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Shelter-in-Place

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Shelter-in-Place

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Contents

Dwelling, 3

Givens, 16

12 Steps to Becoming the Whole You: A Motivational Video with Skeet McPhecker, 29

Tamiami, 36

My Mother, the Somnambulist, 51

Shelter-in-place, 63

Hollowed, 119

Dwelling

When I woke up, Jake was still out cold on the couch opposite mine. He'd fallen asleep the night before, a slobbering, sobbing mess. I had fed him a sedative from his boyfriend's medicine cabinet, helped myself to one, and waited for his heaving to ebb before going to sleep myself.

I dreamed only that I was awake and in that very same room.

Before he'd finally fallen asleep, I had looked around Daddy's house while Jake cried. Daddy is what we call his boyfriend Terrance, who's 20 years older than us and always out of town.

"He's always in some other hick town!"

I rummaged through Daddy's drawers and closets, free to assess and to judge. And I listened when Jake vented from the couch between gulps of his vodka tonic.

"I know, honey," I said.

"We live in a hick town! Why can't he just work here?!"

"I don't know..."

There were a million drawers in Daddy's house. Most of them were filled with new things. He didn't seem to have a past. A craft drawer had an unopened glue gun, bags of confetti, and colorful tacks. One drawer had paper dinner napkins, another was full of unopened Christmas decorations. Party favors for celebrations that have yet to even be planned.

The drawers were all over the condo—the kitchen, the living room, a hallway. Daddy's condo was in a brand new development at the edge of town on a street that had long ago

become an old unused capillary. Across the street was an extended stay hotel and a giant gas station and 24-hour convenience store.

“I take care of this place! And why?”

He gestured around, arms held out like a Shakespearean death scene. He was still wearing sunglasses hours after he’d come indoors.

The first time Jake had woken up in Daddy’s house, he called me to gush about its cleanliness and built-in wine rack, its sleek appliances and potted palms.

Jake had been dating Daddy for a few months and hadn’t cared much about his absences until now. Daddy had money and he was generous in an indifferent way. The condo had become a clubhouse for me and Jake. It was a castle compared to our apartment. And neither of us could afford food since I’d only just gotten a new job after months on unemployment and Jake’s family had finally cut him off for good. He’d immediately glommed on to Daddy.

I had seen Daddy when I arrived earlier that day, I had just finished selling phone plans at the mall and he was on his way to the airport. He’d said goodbye and given Jake cash. He wore a white linen shirt like always. I watched the links of his gaudy gold bracelet gather on the granite countertop as he held out a wad of twenties.

He saw me staring blankly and I think he got the impression I was coveting that wad of money because he rolled his eyes. And for a moment, I could have punched him.

I wanted to spit on his shoe and call him a dry old husk, a fat beetle, a box of levers and pulleys built only to build more of itself and fart out toxic gas. But it wouldn’t have had the effect I would have wanted.

“Later...” is what I’d actually said as he walked out the door with his suitcase on wheels trailing behind him. “Daddy.”

We never called him Daddy to his face. Jake had even gasped a little. But Daddy hadn’t heard.

I thought about the look he gave me as I looked through the drawers and I decided to take something.

A drawer in the hall closet was filled with bills. Another was all rolled up ties.

“Devon! What are you doing!? I’m dying here. You don’t care about me any more than he does. WHAT AM I EVEN DOING HERE?!”

Daddy’s closet smelled of leather and wool. A row of loafers lined a shelf, all of them with shoe horns. Boxes were stacked at the top.

“You’re having a good time,” I yelled.

“I’d be having a better time if you were making me a drink right now,” Jake said in his drunken baby voice.

“Give me a minute, schnookums.”

I piled two hardshell suitcases on top of one another and climbed on top for a better view of the shelf.

The boxes were piled three high and two rows deep. All the ones in front were just the empty old vessels for the shoes down below.

The boxes in back contained things: more bills, folded up Macy’s bags, free with purchase cologne sets, unused leather treatment sprays and eyeglass repair kits. Gifts of the

month, and the month before, and the month before. Flashlights and alarm clocks that run only on consumer confidence.

The plastic fumes were intoxicating and I wanted to gather up an armful of the newness and drag it all home with me. But picturing a free with purchase gift set in my apartment—sitting untouched on our dirty futon for months—made me change my mind. Daddy’s collection would lose its appeal when pieced out, like a little bag of candy corn left over for months after all the other Halloween treats were gone.

I picked up another box, this one heavier.

“Where’s my drink?! You’re the worst best friend ever! But I still love you.”

Heavy things slid and clinked. The box was just a little more worn than the others. Inside was another box, this one covered in black velveteen. It opened with a soft thunk and smelled old inside, whereas everything else had smelled so unused.

There was a lot of gold. Fat ropey bracelets and necklaces were wound around each other in clumsy knots.

I put several of the braided gold bracelets on, some on each wrist. I donned a herringbone necklace.

“Isn’t this a lady’s necklace,” I asked Jake as I dangled the bracelets at him, trying to get him to laugh.

“Make me a drink,” I said, doing my best impression of Terrance. “We’ve got tickets to the Trans-Siberian Orchestra this weekend. Have you seen my cat-o-nine tails?”

“Stop,” Jake laughed. “He’s not into S&M...Pop your collar, it’ll lend more authenticity.”

I smoothed the collar of my polo shirt as upright as it would go. “Scott and Jim are coming over for brunch, did you and Devon drink all the Veuve?”

We had, in fact, consumed all the champagne. The first night we were alone at Daddy’s, we opened a closet and found unopened boxes of all the expensive brands, the bottles that monied adults give each other on special occasions when they can’t think of a better gift.

We were determined to not be adults and got good and drunk. Daddy didn’t notice for a week or so, but I still cringe thinking about how he reacted when he did finally notice.

“Maybe I shouldn’t let ya’ll come here anymore. Maybe the privilege of being in this house is too much.”

He’d decided to start cleaning, something I’d never seen him do before, in order to make a point.

“I bust my ass at work and let you Jacob Matthew come into *my* home with *your* friends and *this* is how you repay *me*? Well I’m sick of this crap. I should just drop you back on that vomit stained barstool where I picked you up.”

Jake had looked at me, humiliated. I could tell he’d been through lectures like that when I wasn’t around. Maybe from Daddy, probably from someone else. I’d turned cold on Daddy from the moment.

I stood over Jake as he half sat, half laid there, drunk on the couch. I suddenly wanted the gold chains off of me.

“What does Daddy do again,” I asked, feeling the heft of the precious metal.

“Abandons me.”

“For a living...”

“Sales.”

I went back to the closet. A ring box held a set of cufflinks set with fat diamonds. A wad of big bills was bound with a rubber band. I counted \$4,000. I thought of everything I could purchase with his sales money. And the money I could get selling his sales jewelry.

I fished into a cinched, white satin bag and pulled out the only thing that was inside: a tiny picture frame with an old photo of a woman who looked just like Daddy—with his round chin and pointy nose. The frame was the only thing in the apartment with any tarnish. I’d never heard him talk about his family before and I didn’t even know where he was from. But this was obviously his mother, or a beloved aunt. Someone long dead, anyway. And that’s what mattered.

I slipped off the bracelets and necklaces and put them back into the velveteen box alongside the money and slipped the silver frame into my pocket. I straightened the boxes, put my makeshift step ladder away, and closed the door.

“You couldn’t tell me what he sells to save your life,” I said, straightening the little frame so it would sit comfortably in my pocket, before forgetting all about it.

“He sells broken HEARTS!”

Jake took off his sunglasses and threw them across the room at glass doors.

“You paid good money for those.”

“Daddy did.”

I opened the liquor cabinet above the stove. I wanted something brown, but it was all clear. An unopened bottle shaped like a dragon was tucked way in the back. I didn’t recognize any of the words except for vodka.

“This one looks nice,” I said.

“Just a wisp of tonic.”

“Of course.”

I made myself one, too. We toasted to Daddy, since he’d bought the vodka. We’d done that a dozen times, and we always giggled. Jake stood for the first time in what seemed like several hours. Across a parking lot and beyond a fenced-in pool, the sun was setting. He retrieved his sunglasses from the floor and sat back on the couch across from me.

“Do you think he loves me?”

“Who?”

“Seriously,” he whined. “Do you think he loves me? What’s the point of all this if he doesn’t?”

I took a drink. Jake did the same, but didn’t need it. There was no correct answer. When he slept off the liquor, he’d say the same thing he’d said for months—that Daddy was good for expensive booze, free rent, and spending money.

And no, Daddy didn’t love him in the way he meant.

“I think you’re drunk,” I said.

“I think you’re an asshole.”

*

I was frying bacon when Jake woke up gasping the way you do when sleep comes suddenly and without warning.

“How long have I been asleep?”

“I dunno,” I said. “Fourteen hours?”

“Oh laawwwd,” he said, like a mock plantation mammy.

“Don’t be racist,” I said.

“You fixin to cook up some griddle cake Ms. Devon.”

“Oh my god. Please don’t. It really isn’t funny. Just because you used to do that with Duane doesn’t mean it’s okay now. Or ever.”

“Sorryyyyyy.”

Bright light poured into the room and glinted off all the glass surfaces and white walls and stainless steel. It is what had awoken me, what brought me out of my boring dream about that same room. But in real life it was brighter. If there were colors in Daddy’s house, they would have been richer.

“I dreamed I was sailing a boat, but the sky was the ocean and the ocean was the sky,” Jake said. He stretched his long, skinny limbs. “So I guess I was peeing into the sky...if you’ll excuse me for a minute.”

Jake went to the bathroom and I could hear him singing to himself as he peed. I put the bacon on a plate to cool and divvied up some toast. I poured us both a tumbler of champagne—the cheap stuff that Daddy now keeps around—and topped it off with a little orange juice.

When Jake came out of the bathroom, he’d stripped off his pants and was in only his fire engine red briefs. He carried a towel under his arm.

“Ooh, bacon!”

He made himself a plate and took his drink. He unrolled the towel on to the square of tile floor in front of the doors to the patio and laid down.

“Come get a tan with me,” he said, patting the floor beside him.

“Does that work?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Let’s find out. It’s still too cold out for the pool. Bring me my sunglasses.”

I gave him the sunglasses. They were just where I’d left them on the table the evening before after I took them off his face as he dozed. I put on my own, crappier pair. We laid there and sipped champagne in the little greenhouse between the door and skylight. Clouds passed quickly, leaving our shoulders and faces dappled here and there. The rush of alcohol before noon left me giddy.

“We should do something today,” I said.

“What do you mean,” Jake said, his eyes closed behind the shades. “We are doing something.”

He was right, we were doing something—the way we did things. Being at Daddy’s was doing something, that’s why we went there. There were movies to see, there were lakes to laze beside, and picnics to cook for. But we never bothered after we had Daddy’s.

“I don’t work today, why don’t we find something else to do? Something different.”

Jake took a drink and shrugged in a show that said he wasn’t budging.

“We’re getting a tan,” he whined.

The tile had slowly heated up from the sun and our bodies. I took off my shirt and felt pasty and shapeless next to Jake.

The drone of a maintenance truck shook the building from out in the parking lot and I listened as men unloaded lawn mowers and trimmers. It was Saturday and spring was settling into summer. The men started their machines and got to cutting and edging and I kept listening.

They played a radio set to a classic rock station out in the rising heat as I sat in the cool central air. I tried to picture their faces as I listened to them cackle at each other's jokes that I couldn't hear. One was in his fifties, I decided. The other was a cousin or a nephew or a stepson. Someone the older guy told dirty jokes to. They both wore t-shirts with the sleeves haphazardly scissored off.

"And dirty blond," I said out loud. "There are definitely two of them. What do you think?"

Jake had no way of knowing what I was talking about, but it didn't matter. He shifted his weight a little from side to side, getting comfortable. He was almost asleep.

I decided to look at them. Jake's feet were pressed against the glass door, so he slowly rolled onto his side as I opened it, but didn't wake up.

The punch of the hot damp air made hit me straight in my bare chest. Everything smelled like mown grass and cut weeds. The maintenance guys were at the far end of the parking lot and I couldn't make them out. I lit a cigarette from a pack that sat on a little glass table and propped myself up on the wooden rail of the patio.

My drink was nearly empty and I was buzzed, each draw on the cigarette felt like I was breathing in the warmth of the sun. I leaned back and put my face to the sky until I was interrupted by a voice from below.

It wasn't the maintenance guys like I expected, it was Daddy. My face dropped conspicuously and I took a draw, this one far less satisfying, from my cigarette.

"Oh, hi Terrence."

"Why don't you have a shirt on?"

He was unloading bags from the trunk of his white Mercedes and wasn't asking me so much as saying.

"Can you send Jake down here to give me a hand?"

He shaded his eyes and looked directly at me for the first time. His top lip curled like an Italian mobster in a movie.

"Jake's asleep."

"What? Still?"

"He was up for a minute."

We could have continued forever, both of us so disinterested in each other, our voices so flat the words had no meaning.

He thought for a minute and looked at his bags. He didn't want to ask, but he did.

"Could you help me?"

Slowly and as pained as I could make it—and without really answering—I finished the last of my cigarette and threw it into the parking lot before making my way downstairs. The entrance to each unit opened onto a dull cement staircase that I plodded down barefoot, doing my best to avoid broken glass. By the time I finally made it to Terrence, he'd gathered everything up and shut the trunk of his car.

"Here." He handed me a handful of clothes on hangers, though he'd left the day before with just a small suitcase.

"What's with all this stuff?"

He didn't look at me, he just started walking. As he spoke, I struggled to stay close enough to listen while avoiding cutting the bottom of my feet.

“Finally closed the deal this weekend,” he said, as if I knew exactly what he was referring to. “I’ll be working from home, paperwork, for the next few weeks.”

In the hallway inside, he dropped his suitcase and the rest of his stuff. He looked around as if to check that everything was in its place, like the inventory of his mind needed only a quick survey to know if something was amiss.

I awkwardly put down the clothes, doing my best to lay them neatly atop the suitcase.

Both our hands empty, we stood there a moment. He hadn’t been at home for more than a few days at a time since I’d met him. And I’d basically lived at his house the entire time.

He looked at me up and down, like I was a new addition to his home. Like he was adding me to the list of goods.

“Jake’s asleep? Were you two up late?”

He waivered closer to me, maybe by millimeters.

“No...not really.”

Without moving any closer, he swiveled his leg around to face me fully.

“No? Then what did you do?”

He sneered a little. I felt totally naked. We were beside the closet I’d pillaged the day before and it was all I could do to keep my eyes from darting toward it.

His sneer became a leer. This time, he did move closer and pressed against me. The little picture frame I’d taken was in my pocket and I was terrified he would feel it against his leg, but I didn’t push him away. He stood there with his mouth leveled at mine, looking at me in a cold way. And we remained there for an odd moment before he let out a chuckle and backed away without mentioning the hard, stolen square in my pocket.

“You two leave me any beer?”

Terrence was in the kitchen and I gathered my shirt, put it on. By now, Jake was curled like a fetus, his face nuzzling a potted palm.

Behind me I heard a can of beer open and bags being unzipped.

I leaned knelt down and whispered into his ear as I struggled to put on my dirty sneakers.

“Hey, Jake. I’m leaving.”

Givens

The town's biggest park was playing host to bluegrass players from all over the Tri-State. Our neighborhood and surrounding valley brimmed with the sad, hopeful der-der-derring of fiddles and mandolins. The music flowed into my and Nate's new apartment, stirring the dustiness of our living room.

Spring had begun and the TV was suddenly less interesting than usual, but still on. Dancing cartoon pigs spun around on mute, advertising a sausage company.

I had been to the festival a million times before, about every year for my whole life, so it was no more appealing than my 90s sitcom reruns. And our living room window looked right out onto it all, so I could enjoy it from a distance.

I yelled for Nate to come out of his room and pretend to be there with me. I'd been working double shifts all week and hadn't seen him leave his room since he'd gotten home from his trip to Chicago.

He'd gone to visit Eli, his first boyfriend, the 20-something who taught him the ways of the gay man. How to say the word *girl* and the virtues of Armani cologne. He taught him how to pluck his eyebrows and how to choose jeans that showed that fit just so. Nate and I were sixteen when he and Eli met at the telemarketing place they'd just opened at the edge of town.

We all worked there, as did Nate's mom, Layna, on her weekends off. She had a decent job with the state but also a bad pretty thing habit and rent to pay in the nice part of town. Layna adored Eli. She even let him move into their house: the 22-year-old man fucking her teenage son. My mom said it was because Layna liked the idea of having a man around,

regardless of the circumstances. I said it was fucking weird and Mom just shrugged the way she always did when people gossiped.

“Are you going to come out?” I yelled again, banging on Nate’s door. “I think I see Amber Hixson from high school out there and she looks like she might be pregnant. Again! What is that? Nine, twelve kids in eight years?”

He still didn’t respond.

“One of the fiddlers just fell over drunk!”

I could hear the clacking of his keyboard.

“Looking at bear porn again?”

Briefly, a silence, and then, “Shut up.”

“Ha! You’re caught! You’ve been jerking off to hairy daddies since parting with ole Eli. Am I right or am I right? Say it, I’m right.”

“No. Go away. No...come in.”

The door was unlocked, I let myself in and Nate was where I expected him to be, at his computer desk. But his normally coiffed blonde hair-the hair he spent hours a day to get perfectly spiked and got cut exactly every eight days-was gone. He’d shaved his head. He was in pajama pants covered in little green ducks and an orange t-shirt and his room smelled like old laundry.

He looked up from the screen and his eyes bore into me.

“I’m in trouble, Clay.”

There was a splotchy redness to Nate’s face and on his stubbly skull. It looked like he’d just gotten up from a night of sleeping cheek-down in the carpet.

“Mange?” I asked, “I think it has gone the way of syphilis and you just have to drink a quart of turpentine to clear it up. That’s what my pawpaw always told me. Any excuse to dip into the turp for that old bastard, though.”

Normally Nate would have stopped me there and lectured me on not appreciating my roots.

I’d grown up on top of a hill and Nate was raised down at the bottom and neither of us liked the altitude we were handed. I was racing down and he was clawing his way up when we met, somehow, halfway. When we grew up and moved in together, we split the difference and got a place in the middle of town near the river.

“I’m serious, Clay. Look.”

He tilted his head down to show me the faint red rash and the course it took from beneath his shirt, up his neck and face and onto his scalp. Then he lifted up his shirt. There were red splotches all over his belly.

“Well, did you use a different detergent? Cologne? Lube? It looks like a rash, Nate.” I laughed at the seriousness of it, like you would after hearing your little sister scream and after running to her rescue you just find a spider. The way you laugh with relief even when you’re still a little scared.

“Look,” he said, pointing toward the computer screen.

It was a web search of HIV symptoms. There were people with similar splotchy rashes, vaguely similar ones, and pictures from the late 80s of men’s backs covered in liver-colored lesions. There were photos of skeletal men swimming in hospital gowns, the AIDS quilt was on

there and crazy Christian sect protests of veterans' funerals. There was also a cat saying something about AIDzz.

"Nate, do you know how many times I've hooked up with a guy and then become convinced that the next bug bite I got was Kaposi's? That I'm having night sweats when really it's just fucking hot outside? Several. A bunch. And those internet diagnosis things does not help. I mean, you tell it you've got a fever and the top three results are ebola, typhoid, and African river blindness. They're twisted, man. I once spent a week convinced I had Legionnaire's disease."

He just shook his bald head.

"And...can I ask about the hair?"

He'd done crazier things with his hair. He'd gotten a few spur of the moment tattoos. I shouldn't have been surprised.

"I just did it, last night." He gestured toward his bathroom. The black and white tiles were covered in his blonde locks.

"You just...buzzed off all your hair, alone, just like that? I figured you and Eli had done it together or something. Like, as a joke. You didn't even let me watch?"

Nate rubbed his forehead, out of irritation or anxiety.

"It isn't funny, Clay," he said. "I just had to see underneath if the rash was there."

I wanted to say it was good he didn't have to worry about shaving his chest, since he'd long had that taken care of, but it wouldn't have been funny. Nate was not the type to exaggerate. I was the hypochondriac, he was the happy-go-lucky one.

I spoke slowly and carefully in a terrible impression of bedside manner.

“Okay. That seems pretty...rash. So, are you going to tell me what is going on? What’s bothering you, I mean.”

Mimicking my funeral director’s cadence, he told me he’d stayed with Eli and they’d had sex in various states of intoxication and with various levels of protection. He told me all the drugs he’d done and about the blank swaths of time the he couldn’t recall because they were never remembered to begin with. How Eli had disappeared for hours at a time, leaving Nate in his apartment alone. I never liked Eli to begin with. I guess those few months when I lost my best friend in high school still had me bitter. And Nate’s rehashing of the week they spent together didn’t make me like Eli any more.

When we were teenagers, Eli was very good looking. He was hot and even I admitted it. But he had a certain glassy-eyed vacant way about him, a distance from the world that always made me uncomfortable.

He made a point to behave like us despite being much older. Nate always told me it was because he wanted us to feel comfortable around him. Of course, he never went so far as to reciprocate Nate’s desperate, lusty sixteen year old love. He lived off Nate and his mom until he got bored and then took off for Charlotte or Atlanta or whatever it was. Some Southern dream town the boys were always running away to.

At the end of their week together, Eli dropped Nate off at the airport—and the whole time Nate described it I could picture Eli’s empty eyes—and instead of saying goodbye, he told Nate he was HIV positive and that Nate should get himself checked out.

I ate my fist.

“Then...he hugged me. And reached over and opened my door...” his words came out measured, not cold, just distant.

“And that was it?” I said, my fist still in my mouth.

“And that was it. I’ve called a couple times, but he hasn’t answered. And a day ago, I get this rash. And I’ve had a fever for three days, and I’m sweating at night. And...I just know, Clay.”

I stood up, pacing and mumbling and cussing. Nate stood, suddenly calm. He put his hands up and told me to calm down. There was nothing to be done, he said. This is on me, he said, chill out. My heart pounded. I wanted to make that freakshow feel pain, feel anything, feel what feeling is like because clearly he didn’t have a clue. But Nate, as scared as I knew he was, had turned calm as quickly as had I leapt to fury.

“We have to do something about this! He can’t get away with this! How are you so calm?”

Nate looked annoyed but his tone was even.

“What am I supposed to do? Go give it back?”

I sat back down. “Fuck, dude.”

Eli was from some holler way outside of town, but I didn’t know anything else about how he was raised. Nonetheless, I could see—almost understand—the clockwork inside his head. The gears put in place by a backwards upbringing. One that likely taught him he’d end up AIDS-riddled if he ever messed with other men. And the tick-tick-ticking of his response when it actually happened. Like he always knew it would happen because that’s just the way things are.

Once when we were in elementary school, I slept over at Nate’s and we were watching late night news with his mom and dad, before his left to start a new, more presentable family.

In Atlanta, I think. There was some story on about transvestite hookers in New York dying of AIDS. They kept showing shots of the hooker with the fakest looking wig and strongest jaw out on the streets as anonymous men pulled up. Nate's dad laughed like it was a comedy stunt and said, "Least now their outsides'll match their insides and they'll hurry up and rot off and go to hell." He never once went to church while I knew him.

I hoped Nate wasn't remembering that. He needed to know this was not a given. When I looked at him, he seemed almost placid. And he seemed to already understand what was just then dawning on me. That the when or why was about the least relevant thing. He needed to think about himself. The now what. But what took me a just few minutes to understand must have taken him an agonizing week alone in his room. And he still didn't know for sure. I wished he'd said something sooner. That I hadn't been at work.

The silence between us was replaced as bluegrass and oxygen flowed in and what was inside our heads flowed out. The sunshine forced me back outside myself. I was not calm, but I wasn't upset in a way I knew how to express.

"So..." Nate said.

"Yeah," I said. "But the test. You still need to get tested even if you think..."

"That I know? Yes," he said, "I was hoping you'd go with me."

"Alright, let's go now," I got up, desperate to help somehow.

"Calm down, I can't get it until next Friday. The clinic only does it once a week." He laughed at himself, bitterly, and rubbed his bald head.

That meant another week of not knowing for sure, a week adrift. Anticipating it seemed so enormous. The next seven days would happen without the intervention of time. They would just have to squeeze themselves into gaps between cannibalizing worry.

And then what? My stomach dropped at the thought of it, of Nate losing control to something so much bigger than us. When I was spurned by some boy, Nate would be there to tell me it wasn't the end of the world and when I was unemployed he was there to help with rent and to stock the fridge. But what was I supposed to do if this all came true? I sure as hell couldn't cure it with a night out or a home cooked meal.

I imagined a doddering old nurse fumbling through a desk drawer, pulling out a manual from 1989 and reading aloud.

Do not allow the patient to leave unattended or without professional counseling. The emotional response to a terminal diagnosis can be severe and suicidal ideation is common. Do not refer to the illness as terminal. Always ensure the patient's anonymity.

Oh! she'd say, putting the pamphlet down when she realized her mistake, *Hey, aren't you little Layna Conner's boy.*

I felt silence start to creep back into the room but Nate stopped it, "I've been stewing in my bedroom and you've been slaving away all week. Let's go outside and mingle with some yokels."

He disappeared into the kitchen and came back with two tumblers of citrus vodka, syrupy and straight out of the liquor cabinet—our freezer. "Cheers."

We both gulped twice and everything went wobbly.

“K,” I said. I handed him my glass. We both had another before we left the apartment. Nate put a baseball hat on to cover his newly bald head. It was too big and made him look silly and young. Like his poolside tan was from little league practice.

Outside, we didn’t walk so much as swim down the sidewalk, floating along on booze and humidity. Boiling black clouds churned along the tops of the mountains, threatening to spill over into the valley. Some days they succeeded and others they didn’t, but you could never count for sure on which would happen, so you went out and tried not to think about it.

The festival was the same as it always was, the sidewalk was lined with food stalls and the hay and goats from the petting zoo made everything smell farmy. Folks sat on coolers under the shade of fat oaks, hiding their cans of Budweiser from security guards who didn’t care anyway.

The garlicky, earthy stench of ramps flipped on a caveman corner of my brain. *Feed me or somebody gets hurt!*

“You wanna get ramps and potatoes,” I begged Nate bouncing on the balls of my feet. He looked at me sideways. They were a novelty, a stinking novelty. But he relented, what did it matter? “Alright,” he laughed.

The Lions Club booth always had the best food, and we got in line even though it was the longest one. The men dished up greasy potatoes and eggs cooked in bacon fat. Their plump wives chirped “Sweet tea or lemonade?” to customers nearing the register. Men in Loony Toons and NASC AR muscle shirts grumbled back with their answers through cheeks full of dip. We were at least ten people back and stood there without saying much. Nate pointed his face

up at the sky. He got that placid look again. The whole of him suspended in the heat and the noise and smells like he could ascend to heaven at any moment.

I wanted to ask him if this was about enjoying the time he had left, but realized how ridiculous that was for a million reasons. He wasn't going to die and who the hell wants to explain something like that? *Umm, excuse me, are you in a moment of bliss right now? Trying to enjoy the week you have left before a part of you is gone forever? Ooh, I bet a funnel cake would taste reeeally sweet!*

We finally made it to the front of the line and both of us got the large plate. Nate got lemonade and I got sweet tea. It was starting to get really hot, so we found an empty spot under an oak tree beside the main event tent where a stage sat empty. The closest people to us sat a few yards away under another tree, just close enough for us to hear most of what they were saying. There were two guys and an obese woman with half black hair and the rest platinum. She looked at us like she smelled something extremely funky. The little girl on her lap looked at us when her mom did but never turned back and just kept staring with her mouth open.

"Slack jawed, god damned, creeker..."

"Oh, stop," Nate said. "They don't know any better."

"But look at that baby. It just keeps staring at us. Let's make out and grind on each other."

Nate looked at the little girl, who started to slobber a little from her bottom lip. "Don't look at them," Nate laughed, "'cuz you know that woman will not hesitate to accuse you of looking at her baby. *Why you lookin' at my child?!*"

I looked away and tried not to laugh too loud at his impression. But I could feel the woman's gaze turn back to us. It was all I could do not to look back. I concentrated on my food, instead.

Ramps are only in season for a handful of weeks in the spring, when they're young and tender, so this was a rare treat. The hot potatoes had begun to warp the Styrofoam plate, so I gulped. The bacon fat took away all texture from the eggs and potatoes.

"So I'm off tomorrow, too," I said. Nate was propped on his elbows looking upwards again. He didn't respond at first. "If you want to do something..." I continued.

"Huh?" he said. He pulled out a flask that I hadn't noticed in his pocket. He took a pull and handed it to me.

"Nothing," I said, looking around before drinking from the flask. The baby was still staring at us I resisted the urge to glare. "Goddamn baby."

Nate laughed and rolled his head down. His eyes soon followed and met mine.

"Chill out on the baby tip..." he said.

"Alright, daddy-o."

"Ugh. Say it, Clay. Or ask it, whatever. Just. Let's put it out there so this beautiful day isn't ruined. You're ruining it."

I stuttered, "Well, okay, I, well..."

"Go ahead," Nate said, rolling his eyes.

"Well, to start with. I don't understand how you're being so collected about this. And calm. I would be spewing venom or crying. Probably both. Breaking things. Are you sure you're okay?"

“Yeah,” Nate said, “I am. And *you* would. I thought those things. But now I’m not thinking those things anymore. I would prefer not to be thinking at all.” He lay back down and lit a cigarette. He handed me the pack and I lit one for myself.

“I’m going to be fine,” Nate said.

“I know,” I said, and I meant it.

We lay there taking in the afternoon sun and emptying the flask and eventually we thought we might go get some more. We ambled back to the apartment, drunk as things stood, but ready for some more. I blasted some house music that we usually only listened to while we got ready to go to the bar. Nate made me another drink in a glass and took the bottle for himself.

“I was reading about it, the hiv, you know,” Nate pronounced it like a word, not an acronym. “And it really isn’t so bad.” He was sitting on the window sill with his ass stuck out the window that faced the park and with his head inside as he spoke, slurring every few words. “So I’ll take a few pills every day. I do that anyway!” He laughed and rocked back and forth where he sat and banged the window from the outside to the beat of the music. “It’ll be just like *Valley of the Dolls* only I get to be Patty Duke *AND* Sharon Tate, ha!”

“Yeah, girl,” I yelled from the kitchen. “You have insurance and shit. You’ll probably have to stop drinking so damn much though,” I laughed.

“I mean. Prolly. But NOT TODAY,” Nate yelled, this time outside the window toward the street and at the few people left in the park.

I started frying some chicken fingers and the sizzling and music drowned out whatever else Nate was saying. I turned down the skillet and danced into the living room. Nate had climbed outside the window and stood on the ledge with the vodka bottle in his hand.

“Not TODAY,” he yelled, toward the park. A car honked in solidarity at whatever he was saying, the certainly didn’t know what. “Woooo, not tonight!”

“Nate, get your drunk ass in here, you’re going to fall.” He turned to me as I leaned out the window and he smiled. His teeth gleamed in the twilight, his eyes on fire from the liquor. He kicked one foot out and then the other and kept shuffling them back and forth off the ledge, daring fate to make him lose his balance and tumble down four stories.

I started to worry that he wasn’t enjoying himself as much as it seemed at first. Nate took another swig from the bottle.

“Get your crazy ass in here and hand me that bottle” I said, suddenly sobered and more motherly than I was comfortable being.

“Fuuuuck you.” He didn’t come in.

But he handed me the bottle and sat down on the ledge with his rear safely stuck inside the living room. Another car honked below. Nate lit up again and he thrust his fist out and shook it in the air, “That’s right mother fuckers! Not tonight!”

12 Steps to Becoming the Whole You: A Motivational Video with Skeet McPheckererson

Hello, everyone. I'm Skeet McPheckererson and, yes, folks (hold up photo) this was me just three short years ago. I was a three-pack-a-day smoker. I ate fast food for every single meal. And the most exercise I ever got was a twenty-foot walk to the fridge to fetch my thirteenth or fourteenth beer of the night, if you know what I mean (smile and wink).

I know what you're saying to yourselves – "How could this man, this walking emblem of health and radiant vitality, possibly be that ugly waste of flesh in the picture?"

Well, I'll tell you. I simply changed, my friends. I woke up one morning wallowing in empty beer cans and my own self pity – just like you probably did – and I said to myself, "God! Not again." I heaved myself up to shower and shave. I dressed in my Wednesday brown suit and prepared to drive my early model Pinto to work at the City of Detroit Department of Red Tape and Required Documentation (chuckle and nod head slightly) when I yelled – and boy did I truly yell, people – *ENOUGH!*

I did not go to work that day. Nor did I ever return. I sat down and really got to thinking. I thought long and hard about what I had to do to get out of that wretched rut. Two weeks later I emerged from my cocoon with an itemized list of precise steps I would take to get my life in order: twelve easy steps to get back on track. These are things even you...no...*especially you* (point to camera, make concerted expression) can take to make yourself what I like to call the "whole person." I mean, I did it. Just look at me! And *you* can too:

Step 1: Wake Up and Go! People, the first thing I'm telling you to do is the first thing you do each day but probably aren't doing properly. Wake up, no, *jump up* each morning and

leap into that day. No more morning grumpiness or three cups of cost-cutter coffee. Get up and go – go for a jog, do some gardening, just go out there and take an active approach to your day. Wake up and go, folks, it's that easy. Start tomorrow!

Step 2: Go Healthy. When you wake up tomorrow, folks, I want you to bypass the Krispy Kreme that's on the way to your job with the state or wherever it is you spend your days. Do you know how much saturated fat is in a single donut? I thought you didn't. Well, I'm here to tell you it is a lot! Instead, have a healthy salad of baby greens for breakfast. Organic ones. In fact, why not make that your project from step one. Start an organic baby green garden in your back yard. If you live in a colder climate, why not just build a greenhouse? Growing your own vegetables at home is a fun and easy way to save money and frequent trips to the supermarket. It's absurd not to, really.

Step 3: Leave the Car at Home. Instead of driving to work, why not get those buns pumping by walking to the factory, or what have you? Or, if walking is out of the question – but is it *ever*, really? – just take a walk to one of the many city bus stops that are sure to be conveniently close by. Or, better yet, take a bike! Leaving the car at home saves you money, gets you active and out there, and cuts down on all those toxic “emissions” that are in the news so much these days. Do you realize what, exactly, all these fumes are doing to our bodies and the environment? Well, I don't know either, but boy am I afraid to find out!

Step 4: Stop Stressing Recent scientific studies have shown that stress is a leading cause of obesity, lowered immunity, and even baldness. “Hey,” you say, “I'm not bald.” Well, not yet, you aren't. But keep up all that needless worrying and you will be. Shed the stress, people. Take the proverbial “chill pill” (raise fingers, mimic quote marks). Is it really all that

bad? Will the world really end if you don't get those ITP reports in by Friday? No, it sure won't. But keep worrying about them and your well-being is sure to end. If you are feeling overwhelmed, just stop for a minute. Take some deep breathes. Have a cup of green tea with echinacea. Take the rest of the day off and go home to weed that organic garden you've started. Anything to take your mind off the rat race. Remember, this is about you, you, you. Take a vacation once in a while. I go to Aruba at least three times a year and Lord knows, it helps me a bundle!

Step 5: Think WHOLE-istic Forget that general practitioner you run to every time you get a runny nose or can't seem to remember if that mole was there before or not. Modern medicine isn't as modern as you might want to believe. In fact, I wouldn't say it's modern at all. Any barbarian can tell you that a sharp piece of metal can slice a chunk of your body away. Jeez, Louise, just ask Atilla the Hun (raise haunches, chortle indignantly). I'm here to tell you that your so-called medical doctor is an overpaid hack. And germ theory...a red herring. Call Secretary Sue, or whatever her name happens to be, and tell her to trash your file folder – tell her to burn it, for all you care – Dr. Ahasahemapeddalon won't be seeing anymore of you! Instead, why not switch to a holistic practitioner? These feeling, thinking, people of wellness exist to help you find the real underlying problem. They may suggest a series of herbal colonics for your upper back problem. Or urge you to take up morning sun salutations. And take it from me, my live-in Shiatsu masseuse wants nothing more than to keep me healthy (wink).

Step 6: Stop Your Bad Habits It's simple, really. Just stop. I did it and so can you. Stop smoking, stop drinking so much, stop eating bad foods. Go into your cupboard and

throw away all your unhealthy snacks. Never pick up another cigarette for as long as you live. I don't know if anyone has ever told you this, friends, but they don't call them cancer sticks for nothing. It is easy if you just use that mind of yours and forget what the body begs for. Say to yourself "I want to feel good again." You'll never want another cream puff or puff of smoke again (close eyes, shake head, smile warmly)!

As for the alcohol, no one ever said a glass or two of wine was that bad. Or a couple of cold ones, for that matter. However, that poison you get from the store never did anyone a lick of good. Do what I did - make your own beer and wine. Plant some grapevines and hops alongside your endive and organic Swiss chard. Making wine and beer at home is another great way to save money and busy yourself while keeping the body healthy and free of toxins.

Step 7: Cleanse the House. Look around you, folks. Does your house have wall-to-wall carpet. Can't you just feel all the years of shed skin cells teeming within it? Can you hear the walls and floorboards creaking at night? Your mom probably once assured you as a child that it was just the house "settling." Now let me tell you what it really is...your house is moaning under the weight of all that pure filth. Rip up all those disgusting synthetic carpets and replace them with something nature gave us, like mahogany or Italian marble. Tear down that fake wood paneling and install some hip, natural reed work. Not only will it give your home a trendy safari feel, it will rid your abode of disease causing, chemical-based, man-made materials.

Step 8: Now Cleanse the Home. Does your clandestine lifestyle feel like one big padded room getting smaller and smaller every single day? Your house is built with brick and mortar and wood, while your home is built on feeling and emotion. To be the whole you, you

must also give your personal world a good, thorough scrubbing. Going through the motions for the sake of the kids sounds like a good idea, but when are you going to get to live for you? When do you get your “me” time? If your marriage is stale and you wake up crushed under the weight of the loathing you hold deep down for your spouse every single day...when can you be a whole you? It pains me to say it, folks, but a divorce may be in order. Keep your eye on the prize people, never let yourself be boxed in (draw box in air with fingers), and just think of all that extra closet space you’ll have!

Step 9: Go Natural. This talk of all things “man-made” brings me to another important point. All these solvents and gadgets, shampoos and conditioners, they all make you feel squeaky clean on the outside, but what are they doing to the inside? Your computer, your television, your waffle iron, all these things may seem like creature comforts that keep you connected with the world. But in the end they really just disconnect you from what’s truly important...and that’s you. Everyday day of your life, radio signals, neutron beams, and all sorts of harmful radiations stream through your body and disrupt its natural balance. After you’ve finished with this video, I want you to throw away your TV. I want you to unplug all your kitchen appliances and chuck them all. No more refrigerator, no more quesadilla maker, no more Cuisinart. You need none of it.

Hey, and while you’re at it, place your water heater for sale in one of those ad bulletins all the yokels are always browsing through because you won’t be needing it anymore, either. From now on, you’ll be taking your baths in pure, untreated, unheated spring water. Chances are good there is an aquifer under or around your home. Simply take the

simple steps toward tapping into this water and you'll be well on your way to having your own...*well!* (Laugh here)

But we don't want to spoil that bath with store-bought soaps. Do want I do and mill your own! It's just another example of all the easy steps you can take to live a more balanced, holistic lifestyle. And don't forget shampoo. Pantene Pro-nothing! You can make your own that is far better and more cost effective. Easy recipes for homemade shampoo are everywhere, it's up to you to find them.

Step 10: Make a "Me Space" Everyone needs a quiet place to go and forget about the world at large for a while, I know I do. That's why you need to find a "me space." This is a tranquil arena for your personal thoughts and meditations. A place where the rest of the world vanishes and your tensions slip away. Going out into nature is best for this. Try doing what I did and build a cabin far enough away from the city as to restrict anybody – and I do mean anybody – from intruding upon your "me time." The more "me time" you spend in your "me space" the better you will begin to feel. You'll begin to forget all the inhibitions that hinder you in our restrictive modern society. You never needed their conventions, anyway. If you're anything like I am you'll be spending less and less time at your home in town and more in the quiet confines of your "me space" oasis.

Step 11: You, You, You! Now you can truly be the whole you. You've shed all the trappings of the times. You have arisen as the proverbial Phoenix from the ashes of an unhealthy, unloving, and pretty much un-you world. Doesn't it feel nice to know that you are finally and forever at one with yourself? Doesn't it feel good, this never having to comply with the petty whims of others. Does it not fill you with joy to know that you never have to blow

your hair again, or shave, or gob yourself up with noxious perfumes just to smell and look like everyone else? You are free now. Celebrate.

In closing, you must know that others may become jealous of your newfound freedoms. They may look at you and be driven mad with jealousy over the wonderful world you have built for yourself. They will see how happy you are and they will, on more occasions than you want to let yourself believe, want to destroy you for it. But, friends, you must let yourself believe it because it is the God's honest truth. You are a majestic bird of paradise and man will want to shoot you down and make a headdress from your gorgeous feathers. You cannot let this happen. You must be willing and ready to shoot them down first.

Step 12: Be Cautious Buy a firearm.

Tamiami

Small brown lizards scattered and disappeared into a flowerbed when James put down his duffel bag. He'd pounded on the front door already and had walked around the building to try the door of a small lanai in back.

"Hello!? Danny? Dammit!"

A retiree in white tennis gear watched James for a moment, then climbed into her car. Her watery eyes bore into him as she inched out of the parking lot. He smiled and waved. The flimsy aluminum doorframe was locked in place by a tiny latch that would have easily given way if James decided to pull hard enough. On the other side of the glass door was a plastic table and chairs, a swimming pool noodle, and a few fake looking potted plants. Beyond them was a door into the house.

James walked along the porch screens to a window. More lizards skittered away as he peeked inside. It was dark, but the intense Florida sun revealed a recliner filled by his friend Danny. He was asleep and his jaw hung loose. One of his hands held a remote to a TV James couldn't see. He pounded on the window.

"Danny! Wake up!" James pounded the window. The loose pane rattled and paint bits covered a palm frond below it. "DANNY...WAKE...UP!"

Danny sat halfway up without opening his eyes. He pointed the remote and clicked several times, then sank back into the recliner.

"Jesus Christ."

James leaned against the window and wrestled a cigarette out of his jeans pocket. It was only noon, but he was exhausted. There were no direct flights from his airport, so he first drove

four hours north through bend after bend in West Virginia highway to Pittsburgh. From there, he flew back south to Tampa. Then he drove a rental car an hour and a half down a ten lane highway past endless developments with identical one-story homes and empty swimming pools. He passed grocery stores he'd never heard of in gleaming shopping plazas. Burnt out shacks and cinderblock produce stands still blighted the highway here and there as it charged its way through palmetto jungle. Danny's complex existed between worlds. Not as old as the shacks or as new as the highway, it was 1980s chic with crumbling pink stucco walls and steeply pitched roofs. In the center was a parking lot surrounding a fenced pool. But everything, old or new, was bleached to insignificance in the afternoon sun.

James took a credit card from his wallet and turned it over in his hand. He looked around and saw no one. With a firm shove he popped the simple lock on the lanai and stood in the shade of the enclosed porch. It smelled of old mildew and disuse. He had another door between him and Danny's apartment.

It was locked.

"Fuck Danny! I told you when I was going to be here!" He banged and kicked the back door. Then heard a shuffling. Danny emerged from the gloom of the adjoining room and looked at him through the door's window. One of his eyes remained half shut as he let his friend inside.

"You don't have to yell," Danny croaked through half his mouth.

"Are you serious?"

"Bout what?" Danny dug through the refrigerator, pulling out some dubious Chinese takeout. "Want some?"

“Gross.”

“Nice to see you too,” Danny said through limp, brown broccoli.

“Sorry,” James said. “Outside, I was locked out, don’t know the place. There was an old lady.”

“Well. You’re inside now,” Danny said, still half asleep, chewing, “let the good times roll.” He shuffled back into the living room and James followed. The ceiling soared into a peak that terminated 16 feet above them. An old fan, pressed out of plywood to look like a palm tree, hung creaking and swaying as it turned. Danny sat back in his recliner and stirred up a sedentary smell. Without looking, he reached beside him to fish through a basket full of mail and ketchup packets, pennies and nail clippers. Finally he felt what he was looking for.

“Haven’t changed a bit, huh?” James said awkwardly as Danny took out a pea sized pill and smashed it inside a folded twenty, scraping the dust together onto a dinner plate. He rolled the twenty up and put the dust up his nose. The two of them had done this for years after high school, living together and throwing parties, drinking beer all day. When Danny moved, those days ended. James found an apartment of his own and people were less interested in visiting a guy who lived alone. James hated it at first and spent his evenings at the bar down the road for months, but he eventually got used to it, got a nine-to-five. Things that once made his skin crawl he began to find himself gravitating toward: nights at home, eating in, serious girlfriends. When every night stopped being about partying, the gulf between five o’clock and midnight became terrifying and so he filled it with ordinary things. But what was he supposed to do when that life failed him, too?

“Hell no,” he smiled, scraping another line together, and gestured to James with the rolled up bill.

James didn’t move. He hadn’t done that for a long time. At home, he’d learn to avoid his old friends who’d gotten themselves hooked on painkillers, and there were a lot of them. When he booked his ticket to Florida, he’d assumed Danny was probably still a partier—he knew he worked at a bar, that he never answered the phone until past noon—but he hadn’t thought about what he was partying with. Seeing him snorting pills brought James back, but not in a good way.

“Whatever. Yes. Give it to me.” He took the bill and snorted. A deep pain went up his nostril, into his face, and out one ear. “What is it?” He looked disgusted, his teeth clenched.

“Oxy. And you’re welcome.”

Danny slid the plate under his recliner. He folded his hands across his belly and closed his eyes. James flattened his back onto the cold tile floor and stared into a skylight. They were silent for a while, both of them swirling in and out of painkiller fog. A cloud passed over the sun and the light in the room changed. Danny’s chin rolled down to his chest and his eyes popped open, wide and glazed.

“So how’s it going? What brings you to the sunshine state?” he asked, looking in the vicinity of James, though not quite at him. After two years, James suddenly took Danny up on a longstanding invitation to visit. He didn’t tell Danny it was because a girl dumped him and he felt empty. He didn’t tell him that he didn’t care if it was Florida he went to or Siberia, so long as it wasn’t West Virginia.

“Get out of the cold,” James lied. “You know.” His head was full of opiates and his insides were full of helium. “Things are boring at home,” he burped. “But you left so you know. Just wanted a change. Working a lot.” He hated bullshitting and he hated being that guy who turns to mush because of a girl. He couldn’t say why he really needed to get away, he couldn’t lie without feeling like an asshole.

Danny split his attention between James and a fitness machine infomercial.

“What are you doing these days, again? I forget, man.”

“Working for the state.”

“Well,” Danny said, “you’re still welcome to come here. I can get you a job at the bar. You just pour Bud Lights all night for old dudes who tip you a quarter. But it’s easy and there are some pretty cool people who come in and outta there.”

James wondered what made Danny think he’d want to move to Florida. Did he just want some company or was James coming off like he wanted pick up and move. He imagined himself there, living in warm weather, sitting by Danny’s pool listening to classic rock stations and drinking beers. At home it was probably cloudy like most winter days. And the people moody, like the weather. He wondered if moving to Florida would change him, to match the stillness and the sunshine. He wondered if Danny seemed any different. He thought about it and decided he hadn’t.

He took a cigarette from his pocket. But Danny, cutting himself out another line, stopped him.

“Can you not, dude? I’m trying to quit.”

“Uh, okay,” James said. The two of them used to sneak out to the high school ball field to smoke cigarettes in the dugout. Both their parents smoked, and they shared whatever they could poach: Pall Malls, Marlboros, the occasional Virginia Slim.

“Remember when we’d smoke your mom’s Virginia Slims,” James said.

“Yeah, dude,” Danny said, still watching the infomercial. “Vagina Slimes!”

“Yeah.”

They both smiled toward the television, nodding.

A pause.

“Well, I’m going to go out for a smoke,” James said.

The patio chairs were covered in sooty dirt that only smeared when James tried to wipe it off. He flipped over a bucket and sat on it instead. He lit his cigarette, the last in the pack, and stared out into the parking lot. Sunshine blurred the edges of everything. He heard cars, in the distance, and a lawnmower. James felt lulled by the hum of insects in the grass, by the push and pull of the oxy. He also felt sick. The door to the house opened and Danny came out. His white tee shirt looked dirtier in the light, his pale skin waxy. He was pulled his long, blondish hair into a samurai bun.

“Hey dude, can I bum a smoke?”

James reached for the pack, “Yeah, uuh,” before realizing it was empty. “You can share this one, though.”

“Naw, it’s cool,” Danny said. “I need to go over to my buddy Fred’s house in a second. I’ll bum one off him.”

Unsure if he was supposed to accompany Danny, James just sat on the bucket as his friend slipped on a pair of sneakers. Danny looked up and chuckled. "You are, like, the only person wearing jeans." James looked down at himself then at Danny, who wore khaki cargo shorts to just past his knees.

"Oh, I'll, put something else on..."

"No, no, dude I'm just fucking with you, let's go. Should we take my car or your rental? Let's take my car, I know where I'm going."

In the old hatchback Danny'd had since they were teenagers, the pair left the condoplex. They pulled onto the highway. Far ahead of them, James could make out a truck hauling oranges. Otherwise they seemed to have five lanes to themselves. Danny was going well below the speed limit. He was hunched over the steering wheel and squinting out onto the road.

"You alright, there, Danny?"

"Yeah, good. Why? Am I scaring you?" He laughed and cocked an eye at James.

James didn't say anything else. As they drove, the homes along the highway began to get bigger, the signs to their developments more ornate. They came upon one called Pelican Grove and Danny made an abrupt turn, winding up on the wrong side of the road. A wine colored Cadillac screeched to a halt, the old man behind the wheel honking and scowling at them. "Sorry old man," Danny laughed. James gripped the door. The security guard motioned Danny to drive up to his hut. He asked for ID, where they were heading, then shuffled through some papers. He let them through the gate. They drove around a bend, and arrived in front of a pinkish brown brick house. There was no car in the driveway, only a closed garage door. There

were no cars in any of the driveways, James realized. The homes were all very tidy, nothing hindered the continuity of their lawns and gardens. As they got out of the car, a little gray rabbit bolted from a bush.

“The fuck?” James spurted.

“They’re everywhere,” Danny said. Then, “What up playa?”

“What?” James said, one eye still on the rabbit, before realizing Danny was talking to someone else. He looked toward the side of the house and saw a short teenager—he couldn’t have been more than 19—watering his lawn. He wore a powder blue polo shirt and had his free hand in the pocket of his seersucker shorts. He greeted Danny with an upward nod and a smirk.

“Yeah buddy,” he said and began to gather the hose and wind it onto a wheel mounted to the house. “What’s happenin?”

Danny and the boy, James assumed it was Fred, grabbed each other’s hands and bumped shoulders. They turned to walk inside. “This is my old buddy from back home, James. James this is Fred.” The two shook hands as Fred bobbed his head and smiled warmly. His head continued to bob as he led James and Danny into his house. They stepped out of the consuming sun and into a dim living room. It smelled like drywall and new carpet. Though it appeared to have two from outside, the house was a single, sprawling floor.

“Can you take your shoes off at the door, please, fellas?” Fred said, gesturing toward a large basket filled with sneakers.

James and Danny obliged.

“Offer you a cocktail, gents?”

Fred lifted a cabinet that hung above the kitchen and separated it from the living room. Inside were a dozen bottles of liquor. James recognized one of the bottles as an expensive scotch he'd gotten for Christmas that year. Fred smiled, his cheeks gathered into fat rosy balls.

"Uh." James said.

"I'll just take a beer," Danny said.

"Okay." He turned to James. "And for you?"

"Scotch?"

"Scotch man! Okay! Scotch neat coming up."

As Fred busied himself with their drinks, James looked at Danny, who was flipping through an issue of Maxim. "What are we doing here?"

"Hm? Oh, uh, Fred has something for me."

"This kid is your drug dealer?"

"He's not a kid, he's twenty. And yes, I suppose. God, dude, why so angry? Relax, you're on vacay."

"Are his parents home? I'm just...confused."

Fred looked at the two of them and smiled as he placed their drinks on a tray.

"No, this is his own house. Just chill, will you? Try to have a good time."

Fred brought the drinks over and handed them off. His own drink was clear and fizzy. He and Danny traded pleasantries. Fred's parents were good, their business picking back up, his work was good. Danny offered some anecdotes from his own job.

"What about you, James?"

"Good, things are good," James said.

"I meant, what do you do?" Fred said politely.

"Oh, I'm a paralegal," James said, "for the state."

"Oh, okay," Fred said, his cheeks balled up in a smile of recognition. Paralegal. The state.

"So, Fred, can we?" Danny motioned toward another room. The two excused themselves to the far end of a hallway and left James alone. He downed his scotch and poured himself another. He looked around. The house seemed brand new. New appliances, shiny floors. There were no photographs anywhere and the taupe walls were bare, save for a few novelty items. A clock with no numbers read *Party Time*.

A glass door off the kitchen revealed a screened-in pool filled with inflatables. Beyond the pool were the backs of other houses, all with the same pools and porches, all sat empty. A pack of Parliament Lights was on the coffee table. James fished one out and then another one, which he stuck behind his ear. He slid the door open and stepped out onto the cement in his socks. The heat was a reassuring alternative to the artificial chill inside Fred's house. He lit his cigarette. James could see a rabbit sitting motionless a few feet from the porch door, nestled in the tall, dense grass. Perhaps it was the same rabbit from before. Then

In his periphery, there was movement. Like a mud puddle had briefly come to life outside the patio. The rabbit was suddenly half gone, half inside the puddle.

"Shit...." His word resonated like a tuning fork. James wobbled backwards and smacked into the door. He scrambled for the handle. The alligator finished off the rabbit as James made it inside the house.

"You guys," he said, softly at first. He watched the alligator turn and walk toward the screen.

“You guys, there’s a gator outside,” he said a little louder this time, still staring at the thing as it eked closer to the patio.

Then it simply walked through a loose corner in the screen and was on the patio. It just as quickly slipped into the pool. But, missing the water, it landed on an oversize raft and reclined there for a while, like it should have been wearing sunglasses. It submerged itself and sank to the bottom. James used his phone to snap a picture.

“It’s in the pool now.”

James heard footsteps coming up the hallway. Danny and Fred were back from their transaction, Danny looking as wan as Fred looked pert.

“What’s going on,” Fred asked.

“There’s an alligator in your pool,” James said matter-of-factly.

“I don’t see an alligator,” Danny said.

“That’s because it’s under water,” James said. “Under the rafts.”

Fred slid the door open and cautiously walked to the edge of the pool. Danny looked over and James shrugged. He was finished with his second scotch and starting to feel the effects gathering behind his eyes and down his back. They watched from behind glass as Fred peered down into the pool. He stood motionless, then went back inside.

“I’ll call my uncle,” Fred said. “He’s in pest control. He takes care of all my parents’ properties. He’ll take care of this.”

Fred left the room. Danny and James stood there, still gazing out into the pool. The alligator was out of sight, so all they saw were the floats bouncing off each other in the breeze.

James went back to the liquor cabinet and poured himself another scotch. He asked Danny if he wanted another beer.

“Sure, dude. Thanks.”

James brought it to him. “You wanna go look at it?”

Danny smiled. He followed James onto the patio. The alligator sat at the bottom of the pool. It looked perfectly content to there, still and wide-eyed like a corpse. From above, it looked huge, magnified well past its five or six feet by the water. “How big you think it is,” Danny wondered aloud.

“Twelve feet if it’s an inch,” James laughed.

“Let’s try to feed it something.”

In the kitchen, Danny dug through the freezer looking for meat and James found some string in a drawer. They put their efforts together: a frozen chicken leg on a string. They were chucking their invention into the pool just as Fred returned.

“What the fuck is this?” Pissiness replaced the self-assuredness in his voice. “Are you two nuts?”

“What?”

“You don’t fuck with an alligator. Professionally trained people fuck with alligators. The crocodile hunter fucks with alligators. You don’t fuck with alligators.”

James held the end of the string and was bobbing it up and down on the floor of the pool in front of the alligator, which remained motionless.

“Stop teasing it! I am liable if you’re hurt on this property. Please stop fucking with the alligator.”

James continued bouncing the drumstick up and down on the pool floor. He moved around the pool, adjusting his position in relation to the gator as he moved the bait. Every time he pulled it too far he had to move again to place the chicken closer to the gator.

“Here gator, gator.”

“James, get the chicken by his snout. Let him smell it. Can they smell things underwater?”

“Please, my uncle said just to stay inside and he’d be here after he’s done with the job he’s on now. He’ll take care of this. He’s a professional,” Fred whined.

James finally got the alligator to snatch, but he moved the chicken too fast and lost its attention. He moved around the pool and tried again. But with the gator didn’t pay attention to the chicken when it was on that side, so James moved back and this time got the beast’s attention. When he moved the drumstick, the gator moved. James chuckled with each tug. He pulled the string little more toward the shallow end, then even more. He slowly edged it back until the bait was against the steps that led out of the pool, with the gator just behind it. He yanked it up a step.

“Shit, stop!” Fred panicked and ran to grab the string. Danny held him back.

“Let’s see if he can do it,” Danny said, holding Fred by the shoulders.

James yanked it up another step. He had to keep walking backwards and was nearly at the screen door. He moved it another step up by winding it around his hand, then with a final pull the chicken and alligator were out of the water. The gator lunged. James dropped the string and went out the back door. Danny yelped and went into the house with Fred right behind him. But Danny slammed the door shut too quickly and Fred was left out side.

“Fuck,” he screamed and turned, expecting to see the thing coming at him. But it only slithered, its belly full, back into the water.

“You fucks,” Fred yelled, first at James through the screen, then at the glass. Danny stood in the house smiling as James tried to control his laughter at the kid. “Get out. Now. You are no longer welcome here.”

“Get out.” Fred opened the door and yelled at Danny.

“Alright, dude, chill the fuck out,” Danny said. Then, under his breath, “little fucker.”

Fred went back into the house and locked the door. He looked at them through the glass, the balls of his rosy cheeks had dropped into jowls. Get out, he mouthed. Danny and James walked around the house and got into the car.

“A gator, man, can you even believe that?” James said.

“I know, dude, what?”

They drove home, mostly in silence, laughing now and then to themselves. The light had begun to dwindle into a brilliant pink and the dimness gave the world back its definition. There were still few other cars on the road with them, only street lights every few feet and the backs of houses on either side. James was starting to sober up, his neck muscles ached. There were lights on at the pool as they pulled up to Danny’s complex, colored lights strung up between tiki torches. A dozen people—some standing, some dancing, others reclining—surrounded the pool with drinks in hand. A boom box played Motown.

“What’s all that,” James asked as they got out of the car.

“Old people party,” Danny said. “They do it every week. Sometimes they get rowdy, too, man.”

Inside, Danny sifted through the fridge and found some more leftovers while James let the length of his body drop into the couch. He hadn't eaten in hours, but his need for rest trumped his need for food. Then he remembered something and took his phone from his pocket. He typed a message and hit send.

Danny returned to his recliner and turned on the television. He fished a baggie out of his pocket and smashed a pill out onto the dinner plate, doled a line out and snorted it. "Dude, do you want one," he asked James, his face scrunched into a point. "Dude." James pretended to be asleep.

My Mother, the Somnambulist

The cops have been called to my family's house only twice.

I say *only* because we're screamers, not talk-it-outers and it's amazing those thin walls never just went kaput, blown out like some cartoon when we got into the groove of one of our screaming matches: me against Tina, Tina against Donald. Donald screaming at mom, more like at a child than his own wife, and mom just sitting there with her voodoo eyes.

And because sometimes I could hear the screaming from way down the block on my way home, and the neighbors would look up at me from watering their lawns or walking their dogs and then just as quickly look back down.

What's funny is, both times they'd called the cops were after silences – once right before Tina finally ran off for good and once when Donald heard me whispering on the phone to another boy and broke my nose. Both times, there was our usual noise followed by nothing. Hollering followed by smashing followed by nothing.

The first time, Tina's time, came after she told Donald to fuck himself. She was sixteen and brazen, and backed up by her boyfriend's invitation to come live with his family. She was late coming home and when Donald asked her where the fuck she'd been, she turned to him and said, "Jamie's" and kept on walking. "Dumb little bitch," he called her for the millionth time. And for the first time, wild-eyed and manic, Tina stopped. She stopped and she said "Go fuck yourself, you piece of shit," emphasizing every single syllable like it was the most important of them all.

Donald ran up the stairs and grabbed her by the hair, all the while screaming more obscene things than even I was used to hearing. And Tina screamed and kicked. And I yelled,

begging for him to stop. And after he smashed Tina's head into the drywall, he did stop. Everything stopped, just for a moment, and we all floated there in adrenaline confusion, wobbly.

"Get your fucking kid," Don yelled at Mom, who stood silently at the end of the hall, and went back downstairs to his throne on the couch. Mom edged closer to Tina, almost like she was afraid of her. Tina brushed herself off and stood up with chalky wall dust in her wild brown hair. She looked at Mom, her face a bloated red contrast to Mom's deflated one. She looked deep into Mom's drowsy eyes, past them and into her skull.

"I'm leaving, Mom. I'm done."

"I think I've got some boxes if you need them."

Halfway through packing up the few armloads of junk a teenage girl keeps, the doorbell rang and it was the cops. They saw Tina packing and Donald just sitting there not giving a shit and after a lot of "What's the story here" and "Everything okay, ma'ams" they just took off. None of us gave them much of anything to pursue. Tina was just packing silently with her cat in one of her arms and when they'd asked me what was going on I just told them I'd been sleeping. And Mom. She may as well have been sleeping because when she told those officers everything was fine anyone would have thought she hadn't experienced a bit of it, she was that believable. She helped Tina pack like it was for summer sleep-away camp.

For a while after that, it was like the whole house had taken a big breath in and held it there, all of us suspended and waiting for it to exhale. It was weeks before we saw Tina again, and by then she'd dropped out of school and was working at the snack bar at a county pool. We took her to the mall, I guess because Mom felt bad and wanted her to have some nice new

things. She wouldn't invite us into Jamie's parents' place when we dropped her off because she said they were too different and we wouldn't understand and Mom just nodded and brushed back her hair like she always did.

"I think she's embarrassed," Mom said during our drive home. It wasn't the nicest house, but it didn't look that bad to me.

"Yeah," I said.

Without Tina around, things were a little quieter since she wasn't there for Donald to yell at and since he and Mom had practically stopped speaking. I figured his attention was going to turn to me eventually, though.

The second time the cops came, I was about the same age as Tina was when they'd last paid a visit. In the time between, Donald and I had our spats, usually when he was drunk or had lost money at the dog track. Or both. I tried to keep to myself as much as possible. When I was out at friends' I would call ahead before coming home just to see if he'd answer. If he did, I would hang up. If Mom answered, I'd ask, "Is *he* home?" because that's all we ever called Donald, was *he*. I just wanted to know where I stood, walking in the door, because being ready for one of his moods took preparation. I walked more rigidly and manly and if I was stoned I'd put in Visine even though it was a buzz kill. But when Donald wanted to hit something, he always found it. And by it I mean me and Mom.

One of those nights, I was on the phone with a boy. My first experiment I guess. We'd met at school and even though we didn't get along that well, sometimes you just have to get first things over with. I was quiet as I could be on the phone as we decided when to meet that weekend, both of us giddy and sickened at the prospect. Then I heard Donald come in from the

garage screaming “fucking faggot” and slamming doors and feet and wall, but I wasn’t all that scared. He tended to call me that no matter what his mood, and yell it at other people, like on the TV and in the newspaper. And at nothing in particular when he was angry. But then my door flew open and, veins bulging and red in the face and red underneath his premature gray hair, Donald jumped at me and started punching me in the head as I hurried to hang up the phone.

Face down in my bed, most of the blows weren’t so bad. I just tried to keep my face covered. I let out muffled pleas and *ughs* and he screamed “what faggot, what was that, what do you want to tell me?” and hit me some more. Then he got tired of it and, lifting my face up to the wall, he smashed my nose. I heard a crack and blood started gushing.

That was the difference that time. He’d never broken anything before and the silence that followed the thud – with me slouched against the wall, dizzied, and him standing there as all his rage drained away and puddled at his feet – must have been the suspicious part that alerted the neighbors.

I hadn’t fought back that time, or ever. Mom always told me it was better to let it pass, just like she said it was better just to deal with his occasional violent moments than to be homeless or too broke to eat.

“Next time you wanna talk to your little boyfriend, you might wanna use a fucking pay phone. Because it sure as fuck won’t be in my house.”

He spit on the ground like a teenage hoodlum. Like the boy redneck he never quite grew out of being and walked out of my room, brushing past Mom, who by that point was at my door in her bathrobe.

“Couple of worthless freaks, you got,” Donald said from the living room. He said it like wisdom, like it was learned fact.

“I think he overheard you on the garage phone,” Mom whispered.

I had a t-shirt up to my nose, sopping the blood.

“I think so too,” I said, not looking at her.

Then the cops showed up, two of them. One questioned Donald and he did his good ole boy routine, told the cop his wife’s faggot kid came at him and he defended himself. The other one asked me my story and I said we just got into an argument and it became violent.

“Who started it,” the cop asked me.

“I think, I don’t know...”

“Who started it,” he asked again.

I looked at the officer. He had blue eyes and a weathered face, a countenance you couldn’t read. I couldn’t tell what he wanted to hear me say, which one of us *he* thought was to blame even as I stood there with a bloody rag on my face. He started to look impatient. I looked toward Mom. She was in a corner with her arms crossed over her chest and motionless. I felt like we were each on a TV screen, one watching the other, able to reach out and help.

“It just. I don’t think anyone started it. It just happened.”

The cop, R. Hickman according to his nametag, rolled his eyes and his hands dropped from his hips.

“Look at me,” the cop said, and when I wouldn’t, he grabbed my chin and pushed it up to shine a light on my bloodied nose. Then he shined it in my teary, red eyes.

“How old are you?” he asked.

“Sixteen,” I said.

His nostrils flared a little and he let my chin drop. Turning for a moment, then turning back, he asked me if I wanted to press charges. I hesitated less this time, looking at the floor for just a moment before looking up and slowly shaking my no.

After the cops left, Donald sped off in his truck and Mom and I were left alone. I sat on the edge of my bed trying not to pass out from the sickening pain in my face. Mom stood at my door, looking at me, her eyes puffy with tears that refused to come.

“I think we need to get you to the emergency room,” she said, holding out her arm for me to take.

I didn’t respond or take her arm. I just put on my shoes and followed her out to the car.

The wait wasn’t too long at the hospital, which was a nice surprise. I even laughed a little, thinking they had no choice but to see me quick because the other people in the room were so grossed out by the bloody shirt I had on my face. The doctor set my nose with a nauseating, meaty crack that made my whole head reverberate for days. He put on a bunch of tape and a metal splint and gave me a prescription for painkillers.

On the drive home, I could feel blood flood into my face and down into my stomach. I had trouble getting the pill bottle open, so Mom opened it for me.

“I look like Hannibal Lecter,” I said as I choked down two tablets.

“That’s funny because you sound like The Nanny,” Mom said.

We both chuckled. Mom gestured to the bottle of pills still in my hand.

“May I?”

Slowly, I handed her the bottle. She took out two – eyes still glued to the road – and downed them without even a sip of her diet Coke, handing the bottle back. For the rest of the ride home, I stared out the window trying not to think about anything that happened that night. The more I tried not to think about it, though, the more I couldn't help but picture Mom in the corner as the cop questioned me. Why couldn't she have said something? How was she always so fucking quiet when Donald went on his rampages?

When we got home, he was still gone. As we both started to go to our rooms, Mom seemed like she was about to say something. I wanted it to be an apology or an I love you, something. But instead she just exhaled and looked at me, she brushed the bangs out of my face and smiled a little and that was it. We both went to bed.

I laid there for a little bit, unable to breathe through my nose and choking on bloody snot now and then. But then the ache in my face began to fade and I stopped feeling quite as all-around bad about it all. Sleep came, deep and empty.

The next morning was a Friday and I woke up groggy, the pain right back where it had been. Maybe I rolled over onto the splint while I slept. I took two more pills. I walked into the kitchen and found Mom there, frying bacon and wearing a t-shirt and jeans instead of her work clothes.

"I think the two of us should take the day off and go see your sister," she said.

I looked at her face, lined from an anguished night but bright behind it all. Hopeful, the morning after the storm. I just nodded and accepted a plate of stringy bacon I could barely taste.

We picked up Tina and took her out to Tex-Mex. We all three ordered fattening salads with cheese and ranch dressing. Tina chatted about her new job answering the phone at a hair salon while Mom and I nodded. No matter how glad we were to see her, every time we saw her it was like a reminder of how fucked up things were at our house. All through lunch she didn't mention the glaring evidence in the middle of my face but looked at it every chance she got, raising an eyebrow or shaking her head just barely perceptively.

We sat there for almost two hours after they took our dirty plates away, just talking about nothing and chain smoking. Mom had been buying me cigarettes for a year or so. She said it was better than me stealing them from her purse or from the Gas'n'Go. I felt so giddy there in the sunny booth; my stomach fluttered from painkillers and that skipping school feeling. I could have sat there all day long.

But Mom wanted to go, eventually. She said she wanted to get dinner started before Donald got home and excused herself to go to the bathroom. She was tiptoeing around him as usual, not even able to stay out to spend time with her own kids.

While she was gone, Tina's eyes burned a hole through me.

"You know nothing's ever going to change, right?" she said.

"What things?" I asked, fiddling with my drink straw.

"You're just like her, you know. And look at you! I think you should come stay with Jamie and me. Like, tonight. Just come. For as long as you want."

"Tina, we didn't exactly get along when you lived with us..."

I stared at her as blood congealed behind my nose and eyes. She looked back, expectantly and hopefully and I knew she'd long forgotten any sibling quarrels we'd ever had.

But I said nothing and then Mom was there by the table, clearly impatient for us to get a move on but not saying anything. She just stood there and looked at us, waiting.

Tina and Jamie had moved into an apartment on the other side of town and when we dropped her off Mom gave her an envelope with money in it and told her to be careful. She took the money and stood there, looking at me and kept raising her eyebrows like she was waiting for me to say something we'd planned beforehand. Mom just looked at the two of us like we were weirdos.

"Dusty wants to tell you something," Tina said on my behalf, just as Mom pulled away.

Mom hit the brake and looked at me.

I said nothing, just hated Tina for that moment. Even if she was right, she had no right to be.

"He wants to come stay with Jamie and me," she said.

Mom demanded, in her telepathic way, to know if it was true. She flipped back her hair and licked her lips and held the whole moment in her heavy eyelids.

"Tell her Dusty."

"Tell her what?"

"Tell, her, Dusty."

"I think I just want to go home," I said, slumped in the front seat.

"Bye baby," Mom said to Tina slowly, almost under her breath. Mom didn't acknowledge Tina's tense imploring face as she stood there waiting for me to make everything real, to do as she did and make it known that I'd had enough. That I wasn't going to keep being like Mom.

I watched Tina in the car mirror as we pulled away and she just stood there, arms folded and head shaking, for as long as I could still see her.

The sun shone directly into the corrugated blue roof of our carport, so our house and yard seemed greenish as we pulled up, like a dream that is only in one or two colors. Maybe it was that, maybe it was the two Vicodins I took after lunch. For whatever reason, I stopped at the front stoop, bent over, and puked on a half-dead azalea bush. I heaved and belched and felt turned inside out.

But when I was done, I felt more clearheaded than I had in a long time. It was like I was vomiting up more than just snot and mayonnaise, but something more foul and from deeper down.

I stood back up and Donald had come out front. He looked at me like it was his boots I had puked on.

“Clean that up,” he said.

I looked up at him. Neither of us moved.

“Did you hear me?”

Mom went to get the garden hose but Donald grabbed her arm.

“No. I want him to clean it. It is his fucking mess.”

I didn't move. He yelled at me to take the fucking hose, but I wouldn't. I just stood there and felt calm and empty. He grabbed the hose and shoved it at me. I remained still.

“No,” I said.

“Clean it...the fuck...up” he said through gritted teeth. Donald grabbed a handful of my hair and shook my head by the scalp at each word. But I just stood there, denying him the pleasure of seeing me forced to clean my own puke.

“No,” I said.

And then Donald had me by the neck, first with one hand and then with both, screaming and cussing at me. I couldn't help but wonder how this all looked to the neighbors. And for some reason, it wasn't until that odd moment that I even wondered which neighbor it was that called the cops on us those two times. Could have been any of them, since we didn't really know enough about a single one of them to rule anyone out. I wondered if they would do it again.

And when I heard a car idling up to the house, I thought they had. And doubly so when Donald let go. But I opened up my eyes and saw Tina standing in the yard with all the teenage fury she had the night she moved out.

“The fuck do you want?” said Donald.

“I came because I thought Dusty might want a new place to stay. Looks like I might have been right,” she had driven Jamie's old boat of a Lincoln and had it parked half in the yard.

The calmness I felt before gave way to more nausea and all I wanted was for it to come back. All I wanted was for Tina to leave, for Donald to leave, for Mom not to have to feel the way I knew she felt just then, like a torn and helpless woman. I didn't want her to have to feel that way ever again.

“Get in the car, Dusty, I'll go get your stuff.”

“A slut and a fucking faggot, I don't even know why I waste my fucking time.”

“C’mon Dusty, you don’t need this. Just come and stay with Jamie and me and you won’t have to deal with it anymore.”

Mom looked at me the way she had after Donald broke my nose. The same way she’d looked at Tina when she’d left for good. And I looked right back at her the same way, unable to move.

Shelter-in-place

Elle decided to leave when things got sexual. He saw it coming, but he'd been trying to enjoy the company. He was afraid to be alone and of the possibilities outside that dark, brown basement. The night's revue had gone even better than he'd hoped and he felt he had deserved a little partying. Now, as he snuck out of the after party that had dwindled to just himself and two others, most of his paint was gone, wiped off through a night of fidgeting, of banter, and cigarette smoking and his wig had cocked itself to the side in a fat brittle mass.

He heard the creaking of a bed from the back room. He'd already refused one invitation to join them and didn't feel like refusing another. A dim light came in from a well window, the smell of mildew and a cat Elle couldn't see wafted toward him as he moved--himself like a cat--toward the door. He knew the men he was leaving behind--Rich and Rick, two of his bar girls--wouldn't miss him or even hear him as he left. But some force, some fear brought on by the drug he'd shared with the men and by the angst of being alone as the sun came up had him creeping like a thief. He took off his red patent pumps and plodded on, barefoot in an excruciating sea of carpet.

Elle had made himself a lot of promises the day before as he'd gotten ready for the show. That he'd stop getting himself into situations like this one, that he'd concentrate on improving the show, that he'd start going home directly after. But living life during the day, though it suited him in many ways, exposed his basic contradictions. Errand-running was his most social behavior outside work—and work being, after all, work—he needed an outlet. He needed to chill with his people, he thought. But why his people insisted on half the parties ending like this one, he didn't understand. Nor did he understand his own tendency to do every

substance put in front of him. And he wasn't thrilled by the idea that guys like the two Richards he was leaving behind were his people.

There were the girls at work, the other drag girls. Girls like Elle who showed up to work as the day ebbed and didn't reach peak potential until well into the night, then receded into their respective vices as the bar closed. They didn't all have chemical dependencies, but they did share an addiction to self-reliance. Elle called all of them his girls but none of them his friends.

He'd arrived at the basement barely sober enough to walk, and was now leaving superhumanly awake. Rick (or was it Rich?) had driven Elle's Toyota to whichever of their house he was now in. He wasn't positive where he was, geographically. What was he going to walk outside to? He imagined a street of duplicate ranch-style homes with the same old man in the same t-shirt with the same beer gut and pet mutt watering the front lawn of them each, all of them looking at Elle in the same angry way. Duplicates of duplicates of duplicates.

The exaggerated surge in his head met somewhere in his middle with the sag of his tired, dehydrated body as he reached a blank fiberboard back door. He reached for his head and felt around. He pulled out a piece of hair, and then another slid out, and another. During the night, he'd gradually removed each of the hand-carved pieces of foam that padded his chest, hips, and buttocks; his sequined mini dress; and his fat stage jewelry, all of which he now held in a shopping bag. That left him in dark tan stockings and a tight t-shirt. He smoothed back his real, dyed blond hair. *This is gonna have to do.* He breathed and pulled open the door.

Sun poured in and the dank air of the basement thinned. Elle looked out to the back of a house and a hill. He emerged onto a sidewalk and the morning chill went through his stockings

and ran up his spine. He walked around to the front of the house and into a dense quiet. The basement was not under a house, after all, but a building of four other units that sat alone at the foot of two grey hills. The front of the place had four front doors and two tall, aluminum pillars on the porch. A small graveled area, in which Elle's little black coupe sat alone, abutted the building and a driveway trailed off from it. In front of him, on both sides of the road, were shocks of skinny, leafless trees dense enough to block from view anything past the driveway.

He wanted to go back inside and ask where he was. But the thought repulsed him. If he just got in the car and drove, he decided, he would figure it out. It wasn't so far from downtown. They'd been in the car only a short while after they left the Piston. So town must be nearby. Elle was born and raised in Oakton, but that didn't mean there weren't spots in and around town he'd never seen. And the fractals of creeks and hollows could make many places feel miles from anywhere when a town of thousands was around the bend.

Elle's breath froze in rapid puffs. He shivered, but did not feel the cold. The speed warded off pain and discomfort. It drove him toward things: to bond with Rick and Rich, to leave them behind when he felt repulsed, to get into his car, to go home, take a shower, clean the kitchen, call his mother, bake some biscuits, clean the kitchen again. The future shattered like glass, into a million aching, itching possibilities. First of all, to get into his car.

It smelled of booze. On the passenger side floor was a skinny collins glass, its purple contents spilled and congealed in the rubber grooves of the floor mat. Elle had nothing but vodka on the rocks at the bar, so he knew this sugary cocktail had been a Richard's. The men who'd spilled out their insides in a drug-fueled gush, sitting Indian-style around a table of wine glasses and makeshift ashtrays. Elle now knew that Rich had spent his summers as a kid in

central Florida with a bipolar aunt and that he'd spent the 1980s and 90s partying with a lot of local politicians but he still didn't know Rich's last name. He knew that Rick was forty-two and would be forty-three in May, that he had barely ever left Oakton in those years, and that he got his short, gray crew cuts from a sister of his whose husband had been hitting her for years. But what did either of them do for a living?

Elle fished around the shopping bag for his car keys. Cupped in a bra he saw his keychain, which read in glittery black cursive, his name that barely anyone but his mom used anymore: *Elvin*. He started the car and pulled slowly out of the gravel and onto the paved driveway, past the brush that blocked the rest of the world from view.

The road opened up in front of him and the valley that was Oakton, a flat spot among endless slopes. Interstate 46, connected in the center of town and brought life in and out of the otherwise secluded city. Follow the river and one would find boom towns built on coal and chemicals, follow the highway and one finds bubble towns built on affordable home loans. But now was the coldest time of year and a winter for industry, too, so it was gray no matter which way you went.

Given a few dozen more yards of driving, he would have more-or-less known where he was. He would have seen the way the light shone on him and on which side of him the river was, how the hills were arranged around and above him and he would have figured it out. But he didn't need those things, because it was a sound that gave him his bearings. A siren told him he was on the South End, by the chemical plants. Just like the vague rotten egg smell, the sound would occasionally waft toward Elle's side of town and remind those who still paid attention that there were noxious things made here.

Slowly the realization that it was a Saturday, and not a Wednesday—the day the sirens were always tested monthly and had been for Elle’s whole life—broke its way to the top of an ever-lengthening list of to-dos in his head. And that meant this was not a test.

Everyone thought they were a throwback to the Cold War, to duck and cover bomb drills. Now they warned Oakton of a chemical leaks. Elle and his generation were taught to tape up the drafty windows of their classrooms, get into the center of the building, and sit patiently for further instructions. Every last Wednesday of the month brought the siren. Each time, through high school, Elle and his classmates would go through the motions of a shelter-in-place. And each time, the drill would end and the school day would resume as usual.

No one thought much of the sirens because they never used them during chemical leaks. Never deemed them toxic enough. On the South End—where Elle was now stopped at a green light, eyes stuck staring straight ahead—the leaks happened a lot. Once or twice a year, a pipe would burst or a tanker truck or train car would turn over and residents would call in complaints of irritated membranes or lightheadedness. A shelter-in-place would sometimes be issued, the people in the affected area urged not to go outside. An elderly woman living alone might die in the area and nobody would ever figure out if it was due to her paralyzing fear of the leak, by the chemical itself, or if it was just a coincidence. The company might release the name of the chemical in question and detail its effects on the human body. They might apologize. But the sirens never went off. Unless it was the last Wednesday of the month.

He stared outside his car, sleepy one moment and sped up the next. To his left was a crook in the river where a group of homes clustered together in a little neighborhood cut off from the grid of the rest of town. To his right, the main drag through town followed the

highway from one end of the valley to the other and was empty. It was early, but there should have been at least a couple of cars, Elle thought. The little neighborhood of all one-story brick ranchers sat motionless.

It is Saturday, Elle thought again. The sirens are going off and there are no people. He saw zombies and people turned to piles of dust. He saw himself driving through a town full of stopped cars. He saw Hollywood dystopia. All without moving, he saw the entire valley in a state of apocalypse: empty suits laid out in the shape of their former wearers in front of the courthouse, Wal-Mart littered in blue smocks and empty strollers, and a parking lot full of empty pick-up trucks. The light in front of him changed to yellow . Then to red.

With his chin slung over the steering wheel, he turned the radio on, to the AM frequency, thinking that's where the news would be. With his thumb nail, he picked some gunk out from the tiny gap where the radio met the dash. He turned up the radio and the familiar *This is a test* screech sent shockwaves through his already electrified brain. But it wasn't a test. When the noises ended, a man's recorded, sing-songy twang spoke:

Attention, attention. This is not a test, repeat, this is not a test. The county public safety office has instituted a shelter-in-place to all of Oak County. Chemco has alerted authorities to a breach at its South End production facility. Be advised to stay in your homes, shut off central air systems, and tape off gaps in and around doors and windows. Please take special care that children and the elderly stay indoors for the duration of this shelter-in-place. Stay tuned to this frequency for further details and instruction as more information is made known.

The screeching began again and then the message started to repeat itself.

Beyond the low-lying homes of the South End he could see the white and silver pipes of the Chemco plant superimposed on dull hills. Sometimes they spewed billows of steamy white gas, other times it was more gray, and sometimes it was nearly black. And sometimes, as was the case now, nothing came from the pipes. Elle remembered a moment when he was eight. He was driving to the drug store one evening with his mom. It was this time of year, he remembered, because that's when his mom always got restless and went gathering, when night came cold and early. As they drove past the dim, orange-lit plant, Elle could see fire in the darkness. It smoldered just at the very tip of the pipe and then became dense gas that dissipated the further it rose into the atmosphere, into the darkness. And it burned into Elle's retinas and into his brain. He'd seen it a few times since, only occasionally. Now, as he gazed at the motionless plant, Elle felt sort of calm and couldn't help but think the football field sized puzzle of pipes and valves and lights and nozzles looked mostly harmless.

The traffic light turned green for the third or fourth time, but Elle continued to sit and gaze until, through the blaring siren and insect-chirp of the radio alert, he heard another noise. A car horn. The first sign of life he'd encountered.

Before he could turn around to look for the source of the honking, a black Camaro with dark tinted windows and rusty rims peeled off the road behind Elle's Toyota and onto the grass, though he could have driven around and stayed on the road. *Definitely a '92*, Elle thought. The driver paused in the grass as if looking at Elle, who couldn't see through the smoky windows. Then the Camaro reared awkwardly back up onto the road, scraping its low-slung chassis where the cement met the dirt.

The car peeled away. Oily blue smoke engulfed Elle's car, and there was no one again, just the resonance of the emergency siren, and Elle in a t-shirt and tights and smeared makeup.

The radio alert gave no further information as Elle began to drive again. In front of him, the houses became nicer and the skyline less industrial as he headed toward downtown. He came to a four-way stop and to his left was a white Buick driven by a white haired woman in glasses. She was hunched a little over the wheel when Elle reached the intersection. He waited for her to drive along before doing so himself, but her car didn't move. He waved to her, a friendly *go on now*. She was motionless. For just a second, Elle imagined the woman was dead at the wheel, a victim of whatever chemical was leaking out into the valley. Maybe the radio scared her to death. Maybe she'd inhaled whatever gas was filling the neighborhood and had become catatonic. But Elle could see she had a solid grip on the wheel. And he seemed to see her moving, swaying maybe, a least a little bit. He drove through the stop sign, watching her in his mirrors. He looked several times before the intersection was out of sight, but she remained in the same spot. Ahead of him was the Chemco plant's back entrance, a gate that was always closed. The labyrinth of pipes loomed over him and further ahead he could see the road had been barricaded. Orange barrels sat on both sides of the road and long plastic pipes with reflective tape were strung between them, sandbags placed underneath.

Elle stopped the car. This was his only route home without turning around and driving all the way around the mountain. Beside him was a wet, cement retaining wall. Above it, the highway. Elle could hear no cars whizzing by, which meant the highway was closed, too. He was going to have to turn around and take a back road.

Realizing it was cold, Elle turned on the heat. With the whoosh of hot air came a smell, like artificial smoke in fire safety houses—the double-wide trailers hitched to fire rescue trucks that used to visit school fairs and carnivals. Elle loved crawling through the fake home and waiting for the siren to sound and the fake smoke to pour in. He'd hit the ground and crawl to safety just as the fire marshal instructed. And he loved the smell of the smoke, it was a lot like what he was smelling now. Candy-like but chemical. He shut the heat off.

Elle turned the car around and headed back the way he came. He approached the woman again, who still sat there in her Buick. But he pulled up to her this time. His window alongside hers, he rolled his down and the smell became stronger.

“Ma’am,” he said, and tried not to breathe too deeply. “Ma’am?”

The woman did not look at him, but continued to hold on to her steering wheel. She shook her head back and forth, dismissing Elle. He hung half his torso out to reach toward her window and tapped on it.

“Ma’am, are you okay? Do you need some help?”

The woman shook her head once again and her loose neck skin waved along with it. Elle got back fully into his car. “Do you know what’s happening, ma’am?”

“I am not leaving this spot,” she seemed to say. She gesticulated toward her car radio. “Shelter in place. I am not moving from here.”

“But ma’am,” Elle said, “we’re right by the Chemco plant. That’s the plant with the leak. We should probably get away from here. We need to get into a house, I think.” He thought, but he didn’t know. He felt tire for a minute, then it when away.

The woman never looked at him. He rolled up his window and sat there for a few minutes hoping the woman might change her mind. He'd inhaled something, for sure. His mind pursued a million possible outcomes from his exposure and none of them were positive. He decided to leave the woman behind and take the back roads.

Not too far back the way he came, Elle turned left under I-46, through a tiny underpass that doubled as an outlet for the creek as it flowed between two hills and towards the river. The brightness of morning gave way to the darkness of the hollow. Just as the house where he'd stayed the night before was tucked just out of view from town, so did this place exist independently from the rest of Oakton. He had family along this creek and, in fact, had grown up there for a time. But Elle had stopped visiting a long time ago.

Though Oakton could be a refined place—they had a symphony orchestra, a science museum, a bustling downtown—it was also an island surrounded by sparsely populated, densely wooded hill. As he drove, Elle at once felt an ache and a warmth. This was his world and it wasn't. The creek was very low. It snaked back and forth, under the road to one side and sometimes back to the other. Many of the homes—all with a large yard and many with trailers out front or ATVs or restored muscle cars—sat on short stilts for protection from the creek when it became engorged. Some of the houses looked brand new, kept in pristine condition by their handyman owners. Others sat in disrepair, flooded and gutted and slowly being reclaimed by the surrounding jungle.

If he continued on this road Elle would end up on the side of the mountain opposite the Chemco plant and from there he could take county roads back to the highway toward the spilt-level he rented across town. He passed a group of men standing around a huge, diesel

generator that sat on the flat, wooden bed of a pickup truck. He wondered if they could tell him anything about the leak, anything more than the radio was saying. Or if they'd just spit *It ain't no big deal* as they hooked their emergency generators. The men all reflexively looked toward Elle's car as it neared where they stood, prepared to either wave hello or stare in suspicion. None of them waved.

He drove on, passing more of the same wide lawns and skinny creek. Things became dimmer the further he drove. Around noon, the whole creek would be lit up like anywhere else, but now, with the sun off to one side, things only got dimmer as Elle drove further out and the hills edged closer to the road.

The only gas station on the creek was one mile out, at a place where the creek forked into two and one road continued, two-laned and paved, and another began, graveled and narrow along a second, tiny creek.

As he crept toward the station, Elle could see a lot of people had gathered. Pickup trucks were parked at all four pumps and two men were filling up gasoline cans, presumably for their home generators. Once he'd been at this very gas station with his older cousin Ailene to fill up a gas can for his uncle's lawnmower and they'd taken turns breathing in the fumes from one end of it while they giggled and wobbled back to their house. Elle was suddenly curious about his cousin. He searched for her number, wondering if he even had it. He found it and without thinking pressed send.

It rang several times before she picked up. She said hello like she hadn't answered the phone in a long time.

"Ailene. It's Elle. Elvin."

“Elvin?”

“Yeah it’s me. Can I stop by?”

A pause made him nervous. But he decided the reception had just gone out for a moment.

“Do what now? You up the creek?”

“Yeah, I’m gonna stop up Ailene, I’m a mile out.”

“Do what now?”

Elle looked at his phone, which showed a bar or two of reception. He thought about turning around and calling Ailene back from where reception was better, but decided just to show up at her house. He backed up the ten or so yards he’d driven on the paved road and slammed the car back into drive, spinning out his tires a little as he hit the gravel. He smiled as he looked into the rearview and saw the dust and the men at the gas station glancing over.

Elle had barely thought of Ailene in years. She was nearly ten years older and had never lived anywhere but where she lived now. Which was the same house Elle stayed in with his mom while they, “got back on their feet.” Which was what Elle’s mom said for almost a year until she finally moved them to the north end of town, into a section 8 building beside a convenience store that sold more porn than candy bars. Elle’s mom worked there for a while and Elle used to hang out there with her behind the counter and watch as men came in and politely pretended to browse for chips before heading to the porn.

Elle bounced along the gravel toward Ailene’s. The road was flat for half a mile, before dropping abruptly with the creek’s old, eroded path down the side of the hill. Elle had to slow the car to nearly zero at some of the turns. He crossed the creek once, braking as he went in

and easing into the gas to climb out. He slowly eased down the hill for a while. Then, right before he had to cross the creek again, the road suddenly flattened out and he reached the bottom.

He swallowed to balance the pressure in his ears. He stopped the car at the side of the shallow, muddy creek and hovered in the strange twilight of being so far down the mountain. He continued on and then homes began to appear again. Down here, they were tucked more deeply into the trees than the ones on the main road and light glared off their curtained windows as Elle drove on. The gravel had thinned from years of use into an equilibrium of rock, dust, and dirt. This finger of a creek would end soon, without fuss, abruptly where two hills meet. Just before that was Ailene's house, where Elle had spent what totaled to years. Years from which he could remember few specifics but could recall the exact fluorescence of midmorning as it trickled down through the hollow to the bottom of the creek. He looked up and out the car window now, at Ailene's house and was disoriented by how familiar it all felt.

The house was a perfect rectangle, covered in cold blue aluminum. It sat on stubby legs and the gap underneath was covered in a wooden trellis. There were tallish, ragged hedges at both corners of the house, and as Elle sidled the car up to the place, the evergreen brushed against his windows. Elle pulled a pair of jeans from his paper shopping bag and lifted his midsection in the air to ease them on. He took his dress out and picked off some cat hair, then folded it and put it back. He fixed the rearview directly onto his eyes and evened out what was left of his makeup, smoothing his finger around and around each eye, trying to get them symmetrical. Some mini-blinds in a window just outside the car parted and then snapped back into place.

Elle stopped fidgeting with himself and got out of the car. He hopped up the plain, wooden stairs to Ailene's and knocked on the door. He could smell the dank interior, even with the door closed. The house was practically built into a creek, as it was, and didn't seem to have been maintained much over the years. Elle heard something inside and practiced a quick smile. He cleared his throat and the door opened.

He didn't recognize the woman who opened it. He stammered for a second, wondering if his cousin had changed so much. The woman in front of him was stout, with a short neck and deep auburn hair that had started to turn white. She had permanent creases in her red skin, one on her forehead and one on her wide nose. She smiled and showed a glistening set of greenish teeth.

"Ailene," he said to the woman, and then craned his neck to hide his mistake. "Is Ailene in...there?"

"Sure hon'," the woman spoke from deep down, like a seasoned smoker. She smiled again and opened the door further to let Elle inside. Elle hesitated and then stepped in. He recognized the wall paper and the overwaxed wood trim. The carpet was the same, too. It was all very much the same, only dingier. The woman closed the door. "Ailene's on back," she said.

Elle walked back down the familiar, narrow hallway. The house gave him the same ache it gave him as a little boy. It was still just as dark and cramped and he still wanted to get out of it, maybe even faster. He wondered why he'd come. His mom had long ago disowned Ailene and her dad, after what she called *familial discourse*.

"It's discord, mama," Elle told her as they'd stood in line at the Food Lion, both their arms full of 2-liter diet colas.

“I don’t give a shit what it’s called,” Doris replied through yellow teeth and pink lips.

She fluffed her dull, dyed brown hair to give the situation more drama, and looked around at the cashier and the other customers. One by one, everyone looked down or away from her. There was a time in Doris’s life when they would have looked away out of fear, of her boldness and good looks, but anymore it seemed to be out of pity. Doris’s exterior had finally caught up with her pickled interior.

“And, anyway, Elvin, you don’t want to know what they think of us. Or you.”

Doris never looked at her son when she referenced his otherness. Just as she did when Elle was little and complained that other kids ignored him, Doris turned away in the grocery line when Elle asked why they hadn’t gone to his Uncle Jim’s funeral or sent Ailene flowers.

“We just don’t associate with them.”

Walking through Jim’s house now, Elle welled with guilt. Regardless of what Jim might have thought of him or his mother, they were family and he was dead. There was no reason to hold a grudge against a dead guy. Much less one you hadn’t seen or heard from in years. He should have gone to the funeral without his mother.

The shag carpet smelled mildewed and in the second before Elle stepped into the living room with his cousin, he remembered the house where he spent the previous evening, which had the same carpet and the same dim light. His brain raced again, toward nothing.

“Elvin Ryan McCutcheon? Do my eyes deceive me?”

From the couch, Ailene gazed at Elle through the kind of old lady glasses he always thought looked upside down. She was at the end, where the couch became a recliner, under a floor lamp. Without looking for it, Ailene grasped for the wooden bar to return her seat to the

upright position. She was ten years older than Elle, but looked twenty-five years older. Her sweatpants were dirty and her polyester blouse bunched inside the rolls of fat on her belly.

“What on earth are you doing here?! It’s been so darn...” Ailene paused and went a little limp. She stopped searching for the handle on the couch. “...Long,” she mumbled.

“I know, Ailene,” Elle said. He straightened his spine and held his hands behind his bag, holding the bangles he wore on one of his wrists. “How are you? I was nearby because of the chemical leak and I thought I’d say hello.”

Ailene perked back up. With a swift movement, she grabbed the handle she couldn’t find before, yanked it back, and stood, though a little wobbly. “Come give your cousin a hug!”

Elle ventured toward her, with his arms still clasped at his back. While he was pretty sure he looked crazy, he was one hundred percent sure he felt crazy and the closer to Ailene he got the more he wondered what he was doing there when he should be alone at his home, jerking off in the shower. He had to force the image away as his cousin wrapped her girthy arms around him and he, feeling obligated, did the same. Ailene grabbed Elle by his shoulders and looked straight at him. Through thick lenses, Elle could see Ailene’s glossed, cadaverous eyes and it struck him that she might be feeling a little crazy herself.

“Let me get a look at you, darlin’,” she said, like an old woman. “I was thinking you might look a little queer.”

Ailene pulled on a piece of Elle’s bleached hair, then pushed it behind his ear.

“Leney...”

“What, honey, it’s true. But everyone has their issues. Shit.”

Ailene’s eyes became heavy, suddenly, and she sat back down.

“But, I don’t have issues,” Elle grinned. Then he watched as his cousin faded away again.

“I know honey,” she said, moments after the fact. “Come. Sit down.”

Elle sat perched at the edge of the couch. The television was muted with the closed captioning turned on. A gossip magazine sat on the TV tray in front of Ailene, along with a plastic shower caddy filled with prescription pill bottles.

Elle heard someone washing dishes in the kitchen. The woman who’d answered the door, he assumed.

“So how you been, Ailene? Who’s that woman?”

Ailene was turned slightly toward Elle. She smiled at him, blankly. In the lamplight, her pale skin and dirty brown hair reflected only dullness. The Showcase Showdown wheel spun silently on the television and, for an odd moment, Elle believed he heard the croak of a frog outside, beyond the house.

“Well, hon, things are fine,” Ailene said, “Daddy didn’t leave no debts or nothing. The house is mine. I’m looking for work, have been for a while now.”

Ailene grabbed the handle of her pill caddy as she spoke.

“But I’m still on disability, what from the fall I took at the warehouse...”

Elle eyed the amber bottles as they rattled under the weight of her hand.

“...you know. But it is so nice to see you, Elvie. Why don’t you ever come by? I know you never could with your mama. But you been on your own for a long time now, come see your cousin once in a while.”

Ailene continued to stare at him.

“I’m here now, Ailene,” Elle said, wishing he weren’t and starting to squirm. The woman in the kitchen turned on a dishwasher. The house hummed to its rhythm. “Who’s that lady,” Elle asked again.

Ailene scrunched her forehead, forcing her eyes open while the rest of her body loosened into a puddle.

“Mmm,” she asked. “Oh,” she said.

Elle let out a belly laugh as his cousin nodded off, he couldn’t stop himself, she looked like a giant Cabbage Patch doll. Ailene appeared offended, but only for a moment. Then her chin sunk back into her chest.

“Shelly,” she gurgled. “That’s Shelly.”

Ailene slipped away from the room, then, completely. Elle still perched on the edge of the couch, tapping his toe and nibbling the cuticle on his middle finger. He leaned his head toward the kitchen and saw the very back of the woman, Shelly. The front of her seemed to be cleaning the floor. He could hear watery suction of the sponge mop as she pushed and pulled it. The clinking of glasses in the dishwasher. He looked back at Ailene. She was still sunken into oblivion.

Elle reached for her pill caddie. He turned one of the bottles so the label faced him. He felt a knot in his stomach as he did it, from guilt, anticipation. *For muscle pain, one tablet twice daily.* Elle eased off the cap and slipped three pills out with his index finger. He turned another bottle around, *oxycodone*, and took some of those. Another bottle had a faded label that looked hand-typed and said his uncle’s name, but wasn’t legible otherwise. Inside were several kinds of pills; oblong blue ones, fat white ones, round yellow ones. He poured some of them

into his hand. He'd figure out what they were later. As he slipped them into his pocket, he smelled lemon cleaner.

He looked up and the Shelly woman stood at the entrance to the room, her face blank. Elle looked at Ailene, whose head was still buried in her bosom.

"Ailene was," Elle stuttered, "she nodded off, I guess." He made a show of looking at his cousin's drug caddie like he disapproved, then looked back at Shelly.

"She does that," Shelly said, wiping her hands on jeans that clung to her wide, meaty hips. She was no longer the perky, curious fat lady who answered the door. "Now," she paused, "you ain't getting tired on me, too, are you?"

"Not nearly."

"Mmkay. Now, you want something to drink? Ice tea?"

Elle nodded and smiled, thinking Shelly would return to the kitchen. Instead, she continued standing at the door. Elle smiled and nodded again and Shelly remained, again.

"Well, c'mon then," Shelly said.

"Oh, okay," Elle's upper half stretched toward the kitchen as if it were getting up and leaving the lower half of his body behind. He didn't know who this woman was and was afraid to talk to her away from Ailene's mute but protective presence.

"I ain't gonna bite ya," Shelly said, her eyebrow raised.

Elle got up and he went into the kitchen. He felt his palms sweating and the tiny bulge in the watch pocket of his jeans throbbed. He pressed the lump of pills to make sure they were tucked down enough not to fall out and implicate him anymore than he may already have been. He wondered if Shelly was Ailene's nurse, maybe, or some kind of government in-home

assistance person. Like the kind who show up twice a week to walk elderly shut-ins down their front stoops and back up again and leave behind cans of nutrient shakes.

The kitchen was how he remembered it. Square with high ceilings, one long counter on one side, a window facing out back and the steep hillside just beyond, a small table with four chairs off to the side. Shelly opened the avocado-colored refrigerator and removed a pitcher, the kind with a rubber nozzle at the bottom for pouring. As Elle stood by the door, Shelly filled two tall plastic tumblers with ice and the murky brown tea. She walked to the table and sat down. She looked at Elle, who was still perspiring at the door.

“Jesus Christ almighty, what are you acting s’strange for? Sit your little skinny ass down here.” She reached toward him holding one of the glasses of tea. Elle inched toward the bright of the kitchen where she sat at the table, in front of some windows. He took the glass and hesitated before sitting down.

Shelly looked into Elle’s face like she was looking for something hidden. Elle looked into Shelly’s, it was deeply wrinkled at the creases of her eyes and in the folds of her forehead. Makeup, a shade too light, was visible in the folds. He hadn’t noticed this before. But the light of the window made it visible. He wondered about what was left of his own makeup.

“Now,” Shelly said, smiling as Elle finally sat down and took a pull from his glass of tea. It was thick with sugar. “Leney has told me about you from time to time.” Shelly took a pull from her own glass of sweet tea. “About your mama,” she said, nodding with finality.

Shelly looked at Elle like she was waiting for him to speak, now. But she hadn’t left much of an in. Elle watched her eyes, paranoid about what they focused on. Convinced it was his makeup.

But Shelly didn't seem like she was digging for anything. Her brow softened and she sat and waited for Elle to speak.

"Ma'am," he said, "uh."

"Callin' me ma'am?" Shelly croaked and shook, a laugh came out of every part of her.

Elle laughed, then, too. This woman didn't seem to work for Ailene.

"Well," he sat back in his chair. "I don't even know you. I mean. I just had to come though the creek to get home because the highway across from Chemco is closed from the leak. And I thought I'd say hi to my cousin and here's some strange lady here asking me questions."

Dueling now, they both smiled behind pursed mouths.

"Well, honey. I'm here because this is where I live. So maybe I'm the one should be wondering what you're doing here. Some half dolled-up little skinny thing smelling of liquor and cigarettes and god knows what asking about what I'm doing in my house."

"I thought it was my cousin and uncle's house," Elle said.

"I was, it is I mean."

The dishwasher changed from the wash cycle to rinse.

"I live here to, moved in after your uncle Jim passed," Shelly continued and Elle flashed on the old, flaking pill bottle that bore his dead uncle's name.

"You here to take care of the house with Leney?"

"You think your cousin can take care of any house? I'm here to take care of this house *for* Leney and as it turns out I do a lot of taking care *of* Leney."

He hadn't been to this house in years. All he knew of Ailene was the venom his mother spewed about her. Right after Elle and his mom had moved out of his uncle's house, Elle's mom had stopped speaking to that side of the family. She said they'd been kicked out of the house. That she was ostracized from the family for wanting to live how she wanted to live. But Elle never knew what that meant. And since living in that house, he'd only seen Ailene a few times, in chance encounters at drug stores and grocery stores. And once when Ailene had been behind him when his car had stalled while in line at an ATM. Ailene had come to the window to offer to help before either realized who the other was. And when they did, they exchanged hellos and Elle got his car started and drove off.

He never knew how to treat the people others told him to dislike.

"Why she on all those pills," Elle wondered, the tablets in his pockets starting to move again.

"Pain management," Shelly sighed, putting the words in quotes with her voice.

There were plenty of doctors in town who'd put just about anyone with a sore neck on pain management. Elle knew a queen from the bar who used to be a heroin addict and had since traded in that habit for a doctor approved daily regime of painkillers. "Easier to get," she'd laugh before running off on stage to perform her routine of spins and half-splits.

Ailene had told Elle, during one of their run-ins at the Revco, that she had fallen down at the medical warehouse where she worked. That was at least five years ago.

"She's been managed for a while then, I'd guess," Elle said. He was worried about his cousin not in any way different from the way he worried about people who live under high

tension power lines. She may nod off like a smack head, but anything is merely chronic if it goes on long enough.

“Honey, she’s fine.” Shelly’s constant eye contact finally broke. “She’s fine. And she has me and knows I’d do anything for her and I’m working so with my checks and hers from disability we do fine.”

Elle could glean no specifics—if they were old friends, if Shelly herself was just in it for the pills or the help of the government assistance. If they fucked.

“Where do you work,” Elle asked. The question came out childish and inane and he regretted asking it but couldn’t think of anything else to ask.

“A call center,” Shelly said and lit a long cigarette. “Telemarketing shit. I’m a supervisor, though. Guess that’s something. Yourself?”

Elle was rarely asked this. He was usually at work, so everyone knew what he did. When he was buying women’s stockings at the discount bin people assumed what he did. They were connected through Ailene, he thought, but she even Ailene didn’t know much about him. He’d always assumed that side of the family thought he was a transvestite hooker.

“Drag,” he said to Shelly, half hoping she’d have a stroke about it. “I run a drag revue in town at the Rod and Piston.”

Shelly’s mouth turned upside down like she smelled something putrid.

“Shit. I ain’t been there in ages.”

Elle squirmed.

“Frank still run that dump?” Shelly laughed.

“It is not a dump” Elle said, offended. “And Frank’s dead.”

He looked at Shelly and saw a different woman. One he imagined he'd seen before. The kind of lady who would come into the bar and never leave her stool but somehow manage to talk to everyone in the place at some point in the night. He pried more.

"So, what were you doing at the Piston ages ago?"

"I grew up with Frankie," Shelly said.

"Yeah?"

"Yep. Shame he's gone."

There was a gurgling sound from the other room.

"Shelz?" Ailene sounded like she'd just chugged a glass of molasses.

"What's up Leney?"

"That cousin of mine still here?" The syrup in her throat thinned.

"I'm here Leney. You feel like talking again?"

Ailene didn't say anything. Shelly eyed Elle. They shared the experience of Ailene's suffering and suddenly that was something.

Ailene was exactly as Elle had first seen her, buried in the couch and shrouded in incandescence. Her eyes were half closed and she patted the couch beside her. Elle thought of two ways to feel about this: creeped out by his druggy cousin he barely knew beckoning him like a crone on her death bed, and simply not creeped out. He chose to be not creeped out and sat, perched, really, like always, on the couch beside Ailene.

"Why don't you ever come see me?"

Elle wanted to respond in the fullest way he could. He wanted to ascribe the reason to three feelings at once, of fear, of distrust, and of sheer awkwardness. He gurgled a little like

Ailene had, then just said, "I don't know Leney." He drew his words out to let the air between them add meaning for him.

"Yeah. Well. You better come back after today. I never leave this dump," she coughed and laughed at herself. "Your mama may have written us off years ago about you don't have to."

Ailene looked sad.

"How is your mama," she asked.

Elle wondered how much of this honesty was drug induced and then wondered how much it mattered if it was. He wondered what his mom meant when she'd told him they *thought things* about him. He wondered if she'd made it up because she was just pissed at Ailene and her dad and wanted Elle to be too. She would do that sort of thing. And if you weren't mad at people on her behalf, she'd sometimes be mad at you.

"Mama's doing her thing," he said.

"Yeah, we're all doing that."

Ailene switched the TV to a shopping channel. A wheel of merchandise, loose gems and empty ring settings, slowly turned while a finger pointed and a ruler measured. The closed captioning froze and then started displaying gibberish.

Elle excused himself to the bathroom. He instinctively walked in the direction of it but arrived at a wall he didn't remember and there was no door.

"Aww, honey," Aileen guffawed, "that bathroom ain't been there in years. We moved it down off the kitchen."

Uncle Jim was a master carpenter and moved rooms around at anyone's whim since he'd helped his dad first build the house in the 1960s. The room Elle called his own for a time began life as a laundry room and at one point had also been a large kitchen pantry before becoming a little boy's room.

Shelly was still in the kitchen. She sat at the table drinking her tea and flipping through an ad bulletin. She looked up and noticed Elle looking at her.

"Thinking of getting a fish tank," she said, half-heartedly.

Elle found the bathroom. It seemed less like it had been moved and more like the door had just been switched to a different wall. It was a pocket door, with two finger holes for a handle. He slid it open and was dizzied. He remembered the bathroom now, but as the mirror image of what he now saw. His memory told him the tub was on the left, but he now saw it on the right. The toilet had switched sides, too, and an extra door had been installed off to the side. To the bedroom, he assumed. The bathroom tile, though, was the same. Black and white squares. The ones where the toilet now sat, gleamed a little more than the rest, were newer, and in the shape of the old tub.

Elle was more confused by the sensory inversion than he was by the reasoning behind the change. That part seemed normal. He felt his watch pocket, fit two fingers inside and removed what he could. Two pills he recognized, both painkillers. He fished a few more out. Two were Xanax, his high school favorite, the commodity he stole in such plentitude from his mother and her boyfriends. The other looked familiar, was yellow and round and matte. It was from the old bottle, his dead uncle's bottle. He swallowed the mystery pill without thinking, a knee jerk decision to try and feel something new.

Above the toilet was a small, frosted window that faced the back of the house. The sill was lined with ancient cosmetics in sun-faded plastic bottles: Prell, Mitchum, Breck. A green tin of salve looked like it came from an Old West Sears Roebuck catalog. He twisted it open and his entire face filled with menthol. Aggressive coolness went deep into his head and ears. As he tried blinking the tears away, he fumbled open the aluminum paned window.

Cold air blew into the room and froze Elle's wet, irritated eyes. In the warm months, frogs sometimes mated in the muck outside. As he had when he first arrived, he imagined he heard croaking and plopping into thin mud.

He rubbed warmth into his eyes and tried to lift himself with the one elbow that fit on the window sill, to see a little more of the backyard, but stumbled backwards and knocked his tailbone hard on the porcelain toilet, which rattled loudly. He let out a toothy *SHSS!* from the pain.

"Ya'Iright bub!?" Someone yelled, but Elle couldn't tell who. Probably Shelly, since she was closer and more conscious.

"Yeah," he yelled back, as the throbbing ebbed and returned when he moved and then ebbed again. He flushed the toilet, though he'd left nothing in it. He maneuvered around his reflection in the bathroom mirror and slid the door back open.

Shelly stood directly in front of him. He took in her full largeness for the first time. She was Solid and Nordic, fair and rosy.

"You sure," she said through her nose, like she was accusing him of something.

He thought of all the things she could be suspicious of and decided smashing into the toilet wouldn't have given away any of them. He decided she thought he was masturbating.

“Yeah, Shelly. Yeah. Fine.”

Elle’s head felt heavy. He hadn’t eaten in probably a day, a day in which he’d gone from drunk to wide awake without sleeping. Now, as nothing stood between his bloodstream and the pills he’d only just swallowed, the invisible threads of speed that had carried him through the day started to break and drop him into a world made of down comforters. Something else was different, too, something spotty about his vision. Sleep deprivation, he decided.

“Yeah,” he said again. He breathed slowly, in then out. “I’m gonna go outside and have a cigarette.”

Shelly moved aside.

“You can smoke in here,” she said, her nose in a knot. “What do you think, this is a hospital?”

“I want some air...”

He left her, annoyed or suspicious or whatever she was and floated down the hallway. His cousin sat, looking more bloated than he remembered under light that looked more yellow. The wheel of merchandise still turned on the television. Ailene held a pencil in one hand and a thick paperback book, like a coloring book, with the other. She filled something out and erased it. Then filled something else back in. She looked up and two sets of shiny distant eyes met.

“Doing my puzzles,” Ailene said.

“I’m gonna have a cigarette. Outside on the porch.”

“Don’t get too cold now, you can wear my coat, its hanging by the door.”

Elle didn't have his own coat, so he did as he was told. Ailene's coat was maroon and smelled like an old closet. It was filled with down that had flattened over many years of use. It was huge on this bony body and hung from him like a cloak.

He walked outside and sat on a lawn chair that was on an otherwise empty porch. He'd taken his shoes off inside and his feet tingled in the cold. He rubbed them against the flaking blue planks of the porch to generate warmth. His cigarettes were in his pocket but he could feel another pack inside the coat. They were the long skinny kind his mom smoked. He lit one and took a long, crackling draw.

He stood. He walked down the porch stairs, enjoying the discomfort of the cold hard grass. He rounded the house, past a tall unkempt hedge. A car was parked there, the Camaro his mother had sold to his Uncle Jim right before they moved out. It looked the same, black with contrasting red interior. It still looked cool to him, still cutting edge like when his mother showed up at the house with it and his Uncle Jim raised hell. She'd gotten it used, she said. She couldn't pass it up. Meanwhile, she never paid Jim any rent and hardly ever bought groceries. Elle wondered if she'd sold it to him or given it up for services rendered.

Elle kept walking, to the back of the house. The ground became wetter and seemed warmer, he thought. He smelled decay. He walked further behind the house, to the spot he was gazing at from the bathroom window. The heat pump hummed beside him, its fan whipped a cypress hedge from side to side.

Elle took another step and his foot sunk into the ground, into mud. He pulled it back onto firm ground. It hadn't rained in days. A distinct line where cold hard dirt ended and warm, dark bog began to stretch from where he stood all the way to the hillside, where a person-sized

cement pipe he didn't recall ever seeing emerged from nowhere. He walked along the bog, he saw something jump, and when he moved again something else jumped. There were thick shocks of crab grass and further, closer to the hill, there were reeds standing tall as green like it was summer, and cattails.

"What the fuck?"

In the summer time, it often got muddy there. He remembered mud wrestling with his boy cousins and mud attacks on the girl cousins. He remembered ruining a remote-controlled monster truck in the mud once, when it was particularly bad. But in winter it was always gone. It wasn't even always there in the summer. A mud puddle.

He stared into the bog, transfixed and pill drunk and sleep deprived. He stopped existing for half a second. Something moved again. Elle saw it, tall and gray. It strode head first from around the passenger side of the Camaro. A four foot blue heron.

Both Elle and the heron stood their ground. The heron's head bobbed forward, and twitched a little. Under his greasy bleached bangs, Elle blinked back at it. The lanky, elegant bird looked at his mud puddle and then up at Elle. It was the bird's puddle.

"Oh! By all means, girl." Elle slurred. "After you."

Elle threw his hands up as a gesture of good faith and they poked out from his down sleeves like a cartoon magician. Then he brought one hand down to puff on his cigarette. What was this massive bird doing here? Did they usually show up in the winter?

The heron stretched its wings, and seemed unsure at first if it wanted to use them. After some deliberation, it took off and landed on a high branch of a nearby tree on the hillside and sat there, looking down on its puddle. And at Elle, he thought.

“Fucking bird.”

He sucked down the last of his cigarette and tossed it into the mud. His breath froze. But mist was coming off the ground, too, where the heat met the cold air. Something jumped again. This time he saw it, a frog. He stepped forward and another fat, green blob lurched forward. How were there frogs? He knelt down and felt the ground, it was warm like a bathtub. The heady stink of ferment took him back, to when he was closer to the ground. To when he was the ground, to when there were no people here. This was an oasis of summer in the dead of winter. And a frog jumped, and his heart fluttered. Elle strode into the center of the back yard, his feet sunk deeper with each step, and was surrounded by leaping bullfrogs, he pulled his feet up and down and made deep sucking *thunks*, scaring more of them each time and whipping the yard into a frenzy of *zings* and *whirrs* and *plunks*. He swatted at mosquitos crawling at his ankles. He walked deeper into the swamp and took an awkward step that landed him on his hands and knees. A startled frog splatted him in the face. He stood, dizzied, and limped onto the porch. He sat in a painted aluminum chair and took out another cigarette. Before he could light it, he was slumped over.

“How in the hell do you end up covered in mud? In my damn coat?”

Shelly and Ailene were both on the porch smoking cigarettes as Elle blinked his long, oily eyelashes. He could have been out for hours or moments, but all he knew was the sun was still up or up again and the two women had time to make themselves comfortable outside.

Elle pursed his lips at his cousin, herself slumped in another chair across from him, wrapped in a coat nearly identical to the one he wore. She had brightened considerably he'd seen her inside, or maybe it was just the change of light.

"You seem to be warm enough without it."

He tensed and flexed his back and arms, working heat into his cold body and shaking off the hours of abuse like so much used up dead skin. He looked down at his hand, realizing he still gripped a cigarette deep between his pointer and middle finger. Between him and his cousin was a little wicker table overflowing with an ashtray, a lighter, and a bouquet of fake begonias. He took the lighter and thoughtfully lit the cigarette.

"You always just pass out just like that," Ailene asked with her nose in the air.

Elle stuck his nose up to mime her, deepening the valleys and driving up the peaks of his twang.

"You always have duplicates of the same damn coat?"

Ailene squealed.

"I'll have you know that one of them is a little lighter than the other. I can't tell you which is which at the moment, but I know it's true. I will also have you know that I can have as many of the same damn coat as I damn well choose you little shit."

They both laughed and Shelly, who had only been silently staring at Elle, laughed, too.

"How long have I been out here," Elle asked, casually like he'd only asked the time.

"Well," Shelly began, looking at her watch, "today's Saturday..."

"Shell!"

“I’m only playing. Hun, you was out here at least an hour before we got worried and come looking for you.”

“Well, that ain’t so bad,” Elle said.

They sat a moment, smoking.

Then, like remembering a dream, frogs and giant birds began flying at Elle’s brain.

“Wait! What the hell is all that about,” he gestured toward the back of the house, his face scrunched into a point.

“You don’t have frogs in winter up at your house?”

“Seriously? That shit is nuts! Ya’ll have a live marsh in the dead of winter.”

“Been that way for a while,” Ailene said.

“Since I moved in,” Shelly said.

“But since when? When that start?”

Ailene rolled her eyes.

“Few years back,” she said, “there was a man from one of the chemical plants that contacted us. ValleyChem or Chemco, one of them. Anyway, he got a hold of me and asked to come talk about this pipe they was wanting to lay clear across the mountain from the plant. I asked him how much and he cut me a check and brought it over then and there.”

Elle brushed some dried mud off of his coat and body.

“You mean to say this is run-off from the chemical plant? Good god...”

“Ahh, please, the price was right.”

“You live in a sewer, they have you living in toxic sludge!”

“Like you ain’t chock full of chemicals yourself,” Shelly said.

“The frogs don’t seem to mind it,” Ailene said. “Those frogs love it. If it’s toxic sludge, frogs must be immune. Besides, the man said it nothing much more than hot water.”

It was bullshit that it was just water, Elle thought. If it was just water, they’d dump it into the river right beside the plant. But it was weird how those frogs seemed to like it so much, even thrived in it. He smelled decay all over him, wafting off him. He saw swirling molecules and green fumes.

“It’s still weird,” he said. “But, anyway.”

Elle wanted to shower, he felt the need in every oily pore on every inch of the skin stretched over his bony frame.

“Ya’ll know they shut down the highway because of a leak, don’t you?”

Neither woman moved.

“There’s always some leak or another,” Ailene said.

Elle knew this would be their answer. It had run through his mind several times, too. He argued against himself and his cousin at the same time.

“But they don’t shut down the highway and tell everyone to stay indoors. And sound that old WWII siren.”

“The sirens, huh,” Shelly paused. “I guess that’s something, but the news says they’re fittin’ to lift the shelter-in-place as soon as this afternoon and it’s practically afternoon now.”

The cold sun was almost directly above and only a tiny part of it scattered through trees at the top of the hills around them. Elle snubbed his cigarette and breathed in the cold, clean air. An instance, a chemical flicker, had passed in him and he felt more like himself. Dwelling on

it then, he wondered what himself was supposed to feel like and he hovered there until someone spoke.

“Afternoon’s all they said, though,” Shelly went on. “Could be any time I suppose but down here it’s not like it matters much.”

Elle implored her with big, silly eyes.

“It does if you’ve got the plant pumping out into your backyard.”

“Oh, shut it,” Ailene said. “Both of you. I’m getting as much time out of this boy as I can before he leaves and doesn’t come visit for another dozen years.”

She said it like she believed she really wouldn’t see Elle for years once he left. Elle shook his head like he wasn’t eager to leave.

“A year, tops,” he said as they gathered at the door.

Ailene begged Elle to stay for lunch, said she make it worth his while.

“Just a quick bite to eat,” she winked.

Shelly and Ailene worked together to make it: cold cut ham warmed in a skillet and piled on toasted white bread with mayonnaise and iceberg lettuce. They spoke little as they assembled the sandwiches and only engaged Elle again once everyone was sitting.

“There now, get something in that scrawny stomach of yours,” Ailene said.

Elle ate his sandwich in several huge bites, breathed it in. When he started eating sometimes, he’d realize mid-meal how desperately hungry he was and become ever more ravenous with each bite. He wanted more, but didn’t ask.

“Well, damn,” Shelly said.

“You want another one, baby?”

“No, Ailene, I’m good. I need to take off soon.”

Shelly continued eating. Ailene scooted back in her vinyl chair and slowly raised her ass in the air. She hovered over her chair for a moment, immobile in a half-sit half-stand. She heaved herself higher, with her hands on the table for support.

“It’s time for my pill, anyway.”

She walked back toward the living room.

“Come, I’ll walk you out. Say goodbye to Shelly.”

Elle turned and Shelly filled the room again, the way she had when he’d first arrived. She didn’t smile or frown. She looked at him.

“It was nice meeting you, Elvin. You take care, now.”

Blank. She had nothing to offer Elle and Elle had nothing to offer her.

“Thanks for taking care of my cousin,” he said.

She squirmed.

“Now don’t thank me for that. Thank you for coming to visit her. Give my regards to the Piston. And don’t be no stranger. We’re family.”

Elle smiled, Shelly bit into her sandwich and raised her eyes as a goodbye.

The hallway was still dark, was always dark, as he followed Ailene into the living room. She stood in front of her end of the couch, where the groove of her body was carved permanently. She sifted through her pill bottles, with one eye on the hallway and beckoned Elle over with a snap of her head.

“C’mon, get in here,” she rasped.

“Leney, what are you doing?”

He knew what she was doing. He scuttled over to her. She looked over his shoulder toward the kitchen. She fished several white tablets from the bottle and shoved them down into his waiting hand. Elle couldn't help but giggle. Years ago they were doing the very same thing, only it was his uncle's pills they were stealing.

"Shhh. Here."

She gave him a few more pills, he didn't have a chance to see what they all were. He shoved them deep inside his pocket as she pushed him toward the door. Elle snatched his bag off a nearby chair.

"Say bye, Shell!"

Shelly yelled from the kitchen. "BYE SHELL!"

"THANKS AGAIN," Elle yelled back, Ailene's hand at the small of his back.

"Come back soon," she commanded.

"I promise," Elle giggled.

Ailene pulled her blondish hair into a ponytail, high and loose.

"Bye baby."

Elle hugged his cousin, tight, and felt weak inside her bulk. It felt good.

*

Back at the gas station, things looked normal again, less like a gathering and more like everyday comings and goings. Two teenagers with taugt, young faces and the guts of old men looked over. Few people lived near Ailene, so when an alien car emerged from the dirt road people took notice, if only for just a moment.

Despite the chemical trauma he'd inflicted on himself that day and the night before, Elle felt a kind of freshness. In the passenger seat, his shopping bag lit up with the red glow of his cellphone. He had messages. Outside the recesses of Ailene's creek, he'd begun to get reception again. He tried to think of when he'd last charged the thing, but the days and hours congealed uselessly.

He fiddled around in the glove box and found a charger, which he plugged into his cigarette lighter socket. If he drove further down the creek, he knew he'd lose service again before he came back out the other end near his house. He pulled in to the side of the gas station convenience store and sat with the car idling. His phone began to charge and he dialed into his voicemail.

"Elvin it's your mama. Where you at? Did you see that warning on the TV? You make it home from work? I came by to get that Tupperware you borrowed but you weren't home. They're saying to shelter-in-place, course we've heard that nonsense before..."

It was more misinformation from the biased media, she said. She believed in things she saw, Doris said, not in things she was just told about by some bitch from her high school who wouldn't dare talk to her if she saw her in the street today. She'd seen Cate Castor just the other day looking like she'd only just stepped off the set of *Dynasty*, all high and mighty. She digressed.

"Anyway, I've lived through umpteen of these."

Doris paused and Elle could hear his mother's husky breath and her sucking on her skinny cigarette.

“But I was just seeing if you was okay. I know that car of yours needs some work. Give your mama a call.”

Doris stopped by Elle’s place from time to time. She often didn’t even sit down. Instead, she’d walk in unannounced, saying exactly why she couldn’t stay before she was fully inside the house. She’d look around, pick up a stray sock, shoo the cat away. She’d say she was just nearby and wanted to say hi. It didn’t usually require an excuse like borrowed Tupperware. And Elle couldn’t even remember borrowing any. He so rarely went to his mom’s house he had trouble guessing when he’d have been there to take anything away.

She did know where he left the key, though. And Elle pictured the house as he’d left it, as his mother may have seen it. When he got ready for work, his habit was to start in the spare room he used as a walk-in drag closet and over the course of an afternoon try on every bit of clothing and hairpiece he owned before packing up his outfit for the evening. He left trails of fake fur and feather boas and wads of tape and cellophane throughout the house and never had time to clean up before he left. He wondered if he’d Windexed his mirrored-top coffee table since the last time he’d invited friends over and cocaine had appeared.

Though his mother could handle evidence of drug use. He wasn’t sure how she’d taken the clues that a female impersonator has exploded in her son’s living room.

Before he started doing shows, Elle would hang out in the drag room when he wasn’t busy cocktailing and eventually started toying with the idea of doing drag himself. As soon as he started hanging out at the bar in makeup on his nights off, he noticed that a lot of guys at the bar treated him differently. In or out of drag, he was suddenly a drag queen, a new type of gay, somehow, from whatever type he’d been before.

Elle was about to delete the message when he noticed one of the teenage boys from the parking lot in his rearview. He was leaning around the corner from the front of the store, looking into Elle's rear window. He was either squinting or glaring. Elle turned to give him the finger, but he'd stopped gawking by then.

The day had opened up a little as the sun came back out from under the clouds. Elle eased his car around curve after curve and moved his body with each turn of the wheel.

Leaving the creek was making him wistful. His memories of it were foggy. He never understood what those people who claimed to remember being a kid were really saying. Did they just remember impressions from way back or could they recall full on conversations?

He wished he could remember more and Ailene was helping him do it. In a way. The house was a sad pit, but one he could recall being young in. Or actually feeling young. Usually when he thought back to childhood, it was a blank space where a small version of his present self sat, waiting to be older. Everything else seemed the same and he knew people didn't change because his memory, though it lacked detail, told him he'd always been Elle.

Or Elvin?

He'd always been Elle, he decided.

He was driving in the direction of the creek, was now at its busier end. A few people seemed to have loosened up from the shock of the morning sirens. Enough for kids to be outside the trailers and square cinderblock houses and occasional big wooden home. A little girl in a pink Disney jacket played in front of small brick house. The otherwise empty grey yard was filled with brand new toys, all pink. A princess, Elle thought.

At its mouth, the creek began to widen and the floodplain around it widened with it. Elle was about to emerge from the dreary bottom and into the more expansive valley, the greater city, and it made him wonder which was the actual Oakton.

There was far more land filled by what he was in than there was of city proper. Workers filled the town by day and most returned home at night to hollers or far flung suburbs named after the glass or salt or native game they once produced.

Oakton was both or it was either. It was neither a big city nor a small town. It had dark recesses within its official limits, bordered both by shopping plazas and by barren stretches of claustrophobic valley. He'd lived here and he'd lived there. But no matter where he lived, it was at the border of two things. In town, he lived at night and at the fringe. Back here he was city people.

'It's best not to try and make sense of it,' Ailene had said.

Or was it Shelly? The Richards? It could have been anyone. But it meant the same thing. Maybe it was that big ass bird, he thought. Maybe it whispered to him as he'd crumpled on the porch, passed out. Fucking bird...

As his mind dawdled, driving with only an iota of its capacity, a fat dump truck cut through a turn ahead of Elle's little coupe. It didn't honk, though it was barreling down at him at at least 50mph on the cramped, dangerous road. Elle was forced onto a gravel shoulder. Afraid he was about to lose control, he hit the brake and spun out.

His car faced the hillside, the front two tires were in a ditch. He'd missed the truck, though and the car seemed to still be running fine.

Dazed, he sat there for a moment before realizing the car was halfway in the road. Someone could take a lazy curve and smash directly into him.

He threw it into reverse and was slowly easing the gas when something did smash into him. But not from the sides. It fell from above and shattered through his front windshield and onto the dash. Before he could wonder at it, if it was a boulder from the mountain or frozen waste from a plane, it began to kick.

Elle fluttered his eyelids, afraid there was glass in them, then opened them. There were two furry legs with hooves attached dangling above his steering wheel. A buck, still with its summer rack of antlers, looked at him and sounded his anger, or fear, through his nose like a bull.

Elle reached under his seat and pulled a lever, allowing him to slide back as far as possible from the wheel and the angry deer, which kicked once more. It tried to dislodge itself too quickly and a gash formed along one leg, dripping blood onto the dash.

“Shoo,” Elle said.

He was too afraid to open the door. The buck had antlers at least two feet wide, it a massive thing. As Elle was deciding what to do, it managed to pull one let out from the glass, then the other. It stood atop the deeply dented car and looked, briefly, inside at Elle. Then it leapt onto the roof, which buckled and popped, before fleeing to the street and around the bend in the road.

Elle breathed, relieved. He calmed a spurt of panic that came when he surveyed the damage. The car was absolutely totalled, he thought first, and then: it’s fine, it’s just a car.

All told, it didn't look completely bad. The windshield would need replacing. There were big dents in the hood and on the roof. Some blood on the vinyl. That was about it. He realized the car was still running.

He tested the gas. The engine revved ever so slightly. He pressed harder and the car jerked itself out of the ditch and backwards, nearly into the trees the lined the opposite side of the street.

Elle slammed the brakes, and put the car in gear. Slowly at first, he turned the wheel by increments. It seemed okay. It was capable of moving in several directions. He wouldn't be able to drive fast because of the hole in the windshield, but the car ran so he decided he had to give it ago.

But around the corner, he stopped again. Or, he was stopped. In front of him, blocking the road. Were the bloody carcasses of several deer as massive as the one he'd just encountered. Ahead of them, a group of dozens of the things milled in the middle of the road like an invisible fence corralled them. Elle realized the dump truck driver had plowed down the animals to get through.

Elle was able to maneuver around the dead deer. Most were on the other side of the road. But when he got just to the edge of the herd, he stopped. They sniffed at him, indifferently. He'd never seen anything like this. There were always deer around, but they got out of the way. They fled, even the ones that stared into your soul with black marbles for eyes, once they were goaded.

With no room on either side of road to drive around, he decided to goad.

Putting as little pressure as possible on the gas, he eased toward the deer in front and stopped, the tip of his front fender all but touching a deer's abdomen. He looked at that single animal, right in the eye. It looked at the car for a moment and as soon as it looked away, Elle took his foot off the let the car roll forward.

The deer scooted to the side but refused to move forward. Elle touched the gas and the deer scooted again. The third time, like an annoyed stranger moving out of your way on a sidewalk, it gave in and moved out of the car's trajectory.

Elle cackled at it.

"Move deer. AHHH. Move, move, moooooove."

He repeated the process for another deer, this one less begrudging. Slowly, the animals parted. He moved them out of his way one by one.

"AHH. Move deer. DEER."

A few repetitions in, he was engulfed. He moved forward again. His front tire hit something heavy and the car stopped. Another dead deer, he thought. He tried turning, but the tire hit the thing in both directions. So he drove forward and even managed to get a tire over it. Surrounded by the deer, which now looked at him from all sides, through each of the windows, he tried and failed to move either forward or back. He was stuck. There were no more avenues out and he sat there like a big, unfriendly metal member of the herd.

Without thinking, he decided to climb out.

Before a moment passed and he'd rolled down the window, his body half outside the car. His back was up against the coarse coat of one of the animals. He leaned back inside and grabbed his phone. It had some service. He squeezed past the deer again and was up on the

roof, looking down on dozens of them as they milled and mewed but refused, somehow, to leave the confines of their group there on the road.

He imagined himself leaping from one deer's back to another, sure footed and light, until he reached solid ground. Like Peter Pan. He wasn't far from the mouth of the creek, where the country road met with city streets and he stood looking out and over the deer, hoping another car would come soon. His phone's reception came and went, like the signal was carried by winds the company had no control over.

He sat on the roof, denting it further, and dialed.

*

"Honey?"

"Mom I need a favor."

Elle yelled and the deer mewed, their breath freezing as it left their wet noses. One at a time they blew out and up into the cold air.

"What's that?"

On the other side, Elle could hear his mother grunting and what sounded like the clanging of pots and pans.

"I need a favor, Mom. I need a ride."

"Well honey this ain't the best time."

It was never the best time, Elle thought. He pictured his mother hosting some man he'd never met, feeding him bacon as they shared a Coors and a smoke.

"Mom I don't ask for much. I really need a favor this time, I'm stuck down at the bottom of the hill and can't get out."

“Stuck,” Doris said, like she hadn’t heard everything else he’d said.

“Stuck,” Elle yelled.

“Well honey I’m stuck, too. I can’t seem to get out of my house.”

Elle stopped being angry for a second. She wouldn’t or she couldn’t?

“Are you okay,” he asked.

“I’m fine,” Doris said. “I just can’t get...”

The loudest clanging yet rang out from his mom’s end. Definitely pots and pans banging.

“Mom, what the hell is that?”

“GIT! GIT!” he heard his mother yell. Her shouts were answered with several hisses.

“Mom what the hell is that?”

Elle realized he wasn’t the only one having issues with wildlife.

“Geese,” she said. “Canada geese. And they’re mean.”

They were crowding around the door to her garage and she couldn’t get to her car.

“I was planning on heading over to the store for some smokes but the goddamned things just won’t get out of my way. Nasty things. And Twyla next door’s got a tree full of goddamned squirrels in her yard. You know that pretty birch that’s been there forever?”

Elle hadn’t expected his mother to pause.

“Uh, I guess. What?”

“The birch, Elvin. The pretty one. Well, anyhow, the thing’s just sagging under the weight of all those squirrels. We both think it’s that chemical leak but I thought it was over. It’s a lot of squirrels.”

Squirrels, geese, deer, fucking giant birds.

“Well I’m in a herd of deer stuck on top of my car. Did they lift the shelter-in-place?”

Elle eased himself into a sitting position. It seemed like it would be a while before things worked themselves out. The chemical leak, whatever it was, had the animals in a tizzy.

“GIT! I’m not sure honey, but everyone’s back out. At least up here on my hill. Whether they did or not, it appears to be over.”

Another goose hissed and Elle tried to piece together what the scene at his mother’s house looked like. A tree drooping over with rabid little squirrels. A gaggle of pissed off geese keeping his mother away from her Pontiac like Elle had done as a kid when he knew she’d had a lot to drink. Elle’s world shrank down to where it was encompassed by only that spot beside the creek. That moment was the only moment there was. Then it expanded again, and he could see the end of the road and the chemical leak and this animal nonsense. Shrank and expanded. Shrank and expanded.

“Alright then,” he said. “Call me if you ever get in your car.”

“Okay hon.”

Little drops of rain began to fall here and there. They began clumping together into larger drops and before Elle realized, a hard cold shower was coming down. He rolled up his window as a chilly wind blew inside. Just as sleep began to overtake him, the deer began to move.

Like a snake unwinding, the herd wound around itself toward the edge of the road. The rain came down harder and faster, in a gush toward the crevasse between asphalt and hillside. The deer glommed together again where the water pooled.

Elle was hypnotized by the odd parade and didn't hear the honking behind him until the other driver had pulled around Elle's car to face him. The driver continued to honk, then peeled away, slinging mud and wet rocks across the car.

"Fucking asshole."

Water had begun pouring through the twin holes in the windshield as Elle sat and more was beginning to gush through. Tiny cracks made it almost impossible to see through the windshield, but Elle knew he had to move.

With the deer out of the way, he tried to pull forward before bumping into the dead deer in the road. He couldn't see it, but it felt huge against his car. He tried again, backing up then pulling around. Deer mulled and mewed beside the road, all of them—dozens of them—sticking in or near the water as it poured off the road.

Elle had to drive with his head hunkered down, so he could see through the least cracked spot in the glass. As he picked up speed, the water sheered off his car and stopped flowing into the holes where the buck had crashed. Flicks of rain still hit Elle's face here and there.

As he drove, his shoulders aching from being forced into such an odd position, his phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Hon!"

"Shit, what's the matter?"

The hisses and squawks from before had become a constant drone. He could hear the beating of wings. Then a door slammed.

“Honey I knew I should have gotten that roof fixed.”

The noises had stopped suddenly.

“What’s going on? Why’d that noise stop?”

“I came into the bathroom,” Doris said.

Elle could hear a lighter flick. His mom puffed on a cigarette.

“The roof came down,” she said. “I knew it was only a matter of time but I had asked Ernie from down the road to put up a tarp till I could afford a new roof.”

She paused and Elle heard her take another draw from her cigarette.

“Now the tarp has done buckled under all this water and the hole is...well, it’s big.”

Elle could hear her waiting to talk.

“And what, Mom?”

“Well, could you just come up here, honey? All these...damn birds...have gotten into the house and they just refuse to leave. “

“Birds? You mean those geese from before are in the house?”

“Well,” Doris sputtered. “Mostly. Look honey thanks so much. See you soon. I’ll be in the bathroom.”

She hung up.

The road ahead widened as Elle, finally, began to leave the creek.

The yards of waterlogged homes all hosted deer, flocks of birds, squirrels, chipmunks, rabbits. No yard was without them. Owners swatted at the things, which all just stood placidly.

Elle focused his attention on the road as the pulled back onto city streets. Everything seemed normal as he entered the town proper. The sirens had stopped and more cars were out. The rain seemed to slack a bit as he left the cramped confines of the creek.

The turnoff for his mom's neighborhood was close. She lived on the hill right above the creek, a detail that wasn't likely lost on her when she moved in. The road was steep and poorly maintained. It was one of the first roads of many that began to cut straight up the hills around town before being lined with suburban-style homes. Water rushed off it and down the hillside in instant, craggy creeks.

Elle pulled off to the side of the road at the foot of his mom's steep driveway. The trees in front of both neighboring houses were free from critters. Dirt had collected near the base of the house, on the white vinyl siding, where the rain had sheeted down the house. Though the house was a single story, it was tucked deep into the side of a hill and Elle couldn't see the roof from the street.

He took off his remaining jewelry and slicked back his hair with rain water. He looked at himself in the sideview mirror. His makeup was all but gone and could have easily looked like dark circles under his eyes from lack of sleep. In fact, that could have been what it was.

Elle sighed as he looked at the smashed car, forgetting himself for a moment, before striding to the door and banging.

Nobody came, so he banged again.

Off to the side, he saw a window—the kind that opens sideways, with a knob you turn and turn—slowly swivel open. His mother's voice came out of it, though he couldn't see her.

“Elvin? That you? Elvin, honey, I'm still in the john. Come inside, but be careful.”

As the door opened, Elle was first hit with an overwhelming gamey smell. Then the sugary chemical smell from earlier. He briefly wondered if he should be wearing a mask but then just went inside.

The carpeted floor of his mother's living room had sagged into a shallow pit. The roof above was half missing and rain fell into a pond filled with a dozen geese. They were all clumped together, casually standing in the water that came just about halfway to their knees. One looked at Elle with indifference.

"Mom? What the fuck is happening?"

"The roof caved in," Doris said from the bathroom.

One of the geese hissed as Elle walked past the flock, down a short hallway to the bathroom. From the corner of his eye, he thought he saw something smaller than the geese skitter across the dining room table. But when he looked, it was gone.

He knocked lightly on the door.

"Are they gone?" Doris spoke but left the door closed.

"How am I supposed to get them out? It's fine, Mom, they won't hurt you. We'll call animal control. You can stay at my place."

First a pause, then: "They don't like me."

"Well, what'd you do to them?"

Elle regretted saying it immediately.

"DON'T BLAME ME! YOU ALWAYS BLAME ME!"

"Okay, Mom. Okay. We just need to get you out of the bathroom and then out of the house and into the car."

Without speaking, Doris opened the door a crack, looked Elle up and down with one eye, then opened it all the way.

Her perfume, always pungent, was a relief from the mustiness brewing in the goose pond. The aroma usually struck fear in Elle—when he smelled it in his house mysteriously, when someone at the bar wore the same scent—but not now. For a moment, it was comforting.

Each time he saw his mother, Doris thought she looked noticeably older. Her makeup would be the same, her 80s ratted hair the same, some iteration of the same loose sweater. But slightly more fatigued from life. He tried not to let himself notice.

“Can I grab a couple things first,” Doris said, heading to the bedroom.

“Okay, I’ see if I can get animal control here.”

The back of her seemed gaunt, her bones just glued together by tar and bitterness and the occasional salad with thousand island dressing. Her plain back pumps sloshed up droplets of water as she walked.

Elle took out his phone and called 311. A phone tree guided him with practiced niceness to the city office of animal control.

The phone rang over and over.

“Control,” came a woman’s gruff voice, finally.

“Hi, yes. I’d like to report an animal issue.”

“Yes. And?”

“I’m having some trouble with some wild animals. Specifically geese.”

“Geese. Okay.”

The woman paused as if writing it down using only her voice.

“And,” Elle stammered. “*And* these geese. Are. Inside my mother’s house and we’d like to know if someone could come and get them out.”

“*Inside* the house. Okay, that’s a new one.”

The woman repeated Elle’s story to someone else in the office as Elle waited on the phone.

“So...” Elle said. “Is someone going to come?”

“Look sweetie. We’re in a serious animal control emergency right now. This office isn’t equipped for something of this magnitude. We get a yearly budget of about 100 grand a year. Now we’ve got the cops and the fire department out there helping out but things are just gonna take a while.”

“Can I just stop you there? Can I ask exactly what it is that’s going on,” Elle said.

“Let me respond to your question with a question: Do you live on or near a pond, creek, or other body of water?”

“No. Actually, the house has become the body of water. The roof caved in from the rain.”

Elle leaned over a goose and gazed up at the gash in the roof. Rain continued to fall.

“Well, there you go,” the woman said, as if the conversation had come to a neat end.

“Ma’am,” Elle spoke deliberately in an attempt to not sound annoyed. “I have no idea what you mean.”

“The water, hon. Them geese are there because of the water.”

Just then he saw another movement and looked over just in time to see a squirrel crawling up some window drapes and disappear onto the sill.

“And what about the squirrels? There are squirrels in here, too.”

“Them too,” she said. “Honey do you not watch the news? It’s the spill! Animals are following the chemical from the spill, it’s like catnip or squirrel nip or goose nip. The rain has brought it down from the air and into the water. Totally harmless to people, of course. They say it’ll all be over probably by tomorrow.”

Elle wanted to know more, he wanted to leave an address in case they could get to his mom’s house. He wanted a ticket out of town for a night.

He heard a phone ring in the background. The animal control woman left him on hold for a moment.

“Look honey I’m real sorry about your geese but we’ve just gotten a call about a man with an above ground pool full of copperheads and you would not *believe* the coyote issue they’ve got down at the sewage plant so I’m gonna have to let you go.”

The woman hung up before Elle could say anything and just as his mom came back in the room carrying a little hard shell overnight bag.

“So are they coming?”

“Who,” Elle said. “I who coming?”

“Animal control, stupid. I heard you in here talking.”

“Yeah,” Elle lied. “But it could be a while.”

“Well that’s government for you,” Doris sneered.

As they left, a goose hissed as if to say goodbye.

*

The rain had long filled the dent on top of Elle's car and water poured down from it and into the hole in the windshield. Elle's car was slowly filling with water like his mom's house.

"What the hell happened to your car?"

"Deer," Elle said.

"Shame," Doris said.

They eased down the hill as the rain became a torrent. Water gushed on each side of them and as it flowed it picked up more creatures. Deer came down from the hillsides, a pack of raccoons walked two-by-two with the current. Some of the smaller animals, the chipmunks and squirrels, lost their footing and cascaded downhill through the water.

"What in the world," Doris said.

Traffic had come to a near standstill where Doris's street met the main road. Water flowed, always downhill, toward the river. Everything headed toward the river.

"What should we do," Doris asked, lighting a cigarette.

"I guess we should go where the traffic goes, I don't think we have a choice."

They sat, getting slowly soaked through the windshield and inching toward the center of town. Rodents and birds smacked the top and sides of the car as they waited. Deer would brush past here and there.

The radio said nothing special. "Safe for humans," and "This too shall pass."

Elle had no one to call and discuss the insanity and he knew his mother didn't either.

As they neared the river, the rain began to lighten. People started to get out of their cars.

“Should we get out,” Doris asked.

Elle shrugged and opened his door. They walked side-by-side to the riverbank. Others were there, couples and children and individuals. No one appeared sure about much except that this is where they were supposed to be.

Huge rocks lined the bank of the river. Some people took the narrow, ancient staircase to the water while others scaled the rocks. Doris asked if they could take the stairs and Elle obliged. As they reached the bottom, the candy-chemical smell that had never left Elle’s nostrils became just a candy smell. The rain had stopped by the time they reached the bottom.

“Hey Elvin!”

Ailene was there. She sat on a rock beside Shelly, who waved. Their feet hung in the frigid water.

“Come sit with us! Hey Doris!”

Shelly waved.

Elle looked at his mom, who shrugged. Arm-in-arm, they sat together and put their feet in and the water was fine.

Hollowed

“Where have you been all day?”

On the couch, Ben’s mom has just woken up and struggles to get a Pall Mall out of a pack. The daytime talk show *Whose Your Daddy Is?* blares from an old tube TV atop an even older, broken, console model.

“I was in school, Mom. It’s Friday.”

“Oh, sorry baby,” she lights her cigarette and rubs sleep from her eyes, “I thought it was Saturday. Damn! Friday? Really?”

“Yeah, it’s Friday,” he puts down his backpack and kicks off his shoes.

Ben and Traci live in their little house together, just the two of them, and have for as long as Ben’s been alive. His dad used to live there, too, but that was before Ben was born. Ben’s Aunt Misti lives beside them and his grandma lives on the other side. Like huts in a village, their three homes make one unit.

“Honey, do me a favor and run to Misti’s and see if she’s got any smokes to spare.”

Ben is in the kitchen making himself a sandwich - peanut butter, jelly and honey on white bread.

“Alright!” He yells, and starts making another sandwich. He’s been eating a lot lately. His mom says it’s because he’s growing.

Both sandwiches in hand, Ben walks out of the house toward his aunt’s. Misti and Traci’s homes are identical – built ages ago for coal miners – except Misti’s house has a metal fence around it. They are are connected by a footpath of flat rocks from the creek at the

bottom of the hill. Ben hops from rock to rock and through the metal gate to Misti's place. He walks in without knocking.

"Mist?" he yells.

The house smells of potpourri - clove and cinnamon and cedar - and Pine-Sol.

"Back here, Benj."

Ben follows his aunt's voice to the kitchen. Misti is on her hands-and-knees scrubbing the linoleum floors, her hair held back in a paisley kerchief. Without her brown hair showing, Misti could be Traci's twin, the brunette to Traci's blond. Misti puts her scrub brush into a bucket. She takes a smoldering cigarette from an ashtray on the counter and takes a deep drag.

"Whatcha up to, baby?" She asks, holding in the smoke.

"Mom wants to bum some smokes," he says.

He runs his finger along the coarsening fuzz on his cheek and shifts his weight from foot to foot absent-mindedly. Misti puts her cigarette back on the ashtray.

"Alright, give her these," she says and empties half a pack of Pall Malls onto the counter, handing Ben what remains of the pack. "Tell her I'll be over in a little bit."

"Are we playing cards tonight?"

"Your mama and I got something to talk about and I'm bringing dinner."

"Talk about what?"

"Nunya. Now take those to your mom, git."

Ben shrugs and walks out the back door of Misti's kitchen, around back and into an identical door to his own kitchen.

“Did she give you some smokes?”

“Yeah,” Ben says and throws the cigarettes at the coffee table.

“What is your problem? Was walking across the yard that hard?”

“No. Is it that hard for you?”

“Look Benji, kids do their mamas favors. That’s their job,” she says, trying to make him laugh. “What has gotten into you, kiddo?”

“What do you and Aunt Misti have to talk about tonight?”

Their eyes are level. He’s just about her height, now. She pushes his scraggly bangs from his face and takes a long drag from a cigarette.

“Nothing honey,” she says, her voice as gentle as she can make it, “she’s just...having some man trouble she wants to talk to me about.”

Ben hangs his head and hair falls back into his face. He’s heard about man trouble since he was a little boy. If his mom and Misti weren’t talking about men on reality TV they were talking about the lack of men in their own lives. But neither of them ever seemed to try too hard to go out and find one. And if they weren’t talking about that, they were talking about Ben’s dad being a deadbeat who left before Ben was even born.

“Go get washed up for dinner, baby. And you’re eating every bit of the casserole Aunt Misti’s bringing over no matter how many sandwiches you ate.”

She smiles at him, too old to hug and too young to hear real honesty. The truth is, Misti’s not coming over to talk about her own man trouble, she’s coming to talk about Traci’s.

Alone again, Traci turns her attention back to the television. *Reecie Braggart’s Xtreme Justice* is on, one of her favorites. Today’s episode centers on a family of pool cleaners in

central Florida whose toddler son went missing for two weeks and was later found gagged, quartered and lodged in the family's own home pool filtration unit.

Reecie: *You mean to tell me...*

Mother: *(sobbing)*

Reecie: *Don't give me those bull hockey alligator tears, missy, I smell a rat in*

Denmark, Lady! I smell a rat in Denmark! Now tell me how Chambly

Meester got into that filtration unit! (she pauses) After this!

The camera zooms onto Reecie Braggart's pursed face and she lifts a tube of hemorrhoid cream into view and begins to tout its benefits.

Without knocking, Misti walks in the front door.

"Hey Trace. You wanna eat now or later," Misti asks, clutching a casserole dish. "Oh, you're watching *Reecie*? I was too, but I've seen this one. Where's Benji?"

"He's upstairs."

"Did you tell him, yet?" Misti's voice is hushed.

Traci sits upright and shuts off the television. She whisper-yells at Misti, "No, I didn't. And you ain't going to either. I'll tell him when I have to."

"Well, honey, that's gonna be real soon because you know daggone well Big Ben's gonna come straight for his son as soon as he gets released."

"We don't know that, Misti."

"Suit yourself. But don't be surprised when there's a knock on that door and you-know-who waltzes in like he never left."

Just then, there is a knock on the door. They're both jolted, their heads twist toward the door. It's their mother. She closes the door behind her with the finesse of a woman who's kept a home all her life.

"Did you tell him, yet?" their mother beams as if she's looking forward to Big Ben's homecoming. Traci glares at her. "I know Ben's done bad, baby, but a boy needs a man around. Besides, maybe he's changed."

The three of them whisper back and forth. Traci makes her case for keeping the boy in the dark and her mother coos, soothing her daughter with nods and *I know*s. Ben appears from his bedroom and stands to their side without any of them noticing. He just watches for a moment, not hearing their words so much as how they're being spoken.

"Why are you guys whispering?"

Smiles flash onto all their faces, their eyes wide, their necks rod-straight.

"How's my favorite grandbaby?"

"Hey darlin', you ready to eat? I brought casserole."

"Ben, honey, set the table for us, will ya?"

Ben rolls his eyes, accustomed to being ignored.

In the kitchen, Misti scoops out dense, bready casserole for each of them. Traci tosses a salad of iceberg lettuce, shreds of carrot and ranch dressing. Their mother goes behind them picking up crumbs, adjusting place mats, cleaning before dinner even begins.

Over icy glasses of soda and mouthfuls of lettuce, they each recount the day. Ben does the impression they all love of his nerdy algebra teacher. Traci and Misti discuss what they saw

on NewzMAX that day, their favorite channel and home to Reecie Braggart. Grandma tells them about a show she watched called *Death Row Weddings*.

They are cocooned in their world, their village, their fort atop a hill.

After dinner, they clean. They remove place mats, wipe the table and ready it for a game of cards -- everything practiced, everything assumed. Grandma is about to deal - seven cards each – for rummy, when Ben speaks.

“You know, I think I’m gonna ride my bike down to Jason’s. See what he’s doing.”

“Honey,” says his mom, “you don’t want to play rummy with us? It’s Friday night...”

“Yeah. I wanna hang out with Jason.”

“Go’on and see your friend. You’re too old to be hanging out with a bunch of old ladies, anyway,” says his grandma.

“Speak for yourself,” Misti snorts.

The three women look at him leave, then at each other. They are statues cut by different sculptors with the same intent. They start the game without speaking, but they’re all thinking the same thing.

“He looks just like his father,” Grandma says, breaking the silence. Misti looks at Traci, whose eyes remain glued to her cards.

“I know,” she says, laying down a book.

“But you’re not gonna tell him?” Traci’s mother prods her, delicately.

“I’ll tell him when I have to,” Traci reiterates and discards.

“Traci, for all you know, you ain’t even gonna have to tell him,” Misti says.

“And what does that mean?”

“What she means is that Big Ben might do the telling for you,” Grandma says. “Rummy.”

Grandma excuses herself to use the little old lady’s room. Misti and Traci glare as she gets up, miffed that they still can’t beat their mother.

Ben leaves the house through the front door so he doesn’t look suspicious. He’s really going around back to Misti’s kitchen. He eases open the storm door so it doesn’t squeak and slinks inside. From the counter, he takes one of the Pall Malls, then another, and puts them into the pocket of his shirt.

Back outside, he walks the twenty-seven stairs down the hill. He counts them as he goes, like he has since he was little. He rides his bike to a bend in the creek where he knows he can’t be seen from the house. He lights a cigarette and inhales deeply, leaning against a tree like a caricature of a Marlboro ad. The creek is much higher than usual from a fall downpour. Everything is chilly and wet and starting to decay. Ben closes his eyes, smoking and listening to the water rush over rocks. He doesn’t hear the sound of an engine idling just up the road. He doesn’t hear the screech of the old engine shutting off, the opening and slamming of a rusty door or footsteps coming toward him. He only hears the sheering water and the burning embers of his cigarette.

“Shouldn’t smoke, you know. Those things are poison.”

Ben’s foggy blue eyes snap open. On the creek bank above him is a man around six feet tall, with dirty blond hair and a nervous grin. Ben reflexively flicks the cigarette into the creek.

“Well, don’t poison the creek, too, boy,” the man laughs.

The man offers Ben a hand up the bank, but he doesn't take it. He heaves himself up without help, brushes some dirt off his jeans and starts to get back on his bike.

"Where you going off to so fast, there, buddy?"

"Uhh," Ben's voice cracks, he coughs to cover it up, "I gotta get home. I'm expected at home."

"Expected, huh? You always do everything that's expected?" The man stands in front of Ben's bike, blocking the way.

"No..."

"Why don't you let me give you a ride? You can throw your bike in the back of my truck.

"My name's Ben."

The man offers Ben his hand. It is short and wide like a boxer's.

"It's not like he did it on purpose, Traci."

Misti and Traci are on the couch, the TV is tuned to NewzMAX. Grandma is in the kitchen doing dishes. She was the final winner at rummy and - as her prize - insisted Traci let her be the one to clean.

"I mean, he's done his time and maybe that's that. Maybe things can get better now," Misti continues.

"One: we're divorced, so they ain't getting better between the two of us. Two: Big Ben left before Benji was even born so I don't know how things between two people've never met can be *better* and three: can we just watch TV, please? *Mason/Dixon* is on."

Two men on a split screen banter about Cash-4-Aliens, legislation up for debate in the Idaho statehouse. Mason thinks it's a waste of taxpayer money and Dixon thinks that when people start turning in illegals for cash, the flagging Idaho economy will turn around from the cash influx and from the return of jobs for native Idahoans.

"That's why I can't find a damn job, I think they should pass it," Traci says.

"Aliens?" Misti sits up, laughing at her sister, "When was the last time you saw a Mexican around here? Closest thing we got to minorities is the miners coming home covered in coal dust, ha!"

"They're here. And even if they aren't, they're coming. It's the whole country that needs getting rid of them, you know. What hurts Idaho hurts everybody. We're all hurting."

"I suppose. But I can still try to get you that cashier job at the Shop-a-Minit if you want."

Traci glares at Misti. The subject drops. They sit in silence, watching the two heads on TV gobble back and forth. When *Mason/Dixon* ends, Misti looks at Traci expecting her to change the channel. Traci doesn't move, her eyes are glazed and far off. Opening credits for the next program begin.

"Aren't you gonna change the station?"

Traci doesn't move.

"Traci, you hate *Pedo-Files*. Aren't you gonna change the channel? Hello?"

Traci blinks slowly and looks at her sister without moving her head. She has a pained look and finally, like a possessed woman, says, "Misti. I never told Ben I was pregnant. He left without even knowing."

“NO!” Misti says, nearly choking on her own surprise.

“I just, I thought he was no good! I wasn’t sure I wanted him around a kid, while he laid around the house all day drinking Budweiser.”

Grandma comes around the corner, her eyes smoldering.

“You,” she says, shaking her finger, “what makes you any better? How many months have you been sitting on that couch watching talk shows? Who are you to judge?”

“Mama, you know we got all them Mexicans taking our jobs and the black single mothers stealing our social security! And besides,” she says, suddenly becoming suspicious, “why are you taking up for Big Ben so much all of a sudden, huh?”

“I...I think Benji needs a daddy. And I knew you didn’t tell him you was pregnant the moment you kicked him out. You was just afraid! Big Ben is gonna be a good daddy to Benji! I think so and he thinks so.”

“Who?” Traci’s voice is venom, “Who is *he*? Big Ben? He thinks he’ll be a good daddy? And how do you know that? You been talking to him?”

“I have. A little,” Grandma’s finally lifts her eyes from the shag carpet, she starts to plead, “Baby, I had such a hard time after your daddy left and I just know ya’ll would’ve turned out happier if he’d been around. And Benji is a boy, baby, a boy needs a daddy even more than the two of you did. At first I just sent him postcards telling him about his son and then when I realized he was due for release, I started speaking to him on the phone.” Grandma looks down, again speaking at the floor, “And...I called him while we were playing rummy and told him maybe he should drive over and talk to Benji while he's out.”

Misti looks away.

“You...what?” Traci screams.

“Honey, I thought if they met when you weren’t around, then Benji could make his own mind up about his daddy. I’m sorry, baby, I probably shouldn’t’ve butted in, but...”

“If I can’t find Benji,” she cuts off her mother through clenched teeth, “I’m blaming you. Now, since ya’ll are so close, can you tell me where Big Ben’s staying?”

Inside the truck, Ben can feel his feet getting colder through his sneakers. There is only bare metal on the floor and wind rushes in through gaps in the door. He and Ben -- the other Ben, Big Ben -- aren’t driving in the direction of the house. They’re driving the other way, out of the hollow, toward the highway.

“Lemme see your driver’s license, then,” Benji demands after a long silence.

“I, look, I probably shouldn’t be driving this truck, I, its my buddy’s” he stammers.

“So you’ve got no license,” Benji spouts, counting on his fingers, “no other IDs and you just got out of jail? But you’re my daddy come to save me?”

“I, hey, I never said you needed saving. I came to talk to you, meet my son.”

“Well, nice to meet ya, please take me home now,” Benji slumps deep into the hard, old truck seat. He folds his arms theatrically.

“You gonna kill me and chuck me into the river, now,” he asks, looking out the window.

Big Ben is silent, beguiled. The past thirteen years have taught him a lot of things, but how to deal with kids is not one of them. The burst of autumn color has come and gone and the scene before them is all brown. The light has begun to dwindle, dusk deepening along with their silence.

“You know,” Big Ben says, “not everybody is trying to kill you. Is it that hard to believe somebody -- your own daddy -- would want to meet you?”

“Not everybody just got out of jail, either.”

“That’s true, I guess. Look, there are things I want to teach you. Things I’ve learned, since I was your age, since I was in lock-up. I want to be a father to you.”

Benji clucks.

“No,” Big Ben says, “no. I’m not gonna just tell you. I’m gonna show you.” Just past the highway entrance, Big Ben slams the brakes and throws the car in reverse. Benji is tossed, first against the dash and then back against the rear window.

“What, the fuck...?”

“Don’t cuss at me, boy,” Big Ben yells as he roars onto the highway, the gas pedal floored, “don’t you wanna live a little? Hooooooooohoo!”

In spite of himself, Benji smiles. He puts on his seat belt, just in case.

They fly down the highway, passing old farmhouses and roadsigns: *Horton Motor Inn; Taxidermy, Fireworks, Fuel; Ray Ray’s Stop’n’Shop*. Few cars are out, not many people use this highway for travel anymore. It is just them and hulking 18-wheelers.

“So, what’d you do to get sent to jail?” Benji asks, his voice soft and doughy.

Big Ben looks at him. He starts to answer, once or twice, but can’t find the words.

“Your mama never told you?” he asks eventually.

“No. All she ever told me was that you took off after she told you I was coming. And that you went to jail shortly after.”

At an exit Benji has never noticed before, right before the road curves around a mountain, they leave the highway. Benji is struck by how dark it has become as Big Ben turns the truck up a gravel road. They follow a black crevice of a creek into the gulf between looming hills.

Big Ben bites his bottom lip and his knuckles tighten around the wheel.

“So, she told you that, huh?”

“Yeah. Why?” Benji is afraid to hear the answer and feels the kind of discomfort he gets when he sees other families quarreling, like he’s walked into someone else’s private moment and can’t get away.

“Look, I’m sure your mama has her reasons for telling you what she told you but the truth of the matter is that I never even knew you was coming until you was nearly a year old. Honest. And I was already locked up at Mt. Olive by that time. Your mama’s the one who wanted me outta the house. She said I was no good and I’ll admit I should’ve had a job. But I would have if I’d known you was coming. But she kicked me out one night and I was so down and out about it. And a couple days later I was drunk and driving home from the bar and there was a little girl come out of nowhere and the next thing I knew I was getting hauled off.”

“So you killed her?” Benji asks, his eyes wide.

Big Ben is spent, exhausted from recounting the story he’d gone over and over in his head for years, alone with his thoughts.

“I spent fourteen years in jail thinking about that little girl and of you, and yes...”

Benji turns cold, but knows that if there is anything else he wants to know, now is the time to ask. His stomach drops as the hill they're climbing turns to a steep dip back down into the hollow.

"So why didn't you ever write me? Or try to call?"

"I did!" Big Ben yells, a vein throbs in his forehead, "your mama didn't want me having nothing to do with you so I eventually gave up."

"So how'd you know to come find me? How'd you know who I was back by the creek?"

"Your grandma sent me pictures. She called me and told me you was outside riding your bicycle tonight and so I came to talk to you away from your mama."

"My grandma did that?"

"Your grandma," Big Ben says, "she says you need a daddy and I'm liable to agree with her."

Back at the bottom of the hollow, they pull off into a dirt drive that leads to an old, wooden shack. Benji can barely make it out. Between the hills the darkness is dense and enveloping.

"Here we are," Big Ben says.

"What's here?"

"This is where your granddaddy lived," Big Ben says.

"You mean your dad?" Benji asks.

"That'd be your granddaddy, wouldn't it?"

Inside the cabin, by the oily light of a hurricane lamp, Benji plays with an old man's head sculpted in pottery. Its eyes are shards of old blue tile glued together like irises, its face glazed in whitish peach.

"What was he like, your daddy?" Benji asks, putting down the head and running his fingers across a dirty plywood shelf filled with other sculptures of animals and musty books.

"He was an honorable man, he had his convictions. Not all of them good," Big Ben says while rifling through the drawer of a ramshackle old desk.

"Why'd he live out here? Was he a crazy woods person? Mom says there is a crazy woods man over the hill from us who I'm supposed to stay away from."

"Kinda," says Big Ben.

"Did he raise you here? Is this where you been since you got outta the clink?"

Big Ben rolls his eyes at the word *clink*. "Daddy raised me in town. And I've only been out two days. I'm staying with an old buddy of mine and his wife. That's his truck I'm driving. But I think I might just move in here, yeah. It's mine, now, after all. Has been for a while."

Big Ben finds the old photographs he's been searching for. He hands one of them – a yellowing, black and white one – to his son. It is a man in a white sheet, a pointy-headed ghost in front of a burning cross. If Benji didn't know what the costume meant, he might have found it comical: a man in a sheet, eye holes cut out, a pointy white hat. It could have been a joke.

Benji stares at the picture, at the man he realizes is his father's father. His grandfather the Klansman. He feels like he's seeing something he isn't supposed to. Sure, he thinks, his friends say racist jokes, his mom blames black and Mexican welfare mothers for practically every one of her problems...but this is the real deal.

“I just wanna air the family sheets,” Big Ben says, chuckling. “That was him way back, before I was even born. Once everybody quit that Klan shit around here, he stopped wearing the clothes but never changed what he believed. He built this cabin a couple years before I got locked up. He wanted to depend on hisself and not have to live the way other people wanted him to. Since Mama was long dead, it was just him, here at this cabin, hunting and fishing and growing his own food. Cooked it on that iron stove over there. Never really saw nobody anymore, and he died doing just that. The only reason they found him is ‘cause a few days after he passed, a couple kids was out here looking to raid hunting cabins or cook up some tweak or something and there he was, dead in the back yard.”

Big Ben shuffles through the other pictures, skipping some and lingering on others. He hands the stack to Benji. There’s one of his grandfather holding a hoe beside a patch of corn, one with him holding up the huge, antlered head of a deer, one where he smokes a filterless cigarette, his grandfather sculpting a clay pot.

“So he came out here because he hated people so much?” Benji asks.

“Yeah, yes and no. He came out here because he didn’t belong around people, didn’t like TV and computers and Bible thumpers and highways. I don’t feel driven out here like Daddy did, just drawn to it. I don’t hate nobody the way he did. Living in jail with all them people Daddy raised me to hate, I learned the hard way that we’re all in this life together.”

Benji nods, slowly, thoughtfully.

“What time is it?” Ben realizes he’s been gone a long time.

“Not sure,” his daddy says, “getting late I suppose.”

“I need to call Mom.”

“Oh, hell, there ain’t no phone service out here, kid.”

“Well, she thinks I’m at Jason’s but I think you should take me home soon anyway,”

Benji says.

Big Ben agrees.

“Okay, I don’t wanna step on nobody’s toes two days out. We can come back in a couple days.”

They start putting things back where they found them when there is a pounding on the door. The walls shudder.

“Ben! Open this door! I know you’re in there, Mama said you was gonna start staying in this piece of garbage...”

Leaving Misti and her mother at home, Traci sped to her former father-in-law’s cabin, stopping along the way to pick up Dusty Linden, an old friend who’d attended their wedding. He was also the biggest guy Traci could think of who’d go with her.

“Ben,” Dusty says to the door, playing good cop, “Ben, buddy, it’s Dusty. Been a while my man! Why don’t you open the door and lemme see that ugly face ‘a yours.”

“Benji, baby, are you in there with him? Is he holding you in there against your will? You don’t have to stay in there, baby doll, we’re here to take you back home.”

The door slowly opens. Big Ben stands there, perplexed. Traci, too, looks confused. She sees the man she was once married to: lean, blue-eyed and bent a little at the upper back. Not the muscle-bound, blood-thirsty animal she'd imagined prison had made him.

“You...” she shakes off her confusion like a head full of snowflakes, “you give me back my son, you damn menace!”

Big Ben looks even more confused.

“Menace,” he says, “well nice seeing you too darlin’! What is this? Dusty Linden? What do you have going on here, Traci?”

“Me,” she says, indignant, “Me? What the hell are you doing taking my son to this beat up shotgun shack in the middle of a crick nobody’s ever heard of, hm?”

Traci sticks her head in the door and sees Benji peering at them, trying to figure out what’s going to happen next, where he fits into this.

“Benji, honey, come here,” Traci says, sticking an arm out towards him. Benji takes a few steps toward his mother, who beckons closer.

“Do it, Dusty!” Traci yells. The boulder of a man wedges himself into the cabin entrance between Big Ben and Benji.

“Mom! What are you doing, why are you acting like this?” Benji asks, stepping closer to his mother, “what’s going on?”

Without saying a word, Traci grabs her son by the wrist and yanks him out of the cabin, he nearly falls down the big stones that serve as front steps. She drags him to the car, opens the back door and pushes him inside. He tries to get out but she’s already thought to click the child locks. He lets out a muffled yell and jiggles the handle some more.

“What in God’s name? This is freakin’ insane,” Big Ben yells, pinned to the front door by Dusty.

“Benny, I’m sorry I had to do this,” Dusty says, his voice too tiny for his body. “Traci was in hysterics when she come over asking for my help and lord knows jail’s done messed up the heads of other guys I know. Guys bigger’n you.”

“C’mon Dusty!” Traci yells and climbs into the driver’s seat, pushing Benji back as he tries to get out through the front.

Dusty starts to back away from the house toward the car.

“Stay Ben, just, stay.” Getting in the car, Dusty waves goodbye to Big Ben. “Well,” he stutters, “it was nice seeing you, even under the circumstance.”

Her jaw set and eyes ablaze, Traci peels away, flinging dirt and rocks at Big Ben. On the verge of tears, Benji looks out the back window through the darkness at his father. He watches his him slowly turn and go back inside the cabin. He thinks it’ll be a long time before they see each other again. In fact, he’s pretty sure it will be.