

Fall 2021

Issue 7.1

# Cowboy Jamboree Magazine



## “Buried Child”

*A Sam Shepard influenced, inspired, incited, infused issue.*

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Sam Shepard

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"Well, you gotta talk or you'll die."

*~Buried Child*

"It couldn't get worse, so I figured it'd just get better."

*~Curse of the Starving Class*

"Nobody can disappear."

*~True West*

"How do pictures become words? Or how do words become pictures? And how do they cause you to feel something? That's a miracle."

*~Rolling Thunder Logbook*

## **SAM SHEPARD, 1943-2017**



## THE MOTEL CHRONICLES LIFE

J.D. O'BRIEN

My copy of Sam Shepard's *Motel Chronicles* is the 1982 City Lights edition, a faded yellow paperback with a sepia-tone Sam on the cover, *Days of Heaven* handsome in his cowboy hat, standing tall beside a hearse and holding a glass bottle of Coca-Cola, the kind you have to import from Mexico now.

The book was on its last legs before it even got to me. A tag from an old pricing gun is gummed to the back cover and 1.00 is inscribed in faint pencil in the upper right corner of the first page, underneath a crossed-out number three. It's held up well over several cross-country jaunts. Survived being packed and unpacked and set down on the battered nightstands of some of the worst motel rooms in the United States of America. It's like an old Chevy that's still capable of turning over and going the distance. The brakes are shot but the cigarette lighter burns bright.

Reading *Motel Chronicles* on the road makes every walk to the ice machine cinematic. You're not some piker in a rundown room, you're a cowboy actor on the drift, meeting radically stoned women, drinking Ripple wine and puking into the wind, looking for that *Bad Day At Black Rock* and *Vera Cruz* double feature on every theatre marquee.

I always felt like I could run into Sam Shepard anywhere, especially in the middle of nowhere. But the closest I came to meeting him was when I was doing a profile of a writer who was an old friend of his. The writer had put me in contact with a few of his contemporaries but when I floated Sam's name, the writer quickly shook his head no.

"Sam's prickly," he said.

A second-hand anecdote I heard years later confirmed this. A guy I know met Sam on a movie set. The guy was having a cigarette near the trailers when Sam approached, telling him he really shouldn't smoke. "I know," the guy said. "It's terrible."

"No," Sam said, pointing a finger for emphasis. "You shouldn't smoke. You clearly don't know how to do it at all."

Prickly is right.

On a trip to Austin in 2013, I saw a piece in the *Chronicle* about an exhibit of Sam Shepard's papers and archives at the University of Texas in San Marcos. Three entries in *Motel Chronicles* were written in San Marcos. They are dated March 1979 and feature indelible images of a Holiday Inn swimming pool at midnight, a red shirt billowing like a flag in the wind of a motel air conditioner, Chicano maids in pink sweaters, a sad postcard from Muskogee.

I convinced my friend Leland to drive us the forty-some-miles from Austin to San Marcos and we spent an afternoon lost in Sam's handwritten notebooks and letters, photographs, marked-up scripts and drafts of plays, original versions of pieces that later appeared in *Motel Chronicles*.

The San Marcos exhibit was tied in with the book *Two Prospectors* and the documentary *Shepard & Dark*, both covering the longtime friendship and correspondence between Sam and the writer Johnny Dark, who took the photos featured in *Motel Chronicles*.

Near the beginning of *Shepard & Dark*, a craggy Sam sits poolside at a Vagabond Inn somewhere in California, typing on an ancient Olympia. Later, we overhear a phone call. A TV thing fell through, there's no money coming in, he needs to make some bread.

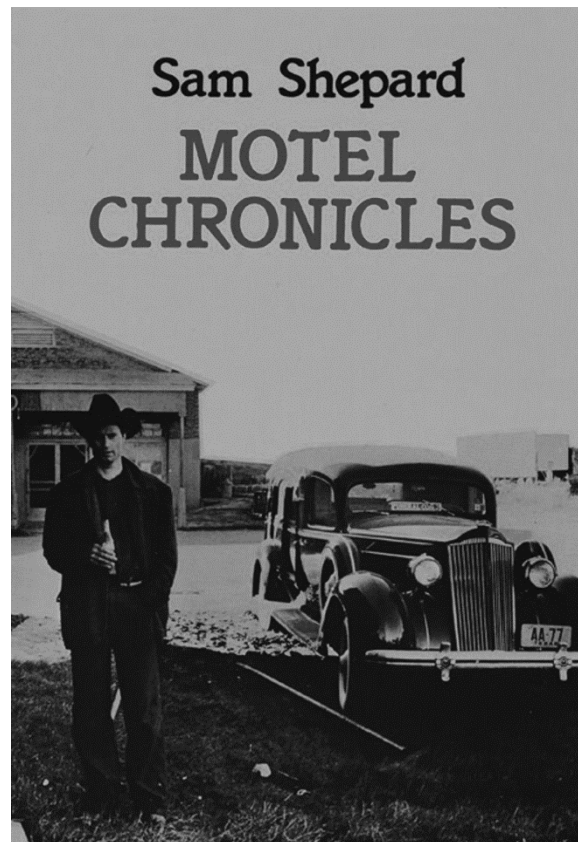
At this point, his relationship with Jessica Lange had fallen apart after nearly 30 years and Sam was lost on the road again. Forever peripatetic, forever rootless. He was driving around with his dog, staying up late, playing guitar and singing "I Wish I Was A Mole In The Ground" in bed, writing his last play, looking over years and years of letters and cursing himself for making the same mistakes again and again.

Until fairly recently, it wasn't outside the realm of possibility to run into Sam filling his tank at a Flying J truck stop or singing "Buckets of Rain" with Johnny Dark in a Denny's parking lot. Now that he's gone I still feel like I could encounter his roaming ghost out there, showing up on the horizon like Harry Dean in *Paris, Texas* before disappearing around the bend like train smoke.

There are other writers whose books have logged many highway miles with me over the years. But Sam always rides shotgun. Take him with you next time.

8/30/21

Kennebunk, ME



## TEN THOUSAND TONS OF MOONLIGHT FRANK REARDON

Last night I dreamed of Katie. She walked across the living room in panties and an over sized Twins T-shirt. She was holding a half a bottle of red wine in her hand. Her lips were red from the wine. I watched her bare feet sink into the rug. She said something to me, but I couldn't hear her. I asked, "baby, say again?" And she'd say her words over again, but I still couldn't hear her. She tilted back the bottle of wine and took a long pull then vanished.

I sat on the couch in the dark and thought about the dream until my alarm went off to get ready for work. I took a blood pressure pill, then swallowed two Warfarin tablets. A couple months earlier I was told by a doctor I had a blood clot in my lung. It was another challenge to add to my life. A life that was already full of challenges and fights. Forty-two years old, and I was still fighting things I couldn't see. It started when I rolled out of the womb. My fists were up in the air ready for a world that was going to put cigarettes out on my flesh. Legend has it, after my birth my Mother drank heavily. She had forgotten that I was even alive. Whiskey and men with mustaches were her thing, not helpless new borns

The days start the same everyday. One minute I'm dreaming of a life I want to live, then I find myself dressed in my black work pants sitting at Reggie's Doughnut Shop with a glazed and drinking a cup of black coffee. The people move in and out of the shop. They talk politics or what they did on a recent trip to a lake. I heard one man talk about a buck he'd taken down with a bow. Another woman wearing a summer dress told another woman in a summer dress about how she went home with a cowboy last night. I tried to hear more but she noticed I was listening and stopped. The only thing a person like me is allowed to do is chew and look out the big picture window. Look at the cars going back and forth, and dream of escaping to faraway places like Katie did. One day she was laying in the backyard with me with cold beer beside our heads. We looked up at the night sky and held hands. We traced the stars and laughed about nothing. The

perfect stillness and the perfect silence together underneath an upside down bowl of twinkling lights put there just for the two of us.

I'd taken up heavy nights of drinking since she left. I didn't care what I drank as long as I could forget her face for awhile. My boss, Darrel, let the scent of me smelling like a brewery slide for awhile until he was forced to say something. I stopped drinking on work nights and saved it all for my two nights off a week. It made it worse because I doubled up and drank until I woke up somewhere in my apartment with a hangover and unable to remember half the night. I also took up with a couple of bar flies named Sam and Sara. They let me self destruct in front of them. They let me fall down the long hole of myself until I couldn't find a way to scream anymore because they, too, were lost down the same hole. They found comfort in our mutual suffering.

Sam had long hair in a ponytail. He was a guitar player in a Journey cover band. His face was narrow and looked like it was caving in on itself. He wore the same Harley Davidson sweatshirt every time I saw him at the bar. Sara was half his height and her teeth were crooked and brown from abusing meth and alcohol for the last decade of her life. She wore wire framed glasses and smelled of laundry washed in a machine without soap. I liked them because I didn't have to talk about my life nor did they. They didn't judge me as long as I had a drink in my hand. But they had one thing I didn't have and that was love. No matter how drunk they were they made it a point to kiss. They made it a point to let their beating hearts collide in a mess of their own broken lives. No money, no food, living off nothing but each other.

It had become a series of the same thing everyday: dream of Katie, get up for work. Go get a doughnut and coffee. Drive to work. Take shit for eight hours doing the same thing with knives and saws. On work nights watch a movie I've seen fourteen times already. On my nights off drink so heavily I'd forget. I knew I needed change. I needed to find a special kind of heaven in a hand that had no money to buy the ticket to get there.

Last night Katie came to me in a dream again. She was sitting in a swivel chair in the middle of the living room. She didn't say anything to me, she only twirled in the chair. She looked at me and smiled the same smile when she used to call me "honey." I took my blood pressure pill and the two Warfarin tablets and decided to make a change. What, I didn't know, what had just hit me in the dream, was that I'd spent my whole life running from myself since my birth. The problem with running from myself was I'd wake up the next morning looking in the mirror again. Each glance into the cracked glass I was a little older, and I had a little less self-respect.

I was halfway down I-94 when I realized I didn't know where the fuck I was going. The prairie turned to buttes, and the sky was blue and open. Like a never ending ocean that stretched from Boston to Europe. I hadn't notified work nor did I let my doctor know I was leaving town. I grabbed my backpack and stuffed it with clothes, a bottle of Jack Daniels, medication, and a notebook to write in. I kept driving until I hit The Badlands. I thought I should camp in the National Park until I figured what to do next. The park didn't allow car sleeping so I drove to a Wal Mart twenty miles outside the park and bought a one man tent, sleeping bag, sandwich food, and a small throwaway cooler.

I set up camp and sat on the grass. The Badlands was a beautiful place. Small buttes everywhere that looked like twisting, giant, anthills. Canyons painted purple and gold along the sides of the clay. Miles of prairie wildlife: wild horses, buffalo, prairie dogs, coyotes. It was the most beautiful place I had seen in years. I felt a moment of peace being there. A moment that everything will be okay in the end. I opened my notebook and decided to write down what I saw and how I felt. Katie used to tell me that I had a "writer's heart." I never understood what that meant, she was the artist, I was only a butcher. I never felt anything romantic or artistic in my heart. But not long after she left I began to read the books she had left behind. I read Hemingway, Faulkner, O'Connor, Kerouac, Willy Vlautin, Denis Johnson, Carson McCullers, and Sam Shepard. At first I didn't understand half of what I was reading, but after awhile I started to feel things

within myself from the words. I started to remember my past and connect the dots. Maybe that is why I decided to live the same way everyday because to transcend hurt so bad. To explore the insides like the writers I was reading would rip my own truths into pieces. Going anywhere beyond what I knew day in and day out hurt too much. I wrote that down. I knew where ever she was she'd be proud of that thought.

I woke up in my tent to the sound of birds and in the distance I could smell bacon frying in a pan. I looked in my cooler and noticed the shitty jar of peanut butter and the shitty loaf of cheap white bread. The bacon smelled better than anything I had smelled in my life. I got dressed and stepped outside into the fresh air. I stretched a little and saw a man at the campsite across the road. I couldn't make out his face but I saw him flipping the bacon on the pan over a camping stove. On the other burner he had a coffee pot. I'd have to drive outside the park to get a cup of coffee. I wasn't prepared at all.

"Hey, Buddy," A voice rang out.

I looked around because I had never been anyone's buddy before.

"Yeah you, over here!" It was the bacon man calling me over.

I felt a slight chill and rubbed my arms and walked over to the man's campsite across the paved campground roads. As I approached the man's site I saw that he was older. He was a little heavy around the gut. He wore small glasses that looked as though they were part of his face and his hair was gray and slicked back. His pasty and flushed skin was covered by a plaid short sleeved shirt that was tucked into tan cargo shorts.

"Want to have some breakfast with me?" He asked.

I didn't know what to say to his offer but everything smelled so wonderful.

"I'm not asking you to storm the beaches of Normandy. Just some breakfast."

"I'd like that. Thank you." I told him.

"I'm Kenny," he said, sticking out to shake my hand.

I grabbed his hand and shook it. "I'm Chris."

"Well, nice to meet you, Chris," he said holding out a cup of hot coffee.

I sat down with the coffee mug at the park picnic table and enjoyed the steam running up my nose. For the first time in a long time I wasn't hungover. I had one gulp of Jack, but something about the clean air and dark silence of park that made me sleep like a baby. If I had dreamed of Katie I couldn't remember.

Kenny placed a paper plate with bacon and toast in front of me. Then he sat down with his coffee and bacon and sighed like a happy old grandfather surrounded by grandchildren at Christmas time.

"Beautiful morning, huh?" He asked.

I was ripping through a piece of bacon and nodded my head to agree with him. He wasn't wrong, it was a beautiful morning. Much more colorful and calm than the bloody knives and wrapping machines at work. Much more of an easy feeling than sitting with Sam and Sara at any of the dozen dives we frequented. I felt no sense of urgency to be anywhere. Every morning I woke up in my apartment I was in a rush to get somewhere, anywhere, fast. I never could understand why. I'd been living the same exact day, everyday.

"So where you from, Chris?"

"Now? Or originally?" I asked him.

He left some bacon grease run down his chin and thought about it for a moment.

"Originally."

"I grew up in Portland, Maine."

"Long ways from home."

"Yeah, that's a long story," I said to him, hoping he didn't want to hear about it.

"I got time," he said.

"Maybe another time."

He took a pull from his coffee and grunted in a way that I took as he agreed not to hear my story about how I started in Portland and ended up in Minot, North Dakota.

We finished our breakfast with small talk about the park and sat in silence. I noticed he had set up his camp next to a stream that ran through boulders and rocks that probably ran all the way to Montana. He invited me to spend a day fishing with

him, but I declined and let him know that I was planning on exploring the park.

"If I catch anything," He said, "fish for dinner tonight. If I don't I have a couple steaks in the ice chest. You are more than welcome to join me."

I thought of the shitty jar of peanut butter, "I'd be glad to," I told him.

"Seven?"

"Sure," I said. I started to turn away and thought I should bring something to the feast under the stars of the Badlands and mentioned to him, "I have a bottle of Jack in my tent I can bring it."

"I don't touch the stuff," He said. "I haven't in years, but you feel free to bring it for yourself."

I didn't want to be on the main drag through the park with all the people with cameras taking pictures of the bored herd of buffalo. Nor did I much care to leave the park and head into Medora to hang out with the locals. Instead I drove to a clearing with a hiking path. Ahead there were small clay buttes and bushes and trees as far as I could see, which for this part of the country is odd because there are not many trees. I grabbed my small pack with two water bottles and walked in.

I'm not an expert hiker by any means. I don't own the necessary equipment but I liked walking enough. And I was dry and not hung over. I headed up over a ridge and saw the Painted Canyon from afar. It was stunning. The valley of rocks and purples and yellows and greens that wrapped around the rock walls. I decided to go off the path. It wasn't long before I was lost like a child's plastic soldier hidden under ground.

I wandered for a good hour in the wrong direction, and I decided to take a seat on a patch of grass over looking a valley below me with a hundred foot drop. I thought to myself if I just moved a little to the left and I'd be a goner for sure. I heard nothing but the silence all around me. I drank from the water bottle, and continued to listen to nothingness. I was far from my rat-trap apartment. Far from the same thing day in and day out at work, at the doctor's, at the bar. I was free from it all and it felt right. I could feel my heart beating inside my rib cage and I had a strange feeling of being alive. But I knew damn well that with clarity and the feeling of being alive that



pain and depression would soon find their way into my body like an uninvited wraith.

It wasn't long after I watched a hawk soar above me that Katie popped into my head. Her body naked next to mine. Her legs laying across mine. How'd she put on Tom Waits and we'd both listen in the dark room. Sometimes we'd make love, other times we'd look at each other, or the ceiling above. If we had nothing else we had the ability to remain in a perfect silence together, knowing that our love was secure. The hawk came floating back and it dipped towards me, then back up into the air until I couldn't see it anymore.

I tried not to think about her anymore so I got up and started to walk in a direction I came from. I walked past trees I thought looked familiar. And I walked past more of the giant ant hills. I stopped at one and removed my pocket knife and carved 'Katie,' into the clay. She was always with my thoughts no matter much I tried to forget her. I never felt like I lived up to her. Why she choose me out of millions of other poor slob? Sometimes it felt like I was only put on the earth to both love her and miss her, which I did, all the time. It didn't matter the emotion: anger, love, grief, I couldn't get her out of my head. I wasn't sure I wanted to either.

The valley wasn't far off so I knew I was headed in the right direction. I saw a goofy family dressed alike taking stupid photos in front of a pile of ancient rocks. They looked thrilled and I couldn't understand why. Civilization wasn't far off because I could feel the rings of fear hitting me in the gut. I eventually hit the trail I strayed from earlier and I thanked a God I didn't believe in when I did. I decided to sit down for a breather and to drink some more water.

Not far ahead of me was a large rock formation surrounded by dark green pines and a small pond below it. It was a beautiful sight and I wanted to go further in for a better look, but I was too tired or too comfortable, I couldn't make up my mind which. The view was beautiful and I couldn't take my eyes off of it. All the great artists that ever lived that Katie told me about couldn't recreate what I was looking at. Water, crystal blue, and a perfect granite formation above it that looked like it had

never been touched by a human being before. I began to wonder if what I was looking at was even real. I wondered If I was even real. A question I often asked myself. I never could answer it, even when I plucked at my own skin I still wasn't sure.

That was the unique quality about Katie, she was real. In a world full of things to trick us and deceive us into thinking what reality truly was, she saw through it. And she didn't preach about it. She lived her life through and over the fence that divided us all. Most everything was music to her: poetry, a child's laughter, orgasms, the popping of a wine bottle, movies. She found the music that lived within the pure joy we are given but refuse to see. For most of us it's work, home, dinner, and sleep. Katie knew that too, but in between those everyday things was love and the scent of our humanness. From a distance she had a way of looking directly at your heart straight through your chest. She could feel if there was music in there, even lost music, or nothing. She didn't deal with those who refused the music inside their own hearts. Instead she'd open a beer and take my hand and we'd sit on a balcony. She'd talk about her adventures all over the world, and I'd sit and listen to her and be completely lost and amazed by the stories falling from her animated face.

I couldn't stop myself from crying like a child. A child whose mother left him at birth for a bottle of liquor and a fistful of pills. A child whose father's name was on a prison role call sheet for life. A child whose priest at his church took him into the basement and raped him repeatedly for three years. One day in my teens I decided that was not me. Assaults like that never happened to people like me. My friends parents became mine. I locked those memories away, until Katie unearthed them. And much like the music she lived in, she reached in with a gentle hand and removed my heart to take a good look at it. She rearranged it and wound it up like a clock until it started to glow red, then she put it back inside of my chest. A person can only fall deeply in love and never look back once someone does that to you.

It didn't take me too long to find the path that led me to the trail head. I got back in my car and began the slow drive back to the campground. On my way I saw a man on a motorcycle kick a large buffalo out of his way. I was both pissed off at him and wildly excited to see if the buffalo would charge him. It didn't though. It stopped eating one patch of grass and moved a few inches to another patch of grass. I passed families walking along the strip, hoping to catch a glimpse of the wild horses. I saw women horse back riding. One of the horses took an enormous shit. No one seemed to be bothered by it other than me. It was so big a person would wrecked their car if they hit it.

It was a little before seven when I pulled into my camp site. I could see Kenny preparing the pots and pans. He waved me over and I threw up five fingers to let him know I'd be over shortly. He either understood or had no clue at all what I was trying to tell him. I went inside my tent and put on a hoodie and a new pair of jeans and a ball cap due to the cooler nights in The Badlands. I grabbed the bottle of Jack Daniels and headed over to Kenny's picnic table.

I grabbed a plastic cup and poured a little of the Jack into the cup, "Are you sure you don't want any?" I asked to be polite.

"Nope." Kenny said. "I had my dance for many years with the bottle, then I had to give it up. I haven't touched the shit in thirty years."

"Thirty years is a long time."

"Not when you are my age it isn't. Yep. After I got out of Vietnam, well, even before that, I drank like a fish. First for fun I told myself. Then it was to release some stress. Next thing I knew I was drinking everyday. Whether to forget the war itself, or I was plum hooked, maybe both, is anyone's guess." He continued. "I have a son who refuses to speak to me, two ex wives. Figured if it wasn't me alone, then it was me and booze together. Man can only go through so much before he decides he needs to give it up, or lose whatever else he's got left, which in my case wasn't much."

I was taken back by his blunt honesty. Not many people can share with another person a story like that, never mind a stranger.

"I didn't catch anything worth cooking up so the steaks will have to do," Kenny said.

"Sounds great to me," I told him, pouring another cup of Jack Daniels.

"So what's your story?" He asked me.

"Not sure what you really mean by that, Kenny."

"I've been on enough benders in my life to know when a man's drinking to remember or forget. In your case you are trying to forget. It's in the way a man holds his cup, like it'll be the last cup of booze he'll ever have. He needs to protect it with his life because it's worth more than his life."

"Just having a drink," I told him.

He looked me over with his head tilted down. His forehead had beads of sweat running down it. He said nothing but "hmm."

I sat there thinking about my parents. I thought of the priest and the way his filthy crotch smelled when he pushed my head in his lap. And how I'd wake up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat reaching for something, anything, to save me from that church basement. I didn't want to see it, but I knew. I damn well knew, but I wasn't about to tell a complete stranger. The only person who knew the whole story, the true story in the marrow of my bones, was Katie.

Kenny popped open a Coke and sat down at the picnic table. He let out a grunt like his entire body was about to break, "Them steaks will take a little bit," he said. I need to sit. I poured another cup of Jack and Kenny watched my hands shake.

"There are somethings you just don't come back from." He said to me.

"Like a small piece of you is floating in a thick, beige, liquid off in the distance. You are right here standing and looking at me, but a part of you is trapped in that distance."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

“What I’m telling you, Kid,” He said.  
“There’s no forward or backward or even sideways. There’s no up or down, no geometrical shapes you can move in and out of. It’s only you incomplete. Sure, you can be made into something that someone accepts. You can see a therapist and have love. You can even love fully and be someone strong for another person to rely on. But part of you, a small sliver of you, will be trapped in that liquid floating around forever. Think of a battlefield. The corpses of soldiers laying where they fell. And let me tell you, I’ve seen plenty of them. The expressions on some of their faces. That terrified last moment when the bullet ripped through the flesh and took what made them whole. How they cried out for their mothers, except their mothers were not there to comfort them. What’s life without comfort and love in return? Those faces forever frozen in that moment, off in the distance, terrified and alone. And the ones that did live wished they hadn’t. Missing legs, missing arms, missing jaws. They love too, and they are worthy of it, but they’ll never come back, not fully. They hear things no one else hears. They smell things no one else smells. There’s no support group for it. They are who they are, in love maybe, but always trapped in the liquid alone without a hand to punch through time.

And time, Chris, let me tell you, she’s tricky. She’s a mean son-of-a-bitch. See, it doesn’t really exist, yet, it still shaves moments from your life, and claims more and more of what you intended to figure out until there’s nothing left of you to figure out. And what is it that you are even trying to figure out? Time smells foul, and sounds like a foot trying to pound its way through a rusted gate. It’s a nightmare before and after a nice dream. Although, you can stop time on occasion. There’s always room for life, and laughter, everyday things. Maybe even children and vacations and caring and holidays. All that shit is real, but so is the distance. And Kid, a sliver of you is stuck in it. You are whole, complete, real. You hold a job. You even go hiking with nothing but healing in mind I bet, right? Sure, and maybe it helps, but that sliver of you is floating out there somewhere. It doesn’t have a real face, nor

does it pray nor scream, not out loud. Never out loud.”

I sat and listened to him go on with his story. How he must’ve lived a dozen lives over and over like some laughing monk off in the mountains of Japan.

“Chris, the only advice I have for you is to live. Live your life so hard that the rocks break under your feet with every step you take. It’s the only way, Kid. If not you’ll lose it all inside what’s floating in your cup there. Everything that’s important to you. Sure, you’ll have drinking buddies and pool buddies, but love, family, if you cannot control it before you know it, it’s all gone.”

He got up and slapped one of the steaks onto a plate and handed it to me. I looked down at it and noticed how perfectly cooked it was. The juices glowing out red and grease colored. The piece of meat was there for the eating, but it was perfect and I didn’t want to cut it open and let it bleed out.

I looked over the table and past Kenny’s red tent and into the water. The moon shined down just enough so I could see the water splash its way up along the rocks. It traveled with a mighty speed, pushing its way past boulders and branches. Yet in the middle of the violent flow of water was a patch of sand where a person could stand and glow under the moonlight. I could stand out there and look illuminated, even Kenny could, but the only person who could carry the moonlight was Katie.

I downed the last swallow of the Jack and poured out the rest of the bottle on the ground. Kenny noticed but didn’t say anything. And it wasn’t what He had told me moments earlier, but because I didn’t want to lose the image I had of Katie standing on that patch of sand. My heart ached for her. I ached all over. In my brain, in my lungs, in my legs, in my groin, but most of all in my heart. My eyes began to swell up because I had no one to tell. Kenny saw my eyes water but pretended not to see.

“Kenny,” I said.

He looked up from the steak he was eating with his bare hands.

“Can I tell you about a woman named Katie?”

## THIS COULD-BE DREAM LOVER

JODY RAE

What would life be like if Copper hadn't fallen for her best friend? If she chose not to hand over a folded piece of paper, covered in tiny, pensive script, her very penmanship bracing for rejection, detailing all the things she loved about Taylor? That broad smile; the torque of the left wrist, just so, before executing a kickflip, as if calculating the degree of an angle with the hands before telling the feet what to do. The tiny circles Taylor rubbed into Copper's back while giving tight bear hugs.

Taylor read the note while sitting on Copper's bed. The dryer was going, humidifying the room and fogging the windows, filling the silence as they bowed their heads in silence.

Taylor's reaction was gracious, but long-distance relationships were a deal breaker. Days later Taylor picked Copper up in that red Ford Explorer, just like most evenings.

"Can I take you for a drive to Cocoa Beach? I want to squeeze as much time with you as possible. We'll grab dinner out there and just bum around?"

After dinner, they drove along the coast and wove through streets until Taylor suddenly offered to seal the summer with a toast. They pulled up to a liquor store and ran inside. The sky was pink and there was a chill.

The paper sack held a fifth of vodka and a bottle of orange juice. Taylor knew a place to park where they could watch the water. They sat side by side in the cold darkness, toasted their friendship and the summer while overlooking the dark misty waves, nestled together against the sea breeze.

Taylor rubbed tiny circles in Copper's back, the way she liked. The backrub lulled Copper into a fuzzy vodka oblivion. Their faces close, Taylor spoke softly in what sounded like run-on sentences. Copper inhaled and shook her head a little to clear it.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is," Taylor said, "can I kiss you?"

For the rest of the night, Taylor whispered repeatedly, "I'm yours", like waves washing over the sands below, echoing. By the glow of the dashboard lights, they were tender and slow.

Days went by, and Taylor didn't call Copper again. Not even to say goodbye before Copper boarded a plane to Wyoming for the semester.

At school, Copper rode her skateboard alone across a windswept campus. During her evening art classes, she glanced around the room as her classmates concentrated on their subjects and giant newsprint pads. They each straddled a wooden bench that held their drawing boards steady and upright. The instructor called the benches "horses", but they didn't even rock back and forth like toys. With no hot breath steaming from their noses, no twitching tails, no hooves clacking against the floor tiles, or muscles rippling between her thighs, Copper lamented the benches as mere lifeless, dark brown seats, scarred and worn from decades of use.

One evening, Copper rested her feet on her overturned skateboard stored under her horse, the belly of the deck covered with a sticker from a Bob Dylan tour and a 2016 presidential campaign bumper sticker. She wore headphones and spoke to no one. Eventually, a girl from Elko, Nevada asked her what she listened to during class.

"Tom Petty," Copper told her. "Or sometimes NPR."

"NPR?" The girl gasped. "That stuff'll kill ya."

"I'm sorry. I don't understand. NPR will *kill* me? NPR will take me out back and what, strangle me? The stuff on NPR is going to leech into my bloodstream and stop my heart?"

This was the last time they spoke to each other.

The November sky was dark gray through the windows, the trees bare and shuddering in the cold. It felt as though the sun might never return, as though her life might never hold magic again.

## MAGIC PATRICK STRICKLAND

I asked my friend Donovan what we were building, but he told me to just shut up and keep working. He had me knocking scrap nails into PVC with a rusty hammer, attaching the piping to the wooden block that would become the base of whatever it was he had in mind this time. I scanned his backyard as I worked. It looked like they dumped their trashcan right there. A hot breeze rustled stomped-on Coke cans and sun-bleached beer boxes through patches of knee-high weeds. Something ripe wafted our way from the septic tank over in the corner, making it hard to focus. With the third nail I missed, Donovan said, “Lard Ass, am I gonna have to do this myself?”

I crouched and picked at a soggy strip of cardboard. The writing on it had faded and bled into a blur. I chucked the cardboard aside and a cluster of cockroaches broke apart, scattering each way like tiny soldiers trying to escape an ambush. I jumped back a step and Donovan laughed and stomped a few dead. Four, five years earlier my mom and dad had split and left my big sister and me high and dry. Our grandma took us in for a while. She was good to us and promised to be around forever, to even outlive us all. She would sometimes joke comparing herself with a cockroach. But cockroaches gave me the creeps, and my grandma died. A science teacher had once said that cockroaches had feelings—curiosity, excitement, fear, greed—but I couldn’t stand them, the way they woke me each night in my bed crawling across my toes.

It was already early October, our first semester at the middle school, but the sun kept pounding the whole neighborhood, splitting small cracks in the sidewalk cement all along the streets. Donovan snatched the hammer from my hand and elbowed me aside. He started cranking the pipe, trying to find the right angle. Between his lips he had a Marlboro Light he’d pocketed from his dad’s soft pack. “It’s for a magic trick, Lard Ass,” he finally relented.

Donovan went wild for magic. He called every little idea he dreamed up a *magic trick*, just like

that, even though you could find most of them in the middle school library, buried in the scholastic magazines they kept there or written about on science websites on their computers. I don’t think either of us ever really knew exactly what point he wanted to make by blabbering about magic all the time, but he seemed to take pleasure in making sure you said he was right, whether you agreed with him or not. He stayed up all night reading online forums. Sometimes he slipped out into the alley and blew up a Coke can full of bathroom chemicals. Other nights he rigged a rocket and sent it roaring over the rooftop next door.

Donovan handed me the cigarette and said to take a puff. I pulled a lungful and coughed so hard we both had tears in our eyes, his from laughing. When I got upset about something, the few times I worked up the guts to talk back after any old thing he did that lit my fuse, I told him his ideas were just science experiments. He’d say to shut my trap or kick me out. He could get like that, all bossy and hotheaded for no reason. When I slept over, he dished out directions like *light this* or *hold that*, *stand here* or *hide there*. He would brag about all his friends, people who followed directions better, but it was all talk: I was the only person who ever came to his house.

Most days I gave him no grief. I didn’t want to work him up and get sent home. My big sister had become my legal guardian a few months earlier, after a car crash charred our grandma to a crisp, and she kept forgetting to restock our leaky fridge. Donovan lived in a two-story home with paint scabbing off the sidewalls. Even though the wires crackled and the lights flickered, he thought he had a leg up on me because his place was planted in the same spot where it had been built. I lived in a drooping doublewide on the edge of the neighborhood, two streets over. Shacks and trailers lined either side of my blacktop road, but Donovan liked to remind me that ours was the only one that looked like it had survived a hurricane or two. Still, he was better than the other boys at school. They gave me the nickname Lard Ass. They were at that point in life when they had just begun to toy around with irony, and they got a real kick out of that. I had

rails for arms and no real ass at all. Sometimes in the locker room, the boys thumped my ribs and laughed and asked shouldn't I be in a charity commercial for starving kids in some country no one knew how to pronounce. It was a cruel nickname that followed me everywhere, and even though he knew it stung me, Donovan had started using it whenever he got the chance. I didn't blame him for trying, but he'd never fit in with the other boys.

"Lard Ass," Donovan said now. He crouched and his hair fell down his pale cheeks in chunks, covering the acne scars on his face. "Pass me the nails, would you?"

We drifted through most of our afternoons like that. We met in the hallway after school, shoved our way through columns of classmates, and then soldiered through the sun back to his home, us both heaving and sour with sweat. His parents hunkered down on barstools at a dive down the road until long after the moon climbed up past the clouds. Me, I never had anywhere better to be. My big sister worked a graveyard shift at the Motel Six near the highway, and Wild Turkey tucked her into bed each day before my school let out.

Donovan handed me the hammer and a bent nail, pointed to a spot on the pipe. "Put it there," he said. I shuddered when a swarm of crows swooped down and cawed right past my head. For a second, I thought I was reliving it, the way my grandma sometimes slashed through my ceiling and soared around my bedroom. All shrouded in flames, she was not like I remembered her. At her funeral, my big sister and I swatted gnats from our faces as they lowered her into the earth. Wiping her eyes with a handful of her dress, my big sister kept forgetting the words to the prayers grandma had taught us, so I cupped her hand in mine and clamped down. Donovan caught my wrist and stopped my hammering. He stepped back and surveyed the thing we'd created. It weighed heavy to one side, looked like a crooked cannon. "You're going to love this," he said. "It's a great magic trick."

"I bet," I said. I just hoped he'd let me stick around for dinner. "What is it, exactly?"

I lumbered around in front of the contraption and watched as Donovan fiddled with it. He sprayed

down the pipe a splash of some kind of liquid. He pulled a potato from his pocket and stuffed it down the tube. The sky burned purple and orange and clouds crept above us. The sun started to sag slanted beyond the silhouettes of homes stamped against the dusk.

When he punched my arm, I nearly stumbled. "Move," he said, just as I found my footing and hopped out of the way. The potato pitched like from its lip like a bullet and busted through the fence, tearing a big, jagged break in the boards. It opened to a spot in the next-door neighbor's backyard. A pit bull stuck his gnarled face through the gap and sniffed around, clenching the potato between its teeth. It growled at us from somewhere deep inside in its chest.

"What the hell?" someone yelled from the far side of the fence. It was a man's voice, a gruff one. "What in the actual hell?"

I wrung sweat from the bottom of my shirt and stood around waiting for something to happen. Strange thoughts struck me in the heat. I felt like I'd lived my whole childhood that way, waiting for whatever came next. I saw my dad dashing to his drop-top Mustang, an old junkyard scrap job with different colored panels, and leaping into the backseat, my mother manning the wheel as the car screamed down the street and they disappeared forever. I saw grandma pinned under a ton of steel, flames scraping her skin away. I saw my sister signing the paperwork to drop out of her senior year in school, the grooves I'd never before noticed carved across her forehead.

The next door neighbor's head came through the hole in the fence. Donovan ripped my wrist backward and dragged me toward the house. As he whipped me around, his cigarette fell down in the weeds.

We collapsed on the kitchen floor. The doorbell dinged, and we plastered our palms to our mouths to stop the laughter. We were creeping to the foyer to get a peek through the peephole when the knocking began, heavy fists hitting the door. "Keep your fucking mouth shut," Donovan warned, but I had nothing to say. I imagined the wind gleaming the cherry on his cigarette out back. I could almost

smell the sharp sting of burning wood, could almost feel the heat off the house as it became crackling ash.

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Upstairs in Donovan's bedroom, we competed trading swear words. I earned extra points for having *Ass* in my name, but Donovan had the upper hand. He'd memorized a long list of words his dad drilled at the television screen when the Cowboys were losing. *Jizz rag, shit ass, and dumpster dick* gave him a solid lead. In my heart, I knew we shouldn't have said those words. I kept thinking about my grandma, how she'd have felt had she heard us.

A cockroach was scaling the wall above Donovan's bed. It had nearly reached the ragged crown molding when Donovan jumped up on the mattress and plucked it from the wallpaper. Donovan's eyes bulged like they did every time he had an idea. "Follow me," he said.

He darted down the stairs two at a time. In the kitchen, he said he had a magic trick that would make the potato gun look like a joke. We would freeze the cockroach in the freezer until it was good and dead, thaw it out, and then zap it back to life with electricity. He pinched the bug between his first finger and his thumb, its legs kicking about the same way grandma's used to when something was stealing her sleep. "Really my—our—best magic trick ever," he added.

"I don't know," I said.

"What's the matter, Lard Ass? You scared of cockroaches?" He thrust the bug at my face and I sidestepped so quickly I nearly fell down.

"No," I started.

"Better watch yourself, Lard Ass." Donovan pushed the bug my way again. I slapped at it but missed. He was relentless.

"Okay, sure," I caved in. Maybe all that sun had stirred up my thoughts, but I had the hazy hope that we could determine whether death was really a done deal.

Donovan flung open the freezer door. He dug around in there until he found a spot and dropped the cockroach behind an ice tray. The bug busted its way up the drumstick of a Butterball chicken. We peeled off our shirts and slung them

across a window unit coated in dust. We let the freezer breathe on our chests. Donovan's arms hung stiff as stalks, slit with the glow of streetlights straining in from outside. He repeated that it would be our best magic trick ever, and I nodded. He dabbed a dirty dishrag on his head. I ran my palm across mine, tracing the scabs where my big sister had snipped my scalp while shaving away my hair. No more expensive haircuts, she had told me, meaning the five-dollar trims at Super Cuts. She'd tugged a Bud Light from the cooler and rubbed the bottle along my skull.

I asked Donovan what next.

"We wait."

"How long?"

"An hour. Maybe two. As long as I say, Lard Ass. This is my house."

The cockroach tried to burrow its body in the frost built up in the freezer. Donovan yanked out a Hungry Man TV dinner and lobbed it at me. "Microwave that," he said, and slammed the freezer door shut.

We divided up the TV dinner, meatloaf and mashed potatoes, while sitting cramped together on the couch. At school, I had taken to pocketing cafeteria food for later. I hadn't eaten this much at once since my grandma passed. Now I couldn't pace myself and choked down my share so fast my stomach tossed each way. Donovan scarfed down the whole desert, a brownie, in a single swallow, leaving behind only a few crumbs. When he went and took a leak, I licked the container clean, lapped it all up like a stray dog until I only tasted the wax coating.

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The television hummed, but we didn't pay it much mind. We were busy arguing about raising the cockroach from the dead. We both agreed that yes, we could resurrect the bug, although we couldn't agree whether it would be magic that did the trick. When I told Donovan that science was why, his face flushed red and tightened and twisted. For a moment, I thought he may punch me, but then his face loosened and he smiled in a way that made me suspicious. "Alright, I've got an idea," he said.

He bobbed off to the bathroom and returned a moment later holding a can of Vidal Sassoon. He asked if I feared fire. I said no, but he already knew the answer. I'd already twice confessed to him how we couldn't show grandma's body at the funeral, the way blaze had gnawed off all her skin. "Well, don't be a baby. It doesn't hurt. I'll show you," he said.

The can hissed hairspray on his hand. He filled a bowlful of sink water and set it on the coffee table between cups filled with cigarette butts and crumpled paper towels. A man talked on the television screen, but the volume was low and the old speakers rasped so that it all sounded like whispers. The rank of wet clothes, the stale cigarette smoke and nuked meatloaf, they all spun my head. Donovan plunged his fist in the water and steeped it there for a while. He grabbed a Bic lighter off the table. He flicked the flint wheel until a flame shot out, and I shrunk back into the couch. "Goddamn, Lard Ass. There anything you aren't afraid of?" Blue flames lashed from Donovan's hand. He flapped it so close to my face I could feel the heat on my cheeks. I pulled away and thought of grandma. On the nights when she soared into my room sideways, she'd take a seat on the old chair in the corner of my bedroom, lighting a Pall Mall off one of the flames on her arm and staring me down. She never said anything, but the fire on her body burned so hot I'd wake tangled in sopping sheets.

"I can't feel a thing," Donovan said. He shook his hand until the fire faded away.

"That's a pretty good trick. You should do that in the science fair."

"Yeah," he said. I'd expected him to correct me. "Maybe I should."

He took my hand and doused it in hairspray. "Your turn."

I nodded and tried to think up an excuse to get out of this without him giving me too much of a hard time, tried to stop trembling, but he was already giving the Bic a few practice flicks. I asked if I should put my hand in water first. "Oh, no. You don't have to do that," he said.

"You sure?"

"Don't worry."

He sparked the lighter, inching it toward my palm, and the fire flared. A flame flashed around my hand, fingers and all. "I can't feel a thing," I said. I smiled and then the laughter clotted in my throat. Something sizzled sharp and my hand burned until it almost felt cold. The fire sheared off the top layer of my skin. As quickly as the pink bubbles formed on my knuckles, they blistered and burst. I couldn't find words. I swung my hand around hard trying to show Donovan something had gone wrong. He couldn't help himself. He keeled over, laughing so hard he had to grab a handful of his stomach. "Okay, okay," he said between breaths. "Okay, okay."

"Shit, shit, shit," he now said. His eyes watered up and took on a soft glaze. From the panicked way he looked at me, I began to imagine my whole face blanketed in burn scars, so I buried it into the couch. When he reached for the bowl of water on the table, he knocked it over. "Shit, shit, shit," he repeated, and tore off toward the garage.

I crushed my hand into a cushion over and over until the flames finally fell away. The room stayed quiet for a few moments, and the ache in my hand seemed to have spread throughout my whole body. I couldn't think of anything to say. When I looked up, Donovan had a little fire extinguisher. "My dad keeps it in the garage," he said. His joints cracked as he shifted his weight from one foot to the next. "Because of the electricity."

In the kitchen, I ran faucet water over my hand for a quarter hour. A layer of skin had peeled away and what was beneath was bright and red. I shot down all of Donovan's ideas for my scalded hand. No hospital, I said. No milk. No butter. No cream. He wrapped my fingers one by one and fixed the gauze in place with scotch tape. "You can go home, if you want," he said. "I'm sorry, you know."

I knew he meant it, but it didn't matter. "Just get the battery charger," I snapped, and for the first time since I met him, I knew I could hurt him.

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With my good hand I pried the cockroach off a pint of Blue Bell ice cream. The freezer had left its body brittle and smooth to the touch. We planned to put it out on the porch for an hour, but even after dark, the heat shriveled it soft in a few minutes.



I swiped my good hand across the kitchen island and swept aside the TV dinner wrappers spread out everywhere. Strips of cellophane fell to the floor in a scatter, scrunched beneath the soles of our sneakers. "Plug that charger in, will you?" I told Donovan.

I decided to check for a pulse, the same way I push two fingers to my neck after grandma's night visits. Cockroaches have no necks, not really, so I settled for the bug's thorax. I couldn't find any signs of life. Donovan set up the battery charger, but the cord didn't reach. "Go get something that can reach," I told him, and he returned with extension coiled against his chest like a snake. He unspooled it and placed the battery charger on the island. I ran my pinky along the surface, moving the roach around to make sure it was still dead.

"Get ready," I said. "Back up."

I pressed the wires to either side of the cockroach's torso. Nothing happened. "Crank up the power."

Donovan dialed up the notch on the charger and I shocked the bug three times. "More," I said. I could hear the dog next door bawling its heart out.

"Take it all the way up," I said. The cockroach startled, flipped, and landed on its backside. Its little legs kicked as if it had come back but death was still chasing it.

"Is it alive, Lard As—?" Donovan began, but he shirked back when I shot him a look. The cockroach's legs wiggled. I turned it over onto its feet and it took a step, and then another. It walked three inches, maybe four. I wondered if it felt alive, or maybe something like hope.

But then it stopped. I lowered my face to it and couldn't see any movement. I tapped it, but it appeared almost serene, it was so still. "You try," I ordered, and Donovan couldn't flick it back to life either. I zapped it four, five, six times, over and over until a faint finger of smoke fluttered up from its body. Its legs had melted to the tabletop.

Donovan's dad exploded into the house, knocking over a vase as Donovan's mom flailed in behind him. Donovan fumbled for the mess spread out on the island. "We gotta hide this," he said, but I clutched his wrist, wrestled it down. I felt every

twitch in my body, the scabs itching my scalp, my heartbeat pulsing down into my bad hand.

Donovan's dad whistled his way into the kitchen. He popped the top off a Coors Light. I took hold of Donovan's shoulders and jerked him back and forth. "Do it, Donovan," I said. "Do the magic."

"Everything alright, boys?" his dad slurred. He was looking at the cockroach on the table. "What the hell happened here—"

I waved him away. I wrapped my arms around Donovan and drew him in closer. "Just do the magic, shit dick," I said. "Be a fucking magician, you cunt rag."

"Whoa, whoa, hey now—" said Donovan's dad.

I shut him up with a raised hand and swiveled back around to Donovan. I hugged him, pulled him in tight, squeezing until he coughed. "Do it now, you cum dumpster."

## WITH ALL THE TRIMMINGS RICHARD ZABOROWSKE

My mom held the knife above the turkey, paused and asked me if I wanted to cut the bird this year. I did, but with my arms folded over my sweater, I told her I didn't. She looked over at my younger brother, he looked at me, he didn't want to either. *Well, she said, I'll carve it myself.*

I watched the knife as she began slicing. It was large and had an ornate wooden handle. It looked expensive. I wondered where she had bought it, not only the knife, but all the new things in the duplex. It was entirely furnished; a new leather couch dominated the small living room, with a sharp edged glass coffee table, and a huge flatscreen television resting on an entertainment center. Earlier, when our father had dropped us off, I was impressed. The furniture was proof that our mother finally, finally had her life in order.

Before she finished the first slice, the doorbell rang. She darted from the kitchen as if fleeing a crime scene; the knife was left dangling from the bird. She parkoured around and flicked off all the lights. *Get down, get down,* she told us. As if dodging a grenade, my brother dove into the living room and pressed himself flat to the floor.

I remained at the table, arms still folded in stubborn tween protest. I wasn't going to play her games. But then with the lights off I could see two men on the small front stoop. They were both wearing bright red, baggy uniforms, with a large Rent-A-Center logo plastered across the front. Through the thin drapes, I could see their cold November breath hang like steam. Their beady eyes were peering in the window. They rapt on the door. *Mam, we know you're in there. You can't keep the furniture if you don't pay. Mam. Mam.* I could hear them taping something to the door.

We sat in the silence as if being punished. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I looked at my mother. She had one knee on the floor, and the other was propped up, holding her head. Through the gauzy light filtering through the front window, she somehow looked both younger and older than the last time I had seen her. When she noticed my gaze,

she smiled, and rolled her eyes. As if to say, *What a world.*

When the men had left, my mother, smoothing out her dress, calmly walked around the duplex. She flicked on each light, casting off the darkness and breaking the spell. I could now see the large Rent-A-Center tag hanging off the couch, and a sticker with a barcode on the side of the coffee table. In the new light, it all had the fake tacky sheen of a department store display.

My brother sat despondent on the floor. I helped him up and we made our way back to the table. Our mother sat down with us, and offered us a strained smile. My brother had a questioning look on his face, and for a moment I thought he was going to ask, but then he didn't. I reached for the knife, and pulled it free. It had the satisfying heft of a tire iron and cut through the flesh like a razor.

## DUMB BOY JULIA NUNNALLY DUNCAN

One Saturday around noon the stray dog appeared at the boarding house where Paul lived. Paul was the first to notice it and the first to give it a bite of fried bologna from his lunch sandwich, a half of which he'd brought home from the diner where he ate his meals. He always brought home leftovers, though he rarely ate them.

He coaxed the dog off the front porch. Other boarders and especially the landlord would never allow the dog to stay. A city ordinance did not allow roaming dogs anyway. But maybe if he lured the dog into the back lot for food and water, it wouldn't be too conspicuous.

The dog was a collie-shepherd mix that reminded him of Shep, the dog that his family had taken in when he was a boy.

He had loved Shep, but something mean in him made him want to shame Shep.

"Dumb dog," he would say, scolding Shep for not sitting at his command or not offering a paw when he asked for it.

He never went so far as to strike the dog or say "stupid dog."

But "dumb dog" was enough criticism to cause the dog to lower his golden ears, narrow his amber eyes, and cower in shame.

Shep would walk away, white-tipped tail between his hind legs, until Paul called him back, ashamed of the pain he'd brought to his friend.

"I'm sorry, boy," he said. Shep immediately forgave him and ran to his open arms. He hugged Shep close to him, smelling the wet-dog odor as he nuzzled his face in the thick fur.

Shep didn't stay long that summer. He was gone as suddenly as he had appeared.

"It wasn't our dog in the first place," his mama said the morning Paul discovered Shep missing from their front porch where he stayed. Shep always waited for Paul to get up and feed him breakfast scraps, but not this morning.

Paul searched the woods near their house, whistling and calling, "Y'here, Shep, y'here." But he never saw the dog again.

"Dogs run off like that," his daddy said, lighting a Camel and peering into the dusk from their front porch. "You can't keep something that don't want to stay."

In his heart Paul wondered if his daddy hauled Shep off, as men often did in those days. If his daddy had set Shep out close by, Shep might find his way back. But Paul was more concerned that he himself had said "dumb dog" one too many times. And he grieved in the darkness of his bed for many nights, crying until no sound came from his throat, thinking he'd run his friend off.

Now, in the back lot, he squatted beside the stray dog and stroked the silky mahogany fur between its lowered ears.

"You're a good boy," he said. "You come to a sorry place, though," he added. The boarding house was shelter, but it wasn't much more. His room was small and nearly bare, the few pieces of cheap furniture—iron bed, chest of drawers, night stand and lamp—provided by the owner. The walls wore tacky floral wallpaper, stained from a leaky roof and curling at the seams.

A second-rate piano tuner who hadn't improved his lot in ten years of employment with the piano plant couldn't expect any better, he reckoned. But the bleakness of the room depressed him and drove him to hang out at night at a clearing beside the railroad tracks, where men as aimless as he drank from jars of corn liquor and gambled by lamplight and campfire.

These men were not his friends. Any of them would cut his throat for a dollar as soon as they would look at him. But they were company. Some of these men he had worked with at the piano plant before they'd been laid off or quit. Others wandered onto the scene from the darkness as if they'd jumped off a passing train. A woman—one who thought to make a few bucks in the woods that bordered the tracks or in the cab of a pickup truck parked just out of sight—sometimes came by. Paul had never been tempted by this woman. He sat on a steel rail, and she stooped behind him, wrapping her perfumed arms around his neck and leaning close. She breathed in his ear, her breath stinking of booze and cigarettes, and she seemed breathless and tipsy as

she said, "I was hoping you'd be here, sugar. I heard about you."

"I ain't interested," he said and brushed her off. He wouldn't be too harsh, though. This woman's boyfriend or husband remained in the shadows ready to crack your skull with a tire iron if you insulted his woman or got too rough with her.

"Oh, I just wanted to see how it felt with a dummy," she said and withdrew her arms from around him. She then moved on to another man. She and this man would talk a minute, maybe take a drink from the jar, and disappear into the darkness for a while.

"I ain't a dummy," he might protest to her and anyone who might have heard her words, but more likely than not, he'd stay silent and let the insult go. He kept his eyes down, plotting which train he'd jump to get away from this miserable life.

Who was it first called him "dumb"?

Of course, it was his daddy, Paul, Sr.

It might have been when he dropped a stick of stove wood before he reached the kitchen woodstove, a heavy stack in his small arms. Or maybe he'd knocked over a glass of buttermilk on the kitchen table at suppertime. Try as he may, he couldn't seem to avoid knocking something over or dropping it, especially when his daddy was watching. One evening when his daddy was taking his bath, Paul took the man's Case pocket knife that he'd discovered on the bedroom night stand. He knew better than to go into his parents' bedroom in the first place, but he couldn't resist borrowing the knife to open it and examine its parts. He sat on the front porch in the metal glider and flipped open the different blades. His finger traced the cool, smooth sides and carefully touched the sharp edges that his daddy had honed with whetstone and oil. If only he himself owned such a pocket knife, he too would take pains with it.

"A man ain't a man without his pocket knife," he'd heard his daddy say, but the man had never offered to buy one for his son.

When he caught Paul with the knife, he took hold of Paul's hand, gripped it until the boy dropped the knife on his lap.

"I catch you fooling with my knife again, boy, and you'll wish you hadn't been born."

Paul said nothing. He would not look his father in the eye.

"Ain't you even going to lie your way out of it?"

"No, sir." He knew better than to challenge his daddy. His mama had taught him well. By saying nothing more, he spared his cheek a sting that would last an hour. His daddy often struck him in anger, especially when his mama wasn't in the room.

"No, I reckon not. You ain't man enough to stand up for yourself. I doubt you ever will be. Go on in the house and help your mama in the kitchen." Under his breath, he added, "Dumb boy."

Paul obeyed the man, not letting his daddy see his tears. He joined his mama in the kitchen, where she stood kneading biscuit dough, her pinafore apron dusted by flour.

"What is it, Junior?" she said, not taking her eyes from her work.

She rarely asked Paul about his dealings with his daddy. He suspected she'd had her share of his sharp tongue herself, the way she lost her voice when he raised his, over the biscuits being too brown or the kitchen floor needing mopping. He learned much from his mama, just from watching her responses.

As far as he knew, his daddy never struck his mama. But there was much he didn't know that went on behind the oak door of their bedroom. He thought he heard crying or moaning—strange sounds that traveled down the cold, dark hallway to his bedroom. These sounds made him feel completely alone. Sometimes he wanted to call out to his mama to see if she was all right. When he woke from a nightmare, he longed to go to her and be comforted. But he didn't dare disturb her. He knew his mama belonged to the man beside her in their bed, and for this reason he despised nighttime and the private room down the hallway. If this was the way it was between a man and a woman, this separateness from others—even their child—he wanted no part of it. But if in some distant time he did find somebody to share the darkness with, he swore he would never make her fear him.

Once, he asked his mama, "Why does Daddy hate me?"

"He don't hate you, Junior," she said. "His daddy treated him bad. When he was little, his daddy boxed his ear until he's deaf now in that ear. He never learned how to be any other way."

"But I didn't do anything. He gets mad at me over nothing."

"I'll talk to him about it," she promised.

But the next time Paul forgot to turn off a light when he'd left the room or carried snow in the house on his rubber boots, his daddy came across the room to him and grabbed his shoulder.

"Don't you ever learn, boy?" the man said and the action of a palm striking a face was so quick—a flash of white heat—that Paul didn't see it coming. There was no dodging the blow or lifting an arm to block it. He only felt his cheek burning and his tears welling. Did his daddy even realize how hard he'd slapped him? His mama stood cowering in a corner, his daddy sneering, *Are you crying, too, Woman?* Paul's tears were as helpless as his mama's, and he hated himself for his weakness. He was disgusted with his mama for not standing up for him or for herself. But did he dare stand up for her? He would someday, he swore.

He went to his mama with his frustration. "He don't mean any harm," she would explain. But harm was done, and Paul determined he'd get out of his parents' house as soon as he could. And he stayed true to his plan. At fifteen he began working at a filling station within walking distance of home, pumping gas, checking oil, washing windshields—a job that required little voice, as his voice had become raspier by this time, his words more a whisper than a distinct sound. As long as he could utter, "Do you want regular or high test?" or "That'll be three dollars, ma'am," or "Anything else for you today, sir?" he needn't say any more. Through the school year he continued living at home, but when summer came, he moved out and stayed in a room over the station.

There was a time when he didn't know if he'd be fit for any job because of his voice. One of his fondest memories of boyhood was his Saturday morning trips to town with his mama. Because his

mama had never learned to drive a car, his daddy dropped them off on Main Street and picked them up in the afternoon. While in the Roses Five and Dime, his mama searched through dress patterns and bolts of cloth, spools of thread and packages of buttons, and he went downstairs where the toy section was located. There he looked at model car and airplane kits, Jon Gnagy Drawing Sets, and caged parakeets. Eventually he left this dreamland and found his mama upstairs where they ate a hamburger at the lunch counter.

While they sat at the counter and ate, a man approached his mama and tapped her shoulder. She swiveled around on her stool to have a small card thrust at her. It read, *Hello, I am a Deaf-Mute and am unable to work. Could you give me a donation to help out? Have a nice day!* This young man, who dressed shabbily and always wore a toboggan cap regardless of the season, had approached Paul's mama in the store many times before. He didn't tap everyone's shoulder, but always came straight to Paul's mama. His mama immediately unsnapped her pocketbook and took out a dollar. "Don't tell your daddy I gave him a dollar," she told Paul afterwards. The dollar she gave the man had come from her own "allowance," money allotted for household expenses that Paul's daddy gave her every Friday evening.

Some people had questioned his mama about his hoarse voice. One day at the Roses lunch counter a woman who sat beside his mama said, "Does your boy have laryngitis?"

"No," his mama said. "His voice has always been weak."

"What does the doctor say?" the woman asked.

He had been to Dr. Miller, their family doctor, many times for bronchitis and tonsillitis. But the doctor had merely given him a penicillin shot and told him to try not talking when his voice grew hoarse. He hadn't seen a specialist, the closest one being in Asheville.

"Doctor ain't said much."

"I don't reckon the boy's deaf, too?" the woman asked.

"He ain't deaf or dumb, either one," his mama said and swiveled toward Paul. He kept his

face down as he chewed, wishing the woman would go away.

"I was going to say they can do wonders for these children at the Deaf School in Morganton. Teach them to use sign language, I imagine. Ain't no reason they can't grow up and work like everybody else." Paul wondered if the woman had been tapped by the deaf-mute man.

His mama motioned for them to leave, though he still had Coca-Cola left in his glass.

He realized then how people must have felt sorry for him and his mama. And he wondered if men his daddy worked with in the shrubbery business had mentioned Paul's voice. Occasionally his daddy brought one of these men home for supper, if they worked late on a summer evening. Was his daddy ashamed of him? Did he wonder if Paul would grow to be a man who could earn his own way? If he lost his voice completely, would he have to depend on strangers to give him a donation? How embarrassed the young man in the toboggan cap seemed when he handed the card to Paul's mama. He kept his eyes down till she handed him the money; then he nodded quickly and hurried away. Would this be Paul's way of making a living?

But as Paul grew older and his voice continued to deteriorate, he realized he could find work, as long as he didn't have to say much. He stayed on at the filling station for a while. He dropped out of school at sixteen and eventually found a better job at the piano plant. Here he learned to tune pianos from a blind tuner. This tuner found him a room at the boarding house, a kind of halfway house for the town's lost souls, a place located near the deserted train depot.

When he moved out of his parents' house, he missed his mama, but much as he wanted to help her, he knew she had accepted her life as it was. Paul didn't blame her. But for years afterward, he wondered if his mama hadn't dreamed of an easier life, of living with a husband who could laugh with her and be happy. It was obvious to him that his mama feared his daddy, which grieved him and made him lose all respect for the man.

But did he despise his daddy?

In his boyhood, on Sunday nights his daddy would pat the seat beside him on the vinyl couch and say, "Come here, Son. Sit next to me and watch *Bonanza*." These were rare times when the family shared the front room. In his pajamas he sat on the couch with his daddy, who was tall and lean and stripped down to a tight clean undershirt and dungarees. His petite mama, in terry housecoat and her brown hair rolled tightly in pin curls, sat close by in her easy chair.

*Bonanza* was his daddy's favorite television show. And he himself studied the father Ben Cartwright and his dealings with his three sons—Little Joe, Hoss, and Adam, his mama's favorite character. Paul admired the respect shown between father and sons. Ben Cartwright favored his own daddy—the graying hair, penetrating dark eyes, and tanned skin. His daddy's skin was a rich red-brown, especially in the summer, from days he spent in the sun, digging and replanting shrubbery. But unlike the Ponderosa rancher, his daddy lacked Ben's gentle, understanding nature. Ben would never call Little Joe, Hoss, or Adam *dumb*. Why couldn't his daddy be more like that?

Still, on Sunday nights at nine, he sat close to his daddy, so close he was enveloped by the sweet aroma of his daddy's bath soap that lingered from his evening bath. Sometimes his daddy would even rest his bare arm across the back of the couch, his hand lightly touching Paul's shoulder. At least for an hour, he loved his daddy and felt safe with him.

That feeling of safety was short-lived, though, and as the years passed, he came to depend on it less and less.

Though they were a sort of company, the men at the railroad tracks were predatory, and Paul avoided looking them square in the eye. He preferred to sit off to himself, just within the heat of the campfire or the drone of the men's voices. But this aloofness made them suspect him, and lately they had stood in clusters, glancing his way. Whether they thought to knock him in the head to steal the few dollars in his wallet or do some other violence to him, he didn't know.

One of them, a man who lived at the boarding house in a room down the hall from his,

had pointed to him one summer night and said, "Dummy there don't care for women." These words were loud enough so that all could hear. The men looked at him, and his heart raced. Would one of them catch him as he walked home in the darkness and teach him a lesson or two?

Despite his fear, he managed to get home and came back the next night, when no one spoke to him, one way or the other. But on that walk home, he had kept his right hand deep in his jeans pocket, clutching his Case pocket knife.

Sometimes at the boarding house late at night, when most of the people had come in and locked their doors, he'd hear a pounding on his door. This would be the man who had pointed to him at the tracks, coming to bum a cigarette or a drink of liquor. He used to keep a flask in his back pocket, but the cheap bourbon he could afford was precious hard to come by in a dry county, and it had got to where it burned his throat to swallow it. And the Camel cigarettes he had started smoking once he moved out of his mama's house had caused him to cough up blood. So even these comforts were a threat, and he gave them up. When he opened the door to the man who was desperate for a smoke or a drink, he might have said, "Man, I don't mess with that stuff anymore." But the words would have been too much of an effort and the sounds coming from his throat might have provoked the man, so he just shook his head and lifted his hands to indicate he had nothing to offer. The man narrowed his eyes. "Why you holding out on me?" he said, accusing Paul of being a liar and a cheat.

Paul stopped answering the door at night.

The fact was he couldn't trust anybody. So when the stray dog appeared at the boarding house, he determined it would be his friend and he would make it feel safe. In return he would feel safe in its presence.

It waited for him in the evenings, stayed in the back lot near its food bowl that Paul had placed behind a holly shrub for its food and water. It seemed to know it mustn't be seen by other boarders, who would sure as hell call the dog pound if they discovered it, if only to spite Paul. He squatted beside the dog and showed it a can of

Spam, its favorite food. While he opened the can, the dog stood waiting, not offering to interfere.

"I never seen such a smart dog as you," Paul said. With a fork that he kept beside the food bowl, he pried out the block of meat and set it aside.

He reached in his pocket, took out his pocket knife, and flipped open the clip blade.

He sliced off a piece of the gel-glazed meat and handed it to the dog.

Only then, when the dog was sure the man meant for it to accept the meat, it took the offering from Paul's hand and swallowed without chewing.

"Good, ain't it?" Paul asked and sliced himself a piece. Though he would have preferred the meat fried in lard, brown and crispy, the way his mama fixed it for supper, he popped the cool meat into his mouth. He chewed it and wiped his slimy fingers on his pants leg.

"It ain't much, but I reckon it's all we need," he said.

He cut the last thick slab into bite-sized pieces.

"Did I tell you how good it is to see you?" he said and dropped the chunks of meat into the food bowl. He wiped his hands again and sat down cross-legged. From his back pocket he pulled a handkerchief and carefully wiped the blade of his pocket knife. He held the knife up in front of his face, inspected the blade, and when he was satisfied it was clean enough for the moment, he snapped the blade shut and slipped the knife back into his pocket. He watched the dog finish its meal, its tail wagging while it ate.

He took the quart Mason jar of water he'd brought and filled the food bowl. He turned the jar up and drank what was left.

"Spam's good but it leaves you thirsty as the devil."

The dog lapped the water until the bowl was empty.

"Well, I reckon we're both finished now," he said and added, "C'mere, Shep." The dog came and lay down beside him. He patted his knee and it placed its muzzle there.

"I'll stay right here with you tonight," he said, his words soundless.

But the dog stretched its limbs, settling in for the night, as if it had heard every word Paul had spoken.

## FOSSIL CREEK JONATHAN DANIELSON

A few hours before my father's heart gave out, before a tiny and otherwise insignificant piece of plaque dislodged itself inside an artery and dammed up what should have been the rest of his life, he stood smiling like an idiot--like a dummy who had no idea what was coming for him--next to a delivery truck parked under the pines in our front yard.

"Two more are on order," he said as the driver backed an ATV off the flatbed trailer and into our gravel driveway. "But the dealership said we could take this one home today." My father signed some papers and reviewed the carbon copies. "It's a quarter till noon," he said when he looked up at me again, still standing in the doorway for our new home and still in my pajamas because I had been asleep until the delivery truck hissed its brakes outside my window. My father's smile crept away as he squinted over his reading glasses. While I remember thinking he looked like an old man doing that, on that day he was forty-four, only a few years older than I am now. "Go get dressed before you waste your life in bed."

Inside our house, a new construction built to look like an old-timey log cabin, my mother blew on a steam-less cup of tea while she watched my father through the window above the sink.

"Make him stop," I begged.

On that day it had been one month exactly since my father cashed in his life spent as an accountant--a career path I unsuccessfully swore I would never follow--and relocated us from our Scottsdale home to an isolated cabin in the tiny mountain town of Strawberry, population no one, in hopes of reconciling us into the family he had realized we were not. I was sixteen at the time--as old as my own son is now--and, as I am learning is typical of that age, hellbent on being miserable.

At the sink, my mother held her mug to her lips even after she swallowed, as if waiting for the taste to somehow change. She shook her wrist and checked the Cartier my father had given her years earlier, either for an anniversary or an apology or both.



"Don't make your father wait," she said.

The delivery truck was gone by the time I returned outside, the pines above swaying with a high country breeze. I had put on a polo shirt from my old high school back in Scottsdale, as if to make it perfectly clear where I would rather be. My own son does the same thing when he lists all the video games he plays at his stepfather's house every time it's my weekend with him, except in March or April, tax season, when he is with his mother full-time because I am busy calculating the investments and returns of other people.

"Here we go," my father said as he sat on the quad in his new hiking clothes and peered at the controls. He looked ridiculous doing that. In Scottsdale, my father had wore neatly pressed buttoned-downs tucked into khakis, even around the house. In Strawberry though, he wore *Life is Good* shirts. Hiking boots. He replaced his Omega--which I now wear and which keeps perfect time only twice a day--with a Casio. That's because in Strawberry my father tried to reinvent himself after he had woken up one day and looked around and apparently saw something he did not like. Something that made him willing to take his family away from everything and usher them up to the Arizona mountains in the middle of butt-fucking Egypt just run away from.

Once he got motor going, my father swung his foot widely to get off the quad, as if he was unsure how to maneuver around such an awkward machine between his legs. When he finally managed to get off, he stood next to the ATV, and I stood next to him, and the engine idled between us.

"Well?" he said.

"Well what?" I said.

My mother opened the door and stood like a sentry behind the screen, her tea cupped in both hands. Since the move I had ignored her pleas to give my father a chance, give the move a chance, just give it time, she had said, but which I knew were only half-hearted requests because she did not want to be there either. And knowing that made it easy for me to simply ignore my dad when he tried to get me to go out and help him identify which animal had shit in our yard during the night by using the field manual he had ordered just for the occasion. It was

easy to lock myself in my room and instant message my friends when he asked me to help him rake pine needles or chop wood out front. In the evenings, when my father tried to cajole me out on walks to see the elk and javelina bed down in the forrest, I had no problem staying on the couch and watching the same movies over and over again, until Dad canceled the premium channels. Until the basic channels went next. Until the modem disappeared.

And then my father came home that day--which no one knew would be his last--with a brand new ATV as some grand gesture of this new life he wanted us to live. This romanticized life out in the woods and a hundred miles away from Scottsdale and all the things my father decided only distracted us from being the family he wanted us to be. A hundred miles away from my friends who were the children of my parents' friends and who would grow up to be just like them, and my mother's happy hours and spinning classes which were mostly just gossip sessions, and--I learned later from my mother when we moved back to the Valley after his funeral--my father's repeated affairs and betrayals.

My father revved the motor again. He pursed his lips to say something--I assumed the "talk" he wanted us to finally have, but which I had avoided since the move--so I quickly jumped on the quad so I could pretend my action was of my own doing.

"Fun!" I said sarcastically, and I swung my leg widely as I mounted, to mimic my father's movements and show him how little we were alike. At the time, that made sense.

"Now take her easy," my father said as he walked me through the controls. He showed me how to turn the ATV on and off, and how to rock it back and forth if it wouldn't get in gear. He used terms like "foot brake" and "gear shaft," which I figured the delivery driver had just taught him. "And remember that I used half the tank on the test drive this morning," he continued, "so just give her a quick spin. We got two more quads coming this week, so we can all go out together then. And son," he said, even though he had never once referred to me as "Son" in Scottsdale. He had always just called me by my name, which was his name too. "Don't go too far out, okay? I want to talk about some stuff later, and I

don't want you getting stuck out in the woods if this thing runs out of gas."

With that, he put his hand on my forearm and squeezed. It was all very fatherly.

However, I would not consider my father's touch, his squeeze, his forcing this new accord upon us, with anything besides contempt until days later when my mother similarly squeezed my arm through my suit jacket as I led her away from my father's casket; when she stood frozen in the aisle and stared down my father's former office manager, the woman who had worked directly under him before the move, the woman practically wearing the same dress as my mother. Even today I can see that woman's grief stricken face half-contort into something like a sorrowful and maybe apologetic smile when she finally looked up at my mother and me. And it would take decades more for me to consider my father's touch with anything besides the resentment I felt following that moment at his funeral. Like the woman's smile, it took me a lifetime to understand it as love.

After my father squeezed my arm, he said something else, but I revved the quad and drowned out his voice. I nodded mockingly to his moving lips then gunned it down the driveway. A mile later was the intersection for Fossil Creek Road, which led to the interstate one direction and forest the other. A few years ago, after planing a camping trip there with my son, I learned the creek was named because of how its calcium rich waters fossilize everything that falls into it, thus preserving old extinct lifeforms as tiny travertine impressions. I also learned the creek was one of the largest suppliers of the travertine used by my clients in the construction industry to tile the floors of upscale remodels, the same floors we had laid in our own house in Scottsdale before moving. They were the same type of floors my wife and I had before we divorced. The trip with my son was delayed though, because my ex-wife's husband bought tickets to the Dbacks game that weekend, and my son wanted to go. Then, a few years after that, the whole trip was canceled forever when the creek was destroyed in a wildfire.

At the intersection, cars passed by me, their drivers waving a country hello I did not reciprocate.

Idling there, I remembered how I absentmindedly wondered what my friends were doing back home. If they knew what had happened at Tiffany Castro's party two weeks earlier, the last time we had chatted before Dad cut the internet. My friends and I were not the type to be invited to the parties held by the Tiffany Castros of our school, but I knew they would have at least heard about it by then, heard who went off into the bathrooms and closets and did all the things we were still waiting to do. The things I knew I would never do stuck watching elk and javelina in the forrest.

Tiffany Castro sells real estate now. I see her half-smiling face on signs around the Valley. During my divorce I contacted her to help me find a new place to live. After I settled on a condo, we friended each other on the internet and met for coffee. We slept together a few times, and texted for a few weeks, before I stopped answering.

At the intersection I aimed the quad toward the interstate while more cars passed by. I knew even with a full tank of gas that the quad wouldn't make it the twenty miles down the mountain to Payson, let alone Scottsdale eighty miles beyond that, but it didn't matter. On that day, I would have tried out of spite. I would have seen just how far I could have taken that stupid ATV, how lost I could really make myself, before Dad had to come and attempt a rescue. And as I revved the engine and made up my mind to do it, gun the damn thing and go, I swore to myself that I would never be like him. I promised I would never let myself be as stupid my father.

And then the Bronco came around the bend.

The Bronco's engine was throaty and through its exhaust I saw a *For Sale* sign taped to its cracked rear window as it passed. It didn't list a price, but with all that rust I knew it didn't matter. As I sat idling on a brand new four-wheel ATV purchased right off the dealership floor, I knew there was no price my father wouldn't pay if it meant he could finally believe I had embraced this new life he wanted for us. If I finally turned my back for good on the life he had made me abandon. I could tell him a quad just wasn't enough. That an old Bronco was what I *really* needed to get out of the house. And

watching the Bronco drive off, I even considered telling him we could restore it together if at first he wasn't convinced. Just the two of us, tinkering with carburetors like we knew what we were doing. And for a moment I laughed at that idea, because I thought maybe it might actually happen, maybe we would actually work on it, because with all that rust it probably would need some work before I could drive it home to Scottsdale over my dad's dead body at the first chance I got.

And so the Bronco passed and I tried to follow it, but a slow moving Cadillac came up after it, with two other cars tailgating it. In that order we drove single file for almost two miles, the Bronco getting smaller and smaller past the totem pole someone had erected in their yard, and the old territorial school house which is now a state park. Smaller until I couldn't see it anymore. Until finally, mercifully, the Cadillac came to a full-stop just to make a right-hand turn, and while the other cars waited patiently for it, I crossed the yellow lines and took off. There was no sign of the Bronco up by the mansion being built near the cut off for the forest, nor past the cattle guard and goat ranch, where the elevation dropped and the pines gave way to brush.

There was still no sign of the Bronco a mile later, where a sharp turn in the road was lined by a dented guard rail. I pulled up to the rail and peered over it, a straight fall into a canyon and seven--I counted--burnt-out cars splayed along the walls. And then, and I know this part is almost impossible to believe, but the squawk from a parrot startled me. A parrot, green and pink, was perched on the yellow caution sign which displayed a car in frozen free fall. At first I didn't even think about the bird and only wondered if the sign had been installed after that first car went over, or if it had always been there. If drivers just kept repeating the same mistakes over and over again. But then the parrot squawked its choppy, high slurred whistle again, its song completely out of place among those mountain shrubs, and just as I became aware of how a parrot like that wasn't supposed to be in altitudes like these, it fluttered off the sign. It glided over the canyon road, where a flash of orange caught my attention, a

cloud of smoke trailing the Bronco before it disappeared again around a canyon wall.

Now, there's probably a story worth telling about me driving down that road barely wide enough for the ATV, and how I had to dodge full-sized pickups racing up around blind turns, but it's not important. Not for the events of that day. What is important is this: I chased the Bronco all the way down to the canyon floor. I followed it from the ridge, where the road was lined with mountain shrub; through its belly, where Saguaros grew in the canyon's sheer desert walls; to its floor, where a line of cottonwoods, sycamores, and mesquites followed the path of the creek and divided the canyon like a leafy seam. Where under that canopy of trees was hidden away a regular garden of Eden.

Kids splashed in that creek and their parents warned them not to wander off, and I stood as I rode past them because I thought I looked cool doing that. I thought I looked more experienced riding that thing than I was. However, I quickly sat back down once I saw the forest ranger's Tahoe at one of the creek's defunct power stations, the ranger looking over a map spread across the Tahoe's hood while he spoke into the radio at his shoulder, the creek raging through the breakers behind him. Years later, when planning that trip that never happened with my son, I learned the creek as I saw it that day was relatively new, its body having been dammed up nearly a century before to provide power to the mines in Jerome. I learned it was only allowed to take back its natural course a few years before this day I am describing, when the dam was decommissioned after the mines bled dry and production moved to the next mine in the next town in the next state over.

A short while later I came upon an old stone bridge, and the Bronco was parked on its other side. One of its tires was propped up on a boulder, like how the dealerships in Scottsdale displayed their Hummers. My father had actually bought one for my mother--my mother forcing him to take it back when he drove it home--after the fight before the fight before we moved. I tried parking the quad on a boulder behind the Bronco in the same way, but I couldn't get the wheel to stay on the rock and the

quad kept skidding back so I just parked it and pulled the keys from the ignition.

Inside the Bronco, a fly crawled over a Big Gulp and a dreamcatcher hung from the mirror. A pair of cutoff denim shorts were bunched up on the floorboard next to a few battered Louis L'Amour paperbacks. Trash bags covered the backseat, and a man in aviator sunglasses with hair combed like Elvis laid sprawled in the bed, his tattooed arms crisscrossed over his chest. I froze and waited for him to ask what I was doing, why I was snooping around his car, who the hell are you and what the fuck do you want? But he just laid there like a statue until the fly landed on his face and he snorted and rolled over.

At the creek a man's voice yelled *Geronimo!* and there was a splash followed by laughter. I followed the laughter down a trail of old cigarette butts and sun-bleached beer cans to where a girl in a bikini sat at the water's edge, the girl laughing as the guy in the creek splashed her, the guy stopping splashing, and smiling, once he saw me.

"Can I help you?" the guy said, and he ran his hands down his beard. The girl looked over her shoulder at me, and my stomach plummeted. I couldn't tell if she was smiling or that was just the way she always looked, and so my stomach kept plummeting because I couldn't look away from her. Because I needed to know that smile. "What's up?" the guy said.

"I was just wondering if that was your truck up there?" I said. I made sure to look at the guy when I said it. "The Bronco? The one for sale?" From the corner of my eye I could tell the girl was still watching me, still smiling or not.

"Why, Willy finally die in the back of it?" the guy said. He swam to the bank, his soaked camo shorts sliding down past his pubic hair as he came out of the water. "Cuz if he did, I don't know what you're talking about." The girl smiled at that, and the difference between that and the way she looked before was obvious. "What can we do you for?" the guy said, and he reached into the denim purse and pulled out a cigarette.

"I just wanted to know how much you were selling it for?" I said.

The guy tapped his cigarette against his wet palm. "Ten grand and she's yours," he said. He put the cigarette in his mouth and nodded a few times, as if considering it. "Okay, eight. Five. How about two?"

"Told you we need take down that sign," the girl said. "Selling that thing's gonna be nothing but more trouble."

The guy shrugged and flicked his lighter. He wiped his nose from the heat and exhaled, his smoke finding its way over everything.

Before that day, I had smoked exactly one cigarette in my life, after my friend snuck it from his mother's purse back in Scottsdale. But I had smoked it too quickly and puked, and my friend's mother caught me on my knees hugging her toilet. She had knelt next to me and patted my back while I vomited, and at her gesture I looked up at her when I finally finished, her towering over me with a sort of smirk. But then she moved my hair from my face--I looked so much like my dad, everyone used to say--and her smile vanished. A few nights later my father actually grounded me for it--"Smoking at my friend's house?" he had asked incredulously, as if no one could have ever done anything worse--but he had waited to punish me until after my mother left for the store, then quickly relinquished on that punishment after I asked how he had found out? After I asked him when he had started talking to my friend's mother?

As the smoke made its way to me at the creek, my throat instantly tightened from the memory of it, and I became dizzy and nauseous. In retrospect, I know now that I should have used my sickness as an excuse and said "thank you" and gotten back on the quad and drove home. Or tried to drive home, if I hadn't used all the gas on my trip down the canyon, which I wouldn't discover until later. If I had tired to leave though, I could have known I was out of gas earlier and flagged down a ranger and had them haul me up the road and back home, and wouldn't that have been a sight for my father to see, a law officer bringing his son home without the brand new quad he had just been gifted? But by mother's estimate, it would have probably been too late for that, too late for my father to peer

over his glasses and see me. And anyway, I didn't leave. Instead the girl stopped smiling and I wanted it back. I would have chased that need anywhere just to get that smile back.

"Your friend's not dead," I said as the smoke drifted away. With the cigarette dangling from his lip, the guy raised an eyebrow. "In the truck? He's just sleeping is all."

"Good to know," the guy said.

As the guy took another drag, a squawk echoed overhead and another parrot, this one green and yellow, landed on a branch floating in the water. I knew nothing about birds then--I still don't, they all might as well be pigeons--but I had never seen a bird like that before, a parrot in the wild, let alone two in one day, and even at sixteen I knew it was something to take notice. Years later, when I told my wife this story when we first started dating, she had given me a half smile before returning to her spaghetti. "Oh, a parrot, that's interesting," she had said. But when I've told this story to the other women I've dated, I've slept with, someone inevitably whispers against my pillow that what I am describing is a lovebird. But I could not have seen a lovebird that day, let alone two, they tell me. Maybe in Scottsdale, they say, where flocks have flourished since someone released a pair for one reason or another forty years ago. But not in the mountains. Not at Fossil Creek. And while I argue that I saw what I saw, that maybe they were the same bird, maybe from a different flock than the ones in the Valley, I'm always told no. I'm told lovebirds always linger wherever they were released. And I'm told every lovebird in Arizona can be traced back to that moment when those first two were let free years earlier.

The guy flicked his cigarette butt into the creek. At that point, I remember trying to decide on what to say or do next, and the girl watched me trying to decide, and the guy kept watching the water. I didn't want to leave, but I didn't know what else to say, do, and the girl's non-smile was too much for me to stand. So I turned back toward the quad, but then for some reason the girl asked if I wanted to stay. "You can hang out," she said, and I didn't move

until the guy looked over his shoulder at me, sized me up and then nodded, grudgingly.

"Chaz," he said as I came over. "This is Addy."

"Adelaide," the girl said.

"Michael," I said, even though only my parents called me that.

"Good to meet you, Mikey," Chaz said. He shook my hand, my knuckles cracking inside his grip. "So what brings you to the creek?" he said, not letting go. "Little skinny dipping? Little forest jerking? Getting yourself a taste of some mother nature?"

I tried to laugh naturally. "I saw your Bronco when you drove through Strawberry."

"And what brings you to Strawberry?"

"I live there."

"And what brings you to live here?"

"I don't know," I said, still trying to sound natural.

"You don't know much, do you Mikey?"

"Leave him be," Adelaide said.

Chaz squinted, or scowled, I couldn't tell which. "I'm just giving Mikey shit, is all," he said, and let go. "Right Mikey?"

My heartbeat rushed through my fingers. "Right," I said.

"Must be fun living up here," Adelaide said. She looked up at all the trees. The creek. The lovebird was gone. "All this nature and everything? It's great."

"We just moved here," I said. "But it's all right."

"Where'd you move from?"

"Phoenix," I said, because I thought Phoenix sounded more worldly than Scottsdale.

"The oyster of America," Chaz said. He pulled some grass at his heel and threw it into the water. "And what brought you to Phoenix?" he asked, but before I could say I was born there, he said he was just joking. Then, as if fed up with something, he wiped his hands down his shorts and stood. He stepped around us, his toes long and hairy, and disappeared into the bushes. He was gone only a second before he yelled *Geronimo!*, and swung out into the creek from a rope tied to a tree. "Come

on in," he said when he resurfaced, but I could tell he was only speaking to Adelaide. "The water's wet, baby," he said, and splashed us, but the water only hit me.

"Knock it off," Adelaide said.

Chaz laughed and put up his hands like he hadn't done anything. Adelaide ignored him. "Whatever," he said, and he took a long backstroke that carried him across the creek. On the other side, he pulled himself ashore, his shorts sliding down his butt.

"Your boyfriend's cool," I said as he stomped off into the bushes.

"If he wasn't passed out, you'd see you were wrong." Then, when she saw I didn't understand, "My boyfriend's the one passed out in the car. Chaz is just our business associate."

I sat down cross-legged next to her. "Oh," I said. Mindlessly, my fingers picked at the grass. Adelaide hugged her knees. "You guys from Phoenix too?" I said.

"Willy and I are from New York," she said. "But we've been in L.A. the last couple months. That's where we hooked up with Chaz."

"You've lived in New York *and* L.A.?" I said.

"It's not as glamorous as it sounds."

"You haven't lived in Strawberry yet."

That made her smile again, which made me smile. And I kept smiling, and she kept smiling at my smiling, and then her smile turned into that half-smile of her's, and before I could do or say something, anything, to push it back into full one, into a laugh even, to make a joke about my life compared to hers, to make her feel sympathy and pity and love for me, Chaz yelled *Banzai, assholes!* and swung out over the creek. Adelaide got up and tried to run before the splash hit us while I just sat there and got soaked, spellbound by her running.

"Looks like I made you all wet," Chaz said when he came up again.

Adelaide swore and wiped away the water from her body, her arms and stomach and chest, and I looked away because I thought that was the gentlemanly thing to do. "It looks to me like you're just out there stroking by yourself," I said to Chaz before thinking. Behind me, I got my laugh.

"What was that?" Chaz said. He swam up and splashed me. Laughing, I tried to get up and run too, but he splashed me more and the rocky bank was smooth and I slipped. I fell and he didn't stop splashing me. The water gushed in my mouth and down my throat, like vomiting in reverse. Snot oozed over my lips, splash, splash, and just when I wished Chaz would keep going and wash my face clean before Adelaide saw me, or drown me outright if she did, he stopped. "Looks like you're all wet now too," he said.

Adelaide called him an asshole and asked if I was all right. Over my coughing I heard Chaz pull himself out of the water. "Hey," he said as he approached us. "Hey, it's just water," he said, and without any warning he slapped me on my back with an open palm.

"Knock it off," Adelaide said.

"I'm okay," I said, and I turned around so Chaz couldn't hit me again. Tears welled in my eyes and I prayed they wouldn't fall. "I'm fine."

"See," Chaz said. He put his arm around me. Despite having come straight from the water, he still reeked of B.O. "Mikey here's all right."

"Just leave him be," Adelaide said.

"What am I doing?"

"Just knock it off, okay?"

Chaz put his knuckles on his boney hips as if in thought. He flicked his tongue against his lip. "I got an idea," he said at last, and he went to the denim purse.

"Whatever you doing," Adelaide said, "don't."

"I'm trying to fix things, okay?" Chaz said as he rummaged through her stuff. He pulled out a prescription bottle. Instantly, the air stank when he cracked it open and pulled out a joint. "Think of this as a peace pipe, okay? We're in Arizona, right? The Wild West?"

"I'm pretty sure that's just a bunch of bullshit you white guys made up," Adelaide said. "The OK Corral only lasted something like thirty seconds."

Chaz waved her off and lit the joint. Adelaide went to him, her fingers extended. She took it and held it like an actress smoking in an old black-and-white movie. My wife used to hold her cigarettes the same way before she gave up smoking. The woman

from my office with whom my wife caught me on our living room floor, the travertine tiles cold and without give, smoked that same way when we worked together and went over my client's accounts. Adelaide exhaled and her face was of pure contentment. Everything around us smelled like shit. Downstream, the ranger's Tahoe went over the bridge.

"I'm cool," I said when Adelaide offered me the joint. Just their secondhand smoke made me want to gag. I pushed out a little cough like I was still choked up from the water. Smoke streamed from Adelaide's nose as she passed the joint back to Chaz.

"You know what your problem is, Mikey?" Chaz said. He lowered himself into a squat and fell back onto the grass.

"Chaz..." Adelaide warned.

"You're too stiff," he said. "I don't even know you and I can see that about you. You're too rigid."

"And how's that?" I said, but I responded too quickly. Too cleanly. I forced out another cough. Chaz winked and wagged the joint at me. He passed it back to Adelaide.

"Why'd you move all the way out to the middle of no where, Mikey-Mike?" he said.

"Could we talk about something else?" Adelaide said. She blew on the tip.

"My parents made me," I said.

"And I bet you just love it out here, don't you?" he said. "Just skinny dipping and forest jerking until your heart's content?"

"Anything?" Adelaide said.

"No," I snorted.

"Well, why not?" Chaz said. Adelaide rolled her eyes. Lying in the grass, Chaz tucked a hand behind his head. He ran the dirty fingertips of his other hand over his gross, wet chest hairs. Adelaide came and sat next to me. "I mean, I would," Chaz said, watching her. "I'd be jerking all over the place, this tree and that. Getting myself in deep with mother nature." He made a fist and flicked his fingers, then did it again and made squirting noises. Adelaide rested her head on my shoulder. Chaz's one hand kept rubbing his chest, his other flicking. Adelaide put her foot next to mine, her's tanned and

tiny, mine pale and clunky. At the time my foot was the same size as my father's, who stood six inches taller than me. My mother used to assure me that I would grow into them soon enough. I would be just like him before I knew it. "This and that," Chaz said. Adelaide grabbed my pinky toe with her big toe, and we laughed and Chaz sat up suddenly and asked if I had ever had a brownie before?

"Huh?" I said.

"You know, a *brownie*," Chaz said. His pupils flickered. "Since you obviously don't like smoking." Adelaide remembered she held the joint, but it was out. She passed it back to Chaz.

"I don't mind smoking," I said.

"It's cool," Chaz said. He again wiped his nose from the heat of the lighter. "That's why I'm asking about the brownie. I'm trying to help you here. Trying to get you *unstuck*."

"They fuck you up," Adelaide said. She blinked hard and laughed. She hummed a song and kicked her feet out and put her head in my lap. "They fucking paralyze you."

"See, the secret's in the butter," Chaz said, his eyes rising from Adelaide to me. The joint was so small it looked like there was nothing between his thumb and forefinger. "Because you can't just stir in weed and brownie mix together like some asshole," he said. "You got to stir it in with the butter and get it all nice and melted. You got to stir it, and stir it, *and stir it*, and you're about stirring it so long you're wondering if the juice is even worth the squeeze. You're putting in so much effort, you wonder if it's ever gonna pay off." His eyes returned to Adelaide, and he dabbed the joint on the ground then opened his mouth and placed the remnants on his tongue. "Then you mix it in," he said, and swallowed. "That way, you get all of that lingering high without any of the taste."

Adelaide closed her eyes and rolled over, her face in my crotch. I held my breath and hoped my stomach didn't grumble or the tightness against my leg didn't turn into something more. Chaz ran his tongue across his teeth. "We got one up in the car if you want to go grab it."

Adelaide adjusted her head and I felt it move.

"Yes," I said, and stood. Adelaide jerked awake.

"In the cooler on the backseat," Chaz said, and he reached into the denim purse and pulled out the Bronco keys. He tossed me them. "Under the bags."

Adelaide rubbed her eye with her fist.

"Wait," she said. She crawled over to Chaz and took her purse. "I don't want this getting more wet." Hunched over, I came and took it, Chaz's eyes going from my crotch to me.

"Hurry back," he said, then smiled as Adelaide rested her head on his chest.

I couldn't stop my erection, and once I was out of sight I sat on a rock by the creek and waited it out. I watched empty beer cans dance in the root system of a tree half grown in the water, half on the bank. Years later, when I would plan that trip with my son, the trash had gotten so out of hand that the state started requiring permits to come down to the water, now a state park. And after my son went with his stepfather to the Dbacks game and my permits for our trip expired, I took him to San Diego instead. I planned everything, down to the last minute, where we would stay, what we would do, but on the first day at the ocean my son stepped on a beer bottle buried in the sand. And as I pulled the glass from his foot, he cried and kept saying that he liked his stepfather's pool better.

When I finally made it back up to the road, the forest ranger's Tahoe and a highway patrol cruiser had blocked in the Bronco. The ranger went through the plastic bags in the Bronco's backseat. He pulled out clothes with tags still on them, and blenders and food processors still in their boxes. The patrolman ran the Bronco's tags. Adelaide's boyfriend was still asleep only in the back of the highway patrol cruiser, as if he had been simply carried from one car to the next. The ranger asked the patrolman for a list of items reported as shoplifted from the Valley. The voice on the radio said the Bronco was stolen out of Yuma.

Silently, I slid down the trail. I hid in the bushes and waited for the officers to follow me until I was sure they would not come. I rushed back to the clearing, to the creek, back to Adelaide and Chaz. I

wanted to tell them what was happening, talk about what to do next. I wanted to come up with a plan to fix things, make everything right, and at that age I was convinced I could do anything based upon my want. But when I came back, I didn't say a word. Our discussion never happened. Instead, Adelaide didn't even see me because her eyes were squeezed shut. Her face was contorted as she bite her bottom lip and knelt over Chaz, his camo shorts bunched up around his ankles, his hands squeezing her breasts, her nipples between his fingers, their movements together so in sync in their repetitious back-and-forth that watching them from the bushes, dumbfounded, I felt like they would go on like that forever.

I was still clutching Adelaide's denim purse when I came out from the trees and onto Fossil Creek Road. The patrolman stopped looking in the Bronco when he noticed me.

"This your car?" he said, and he stepped in my path with his hands on his gun belt.

"No," I said. My face was flushed and my eyes red.

"What were you doing down there?"

"Swimming," I said. My clothes were still soaked from Chaz's splashing but I felt ridiculous lying. I wasn't used to lying yet, I would understand later.

"Anyone with you?"

The ranger stepped out from behind the Bronco and also put his hands on his belt.

"Just some people fucking," I said.

"Excuse me?" the patrolman said.

"Just some--that's why I came up. I went down there, but..."

"You know who they are?" the ranger asked.

"They own this car?" the patrolman said.

"What's in the bag?" the ranger asked.

The denim sagged between my fingers.

"My lunch," I said, outdoing my previous lie so well I realized it could become habit. "My dad packed it for me." The two officers turned to each other. The patrolman asked where I was going and I pointed to the quad. After a moment they stepped back to let me pass, and the ranger nodded for the patrolman to follow him down to the trail.



I had to remember what my father said about rocking the quad back-and-forth to get it in gear. The motor sputtered, but finally, it started. It kicked dust as I turned it around and headed back the way I had come, passing the power station where the kids had splashed in the water. But by then, everyone was gone for the day.

As I headed to the road back up the canyon, the quad ran out of gas. I tried restarting it, but the motor just tick ticked, and so I swung my leg off the seat and I pushed the quad down into the bushes near the water. I hid there and waited for the sirens I imagined would come and catch me in my lie. For Chaz to wade downstream and beat the shit out of me. For Adelaide to find me hugging her purse by the water's edge. But no one came and instead I just sat by the water and waited for nothing.

Later that night, a different ranger would find me sleeping by the creek. We left the quad where it died and he took me up the canyon in his Silverado. When we pulled into my driveway, his headlights lit up a note taped to our door. I had to squint to read the letter in the darkness, the letter written in my mother's hand, which instructed me to "Go straight to the Bradwells as soon as you read this." The Bradwells lived next door, and after they whispered with the ranger while I sat in his truck, they drove me down to the medical center in Payson where my mother waited for me with my father in a white tiled room.

We had only known the Bradwells a month by then, but still they drove down to the Valley for the funeral. Still, they mourned my father. No one, however, mourned him more than that former office manager of his, my mother stopping in the middle of aisle on our way from the casket, her hand squeezing my arm though my jacket as she very calmly told that weeping woman, "I'm sorry for your loss." Ironically, my wife said those exact words to me from across the mediator's desk the day our divorce was finalized and custody dispute settled, after she caught me on our floor with the woman from my office. After she had caught me in all the other places with all other women, all of them giving that same sorrowful half-crooked smile the moment we were

discovered. "I'm sorry you decided never to grow up," my wife told me.

But before that though, on the banks of Fossil Creek, I opened Adelaide's bag. I pulled out her cigarettes. Tampons and tissue paper. Tic Tacs and chapstick. An old Mickey Mouse wristwatch. I opened the prescription bottle and took out the joints. I lit one with Chaz's lighter and coughed. I kept coughing as I blew smoke over the water, the smoke lingering here then not, everywhere then nowhere. Then the leaves above me rustled and the birds sang while a stupid feeling overtook me. With my eyes closed and mouth half-open like an idiot, I ran my thumb over the stitching of Adelaide's bag, its golden thread weaved into the fabric to give it the shape of a sagging, cheaply made heart. I balled it up. I tried to make it as small and ruined as possible. Then I stood on uneasy footing and tossed the bag into the creek, losing my balance in the act and falling face first in the water. When I came up, on hands and knees, I watched the bag float for a moment before it was overcome by the current and sank down forever somewhere along that travertine creek bed.

## EROSION

### NATHAN PETTIGREW

I.

"Sucking the head's the best part," her father said to Charles. "Some don't like it, but I don't know how they can call themselves Cajuns."

*Everyone's different*, Crystal would've argued, but she hadn't seen her father in more than two years. Almost an hour into the visit, and the surreal effect of sitting across from the man at his picnic table hadn't worn off. For someone approaching his mid-seventies, Étienne hadn't lost his gift when it came to throwing a crawfish boil.

Still, Crystal couldn't bring herself to eat much from the mountainous pounds of mudbugs on the newspapers. Sprinkled around the red piles of Cajun goodness were mini corn cobs, baby potatoes and quarter-cut lemons.

Even after their decision to leave Trinity Baptist, Étienne had reserved Good Friday for the annual family boil—a two-man show in recent years with only her son attending.

Crystal grabbed a napkin to wipe her face. Humidity in Terrebonne Parish was always punishing, always unbearable.

"Ma," Charles said, reading a text. "Can we leave an hour early? I have to meet up with Travis."

Crystal wanted to hug him. "Of course, honey."

Étienne snapped a crabby look at him. "You're leaving, now, sport?"

"Not just yet, Grandpa."

Charles reached into the cooler for another Stella.

"That's your third one," Crystal said.

"So, what? You plan on letting me drive home?"

"Not a chance," she said.

Watching Charles pop a spicy wet morsel into his mouth, Crystal second-guessed her reluctance to dig in, wanting to dip the lean meat from a tail into her father's *rémoulade* sauce.

Charles returned to her ear while she lit a cigarette instead. "How are you doing?"

Crystal nodded for Charles to drop it—but so far so good. Aside from the jab about her not sucking

the heads of mudbugs, Étienne hadn't made any comments about her parenting skills or her son's sexuality.

Grandpa never did, Charles had promised when pitching the boil.

"Aw, Christ," Étienne said, patting down his shirt pocket. "Sport. Go inside and fetch my smokes, will you? Look next to my books."

"Sure thing, Grandpa."

"Hold on," Étienne said, swinging a leg over the bench. "I gotta hit the head."

"Wait here," Crystal whispered to Charles, stubbing her cigarette out.

The house smell was the same: a battle between potpourri plug-ins and mothballs. Her father's living room was quiet as a casket. Étienne owned a flatscreen now, living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century—but the picture of Crystal as a child remained on display.

She froze when the toilet flushed, her heart racing when her father's sandals flopped against the hall floor.

Meeting her eyes, Étienne stopped where he stood.

"Thanks for agreeing to this," Crystal said.

"My pleasure," he said. "Let's go outside and enjoy ourselves, shall we?"

"Fine, but we should talk about May."

"Okay, so let's talk about it," he said.

"The high school sent me tickets. You can meet me if you prefer, but I'm hoping you'll come by for pictures."

"For the kid? Of course," he said.

"Charles will be so happy to hear that," Crystal said. "He doesn't know it yet, but I plan on giving him the Camry."

Étienne looked surprised. "You can afford that?"

"The bank gave me a promotion."

"Well, congratulations."

"Still playing cards at the post office?" she asked.

"Not since the retirement party," he said.

"Look, I'd like to help with catering."

"That's—very generous of you," Crystal said.

"Thank you."

Étienne waved her off. "With the kid going to college, we probably won't get to have another one of these."

"There's always spring break," she said.

"An exciting time for a kid his age," Étienne said, staring at his sandals to hide his smile.

Going outside, Crystal stopped. "You know, now that we're talking, I'm thinking we should get together after he graduates."

"For what?" Étienne asked.

She spun around. "So, that's it? You're going through the rest of your life harboring sore feelings?"

"I didn't say that, Crystal. You want to go on ignoring reality? Fine. But I live with it."

"You know what? Forget it," she said.

She left him and found that Charles had stolen a cigarette.

"What are you doing, Charles? Where are yours?"

"Forgot 'em in the car," he said.

"What are you doing smoking that crap?" Étienne asked, offering a menthol.

Crystal lit up, smoking with her son for the first time. Charles had started at fifteen and far too young in her eyes. She'd refused to let him light one in her presence.

But today? Charles was an adult among three, all smoking in silence.

"Well, I guess we better get going," Crystal said, putting her cigarette out.

She circled the picnic table, picking up napkins.

"Leave it," Étienne said.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Come on," he said, opening the gate. "I'll walk y'all to the front."

Adjusting her rearview mirror, Crystal made a rolling stop at the end of her father's street.

"Seriously, Ma? And you're worried about me driving?"

"Stop signs in this neighborhood are excessive," she said. She reached for a cigarette at the next one.

"Well, you got through it," Charles said, opening the glove box to get his menthols.

"He's coming by for pictures before the ceremony," Crystal said.

"Awesome, Ma. Thanks."

A right on Grand Caillou Road was the faster way home. Crystal made a left instead.

"You're taking the bridge home?"

"The noise in that tunnel," she said. "It's awful."

"It's whatever," Charles said.

"You should've seen him," Crystal said, flicking her ash. "He caught himself smiling at me."

"Grandpa?"

"You have to remember," she said. "He wanted to go to college and could've been the first in our family to attend if not for Vietnam."

"That's it, Ma. Use Grandpa to guilt trip me. Seriously. I've heard this story a million times."

"No, I get you've made up your mind, but when did you plan on telling him?"

"After I graduate. Okay?"

"I just don't think he's going to take it well," Crystal said, blowing through a yellow light at an empty intersection.

"It's not his life," Charles said, "and I'd rather take my chances offshore where the money's at."

"He just wants the best for you, honey, and I—I hate to see you rushing off into the oil field. Look what happened to Ms. Cheryl's son."

"He doesn't want the best for me, Ma. He wants to live through me vicariously. But if Grandpa wants to go to college so bad, then he should go. Seriously. What's stopping him?"

Crystal stared at her son's profile, intrigued. "Ma."

She steered back to her lane. "Sorry. So, how's Travis these days?"

"He's doing fine."

"Didn't you tell me he was having some trouble?" Crystal asked.

"That's all behind him, now," Charles said.

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Travis was cleaning his room, picking up clothes when the text came in from Charles: *I'm outside smoking, dickface.*

He hurried to the kitchen window in time to watch Crystal drive away in her Camry. Travis never felt judged by the woman but couldn't help feeling embarrassed whenever she dropped off Charles. These weren't the brick houses of Lisa Park. Mobile homes in West Gardens were made from tin—most contaminated with spreading spots of rust. White folks wouldn't be caught dead here. Residents weren't black or Houma natives or Vietnamese, but a mix of two or all three.

Throughout his entire life, bullies had called Travis a *Sabine*.

He fist-bumped Charles outside. "You good to drive? I gotta roll."

"Hell yeah," Charles said, taking the keys.

Travis used his insurance papers to break his buds on while Charles reversed from the gravel.

"So, how'd it go today?" he asked.

"Could've gone worse," Charles said, shifting into drive. "How'd therapy go?"

"Fucker wasn't open because of Good Friday and all, but I see him next week."

"That works," Charles said. "And the meds?"

"You can't tell?"

"No, I definitely can. Just making sure you still had some. Has Amy called back?"

"Not yet," Travis said. "What about the new guy you're messing with?"

"A one-time thing," Charles said.

"Cool," Travis said. "Hey, burn with me tonight."

"Not on a work night, brah."

"But we've got this down, brah. You seriously can't handle it?"

Charles ignored him.

"Whatever," Travis said. "Stop at the store. Need more rolling papers."

Their routine was simple: Travis' older brother would come home from working offshore with a monster duffel bag for Travis and Charles to empty, repackage and distribute on the dancefloor of Earhart's Bermuda East.

Charles had made the pit-stop at Shopping Bag, almost hitting a biker when trying to pull out on West Park.

"Fucker was going at least eighty," Travis said. "Another second and he would've been dead. Us too, maybe."

Charles lit a menthol before looking both ways.

"You're good?" Travis asked.

"As good as your mama's pussy," Charles said.

"Sick fuck. Come on. What are you thinking right now?"

Charles pulled out. "I'm thinking Earhart's Bermuda East, babe."

The East stood like a beacon on a remote road between sugarcane fields off Bayou Black. Getting there meant a tour of the nicest backyards in Terrebonne. Rich kids at school called it "the bayou side," each yard showing off a brick boat deck under white lights with lavish patio furniture putting the couches and coffee tables in Lisa Park to shame. Never mind West Gardens.

But whether a patron arrived from Bayou Black, the rural farmlands of Bayou Blue or the three fishing bayous, all walks of life in Terrebonne were welcome at the East, and Travis loved the place for that reason alone.

Bikers who preferred Aerosmith held on to the first floor—a traditional scene with pool tables and dartboards. Two stairways in opposite corners allowed millennials to access the second floor.

The DJ had taken the stage, male and female dancers shaking their asses on the giant speakers at each end. Flashed sporadically with red and purple, Travis and Charles didn't have to wait long for their contact to emerge. A hulk who loved to show off his muscles, Maurice had gone with a sparkling green vest tonight.

Charles extended a hand for a quick finger-snap and pulled out his package.

"Sweet Molly," Maurice said, taking the tabs. Travis nudged Charles.

"Right. What about the other thing?" Charles asked, and Maurice took a long look at Travis before sliding a small baggy into his palm.

"Wasn't easy to get," he said.

"And I appreciate it," Travis said. Turning to the bar, he ordered an old fashioned.

Maurice worked fast. Like most Friday nights, it took him less than an hour to reach the entire dancefloor, the customers' eyes now rolling in the backs of their heads.

That was Molly: a rush of numbness and warmth at once, volcanic like an all-body orgasm. Muscles came alive, massaging themselves. Euphoria flushed the nerves, leaving users in a state of empathy while strangers were trusted, and existing friendships became lifelong bonds—or at least for the life of the high.

Travis had flirted with Molly, but Mary Jane remained his true love and he just wished Charles would burn with him on nights like these.

Bass and bright lights consumed the atmosphere, everyone confused when some douchebag tossed firecrackers on the dancefloor.

People were screaming, scattering.

Bodies were dropping.

The firecrackers Travis had heard were gunshots. He reached for Charles, but Charles had fallen, and he wasn't playing dead like they were instructed to do during school drills.

There wasn't a pulse to be found.

Everything happening too fast, yet time slowed down for Travis. His instincts told him to run or get his ass back down, but adrenaline took over.

On his feet now, Travis became an open target until two bouncers tackled the shooter. And just like that, it was over. The most fucked up moment Travis had ever witnessed.

He allowed himself to break, sobbing and wanting to scream with those around him who were still hysterical.

Beneath burning tears, Travis made eye contact with the shooter, meeting his thousand-yard stare. He wanted to strangle to life from those cold blue eyes, fighting to remember that his actions had consequences. He fought to think of others, but when trying to focus on family, Travis thought of Crystal instead, realizing she had no idea.

## II.

The tiny auditorium of Trinity Baptist was jam-packed. Ceiling fans at full speed were stirring the air with strong perfume, bad cologne, and body

odor. Crystal had taken her place in the front pew covering her face until deciding enough was enough. She stood to walk out refusing her father's hand but fell into a state of paralysis when the choir caught the Holy Spirit.

Moved by their joyful sound, Crystal slowly found her seat.

Bouquets of purple and gold irises surrounded the altar. Her favorite flower.

Charles had shared a certain fondness for the iris but preferred the white magnolias that he'd called "bright spots along the bayous."

Pastor Coletti offered prayers and even praise for Charles, calling him a well-liked young man worthy of the Lord's forgiveness. A far cry from the Sunday services when he condemned those who shared his "sin" while quoting the King James and calling it "an abomination."

Having to endure his preaching made Crystal squirm in her pew. Focusing on the irises, she made it to the end of the service and held it together for those who couldn't. She laughed and smiled when others had jokes and stories to tell, even forgave the ones who showed their faces for social reasons.

This was Terrebonne, after all.

Close friends and family arrived at her house to repeat condolences before clearing out as quickly as social etiquette allowed—but not before devouring the catfish that Crystal had fried up in droves. She'd served the freshwater jewels with her famous white beans and rice, glad to see she hadn't lost her touch while rinsing empty foil pans beneath her faucet.

Left with enough finger sandwiches to last a lonely week of binge-eating, Crystal flung a garbage bag in the air, and again, swinging it wide open.

"They sure did love the catfish," Étienne said, gentle with her screen door after seeing off the last of her guests.

"Yep."

"You're throwing the rest away?" he asked.

Étienne had paid for catering, and while Crystal appreciated the gesture, she couldn't stand the sight of her father in her kitchen.

"You didn't have to go all out," she said, driving utensils into the dishwasher.

"Jesus, Crystal. I loved him, too."

"As long as he wasn't himself," she said.

"It's not like I shut the kid out," Étienne said.

"So, what!" Crystal yelled. "You shut me out instead!"

She found her cigarettes next to the marble ashtray on the coffee table.

"You're the one who—who let him make that decision," he said, following her.

Crystal lit up and exhaled. "It wasn't a decision, you asshole. It's who he was. You want to talk about his decisions? Well, he wasn't going to college. Okay? His decision."

She knew the look in her father's eyes all too well—the one that had always seen the worst in her.

Étienne patted down his shirt pocket, finding his menthols. "The hell are you talking about?"

"He was afraid of disappointing you," she said. "After seeing how you treated me? And why are you smoking? I don't even know why you're here."

"Are you done?" he asked, lighting up.

"I am," she said. "Whatever this is where you want nothing to do with me. I'm over it. So, you can leave, now."

"You called me a bigoted monster," Étienne said. "Remember that? And just for the record, I never had a problem with who Charles was. I had a problem with you letting him be so open about it. This is South Louisiana, and I wanted to protect him is all."

"Well, you sure did a bang-up job," she said, flicking her ash.

"See that, Crystal? You're the one who's hateful. Just like you claiming I cut you out, but you never picked up the phone, either. It takes two."

She took another drag before sliding the ashtray toward Étienne.

"I'm—sorry," she said. "For all of it, but what are you so afraid of?"

"Afraid of?" Étienne asked.

"I haven't survived the same horrors you have," Crystal said, "but our worst nightmare's come true. So, tell me. What are you so afraid of? Because you don't confront things. You disconnect."

"I watched men die in unimaginable ways," he said, pacing. "Only they didn't call us heroes back then. They spit in our faces. Even those of us who were too poor to avoid the draft."

Crystal caught herself tearing up, wiping her eyes. "Times have changed."

"Yeah, I get it," Étienne said. "I come from a different time, so excuse me if I can't relate to these little shits in Starbucks who whine on their cell phones about being so oppressed or offended. I mean, look at all the shit we took for leaving the church. I can't think of one good reason why you decided to hold the funeral there."

Crystal took a quick drag and exhaled. "Like you said. This is Terrebonne."

"Who cares, Crystal? Like you said. Our worst nightmare's come true. Not theirs."

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Older homes in Lisa Park were one-story brick houses with carports instead of garages—but still a sight to text about compared to West Gardens. Travis showed up at Crystal's house a week after the funeral, parking alongside the ditch running through her front yard.

Knocking on her screen door, Travis found her wind chimes failing to calm his butterflies.

Crystal smiled when appearing in the kitchen and stepped out to give him a hug.

"Thanks for stopping by," she said. "Come on in."

Travis followed her into the living room, relaxed by the violet fragrance.

"Have a seat. I'll make you some lemonade."

Admiring the freshly cut irises on her coffee table, Travis fell into a daydream until Crystal returned holding a Saints tray with the lemonade next to a glass of bourbon.

"How are you holding up?" she asked.

"Ms. Picou," Travis said, taking the bourbon.

"How are *you* holding up?"

She set the tray on the coffee table and sat in the antique armchair across from his.

"You're an adult, now, Travis. So, please. Call me Crystal. And I guess I'm drinking a lot to answer your question."

"Yes, ma'am. I mean—Sorry."

She smiled. "And you?"

"Lots of therapy," Travis said. He sipped the bourbon. "But Charles—well, he was more than just a friend. He was—my brother. If that makes sense."

"Of course, it does," Crystal said.

"Look, you should know," he said. Another sip of bourbon. "We were into some bad shit at the East. But please understand—"

"Why are you telling me this?" Crystal asked.

"This is Terrebonne," Travis said. "Best you hear it from me is all. 'Least you'll understand why."

She nodded. "Go on."

"I used to be that kid. Like the one at the East, but Charles convinced me to try therapy. Even helped pay for it."

He explained how his mother and father didn't believe in therapy. That was for crazy people. Work hard. Stay focused. That was the Geautreaux way—even for pennies.

But the cash Travis brought in from cleaning shoes at a tuxedo warehouse and what Charles had made from cutting lawns wasn't enough to cover therapy.

"And I swear," Travis said, "Charles wanted nothing to do with the money from the East unless it helped me."

"So, you're doing okay now?" Crystal asked.

"I am. Just saying. I was picked on my whole life and wanted to take my brother's gun to school, and Bam! Bam! Bam!"

Flinching, Crystal reached for her chest.

"Are you okay?" Travis asked.

She stood. "I think I—need some time to myself."

"Of course," he said, standing with her.

He could always come back another day.

Behind the wheel, Travis' attention fell to the glove box where he found the small baggy that Maurice had slipped him at the East.

Distracted lately, he'd forgotten to get the stuff out of his car.

*Seriously, brah. How dumb can you be?*

Three hits of this stuff, Charles had promised, and Travis would no longer need therapy. He would have a "breakthrough experience," forever changed, forever relieved of anxiety, depression, and anger.

But therapy was working, and his mother and father could learn to deal with it. They were Geautreaux's, and Travis had survived the worst night of his life. He'd survived watching his best friend lose the ability to interact within a second, the night constantly replaying in his mind and keeping him afraid to go out in public.

A weight had been lifted after visiting Crystal, but Travis still found it hard to swallow without choking up.

He noticed Crystal watching him through her living room window, staying calm and slowly wrapping the DMT between his insurance papers.

Travis didn't wave at Crystal. He turned the key in his ignition, looking ahead.

III.

Crystal entered her son's room finding an unmade bed and a load's worth of dirty clothes on the floor.

She had given him too much freedom, her judgement corrupted by the guilt she'd felt for failing to have a father in his life. But Crystal had carried Charles in her body and bones. She could tell him anything, and Charles never lied to her, making her happy in this messed up world and helping her to survive and smile while doing it. Without Charles, Crystal found her house too hard to breathe in. Part of her had died, after all. Why not the rest of her? Why was God torturing her this way, killing her slowly? It couldn't be because of anything out of Pastor Coletti's mouth. It just couldn't be. That wasn't the God she believed in, yet here He casted His utmost cruelty upon her, His idea of Charles graduating far different from anything she could've ever imagined. Crystal broke down using her son's sheets to wipe her face. Sobbing, she couldn't stop, her mind screaming out.

*Why!? Tell me why!*

She ran to the toilet, losing more of herself.

Crying on the bathroom floor, Crystal stayed so long she thought she might sleep there until the attitude she missed so much brought her to her feet.

"No more," Charles used to say when talking about her refusal to make peace with Étienne. "You have to deal with this."

He was right, even in death. Crystal had to deal, washing her face, thinking of others. Without Charles, Étienne had no one.

And poor Travis—it had taken guts for him to spill his. So, why turn him away? Normal teens didn't go out with the intention of turning nightclubs into Syria. If not mental illness, then what? Why not talk to the ones who'd pulled the triggers? Do research?

Étienne believed the government would disarm the country if these random acts of violence continued. Not that it would make a difference, he'd said. Mass shootings would subside while stabbings and homemade explosives would take over the headlines.

Crystal played Stevie Wonder's "You Are the Sunshine of My Life" on her phone and didn't mind crying to this song, pulling her son's pillows from their Saints cases. She stopped to blow her nose, sobbing again, but was able to move on. She boxed the bedlinen for a donation and filled three garbage bags with clothes from the closet and dresser. She gathered the dirty clothes, noticing the Michael Thomas jersey that Charles had worn on Good Friday was missing.

With The Salvation Army closing soon, Crystal drove to the market instead for more bourbon.

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Étienne dumped his last sip of Stella down the drain and left the bottle in the sink next to the other five. He felt like an old fool when facing the rifles in his Amish gun cabinet. An arsenal that had done jackshit to protect his family, collecting dust. In fact, weapons like these had killed Charles.

Pulling the 700 BDL, Étienne returned to the living room intending to clean her but was startled to see Charles in the backyard peeling mudbugs. Sitting next to him, Crystal was fighting off the humidity with a wad of sweaty napkins. It wasn't the memory come to life that chilled Étienne's spine, but seeing his family disappear into the night.

He aimed and pulled the trigger, watching glass shatter on his living-room floor and back patio.

Stepping outside in his sandals, Étienne found nothing but destruction by his own hands.

Tears fell from his eyes for the first time in two years, his stomach upset and burning when he broke down. His grandson was gone—a ghost now. A memory. Someone he would never see again. And his only daughter had lost her only child. Haunted by guilt, Étienne sought punishment and knelt on the glass shards, feeling like the little boy who his mother would force to kneel on uncooked rice whenever he misbehaved. Watching blood spill from his knees, Étienne didn't move until seeing blue lights flash against his fence and sycamores.

He hurried to the bathroom finding the peroxide, had just torn open some bandages before the knock on his front door.

"Just a minute!"

In clean pajama bottoms, Étienne made it to the door and slid the chain back while unlocking the deadbolt.

"You don't have deputies for this?" he asked.

"Figured I best check on this one myself," Clement said, shaking Étienne's hand. "Got any beer?"

"For the chief of police?" Étienne asked.

"Let me take care of the lights first," Clement said.

The chief did his thing, removing his glasses when seeing the mess inside.

"Good God, Étienne. I get that you're grieving right now, but I've seen you shoot."

Every Sunday for the last decade at the Verdan range on Savanne Road.

"A deputy would've arrested you on the spot," Clement said. "So, whatever this is—I mean, I can't imagine what you're going through, but you have to fix this."

"I'll call a repairman in the morning," Étienne said.

"That too, smartass. How 'bout that beer?"

Clement assumed Étienne still cared about local politics, taking slow sips of his Stella for close to a half-hour before finally leaving.

Étienne swept the glass from the floor and patio. Emptying the gun cabinet, he made three trips to the picnic table where he disassembled his rifles—starting with bolt bodies. He moved on to firing pens and pen springs. He separated the trigger guards,



the barreled actions from stocks, the magazine boxes and trigger assemblies. He polished and secured the parts in his gun cases for a drop-off on Savanne Road, too exhausted for even a menthol.

Still, Étienne couldn't stop counting the circle patterns on his ceiling when trying to sleep.

Allowing himself to stay in bed past six, Étienne stirred his Ovaltine before taking his first sip. Once a morning paper guy, he refused to touch *The Courier* while Charles and ten others continued to make the front page. National news had barely mentioned the incident, as mass shootings had taken a backseat to politics. Either that or an entire country had grown numb to once-unimaginable horrors becoming more common than hurricanes.

Terrebonne at this time of the year was the worst. No football. No more crawfish boils.

Grabbing his keys, Étienne decided to drive to wherever the urge took him. He ignored his stomach on Grand Caillou when catching a whiff of frying oil from the string of seafood joints.

Making a left on Tunnel Boulevard, he lit a menthol and was relaxed almost immediately by the windy sound of so many cars and pickups beneath the Intercoastal Canal.

The sun seemed brighter on the other side, forcing Étienne to lower his visor. He headed north to 90 for I-10 and made a pitstop at Spahr's for a Bloody Mary, the vodka and Tabasco giving him a kick.

Crossing the Luling Bridge, Étienne admired the wide, brown beauty of the Mississippi and the multi-colored barges. Seeing the Superdome at a distance amid the silhouette of the city, Étienne smiled.

Charles had loved the Saints, and the kid had lived to see the home team win a Super Bowl.

Étienne encountered little traffic during brunch hour on Canal Street and saw nothing scary when reaching the campus. Just kids. Students.

*So, what is it, then? What are you so afraid of?*

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Crystal nudged his arm, but Étienne wasn't responding.

"Dad? Are you okay?"

"What? Yeah," he said. "You want another beer?"

She took the Stella. "Well, the crawfish are sure big this year."

"Sure are," Étienne said. He placed a stack of napkins on the picnic table for Crystal.

"Did you have to wait long?" she asked.

"Not, really," he said. "There was a line like everywhere else these days, but I forgot my mask at home and the Shaffer boy was nice enough to bring my order to the car."

The two dug in, peeling tails.

"You're missing out," Étienne said, nodding toward the growing pile of heads in Crystal's platter.

She dipped the meat from a tail into her father's rémoulade sauce and reveled in the spicy burst of heaven before reaching into the cooler for another Stella.

"You're killing me," she said. "Almost an hour, and not a word about Tulane."

"Shit," Étienne said. "With all the millennials running circles around me before this pandemic? Where do I start?"

"Don't tell me you weren't enjoying it," she said.

"Well, I'll say this, Crystal. The kids on campus were a lot nicer than expected."

"See that?" she asked.

Crystal almost smiled, succumbing to guilt for finding a moment where she could exist without thinking about Charles.

## CANDID SHEREE SHATSKY

"Go on now, get dressed," the mother directs her family. "Something nice and festive, it is Christmas after all. The photographer will be here at six o'clock."

The sisters choose the clothes they love best. Arlene wears the lavender satin gown she hasn't worn since crowned prom queen. A rhinestone tiara sits regal on her sprayed hair and the corsage she stores in the refrigerator to keep fresh, she's pinned at her heart. An orchid in a bed of pink carnations, a sprig of baby's breath to balance the exotic and the common. The edge of death tugs at the petals, but a whiff of fragrance still clings after a month cold-wrapped in tissue paper, the flowers dehydrated in a sort of stupefied suspension.

Mary Grace, the older sister lounges in elegant silk pajamas, a birthday gift from her brother Roy, a Navy man stationed somewhere in the South Pacific. She believes the shimmer of her luminous attire enhanced by the twinkling Christmas lights and sparkly glass bulbs is proof undeniable she alone is the light of the home, chosen by God Almighty himself to stave off the dark moods of her family.

Billy, the youngest wears a red shirt with suspenders clipped to his best pants. He slicks back his hair handsome, the style the mother likes. He sits off in the corner, attention deep in a comic book.

The father wears his old Sunday tweed and flicks his dentures in and out waiting to be told what to do. The mother, she decides on the dark navy suit she wears on formal occasions, meaning funerals and weddings; to her both are one and the same, the beginning and end of life once known and yet to live.

The front room of the tiny home serves as a makeshift photo studio. The photographer is the same fellow who takes photographs for the church directory. Stiff one dimensional shots of parishioner passports to heaven. He checks his watch and asks the father, "What time is your son set to call?" The father points to the mother. "Fifteen minutes," she says and counts the time difference on her fingers to make certain. The idea is when Roy calls, he'll be on the telephone when the family photograph is taken.

The mother will hold the framed portrait of him wearing his dress blues and through the magic of long-distance, Roy will be with them.

"And I'll answer the phone," says Mary Grace. "It's just right me being the oldest child, employed and a contributor to the phone bill." Tom, her boyfriend attends the military academy and when he calls, she accepts the charges.

"You dip ice cream into cones for a job," Arlene says. "And all you eat between customers gets charged back against your paycheck, so that's rich, Mary Grace, you helping with the phone bill. We all know Tom sends you the money."

Mary Grace sniffs. Sniffs again, makes a real big show of sniffing. "Something smells like it's dying in here, don't you think so, Mama? Like a funeral. Like a cheap funeral for a tragic young girl, her last request to be buried wearing her tiara."

"At least I'm graduating high school."

"Mama! Make her stop! You know how much not graduating hurts my feelings!"

"Girls, enough. I am Roy's mother, he is my first born and I will answer the telephone."

Unknown to most everyone, the photographer shoots art shots in the gentlemen's clubs up north in Birmingham. He buys the lady a drink after and asks her to quick lick the stink of the church off his neck for twenty bucks. "I suggest a candid portrait," he says, "seated in the living room much as you are now, as if the phone call is unexpected." He moves about the room snapping test shots and checking his flash.

"Talk about unexpected." Arlene tugs the waist of her sister's pajamas. "Getting awfully tight. Must be all that ice cream."

Mary Grace makes a grab for the tiara. "You are a horrible person, always jealous of me, you stick a knife in my back every chance you get."

"Sort of like Tom, but he sticks you further south."

The photographer steps between the two girls. "Glory To God in the Highest!" He fans his hands wide envisioning the big picture. "The phone rings, it's the brave sailor son calling home to wish his dear mother and father the happiest of the season. A

moment of togetherness, a family of five at Christmas."

"Six," the mother corrects. "My son on the phone makes six."

"Six for now anyway," says Billy behind his Superman comic.

The telephone rings.

Mary Grace elbows past the mother. It's Tom. She bursts into tears. "Let's get married, Tom. Right away. Like you wanted."

The camera flashes. The photo catches Mary Grace in profile. The slight swell of her abdomen.

"Get off the phone." The mother points at her watch. "Roy's call is coming in any minute."

"Yes, Tom," Arlene shouts. "Make an honest woman out of the princess, we all know the truth, cat's out of the bag."

Billy flips a page. "Like the feral cats down the street. Living in that crap hole condemned house. Freed out of the bag I watched Roy stuff the mother cat and her three kittens. The ones I saved and have taken care of every day since."

"There's at least thirty cats over there," says Arlene.

"Roy shipped out two months ago, what do you expect? Cats cat around."

"There's that word again," muses Arlene.

"Expect. Or in your case, Mary Grace, expecting. Mew, mew Mommy, where's my milk?"

Flash! The bulb pops white light.

Mary Grace hits Arlene square in the jaw with the phone receiver. Three upper teeth will die. She will need a dental bridge half a year in the future.

Arlene's lawyer will use the photo when she sues Mary Grace to pay the dentist.

"Get off the phone, Mary Grace!" The mother taps taps the face of her watch. "Roy's calling, Lord have mercy, my sweet Roy's calling. I feel the tingling I get behind my ears when something bad is about to happen. Get off, get off! He's getting a busy signal right now, I know, I just know it, my ears never lie!"

Arlene presses a cup of hot chocolate to her swelling face. She spits a piece of tooth at her sister. "Billy and me, we saw what you did in Tom's car. Mama, Daddy, we watched your precious Mary

Grace spread her legs toward heaven and scream hallelujah!"

"Make that a double hallelujah," Billy adds.

Arlene shrieks, "Hallelujah!! Hallelujah!!"

"Tom, how soon can you drive here, please hurry," begs Mary Grace. "Take me away from these horrid people, I'm begging you, please Tom please. Tom? Tom? Are you there?" She bangs the phone receiver against the table and tries again. "TOM?"

Flash!

The father smiles wild in the photo, buck knife between his fake teeth, the sliced telephone cord in his hand.

## CENTER OF MASS MASON PARKER

We knew it was going to be a closed casket funeral before they brought you back from Florida. I thought you went to Florida to get better, but nobody gets better in Florida. People go to Florida to die in the sun and spend their last days letting the bitterness cook. You don't move to Florida to build a life—you go there once all the living is done.

But I figured getting out of Oklahoma was a good thing, the last chance we had. You should have moved west where people become stars and build things. Lives, careers, healthy relationships—I've been told you can find all that in the west. I wouldn't know. I've never lived any place but the southern plains. You told me you were going to quit smoking—cigarettes, I mean. It was always the drugs that worried me more, and I don't need to explain that. It doesn't need explaining. When your teeth got bad, I told everyone it was the milk I gave you before bed when you were a kid. Of course, I knew how you were living, what you'd been doing—the meth, the crack, freebasing pills. Freebasing pills—I learned what that meant after you became an addict. I know so much about drugs now you'd think I was police or a user myself. I went to those support groups for mothers of addicts. Those meetings helped me cope in those years, and that's where I met Juliet McConnell. Juliet is my best friend to this day. She was there with me on those long nights that felt frozen after you'd taken your life and caused such an emptiness I thought I was going to collapse, spirit leaking from me like a deflated balloon. I was just so tired, and God wasn't talking to me. I saw no light.

Those nights I stayed up until dawn, until I couldn't hold my eyes open. I remember the way Hill Bros tastes at two am mixed with exhaustion and worry. I remember smoking those long Camels 100s for the first time in ten years, whispering to myself, "What else can I do?" All that time your little boy was crying from his cradle in the back room while Charlene, your *baby momma*, was nowhere to be found. Then you came in after four days at six am. All your eyes had left was the pits and your jaw was

locked tight, but it popped occasionally, moving to the other side of your face and locking up again. Those browned teeth, what was left of them, clenched inside your cheeks, sunken and glistening. *What else can I do?* I let you sleep, but I put my ear to the door. I listened to you turning over in the bed, groaning and whimpering. I could smell the sweat. In the quietest moments, I swear that I heard it dripping from your skin—I listened to the threads of the sheets tighten as they soaked it up.

When Charlene came for Everett I didn't know what to do, because you were withdrawing in a jail cell in Baton Rouge, so me and your daddy took your boy. I don't think we ever told you about that, maybe Charlene did. Maybe she told you and you forgot. Regardless, you never confronted us about it, never took us to task or held us accountable. We put Everett in the back seat of the Chevy with a bottle of warm milk and a baby rattle. I had a box of cab sav in the floorboard, and your daddy had a Sig Sauer stuffed between the seats. He wanted to kill you. He wanted to kill Charlene, too. He wanted to kill anybody that got between him and his grandbaby, because he saw Everett as a second chance, a path to redemption. He was always beating himself up about the way you turned out. You know, we were going to take your boy to Rapid City. Remember your Aunt Darcy's empty house that we were always telling her to sell? Probably not.

Dusk was peculiar on those days in Kansas, and I mean that in a good way. The sunset on the plains spread over the fields and went on and on, and the plains looked different then, like they held more hope. All the plains of Oklahoma ever held for me was regret. That big sky and the land stretching out into all the lives that I never lived. In high school, before Everett came along, you were the best swimmer on the team, and I was proud of that. The water took you to a different place. You were always searching for different ways to be in the world, always escaping something, and maybe that's where the drugs came in.

We sold your red GTO because we couldn't stand to watch it rust anymore. You were proud of the body work you did, the brand new paint, and those polished wheels looking like it was just driven

off the lot forty years ago. The thing barely ran though, and you never knew how to fix the engine, you know, fix it on the inside. You never knew how to fix anything. You just lived in a world of broken pieces, floating between the parts as the feeble center for all the debris in your orbit. That car sat in our driveway until the sun dried the paint. It faded and cracked, but you weren't around for that.

Your uncle Sherman got ahold of us as we were driving through Nebraska. Charlene had come by his place in a frenzy looking for us and looking for Everett. But we'd moved out of that house months before when your dad lost his job at the GM plant, after they'd closed it down and moved it to Silao, Mexico. His pension wasn't enough to cover the mortgage. We'd moved into that apartment on the South Side, so Charlene found our old house off Harmony street empty. She went to Sherman's hooping and hollering until the neighbors came out on their porches. Sherman told her he didn't know where we were, and that was the truth. Eventually, a couple squad cars pulled up, and she left without saying anything about anything. I'll never know why she didn't turn us in right then and there. Either way, Sherman called and gave us the come to Jesus talk, so we pulled into a Denny's in South Yankton for a moment of reflection now that the adrenalin was wearing off. I had a stack of pancakes in front of me, but I just watched the syrup harden. My nerves were racing too much to eat. I felt queasy and some part of me thought we were going to get hauled to jail by some off-duty cops sliding into the booth next to us for a coffee and a Grand Slam.

I looked out the window at the big ash trees growing around the parking lot. Under the streetlights they looked like monsters or demons waiting because they knew we couldn't grip our souls much longer, and we were going to lose them. I felt like they were there waiting to snatch them from the sky and gobble them up. I couldn't take it, so we went back to Oklahoma the next morning and handed Everett over to his momma. The next week Charlene was back in prison on account of her career choice, but I don't want to go into that. Charlene has turned herself around. She's a nice woman now. Her and Everett have started to build something good.

At some point, you'd forgotten your son. Forgotten he was born, forgotten his first words, forgotten those tiny, wobbling steps he took at Marilyn Archer's pool party. I imagine Everett's form in your mind, timid among other memories, drawn into your head like chalk on a driveway. The rain came down on you, in those years it was always rain, and the shape of your son washed away. When did that faded line finally disappear? After Baton Rouge or after the beating you took in Tyler? When was it?

What was running through your head as everything converged in that last moment when your finger came down on the trigger and there was no longer a before and an after? It was a peak and a valley all at once; chaos mixed up with silence. How could you not think about those children in the other room, the little girl and your boy? What does it do to a child to hear the gunshot that takes his father's life and to see what's left of him on the wall of a crummy condo in south Florida? I can't ever know that, not really. I will die full of questions, but I guess that means I'm no different than anybody else.

I've got a little place in the hills of the southeast now. Your daddy died a few years back. He was still a young man in his own right. Early fifties. It was all too much for him to bear. Sometimes I think it was too much for me to bear too, and I've just been living outside of myself ever since. When the police called, we wanted to blame it on that woman you'd been with. I guess y'all met at Darren's house, where you'd been staying. She was his cousin or his sister. I can't remember which, but we wanted to believe it was her that murdered you. It's in a parent's nature to make excuses for their kids. Well, it's always been in my nature anyway. The police swabbed her fingers when they got there and found no gunpowder residue, and it was quickly ruled a suicide. They had other concerns. The shotgun was sawed off, and you shouldn't have had a sawed off to begin with. When they called me I was sitting at the park two blocks away feeding those stupid geese and everything faded except the loud, racing voice in my head.

Every morning at six AM, I sit on the porch, and I think of you. I drink green tea now instead of

black coffee. I look at the trees that make up the forest around my home. The ashes hold sparrows and jays, they chirp and make noise with the wind. There's a creek running through the property where the water is always red with Oklahoma dirt, and it colors my pale skin when I lay in the water in the evening and let it run over me. The trees grow from the waterside but they don't look like monsters anymore.

## THE COLDEST DAY OF THE YEAR KEVIN C STEWART

Benny and I pull up to the city water tower in our water-company-issued truck. The aluminum ladder, required to be in our truck bed, has been placed under the tank's access rungs. "Shit," I almost whisper. Benny, who always drives, glances at me and then the tower. He tugs his Redskins knit cap down over his ears. We hop out of the cab.

The sky, the color of a frozen pond, casts a frigid heaviness upon us. Oak Mountain, rising south of town, throws a bruise-gray hue. A frigid wind whistles through the barbed wire and chain-link square around the tower. Squeaking on its hinges, the gate creaks. I shiver, huff a foggy breath, and jam my gloved hands in my Carhartt coat pockets, longing to be sitting by a warm fire in a lakeside condo I'd recently looked at in Davidson, North Carolina.

I follow Benny through the gate and focus on a pair of black combat boots sitting on the ground between the ladder's uprights, a pair of gloves crammed in the right boot leg. A black leather coat, two gray pull-over sweaters, a tee-shirt, new jeans, underwear, and a pair of blue and white argyle socks lie folded in individual piles. A rosary hangs from a ladder rung. I scan the surroundings and then the eighty-foot height of the tower. I feel my insides turn to slush.

Benny kneels and removes his ragged Blue Mules, dropping them on the tundra-like ground. He picks up the jeans, slips a wallet from the back pocket, and flips through the plastic picture holders. Squinting at a driver's license, he stands and says, "Pete Whittaker. Abita Springs, Louisiana. Ain't but seventeen." His breath fogs around his face.

"What's he doing up here?" I ask but know. It's February, 2006, and Katrina evacuees still roam the countryside, living zombies adrift, rudderless and nowhere to go home to.

Shrugging off my question, Benny opens the wallet with his thumbs. "They's a twenty in here." He removes the bill.

"Damn you, Benny!" I grab the front of his coat and try to push him against the base of the

tower. He doesn't budge, but drops the wallet on the ground and swipes my hands away. He slips the twenty into his own wallet. After tugging the gloves from the kid's boot, he examines them, determines them in better condition than his own, and thrusts his hands inside each one.

I glance up at the high, cylindrical tower, faded almost to a pastel aqua. "We better go look," I say, shivering, feeling colder. I climb the ladder. The wind has stilled, sub-zero air clinging to me like starch.

At the top, the manhole hatch stands straight up on its hinge, just below the vent stack at the center of the tank. Key still in it, an opened padlock dangles from the hatch's latch. The conical roof rising maybe eighteen inches in the thirty-foot circumference. The layer of frost glints like finely-ground crystal. A slight breeze picks up, sucks faint steam from the opening. I pause for a moment. The water in there is cold. The tank walls are smooth and slick, and the water level is at least fifteen feet below the manhole.

All around Triple Oaks, the yellow lights of the water company trucks flash; equipment operators unearth water lines with jack-hammers, the ground is frozen so hard and deep. Benny should be out there with them. We are construction inspectors, only Benny used to be a ditch-witch operator. A so-called back problem, and a distant cousin, got him the same job as mine. Same pay too, he with no college degree.

When I told my parents I wanted to move to the Charlotte area to work after graduation, eight months ago, I was eager to get the hell out of town. I'd had a successful interview with the Department of Highways down there. And I liked the place. It seemed alive. The towns weren't riddled with vacant stores. The roads hadn't been crumbled by coal trucks. There were eight-lane freeways with clover-leaf interchanges—the kind of work that better suited my construction engineering degree from Summitt State. I had my eye on those Lake Norman condos hovering over the water's edge like limestone bluffs. My mom cried. I couldn't take that. Here, family is like fibers in a hickory tree, inseparable, each fiber

woven into the other. At least that's what they tell you.

I took this water company job instead, and I've hated it. Mainly because of Benny.

"Hurry the hell up," Benny says. I glance down at his round face, his Redskins cap. I feel like stomping him across the nose, but his expression appears to say, "I dare you."

I climb through the gap in the safety railing and bellycrawl toward the opening. At the manhole, I wait for Benny. He forges his own path toward up and shines his flashlight into the blackness inside, casting a yellow moon on the clear water. About fifteen feet down, the upright body floats near the perimeter of the tank, arms spread, the top of his head barely submerged. A fan of long black hair radiates just beneath the water's surface.

I turn away and backwards crawl toward the ladder; my arms and legs slip on the ice and splay out from under me. I slide feet-first to the railing, where I stop, sit up and look down over the edge. I blink at the hard ground eighty feet below. Trying to vomit, I spit only fog. My body tingles and shudders. Everything should've been locked. But I can't think of any reason why I couldn't have locked it all myself. No matter how much I try to blame only Benny, I can't.

Hearing Benny sliding toward me, I rise to my knees, hands on hips, unable to catch my breath.

"Dammit, Kurt." He stops face to face with me. "Dammit, you know what's gonna happen if the cops find out?"

"What, Benny?"

"They'll bust us sure as shit." He says this with a rehearsed certainty.

"He committed suicide."

"In a tank we're supposed to be watching. If some lawyer gets a hold of this—"

"Worst they can do is get us fired." In the sky above, the flashing lights of a jet head south.

"And we will get fired. The damn tank'll have to be decontaminated now." His chest expands and retracts. He stares off across town. "They might make negligent homicide stick." He grimaces, exposing his teeth to the cold.

I follow his gaze. This is Triple Oaks' only water tank. It stands on Furley's Ridge, overlooking the downtown exit on the four-lane. Six straight days of below-zero weather (rare for Oak County, West Virginia) has frozen and burst most of the water lines in town. Water gets pumped into the tank, but not much gets tapped. We were ordered to monitor the tank every hour on the hour, making sure the heat wrap kept the exposed intake and discharge lines thawed, that the tank didn't overflow. If it reached the seventy-foot line, we were ordered to drain it back down to sixty-five.

On our last check, we didn't lock the manhole hatch up here, which worried me then. We also left the gate in the fence around the base of the tank unlocked and left the ladder lying on the ground. We were tired of fumbling with those frozen, metal padlocks and keys with our gloved hands. Benny claimed no one would mess around up here in this weather. I was inclined to agree. He slides down next to me and says, "We gotta get him outta there."

"We can't mess with a dead body, Benny."

He exhales clouds from his nose. "It ain't just for us."

"Who's it for then?"

"Listen, how you reckon this boy's folks'll feel when they find out he's dead?" He grasps my forearm and stares at me. His grip hurts, despite my thick coat and several layers of clothes. "As long as that boy is missing, his folks can believe he ain't dead, right?"

"That's a small consolation, Benny."

"It's enough for me." He squeezes a little harder. "How bout you?" I glance away from his squinting eyes, his set, whiskered jaw. "That's what I figured." He releases my arm, crawls to the ladder and scales down. I watch him lumber back to the truck.

Alone now at the top of the water tank, I listen to a gust make a low howling noise in the hole. Cars whisk by on the highway below, studded snow tires whining. A tractor-trailer jake-braking for the stoplight seems to shake the whole world. A Greyhound bus pulls from the shopping center. The kid should be on it, headed to Louisiana. I imagine him walking

into a house somewhere down there, his parents waiting in the living room, coffee cups at their sides. Ty bolt from the couch and embrace him. But were they even there? I'm unsure where Abita Springs is, but I'm sure Katrina must've leveled it. Stories over the last six months have profiled evacuees from coast to coast, Canada to Mexico, still an unknown number of people unaccounted for. My gaze follows the Greyhound until it disappears around the bend, headed east on the four-lane. There's one less unaccounted for now.

Benny climbs back up to the top of the tank, a nylon rope coiled around his right shoulder, and crawls to the manhole. Using an ice scraper, he shaves frost from around the hole and clears a path to the ladder. After tying a slipknot in the rope, he pulls his floatable, waterproof flashlight from his coat pocket and flicks it on. Holding a coiled hank of rope and the light in his left hand, the noose in his right, he plunges his arms in the hole. "Shit," he says and freezes. There is a long silent moment, then something goes plunk, splat into the water.

"Goddammit," he whispers, staring into the hole. "My flashlight." A wobbling yellow light illuminates his face. The round edges of his eyes are crescents of yellow. He blinks a few times, then rises to his knees, still holding the unwound rope. He pushes his cap back on his head a little and runs his coat sleeve across his forehead. Huffing steam from his mouth, he looks at me, shaking his head. For the first time, he appears moved by this, and I feel a little sorry for him.

I crawl to the hole and press my body against the tank, the cold soaking into my coat and clothes. I squint into the light as it bobs in the center of the water. Through the glare, I can make out the shadowy form of the kid.

"You can still see him, Benny," I say and move away.

He lets out a long breath and bends over the hole again to rewind the rope. After several tries, he snares the kid around the neck and draws him to the center of the tank; I peer back inside. The body nudges the light's side, rocking its beam up and down the tank walls.



Once the kid is directly below the hole, we move to the ladder to get better leverage and step down in unison, me beneath Benny, gripping the rope, struggling against the kid's weight on the other end. After six or seven steps, the body finally snags. Then he yells, "He's at the hole. Give him a little slack and tie him off."

We step up a rung, and I knot the rope and follow Benny back to the manhole. The kid rotates like a second hand at the end of the rope, water draining from his body, raining into the tank. The flashlight glares in my eyes, and I glance away. My head aches like I've just bitten down on ice. I feel as if we've killed the kid a second time.

We grab the rope, already ice-caked, difficult to grip. "On three," Benny says, and then counts: 1, 2, 3. We give it a long, steady pull. The traction is less than sure where he scraped the metal. Easing toward the ladder, we pull the naked kid from the hole until he lies on his back. We go back to look at him, one of us on each side.

Ice glazes him, his hair and flesh. His skin is pale green, the translucent color of cucumber. His penis has shriveled into his pubic hair and is barely visible. Eyes closed, his face wears no expression, as if he has already been prepared for a wake.

I focus on the rope around the kid's neck, and I know there'll be a mark. If the body is discovered, someone'll suspect foul play. "What now Benny?" I say. "Dammit, what's your big plan now?"

He avoids my eyes. "To burn him."

I maintain my stare, trying not to back down. The frigid breeze feels like a million needles blowing through me.

"My Uncle Willie runs the incinerator at the county landfill. Lives right beside it, too," he says, as if my silence compels him to keep talking. He blinks a few times. I narrow my eyes. "He won't say nothing, not after I dug him a sewer line and septic tank."

I know he has unauthorizedly used company equipment. Though it isn't much, I like having a little something on him.

He stands and brushed frost from his knees. "Let's get him the hell off here."

After padlocking the hatch, we lower the kid to the ground, wrestle him into the truck bed, and stuff a trash bag with Benny's old gloves and the kid's belongings. I unhook the rosary from the ladder rung and say, "What about this?"

Benny takes it and crams it into his coat pocket. I leave the ladder on the ground but lock everything back and we drive away.

We stop at Willie's for the key and unlock the metal gate so we can travel the frozen dirt road into the heart of the landfill. The smell of garbage cuts sharp into my windpipe and lungs. On the sides of the road, frosted bare tree limbs sparkle in the periphery of the headlights before giving way to the barren moonscape of the landfill. I feel vulnerable and evil and cold, and I want Benny to mash the gas pedal a little harder.

We round the last curve to the square incinerator building, lit by a yard light. Benny backs up to the garage door and points to a bundle of broken-down cardboard boxes sitting to our left. "We'll need to throw that in first to get the fire going good." He shuts the truck off and pushes the door open. After grabbing the trash bag of clothes, he walks to the building.

The frozen air slaps my face as I step from the truck. My foot crunches something and I glance at the ground. A headless, limbless, bare torso of a doll's body, the size of a baked potato, lies at my feet. I look at it, then kick it into the darkness, out of the yard light's range.

To my right, a D-9 bulldozer is parked on a small ridge overlooking a landslide of trash—worn-out furniture, old Christmas trees, and a montage of household rubbish. A pile of plastic cemetery flowers lies at the base of the slope.

Benny raises the garage door and climbs onto the concrete loading dock in front of the incinerator, dropping the bag on the landing. He opens the horizontal doors and secures the handle. Inside, a dull orange glow flickers at the bottom. He hops down, walks outside, and cuts the cardboard loose. I help him stoke the incinerator, and he closes its doors.

At the truck, we lower the tailgate. Benny pulls the rosary from his pocket, climbs onto the truck bed

and clips the rosary back around the kid's neck.

"Know any Catholic prayers?"

"Who needs prayed for here?"

He takes a deep breath, then jumps from the truck. I follow. With me holding the kid's cold, bony ankles and Benny grabbing him under the shoulders, we carry him inside and lay him on the landing.

Benny latches the incinerator handle open again, and bright yellow flames belch from the square, steel mouth. He throws the bag of clothes in, and we push the kid head-first into the searing flames. I drop from the landing and step back several paces. Benny closes the doors and stands there, peering outside, off into the distance.

"You hear something Benny?" I follow his gaze.

Only an open, cold, quiet darkness lies there, like an empty room.

He doesn't answer. He turns to the incinerator and latches the door open again. Black smoke rolls out and mushrooms against the ceiling. Heat swirls in the room. Scorched flesh and hair. Coughing, Benny removes the kid's gloves and tosses them into the incinerator. He faces the fire, as though expecting it to thaw out the boy, who might shimmy from the flames. Alive. Benny watches a few moments longer and slips his wallet from his pocket, opening it, and examines it. He takes out the twenty and wads it in his fist and side-arms it into the flames. He slings his wallet in. He tears his Redskins cap off and whips it in, sparks cascading from the opening.

"What the hell are you doing, Benny?" I'm not expecting him to do something like this, to feel guilty. For some reason, it pisses me off. I run at him. He unzips his coat and is struggling to get it off when he sees me coming. Yellow flames are reflected in the tears on his face. He is weakened, and I want to kill him. I grab him hard in a headlock.

"Let go of me, goddammit!" He drives me into the wall. I release him and get knee lifted in the gut, doubling me over. I gasp for air and wait for him to punch me again. Nothing happens. I crane my head up and see him sway back, his body heaving, his coat dangling by one sleeve from his left arm. Behind him, orange flames shoot from the

incinerator opening. A popping hissing noise drones from it. The strange mixture of florescent lights, air, heat, smoke, cold, and death liquify in the room. I straighten to my feet, still trying to breathe. The smoke chokes me. I cup my gloved hands over my mouth and nose and look at him.

He shakes his head and leans against the wall. "Jesus help us."

My breath returns, at first by the tablespoons and then the half-cups. As Benny trudges toward the truck, I hurry back to a second bundle and cut loose more cardboard, dragging it all inside and shoving it in the fire. I close the incinerator door and lock the building up. Benny sits in the passenger seat, obscured by the night.

I climb in the driver's seat. Benny's head tilts back, his mouth agape. I reach for the ignition and notice the smokestack pumping black fumes into the pale, half-moonlit sky. I pause to watch. The wintry air flattens the smoke, spreading it horizontally above the dark, jagged skyline—a sign of a coming snow. The wind has died down. I start the engine and turn on the headlights. Flecks of ash dot the windshield. I hit the wipers to swipe the ashes away.

I slam the column shifter into drive. My head jerks back as we spin forward. I have to get away from Benny. Or anything else that'll remind me of that kid, forced to the road by rising waters but giving into the water nonetheless. I will head south. I plan to be safely into Carolina before the next snowflakes touch the mountains.

**A SPOKE**  
**SEAN JACQUES**

CHARACTERS

Matt Stockton - a deputy at a rural town called Ash Grove.

Adam - a dispossessed yokel from the backwoods.

Mike (voice) - another deputy, unseen, but voice is heard through police radio.

TIME

Around 2000, the final, brief period before the Digital Age swept in and shattered the traditional modes of intimate conversation.

**PROLOGUE**

*Fade in.*

*Morning songbirds chirp. Crows caw. A single low-dimmed light beams on the backside of the stage to reveal a worn, dirty, and ripped camping tent.*

*From the back of the theater enters ADAM, cradling an old shotgun. His face is marked with dirt. He wears soiled clothes and cap. He continues along until noticing the tent. Looks behind himself, looks right, looks left, looks behind again. Takes a few steps forward.*

ADAM. Aye! Anybody there?! Aye! *(He slowly moves onto the stage, shuffling toward the tent, his eyes wide and wandering.)* Aye! Anybody there?! *(The closer he gains to the tent, the slower his shuffle, the stiffer his body. He halts at the tent. Pokes the shotgun into a small opening of the closed zipper, begins to unzip. When the opening is large enough, he carefully lifts back the flap. He spins around, his eyes still wide, looking for movement. Then he turns to the open flap of the tent once again. He bends, steps inside, and disappears inside of it.)*

*Lights Fade.*

**SCENE 1**

*Lights rise upon one side of the stage to reveal a deputy's office area at a rural police station: a desk; swivel chair; radio box; computer/keyboard; personal mementos.*

*Presently, a town deputy, MATT STOCKTON, is in a heated phone conversation with his wife. He holds a stack of documents in one hand, the phone receiver in the other. Pacing around the desk, flopping into the swivel chair, then soaring up out of it – seething.*

MATT. Goddamnit Val, you said we would wait! You said we were gonna wait till the kids were out of school for the summer, we would all get together, we would talk it out, and we would see what would be the best for all of us – which was supposed to be me movin' back home! That's exactly what you said! I'm not gonna calm down, you *said* we would *wait*! We would *goddamn wait*! Watch my language...? Why... I'd say this is the one conversation that needs every word in the goddamn book! *(referring to stack of papers in hand)* I can't believe you just hauled off and hit me like this, you couldn't even tell me to my face? That loudmouth Allie Conway from over there at the courthouse, it's all she could do to keep herself from laughin' when she handed me these fuckin' divorce papers. Cacklin' "it happens to the best of us, honey." Old hag is probably gagglin' about it to every goddamn ear she sees. *(Pause.)* Stop tellin' me to watch my goddamn language! What'd I do that's so awful to you? Huh? What'd I ever do? I know you have a legal right, that ain't what I'm talking about! So I don't have no say in the matter? What about the kids, they don't have a say either? Oh, so it's what *you* want, what *you* want. There you go... So I guess it's just my mistake for marryin' you and trustin' that you'd stick with the plan then, ain't it?

*The voice of another deputy, MIKE, cracks over the transmission box, interrupting the phone call.*

MIKE (V.O.) Base, come in. Base, come in. Mattie, you there?

*A light slowly begins to fade up on the opposite side of the stage to barely illuminate a jail cell. A panel of steel rails represents the barred door, with the three remaining walls imagined. A single stool sits "outside" the bars. "Inside" Adam sits on a cot, head down, hugging himself.*

MIKE (V.O.) Base, come in. Mattie? Hello? Mattie?

MATT. I got a radio call coming in, hold on a minute. No, we ain't done, so hold on! (*Answers radio.*) This is base.

MIKE (V.O.) Hey Mattie. Just checking in. How we doing with our suspect? Over.

MATT. He's still cool and quiet in the cell. Over.

MIKE (V.O.) Has he said anything? Over.

MATT. Not a word.

MIKE (V.O.) I'm still out here with the coroner and this county law crew. Looks like they'll be finishing up pretty soon, but it'll still be a couple hours before we make it to the station. Over.

MATT. They coming here too? Over.

MIKE (V.O.) Afraid so. The county has jurisdiction on this sort of deal, so we're pretty much gonna be sittin' on the sidelines.

MATT (*in phone to his wife*). I want to talk to the kids, so don't you dare hang up.

MIKE (V.O.) You get ahold of the chief yet?

MATT. What was that?

MIKE (V.O.) Have you talked to the chief yet?

MATT. Negative, not yet. I left a couple messages with the hotel he's stayin' at in Pensacola, and I've been tryin' to reach him on that new cell phone of his. I don't think he even knows how it works though. Over.

MIKE (V.O.) Well keep trying him. He'll for damn sure want to know what's happened.

MATT. Guess this is gonna drive a stake through his Florida vacation plans. (*into phone*)

Just a second longer.

MIKE (V.O.) Did you get a statement from that land surveyor?

MATT. 10-4. He wrote out everything he witnessed, includin' him head-knockin' the snot of our suspect. (*Pilfers his desk to find the written statement.*) Collin Crane is his name. He says he lives over near James River Road, so I sent him on home and told him

we'd probably be callin' him back for further questioning.

MIKE (V.O.) That's probably a good call.

MATT. He goes a bit far with the gruesome details in his statement, you ask me.

MIKE (V.O.) Well this sure beats all I ever seen. This tent out here smells like a pile of gutted hogs layin' waste in a hen house. It's a damn wonder coyotes or buzzards hadn't come raided it.

MATT. You know, I went to school with this guy. Goin' all the way back to elementary.

MIKE (V.O.) Come again?

MATT. I went to school with our suspect. Since kindergarten. Over.

MIKE (V.O.) I only know *of* him. Sort of touched in the head, ain't he?

MATT. That's a polite way of puttin' it. I was thinkin' I might see if I can wean somethin' out of him before ya'll get here.

MIKE (V.O.) I wouldn't worry about. Sheriff Dell from County is already heading to the station from his office in Centerville, so he can handle it when he gets there. Over.

MATT. I'm only thinkin' he might come on a little easier with me. You don't know this ole boy like I do, Mike. He's real squirrely and don't talk to nobody unless he feels right. MIKE (V.O.) That's all well and good, Mattie, but this situation is out of our range. County needs to handle it, not us. You copy?

MATT. If chief was here, he'd say otherwise.

MIKE (V.O.) He might. But he ain't here, and I don't think it'd be wise for us to go around protocol. (*Matt goes quiet, fuming.*) Mattie? You get that?

MATT. Yeah Mike, I got it.

MIKE (V.O.) We'll find out soon enough what he was doing out here. I'll call again when we're heading to the station.

MATT. Copy.

MIKE (V.O.) Talk to you then, partner. Over and out.

MATT. Base out. (*Heaves frustration; then goes back to the phone.*) Okay, I'm here. Val? Hello? Val? You there? Val?! (*Slams the phone receiver down.*)

Goddamnit! (*He punches the phone digits, calls her back. Waits for an answer. Waits. Waits. Disconnects, dials again. Waits. Waits. His ire rising. He slams the phone*

*down again.) You ungrateful... Fucking... Bitch!! (He whips his arm and swipes the papers off the desk.)*

MIKE (V.O.) Base, come in. Mattie, you there?

Mattie, come in.

MATT. *(Picks up the hand-held mic.)* What?!

MIKE (V.O.) Mattie? Everything alright?

MATT. Yeah. All good. Over.

MIKE (V.O.) Think you can call over to Josey's Diner and order up some plates of chicken fried steak?

Counting the sheriff and whole posse over here, there's going to be eight hungry mouths to feed.

Over. Mattie? You get that?

MATT *(Heaves his frustration.)* Yeah. Chicken fried steak. Eight orders.

MIKE (V.O.) And you might get a plate for yourself.

Gonna be a long night.

MATT. Get right on it.

MIKE (V.O.) 10-4. See you in a couple hours then.

Out.

*Matt gently places the radio mic down. Calmed, but still smoldering, he bends down and picks up the scattered papers from the floor.*

*He rises, sits in his chair, picks up the telephone receiver, coolly punches in some numbers. Waits for an answer.*

*Browses the top copy of paper stack. With no answer, he gently hangs up the phone.*

*He again browses the divorce papers. Checks his watch. Then gazes toward the doorway leading to the jail cell. Checks his watch again. Then with a clear intent glowing on his face, he tosses the stack of papers onto his desk, rises from his chair.*

*He reaches and clutches a billyclub hidden behind the desk then strolls toward the doorway.*

*Lights Fade.*

## SCENE 2

*Lights rise fully on the jail cell. Adam still sits "inside" on the cot. Same clothes, same cap, same dirt on his face. Slumped over, head buried into his hands, staring at the floor.*

*Matt enters the space, billyclub in hand. He approaches the cell, stops and studies Adam as if he were a caged exotic animal.*

MATT. Hey. Adam. Hey. You awake? *(Adam slowly lifts his chin up, acknowledging Matt.)* You know who I am, don'tcha?

ADAM. Mattie Stockton.

MATT. That's right. Matt now, though. You thirsty? Need to take a piss? Hey, don't look away from me. I

asked if you was thirsty or needed to use the restroom? *(Adam dully gazes at Matt, says nothing. Matt huffs impatience, idles closer to the bars.)*

Alright, suit yourself. Stink like you done shit yourself already anyway. Come up to these bars a little closer

to me. Come on. *(Taps his billyclub on the bars. Adam rises off the cot, shuffles closer.)* Bend your chin down.

Down. *(He reaches through the bars, removes Adam's cap, studies the top of his head.)* Damn. That county

surveyor sure did put a goose egg on your noggin, didn't he? Said he cocked you stone blind with butt-

end of your own shotgun? That was smart. *(Tosses the cap back.)* You know, if Chief Dudley wasn't away

on vacation down in Florida, you'd probably have a dozen of those goose eggs on your skull. What do

you think of that? *(Adam picks his hat up off the floor, puts it back on. Sits back down on the cot. Matt sits down on the stool, studying him carefully.)* When's the last

time I seen you? I've noticed you walkin' around town a few times, but that's been a while. You still

live out on that dirt road past CC highway? No? Ain't you gonna say nothin'?

*(Grimaces.)* I know you've never been able to think quiet right, but from what that surveyor is sayin', what he saw and what

they found out there in the woods... Holy shit, man. What were you thinkin'?

ADAM. Ye still with Angie?

MATT. What?

ADAM. Ye still with Angie?

MATT. Angie? You mean Angie Buxton?

ADAM. Ye with her?

MATT. No, man. That was in high school. She moved off, I ain't seen her in a lifetime. ADAM. She's pretty.

MATT. Yeah, Angie Buxton was a hot fox alright. Probably married and divorced two or three rich bankers by now.

ADAM. So ye didn't marry her?

MATT. No, I didn't marry her, I just said I ain't seen her in years, didn't I? *(Pause.)*

How about you tell me what was goin' on out in them woods.

ADAM. Ye marry another girl?

MATT. Christ, you dumb and deaf? I'm the one askin' the questions and you're the one answerin'.

Got that?

ADAM. I'm not married.

MATT. Well that's not a shocker.

ADAM. Mattie. Matt. Mattie.

MATT. Matt. Yeah. Real simple. Matt.

ADAM. 'Member what ye and the others call me?

MATT. Adam?

ADAM. Mule.

MATT. *(Chuckles.)* That's right. Mule. Mule.

ADAM. I like that. Mule.

MATT. Okay. But I'm gonna call you Adam now. So Adam, why don't you tell me what was going on out in them woods.

ADAM. Don't like playin' tackle the dummy.

MATT. What?

ADAM. Don't like playin' tackle the dummy.

MATT. The kickball game?

ADAM. Hurts bein' picked dummy all the time.

MATT. Yeah, well I'm real sorry about that, but that was when we was in third grade. Let's talk about right now. And why you're sittin' inside that cell. What were you doin' out in those woods with those people? Did you know them? Hey. Don't tighten your lips on me. Did you know them? *(Heaves.)* Hey. Look here. I said look at me. The County Sheriff is goin' to get here soon, and he is not gonna be as patient as I am. Him and his deputies won't put up with your crazyshit talkin' like this, understand? So you might think about fessin' up to me to make things go a little easier on you. How about we start with you tellin' me how it came to be that you were out in those woods with that man and that woman? *(Adam stays quiet.)* You got nothin' to say about it? Nothin'? You know, they might just burn your ass alive when people hear about it.

ADAM. Ye like bein' the law?

MATT. What?

ADAM. Ye like bein' the law?

MATT. Well, let's just say it has its good days and bad days, pretty much like everything else. Today's definitely leanin' more on the piss-on-my-side-of-the-bed. *(Pause.)* How you gettin' by? Welfare?

ADAM. Cans and bottles.

MATT. How's that?

ADAM. Bottles ten cents. Cans three cents. In the ditch, side of the road.

MATT. Seriously? People still do that shit? That all you do?

ADAM. Shucked walnut shells at Olger's feed store. Not no more. Broke the chain on the machine. Sweep Larry Winslow's gas station when I come to town. But ain't too often. Don't like town.

MATT. How often you make it to town?

ADAM. When I need stuff.

MATT. Need stuff like what?

ADAM. Food. Soup cans. Aspirin. Toothpaste.

MATT. Well you don't have hold off so long on the toothpaste, it's okay to brush more than every couple weeks, case nobody ever told you. Deodorant wouldn't hurt you either.

ADAM. Don't like town.

MATT. So you said. What are you wantin', a new fancy hotel or somethin'? With a swimmin' pool? Maybe a golf course? *(Pause.)* You ask me, I'd say Ash Grove beats the hell out most other towns. Nearly everyone looks after their yards and keeps the sidewalks clean. We got three parks, too. Three. And that's not even includin' the new little league baseball field. You seen it? There's not a whole lot of crime to speak of either, no bad crime anyway. Not like you read about in those big cities. And I'd say that's mostly cause people live here go to church every Sunday. *(Pause.)* You ever been to church?

ADAM. Don't like town.

MATT. But you like the woods though, huh?

ADAM. Hunt in the woods.

MATT. What was that? You was huntin' in the woods? Huntin' what?

ADAM. Squirrels. Rabbits.

MATT. Poachin' any deer? It's alright, I won't tell nobody. *(Pause.)* So did you just happen upon that

man and woman then? While you was huntin'? What were they doin' out there? Come on, Adam, you're gonna have to explain yourself to somebody. This isn't somethin' you can just hope will go away. *(Pause.)* Goddamn, are you really this much of a stubborn dipshit or you just playin' with me personally?

ADAM. Ye hung a dead possum in my locker.

MATT. What?

ADAM. Ye hung a dead possum in my locker.

MATT. I hung a dead possum in your locker?

ADAM. Yeah.

MATT. What the hell are you talkin' about?

ADAM. At school. 'Fore I quit.

MATT. Jesus Christ... Look man, enough of this horseshit about when we was in school. If I ever hung a dead possum in your locker, it has nothin' to do with why we are right here right now. That surveyor who found you inside that tent done told us everythin' we need to know about what you were doin', so your only hope now for savin' yourself from a daily asshole rapin' in the state pen is fessin' up a good reason on why you were doin' what you were doin'!

ADAM. Awful mean. Dead possum.

MATT. You not hear me?! I don't know what you're even talkin' about! Kids are mean to one another, that's what kids do, especially to people like you, that's just the way it is. But you ain't a goddamn kid, so stop talkin' about school. You're a grown goddamn man and this is some serious shit you done. Now tell me how it came to be. *(Pause.)* Speak up, you goddamn retard! Don't you see what this is gonna do to our reputation around here? This is the type of shit that makes the ten o'clock news, cross the whole state. It's gonna make the law here sound like we allow a bunch of degenerates to run wild!

ADAM. Ye get another girlfriend?

MATT. Quit askin' me whether I got a wife or whatever! Tell me why you were doin' what you were doin' with those people! Say it! Say it!! Say it, goddamnit! *(Matt reaches through the bars, grabs hold of Adam's head of hair, and yanks him until Adam's face smashes up against the bars.)* What were you doin' out there in that tent?! Huh?! What were you doin'?! What were you doin' layin' with them with your

hands down your pants? Gettin' your jollies off?! Huh?! Were you?! What were you doin' you sick mother fucker?! *(Matt shoves Adam, causing him to tumble down.)*

*Lights Fade.*

### SCENE 3

*Spotlight falls on the desk and swivel chair area of the police station. Matt sits quietly alone, slumped, deep in thought. Take-out bags and Styrofoam cups are on the desk. He checks his watch. Reaches for the phone. Punches numbers, waits. Reacts in surprise when someone answers.*

MATT. Hello? Jason? Hey buddy. How's it goin' little man? You what? Oh, mommy's in the potty? Okay. Well I was callin' to talk to you and your little sister anyway. What've ya'll been doin' today? Rode your bikes? That's cool. Well, I know you want to take the trainin' wheels off. When can we do it? Well, next time I come home. No, I can't come right now. Cause I'm at work. Well, Daddy misses you too. When am I movin' back home? I don't, I don't know, son. Daddy wants to come home, but... Soon. Mommy told you what? She said Daddy wasn't what? Well don't listen to what Mommy says, Mommy's talkin' about somethin' else. Yes, I'm comin' back home. Yes, I promise. Well, because your Mommy and Daddy have been squabblin' at each other, like you and your little sister do sometimes, and we need to be alone to calm down. Yes, I promise. Is your sister there? Can you put her on for me? Of course you can still talk to me some more too. Okay. Go get her. *(Sniffs, takes a huge breath.)* Hello? Hello? Anybody there? Jamie? Jason? Hello? Did it hang up? Hello? *(Realizing the connection is lost, he places the phone receiver into the cradle. Rubs his hands over his face.)*

MIKE (V.O.) Base, come in. Come in, base.

MATT. This is base.

MIKE (V.O.) Hey Mattie. Me and the county boys are enroute. Should be there in about a half hour or so. Over.

MATT. Copy that.

MIKE (V.O.) How's the chicken fried steak coming along? Over.

MATT. (*Heaves displeasure.*) Sittin' here waitin' on you.

MIKE (V.O.) Any word from the chief yet?

MATT. Negative.

MIKE (V.O.) How about Sheriff Dell, he make it there? Over.

MATT. Negative.

MIKE (V.O.) Well when he does, you can tell him it looks like a drug overdose. Over.

MATT. Really? What kind?

MIKE (V.O.) Heroine.

MATT. Heroine?

MIKE (V.O.) That's the coroner's verdict. He says it looks like they got themselves fixed with bad batch. Both been dead over a week. Over.

MATT. Any ID on them? Over.

MIKE (V.O.) Male has a drivers license from Nebraska, but nothing on the female. We located a '90 model Datsun with Nebraska plates on a nearby log-road, looks to be theirs.

MATT. Any idea what they were doing in our neck of the woods?

MIKE (V.O.) Appears like nothing more than camping. Maybe they wanted to get their drug kicks in nature. I need to escort the bodies to the coroner's office to probe them a little deeper, so these county deputies might beat me to the station. Over.

MATT. Copy that.

MIKE (V.O.) Make sure to have a fresh pot of coffee for them.

MATT. (*Smirks.*) That's why I'm here.

MIKE (V.O.) Any change with our man in lockup? Over.

MATT. Still quiet in his cell. Over.

MIKE (V.O.) Sure is gonna be a treat learning his part in this.

MATT. Sure is.

MIKE (V.O.) Okay, then. See you in a few. Over and out.

*Matt hangs the mic back onto the radio box. He looks toward the doorway leading to the jail cell. He then opens a desk draw, pulls out a couple of bearclaw pastries. Rises*

*from his swivel chair, grabs one of the Styrofoam cups, and heads toward the doorway.*

*Lights Fade.*

#### SCENE 4

*Light rises on the jail cell. Adam is lying on the cot. Matt enters through the doorway and cautiously approaches the cell.*

MATT. Brought you a bearclaw. And a Coke. (*He carefully slides them across the floor and into the cell.*) Just leave 'em here if you want 'em. (*Adam remains still, quiet. Matt sits down on the stool.*) Sorry I got a little rough with you. I don't know what got into me, that's not who I am. Normally, anyway. Just some personal stuff goin' on. I still shouldn't have done that to you, and I shouldn't be cussin' at you like that. (*Adam stays hushed. Matt peels the wrapper from his own bearclaw, but can't seem to eat.*) I do have a wife. Closin' in on ten years. We met at the community college over in Big Springs, first week I got there, and we hit it right off the bat. I think I was just tryin' to forget about Angie Buxton leavin' me for Eric Conway and so I took up with the next girl willin' to give me a little, if you know what I mean. And would you believe, after only a month, if we didn't run off and elope at the courthouse without tellin' a soul? Yep. Sure did. Neither one of us was even 19 yet. (*Pause.*) I remember tellin' my dad... You remember my dad, don't you? Had that upholstery shop on Fletcher and Third Street? That's pretty much what he did all his life until he passed away. Anyway, I remember when I told him I'd gotten married to her, he said that I'd earned my first spoke. He had this way of thinkin' that life is like one of those big wagon wheels, you know like you see in Westerns, and it'll only turn dependin' on how many spokes you got on it, and how strong they are. He said devotin' yourself to a good wife is a pretty strong spoke to start with, then he laughed and said it's gonna take a helluva lot more than just her to get myself turnin' though. There's a spoke for workin' a respectable job, a spoke for abidin' to God's word, a spoke for treatin' other people just and right, a spoke



for raisin' your kids proper, a spoke for lookin' after the land... Those are the main ones I remember. I know he was half-way jokin' about it, but he held the belief the measure of a man's life depends on how much he put himself into earnin' as many spokes as he could find. (*Adam rises, reaches for the bearclaw and Coke, takes them up.*) Yeah. Go ahead. Bearclaw's a little stale. (*Matt quiets, puts his own bearclaw down on the floor and allows Adam to sip and chew.*) Anyway, this spoke idea sounded like a fair deal. I just had to stick with it, keep movin' forward, earn another one, then another one. Seemed to work out for my dad alright. And I guess it has worked out for me pretty good. Till lately, anyway. (*Pause.*) This badge here was my second spoke, least I still got it. I like that it earns me a little respect. From most people anyway. My partner, Mike, seems to believe I'm his damn secretary most of the time. Pays decent enough. And I was able to talk Jerry Smith, the president over at Citizens State Bank into trustin' me with a loan to buy myself a 10-acre spread with a little cabin-house on it. It's nice. Peaceful. Especially in the springtime. I got five Herefords pasturin', more as fun for my kids than anythin' else.

ADAM. Kids?

MATT. Yeah. I got a boy, he's seven. And a little girl, she's five. Both of 'em full of vinegar. Hell, raisin' them should count as two or three spokes apiece.

ADAM. I like kids.

MATT. Yeah. Me too. (*Pause.*) Thing is though... It's all startin' to go to shit on me. And I don't know why. Well, I mean I know why, it's because of my goddamn wife. I just don't know what's gotten into her, I give her everythin' she asks for. Least what I'm capable of givin' her. Maybe it's just that itch people say you get after a handful of years together, but I swear to God she's gonna break me. (*Pause.*) I don't know why I'm tellin' you all this. Guess I'm still tryin' to deny it to myself. She served me divorce papers today. Divorce papers. We was supposed to be in a time-out, give each other a little space, but nope. She's goin' all in. Wants to quit it altogether. She's had no problem stayin' in the house I'm payin' for, hardly lettin' me see or talk to my own kids, and now she wants to go all the way with it and piss me to the wind. (*Pause.*) I've been sleepin' over at Mike's

place goin' on six months, tryin' to not let anyone know of what's goin' on. He's the only one who does. My mom doesn't even know, though she suspects. So does my preacher, every Sunday he keeps askin' me, 'Where's Val this morning, she still sick?' and all I can do is lie and say she's fightin' an illness. A busted family is going to look real good on me there, ain't it? Real good. My dad was an elder for twenty-somethin' years, and here I am lookin' at bein' a divorcee, sittin' sad and lonesome on the back pew every Sunday. (*Pause*) I just don't get it. I don't. I'm doin' everything I'm supposed to be doin', but all I am to her is boring. Words out of her mouth, *I'm boring*. Can you believe that shit? With everything I do? Never laid a hand on her, never cheated on her... Even though I could've. I can still spark plenty other Angie Buxtons out there, you know, if I wanted to be fuckin' Romeo. But I'm boring. To her. (*Pause.*) Now she wants to move back to Big Springs where she grew up, she thinks she's better than the rest of us livin' here or somethin'. Better than me, I guess. Wants to move in with her parents, start over. She even thinks it'd be better to raise our kids there, she's got it in her head people there are better than any of us. All Big Springs got is a mall and more movie theaters, the people ain't no better, there's just more of them. And if movin' there is really what she wants, hell, I'm willin' to pick up and go if it meant I could hold things together, but she won't have that either. She wants to break it off. Have space. Like I'm nothin' more than a phase for her to walk through for ten years, then move on. (*Pause*) How in hell am I gonna tell everybody, 'Val just got bored with me'? It's goddamn embarrassin' is what it is.

ADAM. She pretty?

MATT. My wife? Sure. Pretty enough. I haven't lost my urge for her in bed, if that's what you mean.

ADAM. Never had a woman. Have one or lose one. Closest, my sister.

MATT. Yeah, but that's a little different.

ADAM. She ain't pretty.

MATT. (*Chuckles.*) Becky, right? Yeah, I remember she wasn't what I would call pretty either. How she doin' these days?

ADAM. Took up with some boy, left home. She's only one I touched.

MATT. What's that?

ADAM. Becky only woman I touched.

MATT. I don't understand what you mean there, man.

ADAM. Touched her. Daddy said she had to teach me. To be a man.

MATT. You mean you... you touched, touched her?

ADAM. She teached me how.

MATT. Wait a minute, wait a minute. You're sayin' your daddy made you two... play around with one other?

ADAM. Done ourselves few times when he weren't there.

MATT. Like touched, touched? Your privates?

ADAM. Yeah.

MATT. Well... You know that's not right? Right? That's wrong, man. That's like really, really, really fuckin' wrong, man.

ADAM. She ain't pretty.

MATT. No, man, I mean people ain't supposed to do that kind of stuff with family. You can't be touchin' your sister like you would another woman. When did you do this? ADAM. When we was kids.

MATT. Like little kids? You was both little kids?

ADAM. Thirteen. Fourteen.

MATT. And she went along with it?

ADAM. She teach me how.

MATT. Jesus. She just did it? Are you still doin' it?

ADAM. She gone. Took up with some man, ain't seen her in a long while.

MATT. Well where was your mom when all this was goin' on?

ADAM. Took off with an asshole, Daddy said. She ain't come back. Daddy said, Becky jus like that bitch.

MATT. Well it sounds like that piece of shit daddy of yours sure did put a number on all of you. And you bein' like you are.

ADAM. Don't do it no more.

MATT. It's abuse, Adam! Abuse! It's wrong, it's against the law! It's about one of the worst things there is you could do. (*Adam lowers his head, shamed, as Matt lets this information sink in.*) You wanna tell me what you was doin' with that man and woman out in them woods? (*Pause.*) Hey. I won't judge you on it. I won't judge you none, okay?

ADAM. Ye put a dead possum in my locker?

MATT. Look man... I can't picture myself doin' such a shitty thing, alright? If I did, I think I would've remembered it. I don't remember puttin' a dead possum in your locker, and if I did, I'm sorry about it. Just tell me what you was doin' with that man and woman. I promise I won't think bad on you. Alright? I promise. And you're better off tellin' somebody you know, right? Instead of a bunch of strangers who don't understand how you are?

ADAM. Didn't hurt 'em none.

MATT. Nobody's sayin' you hurt anybody. Did you see 'em when they were alive? Did you talk to them?

ADAM. Found 'em like that.

MATT. Like what? Found them dead?

ADAM. Yeah.

MATT. And you were huntin' when you found 'em?

ADAM. Squirrels. Rabbits.

MATT. What were you thinkin' when you found 'em like that?

ADAM. Thinkin' they's purty stupid for dyin' out here in the woods.

MATT. What'd they look like?

ADAM. Sleepin'. With they clothes off.

MATT. You didn't think to come tell somebody about 'em?

ADAM. Don't like town.

MATT. So what'd you do then?

ADAM. Watched 'em.

MATT. Watched 'em?

ADAM. Lay there. With they clothes off.

MATT. Well how long did you do that?

ADAM. Long while. She's pretty.

MATT. So you just sat there? And watched them for a while?

ADAM. Never seen a woman like that.

MATT. Did you do anything else? Did you...touch them?

ADAM. Jus' the woman.

MATT. How'd you touch her?

ADAM. Didn't hurt her.

MATT. I mean did you... Did you touch her like you said you done your sister?

ADAM. Not first time.

MATT. First time? What do you mean by that?

ADAM. Touched when I come back.

MATT. So you found 'em and left? Then came back?  
Later?  
ADAM. Yeah.  
MATT. Well when exactly did you find 'em, Adam?  
ADAM. 'Tween a week, two.  
MATT. You're sayin' you found them over a week ago?  
ADAM. 'Bout that.  
MATT. Jesus Christ, you been out there with them that long?  
ADAM. Left few times. Come back few times.  
MATT. How many times are we talkin' about?  
ADAM. Few times.  
MATT. Few times...? And you, uhh, touched her? Like all over? Everywhere?  
ADAM. Yeah.  
MATT. How many times did you do that?  
ADAM. Not the first.  
MATT. But you started touchin' her the next time you come back?  
ADAM. Yeah.  
MATT. My God... Why would you do such a thing, Adam? Don't you know that's evil-doin'? It's downright evil-doin'!  
ADAM. Didn't hurt her.  
MATT. It's not about hurtin' her, man! She was dead! She was fuckin' dead! Why would you do such a thing like that?!

ADAM. Know what it felt like. With a pretty woman.  
MATT. It's perverted!  
ADAM. Didn't hurt her.  
MATT. And you kept goin' back and doin' it?!

ADAM. Liked her. Didn't want to lose her. Like you.  
  
*Matt falls in silent disbelief. Rakes hands over his face. Realizes the futility of trying to make Adam understand.*

MATT. Okay... Okay... *(Checks watch.)* Okay, look at me. Look at me. Now you gotta listen real close, understand? These lawmen are comin' here to talk to you, and you cannot let them know what you just told me. You understand? Adam, you understand? You cannot tell them. None of it. If you do, they're gonna lock you in a cage and toss the key. They will

take you away, you understand? Tell me you understand that.  
ADAM. Understand.  
MATT. You're gonna say you was never out in those woods till yesterday. Yesterday. You's huntin' no different than you would any other day, and you come upon that tent. You hear me?  
ADAM. Yeah.  
MATT. Say it back to me.  
ADAM. I's huntin' yesterdey.  
MATT. That's right, yesterday. You was huntin' in them woods, yesterday, and you come across that tent. Wasn't over a week ago, it was yesterday.  
ADAM. Yesterdey.  
MATT. And you thought it was strange that nobody was there. Cause you didn't see nobody. Yeah?  
ADAM. Yeah.  
MATT. So you peeked inside that tent, and you saw those bodies, and you got real scared. Real scared. They weren't movin' and they didn't look right, so you bent down and tried to shake them awake. And when you saw they was dead, you got dizzy. Understand? Say it back.  
ADAM. Huntin' yesterday. Saw 'em bodies, shook 'em to wake 'em up, got dizzy.  
MATT. That's right. And you got scared. Now, have you ever seen a dead person before? ADAM. I seen him. And her.  
MATT. I mean before them. Have you ever seen any other dead people before?  
ADAM. No.  
MATT. So that's why you got scared. You've never seen a dead person. And so when you saw this dead man and dead woman layin' there, you got sick and got scared. So damn sick and scared that you fell over right there in that tent, and then you don't remember nothin' else. Alright? Now say it.  
ADAM. Saw they's dead, got sick. Fell down.  
MATT. You saw them dead, you got scared, and you fell down while you was inside the tent.  
ADAM. Fell down inside the tent.  
MATT. And you don't remember nothin' else.  
ADAM. Don't remember nothin' else.  
MATT. You fell down and you don't remember nothin' else. Then you woke just when that surveyor guy come along and attacked you with your own

shotgun. He hit you in the head with it. And that's all you know. You don't remember nothin' else. Now say all that. ADAM. Fell down, don't 'member nothin'. Surveyor man hit me in the head with my shotgun.

MATT. That's right. He hit you in the head with your shotgun, and you don't remember nothin' else. Now say the whole story back to me.

ADAM. I's huntin'. Yesterday. In those woods. Seen tent. Dead bodies. Tried to shake 'em awake. I's dizzy. Dizzy. Fell down. Don't remember nothin'. Got sick, don't 'member nothin'. Surveyor man hit me with my shotgun. Don't 'member nothin'. MATT. Okay... Good. That's really good, Adam. *(Checks watch.)* Alright, now just keep sayin' it. Yeah? Keep sayin' to yourself, over and over, you practice and practice, and when those men come in here askin' you any questions, you only say what I just told you to say. You was huntin' yesterday. You got that? Yeah?

ADAM. Yeah.

MATT. You sure now?

ADAM. Huntin' yesterday.

MATT. And not one damn word about what you and me talked about in here just now. Understand? I only brought you a Coke and a bearclaw, and we didn't say nothin' to each other. Understand?

ADAM. Yeah.

MATT. That's real important. We didn't speak.

ADAM. We didn't speak.

MATT. *(Checks watch.)* Alright, well I gotta go get ready for 'em. They'll be here any minute now. Keep practicin' what I told you to say, and remember, not a word of what you told me about touchin' that woman or anything else. Yeah?

ADAM. Yeah.

MATT. Okay.

*Matt nods anxiously, and heads toward the doorway.*

ADAM. Mattie?

MATT. *(Turns around.)* Yeah?

ADAM. Why we doin' this?

MATT. I'm tryin' to keep you out of a helluva lot of trouble, Adam.

ADAM. Why for me?

MATT. *(Considers the question.)* Let's just call it a spoke. Between us.

*They stand still, looking at one another. Then Matt turns and heads out the doorway.*

*Adam stands for a moment, pondering, then sits on the cot.*

ADAM. I's huntin' yesterday. In those woods. Saw tent. Saw bodies inside, got scared. Shook 'em, they didn't wake. Got scared. Don't remember nothin'. Got dizzy, fell down. Don't remember nothin'. Surveyor man hit my head with my shotgun. Don't remember nothin'. Got scared. *(Pause.)* I's huntin' yesterday. In those woods. Saw tent. Saw bodies. Got scared. Shook 'em, they didn't wake. Don't remember nothin'.

*As Adam rehearses his story, the light on the jail cell fades, while the dim-light on tent remains.*

*Blackout.*

## ARMADILLOS JOHN YOHE

### KONG

Big burly white guy. A biker dude, wears a leather vest with some kind of colors on the back, a flaming skull like Hell's Angels. He's big, chunky, but with muscles, and a thick beard and hair down his neck. Kind of a big fat scary-looking Jesus motherfucker.

### RAY

Black guy, maybe a little on the chubby side, and older, 40s. Clean shaven but with a blue-collar-ish feel. He's quiet and always observing and paying attention to the conversation. He knows exactly what's going on, but just enjoys seeing things play out.

### ASIAN DUDE

A (maybe older) Japanese man. Skinny, long hair, either black and greying, or just all grey. He's really a Zen master, dressed as a blue collar bum. He's pretty stoic, though sometimes with a wry smile, barely visible. He's confident and knows what he's doing the whole time, which is to give Kong an enlightenment workout of the mind.

### TERESA

She can be any color/race, and either skinny hot, or even a little chunky. She's smart, or tries to be, and has obvious leanings to philosophy, but when she gets her chance to speak, she exhausts herself. Key is that she's wearing tight, low jeans and a short sleeveless t-shirt which need to be short so her belly and lower back show. Very key: she has the chinese character for 'Dao/Tao' on her lower back, as a "tramp stamp". Dao/Tao as in the *Dao De Jing/Tao Te Ching*.

### Setting description and notes

Dark, divey, bar. The whole room is dark and seedy and gritty. Neon beer signs. A lit corridor with a sign over the door saying RESTROOMS (or the equivalent, whatever there's space for—two doors—could be in spanish too). The actual physical bar

faces the audience, so that the three men sitting there are facing the audience.

Ideally, the bar should curve around in a 'J' shape stage-right, with the bar door off behind it (where Asian Dude sits) at stage right, so the men can somewhat face each other.

Play starts with RAY and KONG, the only two patrons right now, seated on stools, RAY about midway, and KONG two stools down towards the door (stage right). They're facing us.

TERESA the bartender is facing them, and or sideways, washing a glass. But pretty quick she should reveal her Tao/Dao tattoo. There's a cooler behind Teresa, closer to the audience, which holds ice and bottles of beer, and where Teresa will reach in to get the bottles of beer the men order, so that her butt will be to them.

There may be other people in booths in the background, who might be seen from certain angles, but the main focus is the bar, and the four people there, and the lighting should be focused around it and them.

*Panel 1. Interior. Wide. Top of page. Looking at the backs of RAY and KONG, seated on stools, RAY about midway, and KONG two stools down towards the door, facing the audience. TERESA faces them, or us, or at least out towards the whole room, washing a glass, and putting the glass under the bar, so audience can see her tattoo.*

*Kong has a bottle of Corona in front of him. Ray, a Bud Lite. Both turn their heads to stare at the door opening.*

*ASIAN DUDE stands there holding it open, looking in and maybe slightly smiling, then takes a seat at the end by the door.*

### KONG:

Sounds like a joke: a negro, a cracker and a Jap walk into a bar.

*Teresa walks down to Asian Dude.*

TERESA:

What'll you have, honey?

*Asian dude has a polite (though perhaps imperceptible) smile on his face.*

ASIAN DUDE:

Do you have any Tsing-Tao beer?

*Kong turns and looks at Asian Dude, 'snorting', and/or some kind of annoyed expression. Make sure his Corona is visible.*

KONG (to Asian Dude):

This is America, pal.

*Asian Dude looks down-ish at what Kong is drinking. Face either stoic, or maybe with slight trace of a smile. Asian Dude looks at Teresa and smiles.*

ASIAN DUDE:

I'll have a Corona too.

*Teresa turns around, bending over into the cooler to fish out a bottle. All eyes directed at her ass. She straightens, holding a Corona. Both Kong and Ray obviously staring anywhere but at her, so as not to be caught staring at her ass.*

*Teresa puts the bottle down on the bar.*

*Kong, again, his face and eyes turned to Asian Dude.*

KONG:

So Jackie Chan, what do you know?

*Asian Dude very deliberately reaches for his Corona, looking at it, not at anybody else. He takes a swig from the bottle, still looking down-ish, not at anybody. He puts the bottle down and finally speaks.*

ASIAN DUDE:

Life is armadillos.

*Kong pauses halfway to lifting his Corona to his mouth.*

KONG:

What?

*Asian Dude, still not making eye contact, but maybe fiddling with his bottle.*

ASIAN DUDE:

Life is armadillos.

*Kong puts down his bottle and stares at Asian Dude.*

KONG:

What the hell does that mean?

*Asian Dude taking another swig. Saying nothing and still not making eye contact.*

*Kong turns his body more to Asian Dude, getting angry/excited.*

KONG:

Do you mean life has a hard shell?

Or that we can roll up into a little ball for protection?

*Kong leans towards Asian Dude and points at him.*

KONG:

That's it, right? You mean life is *like* an armadillo.

Hard and weird, right? Well, that's bullshit!

Who the fuck are you anyway? Life ain't no armadillo!

*Asian Dude, possibly, nods.*

ASIAN DUDE:

Life is not armadillos.

*Kong's mouth falls open. Speechless, staring at Asian Dude.*

*Kong turns to Ray, pointing with his right thumb back at Asian Dude. Ray looks at Kong, kind of bored and/or slightly amused with Kong and the whole situation.*

KONG:  
Ray, who is this clown?

*Ray shrugs, amused.*

RAY:  
I don't know, Kong.

*Kong turns back to Asian Dude, still excited and/or angry.*

KONG:  
Now, why are you all of a sudden saying life *isn't* armadillos?  
I thought you said it was.

*Asian Dude shakes his head, again.*

ASIAN DUDE:  
I never said life was armadillos.

*Pause, while Kong processes that. Or tries to.*

KONG:  
Then what did you say?

ASIAN GUY:  
That life is armadillos.

*Kong is again speechless, stunned, frustrated.*

KONG:  
I...

*Kong looks back at Ray, mouth open. Ray looks back at him, amused, like 'What do you want/expect?'*

*Kong pushes himself backwards away from the bar and off the stool.*

KONG:  
Fuck this shit, man.

*Kong walks to the bathroom. Asian Dude and Ray sitting there drinking and not saying anything. Teresa moves around wiping the bar and/or anything else.*

*Kong walks out of bathroom zipping up his fly, and sits back down. He's calmed down, maybe even slightly smiling, looking at the Asian Dude.*

KONG:  
So. You gonna tell me life is armadillos?

*Asian Dude is now actively looking at Kong.*

ASIAN DUDE:  
Are you going to tell me life is armadillos?

*Kong becomes confused/frustrated again.*

KONG:  
What? Wait.  
Are you gonna tell me life *isn't* armadillos?

*Asian Dude smiling slightly now.*

ASIAN DUDE:  
Are you going to tell me life is not armadillos?

*Kong now gets angry.*

KONG:  
What the fuck are you talking about?

*Asian dude stares calmly at KONG.*

ASIAN DUDE:  
What the fuck are *you* talking about?

KONG:  
What about the fucking armadillos?

ASIAN DUDE:  
What *about* the fucking armadillos?

*Kong grips his beer bottle in both hands, about to lose control. Both Ray and Teresa are now watching intently, both more than slightly amused.*

KONG:  
Man, fuck you.

ASIAN DUDE:  
Man fuck *you*.

KONG:  
What?!

ASIAN DUDE:  
What?

*Teresa with arms crossed and smirking. Ray taking a swig trying to stop from smiling. Kong glares down at the bar top.*

*Teresa walks down the bar to Asian Dude, to break the tension. Maybe here make sure audience can see her lower back tattoo.*

TERESA:  
Another Corona, honey?

ASIAN DUDE:  
Yes please.

*Teresa goes and bends over to fish bottles out of the cooler. Again, her butt facing the guys, who all stare.*

KONG (to Teresa):  
Teresa, what's that tramp stamp stand for?

*Teresa straightens and turns around, glaring at Kong. Holding a Corona.*

TERESA:  
What did you call it?!

*Kong, arms spread wide, like giving up, or exasperated.*

KONG:  
Aw come on, that's what they're called!

*Teresa puts down the bottle in front of Asian Dude, but turns and glares at Kong.*

TERESA:  
It's a fucking Chinese character.  
It's the fucking character for Dao.

*Kong looks genuinely puzzled. He has no clue.*

KONG:  
Dow? Like Dow Jones?

TERESA:  
Dao as in The Way.

KONG:  
The way to what? Your ass?

*Even stoic Ray has to cover his mouth, trying not to laugh out loud. Teresa rolls her eyes.*

TERESA:  
Jeezus Kong, can't you just shut up?

*Kong, now acting like a smartass, smiling, pretending to be sincere, knowing he's creating a scene.*

KONG:  
I'm trying to understand your stamp.

*Teresa still angry, glaring at Kong but pointing at Ray. Kong, still gloating over the attention.*

TERESA:  
Kong, why can't you be more like Ray?

KONG:  
What do you mean?

TERESA:  
I mean you're always talking,  
but you never actually *say* anything useful.  
You just talk to talk.



*Kong, not smiling anymore, slightly worried that he's about to be made a fool of.*

KONG:  
What's wrong with that?

*Teresa, still angry, but now lecturing a small child.*

TERESA:  
Just try and act intelligent for once.  
Like Ray. He's smart. You can tell.

*Ray waves his hands in front of him to signal negative.*

RAY:  
I'm no saint.

*Teresa smiles at Ray.*

TERESA:  
I doubt that. But you're smart.  
I can tell.

*Kong turns and stares at Ray.*

KONG:  
How can you tell?

TERESA:  
Because he never says anything.  
The people that talk are the one's that don't know anything.  
The one's who don't talk are the one's who know.

*Kong, confused again.*

KONG:  
Know what?

*Teresa crosses her arms and sighs, tired from lecturing and maybe from thinking so much.*

TERESA:  
I don't know. Know when to shut up.  
Know why they at least don't know.

*Kong with the deer-in-headlights look. He turns to Ray, who shrugs. Then turns to Asian Dude.*

KONG:  
What do you got to say about all this?

*Asian Dude grips his beer, takes a swig, and puts the bottle down.*

ASIAN DUDE:  
Life is armadillos.

**MAKING IT BIG IN BOZEMAN: A ONE  
MAN SHOW (AND ONE DOG, THREE  
COYOTES, A DISEMBODIED VOICE, AND  
A BUFFALO)  
BURKE DE BOER**

The staging is intended for a thrust or arena stage. We are in a sorry excuse for a yard; at one entrypoint the porch steps down from the glass door of a tiny house to a patch of dirt and rock. At center there is a weight bench and a squat rack. At rise, the set is dark. It is night.

Somewhere distant, coyotes howl. The animals in this production might be bunraku puppets, human actors, or if you're absolutely insane, real animals. Whatever.

*(Three coyotes come creeping their way into the yard, bickering quietly among their coyote selves.)*

*A pitbull runs its weight into the door, barking, jumping, scratching at the glass. The coyotes flinch, but hold their ground, slender mountain bodies flexed. They know the muffle of the door ensures their safety; outside, they are in the wild. The siren bark of civilization and its painful domestication can't reach them.*

*The arc lamp over the door alights.*

*Behind the glass, a man's hand grabs the dog's collar and flings the dog into darkness. Then the man emerges and slams the door behind him.*

*This is PAT, a mountain of a man. When people say there's such a thing as too much muscle, this is who they're talking about. He wears nothing but brightly colored compression shorts that say KISS ME I'M IRISH across the ass. He carries a rifle.*

*The coyotes scatter offstage in all three directions. He aims for one - FIRES! Aims for the second - FIRES! Aims for the third - beat - )*

**PAT.** Fuckin' suck ass.

*(He opens the door. The dog barks from within.)*

**PAT.** Miley, get 'em! Attack!

*(Beat. He turns to look in the doorway.)*

**PAT.** Baby, let her go!

**SOFIA.** *(offstage)* Is it safe?! Aagh--

*(There's a stumbling clatter and the dog bolts from the house in pursuit of the third coyote. PAT watches a moment.)*

**PAT.** Woo!! *(exits into the house - o.s.)* Now this is real Montana living! "Is it safe," shit, that's a coyote and a pit bull, that's like a flyweight fighting a heavy! Get over here. *(sounds of kissing)*

**SOFIA.** *(o.s.)* It's four in the fucking morning.

**PAT.** *(o.s.)* Yeah, what are you doing with all that ass at four in the fucking morning? *(sounds of ass-slapping and kissing)*

**SOFIA.** *(o.s.)* We just got attacked by wolves! This never happened here before you came out here, and

now that's the third time we've had fucking wolves in our yard!

**PAT.** (o.s.) Babe, it's okay, they're just coyotes.

**SOFIA.** (o.s.) Did you kill the ones you shot at?

**PAT.** (o.s.) Pretty fucking hot, right? Get over here.

*(The dog trots back onto stage, carrying the bloody carcass of the coyote with her. She shakes and plays with and tears the carcass up in a bloody display while we hear makeout sounds within the tiny house.)*

**SOFIA.** (o.s.) Oh fuck, okay, get offa me.

**PAT.** (o.s.) Baby! What?

**SOFIA.** (o.s.) This isn't "hot." This is gross. Get offa me.

**PAT.** (o.s.) Well, don't have to tell me twice.

**SOFIA.** (o.s.) I did tell you twice.

*(He reemerges, without the gun, now holding his phone. He watches Miley for a moment, as he puts in a bluetooth earpiece and sets the phone down on the bench.)*

**PAT.** Miley you crazy bitch. Get inside!

*(The dog looks at him.)*

**PAT.** Get in the house!!

*(She drops her head and slowly heads for the door.)*

**PAT.** Go lay down!!!

*(Moping, she enters the house. PAT crosses to the coyote carcasses.)*

**PAT.** Crazy bitch.

**SOFIA.** (o.s.) Oh my God! Pat? Is this blood?!

**PAT.** Don't worry, it's not hers.

**SOFIA.** (o.s.) Miley, get off the bed!!

**PAT.** (to phone) Okay Google.

**SOFIA.** (o.s.) It's everywhere!

**PAT.** Okay Google.

**SOFIA.** (o.s.) Patrick, this is disgusting!

**PAT.** Okay Google?

**SOFIA.** (o.s.) I'm gonna have to give her a bath!

*(The dog runs out of the house, cowering.)*

**PAT.** Nah-ah! Get back in there! (*shoves her back inside*) Sofia, you can't use the b-word!

**SOFIA.** I'm gonna have to wash her, and the bedding, and the floor-

**PAT.** (*slams the door*) Okay Google! ...Call The Old Man. ... Hey Pops, what's the story? ... Yeah, it is, but I know you're always up and at 'em, piss and vinegar at six Eastern. How's the sunrise this morning? ... No kiddin', huh? Well I'm lookin' forward to it. How's the stock market?

*(He goes off in the direction of the first coyote he fired upon. We hear his "Uh huh"s and "Oh sure"s off stage, while the backlit shadow of SOFIA struggles to fill the tub and wash the dog inside the house. PAT returns with another coyote carcass that he tosses beside Miley's kill.)*

**PAT.** Hey, I got a question from your farming days. You said the old timers used to-- ... Oh, excuse me, "Never a farmer, my investment company merely owned stake" yeah yeah, whatever, Moneybags. Mr. Fancy Pants with the five dollar words. But what was it you said the old timers did with the coyotes they killed? The ones who really were farmers. To keep other coyotes away? ... How so? ... They strung 'em up? Gross. Well, I guess I gotta do it now. ... Oh, no, nothing dangerous, we just got attacked by a pack of 'yotes a couple minutes ago. Me and Miley killed 'em all. ... It's the wild, Pops, it's how things go! ... Aw, ya sound like a goddamn woman.

*(He exits again, in the direction of the second coyote.)*

**PAT.** (*o.s.*) I said ya sound like a damn woman! Sofia wasn't gonna let Miley out when I told her to attack, she was all "Is it safe" it's like damn, bitch, only one way to find out. ... I'll say it to her face! I talk a lotta shit. I saw how being polite worked out for you and

mom. Life in the city, under street signs and social order, it's not how we were meant to, uh-- Ah fuck! Aaagh! This one's not dead yet!

*(We hear PAT's screams and the vicious snarls and growls of the coyote. Then we hear a series of hard thuds, each accompanied with a painful coyotic whimper.)*

*PAT reenters, dragging the beaten body of the coyote behind him.)*

**PAT.** I'm sorry you had to see that, Pops. ... You didn't see it? Oh, right, we're on the phone. Well I just killed a coyote with my bare hands. Beat it against the ground like an alpha chimp brutalizing a baboon baby. That's Montana livin'! ... No, look, I don't care.

*(He begins the process of hanging the coyote carcasses from the crossbars at the top of his squat rack.)*

**PAT.** I don't care! I know it's "advantageous," but I don't care about New York. Me and Sofia, we don't care about LA no more either, we're outta there. Done and well done, dip it in the A1. I'm making it big in Bozeman, baby. ... Bozeman isn't "nowhere." Montana don't care about New York either, how about that? Sorry you fellas in the city haven't heard yet, but you're about ten years behind. People in New York don't even know what an animal is. They've never seen a tree. Living within the walls of the city, within the walls of Troy, fuhgettaboutit, and good luck when the global warming hits. ... I know cities aren't walled anymore, that was a romantical metaphor.

*(He observes the hanging coyote carcasses.)*

**PAT.** Dad, I can't do this. ... Hanging up the dead coyotes I mean. This is revolting. "Your majesty, the people are revolting! You said it, they stink on ice."

*(He goes about the process of taking the carcasses down and tossing them unceremoniously off stage.)*

**PAT.** Yes, you deaf mick, again, I told you all this but you don't listen to me. Her folks took the tiny house off Air BNB. It was an income source, they're like you, just not like you. So yes, we're paying rent, and I'm happy to do so. I'm out here on Muscle Mountain - that's what I call it, Muscle Mountain - paying rent, making my own way, standing on my own two feet against the rebukes of nature. My personal training's going great. I got hired at a gym in town. I've got steroid connects here now, so if you ever want to get inexplicably shredded- ... Wh-? No, not me! Dad, if I did steroids, do you have any idea how big I'd be? Just saying, I'll get trenbol straight to you, I'll make you a plan, I'll make you huge. ... Trenbol, that's bull testosterone. And that's no bullshit. This is my world! As a homesteader, as a personal trainer, overcoming the limits of nature is what I do. It's what I do!

*(Finished with the chore, he crosses to sit on the bench, and changes his energy-)*

**PAT.** But Dad, listen, speaking of my gym. One thing I've noticed is it's full of ex-LA, ex-California, Texas, Seattle people who want to come out and live deliberately. Hiking and hunting and skiing and shit. Bozeman is booming. Dad, we can go in on some investment properties. Real estate. It's pioneer days out here, I'm not the only one wrestling a foothold for civilization out of a wilderness that doesn't want us. If you-- ... Yeah. ... Mm. ... Yeah, okay, see, this is why I'm not in New York. No no no, 'cause your gifts come with terms and conditions. ... You were just offering us a free apartment, how is this different! The only difference is this comes with a

return on investment. For you. I'm telling you! -- I'm telling you what I'm seeing - and look, I'm capable, I just killed three fucking coyotes, right? I knew nobody out here, came out, I found a job, I'm making my way, I'm out here with boots on the ground. But you don't trust my judgment, so it's like- ... You don't act like it! You're like the fuckin' government, whenever you offer shit you're just extending a means of control. And that's why mom left! Yeah, sure, she's outta her goddamn mind, but that's just because living life with bumper pads on the brain will do that to ya. It's like I'm talking to Willy Loman or some shit. There's a New York reference for ya, and you can put it in your book. Eugene O'Neill-ass shit. ... I know he didn't write-!! -- Look, I don't know what I gotta do for you to take me seriously, but until I find out I'll just take my own damn self seriously and not worry about it. Like you told me once, don't try to impress others, just try to impress yourself. And right now you're the others, y'know what I mean? Sorry 'bout it.

*(Beat)*

**PAT.** Hey, stop me if you've heard this one - an Irishman and an Italian chick move into her parents' cabin in the woods. ... I know, I keep giving you the setup. I'll let you know when I figure out the punchline. ... Yeah, all right.

*(He hangs up, and takes his earbuds out.)*

*He sighs.*

*He picks up a dumbbell and starts doing curls. As he cranks out curls, the lights change. He is focused on his workout. A white buffalo bull enters from the middle aisle and approaches PAT. It lumbers up to him, snot dripping as it comes nose to forehead. The dog barks viciously from within.*

**FROG HEAD: A MONOLOGUE**  
**JOHN WEAGLY**

*He is focused on his workout.)*

Lights out.

(Lights up. FRED lies in a bed center, tossing and turning.)

FRED

(In his sleep.)

Oh, yeah - today's the day they come out. Monsoons in the Sonoran Desert. Arizona. Monsoon season starts today. Lluvia Pesada. Up, out of the ground, out of burrows three feet deep. Today's the day they arrive. The Yuma is part of the Sonoran. Gran Desierto de Alter. 1000,000 square miles of el cero. It's all the same. Everything's the same. Gila woodpeckers and black-tailed gnatcatchers and gilded flickers. Woodrats and box turtles and whiptail lizards and rattle-rattle-rattle snakes. And the frogs. Ranas. The frogs come out for the monsoons. Frogs in the desert, living in the desert. What's that about? Saguaro and organ pipe cactus and ribbit-ribbit-ribbit. Reaching deep, down south of Arizona into the Estados Unidos Mexicanos. The hottest desert in Mexico, or so they say. Heat and dry and nothing. Everything's the same and none of it matters. WATCH OUT, FROGS! WATCH OUT FOR THAT SIDEWINDER! Desalojo. So, yeah, the frogs like that monsoon trickle. Sonoran green toads. Narrowmouth toads. Spadefoot toads. Red-spotted toads. Great Plains toads. Casque-headed frogs. A toad is not a frog and a frog is not a toad. The monsoons last for a couple fortnights. Two months or so. Thunder and lightning and eloquent rain and vigorous wind. Creosote flats fill with water to become transient lakes that were only ghosts before. It changes only to stay the same. Does it matter? Musky-scented Canyon ragweed doesn't give a shit. WATCH OUT, FROGS! DON'T TRUST THAT BANK MANAGER! La ejecución de una hipoteca. A frog survives by moving from cool, dry air to warm, humid burrows. Got to stay alive! Dig-dig-dig! Everybody needs a place to live, to survive. Got to fucking stay alive in the desert. Burrows three-feet deep where frogs spend nine or ten months waiting for those rains. It's all about moist membranes and hibernation and low

metabolic rate and things of that general sort. But does it matter? Does it make a difference? It matters to the frogs. But does it really matter? A copper mine is a copper mine until the copper runs out, then it's just a hole. A man with a frog for a head has no reason to work in a bank. Not Wells Fargo. Not Arizona Bank & Trust. Not Comerica. Today's the day they come out. A frog and not a toad. A vast change. Maldito desalojo! No rest, no supervivencia, no forgiveness, no reprieve, no home - just el monzon. The monsoon rains.

(There is an ominous, heavy pounding on the door. FRED jolts awake in shock. He sits up in bed, disheveled and confused, staring at the audience as the lights slowly fade. Lights down.)

**FEBRUARY 7, 1985**

**JOSH OLSEN**

I was almost 6 years old when Father Rossiter was murdered in the church I was baptized. Shot in the back of the head with a 12-gauge shotgun while kneeling before the altar. The killer, a 29-year-old paranoid schizophrenic claiming to be the biblical Elijah, murdered two more in St. Patrick's that morning, a lay minister and a church custodian. If you want to read about it, there's no shortage of newspaper articles. I have nothing new to add. And I feel like perhaps I shouldn't even be writing this, let alone proofreading it, editing it, and submitting it for publication, for others to read. For the families of the victims to read. For the family of the murderer to read. For the murderer to read. He was released in 2009, 24 years after murdering three in a church, deemed no longer a threat to the public. I was classmates with his niece, not at the time of the crime, but several years later, in middle school, back when he was still in custody of the state. I wouldn't have known she was his niece, but my mother saw her name in a yearbook, and told me she was related to him. My mom was the person who told me about the death of Father Rossiter. When she told me about it, she was crying, and so I too began to cry. I would be 6 years-old the following month, I was in kindergarten, and he was the first person I knew who had died. Reading now about his murder, the news articles, it rings all too familiar. A white man walks into a church and kills. You know the headlines. You know the names. You know the mugshots of the white men who walk into churches and schools and movie theaters and kill. I'm not going to repeat their names. I'm not going to waste the whitespace. But there might come a day when some of them are released of their own recognizance. There might come a day when some of them walk free. There might come a day when some of them are deemed healed and forgiven, no matter what or who they desecrated. And then what?

**REVIEW:**  
**DEADHEADING & OTHER STORIES**

**By Beth Gilstrap**

**(Red Hen Press, out now)**

Reviewed by Adam Van Winkle

I haven't thought about the steam sputter of a pressure cooker in a long time. But you mention pressure cookers filled with collard greens and fried okra, and I'm right back in Grandma Essie's farmhouse kitchen in Texoma. I smell it. I feel the film of grease on the drawer and cabinet pulls built up from years of cooking with hog lard.

One of the great gifts of fiction is its ability, when it is well done, to give us visceral sensation. Beth Gilstrap's southern fiction collection *Deadheading & Other Stories*, out now from Red Hen Press, makes me feel it, and is very well done.

And it ain't just food Gilstrap makes you feel when you read this outstanding collection of southern stories. Set in the Carolinas, *Deadheading* introduces complex southern women, way beyond stereotypes, surviving in a threatening and dying landscape.

Relevant today, many of these women struggle with death and the threat of violence. For it, they are stronger and wiser, and any reader will respect the hell out of the struggle they've endured.

These women are fictional, but Gilstrap writes with such authenticity, such compassion for the place and people, such awareness of the southern struggle, you'd be hard pressed to read *Deadheading* and not imagine it all comes from somewhere very real.

Reading this collection, I thought of Grandma Essie cooking, of Grandma Essie chopping copperheads with a hoe, of Grandma Essie and all she endured on the farm. And isn't that what we want, fiction that reconnects us with ourselves, with our own lived experiences? I know I do.

Buy, read, treasure *Deadheading & Other Stories* by Beth Gilstrap. Do it now.

**CONTRIBUTORS**

**J.D. O'Brien** lives in Massachusetts. His novel *Acapulco Gold* will be released in 2022 by Schaffner Press.

**Frank Reardon** was born in 1974 in Boston, Massachusetts, and currently lives in Minot, North Dakota. Frank has published poetry and short stories in many reviews, journals and online zines. His first poetry collection, *Interstate Chokehold*, was published by NeoPoiesis Press in 2009 as well as his second poetry collection *Nirvana Haymaker* in 2012. His third poetry collection *Blood Music* was published by Punk Hostage Press in 2013. In 2014 Reardon published a chapbook with Dog On A Chain Press titled *The Broken Halo Blues*. Frank is currently working on more short fiction.

**Jody Rae's** work appears in *Sledgehammer Lit*, *The Babel Tower Notice Board*, *The Good Life Review*, and *Red Fez*. Her short story, "Beautiful Mother" was a finalist in the *Phoebe Journal* 2021 Spring Fiction Contest. She was the first prize winner of the 2019 Winning Writers Wergle Flomp Humor Poetry Contest for her poem, "Failure to Triangulate". She has pieces forthcoming in *Rejection Letters*, *RESURRECTION* magazine, and *XRAY*. Her work can be found at [www.criminysakesalive.com](http://www.criminysakesalive.com).

**Patrick Strickland** is a writer and journalist from Texas. His short stories have appeared or are forthcoming at *The Barcelona Review*, *The Broadkill Review*, *The Coachella Review*, *This Great Society*, and *MonkeyBicycle*. He has an MFA from the University of Nebraska - Omaha.

**Richard Zaborowski** is a librarian from the Midwest that puts a contemporary twist on traditional library offerings. His monthly Short Story Night (a "book club" for the busy) packs the local brewery and features trivia, comedy, and author interviews. His writing is forthcoming in *Barstow* and *Grand*.



**Julia Nunnally Duncan** is an award-winning Western North Carolina author of ten books of prose and poetry. Her most recent books are an essay collection *A Place That Was Home* (eLectio Publishing, 2016) and poetry collections *A Part of Me* (Red Dirt Press, 2017) and *A Neighborhood Changes* (Finishing Line Press, 2018). She has essays forthcoming in *History Magazine*, *Smoky Mountain Living*, *World War One Illustrated*, and *Tennessee Home & Farm* and poems in *Red Dirt Forum*, *Broad River Review*, *Crossing the Rift*, and *BlazeVOX online journal*. She lives in Marion, NC, and enjoys spending time with her husband Steve and their daughter Annie.

**Jonathan Danielson** is an Instructor and creative writing Affiliate Faculty at Arizona State University. He is a Writer-at-Large for *The Feathertale Review*, and his work has appeared in *Gulf Coast*, *Juked*, *Superstition Review*, *Gravel*, *Able Muse*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and elsewhere. Most recently, he was named a 2021 Faculty Fellow for the Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing. Along with his full-time teaching duties at ASU, he is pursuing a doctorate in English literature and creative writing. He received his MFA from the University of San Francisco.

**Nathan Pettigrew** was born and raised an hour south of New Orleans and lives in the Tampa area with his loving wife. His stories have appeared in *Deep South Magazine*, "The Year" *Anthology* from *Crack the Spine*, *Stoneboat*, and the *Nasty: Fetish Fights Back* anthology from Anna Yeatts of *Flash Fiction Online*, which was spotlighted in a 2017 *Rolling Stone* article. His story "The Queen of the South Side" was named Honorable Mention in the Genre Short Story category for the 88th *Annual Writer's Digest* Writing Competition, while his story "Dog Killer" was named among the Top Four finalists of the *Writer's Digest* 8th Annual Popular Fiction Awards for the Crime category. Other genre stories have appeared in *Thuglit*, *Pulp Modern*, the *Savage Minds & Raging Bulls* anthology from *Bristol Noir*, the *Mardi Gras Mysteries* and *Mardi Gras Murder* anthologies

from *Mystery and Horror, LLC*, and at *Punk Noir* and *DarkMedia.com*.

**Sheree Shatsky** writes wild words. Recent work has appeared in *The Drabble*, *Splonk*, *Wraparound South*, *Fictive Dream*, *BLACKCACKLE at Entropy*, *The Dead Mule* and *Saw Palm* with found poetry at *Harpy Hybrid Review* and *Heron Tree*. Her current project is a novella-in-flash set in 1969 Florida. An Alabamian by birth, this long time Floridian is a Tom Petty fan. Read more of her writing at [shereeshatsky.com](http://shereeshatsky.com).

**Mason Parker** is an Okie-born, Montana-based writer. His work has been featured in or is forthcoming from *X-R-A-Y*, *Misery Tourism*, *Expat*, and *Rejection Letters*, among others. It has been anthologized in print in *A Beautiful Resistance* and *Zhoupheus*. In his free time, he enjoys exploring the nearby Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness with his partner and two dogs.

A native West Virginian, **Kevin C Stewart** is an Associate Professor of English at Carroll College, Montana. He is the author of *The Way Things Always Happen Here* (WVU Press), and his work has been anthologized in the anthologies *Writers by the River: Reflections on 40+ Years of the Highland Summer Conference* on McFarland Press (2021) and *Eyes Glowing at the Edge of the Woods: Fiction and Poetry from West Virginia* on Vandalia Press, WVU Press's literary imprint (2017). His stories and poems have appeared in magazines and journals such as *Shenandoah*, *Appalachian Heritage*, *The Texas Review*, *The Southeast Review*, *Fiction Southeast*, *The Common* and in *Cowboy Jamboree Magazine's* recent "Asquint" issue.

**Sean Jacques** is a fifth-generation native of the Missouri Ozarks. His wayward career includes bartender, bank teller, stone sculptor, public relations director, creative executive for the Weinstein Company film studio, and screenwriter in various development hell ventures in the movie business. Currently, he teaches English Literature in Los Angeles while writing new tales, his most recent work can be found at *Across the Margin*, *Dead Fern*

Press, and *34 Orchard*. You can find him on twitter @SeanJacques10.

**Burke De Boer** is a writer and producer in Dallas, Texas. He directs music videos and produces podcasts under the Third Eye Sockeye label. Find him on Twitter @professorjoke.

Since 1992, over 100 of **John Weagly's** plays have received productions by theaters on 4 continents. A collection of his short sci-fi/fantasy scripts, *Tiny Flights of Fantasy*, has been taught at Columbia College and is available through Amazon. Also a short story writer, *Locus Magazine* once compared his short fiction to the works of Ray Bradbury and Nina Kiriki Hoffman and called him "a new writer worth reading and following."

**Josh Olsen** is a librarian and the co-editor of Gimmick Press.

**Adam Van Winkle** is the founder and editor-in-chief for Cowboy Jamboree Magazine and Cowboy Jamboree Press. He has published two novels and a novella: *Abraham Anyhow* (2017), *While They Were in the Field* (2019), and *Hardway Juice* (2019). He has published a handful of plays as well: *The Red Knife Plays* adapted from the Appalachian fiction of Sheldon Lee Compton (2020), *Two Eunices* (2020), and (forthcoming from Leftover Books in February 2022) *Dylan Quick is a Dairy Queen Don Quixote*.

