

Honest Work

Todd Daniel Crawford

Act I.

Third Person

The students are sitting in silence. What chatter does slip through the cracks of the walls they've built up is awkward and hushed. The last of them float in, hesitating before resigning to a seat as though they would be signing a lease on it. Zippers on backpacks buzz and papers ruffle. Someone's lips smack as they gnaw on the insides of their lips. If someone's pen drops, it would sound like a bomb. Fortunately, no one is so bold. Such an outburst could surely cast one aside as a pariah for the semester, possibly their entire college career. They'll have to drop out or transfer to another school. The class inhales and exhales in a poly-rhythm. Was someone cracking joints or snapping pencils in half? One final man, bald and bespectacled closes the door behind him. It might as well be a gunshot. It pronounces the birth of a new era.

"Hey," he says, dropping a thick folder on the front desk with a thud. "I'm the person listed as Wesley Thompson at the top of the syllabus I'll be handing out later, but unless you wanna be a suck-up, you can call me Wes. I graduated from here with a Masters of the Fine Arts. I've written as many books as I have fingers, mostly thinly-veiled autobiographies, and this is my first semester teaching, so this will be a learning

experience for all of us. You'll be my guinea pigs. More importantly than anything I've done in the past, is that I can taste how my breath still smells like onions from the salad I ate before coming in here, so if you want to talk to me after class, keep a safe distance.

“It doesn't matter who I am or what I have or haven't accomplished in the past. I'm the guy in the front of the room but I'm not the headliner, here. You're the stars of this show. I'm just the coach. So, real quick, can anybody tell me what they hope to get from this course?”

No takers.

“No? You signed up for it, right? O.K., first person to speak gets five bonus points?” He lifts his hand as though they are in his palm for the class to see. “Yeah, you.”

“To have a better understanding of literature?”

“Uhh.” He shrugs. “Sure. More importantly, though, you're here to learn how to communicate with the world. Every class you take in your life is going to promise something about wanting you to think critically and blah-blah-blah. Well, I actually mean it. I want to train you how to read between the lines. Are you even going to land a job by knowing your Henries from your Falstaffs? No. But what you can get from this class are the tools to be a more compelling speaker. They say

that people who read are more sensitive or know more about the world than other people. Only the good readers. I don't want to tell you how to read books; I want to show you how to read the world.

“This is a hundred level class, so I'm hoping most of you are smart enough to be taking this as an elective. If not, get out while you still can. If any of you are absolutely married to the idea of getting your B.A., feel free to come cry about it in my office. I keep a box of tissues on my desk. A famous writer's son once told him, ‘I've decided that I want to be a writer just like you.’ His reply, ‘*Welcome to Hell.*’”

Ione sits up from the wooden rocking chair in the corner of Mattie's bedroom. She treads lightly across the throw rug to avoid any protests from the floorboards beneath it. She can see her in the darkness just well enough to know that she's asleep. An image of a vampire sucking the blood of a sleeping damsel invades her mind as she leans in to plant a soft kiss on her cheek. Mattie hums softly and squirms but settles back into her slumber. Ione shuts the door behind her with a death grip on the knob as she turns it to ease into position rather than springing back in place with an uncontrolled push.

She lets out a sigh of relief as she walks down the hall

to the living room, bending down to snag a box of matches from the coffee table without missing a beat. All she can hear is an orchestra of crickets. The head of a match dragging across the brittle strip of the matchbox gives way to the sizzle of a tiny flame. She takes it to the dining room table, where she lights a white candle. The match lasts long enough to light another on a counter right beside the entrance. "Fuck!" She breathes as its flame climbs up to the tip of her fingers. She shakes it out of its brief existence. The room is now cast in a soft sepia.

lone heads back towards the bedroom at the far end of the hallway and takes the box of matches with her. She starts collecting all the laundry on the floor, underwear sweat through in the heat of the night earlier and the clothes that came off before them, into a ball that she drops into a laundry basket. She'll run that through the wash first thing in the morning, she promises herself. *For real, this time*, she adds, noticing that sleeves are now reaching out past the brim of the basket like tentacles from a cauldron. She walks the length of the bed to a dresser, opens the second drawer, and pulls out a red tanktop, then, the third drawer, to retrieve some shorts. She strips down out of the clothes the day has soiled. The shirt peels off of her, sticking around her pits. She tries not to notice

the pinched rolls as she encourages her shorts to slide down to her ankles before kicking them off into the basket. She looks at the tattoos on her shoulders, blue butterflies on the left, purple on the right, where she anticipates Brendan's lips, then down to her forearms. One sleeve is complete already. She hopes to have it matched soon, if she ever finds the time. She steps into her fresh shorts and pulls them up. She lights a candle on the nightstand and leaves with the door open.

Then, soon as she gets to the end of the hall, her belly grumbles. She wants to think it can wait, but a pressure moving down towards her cheeks doesn't seem so patient. She turns around, flicking the light switch on to the bathroom and slides her shorts back down like they were on fire without bothering to close the door. As she erupts into the toilet, she grips the marble sink with one hand and the lip of the bathtub with another. A gray film has developed over the bathroom tiles, she notices. A stray nail litter is also littering its surface, right beside her left foot. She reaches for the toilet paper but feels the cardboard roll, and lets out a sigh as she peels herself off the toilet. She remains hunched over with her behind as close to the seat as possible while she opens the cabinet below the sinks, as though a stray dropping might fall out of her at any moment. She reaches towards the bag of rolls but her

hand can't seem to find its entrance. She scours its surface, more impatient by the second, until she's tearing at it with her fingers. As a new hole is torn in the bag, her right hand flies into the side of the cabinet. "Dammit!" she says, not so quietly, this time.

A cry erupts from Mattie's room. "Mom! *Mom!*" as though there was a rattlesnake at the foot of her bed.

"I'm coming, honey!" lone shouts, plopping back down onto the toilet. She unwinds the toilet paper from the roll and scrubs between her legs with as many sheets as it takes until she no longer sees brown but red. She can't help but notice how large her thighs look pressed against the toilet seat. She takes one last sheet and reaches down for that clear crescent on the floor but she can no longer find it. She moves her feet but still, it's nowhere to be seen. Slowly, as though it might jump out at her, she lifts her left foot. "Of course," she says, reaching forth with the paper in hand to collect the nail from the pad of her foot.

By now, the commotion has evolved into a "Mommy! Mommy!"

"Just one second, sweetie!" lone calls out before flushing the toilet with her big right toe. She starts the sink, lathers her hands, and then puts them under. She recoils like

they were bitten. Hot, way too hot. She adjusts the temperature, rinses them, and then lathers them up again. She wipes her hands dry after and heads back to Mattie's room.

“What's wrong, honey?” She coos.

“Owie,” Mattie says, reaching down to pinch her right foot.

“Let's see...” Ione says, picking the foot up, herself. She inspects it. She wiggles all of the toes, starting with the pinkie. “Looks like nothing's broken.” Mattie looks up at her as though expecting amputation to be prescribed. “Can you feel this?” She tickles the sole. Mattie giggles. “Looks like everything's O.K. Think you might've just kicked the gate in your sleep.”

“Billy?” Mattie says.

“You want Billy?” Mattie nods. “What about Bonnie? She's not good enough for you?” Mattie shakes her head. Ione looks back to the toybox but finds the green hat on the floor. She considers putting him back in his cage to teach a lesson about picking up after playtime but then remembers that it's nine forty at night. She scoops him up and places him next to his bride in Mattie's bed. “There ya go, the gang's back together.” Mattie reaches for him and gives him a big squeeze before yawning. “You all set, hon?” Mattie nods, her eyes still closed. She curls into a fetal position, wrapping around Billy

Bear. Ione leans back in for one more kiss goodnight and closes the door behind her.

She walks past the dining room table and parts the curtains to look out to the yard. No headlights but she did notice her fingers crossed for them. She retreats back to the bedroom and shuts the door behind her. She lays down on her back, squirming out of her shorts. Her eyes close as she tries to envision Brendan kissing up her shoulders to her neck before her lips. She feels smooth to her fingers, just shaved this morning. By the time she feels wet enough to slide a finger in, she realizes that she isn't picturing anything at all, but getting off to the act of masturbation itself rather than any porno in her head. She considers reaching for the dildo in the nightstand next to her but this is just a pregame. Something to tide her over. She bites her lip and hears herself begin to moan. Her toes knead and her knees lock in and out as she grinds her butt into the mattress. She hears her inner coach demanding she cut herself off as an orgasm begins bubbling to the surface. She knows she should but she's waited all day. She can't wait another moment until *release*. Her penetrating fingers become more rapid as she crescendoes, gripping the side of the mattress with her free hand. She holds her breath and slowly comes back into her body, circling her lips gently

with fingertips. She wipes the fingers on the comforter and sits up to slide her shorts back on. She blows the candle out before going back to the living room.

She sits at the dining room table with a hand pressed to her temple and the other flicking through her news feed until the curtains begin glowing. The engine's roar dies down and it feels like five minutes of total silence before a door opens. The stairs creak slowly as though the man entering the porch was returning from a 5K run. Finally, the front door opens.

lone can see Brendan's scalp through his thinning hairline. He smiles when he notices her. "Hey, what's up?" His chin has softened, his cheekbones no longer there to define his face. In his right hand was a case of beer.

"Did you get the milk?"

"The wha—?" He set the box on the counter next to the candle and was already fidgeting with the side, trying to tear it open.

"Babe, *the milk*. I texted you!" She stood up and started towards him.

"Shit," he spat. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I totally forgot."

"Did you get gas?" She was now inches from him, looking him in the eyes. On one hand, she wanted to punch him, but on the other, it was his touch she was craving.

“No,” his eyes rolled up towards the ceiling. “O.K., yes, but it didn't even cross my mind. What can I say? It was a long day; I got distracted.” He tore the flap open and cracked the first can open.

She shook her head. “It's no big deal. Just please, please—” The can was already moving towards his lips and tilting back. “I want to kiss you before you taste like booze for once.” He stretches his head out and gives her a quick peck on the lips and then tosses the beer back. He crushes it in his hand once it's been killed and lets out a belch. “Nice, that's real nice.”

“What?”

“What? What are you? A child?”

“I had a long day.” She hears her voice getting soft.

“Every day is a long day, anymore, Brendan.”

“I just want one beer to take the edge off. The rest of this is going in the fridge, right now.”

“It's cool. Have as many as you want. I'm going to bed.” She spins on her heels towards the hall.

“Why? Baby, no.” His voice is high, almost shrill. “Baby, I wanna see you. I waited all day to come home and talk to you.”

“Was there something you needed to talk about?” She

looks back at him.

“Nothing specific. I just wanted to see you.”

“You'll see me in the morning.” *It's been a long day for me, too*, she thinks.

Maggie drops a fork back into the sink as the door swings open and smacks the wall with a thud.

“Scare ya?” Wes says, stepping in with paper bags of groceries under each hand. “Or is that just the recognition of who you're sleeping with finally settling in?”

Maggie shakes her head. “No, I just kind of like that wall the way it is, you know, without holes.”

“So...you're not mad?” He places the bags on the counter to Maggie's left and positions himself behind her.

She purses her lips. “Mildly irritated but I'll forget about it before dinner,” she says as his hands begin massaging her shoulders.

“Oh? I think I can make you forget sooner than that,” he says, kissing her neck. She flings the suds from her hands.

“Forget about what?” She turns from the window before her to look into his eyes and his hands move up to her neck before they kiss. “What is that?”

“What is what?”

“Are you chewing gum?”

Wes cups his hand over his face and breathes into it, inhales, and then says, “Oh, *that*. The kids smoked me up, let me try an e-cig. Cotton candy. Pretty neat, huh?”

“Aren't they a little young to be hanging out with an old man like you?”

“I'm really immature for my age.”

“I live with a child,” she sighed, smiling.

“Speaking of which, what were you thinking for this weekend?”

“I got nothin'. What? Did you have something in mind?”

Wes grinned. “Yeah, well, I picked up *The Little Prince* because I found a copy on campus, but I also torrented *Phantasm*, and was thinking we could spend the day in. We could, you know, show the kid some culture?”

“Yeah,” she nodded. “Keep it up and at this rate, she'll be on Bergman by four.”

“Oh, no,” Wes said, pulling away from her. “At that rate, you'll know we failed as parents. I'm shooting for Tarkovsky by that time.” He pulls a carton of milk out of the bag closest to Maggie. “Better chill this out before it turns to cheese,” he announces, starting towards the fridge.

“I don't think that's how that works, Wes.”

He turns back to her, opening the door. “Uhh, I don't think you know how it works, because if you did, you'd know that's it.”

“How about instead of watching movies about mortuary aliens this weekend, we find a good documentary about cheese? Could be informative for you both.”

“Did I say *Phantasm*?” Wes shuts the door and begins emptying the paper bags. “Because I meant *Fantasia*. I would never torrent *Phantasm* for my daughter...I already own it on Blu-ray.”

“Wes,” Maggie grabs Wes' forearm. “Did you remember the rice?”

“Yes, of course I...You didn't ask for rice, *did you?*”

“Oh my God! You don't know!” She exclaims.

“What? Sure I did! I just might not have grabbed it today is all. I did grab it—tomorrow. I'm so confident that I'm going to get that done that I'm already speaking about it in the past tense.”

“So, you didn't get the rice?”

He looks down at the counter. “No.”

“Good. We don't need any.”

Wes chuckles. “You're a bully, you know that?”

“Oh, yeah? And what are you gonna do about it?” She

turns towards him, rubbing his arms up and down. "You gonna keep me after class Mr. TA? I bet all your students are checking you out up there."

"Can you blame them? I have the body of Adonis...an off-season Adonis." His hands find his way to her hips, spinning her around.

"Guess that means I'll have to step it up around here."

"Guess so." He picks her up and sets her on the counter, massaging her thighs. She kisses him; he kisses her back.

Brendan is massaging the wiry hairs along the path his jawline was once carved. His eyes are tracing over the outline of a running stallion, following the waved lines of its mane, loose in the wind. He inspects the cross-hatching that implies the shadow of the horse's belly. The work is rudimentary. He considers it only the first stepping stone on the journey that has gotten him to where he is standing today, but is transfixed by it nonetheless. Like the white page the horse is running upon, Brendan seems to exist here upon a plane of negative space. His meditation carries him upstream towards his past. Stripped of its context, the horse appears free to him, perhaps a consequence of the amateurish naivety of its author, but

with eyes trained by experience, Brendan sees his former muses with whores' exhaustion. When he used to go to the tracks with his father, at an age where he had held a gun but not yet a girl, they seemed so *alive*. Like a dancer upon the stage, the horses had achieved a recognition that so many desired. There was an elegance to them, majestic like a celebrity and humbled with ignorance of their status. They did not know the crowds hanging on their every step. The only thing they saw were the roads ahead. The fact that the horses that inspired him to draw this in the seventh grade are long dead breathes down his neck. How many were taken by the night to be found the next morning? How many of their lives ended with a gunshot?

Every time Brendan finds himself in this position, he feels the static the drawing once gave him. He worked on this picture for an entire history class when he should have been taking notes. It wasn't his first mental vacation but it was the first time he felt anything more profound than distraction. It started mindlessly but he soon found curiosity in the shape his hand was birthing. He was captivated by the development. He couldn't see the edges of the page, let alone the chalkboard ahead of him. The monotone of Mr. Wilhelm was drowned out by the thunder of its hooves. The romance crescendoed and

left him in a state of ecstasy. The boy felt like he had a brush with God.

A soft voice tickled the rim of his ear as the words, *This is it*, poured into him. That was the moment he knew, the only thing he could ever be certain of. This was his purpose, and he bet his life on it. Standing there, nearly twenty years later, he couldn't tell if it was a sign from above or merely the totem of a false idol. All his chips on the table never left his sight as he estimated the sorry lot of cards in his hand. In fact, he could see the chips so clearly that the cards themselves had started to appear faceless to him, more like blank canvases than blueprints.

His teeth clash as something collides with the back of his head and falls to the ground with a soft thud. It felt like foam but its unexpected arrival gave it the power of a cannonball to Brendan's train of thought. He spins around, eyes darting between his apprentices to see who dared ripple the waters upon which he was gazing. He scans the prime suspect, Arthur, from his bereted head to his black converse shoes. He's wearing a shit-eating grin but that's his standard expression. Brendan's eyes drift toward Amy, behind the glass counter exhibiting all the piercings. She is covering her mouth, giggles spilling out from between her fingers. Brendan feels his

own face relaxing and his sneer melting into a smile. His cheeks flush with chagrin that his initial reaction was so aggressive.

“Don't you dorks have something better to do than play catch?” he says, bending over to scoop the foam pink and blue football up from the hard wood floor. He winds his arm back and launches it towards Amy, who catches in with both hands.

“No,” she says, tossing the ball to Arthur before inspecting her black nails for cracks. Brendan notices a new piercing in the crest of her ear.

“Don't you have something better to do than stare at your old doodles like you're at the Wailing Wall?” Arthur says, shooting the ball back to Brendan.

“In fact, I do. I'm bonding with my coworkers.” He throws the ball to Amy.

“Plus, you're the one who said it's good to have a fun atmosphere. You said, 'we'll look inviting to window-shoppers' that way.” She overshoots to Arthur, who stumbles backwards to catch the ball. He passes to Brendan.

“Yeah, and that was a great idea on my part. The way business has been lately, this place is starting to feel more like a daycare than a tattoo shop.” He looks at Arthur, aiming the ball his direction as he draws his arm back. At the last minute,

he throws the ball at Amy.

She catches it easily.

“Damn! I thought I had you, there.”

“Nope!” Amy shook her head back and forth. “I could see you looking at me outta the corner of your eye.”

“So, how would you rate your first week?” Dr. Kasey says, pouring a ladle full of soup into her bowl with the caution of a science experiment. The food court is alive with the slapping of shoes against floor and chatter. Without direction, one's attention could easily get lost in the chorus. Wes strains to hone in on her voice.

“It's been fun,” Wes replies. It takes all his restraint not to grab the ladle out of her hand and pour it straight down his throat. Instead, he reaches for a starts pinching lettuce and dropping it onto his plate. “It's exhausting—in ways I didn't expect—but I've been enjoying it. It's almost like I get in front of the class and black out. Without student participation, I don't think I'd have any clue if I was even speaking English.”

Dr. Kasey nods. “You'll find yourself on autopilot before long,” she assures him. “You have energy, which keeps the students awake. Starting the day with you is like a shot of espresso. The students seem to be enjoying the performance

aspect of your lectures but you should consider reeling it back some.”

“What do you mean?” He sifts through the croutons with a spoon until there are exactly five before adding them to his salad.

“Well, for starters, you're representing the school as an instructor, now. It's expected that you revere the institution.”

“How so?”

“These students have a lot invested in this program, Wesley. You were sitting in one of those chairs, yourself, not too long ago at all. You know that. As leaders, we need to be filling them with hope, not depressing them. It's our job to inspire creativity. You seem more intent on snuffing it out. You've got energy but it's all negative. You need to redirect that into positivity. Our place is to be building the students up, not tearing them down.”

Wes looks down to notice that if he pours any more fat free Italian dressing onto the project in his left hand, he'll be eating an impromptu soup of his own. He shrugs. “I just don't want to give them any false promises. We can't just line them up for the slaughter, come graduation day. I mean, of all these English B.A.s, how many will go on to write so much as a blog in ten years? How many will even continue to read a book a

year? If we can dissuade those without conviction, not only will the classes be better, but so will those students' lives after they graduate. 'If you can do anything else but write, do that.' I think Bukowski said that. It's Buffalo Theory."

"Listen." Her voice lowered to a deep whisper. "You weren't the only applicant for this position. There were plenty of students, very promising scholars, who wanted this job just like you did. You were not the obvious choice but I took a risk on you. I did that because I believe in you, Wes. You're rough around the edges but you've got passion. Potential alone can be fleeting if you don't put the work in to develop it. You're a student, yourself. Let me teach you so that someday you can have a class of your own. I can make that happen for you. I'm not asking you to get up there in front of the class and lie or solicit anything. I just need you to follow my instructions so that someday, your daughter can say that her dad is a teacher. Think about this, would you want to be anywhere else in life than where you are right now?"

"You're right," Wes says softly. "I'm grateful for this opportunity and I'm gonna make sure you won't regret giving it to me. I take this position seriously and am gonna work on my act."

She puts a hand on his shoulder. "You'll make it. I'm

gonna get you, there.”

Wes raps on the doorframe as students file out. They swerve and eyeball him like he was wearing a ski-mask. Once the last of them is gone, he slides in.

“Aaron Texter’s English class, as I live and breed,” he announces.

Aaron stops shuffling the papers on his desk to look up with a smile. “Wes Thompson!” He stands up and walks over to shake Wes’ hand. “I’m actually not going by my middle name anymore.”

“Really, now?” Wes says, shaking his hand one pump too long. His name isn’t the only difference about him. He’s put on a few pounds. His face is looking kind of pudgy. His blonde hair is looking a little thin towards the top. “I definitely know what that is but it’d be nice if I heard you say it, yourself.”

“Martin,” he says, releasing Wes’ palm.

“Marty it is!” He could tell by the look on his face that this was *not* an ideal moniker. “Hey, man, you picked your poison.”

“Wow, I’m just in shock. I haven’t seen you since—since the five year reunion.”

“*Oh, boy.* Wish you hadn’t. That night was a bit of a

blur. Bit of a wake-up call. Looking at five years' sober, though, so, I'll be ready for the ten year."

"Good for you, man. Good for you." He dips both hands into his pockets. "So, anyhow, how're you liking it?" He leans back onto the desk.

Wes exhales sharply, nodding. "It's different, seeing the class from the other side. Feel like I sold my fellow slackers out."

"It's a new job. When isn't it a little weird at first?" He pats Wes on the shoulder. "Insider's tip, you gotta watch your sleeves near the chalkboard."

Wes lifts his arms to inspect the damage.

"Wes Thompson," he says under his breath, maybe to himself. "What are the odds two book nerds like us'd wind up teaching at the same school?"

"Well, don't get too excited. I'm just a TA. Took a few years off to find myself. Problem was, I found myself working in a grocery store, so, here I am."

"Aww, you're better off for waitin'. I wish I had the maturity when I was in school that I have now. Too many distractions when you're young."

"Speak for yourself, Texter. Some of us are still young at heart. Plus, I'm plenty distracted, as it is, trying to play dad."

“No way. Wes, that's great.”

Wes opens his phone up and taps its surface a few times before passing it to Martin.

“She's adorable.”

“That's 'cause she takes after her mother.”

“Congrats, man.”

“On that note, I'm gonna have to go back home and spend some time with her. Gotta make sure she doesn't learn any bad words. Had to wash her mouth out with soap for the first time last week when I heard her say, 'Coldplay.'”

“We'll have to go out some time, get drinks. Wait, I'm sorry. Forgot already.”

“Water is still a drink. It's *the* drink, actually. Let's make it happen.”

Ione is sweeping locks of blonde hair into a pile as Ronnie blathers on about his latest sexcapade. She is trying to focus on collecting the ribbons into an adequate nest, nodding politely as he gives testimony to the revelation of having two men inside of him at once. “I'm not saying you need the coke to enjoy it, but hon, you have never had a threeway until you've fueled one with coke.” *Kssh*. She feels some of the mist tickle her forearm as he sprays the patron. This was it.

She has to say something. If not for her own sanity, so that they don't both get reported. She had been trying to distance herself from the topic by neglecting to contribute to it any verbal capacity, but the feeling of guilt by association has now begun creeping in. They can't both lose their jobs over his indiscretions. She casts a glance his way as she begins formulating what she's about to say. *Is this really the kind of thing to be discussing at work?* No, she'd come off prudish. She already gets nagged enough about that. *Not in front of a customer?*

"He's not kidding," the patron, a girl with a red undercut and bangs remarks. *Well, there goes that.* lone sighs.

Saved by the bell. They all rubberneck and raise their voices an octave to greet the newcomer.

"Sam!" Ronnie exclaims. "How you been?"

"Livin' the dream," Sam replies with a gravelly voice. lone studies her carpenter jeans and gray sleeveless shirt. She wonders if Brendan provided her with the tribal tattoo on her shoulder or the septum piercing. She walks right up to them as though she was expected.

"I'm still wrapping up with Liv, here. You mind if lone fixes you up?"

"So long as the scissors cut." lone notices her voice just

quivering, just so slightly.

“Hon, once lone's through with you, you'll wonder why you ever let me touch your hair.” lone steps aside so Sam can get into the seat. Ronnie slaps Sam's ass on the way there.

“So, what'll it be today?” lone says, spreading the apron over Sam's torso.

She makes a motion across the top of her head and a buzzing noise.

“Takin' the next step, huh, kid?” Ronnie says, snipping an inch off a swath of Liv's locks.

“One foot in front of the other,” Sam replies, inspecting the topography of the apron.

“I'm proud of ya, a little shocked you didn't just do it yourself at home but we'll take all the business we can get. Isn't that right?” He was looking at lone.

“Umm, yeah, so long as you're sure that's what you want.”

Sam purses her black lips and nods. “If I try this at home, Dad won't let me shut the bathroom door 'till I'm eighteen.”

So, lone takes a comb out of the Barbicide jar and pulls Sam's shoulder-length auburn hair back into a pony tail, holding the end in her left hand. They make small talk as she

amputates the rope of hair, cutting it straight across the back of her neck to a boyish length. They discuss high school, her hobbies, family (*She's Ronnie's cousin.*), and the moment she knew she wasn't a girl. Well, there never was a moment where she knew, so much as a moment that she accepted it, is how Sam explains it to lone.

“I always knew, ever since you were a baby and didn't have any interest in Barbie dolls.” By this time, Liv has been out the door for some time. Ronnie is now reclining in the seat she was situated in.

“That's just because you're mad you wasted the ten dollars on them, you cheapskate,” Sam quips.

lone starts up the clippers and is soon hypnotized by its hum. She's always found something cathartic in its song, the meditation of one mowing the lawn. She sees an artistry in the way the hair sinks down to the floor, like droplets of paint spilling from the brush. Her thoughts migrate to Wes' sister and the gash her passing had inflicted upon him. She can see the image of Wes' deteriorated face projected upon the mirror before her; the mirror is fogged up and the face is obscured by her memory. She retraces the steps Wes took to pull himself together for his family, for their child. Just as easily as the Thompsons lost Matt, they could have lost Wes.

He used to swing by just to shoot the shit. She used to be tired of his voice. There were so many times he would accidentally slam a door and wake the baby, or keep Brendan up all night on the porch when lone just wanted him next to her in bed. These days, she hardly gets the time to arrest him for five minutes when they meet to pass the custodial baton.

lone notices that Sam's eyes are now closed. She sees her lip trembling and a tear is rolling down her cheek. She finds herself wishing a better future for the child beneath her, reminding her that this wasn't just a canvas to project her talents onto but a living person. She wishes she could do something, that an angel would whisper the right thing to say into her ear to let this young girl know that everything can be alright, but all she is left with radio silence.

“Well,” she announces. “If you want to take a look, I think we're done, here.” Slowly, as though knocked-out and regaining consciousness, she pries her eyes open. She either inhales audibly or snuffles, lone can't tell. Sam scans over her dome, grazing over the dark stippling of its surface. She says nothing. “How are you liking it?”

“It's perfect,” Sam says, softly. “Thank you.”

Wes allows his father to pass before him, touching the

pew in front of them as though it was the door of a car. Mattie is curled in the nook of his other elbow. He gets a whiff of his dad's cologne and realizes it's the same brand that he was given for Christmas this past year.

“Ladies first,” he says, but Maggie tells him she's going off to say hi to his mother. Maggie was in the bathroom when Wes greeted her in the entrance. So, Wes shimmies down the pew, stopping to shake hands and say how happy he was to see everyone in his path who could make it this Sunday and let them compliment Mattie on how precious she is. It was a scripted conversation but Wes realized in the passing weeks since he began reciting them that he meant the words he was saying. When this crosses his mind, it reminds him of the last book he wrote, quite possibly the last book he will ever write. It was a simple tale, about a method actor who is no longer able to separate himself psychologically from a character he is playing in his latest movie. The primary difference here being that this isn't a psychological collapse but a happy ending. This structure has become a safe haven to Wes, one he cannot lose himself inside the walls of. By the time he reaches his father, he feels like a celebrity that has just crossed the red carpet.

“Is it ever awkward for you?” he says as he sits down.

“What?”

Wes tilts his head to their right, towards his mother and her boyfriend. Next week, Wes would be on the right side of the church with them. This has become a new tradition for the families. Instead of the custody of the boys' childhood, Wes now spends the Sunday service with each parent every other week. It started with weekly visits just to check up on his dad after the passing of Matt. They would go out to eat, stay in and watch a movie, work on projects to improve their respective homes, anything to keep each other out of the bar. *(Sure enough, there were times early on when Wes would come over to find his father unable to stand upright.)* As the complexities of life multiplied and the hours of the week free of responsibility grew shorter, Wes developed this plan to kill two birds with one stone.

“Probably not any more than it is for her.”

“Mom said it doesn't matter to her because she doesn't care what you think about her.”

“For once, your mother and I are on the same page.”

They sit in silence for a beat. Wes inhales. Somehow, he feels at peace in a way that he cannot identify elsewhere. He's at ease in father's presence, as though nothing bad could happen with him here by his side. Most weekends, ones in which she wasn't out of state visiting family, his girlfriend, Sue would be

attending with them. Wes felt a little more rigid on those occasions, but she never really mattered anyways, so, she could only kill so much of the buzz. “You know what you want after this?”

Wes looks at his father. He sees that all the hairs on his face are now gray. His eyes look tired from carrying their bags. Wes wonders how he wound up being the only person in his family to need glasses. He feels protected next to his father but also somehow smaller, weak. He anticipated as a child reaching a stage in adulthood in which he could carry himself with the same confidence he saw in his father. If that moment ever comes, it hasn't yet. His father always knows what he has to say, whether it's the right thing to say or not seems irrelevant to him. Wes never sees his dad shy away from a conflict, from one between the two of them to a cashier who won't honor a sale. (*So what if the sale ended two days ago?*) If he notices his shortcomings at all, it's like he sees his flaws as contributing factors of his character rather than things to be ashamed of. His mistakes make him more interesting, the kinds of mishaps that wind up in stories to tell your child decades later. You want Don Thompson around, even when he's at his worst, because it won't be something to forget. Wes' shortcomings just make him easier to abandon, so he thought.

As a testimony to this, despite all the shit his father had put him through, here he was today, at his side. Wes glances down at his black pants and considers ripping the tail of his shirt out from under the belt's embrace. He can never tell if he looks more fashionably-challenged with it tucked-in or hanging out and he's too embarrassed to ask Maggie for advice. Did his father ever feel like a child who cannot dress himself in the sweaters he wears to church as he does in his button-ups. It didn't seem likely to Wes.

“Would you wanna come over to our place? We've got some steaks.”

His father nods. “Yeah, that sounds nice.”

“Congratulations,” Keith says with a laugh, slapping a hand on Brendan's shoulder. He hears the collar of his shirt lift as the palm is removed and flattens it back down.

“Thank you,” Brendan replies, nodding.

“Take it from me, son, you want to make the years of congrats last as long as they can before you start getting condolences on your anniversaries. That's what they call a grace period,” he says with a smile.

“Oh, Keith,” Mrs. Calito says, pushing his chest. “Don't listen to him, dear,” she says to Brendan, opening her arms for

an embrace. "We're so happy to have you in our family," she whispers in his ear as they hold each other.

"Thank you. I'm proud to be a part of it." He replies, releasing her.

"This is a nice gig, Brendan." Keith says. "Most people would try to get away from all the kooks for their anniversary."

"Well, Keith, Brendan wants *everyone* to be happy," Mrs. Calito says.

"A wedding isn't just between us," Brendan says. "It's about two families coming together. We're lucky to have two families that can get together like this. I don't know many people who can say that." He inhales deeply, surveying the land of the park. Kids are crawling all over the playground. There's a line-up of adults playing cornhole. He can smell the barbecue. They chose the perfect day to rent a pavilion. The sun is out; the breeze is gentle. This was a good decision. "Well, if you guys don't mind, I'm gonna go play host," he said, reaching a hand out towards Keith.

"Try to find your wife, while you're at it," Keith says, giving him a firm pump.

Brendan starts towards the playground, where he spots Mattie on the swingset. Wes is standing before her, leaning back as she swings up towards him as though he's about to be

kicked in the face each time while Maggie pushes her from behind. He can hear Mattie's giggles from all the way back with the Callitos.

“Mattie!” Brendan calls out.

“Hi, daddy!” She squeals amid a fit of giggles.

“You kicking your dad in the face?”

“No!” She laughs some more.

“Why not!?”

“I'm gonna try!” She kicks her both her feet like she's trying to dog paddle.

“Ow! Ow!” Wes yells, jumping back and holding his nose. “You got me!” He takes a few steps across the pine bark to greet Brendan at its rubber border. “Hey, man, thanks for the invite.”

“For sure. You guys deserve to be here; you're family.” Brendan steps over the onto the playground, approaching Mattie.

“Oh, and good job on the marriage. I'm happy for you guys.”

“Thanks, bro. That means a lot.”

“Mattie,” Brendan says in a falsetto. “There's my girl!”

“*Our girl,*” Wes corrects him.

“*Psshhh.* You know what I mean.” He reaches his hands

out and tickles Mattie as she swings towards him, provoking another eruption of laughter. “Maggie, you ready for a rematch at the cornhole?” He had found stiff competition in her at a cookout Brendan and lone hosted at their home this past summer.

“That depends. You ready to lose again?”

“Sure am, if by lose, you mean lose the shame of defeat.”

“You sure you two aren't biological brothers?”

“Oh, c'mon,” Wes spat. “You'd know if we were because Brendan would be much handsomer.”

“And Wes would know how to throw a spiral,” Brendan rebutted. Then, “Where did you find a Talking Heads shirt in size baby?”

“The internet has everything,” Wes replied.

“Everything.”

“Well, on that note, I'm gonna go look for lone before she finds herself a real man. I'll catch you losers in a bit.”

He feels his shoe grinding down into the pine bark as he spins on his heels back towards the pavilion. lone is sitting with his own parents at a picnic table. The sight is a gift.

“Son, we were just sharing embarrassing stories about you. Care to join in?”

“I think you guys have got this one covered,” Brendan replies, stepping over the bench and plopping down next to lone. “Thanks for saving them until we were legally bound.”

“Well, we didn't wanna scare her off,” his mother, Sue, chimed in.

“At this point, nothing surprises me,” lone says, scooting over on the bench to lean her head on Brendan's shoulder.

“What we were really discussing was how the son of a cop winds up running a tattoo salon,” Doug says.

“Oh,” Sue whines. “It's perfectly obvious how it happens. The pastor's children are always the wildest. That's just the natural.”

“Plus, Dad, don't act like you don't have any tats. What about that bird on your butt?”

The family laughs. lone tugs on Brendan's shoulder. “What?”

“When the kids were younger, we told them Doug had a tattoo of a bird—”

“A toucan,” Brendan adds.

“—on his behind.”

“Which I don't have,” Doug clarifies. “And am perfectly willing to prove.”

“That won't be necessary, Dad.”

“We told them this for years.”

“I believed it until I was in college, and you wonder why I have trust problems.”

A moment of silence.

“So, kids,” Doug says. “How does it feel to be have one year down?”

“It flew by,” Brendan says.

“It really did.” Lone confirms.

“Before you know it, it'll be thirty,” Sue, says.

“I'm just hoping by then, I can train him to put the seat down.”

“See, Doug, he does take after you.”

Wes doesn't notice how smoothly his car comes to a stop, the absence of squealing resistance from its brakes, how effortlessly the vehicle climbs from a stopping at the sign to twenty-five miles per hour. His eyes aren't magnetically drawn to his RPM gauge out of paranoia the transmission could fail on him at any moment. His eyes casually scan the street and immediate scenery for any idiot pedestrian, maniac driver, or hapless critter.

“It was nice of Brendan and Lone to give us the night

with Mattie," Maggie calls over the radio.

"Nice of them?" He reaches for the dial to turn the volume down, despite the buttons built into his steering wheel.

"We're the ones doing them the favor."

"Wes!" Maggie hisses.

"What I mean, Mattie, is that sometimes adult couples like to be lazy, because we're old. We just like to hug and sleep. You know how Tabby sleeps all the time?"

"Tabby is *always* sleepy!" Mattie responds enthusiastically.

"Right. So are some adults. Not Maggie and I; we're fun. Mommy and Daddy B are old, though, and sometimes they need to rest. Like how we have to charge our cell phones."

He turns the volume clockwise. "Mads, I forget who made this song. Can you tell me?"

"Vivet Undaground."

"That's right! You're so smart. I wish I was as smart as you. Do you know who sings it? Whose this girl's name?"

"Uuuummmm..."

"Is it Rico? No...Tico?" He catches Maggie leaning in and whispering something in Mattie's ear behind a wall of fingers.

"Aww, c'mon! No cheating!"

"Nico!" Mattie yells.

"She's not one of your students, Wes," Maggie says.

"Sure she is! She's my star pupil. Mads, whose your favorite teacher?"

"Daddy B!"

"*Heyyy*, that's not funny! You're hurting Daddy's feelings."

"Don't be sad! You're my *smelliest* teacher."

"Well, at least I'm the best at something."

"Speaking of lone," Maggie says. "What was that all about earlier?"

"Whaddya mean?"

"She wanted to talk to you about something. Everything cool?"

"Oh, *that*. That was nothing."

"Yeah?"

"She just, she used to write, and she wants to write a book, but wants me to help her with it. I dunno why."

"Well, that should be fun for you."

"Is that O.K.? You're not gonna be weird about this, since I'm so irresistible and all?"

"Not at all. I was just thinking."

"So, spit it out."

"I just thought maybe this could help you get writing

again.”

“Wouldn't hold my breath on that.” He checks her out in the rearview. Her cheeks are puffed out and she's pinching her nostrils. “Know what? You belong back there, in the silly seats. I'm starting to think I'm the only adult in this car, and *that's* scary.”

“Don't mind Daddy, honey. He's just a grump. Isn't he?”

“Yeah!” Mattie bursts out laughing.

“Then you two should be proud, because you make me feel like the happiest grump. So happy, I don't need stupid books. All I need is this right here.”

Brendan's hand rubs circles over Ione's hip as he kisses her shoulder. His hand first explores the skin beneath her tanktop and then burrows into her pajama bottoms. She can feel him pressing against her. He feels prickles across her thighs. She can feel his heavy breaths on her neck. He fishes his hand out to brush some hair aside and begins kissing up her neck and nibbling her ear. He slides the hand of the arm she is laying on down the top of her tanktop, fondling her breasts. Its opposite slides down the front of her pajama bottoms and into the pouch of her thong.

Ione turns her head towards him to kiss his lips. She

opens her mouth, flickering her tongue against his own. She picks her head up so he can retract his hands and rolls over to face him. He rolls her tanktop up and she raises her arms so he can slide it overhead. He tosses it into a laundry heap in the corner of the room. She pulls his cock out of his boxers and massages it in her hand. He wets her chest, one nipple at a time. She kisses and bites his shoulder. She pulls him close and feels him grinding against her. His hands move from her back down to slide her pajama bottoms off and then the thong. They both wind up in the trash heap.

“I love you,” he says, pressing his lips against hers. He slides her onto her back and straddles her.

“Love you, too.” She reaches over to the nightstand, straining to open the drawer.

“Ione, what if we made another baby tonight?” he says, twirling a finger through her hair.

“Let's use the condom.” She pinches a wrapper between her index and middle fingers, drawing it in.

“I'm serious, babe.”

“So am I.” She holds it out to him. “Not tonight.”

He sighs, and then snatches it out of her hand. He tears the wrapper open and retracts the condom. He thumbs it and pinches the tip before rolling it down his length. He uses the

pinching hand to direct himself into her but feels resistance. He pushes into her a little harder.

“Brendan, let's use some lube.”

“Yeah,” he says, stretching out to grab some from the drawer, still opened. He squirts some in his hand and lathers the latex up. This time, he goes right in.

He holds her hips as he pumps. He is looking at her but her eyes are closed. “Yesyesyes,” she repeats/chants with her hands on his ass. “Right there.” She bends up to kiss his chest.

He would never confess this but he can't feel a thing. The damn rubber is so numbing. He leans further down, nuzzling his head in the nook between her shoulder and neck. He feels her legs cross over him; she runs a hand through his hair. He grinds and pushes into her but nothing proves stimulating. He feels like his dick was shot full of Novocaine before they began.

Her legs lay back down on the mattress. He grabs her tighter, keeps thrusting. She is no silent. All Brendan hears is his own breath. He feels his heart racing from all the work but that is all. Eventually, he slows to a halt.

“You good?” he says, still inside her.

lone nods. “You?”

“Mhm,” he lies. He pulls out and unfurls the condom.

"I'm gonna go toss this." He hops off the bed.

"Just throw it in the trash bin by the bed."

"I, uhh, have to use the bathroom, too."

"Oh. Well, don't do that in here."

He pivots so his feet are on the ground and walks naked to the bathroom, where he strokes himself until he comes into the toilet bowl.

A daytime talk show plays in the background as Wes stares at the sheet of paper in his lap. The host is hyping up some movie up for an Oscar. The star of the film, who humbly began as a stand-up comic, is detailing his transition into drama. He's recounting his childhood and the coping mechanisms that he was able to monetize and later draw from as inspiration for this more tragic role. He's still able to pepper in enough gags to keep the audience laughing.

Wes always liked the idea of holding a clipboard. He never looked up to his gym coaches but there was a certain look to the baseball cap and clipboard combo that appealed to him as a student. Any time he was asked to use one, the situation felt awkward and made his handwriting look infantile. He feels the same way using the chalkboard in front of the class. Dr. Kasey's swooping letters have an elegance that

makes them look like Monet next to Wes' chicken scratch. The last time he used a clipboard was when he visited the eye doctor, nearly six months ago. That felt like nothing compared to the vision test he failed soon after. He strained to see the letters but it looked to him like someone they were obscured by clouds. The letters could have been Wingding for all he could tell. The memory brought his right index and middle fingers to push the glasses further up the bridge of his nose.

There was a simple rule Wes found himself following, to the point where he began to worry of confirmation bias. Any question asking if he had a symptom, ie: *Do you have periods of extreme highs and lows?* he replies yes. Every question prompting him to grade himself, such as *On a scale of one to ten what is your average mood?* he puts a mid-range answer. Anything that might flag him as a risk to himself and/or others, like, *Do you ever feel that life isn't worth living?* he puts an answer that seems the least concerning.

Maybe twenty minutes after he turns his paperwork in, he is greeted by a tan woman in a navy blue suit. He stands to shake her hand as she introduces herself as Kendra Glover. She's young, that's promising, that he won't feel like he has to confess something to a parent. She leads him back to her office, through a doorway and down two halls.

Wes looks around the office, nervously, as he climbs into a seat across from her desk. His eyes scale the spines of books on the shelf to his left. Names are printed on them that he has never heard of. The desk in front of him has a tiny sandbox with a miniature rake in it. There's also a stress ball. He wonders if that is for her or for him. He can imagine that he might have her crushing it if he doesn't mind his tongue. Depending on what he says, she might even whip it at him.

“So, what brings you here today?” she says, the first thing either of them has said since they seated themselves. That ten seconds felt like a year. The familiar anxiety of sitting in the hot seat of the principal's office reached out from the collar of his shirt to wrap its fingers around his throat. The therapist, Kendra, dresses professional but seems casual enough. He feels an urge to jump out of his seat, throw the door open behind him, and run for the exit without ever looking back before the taste of his own foot could enter his mouth.

“My girlfriend wants me to,” he says.

“Why is that?”

“Because I guess I cry in my sleep a lot.” His eyes are sweeping the carpet.

“Do you suffer from nightmares?”

He nods.

“Are the nightmares ever reoccurring? Would you say it's different dreams or repetition of the same dream?”

“Both, kind of. Sometimes it's the same thing but mostly, they're different.”

“Are they about anything in particular? Your job? A memory?”

“No,” he lies. “Different kinds of things, anxieties.”

“O.K.” She is writing something down on paper. He knows that by now, she's already studied the results of the questionnaire.

“That quiz I filled out earlier had me feeling like you were gonna tell me what Disney Princess I am when I came in.”

She looks up from the paper as though she doesn't understand.

“With all the symptoms. *Do you ever* this and *have you ever felt* that.”

“Well, do you want to know?”

“Know what?”

“Which princess you are.”

“Sure.”

“Mulan.”

As the students are exiting the class, single-file, one doesn't. The straggler waits patiently in her seat as her peers empty the room and only once only two or three remain, she starts packing up her belongings.

Approaching Wes' desk, where he is doodling inside a composition book to look busy in front of the students, she brushes a shock of brown hair back behind her ear. The hand that does so is trembling. Although she stands above Wes, behind his desk, he felt an unfamiliar power over her. Even though she is in a physical position to knock him in the jaw and he'd tumble to the floor, he had a feeling that he could throw up a "Boo!" with some jazz hands and she'd go running for the door, begging her classmates to wait up for her.

"What's up?" Wes says, glancing up at her in a way to mimic how he's seen bespectacled characters do in the movies.

"I, umm." Her eyes are glassy with tears that will be rolling down her cheeks any second, now. "Well, I don't really have any excuse. I don't know what happened but I didn't do the assignment for today and I wanted to apologize."

Wes shrugs. "Well, I'm sure you've got a lot going on."

"That's what's so frustrating," she says, wiping a tear

away before it could reach her upper lip. "I don't. I just spent the weekend binging TV shows without a care in the world. Somehow, it just slipped my mind. I feel like a total idiot."

"What were you watching?"

She seems taken aback by this. "*Forged by Fire.*"

"That's the new one, with Riley Jackson?"

She nods.

"How is it?"

"It's O.K."

"Just O.K. or good?"

"Just O.K."

"Alright," Wes says with resolution. "Here's what you're going to do."

She looks at him as though she is awaiting the hammering of a gavel.

"You're going to come to class five minutes early Wednesday and turn your paper in. I'm going to give you two options on how you'd like to handle this. You can either turn the essay in, according to the rubric you were given last week and get a B for tardiness. Or, you can write an additional page, saying what could have made that TV show better. That way, you weren't distracted; you were researching. Anything can be a learning experience, if you open your eyes to it. Worst thing

about being an artist is that you're never off the clock, right?"

"I'm actually just taking this class as an elective." She clears her throat. "My major is in law."

He nods. "Good for you. In that case, consider it a favor, from one idiot to another."

"Thank you. Thank you so much. I'm sorry for the theatrics, also. I just have higher expectations of myself and am really irritated I made such a simple mistake."

"Don't sweat it. Mistakes are all I make and look where they got me."

Rust has eaten through the body of Brendan's truck around the tires. Some patches are a deep burgundy, others bright orange. He's made it a weekly habit to go out with a bucket of soapy water and chemical for rust preventatives. He's scrubbed the spots with clay bars, sprayed them, tried converting the rust, but no matter what he does, the cancer cells blossom anew. He began to notice them on other cars he was passing by. He'd compare to see his progress. He wasn't just an orange stain like some any longer but the rust hasn't yet eaten holes in his truck, either. Of course, he could always invest in a new vehicle. He has the money set aside for a down payment and the monthly payments probably wouldn't amount

to more than the upkeep for the truck but there's a comfort in its familiarity. The truck isn't perfect but it's his and he intended to ride it until that fateful day it will be lain to rest in the scrapyard.

He feels anxious inviting Amy into it. He never gives out rides. Even driving lone and Mattie around, he typically uses her car. He feels like the rust spots are somehow more pronounced in the moonlight, as if they are glowing in the dark. As though God is on his side, the night was filtered by a thick layer of fog. "You've got your tetanus shot, right?" He says, forcing the passenger side door open. *(It's often sealed shut by rust along the bottom of the door, something he'd rather not allow his passengers to notice.)*

"Depends," she says as he walks around the front. "Is that an employee requirement?"

He lets himself in the driver's side and slams the door shut. "Only if you plan on suing when you wind up with it." He hears plastic bottles clash as she moves her feet. "Sorry about the mess. Not used to company in here." Her green eyes watch him as he inserts key into its hole and hesitates.

"What's the hold-up?"

"Seatbelt," he lies. He hears it stretch out and then click into place. He holds his breath as he revs the engine. The

car coughs as it comes to life. The few seconds of purgatory as the check engine light flashes always make him feel like he's back in school about to receive test results for his least favorite class. The pit of his gut sinks as he faces the reality of a day coming when the car will not wake up. Fortunately, tonight is not the night.

He puts the car into reverse and places his hand on the back of the passenger's seat to check himself. He can smell her coconut shampoo.

"Thanks, again," she says as he swings out into the desolate street.

"Anytime." He can't see a damned thing outside the rays of his headlights. When did it get so late? "What is going on, anyways?"

"So, it's the worst luck," she begins. He finds himself immediately drawn into her voice. She speaks with a youthful fervor, yet, wise beyond her years. Talking to her makes him feel both young again and also more like a man. Maybe it's the age difference. "You know how my car is in the shop this week?"

"*The whole week?* How long does it take to replace a coil."

"You're starting to sound like my dad...who is probably

right. Anyhow, Robbie and I are still on a break, so, he's leaving me on Read until he gets bored of whatever girl he's probably lying next to right now. I'd bet she's black. I don't want to say he's racist but he has this fascination with black people that's almost like he objectifies them. It's like, if he scored a black chick, he'd think he was somehow a better white person for it."

"That's funny. It almost sounds like he would have to think less of them to think higher of himself for being so humble as to fuck them."

"Right? It's like he thinks he's doing them a favor."

"He's taking the white man's burden into the bedroom."

Hearing himself say that reminds him of Wes Thompson.

Brendan blames the remark on his bad influence.

"Mhm. What a guy. That's all just what I think he's all about, though, so, it might not even be true. I dunno. You do you, I guess, but in this case, he's actually doing other people, too. Beyond that mess, my parents are geriatric and probably fell asleep at, like, noon."

"Well, it's no problem. After all, what are bosses for?"

"Free tattoos?"

This was something Brendan would never divulge to his peers or wife but Amy got her start at the shop, working to pay

off her very first tattoo. She came in with a leather sketchbook full of some of the most intricate drawings. She had everything, from pop culture icons to calligraphy to original designs. She had the perfect balance of acclimating to different styles while retaining her own voice. Brendan remembered thinking her work was like listening to someone go from speaking one language to another just as fluently over and over again a dozen times over.

She wanted one of the originals on her shoulder. It was a sock monkey. He told her that with her skills, she could probably do it, herself. That's when she explained that even if she could operate a tattoo gun, it would be physically impossible, considering the location of the tattoo. *Fair enough.* When it came down to pricing, she didn't have much. So, he offered to do it for free if she would show up for lessons. From her reaction, that was more like a bonus than a cost. The rest is history.

Every tattoo is a collaboration but none felt so intimate as this one. It wasn't just a life-affirming quote in Chinese that he might give a stylistic flourish. It wasn't a comic book character he would put his own spin on. It felt like communication between two people on a level deeper than the transactional norm. It's common to discuss the inspiration for a

tattoo as it's being done. She explained to him that her grandmother had made the sock monkey while she was still cooking in her mother's oven and given to her the day she was born. She slept with the monkey every night from her crib to her first bed and carried him everywhere. The monkey was called Danny by her parents but she called him Dirty once she was old enough to speak at all. She told him how much she cried when she accidentally tore his arm on the bark of a tree while pretending he was climbing it, and how her grandmother sewed him back up. It was Brendan's idea to put little stitch marks on that arm in their reproduction. As the years went on, Dirty somehow slipped between the cracks. He had somehow escaped from her room. When she asked her parents if they'd seen him, they suggested that maybe he joined the circus. Years later, once her grandmother passed, her grandfather gave her a box from her late grandma. Inside it was one final message typed up (*as her grandmother was unable to type, she dictated it to Amy's grandfather*) and an old friend. *Bye, Amy* was written on the bottom of Dirty's right foot.

Amy explained this to him over the hum of the gun as he tried to mix the ink with the lifeblood of her story. He thinks back to her in the booth in a spaghetti strap and his hand, gloved in latex holding the canvas of her skin. He remembers

the scent of that same shampoo. He developed an appreciation for her as she detailed her childhood and relationship with her family that day and found himself glad he offered to mentor her. He hasn't regretted it a day since.

“That's, that's my turn,” she says, pointing to the left.

“You'll have to tell me which house. I can hardly see a thing in this fog,” he says, allowing the steering wheel to straighten itself out in his hands. He keeps his hands gripped on the wheel just enough to feel the vinyl slide across his palms.

“Right here, on the right.”

He pulls into the driveway.

“Thanks a thousand for the ride, B.” She unhooks her seat belt and it zips back into its resting position.

“Anytime,” he nods. “You ever need a ride, just let me know.”

“Will do, thanks, again.”

“Hey,” he says, as she pops the door open. “You're doing really great and I'm glad to have you around the shop. I'm not great at this boss shit but you've come a long way and I'm proud of you.”

She shifts her weight back into the seat. “That means a lot to me. Ya know I really look up to you. After all, you popped

my ink cherry.” She reaches a hand out. “Don't want you to think I'm unprofessional, so, a hug probably wouldn't be appropriate.”

He takes her hand in his. “We're business-casual at best,” he says, giving it a pump. “Arthur kisses me on the cheek when I give compliments. *That's* where I draw the line.”

She giggles and they disconnect and she climbs out of the truck. “Have a good night, B.”

“See ya tomorrow.” The door shuts with a bang and Brendan turns to navigate his way out of the driveway best he can without leaving tire marks in the yard. He squints to make out anything at all. How did it get so dark? It seemed so sudden, like a curtain drop. Was he truly so oblivious in the shelter of the shop?

Of course, lone thinks to herself as Maggie opens the front door and lets her in from the porch. She was hoping this wouldn't be the case but is met with a smile and spreads her own. “Hey! How are you?” she says in a borderline falsetto.

“Doin' good. How've you been?” Maggie says, reaching towards Mattie in lone's arms. “*And how is my girl?*”

Mattie giggles as lone passes her over to Maggie. She didn't plan on having Maggie babysit but that might be for the

best, anyhow.

“Wes!” Maggie calls out. “Here, come in,” she says to lone. Then, another shout: “Wes, lone is here!”

lone follows her in towards the living room. The place has really gotten a make-over since she moved in. Rather than the stench of pot, she smells a cinnamon candle when she enters the house. A quilt is folded neatly over the cushions of the new sofa. The coffee table in front of it isn't littered with empty bottles and bags of potato chips. Even from the doorway, where she shook off her shoes, she could see that the tiled kitchen floor was sparkling clean. It's a shock, to see the place looking so *livable*.

“Boys,” Maggie sighs. “I *guarantee you* that he's got headphones on like he has no idea company was on the way. I'll be right back.” She disappears into the hallway to the right.

lone isn't sure whether to take a seat on the sofa and stare at the blank TV screen or to tread towards the kitchen for a seat at the table. (*She vaguely hears Maggie in the other room. “Say hi to Daddy!” Then, Mattie squealing.*) She remembers the last time she was here, the night Brendan proposed to her, and decides on the latter.

“What'd I tell you?” Maggie says, emerging with Mattie no longer in her arms but Wes behind her.

“Whatever she says, just agree.” Wes drones. “I’ve learned that the best way to keep her around is to never end an argument. She’d never leave without getting the last word, so, it’s security for me. In your case, I’d just go with it.”

“You’ve got a real charmer,” lone says to Maggie.

“What can I say? I got tired of sweet talk and empty promises.”

“In that case, you’ve made the right choice.”

“Ladies, ladies,” Wes says, taking his seat at the table across from lone. “You can stop fighting over me with this reverse-psychology mindgame.”

“No mindgames, here.” lone says, putting her hands up.

“Oh, sure. I see what you two are playin’. You’re both talkin’ me down to the other, to be, like, ‘He’s not so great. Go ahead, you have him.’ Then, when one of you makes a move, the other’s gonna pounce. You’re just daring each other into some catfight and as a mature adult and the referee of this duel of wits by proxy, I’ll have none of it. But if we must decide on a winner, it’s Maggie.”

“On *that* note,” Maggie says. “I’m gonna be in Mattie’s room, so, you two can have some privacy.” Then, to lone: “Don’t listen to anything he says—besides the writing stuff. He knows that. Also, make Wes get you a drink or snack if you

want anything. He probably won't remember to ask.”

“Aww! Be gone, woman.” Wes says, shooing with his hand. “So,” he turns towards Lone. “What is it that you're working on?”

“Well...” She feels flustered, already. “I don't exactly know.” She feels the muscles in her face cringing as she says this, nervously bearing teeth.

“Gotta say, that isn't the strongest pitch I've ever heard.”

“I mean, I have an *idea*, but I don't know how to make it into a story, yet! I want to write something about self-actualization, somebody, a girl, who thinks she has her life figured out but realizes she doesn't really know herself at all, and then goes on a journey to find that out.”

“Just do me a favor and spare the world that JJ Abrams mystery box shit. The world has enough of it as it is.”

“No, that's not what I was planning.”

“We don't have to know everything about this girl, because she doesn't yet know herself, but gives us something interesting to latch onto. I mean, every scene, every dialogue is an opportunity for the readers to learn about her. So much of self-realization is just going out there and finding out who you are. I think the best way to do that is for her to find herself

through her actions, because that's how characters are defined.”

“Exactly.”

“Have you started writing it yet?”

“I have notes in my phone. Like, lines of dialogue, characters I want to be in it. Nothing is actually written down. I don't even have a title yet. I just don't have the time and when I do, I don't have the motivation. I stare at the computer screen and the page just looks so empty, it's hard to find where to even begin.”

“Just start at the beginning.”

“Wes, I'm not an idiot. You don't have to talk—”

“No, seriously. Think about it like a movie that plays in your head. Can you picture what you want to write? I know it's early but when you think about the book, can you at least see a trailer for it in your head with all the exciting scenes you're dying to get down?”

lone nods.

“Think about every chapter that way. If you can find that scene in your head, just document it on the page like a transcriptionist. You used to write for the school paper, you know what to do. You were the best damn report Mr. Hodgson ever had.”

“Well, that's up to him to decide—but *he did tell me that a few times.*”

“It's a leap of faith. *It's like fucking.*” he says to her in the hushed tone he used to whisper jokes to her with in the eleventh grade.

She glances down at the table. “What do I do once I start and then don't know where to go next?”

“It's all cause and effect. Just ask yourself, 'What happens now?' I've found that more often than not, I know, even if I don't think I do. Just let the muses guide you, or whatever pretentious metaphor you identify with.”

“And what if what ends up on the page is nothing like the movie I have in my head?”

“I guarantee that it won't be. You're talking ideal vs. reality. You'll be lucky if anything you write even resembles what you have in mind when you start the project but if you keep your wits about you, it can be even better than you imagined.”

Wes gets some dribbles on the toilet seat while shaking himself off. “Aww, Christ,” he says, reaching out to grab a few squares of toilet paper. He wipes the seat down and tosses the wad into the bowl as he flushes it. It's a catch-22, he's found.

Either he wakes Maggie up by flushing the toilet at night or he gets it in the morning for leaving a bowl full of piss-water. He feels some more leakage in his pants. *What is wrong with me tonight?* he thinks. The only time he ever loses this much in his pants is when it's really cold. He can stand there and wag his dick for an hour but the moment his pajamas were back on, sure enough, there'll be some trickle. *Whatever.*

He turns both hot and cold knobs at the sink to equal degrees (*six o'clock rotations, to be exact*). He runs his hands under the water, absent-mindedly massaging them to rub the water in before realizing he wasn't wearing any soap to lather. He reaches out for the bottle but notices the hands looked like they are wearing skin-tight red gloves. They glisten with a thick coat of blood. It's pouring out of the faucet into the sink in a heavy menstruation. He jumps away from it, splashing the walls with droplets of blood as he shakes his hands. Looking around the room, he catches himself in the mirror, only, it isn't him that he sees. It's Matt.

Act II.

Journeyman

Brendan continues drying his hands on his pants as he walks out of the bathroom and into the parlor. The paper towels have done their job but it's a habit he picked up as a child. At the very least, he tells himself, people will notice that he washed his hands if they notice at all. He sees Arthur chatting with a bald and burly man in a purple wifebeater and immediately recognizes the tattoos across his biceps and shoulders because he put them there. Shannon's appointment isn't for another ten minutes but Brandon should have

expected him to drop in early. He's been coming here for the past three years to update the mural of his skin. *"If my body's a temple,"* he once told Brendan. *"I want it to look like the Sistine fuckin' Chapel."*

Brendan rests his arm on the counter as Shannon continues giving his pitch to Arthur. His eyes stare with the intensity of his enthusiasm. He smiles as he speaks to reveal a set of yellowed teeth, missing one in the front. He strokes his auburn beard occasionally. Arthur is nodding and taking notes in a tablet, offering a suggestion when Shannon made room for one. "Hey, Bren," Shannon says, reaching out to shake his hand. Brendan accepts the gesture, feeling the calluses in Shannon's palm; his nails are painted black and uneven. "Sorry 'bout that but you know how I get when I'm on a roll. I see somethin' shiny and I lose all train of thought."

"And now I'm gonna feel bad, asking you to take it from the top," Brendan says.

"Actually, I was talkin' to your minion and I think we're gonna let him take a hand on me." Arthur is nodding.

"Cool," Brendan says.

"He figures he'd rather go with the rising star than the over-the-hill master. That O.K. with you, gramps?"

"Yeah. The goal of every teacher is for his students to

surpass his work. Let's see what you got.”

So, they get Shannon into the chair and Arthur gets to work on his left triceps. Shannon's always been a sociable client, one that likes talking through his appointments. The three of them shoot the shit over the buzzing of the gun. When it's done, they get a mirror to bounce the reflection of the one mounted on the wall so Shannon can inspect himself.

“I'm likin' it,” he says, biting his bottom lip. Brendan, too, inspects the black tattoo, stylized as though it was lain by pen and ink, framed by the rims of the hand mirror.

“Whaddya say,” Arthur says with a smirk. “Next time you come in, are you going with the old war horse or are you askin' for me?”

“Aww, man,” Shannon spits. “Don't put me in the middle like that. Ya know what I'll do? I'll pay both of ya to get crackin' on different sides of me. You can each take a wrist or if you wanna get real close, you can each take a tit. How's that sound?”

“Sounds like you're avoiding the question.”

“It's a stalemate,” Brendan says. “Drop it.”

“Oh, c'mon. It's about time we have some fun around here,” Arthur pleads. “A little healthy competition never hurt anyone. Worst case scenario, we'll be pushing each other to do

our best, right?"

Brendan shakes his head. "Wouldn't be right. Not between teacher and apprentice."

"So, you think you're better than me?" Arthur says, pointing a finger at Brendan's chest.

"I'm not saying that. I just don't know that it's ethical, is all."

"No, I think we all know that's what you're implying. Thing is, the two of us both know what you're *really* thinkin'. You're hiding behind the whole master and apprentice thing because you want to remind everyone whose boss. Thing is, I don't know you're so sure of yourself. You don't challenge yourself anymore. If you're not gonna push yourself, I'll push your buttons, myself. Wouldn't it be embarrassing to be outdone by your own pupil? You can't be bested by an employee. You're the teacher and I'm your student, right? So, remind us why that is. Put me in my place."

"I see what you're doing," Brendan says, smiling. "And I'm not falling for it. Try those tricks on an only child and you might have more luck."

"Yo, Amy!" Arthur calls to the front of the store, where she is reclining by the window. She looks up from her sketchbook.

“S'up?”

“Help us settle something!” She sets the sketchbook down with a sigh and heads their way. “What's your favorite piece of ink on this dude?”

She leans in closer to Shannon, inspecting all the forms across his body.

“This shit makes me feel like I'm on display or somethin',” Shannon says with a laugh.

“You are the museum,” she replies coolly. Finally, she straightens her back and announces that “I like it all. Is this a trick question?”

“No,” Arthur replies. “We just want to know what's your favorite?”

“It's cool,” Brendan says.

“I know,” she scoffs. She makes another circuit around Shannon, biting her lip and squinting as her eyes crawl all over him. “I'm probably biased because it's new but I like Art' ink. Sorry, B.”

“There ya have it,” Arthur claps.

At least she can tell the work of my hand, Brendan tells himself. “Amy,” he says. “We're going to be doing a little competition, Art and I. We want to see whose the best tattoo artist, which I know sounds funny but we're gonna let Artie

make an ass of himself on this one. He could use the embarrassment, might humble him. Or maybe I'm the ass; we'll see."

"Sounds cool. So, what, I'm the judge?"

"Exactly," Arthur says.

"What are the stakes? Why not make this interesting?"

Arthur and Brendan look at each other for an answer. "I got it. Whoever loses has to get the winner's face tattooed on his ass."

"That wouldn't be much of a win," Brendan says.

"That'd just mean that I'd have to get to work on Artie's ass once this is over."

"Unless you're game to tattoo Brendan's hairy buns, Amy," Brendan adds.

"Fair point," she concludes. "Whoever wins gets to determine which tattoo the loser will get and where, how 'bout that?"

"Let's set some rules," Brendan says. "No face or neck tats."

"No dicks, balls, or asses."

"Sounds like you're takin' the fun out of it to me," Shannon pipes up.

"No, this'll be fun," Brendan says. "It's been a while

since there's been any real excitement around here.”

“Generally, on the average day, I'd say that I have a sense of apathy to everything that's going on around me.”

“And why is that?” Kendra says as she jots something down.

“Well, it's hard for me to invest in it because I feel like I've seen behind the curtain already, ya know? I've seen the surface layer of life peeled back and the harsh reality underneath. I've braved the elements and found my way back home.”

“When do you think this was?”

“When do you think? Matt's death. Things got hairy for a bit. My life became a horror movie. I almost—I did a lot of stupid things and things could have gotten a lot worse but I reeled myself in.”

“What would you say that you pulled yourself back from doing?”

“Well...” He feels his skin tightening as he looks around the room for a lie. He's seen *The Usual Suspects* enough times to know what to do in a situation like this. “I could have started drinking again, for instance.”

“Did you feel tempted to drink during this time?”

He looks down at his shoes. "Actually, no, I didn't. I didn't even think about drinking for a second."

"Why do you think that was?"

"Because I stopped drinking so that I could be a father. I would have felt like if I drank even one drop, it would be hurting Mattie. That wasn't worth it to me. It wasn't even an option."

"So then what *were* you afraid of?"

He shrugs. "I mean, I dunno. I don't have to know everything. I was just afraid I'd throw my life away. I would never *hurt* anyone. I could never hurt myself. I know that would only make Mattie's life harder."

"But that phase of your life is over and now you feel disconnected from the present?"

"Not disconnected, just not worried. I'm an anxious person; I overthink things. Or, I used to. Now, I'm kind of on autopilot. Nothing frightens me."

"So, you would say this is a good way to live?"

"Well, yeah. Of course. I don't see why it's something we'd have to analyze or investigate."

"You described it as 'apathy.'"

He cringes. "Well, that might not've been the best choice of words but what I mean is that I feel like I can handle

anything. Is that so bad? So, there's a little boredom that comes with the territory. I'd say that boredom is a luxury."

"Some might say that life is a series of different phases, that we're met with new and different challenges every day."

"Yes, and I'm equipped to handle any of them. What I'm saying is, I'm the person I need to be. I'm Luke Skywalker showing up in *Return of the Jedi*. Losing my brother was the hardest thing I'll ever have to do. When you come back home from war, fixing a leaky sink isn't exactly your greatest challenge, you know what I'm saying? My life has reached its climax. If you're not growing, you're dying, right?"

"That's one way to look at it."

"The second act of my life was just cut short, is all, It's all downhill from here for me. I can just coast, if I want to. I've earned it. I could have jumped right back into boozin' and have gotten a get out of jail free card to waste my life away but I didn't. I pulled myself together and am doing better than I ever have. There's nothing wrong with me."

"Then why are you here?"

"Well, I've managed to convince myself of all that. The world, on the other hand, still seems to want me to prove myself. Plus, you could probably use a break every now and then from all the crazies you deal with. I'm probably the most

cool, calm, and collected person you see.”

“It's a lot more diverse than the cliches would have you believe. Many different people seek therapy for different reasons. Mental health, yes, but also grief, or even just to have someone they can talk to without feeling judged or as though there's something on the line they could lose like there might be with an immediate member of their social network. For instance, *I* have therapy twice a week.”

“I dunno, maybe I have 'problems' but compared to what I've dealt with in the past, this is life on autopilot for me. I was a student and now I'm a teacher.”

“You're a TA, still learning underneath a teacher of your own, are you not?”

“Sure, that's fair. You know what I mean. My point is, nobody wants to see the hero get bald and fat.” He pats the top of his head. “I'm already halfway there. Nobody wants to see what happens after the finale of a show. We might think we do but a majority of life is mundane.”

“Life isn't a movie, though. What if life doesn't have a three-act structure but a serialized collection of stories?”

“Life may not be a movie but art *is* a reflection of life and I'd say that it follows similar patterns that we recognize and can identify with in our own lives. Even shows without a

narrative have a golden age before the creativity starts to rust. There's nothing left for me to write about and no decent reason to expect anyone to want to read about me. Looking at myself as the hero of my life story, I'm happily retired to the Happy Isle."

"So, tell me this, do you see yourself as the hero in your life?"

"*Hero?*" He scoffs. "Maybe in the loosest most antiheroic sense of the term. I don't even know if I'm the central protagonist of my life or if I just see myself as the narrator. I only use that term in the most generic Joseph Campbell definition. Playing by those rules, I think my time in the spotlight is over. I've conquered my inner-struggles and forgave my father. It's time to make way for new characters. I'm happy to have a supporting role in Mattie's story." He nods with resolution. "Life doesn't have to be so egocentric. There are other people in the world. My career as the star of my own movie is done. It's time for me to pass the baton."

"You mind taking this one?" lone says, peeling gloves dyed auburn from her hands and tossing them into a trash can as the doorbell announced a new visitor. She feels her bladder pleading to take off and run before Ronnie even has the

chance to answer.

“Sure I can,” he says as though he's keen to something she isn't. “But I have a feeling they might be requesting you.”

She turns around just as Mattie calls out, “Mommy!”

“Hey!” Brendan says, smiling. He lets her run up to wrap her arms around lone's legs.

“Hey, wasn't expecting you guys,” she says.

“Well, I'm supposed to say we were in town but Mattie could use a hair cut and that seems like as good a reason as any to come bug ya at work.”

lone looks down. *Needs a hair cut? She looks perfectly fine. Whatever. Not worth the argument.* “Great!” She leans down and whispers, “Mattie, why don't you let Mommy put you in this seat so I can cut your hair?” Mattie lifts her arms up and lone lifts her to the seat, which she sees is already fitted with a booster. “Thanks, Ronnie.” She didn't even notice him coming around behind her.

“Sure thing, girl.”

“Alright, now, Mattie,” she says. “Mommy needs to use the potty before we start, then I'm gonna make you look so pretty! O.K.?”

Mattie nods. “I want spaghetti hair, so I can eat it!” She moves a lock of hair into her mouth, munching dramatically.

lone pulls the wettened hair from Mattie's mouth. "Mattie, that's not gonna...your hair isn't food...let Daddy explain that to you." She hears Brendan begin to say something as she walks away.

Before using the bathroom, she splashes some cold water into her face. She dries it with a few paper towels. She reemerges with a smile. "Alright, whose ready for a haircut!?"

"Daddy!" Mattie announces.

"Uhh, Mattie, I don't think Daddy has much hair left to cut," Brendan says, twirling a finger through the thinning patch of hair of his crown.

lone grabs a bottle and begins spraying Mattie's hair down while running a comb through it.

"So, I've been talking with the crew, and we're thinking about going to the expo this year."

"Oh, yeah?" lone says, pulling a pair of scissors from her apron. "I thought you were done with that."

"It'll be a good experience for the kids. Plus, it's about time I got back some of my economic libido. I've been part-time on paternity leave a few years, too long, now, I'd say."

"You work hard." She picks a ribbon of blonde hair from Mattie's lap. "Look at this? This came off you're head! Can you believe that?"

“Woah!” Mattie says, kicking her feet as she giggles.

“I’ve been coasting for too long. Time to push myself forward, ya know? My apprentices are really sticking it to me. I can’t have them makin’ me look bad.”

“Mhm.”

“So, um, before we leave, we were thinkin’ about having a little going away party—”

“A going away party? For yourselves? Before you leave together?”

“Well, yeah. Just something small and fun before we go. It’s gonna be stressful and it’ll be a lotta work. We figure, what the heck? Let’s have a good time before we head out to war.”

Having accompanied him on previous trips, she knew that his liver would be doing as much work as his hands.

“Brendan, I really don’t want to have another party around the house. Remember last time?”

“I know, it was a nightmare. But I don’t work with those bozos anymore. Plus, I thought it might be cool to just hang out at the shop. We could make a little bar out of it. It’d be fun.”

“So, what, am I your DD?”

“We live in the modern world, lone. Let’s both get poop-faced and call a Lyft.”

She sighs. "What are we gonna do about the princess?"

"She can go rule over the Thompson castle for a night."

"You don't wanna invite Wes?"

"Naw," Brendan purses his lips as he shakes his head.

"He gets all weird about people drinking."

"No, he doesn't! He worked in a bar for God knows how long way after he got sober."

"Yeah, but he acts like someone whose afraid of dogs when there's one on a leash barking at them."

"Alright, I'll call Wes and ask. When's it gonna be?"

"I dunno. I have to check the dates again to make sure. Darn. It would be fun to invite Maggie, though. You think he'd take offense?"

"If you invited his girlfriend to a party and made him babysitter for the night?"

"But look at this ball of fun!" He says, reaching over to tickle Mattie's belly.

"Babe, *babe!* Be careful! I don't wanna cut her ear off."

"Sorry, sorry!" He pulls away. "All I'm saying is, he'd probably have the most fun out of any of us."

More fun than I'll be having, lone thinks, drawing the blow-dryer. *That's for sure.* "Get ready, Mattie! It's the wind gun!" She clicks it on, spraying Mattie down as she squeals.

“Look at that beautiful girl!” She says, squishing Mattie's cheeks as they inspect her cut in the mirror. She unbuttons the black apron around Mattie's neck and picks her up. “That was a good time, huh, kiddo?” She hugs Mattie before setting her down.

“Great work, babe, a masterpiece. I'm gonna take her picture when we get home and I'll call the art gallery on Main to see if they've got an opening.”

“Thanks for stopping by,” lone says to Brendan as he steps forward to hug her. They wrap their arms around each other, keeping their bodies apart.

“Trying to watch out for the tool-belt,” Brendan says. “I dunno what you've got in there that could puncture me.”

“You were circumcised once. What's a little more?” she replies.

They release each other. “Alright, so, we'll see ya at home.” Brendan says. “Say goodbye to Mommy, Mattie!”

“See ya, dork!” Mattie says, practically howling out the final word in a fit of laughter.

“Hey, now!” Brendan says, giving her a playful spank.

“Bye, Mommy!”

“Bye, sweetie!”

The doorbell rings once more as they exit the building.

“So, that's it?” she hears Ronnie say, behind her. She jumps, having forgotten his presence. “No sugar for Mommy?”

“Oh, *pshh!*” She dismisses the remark with her hand. “We're not about the PDA at work.”

“If there's anyone hiding behind the cash register, the bathroom, or any other nook and/or crannie, please show yourself!” Ronnie shouts, cupping his hands into a megaphone. “Ione's husband has left the building, there are no kisses on the cheek or sneaky ass-slaps to witness! You can now go home!” His hands go from megaphone to a death grip upon some imaginary cock he pretends to fellate.

“Real mature. What's it to you, anyways? You don't wanna see that.”

“Oh, *sure*. I'm not offended by a man and women in love—a *married* man and woman kissing, nobody on this planet Earth would be, and anyone who is of this planet or any of its neighbors, can go fuck themselves.”

“It doesn't matter,” Ione says, collecting the broom and dustpan to begin sweeping up Mattie's clippings. “It's my marriage.”

“You're right, there.” Ronnie says with a smug grin. “Your marriage, your life, your funeral.”

“I know that I *have* social anxiety and I recognize that it manifests itself with these irritating little quirks but the real trick is to catch them before they happen. That's the thing, it's always in retrospect.”

“Hindsight is twenty-twenty,” Kendra adds.

“Yes,” Wes says, nodding. “That.”

“So, I think a productive way of dealing with this would be to make a list of these coping mechanisms you have and come up with better alternatives to use in conversation.”

“Alright, sure. How am I supposed to do that? Don't you think if I knew a better way to handle myself, I'd have started doing that by now?”

“Well, let's have an example.”

“O.K., so, I always put my worst foot forward when I'm meeting someone.”

“And why is that?”

“I'm just saving the best for last.”

“No, seriously.”

“I mean it. I have this notion in my head that if I fuck the first impression up, everything else will be downhill. If I set expectations to the floor, they should be easy to surpass.”

“So, this is a defense mechanism against some sort of abandonment issues?”

“Yes, definitely. And before you start, I already know what you're gonna say! Maybe it's because my parents are divorced, I dunno. That could be a part of it but I think it's more likely just that I fuck everything in my life up. At a lack of a better pop song analogy, I'm a wrecking ball. I just wind up disappointing everyone I know and, so, I think some part of me wants to warn people before they let someone like me into their lives. Knowing what I know about myself, I can't think of any reason anybody would ever want to meet me. It's a subconscious thing but I'm aware of it.”

“Why do you think that is? What do you do that's so toxic you have to warn others?”

“Well, nothing *intentionally*. I just make mistakes, like anyone does. It's just my subconscious rearing its ugly head. It reminds me of back when I was writing, and this is really stupid, like, you don't even want to put this in your notes because you're gonna think I need a wraparound or something, but when I was younger, I used to think that my writing was a kind of time travel.”

Kendra delicately places her pen on the desk. “I'm listening.”

“Obviously not *actually*, but it was a fun thought I'd entertain myself with. You know, I'd write something and then

it would wind up coming true. Like my dad moving away or my grandfather passing away or two planes hitting the Twin Towers. (*That last one was a joke, don't go reaching for the pen.*) I couldn't believe the coincidence of some of those things but the older I got, the more obvious it became that it wasn't any kind of fortune-telling. It was just my subconscious opening up in a way I couldn't admit to myself. It was an adolescent meditation where I could communicate with myself and my own feelings. I know that sounds pretty lame but you're a professional, so, you can't tell me that. I won't be offended if you're thinking it, though, because it *is* lame, really lame.”

“Not at all. I think it sounds like a healthy way of dealing with life. I write almost every day. I keep a journal on my nightstand and will write my thoughts down every night before I go to sleep. You should take joy in your writing.”

“Oh, I'm not writing anymore.”

“Why not? It sounds like it was a big part of your life.”

“Why would I? I'm a father, now. I teach. I'm someone's boyfriend, and a perfectly mediocre one, if you don't mind me talking myself up a little. I have real-world responsibilities; I don't have time or energy to waste on fantasies. How I see it, I could make more investments on books no one will read or I

can be applying myself to making true stories my family can remember for the rest of their lives. I need to be *here, now*. I can't be stuck trying to justify the past or setting utopic standards for my future I'll never meet. Writing is just egomania and I've come to find my place in the world. I thought it was the only thing that made life worth living but really, it was just distracting me from all the things worth living for.”

“You're right, that you are a father. That requires sacrifices and the fact that you're willing to make such a large one speaks volumes for the quality of your parenting. You're also a human being. You're allowed to have hobbies. You can still express yourself, if that's what you want to do.”

“Well, it's not, so, can we move on to another topic?”

Brendan instinctively turns the cold water on first but before reaching his leg over the bathtub, he leans back down to turn on the warm water as well. He uses the time as the water heats up to close the lid of the toilet. He doesn't know if that will prevent the room from stinking up as he washes himself but the dark yellow pool isn't an attractive sight, in any case.

He steps into the water, relieved not to be thrust into

hyperventilation by an ice-cold temperature. He turns to let the water massage his back, each stream from the showerhead like a finger pressing into his flesh. He bends his head down and works the water into his scalp before lathering up some shampoo and molding a foamy wig to the top of his head. He bends down to claim the body wash from the rim of the tub but accidentally knocks it down into the gulf of it with his hand. He shoots back, lifting the foot nearest to where the bottle fell so he's standing like a flamingo or the *Karate Kid*.

There is a pounding at the door. "Everything alright in there!?"

"Yeah!" he calls out more aggressively than intended. "Just dropped the soap!"

"Careful with that! Never know when you might wind up in prison, or something. That's more of a Wes joke. You know what I mean!"

"Ha! Yeah, I do!" He manage to maintain an almost sarcastic monotone while reaching the volume of a shout.

Back to business. He picks the soap up (noticing a rusty ring around the interior of the tub as he does so) and squirts a blob of it into his hand. He works it up into a lather and begins rubbing it in all over himself. By time he goes to rinse it off, most has already been ushered to the sudsy pool by the drain.

He scratches his head under the water until he's confident all the shampoo is out but hesitates to open his eyes in case they will be met with a burning irritation.

A hand reaches around him. It starts at his left love handle and treads lightly with its fingertips across the curve of his stomach and downward. Lips suck on his neck as the hand tugs on his balls. Another hand finds its way over his torso, rubbing circles across his chest. The first hand wraps around his shaft, tugging gently. Its sister pulls on wet strands of Brendan's hair before holding the side of his jaw and placing a finger in mouth. The pulling on his cock grows more passionate. He grows weak in the legs.

The door bursts open and he nearly drops to the ground as though he was in the throes of an earthquake. He plants a hand on the wall for support and leans against it, catching his breath.

"Come on, honey, it's gonna be O.K.," lone says, guiding Mattie into the room. She's using her hand as a makeshift blindfold over Mattie's eyes. "Mattie threw up on the table." lone directs her to the toilet and rubs her back. "Jesus, Bren, calm down. It's nothing I haven't seen before."

"Sorry," he replies, weakly. "Can you hand me that towel?"

“Oh, stop being dramatic,” Maggie says, panting.

“Dramatic!?” Wes says, his head in the nook between Maggie's neck and shoulder. He plants a kiss on her neck and peels his body off of hers. “I'd say this is a conservative display of post-coital crash. I put my soul into that load?”

“Oh, yeah?” she says, rubbing her leg against his.

“Yeah, at least 99% of it. I'm running on E, here. If I came to fruition, we'd better start saving up for Charles Xavier's School for Challenged Youngsters.”

“You mean gifted, right?”

“My answer depends entirely on whether or not you'd abort something like that.”

She slaps his thigh. “Get off me, you weirdo!” He rolls off the bed, stretching. She watches him from behind, studies the tattoo inches above his ass. “You never did tell me which tramp you let stamp you.”

“*Huh?*” He turns to face her, then it dawns on him. He forgets he even has a tattoo. “First girl I ever loved.” He jumps back into bed, rocking the entire mattress. He runs his fingers through the damp ropes of Maggie's hair, looking her in the eyes. “That was what I planned to name Mattie. Getting inked was my form of petitioning for that.”

“Bit early on that one, were ya?” She leans in and kisses his shoulder.

“Chronic symptom of mine. I shoot my loads first and ask questions if I remember them.”

“So?” She raises an eyebrow.

“So, what?”

“You remembering anything?”

“Questions? Umm...there is one I've been thinkin' about.”

“Alright, go ahead.”

He parts his lips but hesitates to speak.

“Aww, *Wes!* This isn't another threesome thing, is it?”

“No,” he looks dramatically down at the mattress. “If we do a girl together, I'm gonna owe you, and then it would be fair for you to wanna bring a guy back home and that would be gay.”

“That's not—I'm not interested in bringing a guy home, or a girl, for that matter.”

He sighs. “Such is life.”

“For real,” she puts a hand to his cheek. “Ask me.” Her hand glides down to his biceps, swollen by the pressure of holding up his body. She squeezes his muscles.

“You gotta be honest, O.K.?” She nods. “Alright, be real.

When we first got together, was it a turn-off for you that I already have a kid?"

She laughs and puts both her hands on his cheeks to pull him in for a kiss. Their lips part with an audible pop. "Wes! That was my *favorite* thing about you. It still is."

"Oh." His lips tighten.

"What's wrong?"

"I was kinda hoping your favorite thing was the sex." He smiles.

"Why don't you come back over here and convince me?"

Brendan feels emasculated, sitting inside with his mother as she takes drags off her cigarette between sips of coffee as his father cooks sausages on the grill alone outside. The catch-22 is, he'd feel infantilized standing there, uselessly, watching the real man do all the work. Coffee was always a pleasant aroma to him, long before he grew to appreciate the taste. Cigarettes, he grew to love, hanging out in dive bars in college and from a long history dating back to high school of courting smokers. He'll never admit it but the scent of post-coital smoke it is soothing to him, like incense; it reminds him of his mother.

“You ever get Nora's card?” she asks as she shakes wags the ashes from the end of her cigarette into the tray.

“Yeah, I did.” Nora, living in Florida, sent a card for his anniversary, being unable to make it in for the occasion. “Kind of shocked she got the address right.” Nora was always the wild child. In high school, she was the one to get into fights. She was impregnated by the son of a mechanic Junior year, the kind of kid to spend his afternoons drinking beers and propping the cans up to shoot once he was done with them. Their parents never found out but she confided to Brendan once after he overheard her crying in the bathroom, that he had paid her to have it aborted. She sobbed after, hugging him so tight that she nearly squeezed the piss out of him. She announced two weeks ago that she was once again pregnant, intending this time to see the child to term.

“I'm shocked she managed to get the name on the envelope right.” She brings the burgundy mug to her lips. “So, when are you going to give us a grandchild?”

“Well, there's Mattie.” Brendan can feel his cheeks burning. He fidgets in his seat, nervously pinching his thigh.

“Yes, and we *adore* Mattie, but you know what I mean. A *real* grandbaby.”

“Mom, Mattie is a *real* daughter. I'm her real father. I eat

breakfast with her every morning, take her to school, I'm helping raise her more than most men do."

"Brendan, Brendan, calm down. You know what I mean. We love Mattie. Listen, let me put it this way: When is Mattie going to get a little brother or sister?"

He fills his cheeks with air and slowly pushes it through pursed lips. "Your guess is as good as mine."

"If you're going to have children, now is the time. Don't you want to?"

"I want to."

"Well, do you ever talk about having children?"

"Not exactly. It's been brought up but we've never *planned* anything."

"Couples need to communicate, Brendan. Maybe she doesn't know what you're thinking about it."

"I've tried talking to her about it. I think lone just needs time after her last pregnancy."

"Time? How much time does she need?"

"As long as it takes, I'd imagine."

"Five years is an awfully long time to wait, Brendan."

The words hang in the air like the smoke rising from the end of her cigarette.

Wes is holding his phone up with hands resting by the wrists on the shopping cart as he waits in line, praying that he does not get a text back until he is in the car at least halfway home. Occasionally, he looks up to see how far the line is progressing but the cashier (most likely someone's grandma bored of retirement and on her first week back in the workforce) never appears to be making no headway in the traffic jam spread across the conveyor belt before her. His phone buzzes and he sighs in the same way he does before checking his bank account. He clicks on the dialogue bubble to see Maggie reply that the only thing she needs is for him to get his ass home so they can get back to their marathon of the animated *Ghostbusters* series. Wes clicks his phone off and sheathes it in his pocket, satisfied, thinking to himself that this outcome is “pretty fucking cool.” He then feels something pressing up against his rear-end, causing him to lurch forward into his cart. He pulls it back towards his body before it can slam into the customer in front of him.

“What's your prob—” he begins, trailing off as he recognizes the face of the lady behind him. The face is rounder, the chin softer, and the make-up applied more liberally. Her hair is now medium-length and dyed icy-white. “Oh, hey, Ca—”

"I'm so sorry!" she blurts out and then adds that her name is Tristan. There is a young boy sitting in the front of her shopping cart. "How have you been?"

"Well," he nods. I've been doing well. How are you?"

"Great, me and Bobby are just out getting some snacks before Mom and Dad swing by." She looks down towards her offspring, which Wes can't help but imagine being pushed out from between her legs. "Can you say 'hi' to Wes?" she coos. Apparently, he cannot.

"No problem, he probably just remembers the stories about his mom's old loser boyfriend from college. I wouldn't say hi to me, either."

She shoots him a scolding *watch your mouth* glare that lasts a split second. "Hey, I'm really sorry about your brother. I can't imagine how hard that must've been for you and your family."

"Yeah, thanks." Wes' mom mentioned her reaching out at some point to offer condolences when it happened but never put any mind to it. "Wasn't a breeze." He realizes how passive-aggressive that came out and also, bearing in mind the fact that he'd have to share the line for her for about another decade, at the rate it was currently moving, he adds "We're coming up towards his birthday. We still throw parties

for him. I don't really know why. Habit, maybe.”

She offers a weak smile. “Well, I know things didn't end on a great note but if you want to leave the past in the past, shoot me a text sometime. I'm always here to listen. I miss Matt, too.”

Why? Wes thinks but abandons the word to die on the tip of his tongue. “Sure, thanks. Here, let me get your number...” He digs his phone out of his pocket and starts transcribing the numbers she dictates to him.

“For real, Wes. A lot happened but we were kids. I think it could be healthy for us to reconnect.”

“Yeah, I'll keep in touch.”

“Good. I'm glad we ran into each other. At your old job, too!” She cackles. “What are the odds?”

“Yeah, takes me back,” Wes sighs.

“Behold!” Brendan announces, spreading his arms before the landscape of Jimmy Oliver's back. Arthur is the first to arrive, leaning forward to inspect the finalized art. Brendan folds his arms, watching as Arthur mouths out a silent *Wow* with squinted eyes. He hears footfalls resonating throughout the room as Amy approaches. Despite his confidence, Brendan can feel his heart racing. At once, he feels so assured of the

quality of his work and yet he was prepared to hang on every word his critics feed him.

Jimmy has been a faithful patron of the shop since it's opened. He's the type who strives for a full body suit of art, to become a living mural. Nearly every inch of his back is covered in a maelstrom of characters, quotes, and objects. Jimmy once described the ongoing project as if there was a tornado in his head and this was all his interests being tossed-around at random. The latest addition was situated in the upper left quadrant, just below the shoulder blade. The ink, still highlighted by pinkened flesh, is a portrait of singer-songwriter, Dean Warren.

Before this, Brendan had only heard a song or two that found their way onto playlists he frequented. After Jimmy pitched the concept to Brendan, he began researching the character. He prescribes to the philosophy that tattoos aren't only skin deep and in order to truly bring these creations to life, he tries to dig beneath the surface of the intent. He talks to his clients as he is tattooing them, not just to socialize or create a positive experience but to deepen his understanding of their relationship to the tattoo. He watched the interviews Warren gave, particularly those in his final months before his life was cut short by a drug overdose at thirty, only two

months before the birth of his second son. The beanie on his head wasn't just a flat object but a soft comfort to preserve Warren from his insecurities at male pattern baldness. His laugh lines were deepened with the memory of living with an improv group in his early twenties when he was playing at open mics and gaining a following at bars in Nashville. The cigarette in his mouth was stolen out of his father's pack on the dining room table while his father was sleeping off a midnight shift at the factory. The ring on his right ear was a token of his independence, for he was kicked out at the age of seventeen for wearing it. Brendan made sure to know his creation, inside and out.

Yes, the reading between the lines is part of the package offered with his services. However, Brendan had personal investment in this project. Upon its announcement, Amy gushed about Warren, saying he was her favorite artist to listen to while she was sketching in high school. Brendan knew at that moment that this had to be it. It was a high stakes gamble, he could feel the weight of it bearing down on him as he operated on Jimmy's back as though it was a life or death procedure. He paid it no mind, except maybe for the inspiration. He chipped away at the bust as the vague outline became a ghost of Dean Warren, an edifice constructed of

flesh, a living memorial, its veins pumping ink. All the while, they listened to Warren's songs coming from Arthur's phone, for the entire eight hours. Warren's voice sanctioned this memorial, Amy could be heard in the corner, humming along with a tangible word occasionally bubbling to the surface of her lips.

She was the mother of this life Brendan's hand had birthed. He considered himself the transcriptionist but the image was interpreted through (what he fathomed was) her perspective. Brendan looked at Warren through her eyes. As she inspects the art, now, with hand over mouth, he is looking back at her through the glimmer Warren's eyes. He just hoped she could see him in there. He recognized early into this endeavor that Jimmy was not the muse of this piece but merely the tablet in which he would communicate his message to Amy. What he was trying to tell her with it, he does not know, even in this moment. That can be determined at a later time. All that matters right now is that he is heard.

"Competition just got a lot stiffer" Arthur says, patting Brendan on the back. "Good work, man."

"Well, let's see what you've got in store for me before we start debating," Brendan replies.

"Brendan, this is so good," Amy says. "I think this is you

best work, yet.”

Brendan repeats himself, feeling his face flush.

“I’m serious. Here—” She pulls the phone from her pocket and takes a snapshot. “This *has to go on the wall.*”

Brendan feels his heart racing. The room is no longer big enough to contain him. The air tastes stale in his mouth. Fight or flight instinct is kicking in for him to sprint towards the door. He needs to escape the oppression of these walls and feel the embrace of the open air. He wants to spin in circles with his arms open wide as he screams halle—

“So,” Jimmy says. “There a chance I might be able to take a look at it for myself any time soon?”

Wes can hardly contain his smile as he pushed the bathroom door open with his elbow. He feels satisfied with himself. The class felt like a knock-out, like he was a touring band and the audiences were finally starting to appreciate his set-lists. The students knew his classic bits and were grooving with the new material. Today, they were discussing high school cliques before class began. Someone asked him which clique he belonged to and he prompted the class to take a guess. One student suggested goth, to which he replied, “Too many days in the week to wear black every one of them.” Eventually,

he told them of his nomadic social nature, belonging to no one culture. "So, you were a geek," one girl said. "I knew it."

Entering the bathroom, Wes is greeted by the subtle aroma of stale piss. Aaron Texter is at one stall with his hand placed on the wall to support himself as though it's the Wailing Wall/Black Stone. The nest of hair at his crown is visibly thinning.

"What's up, Texter?" Wes says once he pulls up to the urinal immediately beside him, despite there being a third, more distant option.

"Wes! Glad to see you. I wanted to ask you something."

"I don't care what you heard, the girl earned that A on academic merits alone!" Wes replies, a bit too loud, and hopes there is no one in a stall to overhear him.

Aaron ignores it. "You going to the ten year?"

"Ten year of what?"

"Our high school reunion, you dork! Didn't you get the email?" He sheathes himself with a jostle of the shoulders and pulls out towards the sinks.

"I check my email about as often as we have high school reunions, I dunno."

"Wouldn't shock me if you weren't invited, come to think of it." He turns from the sink, water running and hands

copulating beneath it the stream. "Wanna be my plus-one?"

"You leaving the wife at home?" Wes says, taking a step back with a zip of the trousers.

"O.K., she's my plus-one. You can be *her* plus-one."

"I don't think it works that way."

"Aww, c'mon! What are they gonna do? Not let you in? This is our old school we're talking about, here, graduating class in the double digits. It's not like they're gonna have a bouncer!"

"Maybe, man. I'll have to ask the old ball and chain."

"Wesley Thompson, as I live and breathe, asking permission."

"—Ask her if she'd like to come with."

"Yeah, man. That'd be great. It'll be a blast." Wes feels a semi-moist palm pat him on the back before Aaron departs. Wes shoddily dries his own hands before yanking his phone out of his pocket and typing up a text to lone to see if she's come by such an email invitation.

Of course I did, like, 3 of them. U probably just werent invited LOL

As lone plugs away at her laptop, Wes sits across from her, marking his students' papers up with red pen. There are

two stacks of paper, the one that he is working from and a separate pile for those he has already graded. His head is titled downward as he inspects the pages and is constantly readjusting his glasses so they don't slide off the bridge of his nose.

"Do you ever write?" lone says as the clacks of her keys coming to an end.

Wes looks up. "I send a few texts every day."

"Seriously, do you ever write anything creatively?"

"I don't see why I would." He clears his throat.

"Whaddya mean? Why *wouldn't* you? You've always written; that's what you do."

"Some bad habits can be unlearned." He looks back down at the stack of papers below him.

"What? I don't understand. How is writing a bad habit, all of a sudden? You've always loved writing; what changed?"

"I loved drinking, too. I changed, for the better."

"That's stupid." She nods as she says this. "That is one of the stupidest things you've ever said, and trust me when I say it's got stiff competition."

He shrugs. "I don't see how it could be stupid at all. I don't want to write, so, I don't. I'm happier this way. Life is easier. I can be a father. I can be attentive to the people in my

life who need it. I'm not stowing myself away like a wanker in the bedroom all night, fighting with myself over I should type 'said' for the third time in one page or break it up with a 'replied.' I can focus on my work, my family, and my own mental health.”

“How does writing prevent you from doing that?”

“It just does. In my case, writing was a selfish endeavor and the idea that I would ever be successful with the kind of stuff I was writing was a juvenile fantasy.”

“Is that what success is to you? Money? Praise?”

“When I'm providing for a family, yes, money is important to me.”

“What happened to your ambition? Doesn't it bother you that you've given up on it? Don't you ever think about what you could have accomplished?”

“I didn't give up on it, exactly. I was able to let it go. Writing is rumination. My books were bad memories. I can live in the present, now. I don't need to act like some time traveler going from memory to memory in my own head. I can just be here, now. I like here and now. I *am* successful. I have an incredible daughter and I was given this amazing opportunity to be in her life. I get to bone the most amazing woman at least three times a week. I have all these great people around

me and I'm given all of these opportunities every day. I don't want to let any more of them pass me by. I don't want to waste anybody else's time; I don't want to waste any more of my own."

"It's not a waste of time. I'm *sure* Maggie would want to read anything you write. You could write Mattie a kid's book and Brendan could illustrate it. Wouldn't that be fun?"

"Maggie would want me to be happy," he says with resolution. "Mattie can have as many books as she wants; I'll buy them for her. What she *needs* is a father, not a closed door. And I don't see why all of a sudden you're telling me to get back to writing. When I was, you wanted me to do exactly what I'm doing, now. You benefit from this. I'm getting you child support. I'm helping out more with Mattie. Don't think I'm not doing this for you, too."

"Well, I never asked you to." Her voice is lower, softer.

"Sure seemed like you were."

"I never meant to, O.K.? I wanted you to be there for your daughter. I didn't ask you to give up on your dream. That's not the same thing."

"Well, I didn't mean it like that, either. I'm sorry. This is where I want to be in life. Raising Mattie made me realize that writing isn't my dream in life. It's not how I want to spend it. I

want to be a father. Maybe I can have both, I dunno. Even if I could, I don't want it anymore. My writing wasn't a gold medal; it was an albatross." His phone, sitting on the table next to the stack of face-down papers which have already been graded, buzzes. He picks it up and slides his finger across the screen. Then, lets out a sigh.

"Everything alright?"

"Yeah, it's just—" He is whispering, although they are the only two in the house. "*Tristan.*"

"Who?"

"My ex, the girl I was with back when we procreated."

"Oh. What's *she* want?"

"I dunno, to make plans, apparently."

"This something Maggie should know about?" She raises an eyebrow.

"No, no. Even if it was, I wouldn't. I think she just wants to catch up."

"I'm just teasing ya. That's your business, anyhow. I can't judge."

"Some timing, though. Just in time for the ten year reunion."

"I ran into my ex the other day, at the grocery store."

“Oh?” Kendra says, looking up from her notes. “The one you were with when your daughter was conceived?”

“That's the one.” He pauses. “You know, most girls I was with in the past were kind of one and the same. Cut from the same cloth, I mean, like, the same archetypal idea of a girlfriend. It's almost like they were interchangeable in my mind. I'd wind up in over my head with a girl before I could even confidently say I was attracted to her beyond a superficial level and then I'd get bored. I'd start to poke holes in the idea of who I wanted them to be, which would only make me feel disenchanting with them—but it's not like that was their fault; they were just being themselves. It's like I needed someone to be there so that I wasn't alone but wasn't willing to let anyone in, at least not by way of accepting them as they were.”

“You say this in the past tense. What's changed?”

“I don't feel that way about Maggie,” he says with resolution. “When I'm with her, I don't want to be with anybody else. I used to see attractive girls with their boyfriends and feel jealous; now, I'm happy for them. I don't want to lock myself in my room, not even to write. I want to spend time with Maggie, even when I'm doing alone-time things, like grading papers. She's better than being alone and I can't say I've felt that way

about anyone else in my life.”

“So, running into this ex of yours, how did you take that?”

Wes shrugs.

“Well, what emotions did it bring up in you?”

“Hope, oddly enough. It made me feel better.”

“In what way?”

“Well, on one hand, that a burned bridge can be rebuilt. Things obviously didn't end on the best terms and this felt like it was at least a step towards closure.”

“What's on the other hand?”

He glances at his shoes. “We made plans to meet up sometime...at a bar.”

“Do you think that could jeopardize your sobriety?”

“Nothing can. I used to work in a bar long after I was sober. When my brother died, I hardly even considered it.”

“Why do you think that was?”

“Because I know if I drink, I'll be letting Mattie down, and I can't let myself hurt her.”

“So, what do you hope to gain from meeting back up with your ex?”

“Like I said, I'm not *interested* in her. It could just be nice to see where her life has taken her since we split up.

We're both parents. And...a part of me is hoping to find acceptance.”

“What kind of acceptance?”

“You know, I feel like nobody can truly love me, not actually. I feel like to the people in my life, I'm some sitcom character version of myself but in my head, I'm the actor behind the scenes. Every now and then they hear some piece of gossip about me when something comes out and they're all disappointed in me. They act shocked and at this point, I feel like they should understand that I'm not this simple, 'good' person they want me to be. I guess I fear that they see me like I used to see women. I feel like a drug that people sober up from. People come to their senses and leave me in their past. She saw me when I was at my lowest point, at least at that point in my life. Doing her wrong is one of the biggest regrets of my life. If she can forgive me, accept me for who I am after all I've put her through, then maybe I can prove that voice wrong.”

“Do you ever think that your view of yourself contradicts your belief that there is good in everyone?”

“There's exceptions to every rule.”

The Thompsons are giving it their best effort to brighten

the house up for the occasion but it feels apparent that is a shadow hanging over the day. Today is the day Matthew Thompson was born in 1998 but it feels more like another funeral. Wes and Matt's mother busies herself in the kitchen with the cooking as the scent of her labors drifts into the living room, where the others are conversing. Occasionally, one will drift into the kitchen to grab a cold cut or to stack crackers with meat and cheese. Inevitably, they will offer to help in the kitchen and invite her in to be with the others. She will politely decline. Hearing their voices from the other room is all the company she needs. In here, she can be at once with company and alone. Mattie is bouncing on Wes' lap. Don is awkwardly attempting to bond with Phil, who is courting the mother of his children. He never expected to be invited or welcome in her home again, so, this is his way of showing off both his appreciation and maturation. Phil runs a furniture store with his brother a town over. The years have taught him to listen to anyone and just nod his head. He can get through tonight just fine. What worries him is Don getting the wrong idea that they'll end the night as *friends*.

The conversation flows freely, as it would any typical holiday, from football to politics to tv shows. It seems to go any direction but the elephant in the room. At one point, it crosses

Maggie's mind that it's almost like the family is being held hostage by Matt's ghost. This forum is really a game of hot potato. Nobody wants to be the first to say his name. Despite the preface to the occasion, it feels to her more like exercising their ability to forget this shared trauma by putting it to the test.

“Do you ever notice,” she whispers into Wes' ear. “They talk to everyone at parties but each other?”

Wes winces with a shrug. “They have all the time in the world to talk to each other. They're just being social,” he says back in a hushed tone.

“The cake is ready!” rings out from the kitchen as the former Mrs. Thompson sets a large, white cake down at the table.

“Do you need someone to—” Wes begins as he realizes it has already been divided into slices.

For a moment, they just stand there, around the table, looking down at the cake as though it was a crystal ball. The only sounds are the shuffling of hands in pockets and fingernails dragging against the backs of necks. A lip smacks. They all know it's a pathetic site but no one wants to be the one to end this purgatorial state.

“Why, why is everyone looking at me, like I've got some

speech written down?" Wes finally says. If they weren't already, all eyes are now on him. "I don't; I've got nothing. He's dead, that's all. There's no speech. I'm not going to be sentimental about it. Bad things just happen."

"Wes," Maggie says, wrapping wrapping an arm around his and resting her chin on his shoulder.

"Daddy!" Mattie squeals but she does not know why.

"I remember when Matt was five," Don begins. "He was obsessed with Indians. He got the headdress with a Halloween costume and would wear it everywhere. The only way to get him to take it off to go in the store was to bribe him by letting him get something inside."

"Usually, he wanted those arrows with the suction cup to put in that little bow he carried around, anyways," Wes' mom added with a wry smile.

"On the weekends, he'd paint his face with stripes and hunt little plastic buffalo toys. He'd line 'em up and shoot at them all day with the bow and arrow."

"He'd call the treehouse his tipi."

"Remember how he'd hide in there and shoot at Wesley from the window?"

"Yeah," he replies, looking at Wes. "You two used to chase each other around all day. You were always the

cowboy.”

“You had your stick horses you'd carry around everywhere. Even when you were sitting on the couch, you'd wedge the sticks in between the cushions so they were propped up between your legs. Maybe I can get the pictures out after cake.”

“That won't be necessary,” Wes interjects.

“Oh, *shush*. You two were adorable, my little cowboy and indian. Then one day, you both just grew up. My babies.” Her eyes shimmer but her cheeks remain dry.

Maggie reaches out to nothing. Blindly, she pats the mattress until her fingers curl around the edge. The discovery of her solitude causes her eyes to flutter as she dutifully reorients her body to an upright position. She can tell by the shade of the room the sun hasn't begun to rise. With the same sense of responsibility as waking for work, she scoots off the bed to plant feet onto carpet. She rubs her eyes as she stands and reaches for a pair of pajama bottoms and a tank top Wes had tossed aside earlier that night. Stepping outside the bedroom and through the hall, she hears a soft whimpering, like a child put in the corner. She follows the sound into the kitchen, where Wes is hunched over the table.

The palms of his hands are pressing into his eyes as he shakes. It is just light enough to see his face flushed almost entirely red. His entire body is pulsing with each sob. A rope of snot dangles from the bridge of his nose, threatening to touch base upon the surface of the table.

He jumps as she wraps an arm around him. “Honey, what's wrong?”

He shrugs and wipes his nose against his forearm. “I dunno. I'm just—Matt's dead and I'm alive but I don't want to be and I'm trying to be good but I can't, I can't do enough and I always embarrass everyone and I can't be normal.”

“Awe.” She kisses his cheek. “You are normal, Wes. You've just been through a lot.” She pulls a chair out and keeps one hand rubbing his back as she seats herself beside him.

“No, I'm not. I wasn't a brother and now Matt's gone. I don't know if I can be a father.”

“You're a *great* father. Mattie loves you.”

“Now. She'll find out who I am and she'll leave, too.”

“No, hon, she won't. She's going to find out who you are and she'll be so proud of you. I know you and I love you for who you are.”

“You don't know what I almost did,” he whispers.

“What did you almost do?”

“After Matt died, I just—” He stops himself. “It doesn't matter.”

“It seems to matter a lot you. Whatever it was, I'm sure it's not as bad as you think. You were going through a lot.”

“I was so angry, Maggie.” His muscles lock up as his shaking intensifies. He begins to gasp.

“Wes, Wes. Wes.” He doesn't reply. The tremors continue. His jaw is clenched and his teeth are grinding while drool spills from between his lips. Maggie doesn't know what to do, if she should cause an ambulance or try to coax him out of this episode, and if so, how. She just continues rubbing his back, praying he would release himself soon.

His head falls to the table and he begins gasping desperately, his stomach inflating and deflating rapidly. He reaches out and grabs her hand, squeezes it while he pants.

Slowly, his breathing regulates and the jitters resolve. He rolls his head on the table to look at Maggie. His forehead is stamped red from pressing against the table. His eyes look like the eyes behind the mask of a killer in a slasher movie. “I'm sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?”

“I'm a failure.”

“No, Wes, you're not. You're an incredible father, your

students love you. Why would you think you're a failure?"

"I gave up."

"What did you give up? You didn't give up."

"I can't write. I'm never going to write anything that matters to anyone but myself."

"Well, there's only one way to guarantee that."

He shakes his head. "I had to give it up, to be a father."

"Nobody asked you to do that; you're the only person saying you had to make that sacrifice."

"I love Mattie."

"I know you do, hon. Why can't you be a father *and* a writer?"

He looks at her with the frustration of someone misunderstood, like this was the stupidest idea he's ever heard. "There's a part of me that needs to prove myself, that needs to always go bigger and do better. Then, there's the part of me that wants to be a provider, wants to be there for you guys. I don't think those two things can coexist. I had to make a choice."

"You can have both, Wes. All you have to do is want it. Mattie and I will still love you just as much, no matter what you do."

"I know," he said, lifting his head off the table. He dries

his cheeks with his palms. "I just don't think that I will."

"That you will write another book?"

"That I'll love myself if I don't," he says with resignation. "All my writing comes from a place of self-hatred but I can't love myself when I'm not writing."

The party feels like a ship with a single bullet-sized hole in it. The captain, Brendan, refuses to accept the futility of trying to stay afloat, trying his best to keep morale up as the shipmates, Amy and Arthur go through the motions of scooping water out by the bucketful to throw it back into the ocean. Unlike their captain, they are resigned to the ship's fate and can only hope for the sight of land, an end to this awkward charade.

The conversation feels stiff. What was intended to feel like an occasion to relax feels more rigid than the work they perform during business hours. Ione has been spending the night proving to be their toughest customer. After introductions, Amy brought up Ione's history of tattooing, which Ione immediately dismissed as a past venture. Brendan rolled his left sleeve up to display a piece she had done years before. Amy and Arthur complimented her potential but the words were swatted out of the air with the gesture of one

waving smoke away. Amy made one final attempt at a connection by trying to relate the experience of hair care with that of helping clients at the tattoo shop. Ione said, "It's all customer service" with a finality that killed any motivation to engage with her. She came across to the apprentices as more a teenage daughter dragged to her father's job than a supportive wife. Brendan seems oblivious, with his arm around her shoulder, or if he is aware, he's doing his best not to show it. Further discussions only involved the employees and their boss. Even that felt uncomfortable, as though it was small talk made at a job interview. It was a performance before not only a harsh but a disinterested critic.

Currently, she is flicking through her cell phone. She's seated in an inkbed and Brendan is standing, pacing more than he probably realizes. She hasn't looked up from her phone for some time. She just continues to flick through it with a blank expression, as one does when a movie they have no interest in is on the TV. Brendan bends down to brush a lock of hair from her forehead and plant a kiss on it. She does not look up but shirks back just slightly enough for Amy to notice the motion.

"Who you texting?" he says as he straightens his back.

"Ronnie."

Brendan grimaces. "You better drink that before it gets

too warm," he uses his bottle to point to hers, half-empty on the table beside her.

"I've had enough, already."

"Enough? That's your first bottle." In fact, Brendan was the only one with more than a bottle already in him. Amy and Arthur politely finished one, themselves.

"One of us has to drive home tonight."

"Fuck that. Where's your party? Let's get trashed and order a Lyft."

"Not tonight, Brendan."

He exhales through his nostrils. "Alright, cool."

She plants her hands on the chair to pull herself out of it. "We should probably be getting home, anyways. I have to work in the morning." She heads toward the bathroom. The door shutting behind her feels like the bars of a jail cell slamming shut. Brendan walks over to the bench Amy and Arthur are sitting on and slides in at the edge, to Amy's left. The bench is hardly wide enough to fit them all and he sits with only one cheek on it.

"I think we're gonna have a lot of fun this trip," he says, before taking a swig of his fourth beer.

They both nod.

"Thank you, again, for taking us," Arthur says.

“Yeah, it's really nice,” Amy agrees.

“I wouldn't go without you.” He draws a deep breath and then releases it. “Really. You guys have motivated me so much and if it was just me around here, I don't think I could keep up with it. Trying to please customer after customer can really desensitize you to the art of it but you guys have kept things fresh, reminded me why I started this all in the first place.”

“You've inspired us, too,” Amy says.

“A lot,” Arthur adds.

The door closes swings open with a shrill creak and closes once more with a thud.

“Well, kids, I guess it's time I get home. Either of you need a ride home.”

“I've got my car out back,” Arthur says, bashfully.

Brendan shrugs. “Leave it. You can crash on my couch and we can keep the party goin'.”

“I, I really, um, need to get home tonight. Maybe some other time, man.”

“I see. It'd be lame to hang out with your boss. That's alright. No hard feelings.”

“It's not that, really—”

“Amy?” Brendan says, pointing his bottle at her before

emptying it down his throat.

“I think I'll ride home with Art tonight, if that's O.K.” She squirms a little in her seat while saying this.

“Yeah, yeah, of course. That's good. You sure you're good to drive, Artie?”

He nods.

“Cool,” Brendan nods. “Good man.” He feels lone beside him, like a dog waiting to be let outside. “Oh!” He turns to her. “Before you go, you have to see the competition pieces.” He walks her to the wall, where framed pictures of his and Arthurs' best pieces are displayed.

“I've seen this, Brendan. You showed me the pictures.” She sounds like an exhausted mother trying to get her child through the store as he is constantly stopping her to look at toys and other distractions.

“Yeah, but you haven't seen *the wall of pictures.*”

“Now I have. It looks nice.” She turns to Arthur. “You're very talented.”

“Who would you vote for?” Brendan asks.

“*Brendan,*” she pleads.

“C'mon, humor me. Whose work is the strongest.”

She barely glances at it before looking back to him. “It's unfair for me to say. I'm staying out of it. Whose the official

judge?"

Amy nervously raises a hand. "It's me."

"Whoever you think is best must be the best, then. That'll settle it."

"Alright," Brendan slurs, smacking his lips. "I guess we're on the way. Artie, can I trust you to lock up?"

"Probably better than you could trust yourself," he replied.

"Thank you! Then we're on our way." He spins theatrically towards the exit, wrapping his arm around lone.

"It was nice seeing you," she calls back.

She unlocks Brendan's truck before the business door swings shut and notices. Since Main Street is dead after dark, they were able to find a parking spot right in front of the shop, even closer than the employee parking out back. Brendan releases lone and flings the passenger door open so energetically it shuts itself. He opens it once more, with caution, and climbs into his seat.

lone is soon to follow. The car coughs for a few seconds before roaring to life. "Fuck," she spits.

"Huh?" Brendan is sitting with his head tilted back, staring at the ceiling.

"Your headlight's out."

“Just both or one of them?”

“Only the one on my side.” She sighs and puts the car into Drive. “Let's just hope we don't pass any cops on the way home.”

“They better hope they don't cross us.”

“Or what?” she says, impatiently.

“I'll fight them.”

“Yeah, O.K., that's nice, Brendan.”

He rolls his head to look at her. “I'd fight a cop for you.”

“I'm not asking you to, in fact, I'm asking you *not* to do that.”

“Well, I would, if you wanted me to, but because you don't want me to, I won't be doing that tonight. But only because I love you.” She could feel his eyes looking at her, expectantly.

She pats his lap. “I love you, too.”

“No, *I* love *you*.”

She side-eyes him. “It's been established, we love each other.”

The brakes squeal as they come to a red light. The radio is off and the only music is that of Brendan's heavy breathing. Sometimes, a bone cracking from one of her rolling her ankle or the stretching of jeans as legs shift in their seats. The light

turns green. lone swallows. Sometimes, Brendan holds his breath once his lungs are full before letting the air back out. lone squints as she drives as they pass beneath countless street lights. There are no other cars on the road. It feels to lone like they are floating at sea without any sight of land and her only tool for navigation are the constellations overhead. She removes her left hand from the steering wheel to scratch her nose. As she listens to the fingernail dig into the rim of her left nostril, she wonders if it is shaving any dead skin off. She hears wind pass from between Brendan's legs and soon smells something rotten. Both windows squeak in unison as she rolls them down. Brendan moans softly, stirring in his seat. She isn't quite certain if he's awake or asleep but does not want to look in his direction to find out. She feels like a teenager sneaking out of her parents' home again. One summer, between junior and senior years of high school, her grandmother stayed with them for her final days. Her death bed was situated in the living room. She was a heavy sleeper but had woken a few times when lone tripped over one of her father's beer cans on the floor. She'd lie about getting up for a late night glass of water rather than sneaking out for a smoke and would be let off the hook. She feels her heart wedged in her throat exactly the same way as it once did before when the cans clatter

across the floor when she makes a turn. She also feels the same heart-sinking pity for the man snoring beside her that she once felt for her late grandmother.

“At our last session, you mentioned the anniversary of your brother's death. How did you handle that?”

“I got through it.”

“Did it stir up any feelings?”

“Nothing profound. It made me feel irritated, honestly.”

“Irritated how?”

“I just didn't want to be there. I didn't want to think about Matt and what he did to us. I mean, the man of the hour chose not to be there, himself. Why should I want to?”

“Oftentimes, funerals or events of the nature are more about the mourners than the deceased.”

“Yeah, obviously, but I'm here for my family. I chose to stay. I gave up my passion so that I could be there for my family.”

“Your passion, as in, writing?”

“Yeah. Maybe passion's a bit melodramatic. My outlet, whatever you want to call it.”

“Did they ever ask you to give that up?”

“Well, no, but they shouldn't have to. I made that

decision on my own because that's what's best for the family. What artist was ever a good father? Anyways, that's besides the point. The fact of the matter is, he's the one who left. Why should we willingly pick at the scabs he left us with? It's rumination; it's macabre."

"Don't you think they want to remember the good times and celebrate his life, rather than focus on his death?"

"If they're dealing with anything like me, and I'm not trying to be aggressive, but it's pretty fucking hard to forget. Everywhere I go, he's in the back of my mind. I'm listening to the radio on my drive to work and I can still hear his voice. I close my eyes and he's there, waiting for me. He never left. He just haunts me."

"Do you think you could take more steps to advance the grieving process?"

"What further action is needed? I moved on with my life. I'm the grief equivalent of a functioning alcoholic. I work, raise a kid, try to be an active member of my family, take care of myself. What more could I do? I can't control my dreams. I'm not willing to go back to the one thing that'll get him out of my mind. I've made my steps."

"What steps have you taken?"

"Well, the biggest one was when Maggie moved in."

“By living with someone else?”

“Not just that but I left Matt's old room untouched, even after he died. So, when she was moving in, she helped me gather up his old belongings and organize them.”

“Was that cathartic for you?”

“It was—in a sense, an exercise in futility.”

“How?”

“My initial reaction to Matt's death was anger. I blamed the world for his death. Eventually, that became sadness. Going through his old things brought back the anger, not towards the people in his life I was angry at before, but towards him. He felt like his life was out of control, so, he left the mess for us to deal with. It made me want to lock our memories up in the closet with the boxes of his junk.”

“You're still angry?”

“That fire's gonna burn until my last breath.”

“Why do you say that?”

“It'll never not hurt. The loss will never fade away to just a fact. I can go through the motions and lie to everyone else. I can be a family man and act like I've changed and moved on. Inside, though, I still feel like I just got the news. I wasn't a good brother.”

“So, you have regrets?”

“I mean, of course I do. I insulted him, beat him up, would frighten him as a kid. I didn't know what I was doing but I probably broke a lot of bones that didn't heal properly, if you know what I mean.”

“Do you blame yourself, for what happened?”

“I'd never admit to it but I also wouldn't let anyone tell me otherwise. I brushed too much under the rug and hoped that time would do the rest. I ignored all the red flags. I made the decision to look away, hoping that by tomorrow, all the problems would go away. I guess in a Monkey's Paw way, I got my wish. I mean, let's be real, maybe I didn't kill my brother. He's gotta be responsible for his actions just like I'm being with mine, right now. There's that, sure. However, if he had a decent brother, not even a good one, just a C-average sibling, I bet you he'd be alive today.

“You know, when Matt was in his coma, I used to fantasize about his recovery. He'd wake up, open one eye and croak another first word, maybe even my name. I'd go visit him every day, help his mental and physical development. We'd become closer than we ever were and I'd finally be able to absolve myself of all my sins. That could have been my redemption. Instead, he just died. I have no closure. I was robbed of my redemption. I'll never get used to it and the

feeling's never going away. Frankly, I think I'm a fucking Olympic-tier emotional athlete for carrying it around all day and not touching a bottle, and I do it all for my family. Maybe that's not just my redemption but my curse, to live with this guilt every day without reprieve. I feel like I've got one foot in reality and the other in Hell. So, yes, I'm angry that he did that to me. I'm offended by the damage he's caused our family. What am I supposed to do about it? How am I to convert anger into compassion? I can't do that. I'm stubborn enough to carry on in life with this baggage holding me back but that's all I have in me."

"Have you ever considered that you already have?"

"Already have what?"

"Turned the negativity into a positive."

"No. I feel like the inside of my heart is a Bosch painting. I truly believe I am damned to a self-constructed Hell."

"You said it, yourself. You're there for your family. You're working with students, who you're very compassionate towards. You're a loving father. It sounds to me like you've used this guilt as a catalyst to distribute all this love into those around you."

"I try. I'm not much but I don't want anyone else to ever

feel like I do.”

“That's a start.”

It's hard not to feel an energy when standing in a hall of hundreds of people with a taste for your craft. Brendan always likened hosting a booth at cons to being a fisherman in a canoe and there are so many fish surrounding it that you can't see the waters below. Of course, with such stiff competition, it's hard to stand out but the addition of Amy caught many eyes. Arthur's work is more attention-grabbing and Brendan holds the company title but men seemed more interested in having her work on their bodies than her hairier, manlier counterparts. That's not to say Arthur didn't get his share of commissions. He operated on a number of passersby and struck up conversation with quite a few ladies during his watch of the booth. The kids were representing the company better than Brendan could.

Brendan spent the day appreciating his role as captain of this humble vessel. In fact, he felt more comfortable behind the scenes. He was beginning to see himself as the coach and his apprentices as the athletes. He looked in the eyes of those with dyed dreadlocks and, Mohawks, forked tongues, cat ears, and sleeveless denim, and he did not see himself. These once

felt like his people and this floor his promised land. Today, he felt like an intruder, an illegal immigrant hoping not to be spotted by authorities and forcibly removed. On his way to the bathroom, he felt like a father walking through a high school to pick up his child. Still, he was enjoying himself in this newfound role. He liked seeing his pupils at work and got to make a few decent pieces, himself.

This energy carried on, back to the hotel, where the tenants of a neighboring booth invited them to party. Cramped in the two bed room, music was blasting as though it was the club, shots were pounded, more hugs were exchanged than a family reunion. A fly on the wall could have mistaken the lot for champions of some grand competition. Arthur kept dipping out to smoke joints with two men staying in the room; Brendan accompanied them once. By this time, as they return, Amy is slouched over in a chair with a sticker slapped on her forehead, reading "Hello, my name is: WASTED."

"Oh, jeeze," Brendan says under his breath, pushing the door open.

"Looks like someone's ready for bed," Arthur announces. The two men in the room with her, each perched at the edge of one of the mattresses, are carrying on with a conversation. They don't seem to mind her any more than they

might a teddy bear propped up in the seat.

“Well, I'd better get her back to the room,” Brendan says.

“You get one arm, I take the other?”

“Let's do it.”

They walk over to her and Arthur snaps some fingers before her eyes. She murmurs something as she stirs. She nods as she is told that she needs to go back to their room for bed and allows them to wrap an arm around each of their shoulders. After taking a few paces, she says she can handle herself.

“You sure?” Brendan asks.

“Yeah, I'm more exhausted than I am drunk. It's just been a long day.” They can't argue with that, and release her.

“Think I'm gonna go back and catch some sleep, myself. Can't party like I used to.”

“You guys want me to come with?” Arthur says.

“Naw, man. Have fun. You earned it today.”

“Alright, cool. I'll see you two in the morning,” he says, before heading to the minibar.

“You're positive, that you're good—”

“I'm walking in a straighter line than you, Bren,” Amy says as they pass by the glass walls showcasing the indoor

pool. "Like I said, today just took a lot out of me."

"Yeah, it can be a lot. I appreciate you guys coming to this." He swipes the key card and holds the door for her to lead the way inside their room.

"You kidding me? Thank *you* for taking us."

"It's nothing, a vacation for me, really." He plops down at the end of the first bed and begins removing his shoes. "You guys are the ones putting in all the work."

"Couldn't do it without you." She follows suit. He feels the mattress sink with her added weight beside him. He feels a tightness in his pants.

"No, I couldn't do it without you guys. In fact, I don't even think I'd want to." He scoots back so his head is resting on pillows, crossing his legs over the covers.

"What do you mean?" She finds herself beside him.

"You guys make me enjoy what I do. This tattoo business, I think it was for the man I used to be, not so much the guy I grew into."

She pushes his forearm teasingly. "Shut up! And you're making me out to be the drunk."

"Really. If it wasn't for you guys hanging around, I don't think I'd still be in business."

"People love your work. You're the reason there is even

a business. You're the reason we wanted to work for it.”

“I don't love my work. It doesn't do it for me.”

“Like, you're not satisfied?”

“Like, I feel like a prostitute.”

She scoffs.

“Really. I'm beginning to question if art is possible by commission.”

“I think what we do is more like a marriage. It's a relationship between the customer's idea and our talents. Maybe we do it for money but so does every Hollywood movie and book you see in stores. I don't see why we can't be taken seriously just because we're paid for our work.”

“It's not that. It's just, I don't know if my heart's in it.”

“O.K.” She's smiling. “What would want to do?”

“I've been thinking about selling the shop and taking the money to learn a trade.”

She cackles. “Brendan, that's the stupidest idea I've ever heard!”

“I have a family to provide for, Amy.”

“And the shop *doesn't* provide for them?”

“Not enough. Ione's back to work and we're pinching pennies. I rolled the die with the shop and the risk didn't pay off.” He shrugs. “It's not all bad. I didn't lose everything. I'll be

fine. I learned my lesson with a slap on the wrist.”

“What lesson is that?”

“Be careful what you wish for.”

She rolls her eyes. “So, what about Art and me? We're just out on the streets?”

“You guys make it fun. You're young, have a future ahead of you, all this talent...”

“Well, you're pretty great, too.” She's looking him in the eyes.

“Yeah?”

“I wouldn't go to bed with a guy unless I could say that and mean it,” she says, giggling.

“Amy.”

“Huh?”

“I love my wife and kid so much.”

“I know you do; that's my favorite thing about you.”

“I'm leaving Brendan,” lone announces. The thought has been rolling around her mind like a pebble in her shoe all afternoon. She chewed it over like a wad of gum while cutting, shearing, and dying customers' hair. While in the bathroom, she'd look herself in the mirror and rehearse it. It should feel awkward, unshapely in her throat like a word she couldn't

pronounce, right? Was it telling of her just how easily it rolled off the tongue? Practicing it for herself felt laughable, like she was preparing for a task instinctual as saying “Hello.” The hardest part was trying not to smile too wide while finally breaking the news.

The look on Ronnie's face wasn't quite shock but spread his lips thin with a sigh. “Awe, hon.” He spreads his arms and walks towards her, stepping on the ribbons of hair spilled from the night's final customer. She accepts his embrace, feeling him rub her back. “I'm so sorry.”

“It's O.K.,” she says, releasing him. “I'm gonna be fine.” She gives a shrug. “I've wanted this for a long time.”

“Well, I'm proud of you,” he says, looking her in the eyes. “And I'm here for you, too. If you need anything, *anything*, a babysitter, someone to vent to, a masseuse, just gimme a call.”

lone laughs. “I might take you up on that venting part, especially over drinks.”

“Drinks on me! As many as you need, girl.”

“You're the best.”

He pivots to retrieve the broom and begins sweeping the floor. “So, what was it?”

“What was what?”

“The straw that broke the camel's back.”

lone looks to the top right corner of her vision as though the answer was written somewhere on the ceiling. She pulls one side of her mouth back into a wry smile and then shakes her head. “I don't think there was one straw. I just haven't been happy for a long time. Too many days spent alone and I began to feel more comfortable without him.”

Ronnie nods. “A man has to be there, for his wife. You need to feel loved in a relationship.”

“He's a good guy. I just fell out of love; it happens, I suppose.”

“Things were never easy for you two.”

She nods. “There's a lot of guilt, with Mattie and that whole mess of a situation. I don't know how I'm gonna break it to her.”

“You'll figure it out, just gotta listen to that maternal instinct.”

lone sighs. “I guess so.”

“How do you think he's gonna take it?”

“I dunno.” She swallows the gorge in her throat. “In some ways, I think he wants this, too, he just might not know it yet. There are hints people give off, ya know, even if they don't pick up on it themselves. He's so loyal to us that I don't think

he would ever consider leaving. I loved Brendan the person, not Brendan the provider. He puts all his energy into his paychecks and even though I know he probably tells himself he's doing it for us, sometimes I also wonder if he even wants to come home. It'll hurt, when I rip the band-aid off, but in time, I think he'll realize this is what's best for him, too. He can start to live his life. He might hate me but I hope he can find himself once all this is done."

"How do you think he'll take losing Mattie?"

She scoffs. "What about it? She's not his kid."

"Water," Wes demands, pounding his fist on the bar.

"On the rocks."

"Ooh," Tristan says, "Look at you, being responsible and stuff." She is holding the laminated menu. Her fingernails are long, painted, and probably fake. She orders a wheat ale.

"Well, nobody wants to grow up with a DUI daddy."

"True, true," she says. "You've really grown up!" she exclaims, sizing him up and down. She shakes her head. "I just can't believe it. The weight, the hair—"

"The cancer'll do that to ya."

"Oh my God." She puts a hand over her mouth. "I had no idea. I'm sorry."

“I mean, I don't *have* it, but cancer will do that to you.”

She cackles, putting a hand lightly on Wes' lap. She's wearing a ring. “So, what's your deal, now? It's been a while, what have you been up to?”

A short film of Wes on her doorstep with her refusing to speak to him plays in his mind. “You know, the usual, got sober, had a kid, went back to school, Dad moved back to town, my brother fucking died, typical twenty-something nonsense.”

“That's a lot,” she nodded.

The bartender hands them their drinks and they relocate to a booth in the corner of the bar. They are the only two in the place, aside from an elderly couple ordering food. The jukebox is turned off.

Wes keeps sneaking glances at her, trying not to be noticed, as he experiences the uncanny valley effect every time he looks at her. At once, this is the same person he used to know, that he once shared a bed with on many nights, and yet, someone transformed. The way she is dressed, her styled make-up and hair, the way she talks and seems to exaggerate everything. It's like at once she's become more adult and less human.

“So, what's your story?” Wes says, as they take their

seats.

She rolls her eyes. "Where should I even begin? I could start with this morning and we'd be here 'till last call."

"How about where we left off?"

"Great," she says, nodding. "That's the worst part."

"Go on."

She takes a deep breath, then exhales. "So, after you did what you did, I had a phase. It was just a college thing, you know how it is, especially when you're so stressed out all the time. I partied, a lot, and drank, a lot, and got to experience the walk of shame from all the different dorms." She laughs. "I know I sound like a hoe. For a while, I was."

"Noo," Wes says, squinting one eye and shaking his head.

"I just felt, umm—" She smacks her lips. "After the way things ended, I had self-esteem issues. What you did was wrong but it was my fault for handling things the way I did. Anyhow, one month, Aunt Flo didn't come to see me. I had been kind of seeing a guy at that time." She shrugs. "We'd been on a few dates. It wasn't, like, a real relationship at that time or anything. Anyways, I sat him down and told him and we had a long conversation and decided to try to make it work. This whole time, I totally hated you, by the way. You were, like,

the devil.” She leans in across the table, closer to Wes, as her story continues. Then, when I saw Bobby for the first time in the hospital, I became so grateful for everything that happened to me in my life. It was like everything was leading up to that moment and all of a sudden, the story made sense. Then, he started crying and I felt sheer terror at the fact that this miracle was in my care because I had no idea what I was doing.” She laughs.

“So, you take your first look at your son and I’m what you think of?”

“No,” she scoffs. “I didn’t think of you at all. That was the key. I didn’t care anymore. If you did cross my mind, it was just hope that you were as happy meeting your little girl as I was to see Bobby. I still thought you were a piece of shit but I also didn’t really care about that anymore because in your own way, you helped me get to where I am now.”

He was starting to feel like she had come here just to rub this in his face. “Well, that’s good because I can’t say I regret what happened. O.K., sure, sorry that I cheated on you and robbed you of your youth and all that, but if it came between being a good boyfriend to you or getting to be Mattie’s father, I’d cheat on you every day of the week.”

“Good,” she laughs. “That’s oddly touching—kind of.”

She takes a gulp from her cup and sets it back down on the table. "We were both ignoring the elephant in the room. Something had to break the camel's back at some point. I think we can both admit that by now."

Wes nods. "We both made some mistakes but it turned out alright."

"You think so?"

"Well, you know, for those of us still living."

She purses her lips. "I can't get over that."

"Yeah, me, either."

"It's so heartbreaking. This is gonna sound weird, but that's when I realized that I wasn't holding onto any grudges against you. I just thought about the pain it had to've brought your family and just how terrible it must've been and as much time as I'd spent fantasizing about ripping your balls off, I didn't want you going through that. I still wished you were spared of that pain."

"Good news is the balls are still intact."

"How do you do it? How are you still, I don't know, sane after that?"

"Can't lose what you probably never had. I just lie. I lie to everybody that I meet and I hide that pain away in a pocket of my mind so that no one else can see it. It's still there, just

hidden. I'm a father, a teacher, a respected gamer in the online community. Some people have diseases that are killing them and go about their lives. I think this is just something like that."

"What about your girlfriend? Do you ever talk to her about it?"

Hearing her mention it took him by surprise. He had been holding onto his *I'm in a relationship* card in case she came on any stronger like a sort-of "The power of Christ compels you" for unwanted advances. "She doesn't need to know about it. She needs a man, not some emotionally-crippled manbaby. She actually *wants* me to talk about it but what is there to say? I'd rather hold onto whatever semblance of masculinity I have in her eyes than let her into that world. She doesn't need to go there. She hardly knew me during that time, you know? We had a class together but she didn't really enter the picture until that was all over."

"I think it might be helpful if you opened up to her about the ways you feel, Wes. Do I really need to remind you what happens in a relationship without communication? She wasn't around then, but she's there for you, now."

He wants to say, *What do you know? You only knew me before the tragedy.* The thought makes him feel isolated, this

flux between his distant past and theoretical future. He raises the glass to his lips and sips some glass, feeling the ice press up against his front teeth. His heart sinks, thinking that no matter who coddles him, no matter how many times he repeats the myth of his own life struggle, he will always be alone on the stage of his apartment floor, shaking and sobbing in the fetal position under the single stage light of his memory.

“What you need,” Ronnie says, turning the television volume down. “Is to let loose, have fun, live in the now for one moment of your adult life.” He sets the remote back down, next to a salt lamp on his coffee table.

Yeah, lone thinks. Nothing wilder than sipping wine coolers and talking shit on our coworkers all night over The Real Housewives of Wherever. Still, she texted Brendan two episodes ago, saying she was out with the girls and a little too tipsy to drive. It was the longest text she'd sent him in weeks. She felt her stomach knot as she hit Send, as though her conscious was punishing her for the falsehood, but typing it out, it felt like a white lie at most. After all, Ronnie was practically one of the girls. Sure, his legs became uncrossed once he got a few drinks in him and she found his arm stretched out across the back of the couch but there's nothing

wrong with that, is there? He, with his painted toenails and collection of fruity candles was no different to her than any lady friends, not that she's had any friends outside of work in some time. With that settled and Ronnie certified an honorary woman, lone was also of the female sex and therefore, it only felt a little teensy bit dishonest to say she was "out with the girls." Herself, being one of two girls, using the definition of the word loosely.

"Yeah? Like what? Steal a stop sign?" she countered, thinking back to the trophy one of her first boyfriends kept on his bedroom wall.

"Just, anything, have an adventure, spend money like you don't have bills to pay, go dancing, whatever you want. Just so long as it's what *you* want." lone catches his eyes scaling up her thigh. *He must be really drunk.*

"You could've invited a girl to the gay bar, ya know."

He scoffs. "No, I don't think so."

"What? You're too embarrassed of me?"

"Not you as an individual, but yes."

lone bursts out in laughter. "*What!?! How!?! Tell me!*" She gives him a light punch to the arm.

"It's a policy I have."

"Not to take me to the gay bar?"

“No straight girls allowed.”

“Why!?! Every girl wants to go to the gay bar!”

“Well, that's part of the problem. It's the same thing every time. You straight girls go to the bar, see tons of hunks grinding up on each other, get too 'white girl wasted' and turn into thirsty whores. It's not the embarrassment so much as the regret when they go home with a couple to get stretched out in ways they never thought possible.”

“Those bad guys,” lone mock pouts. “Nothing like a proper gentleman like you.” She pinches his cheek and feels his stubble pricking her fingers.

“Hey, don't tempt me. I might be better than the rest but at heart I'm more slut than saint.” He removes her hand from his cheek and sandwiches it between his own.

She doesn't break his eye contact.

“Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot I'm talking to Mrs. Responsibility, who'd never do *anything* for herself.”

lone can feel her cheeks burning hot. A storm of feathers teases the inside of her stomach. She can feel the blood pumping in every nerve of her body, surging through the tips of her fingers and toes. She felt as though she had been cast in stone, any movement at all felt impossible. A chorus of memories pleads for her to withdraw from the situation. *No*,

no, no, no, no. This cannot be happening. I can't let this happen.

Then, an image flashes into her mind, of Brendan with that young bitch working under him, a piece of evidence to sway the jury in the court of her mind. Her resolve melts into liquid motion, as she smashes her face into Ronnie's, so hard she worries for just a second that she may have broken her nose against his cheek bone. She feels his soft lips pressing against hers, his tongue venturing inside her mouth as his hands guide hers between his legs. She feels victorious to discover his hardness, as though she had unsheathed Excalibur, and begins rubbing him through his sweatpants. His hand slips down her shirt as he wets her cheek down to her neck, gently squeezing her nipple. *He can probably feel my heart beating a thousand beats a second*, she thinks. *Shit, when he takes my shirt off, he'll probably see it pounding like in the cartoons.* As one hand manipulates her breasts, the other slides down her yoga pants, unlocking her. She hears herself moaning as though her mind is merely a spectator. She tugs his hair, pulling him back in for a deeper kiss, biting his bottom lip.

She slides her pants down and kicks them across the room once they're around her ankles and then does the same

to her thong. Ronnie grabs her by the hips and situates her on hands and knees along the couch, positioning himself behind her. She suddenly feels a pang of anxiety, over which hole he plans to enter and if she is ready to lose that second virginity. To her relief, he chooses the conventional entrance. She is sure that she's leaking all over the couch as he slams her into him, spanking her and wrapping his hands around her body to cup them over her breasts. It doesn't take long for any tangible thoughts to evaporate entirely. She finds herself speaking a new language that he has taught her.

Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.

In the brief time since the crew's last set foot upon the planks of the shop, something profound has changed. To Brendan, it feels haunted by their absence, homely yet alien. He carries the gym bag full of equipment over behind the glass counter and sets it on the ground before taking a deep breath. He can't make the call if their trip had been a disaster or a success but standing behind the counter, breathing in that air feels right. The pictures of sketches and photographs of patrons on the wall seem like windows into his memories. The register before him and the tools in his bag feel like appendages of his own body. He can't help but feel content.

“Well, you guys ready to go home?”

“Shortest shift ever,” Amy remarks.

“Aren't we forgetting something?” Art says, blocking the door.

“Oh! It is time, isn't it?” Brendan says, looking to Amy.

“I believe it is,” she says, nodding.

“Do we need a drum roll?”

“I believe we owe the occasion that much,” Art says, joining Brendan across the counter and placing his hands flat on its surface.

“On the count of three?”

“We're counting down to the drum roll?”

“It's a very special occasion, may as well milk it while it lasts.”

“You're just dragging out your final moment of being my superior as long as you can.”

“One...”

“Two...”

“Three...”

The drum roll ends as soon as it begins once they realize they're rattling all the piercings inside the counter.

“Well, that was fun while it lasted,” Amy says. “Are you ready?”

“The sooner we get this over with, the sooner we go home, you know?”

“Art!”

He throws his hands in the air victoriously as Brendan sags his head with a smile. Art extends a hand across the counter once the jig is up and they shake on it.

“That was a good game, man,” Brendan says.

“Hey, I had the handicap of being underdog.”

“Are you questioning the judge's integrity?” Amy interjects. “I can still change my mind!”

“Naw,” Brendan drones, breaking the shake. “You won fair and square.”

“Well, I'd never be able to do what I do if I didn't have a great mentor.”

“There's no greater accomplishment a teacher can have than being surpassed by his students.” He pauses a beat.

“Well, what's it gonna be? If I can make one request, nothing involving the head or neck. I'd like my wife to still be remotely attracted to me by the end of this.”

“I'm gonna go easy on you, under one condition.”

“And what's that?”

“No peeking.”

“Deal.”

They progress to the chairs. The leather feels cold against Brendan's neck.

“Roll up your sleeve and turn the other way.”

Brendan complies.

“You know, it's kind of embarrassing to work for someone who doesn't even have full sleeves.” Art says. Brendan can hear him prepping his equipment. “You own a tattoo shop! You should have layers, like, sleeves on sleeves.”

They carry on with banter as Art gets to work, with Amy reclining in the chair next to Brendan's. After about fifteen minutes, Art sprays the forearm down and wipes it clean.

“Woah, woah, woah! I never said you can look!” Art says, as Brendan begins turning to check himself out. His head snaps back the opposite direction, feeling like a child with his hand in the cookie jar. “Just kidding, you can look.”

He inspects the new ink in the mirror before them. His forearm is now emblazoned with the bust of a cartoon horse, ending with a tie around his neck. He is holding a coffee cup the one hand he is endowed with, inscribed with “World's #1 Boss.”

“It's that horse you always stare at but he's grown up, now,” Art says, nervously. For the first time since his interview, he sounds vulnerable. Brendan could tell the hand steadying

his arm was shaking as he was giving birth to this character. “A little more cartoonish because if it was a realistic horse, he'd be retired in a barn somewhere or a bottle of glue.”

“It's incredible,” Brendan says. “Thank you.”

“I figure, he's not racing anymore but he's maybe a coach for the other horses, has a gym of his own. He's a cool guy, hence the coffee mug that his employees got him, totally cool with romances in the office.”

Amy giggles, covering her lips with a hand as she blushes.

“So, uh, really, if you don't like it, I won't be offended if you get it covered up.”

“No, I really love it. You know, it's easy to get jaded running a business like this, especially as I get older, but you guys keep it fun for me. You're always reminding me of what it's all about.”

“Alright, you two have fun!” Maggie says, twisting the doorknob. “See you Friday, lone.”

As she and Wes bid Maggie farewell, she remembers the upcoming reunion. Her stomach drops at the thought of attempting to survive that not only with her incumbent husband but the wonder couple as well.

Wes leans forward, making a nest of his fingers in the space between his knees. He's been quiet all afternoon and lone wasn't sure why until this moment. Rather than holding an awkward tension, he now appears poised, waiting for the right opportunity to pounce.

"What's up?" she says, breaking his concentration on finding the cleverest opener to whatever conversation lay ahead.

"So," His eyes are fixed on his interlaced fingers. He slowly releases them and flexes his digits a few times. "I have something to confess."

"Yeah?" She leans in. "You can say anything to me, you know that."

He smacks his lips, takes a deep breath, and releases it. "You know how I told you I was going to meet up with Tristan?"

"Yeah," she says in a hushed tone, as though they're children sharing secrets they did not wish their parents to find know. "You *didn't!*" She shoves his shoulder and he sways on the couch before straightening right back up like a bowling pin. "Did you?"

"No! Of course not. That would be disgusting, outrageous."

She puts her hand on his back, gently rubbing a circle

into it. "Wes, it's O.K. if you did. I'm not going to tell."

"I didn't. I would never do that."

"Uhh, Wes, remember that time we made a child?"

"That was a very long time ago and very different circumstances. I'd think you'd know me well enough to see I'm not that way anymore." He looked her in the eyes, his gaze unwavering. "Nothing happened."

Ione feels a pang of disappointment at this disclosure. Although she so badly wants the validation that would come with his dishonesty, she can't bring herself not to trust him. "Alright, so, nothing happened. Then what's the problem?"

Wes sighs, looking down again. "I never told Maggie about it."

"Why not?"

"Not because I had any bad intentions or that I wanted to be shady. I just felt uncomfortable, like she wouldn't understand."

"Maggie's smart. I'm sure she would. People reconnect with exes all the time. It doesn't mean there's anything to it."

"Maybe." He shrugs. "That's why I feel so guilty. I didn't have a reason to keep this a secret. I felt embarrassed by my shame and those feelings just compounded. It was just easier *not* to have that discussion."

“Well, do you plan to see her again?”

Wes shakes his head.

“Then no need to get all bent out of shape over it.

Maggie doesn't have to know *everything*, does she?”

“Maybe not, I dunno, but I want to be able to share everything with her.”

lone offers a weak smile. “That's great, really. In time, maybe you can tell her, once you're more comfortable.”

“True. I just feel like such an idiot.”

“Don't, Wes. It's not a big deal. Those things happen. Can I tell you something?”

He looks at her, adjusting his glasses.

“You have to set the pen down before I do.”

“Why?”

“I don't want it to wind up in my eye.”

He complies.

“And promise you won't strangle me, either.”

He offers a pinky. She officializes the pact with her own.

Now, she finds herself looking down towards his knees.

“I was with someone else the other night.”

Wes inhales sharply like he's just been administered a shot. He doesn't say anything but she sees him biting the insides of his lips, drawing them tight. His eyes seem glassy as

he scans the room to focus on anything that isn't her. Slowly, he exhales, nodding. "Alright. So, have you told Brendan?"

"Not ye—" She breaks down into sobs, grabbing Wes' arm and latching onto it as she weeps into his sleeve. He brushes the hair out of her face and as she peels away, uses the edge of the sleeve to dry her eyes. She looks up at him with bloodshot puppy dog eyes. "Do you hate me?"

He shakes his head. "No."

"It's alright if you do. I understand." She paws at her cheeks to wipe the tears away. "I hate myself a lot, too."

"Don't say that. You don't deserve to be hated, least of all from yourself."

"How can you say that!? I'm such a piece of shit. I just hurt him and hurt him and because I can't stop hurting him, I feel like I have to go and hurt him more and no matter what I do, he doesn't stop loving me. I'm cruel."

"You're not cruel, just confused." He wraps an arm around her and she cuddles up into the nook of his arm.

They sit in silence for a moment, before lone says, "What if Maggie comes in and sees us like this?"

"I think one broken home is enough drama for one week, so, let's hope that just doesn't happen." lone starts crying more, shaking violently, nearly convulsing in his arm.

He holds her tighter. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that. I was just—I was trying to be funny. It was stupid." He repeats this, though not necessarily in that order, as her fit subsides to a soft tremble.

"What am I gonna do?"

"You know what you have to do, right?"

She nods. "Yeah, but can you say it for me? It'll be easier to do if you tell me to do it."

Great, Wes thinks. Now I'm assigning homework in my personal and professional lives. "You need to come clean to Brendan."

She shivers and her head recoils back into her shoulders like it is trying to withdraw into some imaginary shell. "He's going to hate me."

Wes parts his lips to speak and then seals them back up.

"He is and you know it," lone says, fearfully.

"Maybe. I don't know." He draws in air through his nostrils, hoping to inhale inspiration with it. "I do know Brendan, though, and I think he might understand, in some way."

"I don't want us to be married. I can't treat him right. I don't know what's wrong with me but I just can't. I almost want

him to hate me. I don't get why you haven't kicked me out yet. He's your best friend.”

“lone, in order to be forgiven, one must forgive. To be loved, one must love.”

Maggie's been dropping hints all night about lone's little secret, constantly forcing words like “trust” and “honesty” into the conversation and giving lone a not-so-subtle look. More accurately, she's been shouting these words over the jukebox. Wes knew there was a risk he might regret informing her of this latest development in the circle but didn't expect it to blow up in his face quite like this. Every time Maggie takes a shot at lone, she makes some passive-aggressive remark towards Wes. He knows it's only a matter of time and drinks until Maggie blatantly outs lone's infidelity or possibly worse, lone drops the other shoe and lets Maggie in on Wes' night out. So, he feels both relieved and nervous when Aaron asks him to keep him company as he goes up to the bar to order another round. On one hand, it feels good to be excused from the warzone but on the other, his absence makes him feel more vulnerable to a blow beneath the belt from lone. He keeps glancing over his shoulder towards the table. So far as he can see, they were all sitting in silence, with lone on her phone.

Makes sense, being that lone had been ignoring Brendan and when she wasn't insulting her, Maggie was ignoring lone all night. Aaron's wife, who's been a bi-partisan socialite, still has yet to return from the bathroom.

Wes feels a nudge to his should and looks at Aaron, who is saying something indistinguishable.

“You're gonna have to speak up!” Wes shouts.

“There was a reason I wanted to pull you aside!”

Wes shakes his head. “I told you before, I don't drink!”

“Seriously. I didn't want to say anything in front of the others. Maybe I shouldn't say anything at all but I consider you a friend and want to look out for you. You gotta promise me something, though.”

“I also told you that I don't suck dick.”

“Wes, I'm putting my neck out for you, here. If anyone found out I talked to you about this, it's my job on the line.”

Wes feels his face flush, his throat constrict. “Wh— what's up?”

“People have been talking around the campus and all I'm gonna say is you're really gonna want to play it safe for the rest of the semester, man. You've got eyes on you.”

“Like who?”

Aaron shakes his head. “All I know is that some

complaints have been made and people aren't happy.”

“Well, who complained? The students aren't complaining!”

“Yes, they are.” He held an arm out, almost in a Roman salute, and called his order out to the bartender. “Listen, man. You've just got to chill out for the rest of the semester and let it blow over.”

Wes sighs. “It was that Arnold girl, isn't it?” He can still picture her sitting across from him, sobbing her eyes out and dabbing her cheeks with tissue paper as she told him her story of pregnancy and uncertainty. She felt pressured by the father and her own family to abort so they could go their separate ways and finish their degrees. Wes made the mistake of reminding her the choice was hers. He never saw her again but received an email a week later, reading that she had not only decided to keep the baby but dropped out of college and moved back in with her parents. The father was more committed to his academic career than the idea of parenthood and, unless something's since changed, will not be in the picture.

“The parents blamed you for their daughter dropping out. I never said that.” He makes a swiping motion with his hand. “This conversation never happened, though.”

“So, what now? What do I do to hang onto the job?”

Aaron shrugs. “I don't know if there's anything you can do. Ride it out and hope it passes over. What were you even thinking, trying to run a class like your own talk show? Making fun of the assigned reading and did you really tear up the syllabus in front of the class at one point?”

“I was demonstrating that the rules aren't iron-clad and that the class is to serve the students, not the other way around.”

“Wes, man, you're a bus driver, not Che Guevara.”

“Not really, no. I'm neither of those.”

Aaron stops him with a palm like a traffic cop. “Think of it like this. It isn't your classroom. You're just the driver. You need to get the students to the destinations they set for them and that's all. No scenic detours. I'm not saying it's a perfect system. All I'm saying is that it's a job and if you wanna keep it, you're gonna have to do what you're told.”

“I just didn't want to be another jaded teacher. I want to give the kids a class they'll remember. I didn't want to walk around the classroom like an authority figure. I wanted them to have fun, to be on the tips of their toes, to talk about what happened in class with their friends.”

“And you *can* do those things, but you still have to play

by their rules.”

“I hate rules.”

“I know you do, buddy.”

They stand in silence until Aaron's drink is served before making their way back to the table. The bar is relatively empty. Only a select few are dancing and there are as many empty seats at the bar as there are patrons. Those there for the reunion are keeping to their own cliques. Wes has been wondering all night why they even came.

“We're back!” Aaron announces, placing his drink on the table before pulling his chair out.

“Can I have a sip?” his wife, a curvy woman with short, red hair asks. He slides it gently her way.

“So, Wes,” lone says. He can already tell what's coming. The smirk on her face says *checkmate*. “How was your time with Tristan the other night?”

His insides melt and turn to a thick bile in the pit of his stomach. He feels fight or flight mode kick in and worse yet, knows that everyone at the table can see that he's panicked. He shakes his head, trying to play it off as casual, brushing it aside with his hand. “It was nothing, boring, really.”

“You were out with Tristan?” Maggie says with a raised eyebrow, each word like a stone striking his face.

He grimaces. “Uhh, yeah. Funny story, we just ran into each other and caught up a bit. She has a kid, and a husband, so, we just talked about being having kids and loving who we're with and all that.”

“Why didn't you mention it?”

“You know, I don't want you knowing about every time I go around bragging about you.” He feels himself wincing.

“You'll eventually realize your worth and find you a real man.”

If this conversation gets much worse, she might go and do just that, he thinks.

“Isn't that something that you think might be worth mentioning?”

“Yeah, um.” He's squeezing his bottom lip between his index finger and thumb. “I guess it is. I mean, it was such a not big deal that I didn't even think about it, really.”

“Hm.”

Fuck.

She points at Brendan. “Hey, B. wanna go ditch the losers and make idiots of ourselves on the dance floor?”

He makes a contemplative face, then says, “Sure!”

“That's not, like, a sexual thing between them,” Wes clarifies after they depart. “They both like to dance and I really don't dance. They dance, like, a few feet apart from each

other, not, like, grinding or slow dancing. It's like doing the Dougie or the chicken dance. Nothing's gonna happen, is what I'm saying. They're practically siblings."

Aaron and his wife nod as though they are invested in this before turning back to each other.

"Thanks for clearing that up, bozo," lone says.

"Bozo? Fuck you. You're risking my relationship, here."

"And you're *not* risking my marriage?"

"Your marriage that you don't even want, that one?"

Also, don't blame me for what Maggie says. You know I can't control her. Plus, we're all egalitarian and shit. I can't even take responsibility for half my mistakes, let alone hers."

"Why'd you have to go and tell her? You *know* she can't keep her mouth shut."

"Because I love her and want to be honest with her."

"Just not when it comes to you sneaking out to meet up with ex-girlfriends."

"Well, yes, but you put it like I'm worse than I am. And now she knows, so, consider ourselves even."

"You still owe me some."

"*For what?*"

"I saved your ass."

"How?"

"I can tell Brendan knows something's wrong. He's neglectful but he isn't an idiot. Notice how he hasn't talked to you all night?"

"He's on the other side of the table. He probably doesn't want to strain his voice."

"Use your head, dummy. He thinks he's piecing it together and for all you know, could think *you're* to blame."

"So, because I went out with an ex, that means I couldn't also be hooking up with you? Wouldn't that only make me look guiltier?"

Ione looks down at the table, trying not to laugh.
"Alright, you got me. I didn't think that one through."

"You just wanted to get me in trouble and you know it!"

"Yeah, I did."

"Well, I deserve it, so, you were kind of doing God's work."

"You really love her, don't you?"

"I don't keep her around for the cooking," he says, nodding. "That was a bad joke. She's a good cook."

"So, what are we gonna do?"

"I'm gonna try to not look at the resident happy couple of the table making googly eyes at each other over there as I concoct some brilliant and charming way to communicate to

my girlfriend that although I may be a scoundrel and a coward, I'm also the most desirable man in the world and that she can't stay mad at me. You?"

"Brendan's keeping quiet now but I don't know how he's going to act when we get home. I'm crossing my fingers for a fatal accident so I'll never have to find out."

It isn't until now, as they're parked at the third red light since leaving the reunion, that Maggie breaks the silence.

"So, is this just a thing you do? You get in a relationship and then go back to the girl you were seeing before? Is it some power play, to show that you've still 'got it' and can get someone back whenever you'd like?"

Wes proceeds after glancing to the left to make sure there aren't any cars coming. He can barely bring himself to peek to the right in case she grabs his wandering eye and tears it out.

"Nothing happened, Maggie," he croaks.

"If nothing happened, then why wouldn't you tell me?"

"I planned to. I just didn't because—"

"What's that mean? You 'planned to?' Why would you have to plan something like that? If it's nothing, it shouldn't need a plan!" As her voice gains momentum and volume, it

begins to crack.

“I planned to because I felt awkward about it.” His fingers are locked around the steering wheel like someone is trying to snatch it away from him. “We just ran into each other at the store. It was unexpected.”

“But you spent the night together?”

“Not like *that*. We met for drinks one—”

“You don't drink!”

“I don't, and I didn't. I drank water, with ice. She drank. We just talked about where our lives have led us.”

“I just don't get why you'd feel the need to have your ex in your life. Are you unhappy? Do I not satisfy you? I cook, I clean, I think I'm a good mo—”

“No! It's nothing like that! I am happy and I love you, so much. I just—I feel like I've been blessed with so much and I don't deserve any of it. I used to be a shitty, a *shittier* person than I am and sometimes I feel like I've been rewarded in life for doing nothing but hurting others.”

“Wesley, you know that's not true.”

“I think I do but my mind doesn't. I just wanted to make sure that she was, you know, O.K., that I didn't *break* her or something like I did M—like I was worried I might have.”

“Well, did you?”

For the first time since they've gotten into the car, Wes looks over at her. "She's a little fucked-up but I take no credit."

She smiles, a little. "You're gonna fuck me up if you keep up with these surprises. Really, Wes, I don't need that kind of stress in my life."

"I know. You're right. I'm sorry. I just get caught up in my own head and my own problems and I don't know how to communicate those things."

"Your problems are my problems, Wes. We live together. We sleep in the same bed. If something's bothering you, it's going to affect me, too. And I want to know when something's upsetting you. I want to help you solve your problems. Relationships aren't just fun and sex."

"No, but with me you do get a little spoiled in the sex department."

"You need to talk to me about those things from now on. You don't want to wind up like Brendan and Lone, do you?"

"Ya know, it's so fuckin' irritating, because they used to be my goal. Like, seeing them together used to give me hope and to see how badly—"

"Wesweswes!"

"What!?"

"There's a stop sign!"

He's already in the middle of the intersection. He drives through it without touching the brakes. "Sorry. I was a little caught up in the discussion."

"Eh. We survived it."

Wes reaches over and places his hand on her thigh, giving it a light squeeze.

"Nothing happened that night, Maggie. I promise."

"I know, Wes. I trust you."

They're nearly home by time Brendan takes a deep breath and finally says it. "I know you're having an affair with Wes." There's a resignation in his voice. He's trying to sound strong but he never drives with both hands on the wheel when he's at ease. He takes a look at lone in the passenger seat. His eyes are shattered. He looks broken and crazed and lone feels guilty that the only thing she feels towards this man is pity.

"No," she says, shaking her head. "That's not what's going on at all."

"Oh, come on! Can you cut the shit for one fucking second and be honest with me?" He's now shouting. He's hunched over with arms flexing as he grips the wheel with white knuckles. In all their years estranged and back together, she has never once been afraid of him hitting her. In this

moment, her eyes keep darting back and forth between his awkward frame and the road, not just worrying if he may veer off the road but uncertain that if he does, if it would be due to distraction or an act of murder-suicide. She is so thankful that Mattie is staying with her grandma tonight. “You're spending all this time together. You keep giving each other these stupid looks at the table like nobody else notices. You've got Maggie pissed off at you. You think I'm just a big idiot? You think I don't notice how you act around him? Don't you think it hurts, seeing the way you talk to him with the way you treat me?”

“It's not that,” lone says, hardly above a whisper.

“Why should I trust you? You two have pulled this shit before.”

lone shrugs. “You should trust Wes. You should know that he's learned from his mistakes.”

“You can't even defend yourself,” he spits, shaking his head in disgust. “Fucking unbelievable. I'm not talking about Wes! If I wanted to hear about him, I'd beat it out of him.”

“Oh, so, what? You're gonna go beating people up? Is that what you're gonna do?”

“Don't fucking play those games with me, lone. You know exactly what I meant, don't go taking my words out of context to make yourself look like a victim, here.”

“How am I being a victim!?! How are we *not* talking about Wes when you brought him up!?” She's now speaking with her hands, pointing at him and making a kind of violently staccato jazz hands. “You're acting crazy, Brendan!”

“We're talking about our fucking marriage, which you appear to have forgotten about but is still important to me!”

“I forgot about? You wanna talk about neglect? Do you know how lonely it is to stay at home, taking care of a baby while you stay out all night with your hot little employee. 'Oh, Brendan! You're so smart and talented. Please, put a tattoo on my boobies!'” She punctuates this with mock kissing sounds.

“Oh, taking care of *your* kid that *you* made!”

“You're gonna punish Mattie, now? Because you're mad at me? That's real mature, Brendan. Real father of the year material.”

“Don't you *fucking* start with that!” he shouts, pointing at her. He is no looking directly at her, ignoring the light that just turned green. His face is red and a vein down his forehead looks like it's fitting to burst. “You know it hurt me what you did. You know that I made a commitment to love and care for Mattie like she's my own. You know that everything I do, I do for you, two. I am a good father. You know why I come home from work late at night? Because I'm *working*, to provide for

you. What do you want from me? Do you want me to sell the house? Do you want me to sell the shop and get a 9-5 job? If that's what you want, I'll fucking do that. Just say it! Just tell me what to do and I'll make it happen. 'Brendan, this is what will make me happy,' and it's done. That's all you need to do."

"Don't be ridiculous. You're not selling anything."

"I don't get it," he says, softly. He begins driving again. "This was always our dream. This is what we always wanted. I always thought we'd get here and be, I don't know, *happier*."

"Maybe this isn't my dream," lone croaks. Tears are rolling down her cheeks.

"I love you so much." He reaches an arm around her shoulders and she leans across the center console, resting her head on his shoulder.

"I know."

"What are we gonna do, babe?"

No answer. She just convulses to the rhythm of her sobs.

"We can't keep going on like this."

"I know," she musters. Her voice is shattered.

Wes is greeted by silence as he swings the door open. It's dark out and Maggie's already in bed. He twists the

doorknob and pivots the door shut as quietly as though he's performing a break-in. He treads into the hall like the floor might give way with each step. The bedroom door is open for him. He makes his way in and leans down to part a stray lock of hair from Maggie's face and kiss her cheek. She doesn't stir. He always appreciated that she's a hard sleeper, giving him the freedom to toil away at night without fear of interrupting her rest. He returns to the living room, where he plops down on the couch before having a minor anxiety attack that he likely awakened her. For the first time today, luck is on his side.

He can still picture Dr. Kasey's office, though his memory is shading it ominously like it was the desk of The Godfather, with a heavy mist of smoke like it was being hot-boxed with cigars or heated with hellfire. He can't honestly recall if her hands were folded but the actor playing Dr. Kasey is posed this way.

"Wesley," she says, the earnest concern he thought he heard in her voice as the event played out now sounds like a condescending sneer in the replay. "We have something very serious to discuss."

She gave him the same speech as Aaron, about the complaints from the Arnold parents, that she didn't feel students were resonating with his style, that he's erratic. Her

words characterized him as a buffoon, an overgrown child. “I wanted to give you an opportunity when I offered you this position, and now, I'm giving you another. I want to give you the option to step down from your role willingly and we can all wash our hands of this little experiment.”

“And what if I say no?” He could feel his eyes twitch, his right knee tremble. He wasn't confident that his legs wouldn't give out.

Kasey smacks her lips. “It's a formality, Wes. One way or another, you will be removed from your position. I'm trying to let you leave with dignity.”

“Dignity? What do you know about dignity?” His arms were now outstretched. “This place, it's a church for academic sycophants. There's no education here. There's no honesty. It's a culture of body snatchers. It's a sham. Go ahead, can me. Do what you must, because it doesn't matter what you do. You can cancel, and fire, and suppress whoever you want. The fact of the matter is, you can't stop the truth. The truth will always find a way to sprout up through the cracks of whatever concrete you pour over it.”

“Wes, this has very little to do with whatever views you think I disapprove of and very much to do with your attitude and behavior in the classroom that you're exemplifying in this

moment. I don't know what truth you think you possess that I, or this campus are trying to censor, but I assure you, there is no such conspiracy taking place.”

“I'm not claiming ownership of any truth or absolute knowledge. I'm just saying that you people want to fill kids' heads with all these ideas of how they should think. I knew that when I was your student but I thought I could make a difference. I thought I could be that teacher that makes a difference in someone's life. And you know what? Someone is going to be born because of me. Maybe I didn't keep a 'professional distance' or whatever but you can't make a change by keeping the status quo. All that I have ever said is that they need to think for themselves. I'm proud of my work, here.”

“Please, I'm asking you to compose yourself so we can end this amicably.”

“Fuck that. I'm leaving but make no mistake, this is not amicable.”

“I understand that you're upset. This is never easy. I do want to wish you the be—”

“Keep your platitudes. Keep your cushy job and your indoctrination programs. Just know that when it's all said and done, you won't see me in Hell.”

Back on his couch, Wes leans down and cradles his head in his hands. He pushes his palms up against his temple, massaging them gently. He can hear himself breathing heavily.

God, I think you've heard these speeches enough times to know that I suck at this. I guess, being God, you knew that before I gave them. I know you're probably sick of these one-sided conversations about me, me, me, and what I want and what I need but I don't wanna even try to play you like that tonight. I'm confused. I'm lost. I don't know what to do now or how to live me life or even who I should be. Just, please, give me direction. Let me hear your voice. I've been trying all this time to make it on my own, to go through the motions of faith while retaining autonomy and all I do is create a bigger and bigger mess for myself. I guess this is another one of those times where I call just to ask for something but maybe this time I'm at least asking for the right thing? Anyhow, that's the best I've got; that's all I've got. For once in my life, I'm just gonna shut up and listen to whatever you have to say to me. If there's anything you need me to know, I'm ready.

Kendra is power-walking towards the lobby. She had gotten caught up in taking notes for her previous client, a middle-aged woman deep in grief after the passing of her husband just months after the birth of their first grandchild, and would have lost track of time entirely if her alarm hadn't gone off that it was time to meet Wes Thompson for his appointment. Really, she still has another five minutes but she was raised to believe that being on time is late. She can hear her heels clicking on the tiled floor with each step. By the time she finally pushes those double doors open, trying to make it seem as non-rushed as possible, she finds herself in a lobby of strangers without a patient of hers to be found. Some of the patients give her a look as though she's an intruder and are punishing her for distracting their meditation on the tv with dirty looks.

She tolerates this for nearly five minutes before walking over to the receptionist just a little further down the hall.

"Thompson?" Judy says, scanning her list. "No Thompson's checked in today."

That's so unlike him to be late. She pulls her phone out and finds his Contact in her directory. The phone rings once, twice, three times, and finally four.

"Hi, this is Wes. If you're trying to reach me, clearly I'm

doing something more important. If it'll make you feel any better, leave a message after the beep and I won't listen to it."

Where could he be?

"Hope you don't mind me swinging by but the gremlin had something to tell you," Wes says, leading Mattie up Brendan's porch steps by the hand.

"Happy Father's Day!" she shouts, throwing her hands up like she's tossing confetti.

"Thank you, honey!" Brendan says, lifting her up and spinning her around before setting her back on the ground. "Thanks for stopping by, man," he says to Wes, patting him on the shoulder. "Happy Father's Day."

"Happy birthday to you, two."

"I, uh, you should probably know by now how Father's Day works. We're not all born today."

"Ah, but *that* is where you're mistaken!" Wes replies, holding up a finger. "Not born, but *reborn*."

Brendan laughs, shaking his head. "I've missed you guys."

"How's it been around here, since, uh, you-know-who went to spend some time with family?" Wes says, scoping the place out, even though it looks exactly the same as it always

has, save for a greater population of empty beer bottles in the recycling can.

“Quiet but somehow less lonely.”

“Think about it like this, if you die alone, at least you're in good company, right?”

“True, true. Hey, man, you want a water or something? Mattie, can I get anything for you?”

“I don't wanna be short but we do gotta get going. Grandpas are expecting us. We just wanted to see if you're home and say hi.”

“I appreciate that. Made my day, I mean it.”

Get the lady one for the road, if you have anything nonalcoholic.”

“Yeah, yeah. I think I do.” He ventures into the house. Wes can hear the fridge opening and closing from the porch. Brendan reemerges with a juice box, handing it to Mattie.

“Looks like this is the last one!”

“Guess you'll have to go out and buy some more,” Wes says.

“Yeah?”

“Maybe you can get shake your marriage off but you can't get rid of us that easy.”

“In that case, I'll keep some in stock.”

“Well, we'd best be on our way before Dad rounds up a drunken search party at Sal's.”

“Wouldn't want that,” Brendan chortles. “Thanks again for stopping by, Wes. It means a lot.”

“One final piece of wisdom before I go, unless I think of another. Even if not, I'll probably think of something better in the car and text it to you. Anyhow, never giving up is a core tenet of optimism. Guys like us don't give up; we're given up on.” He pulls Brendan in for a quick hug. “And remember,” he says, patting him on the ass. “only cowards wear condoms!”

Brendan recoils from the shock of that before getting down on one knee to take a look at Mattie from eye-level. “Goodbye, Mattie. I miss you *very, very* much but we're still gonna see each other and be friends, O.K.?”

“Bye, Daddy!” she says, giving him a quick peck on the cheek.

Suddenly, Brendan can no longer see and feels his nose draining into his mustache. “B-Bye, Mattie.”

“It's the food, isn't it?” Maggie says. Wes has been pushing the chicken nuggets around his plate with a fork for nearly fifteen minutes, now, looking down at it like he's about to puke. “Wes, your hands are shaking! Are you feeling O.K.!? ”

“Al—alright, so, I kind of pulled one over on your ass.”

He says without looking her in the eyes. His bottom lip is quivering. “This isn't actually a Father's Day dinner for me.”

She could have figured that out by him choosing her favorite Italian restaurant. “What is it, Wes? What's wrong?” He hasn't quite been the same since losing his job. She recognizes how great a blow that can be to a man's ego but he hasn't so much been depressed in the following weeks so much as skittish. Even at his most nervous, though, she's never seen him like this.

He drops clumsily to the ground and for a second, she thinks he actually fell out of his chair. She gasps in shock.

He reaches into his pocket and then realizes there is a waitress attempting to step around him. “E-excuse me,” he says, weakly. Maggie now realizes that all eyes in the room are on them. “Maggie, I don't know how to do this, because I know I'm not good enough for you and nothing I say can change that. I'll never understand why you lowered your standards to the likes of me but I'm so grateful you did. You are the most beautiful, intelligent, awesome person I've ever met and that includes people on the TV. You are an incredible mother to Mattie. You turned my house into a home. You make everything worth it. I don't know what I'm doing with my life and I can't

even promise I ever will. The only thing I do know is that wherever life takes me, I want to go there with you. I want to take care of you but not because you're helpless; I want us to take care of each other. You're my gym partner in life, my buddy cop. I'm supposed to be good with words because I'm a writer but the more I talk, the less good I feel about that. I wanted to until after I finished eating but then I couldn't eat because I was so anxious and I was also worried that if I waited until I ate the food that I might throw that up while trying to propose. So, here I am, not on one knee, but two because I was too nervous to take the time to properly assume the position, begging you. Maggie, will you please waste the rest of your time with me?"

"Yes," she says, nodding. "Yes." She wipes a tear from her cheek and presents her hand for him to fit with the ring. His hand is shaking so much he can hardly coordinate this, not to mention through his blurry vision, she currently appears to have eight ring fingers.

He stands up on wobbly legs, taking her in his arms as she rises to join him. The nondescript restaurant fills with applause from its faceless patrons as they consummate the engagement with a kiss.

"There's something I need to tell you, too," Maggie

says, the wind of her breath caressing Wes' cheek.

“Yeah?”

“I'm pregnant.”

“O.K.,” Wes says, nodding. He pulls her back in for another kiss. “Cool.”