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NOTHING'S GONNA CHANGE THE WAY YOU FEEL ABOUT ME NOW

when you lay down to sleep that's when it'll hurt the worst
When you wake up alone and still smell my smoke

FEATURING JON SOKOL, PAT JAMESON, R.P. SINGLETARY, PATRICIA QUINTANA BIDAR, CLEM FLOWERS, TIMOTHY BOUDREAU, PAUL ALEXANDER, DAVID ESTRINGEL, BEN PORTER, JD CLAPP, NANCY DILLINGHAM, MARK ROGERS, AND SARAH HOLLOWAY

FOR JUSTIN TOWNES EARLE

1982-2020

Yeah things are startin' to get strange

I'm passin' thru Memphis in the Rain

HEREIN

SILVER-HAIRED CHARLIE

Sarah Holloway

As rain pounds down, Charlie leans forward, his chest almost touching the Chevy's steering wheel as he tries to see where the asphalt ends and the berm begins. He's knocked back two large coffees and feels amped, jittery. He's just managing to keep it on the road.

What's left of Charlie's brother Gary is seat-belted into the passenger seat. He has been reduced to ashes after being pared down to skin and bones by metastasized melanoma. His remains are inside a wood-veneer box. It's June third, Gary's birthday, the day Charlie's supposed to scatter the ashes at Natural Chimneys park. The undisputed highlight of the brothers' childhood years was the time Aunt Elizabeth and Uncle Don took them camping there.

As kids, Charlie and Gary would've still been in school on June third, chafed by every math problem and spelling test that stood between them and summer vacation. The boys learned to look out for one another once their parents began to pursue substance abuse full-time. Gary had been a year and a couple months older than Charlie.

Now, Charlie's car slides a little coming into a curve, and he gains respect for the gravity of his predicament. He slows, turning on his flashers. This rain like to wash us away, Charlie thinks. He decides to drive into Harrisonburg and wait it out.

A shallow stream rushes across the road, visible mainly because of the twigs and leaves it ferries. The storm's vigor feels personal to Charlie, malignant. Driving becomes less fraught as the road unwinds into the Shenandoah valley. The valley road's got better visibility, a wider shoulder, a larger margin of error.

Charlie pulls into the parking lot at Elena's Greek Diner. He rubs his neck. His old man's hands haven't taken kindly to his death grip on the steering wheel. After he swallows a couple of ibuprofen with the dregs of his coffee, Charlie rests his hand on Gary's box and reminds himself to breathe. Imagines rainwater washing tension out of his shoulders, pain out of his hands, grief out of his soul, melting it away like the wicked witch in The Wizard of Oz. He puts in a CD and sings along with Justin Townes Earle. This world's got plenty of pain to go around, Charlie knows that. The lightning and thunder abate, but the rain continues.

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Charlie takes a seat at the counter. The diner's clean, decorated with framed photographs of sun-bleached Grecian ruins against outrageously blue skies. It's 10:30 in the morning, yet it's nearly dark outside because of the storm. Only a handful of diners are scattered about the place. The waitress, a pretty woman close to Charlie's age, approaches with a menu.

"No, thanks," Charlie waves it away. "Was just hoping for a bowl of soup. What kind do you have?" Charlie knows the ibuprofen and coffee will rile his stomach if he doesn't eat something soon. He places Gary's box on the counter next to him.

"Tuesday's avgolemono." Charlie nods. The waitress looks at the box and scrunches her brow for a moment before going into the kitchen.

The soup's so good that Charlie asks for seconds. He wants more of that savory, lemony broth. When the waitress brings it, Charlie surprises himself by asking if she'd like to take a load off and keep him company. She sits on a stool, not next to him, but with only one empty stool in between. Just for a few minutes, she says.

The contours of her presence appeal to him. Charlie knows what Gary would say: You don't stand a chance with her. Charlie asks if she's Elena.

"There's no Elena," she tells him. "I'm Patty. It's been my place for five years, but it's been called Elena's for so long there's no sense changing it."

After he and Patty chat about the weather, Charlie can't think of anything else to say and excuses himself to use the restroom. The day feels heavy—his duty to his brother, the ashes, the storm. Charlie senses some new darkness scratching to come in, too. He hates being the last man standing.

After a couple minutes and a few deep breaths, Charlie thinks he can handle himself and returns to his seat. When he gets there, Gary's gone.

"I moved that box over to a table," Patty gestures at it. "Sorry, but it bothered me a little."

"Oh." Charlie's not sure what to think. He lays a twenty on the counter. "Patty, that may have been the finest soup I've ever tasted," he says, and watches her face light up like sunrise. "Thank you," Charlie retrieves the box and heads for the exit.

Back on the road, the rain's steady. Gary's belted in again. They're headed into the mountains with twenty miles and three bridges to go.

APPROVED WORKMEN ARE NOT ASHAMED

Ben Porter

Can't stop thinking about Daddy. He didn't come home when he was supposed to; on a long haul to Chicago. But now he's gone. That's all Mama says. Gone. Supposed to be here Wednesday. Now it's Tuesday—almost a full week of no-show. Dispatch doesn't know where he is. Truck got dropped off. He signed it out. Gone. That's all.

It's 6:00. Got to burn ass. Got to get brother and sister there by 7:30 and it's a long way to town. Each time I ask if Daddy called, Mamma doesn't look at me when she says no. Not that she'd pick up the phone. It's old, just the numbers, no screen. But she has a way of knowing it's Daddy and not picking up. So I got to be vigilant, be there when it rings or there ain't no chance. If I don't pick up it's like I'm leaving him, like I'm saying fuck you and I don't care, which is not true. I care so much it hurts.

Go to leave my room. Got to find the kids, shove some mac-n-cheese in 'em so they ain't late for AWANAs. That stands for APPROVED WORKMEN ARE NOT ASHAMED. It's for learning the scriptures and getting around good people and trying to walk with Jesus and run around a little bit, wear uniforms and make friends that aren't trash.

If it's Uncle Dale though, Mamma picks up—always, first ring, no problem. And they talk for hours. She goes into her room, phone cord dancing under the crack of her door and she laughs and talks in whispers. Once I even heard her crying.

I walk down the hall and into the kitchen. Can't hear brother nor sister which ain't a good sign.

"Kids! Dinner!"

The sink's dirty with last night's pots still soaking on account of me forgetting them. And Mamma's on the couch, past the kitchen bar, watching TV, watching a man sell knives. He bites a penny to show it's real and cuts it up with his knife, easy, like a pad of butter.

"You seen 'em?" I say to Mamma. She don't move. The TV is huge and flat, changes the color of the room as the pictures shift.

“Seen who Baby?” she says to the TV, after a minute.

“Kids,” I say. “They got meeting tonight.”

“Your uncle Dale’s coming over. Make sure the gate’s unlocked.”

“Kids, Mamma. You seen ‘em?”

The man on the TV’s got a pile of boots and he’s chopping them, one after another.

Mamma turns to me and she has her hair straightened and colored and lots of makeup on, like she is going to tend bar, but she ain’t—Circle-Nine’s closed on Tuesdays.

“You going somewhere?” I say.

“Work.”

“No you ain’t. Bar’s closed.”

“You made dinner yet? I’m hungry,” she says, turning back to the TV. The man takes out a tupperware and opens it, dumps out the heart of a cow.

“Why go if you ain’t working?”

Mamma doesn’t say nothing. The man cuts the cow’s heart into four perfect pieces, holds them up for the camera to see.

“And what’s Uncle Dale gonna do here while we’re gone?”

I’m rinsing out a pot and filling it with water and putting it on the stove to boil.

“Mamma?”

The man on the TV says, “how undamaged the ventricles!” and I tear the top off the mac-n-cheese box and set it by the stove. She just ain’t listening. Don’t know if it's the pills she’s been sneaking or if she’s going nuts or if she just don’t want to talk.

“Mamma. I’m talking to you, goddamnit.”

The man with the knives is shaking the announcer's hand and gets blood all over it.

Mamma gets up, turns around, gives me a look, and walks to her room. She closes the door and I get mad and punch the counter and noodles rattle against the window.

Phone rings and I run to pick it up.

“Hello? Daddy?”

“Hey Sugar.”

“It’s me Dale,” I say, and a hole drops out inside me. I look at the TV.

“I know. How you been? What you wearing?”

“No it’s me, Rebecca-Rachel.”

“Oh, damn. You sound like your Mamma.”

“How are you?”

“Fine.”

“Heard from Daddy?”

“No, he don't call.”

“You want Mamma?”

“Sure do—Y’all going to meeting tonight?”

“Yea.”

“Put your Mamma on.”

“Hey, Hun,” Mamma says, already on the extension.

By the time I get back from the gate—up our long-ass driveway—sky’s all purple and silver, low clouds under a dark sunset; veins of light where the clouds come together, marbled like a big steak. I walk past the house and yell for the kids but hear no answer.

Kids been weird lately, wild with the feeling of Daddy being gone, like there ain’t no rules and everything’ll be different now he’s not coming back. I tell them he is, but it don’t do nothing and they get wilder and wilder. That’s why AWANAs. That’s why they need to be around good people and the word of God.

“Steve! Wanda!”

It smells funny, a little sour, like singed hair. I call again and walk toward the barn. Everything’s close and high up. Property’s a big bowl we live at the bottom of, next to a pond and the walls of the bowl are covered in Cedar which makes it sweet smelling. Except for now. Smells like smoke.

I turn the corner and see fire, see Steve squeezing a can of paint thinner on a live slug. He’s at the wall of the

barn, right up against it and the slug is moving faster than I ever seen a slug move, turning inside out by the heat; Wanda's a few steps away, twirling in place, watching the flounce of her dress bloom as fireballs float as bubbles, popping on the eaves of the old, dry barn.

"Steve Rancin!" I scream, and Steve drops the can on the fire and dodges me as I run to kick it clear, sliding in the grease of the slug, turning for him, leaving footprints of fire in the grass. And I catch him and he wriggles and squirms and I slap him as hard as I can, putting my talk with Mamma into it—which is wrong, and I feel the wrongness of it—makes him stop and scrunch up his cheeks in a face makes me want to cry.

I open my mouth to scold him but can't find the words; shouldn't have hit him that hard.

"Wanda, get your little butt away from that fire!" I say, turning toward her. She steps back, drawing her hand from the burning slug.

Steve is breathing funny and he scrambles up, drawing his arm across his face. I turn and look into his eyes, daddy's eyes, which are brown and wet and wide.

"Why didn't you come when I called?"

Wanda comes over to me and says, "Rebeca-Rachel?"

"..."

"Why didn't you? Huh?" I say.

Steve lets out a little sound like he's gonna talk but starts crying instead so he shuts up.

"And startin' fires! Burn the fucking place down? That your game?" I say

"Rebecca-Rachel?" Wanda says, standing at my shoulder.

"Hush!" I say. "What you got to say for yourself boy?" I set down on my haunches and get on his level.

Steve, all of eight years old, draws himself up, trying to keep his mouth from trembling. He looks at me and those eyes are big and dark; and he steps forward, hands open, looking to hug me! And my heart melts for him, for the unfairness of everything—little Stevie—and I think how I'd like to burn it all too. We didn't ask for this, the way life is set within lives which are shit and no count—here I am, beating on him! —so I lift my arms to receive him.

He hits me hard in the teeth and I tip backwards and see white. When I sit up he's gone, running to the house.

I blink and can't think of nothing to say except "Get dressed for AWANAs! And think about what you done!"

Idiot, I think to myself and taste blood and feel a little better, better than if he hugged me.

"Rebecca-Rachel?" Wanda says again, after a minute.

"Yes, Wanda?" I say, getting up.

"Something you should know."

"What?"

"It's not Steve's fault—the fire I mean."

"What are you talking about?"

"He had permission."

I laugh.

"He did, honest. Daddy said so!"

I'm walking to the hose reel to put the fire out and stop. "No he didn't," I say. Then, after a minute, "You got a hold of him?"

Wanda sways her hips and looks at a little pool of blue fire at her feet—one of my footprints. "No, but Steve did! I saw him on the phone. They was talking while you was at school, yesterday."

I look at her standing there with no shoes, shifting in her little purple dress. Her eyes are clear. She thinks he talked to Daddy.

"I saw him talking on the phone, Becca."

For a minute I believe her. But then I shake my head and take the hose, turning the rusty spigot. "Wanda, what you think? Daddy just calls up Steve and tells him to start a fire? Don't be a dummy."

"Well that's what he said. I saw him talking."

"Go get dressed, Hun. Make sure your brother eats, OK?"

"OK, Becca," Wanda says, shuffling back to the house, picking daisies. As she rounds the corner she says, "I did. I saw him talking."

I shake my head and spray down the fire, wet the barn wall and eaves and roof for good measure. When I'm done I don't know what I know.

I get inside and Mamma's back on the couch and the kids are sitting with her, Stevie with dirty face and no shirt; Wanda's hair all crazy and tangled. They are watching the news and a man with big thick hair takes up the whole flat screen with his yelling face.

I make three plates of mac-n-cheese and put them on the coffee table. Then I go to the laundry room and pull Steve and Wanda's uniforms out the dryer. It's just dusk out the window, a line of blue ringing the ridge of the dark bowl. I take them the laundry and walk to the bathroom to get ready. On my way I grab a pillow and take it in with me and close the door.

Here I am with the mirror and I begin the things I do when I'm alone and it's quiet.

I take off my shirt and stand before myself wearing old jeans and my little training bra holding almost nothing at all. I take a breath. No matter how hard I push, I can't get my stomach to look pregnant. Not my skinny ass. I could stand here in front of the mirror all day drinking water and swallowing my own breath. It don't make no difference. I end up just looking sick.

It's dark so I turn on the light. Thin, hay colored hair, little dark eyes, flat all the way down. I eat and eat—big blocks of government cheese have me shitting all night—but can't make my collarbone disappear, my knobby-ass elbows.

But something a mirror is good for is the walk. So I waddle up and down the bathroom, checking my form. I got it pretty well down, feet pointed out, leaning back, hands on the underside. But I can't get the gut. Maybe I ain't got the body for babies, ain't got the hips for it. All's I can do is strap a pillow to my belly with scotch tape, like so. I put my shirt on and slouch around. Almost got it if I squint.

It's amazing how babies grow, start as a secret, a wad of jelly slapped against the wall. But they get out on their own, unsticking them self, careful, into darkness, drifting in nothing but nothing, lost, right there in the belly of its own flesh and blood.

Notice how there ain't no skinny-asses like me with men? It's always big women—bellies and big tits—big enough for love, for men to put babies into. Plus they're dressed nice, like Ricky Smith's Mamma. She's big too, not ugly-fat, but full, full of love—love for Ricky and Pastor Theo (he's Ricky's daddy). She's always dressed up real good, has Ricky dressed up too, handsome. He plays baseball and we ride the same bus and I like to look at him from the seat behind, try and smell him if I can.

I grab lipstick, blink my eyes and pucker. Got to make something of this. She don't notice—maybe she does and don't say nothing—but I been stealing Mamma's makeup when I saw she uses the same stuff Ricky's Mamma does. Saw all of Ricky's Mamma's gear, her colors, lipstick, the whole deal, on account her purse being open under the bathroom stall at AWANAs. She even had the same pills Mamma been using, phenobarbital and oramorph—both! Must of been a shipment come in down at the IGA parking lot. But Ricky's Mamma probably gets them legit, script and everything. They're a good family.

Goddamn this mascara. Don't want a line up right. Don't help the mirror's dim neither. Can't get a good look at myself. Fuck and Jesus Christ, all this work so Ricky can see me better and I can't see me anyway. Eyes don't pop. That's the problem. I got Daddy's eyes too—me and Stevie—which are good for a man, but not a lady; dark eyes set flat on my face like two little holes in my head.

I look down at the pillow. Wonder what a baby would feel like? I'm fourteen, it could happen; a little Ricky with a smile like his and his black hair and blue eyes, getting fuller and handsomer deep down inside where it's dark and warm and full of love. I'd be lying if I didn't think about it, think of Ricky putting his baby in me. I know it's wrong and God don't like it—those thoughts are for your husband—but I think about it 'til it hurts at night, think about his smell, his nice words, his baby filling me up, growing me out and out and out.

God, I hope Daddy is ok, hope so bad.

They say babies hurt; heard folks say that when your body cracks open it hurts so much you laugh. You crack open and the water comes; sometimes hits the floor, rushing out like a baptism. I ain't never been baptized.

But I'd like to. That's about the only way to get clean enough.

I look at the clock on the wall. It's time to go. So I finish up, rip off the scotch tape and pillow, suck in my stomach. That's me, the way God made me, empty, dirty, flat, something to float away in the wind.

Kids still ain't dressed. Food's cold on the coffee table. TV's on mute and a commercial for a class action scrolls a long list of symptoms on the screen: *shortness of breath, menstrual spotting, migraines.*

I hand Wanda the hairbrush. "Tug out some of them tangles," I say.

I look at Stevie sitting on Mamma's lap. He ain't got no shirt nor shoes and his face is dirty and I can tell he knows I'm looking at him but those little eyes are glued to the TV.

"C'mon Stevie. Time to be ready," I say. "Gotta leave in a few minutes."

Nothing. Wanda's tugging at her tangles and whines for the pain of it.

"Stevie, c'mon. It'll be fun. They got basketball and your sister's got a scripture. You can watch her get her candy. Maybe she'll share?"

Wanda shoots me a look and Stevie doesn't move.

"Ok, boy," I say. Putting my purse down and stepping to grab him.

"Careful. She might smack you one again," Mamma says, petting his head and looking straight at me. Steve buries his face in Mamma's bosom but keeps an eye on the TV. *Bedwetting, restless leg syndrome, neuropathy.*

"You know I'm still Mamma around here? You got no call to be beating on my kids," she says, playing with Stevie's hair.

I feel my eyes get wet and blink them dry. "You know what I caught him doing?" I say. "He was fixing to burn the barn down. Had a fire going right up against the wall."

She kisses Stevie's head. I hear a pop and Wanda whimpers and holds the hairy brush.

"You hear me? Fire, Mamma. Like last month. Next time it'll be inside."

She looks on. No words. Makes me want to take Wanda's brush and beat Mamma's face with it.

"Well me and Wanda are leaving either way, real soon," I say with a tremble, putting my hands on my hips.

"We got to wait for Dale," Mamma says. And when she says it, headlights fill the darkness of the porch outside. We kids go out to see who it is.

The night cooled on us. It's dark and a little wind teases our pond. A truck's making its way down from the bowl's rim, bouncing down the dirt, flashing us with its light.

Steve and Wanda are on the porch. Steve ain't got no shirt and Wanda ain't got no shoes.

"Y'all get dressed," I say.

They don't move and we try and catch a glimpse of the truck. Mamma comes out to the porch and sits down on a lawn chair she keeps next to a Folgers can. I see she's wearing the fancy jeans she wears for work at Circle-Nine. She's real thin; looks sick, like she's been saying. Teeth starting to go bad—but she still has something of a figure and her nails did and stuff, always wearing rings and earrings. The headlights catch her and I think she looks like a queen.

"Your Uncle Dale's coming with us tonight," Mamma says, trying to light up and talk at the same time, frowning into the fire in her hand.

"How come?" I say, the truck getting closer, lighting up the rest of her. Wanda leaves the deck railing and comes to Mamma, grabbing hold of her arm.

"He just wanted to come is all," Mamma says, letting her head fall on Wanda's shoulder, dragging and letting the smoke go.

"Wanted to come to AWANAs?"

Mamma snorts and two jets of smoke shoot from her nose. "Is that what you're wearing?"

"Nothing else was clean. Didn't have time to do my stuff."

Mamma raises her eyebrows and stares into the darkness.

"Why's Uncle Dale coming to AWANAs?"

"Why would he be going to AWANAs?"

"I don't know! Mamma, you tell me!"

"He wanted to come with me. Figured you could drop us off at work."

"Circle-Nine's closed," I say, turning towards her as the bouncing headlights strobe our faces. I know she's going there to sell pills—everyone does. She and Dale set up shop and the whole town comes. But I want to hear her lie and see her face as she regrets it—that way I know she really cares.

But she just lifts her head from Wanda's shoulder and stares at me, dead-on.

"Harold's there, smart-ass. He said he's got new uniforms for me. And, by the way, where the fuck you get off asking me where I'm going?"

I stare back and can hear Dale's music blasting muffled in the dark. "Just doesn't make sense is all," I say.

Mamma takes another drag.

"You know Wanda's presenting tonight? You know she's got the ass-end of Second Peter down flat and she's gonna get a prize and the rest of the parents'll be there. You know that, don't you?"

Wanda's holding tight on Mamma's arm. Mamma pulls free and takes the Folgers can and puts it between her legs, rests her arms on her knees, leans over it and ashes her cigarette with a loud flick. "I get it," she says. "You got a shit Mamma, don't you? Don't care for her own kids. It's so bad, you gotta do something about it, right? Stand up for the little ones. Protect them from their shit Mamma."

I feel tears welling in my head. "I didn't say that."

"Didn't you though? Say, Wanda, you got a shit Mamma?" she asks, turning to Wanda. "Tell me the truth, now. Am I as big of a sack of shit as your sister says I am?"

"I know she'd want you to be there is all," I say.

Mamma's got Wanda by both shoulders. "You want me there, Hun?" she says, smiling, showing all her silver and gold molars. "I'll drop everything for you. You just say the goddamn word."

Wanda's looking down at her feet.

"Huh, sugar? What'll it be?"

"No, that's okay, Mamma," she says. "You're busy."

"That's my girl," Mamma says, pulling Wanda to her chest, getting the cigarette in her hair, pulling it away and ashing it, looking at me, headlights big and blind, lighting up everything and then darkness as Dale passes and parks by the ramp.

"OK if I ask you to do something, Rebecca-Rachel?" Mamma says. "That alright with you? I mean, is that fucking OK?"

"Yes," I say.

"Go help your uncle? He's bringing something for me."

I pick up Steve who's been bouncing up and down and wipe my eyes on my shoulder and feel the mascara streak, hear Dale's door open and close.

I carry Steve to Mamma and set him on her lap and turn toward the ramp.

"Wanda, shoes," I say.

The tailgate drops and Dale rustles a tarp as I walk down the ramp, wiping my eyes, trying to forget her but I can't, and I feel her meanness sink down deep into my stomach and grow there and become a part of me, making me think in ways I shouldn't be thinking. But I gotta think different. Gotta get ready for people, for the kids, be nice; to ride the whole way to town with Dale and Mamma, hoping they don't get high again and freak the hell out of Wanda, her getting ready to recite God's words in front of good people, in front of Ricky's Mamma.

And I stop—a man stands before me I never seen before.

"Rebecca-Rachel, how you doing, girl?" The man says and hugs me. I smell bleach. Feeling leaves my body and I'm in his arms, which are strong and long, wrapped around me all the way, little hands flat on my ribs, big head low on my body, coming to my shoulder.

“All right,'' he says in my ear before letting go.

I feel all wrong and look down; catch a glimpse of him on the way, all teeth and sunglasses and he’s still close, so I lean away from his closeness, full of breath and warm.

“Randy, get your ass over here and help,” Dale says.

“I’ll help,” I say quick, looking to leave the man at the cab. Dale’s at the truck bed with a couple of black duffle bags lined up on the gate. I hope so bad the man is dropping Dale off.

“That the kind of guy you are?” Dale calls over my shoulder. “Letting the lady do it all?”

“Its ok, I can help,” I say.

“I hope so,” Dale says, and the man laughs behind me, slow and whining, let loose from his chest piece by piece. I hear the gravel under his feet and so grab two bags with both arms and turn back to the house. Little pill bottles move under the canvas of the duffle, and I hear the pills shaking like music as I stomp up the ramp. I feel Mamma’s eyes on me as I pass her on the deck but don’t look at her, Wanda too, like the man left his stink on me and everyone can see it, glowing green in the summer dark.

I get inside and drop the duffels on the kitchen bar and think. *Do I know that man? How does he know me? Does he work at the Snack n’ Pump?* Just then, something dense and heavy falls on me from the direction of the kitchen bar and lands on my shoulders and I drop to my knee.

“Hey!” Steve hollers, pulling my hair, breathing on me and scrambling, trying to wrestle. I reach for him and find his shirt collar and pull his head down, hard, into the carpet. He pops up and grins, now with a pink raspberry on his cheek and my heart is bursting and I did not, until now, understand how scared I really feel.

The door opens and Mamma rushes in with a duffle in both hands, cigarette hanging from her lip, drops them on the floor and grabs me by the shoulders.

“What did you say to Randy?”

Her long nails are dug in and her breath is all ash.

“I didn’t say nothing. I don’t know him,” I say, looking into Mamma’s queen-eyes flecked with gold.

“You use your manners. You be polite. He come up here for you. Get me? He come up here just to see you and you ain’t embarrassing me.”

My mouth goes open. She shakes me hard.

“Don’t look stupid,” Mamma says. “You're old enough.”

I begin to hear a sound, loud and fuzzy, like a roar from far away.

The front door slams the wall. Dale comes first, followed by Randy, followed by Wanda, each carrying black duffels.

Mamma turns quick to Dale and kisses him. Wanda turns on a lamp. Dale is Daddy’s twin and kisses much like Daddy, his mouth skin creased up as Daddy’s does; and him kissing her in the same spot by the door as Daddy kisses her.

“Hot damn,” Randy says.

“Take Steve and play,” I mumble to Wanda. But she don’t and keeps watching. Mamma and Dale stop kissing and Mamma hangs on Dale’s chest.

“Rebecca Rachel, this is Randy,” Dale says. “Good friend of mine. Friend of your daddy’s. We’re in business together.”

Mamma wipes her mouth and looks at me, like she’s showing me something. I see what she means and it comes gradual, and a hot light burns up, slow from my neck-spine, filling my mind white so I’m dazed and dizzy.

We touch hands. Randy smiles and I see him full for the first time. Thick neck and shallow sideburns. Short. Shorter than me but strong looking like a monkey.

“Nice to meet you,” he says and I don’t say nothing. Maybe if I stay quiet he’ll give up, he’ll realize he’s come for nothing, that Dale told him there was a girl up here but all he found was a flat chested child with a bad stomach and a queen-mamma already spoken for. But he nods and the gelled spikes of his hair wield wide, fixed and aggressive, first at me then back at the ceiling, and I know he is here to stay.

Silence. Dale and Mamma look at each other and breathe. I breathe.

"We just about ready?" Wanda asks. She reappears with her Bible and uniform, hair brushed and face scrubbed. "We is half an hour late," she says.

I look at Mamma so as to say, please. Let them go and remain children a while longer. But she walks to the bedroom and doesn't say a word.

"We'll leave real soon," Dale says after a minute and turns to me. "In the meantime, mind showing Randy around? Make him feel comfortable?"

The sound starts again and I feel myself nod yes.

Wanda puts her bible down and walks with Steve to the TV. They sit real close and watch and I feel something slipping from me and falling to the floor, a change in my blood.

"Should the kids get in the car?" I say to Dale. But I don't recognize the voice, halfhearted, like a child, as if Dale has us in the crook of his arm.

"No need," he calls over his shoulder. "We'll be out directly." He picks up a rattling duffle and follows Mamma into the bedroom. I hear the click of the lock.

Randy and I stand by the kitchen bar and don't speak. Kids got cartoons on but no sound. We watch an alien from outer space peek from the zipper of a little girl's backpack. Randy sways by the front door, cartoons showing in his sunglasses and I think, it was never going to be like this.

"You a religious girl?" Randy asks. I jump. "Dale says you're a religious girl. Said you is going to meeting tonight."

I don't say nothing and hold my stomach—so tiny to hold—and as I do a thought enters me and bursts because I don't know whose baby I will carry.

"Yeah," I say, soft and alone.

"That's good," he says. "Religion's good. Good for the kids, I say," and he gestures toward the TV. I look at him and he smiles and picks up a duffle and takes my hand and leads me to the couch to sit. The cartoons are bright and we are bathed in color, the room changing tint every couple of seconds.

Randy sits cross legged like an Indian, back to the TV, and I try not to get too close.

"My mamma was a big one for religion," he says. "Church secretary—ran that place—had everybody in line, Pastor included. Tried to save all the children, too. Led most of them to Christ." He reaches in the direction of his belt and my breath catches and now I see it's for his pocket and I stare at the floor. "Tried with me. See here."

An old laminated paper appears before me and I take it. The card is yellow and frayed at the corners with blue letters that say, *James Randall Biggs, 6 years old, baptized in the name of God.*

"She typed that herself after she dunked me," he says, taking the card away. I stare past him. The alien is causing trouble, making the little girl's lunch tray levitate and she struggles to shove him back in her bag. "Except it didn't take," Randy says, slipping his wallet back in his pants.

I close my eyes and try and imagine Ricky's face but it's made of clay and misshapen. And I try to imagine my baby in my arms but it's a clay baby.

"Got something for you," Randy says.

He reaches for his duffle. I hear Mamma laugh through the wall and Dale's low voice rumbles like thunder. Did Randy pay her any money? Or am I favor, something to give in exchange for help or friendship? She laughs again and by the sound of it I know: she didn't think about it that far.

I look at the kids. Steve rolls over on the floor, looks at us with lazy eyes as Randy puts the duffle on his lap, unzips it, pulls out a little orange bottle filled with pills, reaches in again, takes out a big black gun and sets it on the arm rest, zips the bag up, puts it back on the floor and looks at me, curled in the reflection of his sunglasses.

Steve's eyes get big and he sits up.

"I want you to have a couple of these," Randy says, holding the pill bottle for me to see.

Dales is grunting something at Mamma and the walls vibrate with his drone.

"Not here," I whisper, eyeing Stevie.

"Take 'em," he says without expression. "Then I'll go wherever you want me to."

Steve's frozen on us, sitting up on the floor. Wanda gets up but don't notice nothing and grabs her Bible and walks to her room.

The little bottle glows orange and the TV gets brighter. The alien is in the girl's bathroom. Its long neck stretches over the stall and the brightness of the screen fractures the green of him into pixels that ripple like sequins.

I hold out my hand and Randy smiles, unscrews the bottle, places two pills in my hand. They are round and fuchsia, perfect in roundness, and I wonder if they will make me sleep, or not remember things. I look up at Randy and his gun. Green from the TV soaks his shirt.

I pop them, one after another.

"Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be," Wanda's voice rings out from the back of the house, clear and bright, practicing for the reading she will never perform.

Randy grins. "You remind me of my Mamma," he says, relaxing back into the arm rest. "The way you are with these kids, trying to save them from death and sin."

Steve's face is stone and his hair is lit up red, hugging his own knees on the floor.

The pills drop in my stomach, one by one.

"But you can't save 'em no more than my Mamma could save me."

The pills are turning to liquid and I can't look at Stevie no more, most of me dying here before him, turning to nothing before his eyes, hate for Mamma filling me like air, hate for Daddy leaving without a trace, and I can see myself slipping into nothing as the pills leak into my body, and I think out loud, "a good Mamma can save us."

"That's the truth," Randy says, popping a fistful of pills and picking up his gun. "But there ain't one. They are all bad and bad don't beget bad. Bad only gives bad, rot don't make nothing clean."

The front door slams and Stevie's gone and Randy and me are alone, Dale and Mamma shuffling in their room.

"Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat?" says Wanda down the hall in a sing-song voice.

The TV shuts off, and Randy walks back to me, snuffing light as he goes and the darkness feels good.

"That's why baptism don't work," Randy says, "ain't no clean life with no clean Mamma."

"Yeah," I hear someone say, far off, and it's me, but Daddy's voice, deep and soft like velvet. "Ain't no clean Mamma no ways," says the voice.

"But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise."

Getting sleepy and glad for the pills, Randy's boots hitting the floor, his belt, his shirt. I barely see him against the dark.

"It goes on and on," Randy says, naked, swimming in the softness of the pills. "Mammas passing it down one by one to the rest of us."

My breath catches and a hole drops out from inside me and I remember I never been baptized; and I wonder how anybody gets clean. I look out past his shoulder and I see the dark cedars swaying in the wind, pressed up against the stars, glowing orange in fits and spurts. It lights up the clay baby, flickering orange and black inside my head.

"On and on," he says in the dark, and moves toward me.

I close my eyes and a flicker lights up the clay face and it is my face. When I feel him on top of me, he don't even notice the flames.

HEALING

Timothy Boudreau

Walter is resting on the couch, ice pack on his incision, when Ruth tells him chipmunks have been chewing up the car seats, scattering bits of yellow cushion in the garden, that they've even attacked the stuffed cat Walter keeps on the dashboard, chewed open its belly and stolen its guts.

"Don't worry Walt," she says. "I'll show those little bastards." She Googles "chipmunk pests", finds a video where a guy explains how to "lure them to their death"; gets a plank, a bucket, sunflower seeds, peanut butter, sets everything up, the next morning finds one floating in the bucket, its dark almond eyes frozen open.

From the window Walter watches Ruth fish out the body with an old pasta strainer, walk it over to the yard's edge, flip it end over end above the ferns into the woods; watches her come inside, gray-blond bun disheveled, tank-top stained brown where the seedy water splashed on the softness of her belly roll.

When she's up first Ruth checks the scratchpad where they track Walter's meds, reviews the post-op checklist, scans his laptop browser history: *"Busty girl fucks muscular guy"*, *"Milf has intense orgasm"*, *"Chubby girl railed by giant cock"*. He ought to know a hard-on now would be painful—maybe fatal? Anyway why is he searching chubby girls when *she's right here?* And what if he gets tempted and starts jerking, what if he *needs* to come, and while he's humping a pillow his repair comes undone, the mesh snaps loose and his intestines uncoil through the hole in his stomach, get tangled up with his bowels and strangulated and he dies there on the couch, with jizz still creamy wet in his pj's?

Ruth peeks when Walter's in the bathroom, leaning on his cane, lowering himself onto the toilet.

"Is your dick supposed to be that black?"

"Google says not to worry about it."

"I mean *fuck*."

"Just a normal reaction." He shifts his weight. "Doesn't hurt or anything."
"Looks like it hurts like hell." She reaches for the door. "I'll give you some privacy. Don't strain, you might pop something."

When he gets up he braces himself: right hand grips the sink, left hand on his cane; he tries not to lift from his core, where he feels a hot blade stabbing his insides when he does it wrong.

"Nice work Walt," Ruth tells him, after he's shuffled from the bathroom into the kitchen, where she's doing dishes. "You're gonna keep telling me when you need help, right?"

On shopping day Ruth stands over Walter's couch with her fist on her hip. "So just Tylenol and Gatorade?" she asks him.

"That should do it." His expression is sorrowful, as if he blames himself for everything she has to do for him.

"Okay, I'll be right back. Love ya."

The smartasses who opened the new restaurant next to Walgreens named it *Alarming Amounts of Poutine*. In back the kitchen staff blasts bluegrass out the open doors, plinking banjo, sawing fiddle, warm harmony vocals. The parking lot is filled with the smell of bubbling beef gravy, molten cheese, fryolator sizzling with crinkle fries. Ruth imagines herself at twenty, storming into the kitchen like a dom chick in a porno, *"Okay, line up assholes, take out your dicks,"* before brushing past to find nineteen year-old Walt in back washing dishes, lean, dark stubble, half-smirk, head bandana, cigarette-crinkle fry breath when she pulls him in for a kiss.

"Ease yourself back into daily activities," the checklist says. But will they ever have sex again? Walter can't imagine moving that freely, even reaching to pull Ruthie's delicious little face close to his—he winces thinking of it, feels the twisting blade inside. He totters with his cane to

the freezer, returns to the couch with a fresh ice pack while she's making breakfast.

"Hey what if I put scallions in it," she says. "You like that right?" When she brings the eggs over she looks at the bottles on the coffee table. "You take any more of those Oxy's?"

"Not since Sunday," he says. He starts to explain that they make his dreams so vivid they hurt: he meets old friends he abandoned years ago; he's still in love with his former girlfriends. But Ruth is already halfway back to the kitchen, so he adjusts the ice pack, feels the delicious chill along the ridge of his pelvic bone, wonders about the erection he woke up with at three that morning, which didn't hurt at all.

Ruth arranges daisies, brown-eyed Susans and paintbrushes in the vase, wildflowers she remembers from her grandparents' field. Curving green stems, orange tufts, white and yellow petals with quivering water drops; faint sweet scent which reminds her of after a spring rain, bees buzzing over clover, her grandma taking her by the hand to tell her the flowers' names.

"Thought they'd brighten things up," she says. "And here's a new friend." She sets a stuffed cat on the coffee table beside the flowers, price tag still dangling from its fluffy ear.

That afternoon she brings home dinner: an extra-large order of poutine. "Calories," she says. "You need to build up your strength."

"Haven't had this since that last time up in Quebec," Walter says. "We were fucking *wild* that weekend."

"Mais oui," Ruth says. *"Je t'aime mon chéri."*

They sit at the coffee table, use their fingers to pick through the platter: cheese under their fingernails, cheeks flecked with gravy, oil trickling down their forearms. Outside the window a chipmunk runs up the porch rail, lifts its ears, pauses to look in at them.

"Stay out of our shit or we're coming after you too," Ruth tells it.

"But isn't he cute?" Walter says.

Ruth leans over to kiss him, she can't help it, she leaves a big gravy lip-print on his forehead. "As soon as your insides are better, I'm jumping your bones Old Man."

BOB RHINESTONE

Clem Flowers

You can always tell who has the greenhorns on their teams on account of the passing out.

Can't help but smile watching the rest of the 84 team fanning the fuel guy off with a threadbare towel that was stolen from a motel that got bulldozed to make way for the luxurious new *super* Wal-Mart back when it opened in '86.

So wrapped up in the little passion play splayed out before you & reminiscing on somehow a Midwestern nowhere no tell motel had the best flapjacks you ever tasted in your life that you don't even register for a good minute your crew chief is hollering at you about tomorrow.

“Got it, big dog – don't worry about me.”

You can tell he is fuming (terrible poker face why you've won so much off him on the long rides,) but Hal just nods.

“All right, Big Bob – show 'em what you got.”

You nod & pop your helmet on – safety teams always have the howling terribles until you showed it was your older brother, the one who does paint jobs for Gibson, that sprayed it took look ancient despite being a top of the line top flight piece of peace of mind.

You slide into the seat.

You strap yourself in – you nod at the pit crew.

They move.

You rev the engine.

Wait for the opening.

Bust out of pit row like a shot in the night.

Practice rounds, practice rounds – nothing big on the table. Maybe get that start position a little higher up, but you can always bail and just go off qualifying. Mainly just a way to kinda gauge how the other racers are feeling, maybe get in their heads a little bit, try not to crash.

Same as ever.

You feel the smile of the familiar slip along your skull as the warmth of the engine rushes to meet the midday sun in your eyes – bless whoever decided tinting on the windows might be good to put on the visors.

You keep your Daddy's Stetson on the seat beside you & wear your Granddaddy's driving gloves every time you climb in here.

“Three generations, racing as one!”

What the papers and the commentators and the spectators always say.

Truth be told, never even wanted to be a racer.

Fun to watch, sure, especially when you were young.

But then there's all the pressure.

Then there's all the expectations.

Then there's all the media attention.

Then there's all the eyes on you on every moment you're near a car.

Then there's the “family image” to uphold.

Champions!

Kings!

Benevolent rulers of the asphalt!

You could not care less – you just wanna race fast, have a good time, be left alone before and after, and just try not to die.

The Family has played up your unwillingness to fall into per-determined images that has played so well in the past – boisterous, fun loving, salt of the earth type of worker that feels like he could have just stepped out of the factory bar a few hours ago before hopping in the car – into a whole different look.

Not a *King*!

Not a *Prince*!

The Wild Card!

The Eccentric!

The one who shows up for media days wearing an inflatable dinosaur costume!

The one who wanders pit row eating buffalo wings & waving hi to the Goodyear blimp!

The one who is reading Capote, Kafka, & McCullers in their car before the race!

The one who has a boombox in his car that blasts 90s rap mix-tapes as they drive!

To say you were frustrated when you were trying to weird out the sponsors and the team and The Family enough that they'd let you out The Contract and do Something besides driving a car until the day you were eternally hunched like an ancient shrimp, remembering through the fog of cataracts and tears all of the years sacrificed behind the frightening animal that was your engine surrounded by some of the finest chunks of Detroit steel -

Thankfully, the lot where The Family keeps all the test cars and test labs doesn't have security cameras in the garage. No one still has any idea who broke all the windows in the building.

Certainly not the sissy who long ago had forgone the family name as one of his own:

Bob Rhinestone.

The Family was furious at the change, but the PR team spun it into the positive – more wonderfully weird behavior from The Wild Child of the Racing Royal Family.

Even wrote the new name in actual rhinestones on the helmet,

You've had some wins, losses, close calls, terrible wrecks – but you kept coming back you kept driving. And the fans loved you for it – at one point, you were closing in on Awesome Bill's record for most wins as Most Popular Driver.

And you were thankful.

And you smiled when you were handed the trophy.

And you appreciated their appreciation.

But they don't know.

Racing was all you had all you could do – hell, all you knew how to do.

Loathe as you were to admit it,

burnt rubber and

exhaust fumes are

etched eternal in your skull.

Here you are again – the freedom of the wide slab of shimmering black eternity on a 20 degree angle bending down into the most perfect straightaway this country has to offer the spot of hope the spot of legacy the spot where legends were born 50 feet from the finish line from destiny from eternity from the gates of immortality.

Daddy's hat in the passenger side.

Granddaddy's gloves on the wheel.

You somehow living with three shadows on your throat at all times – Daddy, Granddaddy, and The Family all howling in your ear as you turn into turn 4 as you 're blasting Intelligent Hoodlum and you see the cameras you see the eyes you see the fans you see the prognosticators you see the racers turned commentators (Daddy: "They wanna make you into a commentator when you retire. Sure sounds like fun, don't it? (rhetorical.)) all the lights all the lights all the lights all the noise all the noise all the noisenoisenoisenoisenoisenoisenoisenoisenoisenoisenoisenoisenoisenoisenoisenoisenoisenoisenoisenoise and then you see it.

A big gap in the retaining wall – one of the old wood ones the new track owners kept to "maintain the character" of the golden age; there was always something charming about seeing an ad for the smash hit new movie *Spartacus* as you roar by in Bluetooth-enabled race cars.

But today it isn't charm that draws you in – it's hope. It's promise.

It's freedom.

A shot of spent desert beauty floods in as you floor down the straightaway.

You ignore every last bit of training, natural instinct, and self-preservation as you make your way up to ramming speed, thankful they took the bandstands out from behind this old hunk of hickory around the time Ford tumbled into the White House.

You hear the engine whine.

You hear your crew chief screaming over your headset to ask if there's a malfunction.

You hear the mix-tape fade into the next song: “I Got Cha Opin,” Black Moon.

You bust through - the tattered, ancient wood on either side blooming out into the midday sun like makeshift confetti on VJ Day out of a mill window.

You land with a horrific thud, but everything seems to be in tact; steering, tires, engine all look and feel just fine.

You're outside double checking your tires when you spy the ambulance headed out to where you landed.

You sprint back inside your car.

You throw your helmet, Daddy's hat, & Granddaddy's gloves out the window.

You floor it.

You turn your boombox back on just in time to catch “Sailin' Da South” start smacking the little subwoofers on your Goodwill find from a few years back.

You look down and spy a topped-off fuel tank - perfect.

You crane your neck to look behind you & you just bust out laughing.

Sea of sirens, sea of flashing lights, sea of befuddled faces – all waiting and watching to see what will happen because they know you they know your family they know you know better than this some people sometimes just crack up under pressure but surely this is like surely you're gonna turn around right this is crazy where would you go it's just desert it's just desert like not even beach paradise like no cartoon desert coyote should be chasing a road runner around a corner any minute now surely you'll pull a doughnut surely it's a late April fools surely it's just some kind of one of your weird jokes

You rev the engine harder as you find a stretch of wide open Nothing out in the flats before you.

Shimmering in the heat, same heat that made that poor kid pass out just an hour or so ago – think it's finally starting to get to you.

Out before you is open pools of diamond water – a rippling wave of beach & pure sand & smiles & waves & dolphins dancing on their tails – a huge, magnificent library stationed in a sun room so you can read all the weird old books you love so dearly in a climate controlled palace while looking out at the splendor in the lands below.

Paradise. Paradise.

Your foot hits the floor.

You push the engine hard.

The chassis starts to shake.

You smile.

COUNTLESS

R. P. Singletary

"Do you believe that, Mama?" the boy asked.

His mother owled through the autumn-dim downpour, firmly concentrating on driving despite mashed leaves congesting ripped wipers of recycled plastic, what ought to have been replaced last summer, but she'd divorced around the time, and it was Mr. Smith (as she preferred) who handled all things mechanical: trailer, yard, and auto.

"Eight billion people, you believe it, Mama? Eight billion with a b!"

November 15, 2022. Our mighty planet's population today reached a new milestone at some second in the minutes and hours of this glorious day somewhere on our fine globe of Earth, according to data projections earlier sent forth from the United Nations....

"Does the globe get tired, Mama, why not? Why do we say planet Earth but isn't earth also soil? Daddy said *dirt*. What about the other people?"

"Joseph, what are you always talking about? Inquisitive Inquisition, you!"

"Never mind, Mama, never mind. I know I know, I'm not supposed to bother a driver, especially at night. I'm sorry, Mama, I'm really sorry. I'm gonna try better."

The rain eased, the swamps and rivers of coastal Carolina brimming. She and son were almost home.

"Damn," the mother said.

"You said a naughty word, Mama."

Her stomach rumbled like the heavens of late, she'd forgotten to buy groceries because of the weather, and now because of the water everywhere, she didn't want to tuck into the last store on the way home, and Joseph, *could she send him in with cash money* and expect nothing untoward, the boy so young and she didn't know the owners of the new restaurant. In friend or foe of weather, her husband always ran in for take-out.

"Joseph, what are you talking about, son?"

The mother took one hand off the wheel and petted his head, pretending to count the dark hairs that matched those of Dan. She wished Dan had stayed. The boy needed a father more than ever at his age and in the fast years approaching, *might Joseph end up like Mr. Johnston's dead brother?* Yet another one of their common household with young problem untended only to grow into suppurative sap. Maybe they'd not fought as often as imagined; he never laid a hand, not in that way…and yeah, maybe she needed a man all her very own more than ever before, one to herself good and grown.

"Watch out, Mama!"

Hunting-season awares, a frightened but sturdy doe stood before them, blocking the deluged country road. Both hands back on the wheel, the mother flashed the car's high-beams and switched on hazards, signaling *boo* in the spirit of the odd season.

"Why did you do that, Mama?"

"To scare the deer, help her find her way back to her babies in the cypress, the swamp. She's running from somebody should know better, no man hunts at this awful hour, or maybe she's running from that new housing development they're building over hers."

"Oh Mama, why do they do that, why?" She petted the copy of Dan again.

It stopped raining as they pulled into the restaurant's unpaved lot. She handed the boy $25 and an umbrella. He took both and said "thank you" *like a man*, she thought.

"Old like a new, new like an old, woman and man, child o' the time." The radio sang in between news bulletins, yet the louder lyrics were hers, *child o' the time*, Dan's phrase for her and her alone. She dallied over that little homespun ditty of Dan's, what he liked to strum on the guitar left for their son. She locked the door and idled the vehicle, *too many newcomers up to oldgoners' ways*; in her memory no one locked home, store, or church. The radio news ended. She didn't like the new pop song and switched off the noise box.

Eight billion beings buying buying buying time time money and life alone, humans, earthlings lived, bodies buried, monies earned, souls surfacing to arise again. Solo.

The mother worked at the county's main mortuary, founded in 1953. She couldn't count how many funerals having attended. Her own mother did not like telling folks her sole daughter worked at all, much less at a funeral parlor. "A *beauty* parlor for my only girl would be heartbreak enough for mother me, but to work *with bodies?* Gracious God Goodie, no lady ought deign! Not just the hairs, but whole specimens of bodies, *that of them you touch?* Honey, do please tell people, please, but *only after they ask*, *only after they inquire please*, that you *attend funerals*, dear, as a social grace and community favor, don't you dare say that you *work* there, darlin', you sound low-class enough for me and for our ol' family. Hun-- look at me when I speak, frankly you as my child know better. We must try even and utmost when we don't rightly much feel much like tryin' at-all."

The young mother tried to read her watch in the lack of light. Eastern Daylight Time over. Joseph always adjusted, never she. The young boy learned early to improvise over most credentials life bestowing, that lesson of making do, trying, not often enough learned from a book or parent. Joseph graduated from Dan. She flicked the wipers back on, trees of leaves still stuck. Without that failure, she pushed hard to open the creaky car door.

"Goddamn drivers, too much traffic these days 'round here, all these damned potholes of shit and muck, damn," a tall man said. "Oh, excuse me, ma'am--"

He almost dropped his neck-high stack of takeout containers as the mother spoke, "I should've looked before I opened the do--"

"No ma'am, I the one at fault, Mama didn't raise but one hellion in her house, and he in Good Lord's prison for good," the man joked in all seriousness about his family tree, that wayward branch.

"I believe your brother died last month," the woman said. "Passed, I should say. I'm so sorry for your loss, sir, that of yours and of your family's."

"Do I rightly know you, ma'am? What with the early dark these days since time change, I just can't directly see what I once did as a young man, ma'am, please excuse my current state of weakened eye, I beg of you, miss." (Not prone to sarcasm, he always cut courtly his tongue but practiced of place and decent era, unlike the decedent, a brotherly problem, may he rest in peace.)

"I work," the woman caught herself, "Helen, I'm Helen. I help out at Mr. J.W.'s in town. I believe we handled your brother's, um, affairs the other month, so sorry again for your loss, Mr. Johnston. I did not mean to bring it up again, such memories, I'm sor--"

"Ma'am, *you say Helen?*, I still can't directly see to whom I'm directly talkin' to in this dratted dimness of day, and I reckon I'm too dang scared to come a mite closer what with all these many trays piled, my sorry leg, and them damned full-up pot holes. No man don't know what he might step into next with all the change afoot, but don't you go and tattle 'bout this rain in town, or else they gonna start again hollerin' once more fool global warmin' yawp on and on and on, you tell ol' J.W. to keep ass away from me, I ain't ready to see the Good Lord just yet myself. Got stuff to do, I do I do before I die, and my ass be the last of me, he wanna see me runnin' away?" He aired his smoky wheeze. "Please excuse me, my tobacco tongue in dark, ma'am, Mama's home hungry and ornery, and well I'm right tardy myself because of this tropicanonsense and that god-mad traffic out there. I must be on my way or indebted worse than that brother, come mortal home and will have earth's hell to pay--"

"Mama!" the boy yelled from the restaurant's porch. "They out of chicken, said Mr. Johnston took all the good stuff, oh hey Mr. Johnston, I didn't mean to--"

The poor-sighted man had already handed two gracious containers of chicken, vegetable, rice, roll, and cobbler to the boy's mother, who was slamming closed the car's trunk by then.

"It's aight, boy," Mr. Johnston said. "You and yo mama gonna be aight."

He motioned for Joseph to come down off the slick steps with care.

"Got the $25 right here, Mama, I didn't spend a penny of it! We're all right 'til next week now."

Joseph waved the three bills in the damp air.

"Thank you, Mr. Johnston," Helen said, but the man gone, already driven off in his rusted truck and bouncing in and out of potholes back to the main road. She could hear his cussing through the pickup's rattle of aged metal and cracked glass, complaints of knee and fear of wife and other stuff to do before another wind might drip.

Drops began falling once more. Helen called for Joseph, too slow on the steps, to hurry. Doors locked again, they turned back onto the watery highway. A culvert under the road clogged due to the sudden rain filling lowcountry lowlands with nowhere to run, all rivers toward the Atlantic already at floodmark due to the quarter's current full moon, though that unseemly star unseen through the sudden rush of more cloud. “A light!” Helen said. Miracle of tax dollars upon timely work, a sheriff's deputy on her customary evening patrol stopped to close one lane to traffic. She marked the scene with flashing lights and orange reflector cones. Anxious drivers actually behaved; no one sounded not one vehicular horn on their commute home; mostly calm echoed through the rural sprawl of modern life. The leisurely Sun Belt inappropriately named at this crowded, quiet, blackened tok. Helen recognized the deputy from an accident they worked last week when the county coroner needed backup, her long blonde locks and shiny badge acting as extra flashers in the milky purlieus.

“Mama, you think we have too many people?” Joseph said.

She listened this go-round.

“Where?”

“On planet Earth. Miss Jane says we should talk about important things every day with our parents -- or parent.” She fought the desire to reach for his head at the boy's self-corrected speech. “It shall make us better stupils, she says.”

“Pupils,” the mother said and wanted to hug, but driving.

She hid her chuckle, but not her breaking heart.

“Yes ma'am,” her son said. “I love you, Mama.”

As they turned into the yard, Helen wanted to count his hairs, every single one of the boy's, as she used to do his father's own every night as he fell asleep in her arms, but both of her hands lasted, glued to the wheel in the moment of thought. She blamed the polluted air's familiar humidity and the sticky plastic residue covering all contrivances of convenience in the cheaper cars, such as theirs, all hauled in at the big-city port down river. Helen didn't see young Joseph staring at her old worried tears in the shadow of longer night. Switching off the tired engine and headlights, she surmised the downed power line sousing solo from the tanked trailer home, and she sighed, settling on counting the dry stars above, which she could now see in the cleared-again dank sky. It would be a cooler, wet night without cloud cover, she knew, but with *billions watching over them?*, she hoped they both might sleep better for first in a long memory, the threat of latest hurricane newly cured.

“That Mr. Johnston's a real gentleman,” Joseph said, touching his mother's tattooed bare arm and signaling soggy food. “I'm so hungry, Mama, how about you, Mama? Peach cobbler in cold weather with milk, don't that sound perfect, Mama?”

“Yes, Joseph, even if the power's still out when we sit down at table.”

“Candles,” the son said with light in his paired eye. “We have those two Santa candles Daddy bought last Christmas, and I know where they are, Mama, I know where they are with my eyes closed day or night.”

GOOD PEOPLE

Pat Jameson

An hour to close and as always, everybody's desperate to make themselves heard. Crowding close to the bar, asking me all sorts of questions. Tonight was this skeevy guy who looked like Johnny Depp in Fear & Loathing. Hawaiian shirt. Slicked back hair and big fake-looking teeth. He leaned on the polished wood and told me about his club out on the edge of the highway.

"Rico's, over in Painesville?"

"Oh yeah. I know it. Nice joint."

I'd never heard of the place.

"I appreciate that."

Removing the glasses from the drying rack, I rimmed them with a dishcloth, keeping one eye on the clock. In this job, you learn how to give subtle hints without being rude. Still, he lingered.

"And I guess you're Rico?"

"The one and only."

"Nice to meet you, Rico. I'm Paul. How about a shot?"

"Sounds like a good idea, Paul."

I poured him a double. He shot it and smacked his lips. Slid me a 20. No change.

"Hey, just curious– are there any cabs running tonight?'

"One or two, maybe. You never know."

"Well, anyone offering, tell them to hit me up. The lady and I had a bit too much already and– ha!– I think it's only gonna get worse."

I said I'd do that. Then I poured him another drink. Whiskey with a splash of water, hoping to end the conversation. "On the house."

"Hey! Thanks a lot, friend." He lifted his glass and departed.

I bent down to pull a fresh rack from beneath the bar. When I stood, Marty was there.

"You talking to Rico?"

I nodded.

"You see his girl? The one in the jean shorts?"

I looked down the length of the bar. In a booth near the pool tables, Rico sat with a bottle-dyed blonde– late 30s, crop top, bad tattoos. As a roadside tavern catering to the desperate and downtrodden, we served her type often. I'd seen many like her and expected to see many more yet.

"She went to school with my buddy. You know what they used to call her?"

"The goddess of beauty and love??"

"Nasty Ass." He smiled and raised his arms like a prizefighter. "That was her nickname. She would do anything with anybody."

I sighed. "Are you going to order something Marty? Or just fuck with me all night?"

"Give me a beer."

I gave it to him. He drank it.

"You know why you never get any tips, Paul?"

"No clue."

"You think you're better than everyone else. Just because you were in that lame-ass band and got out of here for a while."

"Is that right?"

"Sure is. You don't even play music anymore. You're just a bartender. You serve the drinks and you judge."

"And what do you do?"

He laughed. "That's easy– I drink."

"You finished?"

"Think about it." He grinned and rapped his knuckles on the bar. "These are good people."

"Alright, man."

He moved off. Back in high school, Marty was barely tolerable, the type of guy who ate earthworms and got kicked out of health class for farting. Now, he sold coke by the dumpsters and tipped badly. The whole place was full of shitheads but he was the worst of them.

"Hey," I said to Gwen, the other bartender. "Cover me for a sec?"

We had one of those bathrooms with the long troughs at knee level. I liked to piss in them whenever I needed a break. It helped me pretend that I was at a sporting event or concert, anywhere but here. The door swung open and I heard footsteps. Rico sidled up next to me, unzipped. Silence. Heavy breathing. Piss.

"Ever notice it sounds weird if you whizz in one place for too long?"

I shook my head. "Can't say I have."

"No? Well, listen."

I listened. His pee splashed and then splashed deeper. The sounds became convex and rotund. He was right. It was more like a bass drum than a snare.

"See?" He asked, grinning. Even in the gloom, I could see his artificially whitened teeth. They were like those stars stuck to your ceiling as a kid– Mom and Dad conjuring up galaxies for 50 cents a piece.

"Yeah," I said. "I see."

***

Quarter till we made the proclamation. Lights on. Everyone out. I let Gwen go early, swept the coins and dust from the floor, loaded the remaining dishes for the morning crew.

After I finished locking up, there were still a few hangers-on in the parking lot. The beatdowns, the bad drunks. Good people, as Marty said. I was thinking of bed when Rico came up out of the darkness, his girl– Nasty Ass– hanging onto his arm, both of them totally wasted.

"No luck on the ride then?" I asked.

"Nothing." He held up his hands. "Any chance you can give us a lift?"

"I don't really drive people home, man."

"I'll pay. It's just to Andover. By the lake."

"Hmm."

His girl spoke for the first time. "We'd really appreciate it."

I looked at her. She smiled, shivering in her barely-there t-shirt. I couldn't believe she didn't have a jacket. Even for late October, it was cold out. And it might be hours until a cab came, if it did at all. I thought about it. Andover wasn't far. This time of night the road would be empty. And I could use the money.

"I'll pay you $100," Rico said. "Shit, we'll tip you. Call it $150 for your trouble."

Rico's girl rubbed his arm. "That's right baby, you're a good tipper, aren't you?"

"I am, baby. Certainly. "

"Let me see the money."

Rico opened his wallet. Greenbacks and a single condom, golden wrapped, the size of a bullet hole. "What do you say?"

"Sure," I said. "I guess I could do that."

***

We drove down long country roads. Past fields and farmhouses and grain silos dripping with moonlight. In the backseat, Rico and his girl sat nearly on top of one another; necking against a fogged-up window. I cranked the radio and tried not to watch. It reminded me of times touring on the road, back when people were eager to sit on my lap and hear what I had to say.

After a few minutes, we pulled off the main stretch and down a narrow lane surrounded by row homes and split levels. We must have been close because Rico disentangled himself long enough to give directions.

"This way. Yeah, the next right. Just a little further. Okay, we're here."

We'd arrived at a trailer, big and long; huddled against a thicket of shaded trees. Beyond the yard, the world seemed to vanish, cease completely. I knew the lake must be somewhere close by, swaying back and forth in the darkness.

"Well," I said. "Nice meeting you guys."

"You too!" Rico's girl said, squeezing my shoulder. Rico pressed a roll of wadded-up bills into my palm. "Great driving bud," he said.

We shook hands and they climbed out. I started to reverse when Rico's knuckles rapped on my window. He motioned for me to roll it down.

"Yeah?"

"Say- why don't you come in for a drink."

"Nah, it's late."

"You drove us all this way. Just one drink. Least we can do."

I thought about it. This time of night the only place I could go was my apartment. And what was there? My cat. An empty bed. The guitar which I hadn't picked up in almost a year. Since moving back, I hadn't done anything but go to work, come home, and drink beer. I thought about what Marty said- you think you're better than us.

"Sure," I said. "Just one drink."

***

The inside was what you'd imagine. Cramped, poorly lit, and dirty. Every surface had something on it. Beer bottles. Soiled dishes. A stack of porno mags the size of a Jenga tower. We moved into the living room/kitchen and I grabbed a seat at the table while Rico fixed us a drink. His woman retreated behind a pile of beads in the rear of the trailer, claiming she needed to change into something "more comfortable."

Rico plopped a fifth of whiskey onto the table. He unscrewed the cap and poured us each a shot.

"Cheers."

We raised the shots and drank them. Rico leaned in close. "Say– Marty told me you used to play in a band."

"Yeah, I did."

"Were you any good?"

"I was okay. We played some decent shows. Opened for a couple of big acts."

"Anyone I'd know?"

I listed some bands and watched his face for recognition. When I got to the famous ones, he nodded, seemingly impressed.

"That sounds like a good gig. Why'd you break up?"

I thought about this. "It was time. That's about all I can figure."

"Damn." He shook his head. "And now you're back here."

"Now I'm back here," I said. "Right where I started."

"I'll drink to that."

He poured us another round and we clinked glasses. Threw 'em back.

"Fuck." He grimaced. "Allison sings, you know."

"Allison?"

"My girl, man, Allison."

"Oh, right."

As if summoned, Allison X Nasty Ass sashayed into the room. She was wearing an Ohio State jersey, number 11. The jersey had been cropped short, revealing a pair of bruised legs the color of tangerines.

Rico whistled. "Hey, baby!"

"Yeah?"

"Give us a song. Will you?"

"Sure, baby."

She held out her hands and we helped her step first onto the seat cushions and then the table. Barefoot and wobbly, her head nearly touched the ceiling. We had a good view of her up there, hovering over us.

"Any requests?"

"Whatever you feel like," Rico said. "Something soulful."

Allison scrolled through her phone until she found what she was looking for. She pressed play and music crackled through a small Bluetooth speaker. Smiling, she took a deep breath and began to sing along. I recognized the lyrics. Rico was getting what he wanted. The song was as soulful as they come.

Rico elbowed me. "She's good right?"

"Oh yeah. Real good."

He licked his lips. Then he leaned forward and began to speak, low and urgent. What he said to me was something I had maybe guessed at, but hadn't fully understood until just that moment.

“Is that something you’re interested in?”

I sipped my beer but didn’t respond.

“I’ll watch.” He whispered. “That’s all.”

“Okay.”

“I would do it myself but I have an injury. From the war.”

“The war?”

“Got shot in my package.” He said, tapping the crotch of his jeans. “Now it only works like, half the time.”

I nodded. I closed my eyes and listened to Allison sing. She had a nice voice. High and clear. Damn good, actually. It was the kind of voice that would get you noticed, starting from elementary school, bible camp, and high school, starring in all the plays. Maybe she’d even made it to the city and auditioned for a musical or band, felt like she was finally hitting the big time. But somewhere along the way, I figured, someone had gotten ahold of her. They’d told her that she wasn’t good enough and it had led her back here, to this town and Rico. I saw it as clear as anything– all the hope and disappointment and ruin. It made me sad… so damn sad, and I knew I could never do what Rico wanted.

Allison finished her song and we clapped. She took a bow and fell into Rico’s lap. They kissed again, long and deep. I took another pull from the bottle. I was feeling pretty drunk.

“So,” Rico said. “What do you think?”

“You were right. She’s very good.”

“I mean– what we talked about?”

“Oh.”

“Allison thinks you’re cute, don’t you baby?”

“I do, baby.” She winked. “Super cute.”

I looked at them. They looked back at me.

“Rain check,” I said.

It was a beautiful night, that much was true. The earth and sky were in complete synchronicity, neither giving nor taking too much from the other. Sometimes that happened out here on the edges of the world; equilibrium. Total balance. As I drove toward town, I couldn’t help but marvel at the expansiveness of it. All those darkened houses and fields; underlit and brooding. The lights and the stars and whatever. They looked wonderful. They looked good. They looked like the things that would save us all.

WAY TOO LONG

Mark Rogers

You've seen him. There are millions like him. Men with no game. Truth is, Phil—the man behind the wheel of a bright-blue Sentra—would be hard put to define what game is. He'd manage some kind of reply—maybe something about pickup lines:

I can't tell if that was an earthquake or if you just seriously rocked my world.

Well, here I am. What are your other two wishes?

Hi, I'm Phil. Do you remember me? Oh, that's right—we've only met in my dreams.

But he's never—until today—managed to turn a pickup line into speech.

Phil's driven across the border, from San Diego to Tijuana, carefully following the directions on his GPS. Even then, more than once he's caught up in Tijuana's bewildering traffic circles and shot out in the wrong direction. But it's daylight on a Tuesday afternoon and traffic is mercifully light. By pinballing back and forth he finally finds Zona Norte, the city's red-light district. He drives slowly down a side street off Revolucíon Blvd and pulls into a narrow parking lot overseen by a burly man in a dirty T-shirt with a hole showing the hairy flesh of his belly.

Phil gets out of his car and the man says, "Five dollars all night."

Phil looks over his shoulder at the street, at the general grime and grubbiness. At the Mexicans looking back at him looking. Looks at cars passing by blasting banda music from open windows. Looks at his feet, at a crushed plastic bottle of Sprite, flattened by tires. He wonders if his car will be safe.

Phil says, "What about one hour?"

The man smiles, "Same price."

The man holds out his hand. "Pay now."

***

This isn't Phil's first time across the border. He's been once before, the summer after graduating high school—20 years ago—venturing down to TJ with two friends. They hung close to the tourist scene on Revolucíon; drinking Coronas, eating bad burritos, and buying Zapata T-shirts. They felt bold, even though they explored the city like children, if children drank lousy beer.

This time Phil walks alone, aware that he's the only gringo on the street. Carolina's is less than a block away. There are lots of nightclubs to choose from. Some are dark and dangerous; some are lit up like Vegas. But Phil has heard stories about Carolina's since he was a kid. He's done his research. If he doesn't act like an asshole, chances are nothing bad will happen.

In the afternoon sunlight, street whores lean against the wall. Some give Phil the eye. Others look away. Most are short with too much makeup. Phil thinks every one of them is pretty in her own way.

It's weird. Women leaning on the wall like they were bicycles. They'd shut this down in a minute in San Diego.

Then he's standing outside of Carolina's. The blue-uniformed security guard catches his eye and waves him forward.

The club is dark inside, but it's the darkness of outside sunshine. An alternate reality. Like walking between parenthesis.

Where did all these people come from?

The club is crowded—a ratio of one woman for every man. The women sit at tables with customers or walk up and down or sit at the bar. A handful of the women dance to reggaeton on the catwalk. They wear spandex, bustiers, thong bikinis, lots of see-through fabric. Some of the women are grotesque, with fake breasts and fake asses. Others are truly beautiful. Beyond those, there's another level of women—those who transcend physical beauty—those who smile for real. Maybe their breasts are tiny or sag from birthing children. Some have bags under their eyes or chipped fingernails. They're real, and the job of fucking strangers must be especially hard on them.

Phil stands in one spot, taking it all in, until a waiter appears before him, gesturing to an empty booth. Phil follows the waiter and takes a seat.

The waiter, a slim guy in white shirt and black slacks, says in English, "What can I bring you?"

"A beer?"

"Sol?"

Phil nods and the waiter hurries off.

The reggaeton blasts its four-four kick drum rhythm. The naked dancers bend forward from the waist and shake their asses like they're being mounted from behind. There's a smell in the air that mingles sweat, sugar, and way too many competing perfumes. The smell's thick enough to kill a bug.

The bottle of beer comes and Phil pays with a ten. He waits for change and the waiter pockets the bill, smiles, "Compa. I'll take good care of you."

Phil takes a sip of his Sol. The beer's not all that cold but no one's here to drink beer.

The guys would really bust my balls if they knew how long it's been since I've been laid. I don't even want to think about it. Can a cock get smaller if it's not used? The way muscles shrink when you don't work out? Motherfucker!

A woman with black hair in a long braid and with a full-sleeve tattoo on her left arm pauses by Phil's table. She cocks her head to one side and peers at him, waiting. Phil is a beat too slow and the woman shakes her head and walks away.

What does she see?

Phil looks down at his beige Dockers, his slight belly, the cuffs of his pin-striped shirt.

Dude. You're fuckin' dressed for the mall.

He looks up and sees a second woman standing by his table. Like most of the whores in the club, she has long glossy black hair. But hers has a white stripe down one side. She's dressed in a onesie made of pink flannel, with the zipper down to her navel. White high heels and a silver belt complete her look.

Go!

Phil reaches out and takes her hand. Draws her toward him. "Feel my shirt," he says. "Know what it's made of? Boyfriend material."

Luckily, the woman knows enough English to at least respond with a vague smile. She says, "Can I sit down?"

Phil lets go of her hand. Instead of sitting across from him in the booth, the woman pushes in beside him. The pressure of her thigh makes Phil's skin hum and vibrate.

It's been so long. Way too long.

The waiter appears and of course Phil agrees to buy her a drink. Her beer is nine dollars—almost three times the cost of Phil's. He carefully counts a five and four singles into the waiter's hand. The waiter frowns and walks away.

The woman looks to be the same age as Phil, maybe a few years younger. Peer below the heavy makeup and her features are pleasant enough. Her nails are elaborate; tricked out with glue-on rhinestones over aqua blue polish. When she leans forward her onesie opens and Phil sees the underswell of one breast, which looks real, with even a trio of stretch marks.

She asks, "What is your name?"

"Phil."

"Mercedes."

"Really?"

She smiles. "My name here."

Phil tries a joke. "Can a Mercedes find happiness with a Volkswagen?"

She gives a soft laugh. "Sure. Why not?"

I'm doing this.

They talk. Just bursts of words, since the music is loud. Phil's research on the internet gave him the drill. She'll ask for a hundred to go to the hotel next door for 30 minutes. He'll bargain her down to eighty—it's expected. He'll pay $15 for the room and tip the towel girl. Then he and Mercedes will do it.

Which is what they did.

Afterward out on the sidewalk, Phil touches Mercedes on the arm. "What days do you work?"

"Tuesdays and Fridays."

"During the day?"

"Until five. My girl."

Phil digs his phone out of his pocket. Thumbs it on. 4:51. "I'm the last of the day for you?"

Mercedes nods.

***

It's been a long time since Phil has had a woman sitting in the front seat of his Sentra. His mother and sister don't count.

Mercedes has changed out of her onesie and heels and now wears a Xolos T-shirt and jeans. She gives him directions and in a moment they're out on a highway—the Via Rapida—speeding toward brown hills. Mercedes sits silent as Phil maneuvers past potholes and deep gouges in the asphalt. His fellow drivers seem to think lanes are only suggestions, and hardly anyone uses their signals. The journey is so perilous Phil can't organize his thoughts. He finally manages to say, "I have a good job."

Mercedes considers this, then asks, "What's your job?"

"I work at Amazon, in San Diego. I'm a Fulfillment Center Associate."

"That's a big company," says Mercedes. "They even have an Amazon down here."

Phil nods. "Huge. And it never stops. If I can keep up, I'll be set for life."

Set for life. A concept not many Mexicans consider. Mercedes looks at Phil. His receding hairline. His skin a shade too white. The brown freckles on the backs of his hands. Set for life. Imagine.

***

They exit onto a surface street, past a swirl of tire shops, taquerias, beauty salons, and laundromats. Phil crawls along the narrow street, past double-parked cars and people crossing the street every which way.

Mercedes points, "Stop there."

Phil pulls into one of the four parking spaces in front of an OXXOS, a convenience store—Mexico's version of a 7-Eleven.

"Here?" asks Phil.

"I don't live here. I'll walk the rest of the way."

This makes sense to Phil. Even though he was into her hip-deep an hour ago, it's not like they know each other. And she says she has a kid.

Her fingers tap Phil on the arm. "Thank you for the ride."

"Wait," says Phil.

Mercedes waits.

"What's your real name," asks Phil, "if it's not Mercedes?"

The woman thinks about this for a long moment, then says. "Valeria."

Phil nods. "I like that name?"

"My grandmother's middle name."

Both pause as a huge and noisy water truck rumbles past.

Phil says, "Can I see you again?"

Mercedes shakes her head at this—not in the negative—more like: Is this guy for real?

She gets out of the car and Phil watches her walk away.

***

The next day at the Amazon warehouse in National City, one of his co-workers, a Black woman named Reese, says, "What's got into you, boy? You on Adderall or something? You've changed."

Phil hears a variation of this comment throughout his ten-hour graveyard shift:

"You're making me look bad. Slow down."

"Phil. You are fire."

"You hear about some kind of bonus or something?"

Phil smiles, says nothing. But he's thinking:

You see, I'm not alone. I've got somebody. It's like a crossword puzzle. I've got the whole thing filled in. Across. Down. It's like I did it in ink, motherfucker!

Friday rolls around and one of his managers takes him aside. "Got my eye on you. Not just me, either. Keep it up and good things could happen."

***

The Friday afternoon crowd in Carolina's is drinking hard, talking loud. Phil shoulders his way to a booth that is just emptying. Compared to his first visit, there must be three times as many customers, three times as many girls. In seconds a waiter takes his order for a beer.

Gone are the beige pants and pinstriped dress shirt. Phil has set his wallet free and bought new Levis, brown cowboy boots, and a purple T-shirt. When he put it on before leaving for the night, his mother had said, "Purple. Isn't that a gay color?"

"Only if you're gay, mom."

He waves away five girls before Mercedes—Valeria—finally comes over. Today, she's wearing a tight-fitting black dress with lacing up the sides. Soft flesh bulges through the openings in the dress. She looks tired but manages a smile.

She says, "I didn't know if I would see you again."

"Really?"

"Most men pick different girls. No one wants to repeat the same ride at Disneyland."

"Maybe those guys have a wife or girlfriend at home."

"You don't?"

Phil shakes his head and pats the booth's seat.

Valeria scoots in next to Phil. This time she puts her hand on his thigh.

"I got an idea," says Phil. "Let's skip buying you a beer. Instead of paying eighty up in the room, I'll give you ninety. This will put the money in your pocket."

***

This time around, they're done and back in the bar by 3:45, too early for Valeria to leave. Every booth is taken so Phil stands with his back to the wall, engulfed in the loud music—American hip-hop at this moment.

Valeria had surprised him up in the hotel room.

She kissed me. I didn't think they kissed. I thought that was like off-limits or something.

Across the room, he sees Valeria stand by a booth where three young men sit. Phil can't make out their words, but it's clear what's happening. One man holds her hand and does most of the talking. The eyes of the other two dart around the room, looking for a woman of their own.

The man stands up and he and Valeria walk toward the door. They pass Phil—inches away. Valeria is careful not to make eye contact. Phil watches them go out the door.

I'm an idiot. I should have bought the rest of her time. I have the money. I'm a fuckin' idiot.

***

The Via Rapida highway is less daunting this second time. Phil glances in the rear view.

Once you find a rhythm there's a kind of logic to the craziness.

Valeria sits quietly, staring out the window.

Phil says, "How old is your girl?"

"She's eight. Solana"

"It's just you and Solana?"

"My mom, too. Dad disappeared a long time ago."

Phil takes the exit off the highway.

"Tell you what," he says. "How about I take all three of you out for something to eat?"

***

The roadside taqueria has a blue tarpaulin shading a scattering of red plastic tables and chairs. The four of them settle into a table out of the path of smoke from a huge skewer of meat—orange in color, dripping grease.

Solana is a cute little kid, dressed in a white T-shirt decorated with a cartoon honeybee. Valeria's mom, Estrella, is even slimmer than her daughter. She wears a gray hoodie with the hood down around her shoulders. The expression on Estrella's face flickers between distracted smile and uncomfortable frown.

Valeria orders for all of them; plates of carne al pastor and refried beans, purple juice made from hibiscus, and a plastic basket of warm tortillas. She passes Phil the squeeze container of hot sauce. "Not too much," she says. "They make it themselves."

Phil assembles a taco. Takes a bite. Give an approving nod.

I would have easily blown for a restaurant meal—this whole thing is going to cost me ten or 12 bucks at the most.

"Friday nights are my favorites," says Valeria. "No more school for Solana, and I don't have to go back to work until Tuesday."

Phil speaks to Solana in Spanish: "What's your favorite subject in school?"

Valeria's eyes go wide—Phil has never spoken Spanish in front of her.

"I like math," says Solana.

"Math is smart," says Phil.

Valeria gives Phil an approving nod. "Your Spanish is pretty good."

Phil dabs at his lips with a napkin and continues speaking in Spanish. "I grew up in San Diego. My dad had a party store. I think every second customer was a Mexican, so I had to learn."

Valeria says, "Party store, huh?"

"Not anymore," says Phil.

Solana says, "My birthday party is this Sunday."

A silence hangs in the air.

Valeria and Estrella share a glance, and Valeria says to Phil, "You should come."

***

Phil glances at the gift bag on the passenger seat of the Sentra. Solana's gift was chosen by Phil's mother: a paint set from Walmart: brushes, colors, and a pad of watercolor paper.

The Sunday morning sky is overcast as Phil parks across the street from Valeria's house, which is painted yellow, with clay pots of flowers out front and a stack of cinderblocks in a corner of the front yard.

He had seen the outside of Valeria's small casita when he dropped the three of them off on Friday, after the meal at the taqueria. He'd heard barking from inside the house but never saw the dog. When it was clear he wasn't going to be invited in he bumped fists with Valeria and drove off.

As Phil pauses at the door, he hears music and loud voices and a couple of kids yelping like they're chasing each other. He knocks and Estrella opens the door.

"Hola," says Phil.

Estrella smiles as Phil hands her the gift bag.

The one-story house is small, with a living room leading into a kitchen and then down a hallway to a tiny backyard. Phil takes it all in at a glance. The kids are in constant motion—except for the ones peering into phones or tablets. Women cluster in the kitchen, talking and laughing. Men sit outside in the back. Phil is surprised to see that some of them wear white cowboy hats.

Valeria comes forward, dressed like a mother, in gray leggings and a long sweater striped blue and yellow. A chihuahua follows closely behind.

"You actually came," says Valeria, in English.

Phil doesn't know what to say.

Of course I came.

She leads him to the backyard, which isn't actually a yard since it's a concrete floor surrounded by eight-foot cinderblock walls.

Valeria says, "You want a beer?"

Phil nods and she reaches into a cooler and hands him a red can of Tecate. In the corner of the yard an elderly Mexican grills strips of meat.

"Soon we'll have carne asada," says Valeria.

A woman's voice hollers from the kitchen, "Valeria! Te necesitamos!"

Valeria grins at Phil and heads off. Phil takes a pull at his can of beer and looks around. The other men smile at him and one of them says in English, "The early bird gets the worm."

The others laugh.

They think I'm stupid. I know what they call whites. Gusanos. Worms.

Phil nods, lifts his beer. "Cheers."

The men all take a drink and exchange glances. Phil sees a welcome in some eyes, and an annoyance in others, as

though they're put out by the vibe changing with a gringo hanging around.

One of the men says, "Habla Espanol?"

Phil decides not to answer, and instead takes a sip of beer.

The man who spoke first says to the others, in Spanish, "He's in the flow. The money is going to flow out of his pocket. You know where he must have met her?"

There's a pause. Every single one of them knows the line they are treading: *The dumb gringo doesn't understand a word we say. Right?*

Phil remains silent and an older man—one of the men wearing a white cowboy hat—says in Spanish, "I see his future. Thank God for men like him. They pay and pay and pay. They make it easier for all of us."

A man dressed in a purple guayabera says, "He must be desperate, hunting for love in Carolina's."

"Valeria will be wearing brands," says one.

"Here comes the iPhone," says another.

Phil says in Spanish, "And iPhones are a big deal?"

The men stop—freeze—as though they've taken that first step into quicksand. As though the ground beneath their feet has betrayed him.

There's an empty white plastic chair among the men.

Phil sits down, looks from side to side. Where the next utterance comes from he doesn't know. He kills his can of beer and says, "When does a man get a real drink?"

***

It doesn't matter that I'm hungover—it was a good night.

Phil shifts his body on the narrow couch in the casita's living room. The tequila had flowed. First mixed with Squirt, and then later, straight shots. Phil's not a drinker and so has little experience with the mind-bending qualities of tequila—the spirit's ability to alter consciousness in ways rum, whiskey, and vodka fail to do.

It would be a lie to say that Phil was accepted into the Mexican brotherhood. But by the end of the night, he was tolerated by the men and even liked by a few of them.

He sweeps the thin blanket off his body—the one Valeria had covered him with. He pushes himself to a sitting position, feeling queasy. As bad as he feels, he also feels good. He's in Valeria's house. She took care of him. This was better than a date.

A door creaks open and Valeria appears in a robe. She smiles at Phil. He likes seeing her with no makeup and her hair tousled.

She says, "The men were mean to you, huh?"

"In the beginning," says Phil, rising to his feet. "It all worked out."

"We don't really drink coffee. I have some Nescafe."

"Don't bother. I should go. I've got work later."

"Come with me." Valeria takes him by the hand and pulls him toward the hallway to her bedroom. "I have just the thing for a hangover."

"Oh yeah?"

Valeria looks over her shoulder and smiles. "Whore's secret."

Phil tugs lightly on her hand as they enter the bedroom. "You're not a whore."

***

Phil's mother sits at the dining room table. Mercifully, she's held out voicing her opinion until Phil showered, shaved, and changed.

She looks up at Phil. "You worried the shit out of me."

He gets a bottle of water out of the fridge and sits across from his mom. Takes a glug. "Maybe I should have called."

"You look like your father, the way he used to drink. Droopy."

Phil's mother is a rectangular-shaped person, with hair dyed auburn. She wears a gray University of San Diego sweatshirt and khaki cargo shorts. Yellow-and-white daisy flower earrings are her only concession to presenting as feminine.

Phil says, "I met a girl. A woman."

His mom lets this sink in. Her boy doesn't date. How has he made such a big change right under her nose? 38 years old. What a gift it would be, to have a grandchild.

***

Thursday morning, when Phil finishes his graveyard shift at the warehouse, he's called into his manager's office.

During the week, Phil has gone to a hair stylist instead of his usual barber. His hair is cut in the buzz cut fade style, giving him a sleek and even sexy appearance. Instead of shopping for clothes at Target, he's driven to the Tommy Hilfiger outlet store and bought himself a new wardrobe—understated but classy. The excess weight hasn't fallen off his frame, but his muscles are more evident from the calisthenics he's been doing each morning. His shoulders are squared and his gait has picked up.

His manager—Terri—a woman not much older than him—motions toward an empty chair.

Phil sits down.

"Before we get started," says Terri, "I want to tell you how impressed we are. We being management. We've noticed a new, take-charge attitude."

Phil nods, waits.

"It hasn't been announced," says Terri, "but everyone's talking about it. The fifth warehouse we're building in San Diego County, in Encinitas."

"I've heard something about it," says Phil.

"There's going to be a demand for experienced management."

Phil sits up a little straighter.

"When it makes sense we prefer to promote from within," says Terri. "And in your case, it makes sense."

***

The Friday afternoon traffic across the border to Mexico is thick with Mexican-Americans. They're fleeing California for a weekend with family and friends. Phil is right in there with them. He checks the time on his phone: 3:35.

Will I make it before she's done? No chance of calling Valeria.

The women in Carolina's put their phones in a lockbox when they work. Otherwise, they'd be checking their messages and scrolling through TikTok instead of hustling drinks and fucking the patrons.

Phil finally makes the crossing and finesses the turn for TJ's Zona Norte.

Shift Manager Jr. No more hourly wage. I got a salary, dude. 46K. Time to make a move.

***

It's 5:20 when he makes the turn off Revolucíon Blvd.

Peering ahead, he sees Valeria in front of Carolina's, her phone in her hand.

Phil's phone buzzes from where he keeps it in the Sentra's cupholder. He picks up and hears Valeria asking, "Are you coming?"

"Look down the street."

Valeria smiles when she sees the Sentra. He pulls over to the curb and she climbs in.

"I don't like waiting here," says Valeria. "The men stand in line to bother you."

Phil maneuvers into the flow of traffic.

"I have an idea," he says.

***

They sit at a roadside taqueria on the highway. Dust rises when eight-wheelers rumble by. It coats their shoes but thank God it doesn't rise enough to foul their plates with a dust composed of dirt, motor oil, and dead dogs.

"There's a couple of ways we can do this," says Phil.

Valeria waits, wondering what this gringo is going to say next.

"I can move into the house you have now," says Phil, " or all of us can move to a bigger house."

Valeria thinks about this for a moment, then says, "You came to a birthday party. Now you want to move in together?"

"We have more than that. We clicked right away, when I made that stupid joke about a Mercedes and a

Volkswagen. That was the beginning and we just clicked."

"Is that why you got that haircut? You're trying to convince me?"

"Everything's changing," says Phil. "I was promoted at work. I got a raise. We can do this."

"You're serious?"

"You'd have to leave Caroline's."

"That's the only money I make."

"We can work that out."

Valeria takes a sip of her Coke. Bites her lip. Finally, she says, "It would be stupid to leave the house. The mortgage is paid."

***

The move was a simple one. Space was made in a closet in Valeria's bedroom and Phil was given one of the bureau drawers. Phil bought two plastic containers from Home Depot that fit under the bed and it was there where he stored the rest of his belongings. Phil didn't read so there were no books. He didn't play video games so there was none of that clutter. Like most Millennials, Phil's life was stored on his phone and the cloud.

The first night was strange. Phil's mother called late in the evening when he and Valeria were already in bed. Phil had his hand on Valeria's bare breast as his mother asked how he was settling in. He held the phone up to Valeria's lips and she spoke a hesitant, "Hello…"

Phil's mom let out an audible sigh and said, "You sound sweet. Please—take care of my boy. He's a peach but he bruises easily."

When the call ended, Phil laughed, hauling himself over Valeria and saying, "I'll show you what a peach can do."

***

The deal wasn't a favorable one, but Phil made it anyway, trading his Nissan Sentra for a used Jeep Wrangler. The five-days-a-week border crossing from Mexico into the U.S. was a tedious affair, creeping along in a slow-moving queue of cars. The hour or more crossing was made more bearable in a Jeep. He drove with the top down and the slow progress gave him plenty of time to think.

I wonder if Mexico is the same as home. They say you should spend one month of your salary on an engagement ring. That sounds motherfucking crazy. I've got to ask around down here. See what Valeria is going to expect once I ask. She's got to say yes. I'm living in her house.

***

Three months go by and Phil still doesn't pop the question. Some days, everything's good. Valeria sings ranchera as she moves around the house. Phil plays with Solana, teaches her English words. They watch cartoons together—they both like Sonic. Valeria and her mother cook in the kitchen; Mexican meals better than anything the local restaurants serve. Phil is still on the graveyard shift, so they've taken to eating the big meal of the day in the late afternoon when Solana comes home from school. Then he's off to cross the border.

Valeria and he make love late mornings in bed and afterward she does her best to keep the house quiet so he can get some sleep. Even so, he's always a few hours short and it's catching up with him. Not making him into a grouch—dazed, if anything.

He finds he has skills as a manager. A talent for keeping people on track without coming off like a control freak. Nothing outright has been said, but there have been hints that he could be in line for another promotion.

At break, he looks at his phone and thinks about calling Valeria but never does.

It's fucking three in the morning. Let her sleep.

The first few weeks the house was tight; clean. Then day by day, it got grubbier and more disordered. Instead of complaining, Phil pitches in and does the dishes, folds laundry, sweeps the floor.

Be the change you want to see. That's what the meme said.

But nothing changes.

***

Five months in, he turns on his phone during break and sees the text from Valeria's mom:

Come home. Valeria in hospital.

***

Valeria's face is scraped along one cheek and her left eye is swollen shut and bruised purple and black. A strip of bandage crosses the bridge of her nose.

She lies back in the hospital bed. Her mother sits by her side and won't look at Phil. A nurse says in Spanish, "Only one at a time."

Valeria's mother gets up and leaves the room without a word.

Phil closes the door and then sits down. He reaches out and takes Valeria's hand in his.

For a long moment, they sit in silence. Phil knows and he doesn't know. He finally asks, "What happened?"

This would be the time a person would expect Valeria to squeeze his hand. But she doesn't. Her hand goes limp in his, as though made of something less than flesh.

She finally speaks. "It started two months ago. I don't know why. But I started going back to Carolina's. There was something there I needed. The money but something else. One of the men—I shouldn't have gone with him, but I did. Up in the room he started beating me. I don't know when he stopped. I was found by the towel girl. I got put in a taxi and brought here."

There are things full of air. They look like something when they're full and like nothing when they're empty. I can't breathe. There's no air in me. It's gone.

Valeria turned her broken face toward Phil. "I'm a whore."

Phil said nothing.

APPALACHIAN NIGHTMARE

JD Clapp

Gina took a tablet from her lace bra, placed it on the bathroom counter and crushed it with the bottom of a glass. She used the straw from her son's sippy cup to snort the small pile of oxy. Within seconds, the edge she felt for the past hour faded. Looking through the bathroom window she could see her parents standing in the cold talking. Plenty of time, she thought. She wiped the opioid reside with finger and licked it, then went back to the living room.

As she made her way to the couch where her son Rhett was napping, she avoided looking at her older sister's urn and photo sitting on the cabinet under the TV. Gina believed her mother put the little shrine up to remind Gina to stay clean, lest she OD like her older sister. The alter pissed her off every time she walked past. She loved her dead sister, but that bitch put them through hell at the end. When they investigated her death, Gina got caught holding. I ain't no junky! Gina had screamed when protective services began monitoring her for drug use.

Gina sat down on the couch, patted Rhett on the head, and smiled, thinking this boy was the best thing in my life. Her mother Tracy came in a few minutes later, a blast of cold air filling the tiny old farmhouse when she opened the door. "Your daddy said hi. He asked how your prenatal visit went," Tracy said. Gina nodded, knowing that her father really asked if she was using again.

"Did he say when he needed me at the cabin to cook for his hunters?" Gina asked, hoping to change the subject.

"He just said you were cooking for his camp again this year, so long as you're up to it with another little one comin'."

Gina cursed herself for letting them know she was knocked up. She'd been meaning to get to the clinic. I can barely afford the one I got, she reasoned.

Tracy went into the kitchen to get her cigarettes. She returned and handed Gina a smoke. "Can you watch Rhett tonight night? I need to get him boots for winter." Tracy took forty dollars from her purse and handed it to Gina.

"Let me buy my grandson his winter boots this year. Oh… and don't forget, that social worker is coming to check on us tomorrow," Tracy said.

"I didn't forget," Gina said with an edge as she took the money.

"Don't give me shit, Gina Marie. I love Rhett but I want to be his grandmama not his mama. And his daddy won't be coming home. You miss again and…"

"I won't miss it!" Gina said loudly, cutting her mother off.

***

Gina left just before dark, knowing if she came home late there would be questions. Once she passed through McArther, she sped toward her cousin Jason's doublewide. She had texted him twice, but he didn't reply. She worried he would be out spotlighting deer.

She knocked on Jason's door, hearing Ass Jack blaring through the Bose speakers he'd stolen from that new Airbnb cabin. She didn't wait for him to answer, and pushed her way in. Sitting shirtless on his worn plaid couch, his heavily tatted torso blending into the fabric like white trash camo, Jason blew out a thick cloud of skunky bong smoke. His exhaled smoke mingled with the haze already hanging in the dimly lit trailer, shrouding the dozens of poached taxidermized animal heads crammed into the room in a fog. He glared at Gina and shook his head. Gina walked to the speakers and turned the cowpunk down.

"That's right, you just make yourself at home and barge in. That's a good way to get yourself shot," he said. Jason got up and pulled on a sleeveless Hank III t-shirt.

"I'm sorry, cuz. I'm in a hurry. Tracy is up my ass and watching Rhett for me."

"I'm not holding oxy. I told you it's dry as fuck since them feds came in."

"Come on handsome, I just need enough to get through the weekend," Gina said, running her hand up his tatted biceps.

Jason shook his head, walked into the kitchen, grabbed two Natural Lights, then tossed one to Gina. I don't' have time for this, she thought. Knowing she'd have to play along to score, she opened the beer and took a big swig. Jason reached in the cookie jar and pulled out a small black balloon.

"It's Mexican brown or nothing. And it's $50. Tonight."

Gina took the money Tracy gave her from her jean's pocket, scrounged ten more dollars from her purse, and handed it to him.

"How much do I snort?" she asked.

From the cookie jar, Jason pulled a Ziplock baggy filled with brown powder and a couple cut straws. He dumped a small pile on the grungy counter, he took his Buck knife from its belt sheaf and using the spine, cut it into a line.

"You do about this much. And don't chase the high. Just use some when the edge comes. I'm serious. This shit hooks you fast," he said handing Gina a cut piece straw.

***

Gina looked at her phone after she pulled into the Walmart Parking lot—7:50 p.m. Shit! I've been gone over two hours already, she thought. Despite her time crunch, she took another bump.

Halfway to the main entrance, Gina realized she had not put on her overcoat. Her mind felt sluggish, but she knew she needed the coat and returned to her car for it.

Inside Walmart, she made her way to the children's clothes section. She picked out a couple flannel shirts for Rhett, then made her way over to the boots. She chose a pair of insulated Chinese rip-offs of LL Bean duck boots. Rhett will look just like his grandpapa in these, she thought, smiling.

She bent down to give the appearance of tying her own boot, and slyly slid the shirts and boots into a large pocket she had sewn inside her overcoat last winter. She smiled when she felt a bottle of nail polish in the bottom of the pocket, a leftover from her last shoplifting trip.

She casually walked to the candy isle, grabbed a couple Snicker's Bars, and headed to the self-checkout lane. Gina scanned the candy and paid with her Ohio food card.

As she walked to her car, she debated doing another hit before the drive home. She knew she needed to make this stash last until she got paid for cooking at the deer camp. She doubted Jason would float her or let her blow

him to pay like the old days; he was paying premium for this shit, and he'd want more than head. She wasn't sure he would fuck her because they were second cousins. The one time she floated the idea he simply said, "A BJ don't count as incest," as he pushed her head down.

As she opened her the door to her rusting Chevy Malibu, a sheriff's SUV pulled in behind her car, blocking her in. The sheriff clicked on the flashers, sending blue and red streams of light through her dirty back window.

"Excuse me miss, you are going to need to come back inside the store with us," a female sheriff said.

***

The next morning, a corrections officer escorted Gina to collect her things from the processing center. "You need to call your P.O. and social worker today, Ms. Carpenter. If you don't, you will be back here until your hearing" the guard said, as she released Gina into the cold. Gina nodded.

"Can't I get my coat back?" she asked.

"No, it's evidence," the officer said, shutting the door.

Outside, Gina took a deep breath of autumn air. She'd cried most of the night and was bone tired. The edge was back.

She looked at up toward the clouds forming in the dull November sky. She sighed, took her phone out and texted Jason: Hey, I need you to come get me at the Sheriff's office. I got picked up for shoplifting last night. She hit send. As an afterthought she sent a second text: I need to crash at your place for a night or two. We will work something out handsome. I got money coming from working at my old man's deer camp ;).

She sat down on the curb. The cold radiated through her jeans into her ass. I'll be a fat cow soon if I don't get to the damn clinic. Next week. I'll go next week, she thought. She rested her head on her knees, closed her eyes. Shivering, she prayed Jason would pick her up.

MY BIRD SONG FLEW INTO A WINDOWPANE

Paul Alexander

On Argyle St. it's late, and there's a guy on the corner named Cocaine. The odd oddball walks sideways like a red sand crab. Street lamps are dripping poor and intersection lights change color for nobody. A taxi, alone, passes gas. Most of the buildings are abandoned. Condemned fire traps with holes. And if you have a hole that can only mean one thing. A rat will get in. The boggy neighborhood has the backdrop of an inlet, weed covered railroad tracks, and a sawmill not used since 1935. And there halfway down the slope of Argyle facing all of it-- is the Porthole Pub.

When I walk into the Porthole pub everyone is wearing Halloween masks. After five minutes in the place I realize, "Oh damn-- nobodies wearing Halloween masks."

The jam night is run by three guys. Guitar, bass and drums; and those aren't their names. I get on the most unwanted list. The boys playing know what the locals want; songs with the word 'Sally' in them. You know, "Lay Down Sally," "Mustang Sally," "Long Tall Sally."

I'd gone just past stage fright, which is when you could have explosive diarrhea at any moment after one of the jammers said, "You wanna play a couple tunes?"

And like a lemming over a cliff I say, "Yeah."

The set up is my acoustic guitar with the mic in the hole. So many microphones in front of me I told the guys, "I feel like I'm at a press conference."

It's the first time I realized how incredibly tantamount the gear is for live music. You really must know your gear; thousands of dollars worth. I had no dollars worth and felt lucky their gear was all set up for me.

I started tuning my guitar in front of 10 people. By the time I'm done there are 5 people.

I finally announce, "This song is in F sharp minor 7 flat 5, oh no wait, actually it's in E suspended 4."

A musician at the bar laughs, which is my target audience.

I plunge into a John Prine song. About a quarter ways through there's a lot of law at the end of a rope and a hangman may be my only hope. I'm in a blind alley where the only exit is to drop him before he drops you. Shoot and shoot first. Old grudges are opened and old hates are revived. A place where stool pigeons are beaten and turn keys are defied. And no one's eat'n the damned hangman's stew.

There are two lads at a table in front of the stage in dirty high vis construction vests yelling at each another.

A lone wolf beyond the event horizon hollers, "Turn it up."

The John Prine song is over; shouldn't have tried In Spite Of Ourselves as it's a duet song.

I ask the room if there is anyone that can translate Ork.

One of the construction guys-- more of a squid, teeters to his feet submerged in alcohol and calls me things I'd heard before. Then, "This is a sports bar not a kum ba yah bar, bitch."

The bartender calls across the bar, "I'm gonna have to ask you to leave, Taylor."

It's awkward. This guy couldn't find his ass if someone had spotted him the hole. The whole scene's a broken compass. The lost child an intercom announces at a department store. A golf ball in tall weeds. Turning the dial on the radio-- you can't find the game. It was like walking in circles in a parking lot at the mall looking for your car. Pulling into a gas station, asking for help. Trying to find the right dock at night from a boat in the rain. Grabbing for the proper key on a chain. Not even a police Shepherd could find the scent. The blip had vanished from the screen. Lost on a minefield. Someone walking in a direction with no direction. A blood blinded boxer who keeps going back for one more plow to the head.

It was time to do an original tune.

"This song is for my daughter who was last seen running full speed at an ironing board," I announce.

Taylor is heading for the door and it doesn't stop me from launching into my three chord story.

"After work when I get home, I am greeted by a garden gnome. She's got corn flakes in her eyes, she's got a magic marker smile. I think I'm in love with a little girl."

Well I'll be damned. Guitar, bass and drums otherwise known as Leon, Johnny and Guido had come back up on stage and they were my rhythm section.

"She's got all kinds of clothes, where they come from nobody knows, she's got little tiny hands, they're full of dandelions. I think I'm in love with a little girl."

A couple got up and started dancing. Cowboy hat and boots too thank you very much. I was so shocked by this that I miss-played a chord and there were only three of them. On to the middle eight or six and a half.

"Yesterday she crawled, she don't do that anymore, yesterday she crawled now she's walk'n out my door."

Leon did a lead part. Then it was time to bring it home as they say.

"She keeps me up all night, she don't know wrong from right, but then I look into her eyes, it's there I get a big surprise. I think I'm in love with a little girl."

The song crescendo's out.

In awe of playing through a PA system, I stood up from my stool and headed for the bar, walking away from the mic carrying my guitar still plugged in. The dude running the jam, Leon sets his Strat aside and is yelling, "Stop! Stop!"

I do.

He excoriated, "Another foot and you would have pulled down the board."

Then he said, "Always let us turn down the amp before you unplug," at which point I unplugged with a huge POP sound. I apologized and he seemed cool with it. I told him as the egg slowly oozed down my face, "Sounded strange with some feedback bottoming out on the bass notes."

He said, "You're hearing the monitors and they pick up everything so if you're fretting in the wrong position or playing the wrong note, you'll hear it but it sounded good, man."

That's jam night code for, "You should practice more."

An elderly woman regular came up to me and told me I sang from the heart, but she couldn't hear the words. And I thought the only reason to sing a John Prine song is for the words. And then she told me that I was kind of like the interlude. So, I considered calling my new band, The Interludes.

After getting a few laughs and a free drink I'm on an all-night bus; no one else aboard. The stores and hills flew by like ravens and the rain drops on the windowpane deceive my every prediction on which way they'll run. I've got my ear buds in and the real Prine song I fucked up on play. It's rich. Tone perfect. Funny as hell. I press the stop button. There's a draft in the bus. Thrown away newspapers. All of it smelled like day-old French fries stomped into the floor. The diesel engine lurched into a higher gear in between stops through the urban ebony round. I'm heading home with my friends Wind and Rain.

CUTTING THE LINE

Jon Sokol

The day after Easter, I got out of bed at ten in the morning. I probably would have slept on and off until noon if it weren't for those damned tornado sirens. Still, I waited for the coffee to finish brewing before me and Toots got into the hall closet. Toots is a four-year-old black lab with old man eyes and a moody temperament that matches my own, and I felt as if it was the infernal blaring coming from the fire station that bothered him rather than the stormy weather.

He's also the only substantial possession left by my soon-to-be ex-wife when she moved out of the trailer three months ago. More on that later.

Toots laid down beside me in the closet. He sniffed at my coffee mug then rested his blocky head on my knee. A bare light bulb shined down on us. In one corner stood two long guns — a 20-gauge double barrel and a 30-30 Winchester. A couple cardboard moving boxes were stacked up behind us.

I set my coffee down on the floor and opened one of the boxes that contained relics of a failed marriage. There was a framed ten-year-old photo from my wedding. Both Alice and I stared out of the glass with glazed over eyes. Hers the result of a marathon of planning the perfect reception from DJ playlists to the picture-worthy petit fours. Mine from the bottomless bottle of Jägermeister. I didn't even remember saying I do much less taking the picture.

In another box, mostly filled with literary rejection letters and loose pages of my half-written novel, I found a tin container the size of a paperback that was full of fly-fishing streamers. I'd been looking for the flies since early March. I took out a brown woolly bugger and showed it to Toots. "That's what I needed yesterday when the river was churning," I told him. It had rained an inch before I quit fishing just around noon, and the weather never let up.

I'd been fishing for eleven days straight on the Chattooga near Warwoman Creek. Five days ago, I lost my job. The boss man fired me via text message. Said I could pick up my tools on Sunday, which was yesterday. I drove by the transmission shop to get them and saw his truck and checked my watch and decided to try the

river in spite of the weather. I figured I could pick up my tools anytime. Nobody'd screw with them for at least a few more days.

The tornado sirens quit squalling. I replaced the fly back in its box and me and Toots left our safe space. I let him out the back door and he trotted over to my pickup truck and shat right there at the driver's side door. Then he ran off into the woods behind the trailer to find something miserable to wallow in.

I put the fly box in my fishing vest that hung on a nail by the door next to my waders. The river would be blown out after yesterday's rain and last night's storm. According to the clock on the oven, it was eleven. I looked out the window over the sink and saw a red-tailed hawk standing on one leg out in the yard. He had a limp chipmunk in his other talon and seemed to be studying it as if to say, "this will have to do."

Toots came bounding out of the tree line. The hawk dropped the rodent and lit in the big maple tree. The dog sniffed around until he found the dead chipmunk. He gave it a lick, oblivious to the hawk perched ten feet above him until it screamed. Toots's head snapped east then west before he sprinted to the back porch. I let him in and poured his bowl full of Ol' Roy. That stuff makes his shit smell god awful, but it's cheap.

Mondays are pretty damned lonely when the river's unfishable and you're unemployed, so I put on yesterday's fishing shirt and grabbed my keys and cigarettes and walked out to the truck, figuring I'd go to Saint Luke's to get some lunch. I stepped right in that butterscotch-yellow pile of shit before climbing in behind the wheel.

It took three key twists and some pedal pumping before the consumptive engine started. The fuel gauge went out not long ago, so I didn't know how much gas was in the tank. But I figured there was probably enough to get to town and back.

I was living out on Highway 29 about ten miles from Faust, where I grew up. There wasn't much to downtown, still ain't, but I knew Saint Luke's would be open and serving beer by noon. I drove along the highway with my window down, enjoying the early spring post-storm sunshine. An Allman Brothers song whined through the speakers. I turned up the radio and lit a Chesterfield.

The tornado weather had moved through along the tail end of the front. I didn't see much damage until I got close to town. I had to shift into four-wheel drive to get around a pine tree that had fallen in the road. I almost buried that old beater in the ditch, but I gunned the engine and fishtailed back to the highway flinging mud clods on the asphalt. I forgot to shift back into two-wheel drive until I pulled into the parking lot at Saint Luke's.

I should probably acknowledge that, yes, Saint Luke's is an odd name for a honky-tonk in a sleepy town jam packed with churches. Fact of the matter is, it started out as a church, sort of. Luke Turner's plan to circumvent paying taxes like all those other legitimate churches didn't pass the smell test, especially when the feds figured out he wasn't a real preacher and had no congregation except for his wife and six kids. Luke said he figured it was the Baptists that turned him in, so he converted the old church into a beer joint to spite them, and perhaps himself.

Saint Luke's is one of those downtown spots that serves lunchtime hotdogs and hamburgers to everyone from mill workers and chicken-truck drivers to cops and attorneys. After happy hour, it steadily progresses into a somewhat seedy barroom. At times, it can get downright bawdy, like the time Darlene Spencer gave the lead singer of a Foghat cover band hepatitis in the men's room.

It's open from eleven in the morning until two a.m., and during the course of a day it's not unusual to witness a real estate transaction, an engagement proposal, an arrest warrant being served, the breakup of a thirty-year marriage, someone finding Jesus, or an all-out knife fight. Sometimes two or more of those things involve the same people.

Some would argue that Saint Luke's Pub is more fundamental to this community than all the real churches combined. Others would contend it's a blight that the Lord cast down on our sinful town. I personally think it's the tits.

I walked in after scraping most of the crap off the bottom of my boot and sat at the empty bar. Four guys in suits were sitting at one of the tables. Gloria, the waitress, was taking their order and writing it down on a spiral notepad. A group of Mexicans was in the back, drinking Cokes and playing pool. Otherwise, the pub was empty.

Narvel Felts was playing on the jukebox. A velvet portrait of a praying Jesus was above it. I figured Gloria must have picked the song. She always got a kick out of "Reconsider Me." She slow danced over to where I was perched and gave me a peck on the cheek. "Hotdog plate all the way?"

"Yeah. And a PBR."

She glanced at the clock on the wall. It read eleven-thirty-five. "The sun's not quite over the yardarm," she said. "But sure, why not?"

The men's bathroom door opened and Lee Duc emerged, drying his hands on his blue jeans, which were starched, pressed, and creased down the front. He wore a white Resistol cowboy hat and a silver rodeo belt buckle that was almost as big as his head.

He saw me at the bar and grinned. "Wha'ya say, Stoney?" He had metal taps on the heels of his boots that tinked on the concrete floor when he walked. He sat on the stool next to me.

"Not much," I said. "You still planting pine trees?"

"We on our last tract. Hope to get 'er done this afternoon 'long as the storm's past."

Duc's Vietnamese, but if you're blind you wouldn't know it. He talks like a good ol' boy chewing on a wad of Georgia red clay. He was born here in Faust and was a high school rodeo legend until he tore up his knee. He's in his mid-twenties and runs a tree planting crew in the winter and early spring and helps his daddy raise laying hens in the summer.

"Those your Mexicans back there?" I asked. Gloria poured my beer from the tap and set it down in front of me. I dropped two bucks on the bar.

"Yeah, but they ain't Mexican," Duc said, opening a can of Copenhagen. He pinched a wad of the snuff and dropped it in his mouth settling it down in his lip with his tongue. Gloria gave him a plastic cup stuffed with napkins. "They from Guatemala. Don't speak a lick of American." He spat in the cup. "Pero hablo Español con fluidez."

As far as I could tell, not only was Duc fluent in Spanish, his accent was spot on. I'd also heard him talk to his daddy in what I thought sounded like perfect Vietnamese as well. I reckon he was just good at picking up the local vernacular. He's a smart little dude, and I like him.

"How's the fishing, Hoss?"

"Fair," I said. "Slowed down to a crawl yesterday."

"I bet. You still turning them loose?

"That's right. Catch and release."

"Son. Ain't nothing better than fried trout and yella grits." The snuff bulge in his lip turned his normally contagious smile into a grotesque leer. Like he was shitting his pants.

Gloria slid him his check and he pulled a massive wad of cash from his front pocket. He peeled off three twenties and stood. He slapped me on the shoulder and yelled over to the Guatemalans, "Oye, vamos amigos," and clinked his boots to the door and held it open for his crew, who walked out while squinting in the sunshine.

Gloria put my lunch on the bar—two hotdogs with chili and onions, French fries, and slaw. I reached for the mustard bottle.

"You gettin' too skinny, boy," she said. "When's the last time you got a home cooked meal?"

"Give me five minutes and I'll tell you."

"This don't count as home cooked. Let me guess. It was when Alice moved out, wadn't it?"

Gloria's in her sixties and has questionable blue-black hair, the kind that looks natural on Wonder Woman in the cartoons but not on a real human. She's built like a cask and sweet as can be. She'd been one of my momma's friends and sat beside me and Alice at the funeral after momma died a few years ago. She'd promised momma that she'd look in on me every now and then. Maybe momma knew Alice would leave me one day.

"What makes you think I can't cook for myself?"

"Your baggy britches, for one."

"I just don't have the time."

"Stoney, all you got is time. I heard you got fired for laying out of work."

I had to lean sideways to look around her so I could see the television. The local news was on and the weatherman was giving the five-day forecast. Wednesday would be a good day to fish.

"Who told you I got fired?"

She rolled her eyes and huffed off. Gloria was also married to Glen, my boss at the transmission shop.

A commercial came on the television. It was one of those personal injury lawyers. I always hated those commercials. A buddy of mine lost his CDL because he got sued when a drunk girl drove her car underneath his semi. Took the top of the car off and her head with it. The girl's parents hired a TV lawyer and went after the trucking company. Hell, my buddy wasn't even moving. He was sitting at a traffic light.

Another reason I hate those ambulance chasers, and in particular the one that was on the television right then, was because he was the one Alice ran off with. Hollis Tillman is his name. You've probably heard of him if you've ever lived anywhere in the tri-state area. "Call 1-800, then keep dialing 5's." Yeah, that's the asshole.

Alice worked for him for years as a paralegal. Maybe she'd been screwing around with him for a long time. I don't know. But since last month, she'd been living with him up on the lake. She told me he wasn't the reason she was leaving me, though. Whatever. She said I'd given up on our future. Said a forty-year-old man ought to have his act together by now and not living without some kind of plan.

What the hell kind of plan did she expect me to have? Work my ass off and save up my dimes and buy her a BMW? She knew I lived in a trailer when we met. Why did she expect me to lift her up in social class? I mean, she's the one who put me through college knowing I wouldn't be able to get a job in journalism even with a master's degree. The newspapers still in business these days only hire bloggers and social media kids. They don't have jobs for a middle-aged sports reporter. People can get that content for free.

She also didn't like that I fished all the time, had a shitty job, drank too much, wouldn't finish my novel, was seriously behind on the mortgage payments, and slept most nights fully clothed in my recliner. She told me all that the day she moved out. She was pissed that I wouldn't help the moving crew load the U-Haul. I went to the river instead.

I finished my lunch and slid the empty plate to the side. The four suits got up and left. It was just me and Gloria and the television. I asked her for another beer and paid for it and the hotdog plate. I still had two tens and a one in my wallet. I took the dollar to the jukebox and picked out a couple ZZ Top songs. The opening riff to "La Grange" was ripping through the speakers when I got back to the bar. Gloria picked up a remote control and paused the jukebox before the first set of *haw haws*.

"What'd you do that for?" I asked.

"If you're going to stick around here this afternoon, you're going to have to watch my stories. Starting with *Days of Our Lives*."

Just then, the door swung open and a group of old folks strolled in. There were six of them, three men and three women. The men sat at a table together. One of the geezers pulled out a pack of playing cards and a note pad from the pocket of his windbreaker. The three old ladies sat at a different table closer to the television. They all ordered sweet teas, but one of the ladies told Gloria it was okay if she waited until the commercial break. The women looked at me as if I were a blowfly sitting on a turd.

I figured it was time to move on. But I didn't have anywhere to go except back to the trailer. I got up and went to the bathroom hoping I'd come up with an idea while I took a leak. When I came back out, I still hadn't reached any conclusions. But Charlie Winesap was sitting at the bar. He was wearing blue coveralls and a short-brimmed welder's cap.

Charlie's a crop-duster pilot and sells farming chemicals. He learned how to fly in the Army and was a bit too reckless to be a commercial pilot. I watched him fly under a bridge below the dam once. I guess I should also say that he was known to drink a few. I went back to my barstool and ordered another beer. Gloria poured and delivered it to me without her eyes leaving the television.

"Got the day off?" I asked him.

"Wind's up too much. Can't spray Roundup or it'll wind up in a place it's not supposed to be."

"Never really thought about that."

"Yeah, this time of year can be hit or miss with the wind," he said. "Last week was bad too."

"I remember it being a little breezy up on the river."

"Do any good?"

"Mostly rainbows, but I did catch a twenty-inch brown." I showed him the picture I'd taken on my cell phone.

He put on his reading glasses and took the phone into his hand. "That's a whopper, alright." The picture disappeared as the phone began to buzz. Alice's name came up on the screen. He handed the phone back to me and I hit ignore. "You not fishing today?" he asked.

"River's blown out because of all the rain."

"Sounds like a good day to do some drinking, by God."

I knew this would not turn out good, but I'd never been one to shy away from a reasonable proposition. "Just remind me to go let the dog out before too long," I said.

But I don't think he heard me. He had his phone out and was scrolling through pictures. He grinned and handed me the phone and said, "What do you think about her?"

The picture was of a wispy woman who looked like she was strung out on meth. She had bright red streaks in her gray hair and wore a black sleeveless Lynyrd Skynyrd t-shirt and too much mascara. She was laughing and missing a front tooth. "Who's this?" I said.

"My new girlfriend. Her name's Mona, but she's more of a screamer, if you know what I mean."

"That right?"

"Yeah, boy. She's a wild one too. I have a hard time keeping up with her."

I thought of Alice. She'd come from a good family but used to have a daredevil side to her. She used to like to smoke reefer and make love in the woods. But after we got married, the fun died as quick as the house plants.

"She looks older, if you don't mind me saying."

"It ain't the years brother, it's the miles," Charlie said. "She's only fifty-eight, just like me." He looked down at me over his reading glasses. "Speaking of, how old are you?"

"I turn forty next month."

"Well you probably don't have to worry about it yet, but let me just give you a piece of advice." He guzzled at his beer.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Everything they say about Viagra is true."

"Huh."

"The other night, me and Mona were getting hot and heavy so I took one of those little pills." He looked over at the old lady table. One was cross stitching and the other two were gabbing about something or another. "And let me tell you, it made my dick harder than Chinese arithmetic."

"Haw."

"I got one if you want to try it." He reached into his shirt pocket.

"I don't think I need one right now," I said.

"Not now, dummy. For later on when you're with your old lady."

"Me and Alice split up."

"Aw hell. I didn't know that." Charlie emptied his beer and Gloria brought him another one. She looked at me and I nodded. I knew if I played my cards right, Charlie would be buying.

"Mona's got a daughter that's kinda cute if you want me to introduce you."

"No, I'm going on hiatus for a while, I think."

"Well, suit yourself."

Charlie and I drank away the afternoon. Around four o'clock his phone started playing "Call Me the Breeze." It was Mona calling to tell him to come get her at the Huddle House where she worked. I ordered another beer before he picked up the check and left.

I started to think about life without Alice. I wondered if all that was left out there were worn out hags and if I'd be happy to have one like Charlie seemed to be. I thought about how things would be better if I moved up to the river and found a couple of acres where I could

build a cabin. Just forget about women. Maybe do a little guiding for one of the fishing outfitters up there.

That got me thinking about my bank account and how much I'd have left after the divorce. I'd heard horror stories about guys getting taken to the cleaners. Even though she was catting around with a well-off TV lawyer, I knew Alice would bleed me dry if she had the chance just out of meanness. I decided right then and there that I needed to take out what I had in the bank before she got to it. Bury what little I had in a jar in the backyard.

Judge Judy was on the television. The old folks were still there, but they were paying their bill. One of the old men was asleep in his chair. Some guys from the tire plant had come in and were drinking beer at one of the other tables. I finished mine and told Gloria I'd see her later.

I walked over to the bank across the street and checked my account balance on the ATM. It said I had $73. There should have been over a thousand. *I'm going to kill that bitch*.

I took out sixty. That plus the forty I still had in my wallet would need to get me by until I found some work. Preferably a job that paid under the table. Working as a fishing guide wouldn't be all that bad, I thought.

The big digital clock at the bank said it was 4:47. I was feeling a little drunk and didn't want to go home yet. I knew I'd sit there in my recliner and feel sorry for myself if I did.

I turned from the ATM, and someone hollered my name. I shielded my eyes from the afternoon sun and saw a sheriff's deputy jogging toward me. *Jesus, what now*?

"Damn son, I've been looking for you for three days." It was Toby Garland. He and I had been buddies once until he arrested me for DUI last June. The fat son of a bitch was out of breath. He handed me a manila envelope.

"What the hell is this?" I asked.

"Court papers," he stammered. "Congratulations, you're getting a divorce."

I stared down at the envelope. It took a concerted effort to keep it from shaking in my hand. I wondered why I was getting upset. I knew this was going to happen sooner or later.

"Sorry," Toby said. "I guess that was a bad joke."

"Look, Toby. I'd love to stand here and shoot the shit, but I've got to go take care of some business."

"I understand," he said.

"No, you probably don't." I began walking away.

"Sorry about you and Alice, Stoney. I really am."

I kept walking. I thought about getting in my truck and driving around for a while just to clear my head and think things over. But I figured Toby had seen me walk out of Saint Luke's and he'd probably have me walking the yellow line and blowing in a straw if I did.

So, I went back to the bar.

***

Gloria rolled her eyes when I walked in. I sat down at my stool and waited for her to finish dropping off Budweisers at the table with the tire plant guys. I laid the envelope that Toby had given to me on the bar. The last notes of "Got Me Under Pressure" was fading from the juke box. The five o'clock news was beginning on the television, but thank Jesus, it was muted.

"When you said you'd see me later, I didn't think it'd only be fifteen minutes later," Gloria said, pouring me a PBR.

"You owe me a dollar for the juke box," I said.

"Your songs played," she said. "Why's it my fault you weren't here to hear them?" She put the beer in front of me. "Since you're not fishing or turning wrenches, don't you think you should be home working on that novel you're always talking about?"

"I don't have a lot to say right now."

"That never stopped you before."

"Hardy-har. You think it's easy, don't you?"

"What's in the envelope?"

I didn't say anything.

Gloria poured herself a half-pint and set a dish of peanuts on the bar between us. “What’s the book about anyway?”

“It’s about a poor sumbitch who keeps getting beat down by his family, friends, and society in general.”

“I think I’ve read that one before,” she said. “What’s the last part you’ve written?”

“The wicked witch that he’s married to has just stolen all of his money and he’s sitting at a bar talking to some old battle ax.”

“Um-hmm.” I couldn’t tell if she was paying attention to me or just lip reading the newscast. “What happens next?”

“I don’t know. Ask me in an hour.”

***

Around six-thirty, the door jingled and a group of nurses walked in. There were six of them, all wearing pastel scrubs. One of the ladies looked familiar, but to be honest, I didn’t pay them much attention. Gloria chugged her fourth half-beer down, then made her way over to their table.

From the bar, the brown envelope stared back at me. It looked too thin for something that was going to change my life. I pulled out my pocket knife to open it, then changed my mind. It seemed to be grinning at me. I tried to ignore it.

“Stoney Brooks?” a voice said. “I thought that was you.”

I turned to find one of the nurses standing behind me. “Tasha?”

Her blonde hair was in a high ponytail. She wore blue scrubs and black Adidas track shoes. We’d gone out together a time or two back in high school. She sat on the stool beside me. She had crow’s feet in the corners of her eyes that weren’t there the last time I’d seen her.

I said the first dumb thing that came to mind. “Where you been?”

“I just moved back here from Savannah a couple of months ago.” Gloria brought over her margarita. “I’m working at the hospital now in Maryville.”

“You’re with that group of nurses?” I nodded to their table.

“Yes, but only two of us are nurses. The other four are doctors. One of ‘em’s getting married, so we’re having a little bachelorette party.”

“I’ll be dogged,” I said. She was still cute but was beginning to show her age. Not as much as me, mind you, but then again, I knew how old she was. The last time I’d seen her was at her wedding. I was one of the groomsmen. My friend, Bodie, married her and he’d taken an engineering job at the paper mill in Savannah later that year.

“How’s ol’ Bodie?”

“He’s all right, I guess.” She took a sip from her straw. “We’re separated right now.”

“That’s too bad. I’m sorry to hear that,” I lied. Bodie might have been a friend once, but a few months after he’d moved away, I’d seen him here in Faust at a high school football game tonguing an eighteen-year-old. Tasha was a sweet girl and shouldn’t have married that asshole.

“How’s Alice?”

I looked down at the envelope. “She passed away.”

“Oh, God.” She set her drink on the bar and put her hand on mine. “I didn’t know.”

“Well,” I said. “She’s in a better place now. I guess I am too.”

The door jingled. The bar was filling up with the dinner crowd. *Jeopardy!* was on the television.

“Listen,” she said. “I need to get back to the girls, but maybe we could catch up later this week.”

Perhaps things were looking up, I thought. I looked again at the envelope on the bar and saw someone’s hand on it. On one of the fingers was a doorknob-sized diamond ring. The fingernails were painted blood red.

“I see you got the divorce papers.”

It was fucking Alice. Hollis was standing beside her with a smirk on his face. I looked back at Tasha. She was walking back to her table, eyes wide. She’d left her drink sweating on the bar.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Did I just interrupt you trying to pick up that woman?"

"How about do me a favor and go bite a hog in the ass," I said.

Hollis lost his smile and tried to look threatening despite wearing flip flops and a Patagonia puff vest. He was a good bit bigger than me, but I knew he was too smart to look inside this trashcan. Too scared to find out what was inside.

"Who is she?" Alice said. "She doesn't look familiar."

"None of your damn business," I said, still engaged in a staring contest with Hollis who lost when his cell phone rang. He walked to a corner of the bar and took the call, speaking in his loud and annoying voice until Gloria called him an asshole and told him to take it outside.

"Such a classy joint this is, Stoney," Alice said, shaking her head.

"Then why the hell did you decide to come in?" I'd refused to even look at her until then. She had on a stupid vest identical to Hollis's, but it wasn't enough to conceal her latest acquisition. "Nice tits, by the way," I said.

She ignored the compliment. "I came in here because we saw your raggedy truck outside. I need you to sign those papers pronto. Hollis and I are going to Cancun for a couple of weeks, and I don't want this divorce to drag out any longer."

"I'll sign them right now. But first, I need you to give me the thousand dollars you stole from my bank account."

"She-yeah, right," she said. "That's a joint account, and I don't remember you making any deposits lately." She put her hand on her hip and squinted her eyes. Damn, she still looked beautiful.

Hollis came back inside and sat at an empty table and acted like he was reading a menu.

"Give me the money, Alice."

"I'm not paying you shit." She sucked her teeth. "If you want money, try finding a job with a steady paycheck, you moron."

I put a twenty on the bar. I wadded up the damned envelope and stuffed it down the bosom of Alice's shirt, told her to eat shit, and walked out of Saint Luke's.

I was feeling lousy and pretty wasted and had to take a leak, which reminded me that I needed to go let Toots out. Maybe grab that 20-gauge Mossberg and bring it back to Saint Luke's just to see the look on Alice's face. I thought about splattering her brains all over Hollis's dumb face. Hell, prison's as good a place as any to finish writing a novel.

Parked next to my truck was a red Mercedes convertible with the top down and a license tag that read "LAW DAWG." I knew it had to be Hollis's car, so I unzipped my pants and pissed all over the front seats and dashboard. I was drunk enough not to care if anyone saw me. I finished up and reached inside the car and hit the button that opened the trunk.

There were two suitcases and a handbag back there. I dumped the contents of the purse and was about to look through the wallet when I heard the gravel crunch behind me. I turned around and somebody punched me in the left eye. I hit the ground and looked through my right eye at three young punks crowding over me.

They looked to be college kids. Big boys. They were wearing khaki pants, button up oxfords, and UGA ball caps. A girl was behind them. I couldn't see her, but she was yelling about me rummaging through her pocketbook.

"You stupid son of a bitch," one of them said. They started kicking me. I rolled under my truck and pulled out my Buck knife and started slashing at their legs but hit nothing but air.

"I'm calling the cops, dickhead," I heard one of them say as they all walked back toward the bar, leaving me there cussing and bleeding.

I laid under the truck for a minute like a trapped coon trying to catch my breath. My ribs were throbbing, but I didn't think anything was broken. I needed to get out of town fast. Thankfully, the goddamn truck cranked right up.

When I got past the town limit, I made sure to drive back home slowly so I wouldn't raise any suspicion. I damn sure couldn't afford another DUI. No one appeared to be following me. At the four-way stop at the

highway, I checked my glove box and found a half-empty pint of Four Roses and a Buck Owens cassette, both of which persuaded me to take the long way home.

I knew the river would still be out of the banks tomorrow, and I was thinking about what I'd do since I wouldn't be fishing. That brought me down even lower than getting rolled in the parking lot. The whiskey and the Buckaroos weren't really helping either. Fucking Alice.

To tell you the truth, I was sad to see her go. Even if we had fought like dogs in a pit, I didn't want to give up the one thing in life I thought I had going for me. She was right about the job situation, but I don't think that would have changed anything between us. Her feelings for me were long gone, and it was pretty much all my fault. My only talent in life was the ability to screw up every good thing that came my way. But, damn it. Couldn't she just give me a little more time to figure things out? Even in the rough times, and God knows there were plenty, I always thought that the future would turn around.

It was like snagging your fly on a submerged log. A real pisser. But if you took your time, you could ease the hook out and get back to catching rainbows. To me, cutting the line and starting over just wasn't an option. But here she was ripping my life apart. I thought again about all the evil things I could do to her. I wanted to show her how bad she'd ruined everything.

Then I wondered if she'd even care. Hell, she'd done pretty good for herself. She was trading up.

***

It was eight o'clock when I pulled up in the driveway. The sun was setting and mosquitoes were out. I stumbled up to the trailer feeling like I was carrying a load of bricks on my back.

Toots almost bowled me over when I opened the door. He heard something, probably a squirrel, rustle in the leaves and he beelined into the woods.

I went inside and turned on the Braves game and put a bag of frozen corn on my swollen eye. In my cigarette pack, I found half a joint I'd forgotten about. Some kid on the river had given it to me. I lit it and thought about the shotgun in the closet. Thought about killing Alice and Hollis and those shitbird college kids with the Mercedes.

It began to rain outside.

I checked my cell phone. I had a voice mail from Toby wanting me to come to the police station to "discuss my altercation." Another message was from the bank regarding my "pending foreclosure."

I looked over at the closet door. Behind it, the Mossberg seemed to vibrate.

I pulled my boots off. If I was going to blow anybody's head off that night, I knew it'd be my own.

Toots scratched at the back door.

The Braves were down three to one.

PRODIGAL AND PROMISE:

JUSTIN TOWNES EARLE

1/4/82-8/20/20

Nancy Dillingham

The saint of lost causes
you never thought you were enough
said your father after your death
words that might serve as your epitaph

Tall and gaunt
dressed in your retro suits and hat
your carriage reminiscent of that
other lonesome soul

Luke the Drifter
who also adopted a persona
to hide his insecurity and pain
as he traveled that lost highway

you began to use at the age of 12
and as a gangly and shy teenager
survived five heroin overdoses
by the age of 21

I imagine you longed for a steady hand
to help you land on your feet
even as you went to rehab 9 times
and recorded 13 albums

eerily echoing your namesake
exploring always the promise
in your songwriting of a masterpiece
while waiting around to die

Even as you answered your
ex-con and former addict father's plea
Do not make me bury you the night before
you died with the words *I won't*

you must have known
how out of control
your life had always been

So at 38 years of age
alone in your apartment
you died of an accidental overdose
of fentanyl-laced cocaine

atonement for a life
filled with angst and shame
disappointment and rage

Still in that fragile yet strong voice
one gets the sense you longed for
happiness and peace
that was just not to be for "J.T."

DISHES BEST SERVED COLD

David Estringel

The day my sister told me my father had cancer wasn't very different from any other: I went to work early and left late; wolfed-down shitty take-out for lunch from some nearby "shit shack" in between patient crises; and smoked too much ('til my lungs ached) during the car ride home, belching acid into my mouth from a gut that had seen much better days. The drive home from the psych hospital, where I had worked for too long, quickly became my favorite time of day, allowing me a chance to finally exhale and step away from the daily hell of doing something I was just good at but didn't love. While the money was good—great, actually—it wasn't enough to keep me from cringing every morning I got into my car to go to work. *So goes living the life you ask for (not the one you wanted)*.

I believe I was halfway home when my sister called, which was odd since she never did (except when she wanted something). Niceties were exchanged, I assume (I am not a total asshole, after all), and then she tossed the grenade into my lap: "Dad has cancer." A cold "Wow" escaped my lips, as I blindly searched my messenger bag for my pack of cigarettes; my eyes keenly fixed on the back bumper of the black Cadilac Escalade in front of me. *Drug dealer*, I thought to myself. I wasn't glad he was sick. Again, I am not an asshole, but over the course of 30 years, the man had gone out of his way to make it clear that the family he left behind was not a priority, not even garnering an afterthought. I assume I expressed the concern a son should after hearing such an awful declaration, maybe offering up an "Oh, my God. What kind?" to save face, but she didn't know.

Apparently, my father dropped the bomb on her during one of their regular phone conversations, which she always had to initiate. *As indifferent about her as I can be, I gotta admire the woman's tenacity. She'll be damned if the old man ignored her*. Slightly annoyed, I critiqued her lack of curiosity in the face of a looming family crisis. "So, you are meeting him for dinner tonight," she then said. Absolutely, I was annoyed.

"Why would I do that?" I asked, blowing cigarette smoke out the driver's side window. "We haven't talked in—what—10 years? I can't think of a worse idea."

"He's got cancer, Sean. He's sick."

"So you say." Even though she was family (and we have basically seen each other at our worst), that was one of those moments where one's next move would (pretty much) define one's character going forward in the annals of family history. Regardless, I hadn't forgotten the "radio silence" after he divorced my mother (God rest her soul) and started a new (supposedly improved) family with someone else, even though Lisa, my sister, evidently had. "And where will I be choking this food down, exactly?" I queried. I half-about expected The Pancake House to come out of her mouth, which is where my parents would always take me to tell me they were separating; I eventually began calling it "The Temple of Doom." To this day, chicken fried steak never really quite hits the spot like it used to.

"Roadhouse Steakhouse. Just pick him up at his house and honk. He'll be waiting."

Great, I thought to myself. *Now, steak is fucked*.

***

I drove up to his house—the lawn noticeably unkept, which was odd given his obsession with gardening. I punched the horn a couple of times and waited. Eventually, the front door opened, and he stepped out, leaning in to give his wife a kiss goodbye; she lingered in the doorway and gave me an obligatory wave, as he made his way to the car. He was thinner than I remember. Older, too. The man had sported salt-and-pepper hair ever since I could remember, but now he had gone totally grey, which aged him. He wore a crisp, white long-sleeved shirt and khakis—a far cry from the polyester, Sans-a-Belt slacks I had always seen him in way back when. Despite his wife's stylizing, the clothes shockingly hung from his frail frame almost drowning him in folds of fabric. He got in the car and gave her a wave: I followed suit for the sake of not turning a partially selfless gesture into a blatant "fuck you" to all involved.

The ride to Roadhouse is a blur (not because my memory is shot but because whatever pleasantries were exchanged were likely disingenuous). Per usual, the restaurant was loud and every 10 minutes (or so) the waitstaff would pool at various locations, like blood clots, to sing Happy Birthday ("Yahoo!" and all) to someone itching for a free dessert. Not being much of a

'small talker' and an emotional eater, I downed three baskets of rolls, while recounting the highlights of the past decade (of which there were few) to catch the old man up. We didn't have much in common, but the one thing we could connect on was work; I can't remember a time when my father didn't have more than two jobs. Growing up, we didn't have a lot of money and there were plenty of Christmases when there were no presents under the tree, but he tried his damnedest to keep things afloat, never complaining once (or at least not so anyone could hear).

"What are you doing these days?" he asked, grabbing the only roll left in the red, plastic basket on the table.

"Clinical Director at the psychiatric hospital just outside of town. Been there about…six months." I stared at his face and searched for some semblance of interest (pride, maybe) and found none, just a pair of dulled, brown eyes. "It's alright. Pays well."

"Oh, the big hospital a mile or so from where I live." He nodded and took another bite of his roll—a crumb of bread wedged in the right corner of his mouth. "What do you do there?"

Stymied by the question, I shifted in my seat, folded my hands on the table, and stared at him for a few seconds. "Clinical Director," I repeated. Something was not right. Off. "I supervise the therapists and create the clinical programming for the hospital." Again, I waited for some sign of life behind those deadened eyes, but one never came. "I'm a psychotherapist, Dad. Have been for six years, now. Remember? I'm sure Lisa mentioned it." Still, nothing.

"Really? How did you get into that?" he asked, the soggy crumb punctuating every word.

My brow furrowed; I leaned in. "Dad, I'm a clinical social worker. That is what we do."

"Oh, really? That's good…That's good." He looked confused, cast his eyes down toward his hands. "I remember when I took over that elementary school…Parkview, I think it was, just before I retired. Thought I was done with being a principal, but it was in bad shape. Really bad shape. Their test scores were the lowest in the district and the State was going to close it down if things didn't change fast."

A bit annoyed with the non sequitur, I nodded and smiled, becoming increasingly amused by the fact that he somehow managed to turn a discussion about my career success into one about his own. "Wow," I responded.

"I walked in my first day—just before classes started for the year--and the first thing I did was get all the staff together and told them what needed to change, how it needed to change, and by when it needed to change. If anyone didn't like it, there was the door. What do you think happened?" he (and the crumb) asked.

"What?" *I had heard this story before, but the man supposedly had cancer, so why not let him have a moment*?

"Those test scores went up and the school was awarded 'Exemplary' status by the State. No one thought I could do it, but I did." For a moment, he didn't seem so old; he was the same man (and narcissist) I remembered him to be. "So, what are you doing these days?"

Thinking nothing else could throw me off at that point, it happened again. Luckily, the waitress came by our table to take our orders, which provided a brief pardon from my sister's good intentions. My father ordered a house salad with French dressing on the side (some things never change) with extra crackers and a sweet tea. I opted for chicken fried steak, figuring the occasion called for it, and a Coke. "Is that all?" she asked. I looked at the crumb and then the waitress. "A gin and tonic. More gin than tonic, please."

The waitress gave me a look, then at my dad, and gave me a smile as if to say, "Gotcha."

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Halfway through my chicken fried steak and two repeats of his school transformation story, I decided to break the tension that hung over the table, like a pall and asked my father about his family. His oldest brother, Andy, was doing fine—perfect, in fact—and was happily retired. His other older brother, Patrick, had been recovering for a few months at home from a heart attack—a pretty serious one. Naturally, he gushed about how well my cousins, Michael and Robert—Patrick's sons—were doing, detailing the careers they chose and how successful they were at them. I nodded and smiled, then took a long sip from the sweaty glass of gin and tonic on the table, irked by the fact that I had to remind

the old man what my major was in college any time the topic came up (a fact made even more amusing when one takes into account that my Master of Social Work degree wasn't the one he paid for).

"Those two are good boys. They visit Patrick every day. Make sure that his wife and he are doing okay. Yes, that is how children should be."

"Well, yeah," I responded, "Patrick never left his, plus I am sure they're still in the will."

"What was that?"

"So, Lisa tells me you have cancer." *Why the hell not*?

Still chewing a mouthful of salad (the crumb had since fallen and joined its crouton cousins for a reunion), he looked at me with a blank stare that bordered on hostility. "Everything is going to be fine."

"From what I understand, you haven't worked in a while. That's not you, so things don't seem very fine."

My father shoveled another forkful of salad into his mouth. "I'm going to the doctor, and he's highly recommended. It'll be fine."

"Well, what kind of cancer is it?" The smell of chicken fried steak (for some reason) was heavy in the air, making me nauseous. "What kind is it, Dad?"

"Prostate." He looked at his hands again.

I became dizzy all of a sudden, and my lips felt cold. "Prostate," I blurted. "How serious is it? What stage?"

"I don't know. I was just told yesterday. They are running more tests. I go back tomorrow…I will be fine."

The moment was surreal, like watching a mountain crumble before your very eyes. There was no love lost between him and I, but this was the man that I had idolized for the first 25 years of my life and was—unfortunately—a carbon copy of. "Sounds serious. When were you planning on telling me? I mean, I have to hear this from Lisa?" It upset me that I was upset, that I cared that the distance that had been between us for years was there. The idea that the 'shit' between us was bigger than either of us, even bigger than prostate cancer was hard to swallow. "Are you scared?"

My father rubbed his hands together and then placed them in his lap, looked me in the eyes, and said, "No. I have God and faith that things will work out. I have a beautiful wife and the perfect daughter she gave me. I have a good life. I have no regrets."

"I like to think that things work out…in the end," I responded, tossing my Platinum American Express card on the table and grabbing my mobile phone. "Ready?"

***

The drive home from my father's house seemed to take forever; too many thoughts and emotions clouded my mind, and I hadn't drunk enough. I don't know what I expected from it all. Our relationship hadn't changed. How could it be when we never even spoke? I realized that some part of me still hoped to make my father proud, to earn his respect. Ironically, I had finally reached a place in my life where that could have been possible, but the old man was too demented to realize it. Worst of all, he still has no idea (or still doesn't give a shit) about the wreckage he left behind after he discarded his first family for one that he felt he deserved. Part of me tried to convince myself that he didn't know what he was saying, that senility (or maybe his cancer) had fucked with his brain, so he didn't know what he was saying. That wasn't it, though. His senility, his illness, or whatever it was had just made him honest, finally. No filter. No regrets.

I was a few streets away from home (but not far enough from the Roadhouse shit show) when Lisa called. "How did it go? Did you talk to him?" she eagerly inquired.

"It's prostate cancer. He's optimistic." I remember hating her at that very moment for manipulating me into going and thinking how easy it was for her to orchestrate things from afar when I was the one that had to deal with the emotional shrapnel. "He says he'll be fine."

"Did he say anything else?" She hadn't heard something she needed to hear.

I let out a long exhale and contemplated making her feel as bad as I did (at that moment) with a healthy dose of truth. "He's thankful for his perfect daughters."

I could hear her smiling through her tears.

GOING PUBLIC

Patricia Quintana Bidar

"'How ‘bout this shit, Ang?” Angela’s twin sister was slouched in the loveseat, bare feet splayed atop the coffee table. “Director and screenwriter John Guerrero financed his micro-budget first film by allowing his body to be used for medical experiments.”

Angela was curled up in Edgardo's recliner, work shoes cast off on the carpet beside her. She’d released her curly hair from the big barrette that held it during her shifts waiting tables at The Meat Up.

"Sounds like one stand-up cholo," Angela replied. Noticing Edgardo, she said, "Hear that, babe? What that crazy guy did for art?"

"That's dedication," Edgardo returned, keeping it light. The odor of fruit mingled with ammoniac tang of the hair dye he’d used before dinner. The gloves that came in the package were laughably dainty; Edgardo’d had to use plastic grocery bags. He pierced another peach. The butter crust waited, thumb-pressed into the tin. In the sink, the dinner dishes — with the pastry cutter, mixing bowl attachments and spoons — soaked in hot, soapy water. He wasn’t changing his hair color or anything, just fixing those white strands that threaded the black. He took after his mother. "Anyone want coffee?"

“Extra hot, hon,” Cuca cracked.

If Cuca never returned to Boyd and lived with Edgardo and Angela for the remainder of time, Edgardo would never, ever get used to the sound of his sweet wife's voice defiled into ragged coughing. His bride’s mouth screwed around a cigarette.

"No coffee for me,” said Angela. I'm still wired from work. Wired and tired."

"My love." Edgardo stepped over, rubbed her cool bare feet.

“They let Edgardo and Shirleen go, and now the rest of us just bust our asses twice as hard."

Cuca butted in. "But that movie vato wasn't waiting around waiting for his ship to come in,"

Angela shrugged."Gotta hand it to a guy who'll go that extra mile."

"Thank you, Horatio Alger," Edgardo snapped. Was it triumph he read on his sister-in-law's face before it was covered by the hysterical glee of her magazine's cover girl?

Five months had passed since The Meat Up let Edgardo go. It wasn't him, it wasn't his cooking, just that times were tough. People were going out less. This was the San Fernando Valley, not West L.A. or Santa Monica. They'd keep Leroi, who had a kid. They'd keep Angela.

Edgardo had long since made the rounds of coffee shops around the Valley. The next morning after dropping Angela off at The Meat Up, Edgardo called the UCLA Medical Center and asked whether they were conducting any paid medical studies. After being advised where he could find the current announcements, he barreled the pickup down Sepulveda to Westwood.

At the Medical Center’s bulletin board, he collected paper tabs. He did all this to prove a point: the fact that he wasn't t-shirt cannoning the Valley with resumes had nothing to do with unwillingness to pull his weight.

Edgardo and his sisters had grown up in San Antonio without a man in the house. Their father's lonely hauls back and forth the eye-ten paid the rent and put food on the table and clothes on their backs, but at the cost of his absence. The year he turned twelve, Edgardo had surged up like a sunflower, gaining eleven inches in height over one year. His bones would ache at night, his big feet dangling from the edge of his boyhood bed. His mother assured him the pain meant he was growing into a strong man. But Edgardo didn't want to become a giant wretch who belonged to the world and the interstate. He wanted to stay with his mother and help her make fried herring and kroppkakor.

He began working after school in his uncle Hans and Aunt Linda's roadside cafe, filling water glasses and clearing plates. Later, he’d begun slanging hamburgers and patty melts. His goal was to have his own business by the time he was thirty.

In the medical center's "Healing Garden," Edgardo settled himself on a scrolled bench and began calling the numbers from the slips he'd collected. He discarded the studies that requested female subjects. Most of the lines patched him straight through to voicemail. One study entailed having your throat numbed and apparatus inserted to monitor your lungs. "You will experience a significant amount of discomfort," the gal who answered advised him breathlessly. Finally, he was down to his last chance. The white scrap read, "Vitamin E Study." The researcher answered halfway through the first ring.

Compared to the lung thing, this one sounded civilized: the administration of Vitamin E and some other medication, and few blood draws over a ten-hour period to check the interaction of the two. Since he was already nearby, he agreed to a general pre-screening of urine and blood. He strode to the meeting like a man with a purpose. If this worked out, he'd be doing his bit to advance medical science, contributing to the store of human knowledge. Okay!

The building where Naomi the researcher said to meet her for the pre-screening was a utilitarian stucco affair behind the medical center and through an outdoor freight area. A sheet of paper affixed to the glass entrance read, "Medical Study Area! Room 404." He jogged the three flights, pushed open a swinging door.

Inside the bright-lit room, five or six people, a couple of them attached by rubber tubes to IV stands, lounged in folding chairs around a circular table, watching television or hunched over their phones. A couple of stringy haired guys in pajamas were comparing stories about Robbie Knievel, son of the famous daredevil. Several hospital beds lined one wall, some partially hidden by screens. The room was like a combination waiting room and a shabby hospital suite.

"Mr. Axelson?" A smiling woman approached, buttoning her white smock.

"Hey." Edgardo shook her outstretched hand, marveling at its daintiness. " Her name tag read, "Naomi Tsukimura, Pharm. D., Research Fellow." He wasn't sure what he was supposed to call her.

"Ready?" she asked brightly, already leading him to a cluttered work desk at the back of the room, crowded with IV stands, tubes, vials, opened boxes of medical supplies, and a menacing-looking red plastic tub marked "for disposal of infectious waste." She didn't introduce him to any of the IV people. A Chicano dude dressed like Naomi sat at the next desk, his nose in a spy novel.

Edgardo cleared his throat. She hadn't said anything about putting on a show. This was his blood. "Can I lie down? Could I get a folding screen?" he asked.

"No problem," Naomi returned. She got him settled on one of the cots, had him roll up his sleeve, and tightened a yellowish strip of rubber around his arm. He closed his eyes, heard the sound of a packet being torn. The sharp scent of rubbing alcohol. She swiped roughly at the inside of his arm.

"I'm good," he said for the benefit of the others in the room. He felt certain they had their ears pricked after he'd requested privacy.

He hadn't had his blood drawn since he and Angela applied for their marriage license. The wedding at L.A. City Hall seemed long ago, although less than a year had passed. Shirleen and LeRoi had been their witnesses, and they'd all gone to the Biltmore for drinks after, none of them with a notion of knowing the events awaiting the newlyweds: Edgardo's layoff, the impossibility of finding work. Cuca's noisy arrival. Angela's sadness.

"Who submits to these tests, anyway?" he asked, wanting to place himself outside the population of this strange world of hospital food, of medicines and blood vials.

"Oh, sometimes residents and interns," she answered, still swiping. "They can use the money, plus they happen to be in the neighborhood. I used myself as a subject for this one." She laughed and stuck him.

Edgardo counted ceiling tiles until Naomi withdrew the needle and pressed a square of cotton to the inside of his elbow. He heard a tube being capped. She said Edgardo could rest if he wanted. He did feel a little woozy. She set a plastic cup on the bed beside his shoulder, saying the bathroom was just on the other side of the swinging door, when he was ready. A moment later, Edgardo rose, setting his feet gingerly on the floor. He pushed back the folding screen, cutting an embarrassed glance to the television area.

As he crossed the room, he folded his arms to hide the cup, hoping he had enough in him for the test. The Chicano guy glanced at him; away.

He crossed the room, folded his arms to hide the cup. He hoped he had enough in him for the test. This was a place of medicine. Blood and pee and worse were no big deal here. Organs and pus were their bread and butter! Naomi sat at the technician's desk, on which sat a rack of filled and labeled blood vials. He set the cup of urine beside it.

Naomi offered him some paperwork to read at home. Beginning at noon the next day, Edgardo would spend ten hours here. Nice. He'd pictured himself alone in a pleasant, secluded room, listening to podcasts or reading a book.

"Well, I have to get these into the refrigerator now," Naomi said. She gave Edgardo her hand, finished with him until the next day.

The screening hadn't been painful, and Naomi seemed to know what she was doing. But the thought of her inserting a catheter (Like a little faucet! she'd supplied cheerfully), pulling blood from his body eleven separate times during the next day made Edgardo twist and fidget all night. It was nearly six by the time he finally slipped into sleep. Angela woke him at ten, as he'd requested, shaking him gently by the shoulder. Leroi would pick her up for work in a minute.

The blood draw spot at the inside of Edgardo's right elbow was stained purple. Any effect his dramatic gesture might have provided had already been made. Now the idea seemed ludicrous: that a man might need literal blood money to make points with his own wife. Still curled in their bed. Edgardo read aloud from one of the forms Naomi had given him: "Participation in this study is strictly voluntary. As an experimental subject I have the right to refuse to participate at all or to change my mind about participation after the study is started if I have reservations." Angela, combing her wet hair, smiled encouragingly.

"If I wish to participate, I should sign below."

"Sounds legit." Angela dipped to tie her work shoes; the back of her white blouse was wetted translucent by her hair in a seaweed-like pattern. She was working a double today.

"What if I have reservations, Angela. It's — macabre!" Edgardo grimaced, wanting her to agree, wanting the backing out, his distaste for the medical study, to belong to both of them. Something they'd smile about someday when Cuca was gone.

But Angela's expression was neutral. They stared at one another in their newly familiar roles: Edgardo the fuck-up, Angela disappointed once again.

"Baby, it's been so tough," she said. "This isn't. . .what I thought marriage would be like." She eyed him as though to measure how large an explosion her comment might spark. Did she think he was going to yell or throw a chair with Cuca right there in the kitchen, frying up breakfast sausages?

Edgardo rose. Began yanking the sheets from their bed, flinging them into the corner hamper. He grabbed at the shopping bag on his side, withdrew the packaged white bedding he'd picked up at Pier One on the way home from UCLA. He used his teeth to tear the plastic wrapping, then opened the folded top sheet, tried to shake it out between them.

"Let me help." Angela took one edge of the sheet, tried to pull it away. But the sheet, still folded so tightly from the package, wouldn't pull away.

"Forget it!" Then, with more kindness than he felt: "It's late."

He wanted her out of the house so he could hear himself think. As though Edgardo were a sick child, she kissed his brow, patted his hand, then left the room, half-shutting the door behind her.

In the kitchen, the land line rang. "Hey, if that's Boyd, tell him I'm not here. Tell him I'm with my new squeeze—a cop!" Idiot.

He located the fitted sheet, bonneted the elastic ends around each corner of the mattress, jaw hardening at the festive buzz of the coffee grinder. He'd stay right where he was until they were on their merry ways: Angela to The Meat Up, Cuca out looking at apartments.

Lou Reed, Angela's stocky white shorthair, emerged from under the bed. The cat had the depthless expression of a bully. In their early days, Lou Reed would practically claw the hollow-core bedroom door from its frame while Edgardo and Angela were making love. Finally they'd started letting Lou stay, perched like a child king on the red velvet bedside chair, watching.

Edgardo tolerated the cat reluctantly, although he'd long ago stopped bringing Lou dried fish treats and rubber toys in the hope of winning him over. The only diversion the little bastard enjoyed was a cat o' nine tails Angela'd found on the sidewalk in front of the apartment building back when Lou was a kitten. She could send the cat into paroxysms of feline glee by shaking the whip.

When Angela was around, Edgar made a point of acting friendly to Lou, even patting a fat haunch or scratching behind an ear, but alone with the fat feline, Edgardo's policy was to ignore him.

Lou jumped to the mattress, insinuated himself onto Edgardo's lap. "Move your ass," Edgardo muttered. He lifted Lou's bulk and dumped him to the floor.

So this wasn't what Angela thought marriage would be like. He grabbed her pillow, inhaling her scent. His wife. He wrapped himself around the pliant substitute. As if Edgardo himself had envisioned this dissolve into the housecleaning and the cleaning of the litter box, the grocery shopping, the budget movie matinees.

He leapt from the bed, slapped the shade spinning on its upper rod. He pulled on a pair of sweats and moved to the kitchen, which was dirty but deserted. The air was thick with the smell of sausage and burnt coffee and Cuca's morning cigarette. The stove top was gooey with butter and cold meat grease.

A folded piece of notebook paper lay the kitchen table, his name written in pencil. Angela had left a note. " I shouldn't have said what I did. You are my husband." She didn't say she was sorry. She didn't take it back. He'd been the good little houseboy for the past five months, hadn't he, serving up dinners, cleaning up the messes? Tolerating Cuca's derisive cackle, her comments about how well Angela was taking it.

Did Angela imagine this was what her husband thought his life would be like at twenty-nine, that he'd look ahead of him and have not a clue in the colorless sky what his next step should be? That solemn children in suits and expensive shoes, barely off the playground, would be asking in disbelief why he wasn't Microsoft Office proficient?

That's when Edgardo sprang into action. Pulse dancing, he began cramming jeans, shirts and underwear into the new pillowcases. Outside, he threw open the Scion's door and dumped the whole mess into the back seat. He'd dress, leave food and water for Lou Reed, and get the hell out.

He shook the last of Lou's dry food into the cat bowl. The cat: where was that little prick? Edgardo checked under the bed, his own side of the closet, a tumble of worn black shoes. Next, under the stove, behind the icebox, amidst the dirty clothes smelling faintly of mildew in the bathroom hamper: favorite Lou hangouts. Damn it: the front door was hanging open.

The guest room was next. Cuca'd left an explosion of blouses and pants slung wildly over chairs. Capless spray bottles filled the room with intoxicating, unknown aromas, the smells of a stranger. Cuca said she didn't mind if he worked at his desk while she was out, but he hadn't entered since her arrival.

"Lou?" He bent, shook Cuca's blankets, inhaled her scent, tart and springy. Her smoky, female shit spread around in here made him jittery.

"Hey, Prince Charming!" Cuca cried, standing in the doorway. Her mouth was stained with heavy, berry-colored lipstick. She leered mock-appreciatively at Edgardo's hairless chest.

"Hey," Edgardo managed, moving past her into the kitchen. "Seen Lou?"

"All I ever see of that beast is an asshole and a tail. He hates me," she returned, dumping the contents of the ashtray in the trash and lighting another cigarette.

"Maybe he dislikes secondhand smoke," Edgardo sniffed.

"OK, OK. Sorry about the mess. Don't clean, dude. I'm serious; I'll get it after my interview." He watched her walk away, her round ass the spitting image of Angela's.

He was still holding the cat o' nine tails. "Lou?" His voice was rusty. Edgardo rattled the soft leather fringes of the whip, murmuring extravagant curses and the cat's name — worthless, whoever heard of a cat that came when you called it?

He slapped the chairback with the whip. He'd do it, go through with the stupid medical study. He'd need the

money out there on his own, anyway. He hit the chair again, harder this time.

“Find what you’re looking for?” Cuca. Now with just a bra on top. “I gotta change my shirt. Sweaty.”

Edgardo moved first, but it wasn’t like Cuca pushed him away. In fact, she grabbed him by the head and planted one on his mouth. Deep. A kind of kiss he and Angela hadn’t shared in months. And no, it wasn’t anything like kissing his wife. There was the cigarette-y taste, of course. He liked it. There were also the sounds she made. A throaty moan. Edgardo was instantly hard.

He had to know.

He lifted Cuca to the desk and pushed her skirt up above her thighs. It was she who pulled the flimsy panty aside, not stopping to take it off. He dove. Tasted. Her intimate cry was loud, louder than Angela ever permitted herself. But the taste. Yes. It was the same.

When it was over, she leaned in and wiped his mouth. Her eyes flicked to his crotch. A dare danced in her expression — so like Angela’s in friendlier times.

He squeezed her shoulder.

She caught his hand in hers, gave him a stare.

“I’d better get to my appointment,” he managed.

“Good call,” she said. Get outta here.”

To save money, he parked at the Federal Building and speed-walked across Wilshire and up to the campus. He jogged through the long corridor of the Medical Center, out the back door and into the loading area. He sprinted the steps to the study building.

There was no sign of Naomi. In the deserted hall outside the door to the study area Edgardo removed his watch cap and stuffed it partway into his waistband, then chewed his cuticles, and finally drew the folded release from his pocket.

He said, “On the study day, I will enter the Infusion Therapy and Research Center at 12:00 p.m. at which time a catheter (a small tube that will allow for blood samples to be drawn) will be inserted into a vein in my arm."

The image of the terrible blood faucet came again and he swallowed back a rush of nausea. C’mon, man. It was only a little blood! Plenty of people gave donations of twice as much as the whole study would take.

"After the insertion of the catheter has been inserted, I will receive a single oral dose of cyclosporine of 10 mg/kg with or without a dose of Liqui-E depending on my randomization. I will then have 2 teaspoons of blood drawn at 0, 0.5, 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, and 8 hours after the cyclosporine dose."

Maybe Naomi was waiting inside the actual study area. He pushed open the swinging door and peered inside.

"May I help you?" At the nearest cot, a kneeling technician, pudgy and blonde, squinted up at him as she fiddled with the stubborn wheel of an elderly black lady's IV stand.

"I'm meeting one of the researchers — Naomi? I'm a little early."

"Hmm. They run all kinds of studies in here. Make yourself at home." As Edgardo sat at a card table to wait, for Naomi, the subjects of the IV study stood in turn to submit to their technician at her desk: everyone politely ignoring their fellows as blood was drawn, drips attached. Edgardo recognized some of the faces from the previous day. No one looked at him. Puzzlers, acrostics, bead stringing supplies had been left out on a big round dining table. After being connected to one of the rolling IV poles hung with plastic sack of liquid, a man, pockmarked and skinny, stretched out on the couch and dozed off, face to the ceiling. Something about the setting made Edgardo — no, not feel sick, but feel as though he were sick, on the precipice of surrender to a vague and painless torpor, released from time.

The TV was going at low volume: a tell-all talk show. An adopted, middle-aged woman was meeting her mother for the first time. Another case was an engaged couple, the man openly indulging in an affair, which he planned to end on the eve of the wedding. The mistress was there too, in neutral colors, flat shoes and no makeup, a startling contrast to the fiancée herself. Around the TV, in various positions of repose, the other medical subjects offered suggestions to the fiancée: "Get your GED and take care of number one—that's what I'm doing," a dingy-haired girl in a robe and slippers advised.

"You've got to love yourself first, honey," the pockmarked man sighed without opening his eyes.

A middle-aged lady hmmphed, "Get on with the marriage, and tell that tramp to step off!"

Perhaps as Naomi told him, internists and residents often volunteered, But most of the volunteers, Edgardo realized, were desperate for money. One thing he could say for himself: he'd never sink low enough to follow the soaps or talk shows. Daytime television was for losers.

The overhead lights buzzed. Where was Naomi? Edgardo spotted a water cooler next to the door, and he headed for it. Wrapped in a hospital blanket, somebody slept curled in a gurney. Beside some of the other beds, personal effects were arranged: cheap shampoos and lotions, gossip magazines, several shabby purses. Everything so pubic.

Nobody said anything to Edgardo, although an addled-looking guy with pumpkin-colored hair and bad teeth nodded and grinned from his seat near the TV.

"Hey, I'm running down the hall for a sec, OK?" the chubby technician announced, and there was a general murmur of agreement from the subjects, Edgardo included.

It was 12:05. Edgardo gathered up the papers, crumbled them, carried the armload of trash to the plastic can at the technician's desk. Beside the plastic infectious waste jar, a little white stuffed bear holding a puffy red heart had tipped onto its side. "Something to remember me by," a floral enclosure card underneath the bear read.

He squeezed the stuffed bear, which made no sound. The Justice of the Peace Office at L.A. City Hall, where Edgardo and Angela were married, had been festooned with stuffed bears and kittens, handmade cards and streamers, as though the celebrants needed to personalize the occasion, make it memorable to the State Clerk who performed the same ceremony hundreds of times a month. As though having an interested and involved witness to the intimate moments of their lives granted courage and validity, made it more probable that you'd honor your own promises.

"Aw," somebody said. The man on TV was crying, saying he couldn't help his ways; he was from a military background. His fiancée opened her arms. The mistress looked as though she didn't know whether she was supposed to leave. It was the mistress, going home by herself that Edgardo felt for. What would happen to her now?

Edgardo watched the mistress's displacement with horror, half-expecting the television audience to begin shouting, or even throwing items to force her from the stage.

The men's room, he remembered, was just outside the study area door. He headed there under the silent pretext of needing to piss. He didn't want to be shut out in the cold, with no one to care whether he got out of bed in the morning, no one to recognize or scold or remember who he was. Decisively, Edgardo drew the consent form from his back pocket. He wasn't a desperate person. He uncapped his pen extravagantly with his teeth, and printed on the back of the unsigned release, "I am sorry to say I will be unable to participate in the Vitamin E study. Sincerely, Mr. Axelson.

Back in the hall, Edgardo noticed what he hadn't seen before: Naomi had left him a note. He should meet her, not in the testing area, or her office, but the next building over, in room 105. He used the strip of adhesive tape to replace the Naomi's note with his own, fled up the stairs, through the hospital's interminable corridors, past the hospital gift shop, through Westwood Village and across traffic-clogged Wilshire to the parking lot and the Scion.

The tiny lot behind The Meat Up had a space open. Before going inside, Edgardo dragged the suitcase across the wide leatherette seat and yanked it out the driver's side door. The truck bed was crowded with the artifacts of his and Angela's life: the hibachi spilling powdery gray ash, empty plastic water jugs he kept meaning to fill up at the machine in front of Lucky's, a box of frayed towels, a pink cowboy hat of Angela's.

As he pulled the restaurant’s heavy glass door, Edgardo was weakened by a sudden loss of nerve: What if, in this public place, Angela were to turn him away? The thought turned his muscles to rubber. He headed straight to table two, in back. No Angela. An old guy sat alone at number four, nursing a full glass of ice water and reading a paperback. At number seven, a big party of suits was drinking and yukking it up. One of the men whispered something to a young woman, who teasingly poked the man with a finger. And there was Angela,

emerging from the little cubicle that connected the restaurant to the bar. She was balancing a round tray of drinks, some of which had umbrellas and fruit-stuck swizzles sticking up from them. Her thick hair spilled, incredibly sexy, from the loose bun at the top of her head. Edgardo was close enough to see the beauty mark at the corner of her mouth.

Edgardo watched his wife work. After distributing the drinks, Angela asked the man at the head of the table if they were ready to order. When the man nodded, she set the tray on the floor, leaned it against her leg, and took out her order book. A man in a pastel tie said something and she laughed, showing her dimples.

He waited until her back was to him. Busy taking orders, She didn't notice Edgardo pass and enter the empty kitchen. Where was Leroi, the cook? Edgardo lifted the lid of the row of salad canisters, popped a crouton into his mouth. The swinging doors to the dining room parted. Edgardo's wife appeared before him like some kind of prize. "Hey." She seemed pleased but not surprised to see him.

Angela slid the tray under the salad prep counter, drew the ticket pad from her pocket and wrote some more on the top page. "Huge party of shrinks on seven. They're sure making me nuts."

"Probably how they get new customers." Edgardo bent to wrap his arms around her. He felt like a lover in a movie, meeting his mistress. Leroi lumbered from the back of the kitchen to his station at the grill, holding two uncooked pork chops in each hand. He stood there scowling under his stiff white hat.

Angela raised a finger to the burly cook. "Hold off on that ticket. A minute with my husband." Leroi said nothing, just tossed the chops from one hand to the next.

Tenderly Edgardo kissed her upper left arm and began: "I went for the study."

"You did?" She glanced toward the grill but Leroi had disappeared. Edgardo was nearly disappointed. He wanted to go public with his devotion, wanted everybody in the goddamned place to know how much he revered her. Hot dishwasher steam issued from around the corner.

"Was it okay? Was it awful?" Angela searched his face. He shrugged, dismissing her concern.

"They canceled. I'm the wrong blood type of something. Angela, it's Lou. He got away, honey." He flashed a quick, lateral palm. "Cuca left the door open." He felt like a doctor breaking unsettling news. " I'm handling everything, baby."

Stricken, she reached for Edgardo's hand. "I know she's my sister, but I've never met anyone more self-absorbed."

The glow came. "Ange, don't be hard on her. I'll make posters, check Animal Control every day," Edgardo said. "Feel like venison chili tonight? She like hot food like we do?"

"Sure, OK. I just can't believe this. I know she's not used to pets, but I told her."

"Well, it's a sensitive time. She hides it by cracking jokes and being loud, you know? Let's not tell her it's her fault." He'd pick up some beer, too. He'd freeze it so cold the bottlenecks would be lined with slivers of ice. He'd stop by Ralph's, pick up a slab of venison and the peppers—anchos, pickled jalapenos and the small-but-mighty chilipiquins. Garlic and cumin seeds, they already had. He'd roast the seeds in the cast-iron skillet, sauté the garlic in Cuca's sausage drippings to give the chili a salty, juicy kick. He'd fix it so hot they'd sweat.

Overcome, Edgardo took his wife's hands in his and sank to his knees. Her fingers smelled of cilantro and vinaigrette.

"Honey?" she said. "What would I do without you?"

If only he could ask her to marry him all over again. They'd face this thing together: locating stubby, bilious Lou, helping Cuca to start her new life. Edgardo and Angela, side by side, would build upon the day-to-day push and pull of vulnerability and strength, would build the marriage anew. He could console her all day long.

"C'mon man," Leroi sighed from his station at the grill. On his knees, Edgardo tightened his arms around his wife's thighs, thanking fate for her fingers in his hair, for Leroi as witness to this oh-so-narrow triumph. Edgardo sighed into the flesh of his angel, a man who had gambled with and been found by the narrowest fraction the victor of a complex and drawn-out malady.

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So I'm learning, learning to be a better man

I'm not certain, but I think I can now

Oh, but if I fall short, just know

I've done all I can do to change

But you're never gonna know this

If you always look the other way