your prostate, Dr. Sung says.

Bacterium?

Singular form of bacteria, Dr. Sung says.

Bacteria.

Only one.

How did it get up there? Murphy asks.

That's no longer relevant, Dr. Sung says. What's important right now is that you start listening to your testicles.

I want to listen to them, Murphy says.

You've got to try harder than that, Dr. Sung says.

I will listen to my testicles, Murphy says.

Dr. Sung grabs a prescription pad, scribbles all over it, tears it off, hands it to Murphy. Take these.

What are they?

Cipro. In three weeks, you'll be right as rain.

Murphy nods.

Dr. Sung claps Murphy on the back. Reassures Murphy that things will get better, clean up, and disappear.

On Saturday:

Murphy's brother picks him up, takes him golfing though neither of them golf. They sit on a bench on hole eight, smoke cigars, split a pint of whiskey, tell everyone to go ahead and play through. They're supposed to stay out of the house until six: plenty of time for Marie to get everything set up, and plenty of time for everyone to show up, have a drink, pick a hiding spot, choreograph exactly when and how they're all going to jump out and yell, Surprise! and sing For He's a Jolly Good Fellow.

Murphy tells his brother about his testicles, the urologist, the horse pills he has to take for three weeks.

That's bullshit, his brother says. You're only thirty-five. It isn't like you're fifty already.

Murphy shows him the pills.

How do you even swallow these sons of bitches? his brother says.

With lots of scotch.

What are they supposed to do? his brother says.

Get rid of whatever is causing the orchitis.

Orchitis, his brother says. Sounds like a fish.

Or a flower, Murphy says. Passes the pint to his brother.

Two old men finish up on the seventh hole, approach the tee on the eighth. They stop, stand there, wait to see what's what with Murphy and his brother.

Go ahead and play through, boys, his brother says. We're still studying this one.

One of the old men says something to the other.

It's my birthday, Murphy says.

Shade's hard to find around here, his brother says.

The two old men take out drivers, get ready to tee off. Murphy has to relight his cigar. Some people come here to play golf, you know, one of the old men says. He has a large old man visor on top of his bald head, old man sunglasses that wrap around his entire face. Mind your butts, if you don't mind, he says. He sinks his tee into the dirt, places his ball on top of it.

What the hell does it matter to you? Murphy's brother says. You're playing through, aren't you?

We see it all the time, the other old man says. You kids coming around here littering the course with your cigar butts and empty bottles.

Who the hell are you calling kids? Murphy's brother says.

I have orchitis, Murphy says.

We'll just go ahead and play through then, the old man teeing off says.

That's right you will, Murphy's brother says. It wasn't your idea.

The old man waiting to tee off stares at Murphy, watches him like Murphy should know better, should be ashamed of himself, thirty-five with a case of orchitis, drinking and smoking on a golf course like he was back in high school. Shakes his head at Murphy. If only Murphy could see himself, would he shake his head at himself, the slow serious old man head shake to properly express disappointment in younger generations, that going-to-hell-in-a-hand basket look of helplessness, hopelessness? Murphy ashes his cigar on the ground.

That's what I mean, the old man waiting to tee off says to the old man teeing off. They really let this place go when they lowered the membership age.

I told you that, the old man teeing off says. Takes a practice swing, squints his eyes down the fairway.

What the hell did you say? Murphy's brother says, stands up, makes his way over to the two old men. His shoulders are squared off. His hands folded up into fists. Murphy gets up, too.

You heard me, the old man says. He squares up too, but it looks more pathetic, weak, worthless. Murphy knows his brother could break the brittle old man in two, tear him down like the old man was made of playing cards.

It wasn't enough to just play through, was it old man, his brother says. You had to comment on it, didn't you, couldn't keep your mouth shut about it.

I've earned the right to speak my mind, the old man says. The old man getting ready to tee off pulls up, joins the argument. Holds his driver like a sword. Murphy's brother gets in the old man's face, chest to chest, eye to eye, man to man. It's all you young people that don't care about anything except yourselves, the old man yells at Murphy's brother, right in his brother's face.

I told you I have orchitis, Murphy yells at the old man. He tries to get in between his brother and the old man. The old man tries to shove Murphy, but he slips on the grass, goes down on one knee. His brother decks the old man, right across the forehead. The old man flops on the ground, on his belly, shakes like a fish in the bottom of a boat. The other old man takes a swing at Murphy's brother with his driver, but Murphy's brother ducks it. Murphy holds up his hands, tries to stop the ruckus.

The old man rears his driver back, but Murphy's brother reaches out and grabs it. Wrestles it out of the hold man's hands. Pushes the old man down on the ground. The old man yells, falls back on the grass. Murphy's brother slams the driver against his

knee, bends it like a TV antenna. Tosses it to the side. How about that, old man? he shouts at the old man.

The old man tries to get up, rolls on his back like a turtle. His body looks helpless, his face looks terrified.

We better get out of here, Murphy's brother says.

Murphy looks around for witnesses, but luckily the eighth hole tee is secluded by trees, shrubs, grassy knolls. Murphy hefts the clubs, and his brother grabs the whiskey. They cut across for the parking lot, keeping an eye out for shots coming at them.

His brother drives, peels out of the parking lot, checks the rearview mirror. So much for golfing, he says.

Murphy's hands shake. All he can see is the old man's face, afraid that he'd never be able to get up again.

Murphy and his brother hide out in familiar territory. Dark end of the bar, near the exit in the back. His brother watches the front door. Orders them both a whiskey, acts like nothing happened, like they didn't just beat up two old men forty years their senior.

It doesn't make me feel any younger, Murphy says.

It's not supposed to, his brother says.

I'm not young anymore, Murphy says. There's something hollow and sad in the way it sounds out loud, the way he says it in an empty bar in the middle of the day, on his birthday in a bar, fifteen minutes away from beating up two old men, another hour away from his party. Not anymore, he says.

You've got to lighten up about this whole birthday thing, his brother says. You're not dying yet, and we just beat up two old guys. You're supposed to feel good about it, like I do. He flexes his muscles. Did you see the way that one swung at me? I dodged it like I knew kung fu. I wonder if I do know kung fu and just never knew it, like it was

something I could just do. Like playing the piano. His brother taps his fingers on top of the bar like he's dancing them down a keyboard.

Murphy wishes he was more like his younger brother, find ways to enjoy things like throwing down with old codgers, wants to be able to drink and forget and always act like he's twenty-six perennially, maybe trick his body into finally believing it, spontaneously clear up his orchitis, unleash his balls on the world full strength. Wants a way to feel young again. Murphy thinks about a sports car again, a very fast sports car. Remembers seeing a bumper sticker on a pick-up truck one time that said: Men Who Buy Sports Cars Have Small Dicks, and all Murphy can say is, So What? Is that any kind of big surprise? They can't help it if they have small dicks or get orchitis in their balls, if that's their lot in life.

Come on, Murph, his brother says, punches him in the shoulder. That's what they did when they were younger, punched each other, pushed each other, took turns preparing each other to absorb the blows they'd take later on in life. Lighten up some, his brother says. It's your birthday today.

Murphy thinks that for whatever he lacks in life--fast sports car, seventeen-year-old creampuff, strong working orchitis-free testicles--he can always say he's never alone, that he'll always have his brother on his side no matter what. That's what it means to have a brother, be a brother to someone else. To never be alone anywhere, at any time: on your birthday, in a fight, when you have orchitis, when you're just thirsty. It's my goddamn birthday today, Murphy says.

Another round, his brother shouts at the barkeep. It's my brother's birthday.

The barkeep strolls down. Your birthday? he says to Murphy.

That's right, Murphy says. The big thirty-five.

In that case, this one's on me, the barkeep says.

His brother slaps down a twenty on top of the bar. Then you're having one with us, he says.

The barkeep pours three of them.

I have orchitis, Murphy tells him.

The barkeep isn't sure if it's something to celebrate or something to lament.

Even what's already south is going south, his brother says. I could cut them off for you, if you want. Do it right here on the bar. Local anesthetic and a pairing knife. That'll cure it for you.

I'll stick to the horse pills, Murphy says.

I've always said that testicular clarity comes in a pill, his brother says. They laugh and punch each other in the shoulder because it's Murphy's birthday and they're already beyond being drunk.

His brother goes to the can. Murphy feels a little tight, sits there and concentrates on keeping the room still. The bar tilts back and forth like a teeter totter. The walls contract, expand, contract, expand: like they're breathing. His brother comes back, finishes his drink. Says, It's time, birthday boy.

Murphy nods, follows his brother out to the car. His brother drives them back to his house, parks on the street behind all the other cars there. The driveway is packed, and so are both sides of the street.

Jesus, his brother says. Now this is a party.

I'm ready, Murphy says.

They stumble up the walk and to the front door. They're supposed to ring the bell so everyone can take their places, get ready to jump out, yell, Surprise! and commence the singing. They can hear the music inside, the murmur of conversation, the lovely sounds of laughter and ice clattering inside cocktails.

You're thirty-five only once, Murphy says. For a whole year, but only once.

Are you ready for this? his brother says. Goes to ring the bell.

Murphy doesn't wait, opens the door, walks right in. Barges right in and crashes his own surprise party, right into the middle of the fray, surprises everyone there, Marie included, when they see his face, when he yells surprise.

PART TWO

For want of a longer kairos, we sprout the wings of crows.

THE PREGNANT GIRL

The pregnant girl, and I say girl because she is only 18, kicked me in her sleep last night, and I'm convinced it was deliberate.

Tonight when she kicks me, I look at her eyes to make sure that she's actually sleeping. I don't think she is.

"You kicked me again last night," I say.

"You probably deserved it," she answers, and smiles. She thinks she's very funny.

"Were you sleeping?" I ask.

"Do you think I'd kick you if I were awake?"

"Just checking."

The other day, I asked my father, "Did mom ever kick you?"

"She still does," my father said. "Sometimes I just want to kick her back."

In the morning, the pregnant girl sits across from me at the table drinking coffee and I wonder whether that's good for the baby. She's already had to give up smoking, and she put up quite a battle. I don't want to imagine what she would say if I were to propose that she stop drinking coffee, too.

I asked my father, "Did mom have to give up any habits when she got pregnant?"

"Sure," my father said. "High school."

The pregnant girl now standing up over the kitchen sink finishing her coffee didn't have to give up high school like my mother did. She finished in June and by August she was pregnant and standing over my sink, just like now. She says she did quite well. I suspect my mother did well in school before the pregnancy, and if the school would have allowed her to continue, I'm certain she would have finished with decent grades. But my mother wasn't allowed to continue. The school thought it disgraceful to have pregnant students attend class, and so to discourage the other impressionable youths from the dubious appeal of having a baby, they forbade my mother to return to the classroom. Statistics are still inconclusive as to whether it worked for the other students. As for my mother, it wasn't at all successful; within three years she had three babies.

Watching the pregnant girl rinse out her coffee cup, I wonder if that is to be our fate: three years / three babies.

The pregnant girl is extremely petite, and for a moment I wonder if those tiny hips can withstand the labor of birthing a child. Will she spread easily enough without breaking? It is almost impossible to envision those narrow hips stretching to accommodate another human being. I look at her, searching her body for extra storage space I might not have noticed before. "What are you looking at?" the pregnant girl says, and then surreptitiously glides into the living room to watch television. She is such a little thing. I'm sure our baby will be claustrophobic.

From photographs, I can tell my mother was a very petite girl when she was pregnant; maybe a half second bigger than my pregnant girl. In each of my mother's wedding pictures, she looks to be nothing more than a child. "Small enough to slide down the bathtub drain," my Grandmother always says, and looking at my mother in her wedding dress, I believe her.

Both my brother and I are significantly taller than my mother and I wonder if our baby will grow to be taller than the pregnant girl sitting in the living room watching television. Of course, eventually all babies out-grow their mothers. I can't help but wonder whether that is a good thing.

"What I like about you most," the pregnant girl says, drawing her eyes from the television screen, "is your optimism." She thinks she's really funny, but I don't have the heart to tell her otherwise. For a brief moment, I hope to god that the one thing our baby inherits from me is my sense of humor. I don't think I can bear the thought of our little one having to endure its mother's sense of humor.

When the pregnant girl is 28, our baby will be 10.

I stare at the pregnant girl, who has fallen asleep on the couch, and I wonder if I've done her a great injustice by contributing to her condition. I wonder if in four or five years she won't blame me and grow to resent me because of the baby. I wonder if what I've done to this girl, a biscuit older than legal voting age, couldn't be, or rather shouldn't be, considered a sin.

I sit down next to the pregnant girl sleeping on the couch and stroke the side of her face and pull back the few loose strands of hair and tuck them behind her ear and kiss the side of her soft gentle cumulous cloud of a cheek and whisper delicately across her skin, "I'm sorry."

From behind her closed eyes, she smiles because she thinks I'm being funny. I don't have the heart to tell her otherwise.

LUDINGTON

Melissa, seventeen still for another six months, was pregnant and was keeping the baby. She was living with me then, had moved in a month before into my studio apartment behind the feed store. She'd just come back from the doctor's office and it was official. She poured herself a cup of juice, sat down on the sofa.

Pregnant? I said.

She nodded. Neither of us needed to wonder how or why. We knew perfectly well.

What did the doctor say? I asked her.

He said it's still early.

You want to keep it? I said.

She looked at me like there was no other choice, no other options.

All right, I said. First things first, I had to quit drinking in the morning. Second, I had to get a job and fast. I'd been squeaking by on unemployment for a few months, but with a baby coming that wouldn't be enough money. We'd need more. Babies needed things: cribs, diapers, bottles, toys, clothes, college funds. We'd need a bigger apartment in a better neighborhood. That shit hole we were in wasn't any kind of place to raise a baby.

I was thinking about names for the baby, she said. If it's a boy, I think we should call him Luke.

Luke, I said, worked the sound and the syllable over and over. Luke. Luke. Luke. It sounded better the more times I said it. I nodded to let her know I liked it. What about if it's a girl? I said.

I was thinking Annie, she said. You know, like the movie Little Orphan Annie.

It hit me then that there were names for kids who were born into situations like ours where we weren't married. Those were the kinds of kids people pointed at in grocery stores, whispered about, said they wouldn't be surprised at all to see the kid in handcuffs one day. That's what they said about kids born to parents like us: If that kid avoids the army and the slammer, it'll be but for the grace of god. It made me want to punch them all out, every single one of their upturned noses turned down at us.

What do you think? she said. About Annie.

I like Annie, I said.

She smiled and showed me her little girl dimples, all curled up on the sofa, still skinny as a caterpillar. She'd blow up, blow out, get big everywhere she could. Not just her belly but her hands and her fingers and her feet and her toes and her ankles and her neck and even her ears would plump up like Ballpark Franks. I couldn't help thinking that I'd done that to her. That it was all my fault.

What are you going to tell your parents? I asked her.

Her smile faded, replaced by wrinkles grooved deep in her forehead. I hadn't thought about that, she said.

They're not going to be too happy about this, I said.

I know, she said.

Maybe there's a way we can break it to them gently, I said. Maybe write it in a letter or something like that. Let it slip out during Thanksgiving dinner.

They're going to find out as soon as I start showing, she said. She lifted up her shirt and looked down at her belly, rubbed her palm across the flat of it. It would blow up soon and look like she was hiding a beach ball under her t-shirt. I'm not afraid of getting fat, she said.

Good, I said.

I am afraid of telling my parents, she said. She was young enough yet to worry about her parents and what they might say, and to make matters worse, they hated me,

always hated me. They just about flipped when she dropped out of high school and left home to live with me. Threatened to call the cops and everything. Then, I guess they figured it was one of those teenage girl rebellious things, and assumed she'd go back home after a couple of days when she came to her senses. With her pregnant, all of that would change.

What do you think they'll say? I asked.

She shrugged that she didn't know. I didn't know either. I could see two things happening: one, they take her back to help raise the baby and have me arrested to get me out of the picture, or, two, they give their blessings and I pop the question right there at the dinner table. I needed a ring just in case. The second scenario was unlikely, but one had to be prepared for the impossible.

I need ice cream, she said. She started biting at her fingernails.

I'll go get you some, I said. I grabbed my coat, stopped to kiss her on the forehead. I said, It's going to be all right.

She nodded, though I could tell she didn't believe me.

* * *

I walked three blocks down to the Kroger's. I had enough dimes and nickels to get her a half-gallon of Rocky Road. That was her favorite. The dimes and nickels rattled together in my pockets. Some people looked at me, but I was used to lugging around change. When it came time to pay, the checker gave me a dirty look like it was my sole purpose in life to come through her line and inconvenience her. My girlfriend is pregnant, I said, but she didn't care. Would've preferred it if I didn't speak at all. I was hoping she might take pity on me, having to buy a tub of ice cream with spare change for my pregnant wife, but she was having none of it. Instead, she treated me like the pan-handling bums who went in every day at four to buy as many tallboys as they could

with the money they'd begged. I wanted to tell her that I wasn't a bum, had never begged for anything in my life, was just a little down on my luck, that's all, but things were looking up. There was a baby on the way and I'd get a job, make some money, move us into a bigger place in a better neighborhood, get a car and a car seat for the baby. I'd make things happen. The clerk gathered up my two dollars in dimes and nickels, gave me the receipt, dropped the half gallon into a paper sack. Have a good day, I said to her.

Yeah, she said.

I should've filled out one of those customer comment cards, told upper management what unfriendly service I received. In the Other Comments part I could've wrote: Clerk misjudged me for a bum, but I didn't bother, kept moving instead, outside and across the street, over to Jake's.

Jake's was run by Jimbo, and Jimbo and I were buddies. We'd been up to the UP together to fish and hunt. His old man had a cabin up there, and let Jimbo use it whenever he wanted.

Where you been? he said when I walked in. I ain't seen you around in a while.

Money's been tight, I told him.

He nodded that he knew what that meant. I sat down, plopped the ice cream on top of the bar. What the hell is that? Jimbo said.

Rocky Road, I said. For Melissa.

You want something?

I pulled out the rest of my dimes and nickels, counted out enough for a can of Coors. Jimbo got me the can, popped it open, poured it into a glass. Keep your change, he said. I told him thanks. He said, Don't sweat it.

Jake's had a bowling team and every year they ruled the league. The only team that ever came close to beating them was the handful of fat guys who rolled for Radio Shack, but the year before their best player had a heart attack and the team sank back

down to the drudges. That's what Jimbo was doing, making room for the latest trophy: First place in the Greater Ludington League of bowlers. The trophy was four feet tall and looked like it was made of chrome even though it was really plastic. It had a little guy on top of it in the act of rolling a strike. He even had the gloves on and the proper bowling footwear. Jimbo hefted it up onto the shelf behind the bar, in a spot where the light shined directly on it so that everyone could see it and knew that Jake's was the best in town, better than Radio Shack, the Elk's Club, and the Catholic Church despite their having divine intervention to keep their balls out of the gutters. Jimbo sprayed the trophy with something that made it even shinier.

You should've been there, Jimbo said. He meant the final match. I'd told him I'd come, but something came up and I couldn't remember what.

I wanted to be there, I told him.

Jones rolled a one-eighty, Jimbo said.

Damn, I said.

I know, Jimbo said. The other team wasn't even close.

Who'd you roll against?

Pizza hut.

Did Big Beth roll? I asked. Big Beth was the manager down at the Pizza Hut and hands down the fattest woman I'd ever seen in person. Like she was made of dough and just kept on rising every day, getting bigger and bigger.

Yeah, Jimbo said, but she had an off-night. Sprained her wrist or something.

I waited until Jimbo was done situating the trophy, and then I asked him if he knew about anyone looking for help.

Whole damn town's out of work, he said.

Yeah.

Did you talk to Pete? he said. He's putting together a crew for a demo job in Muskegon.

I told him I hadn't.

I think it's coming up in the next month, he said. You should talk to him.

A month was too long to wait. I needed something next day. Anything else? I asked.

Not unless you want to stick up liquor stores, he said. He laughed, but we both knew it wasn't a joke, that we'd had three buddies try it, one after another, and they all got busted, all three of them, one after another. Tim Lewinski was turned in by his sister, and Paul Bunnan got stuck in the getaway car when the battery went dead. Wayne Lee made it all the way to Kalamazoo, then was pulled over by a state trooper. Just sat there in the car while the trooper ran his name and called for back up. Just sat there as they surrounded him, yelled at him through a loud speaker for him to show them his hands and step slowly out of the car. Seemed like everyone we knew was getting into trouble, just trying to scrape by.

I need the money now, I said.

We all need the money now, Jimbo said.

Melissa's pregnant, I said.

Jimbo didn't say anything, stood there shaking his head. Both of us knew it was just a different kind of trouble.

I need something steady, I told him.

You sure as hell do, he said.

Anything, I said.

I'll keep my ears open, he said.

I appreciate it, I told him.

After a while, he said, We need a fishing trip, and I said, Turkey season is open, and he said, Even better. It was exactly what I needed, three days of hunting turkeys. Rifles and a gallon of whiskey. It was quiet up there and you could talk as loud as you liked, could say whatever you wanted.

I'll call up my old man, he said.

Let me know, I said. I hefted up the half gallon of ice cream and made my way back home.

* * *

When I got home, the ice cream was half-melted, starting to pool in the middle. Melissa was in the bathroom getting sick. It had been like that for the last week, what made her think she might be pregnant in the first place. I could hear her through the thin walls and it didn't help that the bathroom was just off the living room/bedroom/dining room. Heard the heavy splashes into the bottom of the bowl, and I hated that shitty little apartment for being so small, not giving her the rightful privacy to have her morning sickness by herself. I punched the side of the wall. My fist went through the plaster like it was made of newspaper. Soft, like powder. Son of a bitch, I said, because I'd have to spackle the damn hole and paint over it. She asked from the bathroom what the noise was, and I told her it wasn't anything. She wretched. It made me wretch. She got sick in the bathroom, and I got sick in our living room/dining room/bedroom, all over the floor. I got the mop, cleaned it up before she came out. Made myself a quick drink.

When she came out, her whole face was puffed out and swollen. Looked like she might have been crying. She stood there helpless, her wet hair stuck all over the side of her face, on her forehead. I gathered her in my arms, held on to her to let her know she wasn't alone. She cried into my chest, blubbered something about not being ready, not being fair, not knowing what to do, how to tell her parents. She was only as tall as my stomach, and it struck me then that she wasn't old enough for this miserable kind of life, hadn't seen enough during her years to know this wasn't as bad as it could get, but understood how it was bad enough.

I need to sit down, she said. Wiped her eyes and nose on my shirt. We went over to the sofa. I sat down and she curled up in my lap like a child. I petted her head and she finished her sobbing. It was quiet in the apartment. Everyone else was at work, at school, in jail. It was a rare thing to have the building to ourselves, the peace and quiet. Lonnie? she said.

What, baby? I said.

What are we going to do?

I thought about it hard, considered that the best thing for her was maybe for me to leave, pack up some things and get out of town. Her parents would take her back in, take better care of her than I could. They'd raise the baby up right, give it everything a baby needs. They had the money for it, a big yard with a tire swing. They did things like have Thanksgiving dinner, put up a Christmas tree, light off fireworks for the Fourth. Had a nice house in a nice neighborhood, two cars, college funds. Her old man was white collar and her mom was blue blood. All I had to do was scrape enough money together to get down to Muskegon. Grand Rapids, maybe. I could put something together down there, send her money every week. Try to get her to understand that I only did what I did for her, that it was the best thing for the baby. It would only work if she called her parents to come get her and didn't get it in her head that she could try to do it alone. I'd feel like a real son of a bitch if I skipped town and she stayed there in the apartment by herself. We need to tell your parents, I said.

She started crying all over again. I don't want to, she said.

I know, I said, but they need to know.

She nodded, sucked the tears back in, held them in her gut. She could be strong when she had a mind to.

I'm going to get a job, I said. I told you already, I'm going to find work and make us some money and move us out of this shit hole apartment into a better place in a better neighborhood. A house maybe.

I like it here, she said. It's our home.

This place is shit, I said. The walls are made of newspaper and I can hear you puking in the bathroom.

Why didn't you turn on the television? I don't want you listening to me like that.

I won't from now on.

We were quiet for a little while. Listened to something dripping somewhere in the walls, somewhere under somebody else's sink.

She said, I don't mind it here, as long as you don't listen to me while I'm in the bathroom.

One way or another, I'm getting us the hell out of here, I told her. I was starting to make plans. Maybe even get us a car, I said. How'd you like that? So you wouldn't have to take the bus to the doctor's anymore.

A car? she said.

Get a good deal on something, I said. I could almost see it: a four-door with bench seats. Something we could use to cruise around in, out to the drive-in, up to Mackinaw for the day. Get a car seat in the back for the baby, I said. Maybe one of those stickers, too. You know, the kind that say something like, Baby on Board.

She giggled. Squeezed my legs. Burrowed her head in my lap.

Don't you like the sound of that? I said. Laid my hands on top of her head, inside her soft hair.

Yeah, she said.

The more I thought about it the more I realized I needed something soon. Tomorrow, I thought. I would figure something out.

What about the ice cream? she said. She turned to look up at me. Her face was so round and babyish and her eyes so damn innocent. It hurt to love her like that, knowing what I'd done and how young she was.

I'll get it, I said. I went and got the ice cream, brought it back to the sofa with two spoons. She flipped on the television. Rocky Road and All My Children while everyone else was at work, or school, or jail.

* * *

No one was hiring. Signs in the front windows actually said, No Help Wanted, right next to the No Solicitation sign, like going in looking for a job was just as bad as trying to sell raffle tickets or magazine subscriptions. I called on everyone I knew, but nobody could afford to even keep the help they already had, let alone hire on new help. I told them I'd do anything for any kind of pay, even under the table kind of work. No one was biting. They all said, Good luck, and that was it. It wouldn't have made any difference if I'd told them my sad story, that my girlfriend was pregnant and we lived in a shady neighborhood. I didn't say anything, just nodded my head, and said, Thanks anyway.

The problem was the whole damn state was filled with out-of-workers, ever since they shut down all the car plants. The GM bigwigs in their imported Italian shoes and German cars pulled out in the middle of the night, left behind an entire state full of able working bodies without any work to go to Monday morning. They locked the gates and threw away the keys, moved the operation to Mexico where the schmucks down there worked all day for two nickels to rub together, while the poor suckers who'd been building trucks and minivans all their lives woke up in aprons pushing brooms, serving fast food, daydreaming about sticking up a liquor store, figuring out a way to do it and not get caught. They all had kids to feed and clothe and vaccinate and soon enough I'd be one of those family men, too. I stood by the curb and thought about what in the hell I was going to do to make ends meet, pay the rent and buy a car and make sure she never had to worry ever again.

* * *

It was never supposed to last between us. The first time we met was at Jack Minster's party. I had my hair greased back and my sleeves rolled up. I'd done a couple lines and was feeling on top of the world. At least on top of Ludington, anyway. I was holding on to a cigarette even though I didn't smoke. Was wearing sunglasses inside even though I couldn't see a damn thing. When I first saw her, I thought Melissa was really cute for a high school girl. A shy nature like most seventeen-year-old girls, but underneath she was looking for exciting men and dangerous things. She was right at that ripe age when she was done with boys her age, and it sure helped that I was plenty older than her. There was something she liked in the assumption that if her parents saw us together, they'd have me arrested right away. Before we even spoke to each other, she'd already heard some things about me, and lucky for me my reputation was a hell of a lot better than the real deal. Word had it that I carried a knife around and wasn't afraid to use it on someone, that I actually had pulled it on someone from Detroit in Grand Rapids. It was supposed to be that one shot only, a one-night stand, but she was very Catholic and wouldn't do anything with me except dance. When she was ready to go home, I offered to drive her thinking once I got her alone I could make a move, but she was frigid as a nun and when I said, How about a goodnight kiss, she said she kissed only on dates. What do you call this? I said.

It's not a real date, she said. It was just a party.

You Catholic girls and all your rules, I said. She was wearing one of those plaid skirts with the knee high socks, just like a good little schoolgirl, only she had on a tight sweater that hugged her close all over. It was only supposed to be that one night, but things like that involving Catholic girls in the standard tease uniform never worked out like you planned. Never as neat as you wanted it.

It would've been different if she had considered getting rid of it like I suggested. It could've solved all our immediate problems, but she wouldn't even talk about it, wouldn't think about it even for a second. It was her Catholicism that got us in that trouble in the first place when she said we couldn't use any protection. She'd said that's how she'd been raised, and there was no way I could argue with that. I took my chances instead and it turned out that with my luck I should never set foot in Las Vegas. Maybe it was because I was Lutheran that I didn't understand her devotion, the confessions, the guilt, the Hail Marys. After our first time, she got out of bed and told me she had to go to confession right there and then at that moment, and when I told her we weren't doing anything wrong, she cried non-stop until I got dressed and took her. I figured it was because she was still young and it was her first time. All girls feel a little guilty and scared after their first time.

The second time we did it, she said her Hail Marys right afterwards, kissed her rosary beads, and climbed back into bed. That's when the baby must've happened, when we got too confident, too careless, and she didn't go to church. That's how religion always worked for me, didn't do anything as long as you thought about it, but as soon as you forgot it that's when it wrecked hell all over you. She called me pessimistic for thinking a baby meant we did something wrong, and said it was gift from god. It didn't feel like any kind of reward to me.

Without it, we could've gotten back on track and on our feet without feeling like we had shotguns pointed at the backs of our heads. We could've found jobs and started saving up to get into a place where we could plan for babies, if that was what she wanted. What I wanted was a week long turkey hunt with some rifles and whiskey. Mornings in the blinds, nights playing cards. Men doing men things without having to think and worry about all that other garbage that you couldn't control.

* * *

I had three dollars burning a hole in my pocket right about the time Happy Hour rolled around. Jake's was already packed tight, everyone laughing and swearing and dancing and singing. Jimbo was serving drinks, cracking jokes, cracking beers, lighting girls' cigarettes. Had me set up with a shot and a beer before I even sat down. Get 'em while they're hot, he hollered at me. It was probably the only time all day where all of those people felt alive. Fell in love, fell out of love, got into fights, got sick in the bathroom, sang together every time someone played Nugent on the jukebox. We were soldiers together, in trenches, during wartime without a face on our enemy. So what if we drank too much, laughed too loud, slept with other people's girlfriends and boyfriends. I threw back the shot, washed it down with a good slug of beer. Three dollars would have to last all night.

Jimbo set down another in front of me. Twofer Tuesdays, he said. Leaned in over the bar. Stick around, he said. D.J.'s got some blow.

That sounded all right to me. I didn't have the money for it, but when it came to the spur of the moment, like available cocaine, I could count on Jimbo to cover me. Things were looking up. There were some guys at the bar I knew and they were talking about jobs, cars, kids, Nugent. One of the guys said, It's rough out there. His name was Billy Munson. I knew him from around the softball league.

Another guy said, No shitting. His name was Bobby Duncan. He was a football star in high school, got a scholarship to play at State, but got busted for dealing drugs, and the scholarship and his football career both went right down the toilet.

Billy said, I'd do just about anything at this point, and I said, Yeah, man, me too, and all five guys nodded. Said, Me, too.

Shovel snow in another month, Pete Brickowski said.

Bobby Duncan said, I'm not shoveling any son of a bitching snow.

Billy said, They're hiring hands for a crew going to Muskegon, and Pete said, Yeah, in another month.

They're tearing down drive-ins, Bobby Duncan said. End of an era.

I might be heading down that way, I said.

More jobs down there, Billy said.

You could join the army, Pete said, and all of us laughed, knowing we'd never pass a physical and, even if we did, knew there was no way in hell we could take orders long enough to be soldiers.

Billy asked me, Are you on one of those crews?

No, I said. I need money.

We all need money, Lenny said. I never knew Lenny's last name, had never heard anyone call him by it. For money, he sold his mother's prescriptions.

My girlfriend's pregnant, I said.

They got quiet, all looked at me like I'd just told them about someone we all knew dying in a car crash. I'm sorry as hell about that, Bobby Duncan said.

Yeah, Billy said.

It ain't all that bad, I said. Except the money part.

Do yourself a favor, Bobby Duncan said, get out while you can, man. Hightail it the hell out of there.

I couldn't do that, I said.

Bobby Duncan shook his head. I would, he said.

None of the other guys said anything, looked away so they wouldn't have to admit it that they'd do the same thing: turn tail and run. I didn't tell Bobby Duncan or the other guys I'd thought about it, too, had already started packing things at night when Melissa was sleeping. I hid the bag in the back of the closet so she wouldn't know.

Bobby Duncan stood up. Got to go see a man about a dog, he said. Headed over to the jukebox where there was a group of girls, all of them underage.

A woman I knew sat down at the bar next to me. Rhonda Wheeler. We'd gone to school together all the way from K through 12. She worked at the A&W. Wore the

roller skates and everything. Hey, Lonnie, she said. Smiled because we shared some history, had gotten together some times when neither of us had anybody else. I could never see her without remembering the butterfly birthmark on her hip, the way its wings were fanned out like it was flying right out her little bikini underpants.

How are you doing, Rhonda? I said. I hadn't seen her around for a few months.

You know, she said. Not too bad, I guess.

You still wearing those crazy roller skates?

She laughed. It's part of the official uniform, you know, she said. What about you? You working?

Still looking. Buy you a drink?

You'd better let me get the first round, she said. I was grateful as I knew there was no way my three dollars would last between us. Business is booming, you know, she said. There's never a shortage of lazy assholes who want to sit in their cars and watch you roll around all over the goddamn place. She told Jimbo to set us up: twofers all around.

There were a couple of things I really liked about Rhonda, the first being that she never took shit off anyone. She smoked, drank, and on a few occasions snorted whenever she wanted, and never watched her language no matter where she was. She cursed just as easily in a church as she did in a bar. The other thing I really liked about her was the connection we had between us, a physical thing that we didn't need to talk about, but just let ourselves enjoy it. That, and the way she fit into her blue jeans could make a man kill another man with his bare hands.

You with anybody? I asked her, trying to make it sound like I was just making conversation. Curious, but not too eager.

No, she said, but the night's still young.

She looked around the bar to see who was there. Over at the corner tables, the jukebox off to one side, the pool table in the back. She tossed back her shot, sucked on

a wedge of lime. What about you? she said. Scanned the faces, the pairs, those standing off to the side by themselves. You with anyone?

I didn't say anything. Hid behind my shot, my beer. Jimbo rang the bell because it was somebody's birthday. A reason to celebrate.

Yeah, I heard, she said. She was looking right at me. Things get around fast in a small town like this.

Yeah, I said.

Is she going to keep it?

She's Catholic, I said, and shrugged.

Rhonda ordered us another round of twofers. I heard she's still in high school, she said.

She got her GED, I said.

Who needs high school anyway, right?

I stared down into my beer wondering how in the hell it had happened like that, that I took advantage of a high school girl.

Rhonda whistled, trying to make a joke of it. Remember when we were seventeen? she said. She bumped her shoulder into mine. We did some crazy things back then.

Yeah, I said. I remembered a time when we snuck into Mrs. Ginger's office and did it on top of her desk, all over her paperwork.

That time in the back of Jimmy Pinski's station wagon, she said.

At the drive-in, I said.

I forget which movie was playing.

They're tearing them all down now, I said. The screens and those little boxes where the sound comes out. They're ripping them all down.

We had some good times, she said. She was smiling and remembering.

We sure did.

Quit sulking about it, Lonnie, she said. It's not the worse thing that could happen. She moved closer to me. Slid her hand up on my thigh. What about tonight? she said. I'm parked right outside.

I really thought about it, forgetting everything else and jumping in the car with her, just driving. Head up to the State Park where we used to go back in high school. I thought about fumbling over each other in the back seat, trying to find a good song on the radio, trying to get her jeans off. It was exactly what I needed to forget that I had a girlfriend back at home, a seventeen-year-old pregnant girlfriend who was probably all cuddled up on the sofa watching cartoons and watching the clock.

I can't, I told her. I put my hand on top of hers, on my thigh. I said it again.

That's all right, she said. I just thought—but she stopped, and didn't finish what she was going to say. She pulled her hand away. It used to be that we could find each other and know we'd have company for the night; I couldn't stay there and risk changing my mind and going with her. I knew if I stuck around for more Twofer Tuesday rounds and we did a couple lines in the bathroom, there'd be no stopping us from getting together.

I have to go, I said.

Rhonda raised her glass, then shot it back. See you around, she said.

I got up fast, got out of there fast, stumbled through the crowd, outside, and headed back home.

* * *

Melissa was asleep on the sofa, hadn't bothered to pull it out and make the bed. She was wrapped snug in a quilt she'd brought with her from her parents' house. Her legs tucked up, her hands folded under her chin. Her young face looked like it was made out of thin glass. Christmas ornament thin. The television was muted. On the screen,

two women looked like they were fighting about something. I left it on. Went over to the refrigerator. Cracked it open, grabbed the last can of Hamm's. Opened the window, stepped out on to the fire exit.

I tried to imagine how it would happen when the baby was ready and Melissa was ready, in a hospital with a doctor in between her legs ready to catch, his head under the hood, offering words of encouragement. Breathe, push, breathe, push, breathe, push. Nurses, IVs, me in a set of scrubs, Hold my hand, breathe, one, two, three, four. Hold my hand, breathe. One, two, three, four. Swearing her head off until they stuck a syringe in her. Painkillers, she'd say. Breathing's not enough. I need painkillers. Goddamn breathing is not working. Waiting for her to squeeze every bone in my hand to dust. Pulverize it like a car compactor. I saw it there in the Ludington night, staring down below into a dark, empty alley, her eyes rolling up towards the inside of her head, the whites of them flashing at me like snake belly, flashing and glazed and shaking. Her arms shaking. Her grip on my hand strong and cold like steel. The doctor's head moving underneath her gown, saying something I've heard before, something on television or something, his head coming up, speaking to a nurse, going back under. The doctor jumped up, moved back against the wall. Overturned a tray with metal tools; metal tools scattered loudly across the floor. The doctor stared at me. It's coming, he said. Melissa didn't move, speak, or scream, laid there squeezing my hand to death, laid there and let our baby explode out of her, and he did, exploded out of her in one loud suctioned splat. Stood up on fully grown legs, looked at each person in the room with fully grown eyes, face, hair, chest, muscles. Our baby stood up and stood there, taller than me, and spoke, not thirty seconds in the world, said, Which one of you is my father? I spoke without thinking, answered without hesitating: I am, Luke. There in the swirling shadows in the empty alley in a Ludington night, in a hospital room I dreamed, my fully grown freshly birthed baby boy charged at me and punched me out, down to

the floor where I hugged the cold tile, where my newborn son pummeled the sense right out of me.

Sirens somewhere in the distance. In the middle of the night. No money. No job. A pregnant seventeen-year-old girlfriend I left at home. Twofer Tuesdays and the possibility of spending the night with another girl.

I needed to get out of there. It was the only way I could see. I finished off the last can of Hamm's and dropped the empty can off the fire exit into the empty alley.

* * *

When you ask a buddy like Jimbo to loan you two hundred bucks, he doesn't ask why you need it or what you're going to use it for. He opens the till and gives it to you in twenties, says, See you around, because he knows you won't be around to make the turkey trip up North. He didn't need me to tell him I'd pay him back, didn't need to know when. It was something understood between us that I would when I could. See you around, buddy, I said.

Yeah, he said, one of these days.

I'd planned on leaving that night when Melissa was asleep. I'd leave her half of the two hundred with a note explaining it all. The first thing I'd have to say was that I was doing it for her own good, that her parents were able to take better care of her and the baby. I'd have to make her understand that I couldn't do that, didn't have any money, couldn't find any work, but I would, down in Muskegon, or Grand Rapids maybe, if Muskegon was dried up, and I'd make some money and send it to her. I'd have to make her believe that I'd never planned for this, didn't mean for this to happen. I'd write every week until I got a telephone, then I'd call every week. Come up and see them once a month, maybe, if that was all right with her parents. I'd send money every week. I'd make her believe that I didn't want to leave like that, but there was no other

way to do it. I'd tell her I loved her and would miss her, say I was sorry again for the whole mess, but that I would do my best to get all three of us through it. I'd write, You have to believe me that I never meant for this to happen. Would sign it: Love, Lonnie. Would write it in the bathroom, or on the fire exit when she was taking a nap. When she wasn't watching. When she was asleep, I'd leave the money and the note on the table, pinned under the salt and pepper. Would hope she'd call her parents instead of getting the crazy idea in her head that she could go it alone. Should make that clear in the note. Call your parents and tell them. It was the only way. I'd tell her that. Would write that in the note. It was the only way.

When I got back to the apartment, her parents were already there. Her mother was with Melissa on the sofa, holding hands. Crying. They looked up at me standing in the doorway. Her mother hugged her and kissed her forehead. All over the top of her head. Both of them sobbed loud and sloppy so you couldn't tell who the sounds belonged to. Her father stood on the other side of the apartment, in front of the other window. Stared out at the street. His arms were folded across his chest and his face looked like he was thinking very hard about killing me. Her mother looked up at me like I had killed somebody. She hugged Melissa and held onto her like she thought I would try to steal her. Melissa looked up at me, too. Her face was swollen and flushed, her eyes tired and red and worn out. She was afraid and didn't know what to do.

I told them, she said. I called them up and told them.

All right, I said.

I had to, she said. There was an eviction notice in the mail. She pointed over at the table. I could see it from the doorway, printed on bright red paper. There's not enough money, she said.

I know, I said. I didn't say anything about the two hundred I'd borrowed from Jimbo, rolled up in my pocket.

This isn't how I thought it'd be, she said. Not this hard. She wiped her eyes with her shirt sleeve. I'll work if you want me to, she said.

You can't work, her mother said.

You're not going to work, her father said.

Her mother said, Not while you're—but couldn't finish it, couldn't say it. She started bawling all over again and when she started up, Melissa did, too, the two of them bawling together, all over each other.

Her father turned to face me, stared me down from across the room. Made his way towards me, passed me, to the door. He opened it. Said, I want to see you outside, and stepped out onto the landing. I followed him out, shut the door behind me. Figured he'd want to take a shot at me or something like that. He had every right to go ahead and take it. I had the quick thought that he might have a gun, plan on plugging me in the stomach and then unloading it into me while I bled all over the landing, the stairs, the Welcome Home mat. I stepped back.

Her father reached into his coat. I stood there, tried to get myself ready. Thought, How do people do this, get themselves ready to take a bullet in the gut? Thought: This how I'm going to die, on the landing of our shitty little apartment, shot down by my pregnant seventeen-year-old girlfriend's father. I got ready to reach out and grab it, as soon as he skinned it. Waited. He pulled out a large stack of dollar bills. Hundreds, bound with a rubber band. He held it out towards me.

What the hell is that? I said.

It's a thousand dollars, he said. All you have to do is just disappear. Right now.

I thought it might be some kind of joke or something, but his face was serious. His eyes were hard, focused as barrels. He wasn't joking. I stepped back, leaned against the railing.

Take it, he said.

What the hell for?

Don't ever come back again, he said.

It didn't make any sense that he'd give me a thousand dollars to leave and never come back. A thousand dollars. It would've made more sense if he had skinned a pistol and plugged a bullet into my gut. I would've known what to do with that. I thought, Why the hell didn't you pull a pistol on me, old man? If she were my daughter, I wouldn't have hesitated about it. I would've whipped it out and unloaded it on me. Especially if it were someone like me.

Her father stepped towards me, the money still extended. She thinks she loves you, he said. She's idealistic just like her mother. She can't see it right now that you won't ever amount to much. He stopped, looked me straight in the eyes, said, I know people like you. I know money talks. He held it out there smug at me like he thought he knew what he was talking about, like he had me all figured out the whole time. You're a bum, he said.

I'd already made up my mind to leave, and could've used the money—it would've lasted me long enough to get back on my feet—but now that it was his idea and his bankroll, I didn't like it. Didn't like trying to be bought off like that. Like he could just throw money at a problem to make it go away. You can't control her life by waving cash in front of her, I said. There's going to be some things in her life that you won't be able to fix by cutting a check.

I'm not going to stand here and get lectured by you, he said. You're going, one way or another. He waggled the cash in front of me like a bone.

She agreed to this? I said.

She will, her father said. Take the money. Don't try to visit her or the baby. Don't ever try to contact her. The money was still out there in the middle of us. Give her a chance to do something good with her life, he said. It was the only thing he could've said to make everything else he said make any sense, or ring true.

But I wasn't going to take his money. Not like that. If I was going to leave, it was going to be on my terms. Keep your money, I told him.

It's yours, he said.

Save it for Melissa. She's going to need it.

I need to make sure you don't ever try coming back.

Don't worry about me coming back. You won't ever see me again.

Take the money so I'll know for sure, he said.

I already said I would. I pushed his hand away, went back inside. Melissa and her mother were still on the sofa. Her mother was using her fingers to brush the hair out of Melissa's eyes. Was saying something to her, but I couldn't hear because she was whispering. I went over, put my hand on Melissa's shoulder. It felt so thin and small under her shirt and it was strange because she was supposed to be gaining weight, but it felt like she was losing weight instead. She looked up at me and smiled, like everything was all right again. Like everything was all fixed.

I'm going to run down to the store, I told her.

Why? she said.

I'm going to pick us up something for dinner, I said. I'll cook something and we can all sit down and talk about what's going to happen next.

She nodded.

I leaned down and kissed her on the forehead. I'll be right back, I told her.

Hurry, she said. OK?

I will, I lied. I didn't get my bag out of the closet, couldn't have without her asking me questions. I left everything there, everything I owned, which wasn't much, but all I had. I went to the door and passed her father, who was standing in the doorway waiting for me to be gone. He didn't say anything, just watched me walk passed him, through the door, down the stairs, and out to the street. Though I could feel him watching me go, I didn't look back. Not once. Not ever.

MANISTEE ON A GOOD DAY

Still wasn't as good as a heart attack. If only there'd been a piper somewhere who could have come to this one dead horse town and gathered up all the zombies wandering aimlessly down the sidewalks and led them away, towards something better, perhaps. The billboard should read: Welcome to Manistee, Posterity Lies behind You, Go Back the Way You Came. Everyone coming into this town would have been a hell of a lot better off if they'd seen that billboard instead of the one there now: Welcome to Manistee, Death Place of the World's Tallest Man.

Here: Army recruiters camp out on your front lawn because they know, too, the only way out of this place for young men between the ages of 18 and 30 is to sign up and ship out. Each week there's a bus that takes a handful of them, wide-eyed and wet behind the ears, down to Grand Rapids for a physical and a last chance to back out. Most of them never back out. Most of them, if not all of them, were born with their John Hancocks on enlistment papers. I open the window and shout at the Recruiter through the screen, I hope you're happy when you've shipped away all our soldiers and Canada attacks!

The Recruiter roasts weenies. Has a lean-to against the birch tree. Lucky for him, it's been a mild spring. He's still trying to track down my brother, innocent and unsuspecting, long enough to tell him about the opium dens in Amsterdam, the fifteen year old street walkers in Thailand, and the stretch of the Indian Ocean where you can fire on Arabs running all over the land like a bunch of chickens with their heads cut off. He has stories of the world, and even if they're not true, the mere suggestion of them is a thousand times better for my brother than the same old days at Manistee Window and Windshield Repair.

My brother's got a girl, but they're a Saturday night at the drive-in away from having to get married and start a family. The Recruiter counts on this, assumes my brother's thought about being a husband and a father before he's twenty-one and can legally walk into the Union Tavern for a shot and a beer. Caught between a rock and a gravestone.

The high school has a daycare, and drug stores, though legally obligated to carry them, won't sell you contraceptives without calling your parents first. Planes don't come in, and only cargo trains go out. In the switching yard I watch them loading up and chugging out. I look for open cars. I'd make a better hobo than I would a soldier.

One of these days. Yes, one of these days.

FREESOIL

I carved out my love for you on my bicep and the old dead tree in the cemetery where we first kissed and I tasted your dope. It didn't keep you off other men's beds and the backs of their motorcycles. You said, I'm a bird and you can't cage a free bird.

You left Freesoil in a cloud of dust and a murmur of rumors. I couldn't ever believe you'd disappear in a plume of dirt road and a peal of shifting gears. I dreamed I found you at the bottom of Niagara Falls grinning amongst an oak-barrel wreckage. I was this close, you said. You could drive a Mustang through a needle's eye.

That night in the cemetery, you showed me what parts of a woman are mostly liquid. At first, I tasted nothing but your lipstick. There were others around that tried to wake up the dead. Like this, you said, and showed me how we fit together. There on the hood of Bobby Pinski's Buick. The engine ticked. Our zippers scraped the paint. I knew from the curl in your lips you'd never stay in one place long.

Last night I dreamed we walked across the Grand Canyon on a high wire. The Grand Canyon opened up wide as a mouth to swallow us whole. We danced over its jagged teeth and were never afraid to fall.

I went to Chicago to find you, but when I stopped to ask for directions, I was robbed by two Mexicans. They had switchblades and took my watch and my cross and my last thirty-five dollars. I swore I'd never set foot in Illinois again, even if I knew you were there waiting for me.

I thought I saw you once at a Manistee bar. The back of your head and your bleach blond hair stringy and straight. Thought I smelled your perfume of rose petals

and leather jackets. Your machine gun laugh and your ditch water mouth. Your name burned on my arm and because it was summer I stripped down to my undershirt. I had a gun because I was hunting out there. I screamed your name, but it wasn't you and the motorcycle gang came at me with pool sticks and links of chain until I showed them my gun. You can always get yourself out of tight spots by cocking a gun instead of giving in.

This time it isn't a dream. It's a narrow two-laner out in the middle of the woods. The tires spitting up gravel. The needle bumps over seventy. Scales tip. Shadows spin in the headlights. Up ahead, the world ends at a hole where I drive my truck through straight to hell. Right through the devil's peephole and into hell just like your tattoo said I should.

THERE WAS WAYNE

Wayne cracks up the car again. Nancy will think he's drunk, but this time it isn't the sauce. This time it's the weather and the rain. The tires hit a wet spot and the car slid off the road and into the guardrail. It isn't like the last time. Or the time before that. For once, Wayne's in the right on this one, as right as he can be while cracking up the car. It won't stop Nancy from finding other reasons, like he was driving too fast, or he was fiddling with the radio, or the tires needed rotating months ago. And all Wayne will be able to say is at least I wasn't drunk, and Nancy'll say, Yeah, for once.

There's Wayne cracking up the car. Hitting the bend at forty-five. Guardrail flashing in his headlights. He goes to turn into it, but the wheels don't turn and the car's gliding off the shoulder into the guardrail. The guardrail crunches around the front of the car and the car plows through it and into the ditch. He'll be able to tell Nancy that he wasn't drinking, that there were things out there, believe it or not, that happened independently of his drinking. He'll tell her to go ahead and smell his breath. Not one drop. She'll say he was high instead. He would've been, too, if he hadn't run out the week before. This time it really was the weather and just the weather. It was all the rain coming down and some of it was standing on the asphalt and the car hit a patch of it. What happens is the tread on the tire doesn't catch on the road because of the water and you can't steer it for nothing. If you slam on the brakes, then the wheels lock up and if you're sliding, you'll keep right on sliding. It's called hydroplaning, he tells Nancy.

I know what it's called, she says.

Well that's what it was, he says. Not my fault at all. This time it was the rain and there wasn't nothing I could do to help it. That's it, Wayne thinks, just a misfortunate accident, and then he says it: A misfortunate accident.

When it comes to you, Wayne, she says, there's no such thing as an accident.

Wayne finds relief in the fact that this accident was not his fault, and that Mother Nature was to blame this time. The thing is even though it wasn't his fault, his cracking up the car couldn't have come at a worse time. To say money was tight would infer the presence of some money, and there wasn't any to be had. They'd already raided the piggy banks, the couch cushions, and the swear jar. All of it was gone. Nancy was still looking for work, and Wayne was still avoiding it and bumming from his friends. He'd been drinking on credit for four months, and his unemployment was about to run out again. They'd given him an extension, but there wouldn't be any more. On top of that, Nancy was late, and Nancy was never late. Wayne wanted to know how the hell that happened when they used rubbers, and Nancy told him they weren't one hundred percent effective all the time, but that wasn't any kind of explanation, even though she pointed out to him where it said that on the rubber's wrapper. He threw a glass or a jar or a vase--whatever the hell he grabbed first--and when she was done screaming at him, he said, Well now, didn't we both get screwed.

There's a bun in the oven and a car in the ditch. He calls his little brother to come help him haul it out. His little brother has a big truck, but like always, he shows up late and Wayne's got to hear Nancy really laying into him about the car, the work situation, the baby, the future. What are you going to do? she puts it to him, and all Wayne can think about is the car and how it wasn't his fault. All he can do is curse out his little brother for being late and making him sit through that. Wayne? she yells at him. I'm talking to you. What the hell are you going to do about it?

Wayne looks up into her face, and wonders how he can make her understand. It wasn't my fault, he says. His little brother honks from the driveway. I've got to go, he says, and then he's gone.

* * *

There was Wayne and the windshield wipers, hitting that first curve at fifty and feeling her slip just a little. Nothing to worry about really, just the rain on the road. Then there was Wayne hitting the second bend, thinking about how stoned he'd be if he hadn't run out--what a hell of a time to be running out--thinking about a girl down at OKs, having to shift in the seat to make room for his hard on, hitting that second bend at forty-five, taking a little off the gas, turning into the curve. The car doesn't turn. The car hits a skid and keeps on skidding into the shoulder and through the guardrail. Trying to steer her out of it and slamming on the brakes. The wheels locked up and there was no way of pulling out of it. There was Wayne: holding on to the steering wheel, saying, Oh shit, just what I need now.

* * *

Wayne's little brother isn't right in the head. Not retarded, but fucked up in one of his lobes. Took lithium so he wouldn't hear voices and try to kill himself. He'd tried three times. Wayne found him the last time: locked in his car, in the garage, the garage door closed, the car running. His little brother giggles, and Wayne says, What?

You look like you been catching some hell, his little brother says. His little brother gets a kick out of it.

Shut up, Wayne says. You got any smoke? His little brother's still giggling and slapping the steering wheel. Timmy, you got any or not?

Timmy takes out a joint from his coat pocket. Here, Timmy says.

Wayne rolls down the window. Lights up. Nancy's pregnant, he says. Timmy giggles so hard he can't hardly drive. He always gets that way whenever he hears about sex or babies. Wayne has to grab the wheel to keep them from swerving into the oncoming lane. It isn't funny, he says, but Timmy can't help himself and has to pull over. He should've never said anything about it. Timmy's doubled over slapping the side of the door, the window, the steering wheel, the parking brake. He's having trouble

breathing and Wayne tries to settle him down. When he gets out of control like this, he can really hurt himself. Wayne gives him some of the joint. That eases him down, but he's still laughing.

When Wayne looks at his little brother, he sees his old man: in the eyes and the fat round face. Wayne got lucky and looked more like their Uncle Tommy. Timmy got the short end of it, that's for sure. Wayne always told himself that it didn't matter because Timmy never thought about it at all. Probably didn't even remember their old man. Their old man was a real piece of work. Used to push Timmy around because Timmy was never right in the head. He remembered coming home one night to his old man flicking lit cigarettes at Timmy and Timmy crying because he'd pissed himself again and their old man saying, Get away from me retard, I ain't changing your diapers. Timmy was sixteen then, but still you didn't go around acting that way with one of your own, even if they weren't right in the head. Wayne didn't even say anything, just lit into the side of his old man's head. When his old man got out of the hospital, Wayne and Timmy were gone the hell out of there. Wayne found Timmy a home that would take care of him and teach him a trade. Wayne knew it wasn't fair, but there wasn't anything else he could do. He sure as hell couldn't look after him, and couldn't give Timmy anything more than he could figure out for himself.

Wayne tells Timmy it isn't funny.

I know, Timmy says. I know.

They drive to where Wayne's car is cracked up in the ditch. Holy shit, Timmy says. They get out and look at it.

You don't have to tell me, Wayne says. I was driving the son of a bitch. They check it over, but it doesn't look good. The whole front end is crushed up and Wayne only hopes the engine's all right. Come on, he says to Timmy, let's get her out of there. They hitch her up and Timmy pulls her out slow like, out of the ditch and over to the side of the road. Wayne gets in and puts in the key. It turns over and revs up though

it's real rough and there's smoke coming out. He cuts it off. Gets out. Timmy's running his hands along the front end.

It looks like it's just the body, Timmy says.

What about the smoke? Wayne says.

Timmy shrugs. I wouldn't drive it, he says. No telling what's wrong with it.

That's what Wayne thinks, too. It'd be one thing for the car to just be cracked up and another to drive it with a cracked radiator or something like that. Better safe than sorry. Let's go down to OKs, Wayne says.

What for? Timmy says.

So I can call for a tow and you can buy me a beer, Wayne says. He punches Timmy in the shoulder and gets in the truck.

* * *

Down at OKs everyone there knows that Wayne's little brother is fucked up in the head, but no one teases him about it because they know that Wayne is too, in his own way, fucked up in the head. They know Wayne is always on the look-out for a reason to throw down, not that he's particularly big or that he knows his way around during fisticuffs, but everyone tries to stay on Wayne's good side because he's just enough fucked up in the head to be dangerous. There's Wayne: eyeing everybody down, nodding at familiar faces, smiling at the bartender. Hey Tina, he says.

Hey yourself, Wayne, Tina says. Joey says I can't let you put anything more on your tab. He came in this morning, and that was the first thing he said. He says it's filled up.

Yeah, Wayne says. He sidles up on a stool. Timmy plops down on the one next to him. It's a good thing I brought my brother then, isn't it, Wayne says.

Tina says, You now how it is. I got to do whatever Joey says.

Wayne smiles at her, wondering how many times that logic has got her on her knees. We'll have a couple of beers, Wayne says. Tina gets two bottles and opens them up. Sets them down in front of Wayne and Timmy. The bottles foam a little at the top. Timmy sucks the foam off his.

That's four dollars, Tina says. Hands on her hips, tits packed tight into a Poison t-shirt. She's not taking any shit off anyone today.

Pay the lady, Wayne tells his little brother. Timmy digs into his coat pocket and pulls out a couple of balled up bills. One of them's a five spot. Tina looks at Wayne. Wayne says, What, you want him to unfold it for you, too? She glares at him, and unrolls the five spot herself. She doesn't give Timmy a hard time because he doesn't know any better. Wayne likes his little brother's defense, to pull back into a shell like a goddamn turtle. He wishes there were times when he could get away with that. He takes a look around the joint. It's too early for the jukebox. Too late for the veterans. Timmy sucks on his beer like it was a soda pop.

Hey, Wayne? Timmy says.

Yeah, Wayne says.

What are you going to name it?

Name what? Wayne says.

The baby, Timmy says.

And there's Wayne, remembering his girlfriend is late and probably preggers. He should've seen it coming. Fucking rubbers, he shouldn't have even worn the goddamn things in the first place. At least he could've got off proper then. I don't know, Wayne says.

Is it going to be a boy or a girl? Timmy says.

Shit, Timmy, I don't know, Wayne says. Wayne looks at himself in the mirror behind the bar, sees into the future, Wayne with more under his belt and less on top of his head with a kid, a snotty little kid that has Wayne's big nose and receding hairline,

and they're sharing a joint and Wayne's laughing at the kid because the kid's coughing and can't stop. Wayne is punching the kid in the shoulder and pushing him down, toughening him up for the cruel hard world. Wayne sees himself as a piece of shit old man just like his old man, but what scares him most is he sees it but doesn't think he can change it.

You know what would be cool? Timmy says.

What?

If you named it Timothy. Wouldn't that be cool?

Yeah. That'd be cool.

If it's a boy, Timmy says.

Wayne hopes like hell it isn't true. If it is, he can get a job, if that's what it takes. He can do all kinds of things, if he has to. He hopes it's not a boy. Wayne knows by what he sees in the mirror behind the bar that he can't ever be some boy's old man. He doesn't know how to fish and he's never been hunting. He's never even shot a gun before. The only thing his old man taught him was how to play poker, but you can't teach that to a kid. The kid would follow Wayne around everywhere and act like him and pick fights at school and look down the teacher's blouse. Wayne would have to answer for him, and the only person Wayne wanted to answer for was Wayne. Every man for himself, isn't that how it went?

Wayne? Timmy says.

Yeah, Wayne says.

I didn't mean to say that.

Say what?

About the baby, Timmy says.

It isn't that. Wayne sucks back the last of his beer. Timmy's still working on his, got it cradled between his hands. Wayne tried to tell him one time that holding it like

that made the beer warm, but Timmy said he didn't care because he liked warm beer and holding his bottle like that.

Is it the car? Timmy says.

Yeah, Wayne says. That. A bunch of other things.

The car will be all right, probably, Timmy says.

The tow alone is going to cost me seventy bucks, Wayne says.

You need money?

You got seventy bucks?

No.

Then there it is.

Timmy sucks on his beer. He's still got his coat on, and even the way he's sitting there he doesn't look right in the head. We could tow it, Timmy says. Could hitch it back on the truck and just go slow.

It hits Wayne: Why the hell not? It'd save him seventy bucks or more, and they could even take it over to Rudy's place. Rudy owes Wayne a favor and he could take a look over the engine and make sure everything's okay. Fix whatever isn't. All right, Wayne says. He slaps Timmy on his shoulder. That's some damn good thinking, Wayne tells him.

Timmy's all smile and full of himself. He sucks down the rest of his beer. Two more, he hollers at Tina. To celebrate our plan, he says to Wayne.

You're the boss, Hoss, Wayne says, and Timmy likes the sound of that. He unrolls four dollar bills and slaps them on top of the bar. Tina gives them two more beers. She's watching Timmy and Timmy's still all smiles.

Wayne slaps his little brother on the shoulder again. Raises his beer. Here's to you little brother, he says, my goddamn guardian angel. Timmy lifts up his beer and they smack bottles and tip them back.

Wayne drives. Timmy navigates. They have another joint. It starts to rain again.

* * *

In the rain. Foot on the gas. Radio cranked up. Aerosmith. Walk this way. Drive this way, Wayne thought, and laughed at his own joke. Out of dope. Out of dough. Just driving. He was thinking about a girl named Jess. Tight ass in tight jeans. Little itty bitty titties in a tank top jobbie. He was thinking about her bending over. In the back. In the front. Getting hard for a girl named Jess while Nancy was at home looking through the want ads, late for her period, cleaning the house so she would stop thinking about everything. Like: Where was Wayne? Goddamn right. Where the hell was Wayne? There was Wayne, going fifty in a thirty-five. Making room for a stiffy he had for another girl. Feeling good. He didn't even think about the possibility of Nancy being pregnant. Sticking to the road, hugging close to the broken yellow line, the windshield wipers going faster to keep up with the downpour. The downpour pounding on the hood. The roof. The windows. Wayne thought how perfect it would've been to have something to smoke and he could've headed North, taken the back roads. Drive it out of him. That's what Wayne liked about driving, just driving, was you could think about things like that and they didn't have to really happen. He liked the music, too, being able to blast the thing without Nancy yelling at him that she's trying to sleep. Just Wayne and the Stones. I can't get no satisfaction. Preach on Brother Jagger, Wayne said. There was one guy who probably never wore a rubber in his life, and he probably never had to ever think about it when any of his girlfriends was late. Didn't have to start looking for work or worry about paying the bills. Rock star. Why couldn't Wayne be a rock star? He could dance some. As good as Jagger anyway. He could play a little harp. Get a blues riff going. He could jam. Shotgun liters of whiskey. Chop lines of coke. He wouldn't even have to remember his girlfriends' names and he'd still never

sleep by himself. If they didn't like something, they were free to take their skinny ass back to the street to hustle somebody else. If one of those girlfriends ever told him they were late, he could just say, What do you want me to do about it? and get rid of her and have another new one before dinner. Wayne sang: I can't get no satisfaction, and I try, and I try, and I try, and I try! I can't get no satisfaction! Fifty in a thirty-five. He hit that first curve and felt her slip underneath a bit, like she was made of plastic instead of steel. He took a little off the gas. She recovered. He hit the gas again right out of the turn. The rain came down harder and pounded on top of his car. On top of the windshield. On top of the roof. Over his head. Under his feet. Wayne in a monsoon. He eased the gas down and felt her pick back up. It can't be all that hard. Wayne sang with the music and pumped his fists in the air like he was in front of ten thousand horny little groupies, throwing him their underwear. The band sang behind him. Wayne was still on the gas, but he eased off as he got to that second curve. Took her down to forty-five. The yellow sign said thirty, but everyone knew that was just a suggestion, you could get away with adding fifteen more on top of that. Eased her into the curve, holding tight to the yellow line. He felt good in his belly. Loose. Weightless. She wasn't turning into the curve. That weightless feeling sunk into the bottom of his scrotum. He felt sick. The car in a skid, and there was Wayne, knowing there wasn't anything he could do to help it. He slammed on the brakes. The wheels locked up. Her tires were on top of the water. Wayne tried, but she wouldn't turn out of it. Oh shit, Wayne said. This is all I need now. Forty-five across the slick surface of the road right into the guardrail. He closed his eyes. The seatbelt held him in. Through the guardrail. Into the ditch. There was ringing in his ears. He thought it might be the horn. He opened his eyes. The front end was shoved into the ditch. It wasn't the horn. Just the radio. He shut off the car. Got the seatbelt off. He was sore where it dug into his shoulder and his stomach. He climbed out of the car and up the ditch to the side of the road. The guardrail was broken metal all mad where he busted through it. The rain was coming

down all around him, soaking him all the way through his clothes and down into his skin. Shit, he said. Then screamed it. He sat down on the side of the road. He couldn't get his wind back. Headlights pulled up all around him. For a moment they looked like spotlights shining down on him, onstage, pumping his fist and getting ten thousand people to sing with him. The rain sounded like hands clapping.

* * *

Wayne's driving. Both of them solemn as soldiers. Wayne's hoping it's not going to be as hard as he thinks. As long as they take her easy, it should go all right.

Hey, Wayne? Timmy says.

What? Wayne says. The rain's let up, but he's still watching the road close. Keeps his hands on the wheel. Ten and two o'clock, the way you're supposed to if you don't have a girl with you.

If you had a baby, what would that make me? Timmy says. He's staring out the window. That's what he does when he's thinking something over.

What do you mean? Wayne says.

You know, what would I be to the baby?

You'd be the kid's uncle.

Timmy thinks it over some more. Wayne goes over the hitch in his head. Where to put it on the car. Then where to hook it up to the back of the truck. He reminds himself to make sure the car's in neutral.

I'd be Uncle Timmy? Timmy says.

Yeah, Wayne says.

Like Uncle Tommy.

Yeah.

I like that, Timmy says. I like being an uncle. Like Uncle Tommy.

He was all right, Wayne says.

I'll be all right, too, Timmy says.

Wayne thinks so, too, but just because Timmy would make a great uncle sure as hell wasn't any reason to start wishing for a kid. Not for Wayne.

I can take him to the circus, Timmy says. Or a baseball game.

Right, Wayne says, though he wants Timmy to stop talking about it, to quit thinking about it or it might come true. But just cut it out for now, all right, Wayne says.

Timmy clams up. Starts knocking his head against the window. That's what he does when his feelings get hurt. Knocks his head harder against the window.

Goddamn it, Timmy, knock it off, Wayne says. He catches himself. Calms down. I'm sorry, man, I didn't mean anything by it, Wayne says. I just don't want to think about it right now. That's all. I didn't mean anything by it.

After a little bit, Timmy says, Why'd you yell at me, Wayne? Don't you think I'd be a good uncle?

It isn't that, Wayne says. You'd make a hell of an uncle. It's just that I don't want a baby, and all this thinking about it rubs me wrong. You know? But Wayne can tell that Timmy doesn't know. That he doesn't get it at all. Forget it, Wayne says.

But Timmy won't. He's got it in his head and it's nice for him to think about and he wants to know why Wayne isn't having as much fun with it. Wayne just wants to get to his car and get it over with.

What about Nancy? Timmy says. Doesn't she want it? He sounds like he's going to cry about it, like Wayne's taken something away from him that he thought was his.

Hell, I don't know, Wayne says. He tries to keep calm, keeps telling himself that Timmy just doesn't know any better. He doesn't mean anything by it. But it makes Wayne want to scream. What fucking it? There is no fucking it! There's no baby, Wayne says. Not yet. He moves around in his seat. Keeps his hands on the wheel. Then he thinks about Nancy, sees her with a big fat belly sitting on a big fat ass

propping up her big fat ankles telling him to rub some big fat part of her. Why would she do this to him? Something like this, this right now. Sure, they'd messed up a couple of times, but lately they'd been careful to keep the rubber on the whole time. He hated those goddamn things, but he put one on every single time. And the way she told him, she made it sound so final. Shit, Timmy, you'd make a damn good uncle, Wayne says. But I can't go having a baby just for that.

Why not? Timmy says.

Wayne wishes Timmy would just get it without having to say it, without having to think about it. Wayne knows it isn't any use trying to get him to see that. I just can't, Wayne says, and doesn't say anything more about it. He tries to shake it, concentrate on the car. On what's coming up.

Wayne pulls the truck in front of his cracked up car. The rain's stopped, but there's water beaded all over Wayne's car, on the roof and the hood where it's crunched up. He backs up the truck closer to the car. There should only be a half foot of slack. A foot at most. He puts the truck in park, keeps her running. Timmy doesn't say anything, hasn't said anything since Wayne yelled at him about the baby thing. Wayne can tell Timmy's still thinking about it. Can't get it out of his head, getting so close to being an uncle only to have Wayne take it away from him. Come on, Wayne says. Gets out of the truck. Timmy gets out, too. Follows Wayne to the back. Timmy gets out his chain from his tool box in the bed. One end of it's slack. The other end has a hook. Timmy hauls it out. Doubles it up. Gets the slack end wrapped around the hitch bar on the back bumper of his truck. He takes the hook end of the chain and finds a place on the front end of Wayne's car where it won't tear anything up. Timmy hooks it up close to the wheel axle. He's done this before, does it every winter pulling people out of ditches and snow banks. It's something he's good at, and Wayne lets him do it without getting in his way. He moves under Wayne's car, gets it hooked, tugs on the slack to

make sure the chain isn't going anywhere. He gets up and brushes the gravel off his hands. Off his pants. That should do it, Timmy says.

All right, Wayne says.

I'll drive, Timmy says.

Wayne nods. Timmy walks over to Wayne's car, opens the door, flips on the hazard lights. Shifts the car into neutral. Then they get in the truck. He's done this before and doesn't need Wayne telling him what to do. Timmy stares straight ahead at the road. Keeps the truck moving slow, half in the lane half on the shoulder. He keeps his eyes on the mirrors, too, making sure Wayne's car is all right back there. He goes at just the right speed. Cars are blowing past them, some of them honk, but most of them cruise past and keep on cruising. Wayne leans back. It's going to be a slow ride.

Where we taking her? Timmy says. His voice sounds different. Official like. Like a mechanic.

Over to Rudy's, Wayne says. It's off Lincoln.

I know, Timmy says. Even his face looks different. Older. Stronger. Like he's the one with a girlfriend who's late, like he's the one having a baby. Wayne stares out the window. Sits back. Timmy pulls the car slow, just like he's supposed to. It takes them a half hour to get the car over to Rudy's, but Timmy gets it there without fucking it up anymore than it already is.

Timmy parks the truck in the middle of Rudy's yard. The driveway is cluttered with broken cars, cars on blocks, cars with flats, gutted cars, bodies without engines, engines without pistons. Rudy's supposed to be a mechanic, but his place looks more like a junkyard. Timmy and Wayne go to the door. Wayne knocks. He's smoking a cigar, drinking whiskey from the bottle. Hey, Wayne, he says. He rubs his hand across the front of his dirty t-shirt. The thing is though the dirt on his t-shirt doesn't look like it came from working on cars. He shoves his hand at Wayne and Wayne takes it. Pumps it a couple of times.

Hey, Rudy, Wayne says. I need your help.

Come on in, Rudy says. He goes back inside, and Wayne and Timmy follow him in. There isn't anywhere to sit down. Rudy hops up on a work bench. Wayne leans against the fender of a Buick with its hood popped open. Timmy stands off to the side. Doesn't say anything. He doesn't like Rudy at all because Rudy likes to fool around with underage girls. He cruises the high school in his Grand Am and picks them up. Takes them out to the Forest because they never card anybody out there. He can fill them up with liquor and then go park somewhere. Wayne's told Timmy about it, and Timmy's seen it for himself the couple of time Rudy tried bringing jailbait into OKs.

The favor that Rudy owes Wayne is that Wayne helped Rudy clean up a real goddamn mess with a girl. The girl wasn't fourteen yet. Rudy brought her into the Forest. Wayne was there to drink and not have to talk to anybody. At the Forest, nobody ever talked to you, let you drink in peace and quiet. They never said anything to Rudy, and everyone there knew that girl wasn't even fourteen. They knew that girl was somebody's goddamn daughter, but it was policy at the Forest that if you didn't want to get fucked up, you kept your mouth shut about other people's business, even when Rudy brought in jailbait like that. Rudy sat her down at a table in the back, to hide her in the shadows, and fed her shots of Kamikaze. Wayne watched the outlines of them, pounding back the shots. Rudy was playing with the girl's hair and holding her hand in his lap. After a while they left and Wayne stayed there and drank some more. About a half hour later though, Rudy came back in by himself. Came up the bar next to Wayne. You got help me out, man, he said to Wayne. He was sweating all over and his hands were shaking something bad.

What? Wayne said.

I got a problem, Rudy said.

Yeah?

I need your help.

My help?

A favor, Rudy said.

Wayne didn't just go doing favors for people.

It's outside, Rudy said.

Wayne had just about drank his pockets dry. All right, he said. He followed Rudy out to the parking lot. He showed Wayne the girl in the back seat of his car. She looked passed out, but her body was convulsing like she was trying to throw up. Her skirt was hiked up to her hips, her underpants somewhere else. What the hell happened? Wayne said.

We were going at it, then she started shaking like that, Rudy said. I think she had too much to drink. They watched the girl in the back seat. The girl's chest shook like she had hiccups, kind of back and forth like that.

What the hell do you want me to do? Wayne said.

I need you to take her to the hospital, Rudy said.

No fucking way, Wayne said.

I can't do it. She's got me all over her. They'll throw my ass in jail.

What the hell do you think they're going to do to me? Wayne said.

You could do it without them knowing you, Rudy said. Like anonymous, or something like that.

Shit, Wayne said. He kicked the side of Rudy's back tire. This was the last thing he needed on a Wednesday night. He knew the girl needed to get to the hospital, they'd probably have to pump her stomach, and he knew Rudy wouldn't risk it. That he'd probably drop her at a bus stop or something so he wouldn't get caught. Rudy was a piece of shit like that, and now Wayne had to clean it up for him. How much money you got? Wayne said.

Money?

You didn't think I would do this shit for free, did you?

Rudy dug in his pockets. He pulled out a ten. That's all I got, Rudy said.

Wayne grabbed it. This is just for starters, he said. You owe me big for this one.

I know, Rudy said.

No you don't, Wayne said. I'm saving your ass from five goddamn years in jail.

Wayne wasn't sure if that was the right amount of time, but it sounded right and he just wanted Rudy to remember that Wayne did this for him so when Wayne came around to collect on his debt Rudy couldn't give him any shit about it.

Yeah, Rudy said.

Give me your keys, Wayne said. Rudy handed them over, and Wayne drove the girl to the hospital. He left her with a nurse out front. Told the nurse she'd drunk too much and that she was probably raped so they could do that emergency contraceptive thing to keep her from getting pregnant. The nurse told Wayne not to leave, but as soon as she turned her head, Wayne was out of there. There was no way in hell he was sticking around for that, and at least the girl would get the help she needed. Wayne drove back to the Forest. Rudy was inside waiting for him. Wayne sat down and gave Rudy his keys back.

Did she get to the hospital? Rudy asked him.

Yeah, Wayne said. He used Rudy's ten to buy himself a bourbon.

Thanks, man, Rudy said.

I didn't do it for you, Wayne said. He shot the bourbon. Got himself another one.

Well, thanks anyway, Rudy said.

Yeah, Wayne said. He didn't say anything else and Rudy just left.

Timmy thinks Rudy's a real lowlife. He'd said to Wayne one time after Rudy tried to get drinks for a sixteen-year-old cheerleader that only perverts and dirty old men tried that with girls that young, and if he ever caught Rudy in the act, he'd show him right there and then why it was better he kept his pecker in his pants and out of

underage girls. Wayne thinks Rudy's a real lowlife, too, but Wayne needs a favor and Rudy owes him one.

You don't want to sit? Rudy says to Timmy.

Timmy shakes his head at him. I'll stand, he says.

Suit yourself, Rudy says. He holds out the whiskey bottle for Wayne. Want some? He says. Wayne grabs the bottle. Screws off the top. Takes a pull. He holds the bottle out for Timmy.

Timmy says, I don't want any.

Wayne takes another quick pull. Gives it back to Rudy. Rudy has some more. So what brings you fellas down this way? he says.

I need a favor, Wayne says.

Oh, Rudy says. That. Rudy already looks put out.

Don't worry, Wayne says, it isn't as bad as that shit I did for you.

Rudy takes another pull off the bottle. What do you want? he says.

I cracked up my car, Wayne says. I need you to fix it.

Now hold on, Rudy says. I think this is taking unfair advantage of the situation.

You fucking owe me, Wayne says. Remember that? Rudy hides behind his bottle. Timmy looks like he's trying to figure out what it means, the favor and why Rudy's going to fix Wayne's car for free. Fucking remember that, Wayne says. He stands up. Timmy's got his arms crossed. Looks like he's just waiting for Rudy to say no, because even though he doesn't know the particulars behind it, he still seems pretty damn sure that Rudy should pay up and not give Wayne any shit about it. Rudy knows Timmy's not right in the head, and knows Wayne's a little off, too. Now isn't the time for retraction. You owe me, Wayne says again.

All right. Where is it?

Out front.

All right. Rudy gets up. Let's go have a look. He goes outside. Wayne and Timmy follow him out there. They walk out to the car. Rudy whistles when he sees it. Jesus, he says. What did you do? Hit a guardrail?

Wayne says, Yeah.

Rudy bends down to take a look. You crunched her good, he says. Did you get the engine, too?

I don't know, Wayne says.

All right, Rudy says. He stands up. Takes another belt off the bottle. Leave it here, and I'll get to it tomorrow, he says.

All right, Wayne says. Wayne looks at Timmy. Let's unhook her, he says.

Timmy nods. Starts unhitching the car. Wayne watches. Rudy offers him the bottle. He takes it, takes a couple of pulls. Timmy undoes the hook end from Wayne's car. Then he undoes the slack end from the back of his truck. He balls up the chain and puts it back into the tool box. Rudy takes another look at Wayne's car. Looks like it's just the body, Rudy says.

Wayne nods.

If that's the case, I can't make any promises on how it'll look, Rudy says.

As long as it doesn't look like this, Wayne says.

Rudy nods. I'll get into it tomorrow, he says. Start fresh in the morning. He takes another belt of the whiskey. He tosses the bottle to Wayne, and Wayne helps himself to another. He looks at Timmy, and Timmy looks like he wants to get the hell out of there.

What's wrong with you? Wayne asks him.

Nothing, Timmy says.

Have some whiskey, Rudy says.

I don't want any, Timmy says.

Man, he needs to loosen up some, Rudy says.

Timmy points at Rudy. Right at him. Like he's getting ready to rush him. You don't tell me what I need, Timmy says. Not you. His whole face burns up like a struck match.

Rudy backs up. Puts up his hands. Jesus, take it easy, man, he says. Rudy knows that Timmy's a big enough boy to do some damage, if he gets pushed enough. Wayne steps between them.

All right, Wayne says. We're leaving.

Not him, Wayne, Timmy says. Not that piece of shit.

I know, Wayne says.

Not him, Timmy says.

All right, we're going, Wayne says. He backs Timmy to the truck, makes him get in the passenger's side.

Jesus, Rudy says.

Wayne doesn't say anything.

I'll call you about the car, Rudy says.

Yeah, Wayne says. He gets in the truck. Pulls out.

Your friend's a real piece of work, Timmy says.

He's not my friend, Wayne says. Wayne can tell Timmy's still stewing about it, still playing it over in his head. Timmy punches the side of the door.

Wayne says, It's done, let it go. Wayne knows how his little brother feels, and likes it that Timmy hates guys like Rudy. He should hate guys like Rudy. For being so fucked up in the head, his little brother's got a pretty good sense of things. Better than Wayne sometimes. I'm going to take your truck for the day, Wayne tells him.

Yeah, Timmy says.

Just for the night.

That's fine.

Thanks, Wayne says.

Wayne takes Timmy back to the home. Drops him off. Takes the truck.

* * *

Wayne drives home. The long way around, out to Route 2 and up to Monroe and back. He turns the radio on and flips it to a country station looking for Hank. Only a man like Hank knows what it's like for a man like Wayne. He doesn't find Hank, but it's a song he likes about a guy losing his wife and his pick-up and he thinks about making up his own country song about the shit that's raining on his parade. Wayne sings, though it doesn't have a tune, per se, he sings, My girl thinks I'm a worthless stain cause I cracked up the car in the middle of the rain. I got no more money and I don't got no smoke, and now I got a baby cause the rubber done broke. He slaps at the steering wheel. Cranks up the radio.

EVERYTHING IN A PLACE THAT NEEDS FINDING

For Lent, Murphy gives up his fantasies of a seventeen-year-old girl with a short skirt and bra top getting in his sports car, ready to go for a ride in every sense of the word, and his wife, Marie, gives up on him. She packs some clothes and leaves a note, says she's going to stay with her sister until he's out of the house. There isn't any discussing it, it's just assumed he should be the one to leave and she should keep the house. The fair thing to do would be to split it right down the middle and each take half, but finding a ban saw that big on such short notice is equally improbable as a seventeen-year-old girl in a short skirt and a bra top pulling into the driveway in her own sports car ready to give *him* a ride, in every sense of the word. He wants to fight it out, fight for his right to at least fight for it, knowing he'd lose eventually.

He stands at the top of the driveway. Waits for his sports car. Waits for his seventeen-year-old fantasy to materialize out of thin air and let him drive. His brother pulls into the driveway. What a shitty way to start the weekend, his brother says. Murphy hands him his poke. You don't have any suitcases? his brother says. Murphy gets in the car. His brother puts the poke in the backseat. Murphy closes his eyes as they back out of the drive, doesn't want to see his house getting smaller on him.

Murphy crashes at his brother's place, sleeps on the sofa, lives out of the things wrapped up in the tablecloth. His brother keeps saying how sorry he is for Murphy's circumstances, getting kicked out of his own house like that. What you need is a steak and a beer, his brother says.

Murphy nods.

Something happens when you reach thirty-five that Murphy realizes now, sleeping on his brother's sofa and living out of a hobo's poke, somehow, after thirty-five years, the convictions and principles that you lived by become flexible and are no longer as obdurate as you once thought them; at thirty-five you are free, for instance, to have a steak during Lent, or, when you're feeling down in the dumps, to drink as much scotch necessary to lift your spirits. He suggests this plan to his brother.

His brother says, I know just the place.

Murphy has to learn to live with epididymitis, that's what chronic means, the urologist tells him, locates the dull ache pulsating around his testicles. The urologist tells him it's not all that uncommon for some men and most of them go on to live very fruitful lives. The urologist says, Some are teachers, bankers, lawyers. One I knew and treated was an astronaut. Dr. Sung probes around Murphy's testicles with his cold rubber-gloved fingers, pushing, pressing, pin-pointing the swelling and the inflammation. It sits on top of the testes, Dr. Sung says. Like a crown.

Murphy looks away, at the wall, up at the ceiling.

Well, I guess more like a cap, Dr. Sung says. He consults the file. Try taking hot baths, he says. Get the blood moving down there. Another course of the pills and hot baths. He even writes it on his prescription pad: Hot baths, twice daily.

Murphy takes the prescription from him. He can't remember the last time he took a bath. He looks up and notices Dr. Sung staring at him.

You can pull your pants up now, Dr. Sung says.

Right, Murphy says. He pulls them up quickly, buttons and belts them with his back to Dr. Sung. Turns around. Can I go now? Murphy asks.

Of course, Dr. Sung says.

Right, Murphy says. He can't get out of that office fast enough.

Murphy wonders if other people can tell just by looking at him, if it registers on his face or if everyone is equipped with evolutionary sensors that detect his chronic problem and women dismiss him as a possible mate and men ignore him as competition. Can they tell enough by watching him in the grocery store to know it's epididymitis? Do they even know what the epididymal heads are for, where they're located? That they fit on the testes like a crown? That they do other things, too, like swell and enlarge for no apparent reason? He wonders if each time he shakes another man's hand they can tell by his grip or the lack thereof that he's not walking around with wrecking balls, so to say, but that his are out of order, on the disabled list. This is the definition of chronic, Murphy tells himself, when it vitiates every aspect of everything pleasurable. He wonders how in the hell he'll ever get close to another woman when sickening pain shoots into his gut each time she gets close, real close. He studies himself in the mirror. The problem with having a problem with your balls is that there's only two people who can have a look at them and see what's going on down there: you and the doctor. Two people, and that's it. You sure as hell can't go into work, drop your pants and ask the guys there to have a look and give you the low down of your down low. This is something you can't ask your mother about. No, this is one you've got to go alone. Murphy considers it a good sign that they haven't changed color and still have all their hair. He figures he'll know it's cancer if they start losing their hair.

Murphy plugs up the tub, runs the hot water. Waits until it's filled, then steps into it, lowers himself slowly into the steam and the heat. Eases in, eases back. He can't feel his legs or his genitals, just a slight burning sensation in the bottoms of his feet, the hot burn when extremely cold yields to extremely hot. How does this make Murphy feel about himself, having to sit in the tub under doctor's orders and auspices that it's the one thing that's going to save his gonads from chronic epididymitis? Ironically emasculating.

Murphy pulls the washcloth off his face, drapes it over his genitals instead.
Increase the blood flow, reduce the inflammation.

The handle on the bathroom door jiggles. The door's locked, his brother says from the other side of it. Tries it again.

I know, Murphy says.

What the hell for?

I locked it.

His brother stands outside the door, but doesn't say anything. Murphy wrings out the washcloth, soaks it again in the hot water. Places it back over his genitals.

Are you using the sink? his brother says through the door.

I'll be out soon, Murphy says.

You're not in the bathtub, are you?

It's the doctor's orders, Murphy answers.

Let me in there, his brother says.

You're not coming in here.

We have to talk about this.

I'll be right out, Murphy says. He hears his brother move away from the door, down the hall, back to the living room. He glances down at his bits, floating there like a strange piece of kelp. It's funny and not so funny at the same time that Murphy's balls, small in his sack, if they had any lumps on them, no matter how small, could kill him for good, just like that.

Murphy never realized that a mid-life crisis not only included a divorce but a whole change of wardrobe, too.

You've got to stop thinking about yourself as a divorced middle-aged man, his brother tells him. You've got to learn to start thinking of yourself as a sex machine. His

brother has him dressed in a t-shirt and jeans with holes in the knees. Say it with me, his brother says, I'm a sex machine.

I'm a sex machine, Murphy says. Murphy looks over himself in the mirror. This isn't me, Murphy says.

That's the point, his brother says.

Murphy turns around, considers the rear view. Now what? he says.

Now we cruise, his brother says.

His brother's world is loud, filled with bass, people in each other's faces screaming because they can't hear one another yelling hello. It's a world of knowing nods, gestures with fingers, eyes, shoulders that indicate whether someone is familiar and the degree to which they're recognized and liked. Murphy feels like an undercover cop. The inside of the place resembles what Murphy imagines to be a terrible elongated epileptic seizure: the shaking, the strobe, the screaming. He glances around at all the fast-moving women, dancing half-dressed, some in skirts, some wearing underwear as outerwear.

What did I tell you? his brother screams at him. His brother moves into the crowd, leaving Murphy in the periphery with his shoulders hunched and his hands in his pockets. He's not fooling anyone with the holes in his jeans. All he sees, all around him, are flashes of skin on men and women, dancing as though they were copulating with their clothes on. Murphy risks the crowd to get to the bar. Assumes a perch on the end of it. The bartender, who looks old enough to neither order alcohol nor serve it, doesn't notice him until he makes himself known: raises his hand and calls for whiskey. She serves it to him with a cautious eye, watches him as though he were as a representative of the liquor board there to bust under-aged drinkers.

There are so many ways in which Murphy is not hip, is, in fact, utterly and hopelessly unhip: his clothes, his car, his comb over. What happens when a girl comes

up to Murphy and says, You want to get out of here? and Murphy's expected to take her somewhere? Murphy drops his drink down the hatch, holds on to the bar to keep himself steady. The bass of the music replaces his heartbeat and Murphy worries that he's been left behind, won't ever be able to catch up again. When your hair goes north and your balls go south, you can't keep up like you used to. Time to punt. Murphy stares into the pieces of glass glued on the wall. His broken reflection. There's no dignity in this, he says. His brother stands in the middle of the club, in the middle of a circle of girls, and all the girls are laughing, laughing, laughing.

Murphy pays his tab and leaves the club. Outside into the cool evening. He flags down a taxicab and gives his address to the driver. Take me home, he says.

The driver pulls away. Murphy tries to figure out what he's going to say when he rings the doorbell. What he's going to say when Marie answers and sees that he's been crying and has holes in his pants.

She can't end it like this, not now, not like this, Murphy says to the driver.

The driver glances back at him in the rearview mirror.

I've got epididymitis, Murphy says. You can't leave a man like that.

You got what, man? the driver says.

Epididymitis, Murphy says.

Sounds bad.

It's not fatal, if that's what you're getting at.

It's just a matter of figuring out the right thing to say to let her know he loves her, how much he loves her, how much he wants her and wants to come back home.

The driver pulls up to the driveway. Stops the meter. You want me to stick around? he says to Murphy.

What do you mean? Murphy says.

You know, the driver says. Just in case.

No. Murphy hands the driver the fare and gets out of the cab. His house is dark. Even the porch light is off.

Good luck, the driver says, and pulls away.

Murphy's left there in the dark at the end of the driveway. The house already seems like a stranger to him, or maybe it's the other way around and Murphy's the stranger to it. Two stories of darkened windows, pulled curtains. Murphy stands there in his own driveway like a solicitor, peddling unwanted wares. He approaches the front door. There's no going back, Murphy tells himself. Stares into it: the knocker, the peephole, the foot mat. He pushes the doorbell and hears it ring throughout the house, the echo of it whining like the bell at the end of a boxing round. Murphy fixes his hair, gives himself the once over. He rings the bell again. The bedroom light switches on upstairs. Murphy can see the outline of her shadow moving around, past the window, then in front of the window. She pulls the curtain back to see who's at the door. Murphy wonders if she recognizes him in his new outfit, the new Murphy in a borrowed t-shirt and pants with holes in them. He still doesn't know what he's going to say, the magic words that will fix everything. He hears her on the inside, descending stairs, flipping on more lights. The one in the hall, the one in the foyer. The porch light comes on and shines in his face. He rubs at his eyes, regains his composure. Thinks: There's no way she's not going to think I'm drunk. Hears her undo the chain, draw back the dead bolt. Murphy waits for the words to come to him, hopes to god they come to him, pop in his mind and mouth in a moment of divine intervention.

Marie opens the front door. Blinks at Murphy in the porch light. She glances at his clothes. He can't explain those. She crosses her arms. Doesn't say anything. Doesn't invite him in. Stands there unyielding on the inside of the doorway. She waits for him to say something and he waits for the right thing to say. There are no magic words. He has holes in his pants and won't ever step inside that house again. Murphy

blinks at the porch light. His wife blinks at him. He knows now it was more than his hair, his teeth, his testicles. Always more than the accumulation of little things.

EXPUNCTION

She remodels the living room to help her forget that I ever lived there. She paints the kitchen and buys a new dining room table. Some kind of stained oak. She says it's finally big enough to host a holiday dinner. I don't know what she's done to the bedroom yet, but I'm sure she's probably changed it so you couldn't tell that a man ever slept there. She's probably hung lace in the windows and burns smelly candles in there to hide the smells left behind. The clothes all in a hamper and her make-up spread on top of the dresser. She's probably changed the sheets and made it so it doesn't smell like cigars anymore. "Do you like it?" she says. She sets down a tray of finger foods on the coffee table. There's champagne, too.

"No," I say.

"It smells nice, doesn't it," she says.

"It smells like you killed a gingerbread man," I say.

"Cinnamon," she says. "It inspires ambitious rumination."

"I suppose I can't smoke in here anymore," I say.

"You're not allowed to do anything in here," she says, "unless those actions are consistent with those of a guest." She pours herself a glass of champagne. "The color in the kitchen was the most difficult," she says. "At first, I wanted pumpkin pie, but then it dawned on me that it would be seasonal, and I didn't want to limit myself with an annual autumnal ambience."

"What did you do to the bedroom?" I ask her.

"A leitmotif," she says.

"What the hell is that?" I say.

"The house represents a spring garden," she says, "thematically, of course. Maybe next year I'll have the time for the flowers, but that will have to wait until next year."

Have some champagne," she says. I pour some champagne. The glass is tall and skinny. The champagne has lots of bubbles in it. "A French man recommended this kind to me," she says. "The French are very adept at selecting wines." It tastes like carbonated air. "Try some pâté as well," she offers.

"I don't like pâté," I say.

"But you've never tried it," she says.

"I've never liked pâté," I say.

"You've always been like that," she says.

"I don't have to know what it tastes like to know I don't like it," I say.

"You assume too many things a priori," she says, "without ever trusting the scientific process."

"I could go for a beer," I say.

"There isn't any beer," she says. "Not anymore. I dropped it off at the Goodwill, along with the rest of your things."

"I figured as much," I say.

"It was part of the remodeling," she says.

There are papers and attorneys' fees and scheduled hearings and accusations and lost consortium and the necessity to determine retribution. She will tell me what to do, and I'll do it until I'm finally invisible and I stop calling altogether.

"There was a time when you looked at me fondly," I tell her.

"I assure you it wasn't conscious," she says.

"Sometimes, even lustily," I say.

"Women describe them as though they were comas," she says, "and their waking from them is tantamount to a religiously transcendent experience."

"You've always been good at forgetting," I tell her.

"I wouldn't dare insult any of my company by offering them a beer," she says. "Or a brew. Or a brewsky. It's uncouth."

"What did you do to the bedroom?" I ask her.

"One should never serve their company anything they cannot offer in a pleasant manner," she says.

"It's all right if you burned the sheets," I say. "I never liked them much anyway."

"For this reason," she says, "one should never offer their guests potato chips. Or fiddle-faddle. Or crunch-and-munch. Or any alcoholic drinks whose names are lascivious."

"I don't care if you changed the curtains," I say. "Hell, you could've done that years ago. The blankets and the pillows, too, they don't matter to me, either."

"Menus are dictated by the ease of their recitation," she says. What worries me most is her confidence. She subscribes to magazines that will teach her how to say it in French and suddenly it will become a crusade. There will be codes associated with it: an honor code, a dress code, and a code of conduct. It will teach her appropriate feminine responses to typical masculine propositions. French phrases and abnegation of binary oppositions. Re-appropriation of central focus: viviparity shall be supreme law. And no doubt this new datum begins in the bedroom.

"The blankets, the sheets, the pillows, the curtains, the carpet, the artwork, I don't care about any of that," I say, "but don't tell me you got rid of the mattress."

"Successful remodeling," she says, "depends on the completion of drastic change."

"You got rid of it, didn't you," I say.

"I gave it away," she says. "Also to the Goodwill. They do tremendous work for those infected with destitution."

The mattress had my imprint on it and was the last evidence of my existence in this house and in this life. She might as well have donated my shadow. "You take everything away," I tell her. "And then you forget. The perfect forgetting machine."

"The goal is to erase your presence completely," she says, "literally and figuratively."

The mahogany dressers topped with doilies. The doilies topped with rose petals. The bed covered with a canopy. The canopy covered with puddle shears. Pink membranous puddle shears. The room's edges softened with pink and egg shell and Feng Shui. The bedroom without any indication that I'd slept there for years, next to her in a colorless uncanopied bed.

"I can't let you do this," I say. I stand up and run for the stairs.

"Where are you going?" she yells and pursues me. The coffee table is overturned and her carpet is covered in champagne and pâté. "You're not allowed up there anymore," she screams. I take the stairs two at a time, bounding toward the bedroom. Her pursuit, though, is dexterous, and halfway up the staircase she catches a hold of my pant leg. She wraps her arms around my legs, and suddenly we're falling down the stairs together, turning and tumbling. Briefly, in our descent, we're together again – that is, until we hit the bottom of the stairwell where I'm there to break her fall. We regard each other, rubbing the sting out of our respective noggins. There's still laughter in us, after all is said and done.

PART THREE

*What looks like a hole hatches heads, crooked
cackling heads with red eyes and backwards smiles.*

WHEN YOU REMEMBER FAYETTEVILLE

1.

When you remember Fayetteville, perhaps you recall Married Molly of blond descent, with knee-high boots and a chest to end all debate. Her mother didn't like you and her father wanted you killed. Pulled you aside and straight in the eye said, I know people who'll make you disappear for ten thousand dollars. Threw an arm across your shoulder. That truck, he said. For the price of that truck, I could trade it in and you'd be gone.

Where? you said, because you weren't quite following the gist of his jib.

He snapped his fingers because he thought that would hammer it home.

What he didn't know was that you had already seen his daughter naked, had poured tequila all over that conclusive chest of hers, had worn her panties at their dinner table. That is what you'd tell him: They'd know it was you old man, you'd say, relishing the smirk on his face, and he'd say, Oh yeah, how? and you'd look that son of a bitch in the eye and tell him straight, Because I'm wearing her underpants, and watch him make the connection, figure it out for himself, that if you're wearing his daughter's panties then there was a moment when you saw her without them.

2.

It helps to remember her boots because that helps you recall her thighs and how it felt like a bubble bath the first time you moved inside them. How you paused briefly to revel in the soft sensation, and considered for the first time in your life how different everything would be if you added bubbles to your bath.

3.

She didn't tell you she was married. You saw the announcement in the paper.

4.

She used to wear sweaters, and when a girl like Married Molly wears a sweater, traffic stops, men bite their fists, and women regard their own inferior busts. You told her the first time she straddled you and slipped out of her bra that you no longer had any need for heaven, that one small suckle of that amazing rack would last you forever.

5.

On your way home, you suspect somebody is following you. Her father perhaps. On a mission to retrieve his little girl's underpants. You think about sitting at their dinner table, helping yourself to a second helping of their meatloaf, drinking all of her father's light beer, all the while wearing their little girl's naughty see-through panties. It would've given her father a heart attack to know it happened on the way to their house when she took you by her old elementary school and drove around to the back and parked under the elm tree, fooled around there and exchanged underwear.

You know that people like her father need other people to take care of people like you. Know the more you lead him away from Fayetteville the more afraid he'll be to even get out of his car when the time comes. That he'll drive by the house a few times, flash his lights, honk his horn, and go back home without ever stopping.

6.

What you remember about Married Molly is how soft she felt and how hard she bit. In the end, the way her underpants smelled in your top drawer, and bubbles in a bath changed your life forever.

ANECDOTE OF TWO MEN AND A JAR

In the middle of Tennessee there was a jar in the middle of a field, and there were two men standing near the jar discussing the jar's placement and purpose. It was a peculiarity to find a jar in the middle of a field in the middle of Tennessee.

"Unusual."

"Very uncommon."

"A tree in the middle of a field is one thing."

"A natural thing."

"Uncommon, too."

"But not peculiar."

"And certainly not extra ordinary."

"As this thing is out of the ordinary."

"What are the odds?"

The two men stare at the jar. The jar doesn't do anything. It merely sits there in the middle of the field in the middle of Tennessee. They wonder how a thing like this happens in Tennessee.

"Ain't supposed to happen."

"Not around these parts."

"Never heard of a thing like this happening in Tennessee."

"There was that time when Floyd's truck ended up in the middle of the field and he woke up in the morning not knowing how in hell it got there."

"That's different. Floyd was drunk. This here jar is completely different."

"A whole nother kind of thing."

"Everyone knows how Floyd got the truck in the field. Even Floyd."

"He was drunk. Like you said."

"But this jar."

"This thing."

"This whole nother thing."

This thing, the jar, disturbs the two men in the way unexpected and unexplained things do, when the idea of a thing is realized and sitting in the middle of a field in the middle of Tennessee; the idea of a jar in the middle of a field is one thing and not really a thing at all until it is a thing and can be seen sure as the day is long, sitting in the middle of a field in the middle of Tennessee. If it had been only the idea of a jar in the middle of a field, it would not have bothered the two men; it would, at the very least, have been something to consider, but, ultimately, dismissed without any tangible manifestation to test the validity of the idea. But the thing itself, the jar in the middle of the field, right there in front of their eyes without warning or apparent purpose is a disturbance to the two men for here is the physical manifestation of an idea that was never conceived as an idea, and here, before the egg, is a chicken disguised as a jar in the middle of a field in the middle of Tennessee where people, including the two men, don't expect things like this to just happen.

"I ain't so sure what to make of it."

"I reckon someone put it there."

"Well, of course someone put it there. It wouldn't just grow up from the ground like that."

"It don't look like no penny jar."

"It ain't got no pennies in it."

"It may be for canning."

"It don't look like no canning jar, neither."

"I said maybe."

"It'd have some tomatoes in it, or something."

"Maybe somebody dropped it."

"Right there? In the middle of the field?"

"Maybe."

"Standing up like that?"

"I said maybe."

"That'd be hard to do."

"I reckon."

"What if it's a spittoon?"

"Right there? In the middle of a field?"

"Might could be. For strollers and such, like ourselves."

"We don't chew no tobacco."

"But if we did and needed a spittoon, well here it'd be."

"Wouldn't we just spit on the ground? Why do you need a spittoon outdoors?"

"I hadn't thought of that."

"The whole world is outdoors."

"I reckon."

"Besides, there ain't no spit in it."

"Yeah."

"And what's a spittoon without no spit?"

"A jar."

"And that there is what we have here."

"I just don't know what to think."

It is this, a thing without its idea, that perplexes the two men most: Not so much how, but what the hell for? These two men, and others like them, learn to expect certain truths of the world, one of those concerning cause and effect, a reassurance that what

happens in the universe is teleological. But what of this jar in the middle of a field in the middle of Tennessee?

"It ain't no tree."

"But looks like something."

"Maybe it's one of them metaphors. I seen them last time I was in Nashville."

"They don't got none of them out here."

"Maybe somebody from there brought it here."

"Hey there, now you're on to something."

"I bet he was out here walking around—"

"Like us."

"—just like us, and then dropped it, just like that."

"And here it is."

"Yeah."

"Just like that."

The two men stared at each other. Then they stared at the jar. The jar still did not move.

"It looks kind of like it belongs there."

"But it don't."

"Not like everything else."

"Should we go down to Ray's and tell them about it?"

"They'd want to know."

"We'd want to know."

"We sure would."

The two men agree that the best thing to do is head back towards town down to Ray's to tell them what they found in the middle of a field, a jar, not like anything else in Tennessee.

PHILIPSBURG

The town and the sapphires are both in the side of the mountain. The sapphires are under the town, under the hard rock, even under the long-abandoned mines. The town once survived on ore, but now they've got nothing but sapphires and fumes. Main Street slants through the heart of town, down the hill past the one gas station and out to the highway. The highway goes either left or right. Left leads to another highway. Right leads to another highway. As though it is trapped in the middle of a spider's web.

The sapphires are mixed in with the dirt, but don't just pop out at you. It's a labored process to convince the stones to the surface where their jagged little edges catch the sunlight and glint it back at you. Prospecting's out of the question because, as the townspeople tell me, the mountain's tapped. The mines are caving in and the mountain itself is crumbling in on itself, gutted and rotted from the inside. It was foretold by Chief Missoula, who roamed these same mountains when wolves were abundant and horses were still wild. His prescience warned that white man and his velleity would anger the earth's heart and turn it black with apathy, would bare its teeth at them, and consume their children with a jagged mouth and an insatiable appetite. In so many words, he said, years ago, that Philipsburg was pretty much shit out of luck.

They harvest the dirt from one side of the mountain, load it in dump trucks where they drive it to a panning site and dump the dirt in mounds. Here they charge tourists two dollars for every bucket of dirt and for the two dollars you're supplied a sieve and running water and a geologist on site who studies your discoveries and informs you if you've struck it rich or simply struck quartz. I arrive with a fifty dollar bill and exchange it for twenty-five buckets of dirt. The cashier's eyes widen and the geologist's narrow: the cashier has never seen a fifty dollar bill before, and the geologist

is suspicious of my intentions. They show me to my sieve and my panning place in the running water. I don't need anyone to show me how to sieve: how to look or what to look for. The geologist stands behind me, arms folded across his chest, watches over my shoulder. Notes my skillful hands and my knowledgeable eye. You've done this before, he says.

In a past life, I tell him. California, a long time ago.

Sapphires are different, he says, as though speaking fondly of a nephew. The geologist is blocking my sunlight.

Do you mind? I ask him. Perhaps three paces to the left.

Of course, he says, but instead returns to the office.

When they inform me they're closing up for the night, I ask them to lock me in so I can work through the night. By the moon? the geologist says.

It's three quarters tonight, I tell him.

You'll damage your eyes.

There's work to be done.

He consults the cashier girl whether it's a good idea and if I can be trusted inside the gates at night. There ain't nothing for him to steal, the cashier girl says. Nothing he ain't paid for already. Because she's in charge of the keys, the decision is ultimately hers, and she has no reservations leaving me out there in the middle of the night with the running water and my buckets of dirt. See you in the morning, she says to me on her way out.

In Philipsburg, the sun doesn't set until nearly ten. I finish three buckets before I have to actually start squinting for lack of light. Behind me, I hear the mountain sigh, inhale and collapse slightly inward. The creaking sound of the lame leaning on a crutch. The cracking sound of the continent crumbling in on itself. The waves reverberate along the ground and up into my legs. I know by the sky above me and the earth under me there isn't much time.

Because of its size and lack of ambient light, the sky over Philipsburg is brilliant bright with glowing stars. Enough for a wolf to tell its way. Enough for a man with buckets of dirt to sift for answered prayers.

THE ONLY WAY OUT OF IDAHO

Tiny red spiders crawled out of her nose. I'd never known Idaho like that. How does that feel? I asked.

She drank from a plastic cup that she found in the bathroom. She said hotels were supposed to give them to you. For this reason, she said. The liquid was the color and texture of motor oil. She'd boiled the buttons down and made a potion.

Then: there were spiders, and I didn't want to get close to her.

Calm down, she said.

The night before we were in Utah. I think. We were headed back to Seattle. Both of us needed to see the ocean to make sure it was still there, that no one had stolen it, forced it into bottles, hid them in various vending machines across the country. Neither of us wanted to think about what might happen if we had to go to Colorado to find twelve ounces of it. Or Oklahoma for another twelve ounces.

She licked at her lips and her tongue dripped like it was covered with honey. When she opened her mouth, out flew a swarm of bees.

I don't like it here in Idaho, I said.

She handed me the cup.

It isn't going to make it any easier, I said.

Remember the ocean, she said.

I laid back on the hotel bed. I saw sunlight dancing on top of the waves, and the waves lulled back and forth like a cradle. Porpoises rose up out of the water and leaped wonderful rainbow arcs and dove back below the surface. I see it, I said. I felt her lips pressed to mine. Her tongue pressed against mine, heavy and thick like two bears. I kept my eyes closed. Saw seals instead of spiders.

But what if it wasn't there?

The porpoises leaped out of the water and over the edge of the earth, into a place where they floated around and cried for help. Their cries sounded like breaking champagne flutes. The seagulls spoke of prophecy. Cited prior prescient foretelling. Boats turned around, and went back the way they came.

It couldn't be saved.

I opened my eyes. She spun her web around me. Delicate sturdy buttresses in the corners up near the ceiling. She worked over me, moving back and forth across the bed, over it, underneath it. Her web was made of angel's hair. Why didn't you tell me you were in a family way? I asked her.

She spoke in clicks and spit out web, strung it on the wall, around the bedposts, licked it into place like she was sealing an envelope. I didn't understand the things she tried to tell me. Two of her legs braced herself on top of the bed. Two of her legs held me in place. Two of her legs fastened webbing to the ceiling.

There was no other way to get out of Idaho, get back to the ocean. To say goodbye one last time.

I've heard them cry, I said.

She spit on me and I dissolved. Down to a size capable of being consumed. She swallowed me whole where I would decompose in her belly, allotted a bed on which to wait my eventual disintegration. There were other beds, too. A nursery, of sorts. There were babies, but they weren't crying. They sucked each other's thumbs. Each other's small bald heads. Red raspberries rose to the surface of their skin. Splotches of color spread on their bodies like a contagion. One of those unlucky babies would have to leave eventually, would be regurgitated and sprung out into the world. It would have to figure out the edges for itself. I rolled over onto my side. Come hither, progeny, I said. Feast on your father for strength. You will need it to survive.

They came at me all at once. Their mastication a fusillade.

I always knew there was only one way out of Idaho, and it wouldn't include a resurrection. I heard wedding bells. Smelled the red tide. Whichever baby would leave had to know it would never come back. I drew a map on my head with the blood seeping from my open wounds, and showed them where to go once they were free. Showed them what to do to pay the hotel bill.

They told me to lie still. It would be over soon.

I wanted to be able to dig in the dirt like a worm. Wanted to be a delta and feel the silt wash away from me and into the gulf, just like I was being undressed. Sounds faded slowly until it was silent.

Until, all of it was silent.

FAR FROM THE EYES OF THE SUN

*"And, like an eye being born, covered by its lids,
a pure mind grows under the rinds of stones."
--Gerard de Nerval*

The dog was in the oven with its fur still on. It was stinking to all high heaven, and all the way back down to hell. They sat around the kitchen table, which, in another town, in another time, had been a church pew. Two church pews. They were three: Len, Mince, and Big Joe.

Big Joe fetched water from the creek and Mince opened a new bottle. The dog was in the oven because there weren't any more hogs to be had and the cattle were all dead. It happened that side of the mountains sometimes that a whole herd could catch something and all go at once. The herd had migrated to the river and died there. For days crows descended on them in a black wave of rippling claws and bloody beaks. They moved over and on top of the cows' corpses in the strange animation of insect movement. It had made Mince throw up to see it. Big Joe cried. It was his herd and they had disappointed him in the worst way by dying on him inexplicably and all at once.

Big Joe came back with the water. The water wasn't any good, but none of them had gotten the dysentery yet. Big Joe did the pouring: half whiskey, a quarter water. Mince watched the dog in the oven closely, his chair turned so he could see into it. The dog stank like Death's dirty laundry even though Mince had rubbed it with butter and sage. He was worried the other two men would hate it and make him sleep outside again.

Big Joe handed a cup to each of the two men, and then picked up his own. Drink up, boys, he told them. It's true we're eating mongrel, but this is a fresh bottle and the first drink of a fresh bottle is good as gold. The men nodded, drank from their cups.

Mince opened the oven door to have a better look at the dog.

Will you let it alone? Len told him. We'll smell it when it's done.

We're smelling it already, Big Joe said.

We'll smell it when it's done.

I'm just making sure, Mince said. He didn't want to sleep outside again. The nights were already getting cold as a well digger's ass and the wind felt like little baby's pointed teeth. I hate it when we have to cook dog, he said.

The other two men nodded. It was one thing they shared between them: they all thought dog was too tough, no matter how long it was marinated. Mince was left to the marinade and the worrying. It was a sorry lot in life, Mince knew, where his one goal and only hope was to be allowed slumber inside with the other two men, safe within the walls and out of the range of the wolves outside.

The wolves had eaten the cattle near the river, but lately had been patrolling closer to the cabin, had approached it and around the back. The wolves knew there were three men what lived there, and that none of them had a rifle. Mince alone felt the vulnerability. His mother had been part bluebird, and his birth nearly broke her in two. He exploded out into the world in a rush of blood and bone and awful braying. When he first cried, it shattered the X-ray display.

Len had always known he was going to die. Lately, he'd wondered if it had already happened, if the three men had somehow contracted the brucellosis that killed off the cattle and this was their purgatory, sitting around waiting for the dog to roast. He was not religious, but thought it must be a purgatory: the house, the dog, the wolves.

Big Joe was not afraid of anything and was big enough to only be stopped by a bullet. He was sad though to think about dying without ever touching a woman again.

To die amongst dogs with no woman to comfort him, to beckon him into the back bedroom with a sultry finger and an unbuttoned blouse. To die alone with two other men, watching each other from across the table, when the dog and the whiskey were all done. Big Joe eyed his two companions. We're going to die out here, Big Joe said. He thought of the last woman he'd touched: Rip's sister, Maria. Her skin was the color of sunset and the inside of her fold felt like a baptism. Big Joe sipped at his whiskey. He wasn't afraid, just sad.

We've come here to do our job, Len said.

We're going to die here.

Mince didn't like to hear the other two men talk about it out loud in front of him. He preferred they spoke of it in hushed whispers when he was asleep. He knew that when the dog was gone, he'd be the first to get gutted and skinned. He wouldn't make much of a meal, but that didn't change the pecking order. He only hoped they wouldn't make him suffer. He envisioned terrible delusions of eyes squeezed shut while Big Joe descended on him from behind. They were all men of morals, Mince thought, but a place like that could change a man; once a man eats dog, his moral code metamorphoses into something base, haggard, hirsute. He'd read stories about stranded sailors, cowboys out on the lonesome plains, hunters lost in the thick of the woods. We're brothers, Mince said. Aren't we?

The other two men made no reply.

Mince moved closer to the oven. Peered into it to see about the dog.

I thought I told you to let it alone, Len said.

If we had trees with leaves on them, this is the time they'd be turning, Big Joe said. Now.

You let out the heat every time you open the goddamn door, Len told Mince. He was becoming irascible, gritting his teeth and pressing his fingernails into the palm of his hand. The whiskey wasn't helping.

All kinds of colors, Big Joe said. Reds, yellows, browns, oranges. Have either of you seen an autumn in New England?

Mince shook his head. I'm from California, he said.

Len stared into his whiskey. A small trickle of blood rose from the small slit of broken skin in the middle of his hand, and moved slow and ferrous down his wrist.

Your hand, Mince said to him.

I seen it in Maine one year, Big Joe said. When I worked on a crab boat. You know how much one of them crab pots weighs?

Let it alone, Len said. He dipped his hand in the pail of water, washed the blood off. He pulled it out and examined it. The area surrounding it was raspberry red, like a bite, from a hornet or a wolf spider. He held it up to the light, poked at it with his other fingers.

We're going to need more water, Big Joe said.

How much is left of the bottle? Len said.

We have another.

Go on and fetch it then.

Like hell, Big Joe said. It's your blood what tainted the water I fetched first.

Mince can do it then.

Mince's tending to dinner, Big Joe said.

Len glanced at the things spread out on the table: the cups, the bottle, the bowie knife. He was skillful with a knife, but he knew the only thing that could stop Big Joe was a bullet, and he didn't have a bullet or a gun to propel one.

We all know whose blood it is in the water, Big Joe said.

Len nodded.

Your blood, and your blood alone. It sounded biblical.

Len took up the pail, hurried out the door.

It's getting dark out there, Mince said.

Mind the dog doesn't burn, Big Joe told him.

Mince opened the oven door enough to look inside. The fur was singed along the sides of the carcass. Juices were boiling up through the neck hole, spilling over, sizzling on the glowing coils. I think we should turn it, he said.

Big Joe reached across the table and filled his glass from the bottle.

I want to turn it, Mince said.

Then do it, Big Joe said. It's no use telling me you want to do it.

Mince turned the dog, and announced it would be done shortly. Big Joe nodded. It was the time of year when the darkness happened without anyone watching. Big Joe looked for images of women in his whiskey. Have you ever been in love? he said.

It startled Mince. He wasn't sure how to answer and not reveal his vulnerability. Big Joe was so much bigger than he was that if it was going to happen, there wasn't anything Mince could do to stop him.

Her name was Maria, Big Joe said. She had golden skin and a salamander tongue. He paused and drank back some of the whiskey. If I'm going to die, I'd rather it happen inside her, he said. It was holy inside there. He finished what was left in his glass. Cursed Len for taking so long with the water. He stood and paced across the rotted floor boards.

The dog's almost ready, Mince said. It made him nervous to have Big Joe pacing back and forth, standing over him and breathing into his hair.

Almost ready, Big Joe said.

Becky Jackson was my first, Mince said. She was my babysitter.

Mine was a neighborhood dog, Big Joe said. Then my sister. He rested his large hands on Mince's shoulders. Patted Mince's head. You never forget your first, he said. He patted Mince's head gently on top of his hair. Like he would pet a child.

Mince stood up quickly, moved across the room, around the table. It's already dark out there, Mince said. He moved to the window. The moon cast a faint glow over

the world outside. The tall weeds and dead grass. The dark outlines of the evergreens stood over them like large looming scarecrows.

I remember when it wasn't so dark, Big Joe said.

Mince saw a figure moving through the darkness, weaving through the shadows like a hobgoblin with a limp: leaning to the right. It's body twisted back and forth as though that was how it propelled itself, rearing back with the right and throwing itself forward with the left. He's coming, Mince said.

Big Joe sighed.

Len's shadow moved fast and low to the ground, his arm pulled down with the weight of the pail. His feet scurried like a possum's, and stumbled over rocks, roots, ruts. There were shadows behind his, smaller horizontal shadows pursuing. Mince counted five of them, moving towards Len in a half moon. It was too dark to see what they were, but they were something and they were after Len.

There's something out there, Mince said.

Besides Len? Big Joe said.

He's coming.

Open the door for him.

Mince didn't move from the window. He stared out at the strange shadows doubled over chasing Len, maybe twenty yards away and gaining ground. They're getting closer, Mince said.

Big Joe went to the door and flung it open. He looked for Len, but there was nothing but darkness. He heard barking close by. Canine coughs in the shadows. Len emerged from the darkness, bent and moving fast across the terrain, up the path and to the porch. He hurried inside, and told Big Joe to shut the door. Lock it tight, he told Big Joe. Big Joe did it. Len dropped the heavy pail onto the table. There's your water, he said. He saw Mince by the window. What are you doing over there? he said. The dog better not be burnt.

What are they? Mince asked. He was still watching out the window.

Wolves.

Out there? Big Joe said.

They're circling the porch, Mince said.

They surrounded me at the creek. What about the dog?

Get yourself a drink first, Big Joe suggested.

Len sat down and poured himself a tall one.

What do they want? Mince said. He watched the shadows of the wolves move around them, move around the house in the night.

The dog, maybe, Big Joe said.

Len shook his head.

The three men could hear the wolves circling around the house. Some of the wolves barked, yelped. Others howled and others answered, farther away in the darkness. Mince watched them from the window, and the other two men listened from the table. They poured drinks, but only Len drank his. Big Joe kept his ears cocked for the sounds outside. He said he thought the wolves would surround the place and wait them out. Wolves knew hunger better and longer than the three men ever had to.

One of the wolves stood a few feet from the porch and howled a haunted caterwaul, wailing like a dead thing trapped between worlds. Mince looked over at Len, and Len said, It's the others out there.

I told you we shouldn't have eaten mongrel, he said. They're here for revenge.

They'll wait us out, Big Joe said. They can last three days. Three whole days.

It's no use watching them, Len said to Mince, and drank long and pensive.

Mince was looking for the flashes of faint white and gray circling in the night. It won't slow them down, Len said. Or stop them at all.

Mince came back to the table. Sat down and poured himself a tall one, too, like the other two men. All three men were quiet as they strained to listen for the wolves,

trying to hear them on the porch, at the door. Listened as the wolves patiently descended upon them.

ALONG THE BORDERLINE

It is a place people find only by getting lost. Those already here don't know for sure if they're in America or Mexico. Perhaps it is neither, as nobody would ever wish to claim this place as their own. No flags flip in the wind, though that may be because there's no wind. I've been here as long as the trumpet player, and I've never seen any wind. No weather to speak of: no rain, no snow, no wind, no tornadoes. Sunshine is weather, Don Gaucho, the barman says. He used to be a very tall man, black as motor oil, solid as mortar. He has a disease that makes him shrink, shrivel like a raisin.

Sunshine is the absence of weather, Pedro, I say.

Everyone listens to me because they think I'm dead, that I arrived here by taking a wrong turn en route to hell. They listen because in these parts it's bad luck to not listen closely when the dead speak. The trumpeter plays a sad low note, stretched as long as a swan's neck. Because we arrived the same day, at the same time, the others assume he followed me here. I've stayed awake some nights thinking that maybe I am dead, and the trumpeter is my escort to wherever I'm heading next.

I wish you'd cut that out, the barman told the trumpeter.

The trumpeter sat in the darkest corner, his hat pulled down over his eyes. A specter riding in on a C sharp. His glass is empty and the barman refuses to fill it until he plays something sweet to remind him what it tasted like to kiss a woman.

That damn note is going to make me kill you, the barman yelled.

Refill his glass, Pedro, I entreat of the barman. He's as sad as we are.

You know your money is worthless here, Don Gaucho, the barman says. This is why you offer like this, because you know I can't refuse.

His glass is empty, Pedro, I say.

The barman stares into the dark corner, seemingly empty save for the sound as the trumpeter moves from one lugubrious note to another. A trumpet is no instrument for a man, the barman says. It is a sound for a goose, but not a man.

The whore on the other side of me cackles, bangs the bottom of her glass on top of the bar. The nub where her left leg used to be twitches at the excitement. The others here think she too is already dead, though they never listen to her. When she bangs her glass, the barman knows to refill it, refills her glass every time she asks because he knows eventually she'll end up in his bed and he has no money to pay her. As long as there is liquor here, the whore gets up in the morning and sets to drinking. From nine to night, cackles and consumes.

Why hers and not the trumpeter's? I ask.

The barman waves a rag at my question as though to dispel it like a swarm of gnats. When he grows a hole like hers, then he can drink, too, the barman says.

The whore cackles, consumes, cackles, consumes.

I have no bed for her to sleep in, and it isn't right to ask a whore to sleep with you in the dirt against the side of the building. With no bed, a man can expect no whore to spend the night with him.

The barman stands in front of me. Let me ask you a question, Don Gauchó, he says. Why is it you bring him here to torture me with that sad sound of a dying goose?

I glance over my shoulder at the darkened corner where the trumpeter plays. It isn't the sound of something dying, I tell the barman, but the requiem for something already dead.

The trumpet stops, and the barman, too, looks over at the corner. We hear the trumpeter stand.

A man does not play the trumpet, the barman says. A real man plays the guitar, and if he knows not how to play a guitar, then he carries a knife.

I did not come with the dead man, the trumpeter says. The sound of it stops the barman from speaking. The dead man is here alone, and must find the way to hell on his own, the trumpeter says.

Step from the shadows, the barman says.

You are jealous because the whore prefers my lips to yours, the trumpeter says.

I hope you came here prepared to die, the barman says. He drops his rag and produces a knife, seemingly out of thin air.

Pedro, I say.

This is not your concern, Don Gaucho, the barman says.

We hear the trumpeter set down his instrument, fold back his poncho. I play a dirge for you, old Negro, the trumpeter says. It is you, Negro, that I escort to hell.

You will join me as company then, the barman says. Veins in his wrist swell like rivers. He steps slow from behind the bar. Undoes his apron, lets it fall to the floor. The whore wheezes a whistle through her nose. Gulps at her glass. The darkness in the corner is silent. In the land that is neither America nor Mexico, when a man wants to kill another man, he spits on his hands and then spits on the ground. Pedro spits twice: once in the palms of his hands, then twice on the dusty floor in the direction of the trumpeter. The trumpeter says nothing. Moves not a shift, nor a sigh. Stands there in the shadows as an indelible specter.

I assume if you came for me, *payaso*, then you carry your knife on the other side of your trumpet, Pedro says.

The metal slide of a blade unsheathed scrapes against leather and pings against the open air.

Pedro holds his out in front of his body as though it is a torch to illuminate the place where his fate awaits. We do this as brothers, Pedro says. Extends his hand towards the shadow, and from the darkness the trumpeter extends his, white and thick as bone. They grasp each other and pull back and forth as they jockey for advantage.

When done as brothers, there isn't any need for bondage. No reason to convince you in the thick of the melee. The whore and I witness the two men pull at each other, pull and pull, and the trumpeter pulls Pedro into the shadows with him where they engage in a lover's embrace, the stabbing lurch that sinks metal deep into flesh where it spills élan vital all over the floor. The two shadows part, then collide, and one of them falls. The lone figure standing takes up the trumpet and moves to the door. Extends a hand for the whore to take, and the whore hops off her stool and hops over to the extended hand.

I drink my liquor, though everyone knows even liquor can't do a dead man any good. From the darkened corner come the sounds of choking and bleeding, and finally just bleeding. Pedro? I call into the corner, but there is no response. Oh, Pedro, mi amigo, I say, it is not fair to die.

PART FOUR

*Ligature, what binds us to each other,
holds us here on a spinning earth*

WATERLOO

It is not the Waterloo of Napoleon infamy, of exile and abandonment. An island, sure, but one that's landlocked, been landlocked for a long time, forever perhaps. The hard cracked earth cooked to concrete in the glaring sun. It is always a surprise to see how babies born in Iowa don't come with sunglasses already in place, dark filters covering sensitive eyes. Those without sunglasses spend their days in Iowa in a mock salute, shading their eyes in order to see the shapes of things beyond the glittering shards.

I look for Napoleon on top his mare, strutting arrogantly and defiantly across the cornfields of this Waterloo, expecting to only see the top of his tall hat and his square shoulders peeking up over the tops of the taller stalks. If I stand here long enough and let the sun bake the top of my head, I may sweat into visions where off in the distance on the side of the road I spot a Frenchman seated in the gravel, his hat on the ground, his head in his hands. The steam rising from the asphalt may materialize into a revolution and charge into Waterloo like a herd of Tartar ponies. Will rumble like a thunderstorm barreling over the horizon. Black clouds gathered over the small town like a shroud. Everybody holding their breath waiting for the hail and flash floods. The Frenchman will speak about the waiting, how it turns dreams into dust and bones into rust. How it killed his horse and rotted the carcass a ways back in the wheat. How the ticks leapt off, all at once, and dispersed in the air like pieces of canon wick. He says if you wait long enough here the rain will unleash its uncaring terror on you, and work to wash you away along with the topsoil.

It was written in the bible, he says. L'écrivis dans la Bible, he says. In one Waterloo it means something, and in the other means nothing.

It is appropriate to shrug if you don't understand. It's a land of shrugging backs. If you scratch my back, they say, then I'll scratch yours. Backs weary from bearing burdens and bales of hay. Hands weary from scratching backs. There is idleness in Iowa that stirs in the dirt like scorpions, an unsettledness that knows the flood can happen any minute, can happen in a minute, and leach loose sand and pesticide for miles.

In this Waterloo, I study the face of the man standing in front of me in line at the diner. His Caterpillar cap pulled over thinning unwashed hair. His eyes have the horizon stare, the hundred mile mirage gaze. The one that sees the lightning pop like a photograph flash in the distance, but not the tornado that touchdowns in front of him while it spins in frenzied madness and lifts his aluminum tool shed off its concrete slab foundation, carries it five miles down the road, and dumps it in the Cisco Steel parking lot. It crunches like a soda can. The man uses his hundred mile stare to scan the menu, the same menu he's read every day for the past four years. What about a hot dog? he says, though no one is listening. Not in this Waterloo.

Je voudrais un hot dog, I offer, but no one responds.

The man says to me, Thanks for trying.

We might as well be ghosts here, I say.

Maybe we are, the man says.

A Frenchman told me a flood is coming, I tell the man.

The man nods. Always one coming, he says. He takes off his Caterpillar cap and scratches the top of his head, his head bald and pink in a shapely crown like a crop circle. As though a UFO lighted on top of his head and singed off the hair while the man napped on his porch in his wicker chair. Comes a time when the corn starts to look like the crows, he says, and steps out of line. It's important to know that when you step out of line in Waterloo, you lose your place forever. The man understands this. Says to the others waiting, I know and I don't care anymore. You hear that? I don't care anymore.

The others part to make a way for the man and the man storms out of the diner. The waitress stands in her apron and the patrons stand in line.

The Frenchman still sitting on the side of the road, still waiting for the flood to come and exculpate. His head still in his hands. I had no choice, he says. Waterloo isn't a choice. N'est pas un choix. N'est pas une chose.

Quelque chose? I ask him.

Rien, he says.

It sounds like rain to me, and somewhere in the sky clouds rumble a godly discontentment. Rumbles an imminent displeasure that invokes immanent demons. I sit down with the Frenchman and we wait together, both of us knowing that Waterloo was never a choice. Places like Waterloo are never destinations.

IN KANSAS:

There is nothing about which to be terrified, really terrified, except, including, but not limited to: foreclosure, forgetfulness, fallow land, fallow hearts, failed legs, failed dogs, failed tools, tornadoes that don't fail, failure to arrive in a timely manner, all men with nothing in their pockets, all men with clipboards in their hands, all men with smiles on their faces even though nobody's told a joke, all men who hide their hands, hiding places with bars, bars with no straight men, straight shots with six shooters, shooting six straight shots of whiskey made in Canada, all Canadians, while we're at it, it or that which you can't easily define, and that—only that—which keeps you up late at night in a cold sweat and a nervous cough, gnawing at your mind and your insides, tearing you up and inflaming your ulcers.

These things, and those like it, should terrify you, and you shouldn't feel bad about it; you are not the only one. There are many out there in the state much like you who are so terrified that sometimes they don't even get out of bed, taking the breath and legs away from every man with two good hands and a strong back. It is unnecessary to worry about those things which evoke terror for two reasons: (1) all of the aforementioned are out of your control and (2) there are things out there that'll really scare the shit out of you.

Namely, mirrors, when nobody else is standing next to you. Bibles, by themselves in otherwise empty drawers. Your name in the newspaper, clear as day, for no apparent reason. Ridicule from total strangers. Castigation from friends and family, especially from those whom you owe money. Governments scare the shit out of you. They're the reason why you don't have any legs and your strong back is rusted. In the middle of it all, what really and unequivocally scares all of the shit out of you in one fast

furious liquid moment is the thought that, when push finally did come to shove, nobody out there would give you their kidney, even if it meant life or death, and there it is: you've got two kidneys, and if you lose one of them, you're as good as gone. But it isn't the kidney, per se. It is this: that in the whole square state of Kansas, you're all by yourself for as long as your body holds up and holds you together.

My daddy was a farmer and afraid of no man, even those officiates armed with clipboards. He whooped every son of a bitch that stepped foot within twenty feet of his property line, and then chased them off for good with buckshot. He was a mean son of a bitch, and when they finally dragged him down, he went down kicking and cursing. My daddy was, for as long as he could be, his own country: he hated baseball and apple pie. My daddy: a drinker, who trusted gamblers over politicians because gamblers, he said, at least gave you the odds; a man not intimidated by the land or anything he could grapple with his hands. His daddy was a farmer, a drinker, and a mean son of a bitch, too, with two strong hands and a good back and a strong crop and a good living, but somewhere sometime something happened to the crop and it wasn't as good and harder to grow and my daddy had to be stronger than his daddy, but it got harder and that wasn't enough, he had to be stronger and get meaner and it turned my daddy into a better son of a bitch than his daddy, and that still wasn't enough. Hands go soft and the backs of men, like those of horses and dogs, bow and bend and finally break under the heavy weight of a big square state, and if a man doesn't look to Jesus, then he buries himself in a bottle where it's warm and safe and numb. Instead of the Word, my daddy ordered a whiskey, and cursed every clipboard carrying government official. The only thing you can say about him, the sorry son of a bitch: he went down swinging, but in the end, he went down and out with a whisper.

My daddy says: You're wasting your time.

Government official says: Corn prices aren't what they used to be, mister. On account of the war.

My daddy says: We don't grow corn.

Government official says: Well, what's that then?

My daddy says: Wheat.

Government official says: Oh.

My daddy says: They grow corn in Nebraska.

Government official says: I see.

My daddy says: And Iowa.

Government official says: Wheat, you say?

My daddy says: Can't you recognize wheat when you see it?

Government official says: I'm new to the position. Two weeks now.

My daddy says: You ain't never farmed.

Government official says: No, but I studied it. Well, the economics of it, anyway.

My daddy says: You ain't never farmed.

Government official says: At a university in Chicago.

My daddy says: What the hell you doing down here?

Government official says: I work with the Department of Interior.

My daddy says: Don't mean nothing to me.

Government official says: We're conducting an extensive study on the country's corn crop.

My daddy says: I don't got corn.

Government official says: Yes, sir, I see that now.

My daddy says: I got wheat.

Government official says: Well, sir, my trip here has a double purpose, you might say.

My daddy says: . . .

Government official says: In order to save our crops, we're offering farmers like yourself subsidy assistance to ensure—

My daddy says: Get off my land.

Government official: Sir, I don't think you understand.

My daddy says: Get off.

Everyone in Kansas, including my daddy, was terrified they'd lose their farms, and then, one day, they lost their farms, and it was worse than they had feared and inside they died a little each day until there was no more dying to do and they stopped breathing and that was it. If they didn't go west, they stayed and starved. If they did go west, they still starved, and died somewhere away from home on foreign soil in a strange land: Colorado, Utah, Nevada, California. Some, like my daddy, chose to stay, and lost their farm and died a quiet, isolated death in the square state of Kansas. There is, according to my daddy, no better grave than a cold, shallow one in the dry, hard earth.

INTERSTATE HIGHWAY 70: AN INCISION

A man finds himself less terrified when he has little or nothing to lose, and when he loses his job (one of many shit stints pulling weeds and cutting grass for the Parks and Rec at 5 and a quarter an hour), more or less voluntarily (deciding one day not to go), there's nothing left to do but cut your losses, count your winnings, and head east for the middle of the state (all great mysteries are reconciled in the heart).

Four weeks in exchange for a few hundred dollars and a free t-shirt that says, Sheridan County Parks and Rec. I'm wearing the t-shirt right now, a respectable Sheridan County representative, making tracks and making do.

It feels, in a way, like running, retreat, but that's all right with me: the way I see it, if nobody misses you, then you don't belong wherever it is you were. But I'm not

running, I'm driving: a truck with multiple warrants out on it for various moving violations and unpaid parking tickets, pushing her as fast as she'll go, topped out at seventy-five, and she shakes under the speed, but I'm certain that, if she holds together, she can maintain just fine.

Forty miles outside of Hays, there's a Negro hitching a ride on the side of the road. I pull over and he walks up to the truck, leans his head in through the opened window. He says, "Hey there, mister."

"Hey there," I say. "Where you heading?"

"Kansas City."

"I hadn't planned on leaving the state."

"How far you going?"

"Topeka. Maybe."

"I'll ride that far, if it's ok with you."

"Get in."

But he hesitates, looks off down the road, wipes his forehead. "I got to ask, sir," he says.

"Go ahead then."

"You ain't mean, are you, mister?"

"Mean?"

"Last white man stopped was meaner than a mad dog, said he was to going to carry me down to Bama and treat me proper."

"I'm not going to Alabama."

"Ok." The Negro tosses his bag in the back and climbs in.

The sun's hot and the pavement's smoking. I wait five miles before I say anything. Then I say, "You been hitching long?"

"Three days," the Negro says.

"Why you going to Kansas City?"

"A job."

"Just got rid of mine."

"You lucky," the Negro says. "I wish I could do without."

"When a man's got nothing to lose, he can afford to lose his job."

The Negro nods, but he doesn't understand me. It isn't anything I expect him to understand, and sometimes I don't understand it myself.

I say: "What kind of work you going to do in Kansas City?"

"Lay pipe with my cousin," the Negro says. "He the one tell me about the job."

"Pipe, hey."

"City's spanding. Need more pipe for more shit."

"Literally."

"He says to come out right away. They supposed to be paying five and a quarter."

"I never laid pipe before."

"I done it down in Baton Rouge. It ain't all that hard. Only when it's hot. The hole's already dug. All you got to do is lay in the pipe."

It sounds easy enough, but it's these things, the ones that sound easy enough, that scare the shit out of me. It's something I know I can do, can see myself doing it, down there in the ditch laying the pipe and fitting them together so someone's shit—ultimately scared right out of them—can flow, smoothly and uninterrupted all the way to the Missouri. If the Negro can do it, then I should be able to get in there in the ditch and do my part. But how exactly does one begin laying pipe if the said one has no prior experience laying anything, pipes and fifteen year old neighbor girls included? What kind of tools do you need? Do you bring your own? Are they supplied? Does the Negro have tools with him? In his pack? How do you hook the pipes together so the shit flows smoothly through them and into the Missouri? Do you fasten them? Bolts? Glue? Duct tape? Do you get breaks? Do they offer health insurance? Laying pipe

sounds a little risky, a little hazardous, working in a ditch and all. How strong do you have to be? The Negro doesn't look more than a hundred and forty. His arms are lean and wiry. The veins are sticking up out of them, and they don't look like they could heft any pipe. On his right arm, there's a scar, about seven inches long, up the inside of his forearm.

"Did you get that laying pipe?" I say.

"What?" the Negro says.

"The scar."

He looks down at the scar, and shakes his head. "Naw," he says. "You don't get cut like this laying pipe."

"Oh."

"I got cut."

"Oh."

"You ever been to Baton Rouge?"

"No."

"It gets rough sometimes." The Negro puts his arm down and hides the scar.

Never trust scars. They have stories behind them, intricate dangerous stories of something that cut deep and left its mark forever. They never heal completely, not ever completely. My daddy had them, and his daddy had them, annealed gashes in their skin that proved to the world that whatever it was they faced, they whipped with their two hands. The Negro has them, and even the square state of Kansas has one, one long one, cut right across the middle of it, a demarcating incision exposing its guts and its insides, all of the things it's made of.

I have no scars, have never laid pipe, and everything, at this point, that isn't nailed to the floor, scares the ever living shit out of me.

"I need a beer," I say.

The Negro looks at me, and waits.

"What about you?"

"I ain't got no money," the Negro says.

"What have you been eating?"

"I ain't."

"For the past three days?"

The Negro nods.

"Jesus, man, you need a steak, too."

The Negro shrugs, but looks uneasy. He doesn't trust me, and never will, no matter what I do to reassure him. I take the next exit anyway, and pull up to the first diner, a place called Max's. We head inside, the Negro trailing behind me, and we take a corner booth. I order us both a beer and a steak. The waitress points at the Negro and says, "He don't look old enough to drink."

"Hell, honey," I say, "he's twenty-three."

The Negro doesn't say anything.

"Twenty-three?" the waitress says. "He don't look it."

"He works underground," I say.

"Oh," the waitress says.

"They age slower down there."

"What you do?" she says to the Negro.

"He lays pipe," I say.

"Oh," she says. "You really twenty-three?"

"Yes'm," the Negro says.

"Ok," she says, writes down our order, and fetches us two beers. They're in bottles and they're very cold. All beer in Kansas always tastes cold. We raise our beers and we're drinking together, two men, one with a scar and the other in desperate need of one.

"Thanks, mister," the Negro says. "It sure taste good."

"Yeah," I say.

I watch the Negro take small sips of the beer, slow sips, and he sets the bottle down.

"It isn't your first beer, is it?" I ask him.

"Naw," he says, and smiles, awkward and embarrassed.

"Well, hell," I say, "there's plenty more so feel free to drink up."

He nods, takes another small sip, and sets the bottle back down. The way I see it, driving across the square state of Kansas is not the proper time to sip a beer. Mine is half gone, will be done in three more pulls, and I'll have one more before my steak gets here, but everyone's got to find their own pace, their own way of fording across the Missouri.

"So you laid pipe before," I say.

"In Baton Rouge," the Negro says.

"How does it work?"

"Good as any."

"That's not what I mean. How do they get the pipe into the ditch?"

"If they got a lift, then they drop it in like that."

"And if they don't?"

"They roll it in with a pulley."

"Then what?"

"Then you fit in the pipe."

"Do they use bolts or tape?"

"For what?"

"To fasten them."

The Negro shakes his head. "They got their own fasteners."

"Sounds easy enough."

"You interested?"

"Are they hiring?"

"It's pipe, mister. They always hiring."

"All right then." We drink to our new jobs, and then our steaks come. The Negro eats his steak fast and sips his beer slow, and I laugh because it seems like you should do the exact opposite in Kansas: eat slow, drink fast. We have another beer and I pay the check. The Negro says, "Thanks, mister," again, and we head out, get back in the truck, back on the highway, traveling along the great state-wide scar of Kansas. I turn on the radio and the Negro and I listen and don't say anything else.

UNTIL:

The truck breaks down ten miles outside Junction City. It coughs and smokes and finally dies, rolling to a stop on the side of the road.

"What's the matter, mister?" the Negro says.

"I don't know," I say. We watch the gray smoke seep out from under the hood. "Looks like she's overheated." I pop the hood, and get out to look her over. The Negro gets out, too. I lift the hood and black smoke pours out and up into the air. Black smoke is always a bad sign.

"Jesus," I say.

"It ain't overheated," the Negro says. "It's dead, mister."

I try to see where she's broke, but there's too much black smoke to see anything except the bad side of things. The Negro is right: she's finally dead.

"Shit."

"We got to get to Kansas City," the Negro says. He sees it better than I do what this all means.

"She's dead," I say.

"We can hitch," the Negro says. "We ain't far now. Somebody'll give us a lift."

"I have to stay here."

"What you talking about, mister?"

"I have to stay here with her."

"She's already dead. You said so yourself."

"I'm staying." I wait for the black smoke to clear so I can get in there and fix her, but it doesn't; it keeps pouring out of her as though she were a smoke-stack, spitting out the fire burning in her.

"Suit yourself, mister," the Negro says.

"I'll catch up with you."

"I'll try to save you a job on account of your being so kind to me, but I can't make no promises."

"I know."

The Negro grabs his pack and makes his way down the side of the dusty highway, his thumb held out and his head hung down, ten miles outside of Junction City. He'll find a ride, and he'll be there in Kansas City tomorrow, with or without me.

Me: I sit in the dirt and wait for my dead truck to give it up and stop dying already. It seems that, in the square state of Kansas, dying takes twice as long and is twice as loud, a slow menacing dirge that you have to bury deep in the ground to keep quiet. This terrifies me, by myself out in the middle of the county with nobody to talk to and nobody to give me their kidney if I needed it. But I don't need a kidney; I got two good ones of my own that have never shown any signs of fading. Maybe that's it, when you finally have nothing then nothing scares the shit out of you, and suddenly I feel like I could live out here forever in the middle of the square state of Kansas. My daddy was right: there isn't any other place like it.

FLOODING AND FLOOD

1.

Flooding and flood are two different things. The difference between Kansas and Bangladesh, say. I've never been to either place.

2.

There is what they call flash flooding, which is when a hard downpour washes away the topsoil, usually downhill. Destroys houses. Uproots trees. Nasty shit. I saw it once in Montana after a summer of wild fires. First, everyone's house burned and then the charred remains were washed away. Well, they said, if that don't beat all.

3.

I was in a flood in Missouri. Rain came down and the water piled up in the streets and you couldn't get to your car or leave your house. I didn't live there at the time, so I watched it from on top of a diner called Margie's. Margie's didn't close, but Margie left to make sure her house was all right. To make sure her kids were all right. Row boats and rafts made their way through the streets. Rain kept coming down. You're not supposed to wade through the flood water on account of all the debris floating around in it. It's how you get tetanus. One way, anyway. I told Margie I'd watch the diner for her. She kissed me on the cheek. I made coffee and hamburgers for those few of us inside the diner who weren't from there and couldn't leave now that the streets were flooded.

4.

A man lost his entire collection of toy boats in the flood. All three hundred sixty-five of them, caught the current and set sail. Just like they were made to.

Toy boat, toy boat, toy boat.

5.

Bangladesh is built on a delta. Every year they lose their poets. Every year. They get washed away in the flooding, along the current and into the Bay of Bengal. Some get stuck in the silt. They say that poets are good for the soil. They enrich the deposits there, supposedly. For the sake of poetry, they should consider anchoring some of their poets to the ground because every year they get washed away the next generation of poets must re-learn poetry anew, without any guidance, instruction, criticism. Tantamount to cooking without being allowed to taste for seasoning.

It's a good thing all the poets in America live in places that aren't frequently susceptible to flooding or floods: New York, San Francisco, Arizona. They've got their own problems (muggers, earthquakes, wild dogs, respectively), but flooding and floods are not among them; our poets collectively are safe for the time being, so long as they stay away from Bangladesh and Missouri.

6.

This must've been what they saw when they sang in chorus: Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream. Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily. . .

7.

You have to say it, three times, really fast, and you'll be back in Kansas before you know it.

Toy boat, toy boat, toy boat.

8.

Semantically, one could be said to be in the process of, as demonstrated by the participle ending, whereas the other could have already occurred, still may yet happen, may only happen in the infinitive.

They don't move in Bangladesh. Every year the waters rise and the land shifts and drifts into the mouth of the Bay of Bengal and nobody there ever considers moving.

9.

In Missouri, on top of Margie's, it looked like they were all prepared for it, ready with sandbags and to let the poets fend for themselves. As though they're ready for it at any given moment. There they don't move either. It's a matter of doing what you can to stay afloat: stayed afloat, staying afloat, stay afloat, will stay float.

REVERSE-ENGINEERING MURPHY

Murphy feels pretty good knowing he could never be replaced by a robot. He read it in an article, scientists concluded that robots could not be programmed to have common sense. Damn tootin, Murphy says, because if there's anything he has in plenitude it's common sense. Plum plenum with common sense. For instance, when he sees money on the ground, any kind of money, he bends down and picks it up. When it's raining outside or looks as though it might rain, he carries an umbrella with him. He knows that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, and knows it's neither an actual bird nor an actual bush.

There are no bushes where he is, on the other side of the country, two time zones away from his wife, his house, his family, his job, his urologist. Evergreens everywhere he looks. Wonders how they ever tell it's spring or fall around here. In the motel room, there aren't any bushes or plants or flowers, plastic or otherwise, though the bedspread has impressions of some flora on it: indeterminate petals, washed in an unnatural red. Faded flowers in withering bouquets. A robot probably sewed it together, but never knew it was sewing hyacinths. Couldn't tell you they were hyacinths.

* * *

If you ask his mother, she'll tell you he was well-behaved as a baby. Wasn't a fussy eater at all, and only occasionally wet the bed. She'll tell you he went through a period of bad dreams when he was seven, but won't be able to tell you what those dreams were.

On the telephone, it's awkward between them because she doesn't know where he is and he won't tell her. There's someone here asking about you, his mother says.

Don't worry about it, Mom, Murphy says.

It's just that I don't even know where you are, his mother says.

I know, Murphy says.

I called Marie, his mother says.

Why did you do that? Murphy says. He tries not to sound irritated because he knows how important it is to be patient with her. Her age and health.

I was just trying to see if she'd heard from you or if she knew anything more, she says.

I haven't called her, Murphy says.

She doesn't know where you are, either.

I know, Mom, Murphy says.

Don't you think she has a right to know?

I have to go, Mom, Murphy says. He hangs up the telephone. Lies down on the motel bed. Still made up. Props up his head with the two pillows, blinks at the television. There's no mini bar in this motel, and Murphy realizes that if wants a bottle of something, then he's going to have to get up and get it himself.

* * *

Murphy knows you can program a robot to put together a car or individually plastic wrap caramels, but how do you program a robot to know only to sacrifice itself for another life equal or greater its own value? Can you program a robot to pick up money from the ground, know how to distinguish quarters from aluminum can tabs? Will the robot have the ability to look up at the sky and make a split decision to grab its umbrella? Will it be able to vary its handshake depending on whose hand it's shaking? Will it know how and when to change the channel to find something better to watch? Like this? From game show to baseball game. In this part of the country, the Braves play at four. Murphy thinks, There's not a robot alive who can make decisions as

quickly as I can and know, also as quickly, they're the right decisions. Murphy thinks of ways to get a bottle of scotch without having to get off the bed. He picks up the telephone, waits for the desk clerk to pick up. The desk clerk answers: Front desk.

Murphy says, This is room 328.

Yes, the desk clerk says.

I was hoping to get a bottle of scotch delivered to my room, Murphy says.

There was silence on the other end.

A fifth would be perfect, Murphy says. Though maybe I'd better go with one of those bargain bottles. You know, the twofers.

The clerk still doesn't say anything. Murphy wonders if he's still on the line. Listens. Can hear the clerk breathing. Other voices in the background.

It's just that there's no mini bar in the room, Murphy says. If there was, I wouldn't have to bother you down there.

Excuse me? the desk clerk says.

You know, Murphy says, a bottle of scotch, any brand, and maybe a ham sandwich to go along with it.

What do you think this is, the Holiday Inn or something? the desk clerk says.

I just thought it was all in the price for room service.

Room service? the desk clerk says.

That's what I thought.

Do you need any more towels?

No. I already have some.

There's your room service, the desk clerk says, and hangs up.

All right, Murphy says. Murphy switches off the television. Sits up. Realizes now he's on his own.

* * *

If you ask his father where Murphy went wrong, he'll tell you, Right out of the womb. He'll tell you his mother coddled him like he was made of aluminum. Made him afraid of everything. He'll claim he tried his best to help Murphy get ready for when the real world started taking its shots and Murphy started taking his licks. Hung a heavy bag in the garage, tried to teach the kid how to box so he could defend himself when the other kids started picking on him. It's Darwinian, you know, his father says. Kids are trained to recognize the weaker ones and then to bully the hell out of them. His father says, It didn't help that he was sickly when he was born. A few weeks early. I guess they called it premature. There was something wrong with his lungs. I was in Atlantic City on business when it happened. How the hell was I supposed to know he'd come three weeks early?

Darwin did not likely develop his theory of fitness and survival with kindergarten in mind. Maybe not, his father says, but it sure as hell applies. If you look closely you can see in Murphy's father's eyes the outlines of a little boy who actually believed it, still believes it, that if he didn't bare his teeth he'd get weeded out of the bunch, trampled down, teased right out of the gene pool.

You can tell in the hard lines of Murphy's father's face that he really does believe he's doing the right thing by choosing not to know about Murphy's troubles. Really believes it has everything to do with Darwin, and really believes if he gives in now, his son is hopeless.

* * *

Murphy envisions a robot you could program to run down to the liquor store for a big bottle of scotch. Program in the brand name and size, give it exact change to give for the scotch so it wouldn't have to worry about counting the change. To the liquor store and straight back, he'd tell the robot. No diversions, no matter what.

Murphy has a dilemma. He wants a bottle of scotch and a ham sandwich, but doesn't want to leave his motel room. Has already taken off his pants, and doesn't want to put them back on. Is already lying down, examining his testicles. He blames them for this whole mess, for his lot in life. Robots are lucky to not have them, not have to bother with them. The pills worked to clear up the infection, get rid of the pain, but did nothing to help their general sagginess and the sad deflated look of two flat tires. They droop like an old man's skin. If somebody had knocked on the door willing to trade Murphy a bottle of scotch for what was left of his testicles, Murphy would've jumped at the opportunity. Would've immediately explored ways to amputate them. Would've told the junkman to throw in a ham sandwich and they could call it a deal, would've stuck out his hand to shake on it.

Murphy asks himself what exactly can he do that a robot couldn't? This: Go down to the liquor store, buy the right bottle of scotch, pay with a twenty, and know what to do with the change. Knows he can take the change across the street to the bar, go in and belly up, get a head start on things. Knows he'll need pants to do that, knows how to put them back on without having to compute all the implications. Simply knows the possibilities and is fully aware of the probabilities.

* * *

His brother will tell you it's because he thinks about shit too much, is too serious about everything. If you ask him, his brother will say that Murphy is Murphy's worst damn enemy, that the only thing holding Murphy back is Murphy. It's all up here, his brother will tell you, pointing at his hat holder. All up here.

Has his brother ever tried to help?

All the time, his brother says.

His brother says: He had the chance, too, to change his ways and break out of his shell. The night of his bachelor party we all chipped in and got him one of those

strippers that does more than just take off her clothes and we all paid her enough that Murph didn't have to worry about that, she was all his and all he had to do was want her. He didn't and she ended up taking it personally, got up in his face and Murph pushed her a little to get some distance and she ended up tripping over the chair and falling backwards, hit her face on the side of the arm or something. When she got up, her front teeth were chipped and she was screaming hysterically. We got her out of there, but she went and got her pimp and her pimp came up and started threatening Murph. The thing was the pimp wasn't a big guy or anything, but he was talking tough in Murph's face, but Murph didn't do anything. Just stood there and let that little pimp push him around. Then the pimp slaps him in the face, open handed kind of thing, like he was hitting one of his girls. I was hoping Murph would stand up for himself, but when I saw it wasn't going to happen, I had to do something. The next day there he was at the church in his tuxedo looking all shiny and happy like he didn't get slapped by a pimp the night before, like the whole thing never happened, smiling and saying, I do. Well, he did and that's what did him in.

* * *

Murphy does. Puts his pants back on, makes sure he has the key to get back in. The motel is one where all the doors face the parking lot and in the corner there's a swimming pool. A small, sad dirty-green swimming pool. Murphy doesn't want to get back in the car. Remembers seeing a strip of stores a half-mile down. Starts hoofing it, whistling while he walks.

A robot can't do this, Murphy thinks. Walk down to the liquor store motivated by volition and volition alone, whistle while he walks. Purses his lips and pushes air through them, creating a melodic tone that some of the birds in the trees mistake as one of their own. A robot can't whistle while it walks.

Murphy's in luck, doesn't have to cross a street to go from liquor store to bar as the one he arrives at is attached, side by each, with a large sign above them: Eastgate Liquor and Bar. Murphy goes in, pays for his double bottle of scotch, carries it through the saloon-like double doors, and bellies on up to the bar. The woman behind it looks like she's seen some days, knows every trick in the book. Has a cigarette pinched between her teeth. Breathes in through the mouth, blows it out through the nose. This woman probably has tattoos, Murphy thinks. A criminal record. Probably has a hand gun tucked near the register. A boot knife holstered around her ankle, just in case. She swaggers down to the end where Murphy's perched. Smiles at him to show him she's missing teeth, and if he was planning on messing around with her, then he'd better come up with a Plan B real quick.

Evening, Murphy says.

It's only two, she says.

Right, Murphy says.

What do you want?

Murphy lays all of the cash in his pocket on top of the bar: seven left over from the twenty, and a second twenty. Scotch, he says.

All right then, the woman says. Swaggers back towards the middle of the bar where she grabs a glass, scoops some ice into it, shoots in some booze from the squirt gun. Swaggers it back to Murphy. Takes a five spot from his pile, brings him back the change. He adds it back to the pile, knows when it's depleted that it's time to head back. Murphy realizes, just before his first sip, that they call it a bottle even though it's made of plastic. Wonders what kind of havoc that would wreck on the poor robot who's been programmed to purchase a big bottle of scotch, knows a bottle, by definition, is comprised of glass, and is confronted by a row of plastic. Yet one more thing a robot can't do that Murphy can: Take it all in stride. Takes his first sip. You know, he says

to the woman, they call them bottles when they're clearly made out of plastic. How do you figure that one?

I don't, the woman says. There's something about the woman that Murphy likes, feels akin to, and yet the rest of her scares the holy bejesus out of him. The missing teeth, the cigarette, the buckshot in her voice, the probable criminal record.

Can you have one with me? Murphy asks her.

I can do whatever I want, she says. Swaggers over to the booze gun and shoots a shot into a glass. Drops in three ice chunks on top of it. Swaggers back over, takes three ones from the pile. She waits until the ice melts, then tosses it back, one big shot. Nods at Murphy. Murphy nods back at her. She swaggers to the other end of the bar where there's a guy sleeping, propped up in the corner stool, leaning against the wall. She shoots him a shot of something from the booze gun, slams it down in front of him. Wake up, Earl, she shouts at him. Time to go to work.

Earl wakes up, rubs at his eyes. Throws back his shot, runs his hands through his hair. Thanks, Darla, he says. See you tonight.

Yeah, the woman says.

Earl staggers towards the door, stumbles out into the open mouth of daylight. The door closes and the inside of the bar returns to its anonymous darkness and indiscernible time of the day.

How about another round, Darla, Murphy says.

She glares at him at first, like she doesn't appreciate his using her first name in the familiar like that, but doesn't say anything outright about it. Shoots them both another, shoots hers down. Takes it off the change pile, renders it only big enough for another round. Murphy sips his slow, postpones the hike back to his miserable motel.

Is it always this quiet during the day? he says.

Darla swaggers down, stands in front of him. You ain't from around here, Darla says. It's not a question. You're too young to be in here this early in the day, she says. You should be working somewhere.

I'm not too young for anything anymore, Murphy says.

It's a waste, she says.

Murphy doesn't know what to say.

What are you running from? Darla says. She sees right through him with her bad eyes, missing teeth, muddled complexion: looks right through him like he's a walking talking x-ray. Murphy wonders if it's possible at all to stare into a robot's face and figure out what's on its mind, if, with facial expressions, they ever tip their hands like humans do. Darla can tell he's holding back something.

I had orchitis, Murphy tells her.

Is that like cancer? she says.

No.

Fatal?

Not this time, he says.

Where? she asks.

In my testicles.

She doesn't flinch. Guys usually flinch, but Darla has fortitude. She's seen some things in her life. Let me see, she says.

Murphy laughs. It's his first response to such a ridiculous request. Darla doesn't laugh. Is she serious? Murphy shifts on his stool.

I'm a mother, too, she says, and that's it, the one thing she could've said to him to convince him it's all right. Suddenly it doesn't matter that she doesn't have all her teeth or that she could pull off an eye patch without it looking overtly creepy. It's something intimate between them, and Murphy finds he's not reluctant to stand up and

undo his belt. He drops his pants around his ankles, pulls his underpants down to his thighs. Darla leans over the bar, stares down at him.

Looks all right to me, Darla says.

It cleared up, Murphy says.

Just like that?

I took pills.

She nods that pills can do that sometimes. Her eyes are still focused on him, scanning over every peculiarity on him: the squirrelly, scattered hairs fuzzy like small kiwis, the strange purple color of the head, the large birthmark on the shaft visible even when it's contracted and wrinkled and reposed, the way one ball hangs lower than the other.

They all look different from each other, Darla says. It's been a while since I seen one that wasn't pierced.

Murphy looks down at himself. Nothing to boast about, but healthy looking.

You can pull your pants back up, Darla says.

Murphy pulls up his underpants, then his pants. Sits back down.

Darla lights another cigarette. They tell you all that damn metal is supposed to make it feel good, she says. She reaches for the rest of the change pile, but stops, looks at Murphy to see if it's all right to use it up for the last round. Murphy nods that she should go right ahead and pour two more, that's what it's there for: to drink, be drunk, get drunk.

Here's to us not being robots, Murphy offers.

Darla drinks to it, though Murphy suspects she'd drink to just about anything.

* * *

Murphy wonders: Do robots ever waste time? Sit around and be lazy for the sake of sitting around and being lazy? Do robots have vices? Murphy adds it to his list

of reasons why a robot will never replace him: he indulges in vice because it is fun and feels good. Lies naked on the motel bed, on top of the spread, pours scotch from the bargain bottle into one of the plastic cups he found in the bathroom. Flips the television channels between the weather channel and ladies' professional wrestling. A tropical storm off the coast of Cuba. A large woman in spandex called Big Bertha going off the top ropes on a blonde bombshell called Goldie.

This is, Murphy decides, officially living high on the hog. He laughs out loud, louder than the television, in fusillade outbursts. Laughs until it hurts his entire face. A robot can't laugh honestly, Murphy thinks. A robot can't laugh and a robot can't dance. If you told it to go in and pour you a glass of scotch from the bottle and the robot went in and discovered there was only a plastic bottle of scotch and plastic glasses to pour it into, it would scratch its metal head, look back and forth between plastic bottle and plastic cup until the little chip in its head burst. That's what it means to be human, to be Murphy, and be irreplaceable: split decisions made using common sense; to simply pour when the cup is empty.

Murphy demonstrates. Flips the television back to the weather channel. When Murphy wants something, he simply decides.

* * *

If you ask his wife, she'll tell you a different story. She'll tell you how he swept her off her feet one night, one magical night, when nothing went wrong and he said and did everything right, will tell you after that one night, it was all downhill from there. When I first met him, she'll tell you, he had dreams and ambitions. Wanted to build things, speak different languages, learn how to play guitar, make money. He wanted to do things. Wanted things.

You'll notice how she watches through the window, how she looks each time a car drives by. Will notice she isn't dressed yet after noon: still in a robe and slippers, her hair still tangled from a rough night of sleep. He's not the same man, she'll say.

What does she miss most about him?

His potential, she says. Murphy could never use an ax without chopping something off. Couldn't set an alarm clock. Couldn't light a grill without singing his hair.

How many times had Murphy set something on fire? Sliced himself while dicing onions?

It happened at a bar, she says. I was there with friends, celebrating my birthday and he was there with co-workers, celebrating his promotion. I was coming from the bathroom, and he was standing at the bar. We saw each other at the same time. Like in the movies. He said he'd been promoted. I told him it was my birthday. He told me that sounded more important. I remember there was this look in his eyes, that kind of confidence that says the world belongs to him, not all at once, but piece by piece. He asked for my phone number, and I wrote it down on a cocktail napkin with my lipstick because neither of us had a pen. That look and the way his tie was loosened and his top button undone. The way he wore his five o'clock shadow, the way he kept his hands in sight and close to me. The way he looked at me, she says, her eyes glazed over in recollection, like he was trying to remember every little detail about me. He said to me, Happy birthday, Marie, and the familiarity in his voice made me melt, made it seem like we'd known each other for ten years, not ten minutes.

There's an age difference between them. Meaning: when they first met, Murphy was twenty-eight, enjoying his first major promotion, while his wife-to-be was celebrating her twenty-first birthday, only then legally old enough to buy herself a drink. Neither of them was ready for him to turn thirty when he finally did. She says, I could still go all night, and he was catatonic by nine. I could still fit into a size three, and he

was expanding daily. I was beginning to think that's how thirty worked, that as soon as you reached it, the world started mushing you down and making you round. He shrunk three inches, gained thirty pounds.

What happened to Murphy?

He started losing his hair, his wife says. Started letting his teeth go, she says. Started complaining about pains all the time, she says.

If you ask his wife, she'll tell you she's his ex-wife now, will tell you it's over while at the same she stares out the window to see if he's coming. She'll tell you, It's time to move on, I guess, pick up the pieces and move on. Stop crying over my spilt Murphy. Move on. We all learn to mistrust our repeated assertions.

* * *

In the middle of a tornado watch in Kansas, Murphy decides to call his wife. Decides, and then does. Doesn't consider the time difference.

It's midnight, Marie says.

I'm still getting used to this time zone, Murphy says. How's the house?

Where are you?

There's tornadoes in Kansas.

I told your mother I didn't know, but she doesn't believe me.

Murphy stares at the television. It's not just one tornado, but now it's four of them: four separate twisters. Four of them, he says.

Murphy? Where are you?

I opened a post office box today, he says. You can reach me there.

I thought you were coming home, she says.

He listens to her waiting. The phone crackles. He wonders if it might be the twisters, plowing through Kansas and cutting off the country's communication right down the middle. Cleanly severed as though done with a scalpel.

Aren't you coming home? she says again.

I've got to go, he says. There's four of them now and I can't tell anything without the sound on. He hears her crying on the other end of the line. I'm sorry I woke you up, he says. Hangs up. Turns the sound back on. They're buckling down in Topeka.

* * *

Both Murphy and a robot can do long division. The robot is capable of doing it faster, but Murphy still knows how. Both Murphy and a robot are capable of breaking a twenty for you, provided they have two tens or four fives in their pockets. Murphy can drive a car through traffic, whereas a robot requires an empty highway. A robot can build an entire car by itself, can construct a Cadillac inside twenty-four hours; Murphy doesn't even know how to change the oil, check the spark plugs, fix the carburetor. A robot, like the ones in the movies, can be trained to kill impartially and indiscriminately, and the thought alone of holding a handgun makes Murphy queasy. He's never fired one before, has never had to, hopes he never will. A robot will never know a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, will attempt to locate a real bird, a real bush.

Murphy likes his odds, knows he's got a better chance if it comes down to him and a robot. He's got common sense, filled to the brim with it, and, evidently, there's nothing common about it if robots don't have it or can't ever have it. Common sense and other things, too.

IMPUGN

I know there are days when you wonder if I'm really here, if I really exist, if my existence matters, when you look right through me at the calendar, counting the months until the lease is up. I talk to my echo and the neighbors downstairs. Even the cat doesn't listen, a willing participant of your mutiny. You negate my existence by erasing my outline from the bed, my clothes from the closet, my shadow from the corner of the room. Undo all of the things that did me in.

You don't like my feet, and hate that I wear hats. They'll make you bald before your time, you said to me when you were still saying things to me, when you recognized a me to whom you could say things. Hated that I never carry an umbrella or wear sunglasses.

You fell in love with me once, my charm, my pyramid scheme. Loved that I had a parole officer. You always liked bad boys, still do, and liked me because I was a bad boy until you found out it wasn't for anything good like aggravated assault or armed robbery, but that it was for fraud and passing bad checks. Any weasel can write a rubber check, you said, and you were right.

The only thing I learned in prison was how to get cable for free, which my cellmate, Jimmy Squish, taught me to do. How to split it from your neighbors and feed it into the back of the television.

In the morning, I wake up before you. Sit up and watch you breathe, pushing it hard out of your nose so that it whistles as you exhale. I get up and make coffee. Pour you a cup when I hear you stir. I know exactly how you take it: two sugars and enough cream to turn it golden. I leave it for you on the counter, hoping if there's enough little things like that, you'll let me start using the bathroom again. You come out into the

kitchen, your eyes half-closed, your robe half-undone. I watch you ignore the cup of coffee already there for you, already made, steaming and waiting. Watch you open the cupboard and retrieve another cup. Watch you pour your own coffee, fix it yourself: two sugars and enough cream to turn it golden. You leave the other cup on the counter where it cools, colder, and finally cold.

If you do this long enough I will disappear from the apartment and my name will be left off the new lease. The cat will forget me, and you won't be able to smell me on the furniture anymore. You sit at the table with your cup of coffee and the morning newspaper. We always sit like this in the morning. We used to talk about things, current events and our strange dreams and the things we were feeling, used to say things like I love you and I'm afraid.

Until: we talked less, less about current events, less about what we were feeling. You stopped telling me your dreams and I assumed it was because you dreamt of another man, one who could build a bookshelf, ride a bull, catch a fish, find your clitoris. I kept dreaming the same thing: that I was in a circular room and couldn't find the way out. Couldn't find a window to open.

CLE ELUM

I watched a man in a suit mow his lawn. It was in the middle of a summer. He was sweating through his coat and all over the top of his balding head. The blades on his mower were rusted and clanged as he pushed it from one corner of his small yard to the other small corner of his yard. Every so often he took out a handkerchief and wiped his forehead or the back of his neck. I sat on the curb across the street, drinking what had started as a cold beer. I was waiting for the local authorities to come pick me up, give me somewhere to sleep for the night. It was on Main Street. The main drag through town, but nobody was coming. The afternoon was getting long in the tooth. I wondered why the man was in a suit mowing his lawn. He saw me staring at him and watched me sitting there. I held up the beer and offered him some. Not on the Sabbath, he called across the street.

I didn't know it was Sunday. It explained the old man's suit.

The man bent over and extracted a clump of grass stuck in between two of the blades. It had been a long time since I'd seen anybody using a push mower.

I needed to get over the mountains. I knew what I needed was somewhere over the mountains. I was told I'd never seen mountains like them before. I stood up and went down the street, stopped off at a place with a glowing beer sign in the window. I asked the guy behind the bar for another bottle of beer and a cigar. He asked to see my money first. The fact of it is, mister, I don't know you from Adam, he said. If you was a regular, that'd be one thing, but it seems like you're passing through and I've been had by enough of the passing-throughs in my time to know it ain't happening again.

It was a land of dust and staying still. I pulled out the last five dollars I had. I was either getting over those mountains tomorrow or accepting my dusty grave there on Main Street.

All right, the bartender said. He gave me the beer and cigar.

I asked him for a match. He lit the match for me, and I leaned in and puffed on the cigar. I knew that once over those mountains that place would cease to exist for me, would appear only in my memories every now and again, incomplete and fuzzy around the edges. Thanks, I told him.

Don't mention it, he said.

The cigar was dry and burned hot, like smoking a clump of that old man's small lawn, burned brown from the hot summer sun. There was a fan going in the corner of the bar, ticking and whirring around. It didn't seem to help with the heat much. The whole inside of the place felt like an armpit. The wood sweated. The bar. The tables and chairs, where there sat a couple drinking a pitcher of cold beer. The sides of the pitcher sweated, too. A man in the corner was drinking something brown. Everything, including the people sitting in the chairs, sweated. I wondered if that was how it was in real deserts like down in Arizona. New Mexico. Death Valley. Death Valley sounded hot, littered with cow skulls and shed snake skins. Everyone there could tell I wasn't from around those parts. That was how it was in towns on that side of the mountains. Everyone knew everyone else and knew it when someone was passing through and didn't belong.

They'd told me that on the other side of the mountains there were cities where you could walk around for weeks and not see the same person twice. I needed a place like that. The three patrons and the bartender watched me smoke the cigar, sniffed at it like they smelled a brush fire. The couple at the table was older, and both of them looked like they'd been pulling each other along for years. The guy by himself in the corner had his back leaned against the wall. He was in a shirt and tie, his coat hung

over one of the other chairs. He looked ready to nod off, his something brown nearly finished.

Where you heading? the bartender asked me, but it didn't sound like a friendly question at all, or like small talk between two strangers.

The other side of the mountains, I told him.

He nodded like he'd had it figured out all along.

The woman at the table said, I was there once. Walked down the streets in a dress. The man across from her smiled. It must've been a pleasant memory.

What color was it? I said. The dress, I mean.

It was white, the woman answered.

She was the queen of the ball, the man said. He reached out and put his hand on top of hers. They smiled at each other.

I hope it's what I find on the other side, I said.

It's what you'll find on the other side, the man in the corner said. You can be sure of that.

No one will see you, the woman said.

That's what I want, I told her. I told all three of them and the bartender too, I said, That's what I want.

You running? the bartender said.

Or just disappearing, the man in the corner said.

I told you we knew our passing-throughs, the bartender said.

This one looks all right to me, the woman said.

They always look all right, the bartender said. That's the problem with them. They always look all right. A little dirty, a little tired, always like someone's kid. You know what the problem with you is? the bartender said to me. I figured he was going to go ahead and tell me without my prompting him. You don't look like anyone's son, he said.

The other three looked at me solemn like they'd seen a three-legged dog who'd lost his teeth and half his tail, had an asthmatic bark and only one good eye. It was unfair because I was somebody's son.

My mother works at a grocery store, I told them, and I realized how young it made me sound in the same room with those four people who had so much history and weren't themselves, any more, anyone's son or daughter. She works at a grocery store and has diabetes, I said. She's overweight and her feet always hurt her. I exhaled a cloud of smoke and tried to hide it in, keep them from seeing me remember my mother and her fat tired feet squeezed into a tight pair of Dr. Scholl's shoes bought used at the Salvation Army, stepping gingerly like a horse with a cracked hoof. My mother though never broke an ankle and administered her own insulin shots at the breakfast table. Every morning right before her English muffin.

I don't take it back, kid, the bartender said.

Give him another beer, the woman said.

Not on the house, the bartender said.

On me then, the woman said. She wasn't looking at me. She smiled across the table at the man and the man smiled back at her. If I had known the woman, I bet it would've been pleasant to have remembered her in a dress, walking white down the big city streets.

I've already called the sheriff, the bartender said.

One for the road, the woman said.

It must've been a popular expression on that side of the mountains where roads could still take you places.

One for the road then, the bartender said, and obliged the woman.

I couldn't speak for anyone else in the bar, but the woman's gesture made me want to see her in that white dress. It didn't seem like enough to simply thank the woman, but I did it anyway because it was all I had.

It's for your mother, the woman said. Sounds like she needs it.

Sheriff'll be here shortly, the bartender said and set the beer down in front of me.

I drank it slow just the same, was going to make it last right up to the last moment right when the sheriff walked in and ruined the rest of my evening. You didn't have to do that, I told the bartender. All you had to do was ask me to push on, and I would've pushed on.

The bartender shrugged like that was supposed to excuse it all.

I took the first cold swig off the top, and then the sheriff strolled in with his deputy and that was all I had of that beer, just the little bit off the top. The sheriff walked up to me with his hands on his belt and his keys jingling against the side of his leg like he was wearing spurs.

You're going to have to come with me, he told me.

I nodded. Left my beer on the bar. Nobody said anything as the deputy escorted me outside. I didn't say anything either. I did as I was told and got into the back of the patrol car and didn't say anything to the sheriff or the deputy when they climbed into the front seats.

They drove me out just beyond the city limits where the hills were sloping and beginning to roll into foothills. There, the deputy in the passenger side said, You're not our problem anymore.

I got out of the car and stood in the dust on the side of the Interstate. I watched the sheriff's car pull away and turn around, drive back towards town. The sun was setting on the dry landscape. Most of it looked thirsty, and some of it looked already dead. I knew it would be different once I got over the mountains, that things would change, for the better, once I got over them to the other side.

PART FIVE

*With a long slender finger she beckons me and I follow her:
to Fuji, to flotsam, to Finland, to forlorn. To forlorn and back.*

GALILEO, OUT FROM UNDER A COPERNICAN SHADOW

It took a woman to show him the proof, the many faces of her, winking sometimes, scowling others, at him in the night. He watched her out his window and noted where she was, how brightly her one eye glowed at him. He knew the secret to the mystery lay embedded in the movements of her dance: around him and the rest of the world. All answers underscored in the degree of her turn, the spin on her feet, in circles around him.

One night it was a white dress. Another night it was red.

He watched her intently as if to possess her, tame the path of her waltz in order to let him lead. He'd always wanted to lead. His whole life, wishful and wanting. He recorded in his journal that, tonight, she seemed indifferent; aware of his existence but apathetic to its significance. Apparently, that night, she performed only half turns, one hundred and eighty degrees in a long platinum skirt.

He'd never tell his mother what he did at nights. Could never explain to his wife why he couldn't sleep. She pretended not to notice it when he slipped out of bed, softly closed the door behind him. He could never tell his friends either what he watched at night. The contents of his recordation. When they asked him what he was working on, he only replied, This and that. Tit and tat. They were men of tinkering, too, and could always tell when he was lying.

There were moons then, six he could see and see that they moved in an ordered ellipsis. It was a version of what he always suspected, a miniature version albeit a working moving model. The circles weren't perfect at all, elongated as though they were sat upon; wobbled as though they were intoxicated. It was imperfect, but he'd never expected elegance. He knew when he found it, it was going to look more caterpillar than

butterfly. He wondered if he should name them, to tell them apart, but instead assigned them variables. Elegance, in order to be beautiful, had to have utility.

There were clocks in his dreams, when he did sleep. Oversized clocks with large, immense pendulums, swinging back and forth with such a force as to render the day into night and the night back into day. During the day he stared at it for to see the secrets in its swing. Gazed at it while at the dinner table, his Bolognese cooling, cooling, cold. While conversation floated around him, he watched it swinging and noted the apex points of each turn, back and forth. Though he couldn't put his finger on it, he knew a mystery was opening up before him, exposing the intricacies of its inner workings. We all have such inner workings, he thought. He paid no attention to the time, the dinner table, the bowl of Bolognese.

It was in the revolution of bodies, had always been in the revolution of bodies: how they moved around each other on the street, the dance floor, the market square. How his wife rolled over in bed as soon as he slipped out, reaching for him. The lights in the night sky, those pinpoints, too, moved around each other. The phases of her face up there watching him watching her, knowing then why it was and why it must be. While the rest of the world dreamed, he saw in the sky a different dance. He noted his observations in his journal, though he realized the consequences. Had heard the rumors of those coming for him. Heard them coming for him, down the sidewalk with lighted torches. He watched them from the window proceed to the door and commence pounding upon its face. The pounding awoke everyone. He heard his wife call out for him, call his name in desperation. I don't want to know the truth, he shouted. He opened the window and shouted again, like a man in love, in love and out of reason, I don't want to know. Do you hear me? he shouted. I don't want it in my dreams.

The men down below gained access inside. His only response was the waning echo of his assertion, fading in the early morning hue. He stared out at it, and, according to the notes in his journal, he swore he saw her smirk.

FALL BACK AND I'LL CATCH YOU

It had been months since she'd touched him in any affectionate manner. He'd been counting the weeks, using the calendar, crossing them off when another one went by without a kiss on his cheek, a hand on his back, a pinch on his bottom. The first month he thought it was just a dry spell, nothing uncommon. Something all couples go through at one time or another when the passion fizzles slightly. She didn't mention anything about it and he decided he wouldn't either. A dry spell, he told himself. They happen all the time. Frequent as full moons.

Go ahead, she said. There was a trace of impatience in her bidding, as though he should already know the protocol when a birthday cake is placed in front of him with its candles ablaze. His wish was for as much attention as she paid the cake, to sift him like she did the flour, to measure him as she did the sugar, to beat him as she did the eggs; to stop treating him like a memory.

He had to admit that after the second month, he was beginning to feel dejected. She hadn't made a move towards him in eight weeks; he had them crossed out on the calendar to prove it. They'd gone about their business of staying together and running a household, paying the bills and vacuuming the dust, changing the sheets and watering the lawn, but each night she was asleep before him, in the morning awake before him. For two months straight he listened to her in other rooms. Always she was in other rooms.

After the third month, he said something. On one of the rare occasions they sat down to dine together. Game hens with a rosemary rub, rotisseries over an open flame in the middle of the kitchen. He mashed the potatoes, opened the can of cranberry sauce. He mumbled something about the open flame retarding the linoleum. She asked

him to repeat what he said. He stared at her. In one hand he held the plates. In the other the mashed potatoes. It's been three months since you touched me amorously, he told her. He extended the plates and the mashed potatoes. I supplicate myself, he thought. I throw myself at, immerse myself in supplication, I am supplicated, I will supplicate. Consider me supplicated, he thought. I'm on my knees for you, plates and potatoes in hand.

She stared at him blankly, as though he'd spoken a foreign language. Had clicked out a plea that expressed to her how he was at the razor's edge, that he wouldn't be able to last much longer unless she did something - kiss him on the lips, let him kiss her back, hold his hand. It's been a busy month for me, she said. She turned the game hens. Basted them.

I know, he said.

For both of us, she said.

It felt like their personal space had manifested actual walls between them and they moved around each other as though encased entirely in bubbles. Three months, he said again.

She glanced up from her spit. What do you want me to say? she said.

He wasn't sure. Tell me it was unintentional, he thought.

I told you we've both been busy, she said. If that's what you mean.

Maybe she hadn't heard him right. Three months, he said again. He emphasized it by gesticulating first with the plates, then with the potatoes. I cannot supplicate myself anymore without turning into carpet, he thought.

What are you saying? she said.

He dropped the plates and the potatoes. The plates broke and the potatoes covered the broken pieces.

Why did you do that? she said.

Three months, he said. He left the room and went upstairs to draw a bath. She ate the game hens by herself.

He woke up in the middle of the night for want of a glass of water. He noticed how far on the other side of the bed she lay, as far as she could without falling off. A different zip code, practically. He knew he wouldn't wake her.

Downstairs on the counter was a plate with her pile of bones. Small Cornish game hen bones, picked and polished clean. He lifted one of the leg bones to his lips and kissed the side of it, tasted the sweet marrow of it, the trace bit of her scent and spit left over on it. He envisioned her at the table working the bone over with her teeth, tongue, lips. I'm that bone, he thought, every inch of me probed, pulled, consumed. He kissed one of the wing bones, finally pressed his face into the pile of them, hoping to taste her, if even merely a little bit of her residue.

In the morning, he woke up shivering on the cold tile. The bones scattered all around him like a voodoo ceremony gone awry. He cleaned them up before she woke and came down to find him like that, on the floor with her leftovers, sans dignity.

* * *

At the four-month benchmark, he started entertaining the idea that there may be somebody else in her life, someone on the side. He searched around the house for clues: matchbooks from motels, new see-through underwear, strange transactions on her credit card bill. He tailed her one night, but she only went to where she'd told him she was going - the twenty-four hour fitness center for the two a.m. kickboxing class.

Dinner: She prepared rabbit stew, with rabbits she trapped in the backyard. Three of them. She laid them out on top of the granite counter, spread their legs apart to gut them. The incision should only be as large as your hand, she said. She said whenever game tasted gamey, it was usually because whoever dressed it let it bleed too much. She shoved her hand, wedding ring and all, inside the rabbit's sliced belly, up into

the cavity, and extracted the small stomach and intestines. She dropped them into the garbage can where they hit the bottom with a sucking splat.

Predominant blood loss occurs when you're cutting out the heart, she said. Her voice was collected and her hands steady. He felt weak and wobbled slightly. The movements of her hand inside the rabbit showed in the protrusion of its fur and skin. She smiled when she located the tiny heart, no bigger than an almond. She pulled it out through the slit, held it up in the light. Just like that, she said, and turned the discolored organ around in her hand. She tossed it into the garbage can. Small blood puddles pooled like mercury on the granite countertop.

How do you feel about skinning them? she asked him. The front of her apron was smeared with rabbit blood. A streak of it across her cheek, drawn there when she tried to brush away a stray bang out of her eyes. He'd have to hang the bodies from a tree limb in the backyard, convince fur away from flesh with only a paring knife. Start on this one, she said, handing him the limp corpse by the hind legs.

He carried the carcass out to the backyard where the twine was waiting for him under the oak tree. He strung up the carcass by its hind quarters, scored the skin around the back feet, worked the paring knife under the fur, on top of the flesh. She came outside with her own carcass, gutted and cleaned, and her own paring knife. She showed him how it was done. Like husking corn, she told him, and peeled the skin back away from the body. She worked fast, had the body stripped in a matter of seconds, the fur balled up near the rabbit's head.

It will end for me like this, he thought. Hung from the oak tree, gutted and dehearted. He pictured her with her paring knife and bloody apron, waving to the neighbors as she scored the skin away from his pelvis, long enough for him to feel the long linger of her careful caresses, the gentle sting of paring knife sticks, pricks, pulls. He could see it in the procession of her knife strokes, swift and economic, could see she was capable of it, even if it meant her fingers around his throat, up inside his stomach,

poking through his ribcage. He stood back while she finished skinning the rabbits, projecting his body into the rabbit's empty carcass, imagining her hands moving down the length of his body, under his skin. There were no limits to the dark depths of wishing and wanting.

She forgot he was there, standing off to one side, and he forgot how it felt, the moistness of her warm touch. Her hand on top of his. Fleeting. Across the side of his face. He gladly would've had her plunge her paring knife into his gut if it meant that her hand would be buried briefly in him.

* * *

He dreaded having to go home and face her. He rang the doorbell on his own house. Laura answered it. She wore an apron. Hog's blood down the front of it. From the Do-It-Yourself Butcher Kit she bought in Chinatown. Intended on making her own fatback. Why are you ringing the doorbell? she asked him.

Where do you go on Tuesdays and Thursdays between ten and three? he asked.

Did you forget your key? she said.

Are you seeing another man? he said.

She wiped her hands down the front of the apron. Stood in the middle of the entryway. What are you trying to tell me? she said.

Another woman, perhaps? he said.

Are you coming in or aren't you? she said.

Do you think I'm too weak in the stomach? he said.

She stepped to the side of the entryway. My fatback's almost ready, she said. There'll be chops for dinner.

He went into the house. Took off his coat, hung it in the foyer closet.

We'll need some pommes des terres, she said.

You haven't touched me in four months, he said. Followed her into the kitchen. The hog was dragging itself across the kitchen floor. Headed for the door.

You hold him down, she said, and I'll do the honors. She grabbed the cleaver. Freshly sharpened. He held down the errant hog, pinned it to the floor with his knee. There was once a time when cleave meant to bring together, she said. In synthesis, perhaps. She hacked the hog in half, then quartered the two halves. It seemed to him she was taking a little too much pleasure in the blood and the cleaver. I hope you came home hungry, she said. There's no more room in the freezer, and this hog won't keep through the night.

He considered his appetite: capacious, ravenous, starved. What would she say if he forced himself on her, ripped off her clothes and had her in the middle of the blood and hog halves?

I could eat a horse, he told her.

Well, we're having pig, she said.

He would get stuck mashing the pommes des terres. Pickling the asparagus. He made himself a cup of herbal tea.

She listened to Wagner. Brooding Wagner. Hot hog blood.

* * *

Five months: At three o'clock, he parked across the street from the high school. Watched the cheerleaders practice. Short skirts. Bra tops. Leg kicks. Human pyramids. He watched the girls sweat, let his hand drift south. This is what five months have done to you, he thought. This is what five months has done. A trench-coat pervert.

Laura was gone all day on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Left the house at nine. Didn't return until six. It was his job to make sure the cows were fed. Milked. She bought two of them. Penned them up in the backyard. They had eaten the entire lawn

within a week. She wanted to breed them, but there were zoning restrictions and the neighbors threatened with litigation. In the kitchen, on the easel, there was a schematic diagram: The Proper Way to Quarter a Cow. She had turned their kitchen into a slaughterhouse.

When she returned home that Tuesday night, he had already laid down the newspapers. Hope you're feeling strong today, she said. He was. Had joined a gym. Lost fifteen pounds. She didn't notice, though, and he wondered if it even mattered that his belts were down to their last hole and all of his pants were puckering in the waist. He nodded.

According to the schematic and the hotline, she said, the initial incision is the most difficult, the loudest, and produces more blood than the subsequent cuts. He already knew he'd be stuck running the cow down, tying it up. Hog-tying a doomed heifer. His job was to hold her down. Keep her still. Steady. Laura hated it when they whined, groaned, squealed.

Try to keep her quiet this time, she said. I'm this close to a splitting headache. She held up two fingers, spaced two inches apart.

He only performed these duties for her because there was always the chance that she might touch him, that they might come into contact. That she might grab onto his arm to illustrate a better way to pin the heifer's throat down with a forearm instead of an opened palm. Might pat him on the back for encouragement. High-five him when the heifer was done and stacked in perfect quarters. A job well done. Might, while on their knees, knee-deep in the gore, look at him with his hair mussed up and blood streaks across his forehead and remember why she had ever touched him in the first place, would touch him then, a hot hand on the side of his cool cheek, a hand hot with heifer blood, and might, possibly, lean over and kiss him on the lips. There was always the hope that the blood from the slaughter would inspire her to take off her clothes and offer herself to him. Hope is the thing with feathers, he thought, that springs eternal, though

the evoked image resembled something she might slaughter. Maybe already had. The Proper Way to Dice a Dozen Dreams.

He fetched the lasso. Stepped out onto the back patio. The two cows were in the far corner of the lot. In the shade of the hazelnut tree. They'd really done a number on the lawn. What with their hooves and their grazing. The bull had a bell around its neck. She'd named him Brutus. His horns were not impressive. Not like others he'd seen before. Maybe she had shaved them down; they did that to bulls sometimes, especially those destined for the ring. Shaved down his lances and rendered him impotent. The heifer was named Subject. She was not much longer for the range.

Brutus looked up at him, watched him as he approached slowly, slowly getting the lasso going. Long lazy circles at first, tightening it up the closer he crept.

Brutus bellowed.

Easy there big fella, he said. I've just come for the girl. He walked up to within three yards of the heifer. Subject didn't budge. He raised the lasso above his head, spinning it fast and fierce. Subject watched him with her usual bovine indifference. As though anything he had to offer would not greatly impact her day.

Lady, he thought, this is the day to wish you'd done something important with your morning. He stepped closer. Brutus bellowed again.

Laura watched him from the patio. Dig in your heels if she bolts on you, she said.

He stepped closer, timed his throw, snapped his wrist, let her fly. The loop wrapped around Subject's head. She kept chewing. He cinched the knot tight around her neck. She stepped nervously in place. That's right, old girl, he told her. March it right into the kitchen. He'd tie her legs off once inside and on the floor. He tugged on the rope and she followed him. Laura held the door open. Brutus bellowed again, and his bell clanged as he pursued them to the patio. Not you, big fella, he told Brutus.

Brutus bellowed at Subject, but Subject didn't respond.

Laura turned on the garden hose and sprayed it at him, chased him back into the corner for fear he might have a moment and think he was brave, try saving his girl by charging them. A shaved horn won't pierce skin, necessarily, but will leave quite a nasty bruise. Sting at first, then ache for weeks. Both he and Laura knew that Brutus, if he had a mind to, could lay them out and break their ribs and hurry inside, lock them out, change the phone number, stop the mail, start paying the Association's dues. He had the potential, but Laura embarrassed it right out of him. Sprayed him in the face with the fast stream, scared him and humiliated him back into the corner of the yard, in the shade of the hazelnut tree.

He led Subject into the kitchen. Laura prepared the syringe. Subject took it in the backside without complaint. He admired her courage. Her dignity. The strength in her eyes, even when Laura pulled out the pole ax. We're each going to have to take an end, she said.

He nodded. Gravely. It was a kind of surgery now.

You take that end and I'll take this end, she said.

Eventually, Subject closed her eyes. Fell asleep.

* * *

Six months: half-life of a certificate of deposit. At a measly three and a half percent. He stopped bathing. Refused to sleep in the same bed with her. Curled up in a corner of the kitchen like a cat. There were cobwebs in his crotch. Actual spiders, spinning actual webs. He remembered a time when he wanted things. In the past.

She was singing in another part of the house. Her singing was inescapable. Echoed and resonated in the woodwork, trapped in the grain; he even heard traces of it at night when the house settled in the wind. Half of the calendar was blacked out, a

heavy line through each week: totted up twenty-four. He considered blacking out the rest of it, surrender to its inevitability.

Laura was gone all day on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Left the house at midnight on Mondays and Wednesdays, didn't return until morning on Wednesdays and Fridays. Sometimes for entire weekends.

He waited for her in the shadows of the foyer. Waited for her to get all the way inside. He leaped out, tackled her to the floor. Bound her hands behind her back before she had the chance to retaliate. Dragged her into the living room. Hefted her up and into the leather chair. Straddled the ottoman. I would've sacrificed myself for your slaughter, he said, but you never asked me.

I appreciate your using nylon instead of chains, she said. You know how my skin breaks out when metal rubs against it.

Would've laid there voluntarily without anyone having to hold me down, he said. If only you had asked.

Is this about the steaks? she said. You know I can't tolerate looking at ground meat.

He thought, As long as she says it was unintentional, all can be forgiven. Forgotten. Bygones. As long as she says it. Say it, he said.

It looks already chewed up, she said.

Tell me you didn't mean to and I'll believe you, he said.

If you want ground beef, then you can grind it yourself, she said. You're perfectly capable of operating the grinder without my help.

He didn't appreciate her insolence. I refuse to believe that six months was unintentional, he said. Two months, I can see. Three, maybe. Six is malicious.

You'll want to chop the slabs into smaller cubes first, she said. So you don't jam up the blades.

Purposefully malicious, he said.

If the blades jam up, then the crank won't turn, she said.

You haven't even noticed my absence from our bed, he said.

Of course, if it doesn't crank, she said, then you already know it's jammed.

He kissed her on the mouth and she didn't resist him. Her lips tasted tart, like cherries off the tree. He thought he would explode. Felt himself pushing out - pushing against his external restrictions.

You can untie me, she said. I promise I won't run.

He didn't untie her. He believed she wouldn't run, but she was too deft with a knife to be trusted. He knew he could never turn his back to her again. It would be like this for the rest of forever, he thought: her hands bound so he could see them, facing him so he knew her intentions. So he would know when she was sleeping and when she was only pretending to sleep.

CONTRARIETY AND CONSILIENCE

Across the country, one on each coast, over the telephone I plead for her to have faith in Newton and all he prophesied about particles. It'll bring us closer, I offer.

She's made it perfectly clear she has no intentions of ever relocating to the West Coast. They have no culture, she once proclaimed, after too many glasses of Sherry in downtown San Francisco. Those people think they invented the counter culture, she continued, her voice rising above the hum of rush hour traffic, when all they can lay claim to is suburban sprawl. She spit on the vehicles traveling in the carpool lane. Move to the city! she screamed at them. The officer would've arrested her if I hadn't told him she was from out of town. The other side of the country.

Something about a particle's mass, I offer.

It's the time zones more than anything, she says. These three hours, when you're just getting home and I'm getting ready for bed.

I tried the weekly continental flight, but discovered I have a weak stomach. In the meantime, she made partner, started making her bed, and made plans to buy her own house. You're leaving me behind, I accused one night, once again over the telephone; this time it was me with one too many Sherries. You're leaving me far behind, more than these measly three hours, I said. Decades now. Decades will exist between us as you repair leaky roofs and replace antiquated boilers.

On the West Coast, I offer, everything is electric.

Your concerns are legitimate, she says, and that's when I know she's already kissed another man, has already gone out dancing with him and already let him touch her under her sweater because we live on different coasts and she knew I'd never find out. It means a corner office, she tells me, and a thirty percent pay increase.

I've never been impressed by percentages, I say.

I know she's already kissed a guy named Chad, a patent attorney named Chad with a ritzy two bedroom apartment and an impressive investment portfolio. I already know he has all of his own teeth and all of them are white. Purely white. As are his neckties. His bathroom tile. His omelets.

All of our answers are in particles, I tell her.

That doesn't mean anything to me, she says.

It has something to do with our mass. The distance between us. According to those who know more than I do, the universe is cambered like a sink drain. Yes, I know it has something to do with our mass and the distance between us and the way the universe resembles a sink drain, I say.

Everything has to do with the distance between us, she says. These damn three hours. I can hear the confession in her voice, his name underlying the tension contained in her inflection. Chad. White Chad. I feel it rising up out of her inversely proportional to how the kiss originally went down her: on a street corner waiting for the light to change, he grabbed her shoulders and they knew exactly what to do with their tongues, naturally, without the initial hesitation of kissing someone for the first time.

It's supposed to tell us how to move, I say. It's supposed to steer us toward each other. Yes, I think, that's how it works. Despite the distance and the time between us, I tell her, the force is what draws us together.

Being within walking distance is what draws people together, she says. You want to believe in this fairytale of mere gravity saving us. A fairytale.

Even if I proved it to her that it's cambered like a kitchen sink so that eventually we'll meet in the middle, she wouldn't believe me because she can't see it happen. Because it happens so slowly, she'd say. The kiss happened and she's getting ready to say a final goodbye, preparing to hang up with me for a final time. I wonder how different the world would look if Newton, long ago, had fallen in love and had his heart

broken. All movement is but a memory of what has already transpired, and, consequently, a record of what is already done and can't be changed.

LINGUA FRANCA

She says one thing. I say quite another. She says: "I know it's scientific law that the sun sets earlier each day until the winter solstice, at which time it will set later and later each day. I know that, as scientific law, it's indisputable. But I must say, it depresses the hell out of me when it's already dark at five."

I say: "I think we should subscribe to the National Review."

She says: "Each day, a little earlier. I can't help it, but I suspect it's the reason for my circumlocution."

"The Johnstons subscribe to it," I say, "and I want to be prepared the next time Bob challenges my views on taxes and prayer in schools and illegal immigrants and homosexuality."

"They say it's common for women to experience ailments this time of year," she says.

"I especially want to be prepared for when he broaches the topic of homosexual illegal immigrants," I say. "It's an especially juicy topic."

"Depression, anxiety, malaria, influenza, hot flashes, irregular menstruation, Broca's aphasia, amnesia, insomnia, instantaneous bulimia, mild agoraphobia, infrequent masturbation, fainting spells, black outs, hives, cold sores, hang nails, vertigo, terror, and general malaise are all examples," she says.

"Please pass the salt," I say.

"Please pass the pepper," she says.

"You know what this red sauce needs?" I say.

"I know what this red sauce needs," she says.

"More thyme," I say.

"More oregano," she says.

"There is still the matter of the wine," I say.

"And the weather," she says.

After dinner, she says, "That was just enough to satisfy."

"I'm still hungry," I say.

She smokes a cigarette. I smoke a pipe. She has a glass of Sherry. I have a Pink Gin.

She says: "My daydreams don't keep me interested anymore."

I say: "The Johnstons are concerned their child is too smart for its own good. They're convinced the child will experience developmental difficulties because of its inflated IQ."

"It's hard when one's fantasies become mundane," she says.

"Apparently, the child can already say things like ball and mommy and daddy," I say, "but they have no specific referents yet."

"I often think what the world would be like without parachutes," she says.

"What difference does it make if the child can formulate the words?" I say.

"Meaning is entirely dependent on reference."

"Why just today," she says, "I was wondering what would've happened had I carried to term."

"Bob says they've already enrolled the child in school," I say. "Not preschool, per se, but some type of pre-preschool. He says it's designed to enhance the child's development of language and motor skills. They're going to try dissuading it from eating pennies."

"I thought maybe the afternoons wouldn't be so quiet," she says.

"They have high hopes for that child," I say.

"We all have high hopes," she says.

"It would have been nice to watch him play baseball," I say.

"Take her to get her first brassiere," she says.

"Or show him how to handle himself when engaged in fisticuffs," I say.

"Her first kiss," she says. "The boyfriends, the dates, the dances."

"I've spent my life avoiding mirrors," I say.

"I wonder why they only install airbags in automobiles," she says.

"Even my reflection in shop windows," I say.

"I often think that it's a very good thing that we can always purchase more Sherry," she says.

"Bob says it isn't at all how they imagined," I say, "but I guess it never is."

At night: We know our creole is just around the corner, waiting until we turn out all the lights.

THREE LOLAS

1.

LOLA FROM LONDON:

Pushed back her long blonde hair out of her eyes to check her leggings for runs as it seemed she didn't have time to do it at home. She didn't fit quite right in the subway seat as the rest of us did. Six-three, and she wasn't wearing heels, proportioned in two parts: legs and neck. She ran her hands down the length of one leg, then back up under her skirt. She checked the other leg, too, and then noticed me staring, sitting across from her, thankfully hidden inside a topcoat.

"Sometimes they start up top, and work their way down," she said, "and I don't see them until I get to work and then it's too late and I got to live with it for the rest of the day."

I nodded, still staring at her legs stretched from her hips all the way to the floor like two totem poles, two toned totem poles carved in glorious flesh. Fabulous fleshy totem poles, ideal and idyllic.

"I should keep an extra pair in my purse," she said. "That way I could change them anytime I got one and could change them anywhere."

Secretly, I prayed for a run, prayed for a hundred runs, little tributaries pulling apart her panty hose. She lifted the sides of her skirt to make sure no subversive runs had begun to crawl down her legs.

"These things are such an inconvenience," she said. "I don't know why I don't just wear pants instead and not even bother with them. But I think I look better in skirts. Don't you?"

I nodded.

"Do I know you?" she said.

"I don't think so," I said.

"You look like Charlie. I'm Lola."

"Lola," I said.

"You work downtown?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Do you know where Vaughn's is?"

I nodded again.

"Want to meet me there at six and buy me a martini?"

I nodded.

"All right, Charlie, I'll see you then."

All day I couldn't wait for six o'clock to come.

LOLA IN SOCIAL SITUATIONS:

Said, "Straight up with a twist and if I get it with olives, I swear to god I'll stab you in the forehead with my high heel."

The bartender smiled, but didn't say anything about it.

Said to me, "I can't stand olives, Charlie."

"I know what you mean," I said.

We stood at the bar and waited, her towering over me like an Amazon goddess. I stared up at her as though looking into the sun at its apex. She had head and shoulders over everyone in the room, and I noticed us together in the mirror behind the

bar. The mirror was not tall enough to reflect all of her. It was me and a torso. We made a wonderful couple.

"I swear to god, Charlie," she said, "I couldn't make it through the day if I didn't know there was gin waiting for me at 5:30." She tapped her hands on top of the bar, and everyone sitting near us stared. We must've resembled a carnival act, her ten inches taller than me. I tried to put my arm around her waist, and had to reach up to do it.

"You're sweet, Charlie," she said, "and we must be a sight together. Don't you think?"

"I don't mind them staring," I said.

She laughed. "Neither do I, Charlie."

The bartender served us our drinks, and we took them over to a table and sat down. Lola crossed her long lovely legs, and sipped at her martini. Her panty hose were gone and there was just her flesh, her thin thigh, bare, half covered by her skirt that kept threatening to crawl up her hips.

"At five o'clock," she said, "they come off no matter what. They're so uncomfortable that I can't wait to get out of them." She sipped at her drink and half of it was already gone. I wondered if she had to drink faster because the alcohol had to travel greater distances up and down her frame. It must've been quite an arduous journey down the length of her limbs to the tips of her toes, drowning in the bottoms of her shoes. She did look more comfortable with the panty hose off. More relaxed, and her legs could probably breathe better. Easier. Slipped into and slipping out of her short skirt. I tried not to stare, but it was so hard when they were so long and so lovely.

"And what about you, Charlie?" she said, leaning into the table closer to me. "I liked you from the get-go. You're sweet and unassuming. I swear to god, Charlie, men see these legs and they melt into puddles of spineless amoebae. But you, Charlie-" she reached across the table and put her hand on top of mine-"you didn't do that. You looked me in the eye and listened, and I swear to you and god, Charlie, I can't remember

the last time a man listened to me without verbally wishing for a breeze to blow up my skirt."

I nodded.

"See what I mean? You're a sport, Charlie, a real sport. What do you say we get two more of these?"

I hadn't touched mine yet, but nodded anyway. The night begged for affirmation.

LOLA IN THE MORNING:

Couldn't find her underwear anywhere. She stood up in the middle of the room, on top of her two naked legs, hands on naked hips, looking in the corners and under the table for her pair of underwear, which she knew must be around there somewhere. Her long back was to me, dotted with little precious birth marks, and she scratched the side of her thigh. Right hand: right thigh. Her backside was white and round, the cheeks like two perfectly shaped goose eggs.

"I know they're around here somewhere," she said. She scratched at her shoulder. Left hand: right shoulder. Long, tall Lola, naked in the morning, standing in the middle of the bedroom, her long blonde hair frizzed along the edges, reaching down toward her shoulder blades, smelling sweet of sleep.

"Where did you hide them, Charlie?" she said.

I looked inside the blankets, and her panties were balled up down under there like a little handkerchief. I pulled them out and handed them to her.

"You're a lifesaver, Charlie," she said. "A girl can catch her death of cold if she goes too many days without any underwear. What time is it?" She slipped on her underwear and gathered up her other clothes.

"It's seven," I said.

"Good," she said. "I can still get home to get cleaned up."

"You can take a shower here," I offered.

"You're sweet, Charlie," she said. "You're really sweet." She finished dressing, and grabbed her purse. In clothing she looked disheveled, uncomfortable, and out of place.

"Come back to bed," I said.

She smiled at me, leaned down, and kissed me goodbye. "Maybe tonight, Charlie," she said. "I'll find you."

She left and a quiet settled in throughout my apartment. A disturbing calm, enough to wish for noise, any noise, traffic outside, telephone next door, coffee pot in the kitchen, anything to make it seem not so lonely.

LOLA THAT NIGHT:

In a different skirt, with her hair brushed and her clothes on, seated at a table surrounded by empty cocktail glasses and eager male suitors, laughing, smoking, checking her watch, ordering another, her long legs, long neck, long hair, long arms, long fingers, long laugh, long wait, long sips, long sighs, long stare at me when she noticed me walk, long trail following my path to her table, long smile, long kiss.

"Hey there, Charlie," she said. "I thought you'd never show up."

All of the eager male suitors stopped to stare at us.

"Boys," she said, "this is Charlie, my date." She stood up next to me. I put my arm around her waist and she spun me around. I hung on to her tight and she spun me around in wonderful dizzying circles.

"Goodnight, Gentlemen," she said, and walked towards the door. I clung on to her waist and tried to match her steps: my three to each one of hers.

"I hope you don't mind, Charlie," she said, stopping for me to open the door.

"But I just couldn't stand it another second in there." She escorted us out of the bar and into a cab back uptown to my place.

"I missed you, Charlie," she said in the cab. She kissed my forehead. "I could smell you on me all day."

I closed my eyes, and she kissed my forehead again. The cab was speeding and she kissed me on the lips, frantic and furious, tongues and teeth, and with my eyes closed it felt like a merry-go-round. I hated merry-go-rounds, but this one I never wanted to end.

LOLA, WITH ONE EYE SQUINTED SHUT:

Said, "I like you fine enough, Charlie, you're sweet as all get out, but you know this can't last." She shaped her hand in the form of a pistol, aimed it at my head and said, "Bang, Charlie. I got you." She rolled over, her back to me, not so long not so tall when reclined. I reached out and ran my fingertips along the line of her spine. Little bumps rose up all over the surface of her skin. She didn't move to cover up, and I didn't offer her the blankets. I ran my fingers back up her spine, splaying them at and across her shoulder blades like fireworks at the peak of explosion. The curve of her sloped such that it seemed the topography of a desert dune in New Mexico, descending down her waist, the careful climb up her hips and on top of her soft bottom.

"I'm sorry, Charlie," she said, sad and muffled. "You're sweet as hell, and I hate it. I just hate it. But I can't help it."

"Stay the night," I said.

"OK," she said. "I'll stay the night. For you, Charlie."

She moved closer to me, and I put my arms around her, pressed closer into her. At some point we closed our eyes, and eventually fell asleep like that, disproportionate, me hugging on to her like a hunchback. With Lola, long tall Lola, I was Quasimodo.

LOLA, THE NEXT MORNING:

Didn't say goodbye.

When I woke up, she was gone. Her clothes were gone, too, as was every trace of evidence that she had ever been there, even her smell and the echoes of her laugh. I never saw her again though I looked for her often, her head poking up above everyone else's, a beauty too big for this city.

2.

LOLA, WITH SHORT SPIKED HAIR, BLACK LIKE PORCUPINE QUILLS:

Called me a suit and rubbed mustard on the front of my white dress shirt. She seemed upset because I was staring at her legs, long legs in fishnet stockings, connected to a garter just above her knee. Her skirt was short and red and covered in glitter. She wore a tight tank top that displayed all of the intricate tattoos wrapped up and down her arms. Her bracelets had spikes that stuck out in a menacing fashion. She had a choke chain around her neck and a miniature barbell through her lower lip she wore to scare strangers out of asking her for the time. She was six-one in bare feet, and six-six in stilettos, sharpened at the points like daggers. She stood in front of me, a tall mean punk anachronistic in her present circumstances. The other suits in the restaurant stared at us, figuring her for a hooker. Or a pusher. Or a puller.

"You won't victimize me," she said. "I'll kick your ass." She poked me in the chest.

"Please accept my profuse apologies," I said. "I never meant in any way to objectify you."

She waited. Then glanced around at all of the other patrons, staring at us, and waiting. She realized she was the center of attention, but, I figured, because she was as tall as a flag pole, she must've been used to that. The outside of her was electric, flaring up and out in bursts of voltage out the tops of the tips of her spikes like a tall, hypnotic Jacob's Ladder. I was fully prepared for her to shock me and leave me quivering on the

floor afraid of swallowing my own tongue. I stood my ground, waiting to be used as a conductor. She crossed her arms at me, and glanced down at the front of my shirt: white and bright yellow. She had smeared the mustard on there pretty good. A lump of expressionist glob, glistening yellow, beginning to dry. She stared at me in my ruined dress shirt. There is no better revenge than supplication. She uncrossed her arms, and her breasts were small and tight on her chest in her tank top. I tried to distinguish the tattoos individually, but there were too many. They looked like a large collage of hearts and arrows and butterflies and barbells and barcodes and clovers and cartoons. Their color was diffused against her dark skin, and there were tiny brown hairs all along her forearms. She looked willing and ready to take care of herself.

"Listen," she said, "sorry about the shirt."

I nodded.

"I'm Lola," she said.

"Of course," I said.

"Let me make it up to you."

I nodded.

"Come with me."

"Right now?"

"Yeah."

I nodded again. She pulled on my coat and led me out of the restaurant. It was the middle of the day, and I followed long, spiky Lola outside and downtown, my shirt covered with dried, encrusted mustard.

LOLA IN THE MIDDLE OF THE DAY:

Took me to a bar called The Sty. I ordered a shot of bourbon and she got a Rusty Nail. We were the only ones in the place, and we sat at the bar. The bartender didn't say anything to us, and served us in silence. There was no music and no other noises but

the traffic outside. Lola slammed her Rusty Nail and the bartender served her another without any verbal communication exchanged between them. She slammed the second, and the bartender served her a beer. I could tell she'd been there before.

"Here," she said, unbuttoned my shirt, and took it off. She tossed it on the floor, and I sat there, half naked in a bar in the middle of the day. I sipped at my bourbon, and she smiled at the pallid color of my skin, pale as cream. "That's better," she said. She reached out and scraped her fingernails down the front of my chest, leaving a long red streak down the front of me. The streak stung and felt as though it were bleeding. She stepped back and waited for my reaction. It was cold in the bar. My nipples got hard and pointed. She smiled.

"Mine do that, too," she said. She pulled off her tank top, and her little nipples poked out, too, two hard rosy eyeballs. The bartender didn't say anything, and neither did I. She was naked from the waist up and completely covered in tattoos. A crucified Christ on her side. A raven spreading its wings on her belly. Various daggers and Chinese characters splattered all over her torso. A snake circled around her left breast, her hard nipple in the middle of its distended jaws. Scars all along her ribs, inked red made to look like annealed scabs. It was hard to find her body hidden in the illustrations, and what were immediately noticeable were her breasts, small and pale and compact. She tossed her tank top on the floor, and kicked off her high heels. She shrunk five inches, half naked in the half dimmed bar in the middle of the day. She made her way over to the jukebox and made a selection. I sipped my drink, and stared at the puzzle standing at the jukebox, her red skirt and fishnet stockings, a winged dragon soaring across her back, a crumbling chunk of continent in its claws, its large fanged mouth expending flames up her shoulder blades. She picked a Hank Williams song, and stood in the middle of the room, watching me and waiting. I finished my drink. No, Hank, I thought, I've never seen a night quite like that.

"Take off your shoes," she said.

I stood up, and kicked off my shoes.

"Come here," she said, and I strode towards her, her arms reached out and her body trembling slightly in the draft and the dank. I reached out to her and she pulled me into her, my face in her breasts, standing on top of her feet. We danced slowly in circles. She pressed me into her, my mouth on the snake's, as though it were waiting to swallow me whole. Her cold skin smelled stale with sweat and the faint remnants of patchouli. I wondered if I was hurting her feet, if my weight was too much on top of her, but she danced lightly and spun without burden, bare chested and pressed together, leaving one set of footprints in the dirt on the floor. She rested her chin on top of my head, and hummed low like an idling car. Hank sung to us and only us because only we understood, finally, exactly what he meant. Loneliness, while momentarily forgotten, is never absolutely abnegated. In her arms, I could feel the isolation in her quiver. The blue in her breast. The sad in her step.

LOLA UPSTAIRS

Handcuffed me to the bed. She straddled me, scraped her fingernails up and down my chest, and wept the entire time I was inside her.

LOLA AT THE BREAKFAST TABLE:

Sat at the table, staring at me in bed while she ate cereal out of a box. She rested her long legs on the other chair, completely naked except for her tattoos, a second skin that she could never shed. The cereal box rested on her chest, and she chewed with her mouth open, the barbell in her lower lip bobbing up and down like a buoy.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"It's early," she said. She reached down and scratched the side of her leg. "I don't know your name," she said.

I nodded.

"Want some breakfast?"

"No. Thanks."

She ate a handful of the cereal. I sat up and rubbed my face. I was naked and felt sticky. There were scratch marks all over my chest, raised streaks scabbed over already in little drops of dried blood.

"Did you like it?" she said.

I nodded.

"Good," she said. "We're even." She put the cereal box on the table, and stood up. "I've got to get going," she said.

I nodded, and stood up, too. I put on my pants, and my shoes.

"Don't call me," she said. "Or come by. All right?"

I nodded.

She went into the bathroom, and that was that. I left quietly, and made sure the door was closed behind me.

3.

LOLA NEXT DOOR:

Borrows sugar and laundry detergent. Her knock is quiet and her smile shy, hiding behind a thick veneer of modesty and plump lips. She stands six-three in bare feet. I've never seen her in shoes.

"I hate to bother you," she says.

"Come in," I say. "I've known other Lolas in my time."

She comes in and sits down.

"Would you like something to drink?" I offer.

"No, thank you," she says, avoiding eye contact. "I just came by to borrow some detergent."

"What about a glass of iced tea?" I ask.

She smiles. Nods. "If it isn't any trouble."

I fix us each a glass of iced tea, and sit down on the other end of the sofa. She doesn't cross her legs, I notice, but instead presses her thighs together like that and keeps one hand on her lap holding down the hem of her dress. Uncertain and unsure of herself, but still ladylike. Her blonde hair is straight and plain and doesn't reach past the tops of her shoulders. She doesn't have on any makeup or perfume. She doesn't stand out or smell in any way. Except maybe like summer, sweet like cut grass. Natural smells.

"What were they like?" Lola says.

"Who?" I say.

"The other Lolas."

"They were tall."

"All of them?"

"Both of them."

She stares down at her long legs, bent at the knee in ninety degrees, naked from the mid-thigh down. She seems to want to fold them up and hide them away, change into a smaller pair so she doesn't stick out and up heads above everyone else.

"I can't help it," she says.

"I know," I say.

"I've been this tall since ninth grade. They tried to make me play basketball."

"I would think it's nice to stand tall," I say.

She shrugs. "Sometimes."

I notice she hunches her shoulders, poor posture to compensate, to make herself shorter. It makes me sad in a small way to see her try to shrink herself.

"It intimidates people," she says. "Men, especially."

"Not me," I say.

She glances at me and for the first time there is eye contact between us, an ocular understanding of the connection between us, despite the differences in our stature.

"How tall were the others?" she asks.

"Taller than you."

"Both of them?"

"Yes."

"I'm not an oddity."

"You attract attention."

She blushes again. Looks away. Down at her feet. Unshoed and unpolished.

"Stand up," I say.

"No," she says, and shakes her head.

"Stand up," I say again.

"Please," she says. "I only came by for a little detergent."

I set down my glass. Fold my hands. And wait. Lola glances at me furtively in quick peeks, but looks away.

"Please," she says.

But I don't say anything. I can wait out her modesty. It doesn't take long. She bows her head, stands up, rises into the air like a lighthouse, a tall, lithe beacon of light. She stands, straight up, her arms at her sides, still staring down at her feet, down the long length of her legs. She shifts her weight from one leg to the other.

"Take off your dress," I say.

"What?" she says.

"Slip off your dress."

"Right here?"

"Yes."

She shifts again. Right to left. She looks around, but I know she's not frightened. What's happening between us is nothing criminal, it's just swift and the pace takes her

by surprise. She reaches up to the straps on her dress, but pauses. "The others," she says, "you saw them naked, didn't you."

"Yes."

She nods. Slides the straps off her shoulders and the dress, like a curtain, drops in a puddle at her feet. Her skin glows like butter. Her brassiere is purple and her panties have purple flowers printed all over them. She looks at me, directly at me, and I move for her and this Lola, the one Lola, is finally ready and there is no more hesitation.

LOLA IN THE SHOWER:

Sings songs in Italian, and leaves short hairs in the stall and long hair in the sink. She doesn't blow dry or spray or curl or condition. Her hair is naturally plain, and she stands there in the middle of the room naked, wet with beads of water dripping down her butter soft skin.

"I've been waiting for you," she says. "All my life, I've been waiting for you to come along and take me out of my skin." She stands tall and naked and straight up and straight out and I'm more than willing to get lost and stay lost in her.

After a few weeks, some of her things find their way into my apartment and some of my things find their way into hers. We share sugar and laundry.

LOLA IN BED:

Sleeps on her side, and I trace my fingers down the outline of her body. There is a story on her back and a mirror in which I see my reflection staring at her in awe, utter awe, without any comprehension of how it came to be, knowing only that it is, three Lolas, long and tall, that, like sand, congealed into this marvelous piece of glass with a warm touch and a wet kiss and soft skin and plain hair and a shy smile and a quiet knock and a careful step. One Lola, on her side sleeping, and I know, for the first time in my life, that I never want to leave the bed and I never want to die.

ONE LAST TIME

Murphy had been gone two years, but still acted surprised to find another man in bed with his wife, shocked in fact, despite that she had sent him divorce papers and he had willingly signed them. His wife and the man in bed with her sat up. What are you doing here? his wife said.

Who the hell is this? the man in her bed said.

You didn't change the locks, Murphy said. I think that's very endearing.

Marie, who the hell is this? the man in her bed said. He was a good looking guy, younger than Murphy, with all of his hair and a chiseled chest. Like he worked out some.

I'm her husband, Murphy said.

Ex-husband, Marie said. She had the covers pulled up to her neck. Looked fist-bitingly beautiful all naked and indignant. Murphy wanted to take her back. Just reach in there and take her back.

Ex-husband, the man in her bed said. He leaned against the headboard. Smirked. Reached over and grabbed a cigarette off the nightstand.

There's no smoking in my bedroom, Murphy told him.

There's smoking in *my* bedroom, Marie said.

The man in her bed smirked more fiercely at Murphy, as though that was the way the man was going to best him, sit back in Murphy's bed with Murphy's naked wife--naked ex-wife--and let her dictate the terms, argue conditions, and finally lay it all out for Murphy to understand plain and clear: they were divorced now and now it was her bed, her bedroom, her house, and she could have anybody she wanted in that bed and if they wanted to smoke, then they were permitted to smoke.

What is he doing here? the man in her bed said.

What are you doing here? Marie said to Murphy. She reached for the man's cigarette.

You're smoking again? Murphy said.

You don't get to pass judgment on me anymore, she said. She blew a cloud of smoke at him. Murphy glared at the man in her bed. The bad influence. He blew smoke at Murphy, too. Murphy wanted to drag the man in her bed out of her bed, by his balls, across the room, over to the window, out the window. Watch his naked ass fall two stories into the prickler bushes. That would take care of that rotten smug face of his.

Murphy, Marie said. What the hell are *you* doing here?

We could call the cops, you know, the man in her bed said.

Take it easy, Mitch, she said.

Yeah, Mitch, Murphy said. Stand down.

Mitch blew more smoke at him, but nothing else.

I left some things here, Murphy said. In the backroom. Some in the basement.

You want to get them now? she said.

No time like the present.

Are you drunk? she said.

Of course he's drunk, Mitch said. He's in our bedroom at three in the morning.

Marie looked at him closely. She could tell, could always tell when he was drunk. He was never able to hide anything from her. She could see for herself he wasn't drunk, that he'd only had a couple, but that it was something else that compelled him there to break into her bedroom at three in the morning. What things? she asked him.

Pictures, he said. Some letters. My collection of Canadian money. He thought he saw her smile.

Not tonight, she said. You can come back tomorrow and pick them up.

I'm already here, he said.

It's three in the morning, she said.

And you're in our bedroom, Mitch said.

I thought we told you to take it easy, Mitch, Murphy said.

Mitch, Marie said. She handed Mitch the cigarette. Got out of bed. Murphy stared at her, thought he was entitled to see a quick flash of her as she crossed the room to get her bathrobe. Get your money's worth, she said. He was right: she had smiled.

I will, Murphy said.

It'll be the last time, Mitch said.

Murphy ignored him, watched his ex-wife. She put on her bathrobe, tied back her hair. Come on, she said. We can talk about this downstairs.

Where are you going? Mitch said.

I'll be right back, she said to him.

Murphy followed Marie downstairs, into the kitchen. She put on the kettle. Said, What the hell's the matter with you?

Murphy didn't say anything.

What are you doing? she said.

I just came for my things, he said.

It's been two years.

He leaned against the counter. How long have you and what's-his-name been smoking up the bedroom? he said.

I'm not going to do this with you, Murphy. It's late and I've got work in the morning.

I wanted to see you, Murphy said. That's it. Get my things and see you one last time.

You can get them tomorrow, she said.

Yeah. He wanted to hurt her, to say things he could never take back, but which he knew would hurt her, make her feel like garbage. Wanted to say awful things about

what a terrible woman she was, what a terrible wife she'd been, that she'd put on weight, that she was always a wet noodle in bed.

Do you want some tea? she said.

Sure, he said.

Have a seat, she said.

What about what's-his-name?

He'll wait.

They sat down at the breakfast table. She poured them a cup, and they sat across from each other, stared at one another as they had countless times during their marriage. She looked so much better than he did. Not quite as broken down, or lost looking.

Where the hell did you go? she asked him. I waited for you. The first year. I waited. For the phone to ring. For a letter. For you to show up. And here you are, after two years. You finally show up.

I wanted to call, he said.

But you didn't, she said.

But I didn't.

I didn't know what to tell people, she said. My mother, my family. Your mother, for Christ's sake. You could've at least called your own damn mother.

He nodded. He didn't come there to apologize, if that's what she was waiting for him to do. He'd told himself that he wasn't sorry, wasn't going to say it either just to say it.

Pictures? she said.

And letters, he said. You should know I thought about you the entire time.

Well, she said, now I know.

Yeah, he said. He stood. Carried his cup over to the sink. I should let you get back to bed, he said. Before what's-his-name throws a tantrum.

He isn't all that bad, she said. You just happened to meet him at the wrong time.

There wouldn't have ever been a right time, he said.

She stood, too. Put her cup in the sink with his. I'll be home after five tomorrow, she said. You can come then and get your things.

All right, he said.

She walked him to the door. I wish I could say it was good to see you, she said.

Here's your key back, he said. He pressed it into her hand. Her hand was warm.

Tomorrow, she said.

He nodded.

When he'd return the next day, he would have to knock on the door, and she'd open it for him and he'd walk in like a guest. It was the way they'd learn how to live with the history of each other. To know one another anew.