

Conditional Love

Todd Crawford

That Joke Isn't Funny Anymore.

“So, tell me about your last book.”

“Oh, c’mon,” I said. “You don’t want to hear about that.”

“Sure I do!” She gave the cheeseburger another rep off her plate and into her mouth. It was pissing grease down her finger. Some guys would be put off by that, a girl that’s not afraid of her own appetite. It’s the kind of thing that’s considered a red flag on a first date. Not me. I’m all about it. There’s a kind of dishonesty about the salad with lemon water, a false advertisement for meals to come. “It got you a Fellowship, didn’t it?”

I was stirring my fork through the lettuce before me. The population of grilled chicken strips had apparently been exhausted. “Well, yeah.” I was blushing. I knew I’d regret bringing that up. “It just—it’s hard to for me to talk about my own books, especially when I’ve moved on to something new.”

“Oh, *please*.” She wagged a french-fry at me. They always reminded me of matches when I was a kid. Matt and I used to pretend we were smoking cigarettes as we ate them, holding them between our fingers as we exhaled imaginary fumes. “Every successful artist is also a salesman. Give me the pitch.”

I cast a glance down at my silverware. “The book’s dedicated to my daughter, Maddie. It’s the story of her maculate conception. I started writing it when I was going through a phase of alcoholism and self-pity. Her mother and I touched base—not physically—at our high school reunion, so that’s kind of a weird part of the story. I also worked some stuff in there about my brother coming out as a transsexual.”

“Is he your brother, or sister now?”

“She’ll always be my brother, ya know?”

“Gotcha. Sorry about that.”

“No, it’s fine. I don’t give a shit. He does, but that’s his business.”

“So, the book is nonfiction, then?”

I shrugged. “Kind of. I mean, I embellished quite a bit, but that’s the kind of shit that wins you Pulitzers, so why not?”

She was nodding. “That’s really sweet. You ever going to let her read it?”

“Oh, fuck, no.” I could tell that drool mixed with Italian dressing was spilling down my chin. I wiped it off with my hand and wiped my hand on the tablecloth. “If her mother wouldn’t kill me for it, she would.”

“I’m sure she’d understand—in time.”

“Yeah, maybe in time. You know what I call my books, when they ask what genre I write? Posthumous.” She smiled, but it felt forced, too polite. “I’ve just accepted that it’s probably going nowhere. Someday, they’ll be all that’s left of me and maybe Maddie will pick some old manuscripts up to remember me by. It’ll be something for her to look at and think, ‘Boy, I’m sure glad *that guy’s* not around anymore.’”

“I’m calling bullshit! *Bullshit*. You’re in an MFA program on Fellowship from that same book. Clearly, there’s people out there who are interested in what you have to say.”

“I dunno. Maybe.” I took a swig of water. “I’m sorry. I just get caught up in my work sometimes. What I’m saying is that I’m fortunate enough to be able to write at all. Some people can’t afford to do that in our country, let alone the third world. The writing *is* the reward, and if anything else comes of it, then it’s just a bonus. What’re you in for?” She stared at me, confused. “I mean, what did you write that got you into the program?”

“Oh!” Her face lit up. “I did a piece on America’s involvement with the Armenian Genocide. It’s really something that isn’t talked about enough, even today. Did you know the New York Times still denies it? That’d be like if Breitbart was openly denying The Holocaust.”

“Well, that’s very altruistic of you. Unfortunately, I’m not smart enough to get into that topic.”

“Alright, so, what are you working on, now?”

“Well,” I laughed. “It’s just a silly thing. It’s more marketable, actually. It’s called *Crazy Cat Lady*. This guy is going out with a girl, and when they go back to her place, she warns him that she’s a bit of a, well, crazy cat lady. Soon as they step inside, the cats swarm this guy, hissing at him, one scratches him and draws blood, all that stuff. The guy just thinks they’re being assholes, like animals are. Well, the more time he spends with this woman, the more obsessive she gets about her cats. Eventually, through plot convenience, he finds out that the cats are her former lovers, who used to be human, who have all tried leaving her before. So, they were trying to warn him the whole time about this crazy bitch, like, he’s going to end up like they are if he doesn’t get out while he still can. So, he has to watch his back while they come up with a way to take her out. All the cats probably gang up on her and scratch her eyes out or

something at the end.”

She clapped, falling back into her chair, laughing. “I love it! That’s, like, all my friends! One thing, though. How does she do it?”

“Well, the same as any other woman, I’d imagine...”

“No, pervy. How’s she turn the men into cats?”

I looked around the room for an answer. Because it was one of those restaurants with mirrors all over the place, I ended up looking my own dumb ass in the face. “Shoot me a text soon as you find out, because I’ve been at a standstill on that one.”

Cut to my car, outside of her house, where I found myself at yet another standstill. Would it be impolite to ask for an invitation in? Or would it seem weak not to? My mind was scanning the muddled transcript of our conversation at dinner. What once felt clever on my tongue left a crass aftertaste in the back of my throat. She probably thought I was an asshole, and if she did, she was probably the kind of girl worth pursuing. Boy, was I going to feel like an idiot on the ride home.

“Everything O.K.?” a voice from the real world penetrated my isolation. I turned away from the still night across the dashboard to Maggie in the passenger’s seat. I felt like I was hotboxing her scent, that a curtain of smoke would be hanging between us. It seems like thicker girls always overdue it on the perfume, but I’m not complaining. I leaned across, hoping not to take long enough for her to notice the unflattering details of my kissy face. A finger stood in my way, like a protester before a tank. “Let’s take this inside,” she said, biting her lip. That works for me.

Oh, yeah. I’m supposed to walk her to her doorstep, I thought, as she pushed her front door open. Inside, a flat screen TV was blaring from its mount on the same wall holding the front door. On the futon directly across from our place in the doorway was an Indian girl with thick eyeshadow. She was wearing pajama pants and the lady version of a wife-beater (*a husband-beater?*). I was trying not to stare at her belly ring. I couldn’t tell if it was due to perversion of being bird-brained enough to actually get distracted by shiny objects, but in hindsight, I’m sure it was a little of both. “Yo,” she said without breaking her concentration on what I could only imagine was a reality show.

“Hey,” I managed, somehow even more uncomfortable than before.

“Wes, this is my roommate, Trish,” Maggie said as she pushed me through

the doorway. Oh, yeah. I did vaguely remember her saying something about a roommate earlier.

“Trish, keep our guest entertained so I can brush my teeth.”

“*Our* guest?” Trish croaked, but my date was already exiting stage right. I thought about making a threesome innuendo, but I decided not to try my luck. Instead, I shoved my hands into my pockets, looking around the room for something to comment on. “It’s O.K. to be quiet. No need to make this awkward by forcing conversation.”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“I mean, it’s not like you’re trying to fuck *me*.”

The thought had crossed my mind about sixty times in the estimated minute I’d spent in her presence, but I suppose she was right, considering none of that energy was made kinetic. I gave the statement my consent through silence. From then on, it was me watching her watch TV, trying to look at anything else. Occasionally, I’d peek over at the screen. By the time Maggie returned, I was considering bolting out the door.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be out here all night,” Trish declared, as Maggie led me through down the hall. There were two windows inside the bedroom, and below each window, a bed. The format was almost spooky in its symmetry, like the twins from *The Shining* or something. The wall nearest to the right-side bed was covered in pictures of topless male actors and pop stars. “I take it *that* one’s not hers,” I said. Waiting for us in bed was a teddy bear, tucked neatly in so that one arm was visible and the other covered.

“You would guess right,” she replied coolly. She demonstrated by taking a seat on its far end. I plopped down beside her. For a moment, we just looked at each other. It seemed we were just appreciating the privacy. Up close, I could see all the intricacies of her make-up. How long did it take to put all that shit on? I went to wrap my arm around her, but wimped out halfway through and planted my hand on the mattress behind her to form a tripod with my body. She must have taken that as initiative, because before I knew it, her face was sucking on mine. After that brief but pronounced second of lip on flattened unprepared lip action, I caught up to her pace. Her taste almost reminded me of milk. I can’t really explain it; that’s just the truth. It wasn’t unpleasant, though. She ran her fingers through the back of my hair as I worked

up the confidence to cup a hand on her shoulder. I bit her lip and she pushed me down, falling on top of me. Necks were wetted, hands wandered. She lifted herself up to remove her shirt. It seemed like a nice one to me, but she tossed it to the floor like some kind of performer. Underneath was a body that wasn't quite pear-shaped. She dipped back down to me and I removed her bra.

She peeled her lips away from me. "Can we put some music on?" She paused to dry her lips with the back of her hand. "So we don't bother Trish?"

Personally, I thought the surround sound experience in the living room should do the trick, but instead, I said "Sure." As she got up toward the boombox on the edge of a dresser on the wall across from me, I added "I don't know what kind of idea you've got of me, but I'm not exactly the screaming type."

She turned back my way, smiling. "Don't underestimate me." She unzipped her pants and kind of danced out of them as the music started. She rolled into bed, nuzzling me. "I don't know what kind of idea *you*'ve got of *me*." She kissed my neck. "I'm not exactly the kind of girl to take a blind date from some guy at orientation."

"That's what they all say." I snuck an arm around her, pulling her in.

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. I'm actually working for the campus. They pay me to romance new girls at orientation, give 'em their tuition's worth."

"For twenty thousand a year, you talk a big game."

"I come in payments."

A hand burrowed into my pants as she sucked on my neck. "*Something wrong?*" It would seem that I was not quite up to task.

"I'm sorry. I'm just not...I don't know if I can do that right now."

"Is it—did I do something?"

"No, no. It's not your body or anything. It's the music."

"*My body?*" Her face contorted into something that could turn a man to stone.

"Yeah, it's not that."

"Then why bring it up? Clearly, it was on your mind."

"On my *mind?* It's on *me!*" Not for much longer. She was soon off the bed and scooping her clothes up from the floor. I swung myself to an upright position at the side of the bed. "It's the song. It sounds like some tweeny bop shit, giving me some

Lolita vibes. Exposing myself to these airwaves would run a risk of some kind of auditory STD.”

“Oh, sure. You’re just *too fucking cool*. I get it. The shirt was back over her head.

“Listen, I’m sorry.” I was massaging the extremities of my hairline, head hanging down to study the carpet between my feet. “It’s not you. It’s not even the song. It’s cheesy, but I get it. I like Cindy Laupier, so I can’t judge. Right now, I’m just feeling weird about the whole thing. Like, we just—I’m getting the feeling it’d be better if I just left.”

“Wouldn’t be the worst decision you’ve made tonight.”

The music was castrated of what was surely the final of three choruses as I collected my shirt. Before removing myself, I cast one last glance her way, a telepathic SOS of sorts. Her expression held no compassion. I muttered an apology and skulked out like a defendant entering the courtroom. I didn’t even look at her roommate, still on the couch. I couldn’t take the judgment. To her, I was probably nothing more than the equivalent of a windshield wiper sweeping across the television. I tapped out an apology message on my cellphone, from the safety of my car, but decided against sending it.

By the time Ione answered the door, there was only one thing on my mind. “Can I use your bathroom?”

“Couldn’t hold it ‘till you got home?” She was in purple pajamas with a black top.

“Thought you guys told me I *was* home, here.” I brushed past her on my way in. “You guys weren’t, like, pegging or something right now, were you?”

“Just gearing up to prep the bull,” Brendan said from his seat by the fire.

“Hey, don’t get too excited. By time you’re done with that light beer, you won’t legally be able to consent to whatever you’re thinkin’.”

“Guys, don’t start.” Ione’s hands went from the closing door to her eyes, rubbing them in a way that looked like some interpretive dance formation. “We just got Maddie to sleep.”

“For real, am I being a bother?” I looked around, feeling uneasy where I stood.

“Brothers can’t be bothers,” Brendan announced.

My lip stretched back as though it was hooked by fishing line. “*Ehh...* That makes things sound a little weird.” I looked back at Ione. “Does that make you feel incestuous at all?”

“*Completely.* It’s a fantasy come true. Weren’t you pissing or something?”

“Right.” I went on my way. “I’ll be back before you can say...*toiletries?*”

“That’s because you don’t wash your hands.”

“I’ve gone over this a hundred times over, *at least!*” I called out, glancing through the doors of bedrooms to my left and right. “Little Wesley is the absolute cleanest part of my body. If anything, I should dip my balls into the sink and wash them after touching my hands.”

“Guys, seriously.” Ione spoke in a loud hushed-tone. “Maddie *just* got to sleep.” As if on cue, my girl started wailing from the darkness of her bedroom.

“Dammit! I’m sorry. I can take care of her,” I yelled as I unzipped myself.

“It’s fine. You can’t even handle closing the bathroom door.”

“You know I can’t do that. My confidence levels are too high.”

“And the light’s off! Do you know how many times I come in there and have to clean dribble off the toilet seat!?”

“Hey, I’m not just going on instinct, here. When the zipper’s down, it’s like God exposing Himself to Moses. My aim is on point, and you’re holding the proof!” I ran the sink for ten Mississippi to give the impression I was sanitizing and returned to the living room.

“Didn’t you have a date tonight?” Ione asked from the table as she bobbed my girl on her lap.

“Yeah, I had her wait out in the car. Didn’t wanna make anybody jealous.”

“*Wes!*”

I brushed the exclamation off. “Naw, she was lame. Thought I’d rather see what the fam was up to.”

Her head tilted towards Brendan. “Why don’t you guys go outside so you can flirt in private? I have to open shop tomorrow and I’m trying to put a baby to sleep.”

He rose on command to lead me out. “You want a water, man?”

“Better not. All I need is a drink from the fountain of love,” I said, walking over to pet Maddie’s head. I never knew it took babies so little to grow so much hair

before she came around.

“C’mon, please,” Ione whined. “She was just nodding off.

“Oh, it’ll be fine, *Mom*.” I lifted her out of Ione’s arms, feeling a soft resistance on behalf of her mother. “She was probably just waiting for pappy to come around to say goodnight.” I patted her back as I rocked my shoulders side to side like I was an awkward extra in a hoedown scene from one of those old movies. I felt some slobber gathering near the blade of my shoulder, but it was all good. Being daddy means having to deal with slobber, tears, and some sad day, blood. “Alright!” I said, stamping a kiss on her forehead, pronounced with a loud smacking. “I’ve got my fill...for tonight.” I returned her to Ione’s custody. “I still think you should consider that whole cracker chalk circle thing, I get to take her top half home; you guys can keep the legs and diapers. No? Well, good night, then.” I leaned in to kiss the side of Ione’s face. She shirked away from me with a *Wes, please*. “Oh, gimme a break! It’s not like I won’t kiss Brendan’s cheek on my way out. See ya, *loser!*” I headed for the door with Brendan at my heels. He assured her that he’d be back in a minute.

Outside, frogs were stretching their throats. The freaks who live here find it calming. It makes me anxious. “For real, I didn’t interrupt anything when I stopped by?” I rested my arms along the wooden rail of the porch, looking at my car and the road behind it.

“No way, dude. You’re always welcome around these parts.” He took a drag from his e-cig. “Ione’s just...nesting, ya know?”

“Does that ever stop?”

He bobbed his head around. It looked like he was trying to dislodge the answer out from whatever cranny it might be fitted. “Not really.” He laughed. “It’s not *bad*, but it can be a bit much. Everything is us, in the house, all the time.”

“No more nights out with the bros, then?”

“No more bros.”

“Well, who needs ‘em? The older I get, the more I’m starting to see the socialites as the freaks.”

“So what went down with your date? How was she?” He turned to look me in the eye with almost carnal anticipation.

I burst out laughing. “Man, don’t look at me like that. I know you’re tied down to the ball and chain but that doesn’t mean you can live vicariously through *my*

exploits!”

“I’ll have to wait for that ‘till the book comes out?”

I didn’t mean to let that hang in the air, buoyed by the frogs’ croon, but I had nothing in my arsenal that could shoot it down. He’d won this round. All I could do was change directions. “I’m just not ready, you know? It’s not the same, with Maddie around. It’s better, much better, actually, but everything else just feels so trivial. It’s hard for me to invest in anything else.”

“I feel ya there. Back in the day, I used to do tattoo parties all through the night at least once a month for spare cash. Nowadays, it takes almost everything in me just making it to close. I just want to be around, all the time.”

I interrupted him with a monotonous *ehhhhh*. “Us men are hunters and gatherers. We got no time for that campfire shit. We provide the resources for the women and children to spend, ya know?”

“That what you tell yourself each month when child support comes out?”

If we had bothered to turn the porch light on, he’d have probably seen me blush. Donating to the charity of Maddie was the only thing better than money in my own wallet. It was my only real source of pride, the only thing that made me worth my while on this planet. If you want to know the reason I crossed the road, it was to make sure Ione gets that check. Lame, I know, but that’s why I make my bread at the bar and not from royalties.

“You know, I always felt like autumn was the best time of year to fall in love.”

“That’s why they call it the fall.” I couldn’t help but to smirk at this, but I didn’t want Brendan to see in case he was attempting to talk that real.

“Something on your mind, man? You just seem—distant, and the whole dropping by thing. I mean, you’re welcome here anytime. It’s just, well, most guys would’ve saw the date through, if you catch my drift.”

I shrugged. “Just not worth it to me. Pussy’s...well, it’s pussy. I don’t want some girl that’s down to hump for twenty minutes. I want a *woman*, you know? Someone to call step-mom.”

“Sounds kinda kinky.” His tone implied that he had pulled one over on me, which would be impossible. The other times were just flukes, like when a dude lets his kid beat him at chess.

“You know what I mean. I just can’t stand the false advertisements of it all.

It'd be so much easier to just skip past all that and cut to the chase. I'm a man and here are my needs. You're a woman, so tell me yours and we'll see if we can make a compromise. If so, let's sign the papers and we can get married by the end of the night."

"That sounds like a great way to scare a girl off on the first date."

"Bowie was planning kids with Iman by the end of their first dinner."

"Yeah, but you're not him." God *damn*, Brendan had grown savage. He'd probably been taking notes from our exchanges when it came time to hand Maddie off to me.

"And...there's the whole Matt Situation."

"Yeah, I'd say that'd take up some mental space. How's he been, by the way?"

"Fuck if I know. It feels like I'm living with an extraterrestrial sometimes." *Speaking of Bowie...* "That's not a joke about his whole gender-bender thing. I mean, like, he's getting out there."

Brendan shook his head. "You mean, like, with using?"

"I mean that I'm terrified to come home and find him dead with a needle in his arm. He swears it's only pot, but he's wrecked himself. He looks like a zombie half the time."

"I'm sorry, man." I felt his hand on my back. Usually, this would make me feel uncomfortable, but somehow, I felt myself inheriting the confidence of his action. You could tell this was something he didn't have to think twice about, whereas I (*and, let's be real, most men*) would shy at the thought of touching another dude.

"It's his life. We're just the ones that have to deal with the consequences of it." I relieved the rail of my weight. I could feel the indentations it had left on my forearms. "On that note, I should probably stop pussyfooting and get on with the night."

"You sure, dude? You can stick around long as you need to."

"Yeah. I shouldn't be keeping the happy family up with my problems all night, anyhow. Thanks for talking." I reached out to pat his shoulder, but the gesture was weak and missed its mark. We psychically agreed to pretend that it hadn't happened.

"We're here for you anytime, Wes."

“Right back atcha.” As I was climbing down the stairs, I shouted, “Enjoy fucking the mother of my child tonight!” I kinda hoped Ione would hear that, because she gets uncomfortable with that kind of talk and the thought of annoying her from beyond the porch amused me.

“Thanks, man! I certainly hope to!”

I opened the car door. “Love her so good she’ll stop calling out my name at climax!” At first I was happy to have the last word, but as the silence of the car engulfed me, the exchange felt futile.

I was anticipating the stillness of the night to have endured into our house as I opened the door. Best possible scenario, I would tiptoe over the floorboards and retire into my room for a few iron reps before bed. Sometimes, there can be a comfort in loneliness. A lamp cast a sepia tone across the room. I could hear the heater running like the background noise of a David Lynch movie. I tried not to let Matt see me jump as I noticed him on the futon, staring at the empty TV screen with the cat on his lap. He looked like a cross between a pod person and a parent waiting for the belated teenager to return home.

“*Jesus Christ!*” I let out. “I’ve heard of mindless entertainment, but this is ridiculous.”

“What’s up?” His hair was ruffled, standing up at awkward positions. There’s the kind of messy hair one aims to achieve, like the bedhead they fix up for actors in the movies, and then there’s unkempt. This was not a case of the former.

“Just makin’ my rounds, keepin’ out of trouble. You?”

He jolted his shoulders in a shrug. “Bored. Nothin’s on the TV.”

“Turning it on might help.” I closed the door behind me, taking a reluctant step into our abode. “Then again, it might be better off as-is.”

“You see Maddie any?”

“Yeah, actually. Wasn’t supposed to, but I dipped out of my date and figured I may as well.”

“What’s it like?”

“You mean—having Maddie?”

“Yeah. Is it worth it to you? I’m not trying to be a dick.”

I tried not to show him how taken aback I was by this, but it took restraint. “I

think that's a loaded question. How do you define worth it? To me, she's worth everything else in life. She's not a distraction; she *is* my purpose, if that makes sense. When you're single, it's all about providing for yourself, but everything I do now is about giving her the best life I can."

"Yeah, but there's really no purpose to life. It's not like any of this matters at all. It's all" he circled his finger around his head. "Noise, ya know?"

"Maybe, but that's just nihilism. That kind of commitment to nothing being meaningful is just as much a belief as putting faith or value into anything."

Apparently this concept was only worth about one half of a shrug.

"Speaking of responsibility, when you gonna start bagging all this garbage?" The coffee table was populated with empty bottles, candy wrappers, and God knows what else. If we placed it in an art exhibit, critics would praise it as looking "wonderfully lived-in" and commend what it says about the American lifestyle. What can I say, one man's art is the rest of the world's trash, and I didn't find Matt's piece worth displaying. "It's starting to look like your room out here."

"Yeah, coming from you..."

"Yeah, coming from the guy who got his shit relatively together. Now I'm cleaning counters for a living while you fill them for fun."

"Calm down, Mom."

I left him to gaze into the abyss of our television set. Sometimes, you just have to be the bigger man and know when to walk away. This decision was more likely due to my lack of patience rather than any abundance of maturity, but it's all means to an end. Safe inside my bed-womb, I could feel the steam pouring out of my ears to create a dark cloud above me. The events of the night were pouring back down on me, the worst of them cracking down on me like thunder.

Who the fuck did Matt think he is, talking about Maddie like that? I try to be empathetic, but sometimes a line needs to be drawn and she's on the other side of it. I knew what this was stemming from. She used to love her uncle, but lately, she's been uneasy in his arms. Soon as he picks her up, she starts wailing. You wouldn't think a kid that age would have any real judge of character, but then again, lots of people are wrong about plenty of shit. I used to get anxious around kids pre-language. I had this fear that they had this almost telepathic capability to identify which adults could or couldn't be trusted. That'd explain why they always shied away from me. Back in my

retail days, I was exposed to enough kindness that I learned how to perform for them. The paranoia turned out to be just that, a spooky filter over objective reality. With this whole Maddie/Matt thing, I'm starting to reconsider it.

My conversation with Mom felt like the phone call equivalent of an instrumental track. The rhythm was there, even if the words weren't. It was as though I could feel her lips moving against my ear, but I could not translate them into any decipherable language. What I can recollect is that it was absolutely nothing remarkable. I was sitting at the edge of my bed as she rambled on about all the same subjects we love to ramble on about. My feet dangled a mere inch above the floor. If I stretched my toes out, they would breach the wooden surface. For some reason, I felt compelled to, yet I was not prepared to feel the cold against my flesh. I was hanging in that moment of truth before pressing cheek against toilet on a winter's night. The lights were dim and no sunshine broke through the blinds to disrupt the darkness. I felt dazed, drawn into a meditative state by the lullaby of my mother's voice. Then, like a flat line jolted back to life, her voice rose to a scream. The sound pieced my ear. It was not the scream of a civilized creature, but of an animal in pain. It was as though she had stepped on a nail and was forced to repeat the action on a loop. Each outburst was followed by another, with little to no room between to catch breath. I held the phone away from my face. I stared at its blank screen as though it would hold an answer of whatever it was that had gone so horribly wrong. Something was collecting in my throat, climbing its way up to be birthed from my mouth. Whatever horror I contained could only be sibling to the terror my mother was producing. I felt my veins swelling, blue networks pronouncing themselves against the thin veil of my skin. I felt every hair clogging the follicles of my head as though they were freshly sewn into my skull and about to fall out at any moment. The screaming did not stop.

I woke to a single voice, but somehow it sounded like a chorus. The frankentone of male aggression given a female pitch wavered between a scream and a growl that was probably closer to a whimper than intended. It should have startled me but it felt more like a gentle nudge at my bedside, a distant memory floating up to the surface of my conscious. Select few words registered in my lexicon, like undigested bits in a puddle vomit. *Cunt. Whore. Kill. Fuck.* Why would I say those things? What is

wrong with me? This isn't how I sound. I don't say these things. Do I? Is this how I sound to other people? Is this my mirror image unfogged by the steam I blow up my own ass? Oh, Christ. What if my daughter was here? What if she can hear what I'm hearing? I tried to gather the context of what day and time it was, but I seemed to have found myself in a purgatorial flux. I was caught in the ether between morning and night. Blue light poured into the room between the folds of my curtains. It looked like that spooky light when the Cenobites show up in the *Hellraiser* movies. It felt too light to be four and too dark for six. My brain sent a signal to my hand to cover my mouth but it was off the clock and not taking calls. So, the monologue wavered overhead like a lifeline or maybe an electric snake overhead writhing with tail in mouth.

In time, the noise dissociated from my self, giving birth to a new identity, cognitive dissonance made flesh. I christened it *Matt*. Thank God. I was vindicated, my name cleared. I was spared another unforgivable fuck-up. I'm bile, the vomit of a fly that lands in a pile of shit, but at least I'm not *that*. I'm just an innocent bystander, here, a collateral victim whose only sin was being in the vicinity.

Something began to pound in a violent percussion to accompany the vocal performance. It sounded like something being kicked repeatedly. My first fear was that it was somebody's head being assaulted, then that it was Matt's head pounding against the wall. That was it. I needed to force myself up. First, I had to untangle myself from the sheets. Somehow, I found myself rolled towards the window. The curtains were parted, inviting the light in. It was a straight shot into the neighbor's window. *Didn't she just separate from her husband?* Suddenly, I was aware of my nakedness. I would never consider myself sexy but I was comfortable enough to no longer find myself grotesque. *I should probably close those blinds.* People aren't supposed to see me like this.

I woke to the smell of something burning. I'd say that my I could feel the hair in my nostrils start to melt down like wicks of a candle but that would be a gross exaggeration and unimaginative. Fearing that the house was going the way of a classic Talking Heads single, I calmly stumbled out of bed and marched into the kitchen with one leg of my boxers neatly half-tucked between the fold of my ass cheeks.

"What the fuck is this? Are you burning down our house?" I said to the figure somethinging in front of the stove. If I didn't know better, I'd say it was my

brother.

“Our house?” the woman formerly known as Matt replied, turning to challenge my diction with a smirk that belonged on an animated Dreamworks movie poster.

“Yes, *our* house. I pay half the rent, don't I?” I sat down at the table. There was a centerpiece of trash. Lazily routing through it with my finger, I realized that it was mostly not mine.

“No utilities, though.”

“I pay child support and you don't, so it's even.” Light was shining through the shades. Rather than brightening the room up, it really just exposed it for how unpleasant it all was. Somehow, it made the table feel stickier, the trash more cluttered. I was ashamed to be here.

“You pay child support for *your* child. I pay for *our* water. That's a false equivalence.” Damn. He probably stole that play from my book; it was too good for him to've come up with it on his own.

My sister, Matt walked over with a plate of molten eggs in a bowl and placed it before me.

“What's with this?”

“It's your first day of class, thought I'd make you some breakfast.”

“Yeah, *some breakfast*. What happened here? It looks like you were trying to punish these things.”

Matt shook her head and shrugged impatiently. “I was trying to do something nice and I got distracted, O.K.?”

“You never neglect your eggs, Matt.”

“Whit,” he cut me off.

“Whoever you are, and whatever your eggs are, you never leave them unattended. They're a cheap metaphor for responsibility, or children, or some shit. I don't know. I'm not awake yet.”

“Speaking of which, you hear Carly had a kid?”

“Is *having* a kid, you mean.”

“No, the brat's out the bag.”

“What? That doesn't even make sense mathematically. She just started seein' this dude how long ago?”

Matt blew air out his mouth in a fricative manner. "Fuck if I know. That's none of my business."

"Well, best of luck to him."

"They had a girl."

"Well, *Whit*, that's awfully funny of you to get hung up on pronouns, now."

He just shook his head. I wasn't ready to end the volley there, so I shot him with a "And how're you so sure I wasn't talking about the father?"

"Must be a bigger man than you. How many ovarian cycles of hers were you sitting on?"

I shook my head. "Just sounds like she rushed into something."

"Yeah, it's a real shame that not everybody has the patience of the one night wonder over here."

"Hey, now, I knew her mother since we were kids."

"You knew her by name since you were kids, maybe. You bozos didn't talk for how long again before you poisoned her ovaries?"

I was holding a finger beneath my nose. It still smelled like pussy; I don't know if that speaks less of her hygiene or of mine.

"First off, you put some respect on the girl named after you. Maddie might have started off as pollution, but she's my special blend..."

"You didn't name her."

"*My point remains!* Secondly, I think it's clear Ione and I were bound by a twist of fate. Maybe not as lovers—"

"Don't say that word around me, that sounds perverse coming from you. You talking about love is like Hitler giving a speech on Jews."

"He gave some very famous speeches. *Anyways*—Maybe not as people who fuck on the reg, but as brother and sister." There were so many flies buzzing around. Did we always have this many bugs in the house? Where did they come from?

"Who fucked?"

"Yes, exactly. A brother and sister who fucked *once*, and are now platonically raising a child together. That's all."

"Oh. Well, that makes sense when you put it that way. I can see how that fits right into God's plan."

I pointed a fork at him. "Hey, you ever read *The Bible*? It's got tons of wacky

shit in there. We'd be right at home. You, too. Jesus liked hookers and stuff." I was starting to feel like King Kong, swatting at all these buggers. I hadn't touched my food, it was so distracting...not that I was in any rush to dive into those crusty yokes.

"Hookers and stuff? So, being trans is like being a hooker?"

"I don't know. In the eyes of Jesus, maybe. I'm not him."

"You're right, there."

"Oh, what do you know? You probably don't even believe in that stuff."

"There you have it, you're real. End the conversation on a nice note."

I nodded, trying to force the crispy hardened egg foam down into my mouth. "I do like keeping it real." I could hear Matt trying to scrape the hardened remains of my meal from the skillet into the trash can.

I was nearly late to my first day of class, on account of stopping at a drive-thru for a chicken sandwich. Soon as I walked in the room, I could feel the glow of a dozen eyes burning my skin. Maggie sat in the corner pocket of the front row nearest the door like some gargoyle put there to mark my discomfort. I just kept my eyes above theirs as I made my way to the furthest corner away from her. The room was more than enough to hold us yet felt claustrophobic. I could hear the air conditioner struggling to operate but doubted it was doing much. I had the vague feeling that running it was more of a formality to show the students they care about our comfort. The chalk board was still marked up from the previous class, something that looked to be French, or maybe Latin. I don't really know. My curved seat was harsh. With all the tuition we pay, they couldn't afford some God damn cushions? I felt judged as I undressed my sandwich, as though all ears were on me. Every crack its wrapper made was amplified. Somehow, the acoustics of my mouth were louder than they'd ever been, each bite an earthquake. Fortunately, I didn't have to worry about being the center of attention for too long, as the professor entered the classroom.

The first thing I noticed about her was that her posture was immaculate; there's no way she wasn't in a brace of some sort. She carried a manila folder stamped by a label maker with the class room number. I almost expected her pivot on her feet once at the front and center of the classroom and sieg heil. Her hair was red and curly, only tickling the back of her neck. The product she used made it look permanently wet. She kept good shape for her age, which I'd estimate was old enough to have seen

Bon Scott fronting AC/DC in concert. She took position behind her podium with hands folded above the folder, which she placed and then opened upon its surface, watching the second hand of the clock slide into the new hour.

“When you are in this classroom, from noon until three o'clock, you are on my time. Is that understood?” she heralded from lips painted plum. She was met by an unenthusiastic chorus (which I did not contribute to, as per my anxiety about being heard). “What that means is that you will show up on time. There will be no conversations, unless we are having a group discussion. There will be no hoods or jackets worn.” A few of my classmates slid awkwardly out of their layers, resting them on the backs of their chairs. “And no food or drink in this time.” I shoved the rest of my sandwich into my throat like she was about to rip it from my hands. “If you must use the restroom, there will be a fifteen minute break every class. If you're about to be sick, do not be sick in my classroom. Otherwise, save it for your own time. Have I made myself clear?” The class articulated something that sounded more like the moans of the risen dead than any English affirmation.

“With that out of the way,” she continued. “I want to have fun while we are here. This is creative writing, after all. The desks in front of you are your sandboxes. Don't be afraid to play around. This doorway is the barrier to a no judgment zone.” She pointed to the exit, which I was eyeing like it was my only passage for survival. “If any of you cannot follow these rules, then you are free to leave. What we have in this classroom is a society. One cannot have a society without laws.”

I noticed a dude a few seats over was holding his hand over his mouth to obscure a shit-eating grin. I was tempted to write “Can you believe this shit?” on a piece of paper, fold it into an airplane, and toss it his way. From what I gathered of our leader, she seemed like the type to catch the fucker in her mouth and chew it up, just to spit it back in my face.

“I want to get to know each and every one of you, find out what you like to write, and challenge your perceptions of what you are capable of. When you leave your final portfolio, which will consist of your best work produced in this class, you will not be the same writers that you are today. I will warn you now, the conditions may be harsh. You might hate me. You might think I'm the meanest bitch in the world. That's O.K. I'm not here to be your friend. I am your professor. If it helps, think of me as a coach, pushing you past the limitations you set for yourselves. If you do not pass this

class at the end of the semester, then the failure is my own. Any questions?"

We all looked around the room at each other, scanning to see if anyone dared break the silence. One girl, a thick blonde dressed for a job interview raised her hand.

"Yes?"

"Um, I was—"

"Your name, please."

"Oh, right! I'm Morgan, and I was wondering about the portfolio. How exactly will that be graded?"

Dr. Kasey nodded, as though she was gracing the question with her consent to answer. "That's a very good question, Morgan. The portfolio, as I've said, will consist of your best writings from throughout the semester. They can be of your choosing, or you can always come to me with suggestions. However, I'm sure you'll be able to figure those out for yourselves by the grades you receive on them. You will, of course, be given the opportunity to revise the original drafts based on my notes, and the amount of effort you take to polish them will be a major factor in your grades. The rubric for this is included on the syllabus, which we will be going over after the intermission later. Any others?"

No takers.

"Well, today we are going to be discussing perspective. Can anybody tell me what perspective is?"

Someone raised their hand for the chance to state the obvious.

"Exactly. It is your point of view. This is important, because this is where we will be writing from. For instance, third person would be the footage of the security camera in this room. It is objective and is monitoring all of us at once."

The guy who was laughing earlier raised his hand. "I always thought of third-person like God, because it can go into the character's thoughts as well as their physical actions."

"That's a good point, it can. I don't personally like that example, as some students may not be comfortable with religion in the classroom, but third-person can enter the thoughts of characters. Now, what is the difference between first and third person?"

Maggie raised her hand. "First person is the thoughts of a single character."

“Right on...”

She identified herself.

“Now, is first person always reliable?” She didn't wait for a volunteer, shaking her head as she said it. “However, that doesn't mean that this character's perspective isn't valuable. A rule of thumb is to never write a story in first person that could be written in third. The character's voice is like a filter that the story is being run through. We are seeing it through their eyes. To demonstrate, I have brought with me my snowflake glasses.” She reached inside of her suit pocket and pulled out what looked to be the kind of eye wear that would come with an Elton John Halloween costume. “We'll start in this corner and pass them around.” She tread the aisle between desks to hand the flimsy orange spectacles to me. I had to bend its wings a little to fit around my thick skull but sure enough, through the films of its cheap lenses, I could see orange fucking--

“Snowflake glasses? You can't expect me to actually buy this shit. It might work on our patrons, who only have to pretend to listen to you for a few hours a night, but I'm not gonna fall for it and I won't let you get away with this one.” Lindsey said as she handed two mugs to a balding man in a polo shirt. Some bled out onto her finger; she licked it off.

“First of all, I couldn't come up with that shit. The thing people don't get about lies is that most lies take creativity. That's too obvious to be made up. Let's say you asked me what color shirt I wore yesterday. I wore a red shirt, but *told* you that I was wearing a blue shirt. What the fuck is that? Who would give enough of a shit to lie about that?”

“A pathological liar, which you seem to resemble more and more by the day...”

“Secondly—”

“Oh, boy.”

“What?”

“There's a secondly.”

“Well, of course there's a secondly. If I leave my main point hanging too long, that'd give you enough time to think it through and make a better argument. *So*, secondly, don't you *dare* insult our beloved patrons!”

“Why not? What else is there to do around here?”

“Because, they're one of us. Well, we're one of them. Why else would we wind up here?”

“Actually, we're not. That's why there's this thing called a bar separating us from them.”

“Listen, before I started working here, I used to come here every day.”

“I know. I remember you. That's the only reason George vouched for you.”

“I do miss that ugly motherfucker.”

“Referring for you's what cost him his job, ya know?”

“Nuh uh.” I looked up from the counter I was pretending to wipe. “Seriously, though, not really, right?”

“You didn't hear? He was taking some off the top at the end of the night for himself.”

“What? No way. How come nobody told me?”

“Cause everybody knew it, so we assumed that there was no need to talk about it. Why talk about the sky being blue? What's there to say about it?”

“*Anyways*, what I was trying to say was that we're like actors at Comic Con or something. We're one of them, and we need to keep that in mind.”

“First of all, people who get paid to go to conventions are definitely *not* the same as people who pay to go to conventions and I think the reason why should be obvious. Secondly, that's all bull and you know it! You sound like a politician in one of those commercials, posing next to some actors in hard hats to say that you care about the working class because you're a part of it. Give up the act, man. Embrace your celebrity status here; it'll probably be the best we'll ever get. You want my advice?”

“No.”

“Here's what you do: You sleep with them. Don't take someone home every night, but just often enough to get a reputation. That gives them hope. If they think there's a chance to get laid, you'll be getting stripper tips.”

“You do that?”

“I've made a few happy accidents. Nothing I wouldn't have done anyways.”

“Yeah, I don't think that'd work for me. It's a little different bein' a dude.”

“Might not work for you, but it works for plenty of dudes.”

I shrugged. “Fair enough.” Speaking of patrons, I noticed that Angus was

looking in need. “Hey, Angus, you good?”

“Anuddah,” he demanded, pounding his fist on the counter as though it was a gavel and this was his sentence. He came here every day, drank himself to the point where he could no longer remember the face of his wife and kids, then we’d order him an ride home on the house so he wouldn’t get hit by a car or something. He was a pretty cool guy.

“Draft or bottle?”

“Dongivafuck. Just gimme *more*.”

A bottle it was. (They cost more.)

Lindsey bumped her hip into me in a way that was so platonic it almost felt emasculating. “Isn’t his name Rory?” she whispered in my ear as she handed me a bottle.

“I dunno. By this point in the day, I don’t think he knows, either.” I turned back towards our subject. “Hey, Angus. Is your name Rory?”

“You can call me fuggin’ Suzie so long as I get a damned drink over hea.”

“Your wish is my pleasure,” I said, placing the bottle in front of his hands. They looked like they were covered in soot or something. The fuck does he do to get dirty like that? A more obviously answered question is what doesn’t he do to keep them dirty like that? (*A: Wash his hands. Duh.*) He watched the smoke dance seductively from the bottle’s lips like a cobra rising for him. I nudged the bottle closer his way like a wingman pushing his friend towards a potential bone and returned to Lindsey.

“Your wish is my pleasure?” she scoffed. “The fuck is that?”

“I dunno. It just felt like I should say something, and that’s all I had on file at the moment. It’s not like he’ll remember for me to feel embarrassed about.”

“Yeah, but it embarrasses me. When I said you should try to arouse the customers, I was talking about some butterface girl or something. Not *him*.”

“Hey, how’s it going?” I said as my mother planted a kiss on my cheek. She had her arms wrapped around me so fast that you’d have thought she intended to smuggle me.

“Oh, we’re doing great! Maddie and I watched *Sesame Street*, the one that you used to watch when you were a little older than her.” She let me go and I followed

her into the house. I was hoping this would be a quick operation. Get the girl back from Mom and head out the door, but I knew as soon as I walked in the door that hastiness was not an option. It smelled like she had “Just got done making your favorite dinner.” Kielbasa and sauer kraut.

I went immediately for my target, who was harnessed in some bizarre contraption that would only ever be legal for a baby to be restrained with. She seemed to be enjoying it, though. “Hey! How are you?” I said, trying my best to elevate my pitch to a baby-friendly level. I just don't have the range or the confidence like some men do. Brendan sings to her. I've never even heard my own singing voice sober.

“You tell your dad you're having fun with grandma!” I heard from the kitchen. Her babyspeak was much more refined than my own. She could carry a tune with it; I could hardly hold a false note before my voice cracks and begins warbling (and not in a sexy *Bright Eyes* kinda way, either). To my defense, she did have a lot more practice. “Come on, sit down! I already made you a plate.” Sure enough, when I turned around, there was a steaming plate on the table, waiting for me.

“How do you keep this place so clean?” I said, pulling up a seat. I always sit in the same chair, even though out of the four, there are usually three open besides wherever Mom chooses (and she's never the first to the table). She knew to put the plate in front of the right place for me.

“It's easy without you and your brother around.”

“Yeah, but we're adults now, and we can hardly keep trash off the floor for a weekend.”

“Like I said, it's easy without you and your brother around.”

I had already scolded the roof of my mouth but I couldn't resist the sauer kraut. And once I'd gotten a taste of it, there was no holding me back, so I'd quickly shovel more in and then force it down my throat before it had time to sit and melt the inside of my mouth. (*There's some convoluted metaphor about my throat being some kind of fireplace in there, but it's not worth my effort.*) “You know, of all the feminine traits for Matt to imitate, why couldn't cleanliness be one?”

“Don't even get me started, Wesley,” she said, seating herself. “I just don't know where I went wrong with that one.”

“I wouldn't beat yourself up over it,” I said, slicing the tip of my kielbasa off with a fork and impaling it. “Even prize hens can lay a bad egg.”

“None of this seems like *him*, does it?” I shook my head in affirmation. “He seemed to have a good life ahead of him, and he's throwing it all away for...I don't even know what. It's not just thinking he's a girl. It started there, but I could deal with that. He's just letting himself go. He looks like he's on drugs. He gets angry when I talk to him. He's always asking for money. You've got to have a talk with him.”

“I know.” I was avoiding eye contact at this point. I was pretending to be watchful of Maddie in her baby bungee, but was really just looking for something to distract myself with. “It's just awkward.”

“Nothing important is easy to talk about. You're a man, now, a father. You need to start handling things like one. I wish your father was around so I could say this to him and not you, but you don't want to end up like him. Do you?”

“No, I don't.” I was starting to feel like one of the drones back in class.

“He cares about you. He doesn't like to show it but he looks up to you. I'm just his mom, so he'd think I was nagging if I woke him up to tell him the house was on fire. He listens to you. You were the man of the house when he was growing up. It's not fair to you, but you're the closest thing he has to any relationship to a father.” My memory doesn't quite line up with the history she was presenting, as I skimmed through a highlight reel of sneaking out to meet up with girls and locking my bedroom door to sit alone and think about meeting up with girls.

“You're right.” The quicker I got that over with, the sooner we could move on to another topic.

“So, how was your first day of class?”

“Well, it was class.”

“Yeah, but what was your teacher like? Do you get along with the other students?” I just realized she had hardly touched her plate.

“I'm not sure, really. I don't feel very comfortable there.”

“Well, it's your first day. You'll settle into it.”

God, the thought of settling into that sounded to me like settling into my own coffin. “I'm sure you're right. It's just strange at first, like getting a new job.”

“Well, I'm proud of you for going back to school, and so is Maddie.” I could feel her looking at me as I gazed into my plate. “I love you, Wes.”

I looked up at her. “I love you, too, Mom.”

Opening the window for the moon to shine through and the wind to blow the scent of leaves into my room felt unnecessarily romantic for this writing session, like lighting a candle just to rub one out. How I see it, though, is a prayer's a prayer, no matter if it's uttered from the pew or on the shitter. The nice things in life can be subtle, fleeting, so why let them slip away on account of semantics? I was just happy to be comfortable with the window open. After my mugging last year, I couldn't even peek through the blinds without raising my heart rate. I'd wake up every night from visions of my robber climbing in through the window to finish me off. Still, I kept Maddie on the side of me furthest from the window.

I looked at her in my bed, eyes closed and mouth open, leaking a little spittle out onto my pillow. (The moonlight was lucky to touch her.) I felt a knot in my stomach at the sight of her, beautiful as she was. I didn't deserve her. My crude hands weren't fit to hold her. I wanted so badly to make this all worth it for her in the long run, these sleepless nights at my desk, trying to turn shit to gold, or at least give it a good polish. I just wished there was any other way. Ione wasn't my biggest supporter of going back to school. She thought the idea of mastering in the liberal arts was foolish, an act of vanity. How could I provide for a family with an MFA? Brendan wasn't so confident in my decision, either, but he believed in me. Whether Ione does or not hardly matters, because she trusts in him. Shit, I do, too. If he wouldn't have been willing to give me the chance to prove myself, I don't know that I'd ever take such a risk.

For that, I wished that I could write them something beautiful. I wanted to paint the kind of pictures in my readers' minds that they'd hang in their living room, maybe even use as a conversation starter when guests showed up. Instead, I'm stuck with the kind of pomo garbage that you might see in a museum and mistake for trash. Just crumpled up wads of paper in the corner that nobody's allowed to touch. *It represents the struggle man has with his own mind. It's sectioned off from viewers to show the fragility of his own ego and stubbornness to let the folds of his mind be manipulated by outside influence.* That's at least my excuse. Truthfully, I don't know that I'm fit to possess beauty in any capacity. I'm more interested in the priest's dirty thoughts than his conviction not to act on them. I'm too hung up on the deer shit in the forest to take notice of the trees.

Maybe that's my own apprehensions of failure. I'm a turtle who who refuses

to race the hare because he tells himself that his shell isn't worth leaving. Why shoot for the stars when I know I'll never make it? Might as well just get comfortable in the mud where I'm laying. See, in my head, everything I want to write is the perfect pop song, something Prince would have written. It's got the warm familiarity of a traditional structure but with the danger of something more progressive. It's smooth, charismatic, distinct. It's the excitement of a rollercoaster, thrilling but never going off the rails. Then, when I look at it the next day, it reads like a terrible garage band demo. The instrumentation is scratchy. The transitions are disjointed. The voice is unclear and can't hold a note. Worst of all, it's tasteless, bland. The words I'm trying to make life out of are aborted in the reader's minds. In theory, I'm Casanova, but when it comes down to the execution, I'm just a limp-dicked pervert.

And what kind of portrait am I painting of myself for my daughter to look up to? Is she supposed to be proud of this? Someday, when she's grown up and reads this, what will she make of me? Will she be as disgusted with my voyeuristic pursuits? Or will she find solace in the imperfections of her parents? Is it better to be seen as this image of "Dad" or a human being? Is it possible to maintain both? The concept felt like a lie, living a double life. They say to never meet your idols, but too many of us compare ourselves to false impressions. The only thing I felt certain of was that she's too good for me. I used that as my motivation. This girl deserved a better father than the man I was, so I had to become a dad good enough to raise her. Suddenly, I caught sight of the narrative. This wasn't a case of self-flagellating for the sake of cruel and unusual satisfaction. This was an exorcism. Someday, when she's grown, if I ever decide to let her read this (probably once I'm already dead), she can see that I overcame it all for her, to give her the best life I could give. I always think of it as a comeback but come back to what? Was I somehow more of a man as a child? I had my innocence but without my mistakes, I'd be nothing. Hopefully I can teach her from mine so she won't have to put her own hand to the stove. I might burn my feet in my tour of Hell, but I'd do so to carry her home safe.

I had to knock three times before Brendan opened the door. Aside from a corner lit up by a table lamp, I could hardly see inside the place. He looked like he had just gotten out of bed, but not as though he was just woken up. With his hair all ruffled, I realized how steep the M of his hairline had become. Poor guy.

“How's it goin', Wes.”

“Same old. What's up with you? This is Wednesday, right?”

Brendan looked at his wrist as though he was not only wearing a wrist watch, but one that doubled as a calendar. He shrugged. “Yeah, it probably is.” He smelled like liquor. “Fuck.”

“You O.K., man? You're sounding more like me than yourself right now.”

“Yeah, yeah. Can I talk to you about somethin', though?” He scratched the back of his head.

“Yeah, I'm just working full time, going back to school, and trying to raise a daughter. I've got all night.”

“Just gimme a sec...” He walked back into the house, leaving the door wide open. I wasn't sure if that counted as an invitation, so I waited outside. I took a deep breath. I knew I was guilty of something, but I didn't know what. Probably something stupid like getting a stray drop of piss on the toilet seat the one time a week I come inside. A part of me felt like smuggling Maddie into my car and leaving before he could return, but he was soon back with one hand in the sleeve of his robe. I wasn't sure if he was going to pull a gun out or expose himself like Buffalo Bill. If I had to make Sophie's choice, I'd stick with the former. He walked past me, resting his elbows on the porch rails. I followed, but not before shutting the door behind him. *(I've actually gotten quite skilled at holding Maddie with one hand and multitasking with the other, not that I'd use such a talent in anything less than extraordinary circumstances of this nature.)* Maddie was sleeping on the ride up, but was now sucking on her binkie and while she studied me.

“So, you gonna show me where Ione's buried or what?”

He let out a soft chuckle and looked at me. I couldn't tell if his humor was out of politeness or psychosis. “Yeah, things haven't been easy. I love Maddie, but having a kid around makes things hard, especially with our situation.” Shit. *Was Brendan leaving us?* Looking at the situation rationally, it'd be hard to blame him, but the possibility hadn't even crossed my mind. I guess, he and Ione had split up before... “She's great, but it's hard not to feel like a third wheel, ya know?”

I did. “If anyone's the third wheel, it's me. I intervened with your lives together. You've got the house, Maddie, good chemistry. I feel like I'm always interrupting you two or standing in the way.” I felt my voice weaken. It's weird how you

can casually think something a million times yet it can feel so taxing to externalize it. I shrugged. "I used to wish that you'd've been the one to knock Ione up, so you could just move forward with your lives. I wouldn't give Maddie up for anything, and I wouldn't want to take her away from either of you, either, but if anyone's the third wheel here, it's me."

"No, no. When I met you, I thought you were a real loser. You were a drunk, a slob, rude. It hasn't been easy for you, but you've really come into yourself as a new man. Shit, if it was easy, maybe it wouldn't mean as much. You pulled through. You're working. You're going back to school. You're great with the girls. Back when you first came around, I wanted to kick your ass so bad...I still do, but I'm also glad to have you around."

"Yeah, I want to be here for you guys."

Brendan reached back into his pocket. "Before Maddie came around, I promised Ione that I'd be there to support her, that I'd love Maddie like she was my own..."

The door creaked open and we bumped elbows, spinning around. "Will you bozos just gimme my daughter so I can go to sleep?" Ione stepped onto the porch in a tank top and boxers. I was relieved to see her, being unprepared to tell Brendan that I wasn't going to let him watch my daughter while on the crest of a bender. I planted a kiss on Maddie's forehead and bid her farewell. I wondered what it would be like not to have to say goodbye to her, to have her with me more than three days a week. If Brendan was stepping out, would this be my time to swoop back in? Rational as it seemed, there was a perversity to the thought of it, as though it was an act of betrayal. I passed her into Ione's arms. "How about the car seat?"

"I'll bring it in," Brendan chimed in. "We're just talking about that thing."

"Alright," Ione said in an agitated tone. So, whatever it was, she already knew? Were they already broken up? "Well, speed it up so we can get some sleep around here. Doesn't need to take all night."

"Sure," Brendan said. We stood quietly in the dark until the door separated us from Ione's ears. "It's just that nothing I do seems like enough. There's never enough money, but the more you work, the less you're around. We fight. Some days, we hardly talk at all. Everything's about the baby." Hearing this irked me. I felt the urge in my gut to jump to Maddie's defense, but first I wanted to hear him out. He shook

his head and used the back of his finger as a Kleenex. “I’m not complaining. I’m lucky to have Maddie in my life; anybody would be. That’s the thing. I want to support her and Ione, more than ever. This just feels like the right thing to do—” He removed his hand from his pocket, bearing a ring in the palm of his hand. “I want to show Ione that I’m ready to be there for her, through thick and thin. No matter what. I want to show Maddie that even though I’ll never replace you as her father, I want to be a part of her life for the long run. It just felt right to talk with you about this. I don’t want to upset you or offend you in any way. I know things have been complicated.”

“Dude, don’t worry about me. You have to do what’s right for the two of you. I’m here for everybody, too, but my life is mine and yours is your own. Things haven’t been easy, or normal, or even good at points, but I want to make this work for all of us. Even if Maddie wasn’t around, I’d still visit you guys. If I never knew Ione in the literal or Biblical sense, I’d still hang out with you. I mean, I wouldn’t know you, but if we’re taking creative liberties with the past...you know what I mean. I’m Maddie’s father. That’s my role here. So are you in many ways, probably more ways than I am, but you’re also Ione’s partner. That’s your jurisdiction, bro. Whatever you decide to do, I’ve got your back.”

“So, it’s not awkward?”

“No,” I lied. “Well, yeah, it’s a little weird, but weird doesn’t have to be a bad thing. Things have been weird since this story began; we just gotta own that shit.”

“But you’re cool with everything?”

“Yes, of course I’m cool. Just don’t worry about me. I appreciate it, but my only interest in Ione is raising our child together—which sounds a lot less than platonic out loud. What I mean is that what happened between us happened, but that’s in the past. *I* am in the past. You’re her present, so don’t worry about what’s behind you.”

He patted me on the back. “Thanks, man. Also, just to let you know, I’m a little drunk.”

“Really? Couldn’t tell.”

He nodded. “Just a lotta stress at the shop. Stupid high school shit. If you’re ever someone’s boss, don’t waste your time trying to be their friend.”

“So, does Ione have any idea about *this*?”

“The—oh, no. Honestly, with the way things have been, I think she’d think it more likely for me to walk out on her. I haven’t been the best me lately.”

“The drinking probably doesn't help.”

“It does, but not with that, no.” I heard him gulp audibly. “This is our secret.”

“Then what's Ione think we were talking about?”

“Oh, she wanted me to yell at you about peeing on the toilet seat, so don't do that.”

Figures.

My second day of creative writing class began with a lecture on the rules of criticism. I won't bore you with them, as I could hardly be bored with them, myself. The point is that we had another feature length amount of time to arrange our desks into a circle and discuss each other's work, which we were required to post online three days after our initial session, giving us each three nights to read each other's work and produce “thoughtful criticism.”

“Can I get a volunteer?” Dr. Kasey said, seated at her desk immediately to the right of the podium. “It's a catch-22, because nobody wants to go first, but I've found that students are always the most shy for the first round, especially on the first day of workshopping. You also have the benefit of having it behind you for the rest of class.”

The dude I peeped laughing from our first meeting raised his hand. His arms were not only muscly, but I could see a thick vein protruding through his skin.

“Alright, Arnold. Showing the bravery you wrote about in your story. Who wishes to be first, and remember, you are not allowed to defend your own work. You may only speak once every one else has said their piece.”

A girl with thick-rimmed glasses and pink hair raised her hand. For some fucking reason, she was wearing a tank-top, as though she was proud of the pit hair she'd been collecting. “So, I thought this story was kind of nationalist. Like, all the characters are American soldiers. They're straight white men—”

“Now, what about Jamaal?”

“Well, of course there's got to be *one* token in there to make it seem diverse.” I found this a bold thing for her to say to the only black guy in the room. “There are *so many* trans soldiers today. Why not include one of them? Or a woman? Do we really need another story about a bunch of men destroying the foreign enemy?” A balding toad of a man was nodding his head beside her.

“Well, what's that to say about the military?” Maggie butted-in. “That's what they do. Soldiers aren't always making their own decisions. My grandfather served. My brother is in the Navy. They're not racist. Yes, they are straight white men, but that doesn't make a difference in what they do.”

“Now, I dunno about *that*. White people and us don't always act the same. They can't even *write* us. No offense, bro, but you need some linguistic counseling if you're gonna write for black people. 'Cause we do *not* talk like that. Well, maybe in the movies written by white people...”

“If I may interject,” Dr. Kasey said. Her voice was like a resolution to the banter before, like a gunshot silencing a riotous crowd. “I want to say that Lizzie has a good point. Is the current political climate ripe for such a story? There's a lot of tension right now and something about American soldiers may not do much to relieve that. However, Maggie also makes a good point that those serving in the military should be honored for their losses. Maybe there's a middle-ground between showing the representation necessary in storytelling today and depicting such themes. Does anyone else have anything to say? Wes, you've been quiet.”

“Well, I—” My words were shredded, weakened as they climbed their way to my tongue. I cleared my throat. “I'm confused as to how any of this qualifies as criticism. What's any of this have to do with the quality of Arnold's story? Would one more minority improve the structure? He's right,” I pointed at the token of our classroom.

“My name is Ty.”

“Thanks. *Ty* is right. It's a lose-lose. Either we write about straight white men and we're criticized for being exclusive or we try to write outside of what we know and risk coming off as even more racist.”

“Maybe you should step aside for a bit and let people tell their own stories?” The balding man spoke up, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. The roundness of his face made them look so thin, like a bear holding a pencil. “We already know all about the life of the het-cis man. We don't need you to tell us how our lives are, either. Maybe it's time for you all to listen.”

“What? In the world of the Kindle, when there are more books being produced and read by more people than any point in history, you're saying there isn't enough room to coexist?”

“No. We're saying that the time of literature being run by old white men is over and you should start acclimating if you want to survive in this brave new world. It's called evolution.”

“May I interject, since this is no longer about my story?” Arnold spoke up. He looked like he no longer had a choice. A mob of words seemed to be prying his lips open, despite the best of his will.

“In the future, we should try to remain as focused as we can for the sake of our subjects, but since this conversation has already taken on a shape of its own, I feel it would only be fair to give you your say.”

“If literature is run by old white men, then who is JK Rowling? E L James? Suzanne Collins? Rupi Kaur? Who has the most famous book club in the world? Oprah.”

“What about John Green?” A disconcertingly-thin girl who had up until this point remained silent piped up. I remember her name as Bridgette, because the word bridge is in her name and for some reason, that struck a cord in me. “Stephen King, Dean Koontz, Nicholas Sparks.”

“Do they even qualify as men?” I jumped in.

“They are white, though.” Lizzie said.

“Yeah, but let's be real. A bunch of famous black writers just isn't gonna happen.” Ty said. “That's just not how it goes.”

“He's right,” Arnold said. “Black people make up about fifteen percent of the population. It would be stranger for a majority of successful writers *not* to be considered white, especially in a world where George Zimmerman fits the bill.”

“Hey, *hey*. Can I say something rational, here?” Maggie said, speaking like an angry mother in a room full of ill-tempered children. “We actually brought up a real point earlier. None of this has to do with the quality of Arnold's writing. It doesn't matter whether the characters are straight or gay or whatever color. What matters is that the writing is good. I love *Sixteen Candles*. Long Duck Dong is pretty much the most racist thing ever written, but there are still a lot of great things in that movie. It's something we have to roll our eyes at today and overlook. We should be focused on the quality of the writing, not the subject.”

“A decade ago, Maggie, I might have agreed, but today you're opening up an entirely different can of worms. Without getting into it today, because we do have

other pieces to get to, the responsibility of today's writers to accurately and respectfully approach their work is something to consider. The world is changing, like Reggie said. What we need to ask ourselves is, how do we want to change with it? Alright," She clapped her hands together, to dispel any lingering thoughts of the conversation she had just eulogized. "Who's our next victim?"

"That's me," Ty raised his hand.

"This whole story felt to me like uptalk," Lizzie said. What a conversation-starter, this girl was... "It felt like you were trying to describe someone else's life using characters that resemble your own personality."

"What do you mean by that?" Arnold asked, almost as a challenge.

"I'm also curious to what you meant by that," Dr. Kasey said.

"Well, Ty, when you're talking in the room, I think your personality comes through very clearly. That shows in your characters, but not the story you're telling with them. It feels like you are afraid of getting your hands dirty." Ty looked like he had gotten slapped in the face. "Real life has grit. People have pimples. They swear. Your story feels like it's dressed up for church on Sunday morning when real life is more like the night before."

"I liked it," said I, wholly disinterested in continuing *that* conversation. "I really liked the relationship between the narrator and his grandmother. I thought it was put together neatly and at the end, it was a little moving." Ty nodded, taking the compliments gracefully.

"I thought it was really cute," Bridgette agreed.

"I do wonder if the story would benefit from more description," Maggie said. "I like everything that you have, but I can't picture any of the characters in my head. I don't know what the apartment looks like that it takes place in. I think that's a problem."

"Have anything to say, Ty?" Dr. Kasey said.

"Yeah, I think it's great some of you liked my story, and I really appreciate your advice, Maggie. I'm gonna try to work on that. I also just want to say that this was a true story about my dad, when he was growing up."

"Well, that is some story. Now, I don't know about you guys, but I'm *dying* to talk about Lizzie's story. That hasn't left my head since I read it Thursday night."

"It was really good," Bridgette said. "It was just, like, hell yeah."

“It was empowering,” Maggie said. “But the beginning was really hard to get through.” She put her hands up, as though tomatoes were inbound. “Not in a bad way! It was just so visceral, the way the you talked about the protagonist getting raped.”

“As trying as it was, I think that it was needed to show you where the protagonist was coming from, to prepare you for the rest of the story,” Dr. Kasey said.

“I really thought that when her door opened up, it was going to be the rapist's friends and I was so worried for her.”

“I don't want to break the silent rule for the author, but what gave you the idea to write about a gang of previous victims that kills rapists? That is just wonderfully creative and *a little* morbid, but in a way that these times call for.”

Lizzie shrugged. She was soaking this moment in. I could see it from the smirk on her face. “I just think that would be so great.”

“And this mayor, what an interesting character. I want to see where you're going with this, but I have an inkling,” She pinched her fingers together to demonstrate the seed of an idea she was about to present. “That she's on our girls' side. Think about it. What if this was a government program, like a group of social workers taking it to the streets, and she was their leader. She might even be a victim herself, being a woman in politics.”

“She'd be like Hillary Clinton,” I heard Reggie mutter to himself, probably marveling at his own genius for inventing such a comparison.

“Does anyone else have anything to add?”

“Yeah,” Arnold said. I could tell that trouble was brewing. The dynamics of the classroom had already begun pronouncing themselves. “Are there going to be any repercussions for these women? What gives them the right to murder someone over the act of rape?”

“You sayin' rapists *don't* deserve to be killed?” Ty said.

“Well, you have to admit, it's a little messed-up. This story doesn't even seem interested in that moral dilemma. You're just supposed to accept it.”

“The protagonist is supposed to be a little crazy,” Bridgette said.

“How, though?” I. “She says 'Oh, you'll probably think I'm crazy' a few times, but that's it. Aside from stating that she's crazy, the character acts totally normal.”

“Especially when the act of murder itself is normalized, here. You're supposed to think that two wrongs make a right.”

“They have a point,” Maggie said. “You talk about the girl being crazy, but never show it. What if the narrator slowly loses her grip on her sanity, like *Taxi Driver* or something? Then, when she's lost all hope, she can be trained by the gang or something.”

“Yes, but then we'd lose that amazing reveal of the Ball Buster gang in the doorway right after the crime takes place.”

“True, but maybe there's another way they could do it. She could try killing herself and maybe they save her at the last second. She could try jumping off a bridge or something public. Then, when she finally does get her revenge, it's a big deal for her? I love that she twists the guy's junk off with a wrench, but going from being a victim to a hero in less than two pages is a bit much.”

“What if they go after the wrong guy?” Ty said. “That would shake things up.”

“Well, that'll just be something to expand upon. I think the fact that this story produced so much conversation really speaks for its provocative nature. Anyone care to follow that up?”

Fuck it. I raised my hand. I caught Reggie scoffing, as though to say, “Oh, look, another white male,” as if the hypocrisy was lost on his fat ass.

“Well, *this* should be interesting.” Dr. Kasey said.

“You know how some guy's write about a girl to look sweet?” Bridgette said. “You'd be better complimenting women by *not* writing about them.”

Well, she didn't quite get to see the relationship between the protagonist and his neglectful girlfriend develop yet, so how could she understand that it's really about the fear as a writer of the Twitter generation...

“Like, you just name her after some one-hit wonder pop star to objectify her. Most women have to change their last name, but she doesn't even have an option to keep her *first*.”

Sure, but that's to highlight the way the protagonist objectifies women and sees them as below him. Carly Rae Jepsen was known for looking about a decade younger than she really was. That was to further establish a false *Lolita* dichotomy between the two and show how arrogant he is. He literally treats her as though she's a child. A criticism can't be valid if it relies on misinterpreting the text...

“I have to agree with this one,” Maggie said, nodding. Oh, geeze. Here was

her chance to get me back for standing her up when I should've been laying her down. "The main character really has a juvenile perspective on women and those around him. It's embarrassing. Bukowski's dead. Do we really need to see anyone trying his skin on for size?"

"I liked the part where his brother's watching the late night talk show and there was something about it being televangelists for millennials," Arnold said.

"What's wrong with late night TV?" Reggie said, mouth practically hanging open (*unless the sheer girth of his cheeks just pushed his lips permanently ajar*). "Just because they have the heart to know what's right and the guts to stand up for it doesn't make them like cult leaders like Billy Graham."

"I did feel like that bit was unnecessarily harsh," Dr. Kasey said. She was beginning to resemble a judge from her position at the front of the class. Giving her verdict and speaking for the jury at large at will. "It was just kind of thrown in there, like you wanted to make this statement but couldn't organically fit it into your narrative, so you included a throw-away line in the middle of your dialogue."

Ty was looking around the room. "I dunno, man. I thought some of the stuff you said here was pretty funny."

"Well, I think we've said all that needs to be said about this one. Care to defend yourself, Wes?"

"Yeah, I do." I could feel my foot shaking beyond my control. I could only hope the visible parts of my body were more composed. I could already feel my voice warbling in the pit of my throat. "This is just a few chapters of a larger story. I'd rather let the work speak for itself, but it probably makes more sense in the context of the whole."

"Is this larger body of work titled *Brashful*, or is that just the name of this section?"

I shrugged. "I've gone through about a dozen names. I kind of like *Suicide Risk Daddy*, because it sounds like a Springsteen song."

"Well, whatever title winds up on your portfolio at the end of the semester, I look forward to seeing whatever will be going inside of it and how that might excuse this first effort. Now, before we continue, I do think it's worth mentioning that *every* submission this week has been written in the first person right after we had our discussion on perspective."

“Liquor, liquor everywhere, not a drop to drink,” I heard behind me as I was reaching for a glass.

“You’re a real dick,” I said, turning to face Lindsey. “You know that?” Slow days were always fun, because we could focus on our own banter rather than any synthesized conversations for the sake of our patrons’ entertainment.

“And you’re a pussy. That’s our dynamic.” She was wearing a tank top today, exposing her tattoo sleeves. If you ask me, it looked like some degenerate shit. Skulls with snakes around them, thorns that might’ve been from the climax of *Sleeping Beauty*, crosses and shit (even though Lindsey resents any form of western religion).

“You know, I know a—”

“*Really?* You know a guy? Is he your brother outlaw?”

I set the glass on the counter, filling it to the brim so that the foam threatened to spill over but ultimately settled in. “We prefer brothers outlaw, ‘cause that sounds—”

“Like cowboys, right.”

“Fuck. Sorry.” The glass was stolen away by a middle-aged woman, who returned to the giggling cacophony her friends were creating from the corner. “I just think things so much in my head that I forget what I say. It’s like I rehearse so much that I forget that I already gave the actual performance...or have I already said that?”

“You ever talk so much you forget what you think?”

“Actually, yeah.” She ruffled my hair. I tried matting it back down with my hand, but knew that whatever idea of elegance I had in my head was already shattered. “This place can feel like a trench, but if I had to be stuck here with anyone, it might as well be with you.”

“I could do a lot worse than you, too.”

“Ya gotta work on your material, though, bro. Now hold on, some fucking grandpa is gonna need a menu to find out that he wants a hamburger.” She snagged two menus from a shelf beneath the counter and approached a table where a woman was sitting across from—*no fucking way*. You know that scene in *Jaws*, where the camera gets closer on Brody’s face and everything just hones in on him while also appearing to get further away from the background? I can’t write a better analogy than that shot. It’s almost like I felt my hands go numb. I felt trapped, like a man just kicked the door down with a shotgun in hand. I heard his voice laughing with Lindsey as she

took an order for drinks. She walked back smiling, but by the time she reached the bar, her face contorted into a look of worry.

“Wes, you alright?”

“Of all the gin joints in Ohio, and he drops into mine.”

“What? You know that guy?”

I don't even need to tell you what I said next, because you already know
“That's my father.”

“Oh, shit!” She said, as though she had just cut her finger on a broken glass while doing dishes. “Do you need to leave?”

“I—I don't know. I don't know what to do. I can't ditch you, here.”

“Don't worry about it.” She touched my arm. “There are more important things than Sal's.”

“He's never even seen Maddie.”

“I know. It's bad. Like I said, I can—”

“I'm gonna go talk to him.”

“What? No, really. You don't have to. That might not be—”

I nodded, as though that was enough to relinquish all her worries, and marched past her. I tried arching my back into a decent posture, but it felt not only inauthentic but less comfortable than my usual slouch, which I sank back into. I cleared my throat best I could, but it was clenched. Might as well have been my better judgment trying to choke the words so I couldn't put myself through this. It was too late, I'd already made my choice.

“Hey, how's it going?”

My father looked up from his seat. At first, he appeared as though a glass of water was just splashed in his face, then the shock melted into a smile. “Wes!” He stood to meet me. He held out his arms for an embrace, which I accepted. “How have you been, buddy?”

“I'm alright.” We released each other. “How long have you been in town?”

“Oh, just about a week. Been busy unpacking and getting all set up. You'll have to come see the new place sometime.”

“What made you decide to move back?”

“Wes, this is *[I honestly can't even remember her name, sorry, guys.]*” I knew her. I'd seen her here before. Leathery skin, dyed sandy-blond hair with gray

roots only apparent where her hair was parted, the raspy laugh of a lifetime smoker. She was a regular.

“Wesley! I had no idea that was you. Should've known from the pictures your father showed me. You've grown so much!” She spoke of me as though she had known me since childhood. Grown so much since what? Six year old photographs? Who the fuck is she to call me by my whole name?

“Hey,” I said. “Well, I should probably get back to work, but I wanted to stop by and see you.”

My father slid back into his booth. “You work *here*?”

I nodded. “Just while I get through school.”

“You're back in school? Great. What for?”

“Same old.”

“Well, you get back to work. We'll have to get together some time soon.”

“Sure, yeah.”

I heard him say, “Love you, buddy” as I walked away.

Matt was watching some YouTube video on the TV when I walked in the living room. I felt like a vampire just before sunrise, desperate to crawl back into my coffin. The last thing I want to do after a day of work and forced socialization is come home to another stilted conversation. Whatever he was watching, he paused it and turned the TV off.

“Guess whose back in town?”

“Don't tell me what to do.” He was stroking Tammy's fur. She preened on his lap, arching her back as he pressed between her shoulder blades.

“Dad.”

“God dammit.”

“Yeah.” I sat down next to him on the couch. That scared Tammy off. “You know, I never see her anymore. I forget we even have a cat.” God, his face looked so sunken-in. Matt was always thin, but damn. He looked like he was eating one meal every other day. I could tell he was trying to soften his jagged features with make-up, add some life to that drained face, but you could just tell. “Sometimes, I forget we even own a cat.”

“Well, when you go straight to your room after work every day, it's pretty easy

to miss her.”

“Yeah.” Couldn't argue with that. “I still miss Tictac sometimes.”

“Why? You're the one who decided to get rid of him.”

“Didn't have a choice, you know that. He was no good for Maddie.” I felt like I was in a shit relationship, going through the motions of a conversation without any real passion behind it. We used to go back and forth for hours, now, the chemistry was gone. We were upholding tradition but had lost the spirit. We didn't part because we had a family together and the concept of living alone was frightening to us both. “You'll understand some day when you have a high school reunion and some guy knocks you up.” Nothing. “So, you don't care to hear about Dad?”

“Not really.”

Fuck this. I wasn't going to pry a conversation out of him. Is this what it's going to be like when Maddie's a teenager? That thought squeezed my balls. I looked down and noticed Matt's bright red toenails against the dull beige carpet. Had to give him credit for consistency. “What medicine did they put you on last year?” Last year, just a few months after Maddie was born, Matt broke his leg due to a mechanical error at work. He still struggled to bear weight on his right side but had retired his cane. Fortunately for him, they covered all his medical expenses and enough hush money that he hasn't worked a day since. Unfortunately for me, that means he's been haunting the place at all hours since.

“Oxy, why?”

Thought so. “Just some people at work talking about it. No real reason.” That was a lie. I stood up. I had nothing else to say. I didn't have anything worth saying in the first place. Time to accept my failure for the night and try again tomorrow. “Well, good night, Matt.”

“See ya.”

“So, whaddya think happened with Dr. Kasey? She doesn't seem like the kinda professor to skip out on class, especially not on the second week.” Bridgette said, wagging a french fry. A ranch teardrop fell from its tip onto the basket below.

“I dunno, but whatever it is, I'm thankful,” Ty said.

“Yeah, but someone could've died,” Lizzie said. I was more on her page, but rather than contributing to the conversation, I studied the bowl of salad in front of me.

I felt kind of lame, being the only one not to order a coronary on a plate. Oh well, it's not like I was missing out on anything special from the campus food court anyways. We were only here because it was the closest place within walking distance from the classroom, which was posted with a handwritten notice of our professor's absence.

“So, Reggie, I've been thinking about your idea,” I said. After all, we were supposed to be having a(n unmoderated) class discussion.

“It's interesting, because you've set yourself up with a real opportunity.”

His ears perked at this. He seemed both flattered and ready to take the defense if necessary.

“So, your story...umm...”

“Alt-Fright.”

“Yeah, it could be about a descent into radicalism. Like, if you start the book with the protagonist as a fairly normal dude that might seem a bit off, you could actually show each step towards extremism. Like investigative journalism, almost. You start off with his trust in the liberal mindset being betrayed in some way, which gets him looking into alternative perspectives. Maybe start with libertarians or whatever. Then moderate conservatives. Work your way down almost like an addiction where he needs more and more to get his fix until it ends with some Columbine-type scenario.”

“There's one issue with that, though,” Lizzie interjected. “What's the difference? They're all racist. They all work towards oppressing women, the LGBTQ community, Muslims...”

I could see the muscles in Arnold's jaw rehearsing a rebuttal, so I jumped back in before he had the chance to enter the ring.

“Well, even so, you can document that by showing the protagonist take one (il)logical step to the next. Honestly, I think you will vindicate a lot of people by proxy, because most people aren't Dylann Roof. See, most political arguments about those kinda things seem to come from an emotional stance. You could possibly use your narrative to tackle this from an emotional *and* a logical angle.”

“That could work,” Maggie said, after forcing down a mouthful of cheeseburger. “If you think about it, it could be a research project and a work of fiction.”

Reggie was nodding the whole time. “Yeah, thanks. I think that's a really good

idea. I wouldn't know where to start, but I'm gonna look into that.”

“If you want real conservative examples, I can send you links,” Arnold said. He almost came off as someone pushing a drug, the way he said it.

“Maybe,” Reggie laughed. “It might be strange watching some of that stuff. I need to visit my grandfather more anyways, so I can just start from there.”

I felt a buzzing on my thigh. Fished the phone out of my pocket. *None*. I put her to voicemail and started tapping out a text.

“Did Maddie swallow something or can it wait?” I reached for my straw as the conversation evolved beyond me.

“1: That's not funny. 2. Can I come over?” An animated ellipsis in our chat box showed me there was more on the way. “Not gonna yell at u. Just need someone to talk to.”

I had a feeling I was being set-up, but I texted “stop over around 8” against my better judgment as I braced myself for whatever lecture was awaiting me.

By the time I looked up from my phone, they were discussing Maggie's book idea. It's an anthology taking place in a department store. Each department is a different take on a popular genre. For instance, the chapter she shared on our little class message board was a parody of *Hamlet*, where one employee gets his boss fired in order to usurp his position and his employees are trying to reclaim their department. “I actually had an idea to pitch to you on the way here,” I piped-up. Maggie looked my way, without contempt nor fondness. “So, you can make an epic poem about working the front lines. The cashiers are like the Trojans and their manager, giving them orders through the walkie-talkie is their general.”

The faces at the table compelled me to go on.

“That's all. It's a pretty simple concept.”

“Yeah,” Maggie said. “I'll think about that.” I could tell I discomfited her. She looked at Bridgette. “I can't get over how good your chapter was.”

“Thanks!” She said, after covering her face in a kind-of embarrassed at being flattered fashion. I dunno. It's a girl thing. “I was thinking about just dropping out instead of posting it. I still might change my project entirely.” Maggie was right. Her chapter *was* good. It was an interview between a girl and a boy her age to work at a coffee shop.

“I thought it was really clever how you used this situation not only to create an

attention-grabbing opener, but to also provide immediate exposition on your narrator.”

“It just made sense to me. Of course, she’d have to talk about herself at an interview.”

“That guy, Cameron, is supposed to be a creep, though?” Reggie interjected.

“Yeah, definitely.”

“That worried me a little, because it was hard for me to tell whether you’re supposed to like him. I just got real creeper vibes the whole time.”

“So, here’s the thing. These kind of guys know how to get what they want. They’re not all horny dorks. Lots of guys use their charm and confidence in order to take advantage of girls. If the readers are supposed to accept how this girl can fall for his tricks, they have to be seduced themselves. At least, that’s what I’m trying to do.”

Ty nodded. “Playas gotta know how to play if they wanna score.”

Everybody laughed. Everybody but me. Nothing accentuates singularity more than being in a crowd. I felt like an impostor, an old man dresses clothes trending for high schoolers. They all laughed so carelessly, spoke as if the world was hanging on the tip of their tongues (*Whatever that means*). None of them seemed to have daughters, sisters of a brother, or separation issues from their fathers. Of course, it’s easy for me to say from my position in my own head. They spoke with a youthful energy, like they hadn’t yet been worked down to exhaustion. Their liveliness didn’t upset me. For once, I didn’t even envy it. I just couldn’t relate.

Brendan’s truck was blocking me out of my own driveway by the time I got back. I just left my car in the yard and hoped I didn’t tear too much of the grass up. Oh well. That can wait until morning. I

I tapped on the driver’s side window. “What’s up?” I said as Ione cracked it down.

“Can we talk about it inside?” It smelled of nicotine.

“You smoke?”

“Only when I’m stressed,” she said, swinging the door open. She cracked me in the knee and I backed-off. “Brendan doesn’t like it.”

“Don’t think I’m the biggest fan of that one, either.” It was hard to see the ground by this point in the night. It wasn’t starless up there, but they weren’t doing me

any favors. I was just trying not to slip in the wet grass or worse yet, the dreaded dog turd. I fumbled with my keys at the front door. Ione's breath on my neck as she hovered behind me didn't help matters. I'm the type to get performance anxiety. If you put me on the spot, I can't spell the alphabet forwards. "Can you—does your phone have a flashlight or something?" She complied and I let us in.

"Whit here?"

"My guess is as good as yours." I kicked my shoes off. One landed on the couch. Fuck it.

"Well, doesn't she tell you when she goes out?" She slipped neatly out of her shoes and left them on the doormat. They'd act as stoppers should anyone come in through the front door, but it's not like I was expecting anyone.

"Why would he do that? I'm not his keeper."

"Just so you know she's safe."

I shrugged. "We're adults. We don't answer to each other." I sat down next to my shoe, then swept it onto the floor.

"I just, well, you know." She sat next to me, her legs beneath her in that girly way with her feet beneath her ass.

"No, I don't know. What?"

"Well, I think it's time you should be worrying."

"Well, I'm worrying. Just not sure what step two is."

"I dunno, Wes. It's just sad to see you two like this. I know it hurts you. I see it every time you come over. You can't just let this happen."

I was looking around the room, at the soda bottles collecting in the corners and the candy wrappers at each end of the couch. "Makes me sound like a pussy but I don't know that I can let this not happen."

"What do you mean?" Her voice was soft. There was a cushion between us but she felt close.

"I don't know what to say or do. If I accuse him of anything, he'll freak out. Then, if things keep going on how they do, who knows."

"Just talk to him. He trusts you. Ask him what's going on."

"We were never the kind of family to talk things out. We'd usually just avoid each other until one of us got over it."

"Well, maybe it's time you start taking the steps to change that. Brendan told

me your dad's in town.”

I scoffed. “That’d be like putting out fire with gasoline.” I looked over at her glassy eyes. Her cheeks were flushed. All of a sudden, the softness in her voice seemed more like frailty. “Why are you here, anyways?”

She smiled. “Am I not welcome?”

“No, for real. You came over here for something. What is it?”

She sighed. Now it was her turn to look around the room. “Do you have Maddie over here with the house like this?”

“No. I clean up. That’s actually the only time this place looks semi-presentable. You’re acting weird, Ione. What’s up?”

“Brendan asked me to marry him,” she said with downcast eyes.

“Well, that’s great!” I tried to sound enthusiastic, but in this moment, congratulations felt unwelcome. “You’re happy, right?”

She shook her head and started sobbing. All defenses were lowered, now. So, this is why she came. I felt the urge to hug her but I didn’t want my platonic support mistaken for an advance, so I sat there awkwardly next to her. I reached out to touch her shoulder but retracted before she noticed. Once the sad hiccups had bubbled out of her, she said, “I haven’t been happy for a long time. I don’t know who I am anymore.”

“What do you mean? You are you. No need to question that.”

“I’m a mother. I’m a hairdresser. I’m somebody’s girlfriend, but I don’t know who *I* am. I don’t know what I want. I just allow life to happen to me and my life doesn’t feel like my own.”

“Maybe, but you’re great at all those things. And you can take steps to discover who you are. You’ll always have time for that. It sounds like you’re just complicating it for yourself. So, you told him no?”

“I told him I needed time to think.” She looked up at me. Her hair was in disarray, her eyes bloodshot. “What do you think I should do?”

“You should do what you think’s best.”

“Don’t give me that bullshit!” She pushed me by the shoulder. “Tell me, one hundred percent honest, what you think I should do.”

“I think you should say yes.” I made sure to look in her eyes as I said it. “Brendan *loves* you. He’s there for you. He treats you right. He’s great with Maddie. I

think you should give him a chance.”

“That’s another thing. It’s unfair for him to raise someone else’s child. He loves Maddie, but she isn’t *his*. I got jealous of some girl working for him, broke up with him, and go sleep with you to get back at him for it.” Well, fuck. This was news to me. I tried to appear unphased. “Then, when I get knocked-up, because I’m *stupid*, he not only forgives me for it all, but helps me raise my baby. He pays for her clothes, food, runs us all around. He’s perfect, but I don’t think I deserve that.”

“So, what I’m taking from this is that you can afford to lose the child support?”

“*Shut up*. Do you know what I’m saying?”

“Yeah, I do. I think that Brendan’s great for you and Maddie. If that’s where he wants to be, then you should let him be there for you.”

“Things just changed after everything last year. We don’t even have sex anymore. Even when I was pregnant, we went at it at least a few times a week. Actually, more than usual—”

“C’mon. I’m captain of Team Brendan but even I don’t wanna hear that shit. My *baby* was in that vagina.”

“Sorry. And sorry to come over here and just vent on you.”

“Anytime. We fam. A dysfunctional, fucked-up *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* kinda family, but a family. Speaking of which, isn’t it about time for you to get back to your unit?”

“No rush. I told Brendan I was going to stay with my folks.”

“Alright, that’s it.” I stood up. “I’m kicking you out.”

“Oh, c’mon! We’re just talking.”

“Nope! Your ass is outta here.”

She wiped her eyes, and then her top lip with the back of her hand. “I probably look like a crazy person.” I wasn’t going to lie and say she didn’t, so that just hung in the air for a second as she sniffled more. “We never get to talk anymore, with you back in school and working all the time.”

“There’ll be plenty of time to talk in the next eighteen years. Tonight, you’re due back home.”

She stood up and hugged me. I could feel her trembling as I wrapped my arms around her. “You know, Wes, you’re not such a bad guy.”

I used to hate sweating, now I can't imagine a day without a soggy ass. There's something cathartic about working out. Really, a salesman of any talent could turn the most emotive hardcore teen into a total jock. It's both about indulging in your baser instincts while refraining from the petty delights you've been conditioned to accept. Once you get hooked on water, it's hard to go back to soda. I'm obsessed with the shit. I love watching the water in a glass and thinking about the volume of it going through my body as I take each gulp. I drink a bottle soon as I wake and don't stop until it's too late and I know I'll be up all night pissing it out. It's purifying. Physical health is almost an act of Christianity, overcoming the material temptation in order to make a temple of oneself. You grow to respect yourself through exercise and dieting. You learn restraint. You built this house; you're not going to go and pollute it. You develop a healthy communication with your body. You listen to its needs. Your vocabulary grows to hear its finer notes. Your geography becomes more animate. If there's a muscle aching, it's more pronounced. If you slouch, the dog whistle of aching is amplified to an alarm clock.

You learn the whole cliché of the meathead jock is total hogwash. It's just embittered envy. It's reverse-bullying. When I see someone more built than me (and I'm built like a homeless cardboard shelter, so that's pretty much everyone whose ever lifted a hundred pounds or more), I don't resent them. I admire their dedication. It's almost homoerotic, the way I've started worshiping the male body. It's the old James Bond adage. Women want to be with him and men want to be him. It's like how all the kids who went to technical school in high school half the day who were seen as lower class and grow up to become electricians. I'd actually wager that people in-tune with their bodies are more likely to be intelligent. I don't see them as bullies, either. I'm not a gym rat, but the bros there aren't mocking the more rotund tenants. If anything, they're there to help and support them. To them, sharing their bodily wisdom is an act of charity. They're like missionaries spreading the word. I don't see someone dumping a bag of skittles into their mouth and scoff; I look at them the same way I see the patrons down at Sal's. They're just addicts. It's nothing to laugh about, but something to mourn. It's the death of one's potential. If you waste that, your whole life's a funeral for the person you could have been. I can't live with myself that way. I want to show my daughter what she's capable of (which is of course more than I can

ever accomplish); I don't want to be another cautionary tale.

A good way to counter this is to meditate. It helps you appreciate the little things. If a fan's blowing, you feel the soft breeze in the room. You hear its blades pushing the air around the room. You feel your weight as you sit on the edge of your bed. No breath is taken for granted. You feel your body expand and retract around it. Each moment of existence becomes a physical transformation. (*Furthermore, if you indulge in decadent foods, you feel it sitting like sludge in the pit of your stomach.*) I started practicing to get over my anxiety after my robbery trauma. It helped lull me to sleep at night, simplifying down to the act of just taking air in and releasing it. I also think it's helped clear my mind when I write. There's such a thing as a runner's high. I think it's something like that, this sensation of acute focus. You don't levitate or start shooting holographic shapes out of your palms or anything psychedelic. The result is much more sobering. You become more aware of your surroundings and begin to notice yourself in ways you formerly took for granted.

Before getting into that, though, I needed to hydrate. I walked out of my room with my shirt and sweat pants clinging to my body. My hair felt like I just got out of the shower. I ran my hand through it. I felt more scalp up top than I was comfortable admitting. The house was dark. It was almost peaceful if-*fuck!* Heard a screeching sound as I stepped on the cat's paw. It almost sounded like I deflated her. I imagined her paw tearing off beneath my foot and she'd zip across the room, whistling as the air escaping her body buoyed her across the hall like an untied balloon. Other than that, I made it to the kitchen without any mishaps. I filled my plastic bottle and downed it whole before filling it again. Then, I walked up to the front window. Matt's car was still vacant from the driveway. Home alone, still. What used to be exciting (a green light to wank in the living room) now sank my heart into my stomach. Suddenly, the room felt very cold.

Huh.

I started back towards my bedroom. It was pure black in the house. If I wasn't standing upright I wouldn't be able to tell up from down. For all I knew, I could have been swimming further and further away from the surface I was trying to break. Alas, I crossed the threshold of my bedroom, where Ione was waiting for me at the edge of my bed.

Her breasts were fuller than I remember, swelling with the experience of

motherhood. Her hair was down, framing her face as curtains do a performance. Her lips were plump, ready to open for me. One leg was crossed over the other. She was illuminated by an electric blue spilling in from the window. One hand was palm-down on the mattress; the other was resting on her thigh.

I found myself on my knees, crawling towards her. I was throbbing for her. If only I was longer, I'd be giving my dick brush-burn. Her legs parted dramatically before me. I felt a hand on the top of my head, fingers entangling in my hair as they massaged my scalp.

“Wesley, I need you to do me a favor,” she said. Her tone was maternal as it was seductive. She drew me near her. I rose to the task, licking her like a dog to a wound. I felt a hand wrap around my cock; it was my own. A salty taste came to fruition, something I had coaxed out of her that was distinct yet unfamiliar. If I hadn't already, I'd say I couldn't quite put my tongue on it. I withdrew, opening my eyes to find a single milky tear rolling out of her. *Cum*. I spit it out, my wad landing on the carpet below me. I looked up to Ione, who appeared titanic above me. “Suck them out of me.”

I felt my stomach turn, but I was compelled to oblige her. So, I carried on, lapping up the nectar of those who came before me and then spitting out the backwash onto the floor. I was just draining the poison out of her, no different than if they were snake bites. Each batch had a unique taste, as though I could taste the genetic recipe of every man. At one point, I saw Brendan in the corner. One hand on his member, the other knuckle deep in his own ass as he enjoyed the performance. I tried not to break the fourth wall by acknowledging him and stay on task. Somehow, her hair seemed to grow. I couldn't help but to floss with it. I tried to pull away, but her legs caught me in a death grip.

“No cheating,” she cackled. I struggled to pry myself out of her with my hands, pushing off of her thighs with my palms, but it did no good. My circumstances were clear. This was sink or swim. So, I gulped them down. It felt like shotgunning warm beer. The more I emptied from her, though, the more bewildered she became. She tore at my hair, ripping patches straight out of my scalp. She grinded her ass on the edge of my bed. Somehow, I knew she was pinching her nipples as she threw her head back, laughing at my fate. She began slapping the back of my head. “This next one's the big one. “

“Mmmm,” I heard Brendan whimper from his corner. “Now you're gonna taste *me*.” It was as though his words turned on the faucet inside of Ione. She pissed a thick stream of the cum down my throat. It was a cumulative effort, all the loads he had shot into her being purged into my mouth. I didn't even have the choice to swallow or tighten my throat. It was splashing my tonsils before I could prepare for it. I couldn't breathe any longer and I felt my nose crying it out. My throat was filled with Brendan and he was now pouring out of the corners of my lips and down my face as Ione punched the top of my head. The last thing I heard was “Now, who's the cuck?”

I woke up, covered in sweat and cocooned in my sheets, gasping for air. Even with my meditative breathing technique, it took a few minutes to feel caught up and for my heart rate to start slowing down. “What the fuck is wrong with me?” I asked my empty bedroom.

Writers are like serial killers, just waiting to be discovered so that we can give up all our secrets. We're the Zodiac, leaving clues and just hoping that someday, we'll be found out so that we can get the praise we so desperately try to convince ourselves that we deserve. It's hard to even have someone skim your first draft without shedding light into every nook and cranny of your manuscript. If they make it to the final page (which is rare), you feel like a James Bond villain in the third act of the movie, ready to lay out your master plan in full detail. You're through with the foreplay and ready to shoot your load. Finding a single reader can be one of the most challenging aspects of the craft, but a good conversation about your finished novel is the light at the end of the tunnel. It's a good date, where you click on every topic. They laugh at your jokes, think you're smarter than you really are. Your politics don't offend them and (neither does your smell-*maybe make it more of a double entendre?*)

This was not that conversation. This was the kind of first date that ends in an argument and one person leaving before the meal is even over. It's the kind that makes you wonder why you ever thought this person would be a good match for what you've got to offer in the first place. You don't open up a car dealership in Amish county. That's bad business.

“I can't even fathom why someone would want to write something like this. It's like, we get it; you hate women. Nobody wants an entire book on just that.”

“Lizze,” Dr. Kasey said. Bronchitis still had her by the throat, robbing her

voice of its natural acoustics. “I appreciate how strongly you feel about this, but let's try not to raise our voice.” She got up from behind her desk and softly shut the door, as if someone was in bed sleeping on the other side of it. “We don't want to disturb the other classrooms.”

“With all due respect, Dr. Kasey, maybe they *should* hear this. I'm not being mean. As a queer woman on this campus, I feel marginalized enough without having to read this kind of garbage. I had my sexist white male writers in undergrad, but at least they had the excuse of being dead. This is constructive criticism. Wes, this is an intervention. I know you can do better than this. I know you're capable of writing something more. You've shown all of us in this class how smart you can be. It just upsets me to see you wasting your time on this kind of trash. You need to start being as critical of your own work as you are of others and I think you'll really start seeing some improvement.”

“M-May I?” I asked, breaking the traditional custom of the muted author.

Dr. Kasey nodded. “I think in this instance, an exception would be worth making.”

Fuck. I knew that all eyes were on me. This wasn't another passive moment of playing verbal hot potato until class was over. I found myself the subject of an engaging conversation. “I understand what you're saying, but I don't think that you're hearing what I'm trying to say through the text. I'm also totally open to that being a result of my own limitations as a writer. I think we're just on a different page, here. I'm not glorifying these actions. I don't think it's cool that this character jerks off to girls' Facebook photos. It's not something that I'd ever do.” That might be a lie, but this was an educational environment. “This is establishing a very flawed protagonist. The conflict of this story is primarily internal, with the external struggles he faces being largely a direct result of his own actions. This is a story about giving in to temptation and being punished for it, but through that punishment, he finds redemption. Some of these thoughts are things that go through guys' minds. We're not perfect. This isn't a high-five to anyone who has these traits. A lot of this character is based on the person I'm afraid of being. It's showing them that even though their thoughts or even sometimes their actions aren't O.K., that they can turn themselves around and be a better person. If you want to talk about sexist, lousy white men, this is a prime example of what you're talking about. The book is an exorcism of those flaws, but before they

can be cast out, they first have to be identified not only as existing but also it should be demonstrated *how* they are harmful. It's like a virus, that you don't recognize until the symptoms start showing themselves.”

Silence for a single beat.

“Well, I understand having a villain do horrible things, but is it responsible for your *protagonist* to be so shitty?”

“Yes,” I said enthusiastically. “I think it's absolutely necessary. You're not going to write a book about a drug addict that never falls into addiction before he gets to recover. I don't like writing gross stuff about women or men or anybody, really. It's a means to an end, that end being about how no matter how much nastiness you're capable of, you have potential to be twice as good. It's just a journey for the character to find that goodness in himself.”

“But don't you think that as artists, we have a social responsibility? Wouldn't you say there comes a level of privilege with our platform as writers? There are so many books written from sexist, racist perspectives. Why do we need another when we can speak up for a voice kept silent for so long?”

“No, I don't. I really think that most of what we write is bullcrap. Do you think gay vampire books were what made marriage equality pass? No. I honestly believe that fiction writing is for the most part a profession that contributes very little to society. We all know it, so we try to cover that up by pretending we're activists. This isn't Soviet Russia. You can publish literally anything on Amazon for free right now in America. We're just giving ourselves this aura of self-importance because we know there's not utilitarian justification for our aspirations. We just think we're important enough that what we write matters.”

For a moment, she seemed stunned, her head recoiled, giving her a soft double chin. Then she peeked out of her shell to continue. “Sure, I think you're somewhat right, at least about the most of us. What about George Orwell, though? Upton Sinclair? Maya Angelou?”

“Yeah, they were notable exceptions, but being exceptions is part of what makes them so important.”

“O.K., so at least tell me this: Politics are downstream from culture. Representation in the media can change the public's opinion on a certain issue. Art can bring people together.”

“Yeah, but how do you account for the turf war between DC and Marvel?” Reggie said. Ty chuckled at that, but Reggie went ahead and apologized, anyhow, saying “That was a great little speech, though,” looking down at the surface of his desk.

“I don't know. I don't even think it's my place to know. I don't write exposés. I don't want to take a side or make any huge statement. I think people should think whatever they want to think, so long as they're not hurting anybody else. I just want to write silly books. If people can see me make light of my own life, maybe that'll give them some levity about their own, right? Or at the very least distract them. It's entertainment.”

“Yeah, but that's a very privileged point of view, once again. You said that you want people to think what they want if they're not hurting anybody. What about fascists? White supremacists? Nazis?”

“I mean, yeah. Those people suck, but what's that have to do with my book?”

“Well,” Dr. Kasey interjected, now that an opportunity presented itself. “That is a very interesting debate to consider this week. In the meantime, we're nearly five minutes overtime.” Students uniformly began throwing their notebooks into purses and bookbags. There was a skittish nature to it, as though they had been anxiously waiting for the go-ahead to do so. “Now that *doesn't* give you the right to show up for class five minutes late next week, but I don't see why I can't let you out a bit early to compensate. Have a good week, kids.” I found it kind of strange that she referred to us as kids, as we all had the better half of our twenties behind us, but fuck it. I wasn't about to stop and ask any questions. I started booking it outta there.

“Hey, Wes!” I heard behind me. It was Arnold. “I just wanted to say that I really appreciate how you stand up for yourself in class and aren't afraid of the mob mentality.”

“Oh, thanks, man. I dunno if I'd call it—” I pulled over at the water fountain.

“It's hard for some of us to speak up, but it's really cool to see you just go at it.”

“Well, yeah, I mean, it's my book we're talking about.” I started bending down to take a sip, positioning my hands on the fountain. “That's like talkin' shit on my daughter.”

“Anyhow,” he looked around, almost nervously. “There's this thing going on next week on campus. Big Sister is giving a speech. You ever hear of her?”

“I’ve seen some fliers. I don’t really follow...anything, these days, aside from a few pornstars.”

He laughed. “Well, a few friends and I are going. Didn’t know if you’d be interested. Think you might enjoy it. She’s a real free thinker.” It almost sounded as though he was asking me out on a date.

“Sure, man. I don’t have anything going on that day.”

“Alright, well, see ya!” He charged ahead. I leaned down to take a sip and noticed Maggie take a prolonged glance at me as she was leaving the classroom.

“Wes,” I heard behind me. I jumped, turning back with a slimy upper lip from the misfire. It was Lizzie.

“Yeah, what’s up?” I noticed that my hand was behind my head, nervously pulling on some hair.

“I just wanted to apologize if I came off like a bitch in there.”

“No,” I lied. “I don’t think you did.”

“Well, thanks. This is kind of awkward for me, honestly. I just wanted to say that I take writing very seriously and think sometimes it’s worth challenging one another. Just like, feel free to call me out when my writing sucks.”

“I’m not really that kinda guy. Not really into calling people out or anything. I like constructive criticism. Instead of, ‘This is bad,’ maybe, ‘It might be interesting if you tried this.’ I think writers have intent and it’s important that they adhere to it. If I would’ve backed-down in there or changed my writing just because someone wasn’t into it, then what does that say about my writing? That’d make it meaningless.” I shrugged. “That’s just how I see it.”

“Well, see ya in class.” She gave me a smile before walking away.

For the first time since childhood, I was seeing Dad on a daily basis. Around six or seven every night, he’d be in here, sometimes with his girlfriend, sometimes alone. Well, alone isn’t an honest way of putting it, as a crowd was always gathered around his table. There’d be constant uproar as he relived nights wasted at the horse races and sneaking out of his parents’ house when he was younger than my age. I’d just stand and begrudgingly eavesdrop as I pretended to work behind the empty bar. My father was the headlining act and I was just running concessions. Once again, he positioned himself man of the house and I was relegated to the neglected child left

alone to the dishes as he entertained guests in the dining room. I went from being the guy who couldn't get anybody's drinks right to Don's son, who couldn't get anybody's drinks right.

"Is this as awkward for you as it is for me to pretend like I don't see how awkward this is for you?" Lindsey said as she filled a second mug from the tap.

"Some questions answer themselves." I was trying to maintain my cadence without letting it waver in my frustration. I didn't want my irritation to show but I also couldn't feign complacency.

"Well," she said, lifting a drink in each hand. "If it makes you feel any better, I can almost guarantee you he's going to look down my shirt in about thirty seconds." She set the drinks back down as my father approached.

"How's it goin' over here in the pit stop?" Dad asked, a stupid grin on his face. I saw his eyes dart up and down as though he was sizing Lindsey up for a bust sculpture.

"Hey, I was just about to bring these to ya."

"Aww, I don't mind. I could always use the exercise." He looked over to me. "So, when you gonna stop by my place?"

"Soon as there comes a day when it isn't empty. Figure I see you every day, here."

He grimaced. "Nonsense. We'll cook you a meal sometime, a *real* one—no offense."

"Tell you what, you let me know. Set a date and I'll be there."

"Yeah," he nodded. "That sounds good. I'll talk it over with (that damn name I can never remember) and get back to ya." He assumed custody of the mugs and turned back to his audience for his first encore.

"You know where I'll be."

Lindsey scoffed.

"What?"

"That was such a bluff."

"So? Not like he's gonna call me on it."

The moment of truth. Here, I was, standing on the precipice of manhood. With the razor in hand, I would slit the throat of my younger self to usher in a new age

of Wesley Thompson. The shadows obscuring the corners of me would now be enlightened. I was not confronting a face made of flesh in the mirror; I was staring down reality. Now, if only it didn't have to be so cliché. Oh well. Maybe some things were cliché for a reason, necessary rites of passage. Nobody ends their virginity reverse cowgirl; you hit that shit missionary while it's still exciting. Maybe this was no different.

I looked at the electric trimmer in hand as though it was a loaded gun. I could feel its weight tempting me to set it back down. It did not enjoy its job. It would be so easy to, but temptation is the mistress of the weak. I flicked it on, and the blades began to whirl. I closed my eyes as I pressed it to my forehead and dragged it straight up to my crown. Then, I just stood there, in the bathroom with my eyes closed. What now? I knew there would be a before and after, but what about the act itself? Slowly, I opened my eyes to the crime scene I had created. I started down at the sink, where locks of brown hair were collected. Somehow, they looked lifeless there in their severed state. Then, my eyes scaled the mirror to find myself with one rectangle shaved off the top of my head. It looked like someone ran through through an overgrown yard in a straight line. It was a ridiculous inverted Mohawk. I immediately honed in to the follicles peppering my flesh, a loose formation. They looked more like what the hair follicles of my forearm might than what I imagined the sides of my head to. Well, I set about this task to face my fears, and here they were. I turned the trimmer back on and exposed another patch of skin, and another, and then another. Eventually, I had accidentally cut myself into a horseshoe hairline. If I didn't buckle down and shave, this'd be my fate, I told myself. I looked silly, not like a Greek philosopher as my father did. I hadn't yet grown into that hairline. Of course, the sides came next, and then I ran over my entire circumference another few times to make sure I hadn't missed anything blatant.

At the end, I investigated my new self. It was more a feeling of resignation than discovery. I was retired to myself. Here I was, bared for the world to see. No sleeve to hide any tricks in, as I saw my longer locks compensating for the steep hairline. The room did feel colder, like I had just shed a layer of clothes. I felt lighter, though. On one hand I looked older, naturally, but somehow I felt younger. Like a how a baby is born bald. Well, except Maddie was born with a thin mane on her head. Was I born bald? Is that how you know the hair's gonna go? You enter the world without and leave it likewise?

Existential crisis aside, how was I gonna clean up this mess I'd made of myself all over the sink?

I felt like everybody was looking at me. Heads turned to examine my own, as though subconsciously they were aware that something was off about me. There was some essential part of my physical presence, my character, even, that was once there but was now missing. I could try and pass it off as my own decision all I want, but they knew the decision was made for me at the moment of my inception. I was now an invalid. If I'd thought of it, I would've tried out a handicapped parking spot and not had to walk all the way from Sal's to get to the campus. It felt like the wind was taking advantage of me in this vulnerable state, whipping across my naked head as an unsubtle notice that I am its bitch, now. About time I buy a hat for protection, that way I don't catch something in this weather.

The closer I got to the spot where I had agreed to meet Arnold and his pals, the more this insecurity was replaced with an intense fear. As the crowds building around the campus became larger, it became more apparent that this was somewhere I did not belong. This wasn't an event small enough to fit within the context of my sheltered life; this was something that belonged on the TV. There were as many people holding signs and chanting as there were people who appeared to be there with the intent of watching the show. I felt like I was at a classic rock concert and suddenly, it didn't seem as cool as it looks in the VH1 retrospectives.

How did I miss all the signs around campus for this thing? They seemed to be everywhere. Maybe they were like weeds, multiplying as the date drew nearer. Well, shit. Knowing my attention to detail, (*not that I need to comment on that to you, readers*) I probably wouldn't notice the signs if I got hit over the head with one, which very well might happen yet. I felt like I was in a zombie movie, and I couldn't tell who were supposed to be the good guys. Maybe this was like one of those movies where the humans were just as bad as the zombies, military douches like *Day of the Dead* or something.

Fortunately, we had agreed to meet somewhere outside the heart of the crowd. I took a left in the center of the campus and kept going until I saw a familiar face sitting on a bench outside the library. With him, were two faces I'd never seen around campus.

“Wes!” Arnold exclaimed. The tone of his voice made him sound like a father of the bride greeting guests on the big day. “You look like a new man.”

“Thanks,” I said, trying to avoid eye contact. “I feel more like an old man.”

He chuckled. “So, meet my droogs: Phillip,” he nodded to a plump, toadish man to his left. “And Jack,” who at least looked like a fucking human being.

“Greetings,” Phillip said, because of course he did. Unruly wires were protruding from his acne-scarred face. *Christ, is that how my beard looks?* I wasn't ready for another wake up call of this magnitude. He wore glasses and a band t-shirt he probably copped from Wal-Mart. He looked like the exact image of Mountain Dew's target audience when they invented the Gamer Fuel. I try to make not passing judgment my second nature, so I'll just say that I appreciate that challenge this beast of a man was presenting me with.

“Sup?” Jack asked. He had a rotund voice, unfit for such a small body.

“Hey,” I said, weakly.

“Just wanna say, I really liked that thing you wrote, about how porn is like, educational for women and entertainment for men,” he continued. “That was some funny shit.”

“Oh, thanks.” My eyes darted to Arnold. “Why'd you share my writing to people outside of class?”

“They were just in the living room while I was going through everyone's submissions. They heard me laughing and I let 'em take a look.” He shrugged. “That's what writers want, anyhow, to be read, right?”

I couldn't argue with that, so I let it drop. The droogs got off the park bench after Arnold's lead and we started heading towards the mayhem. “So, you guys all live together?”

“For now,” Phillip replied.

“Philliam's gonna be a married man, soon.”

He nodded.

“He even did it all out of order, so his own daughter gets to be flower girl,” Jack contributed. Nobody else seemed to find much humor in his observation. I couldn't imagine what kind of father that man might be, but then again, I wouldn't have been able to imagine what kind of father I'd be, either.

We could hear chanting as we neared the event. It was almost like a fade in to

a song steadily increasing in volume.

“Notice anything about these signs?” Phillip said, glancing coquettishly at Arnold.

“*I know*,” he said, drawing the last syllable out.

“What about them?” I said, just before stumbling over uneven blocks of cement. If I didn't regain my composure, I'd probably have caught myself with my face.

“They're just on some Alex Jones shit,” Jack scoffed.

“No, seriously, Wes. You strike me as a smart guy. Look at them. What do they have in common?”

“Well, they don't seem to be protesting *in favor* of the show.”

He laughed politely. “Other than that.”

“I dunno. I have no idea.”

“They're all immaculate, every one of them. There isn't a single misspelled word or shitty handwriting on any of them. They look like they were professionally made.”

“So, we're dealing with seasoned protesters?”

“Yeah, actually,” Phillip said as we joined the tail end of a line winding down to the entrance of the campus music hall. “*Professional* protesters.”

“It's obvious by looking at them.” I was looking as hard as I could. The signs *were* all well-designed and perfectly legible. “They're paid to be here. It's a total fraud.”

I gave my shoulders a jolt. “What if they just made good signs? Doesn't that make more sense?”

“Normally, I'd agree, but look at these people.” That was rich, coming from the Dungeon Master, himself. “You really think the better half of them are literate?” To be fair, the orgy of undercuts and mismatched clothes did seem more fit to be waiting outside of a punk concert than they did picketing on campus. They didn't seem like the most studious type, going off image alone.

“What I read online is that they scout for homeless people and recruit them to do the really violent stuff,” Arnold said. “Those are the ones that bring knives or start punching people. They're all freaked-out on drugs and have nothing to lose, so they can get radicalized easier. They'll take them in and treat them real nice while setting them up for some Charlie Manson shit.” I knew nothing about any of this.

“Who is *th—*” I nearly bit my tongue off, as a fist collided with the right side of my face. My lungs immediately deflated, as though I was laying down flat and someone jumped onto them. I couldn't tell if it was blood or spit wetting my chin.

“Take that, you fucking skinhead!” I heard vaguely. The sound was drowned out by a pulsing in my brain. Shit, maybe I would end the night concussed after all. I heard the guys around me shout back at my offender, scrambling to get them away from me as the world shifted back into focus. A hand found its way to my cheek as I wondered if I would spit a tooth out like in the movies. Fortunately, I did not.

“You O.K., man?” I heard Arnold say as his face emerged from the fog of my disorientation.

“Am I bleeding?”

“Doesn't look like it. Looks to you like she hit like a girl.”

I smiled, not at what he said but to know that my damage wasn't too severe. I could never stand the sight of my own blood. There was something so mortal about it. Despite all my self-deprecation, I didn't appreciate the reminder of my own vulnerability to the world around me.

“What the *fuck* are they doing inside?” Jack said, panting. Apparently, he and Phillip had chased the assailant off.

“Who?”

“The cops, man. They're all waiting inside while Hell is breaking out.” Now that he mentioned it, the chorus of screams was amplifying around us. Suddenly, I had the urge to get the fuck out of there. It felt instinctual to flee.

“I'm gonna get outta here,” I said, massaging my face. “Not really up for this after that.”

“Yeah, man.” Phillip said. “I'm with you.”

“How about we head to the bar?” Jack said.

Arnold sighed. “Yeah, it's probably for the best.”

“Well, if you guys are up for the bar, I know a place,” I said.

“Of all the punchable moments you have, I have to miss the one time you actually get what's coming to you,” Lindsey said as she handed me the bag of ice from across the bar. Funny, talking to her from the other side. I had stopped putting money into the place the day they began putting money into me, so this took me back.

“Yeah, but you should’a seen the other girl.” Jack, seated to my left, said.

“Jesus, Wes. You didn’t actually—”

“Naw, he didn’t hit her. She was just hot. You should’a seen her.” He paused a beat. “I know I have no room to complain, but I can’t get over that girl calling me fat.”

“Well, you’re getting there, buddy.” Arnold said. It took me a moment to realize he meant that Phillip was losing weight and not getting there as in fattening.

“Yeah, it just sucks. People don’t get it. You’re raised from birth to eat all this junk food and drink all these empty calories. You don’t question it when you’re younger, and before you know it, you’re twice the size as everyone around you. I know it’s pathetic that I let myself go so far but it takes a lot of time to get over years of sugar addiction.” I did notice he was the only one other than me to order a water tonight.

“Fuck her, man,” Jack said. “If she wants to go around hitting and insulting people, that’s one thing, but what gets me is that these people wanna go and take the moral high ground while punching below the belt.”

“Well, in my case, she aimed above belt-level,” I interjected.

“No, seriously,” Arnold continued from where Jack left off. “I’m so sick of being talked down to and treated poorly because I want lower taxes. I’m not racist. I don’t think you should treat anybody any differently than anybody else. I don’t like the alt-right. Everybody’s always telling me what a shitty person I am, but I never treat any of them the way they treat me. Wes knows what I’m talking about; he’s seen it on campus.”

“I dunno, man. I’m not a conservative. I don’t think I’m smart enough to be giving out my opinions on taxes or anything. I don’t have the answers, but I’m willing to hear anyone out who says they do. I just don’t think you should judge people for any reason. Maybe I’m wrong, but even if I ran into somebody who was racist, I like to think that I could show them the error in their ways by giving them the kindness that they’re so quick to revoke from others.” Arnold’s phone started buzzing on the counter. He picked it up and started flicking at the screen. “If you disagree with something I say or do, that’s one thing. I don’t like a lot of things about me. I just don’t like getting punched in the face.”

“Dudes,” Arnold shouted. That was the highest pitch I’d ever heard his voice climb to. “You’re not gonna believe this.”

“What?” we all said in unison, including Lindsey.

“The event was fucking canceled.”

I shrugged. “Well, what else could they do? They can't just have all that violence on campus.”

“Here's the kicker, though: It was canceled yesterday. Big Sister posted that she was told at noon today.”

“Yeah, but if that's true, then how come she didn't post about it earlier? Why have people come at all?” Jack said.

“Maybe they wanted this to happen. Think about it, this is news. *Riot breaks out when controversial speaker comes to town.* That's a story.”

I admired the neon beer signs behind the counter as we sat in silence. Something about them always fascinated me. I could see why moths were so attracted to the damn things.

“So, Wes, you ready for your one-on-one with Dr. Kasey?”

The thought of that tempted me to order my first shot in about a year. “Semester's went by so fast, I haven't even considered it until now. All I can say is, I'm not looking forward to it.”

“I already know how mine's gonna go. She'll dock half my points for wrong-think and let me slide by with a C just to avoid suspicion.”

“Maybe. I can't get a read on her. She does seem passionate about what she does, but sometimes I get the feeling that she's too involved emotionally in what she does to take an objective stance. I think she definitely plays favorites.”

“You're telling *me*. Every other kid in the class can turn in their SJW pieces and get flying LGBT rainbow colors, but if I put anything that even remotely criticizes the left in my own pieces, it's an act of political violence. She straight up told me not to include one piece because she felt it was mocking the other students.”

“The one about the board of free speech that filtered out anything that didn't conform to their beliefs?”

“Yeah, that one. How'd you guess?”

“It was a little on the nose.” I downed the last of my water. Lindsey was filling me back up before the glass was even back in place on the bar.

“So were some of those jabs they took at me in some of their pieces. Kind of funny how almost every other story but ours has some racist, sexist neo-nazi character

whose name begins with the letter A.”

“Maybe it's for Adolf?” I said. I could tell by the silence that he wasn't sold on it. “I mean, yeah, you're probably right. I do think it's wrong for them to write you off. I just think it's also unfair to judge them. The only person I'd ever want to criticize in my writing is myself. Ultimately, I think they're good people; they're just confused about things. I know you're probably not a racist or anything, but you can't be confrontational or stand-offish in class. You have to take the high ground and say, 'I'm not insulting you or calling you names. Why are you doing that to me?' I don't have any interest in any hackneyed satire about republicans but I don't care to start writing any hit pieces on the dems, either. I think all you guys are probably good people who care about issues and just have very different ideas of how to solve them. I think if you actually got to know each other, you'd see that you have a lot more in common than you have differences.”

“Things centrists say,” Phillip said. Everybody at the bar, including Lindsey cracked up at that.

“No offense to anyone who might tip me, but I fuckin' hate right-wingers. Even I gotta admit, though, they got ya there, Wes.”

“Thanks for breaking from your studies to meet us,” Ione said. I couldn't help but stare at the surface of the table she was across from. It was the kind with a bunch of local advertisements. There was nothing interesting or even different than the last time we had been here. It just had this effect on me like if a TV's in the room, even when it's playing a show I have no interest in; something about it demands my attention.

“I could use the distraction,” I said.

“I'll say,” Brendan said. “Looks like your classes have really put a beating on you.” Nobody laughed.

“It's too bad you didn't get a good look at the person who did it to you.”

“Yeah, I hear she was hot.”

Ione sighed. “You probably could'a pressed charges.”

“Not worth the stress. I got punched; it's been a long time coming.” I looked down at Maddie to my side. “You got your first Christmas coming up. Do you know about Santa Clause?”

I looked at my co-parents across the table. “Did you tell her about Santa Clause?”

“We’re already playing Christmas music for her in the car,” Brendan said.

“She’s gonna *meet* Santa soon as he comes to the mall; you should totally come!” Ione said. “We can all go Christmas shopping.”

I nodded, as I was sipping water through a bendy straw.

“This is probably something we should have talked about before, but are we going to raise her Christian?”

Brendan and Ione looked at each other, then back at me. They each drew in breath and finally, Brendan said, “We don’t know.”

“I’m not really, well, I was raised Catholic,” Ione started. “I-I don’t know.”

“I would like to,” Brendan said. “If everyone else is on board with it.”

“I honestly don’t care. I was just curious.” I looked down at my baby. “Eff it. It’ll probably be good for her. She’ll learn some morals, get a sense of community outside of public education, and if nothing else, it might get her reading.”

“We’ll talk about it later,” Ione concluded. She was looking at Brendan when she said that.

“On another, equally awkward note,” Brendan said.

“Are you asking him!?” Ione said, almost squeamish-sounding. The waitress set a banana pepper pizza in front of us. The steam rose up to my nose. *Are we raising her vegan?* That’s another question to bring up at some inopportune moment.

“Well, I’m trying to,” Brendan said.

“Asking me what?”

“Umm, it’s kind of awkward—”

Ahh, here it comes, the inevitable threesome proposition.

“Do you want me to ask him?”

“No, babe. I’ve got it.” He seemed agitated in a way I’d never seen him before. “Well, Ione and I were wondering if you’d be best man at our wedding,” he blurted out.

I looked down at the table. “Yeah,” I said, correcting my eyes to meet his, and then hers. “That’d be great. Thank you.”

Brendan was smiling. Ione was smiling at him smiling, and then smiled at me. “If not, it’s O.K.”

“No, it's totally cool. I'm excited.” I meant that. I just felt a lump in my throat; my palms had grown sweaty, resting on my pant legs.

“Thank you, Wes. You're like a brother to me. It just, well, it means a lot.”

“Yeah, anytime,” I said, standing up. I hit my knee off the table. “Shit, I'm sorry. I'm just gonna be right back.” I marched to the bathroom with my eyes glued to the floor. I tried counting the red and white tiles to keep my composure. I practically shoved the door open and locked it behind me, sliding down the other end to the floor. I ran my hands over the skin of my head as I felt the tears rolling down my face. By the time I was on the floor, I could no longer breathe through my nose and I heard myself whimpering. Hopefully there was no one waiting to shit on the other side that could hear me. I knew no matter how long I took to pick myself up off the floor, they'd see it in the color of my face what I was doing in here. There was no denying that I was a crybaby; I just hope they wouldn't take it the wrong way.

If I was the title of any Tupac album when I walked into class, I would have been, *All Eyez on Me*. Somehow, I felt like it wasn't just my paranoia, this time. I heard sniggering as I sat down. Damn, did my shave look that bad? The swelling in my cheek no longer looked like I was packing a wad of gum in the side of my mouth but maybe the damage was more apparent than I thought. I could hear people talking and couldn't help but eavesdrop the best I could. Something about a nazi, so I must've been safe. Probably just talking about some nut in the news.

Arnold, already seated to my right, leaned towards me. “Bad news.”

“What?” I said, feeling my face flush of all color.

“You're public enemy number one.” He held his phone up to display a picture of some bald guy getting punched on the front page of the campus news page. *White Nationalist Speaker Cancels Event after Local Freedom Fighters Brave Off Nazis*, the headline read.

“What the fuck!?” I couldn't help but shout. If the attention wasn't on me already, it definitely was now. “That's not true,” I announced, pointing at Arnold's phone as though everyone in the room knew exactly what was on it. (*On second thought, they probably did.*) “I'm not a nazi. I was born in 1996; I don't even *know* any nazis.”

“Then why were you at a white nationalist event?” Lizzie said, quick to the

draw.

“And why'd you decide to go as a skinhead!?” Reggie barked.

I tilted my head down like I was about to charge. “Because I have weak genetics!”

“You mean like the Jews?” Bridgette said.

“No! Like my father—who is also bald. I just went to the event to check it out. I don't even know who Big Sister is.”

“She's not a neo-nazi,” Arnold chimed in. “She's disavowed them hundreds of times. If you actually watched—”

“Well, obviously she can't come out and say she's a nazi,” Lizzie shouted. “Because then nobody would let her give her speeches.”

“Whatever she's doing now,” I said, rubbing my cheek. “It isn't stopping her events from getting canceled.”

“She's just shifting the Overton window for them until Nazism is more acceptable in the mainstream; she's normalizing racism and sexism.”

“How is saying that nazis and racism are evil dog-whistling to them? She's married to a Jewish woman. I don't think that qualifies her as the face of antisemitism.”

“Why else would anybody go to an event like that? You're giving her your money—”

“The event was free for students,” Arnold interjected.

“You're giving her a platform for hatred.”

“Maybe they would go to have an open mind, to hear what this chick was all about. That's why I went.” Maggie chimed in. The room was silent. Everyone but Arnold and I looked like she did a lap around the room and slapped them all. “Obviously, that didn't work out. I looked some of her videos up before, out of curiosity.” She shrugged. “Nothing special, just the same neo-con talking points with a shock-rock attitude to catch headlines. She's just Ann Coulter without the wrinkles. She isn't interesting, but she isn't a white supremacist. She's not worth the discussion and she isn't worth tearing each other apart over.”

I was just at the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong haircut, I decided not to say. Instead, I just put my head down and waited for Dr. Kasey to enter the room. Quick as this semester had gone by, it couldn't end soon enough.

I twisted the doorknob with one hand and kicked it open, holding Maddie in my other arm. I pressed her close to my chest, as though that might protect her from the cold any more than all the layers she was wrapped up in. The first flurries of the year were beginning to dance around the lamp posts and I for one was not ready. I made sure to shut the door quick, as not to let out any of the turkey smells.

“Hey!” Mom said, standing up from the table. She was wearing a black sweater. Matt, seated at the table, twisted to get a look at us, and snapped back to attention at the table.

“What do you want? I can make your plate; we’ve been waiting for you guys.”

“I can make my own plate, Mom. I’m twenty-three. What’d you make, though?”

“Everything. We have green bean casserole, turkey, creamed corn, mashed potatoes, gravy, stuffing, and pumpkin pie for dessert.” I would be having all of that.

“Geeze, Mom. I feel bad for keeping you waiting all day.” I said, kicking my shoes onto the carpet. It was already bleeding some melted snow.

“Nonsense, you’re worth the wait.” She was already up to me, reaching to snatch Maddie out of my arms like a basketball player on the offense. I surrendered Maddie over to her; after all, she worked all day for this moment. “And so are you,” she said, at least two octaves higher.

I followed them into the kitchen.

“How was work?” Matt said, rising from the table with a clean plate. It was nearly ten at night; they had been waiting all this time for us.

“Ya know, it was the first Thanksgiving I spent with our father since high school.”

“So, not very good,” he said, shaping the perfect volcano of mashed potatoes next to a wad of stuffing. Speaking of high school, I hadn’t seen him move this fast since he was running track.

I shrugged with a smile and started collecting my meal. Hard to believe anyone could prefer a night hunched over a bar to this. Scary thing is, in my own way, I almost did.

Somehow, we all coordinated to retire to the table at the same time, pulling out chairs and sliding into them in unison. Mom bowed her head and we followed suit. I kept my eyes open, looking at the food beneath me. I always found the idea of

closing one's eyes to pray odd. There's some lousy joke about blind faith in there somewhere. I'd rather see what I'm giving thanks for.

“Dear Lord,” she began, rocking Maddie in her arms. “We want to thank you for getting us all here safely tonight. We want to thank you for this meal you have given us and the year we've had since last Thanksgiving.” That was probably the last time we prayed over a meal, so that's an awful wide brush stroke in my opinion. “We want to thank you for introducing Maddie to our family and for watching over Wesley and Matthew—”

“Whit,” Matt grunted.

“Matthew, this isn't the time. We're talking to the Lord right now,” she said, as though God was on speaker phone.

“Well then, please don't dead-name me to the Lord, Mom.”

“I'm not going to get into this on Thanksgiving, but you'll always be my Matthew, and the Lord knows that.”

“I was never Matthew. That's just the name you gave me.”

“And it's a perfectly fine name, now, please let me finish this prayer so we can get to eating, Matthew.”

“You know it's considered an act of violence to dead-name somebody, right, Mom?”

“I'll give you an act of violence,” I said, lightly punching his shoulder.

He shot up from his seat. “I'm so *sick* of you trying to act like you're this family man, now, Wes. You get too drunk to wrap yourself up and all of a sudden you wanna act like Mr. Perfect. It's bullshit and we all know it.”

Mom sighed and shook her head. In the hand that wasn't beneath Maddie's bum, she started massaging her brow.

“Not now, Whit,” I said, trying to slow my speech to a calm rhythm without sounding condescending. My heart was beating to break out of its cage and I didn't want to sound agitated. “When was the last time we were able to all get together, even for a holiday? Let's just try to have a—”

“Oh,” he sneered. “That's hysterical, coming from Absent Father of the Year, himself. You're just a glorified sperm donor, a part-time babysitter at best. How often do you even spend time with Maddie, Wes?”

“I'm trying to take responsibility and make up for my actions. We're going

without now so that I can give Maddie a good future.”

“You’re using school as a distraction. Nothing’s changed about you. Maybe it’s a good thing you got to see Dad this Thanksgiving; clearly, you’ve been taking notes from his parenting skills.” He stormed out into the living room.

“Matt!” Mom called. “Come back in here!” He didn’t turn back. He slid into his shoes and threw the door open, walking out into the night without even bothering to shut it. A cold breeze entered the room in his absence. “Matt!” Mom called out once again, her voice starting to strain.

“I’ll go get him, Mom,” I said, following him to the door. By time I was on the porch, his taillights were already sinking into the darkness outside. I closed the door behind him.

I’ve made a bad habit of being unfashionably early. I show up to work half an hour before my shift begins every day, even if there’s nothing going on. I’m always twiddling my thumbs in class before the teacher arrives. Let me tell you, it does not traditionally pay to be early.

I had been flipping through the pages of my pamphlet, waiting outside of Dr. Kasey’s office. It smelled pleasant in the campus hall. It was a modest school, so there wasn’t much to entertain myself with aside from a vending machine if fattening was my idea of time well-spent. (*Already learned that lesson, the hard way.*) I felt like a dog, eager to meet its owner at the door when I heard footsteps sounding my way.

It was Maggie.

“Hey,” she said, sitting down next to me. There was no color in her voice to interpret. It was purely mechanical, as though she was speaking into an automated machine.

“What’s up?” I said.

“Oh, you know. Finals.”

“You have any anxiety about your meeting?” I could feel my throat tighten, my body’s way of telling me to shut the fuck up, dude. It was a lost cause.

“No. I look forward to it so I can work on my essays.”

“Hey, um, I have a question...” I could hear my voice wavering; my cheeks were probably flushed.

“Sure.”

“Why have you been so fair to me? I mean, in class and everything.”

“Because I’m a professional. My thoughts on you outside of class have no bearing on your work.”

“Well, thank you.”

“No problem.” She took a deep breath and closed her manila folder. Her surrender of her moment of silence made me feel guilty for trying to claim it to make myself heard. “It’s not for you.” Her brown eyes stared hard into mine. “I do it because I have ethics.”

“Yeah,” I said, looking down. *Oh, Jesus. Would she think I was looking down her shirt? Fuckfuckfuck.* I met her gaze. “I respect that. Honestly, I do.”

“Well, thanks. Means a lot.” She looked forward, studying the bulletin board on the opposite wall.

“And, I’m sorry, about before. It wasn’t you.”

“I know that,” she interjected.

“No, really. I just got nervous, and I got anxious to admit that I was feeling nervous. Instead of being honest, I tried to shift the blame onto you. That was wrong and cowardly and I’m sorry. I think about it a lot.”

“Don’t,” she said. “Don’t think about it. I don’t need to talk about it. What’s passed is in the past and might as well have never happened. We’re just students in a classroom, now.”

The door to Dr. Kasey’s office opened. Ty looked back and asked if she would like it open. Apparently, she did. “Hey, guys,” he said, passing through. He was doing his best to sound sociable but I could tell he wasn’t happy.

I nodded and said hey back in a voice deeper than my casual registry; I don’t know why I lower my voice when talking to others dudes. Is that what they call latent male insecurity?

“Hey, Wes,” I heard, as my handle touched the wooden door frame. I looked back at Maggie. “Thank you. I know that wasn’t easy.”

“Anytime, well, hopefully, there won’t need to be a next time, but you know—”

She raised an eyebrow. “You should probably get to your meeting.”

“Yeah,” I said, turning to face my superior. “I should probably—hey, Dr Kasey, how are you doing?”

“Hello, Wes.” She almost looked like the Godfather behind that desk. The walls were lined with bookshelves. I noticed a cactus on the highest shelf of one and some VHS tapes on the bottom of another. Scanning her spines, I couldn't help but notice that she had impeccable taste. “We have a lot to talk about today. Did you bring your portfolio?”

I did, and offered it up on the table. She snatched it and put it on the pile in the corner closest to her right. “So, let's begin with the name of your book, *Brashful*.”

“Yeah, I wasn't sure about that one. I was really attached to *Crying at the Strip Club*—”

Her face implied that she wanted me to go on.

“Except, well, there's no strip club anywhere in the story.”

“Not much crying, either,” she added, solemnly. “So, with this title, what are you trying to convey?”

“Well, the arrogance of self-deprecation, and how sometimes narcissism can be about obsessing over your own insecurities.”

She nodded. “I can see that. I think a lot of that shows in your work. You have a lot of personality, and a dark sense of humor. So dark that it sometimes worries me, but I'll excuse it in the name of art. What I want to say, here, is that you have these ideas and strong themes, but you don't have the text to back it up. The title conveys your themes, but wouldn't they be better suited with something more refined? You have a lot to say, but you get so tripped up over all these threads you're carrying thematically that you seem to have trouble expressing yourself the way you need to. Would you agree with that?”

Shit, I'd never put any thought to that. So, naturally, I nodded as I took a deep gulp.

“You can defend your work in class like you have a law student, but once you start getting published, you're not going to be in the room to stick up for your writing. It needs to stand on its own. Your crippling your children by acting as a hover parent.”

“I understand what you're saying, but I don't know that it's my responsibility to make sure that nobody ever misinterprets my work. A lot of the criticism relies on taking parts of my book out of context. I think that's unfair and they wouldn't hold weight with honest examination.”

“That's one way to look at it. She glanced down at the manila folder with my

name scratched on it. Suddenly, my handwriting looked inadequate to me, like that of a child not yet adept with the pen. “Do you ever think that maybe you're writing is unclear and that is the source of confusion for readers?”

Maybe. I don't know. How was I to judge that?

“What I want you to consider, Wes, is everyone else's theses for their works compared to yours. What is your message? How it reads to me, and to other students in the classroom, it would appear that your intent is to express your own anger towards yourself. Some of us are writing about racial identity, sexuality, feminism, hard subjects. The only contact you seem to be willing to make with any of these issues is to make jokes about them. You're too smart to be the jester, Wes. You have the talent; you just need hone your powers in and use them for good. I think there's a very strong writer inside of you; you just have to find him.”

I tried not to look disappointed or frustrated, so I found myself looking all across the room like I was recording it for a VR production.

“These things take time. You'll get there. You're still young; what you have here is impressive. It could just be better with a little more consciousness about your subject matter. Is this helpful to you?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I got it.”

“Do you have any questions for me or where I'd like to see your work go?”

“No, I think I understand, but thank you.”

“Well, I'll have this marked and graded for you next time we meet in class. I already have a good idea what I'm going to put, so it should be a good starting point for you. A large portion of your final grade is how receptive you are to criticism and are willing to collaborate with your work shop peers and of course, myself.”

I thanked her and lurched out of the room like I had just lost a court case.

There's something profound about sitting behind the wheel of your car. It's this powerful sense of being in control and yet safe, a part of the world but tucked away inside this mechanical pocket where you can function as a spectator. It's a unique vibe. You'd think that being in my home would be just as comfortable, if not more, but I'd argue that there's a reason Gary Newman never wrote a hit single called “In My Room.” My theory is that it's the first thing we own of any significance. Well, maybe the kids today can claim their thousand dollar smart phones, but fuck them. When I

was eighteen, I saved up my wages from an entire summer working at the ice cream shop to buy this thing. For me, this was it. It was my liberation. I barely had enough room to spread out in the back seat (although I made due in desperate circumstances, when my roommates weren't willing to gimme any privacy with the lucky ladies) but it was kind of my mobile home. You rent an apartment. Sure, you get settled in but there's a degree of separation. Your car is yours. It has personality. When the tailpipe coughs, I pat the dashboard to encourage it to work through the congestion. When it stalls out, I'm not just worried about getting home, I'm hoping for its health. Maybe it is run-down and fitting for the junk yard, but I plan on keeping it around until the day comes when the headlights are dimmed forever. It has personality.

I've come up with some of my best ideas in my worn-out seat. I can't even name all the times I've pulled over to tap something into my phone before it flew out the window. Sometimes, I just sit in my car and meditate on what I want to do. It's my incubator. All my distractions are outside the windows and they can't squeeze in to bother me, even when I crack them open for some fresh air.

Tonight, the dogs were barking outside. Every now and again, I'd hear an owner call for them to shut the fuck up. That might help, until the door slammed and they were right back at it. I didn't mind. It felt like a soundtrack to the civil war going on inside my head.

Writing workshops just aren't for me. It's a creative process by committee. Art isn't a democracy. Sometimes, you need a good dictator to keep shit in focus. Don't believe me? Watch a Kubrick film and then we'll talk. Who is Dr. Kasey to define my work, my identity as an artist for me? Does a doctorate from some fancy university credential one to tell others who they are and what is off limits for them? Fuck that. I glanced in the rear view mirror to see Maddie snug in her car seat. She was passed out; I could see a string of drool climbing down her face and reaching to her shoulder. What would I tell her to do, if she was in my position? To me, that's not the kind of question where there's any more than one right answer. I know what's right.

I have to stand by my work, marks and all. It's my work and I know what's best for it. Nobody else can tell me how to express myself. I wrote it with deliberation and if I bowed to their criticism or anyone else's, then that intent would be rendered meaningless. There's a thematic framework to uphold and I'm not going to go tearing my own home down for the sake of stylistic trends. I wrote something to this effect at

the bottom of my paper and called it a night.

“So, how's it feel to be finally done?” Brendan said as I handed Maddie's car seat with one hand. I held Maddie herself in my other arm. She was wrapped up in one of those coats that are shaped like the Michelin tire man, sucking away at a binkie, watching both of us with intent either in admiration or confusion at the prospect of having two dads. I dunno how kids process that shit or if they recognize it at all. I didn't know what to make of it for a while, myself, and I'm Dad #1.

“Well, since you've never been to college, I'll give you an insider's secret. It's just the end of the semester. This is just winter break like in high school.”

“Thank you. That's very informative and not at all condescending.” He bent into the back of his car, adjusting the seat into place. “Seriously, though,” he said, standing back up straight. “We are proud of you. Maybe we can catch dinner sometime to celebrate, on me.”

“Feel like it should be on me. After all, I'm the one twiddling thumbs behind a desk rather than on my grind providing for the fam.”

“Naw.” He brushed the notion away with a swipe of the hand. “You're just making a long-term investment; no different than starting a business. You wanna come over tonight? We got nothin' going on.”

“Working 'till past bedtime.”

“Well, tell your father we say hi.”

“*Pssh!* I don't even wanna speak to him for myself, let alone for anyone else. Jesus, Maddie probably won't even meet her grandfather 'till she's of drinking age.”

“Well, I'd better let you go, so you can actually turn that fuck-err, sucker in.” Brendan has been on this whole thing about not swearing in front of Maddie. I don't see the big deal. It's not like the first word out of her mouth is gonna be “ass” or something. Even if so, that'd be pretty funny.

“Plus, the cargo might get cold,” I said. It was finally that pubescent time of year as fall gives way to winter. Its voice is cracking with the whistle of wind. Its body is changing in ways a better writer than me could come up with an apt comparison for. (*Is snow an appropriate allegory for body hair, maybe? Or would green grass be a better fit, which would only work in the context of spring?!*) The time of year where you have some good days and some bad days. This was a bad day.

I glanced down at the baby in my arms. Her eyes were looking into mine, twin marbles pushed into the doughy skin of her face. To her, this moment was everything. She hasn't yet made any mistakes to look back on with regret and doesn't yet know the promise of tomorrow. In her world, there was only this moment, and she decided to spend it by looking at me. "I love you very much, Maddie, even more than your mom." I planted a kiss on her cheek. Matt looked confused. "I meant that I love her more than her mother does, not that I love her more than I love her mother, which is your fiancée...obviously, who I do not love in any romantic capacity or otherwise." Somehow, this didn't seem to be helping my case. "Shit, she doesn't know the English language enough to know what I'm saying and you know what I'm just kidding around." I glanced back into the passenger seat of my car to make sure that my essay hadn't somehow blown out of the driver's side door in some *Final Destination*-esque turn of events to foil my grades. It wasn't there at all. My entire face went numb, so did my hands. *What the fuck?* I specifically remember putting it in there. Wait, no, I don't. I don't remember that at all. I even took the God damn folder inside and set it on the kitchen table for some reason. Jesus Christ, why would I do that? It's not like I was going to make any last minute revisions in the next six hours before turning it in. Maybe this is a sign that I'm truly not college material.

"You O.K., Wes?" He looked at me as though I was passed out on the ground and he wasn't yet sure if I was alive or just passed out.

"Hey, man. I gotta go. I forgot my essay at home. I dunno how and I'm really mad at myself. It's due by two."

"Sure thing. You've got enough time. Just take it easy on the road. I know you get anxious."

"Yeah," I said, already on the other side of my car and opening the door. "Bye," I said, really, whispered, as I shut it. I turned the key, still in the ignition. The clock said that it was one, now.

Of course the campus parking lot would be packed full during the week of finals. Why wouldn't it be? It's probably the single most important time to be on campus. That didn't stop my dumb ass from being optimistic about finding a spot. Much to my dismay, there was a line just to enter the parking lot. I drove right past it to the bar and started running for it. It was that kind of rush where you don't even

remember if you locked your car doors. To give myself some credit, at least I remembered to grab the folder this time (which was exactly where I had placed it on the kitchen table the night before).

Gotta say, though, for the first time in my life, my legs weren't entirely unconfident about running. I made it a few blocks without even starting to get that noodly feeling or being out of breath. It felt pretty good. This recognition was interrupted by something wet on colliding with the back of my head. It was freezing and sinking down my neck into the back of my shirt. For a moment, I was certain that it was blood and that I had been shot from behind. (*Maybe it was cold because I was already dead? When you're in a panic, logic starts phoning it in.*) When I reached back to touch the back side of my brain, I knew exactly what it was: *a snowball*. My head was retracted and my collars raised like a turtle shrinking back into its shell from the shock of the blow; I let my defenses down and turned around to go off on whichever hooligans dared interrupt me on my mission.

My assailants were two kids, a boy and a girl. If they weren't siblings, they could've passed for them. They had a fear in their eyes as though I had pulled a gun on them. The girl was holding onto her brother's arm. Suddenly, my anger melted into humor just as the snow on the back of my head was turning to water. I couldn't help but shake my head and laugh.

"I-I told him not to do it!" the girl shouted nervously, her voice starting to crack.

"*Ashley!*" her brother scolded.

"It's O.K.," I said. "You kids have fun." And I was back on my track with a brisk power walk. Soon, I was jogging. By the time I spun around the corner of the English hall, I had definitely reached that point of exhaustion where your throat becomes a desert canyon and your heart is beating in surround sound inside your skull. I grabbed the bar to throw the glass door open and nearly pulled my arm out of its socket off doing so. When I was a kid once, I chased a train down and tried grabbing a hold of it. Soon as my hand wrapped around a metal bar, I realized the train was going much faster than I could ever hope to catch up with and would lose my whole arm if I didn't let go. It felt something like that. It felt something like that. I took a step back and looked at the door. How could it betray me in such a time of need? Was the building locked up already? Was it finally too late? Then I remembered that

it's a fucking push door, not a pull, and entered.

Somehow, I had managed to avoid every puddle and slab of ice on my way in yet slid right across the tiled floor once I was in the building. I was able to catch myself on the wall; otherwise, I might have performed a successful split right there in the hall. I expected some climactic encounter with Dr. Kasey to cap off the semester but her door was shut. On a chair beside it was a box labeled "Finals." I slid my folder delicately on top of another. *Aren't I supposed to feel relief right now?* I thought. Somehow, it felt more like defeat. Seeing my work in that box was like looking at a coffin lowered into the ground. Perhaps that's appropriate, considering the fact that I'm sending my work off to certain evisceration. I let out a sigh and made my way for the bathroom. With this task out of way, I realized that I had to piss so bad that it felt like someone had a death grip on my balls. I'd be lying if I said a little didn't dribble out prematurely inside my pants.

Hitting the bar after finals never felt so essential, mainly because I was never before at risk of losing my job if I didn't. What I love about closing at the bar is that you get all of the perks of going out without having to drink or spend money. Some people seem to hate closing on a Friday night due to the drunks (even if the tips are nice) but I love the reminder of what I used to look like. I still get that social fix, make some easy money, and keep my demons across the bar but always in sight.

I was met by applause and cheers when I walked through the door. "Now, that's the kind of reception I deserve every time I walk in here," I said, slinging my backpack off my shoulder so I could carry it by the strap.

"It's the scholar!" I heard Lindsey say. She was joined at the bar by my father and Toby. Toby was a fat stinking fuck who manages a factory in town, though, I swear the only sweat he's ever broken in his life is the walk from his car to the nearest food.

"Run outside fast enough and you might catch the new princess of Sal's."

"Your sister?"

"Your mum have a new kid?" my father asked. The unfortunate thing was, I don't think it was said in jest; he's just that far out of the familial loop.

"Yeah, picked her up after finals so she could...*drop me off?*" Honestly, I have no fucking idea what Matt was up to, could be a drive-by for all I know. He was certainly sweating bullets on the ride back down here. I don't understand anything

about that person anymore. Figured the less I know, the less liable I am, legally speaking.

“How's it feel to be done?”

“Oh, you know.” I took my place behind the counter, throwing my backpack to the ground. Lindsey hates when I do that but I'm not leaving it anywhere public where it could get stolen or unattended in the kitchen for anyone to go snooping through. “Thrilled to be spending more time here.”

“Yeah?” She raised an eyebrow at me. I think she was wearing a different shade of eyeshadow but couldn't tell and didn't want to embarrass myself if not. “Miss me that much, huh?”

“Always better to make money than to spend it.”

“Ya know,” my father slurred. I could tell that he was already thoroughly sloshed. One eyelid was half-open, twitching as he tried to hold it open. “I was just telling Lin, here how great you two'd be together.”

My face flushed pink. I don't know what was more embarrassing, seeing my father like this or his attempts to get me pleasure out of business. “That true, *Lin?*”

“That's not a thing. Nobody has ever called me that before in twenty-six years and I don't intend to start going by it now. Other than that, yes, your pop was mumbling something about me taking you on a pity date.”

Fucking Hell. “Are we allowed to kick him out?”

“You can call (*whatever his girlfriend's name is*) to come pick him up. Other than that, his money spends as good as anybody's.”

“Here's an idea. Drink's on me!” my father lifted his head up from its place on his knuckles to exclaim. “My boy turned his finals in. Let's do shots!”

I shook my head. “Dad, no. I don't—I don't drink. You know that.”

“Aww, c'mon. Don't be a bitch. You always were scared. You'd never take the jump 'cause a you're too afraid to scrape your knees. One drink won't kill ya.”

I looked around the empty room. The hum of the neon signs became more pronounced in the moment as I felt a pressure at my temples. It almost felt as though horns were pushing through my skull. I turned to Lindsey for support. “You don't have to, Wes.”

“You know what, fuck it,” I announced. “Let's do shots on Dad. Vodka.”

Lindsey sighed and gave me a tender look. I mouthed the word *water* and she nodded

with a feint smile. So, she poured vodka into three shot glasses and discreetly filled the fourth with water. She placed two shots of vodka on the bar for the geriatrics, kept one for herself, and handed me my water. On her count of three, we all downed them.

“Lindsey, can I have a word with you before my shift?”

She followed me into the kitchen.

“Listen, I’m sorry but I don’t want to be here and I can’t stand my dad being around and I hate seeing him like this and I’ll finish my shift and all that but I’m just really—”

“Wes, *Wes*.” She put a hand on my shoulder. “Do what you need to. My dad used to drink around me all the time as a kid. When I started having friends over, he’d smoke them up. I *know* it’s hard, what you’re going through, even if I haven’t been exactly through it. I know it’s hard but keep in mind that he’s just another patron here, the same as anyone.”

“It’s not that simple. I mean, in a way, you’re right, with how little he’s been involved in my life, but it isn’t that easy for me to just turn off the feeling that he’s, or he should be my father.”

“You’re right. That was shitty to say. Maybe it’ll help—”

“I know you two are having a moment but these fries aren’t getting any warmer and I *really* don’t feel like throwing them back in the microwave,” Fred interjected. We parted to let him through the doorway to the bar. I caught myself sucking my gut in, just to make extra sure his greasy apron didn’t rub up against me.

“Oh, poor him, right?” I said. “God forbid he has to step away from the TV to threeheat some fucking French fries.”

“It doesn’t matter, Wes. He’s out of our hair, now. Well, my hair, on account of your whole *situation* up top. *That’s my point*.”

“That I’m bald?”

“No, dummy. That these assholes don’t matter. They make us work a little harder to earn our money but this place is just a business and they’re just customers. We just follow protocol and make it through the night. You handle the creepy guys and I can take care of your deadbeat dad. It’s a buddy system. Just disregard his stupid comments. Anyhow, what I *mean* to say is that maybe it’ll help to see him as a reminder of the person you’re too good to be. You always brag about being sober and working around a bunch of alcoholics. Think of him as a bad example of a father. Let

him see the son he's missed out on and how well you're doing, no thanks to him. You just finished a semester of grad school, Wes, that's so fucking cool. His actions out there speak only for him. He might have *made* you but he doesn't have to define you. You have to do that for yourself."

"Damn. Working here's made you real good at pretending to listen."

"That's how you make the best tips." She patted me on the head. Sure, it was condescending, but in her own affectionate Lindsey way. "I'm here for you. You're like a retarded little brother to me. You need to take a minute, I got you covered."

I felt a vibration in my pocket. Instinctively, I fished it out. "Shit, sorry. I'm getting a call."

Second Act

Every Shortcut, a Detour

I pinned Brendan against the wall, holding him by his throat. A leather Bible fell off the stand. I could hardly see him through misted eyes. It felt like my lashes were bent inward, prickling the bulb like antennae probing its surface. I could feel tears rolling down my cheeks. "Let me see Maddie!" I screamed in his face, pressing my thumbs harder into each side of his Adam's apple. If I grasped him any harder, would he die? Did it matter? In this moment, no. He was collateral damage, just something in the way.

He put his hands to each of my shoulder blades, pressuring me to back off. He began to part his lips but seemed to realize his wind pipe was pinched shut. I could see his eyes starting to well up, looking into mine.

"You're not a father! You have no right to keep my daughter away from me!" I spat, literally, in his face. He did not remove the specks of saliva from his cheeks, instead, clamping his fingers down into my shoulder. We might both end the night with a few bruises.

"Oh my God!" I heard from the hall. I think we both turned at the same moment, like dogs at the door when they hear a knock. It was a nurse. "I-is everything O.K.?" I felt my grasp on Brendan's neck loosen.

"We good," Brendan croaked, nodding to her as I peeled my clammy palms from his skin. "Just sorting some things out." She scurried off, probably to inform security of what she had just walked in on. Soon as she was out of sight, I felt a knee strike my stomach, doubling me over. I didn't drop down so much as I rolled over into a fetal position on the ground. Each breath in and out was like another blow to the gut. I could hear the bark of my gasps as I noticed *The Bible* face-down next to me. There was no inscription on the cover; just a textured black surface. I could feel snot drain into my mouth as I panted on the floor. The door closed, and then locked. I felt a hand soft on my shoulder, surely Brendan's encouraging me to pick myself up off the floor. "She can't see you like this, Wes," his voice penetrated the hum in my skull. "It's not fair to her." I planted my palm to the ground, steadying my arm to lift myself up; Brendan held the other. I pressed down and he was trying to lift me. To my arm, it felt like dead weight. Brendan stumbled a few steps backwards as I collapsed to the floor. I curled back into my fetal position, numb to the world around me. A million miles away, I could hear my mother crying softly in the corner of the room.

Hours later, in the blink of an eye, Ione is next to me. Her oily hair is pulled back into a pony tail. I think, this must be what purgatory feels like. It's a kind of peaceful dread. I am desperate for this moment to end and yet I'm clinging to the uncertainty of its outcome in the event that it isn't in my favor. A part of me wishes it was me in there, blissfully unaware, rather than left out here to worry. I recognize that thought is cowardly but I'm too exhausted to show it the door, so I just listen to its bullshit.

"I don't know what else to say, I'm just so sorry," Ione repeated. This was probably her third time apologizing for the event. "I knew things were off but I never expected this."

I looked over at her. The joints in my head felt rusted. They almost needed assistance from my hands in order to properly articulate. "You know he hates you, right?"

"She."

"What?"

"She hates me."

"A little late for flattery."

She pulled the corner of her mouth back sympathetically. "We don't know that. She'll have plenty of time for flattery while recovering in here." I didn't have the heart to tell her my prediction. "Hey, why didn't you write about the last time we were here?"

I averted my gaze down towards my crotch, not that there was much to see down there. "I didn't know you read any of that stuff."

"Of course I did; you wrote it."

"I'm just shocked; you're not mad at me."

"Why would I be?"

"You told me not to write about you and I did, again."

"Well, I wasn't flattered but I understand that's just how you process things."

"Thanks for understanding."

"I wanted to support you, even if I'd rather you go back to school for a trade than another degree. Success for you is a win for Maddie." I opened my mouth to speak but she was one step ahead of me. "I'm not talking child support. I want you to do well, because I want you to be a good father."

“That why you put up with me all this time, even though I’m me?”

“Well, yeah.” She looked me in the eyes when she said it. “Plus, I like you. It was hard at first, I’m not going to lie, but you’ve come around. I didn’t think you would from how rocky things were at the start; that might be the only time I was happy to have been proven wrong. Brendan always believed in you, but that might be because you let him give you stamp you like a tramp.”

Brendan. The thought of him clogged my throat. I really fucked-up on that one. I don’t know what came over me. I just heard Ione wasn’t bringing Maddie and freaked. I needed her here; Matt needed her here. It felt like a betrayal. I could never explain myself; there was no excuse good enough. “I’m sorry about—*that*.”

“You mean the, the thing that happened earlier?”

I nodded.

“I’m not going to say it’s O.K.”

“It’s not, I know. I don’t know how to make it right.”

“Bring him a case of beer next time you stop by and he’ll already be over it. You’re just lucky he’s the kind of guy to settle things outside rather than in court.”

Christ, that put a scary thought in my head. He could’ve *sued* me; they could take Maddie away forever because of that, and they would be right to. Thank God for these guys. I don’t think I’d be able to co-parent with anyone else. “You really want to know why I didn’t write about last time?”

“I don’t ask questions I don’t want the answers to.”

“I’m not a good enough writer and I was afraid of the situation. I can write about myself but that was bigger than me.”

“Well, I believe in you.” I felt the weight of her head on my shoulder. My first instinct was to make a cheap gag about fixing herself before Brendan came back, not because he’d be jealous but because the prospect of getting cuckolded would excite him, but I didn’t allow myself to ruin the moment.

I felt tears rolling down my cheeks and the airways in my nose tighten. I knew I was starting to shake but her closeness took my guards down. “I’m afraid right now.”

“I know you are, Wes.”

“You fucking faggot,” I looked down at the cadaver in front of me, only living through the charity of tubes. My eyes scorched the bruised surface of its forehead,

raised at the temples. I unknitted the stitches holding its flesh together. I pinched the veins of its wrist. I wanted to flick its Adam's apple. "You couldn't be a man so you put on a costume and call yourself a woman. You couldn't even kill yourself right, you worthless stoner." My hand was gripping the cloth of its bed. "You stupid coward. You'll never amount to anything more than a statistic." I could feel my head shaking, the pressure bubbling up beneath the lids of my eyes. It took all my will-power to keep the chasm of my throat from pinching shut. "You put all that effort into how you look, spent all your money on hair products, make-up, lipstick, for what? For this? So you can rot? You disgust me."

The doctor said that stimulation like familiar voices might help; this probably wasn't what he had in mind.

"Fucking defend yourself!" I shouted, shaking the bed. I felt tears launch from my cheeks into the air. "Don't let me say these things to you. Make fun of my bald head. Make fun of me for being a fuck-up. Please." I fell forward, out of my chair onto my knees. I held his wrist with both hands, spoiling the sheets with my snot and tears. I could feel ropes of drool unspooling from my mouth but didn't have the dignity to do anything about it.

As my heaving began to subside, I heard another sound in the room, something that was not newly present, like when you stop and listen for the sifting of the wind. It was the sob of another. I shot up from my disgraced state, desperate not to be seen in such a vulnerable position. There was a girl in the hallway, watching me. Her own face was broken, tears streaming down reddened cheeks. She had fire red hair and was dressed in all black. Noticing me noticing her, she fled. I expected her to run to a doctor, security, anyone that could prevent me from continuing this abuse but no one came.

I couldn't help but find myself in a power walk towards room 1009. Every moment spent outside of the ICU felt like a missed opportunity to be there when Matt came to. I was only supposed to be gone for an hour, maybe two, so that I could take a shower and throw on some fresh clothes. What I didn't plan on was passing out naked on my bed, still damp from my shower. I lost five hours before I knew it. If it wasn't for Mom calling to see if I wanted a ride down, I might've let the entire day passed me by. She was probably still freshening up in the bathroom while I bolted through the

halls like it was Black Friday. You know that feeling that luck is on your side? It's that security that sooner than later, you're gonna hold that winning lottery ticket. That's been breathing down my neck since this morning. It was no longer a matter of *if* Matt would come to that was twisting my guts; it was the anxiety of not being there for him when it happened. He'll probably be confused at first. Sure, the doctors or some nurse might explain to him what's going on but he needs a familiar voice to guide him. They might know the medical details but I know my brother. At least, I thought I did.

A voice coming from inside the room stopped me just before I swung around its frame. My sneakers squeaked and I checked to make sure I didn't leave any skid marks on the floor. Back in elementary school, my gym teacher used to make us rub out any skid marks left on the floor at the end of every class. Ever since then, it was second nature for me to check for marks whenever I rub the ground the wrong way. The voice was harsh but frail. It sounded like a congested prayer. I didn't want to intrude but also wasn't going to *not* see who had taken my place at Matt's bedside. I pulled myself forward with the hand still clamped around the door frame, moving my eyes more than my head, as though he would hear the stretching of my skin. It was my father. He was nearly doubled-over at the end of a chair with his hand lain on top of Matt's. His face was flushed red, his eyes swollen from tears, thick globs of snot lying in the thick of his mustache.

"I'm sorry," he kept repeating. "I promise, if you come back, I won't see you again. I know I'm a failure. You don't deserve a father like me. I'm not a father at all. If you want me to leave you alone, I'll never speak to you again, but I need to know that you're out there and you're still in this world. I wasn't there for you. Maybe you don't need me anymore but I still need you; I just couldn't show it. Please, don't let this be too late." He broke down, sobbing. His face crumpled up and he cupped his hands over his tears.

I felt my stomach knot. It was the emotional equivalent of a diarrhea cramp. Seeing my father in pain hurt me. It made me feel powerless, a child once again. My vision became muddied and I didn't know what to do. I couldn't feel the arms at my side. Would an attempt to comfort him justify my intrusion? Why bother? There was nothing I could say; nothing I could do to remedy this. A hand perched softly atop my shoulder.

"Take note of this," my mother whispered into my ear. I turned to her and

suggested we turn around. Better to give them this moment. Had I been foretold of this moment, I would have anticipated rage. I would see myself storm in, demanding an alibi for his presence. How dare he sit at the alter of Matthew Thompson? He wasn't there in his waking life so why show up to disturb his rest? Maybe I would punch a wall or flip a chair for dramatic effect. I would like to think I was weak enough to hate him. The last thing I would expect was humanity. No one likes to see their heroes fall, even if their heroes have failed to earn their title. On a human level, I couldn't relish in the pain of another. And this wasn't just another human to me; this was my dad. I always did see myself as more of a Hamlet than an Oedipus.

Light flooded the room from the window. It looked as though it was run through the filter of a camera with the exposure turned up. Bathing in it next to Matt was purifying, I held his head forward so that I could run a brush down his hair. The bruises stamped across his face were painted over with make-up. In time, they would heal. This hospital bed would not contain him forever. This wasn't the Matt I had seen before; he looked reborn. He was lifted from the burdens of his past life, no longer shackled to harsh truths and emotional baggage. This was the Matt he saw himself as when he dreamed; this was his ideal persona. The light may as well have been coming off of his body. We said nothing to each other but I could feel we were at peace. He was waiting on Mom. Earlier, he mentioned he was expecting her to arrive before I would. The medication had him all lofty. He said he could see through me, that I was just a visitor. The doctor would be coming in to speak with him, soon, he said. The doctor would want to speak with him in alone.

“Wes, what the fuck is this?” Ione announced, walking into the room. Not exactly the reception I was hoping for.

“I just thought it would be nice,” I said, bashfully.

“What on Earth would make you think *that* was nice? This is so embarrassing.” Matt's face was caked with powder, the lids of his eyes sloppily colored.

“Well,” I could feel my cheeks burning red to match the blush I had applied to Matt's. To me, it made him look like a Raggedy Ann doll. “He likes wearing make-up and I figured he wouldn't want a naked face when he wakes up.”

“She's a *woman*, not a clown, for Christ's sake!” She cut herself off, arching

her brows. She drew softly forward, as though not to wake him. "Did-did you shave his face?"

I nodded, unable to match her gaze. I wanted to hang my head down and walk out of the room. I had been shaking with excitement since the idea popped into my head. Now, all that positive energy feels wasted on rejection, especially since it made keeping a steady hand even more difficult through the application process.

"That's actually thoughtful." I dared look up to see her rewarding me with a weak smile. "You've got the hand of a toddler but that was sweet of you."

"I tried." That was all I could muster. The ball of stress clogging my throat wouldn't let any other words through.

"Know what," she said. "Is this stuff waterproof?"

"I don't know."

She sighed. "Boys." She rested on that for a beat. "Tell you what, go wet some hand towels and bring them in here. I'm gonna fix her up."

I got up and went for the door. "Sure you don't mind?"

"Trust me, I know what I'm doing."

"That a woman thing or a hairdresser thing? Just curious."

"Shut the fuck up and bring me towels, and whatever make-up you have with you." I came back with a clump of wet white sheets. "Anything sturdier we can use? A towel or something?"

I shook my head. "Not really. Wait." I tore my hoodie off, which pulled the t-shirt underneath up to reveal my belly button. That's always a little shameful for me, even if it's nothing she hasn't seen before. I ran some warm water over the sleeve and passed it to Ione. While she was dabbing Matt's face, I collected the make-up for her. Her decoration of his features looked so intuitive, so obvious that I couldn't fathom how I went wrong. Whereas I had just laid it all on thick, she demonstrated restraint. The difference was having the instructions memorized as opposed to working off of an uneducated guess, I suppose. I worried that Matt would wake up before she could finish.

"Lookin' good," Brendan said, entering the room.

"Thanks, babe." Ione said over her shoulder.

"Not you, well, you always look good, but you also did a good job, here."

"Nice scarf," I said.

“Hey,” he stabbed a finger my direction. “You want a round two?” There was humor in his voice.

“No,” I said. It took all my nerve to maintain eye contact. I could feel my feet twitching. “And I’m sorry there was about—all that.”

“Don’t stress it.” He pulled up a chair across the bed from me. “I know that wasn’t you. You’d just better cut that shit out before someone really decides to hurt you.”

I wanted so badly to tell Mom how much Matt resented his religious upbringing. His only form of worship was at the pulpit of devout atheists. He was the kind of person to proudly display a coexist bumper-sticker while writing Christianity off as “the real cult” (as though that was a title that could only be held by one). He viewed the Wesboro Baptist Church as ambassadors for churchgoers everywhere and often professed that without religion, there would be no need for wars. It was one of the most aggravating things about him. Yet, it felt like an insult to listen to her read scripture to him. I didn’t have the heart to intervene. It seemed to be the only thing holding her together. I think it was something to hold onto, a promise she could give herself. This was no random chance, but a deliberation. Everything was predetermined and we’re all just reading off a script written long before any of us were born. We weren’t being punished out of cruelty or circumstance; we were being tested. Someday, once the curtains close, if we played our roles well, we’ll be invited to the afterparty. It’s a pretty thought but not everything pretty can be trusted. Sometimes that security can be a mental trap.

I don’t think she even knew what she was reading, some of the time. There was no pattern or structure to her performances. She seemed to open a page at random and start from the first word that caught her eye. Judging from how far she had dug into the text, there was no possible way she could’ve taken it from the top. They were just words, something to recite when she was at a loss of her own. They had a greater significance but I don’t believe she could measure or define their power. All she knew was that they were supposed to be important. Its pages were a candle she can burn, their words an incantation she could not predict the outcome of. Still, in an uncertain tone, her voice marched forward, because where else was there to go?

On the third day, Matt escaped us.

We decided to go out for lunch. We left for two fucking hours. We weren't enjoying a fancy meal with a glass of wine. We left the hospital to eat fast food, an excuse to get away from all the beeping machines and the oppressive clinical atmosphere. Mom's phone started buzzing, dancing across the table. She scrambled to pick it up, dropping it back on the table. It skipped down to the floor and continued to hum. She collected it, slid a finger across the screen to answer the call, and held it to her ear in one swift motion. Soon as I heard a male voice on the other line, I saw her face drop. It looked as though she had died right there and her skin was about to sag off. It lost all color.

“We have to go,” she said. Before I could ask what was the matter, she grabbed me by the arm and ripped me out of the booth. On the ride there, all she would say is that the doctor wanted us to be there soon as possible. My stomach was sliding up my throat like an octopus squeezing its way through a tight hole until the doctor intercepted us in the hall, when it dropped down within me. I felt a chasm open and soon I fell to my knees. The doctor hadn't said a word; the look on his face told us all that we needed to know. I felt my mother gripping my arm, shaking. I couldn't feel anything but I knew that it should have hurt. She was shrieking so loud I thought her vocal chords would snap, silencing her forever. It felt like we might just die there in that spot. There was no other logical conclusion, it seemed. That would be the end of our family. Of course, one breath led to the next; painful as each moment was, it was succeeded by another. We were soon escorted by a few nurses into a room to collect ourselves. A chasm opened inside of me; I could feel its winds howling against my ribs.

The morning of the viewing, I remember thinking to myself, “Well, this is the day.” I didn't know what to expect. I didn't want to get out of bed at all that morning. It didn't feel like a celebration of life to me; it felt like a mockery. It was parading our anguish for an audience. We were taking our deepest sorrows and making a public event of them. It was distasteful, macabre. It was an embarrassment. I neglected to go out and buy a suit for the event. It felt pointless. Why dress up to make myself look so composed when inside I was anything but? Despite that mentality holding strong, I still felt like a child once guests started pouring in, every one of which better-dressed than

me. Fuck it, I was at a loss. If they were judging my grieving aesthetic, then that speaks more for them.

Ione and Brendan were among the first to arrive. “You look beautiful,” I said, as Ione passed Maddie into my arms.

“Thanks,” Brendan replied, beating me to my own punchline.

“Wes told me that you made Matt up, the day before,” Mom said.

Ione nodded, visibly uncomfortable. She looked as though she was a child awaiting her impending grounding.

“That was very sweet of you; he would have appreciated that.”

“Of course,” Ione smiled, weakly. “You guys know we’re both here for you. If there’s anything we can do to help, please let us know.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“We’re gonna take our seats while there are some available, looks like you’ve got company,” Brendan said. I turned my head to catch my father waiting behind us.

“Save a seat for us in the front,” Mom said.

They nodded and made their leave. Dad approached us. His hair was shaved off, entirely. He was wearing a suit and tie, something I had never seen him in outside of wedding photos from way back maybe twelve hours before I was conceived.

“Is this Maddie?” he said, looking down into my arms. *Holy shit, he’s been in town this long and has yet to meet my daughter*, I just then realized.

“Yeah,” I said, as he reached out to tickle her. She studied him with her wide eyes, oblivious to the devastation around her. To her, the only things in the world at that moment were her binky and her grandpa.

He looked back up at me, and then my mother. “I’m sorry for—” He nodded towards the casket. It felt oddly formal, almost rehearsed, but I could tell there was an underlying regret in his tone. He was holding back but I respected this boundary. In his own way, this was his loss, too. He may not have seen Matt in years, but it was still his son. He was still at the hospital the day he was born. Those were still his features on the face of the corpse.

“Thanks,” I said. “Where’s your girlfriend?”

“I told her I needed to do this alone,” he said. “Maybe that was ignorant of me.”

“I’m sure she understands.”

Soon, he took his seat.

Past funerals always felt so put-on, distant from the tragedy that they were commemorating. Something about this one wasn't so. Maybe it was the devastating abruptness of our loss that cut past the formalities but everyone in attendance seemed to genuinely share our pain. There was a huge turn-out, with people standing in the back. *(Most of these were assorted characters that could have only come from the gay bars Matt frequented in his final years. Not many of them approached us, God only knows what they made of us from what they'd been told, but we were glad to have them and I think Matt was, too.)* Every voice giving an apology, every pair of eyes that dared gaze into ours had this sincerity, as though it was all of our loss. Seeing the downfall of our family face-to-face disarmed them, I imagine. It felt like a graduation of sorts, an induction into victimhood. We were now officially one of "Those Families," that you see in the grocery store and whisper about, forever crippled by misfortune.

I tried to ignore the body, but as we were seated, waiting for the service to begin, he was unavoidable. Around his coffin were many bouquets of flowers, from family members out of state, from our jobs, from friends. I can't fathom what makes a casket attractive or unattractive. They're not fucking cars. Nobody's a casket aficionado and I'm certainly no exception. However, despite being a cornucopia containing my worst fears brought to fruition, it looked sleek. It was hard to appreciate the beauty of the scene but what's the point of denying it?

The priest came to the podium to distract me from this diorama before long. I find it suspicious that I've never met a priest without a full head of white hair and this one was no different. When he opened up his binder and began by appreciating the profundity of our loss, I couldn't help but hold it against him. When he began recounting our memories with Matt, it felt like a betrayal of our trust, as though we had shared those moments for any other purpose. It was a performance, a cheap imitation. He even plagiarized my joke. "When Matt was nine years old, he went Trick or Treating in a dress and wig; he must have taken a liking to that." Yet, there was a catharsis in this presentation, a softness in his affectation that could only be born from a real place internally. I wanted to despise it. Everything inside me desired to rebel against his words like he was The Clash onstage and I was a member of Crass in the audience. But I could hear my mother sobbing beside me and that was real. He might

not have been present in our lives before death but he was here, now, to comfort us with his words.

After his sermon, we were instructed to pay our last respects row-by-row, starting from the front. My legs felt weak. This was the moment. My eyes already felt shattered into a thousand red lines. Brendan and Ione were already standing. I put my hand on Mom's back and we followed suit. I felt like we were marching to the gallows ourselves; this was the death of life as we knew it. I heard Ione sobbing and Brendan wrapped an arm around her as they stared into the box. Then, it was our turn. There were a lot of thoughts in that moment. Mom was hysterical. She might have went through an entire case of tissues just in that moment. I felt powerless. A part of me hated my brother. He might have been at peace below us but we were now left to carry the burden of his suffering on top of our own. I was screaming *Why!?* in my head, but even internally, my voice was weak. I could feel my hand gripping the side of the coffin shaking. My legs were threatening to give out as Mom caressed the side of his face, whispering, "Goodbye, baby boy." An eternity seemed to exist within the pocket of this moment. When it finally came time to let Matt go, I thought, "Love you, dude," and tapped on the side of his coffin.

I helped Mom to the back of the parlor, where she could sob into me. I held her and broke down, myself. There's nothing to say, no profound revelation. We were simply destroyed.

"We're getting ready to head out," Ione said, after allowing us this moment. "You gonna be O.K.?" There was a softness in her voice, like when she's talking to Maddie or one of the dogs.

I shook my head no.

"I guess that's normal, considering everything." She put a hand up on my shoulder.

"Call if either of you need anything," Brendan added. "I mean it."

I said goodbye to Maddie, who was in his arms and they turned to leave. "I-Ione!" I said, and she turned around. I stepped away from my mother, who was still gagging on her tears. "You were right. I could have saved him. If I had just opened my stupid fucking mouth at the right moment for once in my life, we might not be here. I let everybody down and maybe I deserve this but nobody else here does. I made too many excuses and now I'm too late."

“You can't put that on yourself, man,” Brendan said. “I know that's easier said than done.”

“I don't think anything could have saved him, Wes,” Ione said. “Not if it was that bad. You were a good brother; I know he loved you.”

“Th-thank you, and I'm sorry.” I pushed past them. Something had caught my eye. “I have to go.” I saw Dad walking out, alone. His head was aimed at the floor right in front of each step he took, and he was wiping his eyes with the sleeves of his suit. I couldn't let him leave like that. My father was hurting and I couldn't turn away from him again. He was already out the door by time I pushed through the crowd to him. On my way out, I noticed that girl who saw me freaking out in the hospital..

The wind was blowing outside and he was struggling to light a cigarette. “I'm sorry, Wes,” he said. His eyes were totally bloodshot. “I probably had no right being here, today. We both know he wouldn't have wanted me.”

“That's not true,” I said. Objectively, it might have been, but he didn't need to hear that. “Things were just complicated with Matt, for all of us.”

“Thank you, Wes. Might not seem like much but that means a—” His sentence was interrupted as he choked out a sob, covering his face with the hand holding the now lit cigarette.

“I'm sorry, Dad,” stepping towards him. I wrapped my arms around him; the act felt unnatural but this wasn't about my comfort, right now. He tossed the cigarette aside to hold me back.

The neon lights were still burning inside of Sal's. The drunken laughter carried on, challenging me to keep my face behind its veil. I was no longer among its tenants, nor was I an ambassador of sobriety come to proselytize their reformations. I had been transfigured, baptized in my brother's blood. This place was infuriatingly unaffected; its shelter from the storm a marketplace of cowards; its patrons infantilized by the elixirs they sucked out of bottles. They were opponents to my trauma. I felt displaced, cast adrift without ground control. I was not adapted to the atmosphere. The smoke hanging in the air irritated my eyes. The crass jokes could not molest my humor. The bar was my barricade from the degeneracy playing out on the floor. I wanted to keep my back turned to it all but the beer was spilling out onto my hand and a patron was shouting something about it not taking that long to spit in his drink. I

sucked the snot back into my nose and tried to rub the tears from my cheek before facing my heckler.

I shoved the mug across the counter, a wave sloshed onto the counter and his hand recoiled. He pulled it in and laid an arm flat around it across the bar as though it was a duckling beneath his wing. He used that hand to pluck one quarter out of the other, handing me two dollars and fifty cents.

“That’s two seventy-five,” I said, my hand still out, with the dollars pinned down to its palm by the change.

“You took some off the top, so I did, too,” he replied with a crooked smile. He leaned in, taking a closer look at me. “Aww, what’s the matter?” He cooed.

“Leave him alone, Woody,” Lindsey said, wiping the beer I had just spilled from the counter with a filthy rag.

“I’ve heard of tears in my beer,” he said. “But this guy’s *ridiculous!*”

I felt a cold hand wrap softly around my bicep. (I hoped that wasn’t the hand she had been carrying the rag around by. Judging by the orange stain on my arm, it probably was.) “C’mon, Wes,” she pulled me towards the kitchen. “Why don’t you head home for the night?” She said behind the privacy of a closed door. “There’s only two hours left and we’re dead; I can take it from here.”

I shook my head. “No, I’m fine.” She tilted her head doubtfully. “Really. This is my first night back; I can’t take off early.”

“Wes, your face is all red and you’re crying. Take some more time. Sal will understand. We don’t need you here if you’re not ready. This place is still going to be here in a week. These same assholes will still be here, too. You’re not missing out on anything. Where you need to be right now is with your family. Actually, I’m calling your father to come get you.”

“Isn’t he drunk? Isn’t he *here?*?”

“He hasn’t been around much since everything happened. He stopped by for lunch yesterday and gave me his number in case you needed anything. That was the first I’ve seen of him since.” She pulled out her phone and was already tapping away.

“Linds—”

“No,” she said, putting a hand on my shoulder. She pulled me in for a hug. “Your father’s coming to get you and that’s that. In the meantime, I’m putting you in time-out. If I see you leave this room, I’m telling Sal I caught you jerking off back

here.”

Riding shotgun in my father's truck took me back to high school. This time around, he managed to clean out the soda bottles and fast food wrappers from the floor. The truck smelled somewhat new and the paint wasn't peeled off in any noticeable spots around the exterior. That was one thing about him that had apparently changed for the better. At some point after his marriage fell apart, he gave up on himself. The drunken slob famous in Sal's wasn't the man I grew up watching. He was always a fun-loving guy, more Falstaff than Prince Harry, but he had never shirked responsibility or let himself go like this. He had a drink or two at family gatherings or on the rare occasion a friend might come over and liked watching funny movies with us kids on weekends. He was a family man, so far as we could gather from the eight days a month we spent with him. Tonight, he smelled like cologne. I could tell he was trying to connect with me, asking when classes start back up, how I've been getting along with Ione, and even about my mother. He avoided the obvious.

“You want to grab dinner?” he asked at a red light.

“Naw, I really don't think I can eat tonight.” My eyes scanned across the window like they were wipers. I felt a strange pressure behind them, as though my skull was trying to push them out.

“C'mon. We can grab dessert somewhere. You still like milkshakes, right?” I recalled back when we were children, he'd have a few bars of chocolate and soda waiting for us every time he picked us up from school. That was the coolest thing, back then. Now, he felt more like a peddler.

“It's fine, really.”

“How 'bout we go back to my place and see if there are any movies on?”

“Not tonight, Dad. I'm just tired.”

“Please, Wes.” He looked over to make eye contact with me.

“I should really just go home tonight. Maybe some other time.”

“Alright, yeah.” I could tell I let him down. “Just let me know whenever you're free. I know you're busy.” He asked me to take care of myself before climbing out of his truck. Before I shut the door, he reminded me that he loves me. I said my part and he took off. I felt stranded on my lawn, watching him coast off into the night. It almost felt like I was returning home from an unfruitful date.

My entire head was throbbing. The buzzing between my ears grew to a roar. It felt like it had been put in a vice that was tightening with each step I took towards the door. My legs felt like they were treading through mud up to my knees. I suddenly felt insatiably tired. I laid a palm to the door and held myself up with it as I fumbled for my keys with the other hand. I tried with the wrong key once, and then another, before realizing the door was unlocked, still. This was the last time Matt would let me into the house.

I practically fell through the door, stumbling in. I grabbed the balls of my knees, bent over, panting. The lights were off and I couldn't see a fucking thing. This place was haunted with absence. A void had opened in its place and was drawing me into it. I thought I should have recovered my breath by the time that thought crossed my mind but each gasp was briefer than the last. My throat had closed and I might as well have been trying to suck air through a straw. I doubled-over, landing hard on my shoulder. I knew it should have hurt but my body was numb to it, like being drunk. Come morning, it would be bruised. The room was spinning and I was right at the center of it. The speed of oscillation pinned me to the ground. I was carried in the womb of a mother swept up into a tornado; I was dirty laundry spinning around in the wash. I reached out with my hand but I knew not for what.

Then, I fished into my pocket to pull out my phone. I swiped past the lock screen and pulled up a video. "Say it again, Maddie!" I could hear Ione saying off-camera. "What do you say?" Maddie was in a high chair, looking right into the camera.

"*Dada!*" Maddie shouted, in a squeaky voice, slamming her hands flat on the tray at the front of her chair.

I played the video on repeat until the rest of the room came to a standstill.

I didn't notice my classmates; my veil was too thick, yet to see them through. I returned to my desk with my head hung in shame as though I was just back from a losing away game. I was branded with a new role in society. My newly-achieved victim status was a loose fit and I felt unprepared for this catwalk. I felt a poke at my side, once seated, and looked over.

"Hey, man," Arnold said. "Hope you're holding up."

I nodded and mouthed the word *thanks*. I felt like throwing my hood up; I

wanted to cover every inch of myself.

As Dr. Kasey entered the room, I found myself unable to meet her in the eyes. I kept my eyes at the belt-line. From what I noticed, she seemed the same. Everyone seemed the same. Little did they know how miraculous it was to remain unaffected. She did her shtick with hoods and jackets and the awkward shuffling of layers being removed filled the room for a second before she passed around rubrics. It was kind of pathetic. The only thing differentiating it from that of her other class was the class number at the top of the sheet. As if that wasn't enough, the entire introductory class was a repeat performance. She made the same awkward jokes in the same places so that the same students could politely pretend to laugh. As a consumer, I felt gipped. As a bit of an entertainer, myself, I couldn't fathom being locked into such a rigid structure. I need room to grow. Some missteps along the way are fine, so long as I'm moving forward. This was just sad. Is this how The Rolling Stones feel, playing their hits every night? Maybe not, but this was no "Sympathy for the Devil."

I clocked out long before we were dismissed. I wasn't distracted by any tangible thought. I just wasn't there. I felt medicated, or like I was tossing and turning all night, unable to fall asleep but too exhausted to do anything productive. I pretended to organize things within my backpack while everyone else poured out so that I could latch onto the tail of the line without having to be seen by anybody. As I was crossing Dr. Kasey's desk, I heard my name. It struck me like a baton to the side of my head. I turned to face my caller.

"Hey, Wes," Dr. Kasey said. She was looking up at me from her seat. There was a tenderness in her voice I had not heard before, a welcoming look on her face I couldn't recognize. "How you holding up?" Oh, *this*. I suppose it was to be expected at some point.

"I'm doing well," I nodded. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine." She nodded back, hands folded on top of her desk. "I just wanted to say that I'm terribly sorry about your family's loss and if there's anything I can do, don't hesitate to let me know."

"Thanks but I think I'll be fine."

"Really, Wes. If you need some extra time off or ever need an extension on anything, I completely understand."

"Well, thank you." I started turning on my heels to leave.

“And if you ever need to talk, I’m here.”

I opened my mouth to thank her again.

“Not just as a professor, but as a survivor. I lost my sister when I went to college. She was fifteen years old. I’m not saying our tragedies are the same but I know how lonely it can feel on the other side.”

“I’m sorry to hear that and I really appreciate you saying that to me.” I did.

“Well, I’ll let you go but I didn’t want to have you sneak off before I could do my part. Have a good day, Wes.”

“Have a good day, Dr. Kasey.”

What was I expecting, a fucking statue in his honor? Still, it was underwhelming, to say the least. The garage wasn’t leveled to the ground. Its roof wasn’t caved in, making an M-shaped formation. The garage door was broken off and a blue tarp was put up in its place; that was all. So, what now? I knew this was petty voyeurism on the bus ride down here but I never really planned this far ahead. It’s not like I could plant a flag in the rubble I had imagined. The most I could make of this experience was a selfie but Ed Gein would probably even look down on that. I had nowhere to go but it felt like a wasted trip to hop off the pot after just farting.

The cold taunted me, made me feel even more naked and alone out here. It wasn’t dark yet but I could tell the sun was getting weary. The bus ride was about thirty minutes. Taking a cab back would probably take half that time but cost four times as much. Maybe there’d be some restaurant around to make the trip worth it?

The front door started opening. A head was peering out of it before I could begin to feign movement like I was just passing by. It was the redheaded girl from the hospital. “Hey!” she called.

I glanced around as though there could be anyone else she was speaking to. “H-hi.”

“You wanna come in!? It’s freezing out here.”

Well, an invitation was the last thing I would have expected but what’s there to lose? That’s probably been said a thousand times moments before abduction but if we got down to it, I could probably take her. She looked like soaking wet, she weighed the same as my right leg. I crossed the yard to follow her in, letting the screen door close behind me.

She was wearing a green tank top, exposing a few stray pimples planted in her back. Her scent combated the odor of an unkempt litter box singing my nostrils. It was a cheap perfume that was probably better suited for a teenage girl than an adult woman. Her neck-length hair was still wet. She asked if I wanted tea or anything and then sat down on the couch in front of a table painted to look like a Ouija board.

“You can sit in the bean bag chair if you want.” I declined. I still wasn't sure what I was doing here. She shrugged, as though I had just turned down money. “People usually like the beanbag chair.” The make-up around her eyes looked like something in a movie about Cleopatra. Her dark lashes were given wings and the lids were painted electric blue. “So, how are you?” she said, as though we were old friends.

“I'm alright,” I lied. “How are you?”

“You know, holding up, moving on. My boyfriend has some contractors coming tomorrow to fix the garage.”

“Yeah,” I looked down at the glossy surface of the table. The coasters were planchettes. “Sorry about that.”

She scoffed, brushing it off. “Why are you sorry?”

“Matt—the person who drove through your door was my brother.”

“Well, I know *that*.” How? Did she fancy herself some sort of amateur psychic? That would explain the corny Tarot card posters on the wall. I suppose she could have done some sleuthing around the internet, made the connection through Facebook or something. “But it's not like you were the one to drive into my garage.”

Being the kind of brother I was, I might as well have been. “I'm sorry, I'm not really sure I know what's going on, here. How do you know that, again?”

“Well, I recognized you from the hospital, and the funeral—”

“You really didn't have to go there, by the way. It's nice; we appreciate the gesture, but if it was out of the way—”

“It's not like many people stand outside just to admire my garage.” She had me, there. “Plus, I dated Whit for almost a year.”

I tried to conceal my shock. Was I supposed to have been aware of this? He had a fuckin' goomar the whole time? Was that the excuse for his absence?

“We kept things on the down-low. That was her idea.”

“Oh.”

“Did she mention *anything* about me? My name is Theresa. I suppose it

doesn't matter, I was just curious.”

“No, not a word. Honestly I recognized you from the hospital and still don't quite know what's going on right now.”

“I don't think any of us knew what was going on back then. She was all over the place and acting erratically. But, I think I could fill you in, if that would help.” She kept her eyes down to the table.

“I mean, yeah, that would be great.” It felt hopeful, I wanted to say, a chance to connect with my brother after death. I just hoped she wasn't actually going to start sliding the coasters around the table and looking at my lifeline. “I'm still in shock of what happened and I don't really understand any of the hows.”

“I was what you call, kind of an 'F hag,' if you catch my drift.” She made quotation marks with her fingers that hopped with each syllable within the term.

I shook my head. I was drawing blanks on that one.

“Think of what the word hag rhymes with.” Ahh, it clicked. “Someone who enjoys going out and being around alternative cultures. I went to a lot of gay bars and most of my friends are LGBTQ. That's kind of how I met Whit. Back then, she was still gender-fluid and going by her dead name. We just hit it off. She was smart, funny, generous—especially with weed, speaking of which, do you want any?”

“No, I'm good.”

“Anyways, she was like no one I'd ever seen before. I felt like I was on Ziggy Stardust's arms when we walked in the club together. Everybody knew us. We were what the tabloids call a power couple. At home, we were also just two working class people. Whit was working at the mill and I was just a waitress. We didn't dress up like queens unless we were going out. We just liked spending time together, watching movies and stuff, you know?” *And stuff*, I knew what that implied from personal experience.

“So, were you two together when things happened?” *Things*. Who knew that euphemisms were contagious?

She shook her head. “We were both finding ourselves, back then. We were stuck at the same crossroads but wound up taking separate paths, you know? We were in love but were also young; we started to grow apart. When Whit got hurt was when things really started. You know about the—”

“The pills?”

“Yeah. That was a problem. I kept saying, ‘This is how it happens.’ People get hurt, they get prescribed something, and then they become addicted. We partied but we never did anything like *that* before. Of course, Whit denied it. I was paranoid, nagging, whatever. But, the symptoms started to show. On top of that, Whit took the extra free time to find herself. She realized that she was more on the female side of the spectrum and started drifting towards that. I think they say about one percent of trans relationships survive a change like that. I thought we could be the exception but things just kept piling up. We eventually reached our breaking point and that was that.

“And I’m gonna be honest, I have felt so guilty for so long about this whole thing. I felt like I was complicit in what happened. I mean, she ended her life in my garage! I hated keeping it from you all. I typed up so many messages on Facebook but deleted every one of them. She said she’d kill herself if I told. She was proud to have a good job, to be the responsible sister. She didn’t want to disappoint you. I’ve imagined telling you all this for so long and it’s so weird to actually say all of it. I always pictured myself crying but I also thought this would happen before Whit was actually gone. I don’t think I have any tears in me, anymore. I probably need to drink more water just to compensate. This *sucks*. It really does, but it’s also relieving to be able to say it, even if it is too late.”

“I know what you mean.” Hearing her story, I kept expecting the familiar blurring in my vision to come but it looks like I had gone and dried up, too. “I can’t imagine how hard it was and I felt the same way. You might have known more details but you were also removed from a lot of it. I was right there and even if I didn’t know what was going on, I had to see it. I watched him dying every day and I didn’t lift a finger to save him. Maybe nothing could have.” I shrugged. “Maybe we’re all guilty.” Those words hung in the air for a moment. I pulled my phone out of my pocket to check the time. *Seven after seven*. By time I grabbed the next bus and got back to Mom’s house, it’d be around nine. “It’s honestly been nice talking but I really need to get going. I’m not just saying that.”

“Oh, yeah, I understand.” She stood up. “It’s not like you expected some crazy stranger to invite you into their house. I’ve probably held you up too long while I was venting.

“No, it’s fine.” I stood and caught myself looking into the depths of her eyes. I felt connection when it should have felt awkward. “This was honestly the first time I

was able to lose myself in a moment in I don't know how long. Everything else just feels like a distraction. It's been real." She crossed the table to hug me. Her frame felt thin in my arms. I wasn't sure how confident I felt in holding it. She came to me naturally but that's what had me frightened. We maintained the embrace for maybe a beat too long.

"You're welcome here any time. Please, come back if you ever want to. In some bizarre way, we're family." We did share blood, even if it might have been the blood on our hands. We exchanged numbers and she let me back out into the night. It was full dark out.

"I'm thinking about going to a group next week if you want to come with me," Mom said, stirring gravy.

"Sure thing," I said. I was hunched over the table. The thought revolted me, going to some gathering of grievances to exchange empathy. It sounds more like rumination than progress to me but if it's something that helps Mom out, I'll suffer through it; I owe her that much.

"I just hate going to those things alone, when you don't know anybody. I always feel so awkward and afraid to say anything. I feel like everybody there is judging me."

Funny, I was more uncomfortable around people I know than complete strangers. Back in college, I formed a nasty habit of interviewing the homeless. I suppose some of it was voyeurism but I also felt more able to confess my deepest thoughts to someone who had no stake in my life. That probably makes me a coward. "Well, the good thing about those groups is that they're supposed to be judgment-free zones. Everybody at the place will have a story that brought them there. It's not like anyone just goes to laugh at others' misery."

"Yeah, you're probably right." She pulled the roast out of the oven. The stench was suffocating but the scent of it wasn't such a bad way to go. "I just get nervous, that's all."

"Yeah, it's alright. I'll go." I wasn't expecting a text but I felt disappointed in how long it's been since my phone went off. "Hey, that class with the crazy teacher is having me do a public reading at the end of the semester."

"Oh, I'd *hate* that. I had to take a public speaking class and still don't know

how I passed it. You'll have to let me know when it is so I can go. We can bring little Maddie.”

“For sure. I'll let Brendan and Ione know, too.” I wanted so badly to connect with her, to let her know that I've made contact from beyond the grave. I had found a link to Matt and that we no longer had to feel so alone. I wanted to rejoice but my walls weren't budging. What was the use, anyways? Was she gonna adopt Theresa as an honorary daughter in-law? Definitely not. I could picture see her at Matt's side, let alone within the context of our surviving family. The risk to reward ratio just wasn't in favor of sharing this piece of information. Worst case scenario, Mom'll probably judge me for it, think that I'm fixating unhealthily on things. So what if she was right? We can't all be as strong as she is. In fact, I don't think anyone can. She holds it together so well during the day but I can hear her break down crying at the table every night. Some nights, I get out of bed and comfort her, hold her close to me like she used to do when I came home upset from school. She apologizes to make me see her like that but she's got nothing to feel sorry over. If anything, the world owes *her* an apology; she deserves better than this life. Other nights, I cry along in the other room soft enough to hope she can't hear me. “Mom.”

“Yeah?” She glanced over her shoulder at me. The way the skin on her face stretched made me realize just how much weight she had lost recently.

“I think I'm gonna go back to the house soon.”

“You sure, babe?” It looked like I had broken her heart all over again.

“I mean, yeah, if you're gonna be alright.”

“Yeah,” she nodded. “I just didn't know if you'd be able to get to school and that you can take care of yourself without the car.”

“I'll be fine, Mom.” I wanted to retract it, now. I wanted to pull the sword out of her chest but I knew the damage was done. The band-aid was torn off; it wouldn't stick even if I tried putting it back on. “I just have to start moving forward, you know?”

“Yeah, of course. I am gonna miss you around here, though.” She turned from the stove and walked towards me. She put an arm around my shoulder and I leaned into her. “I'm being a little selfish right now but it's been nice having you back around. I like cooking for you every night and having some company.”

“I know, but I've got school and Maddie's gonna be coming back over.”

“Well, what's wrong with that? You know I want Maddie over here. I can

watch her while you study.”

“It's not that, Mom. It's just that, well, I have to confront this if I'm going to move on from it, if that makes sense. I dread going back to the house but I also think that's why I need to go while it's there for me to. Maybe once the lease is up, I can move back in. Plus, I can't keep the cat at Brendan and Iones' forever.”

“If that's what you want, then I understand. You're always welcome to come back here, though, any time you want. I don't care if it's two thirty in the morning and you're having nightmares. Just call and I'll come pick you up, O.K.?”

“O.K., Mom.”

I felt like I was stepping foot on the moon. Ione and Maddie would be stopping by before long with the cat but it was important for me to cross the threshold on my own. If I wasn't able to do that much, how could I be expected to catch any sleep around here? Mom offered to come inside and wait with me but I told her to head home. It was up to me to face the memories in this house. We weren't even comfortable with her in the house when Matt was here to skunk it up. Why put her through the trauma of revisiting sins that weren't even hers?

It wasn't quite dark yet, but shadows were beginning to cast around the edges of the room. I had a feeling the place was in need of a deep clean, that if I was to turn the lights on right now, it'd be covered in cobwebs. Each step deeper into the house felt like a step away from safety. I kept the front door open as though I might need a quick escape in the event that something should jump out at me. Shit, it's been so long that a squatter might as well have made home in the place. Oh, well. It's not like any other living was going on in here.

It was difficult, I'm not going to lie. It felt like I was wading through swamp water up to my knees. I was breathing heavy. My head wasn't radiating with pain, however. This time, I was able to stand on my own two feet. I didn't really know where to begin. I dropped my bags on the floor. I suppose that I could start by cleaning the fridge, doing some dishes, general shit that'll help avoid a lecture about my lifestyle once the baby mama stops by. Or maybe I should get to writing? I had an assignment due next week that I'm expected to present in front of the class. I picked my bags back up off the ground and started walking them to my bedroom. Might as well unpack and get started on writing. I passed the door to Matt's room, still cracked open. A part of

me wanted to close the door, as though I could shut out all the regrets that easily. The smoke of memories would still undulate from beneath it. For now, I just walked by it and tried not to glance inside.

“I’ve been calling this ‘Whit’s End’ but I might end up changing it at some point. Anyhow, this is it.

“When I first heard about Whit, it was too much for me to bear. The pressure was too great for my body to contain. I remember screaming because there was too much pain inside of me and thinking that it must be like how my sister was too much for the world to contain. Some say that suicide is weak. My sister did not commit suicide because she was weak. Sometimes, I used to wonder if the only reason she had killed herself while I was facing life was because she was the one brave enough to do so. Still, after the initial shock wore off, the pain was dulled and life began to move on. Like any tragedy, it went from a crippling reality to a painful memory and eventually retired to being just a fact. Just like the fact that I was no longer enrolled in college, my sister was no longer alive.

“I checked my mailbox every day after class. I’m the worst at that, which had gotten me into a lotta trouble in my first few years of teaching. So, I made sure to make a habit of visiting it first and last thing every day. The semester was ending, so nobody held me up at the end of class. Everybody was in too great of a hurry to get back to studying for their finals to dick around with the details.

“There was one envelope waiting for me. It wasn’t marked with a return address or even a stamp. The writing on its off white surface also seemed very strange, a cursive in pen. I asked the secretary if she’d notice anybody drop it off. She hadn’t. I shoved it in my coat pocket and headed out. It felt like I had shoved a hot coal in there on the walk to my car. I had no reason to fear the contents of this letter and yet I could feel this dread churning in my stomach over it. No bill would be so anonymous. It’s not as though the Dean would call for my resignation in such a fashion. Something about it just felt ominous to me. Soon as I was in the safety of my car, I tore it open, ravenous for its contents. I pinned it up against my steering wheel as my eyes measured it like I was expected to have it memorized by the time I made it home.

Wes,

“I don’t know what to say. There’s so much that it’s hard to see the trees from

the forest. I never meant for it to be so long, but I was ashamed. I know that's cowardly of me and I have no excuse. I just knew that I had hurt you all and didn't know how to make it better, so I went away. I was so embarrassed. I wanted to wait until Mom had gone. How's Maddie been? sounds like a good starting point. She must be as old as I was, by now. Who'd she grow up to be? I always figured she'd be a doctor, considering her medical problems in the beginning. I dunno. That was just my opinion. She probably wouldn't remember her old aunt.

“Anyhow, I'm going to be stopping by tonight and didn't want to do so unannounced. You might want to put something decent on (and by that I don't mean picking something with a collar up off your floor—please tell me you don't still do that). Not just for me, I know you're after twenty years you'll still be ugly. We're going out.

-Whit

“I probably changed more times that night than I do in one month. Should I go full suit and tie? business casual? Did it really matter? I knew that I should feel like a lunatic. This was probably some malicious prank. Maybe I'd get a knock on the door and my picture taken for being the world's most gullible chump at best. Worst case scenario, I'm losing my mind. The last thing I wanted was my psychiatrist to double-down on appointments. That guy's lucky I'm OCD, otherwise I'd have started talking to other people years ago. There was no sound outcome to this predicament. There was no way my dead sister wasn't going to bail on me. Yet, I had no doubt in my mind that before the clock struck twelve, she would be there. When I heard the toll of my doorbell, there was no question of who it was.

“I greeted my sister with a hug. She was still thin but had managed to spread some meat on her bones over the years. She certainly didn't look very dead. Actually, she looked more alive than in her last year of life. After the hellos, she said, 'Well, we'd better get going.'

“Where?' I said.

“Oh,' she smiled. 'You know.'

“We climbed into her carriage that was parked in the center of the street. Just her luck, no one was honking or throwing a fit behind the wheel while at my doorstep. The carriage was all black; I didn't get a look at the driver. I thanked him for stopping for me, anyhow.

“I had no clue where we were headed. It was full dark out and I was too busy

studying my sister to look out the window. Like her note had said, there was far too many questions for any single one to be appropriate to start with. So, I let her guide the conversation with her own. What was I doing? Had life been kind to me? Did I keep up with Ione and Brendan once Maddie had gone to college? That family reunion sorta stuff. Eventually, we pulled over and Whit led me in.

“Inside, we had joined a crowd of people. I felt like I was a member of the VIP, here. Everybody knew Whit and by extension, they knew me, too. Mom was there. So was Dad. I don't need to go over the details, because you were there,” I pointed at a member of the audience. “And you.” Another. “And you.” I pointed at Dr. Kasey. “And Whit had taken the microphone standing on-stage and could speak for herself, so I no longer had to speak for her.”

I began shuffling offstage, trying to rub my eye sockets without making it too obvious. If that didn't give my vulnerability away, the cracks in my voice most definitely would have already. I had become an actor wrapped up in his own performance. These words that rang false in the back of my head struck a chord from my own heart strings. As the classroom rang with applause, I knew that it was not from politeness. They'd bought what I was selling. I had won their acceptance. They had found me in the underworld and gave me a Get Out of Jail card, not even minding that it was a mixed metaphor. I felt elated, high. I felt like a lotus eater.

The damn cat kept flexing its claws into my leg. It would knead, get a claw or two stuck in my jeans, and then panic until I helped remove it from me, only to repeat. Yet, if I reached down to pet its head, I was the one imposing. The fucker was black and thankfully, so were my pants.

“I dunno, I mean, how are you handling all of this?” I said, looking back up to Theresa. Her hair, as black as the cat's, was pulled back into a ponytail, although there was hardly enough of it to make a ponytail out of. Her makeup seemed to be on twice as thick and the same could be said of her perfume. There was a candle burning on the table, something pomegranate. The rot of mummifying cat shit had been purged from her house.

She shrugged, like I had asked if she minded staying in for the night rather than going out for dinner. “It just *is*. I think I spent so long preparing myself for it that once it hit, I had already come to accept it. I know that sounds ignorant. This has just

been a long-time coming and now that it's over, I feel like I'm free to move on with my life. I don't have to worry about Whit all the time, where she is, what she's doing, if she's O.K. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah, I guess it does. It is fucked-up, but it makes sense. Probably better than how I'm taking it."

"Well, you were her brother. Of course it's going to be hard on you. It's not like failing a test; that has to be difficult." I nodded. "I don't even know what I'd be doing if something had happened to my sister. And this does hurt me. It hurts a lot."

"Yeah? How so?"

"I have nightmares, Wes. I have nightmares that I walk into the living room and he's lying right here, bent over the arm of the couch with a needle in his arm. I have nightmares that he crashes through my window instead of the garage. It got so bad I had to start taking sleep medication. I was waking up in a panic. That lasted a few weeks, and then I started to get better. Can I tell you something?"

"Yeah, of course." I looked her in the eyes.

"My boyfriend left because of it. He couldn't take me being such a mess all the time." She shrugged this off, too. "Can you blame him?"

"Yeah, I think I can. If he really cared about you, he'd want to be there for you even while you were hurting, maybe more than ever when you're struggling."

"Well, you're just nicer than most people." She offered a wry smile. "I am happy you came back, and I'm happy to have met you. I'd seen pictures on Whit's Facebook and she had told me so much about you."

"Considering what she probably told you, I'm shocked you ever let me in."

"No, no." Her eyes seemed to invite me in. "She was so proud of you, probably a bit jealous. She thought it was so cool that you write books and she *adored* Maddie. Whit always liked to say how she was named after her. It's just so weird having you right here, in front of me, now. Not in a bad way."

"It feels almost like fate in a way, doesn't it? Like Whit wanted to bring us together to help each other after she was gone, right?"

"Mhm." A hand reached across my face to turn it towards hers. I felt lips pasted to my own and gave them my stamp before I could consider rejection. They kissed down my neck, fingers fumbling with my button and then my zipper. I closed my eyes as I felt fingernails biting into the palms of my fists. "No?"

I looked down. *Thank God*, I thought. *Erectile dysfunction saves the day*. For once in my life, my cock was mindful enough to reject a woman my brain didn't have the balls to. "I-I'm sorry," I stammered, biting my bottom lip as not to crack into awkward hysterics. "I just keep thinking, my brother's penis, my brother's feminine penis was in that mouth."

She straightened up, wiping excess slobber from her lips. "Actually, you have *that*" she nodded down towards my crotch, which I was quick to cover back up. "In common. What did most of the mouth work."

"Alright," I said, standing up. "On that note, I think it's best that I headed out of here."

"Listen, I'm sorry." She hopped up, almost defensively. "I shouldn't have done that, or said that. I'm just confused right now and you're easy to talk to and—"

"Don't worry about it," I interjected. "It was a mistake but we were both on that couch. It's probably inappropriate of me to be here at all, so, I'm just going to get going, O.K.?"

"Sure." Her eyes were pointed straight at the ground.

"Take care," I said, rushing out the door. The way I said it made the phrase sound like I was asking if that was the proper thing to say in this situation. Really, nothing about that situation was decent at all.

I checked my phone as my car was starting up. One unread message. It was Mom. "You still wanting to go to the meeting tonite?" Fuck.

Sometimes, I wonder if criticism is really worth it at all. I've grown to appreciate some of my favorite works of art so much more through it and I've pulled a few one-eighties on a few others thanks to a good analysis, but then, half the time I wonder if it's just the sport of loving the sound of your own voice more than everyone else in the room. Maybe that's a better fitting description of debate but at times like this, I wonder what the difference is.

We were dissecting the presentations the class had given last week. I wasn't actually that nervous about it, for once. Shit, if I stepped it up just one more notch, I'd have gotten a standing ovation. I walked away from the podium with the class in my pocket. I was actually impatient for my turn to stand on trial so I could bask in praise. Going over everyone else's felt just preliminary.

Lizzie was the first to speak up. “I just want to say that your story was very emotional and I did really enjoy it a lot. I don't want to come off like I'm criticizing your experiences or trying to shape your narrative. I do worry, though, that writing a story about a trans person who commits suicide might perpetuate the harmful stereotype about transgender people being mentally ill.”

Arnold was quick on the defense. “It's not much of a stereotype, no offense, Wes, when the suicidality rates are sitting at forty percent.”

“I-I'm not saying that this can't be criticized or questioned, but I don't really see it as a statistical argument for me. It's about honoring my sister who is dead. That's all, really.” Thank God we were allowed to speak up for ourselves in this class. I don't know what changed between semesters to grant us that allowance, but whatever it was, I'll take it.

“I totally get that, but don't you think this could be triggering?” Reggie, who showed up to class with a new undercut, said. “What if somebody reads this, sees the glamour of Whit on stage at the end like some kind of hero, and misinterprets that? It could be read like it's glorifying Whit.”

“Maybe, but you don't write about somebody's worst qualities for their obituary, ya know? That's kind of how I see this. Whit didn't get the life she deserved so it's about me hoping that she finds what this world was lacking in the afterlife.”

That seemed to shut him down. It seemed obvious to me that my loss had given me a sort-of power over the room, that nobody dared speak out against my tragedy. In this culture, a black veil might as well have been a medal of honor. I felt like through my suffering, I had become sainted a living martyr. Ultimately, the criticism proved ineffective. I had their fear and respect. They wouldn't dare tread on my victimhood. The rest of the class really wasn't worth repeating.

I was walking out when I heard a “Hey!” behind me. The tone had me thinking that it was a professor, and that I had done something that would get me into trouble.

It was Maggie. Her hair was curly, now, and her jawline more prominent, as well as her collarbone. “So, I take it you're a fan of James Baldwin?”

I squinted at her, as though I was looking hard to read between her lines. “Who isn't these days?”

“I'm shocked.” She said it as though we were in the thick of an argument and

I had just crossed some line. “No hot takes? You've lost interest in owning the libs with your Pepe buddies?”

Pepe buddies? I mean, Arnie and the boys are dorks but I didn't see any reason to bring them into this. “I'm not really sure what I've done to you, this time.”

“Well, your reading the other night.”

“What about it?”

“It was sad.”

“Oh, thanks.”

“I meant sad as in pathetic. You totally stole 'Sonny's Blues' You turned creative nonfiction into an act of grave robbery!”

“I made it my own.”

“You made your own story into the class'.”

“Anything else you'd like to add?”

“The carriage analogy would be overdone, even if you didn't just use your 'creative' silly putty to lift it from Dickinson. It's a total cliché.”

“I like when you talk to me like this; you sound like the voice in the back of my head.”

“I mean it, I truly did not appreciate what you did, there. I think you're better than that, it's beneath you, and you should feel ashamed.”

“So, for once, we can agree on something.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, I think you owned my ass. That's valid criticism. It was a shitty, self-absorbed story that took real-life tragedy and turned it into the classroom equivalent of Bay's *Pearl Harbor* movie.”

“Well, I wasn't expecting that response, so I don't know what to say. I guess that I'm glad you're self-aware enough to recognize all that.”

“This isn't me using this as an opportunity to ask you out again, but shoot me a text if you ever feel like talking more about it over dinner, sometime.”

“I deleted your number a long time ago.”

“Well, how about I shoot you a text if I ever feel like discussing this over dinner?”

She smiled. “You know what, I'll probably regret this, but why not? You seem like you could use a good role model in your life.”

The door opened with a falsetto as a widening ray of light was cast into the room. The comforter was still folded with a welcoming triangle peeled back, waiting for someone that would never return to crawl back in. I couldn't imagine anyone using the mattress, again. It would feel like crawling into Matt's coffin with him. On the floor were dirty socks, thongs (*couldn't tell if they were also dirty but the thought of it made me want to retch*), and dresses heaped into a pile. There was a torn-open wrapper lying with the laundry that I mistook for a condom but upon closer inspection found to be for something called Suboxone. Wads of lined paper were spread across his desk like tumbleweeds in a diorama of the desert. There was one piece of paper left uncrumpled weighed-down beneath a pen.

Same nightmare again. I'm seven years old, hiding under the table. The other kids are saying my name from the outside. They lean down to look at me. They're wearing masks. Wes doesn't save me. He is on the outside, with them. He tries to make his voice sound deeper like a monster but I know its his; I don't know which mask he is wearing. I feel somebody grab at me. I'm crying, begging them to stop. They don't.

My heart sank as I recognized this scene. It was locked away long ago in a file with other repressed memories. Back then, it felt like kids being kids, a harmless prank on an irritating little brother. Now, I don't know what to call it. I should have been protecting him, not instigating his suicide. How could I have known? I was a child, just a few years older than he was. Still, I should have known better. That's not something one should have to be taught, but apparently that was a lesson I had to learn the hard way. I felt like my face was turning to mush as tears rolled down my cheeks, as if my visage was a ball of clay being pressed in by a thumb. I knew this was going to happen but I had to keep pushing forward. I came in here looking for the truth and I wasn't going to turn back until I had answers.

I tore the top drawer to his desk open. Nothing. The middle and last were no more fruitful. In his closet were dresses on hangers. Glittery dresses, flowery dresses, striped dresses. Below them lie a rifle like a snake stretched out in the grass. I walked over to it. I was never a gun guy, so I can't say what type it was, but it was heavy. And when I checked, it was loaded. What the fuck would Matt need *this* for? Probably just for the novelty of owning one, I'd imagine. I just never would have thought him to have

such a thing. I turned around and noticed a wire plugged into the wall. On the other end, was his phone.

I picked it up and plopped down onto his bed. I wasn't sure why the fuck Matt didn't take it with him on his last ride. Maybe he knew he wouldn't need it, or didn't want to have access to the world. Maybe he knew that he would call for help, if help was in the palm of his hand. Regardless, he was gone now and his phone was still here. It was unlocked, to my surprise. One of those features where you can bypass the lock screen at home? Thought I was the only one who actually used that. The most recent message was from Theresa Pele. Next to her name was a picture of her kissing Matt's cheek. *Can't believe it's been almost a mo...* sent a few days ago. It felt like a violation of privacy to click on it. Below it was a message outgoing to a contact named Cunter. Next to it was a picture of a thin white guy in a bucket hat with a roach in his mouth. I clicked on it. Inside was a series of transactions the local police department would be very interested in. I flicked up to see months of appointments for subs, and going off the wrapper I found earlier, they weren't talking sandwiches. I backed out of the conversation and went to find Mom. Before I could hit the telephone icon to make a call, I remembered whose phone I was on and pulled my own out.

“Hello?” She sounded like she had been asleep, or congested, or crying.

“Hey, Mom. Can I borrow your car?”

Cunter's address wasn't hard to find, thanks to Matt. He actually kept people's addresses listed under their contact information, the nerd. By time I dropped Mom back off at her place, it was dark out. She had a thousand questions about where I was taking her vehicle, and then a thousand more once I told her that I needed it for a date. I told her about Maggie until we got to her driveway. She was ecstatic. There was less guilt that way. At least I *did* have a date with her, in the past if not the future. I turned right back around to my place and grabbed the rifle, setting it between the driver's side door and the seat. Fortunately, Mom's van had enough room for it to lie comfortably, there.

Of course, the GPS took me to some shithole in the projects. I pulled aside when it was announced I had reached my destination. A couple of men my age were playing basketball with some teenagers under a streetlight. The slap of the ball against the pavement resounded through the area like a metronome. I felt like I should be

panicking, struggling to catch my breath, but I felt at peace. I was in a meditative state. I knew what I had to do and I was resolved to it.

What I wasn't sure of, was my next move. Do I walk up and knock on the door. With all the apartments in this complex, I surely wouldn't make it back to the car before getting tackled. Hell, there's probably police staking the place out, just waiting for some action. My best course of action might be pointing the rifle under my chin soon as Cunter was taken out and going on my own terms. Compared to prison, it would be a relief. This fucker helped tear my family apart, stole my brother from me. Seeing him bleed was something worth dying for. I didn't have long to meditate on it, for the beat of the basketball came to an end.

I looked up to see someone approaching the car with ball under arm. Dyed blonde hair was spiked up, connecting by the sideburns to a patchy peach fuzz beard. I recognized the face framed within this awkward, outdated hairstyle as that of Cunter, if that was his real name.

I rolled my window down and he leaned into the car, resting his arm along the window. Without my airlock, the stench of his man-sweat was polluting the atmosphere.

“Can I help you?” he said, as though he knew exactly why I was here.

Was now my chance? If I waited too long, surely the opportunity would be gone. Such an encounter wasn't something I was expecting. On one hand, if I tried pulling the awkward length of this rifle on him, he could easily redirect the barrel away from him. On the other hand, how fucked was I if he looked any further down? I could just grab him by the throat. Would help arrive by the time he was out of this world? None of the risks felt outweighed by the potential reward of my bounty, especially now that I'm in the situation and the only thing I can think about is little Maddie growing up without a father.

“You a fuckin' retard or somethin'?” He scoffed. “What are you doin' here?”

“I dunno,” I stammered.

He tightened his lips and nodded. “You tryin' to spy on us, man? Think you might see somethin' we don't want you to? Get some entertainment? Let me tell you somethin', man. You wanna see some basketball, these kids have a game at six, Friday night. You get the fuck out of here and go to that if you wanna see somethin'. We *live* here, man. This isn't no zoo; this is our home.”

“I got lost,” I said, eyes locked onto the steering wheel. “I pulled over to put my friend’s address into the GPS, that’s all.”

“Yeah,” he backed away from the window. “You can start by turning this car around.” He turned to walk away, then looked back over his shoulder at me. “You look familiar, man.”

“Never seen ya before,” I said, noticing my hands trembling on my lap.

“Well, try not to see me again.” He started back towards his friends, who were watching us both. “Just some bitch, got lost!” he shouted. “Nobody worth worrying about.”

I could give him something to worry about, I thought, my hand reaching for the gun. I felt the cold metal of its barrel on my fingers. Open the car door, take one step out with the barrel pointed through the open window. I hadn’t shot a gun since high school but he was still close enough to bring to the pavement, no problem. I longed to see his face scraped up by the concrete, drool leaking from his lips without breath as a pool of blood collects around him. I wouldn’t wait around to see it. I’d slide right back into the driver’s seat and peel out.

Yet, Maddie. For all the harm this idiot’s done, he wasn’t worth depriving her of a father. He couldn’t add up to a single smile taken away from her. I pulled Matt’s phone out of my left pocket, locked, just as I expected. I tried the first combination I could think of: *0000*. Yeah, it fucking worked. *Christ, man,* I prayed to Matt. *You could’ve thrown a one in the middle, there, put some effort into it.* Oh well, his oversight was my gain. I went to the messages and tapped on Theresa Pele.

“What’s up?” Theresa was rubbing her eyes with heels of her fists. She looked like I’d woken her up. “Everything alright?”

“Can I come in?” My efforts to disguise my voice as stable or civil were futile.

“Sure, yeah.” She stepped back, holding the wooden door. She threw it shut behind me. She was in pajama bottoms and a tank top. “Do you want some tea or something?”

“No, what I want to do is talk.”

“Kay. Whaddya wanna talk about?” She fell back into the beanbag.

“What was the last conversation you had with Whit about?” The way it left my lips, it sounded like an accusation.

“You know, just kind of—”

“No, I don't think I do know.” I felt in control of the conversation, standing above her. There was too much energy in me, though. I was pacing back and forth in a line. I was like a lion trapped in a cage with her and she was without a whip to ward me off. “And I think the reason that I don't know is because there's something you're not telling me.”

“I don't know what there is to tell you, Wes. Whit had a lot of problems. They didn't all deal with me.”

“Well, I think he'd have a pretty big problem with you macking on his brother while he rots in an early grave!” I was now yelling. I could feel my eyes twitching.

She was whimpering, hiding her face behind her palms. For a moment, the only sound in the room were her sobbing. Finally, she looked back up at me. “How dare you.” Her voice was weak. “You come into my house, start attacking me like a crazy person, accuse me of I don't even know what, and try to scare me!”

“You wanna know what it feels like to be scared!?! You don't know how it feels to lose your brother. You don't know what it feels like to hu—”

“Shut the *fuck* up!” She yelled. “Get out of my house! You are scaring me. If you don't get out of my house, I'm calling the cops.”

I sighed. “You're gonna call the cops?”

“Yes, I'm going to call the fucking cops if you don't leave my house right now.”

“Sure, I'll leave. Real quick, do you have your phone on you?”

She reached in her pocket; I could see that it was empty. “Yes.”

“Well, let's see it, then.” She failed to produce any evidence, just leaving her hand empty in her pants as though that was enough to fool me. “It doesn't matter. I have this,” I pulled Matt's cell out of my pocket and tapped four zeroes into the lock screen. “I feel so empty, now,” I recited. “I can't stop thinking about how we could have been a family. Why didn't you believe in me? What's so wrong with me that you had to do take my baby away?” More hysterics hardly obscured by her palms. “What did he mean by that? You took his *baby* away? Last I checked, Matt never had any children. Ill leave you alone, sure. Frankly, I don't even want to look at you right now. But before I go, you're gonna tell me what the fuck is going on, here.”

“I had an abortion, O.K.!” She shouted at me. “what was I to do? Raise a child with an addict!? An addict who gaslighted me, who made me feel like shit all the time, who couldn't even take care of herself anymore? How could she be a father? She wasn't even a man. She certainly couldn't function as one by the time I found out. I thought we could have been the exception; I thought I could be with someone who wasn't cisgendered but I couldn't. It was too much. We had an accident and I did the responsible thing. We couldn't bring a child into the world like that.

“I thought Whit would have agreed; I thought she would have thrown money at me to get rid of it. I was wrong. She loved being an aunt so much; she wanted us to be mothers. I had already been unhappy for months, I couldn't deal with it the rest of my life. We couldn't fuck; we couldn't hold a conversation; we could have never raised a child. We fought about it and after it was over, we fought more. I told her to leave me alone and I moved on. I can't help that she didn't. And I'm not going to sit and be lectured in my own home for doing what I think was the right thing, so whether or not you have anything to say about that, you can just fucking leave.”

I was shaking. I felt like my eyes could have burned a hole right through her with the rage boiling inside my skull. A part of me wanted to strangle the life out of her, right there. Another part felt that condemning her to live her life was the greater punishment. A member of my family was conceived and I didn't even know about it. I felt furious, mostly at Matt for keeping this secret from me. Right now, though, I was in someone's living room that very well could soon be calling the cops if I didn't leave soon. In fact, I'd better head right home because she'd probably be dialing 911 before I could even start the car. For a brief second, I considered marching back in here with the rifle. Instead, I stormed out the door without looking back.

Thank God for Maddie. She had already saved so many lives and didn't even know it.

Im under the table and I hear their feet stamping the ground around me. The tablecloth runs down to the floor but they lift it up to take a peep at me. Sometimes, hands reach in to grab me in my makeshift womb. They're laughing and cooing my name. Wesley. They let it roll off their tongues in waves. Their faces look like masks of the people I knew. It can't truly be them. Ione looks as though she was made of wax and held to a candle. Brendan is shining like he's made of titanium. We

might as well have been at the bottom of the ocean and yet there a sheen spread across his face like a bolt of lightning. Dad had the cheeks of a chipmunk, so inflated that it looked painful. He would lift the table's dress up to throw M&Ms at me, cackling. Matt's face was chameleon, holographic, evoking a new scare from each angle. One moment, Whit's makeup was running down his face like he was crying. Another, his face was blackened by the tread of a tire. Then, his hair was lit at the ends, just above his shoulders. At first they were lit candle wicks just about his shoulders but the flames quickly climbed up the curtains framing his face and claimed his entire skull. I could hear the fire whirring and chewing on him. I felt a warmth in my groin, collecting in my underwear and spreading down the legs of my pants.

I woke with my head propped up by the rifle, pointed under my chin. I held its neck in both my hands. How does one even fall asleep like this? The pose was more fit for a statue than slumber. I recoiled from it upon waking, jolted out of position by a pounding at the door. I swear, I heard a pop as the barrel was released from my chin. I threw the gun across the floor and then collected myself into a hunched-over standing position. My back wasn't ready to straighten itself out.

“One second!” I shouted, correcting my posture with a hand to support the arch of my back. I hobbled over to the gun and pushed it with a naked foot under the couch before turning towards the door. I swung it open to let Brendan and a gust of the cold in. Outside, it smelled like rain.

“Hey, man, how you been?” he said. I could tell he was scoping the place out, even though he was trying to act casual.

“I'm alright,” I said, and then repeated it as though it would become more true with each incantation.

“Just, uh, thought I'd swing by. I was in the area, on the way to work. Wasn't sure you'd be home.”

“Yeah, I don't work until four, so I was just catching up on sleep.”

“Oh, yeah, yeah. How're classes goin'?”

“Alright. They're just a distraction from what's really important, it feels like. I could be spending time with family, making money, working on myself, but instead I'm wasting time and money over there.”

“It'll pay off once you're out.”

I sighed. "That's what I'm tellin' myself. It's all just an investment."

"For real." He looked me in the eyes, his stare unwavering. "How you been?"

"O.K., I guess." I shrugged. "I dunno what the standard is. How am I *supposed* to be right now?"

"I don't know, man. I can't even imagine. You just gotta keep moving forward. You know we miss you over at the house a lot. You're always welcome to swing by."

"Yeah, I'd love to. It's just hard with school and work and trying to keep an eye out on Mom."

"How's she?"

"Great, somehow. She's really turned this into positive energy. She's an activist, now, so that's something."

"For a local politician or..."

"She just goes to these groups, for the families of drug addicts, suicide victims, any sort of thing like that. It keeps her busy and she's got a good social life, so I think it's probably a good thing."

"You ever think about going to one of those?"

"Yeah, but I think about becoming a professional skater, too. When I have the time, I don't got any energy and when I'm motivated, I don't have any time."

"Yeah, I feel that, for sure." He seemed like he was scanning the floor, every surface present, anything he could get his eyes on. "Hey, can I use your John?" He pointed towards the hallway.

"Yeah, of course, no problem."

I noticed him take a peep into Matt's old room, and then mine, as he passed by. I wanted him out of here. It wasn't long before the toilet flushed and the sink ran. It almost felt like he was timing it and didn't actually need to use the bathroom at all. It was just an excuse to further his research on me. He came right back out.

"You know, if you ever want any help cleaning this place out," he began. "Boxing stuff up, whatever, lemme know. It's not too far outta the way for me." *Only about twenty minutes*, I thought. *Not quite on the way*.

"Yeah, thanks, I've been meaning to get around to that." It would probably be better if I went about that on my own, considering the revelations my last journey into Matt's room produced. "Hey, you ready for the birthday?" Maddie's first.

“Ugh.” He rolled his eyes. “Don't even get me started. It's gonna be a nightmare. So many people. You know, with everyone's families, we might as well rent a place out. It'll be fun, but until the day of, I'll be stressin' it. You?”

“Well, it's not at my place, so, that eases the tension. Actually, I was wondering if I could bring a lady-friend, if that wouldn't be too awkward.”

“Oh!” His ears perked to that. There's something about dating that made you feel adjusted to people. Like, if you're getting laid at the end of the night, then everything's going to be alright. “That'd be great, yeah.” He rubbed the back of his head. I could tell beneath his hat that Ione had cut his hair recently. “Well, I'd better be on my way. I'm swinging by Pattycakes, picking some donuts up for the crew before work.” There were closer bakeries to him, for sure, but Pattycakes was worth the extra miles. “You wanna come with?”

“Naww, I'd better get back to sleep for a bit. I'll catch you some other time, though.”

“Alright, sounds good.” He wrapped his arms around me. I felt shy to fold mine around his midsection. Something about his hugs was always awkward for me, like how a child feels when they're upset with a parent but forced to embrace them. “You take it easy, man.”

“Yup, you, too.” I closed the door behind him and felt comfortable to be alone again with my nightmares.

Oh Christ, I thought, as I saw my father's girlfriend hobbling into the bar. She was leaning heavily to one side. I saw something on Facebook about her taking a fall and needing a new knee a few weeks ago.

“Hey, Wesley,” she said, so soft I could hardly hear her over the music. “How have you been?”

I swept fries off the table into the basket they were brought over in. “I'm alright. If you want to order, Jordan's up at the bar.” He might have been hired to replace Lindsey after she got a job in her field but his presence only pronounced her absence, in both quality of work and conversation.

“No, no. I was just stopping by to see you.” I turned around. I never looked at he closely enough to see the face behind her makeup. She looked worn-down.

“Yeah?” I said. “What's up?”

“It's your father. He's just not doing well, lately.” A knot turned in my stomach. The last thing I could tolerate right now was another death in the family. “He doesn't leave the house. He's not even going to work anymore, they had to put him on leave because all he does is cry. And now, he's drinking alone while I'm at work. I don't even remember the last time I've seen him standing upright.”

I thought about him pressuring me to hang out with him in that car ride shortly after Matt, and then how many weeks it's been since I'd last seen him. I think that *was* the last time. He's crossed my mind every now and again since, but I was so used to him not being around that I slipped back into a world without him without fully realizing it.

“I know you're busy with school and that the last thing you need is more stress. I just thought that you should know. I'm worried about him, Wes. I've never seen him like this; I've never seen *anyone* like this.”

“O.K.,” I nodded. “Thanks for letting me know.”

“You know what her first word was?” I asked Maggie, Maddie in my arms.

“Lemme guess...Dada?”

“Can you tell her?” I looked down at my baby, born one year ago on this day. In this time, she'd nearly doubled. I have also already missed out on a great deal of milestones, many of which were commemorated at this event. So many pictures being passed around at the table before we blew out the candles for her cake. I couldn't even name the cartoon it was decorated in the style of. Something with merchildren underwater? I was a stranger at my own family's table. Her first steps had come, little awkward hobbles before faceplanting into the carpet. We were having her run from family member to family member, sitting with crossed-legs close enough that we could catch her before a concussion could be added to her list of firsts. I felt like she didn't run any faster towards me than she did anybody else. “Can you?” I rocked her a little bit in my arms. “C'mon, Maddie...” I looked back up at Maggie with a shrug. “She's a little shy, still. She takes that after her father.”

“Oh, sure.” She rolled her eyes. “You're real shy, until you have something to say.” She was wearing a white dress, her brown hair curled. Everybody was probably wondering what a girl like her would be doing with a schmuck like me and I couldn't blame them. “So, what was it?”

“What was what?”

“Her first word!”

“Oh, it was Dada.”

“Knew it!” She leaned down towards Maggie. “Can you say *Dada*? Can you say Dada for me?” Maddie repeated after her.

I swear, all women in the world are on a team against me, and they've recruited my own daughter. Sure, you could say I'm on the male team, but I don't know many men who qualify as team players. The saddest part about all this was, I'm not even Dada. Brendan got her to say it a few months back, when I was mentally still in Matt's coffin.

“Here's the thing, it isn't Dada, it's *Dada*. She turned out to be a big fan of Max Ernst.”

“Yeah?” she laughed. “Baby genius?”

“For sure. Hey,” I said, surveying the room. “You mind holding her for a minute? I wanna go check up on Dad.”

“Yeah, of course.” I handed her the baby and made my way to the kitchen. The only other person here my father knew was my mother, which meant this must be a pretty lonely place for him. It wasn't until I got to the kitchen that I realized the one person more stranger than him at this party was Maggie, who I had just ditched. *Fuck*.

Brendan was in the kitchen, reaching in for a beer. “Oh, hey, man.” I never noticed before how he much the booze had begun to define his midsection. “Need somethin'?”

“No, I was just steppin' out. What's up?”

“Ready for this to be over with. Can't stand the commotion.” He cracked the tab open and sucked the foam from the top of his beer.

“Just wait for the wedding.”

“*I know*, right? Hey, good job on the lady friend, by the way.”

“Maggie?”

“No, the other one. *Yes, Maggie*. How long you been seein' each other?”

“Well, that's too good a question for me.”

“C'mon, *fuck that*. Not like it's a secret. I'm just askin'.”

“It's not *secret*, I just dunno. We went on a date a while back and I blew it and now, here we are.”

“So, is this, like, your first date?”

I shrugged. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Bold move.”

“Well, she's not your average girl. Thought this might impress her more than the average formalities. She's real, ya know?”

He raised his can. “Well, good on you.”

“Hey, you seen Dad? I actually came back here to—”

He pointed through the window, which gave a perfect view of both our fathers smoking and laughing on the porch, probably talking about sports. And I knew that Ione was talking with Mom and the other women in the living room, still. All grounds were covered.

Maggie ran her hand over my head, starting at me with bedroom eyes. “I can see where your hair won't grow back.” I felt my face flush. “Sorry,” she giggled. “Was that news to you?”

“No, I knew,” I said. “Just wasn't in need of a reminder.” I was the worst with shaving my dome. I could hardly keep up with trimming a beard, let alone my whole head. I suppose one positive of it transitioning from thinning to straight baldness on top is that it'll be less ground for me to cover. I reached out and ran my fingers through her hair, and then pulled her in for a wet kiss. She wrapped a leg around me. She was warm, warm enough that I didn't mind the blankets only covering half of us.

“So, what was *really* with our first night?”

Audible gulp.

“I'm not *mad* at you; I know that was a long time ago and that a lot's changed since then. I just want to understand, is all.”

“You were the first person I was almost with since the mother of my child. I was afraid, and I was even more afraid to admit that I was afraid, so I deflected. It was cowardly and wrong and I'm sorry.” I began looking her in the eyes but by the end of my piece, my eyes were cast downward towards her collarbone. Then they were distracted by her nipples. I reached down to put my lips to one of them.

She caught my face in her hands, holding me by the cheeks. She raised my face to look into hers. “You could have just told me. I would have understood.”

I flattened my lips. “It didn't feel possible in the moment. I thought you'd just

be disappointed and angry. I really didn't feel like I was much of a man.”

“I was a lot more disappointed and angry with you for the route you *did* choose.”

“I don't know how many times I can say I'm sorry. All I can do is make it up to you, now that I know better.”

“You know, this isn't going to be a thing, right?”

“What do you mean?” I could feel my heart sinking.

“Us.”

“Why not? I think this was good. When we work together, we can achieve great things...” I put my hand on her hip, trying to pull her in closer to me.

“*This* was good.” She wrapped a hand around me and began stroking. “But there's more to life than amazing sex. You're just not present, Wes. Sometimes, I can see that somewhere deep inside you, there's a great man waiting to come out, but you keep him locked away. I don't know if you're afraid you're not good enough or if you're just afraid of the world hurting you any more. Whatever it is, you're just not here, yet. Even when you're with your daughter, you look uncomfortable. You look like you're afraid of her, afraid of the whole world. You act like life doesn't have anything to offer you but pain. I think you need some time to find yourself but when you get there, you have a beautiful family waiting for you.”

“What about in the meantime?”

“In the meantime, you can get to work.” She pushed my head down so she could wrap her legs around it.

I took a square of paper out of my breast pocket and unfolded it. “I haven't really thought of a title for this piece, yet. Nothing really feels appropriate. It just *is*. I know it's a cliché at this point to call an untitled piece 'Untitled,' so think of it as anything but that. You can call it what you want. Actually,” I tore the page in half, crumpled them up into a ball, and dropped it into the trash bin conveniently placed to my right. I looked into the eyes of each of my classmates, as well as Dr. Kasey sitting in a chair at the back of the coffee shop. I tried to avoid catching sight of my mother or the rest of the people who know me outside of class. I couldn't help but notice, though, that she was not only sharing a table with Ione, Brendan, and Maddie, but that they had also offered my father a seat with them.

“My daughter came too early. Not just in my life, because I was clearly not mature enough to be responsible for myself, let alone raising a child. I mean, she was born prematurely. I was right in the middle of my self-proclaimed zero's journey to becoming a real adult and she just decides to drop in, just like I had never planned on her conception. My mother didn't even know that I was going to be a father, yet. She found out at the hospital while Ione—Maddie's mother—was in labor. The family was in with her as she delivered, same with Maddie's stepfather, Brendan. They were all there, ready to greet her when she came into the world. Like always, I was on the outside, trying to coach myself into accepting the reality of the situation. I was about to be a father, O.K., and I was crying in the hospital while my mom reassured me that everything would be alright, like some child afraid of the dark.

“And it's true. I am afraid of the dark and I'm afraid of the unknown but my worst fear is shedding light on my fears. If you turn a light on, the kid sees that there's nothing to be afraid of. I'm just paralyzed in fear under the covers of my own white lies. I can't turn the light on for myself. I need a parent to come in and do it for me, walk me through the room to show me that there's nothing to be afraid of. I'm not a man at all. Men face their fears. They're brave. They play chicken with fear and win every game. My bones are made of jelly. I can't even peep out from under my sheets.

“There are complications. I'm heaving in the bathroom over the sink; I couldn't even make it to the toilet. I'm holding onto the sink because I can't stand upright and I can feel my legs shaking beneath me. The entire room is spinning and all that I can think is that *I've done this. I killed them.* This was my penance. There was no scientific explanation. I fucked-up and this is what I get. I was drunk and had sloppy, unprotected, and underwhelming sex with a woman who wasn't my girlfriend—no offense, Ione—and their deaths would be my punishment. This was my curse and there was nothing that could be done. God wrote my fate in pen. Everybody keeps telling me, 'It's going to be O.K. It's going to be O.K.,' but it can't convince me. Nothing was O.K. I knew because the pit of my gut told me so and I wasn't about to be pacified by any platitudes they had to offer. I should have been in there, showing my strength and helping my family through it. I should have been a man. Instead, I was a weak animal, totally paralyzed with fear.

“The baby is born; it's a miracle. We should be happy; that's one hurdle cleared. Problem is, we all know how premature births can lead to health risks. The

baby needs to have every breath monitored in the event that it stops, as though it's an inevitability. The mother needs a blood transfusion. I don't understand anything that's going on. I just know that a baby shouldn't have to be fed through a tube like that. I'm just sitting in the hospital, shattered, waiting for the ceiling to cave in on us while everybody tells me that everything is going to be alright in the end. I should have been ready to bend iron to make sure that everything would work out, but I wasn't even strong enough to hope. Sure, eventually, the tubes were taken out. We all got to go to our homes.

“The days turned to weeks and the weeks turned to months and it's been a year and I think things are supposed to seem O.K. We've lived through the worst of it and I'm supposed to take comfort in that. I don't think anything in life will ever eclipse losing Matt. Maddie is a healthy, beautiful girl. Her eyes are so full of wonder and when I'm with her, life is undeniable. She has the most mother and I couldn't ask for a better man to be raising my child. But I haven't gotten a full night of sleep since coming home from the hospital and I'm not talking about the baby crying.

“I'm still afraid. I have these nightmares, these nightmares where I'm standing over her crib and she starts to yellow. She begins to shed her hair and those shining eyes dim as they sink deeper and deeper into the pits of her skull until all I can see is blackness. Her skin starts to look so thin I can see all her veins. Her ribs are poking through her skin. I try to pick her up, to hold her, cradle her and let her know that everything is going to be just fine, because Daddy's there to make sure of it. She just crumbles in my hands, pouring between my fingers like dust back into her crib. I was just too late.

“I love the idea of being a father. I just don't think I'm qualified for the position. I know that I can love my daughter but I'm so afraid of her. Every time I look at her, it's a reminder that I can't save her from the world. This innocence, this purity she has can't last forever. I know that someday I can find that love within me that she deserves. I know it's there because as scared as I get when I'm around her, the only thing I want to do is keep her safe and make her happy. I might be the worst employee in my field but I love my job as a dad. She makes me proud. I just wish that I had something more to offer her than lies, but as a writer, maybe lies are all I'm good for.

“But what if I'm too late? Just like I was too late to Matt. Eventually, she'll start growing up and begin to notice that I'm not like the other dads. I'm not even like

her stepdad. Every girl deserves a father who loves them with all his heart. How can I even worry that I won't love her enough? What if she misinterprets my hesitation as a lack of interest in her? She'll grow to resent me, is what. She'll pick up on those subtle queues. She'll resent me for it. She will absolutely grow up to hate me and the reasons why are so intrinsically tied to my character that I don't know if there's a damn thing I can do to prevent that from happening.

“I never wrote about her birth before. It was too hard for me. I could have—I had the responsibility to in my last book, but I shied away like a coward. How can I call myself an artist if I'm unwilling to brave the depths of my own past? How can I call myself a father if I can't come to terms with my daughter's birth? What kind of father is afraid of his child? An innocent baby?”

“I don't know. I don't expect you to have the answers and I probably wouldn't listen to you, even if you did.” I shrugged. “Maybe you'll see me differently after this; maybe you *should*. I don't really give a shit, anymore. That's the truth and I thought you should know it.”

Not Enough.

Everybody was laughing and touching everyone else's shoulders. I felt stiff in my suit. I wondered if I was the only one who stood before it, hanging from my doorknob and let out a sigh before putting it on and resigning to the day. I felt like I had to clock in to this wedding and that I was upholding the official position of Best Man. In a way, it helped. I could hide behind it. "Oh, you're [insert family title here]? I've heard all about you." *Shake hands/hug.* "Yeah, I'm Wes, the best man." *Rinse and repeat.* Everyone else felt so much more comfortable in their roles than I did. They didn't seem more rehearsed, just more capable of finding the moment and living within it.

The wedding ceremony itself was pleasant. It was staged at a church I'd never been to before. They had a coffee bar. A fucking coffee bar at a church. What a time to be alive. We stood in front of an audience like the end of *A New Hope* while they tied the knot. I was sweaty and wondered if the people next to me could smell that. I had to keep fixing Maddie's bow in her hair, as she kept wanting to play with it. Ione was walked down the aisle by her father, a naturally goofy man I always enjoy seeing. Her entrance felt like the headliner walking out onto stage for me. Seeing her in that white dress made me realize that I loved this woman, as a sister, which meant my brother and sister were getting married, but in a cool way. I got to walk her up with the rings to present to the bride and groom. She tried putting Ione's in her mouth, which got a laugh out of the audience. I tried not to take notice of the pictures being taken by a professional photographer.

At least I had the option to shove those into the back of my mind. The next hour felt like a God damn photo shoot. The bride and the groom. The bride and the groom with our daughter. The bride and her father. The bride and both her parents. The groom and both his parents. The groom and I. The bride and the maid of honor, who was Brendan's sister, who was hot, which I mentioned to Ione the first chance I got. "Don't even think about it," she warned me. Then, as if that wasn't enough, we went outside to take some more photos. Photos of everyone together. Photos of the bride and groom kissing while we applaud. All the men walking with our arms around each other from behind like we're the cast of *Stand By Me*. My mother and I. My father and I. Thank God I wasn't forced to take one with both my parents. The church was hardly big enough to hold them, let alone making them stand within proximity of each other and smile. Someone did have the bright idea to take a shot of the best man

and the maid of honor together. *Score.* Gotta give thanks for that one.

I've always loved photography but can't stand having my picture taken. It feels so artificial, so calculated. I could be grinning from ear to ear and if you pulled a camera out, my lips would tighten like an alarm had gone off. That fake toothy smile feels so forced to me and while I'm trying to hold position, the only thing I want to do is let my face snap back into its resting position. Planking is one thing but that shit is ridiculous. It was a sunny day. Everyone was happy. Why can't we just enjoy it and have a photographer follow us around and try to capture our most natural moments? I'd still be uncomfortable but generally speaking, the smiles would be more authentic and the moments more memorable. There are some moments I'll never forget but I can't think of a single time I've ever stood posing for a picture that was worth commemorating. It's enough to kill any moment for me. Eventually, the photographer decided he had tortured us enough and we were free to go. We packed it up and took off for the reception.

After the party was the afterparty. What more can I say? The bride shoved a piece of cake into the groom's face and we all laugh like it was the first time we've ever seen it. The DJ plays a few songs we all know and expect, whether we love them or not. (*On that note, I don't really know why we even need to employ a DJ. Why not just organize a playlist, hook a laptop up, and press play?*) Of course, I stayed safe at the table with my parents and Maddie. Fortunately, there were some other strangers there to distract Mom and Dad so they didn't have to tolerate each other, plus food to distract them. Dad got up for a bit and rocked Maddie back and forth. Someone got a really great photo of it that's hanging on my fridge next to a picture of Matt and I when we were kids freshly hosed-off from playing in the mud. Of course, eventually came the Best Man's turn to take the mic.

I walked up to it, feeling all eyes on me. I tried to keep my back straight and walk like I either didn't notice or couldn't care less. I grabbed the mic with one hand and mouthed the words, *Is this thing on?* Some people shouted back that they couldn't hear. They didn't seem to pick up on the joke. "Sorry," I said. "Had to fix the Michael." That got a chuckle or two, but mostly polite smiles.

"I've been giving a lotta speeches lately, in class. Thing is, they're all about me, and we're here to celebrate Ione and Brendan. But right now, mostly Brendan,

because brides don't have best mans. Brendan has every right to hate me. If I was him, I'd be walking around with my head on a stick, using it like a staff, but my head being the real me's head, you know? What I'm saying is that Brendan's raising my child. Wouldn't it, like, be kinda crazy but funny if somebody didn't know that and we all just heard this gasp of shock? Or if nobody knew that and this was a big reveal? Anyway," I shrugged. "I think that'd be funny. Brendan could have turned away from Ione when she turned-up pregnant. Shit, who wouldn't? No offense to the bride, who is a total steal. Brendan isn't just anybody, though. He took what most would see as a misfortune and used that as an opportunity to grow, not just himself but to help those around him grow.

"Let's be real, he was always more fit to be a father than I was. I still get jealous about it. He is in every way more deserving of a daughter like Maddie than I am and if she turns out to be normal in any way, he'll be the one to thank. I mean, Ione, too, but you know what I mean. When we were in the hospital, there was a short fright. Maddie was ready to come out into the world and she wasn't quite fully cooked. I wasn't even ready to meet her, but Brendan was one of the people who got me through it. On my best days as a father, I'm imitating him. Somehow, he took the title of cuckold and found a way to wear it with dignity. He takes responsibility for my actions every day, both past and present. He's my buddy cop when it comes to parenting and I am a better person for knowing him. I always wanted a brother, but it turns out what I got was more of a sister. When I'm hanging out on Brendan's porch, I feel like he is that brother. If there is anybody in this world deserving to share a life with Ione, it's probably Hugh Jackman, but Brendan's a pretty close second."

I stepped away from the mic to applause. Brendan intercepted me on my way back to the table with a hug, patting my back. "You're a dick, you know that?" he whispered in my ear. "But I love you, man."

My hand felt crude, lying upon the tabletop, as though if I lifted it, I'd see that I've left a stain, some dark smear upon the white fabric. I felt the obligation to move it but not the ambition. The music was faint in the back of my mind. My father was outside, smoking with clique of other dads. He looked comfortable in a suit, although I could tell he was anxious to frequent the open bar. There were still crumbs on my plate, some morsels of bread and a thin film of gravy I couldn't manage to scrape off

with the side of my fork. Mom was bouncing Maddie on her lap. Her hair was straightened and dyed. I could tell that her face was made up but I couldn't identify the changes. I was simply aware that her face appeared more painted than normal. She didn't look desperate or artificial, though. It was just something that I recognized as her son. I could smell her perfume. My suit was slung over the chair and I was tempted keep unbuttoning my shirt. The collar was already loosened and so were the pipes in my throat. No matter how much I try a shirt on before I need to wear it, come the day of, that collar would be pinching my throat shut. If my throat looked how it felt, I'd have looked like I was just assaulted.

Occasionally, someone would migrate over and compliment my speech. They'd say I was funny and should consider stand-up. *I'm thinking about teaching*, I'd tell them, and they would nod amiably. The reception was inside a barn. The ceiling was high and there were two stories; we were on the second. The bar was downstairs and I imagined that this was where my father would be found for the rest of the night. I noticed the daylight was starting to dim. A bird flew in through an open window, just sitting on the sill as though it wasn't a drifter but a guest like any of the rest of us. I was tempted to approach it and see if I could pet its head or even just stand next to it like we were old pals. I didn't chance it; couldn't risk disturbing him. I noticed my glass next to my mother's. They were both full, hers red and mine clear. The rim of her glass was stained with muted rose lipstick. I couldn't fathom drinking anything but my water. I took a moment to appreciate how it was both fulfilling and purifying. The wine looked as though it would clog my throat, make me bloated and lethargic.

Maddie was watching me. Her eyes were like orbs of pure energy. Mom seemed to be revitalized in her presence. She looked like a young mother again, cooing to her over the music, which was now swelling. Maddie was wearing a white dress like her mother's. I wanted to say something, to make more of a mark on this event than just my hand resting on the table like a lizard on a rock. I felt like my body was cast in cement from the neck down. I sent the signal to tap a finger, just lift one digit up from the table to show that I still had the strength to do so, to prove that I was more than just a spectator, but the message was lost in transmission.

My mind wandered, began to wonder if Maggie was here, could I entertain her? Would my conversation be enough to preoccupy her? Where would Matt sit, if he was able to attend? Between Mom and me, I suppose. How would he greet my

father? What kind of dress would he wear? I could see Mom with his baby on her other knee. She didn't know what she was missing and I prayed that she would never find out. I tried to escape that notion. My eyes began to scale the scene, desperate for something worth spending more than a moment to process. I was consciously trying to frame the moment, capture a mental snapshot of my own. Who knows if there would be another moment like this, with us all here together. Who knows if it matters, because right now, we were still in this moment. My hands were cupped but I felt the sands of time sifting through my fingers. The hands of the clock were nudging me forward, second by second. The music stopped.

“Hey!” Ione says, sitting down in Dad's seat. “Care to dance?” I can see the beads of sweat on her forehead.

I inhale through my teeth, pulling my lips back like I had just heard the sound of a vase shattering between my feet. “Your husband gonna be cool with that?” She smiles. “Oh, lemme guess, this was his idea?” She nods. “Just like a cuck,” I say. I stand up and turn to see him watching from afar. I point at him, laughing as I scooped up my daughter and take his girl to the dance floor. “Seems a bit familiar, huh?”

“Yeah,” Ione laughs. She is cradling our child in her tattooed arms. “Different enough, though, so the moment will stand on its own.”

I smile. “Ya think?” We are stepping in circles. I can't tell which part of the room I'm facing or who's watching. At first the background is a matte painting to me. Soon, it might as well be filtered through a kaleidoscope. I know there's music playing but I can't hear it. I don't think I could name the song playing for a free ticket to Heaven, not that I'd take one, anyway. I'm quite happy to be where I'm at. All I can see is my daughter and her mother; I see them looking back at me.