

Phosphoria

By

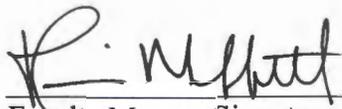
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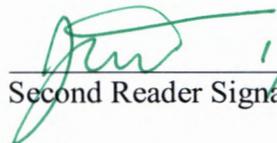
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Abstract

Phosphoria is a short story collection consisting of nine stories with the common themes of alienation and marginalization, often but not always a product of the characters' own efforts and ennui. The majority of the action in these stories happens in and around Mulberry, a small rural community in Central Florida with a depressed phosphate industry, low education standards, and a general sense of malaise, unconquerable and unchanging despite the buried desires of the characters. The actual community of Phosphoria was a small mining encampment located approximately seven miles from Mulberry, the evidence of which is still visible today. The area is very rural.

The goal of the author was to write quiet, character-driven stories. Protagonists are usually given an opportunity to affect their circumstances through choice, and while they often justify their negative actions, there is usually an awareness of moral failure by the end of each narrative. While many of the subjects are of a dark or negative nature, it is his desire that, whenever possible, they be read as hopeful if not always positive. Hence the final story, intended as an optimistic (if wobbly) look into the future of one of the native sons of Mulberry.

The author would like to express his deep appreciation to the residents of the town of Mulberry, several of whom were integral to the construction of this manuscript.

The Collector

Twice before Harold Lyle had been caught adding to his collection of silences. The first was fifteen years ago when he had just gotten back from Iraq and had yet to start to think of what he was doing as collecting, well before he'd met Portia when they were both working for Heidelman's. He was still in Ogden then. The house he went into was one of those strange boxes, a brown, ugly cottage with no front windows and no friendly character. The owner had left their front door open, an invitation to anybody walking by, which happened to be Harold on his way to buy cigarettes. He stood in the front door for only long enough to let his eyes adjust to the darkness, and with a shiver, crossed the threshold into the pleasant coolness within. The interior walls of the house were lined with boxes of all sizes, a reinforced wall of cardboard the purpose of which Harold couldn't determine. In the center was an overstuffed chair, a folding TV table with an equally overstuffed ashtray sitting on it, and a bronze floor lamp with no shade, its cord winding across the floor and fished between the boxes that made up the makeshift wall, presumably to a plug. He was trespassing, but he didn't care about that. It was so quiet, he could hear himself breathing, and he felt a calm descend over him. He wanted to sit in this chair. Had it not smelled like animal droppings, he would have. When his eyes had adjusted to the point he could make out details, he saw a field of dog turds, some dry and grafted to the carpet, others wet and glistening, among the cardboard boxes and stacks of newspaper. The stench turned his stomach—he was poor himself but refused to live in squalor—and he left the shack before he lost his breakfast and added to the

stink. At the door he bumped into the occupant, an ancient brown piece of jerky in a stained lime tracksuit. She was carrying a plastic bag from the very convenience store he had intended to patronize for his smokes, and, surprised to find a stranger in her home, snarled and howled at him until he'd beat feet and disappeared around the block. Later, he dreamed about that house—its absolute stillness—and made a decision to experience that feeling as often as he could. Only without the filth and the stench and the oddity of the house is Ogden.

The second time was a year or so later when Harold was still in Utah, though he was in Provo by this time. It would still be some years before he stopped drinking. When he was able to collect silences the need for liquor was overruled, but Harold worked with his hands and therefor life for him could be noisy. He'd taken contract work for a company tasked with replacing the insulation in the city library, and quite by accident, had fallen asleep in a ceiling crawlspace. The foreman assumed Harold had walked off the job. Instead, Harold woke confused and cotton-mouthed and cramped hours after the library had been shuttered. Harold spent the night tiptoeing through the stacks, doing his very best to let the silence soak into his bones, listening to the blood in his ears. A startled librarian found him the next morning curled up in the beanbag chairs of the Story Circle Children's Room, snoring and looking like a greasy interloper in the pile of bright reds and blues and yellows.

He was supposed to go to court over that one. His public defender even managed to get the charge lowered from breaking and entering to trespassing—the venerable old judge had been in Vietnam and took pity—but he decided the

mountains of Utah suited him about as much as the possibility of a jail stint for trespassing, so he left them both behind and went to Tampa, where a friend of his from the service said he could get him a job making manufactured homes.

Whisky Jack made cabinets and told him he'd have more work than he could handle, unaware of the embezzlement charges his company's board would be facing right about the time Harold was on the Greyhound. He'd never been to Tampa, but for those sixty-three hours on the bus he built it into a city of gold and sunshine between hidden swallows from a bottle of celebratory Diplomático. Add a cigar to this and that's what Tampa tasted like, he thought.

It was on his way to Florida he decided to start his collection, listening to the hum of the bus in the middle of the night, cocooned in his seat, and while they stopped in Chesterfield to refuel, on a whim he nabbed an old Trapper Keeper someone had left on a bench at the station. It had a galloping brown horse on the front and a name, "Macey," written in permanent marker on the interior cover and a quarter ream of loose-leaf, wide-ruled notebook paper clipped inside. Eventually Harold would feel silly walking around with a little girl's notebook and would cover it in silver tape. It looked more like a jobsite notebook than something a child might carry. He'd even fashioned a pocket to hold a stubby pencil so he always had something handy to scribble a new addition.

If it happened today, he would never count the dog-turd house as a part of his collection, he wasn't in the house long enough to enjoy the silence. But it was the progenitor of his collection, the Alpha. It needed to be included. And the Provo library was more of a happy accident than a deliberate addition. He figured

that if a coin collector was handed a 1933 double eagle as change for a taco, he'd damn well add it to his collection and call it a day. Why couldn't he do the same? So he wrote them both in the Trapper Keeper along with a few other instances of silence he pulled through his bleary memory. Those entries looked puny on the page, and he thumbed the blank paper and resigned to think harder about it when he got to Tampa. Regardless, his collection was started.

Whisky Jack felt guilty there's was no job for Harold in Tampa, and got him a lead on a warehouse job in Mulberry forty minutes away. It was working for Winn Dixie in their distribution warehouse. His job was to move product from the pallets to a roller conveyer and from the conveyer onto the back of trucks. He would have hated it and quit except that's where he met Portia, a meaty forklift operator twenty years his senior. Portia was from Austria though she'd been in the States many years. She had a thick neck and remarkably smooth skin for a woman in her fifties, and she never smiled or frowned so it took Harold a while to get a read on her. Later, he discovered she made love like she worked a forklift. She was efficient and used the fewest amount of movements necessary to get the job done. Harold fell in love after a brief courtship, and they moved into together. Or rather, he moved into her place, a single bedroom apartment in a depressed part of town. She kept the place neat and expected him to do the same. It was decorated with a rooster motif.

"No more boozing or you're out," she told him after he came home drunk after a night at the bowling alley and probably accidentally kicked over one of her favorite ceramic roosters, a red and green monstrosity she had named Old Boy.

He'd stood in front of her with the maroon-colored comb in the palm of his hand, dumbfounded, trying to comprehend how it had happened. She didn't yell, nor would she need to. She extracted a promise from him to give up drinking or else, and after he'd agreed she took him to bed and gave him an old fashioned as a sort of reward for his effort, catching the mess in a washrag and rinsing it out in the sink.

It had been harder to stop than he thought. After the second broken rooster, she kicked him out for the night. He slept in front of the door and woke with the doormat on top of him. It had been chilly, and he must have pulled it over himself for warmth. He begged Portia to reconsider. She eventually agreed and took him back, this time without the handjob.

There was no third rooster. Instead, when Portia sensed he had grown restless and might drink again, she sat him down.

"You are drinking too much," she said, but he couldn't tell her why. Certainly nothing about his years in the army.

"You need a hobby," she decided. "Like me with my roosters."

"I got a hobby," he told her. Then he showed her the Trapper Keeper before he could stop himself.

Harold felt the tears coming, like he'd been clogged by his secret and was now unblocked. He couldn't stop himself. While he blubbered and snuffled, unable to think of a sensible way to explain away his inclinations, Portia leafed through the makeshift notebook and ran her finger down the pages the same way one might look up the number for a plumber or an exterminator.

“There are many entries here,” Portia said at last. It was her habit to state the obvious and wait for a response. No questions necessary, just plant the seed and see what grows. “Your shirt is brown,” she might say when she didn’t like the clothes he was wearing. Or, “Here is Millirahmstrudel,” when she wanted his opinion on her cooking. Harold had heard her do this so many times, he wondered if it was her way of translating aloud from German to English.

But this time no seed sprouted. He didn’t know why he had a collection of silences in a battered Trapper Keeper any more than he knew why he woke up the same time every day without the help of an alarm clock.

When she finally lifted her head from the notebook, Harold saw something he didn’t expect. He saw understanding. Portia hadn’t looked at him like he was peculiar or damaged.

“This is your collection,” she said.

“Yeah,” he said, sniffing.

“It is not yet complete,” she said.

He shrugged.

“You are better when you write of these silences in your collection.”

Harold felt like it was almost a command. He nodded both in confirmation and acquiescence.

She shut the Trapper Keeper. “Then it is my belief that you must add to your collection. That is the solution to our problem.”

It was a relief to Harold that Portia was willing to share some of the burden, and he sighed raggedly and wiped his nose on his hand. How long had it

been since he cried? Certainly not since returning from the war. He couldn't recall exactly, but he wished he hadn't waited so long.

“That is snot on the back of your hand,” she said, and handed him a Kleenex.

For a while, life got a little more exciting for Harold.

Portia went to the Rite Aid and bought him a proper notebook and pen. She had to visit three different locations to find what she was looking for, and eventually settled on a ledger-style notebook with a marbled brown faux-leather cover. It had a red ribbon bookmark sprouting from the spine to hold his place, just like in a Bible. There was no loop to keep a pen handy, so she purchased a box of fifty blue Bic ballpoints. She gave him two and put away the rest.

On the front page he wrote “SILENCES” in capital letters, and under, “Harold Lyle, Collector.” He liked the sound of it, as if he was a museum curator.

Then came the transcription work. Each night after dinner, once dishes were done and put away, he sat at the small table in the little dining nook, writing in block letters so that it stayed legible and neat. He was faithful in his reproduction of the entries except for the spelling errors. “You're using the wrong there,” Portia had to keep telling him. “That should be corrected,” pointing at the mistakes with a plump, smooth finger. Writing was never his strong point, nor was it the purpose of the collection, but she had done so much to help, he fixed each error dutifully and without complaint.

Two weeks and almost a hundred entries later, he was finished. Each record had a date, a location, and an approximate duration of silence. Most had a brief description written next to them. A/C noise or smells dusty or could hibernate like a bear here. He recalled many of them vividly, and he allowed himself to flesh out the details where he could. “Like a coin collector polishing his money,” Harold said. He needed a rating system and settled on stars because he couldn’t think of anything else. One star for the most fleeting or interrupted silences, five stars for the quietest or most relaxing. Portia had to go to the Michaels over in Lakeland to find the foil adhesive kind, but they both agreed it was worth the trip.

Harold found he liked to tilt the pages back and forth to catch the light from the inexpensive chandelier that hung over the table. It almost made the stars twinkle.

“That is for visual interest,” Portia said.

It took six weeks for Harold to build the cocoon.

The warehouse was big which gave him a lot of choices. He settled on a crawlspace nobody paid any attention to, accessible via a hatch next to Returns and Reprocessing. It was where Portia parked her forklift when she wasn’t using it, conveniently blocking the view of the hatch. Over those first weeks, he lined the walls with paper towels, careful to take only a few rolls at a time. Harold didn’t think a supervisor would notice a few paper towels were missing, but Portia thought it was better to be safe. In celebration of their one year anniversary

together, Portia stuck her forks through a crate box of two-ply toilet paper—the good stuff—rendering it unsalable. “That is my mistake,” she told the floor supervisor and nodded at Harold when he was instructed to salvage what he could and dispose of the rest in the dumpsters.

Each day, the warehouse shut down forty-five minutes for lunch, and Harold would enter the crawlspace. He was careful not to rip the cushions of paper goods. He would lie on his back, a single roll of paper towels with the cellophane removed as a pillow, and wait for Portia to shut the door, sealing him inside. She acted as lookout and ate Wurstsemmel with Gurkerl perched on her forklift. A few minutes before break was over, she would knock on the hatch, which was Harold’s signal to switch on a pen light that dangled by a piece of yellow packing strap above him in the dark. He used the remaining time to write his notes into the collection, his pages shining with stars, and would wait for Portia’s second knock, letting him know the coast was clear.

Harold got used to going without lunch and wouldn’t even eat it on the weekends, though he more than made up for it at dinner.

Their ritual could have lasted indefinitely had it not been for a particularly nasty influenza season. “It is unwise to do it without me,” Portia groaned, but after a week of working while she was waylaid by her flu, his palms started to itch in a way that scratching didn’t solve. He tried to make up for it by drawing the curtains at night and sitting in the middle of the living room floor. Covered in blankets with a wobbly stack of decorative pillows over his head, he did his best to block out the sounds of the apartment. But he could still hear the incessant

ticking of the wall clock and the wet snores of Portia from the bedroom. Plus it was hot and sticky under the fleece blankets—oppressive—and it caused him to sweat a chicken soup smell that made him want to gag.

They caught him coming out. After seeing the crawlspace, the floor supervisor was a little frightened, and he wanted to fire him on the spot. But he couldn't without permission, so while his coworkers watched, Harold was marched across the floor and into the front office. Mr. Beall was a by-the-book kind of manager, so he needed to see the crawlspace with his own eyes. One look at the ragged makeshift cocoon and Harold was given three minutes to gather his things and get off the property. Word had already gotten around the warehouse, and everyone held their breath until Harold had been escorted off the premises. Later over beers at Ricky's, they agreed there had always been something off about Harold Lyle and his old lady and made jokes about what they might have done in the crawlspace together.

Harold paced the room. Portia's fever had broken, and she sat up in bed, ragged and expressionless to listen to him rant. The warehouse was too loud for him. He was bound to be caught sooner or later. It was starting to smell like mildew and sweat. "I didn't want to say anything but last week I think I found some rat turds," he said. "Rat turds in my quiet space." He huffed and plopped onto the bed "Why work for ten hours every day just for the same sliver of quiet?" he asked her. His collection had suffered.

"This is nothing," he said, leafing through the journal. The foil stars were lusterless in the gloom of the bedroom. "To me this is no more a collection than a

book of stamps is to a stamp collector.” He read her an entry, flipped the pages, read another. “They’re almost exactly the same,” he yelled and hurled the journal to the floor dramatically. “Stamps! A handful of newly-minted pennies!”

He threw himself back against the pillows and buried his face into her side, and after a while Portia placed her hand on his head. “That is all true. You will let me think about it, and then we will fix this,” she promised.

That was good enough for now, so Harold nuzzled closer, and they stayed that way, quiet until dinner.

“The middle of the night is when it is the quietest,” she said to him. It was the night after he’d lost his job, and they were eating dinner at the dinette. She had felt well enough to cook fried eggs, ham, and toast for him, but settled on Erdäpfelsuppe for herself, afraid the solid foods so soon after being sick would interfere with her digestion. “You will get a job that lets you work during that time.”

She sipped her soup.

Mulberry was a small town that went to bed early, and it wouldn’t support a night industry in the same way a larger town or city might. There was little need for night watchmen, no museums besides the Phosphate Museum to prowl with a flashlight looking for cat burglars or art thieves. Nobody was interested in stealing old whale fossils and sharks' teeth. The mines paid well and had a night shift, but the noise was too much and Harold quit after his first night.

He tried the Mulberry Library, an anemic little building with a collection that looked to be one quarter old *National Geographic* magazines, but the suspicious old sourpuss behind the circulation desk couldn't tell him who cleaned the building each night, and didn't seem interested in helping Harold find out.

The County morgue was hiring, but he was underqualified. Besides, he didn't like to think about the dead. It dredged up too many old feelings. He decided not to apply.

Harold wanted a drink.

"You will fix this," Portia promised.

He got a job painting houses. Harold had never painted before, but his new boss wasn't picky.

"You put paint on a brush, you put the brush on the wall," he said. "Then you do it again."

For weeks, a small crew of them would paint a new location around town. Sometimes they did houses, occasionally they did businesses. Once they painted the vestibule of the Southside Baptist church in a color called glaucous, though it looked like blue to Harold. The other men liked working with him because Harold always volunteered to do the most awkward spaces. Under eaves and the inside of cabinets and the backs of closet doors. In each job, he found a way to add to his collection. He was able to snatch bits of silence, to add to his collection, and to stave off the itching feeling under his skin. In many ways it was better than the Winn Dixie warehouse, and he felt reinvigorated.

“You will need a new journal soon,” Portia said to him. He was leafing through the notebook, trying to decide which was his favorite of the recently added silences. Probably the pantry he’d done in antique white deep in the bowels of a Southern plantation-style that the owners were repurposing as a bed and breakfast. The prospect of a second journal made him feel dizzy.

He wanted badly to end what he started thinking of as Volume I with something remarkable. The closer he got to the end of the book, the more he thought about it. He carried his collection everywhere, tucked down the back of his pants against his lower spine and nearly wrote “VOLUME I” under his name on the front page in anticipation of things to come. But he decided to wait for that remarkable thing to present itself before he did.

And then he went on a job at the mayor’s house, and it appeared.

Mayor Dunlap and his wife lived in a two-story McMansion in a better part of town. Mrs. Dunlap wanted the exterior of the house painted in Cinnamon with Honeysuckle White trim. It would take them four days, assuming no rain. Harold spent most of those days on scaffolding, removing and painting the decorative shutters and scraping the eaves. They stopped each day for lunch before noon, and the crew would go out for hamburgers, leaving Harold to eat the lunch Portia had packed for him in the scant shade on one side of the house, his ledger sitting close by. He’d not collected in three days, nor had he done so in the week before. He was desperate to find the right way to end Volume I, and it was weighing on him heavily. The house had no trees in the yard, and there was a

gazebo but no shed. Inside was his best option, but they had contracted the exterior only.

On the third day, while dozing he was struck by a sudden idea, but he'd need to act before the others returned from lunch. After a knock on the door and a quick and pointed request, he found himself sitting on the toilet in the guest bathroom on the bottom floor of the house. It was a nice, clean room, interior to the house with no windows, marbled tile floors and white subway tiles on the walls. A white U-shaped fuzzy rug clung around the base of the commode

Harold unlaced his boots and peeled off his socks. Barefoot, he stood on the cool tile floor, closed his eyes, and listened

Somewhere deep in the house and over the explosion of a drop of water hitting the pedestal sink, he heard a television. It sounded like a soap opera. He heard the rumble of the Chevy van with its ancient pistons going up and down inside the engine's cylinders. It's pulling into the driveway, and not long after, he heard the chug of the compressor that runs the paint gun. It is on the far side of the house. He could tell by the hiss of the nozzle as one of the crew, either Chuck or Izzy, sprayed paint.

He sighed. This room was good, but not great. He wanted great.

Harold put on his socks and slid into his boots, and ran water over his hands and dried them on his pants so he wouldn't get paint on the mayor's wife's guest towels. He pulled the pocket door open and as he was leaving the house, called out his thanks. Then he noticed at the top of the stairs, an open door leading into cool darkness.

It was like an invitation, and he shivered.

They sat in the car for two nights waiting for the mayor and his wife to leave. Portia brought dinner, and they ate it off the cracked dashboard of the car. Because they'd been out late they hadn't got much sleep. Portia cross-stitched until it got too dark, then she catnapped until Harold woke her. He was dejected both nights, but she raised his spirits.

"It will happen," she said.

Before the scaffolding had been pulled down, he had tried to see into that upstairs room from the outside. The windows were covered in heavy curtains. Portia had called them "drapes" when he told her about them, although he didn't know the difference, but he started referring to them as drapes, too. He pressed his hands against the window—it was pleasantly cool—and he imagined what it was like beyond the panes. He pictured thick sheets of cardboard and egg crates. He knew it was silly, but it made him smile anyway.

He'd left an entrance into the house by claiming he needed the garage door opened so that he could fully paint the exterior molding. While that was true, it was also good opportunity for him to unlatch the window lock. He only hoped it hadn't been noticed by the mayor or his wife, but there was very little he could do about it, so he tried not to worry. He felt optimistic about it.

On the third night, it happened. After they had balled up the wax paper from their sandwiches, stored them in a plastic bag, and wiped the crumbs and pickle juice, they saw the mayor's slate gray Town Car pull out of the garage and

disappear around the corner. Harold sat, dumbfounded. He'd been waiting for it to happen and it had happened.

“Go,” Portia hissed. Her eyes shone like foil stars.

Harold grabbed his notebook and went.

The garage window had been unlocked, though the door leading from the garage to the house had been turned. Fortunately they had neglected to pull it shut tightly, and it gave Harold no problem getting into the house. He chose to see it as a sign.

He crept through the house, careful not to bump any of the furniture or knickknacks, and in the dark noticed the guest bathroom door was open. He paused at the doorway, his stomach fluttering until he heard the plink of a drip in the sink, and he moved on, remembering his goal.

Harold found the stairs and moved up them like a phantom. Off the carpeted landing at the top there was another bathroom, this one larger than the one downstairs and lit by a faint blue nightlight. He ignored it and moved to the object of his quest, the door he had seen open. The one that had invited him in.

It was closed now, so he grabbed the knob and turned, and then let his eyes adjust for just a moment before stepping inside.

It was after midnight when he slid the garage window closed. Harold had written the final entry in the back of the notebook by the nightlight in the bathroom and moved the red ribbon bookmark to the middle. He no longer

needed it to show him where to make the next entry. He walked to the car and saw Portia slumped against the driver's window, and for a quick, irrational heartbeat he was scared that she had died somehow, the victim of a sudden stroke or a stray, unheard bullet. He saw her chest rise and fall, and it washed the feeling away. In the dark he watched her and marveled at her remarkably smooth, unwrinkled face. How a woman her age managed to look so unaffected by life was unknown to him, but he suddenly felt very sad for her. Still, to have nothing to be afraid of must be wonderful, though it didn't feel that way.

Her eyes fluttered open and when she saw him, she rolled down the window and asked if he was ready to go. There was no question that he was. As they drove away from the freshly-painted house, the Town Car came down the street carrying the mayor and his wife, home from their late outing, and as they passed Harold couldn't help but think about how quiet it must be on the inside.

Invisible Fence

It's a rare chilly night, almost cool enough to feel like the holiday.

Rebecca has agreed to host Christmas this year. Have Christmas, they call it. Each October they talk about it before leaving the restaurant on her mother's birthday. Who will have Thanksgiving, who will have Christmas. They'd stopped having events at her parents' house now that they were older and didn't want to deal with the mess, so the holidays were divided between the three of them. Matt had Thanksgiving, and she'd have Christmas. This year Ethan got the reprieve.

Her husband, Rich, is a sous-chef at the Grand Coral in Orlando. He has to work on New Year's, but he's off for Christmas and can help prepare the meal. They are having a ham, because when they have Christmas, they have ham.

There is a loud crack, like a gunshot, and Rebecca, who is opening the can of jellied cranberry, stops in mid-crank. She looks at Rich, who also stops what he is doing. Under normal circumstances he is moving, stacking mail, aligning the pepper mill to the salt shaker, wiping the counter, straightening the corners on the bed, but this has frozen him in mid-flit. They make eye contact, which reanimates Rich, and he strides to the sliding glass door in long steps. When he pulls back the curtain Rebecca sees that it is later than she had thought, and she is reminded to check the clock on the stove. It is almost six. They'll be here soon.

"What is it?" she asks.

Rich cups his hands over his eyes to cut the glare and looks out onto the backyard. They live on a small lot in a claustrophobic row of almost identical houses. Each is painted differently, but all the colors are indigenous to Florida or

the tropics, like plumeria with none of the pesky natural beauty. The houses stick out of the brown lawns like capped teeth on diseased gums. Rebecca loves it, though she wouldn't complain if they had a little extra space on the sides of the house. When she showers, sometimes she imagines Mr. Farquhar, the retired accountant who lives next door, listening to the sounds of it from his bedroom window, and it keeps her from singing, though her friends tell her she has a lovely voice.

Their house backs up against another neighborhood, one where the people who rent there don't care much about things like property values, and they hear a second crack, not as loud as the first, but clearer than before. They can tell the direction. It is coming from the house behind them. A few months ago there was a wooden fence separating the lots, but it was old and hurricane season was a beast this year, even this far inland. Mulberry had taken a few good hits, and they lost the fence. They were still wrestling with the insurance company over that one. In the meantime, Rebecca had taken to pretending the fence was still there. When she was on the back patio reading or watering the begonias or having a cigarette—a habit she'd tried to break exactly zero times and to hell with anyone who didn't like it—and if her eyes moved to the invisible fence, her brain wouldn't register what was beyond.

“They're shooting guns,” he says. Rebecca moves to the door next to Rich and looks past the invisible fence. Only a hundred feet away, give or take because she isn't good with distances, a man in a black NASCAR jacket is with two boys, and they are lining up shots against a lumpy paper target they've set

against a tangle of orangewood in their yard. The man has a big gun, like a pistol, and the boys have rifles, both of which look puny compared to the man's hand cannon. He is pointing out things on the guns—barrels and triggers and stocks. Is it stocks?—and the boys roll them over in their hands as he guides them through it. Rebecca can't make out any words, but the boys are bewitched.

They're firing long-ways in their yard, away from any house, but Rebecca decides to be irritated anyway. The boys look like middle-schoolers, maybe younger. What are they doing with guns? She and Matt and Ethan never had guns when they were children. As far as she knows, none of them have guns as adults. It's irresponsible to give guns to children.

Rich does not pick up on any of her quiet aggravation. He appreciates the obvious, operates best when something is presented to him. And he is good-natured, so he often needs to be lead to her irritation. Explained the reason. *Because*, Rebecca would need to say to him. *Because I asked for no ice. Because I work hard and deserve a little quiet. Because nobody in their right mind would put 'Welcome Back Kotter' and 'All in the Family' in the same category.* It's common for him to unwittingly add to her irritation.

"Can they do that?" Rebecca asks. "Shoot guns like that so close to the other houses?"

"City limits," he says.

It's true. They're just outside Mulberry proper. She doesn't like it.

"Must be Christmas gifts," Rich asserts. "Neat," he says and watches until Rebecca calls him back to the kitchen to check on the ham.

Before he closes the sliding door, he waves to the man and the boys. She can't see from her angle, but Rebecca hopes they do not wave back.

Ethan is the first to arrive. He is reedy and too pale from doing something with computers all day at work, but he pecks her on the cheek and does his best impression of a smile when Rebecca answers the doorbell. He brings an armload of awkwardly wrapped presents with smashed stick-on bows, and something he calls his "famous salmon dip" and a box of Wheat Thins. Insofar as she knew, the claim of this dip being "famous" was an exaggeration. She has no recollection of him bringing it to any other holiday celebration. Of the two brothers, Ethan is the one Rebecca likes the least, but only because he is a wannabe, and she cannot abide a wannabe. He's the sort to call something "famous" despite no one having heard of it. He kisses everyone in a European way as a form of hello, even though he's never been out of Polk County. He was married to a woman named Karen until last year, but that ended when something drove a wedge between them. Some discovery by one of the two of them. Rebecca thinks it was an affair—what else could it be?—but he wasn't talking so she wasn't asking. Which of the two was the philanderer was anybody's guess. She hadn't known her brother since before they drifted away as teenagers, not really, and she wouldn't be surprised if he'd grown up to be a cheater. Still, Karen wore too much mucky black eyeliner—always wore it, always too much—so Rebecca wouldn't put it past her to be the perpetrator. Honestly, who wears so much

makeup when going to Shoney's? Even swimming. She always came out looking like a goddamned raccoon.

Good riddance, she'd thought when her mother told her they were splitting for good. Though he didn't know it, it was the closest she had come to a moment of solidarity with her brother.

They settle the presents under the tree, and Rich helps to arrange them just so. Earlier today Rebecca had moved the gifts that weren't for the family into the master bedroom. There was no sense in worrying that something gets opened accidentally. And she'd purchased a very expensive Thomas Kinkade crystal snowman from the Bradford Exchange for her manager in the office, Margo, and like an idiot she'd neglected to bring it in the last day before the holiday. She couldn't risk that getting broken. Rebecca had purchased gifts for everyone in the office, all seven of them excluding herself, and the snowman had been deep under the tree and she'd been in a rush and had missed it that morning. They were trinkets mostly, but she'd put some thought into them. Like a blue coffee cup with the Florida Gators football logo printed on it for the AR guy, Bill. She'd bought a red one with the FSU logo at the same store for Allen because the men had a friendly office rivalry about it. Well, not red, Allen had corrected her. "*Garnet.*" Garnet. Whatever. The worst part was that everyone else had bought for Margo, even when they hadn't bought for everyone in the office. It was obvious—so obvious!—that she was the only one with who hadn't brought anything for the manager. She'd tried to explain her forgetfulness and Margo had been very understanding about it, but Rebecca had been mortified all the same.

What a way to start the holiday weekend.

Ethan is opening a bottle of cab that Rebecca has set out for the guests. In typical fashion, he doesn't say anything or bother to ask and make sure they weren't saving it for dinner. He pops the cork and there is another gunshot from the backyard. He stares at the corkscrew in his hand as if wondering if the sound came from the bottle.

"What the heck was that?" he asks. "Sounded like a gunshot."

"Yeah," Rich agrees.

"It's the people that live in the house behind us," Rebecca says. "The guy that lives back there got his kids some guns for Christmas." She is an authority. "They've been making that racket all day." Rich is busy putting out the salmon spread and doesn't seem to notice her exaggeration.

Ethan only says, "Hmm," and that while his lips are on the wineglass.

The sound of the front door opening is followed by the deep baritone of their father. "Knock, knock," he says. He is impossibly wrinkled, like the laugh lines around his eyes and his mouth grew until they connected into a map of highways and interstates across his face and down his neck. If anything he looks more like her father than he ever had. Almost used up but still smiling, somehow unfazed by his children's lack of inspiration. His wife and her mother shuffles behind. She is younger than her husband by a month, but she suffers severe bursitis in her knees and uses a cane, and she moves like she's much older. She turns to take the step up into the house sideways like a crab and supports herself on the doorjamb. Rebecca's other brother, Matt, is behind her suddenly, holding

her, lifting her, and Penny next, holding a mountain of gifts. Both of them are short and broad like fireplugs, more like brother and sister than husband and wife.

Her sullen, pimply nephew, Hunter, is the caboose of this sad train, carrying the corn casserole wrapped in a weary bath towel to try to keep it warm. He does this the same way he does everything else. Half-assed. It isn't encased in the towel the way it should be—lay out the towel, put it in the middle, fold the corners up like a diaper—and now she'll have to put it in the oven to get it reheated. That isn't her problem, she thinks. If it isn't ready when the ham is ready, so be it. They'll eat corn casserole cold or with dessert for all she cares.

“Well, I'm here,” Dad says. “Christmas can begin.” He is kicking off his shoes at the front door into the clutter of shoes. When he smiles Rebecca sees that he's lost another tooth since the last time she'd seen him. An incisor this time. It makes her feel cheerless, like she's losing a bit of her father one tooth at a time, and she hopes he can chew the ham.

There is too much food for eight people. The casserole reheated fine, and it is warm and slightly sweet from the corn. There is salad with walnuts and too much dressing and cranberry shaped like a can, and deviled eggs with slices of green olive and pimento on top. Matt hoists an egg and appreciates the touch. “Festive,” he says and shoves it into his mouth, chewing loudly. Matt always did appreciate her little touches. Dad offers bread from the basket, and the butter is moved from one side of the table to the other, then back again.

The ham is perfect, of course. “It pays to use a proper marmalade as a base for the glaze,” Rich says, and the family agrees because he is a chef and there is no reason why he would be wrong. She had worried when Rich came to her and told her that he hated his job at the dealership and wanted to go to school to become a chef—he made a good living, they were comfortable, and they were in their forties, for God’s sake—but he convinced her it was something he needed to do so they took a chance. It had been hard, but they hadn’t lost the house, and he came out on the other side happier with his life, a master of sauces and gravies. Hallelujah.

“I can give you a few simple tips if you’re interested,” he said to Penny. His earnestness was coaxing her to play along, to make pretend mental notes and to nod at each suggestion. Return to your rubbery canned ham at your own peril, Rebecca thinks, remembering last Christmas. We’ll be polite, but we don’t forget.

“How about those gunshots?” Ethan blurts as if he’s just remembered them. Specks of food fly from his mouth. He’s on his second bottle of wine already and will almost certainly polish that one off, too.

“Gunshots?” Mom asks. She hates guns, had to fight tooth and nail to keep her husband from buying one. “‘It’s either me or the gun,’ I told him,” she’d said once, twice, three times during their weekly phone call. Her mother could have flair when she was serious about something, and when that happened, she often repeated herself.

“Some man and his kids. Tell them, Rebecca.” Ethan has already exhausted his interest in the story.

“Nothing, really,” she says. “Just the neighbor letting his children fire guns within range of the house.” She sticks her chin out, daring any of them to do anything other than agree with her.

“Can they do that?” Dad asks, chewing. “Inside city limits, I mean.”

“That’s what I said,” Rebecca says.

“We’re just outside the city,” Rich explains. “We’re on County water, too.” As if that’s needed to understand the difference.

“What school zone is this?” Penny asks Rebecca, changing the subject.

“How should I know?” She is irritated again. Penny looks like she might say something but thinks better of it.

Ethan pours another cab and empties the bottle. “Speaking of school,” he says. He is looking over the rim of the glass at his nephew. “What’s this I hear about your report card? A mess of F’s, your mother says.” He is bright-faced and swaying slightly, like he’s been caught in a stiff breeze and he’s pushing against it.

Hunter slouches further into his chair, uncomfortable with the attention. He looks betrayed by his mother—doubtless one of the many slights he feels from her daily—but also deserted by his favorite uncle, onliest he may be. It annoys Rebecca to no end, this relationship Ethan has with Hunter, but someone has to maintain. Someone has to show a little dissatisfaction.

Ethan leans forward and closes his eyes. She knows this moment. She's seen it before. It's the inhale of breath before one of Ethan's famous lectures, and no amount of noisy chewing or throat clearing or clinking silverware was going to stop it.

"Hunter," he begins.

Is this the right time for this? she thinks.

"You need to understand the importance of good marks in school."

'Marks'? You never called them 'marks' in your life. They're 'grades'. Call them 'grades' like the rest of us do, Ethan. She twists the napkin in her lap.

"When I was in school..."

He doesn't care, Ethan. Why do you care? This kid has a thousand chances.

"...I never got anything below a C. And then only rarely." He hiccups on *rarely*, and it surprises him. His eyes pop open. "In fact, if any of us kids brought home a C, your grandpa would be pissed." He looks to his father for confirmation.

"Hmm," Dad says. "Upset, yes. I'd be upset."

"We'd be grounded. No TV, no phone, no hanging out with our friends."

Ethan's head droops, and he loses the thread.

Why are you ruining my dinner, Ethan, she wants to ask. Her napkin is gone, replaced by a knotted rope.

"You grounded?" he blurts.

“We don’t really believe in that stuff,” Matt says. “Honey, tell them about that book you read on it, the one Shirley gave you. Doctor whatshisname. Brontosaurus.”

Penny swallows her bite. “Dr. Bronislaw. He believes in letting young people find their own path, academically, socially, and creatively.”

Way to read it off the cereal box, Penny.

“It’s worked wonders for Shirley’s daughter. Would you pass the, yes, that’s it, the broccoli?”

Rebecca feels heat rising from her chest.

“It all sounds like hoey to me,” Mom says.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Dad counters. He lets it hang there.

Mom rests her hand on his arm. Holds it down. “A boy needs some structure,” she says.

Hunter hasn’t said a word. He keeps chewing.

“Mom,” Ethan begins.

Rebecca feels it get away from her. She is unable to stop it. She screams, but there’s nothing feminine in it. It is a bellow, a battle cry, a call to action. One moment there is corn casserole on the table, and the next there is corn casserole on the floor, and everyone is looking at her as if she’d lost her mind.

The family leaves right after the last gift is opened. There is no watching of *Holiday Inn* as is their tradition. No Bing to sing or Fred to dance, no “White Christmas,” no mention by Ethan that the Abraham Lincoln scene is “pretty

racist.” They gather their gifts and help one another load them into the cars. Matt will drive Ethan home, Penny will follow in the truck. They are chaste and subdued and embarrassed, although for who exactly is unclear.

Before leaving, her father wishes her a merry Christmas and squeezes her like he used to when she’d scraped a knee or fallen on her butt learning how to stand on roller skates. Like he always does he tells her he loves her, and they drive off into the night. It has gotten chilly enough to make her shiver, but she watches their taillights until they turn the corner and disappear.

Inside, Rich is finishing the dishes. She grabs a towel to help dry.

“I suppose I need to get them a new casserole dish,” she says.

“I suppose,” he agrees. He seems to be expecting something, maybe an apology, but while Rebecca thinks how to fill the space, he tells her he’s off to bed. He pecks her cheek and disappears down the hall.

Rebecca moves around the house, turning off lights. A trick of light draws her eye to the sliding glass door and she walks over to close the slats on the vertical blinds. Past the invisible fence she sees the neighbors gathered around a smoky fire pit. Now that it’s dark, she cracks the door wide enough to stick her head out. Has the temperature dropped again? She sees four people now, maybe the mother is with them, and they’re roasting marshmallows. Rebecca listens to them laugh, and then break into a warbling version of “Rudolph.” That’s a song a boy would like.

Rebecca closes the door as softly as she's able, locks it. What right do those people have to shoot so close to MY house? she thinks. The heat rises again so she uses it.

"I'd like to report a loud noise. I think maybe gunshots," she says to the 911 operator. She has to guess the address, but she's been in Mulberry her whole life, and she has a good idea of how to direct the man on the phone. She stands in front of the sliding door and watches the family singing. "There may have been some screaming," she adds. "You should hurry."

That's it, she thinks. I've done it.

Her breath has left condensation on the glass. It has definitely gotten colder.

"Merry Christmas," Rebecca says to the operator, but he is already gone.

The Percolator

That year the lovebugs had flown later than usual. Though they'd returned to whatever hideout they swarmed from each season, there'd been so little rain that many of the vehicles around Mulberry still carried the white pings and ricochets of insect guts pasted on their windshields and front grills. By now they were baked into the clearcoats of cars, ruining paintjobs all over town. It happened again in the fall, twice a year, and except for a few vain people, nobody really noticed. Not Mrs. Crapeau, who rarely drove, and certainly not often enough to accumulate lovebug splats.

It was the last Sunday in May and already summer hot. She sat in her usual place on the front porch, below the sign she'd had made at the Saturday swap meet several years ago and hung to act as a friendly if inaccurate reminder of the house's occupants. "Welcome The Crapeaus" was burned into a plank and attached to driftwood collected nowhere around here. Mrs. Crapeau was shelling beans that she'd painstakingly grown on the rusting skeletal trellises set up north-south along the side of her weary bungalow. Despite the restrictions that the city had put in place due to the drought, she'd watered them twice a day, once before sunup and again at night, at least an hour, sometimes more. And because it didn't look right to have one side of the house in green, she moved the sprinkler around the yard and feigned ignorance when the neighbor next to her, Mr. Larson, wondered aloud at her uncanny ability to grow grass in the driest summer since '86.

“You can thank Norman for that. That man had a green thumb,” she lied, and she’d leave Mr. Larson scratching his head, teetering away from the fence and back to the welcoming shade of her porch. She didn’t often leave the porch during the hottest part of the day for fear of blemishes. She’d always had such nice skin, soft and tan, a product of her French Riviera heritage on her father’s side, she would say. Until she hit her forties and she began to freckle if she spent too much time in the sun. Each year she looked on in horror at the appearance of more spots, and by the time she was in her fifties her décolletage was covered in a forest of moles and skin tags. These eventually made their way down her back and her legs, and she became terrified of various cancers. The scare was erased up by a dermatologist, “Age,” he said. “It happens to all of us.” But that assurance did nothing to alleviate her embarrassment. She started covering herself at all times, and whether she was out to dinner or home on the couch watching television, the only skin visible was her face, which had escaped the worst of the freckling, though not the wrinkles. Since then she had decided it was better to sweat her way through life and resigned to do her best to think chilly thoughts. The skin doctor was right. It did get worse. She would be seventy next year and dismayed that while she might not feel that old, she certainly looked it and then some.

Old State Highway 37 ran down the left of her property, separated by a lush viburnum hedge as tall as Mrs. Crapeau. It prevented her from being seen while she worked in the yard, which she did daily in long sleeves and a floppy wicker hat, and was therefore deemed by her to be “tall enough” not to need a

fence. It had grown scruffy since the last time it had been trimmed, at first with the occasional defiant branch, but now it was in a full-blown rebellion. Now she could only see over them when on the porch, and if she didn't do something soon, only when standing on tip-toe. She knew her arthritis would never allow that.

Mrs. Crapeau heard the roar of the car before she saw it, and she set the bowl of beans cradled between her livery knees onto the floor and stood quivering, gripping the arm of the rocker for support.

A small yellow car was hurtling down the road, too fast, she thought. Cars often sped through this area because it was straight and flat and was one of the tributaries of asphalt that connected the central part of the state with the east coast, if one was inclined away from the interstate highways. And anyway, though passers-through would only know it as a rural stretch of road, the locals understood the county sheriff rarely bothered coming here, all the way out in Phosphoria. They had no business interfering with the mining trucks and the men who operated them, as long as those men stayed relatively sober. Though her vision seemed to be getting worse each day—so bad she'd made a promise to herself to mention it to Dr. Brooks during her next visit—Mrs. Crapeau recognized the car and the boy driving it. It was the Peckman's son, Dale. They lived down a ways, and she'd known them for years. She had played rummy with the boy's parents back when, and even as a boy, the oldest son, Dale, was hard to miss. He was always sloping and overlarge for his age. A boy for football and fleas if she'd ever seen one. As he tore down the road his arm was hanging out the window like an ape, and for a moment Mrs. Crapeau worried that he might

scrape his curled knuckles on the road if he wasn't more careful. She could see the shape of someone in the seat next to him, and as the car grew nearer, recognized the passenger as Katie Wiggins.

Though she was under the protection of the porch, Mrs. Crapeau shielded her eyes from the sun to focus her vision. It seemed there was some commotion. The girl was gesticulating wildly, though in anger or prodding for speed Mrs. Crapeau couldn't tell.

“Race the devil,” she said. “Be careful, boy.”

As if on a petulant cue, the little Chevette wobbled uncertainly, skidding off the road. Mrs. Crapeau held her breath and watched as the Peckman boy overcorrected. He crossed the dashed white line in the middle of the road and onto the opposite shoulder, heading directly for her yard. For a second or two he disappeared behind the viburnum before hitting the berm and launching into the air. The car, carried by momentum, almost cleared the hedge and landed with a tremendous crash in her front yard, smashing her sprinkler and barely missing a faded ceramic garden gnome Norman had named Chip in one of his more playful moments.

Mrs. Crapeau scurried to the edge of the porch, kicking the bowl of beans but had to take the steps in her customary manner—sideways, one stair at a time, clutching the rail—and hurried out into the yard. What had appeared to be a jump over the hedge couldn't have been anything of the sort. It had been crushed flat, and she could see the road from her front walk. When it landed the front tires had exploded and the nose of the car had dug into the ground. Her lawn had wrinkled

and a large flap of it had torn free and folded over on itself like peeling sunburnt skin, exposing the rich black underside of the St. Augustine grass. There was no movement inside the car, and Dale's limp arm still dangled out of the driver's side window. Mrs. Crapeau heard a gentle sound, like lighting her gas stove in the kitchen. The Chevette had somehow caught fire, and she smelled sulfurous rubber burning. Evil-looking smoke was billowing from under the hood and into the stark blue sky.

“Boy!” she cried. She thought of trying the door, but she couldn't bring herself to take another step closer. The oily-looking smoke was pouring through the vents and into the cabin of the car, and the Dale and Katie—was it Katie?—were eaten by it. Mrs. Crapeau knew she needed help. The sheriff, the fire department, Mr. Larson next door. Even the girl across the street, Cathy Govartz, whose name she'd only learned when her mail was delivered to Mrs. Crapeau by mistake. She wore hospital scrubs. She was a nurse, wasn't she? Why didn't she come?

Norman would have known what to do. If only her beloved Norman were here. They'd be drinking lemonade on the porch with the Peckman boy and his young lady, laughing at the close call they all had. Instead they were stuck with a frightened old woman who was no good to anyone. Norman would have thought she was braver than this. And if she'd been asked on a Sunday, she would have said she was, too. She realized that if she could make it through the terribleness of losing the man she loved, she could probably make it through anything.

But how she missed seeing his old green truck parked in the driveway.

Mrs. Crapeau found her way to the phone that still hung in the kitchen next to the backdoor, her days of trying to move it somewhere more comfortable long past, and she called emergency services. After more questions than she thought necessary to dispatch a fire truck, the man on the other end of the line promised they'd send help right away.

It occurred to Mrs. Crapeau that she hadn't had visitors since Norman had gone. She saw herself as a social creature. More's the pity. People would come over all the time. Rummy was typical most Saturday nights, usually with the Maitlands, but there were also the Figgs or the Doners now and again. For a while they'd even gotten into Canasta, and though she always hated it when they played it with three couples, she was a good sport about it and rarely ever complained. Having friends gave her a reason to get out of her house clothes, to keep everything dusted and vacuumed. But now that she was the only person who ever crossed her threshold, she did just enough to keep away the cockroaches. The dishes were washed but in a perpetual state of drying in their rack. She just took from it when she wanted to use a plate or a spoon or a coffee cup. Each night she wiped the counter with a damp washrag after dinner, but she hadn't moved the glass canisters of descending sizes containing flour and sugar and buttons in she didn't know how long, hadn't considered the crumbs behind them. Though the sink in her bathroom wasn't so bad, and while her age made brushing her teeth unnecessary—she soaked them in peroxide while she slept and sometimes bleach—her bathtub hadn't been given a good scrubbing in months,

and she kept the shower curtain pulled to avoid looking at it when she did her business.

But the yard was visible to the neighborhood, and she'd made an unconscious decision to keep it in order within her means. She'd tried pushing the old Lawn-Boy around, but after spending the better part of an hour simply trying to get it out of the shed, and finally doing so, wasn't able to get it started, she resigned herself to cutting back on what she called her extras, Wednesday dinner at the Shoney's, the good ham she liked from the deli in Winn Dixie, cable television, and used the money to pay Mr. Larson's godson to take over and cut it twice a month. The St. Augustine grew fast and thick, and once every other week was hardly enough to keep it at a reasonable level, but it was the best she was able to afford. As the summer wore on, she could always have the boy cut the front every week if he was able and ignore the backyard. She would just have to avoid looking out the back windows if it began to bother her too much. Of course, all bets were off if it drew field mice or grass snakes. She couldn't abide such creatures.

The front yard though, she took pride in that. It was her mask for the outside world. This spring she'd grown an amazing line of sunflowers along the fence and enjoyed them for several weeks before the heat got to be too much and she dug them up and threw them out of sight over the back fence. Without shade in the yard she had to select plants that could suffer the brutality of the Central Florida sun. Ragweed grew in abundance in the area, but it was reclaimed land from old phosphate pits and never reforested. Mrs. Crapeau had heard long-ago

stories of newly planted flowers pushing themselves out of the still-settling ground, and even though she had lived here for thirty-eight years last October, all of that would have happened well before her time. Last week she'd planted coreopsis right along the front walk, five beautiful yellow plants along each side. And though she had carefully mulched around each and watered them profusely, they were to the best of her knowledge, still firmly planted in the ground. And they looked so nice next to the grass, which was as green and as thick as any of the nicer lawns in Mulberry proper. Norman had insisted they have the St. Augustine installed, and she was ashamed to admit that at the time she thought it was a huge waste of money. How wrong she had been. It was by far her favorite thing about the yard. If only he was here so she could tell him that.

After hanging up with 911, she teetered back through the kitchen and into the living room. From there she could see smoke from the flaming car, but without going outside, the car itself was blocked from her vision. Through the oppressive quiet of the house she could hear sirens getting closer and was relieved that soon the experts would be here to get control over the situation. When the red and blue flashing lights appeared reflecting off of her front window, she felt brave enough to go back outside, though when she finally did she stayed on the porch. The fire was going strong, "Hot as H-E-double-toothpicks," her mother might have said. Thankfully the windshield was completely blanketed in smoke and soot, though the poor Peckman boy's arm was still hanging limply from the driver's window, now blackened by ash. Beyond the car and through the waves of heat, the Govartz girl had arrived wearing her pink and blue scrubs. She must

have seen the fire and come out to rubberneck, Mrs. Crapeau decided, but then she understood that the girl was frantically waving her arms, like trying to direct an airplane after landing. It was probably best she was here, thought Mrs. Crapeau. A nurse would be better equipped to deal with a situation like this than an old lady in a long-sleeved parrot housedress who had neglected to put in her falsies this morning and was afraid to come off of her front porch. Though she was full of herself, that one. They didn't talk much, which is the way Mrs. Crapeau preferred it, but when they did, Cathy spoke to her like she was a baby instead of a grown woman capable of taking care of herself. Slow and high-pitched and goo goo gah gah. When the nurse had gotten into the habit of bringing her leftovers over, that's where Mrs. Crapeau had to draw the line. She wasn't about to accept charity. "I'm right across the road if you need me," she'd said to Mrs. Crapeau the last time, standing in the same spot as the ravaged car was now and holding a covered plate which she had refused. "We single girls need to stick together."

Eventually there was a fire truck, an ambulance, some sort of truck with an enormous tank, and two sheriff cars. The fire truck arrived first, noisy and determined, and it pulled up along the front of the house, presumably to get a better angle to attack the fire. Though dressed in baggy yellow coats and boots that reminded Mrs. Crapeau of bears lumbering about on two legs, they moved efficiently, a well-practiced choreography. One of the firefighters looked to be a woman, and Mrs. Crapeau wasn't sure how she felt about that. Perhaps if she was

a younger woman, she might like to try it. A hose was rolled out and attached to the side of the firetruck, and upon arrival of the tanker truck, a smaller hose was connected between the two and the pump started. Soon a stream of targeted water was spraying down the car, sizzling as it hit the hood, the process crushing all but one of the coreopsis plants, which were washed away by the relentless effluence. Mrs. Crapeau sighed, sad to see them go so soon. As the fire extinguished, the rolling black smoke changed to weak gray clouds. When the slight summer wind briefly changed direction, Mrs. Crapeau coughed until she moved to the far end of the porch, far away from the stinging tangy flue.

The air in the yard was sticky with localized humidity created from the smolder and the spray from the hose, suspended permanently maybe, trapped between the fence and the hedge and boxed by the house and the emergency vehicles. The firefighters and deputies were sweating in their long sleeves and protective gear. Mrs. Crapeau herself was used to it, and now that the fire was out, from under the porch's awning she barely noticed it. She watched as the firehose did its business and doused the rest of the yard in case an ember started it up again. Mrs. Crapeau was dismayed to see that the viburnum hedge had caught fire during the ruckus. While not as dramatic as it might have been—the bushes made a path leading to the back shed where she let Norman store gas cans for the mower and ancient cans of paint—fully half of it would need to be cut down. She could see people were lining up along the highway, returning from church and finding themselves unable to get into the neighborhood. The firetruck was awkwardly parked, the sheriff's lights flashing a barricade. The men working the

ambulance had blocked the road with their truck in order to find space to unload their rolling stretcher, but were now standing around smoking cigarettes while the firefighters worked. One of them, a firefighter wearing a full face mask and helmet, used the back spike of his axe to smash the front window of the blackened car. He tapped it and it collapsed like soggy paper into the interior of the car, and more black smoke was released momentarily. The paramedics, one a rather uneven-looking man with a shaved head and the other grossly fat and splay-footed, had gotten down to serious business when they'd arrived, but now that the fire was out seemed in no hurry to get involved, and looked sullen and aloof. Even if the poor unrecognizable shapes in the front seats were beyond help, it would be common courtesy if they took a moment and let people get home, Mrs. Crapeau thought.

Norman had common courtesy in spades. If he had been here, now with her, he would get those men to move their ambulance, and they'd smile and think it was their idea. He'd move his old truck so they could park in his spot. Norman had a way with people, a way of making them listen when he talked. His deep, raspy baritone did nothing to diminish his charm. And he had the clearest, most startlingly blue eyes, and they gave his round face open honesty. Nothing hidden. He wasn't much to look at otherwise, though she loved him, but those eyes.

Norman would have raced to help those children if he could have. He'd have thrown open the door and used his pocket knife to cut those children from their seatbelts. She had never seen him not have his knife at the ready, producing it from his front pocket whenever a string needed cut or a box opened. He would

have dragged them away from the fire, she was certain, though it would be a herculean task considering Dale Peckman's size. Katie, the girl, he could have saved for certain. She was much smaller. And if they weren't breathing, he could fix that, too. Didn't he say once he had taken a course in CPR as a younger man?

And if they hadn't been there to see it happen? Maybe the beans would have been shelled sooner with the two of them working on them together like they had done so many times before. What if they were elsewhere? The backyard, perhaps. They liked to grill pork chops or chicken thighs on Sundays. Anything to keep in the yard a little longer. What if they came around the front to find this carnage waiting for them?

Easy, she thought. He would have raced to the phone to call the authorities, and when they arrived, he would have shown them the best place to go so as not to damage the grass or the coreopsis. He'd have found a spot for that ambulance to park, between the front walk and Mr. Larson's areca palm looked like a good spot. "No need to block the road, gentlemen," he'd have said to them. And when one of those paramedics expressed concern for driving on the lawn, he would have dismissed them with a clap on the back. "To hell with the yard," he would have said. "I can fix that later. There is more important business afoot." Then Norman would have made his way to all those neighbors standing on the side of the road, and he would have been careful to stay out of the way of the ruckus while doing it. When they asked him what happened, he'd have recreated the crash in glorious detail and found no need to embellish the truth of it, though he would be somber wherever appropriate. He had respect for the dead. And

when things were finally done and settled, he'd have invited each of the neighbors to the porch for a drink. That dreadful lemonade, which he loved but she stopped keeping in the house since he'd left her because even a simple thing like seeing a can of powdered lemonade hurt her heart something terrible. He used to say that he loved her lemonade.

But Norman wasn't here to do any of that, and Mrs. Crapeau could only stand by while everyone pointed at the wreckage. She clutched her housedress tighter against her chest and felt suddenly very aware that they were all looking at her. She kept a broom leaned against the wall of the house that she used to sweep the porch each day, and went to work cleaning up the beans that she had spilled. A woman with a professional looking camera was buzzing around the yard taking pictures from every conceivable angle, and while she worked, Mrs. Crapeau kept her head down and tried to hide behind the columns that supported the porch roof. Most of the bowl was empty and beans were scattered across the floorboards, and she worked them into a careful pile which she moved from one corner to the other before finally sweeping them over the edge, the realization of what she had done dawning on her after it was too late. She scowled at her own capriciousness. For weeks she tended those plants, and she'd just brushed them away. What was she thinking?

“Excuse me, ma'am.”

One of the sheriff's deputies, clean-shaven and wearing a wide-brimmed hat, stood sweating at the bottom of the steps. He was carrying a large metal clipboard, an official kind, the kind that holds paper in a compartment. “Do you

mind if I come up?” He didn’t wait for her to answer. The deputy seemed grateful to be out of the sun. “Is your husband around?”

Always this question. “I’m here all alone,” she said.

He nodded. “Did you see what happened here?”

He was very handsome, this young deputy, and Mrs. Crapeau was surprised to feel a flash of heat run through her. He had deep brown eyes and a strong chin and a nose that ended in a friendly bulb, when he took off his hat to wipe the sweat from his forehead she saw he was just starting to gray. Suddenly she saw herself as he must see her: blotchy and disheveled and having nothing to do as to not get dressed on a Sunday. She moved one hand to the back of her head, patting down her tight curls, and realizing she was fidgeting like a schoolgirl, forced herself to stop. She gripped the broom tightly and wished that she could hide behind it.

He asked her again if she had seen what happened, softer this time one would with a child. This mortified her, and she responded more forcefully than she’d intended.

“I did,” she blurted. Her voice sounded high and reedy in her own ears.

“Dropped your beans,” he said. He moved further into the porch and retrieved her bowl and set it on a patio chair. He smelled of aftershave lotion and sweat, a pleasant kind of odor, spicy. He asked her if she would mind giving a statement. Below the star pinned over his green shirt pocket was a name badge that read VINCENT in a bold inscription. While she talked, he scrawled notes on a preprinted form he retrieved from the clipboard compartment. He wrote slowly.

His handwriting was neat and surprisingly elegant, not at all like the blocky script she expected from a man like this. It contrasted with his virility, and it reminded Mrs. Crapeau that men—real men—are often full of secrets.

Norman had been full of secrets.

After taking her statement, Deputy Vincent handed her a card with his name and telephone number in case she had questions or thought of something later. It said his name was Scott M. Vincent, and she wondered what the M. stood for. She put it in the pocket of her housedress, and he returned to the brilliance of the yard to re-join the recovery operation. She watched him move among his own with authority. Deputy Vincent was running through his clipboard, looking at her statement, reading her name. He had purpose. What were those others doing? Lollygagging. He had no time for that. Deputy Vincent was a quality man.

She felt herself flush and reminded herself he was probably half her age. Norman had been younger than she was, too. Not as young as the nice Deputy Vincent, but young. She'd been afraid of what others might say about that, but it turned out her fears were unfounded. It never seemed to bother Norman, and in fact had never been a topic of conversation between the two of them. She was grateful for that, for never having to say it to him, to force it into the light. A woman needs her secrets, too.

Had there been something between them, just for a moment? A flash in his eye or a wink? He gave her his card with his phone number on it, so maybe. Mrs. Crapeau was overcome with the need to talk to Deputy Vincent—Scott—again. So to give herself a reason, she decided to make coffee.

The percolator was bought at Thrifty Nifty secondhand store years before, but since bringing it home it had never been used. It was a chrome rocket ship from the 1950s with a plump glass perk knob at the tip. A flower garland was stamped around the fattest part of the circumference, and a black plastic handle mirrored the shape of the percolator's spout. She liked the symmetry. Perhaps her favorite detail was the cord, one of those braided cloth affairs that gave a handmade quality to mass production. They definitely didn't make them like that anymore. Mrs. Crapeau had been quite taken with it when she saw it sitting on the shelf. It reminded her of her mother who had had one similar, and for a few weeks after she bought it, she left it sitting on her kitchen counter next to the boxy, inelegant automatic drip maker she'd gotten from Zayer's. She looked at it fondly until she'd almost accidentally knocked it off the counter. She decided, reluctantly, to put it on a shelf in the pantry next to her stand mixer and a die kit meant to stamp out cookies, round ones and ladyfingers and for some reason, one shaped like a turkey.

She set the percolator in front of the other coffee maker and opened the lid and gave it a sniff. Even when she closed her eyes, it smelled like nothing at all. She removed the basket meant to hold the coffee grounds and gave it a good wash and a dry, then did the same for the interior of the device. The lid had protected the inside from dust, but she didn't want to chance that there was something in there that might affect the taste. The interior clean, she took a damp sponge to the outside and used a towel to polish it clean.

Making a cup of coffee was simple enough. She liked Folgers so she bought Folgers. She scooped the grounds into the basket, poured water into the carafe, reassembled it, and plugged it in next to her other coffee maker. While it sputtered and spit, she gathered together coffee cups. She wondered how many she'd need. She'd need to make sure Deputy Vincent got a cup—she washed her best mug for that, white with the image of a pleasant field of daisies printed on the side—and it would be rude not to offer her hospitality to the others. In the end she managed to collect eleven cups including the one she liked, shaped like an owl and not too big. She balanced them all on a platter meant for carving meat and carefully brought them to the porch, setting them on a chair until she assembled a TV tray and arranged them on that. She'd need a second tray for the coffee and set one up before unplugging the percolator and bringing it to the porch. Before letting it go, she checked the wobble of the table, and, judging it safe provided it wasn't bumped, left it to retrieve and fill a matching turquoise milk and sugar set, which she also never used, though she liked both in her coffee but had deemed them too much of a hassle and usually drank hers black. She poured a cup into her owl, spooned one-too-many scoops of sugar and a dash of cream, and sipped and tried to catch the eye of the handsome young deputy.

He had his clipboard cradled in one arm and was speaking to the nurse, presumably asking her the same questions he had asked Mrs. Crapeau. The firefighters were prying the doors from the car, and it made a terrible racket and muffled any chance of overhearing their conversation. She sipped coffee and pretended to pay attention to the extraction of the children. Out of the corner of

her eye she watched Cathy Govartz wipe away tears, and was horrified when the deputy put his hand on her shoulder to comfort her. The lengths that one will go to make it about her, Mrs. Crapeau thought. When he reached into his front pocket and retrieved a business card, Mrs. Crapeau dropped her owl cup, which bounced once and shattered into several big chunks. Peeved, she swept the fragments into a wet pile and did her best to brush the coffee off the edge of the porch.

She didn't mean to catch the nurse's eye, but she'd looked up again at just the wrong time and when Cathy waved—a grim sort of flap—Mrs. Crapeau wasn't able to pretend she hadn't seen it. Cathy walked to the steps of the porch, but stopped before ascending, perhaps sensing that she had not really been invited to move forward.

“What a mess,” she said finally.

At first Mrs. Crapeau thought she meant the broken coffee cup, but the woman motioned to the covered bodies on the lawn so she must have meant that.

“Those poor children,” Cathy Govartz continued. She was shaking her head in pity, but Mrs. Crapeau didn't care for the way she said it. Wooden, like someone who sees this sort of thing all the time but understands they must go through the motions so as not to seem insensitive to those who weren't inured to mayhem. “Any idea who they are?”

“I expect they'll tell us when they know,” Mrs. Crapeau said. She had no intention of giving away her secrets.

“I expect,” Cathy said. She didn't appear to be listening anyway.

“Coffee?” Mrs. Crapeau asked. She didn’t know why.

“Coffee,” the nurse repeated. “In this heat?”

Mrs. Crapeau scowled, but the nurse didn’t seem to notice.

“They’ll be here all day getting those poor children out of here,” she said.

“But at least they’ve opened the road again so people can get home.”

It was true. People were headed into the neighborhood, driving at a snail’s pace as they drove past the house. They watched the cars dispel and said nothing.

“Your poor lawn,” she added abruptly as if she’d been meaning to say it and just remembered. Her hair was pulled up in a bun so tight it pulled at the corners of her eyes. “Such a shame.”

“Well, if I can’t get you a cup—” Mrs. Crapeau started. “If you’ll excuse me,” she said. “I was just about to pass out this coffee.”

“Oh, you poor dear, let me help.” The nurse was on the porch and scooping sugar into empty cups before she could say no. Mrs. Crapeau seized the percolator and clutched it to her body to try and ward off the woman, but when Cathy reached for it she let it go willingly. She watched as the nurse poured her coffee into the mugs, spilling none of it, and listened as the woman prattled away.

“Don’t you worry about your yard none,” Cathy said. “Once they pull that car out of here, it’ll be easier to see what the final damage is. Some of those flowers look like they’re not going to make it, but those are easy. You can plant more.” She smiled and handed the percolator back to Mrs. Crapeau. “That hedge is going to be a problem though. And some of your grass. I’ll come over and help put things in order, and I’m sure I can get a few others to help. Mr. Larson

and that kid of his. Or maybe we can call that man who used to cut your lawn?” the nurse asked. “The one with that beat-up green truck? But don’t you worry none.”

She wanted to tell Cathy that she wasn’t worried and that she should mind her own business. She wanted to tell her that Norman was gone and not coming back no matter how many times she had begged him to. The way he had looked at her that last time standing in the yard and pretended there had never been anything between the two of them...

Instead she raised the percolator over her head and dashed it to the porch. Cathy let out a squeal as hot liquid splashed her legs, more frightened of the unexpected than hurt by the coffee. “Get off,” she yelled at the nurse, repeating it until the woman had retreated into the yard. Mrs. Crapeau felt flush like every bit of her covered in a thin layer of clammy sweat, and as she regained her wits she realized they were all looking at her. The firemen and the paramedics, the neighborhood people who were still interested and now had this new drama to entertain them, Cathy. And while Mrs. Crapeau didn’t see Deputy Vincent, he had to be out in that brightness somewhere because she could feel his eyes, feel them branding her.

They left as if in shifts. The water truck went first, then the ambulance, followed by most of the firefighters. It was almost dark before the car was hauled onto a wrecker and towed out of her life. After her outburst everyone had left her alone, though she heard somebody snicker and call her a crazy old bat. That had

hurt even if she was ashamed of herself. She'd broken the percolator beyond repair—it had a tremendous dent in one side and the plastic handle had splintered—and after everyone was gone she put the scraps of it into her battered old garbage can by the road. She found the remains of the owl and threw those away, too, and felt sorry to have to abandon her favorite mug. From the road she could see Cathy's house, the glow of the television around the edges of her curtains. For a moment she considered knocking on her door, apologizing, saying that she didn't know what had gotten into her. But the thought of doing that made her head hurt. She decided that the heat of the day had finally gotten to her, and she needed to go inside and lay down. Sound sleep was what Mrs. Crapeau needed to put this day behind her. Sound sleep and pleasant dreams.

She remembered the deputy's business card then, and as she shuffled through the great stain on her front walkway and back to her empty house, she clutched it to her chest and sighed deeply and made up stories about the life that they had built together.

George Junior Wins the Lottery

When I was twenty-four and still stupid, I was living with my aunt and working a shovel in phosphate during the day and trying hard to learn how to drink in the evenings. This was before I listened to my parents about getting out of Mulberry or risk being unremarkable like them. When they knew I was fucking up my life they never said so, and instead just made ominous predictions about what might happen if I didn't return to school to complete becoming a civil engineer. That winter the International Chemical Workers Union Council Locals 44c and 156c were on general strike from Brunswick Mining Company for safety on account we'd lost a man in a nasty accident by the name of Fred or Frank Salad. I can't remember his first name, but you don't forget a family name like Salad. He'd died when a dragline bucket broke free on one side and rang his bell in a permanent way by knocking most of his head off his shoulders. We all agreed it was a bad way to go, though all things considered, he probably didn't suffer much. So we were presently in what they called an industrial dispute, and while my shovel education suffered, I took advantage of that time off to sharpen my drinking skills, sometimes at Scoots over in Bartow but usually at The Dragline Bar across from the old Gem Theater on First Avenue.

The Dragline is one of those places that cater to a single-layer clientele. The military vets had the VFW. The Earline Keene factory guys with their pockets full of sawdust and high on clouds of eau de furniture varnish went to Ricky's off of Highway 60. The younger ones who did none of that went to the

Cuban clubs in Tampa or hung out in parking lots and drank cheap gin and snorted Adderall. The Dragline was for miners. Inside the smell of wet clay overpowered that of the cheap pilsner, and the sand and other matrix from our rubber boots collected in crumbly drifts in the corners and cracks in the baseboard. The hierarchy exhibited at work carried over here, with the heavy operators at the top, then the beneficiation plant guys, and the flotation and slurry workers beneath them. I was one of the latter, and all day shoveled and swept escaped phosphate slurry back into trenches so it could make its way to the dewatering tanks. I got ribbed a lot for being green, but most of it was good-natured, and because I didn't ask that many questions, I felt like I was generally well-liked.

At the bottom of the pyramid way below me was anyone who worked the front office. That's what George Junior did, a job that required a tie. Human Resources Coordinator, it was called, and one of several people who scratched out their living that way. Anyone who worked in HR was part of management—they weren't part of labor, they paid no dues—but knowing what I know about the guy, he must have spent most of his time playing computer solitaire and trying to look busy. I met him my first week on the job when he called me in to sign an indemnification paper that I'd purposefully neglected on the advice of my union rep, a once-dashing-and-now-leathery old-timer named Kermit. "Make 'em ask ya, son," he'd said to me, "then tell 'em yer signin' under duress, and they'll put it away so fast it'll spin yer punkin." Then he reminded me to pay my dues.

That day in his dirty cubicle George Junior just shrugged when I told him I wouldn't sign. "They never do," he said and changed the subject. Instead of a wife and kid he had a framed photo of a plump German Shepherd on his desk. Odd guy.

"Hey, my Town Car was making a funny noise this morning, and I had to get my mama to bring me in. You mind giving me a ride home so I don't have to make her drive all the way out here to pick me up?" And just like that he was waiting at my Celica at five that day. No idea how he knew it was mine. That morning I'd never heard of the guy, and that afternoon he was farting into my pleather seats. When I suggested we stop for a beer at The Dragline, he cocked his head as if he was trying to figure out if I was yanking his chain, and nodded enthusiastically when he decided I wasn't.

He became a bar regular after that. I was too clueless to know management and labor don't mix. I had to take my lumps. To add an insult I found out later that not only was he not having trouble with his Town Car that day, there was no Town Car to begin with, unless you count the one his father used to drive around Mulberry. But they couldn't stop him from coming through the door. And after finding his way in, George Junior didn't take the hint.

I guess it's still opened, that bar, though Berman's since passed it to his son, Lance. I'd called Dad when I read on Facebook what'd happened to George Junior, and that led us to talking about old times, and I wondered about that bar. Dad laughed and told me Lance had tried to country-fy it by giving it a paint job

to make it look like some sort of Western saloon with hanging spurs and lassos and hats. He said he'd painted a bull on the men's and a cow on the woman's until someone graffitied the both of them and he had to cover over them up. Either he finally got wise that miners don't go in for that sort of crap or he got tired of scrubbing grease pencil pricks off of cattle.

I was there the night George Junior came into The Dragline screaming like a siren. You know him then you know that was abnormal behavior. George Junior was a compact sort of guy, about fifteen years older than I was at the time, quiet-natured until he had a few in him, short and knuckley, like a disheveled miniature version of his father, George Senior—just called George to everyone—who had been a towering, curly-headed man, bull-chested and well-regarded by the men who worked with him at the mines. Not just the mines. The whole town liked him. He died when a stroke took him out one morning in the drive-thru of the Krispy Kreme, and Bill Yodonis, the guy who owned the franchise, felt so guilty it'd happened on his property that he sent thousands of donuts to Brunswick as a sort of apology. The flower arrangement he sent to George's funeral was real nice, too. While George Junior may have been a miniature version of George, it stopped at family resemblance. Whatever it was that made people like the father, it wasn't passed to the son. I never had any problem with him myself, I don't think anyone did, but one of the operators, a guy named Phil Matkovich told me the men all thought he was a jerk-off.

“That guy ain't like his pa,” he told me over beers one quiet night when George Junior hit the can and left us alone drunk at the table. “You gotta be

careful who you associate with, Ken. You get a reputation.” He pronounced it ‘rep-i-tashun.’

I told him I didn’t see it, but I guess I did, though I couldn’t put a finger on it. Maybe I was taking another stab at alleviating my guilt for bringing him into the bar that day. Maybe I just felt bad for the guy.

“He carries a picture of his dog in his wallet.” I’d seen it, we’d all seen it. It was an obese German shepherd named Gretchen. He’d passed it around the bar one night. I didn’t mention the framed photo of Gretchen I’d seen on his desk.

“That’s a jerk-off thing to do, Ken. Ridiculous.” He pronounced it ‘ridic-uh-lus.’ After a long, thoughtful pause, Matkovich hiccupped. “And he don’t cuss.” The old man was swaying a little from the beer. “Men, they cuss.”

Of course all that went away when George Junior hit the lottery. It was a big one, too, and came about two weeks before Christmas.

That year it was actually cold for Florida. You could see your breath. Someone said it was supposed to get in the thirties. It put us in good spirits, though that’d be gone in the morning when we realized the strike was going to make our holiday puny. There was talk Brunswick had no intention of negotiating until after the first of the year. We forgot all that was looming over us when George Junior came out of the cold wearing his tie and a dirty red windbreaker with a scabby Marlboro silkscreen on the back. For the season, Berman ringed the bar with a string of blinking lights, and he’d set one of those plastic yard Nativity scenes up near the door, and on his way in Junior didn’t

seem to notice when he punted a Wise Man across the linoleum. It spun around an impossibly long time before coming to a rest under the pool table. I was shooting darts and losing to Matkovich's nephew, Rich, a guy I'd come up in school with. George Junior jumped on a chair next to us, hollering and waving his arms. The commotion scared Judge, who was sitting too close, and he grabbed his Cutty Sark and moved to the one end of the bar scowling at the spillage.

“Shush up,” George Junior commanded.

The place was busy. There were maybe twenty of us. We had no reason not to shush so we shushed. All of us but Emmylou Harris and Roy Orbison who sang about that loving you feeling on Berman's old jukebox.

“OK, sure.” I think he was surprised it was so easy to get our attentions, and he swayed and almost fell, and I couldn't tell if he'd been drinking before he got here. Someone snickered, and he recovered. “I've got an important thing to tell.” George Junior stood on the chair like he was trying to remember what it was he wanted to say.

“Get him down before he breaks his neck,” Berman yelled. “Georgie, get off of that.” He waved his bar rag like trying to scare a cat off furniture.

I thought maybe he wasn't going to listen, but George Junior was George Junior, so he only nodded and said, “Okay.” Mitch McKinney let him put his hand on his shoulder to help him down. “Okay,” he said again when he was

safely deflated and back on solid earth. The bar started murmuring again, and I tried to go back to my game. I was embarrassed for him.

“Okay,” he said one more time, a little quiet. “So I think I won the lottery,” he blurted, and that got most of us curious again. Roy and Emmylou were replaced with Cheap Trick.

“Bullshit,” Judge muttered. He was still upset about spilling his drink. Judge had been an art teacher at MHS in the '90s, Berman told me, and by all accounts a good one, but he'd never worked the mines. What had really happened is that he'd been fired for letting the kids make their own ceramic bongos in the school's kiln, which seems a pretty good reason to me,

We watched George Junior put his knobby hands in his pockets. His pink neck went red. Everything but a lumpy cyst that had perpetually clung near his Adam's apple. We were all looking at each other, trying to decide who was in on the joke. I think it was Dee the barmaid who broke the silence. “For real, Junior?” she asked, and when he didn't answer added “I think he's not for real.”

“Of course it's not for real,” Andy Farquhar answered for him. “This guy is full of shit.”

Andy was six-foot-two in a “Save the forest, Eat a beaver” shirt. He said he suffered from earaches and always had cotton jammed in his ears. He had severe acne scars, which wasn't a reason to dislike him, but also didn't help. I'd heard he liked to bang on his wife for fun, and after working with him in Separation for a few months, I believed it. Someone said he'd been arrested twice

for domestic abuse. We used to call him ‘Handy Andy’ on account of it. His job was to keep the eroder in good order and making slurry. One time he turned the water cannons on with a man still in the trench. He said it was an accident, but most of us knew that was bullshit. I knew it was because I saw him do it. The guy who got knocked on his ass, Jose Something-or-other, a guy newer than me, thought he was making a joke and called him Handy because he’d heard someone else do it on break, though not to Andy’s face. From that day on Jose refused to drop into the trench while Andy was on shift and eventually got a transfer to another division. At the time it happened Andy played it cool and was properly apologetic, and I guess they let him off with a warning. Those cannons are no joke, they can cut a man in half when they’re opened wide. I think maybe it scared Andy at first, like maybe he got an impulse and surprised himself by acting on it, but the next day I overheard him laughing about getting away with it. From then forward I was always careful to stay the hell out of his way.

“Prove it, Hoss,” Andy said to George. He had a habit of calling everyone ‘Hoss.’

George pulled a neat stack of what looked like brand new twenty dollar bills still bound in a violet bill strap. Like he’d picked it up at the bank earlier that day. Which I suppose he probably did. It sucked the air out of the room. We all came to the realization he wasn’t kidding around at the same time, and Cheap Trick got drowned out by the clamor of whistles and cheers and congratulations. Someone ordered a round for the bar and asked George Junior if he’d take care of it, and he laughed and said of course he would, which got us all cheering again.

George Junior turned the color of his windbreaker, and while Berman ran to the back to get a tray of clean glasses, Mitch asked him how it happened.

“I’ve always been lucky,” he lied. “I’ve been playing the same numbers since the week of my eighteenth birthday, and I just kept at it until it happened.”

Then it was a celebration.

Berman poured so much beer he told us later he’d tapped four kegs of Michelob before the end of the night. Someone tied a bandana around the head of Nativity Baby Jesus in his molded plastic diaper and stuck it on the bar. After what had happened to George Junior, we got it into our heads that it’d be a good idea to rub the son of God’s molded plastic nose for good luck. After getting Georgie to cough up money for a roll of quarters, Handy Andy played “Family Tradition” by Bocephus on the jukebox a dozen times in a row, interrupted once by “Rainbow Ride” when he punched E11 instead of D11. “Who the hell put on this fag music?” he kept asking, so drunk he was unaware it was he who had done it. At one point, George asked if we were hungry, and of course we all said we were, and Mitch and I offered to drive through the Taco Bell on 37 because it was the only place that was opened late. The young woman at the drive thru thought we were screwing around when we ordered a hundred and fifty soft taco supremes, and the manager made us pay up before they’d even get to work making them. We forked over the five crispy twenties George Junior had given us and tried not to look drunk while the night crew burned holes through us from the window for making them work hard so late. But we were heroes when we got

back to The Dragline. After we'd eaten, Dee requested to see the picture of Gretchen, and when George Junior pulled it from his Velcro wallet and passed it around, even Matkovich had to admit she was a fine-looking dog, though by then he was hiccupping when he said it.

So I myself participated in the revelry, and why shouldn't I? At the time I could count myself as one of them. Maybe none of it would have happened if I hadn't brought George Junior in that night my first week of work. Maybe he would have walked a different path—left instead of right and never into the GoGo Mart to get his ticket and all that happy horseshit—and maybe he'd have stayed poor and stupid like the rest of us. No free beer and tacos, no lucky Jesus.

It's also possible he did play the same numbers every week, that I had nothing to do with it, that it was all inevitable. In any case by the time the hot sauce and Michelob was turning to gas in our stomachs, we were all pretty well piss drunk.

Something interesting happened as the night creaked towards dusk. With every beer he bought and paid for, George Junior got a little bit taller. He was given a place of honor to mingle with his new friends. It was from the blare of the jukebox and opposite the door so that when it opened to let in the next bleary, loam-covered hypocrite who'd gotten a call about George Junior's good fortune, the first thing he'd see was his company's former HR reject nouveau proud and surrounded by chums. George Junior got several offers to go fishing in the morning, even though it might be a bit colder than freshwater bass liked this time

of year. Dee made eyes at him, and we hooted when she eventually kissed him on the mouth. He kissed her back, no blushing, although I expected he hadn't had a lot of practice at that point in his life.

In the chilly night air that found its way in through the swinging door of The Dragline, George Junior had been swept away and in his place surrounded by swirling cellophane Marlboro wrappers reflecting the Christmas lights from the bar stood George Senior, albeit a younger version of the man. Confident, towering, powerful. The center of our attention.

Though guys like George, they don't know how to recognize the difference between camaraderie and people just taking advantage of a moment in time. Or little acts of kindness. They think that any bit of benevolence shown to them demonstrates something more important or bigger than it actually is. That's why he latched onto me after I gave him a ride home. I saw it as a little thing, a favor, something that if I'd been going a different direction I probably never wouldn't have done. He saw it as evidence of friendship. I sensed that George Junior was mixed-up and desperate for it.

Handy Andy sensed it, too, and sometime early on he decided to give him what he needed. He kept putting his arm around George Junior's neck, and the drunker he got, the tighter the squeeze. He called him 'Bubba' and gave him noogies, and while George laughed each time, it looked like it hurt to me. He offered to go with him to buy new fishing gear and help to pick out a proper Yamaha four-wheeler, and told him he knew of a camp in West Virginia where

they could do some mid-morning turkey hunting. “The best time to get a gobbler is after the hens have been bred and the toms are strutting.” Most people in Mulberry learn to handle a gun at an early age, and we all hunted something, but George never struck me as the sort who would kill anything. “Speaking of strutting, the women in that town would love a guy like you.” He was slurring his words pretty well at this point. “Snizz, Bubba. I’m talking about snizz,” and he noogied George Junior until his sweaty curls stuck out odd angles.

At some point the mood got festive enough that I saw my chance to suggest to Andy that maybe he should give him a little room. He smiled at me and suggested in hot breath that I mind my own fuckin’ beeswax or he might be inclined to feed me my teeth, and I decided it was in my best interest to stay closer to the door at the end of the bar for the rest of that night.

As he got lit, George Junior started to love all of Andy’s attentions, and believe it or not, he reciprocated in his own way. After “Blue Christmas” had its turn on the jukebox, George Junior started calling him The King. Andy decided George would be his Colonel Parker, and an hour later they were still singing together in exaggerated Elvis impersonations, the words scrambled or plain wrong, “blue blue blue blue” dragged out past the point of being amusing to anyone but the two of them. Though Andy was a good foot taller, George awkwardly aped Andy’s headlocks, hanging on him like a miserable baby monkey clinging to his irascible mother. As the night wore down, people gave them their space, though Dee kept popping up between them to compete for the spotlight, braying good-naturedly when Andy made little jokes at her expense,

even when he told her he could smell her cooze from across the room. Classy guy, Handy Andy.

It was after 2:00 when the bars were supposed to be closed. A sheriff's deputy came in to find out why there were still so many cars in the parking lot, and we held our breaths while Berman explained the circumstances. He was skeptical even after Georgie showed him his dwindling bundle of cash, but those of us that remained vouched for him. As it turns Rich and I went to school with the deputy, a guy named Scotty Vincent, and we convinced him to stay for a celebratory beer. "How's tricks?" he asked me before he left, and I slipped up and told him the truth. George Junior was enjoying his newfound openness and encouraged him to come back when he was off duty, and Scotty laughed and extracted certain promises from us on his way out the door. Andy yarbled after him to hurry if he wanted to bust the furniture drunks pulling out of Ricky's. I think the two had history.

Instead of drifting into the haze with everyone else, I felt like I was on caffeine or speed. I hadn't moved from my place at the end of the bar, even when Deputy Vincent came and went. I was too restless to sit. The universe felt off-kilter. I tried watching out for George Junior, which was better than what anyone else was doing, but it was like observing a man do something stupid you couldn't do anything about. Like watching a man at a barbeque as he climbs onto a roof to do a belly flop into a swimming pool. But I felt compelled. As soon as I saw Andy hit the can, I stepped up.

“You did it right, Georgie,” I said. “A real once-in-a-lifetime party. So maybe now it’s time to pay the tab and head on home.”

“Home,” he said. “No, not home.” He tried to straighten his necktie, but he’d lost it somewhere.

“Go home, man,” I said.

“I’m going to buy you a house, Ken,” he said. I’d never heard him use my name, even when I was sitting across from him in his cubicle all those months ago.

“I don’t want a house,” I said. “I’ll call you a cab.”

“You’re a good man, Ken. I’m going to buy you a house.”

It was almost four in the morning by the time I started to sober up enough to keep my car on the road. I had wanted to go home when I suggested it to George Junior—in fact it sounded like a great idea—but Andy returned from the bathroom and ordered another round so we drank. I sipped. The jukebox stopped playing at some point, and Berman disappeared. I’d seen him drinking and laughing with the rest of us, caught in the festivities he had hosted. Eventually Dee curled up in George Junior’s lap after he collapsed in a chair, and she kissed his neck and his cyst and tried not to crush the hard-on he developed from her attentions.

Even in my drunken circumstance I remember thinking, huh, what do you know about that?

Only Andy and Judge were still boozing, though not together. Judge had been quiet most of the night. He knew a good thing when he saw it and got down to the business of drinking. It was foolish to let his attention go elsewhere. Andy helped himself to something brown from behind the bar and sat in a chair next to George Junior, drinking from the bottle and occasionally tugging at the cotton in his ears. I thought he looked like a long gray wolf. I felt bad for his wife all of a sudden.

Out of nowhere Dee retched and jumped off to the bathroom. The drink finally caught her and the sound of her puking into the toilet almost sent me doing the same thing. It startled George Junior, and he stood and called after her. Andy laughed, hoarse from cigarettes and yelling over the crowd all night.

“Dumb bitch can’t hold her drink,” he said. But he didn’t know George Junior had fallen in love.

“Take it back,” George said.

“What’s that, Colonel?” Andy asked. I think he was genuinely surprised.

“She’s not a bitch,” George said. He was slurring pretty bad. “Take it back. Handy.”

I couldn’t believe he said it. For the second time that night the air sucked out of the room.

It was one punch so it was over fast. Andy clenched his teeth and hit him with a right cross, and the cotton popped out of one of his ears. George Junior

was knocked backwards, his nose exploding in a glorious red fountain, and he banged his head on the floor hard enough that I believe I felt the vibrations across the room. There was a lot of blood, but that'll happen.

Andy stood panting over his victim, purple bruises on his cheeks, and I thought he might put his El Dorados to work dancing on Georgie's ribs. I felt Judge looking at me, but I wouldn't meet his eye. Neither of us moved. Eventually George Junior mewled, and when he did I prayed he knew better than to try to stand. Andy was huffing like he'd just run a marathon, then he gave a little piss-shiver, wiped his face top to bottom, and banged out the door. A cold draft hit all of us squarely, and it had indeed gotten into the 30s that night.

At the sound of the commotion, Dee had come running out of the bathroom looking frightened and green. I told her what had happened, and while she didn't say anything as I talked, I could tell she was disgusted with George Junior's part in it all. Then she got some ice in a towel and did her best to stop his nose from bleeding. It wasn't as bad as all that, but he was definitely going to bruise.

I was too tired to argue when Dee offered to get him home, and I helped load him into her jeep while he sniffled and snorted up monstrous bloody loogies. It was unnaturally quiet, and I think it passed freezing before the sun came up. Judge told me he'd lock the place up behind me, and I waited until Dee's taillights disappeared, climbed into my tired old Celica, drove home and slept past noon for the last time.

As it turns out we were all wrong, and the strike broke two days before Christmas. Most of the guys got a holiday bonus that year as part of the settlement. Not me. I hadn't been there long enough.

The rest of my time working the mine wasn't as eventful as that night. There was a bit of drama after a guy on a different crew named Terry Masco hung himself. I heard his wife was cheating on him with his brother. Then a few days before I put in my notice we found a saber-toothed cat skull in one of the pits. It had most of its teeth intact, and I got to hold it, which was pretty neat. Brunswick donated it to the phosphate museum in town, though I guess they already had one on display.

I didn't stay in Mulberry long after that. I listened to my parents and left, finished my degree in civil engineering, ignored it, went to work at Roper Corporate in Chicago, worked my way up. I sold my car, but I get around. I married a woman who's also from a small town in Florida. Only hers was an island, where they filmed a Pippi Longstocking movie in the '80s. We laugh and think it's funny that we had to go to Illinois to meet one another when we're both from Florida, but it isn't really. Same state, different planet. We have a kid, too. She wants to open her own babysitting service when she gets older. Isn't that great? She's eleven.

Things are pretty good for me now, though I wear a tie. It can't be helped. I don't drink all that much anymore.

Things were okay for George Junior for a while, but eventually it turned to shit. You know the story. Everyone finds out you have money and treats you different. They all want something from you. Beer and good times always, Colonel. Then it gets real bad. At one point someone claimed George Junior stole the ticket from them, and he got sued for it. Georgie eventually won, but I guess it was messy. He bought a house for Dee, though she wouldn't marry him. Would you believe after a few years of dangling she killed him? I read about it on Facebook, then I looked it up. She did him in with a lousy hammer, buried him under a concrete slab in the backyard. No parole for her. She's in Starke for the rest of her days.

I wouldn't work the mines again if they paid me twice what I make now. But I imagine going back to The Dragline sometimes. I'm a big man in a tie, but not so far away from real work that I've lost the respect of those men. I can't offer to buy drinks the way George Junior did, though maybe I can afford it now. I think it'd be sort of a blasphemy. I have other things to offer, my things, and George Junior had his.

It occurs to me that Frank Salad had his head knocked off by a bucket, and he still got it better than Georgie. A millionaire with no real friends.

And I never got my house.

What a world this is.

The Favor

July after a rain is a bad time to spend outside in Florida. In the time it took Carlton to walk from the small parking lot to the front steps of Excelor Funeral Chapel, he managed to soak through his scratchy button-up mechanics shirt. He climbed the stairs and mopped at his brow with a stained cotton hanky before stuffing it in the front pocket of his jeans, ran the fingers of his free hand through his lanky hair more gray than blond. Carlton carried a small corrugated cardboard box under one arm. It had once held the remanufactured alternator to a '93 Celica but now contained the cremated remains of his mama's left leg. Just before driving over he'd accidentally stepped on the flimsy, decorative box that the leg had been delivered in, and while its replacement had smudged grease from a repair long past along the top—Pure Energy, it read behind oily fingerprints—the box was double-walled sturdy and worked well for its newer purpose. Inside the dust and bone chips were sealed within a heavy plastic bag bound with packing tape that had held its contents when he stepped on the box. A clumsy ox, his mama used to call him when he was a child, sometimes later. He supposed she was right about that.

Shuddering at the thought of cleaning up the remains from his floorboard, Carlton crawled the back roads to get to Excelor with the box sitting against him on the bench seat of his rusting Nova where he could feel it if it moved.

Excelor was in a friendly residential neighborhood in Mulberry's south side. If not for the understated "Excelor Funeral Chapel, EST. 1954" painted in block letters with elegant gold scrollwork beneath and the lot next to it, formerly

the old Harvester place, now torn down and strewn with chalky white shells that served as paving, it would have been like many other houses on the street. Perhaps a bit larger, big enough to divide into several small apartments, with a wrap-around porch and rows of rockers seldom used by mourners but occasionally by the mortician and his wife in the evenings. Carlton could see a hidden drive—he was curious about out-of-the-way streets and private nooks—and assumed this one was for bodies to be brought in around back behind a wall of lattice crawling with jasmine, grown to obscure its purpose. Here was secret parking wide enough for a hearse or an ambulance, though not both at the same time.

Carlton remembered his mama went down that hidden drive not all that long ago—his pa well before that—and it reminded him of his purpose. He clutched his box and took the wooden porch steps, the sound of his work boots muted from the neat brown outdoor carpeting, and entered the funeral home without knocking. A small electronic chime called from somewhere within.

It was dark inside, and as Carlton's eyes adjusted from the sunlight, his other senses took over. He smelled perfume, flowery like the old women at church, friends of his mama's, and something else underneath, antiseptic but not obtrusive, a reminder of where he was. He heard murmuring voices from the room to his left, but the pocket doors leading into it were pulled shut and Carlton couldn't make out any words, couldn't even tell if it was men or women talking. Somebody must have died. To the right was a hallway with a bathroom and after a short distance a battered chain with a sign hanging off it—Employees Only,

Please in an elegantly stenciled script—likely meant to warn mourners from moving too far into the bowels of the house.

The doorway in front of him led to the Slumber Room, a large, heavily carpeted and dimly lit space where the services were held. Neat rows of folding chairs took up most of the center, an open casket at the far end. Carlton left his glasses in the truck, but over the lip of the casket he could still make out the bump of a nose and a pair of hands neatly folded on a chest. Ready for the next service then. A Mr. P.S. Beall, according to the changeable letter sign.

Carlton felt like an intruder standing in the middle of the room, and while he tried to stay still, his mind wandered easily, and he couldn't help but fidget from one foot to the other while he waited. He'd rather be done with this business before people started showing up for the next funeral. He was thankful that at least the foyer was cool, maybe downright chilly, and by the time he had regained his vision his sweat-soaked shirt had dried against his back, and he shivered and hugged the box closer to his body.

It occurred to him that he'd been to the Excelor Funeral Home three times in the past.

The first time he had been very young, after his pa, Big Ed Wright, had slipped and fallen off the roof while trying to fix shingles that had blown off in a storm that season. Like Carlton, Big Ed was a giant of a man, and he'd gone down hard and with all the grace of a sack of grain hucked from a barn loft. He'd broken his back and lived for almost three days, but he never would have walked again and probably wouldn't have been able to eat without somebody's help or

even wash himself, and Carlton's mama said it was probably better that he never woke up. But come to think of it, his mama never walked again after her accident either, and she seemed to do well enough in her wheelchair, which she'd had for most of her adult life until she got old and learned that she could get a motorized scooter through the AARP. The government would pay for it if she signed a few papers.

Would she have said that about his pa if they could have signed a few more government papers for an extra scooter?

The truth was that Carlton remembered very little of his pa. His mama talked about him sometimes, and he imagined most of what he could recall was actually her memories of him put into his head. He did seem to remember bits of his pa's funeral, although any time he thought back on it his mind's eye draped the walls in red velvet, great sheets of it hanging around the coffin like curtains around an actor on stage. Carlton always pictured Big Ed dressed up, a piece of wax in a gray suit and tie, which was funny because to the best of his knowledge it was something he'd never done his whole life. That was for men who sold insurance, not for those who worked for the mines. Pious men on Sundays, maybe. From what everybody had always said about him, Eddie Wright was neither of those kinds of men.

Carlton was surprised to see no velvet when he returned just last week to make arrangements for his mama. The walls were covered in dark copper with muted roses, the kind of wallpaper found only in funeral parlors and whorehouses, designed to allow the bereaved to get on with the terrible and weighty business of

the day. There are decisions to make for the dead. Carlton sat in the room behind the pocket doors with Mr. Berquist, and he answered questions about flowers and which time of the day would be best for the service and which picture to use for the obituary in the News Chief. Carlton was embarrassed by these questions, though he couldn't exactly say why. He felt like he might say something wrong. He was afraid he might mention the velvet.

But he got through it, just this past Saturday in the next room. And everyone was kind and said it was exactly what Georgette would have wanted. Though the truth was that he was limited by what he could afford. His mama had left him a payable-on-death account at the bank, which was just a few thousand dollars, the last of the payout from the accident that took her leg. But Berquist had worked with him to make sure it was enough to bury her. The flowers were carnations and the coffin had been the cheapest one Excelor offered. It had been the mortician's idea to let her rest in state on a bed in the Slumber Room before packing her up and bringing her to Oak Hill. He said that many people chose the option to display the deceased this way, though Carlton had never heard of it and assumed it was to save her the humiliation of being seen in such a cheap box. There was no picture in the newspaper either. Just a mention of her name—Georgette Grace Wright, née Carlisle—and the date and time of the funeral at Excelor.

The pocket doors leading to the office opened just then, just a crack, and old Mr. Berquist's face appeared to fill the space. "It's Carl Wright," he said when he recognized him, maybe to himself or maybe to the person he'd been

conversing with in the room behind him. “I thought I heard the chime,” he added, though he seemed surprised to see Carlton.

Carlton didn’t know what to say, so he held up the box instead and it loosened his tongue. “I need to talk to you about this here box,” he said.

Careful to slide the door shut behind him, Mr. Berquist moved into the foyer, and in an instant he’d adopted a look of vague mindfulness that implied a mild interest. It occurred to Carlton that the mortician had probably cultivated that look over the years while listening to the sad stories pouring out of people he didn’t know. Carlton thought it was a look that said ‘You have my attention, but in truth I’m thinking about fishing.’

“Pure Energy,” he read. “What about it?”

“It’s my mama’s leg,” Carlton replied.

The mortician blinked twice, then remembered himself and reinforced his practiced look.

“Mrs. Georgette Wright,” Carlton clarified.

“Yes, of course,” Berquist said. He clearly needed help.

“She was buried without it. That wasn’t supposed to happen.”

“Yes, of course,” he repeated and smiled nervously.

“I’d like to rectify that, Mr. Berquist.” Something in the way the mortician was looking at him irritated his skin, and he scratched his arm with his free hand.

Berquist inhaled and considered before answering, then asked to be excused for a moment, and once granted with a nod by Carlton, returned behind

the sliding door, closing it behind him. Carlton waited and shifted from foot to foot. He realized he had goosebumps and wished he was outside in the warm sun again.

He looked to the coffin in the far room and thought of his mama. The day she passed it was a Wednesday, which means she had taken the Citrus Connection bus to meet Mrs. Preast and the rest of her sewing group from Jerusalem Baptist at the outdoor mall in Winter Haven. Lunch at the Buddy Freddys then over to the Goody Barn for fabric and yarn.

Knitting was a habit she'd cultivated years ago, mainly blankets and potholders and the like. And any opportunity, any slight opening in conversation, she'd talk about how each member of the circle had a specialty, something they were famous for while the poor, trapped listener would nod politely, glassy-eyed. Her forte was poppets with no legs and long skirts designed to sit on empty bottles of Joy dish soap. And she named them all: Holly and Heather and Daisy and Zinnia. His mama made white girls with blonde hair and black girls with red handkerchiefs on their head and once a yellow girl with slanted eyes, her hands sewn together as if performing a bow, an intricate cherry blossom woven into her dress. All but that one she gave to friends or donated them to sell during the church rummage sale. They were very popular among the Jerusalem sewing group, among a certain class of woman. His mama had even knitted a man once, a little man in overalls, and she told her son it was him, a little Carlton. He'd been not quite embarrassed enough to keep it in his kitchen, afraid that a visitor might see it and look at him sideways, although he couldn't quite recollect the last

person who'd been out to see him in his trailer, and certainly not his modest kitchen.

Mrs. Prest explained the circumstances of her passing at the funeral. "Oh!" his ma d said while browsing scraps of fabric. And it was no more dramatic than that.

"She sounded almost delighted. Like she'd found just the right thing." They'd stood next to the coffin, and Mrs. Prest had patted his hand. It was the most she'd ever spoken to him, a change from the sour looks the old woman usually gave him, though he couldn't imagine why. And here she was now treating Carlton like an old friend.

"Do you suppose she saw our Father?" she'd asked, a bit hopeful.

"I suppose," he'd answered simply, and he could tell looking into Mrs. Prest's rheumy old eyes she was thinking about her own time left on earth. He preferred to think maybe his mama saw his pa along with Jesus in his flowing robes.

The murmurs from the office changed abruptly to words when the pocket door slid open and the mortician emerged.

"—wait next to your father until the other guests arrive, if you'd like, Miss," he was saying quietly, mournfully. A young woman in a simple blue dress followed him. She was sniffing into a tissue, and when they briefly made eye contact, Carlton could see that she'd been crying. He looked away, embarrassed for them both, and shifted the Pure Energy box from one arm to the other. He

heard her sigh shakily as if steeling herself, and she walked briskly into the Slumber Room.

“This way, Carl,” the mortician said. All touches of sadness were replaced with business. I thought I was done with you, he might have been saying. Let’s get this over with.

Carlton followed Mr. Berquist into the office. The mortician slid the door shut and motioned to Carl to take the seat in front of the desk. Last week when they’d been in the well-lit office they had sat on the nearby sofa while looking through books of coffins and selecting any one of twenty-two hymns available to be played before and after the service. And by Mrs. Berquist herself on the Casio.

Now he was seated in front of the large, maple desk, the box in his lap while Berquist stared at him. Like he had two heads. And Carlton was sweating again. He wondered as to how they regulated the temperature in this place.

“Now what can I do for you, Carl?” Berquist asked. “As you can see, we have a service starting soon, and I’m very busy.” He spoke slowly, as if he intended not to be misunderstood.

Carlton’s wished he had water. “This here box holds my mama’s leg,” he repeated. “Cremated.”

“Your mother’s cremated leg is in that carburetor box?” Berquist asked.

Alternator box, Carlton wanted to correct. He nodded instead.

“Why didn’t you give it to me before we buried her?” The mortician leaned forward and folded his hands on the desk in front of him. They looked soft, and Carlton noticed his nails were square and trimmed neatly.

“Don’t rightly know. I meant to. Took the leg from her house to my place and everything.” He could have said more, how he left the leg next to his couch, how he’d fallen asleep and crushed it when he woke in the night thinking about his mama. Crushed it with his clodhopper like a clumsy ox and put it in this box and forgotten it until this morning when he remembered what he had done.

“Carl, I gave you a real good deal to bury your mother. You know that, yes?” The mortician rubbed his eyes. “I’m not sure what it is you want me to do now that we’ve buried her out at Oak Hill.”

Carlton fidgeted in his chair. “I want you to dig her up,” he said. “Unbury her.”

The mortician looked at him coldly. “Carl,” he began.

“Dig her up,” he said. “Put the leg in there—it ain’t much, you’ll see, just open it a crack and stuff it in—then close it up and bury her again. Tight as you please.”

“Carl,” he repeated. “There are laws.”

Carlton leaned forward. “She told me not to forget,” Carlton said. “And I did. I forgot.”

The mortician was no longer hiding his irritation. There was another service to worry about. There was fishing. “Once a body’s been buried, we can’t just dig it up. Not without a court order. There are laws, Carl.” He frowned. “And it costs money.”

It was almost an afterthought, but Berquist let slip a small smile. “It’d be eight or nine hundred dollars, up front,” he said. “We’d have to pay the cemetery

to move the headstone, to dig up the plot. Resodding alone is nearly seventy-five dollars.” His face grew serious. “I told you last week that it wasn’t cheap to bury someone. There are expenses.”

“She told me not to forget,” he said. His voice cracked and it surprised them both. He tore into the box then, slid his finger under the tape, ripped through the double-walled corrugated cardboard. He reached in and pulled out her leg, no more than a handful of dust and bone, wrapped in a crinkled, plastic bag and wrapped in yellowed packing tape, and let the ruined box fall to the floor. “This is all,” he said. “Put me together, Carlton,” she said. “Don’t forget.” He held the bag between them both.

Berquist composed himself. “Do you have nine hundred dollars, Carl?”

“It’s Carlton,” Carlton said. “And you know I don’t.”

“Then I suggest you come back another day. We sell a variety of urns, one of which is sure to meet your needs. I’ll try to give you a good deal. You can keep Mrs. Wright’s leg in that.” The mortician checked his watch. “Or not,” he added and stood. “But I really must prepare for the next service.”

Carlton gathered the torn Pure Energy box from the floor, and once the sliding door was shut, he stuffed his mama’s remains into his pants pocket. She’d asked for one thing, to be put together when she died. All those years ago when she lost her leg, she always figured Jesus would give it back to her when she walked through the gates of His Kingdom. “Just put me together, Carlton, so He knows where to find it.”

He promised her he could do that much.

Carlton mopped at his head with his hanky. He felt unsettled. Business wasn't finished. Instead of leaving the funeral home, he walked into the Slumber Room. The woman in the blue dress was at the casket, and she had her back to him. He recalled her snotty nose and puffy eyes, and when he remembered the look they'd exchanged, he felt shame for intruding.

"Did you know my father?" the woman asked. She hadn't turned. Even on the heavy carpet, Carlton was an ox.

He stuttered. "No," he finally said and muttered his condolences.

"They did a good job," she said, probably to herself. "Not too much rouge on his cheeks."

Carlton stepped forward to look. He expected to see an old man, but the man looked no older than Carlton, though his face was oddly lumpy, like a shattered glass bowl glued together not quite straight. He wore a blue suit and a red black and blue striped tie. Like an insurance salesman maybe.

"Yeah," he agreed once he was standing next to the woman. She was tiny compared to him, almost like a child, and she looked young enough to be his daughter, though he had never considered such a thing before. And she smelled like baby powder, although now he thought maybe it was the deceased, Mr. P.S. Beall instead, recalling his mother had smelled similarly.

The woman broke down again crying, and turned suddenly to bury her face in Carlton's chest. It scared him a bit. He'd not been that close to anyone in years, not since he was a boy, not even at his mother's funeral in this same room a

few days ago. He patted her awkwardly while she cried and offered her his stained hanky. She accepted and wiped her red eyes.

“A car accident,” she said as if he’d asked. “They did a good job,” she repeated.

“Yeah.”

They stood together saying nothing for a long time.

“I think maybe I’m going insane,” she said at last.

Carlton considered. “Yeah,” he agreed, squinting. He knew the feeling.

She wiped her eyes, took a deep breath, composed herself. “I’m Holly,” she said and put out her hand.

“Like the doll,” he said, forgetting himself. But she smiled. “Carl” he said, squeezing her hand gently.

“You’ll forgive me if I go freshen up before everyone gets here,” she said. Carlton nodded his assent. “Are you staying for the service?” she asked.

“I reckon,” he decided.

She smiled weakly and hurried off to the bathroom.

By the time most of the guests arrived, Carlton had found a spot in the back of the room. The box was under his chair. He no longer needed to keep it close to him. It was a good box, nothing a little tape wouldn’t fix anyway. He could use it for something else later, knew just the thing, in fact.

He decided that not only would he sit through the service but that he’d also go to the cemetery, even though it’d be the hottest part of the day, and he

wasn't likely to get his handkerchief back from the girl. He could sweat. It was a small thing. And besides, he took the day off work anyway, so he had the time to give.

And when he watched them put Mr. P.S. Beall into the earth, maybe Carlton would say his own little prayer for the man, and ask him a small favor. In exchange for the kindness to his daughter—and if he wouldn't mind too terribly—reaching into his coat pocket and seeing to it that his mama's leg finds its way back to her when he walks through the front gates of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Rebel

Rebel pulled his pickup off the road fifty yards or so from U.K.'s house, far enough that his father-in-law wouldn't see him unless he came to the road for his mail—unlikely on a Sunday morning—but near enough to observe the work shed through the copse of slash pines that ran the length of the property. It dawned on him that he was still a little drunk from last night. He sat with his first beer of the day wedged between his legs listening to the engine tick and cool and deliberated whether to give the old man an opportunity to explain before he beat the daylights out of him. By the time the morning sun was high and his third Black Label empty, Rebel had decided to hear him out. He didn't exactly hate U.K., but he'd need to pay the price for insulting Trina. Family or no, if you slur a man's wife you had to expect some sort of retaliation. That's just the way things were done between men.

On weekends U.K. was always up early and at his work shed. You'd think he'd have got his fill making dinette sets during the week at Earline Keene Furnishings. But he was always in the yard sanding and staining and refinishing something across a pair of makeshift sawhorses or tucked under the awning of the shed when the sun was too much or the storms settled into their summer pattern. U.K. had tangles of furniture sitting on plywood, imperfect pieces he'd collected from the factory and stored under tarps next to the house until his fancy was struck. He'd do one or two pieces a weekend, and when the polyurethane was dry, his brother, Earl, would come by to pick it up and sell at the Saturday morning flea market that set up at the Silvermoon drive-in. Rebel had met Earl a

few times and didn't care for him, though he had a hard time putting his finger on why. Talked too much, maybe.

It was Sunday morning, and they'd been up late last night shooting off Roman candles and tossing black cats for the Fourth. Rebel imagined he could see the cardboard tubes scattered around the fire pit in the yard, though those may just be discarded empties that needed to be cleaned up. U.K. never said no to a freebie, and would often spend his lunch hour rushing to one side of Mulberry or the other, on his way to pick up some cracked and damaged thing. "There's still meat on that bone," he used to say to his wife, Beverly, when she complained about his latest catch. But he was hauling in junk so often that her admonishments couldn't keep up, and she finally stopped trying. The yard had become a museum of junk, most of it collecting rainwater and mosquito larvae. Or as Rebel called it, a real shithole.

Just last week, with Rebel's help U.K. borrowed the neighbor's trailer and oldest boy to help haul back a jettied hot tub someone had pushed into a culvert off of Highway 60. How he found it was anybody's guess. They'd pushed it off the trailer and next to the back door of the house and filled it with a hose while U.K. sucked his teeth. "Tight as a duck's ass," he laughed and dragged his fingers across the surface while the neighbor boy picked stray leaves from the pool. Last night when barbecuing Rebel had gone into the house for a set of tongs and a fresh beer, and he'd noticed that hot tub was still as they left it that day, green water hose snaking from the spigot and hanging limp over the side. A dead frog floated belly up near the side, having jumped in and not able to get out, a swarm

of white worms wriggling and feasting like pigs suckling at the teat. It had made Rebel a little nauseous then, and his mouth watered thinking of it now.

He polished off the last swig of his beer and tossed the empty out the window with the others. The morning light bouncing off the glass of the screen door caught his eye, and he saw his mother-in-law, Beverly, walk out onto the front deck dressed for church in a floral print dress, her frizzy red hair pulled up and somehow tamed in a bun. She locked the front door before getting into her Ford—in his house U.K. only allowed Fords, never Chevys—and driving away. Rebel slouched into the seat of his truck as far as he could manage, although Beverly was headed away from him and it made him feel silly to do it. She was down the road and had turned the corner by the time he looked back at the house, and by then, U.K. had appeared at the shed in the back.

Three weeks after his father died, Rebel met Fulton's sister, Trina. He was seventeen and she was a year or two younger than that. They had been driving Fulton's jeep around and through the groves in Mulberry, the ragtop unsnapped and stuffed behind the seats, enjoying the few brief days of a Florida autumn.

"I'm hungry. Wanna stop at my house?" Fulton asked, and when Rebel said he could eat, Fulton surprised him by pulling a U-turn and veering into a healthy-looking subdivision they would have passed otherwise. Fulton drove the twists and turns of streets until they pulled into the driveway of a nicely manicured house. A residence.

“This your house?” he had asked. He was surprised. Rebel hadn’t given it much thought until now, but he figured Fulton was like him. But this place looked like somewhere Eric Shelnut and Roy Hand or any one of the rest of the rich kids from school might live. No peeling paint, a nicely manicured lawn, if a bit barren. There were no trees in these newer subdivisions. They were all plucked from the ground like weeds before the first house was ever framed. You’d never know that this was orange groves.

Fulton shut off the jeep and jumped out, agile for a kid his size, a hulking offensive tackle on Mulberry High’s team. “C’mon. I think there’s some leftover lasagna in the fridge,” he said, swinging his keys around his finger. “I’m starving.”

The house was as nice inside, but like the yard, barren. Nothing hung on the walls. As they passed through the living room, Rebel could smell it was clean. No dog smell like at his place. His mother had an old wolfhound that had taken to shitting in the house in its advancing years. With nobody home during the day it, they’d often come home to two or three runny piles. Even in the best of days the house wasn’t ever very clean. “Lived in,” his mother called it. “Cozy.” Dirty, Rebel thought.

This house wasn’t cozy at all. Comfortable because of the furniture. Clean. But not cozy. You needed pictures and clocks and knickknacks for cozy.

They passed into the kitchen, the light from sliding glass doors painting the walls a cheery yellow. Fulton’s sister, Trina, was leaning on the kitchen counter, almost laying on it, really, leafing through a copy of *Seventeen* and on

tip-toe and kicking her legs behind her absentmindedly. She still had on the dark pants and loose-fitting shirt from her weekend shift at Zayer's, the latter a sort of Seventies orange in color, though she'd taken her red hair down and it had gone frizzy from sweat. Trina was using her finger to scoop peanut butter from an open jar of Skippy and licking it off in little tastes while trying not to drop any on the magazine and mess up the slippery pages. While Fulton rummaged the refrigerator, Rebel stood at the threshold between the living room and the kitchen suddenly needing something to do with his hands, cramming them into his armpits. Trina nipped at the peanut butter and pretended not to notice that they had company.

While they waited for the wedges of lasagna to heat in the microwave, Fulton poured them both a glass of Big Red soda. For spirit building the football team, the Mulberry Chiefs, had it shipped in special for games and Fulton had managed to steal a case of two-liter bottles from the concession stand. It was all he drank now, he said. Fulton gulped from his glass while Rebel sipped—he wasn't much for cream soda—and they said nothing. The microwave dinged and the first plate came out, Fulton stabbed the middle of the lasagna with his finger, testing. "Hot enough," he said and slid it down the counter near where Rebel stood. Fulton heated his own plate and retrieved forks and paper napkins and set it next to Rebel. "Don't wait for me. Eat."

It was good. They usually just had the frozen stuff at his house. Fulton's mom used cottage cheese instead of that other stuff, and normally Rebel would

stay away from it, but this was good. He ate in huge bites, accidentally mimicking Fulton's attack on his own plate. Then he felt eyes on him.

Trina was watching him, looking over her magazine. Rebel nodded and smiled at her, not knowing why he was embarrassed, and he wiped his mouth with the napkin. It came away stained with sauce.

"Randy Rhoads," she said.

"Scuse me?"

"I've been sitting here trying to figure out who it is you look like, and I just did." She slapped the *Seventeen* onto the counter. "You look like Randy Rhodes."

"Who?"

"Who? Randy-fucking-Rhodes, man." She narrowed her eyes. "Don't tell me a guy in a Molly Hatchet shirt doesn't know who Randy Rhodes is."

"Of course I do." He did not, and he could feel himself blushing. She wouldn't look away.

"I guess, sorta," Fulton said. "You want another plate of lasagna," he asked, saving him.

Rebel spent a lot of time at Fulton's that fall. When Fulton didn't have football practice, they'd drive to his house after school and play video games and watch Adam Sandler movies, and there was always food around, although he'd never seen their mother and had no idea when she'd find the time to make it. Trina smoked cigarettes, and Rebel picked up the habit despite the lung cancer

that had killed his father not terribly long before, taking furtive little puffs but watching her out of the corners of his eyes, looking at her hands when she held the smoke, trying to figure out how she took such huge drags without hacking and choking.

He hung out at the house even when Fulton had practice. If Trina was working, he'd let himself in through the sliding doors of the back lanai, which is what he'd learned they called the porch. At first it was strange being in the house alone, but he warmed to it gradually, and after a few days, Fulton or Trina would come home and find him draped over the couch, watching MTV and eating chips or just sitting in the quiet.

Rebel knew it was better here. Sometimes he felt guilty about it.

One afternoon, Rebel was napping and woke to the sound of keys jingling in the lock. The door opened and a frizzy redhead stood over him, unmistakably related to Fulton and Trina, large-boned and round-headed. He was up and standing in his socks, embarrassed and feeling like he'd been caught, though she smiled and tried to put him at ease by offering to get him a drink, though the empty glass next to him indicated he'd already helped himself. She didn't seem surprised there was a strange boy in her house, and as she spun through the kitchen like a whirlwind, she yammered happily about her job as an attorney's assistant—a glorified secretary, she told him—and her plans to go camping with her new man friend that weekend and whatever else came to mind right at that moment.

Beverly never introduced herself and never asked his name, and by the time Fulton came home she was already gone, replaced with vibrating silence and the smell of a hastily made potpie cooking in the oven.

Rebel felt like he was a spy. From his place in the truck he watched U.K. work. He had a Hastings—a big, round table he might even have put together himself at Earline Keene Furnishings—and was sanding one of the legs carefully.

The house was a large, boxy place, a two-story thing done in the plantation style. After a serious pressure washing where he had managed to cut through two of the screens on the back of the house, U.K started painting it in February, taking it from a thin, dingy white to a muted yellow that mimicked the bungalows found in Sarasota where he still had family, a cousin he and Beverly would visit occasionally. Because U.K. was afraid of heights, he'd only finished painting the bottom half of it and whatever he could reach from leaning out the upstairs windows before running out of steam, although he vowed to finish the job. It couldn't be done now, he'd explained to his annoyed neighbors, not in the middle of hurricane season. Not with the afternoon rains. He'd have to get to the doctor about his back, too, as painting had "exacerbated his lumbar", a term he heard somewhere and liked to use when it was needed. His neighbors had come to expect this sort of eccentricity—the piles of furniture, the sounds of the electric sander echoing all hours of the day and night, the houseboat on a trailer hitch with flattened tires U.K. liked to sit in, though as a boy he lost a sister to drowning and had a deep fear of it himself—but the lot of those things was confined to the back

of the house, only visible from the proper angle, and not so unusual for the crackers who lived on acreage on the back country roads besides.

It was garish though, the yellow paint, and sitting back where he was, taking it all in from this vantage, Rebel was almost embarrassed for U.K. The people around her probably thought he was off his nut. They probably whispered about it, and him. And it would be guilt by association for poor Beverly, who was probably pitied by the ladies at the church. “Well, bless her heart,” they’d say when they’d find it in themselves to say anything at all.

Rebel sighed and got out of the truck and wished he had another beer.

They started dating eventually, of course, Rebel and Trina. He had no car, but Beverly got her a white Geo convertible for Christmas, and they no longer needed Fulton to get around. Trina seemed to know everything about music and introduced him to R.E.M and Mazzy Star, punk and acid rock and the soundtrack to *Grease*, and though he preferred bands driven by guitar with earsplitting solos, she taught him their lyrics and they howled like hounds on their way to school each day. He returned the favor by trying to learn their songs on the guitar, and by the time Rebel and Trina had fallen in love, to her delight he could play most of *Nevermind* and good selection of Jane’s Addiction from memory.

Rebel graduated from high school a year earlier than Trina, and he spent his days watching T.V. or sleeping. It seemed to him he was unable to get comfortable whenever Trina wasn’t around. Perhaps sensing he needed her, Trina quit her job at Zayer’s so they could spend more time together in the evenings.

Perhaps she didn't need to work. It was her senior year, and she could use the extra time for study. Though Beverly would need to pay her car insurance and gas, and a little spending money if she could spare it, she didn't seem to mind. She'd done the same for Fulton so he could play football, so what's the difference?

She was occupied anyway, other things on her mind. Trina told Rebel she'd overheard a phone call. Something about U.K. and the sheriff, and a promise to finally stop drinking.

Rebel first met U.K. during a birthday celebration for Beverly. They were meeting at Mike's Steakhouse for dinner. Fulton was working a dragline at the phosphate mines and was bringing a girl from the front office, a quiet, dewy blonde named Mandy. Trina had asked if Rebel could come, too, and Bev had agreed, though clearly hadn't mentioned it to U.K. until they were standing in front of the restaurant.

"Who's this then?" U.K. had twanged, nodding at Rebel, friendly except for a furrowed brow. Though he wore blue jeans and cowboy boots and the hat of a cattle rancher, they were clearly for fashion, and his belly hung over his belt and made him look soft. Still, he smiled big white teeth behind a close-cropped silver beard and welcomed him with a meaty handshake. "U.K. Suggs. Pleased to meet you," he boomed after Beverly had made introductions.

They ordered steaks and ate them with sweet tea instead of beers, and the talk turned from friendly teasing and light conversation to their jobs. Fulton hated

his, and he said so, lamenting the overtime he'd have to work and felt was forced upon him. "It's good for you, son," U.K. said, and they learned that U.K. was a foreman at Earline Keene Furnishings. He'd worked there since he'd dropped out of high school, going on thirty-six years now. "That's longer than most of you have been alive," he roared, looking at no one while he said it. He squeezed Beverly's hand. "Worked my way up. Got a healthy retirement coming." U.K. didn't speak so much as yell.

The focus slid to Rebel, and he stuttered when asked what it was he did to make money. "I'm between jobs," he finally managed, and U.K. furrowed a bit, but smiled.

Hell, son, I'll bet I can get you on at the factory," he said. "If you don't mind honest work.

Between the meal and dessert—a chocolate cake with white icing and the words HAPPY BIRTHDAY BEV in blue piping—Rebel went out front for a cigarette. He smoked and considered his options, and Trina joined him, and by the time he stubbed the cigarette out on a yellow concrete parking block, they'd made up his mind to take U.K. up on his offer.

The job U.K. had gotten him wasn't exactly what he had in mind for a career—he'd seen himself a guitarist if he could ever get good enough—but the pay was better than he'd expected. The Southern yellow pine they made most of the furniture from would come in from Georgia on huge pallets, would be unloaded by the forklift operators, and Rebel would use an industrial-sized

sprayer attached to a sealed vat and coat the wood with a chemical to kill termites and other pests. U.K. promised that if he came to work every day and kept his mouth shut, eventually they'd certify him on the forklift. That was where the real money was.

The day after Trina graduated from Mulberry High, Rebel asked her to marry him. He'd spent a sleepless night lying next to her, and he'd put a lot of thought into the idea. He had a job now, and soon he'd have enough for a car. He'd always liked Fulton's jeep and thought maybe he'd be willing to sell that at a good price. Or maybe he could get a truck. He'd always wanted a truck. She was planning on going to Polk Community College to be an LPN, a nurse. And that was just right next door in Lakeland. Between the two of them, he could probably make enough to support them both until she'd made her way through school.

She said yes, and with Beverly's help they rented the hall at the VFW where Rebel had gone every Veterans Day with his family as a child. His father had served in the Army. They did it in late August, sweating in rented tuxedos and dresses while the guests wore shorts and t-shirts, and eating barbecue that U.K. had smoked that morning and pretzel salad Beverly and Trina had been up all night making, laughing mostly, but tearing up and wishing Trina's father was still alive to walk her down the aisle.

And again with Beverly's generosity had a honeymoon in Key West, and when they returned a week later—he, brown from the beach and she, burnt and sun sick—asked to stay in the house until they could get a place of their own.

U.K. thundered he wasn't so sure it was a good idea to start a marriage in someone else's house, but Beverly didn't agree. So she said yes, of course.

As angry as he had been on the way over, Rebel couldn't bring himself to walk through the pines and past the house and into U.K.'s backyard. Instead he leaned on the front of the truck and sweated from the beer and humidity, the last remnants from yesterday's showers making his shirt stick to his back and chest. The heat sapped his strength. It latched onto his natural inclination to keep things peaceful. It made him reconsider. In a way U.K. had been his father, and he didn't want to change that, not if he didn't have to.

U.K. had finished sanding the Hastings and stepped back to admire his work. He produced a dingy handkerchief and mopped his brow before disappearing into the shed and when he emerged he was carrying a small ice cooler.

He walked to the houseboat and put the cooler on the deck before unfolding and climbing a small stepstool propped against the hull of the boat. He disappeared again, this time into the cabin and returned a moment later wearing a captain's hat. Rebel recalled him getting that hat in a tourist spot during a family vacation to Boca Grande, and though U.K. wore it every day during the trip, he couldn't remember having seen it since. He felt wrong suddenly, like he was intruding on something deeply personal, something childish.

U.K. pushed the cooler with his foot to the widest part of the deck, almost losing his balance before sitting on a lawn chair. He pulled out a can beer,

popped the top, and drank deeply, finishing the can in a few long swallows. He crushed the can and opened another, propped his legs on the side of the boat, and looked out across his yard, considering.

Rebel was watching him so closely he nearly didn't recognize that U.K. had spotted him, and it wasn't until he'd hidden his beer and waved him over—reluctantly, it seemed to Rebel—that he was pulled back into the now. He made his way slowly through the pines, past the freshly sanded table—he had been wrong, it was a drop-leaf, not a Hastings—and into the backyard, and tried to remember what it was he had come here to do.

U.K. and Bev were married the year after Rebel and Trina. After a long discussion, Bev decided to move into U.K.'s house. It was on a healthy bit of land, and the mortgage was satisfied. And while it needed a few things to clean it up a bit—he'd lived the bachelor lifestyle too long, he joked—a fresh coat of paint and a few nails would help immensely. U.K.'s fondness for collectibles had taken over the yard, and a compromise was reached between them. He could keep his stuff provided it was moved to the back of the house. The front would need to be well maintained. U.K. was happy with the agreement. It tipped the scales and gave him the excuse he was looking for to get a new John Deere mower he'd had his eye on.

Rebel and Trina stayed in Bev's house. She let them stay rent free, provided they paid the electricity and water and kept the place clean and in order. Most of the furniture stayed, too, only they added a threadbare Lay-Z-Boy they'd

picked up at a garage sale one Saturday. Rebel wanted something comfortable that he could call his own. Trina understood.

Rebel had done as U.K. suggested and was driving a forklift. They trained him for it—who knew it was so complicated?—and gave him four dollars more an hour. It beat spraying chemicals all day. And it was easy, as long as you didn't mind the heat in the warehouse during the summers.

Trina had a tougher time of it. She got through nursing school without much trouble, but once she had the degree, she seemed to lose interest. The hospital in Bartow was her first choice, and she got on as a shift nurse in the neonatal unit, and although the pay was good, she wasn't much for babies and the hours were terrible. She had to drive a half hour each way, and she told Rebel the late shifts made her nervous. He didn't like the thought and encouraged her to move to a unit that worked mostly days. She moved to an ENT and seemed to enjoy it, and she worked closely with a doctor for a few years before she was unexpectedly fired. Rebel pushed Trina for the reason, but all he ever learned was that the head of her unit had it out for her and had been looking to get rid of her for some time. She had been sabotaged, she said. Rebel insisted she write a list of grievances and take them to the hospital's Human Resources, and he helped her come up with just the right thing to say to imply she might just retain the services of a good lawyer.

In the end she never mailed the letter though. Trina said she'd rather just get another job and move on from the place.

She did and worked a few weeks at Mulberry Shores, the tired nursing home where her Paw Paw had gone senile and died when she was still a girl. It wasn't long before she told Rebel working with those people depressed her so badly she could hardly get out of bed in the mornings. Rebel could have argued, but instead he told her he understood. She was tired so he let her sleep.

She slept a lot. Besides her jobs, he didn't know what else had changed.

Any mention of the house in front of U.K. no matter how innocent made him bite his tongue. Rebel sensed he was dissatisfied with the house arrangement between Trina and her mother, and he imagined they'd discussed it when they were alone in bed at night. The daughter with the freeloading husband. U.K. had never said a word to Rebel about it, but it sat between them anyway. With Trina between jobs so often, they couldn't afford the mortgage on their own, which was over a thousand dollars a month, he imagined. He'd deal with it when it happened. That's the best he could do.

After a few years, they considered moving elsewhere, though it wasn't U.K. that spurred it. It was a television show about travel. They were in the living room, Rebel dozing in his chair and half in and out of the program, Trina wrapped in a blanket on the couch.

She woke him with no apology.

"Rebel, would you ever consider moving?" It was the most she'd said to him all evening.

"From this house, you mean?"

“Yeah, the house. Mulberry. Whatever.”

Rebel pretended to consider. “Maybe.”

She looked back at the television. “Seattle seems nice. The Space Needle is there. Mount Rainier.”

“Yeah.”

Rebel and Fulton had run out of things to drink. The whiskey was gone, but the Little General was still open, even late on the Fourth. Especially on the holiday. They could get beer. Without football Fulton had gotten fat and could drink huge amounts without it affecting him, so he drove. They climbed into his Explorer and drove into town and bought two cases of Black Label from the Pakistani who owned the Little General—him having taken over from Berris Prangle after he passed—who eyed them suspiciously until they had paid and were back out the door. Fulton called him the Waki Paki, and Rebel laughed until he hiccupped.

The Black Label was warm. Too many people were buying for their cookouts and parties to keep it in the cooler, but they each drank one on the ride back to the house, careful not to raise the cans from their laps when they passed a another car. Fulton couldn't afford another D.U.I.

“I'm not shooting at anyone, anyway.” Fulton had swilled a dozen beers and was starting to slur a bit.

“What's that mean, 'shooting at someone'?” Rebel asked. “You go shooting when you're drunk?”

“Like U.K., the bastard,” he said.

“That’s why he don’t drink. You don’t know? Mom made him stop.” He was grinning. “He got all whiskied up one day and started shooting at passing cars. Nearly hit some of them, too. When the deputy pulls up out at his place, he’s yelling about the world ending in fire, and he nearly takes the cop’s head off. He’s lucky he didn’t shoot back.”

“No, I didn’t know that,” Rebel said. “Why didn’t they arrest him?”

“Friends with the sheriff, man. It’s all who you know, you know?”

“So that’s why he doesn’t drink,” Rebel said.

“That’s why he doesn’t drink,” Fulton agreed.

By the time they got back, Rebel was too drunk to see that Trina had been crying. “I want to go home,” she said, and he told her she’d have to drive the truck, and he’d passed out on the way home.

Rebel stood at the back of the boat looking up at U.K. and used his hand to shield his eyes from the sun. It was too early for clouds. It was going to be a hot one.

“Well,” U.K. said, “you caught me.” He held up the half-empty can. “It isn’t really my brand, but you left them here last night so I figured why the hell not? You want one?”

Rebel nodded and accepted the beer without thanks. It was warm, and he realized he was probably hiding them in the shed.

“Don’t tell Bev,” U.K. said. Or maybe asked.

Rebel felt the beer add to the ones he had earlier. “Listen,” he started.

U.K. shrank, and Rebel realized he was nervous at the very least. Maybe even scared. It caught him off guard, but he tried to sound firm when he asked the old man to come down off the back of the boat. U.K. obliged, though he didn’t move too fast, as if he wanted to make sure Rebel knew he wasn’t the only one in charge, that he wasn’t abandoning ship because some kid told him to. No, sir. U.K. turned and came down the stepstool backwards, holding the sides of the boat, and when he did Rebel could see the back of his shirt was stained in sweat.

They stood close to one another, not more than a yard or so, and neither of them said a word to the other. The smell of sawdust was still on the breeze, and somewhere they heard a neighbor whistle for a dog to get home.

She’d almost left him in the truck along with the case of beer Fulton had loaded up when they left, she told him this morning. He had a headache, and she was slamming things in the kitchen, the bedroom, the bathroom. Rebel thought she was mad at him, and she probably was, and that made it easier for them to argue. And they fought until she had finally broken down and told him what U.K. had said to her when they were alone for a minute in the kitchen. How she was lazy. How she was worthless and a burden on her poor mother.

“All I said to him was that we didn’t mind hosting, and that next year maybe we could have the cookout at our place. All I said was that we liked having family over to the house!” She was crying. He’d never seen her do that before.

That was it, he decided. Rebel grabbed the keys to the truck from the hook in the kitchen and roared from the house. He didn't know what he was going to do, or what it was that U.K. deserved, but family or no, if you slur a man's wife you had to expect some sort of retaliation.

Mr. Dyerhurden

Friday nights were for drinking.

They worked the rest of the week—Kenny changing out tires with retreads and Alfie leaning on shovels when he could get it—but that Friday they were in the parking lot of the Krispy Kreme sitting on Alfie’s ‘73 Pontiac Goat, sweating and smoking themselves hoarse on Pall Malls. Kenny had brought along fifths of Wild Irish Rose, two for each of them, and he lined them up on the poured concrete curb with their labels out like red soldiers before picking up the first and twisting the cap. He handed it to Alfie.

Alfie took his first swallow and ran the sleeve of his jacket along his mouth. It left a red streak on the denim. “Aah!” he said and smacked his lips before passing it to Kenny. Kenny wiped the mouth of the bottle with the palm of his hand, nails grimy, and drank deep and let loose a wet burp. The Irish tasted good tonight, so he took another taste and sent it back to Alfie.

For the first time in a long time, Kenny felt good. The summer had come to an end, and while it had been the hottest since coming back to Mulberry after being gone for six years in Starke for aggravated battery, the air had a bit of cool in it. It lifted his spirits. It mellowed him.

Kenny liked the Krispy Kreme because it was far from Highway 60. This was a good place to keep your head low to the blacktop and enjoy a few drinks, and definitely better than stumbling out of Berman’s after two-for-one whiskey sours into the arms of a deputy with a quota and a hard-on. Kenny felt like

Sheriff Ferrell had it out for guys like him. Not just like him though. The sheriff had it out for everyone else he knew, too.

“Look there,” Alfie said and nodded at a green Celica that was pulling into the donut shop and parking at the other end of the lot. When the door opened they heard a classical tune slip out of the car until the driver shut off the car and silenced it. An odd-shaped man, a pear, well into his sixties went into the Krispy Kreme. Kenny thought there was something familiar in him.

Alfie gave a *can you believe this shit?* look to Kenny and offered the bottle, but Kenny was elsewhere. He walked to the window to get a better look, and when he did, it clicked. It was Mr. Dyerhurden.

He hadn't seen Dyerhurden in twenty-five years, but there was no doubt it was him. He looked the same. Same awkwardness about him like a skinny man gone fat on bottom, same catcher's mitt face, eyes sunk deep and leathery like he spent too much time squinting into the sun. His hair should have long since gone gray, but it was jet black as was his pencil mustache. Maybe he didn't look so much the same after all. Maybe he was just trying to hold it together.

“Friend of yours, Kenny?” Alfie was beside him.

“That's my teacher way back from when I was a shit dab in elementary school.” He grabbed the Wild Irish from Alfie and moved around him to get a better peek through the window. “That old bastard used to ask us the same question every morning when we'd come into class. ‘What's your contribution gonna be?’ We'd say the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag, and before he'd let us sit, he'd ask us that question.” Kenny turned and leaned his back against the

glass. It was cool from the air conditioning inside. “Each day, a different kid random.” He wiped the lip of the bottle and drained it. It had already gone warm.

“Your contribution. Well ain’t that just fine?” Alfie walked to the Goat and rummaged for a moment, looking for his can of Kodiak. When he found it, he thumped the lid to pack it and tucked a pinch into his lip while Kenny set the empty bottle back in its place on the curb with the label out and twisted open another lukewarm bottle.

“Man like that, he figures he’s got something to teach all them children. It should be regular schooling like reading or arithmetic or whatever the State’s paying him to do.” Alfie squinted through the window of the donut shop.

“I think he taught history,” Kenny said. “No, it was social studies.” He remembered.

“OK, social studies. Thing is, kids don’t give a shit about that stuff. School’s the last place they want to be. Believe it. And that man,” Alfie said and stabbed with his middle finger, “he knows it. So he’s got to try and find a different angle if he wants to keep his shitty job. But the fact is most of them have come up so poor they don’t have the sense to be ashamed of it. He thinks he can change them. Why the hell else take a job like that, ‘less you’re a kiddie diddler. But you can’t change poor, Kenny Boy. Believe it, I know. I’ve tried,” Alfie laughed.

“Social studies.”

“He won’t say it, but he thinks he’s better than them.” Alfie snorted and shot a thick red-brown gob onto the curb. “That’s what I think about that, Ken.”

Careful, Kenny almost said. He'd nearly hit the bottles with his spatter.

As far as Kenny knew, Dyerhurden hadn't ever messed around with children. Just the opposite. He hardly seemed to know they were there.

When his own father up and had a heart attack and left him and his mother, and she had one of her spells, only this one so bad they had to put her in Peace River, Kenny figured he could have used a little attention. Teachers were supposed to do that, weren't they? Instead he spent those six months she was gone as a ward of the State, busted inside and out. Back then they'd put kids with whoever would have them if they didn't have family near. You'd think somebody would notice black eyes, a busted tooth, a sprained arm. But nobody did. Or if they did, they didn't say anything. Not the lady the court assigned to look out for him, Ms. Wassy. Not his teachers. Not Mr. Dyerhurden.

Kenny took a long pull from the bottle and wished he had a real drink. Bourbon, maybe.

"Suppose he's got any money? We could always ask him for a coupla bucks." He'd lost his front teeth to crank a few years ago and said it like *buckth*. Kenny hardly noticed anymore. "Or maybe roll him. Whatchoo think about that, Kenny?" When he reached for the bottle Alfie's eyes were shining, and Kenny could see his tongue was stained red from the Irish, and he had brown juice in the corners of his mouth.

"I can't hurt nobody again" Kenny said finally. "I ain't going back to Starke. I can't get caught."

“Dontchoo worry about that none. We won’t let that happen. We’ll just show him our pokers, scare him a little bit is all.” Alfie drank a few big gulps and sent the bottle back. “Hell, it’ll be fun,” he laughed and wiped his sleeve across his mouth.

Kenny felt a little sick so he lit a fresh smoke and while they drank he pretended to think about it. The wind was blowing gently, and he watched the phosphate dust crawl across the parking lot and settle in the cracks. It occurred to him how close they were to the mines, and he considered what it would take to get a job doing that kind of work. They had the best paying jobs in Mulberry, union jobs, but Lonnie Kowit at the Goodyear told him to forget about that, that they wouldn’t hire a man with a rap sheet who couldn’t get their probation officer to vouch for him. Kenny hated his PO.

The sky was going soft pink, and while he drank, Kenny let himself get lost in it. He could smell summer coming and knew that soon the days were going to be best spent inside. This time of night most folks had finished supper and were either down at the VFW for beers, or if they had kids, were waiting for the double-feature to start at the Silvermoon Drive-in. That made him think about Joy, and he wondered what she was up to right now. She had called him a restless soul before she left.

Alfie pulled him back. “Man, by the time anyone shows up, we’ll be long gone.”

Kenny drained the second bottle and let the heat settle into his gut. He balanced the empty label-out on the curb and picked up the third bottle. Why had

the old man pulled in for doughnuts tonight? He was feeling fine, thinking about nothing much, having a drink with his shitbird friend. Didn't he deserve at least that much?

But it was in him now, he was filled with it like the booze. Only one way to get it out.

"Let's do it," he said, and Alfie hooted and grinned and showed his gums again. They cracked the warm booze in celebration.

"Hide your car beyond that berm yonder," he said. It ran behind the Krispy Kreme and Kenny figured it was their best bet to make a quick getaway. Alfie climbed into the Goat and cranked it up. It coughed and sputtered but started just the same. He roared off, and Kenny slunk into the shadows of the building where he'd go unnoticed unless someone was looking for him.

He swatted at mosquitoes and drank and watched a young migrant woman with a dirty child come and go a few minutes later carrying a box of donuts. He wondered about Alfie and gulped the third bottle, and by the time Alfie returned Kenny had emptied it. He stepped from the shadows long enough to return it to the line and retrieve their final Wild Irish. No worries, he thought as he opened it. There was no shortage of cheap booze in Mulberry. If the score from Dyerhurden was big enough, maybe they could buy something a step up from fortified wine anyway.

The heat that had soaked into the curb had found its way into the last bottle. It tasted almost like warm cough syrup now, and more than once as they passed it Kenny had to steady himself so that he didn't sick it up.

They'd seen only two people working the store that Friday. One was a pimply woman who Alfie said he recognized as Patsy Someone-or-another from the bowling alley. He'd asked her to beers at the Lucky, and she turned him down. He tried to act tough about it, but Kenny could tell he was pissed from the telling. And there was a kid with a hangdog face and long greasy hair put up in a hairnet. Kenny figured there was probably a shift manager somewhere in the beyond the kitchen. If the two of them moved quick, they'd be gone before anyone even knew anything had happened.

From their place in the shadows they watched Mr. Dyerhurden eating and drinking coffee in a booth. He was the only customer. "He's having a fine old time," Alfie slurred. He cleared the spent dip from his lip and slopped it against the wall.

"That's the last of it," Alfie said when he drained the bottle. Kenny caught his arm when he moved to toss it in the parking lot. It was sticky from where Alfie kept wiping his mouth on his sleeve. "Quiet," he said and took it from him. He stepped into the light and placed it back on the curb next to the others. Someone had turned on the neon sign that hung in the window announcing fresh donuts, and in each bottle he caught the curved red reflection. HOT NOW, it read.

That's it, Kenny thought. That there is my contribution.

They didn't wait long. They watched Mr. Dyerhurden wipe the crumbs from the table into his paper cup and deposit it into the garbage bin. As soon as

he left the Krispy Kreme, Alfie poked Kenny, and they slid from the shadows and made a beeline for the teacher.

“Gotta light?” Alfie asked.

Mr. Dyerhurden turned and jumped away from the voices. He mumbled a quick, “Sorry,” and tried to step around the pair, but their knives were in their hands.

“Gimme your wallet,” Kenny said. He made a stabbing motion towards the teacher.

Mr. Dyerhurden shrieked, and Kenny was in his face, pulling him close to quiet him. He could smell the coffee on his breath, and there were white flecks of powdered sugar in his dyed moustache. “Your money,” he insisted.

Alfie rifled through his pockets until he found his wallet. It was thick with discount cards—Denny’s, Zayre, Joanne’s Fabrics—a dog-eared library card, a picture of a dignified old woman with Dyerhurden’s face, a plastic faculty badge from Mulberry Elementary rubbed white. There were no credit cards and four wrinkled one dollar bills.

“Four bucks,” Alfie hiccupped. “Hardly enough for another bottle.” He threw the wallet on the ground.

“I don’t know you,” Mr. Dyerhurden whispered. “Leave me be,” he begged. His hands were shaking.

“You see that?” Alfie laughed. “He pissed hisself.”

Helpless, Kenny thought, and he felt the heat and the Wild Irish Rose rising. He shoved the old man back, kept shoving him, until Mr. Dyerhurden

stumbled and tripped on the curb. He fell and when he did the line of bottles toppled and smashed. There was blood, and the old man groaned.

“Hey, you there,” someone yelled. “Leave that man be.” It was Patsy, still inside the Krispy Kreme, yelling through a crack in the door. “We called the cops,” she hollered.

They ran.

When they reached the Goat and he tried to open the passenger door, Kenny was surprised to find his hands were slick, and he wiped them on his pants. They left behind stains, blood that wasn't his. He didn't know if he'd hurt the old man, hoped he hadn't, but his knife was gone so there was no way to be sure. He had lost it somewhere in the commotion.

Alfie drove fast for a mile. He kept the headlights off in case they saw the sheriff coming, but by the time they reached the highway he had them back on and had slowed the Goat to the speed limit. He started whooping and laughing, and his eyes bugged out of his face.

“You see that?” he screamed over and over. “You sure showed him, Kenny. Believe it!”

When he got to his trailer that night, Kenny used a bar of Lava to scrub his hands in the kitchen sink the best he was able. He wasn't sure if it was grime was from the Goodyears under his nails or something else. He lay in bed until his mouth got watery and he had to get up and puke the Wild Irish Rose in the toilet. It was red like Kool-Aid. He knew it wouldn't be long until they found him. That lady knew Alfie, and he'd lost his knife somewhere. They'd catch up to

him. He'd go back to Starke, this time for a long stretch. Damn sure longer than six years.

Kenny lay on his bed and stared into the dark. He strained to see through it, but instead all he saw was Alfie's face, eyes popped out, cranked and toothless.

“You showed him, Kenny! Believe it!”

Instead he pulled his quilt over his head and tried to sleep.

Mrs. Maitland

Mrs. Maitland backed the grumbling Buick a few feet past the tangled pile of orangewood kept opposite the house and felt a bump that at first made her think she'd hit one of the shallow potholes in their gravel driveway. She'd been woolgathering, for some reason thinking about the red oak in the middle of their lawn again. That tree was a pitiful sapling when Mr. Maitland planted it the week they brought home little Robby from the hospital, but now it was a wretched thing, dripping in Spanish moss and horribly overbearing, its shade keeping the St. Augustine grass from growing properly on the front lawn. And she'd lost count the times she'd told that man to clear the suffocating jasmine from the trunk. Better to cut the whole thing down and bore the stump into a planter for begonias.

Mrs. Maitland muttered and stopped the car when she felt the bump. The tickle in her stomach told her something was wrong, that it was too big to be a pothole. She yanked the car out of reverse and into park, and hunched over the steering wheel to listen. Above the rumble of the Buick she heard the high whine of a dog in pain, and she shut off the car and got out to see the state of things, muttering and clutching her purse out of habit.

Old Doris, her husband's prized bluetick, was pinned under the right rear of the car. She couldn't see the dog's head, only its back half, but the spotted midsection was bulging and twisted cattywampus in an unpleasant way. If only she'd remembered before he left that they had drunk the last of the orange juice

this morning. He could have stopped by the Winn-Dixie while he was out fetching the mail from the post office and she wouldn't have had to drive this awful automobile, captaining the wheel like she was steering a steamboat through the Mississippi shoals instead of an LTD on the back roads of Florida. She never had gotten used to the thing, and now look what had happened.

She considered ringing the strange Polish veterinarian, Dr. Nowicki. Certainly he would make a house call. But the expense! She unclasped her purse and rummaged for the silk kerchief she always carried and, finding it tucked in its usual pocket, unfolded and spread it on the ground near the back right tire. She knelt carefully and reached forward slowly to lay her hand on the animal. It felt like a warm, overfilled balloon, taugth and ready to burst, and she pulled away her hand in disgust.

What would she tell Mr. Maitland? He babied that dog in a way that would have made Mrs. Maitland jealous, if such a thing was possible. Doris was allowed liberties that most youngsters wouldn't get, and he treated this mangy hound better than he did her. He had the thing so spoiled, he made her boil chicken necks each and every evening because the dog wouldn't eat kibble anymore. Why, just this morning during breakfast the dog had to be shooed from the kitchen after Mrs. Maitland had almost tripped over it—her husband had been feeding it crust from the table. She wouldn't ever say so publicly, but Mr. Maitland would have let the dog sleep with them at night if she would allow it. That was where she drew the line. Imagine, letting this dirty thing onto her clean sheets while they slept.

Mrs. Maitland stood and steadied herself on the trunk of the LTD, and, after brushing the wrinkles and invisible specs of dirt from her rose-colored dress, she considered how to get Doris out from under the car. Dead animals didn't bother her—she'd been raised on a pig farm after all—but this was no chicken or fatted hog and her father wasn't coming around the corner to carry away the carcass, his axe on his shoulder whistling "He Leadeth Me". Doris wasn't big for a bluetick coonhound, but still too big for Mrs. Maitland to carry. It would take all of her effort just to pull it out, and with that she wasn't sure she was strong enough to do it. She bent over, found its legs and at first tugged gingerly, testing, and when that did nothing, firmer. Doris didn't move. What did she expect? Mrs. Maitland thought. She'd be seventy-eight next year. Any real strength had abandoned her long ago.

Mrs. Maitland realized she might have to drive back over the dog and blanched. What a mess that would make. Perhaps if she drove very slowly. Would that work? She eyed the suspicious bulge in Doris' side and shivered.

Perhaps if she lifted the car. There was a jack in the trunk. Mr. Maitland had never showed her how to change a flat tire, but he'd never needed to. She knew that was a stupid decision. He was always doing that, Mr. Maitland was. Keeping her in the dark on things. Putting her at a disadvantage. Now she'd have to figure out how to do this without him, jack up this car, and because of him she didn't know if she could do it.

Though early, the day was warming, and Mrs. Maitland could smell the sweet wild jasmine from the red oak hanging in the morning air. She rummaged

her purse again for the car keys to open the trunk. What had she done with them? She found them left behind in the ignition, lucky not to have locked them in her haste. She opened the door with its usual lumbering creak, and she said a small prayer of thanks before removing the key and stopping the ding of the key-in-ignition chime.

She opened the trunk and muttered. That man was impossible. Mr. Maitland had made her agree to deliver the clothing donations to Mulberry Baptist's clothes drive when they went to church, only he kept forgetting to remind her to do it. And now she had to move heavy trash bags filled with clothes and blankets just to get to the car jack. She'd be a sweating mess, and at the end of it Mr. Maitland would be home and would see what she'd done.

She flushed pink. Another secret to keep then. In fifty-eight years of a marriage, Mrs. Maitland certainly had her fair share of secrets. Some were small things. Like Mr. Maitland's lucky sweatshirt, the one he would wear while watching college football on the television. The only lucky thing about it was when she accidentally spilled bleach on the ratty old thing doing laundry and was forced to hide it under a week's worth of garbage in the bin next to the woodpile. Or just this year when she baked her cobbler during blueberry season and had switched to a new artificial sweetener instead of using sugar. Mr. Maitland couldn't tell the difference, but she was not yet confident enough to use the altered recipe for the potlucks at their church and risk being found out.

But she had bigger ones too. The shame of turning away from God when her little Robby was taken in his sleep. The day of his funeral, Mr. Maitland said

he was glad they had planted that red oak tree in the front yard. It would help them remember, he said, and she had hated him just then for needing a reminder.

It had been years since she'd been to see Robby. She had decided it wasn't proper to look at a tiny headstone when by now he would have been old enough to have a family of his own. She only hoped the caretaker was keeping the grass and weeds from hiding the marker.

The jasmine was giving her a headache, and she wondered how long would it take for Mr. Maitland to pick up the mail? It was a fifteen minute drive into town from their property, and he usually chatted with the men in the post office once he got there, but with this being Saturday there'd be none of the regulars to talk to. He'd likely check the box and come straightaway home. They lived outside of Mulberry on an acre-and-a-half, past the strawberries and blueberries and tangerine groves in the north of town, far away from the phosphate pits in the east. It wasn't the original house, but the land had been in her family since before the War of Secession, and not for the first time she was relieved that Mr. Maitland hadn't convinced her to sell the place and move closer to town into one of the retirement communities that were springing up in the area.

Mrs. Maitland closed the trunk on the LTD, harder than she intended, startling herself, and with new determination went back around to the rear right tire. She looked through the trees—behind her, left then right, then behind again—and seeing no one, hiked her dress above her knees and past the beige stockings she always wore when she was away from the house. Unfettered and

able to squat, she grabbed Doris' hind legs again and tugged with everything she had.

The dog slid free from under the Buick easier than expected, and having dislodged with so little effort, Mrs. Maitland fell backward, the gravel biting into the tender skin on the back of her thighs. She considered what someone might say if they saw the state of her, dress bunched around her backside, skinny, veiny legs—did those belong to her?—straddling the lifeless corpse of her husband's prized bluetick coonhound in the middle of their front yard, and she scuttled to her feet as quickly as her age and aching backside would allow, wincing and lamenting the purple bruises she'd have before this was over.

The dog's tongue lolled from between its bared teeth, and its eyes were half-open and murky. There was white chalk and gravel stuck around its mouth and nose, and Mrs. Maitland bent over to pick the flecks from its muzzle. Blow flies had already started to gather, and they buzzed and landed in unnatural places until she shooed them and they took off again. Standing above the dog, Mrs. Maitland had a moment of pity for the unfortunate beast. We're all God's creatures, after all, she thought. She gripped Doris one final time and dragged her as deeply as she was able behind the colossal tangle of wood that Mr. Maitland had collected yet never used, unable to pass by hand painted signs announcing free firewood given up from the orange and tangerine trees that grew in groves surrounding the town.

Mrs. Maitland got back in the Buick and pulled it forward to its usual spot. From her position, Doris was completely hidden. The hiding place wouldn't last

long if Mr. Maitland had an itch to walk the property, something he often did in evenings. The Florida days were about as long and as hot as they could get, and she'd need to get Doris in the ground before rot settled in and Mr. Maitland sniffed his way to her deception. But for now he'd be home any time, and that was just a risk she was going to have to take until she could come up with a permanent plan. She grabbed the broom from the porch and carefully swept away the path she had created dragging Doris through the gravel, and was thankful there wasn't much blood to cover in dust and scatter in the crabgrass.

She felt dizzy from the effort, but was too antsy to stay in the house. Mrs. Maitland took up her porch broom and swept stray leaves from the stoop, stopping occasionally to fan away the relentless heat. By the time Mr. Maitland was pulling into the drive in his battered blue Chevy, she was sweeping the steps for the third time. He parked the truck in its usual place next to the woodpile and limped towards the house waving a handful of opened mail.

"I have no intention of paying that doctor a John Brown penny more for my toenail," he said by way of greeting. He pulled himself up the steps and grumbled and grouched through the screeching screen door and into the cool dark of the living room. After stealing one more glance at the woodpile, Mrs. Maitland followed him in to make his lunch.

She fixed bologna sandwiches and a pitcher of iced tea with lemon and a small scoop of butter pecan for dessert, and they ate on faux wood aluminum TV trays in front of Perry Mason. Mrs. Maitland hardly touched hers, although she hated the idea of wasting food. She tucked the uneaten portion of her sandwich

under her napkin before placing it in the wastebasket and ran hot water to dissolve the uneaten ice cream in the sink. With a practiced hand, she scraped leftover pecans into the drain basket and threw them away after the sandwich.

Her backside ached from her earlier fall, and she was anxious to see the damage. She dried her hands and crept from the kitchen to the living room doorway and spied Mr. Maitland kicked back in his recliner, sleepy-eyed and dozing. She disappeared to the bathroom and sat on the commode to survey her wounds as best she could. Her legs went from yellow to purple and black. It looked worse than what it was, but there was no hiding it, that much was certain. She'd need to be modest with her husband until it had healed some. And she'd need to come up with a little white lie for when she visited Dr. Stapp. Oh, how she hated to have to tell a lie. She winced and poked tenderly at the worst of it, then took two aspirin and washed her hands before returning to the couch in the living room.

She watched Mr. Maitland sleeping, mouth open a crack, and listened to him breathing, and she felt sorry for him suddenly. She fought the urge to wake him and to tell him. She saw herself leading him to Doris and imagined him breaking down at the sight of it all, although she'd never seen him cry in fifty-eight years, not even when his mother passed. The thought of it was too much, and she flushed, embarrassed for him.

Mrs. Maitland returned to the kitchen and wiped the counters and the sink before straightening the dishtowels and the canisters holding flour and sugar and tea. She lifted and tied the garbage liner from the wastebasket and went outside to

drop it in the bin, careful not to let the screen door slam shut and wake Mr. Maitland.

A cooling breeze was blowing, and Mrs. Maitland smelled rain in it. She lifted the lid of the bin to pitch the garbage and a tang of old scum hit her before being carried away with the wind. Hand still on the lid, she closed her eyes for a moment and listened to the whisper of the leaves high in the red oak. When she opened her eyes they were shining, and she crept closer to the pile of firewood. Peering through the tangle, she could see a bit of the dog, but only because she knew right where it was and the flies were swarming now.

She turned away and looked beyond her behemoth car, beyond their house with the gravel drive and the sagging red oak and past the groves and fields that surrounded Mulberry. Doris' sweet smell was mixing with the jasmine, and it was hard to tell one from the other. Mrs. Maitland looked back to the house, and seeing it was quiet, worked her way behind the firewood then, and she pulled the dog from its hiding place and dragged Doris under the back passenger tire of the Chevy. She straightened the gravel with her foot as best she could.

She stood on the porch and brushed at the wrinkles in her dress, panting softly. She surveyed her work and was satisfied Doris would go unseen until it was too late. A place for everything and everything in its place, she thought. She went into the house to wake Mr. Maitland from his nap. They'd need orange juice for breakfast tomorrow, and Mrs. Maitland needed him to run to the Winn-Dixie before it rained.

The Surfboard

My friend Angel was a Mexican brought to this country on a green card and abandoned in Mulberry, Florida by his mother who I never met. She left him with his father, Alonso, right about the time he turned six years old. “She’s coming back, *hijo*,” Alonso would tell him, though she never did.

So I never had the opportunity to meet her, although Angel showed me a picture once. She was posed in front of a fountain in her bare feet and coral-colored skirt, smiling with one arm up, her hand lifting the back of her head like some kind of a movie star. She was squat and hippy while Angel was like a pasture weed, but they favored in the face. Both of them had big, wide faces, flat and brown as a plain, like something that had sprung from red Mexican earth. After he handed me the photo I felt like he was waiting for me to say something. So I said, “Pretty,” though she wasn’t. He just nodded and stuck it back in his pocket.

Angel and his father lived in a single-wide where all the other Mexican families lived. My family was poor, but we weren’t Mexican poor, we were white poor, which meant we lived in a trailer off a series of cul-de-sacs in Mulberry and not way out in Phosphoria close to nothing but reclaimed phosphate pits and orange groves. His dad picked fruit, while my father had gotten hurt working at the mines and collected a small disability check and mostly just drank gin. My mother worked as a barmaid for a while, then at Zayer’s at the customer service counter. That meant we never went without electricity or meals like some of the other kids in my neighborhood.

This was in 1994, the summer right after Angel and I left Mulberry High School. There had been one big mix of us in those days—black kids and white kids and brown kids—before the schoolboard bused the Phosphoria kids to Bartow or Lakeland. We were two of the lucky ones. We got out with our diplomas, something that neither of our fathers had done. Angel's father didn't even know how to read. But we were both smarter than we let on and did okay. I remember that time in school as sort of one gray smudge in my mind's eye. That is, I can tell it's there, but I don't know its shape. Some things are clearer, I guess. Pencil lead jammed in Fred Garvey's knuckle. Mrs. Gonzales's cleavage. Getting smoked out in Angel's truck in the parking lot. School pizza. The rest of school is just a lot of events that must have happened. They had to have occurred or else I wouldn't have graduated. Cause and effect. From butterflies come tornados, but if asked, who could trace the series of events that made it all happen? Don't ask me. I'm just along for the ride.

That summer after high school, the summer of '94, I remember that.

Angel and I were doing what we could to enjoy it. That meant getting out of Mulberry as much as possible. "Fucking off," my father called it. Angel had a dull red Isuzu truck, something he'd worked his ass off for the year before, and he knew some guys who helped him lower it by cutting the springs, and we used to take it to the Silvermoon for movies or sometimes to Tampa or Orlando on the weekends, rattling down the interstate, feeling every bump. It had no air conditioning, which is tough in Florida, but he put a mondo sound system in it and that made up for it. One time a girl he dated for a while, Amy Hart, bit off a

little nib of her tongue riding in that truck. He told me she broke up with him in the emergency room after they'd stitched her up, a big white bandage hanging out of her mouth. I didn't mind it myself, although I guess I never bit anything off riding in it and couldn't blame her. To me all the rattling and bone jarring meant we were going somewhere else, probably somewhere better but definitely somewhere different. Even when we had to slow to a crawl to get over railroad tracks without bottoming out, we felt kinetic.

One night at the Krispy Kreme we ran into Jay Bucklew, this kid who was a year behind us in school. I didn't really know Jay because he drove a new Wrangler and lived in a house that wasn't delivered on a flatbed trailer to a weedy vacant lot, but Angel knew everybody. Jay had a new cast on his arm, and while I smoked a Marlboro and tried to look like I hadn't just picked up the habit, he told Angel the story of how he broke it surfing the day after school let out.

"It was only chop, man," he said. "Nothing to get excited about. Then coming in I slipped and landed on a rock and did this." He held us his cast, and I saw someone had drawn a Kilroy on the underside. "I heard it snap and everything." He looked disappointed.

"Did it hurt?" I asked, and he looked at me like I was stupid.

"Well, that's too bad, bub," Angel said. "A real shit sandwich."

Jay's mother was making him get rid of the surfboard. "She's riding me about it, and I figure one of these days I'm going to come home to it in the trash." He asked Angel if he'd hold onto it until things had cooled, and Angel agreed to pick it up the next day about noon.

The next day Angel came by on the way to Jay's. I hadn't slept well, and I had a headache. I always ate too many doughnuts when we hung out at the Krispy Kreme. I think the sugar kept me awake, and I was restless. Riding in Angel's bumpy truck didn't help my head any, but he put some Breeders on the stereo and kept it at a respectful level. I asked Angel to go through the McDonald's for a coffee—another habit I was trying to pick up—but we missed breakfast so instead I got a couple of hamburgers and an order of fries, and I paid. My Uncle Norman had a lawn service, and that spring while one of his guys was dealing with his wife's cancer, I had worked weekends filling in for him and made a few bucks. I'd been the money I made ever since and figured it'd last me through most of the summer if I was careful.

“What are you going to do with it?” I asked Angel when we pulled onto Church Street, meaning the surfboard. I'd done some of the lawns in this part of town. Even though it was the start of the rainy season and the grass grew fast and thick, people managed to keep their yards in good order. I'd noticed a surprising number of riding mowers under carports and in sheds, and I'd wondered how often they had been used by their owners.

“What are *we* going to do with it, you mean,” Angel said. “We're going to learn to ride it.”

I lit a cigarette and considered the fact.

“All we need is a beach,” he said and turned onto Jay's street. “In case you didn't notice, Erin, it's Florida. We're surrounded by them on three sides. It's a peninsula.” He was tapping the steering wheel, drumming with the music.

“Surf’s up,” I told him. I had never really considered the meaning.

He nodded at my smoke. “We’re almost there. Throw that out.” I pitched it out the window. “I hear his mom’s a real pain in the ass.”

“How are we going to learn how to do this?” I asked. “We don’t know anything about surfing.”

But we were there. Jay’s house was in a line next to a lot of similar houses, all painted in bright colors. His was a lemony yellow with a friendly white garage door. We pulled into the driveway next to Jay’s blue metallic jeep. He had a cluster of three pygmy date palms on the path to his front door, something I’d learned from the time with my uncle. White vertical blinds hung in the windows and kept the summer sun at bay. An American flag hung loosely from an outrigger pole next to the front door, and I recognized the place. I’d cut the lawn of the house next door. I wondered if Jay had seen me.

“I think I’ll wait here,” I said. All of a sudden I didn’t want to go inside.

“Suit yourself,” Angel said. “I won’t be long.” He left the keys in the car so the music would keep playing and did a little dance on his way to the door. He rang the doorbell and when the door opened, turned and gave me thumbs up before disappearing into the dark house.

Mulberry was nowhere near the beach. In fact, it was geographically located near the center of the state. The tropical plants and seashell hardscaping were carefully cultivated to fight against the town’s more tired features, and Jay’s street demonstrated that marvelously. I lived less than a mile from here but it may

have been another planet entirely. Where I lived the phosphate dust caked the aluminum windows of our homes, the places of the very men who sent it floating into the air in the first place, a constant reminder of their subjugation. Here they painted over all of that with pink coral and aquamarine. The residents had beaten the crabgrass into submission. Had watered their lawns until they were green and fragrant and chased away the nitrate smell I was so used to, I only noticed when it wasn't there.

Angel was inside for twenty minutes or so, and I was left sweating in my jeans and t-shirt. I had found his sunglasses—aviator-styled mirrors—and put them on to try to reflect some of the sun back on itself, an ineffective protest. I settled for turning down the music until I could only hear the barest hint of the bass and the dreamy vocals, and I started a game with myself to see if I could guess which song was playing without looking at the display on the stereo. My head was pounding and I was thirsty and I regretted having drunk all my coffee. I saw a water hose hanging neatly on a reel mounted to the house, and I considered getting out to cool off just as the garage door lifted.

Jay stood in the garage in bare feet and no shirt. His sandy hair had fallen over one of his brown eyes, and in the daytime I could tell that he was tanned and had freckled shoulders like someone who spent a lot of time in the sun. I was embarrassed noticing a detail like that, and as he walked to the edge of his garage and put his hand up to shield his eyes to look past the glare of the windshield, I felt like he could see what was in my head. Instead of looking away like I wanted to I put my hand up in a sort of wave, which he returned after spotting me in the

front seat of the truck. Angel was behind him carrying a surfboard under one arm. On his way out of the garage, he was careful not to ding a silver Volvo parked inside. It must have belonged to Jay's mother.

"Here it is," Angel said. He turned the surfboard vertically so I could see its length and let it rest on the top of one of his sneakers to keep it from scraping on the concrete drive. I knew that sort of care would dry up once Jay wasn't around to see it. I got out of the truck to get a better look.

"It's a shortboard," Jay said.

The surfboard was about six feet long, taller than Angel but just about the same height as me. It was white with two thin red stripes that ran the length of the board. A black cord was attached to the back and ended in a Velcro cuff. Three long fiberglass fins jutted from the underside, and it looked like one of them had been repaired at some point because it had globs of epoxy or some sort of resin where it attached to the board. The topside of the surfboard was caked and dirty, and Jay leaned in to brush it off. "It needs new Sex Wax," he said.

"Sex Wax?" I asked.

"It gets grungy from your feet. You need to scrape it off, bub. Put on a fresh coat," Angel said.

They were both looking at me. "Like I would know," I said.

Angel loaded the board in the back of his truck. It lay flat without having to lower the tailgate.

We backed out of the driveway. "What took you so long?" I asked. "I was melting out here."

“Did I take long?” he asked. “Want to go to the beach tomorrow?”

As we drove past the house, I’m pretty sure I saw the blinds in the front window move, like someone had been watching us.

We didn’t go to the beach the next day or the day after that. Angel told me he got a nail in his tire and couldn’t afford to get it patched. He called me Thursday night.

“Tomorrow, bub?” he asked. It sounded good to me.

“I know this is short notice,” he said the next morning after he came by my house to pick me up, “but I asked someone else to come with us. A girl.” Angel had loaded the surfboard in the back along with a small cooler and a scratchy blanket that I recognized as coming off his bed. I myself had brought an old green bath towel, and I was wearing my swimming trunks. My legs were pale next to Angel’s.

I didn’t know what to say. And up to that point I’d been feeling pretty good about my day, too.

“I made sandwiches,” he said. “We need to get ice.”

Angel had cleaned out the truck. He’d gotten rid of the empty Coke cans and Taco Bell wrappers. Up until then I’d thought they were permanent residents in the cab. It looked like he’d taken a vacuum to the floor and bench seat, and there was a tree hanging from the rearview mirror. It smelled like sandalwood and something less spicy.

“Who is this girl?” I asked when we pulled into the gas station. I felt my stomach tighten.

“Just a girl,” he said. “Jay’s sister. You wouldn’t know her.” He laughed. “She’s a little younger than us, but she seems to be mature for her age. We got to talking when we were over there the other day. She’s pretty cool. You’ll see.”

He pumped gas while I went inside for a bag of ice.

Jay’s street looked exactly the same as it had a few days ago. Even the grass grows differently on this side of Mulberry, I thought. I noticed the American flag had spun around the pole and gotten caught in a gutter, probably in a gust. They happened this time of year, hurricane season. Nobody had bothered to fix it. Angel didn’t pull into the drive this time. He stayed on the street and honked his horn, two short bursts. It was a flagrant thing to do in this neighborhood.

After a minute, Jay stepped outside. “Oh boy,” Angel said, like he hadn’t been expecting it.

Jay had on more clothes this time, a pair of khaki cargo shorts and a shirt with a big Ferrari logo on it. He had cut the sleeves off of it himself. Blue flip-flops. “Yo,” he said and walked across the lawn. He leaned down into window and looked in at me then across to Angel.

“Yo,” Angel returned.

“Kristin says she’s going with you to the beach.” Maybe it was a question. Whatever friendly nature he had was gone. I don’t think he cared for the idea much, and he was practically crawling over me make his point with Angel. I’d never been this close to Jay, and I saw that he had acne scars on his neck, so small they were barely noticeable. It didn’t take away from anything.

“Yeah, bub, I guess she is.” I could tell he was nervous. Not that Jay knew. You had to know Angel well to see it on him. I think the world saw him as coolheaded most of the time. But I knew.

“She’s a nice girl, Torres,” Jay said.

“Yeah, I know,” Angel said. “I know.” I think he needed to make sure Jay knew.

“She likes you though.” Jay sighed. “You’re Mexican. My mom would shit a brick.”

“Well, okay,” Angel agreed.

I surprised myself by stepping into it. “We just want to try the surfboard.” I thumbed to the bed of the truck.

A girl walked outside then, wearing flip-flops and an oversized baby blue shirt with *Hurley* emblazoned across the front in silver letters. It was so long I couldn’t tell if she was wearing pants. An expensive-looking brown suede bag was slung over her shoulder. She had the same sandy-colored hair as her brother, only longer and sun-streaked and pulled back in a messy twist, and round mirror sunglasses with iridescent peace signs in the lenses that hid her eyes. This girl was cool and aloof, and I immediately felt inadequate next to her.

Jay pulled himself out of the truck and looked in the back. If he noticed his sister he didn't let on. "That ice is going to melt," he said. The cooler wouldn't hold the whole bag, which had a cartoon penguin on the bag wearing a pair of mittens, and it seemed a shame just to dump the rest of the ice in the parking lot. I'm not sure what I was thinking. "Did you wax the board?" he asked. Any hint of worry about his sister was gone. He seemed friendly again.

"I tried," Angel said. "It's harder than it looks." He looked past Jay and smiled.

Jay laughed, and it was bright and mean. "It sure is, hombre. It sure is. Be good, you hear?" I thought he was talking to Angel, but he turned to Kristin. "I mean it."

We drove towards Cocoa Beach, Kristin wedged in between us. Jay put music on the stereo—something poppy I had never heard before—and we made our way out of Mulberry and into Lakeland towards the interstate. Kristin hadn't said a word to either of us except "thanks" when I got out to let her get her seat. The truck was a standard so she chose to put her legs next to mine instead of straddling the shifter. She dropped her bag on the floorboard so that I had to be careful not to step on it. She didn't seem to notice or care if she did. Her stick-thin legs were brown like Angel's, especially next to mine, and I could tell that she spent a lot of time in the sun. She had the same surfer look as her brother. Freckled nose, straw hair with long blonde streaks. I heard of girls putting lemon

juice in their hair to bleach it out, and I wondered if Kristin had done that. She smelled like coconuts.

“I’m Erin,” I said. If our legs were going to touch we should at least make introductions.

“Hey,” she said. She didn’t look at me.

“Erin wants to learn to surf, too,” Angel said. As if that was the reason I was here.

“Do you?” Kristin asked. It felt like a challenge.

“I guess,” I said. “Do you know how? To surf, I mean.”

“I guess,” the girl said, and looked at me. It felt like she was studying me from behind her glasses. “What’s your name again?” she asked.

“Erin. Erin Franza,” I said. “You look like a surfer.”

“You don’t,” she said.

Angel laughed. “Told you she was quick, bub.” He hadn’t, but we were pretty clearly in some sort of game where the rules were known only to this girl, and it was Angel’s job to try and keep up. I was to be wingman only.

Kristin seemed to like the attention, and she smiled. Her teeth were too white, and I thought again of lemon juice.

“What do I look like?” I asked.

“How long to the beach?” she asked, ignoring me.

“About two hours,” Angel said. “Maybe a little shorter.” We pulled onto the interstate.

“Can you get their faster?” she asked. “I want to get on the water before it gets too crowded. The best time to surf is usually early morning. Once the Bennys get there, it’s never as good. They get in the way.”

“What’s Bennys?” I asked.

“Non-locals.”

“Isn’t that us?” Was this a put-on?

She sighed loudly. “Can you? Get there faster?” Kristin asked again. She pulled her legs together to keep us from touching. I did the same.

“And beat the Bennys?” Angel said. “Watch me go.” He put his foot down then, and we sped into the fast lane, the truck vibrating so violently our teeth hurt after a few miles. Kristin turned up the music, while I turned to check the surfboard to make sure it hadn’t blown out and disappeared before we had the chance to get it into the water. Just when I did, I saw the melted bag of ice with the penguin on it zip into the air and disappear somewhere into the glare of the interstate behind us.

Angel sped where he could get away with it, but it took us longer than two hours to get to Cocoa Beach. Traffic through Orlando was at a standstill both east and west on Interstate 4, and we were sweaty by the time we made it past downtown. The tourists were thick as flies during the summer, and if they weren’t heading to see Mickey Mouse, they were trying to get to a beach somewhere. In a few weeks another shuttle would be blasting into the sky and the Space Coast would get even busier in the days leading up to it, but for now, we

only had to deal with the normal, unreasonable numbers of people. They were everywhere.

We followed the signs over the Hubert H. Humphrey Bridge to the beach and into the choked public parking lot to a space in the back next to a large brown dumpster with “NO DUMPING” spray-painted in faded white letters on all sides. “Remember where we are,” Angel said, and we promised to try.

As soon as I was able, I picked up the cooler and tucked the blanket under one arm. I’d decided on the trip over that I’d let Angel get first crack at the surfboard. Having never ridden one before, I was certain to look like an idiot when I finally tried. Angel wouldn’t mind looking silly. He would turn it into affable charm. He had a way about him that I both admired and wished for myself, and I found myself looking forward to watching him try. It made me less nervous for my own turn on the surfboard.

“I like your nail polish,” Angel said.

We all looked down at Kristin’s feet. Her toenails were dark red, the polish battered. “It’s called Vamp,” she said, and for the first time seemed self-conscious. I don’t know why exactly I felt embarrassed for her, but I did.

“Can we stop staring at my feet?” she added and sounded clumsy.

“I need a bathroom,” Angel said. “I’ve got to take a leak.”

“Just do it in the ocean,” I suggested, and Kristin scrunched up her nose.

“There’s a bathroom right there,” he said, pointing to a blue public bathroom made from cinderblocks, sandy and utilitarian. “I’ll be right back.”

We waited. I set down the cooler and balanced the blanket on top.

“What’s your dad do?” I asked. “Is he rich or something?” I lit a cigarette and pretended not to notice that she was watching me carefully.

“Can I have one of those?” she asked.

I shrugged and dug one out of the pack.

“Light it for me,” she said.

“Take this one,” I said and handed her my lit smoke. She took a small, tentative puff, then another and coughed a little.

“It takes some getting used to,” I said and lit my own cigarette and blew smoke through my nose.

“I guess I don’t know,” she said. I realized she was answering the question about her father. “He’s been gone a while. He still sends my mom money, I think.”

I nodded. No sense digging in too deep. We smoked for a minute. A pregnant woman in a green one-piece walked past us frowning, her husband following her laden with chairs and an enormous beige beach umbrella. She coughed exaggerating, and we ignored her.

“Don’t worry,” Kristin said. “I’ll teach you how to surf. I’m pretty good,” and she took off her sunglasses for a moment. Something different than her brother, Jay. She had blue eyes.

Angel lifted the surfboard from the bed of the truck and tucked it under his arm and Kristin grabbed her bag, and we walked across the hot asphalt to a sidewalk half-concealed in sand that had blown from the beach. “Look at all

these Bennys,” Angel said, and we all laughed. It was the hottest part of the day and the beach was crowded. We walked south towards a long elevated pier, hands up to shield our eyes from the blistering sun.

“Down there,” Kristin said, pointing towards an open space in the sand. “We can drop our stuff and wade in where those waves are coming in straight.”

These were barely waves. Definitely not like I had imagined. I expected something more intense than what was rolling in towards the shore. Something like the cover of *Surfin' USA*, tall and curled and intense. These were like ripples, and it wasn't until they were nearly onshore that they seemed to break into foam. Groups of children waded in the surf, riding inflatable tubes and rafts and squealing and splashing one another. Their voices were carried away in the wind. A man with a bright yellow skimboard skidded across the shallows while a couple of pale, flabby Northerners pointed and cheered. The man fell off and they clapped and laughed until he gave them the finger and moved on up the beach.

“Is this going to be enough to surf on?” Angel asked. He looked as skeptical as I felt.

“See that break out there?” Kristin asked. “Where the surf is coming in? That's a sandbar. We're going to paddle out there where the waves are a little bigger. And there isn't anybody out there to get in our way.” It was maybe thirty yards from shore.

We started onto the beach towards our patch of space. We kicked our way through the sand, and it sifted between my feet and my flip-flops. It was hot but satisfying. The closer we got to the water, the more we trudged, and by the time

we arrived we were winded. Nearby a group of college girls was sunbathing, their radio playing R.E.M. I spread Angel's scratchy blanket and we used the cooler and Kristin's bag to keep down the corners. Angel put the surfboard next to us and jumped up on it, posing and giving his best surfer impression. "I'm ready," he said.

Kristin asked us if we'd brought suntan lotion, but that was something we'd forgotten. She dug in her bag and produced a squeeze bottle. "You do my back, and then I'll do you," she said and handed me the bottle. While she threw her sunglasses into the bag, Angel stopped posing and looked at me mean. Kristin slipped off her Hurley shirt and took back the bottle, squeezed some on her hand, and rubbed it into her arm. A ribbon of coconut was carried onto the wind. Her belly was brown like her arms and legs, and she was skinny, maybe boney even, and she wore a halter-style top over her flat chest. It reminded me that she was much younger than us, and I felt a moment of guilt for giving her one of my cigarettes. Though I decided that if she wanted another, I would give it to her. She took off her shorts and applied sunscreen to her legs while we watched.

Angel flung off his shirt. He had hair on his chest and belly like a man. "Give me the bottle," Angel said gruffly, and she handed it to him. He crunched it into his hand, tossed me the bottle, then divided the blob of lotion around his body in little motions. A little dab on each shoulder, his forearms, his legs and chest, his face. I removed my shirt because I had to and mimicked Angel, making sure I was covered. "Don't forget the tops of your feet, they'll burn," Kristin said,

and we did our best to brush away the sand. While Angel watched, she rubbed lotion onto my back.

“All set,” she said, and patted my back twice. “You next.” She pointed at Angel. After she was done, he returned the favor. Gladly, by the look on his face. I saw that she had a raised birthmark on one shoulder. The music on the radio changed to Weezer.

We carried the board down to the water and waded into the surf. It was cooler than I expected for this time of year. About halfway to the sandbar there was a steep drop-off, and we turned the surfboard sideways and hung on it and kicked. The strongest among us, Angel stayed in the middle to keep us from paddling in a circle. The sand on the bottom gradually reappeared, and soon we were standing mid-calf in water and foam. The distance and the surf covered the sounds from the people on the shore, and they became silent, indistinct shapes, and except for the seagulls overhead, we were all alone.

“I’ll go first,” Kristin said. She strapped the leash, that’s what she called the long black cord, to her ankle and paddled out beyond the bar, rising and falling over the waves. She took on the distant stare of someone studying the horizon, looking for what, exactly, I wasn’t sure. The perfect wave, I thought. Or whatever passed for it at this beach. I couldn’t tell the difference in any meaningful way, but I wanted to know what it was she was after so I watched her carefully and tried to figure out the secret. When she had gotten ten yards from us, she maneuvered herself to point at the beach, then stopped paddling and straddled the surfboard. She waved, and we waved back.

“I’m going to look like an idiot,” Angel said, and it surprised me that he thought that way, too. It was hard for me to picture Angel doing anything to make himself look foolish, and I laughed nervously and reached into the water at a clump of floating sargassum that had tangled around my legs. It was slimy and uncomfortable, and I tossed it away.

Kristin looked over her shoulder and spotted an impending wave headed towards her. She stiffened and leapt to her knees on the board and waited. Maybe she had calculated the wave’s speed and was counting down its arrival. Or she felt it pull, the closer it got the more earnest the tugging. Or maybe she didn’t think at all, letting muscle memory guide her movements, telling her when and how to stand, offering minor adjustments to her position on the surfboard that she didn’t know she was making, alterations and realignments and fixes. It worked, all of this together, and she crouched and rode the small curl of foam back to where Angel and I stood gaping and feeling grateful for her and pleased that it had looked so easy to do, all things considered. When she slowed, instead of falling off she jumped from the board to the sandbar and guided the surfboard to a stop between us where it bobbed and waited for its next rider.

“Easy,” she said, and I knew that she was no expert either. It seemed to me Kristin was relieved she’d ridden the wave in front of us, pleased that she hadn’t fallen off.

Angel had his hand up, shielding his eyes. “Easy, huh?” he asked playfully. “Okay, let me give it a try.” He was puffing out his chest, though I don’t think he realized it.

Kristin told him to lift his leg, and she strapped the leash to his hairy ankle. “So you don’t lose it,” she reminded him. She showed him where to sit on the board, and she tapped his bottom until he was right in the middle so he didn’t topple forward or back. “When you see a wave, slide closer to the back of the surfboard, then grab the rails with your hand and spin around until your pointing toward the shore.”

“I’m not sure I can stand on this thing,” he said. He looked nervous, deflated. His chest wasn’t stuck out anymore. I couldn’t remember him looking nervous before, not really. For some reason it irritated me. I let it pass.

“Don’t try,” she told him. “It takes a lot of practice to stand. Treat it like a body board, and if you get comfortable enough to stand, you’ll feel it.” He nodded. She seemed to like being the expert.

Angel lay on the board like he had seen Kristin do and paddled out to the approximate location she had stopped at. “Sit up,” she yelled, and he balanced into position, just as she had shown him to do. He looked like a real surfer just then, his black hair moppish and hanging in front of his eyes, his skin brown like a mock suntan. He looked back at us, squinting against the sun, and gave a salute. “Turn, turn!” she yelled, and pointed at a coming wave. He slid back on the board and pivoted into position, just like she showed him. A few moments later, he was torpedoing towards us, grinning and determined.

“How was that?” he asked when he had skidded to a halt next to us. “That felt pretty good.” We had to agree it was good. He’d done great for his first time out. “I’m feeling it. Mind if I give it another go?” He was talking to me.

“Whatever. Go for it,” I said. I tried not to sound disappointed. We watched him paddle out again, further this time.

“Angel really knows what he’s doing,” she said. “Are you sure you guys have never surfed before?” She turned to me and I shrugged. Despite the sun, I felt cold and shivered. My nipples had gone to points, and I didn’t want her to see, so I stuck my hands under my arms. A low-flying plane flew along the coastline dragging a banner. *Fat Jack’s All-U-Can-Eat Oysters - \$9.99 ♥ Kids 10 ↓ Eat Free*. I watched it go past while Kristin waved wildly, hoping to catch its attention.

“I don’t think he can see you,” I said, meaning the pilot in the plane.

“Why not?” she asked.

“Too high,” I said. I didn’t know if he could or couldn’t see us.

“He sees all of us. Maybe not individually, but as a group.”

Then why wave, I wanted to ask. But I didn’t.

“Do you have a girlfriend?” she asked.

“No,” I said, a little too quickly. She seemed not to notice.

“Does Angel?” That reminded me that he was out there, bobbing on the surfboard. He was turned towards us but looking over his shoulder, waiting for a passable wave to form.

“Angel has lots of girlfriends,” I said. That wasn’t exactly true. He’d lost his virginity last year to Amy Hart, the girl who had bit off her tongue, and he’d been to some school dances with a few girls, usually with me hanging nearby, but he didn’t have a lot of experience with relationships.

“Let me see your hand,” she said, and plucked it out of my armpit. She held up her own and pressed it against my hand, lining them up carefully at the base near our wrists. Her hand looked small and plump next to mine, which was pale and lean and veiny. She had the same nail polish on her fingers, only it wasn’t chipped like the paint on her toes. Like she’d just done them fresh that morning. I felt something run through my arm and into my hand, some electricity or bright energy. Maybe I passed it onto her.

“I like to look at people’s hands,” she said. “It can tell you a lot about a person. You have hands like my dad. He had big hands.” She was studying them now. “You bite your nails,” she said, and dropped her hand. “That means you’re the nervous type.”

“Does it?” I asked. I felt like the nervous type. I crammed my hand back under my arm and hoped she’d drop the subject.

“Do you want to kiss me?” she asked. She took a step towards me and I noticed her eyelashes were blond.

I didn’t know what to say. Now that I had been asked, I supposed I did want to kiss her. She didn’t wait for an answer. She kissed me hard, harder than I expected from those lips, and I felt her tongue enter my mouth and leave before I knew what to do with it. She pulled away and I watched her open her eyes and I thought maybe I’d done it wrong. I had left mine open.

Angel yelled, and I looked just in time to see him topple from the surfboard. He had tried to stand, but couldn’t find his balance. When he broke the surface of the water he was laughing and wiping the water from his face.

“Almost,” he screamed, and looked around to get his bearings. “Did you see that?” he yelled once he’d spotted us. “I almost had it.”

While I stood shivering, Kristin did sort of a dive or a flop off the sandbar and dogpaddled to where Angel had drifted. She slid onto the surfboard and paddled it back towards me while Angel detangled from the leash. “Erin, you try,” she said to me. “Give him the cord.”

Angel was still smiling when he reached down and undid the Velcro on his ankle. I lashed it to my left ankle, thought maybe I had it on the wrong foot and moved it to my right. Did it matter? I didn’t ask. It felt ill-fitting and hung loose. I felt wrong suddenly, like I had no right to be here in the water, like I was pretending I was something I was not. My head was hurting and I was tired and just wanted to go up to the beach and crack open those sandwiches—what were they? Peanut butter, probably. I thought about Kristin’s kiss, about how I didn’t know how to feel about it. About how, when it came down to it, I didn’t really feel anything about it at all. If Angel had seen it happen, he wasn’t letting on. For whatever reason, that made me feel better.

“Sit,” Kristen commanded. “Remember, paddle out to give yourself some distance, then turn the surfboard when you see a wave coming towards you.”

Off I went. When I left the sandbar, I lay on my stomach and paddled carefully into the water. It was the first time the surfboard was entirely within my control, and it felt more awkward than I had anticipated. It was unexpectedly heavy and unbalanced, and it took me several minutes to feel like I wasn’t going to slide off to the left or the right. I was afraid that if I looked around I would

slide off the board, like a tightrope walker who looks down at his feet. Just keep moving forward, that's what he should do to make it to the other side. Once I bent slightly and slid my arm down my body to feel that the leash was still attached to my leg—it felt like it wasn't there—and I almost lost my balance. I decided that if the surfboard got loose, Angel would grab it. Or it would find its way to shore eventually.

The surfboard bobbed under me, and first large wave that I encountered bucked the board violently and cracked me on the chin. I was more careful after and used my arms to absorb the shock of subsequent waves. The further from the sandbar I got, the more in control I felt. I let my body move with the board, and adjusting felt natural. The noises of the shore were behind me somewhere. The radio noises, the children noises, the cars on A1A were all held back by the wind and pressed down by the sun. Out far from shore, I only heard the sound of the water lapping against the front of the surfboard—a sound better suited for a bathtub—and the cry of the gulls that flew high enough to laugh down on all of us. I turned my head and pressed my ear to the surfboard and listened and thought maybe it would amplify the sound of the ocean beneath it or tell me a secret like a rushing conch. I imagined the shark from *Jaws*, Bruce they used to call it on the movie set, coming up from below. Only I was in place of the blonde swimmer, a gangly teenager with pimples on his shoulders, able to be eaten in one bite, gone before anyone knew what had happened. Before I knew what happened. I shivered thinking about it and pulled my dangling arms out of the water for a moment, like when I was a young boy, convinced there was something

under my bed, terrified and cocooned in my blanket, careful not to let so much as a finger or a toenail hang over the side, my mother and father oblivious to the drama playing out on the other side of the artificial wood paneling. But I hadn't been a boy for a long time, and I wouldn't ever be again, so I let my arms and legs go slack and loll into the warm water.

I could feel myself burning under the thin layer of sunscreen and I scrunched my shoulders into bony wings to test the pull on my skin. There was no doubt I would get red and peel. Once I had gone to the beach during a church trip, back when I still went to Southside Baptist, and had stayed out too long, swimming and playing Frisbee with the other kids. We all got sun poisoning, most of us anyway, including the youth minister, a doughy twenty-something named Noah, who had to be taken to the hospital the next day when he couldn't stop throwing up. My lips swelled up like sausages, and I got to stay home from school for a few days eating Otter Pops and rubbing myself in aloe from the plant in our yard. Despite missing school and the unlimited Little Orphan Oranges and Alexander the Grapes, it had been a miserable week, and I didn't want to relive it. If I was going to do it, to ride the surfboard, now was the time.

I sat up straddling the board and oriented myself. I felt like I had just returned from somewhere secret, like I'd just woken from a dream. I saw that I was no longer headed into the waves and had instead drifted sideways. I expected to be further down the beach, but I pinpointed Angel and saw that I had hardly strayed at all. I waved to let him know that I was okay, but he must not have seen me because he didn't wave back.

It was then that I heard a rush of water, the unmistakable sound of a wave. It was a Cocoa Beach wave, not an Oahu or Gold Coast wave, small but with a white curl of foam at the top. I slid back and grabbed the rail with one hand like Kristin had shown me, and as the nose of the surfboard lifted into the air, I pulled and pointed it towards the shore. My feet were kicking furiously, and I almost slid off the back, but I caught myself before it could slip from under me, and instinctively remembered to lay flat. I felt myself get pulled into the wave, and I paddled against it with both arms until I lifted into the air, no longer in control. Stand, I said to myself. I brought my left knee up under me, drug my foot forward, and planted it near the center of the board. There was a jiggle as I repositioned myself on the board, and for a moment I thought I would topple. Instead I managed to get all the way up, first crouching, then standing, my right foot turned to at an angle and planted at the back of the surfboard, my left knee bent, my arms out for balance, a capital T, a Beach Boy, perfect for no more than a single oscillation of water. It was enough. I was surfing.

I rode the wave to the hoots and shouts of Angel and Kristin until I reached the sandbar where it broke. I slowed too much and could no longer keep my balance, and I flopped backwards into the water, accidentally pushing the surfboard away. It pulled against the leash and I felt it tug pleasantly on my leg. When I emerged from the water, I was grinning, and I couldn't stop.

“That was impressive, hombre,” Angel said to me.

“Yeah, that was really good.” Kristin was standing next to Angel. A little too close, I thought. I felt my grin fade away.

“I didn’t think,” I said. “I just did it.”

“Then that explains why you’re so good at it,” Angel joked. “Let’s eat,” he said.

Something had changed between the two of them while I was out there. She looked at him different than before, like she’s allowed herself an opportunity. As if she’s happy with her choice. Angel took Kristin by the hand, dragging her back towards the shore, and she followed him. She seemed already loyal to him, just like that. I knew the feeling. I’d seen tongueless Amy Hart look at him the same way when they had first started going together. I’d seen a few other girls do it, too. I wondered if I had ever done it.

Handsome Angel Yzaguirre. I’d seen their expressions.

Whatever was going to happen on the shore didn’t include me. “I’ll stay,” I yelled, and Angel waved, understanding insofar as he knew. I would deal with the sunburn later. I straddled the surfboard and then lay down, and as I found my balance it felt like being on it for the first time. I turned the nose and paddled out past the break for the second time that day, only this time I was thinking about Angel, and about whether he would understand. And I wondered if I was brave enough to be the kind of person I wanted to be.

End