

ENGL499H
December 2014

COUNTY LINES

by

Tyler Downey

Contents

County Lines 3

Fly Me To The Moon 46

Well Here We Go 71

This Is How We Loved 97

County Lines

Ruxin was having a hard time with the stars. They didn't look right to him. He was standing on top of an A-frame ladder, flashlight in his mouth. His balance was shaky, and he used his left hand to steady himself on the ledge of the building, right hand guiding the can of spray paint. He had painted most of the colors from a safer place on the ladder, but realized he needed to finish the stars and night sky, the tops of the buildings and upper half of the terrace.

He was wondering if it was considered trespassing if he was painting on a building in a *public* university—didn't that mean it was just as much his as anyone else's? Doesn't matter, he thought. No one was out there to notice at three in the morning, not even the old security guard who rode around in his little golf cart enforce-a-mobile.

He climbed down the ladder to his backpack to get a different color. He checked his book for reference, made sure he was getting the number of stars right. He bit down on the flashlight again and climbed back up the ladder. He reached the top step and almost fell off, but caught himself on the ledge.

Ruxin didn't know he was being watched, just kept working. The coarse exterior

of the building wasn't the best canvas, and the paint ran down the wall if he sprayed too much in one spot. The night was damp, the grassy smell of dew and fog. The campus was lit along the walkways, but the alcove in the building's exterior was dark and the flashlight didn't help much, just made his jaw sore.

He created a crude rendering of Van Gogh's Terrace at Night, complete with golden yellows, oranges, and deep blues. He referenced the book for clarity, finished the stars. Then he threw a misquote on top of the wet paint: "A good picture is equivalent to a bad deed." He painted the word "bad" in red.

He climbed down and admired his work, standing a few yards from the wall and smiling, cross-armed, shoulders burning from holding awkwardly-extended positions.

A few hundred yards away, across the lawn, a man sat at a bench watching him work.

The day before, Ruxin had taken his mint-like-new Spanish textbook back to the community college bookstore. It was the middle of the semester. The book had served him well sitting on the floor of the garage, so he figured he would allow someone else to enjoy the thing. He drove the back way to campus because it was rush hour by the time he got out of bed and put on pants. On his way, he passed the farms that stretch on for acres and acres and inch all the way up to the highway, tar and exhaust seeping into the corn and livestock. Then the scenery became more humanized, houses grew into developments but still retained that "country home" feel. He passed the library, the private school—where some kind of sporting event was taking place, judging by the number of cars parked along the road—and finally the church where his mother used to

go. His new father figure—the thought made Ruxin laugh again—Michael, didn't believe in God, and so Ruxin's mother had given up church when he moved in. Ruxin's mother had always believed in some kind of higher power, and Ruxin knew it had given her comfort. He resented—among other words—Michael for taking that away from his mother.

He slowed down as he passed the non-descript church: off-white, mid-size, one-story building with a small cross above the front doors. There was a detached house for the church offices. There was a basketball hoop in the parking lot, and Ruxin remembered shooting around with some of the other kids back when he was in middle school. He considered pulling in and seeing if that same pastor was still there: Michaelson. Ruxin had always liked the guy for some reason. He didn't know if he really believed in God, but had enjoyed hearing Pastor Michaelson talk about God—something comforting about it. Ruxin drove by, he would do it some other time.

Ruxin could smell the stench of academia as he walked to the bookstore: the kids all bright-faced as they tightly grip their textbooks, dreaming of taking on the world, only to realize a few years down the line that Costco will gladly take eight hours of their life every day until they eventually leave this earth in a series of disappointing events.

He walked to the counter, slid his textbook across to the woman, eyed her up. She was short and round, and wearing a scarf for no apparent reason—probably thought it made her look interesting. Ruxin thought about pulling the scarf from her neck and setting it on fire with his lighter as a joke.

She opened the book, shut it again, slid it back to Ruxin.

“We no longer carry that edition. You can recycle it over there.” She pointed to a large blue bin that was labeled “Recycle Your Books!”

Ruxin turned and looked at the blue bin, then back at the woman with the scarf.

“You serious?” he said. “I bought this book seven weeks ago. Why do you advertise a book-buy-back day and then tell students to throw them in the trash?”

“It’s not a trashcan, it’s a recycle bin.”

Ruxin turned again to the bin. “It sure looks like a trashcan.”

A girl behind Ruxin laughed. He smiled.

The woman pursed her lips and stared at Ruxin.

“In that case, you keep it,” he said, sliding it back. “I don’t particularly feel like trudging it all the way over to your giant trashcan that is so pleasantly labeled. It’s a gift, from me to you.”

The girl behind him laughed again and muttered, “Wow.”

Ruxin walked to the girl. “You want me to take your books for you? Save you thirty seconds.”

“I think I’m okay,” she smiled. “I can find my own way to the trashcan.”

“See,” said Ruxin, loud. The other students in the bookstore lifted their heads to see the noisemaker. “It’s a trashcan, despite your attempts at camouflage.”

Back in the truck, Ruxin wanted to stop everyone from going to the college, stop them from thinking anything good would come from the place. He drove to Wal-Mart for some spray paint.

After painting his mural late that night, Ruxin drank many beers and managed to

fall into something like sleep until 3:30 in the afternoon, alone in his mother's converted garage. Nights were not kind to him, and he usually sat up thinking and reading, his eyes itchy with red lines stretching across their whites, torturing himself with other men's tragedies and sorrows on the page as he found relaxation and slower, muddier thoughts and emotions in beer, calming himself and sleeping late into the day.

Someone knocked on the door.

Ruxin's eyes flickered. He fumbled with his hands and feet to move off the bed, fell onto the floor in his sleepy-tipsy state.

The knock came again, louder. The noise hurt Ruxin's head.

"Yeah," said Ruxin, kicking jeans towards his bed. "Hold up."

He opened the door and saw Michael standing there, a Miller Lite in his hand. A man with a small, tough build, Michael had a dark, short beard and his hair was cut close on the sides and longer on the top, often hanging down onto his very large forehead.

"What's up?" asked Ruxin.

"Your mom's been texting you," said Michael. "Dinner's ready." His eyes wandered.

Ruxin knew he must look like hell, his black sweatpants were too short and had holes in them that matched his grey hoodie, both had paint spots on them.

"Yeah," said Ruxin. "My phone kind of died."

"At least open a window to get the cigarette smell outta here. Look at all this shit." Michael rubbed his beard and looked away. "You a painter now?"

"Okay, thanks," said Ruxin, closing the door.

"You get fired again?" Michael said, behind the closed door.

“Thanks for stopping by.”

Ruxin walked back to the window and watched Michael cross the driveway to the house.

Michael stepped up the two wooden steps to the kitchen door. “Little fucker,” he said. He spat into the gravel and walked inside.

Ruxin let the curtain hang back across the window and picked up his phone. The text from his mother was there: “Dinner.” There was also a missed call and voicemail from a number he didn’t recognize. The message told him to come in and see a certain art professor about the graffiti.

He plugged his phone into the charger and dug around in his backpack, found an energy bar under some notes and papers. He took off the wrapper and held the bar in his teeth, grabbed a beer from the mini fridge and turned the TV to CNN with the sound off. He took his notebook and a pen from the desk and sat down on the bed to draw cartoons of the news correspondents.

After two more beers, he had finished the comic strip. His favorite was the crazed woman dressed in a pointy suit with huge hair. She was staring wide-eyed from the page while screaming “Lies! Lies! Lies!” with her mouth open to the point of taking over her entire face—as if she were singing in a Charlie Brown cartoon. The old man next to her had a mass of stringy, curly hair above his ears, leaving the top portion of his head domed and bald. The woman gave him a kiss with her giant lips, the old man’s eyes doubling in size and his messy side-hair sticking straight out as if electrocuted.

Ruxin lay back on the bed and turned the channel to Nickelodeon. He’d had enough of cartoon characters for one night. He preferred cartoons that were supposed to

be cartoons, their identity was sure, and they didn't lie about it.

Someone knocked again.

He opened the door and found his mother standing there, rubbing her arms in the chill evening wind. She almost always wore her hair pulled back, little makeup, and her face had the worn look of a lived life, the years taking their mark and hiding her gentle eyes.

"It's cold. Are you cold in here?" She walked in past Ruxin.

"No. It's fine."

"Hmm," she said. She started picking up bottles and crumpled papers.

"I can do that."

"But you won't," she said, shoving things into piles with her foot.

"You're mad."

"You didn't come to dinner, again." She looked at his face.

"What do you want me to say?"

"Sorry, for one," she said, going back to her straightening up.

"Okay, I'm sorry," he said.

"I don't want to keep doing this."

"I don't either."

She sighed and placed some trash into the trashcan. "How was class today?"

"Fine."

"Sounds like you learned a lot," she said. "One class, Rux. Just one class. I mean, honestly, what do you want me to do?"

"Nothing. I don't want anyone helping me."

“But you don’t get it. We stop helping you, you do nothing.”

“Don’t say we.”

“It is we. It’s not just my money.”

“I don’t care about money.”

His mother put her hands up in a mock gesture of bewilderment. “Oh, such the young idealist, aren’t we? It’s not your money, so you need to care.”

“Okay.”

“So, tomorrow you’ll go.”

“Mh-hmm.”

She walked back to the door. “Clean this mess up, will you?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She turned before walking out. “Did you get fired again?”

Ruxin scratched his head. “Yeah.”

“What do you do that you keep getting fired?”

Ruxin pulled out a cigarette. “I guess I’m just not that likable of a guy.” He lit it.

She laughed and walked out. Ruxin watched her from the window. She lingered in her steps back to the house, head hanging down, hands on her hips.

The next day Ruxin walked down the hallway of the art department, wondering if he wouldn’t be better off drinking a few beers in the garage. Again, the smell of academic pursuit reached his nose, that smell that made him think of people working inside of a sheltered box instead of contributing to society, the smell of dry-erase markers, pencils, and disinfectant. The possibility of possibilities made him nervous, and his back was

damp as he walked down the non-descript hallway painted so generically that Ruxin wondered if the art professors realized how bland a building they worked in. He came to office 234 with the name Carl Frost displayed on the door. The door was cracked.

He knocked.

“The door’s open, why are you knocking?” said the voice inside.

At the desk sat Professor Frost, chewing a large wad of gum. He was a man in his mid-thirties who looked much older and dressed much younger: fitted black t-shirt and slim dark jeans with black sneakers. His brown hair was thinning on his head and he was slightly overweight but skinny in his arms, a result of drinking and eating poorly. A beard of short stubble covered the skin on the lower half of his face. Papers were everywhere on his desk and in no kind of piles. There were also papers and paintings all over the floor and on the shelves. The only organized thing about Frost’s office was the large stack of Nicorette gum packs on his desk. Ruxin also noticed a patch on Frost’s arm.

“Wouldn’t it be healthier at this point to just smoke?” said Ruxin.

“I knew you’d be a smartass.”

Ruxin stepped towards the chair opposite Frost.

“Don’t step on anything, or I’ll rip your throat out.”

Ruxin hesitated at Frost’s tone, but made it to the chair and sat down.

Frost leaned back and chewed his gum, stared at Ruxin. “So, you’re the punk vandal?”

“How’d you even find me?”

“I saw your dumb ass and checked the security tapes, those guys are friends of mine. We caught the license from that truck and bam, there you were.”

“You saw me? At three in the morning?”

“I sit out there at night and look over paintings in the dark.”

“In the dark. Right.” Ruxin scratched his chin.

“You think it’s wise to insult the man who can turn you in?”

“Turn me in? It’s graffiti.”

“It’s also a crime.”

“So what then? You wanted me to come in here so you could scold me?”

“Why did you come here today?”

“Because your message said I had to.”

“But you don’t seem intent on changing my mind. You seem concerned with telling me off. Why is that?”

Ruxin leaned forward in his chair. “Maybe I came here today because I was curious about the guy who claimed to know I did something. Maybe I just wanted to figure out how you knew it was me. And yeah, maybe I was curious as to why you’d suggest the possibility of giving me a chance.”

“A chance? Chance for what?”

“I don’t know. Isn’t that why you wanted to meet?”

Frost smiled. “Why should I offer you a chance at anything for vandalizing my school?”

“Do you own the school?”

“There’s the smartass again.”

“Maybe you want me to take one of your classes so your enrollment will go up by at least one and the school will stop defunding your art programs.”

Frost laughed. "I don't want you in my class."

"No?"

"No." Frost sat up in his chair and put his arms on his desk. "Anyone with talent should not take art classes here. I imagine this kind of honesty piques your interest."

"You think you have me figured out from a minute of talking?"

"No one can ever be figured out. But I know you're arrogant, talented, obnoxiously confident."

Ruxin began to stand.

Frost put his arm out, Ruxin sat.

"Do you even know what you painted up there? It wasn't half bad, considering you used spray paint."

Ruxin sighed and shifted his weight. "Let's just do whatever you had planned already."

Frost picked up papers and a pen, as if he had already moved on. "If you don't want to be turned in, bring me everything you've done so far. Paintings, sketches, everything. I want to see it all."

"Got it," said Ruxin.

"And bring it soon."

Ruxin couldn't get to sleep that night. He had piled up all his work on the desk, and kept getting out of bed and looking at each drawing. He ripped a few apart, then tried to sleep again.

He dreamed of sex for a while, repetitive sexual encounters with faceless women.

He always got caught in the act when he dreamed of sex, his mother or imaginary father scolding him for some reason. Then he realized he was young in the dream, only thirteen years old. He should not be doing those things, he should feel ashamed.

The sensually shameful dreams blurred into a scene with four small islands in the middle of a dark and violent ocean. Water splashed on his face and he could see his mother, Michael, and a little girl standing on the other three islands that were opposite his own. He wondered who the little girl was. One of his father's other kids, maybe? He hoped not. Man like that shouldn't have any more kids, he thought. The photograph of his father appeared in his hand, the one his mother had kept and never told him about, the one with "Hal" written on the back, the only clue. She never knew Ruxin had found it and hidden it under old drawings in his desk. The waves in the dream kept getting bigger and bigger as Ruxin held on to the photograph, trying to keep it dry. The waves overtook his mother and Michael. Ruxin wanted to jump in and swim towards them, try and pull them from the sea, but he couldn't move. The little girl was the last to go. She was there, the wave crashed, and then she was gone.

Ruxin jerked awake, sweating. He went to his desk and reached under the folders of drawings, pulled out the photograph. It was a little blurry and had been taken in a field, a man standing there with his hands on his hips. He had always wanted to imagine his father as small and weak, but couldn't help finding the picture, couldn't help remembering that his mother had let slip his name once. Other than that, his father was not spoken of, but Ruxin knew the checks kept coming.

He eventually fell back asleep, and was glad to dream of nothing.

Ruxin woke up to his phone vibrating. His friend Rich told him to come hangout on the bridge. He washed his face and walked the two miles to the bridge over the creek. Jason and Rich waved and yelled from afar when they saw Ruxin. Leah walked beside them. She wore her green canvas jacket, black boots, dark jeans, and American flag t-shirt along with her grin that always appeared around Ruxin. Her hair was long and black, trickling down the jacket.

“I told you he’s alive,” said Jason.

“I never thought he was dead,” said Rich.

Jason’s appearance contradicted everything about his weed habit: tall, skinny, wire glasses. Rich, on the other hand, fit the description: long unkempt hair, ratty clothes, blank expression.

“What’s in the backpack?” asked Ruxin.

Jason swung the backpack from his shoulders. “We’re gonna fly this over the bridge.” He removed a small, plastic toy helicopter and a controller.

“What are you, ten?” said Ruxin.

“No, but we *are* high,” said Jason.

Ruxin pulled out a cigarette and put it in his mouth. Leah moved in and held out her hand. Ruxin took it out of his mouth and gave it to her, lit it before getting his own.

Rich and Jason stood on the bridge overlooking the creek twenty feet below. Jason held the controller and Rich held the toy helicopter. Ruxin and Leah walked to the other side of the bridge, leaned against the guardrail and watched cars drive by.

Rich turned towards them, yelled across the road. “We’re making history.”

Leah puffed smoke into Ruxin’s face and smiled. Ruxin tried to imitate her grin.

“Why so sad?” she asked.

“Leah, I think I might die of boredom. I mean I think this might actually kill me.”

“What *are* you doing with your life?”

Ruxin inhaled and then exhaled, slow.

“You just need some direction. I could get you a job at the coffee house.”

“Thanks, but no. It’s not direction though.”

“Motivation then.”

Ruxin left the cigarette in his mouth, put his hands in his coat pockets, stirred his feet in the gravel. “No, you’re not listening.”

“What, then?”

Ruxin tried to clean off his left shoe with his right, scraping at some mud while smoke drifted out his nose. “Forget it.” He threw his cigarette out on the blacktop. He sat up from the guardrail and Leah put her hand on his stomach.

“Come over after this,” she said. “I’ve about had my fill of the two stooges.”

Ruxin looked at the pavement.

“I only ask nice once,” she said. She leaned in and blew smoke on his cheek before kissing it.

Rich and Jason started a countdown, the helicopter resting on Rich’s hand.

“Three. Two. One!”

The helicopter flew towards Leah and Ruxin. Rich ran after it, dodged a car.

“No, no, no, no, no,” said Rich, watching the copter soar towards the sky. “Turn it off,” he yelled.

“I did,” said Jason.

The copter flew up and up.

“Did you turn it off?” asked Rich.

“Yeah,” said Jason.

The helicopter rose high above the creek before losing power and dropping the long way down.

“You better hope that pilot ejects,” said Ruxin.

“Shit,” said Rich.

They all watched it fall and smash on rocks in the shallow water.

Time with Leah was one of Ruxin’s favorite things, in a limited sense. Her father was never home, always travelling somewhere, working “for the government.” Her father wasn’t thrilled about Ruxin the few times he’d met him.

Leah unlocked the front door of the rancher and walked inside, Ruxin right behind her. The family room was dark and the white walls looked grey. The blinds were all closed over the windows. Over to the right was the kitchen with cheap wooden cabinets and old, white plastic appliances. The brown couch in the family room was opposite the fireplace. A small TV sat in the corner. Against the far wall, next to the TV, was a sliding glass door. The white, vertical vinyl blinds only allowed traces of the evening light into the room. Leah took off her boots and jacket and Ruxin walked out the sliding glass door to the woodpile. He started a fire while she rummaged around in the kitchen.

“Rum okay?” Leah asked.

“That’s fine,” Ruxin said. He took his coat off and sat down on the floor, felt the warmth as the fire started to glow.

Leah walked back from the kitchen and set the bottle of rum and glasses on the floor in front of Ruxin, sat down next to him.

“What’re we ordering?” she asked.

“Chinese?” said Ruxin.

“Sure.”

The food arrived and they sat on the floor and watched TV and ate spring rolls and orange chicken and rice while *I Love Lucy* played.

After dinner she made coffee and they drank their rum with their coffee and it tasted bad. He walked outside to get more wood for the fire. Then they kissed for a while and she went back down the hallway and came back with a sleeping bag. They talked and kissed late until the early morning and were warm by the fire.

In the morning Ruxin microwaved the coffee, found some paper and a pencil in a drawer and sat at the kitchen table drawing while Leah slept. His hand flicked across the paper, perfecting his outline before finishing a beautiful portrait of Leah sitting upright on the floor by the fire, her hair hanging down her neck and shirt, shielding part of her face. He drew her wrinkled canvas jacket and the grin curling up her lips. She looked down in the sketch. This is how he drew her every time, always looking away—he couldn’t meet her stare and draw her at the same time. When he was finished with the portrait, he folded the paper and put it in the back pocket of his jeans.

He got out a frying pan and made eggs. He got a few pieces of bread and put them in the toaster. There was no juice or bacon or sausage so he poured two glasses of water and got two plates and some butter and set everything on the kitchen table.

He woke her up and they ate breakfast like a normal couple.

“Why not come work with me at the coffeehouse?” she asked. “It’d be fun.”

“Look,” he said. “I just can’t.” He played with the food on his plate. “And you know that any kind of relationship—”

She set her fork down and got up from the table. “Okay, you’re right. I wouldn’t want to scare you with the thought of time with me.” She walked down the hallway to the shower.

She drove Ruxin back to the garage in her old, blue Honda. The ride was silent as Ruxin thought about what he’d said.

He took a shower, brushed his teeth, dressed. He looked in the mirror and hated what he saw. He was looking more and more like his father.

He took the truck to the train station where his father had boarded the train to take him away from his newborn son, or so he had been told. It seemed a little too perfect to be the truth.

Ruxin sat on a bench and watched everyone walk by, putting off his decision about Frost. He tried starting a few realistic drawings of the station and the people, but ripped them up. He could only draw Leah or his mother that way.

A train pulled up and stopped with loud screeches. Ruxin waited for the passengers to come out of the mobile rectangles, watching through the glass windows as bodies moved in close formations towards the doors. Men with cellphones and overcoats, women in heels holding briefcases, couples wearing knit hats and gloves and holding each other close for no apparent reason. He saw a little girl with a blue hat walk off the train with her mother. The mother, a blur of blonde hair, seemed to be in a hurry, half-dragging the child behind her. The little girl looked like a tiny artist with her little beret

tilted to the side on her head. She waved to Ruxin, jogging to keep up with her mother. Ruxin put down his pencil and waved back. He tried to draw a cartoon of her, but couldn't. He tried to draw a portrait and eventually tore it out of his notebook, threw it on the ground.

When Ruxin got back it was dark out and he saw a light on in his old room on the second floor. He had moved into the garage four months ago when Michael moved in, and his room had been vacant ever since. His mother had tried to tell him how ridiculous it was for him to move into the garage.

"It's like an apartment," he had said.

"But it's not your home," his mother had told him.

He walked in the kitchen door and heard Michael and his mother arguing. The table was set for dinner but no one was there. He walked around to the hall and found Michael standing on the first step, holding the banister. They stopped talking and looked away from each other.

"What is it?" his mother asked.

Ruxin couldn't understand the look on her face. "I was coming to give the keys back."

"Just set them on the table," she said, brushing her hair back behind her right ear.

Ruxin looked at Michael, who seemed just as disoriented as his mother.

"What's going on?" asked Ruxin.

"Rux, just, please?" his mother said, moving her hands up in a beg for silence.

A girl with a small blue beret walked down the staircase.

"There's no blankets on my bed," the girl said. "And it's cold in my room."

“They’re in the closet,” said Michael.

Ruxin’s mother sighed and glared at Michael. “Well go get them for her,” she said.

“Here,” said Michael. “I’ll come get some for you.”

“Ruxin?” asked the girl.

Ruxin looked at his mother. “Umm,” he said. “Yeah.”

“I’m Zoe,” the girl said. “I saw you.”

“At the train station,” said Ruxin.

“You were at the station?” his mother asked.

“If you’d have told me you could have picked her up,” said Michael.

Ruxin’s mother laughed. “Always thinking of others,” she said. “Go get her blankets, Mike.”

Michael took Zoe’s hand and started walking up the stairs.

“My mom was there,” said Zoe, looking at Ruxin. “She’s upset.” She disappeared up the stairs with Michael.

Ruxin stepped back. “What the hell is happening?” he said.

“His ex brought her by,” said his mother. “Told him he had to keep her for a while.”

“What’s a while?”

“Right. Never mind the little girl here, Rux.”

“This is okay?”

“Okay what?” said his mother. “She’s his daughter.”

“Correct me, but I remember him telling you he did *not* have children.”

“You’re not wrong.”

“Bastard.”

“Right. The evil boyfriend. Rux, sometimes—”

“What? You love him so much? Please don’t tell me that.”

“This is not about me and Michael,” said his mother. “This little girl needs a place to stay, and as far as I know her mother’s a wreck.”

“And her father’s an asshole.”

“That’s my problem.” She walked down the hall. “You’re welcome to join us for dinner,” she said.

Leah was still working when Ruxin got to the coffee shop. He sat in the truck in the parking lot watching her take orders and work the register. She smiled at every customer and looked happy, a smile he never saw unless she was talking to other people. He got out of the truck and walked inside. She noticed him immediately, gave him a look that told him she couldn’t talk.

He went back outside to the truck and waited, opened one of the beers he’d brought, turned the radio to classic rock. He reclined the seat and drank, read by flashlight, Don McLean singing about the day he would die.

Ruxin was asleep when Leah walked up and knocked on the window. Four empty bottles were lying on the floor of the truck, another in his lap along with a wrinkled paperback, the last beer sitting innocently in the cardboard pack.

“Hey,” she said, knocking again at the glass.

Ruxin slid up in the seat, beer bottle falling off his lap and joining the other four

on the floor. He opened the door.

“Hey,” he said, stumbling out to the pavement. The book fell out with him.

“Are you drunk?” She pulled her jacket closed.

“No. I only had a few beers or something.”

“Did you eat today?”

“Not really. Whatever. I’m fine.”

“Yeah,” she said.

“Just, will you listen to me for a minute?”

“You have to come to my work?”

“Don’t say it like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like I’m bothering you. Why am I bothering you? I thought you liked me. If I’m bothering you then I guess you really don’t like me a whole lot.”

“You just don’t usually come to me. I always have to track you down.”

“Well I’m sorry about that. And I’m gonna start tracking you down, lady.” Ruxin pointed at Leah.

“Drunk Ruxin is fun,” she laughed.

“You’ve seen me drunk before.”

“Not like this. Not drunk and upset.”

“I am upset. I. Am. Up. Set. But I don’t think I’m drunk or anything like that.”

“I can see that.”

“Let me just, I’m gonna sit down here a minute.” Ruxin sat down on the pavement and leaned back against the truck’s front tire. “Better,” he said.

Leah knelt down in front of him.

“So, I guess the bastard has a daughter. And apparently she’s living with us now.”

He took out a cigarette and lighter from his jacket and lit it with some difficulty. “And she’s like six or five or something young like that.”

“What?”

“My mom never even knew about it, always lies from him. But now, we’re one big happy family.”

“Where’s her mom?”

“Some blonde wreck. I dunno.” Ruxin tried to rub dirt off his boot with his other boot.

Leah sat down next to Ruxin. “That’s fucked up,” she said, taking a drag from his cigarette.

“Yeah. Fuck this guy.”

“Fuck him.”

“Fucking fucker.”

“Fucking right.”

Ruxin put the cigarette in her mouth and then reached his arms around her. “Just don’t leave, okay?”

“Why would I?”

“I guess I just worry you might sometime. I dunno.”

“I’m not.”

Cars drove by on the road, a plane rumbled in the sky.

“What do you get from this?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“This. Me.”

She took a moment, breathed in deep. “I think I see the parts of you that you don’t.”

“You think?”

“I do.”

“I’m no barrel of monkeys,” he said.

“You turn into an old man when you’re drunk.”

They sat there on the pavement for a while. It was foggy and their faces and hands grew damp in the wet smell of the parking lot.

“Alright,” she said. “I’ll drive you back.”

“I’m fine. I just had a few.”

“Yeah, okay. I’m still driving you.” She started to get up. Ruxin slumped over to the pavement. She stood and grabbed his hands, tried to pull him up.

“No,” he said. “But they’re gonna be pissed. They might need the truck tomorrow.”

“So profound tonight.”

“Don’t condescend upon me,” he said, still slumped on the ground with his limp arms being tugged.

“We’ll get you some food and coffee and then we’ll come back to get the car.”

“Okay,” he said. “That’s a good idea. I like the part about food and coffee.” He laughed.

She lifted his arms and he made an attempt to get up. Then he leaned on her and

walked to her car.

Ruxin's eyes were closed as he talked in the car.

"You know," he said. "I just don't get her. Why does she always want some shitty guy in her life? I don't understand it like at all."

"People don't like to be alone."

"I love being alone. It's my absolutely favorite thing." Ruxin's hands moved and flopped while he talked.

"Mh-hmm." She turned the windshield wipers on as it started to drizzle, the sound of wet tires and droplets falling on the glass mixed with the soft thump of the wipers back and forth.

Leah drove him back to the coffee shop in the morning to get the truck. Michael was at the dealership, but his mother was home.

"You either go back to class and get a job, or you lose your truck privileges. You got it?"

"Yeah, I got it, alright? Just...leave it alone."

His mother sighed and sipped her tea. Zoe walked into the room.

"Are we having lunch soon?" she asked. She looked over at Ruxin, then back at his mother.

"Yes," said Ruxin's mother. "What would you like?"

Ruxin rubbed the back of his head before taking out a cigarette.

"Not in the house," his mother said.

"Mommy always makes peanut butter and jelly," said Zoe. "With no crust."

Ruxin was told he must come to dinner that night. Whether or not he believed they were a family, they were a family, and he was to behave as if he were a part of it. He was expecting to eat a home-cooked meal, the occasion seemed to call for it. But when he walked into the kitchen there were three pizza boxes on the counter and some bottles of soda. What was worse was the fact that his mother and Michael seemed to be acting so casually while this new sister of sorts sat sideways in her chair and swung her legs back and forth. Zoe was all excited, purple ribbon in her hair that matched her purple dress.

“You want Pepsi or Dr. Pepper?” Michael asked.

After that, Ruxin knew he was expected to play a game.

They all ate in relative ease, which made Ruxin feel sick. Michael joked with Zoe and acted like a dad. Ruxin’s mother went along with the whole thing, kept staring at Ruxin to join in and participate.

“What’s that?” said Michael. “I can finish your pizza?” He reached over to Zoe’s plate and pretended to pick the slice up.

“Noooo,” said Zoe. She seemed reserved around Michael, which made Ruxin like her.

“Why don’t you tell us something in Spanish, Ruxin?” said Michael.

“I don’t think so. I’m not that good.”

His mother laughed.

Ruxin got up, went to the fridge for a beer.

“The hell you think you’re doing?” said Michael.

“You said a bad word,” said Zoe.

“Oh, you’re right Zo-e-bow-e.”

“You get a time out.”

Ruxin couldn't help himself, he burst out laughing. Michael looked insulted, but then joined in once he saw Zoe laughing. Ruxin's mother smiled and shook her head.

After dinner, Zoe rode her tricycle around the driveway in circles for a while and Ruxin sat outside on the steps and smoked.

“I can ride a real bike,” she said. “But mommy won't buy me a bike because she's scared I'll fall and get hurt.”

“Mmm.”

“I think mommy doesn't want me to have fun.”

His phone vibrated in his pocket. It was Frost.

“I take it you've decided not to show me your work?”

“Look, I didn't—”

“Yeah, I don't care what you decided. Meet me at the Corner Inn.”

“I'm not twenty-one.”

“Fuck off. You have a fake I.D.?”

“Yeah.”

“Then what are you saying stupid things for?”

Ruxin walked in the house. His mother and Michael were sitting on the couch watching football. Michael yelled at the screen.

“Can I have the keys?”

“You gonna get a job this week?” asked Michael.

“Yes. I'll go find something Monday. Can I just have the keys?”

“Not overnight again,” said his mother.

The Corner Inn was a local bar for blue-collar workers, the parking lot always filled with pickup trucks after five o'clock. The place was dark inside and most people seemed to be sitting and drinking alone in the room. Frost motioned with his arm when he saw Ruxin. Two empty drinks were already on the table.

A waitress came over and Ruxin ordered a whiskey. She briefly glanced at his I.D. before handing it back.

"I gotta ask," said Ruxin, putting his wallet back in his jacket. "What's your deal?"

"My deal?"

"Why do you ask me out to drink, say you don't want me taking classes?"

Frost shifted his entire upper body, leaned forward on the table, put one hand on his head. "I don't give a shit about things that don't matter," he said. "I saw some potential and reacted."

"Potential."

"Now I just have to figure out if you care about it."

"Why should I?"

"Because maybe you have a responsibility."

"I don't know what that means."

Frost looked away. "You know what Michelangelo said about art?" he asked.

"No."

"The true work of art is but a shadow of the divine perfection."

"You religious?"

"There's something in those words that's true." Frost put his hands up as if

demonstrating something, then paused, frozen in thought. “If one can get past all the bullshit that makes us people, then maybe they can express the truths that make us all human.”

“That only kind of makes sense.”

“Nothing. Never mind.” Frost shifted his whole upper body again. Ruxin wondered if he wasn’t on something. “I’m testing you. That’s what this is. This is your class. And so far nothing about you is very impressive.”

Ruxin’s drink came and Frost reached over and drank the whole thing.

“Now,” said Frost. “You see that woman over there?” He put money down on the table.

Ruxin looked and saw a heavy woman in a tight red sweater alone at the bar.

“I’m gonna go take her home. See you next week.” Frost got up and walked towards the bar.

“Next week?” asked Ruxin. He sat there at the table, wondering why the hell he had come. He walked up to Frost and the red sweater woman, leaned in.

“Guy’s fucking psycho, fair warning.”

Frost smiled and pushed Ruxin away. “He’s underage,” he said.

Ruxin was at the door when Frost yelled. “Tomorrow. I’ll text you.”

Ruxin took his work in to Frost. He pulled out the better drawings of Leah from the folder before he took it in, and also kept two sketches of his mother.

“Only a few of these are any good,” said Frost. He was chewing hard on his Nicorette gum.

“What?”

Frost picked up the folder and dropped it down on the desk. “Most of this is shit. Get rid of it.”

“Fuck off.”

“Think I’m wrong? Cartoons and sappy portraits?” Frost dumped the folder into the trashcan. “Does that make you angry?”

“Okay, seriously fuck off.”

“If you don’t care about anything, why bother?” He pulled the folder out of the trashcan and found a portrait of Ruxin’s mother, dumped the rest back into the trash.

“This one isn’t bad. I was gonna ask you about it.” He sat back down. “Why your mother?”

“How do you know it’s my mother?” said Ruxin.

“Why not your father, brother, sister, friend?”

“I dunno.”

“See? Right there. You can have this one portrait, or you can have the folder of shit.”

Ruxin snatched the portrait and left, drove to the bar. Leah met him there, didn’t know how many Ruxin was going to drink before she arrived. She was worried from the way he’d sounded on the phone.

“Buy you a drink?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” said Leah.

“This is a bar.”

“I don’t need to drink all the time.”

“That supposed to be some kind of subtle message?” Ruxin smiled. “She’ll have a beer,” he told the bartender.

The bartender turned. “I.D.?”

“I’m really fine with water,” said Leah.

“What? C’mon, just get your I.D. and drink with me.”

“Ruxin, I don’t have my I.D. with me.”

“You drove here, I know you do.”

She slapped his arm.

“Oh, so you don’t have your *fake* I.D. with you. I’m sorry.”

“Fake I.D.?” asked the bartender.

“Yeah she forgot her fake I.D. so she can’t drink tonight. Mine’s real though, you have my word.” He winked.

“You two need to get out of here,” said the bartender. He looked away, motioned with his arm.

Leah got up.

“No,” said Ruxin. “C’mon, I’m twenty-one and I want to stay right here and drink some more.”

Two large waiters in tight black t-shirts came up to the bar. “There a problem?” one of them asked.

Leah was trying to pull Ruxin off of the barstool when he stood up and faced the two waiters.

“Yeah, there’s a problem. Tweedle-dumb over here won’t let me finish my beer.”
He slammed the bottle down, looked the two guys up and down, their tight shirts clinging to their shoulders. “And now I’ve got two fags bothering me.”

One of the waiters reached for Ruxin’s arm and he drew back and slapped the waiter’s hand.

“The fuck away from me,” said Ruxin.

The waiter tried again and Ruxin hit him in the face.

The other guy stepped in and grabbed Leah.

Ruxin grabbed the bottle and smashed it on the bar, held it to the guy’s neck.

“You *fucking* touch her!” said Ruxin, pushing it into his neck.

The guy let go, backed off.

Leah touched Ruxin’s arm. “Ruxin,” she said.

He dropped the bottle. Leah apologized and dragged Ruxin by the hand towards the door. Once outside, she let go.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” she asked.

He straightened his shirt, pulled out a cigarette, walked over to his mother’s truck.

She got her keys out. “I don’t know why I keep doing this.”

“Fuck, then,” he said. “Just leave.” He leaned back against the truck, tried lighting the cigarette, but the wind kept blowing the flame out. He threw his lighter on the ground and slammed his fists against the truck.

Leah jumped back.

He rubbed his face. “It’s like I don’t belong here. No place.”

“You’ll find something,” she said.

They heard people yelling from inside the bar, a car pulled out onto the road.

“Well thanks for being so encouraging,” he said.

She shook her head, sighed, walked to her car and drove away.

Ruxin picked up the lighter, shielded it from the breeze, lit one, watched people walk out of the bar. An older couple trying to look young, tight clothes and her in a baseball hat, probably still pretending to love sports so he'll feel closer to her. Then a younger couple walked out, flirting and laughing like idiots. Ruxin threw his cigarette and got in the truck. He managed to drive home by blinking a lot and opening his eyes as wide as possible while the radio blared.

The next day, Michael's truck wasn't there and he found his mother drinking tea at the kitchen table, left cheek red and puffy, lip cut.

“Don't,” she said. “It's my job to fix, not yours.”

“If he even—”

“I will fix it,” she said. “Believe me.” She sipped her tea. “Now will you please take a shower and pick up Zoe from school this afternoon? She's been having a hard time on the bus.”

“Pick up Zoe?”

His mother walked over to him and slapped him. For a moment he forgot it was his mother speaking. “I told you, I'm going to fix it.”

“He deserves to get the shit beat out—”

She slapped him again. “Stop cussing so much.”

“Stop cussing so much?”

“That’s what I said.”

Ruxin put his hand up to his burning cheek. “He’s not picking her up from school?”

“What did I say?”

“Alright. I will.”

“Thank you.” She sat back down, stirred her tea, the spoon clicked against the sides of the mug.

“I called Zoe’s mother. She’ll be here tonight.”

“What?” asked Ruxin.

“She called earlier, set Michael off. Sounds like she’s been having a rough time, so she’s going to stay with us for a while.”

Ruxin took a breath to ask another question, but walked out instead.

He drank three cups of coffee and ate some toast after he showered. His mother wasn’t in the kitchen while he ate, and he didn’t go find her.

He didn’t know protocol for picking up a kid from school. He waited in the long line of cars before driving past them in the wrong lane. He parked and walked towards the buses. Zoe was sitting by herself in the grass. She got her backpack and walked over to him. A woman standing there asked Zoe if she knew Ruxin.

“He’s my brother,” she said.

The ride home was quiet until Zoe asked Ruxin if he liked to ride bikes.

“Sure. I like it.”

“Do you want to ride bikes when we get home?”

“I don’t have a bike.”

“You can ride mine.”

“I don’t think that’d work.”

“You’re too big to ride my bike.”

“Mh-hmm.”

“Do you want to watch me ride my bike?”

“Sure.”

“You don’t talk much.”

“Nope.”

“Are you mean?”

Ruxin looked over at her. “I think so.”

“I think you’re mean. But you’re nice, too.”

“Why thank you.”

Michael’s truck was back. Ruxin took Zoe into the garage, figured she might like to see his drawings. Then he remembered he only had a few left, the few he had kept and that one of his mother.

“Do you have any crayons?” asked Zoe, looking at the picture of Ruxin’s mother.

“Only pens and pencils.”

“Do you have good erasers?”

Ruxin laughed. “Yeah, here.” He grabbed a pencil and eraser from his desk and ripped out a few blank pages from his notebook. He looked over at the house. “Stay here, okay? I’ll be right back.”

Zoe wasn’t listening, too busy drawing with her new pencil.

Ruxin listened at the kitchen door. He heard Michael yelling and stepped inside.

His mother was standing with her arms crossed, calm face.

“But I’m not *gonna* hurt you!” yelled Michael. “You need to know that. I would *never*.” He kept hitting the counter with his fists.

“I already told you to get out. I’ll call the police.”

“And say *what*?”

“It’s too late, Michael. Just leave.”

Michael walked towards the door, eyeing up Ruxin, who stood up tall.

“And Zoe is staying here for now,” she said. “With her mother.”

Michael turned around. “What’d you do?”

“You never wanted any of this.” She shook her head. “Get out of my house.” She looked away, swiped her nose.

Michael walked out, slammed the door. The truck roared away.

Ruxin’s mother opened a drawer, pulled out two needles that were stuck in what looked like a small hat, all different colors in the stitch. Her face changed as she worked, didn’t droop like it had before, eyes brightened.

“For Zoe?” asked Ruxin.

“She likes bright colors.”

“And her mother?”

“He never wanted kids, said he definitely doesn’t want them now. Not with someone as old as me.”

“Old?”

“He prefers younger and dumber girls at the bars.” She smiled, needles softly clicking.

“Prick.”

“But yes, Zoe and her mother are going to stay here for a while. I think I’ve had enough men like him in this house.” She set the hat down, walked over to the fridge, started pulling vegetables out of plastic bags.

Ruxin walked to the fridge, grabbed the four remaining bottles of Miller Lite.

“What’re you doing?” asked his mother.

Ruxin opened them and poured them down the sink.

His mother laughed.

Zoe eventually went back into the house to do homework, and Ruxin sat at his desk, trying to think about his mother. He got his pencil and some paper. He drew his mother sitting sipping tea, the cut on her lip, little line of dark shading along the upper edge. He shaded her cheek to show the redness and inflamed skin.

He decided he wanted to see Frost, drove to the Corner Inn. It was happy hour, so the parking lot was a sea of Fords and Dodges. Frost was sitting at a table with an older, heavy woman. Ruxin noticed Frost was drunk.

“Hey, look who it is,” said Frost. “Sandra, this kid wants to be an artist.”

“Oh! Really?” Sandra said. She had an incredible amount of makeup on her face.

Ruxin hated her.

“Look,” said Ruxin. “I didn’t—”

“Sit down. Have a drink with us.”

“No, I figured,” said Ruxin. “I thought you’d be alone.”

“I’m never alone when I’m here,” said Frost. He squeezed Sandra’s thick arm.

Ruxin felt sick.

“I’ll give you boys a minute,” said Sandra.

“Don’t be too long,” smiled Frost. His face was sweaty.

Sandra stood and shuffled away, ridiculous high heels.

“What do you want?” asked Frost.

“You said that—”

“Wait. Kelsey! Another?” Frost motioned to his empty glass. He sniffed, rubbed his nose.

“You said I might have talent. And I didn’t know what I should do.”

“You coming to me for advice? Interesting for a guy that walks out on me when I’m teaching.”

“Teaching?”

The waitress brought his drink. He drank the whole thing in one gulp.

“You want my help? The best lesson I can give you is that this place is shit, and we’re all full of bullshit. Try to numb it every now and then by losing yourself in a painting, or a woman.”

He stood up and fat Sandra appeared again.

“You wanna have a go in the bathroom again?” she asked him.

Frost burped, rubbed his mouth. “Absolutely.” He hit Ruxin’s shoulder and walked back to the bathrooms.

On his way out, Ruxin saw Michael at the bar, alone. He was slumped down on a stool. Ruxin sat down next to him, ordered a beer. Michael laughed.

“What?” asked Ruxin.

“You kids and those fake things.”

“I should fucking kill you.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Michael rubbed the lip of his glass, breathed out with his cheeks puffed. Ruxin could smell how long he'd been there.

“I didn't mean to, you know?” said Michael. “It just happened.”

“Yeah.” Ruxin's beer came. He sipped it. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why did you lie to her all the time?”

“I don't want you to think it was like that. It wasn't all the time. I just lied to her. There, I did it.”

“And this mom?”

“Good girl, really. Younger than your mother. Well, sorry. But, it's true.”

“Couldn't keep her around?”

“She was crazy. Didn't want a kid but wouldn't get an abortion. Uptight chick like that.”

Ruxin scratched his head.

“So,” said Michael. “You not going to school anymore?”

“Fuck off.”

“That was the last thing your mom and I really talked about before it got—out of hand.”

“I'm getting advice from the absentee father figure? That what this is?”

“I don't want you getting all hung up on some kind of daddy issues, okay? I did

what I did and it's over."

"Yeah."

"So what, you're not going to school? Why would you not take that opportunity? Your mom's ex still sends the money, right?"

Ruxin finished his beer. "Yeah. I should. Nice talk. Maybe I'll see you some time."

Michael watched from his stool as Ruxin walked out. Then he ordered another.

Lots of lights were on in the house when Ruxin got home. He knew his mother would have seen the headlights, so hiding in the garage wasn't an option.

They were eating ice cream. Five different flavors were out on the counter and the TV was playing some movie. Zoe was sitting at the table and the two moms were with her, watching her draw.

"Ruxin," said his mother. "This is Megan."

"Hey," said Megan, her blonde hair messy. She was a good ten years younger than his mother, and Ruxin hated that he noticed that, just like Michael had.

"You want some food?" asked his mother. "I made dinner, but you were hiding or out somewhere, I don't know."

"You want to draw with me?" asked Zoe, smiling.

Ruxin heard the TV: *I can't stand it anymore. I love you, and you have to love me back.*

"Don't just stand there, Rux," said his mother.

"I'm not hungry," he said.

“Come look what Zoe found,” said his mother.

“We’ve all been admiring them,” said Megan.

Ruxin walked over, counting the seconds before he could drink. He saw the portraits of his mother and Leah spread out on the table.

“They’re so beautiful,” said Megan. “Really.”

“She’s pretty,” said Zoe, pointing to the one of Leah.

“And, Rux, what’s this?” his mother asked. She held up the picture of his father. She touched his arm. “I thought I’d lost this.”

He felt like he couldn’t breathe. “How did—”

“Zoe found it when she was looking for another pencil in your desk,” said his mother.

“It broke right in my *hand*,” said Zoe, giggling.

He backed away.

“Rux,” said his mother.

“No,” said Ruxin. “I’ll be—”

He walked out to the garage, opened the mini fridge, downed the rest of his beers. After he was good and drunk, he stared at himself in the mirror. He did look like his father. He threw a heavy book at the mirror, smashed it to pieces.

Leah had her headphones on when Ruxin threw open the door to her bedroom. She jumped up.

“Ruxin, what the hell?”

“I need to talk to you,” he said. He tripped and his face landed on the foot of the

bed.

“Ow, shit.” He was trying to get up, nose and lip dripping blood.

“You’re a mess,” she said. “How did you drive here like this?”

Ruxin started laughing. “I tried to. Stopped driving a mile or two back.”

“Stopped driving?”

“Tree came outta nowhere. I mean I was fine to drive, just like I am right now. I mean, look, I can do it.” He extended his arms and grabbed a fake steering wheel, smiling.

She started to sit him up against her bed. “If you throw up in my room, I’m gonna kill you.”

She ran to her bathroom and came back with the trashcan.

“I’m not gonna do that,” he said, slowly shaking his head from side to side. “Not gonna throw up.”

She walked him to the bathroom and helped him step into the shower.

“We gonna take a shower together? That’s hot.”

She grabbed the showerhead off the holder and turned the water on. She sprayed him in the face.

“No. Stop. C’mon.” He fell down into the tub.

“You break into my house, drunk and all fucked up.”

“Fuck. The door was unlocked!”

“I’m not gonna take care of you, Ruxin. Get out of my house.” She moved the nozzle close to his face and kept spraying cold water until she saw he was crying. She turned the water off and it dripped down her hand. He was sobbing, face contorted, a

mess of snot and blood. He looked like a little boy, holding his arms and whimpering.

“Ruxin?”

He forced a smile, still bawling. “No. It’s fine.” He covered his face. “Get out of your house.”

She sat down on the toilet, showerhead in hand, and listened to him cry.

She barely got him out of his wet clothes, into her dad’s robe, and to the couch before he fell asleep. She taped some gauze to his head and set a trashcan next to the couch.

She took his phone from his wet jeans and dried it off, found his mother’s number and hesitated.

“Fuck,” she said, looking at Ruxin. “You’re gonna hate me.”

His mother answered the phone, but didn’t have the truck to come get him. Leah said he wasn’t that bad, but might need stitches. Ruxin’s mother told Leah to bring him to the house first, it was on the way to the hospital anyway if he ended up needing to go.

On the way to the house, Leah passed the truck. The lights were still on and the door was open, hood buckled a little, grill up against a tree.

They got him into the kitchen, barely awake and mumbling, and his mother looked at the cut on his head.

“Is he okay?” asked Zoe. “Does he need a blanket?” She kept trying to get closer and see, but Megan held her back. Zoe ran upstairs, said she’d bring him her blanket.

“Does he need stitches?” Leah asked. “I didn’t know what to do, if it was a concussion or something.”

“No. You did fine,” his mother sighed. “Let’s take him to the hospital.”

The doctor stitched Ruxin's cut and sent him home, told his mother to watch him for the next twenty-four hours, wake him up every now and then.

They put him up in Zoe's bed and she made sure her purple blanket was covering him. Leah sat down on the end of the bed. His mother pulled a chair up.

"You're even prettier than the pictures," said Zoe.

"Zoe, come on," said Megan. She and Zoe walked out of the room.

"I don't—" said Leah.

Ruxin's mother brushed his hair off his face. "You know, his father was a dangerous drunk." She sat back in her chair. "And so I never let him near. I wonder if that was the right thing." She pinched the bridge of her nose. "You should see his sketches."

Leah pulled her hair back behind her left ear. "What does he draw?"

"Mostly you."

Leah bit her nail.

Ruxin was dreaming, the ocean again. This time he was in a raft. His mother and Leah were eating ice cream on the beach. The current kept pulling his raft away. The waves weren't that big, so he jumped in and tried to swim over. His arms grew tired as he got a little closer. He could hear them, and they were laughing. He stopped swimming and listened to the sound. He thought he might drown, but knew it was okay as long as he could still hear them.

Fly Me To The Moon

He was drunk and standing at the pulpit. He gave his sermon to the congregation—which, on a Saturday morning at 4:00 A.M., consisted of empty pews. The Jack Daniel's hung loose from his fingertips, the bottle banging against the wooden pulpit as he swayed and steadied himself.

He hadn't planned on getting drunk, but he had learned new things about his father who, in a little over twenty-four hours, would be preaching from the same pulpit. To actual people. A misty thought ran through his mind that he needed to get out of the building before he did something stupid, or—more likely—fell asleep only to be found by the girls coming to the retreat later that morning. Stephanie would be there, and now James turned to thinking about her—her hair, her legs, the smart-ass attitude that attracted him to any girl—the alcohol helping to keep his mind from the time-sensitive issue of leaving.

Thinking of Stephanie reminded him of finding out about his father, and this made James take another mouthful. He got an idea and started laughing. He fumbled in his pocket for his lighter, slammed it on the pulpit. He took a swig of whiskey and

swallowed it before he could get to the lighter, which made him laugh again.

“Shit,” he said, stepping back to keep his balance.

He lifted the bottle, and this time held the liquor in his mouth. He brought the lighter near his lips and sparked a flame, spewed the Jack.

The fireball was glorious. Perhaps the most glorious thing that ever happened in this church, he thought. The flame reached out into the congregation, suggesting that if other Christians had been present, they might have been singing.

He stuffed the lighter back into his pocket and stepped down from the pulpit, missed the last step and fell to his knees and then face, spilling precious whiskey onto the sacred ground, a strong, sweet smell invading the red carpet. He lay there a minute and wanted to sleep, but remembered the girls coming in the morning. He wiped up most of the spilled alcohol with his shirt, couldn't find the bottle cap. Then he stumbled down the aisle and out the door to the parking lot.

He made it all the way to his car, and even yanked the door open and tossed the bottle inside before he threw up. He vomited for a while on the concrete, then fell asleep in the cold, slumped against his car.

Two weeks earlier, James had been smoking on the side of the road after pulling the car over halfway to the church, had leaned against his metallic brown/gold '92 Camry, facing traffic, the smoke flying away from his mouth in long grey lines as he thought about the new job starting today. He wanted the carcinogens in his body, wanted the disease, held the smoke long.

His khaki jacket wasn't warm enough for the January weather, and he zipped it all

the way up with half-numb fingers. The stiff cotton pushed against his chin, made it annoying to dip his chin towards the cigarette. His hands were turning red in the cold. His knuckles were chapped to the point of bleeding a little. As he smoked, the knot in his stomach untangled, hands steadied, sour taste left his mouth. He thought about the hospital.

He tossed the cigarette, got back in the car and blew into cupped hands before turning the key.

He pulled into the church parking lot with the music blaring. He took off his khaki jacket, and sprayed himself with Vamoose before getting a piece of gum.

He walked through the tinted door into the Potter's House. Inside, there was a desk to the right of the door, no one sitting there. Originally, the entire church property had just been someone's yard with a small home in the middle of it, but then it was sold and the church constructed the main building, converting the house into offices. The kitchen had been opened up and turned into a conference room, the bedrooms into main offices, the rest divided up into small, grey cubicles.

"Hey, James," said Paula, one of the office secretaries. She had short grey hair that framed her round face, and thick, dark glasses that made her look like a raccoon. She cleared her throat as she walked by James, a hint of a coughing sound.

"Hey," said James, adjusting his sunglasses. He smelled his shirt again, walked through the conference room and came to an office door.

He knocked, stuck his head inside.

"I'm here," said James.

“You’re half an hour late,” said Pastor Michaelson.

“Overslept.”

Pastor Michaelson set his glasses down on his desk next to the open Bible, leaned back in his yellow padded swivel chair. His back was to the window that looked over the parking lot. The old chair squeaked with every movement. His office was just a room in a house built in the seventies, a white stucco ceiling and brown walls with built-in shelves and a green carpet. James tried to figure out why he thought the office smelled so good. Wood polisher.

“I heard you pull in with that music. You shouldn’t play it so loud around here, or smoke, even in your car.”

James shifted his weight, leaned against the door.

“That why you’re not wearing a coat?” asked Pastor Michaelson.

James smirked.

“We agreed to give you this job, and you should appreciate that. You’re not the easiest person to hire. Your track record.”

“Who doesn’t know all that’s over with?”

The pastor leaned forward in his squeaky chair, put his glasses back on.

“Stephanie will show you around. Try to be here on time from now on.”

“How many people call this place at nine in the morning?” asked James.

“And don’t wear jeans here.”

James looked down. “These are *nice* Levi’s.”

“Don’t wear jeans.”

“You serious?”

“No. I’m joking. That’s why I’m not laughing.”

James squinted. “Bad day?”

“Just—please. Okay? You’re here in good graces. Try and act like you care.”

“Where’s Stephanie?”

“You walk out there, you find her, there she is. Now, I have a sermon to prepare. And take those sunglasses off. This isn’t a rock concert.”

“You got it, bossman,” said James, tapping the door twice before walking away.

He walked back through the conference room to the lobby and into the cubicle section of the office, hanging his sunglasses on his shirt and rubbing the sides of his nose. He walked past two cubicles before finding Stephanie. He lifted his arm up and set it on her cubicle divider, leaned in to the workspace. She was sorting through visitor cards. She set them down like a performance and looked up at him.

“Hello, Mr. On Time,” she said.

“You gonna show me around, or what?” asked James, smiling.

“Such attitude.” She bent down in her chair and put her shoes back on. James watched her fiddle with her shoes, admiring her porcelain legs. She stood up, straightened her skirt. “That won’t get you far in the church,” she said.

“I wouldn’t think so.”

She walked past him and pulled his shoulder around. She was the same height as James, taller if she wore any kind of heel. Her long dark hair was pulled back loose as some of it fell forward and lined her face in thin strands. She never wore much makeup, pretty without it and she knew it. They had known each other since middle school, and she’d always taunted James that she was a year older. She walked him to the copier,

stopped and used her hands to dramatically present the machine.

“Here’s the holy copier. If it jams just come get me because no one else around here knows how to use anything newer than a typewriter.”

“Is jamming it on purpose frowned upon?”

She smiled and shook her head. “So anxious.” As she walked past him she trilled her fingers on his shoulder. She walked him away from the copier and back to the lobby where the empty front desk was crammed into the tight space. The white desk had a black phone on the right corner, a plant sitting on the left corner, a brown stapler, a black plastic cup of pens and pencils, a large yellow notepad for messages, old Dell computer in the center, and a Bible that was pushed up against the wall. James sat down and spun in the swivel chair, the same yellow padded kind which the pastor sat in over in his office. Stephanie walked around and faced James.

“Basically,” she said, “you’re a front for all the people who call and walk in here. Most of them will be scheduling counseling appointments or meetings or events or whatever, nothing complicated. You just put them through to the right people. You know everybody here, right?”

“Most. Since I was five.”

She showed him the list of extensions for transferring calls, walked him through the voicemail, opened the email account in the computer.

“So, just don’t insult anyone, be nice, and say ‘God bless’ all the time. Sound good?”

“Can’t wait.” James spun in the chair again. “What happened to the lady that used to do this? Linda?”

“Just quit. I dunno. She never talked much anyway.”

“Well, I guess not everyone can take the pressure of church administrative assistant.”

“It is a unique breed.” She smiled.

“So, do people go out to the bar after work?”

“Not exactly. But I have heard that certain people find their way there after hours. I’ll keep you informed.” She walked away and back to her cubicle. James watched her walk away, stared at the back of her skirt. He took the sunglasses from his shirt and set them on the desk next to the Bible. The phone rang and he picked it up.

“First Alliance Church,” he said. Then he thought about his next words: “How may I help you?”

The day wasn’t exciting. Lots of copying, folding bulletins, and proofing flyers, along with about a dozen phone calls that were mostly attempted transfers to people in cubicles or pastors in offices. Stephanie dropped a lunch menu on James’ desk around noon. “And you get to go pick it up,” she smiled. “Hmm, it might be a two person job,” said James. She chuckled and walked away: “I’m not the lowest on the totem pole anymore.”

It was 5:30 and the people who had worked late or ended up talking by the water cooler were leaving. Pastor Michaelson walked up to the desk, beige overcoat and Bible in hand.

“A good day?” he asked James.

“Fine,” said James.

“You staying late?”

“Just a bit longer. Stephanie said she’d give me a crash course on the phones when people left so they didn’t all ring at once during peak business hours. Didn’t do the best job on transfers today.”

Pastor Michaelson smiled. “Peak business hours,” he mumbled. “Alright, well get the hang of the phones before you leave. See you at home.”

“See ya,” said James. He gave a half-salute, one finger flicked towards his forehead and then out.

His father walked through the door and down the sidewalk stairs to the parking lot.

James went to find Stephanie at her cubicle.

“Everyone gone?” she turned around and asked.

“Just me and you.”

“You and I,” she said.

“You wouldn’t say ‘just I,’ would you? So isn’t it ‘you and me’?”

“I guess I don’t care very much.” She grabbed his shirt and kissed him.

He pulled her closer. “Do we get overtime for this?”

“No,” she smiled. “Just after hour perks.”

A week later James pulled into his driveway, late again. He could see the light on in his father’s study as he walked to the front door. He walked inside and past the study, hardwood creaking. James gave the half-salute as he walked by. “Father,” he said.

“Come here,” said Pastor Michaelson.

James stopped, walked back into the dark study, saw his father holding a Bible,

reading from a lamp next to his reading chair. James always pictured his father in that chair, gazing over The Book, glasses on, never a drink or any coffee or tea on the table next to him. His father always said all he needed was the Word of God. “And my glasses, of course,” he’d always add.

“Sit,” he said.

“What’d you hear I did?” asked James, moving a small stack of books off the chair opposite his father.

His father closed the Bible and leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “I know you don’t take any of this seriously.” He rubbed his eyes, and this made James uncomfortable—cheated out of some respect.

“Not true,” said James.

“Isn’t it? Why did you take this job?”

“You asked me to.”

“Yes, but if you didn’t want it—”

“Who said I didn’t want it?”

“No one.”

“Okay. So, what are we talking about here?”

Pastor Michaelson straightened up in his chair. “I guess I’m not sure.”

James stood up to leave.

“I hope you can learn to take the church seriously at some point.”

James sat back down. “What do you think I’m doing? Do you think everything’s a joke to me? Haven’t I earned a little more than that?”

“You haven’t earned anything.” Pastor Michaelson’s voice boomed in the dark

room. “Just because you agree to one thing I asked does not mean that you live up to your potential.”

“Potential.”

“Yes, potential. I know you and Stephanie stay late at the office, and I don’t berate you for that.”

“Berate. I’m not ten years old.”

“You are also living in my house, and you are my son. I see you publicly misbehaving, even if you think you are subtle.”

“Publicly misbehaving?” James smiled.

Pastor Michaelson rubbed his eyes. “You don’t understand.”

“What don’t I understand? What?”

“You should be a better example. People look up to you. How far you’ve come since—”

“No one looks up to me.”

“Then they should be able to. People might not look up to you in the traditional sense, but they watch you.”

“That’s not my problem, what they think.”

“That does not matter.” Pastor Michaelson’s voice was harsh. “*You* are my son.”

James slapped his knees and stood up. “Forgive me, father, for I have sinned.”

“Of course. A joke.”

James walked slowly out of the room, heard his father sigh.

“One of these days you’re going to have to take something seriously.”

“Yeah. Thanks.” James walked to his room. He sat on the edge of his bed, waited

for his father's footsteps on the stairs. He didn't hear any. His father wasn't coming up to clarify what he'd been trying to say. Not tonight. Pastor Michaelson had been different recently, reserved. James didn't mind, he thought it was a nice change. His father was always scrutinizing every single detail, each lyric in the song James listened to, let alone the songs he wrote. His father was always bringing up the past, alluding to the hospital in each second-guess of his son.

James pulled his phone out of his pocket and texted Stephanie.

Your parents home? Or still away?

He pushed Send and sat for a minute, became more and more frustrated while she didn't text back. He walked to the dresser for some clothes to take with him. The dresser still had memories inside, made James nervous. It was only a year ago that he had made a "full recovery," as they had said. Every time James went to his dresser, there was a familiar itch for numbness. But there weren't any small plastic bottles, not anymore. That was all over with. But the memory was enough to put a bad taste in his mouth and remind him how it felt to get kicked out of school in 12th grade. That was three years ago, before a long stay in the hospital, before tutoring and the GED.

He hadn't done laundry in a while and so the clothes in the drawers were sparse. Opening one drawer, he heard something shift, slide across the wood. He lifted a wrinkled shirt and saw his old journal. His phone buzzed on the bed and he looked over at it. Then he turned back to the open drawer. It smelled of oaky varnish as he pulled out the yellow, large-ruled notebook. The cover was riddled with marker, the title had changed from time to time, crossed out to display the new one below. How long had it been since he had written a word in those pages? Five years? Ten? He walked back over

to his bed and sat, checked his phone. The message was from Stephanie.

Still away. What? You wanna come over?

He shoved his phone behind him and opened the journal to an early page.

January 1st, 2000

Dad is thankful that we didn't all die this year because the computers couldn't go to 2000. He says he probably didn't think it was going to do anything anyway. I asked him why he bought all those cans of beans and water bottles. He said it was in case God wanted something to happen. But he says he is still happy about it and thankful. Got to play with the cool flashlight and radio today that we bought at BJ's in case all the power died. Fun day. Mom wanted me to do school but Dad said it was OK if I didn't.

James grinned at his younger self. He rubbed his fingers across the page, felt the colored wax of the crayons, remembered how it smelled when he would open the box to draw or write something, the smooth feel of holding a crayon in his hand, fingers always blue from his preferred color. The letters on the page were large, and drawn by a heavy hand. His whole arm used to ache from writing or drawing too long because he used to hold the pencil, crayon, or marker in a fist, gripping tightly as he focused on his work. One time a friend had found out about his journal and made fun of him. "Only girls keep diaries!" he said. James' father told him that it was good for a boy to write, for writing put things in order, thought things through. "Think of all the great men who have written," he used to tell James. He continued to write, but did a better job at hiding the notebook. Spelling was never his strength, and he used to run to the top of the stairs and

yell down to his mother for help. “How do you spell restaurant?” Then he’d run back and write the word, coming back with, “How do you spell dinner?”

He flipped through the pages, letting the old markings blur into blocks of color on the page as he searched for another day.

April 19th, 2009

Mom is still sick, and-

He slammed the journal shut, tossed it on the floor, turned and picked up his phone. He texted Stephanie back.

No prolly shouldn't. Dad's in a mood.

He set his phone down and hung his head in his hands, looked at the journal lying on the hardwood.

It was Friday, and James was sitting at the front desk when a woman walked in the door of the church office. She looked distracted, like she wasn’t sure she was in the right place. She was holding a cardboard box in both hands and dropped it on the floor when she walked up to the desk, bent down to pick it up, purse sliding down her arm.

“Can I help you?” asked James, standing to help her.

“Yes. I’m here to pick up some of Linda’s things.” She gathered up her purse and the box. Her eyes darted around the room as if she was looking for someone.

“Oh,” said James. “Sure.” He opened the drawers and stepped away, hands in pockets. People poked their heads out of cubicles.

James retreated to Stephanie's cubicle. She was looking.

"Get out of the way," whispered Stephanie, moving James to the side.

"That lady's here to pick up Linda's stuff," said James.

"Yeah."

James looked around at the people lingering, papers or coffee mugs in hand.

"Why is everyone watching?" he whispered.

"Because. Why is this woman here?"

"Instead of Linda?"

"Okay, you need to catch up here."

"Okay. It's weird."

The woman had put almost everything from the desk into the box.

"She gonna take the phone and computer?" said James.

She picked up the full box and wrapped her free arm around the plant.

"Oh, not the plant," whispered James.

Pastor Michaelson walked out of the conference room to the front desk, looking at the papers in his hand.

"James," he said. "I need you to—" He looked up from the papers. "Oh. Do you need any help there?"

"It's okay," said the woman. "I'm fine. No thanks." She shuffled towards the door.

Pastor Michaelson stepped in front of her and opened it for her. She dropped the plant on the floor and the pot shattered, dirt everywhere.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said.

“No, no,” said Pastor Michaelson, still holding the door open. “It’s fine. We’ll clean that up.”

The woman walked out, purse slipping down her arm again.

“That was my plant,” said James.

“James,” called Pastor Michaelson. “We clean this up?”

James looked at Stephanie. “I love this job,” he sighed.

Later that night, the bulletins were printed with several mistakes and James and Stephanie had to print and fold new ones. They went out for some food, and when they came back there were more cars than before.

When they walked inside, they could see through the glass next to the conference room door.

“Session?” said Stephanie.

“This on the schedule?” asked James.

“No.”

They folded the bulletins, used two rulers to make the single sheets into tri-folds.

“How many of these *are* there?” asked James, stepping back from the table.

“Keep going. Lots.”

There was a noise from the conference room that sounded like shouting. James and Stephanie looked at each other, waited to hear it again. They didn’t.

They finished folding at eight o’clock, no sign that the meeting was ending anytime soon.

“You want to hang at the house for a while?” asked James.

Even though they only walked in the cold from their cars to the front door, they

still shivered when they were inside, the hardwood floors creaking and groaning with every step they took. James threw his coat on the couch. Stephanie kept hers on, only taking off her hat and scarf. They cooked a frozen pizza in the oven and then went up to James' room. Stephanie picked up the guitar, fiddled with the strings.

“Play me a song,” she said.

“No, come on.”

“I want to hear you.”

James took the guitar, sat down on his bed, tuned for a minute. Stephanie sat down on the floor and looked up at him, and James wondered if he'd ever seen someone so pretty before.

She smiled. “You gonna play me a song, or what?”

He fumbled around on the strings, then played Sinatra's “Fly Me To The Moon.”

Stephanie watched him watch his hands on the instrument, trying not to smile. Then she closed her eyes, pulled her knees into her chest, tapped her toes to the rhythm.

When he finished he set the guitar down and gave a mock bow. She clapped, stood up and kissed him, pushed him back on the bed. James wrapped his arms around her, feeling her back under the thick wool coat she was still wearing. Her hair smelled fruity and wonderful as it fell around his face.

They later went downstairs and fell asleep watching a movie, her head on his chest, hand reaching over to his shoulder, wool coat still on. James woke up when his father shut the front door, loud. James rubbed his eyes, heard footsteps up the stairs, the bedroom door shut. His father never stormed in and straight up to his room. It was always a conversation, always questions. James looked at his watch.

“Steph,” he said.

Her eyes flickered, she stirred. “Mmm. What time is it?”

“One-thirty.”

“Really?” She stretched her arms.

“Yeah.”

“I have to be at the girls’ retreat thing in the morning.”

“Yeah, sorry, I didn’t realize.”

“Okay. I’m leaving.” She got up. “I’ll see you Sunday.” She grabbed her scarf and hat and walked out. He listened to her tires roll against the pavement, brakes squeal, engine whir in the cold. The house was left quiet. James heard the clock ticking.

He walked into the room and found his father sitting on the edge of the bed, head in his hands. It didn’t look like he was praying.

“James,” he sat up, sniffed.

“What was that meeting?”

“Well, it appears I’m going to be taking some time off.”

“Christmas you said you hated session’s idea of a sabbatical. Said you don’t take a break on God.”

“And now, I’m taking one.”

James crossed his arms, leaned against the doorframe.

“There’s something else,” said his father.

“Still the ‘difficult to understand’ thing? Just make more references to application in your sermons. Make them a little less intellectual. They won’t fire you.” James turned to walk away.

“That is not the issue.”

James stopped. “What then?”

His father hung his head in his hands again, rubbed his temples.

“Why didn’t Linda come get her stuff?” asked James.

That night James gave his sermon to the empty pews, holding the bottle of Jack and spitting fire.

After waking up next to his car, freezing cold, he drove to a Dunkin Donuts and sat there for an hour, drinking coffee and picking at pieces of a donut.

When James got home his father was stirring sugar into his coffee.

“You look like death,” said Pastor Michaelson. He sniffed the air. “Great.”

James glared at him, took his shoes off.

“Should I just use my imagination?” asked his father.

“You know,” said James. “I’m done.”

“What’s that?”

“I said I’m done.”

Pastor Michaelson crossed his arms, looked at the floor. “You’re slipping back.”

“No.”

“You’re slipping back.”

“I have it under control.”

“You do, huh?”

James walked by his father, poured some coffee into a mug.

“I,” his father hesitated. “I know how you feel.”

James launched his mug at the floor. It shattered, sent shards and hot coffee flying.

His father walked towards the hall.

“To mom?” James mumbled.

His father stopped, then went upstairs.

He stood in the parking lot and smoked, leaning against his car. The evening air was getting chill as everything faded to dark blue. The doors opened and girls started filing out, eager faces morphing into concerned movements of eyebrows and lips as they saw James committing the pagan act of smoking. James stared at one girl as she walked by, followed her eyes and lit another when she was close. Paula walked out and got in her car without a word to James. Headlights lit him up in whites and yellows as they all drove away, one by one. Finally, Stephanie walked out. She held out the cap to the Jack.

“Lose something?” she asked, coming up beside James and leaning on his Camry. “It smells like a distillery in there.”

He took the cap from her.

“You look terrible,” she said.

James didn’t respond, lit another cigarette. She took it out of his mouth and tossed it onto the pavement. “Enough of that,” she said. “What’s your problem today?”

“Did you know?”

“Know what?”

“You know. I think you’ve known.” He pulled out the cigarette pack.

“Seriously,” said Stephanie. “You shouldn’t smoke so much.” She reached for the

pack

“Stop,” he pulled away from her. “Tell me.”

She crossed her arms, looked down at her shoes. “I didn’t know specifics.”

James shook his head.

“What would you have wanted me to tell you? I *think* something happened?”

“You should have at least mentioned it, even if you thought it wasn’t true.”

“I didn’t know if it was.”

“Stop lying,” he said.

“I know now. I didn’t before.”

“How long?”

“That’s what I don’t know,” she said.

“A month? Year?”

“Longer.”

He looked at her, then at the ground. “Steph.”

She shivered in the wind. “Clean yourself up, will you?”

“I already did.” He shuffled his feet. “I will.”

She took the cigarette pack from him, put it in her jacket. “What’re you gonna do?”

“He says my job here is still fine. So, there’s that. But him? I don’t know if you land on your feet after something like this in the church.”

“James,” she said, waiting for him to look up at her. “I don’t think it’s really as big a deal as you think. I mean it is, but—”

“All my life,” he said. “He’s acted like I was so much worse. That he did

everything perfect. I should follow in his footsteps.”

“Okay. Yeah, but I really don’t know it’s all that bad. I mean, it wasn’t like—”

James let go. “He betrayed me.” He rubbed his face. “Me. Mom. Fucking liar.”

She put her hand on his chest. “I just think you shouldn’t—”

“Don’t make this into something small.” He rubbed his right eye, looked away from her.

She stepped away.

“Just,” she said. “Please don’t do anything else drastic.”

“I won’t,” said James.

“No.” She grabbed his arm. “You promise me you won’t.”

“I’m alright.” He kissed her forehead.

“Don’t just do that,” she said. She pulled away.

“What?”

“James, you’re not listening.”

“I’m not gonna do anything.”

“About your father.”

“Don’t.”

“You make him some kind of monster.”

“Stop.”

“It’s been years, James.”

“You’re making it something small.”

“Because it is.”

“Give me the cigarettes,” he said.

“You’re wrong.”

“Please?”

She handed them back. “You’re wrong.”

He pulled one out and lit it.

“Well I’m going home,” she said.

A month passed. The winter started to warm a little, the wind died down and the sun stayed out later.

James came home from class one evening to find his father dressed up, reading a book at the kitchen table.

“Dinner’s in the fridge.”

“You don’t need to make me dinner.” James set down his backpack. “Why you wearing those clothes?”

“Had an interview today. Got the job.”

“Which one?”

“Youth pastor at Grace.”

James sat down at the table. “Youth pastor? That mega church?”

“Yes. They even offered to help us pay for a house down there.”

“It’s not even that far of a drive. How much money do they have down there?”

“A fair amount.” His father put the book down.

James rubbed his chin. “Youth pastor?”

“Is it so hard to believe?” His father smiled, taking off his glasses.

James grinned. “No. Well, don’t they usually get a younger guy for that?”

“Not always.”

“You gonna run games and lock-ins for the kids?”

“I can be fun,” his father said.

James laughed. His father shook his head and then joined in. James couldn't remember the last time they had laughed together.

“Well,” said James. “That's good.”

“Thank you.”

James stood up. “You told them no about the house thing, right?”

“Well, I told them—”

“We're not moving,” said James. “It's barely over an hour there. You can commute.”

“Yes. And that's what I told them.”

“Okay, because I never want to talk about moving.”

“Yes, and we're not.”

James walked over to the fridge, pulled out leftovers. “Look, about the whole thing—”

“I wish you would come to church,” said his father. He closed the book, stood.

“I mean with Linda.”

“It'd be good for you.”

James spooned out meatloaf onto a plate. “Yeah.

Stephanie found his journal one night when they were fighting. She wanted him to forgive his father more than he had claimed to. He couldn't get her to understand what it

meant to him, how deep it went.

He walked out of the room to go turn the beeping oven off.

She was cold and looked for a sweatshirt in his dresser, saw the yellow notebook.

He walked back in while she was leafing through pages.

“Sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean—”

James leaned on the doorframe. “It’s okay.”

The tension left the room as he watched her read.

“Your heart gets sadder,” she said, “as the pages go on.”

James rubbed his chin. “Yeah.”

She made him read it to her from time to time, saying it was “non-negotiable.”

One night, they were sitting on his bed, had been talking about a future when James remembered something he wanted to tell her.

“Girl comes up to me on my way to class, asks if I know Jesus.”

“Flyer pusher?” asked Stephanie.

“Of course. I just keep walking and you know what she says? Yells it at me. Says, ‘You know you’re going to Hell if you don’t believe.’”

Stephanie laughed. “You didn’t say anything back?”

“What do you say to that?”

“Well,” she said. “It sounds like she helped bring more light into the world, that’s for sure.”

She asked him to read more from his journal.

Two entries were her favorite. She said they revealed his core when he read them, his foundation. He said she just liked sad things, but she insisted, saying she was right, he

needed to read them every now and then to remember who he really was.

June 5th, 2009

The elders prayed over mom again yesterday. So far, no change since the last two times they did that. Dad says we pray for a reason. But it seems like we just pray and pray and nothing really ends up happening. If God doesn't heal her then I guess I don't believe in God the same way other people do.

April 23rd, 2010

Thinking about the photo album mom gave me last year. I thought it was weird, but then I read the letter she wrote to me inside the first page. She said when she was diagnosed, when she was sitting in the hospital, the first thing she thought was that she wanted to make sure she was around to see me graduate high school. Wish she could have made it that far.

They sat there on his bed, legs crossed Indian style. She made him keep reading, trying to get him to come to terms with his past, listening for the changes in his voice as he kept reading more.

Pastor Michaelson was downstairs. He had a lesson to prepare.

Well Here We Go

DRIVER'S ED

We're flying down a one-lane winding road at eighty miles an hour with the tires squealing and dirt and dust flying up behind us in the wake of expertly reckless automobile handling and Gabe is talking. Gabe is always talking when he's driving, and right now he's very excited from the weed and beer.

"Well here we go, ladies and gentlemen, unfasten your seat belts and keep at least one arm, limb, or other extremity outside the vehicle at all times because if we crash and die the last thing we want is for you to go out in the boring normalcy of a seated and upright position."

"Will you please stop talking?" I ask.

"Fuck you. That was funny. You're not high enough."

"I'm just fine, Gabe. Just fine and dandy over here. You see me inhale on this spliff?" I take a drag, loosen my grip on the door handle.

"You mean toke?" says Gabe. "Did you even make that thing right?"

"I pulled out some of the tobacco, put in some weed. What?"

"Is that the best way?" asks Gabe.

"I dunno. I think it's working."

Out the window things fly by in dark blurs: mailbox, driveway, trees, mailbox, driveway, trees. I lean my head against the glass. The scenery turns into a whoosh of confusion, a sea of fast color. Acceleration down a hill, engine pushed, trees clear and reveal a long driveway leading up to a huge house with a big open yard. Then it's back to rows and rows of trees and my head starts to hurt so I turn back in my seat.

We're getting close to the party at Michelle's house when we see two people riding bikes. This isn't two in the morning or anything like that—a time when a wild high school kids scene such as this might seem somewhat normal—it's a summer Saturday evening and the sun has just set over the trees. But we see what looks like this guy and his daughter riding *bikes* on this one lane road. I mean honestly, how stupid can people get, especially with their young daughter? Of course of course of course they're both wearing helmets, but helmets don't really help when a green Pontiac comes screaming down the road with no lanes and you're riding a damn bike. Gabe floors it straight for them, laughing in a high-pitched cackle.

My mouth goes dry and I swallow hard.

“Gabe,” I yelp. “Not funny!”

They're fifty feet away. They're caught in the headlights, illuminated in a harsh yellow as we zoom towards them. The father jumps off his bike and goes for his daughter.

They're thirty feet away. My mind drifts in cannabis-dreaminess. Slow motion. I can see the headline story now: “Local father and daughter killed in brutal hit and run by merciless under-age college students with a large supply of marijuana and alcohol in the car.” We become the billboard kids for some anti-drug campaign. “They were just

victims of a crazed culture that promotes drug use as something cool. They didn't stand a chance with their innocent minds. You could be next. Blah, blah blah."

The skidding tires come blaring into my head and I see the father and daughter in the headlights and my body lurches to the left as Gabe cuts the wheel. I wonder if we hit them. I look back in the mirror. They both seem fine, the father standing and yelling at us with his arms raised.

"That was unfortunate," I say. My head is still fuzzy but I think I hate Gabe for this.

"Thank goodness for those helmets," laughs Gabe. "They could've been hurt."

At this point, Mitch leans up from his lust-fest in the backseat with Jenna, stretching his jaw that probably aches from affection.

"Did we almost just kill people?" he says, long hair hanging down his sweaty forehead. Then he starts laughing as if he expects us to join in. Jenna leans up, equally sweaty and messy-haired, laughs with him and pulls his face back to the love nest so they can continue their almost-fornicating. Mitch and Jenna are that kind of carnal couple that are always on top of each other no matter where they are. But, I can't really blame them, because if I looked half as good as Mitch and had a girlfriend who looked half as good as Jenna, I don't really know if I could ever separate myself from such physical perfection. All blonde hair and Ralph Lauren.

The car screeches to a stop in Michelle's driveway—one of those short driveways that's really wide so multiple cars can park and turn around because apparently the garage is for storage and not parking cars—in front of Michelle's red Mustang GT,

inches from chipping the paint. Gabe turns the music off and yells: “Man, that was dangerous, HAHA! That could have been really bad!”

He slaps me in the face and jams it into park before killing the engine.

“Grab the beer!” he yells. He jumps out of the car and runs towards the tall wooden fence guarding Michelle’s backyard.

I ask Mitch and Jenna if they’re coming and Mitch responds by tossing Jenna’s panties in my face, knocking the spliff out of my mouth and onto the console. Luckily, the spliff is salvageable so I put it back in my mouth and reach back and grab the beer from their tangled legs. I get out and walk to the pool and backyard of Michelle’s house—which is really her parents’ house, but they’re gone for the weekend down in Naples or something. I hear people talking and the splash of someone jumping in the pool and then I hear Michelle’s voice yelling at Gabe.

POLITICS

“You asshole! You told me you’d be here two hours ago!” Michelle has this thing where she overreacts to things, which isn’t a good thing because she’s dating Gabe, who causes lots of...things for her to overreact to.

“Babe, come on!” says Gabe.

I’m setting the beer down on the table. Gabe takes off his shirt and runs to the pool, still in his shoes and pants, completes half a flip before slamming his back onto the water like some failed acrobatic demonstration.

Michelle crosses her arms and shakes her head as she walks over to me.

“Why am I dating him, Trip?” she asks. People call me Trip because my last name is Trippington. No one bothers with my first name.

“Well, you know,” I say. “He does have a lot of good qualities.” I stop and take a drag on my spliff. “They’re just hard to see.”

Michelle eyes me down. It reminds me that I still think I hate Gabe for almost hitting that father and daughter.

“Yeah,” I say. “I don’t know why you’re dating him.”

She walks over to the bonfire and I follow, see that her bikini is oh-so-tiny-and-lovely, completely lose focus and trip on the little ledge between the patio and grass. No one notices. She’s so close to me that I can smell the sun tan lotion and sweat and she looks so amazing standing there that I almost ask if she wants to go inside for a bit.

“Michelle,” I say. “You’re the patron saint of wearing bikinis.”

“Are we Catholic now?” she asks, walking over to the nearby picnic table.

“No, but I might convert just so I can pray to you.”

She smiles. “Church in the morning?”

“Church in the morning,” I say, joking but also knowing that we’ll all be in that building bright and early.

She bends down to work with the weed and paper on the picnic table and shakes her hips side to side, turning back and grinning at me.

I feel pain, resisting every urge in my body. My blood is so warm and I can’t stand looking at her legs so I turn away.

People have been smoking for a while now and I've gone through three cigarettes while the initial-but-puny high of the spliff wears off, realizing I probably didn't make the thing right as everyone else takes hits from a water bong some guy in denim shorts brought. People keep slapping their skin and trying to kill the bugs flying around. Michelle goes and gets some terrible-smelling bug spray. The bubbling sound of the bong creates a nice atmosphere against the crackling bonfire.

"I just feel like a centipede," says Gabe, "who's crawling down someone's throat. And you can't stop me even if you want to because you can't contain me and I'm just gonna live down there in my cocoon until I grow fucking butterfly wings and fly out your nose. So badass like that."

Everyone nods in agreement. "I can totally feel that," says Denim Shorts Guy. He squints, nods his head and makes the water bong bubble.

"You mean a caterpillar," I say. Everyone turns to me.

"What?" says Denim Shorts Guy, his head cocked to the side.

"Not a centipede, a caterpillar," I say.

"I can feel that, man. Totally," says Gabe.

"Mh-hmm," says Michelle, mocking.

There's a shrill crash from the table over by the pool and everybody looks to see boxer-clad Mitch who has just dropped the whole case of beer. A few bottles are shattered. He laughs like he did it on purpose and grabs a couple of the unbroken bottles, holding them in his muscled arms as he whistles the National Anthem and makes his way back towards the car.

“You are going to have to get that car pro-fessionally cleaned,” I say to Gabe, who is lying in the grass with his shirt off.

Things die down for a few minutes. I look at Michelle. She’s staring into the fire, eyes shiny. I start to look down her body but then look back at her face.

“Matt deployed yesterday,” she says.

Her brother. The silence is long. The wood cracks and pops in the flames.

Gabe makes the water bong bubble. “I’d never join the fucking military,” he says. “Like who gives those orders to blow shit up anyway?”

Michelle doesn’t respond, keeps staring into the flames.

“I’d turn my gun back on my commanders,” Gabe says. “And then go for Congress.”

“You’re not fucking funny,” whispers Michelle.

“It’s not supposed to be funny, sweetheart,” says Gabe. “Just politics. Vietnam all over again. Boom boom boom boom boom boom and they’re all dead. Wipe them all out. Blood for nothing.”

“It’s not Vietnam,” I say. “And you can’t call terrorists innocent, dumbass.”

“Oh?” asks Gabe. He sits up and looking at me like a maddened correspondent. “No war crimes are being committed?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Exactly,” Gabe continues. “War is the crime. It’s for the damn birds. The fucking white-haired old fogies who decide who lives and dies.”

“I think some things are worth fighting for,” says Denim Shorts Guy.

“Well fuck you,” says Gabe. “I’m not doing it.”

“Nobody asked you to,” I say. “And stop talking. Great soldier you’d make.”

“Screw this world, man,” says Denim Shorts Guy, fidgeting in his chair. “It’s way too messed up. Like I don’t know what to *do* with it all anymore.”

“It’s America, pal,” says Gabe. “Get a job, get married, get dead.”

“You should give inspirational speeches,” says Michelle.

“Beer?” I ask, getting up from my seat and taking off my jacket.

“Yes,” says Michelle.

“Bring me two, please,” says Gabe.

I get us more beer and Gabe keeps talking and eventually Michelle starts flirting with him again. The whole thing makes me sick and I leave and go back into the house, wishing I had driven myself, that Michelle would stop forgiving Gabe. I watch some TV before falling asleep and dreaming about being in the pool with Michelle.

Gabe wakes me up by hitting me with a towel. He says he wants to leave, Michelle’s mad at him again.

“How long was I out?” I ask.

“A while,” says Gabe. “You missed all the swimming.”

I get up and follow Gabe out the front door, turning and looking through the back window at the orange light of the bonfire, where I know Michelle’s face and body are lit in the warm tones of the summer evening.

MECHANICAL DIFFICULTIES

Gabe turns the key and the car groans and rururururururururur's but doesn't start.

"Shit," says Gabe.

He tries again, holds the key longer. The car doesn't start. Gabe bangs the steering wheel with his palms.

"Your battery dead?" I ask him.

"I dunno. How do you know if your battery's dead?"

"I dunno."

"Do you think I just need my oil changed?" says Gabe.

"Was your oil low?"

"I dunno."

There's a noise from the back, and then a head pops up.

"Fuck!" I yell, jumping in my seat.

"Still?" asks Gabe.

Mitch moves and shifts around with Jenna. By now they've covered themselves with a large red blanket that I've never seen before. Mitch emerges, revealing his hair that is now more frayed than messy. He smells terrible. "Can you guys keep it down?" he says, pulling the blanket back over his head. I wonder where the hell they got the blanket. Gabe is resting his head on the steering wheel.

"Stop brooding already," I say, opening the door.

"Where are you going?" asks Gabe.

Gabe gets out of the car and follows me over to Michelle's Mustang. "You're gonna need to get her keys," I say. "That relationship is over anyway, right?"

Gabe stands there and scratches his head, ponders his children-and-white-picket-fence-future with Michelle.

“Why her keys?” he asks me. “Let’s just take the keys to her mom’s Beemer. It’s a fucking M3.”

“You first,” I say.

“She catches us-”

“She won’t,” I say, though I don’t really care. I know that however this plays out, I’ll be okay.

As we’re walking into the house, Michelle walks in the back door. Gabe jumps towards the chair and crashes on the floor. Michelle laughs.

“What’re you two morons doing?” she says.

“Don’t tell her,” says Gabe, his face in the carpet, voice muffled by the fabric.

“Don’t tell her, man.”

“We’re stealing the keys to the Beemer,” I tell her. “You wanna come for a ride? I should tell you that we are fresh out of weed, but we have plenty of beer.”

“You were gonna steal my mom’s car?” Michelle says, to Gabe.

“That was the general plan,” I say, smiling at Michelle. When she looks at me her expression changes, eyebrows raised and lips curled. I know Gabe is no longer a threat.

“Follow me,” she says. She walks out of the kitchen and down the hall to her parent’s bedroom. I enjoy the view of her scantily-clad backside as Gabe slowly gets up to a crouch, holding his head in his hands. Walking down the dimly lit hallway I see a family photo I’ve never seen before of Michelle and her parents. They’re standing outside

church after what was probably an Easter Sunday service because they're especially dressed up. Everyone's wearing a smile that looks ridiculous, but then I reconsider the faces. She looks happy in this picture, something I've never seen in her before. Although Michelle, like the rest of us, is good at leading two lives—one with parents and church people, the other with friends—I've always thought of Michelle as the heavy-drinking-party type. But she looks so real in the photo. She comes walking back down the hall.

“Aren't we just precious?” she says, chuckling as she walks away. I follow a few steps behind, wondering about her smile. Once in her parents' bedroom, I completely forget about that stupid picture and start thinking about how good Michelle looks as she leans over and opens dresser drawers. I walk up behind her, reach my arms around to her stomach. She grabs my hands.

“You know,” she says. “I am taken.”

She turns around and we start kissing, if that's what you can call it. She walks me back to the bed and falls down on top of me, viciously attacking my face with her mouth and tongue.

“Shit,” she says, pulling her teeth away from my ear. “He might walk in,” she whispers. Her hair is falling down on my face as I sigh. She climbs off me, rearranges her bikini.

“I'm pretty sure they keep them in one of these drawers when they leave,” she says.

I find the keys in the first drawer I open, hold them up in my hand.

“Who's ready for some German-engineered joy-riding?”

She grabs the keys out of my hand.

“I should probably put on some pants,” she says. I mourn the loss of exposed skin, there should be a candlelight vigil.

I walk back out to where Gabe is now standing on the carpet, still holding his head in his hands.

“You good?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he says. “Just getting started.”

Michelle walks in wearing baggy sweatpants and a t-shirt and I feel like crying because I can’t see her legs anymore.

“You okay leaving everyone at the house?” I ask her.

“Well it is my party, so I can leave whenever I want.”

We walk out to the garage and she pushes the button.

“I’m driving,” says Gabe, walking to the driver’s door.

“No,” says Michelle. “You’re punished. Trip’s driving.” She tosses me the keys.

“Punished?” he asks.

“Mh-hmm,” Michelle smiles at me.

“Fine,” says Gabe, stepping back to the rear door. “We can have the whole back to ourselves.”

“No, I’m sitting up front with Trip. You can have fun all by yourself back there, buddy.”

I’ve never heard the word “buddy” sound so mean. Gabe glares at her. She gets in the car. He gets in the back and slams the door.

My foot is on the brake with my finger ready to push the start engine button when Gabe speaks up.

“We gotta get the beer,” he says. The back door flies open and he stumble-runs out the open garage door.

“What beer?” I yell.

He takes a few seconds before he returns with a case.

“More?” I ask.

“Always. In my trunk.” He sets the beer down on the seat. “Mitch and Jenna are still in there,” he says, opening a bottle. “Windows fogged up. And the smell.”

I start the engine. It’s loud, and I can feel the power. We pull out to the summer stars that are look as beautiful as any good poem would describe them, and then we’re gone.

This Machine Enables Fascists

We’re into the night. The American Dream spreads out before us as we pass house after house depicting the entirety of the great idea of it all. Large houses with shutters and wrap-around front porches and garages with at least two cars, sometimes more cars parked out in the driveway. These people are successful America at its very best, the Polo shirts and leather loafers, the Gucci bags and J. Jill accessories, timeshares in Orlando or Hilton Head or maybe a vacation home in the Outer Banks, new cars with heated seats and sunroofs. We’re on our way ten minutes due west into another county, a county in which people will drink a Bud-Light because it’s a Bud-Light, never scratching their chin and asking the waiter “What do you have on tap?”—a county where people tend to drive older cars and leave the timeshares to those in my county.

Gabe's leaning forward from the back, head on the console. He's on the edge of saying something very profound but can't quite finish the thought or tie it in to what he was talking about in the first place.

"I mean take this car, just for example," he says. "The leather, the gas mileage, the fucking fumes and everything. It's unbelievable. I almost don't even want to ride in this fascist-mobile."

"It is German," says Michelle.

I look over and see her form a sly grin with her lips, the kind that says, "Don't you think that joke was just so funny you can't stand it? Look how gorgeous I am."

Michelle and I both drink some beer and Gabe downs two before something beeps and I look down and see that the tank is almost empty.

"Hold up," I say, finishing the beer. "We need gas. Hide the booze."

We put our beers on the floor or under the seat before we pull in to the Exxon on the corner where the back road and main road going through town meet up.

"You have your credit card?" asks Michelle. "I might have some cash." She rummages through her Gucci purse.

"I do," I say, pulling up to a pump. "But this thing probably needs the expensive stuff. And I can't charge this, parents might check."

"Well you should buy some more cigarettes, too," says Michelle.

"I can't charge that, either. I'm telling you, they look at the statement sometimes. Unapproved purchases must be in cash."

“So use cash. I want cigarettes.” She gives me her look again. “But no menthols, okay?”

“What am I?”

“I’m just saying. They’re awful.”

“I know this. Reds it is.”

“Well wait,” she says, taking off her seatbelt. “I don’t like those either. Just. I’ll come with you.”

“Aww,” says Gabe. “You two.”

“We should have left him back at the house,” she says.

We walk inside the Tiger Mart and the guy behind the register looks up from his phone. Michelle and I walk up to the counter and lean in to browse through the cigarette selection.

“Ok, what’s the best cigarette?” I ask the guy, who looks like a college dropout. He wrinkles his forehead. He looks like he belongs on a farm making cheese, the dreadlocks and scruffy blonde beard—like he must just *love* Axl Rose.

“I like Marlboro Blacks,” he says.

“Ew, no,” says Michelle. “Sorry, they just sound like too much for me.”

“She likes Menthols,” I say.

Michelle puts her hand over my mouth and I swat it. “Don’t mind him,” she says. “He doesn’t know what he wants. Marlboro lights, please.”

“I.D.?” says the dreads guy.

“Yeah,” I say, pulling it from my wallet. “You know they’re thinking about changing the age restriction for buying these?”

“What?” says Michelle. “You serious?” She hands her I.D. to the guy and he hands it right back.

“Yup,” I say. “Twenty-one.”

The dreads guy bends my license several times, like he’s trying to break it out of sheer rage over the fact that I don’t also have dreadlocks down past my knees.

“Well shit,” says Michelle. “I can apparently choose whether or not to risk my life in the military at eighteen, but I don’t have the capability to decide whether or not I smoke or drink until I’m twenty-one?”

“The military doesn’t care if you make the right decision or not. They just want you to join up, and then they’ve got you. Plus, you can smoke and drink in the military all you want, right?” I remember Michelle’s brother is over there and wonder if I should stop.

The hippie finally hands me my license and reaches back for the cigarettes.

“And forty bucks on pump 3, please.” I put the cash on the counter.

“I should join up,” says Michelle.

“No, you’re a girl,” I say, raising my eyebrows and smiling big.

Michelle slaps me lightly on the cheek and reaches for the cigarettes. “And some matches,” she says, working the plastic off the pack.

“I’m just saying,” I say. “Why do women get to do the same job with different training? If I’m a guy out in the desert, I don’t want a woman watching my back who hasn’t had the same exact training as everyone else. It’s a unity thing.”

“Oh, is it a unity thing? I think it’s a prejudice thing.”

The dreads guy smiles.

“What do you think about all this?” I ask him.

“I was in the Army,” he says. My face gets hot over the bit I just did on the military. “Never had any girls I went out and fought with,” he says. “Knew a few of them, though. They’re all right.”

“But tell me,” I say. “Life or death, who would you rather have on your side?”

“Yeah, probably another guy.”

“It looks like the Army is on my side.”

“Yeah,” says Michelle. “You sure have picked a diverse group to ask. Just like my brother.”

Her face changes the slightest bit. I push her out the door.

“Come on, soldier,” I say.

As we’re walking to the car, I see this guy sitting by the dumpster with a cardboard sign that says something about how he’s homeless and needs food. It doesn’t make any sense because it’s dark outside and he’s not even sitting close to the door of the Tiger Mart where people would walk by. It’s like he’s humbly homeless, scared of bothering people with his begging. Michelle doesn’t seem to notice as she gets in the car. I keep looking over at him and he’s eyeing me down with this puppy dog look and I can’t help but walk over. I open my wallet and realize how much money I just spent on gas and cigarettes, leaving only two dollars for me to give him.

“Hey, here you go, man.”

He nods quickly, doesn’t say anything.

I turn around and fight the urge to turn back and get roped into buying him food. I avoid looking at him as I pump gas, staring the other way until I put the nozzle back in the holder and close the cap, quickly getting back into the safety of the car.

Then I break and look over at him again.

“Give me the cash you guys have,” I say.

“What?” asks Gabe. “Why?”

“Just do it. You see that guy over there? Just do it, man.”

“Fuck off,” he leans up to the front. “It’s my money. Let him make his own. This is America.”

I can’t take Gabe’s stupid words anymore. I lean over the console and grab his shirt with both hands. “Give me your fucking money, or I’ll beat your dumb ass and leave you here.”

“Trip,” says Michelle.

Gabe looks away and reaches around for his wallet. “All I have is two twenties,” he says. “This is stupid. What’s he gonna do with two twenties? Get his life back in order?”

Michelle takes eighty dollars out of her wallet and hands it to me, squeezes my hand. I get out and walk over to the guy, hand him the wad of cash.

“You’ll be okay?” I ask him. My head feels tight.

He nods again and grabs my hand. His hand is warm and soft. I resist the urge to pull away because of the gratitude in his face, visible behind the grime and beard. He holds on for a second, looks into my eyes, squeezes my hand. I don’t know what to say, so I don’t say anything, just nod at him as he nods at me.

On the way back to the car I wonder if there's any hand sanitizer in the console.

MUSICAL INTERLUDE

We're at the Red Tortoise now and there's a small stage set up because it's Saturday night and they let shitty musicians come play. Some rock band is playing out of tune and time while the singer yells into the microphone. Even with all the noise, I can't shake the thought of the homeless guy.

"Why the hell would you pick a spot like that?" I ask. "It's not like it's warm or something, and it's not like tons of people are walking around back there. Can't he find a better place?"

"Can we stop talking about this guy?" says Gabe. "We already gave him a bunch of money." He keeps rubbing his eyes.

I imagine punching Gabe's stupid face, knocking him out of the chair.

"Well look who it is," he says.

I look towards the stage and see James Michaelson walking up with his guitar.

"I saw them when we walked in," says Michelle.

"Them?" I ask her.

"Stephanie's over there." She points to a table on the other side of the restaurant and I see the self-righteous Stephanie sitting there smiling like an idiot at James. These two people are always involved in some church function, causing my parents to always ask me to be more "like them."

"They're so pretentious," I say.

“If he breaks into Jesus Loves Me, This I Know,” says Gabe. “I’m throwing something at him.”

We all laugh and wait to see what the pastor’s kid will play. He finally goes into some cover of a Springsteen song, and it pisses me off that he’s actually good. A few of the girls in the restaurant whelp and shout when he finishes and walks off stage.

“I got to,” says Gabe, standing up.

“Don’t, you’re drunk,” I say. I follow after him.

James straightens up in his seat when he sees us.

“Hey, faggot,” says Gabe. “Play an original song.”

“Gabe,” I say. “Come on.” I grab his arm and he jerks it away.

“Go back to your friends, kid,” says James. He crosses his arms and looks at the floor.

Gabe laughs and turns to me. “He called me a kid? You hear that?”

“Just leave, okay?” says James. “You look plastered as shit anyway.”

Gabe gets closer, right into James’ face. Stephanie stands up from her chair.

James seems to have no reaction.

I’m pissed at Gabe because I don’t want to hit James and I’ve kind of had a thing for Stephanie since middle school.

“Don’t tell me what I *fucking* am,” says Gabe.

“I just told you what you look like,” says James.

I pull Gabe’s shoulders back and he gets out of James’ face.

I look at Stephanie, but she doesn’t seem to care.

“Stephanie,” I say, nodding at her. “Sorry, guys.”

I walk Gabe back to our table and he plops down in his seat. I look at Michelle in the silence and she finally takes a breath to break it.

“You guys hear Christie and Steve got engaged?” asks Michelle. Christie and Steve are just two more twenty-somethings in the church.

“Doesn’t he work at Sam’s Club?” I ask.

“Yeah,” says Michelle. “Loading dock.”

“Then what the hell are they gonna do? Live in their parents’ basement their whole lives?”

“Probably,” says Gabe, his head on the table.

“Probably,” says Michelle.

“It’s the new thing,” continues Gabe. “Go to college. Live in parents’ basement. The end.”

“The end,” I say.

We drink more beer—with our fake IDs—and Michelle grows restless, her knee bopping up and down and up and down with boredom. Gabe keeps sinking, rubbing his eyes and moving his head on the table.

“I’ll be outside,” says Gabe. He walks out.

We pay cash for the beers and go out to the parking lot and find Gabe lying on the hood of the Beemer.

“I drank too much,” he says, hands on his face.

“No shit,” I say. “Get off.”

“I kind of want to get home,” says Michelle, yawning.

“No one leaves until we’re done with the night,” says Gabe. “I’ve got a plan.”

We get in the car and I'm pulling out into an intersection when Gabe says, "We need supplies!"

"For what?" I ask.

"Just pull into Wal-Mart."

We follow a drunken Gabe around the store and he gets two items before I realize what he's doing.

BIOLOGY 101

A mailbox bomb consists of Drano, tin foil and some water all mixed in a large bottle. The windows are down and we're looking for the right one. The air is damp and earthy, a mist in the dark night. We drive through a few neighborhoods, finally finding a mailbox that's perfect, right under a lamppost like a beacon calling out.

Gabe's got the ingredients in the back seat, and Michelle has finally stopped freaking out about Gabe ruining the carpet or leather. I drive up to the mailbox and Gabe starts pouring the Drano into the bottle, plastic bag covering the floor as a precaution to any spillage. He struggles getting the window down for a second, then reaches out and opens the mailbox.

"Shit," he says. "Hold on. Fuckers don't check their mail." He opens his car door, hits the mailbox with it, blemishing the shiny black car. "Shit." He slides out.

"Be careful, man," I say.

"Hurry up," says Michelle.

“It’s fine,” he says. “It takes a while.” I can see the bottle expanding in his hand and I wonder just how drunk he is as he reaches inside and pulls the mail out, tossing envelopes on the road one at a time. “Just pull on down,” he says. “You’re in my way.”

“Dude,” I say. “You’re gonna get burned alive by chemicals when that thing explodes. Invisible flames we won’t be able to put out.” He doesn’t acknowledge me and I pull the car down the street, turning my head and watching with Michelle. It looks like a one-man play the way the lamppost lights up Gabe and the mailbox.

The mail is all over the road and Gabe keeps fiddling because the bottle has expanded to the point of not being able to fit inside the mailbox. His body lurches a little bit and I see him throw up all over the bottle.

“Dude! Drop the fucking thing!” I yell out the window. He turns and looks at me, the oversized balloon-shaped bottle in his hand.

“Gabe!” yells Michelle.

“Will you calm down?” he yells. Bits of vomit drip from his lips, the bottle explodes.

LOOSE ENDS

I’m out with Michelle getting coffee. We’re at a window table and the chill November rain drips down the glass as the baristas froth milk for cappuccinos. We’ve stayed in touch more than the others since it happened. We both keep shifting in our seats and watching people in line order.

“Mitch checked into rehab the other day,” says Michelle. “Jenna transferred out of state. He’s also still convinced he’s bi-polar.”

“Hopefully they’ll be able to help him out with all that,” I say.

I think about how much I wish we could have started dating. How Michelle told me she couldn’t possibly date me after what happened.

She sips her coffee and looks out the window.

I think about how Gabe never told the truth about that night, kept his mouth shut about us. I wonder if Michelle thinks he’s a good guy. All our parents suspected, but never found out. They didn’t want to ask that question, just let Gabe take it alone.

We had cleaned out the car when we got back to Michelle’s house, vacuuming the carpets and wiping down the inside like we’d killed somebody. There was a small scratch on the door where Gabe had bumped it against the mailbox, and Michelle said she’d take it in to get detailed and shampooed, tell her parents she dinged it at the gas station. Her parents always went for the sweet-little-daughter thing.

We also took the trash bags of beer, cigarettes, and weed to the Dunkin Donuts dumpster so no one would ever find those things. After a sleepless night, I went to church in the morning like nothing had happened, tried to subtly nurse my hangover. I didn’t talk to anyone, just glanced across the aisle at Michelle, dressed up in nice clothes. That was when Pastor Garrison announced Gabe was in the hospital and we should all be praying for him and his family. He had lost a lot of blood, but was stable, said Pastor Garrison.

“Lisa?” says one of the baristas. I look over and see an older woman put a straw into the frozen drink.

Michelle's still watching the rain. I think about how no one has visited Gabe since he was discharged from the hospital. I also think about how I have to go pick up my new prescription at the pharmacy later on. I wonder if Michelle takes anything.

"Why'd we fucking leave him?" she asks. I can see her eyes getting all watery.

"We had to, I think. We could have gone to jail."

"I don't think it was right."

"The ambulance got there."

"One of his fingers was still hanging there, loose. But they had to take it off."

"I can't imagine."

She grabs her arms like she's cold. "My dad told me the elders at church visited him in the hospital. He didn't say a word the whole time they were there. They prayed over him and all that stuff and he just sat there with his eyes open."

After the bottle exploded, Gabe wasn't screaming. He was rolling around on the ground, feet kicking. His hand just looked like blood. I got out of the car and started walking towards him and my legs felt all strange, like in a dream when you can't run away from the monster. I heard Michelle yelling. I forgot to put the car in park. It started rolling forward so I ran and jumped back in and stomped the parking brake. I looked at Michelle as we heard Gabe start wailing, then I got out and ran towards him, loose gravel crunching under my feet. I stood and watched Gabe tremble on the ground, realized Michelle was next to me. She started to go in close and I pulled her back.

"You can't get blood on you."

"He doesn't have fingers," she whispered.

“What?”

“He doesn’t have fucking fingers!”

“We have to leave.” I could smell the chemicals from the bomb, they didn’t smell like anything else, just wet and unnatural.

Michelle started to walk towards him again and I grabbed her. I dragged her back to the car and Gabe’s screaming was drowned out by the roaring engine as I floored it out of there.

This Is How We Loved

She was an aspiring actress, and that turned me on more than I ever wanted to admit. I guess the fact that I'm writing this down makes this my confession, admitting it was the idea of her that I loved.

I was looking for her in the crowd at Brett's party. The music was loud and the light was dark and everyone had a drink in hand. People kept stopping me to congratulate and praise the book, and I tried to smile quickly and move on.

"Have you seen her?" I asked her agent, a tall, stout woman in her forties wearing a tight grey suit.

"No. Said she'd be trying to get her script approved."

"Not good."

"No. Director's never gonna go for it."

"Thanks," I said, leaving her.

I kept weaving through the people, straining my eyes to make out anyone I actually knew. I saw Brett talking to a group of girls who could still be in high school, all short-skirts and bleached hair. He was smiling and rubbing the arm of one of the girls, probably his new tenant. My stomach churned.

I walked out to the pool where a few drunk people were swimming, the girls topless. They were splashing and yelping between silences as if they didn't know what to do until they went inside and had sex, just going through the motions of time-spent before fucking.

I saw her off in the yard, sitting alone with a glass of white wine. One of the lights in the yard was shining behind her, and the way she was smoking her cigarette was something angelic.

I walked past the foreplayers in the pool and into the grass. She didn't hear my steps as I came up to her.

"I thought you didn't smoke since Maryland," I said.

She looked up at me and smiled, exhaling a cloud that looked gold in the light. "Now and then," she said.

"He didn't go for your script."

"Nope."

I put my hands in my pockets and looked away. "Someone will pick it up."

"Mh-hmm." She took a long drag.

One of the girls back at the pool screamed and I looked back to see there was now a group chicken fighting. I looked past them at the house, figures outlined in the large floor-to-ceiling windows, bass line of the music rumbling.

"I was thinking," I said. "We should go somewhere for a while."

"That sounds nice. And where would we go now that we're famous? France? Italy? Shall we drink and dance in the cafes and go to bullfights?"

"I'm open to suggestions."

She grinned. “Come here.”

I walked closer and sat down on the ground, leaned back against her legs. She leaned forward and put her hands in my hair.

“I just thought it would have happened by now,” she said.

“I know.”

“All this, and so far it’s for nothing.”

“We’re here, aren’t we?”

“We are.”

She kept playing with my hair. “Are we ok?” she asked.

I put my hand on the back of her calf and looked up at her. “We’re ok.”

“You shouldn’t sit in the grass. Those pants are too nice.”

I traced patterns on her calf. “I can afford new pants.”

“When do you leave again?”

“Twenty-third. Only for three weeks. Then we’ll see.”

“I wish we were together more.”

“I’ll write the next one on set with you.”

She smiled at me. I kissed her knee.

The people in the pool were headed inside now, towels loosely wrapped around them. I wondered if they’d pick a bedroom or a shower.

“I do love your writing,” she said.

“I know.”

“Can’t I still be at least a little bitter?”

I smiled at her. “Sure. Don’t want to blow my ego up too much, do we?”

“Never.”

She had broken up with me when we were twenty and both still living in Maryland, that place we both wanted to get out of. Our relationship consisted of singing at gigs and arguing about movies between spending hours in her bedroom. She seemed a lot younger back then, full of energy.

She was moving out to California with her writer/director friend in eight months. Her aspirations were taking her places and mine were not. I had tried acting with her and her director friend, even some screenwriting. But I knew that it wasn't for me. I wanted to be a writer, and I wrote stories late into the night, drinking and throwing books around my room to try and find the words, never coming out with anything good. One day in class a colleague told me that my writing reminded him of something from a Hallmark movie or an ABC drama. I tried to hide the fact that the comment made me want to tie him to a telephone pole and set him on fire.

So, I was a nothing-writer with a California-bound girlfriend. On top of that, she started acting uninterested, never had any time for me. I was driving over to her house whenever she said she had some free time, and it was ridiculous. One hour here. Two there. An afternoon turned into twenty minutes if she decided she had to try out an idea for a short film.

I decided I wanted to shake things up, give her a reality check. I wanted to show her that she couldn't ignore me. I was gonna fake a breakup to get her to realize how stupid she was being. After I told her I thought we should end things because she was so busy, I knew she would protest and say she could try harder, make more time. She didn't

want to lose me and I knew it. I drove over to see her, all confident and puffed up on my righteous anger. But we talked in her driveway and she scolded me with her eyes while explaining how I had betrayed her trust.

“You promised we’d always just make it work, remember?” she said.

This didn’t help my being pissed at her. After standing there silent for a few moments, she said I should probably leave.

“Well, I guess you should go, then.” She said it just like that. No inflection, just a fact.

“You joking?” I said, trying to call her bluff on my bluff.

“Why would I be joking about this? Who jokes about something like this?”

I heard a few cars drive by on the nearby highway. One of her neighbor’s screen doors creakily opened and banged shut.

“Fuck this,” I said, looking at the ground and turning away before she could scold me anymore with her condescending face. I slammed my car door shut and almost crushed her mailbox backing out. When I got home my right hand was bruised from hitting the steering wheel, ears ringing from how loud I turned the music up.

That was that.

But then I wanted her back.

A few days later, I broke and texted her. We were both upset about how things had ended, and I reluctantly apologized and said I had overreacted. She said something about how she just couldn’t really deal with us right now, had to focus on her career. I wanted to ask what career she was talking about. Waiting tables?

She didn’t want to get back together, I didn’t even ask.

I grew my hair out longer and got a few tattoos, started smoking. I dropped out of college during my last semester, worked full time at Wal-Mart and paid \$200 a month to sleep on my friend's couch. I read and wrote when I wasn't working. And made dinners, that was part of my rent. I kept writing about her, and thought it was pretty good. I showed it to my friends, and they didn't think much of it. They kept asking when I would go back and finish school.

I heard through a friend that she was out in California, the whole acting thing was picking up momentum. I still imagined California as some strange, untouchable place where you either lose your whole life or win once and then lose. I bought a ticket that night to go out there: Four-hundred-and-twenty-nine-dollars and forty-nine cents. But I couldn't get my ass to the airport that night. I was too scared, like some grade-school nervousness before trying to go and talk to the girl with the Cinderella lunchbox.

So, I bought another ticket two days later, another four-hundred-and-twenty-nine-dollars and forty-nine cents, after many cigarettes and half a bottle of old, nasty tequila I found in my closet. I didn't even know what to pack, how long I'd be there, or where the hell to find her. I dusted off an old duffle bag, threw in an assortment of jeans and shirts and called my friend to drop me off at the airport.

I sat next to this older guy on the flight who asked why I was headed to L.A. He was wearing this really nice jacket and had a gold watch on his right wrist. I told him that they were turning one of my novels into a movie, and I was flying out to approve the script.

"Good for you," he said. "I tell you, you kids sure are doing a lot of work out there."

“It’s a new movement of artists. I’m just glad to be a part of it.”

“Hmm,” he said, going back to reading his *Forbes* article. “Good for you.”

Ten minutes passed before he asked what the name of the movie was going to be.

I told him I couldn’t talk about it yet, contractually-obligated silence.

“It’s not one of those vampire-love movies, is it?” he asked.

“God, no.”

“Good. My youngest daughter won’t stop watching those things.”

“Yeah. Vampires was a big movement a few years back.”

“Yes. Movement, mh-hmm.”

He then fell asleep until we touched down in California.

After getting off the plane in L.A., I called her. I didn’t realize the significance of the phone call until it was already ringing. I panicked. It rang and rang, went to voicemail. I left a long voicemail. Way, way too long of a voicemail. I was in the cab on the way to a cheap hotel when she called me back.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi.”

“Why are you out here?”

“Wanted to see you.”

“Wanted?”

“Want. I want to see you. Where are you?”

There was a long pause, I heard a few sighs.

She gave me the address of this coffee place she wanted to meet. I was nervous and pretended as if I knew the roads and already had a good idea of where it was. We

agreed to meet at six, after she got off work at the restaurant.

The hotel was way cheaper than it looked online. I mean, I knew how much it would *cost*, I just didn't know that there would be dead bugs on the windowsills and hair in the sink. I didn't want to think about the bed, so I just took a shower and got dressed, sitting in one of the chairs and watching TV for two hours.

I took a cab to the coffee place and waited for about twenty minutes until she texted me.

I'm gonna be late, just got back to my place. You wanna come here?

Where is here?

I'm staying with this guy.

A guy?

Been helping me out.

Ok. So where?

I was expecting to pull up to a run down apartment complex in a bad area of town so that I could tell her I worried about her living there and seem all masculine and protective. But the cab dropped me off at a beautiful house overlooking L.A. There was a Ferrari parked in the driveway next to her old Dodge sedan, and I could see through the floor-to-ceiling windows to a glistening pool in the back patio. The whole house was lit up glass, a beacon set on top of a hill. I guessed no one in L.A. believed in curtains.

“Are you sure?” I said, to the face in the rear-view mirror.

“This is the place you tell me,” he said.

“Yeah. Okay then,” I said, opening the door. “I'm here about a girl, so you might

just want to wait here for a few minutes, who knows. She might kill me for all I know.”

His face told me he didn't get the joke.

“Never mind,” I said. I gave him some cash and got out.

He sped away after I shut the door, and I stared at the mostly-glass house before walking up the driveway. I went up to her car and noticed she had a SoCal bumper sticker above the old HoCo one she'd always had.

There didn't seem to be a front to the house, and I finally saw her slide a section of the glass open like a magic trick.

“I didn't know you were this famous,” I said.

“I'm a whole new person out here.” She was tan, and wearing tiny white shorts with a weird sweater-shirt thing that hung off one shoulder.

“Your hair is longer,” she said. “I like it.”

We exchanged a strange hug before going inside.

“Whose house is this?” I asked.

“Brett Casey. Musician.”

I had never heard of a Brett Casey in my life.

“What band?” I asked.

I had never heard of the band, either.

“I guess he did well for himself,” I said. “Unless that's your Ferrari.”

She laughed. “Nope. Can't buy one yet.”

I sat down on one of the white couches in the main room, looking around and waiting for her to talk.

“Why did you really come here?” she asked, her hands fidgeting with the bottom

of her sweater-thing as she stood there tense.

“I wanted to see you. I told you.”

“You were a dick to me.”

“I know. So why’d you let me come out here?”

“I missed you.” She moved herself to the couch opposite me. “But what’d you come here for?”

“I thought I could find you and things would be better.”

“Things would be better?” She hung her head. “Am I your solution?”

“Okay. Why do you think I’m here?”

“*You’re* the one who came here.”

“*You* told me to come here.”

She stood up, pulling her hair behind her left ear. “Well, this has been an interesting conversation and all, but—”

I stood up, walked up to her and starting kissing her. She initially resisted, but then stopped pulled on my shoulder blades. We walked to her room and had the best make-up sex in the history of make-up sex, collapsing on the bed in an intertwined mess of limbs, our faces together, her hair falling over my chest and shoulders. We lay there for hours, as she traced the outline of the ship tattoo along my shoulder and I twirled strands of her hair.

“Do you forgive me now?” I asked.

“You never apologized.”

“I did.”

“Not really.”

“Okay. I will. I’m sorry.”

It was just like it had been before, but now we were in a better place, a foreign place that didn’t seem completely real. The sheets were incredibly soft and the pillows were perfectly fluffy, you could get lost in them for hours, never wanting to get back up and face anything difficult. The walls separating the rooms were a light taupe, and the hardwood floors were a light maple.

“How’d you go from Maryland to here? Seems like you skipped a few steps.”

She shifted her weight on my body. “I did this one photo shoot for a band, drummer’s girlfriend was talking to me about moving to L.A. Talked about Brett. He’s done this a few times for young actors or musicians coming to L.A. for the first time. Gives them a place for cheap. Helps them out with his contacts sometimes.”

“Nice enough guy, I guess.”

“He’s struggling. I’ve seen the notices in the mail.”

“He doesn’t play anymore?”

“He hasn’t in years. Been getting some money from dealing small-time.”

I moved my head so I could see her face. She looked up at me with her innocent eyes, brow all raised and trying to look confused. “You joking?” I asked her.

“Just small time. It’s not a big thing. He knows what he’s doing.”

“It sounds like he doesn’t.”

We heard someone in the kitchen.

“You’ll like him,” she said, getting off the bed and gathering her clothes. I reluctantly sat up and watched her dress. I had never seen her naked before. I mean, obviously we had both been naked a few minutes before, but we were so close we

couldn't see each other. Gazing now, I wished I had a pause button. It was as if she had been painted in long, smooth strokes of pleasure; all legs as she danced around on her tiptoes putting on her underwear and shorts. She must have noticed because she turned around.

"I mean, do you want him to see your junk?" she said, smiling devilishly. She put her sweater-thing on and I just wanted to rip all the clothes back off again.

"So he has a Ferrari, and another car?" I asked.

"Hummer," she said.

"Of course."

We walked out of the room hand in hand, to the kitchen where Brett was loading beer into the fridge. She introduced us, and he turned and said, "Hey, man. Good to meet you." He walked over and shook my hand, still wearing purple-to-clear-fade aviators. His eyes were noticeably bloodshot behind the clearer part of the sunglasses. His hair was thinning and spiked up in a mess on top of his large white forehead. He had a plethora of earrings, a few rings on his hands, and was wearing a tight black t-shirt with ripped jeans and black combat boots. He must have been forty, and his handshake was weak and strange.

"He might be staying with me for a while," she told Brett.

"Yeah, that's cool with me. No problem as long as he likes to party like we do, baby."

His voice had a strange rasp to it. Singer.

She smiled and rolled her eyes. "Uh-huh," she said.

I stared at her, looking for any kind of sign. She shook her head no.

“Just joking,” said Brett, his head back in the fridge stocking the beer.

“What?” I said.

“I knew you were probably wondering about me and her.”

“We’re gonna go take a shower,” she said, giving me a playful look that told me she was in total control.

“Have fun,” said Brett.

We went at it again in the shower, and then stood there sopping wet, speaking in hushed voices over the water

“He’s harmless,” she said. “He just jokes because he knows he’s way too old for me and I’d never go for him anyway. All he does is drink, talk on his phone, and get high every now and then.”

“Every now and then?”

“Come on. What’d you expect looking at him?” She grabbed a purple bottle and squeezed some gel onto her hand.

“Can’t argue with you there,” I said. “Does he always wear sunglasses?”

“Stop worrying. You think I can’t take care of myself?” Her hair was white with suds as her hands worked the shampoo in.

“I think you’re a little too accepting of him. And what do you mean he knows he’s too old for you? Isn’t ninety percent of being in a band screwing younger girls?” I grabbed some soap and started washing the sweat off.

“Stop,” she said, putting her shampoo-covered hand over my mouth. “You’re here now, right?” She put her arms around my neck. “What are you worried about?”

I drew my hands up from her hips to her shoulders and back down to her hips.

Her legs moved and she giggled. “That tickles,” she said.

“It’s bad enough you look the way you do. I’m not thrilled about worrying over some washed-up druggie.”

“It’s fine,” she said. She started rubbing her hands through my hair and then scrubbed my head. I didn’t much like being her puppy dog.

The next day Brett was still in his room while we ate breakfast, Hummer and Ferrari both still in the driveway. I rode with her in the old Dodge into work so I could see the restaurant. It was a nice place, white tablecloths, dim lighting and a large wine list. She introduced me to her co-workers as they set up for the day, and then I left when she went on the early shift—she was new, and had to work lunch to five.

I took a few buses and got lost before calling a cab. I went back to the cheap hotel and got all of my stuff—a small suitcase and a backpack—before heading back to Brett’s. I told the driver to let me off about a mile away from the house. I had this idea of walking up the street and taking in the view of the city. It was a dumb idea. It was obnoxious walking with the suitcase, but the air was warm and I did catch a few glimpses of a smoggy city. When I got to the house I slowly opened the door, not wanting to make a loud noise and wake a possibly-hung-over Brett. I walked to her room and found Brett standing on a chair working on the air vent up on the wall.

“Hey,” I said.

Brett barely flinched. “Oh, hey. This vent is all messed up. Trying to fix it.” He twisted one of the screws back in place.

I set my suitcase and backpack down. “Okay.”

“Help yourself to some food, man. I made some guacamole.”

“Maybe later.”

Brett jumped down from the chair. “Ah, it should be working now.” He carried the chair back out of the room. “You want an official tour of the city?” he yelled from the other room. “I’d be happy to show you around.”

“No, not today. I have some writing I need to do.”

“Oh, cool. Screenwriting, right?”

“No. Well, sometimes.”

He came back. “Well, I’m gonna be out today. Do whatever you want, everything here is up for grabs. Except the cars, gotta draw the line there.” He grinned.

“No problem,” I said, managing a slight laugh.

“All right well, I’ll see you.” And then he walked out, quick. I heard the Ferrari engine thunder to life and rev off into the distance.

I got the chair from the other room and looked inside the vent. I found a tiny little camera sitting right up against the grill, taped into place and pointed at the bed.

I called her. I called her nine times and she never picked up. Fucking silent mode on her phone.

I started grabbing her stuff from the drawers and piled some of it onto the bed. Then I wandered into Brett’s room. His bed was huge. There was a large plasma screen mounted on the wall, giant stereo system on the adjacent wall, a few guitars hung on the other wall. I opened the dresser drawers and looked through. I found ripped jeans and metal bracelets until I looked in the nightstand. There were discs in little white-see-thru plastic containers. They were labeled with blue tape and Sharpie. Her name was on the

first one I saw. Then there was name after name of different girls. I closed the drawer and opened the next one down and found two cellphones, a bag of some kind of powdered drug, and a gun.

I paced around the house for a while before she got back, afraid to start packing her stuff if he might come back again. She stormed in in a quick stride of fury, glaring at me.

“So, you need to call me nine times at work? What was that?”

“We have to leave. Tonight.”

“Stop. What is the problem?”

“What’s the problem? He has cameras in your room.”

“Cameras?”

“One in the air vent.” I realized I hadn’t checked the room for more.

“Okay,” she said, pushing against her eyes with her fingers. “Just, I know.”

I stepped back. I stepped back and looked at her rubbing her eyes like she had the upper hand and was trying to explain herself to a dumb little kid.

“Excuse me?” I said.

“I know about it.”

I brought my arms up and didn’t say anything for a second, my mouth open and searching for the words. I finally whispered, “Then what the *fuck* are you still doing here?”

“Look, he’s letting me stay here for almost nothing.”

“Almost nothing? Who gives a fuck? He’s fucking taping you sleep.”

She brought her hands up and shrugged “I don’t really care, I’m sorry. It’s gross, I

know. He's not going to hurt me or anything."

I couldn't control my hands, they moved spastically as if I were speaking in sign language. "Not going to hurt you? Do you even know what psychopathic behavior looks like? This guy: psycho. He probably dresses up in a clown suit and kills people at night. And he probably films that, too."

She put her hand up. "Stop. This is my decision. I didn't ask you to come out here, but you did. And I'm happy you're here, but this comes first."

"This?"

"My career."

I stopped for a second, letting her lack of words sink in. "You want those tapes around?"

She caught her breath to say something, but didn't.

"Famous-by-sex-tape? It's a bit overdone, don't you think?"

"Fuck you," she said, walking away.

I chased after her, grabbing her arm. "No, you fucking come back."

She jerked her arm away. "*Don't* grab me."

"How does this not fucking bother you? What the hell has happened to you over here? Do you sleep with all your directors, too? Is that how you're getting work?"

She slapped me, hard.

"I am not a whore. Fuck you."

I looked down, avoiding her scolding eyes. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

She crossed her arms. "He has cameras in all the bedrooms. He has quite the sex tape collection of girls he's been with. He talks about them, he's open about it. It's not as

secretive as you think.”

“I don’t understand,” I said.

“I know. It is crazy. But it’s *my* crazy life. I’m not asking you to accept it.”

“You don’t wonder if he’s safe?”

“He is.”

“How can you know?”

“Because I asked other people who know him. He’s had some parties here, with a lot of other girls. They all say he’s weird, but a teddy bear. Never hurt a fly.”

“Well, the teddy bear has a gun.”

“Yeah. A lot of people have guns.” She pulled her hair back. “Look, he has connections I can use. *We* can use. If we just put up with it for a little longer, I’ll be making a lot more money. He knows some writing people, too. You could get published.”

I reached behind my head, pulled my hair together in a fist. “How much of you wanting me back is you wanting me to help you be famous?”

“Oh, don’t act like this is all about me. You want to be a writer just as much as I want to be an actor.”

“Please.”

“No,” she put her hand up in front of my face like “how dare you?” and I wanted to smack it down with all the masculine rage I could muster. “Stop,” she continued. “I know what you think of me.”

“I don’t think you do.”

“I represent everything you want. But you don’t just want me. Not really. You want what I come with, the kind of life we can have out here.”

“Why’d you want to be together again?”

“You broke up with me. You were a real dick about it, too. But I don’t know anyone else out here. We might make a good team.”

She smiled at me, that stupid fucking smile that I’d learn to hate.

She became fairly famous in only a matter of months. She was in a few teenage romance productions, and then graduated to two indie films that did well at the festivals. She always wanted me with her at the premieres, despite my initial protest. The premieres weren’t anything spectacular, but still, people started to wonder who the hell that guy she was always with was. She told one of the microphones amidst the flashing cameras that I was a writer.

One of the guys she knew through Brett read some of my stuff and published it online. The work became somewhat popular and I was soon signing a small book deal with a publisher. My ambition and accomplishments were starting to match up with hers, and this balancing out of things was good for our relationship. I stayed up until early morning for weeks and weeks, writing and editing. Most of the time I actually spent just trying to come up with an idea for a story. The publishers wanted about two-hundred and fifty pages, and I lied to them that I already had that much material.

“I’ll just have to decide what to leave out,” I told them.

I wrote two-hundred and seventy-three pages that I thought were really good. Then I reread it all after I sent it and hated every word. My wife told me she loved the stories, that I was a wonderful writer, marvelous. We always complimented each other like that, using the words “wonderful,” “terrific,” and “incredible,” almost every time we talked about work, almost always ending in kissing and often sex.

The day before my first book tour, I was standing in our California apartment when I found some fan mail addressed to her. I wondered who even wrote letters anymore. Despite the fact that she was gorgeous and sometimes half-nude in all these indie films for any sweaty perv to pause and jack off to, some guys sent mail. One letter had multiple pictures of a dick. I ripped it apart and stuffed it into the bottom of the trashcan in our small apartment. But the worst letter was from one of the guys in one of the past films, a ridiculously European name: Artem. The only thing he had done in the movie was say a few lines and then take his shirt off. It was some terrible love story/vampire spin-off from a first time director. It was the first film she had been paid to act in, since she had only done a few other small things before, but it was still a shit movie and she knew.

I took that letter with me on the tour to make sure she didn't find it, hid it in my bag after reading it. I said goodbye and ten hours later was sitting in a nice-ish hotel lobby drinking cheap whiskey with my agent.

“It's selling remarkably well for a first-time unknown like you.”

I hated the way my agent framed me as a nothing writer all the time, as if I should be ever-grateful to have anything published.

“How many at the reading tomorrow?”

“Hoping for about thirty or so.”

I finished my whiskey and went back up to my room, rereading Artem's letter to my wife. I put the letter away and began writing. I had started a few ideas for a second book already, none of them very good. But that night I started to write about her. I wrote

pages of a story loosely based on our relationship, but then it turned into a book detailing our history, with only slight fictionalization. I got so excited about the idea that I called her that night and told her. I thought it was a great idea to capitalize on her recent fame, give people an inside look at our lives.

She was furious.

“You can’t put me in your little fucking book,” she screamed at me on the phone. “People shouldn’t know everything. They shouldn’t know us.”

And then I hung up on her.

I read a few stories every night to about ten to thirty people in a bookstore or a mostly empty auditorium. It felt like a failure as it all was happening, even though I was writing a second book. Meanwhile, the wife was pissed at me and out working on film sets almost every day, getting paid better money for being pretty and on camera.

When I got back from the tour, I walked into the kitchen a few days after I’d come back, after the sex had worn off again. We were in a nicer apartment than before, she’d found and rented one while I was gone. But I walked into the kitchen and found her typing away on her laptop, hair pulled back, glasses on, papers all over the place.

“You sleep at all last night?” I asked.

“No. Had an idea for a script.”

Flashing red lights in my head.

“You’re writing?”

“Mh-hmm.” She kept typing furiously.

I read it later that night. She printed it out and stapled it, set it on the table. The way she asked for my opinion was disingenuous, we both knew it.

“I want to know what you think,” she said. “Be honest. You won’t hurt my feelings.”

I sat down at the table, she went to bed. She had a reading the next morning for the next film she was in.

It was bad. It was a cheesy, melodramatic love story that read like the characters were in a high school soap opera. I never told her.

“I like it a lot. You should keep going with it. Send it around.”

“Really?” She smiled at me.

I had already started feeling strange about her smile, and at that moment I knew I hated it.

She kept killing herself over writing the thing. Draft after draft. She sent it everywhere, and no one wanted it. Her acting suffered, she couldn’t focus, didn’t care about being in the small-time world she was in.

I started meeting regularly with some other new writers throughout the week to review each other’s work. One of them was this amazing woman Janet who wrote the most beautiful prose. I knew I could never write like she could. I became comfortable spending time away. My wife was gone all day, so why shouldn’t I be gone all day?

All the material for my second book was about my wife, and so when it was my turn to read my story, we all talked about how my wife should come across on the page.

One morning—it always happened with her in the morning, I always picture my wife in the morning now—after a late review session with Janet and the group, my wife came out of the shower, hair up, wrapped in a towel and kissed me to wake me up.

“You and your writing buddies figure out how I should look and act?” She said.

“What I should say?”

I opened my eyes. She was grinning and dripping wet, a dangerous face. I rubbed my face. “It’s what my story’s about. It doesn’t affect you, just how the reader perceives your character in the book.”

She laughed. “Oh, well now I’m so relieved.”

I sat up in bed so she wouldn’t be standing over me. “Look, you’re the one who said we’d make a good team out here. And that’s what we’re doing. This book will be a success because people know you, and me a little.”

“That’s the first thing you’ve said in a while that I’ve agreed with.”

“Don’t you have work to do on your script?”

Her grin vanished and she looked small, twelve years old. She walked back into the bathroom and slammed the door.

Sometimes we would all drink after our review sessions, and one night Janet and I stayed at the bar late and had too much to drink. It wasn’t that I didn’t want it to happen, it was just that I knew it shouldn’t have happened. But my wife was probably having affairs with the beautiful men in her movies, why shouldn’t I enjoy myself as well? My wife never found out, and I never asked her about her affairs.

There was more and more mail from guys wanting to sleep with my wife. I didn’t mind as much as I thought I would, but continued to read them all. There was one letter—handwritten—in which I recognized the name. It was that same fucking moron Artem. He mentioned seeing her on set, and I realized that she had lied to me about his being in her current movie.

I drove to set, said Hi to the people I had met. The mess of people moving equipment around was hectic, but I finally spotted her kneeling down in the corner, back against the wall. She was staring at the ground, and seemed to be thinking heavy things. I approached her but she didn't notice, she was far away. Everything was somber and peaceful about the scene, I almost dropped my suspicion about her having an affair, but then it happened. She looked at me, and I smiled at her and raised my hand. Her face turned to anger and outrage, and I didn't understand it.

Fuck her, I thought.

She stood up. "You can't be here right now," she said, walking past me. "You shouldn't have come here."

Fuck you, I thought.

She walked away and just left me there like an idiot. People were gathering for the next shot, and she walked on set and took her place in front of the camera. I watched with my arms crossed, hoping she would be able to see my frustration by my posture. And then he walked into the shot, that fucking moron whose only talent was taking his shirt off. She had lied to me, said he wasn't in this film with her. Bitch.

A few people yelled things and then the director announced "action" and the scene started. My face burned and I could feel my pulse in my hands. I ran up to the camera and pulled it to the ground. People gasped and then there was silence. They probably didn't do anything in that instant because they knew who I was. I started stomping on the thing. Five times I stomped it. It was actually more of a downward kick than a stomp, but either way I broke a few pieces off the damn thing.

I didn't wait for a reaction, just walked out of there.

She was upset for a few days. But then the publicity of the event allowed her to forgive me. We were in just about every magazine out there, someone had gotten pictures of the aftermath: me storming out of there and the broken camera on the ground, people's faces gaping. She got three smaller roles in bigger movies, and appeared regularly in a TV show for one season. But she kept trying to get her scripts approved by a director, any director. No one would read it, and the lack of respect started to make her hate herself.

You need to know that even though we talked and acted like we loved each other, we didn't anymore.

The book about her was published, and made us rich.

We were at another party. She had started drinking heavy. She was sick of being the pretty face on the screen and wanted to be respected, but no one would respect her unless she appeared half-nude on film.

"If I have to fake-fuck one more idiot, I'm going to kill myself," she had started saying.

I was looking for her again. I saw her at the bar, as this particular party had an actual bar brought in with three bartenders in bowties.

I brushed by Brett on my way to her, he was always everywhere. She saw me approach out of the corner of her eye and started talking/yelling at the guy standing next to her.

"Have you met my husband?" she asked him. "He's a wonderful writer, wrote this book about me that's just flying off the shelves. *I'm* a little embarrassed though, embarrassed for him that he couldn't even write anything good without me being the

subject.”

She turned to me, half speaking to the guy at the bar and half talking to me.

“He’s never been anything without me, and now he’s finally found a way to pass my own ambition by using me. Isn’t that interesting?”

“We should leave,” I said.

“I don’t particularly *want* to leave.” She said.

The guy at the bar walked away.

“Why don’t you stay, honey?” She said. “I could give you some more ideas for another book of yours.”

“I’m leaving.”

I took the car, she could call a cab. There was no way she was driving anyway.

I slept late the next day, and she woke me up again by kissing me with wet and dripping hair, towel around her. The habit had started to unnerve me, an oddly sensual act from a cold person.

“Morning, sunshine,” she said.

“Morning,” I said. “Look, I didn’t mean to—”

She put her hand on my lips and stepped back to the dresser. She took her towel off.

“I was thinking,” she said. “You know there’s something we’ve never done.”

I tried to figure out what was coming next, sat up in bed. My blood couldn’t resist warming a bit at the sight of her towel-less.

She picked something up from the dresser and threw it at me. “We should try this sometime,” she said. Then she walked back into the bathroom.

I watched her shut the door, then looked down in my lap. It was a little white-see-thru plastic case with a disc inside. I might have chosen to believe it was the one from before, but she had made a point to date the thing and write her name next to Brett's on the blue tape.