

BOUND SADLY HOME

Collected Stories

by

Martin Armstrong Jr.

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*“Seashore washed by the suds and the foam,
Been here so long he’s got to calling it home.”*

*-Robert Hunter, for *The Grateful Dead**

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Abstract

These six stories are about home: what it is, where it is, *who* it is, and what happens when it changes. They wonder aloud who in his right mind could have coined the phrase, “Home, Sweet Home,” because, as the characters herein understand, home can be anything but sweet. It can be elusive, it can be imprisoning. Ray in “He’d See This Through,” can’t go home, no matter how badly he wants to. Others, like Wayne in “Past Repair,” can’t escape from homes they’d rather leave behind. “All That’s Left Is Never Enough” and “Something Like an Emergency” feature characters that must adjust to homes that have holes, but have difficult times doing so. Compounding these dilemmas are everyday problems, like unwelcome fishing partners, hernias, and dead-end jobs. In these stories, everyone is busy trying to forget something, but they’re always painfully reminded that, at the end of the day, they’re all bound sadly for home again.

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All That's Left Is Never Enough

“It’s just so fragile! Just like this, *whoosh*, and it’s gone!” she said to the black-and-white portraits of her dead ancestors, shattering a piece of china against the sofa table in the front hall to demonstrate her point. The framed portraits cluttered the wall: men, women, young, old, all in stiff clothing, standing in front of rusted machinery, crowded markets, or muddy Galway gardens. She stared fiercely at her great-great-grandfather Cormac, a thick-mustached man in heavy overalls, and waved a *Chicago Tribune*, pointing to a headline. “*See?*” she implored.

After a moment, she regained her breath and her shoulders relaxed. “But, oh, just listen to me go...I know *you* all know this already,” she said quietly, as if defeated. “Preaching death to the dead,” she said, and snorted. Looking down, she frowned at the shards and powdery remnants of the ornate little blue teakettle strewn on the rug, and, dropping the newspaper on top of the piles of mail on the sofa table, retreated to the kitchen to fetch a dustpan.

But in the kitchen the fruit bowl distracted her. It was almost empty, save one browned, curled banana. She hastened to the countertop near the toaster and opened the plastic bread container. The loaf of potato bread was nearly gone. In the fridge, both the milk and the marmalade were running dangerously low. Frantic, she dialed Owen from the corded phone mounted next to the calendar.

Her son answered after the first ring. “Hello?”

“Owen, hi, it’s your mother, I – ”

“I know, Ma. What’s the matter?”

“I’m entirely out of groceries. I’d love it if you could pick me up some – ”

“Ma, you can go yourself. You need to go yourself, it will be good for you to get out.”

“Owen, don’t fight me on this, please, not now. I can’t possibly – not today, of all days – please, Owen. I’m in such a – Owen, I’m your mother and I’m asking you please.”

“Ma, let’s be reasonable now. Let’s take a deep breath and – ”

“Owen! I simply will *not* go out and *drive* amongst those animals, and that is entirely the end of discussion! Did you not see the front page of the *Tribune* today? I mean, for heaven’s sakes – ”

“Yes, I saw that. Knew you would, too. But, Ma, come on. To be fair, it wasn’t actually a real auto accident. The guy must have had a death wish – what’s he doing getting out of his car on the Kennedy during rush hour anyway?”

“Owen! I can’t bear to think of it! To be living and happy one moment, and *whhish!* Lights out the next...” Her voice wavered.

“Okay, okay, well, what if I came and picked you up? I’ll drive, but you at least come along. Only way I’ll do it.”

“No. Fine, let your mother starve,” she said. But as she said it the empty fruit bowl seemed to grow deeper, darker, emptier, threatening to devour the room. She imagined gnawing hunger, felt herself shriveled and dry on her pastel-tiled kitchen floor.

“Wait! Owen!”

“Yes?”

“I will go with. Pick me up out front in fifteen minutes.”

She hung up the phone and collapsed into one of the swiveling kitchen chairs. Wheezing commenced. She rooted in a mountain of Jewel-Osco prescription bags for her inhaler, orange pill containers rolling off the pile, careening to the floor, plastic hitting tile and pill hitting plastic and pill hitting pill, rolling and rattling around. Gasping, trembling, she shook the inhaler wildly and swallowed three quick bursts. “There we are,” she said out loud. “There, there.”

After double-checking that the back door was locked, she scuttled to the dining room in search of her purse. The clocks ticked loudly. Scores of them filled bookcases, crowded shelves, adorned the wallpapered walls. They ticked and ticked and ticked and ticked and she found her purse and dumped it out on the white lace tablecloth. The clocks ticked and she sifted through the junk for what was essential and crammed it into a traveler’s fanny pack: wallet, keys, pepper spray, Carmex, coupons, contact book, rosary, brass knuckles. They ticked, ticked, ticked. She unbuttoned her cardigan, looped the pack around her waist, fastened it tight, and pulled the sweater closed over it. She turned sideways in front of the mirror on the huge oak buffet table that had made it across the Atlantic with the first of her ancestors. She shot a glance at one of the ticking clocks. “No! He’ll be here any minute!” she whined.

She hurried into the front hall and crushed something underfoot. “What was that?” she screamed at the sullen, grainy faces on the wall. It was a chunk of porcelain from the broken teakettle. “That’s a sign! Isn’t it?” she asked. The frozen matriarchs and patriarchs, those callused ones who’d braved hunger, rebellion, typhoid and sea

travel, only stared back at her and the bump of a fanny pack hidden beneath a cardigan sweater. “Maybe I shouldn’t go,” she said. “That’s a bad sign.”

Outside a car honked.

“Goodness me! What do I do? What do I do? What do I do?” She searched the portraits for strength.

“I need to go. Everything will be fine. Everything will be fine, won’t it?” she asked.

Owen honked again.

“Coming!” she yelled. “Ok, I’m going! I’m going! Wish me luck! I shall return!” She smiled at her ancestors and went out the heavy front door, locking it behind her then jiggling the handle from the outside to be sure.

From the car, Owen watched his mother take her front stoop stairs one at a time, holding onto the handrail with both hands. He rolled his eyes when she jerked open the rear driver-side door and plopped down on the back seat.

“Hi, Owen, dear! Honey, how are the roads? Was the traffic bad on the way over? Maybe we should just do this another day...”

“Don’t you want to sit in the front seat?” He looked at her through his rearview mirror.

“No, no, it’s entirely safer back here. I’ve read that according to a study –”

“But, Ma, come on. It makes me feel like a chauffeur or something. We can’t even see each other. Come sit up front and we can talk. You can tell me about your day.

How was your day?” In the mirror, he noticed her unbuttoning her sweater. “Ma, what are you doing now?”

She had the sweater open and was rummaging in a fanny pack. She untangled a rosary and crossed herself, her eyes closed. Then she opened them, and met Owen’s stare in the rearview mirror.

“Owen, honey, just drive. Just drive, please. I’m more comfortable sitting back here, thank you. There’s no need to talk, anyway. That way you can pay more attention to the road.” She closed her eyes again, gripping the rosary.

Owen threw the car into gear and headed for Happy Foods.

After a few silent minutes, he stole another glance at his mother in the back seat.

“Ma,” he said softly, “how’d you like to see Dr. Strayhorn sometime? I’d like to take you to visit with him again.”

“No doctor will put his conniving hands on me! I’m fine, I’m entirely healthy!” she said, shaking her rosary beads.

“He’s not *going* to touch you, Ma. He’s going to *talk* to you. You remember him. You said you liked him very much.”

“I said no such thing! And the answer is still no. There is no need to waste the time and energy, not to mention *money*, with something like that. I’m fine. Yes, sometimes, I admit, I may get a *little* bit – ”

With a quick gasp she stopped talking. Owen glanced at her in the mirror to see what was the problem. She was sitting on her hands now, cheeks puffed full with held breath. They were passing a cemetery, the marble headstones – still wet from this

morning's showers – rolling alongside the car. Owen put his foot down. If he didn't catch this green he feared his mother might pass out.

She finally exhaled after the cemetery was safely behind them. Owen heard the zipper of her fanny pack and the contents being poured out onto the seat next to her. She was huffing short, choppy breaths and Owen felt her feet kicking lightly against the back of his seat.

“What's the matter now, Ma?”

“I've forgotten my inhaler, it seems. How could I have done that? I absolutely need to have that with me, Owen. Without it I – Owen, maybe we should go back and get it? Do you think, maybe, we should just go back and get it?”

“I think you'll be fine if you just calm down and take some deep breaths. Relax and breathe. Think about your stomach filling up with air when you inhale, like Dr. Strayhorn said. Remember that?”

“Oh, but what nonsense all of that was! Breathing is precisely what I need the inhaler *for*. Breathing is the problem, Owen, not a solution.”

“The point is to force you to pause a moment and collect yourself. That's all you really need, Ma. To pause and collect. Would you like me to pull over for a sec— ”

“*No!* Owen! Are you mad?” Her wheezing quickened between her breathless shouts. “You read that article in today's *Tribune!* That poor man who ‘just pulled over’ ...look what happened to him! They're still *collecting* pieces of him from under the Cumberland stop as we speak! Do not pull this car over, Owen!”

“Okay, okay, I forgot about that. I apologize. But, again, it's not like that would happen to – ”

“Just *ssshh!*”

Owen drove on and kept quiet. Slow, deliberate breaths came from the back seat, and he could tell his mother was practicing the doctor’s techniques after all. It was odd, but perhaps scaring her was the best way to get her to accept any of the help Owen took such pains to provide her. Every new doctor to look at Ma came to the same conclusion: the problem was her refusal to help herself. Plenty of people cope with anxiety disorders like hers – but it starts with a will to improve. Ma displayed no such desire: dismissing doctors for alleged incompetence, skipping therapy sessions, flat-out denial of a problem. Owen had even caught her sneaking pills down the kitchen disposal. But Ma had always been a hard head. Even before Dad died and she started gradually losing it. Owen couldn’t remember a time – ever – that his mother actually listened to someone else’s advice. She’d always been the ultimate critic, never short of reasons to discredit. And yet, ironically, hypocritically, she was famous for telling others not to be so critical. When teenage Owen would complain about a classmate’s behavior – “Don’t be so *critical!*” When Dad would scoff at an evening news report and grumble about wanting the *real* story – “Don’t be so *critical!*” When Owen first hinted that he thought living alone was maybe getting to Ma a little, and that maybe finding ways to get out more and interact with people might be a good idea – “Don’t be so *critical!*”

Her stubbornness frustrated Owen. If she didn’t care enough to get better, why should he? The doctors weren’t cheap. No-show fines and Niravam weren’t cheap. But she was his mother. His mother. And he her only son. Did he really have a choice?

“So, Owen, dear, tell me about your work. Is it going well?” Her willingness to make small talk told Owen she was calmed down. The deep breathing had worked, but

Owen decided against making a point of it. No need to start a quarrel. Nothing wrong with a silent victory.

“It’s great, Ma, thanks. Going really well.” Now he was lying to his mother. The sales rep position he took with Revlon three years ago was dead-ending. He thought going in he would hate it – and he was right, he hated it – but he’d been banking on a swift promotion. An office with a window and a chair he could lean back in. But three years had wasted away and he was still driving around in the company Celebrity to Chicagoland area drugstores with a trunk full of lipstick samples and display stands with photos of women with long, long eyelashes.

“That’s just wonderful, dear. Wonderful. You make me so proud.”

Feeling lightheaded, she decided she must eat. *Click, click, click* and the gas lit and she emptied a serving saver of homemade chili into a pot on the stove. It sizzled and she stirred. She tasted the cold chili. She added some salt and she stirred.

“Now, we let simmer,” she said.

She left the kitchen and walked through the dining room where the clocks were ticking. She could still hear them ticking as she passed the wall of portraits and ascended the stairs, bound for her bedroom. There were clothes needing folding in the basket by her bed.

The master bedroom was old and cramped. In the corner there was a yellowing sink for shaving where her husband’s old Bic razor still rested. The blades had rusted in the six years since his passing but she could still smell the shaving cream when she stood

above the sink. She grabbed the bowl from atop the radiator and filled it with new water, breathing the Barbasol and remembering James, her starched-collared and whiskey-sweating knight. Her muscled, redheaded rock. She could yield to his decisiveness, harbor in his hairy arms, and she did because he'd have it no other way. He would take care of everything because he'd always be there and because he could. With shoulders like an Irish Catholic Atlas, he could. And he did, and he always would, he said, he always would. But all those hot night-whispers had been lies. They were lies just like the lies that he'd quit smoking before it killed him were lies. They were lies because she was still here – look! – she was still here, but he wasn't. He wasn't here and now there was no one to take care of everything, to take care of her.

She wiped her eyes and placed the water bowl back on the radiator.

When closed, the closet doors were also full-length mirrors and a heavy, gold cross hung on the wall above them. Now she stood before the mirrors and folded her blouses, her sweaters, her slacks. She paused to examine her teeth. They looked brittle and yellow and she didn't want to lose them. That could happen to people her age. She leaned closer and wiggled a canine between two fingers. She imagined it pulling clean from her head, bloodless, painless, like a berry plucked from a branch. Teeth were bones, in fact, and she couldn't remember the last time she'd taken her osteoporosis pills. She hated swallowing pills because it made her panicky waiting to feel them working from the inside. But if it might save her teeth maybe she would start.

She finished folding and left the piles on the bed. She would hang them up later, right now she needed to get to the desk downstairs in the dining room and write herself a note about the osteoporosis pills. She didn't want to forget.

Something awful met her nose at the base of the stairs and her throat began to close.

“What is that? What is that smell?” she demanded of one of her ancestors on the wall. Her hands were trembling and she dashed into the dining room where smoke was billowing in from the kitchen. Her heart was thumping fast over the slow ticking of all the clocks. They ticked slowly but her heart was racing and the smoke was everywhere. It was hard to breathe and she stumbled back into the front hall where it wasn’t so thick.

“Oh my God! My God!” She ripped a portrait off its nail and shook it in front of her face. “The chili! On the stove! What do I do? The chili!” The man in the portrait smiled back, leaning against a huge cart of vegetables with his arms folded. He was barefoot and there was mud caked on his ankles and the hems of his woolen trousers.

“Oh, no! Help!”

She fought her way choking through the smoke to the kitchen and flicked off the gas. She was still clutching the portrait in one hand and she covered her mouth in her elbow. The pot was charred black and smoke was hissing from it, shooting and swirling on the ceiling then creeping back down the walls and filling the kitchen. The smell was unbearable and she coughed and the smoke mixed with the air in her lungs and she couldn’t breathe. She transferred the portrait to her left hand and with her right she took the telephone off the hook and dialed Owen. The coughing grew worse and she felt tired and dropped the receiver, letting it dangle a few feet above the floor, hitting against the wall. The portrait slipped from her hand and shattered on the tile. She slumped down to the floor near the dishwasher. Everything was cloudy then – her vision and her throat

and the light on the ceiling when she gazed up through the smoke and her lungs were burning and she could hear the distant ticking of the clocks from the other room.

Owen knew what he had to do. It made him uneasy -- the horrific imaginings of all that could go wrong keeping him up the last two nights while he tried to sleep in the chair beside his mother's hospital bed -- but it was his best option. He'd have to start taking Ma along with him in the car as he made his rounds to the area drugstores. She couldn't be alone all day, every day anymore. He didn't have the money to put her somewhere, but that didn't matter. Ma would chain herself to the foundation before she left that old house. He'd briefly considered bringing someone in, a maid of sorts to more or less supervise for a few hours a day, but then he thought better of it. He couldn't do that to another person -- Ma would send any possible candidate running for the hills. John D. Rockefeller in his prime couldn't pay someone enough to do *that* job.

Owen decided to bring it up to her on the drive home from her short hospital stay. She was riding in the back seat again.

"So, Ma, I've been giving it some thought. I think it'd be a good idea if you started coming along with me on some of my runs."

"You mean your work? Going to work with you? Oh, Owen, absolutely not. That's not necessary. Why would I do that?"

"It'll be a nice way to get out of the house. See the city, different neighborhoods. Something to do, Ma."

“Oh, well, that must be against company protocol. Surely that wouldn’t be allowed.” Owen could hear her wiggling in her seat.

“No, it’s not. That wouldn’t be an issue.” Actually, that thought hadn’t occurred to Owen. It probably was a violation of some sort. But, really, Owen didn’t care. Getting fired wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world – it would only force him to finally go find a better job.

“Oh, well, I’m not certain that would be the best thing for me right now, considering my health after all this and whatnot. I should be resting, not racing around with you and slowing you down, dear. No. It’s a nice thought, but no. I’ll be better at home, given my health...” She was growing nervous; Owen could sense it.

“Ma, you’re fine. You heard the doctor. You were right there in the room. It was only an asthma attack, no real damage. You heard him say that you’re fine.”

“But, but I – really rest is probably the best thing. What does that doctor know? You saw him Owen, nothing more than a white-jacketed buffoon. What does he know? I really should – ”

“He is a *doctor*, Mother. A *doctor*. He knows *exactly* what he’s talking about. You are fine.” Owen hadn’t intended to raise his voice but he had. He paused and looked through the rearview at his mother, who was wringing her fingers in her lap. Then he softened his tone. “The decision is final. You’re going to start coming with me and it’s going to be good. I promise.”

He looked back in the mirror again to see her reaction. Her arms were folded and she stared out the window with her head turned.

“Also,” Owen added, “I’m going to start staying with you sometimes. In my old room. Just to be around more.”

This was maybe the worst part of it all for Owen. He squirmed thinking about sleeping in his childhood bedroom, the small, blue-wallpapered room in the front of the house that now, strangely, looked exactly like and nothing like it used to. The furniture, the pictures hanging on the walls, the bad carpet, even the bedspread, were all unchanged from the decade before when it was still his room. But there was a layer of dust over everything now that never seemed to relent, and there were boxes stacked in the corners, boxes full of his father’s old things that his mother couldn’t stand to see in her bedroom everyday but refused to throw away. Boxes that Owen personally would have loved to throw away – boxes he’d on more than one occasion fantasized about picking up in the middle of the night and carrying to the dumpster in the alley and throwing away.

The streetlights were still blinking yellow in the pre-dawn blue one Monday morning a few weeks later. Owen and his mother were in the car, silent. It was too early for talking and they merged onto the Kennedy heading eastbound. The fusses and fits Ma had thrown the first few times Owen made her accompany him on his trips had been diminishing in passion lately, seeming to Owen more like protests she felt obliged to stage as a mother whose child now dictated how she spent her hours, the way she had once, long ago, dictated his. This morning she offered almost no resistance at all, groggily stuffing her fanny pack while Owen brewed them coffee.

They watched the Sun coming up over the city as they sped along. Owen interrupted the silence once to remark how dawn breaking over the lake washed all the

city's windows in gold. The expressway that had been empty when they first started now welcomed a sprinkling of new cars at every on-ramp. They hummed alongside Owen's company car, their drivers crusty-eyed and nodding to talk radio, burning their tongues on convenience store coffee in Styrofoam cups, tired, but beating the rush hour traffic. Ma spied on them through her backseat window.

Owen was heading to the Walgreens on 55th and King Drive, near the Washington Park Pool on Chicago's South Side. A fight had erupted inside the Walgreens the week before – which wasn't at all uncommon for stores in that neighborhood – and one of Revlon's endcap displays had been destroyed in the fracas. The store manager phoned Owen on Friday to report the damage. He stated that nearly all his stock of eyeliner, the product that Revlon was featuring on its endcaps that month, had either been broken or stolen by the neighborhood kids who flocked into the store to cheer on the fight and cram their pockets with candy and anything that was rolling around on the floor. There was nothing he could do, the store manager told Owen, he was understaffed that day to begin with, and it was too risky to throw himself headlong into a fight like that and try to break it up. Owen said he understood, and that he'd be there Monday morning to replace the display and restock the eyeliner. He was going to come early, though, before the store opened, because it'd be easier to set everything up with no customers around. Owen didn't mention that he always felt embarrassed organizing beauty products in places like that. The store manager said, Good, thanks, he'd see Owen bright and early on Monday.

Owen pulled into the empty Walgreens parking lot and killed the engine. A silver '84 Caprice swung into the lot and parked a few spots over. Owen turned in his seat to face his mother, who was now wide-awake and had started fussing a few minutes ago

about all the important morning television programs she was missing while Owen dragged her unwillingly through the ghetto. She also snuck in a few jabs about his work. Since she started riding along with him she'd gotten a better idea of what exactly it was Owen did, and all that false pride she used to speak of suddenly seemed exactly that – false. She'd adopted a new habit recently of making a *tsk-tsk* sound with her tongue and saying, "If only your father were around to see..." before trailing off and shaking her head. She complained a lot, too, as if to make clear he was inadequate *and* inconsiderate.

"Is this any way to treat your mother? No, Owen, it absolutely is not," she kept saying. "No way to treat you mother."

"Alright," he said, "do you want to come in or wait in the car? It should only take maybe twenty minutes or so."

"I will be fine in the car, thank you. What on Earth would I do in there anyway? This wasn't my idea to come along." She huffed and played with her bracelet.

"I know, Ma, and it isn't exactly my ideal situation, either. But can you please stop making it harder than it has to be?" She made no answer, and busied herself by digging through her fanny pack, as if she didn't hear him.

"Okay. I'll be back soon," Owen said, exiting the driver door.

He walked around to the rear of the car and immediately three hooded men approached him rapidly, appearing seemingly from nowhere and closing in around his car.

"Open the trunk, motherfucker," one of them said in a hushed but serious voice. Owen was scared, tongue-tied. Two of the men crowded near him on either side. The

third was standing in front of the rear driver side window. Ma. He was standing in front of Ma.

“Listen, guys,” Owen began.

“Shut the fuck up and open the trunk!” The man who had spoken quietly before was now shouting.

“Open it!” the man behind him added. “Open it now!”

Owen dreaded opening the trunk and revealing the boxes of eyeliner and ad posters of an airbrushed Cindy Crawford. He hoped it wouldn't infuriate the men, who likely had Owen pegged as a prescription drug rep with a trunk full of painkillers they could sell in the nearby housing projects. He feared, upon discovering the contents of the trunk, these men might be as embarrassed as him, and might get violent in response.

“Okay, I will. I'm going to open it. But I'm telling you it's not what you think. I don't have anything you're looking for,” Owen explained. “And my mother's in the car, I'm begging you – ”

“The fuck you think you know what we're looking for? Open it, now.”

Owen nodded and opened it. He stood terrified, staring into the trunk. The man behind him shoved him aside to get a better view. Owen took a step back. He couldn't see her – the open trunk blocking the back window from view – but he pictured Ma, panicking, thrashing, praying in the back seat. He worried she might hyperventilate or have another asthma attack. The two men were rifling through the trunk. Owen could hear cardboard ripping.

“You can take whatever you want,” Owen said, “Take whatever. But I'm begging you, my mother, please. She's got problems already and this will – ”

“Man, won’t you stop crying ‘bout your Moms. I’m keeping her safe, right over here,” the third man who was standing by the window said. “Look, we’re fine over here, aren’t we, Moms?” As he said this, he drew a handgun from the waistband of his pants, and tapped the glass of the window with the gun’s handle. He was going to scare her to death. Owen’s head was pounding. He felt as if air wasn’t reaching his brain.

Then the men with their heads in the trunk started laughing. They called to the man by the window to come have a look, come check out what this pussy motherfucker has in his trunk. They laughed and made jokes at Owen’s expense. Owen stood there, full of shame, like a boy who’s just wet his bed and must face the drunken ridicule of his never-satisfied father.

“Man, look at all this shit!” one of the men said, laughing, spiking a tube of eyeliner against the pavement. “You’ve gotta be kidding me, man.” The three men looked back and forth at each other. They seemed unsure of what to do next.

“I’m sorry – ” Owen started to say. It was clear now that the men weren’t going to hurt anybody. But Ma must be losing it back there. He had to help her.

“You’re sorry? You’re sorry? Man, I *know* you’re sorry! Drivin’ around with a trunk full of this shit, your Moms in the backseat. Damn!” The three of them laughed even harder now, until one of them picked up a box and said, “C’mon, let’s get out of here. Leave Mama’s Boy to himself.”

They each grabbed two boxes and sauntered back to their car, shaking their heads and muttering things to each other. Owen dashed over to help his mother, half expecting to find her unconscious on the back seat. He opened the door, kneeling and leaning in.

“Ma, Ma, I’m so sorry. Are you okay? Ma, it’s okay, they’re gone.” His mother sat stock-still and staring. Her eyes had an icy, distant quality. “Ma! Ma, I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Please, it’s okay...”

Owen began to weep. He reached out his hand to touch his mother’s face, but suddenly she slapped it away.

“Don’t touch me! Are you crying?” It wasn’t vacant shock in her eyes – it was anger. Disappointment. “Owen, why are you crying? Why didn’t you do anything?”

“What? Ma, I tried, I – I was so worried about you, I – I was begging – ”

“You did nothing. You didn’t take care of it.”

“I – ”

“Did you even get a license plate number on the car? Do you remember what they looked like?” She was scolding him, challenging and belittling in her old, familiar way. Owen was confused and humiliated like he hadn’t been since his childhood.

“No, Ma, I was too worried about you...I was, I was trying to keep you safe.”

“And how’d that go for you?” She stared at him. Owen didn’t know what to say.

Then she held up a wrinkled photograph she’d been holding in her lap. It was one of the portraits from her front hall, one that she had removed from its frame and been carrying around with her in her fanny pack. She handed it to him. Though it was still black-and-white, it wasn’t an ancestor. It was a portrait of her husband, Owen’s father, a portrait Owen had seen a thousand times too many. Red-eyed and severe, impossible, judging. His neck bulged against his collar. He wore his Sunday suspenders. On the back a number was written. The plate number of the silver Caprice, Owen knew.

“Ma, I can’t believe it. You wrote down the number?”

“Someone had to.” She folded her arms and looked the other way.

“I can’t believe it,” Owen repeated, holding the photograph at arm’s length.

“Well?” Ma was facing him again, waiting. She snatched her husband from Owen’s hands and rubbed the photo with her thumbs. “Are you going to drive us to a phone so we can call the police? Or will I need to take care of that, too?”

He'd See This Through

Everything felt sufficiently firm. Dr. Driscoll finished poking around and said as much. Ray felt awkward with the thin, blue medical paper covering his manhood, just below the freshly shaven pubic area the doctor had been probing. The mesh prosthesis apparently was still in place, and wasn't being rejected.

"This is good, Ray. All very good." Dr. Driscoll said. He pushed gently with two fingers in one last spot, then slapped Ray's bare thigh. "Alright, you can go ahead and get your clothes back on, then."

"So it worked?" Ray asked. "I'm all set?"

"The mesh is doing its job, yes. But you still have to take it easy." The doctor stood up and threw his blue latex gloves in the trashcan. "We're talking *easy*, too, Ray. No exerting yourself." Driscoll spoke over his shoulder, his back turned to Ray as he sterilized his hands in the corner sink. "No bending down and lifting, no jumping. You even need to be careful if you're coughing or laughing too hard."

"Jesus, are you kidding, doc? It barely even hurts. I've gotta –"

"Ray. We don't want that thing poking through again."

"But –"

"Listen, I've got a boatload of patients waiting on me. Talk to Lindsey at the desk on your way out if you have any questions, she can help." Dr. Driscoll moved for the door.

"But I –"

“Take care, Ray. Everything’s looking great.” The door slammed shut behind the doctor, and Ray was left sitting, naked, staring at a poster of the human gastrointestinal system.

He smiled as he drove back to the apartment. Life so rarely offered him such occasions lately, and he took the time to relish the bit of good news. Although, it wasn’t clear how immediately this doctor’s visit might improve his current situation. Driscoll had made it known that Ray wasn’t 100 percent healed. And though he didn’t address it directly, Ray figured this meant he couldn’t yet return to work. Not that he hadn’t been working – technically, he had been. But since the injury Ray had been prevented from doing his job the only way he knew how: hands-on, engaging with his men on the floor.

Ray had been overseeing warehouse operations for Foley Produce Packaging for nearly twenty-three years now. He’d worked on the floor for thirteen years before that, until Mr. Foley promoted him to Warehouse Manager on account of his enthusiasm, honesty, and well-won respect. At thirty-two years old, Ray was spilling over with promise. Newly promoted, he had his own office, complete with a desk, a window, a bronze placard with his name and position proudly engraved. He had an income with which he finally felt comfortable marrying his longtime girlfriend, Susan. They married in an orchard, surrounded by friends who threw handfuls of rice up at the autumn Michigan sky. The wedding day had been chilly but strikingly sunny and clear. The few children who were present, wearing stifling dress clothes stained and untucked, ran around kicking the fallen apples and inspecting them for worms. There were pieces of rice in Susan’s long, curly hair as she, beaming and laughing, pulled Ray along into the decorated Cadillac that waited for them at the end of a row of apple trees. They’d be on

their way to a honeymoon in Windsor, Canada – both Ray and Susan’s first time outside the U.S. As the car honked and pulled away and the wedding guests walked cheerfully to their cars, some crows swooped down and picked the rice from the trampled grass.

Foley Packaging was the state’s foremost supplier of produce packaging materials: they made and shipped boxes, barrels, bins, trays, and crates that could hold apples, blueberries, corn, peaches, soybeans, you name it. Ray used to tell people, *If you can grow it in the soil, Foley can sell you something to package it in.* The office he had was more symbolic than anything else, as he seldom spent his working hours in it. Even after he became the boss, he continued to work just as he had before the promotion. He lifted palates full of apple bushels and asparagus crates alongside his men.

But, now, pushing fifty-five and dealing with a pesky hernia, Ray was trapped in his office, drowning in pools of inventory checklists and change-order receipts. He wasn’t allowed to walk around the floor all day, stepping over spills, stacking shipments, horsing around with his crew. It was a temporary death sentence, and Ray longed desperately to return to his normal work activities.

Ray, mail under his arm, unlocked his apartment door and flipped the lone light switch. Returning from wherever he’d been was always the loneliest part of Ray’s day, because the apartment simply wasn’t home. Home was six miles away on the other side of town. Home was the plain, but sturdy and pleasing, one-story ranch with the lamppost by the front walk and the two sun-bleached-green cushioned chairs on the porch. Home was with Susan. He took the mail from his armpit and sorted it on the kitchen counter: junk, junk, bill, junk, bill. Exhaling audibly, he turned and opened the fridge – bright white, cold, and nearly empty. He seldom shopped, and his hovering hand had only a

carton of orange juice, some deli meat, barbeque sauce, ketchup, a wilted head of iceberg lettuce, and Budweiser to select from. He chose a Budweiser. He closed the fridge door and the magnetic picture of him and Susan – which was holding up a reminder for today’s earlier appointment with Dr. Driscoll – caught Ray’s eye.

It was taken during their vacation to Key West, and both of them wore stupid snorkeling masks that were too big for their faces. Ray was giving a thumbs-up to the camera, and Susan’s hand was on his bare shoulder for support, her knees weak from laughter. The sizable belly he now sported was glaringly absent. He wondered if even back then his frickin’ small intestine was beginning to bulge against the soft tissue of his abdominal wall. Susan looked just as Ray always pictured her: tall and slender, with a freckled face and shoulders. Her fingernails were always painted purple. If you asked Ray, her hair was dark red – but Susan was adamant it was brown. Ray figured the photo had to have been taken – what, fourteen years ago now? Something like that. They’d been divorced already more than ten years, and Key West was well before any of that mess.

Ray brought his beer over to the couch and sat down. There was nothing to the apartment. Besides the kitchenette that was right inside the door, the main area was minimally furnished: an old blue couch sat against one wall, with a coffee table in front of it, and a television faced it from against the opposite wall. The carpet was brown and rough. There were two windows and a long heating & air conditioning unit on the remaining wall. Above the blue couch hung a store-bought painting of a basket of blueberries resting on some grass. A few stray blueberries had somehow spilled out of the basket, blue dots interrupting the broad strokes of green. Past the T.V. was a narrow

hallway that quickly dead-ended: to the left, Ray's modest bedroom, and to the right, the bathroom. With feet up on the coffee table, Ray wiggled out of his boots and let his toes breathe. He turned on the T.V., for the noise more than anything. Damn, had it really been ten years? It seemed both longer and shorter than that. He could remember first moving into the apartment. He hadn't bothered to really outfit the place because he'd figured it wouldn't be long before Susan let him back in the house. He'd maintained that hope longer than he probably should have, and even after it was clear that she had moved on, he never got settled. For Ray, properly moving in equaled agreeing to move out – something he had never willfully done. He loved their old house, and he loved Susan.

All the trouble stemmed from how badly Susan had wanted children. It wasn't that Ray didn't – if that had been the case, and he had been one to deny her wishes, he would have understood her hatred. But it was more complicated than that. He was all on-board for having kids. Lord knows they'd tried, and tried, and tried. The problem was, the two of them simply couldn't. The miracle of conception had proven for Ray and Susan as difficult to perform as any other sort of miracle. They couldn't turn water to wine, they couldn't part the Red Sea or come from behind to beat the Soviets for the gold medal, and they couldn't get a pregnancy to take. The truth was – Ray knew, because a doctor had once quietly told him – that Susan was barren. Whether she knew that he was privy to this diagnosis or not, Ray wasn't sure to this day – but, he supposed, it didn't much matter. In the souring twilight of their marriage, Susan projected all her malignant self-hatred onto Ray. She cried, she screamed, she went silent for days on end, she blamed him for everything, she told him she hated him, she told him she could not live with him anymore. Sometimes he shouted back at her, sometimes he kept calm,

sometimes he wept for her in the night. He believed that somewhere in her heart she knew it wasn't his fault – but if she couldn't come to peace with it, there was no sense in him trying to force her to. Near the end, she'd grown bitter and scornful: and when she one day demanded they divorce, Ray looked her in the eyes and knew she wasn't the same smiling woman he'd married that October afternoon in the orchard.

On T.V., Babe Winkleman was demonstrating to his viewers how to properly gut a walleye. The secret was in butterflying the fish after its head was removed. Holding it belly up, you start with your knife at the backbone and cut upward, sliding along the outside of the ribcage. At some other time, Ray might have been interested in the technique. But right now he was stuck on Susan again. It happened more often than he wished to admit. He was still, after ten years apart, in love with her. He struggled with the knowledge that their split had no real connection to their compatibility – they truly were right for each other. He believed that. He wanted more than anything to forgive her, to forget it ever happened. And he maintained hope that was still not impossible – Susan just first needed to forgive herself. Now Mr. Winkleman was placing the whitish-pink filets in a pan of hot oil. You want to leave some skin on, for the flavor, he explained. Ray scoffed at the thought of any real-life fisherman having gourmet cookware mere feet away from his cleaning station. A fleshy chunk of raw fish slipped out of Winkleman's hands and onto the ground as he transferred it to the pan. The image reminded Ray of his own fleshy chunk that wouldn't cooperate. The slimy, puffy piece of intestine causing him so many problems probably looked a lot like that fish as it squeezed through Babe's fingertips. Winkleman laughed the snafu off like a polished salesman. Ray changed the channel to news and nodded off.

The telephone rang, filling the small apartment. Ray snapped to attention from his haze and sat up, putting his feet on the floor. The phone rang again on the middle of the coffee table. Ray grabbed it and answered.

“Raymond?” It was Susan.

“Hey, hi there, Susan.”

“Hello, Raymond. I’m calling to ask a favor.”

“I was just thinking about you. That’s really funny, I mean just now I was –”

“Raymond, please don’t. Not now.” She sounded annoyed. Did she forget she was the one who called him? “I just have something I really need your help with, and, I’m begging you, don’t read any further into it than that. I know how you get.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked.

“You know what I mean.”

He did know what she meant, too. Every time they spoke or came into contact – which wasn’t terribly infrequently (they did, after all, still live in the same small town) he got all excited, like a damned Jack Russell terrier.

“What is it?” he asked, adjusting his tone.

“I just had a new couch delivered, and I swear I must have told them a million times that I needed it carried *into* the house. *Into* the house. I told them that, that idiot woman on the phone...” She paused. “I need help moving it in.”

“Where is it?”

“The driveway, Ray, it’s in the driveway where they left it. But I spent good money on the damn thing and I don’t want it sitting outside. It’s a brand new couch.”

“You want me to come over there now?”

“Well, yeah, Raymond, if you’re not doing anything. I don’t want this thing sitting out there.”

He thought about it. He thought about carrying that couch into *their* house for her, setting it down while she thanked him and thanked him, then making love to her on it. It might have been stupid, but he thought about this favor being what could bring them back together.

“Are you?” she asked impatiently.

“Am I what?”

“Are you doing anything else? Or can you help me out?” She was beginning to sound agitated. He didn’t want her to regret calling him.

“Sure. Sure thing, honey. Of course. I’ll be over there in twenty?”

“That works. I’ll be here. Thank you, Raymond.” She hung up first.

He knew better than to get his hopes up. This was no different than the time she’d called for his help with the raccoon living under the porch, or the time she’d thought the asphalt guy was taking advantage of her when she was having the driveway repaved and asked Ray to stand there with her while they negotiated a quote. But he couldn’t help himself. He was optimistic by nature. He scrambled for the remote and shut off the television. He bent down to put on his boots, not bothering to loosen the laces. He twisted his leg this way and that, working his foot in. He pulled hard on the tongue and heel of the boot, and felt a sharp pain in his groin. “Damn it all!” he yelled. The hernia. He doubled over in pain with his hand on the spot where it hurt. The doctor had told him to be careful *laughing*, and now he was going to lift a couch? He played out how that conversation would go with Dr. Driscoll – Ray trying to explain that the mesh prosthesis

they had surgically implanted had been forced out of place by Ray's self-imagined heroics aimed at winning back his ex-wife. He didn't know what to do. He couldn't call her back and renege, no way. He decided he'd drive over there and check it out at least – see what he was up against. Maybe he could tell her about the hernia then find a neighbor to help. Mark Rutherford across the street was a good guy. That way, he'd still have helped her, but could avoid damaging himself.

Susan was standing outside in a jacket and house slippers, arms crossed, when he pulled up to the house. Ray spotted her purple nail polish from inside his truck. She looked great. Some extra weight had gathered on her hips, thighs, and upper arms, but that happened to all women her age; that didn't bother Ray. As he killed the ignition he glanced in the rearview mirror, lamenting that he hadn't thought to comb what was left of his thinning brown hair before he left the apartment. He stepped out of the truck's cab.

“Thanks again, Ray, I really appreciate this.” She took a step toward him. For a split second, Ray thought that he detected a flash of her old smile.

“Absolutely. Can't have a nice new piece of furniture standing outside, now, can we? No, no. That'll be it then?” Ray pointed to the three segments of green suede couch that sat next to each other near the open garage door. They were wrapped heavily in clear plastic. Ray could see huge tags on the arms. “Sectional, huh? Fine looking couch, Susie.”

“Yes, I know, I spent a lot of time picking it out. This is the one. Now if only I could finally get it into my living room.”

“That's what I'm here for, isn't it?” He wasn't sure if he meant that to be a question or not.

“I know, Ray. I was only making a little fun.” This time he was sure she smiled. She’d moved closer to him, too, while they were talking. Was this more wishful thinking, or was Susan acting warmer towards him than she had in years? He balanced these prospects against the hernia, against the pain, against the hospital bills.

“Well,” she said, “I’ll go prop the kitchen door, then? You can take them right through there into the living room, I think that’ll be the easiest way.” She looked at him, waiting for a nod of agreement. But before he could respond, she started into the garage for the door.

Sweat gathered quickly on Ray’s forehead. He wiped it with his sleeve. Christ, he thought, what to do? What would be the worst that could happen inside there? Another operation to replace the mesh?

“You waiting for a hand-written invitation or what?” Susan called from the doorway between the garage and the kitchen. She was smiling again, at Ray. He couldn’t let her down. He’d see this through.

Bending down to get his arms around the first sectional, Ray felt a pressure in his groin. The pressure morphed to a steady pain as he straightened up. The pain throbbed at about the same degree as he took a few steps forward with the couch piece. He couldn’t see in front of him, and his face rubbed against the plastic wrapping.

“Piece of cake!” he said, short of breath, poking his head around the side of the sectional to see where he was in relation to the doorway. Having lived in this house for over a decade helped the process. His movements around the garage and in the house felt natural, uninterrupted, like he’d never stopped living there. He recognized every tile on the kitchen floor as he looked down, sweaty forehead stuck to the plastic. He got the first

piece to the empty space of carpet in the living room and crouched to put it down. The pain shot down his leg, and he stumbled a little. He took a second to catch his breath and let the pain subside. If that thing hadn't popped through already, it was going to by the time he was done.

Susan had disappeared into the master bedroom sometime while Ray was busy with the second sectional. The pain in his groin had been about the same carrying the second one as the first. As he lifted up the final piece, the pain hit a new high. It made his stomach feel sick, and he thought for a moment he might drop the couch. He thought of that walleye filet falling. He paused, swallowed, and fought through it, shuffling his feet in little half-steps as fast as he could until he was once again in the living room. He set it down and hunched over in pain, wincing. Shit, he thought, this was no good.

"Ah, that's perfect. I can take off that plastic and slide them around how I want them, don't worry about that," Susan said, coming down the hall from the bedroom.

"Are you ok, Ray?"

He tried to stand up straight, but the pain was too great.

"Yeah, yeah, fine. Just out of breath, you know? Getting too old, ha." He drew in a deep breath and forced himself into good, upright posture. Still with the pain pounding in his abdomen, Ray noticed Susan had changed into brown leather boots. It looked like she'd reapplied some lipstick, too.

"Thank you so much, Ray." She smiled.

"Anytime, Susie."

"Let me buy you dinner for this," she said. "Come on, we'll go out somewhere."

Ray was stunned; he searched for words.

“On me,” she said, “it’s the least I can do for you helping me with this. And don’t try telling me you have something cooking already at home.” She laughed.

“Um, well, sure. Heck, you ever known me to say no to dinner?”

He tried not to sound overly excited, but he couldn’t help himself. In that moment, he forgot about the pain, about the hernia. There was only Susan, and those ten long years between them. And, for whatever it was worth, there was dinner.

Feeding Time at the Zoo

It was better than Christmas – they got McDonald’s. Dad ordered at the drive-thru window: nine cheeseburgers and nine Cokes. One of each for everybody in the car. He handed the bag to Mom in the passenger seat to distribute. “Feeding time at the zoo,” Dad said. Tommy, the youngest of the seven siblings in the back of the ‘63 Biscayne station wagon, could only remember two other times in his eight years on Earth that he’d visited the Golden Arches. Turned around on his rear-facing seat, he kicked his feet and fought against the elbows of his older brothers, all desperate to get their burgers first. “Hey! Everyone settle down right now or we’re taking it back.” Mom looked sternly at her six boys and only daughter, and held a burger up, threatening. Seven sets of little blue eyes followed her hand. Dad smiled proudly into the rearview mirror at the excitement.

They inhaled the greasy burgers. The younger boys could not sit still. Tommy sat on one of his hands and rocked back and forth, singing nonsensical words of joy in between bites, the burger soaring around in his other hand like a toy airplane. Bobby ate furtively with two hands and his head down, as if he were praying, as if he’d been in a desert for four days and just handed food. Craning his neck to see forward, Tommy noticed how Dad drove with one hand on the wheel and ate his burger, neatly folded within the open wrapper, with the other. Everyone else had just crumpled the wrapper into a ball and dropped it on the floor when Mom wasn’t looking. Little Tommy swore to himself that next time, whenever that might be, he would eat his burger like Dad did.

Twenty minutes passed and they were twenty miles closer to Milwaukee. The energy over McDonald's had seeped out of the car, and heads began to bob as kids fell asleep. It had to have been over ninety degrees, ninety-five maybe, and in the way-back seat of the wagon Tommy felt queasy. His little fold-up seat faced backward out of the rear window of the wagon and the reverse motion made the awful feeling in his stomach come in waves. He felt light-headed and pictured his face green. Plus it was so hot, so hot. He tried to get comfortable and rested his head on his bunga-bah – the blanket he'd carried everywhere since birth. But he felt dizzy now when he lay his head down on the beloved blanket, and his fingers tingled. Sweat beaded on his little forehead and tears welled up in his eyes. He puked all over the floor of the trunk, all over his bunga-bah, all over his hand-me-down jeans.

“Ah, gross!” someone shouted. “Dad, Tommy puked!”

The acrid smell of Tommy's vomit in the ninety-five degree heat did something evil to the air in the crowded car.

“I can't take it anymore, Frank. That smell,” Mom said.

“What do you want me to do about it?”

“We have to stop, clean it up, or everyone's gonna start hurling.”

“We don't have time,” Dad said impatiently, “we're already late.”

He looked back into the rearview mirror at all the kids plugging their noses.

Tommy was whimpering. “Tom,” Dad shouted. “Take off your jeans, son, and hand them to me. And the blanket, too.”

Tommy did as he was told and stripped down to his hand-me-down briefs, gave the puke-stained jeans to Billy to hand to Dad. But he gripped his bunga-bah.

“The blanket, too, Tom,” Dad said.

Tommy started to bawl.

“Bill, grab that nasty thing from him, willya?”

Billy pried the blanket out of Tommy’s hands and handed it to his father, who was already cranking down his driver-side window.

“Getting too goddamn old for this thing, anyway.”

Tommy’s wailing was full-pitch now. Dad threw the jeans and the blanket out the window of the car in one fast motion, and Tommy shrieked, pressing his puffy face against the rear window as he watched his bunga-bah whip and flap away down the interstate, before it was lost forever beneath the rush of cars.

Past Repair

Before the busted microwave even landed on the pile with the rest of them, there was another one in his gloved hands. He heaved that one the same way: with no regard for how it landed, with two arms flinging the filthy old appliance above his head and then releasing it, with the dreadful knowledge that the instant those same arms reached his sides they would bear the weight of yet another smashed up microwave.

His throat felt like a vacuum cleaner hose, sucking in dusty, dirty air that tingled down to his lungs. Greyish-black smog hung thick above a mountain range of dead consumer appliances. Some of the stacks were over thirty feet high. He wanted desperately to scratch an itch on his nose, but his hands were never free. He had no idea where these microwaves continued to come from – they simply appeared, materializing between his two hands. Every time he looked down, another one. No one told him to throw them, but the impulse to stop never crossed his mind. He somehow knew, as if it were coded in his genes, that stopping wasn't an option.

He had the feeling he'd been throwing microwaves for hours, but there was really no knowing: the two sun-like masses sadly burning behind the thick, grey haze of sky never moved. He did not dare question. He coughed a puff of smoke that lingered in front of his soiled, sweaty face, repositioned his boots in the loose, ashy dirt, and pitched another microwave at the pile.

Wayne woke with a terrible pain in his back. Older than he was, the shitty mattress on the floor dated back to his parents' first apartment together twenty-eight years ago. It bothered Wayne to think he was more than likely conceived on the same mattress he now slept on as a twenty-six year old.

He rolled over to the alarm clock on the floor and turned it off before it had a chance to ring – a new habit of his. Between the nightmares and the back pain, sleeping was proving harder than waking. He sat up on the mattress and stretched his arms as high as he could, yawning. He was lanky and wiry, with big elbows; his ribcage was visible. His hands were mangled beyond their years, peppered with pink and white scars. They hung thick and leathery from his wrists, dirt and oil lining the yellowed nails. He shook his head a few times, slapped his thighs, and popped up to his feet. His uniform was slung over the back of his chair where he left it after work yesterday. He grabbed it and dressed himself.

Wayne had worked nearly ten years now in a garage behind a rundown go-kart track. He'd originally taken it up as an after-school and summer gig, perfect for a sixteen-year old eager for some weekend spending money. But, after he dropped out, he started working there forty-hour weeks, and before long he was making enough to afford rent on the one-room shack he now called home. He signed the lease, took the old queen mattress from the basement, and moved out from under his parents' roof.

The work at the garage was not too physically demanding, nor too mentally challenging, but the merciless slow drag of the hours wore Wayne like water running on limestone. He felt his life eroding as he sat on his swiveling, adjustable-height stool

looking up at the underbellies of go-karts forklifted into the air. Whenever a go-kart would break down or run out of gas or need new oil, one of the cute high school girls who worked on the track would drive or push the kart into the garage where Wayne would tend to it. Oftentimes, the girls would offer their diagnoses of what they thought was wrong through awkward smiles. This was never really necessary, though, as Wayne's eye was so sharply trained he could discover any problem in one glance-over, but years ago, this contact with the girls kept Wayne going. As stupid as he knew it was, he used to feel empowered being the guy the girls came to with their go-kart issues. *Bring me your torn starter cords, ladies, your unscrewed rail guards, your blown tires,* he'd once thought, amused, *I'll fix them straight away and have them back out the door!* But those friendly female crews were long gone now, off to college or real jobs, and the new girls – he could sense – were apprehensive around him. How young they were. To them, he must have been so old, so creepy: the twenty-six year old high school dropout still working a high school kid's job. He knew how it worked: every one of them was only working at the track for a brief moment; they'd soon move on to desks and deadlines, expense reports and travel, salaries, marriage. Wayne hated that to other people he looked a lot like a lifer – like his *career* was going to be playing doctor on rickety metal karts with five-and-a-half horsepower engines. Worse yet, he feared it was true.

Wayne's decision to drop out of high school began the closing of a door between himself and his parents. His decision to move out, which his drunk-ass father called "more boneheaded idiocy," slammed that door shut. Shortly after, when Wayne's parents packed up and moved to Texas, the door was locked and the key thrown out. Of course,

there were countless shouting matches, mostly with his father, along the way. A few nearly came to blows; every one of them ended with both parties separately getting bitter drunk and hardening his will against the other. Their hearts became like cement mixers: each successive argument serving as added aggregate, whiskey being the water. With enough shaking and tumbling, both hearts turned concrete.

Between moments of contact, more than a year would sometimes pass. The last time Wayne had received so much as a hint that his parents were even alive was nearly nine months ago when his father called him late one night. Wayne was drunk on his mattress, watching re-runs of “Cops.” The name on the caller ID heated his stomach, his grip tightened on the bottle of Rich and Rare.

“Yeah?” he answered.

“Thought you should know we moved agin. We headed on south to Corpus Christi. Mother got a job cleaning them big cruise ships come in off the Gulf.” Wayne figured his father would be equally drunk, and focused his ears for evidential slurs or burps. But his father’s words were so curt it was difficult to be sure.

“So?”

“So, whatever kinda address you might of had for us ain’t valid any more.”

“Isn’t Corpus Christi a shithole?”

“Says the boy who works in a goddamn toy garage.” His father grunted, and on the heels of the grunt came the slightest of hiccups. There it was, confirmation. The old man was liquored up all right.

“Least I do more than sit ‘round on my fat ass all day making a woman support me.”

His father busted up with drunken chuckles. “You got it all figured out, huh? Shit, you know you gon’ end up same as me. *Same* as me, only probably without even a wife. Fat, drunk, and pissed off. *And* alone.” He laughed some more at his son.

“Well at least then I’ll have the courtesy not to be bringing another boy into this hell,” Wayne said before shutting his cell phone and throwing it across the room at the patchy, stained dry wall.

They kept the go-karts in the garage at night. Wayne would move all his tools, the forklift, and his stool over to one side so that the high school girls could pull the twelve cars in. This – what used to be Wayne’s favorite part of the workday, his real chance to flirt with the girls as they hustled in and out of the cars, blonde and brown ponytails bouncing behind their heads – was now the time he dreaded most. The girls made him anxious. They marked his awkwardness and cultivated an uneasiness of their own. Sometimes he’d catch two of them glancing at each other when they thought his back was turned. His impulse was to blame them; but for what, he wasn’t sure. Something about their presence made him retreat back into his own skull, made him overthink everything. *Did what I just say make me sound too creepy? Do I sound like I’m trying too hard to be cool?* He was ashamed of the shadowy, stringy mustache that was always on his upper lip, no matter when he’d last shaved. He spent all his attention analyzing his own words and wouldn’t hear what they’d say in reply. He stumbled with his words and fumbled with his tools. *Fuck, Wayne, just be normal.*

“I hate FIPs,” Jo complained. She was working the track this night. It was a weeknight, which was always slow, and she was operating the track by herself. In Wayne’s seasoned opinion, she was the cutest of them all: freckled and petite, with long blonde hair she wore up, but messy. Wayne stared at her ass while she bent over to flick the kill switch on one of the karts.

“For real.” That was the best answer Wayne could produce. He understood the acronym, but he didn’t necessarily share the animosity. Truth was, he never really had to deal with the “fucking Illinois people,” as all the southwest Michigan natives so scornfully coined them. He had no reason to hate them.

Wayne’s eyes followed Jo’s little hips, swinging in her short, navy blue uniform shorts, as she paced back to the track for another car. The pressure of what to say to her when she returned pulled the walls of his throat tight, like when salt is poured on a slug. In a panic, he turned his back to the incoming kart and idly picked up and set down tools. Better to appear in search of pliers than words. The haphazard shelves cluttering the wall of the garage screamed neglect. Ghosts of a time when order was still a priority whispered here and there, in the worn, peeling labels on drawers and cabinets. Rusted license plates from Montana, Wyoming, Michigan, New Mexico, hung on nails. A filthy, faded Pringles can stood in a graveyard of wrenches and blackened sparkplugs, home to hundreds of washers. Mounted above a Route 66 sign was a souvenir skull of a steer.

Behind him, Wayne heard Jo working: the screeching of the brakes as she pulled each car in, the garbled diminuendo into silence of each killed motor, the soft patting of her gym shoe soles on the garage floor linoleum. His nerves began firing, smoking, sputtering like a flooded engine. He wanted not be silent and weird, to have something

clever to say, but he didn't know how. More anxiety seized him, and he focused all his efforts on preventing his throat from closing entirely. He fought the familiar numbing tingling as it marched from the base of his neck across his skull. If it reached his forehead, he feared, he might faint.

The sound of the metal garage door being pulled down was too much to ignore, and Wayne turned to face Jo.

“Should I lock this up, or you gonna be staying awhile?” Jo asked him, her hand on the red cord used to pull down the door. The other hand was on her hip.

“No, no, it's fine. I'll take care of it.” Wayne hoped his eyes weren't noticeably watery as he glanced up to answer.

“Alright then, g'night.”

Relief washed over Wayne as he watched her walk away, un-tucking her uniform shirt and rifling through her purse for car keys. He flicked on the dusty lamp in the corner of the workbench surface. He never understood how he could hate his job as much as he did – despising every droning moment of every day – yet still not feel like leaving come closing time.

Wayne got up from his stool and pulled down the garage door, locking it. Darkness swallowed the garage, save the lamp's weak cone of yellowish light over the bench. He sat back down and opened a squeaky bottom drawer. From it he drew a bottle of whiskey and a dirty glass. He poured himself a drink, and played with a stray washer, thinking. Three hammers and a saw away from the Pringles can, there was a box of purple powdered Latex gloves, used when changing the oil in the karts. Wayne's bored imagination began to rev like a kart with a faulty governor. He finished off his drink and

poured another one. Staring at the box, he could almost feel the powdery coating on his fingers. He tried to think if there were any repairs he still needed to complete. Then he gave in, grabbed a glove from the box, put it on, and started to masturbate.

He pictured Jo wiggling her short, slender fingers into one of the purple gloves, the faintest puff coming from her cute round nose as her rings got caught on the way in. He could smell the fine powder particles floating in the lamplight. Once she's got it all the way on, Jo pulls down hard on the end of the glove, stretching it tight over her fingers and hand, then lets it snap back to her wrist, her tongue just visible below her thin upper lip. Tilting her head slightly to one side so that her blonde ponytail wags behind her, she smiles mischievously, sending scores of pink freckles higher up her cheeks, and gets down on both knees in front of him. Her Latex-laden fingers are pleasantly cold on his stomach as she grabs his belt buckle and ---

He came on the dirty linoleum floor. He sat there for a second, catching his breath, then took another swig of whiskey. He zipped his pants, grabbed an oil rag from the cardboard box on the floor, and wiped up his mess. He tossed the rag back in the box, and threw the glove in the trash. This was far from the first time Wayne had jerked off in the garage after work. In fact, he was trying to quit doing it. Every time after he'd finish, he'd feel worthless to his core.

Two drinks in the dark, lamp-lit garage quickly became eight, and Wayne was too drunk to drive home. He'd gotten lost in his thoughts and just kept pouring. He thought about the friends he used to have, the parties whenever someone's parents were out of town, the girls. He remembered the time he and Robbie and Bricksy, drunk off their asses, dumped canned vegetables all over Mr. Guerrero's front stoop, finger-painting

vulgarity in the watery beets, the green beans, the corn, the crinkle-cut carrots. Wayne chuckled to himself, remembering the night at the construction site when Bricksy earned his nickname.

Then he remembered the months when everyone started to leave. Like a sad, slow leak that Wayne couldn't stopper, each one of his friends eventually escaped town. They moved across the lake to Chicago, or to some snobby campus somewhere, or even out west, leaving him behind. Robbie had tried to make Wayne come with him.

"C'mon, man, just for the hell of it at least. Wing it," Robbie implored. "You gonna have to ditch this dump eventually, might as well come with me now. Imagine the chicks in Chicago, man. Imagine the *bud* in Chicago."

Wayne had pretended to give it thought. "Let me sleep on it," he told Robbie. But that's precisely what he didn't do: sleep. The thought of moving away scared him stiff. He was paralyzed by a fear of the unknown, by change. He made up a lie that he'd save up some more money here and meet Robbie in Chicago the next summer. That was nearly four years ago now, and the well of opportunities to get out had completely dried up.

Then Wayne's thoughts drifted to his piece of shit dad, and the accident. His old man worked tool-and-die for thirty-odd years before some new guy dropped a steel beam over a catwalk, pinning his father underneath. He broke a few vertebrae, went on workman's comp, and never again left the couch. Wayne thought about his helpless mother, how he couldn't stand her obedience to the old, mean hog. She cooked his meals, did his laundry, paid his bills, and took his shit. The one time Wayne called her out, challenged her to leave him behind and think about herself, she slapped him and told

him marriage was a lifelong vow and to never speak like that in her kitchen again. The old man owned her, and he turned her against Wayne. His father might have had a broken spine, but his mother didn't have a spine at all.

Wayne reached to pour another drink and discovered the bottle was empty. He glanced at the clock that hung on the wall next to a yellow metal Pennzoil sign. The clock had a picture of the Grand Canyon on its face, and it read nearly quarter-till three. *Fuck it*, Wayne grumbled and went over to the rack of shelves across the garage and grabbed a handful of clean rags. He'd bundle them up as a pillow and sleep in one of the karts. It was only a few hours before he'd have to be back to open anyway, this would maximize his hours of sleep. He put the empty whisky bottle and the glass back in the drawer and turned off the desk lamp. He actually welcomed the idea of a night away from that spine-wrecking mattress.

When Jo walked into the garage, he shut the door behind her and locked it. He could hear her asking what the hell he was doing, but he ignored her and grabbed her by the shoulders, squeezing so tight she couldn't move. He didn't register any of the words she was screaming, but she was screaming. Kicking, too. Her panic and her physical helplessness -- of which he was acutely aware -- made him feel high, frenzied.

Holding her around her arms and her waist, he carried her to his stool and held her in his lap. Feeling her pressed against him, struggling, his excitement became unbridled; and it manifested itself in his Dickies. She had to have felt it. Instinctively, or without thinking anyway, he grabbed the air compressor hose from atop the canister in the corner of the garage. It took awhile, her struggling and biting and crying, but eventually he got the nozzle of the compressor down her throat, and started pumping it.

He knew how powerful the air gun was, and one pump probably ripped her windpipe right through, but he gave the handle three or four more pumps. Insurance. After that she couldn't scream anymore. The only noises she made were new ones to his ears. They were hybrids of gasps and gargles, sounds you just can't make unless there's a hole in your throat. After he took the nozzle out of her mouth, he replaced it with the nearest oil rag, and jammed as much of it as he could fit in her mouth. Jo's body was making the strangest movements in his lap as she struggled for her last breaths: the fish-like flails of her feet, the spastic arching and then sudden relaxing of her lower spine, the way her fists clenched so tight her nails dug graves into her soft, lotiony palms. This lasted about a minute or two, and then suddenly, almost anti-climatically, she stopped moving and died.

The heavy garage door was thrown open and intense sunlight spilled across the linoleum, filling the garage. Wayne woke from his nightmare with a jump, and banged his knee on the steering wheel. The bright light hurt his eyes and he had a splitting headache.

“Oh!” Jo was startled when she saw him. “Oh, sorry, I...” She stopped speaking and looked around nervously. Wayne fought to open his eyes, and threw a hand in the air.

“No, no, no, it's fine, it's fine. My bad.” His voice sounded scratchy. His eyes finally adjusted to where he could see, and when he realized who was there, his stomach dropped. He almost puked the whiskey. His dream still fresh in his mind, he couldn't

look at Jo. He felt like a monster. Jo stood there for a moment, staring at him through big, innocent eyes.

“Well, sorry, but I have to pull the cars out,” she said, suggesting he get up so she could do so. He scrambled to his feet, hitting his knee again getting out of the cramped car, and walked across the garage, looking at the floor. She was noticeably uncomfortable, and went straight to work starting up each kart, pretending he wasn’t there. Wayne watched her bend over behind a kart, playing with the choke. He couldn’t help it. Then he pondered that red cord hanging from the open garage door.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

'Frank Lloyd Wright' Sounds Like a Serial Killer

The grass was still white and crunchy when Sherri Reinhardt approached Huston. It was a little before eight on a cold, March morning. The boat that always graced one corner of Huston's driveway was hitched to his truck. He was pacing back and forth between the boat and the garage, prepping everything for a day on the lake. He was hurrying down the driveway on one side of his truck. She came up the driveway on the opposite side of the boat, so that he did not see her until they met at the trailer hitch behind the rear bumper of the pickup.

"Well good morning there, Huston!" She piped. Huston nearly dropped his thermos of black coffee. "Getting ready for a big day of fishing?"

No, I'm putting all my gear into the boat and hitching it to the truck for my health's sake, Huston thought.

"Yeah, yep...got a call from my pal Hank last night saying the ice had broken and the fish were bitin'. Got the day off, figure, what the hell, nothin' better to do," he said.

She offered him one of those smiles of hers, and he did his best to reciprocate, but it was early and his coffee hadn't yet woken him and he was busy trying to figure out what the hell she was doing in his driveway.

He tried to sound cordial, but at the same time wasn't about to risk getting into a drawn-out, pleasantries-filled catching-up session.

"What can I do you for, Sherri? What brings you out this cold morning?"

“Well, funny you should ask, Huston. I hate to ask, hate to bother you and all, but Frank and I were wondering if maybe you’d do us a favor?”

“Why, sure, that’s what neighbors are for after all, innit?” He looked down and examined the hitch, pushing here and pulling there, making certain all was secure. He thought maybe the Reinhardts’ furnace was out of whack and they wanted him to come take a look.

“It’s just that, Tanner’s always asking us, and talking all about it, and we just *know* it would mean the world to him...really it would just make his *month*...” She hesitated as Huston quit fiddling with the trailer and looked up at her. “Huston, would you – I guess what I’m asking is, would you mind if Tanner came along to the lake with you today?”

Huston stood there staring for a moment, unsure how to respond.

“He’d be on his very *best* behavior, I swear it. Frank and I already sat him down and told him he was not to touch anything he shouldn’t and he’s to listen to your every word. It’s just, he’s so active and curious and he gets restless being inside the house all winter. And we could use some time free of him to get things done, frankly. And –”

“I guess –”

“Honest, Huston, you can say no. You don’t have to say yes. But he’s such a sweet boy and it would mean the world to him to be out on a boat with –”

“No, no, it’s not a problem, he can come along.”

Jesus Christ, what am I getting myself into? But he had no way out now. She’d blind-sided him. It was early and it was cold and she’d blind-sided him with a smile, and now he had to take the kid fishing. Yet, could he really be called a *kid*? Huston figured

Tanner was maybe twenty-five, twenty-six years old. *What if he freaks out and puts a hand in the propeller or tries to tip over the boat?*

“Has he, uh, ever been on a boat before? Does he know what...or do I...”

“Oh yes, yes. He has been. He knows how to behave all right. There’s nothing for you to worry about like that.”

“Well, ok then...I was planning on wheels up in about,” Huston looked at his watch unnecessarily, “...ten minutes or so here. Will he be ready to go?”

“I think he’s already bundled up and waiting. Oh, he’ll be so excited! Thank you so, so much, Huston.” She smiled some more and turned back down the driveway towards her house. “I’ll go let him know and send him over straight away!”

Again the boat rocked and again Tanner lost his balance, this time knocking backwards into Huston while he was reeling in. “Gee, I’m sorry Huston, I can’t seem to find my sea legs,” Tanner said and smiled at Huston’s back. Huston heard him but didn’t react. His peaceful day of fishing had become anything but peaceful. Now, his hook was caught on his weights, which had leapt over and around the rod, leaving the line in a terrible mess.

It was a typical Minnesota March day. The ice cover had finally relented and given back the lake to the local sport fishers. Huston took off one of his gloves and put it in his teeth, went to work on the knotted line. He turned around just far enough to see if Tanner was still facing his direction. *Maybe he’d like to see the knot he caused.* But he wasn’t. He was standing, bundled and stupid-looking, with his line cast over his side of

the aluminum dinghy, his excitement gently shaking both his rod and the puff-ball of green yarn that sat atop his knit hat. Huston watched the red-and-white bobber dance on the surface of the water. *Won't catch a thing, the shit jiggling like that.* He took the glove out of his teeth and stuffed it into his armpit. He took in a deep breath of cold through his nose, and then let it slowly out of his mouth, watching the clouds of warm breath puff forth and swirl as if from an icicle-cigar. "It's no problem, don't sweat it, buddy. Let's get a bite, now, eh?"

Tanner Reinhardt lived across the street from Huston and was as close to a prominent figure as one could be in a quiet, working-class, Duluth, Minnesota, neighborhood. He was something between a celebrity and a menace, depending on whom in the neighborhood you asked. It was generally understood that something was wrong with Tanner – that he “wasn't all quite there” as Mrs. Bodley might put it – but nobody knew exactly what his condition was. Huston was certainly no doctor, but if pressed to make a diagnosis, he'd say Tanner had a smiling disease. Tanner could smile for days. And he had a catalogue of different smiles that reflected different moods, tons of them, like flavors at a Baskin-Robbins. Happy smiles, cunning smiles, I-know-something-you-don't-know smiles, smiles that made you wonder what exactly was going on up there.

His hair was always cut short, buzzed almost, and he was lanky with big elbows and knees. He wore thick eyeglasses, like magnifying glasses, and the buggy eyes behind

them didn't line up right. He had a peculiar chin, like a butt chin, but one bump in the chin was much larger than the other.

Despite his age, Tanner still lived with his parents across the street. Mr. and Mrs. Reinhardt mostly kept to themselves. Sherri, much like her son, always seemed to be wearing a smile. Only hers felt more obligatory, burdensome. They seemed heavy, a lot of work, existing only on the top-most, surface-level layers of her face. Huston imagined Sherri removing these smiles before bed, placing them in water on the nightstand, and sleeping with the big frown that was always hidden underneath. At the annual neighborhood picnic, the elder Reinhardts would show up with a crockpot of barbecue meatballs or a platter of store-bought potato salad, and occasionally they'd knock on your front door to apologize about Tanner having been rummaging for frogs in your window-well again, but other than that Huston and the other neighbors had little contact with them.

The same could not be said for Tanner. Tanner was everywhere, all at once. He seemed determined to set world records for waves and greetings. When you went down your driveway to get your mail, Tanner was there at the box – your mail in hand, ready to inform you that your monthly utility bill had arrived. “Don't worry though,” he'd tell you, “everyone else has got theirs, too.” He might then try to engage you in a conversation about his pet hermit crabs, which lived in a large, elaborately decorated plastic tote in his basement. On summer days, Mr. Reinhardt, a small, unhappy-looking man who never made eye contact, would carefully carry the hermit crab habitat out onto the front lawn, where Tanner would sit on his knees in the grass and marvel at them for hours, desperately flagging down each passing car to come have a look.

The street they lived on, South Riviera Court, was quiet and simple. All the homes were ranches of different shades: beige, gray, green, yellow, with square front lawns and cement driveways. Some yards had a tree in them, some driveways a basketball hoop. Huston and his wife Marybelle had moved into the neighborhood nearly four years ago. They had no kids, but were tired of renting and moving their things around Duluth each time a lease was up. Huston had earned a good raise at the power plant about six years back, and they were disciplined about saving their money. “We’ll get a place of our own,” he told Marybelle in bed one night while the pipes of the apartment unit above rushed full with water, “with a lawn and a little lamp by the front porch walk and a welcome mat by the door.” She cooed sleepily and kissed his shoulder.

But somehow things were better in those days. Even with the garbage disposal in the sink breaking down all the time, and having to call the landlord because the trash didn’t get pick up again – the days were just busier. And though they complained about it then, none of it seemed so bad to Huston now. There was always something, and Huston was beginning to think that that had kept them young, fit, sharp. Maybe too much comfort was a little dangerous; maybe too much comfort could dull you slowly, round you off at the edges. The days lately all seemed to blend together. Huston would come home from work about 6 o’clock; Marybelle would be there in the kitchen, dinner just about ready. “Hon, take off your shoes when you walk in the house,” she’d yell to him at the back door with her head in the oven, poking at the meatloaf to see if the top was crispy but the middle still moist. He’d grumble but oblige. Then he’d walk to the fridge for a beer, and see her close the oven, take off the oven mitt, and place it on the counter next to the yellow and green ceramic cookie jar.

The cookie jar was a new addition, appearing one day about a year ago. Huston had personally never opened it, not being one for sweets, but he'd been noticing his wife making frequent withdrawals.

"How was your day at work?" she'd ask, rubbing his back as he bent low to peer inside the fridge. Same question every time.

"Good, it was fine."

Sometimes he'd stand up and kiss her on the cheek as he cracked open a can, sometimes not.

Huston got his line untangled and was ready to cast. Tanner was still trembling with excitement on the other side of the aluminum craft, and Huston had to widen his stance for balance. It was all very quiet out on the lake. There were maybe four other boats. Hank had to be out there somewhere, Huston thought. He'd expected there to be more boats out today, actually. Maybe they thought the ice hadn't melted yet? Whatever the reason, it ought to mean more fish for Huston. He just needed to find the hotspot.

The lake wasn't big, but it wasn't small either. There was a launch in the northwest corner of the lake, which Huston's boat was facing. He'd cut the motor, allowing the little boat to drift about the lake, just southeast of center, where the water was deepest. Just up from the shore's edge at the launch was the big asphalt parking lot. In a few weeks, the parking lot would be jam-packed with F-150's and Silverados, the launch ramp busy. Huston would be there, for sure. He loved those days when the air smelled like bait and Evinrude exhaust and carried sounds of bass jumping, coolers

opening and closing, reels letting out slack, fishermen cursing the big one that got away. He took his boat, which he'd bought two springs ago, out on the lake every chance he got. He wasn't sure what he'd do with his time if he didn't. Sit on the couch next to, but not touching, his wife while she watched bullshit daytime television and snacked on assorted chocolates?

Huston cast his line over the side, let the hook sink until he felt the weights gently hit bottom, then reeled in on the crank three times so as to position the bait just above the algae-bedded lake floor. This early in the season the fish shouldn't be straying too far from the bottom. As he stood there, pole in hand, Huston looked around the little boat. It was nothing fancy, but it got the job done. It was aluminum throughout, reminiscent of a canoe but much wider. In the rear by the motor a metal bench ran the width of the boat so that, when maneuvering about the lake, he could sit there and steer the motor with his right arm behind his back while he faced forward. In the middle of the boat, between his feet and Tanner's on the other side, sat a cooler, tackle boxes, two spare poles, a jar of peanuts with no lid, a net. Earlier Tanner had dropped the peanut lid over the side while they were cruising out to the fishing spot.

"Heya Huston," Tanner had bellowed over the drone of the outboard engine, "I think I dropped the lid to the peanuts!" He was sitting on the cooler near the edge of the boat, pouring out handful after handful of Huston's peanuts. Most, he ate; some, he dropped over the side and watched in innocent wonder as they were sucked up in the white wake running along the bottom of the boat. He left the red plastic lid resting on his knee, and it fell off into the water after he more daringly leaned overboard to let his

fingers, which loosely caged a few peanuts, skim across the surface of the freezing water. The nuts instantly ripped from his grasp and were lost in the watery blackness of the lake.

“You did what?” Huston hollered up to Tanner, who was now turned around on the cooler and facing Huston, smiling, as always.

“I dropped the lid, the lid that goes on the peanuts. Wanna go back and get it? I’ll fish for it with the net.”

“No, no, not worth it. Just try not to drop anything else over the side, ok?”

“Okie dokie, Huston. 10-4!”

Huston and Marybelle would sometimes watch Tanner from the picture window at the front of their house. Marybelle would spread apart the blinds with her thumb and middle finger and they’d peer through the open slot out across the street where Tanner would be doing any number of odd things. Huston would notice how chubby Marybelle’s wrist looked as it hung there at eye level. He thought the cottage-cheese flesh dangling from her forearm looked like that one painting where those clocks were all melting. Her wedding ring – he could still remember the day they went and picked it out together – now appeared to be choking her plump finger. The finger was white just around the ring, then purple around that.

“Huston, look at that, what is he doing now?”

Tanner was on his driveway. He had his bicycle upside-down so that the seat and the handlebars served as its base, wheels upward in the summer sun. Tanner straddled

the frame of the bike, in between the tires, and stooped a little so he could hold both pedals with each of his hands.

“He’s just so bizarre...” she said, eyes focused through the gap in the blinds that her hand still held open. A smile crept across her face, forming new dimples that weren’t always there, and she looked away from the window and at Huston.

“Yeah, he sure is. But innocent. He don’t hurt anybody. Just talks ‘em deaf is all.” They both chuckled at that. Huston put his arm around her and let his hand cup the round deposit of fat just above her hip. He could remember when that wasn’t there. He let his thumb rub back and forth.

Across the street on his driveway, Tanner now pumped the pedals feverishly up and down with his arms – the back tire of the bicycle spinning wildly in the air behind him. Then he leapt up away from the bike, and fell to his knees on the concrete behind the whirling rear wheel. Cautiously, but with mad curiosity, he held the palm of his hand just above the spinning treads, then allowed the tire to rub against his palm until the friction finally caused it to stop spinning. Evidently delighted, he hopped up from the driveway and straddled the frame again, ready to repeat the experiment.

“Really, I see no problem with him. He’s entertainment anyway, and he’s always so energetic. I kind of like him,” Marybelle said.

“Yes, energetic for sure. No one’s arguing that. But it’s just weird that he’s so old. Not that that’s all bad, I guess.” Huston said with a shrug. “And you’ve got a point, he *is* entertaining.”

Huston stood staring for a moment, then turned from the window and headed for a beer.

It was intensely sunny the day Huston knew he loved Marybelle. They had been dating for a few months, and on an adventure-seeking whim decided to make the drive from Duluth to Cloquet to see the Frank Lloyd Wright gas station. It was supposedly the only one in the world. They drove with the windows down, Marybelle saying she didn't care if it messed up her hair, Huston telling her he hoped it did – he liked it better messed up.

She sat there in the passenger seat, wearing big, dark sunglasses, her hair swirling around her head. Huston looked at her more than the road. The sun was behind them and reflected off the side view mirrors. She had taken off her shoes and was sitting with her bare feet curled under her, hands busy chasing the hair out of her face and playing with the radio. She was thin then, once a high school pole-vaulter. She never lacked energy and was quick to laugh. She had a heart-shaped upper lip that Huston was crazy for.

The drive ended up being most of the fun, and they were okay with that. Once they got there they didn't know what to do next. They looked at each other and both burst into laughter. Sure, it was unique-looking and all, with its crazy, green tiled roof that stuck out so far, but it was still just a gas station. Neither Huston nor Marybelle knew the first thing about architecture. Marybelle said she thought 'Frank Lloyd Wright' sounded like a serial killer's name.

“You think they have corn nuts here?” Huston asked her after gaining control of his laughter.

“What nuts?”

“Corn nuts. You know? Corn nuts?” He looked at her, his head tilted to one side.

“Nu-uh, never heard of them, Huston. Are they good?”

“Are they good?” Huston gave her a look of incredulity. “They’re the *best*, M Bell. Come on, let’s go inside and see if they got ‘em.”

Inside the gas station Huston found the aisle of salty snacks, and exclaimed, “It’s your lucky day!” He paid for the corn nuts and they walked back out to the car holding hands. They sat on the hood of the car in the parking lot of the Frank Lloyd Wright gas station at the intersection of MN-45 and MN-33 and fed each other corn nuts.

“Now you believe me?” Huston asked her as she munched on a handful.

“Mmhhm,” she nodded, mouth still full of deep-fried kernels. “These are so good.”

“Told you so,” he said. He kissed her on the forehead and lay back against the windshield.

“Hey, watch this!” She grabbed his knee. She put one kernel in her mouth, relaxed her shoulders and arched her back, then spit the corn nut as far as she could. It flew about eight feet or so before falling to the pavement.

“What a lady,” Huston said as he sat back up, reaching for a nut out of the bag. “I got that beat, easy.”

“Oh yeah?” Let’s see it then.”

Huston readied himself, and then let it fire. His kernel flew twice as far as hers had – fifteen, maybe even twenty, feet – landing near the coin-operated air pump. She punched him in the ribs. “Jerk,” she teased.

She moved her hand to go into the bag for another try, but Huston snatched it up in his and held it. She looked up into his eyes.

“M Bell, I love you,” he said.

Tanner made a hoot that startled Huston from his reverie. *No way he’s got a bite. No way.* He turned around and watched Tanner reel in like a madman, tongue poking out of the side of his mouth. He reeled and reeled until the bare hook came shooting out of the water. Nothing doing. Tanner chuckled.

“False alarm again!” he yelled. “But the Big One’s a-comin’, I can feel it.”

Huston shook his head and looked down at his boots.

“Ha, you keep on feelin’ it then, Tanner. But when she does bite, you better be able to haul her in. That’s the true test of a fisherman.”

“Oh, I’m a fisherman, alright. I am,” Tanner said with a certainty that puzzled Huston a little. Everything about Tanner puzzled Huston. Sure he was a weird bundle of energy, and was twenty-something years old and still lived with his parents who probably still cut his steak, but there was also this purity to Tanner. There were no needless worries, no analyses, and that was enviable. Huston hated –

“Ahoy there, matey!” Tanner boomed. The boat began to rock.

“Why, hello,” a voice called back, “and if that ain’t Huston!”

Huston turned around again to see Hank alone in his boat, floating a few yards away.

“No, it is Huston! It’s him!” Tanner yelled back.

“Tanner, he knows that, he’s saying hello.”

“Oh.”

“What’s the haul so far?” Hank asked.

“Nothing yet,” Huston said, “not caught a damned thing. How bout you?”

“I had the Big One on the line, but he just got away!” Tanner shouted across the water, ecstatic.

Hank gave Tanner a confused look and laughed with his shoulders, then answered Huston’s question: “Bout the same luck. Caught a few in the thick over there on the west shore, but no keepers. How you been, buddy? Haven’t been seeing you around.” Hank squinted again at Tanner and jerked his head, silently asking Huston to explain.

“I’ve been good, real good. Nice to finally get out of the house, you know? Boring winter. And this is Tanner, a neighbor of mine. He’s out here to scare all the fish away, isn’t that right, Tanner?” He put an awkward hand on Tanner’s shoulder. It occurred to him that he’d never touched Tanner before.

Tanner looked up from the cooler he was sifting through for the bait, and shot Huston a devilish grin. Tanner appreciated sarcasm.

“Yeah right!” he yelled to Hank. “Huston doesn’t know anything about fishing!”

“You’re right about that, boy, he sure doesn’t,” Hank said with a smile and a wink. Then he got serious, he put his hands in his pockets and wrinkled his brow.

“How’s M Bell these days, Huston? She doing good?”

“Yep, she’s doing fine.”

Huston nodded a few times after saying so. And he left it at that.

“Listen, Huston, about what I said – ” Hank started and then paused.

Tanner grunted as he dug his fingers around in a container of dirt, hunting for a new nightcrawler for his hook. He didn’t appear to be listening to the men anymore.

“I’m real sorry for ever bringing that up. I was drunk, you know? But that’s no excuse, I realize. Wasn’t my place.”

“Don’t mention it. Out of mind.”

“But I really didn’t mean it. I love Marybelle, you know that.” Hank was trying to be delicate, “she’s the best. I mean, so what if she’s put on a few…” he trailed off, searching for the right words. “You know what I’m trying to say. I’m sorry.”

“Honest, Hank. It’s nothing. I forgot it even happened. And it’s not like she couldn’t use a diet, I don’t think that’s a secret.” Huston said.

Hank nodded and looked down into his own boat. In the awkward silence Huston watched Tanner, who’d gotten hold of a fat, black worm and was now fighting to get the hook through him. The worm tensed and curled, refusing to cooperate.

“You’re just the only asshole drunk enough to say it out loud!” Huston said with a smile. Hank smiled back, letting Huston know he was grateful for the forgiveness.

“Alrighty then, gentlemen. I won’t intrude on this hotspot of yours,” Hank said, yanking the starter cord on his Evinrude. It gurgled water then roared to life. “Tanner, it was nice meeting you!” he shouted over the engine. “Huston, best of luck to you, buddy. With everything!” They exchanged nods. Then Hank lifted the motor into gear, the nose of his boat lurching upward and a foamy white wake forming behind.

“See you later!” Tanner shouted, waving.

Gracefully, Hank’s boat eased into a looping left turn on the surface of the water before heading away from them toward the other end of the lake. In no time, the boat was nothing more than a silver wedge with a white ribbon following it and it was quiet

again. The cloud of oily exhaust hanging in the cold air drifted across the water toward Huston's boat from where Hank's had just been. Huston loved that smell.

"Can I have that?" Huston asked, pointing to the light blue plastic bait carton. Maybe a fresh, squirming one would do the trick.

"Sure." Tanner held up the carton of dirt and worms, but he didn't hand it over. Huston reached for it but Tanner held it out over the edge of the boat.

"You think Miss Marybelle is fat?"

"No. What are you – no, no one said that."

"But you want her to go on a diet. Fat people go on diets."

"Yes, but that doesn't mean I think she's – it's complicated." Huston paused. "I mean, she *has* sort of ... you know what I mean..." he said. But Huston wondered if Tanner really did know what he meant. Did he notice that kind of stuff? Or was that just another bother he was free from?

Huston moved for the bait again, but Tanner stuck his arm further out over the water, wanting to hear more.

"I don't get it though. Does that mean you don't love her?"

"It doesn't mean –" Huston started but bit his tongue. He was angry. "Tanner, just hand me the worms. Please." He spoke sternly. That was enough.

Tanner hesitated, shrunk his shoulders, and then handed the worms over.

"Thanks," Huston said, looking Tanner in the eyes.

"You know what I think?" Tanner said after a moment's silence. "I think *you're* fat, Huston, and you can't even catch a fish!"

And Huston couldn't help but smile at the joke.

Something Like an Emergency

“You feel that?” he asked.

He knew she did. His beer tasted like bananas. Bananas, and clove.

“Feel what?” she asked.

He only said it because they’d been looking at each other for so long he was sure she had to have. Now Nick looked away.

“Nothing,” he said. “Thought I felt the table shake a little,” he lied.

She didn’t buy it. He could tell. She knew what he felt and she felt it, too. But she pretended to buy it.

“Huh, weird.” Katherine’s voice cracked. “Nope, didn’t feel anything,” she also lied.

To cover his tracks, he bent his head down below the table and pretended to examine one of the legs. Blood rushed to his head, on the heels of the beer. He grasped the table leg and lifted once or twice. A purposeless exercise. As he straightened himself back up in his chair, he spotted a clod of cemented chewing gum that some drunk had pressed onto the underside of the table who-knows-how-long ago.

“Nothing,” he said with a shrug.

“Huh, who knows,” she said, smiling, agreeing to go along with it for both their sakes.

The bar was decidedly not crowded, which was unusual. How dark it was, however, was very usual. It was always this dark. That was part of the appeal for them. “Who wants to go to a bar and squint?” is how she’d put it when they were weighing Wooly’s merits earlier that evening. “Exactly!” he’d agreed. That the floor and the walls and the chairs and the tables were all made of the same dark, cherry oak helped. The place *looked* like it should smell like a log cabin or a ski lodge, but it didn’t. It smelled more like used washcloths, and occasionally pub cheese and bacon.

The chalkboards were the claim to fame at Wooly’s. A continuous line of them hung at about shoulder height on nearly every inch of wall. On the main wall -- which was in the back and faced the door so that you immediately saw it when you entered -- there were pink, rounded, friendly letters nailed above the chalkboards that spelled WHASSUP AT WOOLY’S, vaguely informing those customers who didn’t already know that the chalkboards were there to display “what was up.” That is, whatever people may have been doing at the bar, whatever their occasion was, they were invited – indeed, encouraged – to share it in yellow and green chalk. Without fail, there would be large, excited scribbles about how it was so-and-so’s 21st birthday, this always followed by at least six exclamation points. Sometimes a poor attempt at a birthday cake. In the corner of a chalkboard always lurked the obligatory “Getting drunk,” the obviousness of the statement being where the smartass who wrote it found humor, but the neatness of hand always betraying him, evincing that he was in fact failing at his own stated objective.

“Look, check it out,” Nick said, jerking his head at something across the bar, eager to change the subject, desperate to ignore that he’d almost just brought up love on a first date. How uncharacteristic of him, too. Nick, ever the self-deemed pragmatist, he

who scoffed at love at first sight and all its believers. Yet here was Katherine, coy and flirty and mysterious, rousing in him feelings he didn't believe he could have.

After checking that the coast was clear, a kid in a technicolored snowboard jacket began drawing the unmistakable outline of a penis. His cronies were convulsing at their table in the middle of the bar, red with poorly stifled laughter, probably believing they were the first people bold enough to try such a thing. They weren't. Not by a long shot.

"Look how mature!" she said. "Those kids look, like, nineteen."

"More alarmingly, who gave this kid the exact specifications of my johnson?"

The green chalk penis was unrealistically huge, as penises drawn on chalkboards almost always are. Nick was careful that his tone made it obvious he was kidding, though. He was never one to speak like that. Again, saying things he ordinarily wouldn't. Nick *hated* guys who spoke like that.

"Funny," she said.

"Maybe I should go help him out with the pubes, you think?"

"Oh, let's not talk rot, please, Nick," she said, and sipped her beer, looking pleased with herself. Nick laughed at that comment.

"Talk rot?" he asked, laughing still. "You've been reading Hemingway?"

"Oh, fuck you!" she said, laughing. She *had* been reading Hemingway, and she both loved and hated that he'd caught on.

Nick and Katherine had met on a bus three weeks before. It was freezing outside and the heat of all those bundled people sardined together fogged the windows. Nick was

huddled in a seat, blowing into his hands, a to-go Caesar balancing on his knees.

Suddenly, a finger tapped the clear top of the container, pressing the plastic against one of the too-big rye croutons.

“Can I have that?” the girl seated next to him asked. He thought maybe she was crazy. Crazy people rode the bus often enough.

“Have what?” he asked. “My salad?” He offered a patronizing smile. “No way! I blew all my lunch money on this. You realize how much extra the chicken is?” When confronted and unsure how to handle himself, Nick usually resorted to joking.

“Lunch money? You’re a student, aren’t you? Isn’t that included in your deal?” She smiled back at him now and he decided she was too lovely to be crazy. Her short hair was too clean, too carefully curled at the bottom, hugged her ears too closely for her to be crazy. The paisley scarf wound tightly around her throat, the birthmark on her right cheekbone, the way she buried her hands between her thighs and leaned towards him – she was arresting.

“My deal? You mean my tuition? I *wish* meals were included in tuition, but, I’m sorry to say, they most definitely are *not*.”

“Oh, so you’re slummin’ it?” She winked.

And before he could form a response she added, “Here, then let me sweeten the deal,” and reached into the pocket of her royal blue pea coat. She held a closed fist over the salad container and for a moment Nick worried there were drugs crammed inside her palm.

Instead, she placed a heart-shaped chocolate wrapped in red foil on top of the plastic lid, pressing it down gently for a moment with a finger, looking at him. His face lit up in surprised relief.

“Dessert!” he said. “Thank you, how nice.”

Silence fell between them then, and Nick wondered about her as the bus slammed and skidded around corners. She looked about his age, but she couldn’t have been a student, or else she wouldn’t have thought meals were included in tuition. Maybe she was an artist? Maybe her family owned some home furnishing store where she’d had to log fifty-hour weeks and never had the time to enroll? He fondled the chocolate heart, drummed it on the clear plastic. When she rose from her seat at a stop, they exchanged smiles and he thanked her again for the chocolate. He would have used her first name – his father had taught him that people always love hearing their first names – but he hadn’t gotten hers. As she hopped off the bus and onto the crowded sidewalk, Nick hated the prospect of having to continue making up names and imagining encounters, taking buses when he should be walking in hopes of bumping into her again, never knowing if she was the kind of girl who matched her bras to her panties, if she slept with sheets, or just a comforter. He longed to catalog all her other birthmarks, to know intimately their taste, to trace his finger on her skin and connect the dots.

So Nick shot up from his seat, cradling the salad, shouldered the closing bus door, and followed the blue of her pea coat.

“Hey! Excuse me,” he called to her. She turned around. She had an expectant smirk on her face and she hid her chin in her scarf.

“Yes?” she asked.

“I – I didn’t catch your name,” he said.

“It’s Katherine.” She held out her hand.

“Katherine. Nice to meet you, Katherine. Nick,” Nick said, shaking her hand.

“You know, is there any chance – ” he began.

“Yep,” she said. She broke off their handshake and then nodded at his hand.

He opened it and found a small strip of paper, her phone number scribbled in royal blue ink. When he looked back up, she was almost to the next corner already, proud-walking away in the bitter afternoon cold.

The morning of the Friday Nick and Katherine were to have their first date, Nick’s Uncle Buzz was struck and killed by a limousine. He’d stepped out of the taxicab he’d parked on the shoulder of the Kennedy Expressway, and witnesses said he flew – actually flew – almost fifty yards before he landed in a heap on the frozen grass beneath the platform of the Cumberland Avenue Blue Line stop. Everyone waiting for the train looked down at the mess of a body. The one thing they all mentioned when the police asked them to detail what they’d seen was the bloody socks. He had no shoes on, they all reported. The police just nodded and wrote everything down, not caring to share with the shocked witnesses that the shoes had been found on the pavement not far from the taxi.

On the awful drive to his grandmother’s that afternoon, where his father’s side of the family was gathering to be together – his Uncle Buzz, his loony and lovable, taxicab-driving, lifelong-bachelor Uncle Buzz, was the youngest of Nick’s father’s six brothers –

Nick remembered the date he'd made on the phone with Katherine the night before. He had to cancel. He hoped she wouldn't be upset.

He tried her three times before leaving a voicemail. *Hey Katherine, it's Nick.* He fought against the shakiness of his voice. *I'm really sorry, I hate to do it...* He didn't tell her the truth why he had to cancel, just that "something like an emergency" had come up, and that he promised he did still want to see her, and that he hoped she'd be open to rescheduling. *Again, I'm really sorry. Call me back when you get this, please.*

It was late that night and Katherine still hadn't called. The hours inside Nick's grandmother's house had been a whirlwind of tears, hugs, stories, swears, sobs, and now whiskey. One of Nick's uncles had opened a bottle of Johnnie Walker and those who were still there passed it around, taking solemn swigs. They cursed the bastard who did it. The limo driver, Butterfield. Butterfield was his name, and the police had already tracked him down. The motherfucker was drunk, pulling from a plastic double-pint of vodka at nine in the morning. Nick's Uncle Tony slurred threats of killing that cock-sucking Butterfield, but Nick's grandmother, the only woman still present, partaking herself in the passing of the bottle, slapped him across the face and warned him never to talk filth like that in front of her again. God would decide Butterfield's punishment, not them. And even so, even if he was able to do it somehow without getting caught, these were things a mother should never hear.

Between the whiskey and witnessing the weeping of broken men – his father and his uncles, men he'd only ever seen jovial when together, their greatest shared woes the familiar ones brought on by summer after summer of disappointing White Sox underachievement – Nick needed fresh air. He went out onto the lawn without a jacket,

his frozen breath clouding around his face. He thought about Uncle Buzz. Somehow, never seeing him again wasn't as awful to imagine as never *hearing* him again. That breathless, rushed, shouting voice played over and over in Nick's mind. People had to ask Uncle Buzz to slow down sometimes so they could understand him. He was always excited. When he talked, he talked with his hands, which probably unnerved those in the back of his cab who wished he'd just hold the wheel. But not Nick. Nick loved riding with Uncle Buzz. When Nick was little, Uncle Buzz would take him on errands in the city. The buildings were so tall and everything moved so fast and Uncle Buzz always let him hang his head out the window, unlike his mom. Downtown in Uncle Buzz's cab was where Nick first learned how to give the middle finger. "Don't ever let your mother catch you doing that, Nick-O, or she'll have my bald head on a platter," Uncle Buzz had said after Nick starting imitating the gesture he'd seen his uncle flash at an Asian man in a fish truck who'd just run a red light.

Uncle Buzz was always saying things like that: *my bald head on a platter*. He had lines like that for every situation, lines that always used to crack Nick up, despite having heard them a million times before. Another one was, *so I got that goin' for me...which is nice*, which Uncle Buzz would use to wrap up stories about himself, good or bad. Nick remembered how excited he was the first time he saw *Caddyshack* and realized that was where that line was from. Bill Murray was Uncle Buzz's all-time favorite actor. Nick's, too.

Nick shivered and swallowed back the welling feeling in his throat. It just wasn't fair. He stood there in the freezing cold trying to understand why. When he couldn't think about it anymore, he dialed Katherine again. Still nothing.

Finally, that following Tuesday, Katherine called. Nick had already given up hope, figured he'd never hear from her again. Everything was still very irregular – the waves from his Uncle Buzz's death still rocking and upsetting Nick's mind, making everyday details like his schoolwork and his meals feel both sharply focused yet fuzzy, forgettable, at the same time. Nick was napping – something he did a lot of that week – and he missed the call.

In her voicemail, Katherine sounded so much less confident than she had that day on the bus. *Hi, Nick. I got your message from Friday. I'm sorry it took so long to get back; I had a lot going on, too. It was a horrible weekend, actually. Please don't think I'm mad – I'm not. I hope your "something like an emergency" is better now. Call me back if you still want to make another date. I'd like that. Ok, bye, Nick.*

So as not to come off too eager, Nick waited a day to call Katherine back. After four or five rings she picked up. She sounded hushed, hurried, like there was something important on her end she needed to get back to. They didn't really make small talk, Nick sensing she wasn't game. But she did agree to go out Saturday night. He told her he couldn't wait and apologized again about the earlier cancellation.

"I hope you got the message in enough time," he asked, "and you didn't actually start getting ready or anything?"

"Nick, I mean it, you can stop apologizing. To be honest with you, it worked out that you cancelled first, because if you didn't, I would have had to."

"Really?" he asked. He didn't believe her that it was no problem. He knew how girls worked.

“Really. I couldn’t have gone,” she said. “I had my own ‘something like an emergency,’” she added.

Nick thought she was poking fun at his ambiguous phrasing now, and he began to apologize for that, too.

“Nick, Nick, stop. It’s ok. You don’t have to explain.”

“But you do like Hemingway, then, huh?” Nick asked after returning from the bar with a new round. Wooly’s was beginning to fill up now and there was a palpable Saturday night energy, lots of chatter and clinking of glass, the sounds of excited chalk on chalkboard. He handed her her Captain & Coke. With lemon, not lime.

“Oh my God, yes. My all-time favorite.”

“Really?” he asked. “That’s awesome. I love him, too. What’s your favorite stuff?”

“I mean, I like everything really, novels and short stories. But...” She trailed off.

“But?”

“But if I had to pick *one*... It would have to be *Farewell to Arms*,” she said.

“Sometimes, at parties or whatever, I’ll tell people I’m named after Catherine Barkley.”

“Ha, nice. That’s excellent. But you’re actually not?”

“No! I mean, I wish. But no, I’d be surprised if my Dad’s ever heard of Hemingway. Definitely has never *read* him.” She looked down into her glass at the mention of her father. She picked at one of her orange-painted fingernails. “Plus,” she added, looking back up, “it’s spelled differently.”

“Ah, good point. You’re a ‘K,’ huh? She’s a ‘C’?”

“Yep. I’m a ‘K.’” Katherine sipped her drink through a straw. Nick gulped his beer. They looked at each other, their hands on the table.

“Can I tell you something private?” she asked.

“Sure,” Nick said. “Go ahead.” He wondered if maybe she’d have more courage than he’d had. If maybe this was going to be it.

“One of the things that attracted me most about you was that your name’s Nick,” she said. “You know, like Nick Adams?”

Nick laughed, a little too loudly, flushing a bit, embarrassed over his secret expectations.

“I see! So that’s the only reason I got your number? Because my name’s Nick?”

“Well, no. If you remember, I gave you my number before I even knew your name, technically.” She winked. The birthmark on her cheekbone leapt whenever she did that – Nick couldn’t get enough. “But it did give you a serious advantage once I found out, to be honest. I thought it was cute: Nick and Katherine, a Hemingway-inspired couple.” She took a long sip through her straw. Nick smiled – she’d said “couple.”

Katherine excused herself to use the restroom. When she got back, Nick asked her what she did, what her story was. He wanted to know why such a sharp, gorgeous, well-read girl didn’t go to college. She explained that money was tight, that it was just her and her father and that he’d always had trouble holding down a real job. After high school she’d actually done two years at Oakton Community. She told him about Sean, her English teacher there, the one responsible for getting her hooked on Hemingway. She

gushed about how over-qualified he was to be teaching at Oakton – a Ph.D. from Cornell, he “just knew *everything* about *everything*,” she said.

Anyway, she continued, her plan was always to go to Northern after Oakton. But when the time came it just didn’t feel worth it anymore. Plus, how fucking *boring* would living in DeKalb be, right? She worked at a bakery and she loved it. It hardly felt like working, the owner relied on and trusted her (she’d even taken Katherine out for Katherine’s 21st and picked up the entire tab!), and the smells were to die for. If Nick ever needed doughnuts or cupcakes or whatever, he should totally just ask her, she could hook him up.

The bar was officially crowded now; people were standing, shifting, shuffling all around their table. Waitresses and bar backs fought their ways through seas of elbows and feet. The music was turned up. They’d had another few rounds and Nick was quite drunk. He’d switched to Captain & Coke two drinks ago at Katherine’s insistence. He *had* to try it with lemon.

“It’s better right?” she shouted.

“Yeah, it’s good.”

A guy with a pitcher in each of his hands tried squeezing past their table and bumped into Katherine.

“Asshole!” she barked, and then busted up in giggles. She was drunk, too. Her cheeks had turned a blotchy red and her voice had flattened and loudened.

“Hey, you wanna go write something on the chalkboards?” Nick asked. They’d been sitting for a long time now and he thought it’d be nice to get up and move around. Plus, maybe he’d try dancing with her once they were up.

“Yeah! We’ll lose our table, though,” she said.

“We don’t have to.”

“No! No, let’s!”

They navigated their way to the nearest blackboard and Katherine selected a long piece of yellow chalk. She tapped her chin with it and asked Nick what she should write.

“I don’t know. Whatever you want!” He knew what he wished she’d write.

Something, anything, about being there with him.

She gripped the chalk like a pencil and began pounding it on the board. “I know!” she announced.

In big, capital letters she wrote out *MY BIRTHDAY!!! With Nick Adams <3.*

Nick was pleased. So what if it was a little clichéd. A playful nickname, a heart – he was in.

“Wait a second. You never said it was your birthday!”

“Yeah! Finally twenty-one! I love it!” she threw her hands up in the air. The chalk went flying. “Oops!”

“Twenty-one? I thought you said your boss took you out for your 21st?” Nick asked.

“Yeah, and some of the oth – ” she stopped and held her hand to her mouth for a moment. “Some of the other people from work.”

“Hold on, I’m confused.”

She laughed and put a hand on his chest.

“You crack me up,” she said. “That was earlier this week. On my actual 21st. This is my first time using my legit ID though! Came in the mail yesterday. Look, I’ll show you, but you can’t laugh at the picture, OK? I hate it.”

She rifled through the purse slung around her shoulder and pulled from it a small wallet. A carton of white Tic Tacs fell from her purse to the floor. The wallet had a plastic viewing window, with her driver’s license inside.

“See!” She thrust the wallet at him and bent down to search for the Tic Tacs amongst all the feet.

Nick stared at the ID. He’d never seen or heard her full name before: KATHERINE LEIGH BUTTERFIELD. Stunned, he read the name over again. BUTTERFIELD.

“Katherine – ”

“God, this floor is disgusting.” She stood back up and jammed the Tic Tacs into her purse. “Bad picture, I know.”

“Katherine, remember last week, we were gonna go out, and I had to cancel?”

“Yeah, I said I didn’t care like a million times, Nick.” She started searching for a new piece of chalk to write with.

“Remember you told me you couldn’t have went out anyway?” Nick’s face was hot. He didn’t feel drunk at all anymore. “Why was that exactly?”

“I had ‘something like an emergency,’” she said in a deep, imitation-male tone. She wouldn’t let that go. She was laughing now, swaying a bit. “Oh!”

She chalked a new message on an empty space of blackboard, this time in green: *Something Like an Emergency!* She was cracking up.

“I’m being serious, Katherine,” Nick said.

She slammed down the chalk and looked at him quizzically. He wondered if she could notice his chest heaving.

“Huh?”

“What was it?” he demanded.

“The fuck is up with you?” she asked. She hiccupped. “Are you yelling at me? It’s none of your business. I never asked you about your thing.”

She had a point. She never did ask why he’d had to cancel. Thank God, too. How could Nick explain Uncle Buzz to someone who’d never met him? He couldn’t just say, *imagine your favorite uncle dying*, because that didn’t begin to cover it.

“Just – just tell me. I need to know.”

“Oh, you *need* to know?” She was using that fake male voice again. “No, you know what? Fuck that.” She started laughing. “Well, fine. I’ll tell you if you tell me. How bout that, Nick? We’ll trade emergencies.”

Nick couldn’t take it. She was mocking him. He couldn’t look at her, swaying in her high heels, supporting herself with a hand on the wall. He couldn’t take any of it. He couldn’t take the guy behind him, blabbering about winning his fantasy football league. He couldn’t take the smell of the place, the glow of the bright chalk in the dark bar, the thoughts of his Uncle Buzz and wiffle ball games in the street and backyard barbeques and the best Hawk Harrelson impersonations ever during Sox games on TV and Buzz’s lonely studio apartment Nick saw one time, with bottles and socks littered all over the floor, any one of those pairs maybe being the now-bloody pair that all those fucking commuters got to see but Nick didn’t because by the time he got to see him Uncle Buzz was in the casket wearing so much makeup he didn’t even look like himself anymore.

Nick handed Katherine her wallet and headed for the exit. He pushed against all those elbows and shoulders and tables and flung open the door, the cold air hitting his face, making his eyes water. A taxicab sped by on the street and Nick thought about chasing after it. It would feel good to run, to suck in the freezing air and just run.