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South Shore and Everyplace You Don't Belong

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South Shore and Everyplace You Don't Belong

A Thesis Presented

By

GABRIEL BUMP

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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M.F.A. Program for Poets and Writers
Department of English

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GABRIEL BUMP

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for Mom, Dad, Mike, and Nat

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Thank you, all the places that helped me belong.

ABSTRACT

SOUTH SHORE AND EVERYPLACE YOU DON'T BELONG

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GABRIEL JAMES BUMP, B.F.A., SCHOOL OF THE ART INSTITUTE

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South Shore and Everyplace You Don't Belong, tracks a young man, Claude, raised by his grandmother on Chicago's South Side. We follow Claude as he experiences tropes familiar to young Chicagoans: segregation, gun violence, gang recruitment, death, police brutality, and crooked politics.

We also follow Claude through universal experiences familiar to all young persons: falling in love, social anxiety, making friends, losing friends, rebellion, and identity crises of all shapes and sizes.

We follow Claude as he experiences America as a young black man.

KEYWORDS: Fiction, Chicago, Missouri, violence, segregation, police brutality, politics

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Book One

South Shore

Prologue

I was jailed for an idea, a premonition, an abstract concept, something I can't describe and something you can't describe either.

I was jailed in Missouri and released to Chicago, my home and place of all my troubled reincarnations.

Here I stand: this heirloom bathrobe, these heirloom conspiracies.

You ask if I'm okay now.

Have you ever placed your ear in the gutter and listened for the number 14 bus, express, barreling up Jeffrey Boulevard, barreling into your closed eyes and agape mouth?

Have you ever found yourself alone on New Year's Eve, walking around downtown, staring up at those white lights, staring into our neighboring galaxy?

I'm okay.

You ask if I learned anything, if I gained perspective, if I'm happy with how things turned out, if I could say a few words—explain myself.

“Claude,” you ask. “What happened down there?”

Euclid Avenue

“If there’s one thing wrong with people,” Paul says. “It’s that no one remembers the shit that they should and everyone remembers the shit that doesn’t matter for shit.”

I remember Euclid Avenue. I remember Grandma holding my ankle, swinging me out the front door, flipping me right-side up, plopping me down next to the Hawaiian violets, plopping herself down next to me.

Dad was on the curb, wrestling another man. He had the man’s head, the man’s life and soul, between his thighs.

Upstairs, above our heads, Mom screamed for the men to stop, to regain their senses, civilize themselves.

“Say it again,” Dad told the man.

“I’m sorry,” the man told Dad.

“Sorry for what?” Dad asked the man.

“Sorry you look like Booker T. Washington,” the man told Dad.

Dad unsqueezed the man. Cops came speeding down our street before Dad's loafer could unhinge the man's teeth.

"Gentlemen," Dad told the cops after noticing two-year-old me sitting there applauding. "Not in front of my son."

The man stood up, brushed grass and dirt off his jeans, wiped his bloody and twisted nose on his torn shirtsleeve, adjusted his purple and blue floral tie, adjusted his large silver belt buckle. He stared at me, this man I hadn't seen before or since and would never see again. He had a sad face. On his tongue: something important and tragic, ready to pour out and bless me.

Then Paul ran out with a fireplace poker, with his robe open and his belly fat rippling.

"That's it," Grandma said. "Enough culture for one day."

No one pressed charges. When the cops came around asking, no one saw anything. It never happened.

Fog

Coach and Dad tipped buckets in the sixties.

They snuck up and tipped buckets of fish in the harbor, hauling ass through the golf course before the guy in a Nellie Fox t-shirt could catch them. That was when South Shore was still Jewish. When the guy in a Nellie Fox t-shirt caught Dad, he dangled Dad by his ankles over the harbor and promised to drown him. There was a moral to that story, but Dad was never sure what it was. Coach thought the moral was don't fuck with anybody in a Nellie Fox t-shirt.

When they were growing up, Harold Washington was mayor. The Jews were almost gone, a few stubborn old men refused to leave. Dad and Coach recited poetry by the water. They felt their hopes evaporating and swirling into fog. Dad wanted to be Langston Hughes. Coach coached junior varsity at South Shore High. He wanted to play in the NBA.

Grandma and Mom were from The Highlands, a three-block chunk of South Shore reserved for doctors, politicians, and lawyers.

When they were young, Dad and Coach rode their bikes through The Highlands. Jeffery Boulevard and Metra tracks separated Mom and Dad.

When Dad started taking me to see Coach, Mom thought Dad was toughening me up. There wasn't anything tough about Coach. His wife had left him with two babies and moved to Florida. Dad took me to see Coach because Dad thought Coach was capable of murder-suicide. Dad said Coach loved ferociously.

The first time Dad took me to Coach's apartment, five of us sat in three plastic chairs on Coach's shag rug. Dad bounced the babies on his knees.

The empty fireplace overflowed with dusty trophies. When Coach started crying, Dad made me go in the bedroom with the babies.

One Thanksgiving when I was five, Dad invited Coach over. Paul sat in the living room and grunted when Coach pushed the doublewide pink stroller through the door.

"Paul?" Coach asked.

"Paul's Grandma's friend," Mom took the babies in her arms.

"Pleased to meet you," Coach slid past Mom and sat next to Paul on the couch.

I don't remember who played that year, but the game was enough to get Coach and Paul drunk off excitement. Dad wanted to get drunk too. Mom and Grandma kept yelling from the kitchen.

Dad gave me a beer at dinner, which turned into a fight.

"What do you want my Grandson to be?" Grandma said.

"What do you want our son to be?" Mom said.

“This is a party and I don’t want him to feel left out,” Dad said.

“My Grandson is not a follower,” Grandma said. “He is his own man.”

“My son will be a force in the world,” Mom said.

“A father can give his son a beer whenever he wants. I can give my son a beer whenever I want.” Dad slammed the table.

Nobody looked at me. While they argued, I chugged the beer as fast as possible. Grandma, Mom, and Dad looked at Coach, who was flinging mashed potatoes at a giggling Paul. He used his fork as a slingshot. Mom slammed the table. Paul wiped the potatoes from his face. Coach turned toward Mom, raised his weapon, and hit Mom on the neck so clumps fell down her blouse. Grandma gasped while laughing. Her bracelets jingled when she grabbed her chest. Dad went for another beer. Paul called Coach a bastard. I felt lightheaded and sick

The babies’ crying marked the end of Thanksgiving. Mom held the front door open, tapping her foot. Dad told me to get my coat.

Jeffery Boulevard felt quiet. Cars moved slowly around potholes. Coach stood at the stoplight and didn’t say a word. We all smiled. We all waited for the light to change. We all looked at a bus pass. We all nodded at the lonely passengers in the window.

Outside Coach’s building, I knelt in front of the babies. Dad grabbed Coach behind his neck.

“Are you going to be okay?” Dad said.

“Can you come upstairs?” Coach said. “Please.”

Dad carried the babies. I folded the stroller and lugged it up. Coach hummed like mad over his jangling keys.

Who said, God hates me? Who wanted to cleanse himself of responsibilities? Who opened the bottle? Who sat there drinking all night and who paced around the room with his arms raised towards the ceiling and asked for forgiveness? Who forgot I was standing there? Who didn't hear the babies crying?

Dad woke up the next day with a hangover.

Coach disappeared around Christmas.

The babies ended up in Kentucky, or Pennsylvania.

And my life went on like that: people coming and going, valuable things left in a hurry.

63rd Street Beach

“Fuck Hakeem Olajuwon!”

Dad was out there without a boat, without pants or suit jacket, down to his underwear, past the buoy, rocking with the swells, pumping his arms up and down, jamming to the news. Jordan: he’s coming back. No more baseball. Back to work. Back to the ‘Ship.

There was a storm coming up the horizon, up from Indiana. Lightning hit that barge of junk—that barge in the middle of Lake Michigan.

I remember Mom with her earrings. Her bracelets had rubies. Her necklace was sapphire and thick. I remember her near the shore, running, jangling, not caring about broken glass, kicking up sand, not caring about her hair, her shoes, her dress—the final straw.

“Claude,” Grandma called from the parking lot. “Fly your behind back over here.”

“Join me!” Dad yelled to all of us.

“You’ll die!” Mom yelled back.

“Fuck Olajuwon!” Dad yelled to heaven.

“We’ll miss the first act!” Mom yelled to a different, a more desperate heaven.

Grandma pulled me into the backseat. She plopped me down between her and Paul.

“It’s just a game,” Paul said. Paul was a Knicks fan.

Grandma got my cheeks between her thumb and middle finger. She squeezed and pulled our faces close. Her long false lashes brushed against my eyebrows. Her lipstick, from that close: chalky and clumpy and peeling.

I don’t remember how she smelled; I don’t remember what she said. I remember looking past her moving lips. Out there: my father, still past the buoy, still waving his arms, still miraculously afloat.

Tomorrow, Mom will leave him and us and Euclid Avenue and 63rd street beach. Tomorrow, Dad will follow her; neither will leave a note or kiss goodbye.

“That’s it,” Paul said, then, in the car, before pulling a sleeping mask from his breast pocket. “That’s enough culture for one day.”

We missed the first act.

I remember 63rd street beach.

Bubbly and Nugget

Ms. Bev asked if our parents loved us. She was crying again. We always said yes when she cried. When the divorce started she brought three lunches to class, eating them throughout the day.

“That’s good,” she said. “Love is good.”

She put her head on the table and bid us to leave. We were nine. We didn’t have anywhere to go. There was a foot of snow outside.

Bubbly leaned over and whispered to me. “I think she’s going to kill herself.”

“How do you kill yourself?” I asked. I loved Bubbly.

She stuck a finger up her nose and ate what she found.

“My parents think she’s going to kill herself,” she said.

Nugget smiled, showed us an eraser in his mouth.

“She’s just sad,” Nugget said over the eraser, spit coming down his chin.

“Haven’t you guys ever been sad?”

Bubbly raised a fist at Nugget. Nugget didn't know anything about fear. When he got older he found out. He jumped out of a plane and his parachute didn't open. It was on the news. Back then he couldn't tell fear from sadness. He took the eraser out of his mouth and rolled it between his palms.

"Nugget," Bubbly said. "You smell like bologna."

"Thank you," he said and turned around. Nugget loved bologna.

"You're nice," I said to Bubbly.

I was going to ask Bubbly to marry me, but Principal Big Ass walked in. His real name was Gene Longley IV.

"Mrs. Beverley," Principal Big Ass said. "May I speak with you in the hall?"

"It's Ms. Bev," Nugget said.

"What was that, Jeffrey?" Principal Big Ass asked.

"It's Nugget," Bubbly said.

"What, Tiffany?" He asked.

"It's Bubbly," I said.

"Claude?" His face was getting red.

"Yeah, that's right," Nugget said. Everybody laughed. Nugget put the eraser back in his mouth.

Ms. Bev followed Principal Big Ass into the hall. She looked at us over her shoulder before closing the door.

"See, Nugget," Bubbly said. "That's fear."

"I'm always afraid," Nugget said.

"I know, Nugget." Bubbly patted his back. "I know."

Grandma thought Ms. Bev should go down the river.

“For a swim?” I asked.

“The river, Claude,” she said. “Listen.”

I was listening. She sat on the faded White Sox carpet next to my bed and rubbed my feet.

“You never listen, Claude,” she said again. I always listened. Paul leaned against my doorjamb, arms and legs crossed. I thought about pushing him over.

“He does listen,” Paul said.

“She really shouldn’t put you kids through her shit,” she said.

I called Bubbly my bitch one day at recess. Principal Big Ass heard and called Grandma. Grandma wanted to know what the context was. Principal Big Ass told her. She was ambivalent about it. He wasn’t. We had to change. Paul told me to call Bubbly my sunshine.

“You kids aren’t learning anything.” She brought my foot up to her lips. Her lipstick felt like chalk. She had a date.

“Nugget loves bologna,” I said.

“Nugget is an idiot,” Paul said.

“Nugget’s my friend,” I said.

“And that Tiffany,” Grandma said picking at my big toenail. “That Tiffany is fast.”

I shouldn’t have told Grandma that Bubbly and I kissed. She called Bubbly a skank.

“I’m going to marry her,” I said.

“Let’s pick out a ring tonight,” Paul said.

“Then you’re going to marry a fast woman that will break your heart,” she said. I pulled my knees to my chest.

“You’re fast,” I said.

Paul whistled and left. Grandma palmed my face. She left too. Her long purple dress got caught in my door. I heard a rip, running down the steps, the front door slam. That was 8:00.

Later, Paul opened my door with an empty beer in hand.

“Let’s go get that ring,” he said.

Paul never shoveled snow. He carried me to the salted sidewalk by my armpits. Rainbow Bar was three blocks away. Wind tossed me around. Paul dragged me along. I slipped on ice. He said sorry. The Temptations were playing over the speaker when we arrived. We both nodded at the bartender and went to the back room.

“I love babysitting,” Paul said.

Teeth was already there.

“I hear you want to fuck someone, Claude.” Teeth stood up and kissed Paul.

“We’re not swearing anymore,” Paul said, an arm around Teeth’s waist.

“Is that what Claude wants to do?” Teeth asked. “Do you want to fuck someone?”

“No,” I said. “I just want to marry her.”

“What are you going to do when you’re married?” Teeth asked me.

“Go on adventures,” I said.

“What are we going to do when we get married?” Teeth asked Paul.

“Go to the moon,” Paul said.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’d go to the moon with Bubbly.”

“Why does love always start with the moon?” Teeth asked.

“Bubbly is my sunshine,” I said.

Teeth crouched in front of me.

“What would you do for your sunshine?” Teeth asked. “Would you protect your sunshine from this cruel world? Will you guide your sunshine through any perils? Will you pay the bills? Will you walk the dogs? Will you take out the trash? Will you hold your sunshine when there’s thunder outside? Will you rock the baby to sleep? Will you drive the kids to school? Will you bury your sunshine in the most expensive coffin?”

“Yes,” I said. “Of course.”

“Leave him alone,” Paul said to Teeth.

“Is that what you do for Paul?” I asked Teeth.

“For Paul,” Teeth said. “I do anything.”

Teeth’s sister was in our class also. She sat three rows behind me. Teeth wasn’t allowed to see her. Teeth refused to understand the law. Paul and Teeth had dated for six months. It was our secret. Most people knew, but still. Teeth was twenty years younger than Paul. He used to play professional tennis. Teeth was long and had a spider tattooed on his cheek.

Teeth picked me up.

Teeth spent five years in Cook County.

Teeth put me down. Paul pushed me towards a fold out chair facing a wall. I sat like I always did and pretended not to listen.

“If you love me, Timothy,” Paul said. “You’ll move away.”

“I can’t right now,” Teeth said.

“Then when?” Paul asked.

“Why do we have to leave?” Teeth asked.

“This place isn’t good for us,” Paul said.

“This place isn’t good for anybody,” Teeth said.

“Let’s go to Italy,” Paul said.

“I can’t,” Teeth said.

“Why not?” Paul asked.

“I just can’t,” Teeth said. “Do you understand? I just can’t leave this place. What am I going to do? What place would take me? There’s nothing I can do.”

“We can love each other,” Paul said.

“We can love each other anywhere,” Teeth said. “I’ll love you always.”

“We can love each other in Florida,” Paul said.

“I’ll love you between heaven and hell,” Teeth said. “I’ll love you into other dimensions, into other lives.”

They went on about love and leaving and staying and possibilities. Real love, I learned that night, is compromise. Teeth agreed to consider a life in Florida. Paul agreed to give Teeth some time to think about it. Teeth gave kissed Paul goodbye.

Teeth crouched in front of me.

“When you have your sunshine,” Teeth said. “Don’t let your sunshine take you to Florida.”

Teeth stood up and kissed Paul one more time. We left him standing at the bar.

Snow started falling when we left Rainbow Room.

Paul got a call in the morning. Teeth. Metra tracks. Flattened. An fatal accident.

Paul sat at the edge of my bed until Grandma called for breakfast. He filled his glass with white wine and told me it was juice.

“Life isn’t like this,” Grandma said with her hand on Paul’s. “Everybody doesn’t leave you.”

Paul took his pancakes and wine up to his room. Grandma pulled me to school, through the snow, in her slim wake.

Ms. Bev told us Teeth’s little sister wouldn’t be in school for a while. She told us to take out our math notebooks. We worked on fractions while Ms. Bev ate chicken marsala.

“Did you hear what happened?” I asked Bubbly.

“Yeah,” she said. “I heard the sirens. My parents had to go to work.”

Bubbly’s parents wrote for *The Defender*.

“What happened?” Nugget turned around.

“Don’t you live next to the Metra, Nugget?” Bubbly asked.

“Something bad, Nugget,” I said.

“I’m a heavy sleeper,” Nugget said. “My mom has to shake me in the morning.”

We told him. His eraser dropped out of his mouth. It bounced off the tile.

“That’s going to give me nightmares,” he said. “I’m sad.”

“You’re scared,” I told him.

“Thanks.” He turned around forgetting his eraser.

I asked Bubbly if she wanted to marry me.

“I want to bury you?” she asked.

My hands were sweaty.

“No,” I said. “Marry me.”

Principal Big Ass walked in.

“Claude,” he said. “That’s enough.”

He stood at the front of the room. His ass blocked Ms. Bev.

“I’m sure Mrs. Beverly told you about what happened to Tanya’s older brother,”
he said.

“It’s Ms. Bev,” Nugget said. “He exploded on the train tracks.”

“Jeffrey,” he said. “Do you want to spend lunch in my office?”

Nugget put his head on his desk.

“I know a lot of you are close with Tanya,” Principal Big Ass continued. “We
arranged for The City to send a counselor. He’ll be here tomorrow. I want you to go
home, talk with your parents, and come prepared to discuss. That’s your homework.”

“My parents think a police officer tied him to the tracks because Teeth wouldn’t
fuck him.”

“Tiffany,” Principal Big Ass said in his disappointed voice. “My office. Now.”

Bubbly packed her backpack and stomped out the door without saying goodbye. I could've tied Principal Big Ass to the tracks.

"Fuck, shit, fuck, shit," I said.

"Very funny, Claude," he said. "Mr. Funny is getting close to detention."

He left before I could close the deal. Nugget moved to Bubbly's desk so I could help him find common denominators.

Grandma had a date in the Gold Coast with some professor. I zipped up her midnight blue dress.

"What happened to Grandpa?" I asked.

"Bad moonshine," she said.

"What's moonshine?" I asked.

"Like Proud Mary in a draught," she said.

"What?" I asked.

"Wildfire," she said.

Paul laughed from under Grandma's bed.

"Where did you meet Paul?" I asked.

"Paul was an accident," she said. She reached under the bed and rubbed Paul's head.

"We met in New York," she said. "After your Grandpa died."

"And fell in love?" I asked.

"No," she said. "He stole fifty dollars from me."

"Seventy," Paul said.

“Seventy,” Grandma said. “He promised me seventy dollars for a photo shoot and didn’t pay me.”

“Grandma was hot,” Paul said.

“Grandma’s still hot, baby.” Grandma patted her backside, patted my head, patted wrinkles around her mouth, patted her grey hair.

“I had your mom and needed a place to stay,” Grandma said. “Paul let me stay at his place.”

“Then Grandma made a movie and took me along for the ride.” Paul slid his head back under the bed.

“Now we’re here,” Grandma said. “In Chicago. Surrounded by fast little harlots.”

“You’re fast,” I said.

She put her knee in my back and left.

I sat on her faded orange carpet and looked at the top of Paul’s head. He was staring at the bottom of Grandma’s box spring.

“I’m supposed to talk to you about death,” I said. “For homework.”

He tilted his head back and looked at me upside down.

“We should’ve sent you to private school,” he said.

“Principal Big Ass said we had to,” I said.

“Principal Big Ass likes women to pour hot wax on his nipples and call him kitty cat.” Paul crawled out and stood above me.

“What?” I asked.

“Your parents abandoned you, right?” He headed for the door.

“Right,” I said.

“One day Grandma and I are going to abandon you also.” He had his back turned to me. “And Tiffany.”

“Bubbly,” I said.

“Bubbly and Nugget,” he said. “And you’re going to be alone.”

He told me to go to sleep as he walked down the stairs. I stared at my ceiling until Grandma came home. I listened to them through my floor. Paul couldn’t stop crying.

Ms. Bev introduced the person from The City. He looked like he came straight from a funeral. Principal Big Ass sat behind Ms. Bev.

“Class,” she said over her pizza. “This is Mr. Something.”

“Mr. Smithing,” he said.

“Mr. Smith.” She picked up her pizza and left the room.

“I’m Mr. Smithing,” he said again. “But you can call me Chuck.”

“I’m Nugget,” Nugget said.

“That’s nice,” Mr. Smithing said.

Bubbly wasn’t there.

“Do you guys know why I’m here?” Mr. Smithing asked.

“Because death,” someone shouted from the back row.

“Because we’re too young to die,” another voice said.

“My mom says people like you get off on violence and despair.”

“I’m here to help you,” Mr. Smithing said. “Let’s play a game.”

Mr. Smithing handed out notecards and colored pens and asked us to describe our greatest fear. After five minutes he clapped his hands.

“Let’s start here,” Mr. Smithing pointed at Nugget. “What’s your biggest fear?”

“I’m afraid I’ll wake up and no one will be there,” Nugget said.

“That does sound scary,” Mr. Smithing said. “What about that scares you?”

“My mom says I have too much love in my heart,” Nugget said. “She says I cry when I’m alone because my heart is too big for one person.”

“Do you think your heart is too big?” Mr. Smithing said.

“I think my heart is just the right size,” Nugget said.

“I think so too,” Mr. Smithing said.

Mr. Smithing focused on me.

“What are you afraid of?” Mr. Smithing asked me.

“The person I love dying,” I said.

“That is scary,” Mr. Smithing said.

“I know,” I said.

“What is scary about that?” Mr. Smithing said.

“I don’t want to stay up all night crying,” I said.

“Are you staying up all night now?” Mr. Smithing asked.

“Paul is,” I said.

“Who’s Paul?” Mr. Smithing asked.

“Paul was fucking Teeth,” I said.

Principal Big Ass fell off his chair.

“Claude McKay Love,” Principal Big Ass said from the floor. “Do you want me to call your grandmother?”

“They were in love,” I said.

“They were fucking,” Nugget said.

“I’m calling both of your parents,” Principal Big Ass said. “My office.”

We packed our bags and stomped out. Nugget rubbed his chest.

Nugget played with his bologna sandwich. He ripped at the crust, took it apart, smeared the mustard, licked his lips, inhaled deeply. Principal Big Ass sat in his office and tried to call our families. Every couple minutes he’d appear to let us know that he was trying again and we were in a lot of trouble.

“Why did you swear?” I asked Nugget.

“I didn’t want you to get in trouble alone,” he said.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Where’s Bubbly?” He sucked on a bologna slice rolled into a cigar.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“I want to marry her,” he said.

Grandma came in wearing a bathrobe and knee-high boots. She drove a knuckle into my skull. She grabbed my neck and pulled me into Principal Big Ass’ office. Nugget seemed not to notice. He was smiling, lips stained with mustard.

“Ms. Trueheart.” Principal Big Ass tried not to stare. “Please have a seat.”

“Was he swearing again?” She forced me into a chair. “We haven’t been swearing again.”

“Yes,” he said. “But I’m afraid it’s much worse than just that.”

Grandma wasn’t wearing make up. Her wrinkles seemed to twitch. The bags under her eyes throbbed.

“Was he kissing that little girl?” She twisted my kneecap.

“Ms. Trueheart,” Principal Big Ass said in his caring voice. “I think Claude’s depressed.”

Grandma’s grip relaxed. Her wrinkles and bags loosened.

“Didn’t his parents leave in winter? Wasn’t it snowing?”

“No, Fall, and I should kick your fucking ass,” Grandma said. “Making me think my grandson is acting like some delinquent.”

“Well, he is,” he said. “But that’s not the point.”

Principal Big Ass thought the point was loneliness and isolation. He thought I shouldn’t talk with Nugget; on that count, Grandma agreed. Principal Big Ass thought Bubbly was a bad influence; on that count, Grandma agreed. He thought if things didn’t change for me—he’s seen countless kids like me fall through the cracks and end up dead like Teeth.

“There isn’t a crack big enough to swallow him,” she said. “My grandson will spend his life conquering people like you.”

She dragged me out. I waved at Nugget but he didn’t notice. He was licking his fingers and wiping mustard off his nose.

We passed Ms. Bev outside. I waved to her also. She was taking big gulps out of her soup thermos. She looked at me but didn’t wave. She crammed a fistful of oyster in her mouth and took another gulp.

A barrier of tight-packed black crystalized snow blocked us from the street. It was a bad winter. I tried to keep up with Grandma. We reached our house. She cupped my armpits and carried me to the front door. Paul nursed a hangover in the living room. He

asked what was up? Grandma spanked me to my room. I sat alone on my carpet. I listened to them argue about my direction.

I spent the rest of the week helping Paul build a Lego castle. Grandma found a man she could spend more than one night with. He worked in insurance, or bail bonds. Paul stopped leaving the house. Snow mountains narrowed the sidewalks.

Bubbly's parents decided to homeschool her. Grandma and Paul sent me to a catholic school across the tracks. I'd pass Bubbly's house on the walk. I'd look up at the sky if I saw her on the porch with her mother. I'd wave if she was on the porch by herself. Sometimes she'd wave back. Sometimes she'd be looking away and wouldn't see me. I'd try again on the walk back.

She was playing catch with her dad the last time I saw her. The football was too big for her to get hands around and she couldn't catch it. There was a moving truck in her driveway. I waved. Her dad looked at me, whispered something to Bubbly, and went inside. Bubbly picked up the football and bounced over.

"We've moving to Oak Park," she said. "Mom and dad got new jobs."

"I want to marry you," I said.

"I know," she said. "But your breath stinks."

"The new kids at school bully me," I said. "They think Paul and Grandma are crazy."

"They are," she said. "And you're a baby."

"They call me Princess," I said. "And lock me in closets. I wish you were there."

“You think Ms. Bev killed herself?” She dropped the football and kicked it at me.
“She’s missing.”

“Paul said she went on vacation with her new boyfriend.” I tried to kick the football but slipped and fell on the grass. Bubbly stood over me.

“My dad said she swam out into Lake Michigan,” she said. “He said she sank to the bottom. That’s why they can’t find her.”

I tried to stand up but slipped again.

Bubbly laughed. Her dad called from the screen door. And that was it. I sat there for a moment. I got to Catholic school late. The nun made me stand facing the wall. The kids laughed at my wet butt.

Later, I transferred to Crispus Attucks Middle School. Nugget went to a magnet school up north, one of those schools with a middle school and high school in a big building with big windows. He graduated valedictorian. He went to Northwestern for History, Yale for Law. He moved to New York. He blogged about urban decline and America’s moral decay. He organized rallies whenever the police shot an unarmed black kid. He flew back to Chicago for Civil Rights summits. He didn’t have time for me. There are pictures of him online laughing with Obama. His parachute didn’t open on his fortieth birthday. I went to his funeral. I couldn’t find a seat.

Bubbly married an accountant.

Ms. Bev is still missing.

Cookout

Grandma's lighter was gold-plated, recently polished, freshly fueled, and dangling from her fingertips, over a pile of Bulls memorabilia.

She had an epiphany: gasoline.

"Go get something potent," Grandma said to Paul, who was standing next to me, there, in the backyard, underneath a crabapple tree, over a pile of rotting tiny fruit.

When Paul was in the house, Grandma looked me over.

I cried too often.

First, my parents. Then Bubbly. Then the bullies at school.

I was crying then, there, in the backyard. I thought I was crying for my broken heart; I was crying for the future and how unbearable it seemed. Grandma was sick of it. She had stopped consoling me. She stopped acknowledging my runny nose and puffy eyes. When I cried before bed, she didn't come running down the hall with her robe open.

First, she swept pictures of my parents off the piano into a trashcan.

Second, she stepped on Dad's favorite Temptations records. "Not the solo David Ruffin, that doesn't count," she said. "You can't expect me to—I mean, it's David Ruffin, for Christ's sake.

Third, she took a weed whacker to all of Mom's remaining dresses and pantsuits.

Fourth, she took me to the roller rink to meet girls.

Fifth, she took me to the park to make friends.

Nothing worked.

Sixth, now, in the backyard: The Chicago Bulls.

I cried whenever I passed our Michael Jordan portrait in the foyer. I cried whenever I sipped from my Phil Jackson mug. I cried whenever I passed our portrait of Craig Hodges wearing a dashiki, also in the foyer, above Jordan.

The championships were over. Those times were never coming back.

"We needed cleansing," Grandma said.

Paul sprinted out the house with a clear jug half-filled with sloshing clear liquid.

"What's that?" Grandma asked, taking her eyes off me.

"This right here can burn through diamonds." Paul took a swig from the jug before handing it to Grandma.

"Wait," I said.

Grandma and Paul looked me over.

"Baby," Grandma said in her worried voice. "This will make you feel better."

"Fire is purifying," Paul said.

"We can't blame the Bulls," I said. "They didn't do anything wrong."

I pulled my Horace Grant t-shirt from the pile and went up to my room.

“Thank God,” I heard Grandma say behind me.

“Goddamn,” I heard Paul say. “We’re going to be alright. Everything is going to be alright.”

Jonah and The Dunk

July before I started 8th grade, Paul had this scare. A fuzzy blemish on an x-ray. After tests and hours of chain smoking—nothing serious, just an aberration. Paul chain smoked whenever he felt helpless. Paul chain smoked in celebration, steak on his plate, whiskey at his goblet’s brim.

“If I’m going to die,” Paul said. “I’m going down swinging, in style. Happy.”

The doctors wanted him to change. Paul thought change meant assimilation, thought assimilating meant melding into society, following, not leading. Grandma called him ridiculous. It was just steak, cigarettes, and hard liquor. Not the right to vote.

“If I’m going to die,” he said, cutting a bite-sized triangle out of a New York Strip. “I’m going to do it proud.”

Jonah moved up the street a month later.

Jonah’s dad was a cop. His mom decorated houses up North. Jonah dressed like he was a pro. He was over six feet. I hadn’t hit puberty yet. He dribbled up and down the block, between his legs, behind his back. I wanted his Nike sweatpants and Jordan tank

tops. Paul only bought me Adidas. He thought kids got killed over nice gear. Jonah moved like liquid.

“So, Jonah,” Paul asked when Grandma invited the new neighbors over. “You ball like the devil?”

“Yes, sir,” Jonah said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Jonah’s dad asked.

“Bad,” Paul said. “You know, bad as hell.”

“Oh,” Jonah’s mom said.

“What about you?” Jonah’s dad asked me.

“What?” I asked back.

“You ball?” Jonah’s dad asked me.

“Claude’s too angelic,” Paul said.

“That doesn’t sound bad,” Jonah’s mom said to me.

“What high school did you play for?” Jonah’s dad asked Paul.

“Paul can’t shoot a cherry into a black hole,” Grandma said from the kitchen.

“The game is more complex than shooting,” Paul said.

“Wait,” Jonah’s dad asked Paul. “You’re not from Chicago?”

“New York is basketball’s soul,” Paul said.

“New York,” Jonah’s dad said.

“Mecca,” Paul said.

“You’re asking my son about basketball,” Jonah’s dad said, “and you’re from New York?”

“You’re asking my son about basketball,” Jonah’s mom said, “and you didn’t even play?”

“Who do you think you are?” Jonah’s dad asked.

“Where do you get off?” Jonah’s mom asked.

“I played against Tim Hardaway,” Jonah’s dad said.

“Me too,” Jonah’s mom said.

“Doc Rivers, Cassie Russell gave me his shoes,” Jonah’s dad said.

“I drove Juwan Howard to school every morning,” Jonah’s mom said.

“Michael Jordan was born in Brooklyn,” Paul said.

“Nate Archibald!” Grandma yelled from the kitchen.

“Ben Wilson is a saint!” Jonah’s dad yelled.

“Isaiah Thomas!” Jonah’s mom yelled.

“Lincoln High School!” Grandma yelled.

“Simeon!” Jonah’s mom yelled.

And they yelled names and places at each other until Grandma served the pasta. They yelled with forks in their mouths. They spit marinara across the table. Jonah and I sat there, gave each other apologetic looks. When Grandma put down her apple pie, Jonah’s mom gave up.

“Jonah,” Jonah’s mom said, “we’re leaving and never coming back.”

“Jonah,” Jonah’s dad said, “people who think Patrick Ewing is better than Scottie Pippen can’t be trusted.”

“Rucker Park!” Grandma yelled as they drove away.

Under his breath, while we cleaned the dishes, Paul muttered.

“Willis Reed, Willis Reed, Willis Reed, Willis Reed.”

After midnight, someone threw rocks at my window. It was Jonah.

“Let’s hoop tomorrow,” Jonah said.

“I’m not very good,” I said.

“It’s just hooping,” Jonah said.

“Okay,” I said. “Cool.”

There weren’t many cages in Chicago. All the courts were open air and surrounded by trees. The high schoolers played on Lake Shore Drive, closer to the beach, where the girls hung out. Cages were a New York thing. Grandma thought cages made us look like animals. Jackson Park had a cage next to the golf course. We had the courts to ourselves. Jonah brought his five-year-old brother. Paul sat on the concrete with a beer. He patted the ground for Jonah’s little brother to take a seat.

The rims were soft and forgiving. Everything shot worth anything went in. His bad shots would spin, roll, and fall. His perfect shots would crack the net like a whip. I tried fancy lay-ups that didn’t come close. Paul told me to stop acting like some Rucker Park Disciple. Just feed The Devil the ball, he told me. Jonah’s little brother nodded in agreement. So I did. I passed the ball to Jonah. He cared for it. He never looked at it. His eyes showed concern the rare times he mishandled it, let it roll away, let it bounce above his waist. He was noble and righteous. He was spectacular.

As the sun went down, Jonah told his little brother to stand in front of the basket. He told me to throw the ball in the air.

“When?” I asked.

“You’ll know,” he said and walked to half court. He turned around and started running. When he got to the three-point line he looked at me.

“Now!” Paul yelled.

“Now!” Jonah’s little brother yelled.

“Now, Claude, Now!” Paul yelled again.

“Now!” I yelled and tossed it.

Jonah took off from the free throw line. He spread his legs and caught the ball with one hand. He cleared his little brother by a foot. It looked like he would fly out of the cage and land somewhere in Ohio. He was a low-flying jet in the dusk. He returned to earth like a breaching whale. My legs quivered. Paul ran over and hugged him. His little brother held onto his waist.

“See that, Claude,” Paul said. “That’s how sex feels.”

“My God, son,” Paul said to us all. “You are a religion.”

The sun went down. We walked back in reverie for the spectacular. I noticed beauty in everything: the warped chain-link fence, the tags on the bus stop advertisements, the glimmer from broken glass in the gutter, the breeze carrying sewer smells. We left the brothers on Jonah’s doorstep.

In our living room Paul went face first into the couch.

“You see, Claude,” Paul said into a cushion. “If that boy ever stops balling, the world will end.”

Grandma looked up from her book and asked what happened. I told her Paul had been converted.

In the kitchen, over breakfast, Paul vowed to quit smoking. Cigarettes were too expensive.

“And they’re poison,” Grandma said.

“And they turn us into zombies,” Paul agreed.

“And they cost too damn much, Grandma said.

“And I can’t breath,” Paul agreed.

“A glass of wine,” Grandma said.

“That’s all I need,” Paul agreed.

“Quitting something is an important exercise in self discovery,” Grandma said.

“I will find myself,” Paul agreed.

“And Claude,” Grandma said.

“And Claude,” Paul agreed.

They wanted a response from me.

“Jonah knows who he is,” I said. “I want to know who I am.”

Jonah showed up while I was scraping eggs into the garbage can.

For the first time, he looked human. His eyes were glazed and baggy. His face was dull and unglowing. He was troubled, standing there in our kitchen with his Nike gear. Was his black hoodie always that dusty? Were his shoes always that scuffed? That wasn’t Jonah standing in our kitchen.

“I killed him,” Jonah said.

He wasn’t covered in blood. He wasn’t holding a weapon. He was still wearing his clothes from last night, crusted sweat around his collar and armpits.

“Jonah,” Grandma said. “What are you talking about?”

“He’s dead,” Jonah sat on the table, his feet touched the floor.

His little brother had collapsed at breakfast. His parents took him to the emergency room. They told Jonah to wait at our house for the phone call. We were the only option. They didn’t have any other friends.

“How could you be responsible?” Grandma asked.

“He told me I was his favorite big brother,” Jonah said. “Then he collapsed and died.”

“It’s okay, son,” Paul said. “These things happen.”

At that moment I wished I knew Jonah better. I wanted to know if he could kill his admirers.

“Your brother is not dead,” Grandma said.

Jonah’s parents showed up around lunch. His brother wasn’t dead. Just in a coma. Paul burned cheese sandwiches on the stove. Grandma stroked Jonah’s head.

I didn’t see Jonah for three weeks. I waited for him at the cage with Paul. I walked past his house. No one was there during the day. At night, the lights were out.

Then school started.

George Bones and the rest of the basketball team clapped their trays onto our table.

“I hear your dunks vaporize people,” George Bones said.

I stood up. Jonah pulled me down by my bicep.

“You’re a bitch,” George Bones said to me. George Bones could dribble two basketballs at a time blindfolded.

“I can’t dunk,” Jonah said. He stared at George Bones and didn’t blink.

“You should play with us after school,” George Bones said. “Coach lets us use the gym.”

He wouldn’t look at Jonah. Jonah looked right through him.

“Claude can’t come,” George Bones continued. “He has to go fuck his Grandma.”

I caressed my fork. They laughed and walked away.

When the team left, Coach Harper sat down.

“Don’t listen to them, Claude,” he said looking over Jonah. “You might make the team this year. We need someone to clean up after practice.”

Coach Harper chewed five pieces of gum at a time. Grandma thought this must mean he had jaw cancer until I told her that’s just his thing. Then she thought he was an asshole.

“So,” he smacked at Jonah. “You can dunk?”

“No,” Jonah said.

“Not what I hear,” Coach Harper said.

Jonah stood up. I did too.

“Wait, wait,” Coach Harper said. “You know who I am, right?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Shut up, Claude,” he said.

“Yes,” Jonah said.

“Then you know I can destroy you,” Coach Harper said.

I didn’t know what he was talking about. Jonah didn’t care. I cared. I was terrified.

“How will you destroy us?” I asked.

“No one cares about you, Claude,” he said to Jonah. His gum blob fell on the table. He picked it up, put it back in, and chewed like crazy.

“If Claude plays,” Jonah said. “I’ll play.”

“He can carry your shoes,” Coach Harper said to Jonah.

“I can do that,” I said.

“We have good chemistry,” Jonah said.

“We do?” I asked Jonah.

“Just come to the gym after school,” Coach Harper said

“Do we have a deal?” Jonah said.

“If I beat George Bones,” Coach Harper said. “Claude can start at point guard.”

“Really?” I asked Coach Harper.

“With you,” Coach Harper said to Jonah. “We only need four players anyway.”

“After school,” Jonah said.

“After school,” I said.

“After school,” Coach Harper said.

Coach Harper left.

“You shouldn’t be such a pussy,” Jonah said.

George Bones and the other guys were shooting around when Jonah and I walked in. They had on Jordans, Kobes, and LeBrons. Jonah wore jeans and boots. Coach Harper blew his whistle. He told everyone to sit in the bleachers except Jonah and George Bones. He rolled Jonah a ball.

“You need anything, Jonah?” Coach Harper asked. “A Gogurt? Some Gatorade?
A pair of Nikes?”

“Maybe a doctor,” George Bones said.

“Alrighty then.” Coach Harper tried to blow his whistle but gum blocked it. The sound came out wet. “George you start. First to twenty-one. Two and Threes. Keeps. Let’s ball.”

George Bones had possession of the ball for two full dribbles. Then Jonah stole it and hit seven threes in a row and we left.

“Claude plays,” Jonah said from the doorway.

Paul saw Jonah’s hand in anything miraculous. Paul claimed Jonah was behind the winning lottery ticket for Ms. Dunewell, the young widow from 72th street. He led me into his room. He presented his corkboard. It was something from a movie about insanity. Thin slips of newspaper were thumbtacked in a chaotic array.

“Firemen Arrive Just in Time to Save Kittens”

“Mother of Three Barely Escapes Sinking Car”

“Deputy Mayor Indicted”

“Redbelters Stash House Raided”

“Crime Rates at Record Low”

“You see what this boy is doing,” Paul beamed.

It was almost Halloween. The start of the season was a month away. A story about five teenagers, former drug dealers, finding God and becoming altruistic was displayed in the middle of Paul's madness.

"But I thought Jonah was The Devil?" I asked.

"The Devil works in mysterious ways." Paul lay on his bed, facing the heavens.

"Leave Claude alone, Paul," Grandma called as she walked past. "Just because you're crazy doesn't mean he has to be."

Paul was still lying there when I left for the cage.

Of course I already knew Jonah was a savior. I didn't need Paul to tell me that. The world was kinder with Jonah in it, sweeter, benevolent, unfamiliar. Jonah awoke faith in me. His spirit guided mine.

George Bones was standing under the hoop when I showed up. No one else. He usually balled on Lake Shore Drive, putting on a show for the girls.

"I've been practicing," he said. "Let's play."

"I'm just gonna wait for Jonah." He could tell I wanted to run. I wanted to fly.

"Come on." He took a step closer. I took a step back. He took a step closer. I bumped into the chain link. "Let's practice."

He threw the ball at my chest. I dropped it. It rolled back to him. He threw it like a football. It hit my head. I slid to the ground.

"Jonah's gonna kick your ass," I said to my feet.

I didn't see him move. But then he was standing over me.

"What did you say?"

“I said ‘Jonah’s gonna vaporize you.’”

He took my head between his palms and drove his knee into my face.

I thought I saw a flash of light. I thought a beam took George Bones and lifted him off the ground. There was heat all around me. Heat and light pulsing down my spine. I knew Jonah would come. I thought I saw him lift George Bones over his head. I thought I saw him throw George Bones like a paper bag filled with quarters. I thought I heard George Bones explode against the concrete.

I woke up in the hospital. My eyes were swollen shut. I heard Coach Harper.

“Don’t you fucking scream, Claude,” he said.

“Why would I scream?” I asked. “Where am I?”

“You’re in hell,” he said close to my ear. “Don’t you say a fucking word.”

I smelled a pile of minty green.

“You say anything,” he sounded farther away. “And I’ll destroy you.”

“How will you destroy me?” I asked. But he was gone. I asked again.

“What the hell are you talking about,” Grandma’s voice was over me. “Did they give you drugs? Nurse. Did you give him drugs?”

“The voice,” I said. “The voice said it was going to destroy me.”

“Nurse!” Grandma yelled down the hall.

A nurse came in wiping chalky white smudges from her cheeks. Her mouth was full.

“Was someone in here with my grandson?” Grandma asked.

The nurse swallowed.

“It’s Raven’s birthday,” the nurse said. “We were eating cupcakes. She’s thirty. Her father came down from Waukegan.”

“Did you give him drugs?” Grandma asked.

“Now would I do a thing like that?” The nurse walked out the door.

Grandma rubbed my forehead.

“Don’t worry,” Grandma said. “You’re just going a little crazy.”

I spent two days in the hospital with two broken ribs, a broken nose, concussion, and messed up face. Mothers screamed for their children to come on, that house doesn’t have any candy.

Little monsters banged on our windshield when Grandma pulled up.

“I’m going to kill Paul,” Grandma said as she led me up our porch.

Paul was dressed like a cross between Madonna and Diana Ross. He held empty bottles of vodka in each hand. He only drank vodka when he ran out of cigarettes and the world was closing in on him. He was supposed to go to a party up North. He was supposed to leave a bowl of candy on the porch.

“Hell has risen on our doorstep,” he clanked his bottles together. “The trumpet sounds and our chariot awaits.”

“Claude,” Grandma led Paul into the kitchen. “Go to your room.”

My vision was still blurry. I tripped four times going up the stairs. Jonah was on my bed.

He sat on the floor.

His brother woke up the day George Bones put me in the hospital. He heard I was coming home. He knocked on my front door and asked Paul if he could wait for me. Four people were shot when I was away.

“Paul begged me to kill him,” Jonah said.

“Your brother?” I asked.

“No. him. Paul,” he said. “He begged me to kill him.”

“Oh,” I said. “He’s not well.”

“Sorry I wasn’t there to help,” Jonah said.

He got up and left. I started to follow him. Then I got dizzy and had to lie back down.

I heard Grandma say hello and goodbye to him. I heard the front door slam. I heard Paul scream for mercy and forgiveness.

Paul swore off breakfast liquor. Grandma refused to cook any meal for him. He sopped up our bacon grease with stale bread.

“I’d rather die than live under that devil’s thumb,” he said, still drunk. “He’s the one that did that to you?” He pointed a trembling fist towards my face.

“Paul.” Grandma jabbed him with his fork. “That’s enough.”

“That devil might ball,” he continued. “He might ball like religion. But he’s still a devil. Always was and always will be.”

I smelled fear and booze.

“You scared Jonah, Paul,” Grandma said. “He couldn’t even speak when he left.”

She turned to me.

“Was it good seeing him, Claude?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said truthfully.

“Are you going to see him today?” she asked.

“Of course,” I lied.

Coach Harper and my principal came over around lunch. They wanted to know if I remembered who attacked me. When everybody wasn't looking, Coach Harper ran his index finger across his throat.

“I'll wait in here with little Claudey,” he said when the other adults went to grab sodas from the kitchen.

“This is all I have, Claude,” Coach Harper said.

He picked up a flower vase next to his chair. He put the vase down. He massaged the tulip bulbs. He studied the flower vase as he talked to me.

“If you tell them the truth,” Coach Harper said, “they'll kick George Bones off the team.”

I didn't know what to say to him. I didn't want to say something wrong. There was something unmistakable and unstable in his eyes.

“I'm all alone in this world,” Coach Harper said. “If they kick George Bones off the team, I won't have anything.”

“You'll have Jonah,” I said. “We all have Jonah.”

“Michael needed Scottie,” Coach Harper said. “Jonah needs George if we're going to win the city championship.”

He picked up the vase again. He put it down when the adults came back in.

“Now, Claude,” my principal said. “I hear George Bones might have had something to do with this.”

“Yeah,” I said. “He did it. He did all of it. It was all him.” Fuck George Bones, I thought. Fuck Coach Harper and his ruined world.

Coach Harper picked up the flower vase and threw it at my head. He missed. He lunged at me. Grandma stuck a foot into his knee and dropped him.

“Can I go back to bed?” I asked while the adults held Coach Harper on the floor. I went upstairs.

“You ruined me!” Coach Harper yelled.

“You ruined me,” Coach Harper cried.

George Bones was kicked out of school. Coach Harper was fired and ordered to counseling.

That Sunday, when Jonah and his parents came over for dinner, a bee landed on my neck. I didn’t feel it. One sting would’ve put me in intensive care. Jonah brushed it off and it stung his hand.

His parents were over to talk about moving. They wanted Jonah to say goodbye.

“This place is fucked up,” his mom said without hesitation.

“We’re moving down state,” his dad said. “Close to Missouri.”

Paul looked relieved. He lit a cigarette and smoked slowly.

“That’s nice,” Grandma said. “That’s a good thing to do.”

“That’s nice,” I said.

“All this craziness,” Jonah’s mom said, “isn’t good for raising kids.”

Jonah stood over the sink, his back to us, soaking his bee sting in warm water. We looked at his back. We wanted him to say something. He didn't. He stood in his Nike gear and considered his wound. Next morning, they were gone.

Jonah still lives Downstate. He doesn't play basketball. His parents got divorced. Jonah won't even visit South Shore.

A few years ago, his brother died in his sleep from an unknown disease.

I wonder if Jonah knows it wasn't his fault.

I wonder if he sees benevolence in his shadow.

67th Street

Grandma took the swing beside me and matched my lazy rhythm. Running away was one of my new impulses.

“What’s wrong with you and this game?” Paul would ask each time he retrieved me from the park. Sometimes, Grandma came for me.

This time, Grandma hung with me for a little bit, swayed with me, kicked off her sandals.

“Say the word and we’ll move to Hawaii,” Grandma said to me.

Silence was my other new impulse.

“Well, just listen then,” Grandma said.

She put her hand on my back, pushed me gentle and slow.

“Those boys standing around that bus stop aren’t going anywhere. Those Redbelter boys. They’re smart like you. Smart enough to do basic math, smart enough to know when someone’s trying to kill or fool them. That’s smarter than a lot of people in this world. Those boys aren’t going anywhere. Society doesn’t want them to go

anywhere. Those boys aren't taking the bus. They're going to stand all day and then they're going to stand all night. They're going to stand until dust settles on their bones.

Do you know what I mean?"

I didn't.

"I failed with your mother," Grandma continued. "The universe failed your father. I'm not going to lose you to the breeze. You got something special in your bones. We don't know what it is yet. We'll find it. Don't worry. We'll find it. I've ruined too many fixable things in my life, and I'm not that old. There's hope for us yet, and you're too young to be broken, and, goddammit, baby, I love you."

We watched the buses go by. An undercover screeched onto the sidewalk and those boys scattered.

That night I dreamt my room was a spaceship. I was a skeleton and my ceiling fan swirled mini dust tornadoes around my bed. Those boys were writing scriptures on my wall. At least, that's what they said they were writing. It was all equations I didn't understand.

Janice and The Redbelters

Chill's Smokehouse was a front. The Redbelters handed out flyers for the grand opening in the parking lot after school. The flyers promised half-off the lunch special.

"We got fries," a large man in sunglasses told me. It was November and cloudy. He wore a camouflaged tank top with a tattooed killer whale print

That was my freshman year in high school. That was the year Chicago Public School lunches were deemed sub-healthy. Fries were the first to go.

Their marquee advertised ribs, pizza, and gyros. They didn't even have a soda machine, fryer, or oven. Fries were the lunch special. They microwaved them by the pound. Mine were cold and soggy. A bearded linebacker passed out paper plates covered in ketchup, for dipping.

"Y'all got mustard?" someone asked.

"Coming soon," the linebacker said.

Everything was coming soon. Like chairs and tables. Sticky brown and yellow stains dotted the linoleum floor. A door slammed behind the counter. And Big Columbus

appeared. We knew we had made a mistake. Big Columbus sold drugs to kids and guns to teenagers. Big Columbus was head of the Redbelters.

“How y’all doing today?” Big Columbus said. Someone raised a hand. Big Columbus called on him.

“I have to go home,” the person said. The linebacker blocked the entrance. Big Columbus ignored him.

“Who here wants to save South Shore?” Big Columbus asked.

No one answered.

“Who here wants to get rich?”

He stood up on the counter.

“Who here knows who I am?”

Everybody nodded.

“Good,” Big Columbus said. “If any of you get sick of being chess pieces and want to be soldiers in the fight for sovereignty, you know where I am.”

Big Columbus hopped down. The linebacker moved from the door. The street outside was littered with flyers, paper plates, and fries. Ketchup splattered the sidewalk.

Grandma wanted to put Big Columbus in a headlock.

“I knew that boy when he was in diapers,” Grandma said.

“How?” I asked.

“Don’t worry,” Grandma said.

“He said he wants to save South Shore,” I said.

“Those Redbelters think they’re Black Panthers,” Grandma said.

“We were the struggle,” Paul said.

“You were a girl scout,” Grandma said to Paul. Paul took his pasta and went upstairs.

“They gave us fries,” I said.

“They were probably microwaved,” she said. “And they probably didn’t have any mustard.”

She slapped her palms against her head.

“Don’t be stupid, Claude,” she said grabbing her coat. “If you’re stupid I’m going to dropkick you.”

She kissed my eyebrow and ran out the front door. Paul crept into the kitchen. He was holding a framed picture.

“This look like a girl scout to you?” He shoved the picture in my face.

I’d seen pictures like that during Black History Month. Young Paul stood behind a man screaming over a podium. Everybody had fists raised. Most of them were wearing sunglasses and Afros. Paul was slim, muscular, smiling. He was smiling wide. He wasn’t wearing glasses. His smiling eyes shone under his space-black shrub-like hair.

“That’s power.”

He leaned back in his chair and put his hands on his belly.

“That looks like Fred Hampton,” I said.

“It is Brother Fred,” he said. “Brother Fred would make Big Columbus shine his shoes.”

“But they killed Fred Hampton in his sleep,” I said.

“That’s not his fault,” Paul said.

“Why didn’t they kill you?” I said.

“I will always be alive,” Paul said.

He yanked the picture out of my hand and went to the living room.

Over the next several weeks kids stopped showing up to class. Chin, a freshman fourth-string running back, thought working for Big Columbus was safer than sprinting full speed into an immovable pile of lineman. Travis left because *Gone with the Wind* ruined his appetite for reading. Mary Dobson gave her baby to relatives in Ohio and wanted to send money. And so on. Freshman, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. They were all making money. Principal Carmichael was worried. He had principled through the Stones and GDs. Those gangs imploded on themselves. That took years though, generations. Principal Carmichael didn’t feel like waiting for The Redbelters to self-destruct. He was old and scared and ready for destruction. He called a lunch-time assembly.

We shuffled into the auditorium. I sat in the back, behind band kids and the science club.

“There is a disease among us,” Principal Carmichael whispered into the microphone for gravitas. “Let’s talk about a cure.”

Vice-Principal Mac yelled for him to speak up.

“We can’t hear you, preacher,” he yelled. Word was Vice-Principal Mac used to run guns from Indiana and sell them to Latin Kings. When e read about British sympathizers during the American Revolution, I pictured Vice-Principal Mac and his big earrings. Principal Carmichael turned the mic volume up but spoke softer.

“How many of you are scared?” Principal Carmichael asked.

The rows in front of me raised their scrawny arms.

“So here’s what we’re going to do,” he continued.

Double doors slammed. A pigtailed girl I recognized from lunch sat down next to me.

“Ms. Camden, please take a seat,” Mr. Carmichael said in his strict voice. Then he kept whispering.

“You’re Claude, right?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. Her t-shirt hung past her knees. Her baggy sweatpants bunched around her chunky white shoes. Her face was sharp and movie-like, stunning.

“I’m Janice,” Janice said.

I felt calm next to her. Her smile was uneasy and warm. Like me, her spirit was uncomfortable; her nervous energy relaxed my loneliness. All my friends ended up leaving in unexpected ways: Jonah, Bubbly, Nugget, my parents. I was used to sitting alone, staying alone for most of the day. There were moments when, outside my bedroom window, the world seemed fake. All those people far away, treating me like I was invisible.

Janice smelled musty and real. I didn’t care. I didn’t want her to leave me. I cared about her. I didn’t know her and I cared about her and I wanted to give her everything.

“Pleased to meet you,” I said.

“You’re nicer than I thought,” Janice said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“People talk about you,” Janice said.

“Really? What do they say?” I asked.

“They say you have no friends and you’re going to shoot up the school,” Janice said.

“I have friends,” I said.

“Really?” Janice asked.

“What’s it to you?” I asked.

“Like who?” Janice said.

“Paul,” I said.

“Paul Newson?” Janice asked. “He plays baseball and he’s not your friend.”

“Not that Paul,” I said.

“Which Paul?” Janice asked.

“You don’t know him,” I said.

“It’s okay,” Janice said.

“I’m serious,” I said.

“I don’t have any friends either,” Janice said. “People talk about me too.”

And I never wanted Janice to leave.

Principal Carmichael reminded us that police officers are our friends and informants aren’t snitches.

“Your grandma came to my house yesterday,” Janice said.

“Why?” I asked.

“And Paul,” Janice said.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “They’re worried like everybody else.”

“They wants to start a militia,” Janice said.

Principal Carmichael invited Officer Baggs onto the stage. Officer Baggs was indicted on bribery charges over the summer.

“My cousins want to do it,” she said. “They’re talking about getting a shotgun and two pistols for the house.”

“Your cousins live in South Shore?” I asked.

“I live with my cousins in South Shore,” she said.

“Paul’s not my dad,” I said.

“I know,” she said. “Paul doesn’t look like a dad.”

“What does he look like?” I wanted someone to tell me.

“He looks like someone who would live anywhere else in the world but here,” she said.

Officer Baggs said da gangs are bad and ruin lives. He said da kids dat join da gangs were going to end up in da jail or da cemetery.

“My parents moved to Missouri,” I said. “But not at the same time.”

“My parents died on vacation,” Janice said.

She was looking at me so I looked at the stage. Officer Baggs was setting up a poster board like a science fair. He pointed to a picture I couldn’t see. Janice was still looking at me.

“When you squint,” Janice said. “You look like you’re going to cry. It makes me feel uneasy.”

“Sorry,” I said.

“You’re still beautiful,” Janice said.

Officer Baggs left the stage.

“Be safe,” Principal Carmichael said. “Take control of your future.”

“See you tonight,” Janice said.

“What?” I asked.

She was already gone.

Janice and her cousins, Jimmy and Annette, came over for dinner. Grandma ordered pizza. She put on a burgundy pantsuit. We brought extra chairs into the living room. Grandma was expecting twenty people. There were five pizzas for the six of us.

“This is it?” Paul came in late with a beer.

“Good to see you again, Paul,” Jimmy said. His arms were longer than they should have been. His chest looked sunken in.

“It’s a pleasure, Paul and Catherine,” Annette said. Her pigtails were the same as Janice’s—except hers were grey.

“Please,” Grandma said. “Call me Grandma.”

I asked if I could go to my room. Grandma said I should bring Janice. Janice smiled at me and we went upstairs. I took the first pizza I saw.

“So this is your room?” Janice asked as she opened my closet and started fingering my shirts.

“Those are old,” I said. “The new stuff is in my drawers.”

I opened the pizza box. Janice made me dizzy. I realized I’d taken the anchovy. The room stank like fish. I had to eat something.

“The new stuff looks like the old stuff,” she said bent over across the room from me.

“How did your parents die?” I asked and took another bite.

“Hippo attack,” she said.

“That’s tragic,” I said.

She moved to my bed and watched me rock in my chair.

“Actually they were kidnapped in Venezuela and sold into sex slavery.” She fell backwards and looked at me sideways.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said.

“Seriously, they were both hit on the head with coconuts in Jamaica, at the same time, but under different trees.” She stood up again and walked over to me.

“That’s tragic,” I said then she kissed me. I remembered Bubbly telling me that my breath stank.

“I’m sorry about the pizza,” I said.

“I like anchovies,” Janice said.

“I’m sorry about your parents,” I said.

“You’ll believe anything won’t you,” she said. I nodded and she kissed me again.

She pulled away again.

“How did your parents die?” she asked.

“They didn’t,” I said. “They’re in Missouri.”

“I thought you were lying,” she said. She kept her lips away from me.

“Why would you think that?” I asked.

“I don’t know how you work,” she said.

“They left when I was five,” I said.

“Mine got flattened by a semi driving to Idaho in the rain,” she said. “The driver was on methamphetamines.”

“How did they know he was on methamphetamines if he didn’t stop?” I asked.

“He did the same thing to three other cars,” she said. “It was on the news. Don’t you watch the news?”

Then Janice unzipped her pants and unzipped mine. She climbed on top of me. Dawn, chemistry, physics, melding; rush, fire, an eclipse between us. Holding Janice like that—never again would I feel that close to someone. And I knew she wanted me to hold her. Someone wanting me like that—I don’t know what to say about it. Unlike anything else; fireworks, waves crashing, parted clouds—I felt Janice through me. Those thirty seconds felt like two lifetimes. I saw sublime flashing lights. She climbed off me. Something broke downstairs. Jimmy screamed Janice’s name.

“Let’s eat together tomorrow,” Janice said. She checked herself in the mirror. Jimmy screamed again. Janice looked over her shoulder and puckered her lips at me. She hurried out my door and down the stairs. I looked down at my exposed lap. I zipped up my pants when I heard Grandma’s heels clicking. She threw open my door. Her eyes were bulging.

“Those cowards don’t know what resistance is,” she looked past me. “No one cares if this place is overrun with rats and snakes. Give me that.” She took the pizza, took a step back, stopped. She sniffed. She shot me a glance and went to her room.

Downstairs Paul was sweeping broken glass into a paper plate. Boxes of pizza looked untouched.

I asked what happened. He sat down on the carpet and started picking up tiny shards with his fingers.

“The usual stuff,” he said. “Violence against non-violence.”

He rubbed the carpet then took a swig from a wine bottle. He swore under his breath when glass stuck to his palm.

“But what happened?” I asked.

“Those cousins think they’re better than us,” he said. “They don’t think Grandma should lead the march.”

“Paul,” I said. “What march?”

“Oh, this.” He held out his palm. “One of those cousins broke a wine glass when Grandma tried to strangle her.”

He sat next to me on the couch. We stared at the pizza.

“Janice is cute,” Paul said.

“We had sex,” I said.

“That’s not funny, Claude,” he said. “You won’t get any woman talking like that.”

A few months later, Janice invited me over for a Bears game. Grandma had tried unsuccessfully to rally the community. Each night she’d go to sleep angry. The house was filled with stomping and slamming doors. Paul was her only supporter, but Paul spent all his time drinking. Grandma and Paul were getting ready for church when I was getting ready for Janice. Paul shot his remaining martini down his throat and handed me an empty glass.

“You should come with us,” Grandma said while putting on her heels, her hand on Paul’s shoulder for balance.

“I really love Janice,” I said.

“You don’t know anything,” Paul said.

“You think no one matters but yourself,” Grandma said.

“That’s going to be the end of you and mankind,” Paul said.

I left. I got to Janice’s right before kick-off.

“Jimmy,” Annette yelled upstairs. “Claude’s here.”

Annette said Janice was walking the dogs and would be back shortly. She waved me into the living room. Jimmy came running down in a Walter Payton jersey. The three of us squeezed onto the couch and put the game on mute.

“You look like a good kid,” Jimmy said. “How did that happen?”

“Jimmy,” Annette said. “That’s not fair.”

“What?” Jimmy asked. “Isn’t it fair to say Claude could have turned out terrible?”

I sat between them. They were talking over my head. I didn’t realize how tall they were, how small I was.

“Jimmy,” Annette said. “Claude’s had a rough life.”

“Which is why he’s impressive.” Jimmy looked down at me.

“You’re impressive,” he said.

“We knew your parents,” Annette said.

“You’re Grandma used to be…” Jimmy trailed off.

“More together,” Annette said. “It must be hard dealing with her.”

“We knew Paul too,” Jimmy said. “He’s gained weight.”

“You’re mother beat me up for fun, once,” Annette said.

“You’re dad sold me weed, once,” Jimmy said.

“Jimmy,” Annette said. “Please.”

Jimmy shushed her. The Bears fumbled on the goal line. Jimmy kicked the coffee table and a stack of coasters fell on the carpet.

“I don’t want to say that your parents are bad people,” Annette said.

“They’re awful people,” Jimmy said.

“The worst kind of people,” Annette said. “But that’s not surprising.”

“The world is filled with people like them,” Jimmy said. “And that’s what’s wrong with the world.”

Janice came in with the dogs, a black German shepherd looking thing and something small resembling a teddy bear. I wanted to run away with her.

“Janice,” Annette said. “Come in here. Claude was just telling us about his family.”

“Something bad is happening outside,” Janice said. “There are cops everywhere.”

Janice dropped the leashes. She was pale and sick looking. She didn’t look prepared for whatever was coming. I wasn’t prepared either.

“We didn’t hear any sirens,” Annette said.

“Bad things are always happening,” Jimmy said.

“Come look,” Janice said. “Something bad is about to happen.”

Janice led us around the corner. The cops had blocked off the street. A crowd was gathering. Officer Baggs had an air horn to his face. He told everybody to respect da crime scene. Dis is a crime scene and we must not obstruct da police’s efforts. I heard

sobbing in the distance. Janice held my hand and grabbed my ass. An ambulance honked and the crowd parted. A small child lay motionless on the sidewalk. There wasn't any blood. I didn't remember hearing any gunshots.

"Murderers," someone yelled at Officer Baggs.

"What happened?" Annette asked the person closest to us, a middle-aged man in a Gale Sayers jersey.

"That boy stole something from the house," Gale Sayers pointed his chin towards a big red brick house with a black fence. "The family was at church, or something. A neighbor called the cops. The cops came and the boy ran away, or something like that."

"Figures," Jimmy said.

"Jimmy," Annette said.

"I'm scared." Janice let go of my hand and wrapped her arms around me.

"So the cops come," Gale Sayers continued. "And they tackled the kid because he isn't that fast. I think I've seen him before. Like running around the park, or something. If I'm thinking of the same kid, if I saw him before, I know he isn't that fast."

"That's the Warren's boy," someone else said. "He wasn't stealing anything. He was just going in to feed the cats because the family is out of town. The Warren's are good people."

"So I have seen him before," Gale Sayers continued. "I knew I had seen him before. So long story short the cops catch the kid and sit on him because the kid won't cooperate. They sit on him so that the kid can't run away. But they end up suffocating him. They were choking him too, I think."

“Murderers!” Jimmy yelled at the cops. The crowd was growing. Officer Baggs yelled for order. He said that we must keep da peace at all costs. Someone threw a football at Officer Baggs head. He ducked and reached for his gun. Then four SUVs screeched to a stop behind us. The Redbelters jumped out.

“Pigs!” Annette yelled at the cops.

Big Columbus climbed onto the hood of an Escalade.

“Are we going to take this?” Big Columbus asked the crowd. Everyone faced him, even the cops and paramedics.

“Are we going to remain victims?” Big Columbus asked again.

“No,” someone yelled back.

“Are we going to let these criminals kill our babies, our little sisters and brothers?” Big Columbus stomped on the hood.

“If we don’t do something about this today,” Big Columbus said. “Then we won’t have a tomorrow. We have fallen prey to these evildoers and they will not stop until they have taken everything we have.”

“We need power,” someone yelled back.

Janice put her face in my armpit and bit me.

“We must destroy them,” Big Columbus said. “Before they destroy us.”

Riot

On the sidewalk to my right: cops and more cops lined up in combat gear. On the sidewalk to my left: Redbelters and more Redbelters pulling up in black trucks.

I saw familiar faces in the Redbelters camp. Frank Wooten had a baseball bat at his side. Herc had a frying pan. Bobby from the gas station had a broom. Little Brian had a hockey stick.

We, the civilians, were trapped in the middle, about twenty of us sucked into the stand off.

“Look at these pathetic soldiers!” Big Columbus yelled to us civilians. “They want war!”

The Redbelters inched closer. The cops inched closer.

“Look at these puppets!” Big Columbus yelled to us civilians. “They want to invade our streets!”

“He’s right!”

“This is our neighborhood!”

“Our streets!”

“They don’t care about you!” Big Columbus yelled.

“He’s right!”

“They want to kill us!”

“No!”

“Wait!”

“Everybody calm down!”

“No!”

“DISPERSE,” a bullhorn said.

“Fuck the cops!”

“They killed that boy!”

“They want to kill us!”

“Kill the pigs!”

“Brothers and Sisters!” Big Columbus yelled. “Take back your sidewalk. Take back your pride. Make your own history! Eradicate the virus!”

“DISPERSE,” a bullhorn said.

“They killed my cousin two years ago!”

“They killed my brother!”

“They killed Fred Hampton!”

“YOU Disperse!”

Big Columbus jumped off the hood of his car. He stood in front of his cavalry. I held Janice tighter than she held me. Jimmy and Annette stood at attention, focused on

Big Columbus. Everyone looked at Big Columbus. He had a general's air. The cops maintained their formation behind us. I heard my heart beating against Janice's back. I felt her heart in my arms. My eyes darted between cops and Redbelters. A few civilians walked behind the Redbelter phalanx. A few civilians tried to find security behind the cops. The cops held up their shields and wouldn't let them through. The refused joined Big Columbus, were welcomed like family by Redbelters. I considered which side to seek out. I tried to consider what was at stake. The situation was bigger than my frame of reference. The lines between right and wrong and life and death seemed blurred and indecipherable. What was everybody saying? What was coming? How was this supposed to end?

"Let's go," Jimmy said.

"Damn right," Annette said.

Jimmy and Annette pulled Janice from my arms and dragged her towards the Redbelters.

"Claude!" Janice yelled.

More civilians tried to break police ranks.

"We're on your side!"

"Let us through!"

"Save us!"

"Help us!"

"DISPERSE," a bullhorn said.

Soon, it was just me out in no man's land.

Why won't the cops accept us? I could see the officer's faces underneath their riot helmets. Couldn't they see us? Couldn't they see our fear? Why didn't they let us through? Black cops too, standing there blank and emotionless. They weren't scared. Why weren't they scared? Why wasn't everyone scared like me? I saw anger in The Redbelters faces. And I got angry at the cops blankness. And I wanted them to fear me, to fear us, to understand our capabilities. Instead they pushed us away.

"DISPERSE," a bullhorn said.

"Claude!" Janice yelled again. I lost sight of her.

Why didn't I join her right away? Why didn't I follow Jimmy and Annette? Why was I stranded? I couldn't move. Why? Did I feel trapped in history, between too violent wrongs? There was no available peace. That's something history class doesn't mention: what happens when there's no peace? When they kill one of yours and you want to defend yourself? Wasn't that what Big Columbus wanted? He just wanted to free us. And you can't ask for freedom. History knows that. Schools know that. And we're free because of it. Because we didn't ask for freedom. A war was fought over freedom over a century ago. And people say, when they want to sound smart in history class, those people in the front row, they say: "The Civil War wasn't fought over slavery, to free Black America." They say, "The Civil War was political." And they say, "Black America still isn't free." And then other people say that history sanitized Martin Luther King and these other people say Brother Martin was a revolutionary. They say, "Non-violent protest was political." They say, "Non-violent protest was meant to show the world how violent the white man was, how backwards the South was." And they say, "What about the North? What about Chicago? Martin Luther King said he saw worse racism, worse

discrimination, more evil in the North, in Chicago.” And people say, “Discrimination isn’t over. It just looks different. Segregation isn’t over. It just looks different.” And people say, “Martin Luther King was a puppet.” And these people that say Martin Luther King was a puppet also say, “Brother Malcolm got it right: any means necessary.” And those means aren’t crystal clear. And both those brothers got shot. And both those brothers wanted freedom. And the Civil Rights Act was political. And Black America still isn’t free. And black men are still dying. And black women are still dying. And there’s anger, yes, there’s anger. And that anger has to go away when you go to work or go to school or ride the bus or go to the grocery store or go to a movie downtown. And that anger has to go away—if it doesn’t, how do you exist? And everybody is angry as hell. And that anger is confusion. And that anger is dangerous. And confusion is dangerous when you’re standing in the middle of the street and not sure if you should go with the gang that kills people or the cops that kill people. And there’s only one option.

And that option is standing with your people.

We’re free. We’re free. We’re free. We’re free. History says we’re free. We’re free.

“DISPERSE,” a bullhorn said.

And I went looking for Janice.

“Janice,” I yelled.

“Claude,” Janice yelled back.

“Annette,” Janice yelled back.

“Jimmy,” Janice yelled back.

“Are you all dead?” Janice asked.

I still couldn't see her. Big Columbus clapped his hands.

"Brothers and sisters!" Big Columbus yelled at his allies. "You see how they pushed you away. You see the hate in their souls. We must rid ourselves of these vermin, these vile scourges! Join me! Rise with me!"

The crowd responded with cheers.

"DISPERSE," a bullhorn said.

"Dismantle the oppressor!" Big Columbus yelled.

He pointed at the cops and his allies charged. And I stayed on the sidewalk still looking for Janice.

The tear gas came the moment the two sides collided. This was an old battle scene. Hand-to-hand and unforgiving. The tear gas plumed and drifting over the throng. Fighting continued through coughing and hacking. Smashed. Everyone was smashed together and hurting. I saw a hockey stick break against a riot shield. I saw a skull break against a riot stick. I saw cops don gas masks and descend upon coughing and blind fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters and big cousins and uncles and nieces and aunts and nephews. I saw no peace.

"Janice!" I yelled.

No response.

"Janice!" I yelled again.

"Fight!" Big Columbus yelled. "Fight for your freedom!"

DISPERSE," a bullhorn said.

"Janice!" I yelled again.

"DISPERSE"

I saw a blinded and coughing women break a cop's leg with a shovel.

I saw a blinded and coughing man spin his arms like windmills against a riot shield.

I saw mounted horseman on the horizon.

I saw helicopters above.

I saw madness and confusion.

I saw humanity collapse in on itself.

I was scared.

I was alone.

“Janice!” I yelled one last time.

I ran.

I dispersed.

I ran home.

I ran past family homes, homes of friends, of brothers and sisters.

There were the Jacksons with their three toddlers. The Jackson parents were professors of Medieval Literature at Chicago State. Their oldest son died of cancer when he was thirteen.

SWAT trucks sped past.

There were the Mitchells, an old couple that organized block parties and neighborhood-wide garage sales because they wanted the community to remain intact.

The Howards and their four-story blue stucco. Their daughter was in my grade. She stuck gum underneath her desk everyday. She had bad breath and said gum made her

feel normal. Mrs. Jamaica would have given her detention if she found out. Janitor Anthony would wink at her in the hallways.

The Smith and Williams families gathered around the picket fence that divided their houses. They hated each other because the Smith's dog liked pissing on Mr. Williams's roses and shitting next to Mrs. Williams' garden gnomes.

No one noticed me. I couldn't hear any screaming over the sirens, gun shots, and helicopter blades.

I tripped and fell on the Billings' lawn. The Billings moved back to Virginia after their twins graduated from private schools last May. Their grass was overgrown. Their bushes were dying. The For Sale sign had a giant spider web in between the posts. People didn't want to buy houses in South Shore. They'd rather buy apartments in Bucktown.

A large blast, like a bomb, went off. I turned and saw flames. The families ran back into the houses. I was alone on the street. I saw a burning man running towards me. He dropped. People smacked the burning pile with their coats and feet. I ran home with my eyes half closed, tripping every couple of steps.

Grandma was standing on our porch in her Sunday dress and church hat. A wooden plank rested on her shoulder like a musket.

"Where's Janice?" I asked.

"She's inside with Paul," she said.

"And why the hell are you not inside?" she asked

Janice sat on the living floor wrapped in a blanket. Paul, in his suit and on his stomach in front of her, wiped the blood from her shins.

“You guys should’ve come to church,” Paul said with a nervous smile.

I fainted.

When I came to, Grandma was an inch away from my face.

“Those motherfuckers,” she whispered. “Those motherfuckers.”

Paul had Janice in his arms on the couch.

“Is it over?” I asked. A frozen pork chop was on my forehead. I looked down at my chest. The blood was still wet.

“It’ll never be over.” Grandma stood up using her wooden plank like a crutch.

“The National Guard is coming,” Grandma said.

“Bush might send the Air Force,” Paul said.

“Everybody’s dead,” Janice said. Her eyes slammed shut.

“Not everybody,” Paul said. “But a lot.”

A knock at the door.

“Don’t think you’re getting in here!” Grandma yelled.

“Is Janice there?” a voice asked.

“Who the fuck is asking?” Grandma yelled back.

“Annette!” Annette yelled.

Grandma opened the door.

Annette.

She was covered in dust. She looked like a ghost. Her face was hollow. She wasn’t dead.

“Is Jimmy here?” Annette asked. “Where’s Jimmy? Our house is empty and the windows are broken.”

She noticed Janice and ran to the couch. She kned Paul in the stomach on accident. He pretended he wasn’t hurt. I sat up.

“Jimmy’s dead.” She held Janice’s head against her chest, spoke into her hair.

“I’ll go get some water,” Paul said.

“Turn on the T.V.” Grandma said.

South Shore was on every channel. New cameras from the helicopters showed: burning houses and burning lawns; people running scared, people standing their ground; cops advancing, cops retreating; firing guns, tear gas, leaking wounds, charging horses.

Each channel had a different headline.

BREAKING: POLICE KILL CRIMINAL. NEIGHBORS RIOT.

BREAKING: GANGMEMBERS KILL OLD WOMAN. POLICE
OVERWHELMED.

BREKAING: DEATH OF UNARMED BLACK TEEN IGNITES VIOLENCE.

BREAKING: CHICAGO BURNS

“Where are we?” Annette asked with Janice in her arms. “Where’s Jimmy?”

Paul carried five opened bottles of wine and handed us each one.

“This,” Paul said, “is nothing compared to when MLK died.”

“Paul,” Grandma said. “They’re kids.”

“They’re fourteen,” he said. “The world is about to end. A little Riesling won’t hurt.”

I drank from my bottle. So did Grandma. So did Paul. Janice and Annette held theirs with shaking hands and stared at the aerial footage.

“Remember the Democratic Convention?” Paul said.

“Paul,” Grandma said. “This is bad enough.”

“I know,” Paul said. “But this is nothing like ’68.”

“It’s worse,” I said.

“What do you know?” Paul challenged me.

“This is our neighborhood,” I said.

“What does that have to do with it?” Paul challenged me again.

“The cops are occupying our neighborhood,” I said.

“You sound like that Big Columbus fool,” Paul said.

“The cops wouldn’t leave,” I said. “The cops wanted a war. They wanted to kill more of us.”

“How do you know?” Paul said.

“I saw it,” I said.

The aerial footage followed four teenagers running down 67th street, towards the epicenter.

“Hooligans looking for action,” a newscaster said over the footage.

They carried duffle bags and had their black hoodies up. I wondered if I knew them. I wondered if I should join them. As they ran, they took turns pulling out liquor bottles from their duffle bags. There were rags stuffed in the bottles. They took lighters to the rags and tossed the bombs at parked cars.

“Horrible, horrible,” a newscaster said.

“You see?” Paul asked me.

“Is that Monica’s son?” Grandma asked. “Those knuckleheads are going to start World War Three, Four, and Five.”

“At least they’re doing something,” I said.

“This?” Annette asked. “This is something?”

In history class, we talked about gunfire during World War 1, constant and pounding, so constant and pounding you forget it’s there, forget death is flying over your trench.

Looking at the live footage, those teenagers exploding cars, I stopped paying attention to the gunfire outside. Where were they heading with that explosive cargo? Those teenagers, my age—what did they know that I didn’t? There they were: heading into the maelstrom I fled. Brave and strong, they were unstoppable.

The teenagers approached a line of riot-gearred cops.

“Don’t do it,” Grandma said to the T.V.

We could see the cops, guns raised, yelling at the teenagers. We could see the teenagers standing side by side. We could see a paper bag flutter between them, fallen leaves swirled skyward. We could see our neighborhood aflame.

We couldn’t hear what the cops were yelling. We couldn’t hear their hearts beating. I couldn’t hear anything over the blood rushing behind my ears.

The teenagers pulled their hoods down.

And it was Monica’s son. And it was Travis. And Chin. And Mary Dobson.

“I know them!” I shouted.

And then Mary Dobson reached into her duffle bag.

And the cops fired into their teenage bodies.

And they wouldn't stop.

"Jimmy!" Annette yelled.

The screen cut back to the studio. A newscaster looked pale.

"We apologize," he said. "That was—what a—terrible."

Janice dropped her bottle. Annette held her tighter.

"He's not there," Grandma said. "Don't worry. He's not there."

"Where is he?" Annette asked. "Where is he? Where is he? Where is he?"

"Our hearts go out to those in Chicago," the newscaster continued. "We'll be back with more from South Shore."

A commercial for enlarged bladder medication came on. A fire truck passed by our house. I noticed the gunfire again, then, and forever. I thought of things I would die for. All of them were alongside me.

Nothing changed when the sun went down. Paul tried to order pizza. We heard the guy laughing at him through the phone when Paul told him the address. Grandma decided to make bacon and eggs.

"We never got breakfast," Grandma said.

Annette and Janice didn't move from the couch. I was almost done with my Riesling and felt tired and sick. Paul was on his second bottle. He was smoking on the porch because Annette's head hurt. Bush was scheduled to address the nation at nine. Jimmy was still missing.

When Grandma finished cooking. She invited us into the dining room.

“We don’t need to watch this anymore,” Grandma said. “We know what’s happening. Let’s eat.”

Grandma turned off the T.V., stuck the remote in her bra.

“Claude,” she said. “Get Paul.”

Paul leaned over the railing. A burning cigarette was next to his foot.

“Do you see that?” he asked. “I wouldn’t mind that being the last thing I ever see.”

The smoke in the distance looked like heavy mist. Helicopters shone spotlights down on the wreckage. We couldn’t see any of the fighting. We could hear sirens and gunshots. But that was all behind the peaceful houses and apartment buildings in front of us. Cop cars and trucks drove up our street. One of them stopped. The officer told us to get back inside. They said it’s only going to get worse at night.

“Let me enjoy this,” Paul said.

“If you’re drunk,” the officer said. “I can take you to jail. Go inside.”

Then he drove off. I stood with Paul a second longer. Then I pulled his arm and told him breakfast was ready.

“Is it morning already?” he asked. “I thought I was only out here for twenty minutes.”

Grandma had plates ready for us.

“I was just telling Annette that I thought you died in ’68,” Grandma said to Paul.

“I was hiding,” he said. “Jimmy is probably hiding.”

“You hear that?” Grandma said.

“But I did almost die,” Paul said. “Jimmy could be dead.”

“Paul,” Grandma said.

Janice poked her eggs with a fork.

Paul told us about '68.

First, Martin Luther King got shot. Grandma and Mom had just moved in with Paul. Mom was a baby. Paul was working on a photo series about urban decline.

“No one knew what was going on,” Paul said. “If you didn’t live in a city, you had no idea what us black folk were doing. I knew black country folks that saw black city folks as a mystery. I got a commission from some Podunk gallery in Texas. I took my camera to open fire hydrants, got pictures of children playing, jumping rope, that kind of thing. I took my camera up to The Rucker. I took pictures of people going to the movies. Just normal stuff that everyone does. I was saying, with my work I was saying, ‘Look, urban decline isn’t caused by the individual urbanite. It’s the urban *institution*. The individual urbanite is just like everyone else, when it comes down to living life.’ Government is the problem. Capitalism is the problem. We were all Communists back then. So I was shooting these photos, trying to humanize and contextualize. And then they go ahead and kill Martin.

“I was out shooting that night. And it was just like today. I thought I’d go out there and join the struggle, join my brothers. And it was just like today: cars on fire, shop windows broken, running, screaming, crying, sadness, fear, disbelief, anger—all that rolled into one roving blaze. I hid underneath a car for three days.”

Two months after Bobby Kennedy, Grandma was offered a modeling job in Chicago. They moved to South Shore on August 1st. The Democratic Convention came to town on August 26th.

“I was babysitting your mother,” Paul said. “And I thought I’d just pop up to Grant Park, you know, say what’s up to some friends, yell a little, get back home in a couple hours. Two hours tops. I left your mother with our neighbors, these down Jewish folks, down with the struggle. Old Communists. Fuck Nixon. Fuck Vietnam. That kind of thing. And I went up north. Damn—I thought I saw some shit in Harlem. Mayor Daley unleashed those cops on us like Hades unleashing Cerberus. I got the fuck out of there.”

“What’s your point?” I asked.

“My point is: stay out of it,” Paul said to me. “There’s enough trouble waiting for you. Don’t go looking for it.”

“Jimmy’s not dead,” Grandma said to Annette.

We picked at our eggs. Paul stood up to get more wine from the basement. Grandma made him sit down. Annette went to the living room. Janice was frozen and unresponsive. I was drunk and dizzy.

“Look what you did,” Grandma said to Paul. “You’re torturing that poor woman.”

“This isn’t anything,” Paul said. “This is Romper Room.”

Annette told us all to come quick.

“Hurry,” she said. “They’re coming right for us.”

Our street was on T.V. Outside our window helicopter searchlights weaved. The T.V. shook. They cut to the news anchor.

“Again, we remind all South Shore residents to stay inside,” he said.

Breaking glass and car alarms. They went to commercial. Lexus had a sleek new hybrid that got 70 miles per gallon on the highway.

“Claude,” Grandma said. “Take Janice and Annette to the basement.”

Grandma picked up her wooden plank, told Paul to grab a knife, and walked outside.

After five minutes Paul came running down the stairs empty handed.

“It’s about to happen,” he said.

“What about Grandma?” I asked.

“It’s a nightmare up there,” he said.

Annette pulled Janice into a closet. Paul tried to push me into a corner. I slipped under his arms and ran upstairs. Paul was right. It was a nightmare. The front door was open. Grandma stood on the porch with her wooden plank raised like a bat. I picked up the knife Paul dropped on the carpet and joined her.

A teenager stood in front of our house with a glass bottle aimed at Grandma.

“Try it,” Grandma said. “I’ll split you down the middle.”

He broke the bottle on the sidewalk and took off laughing. Grandma turned around.

“If you’re going to help,” she said. “Don’t stand back there.”

She made room for me at her side. The riot moved like a herd. I saw someone get trampled. I saw someone pull shoes off a lifeless body. I saw cops cursing a handcuffed boy. I saw a cop drop his riot shield, take off his helmet, and run towards the lake. I saw despair unbound.

“If someone gets close enough,” Grandma said. “Don’t hesitate to use that.”

I didn’t have to kill anybody. Grandma didn’t kill anybody either. We didn’t leave our house for two days. As promised, Bush sent in the National Guard. Janice slept in my room. Annette in Grandma’s. Paul stayed in the basement. I slept under a large blanket in the living room with Grandma. The fighting erupted in random spurts. We slept in shifts. I thought Janice would look at me like a hero. But she wouldn’t talk to me, or anyone.

When it was safe enough, on the third morning, I went with Grandma to Annette and Janice’s house. Annette and Janice stayed back. They didn’t want to know how much they’d lost. They didn’t want to find Jimmy’s body on the street. Paul stayed back.

On the walk we passed reporters sifting through the wreckage like archaeologists. SWAT members with assault rifles were at every corner.

Of course Janice and Annette had lost everything. The blocks surrounding where the riot started were bombed out without any bombs dropping. Every window was broken. A few cars were turned over. Grandma offered Janice and Annette to live with us. We filled garbage bags with clothes and underwear and went back.

The final body count was 26. Some cops. Some Redbelters. Of course Jimmy and people like Jimmy. Trapped people that were looking for a place to run and ended up in the crossfire. Jimmy was shot three times. Janice had to identify the body in our high school’s gym. They had the bodies lined up across the basketball courts. Jimmy’s was close to the free-throw line.

There was a mass memorial in Grant Park that no one in the neighborhood could go to. The buses weren’t running. And it was after curfew.

In the following weeks a lot was said about South Shore. Nationally the conversation was about police brutality and our militarized state. Senator Obama was all over T.V. He vowed to take legislation to Washington. He said he would help us rebuild and reconstruct broken urban systems. Jesse Jackson walked around with camera crews. He used to live in South Shore but had long ago moved to a bigger house in the suburbs. Bush even visited. He gave a speech at our high school and the teachers booed. Mayor Daley handed out turkeys on Thanksgiving.

Big Columbus and the Redbelters disappeared. Word was they were hiding out near St. Louis. He sent videos to CNN. In one of them, while he spoke against police states, his followers were shooting human-sized cardboard targets in a flat and barren field. They were sweating through military fatigues. They looked unwell, sick and thin.

Officer Baggs got promoted to Sergeant.

After a month, the news moved on. Haiti fell into another civil war. A tsunami poured over Japan. School started back up. The National Guard left. The Red Cross moved on. Families that still had homes threatened to move away but didn't. Jesse Jackson and Senator Obama disappeared again.

Christmas came without presents.

By that point Janice had been sleeping in my bed. I had a cot that my feet hung off of. Annette had a room in the attic that she hated because it was filled with spiders and dusty books.

I would try to kiss Janice at night. Or I'd reach my hand over to touch her thigh.

“Not now,” she would say. “Try again tomorrow.”

For New Year’s, Paul bought everybody their own bottle of champagne. When the champagne was gone we sat on the living room floor and picked at a chocolate cake.

“Do you think Claude and Janice will get married?” Annette asked.

“Why not?” Paul said. “They could both do worse.”

“Yeah,” Annette said that Christmas. “If they got married Janice would never leave South Shore.”

“Claude’s going to make a difference in this world,” Grandma said.

“Both of their parents are awful,” Annette said.

“My daughter’s not awful,” Grandma said. “She’s just ridiculous.”

“Should we talk about our ruined lives?” Paul asked.

“Do you have any answers?” Grandma stared at Paul and he looked away. They still weren’t talking.

“I’m just saying,” Paul said to the carpet.

After a year, Annette had had enough, couldn’t take it anymore.

“I feel his ghost,” she said. “I feel it all the time.”

She had to leave South Shore. Grandma tried to talk her into staying. We fought about it during a blizzard. She met a man with three daughters. This man got a job in California.

“Janice,” Annette said. “You’ll just remind me of him.”

Grandma threw a glass of water in Annette’s face.

“Leave,” Grandma said. “Now.”

On the curb, Annette waited for her new life. Snow swirled around her. A sleek new Lexus hybrid pulled up and took her to a different place. Whether that place was better—who knows?

Janice moved into the attic. The riot took the romance out of us. We all came out less full, drained. We all felt Jimmy's ghost.

Vacuum

Big Columbus didn't take the drugs with him; or the guns; or his child soldiers, confused boys and girls around my age, my classmates. Big Columbus didn't pack away the riot's destruction and take it with him—the bombed out storefronts and car skeletons. Big Columbus didn't leave behind structures or programs or organizations. All his foot soldiers were left to fend for themselves.

Gangs from other territories wanted to claim South Shore. Seventy people were killed in July; most of them were young men, too many of them were just in the wrong place at the wrong time heading in the wrong direction.

“What do you mean ‘leave’?” Janice asked. She craned her head out my open bedroom window, looking for a gunshot's origin. I watched her from my bed.

“Leave,” I said. “Like go.”

“But where?” Janice asked. “But how?”

“College, probably,” I said.

Janice fell back in the window when another gun went off, and then another, and then three more.

“Think they’re down by the beach,” Janice said.

“I can’t stay here anymore,” I said.

“It’s always been bad,” Janice said. “When has it never been bad?”

“Who wants to live like this?” I asked.

“Like what?” Janice asked.

“Like, crazy, unpredictable,” I said. “Like anything can happen at any moment.”

“You’re just dramatic,” Janice said. “You’re just grappling with existence.”

“Aren’t you?” I asked.

“Grappling with existence is stupid,” Janice said.

“The city’s going to close Crispus Attucks next fall,” I said.

“Why do you care?” Janice asked.

“What if we’re next?” I asked.

“Nothing’s changed,” Janice said. “You could have gotten shot walking down the street last year, two years ago, thirty years ago. Nothing’s changed.”

“Maybe Big Columbus was right,” I said.

“Big Columbus ruined my life,” Janice said.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“You think I’m happy?” Janice asked. “You think I don’t want to leave? We can’t leave. Okay. No one else wants us.”

“You’re right,” I said.

“I know I’m right,” Janice said.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“And Big Columbus is a murderer,” Janice said.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

Janice stuck her head into the summer breeze. She watched the ambulances and cop cars holler past. I watched the blue and red lights vibrate against her scowl.

I couldn’t put a finger on the atmosphere: what unease was seeping into my muscles? I knew my spirit was damaged. I didn’t know how or the extent or if something hopeful was hiding, waiting for me to gleam it in the wreckage.

I knew I had to leave Chicago.

Chester Dexter and Renaissance

Sophomore year, after the bloody summer, after reading a flyer in the cafeteria, I joined the school newspaper, *Pantherbeat*. The flyer promoted journalism as a great way to see the world outside South Shore, expand your horizons.

After I told Grandma, she went up to her room and came back with a book.

“Here.” She threw a copy of Mike Royko’s *Boss* on my spaghetti.

“That’s going to be you,” Grandma said. “A journalist. A man of the people.”

Paul applauded the prediction. Janice groaned at the sink and ran the garbage disposal until there was nothing left to shred.

“I could work at a foreign bureau,” I said. “In Rome or Istanbul.”

“Don’t you see the state of your own people?” Grandma asked. “What do you care about Italians? What do you care about anyone else? We need you here.”

“Everyone has problems,” I said.

“Look after your own people,” Grandma said.

“He wants to abandon us,” Janice said.

“Write a story about me,” Paul said. “Write a book about me and win a Pulitzer Prize.”

Janice grew curved and full-lipped. She grew strong and indomitable. Sophomore and Junior year she was a cheerleader. She went to parties all over the city. I was her lame brother; the athletes and rappers wanted me to put in a good word. I said I would and never did. Janice grew independent and didn’t need me anymore. Once, she brought me back a Styrofoam plate signed by Chief Keef.

She quit cheerleading before senior year. She started dating Chester Dexter, which was cool enough. Chester Dexter scored more touchdowns than anybody else in Chicago. He even put up 400 yards against Mount Carmel. Nobody put up 400 yards against Mount Carmel. Chester Dexter showed Janice parts of Chicago I had only seen on T.V. He could go to parties anywhere. Whenever he walked into a room people stared at his bulging neck and thighs like, Jesus, That Boy is a Horse.

I tried out for the basketball team and couldn’t make it even though we were the worst team on the South Side.

Paul refused to meet Chester Dexter.

“If he ever hits you,” he told Janice. “Tell me and I’ll find someone to break his knees.”

Paul wanted Janice to date a basketball player. He thought football players were murderers and cheats.

One Saturday over Winter break, Grandma wanted me out of the house.

“You’re depressing me,” she said.

“I have to finish my applications,” I said.

“Let him stay,” Paul said to Grandma. “He’s my teammate.”

“He doesn’t want to come,” Janice said.

“He’s just shy,” Grandma said. “He’s just stuck in his head.”

“I don’t want to go,” I said.

“Why do you have to fill out applications?” Paul asked. “Didn’t you already apply to DePaul?”

“Yeah?” Grandma asked. “Don’t waste your time.”

“Can I come with you tonight?” I asked Janice.

“Fine,” Janice said. “He’s on the way. Just try to act like someone cooler than yourself.”

Chester Dexter pulled up in a charcoal Jeep. He made his friend sit in the back with me so Janice could sit up front and rub her hand against his knee. She had started putting sparkles in her nail polish. Football season was over.

“I’m all about scones now,” Chester Dexter said as we pulled onto Lake Shore Drive.

His friend introduced himself as Renaissance. He looked thirty. But so did Chester Dexter.

“What’s a scone?” Renaissance asked.

“It’s like a muffin top,” Chester Dexter said. “Except with more stuff happening.”

“I could fuck with that,” Renaissance said.

Renaissance gutted a tiny cigar with his fingernail, rolled down his window, and let cold wind pull the tobacco out. He filled it with weed, twisted it together in one motion, licked and sealed it, and tucked it into his sock.

“For sunrise.” He smiled at me. His teeth were smaller than I expected.

“So, Claude,” Chester Dexter asked through the rearview mirror. “What are you all about?”

“He doesn’t know.” Janice moved her hand to her hair.

“I like croissants,” I said.

“Fancy boy,” Renaissance said.

Chester Dexter turned up the radio. Janice moved her body in a way I hadn’t seen before. She moved like another person, a person that was supposed to be sexy for football players.

We passed skyscrapers. Janice touched Chester Dexter’s thigh, then chest, bicep, head. We pulled in front of an apartment building. On the curb I looked up and couldn’t see the top. Chester Dexter left his car in a tow zone.

“The Twins better have ginger ale,” Renaissance said.

“I’m not buying shit,” Chester Dexter said. Janice wrapped her arms around his waist. He walked into the lobby like he didn’t notice her. I followed Renaissance. The doorman bowed to Chester Dexter. Chester Dexter flipped him his keys.

“Move it if the cops come,” he said. “Don’t touch it if they don’t.”

“Notre Dame needs more people like you,” the doorman said. I turned around and he was smiling at Chester Dexter’s back.

Renaissance whistled Dixie as the elevator climbed. The Twins lived on the top floor.

We stepped into a hallway filled with portraits of old white people in fancy clothes. They shined and their eyes followed you.

“We have arrived!” Chester Dexter took off. College scouts compared his speed to lightning. They were right. Renaissance put his arm around me. Janice followed Chester Dexter.

“This fancy enough for you?” Renaissance asked me. The portraits quivered quivering as music shook the walls.

“What about the neighbors?” I asked.

“They’re perpetually pissed,” Renaissance said. We followed the music.

Renaissance knew where we were going. He dragged me along.

“What about their parents?” I asked.

“They have a house in Michigan,” Renaissance said. “They’re always there.”

The Twin’s dining room table was set with ornate kitchenware. A large vase with wilted roses stood in the middle. We pushed open a swinging door and stood in the kitchen. The music was louder. Dishes piled higher than the sink. The bass shook and an unsteady plate fell to the floor. It shattered. I slowed down and bent to clean it up. Renaissance kept pushing.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “That’s not our duty. We’re guests.”

After the kitchen we arrived at a smaller library.

“This is the study,” Renaissance said. “Hard drugs are studied here.”

A large wooden door was on the other side of the study. We were close. I slowed down. Renaissance kept pushing.

“Are you ready?” he asked and didn’t give me time to answer. He opened the door and we walked into a mixture of cigarette, weed, and smoke machine smoke.

About twenty teenagers were standing in a circle. All the lights were off except for a strobe. A disco ball hung from a chandelier. The chandelier, like everything else in the house, was antique. Underneath the disco-ball chandelier two boys were bareknuckle boxing. Music pumped from tall speakers in the room’s four corners. I couldn’t see Janice and Chester Dexter. Renaissance remained by my side. He yelled something at me I couldn’t hear over the cheering and music. The smoke had reduced his face to a vague outline. But he was smiling, his teeth gleaming. The two fighting boys were outlines also. One knocked the other in the stomach and finished him off with an uppercut. I suspect the one that got knocked out hit the floor hard, but I couldn’t hear it. A voice interrupted the music.

“Intermission,” the voice said. The lights came on. The circle collapsed. When the music started again it was softer.

“Let’s get some drinks,” Renaissance said. He pushed through the crowd. I followed in his wake. There was a foldout table covered in wine bottles and liquor. A long cooler filled with ice and beer underneath the foldout table. Renaissance snaked to the front of the line and no one stopped him.

“Wine for the fancy boy?” he asked.

“Where’s Janice?” I asked.

“No ginger ale.” He studied a bottle of whiskey before deciding on a beer.

“Where’s Chester Dexter?” I asked.

“Dex’s probably giving her the business.” He handed me a plastic cup filled to the brim. Renaissance noticed something over my shoulder and looked scared.

“Let’s move,” he said. “The Twins are coming.”

We didn’t get far before a hand grabbed my shoulder and turned me around. Renaissance disappeared into the smoke. Before me were two tall blonds. One of them was in a tight white dress with red wine stains down her chest. The other was in black. If she had similar stains, the black concealed them. I assumed she was stained also.

“You with him?” White Dress asked.

“I’m with Janice,” I said.

“That’s nobody,” Black Dress said.

“She’s like my sister,” I said.

“If you’re with him,” White Dress said. “Both of you have to leave.”

“We hate him,” Black Dress said. Black Dress’s blond hair had pink streaks.

“He steals from us,” White Dress said.

“If he steals from us,” Black Dress said. “You steal from us.”

“If you steal from us,” White Dress said. “You fucking pay.”

“Do you know Chester Dexter?” I asked. I was sweating and spilling my wine.

“Everybody knows Chester Dexter,” White Dress said.

“Chester Dexter is famous,” Black Dress said. “What are you?”

“I’m Claude.” I extended my hand for a handshake. They backed away.

“Well, Claude,” White Dress said.

“You’re an intruder, Claude,” Black Dress said.

“We have a crasher!” White Dress yelled and the music stopped.

Everyone turned towards me. I looked for Chester Dexter or Janice. I hated Renaissance.

“You know what we do to intruders,” White Dress said.

“Intruders must fight or leave,” Black Dress said.

“I’ll just leave,” I said. I tried to walk past them.

“Did you not hear us?” White Dress asked.

“Let me find Janice,” I said. “And we’ll go.”

“Intermission’s over!” Black Dress yelled.

“Hold him,” White Dress said to the guys standing around me. They obeyed.

The circle formed again. The guys carried me to the circle’s edge. There was blood on the ground. Someone hit the lights and turned the music up. The voice came back.

“A slight change in our program,” the voice said. “Up next: Intruder vs. Truck.”

Through the strobe I couldn’t see exactly what I was facing. It looked like a human man with gorilla arms and elephant shoulders. I caught flashes of his grimace. I thought he had a scar down the middle of his face. The Twins put their heads on both of my shoulders.

“This is what happens when you steal from us,” White Dress said.

“I didn’t steal anything,” I said.

“Truck is going to turn you into piss,” Black Dress said.

“Are you going to kill me?” I asked.

They shoved me forward. A bell sounded and Truck lunged at me.

I waited for him to get close and slipped away. The crowd didn't like that. They booed me. They wanted more blood. I kept looking for Chester Dexter and Janice. I heard Renaissance's voice.

Paul tried to teach me how to fight in our basement. Paul taught me to kick shins and punch balls. Paul's techniques involved hiding kitchen utensils in his socks. He once pulled an orange peeler on me and demonstrated how to cut a throat.

"Kill him, Truck," Renaissance said. "Bury him, Truck."

I ducked around Truck and kicked his shins. That made him growl. I tried to punch his balls; I clipped his thigh, which felt like concrete wrapped in denim.

If all else failed Paul told me to scream. Run and scream. Truck kept coming after me. I started screaming. So I was running around, kicking his shins, trying to punch his balls, and screaming as long as I could. I might've looked like I was winning.

My legs were getting tired when Chester Dexter stepped into the circle.

"Enough!" he said. "Someone turn on the fucking lights."

Someone turned on the lights. Chester Dexter was between me and Truck.

Truck's scar zigzagged from his left temple across his right cheek. His eyes weren't demon-like, red, or pulsing. His eyes were emerald green. He was more sad than crazed. He was neck was thicker than I thought. He breathed heavy.

"Who here is messing with my man, is messing with me," Chester Dexter said.

"Who here is messing with me?"

Janice walked into the circle also. She adjusted her clothes and tried to tame her hair. The crowd went silent. The Twins walked in front of Truck.

"He's an intruder," White Dress said.

“He steals,” Black Dress said.

“Claude doesn’t have stealing in him,” Janice said.

“Just look at him,” Chester Dexter said.

Everyone looked at me again. They seemed to agree. The circle dissolved and the party resumed. Some people wanted to shake my hand, acknowledge my balls.

“If that were me in there,” a man gauges in his ears and nose said. “I wouldn’t curled up into a ball and started crying.”

Another person offered me a swig from their Hennessy bottle.

“Tonight is not your night,” White Dress said to Chester Dexter and me.

“Come back when you drop the loser,” Black Dress said to Chester Dexter.

“Thanks a lot,” Janice said to me.

Chester Dexter nodded in agreement.

“Renaissance!” Chester Dexter yelled. “We’re moving out.”

“Andre’s having a party,” Janice said.

“Renaissance!” Chester Dexter yelled again. “Andre’s! Let’s pop!”

Janice and Chester Dexter headed back towards the elevator. I saw Renaissance catch up and slink behind them.

We rode the elevator in silence.

In the lobby the doorman tossed Chester Dexter his keys.

“You bringing glory back to Notre Dame?” he asked Chester Dexter.

“Notre Dame can’t afford me,” Chester Dexter said.

“Brother,” the doorman said. “No matter where you go. Make sure you come back.”

Chester Dexter dapped up the doorman. It was snowing outside. Janice curled underneath Chester Dexter armpit.

“Does that ever get old?” Janice asked Chester Dexter.

“What?” Chester Dexter asked.

“All these people loving you,” Janice said.

“They don’t love me,” Chester Dexter said. “They just want to know me.”

In the backseat, Renaissance unpacked a porcelain ballerina statue from his jacket.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Renaissance asked.

“Try not to ruin our night,” Janice said to me.

“I wasn’t trying,” I said.

“Don’t worry about it,” Chester Dexter said to me.

“Thanks for saving me,” I said to Chester Dexter.

Janice rubbed Chester Dexter’s face.

“Hero looks good on you,” she said.

We parked and Chester Dexter got out. We followed. I understood why people loved Chester Dexter. It felt like right to him was the safest place to be.

Andre was Jamaican. His parents were in the import business. He was standing in the doorway when we walked up.

“Chester Fucking Dexter,” he said. “Have everything you want. Everyone’s in the basement.”

He looked at me cross-eyed.

“Who’s your man?” Andre asked Chester Dexter.

“Dude’s going to ball at Indiana next year,” Chester Dexter said.

Andre dapped me up, smiles and showed yellow teeth.

“Anything you need,” Andre said to me.

Chester Dexter and Janice headed upstairs.

“Meet you in the basement,” Chester Dexter said to Renaissance.

“Try not to start a war,” Janice said to me.

Renaissance grabbed my arm.

“Come on,” he said. He dragged me into the kitchen.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

He looked through the fridge. He sniffed fruit, opened Tupperware, tasted the milk.

“Come on,” I said.

“Janice loves you,” Renaissance said with his head stuffed into a head of lettuce.

“What?” I asked.

“Janice,” Renaissance said. “She talks about you all the time.”

“She does?” I asked.

“You’re her best friend,” Renaissance said.

Renaissance finished with the fridge. He started looking through the cabinets.

“Why are you telling me this?” I asked.

“Dexter is cool,” Renaissance said. “But he’s not ready for the world.”

“He seems ready,” I said.

“You’re ready,” Renaissance said. “I can smell it on you.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“You know,” Renaissance said. “You got the musk.”

Renaissance emerged from a cabinet with two bottles of Coke.

“Can’t hide from me,” Renaissance said to his discovery.

I decided Renaissance wasn’t a part of reality. I followed him into the basement.

“There it is,” Renaissance said. “There’s what we want.”

He pointed to a keg surrounded by liquor bottles.

He used me as a wedge through the crowd. I spilled someone’s drink.

Renaissance apologized on my behalf.

“He doesn’t know any better,” he said. “Fancy boy doesn’t have any manners.”

There was a line for the booze. Renaissance pushed us to the front.

“Give me that.” He took the Coke out of my hands. “Let’s forget who we are.”

He picked up a bottle of vodka, took a swig from it, took a swig from the Coke, and passed the two bottles to me.

“Do it,” he said.

I did as he said. I passed the bottles back to him. He repeated. I repeated. He repeated. I repeated. A guy with a Mohawk asked Renaissance if he could get some.

“This guy’s sick with something incurable.” Renaissance nodded towards me.

“But it’s my bottle,” Mohawk said.

“Do you want to die?” Renaissance asked.

Mohawk left us alone.

“You’re alright,” Renaissance said to me.

“I think you’re a bad person,” I said.

“That’s true,” he said. “But I could be worse.”

“I’m going to throw up,” I said.

“Figures,” Renaissance said.

“Where’s the bathroom?” I asked.

“I have to piss in the one down here,” he said. “Go to the second floor. Don’t get us kicked out again.”

I put a hand over my mouth and took off.

Chester Dexter bumped into me when I was running up to the second floor. He shook his head.

“You’re a pest,” he said and kept walking.

Janice was in the bathroom when I barged in.

“Jesus, Claude,” she said. “Knock.”

“I have to throw up,” I said. “What were you doing?”

I barely made it to the toilet. Janice sat on the sink and laughed.

“Do you love me, Claude?” she asked. I couldn’t answer.

“You want me all to yourself?” she asked. “Don’t you?”

When I finished I looked up at her and saw that she was crying. I hadn’t seen her cry since Jimmy died. She used to ask me questions like that all the time when she first became my sister. She’d walked into my room late at night and crawl into bed with me. Then I’d try to kiss her and she’d leave.

“When you look at me do you see something you want forever?” she asked.

I wanted to fall asleep on the bathroom floor. She flushed the toilet for me. She rubbed my back.

“You’re a loser, Claude,” she said. “You offer nothing.”

“I know you love me,” I said.

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

“Renaissance told me,” I said.

“That guy huffs spray paint,” she said.

“That’s what I thought,” I said.

She smiled and wiped her eyes on a hand towel. Then she wiped my mouth. She looked like she wasn’t finished talking yet. Renaissance busted in.

“Get it together,” he said. “Let’s boogie. Dex’s in the chariot.”

The cops were downstairs yelling. Renaissance snatched a throw blanket off the couch on our way out.

In the car Chester Dexter told us he was hungry.

“Maxwell Street?” Renaissance asked.

“Maxwell Street,” Chester Dexter said.

Maxwell Street was right off the expressway and sold Polish sausages and porkchops and hamburgers twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. I’d never been there that late on a Saturday. It looked like another party, which made me want to throw up again.

“Janice,” Chester Dexter said when we pulled up. “Get us three Polishes and three burgers. And whatever you want.”

“This is on me.” Renaissance handed her two twenties. Janice slammed the door.

“Claude,” Chester Dexter said through the rearview mirror. “Janice told me you fucked her.”

“Chill,” Renaissance said to Chester Dexter.

“I’m chill,” Chester Dexter said. “I just want him to know that I know.”

“It was only once,” I said.

Chester Dexter didn’t say anything. He watched Janice order.

“I think she’s going to break up with me,” Chester Dexter said.

Renaissance poked me in the ribs. Renaissance pulled the blunt from earlier out of his sock.

“Why you say that?” Renaissance asked.

“Just got the feeling,” Chester Dexter said.

“That’s just Janice,” I said.

“Does she talk about me?” Chester Dexter said.

“Just about how cool you are,” I said.

Renaissance passed me the blunt. Janice made her way back to the car. She handled her armful of greasy paper bags with grace and ease.

“I don’t know,” Chester Dexter said. “There’s something about her I can’t figure out.”

“I know,” I said.

“She loves you,” Chester Dexter said to me.

“I know,” I said.

We ate in almost silence. Every now and then Janice would say something about how beautiful Chicago was at night. How she couldn't believe we got to live in a place this beautiful.

"Will you miss it?" she asked Chester Dexter. "Will you miss it when you're famous?"

"No," Chester Dexter said. "No. I won't. I'll miss you."

"Yeah," Janice said. "Right."

We finished eating. Chester Dexter drove us home. Renaissance was asleep grinning when I closed the door.

Paul and Grandma were both asleep in the living room. Paul was sitting up, snoring. Grandma had her head in his lap, snoring. We tip toed up the stairs together.

"Do you think we'll be like that?" Janice asked outside my room. "Do you think we'll be together forever?"

"I don't know," I said.

"I hope not." She walked upstairs to her attic.

Ohio

In March, I heard Janice break Chester Dexter's heart. They were underneath my window, on the front porch, smoking clove cigarettes.

"Can't you come with me?" Chester Dexter asked.

"To Ohio?" Janice asked.

"Yeah, everywhere," Chester Dexter said.

"What am I going to do in Ohio with you?" Janice asked.

"You can be my girl," Chester Dexter said.

"That's not something to do," Janice said. "That's not a reason."

"You can be rich," Chester Dexter said.

"That's something I can do on my own," Janice said.

"You can do anything you want," Chester Dexter said.

"I can do anything I want in Chicago," Janice said. "I can do anything I want anywhere I want."

"Then let's go to Ohio," Chester Dexter said.

“You should go home,” Janice said.

“You’re making a mistake,” Chester Dexter said.

“No, I’m not,” Janice said.

I heard Chester Dexter peel away in his charcoal grey Jeep. I heard Janice light another clove cigarette. I put on my slippers and rehearsed consoling lines. I heard the front door open.

“What’s going on?” Grandma asked Janice.

“He wants to take me to Ohio,” Janice said.

“That’s too bad,” Grandma said.

“We don’t have anything to talk about,” Janice said. “He just wants to look at me.”

“That’s all they ever want to do,” Grandma said.

“If I went with him,” Janice said. “I’d never have to work.”

“Give me one of those,” Grandma said.

I heard Grandma light a clove cigarette. I heard Grandma cough.

“Am I stupid?” Janice asked. “Am I making a stupid mistake?”

“You know how times I could’ve moved to Ohio?” Grandma asked. “You know how many men have asked me to move to LA, France, New York, Miami? Hell, one fool even tried to get me to follow him to Nebraska.”

“Why didn’t you go?” Janice asked.

“Because my life isn’t about following men around,” Grandma said. “And you know what happened when those fools moved away without me? You think they called, or wrote, or came back to visit?”

“They didn’t,” Janice said.

“Of course they didn’t,” Grandma said. “Cause they were full of shit and scared of being alone in a new place. That’s all. They’re just scared and want us to help them. And helping them isn’t what we’re about.”

“I’m scared too,” Janice said.

“Damn right,” Grandma said. “It’s scary out in the world. You think I wasn’t scared when I had a baby daughter and no family and no man and no money?”

“Then you met Paul,” Janice said. “You found someone to help you.”

“Paul,” Grandma said. “Paul couldn’t help himself to a free buffet. And I love Paul. When he dies, I’m going to grieve until I’m buried next to him.”

“Claude is my best friend,” Janice said.

“I know,” Grandma said.

“I love him,” Janice said.

“I know,” Grandma said.

“He cares about me,” Janice said.

“I know,” Grandma said.

“He understands me,” Janice said.

“I know,” Grandma said.

“Ohio sounds awful,” Janice said.

“I crashed a man’s Corvette outside Cleveland,” Grandma said.

I heard gunshots in the distance.

“Come on,” Grandma said.

I closed my eyes and thought of the places I'd go with Janice, everywhere I'd follow her. I heard sirens get closer closer closer closer and speed by.

His sophomore year at Ohio State, Chester Dexter broke his leg in five places. I heard it on TV. He moved back to Chicago and started selling used cars on Pulaski Road.

I haven't heard anything about Renaissance.

Missouri

A week after Janice dumped Chester Dexter, my acceptance letter from Missouri came in a large envelope. I opened it at dinner.

“Without asking us?” Grandma asked.

“Why the hell would you apply to place like that?” Paul asked.

“Without asking us?” Janice asked.

“I’m going,” I said.

“No, you’re not,” Grandma said.

“Why would you do some stupid shit like that?” Paul said.

“You’re not going,” Janice said.

“I can’t stay in Chicago,” I said.

“Yes, you can,” Grandma said.

“All they got in Missouri is BBQ and guns and backwards politics,” Paul said

“You can stay here,” Janice said.

“It’s the best journalism school in the country,” I said.

“Northwestern,” Grandma said. “Go to Northwestern.”

“I didn’t get in,” I said.

“Apply next year,” Janice said. “Take a year off.”

“College is overrated,” Paul said. “I can teach you anything you need to know.”

“They have alumni networks all over the world,” I said. “They have a study abroad program in Germany.”

“Germany!” Grandma yelled.

“Expatriate!” Paul yelled.

“Why do you want to get so far away?” Janice asked.

“I can’t stay here anymore,” I said.

“Don’t you feel it?” I asked.

“Feel what?” Paul asked.

“Your insanity?” Grandma asked.

“Feel what?” Janice asked.

“Chicago doesn’t want us!” I yelled. I stood. I stopped and turned around before I walked out the kitchen.

“They’re closing schools,” I said. “They’re closing businesses. Obama isn’t going to do anything. He can’t do anything. No one can do anything. Tell me: is South Shore any better off now than it was ten years ago? Twenty years ago. Nothing is ever going to change. There’s no way to change it. And the rest of the world isn’t like this. We think the world is just like Chicago and it isn’t. Civilization has moved on. The rest of the world isn’t still corrupt, broken, wild, and dangerous. I could get shot any day for doing

nothing. Just like that. Killed. Bang, Walking down the street. The rest of the world isn't like this. We're trapped in this toxic bubble and we can't breathe and we think that's okay. What's wrong with us?"

I sat on the floor.

"Are you done?" Grandma said.

"Yes," I said.

"You're wrong," Grandma said.

"What?" I asked.

"The entire universe is ruined," Grandma said. "And no one wants us anywhere."

"I'm going," I said.

"If you leave," Grandma said. "You'll come right back."

"I won't," I said.

Grandma joined me in the doorway. She pulled me up.

"You will," Grandma said. "The world is no place for a self-hating black boy."

"Why won't you let me leave?" I asked.

"I'll let you leave," Grandma said. "And I'll let you come right back when everything goes wrong."

Paul shuffled into my room after dinner.

"I'm not staying," I said.

"Listen," Paul said. "We'll support you no matter how crazy your crazy-ass ideas are. We love you. We'll support you. I'm going to miss you. That's all. We're all going to miss you. Now, let us miss you."

Leaving and Asking

Janice, Grandma, and I were about to sit down for dinner when Paul came home with a fresh bruise on his face. He walked into the kitchen, vowed revenge, went upstairs to work on a list of targets.

“Grandma asks do you want broccoli,” I said from his doorway. He was hunched over his desk with his back to me.

“A heavy hand is going to fall,” he said.

“Can Janice have your broccoli?” I asked. “If you don’t want any.”

“How’s the list coming?” I asked.

“Almost done,” he said. “Justice is about to bite someone. Right on the ass.”

“Grandma wants to know if she should put an ice pack in the freezer,” I said. “For your face.”

“Yes,” he said. “Please.”

“Dinner’s ready,” I said.

“Tell Janice to stay off my broccoli,” he said. “I’m in no mood.”

He lifted his head up but didn’t turn around.

“Can I do this?” he asked the wall.

“I don’t think so,” I said. “Grandma doesn’t think so. Janice doesn’t care.”

“What do you think?” he asked.

“I think you can,” I lied.

“Don’t lie to me,” he said. “I’m done.”

“Can I see?” I asked.

He waved me over. The list wasn’t really a list. It was one name, Charles Doyle, written ten times.

“Should I drive you to the hospital?” I asked.

“Charles Doyle is going to need a hospital,” he said.

“Grandma thinks you should eat,” I said.

“Where’s my staff?” he asked. “I have to practice.”

He bought the staff at a garage sale in Cicero. The woman said it was African and ancient. Paul paid sixty dollars. He threatened me with it whenever I called him insane. He pulled it out from under his bed.

“Leave,” he said. “I must change.”

“Should I put your food in the oven?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “Warm my plate. Please. Thank you.”

I heard him stomping his feet and yelling as I walked back down the stairs. That was a week before graduation. Grandma thought Paul was acting out because I was leaving for Missouri after summer.

After dinner I sat with her on the porch. Paul stomped around upstairs.

“Are you going to live with your parents?” she asked.

“Missouri’s big,” I said. “I don’t even know where they are.”

“Not that big,” she said. “Not big like California, or Texas.”

“Nothing is that big,” I said.

“Do you think they ever cared about you?” she asked.

“Maybe,” I said.

“You’re soft,” she said. “You deserve Missouri.”

“You’ve never been there,” I said.

“You’re soft. You’re going there. It’s soft,” she said. “It’s cold. I’m going inside.”

It wasn’t cold. I followed her in.

Paul practiced with his staff all night. Something shattered when I was about to fall asleep. It sounded like the breaking of a lamp.

Over breakfast, Janice told Grandma about her plans for after graduation. Paul was upstairs training.

“What do you mean you’re not going to college?” Grandma asked.

“I want to work,” Janice said.

“Doing what?” I asked.

“The service industry,” Janice said.

“You want to serve people food?” Grandma said. “What the hell is wrong with you two?”

“I want to be in control of my life,” Janice said.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Grandma said.

“It’s more than just serving tables,” Janice said.

“You want to serve people alcohol?” Grandma asked.

“Some of those places downtown,” Janice said. “The people that work there make six figures a year.”

“Six figures?” Grandma asked. “When did you start talking like that?”

“Really?” I asked. “They make that much money.”

“Yeah,” Janice said. “I met this guy at a party—”

“Claude,” Grandma said. “Fuck out of here now.”

Paul was in his room. He was sitting on his bed out of breath.

“Did you do it?” I asked.

“Not yet,” he said. “Can’t leave anything to chance.”

He threw himself onto the carpet and started doing push ups. He got to four and a half and collapsed.

“What did you do to him?” I asked.

“Me?” he asked. He stood up.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Me?” he asked again. He took a step towards me.

“You must’ve done something,” I said.

“Me?” he asked again. “Me do something?”

“Yeah,” I said. Our faces were almost touching.

“He took something from me,” he said.

“What?” I asked.

“A man,” he said. “He took a man from me.”

“You don’t have a man,” I said.

“Correct,” he said. “Not anymore.”

“Janice and Grandma might kill each other,” I said.

“Your mom was the same way,” he said.

“How?” I asked.

“She wanted to kill Grandma,” he said. “Grandma is unkillable.”

He fell back down on the carpet and tried to do five more push-ups. He only made it to two. He rose to his knees.

“You know you’re not going to see her?” he asked.

“Mom?” I asked.

“Or dad,” he said.

“I don’t even know where they are,” I said.

“Just checking,” he said. “They don’t want to see you.”

“I know,” I said. “But they might.”

“No,” he said. “They won’t.”

He picked up his staff.

“You should probably get out,” he said. “It’s going to get dangerous.”

Janice ran past me and slammed her bedroom door.

Paul woke me after midnight. He was wearing all black and had an “X” painted over his face. He was holding his staff.

“Come on,” he said. “I need help.”

“I have school in the morning,” I said.

I rolled over. He rolled me back.

“Don’t make me use this.” He raised the staff over my head.

“Okay,” I said. “But I’m not changing.”

“Your loss,” he said.

We climbed into Grandma’s Cadillac. I was wearing boxers, flip-flops, and a Phippen jersey. Paul put the staff in the backseat.

We drove for ten minutes and pulled in front of an apartment building. Paul turned off the car.

“Now,” Paul said. “We wait.”

“For what?” I asked.

“The prey,” he said.

“I should be asleep,” I said.

“You can sleep when you die,” he said. “This is important.”

Paul looked around.

“Never give up something without a fight,” Paul said.

“I know,” I said.

“How do you know that?” Paul said.

“You’ve told me that before,” I said.

“Have I?” Paul asked.

“I think so,” I said.

“Sounds like something I’d say,” Paul said.

“I know,” I said.

“Raised you right,” Paul said.

We both sat in silence and considered whether or not that was true.

“Do you ever talk to my parents?” I asked.

“I used to,” he said. “When the first ran away.”

“What are they like?” I asked.

“They’re the same,” he said. He didn’t look at me. He kept his eyes on the deserted street. Whenever a car drove past he ducked a little.

“I remember some things,” I asked.

“Like what?” Paul asked.

“Like dad fighting that man in the street,” I said.

Paul laughed.

“And dad out in the lake when Jordan came back,” I said.

“That did it for your mom,” Paul said.

“What was mom like?” I asked.

“Your mom wasn’t like a mom,” he said. “Your dad wasn’t like a dad.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“You were an accident,” he said. “They never wanted you.”

“I know that,” I said. “Besides that.”

“Duck,” he said. “You’re going to blow our cover.”

I ducked.

“But what did they like?” I asked.

“Your dad liked poetry and Mike Royko,” he said. “We all loved Mike Royko.”

“I know about Mike Royko,” I said.

We sat in silence and consider Mike Royko.

“Your mom liked thinking of better places,” Paul said.

“When was the last time you talked to them?” I asked. The staff felt heavy in between my legs.

“After the riots,” he said. “They wanted to see if any of us died.”

“Are they together?” I asked. “Are they happy?”

“They don’t know what happiness is,” he said. “They’re not together.”

“What do they do now?” I asked.

“Your mom is married to a man that makes boats,” he said.

“Did she ask about me?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “She doesn’t like you.”

“Did she ever?” I asked. “What does Dad do?”

“Duck lower,” he said. “The time might be near.”

“What does Dad do?” I asked.

A grey truck crept past us.

“What?” he said. “Your dad is lonely and broken.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because he followed someone to Missouri,” he said. “Don’t follow people to Missouri.”

The gray truck pulled into a spot up the block.

“It’s go time,” Paul said. “Give me that.”

Charles Doyle stepped out of the truck. He stood under a streetlight. He grabbed his bag from the backseat. He was wearing a janitor outfit. He hobbled in our direction.

“Keep a look out,” Paul said. His voice quivered.

He stepped out of the car with his staff. I rolled down my window. He jumped in front of the man and started wildly swinging. He held the staff out in front of his body. They advanced on each other.

“This is your last chance,” Paul said. His legs were unstable.

“Round 2?” Charles Doyle asked.

Paul got close enough to try a move I saw him practice on Grandma’s mannequin. He jumped in the air, held the staff like a javelin, and tried to jab it into Charles Doyle’s neck. He called it the Kill Shot. It worked one out of ten times against the mannequin. Charles Doyle stepped to the side. Paul lunged past him. Charles Doyle yanked the staff out of Paul’s hands with ease. Paul turned around and sprinted back to the car. Charles Doyle was close behind.

“Start the car!” Paul yelled.

Lights turned on in apartment building windows.

A voice yelled out from above “Paul! Paul!? I never loved you!”

I started the car. Paul slid over the hood. Charles Doyle broke a headlight with the staff. Paul crawled into the driver’s seat, backed into the car behind us, set off the car alarm, and we tore down the street. Charles Doyle threw the staff. It pierced the rear window like a javelin.

“Come back for more!” Charles Doyle yelled.

Paul ran three red lights. I heard him sniffing.

Janice was smoking on the porch when we pulled into the driveway. Paul tried to act smooth.

“Don’t tell Grandma,” he told us. He went inside. I stayed out with Janice.

“Can I go with you?” Janice asked. “To Missouri?”

I sat down next to her. I didn’t notice my hands shaking in the car. I couldn’t stop them.

“Paul almost got us killed,” I said.

“I have nothing here,” she said.

“What about the service industry?” I asked. “What six figures? What about that guy?”

“He hasn’t called me back,” she said.

She put her head on my shoulder. She let the cigarette hang off her lips.

“What would you do there?” I asked.

“What will I do here?” she asked.

“I have to live in the dorms,” I said.

“I’ll live on the street,” she said. “I need to get out of Chicago before I end up like everybody else.”

“You’re not like everybody else,” I said.

“I’m cold,” she said.

It wasn’t cold. She kissed me on the cheek before she went into her room.

The Cadillac looked worse in daylight. Grandma smashed plates in the kitchen. She cornered Paul. She called him names like Clown and Sorry Boy. The staff was propped against the front door. The Cadillac looked worse in daylight.

When I got home Janice told me about Amsterdam, Missouri.

“It’s small,” she said. “I need small right now.”

“I have to live in Columbia,” I said.

“Is Columbia small?” she asked.

“Not really,” I said.

“I need small,” she said.

“What’s going with you?” I asked.

“The world feels too big,” she said.

“I don’t think I want to leave,” I said.

“You have to leave,” Janice said.

“Why?” I asked.

“You’re not stupid,” Janice said.

“You’re not stupid either,” I said.

“I know,” Janice said.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“I want to live in Amsterdam with you,” Janice said.

“Why?” I said.

“I want start a bakery and you can write your stories,” Janice said.

“You don’t know how to bake,” I said.

“I don’t want children,” Janice said.

“Me neither,” I said.

“I just want to matter,” Janice said.

“You matter to me,” I said.

“And you’re leaving,” Janice said.

Paul called for me.

“Claude!” He yelled. “Come check this out!”

Grandma yelled back.

“No yelling! Everyone’s on timeout!”

Janice followed me into Paul’s room.

“Okay,” he said. “So the staff was the problem.”

“We shouldn’t talk about this,” I said.

“Okay,” he said. “We need something lighter, something more aerodynamic.”

“Like a knife,” Janice said.

“I’m not trying to kill him,” Paul said. “Just teach him a lesson. I’m too deadly with a knife.”

Paul removed a pair of nunchucks from his desk drawer

“Where did you get those?” I asked.

“I’ve been saving them for a special occasion,” he said.

“He’s going to kill you,” I said.

“He is who will die,” Paul said.

“He’s going to kill you,” Janice said.

“It’s too late to get in on the action, young lady,” Paul said. “Your ship has sailed.”

“Why do you care so much?” I asked.

“Because I have dignity,” Paul said.

“No you don’t,” Janice said.

“I have homework,” I said.

Paul twirled the nunchucks and hit himself in the stomach. Janice left.

“You’re going to kill yourself,” I said.

“When someone wrongs you,” he said. “They must pay for wronging you.”

“It was just a man,” I said.

“A man is never just a man,” Paul said. “There are no small injustices in this world.”

“Fine,” I said. His eyes were tearing up.

“I need to practice,” he said. “Get out. I will let you know when it’s time.”

Grandma was standing in my room.

“You know Paul is going to get himself killed, right?” she asked. She sat on my bed and patted the spot next to her. I sat down and she inched closer to me.

“You know I didn’t raise you like someone that follows their parents to Missouri,” she said. “And follows idiots into street fights and gets their Grandma’s Cadillac smashed up.”

“Janice wants to come with me,” I said.

“Are you guys fucking again?” she asked.

“No,” I said.

“Is that why she’s acting all crazy?” she asked.

“Why would that make her act crazy?” I asked.

“You’re the best person in this house,” she said. “That’s not saying much. But it’s saying something.”

“What’s it saying?” I asked.

“It’s saying enough,” she said. “This place is going to crumble without you.”

She pinched my ear.

“The world might end.” She left.

“Give me those!” She yelled at Paul from down the hallway.

“This is an island of despair!” Paul yelled back.

“How much ass am I going to have to kick today?” Grandma sounded hollow.

Like there was a part deep inside her that wasn't working right.

That night I thought about my parents. I looked into my mirror and imagined which features were mom's, which were dad's, and which belonged to some ancestor I'd never know about. I wondered what mom sounded like when she wanted to kill Grandma. Did her voice sound like a cartoon, like Janice? Or was it deep and forceful in a way that made you believe she could do it? Did she possess qualities that made her seem capable of anything? Did I get those qualities from her? Or did Grandma lie to me about my promise? Just to make me feel better? Just to make Grandma feel better about raising another failure?

Did mom look back at Chicago as she drove south? Was she moving too fast? Were her windows down? Was there music that I could recognize? Did she sense the man she was leaving dad for would leave her in the same way? Just leave a note and vanish. If she felt it did she ignore that feeling, or did she just not care? Was it not about the man? Was it about me? Was it about Chicago? Missouri winters are bad also. It couldn't have been about winters.

Was she as bad as Paul and Grandma say? Did she do things that make you love her no matter what, like Janice? Did she pull her out her hair when she got nervous? Or

sneeze without covering her mouth and apologize every time because her snot got everywhere, on everyone?

Did dad hate mom? Did he stay with her out of fear? Did he think he couldn't do better? That he'd be alone forever? Could he do better? Would he be alone forever? Paul said dad was lonely. But is he alone? Did he find someone that's low like him? Is he broken beyond repair? Does he not have time to think about me? Is he too concerned with himself? Should I understand? Should I feel his pain and understand? Can he not help dreaming about me? Does he have other kids also? Do they matter more than me? Less? In these dreams is he my father? Does he see Paul chasing me around with a knife in the basement? Does he think Paul is teaching me how to be a man? Is he ashamed? Happy?

Should I dream about them more? Should I fall asleep?

I feel asleep.

Janice stood over my bed. It was still dark out. Her laptop screen illuminated her face. Her eyes were wild.

"There's a Paris in Missouri." She forced himself in bed next to me.

"What?" I asked.

"It's bigger than Amsterdam," she said. "But it's still small."

"I don't know," I said.

"Fine," she said. "There's a Mexico."

"Why don't you just go to the real Mexico?" I asked.

"You wouldn't be there," she said. "And I don't have a passport."

She put her computer down and spooned against me. Her head was in my armpit. Her hair smelled like smoke. We slept like that.

Grandma woke us up.

“Sorry Boy is in the hospital.”

Paul tried Round 3 with Charles Doyle. This time he took his nunchucks. He thought if he exercised some control and precision Charles Doyle would live. Charles Doyle took the nunchucks from Paul. Paul tripped and fell on broken glass. His stomach got cut up. He took Grandma’s car again. Charles Doyle drove him to the hospital in Grandma’s Cadillac. He didn’t want to get blood in his truck. We had to take a cab to the hospital.

Charles Doyle was at the hospital talking to the cops. He didn’t recognize me. He didn’t want to press charges. He thought Paul learned his lesson.

“It’s sad,” Charles Doyle told the cops. “He thought he was dying. He said everything he loved was going to Missouri. I think he pissed himself.”

Paul and Grandma sobbed at graduation. Janice had a bouquet for me. Paul’s crying ripped open his stiches. He bled through his suit.

Janice and I went onto the porch after dinner.

“I’m not coming with you,” Janice said.

“I figured,” I said.

“It was a stupid idea,” Janice said.

“I know,” I said.

“I’m not like you,” Janice said. “I can’t leave.”

“Sure you can,” I said.

“Fine,” Janice said. “I won’t leave. I don’t want to leave. Missouri sounds horrible.”

“What are you going to do?” I asked.

“This guy got me a job downtown,” Janice said.

“Six figures?” I asked.

“I’m too young to serve liquor,” Janice said. “They call it hostessing?”

“A hostess?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Janice said. “At this club.”

“Are you happy?” I asked.

“Are you happy?” Janice asked.

“I might be,” I said.

“You want to know what I think?” Janice asked.

“Sure,” I said.

“I think happiness is an illusion,” Janice said. “Are you making your own decisions? Are you taking your own chances? Are your failures worth it? Do you make dynamite?”

“What?” I asked.

“We’ll be okay,” Janice said.

Two days later, Janice was gone. She moved into a studio apartment up north. She filled her duffle bag with wrinkled dresses. Her club was called Barcelona.

Sunset

Paul said to look scary so people wouldn't sit next to me. We were standing downtown waiting for the Megabus. To our right a man in a wrinkled blue suit crouched down and hugged two children. He was crying. The children were too. A woman stood crossed-armed behind the children, tapping her foot. After a few moments she pulled the kids away. She turned her head when the man in a wrinkled blue suit tried to kiss her forehead. The woman and children left, disappeared behind an office building. The bus was already fifteen minutes late. I only had a duffle bag. Paul and Grandma were going to mail me everything else. Microwave, Martin Luther King poster, waffles, toaster, etc.

“At least you're not like that guy,” Paul said loud enough for the man in a wrinkled blue suit to hear.

Paul spent the whole morning trying to cheer me up. I told him I wasn't sad, which was true. He insisted I was in denial. Grandma was having trouble getting around the house. She had been spending most of her time in bed. She could barely breath when she got up to kiss me goodbye.

“Here it comes,” Paul said.

The Megabus slammed on the breaks. The driver hopped out. He was wide-eyed and shaking.

“Let’s do this,” he said. “Let’s take y’all to another planet.”

“It’s not too late,” Paul said as he hoisted my duffle bag next to the other luggage. It was too late. He wasn’t crying. I could tell he was trying his best not to. He probably thought his crying would make me cry. It wouldn’t have.

“Remember,” he said. “Fart or burp if someone tries to sit next to you.”

He didn’t stay after I got on. He crossed the street and disappeared behind a smaller bus.

I-55 takes you through forgotten parts of Chicago: the Mexican neighborhoods that were once Polish neighborhoods, the Polish neighborhoods that were once swampland; the large-chain auto part shops that were once mom and pop auto part shops. Like South Shore was once Jewish. You have to take I-55 to get to Brookfield Zoo. Lincoln Park was closer, but the monkeys kept dying. Brookfield was out in the suburbs.

I-55 ends in St. Louis. From there you take I-70 to Columbia. Almost everybody got off in St. Louis.

I-70 cuts straight westward through the gut of Missouri. The bus drove into the sunset.

In Chicago, the buildings make it so you can’t see the sun dip below the horizon.

Interlude

Outside Springfield, a giant neon horseshoe sparkled over us and the gas station. We had twenty minutes to do whatever we had to do: eat, smoke, bathroom, sit and watch the highway pass, sit and look out into the flatness. Grandma's voice came through empty and distant, wounded.

"I'm scared," I said.

"Do what you have to do," Grandma said.

"I want to go home," I said.

"Try again," Grandma said.

"I don't know if I can do this," I said.

"You can do anything," Grandma said.

"How?" I asked.

"How do you think?" Grandma asked.

"Can't I come home?" I asked.

"Just listen to them," Grandma said.

Grandma said I should keep my head down, listen, do my job, come home after the work was finished.

“We’ll be here,” Grandma said.

“We’ll always be here,” Grandma said.

The bus driver honked for us to load back on.

“Love you,” I said.

“Love you too,” Grandma said.

A crop plane passed low overhead. There were birds I’d never seen before. Two hours to St. Louis.

Book Two

Missouri

Fog Continued

I saw two bus stations that day, hundreds of miles apart, similar in almost every way except noise and bustle. Here: a short man cried atop a pile of luggage, under a faded streetlight; all the streetlights were faded, illuminated soft scenes. There, back home: no need for quiet drama; no one cared.

“That’s mine.” A man in a gold and black striped jumpsuit pointed at my feet, at his bag I had accidentally grabbed from under the bus.

“My bad,” I said. “Do you have mine?”

“What do you think this is?” he said.

“I need to get to Stadium Boulevard,” I said. Paul put a hotel room on his credit card and maxed it out.

“Where do you think you are?” he said.

He snatched his bag, headed towards the glow of an unoccupied faded streetlight, enacted his sorrow with flailing arms and contorting torso. His hair was long and black and stiff at the ends. I hadn't noticed.

My bag was gone. My phone was dead. My wallet was empty. My hotel was across town.

Junkies didn't beg here. They slept on benches, shuffled between parked cars, allowed us passage into and out of their world, and didn't carry luggage. Were those junkies? Or were they just lost like me? Skinnier, yeah; similar pace: I shuffled too. I shuffled up to the bus driver and asked if he'd seen my bag. He asked what was special about my bag. I told him it was lost. He asked if I'd ever hitchhiked cross-country for a music festival and a girl and a promise at a new life. I told him no. He asked if that was any way to live. His stance—leaned against the bus, feet crossed and ballet-like, hands withdrawn into back pockets—his stance was hard to investigate. Was he serious at all? Did he take the same stance, back in the day, when he told his classmates about sex and love and made-up twilight rendezvous? Was he lost too? Missouri felt heavy handed. He started whistling. I turned around and went to stand someplace else. Did all his conversations end like that?

Everyone I recognized from the bus was gone. Everyone I knew in Missouri was gone. A mom, dad, and three young daughters organized their belongings next to me. Everyone left was headed to Kansas City and would arrive in time for the ten o'clock news. I stared at the family for too long and the mom held two of the daughters close, the dad held the third. I had to get to Stadium Boulevard and didn't know where to start. A

skinny apparition shuffled up behind me and grabbed my triceps. I knocked over a rolling suitcase when I jumped back. The skinny apparition was a shiny-toothed man around my age. The fallen suitcase got everyone's attention.

"You're lost," the skinny apparition man with shiny teeth said.

"Don't touch me," I said.

He touched my biceps and our faces were close. Behind those shiny teeth were tiny dying animals, it smelled like.

"Don't touch me," I said.

"I know what you're looking for." He winked. The crowd responded. Moms and dads held their children close.

"Let the boy go."

"Should we call the cops?"

"This is between them."

"We shouldn't get involved."

"This one probably owes that one money."

"Let's not get involved."

"I want to go home."

"Kansas City is home and we're close."

"I want to go home for real. Back to Minneapolis."

"We can never go back there."

"Let them fight it out."

"ALL ABOARD! LAST BUS TONIGHT!"

Everyone around us slid onto the bus, careful not to touch us. They sucked in their bellies, turned sideways, studied shoelaces, held the hands of people they couldn't without. Tight, careful.

"Help," I said.

"You need help."

"Good luck."

"We should give them change."

"They'll spend it on drugs."

"Or booze"

"Or gifts they can't afford."

"And shouldn't buy."

"Help," I said.

"You need Christ."

"Here we go again."

"What?"

"With that Christ stuff."

"Please move along."

"Go to hell."

"Take it back."

"Take me back."

"FINAL CALL FOR KANSAS CITY. LAST BUS TONIGHT!"

The skinny apparition man kept his eyes on mine; his narrowed slightly, mine widened. The bus filled and then drove off. I heard a passenger wish me luck from a

window. The engine muffled their voice and they could've said something like "go fuck." Luck was what I needed, that's what I heard.

"My name's Jeremiah." Jeremiah still had hands on my biceps. I flexed. He didn't notice, squeezed tighter, told me to keep my emotions locked up—*easy, easy, be easy*.

"My name's Claude." I turned my head from side to side and only saw shadows. Some of them stayed still, others swayed (?), some appeared to stand up and stretch their distorted legs. I couldn't tell if we were alone. I felt alone. I felt Jeremiah's long nails under my skin.

"I'm going to rob you now, Claude," Jeremiah said.

Jeremiah was sick with something, he said. I thought he was sick with drugs. He explained his sickness was more profound than an addiction and more time consuming. He pulled me closer. He warmed me against Missouri and love and possessions and organic green juices and hate speech and second amendment rights and laying outside on your back and looking up shooting stars and trying to run across a river without first checking its depth and building snowballs too early in winter and poetry and fiction and movies about mobsters acting like humans and shows about humans acting like mobsters and not calling your mother enough and exploding a quarry without an exit strategy and voting and not voting and not standing up for what you believe in and happiness and old tonics and fly-over states; life, he said, isn't easy to figure out. Our noses touched. His was crusted at the tip.

"I don't want your money," Jeremiah said. "But I'm going to take it."

"I lost my bag," I said.

"That's a start," Jeremiah said.

“I don’t have any money,” I said.

“Very good,” Jeremiah said.

He released me and shook his hands. My arms were sore.

“You, Mr. Claude,” Jeremiah said. “You will do well in this place.”

“I need to get to Stadium Boulevard,” I said. My legs were shaking and I had not noticed. I knew I’d cry the moment Jeremiah turned his back and disappeared. I knew he would disappear even before he did. The way he looked at me next—those eyes I got to know well during our time together.

“Over that horizon,” Jeremiah said, pointing south, over my shoulder.

I turned around and faced the short apartment buildings and the shorter businesses, closed for the evening and dark; nothing was taller than three floors. All the streetlights were dim, orange, and cloaked in mosquitos and moths. This was it: my new home. Where were all the cars? Where was the racket? The silence wasn’t peaceful. The distant insect chirping wasn’t soothing.

I didn’t notice Jeremiah pick up my bag and run.

When I visited Grandma in the hospital before I left, she told me about exercising agency in this world. She coughed. She asked me: what about your past lives, Claude? She asked: what if you’re reincarnated as a candy wrapper? Could you stand wasting these good years—good golden years right in front of you—if you had to spend the next eternity in a pile of trash lost at sea? Make something of yourself down there, she said. What was there to make? I didn’t have much to work with: broke and no clothes, tired and no bed. I was supposed to come down here and turn into a journalist and work for

The New York Times. I'd do that for Grandma, since she asked. Who else? I couldn't give Paul anything he didn't already have. Janice had boyfriends that took her to dinners at underground restaurants without windows and flew her to pacific islands you need a magnifying glass to find on standard issue maps. I never did anything for Dad. Mom... I saw Mom. I heard her voice. I hadn't seen her since she left. I didn't remember what she looked like before she left. Past, current, future—what were her lives? Did she drive an old Cadillac with black leather seats? Does a son know that about his mother? In his gut, in his water, in his bones, in his stones?

State Ave cut through a deserted part of campus, deserted on the surface, at least. No one around. I recognized some buildings from the glossed brochure they sent me a few weeks ago: Red Campus. Founders Jonathan H. Birthright and Charles M. Charles personally supervised Red Campus's construction, according to the glossed brochure; antebellum red-bricked structures peeked through darkness, off-kilter, askew. The Oldest colleges were located on Red Campus: Agriculture, English, History, Engineering, Poetry, Irrigation, Anatomy, Husbandry, Native American Studies, and Journalism. White Campus, put together with large pale stone chunks and located across Truman Stream, started as an off-property one-story jail for Bootleggers.

University Spokesperson Wilma Sugarbird sent out an e-mail in July regarding White Campus's continued expansion for the purpose of accommodating first-rate facilities for Computer Science, Aeronautical Engineering, Astrophysics, Quantum Physics, and Agricultural Engineering.

Dorms were on White Campus.

Recipients of the Meredith Miles Marmaduke Scholarship of Excellence lived on Red Campus in a four-story mansion with tall columns and few windows. Athletes lived off-campus, close to the stadium, in a series of town houses gifted by the Gilded-Schlopp family.

I passed a building named after Thomas Jefferson with a doorway named after Thomas Hart Benton—Agriculture. I passed a building named after Omar Bradley, a building named after Charles Lindbergh, a fountain named after T.S. Elliot, a large stone named after Tennessee Williams, a smaller building named after Mark Twain. These buildings didn't have names until halfway through the twentieth century. Through naming, the glossed brochure said, we appreciate and keep alive the memory of Missouri's luminaries.

State Avenue started shrinking. The four-lane road had funneled into a two-lane road then a one-lane one-way than this: a large opened gate with "Welcome Home" carved into a fat arch. The one-lane one-way turned into a thin tree-lined path. Here were the famous dogwoods.

After Truman inherited the Presidency and dropped the bomb and won the war, the Gilded-Schlopp family sent over twenty flowering dogwood saplings. Now they're grown and this path appears on all promotional material. When the flowers bloom in spring, supposedly, they're an indescribable sight, life-changingly beautiful and all that. Grandma said there were plenty of dogwoods in the world. Another way, Grandma said, that school is full of shit, nothing special.

The thin path forked after the dogwoods ended.

Walking down a thing tree-lined path, alone and in silence, isn't all its cracked up to be. I felt the same as I did when I got of the bus: mostly tired, a little fearful, tired, angry at something I couldn't identify. Myself, for leaving Chicago? Janice, for never calling back? Paul, for getting me a room on the other side of town? Myself, for leaving Chicago, for *this*?

A light in a first-floor window to the right. To the left, more darkness. How long had I walked, so far?

I approached the light, crouched.

Leather-bound Encyclopedias propped open the window. I was expecting a janitor, someone that could point me in the correct direction. What I got was something dreamlike and hard to comprehend; the last thing I needed more of.

What I saw was a young man and young woman in black leotards, both blonde and wide-shouldered, practicing jumps and lifts in a classroom. Chairs and desks pushed aside, the man stood in the middle of the room with the woman held above his head, her legs parted at his forehead, her face towards me, her arms extended, his face turning red. He looked familiar, from a place I couldn't picture.

A third person, an older woman in a silver fur coat and blue lipstick, smoked a long pipe in a corner, atop a desk, cross-legged, keeping a slow rhythm with steady claps.

"Again," she said out the corner of her mouth, voice followed by smoke.

The man lowered the woman, kind and gentle, and the woman bounced across the room. She straightened her back and I straightened mine.

"One, two, three." The older woman sped up her claps. "One, two, three."

"Onetwo, three."

“Onetwothree.”

“Onetwothree.”

“GO!”

Two quick and powerful strides took her into the air. The man grabbed her waist with a slap. She froze like a starfish. The older woman was in front of him now.

“Lift!”

“Legs!”

He bent his legs.

“Back!”

He straightened his back, I straightened mine.

“Arms!”

Muscles bulged between muscles. Screams came between grunts. He’d lift her an inch, she’d fall two inches, he’d lift her three inches, she’d almost hit the ground.

“Don’t you fucking drop her!”

“Limp dick!”

“Flower boy!”

“Pencil dick!”

“Don’t you fucking drop me!”

He tried to roar. A falsetto squeal was all that came. He got her though, got her above his head, regained control of his face, allowed his arms to shake.

That’s it. Those arms. That face; eyes and a chin that could withstand a sledgehammer. John-Michael Jeremy. The Tallapoosa Tempest. Himself. Could it be?

John-Michael Jeremy, arm like the Mississippi River overflowing, a force of nature attached to his shoulder.

Invincible John-Michael Jeremy, The Rural Rain Maker, had this woman above his head and he looked about to burst and she looked ready to kick him in the head, his weakness unforgivable, and this older woman looking up at him and screaming unflattering things about his dick and they're the only ones with directions and I have no where else to go and this all still must be a dream, in my head, a figment of my imagination, thoughts run amok. I had to tap on the window, make my presence known. Too late: a hand on my shoulder. The hand turned me around, a flashlight pushed into my face: campus cop. From behind me, from inside the room:

“What the hell is that?”

“I got to get out of here.”

“Yeah, right. Baby dick, run.”

“Give me a ride to Tiger Spots?”

Door slammed.

“I said, ‘Excuse me, sir,’” the campus cop said. She was wearing sunglasses, peeking over them.

“That was John-Michael Jeremy, wasn't it?” I asked.

“What are you doing here?” she said.

“I'm lost,” I said.

“I don't doubt that, nope.” She extended her hand. I gave her five.

“Are you high?” she asked.

“Just tired,” I said.

“I.D., please,” she said.

I fumbled with my wallet, dropped it, couldn’t find it.

“Drunk too,” she said. “Tiger Spots is up the road.”

“I need to get to Stadium Boulevard,” I said.

She found my wallet, started thumbing through the Wal-Mart coupons Grandma gave me to use on a trashcan, trash bags, pencils, and socks.

“Isn’t it a little early for all that?” Her worry sounded sincere.

“I have a room down there,” I said. “I’m a new student.”

She had my I.D. out.

“Chicago, huh,” she said. “You know what, I’m sick of you Chicago people coming down here and—”

“No.” I took my wallet back.

“What?” She put her hand closer to her waist.

“You know what,” I said. “I’m sick of this fucking state already. I sat on the bus for eight hours. There’s nothing out there to look at. I get here and someone takes my bag and someone else puts me under a spell or who knows fucking what. There’s all this fog—”

“Biggest fog machine in the state,” she said.

“And these two frat boy assholes send me the wrong fucking way and I’ve never been here before and those trees aren’t that cool and I’m broke and John-Michael Jeremy was just in there doing ballet and Paul got me this room—”

“Who’s Paul?” she asked.

“And I just have to get to Stadium Boulevard. Please. Just tell me how to fucking get to Stadium Boulevard.”

I noticed the tears, then, when I couldn't stand looking at anything else. I looked at my feet and there they dropped.

“Are you done?” She asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

“First off,” she said. “I should slap you for using that language.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Second off,” she said. “Bring your ass along. You're going to get in trouble wondering around out here.”

Her ride was a golf cart with all-terrain tires, parked half in the grass with the engine running. As we pulled off, three shadowy figures exited the building disappeared. They left the light on and the window open; they ran as if chased by bigger shadows.

“Was that really John-Michael Jeremy?” I asked.

“Isn't he a nice thing to look at?” she asked.

“What was that?” I asked.

“Haven't you heard of rituals?” she asked.

“Who were those women?” I asked.

“Why do you care about any of this?” she asked.

“I'm Claude,” I said.

“Latifah,” she said. “Like the Queen.”

We left Red Campus in silence, crossed over Truman Stream by way of the Grant Bridge, entered White Campus in silence.

“I feel sorry for you,” Latifah said.

White Campus looked like a recently excavated futuristic city; buildings appeared covered in grey dust, deserted like Red Campus. All the buildings were named after corporations and living rich families: Nestle Purina PetCare Science Hall, Famous Footwear Renewable Energy Laboratory, Wachovia Securities Dining Hall, Schaeffer Oil Physics Dome, Gilded-Schlopp Dormitory.

“Why do you feel sorry for me?” I asked.

“Chicago,” Latifah said and shook her head. “What a pit.”

“It’s not so bad,” I said.

“Where are you from?” I asked.

“Chicago,” Latifah said. “That’s how I know that place is going to sink into the earth. I’ve seen that hell up close, I’m intimate with that fire.”

“What part of the city are you from?” I asked.

“South Side,” Latifah said. “Where else?”

“Anywhere else,” I said.

“We moved to St. Louis after my cousin died,” Latifah said.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“We moved to Kansas City after my brother died,” Latifah said.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“We moved to Washington, the town, not the city, not the state, after my father died,” Latifah said.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“We moved to Wentzville after my sister died,” Latifah said.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“We moved to Iowa for two months after my nephew died,” Latifah said.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“We moved to a twenty-year-old van after my mother died, my final sister and I, after my mother died,” Latifah said. “Think living in the van made me hate Chicago more than anything. Like Chicago started it all and we were doomed forever. I’m okay with people dying. I understand natural selection as a philosophy, a code to live by, an inescapable truth. I get it. Just. Why so many? Why so many close to me?”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

We drove across lawns, into and out of ditches, down a concrete staircase, between parallel roads dedicated to veterans and victims of both Iraq wars. There weren’t as many stars as I was expecting.

“When it’s quiet like this,” Latifah said. “Before all the students come back—this I love.”

“What happened to your sister?” I asked.

“I moved out here when she died,” Latifah said.

Missouri Pacific Railroad had a building with an all-night McDonalds on the first floor. Two workers threw ice and French fries at each other while a third watched from outside the front door, cigarette and beer in each hand.

“We’re close,” Latifah said.

“One time,” Latifah said. “When I first got hired. There was this fight in Greek City. A brawl, really. I’ve seen fights and I’ve seen brawls. That was a brawl. The news called it a fight. Perception. Reputation. Anyway. These two kids were throwing bricks at

each other from close range. And making contact. And missing some and taking out car windows. That's how it started. Beef about an unpaid debt, or a girl. I think a mix of both. Then the friends have to get involved. Then the friends of friends and their friends have to get involved. I've seen that happened everywhere. Pretty soon, the street is filled smashed properties and minor to severe injuries. A whole block. We, Campus PD, had to hold them off until the real cops with guns came. We didn't have Tasers back then. Now we got Tasers that could fry an egg inside a chicken."

We accelerated, diagonally, through a large parking lot with an overturned porta potty spewing blue slick on the asphalt. I didn't want to talk anymore. We disappeared into a parking garage.

"There's about five of us," Latifah continued. "I was new, so was Tony. The other three had experience. Had been on the job for a few years. Had resorted to violence and were fine with it. Tony. Tony didn't have it in him: the control needed to confront a brawling mob. Total control. Tony lost it. He went in there with violent intent pouring out his eyes. Messing people up. Kids. You are all kids to me."

Latifah's voice bounced around the empty parking garage.

"Thing about Tony is. He's not from around here. Let's say that. He's from New York, I think. He's from the Berkshires. Think the Berkshires are in Massachusetts too. Thing about Tony was that he saw something wrong happening and he wanted to stop it. He got in there and started unloading his fists on skull and anything else he could find. Thing about me is. I know what this place is all about. Sometimes you just have to sit back and let stuff turn out the way it's supposed to. They fired Tony for getting involved. I received a commendation for my courage under fire. This place isn't for everybody."

“Where’s Greek City?” I asked, trying for politeness.

We exited the garage.

“Here,” Latifah said.

Greek City started out as the Red Light District. Then Prohibition came and the brothels and saloons moved into the woods and the fraternities and sororities moved into the Red Light District. Greek City was on the outskirts, a five-block community with three main roads connecting the inhabitants to the outside world. Latifah told me we were heading down the middle, the uninteresting heart of darkness.

“Stadium Boulevard is right over there.” Latifah pointed straight ahead at a forty-five degree angle.

“Over those houses,” Latifah said. “We’re close.”

The houses around us varied in their states of disrepair. Some missing elements appeared easy to replace: torn-apart bushes, hanging gutters, missing steps, missing railing, chipped paint, flickering lights. Other missing elements appeared existential and difficult to name.

“Some people live here over the summer,” Latifah said. “Those people have it the worst.”

What do you say about a young man standing on his front lawn, shirtless, drinking a beer and staring blankly at the road in front of him? He didn’t wave back or acknowledge the world moving around him. What do you say about a group of young women prepping their hair in an upstairs window, checking their bras and dresses in unison, moving between mirror and handle of something clear and strong with saying anything? What would you call a dance like that? And the young men walking in a line

and peering into the sororities on their way, presumably, to Tiger Spots or some other drink deal? The way they call for the young women like a musical about tenement buildings in 1950's New York—what is that all about?

“The black frats don't have houses,” Latifah said. “They used to. At the beginning. Then the white frats kept burning their houses down and the university wouldn't do anything about it.”

“Where are the black frats?” I asked. “Paul was an Alpha, I think.”

“Who's Paul?” Latifah asked.

“He's like my uncle,” I said.

“We all got some of those,” Latifah said. “We got Alpha's here too. The black frats exist underground. Look at that. Who would want to live around that anyway?”

That was a pair of young men wrestling in a kiddie pool filled with ice as a small mix-gendered crowd looked on.

“Pledge bitch!”

“Go for the legs!”

“Go for the balls!”

“We have to go get ready.”

“I fucking love you!”

“We need another case.”

“Another shot!”

“Shot!”

“Shot!”

“Shot!”

“Shot!”

“Shoot!”

“Shoot the legs!”

“Shoot the balls!”

“You want to be one of us!”

“You want to be one of us?”

“Shoot those fucking legs!”

“Shot!”

“Shoot!”

We passed without a conclusion. I could still hear the yelling. I turned around to look. Latifah didn't. I turned back around. That wasn't anything I had to see. I wonder though: what horrible things would they do to the loser?

“They're getting the new batch settled,” Latifah said. “Rush. Pledge. Brainwash. If you asked me. Brotherhood. All that. Shit. If you ask me. Delta Kappa Psi Theta Zeta Gamma Chi Epsilon Beta Alpha Nu Mu. Shit. All of it.”

Latifah was serious now.

“We have to sit,” Latifah said. “And wait for the cops when one of those assholes rapes someone and we respond first. We have to fucking sit and wait and look at these assholes. We can't handcuff them to a railing and beat them with a sack of oranges. And if they run. They run and we have to chase them until the cops come.”

“I'm sorry,” I said.

“I'm sorry,” Latifah said. “For you. That anybody told you this was a good idea.”

Off on our right: a couch on the sidewalk with a sleeping young man sleeping on top another sleeping young man. Passed out or sleeping, still, statuesque. Tableau vivant, I think. They were painted the school colors: red and blue. Or Indian red and Egyptian blue. One face and torso was Indian red, the other Egyptian blue. They were laying face to face with their arms and hands dangling in overgrown grass and dandelions. At one point, maybe, hours ago, they were awake and happy.

“We need to check for pulses,” Latifah said, pulling over the golf cart. “If we see something like this. We need to check for pulses. Lawsuit. Couple years back.”

I followed her up to the young men; I leaned in with her. Breathing, okay. There were also dicks and boobs over their foreheads and cheeks.

“Hey!” Someone called from an open window inside the house.

“Hey!”

“Hey you!”

We looked up. One shadow was joined by another, then several.

“Yeah! Hey! You!”

“Stay away from our Pledge Bitches!”

“Stay away from our art!”

“Take these fools inside!” Latifah yelled.

“You’re fool!”

“We have rights!”

“Haven’t you ever seen art before!?”

“Don’t you know beauty!?”

“Want me to call the cops!?” Latifah said.

“Oh, shit!”

“Latifah!”

“We’re sorry!”

“Damn right!” Latifah said.

“Pledge Bitches!”

The two young men shot off the couch and stood at attention next to us, shaking, looking at the shadows in the window.

“Move it!”

The two young men sprinted into the house, so wild they both tripped up the stairs and managed to keep moving.

“We’re close,” Latifah said when we got back in the golf cart. “Stadium Boulevard is right up there.”

“They know you,” I said.

“They better,” Latifah said.

“Why?” I asked.

“Everyone knows me,” Latifah said. “I’m not a bad person to know.”

Icebreaker

RA Tom escorted us, our entire floor, into the common room. He asked the sleeping person on our common couch if he lived here. The person said no without opening their eyes. RA Tom told the person to please leave. We all stood there when the person walked out without opening their eyes. We stood there until they disappeared into an elevator and were never seen again, at least, not on our floor.

“Great!” RA Tom slapped his hands against his cargo shorts.

We had to sit in a circle, legs crossed, name tags visible. Some of the sad-looking kids chose to lean against the wall with their feet barely in the circle. Some of the kids with piercings wrote crude nicknames on their nametags. Prince Dick, for example.

We had to say three things: name, hometown, major. If we were feeling adventurous and open, no pressure, RA Tom added, only if you want to, you can say what animal you’d chose as a partner for the apocalypse.

“I’ll go first,” RA Tom said. His dress shirt looked too big for him, even with the sleeves rolled up and the bottom tucked into his cargo shorts. He didn’t pull off his look:

the spiked blonde hair and flip-flops and ankle bracelet. His face was too formless, his eyes too black

“My name is Tom...Oh, when you say your name, we’ll all say ‘Hey, blank!’ My name’s Tom.”

“Hey, Tom.”

“I’m from Kirkwood. My major is Agriculture with an emphasis on Animal Husbandry. And, let’s see, animal, animal, animal. Oh! A cow. A strong and loyal cow. Okay. Next.”

“Hey. My name’s Molly.”

“Hey, Molly.”

“I’m also from Kirkwood. Funny. Um, my major is Biology. I think. I might switch. I’ll probably switch. I don’t know.”

We were bored after Molly, after RA Tom really. We were bored and agitated after Bradley, Jayson with a Y, Samantha, Justin G., Justin S., Justin Q., Samuel, Bertha, Justine, David B. from Kansas City, David B. from St. Louis—we were ready to lose it.

“I’m Claude.”

“Hey.

“I’m from Chicago. I’m majoring in Journalism. I think whales are cool.”

“And that’s it! Thanks for bringing us home, Claude!”

The Prairie Executioner

Whitney B tore my second draft to shreds, right in my face, right on my lap, and kicked over a tiny garbage can; Whitney B was disgusted.

“Two months and you still can’t spell ‘lede’ right,” Whitney B said, her face hot and sweaty, like always.

Whitney A came over to wrap-up Good Cop/Bad Cop.

“Whit,” Whitney A said. “He’s new, he’s trying, we talked about this, go take a walk.”

Whitney B kicked open the office door and ran downstairs for her two o’clock cigarette. Whitney A sat on my desk, looked at my shredded 250-words on the Volleyball team’s bake sale, drummed a pencil on her lap—*What are we going to do with you, Claude?*

“How are you adjusting, Claude?” Whitney A asked.

“I’m good,” I said. “I just need to use the bathroom.”

My desk was the type of desk you found in classrooms, a seat with a plastic slab raised over the lap. Whitney A was small enough to sit on the plastic slab without the plastic slab moaning, the only person small enough; other people wouldn't dare. You didn't want to stick out for the wrong reasons: breaking a desk, burning toast, deleting the front page, spelling Tennyson with an "i", spilling hot coffee on your shirt, spilling hot coffee on your pants, screaming at hot coffee soaking through your jeans, showing up late, showing up on the wrong day, showing up when no one needed you, not being needed. Two months in and I stuck out. Other editors and reporters listened to Whitney A while she drummed her pencil and sucked her teeth. Typing slowed down, conversations turned to murmurs.

"Look," Whitney A said. "No one is a natural. This is an unnatural enterprise. Getting in people's business."

You also didn't want to cry. Not in the newsroom.

"I have to go to the bathroom," I said.

"Go," Whitney A said. "Come back and finish."

She got off my desk and my desk didn't make a sound. Before she disappeared behind a row of filing cabinets, she gave me the same thumbs up and frown she had given me every day.

The Prairie Executioner claimed the oldest history of any student newspaper in the Union or Confederacy. "Fuck *The Crimson*, Harvard fucks" was chiseled into the kitchenette tiles. "We keep Them honest" was the official motto, laid out in italics underneath the masthead. The newsroom was underneath Mark Twain Hall, in a basement with little else—unisex bathroom, boiler room, separate office for the Editor-

in-Chief, two broken vending machines. *The Prairie Executioner* used to have its own building. That was before the Civil War broke out and Confederate sympathizers burned down the newsroom. *The Prairie Executioner* claimed the first abolitionist editorial stance west of the Mississippi.

I wiped my eyes and blew my nose and called Janice.

“You again?” she asked. She was on a boat. I could hear the waves and the sliding champagne glasses.

“I don’t think I can do this,” I said.

“You keep fucking up,” she said. “Nothing wrong with fucking up.”

“I miss you,” I said.

“You keep saying that,” she said. “And I’m going to start believing you.”

She hung up after a loud horn sounded somewhere across the water. Was she on Lake Michigan or a proper sea? She had been spending time with an art collector based in Miami.

All new reporters had a desk like mine; editors were across the room in a row of cubicles, ten of them, seniors with columns and internships lined-up. In between the editors and reporters: The Pit.

The Pit was a twenty-foot snakewood table with enough chairs; second-and third-year reporters shared The Pit. When I got back, Whitney B was on the table telling everyone to gather around and shut the hell up. Whitney B was the size of Whitney A. Whitney B made all her announcements from atop The Pit. She extended her arms, made herself big, stirred fear into the tension.

“Feeding time!” Whitney B yelled, like she always yelled before the afternoon meetings. Whitney B started with the editors.

“Peanut,” Whitney B asked. “Sports?”

“Soccer, good to go. Volleyball and Cross Country, good to go by five.”

“Bowtie,” Whitney B asked. “Art?”

“Fauvist exhibit is coming down this week. Think sculptures, Rodin-like, are coming next.”

“Think? Like? Specific, specific.”

Whitney B pointed at you with rolled-up papers after calling your name. She would hold her arm, extended, unmoving, until you satisfied her question. She held her fencer’s pose as Bowtie wiped sweat from his nose.

“Anything else?”

“Do your job!” Whitney B was satisfied.

“Rummy,” Whitney B asked. “Politics?”

“Student government is preparing a list of demands for the Provost meeting. This new President is feature worthy. City council is meeting on the fog machine next Wednesday”

“Pudding Snack,” Whitney B asked. “Fashion?”

“Fur boots column is 90% there.”

“Carload,” Whitney B asked and was cut off by the door slamming shut.

I had heard of Connie Stove before that moment; she once drank Tom Brokow under the table and went home with Dan Rather. Story goes she still doesn’t return Dan’s calls; she was at Kent State in ’70, she was in Berlin when the wall came down. Her grey

hair was starting to turn baby blue. Whitney B stood at attention. Word had it *The Times* gave her the boot after she called Arthur Sulzberger Jr. a morally bankrupt pig no better than the rest of the morally bankrupt pigs. The university wrote her a check and there she was: Faculty Advisor and Editor-in-Chief of *The Prairie Executioner*.

“Please,” Connie said. “Continue.”

Whitney B appeared to bow, slight neck compression, almost imperceptible shoulder dip.

“Carload!” Whitney B puffed her chest out and lunged toward Carload.

“Football.”

“We’ve got five reporters at practice today, tomorrow, and Friday. Sit-downs with Coach Smoke tomorrow and Friday. Sit-down with John-Michael Jeremy on Friday. Three reporters at the game on Saturday. Six reporters hitting tailgates on Saturday. We’ll be ready to run Sunday night.”

Football writers, much like players and coaches they covered, operated under mysterious regulations. Whitney B never threatened to bite off a football writer’s ears.

“Excellent,” Whitney B said.

She continued down the list:

Chocolate Chip, National: column rating Barack’s reaction to gun violence and recent shootings, almost done, waiting for fact checkers.

Roses, Crime: reporters at the station trying to figure out what happened in Greek City, the victim won’t press charges; reporters checking on the recent break-ins on Red Campus; researching crime from Chicago and St. Louis spilling into the area, another shooting last night.

Pampers, Entertainment: new Cohen Brothers review good to go, *Where the Wild Things Are* is out next week; MO Theatre is getting ready to close, feature on that will be ready at the end of the month; if we need space, I can write 200 words on the current state of British drama academies.

Cherry, Weather and Agriculture: corn harvest is coming in slow; global warming spread should be finished in two months.

Whitney A, Editorial: continued series on diversity on campus, this time it's a letter from an alumnae; they found another burial ground during construction, slaves this time.

Everybody wanted a nickname except for the Whitneys. Only Senior Editors

“Back at it!” Whitney B hopped off the desk.

“Please,” Connie said. “Sit down, everybody.”

Whitney B moved closer to Connie and sat cross-legged next to a dried puddle of spilt purple soda.

“You may be hearing a lot of talk about our current state of affairs.” Connie craned her head as she spoke, to look each person in the face, even craning her neck downwards for Whitney B. She moved and spoke at a patient and comforting pace.

During her speech, we made eye contact four times. Twice, I blinked. Once, I looked away. Finally, I held it and only saw green and brown puddles reflecting back.

“Our current state of affairs, that is, us, this thing we do, have to do—our fucking jobs.

Does anyone know why I'm here? Why am I not under a table jerking off Charlie Rose and the other shriveled *60 Minutes* dicks and pussies? I could do that with my eyes closed and make your tuition in a few hours off guest appearances and speaking arrangements. I

was getting Walter Cronkite coffee when JFK got his head blown off. I once smuggled myself into West Germany to have tea with a triple agent. So why am I here? Put your fucking hands down. Readership is down. Quality across the country is down. Papers are cutting Investigative Teams left and right. Why am I here? I used to go sailing with Helen Thomas off the coast of Maine, cold water, then grab some lobsters, you could get fresh butter from the source back then. They say the field is dying. Online this, online that. They said the same thing about the radio and the television and the microwave. They said the same thing about me. I once called Ted Sorenson a hack and I meant it to. Quiet! I once got slapped in the face and the ass for missing deadline. I stabbed that mothafucker with a letter opener and left him bleeding in the stairwell. I loved my first husband. He hated this world. Do you know what a light bulb overheating and popping sounds like? Do you know what it's like to follow that sound into the garage and see the only person you ever wanted to see, slumped over their gut, that gut you complained about over the years, since you got married, since you worked to keep your body slim for the newsroom, since you did everything for the newsroom, the newsroom stood for something, and you forgot the past four anniversaries—that kind of thing makes you question.”

Connie Stove pushed back from The Pitt and exited into her office.

“What the hell was that?” Whitney B asked.

“Dismissed,” Whitney A said.

On Friday, when everybody was packing up, Whitney A wanted to talk to the only black reporters, the only black people on staff, about a new diversity project. There were two others: Bio and Simone.

“I still have the volleyball story,” I said.

“Don’t talk,” Whitney A said. “Connie wants you three to work on this.”

“Why?” Bio asked. Bio moved from Mozambique to Tennessee when he was fifteen. Bio had high cheekbones and a pointed nose and skin like damp sand. Bio’s real name was Eusebio. No one called him Eusebio.

“Don’t talk,” Whitney A said. “You’re black that’s why.”

“That’s messed up,” Simone said. Simone grew up outside Kansas City in a house with a barn in the backyard. She smoked two packs and chewed three packets of gum a day; sometimes her cigarettes were light, sometimes her gum was strawberry. I heard her dad was Dutch or Ukrainian.

“You’re right,” Whitney A said. “It’s messed up. Editorial should be doing this, not reporters.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Simone said.

“I know,” Whitney said. “Don’t talk.”

“What do we have to do?” I asked.

Whitney looked at me the same way then as she did when, on my first day, I dropped a full plate of mashed potatoes and gravy on her backpack.

“Come back tomorrow with ideas,” Whitney A said. “This, now, this is your life.”

“Ideas about what?” I asked.

“I have a soccer game tonight,” Bio said.

“Get out,” Whitney A said.

Whitney A put her head on her desk when we had turned around and she thought we wouldn’t look back.

Bio, Simone, and I left the office together, for the first time.

There was a light on in Connie Stove's office. A soft and orange light came from underneath the windowless door. A single voice came out too; a sound like a person talking to a mirror.

"What kind of ideas should we think of?" I asked when we got outside.

"Hell if I know," Simone said while digging around in her bag. Cigarettes, reds, blue lighter, small flame, used up.

"This smells like bullshit," Bio said.

"Maybe it'll be good for our careers," I said looking at Simone. The sun was going down, her green fingernails were bitten to the meat.

"What career?" Bio said. "I'm going to be an accountant. You're telling me you *want* to do *this*?"

"I thought everybody did," I said.

"I think that's cool," Simone said.

When Simone said that, the crazy movements in my insides didn't come from my heart or dick or stomach or head or mouth or knees, my ears started ringing, yeah, and my vision got a little blurred—my arms or something, my wrists, my fingers and toes: that's where it came from. Hard to explain. I started smoking right then and there.

"Can I bum a square?" I said.

"Square?" Simone said.

"A cig," I whispered.

"What's a square?" Simone asked.

"Guess it's a Chicago thing," I said.

“Cool,” Simone said.

“I’m out of here,” Bio said. “This is bullshit.”

“Walking this way?” I asked.

“Sure,” Simone said.

Simone lived in the Meredith Miles Marmaduke Mansion. She thought I was surprised at her intelligence. She said people were often surprised at her intelligence and it made her want to choke and bite and elbow. I wasn’t surprised. I was disappointed that she lived so close to the office. No long walks to work, no long walks home for the office, no time to learn her favorite animals at ages eight, ten, eighteen, eighty; nothing significant. She left me at the bottom of the staircase. She walked on the balls of her feet. She bounced.

“You know,” Simone said without turning around. “This is bullshit.”

Kenneth was building a blanket fort, poorly, when I got back. He couldn’t figure out the mechanics of it. He wanted to smoke inside without setting off the fire alarm. I walked in and he had a pillow under one arm and a chair under the other, looking at her bed, looking at the floor, looking at the ceiling.

“I have some work to do,” I said.

“Me too,” he said, still entranced or depressed.

I went to the library and thought up ideas:

More breakfast options

Less fried options at lunch and dinner

Where does the chicken come from?

Is our corn local?

Why don't all cooks have to wear hairnets?

Less security at dining halls

Fried ravioli vs. bosco sticks

Why is there ranch on everything?

Why does everyone put ranch on everything?

Frank's hot sauce is only good on Buffalo wings

Why are all the fast food options burger places?

The broccoli is rubbery

Where do you get rubbery broccoli?

Where does it end?

Does it go all the way to the top?

Will we ever know?

Hours at the office allowed for one meal a day.

I brought my burger back to the room. Kenneth struggled to tape his sheet to the ceiling. I offered to help. The tape was weak and the sheet was heavy.

“Another day,” he said when we gave up.

Connie Stove, Whitney A, Whitney B, Simone, and Bio sat at The Pit when I arrived the next morning. The remaining staff was either tailgating or reporting on tailgating.

Whitney A and Whitney B were wearing matching sorority sweaters—ZTA in green letters on a black sweater—and black leggings. Connie Stove had on a long thick

shawl that looked like a robe. I might have been a robe. Bio and Simone were on one side of The Pit.

“You’re late,” Whitney B said.

I was early.

“Sit down,” Whitney A said.

Bio was closest to me; I took the seat next to Simone, walking the extra steps. Did everybody notice? Simone didn’t seem to notice.

“Claude.” Connie Stove knew my name. “Do you have anything to add?”

“What?” I asked.

“Ideas,” Whitney B said.

“I wrote them down,” I said.

“Simone,” Whitney A said. “Was thinking about doing a series on the university’s inner-city outreach scholarship program and the problems they’re having with retaining scholarship recipients.”

I put my notebook back in my bag.

“Yeah,” I said. “I was thinking something similar. Similar to that.”

“Cool,” Simone said and gave me a fist to pound, which I missed.

“Great,” Whitney A said. “Both of you will work on that now. Let’s put something together by next Wednesday. At least some kind of introductory article.”

“Bio,” Whitney B said. “Put together your race and intramural soccer idea by Wednesday. Just hand it to us and we’ll fix it.”

“500 words,” Whitney B and Whitney A said at the same time.

“Why are we doing this?” Bio asked Connie Stove.

“Yeah, why?” Simone asked.

“Yeah?” I asked. “Why?”

Connie Stove slapped the desk and locked eyes with me. Those puddles, green and brown. Emerald, maybe. Or jade. The brown was khaki.

“Ill tell you why we’re doing this,” Connie Stove said. “Ask the bastards why we’re doing this. Those bastards that think politically correct culture is ruining this country. Republicans, I guess. Who knows? Democrats too. Listen up! I’ll tell you why: Robert Kennedy. He told me that he wasn’t afraid of death. That’s how they killed him. He wasn’t afraid. You can’t be afraid in this business. Martin Luther King Jr. knew he was going to die. All that adultery stuff. Maybe that was him understanding our scale in all this, our impact. You do good as often as you can. Why does everyone talk about fucking and fighting and stealing when the plane goes down and the end is certain. Why don’t people talk about hugging their neighbor and singing them a song about a nice house somewhere in Montana or Canada or the Bahamas? That’s doing good. That’s what you want to do. Your children will understand when you have to fly to Mogadishu for a story about Soviet arms dealers. They’ll understand when the electricity goes out at your hotel and you can’t call them to wish them a happy birthday. Now, will you understand when that time comes and you can’t sleep at night? The guilt. The guilt, you know, the guilt. Will you feel guilt for doing your duty? That’s what this is all about. That balance. That impossible equation”

Connie Stove pushed back from The Pitt and exited into her office.

“Again?” Whitney B said to Whitney A.

“We’re done here,” Whitney A said to us, across the table. Simone, Bio, and I left the office together, for the second time.

Simone fished for her pack. I pulled out my lights, recently purchased, untouched, and offered her one.

“I’m smoking reds today,” Simone said.

“Y’all going to the game?” Bio said.

Simone found her pack. Lit up. Matches, this time, from a strip club in Mississippi.

“I hate football,” Simone said.

“Me too,” I said.

“Want to hang out?” Bio asked. “Football gives me anxiety.”

We sat on the porch of the Meredith Miles Marmaduke Mansion, smoked, and watched the drunken stream of bodies move from the bars downtown towards Greek City and the Stadium. Simone yelled nonsensical insults at them and they struggled to respond.

“Your sweet potato pie tastes like tiny pumpkins!” Simone yelled, for example.

They responded:

“I ate hot dogs for lunch!”

“You don’t know my mom!”

“I have bills!”

“My car costs more than your house!”

“You sit up there in your ivory tower judging us little people! With your porkpie hat!”

“You are no queen!”

“I lost my glasses!”

“I climbed a mountain!”

“What did you do today?!”

“At least I tried!”

“I tried, at least!”

“He tried, okay!”

“Eat what’s given you!”

“I’ll show you pie!”

“Ha! I’ve never seen a sweet potato in my life.”

“Thanks! You bitch!”

Bio yelled back in Portuguese. He said something like, you don’t know how to dance, but I do!

“You speak Portuguese?” Simone asked Bio.

“Everyone from Mozambique speaks Portuguese,” Bio said.

“Cool,” Simone said.

Bio pulled out a flask of rum and extended it to us. The way Simone looked at him, the way she never looked at me—I lit another cigarette.

“I can speak a little Spanish,” I said.

“My dad speaks Portuguese,” Simone said.

“I miss speaking it all the time,” Bio said.

“He does work in Lisbon,” Simone said.

“My aunt lives in Lisbon,” Bio said.

“Cool,” Simone said.

“Cool,” Bio said.

Another wave passed. This one was cutting it close. Kick off was in thirty minutes. This wave moved like a stampede. You can only watch drunken old men getting trampled by drunken young men for so long. I resigned myself to friendship with Simone.

“So,” I said. “Is Connie Stove crazy?”

“You’d be crazy too,” Simone said. “If you had to deal with what she has had to deal with her whole career.”

“Yeah,” Bio said. “She’s crazy.”

“She is not,” Simone said. “She’s a genius. Have you read her book?”

I shook my head. Bio shook his.

“Well,” Simone said. “You don’t know shit about her. She’s giving us an amazing opportunity. She’s a trailblazer.”

Routine

If you showered in the morning, more piss splashed around your feet. If you showered at night—that's when the moaning started, soft and lonely whimpers filled with longing, unromantic in their steadiness, a pounding and mechanical rhythm, efficient and solitary.

If you showered at night, you might hear an old girlfriend's name. You might hear two recent boyfriends experimenting for the first time, trying it out, seeing how it fits and feels.

Once, I heard David B. from Kansas City convince David B. from St. Louis that he felt love when they held each other. I was brushing my teeth. They were in the stall furthest from the door. All that running water made it feel like we were under a waterfall, in a movie, right before happily ever after. Someone across the room, in the toilet stall closest to the door, started humming *The Wonder Years* theme song.

Justin S. screamed into his loofa every night. He was violent with himself. He'd call on Aphrodite to release his lurid cravings, to free him from desire. Justin S. wore

flip-flops with baby sparrows on them. His showers lasted over an hour. I went back to my room if I saw him coming up the hall in his robe and carrying his wicker basket filled with generic cleaners and scrubbers for his temperamental skin. Emotionally, I couldn't take it.

I met a woman in there one Thursday afternoon. She had a bladder emergency and didn't know this was the men's room, sorry, sorry, excuse me, wait—How do you get piss on the ceiling? Why is the floor sticky?

I peeked out my curtain and shrugged at her. She did not seem at ease. She whispered private words to herself and went into a toilet stall.

If you showered in the afternoon, you weren't a part of something larger. You just wanted to get clean and masturbate in peace.

Sociology #1

“Sociology,” Professor Janus said the first day. “Sociology is about trees in a forest.”

Professor Janus wanted our class to call him Professor Jim, for short, for friendliness, relaxation, and comfort. No one wanted to call him Professor Jim. No one did. Professor Janus wanted to play a game: write your hometown on a piece paper, write five things that make your hometown special; note similarities, note differences, notice how small the world is, notice humanity.

“Okay,” Professor Janus said. “Who wants to go first? Wait, first, say your hometown and then say two things from your list. Got it? Okay. Who wants to go first?”

Professor Janus pointed to someone in the first row. I couldn't see from way in the back. The person sounded tired and annoyed, like everyone felt.

“I'm from Joplin. Langston Hughes is from Joplin. Our homecoming had a real tiger, from India.”

“Okay,” Professor Janus said. “Joplin. Great. Who's next?”

“I’m from The Hill. Italian food, stuff like that. I’m Italian. Baseball.”

“I’m from Joplin. Hey, Laura. We went to high school together. Yeah. Langston Hughes is from there.”

“I’m from Topeka. *Brown v. Board*. The capital. That’s about it.”

“I’m from Washington. Meth labs. Meth heads. Meth dealers. I hate it. It doesn’t taste good. It fucks your skin up. That whole town smells like melted plastic and poison flowers.”

“I’m from Carthage. Joplin sucks.”

“You suck.”

“We beat Joplin in basketball four years in a row.”

“We beat Carthage in football.”

“Carthage doesn’t matter.”

“Nothing matters.”

“This whole state is just fields for dying corn.”

“And meth labs.”

“And meth labs, yeah.”

“We are void of sophistication.”

“I’m from Pennsylvania.”

“Pennsylvania sucks too.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Whoa. Stan Musial is from Pennsylvania.”

“Stan The Man.”

“Pennsylvania doesn’t suck too bad.”

“Hershey’s chocolate.”

“August Wilson.”

“I’m from Kansas City.”

“Royals suck.”

“Yeah, Royals suck.”

“Royals suck, yeah.”

“Do you remember a time when the Royals didn’t suck and Kansas wasn’t just an overflowing toilet?”

Copyright

Latifah bought me lunch. Hideaways, a barn converted into a cafeteria, the next town over, Kingdom Place. She didn't want us seen together. A bad look, she called it, me and her at a table, alone, splitting fries, wiping ketchup from her cheek, laughing at her stories. Platonic, of course, still—bad look. She understood children. She understood teasing. She just wanted to make sure I was okay. I wasn't. I told her about my new assignment.

“That sounds like discrimination,” Latifah said.

“I know,” I said.

“Making you all do this just because you're black,” Latifah said. “That's discrimination and those mothafuckas have to pay.”

“It's bullshit,” I said. Our burgers came well done and Latifah sent them back for more time on the grill.

“Burnt,” she told the mulletted waiter and his pigeon-toed walk.

“Sorry, Ms. Latifah,” the mulletted waiter said as he took his pigeon toes and his hanging head back to the kitchen.

“If could be good for my career,” I said.

“In that case,” Latifah said. “Fuck them. Use them.”

“I’d like to come up with my idea,” I said.

“Make yourself useful,” Latifah said. “Good objective. Admirable.”

“I could go undercover,” I said.

“Where?” Latifah asked.

“Anywhere,” I said.

“Have you ever thought?” Latifah inspected her hard and crusty patty. “Maybe this isn’t the line of work for you?”

“Everyday,” I said.”

“Good,” Latifah said. “Perspective is good.”

We ate our burgers, drank our shakes, discussed various undercover roles waiting for me, craving me, the scandals, fame and a place in history. I could grow a mustache and Afro and show up to a New Communist meeting. Gain their trust, rise through the ranks, experience a moment of doubt when the time comes...what is there to uncover? The Sons of America, that’s the one. I could clean up my whiskers, cheap camouflage, heavy boots, intricate laces. I’m not black, I’d say, I’m Brazilian. No, Egyptian. Gain their trust, raise through the ranks, experience a moment of doubt when we’re building the pipe bombs and having a good time and the blueprints to the Chancellor’s house are on the table; Brother Claude, they’ll ask, are you ready? I’d win the Pulitzer, the youngest ever. They’ll teach my book about Neo-Patriotism in classrooms around the country. A

career criminal will read it in prison and decide to change for the better, to be a better father, to write a book of his own. Influence, that's it. That's something to shoot for.

“You don't have the balls for undercover,” Latifah said. “You should know that about yourself.”

“I know,” I said.

You can't see thin country highways from the proper Interstate ones. Too many trees and hills and burnt out farmhouses. Sergeant Miles Down Highway connected drive-by one-stoplight hovels. Those were the places you'd go to lay low, cool down, start over, fade away, plot revenge. Hawks and burned out cars; loose speed limits and untamed brush. Sergeant Miles Down was shot in a bar outside Dallas, Texas, off duty; a man took issue with his wandering eyes. Those places along Sergeant Miles Down highway made you feel like an outlaw when you cruised past.

“You know,” Latifah said. “I might have a story for you.”

“Ever heard of Magma?” We approached a shirtless man on the roadside. He waved at us. Stop, his hands and face asked. Latifah kept us moving.

At our midweek meeting, Whitney B dropkicked a pocket-sized dictionary into Bio's face. She stood on The Pit and threatened, looking down at Bio, to kick his perfect nose. He had misspelled alcoholic twice. Whitney B called us, the three black reporters, Minority Report. Bio said that was messed up. Then the pocket-sized dictionary came fast at his face. Whitney B called on Simone.

Simone, Minority Report; interviews scheduled with Academic Advising, Black Cultural Council, Recruitment Office. Still waiting for word from the Chancellor's office.

Not hopeful. Student Government offered to help anyway they can. The new President is from St. Louis. He's black.

"Just because he's black doesn't mean he's interesting," Whitney B said.

"I know that," Simone said.

"Don't talk," Whitney B said.

"Anything else?" Whitney B asked.

Simone looked like she couldn't decide between saying something, saying nothing, saying everything she had wanted to say to Whitney B since our first day, or jumping on the table and putting a knee into Whitney B's stomach. Simone stared at Whitney B and Whitney B stared at Simone.

"Have you heard of Magma?" I said.

"What?" Whitney B said.

I had everyone's attention for the first time.

"Magma," I said. "It's this drug."

"I know what it is," Whitney B said. "Why are you talking?"

"I think we could write a story on it," I said.

Simone jabbed me with her pencil. Bio flipped through his pocket-sized dictionary.

"What does that have to do with black people?" Whitney B asked.

"Let him finish," Whitney A said. "Go 'head, Claude."

"Magma," I said. "It's this drug you can get at smoke shops and gas stations and places like that. Corner stores. It's legal and cheap. A lot of high school kids do it. I guess

it's like chugging five cups of coffee. They market it for truck drivers and night-shift people."

"So," Whitney A asked. "What?"

"Why are you talking?" Whitney B crossed her arms and looked ready to dropkick my mouth shut.

"So," I said. "I hear there's a chemical or something in it that, if you know chemistry, you can extract. You, you know, if you know chemistry, can extract this chemical and mix it with another chemical. When you mix the chemicals, you get something pure and fucked up."

"What are you talking about?" Whitney B asked.

"What are you talking about?" Whitney A asked.

"Yeah," Simone asked. "What are you talking about?"

Peanut, Bowtie, Rummy, Puddin' Snack, Carload, Chocolate Chip, Roses, Pampers, Cherry, all of them, editors and reporters, joined in.

"It's called Berry Pop."

"No, no, no, no."

"It's called Fantasia."

"My cousin takes it every Friday night."

"Yes."

"I tried it once."

"How was it?"

"I heard it's like dying."

"I heard it's like sex, good sex, great sex."

“I heard you hear God.”

“I heard you see colors and can taste popcorn on everything.”

“It’s like you’re upside on a cloud and it’s as fluffy as you’ve ever imagine and you’re floating up and up and up and up and suddenly, like a roller coaster, you start falling and you get this movement in your gut, adrenaline, I think, and then you float back up and up and up and up and you don’t fall this time. This time. You’re there forever. It feels like forever. I heard that. That’s what it’s like.”

“What does any of this have to do with black people?” Whitney B asked.

“They’re selling it.”

“Who’s they?”

“You know, ‘they’”

“Them.”

“Those dudes.”

“Homies.”

“There’s a guy that works in the chemistry lab that sells it for a high price. Scientific quality. He’s black.”

“Chicago dudes, mostly.”

“They make that shit in the black frat houses and sell it to the white frat houses.”

“There are no black frat houses.”

“Yes. There are.”

“No, no, no, no.”

“The black frats live in the woods.”

“No, no, no, no.”

“They have like shacks out there. They make this shit in them.”

“It’s called Midnight Express.”

“It’s called Deer Hunter.”

“It’s called Polo.”

“It’s called Timberland.”

“It’s branded.”

“Copyright.”

“Jay-Z. That kind of thing.”

“I heard it’s the new crack.”

“Only white people do it.”

“Don’t get high on your own supply.”

“Black people can do anything white people can do.”

After the meeting, after the Whitneys gave me until next week to come up with an outline, after the editors patted my back and rubbed my head—Simone told Bio to wait for her outside, she pushed me into the bathroom.

“What the hell are you doing?” Simone asked.

“What?” I asked

“You’re making us look bad,” Simone said.

“What do we look like?” I asked.

“You’re playing into their game,” Simone said.

“I’m playing any game,” I said.

“Don’t write this story,” Simone said.

Somewhere in the building, someone flushed a toilet and water rushed down the pipes around us. The bathroom, when it got like this, felt like it could explode.

“I want to write my own story,” I said.

“The world doesn’t need another story about black people selling drugs,” Simone said. Simone left. Simone told me to wait three minutes before leaving; no one needed to get any ideas about our relationship, a working one, tenuous and forced. I left the bathroom and bumped into a running Connie Stove. She was wearing a floral nightgown; she headed towards the exit, flying. She dropped her slipper on the steps. She kicked open the door and turned a corner. Simone and Bio were gone. I smoked alone.

I called Grandma when I got back to my room. Grandma was in the hospital again.

“What do you need?” Paul said. “Money?”

“I’m thinking about writing a story about drug dealers,” I said.

“Don’t snitch on people,” Paul said. “That’s the easiest way to lose friends. And go to jail. Don’t believe them if they’re offering you immunity.”

“One of my friends thinks I shouldn’t do it,” I said.

“If you want to keep that friend,” Paul said. “Don’t do it.”

“It would help my career out,” I said.

“If your career needs that much help,” Paul said. “You need a new career.”

“How are things back home?” I asked.

“We’re all dying,” Paul said.

“Don’t talk like that,” I said.

“If you’re scared of death,” Paul said. “Don’t call around here anymore.”

“How’s Grandma?” I asked.

“What did I just say?” Paul asked.

“How’s Janice?” I asked.

“How should I know?” Paul asked.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Love you,” Paul said.

Why did those next thirty minutes feel sluggish? I couldn’t look anywhere besides my hands, folded across my lap. Shaking? Trembling. The kids next door played this game with a tennis ball. I had never seen it; I could only hear the ball bounce against the wall. Maybe something different from a tennis ball, not a basketball, not a football, something small and round. I knew there were points, winners and losers. I knew it was probably a fun way to pass thirty minutes. I knew they huffed keyboard dusters before playing. They were playing it when time got sluggish and my hands got unsteady, sweaty, fragile. They were playing it when Kenneth walked in with a tray of ribs.

“Want some?” Kenneth asked. “Found them.”

One time, Kenneth found a stack of clean and folded towels in the bathroom. He found two unused Art History textbooks in the Student Union. He found a fresh baguette and somewhat-fresh blood oranges, about six, on his way back from class, right there, underneath a tree, can you believe it? Kenneth filled up his closet with found objects.

He put the ribs on top of his bed and looked around for some hot sauce.

“Hey,” I said.

“I need something Southern,” Kenneth said.

“Do you know anything about Focusal?” I asked.

Kenneth offered up some dripping meat and bone.

“Focusal,” Kenneth said. “You can get that anywhere. Why are you asking?”

“You know what I’m asking about,” I said.

Kenneth moved the tray to the floor.

“Galactic Cowboy,” Kenneth whispered.

“Yeah,” I said. “Do you know anything about it?”

“I’d like some right now,” Kenneth said. “That’s all I know.”

“Know where I can get some?” I asked.

“Claude?” Kenneth pretended not to recognize me. He put his hands over his eyes, walked around the room, almost stepped in ribs, and knocked over a jar of pencils.

“Claude,” Kenneth said. “Is that you?”

“It’s for a story,” I said.

Kenneth, concerned and earnest, knelt on the floor in front of me, got his shoelace in barbeque sauce, put his hands over my knees and looked up at me. He didn’t recognize me.

“Tell me the truth,” Kenneth said.

“What?” I asked.

“Are you a cop?” Kenneth held his breath and I could see his throat convulsing under the pressure. I waited until his face turned a little blue.

“It’s for a story,” I said. “I’m not a cop.”

“Are you a narc?” Kenneth asked.

“It’s for a story,” I said.

“I like you, Claude,” Kenneth said. “Don’t lie to me.”

Nothing could make me fear Kenneth. He stood in front of me, chest out, barbeque sauce around his mouth, shirt wrinkled except for the spots where his softness pressed against the fabric and ironed it out. His stance, those legs apart, those feet pointed: must’ve seen it in a movie about drug dealing and turf and crooked morals.

“Just tell me where to go,” I said.

“They mostly sling out of Greek City,” Kenneth said.

“Who’s they?” I asked.

“They are people you don’t want to ask too much about,” Kenneth said.

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“I’ll tell you where to go,” Kenneth said. “Just don’t bring me into this.”

“It’s just a story,” I said.

“Whatever it is,” Kenneth said. “Don’t bring me into it.”

Kenneth had eaten himself sick and tired when Simone banged on our door. In my boxers, I couldn’t speak when I opened the door and there she was.

“Let’s go outside,” Simone said.

“I need to get a coat,” I said.

“Pants,” Simone said.

“Those too,” I said.

She walked past me, studied the small room, whiffed the bone pile on Kenneth’s desk, whiffed the clothes pile on my desk, took a seat on my bed, whiffed Kenneth asleep and gassy, appeared to whiff me, looked at me like: ready?

“One sec,” I said.

I lit my cigarette off her's and blew smoke in a passerby's mouth. They coughed and Simone had to repeat herself.

"I said, 'I'm sorry about earlier,'" Simone said.

"You don't have to be sorry," I said.

"Well, I'm not sorry," Simone said.

"Why did you say it?" I asked.

"Listen," Simone said. "You should work with me on my project."

"You're right," I said.

"Really?" Simone asked.

Before that moment, any time before, from Creation, I would've lied to Simone and hoped that she would kiss me for my loyalty. I can't say why I told Simone the truth. She was the same Simone. Her eyes were still wider than I remembered; her eyes seemed to grow each day. Her breath was still labored and her periodic coughing fits still produced a bit of dab of phlegm. Did I tell her the truth thinking she didn't need any more lies in her life? Was I assuming some karmic balance in the universe? Did I look at her and feel microscopic and insignificant? Was I paying attention in Philosophy and Biology? Or did I look at her and see that everything is the way it is and we have to play the hand we're dealt and life is crazy sometimes and the sun will rise tomorrow and the birds will fly south and the hens will roost and the dogs will have their day and you win some and you have to learn how to walk before you can run and love is crazy sometimes and love is blind and love is boundless and love is kind and the only real love is self love and Frankly, My Dear, I Don't Give A Damn and you lose some and it all works out in the end and there are plenty of fish in the sea and the world turns and the first cut is the

deepest and there's always sunshine after the rain and ain't that just how it goes? Was it all that simple?

"No," I said.

"What?" Simone said.

"It's my story," I said.

"That's not the point," Simone said.

"Your point is different from my point," I said.

"You have no idea what kind of bad you're bringing," Simone said.

"I'm a reporter," I said.

"You're a tool," Simone said.

"You're a bully," I said.

"You're a baby," Simone said.

"I'm right," I said.

"You're wrong," Simone said. She knocked a passerby over when she turned around. She tried to help them up. She burned their wrist with her cigarette.

I finished mine, went upstairs, vomited twice, crawled into bed, went back to the bathroom, vomited a third time, crawled into bed, didn't sleep.

Around three in the morning, Kenneth moaned into his pillow.

"Claude?" Kenneth asked.

"Yeah?" I asked.

"Am I going to be okay?" Kenneth asked.

I didn't answer and he didn't wait. He fell back asleep and I tried to count the hairs on my arm in the dark.

Connie Stove greeted me from my desk. Almost finished with *The Times*, she held up a finger, instructed me to wait. She creased the pages when she finished.

“You’re Claude,” Connie Stove said.

“I am,” I said.

“I hear you have an idea,” Connie Stove said.

“I do,” I said.

“Come tell me about it.” Connie Stove needed help standing up. She didn’t ask for it. I extended my hand and she slapped it away.

“Come with me,” Connie Stove said.

The newsroom was quiet when I arrived, suspense, worry, mystical. When we left: murmurs and groans as loud as screams. Connie Stove didn’t say anything during our short walk, didn’t say anything until I processed where I was standing. She gave me a look like she wanted me to process.

I was standing at the center of a much smaller room than I expected, not much bigger than a dorm room. From the outside, the hallway, you felt like this room could, should, go on for miles. If I fully extended my wingspan, I might touch the bookshelves, one on each side.

“Go head,” Connie Stove said. “Look if you want.”

Connie Stove pointed at the right bookcase, not filled with books, filled with plaques, medals, gilded frames, jewelry and trinkets.

“That horse,” Connie Stove said. “Was a gift from Dame Judi Dench.”

The horse, a miniature white pony with blue spots, was next to a picture of Connie Stove arm wrestling Gerald Ford in the oval office.

It was all true.

Connie Stove appeared over my shoulder. Was she wearing blue, before?

“Those earrings,” Connie Stove said. “I won those earrings from a bet with Ruth Bader Ginsburg during the 1994 World Series. Something about strikeouts and miles per hour. I forget.”

Connie Stove watched me reach for one of her Pulitzer Prizes, arranged at eye level, three of them in total.

“You can touch if you want.” Connie Stove picked up the oldest one, 1961, *Amarillo Globe-Times*, Public Service.

“They give this one to the whole staff, this category,” Connie Stove said. “You knew that though.”

I nodded. I didn’t.

“That’s how I got my start. Smaller paper than this, readership-wise, not much smaller, those were different times. Uncovered some bad men, public officials, cops. Doing something they weren’t supposed to be doing so we got them. I was just out of college then. I didn’t care. I was the first to investigate those fuckers. All the bad people in history are white men, the ones you know about, the one’s in history books. That’s changing now. Bad people everywhere doing bad things. Some women, Congress, doing bad things. Not just gender either.”

Connie Stove paused, put her award back, motioned for me to sit. We both remained standing.

“Race,” Connie Stove said. “Race. Used to be you could look at a black man and say that whatever evil he’s done in this world was forced into his hands, put in his path by the real evildoers. Used to be, now I’m not saying this is correct, but used to be you could look at a black man with such pity that his actions, no matter how heinous, no matter how unforgivable—pity made you forgive that black man. That’s all changing now. Race is improving, status is improving. Responsibility. Comes with the territory. You understand? You hear me? Good. Black people can’t just get passes for being black. These drug dealers, I mean, you know, the free ride is over.”

“Yes,” I said. “Miss Stove.”

“We understand each other,” Connie Stove said.

“Claude,” Connie Stove said. “Call me Connie.”

“Miss Stove?” I asked. “Can I leave?”

“You can do whatever you want,” Connie Stove readied herself for a wink.

I turned and left before the wink came.

“What was that about?” Bio asked.

“Fuck Connie Stove,” I said.

“So you’re not doing the story?” Bio asked, leaning in.

“Fuck yes I’m doing the story,” I said.

Ghosts

Unlike most Fridays, weekends, float trips, barn parties, Thursday and Wednesday Blackout or Getouts, Monday Night Football parties, hay rides, tailgating, after-game tailgating, after-tailgating cookouts, pre-cookout chugging after post-tailgating purging, formals, socials, get-togethers—Halloween was different: I was invited.

Bio knew a bouncer in a roundabout way. Bio, briefly, knew the bouncer's sister. This somewhat-known bouncer worked at Tiger Spots. He kept the town's most prominent gate.

“Cool dude,” Bio said. I never heard him say dude again. I wonder if he noticed my expression and saw the word didn't fit him right.

Bio was flexible like that: willing to change something about himself for someone else's comfort.

Another example, in the cafeteria, on hot dog day, the day before Halloween: I asked did he really put ketchup on his dog. Instead of answering, Bio trashed the dog,

picked up another one, dumped a half-bottle's worth of yellow mustard between dog and bun, so his looked like mine. Simone told Bio to grow a fucking spine, stand up for yourself. Bio wasn't set on anything. Bio wanted to try new things. He didn't come here to stay the same.

What did here mean to Bio: Campus, cafeteria, us, America?

What did same mean? Who was he before and who was he now?

I had the same questions about the cafeteria line cooks and their perfect microbraids under their less-perfect hairnets.

"What are you going to wear?" Bio asked me.

"I got this pimp hat," I said.

"That's fucked up," Simone said.

"It's purple and floppy," I said.

"That's not even what pimps look like," Simone said.

"How do you know?" Bio said.

"This isn't the movies," Simone said. "Pimps look like regular people."

"It's like a caricature," I said.

"Like a statement," Bio said.

"Like some bullshit," Simone said.

Next to us, someone overloaded their tray and couldn't handle the weight; they, the person and their human-baby-sized food pile, crashed onto the floor and dissolved into a puddle of tater tots, mac and cheese, hot dogs, minestrone soup, bright and colorful cereal, bosco sticks, chicken wings, and ranch dressing. Simone jumped up before the spillage hit her heels. Bio rushed to help. I laughed. I shouldn't have laughed. I knew

laughing was wrong. I laughed so hard I couldn't stand up; my shoes and pants were an abstract mess.

“What if that person broke their neck?” Simone asked, right after, when were walking to Bio's dorm so he could change for his soccer game and I could borrow some shorts, if he had a clean pair, or ones that fit, an old pair, maybe, we'll see.

“They didn't break their neck,” I said.

“But what if they had broken their arm?” Simone asked “What if they had broken their arm and you were just sitting there laughing your stupid head off?”

“You didn't help either,” Bio said.

“That was shock,” Simone said. “I was in shock.”

“You're right,” I said.

“I know I'm right,” Simone said.

“What about that?” Bio asked. He pointed at a scrawny short man in baggy sweatpants and a tight tank top across the street, in Anheuser-Busch park. The man was throwing rocks at a stuck Frisbee. He was too old, alone, desperate, sweating. All the parks in town were on our campus. Every now and then, a townie with nowhere else to go, like this one, would cause a scene with their presence. Anachronistic, Simone called it. She had the vocabulary to describe events and people that straddled the line between awkward and bizarre.

The man's ponytail, streaked with grey, jerked with each toss. No one offered too help. People stopped to watch, we did too. Why was he alone? How do you play Frisbee by yourself?

“Now,” Simone said. “That’s hilarious.”

“What if that’s his favorite Frisbee?” Bio asked when we started walking again.

“Then,” Simone said, laughing a little, unable to help herself. “Then it’s fucking hilarious.”

“We should’ve helped him,” Simone said from Bio’s bed, her back against the wall, her feet dangling off, her head underneath a framed portrait of Cristiano Ronaldo.

“Try these.” Bio underhanded a pair of mesh shorts across the room, in my direction.

“How did you get such a big room?” I asked and snatched the shorts out of midair.

Bio lived in Gilded-Schlopp, in a single that, size-wise, looked like a double, like my room. Half of his room was untouched.

“My roommate took to many antidepressants,” Bio said, looking through his closet. Nothing was hanging, everything in one big pile on the floor.

“You have two closets and you still can’t get your shit together.” Simone walked over to the other closet, she opened it and gasped: empty.

“You have two closets and you’re only using one.” Simone sat on the ground in disbelief.

“All this room,” she said to herself, shaking her head. I couldn’t believe it either.

“The dude tried to kill himself a day after he moved in,” Bio said. “I found him in his bed. Drooling.”

“Oh, lord,” Simone said.

“Damn,” I said.

“Yeah,” Bio said. “Feels wrong on that side. Like a ghost or something.”

“But he’s alive,” Simone said. “It’s not like he died.”

“That’s as close to death as I’d ever want to be,” Bio said.

He kept looking through the pile on his closet floor, smelling, tossing, mumbling, searching for something.

“Is that a cultural thing?” I asked Bio.

“What?” Bio asked back.

“Ghosts and stuff,” I said.

“Don’t be dense,” Simone said. She was still looking into the empty closet, imagining, I assumed, what she would do with all that extra space. Strange: conversing with two different people rummaging through two different closets; a strangeness I couldn’t place or describe. Simone might have the answer. We were, however, still talking about ghosts. Or, I kept talking to their backs.

“Do you know where Lisbon is?” Bio asked.

“Portugal,” I said.

“There’s more of that ghost shit in Tennessee,” Bio said.

“I have a ghost story,” Simone said.

“We all do,” Bio said.

They faced each other. They fell in love.

“What’s your ghost story?” Simone asked.

“I have one too,” I said, trying to stay relevant. They didn’t notice.

“It’s my last memory from Lisbon,” Bio said. “From right before we left. The day before we left. My mom and dad were fighting, verbally, on the Liberdade, on a bench, with me sitting in the middle. Mom was a Benfica fan. Dad routed for Sporting.”

“What are those things?” Simone asked.

“Streets and teams,” Bio said. “Doesn’t matter. Either way: Sporting had just won the championship and we were sitting on this busy street, watching cars speed past with Sporting flags hanging out their windows, honking their horns, calling Benfica fans losers and ineffective monarchs and pig fuckers and bad children of Ulysses.”

“What?” Simone asked. Bio kept going. He sat on the pile of clothes in his closet. His legs stuck out, his back against the wall. I could see his face. Simone couldn’t. She sat in her closet, cross-legged, hidden. Bio rotated his eyes from the floor to the ceiling, skipping over me. This was the most important story he had ever told, it seemed; a difficult story, one that made him hide. And we didn’t have any idea what he was saying.

“My father didn’t want to go to America,” Bio continued. “He wanted to watch the happy people honk their horns. He wanted to watch Sporting’s colors, green and white, wave through the night. He wanted to go back home, to Cape Verde. Green Cape. He couldn’t stop smiling. My mother told him Sporting fans were snobs. Benfica was the real world. And the real world was closing in on them fast. There were jobs in Tennessee. There weren’t jobs in Cape Verde. And I remember this clearly: the drama in my mother’s voice, indifference in my father’s, the way he smiled. My mother says I have his smile. My mother says he didn’t come with us because of Sporting. I know he just wanted home: someplace he understood, someplace that understood him.”

We knew, the three of us, that there weren't any real ghosts in that story. We knew Bio wasn't stupid or egregious with his metaphors, romantic, symbolic, removed from reality. We knew he just wanted to let us, show us around, sift through his belongings, demonstrate trust and friendship in us. Of course, we knew all that; Simone still couldn't help herself: she had to break the tension, the silence and depression settling over us. She stood up.

"But where's the ghost?" Simone asked.

"Guess there isn't a ghost," Bio said.

"There's a man in a white top hat that knocks *The Fellowship of the Ring* off my bookshelf," Simone said.

"Michael Jordan ruined my family," I said.

Bio missed his soccer game; he didn't find what he was looking for in his closet.

We spent the night figuring out appropriate Halloween costumes.

Simone would get a Diana Ross wig. Bio and I would also get Diana Ross wigs. It was getting late, the sun was coming through the windows, we had to make a choice.

Halloween

Paul's heart twisted early Halloween morning.

I pulled my cheek from Bio's carpet, from a drool puddle, answered my phone, heard Grandma's voice, urgent. Home. Now.

Simone and Bio walked me to the bus.

"Aren't you bringing clothes?" Bio asked.

"I'm going home," I said.

"I'm sorry about your uncle," Simone said.

"Thank you," I said.

"You'll be okay," Bio said.

"He's not really my uncle," I said.

"Don't say that," Simone said.

Simone held Bio's hand as my bus pulled away. Rain came from nowhere. They ran towards shelter I couldn't see. I had a row to myself. From what I could tell, the few other passengers were experiencing their own emergencies. Like the man, sitting towards

the back, with his fingers in his ears and his eyes open and frozen. Like the man, sitting towards the front, squeezing and biting his pillow.

Hurting north on Interstate-55 is a different experience. At every new horizon, I expected Chicago to poke through the flatness. It got dark outside Springfield; those transformers, flowing with energy, resembled the transformers outside Gary. Everything resembled something close to home. I considered repetition until Janice texted me. She wanted to know if I knew, if I had heard, if I was coming back, if I cared. I told her: yes, I'll see you later tonight.

She'd see me in the morning.

Her flight was delayed.

Grandma had her finger in a cop's face when I got off the bus. Her opened robe revealed her faded nightgown. Her sneakers were neon green. Her new car, a dull-blue sedan without an emblem, blocked a fire hydrant. I walked across the street and joined her.

"See," Grandma said to the cop. "He's here. This is an emergency."

"Ma'am," the cop said. "This doesn't look like your son."

"And you," Grandma said to the cop. "You don't look like shit."

The cop kept walking.

"Everything okay?" I asked Grandma.

"Yes" Grandma said. When she hugged me, I felt her ribs and shoulder blades shift. Her dry hair scraped my cheek. Was I taller? Or was she shorter?

"No bag?" Grandma asked.

“I’m just going home,” I said.

“Yes,” Grandma said. “You’re home. Let’s go home.”

Grandma shouted for me to wiggle the handle when the passenger door wouldn’t open. We slid into Saturday evening: sunlight bouncing off office buildings, streetlights starting to glow, brake lights, head lights; Grandma busted through a red light.

“Is he still in the hospital?” I asked.

“He better be,” Grandma said.

“What happened?” I asked.

“That fool is living on borrowed time,” Grandma said.

We hit Lake Shore Drive and left Downtown behind.

“When did you get a new car?” I asked.

“Downsizing,” Grandma said.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” Grandma asked.

“Everything seems different,” I said.

“You can never come home again,” Grandma said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“Nothing stays the same,” Grandma said.

Lake Michigan looked the same, beyond Grandma’s profile. Those chaotic waves crashed the same.

“What are you looking at?” Grandma asked.

“I miss the water,” I said.

“Listen,” Grandma said. “Two months of college doesn’t mean you can say nonsense and call it poetic.”

“I’m not,” I said.

“Listen,” Grandma said. “No one’s in the mood for ruminations.”

“I’m not,” I said.

“Don’t brood,” Grandma said.

“I’m not,” I said.

“Everything’s different,” Grandma said.

“Everything’s fine,” Grandma said.

Around 47th street, a minivan blurred past. I glimpsed the driver, laughing like a howl. He threw feathers from his window. White. From a chicken, I guessed. Maybe a pillow. The cops weren’t far behind. I heard them before I saw them. I heard the crash before I saw the crash. The minivan jumped a curb, busted a railing, flipped, settled on a soccer field, started smoking.

Grandma slowed down.

“Maybe I’m wrong,” Grandma said.

The driver, a man smaller than I thought, climbed out from the wreckage, bloody and mostly all right—he took off towards the viaduct. The cops parked on Lake Shore Drive, climbed out, and went, on foot, after the perpetrator of a crime unknown.

“Maybe I’m wrong,” Grandma said again.

We continued in silence.

The Trick-or-Treaters were out and eager on our street.

“Isn’t it early?” I asked Grandma. It was just past six.

“Neighborhood Watch wants it shut down before eight,” Grandma said.

“Why?” I asked.

“That boy,” Grandma said. “Last month.”

“What boy?” I asked.

“Last month” Grandma said. “That boy got killed. Didn’t I tell you?”

“No,” I said.

“They’re all just children,” Grandma said. We pulled into our driveway. A small ninja tapped on my window with a plastic sword. A woman told ninja to move on, they don’t have any candy, they never have any candy.

“Neighborhood Watch?” I asked Grandma.

“Didn’t I tell you?” Grandma asked.

“Tell me what?” I asked.

“That boy,” Grandma said.

“What boy?” I asked.

“Maybe I was wrong,” Grandma said to herself.

We both got out the car.

“Maybe everything isn’t okay,” Grandma said to herself.

“What’s everything?” I asked.

At the front door, Grandma stopped me with an extended arm against my chest.

She put her ear against the door.

“Hear that?” Grandma asked.

She lowered her arm, let me join her.

“Sounds like Alex Trebek.” I said.

“I’m going to kill him,” Grandma said.

Grandma opened the door, picked up an umbrella from underneath the coat rack, raced into the living room, started pounding on a body I couldn’t see. I only heard familiar pleads.

“You want to die?” Grandma yelled from the living room.

I followed her. And there was Paul: curled up on the carpet, arms covering his head, an opened hospital gown revealing his ass, receiving a beating. From where I stood, he was okay. Grandma’s arm tired; she switched to her legs, kicking and stomping. Paul didn’t try to crawl away. He took his punishment. He kept his forehead against the carpet, in prayer.

Grandma was too tired to cook. We ate pizza in Paul’s bed, three of us on Paul’s too-small mattress. Paul changed into his pajamas. He tried to stuff the hospital gown in his tiny bedside trashcan. Grandma picked sausage off Paul’s slices. They were next to each other. I was across their feet. Grandma balanced a plate of unwanted sausage on her stomach.

“Your body needs a rest,” Grandma said to Paul.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Nothing,” Paul said. “Everyone’s making something out of nothing. Nothing at all.”

“Tell him the truth,” Grandma said. “Tell him how you almost died.”

“That is the truth,” Paul said. “Nothing is the truth.”

“Tell him about the competition,” Grandma said.

“Competition?” I asked.

“It’s nothing,” Paul said.

“Fine.” Grandma handed Paul a sausage-less slice. “I’ll tell him.”

“Are you dying?” I asked Paul.

“A swimsuit competition,” Grandma said. “At the Rainbow Bar. This fool wanted to enter a swimsuit competition.”

Paul put a pillow over his face.

“He wanted to look like David Hasselhoff,” Grandma said.

“Bill Withers,” Paul said from under his pillow.

“Lifting encyclopedias in the basement,” Grandma said. “Can you believe it? Can you imagine dying that way?”

Paul hit Grandma in the face with his pillow.

“It was nothing,” Paul said.

“Your valves were stuffed,” Grandma said. “That’s what the doctor said. They had to put plastic in your heart. That’s what the doctor said.”

“That hospital smells like old rubber,” Paul said. “That hospital smells like rotten flowers.”

“You need that hospital,” Grandma said. “I’m taking you back tomorrow.”

“Can’t I just convalesce in your arms?” Paul curled into Grandma’s side.

Grandma put an arm around Paul.

“How could I go on without your nonsense?” Grandma said.

“I look good though.” Paul sat up and flexed. He looked the same, except older. His face drooped and his eyes were dull. The grey hair on his temples had spread across his hairline. His arms and their muscles—those looked the same.

“And what about you?” Grandma said to me.

“What?” I asked.

“You don’t call,” Paul said.

“You used to call,” Grandma said. “I told you to call. You should call.”

“The newspaper is a lot of work,” I said.

Paul curled back into Grandma.

“See?” Paul said, up, into her eyes. “He’s too big for us. Mr. Woodward, Mr. Citizen Kane.”

“It’s true,” I said. “I’m working on a project, a big project.”

“Is someone stealing fruit from the cafeteria?” Paul asked, his head tucked into Grandma’s armpit.

“Are too many people jerking off in the shower?” Grandma asked. With her free arm, the arm not around Paul’s neck, she tried to hi-five Paul. He didn’t see. She was left hanging.

“It’s this new drug,” I said. “Magma.”

“What kind of trash...Magma?” Grandma asked.

“Snort, smoke, or shoot?” Paul asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t know much about it now. That’s reporting.”

“I know what reporting is,” Grandma said. “You don’t have to tell me what reporting is. I watched Brokaw in his prime and pomp. I saw Gwen Ifill when she was still in diapers.”

“Look at him,” Paul said. “Two months working the beat on Frat Row and he’s Nellie Bly.”

“Who’s Nellie Bly?” I asked.

“See?” Grandma said. “You don’t know shit. And you don’t call.”

“You should call,” Paul said.

“We miss you,” Grandma said.

“I miss you too,” I said.

“And you’re writing about drugs,” Paul said.

“Yeah,” Grandma asked. “Why the hell are you writing about drugs? Are you doing drugs?”

“You can do some drugs,” Paul said.

Grandma scratched Paul’s cheek.

“No,” Grandma said. “Do drugs and end up like him. See how you like it.”

“Magma,” Paul said. “What does it do to you?”

“It’s hard to describe,” I said.

“Does it get you high?” Paul asked.

“You imagine stuff,” I said. “Hallucinate. Your mental landscape shifts.”

“Mental landscape,” Grandma said. “What’s wrong with you? Talking about mental landscapes. What’s a mental landscape?”

“Your mental plane,” I said. “Whatever. Your mind.”

“Why are you writing about mental landscapes?” Grandma asked.

“I’m writing about a drug,” I said.

“Not even a good drug.” Paul said.

“Isn’t there a student government election?” Grandma asked. “Can’t you write about how dirty the parking garage is?”

“Is the parking garage dirty?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Grandma said.

“That’s your job,” Paul said to me.

“Why are you writing about drugs, anyways?” Grandma shrugged Paul off her.

She sat up. She caught her sausage plate before it fell.

“They want the black journalists to work on separate projects,” I said.

“They got you doing what?” Grandma asked.

“What did I tell you,” Paul said to Grandma. “I said, ‘he’s going to come back here thinking segregation is good for people.’”

“You’re not going back there,” Grandma said.

“It’s not like that,” I said.

“What’s it like then?” Grandma asked.

“We’re working on diversity projects,” I said. “It’s a good thing.”

“You’re writing about drugs,” Grandma said.

“Not even good drugs,” Paul said.

“I think it has something to do with Big Columbus,” I said.

“Hell, no,” Grandma said. “That’s just what we need.”

“It’s a good story,” I said.

“Sensational,” Grandma said. “That’s what it is. Racist. That’s what it is. Bullshit.”

“I want to write about it,” I said.

“You’re not going to be famous,” Paul said. “If that’s what you want, lil’ Hunter S. Thompson.”

We didn’t hear Janice come in. She was standing in the doorway, a duffle bag at her feet, boots up to her knees. Her skirt didn’t cover her thighs. Her fur-collared jacket didn’t reach her stomach. Her clothes were cream. She drummed her red nails along her temple. She coughed. I noticed. Paul and Grandma kept talking about journalistic integrity. Janice coughed again. Two months, I thought. How did all that happen in two months? She bit her glossed lower lip in frustration. Her hair was short now, blonde, styled into a Mohawk. A diamond cluster made her earlobes sag. New earrings. New shoes. New bag. New skirt. Her legs were new, muscled. Her face was the same. Her eyebrows were different, pointed, slender. Her face was the same. She wasn’t staring at me, like I was staring at her. She stared at the ceiling and blew air over her glossed lips. Paul and Grandma kept talking about right and wrong decisions, about home.

“Janice,” I said.

“What?” Grandma asked, followed my eyes, saw Janice and her duffle bag in the doorway.

“Janice,” I said again.

Grandma jumped up, spilled her sausage plate, hugged Janice to the floor.

“What are you doing here?” Grandma asked.

“I thought your plane was delayed?” I asked.

“Where’d you get those boots?” Paul asked.

Janice slid away from Grandma, stood, adjusted her skirt and hair.

“We took the jet back,” Janice said.

“Who’s we?” Grandma stood, didn’t adjust anything.

“What jet?” I asked.

“Back from where?” Paul asked.

“Some friends,” Janice said. “You don’t know them.”

Janice and Grandma joined me and Paul on the bed. Grandma reclaimed her spot.

I moved the pizza box and let Janice sit on the greasy patch of sheet.

“You don’t look like you’re dying,” Janice said to Paul.

“How would you know how he’s supposed to look?” Grandma asked. “We haven’t seen you in months.”

“I’m not dying,” Paul said.

“We’re all dying,” Grandma said.

“I have to go,” Janice said.

“Go?” Grandma asked.

“My ride’s waiting,” Janice said.

“You just got here,” Grandma said.

“It’s Halloween,” Janice said.

“Can I come?” I asked.

“Why?” Janice asked.

“Doing drugs and going to parties.” Grandma shook her head at me.

“I’m not doing drugs,” I said.

“Who said we’re going to a party?” Janice asked.

“I know you better than you know yourselves,” Grandma said.

“Can I come?” Paul asked.

Grandma pinched Paul’s rib.

“We’re not finished,” Grandma said to me. She hugged us, bent over, started picking up spilled sausage pieces. Paul saluted me, saluted Janice, started at the window. Before leaving the room, I saw Paul, over my shoulder, rub his chest and mumble something that looked like a prayer.

Janice threw her duffle bag in my room. She looked me up and down, sized me up.

“You’re not wearing that,” Janice said.

“Is it a costume party?” I asked.

“No,” Janice said.

“It’s Halloween,” I said.

“Here.” Janice found a faded Hawaiian shirt in my closet. Blue with grey flowers and red butterflies.

“This isn’t cool.” I held the shirt up to my nose and whiffed dust.

“You don’t know what cool is,” Janice said.

She was right; we were back in high school. We were unsure again.

“We’re already late,” Janice said.

For a moment, I wanted to stay back. Paul needed me, I thought. Grandma needed me. Janice didn’t need an uncool me slowing her down, dulling her shine. Janice didn’t

need my dusty shirt next to her perfumed aura. Janice didn't need me staring at her all night. Janice, from where I was standing, didn't need anything.

"Come on," Janice said. "I miss you."

I changed shirts and followed her downstairs.

Janice's waiting ride was a yellow stretch limousine, a low-riding Cadillac with big wheels. There was crowd of trick-or-treaters gathered. Miniature superheroes, goblins, ninjas, parents carrying plastic buckets and paper bags overflowing with sweets.

"I heard it's Derrick Rose."

"I heard it's Scottie Pippen and Derrick Rose."

"I heard it's Kanye. I heard Kanye's grandmother lives over there."

"I heard it's the FBI."

The limousine driver, a tall brunette man with chiseled everything and lagoon eyes, saw us coming, hopped out, ran around the car, opened the door and bowed for Janice.

"Thank you, Martino," Janice said.

"My pleasure, my lady," Martino said.

Martino didn't say anything to me. As he closed the door, Martino sniff at me and made a face like he didn't approve of what he smelled. When Martino closed the door, all I could smell were roses and leather. The limo's insides felt, somehow, bigger than the outside, longer in all directions. The ceiling was a tinted moon roof I couldn't see through. Janice was fishing through a mini refrigerator when Martino started up the engine, again, bigger than expected.

"What the hell," I said.

“You should see the jet,” Janice said.

Janice threw a mini bottle of brown rum at my stomach. For herself, she pulled out a large bottle of tequila, an ice tray, two cold glasses, and a cup filled with quartered limes and lemons.

We pulled away from the crowd, questions asked at our tinted windows.

“Who the hell was that?”

“Can I go where they’re going?”

“They came from the no-candy house”

“And here I am: lonesome.”

Martino took us up Lake Shore Drive. Halloween turned normal Saturday night traffic into a party, a freak show. We passed a van with its sliding door opened, revealing, in its backseat, a scary clown playing the electric guitar.

“I heard there was an accident today,” Janice said.

“I know,” I said. “I saw.”

“Something about a chicken man,” Janice said.

“I know,” I said. “I saw.”

“Was it you?” Janice asked. “Are you the chicken man?”

“Janice?” I asked. “What is all this?”

I pointed, with my tiny and empty bottled of rum, at our surroundings.

“A friend,” Janice said.

“Which friend?” I asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” Janice said.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Drinking tequila in a limo,” Janice said.

“Seriously,” I said. “Like, in life. I haven’t seen you in months.”

“Seriously,” Janice said. “Like, right now: I’m drinking tequila in a limo.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“Just enjoy it,” Janice said.

She overflowed my glass with tequila. She pulled out her phone. I stared out the window into a strange darkness.

We passed an old school bus, painted blood red, packed with demon costumes and smoke, with “Highway to Hell and Pleasure” scrawled, in white paint, on the side. We passed a police officer searching Dracula’s cape pockets. We passed and passed and passed the Lake, which contained the moon’s reflection. We passed the Lake until we got off at Grand Street, Navy Pier.

Downtown had changed in the hours since Grandma picked me up from the train station. The suits pushing through the sidewalk had turned into sleeves-rolled-up button downs and skirts like Janice’s. Night softened the skyscrapers and office buildings, made them less imposing. Their blackened facades were just an extension of the sky. We drove under the L and kept going west.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“Does it matter?” Janice said.

“To me,” I said.

“Victor’s,” Janice said.

“Is that a bar? I asked.

“Victor is this.” Janice sucked a lime, held it between her thumb and index, flicked the lime onto the carpet, which, I noticed for the first time, was made of soft fur.

We passed over the river and left downtown behind. Here was the city I didn’t know, only heard about. I knew it was changing. The old meat factories and old Irish bars were turning into new high-ceilinged lofts, microbreweries, artisanal sausage makers, businesses about social media—a new Chicago that grew outside of the Chicago I knew. Here was, according to online articles, something exciting, something to behold.

Martino stopped in front of an old factory building with a new lobby made of glass.

“We’re here,” Janice said.

Martino opened the door, bowed for Janice, stood for me, closed the door, leaned against the limo.

“I’ll text you,” Janice said to Martino.

“Mame,” Martino said before pulling out a golden cigarette case and lighting up.

Janice entered a code in a keypad next to the tall glass door. The door clicked open. I caught Martino’s reflection before we entered. He took drags and exhaled without removing the cigarette from his lips. He stared into the curb. He kept his hands in his pockets. An ambulance passed, sirens blaring, and he didn’t move, didn’t look, kept his head in the curb. Against his bright vehicle, he was somber and motionless.

I caught up with Janice as the elevator closed. She hit the top floor.

“Martino doesn’t look so good,” I said.

“Martino is beautiful,” Janice said.

“Can we catch up?” I asked.

“Listen,” Janice said. “When we get up there, don’t mention anything about Paul or Grandma.”

“Why?” I asked.

“These people are my friends,” Janice said. “I don’t want to scare them away.”

“Do they know about me?” I asked.

“They know I’m bringing a friend from high school,” Janice said.

“Oh,” I said.

“Don’t look sad,” Janice said. “Have fun.”

Janice rubbed my back and put her head on my shoulder.

“I missed you,” Janice said.

“I missed you too,” I said.

“Now,” Janice said. “Let’s have fun.”

The elevator opened and a closed steel door revealed itself. Janice pounded her first against it.

I was expecting a wild scene, something familiar to my idea of Janice and her friends, an idea that grew from that night with Chester Dexter and Renaissance. I was expecting smoke machines, crowded hallways, sticky and slick. Music, loud music, pounding and shaking the walls. Chaos. Contained Chaos. Something that burned fast. I was prepared to lose her soon, see her and Victor disappear into a bedroom or bathroom or fire escape. She already felt lose to me. This woman, this beautiful woman was beyond me. Beautiful and strong; powerful. She had power now. And she knew it. She was capable of anything, especially leaving me behind.

And when that steel swung open, I expected her to sprint into desires too big for me.

First, Victor didn't look like anything special. He appeared our age. His shaggy hair fell over thin wire glasses, copper with smudged lenses. His white t-shirt had a brown stain on the chest, fresh, still greasy. He wasn't wearing pants, just long boxers. He wasn't anything on his hairy feet. His smile revealed tiny yellow teeth. When he shook my hand, his palm was wet and limp. His pale face was covered in pimples and pimple scars.

“My love,” Victor said to Janice.

Janice didn't run into Victor's apartment, a large studio with windows extending from wood floor to concrete ceiling. Except for a concealed bathroom next to the front door, everything was open. Victor led us, with a slow walk, past an open dirty kitchen with crusted plates and bowls scattered around a sink. The sink—like the refrigerator, oven, microwave, and dishwasher—was new, metallic, and decorated with fingerprints. The apartment's only table was short, covered in books, cigarette butts, and situated between a circular arrangement of ten large beanbags. There was a mattress on the floor in one corner. There was a pile of clothes in another corner. Everything smelled like a mixture of stale and fresh smoke.

“So the plane was good?” Victor asked Janice.

He pointed towards the beanbags and opened the fridge. He joined us with four Japanese beers. On one of the beanbags, to my surprise, was a body covered in a blanket.

“That's Otie,” Victor said when he noticed me staring.

I could see Otie's bare feet, large and ashy, poking out the blanket's bottom.

“Where should I put my shoes?” I asked Victor.

“You’re my guest,” Victor said. “Do what makes you feel good.”

He handed me a bottle opener. He lit a cigarette and offered me one.

“I hate it when you smoke,” Janice said to Victor.

“Just one,” Victor said to Janice.

“Don’t smoke,” Janice said to me.

“I’ll take one,” I said to Victor.

Janice moved across the table, to another beanbag.

“Claude, right?” Victor asked me.

“Yeah,” Janice said.

“Yeah,” I said.

“And, Claude, what do you do?” Victor asked.

“I go to school,” I said.

“And your dreams?” Victor asked. “What are they?”

“What?” I asked.

“Dreams,” Victor said. “Dreams, Claude. What about those?”

“Claude wants to be a reporter,” Janice said.

“Yeah,” I said.

“And what are you reporting on?” Victor asked.

“This new drug,” I said.

“Excellent,” Victor said. “The war on drugs is a genocide. Did you know that, Claude? A charade, more like it. A colonial tool of oppression and propaganda. Of course

you know that, Claude. I'm not telling you anything you don't know. Excellent, Claude. Excellent."

"It's a school newspaper," Janice said.

"Don't be dismissive," Victor said to Janice. "Claude is fighting the war the best way he knows how. Claude is grassroots. You see, Claude, you, Claude, are how revolutions are carried out. People like us, people like me and Janice, are how revolutions are begun. But you, Claude, are how revolutions are fulfilled. Bless you, Claude."

"Revolution?" I asked.

"We don't have to tell him," Janice said to Victor.

"You know him, right?" Victor asked Janice. I felt suspicion flare up around me. Victor looked at me sideways.

"Yes," Janice said.

"And you...trust...him?" Victor asked.

"More than anyone," Janice said.

"Then he should know the moment at hand," Victor said. He slapped my back and leaned in close.

"I thought we'd just smoke some weed and watch the city," Janice said.

The city, in front of me, out the window, behind Janice's silhouette, was something new and beautiful. I had never seen Chicago from this angle, from this high up. We were facing west, away from the skyscrapers and the lake. I knew about those neighborhoods below us, stretching beyond the horizons with their tiny lights and dwarf facades. Those neighborhoods belonged, first, to the Ukrainians, Poles, Italians, Norwegians, and Greeks. In high school history class, we learned, those neighborhoods

segregated Chicago. Every culture had its pocket. Somewhere in time, the Ukrainians, Poles, Italians, Norwegians, and Greeks made way for Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Blacks. In the high school cafeteria, we learned that West Side was no place for a South Sider—those West Siders were another breed of crazy. Somewhere in time, the Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Blacks will make way for more condos and more organic grocery stores. There I was: drinking imported beer on a large bean bag in a modern apartment building that was, decades ago, a modern factory and before that this was all prairie and deer. I didn't know what to think, yet. I just knew that the world, in that moment, expanded.

“Claude,” Victor said. “Don't you know about the Illuminati?”

“Excuse me?” I asked.

“He doesn't,” Janice said.

“Of course you don't,” Victor said. “That's what they want. They don't want you to know, so you don't know.”

“Who's they?” I asked. In my periphery, I caught Janice shaking her head.

“I'll tell you who they is,” Victor said. “Janice, my love, can you get the dank out? Let's blow Claude's mind. Let's show him the truth.”

“Finally,” Janice said. “Where?”

Victor pointed to a cabinet over the fridge.

I watched Janice swish over. When did she start swishing everywhere? Janice stood on her toes and her skirt pulled towards her waist, revealing gold panties. I looked away. I watched Victor watching her. Victor smiled, bliss, unmistakable bliss on his face.

“Yo,” I said to Victor.

He looked away, slow and reluctant. He looked at me with that blissful smile still on his boring face.

“You were saying?” I asked.

“About?” Victor glanced towards Janice, who was making her way back with a large plastic bag stuffed with emerald buds.

“The Illuminati,” I said. “You were telling me about the Illuminati.”

“Let’s not,” Janice said. She sat back down, rummaged through her purse, removed a crumbled rolling paper, rummaged through the bag of weed, removed a bud that looked like it wouldn’t fit.

“The Illuminati, Claude,” Victor said. He adjusted himself and started over.

“You know money?” Victor asked.

“Of course he knows what money is,” Janice said to Victor, annoyed, arranging and folding the joint.

“Of course you do,” Victor said. He adjusted himself and started over.

“The Declaration of Independence,” Victor said.

“What about it?” I asked.

“The Founding Fathers,” Victor said.

“What about them?” I asked.

“Illuminati,” Victor said. “All of them.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“Burger King,” Victor said.

“What?” I asked.

“Illuminati,” Victor said. “Not McDonald’s. Maybe Arby’s.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Church’s Chicken,” Victor said. “For sure. Church’s Chicken.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Janice said to me.

When did Janice learn to roll flawless joints? She lit up. As she exhaled, the body under the blanket—Otie—started moving, sniffing, raising. I forgot he was there with us. From underneath his blanket, in an old man’s voice, he spoke.

“Enlightened?” Otie asked.

He removed the blanket, revealed his face. Otie had a long grey beard and red hair, shaved, lined up, dyed, unnatural. He was deep black with ice blue eyes. His eyes, like his hair color, looked fake. Otie rubbed his puffy cheeks with fists that were too small for his body. His long grey beard looked real. Otie looked ancient and mystical. Otie looked at Janice. Otie looked at me. Otie smiled when Victor blew smoke in his direction.

“And who are these angels?” Otie asked Victor.

“Otie,” Victor said. “This is Claude.”

“Stay free, Claude,” Otie said to me.

“And you know Janice,” Victor said.

“I know everybody,” Otie said.

Otie raised up. He was taller and wider than I thought. He struggled through five jumping jacks and sat back down.

“I was just telling Claude about the Illuminati,” Victor said to Otie.

“The Illuminati are just humans,” Otie said. “They are me and you.”

I took the joint from Victor, took too much in, coughed, passed to Otie, coughed some more.

“Otie is my spiritual advisor,” Victor said.

“I’m a microscope,” Otie said with a handful of smoke crawling out his lips.

Otie passed to Janice.

“What does that mean?” Janice asked.

“Otie helps me see the world,” Victor said.

“We can only help ourselves,” Otie said.

I thought I saw a shooting star falling towards earth, beyond Janice’s head, right out the window. A flash of magnificent light. I thought we were all spared by benevolent forces beyond our control. I wanted to cry. I wanted to jump out of my bean bag. I wanted to jump into Janice’s arms. Then I realized I couldn’t move my legs. Then Victor passed me the joint. This was strong weed. I wasn’t ready for it. I took another hit.

“Did anyone else see that?” I asked, making sure.

“See what?” Janice asked, worried.

“Nevermind,” I said.

“You were saying,” I said to Otie.

“I don’t say anything,” Otie said to me.

“Claude’s a journalist,” Victor said to Otie.

Janice rolled her eyes. And then closed them. She held the joint in her mouth and kept it there.

“Don’t put me on paper,” Otie said.

He was serious. He hand his tiny hands on his knees.

“I won’t,” I said.

“Compatriot,” Otie said.

He smiled again.

“Tell Otie what you’re writing about,” Victor said.

“This drug,” I said.

“Everything is a drug,” Otie said.

“That’s beautiful,” Victor said to Otie.

Jancie still had the joint in her mouth. She shook her head and long ash tube fell down her chest.

“And, you, Claude,” Otie said. “What is your drug of choice?”

“I don’t do drugs,” I said.

“Smart,” Otie said.

Otie extended his tiny fist for me to dap. I dapped. Janice opened her eyes— bloodshot and wandering and going right through me. Janice passed the joint to Victor.

“Do drugs even exist?” Victor asked.

“Don’t mock philosophy,” Otie said to Victor.

“This is boring,” Janice said to the world. “Let’s throw shit off the roof.”

In swift movements and seconds, we were up on the roof with moldy loaves of sliced white bread. Janice and Victor were over at the ledge, tossing their bounty into chill wind. Otie was sitting next me. We leaned against a vent. Heights made both our knees weak. The sky was gorgeous and rippled, rolling with clouds.

Otie lit two cigarettes.

“Thank you,” I said.

“I hate that fucker,” Otie said to me.

“Victor?” I asked.

“His parents own the largest BMW dealership in Chicago,” Otie said.

“That’s cool,” I said.

“That’s stupid,” Otie said.

“He seems cool,” I said.

“He’s what’s wrong with the world,” Otie said.

Otie had this look on his face, this look like he wanted to shove Victor over the ledge, onto the sidewalk. Otie had contempt in his voice. He appeared to boil under the surface. When he turned and looked at me, saw me staring, with worry, at him—that look on his face; I didn’t know what to say.

“You know what I mean?” Otie asked.

“Yeah,” I lied.

“Yeah,” Otie said to himself, looking back at Victor. “He’s what’s wrong with the world.”

“Why do you hang out with him?” I asked.

“Same reason she does.” Otie nodded towards Janice. She crumbled up some bread and sprinkled it into the city.

“And why does she hang out with him?” I asked.

“Because he’s rich and has good weed,” Otie said.

We sat in silence until our cigarettes went out. Otie lit two more. Janice and Victor were almost out of bread.

“So,” Otie said to me. “You’re a journalist.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“And you’re writing about drugs?” Otie asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Meth?” Otie asked. “Or heroin?”

“Do you know about Magma?” I asked.

“That evil?” Otie asked.

“You know about it?” I asked.

“Know about it,” Otie said. “My cousin got kicked out of my Auntie’s house for cooking.”

“Cooking?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Otie said. “Cooking Magma in soup pots.”

“Your cousin cooks Magma?” I asked.

“Cooked,” Otie said. “He cooked.”

“Cooked,” I said. “He doesn’t cook any more.”

“Now,” Otie said. “I think, he’s looking for oil in Bismarck.”

“Who was he cooking for?” I asked.

“You know,” Otie said.

“No I don’t,” I said.

“You’re writing about Magma,” Otie said.

“Yeah,” I said.

“And you don’t know shit about it?” Otie asked.

“It’s a new story,” I said.

“It’s an ancient story,” Otie said.

“How?” I asked.

“You know,” Otie said. “The Hustle.”

“Huh?” I asked.

“What we do,” Otie said. “Immemorial. This thing.”

“Who’s we?” I asked.

“You know,” Otie said. “Redbelters.”

I coughed, choked, had to spit. Otie slapped my back. Victor and Janice finished their bread. They stood near the ledge, watched the city’s glowing and towering silhouettes. Victor tried to put an arm around Janice’s waist. Janice slapped him away. She remained where she was, staring out there.

“I thought,” I stammered. “I thought. I thought. I thought.”

“You okay?” Otie asked. He stood, stretched, remained standing, looked down on me.

“I thought,” I said. “I thought The Redbelters were in hiding.”

“You can’t hide a revolution,” Otie said.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“I’ll show you,” Otie said.

“How?” I asked.

“Come,” Otie said. “Get up. Rise. Here.”

Otie pulled me up. Otie pulled me close. Otie made me face west, away from Justin and Janice, towards Chicago’s dwarfed outskirts.

“See all that?” Otie asked.

He extended an arm towards avenues and boulevards I had never crossed:
Ashland, Western, Pulaski, and Damen.

“We’re out there,” Otie said.

“Westside?” I asked. “The Redbelters are on the Westside?”

“Listen,” Otie said. “We’re everywhere.”

“Even Missouri?” I asked.

“What do you know about Missouri?” Otie asked.

Otie, for the first time that night, appeared to not trust me. There was deep suspicion in his voice. His eyes—those bright and cold eyes—were skeptical. He stepped on his cigarette. I stepped on mine. Regret, too, was somewhere in there.

“That’s where I go to school,” I said. “I just came from there.”

“You’re a journalist,” Otie said.

“Yeah,” I said. “You knew that. I told you that.”

“From Missouri,” Otie said.

“Yeah,” I said.

“And you’re writing about drugs,” Otie said.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“You’re writing about Magma and The Redbelters,” Otie said.

“I’m not writing about The Redbelters,” I said.

“You’re writing about Magma,” Otie said.

“Should I write about The Redbelters?” I asked.

Otie skeptical eyes, cold and bright, were squinted and furious. He grabbed my shirt collar. Pulled me close again. Out noses touched. His tiny hands were strong, choking.

“There’s nothing in Missouri,” Otie said.

“Okay,” I said.

“You hear me?” Otie asked.

I heard him.

“I hear you,” I said.

“There’s nothing in Missouri,” Otie said again.

“Okay,” I said.

He let me go, put me down.

“Nothing,” Otie said. “Nothing, nothing, nothing.”

Otie turned away from me.

“Victor!” Otie yelled.

Victor and Janice turned towards us.

“This...” Otie started. “This... This...abhorrent trickster. Tricked Me. He betrayed us.”

“What did you do?” Janice asked me.

“Nothing,” I said.

“They must go,” Otie said. He left the roof without looking at me.

“I’m sorry,” Victor said. “He is my counsel. Martino will take you home.”

Victor tried to kiss Janice on the cheek. Janice stepped back and Victor stumbled.

“We’re all helpless,” Victor said. “We’re all pawns.”

Victor left the roof, also, without looking at me.

“What did you do?” Janice had a finger in my stomach.

“Nothing,” I said. “We were just talking.”

“You must’ve done something,” Janice said.

“Something isn’t right,” I said.

“You,” Janice said. “You aren’t right.”

“Something is going on,” I said. “Big. I think.”

“What?” Janice asked.

“I don’t know yet,” I said. “Did you know that guy was a Redbelter?”

“Victor?” Janice asked.

“No,” I said. “Otie.”

“Who cares what that fool is,” Janice said.

“I think the Redbelters are in Missouri,” I said.

“Who cares?” Janice said.

“I think they’re behind this drug,” I said.

“Why do you care?” Janice asked.

“It’s my job,” I said.

“The world isn’t going to change,” Janice said.

“What does that mean?” I asked

“Are you hungry?” Janice asked.

I was hungry. And I was sorry for ruining Janice’s night. And I was scared. And I knew I had to get back to Missouri and tell everyone—The Whitney’s, Bio, Connie Stove, Simone, everyone—something was up.

And I was stoned.

I was hungry.

“Maxwell Street?” Janice asked.

“Maxwell Street,” I said.

Martino was waiting where we left him, cigarette pile at his feet.

“So soon?” Martino asked.

“Maxwell Street,” Janice said.

Halloween peaked outside our tinted windows. There, on Lake Street, before the Dan Ryan ramp, a Black Cowboy cried in the arms of Black Ronald Reagan. On the Dan Ryan, headed south, a gorilla on a motorcycle popped a wheelie and glided between two sixteen-wheelers. Janice was sitting close to me.

“I’m stoned,” I said.

“I’m not dating him,” Janice said.

“Victor?” I asked.

“Justin,” Janice said.

“Justin,” I said.

“I’m just using him,” Janice said.

“I know,” I said.

“They’re full of shit,” Janice said.

“Otie freaked me out,” I said.

“Otie,” Janice said. “Otie can’t tie his own shoes.”

“It’s not his fault,” I said. “His small hands. It’s not his fault.”

“That’s what I mean,” Janice said.

“I think the Redbelters are doing something in Missouri,” I said.

“What does that mean?” Janice asked.

“I’m writing about this drug,” I said.

“Sounds boring,” Janice said.

“And Otie,” I said. “When I said I was writing about this drug. And I was writing about this drug in Missouri.”

“He died of boredom?” Janice asked.

“He freaked out,” I said. “He started acting weird.”

“Holograms of Malcolm X appear in his dreams,” Janice said. “At least, he thinks they do.”

“I have to let them know,” I said.

“Who’s they?” Janice asked.

“At the newspaper,” I said. “My friends.”

“And what do you think of us?” Janice asked.

“Who?” I asked.

“All the people you left behind,” Janice said.

We parked. Martino rolled down the divider.

“Two sausages with everything and extra peppers,” Janice said.

Martino rolled the divider back up, got out, went to order our food. The people already waiting in line, bored-looking people without costumes, just clothes—those ordinary people stared at our unordinary car. They stared and whispered to each other.

They stared and asked Martino, after he ordered and waited, too, with boredom—“Who’s that?” “Who are you carrying around?” “How much do they pay you?” “Are you hiring?”

Martino shrugged and kept looking ahead, at the Dan Ryan rushing and blurring, churning with energy.

“I hate this car,” Janice said.

“I didn’t leave anybody behind,” I said.

“I know,” Janice said. “It just feels like it.”

“I’m excited,” I said.

“About what?” Janice said.

“Purpose,” I said. “That’s what it is, I think: purpose.”

“You sound different,” Janice said.

“You looked different,” I said.

“I look amazing,” Janice said.

“Do I sound amazing?” I asked.

“Like someone that wants to be important,” Janice said. “That’s what you sound like.”

“Is that a bad thing?” I said.

“You shouldn’t write about black people selling drugs,” Janice said.

“It’s a story,” I said. “I’m just writing a story.”

“When I walk into a party,” Janice said. “When I walk into a party looking like I look, with heels and something tight and dope. When I walk into a party just, you know, myself. When I’m in that party and someone starts talking to me. You know.”

“What?” I asked.

Janice was sinking into herself. She squinted her eyes outside the window, focusing on nothing real.

“Just listen,” Janice said.

“When I’m in that party,” Janice continued. “When I trying to fill my cup with champagne, if they have it and it’s a good party. Or vodka and ice. When I’m standing by the bar and someone starts talking to me. They want to talk about gentrification. They want to talk about James Baldwin. They want to talk about plight. They want to put a hand on my back and tell me they understand. They want to put a hand on my ass and tell me they understand. They, with their garlic breath and tiny plate of hors d’oeuvres, they want to put their lips against my ear and whisper that they understand. And what the fuck do you say to that? What are you supposed to do about that? I’m using them for their champagne, if it’s a good party. I’m using them for their vodka. And they’re using me...they’re using me to *feel*. They want to feel my ass. They want to feel my back. They want to feel my heartbreak when they talk about violence. You know what I tell them? I tell them I’m from the suburbs. I tell them my parents are from Canada. I tell them I come from a long line of doctors, trailblazers, freemen and freewomen. When we’re headed to a hotel, or condo, or penthouse, or mansion in Lincoln Park, when we’re in cab and he has his hand on my legs, moving up my legs—I tell him I’m not like anything he’s ever heard of. I tell him I’m special. What you see on the news isn’t me. What you read about in *The New York Times* isn’t me. I’m special. I’m special. You know what I don’t tell them, these men and their garlic breath? I don’t tell them my real parents were plumbers. I don’t tell them my real parents drank until their livers stopped working. I

don't. I don't. I don't. I don't. I can't. I don't tell them about the riots. I don't tell them about Paul and Grandma. I don't tell them about you."

Janice sank deeper. She was horizontal now. Her head was close to lap. Her feet were on the seat.

"I can't take it," Janice said. "I don't want to hear about drugs anymore. I don't want to hear about violence anymore. I want to read stories about old empires. I'm not making sense. And that's okay."

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"No," Janice said. "And you're not either."

"I'm fine," I said.

"You're a tool," Janice said. "Just like me."

"For writing about drugs?" I asked.

"When they see you," Janice said. "When they, those people, your new friends—when they look at you, they don't see the same person I do. They look at you and say 'Boy, tell us about your cruel world.'"

"No one says that," I said.

"Of course they do," Janice said.

"Why can't I do what I want to do?" I asked.

"I know you," Janice said. "I know what you want to do."

"And what's that?" I asked.

"You want to matter," Janice said.

"And what's wrong with that?" I asked.

"Most people don't matter," Janice said. "We don't matter."

“I don’t believe that,” I said.

“Tell me,” Janice said. “What do you believe? Tell me.”

“I believe,” I said. “You shouldn’t go to parties with people you hate.”

How long had my hand rested on her forehead? Was I stroking her hair the whole time? When she looked up at me, did I know? Did we know? When we looked at each other, did we know? Did she understand, as I did, in that moment, that I had never stopped loving her?

And if we kissed, would that affirm everything I knew about that never-stopping love?

I leaned in.

Martino knocked on the window. He was holding a greasy paper bag.

Janice sat up, rolled down the window.

“Home?” Martino asked.

“Home,” Janice said.

Janice rolled the window up.

Janice wiped her eyes.

When did she start crying?

When did I start crying?

We rode home in silence, in our extravagant chariot, without touching our food.

I was still stoned. Was that her excuse too?

Cop cars, ambulances, police tape, and news trucks blocked our Lake Shore Drive exit: a crime scene. We had to take the long way around, past the children’s hospital,

hidden, out there, by sparse woods. We crossed the train tracks and passed the old country club. The old country club turned into a cultural center after the old country club members preferred disbandment than admittance of the neighborhood's new black residents. Barack and Michelle got married at the new cultural center.

On our left: the lake and horizon, blended. On our right: those apartment buildings, slanted with history and wind. Paul says, one day, they'll tear down those apartment buildings and put up condos and organic grocery stores. One day, Paul says, we'll drive through the neighborhood and not recognize a thing. Paul thinks Barack will put his library in South Shore. Progress, Paul says, is complicated and expensive.

We pass another crime scene. I don't know what to think. Janice fell asleep back on the expressway. I can see the body, leaking. I can see a man crying in a cop's arms. Over there, above their heads, are sleeping pigeons on an old beauty salon marquee. I see them take the body away. They have a sheet over the body, except the feet, bare feet, feet, it seems, the same length as mine. A body like mine. I want to poke Janice and ask what she thinks.

Then, the crime scene is behind us. Now, a red light and a closing bar. Costumed and stumbling patrons waded towards the intersections. They wanted to know, dressed as fantasy, who was in that whip. Who hid behind the tinted glass? They froze. They waved. They couldn't see me wave back. We continued home when the light changed. They stayed on the street: hugging, laughing, kissing, not concerned, in that moment, with a violent and changing world on their doorstep.

I thought, maybe I should write a story about regular people. What makes a person regular? All the regular people I see in South Shore, I don't see in Missouri. Are

there commonalities? Is there something universal in regular life and regular people and regular places and regular hopes and regular dreams and regular tragedies? Am I regular? Is my family, after all, regular in their irregularities? Do I think like this—wrapped in a circle—when I’m not stoned in the back of a yellow limo? Am I often struck by humanities sameness? Am I just unaware of my mind?

Does the world need another story about drugs and gangs and violence in Chicago? Does the world need my voice? Is Chicago the world? And what’s up with Otie? And what’s up Victor? I mean, Justin. And what’s up with Justin? And what’s up with Janice, sleeping with her mouth open, scratching, in beautiful sleep, behind her knees?

I didn’t notice when Martino parked in front of our house.

Martino tapped at our window. I tapped on Janice’s shoulder. Janice stretched, yawned, didn’t notice drool smeared across her cheek.

“Is this the airport?” Janice asked.

“We’re home,” I said.

Janice looked past me.

“I’m going to Venice,” Janice said.

“Your bag’s inside.” I said.

“Justin will buy me new clothes,” Janice said, half-asleep and bored.

“If I don’t go back,” I said. “Will you stay?”

“Go back,” Janice said. “Write your stories.”

Martino knocked on the window again. I knocked back.

“If you stay,” I said. “I’ll stay.”

“Please,” Janice said. She rolled onto her side, faced the seat cushion, her back towards me.

“Please, what?” I asked.

“Please don’t make me late,” Janice said.

I opened the door and put one foot in the street. Janice rolled back over, showed me her face.

“Hey,” Janice said.

“Yeah?” I said.

Janice held up the greasy paper bag.

“Don’t you want your food?” Janice asked.

“No,” I said.

“Well,” Janice said. “Throw it out.”

I took the greasy bag from her. I thanked Martino for driving. I offered him a tip: two crumpled dollars from my back pocket. I offered him the greasy bag. He laughed and closed the door behind me. He shut Janice away.

“My name’s Chester,” Martino said. “I came of age in Little Rock, Arkansas.”

Martino, whoever he was, was back in the driver seat and headed towards the lake before I was on the sidewalk.

That was the last time I saw Janice: horizontal, facing away, snoring, I think—bored, she was bored of me. She was, also, I think, bored of herself. She knew something I didn’t, something I’d come to know soon. She knew powers in the universe were always working against us with unceasing stamina and persistence. She understood

power and how it wanted to crush us. We didn't stand a chance; Janice leaned into our horrible odds, our crooked and weak-boned destiny. I watched her carriage head towards Lake Shore Drive. That was around midnight. If I knew I'd never see her again, I would've chased after her. I would've caused a scene up and down the neighborhood, professed my love, blocked the intersection, howled, begged, danced, stood up for what I wanted. And none of it would've worked.

Janice was gone.

Janice was in the wind long ago. Janice glided and twirled away from South Shore. Janice was bigger than any of us.

I think she loved me until the end.

I think I knew her better than anyone else.

I like to think our thoughts connected on an invisible plain.

I like to think she knew me better than anyone else.

I don't know; it's nice, to think, that, out there on the curb, outside Grandma's house, it's nice, to think, that, in that moment, I don't know—Did Janice know what was happening inside me?

A siren sped down a nearby street, out-of-sight and howling. I went inside. Paul was eating, on the couch, bits of sausage from a paper plate. He was shirtless under his untied bathrobe.

"Where's Diana Ross?" Paul asked.

He sat in darkness—no T.V., no lamps; streetlights landed on the carpet, near his slippered feet.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

“What’s that?” Paul pointed at my greasy paper bag.

“Maxwell Street,” I said.

“The world is giving out,” Paul said. “Right under our feet.”

“Were there always this many cops?” I asked.

“That boy got killed,” Paul said. “I thought that was the last straw.”

Paul tried to toss a piece of sausage into his mouth, missed, stared at the sausage as it settled on the carpet. I pulled out my Polish and fries and started eating.

“What boy?” I asked.

“Didn’t Grandma tell you?” Paul asked.

“She said something about a boy,” I said. “There’s always boys getting killed.”

“Remember the riot?” Paul asked.

“Of course I remember the riot,” I said.

“Remember Big Columbus and those fools?” Paul asked.

“How long do you think I’ve been gone?” I asked.

“You’re gone,” Paul said. “I’m just making sure you’re not disappeared.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

Paul created space for me on the couch. He waved me over. I sat and coughed at his smell: cigarettes and whiskey. Up close, his eyes were blank, rolling. He offered me his plate of sausage. I offered him my leftover fries. He accepted.

“Where’s Grandma?” I asked.

“Tired,” Paul said. “Sleeping.”

“Are you okay?” I asked again.

“At least,” Paul started. “When Big Columbus and those fools were around, we had some backbone.”

“Whose we?” I asked.

“The neighborhood,” Paul said. “Us.”

“What do you?” I asked.

“They just killed that boy,” Paul said. “He wasn’t doing anything. Just walking. And they killed that boy for walking. And that’s it.”

“What?” I asked.

“He’s dead,” Paul said. “And we’re alive. And that’s it.”

“Let’s get some sleep,” I said.

“Mitchell Manigault,” Paul said. “And he was just walking. And they killed him.”

“I know,” I said.

“What do you know?” Paul asked.

“I know you need some sleep,” I said.

I lifted Paul to his feet, unsteady and drooping.

“Why this one?” Paul asked himself. “Why does this one signify the end? Why does today feel like the universe twisting into a destructive vortex?”

I led him up the stairs. I held onto his waist. He held onto the walls.

“I’ve seen black men killed my entire life,” Paul said to himself. “My entire life, I’ve seen black men and women killed. Why now? Why does this moment feel like civilization—the end? I’ve found hope in love. I’ve tried to be good. And death feels closer, close enough to scare the shit out of me.”

He fell out of my arms and into bed. Paul missed his pillow and smacked his head against the mattress.

“Look at me,” Paul said.

I hadn’t stopped looking at him.

“Closer,” Paul said.

I leaned in closer.

“Closer, “ Paul said.

I put my nose close to his breath: hot and smoky and sour; desperate.

“You high?” Paul asked.

Then, he faded into peaceful sleep. I closed Paul inside his room. I stood in the hallway and felt something pulling at my gut, heavy and painful, emotional and thick. Paul wasn’t okay. Janice wasn’t okay. Grandma, when I saw her, earlier that day, looked beyond sanity. Something wasn’t right. Not just within our dysfunctional house—for as long as I could remember, there was always something off about us.

I had been back for less than a day. I wanted to leave. Chicago wasn’t what I remembered. I remembered, when I tried to sleep in Missouri, the busses running late along Jeffrey. Now, all I hear are sirens. Were the sirens always there? Did those silence Missouri nights recondition me?

I had been gone for less than a semester—what happened? I felt like an outsider. On Victor’s roof, I looked out on an unfamiliar city, a city I didn’t want to know. Maxwell Street didn’t taste the same. The grease didn’t comfort my stomach like it used to. I felt sick. Heavy. I felt heavy and sick. I wanted to sleep. I wanted to go back to Missouri.

My phone rang. A Chicago number I didn't know.

"Yeah?" I asked.

"Come outside," a voice said.

"Excuse me?" I asked.

"Outside," the voice said, with force this time.

"Outside where?" I asked.

"Outside your house," the voice said.

My tiredness and heaviness shifted into fear.

"No," I said.

"Outside," the voice said. "Or I come inside."

"Who is this?" I asked.

"Outside," The voice said.

"What are you going to do to me?" I asked. "I don't want to come outside."

"Claude," the voice said. "Outside."

I thought about calling the cops. I thought about waking up Paul, waking up Grandma, calling Janice. I thought sneaking out back—what if they, whoever they was, knew about the back door and how you can hop the fence? I thought about hiding in the basement. I thought about holding my ground.

Outside: Otie and Victor holding half-eaten burritos wrapped in aluminum foil. In their free hands: long and burning joints.

"Come on," Otie said to me.

"How did you get my number?" I asked.

"Come on," Otie said to me.

“How did you know where I lived?” I asked.

“Janice told us,” Victor said to me.

“Get in the car,” Otie said to Victor.

“Come on,” Otie said to me.

Victor walked off the porch, towards a grey BMW with tinted windows. He disappeared into the driver’s seat.

Otie pointed his burrito at me. A fatty steak bit fell at his feet. He flicked ash onto the porch, next to the fatty steak bit. He blew smoke past my head. He moved his burrito from my face to the grey BMW with tinted windows.

I took a step back, towards the front door, towards safety.

“Don’t,” Otie said. Somehow, without a free hand, he lifted up his shirt and revealed a small gun peeking out his pants.

“Come on,” Otie said.

I followed him to the grey BMW with tinted windows. He opened the backseat door, followed me in, shut us in. Victor was silent behind the steering wheel. He puffed from his joint and didn’t look backwards when we got him. I glimpsed him through the rearview; his eyes were still, empty.

“I’m sorry about earlier,” Otie said to me.

“Why are you here?” I asked.

“This thing we do,” Otie said. “This shit we’re into. The Struggle. Making It. You know?”

“What are you going to do with me?” I asked.

“You’re in it now,” Otie said.

“In what?” I asked.

“This shit,” Otie said. “This thing we do. You’re in it.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “What you’re talking about. I don’t know.”

Otie noticed my shaking legs. I saw him watching. I couldn’t stop. I closed my eyes. When I opened them, Otie had the joint in my face.

“Here,” Otie said.

I smoked the joint. I started coughing. I kept coughing. I couldn’t stop coughing. I couldn’t stop shaking. A burning sensation ricocheted between my chest, ears, eyes, and nose. Underneath my skin: fire, roiling and quick. I couldn’t stop coughing. The fire jumped to my toes. Then my fingertips. Then my thighs. I wasn’t in pain. The burning sensation felt well-meaning, its intentions were pure. Otie laughed. I looked at him through tears. He was a fuzzy swirl. I could hear him laughing. I couldn’t see his face. I wanted to grab him. I couldn’t move my arms. I wasn’t shaking. I couldn’t move my feet. I wasn’t coughing.

“Am I going to die?” I asked.

“Death calms the troubled mind,” Otie said.

We started at each other. I still couldn’t see his face.

“Are you troubled, Claude?” Otie asked.

“Home,” I said. “Let me go home.”

Under my skin, burning turned cool and relaxed—tingling. I felt sparkles inside my limbs. Outside, past Otie’s head, it looked like the night sky had collapsed. There were stars everywhere. Real. Glowing, pulsing. Stars torn from galactic fabric and placed right there, in South Shore, behind Otie’s head, outside that window.

“Chill,” Otie said. “It’s just Magma.”

“Magma,” I repeated.

I wanted to scream and freak out. I wanted fight my way out. I felt frozen and happy.

“Don’t you see that?” I asked.

“See what?” Otie asked.

“Outside,” I said. “The stars outside. They’re going to burn us.”

Otie, unconcerned, rolled down his window.

“See?” Otie asked.

A boy rode past on a bike. He carried an overflowing bag of candy. Besides the boy: nothing out there, no stars, just the world.

“I don’t like this,” I said.

“You’ll get used to it,” Otie said.

“I can’t see your face,” I said.

“You’ll get used to it,” Otie said.

“Why are you doing this to me?” I asked.

“The big man wants to talk with you,” Otie said.

“Who?” I asked.

“You,” Otie said. “He wants to talk to you.”

“What are you saying?” I asked.

“The big man will meet you in Missouri,” Otie said.

“Who’s that?” I asked. “Why me?”

Victor laughed in the front seat. He laughed and laughed until Otie slapped the back of his head. They had not stopped smoking. So this was Magma, I thought. My mouth tasted like sulfur. My sensations didn't make sense.

"It's an honor," Victor said. "To meet the big man. Be honored."

"Who's the big man?" I asked.

"Big Columbus," Otie said.

"Big Columbus?" I asked.

"Big Columbus," Otie said.

"You're joking," I said.

"He wants to meet you in Missouri," Otie said.

"You're fucked up," I said.

"Yes," Otie said.

"Big Columbus," I said. "Wants to meet me?"

"Yes," Otie said.

"Why?" I asked.

"I'm just a messenger," Otie said.

"I'm not going back," I said.

"Yes you are," Otie said.

Otie pulled out a bus ticket for tomorrow morning. He shoved it down my shirt.

"What if I want to stay here?" I asked.

"Don't do that," Otie said.

"Don't do that," Victor said.

Otie slapped the back of Victor's head.

“I want to stay here,” I said.

“Martino will pick you up tomorrow morning,” Otie said.

I got two words of protest out before Otie removed the gun from his waist. He pointed the barrel at my forehead.

“This will help you sleep.” Otie pushed the joint between my lips. He pushed the gun into my temple.

“Breath,” Otie said.

I breathed.

“Deeper,” Otie said.

I breath deeper.

I felt the Magma fill my lungs.

“Hold,” Otie said.

“Exhale,” Otie said.

“Nice to meet you,” Otie said.

“Get out,” Otie said.

Otie pushed me onto out front lawn. I managed to wobble, only for a moment. I collapsed on the grass.

*

Mom stood on a cloud, looking down, holding her chin and a suitcase. Her hair was bleached gold, her nails a dark shade of something. In that moment we shared a face. Had her lips always puffed like that? And her ears pointed at the tip and round at the

bottom, sticking out like tiny wings? My lips, my ears. Tsk, she said without looking at me. All this dust, she said. She turned towards me and her thick eyebrows, my eyebrows, turned into butterflies, a dark shade of something. What's amazing is that the butterflies stayed still. There was wind now. A hard slow wind I felt in my chest. This room, she said. This room is a mess, she said. Claude, she said, pick up your dirty socks or I'm never coming back.

The mist turned into an old Cadillac with black leather seats. I was in the backseat and Mom had the windows cracked. I noticed the highway: a long stretch of sick wheat and brown corn stalks. In all my dreams about her, there was never smoke. Why was there smoke now? Why was I dreaming when I was just standing? Claude, she said through the rearview mirror, butterflies still there, her face, my face, older now. You're a man now, she said. None of it was real. The smoke was coming from an arm-length cigarette. She lit another one. There aren't two ways to get to where you're going, she said. You're going, she said, the only place you can. While I was counting the dots on her butterflies' wings, we pulled into Grandma's living room. Grandma's hair was black and her body was full. She shadowboxed on the couch. She beat the air into pieces. The scene shattered around us. We were back on the highway. It was dark out and Mom refused to put her headlights on. Mr. Strongman, she said. You weren't shit before and you're sure not shit now, she said. I look at you and see a mouse, she said. Mr. Strongman the mouse, she said. At least you're not you're father, she said. Our old Cadillac with black leather seats didn't have a roof now. There were stars out here, constellations that didn't exist. Michael Jordan was up there playing one-on-one with Michael Jackson for charity. The moon wasn't a basketball. What are you going to do, Claude? She winked at me through

the rearview; her butterflies turned into hawks and flew away with squealing mice in their talons.

Mom disappeared.

The old Cadillac with black leather seats kept straight for as long as it could. Luckily, this was a dream or something like it: I blinked and was sitting on 63rd street beach facing Lake Michigan.

What are you going to do, Claude? Who do I have left? Grandma's body is turning to mush. When I almost drowned on this beach, she put me on her shoulders and carried me to the sand. She told me she'd carry me anywhere. I didn't need to learn how to swim, she said. She said she'd always be there to carry me and put air back in my lungs. When was I going to wake up? Wake up, Claude. Wake up.

I blinked and was on a raft without any shore in sight. The water tasted fresh and dirty: not far from home. Another constellation formed underwater: Barack Obama playing one-on-one with Abraham Lincoln and Barack's letting Abe win because Abe doesn't know the rules and they're both acting coy and respectful. Wake up.

I blinked. I rode shotgun in a Helicopter looking for a sunken ship. Come on, Claude.

I blinked. I rode a dolphin up a tsunami. Claude.

I blinked. Paul called my name from the opposite side of a tornado. He was beating a pot and pan together. His robe was open. His lucky "Purple Rain" boxers. Wake up. Come on. Claude.

I blinked and Janice was hiding in plain sight behind a skinny tree in an open field. I set out after her. Claude. Come on. Wake up. WAKE UP.

*

I woke up to Grandma's barefoot against my cheek. The sun, somewhere behind her head, was coming up.

"Wake the fuck up," Grandma said.

I pushed myself off from the cold wet grass.

"Good," Grandma said. "Now, I'm going to kill you."

"What happened?" I asked.

Grandma wore an extra long t-shirt, no pants, no shoes, no earrings.

"You tell me what happened," Grandma said. "You tell me why I look out my window and see you on the grass like a tramp, like a drifter, like you're left for dead."

"I think some people came over last night," I said.

"You had a party in my house?" Grandma asked.

"No," I said. "Just two people. Janice's friends. I think they gave me some drugs."

"You see," Grandma said. "You try to act like Katie Couric... Look at you: doing drugs."

"Is Janice okay?" I asked.

"How should I know?" Grandma asked. "I see that ghost for two minutes, she steals you, and leaves you for dead."

"I think I have to go soon," I said.

"Of course you do," Grandma said.

"Can we go inside?" I asked.

“Good idea,” Grandma said. “I don’t want all these witnesses.”

Up the street, half way down the block, a young woman had stopped walking her large dog, a great dane, maybe. The young woman stared at us. We stared at her. Grandma, after some consideration, extended her middle finger, spit in the young woman’s direction, and went inside. I followed.

Grandma slid a glass overflowing with grapefruit juice across the table. I stopped it from hitting the floor, took a sip.

“They put a gun to my head,” I said.

“What kind of fucked up are you?” Grandma asked.

“They told me Big Columbus was in Missouri,” I said.

“Who the fuck is they?” Grandma asked. “And what did they give you?”

Grandma stopped cracking eggs. She turned off the stove. She sat at the table, across from me. She put her head in her hands. She put her head on the table. She spoke into the wood.

“What did you just say?” I asked.

She lifted her head.

“Where did I go wrong?” Grandma asked.

She removed two Coronas from the fridge, popped their tops on the counter corner. She slid me one. It clinked against my grapefruit juice. She sat back down.

“First Janice,” Grandma said. “Then you. Out all night. Sleeping on the lawn.”

“I wasn’t out all night,” I tried to say.

“Just let me finish,” Grandma said. She was measured.

“First, your mother,” Grandma said. “Out all night. Sleeping on the lawn. Rebellion. Teenagers. I thought it was normal. I guess, looking back, knowing what I know—it is normal. There are power structures throughout our existence that we wish to break down. Family, before we learned to appreciate it, is the first power structure we wish to demolish. Since the dawn of curfews and mothers and domestic rules and domestic punishment, I suppose. I tried to understand that, in your mother. You know I didn’t have a mom? You know I didn’t have a dad? I didn’t. Well, I did. I’m here. I did. My dad stayed in Germany after the war, found a new wife, wrote me letter when he was dying of liver failure, years later. My mother found a new husband. That new husband didn’t want a new daughter. I grew up with my aunt. I was just an angry child, abandoned, clichéd, breaking down. My aunt worked two jobs. I had our tiny apartment to myself. My mother moved to Massachusetts with her new husband. I stayed in Harlem and had this apartment to myself, this tiny apartment. It was a nice apartment. My aunt was a nice person. We ate nice dinners on Sunday. Daffodil. That was her name. When I was still a child, when I first moved in with my aunt, I used to write fairy tales to myself. They were horrible and stupid and filled with hope. I didn’t have anyone to slap reality into my head. I thought my mother would come back. I thought my father would come back. I thought we’d all move to Africa and ride giraffes. I thought the world was fair.

“Then I started high school. Then I became a woman. When I was a child, when I walked to the bodega, no one paid attention to me. I imagined I was a ghost. When I became a woman, when I walked to the bodega, people noticed me, men noticed me. And it wasn’t fulfilling. Those men, those men sitting outside the bodega, thought they were doing me a favor by whistling at my ass. Fuck them. I stopped going to the bodega on our

block. I started taking the bus to another bodega, twenty blocks away. There was a library next to my new bodega. I'd go to the bodega after school, get my sandwich, soda, and pomegranate. Then I'd go into the library and read about places I thought were better than Harlem. Isn't it strange how fast you learn how everyplace in the world is fucked up and doesn't want you? Isn't it strange how fast you can find that out? Everyplace you don't belong? Freshman year to junior year, that's what I did. Fourteen to seventeen, eating bodega sandwiches in a library, reading about the world.

“So I was reading about Moorish Iberia when this man tapped me on the shoulder and asked me to dinner. I told him I was too young. He said he was too young also. I told him—asked him—if he knew where we were, if he knew this was a library, for fuck's sake, not a cocktail bar. He apologized. He said he couldn't help himself. He said I was beautiful. He said he loved Moorish Iberia. He wore a suit. Back then people wore suits to the library. Back then everybody had short hair and mustaches. He had short hair and a mustache. He looked like every man in Harlem, except better. He had dark skin and green eyes. His hand, against my back, felt smooth and powerful. So, I'm sitting there reading about Moorish Iberia and how woman had to stay inside and how they couldn't just invite a man they met in a library back to their tiny apartment. So, I said, fuck it. My aunt was at her second job, the one taking care of dying rich people. I invited this man back to my aunt's place. And that's how I lost my virginity. And that's how I got pregnant with your mom.

“And then I told my aunt. And then she kicked me out. And then I lived in a shelter. And I never heard from that man again. And then, after I had your mom, I was carrying her down the street, begging for money, when this man in a suit stopped me. He

told me I was beautiful. I told him I'd heard that before. He told me about his modeling agency. He told me I should model. He told me there was a lot of money floating around just for beautiful women like me. So, there I was, with your baby mom crying in my arms, looking for work, just wandering around the streets. And this man in a suit asks if I want to see his office. Fuck it, I said. What else did I have to lose?

“You should've seen the faces on the skinny California bitches when they saw me backstage with your mom, breastfeeding before walking the runway. You should've seen the money. You should've seen the men in suits, how they carouselled around my ankles, how they drooled at my feet, kissed my ass. And I didn't need them. That was the best part: telling all those men in suits to fuck off. I had your mother and I had money. That was all I needed.”

Grandma emptied her fourth beer down her throat. I still hadn't touched my first. I still hadn't touched my grapefruit juice.

“Often,” Grandma continued. “I try to find the moment my life changed. And I don't mean—I don't want to sound depressing. Life changes us. We change throughout life. At some point, I changed. And I want to know when. Maybe it was Paul. Maybe it was Chicago. Maybe it was South Shore. Maybe it was when your mother started staying out all night with your father, when they were your age. You look like your father, that loser. Maybe it was when your mother got pregnant with you and I saw time and history as a spinning circle, always turning, always repeating, always trapping us within our past decisions. Maybe it was Janice speaking to me as your mother used to speak to me. Maybe it was seeing you on the lawn this morning. Maybe it was when that boy got killed. I'm tired.”

“I’m leaving today,” I said.

Grandma headed for the stairs, left her empties on the kitchen table, left all those cracked eggs in the cold skillet.

“Of course you are,” Grandma said. She kissed my forehead. I stood and hugged her. We embraced, like that—vulnerable and uncertain—until she burped in my ear. She held me out at arm’s length, studied what I had grown into.

“I’m coming back soon,” I said.

“Of course you are.” Grandma kissed me again and went upstairs.

“I’m sorry,” I said and didn’t know why.

“I left your bag in the living room,” Grandma said.

“I’ll see you soon,” I said.

“I’ll tell Paul you love him,” Grandma said.

She kissed me a third time and went upstairs. I took my bag and went outside.

Sitting on my front porch, waiting for Martino, watching Sunday morning move slow in front of me—what if, at that moment, I trusted the hollow feeling growing inside me? What if I ran away? Families dressed for church headed towards the bus. Hungover revelers trudged home in half-removed costumes. I hadn’t heard a siren all morning. Three crows talked in a tree across the street. I didn’t run. I couldn’t run. Where would I go?

Martino’s yellow stretch limousine pulled in front. He didn’t get out and open the door for me. He honked. He didn’t say anything on the way to the Megabus. He didn’t answer me when I asked if he’d see Janice soon. We rode, in silence, through light traffic

and bright sun. I thought I heard him say the lake looked beautiful. I thought I heard him whistling something easy and beautiful. I texted Whitney A.

“Heading back now. Need to meet. I have a story. It’s important. Emergency.”

Somewhere outside Springfield, she texted me back.

“Come to office when you get here. Meet in CS office.”

November 1st

Connie Stove had midnight-blue eyeliner raised in her shaky hand, aimed at her translucent eyelid. I still had Pacific's bag under my arm. Connie Stove took a step back from her full-length mirror, which wasn't there the day before. Connie Stove studied herself. We, Whitney A and I, studied her also. Connie Stove smoothed her grey pantsuit, lint-rolled her shoulder pads, smacked her lipstick even and smooth, inspected her nostrils and the protruding white hairs, turned and considered her profile, stomach in, stomach out, butt in, butt out, hair pulled up, pulled down, glasses, no glasses, glasses, pulled up, butt out, stomach in, chin up, stomach out, chin down, chest out, butt in, no glasses; she turned towards us standing there, inspecting her, studying a woman ready to raise hell; Whitney A's jaw agape, drool forming at the corner of her mouth, ready to spill. Connie Stove picked up two pairs of shoes. One was solid black with a multi-inch sharp heel. One was flat and midnight-blue, matching.

“Which one?” Connie Stove extended the options.

“This one.” Connie Stove held the sharp multi-inch heel at us, a pistol. “This is called Dick Ripper.”

“So?” Whitney A asked me. “What’s the emergency?”

“Dick Ripper it is,” Connie Stove said. She put both pairs on her desk.

“I went back to Chicago,” I said. “My uncle, well, not really, my uncle.”

“What is he saying?” Connie Stove asked Whitney A.

“What are you saying?” Whitney A asked me.

“I went out with my sister,” I said. “Well, not my sister. We’re just really close.”

“What did you do with your sister?” Whitney asked me.

“Well,” I said. “That was years ago.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Whitney A asked me.

“Out with it,” Connie Stove said.

“I met this guy named Otie,” I said. “And he made me smoke Magma.”

“What is this?” Connie Stove asked me. “A confession? An airing of sins?”

“And you.” Connie Stove pointed Dick Ripper at Whitney A. “What were you thinking?”

“He said it was an emergency,” Whitney A said. “I thought this was an emergency.”

“It is,” I said. “That’s not it.”

“I have a plane to catch,” Connie Stove said.

“Where are you going?” Whitney A asked.

“The Redbelters,” I said. “They’re in Missouri.”

They both looked at me, confused and frustrated.

“The Redbelters,” Connie Stove said.

“Redbelters?” Whitney A asked.

“This guy,” I said.

“Otie,” Whitney A said.

“Yeah,” I said. “This guy, Otie, is a Redbelter. He made me smoke Magma.”

“What does this have to do with anything?” Whitney A asked.

“This guy,” I said.

“Otie,” Whitney A said. “What kind of name is Otie?”

“Otie,” I said. “Says Big Columbus wants to talk to me.”

“Big Columbus?” Connie Stove asked.

“Bullshit,” Whitney A said.

“That’s what Otie says,” I said.

“Do you trust Otie?” Connie Stove asked me.

“You can’t believe him,” Whitney A said.

“Look in my eyes,” Connie Stove said to me. “Do you trust Otie?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Do you trust him with your career?” Connie Stove asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“Do you trust him with *my* career?” Connie Stove asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“Good,” Connie Stove said. “Now. I have a plane to catch.”

“Where are you going?” Whitney A asked Connie Stove.

“New York,” Connie Stove said. “Guliani’s having a barbeque.”

“You can’t,” Whitney A said. “What if he’s right?”

“Well.” Connie Stove pulled a suitcase from behind her desk. “Find out.”

“And what if Big Columbus is down here?” Whitney A asked Connie Stove.

“And what if The Redbelters are selling drugs. We’re just a school newspaper. We can’t handle this shit. You can’t do this.”

“I can do whatever I want,” Connie Stove said. “I once took a ham sandwich out of George H. W. Bush’s hands, ate half, and threw the rest in the trash. When George W. Bush was running for congress, I left a dead fish in his campaign bus.”

“Stop it!” Whitney A yelled at the carpet.

“What did you just say?” Connie Stove asked Whitney A.

“We need you here,” Whitney A said to Connie Stove.

“What about me?” Whitney A asked herself.

“Look,” Connie Stove said. “I was swimming on a beach in Hawaii with Oliver North when the Iran-Contra hit the fan. He looked at me, Ollie, that chin, those ears. Ollie looked at me. He knew the ceiling was coming down. We cancelled deep sea fishing and caught the first flight back to the mainland.”

“Stop it!” Whitney A pleaded.

Connie Stove didn’t stop. Connie Stove put me in her sights. Connie Stove couldn’t stop.

“You,” Connie Stove said. “You, Claude, you have sparked something here. Something that will be felt across the country and across time. You sparked it. You’re ready to hold the matches. You’re ready to know where the gasoline is. You’re ready for the tools.”

“You’re ready to leave,” Whitney A said to Connie Stove.

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Connie Stove said. “I’ll be back next week.”

Connie Stove couldn’t zip her suitcase. She started to sweat through her make up. She took breaks when she got dizzy, didn’t give up.

“You’ll understand,” Connie Stove said. “One day, the world will force you into a hole and that hole will be somewhere in Missouri and that hole will be Missouri. The world will force you down there. You might throw a drink in Ted Turner’s face at a Grammy After Party, you might spit in Ted Koppel’s coffee on election night, you might find yourself on a beach with Gwen Ifill and she might look beautiful and the moon might be full and you might feel the waves crash against your toes, under your toes, you might feel waves crash inside you. You might try to kiss Gwen Ifill. Gwen Infill might call your editor. All this might happen. And there it goes rolling down the hill, your career, your dreams, your gym membership, your ass—all down the hill, all into the hole. And you wait, and wait, and wait, and wait, and wait until all the hair on your body gets weak and thin and white when it used to get thick and black and strong when you didn’t shave because it was the sixties and then it was the seventies and then you just didn’t give a fuck what Tom Brokaw thought of your naked ass, naked armpits, naked legs. You had it all. And then, one day, it’s just you and the hole. You’ll pretend it’s okay. You’ll hope it’s okay. You’ll say ‘this is my home now. This is my new life.’ They’ll give you an office. They’ll give you a parking spot. They’ll call you esteemed. They’ll let you come to lunch when the donors are in town. They’ll ask you to speak at Commencement, Diversity Day, Family Weekend, Homecoming. They’ll ask you to help write a commercial for the university and you’ll do it. You’ll do all of it. You do all of it and

smile and the smile will mean nothing. You'll do it all because this is your home now. You'll think about your old home, from time to time. You'll think about the doorman with the mustache. You'll think about the doorman with the tongue ring. You'll think about the doorman that works at a strip club as a stripper. You'll think of that doorman the most. You'll think of that doorman's communications degree. You'll think of the tricks that doorman can do with his teeth and little spit. You'll think about all that doorman knows about daily newspapers, the rise and the fall and the success and the failure. You'll think about that doorman in the shower, when you sleep, when you're walking along a country highway late at night. You'll think about that doorman when the headlights come. Those headlights. Those headlights won't kill you. Those headlights will keep on going. You know why? I'll tell you why. Those headlights won't kill you because you're too afraid to die. That's what the hole does to you.

“You'll look back at those years and you'll call them Golden. Those years spent running up stairs, down hallways, between desks. Those years spent listening to your instincts. Your instincts did you well, they served you. You could walk into a maze and you're your way out, eyes closed, just using your gut. You traced that feeling in your gut, once, high of mushrooms in Idaho with Kissinger and Rumsfeld. You traced that feeling in your gut to your soul. You'll look back at the night outside Boise, near the waterfalls, under big sky. You'll look back at those years and you'll call them Wasted. All that. For what?”

Connie Stove closed her suitcase sometime before she finished. I don't know exactly when.

That was the last time I saw Connie Stove. She's dead now, buried in a lot close to Walter Cronkite.

Whitney A and I stayed in Connie Stove's office. We didn't saying anything to each other. I couldn't decide between leaving the room, leaving the state. I don't know what Whitney A couldn't decide. Finally, Whitney A decided to call Whitney B, Bio, and Simone. I called Latifah.

We walked over to the newsroom in silence.

Show-Me

We sat around The Pit and couldn't figure out what to do with me, my situation.

"I know it doesn't make much sense," I said.

"It's ridiculous," Whitney B said.

"I believe him," Latifah said.

"Who are you?" Whitney B asked Latifah. "And what are you doing here?"

"That's Latifah," I said to Whitney B while point across the table at Latifah.

"Of course you believe him," Simone said to Latifah. "You started all this."

"Connie Stove," Whitney A said. "Thinks we need to find out."

"Where is Connie Stove?" Bio asked. "Where is she?"

"Guiliani's having a barbeque," I said. "She'll be back next week."

"I can't believe we're doing this," Simone said.

"We're not doing anything," Whitney A said.

"We're talking about this bullshit," Simone said.

"Chill," Bio said to Simone.

“Don’t tell me to fucking chill,” Simone said. “We’re sitting here about talking about this gangland bullshit when there are real problems in the world. There are real problems on this campus. Who cares about white frat boys doing drugs? Who cares about the black gangsters selling them drugs? What about my story about women of color and academic retention? What about my story about the lack of diversity in the sciences? Anything. Anything else is worth more than this bullshit.”

She was right. Before I could tell her she was right, Whitney A stood up.

“You don’t have to be here,” Whitney A said. “You don’t have to work for this paper. If you don’t approve of the way we select stories, if you don’t—you don’t have to sit here and fume. You can leave. You can do something else with your life.”

Simone appeared prepared for a speech, a verbal reckoning. She appeared ready to split us open. She appeared, in that tense moment, to contain layers and levels of anger, frustration, destruction, and sadness. She appeared ready to unleash something biblical upon us. Instead, she gave us all two middle fingers and walked out the door.

That was the last time I saw Simone.

Bio ran after. We heard Bio’s pleas soften and then disappear up the staircase.

That was the last time I saw Bio.

Simone graduated from Stanford Law and works in Washington. She’s focused on the environment now: wetlands, everglades, estuaries, and marshes. I saw her on T.V. after an oil spill. She was holding a slick duck. She was asking for money, for you to do the right thing, for help, please help, it’s already too late. I donated fifty bucks. I’ve tried calling her over the years. I want to tell her all I regret and all those decisions I’d take back. I leave sad messages and tell her how right she was.

Bio moved back to Lisbon, then he moved to London, then Berlin, then Paris, then Delhi, then back to Tennessee, then Oakland, then Montreal. He's married now, from what the Internet tells me. His body has grown soft, his eyes are dull. He's in sales. He doesn't pick up either. I don't leave him messages.

Latifah stood up.

"Find me outside," Latifah said to me.

And she walked out also.

"Don't worry about them," Whitney A said after Bio slammed the door.

"What are you going to say to him?" Whitney B asked me.

"If this guy is for real," Whitney A added.

"You should wear a wire," Whitney B said.

"Do we have a wire?" Whitney A asked Whitney B.

"We could find one," Whitney B said.

"From where?" Whitney A asked

"I'm not wearing a wire," I said.

"When are you supposed to meet?" Whitney A asked.

"Rendezvous," Whitney B said.

"When are you supposed to rendezvous?" Whitney A asked.

"I don't know," I said. "He didn't say."

"We should call the cops," Whitney A said.

"We can't betray our source," Whitney B said.

"You can't call the cops," I said.

"Right," Whitney B said.

“We’ll call the FBI,” Whitney A said.

“We don’t know if any of this is real,” Whitney B said.

“This person kills people,” Whitney A said.

“It’s Claude’s choice,” Whitney B said.

“No cops,” I said.

“It’s not like he’s going to sit down and let Claude run a tape recorder,” Whitney A said.

“It’s not like he’s going to shoot Claude in the face,” Whitney B said.

“You don’t know that,” Whitney A said.

“He knows me,” I said. “He’s from my neighborhood.”

“What does that mean?” Whitney A asked.

“What does that have to do with anything?” Whitney B asked.

“You wouldn’t understand,” I said.

“What does that mean?” Whitney A asked.

“What does that have to do with anything?” Whitney B asked.

“I need to think about this,” I said.

“So do I,” Whitney A said.

“So do I,” Whitney B said.

“We’ll talk in the morning,” I said.

“Claude,” Whitney A said. “Be careful.”

“Claude,” Whitney B said. “This is important. Don’t fuck it up.”

“I need to think,” I said.

“Are you going to be okay?” Whitney A asked.

“Claude,” Whitney B said. “You don’t have to do anything.”

“What are you going to do?” Whitney A asked.

“Claude,” Whitney B said. “ You don’t have to do anything.”

“This is a good story,” I said. “I should be the one to tell it.”

“There are no good stories,” Whitney A said.

“There are no bad stories either,” Whitney B said.

“There are only stories about ourselves,” Whitney A said.

“And stories about someone else,” Whitney B said.

“I need to think,” I said.

I left them sitting at The Pit. That was the last time I saw the Whitneys.

Whitney A got a job for *The Washington Post’s Pop Culture Blog*. Whitney B got a job at *Buzzfeed*. Whitney A sends me a Christmas card. Each year, she dresses her pit bull up as an elf and dresses herself up as Santa Clause. She’s always in a park in Maryland, next to an unfrozen pond. She’s always making her pit bull face the camera.

Whitney B doesn’t send me anything.

Latifah was sitting in her golf cart. She waved me over.

“What do you think?” I asked.

“Do you really want to know?” Latifah asked.

Campus was always deserted late Sunday evenings. That Sunday, outside that building, the world felt empty.

“Yes,” I said. “I want to know what I should do.”

And Latifah told me.

“You’re not doing anything riteous,” Latifah said. “Uncovering truth, separating fact from bullshit, uncovering evil, is not a riteous act. That doesn’t mean it’s not necessary. You don’t have to act riteous all the time. This is the right thing to do. I believe this is the right thing to do. This isn’t my decision. Now get the fuck in and let me give you a ride.”

“I want to walk,” I said.

Latifah nodded. She hugged me from her seat.

“If you fuck this up,” Latifah said. “Even if you don’t fuck this up—the world isn’t going to change. The world isn’t against you and it isn’t on your side.”

And Latifah rode off into darkness.

Latifah, now, works as a police officer in a small town outside St. Louis. She tries to help lost souls. She’s one of the good ones, she tells me. She’s the one that always wants to help.

I walked back to my dorm.

Something in the air rejected me. Or was I rejecting the air? Was it agreed? Did I not belong here? Was this part of the world too big for me? Too small? Too fast? Not fast enough? If I kept walking, would I figure it out?

I walked down the office steps. I moved without direction.

There I was. Here I am, I thought. And who was I? What was I? Was I supposed to become something by now? Grandma said I’d turn into something special when the timing was right. Grandma showed me everything she could, everything at her fingertips. And there was everything else coming down on me; from every direction: hail the size of brimstone.

Who cares about drug dealers? Who cares about fugitives? I can about drug dealers. I care about fugitives. Those drug dealers, those kids slangin', back home, they're my brothers. And you have to care about your brothers. I want to join the fugitives of the world. I'm not fit for anyplace I've been. South Shore was too cruel. Chicago didn't need me. I was nothing to so many people. In Missouri, I was important for reasons random and unnecessary. I drank too much, threw up, and stumbled upon a conspiracy. In Missouri, nothing made sense. In Missouri, the universe used me as a pawn. In Missouri, what was the point? This was journalism. And I was staring at a black hole, total and unforgiving.

Drug dealers and cops just want to feed their families and take vacations when their existence gets too messy and contradictory, when they can't look themselves in the mirror.

Was this the truth I was supposed to tell?

"I'm Claude and this is my story.

"I've seen lakes as big as oceans. I've seen hot dogs yellowed by Wisconsin mustard. I've seen polishes topped with onions from the corner store.

"I'm Claude and my mother and father understood responsibilities in ways that didn't involve me.

"I'm Claude and my beaches are closed during the summer and my cookouts are better than your cookouts. I've seen cars with rims the size of boulders. I've seen cops dap up with corner boys. I've seen mothers cry. I've seen fathers cry too. I've seen aunties, uncles, cousins, folks, disciples, stones, kin—I've seen families like hordes populate funereal processions.

“I’ve seen fire. I’ve seen wreckage.

“I’m Claude and I’ve seen love.

“I know love doesn’t need me back. I’ve seen women stronger than me. I’ve seen love and I know love doesn’t need me, like women don’t need me.

“I’m Claude and no one needs me like I need you sometimes.

“I’ve seen violent sleep. I’ve seen dunks like you wouldn’t believe. I’ve seen parties. I’ve seen animals, animals, all of them, animals.

“I’m Claude and I yelled at the flowering dogwood trees. I’m Claude of Southern Shores and I’m in over my head. I’m Claude and I just want to go home. I’m Claude and I’m magical. I’m Claude and I miss my family.

“I’ve made mistakes. I’ve made mistake no one noticed. I was too quiet. I’ve held my tongue. I’ve gone along with the flow. I hate the world. I’ve seen the world, all the world a young black man can see in American, everywhere. I’ve seen my world and it’s beautiful and it’s not my fault you ruined it.

“I’m Claude and I appreciate smiles and hellos. I appreciate friendship.

“I’m Claude and I want to do the right thing.

“I’m Claude and I need to find peace.”

“Hey man,” a voice said from above my head, wherever I was.

“What?” I said back. I had followed an unknown path and ended up underneath a windowsill. I looked up. John-Michael Jeremy, The Tallapoosa Tempest, looked down at me in his black leotard.

“Can you keep it down?” John-Michael Jeremy asked me.

“Sorry,” I said.

“We’re just trying to practice,” John-Michael Jeremy said.

“Sorry,” I said again.

“It’s okay,” John-Michael Jeremy said.

“Wait,” John-Michael Jeremy said when I stood up and headed back towards my dorm.

“Yeah,” I said.

“It’s going to be okay,” John-Michael Jeremy said.

“Good luck,” I said.

The next time I saw John-Michael Jeremy, he was promoting long-lasting deodorant on television. He plays for Atlanta now. I hear he’s on billboards down there. No one believes me when I say I knew him better than anyone else.

Walking back to my dorm, I thought of all the things I had to take with me. I’d take a bus to Kansas City, then I’d take a bus to California, then I’d take a ship out into the ocean. Out there, on the water, I’d figure out what I could give the world. I wanted to make my own decisions. I’d call Grandma when I got to Kansas City. I’d call Paul when I got to California. Out there, on the water, I’d ask Janice to join me. If she said no, that would be okay.

I thought about the shirts I’d bring. I wouldn’t need jeans or anything arm-length. Swimsuits, I’d need swimsuits.

I thought about sandals in the elevator.

Before I opened my door, I thought about underwear.

Kenneth was trying to cook bacon in a microwave that wasn't there when I left. He had his back to the door. He swore at the old machine. He cursed the dump he found it in.

"Say," Kenneth said. "You still want me to hook you up with some Magma?"

"Kenneth," I said.

He gave the microwave a slap. He opened the door. He pressed his fingers into the uncooked meat. He turned around.

"You okay?" Kenneth asked.

"What do you do all day?" I asked.

"Things," Kenneth said.

"What are you going to do with your life?" I asked.

"Why do you care?" Kenneth asked.

"You're a loser," I said.

"Claude," Kenneth said.

I took a step forward. He took a step back.

"You don't do shit," I said.

"You're being mean," Kenneth said.

"I'm out here working my ass off," I said.

"I do things," Kenneth said.

"You do shit," I said.

I took a step forward. He took a step back.

"Claude," Kenneth said.

"Get the fuck out," I said.

“Claude,” Kenneth said.

“Get the fuck out now,” I said.

“This is my room too,” Kenneth said.

I was next to the microwave. Kenneth was against the window. I wanted to push him out. I felt an impulse, something deep and swirling, something dark and frightening. I took a deep breath; settle down. I wanted to punch him in the face. I took a deep breath; settle down. I wanted to kick him. I took a deep breath. Kenneth held his breath. My fists must have clenched up. He must have seen my clenched fists. He put his hands up to his face. He addressed me through his fingers, shiny from poking bacon.

“Claude,” Kenneth said. “I’m sorry. I’ll leave.”

I wanted to grab his throat. Settle down. I wanted to pinch his neck, right under the ear, that tender spot. Settle. I wanted to spit in his face.

“Claude,” Kenneth said. “Please.”

I took his uncooked bacon out of the broken microwave and threw it in the trash.

“Claude.” Kenneth put his hands down.

“Claude,” Kenneth said. “That was a gift.”

“Get out,” I said.

“How could you?” Kenneth said.

“Now,” I said.

Kenneth took one last look at the trash, his present in there. I didn’t hear him leave.

I heard a truck backing up, a hawk someplace. I hadn’t heard a hawk before. An eagle, maybe? I heard a ball bouncing above me, a fight below, something about

weekend plans. Or was that coming from my right? Those kids that huffed spray paint and spun around in circles until they puked and laughed until they puked and huffed until they passed out. A mess, we heard RA Tom call their room. A mess they looked in the elevator, in the bathroom, in the staircase when the elevator went out.

I heard sex coming from my left, that truck still backing up, Kick-the-Can in the hallway. RA Tom took their soccer ball away—too many broken lights, dented doors, and one too many broken noses. A kid from Southwest Indiana told us about his childhood, this game they played when they didn't have anything.

“They invented it in New York, I think.”

“Who's they?”

“Immigrants, I think.”

“My grandpa came through Ellis Island.”

“My Tio and Tia came through Miami.”

“San Francisco.”

“El Paso.”

“South Carolina.”

“South Carolina?”

“They Kick Cans down there?”

“I assume.”

“Assumptions, assumptions.”

“You should be ashamed.”

“What do we say?”

“FLOOR SEVEN IS AN ASSUMPSTION-FREE ZONE.”

I closed my eyes.

Big Columbus woke me up.

“My man,” Big Columbus said.

Kenneth was duct taped on his bed.

“Come with me,” Big Columbus said. “We need to talk.”

I could’ve yelled for help. I still don’t know why I didn’t.

“Okay,” I said.

“Put this on,” Big Columbus said.

He threw a blindfold at me.

That was the last time I saw Kenneth. I hear he’s doing fine. Insurance, I think.

He sells insurance in Montana.

Get Down, Claude

Big Columbus removed my blindfold. Big Columbus sat on a couch, a coffee table and carpet between us, three feet, maybe. Above his head, against the wall: a stuffed tiger's head, mid-growl, with sun glasses balanced on his broad nose, glitter in his mane, Mardi Gras beads dangling from his lower fangs.

“Did you hear me?” Big Columbus asked.

I didn't.

Big Columbus got up and walked behind my chair, a soft blue velvet or velour armchair with it's back towards the door; to this day, the comfiest chair I ever knew. I had to peek around the side to see what Big Columbus was getting, what was clinking around back there; the back of the chair rose above my head.

Orange juice from a carton, that's what he was pouring, into two of those McDonald's Super-Sized Dennis Rodman cups, the ones that, once your poured your

liquid to the brim and initiated the chemical reaction in the plastic, would turn Dennis Rodman's hair different colors, unnatural colors.

"Where did you get there?" I asked after Big Columbus sat back down and slide my cup over, spilling a little.

"Your mom," Big Columbus said. "Your mom I didn't know. She was from the other side of the tracks. Did you know that, Claude? Did you know the neighborhood was split in two by the Metra?"

"What are you going to do to me?" I asked.

"Your Grandma was cool," Big Columbus said.

"She remembers you," I said.

"Back in the seventies," Big Columbus said. "She organized all these people from her side, the right side, across the tracks, to bring supplies to families of gunshot victims. Did you know that?"

"No," I said.

"She bought my mom a month's worth of groceries," Big Columbus said. "When the cops shot my dad. She bought my mom a thousand dollars cash three months later when my older brother was singing with his band in the park and someone tried to shoot his bassist and missed. Did you know that?"

"No," I said.

"I don't remember any of that," Big Columbus said. "I was just a baby. I don't remember it and I'll always remember it. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Look," Big Columbus said.

His face—not what I remembered: deep lines around his eyes, grey around his temples, grey in his beard, a new beard, manicured; his eyes hadn't changed. What I thought was a black hoodie and black sweatpants was, in reality, a black hooded robe; what I thought were fancy thin shoes were fancy socks. His face looked comfortable, secure, *relaxed*.

“Why did you do it?” I asked.

“Do what?” Big Columbus asked.

“Everything,” I said. “What are you going to do to Kenneth?”

“I am benevolent,” Big Columbus said. “I am the bringer of light.”

Big Columbus grabbed me a robe like his from a closet, threw it on my lap. He went behind my chair again. I peeked around my chair.

“For your body,” Big Columbus said to the robe.

“Why am I here?” I said.

“I want to talk to you,” Big Columbus said.

“I'm leaving,” I said. “I'm taking a bus tomorrow and then I'm taking another bus and then I'm taking a boat. You don't have to worry about me.”

“I know you, Claude,” Big Columbus said. “We're the same breed. I remember when your mom had you. I remember when she used to need help carrying her groceries up Jeffrey because she had you in a stroller. I used to see your mom and dad fight in the street. Paul was always there, taking swings at your dad.”

“Paul did that?” I asked.

“Paul pulled a knife on your dad at a bus stop,” Big Columbus said.

“Why did my dad leave?” I asked.

“Your dad made a choice,” Big Columbus said. “Your dad was trouble. Your dad felt the walls closing in. This thing we do, Claude. This life. You know. It’s like the movies. It always comes to an end. When your dad met your mom, we all knew that he saw in her, you know, her saw her as his lifeboat, his raft, his long-awaited shore, his spaceship. When she left. He had to follow. “

“*This life?*” I asked.

“I’m down in Missouri,” Big Columbus said. “I’m selling some bullshit drug.”

“Why don’t you stop?” I asked.

“There’s a war coming,” Big Columbus said. “A war of the nameless.”

“Who are the nameless?” I asked.

“You are,” Big Columbus said. “I am. Your father. Your mother. Our families.”

“What war?” I asked.

“This is fate at work,” Big Columbus said. “You are supposed to be a part of me.”

“I just want to leave,” I said.

“And go where?” Big Columbus said.

“The ocean,” I said.

“There’s nothing out there for you,” Big Columbus said.

“There’s nothing down here either,” I said.

“Opportunity,” Big Columbus said. “We are ready to rise. We will strike soon.”

“Rise against what?” I asked.

“We will take back our city,” Big Columbus said.

“I just want to be by myself,” I said.

“We are not allowed to be alone,” Big Columbus said.

“Why not?” I asked.

“You see what they’re doing to our home?” Big Columbus said. “Closing schools, closing businesses, killing kids, watching kids kill each other.”

“I know,” I said.

“Don’t you want to do something about it?” Big Columbus asked.

“I can’t,” I said.

“You can!” Big Columbus yelled.

“Everyone leaves me,” I said. “And I leave everyone. And I’m alone always. And I know the world is horrible. I can’t do anything about it.”

“You can,” Big Columbus said.

“I can’t,” I said.

“Claude,” Big Columbus said. “The call has been issued. These cops. These politicians. These media moguls and their media gremlins. They all think they know what’s best for us. Chicago is run like a military state. They lock us up. They abuse us. They close our schools. They are perpetrating a one-sided war. Time to even the playing field.”

In that moment, I believe that fate had pulled Big Columbus back into my life. His soft expression reminded me of home, of the beach and basketball and cookouts and trunk parties in the beach parking lot. I felt I had spent my entire life drifting in the margins, not willing to choose a side, choose my own direction. In that moment, I wanted to join Big Columbus and rewrite history.

Why didn’t I stay in Chicago? Why not DePaul? Why not UIC? Why not Chicago State? Were your books expensive, alternate me?

Was it nice? Taking the number six bus downtown?

Did you meet a nice woman in your nice anthropology class? Did your nice professors remember your name and send you prompt responses via e-mail? Did you call Grandma and Paul every night? Did you talk Janice off the cliff? Is she there with you? In the library? In the café? Does she approve of your nice woman? Does she love you or is she just saying it? Can you tell, over there?

Did she leave you for another man? Were you not strong enough? Did you not stand up for yourself? Did you fall down the stairs and she stepped over you? Did you shoot too high? Were those nice grades not nice enough? Did you take too big a bite? Did you see your reflection on Michigan Avenue? Were you window shopping for a new dress, a present, something, anything, just take me back? Did you move back home? Did you move somewhere lukewarm? Did you find a way to pay rent?

Or did you marry that nice woman from your nice anthropology class? Did you find a job answering calls for State Farm? Did you move down to Bloomington? Or Normal? Do you get tornados down there? Are you prepared? Do you visit Grandma and Paul when you can? Do your kids know how lucky you are? Do they know? Do you know? Are you reunited with all that people that left? Do you sit around a wooden table and speak of love? Did the revolution come anyway? Were you a good soldier? Do you carry your scars with pride? Did you take back what's yours? Did you still find your way to the ocean? Did you find Janice in shallow water? Was she beautiful? Is she still beautiful? Do you speak of love? Do you visit Grandma in the hospital? Do you visit Grandma at her grave? Does Paul live in your renovated basement? Do you reconnect

with all those people you knew and loved and cared for? Do you kneel at your bedside
and list their names, hands cupped in prayer?

I love you, Mom.

I love you, Dad.

I love you, Grandma.

I love you, Paul.

I love you, Michael.

I love you, Scottie.

I love you, Phil.

I even love you, Hakeem.

I love you, Bubbly.

I love you, Nugget.

I love you, Ms. Bev and I hope you're on a beach somewhere.

I love you for who you are, Principal Big Ass.

I love you, Teeth.

I love you, Jonah.

I even love you, George Bones.

I even love you, Coach Harper.

I love you, Jimmy.

I love you, Annette.

I try to love you, Sergeant Baggs.

I love you, Chester Dexter.

I love you, Renaissance.

I love you, Whitney.

I love you, Whitney.

I love you, Bio.

I love you, Simone.

I love you, Connie Stove.

I love you, Latifah.

Thank you.

I love you, Janice.

Thank you.

I love you, Big Columbus.

Thank you.

“Okay,” I said.

CRASH

behind me.

FBI

kicked through the door

guns huge and pointed right at us.

Big Columbus ducked, hit the ground.

“Claude,” Big Columbus said. “Get down!”

“On the ground!”

“Hands up!”

“Get down!”

Book Three

Elsewhere

Epilogue

You asked if I saw Big Columbus go down.

Did you get what you need?

Do you understand?