Nebraskaphobia and Other Stories

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by

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The Architect

The library wall of my father’s study was all Architecture—Niemeyer, The Poetics of Space, L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui, Gaudi, Shelter, Werk, Bauen + Wohnen, Vitruvius, Architectural Record, Aalto, and on and on—all of which he made me read. My father was a famous Architect—front cover of EL CROQUIS, Issue 16, September, 1986. Article: Artificializing Nature: Reversing the Rules. He liked giving me pop quizzes. One night I woke to him pressing his finger between my eyebrows late enough that I could hear every tick of his A. Lange & Sohne. I was still using my Donald Duck nightlight. Where his lips turned into mouth there was purple from wine, he said, “Who designed Baghdad Gymnasium?”

I said, “Le Corbusier,” and closed my eyes.

“Real name?”

“Charles-Édouard Jeanneret.”

“And how old was he when the project was completed?”

I said, “He was dead, but would’ve been ninety-four.”

“And why did Saddam Hussein originally commission the project?”

“He didn’t, King Faisal II did.”

“When?”

“1957.” I had an excellent memory, just like my mother, but it meant nothing. He said, “Never mistake knowledge for genius.”
I didn’t get my father’s brain, but his sad, drooping face—like in the wedding photo with my mother—is the face I have, now. I know now my mother was a trophy wife—my father’s third, tall and lean—an ugly man’s ultimate symbol of success. I was made to be a trophy son, I suppose, handsome and brilliant, but turned out neither.

Jeffery

I’m a Help Desk Technician at Unitron. This is an entry level position. Most Technicians are still in college, ready to get their degrees in Marketing, or Business, or Computer Science—ready to move on. Some have just graduated: they’re earmarked for promotion. But I’ve been in this position eleven years. I’ve been offered promotions, but gratefully declined. I don’t want to work a little bit harder for a little more pay. I don’t want to lose my noon to eight shift.

Jeffrey’s hands squeeze my shoulders, close to the collar. I know it’s Jeffrey, because this is how he says hello. I minimize an online article explaining why Sapphires are worth five times what they were four years ago, and how China’s stockpiling the stones. My work e-mail’s what’s left on the screen. His hands knead my muscles in a nearly painful, manly way. It’s more uncomfortable than anything. I want to push my ears down to his hands, but take the pain instead.

Jeffrey’s the Manager of the Help Desk Managers: Principal Customer Service Director. He strolls through the Help Desk every few hours. He aims finger pistols at Technicians, chats and smiles. He’s got a great looking wife and two daughters standing shoulder to shoulder on a corner of his desk. The Eiffel Tower’s behind them. He’s got a
t-shirt that proves he won last year’s company golf tournament. You see it three nights a week when he leaves the office for the gym.

Jeffrey’s only five years older than me, but he’s already showing symptoms of midlife crisis: toupee, Porsche, booze in his speech. Lots of indicators. My favorite food’s still the Salisbury steak TV dinner, with the instant potatoes and brownie. Sweat stains around the collar and pits of his once expensive shirts. I could have his job by now if I ever wanted it. Boxy Half-Windsor knots. He slaps me on the side of the arm when he’s done kneading. I spin my chair around.

“How’s it going, boss?” he says.


“Rockin’,” he says, “rockin’,” and sets the underside of his forearm on the top of my cubicle wall. He watches his thumb nail pick under other fingernails. He says, “So when you taking me for a whip in that new Beemer?” Benz, Beemer, whatever. I don’t correct him.

“I’m just leasing it,” I say, though I bought it with cash, “but whenever you want.”

“I’m going to think about that,” he says, and puts as much weight on my shoulder as you’d put on a crutch handle. I buckle towards him. “I’m going to think about that,” he says, so only I can hear.

I can’t tell him to fuck off, so I say, “Anytime, just let me know.”

This younger guy, Rick, comes walking through with two coffees. Jeffrey’s attention and face shift to him. “Ricky,” Jeffery growls and squats into a two point
football stance—elbows on his thighs. He whips his finger through his lips how old
cartoons let you know someone had gone crazy: mostly “b” sounds. He has these little
gestures—little inside jokes with just about everyone. (What he does to me—he’ll pull
his pant legs up to his calves, so I can see his socks. With a ready-to-laugh smile he’ll
say, “Huh?” and I’ll say, “Yeah,” and force a fake laugh. He’ll laugh like a madman and
touch me all over on the arms and shoulders. This is how people who can’t remember
how to make friends think it’s done. The joke: one day he wore two different colored
socks—one black, one grey—and I called them to his attention.) This crazy mouth
football thing with Rick is new: Jeffrey and Rick must have been out drinking after work
last week, or something. Rick’s face shows he remembers the origin of the joke, but
doesn’t remember it being funny. The coffees control every step Rick takes. He’s
watching the lids. Jeffrey laughs in his wheezy laugh. Rick continues past my cubicle.
“Ricky, you know what I’m talking about,” Jeffrey says.

My work phone rings and Jeffrey jogs a little to catch up with Rick. Lots of
change in his pockets, or keys. “Remember?” he says, and puts his arm around Rick. I
spin back to my computer. A little box pops up on my computer screen and tells me
which one of Unitron’s clients is on the line. I click the answer button.

Zig 1

“Unitron Help Desk, this is Steel.”

“Hey Fuckface,” Zig says. If he can’t reach me on my cell, Zig’ll call in on the T.
Rowe Price assistance number, which I gave him. I pull a notepad and pen from my desk
drawer. “Why don’t you answer you cell phone?” he says.
Zig’s an anything-illegal-I’ll-do-it kind of guy, but he’s mostly into selling drugs. Everyone who buys from him knows they can drop him tips—info. on lax security at banks, car dealerships without GPS tracking or cameras, anything for a quick buck—and he’ll kick them a taste of their drug of choice. Zig’s got all sorts of guys lined up, no matter what the job may be. When it comes to domestic burglary, I’m his man.

“May I get your name and email address for my call log?”

“Yeah,” Zig says, “it’s Captain Donkey Dick, and eatshitanddie@fuckyou.com.” I don’t laugh. Zig could be funny if I didn’t know how not funny he really is. To know him is to hate him.

“And what issue are you having today, sir?”

“8918 Sycamore Lane,” he says. “Friday night. Midnight.” I know the house right away: that was the Permanent Address I filled in on student loan applications—it’s the five bedroom Italianate I grew up in; it’s where my father still lives with 24/7 in-home healthcare. Alzheimer’s. He can’t even tell time or remember to eat, anymore. I write down the address and time, and close the notepad.

Money’s not the issue, here: I’ve got money. If I had time to think I’d probably tell Zig I’m not interested or already have another job lined up. I often think about what I’d do with my parent’s inheritance, but not because I’m greedy. I’m not anxious for my father to die, but I do need him to understand I’m more a man than he ever was.

“You hear me?” Zig says.

“Yes, have you tried refreshing the webpage?”
“It’s some old guy. His nurse’s a client of mine. She says she’ll give him a double dose of sleeping pills.” I hear Zig sweep together a ridge of cocaine on his glass coffee table and make it disappear.

“You can just press F5 on your keyboard.”

“You heard from Georgie?” Zig says.

“No, Safari is not a compatible browser.”

“I ended up fucking her a couple weeks ago. Fucking bore.” Georgie’s my dream girl—someone so far out of my league I don’t even think to ask on a date—but to Zig she’s boring. “It was like fucking a wet blanket,” he says.

“Does the page load now with Internet Explorer?”

“Alright,” Zig says. “8918 Sycamore Lane. See you Friday.”

He hangs up and I say, “Perfect, thank you for calling Unitron, have a great day.”

George and Perry

On the other side of my father’s living room picture window the nurse leans against a porch pillar, smokes a cigarette and talks on her phone. It’s been seven Christmas’s since I’ve been here.

I don’t tell George and Perry this house would soon be part of my inheritance. I don’t tell them the old man lying in bed with a c-pap machine assisting his breathing was once a famous Architect. I don’t tell them he’s my father. I don’t tell Perry he can’t steal my mother’s designer gowns she wore to elegant galas and benefits. I don’t tell them my mother’s dead seventeen years, now. I do tell them where to look for her jewelry. I do
show them my father’s watch collection in the top drawer of his custom cherry wood
dresser in the back of the walk-in closet.

We pulled out of the driveway and the nurse moseys back into the house. It was—as
my father would’ve put it—*easy-peasy-Japanenesy*. Ten minutes, in and out.

George’s twenty-five with a little nose that points up: she’s got Norman
Rockwell’s idea of a girl’s face. She volunteers at the Humane Society and cries when
even the Pitbulls get put down. Her yellow hair covers an eye and sweeps behind the
other ear. There’s always at least a half a sandwich in her hemp satchel, just in case she
sees someone who needs it. She wears baggy clothes, but you know she’s got everything
you’d ever want under there.

It’s Saturday morning at a quarter to three. Out my bedroom window, the city’s
hot embers. We’re on my bed going through an Adidas duffle bag with electrical tape
covering its white three stripe logo. It’s full of my mother’s jewelry, and my father’s
watches, cufflinks and tie clips. We’re separating the genuine from costume—the real
from not real, the Anniversary gifts from the Valentine’s day gifts—and George brings
up the thing she always brings up when there’s silence, she says, “Why do you think my
parents gave me a boy name?”

I’ve only got three fingers on my right hand—car door at age ten—and George
still thinks it’s appropriate to drop her little troubles on me. My father called me Crab
Boy, even when it was only us two in the room. Most people call her Georgie, anyway.
“What’s a name mean, anyway?” I say—holding a blue Sapphire broach between my thumb and ring finger—dipping an ear to my shoulder. My father said, “What’s Crab Boy here going to amount to with those pinchers for a writing hand?”

My mother said, “He’ll be whatever he wants.”

Perry’s got a twenty thousand dollar Versace gown on over his black t-shirt and matching jeans. He closes the bedroom door so he can look in the full length mirror on the wall. Our eyes meet in the reflection. “What do you think?” he says. If I even acknowledge the question he’ll try on the rest.

“Don’t get all analytical,” George says. She studies an antique ring, turning it as if she’s driving a tiny car in heavy rain. If I were her type, that ring would be hers. The deal is: Zig and I split the haul 50/50, right down the middle, after George and Perry get two grand a piece.

“I’m just saying,” I say, and look at faces. “Perry, George, Steel, who cares?”

“Steel’s your middle name,” George says. She’s right. I told her.

“Delilah,” Perry says, hands on his hips, fanning his elbows out.

“You can’t use stage names in real life,” I say, and chuck a Pyrite chain at him. He dodges it, but knows it’s his to keep.

George says, “Why not, if you can use your middle?”

Perry drapes the chain across his chest and bends a knee in front of the other. Kind of a half-curtsy. “Thank you, Georgie,” he says. George’s face becomes a toy where when you tilt the head back the tongue clicks out and eyes snap shut. Perry makes the face back at her. Little girls flirting.
I grab a handful of metal from the duffle bag and smooth it out next to me on the bedspread. “Because it’s made up,” I say. “For one.” I don’t have a second point to this argument and George’s smart enough to ask what that might be.

Perry bends toward me like an Olympic Ski Jumper, midflight. “It was my grandmother’s name,” he says. He gets in one of his crying fits and uses the entire length of his bird fingers, under his eyes, to stop the mascara. “You fucking big shit, fag,” he says, “fucking asshole.” I don’t correct him, nor do I make jokes with his words.

Under different circumstances it might appear George is taunting Perry to fight. The real intent of her hands backrowing in front of her is just the opposite. Their collarbones touch as she comforts him. Over Perry’s shoulder, George gives me a look that lets me know I’d be in trouble if she were in a position to punish me. I untangle necklaces from broaches, cufflinks from bracelets, bracelets from rings, watches from everything. I shake my head. What a fucking crew I’ve got, but I can’t complain: George has got a good head on her and Perry used to do installations for ADT. Above all, they can be trusted.

“You’re a princess is that dress,” George says. It sounds like Perry coughs behind George’s back, but it’s really one of those bursts of laughter that slip when you’re crying and somebody tells you a lie to make you feel better. Perry steps back, laughing a little, wiping under his eyes, more. He goes back to the mirror and pushes the gown’s cups up to his chest. He turns his body back to George, but studies the mirror. “You really think so?” he says.

“Sweetie,” George says. “I know so.”
Zig 2

Zig looks like a young Bruce Springsteen shot with a fisheye lens. I unlock the door and he walks into my living room with a hand in his front pants pocket. The calf skin briefcase he claims cost him six-thousand swings around on its silver handle hinges in his other hand. God knows how many nights he’s been up on blow.

“Hey, hey, hey,” he says. “How we doing shitbag?” I lock the door behind him and recheck the peephole. The neighbor’s newspaper has already arrived. Zig’ll probably grab it on his way out—slip the pages away from the whole, with each senseless step down the hallway—and reach the elevator holding nothing.

“Good,” I say and toss him a diamond tennis bracelet.

“Primo,” he says, and goes through the bracelet like a rosary—making sure none of the stones are missing. His teeth squeal in a grind.

George and Perry are on the couch. They stare at an infomercial for some gel that repairs boat, car and motorcycle seats, leather jackets and convertible tops. Perry plays nice—twirling slow—with George’s hair. She’s curled up with her head on his lap. In less than an hour the sun will lift off out of Iowa, across the Missouri river. “Hey mister Zig,” Perry says, and George looks at Zig, and then back to the TV.

“Hey Georgie,” Zig says. She does nothing.

Zig pulls a thin phone from his back pocket and hits a button on the side. The screen lights up blue. “Did I miss your calls?” He turns the blue light at George. “I got a new phone.” Zig’s a guy who can pretty much fuck whoever he wants. If I were him, I’d be in Perry’s spot right now; but women don’t want a guy like me, they want Zig, with
his ego, lies and delusions of high society status. He’s a drug dealer and black market peddler, that’s what he is. The pot calling the kettle, I know, but I also know, deep down, I’m a good person. I pray the bad things I do don’t last forever.

“Have you been bronzing?” Perry asks, and again, George looks up and back to the TV without saying a word. Zig checks his forearms, pretending he doesn’t know they’re tan. He shrugs. If you call right now the TV will double your order for free: that’s not one, but two, bottles of Dr. Fabric Fix All for the unheard of low-low price of nineteen ninety-five. Zig thumbs the 1-800 number into his phone. Now, if you’re one of the first one hundred callers they’ll wave the shipping fee. A salesperson’s pitching Zig over the phone. Now, if you tell a friend, you get the whole fucking shebang for free. Zig says, “Hey, where you at, you like to party?” He says, “Miami?” He says, “I wouldn’t fuck a Cuban, anyway,” and hangs up. “Bitch.”

“You want to check out the stuff?” I say.

“Yeah,” Zig says, jamming his phone back into his pants. “Let’s get this going.” He’s one of those people that think no matter where they are, that’s the hip place to be. He says, “Let’s do this thing.”

George and I categorized seven piles on my bed: gold with diamonds, gold with other stones, silver with diamonds, silver with other stones, other precious metals with diamonds, other precious metals with other stones, and costume. My bed would look like a model of Giza, but the pyramids are out of order. I point to the piles and explain them to Zig.
“I thought we’d just give the costume to Perry,” I say. Perry loves playing dress-up with the stuff, and we’d just throw it away, anyway.

“Fine by me,” he says, and turns over pieces in the gold with diamond pile.

I shove the costume pile back into the duffle bag and sling it out my bedroom doorway. It sticks on the living room floor. “There you go Perry,” I say and close the door.

I have plenty of downtime at work to read up on precious stones and metals, so I never get fucked. I don’t fuck Zig, either, though I could. He really doesn’t know much about what’s in front of him. There’s a necklace from Tiffany’s in there: if he spots it, he’ll know it’s something he wants, but that’s pretty much the extent of his knowledge. I know all the brands. I know all the metals and market prices. I know all the stones and cuts. I know trends and trending. It takes over an hour for me to go through the piles with my calculator, decide what’s fair, and for Zig to agree with me.

Yakov

My jewelry guy—my anything guy, really—is Yakov. He owns, or at least says he owns, Russian Store in the Old Market. In red block type on the front window it says, Russian Store, and Россия Магазине. That’s where we meet on business. I call him and say, “It’s the peaceful American.” His words.

“You have things for me?” he says, and I picture him crossing his feet on his desk.

“I have things for you,” I say. “Good things.”

“Knock my socks off kind of things?” He lights a cigarette.
“Knock your socks off kind of things,” I say.

He says, “You come now.” He drags his glass ashtray across his desk. “I open late.”

“See you in a couple minutes,” I say.

“No,” he says. “You come now.”

“I am,” I say, picking at piles on my bedspread and placing items in the compartments of my old UMCO aluminum tackle box. “I’m leaving, now.”

“Couple of minutes, then?”

“Yeah,” I say and hang up.

I won’t walk past the aisles of painted ceramic figurines, nesting dolls, Russian toiletries and unsealed candy. I won’t spin the display of rabbit fur hats, like I always do. I won’t put one on and ask Yakov if I look like a real Russian. I won’t watch the cigarette smoke lick against his squinty eyes as he closely appraises each piece. He won’t hold them up to the light. I won’t have to say, “Seventy-five,” when he says, “Fifty,” and we won’t settle with a handshake, and then his insistent hug, at sixty-five. He won’t say, “I like you, Peaceful American.” I probably won’t see Yakov ever again, because right now two cops have all their weight against his back, compressing his lungs between their fists and the façade of Russian Store. Yakov’s an Army grunt wading in chest high water, minus the machine gun. They kick his legs apart. He lets them swing his hands away from the bricks and slap the cuffs on him.
The cops move to grip the back collar of Yakov’s silk shirt. Something had happened that managed to swing his gold chains back there. They yank him away from the building. His legs move, but don’t bend. His face leaks streaks of blood. He points his nose to the rooftops across the street. The cops squeeze Yakov’s biceps as they escort him to the cop car. His eyes shift from one to the other. He knows it doesn’t matter how he’s treated—he’ll have these pigs castrated. I stop in front of the store: just another gawking idiot wondering what the hell is going on in this world. Yakov doesn’t see me: he’s too mad to see anything. He says, “Pig. Fuck. Kill. Lawyer.” He smiles at the cops. His teeth are pink with blood. They push him into the backseat of the cop car like moving a hide-a-bed through a narrow doorway. Someone honks behind me and I let my foot off the brake and wave into the rearview mirror. We’re at an incline, so my car doesn’t move. I decide to ease away.

Les

Zig sells to Les, because Yakov can’t stand him. Yakov won’t buy from him. I don’t sell to Les, anymore, because he’s a guy who’ll put a pistol in your face if you don’t like his prices. The last time I saw him he quoted me a lowball number. I was sick of getting fucked, so I shook my head and corrected him. A half second later he had the end of a nine millimeter stuck under my left cheekbone. I saw the safety was off. He said, “This is not Mexico.” I’m still not certain what that meant. (I swore, after that, I was going straight. Who wants to live a life that includes bullets pointed at your brain? That’s when I got the job at Unitron, but that doesn’t pay like I need it to. Zig called me up a couple weeks later and said he’d met this Russian guy, “Schwarzkopf, or something,” he
said, and we could sell to him. I was back to working with Zig while still shadowing calls with a Help Desk Supervisor—Part I of Technician Training Phase II. It’s going to take something extreme for me to go straight and stay straight—something I can’t even fathom at this point.) So, just on principal, I can’t sell to Les—and he probably wouldn’t, anyway—which leaves me with a ton of bullshit: either drive my half across state lines or send it west. I don’t know what the logistics of either would entail. Either way I’d have to kick another few grand to somebody, and God only knows who that somebody might be.

George

I hang up my mother’s gowns in my guest bedroom closet. They barely take up a quarter of the dowel. I carefully line up my father’s watches in the top drawer of the guest’s dresser. In the other drawers I place my mother’s jewelry, so no piece is touching another.

George is asleep on the couch, like a dog: c-shaped, peaceful and oblivious. The sun’s bright on the carpet. I move quietly and close the blinds. George twists into the couch, lipping the cushions over the edge. She lets little whimpers out through her nose.

“What time is it?” she says, with her eyes closed.

“I don’t know,” I say. “Around ten.”

“Coffee,” she says, and smiles. Her eyes still not ready to open.

I sit on the far end of the couch, ease back and realize how tired I am. I’ve been up twenty-five hours. I push in my eyes with a thumb and finger.

“Perry went home to sleep,” George says, bringing her knees back up to her chest

“He’s got a show tonight.”
“Yakov got arrested,” I say, and can tell George’s eyes open, though she’s covered her face with a pillow.

“How?” she says.

“No idea,” I say, and close my eyes; lay my head back on the top of the cushion.

“I pulled up to the Russian Store and they had him cuffed.”

I hear George sit up. “You need to be more careful,” she says.

“Why?” I’m watching Yakov’s legs getting kicked apart, again.

“Because we can’t afford to lose you,” she says.

“Who can’t?” I see myself from the portly cop’s perspective. I smile.

“Me,” she says. “And Perry.”

I sleep away most of the rest of the day, in my clothes, on top of the bedspread; waking every hour or two, checking the clock and falling back into a sleep that’s sweaty and cold. I have dreams where I wake up and walk around my apartment. In my dreams, George makes coffee and watches TV on the couch Indian style. She doesn’t notice me. She stares at the TV and says, “Hey,” but her mouth doesn’t move. She stands beside my bed, with her hand on my leg, she says, “Hey.” She winks at me from the couch and then smiles. “Wake up,” she says. She sits on the edge of the bed and shakes my thigh. She moves the hair that always covers that one eye. “Hey,” she says. I reach out and turn the alarm clock towards me. “It’s 8:30,” she says. I put my hand on her leg and she moves it to the bedspread.

George says, “Do you want to go to Perry’s show?”

“Sure,” I say. “Let me wake up.”
First Saturday of every month Perry dances amateur night at The J Bar. It’s one of two strictly gay bars in the city. This one’s far out west, where the rent’s cheap. It’s all black tint over the front windows. The bar’s martini glass logo, on the front door is reflective and can somehow be seen better at night with the rainbow disco lights spinning above it. Perry’s been dancing since I’ve known him: ten or fifteen years. He’s never won. I’ve only been a couple times and that was years ago.

On the sidewalk, outside the tinted windows, everything’s reversed: boys are girls and girls are boys—the boys smoke cloves, the girls smoke cigars. Dark cars pass on 86th street, slow and accelerate. George finishes her cigarette and flicks it in the street. I say, “Do you just want to sit at the bar?” She says, “We’re here for Perry.”

In the back there’s a stage with a catwalk that juts out twenty or thirty feet toward the bar. Amateur night is sort of a mix between a striptease and a runway show. There’s music playing and the contestants dance to it, but they’re also tromping up and down the catwalk, showing off their clothes. I don’t understand it. I buy four beers and George a tall Gin and Tonic. She finds us a table in the front row, right at the end of the catwalk. It’s the last place I want to sit, but George grabs my hand, says, “Oh, come on,” and I can’t resist that.

“Hello, hello, hello,” a squat, supposed male says into one of those long, wiry microphones. “Welcome to J Bar’s Amateur Night.” He wears a tuxedo and a top hat. The eyebrows are drawn on thick. Groucho Marx. Somebody’s hashed his cheeks and upper lip with black magic marker. He shakes his long fingernails at his throat, so the
music fades out. “I’m Fella She-O. I’ll be your emcee for tonight.” Applause. “Tonight, we have twenty-one sexy contestants,” he says. Fuck, I’m already done with my first beer. More applause. Someone shouts over the crowd, “Fella, I wanna suck your dick!” Laughs and more applause. “Honey,” Fella says. “You’d have a better chance sucking your own dick.”

Fella rips off five or ten minutes of jokes—most of which I don’t understand, but, as far as I can tell, they’re the gay equivalent of straight guy’s fart jokes. “So, without further ado,” he says. “Our first contestant is…” he looks at a piece of paper pinched between his hand and the microphone, and then stretches his arm back to the stage. “Jacqueline!” Applause. The house lights fade out. Candles lit in the middle of each little table, now the only light. Distorted faces in the light. Speakers hum and pop, and then bass shakes the table: doom, doom… doom, doom. A spotlight beams on the stage. Jacqueline’s a little off center, but the bright circle jerks left and finds her. She’s down on a knee with her white gloves fanned over her face. Like playing a creepy game of peek-a-boo, the hands slowly pull away from each other, exposing eyelashes like Tropical spiders, powder white skin under purple glitter and black lipstick. She’s going for an artsy look that lies somewhere between Nosferatu and Mardi Gras. I recognize the song, and don’t mind it: The Rolling Stones, As Tears Go By. The song’s fine, but this demented clown swooning and interpreting the song through dance, is not. This shit’s full-on weird, but the bar is all claps, hoots, and whistles. Everybody loves it, including George who’s got a lighter passing above her head.

“We’re here for Perry,” I say, and she puts the lighter away.
“Weird, huh?” George says, but how she says it means she likes it. I see she’s done with her gin and tonic.

I say. “You want another drink?”

“Oh, she wants you,” George says, whipping her finger at the catwalk.

Jacqueline’s hunched over at the end of the catwalk, sort of walking in place to the music. She’s calling me with a finger. This must be part of her show—she has a guy come up and give her a kiss on the cheek, or something. Our eyes meet and I know those eyes: they’re desperate for attention. They’re Jeffrey’s eyes. Even in this murky lighting, under all that makeup and glitter I can see him. He turns from me and continues to dance away from us.

“You scared her away,” George says. She bumps her shoulder against mine.

“That’s my fucking boss,” I say. “I know it.”

“What?” she says. “Really?”

“I think so,” I say, but I’m sure of it.

After Jacqueline’s song, I watch Jeffrey leave the stage and sit along the far wall with an older man in a cream suit. Jeffrey kisses the man on the cheek, and they hold hands next to their little candle. Jeffrey doesn’t look my way to see if I’m looking his way. He must not know I know. If he did, he’d be headed for the door.

**Jeffery 2**

The twenty-one contestants have finished their performances. We’ve heard everything from On the Good Ship Lollipop to The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald. My beers are long gone. The stage is now a free-for-all—anyone who wants to dance can get
up there. Perry sits with George and me at our table. He’s in a red cocktail dress to which he has added a pink tutu and train of white tulle in the back. The top of his head’s against George’s chest. He lets the mascara run waves of black down his face. Over his nose. He’s beyond caring about it. He fell on his ass while trying to perform a pirouette during the climax of Over the Rainbow. The illusion of Delilah was shattered when the crowd caught a flash of his dick and balls as he struggled to get up.

Jacqueline ended up winning the tiara, sash, and twenty-five dollars in J Bar Bucks. On stage, she accepted with her hands quickly fanning her eyes.

“She only won,” Perry says. “Because she went first.”

“I know,” George says, petting Perry’s hair.

“The first girl to perform always wins,” he says. “It’s bullshit.” He seems genuinely crushed.

I say, “That can’t be true.”

Perry’s face springs at me like a wild animal from the brush. “Fuck you,” he says. “What would you know?” He retreats back to George. “You’re so fucking blind,” he says. This is more of Perry’s senseless ranting.

“I’m blind?” I say, and laugh.

Perry looks up at George’s eyes. George shakes her head. Perry looks back at me and says, “For years Georgie’s been waiting for you to ask her out.”

“Shut up, Perry,” George says.

I say, “What?”

“You’re blind,” Perry says.
I try to not smile and say, “Really?”

“No,” she says, and shoves Perry away from her chest. “Thanks.”

“I thought you liked Zig,” I say.

“Zig?” George says. “Why?”

“Well, you fucked him.”

“Who fucked who?” Perry says.

“He said that?” George says, and turns to Perry. “No one.”

This is obviously a sore subject with George. I don’t say anything, because both yes and no would piss her off. What George wants to say is constructing itself inside her head. Perry says, “Georgie girl, no way.”

George’s face is a new color pink. She’s proving women also have veins under the thin skin of their temples. She says, “A couple weeks ago. I met Zig at the coffee shop. I wanted to talk to him about you. I asked him what I should do. He said, “Steel never mixes business and pleasure.” But he said he did. He tried getting me back to his place to have sex with him. I said, “No.” That’s it.” George doesn’t lie.

It’s time for Perry to leave me and George alone, but he sticks around.

Jacqueline/Jeffery is still across the bar with his/her man. Perry’s back to George’s chest, more bawling about the first one to dance thing; not a mention of his catastrophic pirouette or exposing his genitals. I decide to not bring them up.

I walk up behind Jeffery and put my hands on his shoulders. He tries looking over them to see who I am. I keep ducking away, and he finally quits. I’ve got too much on my mind to feel silly about this. The man he’s with looks even older, close up, in the orange
candlelight. He can’t tell whether he should take me as friend or foe. I knead the muscle powerfully. I continue kneading and can see in the old man’s teeth he’s testing his fist under the table to see if it still tightens like it used to. I slap Jeffery on the side of the arm when I’m done. He spins around in his seat. “Hey, boss,” I say.

“Hello,” Jeffery says in Jacqueline’s voice, and I lean in close.

The old man takes Jeffery’s hand. “Jackie,” he says. “We okay?”

“On Monday,” I say. “We’ll talk about my promotion.”

The old man says, “Jackie.”

Jeffery nods fast, like it was his idea. “Alright,” he says quietly.

I step back and smile as big as I can make it. I lift my pant legs up to my calves. I say, “Huh?”

Jeffrey says, “Yeah.”
Barry’s Seafoam Story

Barry and I stare into the engine compartment of my ’78 Pontiac Firebird. We’ve got our arms crossed at our chests, thinking. The Firebird was my first car. Bought it used from a guy up in Yankton when I just turned sixteen. Barry gave me a ride to pick it up in his Monte Carlo. The thing hasn’t run since I was a senior in high school, and that was fifteen years ago.

Barry’s back in town to be close to family. He doesn’t have the most serious kind of cancer, but it’s in the most serious places. Barry knows how this will go. He’s seen his father and father’s brother die from the same thing. He says the doctors give him twelve weeks, but he’s refused chemo, so it won’t take that long.

I’m agreeing with Barry when I say, “You take it one day at a time.”

“You know what we should do?” Barry says. A smile draws up his cheek.

“What’s that?” I say

“Get a couple cans of Seafoam,” he says. “This old motherfucker’ll fire right up.”

Seafoam is this chemical advertised as an engine detergent, whatever that means. People around here swear by it. Speak of it as some sort of magical engine cure-all. It’s one of those things that’s always sounded to me like it was too good to be true—too good for me to spend four bucks on a can, just to find out its junk.

“Yeah,” I say. “Yeah, we should.”

“You know, I was down working on a crew outside Lawrence, Kansas,” Barry says. “This was, shit, five years ago. Six, maybe.” Barry leans a hand on the front edge of
the Firebird’s hood. His arm looks like the skin’s been vacuumed to the bone. His
tendons look how the tendons of a robot man would. He’s lost the fat that always filled in
his cheeks, even when we were skinny kids. “This backhoe died on us and I ran to the
Autozone down there and picked up a couple cases of Seafoam.” He laughs. “We topped
off the gas tank with the shit. That took about a case and a half, just doing that. Then we
dumped the rest into the carburetor.”

“Did it work?” I say. “Did it fire right up?”

“No,” Barry says, and re-crosses his arms at his chest, “but we all agreed it should
have.”
Clarkson’s Angus Bulls

Scott was Sarah’s boyfriend, just a guy I bought pot from, and he was just a guy Sarah bought pot from until she became his girlfriend. I’d been friends with Sarah since she got bumped up two grades and the fourth grade alphabetic seating chart put her—Sarah Hansley’s—desk next to John Hunky’s desk, my desk. She thought I was funny and I thought she was smart and funny. She was the only person from my childhood I still spoke to and would’ve considered a friend.

Sarah asked me to go to North Platte, because she didn’t want to go alone, but she didn’t have a car, either. She needed me and my ’78 Dodge Monaco. At that time, cars were all supposed to be flying, or at least solar powered: that’s what we were taught in grade school.

We just had to pick up some pot, for Scott, she told me, and it would be really fast, and we’d get stoned—I only got stoned with Sarah, it was a bonding thing—and she’d take me to the Steak Buffet when we got back to Lincoln. She knew I hated doing anything on weekends. I took classes at the University and worked nights, during the week, but I told her I’d go, because I knew she had to go. I asked why Scott couldn’t take her and she said he was busy. He was the type of guy that never had shit to do, but couldn’t stop talking about how busy he was. Sarah told me he was always talking about the one big score he’d make: the final drug deal that would give him enough money to quit and start a tattoo parlor like he’d always wanted.
The first thirty minutes, or so, on I-80 from Lincoln to North Platte, Sarah and I discussed the proper usage of Listerine (before or after you brush?) and then Sarah said, “I gotta piss.” I took the next exit—the one before York—and there was a little service station there on the corner off the exit ramp. One of those tiny mechanic shops for unlucky vacationer’s auto repairs, not somewhere you can choose from forty types of donuts and premade triangular cut or half-submarine sandwiches, and not somewhere the locals would do business. In the garage area, a Middle Eastern man, with long smears of grease like camouflage on his forearms, worked a wrench above his head under the engine compartment of an out-of-state Mercedes sedan. I remembered Sarah’s parents had a car like that, but older, when we were growing up. A family, trying-to-make-the-best-of-it, played—in their pastel polo shirts and khaki shorts—with a Frisbee off in a cut hay meadow.

I heard the gold bell on the service station door chime and Sarah came out of the little customer area and showed me a foot of two-by-four Pine with the word Bathroom lazily routered in the wood and a little silver chain with a key on the last link screwed to the end of the board. I smiled at her through the windshield and she used the key to open an unmarked white door on the sunny side of the building.

The pink polo shirt and blue polo shirt awkwardly threw the Frisbee to each other and to the yellow polo shirt—most throws nose-diving in the cut hay or arcing up against the sky causing the Frisbee to swoop backwards and land behind the thrower—and the purple polo shirt looked on. I could feel the pot I’d smoked the night before, with Sarah, still fooling around in my head. I thought, who are these people? Are they even real, or
just here to add to my story? Where are they going? Do they wonder who I am? Where am I going? Am I just here to be part of their story? Would the little boy and girl really grow into adults, and have families of their own? Would the mother and father become what my mother and father had become, and then possibly become grandparents and great grandparents? I’d never know. They’d forever be a young couple, with two beautiful children who would never age or have the opportunity to do wrong. Never have the opportunity to fuck-up how I’d fucked-up: innocent boy mischief that was once settled between parents gets reported to the police when you’re over eighteen, and there’re no free passes when they get involved.

Sarah used her thumb to pull down a belt loop on the front of her denim jeans that had the legs cut off above where the front pockets ended as she walked back into the building to return the key. When she came back out, she shook her blonde hair back and tied it all in a ponytail. The raising of her arms to the back of her head pulled the bottom of her white tank top above her navel and the man working under the sedan caught a look at her.

We took the Interstate another twenty miles or so and sang with a young Tom Waits crackling out of grainy dash speakers. We passed a sign that read, North Platte 91. Sarah turned the cassette deck volume down. I admired the timid Central Nebraska plains: their sporadic alleys of shelterbelt trees, long abandoned homes near grey barns that leaned, gravel roads that led off to probably nowhere and livestock grazing as if they
had no owners and needed none. Everything sweated from the thick humidity and cloudlessness of late August.

“Do you ever get in the shower and then like halfway through you realize you have to shit real bad,” Sarah asked.

“No,” I said. Sarah always asked questions that would be inappropriate had we not been such good friends.

“Never?”

“It’s like your boyfriend says, ‘There’s two types of people in this world, ones who prepare themselves and ones who get prepared.’”

We sat listening to the tires hum and then I moved to turn the cassette player back up.

“I get out the shower and go in the toilet,” Sarah said.

“You’re all wet and you get out?”

“You get water all over and everything, but you gotta do it.”

“You leave the water running?”

“I think so,” she said.

“I’d be worried about losing all the hot water,” I said. “Do you wipe?”

“Of course I do.”

“Even though you’re just getting right back in the shower?”

“Of course,” she said.
“I’m not sure I believe you.” These conversations always had a twist to them. A reason Sarah’d brought them up. You couldn’t just let her have her way. You’d have to dig, and figure out why she started on the subject in the first place.

“I was just making conversation. Why do you always have to argue?”

“I’m just saying, seems like at least some of the time you might take a shit in the shower.”

Quite a few miles passed.

“Maybe when I was sick or something.” Sarah said, hesitantly.

“Now you remember a time you took a shit in the shower?”

“Not specifically, I’m just sayin’ maybe.”

“If you would have been sick and took a shit in the shower you wouldn’t have remembered it?” I asked.

“Okay, I take shits in the shower sometimes when I’m sick or have to go real bad.”

“Do you use your foot to squeeze it down the drain?”

“I don’t know, John.”

“Well you don’t just leave it in there.”

“No,” she said, and looked out her window.

“So, how does it get down?”

“I don’t know. Fuck, why does every conversation turn into this?”
“You’ve shit in the shower, but you have no idea how it gets down the drain or if it even does,” I said. “You don’t have a bunch of turds laying around on your shower floor do you?” There was more to the story, I could feel it.

“Fine, there’s this old shampoo bottle I keep in the shower and I use that to push it down.”

“You actually have a specific tool in your shower just for squashing turds down the drain?”

“Yes,“ she said, “Now, fuck, let’s talk about something else.”

“If you’ve only done it when you were sick or had to go really bad, why would you need that old shampoo bottle in there all the time?”

She sat back in the seat with her bottom lip out a little and arms crossed over her tank top. I knew the move, I had interrogated her a little too much and she’d dug into things she didn’t even want me to know.

“I love this song,” I said, and turned up the music.

Sarah read the directions: “It says, *take that road for a while, maybe four or five miles, then go east at the bull. There’s a pond on the west side of the road a mile or two before you get to the bull and there’s a big lake on the east side of the road, but if you see the big lake you went too far, but you should see the bull,*” she said. “Jesus, Scott writes like shit.”

“Let me see it,” I said.
I spread the paper across the steering wheel and reread the directions; they were as she’d said.

“I wonder what the bull is,” I said.

“Well, there’s a pond on the left side,” Sarah said.

“Alright, so our turn should be just up here on the right.”

“Fuck, look at that,” Sarah said emphatically and sat up straight in her seat. She pointed at a statue of a bull, sixty, maybe eighty feet high. It was painted all brown with a white face. A giant S shaped metal tail must have been on a hinge as it swung behind the back legs, in what little wind there was. Along the bull’s ribs read: Clarkson’s Angus Bulls, with a red arrow pointing east, then, 1Mile. Ash trees at the bull’s hocks made it look like it was standing in a low bush. I leaned over the steering wheel and looked up at it through the windshield as we got closer, and then turned on the gravel road just before the bull and put the car in park. The tail creaked and whined on its hinge as it swung, and that was the only sound over the car’s idle. I saw its body had large cracks webbing over it and the paint was heavily faded; from a distance it had looked like it may have been built recently, but up close you could see it had weathered the sun, and rain, snow and hail for many years.

I had to lean back in my seat so Sarah could crawl partially onto my seat and get a good look at it. Her face, close to my window, only inches from my face, and at that angle and in that light, I saw how she had lost much of her beauty. The past five or six years, since high school, had drained her. Her skin had hardened, cheek bones seemed to have grown outward and all cheek fat disintegrated. There was a light grey around her 

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eyes as if dust had settled there. She continued to look up through my window, with her lips slightly parted and her eyes slightly squinting. I breathed in, wanting to smell the perfume she used to wear, but she smelled of burnt sandalwood, Scott’s patchouli and the red pine tree that hung between my knees from the Hazard knob. I knew she felt my eyes on her, but she didn’t turn towards my face. She whispered, “It looks like shit up close,” and I whispered, “It’s been out there a long time.” She responded with slow breathes so full they made her back arch up. She closed her eyes after an exhale and I told her we’d better get going.

“Then it’s the first mailbox on the left,” Sarah read. “And there’s a boot on a fence post.” She kept her face pointed towards the notebook paper, though I could see her eyes shifted all the way to the left, on me, and I thought of how that gave me a headache when my eyes were turned so far in their sockets like that.

‘Tony’s place is his parent’s place, a shitty two bedroom two-story stuck up over a mud hole. It’s all ranch land out there: pastures and shelterbelts. His family tends three, maybe four-hundred head of cattle’: that was all stuff Sarah told me Scott told her before Sarah said, ‘Do you ever get in the shower and then like halfway through you realize you have to shit real bad.’

We pulled up the driveway and Tony lay on the windshield and hood of an old rusted out Chevy pick-up: jacked up with mud tires. He was sprawled out with his shirt off and dusty blue jeans, posed like a pin-up girl. His bony upper body was a deep brown and crisscrossed with several long white scars. He had nothing to do up there but drink
Budweiser and smoke full flavors; the smoke from his mouth and cigarette tip caught the sun and appeared an oily blue. I threw the keys over the steering wheel and they stuck between the windshield glass and dash.

“Gettin’ some sun?” I asked Tony as I slammed my door. I had no part in this deal, I was just the driver, but, for some reason I felt like talking.

“Gettin’ some what?” Tony asked.

“Sun,” I said loudly as Sarah slammed her door. “Sun.”

“Just enjoyin’ the day,” Tony said, finished his Budweiser, threw it over his head and it landed in the pickup bed.

“Scott sent us,” I said, and looked at Sarah.

“You’re late,” Tony said, and hopped off the hood. I saw he wasn’t even five feet tall and had a holstered pistol on his hip, which my eyes were immediately locked on.

Sarah walked beside me and Tony walked a little ways ahead, his holster loose around his waist and the weight of the pistol made it swing forward and back. I wanted to give us some space behind him, just in case Sarah wanted to say anything to me, but she looked at things in every direction, but mine, with her arms crossed at her chest.

A couple hundred yards past the rundown house, we came to a dirt corral. A full-size brown bull with a white face stood in the middle of it. Tony jumped up on the corral gate so his navel was at the height of the top of the gate. He looked back to us and said, “You wanna ride him?”

“Nah,” I said, and Tony showed me his teeth, but didn’t smile. It was obvious he wanted an excuse, I offered, “I’m not a bull rider.”
“You don’t have to be a bull rider to ride a bull,” he said, and then turned to the bull and made cute little kissy sounds. He held his arm out towards it and the bull slowly walked to him. “Come on, jump up here, I’ll hold on to him and you can ease on his back.”

“We just need to get what we came for and get going,” I said, trying to heavy my tone.

“You gonna come to my house and refuse to ride my bull?” Tony asked, seriously, and I again fixed on his pistol.

“Alright,” I said, and smiled halfway at Sarah. The feeling I was fully out of my element set in.

I climbed up on the gate, but before I could slip a foot down onto the bull’s rippled back Tony said, “Now, he gonna buck. Believe that. He gonna kick and buck, rear back and jump, maybe even. So, put one foot down, and then just sit on his back. But as soon as you sit down he gonna take off, so you grab a hold of this rope real quick.”

Tony showed me the rope wrapped around the bull’s midsection and went on, “Now, don’t try leadin’ him towards the middle ‘cause all he wants to do is fight you. You lead him towards the middle of the corral and he’s gonna buck you right off into the fence, you crack your head open and have your goddamn brains all over and then he’ll stomp on those until they ain’t even brains no more. You take the rope, try pushin’ him towards the fence, that’s what you do. And you’re gonna get bucked, but just remember when you hit the ground you just run like hell ‘cause he’ll be after you. You run like hell to the fence and get over it quick. Got it?”
I visualized how the thing would all play out and it wasn’t good. Tony rapped a knuckle on the top of my head.

“Got it,” I said.

“And don’t you worry ‘bout runnin’ fast enough, you will be, just remember to run,” Tony said.

“Okay.” I put a foot down on the bulls back. Its muscles shook the hide under my leather shoe. Its tail swung up and slapped my foot, like I was a fly it wanted to shoo. Tony held the rope through the gate, ready for me to grab as soon as I sat. Tony’s eyes were solid and not at all dilated: he was ready for me. I bent at the knees as much as I could and clutched the top rung of the gate in my armpit. I pushed off the gate, sending my body from it, slid my ass square on top of the bull’s back and ripped the rope from Tony’s hand.

I hollered incoherently: the same way you would if you encountered a bear in the woods. Some primal instinct I suppose. Neither fight nor flight: a go-to move for the missing link, maybe.

Both hands were clamped on the rope and my legs squeezed the bull’s ribs tight. I could feel my face contort in all sorts of shapes, and ground my teeth. The bull bellowed and I leaned back a little, waiting for the big buck…

It took me a while to realize it was all a joke. The bull could only walk. I heard Tony laughing crazily and I pulled the rope towards the fence, to make the bull go to the center of the corral, but instead it walked to the fence, pinched my leg between its ribs and the fence and that pressure was unpleasant So, I pulled the rope the other way and the
bull walked exactly where I led it. Tony laughed so hard all I could hear were gasps. I made it to the center of the corral and pulled back on the rope and the bull stopped. I looked back to the gate and Sarah was smiling and Tony had his hands on his knees to catch his breath.

“Watch out he’ll buck ya,” Tony yelled, and I thought it possible that something had gone wrong and the show was really about to begin, so I gripped the rope tight again and squeezed with my legs. I still looked in Sarah and Tony’s direction.

“He’s the meanest bull I ever seen,” Tony screamed and then laughed harder.

Tony let me sit in the middle of the corral for a few minutes, while he and Sarah talked about something and didn’t smile. The bull pissed a heavy stream beneath both of us. Sarah said, “Good ridin’ Tex,” and I looked down, and said, “Fuck.”

“Alright, quit fuckin’ around and get outta there,” Tony said, flipping his switch back to serious. I hopped off the bull and then I was a little scared again when I saw the bull was taller than I, and I slowly walked backwards to the gate and crawled over.

Tony shook my hand hard, and then I looked at my hand because I could feel my nerves making it tremble. “You thought was gonna be just like in the movies, huh?” Tony said with a smile. Sarah gave me a tight hug around the neck, and Sarah was not the hugging type. I acted as though it was nothing and rubbed my hands together to ease my nerves, then took a hand and massaged the muscle between my shoulder and neck, and grinned. As Tony led us past the corral I watched the bull lie down in the dirt; it exhaled through the nose and blew up dust in front of its face.
We came to a large shelterbelt of Oaks, past where we could see back to the house or even the corral. Tony showed us a narrow dirt path leading into the tree shadows. The path winded through, and I was never able to see more than a few feet of it in front of us or behind. I helped Sarah keep her balance with a hand on her back. After a couple minutes, the path brought us to somewhere in the approximate middle of the shelterbelt where a long building sat. “The greenhouse,” Tony said. It was an old chicken coop—still the original rusted tin and steel weathervane on top—with plastic panels to let the sun through and squares of plywood nailed to cover the windows along the long sides. The tree branches were cleared in a wide swath above the greenhouse, allowing a pillar of light to illuminate through the opening in the treetops to the plastic panels on top of the coop.

“Could you imagine if we were high right now,” Sarah asked me.

“I’m glad we’re not,” I said.

“You guys don’t use lamps,” I asked Tony, trying to sound like I knew what I was talking about, but I’d never even seen a growing lamp.

“Police’ll run infer-red on you at night,” he said, “Get busted with lamps.”

I’d heard of police in helicopters scanning the countryside for abnormal heat sources after dark, but it couldn’t have been true. There weren’t many places like Tony’s around and no money to fund helicopters if there was a hundred times as many. “I suppose you’re right,” I said.

“And I suppose that’s right,” Tony replied.
He flung the greenhouse door open. Sarah and I stood back and I could see all the way to the building’s far end after the door opened. A small middle aged woman sat at a folding card table, in an apron, surrounded by marijuana plants. She used yellow rubber dish gloves to break up marijuana buds, and sat up straight in her chair. A large bearded man in blue and white pinstripe coveralls held a green watering can, just inside the door, and quickly shuffled his feet back a few steps.

“Christ you fuckin’ numb nut,” the man yelled, and swung the watering can at Tony, but Tony dodged it, so the man swung at him again and Tony let it hit him.

“Dad,” Tony shouted.

“Use the knock,” Mr. Clarkson shouted back.

“I forgot,” Tony shouted even louder.

“Use the knock, Tony,” Mrs. Clarkson said gently.

“We got company,” Tony said, still shouting and held a hand back to me and Sarah.

“Scott’s friends?” Mr. Clarkson asked.

“Yeah,” Tony said.

“Didn’t say there’d be two of ‘em,” Mrs. Clarkson said, meticulously breaking and sorting buds on the folding table.

“That’s Scott’s girlfriend, and John here,” Tony said, and pulled me into the greenhouse. “He rode Ol’ Ben.” I smiled and laughed a little.

“That joke wasn’t all that funny the first time you did it,” Mr. Clarkson said to Tony.
“It’s always funny,” Tony said. “You shoulda seen his face.”

“Well, hell, you all get in here and close the door, you’re messin’ with my humidity,” Mr. Clarkson said. I let Sarah pass me in the doorway and closed the door behind her. “Scott send you to make sure this guy didn’t screw things up?” Mr. Clarkson asked Sarah while pointing at me.

“Yeah, something like that,” Sarah said.

Mr. Clarkson put down the watering can and put his hands on his hips. The air smelled mostly of potted marijuana plants, but there was an undertone of chicken shit that would probably never fade. “How much Scott need?” Mr. Clarkson asked, and leaned back on his thumbs, pushed his belly out.

“Half pound,” Tony said, before I could say it.

“Gonna be fifteen-hundred dollars,” Mr. Clarkson said as he grabbed a large Ziploc freezer bag full of pot out of a big Tupperware bin packed with Ziploc freezer bags full of pot. There were five or six Tupperware bins just like that stacked atop each other next to him, which I supposed to be as full of marijuana filled freezer bags as the one he had opened.

Sarah scanned as much of the greenhouse as she could from where she was standing. I noticed and flicked her elbow with my elbow.

“Can we try some, first?” Sarah asked.

“We really don’t have the time,” I said, and then smiled at the Clarksons.

“Course, you should try it,” Mr. Clarkson said. “Gotta know what you’re buyin’.”

“Best in Nebraska,” Tony said.
“Scott said you have a beautiful spot with a pond?” Sarah asked.

“Sure do,” Mrs. Clarkson said.

“We could all go see it and share a few joints,” Sarah said. “We can roll ‘em out of our stuff.”

“Sarah…” I said. Sometimes she forced me to act like her father.

“That sounds fine,” Mr. Clarkson said, before I could give any excuse, “But we don’t smoke.”

“Just fine, but we don’t smoke,” Mrs. Clarkson said, as she continued to work with her yellow gloves.

“I need a break, anyway,” Tony said, and Mr. Clarkson slapped him on the back of the head and said, “You do nothin’ but break.”

I wanted to appear calm to everyone, but Sarah, so I let the others walk a ways ahead of us, through the trees, and I told Sarah how fucked up it was that she was trying to stay longer than we had to and I called her a fucking idiot and said she had to somehow get us out of there fast. I said it was shit like that that pissed me off more than anything; shit like that made me want to not be around her; shit like that made me want to stop getting high, because I saw how fucking stupid it made her and if I was ever that fucking stupid I’d kill myself to save the people around me from having to put up with such a fucking dumb-fuck all the time.
Tears formed in her eyes, but she assured me that it would be fine, that she didn’t want to seem like we were rushing them and we’d be back on the interstate, headed home, soon enough. I was too pissed to apologize.

We came out of the trees on the opposite side we’d entered. The drear of trees went to an immediate halt and opened up to a long grassy decline, sloping to a fishing pond at the bottom where it leveled off. Spruce trees encircled half the water mostly on the side of the pond farthest from us and a little boat floated next to the shore with a rope tied to the pointed end of it and then knotted around a small spruce on shore. Everything at that time of day started to push shadows to the east. I expected that area was where the bulls would be, hundreds of them: grazing from the distant windmill—broken bladed and motionless—in the west, to the hill beyond the pond that formed the north horizon, and past the pyramid of hay stacks to the east fence line, but there were none. Not one bull. There were narrow dirt trails—like the one we’d walked through the trees—in the grass that snaked around to the pond and away from it in all directions, showing daily routes the bulls had once walked.

“This is nice,” I said, and we all sat in the coarse grass just beyond the tree line—except for Tony who said he feared the greenhouse door might not have been closed all the way, as it was known to open on it’s own even when you’ve made sure to close it, and he didn’t want the humidity to drop, so he trudged back into the trees—with all that open land in front of us: the spruces and pond, the old windmill and haystacks off in the
distance to either side. It’s not often one gets the opportunity to see as far as their eyes will allow.

Sarah sat on her feet, with her knees together. She filled a Zig-Zag furrow, on her thigh, with marijuana she’d crumbled off a big bud. The summer after her freshman year in college she studied abroad in Amsterdam and came back determined to do nothing but smoke pot, and able to roll joints that looked like non-filter cigarettes.

She rolled it fast with several movements that looked like one. She pulled the rolling paper glue across the part between her white lips where the red tip of her tongue showed, and handed it to me.

“Let me know how it is,” she said, as she got up and brushed her hands on the back of her shorts. Tears had swollen her eyes, again.

“You’re gonna smoke,” I said holding the joint out in the space between us where she gave it to me.

“Yeah, but I gotta shit,” she said and then gave a quick laugh. A tear went down her cheek and she wiped it away fast with the side of her finger.

I scrunched my eyes in confusion.

“Can I use your restroom,” She asked Mr. and Mrs. Clarkson.

“Go in the trees,” I said.

“Its number two,” she said to all of us and put her hand on her stomach.

“Go in the trees,” I said again, but this time with some space between the words.

“She’s welcome to our restroom, though it’s not fancy, mind you,” Mr. Clarkson said.
“It’s off the kitchen,” Mrs. Clarkson said. “Do you know the way, sweetheart?”

“I certainly do, thank you, I’ll try to be quick, but it feels like I might be a while,” Sarah said, striding towards the trees, still holding her stomach.

“I’ll go with you,” I said, and started to get up.

“She knows the way,” Mrs. Clarkson said, pulling a small spool of yarn and crochet needles from a pocket on the front of her apron.

From the tree line, Sarah smiled and wiped a tear away with the back of her hand. She looked younger then, somehow.

“What?” I said.

“Nothing,” She said, and put her hand over her heart apologetically. I watched her walk into the trees and almost instantly all I could make out was her white tank top, then, that too went to black.

I settled down, sat the joint in the grass next to me and pulled my knees up to my chest. I thought about Sarah’s hand over her heard, but said, “This is a beautiful place.”

“Been in the family a long time,” Mr. Clarkson said.

“Mmm hmm,” Mrs. Clarkson said, and worked the yarn with her crochet needle.

“Scott said you had a few hundred bulls?”

“Ah,” Mr. Clarkson said as he dropped tobacco in a pipe he produced from his coverall’s breast pocket and then packed the tobacco down with his thumb, “Years ago, we did.”

“Oh?”
“Scott’s never been to the ranch, always sends a young guy like you,” he said, and lit the pipe.

“How many bulls do you have,” I asked.

“You rode him,” he said. “And he’ll have to go to slaughter before winter.”

“I saw the bull statue you have out by the highway; it’s impressive.”

As he spoke, Mr. Clarkson puffed on the pipe from the corner of his mouth.

“Brother moved to the city as a young man, probably your age. I tried saving up enough to buy out his half of the ranch, when the old man passed on, but still had to get underneath a big chunk from the bank. You pay capital gains tax, they raise land taxes on you year after year, and more taxes, taxes, taxes. They don’t subsidize like in the old days. The bank takes damn near everything you got.”

Mrs. Clarkson and I both agreed with him.

“The old man put that bull up in the ‘50’s,” Mr. Clarkson said. “Probably had close to a thousand head back then.”

“It is a beautiful place,” I said.

“You gonna smoke that?” Mr. Clarkson asked, pointing to the joint that sat on the grass between us.

“It looks like good stuff,” I said. “I don’t really smoke all that much anyway, wouldn’t know the difference.”

“How do you know Scott,” Mr. Clarkson asked.
“He’s just an acquaintance, but Sarah’s an old friend, so I see him quite a bit,” I said and ripped a blade of grass out of the ground between my legs and threw it in front of me. “You?”

“Tony met him through a guy in North Platte,” he said. “Wanted to start sellin’ in Lincoln; said there was more money to be made there, so Scott got Tony set up.”

“He’s an alright guy,” I said.

“I never trusted him,” Mr. Clarkson said. “But Tony does, and if you can’t take your own son’s word, whose can you take?”

I agreed with him and the three of us looked over the land for a few minutes and didn’t speak.

Leaves crunched and twigs snapped, behind us, and I twisted at the waist and looked back. I couldn’t see anything, but the sounds of someone hustling through the trees got closer and louder. Tony came from the trees with the pistol in his hand and shouted, “She took the bins!” Though his words were emotional, his face was not and he broke eye contact with me after I stood up and asked him what he meant.

“I mean she took all the bins, they’re all gone,” Tony shouted at his father.

“Sure about that, boy?” Mr. Clarkson asked.

“Be sure, Tony,” Mrs. Clarkson said.

“I’m damn well sure, they’re all gone and she’s gone,” Tony shouted, stepped forward and put the tip of his pistol barrel about six inches from my nose. It shook a little from side to side and I went cross-eyed on it. The pistol was a revolver and I could see
two holes were hollow on each side, no bullets, but the hammer had already been cocked which meant there could’ve been a bullet in the chamber. I showed him my palms, but couldn’t say anything. It was then, with the pistol in my face, I thought why am I here?

Mr. Clarkson said, “No, son, no,” and his mother said, “Listen to your paw,” and Mr. Clarkson got up and pushed Tony’s arm down and lowered the gun from my face.

For some reason, I thought about the family at the mechanic shop outside York and what if things somehow went terribly wrong there, too; there could have been a dispute over money and the mechanic could have pulled a gun and the gun could have accidently went off and someone could have died. Then the whole family would have to die. They could have forever existed, exactly how I saw them in that hay meadow. I felt the ghosts of a thousand Angus bulls spread across the land behind me. I still have no idea why my mind would wander to those places at that moment.

Tony’s parents didn’t question what he did when he went to the greenhouse, or how he could have possibly missed her stealing the bins, or how she could have carried all the bins to the car and left so quickly, so I didn’t either; but Mr. Clarkson knew the answers to those questions, as the corners of his mouth were turned down when he looked at Tony and Tony spoke to the ground.

Tony had a full story, which made me the bad guy. He spoke it like he had said it a thousand times before, oblivious his father’s suspicious facial expression. His parents agreed on Tony’s story except they made Scott the bad guy, not me, which Tony tried to argue with, but his argument made no sense. “Why would he stay here why she ran off
with the bins?” Mr. Clarkson asked Tony, and frowned, and Tony said, “Like I said, so they could meet up later.” I gave no input on any of the possible scenarios; I would have spoken had I thought they were coming to an agreement against me, but things were never turning that way.

It was decided that Tony would give me a ride back to Lincoln. He would confront Scott and get the bins back, and we would find out exactly what was going on, but I said, “I just want out of everything,” and said I’d walk. Maybe I’d get lucky and hitch a ride on the interstate. I just needed to go, needed time to think. Mr. Clarkson said he understood and Mrs. Clarkson agreed with me, and they let me be on my way. It was dusk, by then, and Tony’s mud tires tore up the gravel road in front of me as I walked the same way I had driven to the ranch. Then the only sound was that of the giant metal bull tail creaking and whining on its hinge in the gentle breeze that blew away all the heat from the day.
Nebraskaphobia

Bethany and family left New Canaan Connecticut forty-one hours ago, bound for Bethany’s husband, Claude’s, Aunt Josephine in Los Angeles. They visit once a year, for fear, if they don’t, her money might stop coming.

They’d normally fly first class, but on this trip they’re driving. The plan is, on the way, spend a day or two in Nebraska: whatever time it takes to cure Bethany. This charade she’s brought on herself. She’s told Claude the reason she’s been so uninvolved, so mentally distant, so much of an absent mother and wife, is because she has nightmares about Nebraska. The nightmares are the kind you remember. They consume your daydreams on otherwise pleasant afternoons. She said they’ve given her a phobia of the State. Said she has to fold U.S. maps like the back page of old Mad Magazines. She told Claude all this using technical terms she doesn’t understand, but he does (she can regurgitate what she reads). The truth is, she does not have nightmares, she sleeps better than pets. Bethany has invented the phobia, because she’s bored. Her days consist of Valium, chocolate and gossip TV in bed. She’s chosen Nebraska as the source of her phantom illness for no particular reason other than she knows nothing about it. She could just as easily have said she’s scared of the moon or Mormons.

He doesn’t have an occupation, Claude, but he hobbies in Psychology: practicing sessions with whatever people he’d currently consider friends. Some are unaware he has no credentials; most partake because they, like Bethany, are bored. It’s for their amusement. To them, Claude’s something like a palm or tarot card reader. Claude never
suggests he’s a Licensed Psychologist, but he’s never suggests otherwise. His home office walls are patterned with framed documents, but none of them are diplomas. He did attend Princeton, but as a Music major—the oboe—and did so for only a semester and a half. That was nineteen years ago.

Bethany’s Diamond White Metallic Mercedes S-Class is parked on the shoulder off I-80 with the hazards on. She’s forced Claude to pull over. It’s 8:10 a.m.—just barely in Iowa. A hundred feet ahead, ten feet high in the ditch, is a green sign with white letters that reads, *Nebraska… the Good Life*. In the sign’s background is an image of Chimney Rock with our closest star, orange as soda, over the formation’s shoulders. A smaller, more elongated sign—in the same green—is bolted beneath the big sign and reads—in the same white—*Home of Arbor Day*.

A hundred and fifty years ago this was unchartered territory. This is where Lewis and Clark came with no idea what was what. This was the heart of the Louisiana Purchase. Motherland to the Arapaho and Arikara tribes. Where the Buffalo roamed. Where volcanic ash laid down in a heavy cloud over *Teleoceras major*—the barrel-bodied Rhino—not to be seen again for twelve million years. The transcontinental railroad tracked the same route as I-80 does today, as did the Oregon Trail leading to Rocky Mountain passes the 49ers found during the Gold Rush. The way: a tortuous rut crossing the state parallel to the Platte River.

The twins, Wayne and Raymond, are in the backseat behind their booster seat three-point seatbelts. They’re identical and twelve. They wear headphones strung to portable video game players gripped with both hands and played with thumbs. The only
sounds in the car are the dull purr of the perfect engine and Bethany’s deliberate deep
breaths, but in the twin’s heads there is million mile per hour chaos: the blips, whips and
dings of points scored; the blups, dooms and dongs of opponents killed or the boy’s lives
lost; insane background music that’s not in the background at all; white flashes of light; a
two dimensional eternity beyond the right plastic border.

The twins are tested at genius levels—I.Q.’s of 154 and 151, for Wayne and Raymond, respectively. If Bethany and Claude never become better people, if they never
grow, spiritually—or whatever you’d like to call it—if they never understand there is
more to living than what they currently believe is life: the twins will continue with their
private schools, and Bethany and Claude will continue to live more and more vicariously
through them. The twins will get accepted to Harvard and Yale at age sixteen. They’ll
decide Harvard and enroll as Pre-Law majors, but only Raymond will become an
attorney. He’ll be a lawyer that does more good than harm. He’ll help people who need
help. Wayne will meet a kind girl with soft features. She’ll be majoring in Philosophy, so
Wayne will change his major to Philosophy. They’ll enjoy life as professors at NYU and
publish three moderately successful books, each.

Claude drums his fingers on the steering wheel. He tries to look at Bethany
without her noticing. “I just need a minute, okay,” she says. “Christ.”

Claude finds the setup menu on the factory Harman/Kardon stereo and shifts the
fader and balance front and to the left, all to the speaker on the dash in front of him. He
turns up the volume and hears the hum of a central air conditioning unit and then a
woman’s muffled cough. He realizes he’s listening to one of his favorite pieces: John Cage’s 4’33. This is a live full orchestral version, conducted by Lawrence Foster. This Claude can tell; not just now because he knows he’s got Claude’s Vacation Sounds Vol. 4 in the twenty disk changer, but if really pressured and stressed: a gun in his mouth, maybe, he still could tell you. He strikes the skip-back button on the stereo so he might hear the three movements in their entirety, as Cage had intended.

“I don’t know what it is,” Bethany says. She massages a fold in her silk scarf and thinks she needs a latte.

Claude has his ear as close to the speaker as possible. His eyes are closed and if Bethany were to look closely she could almost see his head nodding to a rhythm. His head isn’t nodding, but it’s giving the illusion of a nod. He’s in sync with Cage. The speaker plays the sounds of audience members fighting back and letting loose coughs; shifting in their seats, the occasional sneeze; musicians turning noteless pages of sheet music; the auditorium air conditioning kicks on, runs and kicks off. The silence between interruptions translates as static over all of this: a white noise hiss. He looks at the time lapse on the stereo and says, “Just another minute ten, darling.”

A minute ten goes by and wild cheers blast out the speaker and then fade out. Claude turns the stereo volume to zero decibels—there’s the symbol for decibels next to 0—and says, “Brilliant. Absolutely, brilliant.”

“I don’t know what it is,” Bethany says. This time after it’s said, she slaps her hands on her thighs and punches her head back against the embroidered leather rest.
Claude tries to reset the fader and balance. “We’ve been over this,” he says. “Think of words that begin with the letter D.”

“I’m not going to recite D words for the next four,” Bethany stops, checks the twins in the back seat, then aggressively whispers, “Four fucking hundred miles.” Claude doesn’t let her finish, he says, “This is therapy.” Bethany finishes anyway, “You fucking idiot.” It’s the drama in all this that Bethany enjoys most.

Wayne and Raymond flip the left half of their headphones off simultaneously and connect at the eyes. Raymond lowers his right eyebrow, so Wayne recovers his bare ear with the headphone. Raymond is six minutes older, so he calls the shots. He will get the jest of the conversation in the front seat and communicate it later to Wayne through a series of subtle facial movements. He will say, *Mom was freaking out. She wanted to go back home*; and Wayne will wink his left eye which means, in that context, *Me too!* Raymond will acknowledge and agree, by rolling his eyes back and back down, then blink his lids.

Bethany is sorry for yelling. She’s never sorry, but says it a lot.

“Is it the native peoples?” Claude asks. He pronounces *native* how you’d pronounce the first part of *nativity*. Often, he does this: invents pronunciations thinking all words might be blessed with a hint of aristocracy. Bethany doesn’t catch it. Bethany doesn’t know.

“I mean, I guess,” she says. “But it’s just *it*, too, you know?”

“The form?” Claude asks.

“I mean, that’s part of it,” Bethany says.
“You adverse to all states with panhandles?” Claude puts the word hurst in adverse, so this sounds wrong, but he speaks so eloquently and with such confidence one might feel if they were to ever challenge him they’d get a leather glove backhanded across their face and told, “That, old chap, is for being an imb-uh-syle.”

“Maybe,” she says. “I don’t know.”

Claude says, “Fascinating,” and scratches some shorthand he invented on a pad of yellow paper with a blue pen he keeps clipped to the pad top. “Now, you, said you experienced negligent results with the Hypnotherapy?” he says and gives Bethany a concerned look.

“Not now,” Bethany says.

Claude continues to make pen tip dots on the paper, which he started after he said, Now, you...

Claude looks at the pad and is, presumably, surprised by the dots of ink. He says, “Yes, I believe we should move forward with the diversion therapy.”

“Fine,” she says, and takes a deep breath as Claude puts the car in Drive.

He signals into traffic, accelerates. He doesn’t check his mirrors: the rest of the world will look out for him. The twins notice the car is moving. They hit pause buttons on their video games, look out each other’s windows and then resume play.

Bethany says, “Devil, Death, Dread, Danger.” She’s done this before.

They pass the Nebraska sign and Bethany makes her breaths quicken. She’s on the verge of the verge of hyperventilating. “It’s not,” she inhales, “working.”
Claude fumbles with the levers that extend from the steering column. He wants to set the cruise control. Everyday of this trip it’s been the same careless fiddling with levers, buttons and knobs. He keeps going to where the cruise control is on the Bentley which makes the wipers travel on this car.

“You’ve got to let it work,” he says. “D words, yes, but it’s paramount they’re positive.” Bethany thinks he says parliament.

Bethany says, “Dreams, Doodles, Daylight, Demons.”

“Positive, Bethany.”

“Danny, Dave, Dillon, “she says.

“Good, names are good,” Claude says. “Names work.”

Bethany thinks of before she married Claude, she says, “Darrell, Diego, Dante, Dale, Dalton, Dean, Darnell, Dee, Damon, Desmond, Daren, Donnie, Duane, Dallas, Delbert, Dennis, Dexter, Drew, Dwight, Darwin.” She thinks, My God, I had sex with a Darwin.

A sign reads 70 and Claude has figured out the cruise control, so he sets it at seventy-four. “You are quite deft with names,” he says.

Bethany keeps spouting D names, but she’s switched to females; Denise, Dana, Diane... They’re coming easily. Claude can tell the treatment is working.

“Switch to E,” Bethany says. “Ethan, Elvis, Evander.” She’s done with real people and moved on to fantasies. Hawke, Presley and Holyfield, respectively.

“Stick to consonants,” Claude says. “They’re proven affective.” You know he really means affective, because he says A-ffective.
She goes through some familiar R’s as they pass through Omaha.

“This looks like an actual city,” Bethany says. This is the first time Bethany has travelled outside the Northeast United States, save trips to Europe and Bali.

“Maybe everyone here isn’t inbred,” Claude says, “Look at these home stylings.”

He points fingers—counting, like—from the steering wheel two position, and says, “Colonial, Victorian, Italianate, Cape Cod, Bay-and-Gable.”

“Look at the gothic cathedral,” Bethany says, pointing ahead.

Before she can say, I adore flying buttresses, Claude says, “The signification of flying buttresses.”

They drive on a hundred and fifty miles with no issues. Raymond and Wayne occupied in the ways they occupy themselves. Bethany calm with only reciting names every thirty miles or so—whenever she’s awake long enough to get bored—for a minute or two. Claude enamored with his blissful arrangement: tracks eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, then back to one, two and three. Bach, Chopin, Ravel, Handel, Vivaldi, then back to, Mozart, Tchiovski, Saliardi.

Lincoln was off to the left and looked nice. Claude and Bethany both said that. They commented on the Byzantine architecture of the capital building, but failed to find the humor in its phallic resemblance. Penis of the Prairie, the locals call it. Nebraska, as most think of it, lies straight west of Lincoln: the still, flat plains.

“My dear Bethany,” Claude says. “I am convinced you’ve been cured.”

“Not yet,” Bethany says. She’s determined to drag this out. “Leon, Tim, um… Jackie.”
An orange symbol illuminates on the instrument cluster, between the speedometer and tachometer. It’s the indicator that one or more of the car’s tires are running low on air, but Claude thinks it may be more serious. “It has an exclamation point in the middle,” he says. “I think it’s something wrong with the mechanics.” Khan in *mechanics*.

The back passenger tire’s down two pounds—no big deal.

Bethany opens the glove box to retrieve the owner’s manual, but Claude removed it before the trip and stuffed the glove box with individually wrapped moist toilettes. “I’ll not have the boys destroying the leather,” he says.

Several hours pass because Claude thinks there’s something more wrong with the car than a flat tire. He spots an auto repair shop off the interstate and forces mechanics to check and recheck all checkpoints. They lube, grease, flush, relube; they put two pounds in the back passenger tire.

Claude lowers his visor, but it doesn’t drop deep enough to shade his eyes. In the most leveled parts of those plains the sun can, at times, seem to be shining up at you. You might feel a giant, if only for some forgotten sliver of twilight—the feeling lost before it can be expressed in any way.

Bethany’s asleep. Wayne and Raymond pretend to sleep. It’s almost ten o’clock. A clumsy sign off the interstate says *Lodge*, but Claude reads it as *Lodging*. When he gets tired, Claude gets even more confused than normal. He exits. The exit road’s infrequent signs to the lodge lead Claude off anything paved. He winds back into places where trees
touch above the middle of the single lane road. Deer dart away from headlights like confused bottle rockets. Eyes spark silver in the folds of tree branches and disappear.

Bethany wakes. “Find a hotel,” she says.

“I’ve found lodging,” Claude says.

Wayne and Raymond actually fall asleep. The road turns and the trees open to a dirt parking lot. The lot is almost half full of cars and pickups. Surprisingly, Claude and Bethany’s Mercedes is not the nicest here, but most of these vehicle’s trade-in values are less than what a junkyard would pay to tow the things away and have them crushed.

There’s a yellow porch light on, on the porch of an aluminum shed across the parking lot. Says Intake on the door. Moths bump around the yellow bulb like cars on a track. June bugs lie dead on their backs beneath them.

The steady beating of calfskin drums isn’t audible until Claude opens his door. The drums are out in the black, past the yellow light—they’re being struck with deer antlers softened at the ends with more, and thicker, calfskin. In another dimension, or the distant past, this is the sound of half-humans marching to war. Bethany wraps Claude’s arm inside of hers. He’s escorting her to the light. The act of escorting or being escorted: something Claude never does and something Bethany never wants. Every step like that awkward one at the bottom of the stairs, in the middle of the night, when you’re not sure if you’re stepping from the last step onto the floor, or from the second to last step onto the last step.

Claude says, “We’ll ask here.”

Bethany says nothing.
“We’ll ask,” Claude says, “About where we might find a real hotel.”

Those drums are fucking creepy out there.

In the Intake shed a rectangle has been cut in the corrugated wall for a window a/c unit. It’s loud and plays with the few unrestrained hairs of a Native American woman standing behind the counter. She looks in her twenties. She’s Sacajawea on the coin.

“’Servations?” the woman says.

“Salvation?” Claude says.

“We don’t have reservations,” Bethany says, she’s surprised she knows what the woman meant.

“Is there another hotel nearby?” Claude says.

“Naw,” the woman says. “This inna hotel.”

“The sign said, lodging,” Claude says.

“Loadeen?”

“Load… jing,” Claude says. “L-o-d-g-i-n-g.”

“Signs say thisa lodge. This the Arikara sweat lodge.”

“Like in the news?” Bethany says.

The woman doesn’t know what she means.

“We need nice hotel,” Claude says.

“Where all the people died?” Bethany says to the woman. A couple weeks ago three people died in an Arizona sweat. The media made it out like there were more, though they did say three.

“Nobody die here,” the woman says, her face placid. “People born here.”
Claude says, “If we go back to the interstate, is there a hotel within a relatively close proximity?”

“What do you mean?” Bethany says to the woman.

The woman tells Bethany, she and Claude are welcome to join tonight’s sweat. It’s open to all. She explains each round of the sweats; the Peyote and drums. How it all works. She explains that Bethany and Claude will be spiritually cleansed, that they will understand the oneness in which all creatures of this earth exist. They will realize, too, truths not of this earth. They will, like very few in this world do, understand—not the reason, but the essence of—why we are here.

What the woman says is true. If Bethany and Claude participate in tonight’s sweat, their perspective on life will be forever changed. Bethany will start two foundations—a program that aids homeless mothers and a no-kill animal shelter. Claude will support her decisions and make his own to become heavily involved in the teaching and practice of holistic medicine. At age sixteen—on a vacation with their parents in Burma—the twins will contract the common flu and die.

“What’s your price?” Claude says to the woman.

Bethany says, “Our boys are out in the car.”

“No money,” the woman says.
Remembering the Cockroach Game

I don’t know why we called him Uncle Al, he wasn’t an uncle to anyone Gary or I knew. He was a bachelor who owned a couple hundred acres with a fishing pond six or seven miles outside of town. Every weekend, during the warm and summer months, our fathers would take me and Gary out to Uncle Al’s on day long fishing outings. It was so long ago and my mind was so young, then, I barely remember being there. I do remember Uncle Al laying face down on cedar plank floor boards, beaten, coughing into a pool of blood.

A foam mushroom grows from the mouths of our Pabst cans as Gary and I each ease back in an old lawn chair. Our daughters, Jilly and Theresa, wear matching hot pink bikinis. They splash around and laugh like deranged muskrats in the little blue plastic pool past where they can get us wet. It’s an early Saturday morning, Mid-April, and the fog has just lifted.

“Isn’t it cold in there?” I ask the girls.

“No Daddy,” Jilly says.

“No Uncle Rodge,” Theresa says, and Gary leans to me and says, “It doesn’t look cold.”

Two caramel colored squirrels take chase—spiral like the barber’s pole white and red, but dizzyingly fast—around a branch that hangs out from the old Maple on the property line to my trailer’s sagging rain gutter. Their sharp claws tear over bark and rip
little twigs with big leaves from the branch. The twigs and leaves helicopter down or come faster if they don’t catch air just right—fall twig first—snowing down on the girls. The girls hold their arms above their heads, with palms flat, faces down; kick water at each other’s shins. With smiles they scream.

“Look at those squirrels,” Gary says. “They fuckin’ or fightin’?”

“It is spring,” I say.

“Look like males, though,” Gary says, saluting the branch to shade his eyes from the morning sun.

“How can you tell?” I say, and salute with him.

“Color, for one,” he says, leans away and sneaks two quarters out the smaller of the two front pockets on the right hip of his denim jeans: the pocket I’ve never seen anyone else use, but Gary is always pulling something out of there. Receipts, guitar picks, coins, old pictures, notes to himself, Bic lighters, anything that will just fit. He says, “If either one of them is female, they’ll recognize this sound,” and holds the quarters out towards the squirrels and rubs them together fast between his thumb and index finger. He continues to scratch the coins together and follow the squirrels back and forth on the branch and to other branches. He’s aiming the sound at them. Neither of the squirrels react to the quarters; though, to my surprise, it does almost sound animal: like a repeated attempt to suck and blow a stubborn hunk of steak from between your teeth.

“What’s that mean?” I ask.

“Just a sound females respond to,” Gary says, leans away again and feeds the quarters back in the pocket. “Both males.”
All the lose twigs and leaves are done falling and the squirrels rest on smaller limbs that bow under their weight. Theresa sits straight-legged in the pool—her big toes like Painted turtles coming up for air—and Jilly takes the big leaves from the pool water and stacks them on Theresa’s red permed hair: a crimson afro. The wet leaves weigh down on the top: make the sides exaggerate and seem even more ridiculous.

“Don’t do that, baby,” I say.

“It’s okay,” Jilly says.

“It’s okay, Uncle Rodge,” Theresa says. “I’m a princess.”

Gary says, “To be young,” and takes a drink of beer.

We set up our custody agreements so we’d have our daughters on the same one weekend per month the court gave us right to them. Not that Gary and I don’t sit around together every other day of every other week, but Gary insisted Theresa and Jilly be friends. As good of friends as Gary and I were growing up. Plus, since Theresa has someone to play with, Gary doesn’t have to take her to do anything that cost money: when she asked about the County Fair, he suggested she and Jilly spend the day running around on the river sandbars, while he and I seined for minnows. It’s always that sort of thing.

Gary finishes his beer, shakes the empty can at me, and I look at my empty can—warm, the bottom half beaded with its sweat—slouched in my hand on the lawn chair’s rusty arm. I say, “Sure.”

He pulls two Pabsts from between jagged hunks of ice in the cooler he’s been using as a foot rest and the girls have figured out the water they splash from the pool
turns the dirt in the yard to mud. Jilly tells Theresa to get out and Jilly lifts the pool up by
the outer lip, which makes it fold to the shape of a football, then—under instruction from
Jilly—Theresa grabs the nose of the football and they flip it over, rushing all the water
across the dirt. The pool snaps back to a circle, with a thwang, before landing on its top.

“Hey,” I say, and push my eyebrows together, though I think it’s funny.

“It’s okay,” Jilly says, as she drags the pool away from the water.

The girls stand in the puddle facing each other. They hold hands in the space
between them and with their feet they work the water into the dirt and then knead the
mud they’ve made. They sing, London bridges falling down, falling down, falling down.
With each down, they drop and stab their knees in the mud and laugh. They go through
the game at least a dozen times and then Gary says, “Look at this.” The girl’s game
reminds me of something from my childhood, but I don’t know what it is. I search back
through my memory. All I come up with is an image of this black and white picture that
hangs in the bar: it’s the old town Orchestra, but all I can really see is the conductor.

The searching and song has put me in a sort of trance. I’m having trouble
snapping out, but a long blink brings me back and Gary shows me he’s tucked his ring
finger and middle finger into his palm—without assistance from his other hand—and
then made the ends of his pinky and index fingers touch. I try to replicate the trick, but
can’t quite do it. “That’s pretty neat,” I say.

Gary twists his wrist to see from what angle the trick looks best, “Picked that up
the other day,” he says.
The sun creeps almost overhead and the day has warmed enough that Gary and I take off our jean jackets. He gets us each another beer and shakes the cooler, so I can hear ice is all that’s left.

I stare at the mud hole the girls made, which has dried except the dark center—small as a shoe print. The girls are caked in grey mud and ride their bikes on the street: their tires over the gravel sound like a distant waterfall.

“You think of Paula?” I ask. Paula left Gary five years ago, because, as Gary says, *She couldn’t handle being with someone smarter than her.*

“Every time I mail the check,” Gary says in a breathy exhale. The check—child support—which he has some trouble with—he’s been arrested twice for failure to pay. The first time I dipped into my savings for bail. I ate black beans and rice for six months, during a stretch when Arnie cut overtime at the gas station, just so my one-fifty to Miranda would clear on the firsts of those months.

“Do you think of being with her?” I ask.

“Do you think about Miranda?” Gary asks. Apparently, I should have said, *about* instead of, *of* and he’d have got what I meant.

“Sometimes,” I say, and Gary says, “Better not to.”

Miranda and I separated two years earlier, because, aside from her reasons, Gary convinced me she was *an uptight bitch.* I now know he longed for me to share his loneliness. Misery definitely loves the company of a best friend.

“We married uptight bitches,” he said—the first of many times—when he was driving with a tire over the center line back to my place from Sunset Bowl. This was
about a year before Miranda and I separated and about an hour after a league tournament victory and a lot of fast drinking. “Think of all the shit we could do if we didn’t have ‘em,” he said.

“We’re making money,” I said.

“Sure we are,” Gary said. “We could just take off whenever we wanted. Go fishing in Canada, or whatever we wanted to do.”

“Go to Mexico and drink Coronas on white beaches,” I said, and remembered they had cockroaches in Mexico.

“For the fiestas and virgins,” Gary said. “That’s why we go to Mexico.”

It’s a powerful thing: someone with responsibilities, and little money, coming up with such childish dreams as those; especially when you’re like me and can’t find the strength to pull away from them. As much as I tried, my mind couldn’t get on to anything else: everything was Canada and Mexico. It only took that small spark to set me off.

Miranda’d moan about me never being at home—never spending any time with her and Jilly—and I’d be thinking of the lakes in Saskatchewan that Gary, at that time, endlessly rambled about: full of Lake Trout the size of coffee tables and Muskees that snap .03 gauge steel leaders. Miranda screamed about me acting like a child while I was remembering how Gary told me the waitresses and strippers in Mexico aren’t at all what you’d imagine: They’re not the indigenous looking sort, like the Mayans or anything. Lot of ‘em got skin as light as us. All sorts of exotic hair styles. And, man, you’ve never seen ‘em so young: young, young. Not at all what you’d imagine.
My subscriptions to HotRod and Playboy expired and I signed up for Outdoor Canada, Western Sportsman and Mexico Travel and Life. I clipped images and articles, advertisements even, from my new subscriptions and static stuck them inside the plastic flaps in front of family photos in the albums. I picked up an English to Spanish dictionary at the Library and never returned it. The common words and phrases I got down. I worked on conjugating verbs in present and future. A bit of research showed the conversion rate from USD to CAD was 1:0.947937 and USD to MXN was 1:11.6607. Whether I went north or south: I had a budget.

I thought about it in absolute terms: I have to go, I must go. I had the overwhelming sense that there was some truth waiting for me in Canada and Mexico, and if I could just get there my entire life would make perfect sense. I could finally get things organized: straightened out like everyone else seemed to have their life straight. Maybe I could take some night classes and get a Bank job. Maybe I could be an upstanding member of my community. Maybe I could get Miranda back. As the way things always seem to play out, neither Gary or I made the trips.

Miranda said she wanted a separation, just for a while. Said she’d lost her husband and Jilly’d lost her father, and that wasn’t fair to either one of them. She didn’t sign up for that. “You don’t give a damn about anybody,” she said. “Including yourself.” I laughed. She would stay at her mother’s, take Jilly with her and, “Just for now, the courts can figure out the child support and visitation.”

“Fine by me,” I said, sitting on the kitchen counter, rapping one boot heel against a cupboard door and using a shelf on the open Lazy Susan as a rest for the other. “You’re
an uptight bitch, anyway, and you’re only trying to turn our daughter into more of a one than you even are.”

“You drink too much,” she said.

The girls lay their bikes down in the dirt on a pedal and silver glittery handle bar grip-tassel after skidding to a stop on their dried-up mud hole. Gary finishes telling me Easy-Off oven cleaner is best purposed for cleaning internal combustion engines and internal combustion engine compartments. I’ve heard the pitch before. “Its tough shit,” he says. “But not so tough it chews up your bushings and hoses.”

“What are you two planning?” I ask the girls as they approach us fiddling with their bikini straps and taking little skating steps in the dirt.

“We want to know if we can go to the waterpark,” Theresa says, and I look at Gary.

“What’s that, fifteen bucks?” Gary asks.

I shrug.

Jilly says it’s only seven-fifty for them, because they’re under ten, and I say they have to clean-up if they want to go.

“We’ll have to pay to get in, too,” Gary says as he cranes his head my way and looks down at me through the corners of his eyes. “Why don’t we go fishing?” he suggests to the girls. He lifts his Pabst can towards them, points with his index finger from the middle of the can and nods once as he goes on in a throat-clearing sort of voice, “You won’t even have to take a bath.”
Theresa and Jilly look at each other and Theresa smiles and energetically says, “Yeah,” so Jilly smiles and says, with the same energy, “Yeah.”

“Sure, baby,” I say.

I’m loading the fishing poles into the bed of my old ‘64 Chevy pickup. Gary leans against the cab. He says, “Why don’t we try Uncle Al’s?” I give him a look like I didn’t hear what he said, or at least all of what he said, I say, “Try where?”

“Uncle Al’s,” he says. “You remember, that place out east of town.”

I toss my tackle box into the bed, “We have permission?” I ask.

“No need,” he says. “If Uncle Al’s out there, we’ll just tell him we used to fish there as kids.”

“I don’t really remember fishing out there,” I say.

“Sure,” Gary says. “We used to go all the time.”

We stop at Arnie’s, put three dollars of gas in the pickup; pick up a case of beer, a twenty pound bag of ice, two orange sodas, a pouch of gummy worms, beef jerky, and two dozen Nightcrawlers. Arnie reminds me I’m working the four to ten tomorrow and I tell him I’ll be in early to stick the tanks and get a gallon count, so he won’t have to measure them Monday morning, before the gas truck shows.

Uncle Al’s pond is sunk down in a private spot, with tall conifers all around, but not quite up to the water’s edge. There’s nice sand on the banks between the water and trees where I place the cooler—full of beer and ice—and four fishing poles. Gary sets
the snacks and Nightcrawlers down next to the cooler, bends over and touches his shins, then leans back and tucks his chin into his chest.

“I’d have carried the cooler,” he says, and untucks his chin. “But my back, you know.”

I told him I knew.

Almost all the mud has crumbled off the girls, but a few odd patches, shaped like middle puzzle pieces, remain. Their hot pink bikinis have changed to mauve. They look around in the sand as if one of them has dropped something they both wanted—on the ride out Gary told the girls there were lizards out here—and then their bare feet run on the sand and don’t make a sound. The girls stop short of the tree line and turn back. “We want to play in the trees,” Jilly says.

I say that alright and tell her to be careful and continue with my pre-fishing ritual of untangling the fishing poles from each other.

I bait the hooks on two poles, put red and white bobbers four feet up from the hooks on each line and cast them into the water five or six feet from each other. I lay the poles on the bank between me and Gary—one’s his, one’s mine—and lounge in the warm sand. Gary gets off the cooler and grabs us each a beer from between his legs.

Beyond the tree line fallen twigs snap and dry pine needles crunch: the sound of footsteps dropping.

Gary tells me about his idea, where, if done right, a car could run only on wind power.
I get a bite on my line, but can’t set the hook in time. My bobber went under as Gary was having me stand like a tree, so he could show me exactly how you hit a guy to make his ribs break.

Gary gets us each another beer and talks about how hard it is to get your invention patented now-a-days. “Better the idea,” he says. “Harder they make it.”

I for the beef jerky.

He says, “Here, have the rest,” and tosses the zip-lock top bag to me. I hold the bag above my head and shake out all that’s left—the slivers and crumbs shed by the good pieces.

It was silent in the trees.

A deer tip-toes to the pond edge opposite us and laps water. Gary stretches his arm out toward it, holds the fist on his other hand to his cheek, closes his left eye and yells, “Badouche.” The deer doesn’t move, so Gary throws a rock at it, but grips it too long and it plunks in the water a few feet in front of him. The deer finishes drinking and disappears back through the trees.

I reel in and check my hook. It’s bare. Has to have been at least two hours since I had that bite: two hours I’ve been fishing with no bait.

Back in the trees fallen twigs snap and dry pine needles crunch. I assume the girls are returning.
Gary walks to the tree line to take a piss and shouts back, “That deer’s walking back here.” I look back and see Gary holding on to himself with one hand as he grabs a stick off the ground with the other. He pisses on his thigh as he aims the stick like a knife thrower would and tries to sling it through a gap in the branches. The stick knocks around in there and falls to the ground.

He gets us each another beer and flicks the back of his fingers at the wet spot on his jeans.

Gary’s bobber sinks under the water slowly. It could be a Crappie. Crappie take the bait slow, but it just hungs-up a couple inches below the surface and doesn’t move. That’s a snag. His hooks must have drifted into one of the cut Pine trees I helped Uncle Al sink when he decided his Bass needed more cover. I remember that I helped Uncle Al sink Pine trees when he decided his Bass needed more cover. I say, “Looks like you’re snagged.”

Gary looks up from the sticks he’s jabbing in the sand, trying to fashion a pole holder. “Hell no,” he shouts, and I try telling him not to set the hook, but he’s too fast. He whips his pole high into the air. His reel zings. The reel continues to zing as he cranks the reel winder and falls back on the sand with his pole bent over in a whole half-circle.

“You’re snagged,” I say.

“I can feel him fightin’ back on me,” he says, and re-bites his bottom lip.

I reel in my line; still have a whole Nightcrawler on, so I cast him back out. Gary stops spinning the reel.
“You want me to get it?” I ask.

He hands me the pole’s cork handle. “He was a big one, and smart,” he says.
“Must have took the line around a tree and knotted it. Those old big ones’ll do that, you know.” I agree with him that that was probably what had happened and yank the pole straight back from the snag and break his line.

Gary grabs us each another beer and I set up his line with new hooks: two tied on maybe six inches from each other so when you put a hook through one end of a worm and another through the other end, it can stretch out a couple feet off the bottom and do its work. Uncle Al taught me how to set up hooks and bait them that way. He used to spit on his worms; say it was magic. Being out at this place is starting to come back to me, however fragmented it may be.

The cone shaped shadows from the trees cast over the pond and poke at the sandy bank in front of us. I realize the trees and pond, the image of it all with the sun and the shadowy illusions formed by the landscape working together, strikingly resemble the glossy pages I’d clipped from my Canadian magazines and cherished so much. This image is exactly what I was looking for.

“Do you hear the girls?” I ask Gary.

We walk through the trees, and I yell for Jilly and Theresa as we circle around the pond. Gary follows and talks about how women are naturally poor with directions. “It’s biological,” he says. “Spatial reasoning’s a man thing.” We come back around the same
way and then set out to quiet pastures and bean, corn, and alfalfa fields beyond the trees.

The girls are nowhere. It seems like no-one is anywhere.

I don’t know for how long Gary hasn’t been following me, but he isn’t here. “Jill-E… Tuh-ree-suh… Gare-E,” is the new chant I holler (I’d added Gary to the list.) My voice cracks at the beginnings and ends of their names. I move fast back to places any of them might be: again, the trees around the pond; a corn row the entire length of the field and back down another; I stand in the middle of the bean and alfalfa fields and turn in circles, yelling the names through a megaphone I’ve made by cupping my hands together.

Uncle Al has a little cabin back somewhere on the land—I think I looked for it and couldn’t find it, but maybe I don’t want to find it so I haven’t went beyond the bend past where the spring feeds fresh water to the pond.

I go back to the pickup, because I know what’s happening: Uncle Al has the girls in his cabin and Gary went to the cabin. Maybe if I just sleep it won’t really happen, or Gary would do something and bring the girls back to the pickup and wake me up and we could all go home. I fall asleep against the steering wheel.

Whether I slept for an hour or five I couldn’t tell.

When I wake it was dark, with no moon.

I take my little plastic flashlight from behind the pickup seat and walk beyond the bend past where the spring feeds fresh water to the pond.
Branches hang, blocking my view of the cabin; I push them down like sneaking a look out venetian blinds. Gary sits on a tree stump under the eve of Uncle Al’s cabin. He isn’t really dancing, as his lower half isn’t moving at all, but his arms are going: a loose fist up and the other to that elbow, making a ninety degree angle with his forearms, then his hands switching positions. His face is an expression of the dead. The light from the cabin window lights his front; makes his body appear two dimensional. I recognize the sound coming through the cabin walls: a Mexican tune with nylon-strung guitars, trumpets and maracas: *da da da/ ah cha, da da da/ah cha*. I can’t help but hum along with the song. It’s been so long since I’ve heard the happy little jingle. I remember Gary and I being such young, small boys. We were dancing… we were naked…

We were in Uncle Al’s cabin. We used to spend our days here with Uncle Al while our fathers would fish his pond. Mostly we just sat around and talked and Uncle Al would show us interesting things from his books, or tell us stories about all the exciting things he’d done when he was our age. He grew up in Mexico, on the white beaches, and in Mexico children play the Cockroach game. “It’s a dancing game. It’s fun. You’ll like it,” he said.

The last time we played, the bolt lock on the cabin door shot across the room as the door flew open, and my father came into the cabin. His boots bowed the cedar plank floor boards. Gary’s father followed. There was shouting. Everybody’s faces were red. My father ripped Uncle Al out of the green recliner as Gary’s father handed Gary and I our clothes and told us to put them on.

I said to Gary’s father, “It’s okay, we’re playing a game,” and he said, “I know.”
My father had Uncle Al up against the wall, his toes only touching the floor, and Uncle Al looked down at me through the corners of his eyes. He must have been in his early thirties, then, but his face was that of a naïve, frightened child. My friend, Uncle Al, was terrified. I told my father, “No, it’s okay, we were playing a game,” and he kept Uncle Al up on his toes and Gary’s father pulled me back.

“You like playing games with kids?” my father asked through his teeth, and before Uncle Al could respond, my father slammed his forehead into Uncle Al’s face and his nose gushed blood over his mouth and down his bare chest. The presence of blood sent Gary’s father into a madness and he took a bowling trophy off the shelf and beat the top of Uncle Al’s head with the square marble base until my father let him drop to the floor.

Gary and I bawled and screamed for them to stop as both of our fathers repeatedly kicked him in the ribs and face; stomped on his groin. They quit beating on him two or three times, then one of them would start up again and the other would join in. Gary and I continued to scream for them to stop, but only after our fathers were wore out—covered in sweat and streaks of blood—did they stop. Uncle Al lay face down on the cedar plank floor boards, beaten, coughing into a pool of blood.

I sing quietly to myself, la cucaracha, la cucaracha, ya no puede caminar and then catch myself staring dizzily at Gary and stop singing.

“Hey,” I whisper from the darkness, loud enough that Gary should be able to hear me. I put the flashlight on him and shake the light around.
He doesn’t respond. I’m reluctant to go to him, but I do, trying to walk only on my toes through the floor of twigs and dead pine needles. They snap and crunch beneath my feet.

“Gary,” I whisper as I got close to him. “Gary.” He turns to me. His expression doesn’t change.

“See this window,” he says, monotone, like I’ve never heard him speak. His face turns back towards the cabin. “Look how it’s blurry, like it has waves in it or it’s under water.”

Beyond the window, in the cabin, Jilly and Theresa dance with their palms faced out front, doing little goodbye waves to Uncle Al who sits back in his green recliner glugging a beer. Scars like brush strokes on his face. Beer cans are tossed around the room or standing upright on any flat surface. Cob webs are strung between bowling trophies on a shelf above stacks of fat books: Encyclopedias, Repair Manuals, Atlas’, books on anatomy, the DSM, bound National Geographics.

The girls hop from one foot to the other and back, but stay in the same spot: like little wind-up toys made to dance. Their bikini tops and bottoms hang by their thinnest parts from the antlers of a stuffed young Buck on the wall. The girl’s bodies: grey with two white triangles on their chests and a white triangle below their bellybuttons.

“That’s because glass is actually liquid,” Gary says. “Over the years gravity will make it settle. It will ooze down like that and give it ripples. Best thing to do, every fifty years or so, is to rotate the window a hundred and eighty degrees.”
I put my hand on his shoulder. He looks up at me with red all around his eyes and tears ready to go. “Know who told me that?” he says. “Uncle Al.” And the tears are sent loose, straight to his jaw line and off his chin.

With his pointer fingers, Uncle Al conducts the music that plays from the old all-in-one General Electric record player on the coffee table top in front of his recliner. He swings his arms around to the beat, his fingers trail—drag a half-second behind. He sings, “The cockroach, the cockroach,” and with each roach he points at the girls and the girls spin around. The girls aren’t smiling; they aren’t laughing; they look at Uncle Al like he’s some sort of code they’re supposed to crack, but can’t. I remember that feeling, the first time, wondering when the fun starts or if this was the fun.

Gary uses the back of his hand to swipe the wet from his face.

He asks me, “Do you remember this game?”
Stevenson’s Hometown Motors

Being charged with a crime you didn’t commit means you’ve lost trust in just about everything. You’re paranoid. Now you could lose your life, because twelve of your peers say so. I’m not talking about the shit I’ve really done: the insurance, credit card and I.D. scams. I plead guilty to those and served my time. This newest thing is different—I didn’t do it. For one, I’m not attracted to children at all, and two… do I need a two? I wouldn’t suck a six year old boy’s dick. Period. Not even when I was six. Not ever.

It’s my first day out on bail. First day of work at this new job. I stand with Guy Stevenson on his used car lot at dawn in the city where Gerald Ford was born and raised. I only know this because the former President once spoke at my high school where he too had attended some thirty years before. But we’re supposed to believe this city is Henry Ford’s birthplace, because Guy’s illuminated sign raised up at the corner of his lot reads, Stevenson’s Hometown Motors, and beneath that, Birthplace of Ford. If this were true, Omaha would be Detroit. Detroit would be, well, nothing? Guy’s got his Ford’s mixed up and he’s telling everyone about it.

“It’s all about the automobile, Sam,” Guy says. “It’s the lifeblood of America.”

I don’t say anything as I’m sure he wants to go on.

“The heartbeat,” he says.

In the submissive way I used to agree with my girlfriend, Bonnie, when I knew she was wrong, I smile and do little nods, then give a huff to let Guy know I’m
enlightened and maybe a little overwhelmed by what he’s just dropped on me. I move like I may need to take a seat. I’m making this up as I go, assuming nothing lifts the ego of a used car dealer as much as when he thinks he’s sold you something.

“You said it, Guy,” I say. “Hit the nail square on the head.”

Guy reaches inside his noisy windbreaker, between the silver snaps, so I take a pack of smokes from my shirt pocket and lighter from my pants; I shake the pack. Guy lights a smoke and says, “This is where it all began.”

“Henry Ford?” I say, and light mine.

He’s got his speech down how he likes it—I should have known—so he has to start again from the top.

“This is where it all began,” he says. “Right here.” There’s another lengthy pause, but I wait. “The birthplace of Ford.”

We drag our cigarettes.

“I’ve never heard that,” I say, not giving him the tone that would suggest I think he’s mistaken, rather the tone that might suggest he’s more knowledgeable than I. “That Henry Ford was from here.”

“Ford? Oh, yeah,” he says, and kicks a small rock off the lot. “It’s an amazing thing. We’re part of history, here.” He leans against an old Mercury Cougar with hail damage. “This is the tradition and spirit our country was founded on.”

I want him to think I’m contemplating the importance of being on a used car lot in Henry Ford’s hometown (though I know I’m not,) so I look at the red horizon between the distant buildings until Guy says something else.
Something else he says is, “This could all be yours one day.” He caps my shoulder with his hand—looks where I’m looking.

I think we may be playing the same game. Guy’s acting as some sort of father-like employer, someone I could confide in, and I’m acting as the trusting-to-a-fault new employee that Guy can convince of anything. If he’s pegged me right, I’ll be his man to stick on overtime without dishing out time-and-a-half.

If I’m to believe Guy’s being genuine, then I’m completely lost. I got hired on to detail trade-ins because I need any cash I can get and my lawyer is Guy’s cousin. I’m sure I only got the job because Guy owed a favor. Now he’s talking about me owning the place someday? The extent of bullshit I expected to get pushed on me here has already been greatly exceeded. But bullshit I know, bullshit I can take and triple when I throw it back.

My cigarette does high kicks out from my lips as I spread my hands toward the sign and say, “Maybe I’ll put birthplace of Guy Stevenson up there.”

Guy grinds his finished cigarette into the concrete with the sole of his brown loafer, so I finish mine and do the same with one of my sneakers. The widest smile comes over his face; it makes his eyes completely shut and he says, “Wouldn’t that be something?”

He might be thinking, *Guy Stevenson, Legendary Salesman.* Anyway, I hope that’s what he’s thinking. Either his con is working on me or my con is too easy. Experience tells me it’s the former.

Guy’s done with the first half of orientation.
We walk back behind the mechanic shop to a little space cleared for detailing cars: my new workspace. He shows me around. There’s a garden hose with a leaky spray nozzle, an industrial vacuum with duct-taped adjustable attachments, five-gallon buckets of rags, sponges and chamois; there’s bowing plywood shelves against the outside shop wall filled with tubs of solvent, waxes, polishes, window treatments, leather treatments, wheel treatments; as he tells me what each product is made to do he spins them around so I can see the directions on the back. I assume he’s complying with OSHA’s protocol for hazardous chemicals or something. Or maybe he’s just hinting that I should read the directions before I use any of them. There’s a soda machine a few feet away. He doesn’t mention it.

“You clean the cars,” he says, seriously, “and you clean them good.” Guy is breaking character. He sounds like the owner I expected to meet: a no fuck-around hardass.

I nod and shake a cigarette from the pack in my pocket. I want our conversation to get back to friendly, back to less boss/employee, back to whatever we had going before.

“It may not seem like it, but your job is the most important one on the lot.” Yadduh, yadduh, yadduh. He watches me light my cigarette and says, “You get a thirty minute lunch and two fifteens: one in the morning and one in the afternoon.” Guy’s showing me just who’s boss.

“No one wants to buy a less than perfect car,” I say. “You sell a man a vehicle he’s proud to drive.” I want to keep going and I want this to be dramatic, so I flick my cigarette somewhere on the concrete; I put on a real hard look and get real close to Guy.
So close only my finger pointing at his chest fits between us. I say, “You sell a man a vehicle he’s proud to put his wife and kids in.”

Guy takes a step back. He says, “That’s exactly what we’re about.” He lights a cigarette and sits down on a bucket of rags. “We’re about making American’s proud.”

I spot my cigarette smoldering next to a pool of water and snatch it before the breeze rolls it in.

Guy has me pull up a bucket of sponges next to him and sit. We bullshit on some relevant and some irrelevant topics—small business, football, the economy, women, booze, war, (I let the talk go wherever Guy leads it)—and smoke a few more cigarettes. I’ve got Guy back to how I like him.

The in-house mechanic, with Sonny carelessly stitched on the chest of his work shirt, shows up and I’m positive he and I will get along: he’s an hour late and stinks of the night before. Just by how he cuffs his long sleeves I can tell he’s probably got a pint of something stashed in his toolbox. Guy makes a point to check his watch while Sonny heads past us straight for the soda machine. He’s a Coke Classic guy, Sonny is, and Guy’s a Diet Coke kind of guy, whether he drinks it or not.

I get off my bucket when Guy gets off his and Guy says, “I want you to meet our new detailer, Sam.” Sonny’s not saying shit until his soda drops. I put a hand in my pants pocket and rub together my apartment key and a quarter.

The Coke drops. Sonny cracks the tab and asks what happened to Tony. Guy says there were reasons—that Sonny doesn’t need to know—why Guy had to let him go.
Sonny doesn’t seem to care and takes a drink of his soda as he squeezes a shoulder between me and Guy. I lean away, smile and nod at him, but he’s looking at the ground.

Guy gets a ’90 Chrysler TC in on trade for an ex-police Crown Vic. He pulls the car back to my cleaning area. I spring off a bucket and straighten cleaning products when I see him coming. My older brother owned a TC. This one’s still in good shape. It’s got the porthole windows by the backseats like old Thunderbirds. An ugly car by today’s standards, but back when it was new, it was really something.

Guy kills the engine, hops out, slams the door and tosses me the keys in one motion. I catch the keys against my stomach. “Try to have it done by lunch,” he says.

“How much you give for this one,” I say, and crouch at the front bumper—line up an eye down the length of the car.


“I think they only made a couple thousand of these.”

“Oh yeah?” Guy says, and takes another look at the car.

“Yeah,” I say. “Maserati built them. Look at the emblem.”

Guy walks around the back and flares his nostrils when he sees the Maserati emblem. “What’s it worth?” he says. “It’s only got fifty thousand miles.”

I tilt my head, but I’m not thinking. “Four, five grand?” I say.

I turn the hose on the car and work the nozzle back and forth. The car sounds like a snarling dog. Sonny comes around the shop corner, carefully, watching his hands wipe one another with a red rag. I cut the water so it stops ricocheting off the hood. It’s quiet for daytime, though plenty of cars are out on the street.

“How’s it going?” I say. Sonny stuffs the rag in his back pocket and leans against the shelves of car care products.

“You got a match?” he says, and slips a half a soft-pack of non-filter Camels out of his shirt pocket. He opens his hands like a teenage boy ready for his first set of tits.

“I got a lighter,” I say, and toss it over the hood to him. I get out a cigarette of my own and bite it between my front teeth.

“I prefer a match,” Sonny says, lights his cigarette and tosses back the lighter.

“Me too,” I say, and light mine.

Sonny points at the car and blows a jet of smoke. “Shitty old LeBaron, huh?” he says.

“I think Guy said it was a TC,” I say.

Sonny walks around the back and checks the emblem on the trunk lip. “Fucker looks like a LeBaron,” he says.

“Yeah,” I say. “That’s what I thought, too.” Sonny goes back to leaning against the shelves. “So, how long you worked here?”

“Me?” Sonny says. “Shit.” He puffs hoops at the power lines. “Eight years.”

“Guy must be an alright boss, then?”
“He’s alright.” Sonny turns his face over a shoulder and holds it there. “You fuckers are only around for a day or two, though.”

“I plan on working here as long as I can,” I say. “I need whatever money I can get.”

“We’ll see,” Sonny says and squashes his cigarette under his boot. “If you want,” he stops himself. “I walk down to the Carter Lake Lounge for lunch.” He takes the red rag from his back pocket.

“I’ll join you,” I say. “Thanks.”

He wipes his hands as he walks back around the corner of the shop.

The Chrysler looks faster than it did when it first came in. I washed and waxed the body. I vacuumed the carpet with alternating up and down half-moon strokes: it looks like shark’s teeth. Guy didn’t train me to vacuum like that, but I’ve seen cars at real dealerships and that’s how the carpet looks. The seats, dash and door panels are treated with a bottle of stuff I thought looked the most expensive.

Guy somehow knows exactly when I’m done with the car. I finish shining the shiny parts in the engine bay, close the hood, and there he is, with his hands in his pockets, poking his face around inside the driver’s window. He puts on a sad face and nods, so I know I did good. He checks his watch.

“You can go to lunch,” he says.

Sonny appears to my left, wiping his hands.
I check my Casio, because I know I only get thirty minutes. “We’re going to the Carter Lake Lounge, if you want?” I say to Guy.


The Carter Lake Lounge is only a block away from Guy’s lot. Sonny walks incredibly fast. I move as quickly as I can without running, but when I get inside Sonny’s already ordered his food and a beer; he’s found a pool stick he likes. Half the sticks on the wall don’t have tips and there’re no windows in here. White Christmas lights in the rafters give a twilight effect. It smells like yesterday’s socks and French fries. Sonny and I are the only customers.

Sonny squats next to the pool table and the balls disappear—crash away from the glass—and roll to the low end. A penguin-like lady in an oversized Harley Davidson t-shirt and little jean shorts waddles Sonny’s beer over.

“You want a hamburger or cheeseburger?” Sonny says, taking balls from inside the pool table and setting them up on the felt.

“Hamburger,” I say to the penguin lady. “Please.”

“Budweiser?” she says.

I look over to the bar. It’s probably twenty feet away, but I can tell it’s gummy to the touch. They’ve got one beer on tap. “Sure,” I say, and sit at the closest table to Sonny.

“You shoot?” he says, and lifts the rack from the table. The balls are in a perfect triangle pointing to the opposite end.

“Nah,” I say. “I haven’t in years.”
Sonny’s a man you don’t bullshit, you say no you better mean it. He’s not trying to talk anybody into anything. “Suit yourself,” he says and goes to the other end of the table. The amount of energy he uses to prepare for the opening shot—stretching of legs and back, stick preparation—seems like he’s either going to send the cue ball through the brick wall or break every ball into a pocket.

“Burgers’ll be up in a couple minutes,” the penguin lady says as she sets my beer in front of me. I take my eyes off Sonny, so he finally breaks. The cue ball somehow glances off the side of the triangle and I catch a blur of it as it pops straight into a corner pocket.

“Fuck,” Sonny shouts.

“Thank you,” I say to the penguin lady.

Sonny bangs the tip of his pool stick on the felt. It multiplies like a plucked guitar string. “Fucking crooked sticks,” he says.

I take the head off my beer.

“That’s why they’re all bent,” penguin lady says, and points at the table. Sonny uses the stick to show her the way back to the bar.

Sonny retrieves the cue ball, places it in the kitchen, and sizes up a shot. I look at the Christmas lights. “Nice place,” I say.

Sonny strikes the cue ball. The one ball finds a side pocket. “It’s a shithole,” he says, chalking his stick—surveying the table. If there’s going to be any conversation, I’ve got to get it going.

“So, why does Guy go through detailers so fast?” I say. “It’s an easy job.”
Sonny pockets the two ball and grabs the chalk. “No idea,” he says.

“It doesn’t sound like they quit,” I say, and take a drink of my beer.

“No,” Sonny says. His third shot barely misses, but it was difficult combination.

“They don’t quit.”

Our hamburgers show up with fries on heavy porcelain plates. The serving size is truly American: pound of beef, pound of fries. Sonny leans his stick against the pool table. He takes a bite of his burger, a pinch of fries and a drink of beer. He says, “Listen, Guy’s a weird fuck,” and turns back to the pool table.

He sinks the three ball, leans his stick back in its spot, and takes a bite of his burger, a pinch of fries and a drink of beer. He says, “For one, he’s a Freemason.”

Sonny continues this circle of activity, and information about Guy, until the balls are cleared and his food and beer are gone. He’s told me: “Guy sleeps in a coffin.” “He thinks the earth is hollow.” “You know, that’s Crisco in his hair.” “He’s convinced there’s a military base on the dark side of the moon.” “He puts corn syrup on his pancakes.” “He goes to Oregon every summer hunting Sasquatch.” “He thinks the south will rise again.” “I’ve caught him sniffing brake fluid.” “He cuts the faces out in Playboy; look in the bathroom when we get back.” “He thinks there’s a map to a buried flying saucer, coded on the back of a dollar bill.” “He’s told me he’ll put a spell on me if I ever quit.”

I’ve been listening, nodding, laughing, eating, wondering and drinking. Since Sonny’s out of storytelling props I say, “Do you think he really could?”
“Put a spell on me?” he says, and motions to the penguin lady we need our check.

“Probably.”

After lunch dark clouds quickly fold in on the sky. Rain and thick cracks of lightning follow. Guy sends me home.

I’m in chapter three of Milton Friedman’s Free to Choose. I read until I think about Bonnie: the end of chapter six. Friedman writes about the famous road to hell being paved with good intentions, and intelligently applies that analogy to our society. It’s interesting how things might work differently.

Bonnie’s the only reason I have a phone. I dial her number, though I doubt she’ll answer. She doesn’t pay for caller ID, but she’s probably letting all her calls go to the answering machine. After four rings I used to say, “You’ve missed Bonnie and Sam, please leave a message.” Now Bonnie says, “Bonnie’s not home. Leave a message after the beep.”

“Hey, Bon. Guess you’re not home. Just wanted… was just wondering if maybe we could get together and talk. I’ve been thinking a lot about you. I really think if I can just explain, not explain, because I didn’t do anything, but that’s what you need to know: that I didn’t do anything. Anyway, let me know either way, about talking. I love you, Bon… This is Sam.”

I turn on the radio and then rinse my fork in the sink. This AM station’s disc jockey says there’s a free taco from Taco Bell for anyone attending the hockey game, tonight. You just have to show your ticket at participating locations. I open a can of tuna
and don’t drain the oil. The disc jockey plays We Five’s, You Were on My Mind. I’m an optimistic man, but right now, I mean, look at me: sitting alone at the edge of a Murphy bed eating tuna from a can. There’s still enough light from outside, so I haven’t flipped the switch. If my mother were still alive, she’d say, “You got yourself in a spot.”

The phone rings on my thigh and I hit the Talk button before it stops vibrating. “Bonnie?” I say. Three people have my phone number: Bonnie, my lawyer and Guy.

“Sam?” Guy says.

“Yeah.” I set the can of tuna on the floor and stand up. I put my free hand on top of my head. “How you doing?”

“Hey, Sam, say, I forgot to have you sign some papers you were supposed to sign.”

“Okay. Is it alright if I do it first thing in the morning?”

“No, because it’s state law. It’s my mistake, I admit, but there are certain employment forms that state law says we have to go over on the first day and then you sign.”

“Okay,” I say, with a tone that might make Guy realize asking me to come back into work is bullshit.

“So, I’m going to need you to come back to the lot.”

“Tonight? It’s…” I check the time on the radio. It’s only 6:50.

“If you can be here around 8:00, that’d be perfect. I can meet you back here then.”

I’m on Guy’s schedule, now, but I need this job. One day off work and I might not make rent.
I can see what’ll happen. I’ll show up at Guy’s lot at 8:00 and step into his office, which doubles as break room and reception. He’ll be seated at his desk in a black robe. He’ll have me take a seat in front of him on the customer side of his desk. There’ll be a couple forms for me to sign. His office door will open and five or six figures in black robes and pointy black hats—like the Klan hats—will enter. At first I’ll just look back at the men and say, “Hi,” hoping it’s nothing serious. I’ll turn back to sign the forms and Guy’ll have his black hat on too. The men will surround me. They might hold candles. They might begin to sway, rhythmically. Chanting may ensue. Guy will say, “We are the Coalition for the Preservation of Human Decency.” I won’t say anything. Guy will continue, “What you did to that little boy deserves more punishment than the courts are willing to hand down.” I’ll say, “But I didn’t do anything.” Guy will say, “For a man like you, castration is the only answer.” The men that surround me will slowly tighten the circle. Two of them will grab my arms while another makes for my belt buckle and Guy pulls a fillet knife from his desk drawer.

“I quit,” I say to Guy and hang up the phone.
The Bunker

I

Leona and I were married forty-one years. Mostly during the Cold War. Our last anniversary, we celebrated on a Caribbean cruise that poked around Latin shorelines that looked like paintings of heaven. Leona said she wanted to retire in one of the countries where there weren’t many hotels on the beach, but we didn’t talk anymore about it.

In a picture, Leona and I embrace against the ship’s chrome railing, grinning wildly, the unnatural blue of that sea behind us. Somewhere before Aruba. The sun high enough it didn’t make the frame. We wore matching white Polo’s, khaki shorts, bucket hats she’d purchased special for the trip and those sunglasses that clip-on over the frame of your regular glasses.

The night before our final port of call in Miami Leona and I lay in the twin cabin bunk and we spoke like we were young. She said, “So happy with you.”

I said, “Always have each other.”

She rested her head on my chest and I swept the long hair from her temple behind that ear. “Forever,” I said.

Leona was a few years post-menopause—she told me a few years before, that’s what her hot flashes and some coarse hairs on her chin were about—but a couple weeks after we returned from the cruise she said, “Tomorrow, I’m seeing a doctor.” She had her hips against the kitchen counter. I stood against the island behind her as she quickly swiped at a carrot with the vegetable peeler. She stopped and looked at the cupboards.
“There’s some spotting in my underpants.” She went back to the carrot, but set the peeler on the counter.

I took her wrists and crossed them against her chest, hugging her from behind.

Outside the kitchen window, a hummingbird hovered out of focus except for its chest and beak. It sucked red sugar water from the hummingbird feeder and then shot off.

“Everything will be alright,” I said into her hair. She cried and I let go of her wrists.

Leona called me at the Post Office—where I was Post Master—before she could let herself leave the Hospital. Uterine cancer. And somehow only two days later they could tell it had spread to her lymph nodes. When more tests were run and the results came back, the doctor gave her a fifteen percent chance of living five years. Leona trusted the doctor, though I wanted a second opinion.

A shame greater than anything I’d known, grew in me: as the months passed and Leona became more ill and depressed and less-mobile, practically by the minute, my libido increased at the same rate. It seemed to be stealing that energy from her. Sex was out of the question with my wife, I understood that, it just couldn’t happen, and at that point I didn’t even desire it from her. She was my soul mate, and neither one of us needed sex to explain how deeply we felt. Our experience was far beyond that.

Before cancer, when we’d make love it was so tender and pleasant, she’d run her fingertips up and down my back. She’d ask me how I felt, and sometimes we’d talk more than that. I loved the feel of her body against mine. She said she loved mine against hers. At times, there wasn’t even penetration, we’d just hold each other’s bodies, kiss and run our hands slowly and sweetly, everywhere.
My consuming urge for sex raised to the level where I was pulling-off six or seven times a day: sometimes at the Post Office, sometimes coming home from the Post Office in the middle of the day to pull-off at home and not being able to make it past the strip club billboards on Highway 6. I’d go to the shoulder, with my hazards on and cup an imaginary cellphone over my ear. Ejaculate into the coffee thermos I’d wedge between my thighs.


II

I met Tilly on a humid June night, one that didn’t cool after the sun went down. Leona had gone to sleep early as she always did and I wasn’t very tired. I thought, *I’ll go down to the pub, just up the road, for a drink. Just one harmless drink and I’ll come home.* I told Leona I was going out for toilet paper, but the pace of her sleeping breaths didn’t change. The 30 mg Morphine tablets she took at night sent her into a coma-like sleep for stretches of ten or twelve hours.

I sat at the pub and sipped a beer. It was a Tuesday, so there were only a handful of people in there. A few men around my age, but in rough shape, and a few kids—probably in their mid-thirties—shooting pool with sticks they’d brought in wooden cases
and slid under the table during play. One of the boys at the pool table kept feeding dollars
into the jukebox and playing Rock ‘n Roll.

Tilly was a real fat one. She carried with her the smell of moldy carpet and men’s
cheap stick deodorant. She sat next to me on a barstool and the stool joints set off little
explosions. I gave her a smile, thought of the milky sweat that had to have been lathered
at her upper, inner thighs, and got an erection. She didn’t even tell me her name. First
thing she did was lean in close and said, “You wanna fuck?” I felt my heart kick against
my ribs. My face had to have gone white.

“Yes,” I said.

She had an apartment on the ground level at Chateau Le Fleur, which used to be
the worst motel in town—The Green Gardens—and then someone changed the name and
rented the rooms by the month. Advertised the rooms as studio apartments. It was within
walking distance of the pub, but I drove us there. In the car she said, “I’m not a prostitute
or anything. I just enjoy giving older men what they need and being compensated for my
time.”

I said, “But you are a whore,” and turned on my blinker a full block before the
apartment entrance. While the blinker was ticking she said that she was a whore and she
liked that I called her a whore. So I called her that in bed while I was doing to her all the
vile and disgusting acts I’d fantasized about and pulled-off to.

An infant’s raspy cry blasted like a cheap stereo from the bathroom of Tilly’s
apartment. That baby’s ear piercing wale as her mother groaned, “Yes, daddy, I, like it,
rough. I’m, bad. I’m, so, fucking, bad,” and “Such, a, dirty, girl.”
“Whore!”

“Such, a, dirty, whore.”

I finished inside her and vomit involuntarily shot—without warning—from the back of my throat to the back of her head. A meaty splat at impact, and then drew back a thick track down the length of her spine. The instant clarity of what I had done to Leona, what I had done inside of Tilly, the sudden regret of it all, must have brought on the convulsion. There’s nothing more perceptive than a man in the moment after he’s ejaculated.

Tilly screamed and then scrunched her nose up like a pig sniffing. My clothes seemed to dress me faster than I put them on. I didn’t see things fluidly, chronologically, the way the eyes and brain generally work together. What I experienced were the snapshots my mind took of the happenings: me naked; Tilly on bed with vomit on back, looks like she’s swimming; me dressed; Tilly crawls on all fours to bathroom; me standing in bathroom doorway; Tilly takes car seat from bathtub; car seat on bathroom floor; baby red faced, screaming in car seat; Tilly showers and flips the bird; kill headlights in my driveway; unlock front door of house.

I spent the night on the couch, and the next morning told Leona all about Tilly before she even had a cup of coffee. I even said about the vomit, hoping she might see something in that. As if that could show how sick I was, or at least how sick being with another woman made me. Perhaps lessening in some way what I had done. Tears came from my eyes like they hadn’t since I was a young man. Of course, I tried touching her, just on the arm, but she wouldn’t let my hand get near.
Had I known she was so close to the end I may have kept the story as a secret.

She was calm. “I understand,” she said, and then cried. “You’ve got your needs.”

I tried touching her arm again, but she threw her shoulder back again. I said, “No, sweetie, no that’s not it. I don’t have needs.”

“Then what is it?” she asked, and masked her face with Kleenex. If there is an answer to that question I didn’t know it at the time.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Nothing.”

Leona took the Kleenex from her face and breathed deeply. She dabbed at her eyes and nose. She stared at the floor. “I need some time,” she said, smoothly.

She packed a small bag and went to her older sister Alma’s ranch twenty minutes out in the country. I went to work and called Alma’s house every half hour, but she wouldn’t put Leona on the phone.

Leona passed away during her afternoon nap. Alma said she was laying on a daybed in her sunroom and it was warm and sunny in that room. She said it was so peaceful, and that’s how Leona went. She said she didn’t know if she should tell me or not, but she had a smile on her face when she passed.

III

What is there to say about the funeral of your dearest companion? And how would you say it? For me, the funeral was just a church service. Not so dissimilar from those Leona dragged me to on Sunday mornings. Enough mumbo-jumbo, smoke and robes that I was distracted from the actual purpose of being there. Maybe that’s the intent.
The Priest didn’t speak Leona’s name during the service. It was mostly drones in Latin; nothing that made any sense.

I followed the casket out the center aisle like it was some giant Birthday cake made to surprise.

The cemetery; the burial; this is where things came into focus; the situation became even clearer than situations become when you’re alone at the edge of your bed in the dark. This was where reality drove its stake through my forehead, even though I’d read Leona’s obituary in the paper: *Survived by her husband, Victor*, and I did understand that if I survived, she did not.

With each click of the wench, each inch, Leona lowered into her grave, I could tell pieces of myself were leaving, flaking away and falling in with her: the love I’d had, the courage, the kindness, patience and charity. They all returned back to her, down there where they belonged, as they were never really mine. Those things were always hers. She’d just let me borrow them and showed me how they should be used.

I was an eighteen year old Navy Blue-Shirt—a real knuckledragger—when we met. Just back from a year in Korea. Full of piss and vinegar, though I was on crutches at the time. Medical discharge, tie-down lock on a fighter jet snapped in rough seas. Hit my lower right leg like a whip, nearly cut it in two. I was happy for the discharge, even if that meant the torn up leg that still aches when the weather turns. Lived off my disability checks from the Navy and drank. I was just a handful of scattered dots that needed connecting, needed lines to shape me up, make me appear to be something. Leona did that for me.
The Priest stood next to me with his hands gripped into a ball at his stomach. Two men leaned on spades next to a large mound of dirt covered with Astroturf: waiting for the husband to leave, so they could bury the casket. Everyone else had gone from the cemetery, the way groups of people blow away like dust from the various places they gather. Swiftly. Back to their real lives, to await notice of the next assembly. I thought, parades. I thought, stadiums and all-inclusive resorts. Movie theaters. (Is life supposed to be just a series of creating groups of people and then disassembling the group? Maybe this is symbolic. Perhaps groups of people become, in a way, one collective person. They say there’s power in numbers, and maybe that’s true. People gather together and feel they possess some supremacy, which they certainly don’t feel when they’re by themselves.) I thought… death.

“You’re going to hell, mister,” the Priest said.

“What?” I said, my head dreaming somewhere away from my body.

He kind of spread his arms and showed me his swollen palms. “I said, ‘My deepest sympathies, Victor,’” and he bowed his head.

“Okay,” I said. “Which way to the car?”

IV

I’d held myself accountable for my actions; I’d told Leona what I’d done, and for that I lost the last hours of her life. There’s no way to get that back. She must have hated me when she died. At least, she must have had hate for me, and knowing that gave me hatred towards them: gold digging whores like Tilly.
It took me all of two years to fix it up right. I’d always been good with my hands: working with wood, constructing various small pieces of furniture. I had turned the garage into my own workspace: shelves, drawers and a work bench. We had a nice sized bomb shelter out in the back yard, so I had a good starting point. I’d stocked the shelter with canned goods when Leona and I first bought the house, but in the early nineties cleared them out. That wasn’t enough room for the number of women I had in mind: the shelter could have held maybe eight or ten, tops, and there were only two cots down there.

It was time those whores were held accountable for their actions, too. What world do we live in where a man can be tempted like that? It goes against all laws of nature. The human male cannot control himself in such situations. He wasn’t built that way. Look at the animal kingdom. Nature says, the males pursue the females for reproduction, that’s the way it works, if the females flip those usual roles, things fall apart. If one of the sexes didn’t have a strong drive for sexual activity, there wouldn’t be an aggressor to ensure procreation of the species. But if both sexes were to become the aggressor, what’s to stop everyone from fornicating endlessly with each other? Nothing—resulting, certainly, in gross overpopulation; resulting in lack of food and resources; resulting in starvation, in abortion by the billions and most likely a complete collapse of our society. It’s the female’s duty to be of clear mind and only engage in sexual acts when the stronger male physically overtakes her. That ensures the balance. Women chasing men, women matching male sexual aggression: the end of the world as we know it.
I had an excavator brought in and they dug an eight foot deep, six foot wide, trench from the shelter to the house foundation; about twenty yards long. My twenty pound sledge hammer was adequate for me to pound a hole through the bomb shelter wall, where the trench was dug, and beat out another hole opposite it, in the basement wall of the house. The basement and bomb shelter would be connected by a cement tunnel. That would allow me to hold maybe twenty-five, thirty women.

In the trench I built a plywood tunnel which I would cover with over a hundred bags of Quick-crete I’d mixed with water and gravel from my back alley to make concrete. You’ve got to coat the outside of the plywood forms with motor oil or the concrete will stick. You could omit the oil step and leave the plywood forms stuck in there—the tunnel walls wouldn’t be concrete, they’d be your plywood forms—but if you’re going to do something, do it right. Doing it right means you end up with concrete walls.

I’d made a mistake, but I’d also been a good husband and employee. I’d kept food on the table and heat in the house. I kept the mail flowing through your mailboxes. I wasn’t a liar. I was a good man by all measurements you could make of such a thing.

I completely remodeled the basement, new drywall, flooring and carpet. Put in a nice bathroom with shower. A little kitchenette. Plumbed everything myself. Bed bunks all along the walls. With the extra concrete I had left over from the tunnel job, I sealed up the basement’s egress windows: filled the wells right up with concrete. Installed a secure dumbwaiter, an intercom and CCTV cameras that ran straight to a monitor on my nightstand. Sound proofed the basement ceiling by packing R-5 insulation between the
main floor floor joists and then screwed inch thick sheets of plywood to them. Ripped up
the shag carpet in the living room and bedrooms and adhered it to the plywood ceiling
with high grade hypoxi. Replaced the old basement door off the kitchen with an industrial
steel door. Screwed six heavy duty deadbolt locks down the side of it.

I knew what I had to do. Vigilante was the word I thought fit. These whores need
to be off the streets. They needed to be somewhere secluded, where they can’t cause any
more harm. Like how Russia exiled their criminals to Siberia. I needed a Siberia.

I called it the bunker and I was damn proud of the work I’d put into it. It’d been a
long time since I’d really felt a sense of accomplishment. The deepest sense of the thing
you can only get when you’ve put in long hours that made you stink, swear and ache. A
task so daunting, you’d sworn it off twice during construction, but super glued your
calluses back to your palms and resumed labor. You stick that out, complete the task, and
you’ve really accomplished something.

These women want someone to take care of them, and I was going to give it to
them. They don’t want to survive by their own modes and methods; they want someone
to buy them things and they just want to lie around and not work. In the bunker, they’d
have a safe and secure living arrangement, not have to work for their food and clothes,
rent free, which is what they wish for.

V

I went back to the pub for Tilly. Showed up early and stayed until close, a few
times. I wanted her to be the first one I set up in the bunker. After she didn’t show at the
pub, I went to her apartment and the Hispanic man who answered the door in his
underpants said in broken English that he didn’t know anything and, I think, that he had lived there for a year.

Tomorrow is three years since Leona passed and now I’m centered at a little U-shaped corner booth in the back of Bob’s Tavern on the East side. I live on the West, but come this far sometimes. Bob’s reviews in the free local entertainment guide I pick up at the super market range from one-star, “Dark and dingy shithole. Little creepy,” to five-star, “Total dive, but in a good way. Great place to go when you want to hang around people that make you feel better about yourself.” It’s the kind of place I’m looking for. The kind of place that should attract the women I’m after.

The single light above me, reset into a dropped black ceiling, touches the metal edges of everything in my corner with a light electric orange: a Melon Crayola sketch on black construction paper.

I got a Coca-Cola with ice, in a lowball glass, as I requested. No alcohol, I need to keep my mind quick. Need to make sure this first girl goes off without a hitch. I’ve practiced some scenarios, and I’m confident this will be smooth.

Two men—around my age, mid-sixties—hunched at the bar, had a conversation going when I entered, but when I placed my Alligator skin wallet down they went mute: just listened until I got my drink. They stared forward and watched themselves drink in the bar mirror behind the bottles. Their eyes shifted to the side, my way—I saw them in the mirror and looked away before they caught me catching them. In dirty overcoats they sat like toads, with the rotten sweetness of yesterday’s drunk being sweat out, steaming
out the front where the top button’s undone. One of them has a hair lip. If there’s anything I hate more than whores, its men like those: men I could have been had I no spirit, no determination. A man I could have been had I not met Leona.

I handed the bartender a limp twenty dollar bill and told him to hold on to it and start me a tab. “I’m expecting someone,” I said.

Four girls, early twenties probably, came in, beautiful, wearing just a little more clothing than required to cover the parts that require covering; giggled into their Vodka Tonics at the far end of the bar, and left. They still had a chance to go good, to not require the bunker, so I wasn’t interested; even though the tallest one situated herself amongst the other girls in a way that made it convenient for her to steal glances at me while her friends swiped through pictures on a digital camera.

In comes one. This is exactly what we’re looking for: early-to-mid-forties, moderately overweight, a tight thigh-high leopard print dress. Scuffed knee-high boots with big heels. I shake the knot on my red silk tie; it loosens enough I can work out the top button of my shirt. I casually slip up the right sleeve on my suit coat about an inch and slip up the left sleeve twice as far: my left has a Rolex and Gold cufflink, my right only the other cufflink. I place my hands loosely on the table, relaxed, though it would feel comfortable if my palms were flat. It’s important to give the perception that you’re just a regular guy.

She orders a drink and throws her oversized purse on the bar like she’s certain nothing can spill from it. Its fake gold adornments thunk on the lacquered wood. I’m waiting for that look: the quick survey into the almost black and definite drear in the back
of the bar—to find me like some jewel set in this strange light—while she slides a stool away from the bar. I feel it coming, so I finally take the Coke to my mouth with my right hand as she tugs at the stool backrest. The stool feet bark against the floor. Her eyes trace along the adjoining wall beer neons and then find me. I drum the fingertips of my left hand on the table and twist my wrist, as if I’m twisting my wrist because it’s doing something to help tap my fingers. Little shimmers spark off my watch, that’s what I want. Her eyes squint and I take the glass from my mouth and push it in the air towards her.

The bartender slides a Gin and Club Soda, with lime, in front of her. She doesn’t sit; she’s halfway between a trying-to-be-sexy pose and a move that would send her bubbly ass up on the stool. (One boot on the old-time brass footrest that runs along the bottom of the bar.) She examines her drink without touching it: deciding whether she should approach me or not. When the bartender happens to look my way, I wave big and then point down at the top of my head. He gives a nod. The toads at the bar have tensed up in their stools, like someone’s passed smelling salts in front of them.

She looks from her drink, back to me, but doesn’t smile. The bartender points in my direction when she pushes two fingers between her flesh and bra and comes out with a sweaty bill. She fits the bill back under her bra. I slide over on the seat maybe two inches, just a little off center—my right hip finds a sliver of cold vinyl—and she pushes the stool into the bar and snatches her purse and drink. She sucks on the long straw as she walks towards me and works her hips more than she did when she first entered. Her boots drop with hollow knocks on the wood floor.

“Can I sit?” She says, coarsely, easing into the booth.
“Of course,” I say. “Did the bartender take care of your drink?”

“Yeah,” she says, and takes a pack of cigarettes from her purse and tosses them on the table. “What’s your name?”

Her makeup is crude, clown like; her eyebrows look like a child’s drawn them on, and they’ve been drawn on for a while as they’re faded on the ends.

“Beautiful women oughtn’t pay for their drinks,” I say. “Michael Ray Thurman.”

I extend my hand to her, as if I’m offering a baby bird. She awkwardly places her swollen hand inside mine. I lean in and tighten a grip so her wrist naturally wants to bend down. I kiss above her knuckles. “Mary,” she says. “Ellison.”

“The Virgin Mary,” I say, and she takes her hand from mine.

What sounds like empty vitamin bottles knock around in her purse as she plunks it on the seat between us and starts mixing her hand around in there. She says, “Hardly,” and finally pulls out a fuchsia lighter that reads, *Bitch!* She whips a cigarette from the pack and lights it.

“What you drinkin’?” she says. I push the ashtray from the middle of the table close to her and she immediately strikes it with her cigarette.

“Jack and Coke,” I say. I want her to think I don’t mind getting a little loose.

It takes a great amount of leaning for her to cross her legs. She holds the edge of the table for support. “What do you do?” she asks. Her words come out in smoke.

“Retired Astronaut,” I say, and look nostalgically at the ceiling. I drop my eyes back to her. “And you?”
“I do a little of this and that,” she says, and smothers her cigarette with itself in the ashtray. “What kind of watch is that?”

I expected her to ask something about NASA, or possibly retirement, I’ve got answers planned out for those questions; I almost start one of my stories about getting in a fist fight with a cosmonaut at the International Space Station, but I say, “Excuse me?” and take a drink of my Coke and then wince a little.

She points at my Rolex, “It’s a nice watch,” she says. “What kind is it?”

I pinch the clasp on the underside of my wrist and it snaps free. The face shifts to the lowest point. I take it off and set in on the table in front of her. The watch is a fake, but it’s got a four-hundred and eighty dollars’ worth of genuine Rolex components on it. People who think they know what to look for in a fake Rolex just look at the back plate, and make sure the magnifier on the crystal face actually magnifies the date. They check to make sure the second hand sweeps, but everyone knows that. This second hand sweeps.

She looks it over for a few seconds. “It’s real,” she says, and snaps the closures shut on her wrist. It’s far too small: so tight on her wrist, her hand goes red and veiny. She pretends to check the time. “Very nice.”

“That’s good to know, considering it cost me twenty grand,” I say. “How do you spot a fake?”

“Twenty?” she says, and checks the time again. “That’s about right.”
She goes on to show me how the little magnified square on the face magnifies the date as it should, and she flicks her short serrated fingernail on one of the sides and says that sounds like a Rolex. She moves to take it off.

“That looks great on you,” I say. “Why don’t you keep it?”

“Serious?” she says, and traps the watch against her wrist with the other hand. Now that it’s hers, she’s protecting it.

I figure, one way or another that watch is coming back to me.

“I’ve been meaning to get a new one, anyway.”

She passes her purse over her lap, places it on the seat on the other side and scoots right next to me. Her lipstick is gummy on my cheek when she kisses it. “Thank you,” she says into my ear, using more air than sound, and then licks my earlobe. Her hand finds its way to my upper thigh. I start to sweat out anxiety and disgust.

“I have to be honest with you,” I say. “I’m looking for what some might think is an unconventional relationship.”

“And what kind of relationship is that?” She says, and smiles. She’s close enough that I can see she’s got a black line of decay all the way across her upper gum line.

“I’m getting to be an old man, but I very much enjoy the company of beautiful, young women, such as yourself.” She keeps the smile but covers the decay with her lip—I must be staring—and squeezes my thigh. “I understand that you may not be physically attracted to older men, but it may be possible for me to compensate you for your time. I’m quite wealthy.”

She gets her lips back in my ear and says, “Anything you want, daddy.”
She’s feels sorry for me, Mary does. I’ll be her sugar daddy, now, she thinks. She’s thinking I’m just an old pervert who has to pay to screw things like her. I need to pay to have anyone around me to make me feel better about myself, or make me forget I’m getting old, or that I’m already old. She has no idea she’ll spend the rest of her life in the bunker.

Mary decides on our—Leona and I’s—house, so I don’t have to do any convincing to complete that step of the operation. She’s got her kids back at her place, anyway, she says. I’ve got a plan for the kids too. Once she figures out I’m not letting her go, she’ll be willing to give me her address so I can make an anonymous call to the police and have her children put in foster care. Foster care, which is exactly where they belong. There they’ll have a chance to become upstanding members of society.

She says, “I need to use the bathroom, first,” slips out of the booth and disappears through a doorway that leads to the unisex bathroom in the back of Bob’s.

I slide her purse over next to me on the seat and dig my hand into it. A sheathed Bowie knife. Pepper spray. That’s it for weapons. I take the two items from her purse and jam them between the back and bottom cushions of the booth. They fall through and hit the floor behind me, the knife with a dead thud and the pepper spray a bright tink. The bartender looks up and I decide I’ll square-up on the tab.

The two men are still at the bar, still holding conversation.

“Why does anyone accomplish anything?” one of the men says. The other man, with the hair lip, goes to say something, but the first one finishes, “Because we’re all going to die.”
As a broad concept, I don’t disagree, so there’s no reason for me to comment even if I were the sort of person to offer comments, but I’m not.

The hair lip says, “I think that’s right.”

The bartender punches register keys like a little boy at a piano.

“What do you think, friend?” the first one asks me and they both spin on their stools to face me.

“You’re close,” I say. “Except those who think the Apocalypse is near.” There’s been a lot of this Apocalypse talk on the History channel, lately. I’m not passionate about the subject, I just had to say something and that’s what came out.

The hair lip looks like he’s thinking. The first guy lifts his chin to me. He says, “You’re saying, why would they accomplish anything if they think the world is coming to an end?”

The hair lip looks at his beer and quickly and softly says, “Interesting.”

I feel Mary’s mitt slither gently around my side. She squeezes and lays her head on my shoulder.

“Don’t let these old farts fill you full of shit,” she says.

The two men groan, spin, and shift their elbows back on the bar.

“Let’s go daddy,” she says.

VI

I drove the baby blue Cadillac I bought Leona for her fortieth birthday: the only car I own. It’s been taken care of, but the salt from these streets has bubbled the paint behind the wheel wells.
Mary has kind of an angry face, or nervous. I tell her if I’d known I was taking home such a beautiful young lady, I’d have driven my new car. A forced smile breaks through her expression, but some sort of uneasiness still shows in her eyes. I suspect maybe she’s just nervous about the sex.

The engine cranks over and comes to life. Mary slips her hand again up into my thigh and then on to my stick. I’m not hard. I haven’t been hard since that night at Tilly’s apartment.

“You’ll have to do some work to help me out,” I say. “Once we get home.”

Mary lifts her dress bottom.

Knuckles rap against my window. The two men from the bar stand right outside, in the unlit parking lot, with their fists in their coat pockets. I roll down the window. The men pull their fists out; their silver brass knuckles shimmer even though it’s dark.

“Listen to the lady,” the man with the regular lip says.

I look back to Mary and see an empty gun holster strapped to her leg right up by her underpants. Then I see she’s got a pistol pointed at my ear. Her face looks like she’s trying to scare me with it. I look through the windshield and put my hands on the wheel.

“Shut it off,” she says, and presses the tip of the gun barrel into my temple.

I don’t say anything; I just reach down and turn the ignition back. It’s quiet, but I can see cars flashing in gaps between the buildings a block ahead. The two men have huddled right up to my window, obstructing anyone’s view into this side of the car, though it’s dark enough they don’t need to.

“Take out your wallet,” Mary says.
I say, “Okay, but there’s nothing in there.” I’ve got to rip on the wallet to get it out of my trousers. Mary tells me to hand it to the closest man; the regular man. He goes through it, and the man with the hair lip shakes his brass knuckles close to my eyes.

“No cash,” the regular man says. “No credit cards.”

My hands grip sweat on the wheel.

“You old fucking liar,” Mary shouts. She presses the gun hard into my temple and I can see in my peripheral vision she’s showing her teeth like a mad dog.

Someone pops their bubblegum. My eyes go fuzzy. I feel what I think is an electrical shock and smell fireworks. A trumpet plays the highest and loudest note. I try to move, but can’t. It feels like I’m made of steel.

From what sounds like a great distance, one of the men’s words cut through the trumpet, “What you do that for?”

“Fucking, accident!”

“Quit fucking with his cufflinks. We gotta go.”

“Old horny toad mother fucker!” Mary shouts, and those words are soft and dull in my ear. The trumpet fades and then is as far away as the men and Mary’s fleeing footsteps. My vision blurs further, to a grey, and then it’s silent and so black the black looks wet. I breathe easily and feel like a whiff of smoke. I could bow my arms and legs like shoelaces, if I wanted.

A light comes on. I see Leona standing on a sea, the color blue even more exciting than the most unusual pieces of the Caribbean; bone white beaches and high, swollen palm trees behind her. The sun so bright she has to squint and shade her eyes with a hand,
though she’s wearing a bucket hat. She waves big at me with one arm passing back and forth above her head, and then she goes even harder with both arms. She jumps up and down on the water, her arms going as big as they can: from her sides, to crossing above her head. She has my attention, but there’s nothing I can do. I’d like to say, “I see you, but I don’t know how to make it where you are,” but my voice doesn’t work anymore. I drift, trying to tell her everything I wanted to say before she left. She stops waving and her image is cut like the final frame of a motion picture.
The Kind Character

“Marlon Brando. When he was young,” the ladies say when they finally decide how I look so familiar. I couldn’t tell you if they’re right or wrong. I’ve only seen him in Superman.

A dozen Sundays ago Jaycee showed up at my front door, fingering her naval ring. She’d just moved in across the street and was looking to borrow the weed whacker she’d seen me edge the curb with earlier that day. (With my shit, I’m a little particular; I don’t like people touching it, so,) I took the thing over to her place and whacked the Tall Fescue her realtor had let grow up against the foundation and fence line. Since then, I’ve become Jaycee’s Sunday labor. After the third consecutive Sunday spent there, I stopped asking if she needed me to come again next week and just started showing up around noon.

I do all her yard work: spread mulch and fertilizer, lay sod, trim all things in need of a trim, those kinds of things; plant shit. I’ve also changed light bulbs and flat tires. Hosed out her gutters. I relit her pilot light when she smelled gas. Pieced together miscellaneous furniture from IKEA, etc. …But I’m not being nice. I’m not a good neighbor. This isn’t charity. I just want to fuck her.

I can’t tell you the number of women I’ve had sex with. It has to be over a hundred. And all of them had great bodies, but none compare to Jaycee’s. Her ass is the finest I can recall and—being a Personal Trainer for over ten years—I’ve seen thousands,
in as many positions. Her tits rank right up there, too, not too big, but swollen, natural.
You can tell there’re no implants because the natural ones weigh down on bra cups, the straps dig in to her shoulders next to the bone, leave marks. I’ve had fake and I can have fake whenever I want. Not interested. Jaycee’s taller than me and I’m almost six foot.

The face is Jaycee’s problem. It’s the reason she could never model anything but ski-masks and backpacks. The face is mangled—structure where there shouldn’t be bone, depressions where there should. It’s peppered with scars the size of buckshot. A sideshow from the chin up. You could see her nude in the nude magazine of your choice, if not for that face. The face you have to speak of separate from “her,” because it is so far removed from Jaycee’s body. Less perfect bodies are in lingerie ads; more alluring faces are in mug shots of methamphetamine addicts. The face is working the night shift at a truck stop diner in Missoula, while her body is the hottest sunbathing Spring Break in Cancun.

Jaycee strips nights at Titsburg’s. She says the owner of the joint is originally from Pittsburg; it’s a play on words, she says. I’ve never seen her naked, though I wait with binoculars two steps back from my bedroom window when she returns home from work until her bedroom light clicks off, and for the yard work and odd jobs I do she says some night I should stop by the club and, with a wink, she says, she’ll give me a free lap dance. If I were to take her offer, she’d put me down on level with those old cheapskate perverts and fat commission-only salesmen. I’d lose any shot I’ve got at having her. If she spots me at Titsburg’s, the jig’s up, period.

I tell her it would just be too weird to see her naked and I’m happy to do the work, at no cost to her. I tell her I believe in karma. I tell her it feels good to be selfless. Every
so often I slip-up, get too direct with her, and say, “I’m sure you’ll find a way to repay me,” and then I’ve got to backtrack and play it off as a joke. She’s a stripper, yes, but she doesn’t bite on the normal pick-up bait that’s worked for me in the past.

I’ve already been through my morning routine. There’re eight two-ton jacks in my basement. They support the main level floor. The living room and kitchen would sag, feel like you’re walking in mud, without them. But the jacks are old, the hydraulics temperamental. Every morning I’ve got to give each of them a couple pumps to raise them back up to level. After the jacks, I kick-on the sump-pump, which draws water off the floor drain, sends it through a hose out the little basement window and drains into my Rose garden. The reason for the standing water is, this close to the Missouri river, the water table’s only nine feet down. And, even though I’ve caulked the foundation walls, they leak. If it’s rained, or snowed, I’d have to drain the pots strategically placed around the house.

After my morning maintenance I eat three-quarters cup of oats, knock-out two hundred push-ups and an equal amount of crunches, fifty pull-ups, take a five mile run and then bath. I’ve got to heat the bath water in a stock pot on the stove, because the hot water heater’s out. Been out for over a year.

I’m on Jaycee’s front porch in my black Adidas wind suit and sneakers, ready to get started. Last week the leaves were almost done falling in her backyard, so I told her this week I’d concentrate on raking and bagging.
She hides mostly behind the door as she answers my knock. In her red silk robe, a fist at her throat bunching the collar shut. She’s got almost all of her make-up still on from last night, so her face is just tolerable. Still, I can’t make eye contact. I smile and she opens the door wider and says, “Hello, Mr. Work Man.” It looks like her teeth have been fixed, or maybe whitened, maybe both. Maybe neither, as I’m just catching them in my peripheral as I pass into the house.

The kitchen is lit only by the dull vent light, above the stove, and the sunlight desperate to break through the half wall of blinds covering the patio door. The smell of incense and fried rice are caught in the air, but there’s no smoke and the garbage can is empty. I open the patio blinds and the kitchen turns white. Jaycee gets mole eyes and asks if I want a cup of coffee. I don’t. If she doesn’t have one this instant she’s just going to die. I tell her I’m trying to cut down on caffeine. She says she’d die without her caffeine.

She says, “That’s good, though, caffeine is bad for the skin.” Jaycee knows that, and I know Tribulus root boosts your testosterone.

“Doesn’t seem to be affecting you,” I say, and swing my eyes to the floor. She lays her hand on my Deltoid and playfully tells me to shut up. She waits a few seconds, and then gently pushes her hand off the muscle. The tips of her fingernails come off last. This is the first physical contact we’ve made; this is the cue I’ve been waiting for. Normally, at this point, I’d shift my character from nice guy to arrogant asshole, because, it’s true, nice guys never get laid. Nice guys make friends. Typically, I’d start at her back—run my fingers from her neck to her waistline and back up. Then, maybe, casually slip a hand onto her ass or around to a thigh. If the signal were strong enough, I might
press my dick against her and just barely touch my top lip under her ear... But this “nice
guy” thing seems to be working. So, I think I’ll mix it up. I’m going to ride out this kind
character as long as I can.

I look out the patio door and say, “Better get started.”

Jaycee pours coffee into a mug that sits on the counter in front of a row of plastic
bottles: Fish oil, Flax seed, Glucosamine, Vitamins D, B (1-17), A, E, there’s more. I’ve
recommended them. “You’re really excited to get to it this morning,” she says, and
braces a hand on her hip as she lifts her coffee to the face.

I check my watch and say, “I don’t mean to be rude.”

She pulls the mug from her lips. She says, “I didn’t realize it was getting late.”

I slide open the patio door. “Lots of work to do.” I smile, and she decides to
follow me out with her steaming mug leading the way.

A half dozen grey Oaks—spread above, like a web—have coated the backyard
with their leathery leaves. It’s warm for this time of year and with the leaves no longer
blocking the sun it feels warmer than the thermometer reads. A robin shakes water from
its wings in a stone birdbath at the center of the backyard.

“Oh, Darren,” Jaycee says. “I had no idea there was so many.”

I point up at the stripped Oak branches and charmingly explain to her what
happens to deciduous trees this time of year. She laughs. I say, “Hence, the name of the
season.”

She says, “Fall.”
I take off my wind jacket and toss it on the top of the fence. My t-shirt sleeves are cut off. I fully flex my arm muscles as I reach for the rake. The rake’s not the efficient kind that’s fanned out with hooked bristles; it’s the kind with just a little metal comb at the end: eight or ten tines. Eight or ten times the work.

“Is anything the matter?” I say.

“No,” she says. “It’s just this thing.”

“I can help…”

“It’s nothing.”

“…If anything’s wrong.”

I begin in the closest corner of the yard. Jaycee stands off to the side. She’s got one foot in front of the other—on a tight rope—a tan, muscular leg, glassy and seemingly endless, on display between the bottom halves of her robe.

She keeps starting small talk during each of my noisy rake strokes. After every drag through the knotted grass, I stop, lean on the rake, have her repeat the question, and answer. It’s taken me ten minutes to rake clean five feet of grass. I’ll never get this shit done with her talking. I remember I’m not here to rake leaves. I say, “These leaves will wait another week.”

They probably shouldn’t.

“They won’t kill the grass?” she asks.

Maybe.

“Not in a week,” I say. “We could just relax and chat today if you want.”

She takes a long drink of coffee, thinking.
“I can definitely finish this today,” I say, taking a look across yard.

“No, I didn’t mean that,” she says, and her face seems to brighten and I realize I’ve been staring at her face during this conversation and hadn’t even noticed. “Do you do Halloween?”

I lie and say, “Wouldn’t miss it.” Truth is, I haven’t dressed up for Halloween since I was a kid and hated it even then.

“I suppose you already have plans for tonight?” she says.

I guess that means today’s Halloween. I don’t pay attention to those things, anymore.

“Not this year,” I say.

She smells her coffee steam and says, “Would you like to go to a party?”

I don’t want her to think I’m deciding between yes and no, but I am, so I smile big for a few seconds. This gives me the option to go either way with my response.

“Yes, of course,” I say. “That would be great.”

She says, “Good, because I’ve already got you a costume.”

“You bought it specifically for me?” I say. I’d never imagined a circumstance where I’m flattered by Jaycee, but it’s happened.

“Just for you,” she says and motions for me to follow her back into the house. I tip the rake against the fence and snatch my wind jacket.

Jaycee wants to show me her costume, first, so she seats me at the little two-person table in the kitchen. There’re salt and pepper frogs on it. I test them, the crouching
one is pepper, and the one launching off the table is salt. Both of them have holes in their heads.

Music turns on down the hallway where Jaycee’s bedroom is. A minute later she enters the kitchen in a devil costume. The face is covered by a black devil mask with red horns and fangs and a pink forked tongue sticking out. On Jaycee’s body is what looks like a black one piece bathing suit, but its cut lower down the front and high over her hips. A plastic pitchfork over her shoulder like a soldier’s rifle. Her body is stunning.

“Scary,” I say, and the devil mask makes her Muah Ha Ha laugh sound distant.

The only part of the face I can see is her eyes and the black eye liner around them. Her eyes the most beautiful color blue I’ve seen. The illusion of blue you get in an oily mud puddle, that’s the blue.

“You wear colored contacts?”

“No way,” she says. “These are all me.” She leans in with her hands behind her back, our eyes are maybe six inches apart. “Look.” The forked tongue almost touches my lips.

“Oh, yeah,” I say, and look away, but what I want is to keep looking into Jaycee’s eyes.

She jumps back and spins the pitchfork over her head like a Samurai. She springs into the air with a twist and lands with her legs spread. The pitchfork prongs point at me. “Now you try yours on,” she says, and relaxes. “It’s in the bathroom.”
I’m wearing the stupid fucking thing: a supposedly celestial full-length white tunic, completed by a jumbo pipe cleaner halo wired from the back above my head. It’s fine, I guess, I’ll go with it, but I’m not quite sure what my motivation is at this point. I’ll go to the Halloween party with her if that’s what she wants. Or maybe I should just back out now. Fake an illness. Fake anything. But no, let’s see where this goes. I’m almost certain if I come out in my angel costume and make a pass at her, she’ll go for it. I mean, things are looking that way. And she’s got the mask on, so I wouldn’t have to deal with the face, which is a solution to the problem that’s keeps me up many nights after Jaycee’s bedroom light turns off. But I’m enjoying my time with her. And those eyes. I want to look at her face, or I don’t know what I want.

The devil mask is pulled to the top of Jaycee’s head. She’s hunched over into the refrigerator, digging way back by the baking soda, her perfect ass shifting this way and that.

I feel I’m a kid, again. Not because I’m dressed up for Halloween, but because I’m trying on this ridiculous thing. Like Christmas’ spent at my grandparents in Michigan, when I had to do the same with their Michigan presents. I wait behind the refrigerator door with my shoulders slumped.

Jaycee pops out of the refrigerator with jug of Margarita mix and says, “Look at you!” I think I’m blushing. I say, “Yeah, yeah.” She turns around to the counter and pulls the blender out from its spot, next to the coffee maker, underneath the cupboards. She
unwraps the electrical cord from around the base. “If you don’t like it,” she says, and plugs in the blender. “You don’t have to go.”

“I do like it,” I say. “I just wish I looked half as good as you do in yours.”

She turns back at me with a smile, pokes out her bare hip and slaps it. I don’t look at the hand on her hip. “Good,” she says, and then slides out a bottle of clear Tequila from the back of one of the cupboards. “You like Margaritas?”

“I don’t really drink.”

She spins the lid off the Tequila bottle and it races in circles on the counter.

“One or two won’t kill you,” she says, as the Tequila glugs through the hole in the top of the blender. I tell her she’s probably right.

One or two Margarita’s turns into four or five blenders full of the stuff, and we don’t make the party. Jaycee out drinks me nearly two to one. We’ve been roaming around different rooms in the house, listening to music play through the plastic beads in her bedroom doorway. Each new room we move to, Jaycee points out something I need to take a look at. Books, photos she’s taken, souvenirs from vacations and daytrips. We talk about being from different places and not really knowing how we ended up in Nebraska. We talk about how nice it would be to live closer to the equator. She tells me the plan is to quit her job in five years and start her own flower shop. Flower Power. I tell her a similar story, but mine’s a Sporting Goods store. She says she’ll work on a name for it. Says, too, she roots for my Yankees and Jets.
We laugh at a story Jaycee tells, about how funny her friend’s face looked when she stubbed her toe on the catwalk after slipping down off the stripper pole. The face her friend made, like the one Bruce Lee sometimes pulls when he’s fighting in old Bruce Lee movies.

“You know, like, he’s really surprised, that, he’s sucking a lemon,” she says. She can barely get it out; it’s in fragments between laughter and inhales. She calms herself just long enough to do the face. I can only nod, because I’m deep in one of those laughs that make your stomach and jaw hurt.

We’re back in the kitchen. Plastic cups with Disney characters laminated on their sides are lined up over the entire length of the countertop. She points to each one, introduces them by name and where they’re from. “This is Cinderella. I got her at a gas station in Tulsa.” It’s charming.

She stops herself before introducing the second dwarf and points at me frantically. “That’s who you look like!”

“Marlon Brando,” I say, with certainty.

“Jor-El from Superman?”

“Yeah, but when he was young.” I smile how I imagine a young Jor-El would smile.

Jaycee picks up a cup and says, “Sleepy! You look just like Sleepy!”

“Give me that,” I say, and playfully snatch the cup from her. I examine the dwarf. “With those stupid eyes?”
“Yep.”

“And that huge nose?”

“Uh, huh.”

I hand her the cup back and say, “I’ve got more than one tooth, though.”

She laughs and says, “That you do.”

Our progression of rooms stalls in the storage room. In the far corner, eight cardboard beer boxes are stacked on top of each other. Jaycee says, “I’d like to show you something,” and carefully deconstructs the tower of boxes. I try to help her, but she won’t accept. When she gets to the bottom box she says, “It’s in here.”

She’s strong enough to snap the packing tape pressed down over the top of the box. She unfolds the box top flaps and pulls out a framed eight by ten. The red lights of an ambulance and the ambulance’s siren pass outside the storage room window. She says, “Look,” and recklessly forces the photo into my hands. A beautiful blonde, probably in her early thirties, standing next to a tall man with dark hair and arms. You can’t see his face. It’s been erased. Been scratched down to white with the point of a nail or thumb tack. In front of the man and woman, a girl of maybe ten sits in a white chair. The little girl smiles as big as she can, showing off her braces and dimples. Her face is as cute and innocent as they come. The big blonde curls of her hair play around her face and fall just past her ears. Shirley Temple wearing the fashionable geometric prints of the early 90’s. The little girl must be Jaycee. I act dumb rather than asking questions.

I say, “Good looking family,” and try to give the photo back.
Jaycee refuses to reach for it. She says, “That’s me.”

I bring it back quickly, take another look and teasingly drag out the word, “No.” I hold the frame down at arm’s length, so Jaycee’s face is beside the picture. The blue eyes match up. “Really?”

“Really,” she says, and takes the picture. She looks at it again.

I say, “You were very beautiful.”

“Were?” she says, and slams the photo back in the box.

I touch her shoulder and say, “You know what I mean.” Jaycee’s eyes swell and the whites go pink. I say, “Are you okay?”

Her voice is so nasal, she almost sounds deaf. She says, “Why don’t you ask what happened to my face?”

I pull her up from her knees and squeeze her in a hug. I say, “You’re perfect the way you are,” and I mean it. She’s beautiful. A beautiful person. She holds me tight around the ribs, and buries her face into the side of my neck for what seems like a couple minutes.

She releases, takes my hand and says, “Come with me.”

She leads me to her bedroom, looking back at me and smiling.

She pulls back the curtain of plastic beads that hang in her doorway, so I can duck in. Part of this room is familiar. The stereo and beanbag chair, the stuffed pink giraffe, the very edge of her dresser where a marionette sits with his feet hanging over the side, the mobile of bright paper birds that never move: things that show in my binoculars from the angle out my bedroom.
Jaycee sits on the bed and I go to the window. My shadow is on her front lawn. I look across the street and my bedroom is black. The curtains are drawn on the main level. They mellow the light from my lamp in the living room.

“Sometimes…” Jaycee says. “God, I can’t say that.”

“What?” I say, still looking at my house; wondering how much of my life I’ve wasted trying to make it appear perfect. Perfect to people I’ll never know. The white vinyl siding I hose down every Saturday, and touch-up with factory matching paint. The lawn so lush I don’t step on it. Two neatly pruned Ash trees placed perfectly symmetrical to the front sidewalk. I’ve spray painted the shingles facing the street jet black. The house is on its last leg, falling apart, though it looks flawless and beautiful. The kind of money I need to fix it will never come.

“Sometimes,” Jaycee says, gets off the bed and stands next to me. “At night.”

She runs her fingernails up and down my back. She says, like reading me a bedtime story, “When I get home from work. I’ll just stand here in the dark, and stare at your window, and pray your light comes on. Just so I might be able to see you before Sunday.”

I should tell her the kind of person I really am.
Depressed by the Inevitability of Fuel Exhaustion

The Sun wakes in NYC and falls asleep somewhere over the Pacific.

Tonight, though, she isn’t drowsy. The Moon is at work, so she doesn’t call.

Her hair and makeup give her a rough and ready look; she’s working on a Martini.

The contact on her cellphone reads, Asshole. She’s tried erasing his number a hundred million times, but couldn’t.

Her phone dials and she clicks her nails on the kitchen counter granite.

“Yeah,” The Planet Mercury answers his phone, in boxer-briefs, spraying deodorant at his pits.

The Sun does a bad impersonation of him.

“What,” he says, and stops spraying. “What?”

“It’s me,” she says.

“Hey you, how many years it been, million, million and a half?”

“Take me out,” she says.

They get away from the neighborhood because The Sun is bored of suburbs.

There’s a place not too far with fine Japanese and Karaoke. They decide on a bar famous for Hot Saki Bombs.

The Sun has a dozen.

“You’re an asshole,” she says to The Planet Mercury. “Know that?”
The Planet Mercury looks like Elvis did back when he was Elvis Presley. There’s a little red Kimono past the neon arabesques and he imagines her legs could double-wrap where his spine bows in. He reaches over his head to comb back the hair above his ears.

“I heard you hooked up with Saturn,” he says, still combing. “Is it true about Ringers?”

“Shut up,” The Sun says.

“They’re big, right?”

She gives him a deserving look, holds, and elongates the words, fuck and you.

The Planet Mercury whispers inside the Kimono’s ear. His hand travels a lubricious parsec from her knee to left breast. She caws and swipes at it.

A sharp Polo man sings Karaoke to The Police’s, Every Breath You Take, and The Sun tries tempting him with her tongue and then hopelessly flashes a whole breast. The Polo man sees her but continues singing, “Airy shtae you tae. Airy mu you mae,” uninterested.

Oh, Asian girls of the night: The Sun cannot compare.

The Planet Mercury settles on stability.

The Sun has been taken to the dark side of drunk. Black night speeds past and sends her hair in flaps out the car window. The Planet Mercury thinks she may be opening her mouth to vomit, but she’s opening her mouth to get down to what really makes her sick. She says, “I’m going to get fat and die.” She knows when she uses up her
Hydrogen she will greatly multiply in size, consuming everyone around her before she finally exhausts her backup fuel reserves and dies.

“Jesus,” he says. “You just can’t think about shit like that.”

“It’s true, though.”

“In like five billion years,” he says. “Plus, we’ve all got to die.”

“But you don’t have to take everyone with you.”

“I know,” he says, and fits his fingers between hers.

“Will you stay the night?” she asks, and drops her head on his shoulder. “Morning feels like so far away.”
Two Hicks

My girlfriend, her sister, her sister’s husband and I are all hanging out with these two hicks. I’m calling them hicks, because that’s what they’d like to be called. They take no offense to it at all—just the opposite. To them, the derogatory term is some sort of badge or rank they’ve achieved. In reality, these hicks live in brick two-stories, just across the street from my girlfriend’s sister and her husband, in a nice suburb of Dallas. These hicks are Accountants. They drive Japanese compacts and work in high rises downtown.

Why do they wear cowboy costumes? Because they don’t know they’re costumes. These hicks think they’re real cowboys, but they’re not, so they wear expensive cowboy hats and shiny cowboy boots and Wranglers with no dust or horse shit on them. They go to the trouble to starch their shirts. There’s a tall one and a short one. The short one’s fat.

The short fat one says, “My daughter likes to listen to that hip hop.”

“Oh yeah?” I say.

“I heard that shit the other day and I heard a cuss word on there and I said, ‘Oh fuck no,’” he shakes his head, “‘not in my house.’”

I nod for a while, and since his story is presumably over, I say, “Huh.” Great story you fucking moron.

“I took that mother fuckin’ cd disc out of the player and I erased it,” he says.

The tall one laughs so hard he has to slap his thigh to calm himself. “He says he erased the som’ bitch,” the tall one says.
“You erased it?” I say to the short fat one.

“I took that mother fuckin’ cd disc out of the player and I erased it,” he says.

“You put it in a computer and formatted the disc,” I say. “Or what?”

“Yep,” he says, adjusting his jeans to rest on his hips. “I formatted that som’ bitch.”

The tall one says the short fat one formatted the fuck out of it. His laugh makes the spring above the garage door ring out.

“Why didn’t you just snap it in two,” I say, “and throw it away?”

My girlfriend gives me that look she gives me when I’m drunk and being an asshole. We’ve had fights about this, “You shouldn’t be such a pompous fucking asshole,” she’s said. I’ve been trying to fix it.

The short fat one looks at my face like there’s something small on it that shouldn’t be there. I pinch my septum and draw a finger under my nose. He’s somehow trying to hurt me with his eyes. Someone starts talking about something else.

Three or four different conversations have been carried through to their climaxes and fizzled to sighs. The short fat one has contributed nothing to any of them. He’s been staring into his whiskey Coke like there’s tea leaves in there. It’s probably been an hour since he said the thing about his daughter’s hip hop cd.

“Hey,” he shouts at me. I act like I don’t hear him, but then the new conversation, that was loud, dies out, and he says again, “Hey.”

I look at him.
“I wanted her to keep it,” he says, pushing his chin at me.

The tall one stops laughing at something else that was said and says, “What?”

“My daughter,” the short fat one says to me.

“You wanted her to keep what?” the tall one says.

“I wanted her to keep that damn erased cd disc,” the short fat one says. He holds his hand out, eight or ten inches from his face, cupped towards him and focuses on his palm. “Just so she could look at that motherfucker, but know it don’t play.”

The tall one goes into laughter spasms and farts uncontrollably.

I don’t tell the short fat one I know he’d spent the previous hour trying to figure out why the person in his story went to the trouble to, “erase it,” when he could have just snapped the thing in two and threw it away.

Other things I don’t tell him: “Cowboys live out in the country, on ranches, and—I don’t know exactly what they do—but their work doesn’t include free vision and dental. Cowboys don’t have front loading washers. Cowboys wouldn’t know what you were talking about if you said, Green Initiative or FASAC. You, and your friend, are not cowboys.”

Instead, I say, “Y’all motherfuckin’ hicks is crazy.”

Later on we smoke pot at the tall one’s house and ride a mechanical bull in his basement. My girlfriend’s the only one who can stay on eight seconds.
The Man

An eighty-six year old man sits in his hazy, dream-like den. The den has no windows. The man’s chair appears to be absorbing him: the original white, now dark, with darker stains. Tall as a throne. The man thinks of himself as a tumor or barnacle. A parasite destroying the chair. He smokes non-filter kings and drinks Canadian Club: thinking at one time they might kill him, hoping now they might still. Between his thumb and forefinger the glass of whiskey is settled into its square depression on an armrest. The cigarette pinched by the knuckles of his first two fingers sends smoke up in spirals as he scratches his middle fingernail on the other armrest fabric.

The man has no name. He thinks he could’ve been Architect, or Doctor; he could’ve been Attorney, or Chairman; President of something, even, maybe; but he knows he could never be—what he has always wished and still wishes to be—Writer. Sixty-six years of writing fiction—short stories, to start, then novels, then long novels—with not a sentence published. His writing’s been set in the distant and near future; every place in between. Same with present and past. A multitude of characters. And one man; one woman; one child. Every point-of-view possible. Plot twist after goddamn plot twist. Extensive dialogue. Modern. Post-Modern. Experimental. Kids books. Even one for the Christians, and one opposing them.

In the 1950’s he studied under the best creative writing professor in America. The professor’s mantra was, “You’ve got to write, every day. And never give up.” The man still thinks the professor was right.
In the corner of his den are tall stacks of typed-up paper—over twenty thousand pages of garbage.

“For fuck,” he shouts to the frosted glass dome dimming two light bulbs in the ceiling. “How about the Apollonian/Dionysian novel?” For a second he expects an answer. He doesn’t get one when he expects it, nor after he’s realized the glass cannot respond, despite its illumination. He likes the fact that the glass cannot give him answers. He says to it, “You cocksucker.” He thinks his relationship with the glass is humorous, but doesn’t smile.

The man had a literary agent—twenty years. No excitement, no buzz. The agent died. The man hired a new agent who would surely outlive him. The agent has, but the agent doesn’t call.

With the tops of his toes, the man pulls his silk ottoman closer and sinks two dents in its pillowy top. The hem of his blue cotton robe reaches his ankles after he throws each side over the ridges of his translucent shins. He passes the whiskey from hand to hand in order to cover the ridges. A long slit opens up the robe past his piss pocked briefs to the four prominent tendons of his neck. Tendons that appear tight, but are actually under no contraction. His Adam’s Apple a buoy in the middle. The robe’s sash untied, lies about as it pleases.

Three walls all spine out books, all of which the man has read. They heckle and taunt. The fireplace is unlit on the fourth wall. He counts the cut pieces of Ash his wife stacked with patience next to the black poker and little matching broom. The poker and
broom dangle from a little stand that matches. Eleven. It’s July. He thinks about how badly he needs to piss, and, probably—once he does that—shit.

“Fuck,” he says to the wood, the long way, with a crescendo.

Hair that was once stone black and Dillinger—Dillinger is how the hip kittens described his hair when it was stone black—falls from a part down the middle past his sagging earlobes. Earlobes, which, at one time, were cinched-up against the cartilage. He’s always favored the middle part, but has given up on thinking it Dillinger. His gray hair appears copper and weighted on the ends. A month since his wife’s been through it with soap.

The lacquered mahogany door of his den creaks open and his wife’s little head pokes its way inside. The man throws his freshly empty whiskey glass at the head and the head recoils into the light of an adjoining room. The glass knocks against the door, but doesn’t break in two very different pieces until it hits the floor.

The man thinks he threw the glass at his live-in maid. He and his wife don’t have a maid. He and his wife have been married fifty-five years. She’s the daughter of a Textile tycoon. This house is hers. This… everything is hers. The man fucks his wife like he would a live-in maid—like it’s part of her chores—whenever he feels like it, and doesn’t think about her during, before or after. He thinks his wife died years ago. “Get me my pot,” he yells. “The big one!”

His wife speaks softly from behind the quarter-open door, “I heard you yelling.” “I’m yelling, ‘Get me my fucking pot.’”
The first two fingers on his right hand are a deep yellow, orange and brown; black in small circles where he’s let cigarettes wake him. He brings them to his lips and leaves the cigarette up there. He points at the wall. “And my typewriter,” he says.

The typewriter is kicked up between books, on a bottom shelf in the den, and the floor. It sits that way because that’s how it landed after the man threw it last night: how he has thrown it every night. How he will throw it tonight, and continue to throw it every following night until he passes out for over a day and is taken to the hospital. His wife replaces the ribbon in the typewriter and brings it to him. Everything’s bent on the machine, but it still writes.

The last week of his life he spends in the hospital, formulating his last words. He spends all his waking time and effort on this task, because he’s certain, after he dies, his writing will be released to the world and he’ll become madly famous. And everyone is curious what the last words of famous people are. He debates a couple final words he’s thought up and memorized. He decides he’ll go with this one: *As the black folds unroll to cover my eyes, I can see only the beauty that was my life.* But death comes to him more quickly than he imagined and he just says, “Ah.” The man’s wife, at his bedside, weeps as she writes, *Ah*, on a piece of paper. She writes because the man told her to be certain to write down his final words and send it out into the world with all his stories, novellas and novels. His wife finds his final word comforting—it feels like her muscles are melting. She becomes that relaxed.
The man’s wife abides by every word of his will. She makes fifty copies of the man’s entire collection of work: the accomplishments of his life. She sends them out to a list the man had made of fifty reputable publishers. With it she sends an eleven-hundred page autobiography of the man, which explains how he devoted his entire life to writing. She also sends, as the man’s final word. All of the publishers thank the writer’s wife for submitting his work, but none of them will publish a word of it. *It’s a waste of ink and paper*, one editor writes back.
What Dad Would Have Wanted

It’s a funeral reception, but there’s laughter, because—as people say—that’s what Dad would have wanted. I’m at the cousins and uncles table eating mints and watching mixed nuts roam my Styrofoam plate. Uncle Pete suggests the story of when Dad chopped up Frosty in the snowblower. Frosty was a good dog, always played right off your mood.

Alone, at the end of the table my kid sister tries her hand at origami: she folds, unfolds and refolds a mostly translucent napkin, and every so often picks at, or picks up and gnaws at, a Broasted chicken thigh.

Mother is in the corner—the main event. You’d think she’s Joe Frazier in Manila just before Eddie Futch threw in the towel. She’s looks beaten, but she’s capable of the next round; she wants to silence her corner; she wants to get out there and fight. But the people around her are saying things like, “Ray was such a good man. This must be a terrible time for you,” and “Things will never be the same.” It’s like they want her to breakdown in front of them: like they’re desperate to experience some confirmation of what must be happening in her head. Desperate to see the emotion they would expect to feel had their spouse died. Desperate for her to act how they imagine they would.

Fifteen years ago Mother beat Breast Cancer and then a recurrence when I was old enough to understand what that meant. These same people, now with her in the corner, were at the hospital waiting rooms with me and Dad, saying things like, “With
God’s grace she’ll pull through, and if she doesn’t, you know everything happens for a reason.”

It’s this everything happens for a reason business, I can’t take. One of them is saying it to my Mother right now and I want to turn around and say, “If by reason you mean cause, then yes, you’re right. My fist on your chin will be the reason you’ve got a broken fucking jaw.”

I was four and Dad thought it was me he’d somehow caught in the snowblower: a nearly impossible conclusion, though the snowblower did create a large cloud of white.

“Blood, bone and shit was flying out the chute,” Uncle Pete orates to the table, “and Ray went pale and started yelling ‘Tommy! Tommy!’ He busted through the front door with all his gear on.” Uncle Pete throws his arms out to his sides like a bodyguard holding back the crowd. “Guts and shit are all over him, ‘Tom! Where’s Tom?’ and I look out the window and little Tommy here is standing by a bigass pile of bloody snow. He’s holding that goddamn mangled dog collar in his hand like he’d just found his dick; bawling his eyes out. Remember that, Tom?” Uncle Pete’s laughing; everyone but me and the one going for a napkin boat are laughing.

I say, “I loved that dog,” and the table clears its throat. Goes quiet.

“I’m not saying it wasn’t a good dog, Tommy.”

“He was a good dog,” I say. “And Dad used to call you a cocksucker behind your back.”
In the same tone used in the corner behind me, he says, “I know this is a hard time for you.”

I throw a left hook and connect just below the corner of Uncle Pete’s mouth. His eyes go all white. He falls backward over his chair and hits the floor like a frozen fish.

Reputable