

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Robert Hinderliter for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing presented on April 24, 2009.

Title: Wild West Love Songs

Abstract approved:

Keith Scribner

The eight stories in Wild West Love Songs explore issues such as loss, suffering, and betrayal, but perhaps the most consistent theme is the examination of the ways we are haunted by our past. All the protagonists in these stories are haunted. Sometimes they are haunted literally, by a ghost – a physical manifestation of their fears and regrets – but even those without ghosts are haunted by the fact that their pasts, and often, sadly, their futures, are inescapable.

Wild West Love Songs

by
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A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Presented April 24, 2009
Commencement June 2009

Master of Fine Arts thesis of Robert Hinderliter presented on April 24, 2009.

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Robert Hinderliter, Author

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the wonderful faculty at Oregon State University and to my thoughtful and patient classmates.

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Wild West Love Songs

The Biloxi Machine

1.

I keep a naked man imprisoned in my basement, but I am not a pervert or a sexual deviant. The Machine to which the man is connected causes him a great deal of pain, but I am not a sadist. I keep the man imprisoned in my basement because with his help we might all be able to pick up the pieces of our broken lives.

I chose the basement primarily because it's the room in my house with the most free space. There isn't much down there other than empty cardboard boxes and some old furniture that was there when I moved in. There's also a litter box. My house is not large, and it would be difficult to find room for the man upstairs even if he weren't strapped to the Machine, which is bulky and cumbersome. I doubt I would have the strength to move it now, even if I wanted to, which of course I do not. Another reason the man is in my basement is to keep him out of sight. I do not expect others to understand the purpose or the necessity of the Biloxi Machine.

The basement is dark, as I need to conserve energy to power the Machine, and I'm sure the man must be frightened. His bravery moves me, and, though a certain level of pain is unavoidable, I do whatever I can to reduce his discomfort. The speed of the Machine's motor rises and falls to emulate the ocean tides. To him at least, this sound might be soothing. I try to keep his body at a comfortable temperature and make sure he

isn't exposed to any distressing visual stimulation, litter box aside. The man surely doesn't like having to watch Rattles do his business, and Rattles himself was at first reluctant to use his litter box with the man observing, but I think by now they've both grown used to the situation. I change the litter often, out of respect for both Rattles and the man.

The man's name is Mickey, or possibly Michael; he mumbled badly back when he could talk. I call him Mickey, and even though he can't speak he can still hear me, and I think he understands why he needs to be here, why all the tubes and wires and antennas and electrodes are necessary. I think he realizes he's doing a good thing.

In some ways, I envy his life. He is free of so many responsibilities. He doesn't have to worry about eating or drinking or going to the bathroom. He doesn't have to pick up a paper or turn on the television, or walk down the street, bearing witness to the loss and anguish of his fellow human beings. There is only so much suffering a man can see before it becomes too much. We are better equipped to experience pain ourselves than to process the sight of it in others. Once you witness misery, it can never be erased from your mind. I wonder what Mickey has seen in his life and hope it's not too late for him. It's too late for me. The things I've seen will never leave me. They tear me from my bed at night and drive me to the basement, where I watch Mickey and the Machine by candlelight. I find some semblance of comfort there.

*

I'd been in town less than a month when I met Mickey. Billings, Montana was quite a change from Mississippi, and I missed the Gulf almost as much as I hated it. I

spent most of my days sitting down by the Yellowstone River, watching it bubble and slosh against the bank and sketching it in my notebook.

One day I decided to explore farther along the riverbank, and I came across a shopping cart sitting under the remains of a crumbling concrete overpass that no longer reached across the river. The first thing I saw was a tattered red, white, and blue kite sticking up from the cart. As I stepped closer I saw that it also contained an assortment of bottles and cans and several spools of multi-colored yarn. At the bottom, half-buried by the other debris, was what looked like a dead rabbit covered with grass. I was so enamored with the contents of the shopping cart that I didn't realize there was a man lying next to it until I almost tripped over him and looked down to see his frightened eyes staring up at me.

“Oh, I'm sorry,” I said. I took a step back, bumping into the cart. The man began to crawl to his feet.

2.

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina swept into Biloxi, Mississippi from the Gulf of Mexico and tore ninety percent of the buildings along the coast to pieces. Houses up to six miles inland were destroyed. I had evacuated Biloxi and spent two nights in a hotel room in Wiggins, an hour north. The storm devastated the Gulf Coast, leaving every city it hit in shambles. I heard the numbers on the news: hundreds dead, hundreds missing, thousands homeless. Later, of course, the numbers would rise.

When I returned to the city, I gazed in silence at the lopsided shell I could no longer bring myself to call my home. All along every street, others were doing the same. We didn't say anything to each other because we didn't know what to say.

I wandered down to the beach and walked through the debris that stretched for miles along the shore. Around me, people crawled on their hands and knees through the wreckage from the casinos, overturning tables and grating through the wet sand beneath with their fingers, searching for coins. I watched them do this for a long time, sometimes whole families bent down together, clawing at the ground, but I never saw anyone find anything. Maybe some of the people weren't looking for coins, but for something they'd lost. Maybe they were looking for pieces of their old lives. I don't know. But as I said, whatever they were looking for, they didn't find it.

I picked up a barstool and wiped off the seat. I took it out toward the water to where the tide was foaming up against the sand. Pinecones, Styrofoam cups, and splintered pieces of furniture surrounded me. I pushed the stool down into the ground and watched as the watery sand sucked at the wooden legs.

Twenty yards down the beach, a black woman screamed and stumbled back from a pile of debris. Her two children jumped forward to look, but she pulled them back and tried to cover their eyes with her hands. A few other people came running, and I turned away. I knew what it was.

I got out my notebook and a pencil and stared out at the choppy water, but I didn't draw. The tide slowly pushed a ping-pong paddle toward me, nudging it a few inches closer with every wave. I felt like I was moving. I closed my eyes.

It was in that moment the idea for the Machine first came to me. When I opened my eyes, I could see my surroundings in sharp focus. The ruin and pain I saw before me could be quantified. There were numbers on the television, numbers to define the devastation. And problems with numbers can be solved by numbers.

But you have to know the exact nature of a problem before you can devise a solution. I got off the stool and walked over to where the woman had found the dead body in the debris. I pushed people aside and saw the torso of an old lady protruding out from underneath a broken sideboard, her white hair tangled with pine needles and streaked with sand, her mouth and eyes gaping open. I looked at her a long time before moving on. For hours I walked up and down the eviscerated streets, taking in every horror I could witness, searing every image into my mind. Before I went to sleep that night in my car, with Rattles biting at the bars of his cage in the back seat, I had filled forty-eight pages of my notebook with figures, equations, and diagrams.

There was nothing left for me in Biloxi. My sister in Billings said she knew of a place for sale just outside of town. I had enough money saved up that I wasn't worried about the price, plus FEMA would be pitching in. It was a nice place. The morning after the moving truck left, I began construction on the Machine.

*

Sometimes the Machine has to rotate Mickey, which he finds upsetting, especially when it requires him to be suspended upside-down for hours. Other times, it has to spin him at high rates of speed, like the furious swirl of the storm, and when this happens I cannot watch. Occasionally, Mickey will have a particularly strong reaction to the

spinning and produce a small amount of vomit, but it never reaches his mouth and is instead routed through a tube directly into the waste receptacle.

Mickey is required to remain awake for twenty-nine-hour stretches, followed by six hours of sleep. A bell begins to chime in his ears if he closes his eyes for more than six seconds during the time devoted to wakefulness. If his eyes remain shut, the bell grows progressively louder. Sometimes the ringing will reach upstairs, and Rattles will look up at me inquisitively, then clamber through his cat door and go down to the basement to investigate.

If Mickey opens his eyes for more than six seconds during the time devoted to sleep, a small amount of sedative is introduced into his bloodstream. Thankfully, as I wouldn't want him to become dependent on the sedative, this doesn't happen often; Mickey seldom needs prodding to fall asleep after twenty-nine hours of consciousness. At the beginning of his time in the Biloxi Machine, instead of a sedative Mickey would receive a small current of pain through his body to remind him to close his eyes, but this proved ineffective at inducing sleep as the pain would elevate his heart rate and increase respiration.

Even now, the Machine doesn't always function perfectly. From time to time, I have to make small adjustments to ensure every element is operating at the highest level possible. There is a lot of pressure on both Mickey and me, since so many people stand to benefit from the end result of our time together. I deeply regret the suffering the Machine causes Mickey, and I suffer as well, but we must be strong and persistent. When everything has fallen apart, finding a way to piece it back together is never painless. If we

both must suffer greatly so that others may suffer less, then we will suffer. We are picking up the pieces, Mickey and I.

3.

“I’m sorry,” I said again, reaching out to steady the shopping cart. The man had taken a few steps away from me and was watching me closely. He wore a red flannel jacket and a pair of black slacks that came about four inches from the tops of his socks. His face was creased in the deep, asymmetrical way that many homeless people’s faces are creased, which made it impossible to tell how old he was. He could have been thirty-five or fifty.

“I didn’t mean to disturb you,” I said. “I didn’t see you there.” I held up my hands and slowly backed away. Then an idea occurred to me. “I’m sorry,” I said, “but is that... Is that a rabbit in your cart?”

The man stepped over to the cart, keeping it between us. He swallowed and looked down. “That’s my rabbit,” he said. His mouth seemed to move incorrectly for the words he was saying, and it was difficult to understand him. “He was sick when I found him. I’ve been feeding him.”

I walked slowly back to the cart and looked at the rabbit. “He likes to eat that grass?” I said.

“Yeah, he eats some of it.” The man scratched his beard and kept looking down. “He’s getting better, I think.”

I heard the river to my left mutter and bubble. “What’s your name?” I asked.

“Mickey,” he said. I think that’s what he said.

I stepped back from the cart. “Are you hungry, Mickey?”

“No.”

“I’m hungry,” I said. “I don’t live far from here. You’re welcome to come eat with me if you’d like.”

“I’m not hungry,” he said.

“We can bring back something for your rabbit,” I said. “I bet he’s getting tired of grass.”

He stared at me. Then he looked back into the cart. “Okay,” he said.

I motioned with my hand and began to walk. He followed behind me. He would never bring back any food for the rabbit, but it had been dead for a long time.

*

On nights when the memories swirl across the backs of my eyelids with a vicious clarity and I can’t sleep, I’ll go down to the basement and watch Mickey. I bring a candle and set it on the floor between us. My favorite time to watch is when he’s awake and rotating slowly, his wide eyes reflecting the flame from the candle, the antennas protruding from his nipples glowing red in the wavering light. Rattles will come down the stairs and rub against my ankles until I pick him up and hold him against me, stroking his fur. I look at Mickey’s frail naked body turning in circles as the Machine gently hums, and sometimes I’m moved to rip out the tubes and the wires and set him free. But then I think of the dead woman’s waterlogged face with its horrorstruck expression, and I remember seeing that same look on the faces of hundreds of the living, and I’m reminded that we live in a world where something like the Biloxi Machine is the lesser of so many evils. And as I stand there in the candle’s glow, feeling Rattles purr against my chest and

listening to the sound he's making and the sound of the Machine, I'll look into Mickey's eyes and see them looking back into mine with something approaching understanding, and I'll set Rattles down, step forward, and put my hand on Mickey's cheek until the Machine turns him away.

The Cage

I had to look in my side mirrors when I left the state of Indiana to see what I hoped was all my sadness and disappointment vanishing in the distance behind me. I'd packed my rented SUV so full with all my worldly possessions that I couldn't see out the back.

It was the summer after my college graduation, and I was headed down to Atlanta to live with my brother. I had a freshly printed degree in Human Services and was looking for a job to help me pay back my student loans and credit card debt and also make me feel good about myself, which was something that hadn't happened for a longer period of time than was probably healthy.

I thought getting out of Indiana would be the first reasonable step toward any sort of convalescence. There was so much I needed to get away from: soured friendships, childhood memories, unwarranted guilt over a good friend's death, and a girl I loved but never wanted to see again. But more than anything, I needed to escape a state of mind. A heavy mist had been settling around my head for the past few years, and I was hoping it would dissipate the moment I crossed the state border.

My brother lived in a rickety one-bedroom above a hardware store and spent his days cleaning cages at the Humane Society and his nights listening to old Buddy Holly records and practicing card tricks. Our mother was concerned about him, and since I had

no real plans after graduation other than leaving the state as soon as I could, she suggested – requested, actually – that I move in with him. “To keep him company,” she said, though I knew she really wanted me there to keep an eye on him and give her updates on his condition. By that time we both knew he was sick. So I sold everything that wouldn’t fit into an SUV and drove south out of Bloomington for nine hours, stopping once for gas and a burrito. I pulled up in front of the hardware store with an hour of sunlight to spare, the evening still sticky with heat and the air smelling foreign and like something that made me wish I was somewhere else. I immediately knew Atlanta wouldn’t be any better than Indiana, but at least it would be bad in a different way.

I unloaded the few belongings I’d managed to bring, then followed my brother down to the Hertz to return the SUV. On the way back, he talked about his job and I watched him with a fascinated sadness. He was thirty-one, I was twenty-three. I hadn’t seen him in five years, and he didn’t look good. He was skinny and pale, squinted constantly, and had a rash crawling up both forearms that had started to peel. I couldn’t think of anything to say.

When we pulled up in front of his building, he turned off the car and sat staring forward.

“I don’t need you to watch over me,” he said.

“I know you don’t.”

“Mom should mind her own business.”

“You know Mom is incapable of minding her own business.”

“Yeah.”

We sat there for a minute, not looking at each other, and then he said, “I’m glad you’re here, though,” and got out of the car.

That night we played chess for three hours and he beat me every time. We sat cross-legged on the floor. Whenever I made a bad move and left myself open for a critical blow, a huge grin would spread across my brother’s face. He’d bend down close to the board with his hand on his chin, sighing in mock contemplation. He’d pick up pieces and set them down again, shaking his head. Finally, when he’d drawn out the moment long enough, he would bolt upright as if having come to a sudden revelation and make the move we both knew was coming, glancing from me to the board as he moved his piece.

I slept on a futon in the small living room, staring at the ceiling and listening to the bedsprings squeak as my brother turned from one side to the other on the other side of the wall.

*

Through a temp agency, I found work at a senior center doing community outreach because of the heat wave that had been broiling the city for the past several weeks. They were hiring people to go door to door at old buildings whose occupants had been labeled as high risk for heatstroke because of old age or some other infirmity.

It wasn’t a bad job. I knocked on doors, smiled at old people, and passed out little green cards showing locations of city-sponsored cooling centers where the elderly were encouraged to come mill around in front of an AC and drink lemonade.

If no one answered the door, I was supposed to try the knob in case the person inside was too ill from the heat to answer. Usually it was locked, and I would wedge a

green card in the door frame and move on. On a few occasions, the door was unlocked and I stepped inside and called out the tenant's name. When no one answered, I moved quickly from room to room, praying I wouldn't come across anything requiring heroics.

Seeing the inside of those apartments gave me the sickening feeling that I was looking into my future. Trash everywhere, surfaces slick with grime, it was clear that the occupants had given up on the possibility of happiness. When I passed a mirror, I would stop and look at myself surrounded by all that squalor. I seemed to fit right in.

*

"Pick a card." My brother spread out the playing cards on the table. A ceiling fan wobbled around a clouded light fixture above us. Outside, it was nighttime and raining. I liked the sound and the smell of the rain but dreaded the stifling humidity it would leave behind in the morning. I slid a card away from the pile.

"Look at it, memorize it." It was the ten of diamonds. I'd grown used to the sound of shuffling cards late into the night in the few weeks I'd been staying with my brother. He was thrilled to have an audience for his tricks, but they almost never worked.

"Now put it on top of the deck and cut the cards once."

"All right," I said. "If this is the same trick as last time I think you've already messed up."

"Shhh. I need to concentrate. I'm going to shuffle the cards now, so tell me when to stop."

"That's fine," I said. "It's long gone, anyway."

He smiled at me and raised his eyebrows. We had the same eyes: the same color, the same exact shape, a bit too large for our faces and pointed down slightly at the sides.

He stopped shuffling, set the deck between us, and tapped it twice. “You’re right,” he said. “It is.”

“Huh?”

“Your card. It’s gone. Take a look.” I picked up the deck and flipped through it. No ten of diamonds. My brother was wearing a white tank top with no sleeves or pockets where he could’ve hidden the card. The straps hung loosely on his thin shoulders.

“That’s really good,” I said. “Keep going.”

“What do you mean?”

“With the rest of the trick.”

“It’s finished,” he said. “That’s the trick.”

I shook my head. “That’s only half a trick. You can’t just make a card disappear. You have to make it appear again. It’s supposed to end up – I don’t know – in my back pocket or something.”

“Well then, check your back pocket.” He grinned at me.

I narrowed my eyes at him, leaned forward, and reached behind me. Nothing there.

“No luck?”

“Nothing.”

“I guess it’s gone, then. That’s too bad.” He was clearly enjoying himself immensely.

“That’s the trick?”

“That’s it.”

“Okay, fine. So where’s the card?”

“Oh, it’s here somewhere. But you have to find it.”

“Isn’t that your job?”

“Nope.”

“Right. You really need to work on your showmanship, you know that?”

“Maybe so.” He slid back his chair. “I think I’m going to call it a night, Pete. If that card turns up, let me know.” He left the deck on the table and walked out of the room.

After he closed his door, I searched everywhere for that card. I looked through the deck twice and crawled around under the table. I even checked my back pockets again. The card was gone. The next day, while he was at work, I went into his bedroom and searched through his drawers, humming loudly to distract myself from the guilt. I found more pill bottles than I could’ve ever imagined, but no ten of diamonds.

*

The city teetered on the brink of combustion. A few more degrees were all it would’ve taken. Rooftops waited to burst into flame, bridges prepared to melt down into the murky water below them, cables snapping and whipping through the air with a howl. I almost wished it would happen just to relieve the tension. People scurried along the sidewalks like ants under a magnifying glass. I delivered green cards and dripped sweat into dimly-lit stairwells where I always felt like someone was watching me.

As the days passed, I began to slip more and more inside myself. I made no calls back to Indiana, and no one called me. I didn’t trust myself to engage in any sort of meaningful human interaction, sure that I would only become tangled in grim situations I

wouldn't know how to confront. I was trying to erase my old life, though I hadn't found anything I wanted to replace it with.

On an early afternoon about halfway through the summer, my job required me to deliver a green card to a man named Charles Raymond. He lived on the fourth floor of an apartment complex in Clayton County, the kind of place people wouldn't live in if they had much of a choice. I wanted to look as professional as possible despite the heat, so I always wore a thin, lightly-colored dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up to my elbows. As I climbed up the flights of stairs to Mr. Raymond's apartment, I pulled the wet shirt away from my chest where it had adhered to my skin. When I reached his door I knocked and waited, smiling toward the peephole. Down the hall, a door opened and a head appeared, frowning and bald, then withdrew, the door closing behind it. I knocked again, looked around, then gingerly reached out for the knob. It turned, and I cursed silently and stepped inside.

The moment the air inside the apartment hit me, my heart began to race. The smell was overpowering, a hot septic stench mixed with something unfamiliar and horrible. I took a step back and stood there in the doorway, staring into the apartment. I almost closed the door. Then, from the back of the apartment, I heard what sounded like a low moan. I didn't move. I stood there and waited, breathing the hot, squalid air.

"Mr. Raymond?" I called out. The sound came again, definitely a moan, coming from somewhere in the back of the apartment. I walked forward slowly. The place looked untouched, as if no one lived there. No furniture, nothing on the walls. Only the smell occupied the front of the apartment, and it drew me in deeper even as it repelled me. I passed through the small living room into a hallway. The door at the end of the hall was

ajar, and I stepped up to it and stopped. I closed my eyes for five seconds, opened them slowly, then reached out with my foot and pushed the door open, knowing there was something alive on the other side and knowing also that whatever I was about to see would never leave me. The door swung open.

On the floor was a queen-sized mattress, and lying on the mattress was the biggest human being I'd ever seen in my life. It looked as though he'd been poured onto the bed, his flesh spilling out of an enormous T-shirt that had once been white but was now yellow and clung to his skin with sweat, reaching down to cover his lap. He wasn't wearing any pants, and a dark stain had spread beneath him on the bare mattress, the smell almost visibly rising from it. His legs were shocking, two bulbous unmoving masses snaked with purple veins. I can't say how much he weighed, but he was clearly immobile, and even if he could've gotten up he wouldn't have been able to fit through the door. I knelt down in the doorway and gagged, my hand gripping my jaw and water in my eyes.

His mouth hung open, breath coming and going in great rattling sighs. As I watched him, he turned his head to face me, his eyes wide and glazed, looking at me but not focusing. He moved his mouth as if trying to find the right position to make it form words, and then his rasping voice came out.

“Amy?”

I stared at him, breathing into my trembling hand. I tried to swallow, but couldn't. His mouth kept opening and closing as he looked at me.

“No,” I finally said, my voice nearly a whisper. “I'm Peter. My name's Peter.”

I stood up and leaned against the doorframe, squeezing my eyes closed. I steadied myself for a moment and then, my legs still shaking, walked over to the bed. His gaze followed me, and his breathing came heavier and faster. As I got closer he turned his head away and closed his eyes. He didn't want to look at me, or didn't want to look at me looking at him. I stood beside the mattress. I felt like I was falling, like the room itself had become disconnected from the world and was tumbling downward into an empty and endless hole.

"Mr. Raymond?" I said. "Charles?" He loudly gulped in air, his chest heaving, but he didn't reply.

I looked around the room. Two-liter bottles of Diet Coke were strewn beside the mattress, most of them empty. There were also about fifteen cans of chicken-noodle soup, a few unopened, and a can opener. I didn't see a bowl or a spoon. Whoever Amy was, it was obvious she hadn't been around in quite some time. There was a dresser, a closet, and a small table with a fan on it, the blades not moving. The walls were bare except for a purple flyswatter hanging from a thumbtack.

In the corner furthest from the mattress stood a tall birdcage, almost reaching the ceiling. I stepped over to it. Inside, behind the thin bronze-colored bars, a wooden perch hung from two pieces of rope, red paint chipping off. I stared past the perch into the bottom of the cage. There, crumpled against each other on a discolored newspaper, were two dead parrots. One was large and almost neon-green, the other smaller and such a luminous shade of blue I could barely believe it was real. The smaller bird's flesh had sunken away, and I could see its ribcage straining against the downy feathers on its chest, but the blue hadn't lost any of its luster, still vibrant all the way up from the frayed base

of the bird's tail out to the tips of its wings. How was it possible for a living creature to be colored like that, so radiant and so blue? How does that happen?

The two birds were tangled together, embracing almost. A blue wing draped over a green chest. But their heads were facing different directions, beaks open and eyes crusted and pale. I stood there looking down.

And then, slowly, I began to disappear. Pieces of me began to flake off and fall to the floor. My very existence quietly disintegrated until, like my brother's ten of diamonds, I simply vanished. For a long time I just stood there staring down, listening to the man behind me struggle to pull air into his lungs, watching the two otherworldly colors flow into one another behind the bars. I didn't know if I would ever reappear. Maybe, I thought, I would have to wait for someone with more faith than I had to find me.

Down by the River, the Boatman Waits

In my dream, she rises from the water slick and gleaming and pale as a ghost. The water gives off an eerie blue glow that wraps around her body. An empty night sky spreads out above us. Leaning her head back, she smooths her dark hair away from her face. I can see the goosebumps on her flesh, her small puckered nipples, the rivulets of water coursing down her skin toward her bellybutton. Her eyes focus on me, and a smile spreads across her face.

“Chase! It’s really you, isn’t it? You found me!”

“I found you,” I say. “I’ve been looking for so long.”

“Well, here I am!” She laughs and throws her arms in the air. Beads of scattered light plip into the glowing water swirling around her waist. A slow current pulls against us, its muffled gurgle the only sound except for our voices.

“I’ve been calling and calling for you,” I say. “Did you hear me?”

“Of course I did. And I’m so happy you found me. But listen, baby, I can’t stay long.” She smiles sadly and reaches out to touch my cheek. Her fingers are icicles on my skin, but I don’t pull away.

“But I just found you.”

“I know, baby.” She pulls her hand back and shakes her head. My face is still cold from her touch. “If you want, you can come with me.”

As she says the words, I notice the water creeping up her torso inch by inch, lapping against her stomach and then at the bottom of her breasts. She still looks at me with that same mournful smile, and I start to breathe faster as the water rises to my chest. The cold feeling spreads from my face down to my neck and out to my arms. I try to hold them out to look at them, but they won't move. Looking down, I realize they're crystal blue and nearly translucent. They've turned to ice. I raise my head and try to speak, but my tongue is frozen.

"It's okay," she says. "I'm right here." And then water pours into her mouth. Her eyes hold mine even as the water licks against them, and then they're gone. I can't move, can't cry out. The water embraces me gently, gurgling against my frozen face, over my nose, up to my ears. It takes me under. I open my eyes, and in the pale blue glow I see that she's vanished. Above me, the long shadow of a raft cuts across the surface. A thin oar plunges into the water next to me. I want to reach out for it, but I can't move. I want to cry for help, but my lungs are empty. I've run out of breath.

*

I woke up gasping for air, the memory of her face still frozen into my mind. The same dream, nearly every night since she'd left. Sunlight leaked in through the blinds and birds chattered outside my window. My pillowcase was soaked with sweat. I sat up on the edge of the bed and held my head in my hands.

The night before, I'd stood at the window of a stranger's house in Castle Rock, Washington and watched an old man carefully build and nurture a fire in his fireplace for twenty minutes before taking a framed photograph down from the mantle and throwing it

into the flames. He stood there staring at it, and though his face was expressionless I could see the tears shining on his cheeks.

I sat at the desk in my hotel room drinking coffee and going over my notes, line after line scrawled in tiny letters in a pocket-sized journal. A dead end, I thought. She's not there. For two weeks, I'd been systematically investigating every inch of Castle Rock, spending almost every night looking through every window of every house and taking careful notes on what I saw.

In those two weeks, I'd seen a great number of things. What I usually saw was a middle-aged man sitting in a reclining chair staring vacantly at the Weather Channel while he scratches himself, or a woman with her eyes closed petting a cat as two children throw Play-Doh at each other on the floor. But I also saw sit-up enthusiasts and solo dancers; geriatric make-out sessions and children drinking gin; relentless and infuriated fly-swatters; consumers of shocking amounts of ice cream; unimaginable cruelty to animals perpetrated by five-year-olds; unimaginable cruelty to carpets and furniture perpetrated by animals; cross-dressers, blow-up dolls, ball-gags, things that vibrated, rotated, pulsated; meth labs, weed parties, glue abuse; a woman who detached her right leg before climbing into bed; a man who held a gun in his mouth for six minutes before turning on the television and flipping to a children's cartoon; a room devoted entirely to dolphins, with paintings, photographs, stuffed-animals, toys, and T-shirts; a life-sized mannequin of Jesus; a roasted chicken stuck with birthday candles served to a small, grinning Asian man. I'd seen all this and more, much more, but not what I was looking for. Nowhere in all of Castle Rock, Washington had I seen Abbie Marquette.

*

For two and a half years, Abbie and I lived together in Montana, on the outskirts of Helena. I'd worked there as a CPA for three years, and Abbie had just moved to the city from South Dakota for an entry-level position at an advertising firm. I was twenty-eight, she was twenty-four.

We met, we talked, we went out to eat. Movies, board games, wine. After several weeks, I touched her hair and she nuzzled against my neck and closed her eyes. We undressed each other, lay on my bed, and she wrapped her legs around me. We watched our hands move across each other's bodies.

"I feel so small next to you," she said afterward, her head on my chest. "I feel like a baby bird. Or a mouse."

I'm a pretty big guy: six-four, two-hundred-thirty, and she's a foot shorter and over a hundred pounds lighter.

"I wish I was a mouse," she said. "I wish I could crawl into your pocket and hide."

She moved in, a calculated risk that I knew would result in the usual trouble: more dishes, more laundry, more garbage, dirty socks in the living room, and waiting for the bathroom. I also had to bribe a friend to take care of my über-allergenic cat. But in exchange for those few inconveniences, I had the privilege of watching Abbie move clumsily around the house, listening to her sing while she got dressed in the morning, and feeling a helpless longing for her even after we pulled our bodies apart and lay breathing heavily in the dark. I marveled at this strange, radiant creature who had decided to entwine her life with mine. All her little mannerisms – how she'd stick out her tongue at me when our eyes met across a crowded room, the way she covered up her breasts with

the sheets when the morning sunlight came in through the blinds – gnawed at me with tiny teeth of desire. But I was as gentle with her as someone bottle-feeding a newborn lamb. Though we would tease each other, in the entire time we were together, two and a half years, I never said one word to her with the intention of causing her pain.

In bed, we told each other stories about our childhoods. I told her about riding on trains with my dad, who was a railroad engineer, and she told me about horseback riding with her brother in South Dakota. She was nearly deaf in her left ear due to an injury from a car wreck when she was young, so she always slept on the left side of the bed in order to hear me. We whispered soft things to each other in the middle of the night.

*

The road leading into Castle Rock was paved but rough, winding through a thin hardwood forest. Abbie and I were on a summer road trip. We'd spent three days in Seattle and were headed to Portland to spend another two before driving back to Helena. When we saw the sign for Castle Rock, we knew we had to check it out.

“It’s like that town in Steven King’s books,” Abbie said.

“That’s right,” I said. “But I think his is in Maine. And it’s not a real town.”

Beside the road, the Cowlitz River slipped in and out of view, low and flat, slow, with strangely dark rocks around its bank which receded into dark dunes of gravel with tire tracks left as evidence of the fishermen who have come and gone.

The town was exactly what we hoped it would be: a one stoplight affair, twenty-two hundred people and not much else. It had a run-down agrarian beauty to it. The buildings on Main Street weren’t in complete disrepair, but they had a tiredness to them,

like they'd been bored and cramped together too tightly for decades and had begun to let themselves go. Abbie and I grinned at each other.

“Check out that place,” she said, pointing out the window.

A dark green two-story motel sat at the main intersection, bigger and dingier than most of the other buildings, with a cracked and chipping mural on the side of a lumberjack felling great pines.

“What kind of person would work there?” I said. “That must be the creepiest job ever.”

We continued past the motel, and the high school came into view on our right, a few well-maintained but strictly utilitarian buildings and a sign bearing a huge spaceship and the words “Castle Rock Rockets.” Past the school, near the edge of town, two blinking lights warned drivers to slow down for the crosswalk, almost as if the location had once been the scene of an accident.

We circled back and drove through again. Two-story houses lined the side streets, fading paint and small yards cluttered with toys. The windows were covered with flimsy plastic blinds, yellowing, with a few slats either bent or missing. Other than passing a few cars and trucks, we didn't see a single human being.

“What a great town!” Abbie said.

“Yeah,” I said. “I bet all the serial killers in the northwest come here to hide out.”

Abbie laughed. “Oh, come on,” she said. “It's peaceful, it's cozy. I like it.”

We drove out of town and continued heading south into Oregon.

*

Looking back, after Abbie disappeared, I can see now that it wasn't an instantaneous vanishing act. She began to disappear slowly the last month we were together, fading away before my eyes even though I refused to believe it. My stories at the dinner table elicited quiet nods where laughs had been. There were no soft arms slipped around my waist while I was washing dishes, no hot breath in my ear. She started placing a hand on my shoulder while we kissed, palm out, almost imperceptibly pushing me away. She had always slept naked, but I would climb into bed after brushing my teeth and find her in a T-shirt and boxer shorts. "It's cold," she said. "God, Chase, can't you feel it?" It was late August, most days hovering around the low seventies. I would pull her against me then, and she would let me, but the small murmurs of pleasure I'd grown used to hearing when I touched her were gone.

She couldn't sleep. I'd wake up in the middle of the night and find her staring up at the ceiling. I'd ask her what she was thinking about, and she'd make a noncommittal sound and remain motionless. Looking into her eyes, I tried to imagine the thoughts taking shape behind them. At that point I realized what a mystery she was to me, even after two and a half years together. I wondered if she would be any less of a mystery if I'd known her my whole life. I offered her sleeping pills, but she wouldn't take them.

Meanwhile, sleep was coming to me easier than it ever had. We'd turn out the light, she'd roll on her side, and almost immediately my consciousness would drift away. My dreams, though, became unsettling and would often wake me, though I could never remember what they were. I'd watch Abbie stare into the darkness for a few minutes before falling back asleep.

On an evening in mid-September, I came home from work and found a feast waiting for me. Abbie had made fettuccine alfredo with chicken, served with garlic bread, green beans, a luscious garden salad with cranberry dressing, and a bottle of Chardonnay. She wore a green summer dress I hadn't seen before, with a white ribbon around her waist. She touched my ankle under the table with her bare foot while we ate. After dinner, we left the dishes on the table and collapsed onto the couch. She rested her head in my lap.

"I was a yellow baby," she said after a few minutes, her eyes closed. "Jaundice. They put me under a lamp and baked the color out of me. I have a photo of it somewhere. You can see the tiny blindfold wrapped around my head." I stroked her hair and didn't say anything. I was drowsy and content from the food and the wine. "I can't remember it, of course." She took a few deep, slow breaths. "But I'm sure that must have been the happiest moment of my life. Think about it: complete, peaceful darkness, the soothing feeling of light on your skin, not a single troublesome memory or worry of any kind. Nothing to regret. No decisions to question."

I laughed and watched her head rock in my lap. I was glad her usual high spirits and affection had returned. "So it's been all downhill since then, has it? Don't you think it's kind of sad that your happiest memory took place before you could remember it?"

She opened her eyes and scrunched her brow. "I don't think most people could name their happiest moment, which is even worse. That means they experienced it and had no idea it was happening. At least I know what mine was. Can you name yours?"

I thought about it for a minute. "I don't know," I said. "I don't think happiness is quantifiable. It's not a math equation."

“Mine was,” she said. “All those elements in that crib combined to equal bliss. It was simple addition.”

“But you know,” I said, still stroking her hair, “your happiest moment seems like a very selfish happiness, which might be the only happiness a child can know. Adult happiness is different. I think it comes more from making *other* people happy.”

“And adult sadness comes from making other people sad?”

“Yeah, I suppose so.” I laughed.

“You might be right about happiness,” she said. She reached for my free hand and placed it on her stomach. “But sadness isn’t that simple.” She rubbed my hand and closed her eyes again. I could feel the air moving in and out of her body, the rise and fall of her stomach, warm to the touch through her dress.

The next day she was gone. I came home from work and found no sign that anyone else had ever lived there. Nothing she had brought with her was left, not even a single piece of silverware or an article of clothing in the laundry bin. Her sunscreen, her stapler, things I had forgotten were hers now reminded me of their ownership with their absence. Everything was in pristine order, no cabinets emptied out on the floor or drawers upended. It was as if she had known the precise location of every item that belonged to her and had carefully and calmly removed them. The carpet looked freshly vacuumed. There was no note.

I wanted to panic but didn’t know what steps to take to properly express my horror. I called her cell phone, but it went straight to voice mail. I wandered from room to room touching everything, looking for some sort of clue. Nothing. When I called her office, they said the previous day had been her last, that she had gone through all the

proper channels, given notice weeks in advance. Her final check would be directly deposited into her bank account. When the police found we weren't married, they said they couldn't help me.

After much deliberation, I called her parents. They lived in Florida, and I'd only met them once when they flew up for Christmas the previous year. They'd been cordial enough but expressed no interest in my life. It was as if they were meeting someone they never planned to see again. Her father on the phone sounded cold and guarded. He answered my questions with sighs and short, carefully-worded replies that revealed nothing. He ended the conversation by saying, "Listen, Mr. Buckner, I'm sorry she did this to you, but I'd appreciate it if you didn't call here again."

I turned into a ghost. The physical space I occupied in the world seemed to mock me. I felt utterly helpless, able to observe my surroundings but sure my actions could have no tangible effect. I lost my appetite and hardly slept for fear of the lucid, suffocating dreams that came to me. They'd started staying with me more and more upon awakening: the water, the ice, the oar. At night I sat staring at my phone, willing it to ring. Abbie's old number had now been disconnected. I recounted every conversation we'd ever had. And then, finally, the answer came to me, and I knew where she was, the only place she could possibly be.

I had fifteen days vacation time saved up, and I thought that would be long enough. After two days preparation, I drove west out of Helena.

My mind was boiling over with confusion. The coldness, the sleepless nights: could she have been seeing someone else? I had refused to believe it in spite of the signs, pushing down the thought even before I could voice it to myself. Was this simply a case

of a woman skipping town with her new boyfriend? It couldn't be. Even if there had been someone else, something deeper below the surface had been wrong. Some poison had spread quietly into the roots of our relationship. I tried not to think too much about the reasons. If I found her, I could forgive anything, no matter how horrible. But I had to find her.

I reached Castle Rock just after nightfall. The streets were dark and empty, as if a storm had just passed, or was drawing near.

*

It was never my intention to become a denizen of the night, crouching in the shrubbery by windowsills with wide eyes gleaming in the moonlight, recoiling like a terrified animal from the slightest noise. I'd planned on conducting my search by the chaste light of day, asking around town in as cordial a manner as possible, but the citizens of Castle Rock proved to be uncooperative. No one in the stores, the post office, or the library claimed to have seen Abbie, and their looks let me know that it isn't socially acceptable for anyone without a badge to carry out investigative work.

While polite at first, as they waited for me to identify myself as an authority figure, when they heard the word "boyfriend," they frowned and looked at me with narrow, knowing eyes. They saw an abuser trying to track down his runaway victim, or a drunk father whose girlfriend escaped with the kids to save them from his rage. Being such a big guy surely didn't help. So I ended up doing most of my searching at night, when personal interactions could be kept to a minimum.

I stayed in the rickety wooden motel with the lumberjack mural and became friends with the night manager, Perry Kiona. Perry is a Cowlitz Indian, one of around

fourteen-hundred still remaining, he said, though he looks like an average middle-aged white guy, with graying hair, a heavy build, and an amiable face beginning to sag. “I’m about one-twelfth Cowlitz,” he claimed, “eleven-twelfths who gives a damn.” Every time I saw him, he was always wearing one of three checkered shirts tucked into his khakis: two slightly different shades of red, and one blue.

He was wearing the blue shirt when I came back to the hotel at around four-thirty in the morning for the fourth night in a row and he asked me what sort of miserable existence I was living that required me to be up so late every night. “I mean, not that I’m in any place to talk, obviously,” he said.

So I told him. I didn’t have anything to lose. After I finished, he nodded his head sadly. “That’s a tough break. But odds are, she didn’t come here. People making new starts don’t make them in Castle Rock.”

“She’s here somewhere,” I said. “She has to be.”

“Well, good luck, my friend.” He leaned back in his chair behind the desk, his belly straining against the blue checkers. “I’ll keep my eye out for you.”

The nights went by. With my face pressed close to the windows, I would watch my breath form a hazy oval on the glass as I trembled in the cold. My large body made me feel awkward and conspicuous. If I took a step back, I could see my reflection in the window: an unshaven, feral-looking man peering into the homes of strangers. I had to fight against the shame by reminding myself that this might be the only way I’d ever see Abbie again.

After a week went by without a single clue, I decided to stay in for a night, hoping to catch up on my sleep. I lay in bed staring at the ceiling, my eyes unwilling to close. My

body was used to sleeping from about five or six in the morning till noon, and it didn't understand what I was doing in bed six hours early. I decided to go talk to Perry.

"You know, I was thinking about your situation," he said. He laid down a notebook and a pencil on the desk, and I saw he'd been making sketches of what could generously be called horses. "It reminded me of a story my grandmother told me about our tribe."

I rolled a chair from the lobby to the side of the desk and listened. Perry's checkered shirt was a lush cardinal red.

"Have you been down to the river? The Cowlitz?"

I told him I'd passed it but hadn't seen it up close.

"That river was the center of our existence. Young men would go on fasting quests along its banks and come back days later to share with the tribe what it told them." He patted his stomach. "I don't want to hear any fasting jokes."

I smiled and he continued: "Anyway, my grandmother told me this legend – we call it a legend now, at least, it's hard to know whether or not they believed it. Probably not: I think we often underestimate the practical intelligence of our ancestors. But the legend said that some nights the water would start to glow a dull blue, and if you walked down by the bank you'd find a boatman waiting there with a raft to take you down the river."

"Wait. Did you say a boatman?" I remembered the long shadow of the raft from my dream, the thin oar slicing down through the water.

"That's the story."

"It isn't a boat to the afterlife, is it?" I felt the blood draining from my face.

“No, I don’t think so.” Perry looked up at the ceiling and shook his head. “I may be remembering the story wrong, but I don’t think it had anything to do with death. The impression my grandmother gave me was that the boatman would just take you somewhere far away. But you couldn’t come back – the river only flows in one direction. So you had to trust him.”

“Well, if you can’t come back it’s almost the same as death,” I said. “Why would anyone want to take a ride like that?”

“I’m not sure, really. Probably people who wanted to start a new life. Maybe those who were disgraced in some way or felt they didn’t fit in. My grandmother told me all this when I was very young. She’s dead now. But the point is, sometimes people just disappear. It’s been happening for as long as there’ve been people. Maybe they told the story as an allegory, or something like that.”

We sat in silence for a minute. Perry was probably thinking about his grandmother, and I was imagining Abbie reaching for the hand of a tall, hooded figure standing on a raft, a dripping oar in one of his hands, the other wrapping its pale, bone-thin fingers around Abbie’s wrist.

“But you really should go down to the river,” Perry said. I looked up, only half listening. “I go there whenever I need to do a little thinking.” He laughed. “Which isn’t too often.”

In my mind the boatman pushed off from the shore. Pale blue streams ran from his oar as he dipped it into the glowing surface of the water and pulled it back out. Abbie sat cross-legged at the back of the raft. She trailed the fingers of her right hand in the water. The boatman rowed on one side, then the other: slow, calculated strokes. The

backs of their heads grew smaller as the current took them away. The farther they floated from the shore, the darker the water became, growing less and less illuminated with each moment, each stroke of the boatman's oar. Soon the water was black and still, no sign that anyone had come and gone.

*

Fourteen days passed with no sign of Abbie. I had to leave for Helena in the morning.

"I'm sorry, Chase, I really am," Perry said. "If she was here, you would've found her. You can at least find some contentment in that." He was wearing his blue shirt again. Though I'm convinced he only owns three, they always looked clean and freshly-pressed.

I sat next to the desk and shook my head. "I don't know," I said. "I've begun to wonder if this town even exists, or if I'm just lying in bed next to Abbie, dreaming."

"You've got to get it together," Perry said. "Just give it some time. She'll either decide she wants to be found, or you'll realize you don't need to find her after all."

I didn't say anything.

"My first wife was a real piece of work, Chase. I loved her, but man: it was five years of stormy seas. After we split up I never wanted to be within ten feet of a woman again. I was sure my life was ruined. You couldn't imagine what a bitter bastard I was. Two years later I met my second wife. We were really happy together, but she died about a year and a half ago. And you know what? I feel okay. You've just gotta believe there's a happy ending waiting for you somewhere down the road and not pin everything on one person."

"Right. What is this, some old Indian wisdom?"

Perry laughed. “You bet. Everything that comes out of my mouth is Indian wisdom. I resent the ‘old’ part, though.”

We sat for a minute without talking. After a while, Perry said, “Did you ever go check out the river?”

“I didn’t. That boatman story makes me nervous.”

Perry laughed. “Hey, it’s just a story. And it’s your last night in town, isn’t it? You should go. It’ll help you clear your head, if nothing else. Those young men must have experienced *something* on their quests, or they wouldn’t have kept going. Practical intelligence, right?”

“Yeah. I don’t know.”

“There’s a great access point just south of town. You can see it from the road, off to your right.”

I drove south out of Castle Rock. The storm that had been threatening had turned into a listless mist, and I kept my wipers on low. After the final streetlight disappeared in my rearview mirror, only a faint shimmer off to my right cut into the darkness: the river, scattering the reflection of what little was left of the moon. Trees thick with leaves dipped toward the water, obscuring my view. After about a mile, the shoulder widened into a pull-off area where people could park and take in the scenery. I pulled off the road and turned off my car. In the daylight, according to Perry, you could see the Cowlitz winding south through the hills toward its parent river, the Columbia. In the dark, I couldn’t see much of anything except the soft flicker of moonlight across the water stretching for about a hundred feet in each direction.

A dirt path sloped down to the riverbank. I could hear the water rushing along. As I drew closer, I felt an inexplicable certainty that Abbie was waiting for me. She would be sitting on the bank with her toes in the water, leaning back on her elbows and looking out at the broken moon on the surface of the river. I wouldn't say anything at first, just sit down beside her and take comfort in the fact that we were breathing the same cool air, feeling the same soft drizzle on our skin, watching the same water pass in front of us.

The path opened onto a wide stretch of rocky beach. I looked up and down the water's edge. Nothing moved. I walked up to the river and stood there. The water lapped at the stones a few inches from my feet. I thought of it slowly eroding everything it touched. A foul smell drifted in and drifted off. The dark liquid gurgled obscenely as it slid past. It was an empty, joyless place. Only Indian boys half-mad with hunger could ever think this river had any wisdom to share.

Abbie, where have you gone? If I thought you might someday meet me here, I would wait for you until the river dried up and the trees withered away and the bones of all the dead fish turned to dust in the sun.

I remembered the old man I saw, throwing his memories into the flames, bitter tears in his eyes. Would that be me? Sadness isn't simple, she'd said. And I realized, as I stared out at the swirling black water, that the mystery of whatever hidden sadness had welled up inside Abbie might be forever beyond my reach. I thought of her hands then, for some reason, and how she would laugh when I held mine up next to hers and we compared them. My hand looked like a bear paw next to hers. Her fingers were so small and slender, her bones so delicate, that I always felt I needed to be careful whenever I

took her hand in mine. I thought about how her eyelashes would tickle my cheek when she held me from behind and rested her head on my shoulder.

I was ready for the boatman to take me away. If Abbie wasn't here, he surely must be. I imagined the water taking on a faint blue glow, the raft slipping out of the darkness. The boatman would reach out a long, thin arm and take me by the hand. We would push away from the shore and drift off through the smoky blue water into the night, away from this life of pain and loss and not knowing.

I sat down on the rocks next to the water. I was still there when the sky began to brighten and the sound of a bird calling out came to me from somewhere far away.

Leaving Spokane

My friend Kevin Beatle says, “There’s never a reason to be either tired or unhappy. It’s always a choice.” I lean back in my seat and try not to be offended even though I’ve been almost exclusively tired and unhappy for the better part of a year. My friend Kevin Beatle isn’t talking to me. He’s leaning across the aisle of the bus to a young Mexican woman in a green baseball cap bouncing a child on her knees.

“I never get tired,” Kevin says. “I once drove from Boston to Spokane without stopping. Forty hours on the road. I only go to bed at night because I know my body needs it. But my mind keeps racing, keeps thinking new things, right up until the moment I fall asleep. It’s like someone flips off a switch and I’m asleep, then they flip it back on and I’m fully alert. There’s no transition period, not a single moment of tiredness. Tiredness is a myth, I’m telling you, or maybe just a weakness. But those are kind of the same thing, right? Myths and weakness? Or at least they perpetuate each other. If we weren’t weak, we wouldn’t need to come up with stories to make ourselves feel better. Think about it.”

The woman is smiling shyly and glancing over at Kevin from time to time. I don’t think she speaks English.

We’re on a Greyhound heading south out of Spokane, Washington. We have tickets to Portland, but we probably won’t stop there. Kevin and I did a bad thing in a

field seven miles outside Spokane. He was trying to conduct an experiment. I was trying to destroy a part of myself that had grown large and ugly over the past year. I think we both failed.

*

I called up Kevin because my dad had just died, and I needed to be around someone I knew would make me feel alive. My dad moved up to Alaska after I graduated high school in Spokane. He was looking for a little midlife adventure, and with Mom living with her new husband on the east coast and me moving out of the house, he had nothing tying him down. But after only two years he began to get sick. I'd spent the last year in Anchorage, taking care of him, watching him die. He'd always been built like a bear, and as hairy as one. Seeing his muscles waste away and his hair begin to fall out in clumps infuriated me. At the end, he was a knobby, pink little man, and the fact that he was still smiling, still making jokes was the worst part of all.

Kevin had been a year ahead of me in high school. His antics were legendary. One day he came to class with a duck on a leash that he'd captured in Riverfront Park with a fish net. It was terrified, squawking and beating its wings and lashing out at anyone who came near it. By the time the office called animal services, the duck had crapped all over the floor, left welts on Gabby Davidson's calf where it pecked her, and injured its left wing, which it held motionless at an awkward angle while still wildly flapping its right.

Another time, Kevin missed the first two periods of school, then stumbled into our World History class naked except for a pair of briefs, his skinny frame smeared from head to toe with Vaseline. He said he'd been abducted by aliens the night before, and

they'd subjected him to a battery of invasive tests. When the teacher tried to touch him to lead him out of the classroom, Kevin recoiled in terror and fell to the floor, where he curled up into a ball and began weeping uncontrollably. The next day, I saw him in the gym trying to sell nuggets of "extraterrestrial foodstuff" he claimed he'd managed to smuggle off the mothership in his anus. He was holding a plastic bag of what looked like Kix cereal.

Though we weren't close friends, Kevin and I did hang out from time to time. My senior year, I got a job at a little movie theater called the Gypsy Soul that showed old black and white horror films and soft-core porn from the seventies, and I'd let Kevin and his buddies in for free. Sometimes he'd slip me a bag of weed. After the show, I'd go over to his place and smoke with him in his parents' tool shed while listening to his outlandish philosophies about everything.

I needed something outlandish in my life after watching my father die such a complacent death. I called Kevin the day after the funeral and found out he was still hanging around Spokane. He told me he was working at Safeway and trying to write an adult-themed choose-your-own-adventure book he had tentatively titled *An Evening with Maria*.

He seemed thrilled to hear from me and offered to let me crash at his place while I looked for an apartment. He even picked me up at the airport. That night we started smoking, and within ten minutes he'd enlisted me to help him with what he called "a scientific experiment that will have great and lasting ramifications for all of humanity."

"All we need, Cooper," he said, "is some dynamite."

"Dynamite."

“Absolutely,” he said. “I know a guy who can hook us up. His name’s Gustav. The thing is, you’re going to have to go get it. Last time I saw Gustav there were some complications, and he said if he ever saw me again he’d cut off my balls, fry them up, and make me...well, let’s just say I’d rather avoid him if possible. Nice enough guy, though, for the most part. You shouldn’t have any trouble.”

“Jesus, Kevin. What are we blowing up?”

“Well, I don’t have all the details sorted out yet. But it’s going to be magnificent.” He ran a hand through his shaggy blond hair and grinned at me. “No one will get hurt, I promise.”

“I don’t know,” I said, but I knew I would say yes. At that moment, I would have said yes to anything.

I knocked on the door at the address Kevin gave me, and it opened almost immediately. Standing before me was a tall, thick-chested man with a shaved head, pale skin, and deep acne scars. His face looked like someone in his youth had attacked him with a pitchfork. Gustav, I presumed.

“Uh, hello,” I said. “I’ve heard you might be selling, um...things?”

He stared at me. His eyes were clear and blue. Then he jerked his head for me to come inside.

The outside of the house had been surprisingly well-kept, the lawn recently cut and a little row of flowers by the porch that looked like they had been lovingly attended to, but I was expecting the inside to be a chaotic potpourri of the physical manifestations of human vice. I’d prepared myself for tables stacked with guns and knives, beer cans

and syringes littering the floor, bags of weed and shrooms thumb-tacked to the walls, and everything covered by a fine layer of cocaine. Instead, the place was immaculate. The stain-free beige carpet appeared freshly vacuumed. Tasteful landscape paintings adorned the walls. A matching brown leather couch, loveseat, and chair were positioned around an unlit fireplace. The only clue that something in the house might be amiss was the black woman sitting in the chair with her legs crossed, pointing a gun at my chest.

Gustav closed the door behind me and put a hand on my shoulder. “Don’t worry about Bianka,” he said in a deep, soft voice. “She has terrible aim.”

The woman smiled a huge smile, and though she couldn’t have been over thirty-five, she didn’t have a single tooth left in her mouth. Other than her lack of teeth, she was strikingly beautiful. She said something I couldn’t understand, and Gustav laughed.

“You’re shaking, my friend,” he said, and I realized it was true. I could feel drops of sweat rolling down my trembling sides. No one had ever pointed a gun at me before, and it was much more paralyzing than I had expected. I used to have fantasies about getting mugged in which I would knock the gun out of my attacker’s hand and punch him in the throat, then stand with my foot on his chest until the police showed up. I realized then that instead I would probably piss myself and give him my wallet.

Gustav led me by the arm to the couch opposite Bianka. He sat down next to me, his leg touching mine. I could smell his body, a light scent a bit like almonds that wasn’t completely unpleasant.

“Now, my friend,” he said, “tell me how you heard that I might be selling...things.”

I knew mentioning Kevin would be a poor decision. “Just some guy I met in a bar,” I said, looking down at my lap. “I didn’t catch his name.”

Gustav laughed and Bianka joined him. “All right, all right,” Gustav said. “So what sort of things are you interested in buying?”

“I was thinking,” I said, “um...dynamite?”

“Hmm...,” said Gustav. “I might have some firecrackers for sale. How much money do you have?”

Kevin had given me thirty dollars and told me to haggle. “Bring me the change if possible,” he’d said. I reached for my wallet and pulled out all my cash. “Fifty-six dollars,” I said, counting it quickly. “Is that enough?”

Gustav took the money and stood up. “Stay here,” he said. “Bianka will keep you company.” He stepped over to her chair and caressed the back of her head with an enormous pale hand. She closed her eyes and leaned back into it.

The softness of the gesture shocked me. For over a year, the only emotion I’d known had been a bitter, impotent anger. It had swelled up inside me to the point that I found even such a small expression of tenderness disturbing. I looked away until Gustav left the room.

I sat on the couch and watched Bianka. She’d lowered the gun to her lap, but it was still pointed at me.

Again I realized how beautiful she was. Her thick black shoulder-length hair was straight and radiant, and her skin was smooth and clear. She smiled at me with tight lips and raised her eyebrows.

“Hi,” I said, grinning nervously.

She nodded and continued to smile.

After what seemed like a long time, Gustav returned from the back of the house with a small brown paper liquor store bag. He handed it to me solemnly and said, “One large firecracker,” then showed me to the door.

I waited until I was a block away before opening the bag. Inside, wrapped in gauze, was a long, thin, brown tube. Dynamite.

“Listen to me closely, Cooper,” Kevin said. Our headlights shook in front of us as we bounced along a rough dirt road southeast of Spokane. Off to our left, a field of sunflowers glowed eerily in the nearly full moon. I held the bag of dynamite delicately and wished Kevin would slow down. “This is the crux of everything. What we’re on here is a mission to capture a soul on videotape.”

“Did you say a soul?”

“Yes. Now listen to me. Once someone has died, and I mean really died – no heartbeat, no brain activity, dead, dead, dead – medical science can bring them back to life up to *an hour* later. One hour. Do you know what that means?”

“What?”

“It means that the soul doesn’t leave the body until an hour has passed. It stays with the dead body for one hour. Now, we can’t see it, of course, because it’s still inside the body. It’s hiding in there, so to speak.”

“Kevin?” We hit a pothole in the road and I slammed against the door, cradling the dynamite to my chest.

“But what if there was no place for the soul to hide once the body died? What if the body was in such a state that the soul had to hover about aimlessly for an hour, waiting for its time to leave? In such a case—”

“Kevin.”

“In such a *case*, Cooper, the soul could be freely observed if one knew what to look for. Now, one small hitch in this experiment is that I don’t exactly know what to look for, but that’s why I’ve brought this recording device—” He reached down into his backpack between the seats and pulled out a digital video camera. “—so we can analyze the scenario further at our convenience. Now, I’m not sure if the soul will be readily apparent to the naked eye, but I’m hoping—”

“Kevin!”

“Yes, Cooper.”

“What the *fuck* are we doing with this dynamite?”

“We’re going to blow up a cow.”

I turned my head away and looked out the window. We were passing a long stretch of trees, and I watched the moon behind them flash between their branches. Well, what did I expect? I’d been under no illusion we’d be using the dynamite for humanitarian purposes.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Kevin said, “and you’re right. Bovine souls aren’t the same as human souls. They’re likely much smaller, for one thing. From my research I’ve concluded that the size of a soul is directly proportional to the amount of moral choices its host has to make. Human souls are the largest, naturally, but animal souls do exist, and I believe they behave in fundamentally the same way.”

We drove for another few minutes before Kevin pulled off to the side of the road. A large hilly field stretched away from us. “Here we are,” he said. “I’ve scoped this place out. A big herd of cows out there.”

A ditch and a barbed-wire fence separated us from the field. We clambered to the fence and I held it down while Kevin climbed over, then he did the same for me.

“It’ll be just like cow-tipping,” Kevin said. “We’ll find a sleeping cow, but instead of pushing it over, we’ll duct tape the dynamite to it, light the fuse, and record the experiment from a safe distance.”

We walked out into the field. It hadn’t rained in several weeks, and the dry grass crunched under our feet. I felt ashamed to be plotting the gruesome murder of an animal, but I could feel the adrenaline in my system and realized I hadn’t felt that kind of rush, or a rush of any kind, in over a year.

After walking for several minutes, however, we still hadn’t seen a single cow. “Where could they be?” said Kevin. “You’d think they’d be easy to find, just standing around in the moonlight. Beautiful creatures, but elusive.”

“I don’t know,” I said, but even as I said it, I was looking closely at what looked like a large dark shadow spread out underneath a wilted and leafless tree. “Hey!” I grabbed Kevin’s arm and pointed.

“You think so? Let’s get closer.”

We tried to move quietly through the grass as we approached the tree. The shadow slowly revealed itself to be a large brown cow lying on its side.

“You think it’s dead?” said Kevin. “Why isn’t it standing up?”

“Are you sure cows stand up when they sleep?”

“Of course they do. But okay, let’s go take a look.”

When we were within fifteen feet of the cow, we could see its side rising and falling. “Christ, it *is* alive!” Kevin whispered. “Okay, okay. I’ll go set the camera up behind that ridge back there, and you take the duct tape, the lighter, and the dynamite and go initiate the experiment.” He rummaged through his backpack and pulled out the items.

“You want *me* to light it?”

“Thank you, yes, I need to focus on the observation.” He patted me on the shoulder and ran crouching to a small rocky hill about twenty-five yards from the tree. I turned toward the cow and slowly approached it.

It was a huge animal, and most certainly alive. Its side rose and fell in great swells, and I could hear it breathing heavily through its nose. Its belly was facing me. I noticed a thick vein, as wide as my thumb, coursing along its belly down to its udder, which was thin and dry-looking. I took the stick of dynamite from the paper bag and decided I didn’t need the duct tape. I just wedged the explosive as gently as I could underneath the cow. I stood back and looked at it then, and listened to it breathe.

My father’s breaths in those final days were a torture to listen to. Each inhale sounded like he was witnessing something ghastly. Whenever he would swallow, his next breath would be sharp and desperate, as if he’d been holding his breath underwater. Still, every once in a while he would look over at me sitting in the chair next to his bed, and wink. Then something that he meant to be a smile would come over his lips, and I’d have to look away.

He’d been a roofer all his life. That’s the only thing he did well. He made enough money as a roofer to retire at age fifty-two, then died at fifty-five. One son, one divorce,

five hundred roofs: that's all he had to show for a lifetime. How could he possibly be content on his death-bed? Why wasn't he cursing and gnashing his teeth? How could that possibly be enough for someone, to crawl around through roof tar for nearly forty years? To do *that*, and only that? I wanted so badly to smile back at him. I wanted to lean down and wrap my arms around his thin and trembling body. But I couldn't.

I looked down at the heaving animal in front of me: a helpless, defenseless creature. I turned back to where Kevin had set up the camera on a collapsible tripod. He gave me two big thumbs up. I reached down and lit the fuse.

The wick began to hiss. I scrambled back toward Kevin, covering my ears. As I approached him, he reached into his backpack and pulled out what looked like a dark-colored baton. It extended as he pulled on it, and I realized what it was: an umbrella.

Kevin called a late-night radio show and reported seeing a UFO out by the farm. He adopted a southern accent. The next morning he wrote an anonymous letter to the *Spokesman Review* saying he'd heard two "Iraqis" in a diner saying how American farm animals were an affront to Allah. He seemed content that we'd covered our tracks. But then, while we were eating lunch in his apartment, he jumped up from the table.

"Oh, shit. Satellites. How could I have forgotten?"

"What? What's wrong?"

"Jesus, Cooper, don't you know? They've got satellites everywhere these days. They can read the fine print on a pack of chewing gum from outer space. They've got my license number for sure. We've got to get out of here."

"What do you mean, get out of here?"

“We’ve got to leave Spokane. They could be here any minute. Get your stuff together. Go!”

*

The woman with the green hat and the baby gets off the bus in Kennewick, Washington. She smiles at Kevin and her baby reaches out a chubby hand and touches his hair. It’s still another four hours to Portland.

“Have you looked at the video yet?” I ask.

“I watched it last night.”

“And?”

“It will require further analysis.”

“No soul, huh?”

“There’s a possible anomaly or two. You want to see it?”

“I guess so.”

While Kevin searches through his bag for the camera, I watch out the window as the woman with the baby waits for the driver to open the side compartment so she can claim her bags. She presses her nose to her baby’s nose, then gives him a kiss on the cheek. He’s probably two years old. Just two years ago he was inside his mother, breathing through her body.

Kevin hands me the camera and flips open the screen. I start the video. The picture has a green tint to it, and it’s almost too dark to see. But I can make out what’s happening. There I am, a skinny, awkward kid, standing over the hulking shape of the cow. I bend down for a few moments, and then I’m running toward the camera, ducking and covering my ears with my hands. I look terrified and pitiful. I lunge behind the

camera as the screen goes white. When the picture returns, I can see what we did to the animal. In the dark video, it's hard to tell what's foliage and what's cow. Kevin appears on the screen, running out into the mess and looking around wildly.

I hope we don't have souls. In the small, white room where my father died, I'd hate to think that some part of his consciousness slipped free and had to float there for an hour, looking down at his withered, lifeless body and his expressionless son.

I think about what Kevin told the woman earlier, about how happiness is a choice. What a beautiful idea. It's bullshit, though. Like most of what Kevin says, it sounds nice, but it's not true. Maybe my father was able to find happiness in his final days, but to me, the living, it's never seemed farther away.

On the video, Kevin is jumping up and down. He's shouting and pointing to the sky, but there's nothing there.

After the Riot

I was not involved in the Chinatown riot. I was four blocks away, drinking a beer with Shirley Matherson at Pepper's Tavern, tickling her leg while she giggled and slapped at me as she told a story about her friends stealing a piano earlier that day from a garage sale. I didn't want to hear it and kept trying to distract her.

Squeezed into the corner of a booth, her face damp and glowing, Shirley batted my hand away under the table, then grabbed it and held it still against her thigh. "There was this big rack of clothes," she said, touching a finger to her chin when she paused. "Chuck pushed it in front of the piano while Tezzi distracted the old man with her cleavage. He was watching her try to fold out a futon, and Chuck just wheeled the piano down the sidewalk. Brent grabbed the bench, which turned out to have a metronome in it, plus a bunch of old sheet music. Mostly church hymns."

Chuck was Shirley's boyfriend of two years. I'd never met him, but hearing his name always made me grind my teeth. Tezzi and Brent were Chuck's best friends.

"Fantastic," I said. "So where is it now?" I pulled back her dark hair and kissed her earlobe. I'd known Shirley since grade school, and we'd both gone to college at Portland State, but we'd never been anything more than friends until I ran into her at a Decemberists concert at the end of the summer. She broke away from the group of friends she came with, and we chatted by the bar for the whole show. The following

month, we saw each other whenever we could, usually at my place or out-of-the-way bars. For the past two weeks, she'd been telling me she was leaving Chuck.

"The piano," I said. "Where is it now?"

"It's at my place." Shirley picked up her glass and swirled the last of the beer around in the bottom. "Chuck's place."

My cell phone rang. The caller ID said "Max." My brother. I sent the call to voice mail and returned my attention to Shirley. "Can I see it?"

"Huh?"

"I can play. My parents made my brother and me take lessons until we got to high school." I picked up my empty glass and turned it around in my hands, looking at the thin film inside.

Shirley leaned back in the booth. "I don't know, Danny."

"Come on. And hey, while we're there we might as well break the news to Chuck."

She looked at me with her slow, thoughtful eyes. You could tell she considered everything she said very carefully before she said it. "I don't think I want you there, Danny," she said. "That doesn't seem fair to Chuck. It'd be like we're ganging up on him."

"If I'm not there to support you, you'll never tell him," I said. "I can't go on like this, always imagining you two sleeping in the same bed. Let's go over there and get it over with. Today."

She shook her head and looked away. "You're probably right," she said. "But not today. Tomorrow. And let me do the talking."

“All right,” I said. “Tomorrow.”

*

Sometimes when I get up in the middle of the night to use the bathroom, I see my brother's face staring back at me in the mirror. I shake my head at him and he just stares back at me, his clear green eyes and his short blond hair just the way I remember them. He has freckles across his nose. “Jesus, Max,” I say, and then I don't know what to do. We stand there and watch each other. I feel like I should say something to him, but I can't think of anything to say. Sometimes I'll lie to him. “I couldn't hear my phone in the bar, Max,” I'll say. “If I'd known you were calling, I swear I would've...” But he can always tell when I'm lying, and he laughs a silent, miserable laugh, his mouth barely open, staring into my face as tears well up in his eyes. I'll reach out to him then, trying to lay my hand on his cheek. But all I touch is cold glass. I put my hand over his face and he gazes out at me between my fingers. I can't reach him. He's somewhere on the other side, looking at me from across a great distance, though he seems so close. Where are you, Max? On this side of the glass, I wash my face with shaking hands. I turn off the light. As I close the door, I can still see my brother's eyes in the mirror, searching for me in the darkness.

*

I was not involved in the Chinatown riot. If the news got to Pepper's Tavern, it didn't get to me. There were just a few people in the bar at 4:30 in the afternoon, even though it was a Saturday in the middle of summer, and if anybody heard anything, nobody said so. No one barged in off the street to describe the violence taking place just four blocks away. Nobody said: “There's a riot in Chinatown! Daniel Medina? Are you

in here? Two Chinese men are pounding your brother's face into the sidewalk. You have three minutes to save his life.”

Jesus.

It started when the owner of an adult bookstore in Chinatown refused to sell dirty magazines to a group of sixteen-year-old skater kids, my brother among them. They got into a shouting match, and eventually the kids threw a potted plant through the shop window. A crowd gathered, and before long there were twenty people yelling at each other in the street. The police probably could have handled the situation if the kids hadn't called all their friends the minute things started to get ugly. Twenty minutes later, teenagers were showing up with baseball bats. They broke all the shop windows in the block from Burnside to Couch on 4th Avenue. The Chinese hadn't put up much of a fight until then, but after that it was chaos. Sixty angry people and six cops. Traffic on 4th slowed to a halt as drivers at the end of the block stopped to watch, causing drivers in the thick of things to lock their doors and duck down in their seats as boys with bats and tire irons ran from car to car, breaking the windows of any vehicle whose occupants looked like they might have been coming in to back up the other side.

It was all over the news when I got home from the bar. Twenty-three injured. One dead. As one reporter interviewed a man with glass powder in his hair and blood on his forehead, my cell phone rang. My parents. “Danny?” my dad said. “Are you at your apartment? Danny, you need to come over. Something's happened.”

On the way, I checked my message from Max. Five seconds of static and a click.

*

The first time I saw Shirley after the Decemberists concert was at a rhododendron garden in the early evening, with the sun just starting to set. I'd brought a flask of vodka and Sprite, and we passed it back and forth as we walked along pathways and over stone bridges, surrounded by luscious purples, pinks, and reds that blossomed up from the ground, wrapped around trees, and burst from towering bushes. I had no idea what any of the things were that I was looking at, but I assumed many of them were rhododendrons.

"You know," I said, "I've carried a reminder of you around with me all these years."

"Oh really?" She laughed and took a swig from the flask. "That's kind of creepy."

"No, no, it's not a lock of your hair or anything like that. Check this out." I held out the back of my right hand and pointed to a small scar at the base of my thumb. "That's courtesy of you. Sixth grade. You used to throw things at me and call me a wimp. You were a real bitch, actually."

Shirley smiled and shrugged.

"Anyway, this one time at recess you hit me in the back of the head with a roll of masking tape, and I just snapped and tackled you. Remember this?"

She shook her head, wiping her mouth with her sleeve, and held the flask out to me. "Not really. Maybe a little."

"Well, I took you down pretty hard, and all I remember was this look of complete surprise on your face. Like it was incomprehensible to you that I would ever fight back in any way."

“You were so passive that it frustrated me,” she said. “You would take so much crap and never fight back.” We reached a rock bridge and stopped in the middle. The little stream below us gurgled under our feet.

“I didn’t notice until I got up that my hand was bleeding. You must have cut me with your fingernail.”

Shirley took my hand in both of hers. She brought it up to her lips and gave the scar a quick kiss. Blushing, she dropped my hand and reached for the flask. “Useless,” she said.

“Useless?”

“That’s an old wound. It’s far too late to just kiss it away.”

We rested our arms on the rock railing and looked down into the stream. Beside us, a small tree with bright pink flowers leaned over the water. When the petals fell, they’d be carried off down the stream and end up somewhere impossibly far away. “Oh, you never know,” I said. “I guess we’ll see.”

*

There are no mirrors in my bedroom. There used to be a full-length mirror on my closet door, facing my bed. Before the riot, I relished undressing Shirley in front of it, standing behind her as I slowly peeled off each layer of her clothes. I kissed her neck and ran my tongue down her thin side and around the ridge of her wide hips as I slid her pants to the floor. I watched her eyes follow me in the mirror. In bed, we’d make love on top of the covers so we could see the reflection of our bodies as they strained against each other.

After the riot, we didn’t make love for a long time until finally, after a night of heavy drinking, we fell into bed and stripped off each other’s pants without even

bothering to take our shirts off. We'd done this before, out of joyous impatience, but this time felt more like indifference. Out of habit, I glanced at our reflection in the mirror, but instead of our rocking hips, I saw Max. He stood watching us with a scornful frown and raised eyebrows. Blood ran from his head down his arms to his fingertips, where it dripped slowly into a red pool growing at his feet.

I sucked in a breath and pushed Shirley away.

"What's wrong?" she said.

"Did you see him?" I said. "In the mirror?"

"What do you mean?" She sat up quickly and pulled the cover over her lap. "Is there someone here?"

I watched as Max's image faded, giving way to the reflection of our two bodies, awkward and not touching, on the bed. I lay down and pulled the cover over my lap as well.

"No," I said. "No one's here."

"What did you see?"

"Nothing. I didn't mean to startle you."

We lay in silence until I finally said, "I betrayed him."

She brushed my hair away from my forehead. "No you didn't," she said.

"I should have been there for him. I should have answered my phone."

"You need to let it go, baby. Please."

"I betrayed him." I glanced quickly at the mirror, but Max was gone.

She rolled over and put her face in a pillow.

"You wouldn't betray me, would you?"

“Jesus, Danny,” she said into the pillow. “Of course not.”

“You betrayed Chuck.”

“For you.” She sighed and shook her head. “And like you said, I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“You’d already betrayed him before you told him.”

She didn’t respond. I whispered: “How does it feel?”

“What?” She turned her head to face me. I saw her lip trembling. “What did you say?”

“Nothing,” I said. “Never mind.” And then I got out of bed, found my pants on the floor, and started opening and closing drawers, looking for a screwdriver to take down the mirror.

*

Max was beautiful, and he was an idiot. He had a smart mouth that got him in trouble, and in junior high he’d received semi-regular beatings at the hands of the older kids. In high school, thanks to his quick wit and preposterously handsome face, he became popular. He was a wiry sixteen-year-old kid with a smug grin and perpetually raised eyebrows. He had a way of smiling and nodding after you said something that made you feel ridiculous, although there was never enough overt sarcasm or mockery in his face to justify calling him out on it. Sometimes he got in over his head.

One Thursday night in the spring, we were playing pool at the Avalon Theater, a trashy nickel arcade / movie theater – the neon-lit promise of “Fantastic Fun Machines!” draws a wide assortment of people off the streets – when Max started snickering at a huge man slamming a *Back to the Future* pinball machine in frustration. The two of us seldom

hung out together, as we were eight years apart and I couldn't stand the skater brats he always went around with, but I wanted to take him out for his birthday. He was beating me soundly at pool, like he would beat me at every game of skill, when the pinball guy finally got fed up and spun around. He was probably six-three, two-seventy-five, wearing a cutoff Trailblazers T-shirt, his bare arms thick, short, and hairy.

"You have something you want to say to me?" he said, glowering at Max. His thick black beard looked like it had gone untended for half a year. The eight or nine other people in the arcade turned away from ski-ball or "Big Buck Hunter Pro" to watch.

"No, no," Max replied, light and innocent. "But it might be time to step away from the pinball machine. Seems like it's got your number tonight, my friend."

I didn't think that would be enough to set the guy off, but he stepped forward and gave Max a shove, sending him staggering back into the pool table, where he slid to the floor. He got up quickly and took a step toward the man, whose chest was puffed out, his lips pulled back from his yellow teeth in a grotesque sneer.

"Max!" I said. He stopped and looked back at me. I swallowed. I hadn't planned my next move. Glancing down at the table, I grabbed a pool ball in each hand. I clacked them together and started walking toward the guy. "Hey, chief," I said. My voice was husky from the tension, and I hoped he wouldn't notice my shaking hands. "You're about to get your gourd cracked the fuck open. I killed two Iraqis with my bare hands over in that desert shitstorm, and one of 'em was an even fatter motherfucker than you are." I'd never been in a real fight in my life and prayed I wouldn't piss myself. I stopped when I was even with Max and stared into the man's eyes, still clacking the balls together. He

stared back at me. Finally, he grunted and looked around the room at all the people watching us.

“Yeah, okay, okay,” he said. “Just tell your little boyfriend to watch his fucking mouth.” He walked off, glaring at the other people in the arcade.

After he left, I smacked Max on the top of his head. “You dumbass,” I said, but I couldn’t fight back my grin. I felt like a hero.

Max laughed. “You see how scared that dude was? You had him shitting bricks! Gotta stand up to these fuckers, right?”

“That guy would’ve destroyed you if I hadn’t been here.”

“Hell, I could’ve taken him,” Max said. He threw a series of jabs in my direction. “I bet I could take you.”

“Whatever,” I said. “You’re a moron.”

We returned to our pool game, and the rest of the night it never crossed my mind that one day I would replay this scene a thousand times, wishing I’d pulled Max away from the pinball guy and apologized profusely for my stupid brother. Or maybe I should have let him have a swing at Max. A broken nose might have been just what he needed. Because despite what I’d made him believe, neither of us was tough. Neither was strong or resilient. We weren’t then, and I am not now.

*

The piano stood in the middle of the room, a small upright with brown polish beginning to peel and a chipped middle C. A metronome sat on top, nearly matching the brown finish. I ran my fingers across the keys, not pressing them, just feeling the grooves

between each piece of ivory. I remembered in Pepper's Tavern saying I'd come over to play the piano the next day. That was three weeks ago.

"It's a Mason and Risch," Chuck said. He stood next to me, watching me examine the instrument. "Does that mean anything to you?" He seemed nervous, as if I were an antique dealer here to appraise his treasured family heirloom.

"No," I said. I sat down on the bench and rested my fingertips on the keys. A sheet of music leaned on the built-in stand. It was titled "As the Deer."

"Playing hymns on a stolen piano," I said. "How about that." Shirley gave a little laugh from the couch behind us, but Chuck didn't smile. The Chuck in my head was a crass and abnormally sweaty brute with irritable bowel syndrome who bossed Shirley around and cried at night because he couldn't get it up. The Chuck in front of me, however, was thin and soft-spoken, with a pair of delicate glasses low on his nose that drew his gaze downward. His eyes never rose to meet mine.

"I can't play it," he admitted. "But that piece was my favorite hymn back when my parents made me go to church. I found it in the bench."

I felt a tenderness toward him that I couldn't quite explain, except that maybe it was because I knew Shirley had chosen me over him, so I saw him as a defeated opponent who was handling himself gracefully. "I'm surprised you can't play," I said. "Shirley tells me you're good at everything you do. Beat a grandmaster at chess, I hear."

He grinned sheepishly and rubbed his forehead, looking down. "Oh, it wasn't a big deal. It was at some charity event and he was playing twenty people at the same time." He paused and nodded toward the piano. "Could you play?"

"Sure, but I don't know very many songs. I can play some Beatles if you'd like."

“Could you play ‘As the Deer’?”

“Are you serious?” I looked up at him.

He shrugged.

“Well,” I said, “it is a Sunday.”

The piano was surprisingly in tune. As I played, Shirley came over and sat on the bench next to me. She watched my hands move across the keys. I played pretty well for not having practiced in years. When I finished, Chuck gave a pleased murmur. Shirley nodded and looked at me.

“That was great,” Chuck said. “I remember why it was my favorite.”

Shirley leaned in close to the music. “‘As the deer panteth for the water, so my soul longeth after Thee.’ That’s kind of beautiful.”

The three of us were silent. Shirley nudged me, and I stood up and walked to the couch, leaving the two of them on the piano bench. In the three weeks since the riot, I hadn’t seen Shirley once. That night, I told her what had happened and that I’d call when I was ready. I kept replaying the scene in the bar: my fingers circling the inside of Shirley’s thighs as two men beat my brother to death. I thought about telling her it was over. I thought about leaving town without a word. But then I’d think back to the stone bridge, the rhododendrons, the feeling of her lips on my scar. If anyone could get me through this, it had to be her.

“Chuck?” Shirley said softly.

“Uh huh?”

“I’m leaving you.”

Chuck reached out a hand and absently pressed a few keys. “I know,” he said.

I hoped Chuck wouldn't turn around and look at me.

"You knew?" Shirley said.

Chuck didn't respond. He hit one more key and stood up from the bench. He reached out and touched Shirley's cheek, then quickly pulled away. He took a few steps toward the bedroom before turning around and grabbing the metronome from the top of the piano. As he walked to the bedroom door, he gave me a quick look that was so full of sadness I felt sick to my stomach.

Shirley held a hand to her cheek where Chuck had touched her. She glanced back at me and gave me a quick smile before turning away again. "Well," she said. "That's that." And then she reached out and hit high C with one finger and held the key down until the note completely dissolved into the air.

*

Even now, months later, when I get out of the shower I'll stand in front of the mirror and wait for the fog to clear, not knowing whose face will be looking back at me. Usually it's mine, but when it's Max's, it's almost too much for me to take. Long streams of blood run down his cheeks, over his nose, across his lips. He'll mouth words to me, shaking his head, his lips moving too quickly for me to understand what he's trying to say. He throws his hands in the air, frustrated, gesturing wildly. And then he'll stop and just point at me, one long, thin finger pressed against his side of the glass. Blood drips from his chin. "You got me, Max," I whisper. "I was at the bar with Shirley Matherson when I should've been saving your life." He doesn't lower his finger. "She's a sweet girl, though, Max. I think you'd like her. We're happy together." He shakes his head violently from side to side, raising his finger up from my chest to my face as I slowly back away. I

turn off the light, close the door, and stand outside the bathroom taking deep, trembling breaths, dripping water onto my bedroom carpet. When Shirley's home, she holds me and kisses my forehead until she's as shivering and wet as I am, and then we lie in bed together while she whispers words of comfort into my ear. When she's not home, when it's night and she's working the late shift, I stumble around the apartment with a mind full of static. I let the towel drop off and stand naked in the dark kitchen, reaching up for the bottle of whiskey with shaking hands as water drips from my hair and falls, each bead like a tiny stone, to the floor.

Wild West Love Songs

I had swallowed fire. I pictured the inside of my throat, scaled and shriveled, crimson and laced with cracks like sun-baked mud. Once in my stomach, the fire had ballooned, spreading out into the rest of me. It lapped at my organs, hissed angrily against the inside of my skin. My whole body ached, as though someone had tied me up and stuffed me in the trunk of a car for a three-day cross-country journey in the middle of summer. My eyelids felt like dried leaves against my eyes when I blinked. Holly squeezed my hand.

“You poor bastard,” she said.

“Uh huh.”

The symptoms had come on quickly. I’d noticed a scratch in my throat at dinner. Then the restaurant started to feel hot. Now, lying naked in bed, I thought it might be all over for me. I could be a dead man come morning, twisted into some unrecognizable shape, my steaming tongue lolling out of my mouth. Or I might spontaneously combust, taking Holly’s eyebrows with me in one furious poof.

The virus couldn’t be of American origin, I was sure of that. We didn’t make them like this in America. No, this fucker had to have made its way over from Africa, on a cargo ship most likely, infecting one or two people in Rhode Island, then making its way out West in the feathers of migratory songbirds. The cook must have picked it up

from one of his pet cats who took down an infected bird. Then he probably sneezed on my salad, the son of a bitch.

Holly slid her hand along my stomach. “Wow,” she said. She pressed up against me, her skin smooth and cool. “You’re burning up.” She ran her hands down my body, over my chest and stomach.

“What are you doing, Holly?”

“Your skin is so hot.”

“That’s because I’m dying.”

She slid one leg around me, still stroking my chest. “It feels strange,” she said, and in the dim lamplight I saw her grin and run her tongue over her lips.

“Trust me, Holly, this is not something you want.”

“I never get your germs.” She was on top of me now. “You’ve been sick twice since we’ve been dating and I haven’t been sick once.”

“I haven’t had anything like this. This could lead to the extinction of the human race. This is...” I trailed off. Talking took too much energy, and she was pressing her body down against me.

“Be quiet,” she said. She reached over to my bedside table and touched the metal lamp once. The light grew brighter. She touched it again and the room went dark. Only a few rays of moonlight penetrated the closed blinds. She leaned in close, her hair on my cheek, her lips brushing my ear. “Shh.”

I groaned, but then I wrapped my arms around her. I didn’t want to, but I couldn’t help myself. As her hips rocked slowly back and forth, even the moonlight seemed to dissolve into the air, and we were left in total darkness.

*

When I woke up, my hands were covered with blood, the white sheets dark and slick. A soft light filtered in through the blinds.

There was a pounding at the door. It sounded like someone was throwing his weight against it. Next to me on the bed, a woman was heaped into a twisted ball, knees to her chest, arms flopped to the side. It was Holly, but her contorted and bloody face was nearly unrecognizable. I sat up, unable to breathe. On the floor next to the bed was the metal lamp, trailing a loose cord. Its base was spattered with red. "Mike?" A voice I couldn't place came from behind the door, a quick, sharp question. Then the pounding again. I pictured a shoulder lowered against the wood and stared at the crumpled figure lying next to me. My skin was burning and sweat dripped from my face onto the sheets. I reached out a shaking hand to Holly's face and with one finger moved a clump of hair from her eyes.

Her eyelid twitched.

But that couldn't have happened. It must have been a fever dream, a hallucination. I pulled myself out of it, backwards and spinning away, and then I was in the bathroom in a bar in Seattle.

*

As soon as I realized where I was, I knew I was still dreaming and frantically tried to wake up. This was the day I'd met Holly, two years ago, and it was not a day I would like to relive.

I'd been in town for my sister's wedding. She was getting married the next day, and we were all out for a pre-wedding night on the town. I'm not usually very outgoing,

but in an effort to avoid having to listen to old family squabbles dredged drunkenly from the past, I sat down next to a thin young woman about my age and tried to start a conversation.

“Nice place, huh?”

She had dark brown hair, which she brushed from her face so she could look over at me without moving her head. “Not nice enough, apparently.”

“What do you mean?”

She turned and looked directly at me. “In a nice enough place, guys dressed like you wouldn’t be hitting on me.”

I glanced down at my un-tucked green checkered shirt and brown slacks. “Hey, I really wasn’t—”

“Now, you see that guy over there?” She pointed down the bar at a man in a suit texting on his cell phone. “In a nicer place, there’d be plenty more like him to go around. That’s the kind of guy who should be hitting on someone like me.”

I clenched my teeth and felt my face growing hot. I pushed back my barstool and had stood halfway up when she laughed and slapped me hard on the back.

“Oh shit, I’m just kidding! Come on, sit down. I love earth tones.”

I took my seat cautiously, but she clearly felt bad for her joke and went out of her way to make me feel welcome. She grinned and flicked her eyes across my face while I talked.

Things were going great until I realized that what I thought had been butterflies in my stomach were in fact creatures of a much less romantic disposition. I remembered the

schnitzel with the funny aftertaste I'd wolfed down at the buffet before coming out to the bar. I excused myself as graciously as possible.

So I stood there as the bathroom door closed behind me, unable to pull myself from the dream. Once more, I struggled to comprehend what I was seeing. On the wall in front of me, two urinals and a toilet hung side by side by side with no dividers of any kind. To my right was a sink, where one man washed his hands while another stood at a urinal. No dividers? This would not do. What twisted bastard had designed this place? The toilet was my destination, and it was an almost unprecedented emergency.

Not only would I have no privacy on the toilet, but, due to its location, if someone held the door open, I could order another round from the bartender with a wave of my hand. I opened the door a crack and looked at the bar. My sister and my mom were sitting next to each other, raising glasses of wine, directly in line with the bathroom door. I could make out their faces in the mirror behind the bar. Further down, I could see the side of Holly's head as she bent to her drink, her hair falling over her face. If someone opened the door and one of them looked in this direction...

I didn't have time to worry about the details. I dropped my pants and sat on the toilet. The man at the urinal three feet to my right gave me a confused look and angled his hips away. I recognized him as Tim, my future brother-in-law's younger brother. He was a few years younger than me, barely drinking age. The man at the sink was an uncle on my mother's side I hadn't seen in five years. They eyed me.

I tried to hold back, I really did. Slow and steady now, I thought. Come on, Mike, slow and steady. But the schnitzel would not hear of it. It arrived with noise and anger, and I bowed my head and closed my eyes. Goosebumps crawled on my thighs. Why

couldn't I wake up? Could I be dead? Was I doomed to repeat this one moment for eternity?

"I'm sorry, everyone," I said. "I'm really sorry." No one responded. Tim began coughing. My uncle walked out, and I heard the door bang against the wall as he left. He must have really flung it open, but I kept my eyes closed and didn't look to see if anyone at the bar was taking a casual glance toward the restroom. I counted my heartbeats until the door clicked back into place.

Then I had a disturbing thought. What if my uncle had told everyone? I wouldn't put it past him. He had always seemed like a crude man, frequently telling jokes insinuating that my mother was a fair bit less than chaste when she was younger. If he thought he could get a laugh of the group, he would tell them about me without a second thought. Then everyone would be keeping an eye on the door for sure. And what if Holly overheard? I began to hate him already.

I couldn't let that happen. I needed to hurry up and finish before anyone opened the door. Tim zipped his pants up. The worst was over, but I wasn't done yet. The brutal stench filled the room. I kept apologizing.

Tim finished washing his hands. I was left with only one option.

"Hey, listen, would you mind staying in here for another minute or so while I finish up? I really don't want that door to open. You can probably see why."

"Sorry, dude," said Tim. "I'm about to pass out."

"Please," I said. "I'll just be a minute. I'm really sorry."

Tim stepped to the door but didn't open it. "For God's sake," he said.

I did what I had to do. I'd almost forgotten I was dreaming, but as soon as I remembered, I strained to pry my thoughts out of the present. It wasn't easy, and I found this very troubling, but I managed to do it. I would go back out into the bar. I would get Holly's number. Within the month, she would be driving to Spokane on the weekends, and I would try to get to Seattle once or twice during the week. We would watch movies together, and she would curl up on the couch and lay her head on a pillow in my lap. When something funny happened, she would laugh and cover her mouth and look up at me to make sure I was laughing too. When she turned back to the screen, I would continue to stare down at her, wondering about this luminous person nestled against me.

As soon as I pulled my pants up, Tim opened the door and walked out. I saw my mother and sister at the bar. And Holly. No one was looking in.

As I washed my hands, my dad came through the door. He gave me a scrunched look.

"Jesus, it smells in here," he said.

"I know. It was Tim. He said it was an emergency."

"He sat on *that* thing?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Right in front of the door there?"

"Yep."

"I mean, if someone opened the door—"

I dried my hands and walked out of the bathroom. I slid into my seat at the bar next to Holly. A beer waited for me.

“Hey, thanks,” I said. “You didn’t need to buy me a beer. I was planning on buying you a drink, to tell you the truth.”

“Oh, it’s not from me,” Holly said. “It’s from that guy over there.” She pointed across the bar. My uncle was watching us. When he saw me look over, he raised his glass. I raised my beer, nodded at him, and took a drink.

“But I’ll take you up on that offer,” she said, “if it’s still on the table.”

“Of course. Anything you want.”

“Okay. But first I need to ask you something.”

Her tone had changed. And with it, the room began losing its color, the amber draining from the glass in front of me, the maroon soaking down through the counter, everything smearing into shades of gray. The noise in the room had also dissipated. The only thing I could hear was Holly’s breathing, which had become slow and labored. I didn’t look at her. I stared down into the pale liquid in my glass.

“Did you hear me, Mike?” Her voice was very soft.

“I heard you.”

“I said I need to ask you a question.”

I didn’t respond. There were no bubbles in my beer. No carbonation. It waited lifeless in the glass.

“I need to know why you did this to me.”

I stared into my beer and didn’t move. I took a deep breath. Then I took another. She didn’t say anything else. Finally, I whispered into my beer: “I didn’t do that. I swear I didn’t do that.”

“Mike,” she said, her voice gentle, tender, as if she were talking to a child. I refused to look at her. I didn’t need to. I could see the blood dripping onto the counter out of the corner of my eye. A gray rivulet made its way toward my glass. I could hear each drop tick onto the smooth surface. Closing my eyes, I lifted my beer. I drank it all, gulped it down, tasteless and tepid, then slammed the glass on the counter as hard as I could.

*

I jolted awake, my eyes wide, color pouring into them. I was leaning against the back wall of an elevator. In front of me, Holly frantically jabbed at the “close door” button as a red-faced, pudgy man scrambled toward us.

“Come on, come on,” Holly hissed. “Close, you fucker.”

The door groaned shut with the man still ten feet away.

“Whew, close one,” said Holly.

I still hadn’t seen her face and reached out a trembling hand to turn her around. At my touch she turned toward me, grinning brightly and eyes wide with surprise.

“Boy, you don’t waste any time, do you? Can’t you at least wait until we get to my apartment?”

“Of course,” I said. “Sorry.”

I remembered this day. Holly had invited me up after our third date. Apparently, I was still dreaming. I remembered the fat little man hustling toward the elevator and Holly’s relief when the door’s closed.

“That Mr. Angelo’s a creep,” she said. “When he’s in the elevator with me, he stares at my breasts and plays with himself through his pocket. I’d kick his ass if he wasn’t my landlord.”

We rode to the fifth floor. I felt like a ghost as I followed Holly down the hall. My vision seemed locked in place. If I tried to look in a different direction, my vision became blurry and indistinct. Those must be places my memory can't access, I thought.

Holly unlocked her door and motioned me inside with a sweeping gesture. I stepped in and looked around. It was all how I remembered it: a wood-floored studio apartment with posters of musicians covering the walls, a blue couch, and an unmade twin-sized bed. The computer desk in the corner was surrounded by an assortment of instruments.

"It might not be much, but that doesn't mean it's cheap," said Holly. "Have a seat, I'll make you a drink."

Instead of sitting, I wandered around looking at the posters on the wall: the Clash, the New York Dolls, the Sex Pistols, the Ramones, and many more bands I didn't recognize. Looking at the posters by Holly's dresser, I noticed sitting on top of it a framed picture of her with another man, taken at the ocean. The man had one muscular arm draped over Holly's shoulder, and she was grinning up at him with an arm around his waist. Her head barely reached his shoulder. He looked like a football player, and I knew from asking Holly later that he had, in fact, played in the Arena League for a year before blowing out his knee. I tried to look away, but my eyes would spring back to the picture against my will.

"Here you go," Holly said, and I turned around. "My world-famous gin and tonic." She handed me a glass. "You like my posters?"

"Sure," I said. I motioned to the instruments by her computer. "And you're more than a fan, I take it."

“That’s right!” she said. “Didn’t I tell you? I’m recording an album.” She walked over to the desk and picked up a trumpet from the floor.

“On your computer?”

“Yep. If you have a decent program, the sound quality is excellent.” She found the trumpet’s case and put it away.

“What about your neighbors?” I said. “They’re okay with this?”

“Well, the walls are pretty thick, so my neighbors to the sides don’t mind. But the floors are really thin, and my upstairs neighbor sometimes gets pissy. He pounds on the floor while I’m trying to record at night.”

“So you stop?”

“Oh, hell no!” She laughed and took a sip of her drink. “See that baseball bat in the corner? I take it and pound back until he leaves me alone. He calls up Mr. Angelo, but that guy has too much of a crush on me to kick me out.”

We drank our gin and tonics and she told me about the process of recording music. I zoned out of the conversation, which played out just as it had before, and watched Holly. I loved how she’d bite her lip and bob her head with wide eyes while I talked. It made me feel like I was saying something terribly exciting or brilliant. I realized suddenly that she didn’t do that anymore. Now when I talked to her, she’d raise her eyebrows and nod slowly, as if she couldn’t wait for me to be quiet.

I pulled myself back to the conversation. Unlike my last dream, this was a moment I wanted to savor.

“I forgot to ask you,” I said. “Do you have a title for your album?”

“I do!” Holly said. “I’m calling it *Wild West Love Songs*. Pretty great, huh?”

“Is it a country album? I didn’t get the impression—” I gestured around at the walls.

“No, no,” she said. “It’s just this thing... I told you I’m not from Seattle, right?”

“Yeah, the East Coast.”

“That’s right. New Hampshire. Well, anyway, growing up I was always fascinated with the Wild West. Cowboys, Indians, gunslingers, all that stuff. So when I graduated high school, I started my own westward migration.”

“You were looking for the Wild West?”

“You could say that. I mean, I knew it wasn’t like it used to be, but I thought the spirit would still be the same. And there are still cowboys today, after all.” She laughed and took another drink. “So I kept heading west, but it never got wild enough for me. And now here I am. You can’t go much farther west than this.”

“But why love songs? Who are they to?”

“Oh, they’re not to anyone in particular. Lots of people, actually. I like being in love.”

I remembered hearing those words the first time and feeling queasy. Was this a person I wanted to be dating, someone who could record an entire album about her past loves? She’d never finished the record, though. After things started getting serious, she spent less time making music in order to spend more time with me.

As I finished my drink, a soft pounding sound began to register in my mind. I looked around the room, and it began to grow louder. I didn’t remember this happening before.

“Is that your upstairs neighbor?” I asked.

Holly frowned. "What do you mean?"

"That pounding sound," I said.

"I don't hear anything."

The sound increased, and between thumps I thought I heard someone call my name. It sounded like my roommate Pete.

"Oh," Holly said, and she looked at me with grieving eyes. "I know what it is. Come here."

She took my hand and led me to her bed. "Lie down," she said. I didn't want to, but I had no control over my body. She crawled in after me and, as I watched, curled into a ball, her knees to her chest, then threw her arms to the side and flopped her head back. She blinked up at me. "Does this look right?" she said.

"Stop it," I whispered. "Stop it."

"Only you can stop it," she said.

"How?"

"Come kiss me, and I'll tell you."

I leaned down and closed my eyes. Her warm lips met mine and then moved to my ear. "All you have to do," she said, "is wake up."

*

I woke up to a strange bed and absolute darkness. My eyes were wide open, but I couldn't see anything. I felt for Holly next to me, but there was no one there. A rustling came from the foot of the bed, and then a soft snort. My heart started to race. I knew where I was.

This was two months ago, late summer, in Polebridge, Montana, on the edge of Glacier National Park. Holly and I had made the trip together as our birthday presents to each other. We found Polebridge mentioned in a travel magazine and thought it sounded like an adventure. It was sixteen miles from pavement with a year-round population of fourteen, and bears and wolves supposedly roamed the streets. There was a hostel in town where we could stay for \$30 a night and go hiking during the day.

When we got there, we found out we were the only ones staying at the hostel, a two-story wood cabin. Greg, the manager, greeted us warmly, especially Holly. I saw his eyes move up and down her body as he shook her hand. He was in his thirties, light-skinned and handsome, with a blond beard and a hearty laugh. I disliked him immediately. He sat us down under the kerosene lamp in the kitchen and told us stories.

He said he was just a hostel manager in the summers, and that in the winters he was the captain of a crab fishing boat in Alaska. He said he made \$30,000 every winter, then spent the rest of the year traveling and exploring the northern reaches of Alaska and Canada. In June through August, he managed the hostel.

Greg was the smuggest son of a bitch I'd ever met. As he talked, I looked over at Holly to roll my eyes but saw she was captivated by him. Her eyes were wide and bright, and she grinned broadly through all his stories.

"It gets so fuckin' cold out on the sea," he said, "that sometimes we'll haul up a pot and as soon as those pinchy bastards hit the air, some of 'em will freeze on the spot and explode. Pieces of shell flyin' everywhere. Chunks of meat too. All you can hear's the water and their chatterin' legs, and then all of a sudden, Pop! Pop! You gotta cover your eyes and hope God or Jesus or who the hell ever is watchin' out for you."

Holly gave a nervous laugh and Greg continued:

“There was this one kid out with us last winter. Larry was his name, a greenhorn, first year on the boat. Scrawny little fella with kind of an odd way about him.”

Greg looked at me as he said this.

“Six days out, he took a piece of shell right in the eyeball. Sliced him real good. We still had three days left before comin’ in, and he was hollerin’ the whole time. He got to thrashin’ around so much we had to tie him to his bunk or he woulda killed himself or someone else. His voice ran out after a day and a half, and he just lay there moanin’ and gurglin’. Scared the rest of the crew half shitless.”

I didn’t believe him for a second. He seemed like a con-man to me, or at least someone with grand illusions about his own self-worth. When Holly got up and went to the bathroom, he leaned in close.

“Man, you oughtta see the pussy that comes through here earlier in the summer. ‘Round the fourth of July, this place turns into a fuckin’ orgy fiesta. All these skinny bitches from Missoula come up by the dozens, lookin’ for a little excitement. I have to set up tents for ‘em on the lawn because the hostel gets full. Sometimes they’ll get scared of bears, so I’ll let ‘em sleep inside. My bed’s big enough for three, and these chicks are very willing to show their gratitude, if you know what I mean.”

“Great,” I said. “Well, it’s been a long day.”

Greg laughed. “Sure, man,” he said. “Don’t let me get in your way.”

I went out to the car and brought in the box of food Holly and I had prepared. We’d filled it with granola bars, beef jerky, bananas, and Raman noodles.

The bedrooms were upstairs, two with bunks for guests and a small single room for Greg. Holly and I had one of the guest rooms to ourselves. It had a door that had to be kept open at night or the heat would become unbearable. The door opened onto a small balcony where a cross between a ramp and a ladder led to the ground, a necessary safety precaution in a wooden structure which, with no electricity, was constantly full of flames.

We cuddled up in bed and Holly blew out the lamp on our bedside table. We waited for our eyes to adjust. We waited a long time. Nothing. I waved my hand in front of my face, but all I could see was darkness. It was the pitchest of blacks. Holly giggled.

“You believe this?” she said.

“Pretty crazy,” I said.

“It’s like being in a cave. Have you ever been in a cave?”

“Never.”

“Oh. My dad used to take me. He said if you stayed in there long enough, you would go blind. I got so scared whenever he would turn off his flashlight. I was sure that the darkness would take over my eyes and I’d never be able to see anything again except that terrible black wall.”

After a while, we went to sleep.

When I woke up, Holly was gone and there was a creature snorting at the foot of the bed. Now here I was again. I knew everything that was about to happen, but I couldn’t wake up. I was trapped in my body. Or, rather, I was trapped in my mind.

I remembered the box of food. I heard sniffing, wrappers crumpling. I thought about the open door. Bears and wolves roaming the streets.

I still couldn't see anything. I reached over to the bedside table and grabbed my flashlight, knocking over a tube of ChapStick. It fell to the floor with a sickening clatter. The sniffing stopped. I clutched the flashlight to my chest, too afraid to turn it on, sure that if I did I would find myself staring into the hot, salivating jaws of a wolf, only inches from my face, its eyes glowing and hollow in the sudden light. I knew I was dreaming, that I had nothing to be afraid of, but all the same the fear gripped me. The sniffing started again.

There was a bed to my left, and I had a pretty good idea where it was. I quietly pulled back the covers. Now or never, I decided, and lunged across to the other bed, rolled off it onto the floor, then turned and shined my flashlight across the room, crouching behind the bed for cover.

Nothing there. I swept the rest of the room with my flashlight. I nervously lifted the sheets hanging down over the mattresses and looked under the beds. There was nothing in the room. Whatever it was had made a break for it, back out the door into the wild. Wrappers and chunks of granola were strewn around the foot of the bed, the food box tipped sideways, spilling tattered packages of Raman noodles. The following day I'd asked Greg what it could have been and he said it was most likely a raccoon.

But where was Holly? I knew where she was, and I wanted to run into the other room and confront her, but I was trapped in the path I'd previously taken.

I scanned the room with my light, wishing I could replay this scene in slow motion, because as I turned the beam toward the hallway I thought I saw Holly slip out of Greg's room. His door was cracked open. She held a candle and shielded her eyes as she came toward me.

“What’s going on?” she said. She blew out her candle.

“What were you doing in there?” I looked her over with the flashlight. She wore a baggy T-shirt and a pair of boxer shorts.

“In where?”

“You were in Greg’s room.”

“I was in the bathroom. What’s wrong? Why are you up?”

“There was an animal going through our food. Why were you in Greg’s room?”

“I wasn’t in Greg’s room. What do you mean, an animal? What are you talking about?”

“Showing our host a little gratitude, were you?”

“Jesus, Mike, would you listen to yourself? What’s going on? There was an animal in our room?”

“Just get into bed.”

“All right. God damn.” She climbed into bed. I shined the light in her face and she turned away from me. I crawled in next to her and turned off the flashlight.

We lay in silence for a few minutes. Then she said, “It’s too late to go back.”

“What do you mean?”

“It can never be the same as it was.”

Had she really said that? I couldn’t remember. Her voice didn’t sound right.

“What are you talking about?” I said.

She took my hand in both of hers. They were wet. She raised my hand to her face.

My fingers smeared across its slick, hot surface. I jerked my hand away with a gasp.

She rolled over against me, put her arm across my chest. Her breath came in strained, choppy bursts. I didn't move. I squeezed my eyes shut. She brought her face to my face, her lips to my ear. "You didn't do this to me," she said. "You did this to us."

I knew what she meant, and I knew she was right. And so I woke up.

*

I opened my eyes to a dim light. The banging had stopped. Next to me, Holly groaned. I peeled myself away from the sweat-soaked sheets and looked down at her perfect, serene face. I struggled to swallow, my throat still livid with pain.

It wasn't going to work. There would always be that doubt in my mind, both of her and of myself, and it was more than either of us could take. It would only be a matter of time before I'd be revealed as what I was: an insecure coward. Maybe she already knew.

I didn't want to let go. I wanted, if only for a little longer, to believe we still had a chance. I grabbed Holly's hand, held it tight, and closed my eyes.

Privacy

All I wanted to do on the eighteen-hour ferry ride from Prince Rupert, British Columbia to Juneau, Alaska was ditch my dad and older brother and find some place out of the way where I could masturbate. I'd picked up a *Daredevil* comic in the gift shop onboard, and it turned out old Daredevil came across a lot of finely-illustrated breasts on his adventures, though being blind he didn't get to enjoy any of them himself. My dad would've burst a blood vessel if he'd found out, and my brother would've just stolen the comic and threatened to tell if I caused a fuss, so I had to be all secretive and crafty and felt a little like a comic book hero myself: The Phantom Whacker, maybe, or The Stealth Spanker. I'd gone in the bathroom, of course, but it was always crowded and the stalls had these big gaps by the hinges where you could see people walking past who could just look on in or check you out in the mirror while they washed their hands. I didn't even feel comfortable taking a dump in there, let alone jerking off to a comic book.

We were on one of those huge ferries where you park your car on the boat and then drive it off when you get to where you're going, so I had a lot of ship to explore. The top two levels were all fancy and carpeted and decked out with TVs and arcade games and vending machines, but if you went down to the lower level it was all metal surfaces and "Do Not Enter" signs. We'd be sleeping down there later, in a big open room where those of us who hadn't paid for a private cabin could throw sleeping bags on the metal

floor. I rolled up *Daredevil* and stashed him in my coat pocket and walked past the dimly-lit room where a half-dozen people lay around either reading or napping. I wandered off down a long metal corridor with pipes the size of telephone poles running along the ceiling. The low droning rumble from the engines grew louder as I moved deeper into the ship.

This was the summer after my mom had died, and Dad felt like a trip up to Alaska would help us clear our heads and “reconnect with the limitless possibilities of life,” I think is how he put it. In fact, he didn’t seem too upset about Mom dying if you want to know the truth, but she’d been sick a long time before she died so maybe he got his grieving out of the way early or maybe, like me, he’d just been trying really hard not to think about her.

The week after the funeral in March, he called his old buddy in Ketchikan where he used to live before he met Mom and arranged for us to come up and visit at the beginning of summer. We drove up from Wyoming in early June. My brother Trent was sixteen and had just got his learner’s permit, but Dad made him drive most of the way so he could sit in the passenger’s seat and drink from a two-liter bottle of 7-Up that was half vodka and basically have a grand old time, singing along to old Simon and Garfunkel songs he made us listen to and doing that wave thing with his hand out the window. He’d never been much of a drinker, but now with Mom gone I guess he thought he could live it up. At the Canadian border, he tried to bribe the customs officer with a ten-dollar bill even though he hadn’t started his day’s drinking yet and we weren’t doing anything illegal. We ended up having to get out of the car while they searched through all our stuff and Trent and I had to answer a bunch of questions about where our mother was and if this man was really our father and so on.

Dad had been teaching me to play chess, and before I picked up that *Daredevil* comic he'd had me sitting in the cafeteria with the board set up while he tried to find kids about my age and convince them to play a game with me on a ten-dollar wager. I heard him going from table to table as I leaned on my elbows over the untouched board. "Well, if she knows how to play then let's do this," I heard him say. "What, is your daughter a coward?" He split his time fairly evenly between the cafeteria and the bar, which is probably where he was while I searched the hallways below deck for a private place to jerk off. Trent was most likely in the arcade feeding quarters into *Mortal Kombat* and trying to learn new moves he could use later on me. He'd always give me a quick shot to the kidneys or a kick to the shin whenever Dad wasn't looking. We shared a room back home, and some nights he'd stand over my bed and whisper how he was going to kill me one day so I'd better always be ready. Later, though, I'd hear him crying. I'd roll on my stomach and put a pillow over my head.

My steps echoed in the dimly-lit corridors, and I was sure the perfect little hideaway would be just around the next corner. I made several turns and didn't really know where I was, though I guess I wasn't anywhere I shouldn't have been because I passed a few guys who were obviously crew members on their way to do something important, and none of them gave me any trouble. I pushed on all the "Do Not Enter" doors I came to, but they were all locked.

I'd abandoned my old identity a while ago and had become, without a doubt, The Stealth Spanker. I had half a boner going already just thinking about what I was about to do, so I put my hands in my pockets so no one who passed me would notice. I told myself I would whack it three times before heading back up, though part of me knew that after

the first time I'd feel guilty and I might even throw the comic book away, though in an out-of-the way trashcan where I could retrieve it later if I changed my mind, which I probably would.

So I kept making turns and pushing on locked doors until I came to this door that said "Custodian," which I guess surprised and disappointed me a little because I thought a custodian on a ship would get a cooler job title than that. I figured the door would be locked just like the others, but I turned the handle and gave it a push and it opened. I didn't quite understand what I was seeing at first because of the dim light and the surprise of actually seeing someone else when I had my mind in full-on Stealth Spanker mode. But then I saw what was happening and just stood there.

An old hippo-faced guy with a flat nose and a huge roll of fat where his neck should've been stood in the corner with a little blond-haired boy who couldn't have been more than seven or eight, and when I opened the door the man shoved the kid away and I could see the kid's hand had been down the old guy's pants. The kid looked at me with wet, terrified eyes while hippo-man coughed and tried to push down his boner which I could still see poking through his sweatpants.

"Christ," hippo-man grunted. He started to say something else but couldn't figure out what he wanted to say. Then he reached in the pocket of his sweatpants and brought out a five-dollar bill that looked like he'd been sitting on for days. "Hey, look, wrong door, kid," he said and took a step toward me holding out the bill. "Arcade's upstairs. Play a few on me, huh?" He shook the money at me like he thought I hadn't noticed it. I didn't know what else to do so I took the money and put it in my pocket. But after that I just stood there and sort of blinked at the two of them. The kid looked straight at me, and

the old guy glanced off to the side and kind of nodded while biting his lip. We stood there for about ten seconds, and then the old guy said, “Look, my nephew spilled his coke and we were just looking for something to clean it up. This’ll work, right Chris?” He picked up a mop leaning against the wall and grabbed the kid’s arm with his other hand and pulled him out of the room. The boy never took his eyes off me until hippo-man jerked him out of sight.

I sat down on the floor and leaned against the shelves. I stared at the wall and tried to think. I guess I knew what I’d just seen, but I didn’t exactly know what to do about it. I got up and walked out of the room. While walking around the corridors below deck trying to find my way back up, I realized I was sweating badly. I’d nearly soaked through my T-shirt underneath my coat.

When I got back up to the main floor I headed for the cafeteria. On the way there I stopped at a trashcan and threw away the *Daredevil* comic and also the five-dollar bill.

I looked for my dad in the cafeteria, but our chessboard sat at an empty table. I found him in the bar, drinking something clear on ice and looking at his reflection in the mirror behind the bottles. It was only around four in the afternoon and the bar was mostly empty. I touched him on the shoulder and he turned and looked at me with eyes watering and choked with red. He ran his hand over his thick black mustache.

“Tommy. Tommy, my boy,” he grinned at me. He could barely form the words.

“Dad, I need to talk to you about some—”

“Tommy,” he cut me off, still grinning. “My little son, Tommy boy. Tommy, what the *fuck* are you doing in here?”

The bartender glanced at us and then moved to the other end of the bar.

“Dad, I saw something below deck. There was this man and—”

“Tommy, I swear to God. I really do.” He was swaying on his stool. “I swear to *God*, Tommy, if you don’t get the fuck out of here...I just need to be alone for a while to think about some things, all right? Some grown-up things. So run along. Go play with your brother.”

“Dad—”

“Run along. Run away.” He flapped his hand at me. “Away, away, away.” I took a few slow steps back, and he returned his attention to his image in the mirror.

I went to the cafeteria and sat at our table. I stared down at the checkered wood of the chessboard and felt my body shake. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw people at other tables staring. At the table next to me sat a woman with a son a few years younger than me, and I saw him lean in and whisper something in her ear, glancing in my direction. She put an arm around him and pulled him close.

I got up and ran out of the cafeteria to the trashcan where I’d thrown away *Daredevil* and the five-dollar bill. Someone must have seen me throw them away. Both the comic book and the money were gone.

Moonsliver Blues

Martin poured a shot of whiskey and watched Methuselah dance on the kitchen table. This was a new development. Martin tried not to look as he screwed the cap back on the bottle. “I hope you’re enjoying yourself,” he said.

He checked the mousetrap in the kitchen – nothing – and then took the shot glass into his bedroom and shut the door behind him. He set the whiskey on his bedside table and sat down on the bed. It was ten-forty on a late January night, and the wind outside moaned against his window like something ancient and newly awakened. Martin stared at the whiskey but didn’t drink it. The garbage man would be coming in seven hours.

He stood up and grabbed a coat and a stocking cap from his closet, then stopped in front of the full-length mirror next to his dresser and looked at himself. He’d never looked older: he was fifty-six years old, gaunt and watery-eyed with a red bulbous nose and a short, rough beard more gray than brown. Looking at his reflection, he began to feel a pressure building in his chest, as if a snake were slowly coiling around his heart. The man in the mirror coughed once and hit his chest with a clenched fist. He breathed out forcefully. Jesus, not now, Martin thought. Not yet.

On his way out of the apartment he passed the kitchen table, but Methuselah was gone.

*

The drive to the jail from Martin's apartment took ten minutes. His daughter had called him at around ten-thirty, the first time he'd talked to her in two years. He hadn't seen her for three years, since she was fifteen.

"Listen," she said, "I know it's been a while and I probably shouldn't have called, but I'm kind of in a predicament."

She needed \$800, she said. Then there had been a pause and some muffled voices and when she came back on the line she said he'd better make it \$850. He was the only one she knew with that kind of cash, she said. Then she sucked in a breath but didn't say anything else.

He told her he'd be there as soon as he could. The truth was, he didn't have that kind of cash. He had less than \$500 in his checking account but couldn't bring himself to tell her. He barely recognized her voice on the phone.

At a red light, Martin saw two police officers leading a horse along the sidewalk. The horse took small steps and shook its black head as the officers walked beside it, one holding the reins, the other holding a bridle strap and trying to calm the animal by stroking its neck. For as long as he'd lived in Salina, Kansas, he'd never seen a horse in the city. The light turned green and Martin watched the horse in his rearview mirror.

When Martin arrived at the jail, the bondsman didn't get up to greet him. He was thin and red-eyed and kept wiping his nose on his sleeve. They sat at a white plastic table that looked more suited for a backyard patio than the foyer of a jail. "Ten percent of eight grand is eight-hundred, plus a thirty-five-dollar premium for me and a ten-dollar Sheriff's

fee comes to \$845,” the bondsman said, pointing with a pen to numbers on the contract. “You’ll get \$700 of that back if she shows up at court.”

“She’ll be there,” Martin said. He got out his checkbook. “\$845, you said?”

“Yeah.” The bondsman rocked back in his metal folding chair and put his hands behind his head. “I have to be honest with you, Mr. Bishop, I’ve never seen a case quite like this one before. But I guess whether your mode of transportation has two wheels or four legs, a DUI is a DUI.” He laughed quietly and looked at the ceiling.

The table’s rough surface caused Martin’s signature on the bondsman’s contract to look like it had been written by a nervous forger. He pushed the contract and the check across the table. “Can I see her now?”

“Yep, just let me go take care of this,” the bondsman said, but he didn’t stand up. He flipped through the pages of the contract, sniffed loudly, then cleared his throat. “She decides to skip town, the whole eight grand’s on you. It’s all in here.” He shook the contract. “If there’s any problem, we’ll find you and let you know.”

“You don’t need to worry.”

The bondsman stood up with a grimace. “Thing is, *everyone* tells me not to worry, Mr. Bishop. Know what I mean? It’s all in here, though.” He shook the contract again and wiped his nose with his sleeve. “You’ll get a copy.”

Martin watched the bondsman walk to the back of the jail, and a few minutes later he watched him walk back with his daughter and a police officer. Martin stood up. Becca wore dark jeans and a black hooded sweatshirt with some sort of Japanese or Chinese lettering emblazoned in gold on the front. Her hair was pulled back from her flushed face. It felt strange to look at this young woman and realize that she was his daughter, that she

was one half *him*. She looked so different from the last time he'd seen her. Her face and figure were fuller, hair darker. Mouth turned down a bit more. She didn't smile when she saw him.

"Are you the father?" the police officer said. He gave Martin a skeptical look.

"I am," said Martin, and Becca gave a short laugh and looked away. The bondsman glanced at Becca, then turned back to Martin with eyebrows raised, looking him up and down with a wry smile on his face.

"All right," the officer said. He was a heavy black man with thick glasses and specks of gray around his temples. "I'm Sergeant Meyers. Bond's been paid and she's free to go. But there's still the matter of the horse. I don't think it's back at the station yet."

A woman behind a desk looked up from her computer. "It's out front, John. Henderson and Ibanez are waiting for you."

The Sergeant motioned with his hand and led them out the front of the building.

Outside, the cold air closed in around them. Martin watched his daughter's breath rise up in front of her. Becca put her hood up. Thin clouds drifted across the night sky, occasionally passing in front of the last sliver of a waning moon. Empty squad cars huddled together under the white glow of two street lamps. The bondsman disappeared around the side of the building with a quick word to the officer, and Martin silently cursed him as he walked away.

An American flag flapped in the wind. Beneath it, the horse stood with its head bowed against the pole, its reins wrapped around the metal. Two men in police uniforms

stood next to it, one with his hands in his pockets, the other smoking a cigarette. The Sergeant approached and exchanged a few words before dismissing them.

Becca walked over to the horse and untied its reins from the pole. She held her palm to its cheek and whispered in its ear. Martin saw how tenderly she treated the animal, and suddenly – absurdly, he knew – he was jealous of it. The horse had a thick black mane covering its neck and a bushy tuft of hair around each hoof. Two clouds of vapor rose from its nostrils.

The Sergeant turned to Martin and Becca.

“Mr. Bishop, could you escort your daughter home? That is, if you’re in a condition to ride.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Before I let you get on that horse, it’s my duty to make sure—”

“I don’t know how to ride.”

The Sergeant looked at Martin for a moment and then sighed. “Well. Your daughter’s still probably above the legal limit, but if you make sure she keeps to the side roads, she should be fine. We picked her up on Central, trying to make a left-hand turn against two oncoming lanes of traffic. Cars were swerving everywhere. To be honest, she’s lucky to be alive.”

“We’ll stay off the main roads.”

“All right,” the Sergeant said. “Be careful.” He turned and started to walk toward the building, but after a few steps turned back around. “Miss Bishop,” he said, “will you be okay?”

“Ha!” Becca said. She shot Martin a look of triumph. “I’ll be fine, sir.”

The Sergeant stood there for a few seconds and watched them. He seemed about to say something else, but then decided against it and turned back toward the station. Above them, the flag in the wind sounded like a flock of birds beating their wings against the air.

Becca put one foot in the stirrup and slid up onto the horse's back. Martin looked up at her, but her hood covered her face. The horse took a few nervous steps backward, its hooves clacking on the pavement. Martin reached up for bridle strap.

"Let go," said Becca. "I've got her."

"Whatever you say. But you're the one who almost got her killed. What the hell were you thinking?"

Becca tisked at the horse and tapped it with her heels. It started to walk forward briskly. "I'll pay you back for bail," she said. "I can take her home on my own."

Martin scrambled to catch up. "Hold up," he said. "You're not going anywhere without me. The Sergeant said—"

"Fuck that guy. What's he going to do?"

"Do you want to find out? Go ahead if you want to, we'll catch up in the squad car."

Becca pulled on the reins and the horse came to a stop, swishing its tail back and forth. "Jesus, Martin. You're a real asshole, you know that? Since when is it like you to show fatherly concern?"

"Listen, I—"

"No, don't answer that. We're not going to have *that* fucking conversation tonight. If you're coming, let's go. But the barn's about two miles, I think."

“I’m coming. But remember: I just bailed your ass out of jail, so the least you could do is cut me a little slack.” Martin caught up to the horse and started walking alongside it, taking long strides. “Since when do you know how to ride a horse, anyway? It isn’t yours, is it?”

“Of course not. How could I afford a horse? She’s my friend Ashley’s.”

“Ashley.”

“You don’t know her, obviously. Her parents have a little field and a barn. They live pretty close to us. I mean, pretty close to Mom and me.”

“Does she know you took her horse?”

Becca sighed a puff of steam into the air and pulled her hood tighter around her face with one hand. “Of course she does,” she said.

Martin did not believe her.

“Should you even be riding horses?” he said. “What if you have one of your fits?”

“I’m on a different medicine now,” Becca said. “I haven’t had a bad one in over a year.”

They moved through the darkened streets in silence except for the *clop-clop, clop-clop* of the horse’s hooves. Martin forced himself to keep up despite the pressure slowly developing in his chest. He couldn’t think of how to say what he wanted to say. They stuck to residential streets, and only a few cars passed by.

Finally Martin said, “I didn’t know you had my number.”

“Mom made me put it in my cell phone so I would have it in case she died.”

“What?” Martin looked up at Becca’s hood. “Is she sick?”

“No, she’s fine.” Becca kept looking forward. “Just in case. Actually, she has a new boyfriend. Quinton.”

“*Quinton?* Jesus. What, is he an ice-skater or something?”

“No. He isn’t.” *Clop-clop, clop-clop.*

“Well, how about that. You didn’t call him, though.”

“I didn’t call him.” They reached an intersection and waited for two cars to go by. “And don’t tell Mom about this, okay?”

“Ah!” Martin said. “The truth comes out. I was the only one you knew with \$800 who wouldn’t rat on you. Is that it?”

“She’d never believe you anyway. Not after all the shit you pulled.”

“Okay, okay. That’s enough of that.”

Becca looked down at Martin. “We haven’t said your goddamn name in our house in over a year, you know. Not since that night your little Iraqi girlfriend dumped you and you called up Mom – ‘drunk as a skunk,’ she said – and *begged* her to take you back. I remember, after she told you to go to hell, we laughed so hard we were literally rolling around on the living room floor. Then she went to the store and bought a fifty-dollar bottle of wine. We drank it in the kitchen. It was one of the best days of my life.”

“Sounds like a blast. What were you then, seventeen? You’d already been drinking for three years by that point anyway, so the wine couldn’t have been that much of a treat. And Tira was Syrian, by the way.”

“Well, what did you expect, leaving your booze all around the house and then forcing me to watch the way you treated Mom? The way you talked to her, the things you

did. The way you talked to *me*.” She heeled the horse and Martin almost had to jog to keep up.

“I thought you didn’t want to have this conversation.”

“Yeah, well, it’s too late now, isn’t it?”

“Slow down a bit,” Martin panted. The pain in his chest was becoming acute. I’m fucking this up, he realized. This might be my last chance to make things right, and I’m fucking it all up.

“What do you want me to say, Becca? I tried calling the house God-knows how many times. I sent you all those letters. How many times do I have to apologize?”

“You’re only sorry because you’re too old to get a new girlfriend, so you figure, hey, weren’t there some people who used to love me a long time ago? I wonder if they’d let me make their lives miserable again for a few more years?”

“That’s absurd,” Martin said. “And would you slow down that goddamn horse?” He reached out for the bridle and pulled on it. He pulled harder than he’d meant to. The horse jerked its head away and whinnied, then reared back on its hind legs – not a lot, but Becca wasn’t ready for it. She slipped off the horse, clawing at its mane and the reins, but she couldn’t hold on and fell backwards out of the saddle with a cry that entered Martin like a spike. At the last second, she managed to twist her body around so she landed arms first. Then the rest of her hit the street. Martin ran toward her. The horse turned in a circle twice, then galloped twenty yards away and turned to watch them.

“Don’t touch me,” Becca said before Martin had reached her. “Get away from me.”

“Jesus, I didn’t mean – that goddamn horse. It’s acting like it’s never been around people before.”

“Just people like you, Martin,” Becca said in what sounded like a half laugh, half sob. She lay with her head in her arms, shaking.

Standing above his daughter, Martin realized how helpless she was, and hatred for himself boiled inside him. He vividly remembered all the ways he’d hurt her, how he’d scream at his wife, Rachel, for giving him a “broken daughter,” every time Becca would start having a seizure. Some nights he’d come home at three in the morning, filled with whiskey and rage, and crawl into Becca’s bed and hiss in her ear until she woke up. Then he’d grab her by her skinny shoulders and shake her until her screams brought Rachel crashing into the room holding a kitchen knife.

It was a miracle he hadn’t been sent to prison or murdered. If Rachel had stabbed him in his sleep or hired a hitman to put a bullet through his head on his way to work, he wouldn’t have blamed her.

He kneeled down beside his daughter. “God, Becca,” he said. “I’m so sorry. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said, rolling over and pulling back her hood. She covered her face with her hands. “Go get Felicia, would you?”

“Who?”

“Get the goddamn horse.”

The horse had calmed down by the time he reached her. “You’re not helping me out here,” he said. He stroked her neck and put his hand on her side. He could feel the heavy *thump, thump, thump* of her heart. He lead her by her reins back to his daughter.

Becca stood waiting, her face streaked with tears. She took the reins from him and, groaning, climbed back onto the saddle.

“I’ll take her from here,” she said calmly.

“No, we’re almost there, I’ll—”

“Goodnight, Martin. Thanks for bailing my ass out of jail, as you so charmingly put it. I’ll pay you back as soon as I can. Trust me, I don’t want to owe you anything.”

“There’s no rush. I’m just glad I got to see you again. It was good to see you.”

“I’ll send you a check in the mail when I can. You still live in that shitty place down on Second?”

“Well, I suppose if you—”

“Okay, then. Goodnight.” She heeled the horse and gave a little yip, and it trotted off. Martin watched her ride away. He tried to wrap his mind around the fact that he was standing by himself on a dark and empty city street as his daughter rode away from him on a horse. He saw her pull her hood up and lower herself in the saddle, and then she was only a dark shape getting smaller in the distance as the wind picked up and tugged at his jacket. He realized suddenly that his car was a half-hour walk away. He looked at his watch: just after midnight. The garbage man would be coming in five and a half hours. Above, the sliver of moon cut through the clouds like a scythe.

*

Martin blamed many of his current problems on the garbage man. Ever since the start of the new year, a garbage truck had been coming through the alley outside his window at precisely five-thirty in the morning every Tuesday and Friday, waking him up without fail as it beeped and exhaled exhaust and picked up dumpsters and slammed them

back down. When the initial crash of metal or clatter of glass woke him, the truck was usually still at one of the first two of the eight dumpsters in the alley, and he would lie in bed and grind his teeth as he listened to it go through the rest of them, feeling his window of sleep growing smaller.

In the past, the truck had come at around seven-thirty and served as an alarm clock, but now that the schedule had changed, Martin settled into Monday and Thursday nights with an oppressive sense of dread. He lay in bed trying to force himself to sleep, counting down the hours until five-thirty. The anticipation of being awakened kept him from sleep, and all day Tuesday and Friday he'd be groggy and irritable at the furniture store where he worked. He could feel customers looking at him strangely, as if he made them nervous or disgusted them. In the evenings he'd be so tired that he would take long naps that he woke from feeling miserable and disoriented, and then had trouble sleeping at night again.

He'd taken to setting a shot of whiskey on his bedside table Monday and Thursday nights for when the next morning's truck woke him. When the first lurch of metal entered his consciousness, he reached over to the table, downed the shot, and buried his face in his pillow, concentrating on the chemicals pushing their hot way into his blood.

He'd started to drink too much. He'd had a problem in the past, a bad problem, but in the last year and a half a stomach ulcer had forced him to cut back. But now with the garbage man coming two hours earlier, Martin was once again experiencing mornings when he would wake up and not remember how the bottle got so low.

When he got back to his apartment, it was almost one a.m. One drink should do it, he thought. He poured the whiskey into a rocks glass and tried to picture Becca's face, but he had a hard time thinking about his daughter with Methuselah dancing on the table. "This is starting to get old," he said, but Methuselah made no sign that he'd heard.

Methuselah was a portable ghost. Most ghosts that Martin had read or heard about seemed to be tied to some particular location, but Methuselah seemed to be tied, if anything, to Martin himself. He'd first seen him over a year ago, shortly after Tira left. He'd come home one day to the apartment he and Tira had shared and found a sickly-looking man in a tuxedo standing in his bedroom, looking around with a dazed expression. After shouts and threats and an attempted shove, Martin soon found himself kneeling at the foot of his bed with his hands clasped together in fervent prayer, something he hadn't done since he was a boy and thought he'd never do again. It was clear that whatever sort of misguided spirit it was, it did not belong in this world, and most certainly did not belong in Martin's apartment. He couldn't believe he had a fucking ghost. He thought things like that kept to New England or the deep South. Certainly not Salina, Kansas.

Though the rhetoric of his prayers differed slightly over the next few weeks, they all shared the same basic message as the one he offered up that day, the first one he'd uttered in over forty years: "Dear Jesus, could you please remove this unholy apparition from the house of your humble servant?" The answer, apparently, was no. So Martin moved, but after unpacking his boxes in his new apartment on Second Street, he was in for two unpleasant surprises: first, that he could hear mice scuttling around behind his

refrigerator, and second, that the ghost was cowering in the bathtub holding his knees to his chin.

Since he was apparently stuck with the specter, who seemed to be completely harmless and in a constant state of primordial fear, Martin decided to name him. He was a grotesque-looking spirit: tall, thin, and bald with huge, terrified eyes. His pale skin had a green tint, like washed-up seaweed, the flesh on his face pulled back tightly to the sides where it bunched near his ears in clammy gray-green folds. Thin lips smacked together over a black, tongueless hole, silently gulping, his throat moving up and down. His nostrils flared out, and the pupils in his watery eyes were completely dilated. He looked like a man stuck in a wind tunnel, unable to remove his face from the constant blast of air. His small feet were stuffed into black loafers, angled toward each other, his knees bent outward. He looked like the oldest man who ever lived, and who had continued to get older after he died. The name Methuselah seemed like a good fit.

On the table, Methuselah cavorted like a marionette, his long limbs snapping out this way and that, his face pulled into a horrified grimace. More like a seizure than a dance. Martin thought he'd been looking worse lately, the skin pulled back even more from the mouth and eye sockets, globbing in bigger heaps near his ears. It was as if the pressure in the wind tunnel had been slowly increasing. Five days ago, he'd started this repulsive dance. Martin drank his whiskey and tried not to look.

There was a scratching and a chittering from behind his fridge. Still nothing in the mousetrap. Martin noticed the cheese, an orange corner torn from a slice of American, was looking dry. He would change it tomorrow. Maybe after the six or seven mice he'd already caught, they were getting more cautious. There had to be a whole colony of them

back there, with all the noise they made. Maybe the word had spread to lay off the cheese.

He finished his whiskey and turned off the kitchen light, leaving Methuselah dancing in the dark. If he was lucky, he'd get four hours of sleep.

The next evening, Martin was awakened from a nap by his telephone ringing. He fumbled on his bedside table for the shot glass, and only when he found it empty did he realize what had jarred him from sleep. He sat up in bed and reached for the phone. An unknown number on the caller ID.

“Hello?”

“Mr. Bishop?” The voice sounded familiar.

“Yes.”

“This is Larry Barthouse, from Barthouse Bail Bonds. We met last night.”

“Oh. Hello.”

“Hello. We have a problem, Mr. Bishop.”

“We do?”

“We do. Do you have any idea what our problem might be?”

“No, not off the top of my –”

“Your check bounced, Mr. Bishop. This is a problem for both of us. Signing that contract made you an indemnitor on the bond. Do you know what that is? It's a big word.”

Martin's mouth was dry and tasted like rust. His voice in the phone was scratchy.

“Look, I can get you half of it now and the other half in two weeks.”

“It doesn’t work that way, I’m afraid, Mr. Bishop. We’ll need the full amount now. Plus, there will be additional fees and penalties. Did you read your contract?”

“I don’t have the money right now.”

“Borrow it, steal it, grow it on a tree – do whatever you have to do. Money’s not hard to come by. You don’t want your daughter to go back to jail, do you?”

“You can’t do that.”

“Something tells me you’re not an expert on the legalities of the situation, here, Mr. Bishop.” The man sniffed loudly into the phone. “Our address is on your contract. Have the money to us by tomorrow.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“We know where you work, Mr. Bishop. We know where you live. And where your daughter lives, too.”

Martin hung up. He lay back in bed. Then he sat up again and grabbed the phone and dialed Becca’s cell phone number, which he’d saved from his caller ID. The phone rang. He pictured the word “Dad” flashing on her cell phone screen. After seven rings, the line routed him to a voice mail box.

“Becca?” he said after the beep. “This is your dad. I really need to talk to you, so give me a call when you get this.”

He set the phone down and lay back again. He saw that it was after nine o’clock and realized he’d been napping for more than two hours. Through his open bedroom door he could see into the kitchen, where Methuselah flailed around on the table.

“Would you knock it off, for Christ’s sake?” Martin yelled. He grabbed the empty shot glass from his bedside table and hurled it through the doorway at Methuselah. It

missed by a good four feet, hit the plaster wall behind him with a clunk, then dropped to the linoleum floor and rolled. The ghost paused and turned toward Martin. Then he resumed his dance, slower now, provocative almost, grinning his hideous grin. Martin covered his face with his arm and squeezed his eyes closed. He imagined the creases between his eyes hardening into place with the effort it took to keep them shut.

Martin couldn't come up with the money. He asked his boss at work, who had eyed him suspiciously and told him he couldn't get that kind of money at such short notice. He'd tried to call Tira, but she didn't pick up. She probably had caller ID, he thought. After that, he took his phone off the hook.

That night, shortly after one o'clock, Martin heard a snap and a squeal. He got out of bed and turned on the kitchen light. In the trap, a small brown mouse convulsed, its head pinned to the wood, limbs twitching. It had given just one squeal and was now silent except for the sound of its paws scratching at the wood. Martin stood over it and watched it die. He thought of its little heart beating slower and slower as its thrashing became weaker, and he wanted to vomit. I've spent my whole life trying to crush defenseless creatures, he thought. He stood there for more than a minute until it was all over, and when he went back to bed he couldn't sleep.

The next day, Martin came home from work and took the whiskey bottle into his bedroom and didn't come out until the sun had set. He left his apartment building and walked three blocks to a phone booth outside a 7-11. He got out a piece of paper with Becca's cell phone number on it and dialed. She picked up after two rings.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Becca.”

“Martin? Is that you? Where are you calling from?” Martin could hear a man’s voice in the background.

“Becca? I need to talk to you. I’ve been thinking.”

“Hold on. Just hold on a second.” The sound became muffled. There were two, maybe three voices in the background, but Martin couldn’t make out anything distinct. Eventually, Becca came back on the line. It sounded like she was alone.

“Okay. Shit. What do you want?”

“I have to tell you something.”

“Now’s really not a good time.”

“Becca, please. Please, please, please. Just give me five minutes.” He leaned against the wall of the phone booth and pressed his mouth against the black plastic receiver.

“You’re really drunk, aren’t you? All right, what is it?”

“When you were three, we took you camping. Your mother and me. We took you camping.”

“Jesus. What’s this all about? I’ll call you back tomorrow when you’re not drunk, okay? I’ve got to go.”

“No! Listen to me! Listen to me. We took you camping. We stayed for two nights. The first night was so clear and cloudless that we didn’t even need flashlights when we went to bed. We could see every star in the sky. The dust of the Milky Way. Everything. The moon was almost full. Lights shining down on us from everywhere.”

“How romantic.”

“Wait. Wait. But the next night the moon and the stars wouldn’t shine, Becca. There were no clouds all day, but the sun went down and the sky turned to red and to purple and then to just the blackest black you could ever imagine. There was not a single speck of light in the sky. Not an airplane, not a satellite. Nothing.”

Becca sighed into the phone but didn’t say anything.

“We set the lantern in the middle of the table, but it couldn’t shine right for some reason. It wasn’t giving off enough light. We could barely see each other’s faces across the table. You sat on your mother’s lap and kept grabbing at her hair. She batted your hands away and just stared at me across the table. None of us said anything. It was completely silent. But then a dog started to howl.”

“I don’t remember any of this,” Becca said, but the cold edge had left her voice.

“A dog started to howl. Maybe it was a wolf or a coyote. I don’t know. Just a terrible, chilling sound. And after that it was madness. Every dog and bird and frog in the forest, every hissing, buzzing, grunting creature, everything that could possibly make a noise made a noise. It chilled me to the bone, Becca, and when I looked over to your mother, her eyes were dead. Lifeless. You were pulling on her hair, but she just sat there staring at me.”

“Mom never said anything about this. Are you making this up?” She sounded concerned, a little scared. She’s listening, at least, Martin thought. He pushed on.

“And then you stopped pulling her hair and looked up in the sky. There was something wrong with you. You started to twitch. Little convulsions ran through your body, and then foam started to come from your mouth. You were having a seizure right

there on your mother's lap, but her arms just hung at her sides. It had never happened before. That was the first time. I ran around the table and grabbed you. I held you, your little shaking body, in the middle of all that terrible noise. I held your little body and rocked you in my arms, and eventually you stopped foaming and convulsing and went to sleep. How anyone could have slept through that I don't know, but you did. Becca?"

"I'm still here." He could barely hear her.

"I wanted to let you know. I did such a good job that night. I was planning on being a good man. I really was."

"Okay, you're kind of scaring me. I really can't have this in my life right now. I'll call you later. Maybe we can talk more, I don't know. But go get some sleep, okay?"

"Okay. Okay, I will."

"Goodnight, Dad."

Back in his apartment, Martin searched for Methuselah. His stomach hurt. "Come on out, you ugly son of a bitch. I know you're here somewhere." But Methuselah didn't appear. It was eleven o'clock. The garbage man would be coming in six and a half hours.

Martin poured a shot of whiskey and thought about the dead mouse, still there on the kitchen floor, its heart as small as the puff of cotton on the end of a Q-tip. You could pinch it between your fingers and hold it up to the light. And that horse's heart, so solid and strong, pumping below Becca as she rode away. A great hiccupping motor inside that huge animal.

And your heart, he thought. What does your heart look like? He put his hand over his chest and felt it beat. How have you treated the people you've loved? It must be a

jagged and hissing thing, and running out of beats. He felt it jabbing at his ribcage like a dying crab.

He took the shot of whiskey into his bedroom. He fell asleep easily.

The doorbell woke him at twelve-thirty. Who could it be this late? He climbed out of bed and turned on the light.

Methuselah was clawing at the outside of the bedroom window, scratching at the glass with long, pale fingers as he tried to get in. Martin had never seen him outside before. The ghost's horrorstruck eyes screamed at Martin through the glass, his curdled skin almost dripping from the sides of his face. He pawed at the window with quick, useless movements.

The doorbell rang again.

It was his daughter, Martin thought. He was sure of it as he staggered out of bed, his heart pounding wildly, the snake beginning to coil around it once more. Becca was standing in the hallway, hands shoved in her pockets, slowly rocking back and forth. He would open the door and bring her inside and wipe the tears from her face. They would say the things they needed to say to each other, the things that had been waiting to be said for so long. She had come to tell him that she was going to be okay, that he was going to be okay. She had come to forgive him, at last.