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WITH MALICE TOWARDS NONE: SIX STORIES AND A NOVELLA

Burke Nixon

Thesis, Master of Fine Arts, Creative Writing

Department of English, University of Mississippi

August 2011

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## WITH MALICE TOWARDS NONE: SIX STORIES AND A NOVELLA

Burke Nixon

ABSTRACT: A fiction collection consisting of six short stories followed by a novella. The pieces attempt to be comic, but also—with debatable success—to be more than just comic. As the title suggests, one of the collection’s thematic concerns is mercy and its absence. Most of the pieces are set in Texas; characters in the collection include a female student in an absurdly incompetent public high school, a parking cop, the best friend of a stand-up comedian, an Abilene man whose life goal is to be struck by lightning, and an unselfconscious grandfather character, who bookends the beginning and end of the collection. “Fayette,” the first story in the collection, appeared originally in the *Austin Chronicle*. All of the stories were submitted and revised in fiction workshops at Ole Miss, under the tutelage of Tom Franklin, Jack Pendarvis, John Brandon and the great and sorely missed Barry Hannah.

Dedicated to Barry Hannah, who once told his graduate students that he wished he could go to Arkansas and burn his MFA thesis

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## Fayette

When we turned onto Highway 71, my grandfather said, “Eighty percent of feeling good is looking good. I should be a motivational speaker. What are you doing about your nose hairs? You need to clip your nose hairs.”

I said, “I can't help this.”

“You *can* help it. You need a trimmer. Your grandmother used to trim my nose hairs every morning.”

“Yours are pretty long too. That one is curling.”

“Did you not just hear what I said?”

“Yes.”

In a town just before La Grange we stopped to get nose hair clippers or tweezers, against my protests. There was a very nice gas station that also sold scrapbooks and then next to it there was a small, run-down gas station and my grandfather insisted on the latter, thinking that the prices would be lower there. When we walked into the small store connected to the gas station, there was a table of hunting knives right inside the door with a sign that said IT'S SUMMERTIME YOU GOTTA HAVE A KNIFE. It is true that my grandfather later had a knife on his person. The knife was purchased from this display. He never used the knife at any point.

While my grandfather was picking out the knife, I was looking at a picture of a beautiful girl standing next to a horse. This glamour-shot was taped to the counter next to the cash register and beside it were two black and white pictures of men with beards. Taped above all these photographs was a note that said DO NOT ACCEPT CHECKS FROM THESE FELONS.

My grandfather came to the register with the knife and said, "You carry tweezers?"

The man said, "No sir."

"What about nose hair trimmers? They're for my grandson."

"We have little scissors."

"That's fine."

I said, "That girl wrote a bad check?"

"She's running for county fair queen. These two wrote bad checks," the man said.

"You should move that picture so nobody thinks she wrote a bad check," I said.

"It's fine where it is," the man said.

"Did you hear him? Move that picture," my grandfather said.

Then my grandfather tore the picture off the counter himself and tried to stick it to the front of the register, but it fell off. He picked it up off the ground and put it in his pocket. The man behind the register stared at him. Then the man rang up the knife and the little scissors. My grandfather paid and neither one of them said anything and then we left.

In the car again, my grandfather pulled out the picture of the girl and looked at it



while I drove. He held it up for me to see. "Nice set of wheels," he said.

"Yes."

"You know what I'm talking about? I'm talking about legs. I used to stare at your grandmother's legs for hours. Your grandmother never had to wear pantyhose a day in her life."

I tried to look over at the picture as often as I could, but it was difficult with the highway driving. I kept driving onto the grooves in the shoulder, which made a disconcerting noise.

The girl in the picture had hair that put me in mind of a certain shampoo commercial that I sometimes taped and replayed when I was at home. I should also mention that the girl in the picture had an unusually large chin.

"I may introduce you," my grandfather said.

"Who, the girl? You don't know her."

"I'll *get* to know her."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

The prospect of this introduction made me uneasy and short of breath. I told my grandfather that the fair probably wasn't even going on at this time. He said he saw a billboard that said otherwise. He instructed me to drive directly to the fair. There were signs every few miles that pointed the way.

In the parking lot of the fair my grandfather insisted on trimming my nose hairs with the little scissors, which was a terrible experience. We sat in the car and he snipped, getting some of the tiny hairs on the seats. A few people walked by and looked inside the

car at us.

When we got inside the fairgrounds my grandfather inquired with a young man who was part of the FFA program and he told us that the candidates for fair queen were not there during the day in any official capacity, although they might be walking around. He said that the fair queen would be named that night and that all the girls who were running for queen would be present. My grandfather thanked the young man and patted him on the head, an inappropriate gesture. The young man left quickly, fixing his hair as he went.

We walked around the grounds looking for the girl. We bought funnel cake and various other food items and after each purchase my grandfather showed the picture of the girl to the person who was selling the food. After that he began showing her picture to girls at the fair he thought might be around her age, though he told me in passing that the age of a female is hard to guess and that he'd been wrong many times in the past and that it had cost him a great deal. When he asked the various girls if they had seen her they all said no. Each time he asked I stood a few feet away and pretended to be looking for someone and this seemed to work because they didn't notice me. We walked for an hour and we didn't see the girl from the picture and I was secretly relieved.

My grandfather suggested that we might get a better vantage from the Ferris wheel and I consented. We had to buy some tickets from a booth and then we got in the line, which was short, and waited for our turn. Most of the other patrons of the Ferris wheel appeared to be very young couples.

We got on the Ferris wheel and lowered the bar and began to ride. "I wish you would've brought my binoculars," my grandfather said. "That was an oversight."

“I didn't know we'd need them. You didn't tell me.”

“I forgive you.”

“I don't need you to forgive me.”

“That her? Six o'clock?”

“No.”

I had answered without looking, but then I leaned over and saw that it was her, standing near a concession stand and wearing a sash. From this distance she looked perfect. Her chin was hardly noticeable. A feeling came over me like when I would breathe in freshly cut grass.

I said, “I don't think that's her.”

“That most certainly is her. Damn.”

We had to crane our necks to see her now.

“Ask them to let us down,” my grandfather said.

“What?”

At this point he began to look down and yell at the man who was operating the Ferris wheel. The man looked up and then stopped the Ferris wheel, leaving us suspended about three quarters of the way up. My grandfather told the man to let us down. He told me to keep an eye on the girl. When the man ignored him, my grandfather began to throw pennies at him. The man watched the pennies hit the ground and then he began to pick the pennies up and put them in his pockets.

“Do you hear me? Let us down, you son of a bitch. Those are my coins,” my grandfather said.

“Is it an emergency? Are you dying?” the man said.

“No,” I said.

“Then I can't help you. The Ferris wheel doesn't revolve around you two.” A small crowd of onlookers had gathered beside the Ferris wheel.

“It *is* an emergency,” my grandfather said.

The man turned the Ferris wheel back on and we waited to see if it would stop when we got to the bottom. It stopped and my grandfather immediately lifted the bar and walked off, without mentioning the coins or anything else to the man. He looked back and yelled at me to hurry. He had the picture out and he was holding it in front of him.

When he saw that she was no longer where we'd spotted her, my grandfather consulted the picture again and then began to shout the girl's name. Her name was Lori Joseph.

I said, “What are you doing? This is bad.”

“It's fine,” he said.

He continued to shout her name. After a few more times, he quit. We went inside the covered area where the livestock show was being held. This was also adjacent to the arena where the ceremony for fair queen was to take place. The arena was empty at that time.

We walked up and down the rows of students with their animals. I kept my head down. The smell of manure and hay had something of a calming effect on my nerves. At the rear entrance of the covered area, my grandfather approached a woman in a booth.

“I'm looking for someone. Where do they make announcements?”

“We can do that,” the woman said. “No problem at all. Who is it you're looking

for, sir?"

"Lori Joseph."

"We know Lori," the woman said. "She's real sweet. Is she your granddaughter?"

"She's sweet," my grandfather said to me. "Did you hear that?"

"You must be very proud," the lady said.

"My wife was the sweetest woman I ever knew."

"That touches my heart. Let me make that announcement for you."

The woman made an announcement over the loudspeakers: "Lori Joseph, please come to the information booth under the tent. Your grandfather is waiting for you." She repeated the announcement twice. My hands were shaking in my pockets and I believe that this was visible through my pants.

When Lori Joseph showed up, she looked very tan.

"Both of my grandfathers are dead," she said.

"I'm sorry for your loss," my grandfather said.

"Do I know you?"

"I myself lost my wife two years ago."

The woman from the booth said, "Sir, you told me that you were her grandfather. Lori, do you not know this man?"

"No," Lori said.

I had a sick feeling in my stomach.

"I want to introduce you to my grandson," said my grandfather.

"This is weird," Lori said.

I said, "I know." I smiled shyly.

"He's twenty two years old," said my grandfather.

The lady from the booth said, "I'm going to have to ask the two of you to leave. This is not appropriate. Do I need to call security?" It was unclear whether this question was directed to Lori or my grandfather.

"We just wanted to say hello," my grandfather said.

"Well, now you have."

"There's nothing illegal about saying hello to a pretty young lady at a livestock show. It's called the Constitution."

"Sir, I really don't want to call security. Frankly, I feel sorry for the two of you."

"I know, right?" said Lori Joseph.

We left the tent after that.

It was then that my grandfather mentioned something about kidnapping. I believe that he was merely brainstorming. He talked about using cotton candy to hide his hunting knife and I told him that I thought that was a terrible idea.

We went to the arena, where there was now some kind of jazz band performance going on. We sat in the bleachers.

"We should go," I said.

"We could have that woman make another announcement that Lori Joseph needs to meet somebody in the parking lot by the gray Maxima."

"No."

"That woman wouldn't do it."

“Let's go.”

“Let's think about this for a minute.”

“We need to go.”

“I wanna see if she wins.”

“It's not for another two hours.”

I got up to go and my grandfather followed. We went outside and headed towards the exit, taking a slightly longer route to avoid the Ferris wheel. We walked along the outskirts of the fair and then we came across another girl with a sash on, the first we'd seen besides Lori Joseph. The girl was lying on the grass with her palms on the ground like she was about to do a push-up. She was facing our direction. She had dark hair and her face had a sleepy look to it. Her chin was perfectly proportionate to the rest of her face. She turned red when she saw us approaching.

My grandfather spoke to her. “You okay, young lady?”

“I'm fine,” she said, looking away.

“You want my grandson to help you up? This is him right here.”

“Hello,” she said, turning towards us again. “No.”

“Should we wait here to make sure that you get up okay?”

“No thank you.”

“You sure?”

“I'm just doing something, okay?”

“Suit yourself,” my grandfather said, starting to walk away.

“What're you doing?” I asked. I had cotton mouth.

“Sucking water out of the sprinkler system. I used to do this when I was

younger.”

“I used to do that,” I said.

“You serious?” my grandfather said. He looked disappointed in me.

“Yes,” I said.

“You should be getting ready for the ceremony, young lady,” my grandfather said.

“I don't care about that crap,” she said.

After that, I told her my name. We spoke for at least a quarter of an hour and she remained on the ground next to the sprinkler during that time. My grandfather didn't say another word until the very end, when he invited her to come with us to San Marcos to bring my Aunt Joyce some light bulbs, which had been the original intention of our trip. It's true that even then I knew that we would run into legal difficulties, but it's also true that I felt I would be able to explain everything. From her position on the ground, I was sure that she was looking directly into my nostrils, but I felt confident that there was nothing distracting to see there.



## Reyna

First period, the announcements:

Ladies, come help the girls' track team defend their third place finish in district...

There will be a boys' JV soccer game at Delmar tonight at...

I was born in Ontario, Canada in 1908. I invented a lubricating cup so that oil would never escape the...

This concludes this morning's announcements.

Her biology teacher, Mr. Plattenberg, an old man whose skin hung off his face like a turkey's, rolled the TV towards the center of the room and pressed play on the VCR. He was showing the class a tape of his knee surgery.

At her desk Reyna thought about how she'd never hear the dumb announcements again. The kids who did the announcements could hardly read. She imagined herself in the passenger seat of her boyfriend's car, driving past her apartment and the sign one block over that said A REQUEST TO ABANDON THIS STREET HAS BEEN RECEIVED BY THE CITY, past the Laundromat and the tire repair place and the track where the Chinese ladies walk, down the street with the tall light poles at angles from being hit by cars, driving the highway for hours, crossing the border. Imagined herself

*married*. It was weird to think this was a normal day for everyone else. The video crackled, Mr. Plattenberg's old white leg filling the screen. She made a pillow with her arms and closed her eyes. Mr. Plattenberg didn't say anything.

She couldn't fall asleep, though, because Amber Carruthers, who was eighteen and still a sophomore, kept whispering at Randy Linares, the boy who sat next to her.

Virgin. Hey, boy.

Randy was in tenth too, but he looked like he was eight years old. People made fun of him because of that and because he always talked about calculators and because in this class he sat under a poster titled MALE REPRODUCTIVE ORGANS.

Virgin!

Reyna opened her eyes and saw Randy pretending not to hear. He stared at the TV and took notes on the surgery.

Virgin, look over here.

She saw a big wad of paper hit Randy in the shoulder, but he kept writing and looking at the TV. Then she heard Amber ask someone if she could borrow another piece of paper and then the crumpling sound. It hit Randy in the nose and fell on top of his notebook, but he still acted like he didn't see.

Hey, boy.

Reyna lifted her head up. Mr. Plattenberg sat at his computer, typing loudly. Every few seconds he made noises like his throat was filled with snot. She turned around and stared at Amber.

What? Amber said.

Reyna shook her head, but didn't say anything.

Don't look at me, girl.

Reyna put her head back down, closed her eyes, and heard Amber ask someone if she could borrow a pencil. She opened her eyes and thought about turning around but didn't and then she saw the pencil fly past and hit Randy somewhere around the eye and Randy started saying, Ahhhhh, but not yelling. He leaned down towards his desk and held his eye and rocked back and forth. His eye was watering or he was crying.

Mr. Plattenberg looked up and said, Get out.

Everyone looked at Amber, who made an innocent face. Randy was still saying, Ahhhhh, but he'd stopped crying.

Out!

Randy looked up with his one hand covering his eye and the other pointed at his own face. Mr. Plattenberg said, Yes, you! and stood up, like he might force Randy out of the room himself. Randy got up and walked out, head down. Dropping back into his chair, Mr. Plattenberg cleared his throat for a long time, and kept typing.

The surgery lasted a while longer and then the screen went blue and stayed that way for the last five minutes of class, until the bell rang. Reyna grabbed Randy's backpack and his notebook and stared at Amber as she walked out.

In the hall between classes she looked for him but he wasn't out there. Probably he'd gone straight to the principal's office to turn himself in, if he even knew where it was, or maybe he went to the nurse about his eye. Maybe he'd gone to the office and called his mom to come pick him up and enroll him at another school. A request to

abandon this street has been received by the city. She decided not to look. They had the same World History class. She could give it to him then.

Second period was Geometry, Mr. Guerrero, and for the entire period he gave them notes on the overhead about quadrilaterals. It was nice sitting in the dark with the overhead blowing air, but Mr. Guerrero asked too many questions, so she had to pay attention. Sometimes he asked two people in a row the same question, even if the first person answered it right. If he asked you second and you couldn't remember or you weren't listening, he wrote your name down on a clipboard. He wore a tie with equations on it and showed them a different math cartoon on the overhead at the beginning of class each day, and none of them were funny. Her hand got tired from writing notes.

When the bell rang at the end of class, he said, Ms. Moreno, you need to come see me about make-up work. He started wiping the overhead with his hand and his hand turned purple. She walked over and asked for the assignments and he didn't look up. He said, I can't give you two weeks of assignments in two minutes, Ms. Moreno.

Okay, she said.

Where've you been?

Sick.

He looked at her for the first time.

*I was.* For a second she really believed herself.

Come by at lunch if you want your work, he said, staring at the overhead again.

The bookshelves in her World History class contained old remaindered books from the school library. Whenever Mrs. Jeffers-Jackson was late or gone, which was a

lot, she'd leave a note on the board instructing the sub to have each student pick a book from the shelves and write a report. Today she was here, but she made them do reports anyway, while she stood in front of the class and talked into her earpiece.

All the books had red stamps on the side that said WITHDRAWN. Reyna's assigned seat was beside one of the bookshelves and in class sometimes she would stare at the titles. The books closest to her were: *The Heathen Chinees* by Robert McClellan, *The Middle East Today* by Don Peretz, *Van People: The Great American Rainbow Boogie* by Douglas Kent Hall, *Incest Behavior* by S. Kirson Weinberg, *Open Marriage: A New Lifestyle for Couples* by Nena O'Neill and George O'Neill, and *Super Wealth* by Linda Blandford.

She picked up *Super Wealth* and got out a piece of paper. Randy wasn't here. Maybe he really was hurt. Looking at Mrs. Jeffers-Jackson, Reyna raised her hand.

Can I take Randy's backpack to the office? He left it in my first period.

Yes indeed, said Mrs. Jeffers-Jackson.

Reyna got up with the backpack and started to walk out and Mrs. Jeffers-Jackson said, Hold on. Where do you think you're going, girl? Sit down.

Reyna looked at her and then sat down.

Sorry about that, Mrs. Jeffers-Jackson said. Reyna stood back up. Then she realized Mrs. Jeffers-Jackson was talking into her earpiece and she sat back down again.

Instead of reading her book or writing a report, she spent the rest of the period writing down the names of as many people as she could remember who'd left school, disappeared in the middle of the year: Arnold, the little white kid whose hands were always shaking, whose mom and dad both died in the same semester; Emmanuel, the

African kid who said he'd memorized the dictionary, who went back to Africa to fight in a tribal war; Christian, the slow kid who got beat up on the sidewalk by the bus stop for no reason; Terriashay, the tiny girl who always argued with Mr. Guerrero; Daniel, the big quiet boy who always wore the same shirt; Frank, the tall white kid who wore mascara and tried to fight the black kids; Jacinta, who wouldn't read aloud; Karen G., who said her grandma was the maid for George Bush; Karen S., the pretty girl who wanted to join the army; Nuvia, who worked at Subway and read little kids' books to improve her English; Safiya, the blind girl who always had bugs crawling out of her backpack; Ivan, the light-skinned boy with the lazy eye who wanted to be a rapper. Rosalio, Sheterrica, Kim, Courtney C., Courtney R., David, Debbie, Joanna, Shavawn, Amelia, Audrey, Jason, Randy, Reyna.

The last class before she escaped was English with Mr. Taylor, a class she used to have the highest grade in, until she started coming to school really tired and then stopped coming at all. Before Christmas they read part of *Othello* and she was the only one who understood it. Mr. Taylor had long hair and tattoos peeking from under his sleeves and he sweated a lot. There was writing all over his tie where someone had scribbled on it while he leaned over to help them with their work.

Randy and Amber both had this class, but Randy was still gone. Amber stared at her every time Mr. Taylor wasn't looking, but Reyna didn't care. Mr. Taylor kept talking a lot, like always, making hand gestures and walking around the room. They were about to read "The Necklace," which she'd already read twice in middle school. Mr. Taylor read

the beginning aloud, to get their attention, and asked if they could maybe relate to the girl in the story. You ever been unhappy with your life, guys? Mr. Taylor said. I know I have.

Then he told the class to read the rest on their own.

She'd taken her bag out of her locker and brought it into class and now she couldn't concentrate on the story because she kept thinking about how she was going to leave as soon as lunch started, how nervous she'd be, how she'd use the side door and cut through the student parking lot, then across the street to the Laundromat, where her boyfriend would be waiting. She thought about raising her hand and asking to go to the restroom and just leaving now, but she didn't. She still had Randy's backpack. After a while her hands began to shake, like Arnold's. She tried to take her mind off everything by reading the story and for a few minutes her hands stopped shaking and she forgot it all.

She imagined the girl in the story was herself, and she had second thoughts about leaving. Leaving could be a horrible mistake, like the one in the story. As she finished, her hands started shaking again.

Then someone came on the loudspeaker and said, Teachers, please pardon the interruption. Please pardon the interruption. At this time please release all Special Education students for the Special Education field trip. Please release *all* Special Education students at this time.

Everybody looked around. Mr. Taylor stared up at the speaker on the ceiling and shook his head. Amber turned around and faced forward.

Mr. Taylor said, Keep reading, people! Then he went to his desk, got on his computer and shook his head again. After a few seconds he walked over to the door,

opened it and, in a quiet voice that didn't sound like him, said, Amber and Lance, can I see you guys for a second? A few kids started laughing. Amber and Lance Fizer—a loud football player who sucked his thumb but never got made fun of for it—both sat in their chair without saying anything. Then Lance said, Hell no, and got up and went outside. Amber followed, smiling like she didn't care, but you could tell she did. A minute later, they came back in without looking at anybody, grabbed their stuff, and left.

Keep reading, Mr. Taylor said.

Then for a few minutes Mr. Taylor paced in front of his desk and they read and the only sound was the humming of the air-conditioner.

As they finished the story, people started shouting things out about the ending:

That was wrong.

I would *slap* that girl.

Nuh-uh. I would *strangle* her.

Which girl? The main one?

I would tie her up by her toes.

Reyna thought about raising her hand and telling everyone they had no idea what they were talking about, that it wasn't the main girl's fault at all, that it was just bad luck, but she didn't say anything.

Mr. Taylor asked the class what the theme of the story was.

Make sure your jewelry is real, someone said.

Well, Mr. Taylor said.

Reyna raised her hand and Mr. Taylor said, Yes! Reyna?

Can I take Randy's bag to the nurse's office?



Mr. Taylor frowned, then nodded, then said he wanted her opinion on the story when she came back. He wrote her a pass.

She took her bag and Randy's bag and went out into the hall and downstairs into the nurse's office, but the nurse was taking a nap on one of the beds and nobody else was in there. So she passed the front of the school, where Amber and the other special-ed kids waited for a bus, and went into the front office, thinking Randy might be sitting there now, wearing an eye-patch maybe, waiting for his mom. But he wasn't. On a chair in the front office she left his bag with a scrap piece of paper that said his name and then she walked out into the hall and out the side door, through the student parking lot and then across the street, noticing everything one last time, wishing already that she could go back.

## Behold, Ye Despisers

The man wears the outfit of a police officer but his job is only to issue parking tickets on campus. Tall and soft, twenty-four years old, he has a Larry Bird mustache and wears a black cap with earflaps for cold weather. His work doesn't satisfy him. Like everyone else, he considers himself particularly sharp. He's obsessed with history, especially military history—Napoleon, Patton, Schwarzkopf. He has a high school diploma and some community college, but stopped taking classes when his dad got sick. He walks the concrete margins of the campus and wonders why the male students are so concerned with losing their sunglasses, what percentage of the girls God intended to be blonde, what their fathers do for a living, how the boys all achieve the same puffy hair, who pays for their trucks. All day, every weekday, he watches them park and feels highly agitated, malicious even.

His taste in women leans toward spokespersons for car dealerships: blonde, chipper. Early Vanna White. He pities such women for being treated like objects, while thinking of them like objects himself. The campus parking lots bloom with early Vanna Whites. During the workday, the physical symptoms of his lust and loneliness resemble those of an asthmatic, though not a severe one. He's a virgin.

He has a boss who every morning says, “Another day, another dollar. A million days, a million dollars.” The young parking cop thinks this is the stupidest thing he’s ever heard, but never says so. He likes his boss, an extremely good-natured fat man, but detests him. Once, while the young parking cop moved his bowels in the restroom of the Campus Police Station, his boss entered the adjacent stall and began moving his own bowels, while talking on a cell phone and eating chips. Since then, the young parking cop moves his bowels in the single-stall restroom of the campus chapel, if at all.

He enjoys himself on a particular Wednesday morning by giving a ticket to an enormous jacked-up Bronco with a Greek sticker on the back that he can’t translate. The Bronco has been parked in this spot since the previous day, most likely the student attended some sort of mixer or crush party and forgot where he parked, or he’s still asleep, possibly in the fruity-scented bed of a co-ed. The words *mixer* and *crush party* have a strong, disturbing effect on the young parking cop, like combining the notions of country club and strip club. He’s never been to a strip club or a country club and is only guessing as to the smell of co-ed’s bed. If the Bronco isn’t gone by the afternoon he’ll put a boot on the wheels, although the wheels are enormous—Bigfoot wheels—and he’s not sure Parking Services has a boot for wheels of that size. Maybe his boss will allow him to let the air out of the Bronco’s tires. He would like to see the guy’s face when that happens, though he knows this isn’t the way to think.

He knows this isn’t the way to think because a few months earlier he drove his father to see a doctor at a giant hospital in another state and after the appointment, trying to be positive, they stopped at a chicken finger place and on the wall at the chicken finger place they saw a poster called Chuck’s Code of Ethics. It featured Chuck Norris and his

rules to live by, and even though the parking cop knew what his father didn't—that Chuck Norris was a source of humor for many young people—one of the codes stuck with him: *I will give so much time to the improvement of myself that I will have no time to criticize others*. This one rule took him aback. And now for some reason he feels that his father's recovery will be linked to his ability to follow that code.

In his attempt at self-improvement he brings books to campus, reading during his breaks. Self-help books, war books. But often he finds himself criticizing the writers of the self-help books and using the war books to figure out ways to vanquish certain enemies, of which he has none, except in his head. He also reads the Bible, half the time using the text to condemn himself, the other half using it to condemn others. He once overheard his boss tell someone, "There's a tussle going on down there in his heart..." and though his boss was speaking about an old Labrador Retriever, the parking cop feels there's a tussle going on down in his *own* heart whenever he walks on campus. If his boss does tell him to let the air out of the Bronco's tires, the parking cop will make a sincere effort not to enjoy it.

After the Bronco, he passes the time by giving tickets to as many illegally parked BMWs as he can find. There are many BMWs, but almost all of them are legal, unfortunately. He finds two in the short-term lot, waits exactly thirty minutes, and then writes them tickets. He finds one in a faculty lot without a faculty sticker and one in a student lot with no sticker at all, and gives tickets to both. All of these BMWs are white. The young parking cop imagines the girls who drive these cars, certain that they are girls and that they are beautiful. Each time he sees a white BMW, his mouth waters, a reaction he tries to ignore.

In the faculty lot by the fountain a few minutes before his break he observes a young man in a white dress shirt and red pants speaking loudly over the phone about Valentine's Day, which the parking cop remembers is today. The young man has the look of a chubby but successful golfer. The red pants make the parking cop angrier than anything he's seen all day, and he tries unsuccessfully to think of Chuck's code. The pants have little symbols on them, but the symbols appear to be unrelated to Valentine's Day. The young man is standing next to a legally parked Buick LaSabre. The parking cop steps closer to the Buick, so as to eavesdrop more effectively and more boldly.

"How am I supposed to pay for anything then, mom?" the kid says. "No, I *didn't*. That's not even true. I can't talk to you right now. Seriously. Bye."

The parking cop moves directly in front of him, staring at his red pants. The kid stares back.

"Is this your LaSabre?" says the parking cop.

"No."

"Where are you parked, sir?"

"What?"

"Answer the question, please."

The young man stares at him, annoyed and amused.

The parking cop pulls out his parking ticket computer, which resembles the bulky control panel of a remote-control car. "You're what, six feet?" he says to the kid, looking down at the tiny screen.

The kid says, "F this," using the letter and not the word, and then walks off.

The parking cop considers following the kid, but knows he has no authority, so he

merely stands there, pretending to type something into his computer, hoping to regain some dignity.

Two enormous men walk by, sweatsuited athletes clutching little blue notebooks. They look as if they've been built on a different scale than the rest of humankind. The parking cop overhears only one snippet of their conversation:

“Who started Shay’s Rebellion?”

“Shays, fool!”

*Idiots!* the parking cop thinks, though he himself can't recall Shay's first name, nor the specifics of the rebellion, nor say for certain if it occurred during the Civil or Revolutionary War. He feels uneducated and guilty. Sometimes he dreams of walking into the history building and solving an incredibly difficult history question that's been left out on a blackboard, but today he can't even remember Shay's Rebellion. He wants to ask the one athlete about it, but they've hustled out of earshot.

A disabled albino kid walks by, his legs turned inward on themselves, his face a smile that looks like a grimace or grimace that looks like a smile, his progress painful to watch. Saddening. The parking cop stares at a spot to the right of the disabled albino kid, as if something near the kid, but not the kid himself, has caught his attention. He considers befriending him somehow. He thinks briefly of his father, who only a few years ago played softball four times a week and now moves around the house with a walker. The parking cop turns around, looks at the lot, and doesn't turn back until he knows the disabled albino kid is out of view.

During his break the parking cop eats without pleasure a bagged lunch of his own preparing on a bench near the campus coffee shop. Eavesdropping on the patio tables, he

hears a small girl in a fleece say, “It’s not like I want her to apologize, I just want her to say she’s sorry.”

The girl’s tan friend nods and squints her eyes like she understands.

*Fools!* the parking cop thinks.

The tan, squinting girl has brown hair but wears black tights and furry boots like all the others. The parking cop imagines touching her tights, imagines the removal of the tights. He imagines riding in her BMW. He imagines touching her tights again and thinks briefly of pears.

*Turn away from thy youthful lusts*, the parking cop tells himself, quoting the Apostle Paul, but it doesn’t help, and Chuck’s Code of Ethics has no codes specifically about lust.

The tan, squinting girl pats her friend on the shoulder, grabs her bag, and rises to leave. The young parking cop looks in the other direction, throws away the remaining half of his lunch, and follows her.

The girl carries her coffee in one hand and her bag over her shoulder. Her tights, disappointingly, make no sound, or the parking cop is too far away to hear it, though he’s relatively close. Her gait is that of a woman who doesn’t realize she’s being followed.

The young parking cop falls back some, feeling grimy and strange.

She gets on her cell phone, but the parking cop can’t hear this either. They walk past three buildings, past the library, past the fountain, past the faculty lot and into the student parking lot, the parking cop staring at her tights the whole way, but falling farther behind.

He very much hopes that she is illegally parked. He imagines graciously waiving

her fine, talking about parking restrictions, flirting. He's unaccustomed to flirting, but has flirted before, in his way, when circumstances provided an obvious and necessary topic of conversation.

Walking the line of cars, she places her phone in her bag and jingles her keys. The young parking cop walks along the opposite row of cars, holding his parking ticket computer now in an official manner, pretending not to watch. Five spots ahead of her sits a white BMW, gleaming in the winter sun.

She nears the BMW and the parking cop waits for it, but she keeps going. Near the end of the row, she slows and stops in front of a Camry and the parking cop comes up parallel to her, on the other side. Her cell phone rings and she says, "Hey..." in a familiar manner. The parking cop wishes he were the caller, wishes she would address him in a familiar manner, wishes he could leave her routine messages that begin, "It's me..." She holds the phone between her ear and shoulder and opens her car door. The parking cop moves across the lot in a quick but neutral manner and pretends to check the parking sticker on the adjacent car. Her car door slams shut.

He checks her parking sticker now: valid until June. The engine cranks on. His lungs seem to rise into his throat, as on certain amusement park rides. The reverse lights go on and he taps her window with his palm. The girl jumps and emits a high yelp audible from outside the car. The parking cop continues to stand by the window, spooked now himself, holding his parking ticket computer almost at eye level to ensure its visibility. With his other hand he waves and smiles and makes the outdated universal motion for her to roll down her window.

From this distance the parking cop can really see the girl's face now, a kind face



tanned a brownish shade of orange, and caked with makeup. So caked, in fact, that when she moves her head to roll down the window he expects some to fall off, as with a powdered doughnut. He thinks of the tremendous grasping effort this girl must make each day with her face. He feels sad for her now, and slightly repulsed.

After the window comes down she stares at him with a look that says, *Is there a problem?* and in this moment he determines that not only is he still attracted to her, but that given the right opportunity he will tell her that she doesn't *need* that make-up, that she's beautiful without it, probably.

"Just letting you know that your parking sticker needs to be renewed at some point," he says, nodding like a horse.

"Pardon?"

"You need to renew your parking sticker when you get a chance." He smiles politely, his mustache straightening. "Gentle reminder."

"I thought it expired at the end of the semester?" she says.

"Yes," he says.

"It's February."

"True," he says. The engine makes a chugging sound, renewing itself. "Well, actually, speaking of February..."

A black Tahoe behind him honks twice, wanting the girl's spot. The parking cop glances over, but the presence of the Tahoe barely registers.

"This may seem kind of out of nowhere," he says, "since we've just met, but..."

The girl squints, but not in an understanding way. The Tahoe holds the horn down longer this time.

The parking cop says, “I look at your face and I wonder...if you have any Valentine’s Day plans?”

For a moment the girl appears to be confused, her mouth opening slightly, and then she looks straight ahead and rolls the window up. He stands there as she dials a number on her phone, speaks, looks over at him, looks straight ahead again, continues to speak, laughs, puts the car in reverse, backs out very quickly, and hits the parking cop with her side mirror on the way out. The parking cop goes down without resistance, like a quarterback taking a hit to prevent injury. He falls to his left, next to other parked car, and bangs his knee directly on the concrete. The Tahoe pulls into the spot while he’s still on the ground. The young parking cop steps out from in between the two vehicles, wiping the grit off his leg, not yet feeling his knee.

From the Tahoe emerges the young man with the red pants.

The kid in the red pants looks at the parking cop, shakes his head, slams the door, and says, “I got a *test*, dick.” Then he runs off toward campus, backpack bouncing.

The Camry is long gone, the girl probably still laughing at him, calling everyone she knows. He believes his kneecap has shattered. He checks the sticker on the Tahoe and then limps to the Engineering Building, where he covers a paper towel with soap from the dispenser and then upon returning to the lot, uses the soapy paper towel to remove the kid’s parking sticker.

Students walk by, male and female, not a single one looking at him.

When the sticker is completely removed he walks back to Parking Services, still favoring his knee, and picks up a toolbox and a boot. He puts the boot on the front driver’s side tire and prints out a parking ticket for the windshield, and then two

additional tickets, as if the Tahoe has been there some time.

On the way to the jacked-up Bronco, the tires of which he plans to puncture, he sees a pick-up truck with a seven-foot tall antenna. Under the circumstances this antenna angers him nearly as much as the red pants. He leans over the bed of the truck, trying to remove the antenna, but he can't reach. Putting all the weight on his good leg, he climbs over the side, takes a pair of wire clippers from his toolbox, and cuts the antenna off. He continues on, holding the antenna in his hand, alternately dragging it along the ground and holding it up in the air, a totem. The students notice him now with the antenna.

He slaps the antenna against the pavement like a whip. Students scatter, none laughing. The parking cop feels he has no control of his own actions.

Occupying the jacked-up Bronco's spot now is a Kia with vanity plates that say LIL PATT. The parking cop looks in all directions, hoping to catch the Bronco escaping. He sees no Bronco, but in the distance he sees the disabled albino kid. Walking alongside him is a young man in red pants. The kid in red pants is speaking to him and appears to be walking extra slow, but in a natural fashion. Suddenly the parking cop's unsure if this is the second kid in red pants he's seen today, or the third. He's unsure if the kid in red pants with the Tahoe is the same kid who spoke rudely to his mother over the phone, and he's unsure if either of these is the kid who's walking and talking right now with the albino kid. And then the young parking cop thinks of Chuck's codes and wonders what his father would think if he saw him holding this giant antenna, and how his father's health might be affected if he lost this job, and then he limps away to try to repair the damage, and remove the boot, and ask for mercy.

## The Stand-up Comedian's Wife

X is in love with the Stand-up Comedian's wife. The Stand-up Comedian is successful, if not critically acclaimed. He's the co-star of a scripted show on the most watched network on television. X is his best friend, has been since college.

The Stand-up Comedian and his wife have children, girls, age eight and ten. Every Christmas the Stand-up Comedian's wife buys herself gifts, wraps them, attaches a card, and places them under the fake tree. The cards say the gifts are from her husband. X knows because she told him.

"Women have maladies," the Stand-up Comedian tells X, to excuse anything.

The Stand-up Comedian, off stage, often stutters. When he appears on talk shows, twitching slightly, his anecdotes fall flat, and people watching at home remark to each other about how *nervous* he seemed, how strange he was. Unless he's speaking to his wife or X, he prefers his words to have been written ahead of time. He and X compare this practice to football coaches who script the first few possessions of each game.

"Did that go well?" the Stand-up Comedian will ask them after a taping. "I think it went well."

X takes cabs everywhere. Before he took cabs, he used to have to breathe into a machine every few minutes to keep his car going, as a result of his second DUI. X and the Stand-up Comedian tried to subvert the machine once, blowing into balloons and releasing the air from the balloons when they got back into the car drunk, which didn't work. Worse than blowing into the machine during dates, which happened, was blowing into the machine while idling in a drive-through, the person at the window staring curiously at X.

The Stand-up Comedian and X are Libertarians, unusual for Los Angeles.

Because the Stand-up Comedian doesn't exercise, his wife runs with X. They jog in the quiet and perfectly warm weather of her neighborhood. They are all from Texas originally. When he's running, X feels guilty, like he doesn't deserve California.

If X is drunk and doesn't feel like taking a cab, he'll sleep in one of their guest rooms—*his* room, the family calls it—and in the morning he'll watch cartoons with the girls, who call him Uncle. The Stand-up Comedian's wife will walk into the room wearing only a towel, her hair wet, and rub his head as if he were a little boy.

The Stand-up Comedian understands the *form* of humor, but his material is impersonal. Before the scripted show on the network, the Stand-up Comedian's comedy routines consisted mostly of fictional jokes about his wife, told in a vague approximation of the style of Rodney Dangerfield. Many people paid to see him perform. In the fifth grade, the Stand-up Comedian asked the assistant principal if he could put on a routine for the whole school, in the style of Carson's *Tonight Show*. On the day of the show, scared of the performance bombing, he checked out an old joke book from the tiny school library and scrapped all his original material, used only the material from the book. He

secretly considers this a key moment in his life. The Stand-up Comedian's wife told X this also.

For a living, X reads movie scripts—the Stand-up Comedian pulled some strings—and even the good ones are bad. At work X often uses the word *arc*. He has come to despise this word.

The Stand-up Comedian is distracted, but faithful.

If he's been traveling, the Stand-up Comedian will, upon his return, leave his suitcases in the middle of the hallway and immediately turn on the television. His wife will try to ask him about his trip and he will say, "Em-hmm," without turning away from the screen, his eyes dilated. The Stand-up Comedian does not intend for his wife to take his suitcases and wash the clothes from his trip, but this is what happens. The Stand-up Comedian's wife is surprised at how angry the suitcases make her.

"Should I tell them to change my picture on the cover?" the Stand-up Comedian asks them. "Seriously, should I?"

The Stand-up Comedian knows what kind of house his wife always wanted and now they live in such a house. They have a swimming pool with a fountain and high-fidelity speakers disguised as rocks. They have a maid who comes three times a week and reticent men who do the lawn. The Stand-up Comedian's wife does the cooking, the finances, and anything related to the children. Every weekday, she volunteers at a non-profit organization for the protection of the environment. The running is when she tells X everything.

The Stand-up Comedian rarely acknowledges the possibility of sadness. When his wife cries, he asks her irrelevant questions. *Hey, guess how much this bottle of wine was.* He is an optimist, the real deal.

X feels that there are interesting things happening in Los Angeles, events of which he should be aware but isn't. He feels he should take more opportunities. He felt the same in Texas.

Sitting on the couch one evening, watching the Stand-up Comedian's show, X makes brief eye contact with the Stand-up Comedian's wife. After the episode, the Stand-up Comedian's wife offers gentle suggestions about how the show might be improved. The Stand-up Comedian takes no offense because he's not listening.

After another run, X and the Stand-up Comedian's wife take a platonic swim. The Stand-up Comedian's wife stands near the deeper end, water up to her neck, speaking calmly. Her eyes seem bluer than under normal circumstances. Afterwards, X takes a cab home and doesn't come over to the Stand-up Comedian's house for two weeks, claiming he's sick, which is true.

The Stand-up Comedian's wife is sick too, but with an actual ailment. She has a cyst, non-cancerous but requiring surgery and one night's stay in the hospital. A friend from the environmental non-profit brings the kids to see her before and after the surgery, which is successful. The Stand-up Comedian doesn't make it to the hospital, has work obligations, not to mention a fear of hospitals. X misses everything.

When she recovers, the Stand-up Comedian's wife talks to her husband about marriage counseling. His initial reaction is surprise. He denies the need for counseling. Days later, he tells her that it might actually be a good idea, and that she should report

back to him after each session. The Stand-up Comedian's wife is shocked, raises her voice at him, *yells* at him, but starts attending marriage counseling by herself. She and X resume their running, discussing each counseling session in detail.

Breathing hard and making sympathetic noises, X wonders if he's a hypocrite.

In the kitchen after a run, the Stand-up Comedian's wife tells him that the counselor has suggested a trial separation. X feels this is a strange move for a marriage counselor. He defends the Stand-up Comedian, though the defense is more theoretical than truly felt. Give him one more chance, we all have our flaws, etc. Then X tells the Stand-up Comedian's wife that it's at least forty percent her fault for allowing his behavior, for buying and wrapping her own gifts, for attending couples counseling alone, for letting him gamble in Vegas with X on their wedding anniversary. Without speaking, the Stand-up Comedian's wife opens the back door and waits for X to leave.

X doesn't visit the house for two more weeks, but meets the Stand-up Comedian at a restaurant.

"I don't think she understands my side," the Stand-up Comedian says.

"What *is* your side?" X says.

X calls the Stand-up Comedian's wife to apologize for defending the Stand-up Comedian. She has moved into the guest bedroom, she tells him, not referring to it as his room. Still, his spare clothes remain in the drawers and closet. X doesn't know what to think of this.

The Stand-up Comedian needs equilibrium, hates conflict. Known for his energy, he begins falling asleep during key moments in his working life. He can no longer enjoy simple things, he tells X. Sitting in his backyard suddenly seem complicated. When



multiple apologies fail to improve his situation, the Stand-up Comedian buys his wife a gift, for the first time in years. The gift is jewelry and her reaction is unexpected: she becomes angrier. When this happens, the Stand-up Comedian decides that too much is being expected of him and he gives up.

When taping ends for the season, the Stand-up Comedian debuts new material at a club. X attends. The Stand-up Comedian's wife attends. They share a small table in the back and stage left, not speaking, legs touching. The new material still depicts the Stand-up Comedian's marriage, but the material is harsher, sadder, and taken directly from life. He does an extended bit about his wife going to marriage counseling alone, for instance. Unlike previous shows, X doesn't see silhouettes shaking from laughter. The audience is quieter but not displeased. X hazards a look at the Stand-up Comedian's wife. She nods, pained. When the show is over, the Stand-up Comedian doesn't ask them how he did.

## The Spirit of Liberty

Sitting in holiday traffic on I-45, behind an eighteen-wheeler with FISH on the back and below a billboard for a strip club in which even the advertised woman was ugly, Rossler stared at his ringing cell phone. “I bet she wants something,” he said, looking over at his wife. “She only calls when she wants something. I *hope* she wants something.”

“Answer the phone, bud,” said Grace, looking up at the billboard.

He answered as if he hadn’t just read his sister’s name on the screen: “Hello?”

“We’re here,” his sister said. “The water’s off and everything.”

“Well, turn it on,” he wanted to say. Instead he said, “We?”

“Me and Royce.”

“Oh, I didn’t know if he was coming.”

They inched forward, the eighteen-wheeler blowing exhaust into their lungs.

“Why wouldn’t he?”

“I just wasn’t sure.”

“Hey, listen...” Rossler pointed at the phone and nodded at Grace, who looked over at him and blinked. “The reason I was calling... Can me and Royce take the guest bedroom?”

“You think Mom and Dad’ll let you?”

“We’re adults.”

“Technically.”

“Huh?”

“You guys take the guest room, sure. We’ll sleep on the couch or something. No problem at all.”

When he got off the phone, Rossler turned to Grace, already angry that his sister had caused him to be generous, and said, “Royce’s there.”

“I heard.”

“I’m gonna say something to her.”

“For the record, I don’t think you should.”

“Isn’t it my *obligation*, as her brother? My brotherly obligation? I think so.”

“Impossible to change someone’s mind. I’m pretty sure you know that.”

“I’m gonna say something.”

Along the seawall, their windows rolled down, they smelled salt and witnessed the same brown, slow, kelpy water that had been Rossler’s first experience with the ocean as a kid. The people swimming or carrying floats or throwing balls all wore expressions that said they were taking what they could get. An older couple rode briefly alongside them on a tandem bicycle, talking into their respective cell phones.

Most of the boardwalks and fishing piers were still damaged from the hurricane, missing large parts of their original structures, including one small pier with a pick-up truck stuck on top of it, unconnected to the land. People posed for photos with the truck in the background. Rossler kept taking quick looks as he drove. Grace stuck her head out the window and observed the other side.

As they got closer to his parents' place, he started tapping the lock button on the door, the locks rising and dropping, all four doors making a gun-pumping noise, until Grace told him to stop.

"Caaaalm," she said, placing one palm on the back of his head.

"Why am I nervous going to my own family's house?" said Rossler.

"Rhetorical question?"

"Yes."

They passed a sailboat on its side in a field, next to some cows.

"Those cows want to sail, man," said Grace, nodding.

"*Royce* should be nervous," Rossler said. He tried to concentrate on improving himself.

At the Valero station on the bay side, they pulled into his parents' neighborhood. Some of the houses were missing staircases or had roof problems and a few looked totaled, but most appeared to have been fixed already, or spared. Overall, the lack of damage disappointed Rossler, though he told Grace and himself otherwise.

"How long has it been?" Grace said, standing out on the upstairs deck. "Our wedding? Has it been that long?"

“I think so,” Maddy, Rossler’s sister, said.

“I really *enjoyed* your wedding, by the way,” said Pip, looking at all of them. “It wasn’t my taste at all, but I really enjoyed it.”

“Thank you,” Rossler said, looking at his wife.

Lex, real name Alex, a native of Fort Worth, spoke now in a slight British accent. Rossler tried again to think of ways to improve himself, but his mind was blank.

“You look like you’ve lost a little weight, Pip,” Grace said.

“Indeed,” Pip said, smiling.

“Nice,” said Rossler.

Grace mock-punched Pip in the stomach.

Rossler thought about asking Pip if his jeans were made for men or women, though in truth he thought tight pants looked cool and wished he could wear them himself without looking ridiculous. Still, he wanted to ask.

“We’re vegan now,” said Pip, softly.

Maddy nodded, as if she’d only just heard the news herself.

“Nice,” Rossler said.

Below, in the bay, a fish jumped above the surface twice, making small splashes.

“Well, off and on,” said Maddy.

“Not anymore,” said Pip, looking at her.

Rossler rubbed his face, trying to think of something neutral to say, and heard the gravelly sound of a car pulling into the driveway. They went downstairs to unload the truck, Pip hanging back a little, Rossler noticed, probably so he wouldn’t have to carry anything. His dad shut off the truck and stepped out, shaking hands and giving hugs,

wearing a shirt that said it was five o'clock somewhere and sweatpants with Rossler and his sister's handprints all over them in fingerpaints, a father's day gift from a long time ago. Rossler's mom, wearing a green t-shirt that said BRASIL, began kissing them all on the cheeks and lower ears, Pip included, whom she called by his given name. Rossler grabbed two ice chests, one on top of the other, the top one sliding around a little as he walked.

“What's wrong with Pip?” his dad said. “Pip, your arms broken?”

Pip came over, looking down at the ground. Rossler's dad patted him on the back and handed him three duffel bags to carry upstairs.

Rossler and his dad drank cans of light beer and watched TV, his dad resting before he got the boat ready to take out. Grace and his mom unloaded groceries in the kitchen, talking about a memoir his mom read by a man who went to heaven for a short time before being resuscitated, and who in the book described heaven in great detail. Grace looked over at Rossler once, but otherwise pretended to be interested. Pip and his sister stood near the kitchen table, whispering, and then went off somewhere.

His dad flipped through the channels, stopping briefly on Oprah and making a disapproving clicking sound. Rossler thought about asking him what he had against Oprah, but his dad kept flipping. Someone on cable news, smirking and full of contempt, was comparing the President to Hitler. His dad kept it there. Rossler laughed, then exhaled, then briefly considered picking up the trophy on the table next to the couch—he and his sister had won it in an egg toss competition long ago—and throwing it at the TV. His father shook his head, not at the commentator but at the President. Rossler, a second-

year high school history teacher, thought of Abraham Lincoln: *malice towards none, charity for all*. He wanted to say, “Ever heard of Abe Lincoln? Second Inaugural Address? Look it up, assholes!” But this tone defeated the whole spirit of the quotation, so just he just sat there, breathing as if he was performing push-ups in front of the TV.

“Walker’s on,” his dad said, looking at his watch and then punching in the number on the remote. Rossler thought of Abraham Lincoln and tried to calm down.

Walker was beating up a Vietnamese gang in slow motion.

His father watched without laughing and after a while Rossler got up and went outside on the deck, staring at the seagulls congregating on the roofs across the canal, smelling random whiffs of gasoline. Pip and Maddy sat down below on the bulkhead, arguing.

Pip got his phone out, typing a message. Maddy craned her neck and he pulled the phone away so she couldn’t read it.

Rossler remembered once, not that many years before, sitting on the deck reading a magazine and hearing his sister’s enormous laugh from below. She’d taken the little johnboat out by herself to read a book and try to catch hermit crabs and then when she got back she was covered in seaweed and mud, intentionally, and cracking up. He’d started laughing too, before he even saw her. She wouldn’t do any of that now, including the big laugh. Was that growing up, or because of Pip? He would just ask her, next time they were alone. That was maybe the best way to bring up the topic, the most subtle.

Grace sat on Rossler’s lap in the back of the boat and Rossler kept sticking his hand in the water, making it spray both of them. Maddy sat across from them in Pip’s lap,

the two of them whispering again and at one point making out. Grace's mom sat up front, her hair blowing out like a Chinese fan. Rossler's dad drove, of course.

If Rossler had a boat, he'd name it *Malice Towards None*. He shared this with Grace and it sounded stupid as soon as it came out of his mouth. She nodded in a way that said, "Maybe..."

They passed a new three story house on the edge of the bay, with an outdoor bar and a giant plasma television playing a cooking show, which four college kids watched from floats in the water.

"THE ECONOMIC DISPARITY IN THIS PART OF THE COUNTRY IS STAGGERING," Pip said, raising his voice above the motor.

Rossler, though he agreed, made a sniffing noise.

"YEP!" Rossler's father said, looking around and nodding approvingly.

"LOOK AT THE SUNSET," Rossler's mother yelled from the front, pointing.

Clouds covered the last sliver of sun, but the sky was pinkish and the water ahead of them purple and black and silver, like mercury.

They pulled into the bay and Rossler's dad cut the motor. "Who wants to swim?"

Rossler, who had no interest in swimming in the middle of the bay after dark, felt like his dad would be hurt if nobody swam and so raised his hand.

"There we go," his dad said.

"I'll go too," said Maddy.

"Anybody else?" Rossler's dad said, but there no other takers.

Maddy and Rossler put on life jackets as per their dad's rules, stood on the edge of the boat, counted to three and jumped in at the same time, both going under and



bobbing back up, both of them accidentally swallowing saltwater. His tossed them each a can of beer, both of which landed short, floating until they grabbed them.

They bobbed on their backs in the water, drinking the beer, drifting away from the boat.

“Stay close!” their mother said.

When they’d drifted far enough that they couldn’t hear exactly what anyone in the boat was saying, Rossler said, “This is nice, huh?”

“It is,” Maddy said, smiling like she knew something hilarious that Rossler didn’t.

“Why are *you* grinning?”

“No reason,” she said, still smiling.

“Hey, listen. I was thinking today about how much you used to *laugh* when you were younger.”

“What?” She stopped smiling. “Like when?”

“Like maybe two years ago, a year and a half.”

Maddy looked back at the boat and then back at him and he kept talking. “I don’t know. It kind of seems like you’ve gotten so much more *serious*? And I was just wondering if that was from growing up or dating Pip or what...”

“Huh?” Her mouth looked tight, like she was sucking her gums.

“I’m just saying...”

“What *are* you saying? Actually, no, you know what...”

She doggy paddled back to the boat without saying anything else.

Rossler waited a second, wondering how bad this was, and then swam back to the boat himself, ready to offer an unspoken apology.

His sister was drying off with a towel, shivering, though it wasn't cool. Pip stood near the steering wheel next to Rossler's dad. Rossler started drying off, not attempting eye contact with his sister, considering how and when he'd tell Grace what happened.

"We all set?" Rossler's dad said, cranking the engine.

"Not yet," Pip said, clearing his throat.

"Huh?" Rossler's dad said. He turned the engine back off.

"Maddy and I," Pip said, "have a special announcement."

In celebration of the moment, Rossler's dad let Pip drive the boat home, something Rossler had never been allowed to do because he was too lazy to take a boat safety course. Now Pip, who surely had never taken a boat safety course, was driving with one hand on the wheel, like he was suddenly part of the family.

Rossler's mom cried in a way that appeared both joyful and despondent, and Rossler's sister did the same. Rossler's dad stood next to his future son-in-law, smiling, but not smiling too big. Grace grabbed Rossler's leg in a way that said, "Congratulate them." Though he'd done it already, Rossler got up when the boat idled through the canal and patted Pip on the back as he drove, then hugged his sister, who didn't look back at him. Her ring, which Pip had hidden in his pocket all day, looked cheap.

The college kids from before sat on the deck now, the plasma TV still on. They were shooting onions from a large sling-shot at passing boats. One of the onions splashed near Rossler's dad's boat and the college kids cheered, then shot another onion, which arced high in the air and this time landed hard on the floor of the boat. The college kids cheered again and pointed. Rossler's dad moved Pip aside and took the wheel, yelling

gentle obscenities at the kids. Rossler threw the now-deformed onion and it splashed well short of the target.

“Your father is grilling steaks to celebrate your engagement,” Rossler’s mother said, walking into the living room from the kitchen, a few feet away, where she’d been marinating the steaks.

“We don’t eat meat, mom,” Maddy said, quietly.

“I forgot.”

“Well,” Pip said.

“That’s certainly your right,” Rossler’s mother said. “We’re also having mac and cheese, green beans...cornbread?” She seemed unsure of herself.

“The green beans have bacon in them,” Maddy said.

“You love bacon,” Rossler wanted to say, from the couch. Instead he said, “They don’t eat cheese.”

“We have lots of good stuff for a salad,” said Grace, smiling at everyone.

They ate their salads, the only course of the meal, outside on the deck, the breeze blowing napkins off the table, everyone squeezed in next to each other, everyone but Grace and Rossler’s mother drinking heavily.

“What about babies?” Rossler’s mom asked, raising her eyebrows.

“No babies,” Pip said.

“No babies,” Maddy said.

“You love babies,” Rossler said.

Pip said, “We just don’t want to subject a child to—”

“And bacon,” said Rossler.

“Sorry?” Pip said.

Rossler’s sister looked down at her salad and Rossler looked down at his.

“Well, maybe that’s for the best,” Rossler’s dad said, quietly.

“Exactly,” said Pip.

Some empty plates blew off the table and Grace went after them.

“This place may be communist by the next generation,” Rossler’s dad said. “Your President...”

“What?” Pip said.

“What?” said Rossler and Maddy.

“Country is going down the tubes. There are some signs...”

“What signs?” Rossler said.

“Who wants dessert?” said his mother.

“Socialism,” his dad said, shaking his head.

“I’m a registered socialist, actually,” Pip said. “This is hardly socialism.”

Rossler’s dad looked at Pip.

“Who wants dessert?” said Rossler’s mother.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Rossler said.

Pip and both of Rossler’s parents looked at him, unsure for whom this comment was intended.

“Everybody calm down,” Rossler’s mom said.

On the orders of Rossler's mom, they all sat around the television, eating bowls of sliced apples in lieu of ice cream. Rossler's dad held the remote, flipping through the channels, trying to find something that everyone would like.

Rossler thought of Abraham Lincoln. It was *impossible* to have malice towards none. Plus, you let people get away with ridiculous ideas. You can't have charity towards *everybody*. What about John Wilkes-Booth? What about *Hitler*? The sheer amount of points of view in the world made Rossler suddenly depressed. If his dad said anything else about the President, Rossler would speak up.

His dad settled on a baseball game.

"God, I hate baseball," Pip said.

Grace looked at Rossler.

"I don't care too much for baseball myself," Rossler's dad said, and continued to flip.

Rossler wanted to tell Pip that nobody asked for his opinion, but Grace was still staring at him.

His father stopped on cable news again.

"Change it," Rossler said.

His father didn't change it.

"This is *bullshit*," Rossler said.

"So biased," Pip said, nodding his head at Rossler, who didn't nod back.

"Your language, son," said Rossler's dad, softly. He muted the volume and continued to flip.

“Fireworks!” Rossler’s mother said. They all looked out the windows briefly at the fireworks, which exploded in a tiny circle in the distance, and then everyone except for Rossler’s mother looked back at the muted TV.

“What’s your favorite movie, Pip?” said Grace.

Everyone looked over at her like they’d forgotten she was still here.

“What?” Philip said.

“Your favorite movie of all-time?” said Grace.

Philip looked at her like it was a trick question and then looked away.

“Don’t ignore the question,” Rossler said, not sure what he was saying.

“Mine is *Rio Bravo*, I believe,” said Rossler’s dad, shifting in his seat.

Newer, closer fireworks began to explode above the houses across the canal, barely audible through the sliding glass doors.

“I don’t really watch very many movies,” Rossler’s mother said, looking back from the window at everyone.

“*Serendipity*,” Maddy said.

Pip stared at her. “Are you serious?”

“What?”

The cannon-sound of the fireworks agitated Rossler. He remembered when his sister used to be scared of fireworks as a kid.

“Son?” Rossler’s dad said.

“Yes?” said Rossler.

“Your favorite movie of all-time.”

“Uh. *The Shawshank Redemption*.”

He had no idea why he'd said the *Shawshank Redemption* was his favorite movie. Although very good, it wouldn't crack his top twenty, top fifty even. What the hell was wrong with him? He needed to correct himself, something French. "Actually..."

"That *is* a good show," Rossler's dad said.

"It *is*," said Grace, smiling at Rossler.

"I haven't seen it, have I?" said his mother, looking to the entire room for an answer.

"I don't think so," said his father.

"You should rent it," Pip said. "Good movie."

Maddy smiled, for possibly the first time all night.

"We should see if it's on," Rossler's dad said.

"Yes," said Grace.

"Sure," said Pip, nodding.

Outside, the booming happened with more frequency, nearing the finale.

"Do we have it on video?" Rossler's mom said.

"No, mom," said Maddy, gently.

Rossler's father flipped through the channels and everyone watched, silent.

"Is this?...Here it is!" he said.

Rossler's mother leaned over and hugged his father, sniffing a little bit. "I'm so thankful," she said, her voice muffled by the hug.

"This isn't it," said Maddy.

"No," Pip said.

It was *Bull Durham*.

“It isn’t?” Rossler’s mother said.

“Definitely not,” said Pip.

“Well,” said Rossler’s dad.

“Oh,” said Grace. Her face looked pale.

“But Walker’s on,” Rossler’s dad said, as if to cheer everyone up.

He flipped the channel to another showing of *Walker*.

After a commercial for an erection pill, the show’s theme song, written and performed by Chuck Norris, began to play over the opening credits. Rossler couldn’t believe he was watching this show again, that this was the third time today that he’d looked at Chuck Norris’ face.

“Are we really watching this?” Pip said.

His father turned in his chair to see who Pip was addressing, looking concerned. Rossler’s heart started beating in his throat.

“What?” his mother asked, sweetly.

“Are we really watching this?” Pip said again. “Because this honestly might be the worst show of all time, like empirically.”

Rossler’s father nodded, hearing him out.

“You have no idea what you’re talking about,” Rossler said.

Everyone turned to look at him. Now his hands were shaking.

“What?” Maddy said.



Rossler ignored her and stared at Pip. “Why is your opinion so goddamn *important*? I’m serious. Just because you don’t like something, that doesn’t mean...shit. Keep your comments to yourself. We *like* this show.”

Grace looked at him, but he wouldn’t look back. His father’s mouth was open, as if he was trying to speak but finding it impossible. His mother, not smiling, looked so disappointed as to end all pretenses.

Maddy was staring at Rossler like she wanted to hurt him.

Grace said, “Um, I think—” and then Rossler cut her off.

He said, “Listen, I’m just—”

“What you *talking* about?” Maddy said.

“Maddy, I’m just saying what everybody else thinks,” Rossler said. “He doesn’t respect anybody else’s opinions.”

“What? He’s just *saying* his opinion. That doesn’t mean he doesn’t respect *other people*’s opinion. I can’t believe you! It’s not Pip’s problem if nobody else in this family says their opinion. It’s their problem. It’s *your* problem. Why don’t you just *disagree*? He never said he was always right, did he?”

Rossler didn’t say anything.

“*Did* he?”

She was looking around the room at everyone.

“I’m asking everyone in here if Pip said he was always right.”

Everyone—Rossler, Grace, his parents and Pip himself—murmured no.

“Since when are people not allowed to have *opinions*? This is *bullshit*.”

Rossler stared down at the floor and then at the television, which just then showed a fight scene that was going in and out of slow motion. Rossler was sure that everyone in the room was suddenly aware of how bad this show was, even his father. He felt angry and embarrassed, as if he'd directed the show himself. He glanced at Pip, who stared intently at the screen, his mouth shut tight.

“Since when do you start using language like that?” Rossler’s dad said.

Maddy looked at him but didn’t respond.

“Since she got involved with Pip,” Rossler said, nodding, the word and gesture coming without preparation.

He pretended not to notice his wife staring at him.

“Everybody feels the same way,” Rossler said, softer. “They all have a problem with him.”

Maddy looked at her mother and father and Grace.

Rossler said, “He’s just *so*—”

“Stop,” Grace said, and Rossler quit talking.

Pip, Philip, kept staring at the screen, his eyes red.

Maddy picked up the egg-toss trophy from the table besides the couch and flung it at Rossler. He watched the white base as it came at him and then it hit him above his left eyebrow and knocked over a vase of fake flowers beside him, the vase breaking into a few shards on the ground.

“Maddy!” his mother shouted. It sounded like commiserating.

“You two pick that up,” their dad said.

Hadn't somebody needed to say something? Rossler thought briefly of Lincoln and Norris, and tried to ignore those thoughts. He got up, pressing his hand against his cut eyebrow, and got a broom out of the pantry. His mother was crying now. He looked over and Pip, unable to look away, was still staring at the TV, which at some point had been muted, though the show wasn't over. Rossler's hands still shook, worse than before, and his eyebrow was bleeding.

Maddy got up and brought the trash can over to where Rossler stood and they started sweeping and picking up the shards of the lamp, without speaking. Grace brought a box of tissues, set it beside Pip, and sat down on the couch next to him. Rossler's mother went over and sat his other side. Neither of them tried to say anything. Rossler's father picked up the remote and started flipping, but he didn't stay on any one channel for very long.

## Traum

Clara Barton Maewether was a pretty black-haired girl who looked a little sickly. She was also, in the words of her grandmother, something of a free spirit. She had once chased down and tackled a small turkey during a turkey hunt, embarrassing her family.

Vernon Traum made no attempt to speak to her or gain an introduction. He became nervous whenever he had to leave his apartment above her grandmother's garage and risk seeing Clara in passing. He had to leave his house very often. He hid his nervousness by scowling perpetually.

One day, she was sitting on the porch swing, moving back and forth but keeping her legs anchored to the ground. When he saw her he tried to turn around and leave, but she told him to sit down. He sat on the chair farthest from her swing. They exchanged pleasantries and then fell silent. The silence made his feet sweat.

He kept craning his neck to look inside Mrs. Maewether's windows, as if there were something in there that demanded his attention. He wanted to say something.

"I'm trying to be struck by lightning," he said.

"Beg your pardon?" she said.

"It's my life goal. To be struck. I'm not being humorous."

“Oh my. How is that coming?”

“Not very good.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she said. She was smiling.

He told her about ball lightning, bead lightning, dry lightning, heat lightning, rocket lightning, ribbon lightning, staccato lightning, positive lightning, anvil-to-ground lightning, sprites, blue jets, elves. He told her about Roy Cleveland Sullivan, the human lightning rod, and about lightning alley in Florida and the village of Kifuka in Zaire, the lightning capital of the world, places he wanted to go. He recited passages about lightning from Shakespeare and the Bible. He told her that *colpo di fulmine* was Italian for bolt of lightning and also for love at first sight.

They were married in the Taylor County Church of Christ. They flew to Florida for the honeymoon. They rented a convertible in Tampa and drove to St. Petersburg. They visited Cape Canaveral and Silver Springs. They walked along beaches and found fulgurites in the sand, long ones that broke when they tried to dig them out. Clara said they looked like pieces of rock candy. She wanted to make jewelry out of them.

In the afternoons they drove down the new Interstate through the thunderstorms. Vernon insisted they keep the top down any time they saw lightning. At the end of the week, he had to pay two hundred dollars for the damages to the convertible’s upholstery.

Back in Abilene, Clara helped him build a small rocket with an enormous spool of string attached that he shot into a storm, hoping he could direct the bolt of lightning with the string. The rocket ended up flying horizontally, leaving string in its wake for nearly half a mile and then exploding against a barn.

They had children. Lily was the first and Paige came two years later. When each

of the girls was born Traum went months without thinking about being struck. Clara told him he should try to get promoted to management at the telephone company where he worked. They were living in the room above the garage of Mrs. Maewether's house. When Mrs. Maewether passed, they moved into the house.

Traum took his girls to school every morning before work and the family ate dinner together every night. He bought them malts and bicycles with baskets on the handlebars. He took them on a family trip to Aquarena Springs, where he'd once seen the driver of a glass-bottom boat get struck by lightning, but the girls didn't appreciate the attractions. He took them to petting zoos. He moved into the sales department at the telephone company and made a good deal more money than he had made in maintenance.

Then he began taking drives out to the outskirts of Abilene, on days when there was a storm. He didn't tell Clara. On one of these days he sat in his truck and stared out at a bunch of white cows crowded together under a big liveoak in a pasture and he saw the tree get struck by lightning. He saw an explosion on the ground all around the cattle. He climbed over the fence and walked out to the tree in the rain and the cows were fine, but the roots of the tree had exploded. The charge had somehow found the roots. The ground was all torn up, like somebody had been digging foxholes. Charred pieces of roots were scattered all around the tree. Traum took this as a sign that he should resume his true vocation.

He began to save money for a trip to Zaire. He opened an alternate bank account, without Clara's knowledge. His goal was to save enough to be able to spend an entire summer there in Kifuka, perhaps bring the rest of the family over for a few weeks.

Clara found out and was upset. They fought about it for weeks and then they

fought about the way Traum never listened anymore, the way he said “Is that right?” with his eyes looking away from Clara or Lily or Paige, whomever was talking to him at the time. He was thinking of lightning again, thinking of it most of the time, at the dinner table, in his truck, at church, work, funerals, baptisms, book fairs, piano recitals, anniversaries, during sexual relations and class reunions. Clara said, “You’re sleepwalking through your own family.”

He began to excuse himself from the table after dinner and go driving for storms, without saying a word. He came home one day soaking wet, when he’d said he needed to work late.

Clara went to see her family in Killeen, left the children with him to remind him of his responsibilities. It stormed all day on that Saturday. Traum took the girls to a movie. As he drove them to the movies and as they sat in the theater, he thought about an experiment. He was waiting until night.

When night came, it was still storming. He put the girls to bed but they wouldn’t go to sleep. Lily kept complaining about a stomachache. Traum told her it was because of all the candy she’d had. She eventually fell asleep. Paige insisted on staying up.

Traum had bought a football helmet and attached a four-foot metal lightning rod to the top of it. The weight of the rod put a lot of pressure on his neck and sometimes made his head tilt sideways. He instructed Paige to walk up and down the street in the storm to make sure nobody was around. When Paige said the coast was clear, Traum walked into the middle of the street and stood under a lamppost. He counted off the thunder. It was close enough for a bolt to strike his street.

Traum’s theory was that if he ran up and down his street wearing his old metal

baseball cleats and the helmet with a lightning rod attached, a lightning strike to his head would be almost inevitable. He had explained all this to Paige and now he put his theory into action while she sat on the curb in the storm and cheered. Traum ran as fast as he could up the street and then back down the street, with the rod on his head, as thunder sounded every quarter of a minute or so. Every so often he stopped and bent at the waist to catch his breath.

He ran until one of his legs started to cramp up. He had to recline in the street in the rain to stretch. Paige said, "When is the lightning going to hit your head, dad?"

Traum said, "Pretty soon, Paigey."

He ran up and down the street one more time, with a slight limp. Nothing happened. Out of desperation he shimmied up the lamp pole with the helmet still on. Jim and Gracie Moore, his neighbors, came out to their porch in their bathrobes and called out to him.

Jim Moore said, "Vernon, we just got a call from Clara. She said Lily's having real bad stomach pains. She asked us to try and find you." They stood there after that, staring at Traum.

He took the helmet off and left it in the yard. He ran into the house and took Paige with him. Lily was in there crying, talking to her mom on the phone. Traum said, "I'm here, baby." He took the phone from her and told Clara he'd take care of everything, but Clara refused to speak to him. He asked Lily where it was hurting and told Paige to get Lily a soda to calm down her stomach. Lily started screaming. Traum saw that she was coughing up blood.

When Lily recovered, Clara took the girls to Killeen and never came back to



Abilene. Traum would drive to Killeen and take the girls on little weekend trips. They stayed in roadside motels in San Antonio, Marble Falls, Corpus. As the girls got busier, the trips became less frequent. When Traum thought about his family situation, he had trouble breathing. During the week he'd work and then he'd sit at home and read meteorological journals or he'd sit in his truck and wait for rain clouds to gather somewhere so he could drive off and stand under them.

The newspaper published a list of ways to avoid lightning and he put the list in his truck and during storms he tried to break as many of the rules as he could. He crouched beneath tall trees, laid flat on the ground, stood on railroad tracks and on lakeshores, in tents and puddles of water, next to wire fences, next to clotheslines. He built an aboveground metal swimming pool in his backyard and he would sit in it during storms, with his helmet on, holding a rake up in the air. The process of trying became something in itself.

He went an entire week without saying a word to another person and then at the end of that week he left on a pilgrimage to see Roy Cleveland Sullivan, the human lightning rod, at Shenandoah National Park, thirteen hundred miles away, in Virginia.

Sullivan was in his seventies and had been struck by lightning seven times. He'd lost a toe and had his hair set on fire twice. Traum had read everything he could about him. He hoped Sullivan could tell him how to be struck by lightning and also give him some advice about his life.

He got to the park in the middle of the night on his third day of driving. He slept in his car and fogged up the windows. In the morning he went looking for Sullivan. A ranger told him that Sullivan had passed away. Traum knew it had to be lightning, but

then the ranger told him frankly that Sullivan had shot himself over a woman. When Traum got back to Abilene, he sold the swimming pool for scrap metal.

In Zaire a few months later, villagers sometimes brought food and water up to his plot of ground. When they didn't bring any, Traum went without. Some of the villagers knew what he was doing and encouraged him in his pursuit and then called him a fool behind his back. He stayed well past the day of his return flight. He hardly ever moved from his spot, but he would do jumping jacks and sit-ups, to stay limber. Despite the exercises he developed back and knee pains. There were lightning storms nearly every day. He would lie down and watch them and wait to be struck. He was patient. He grew a long unkempt beard and developed bags under his eyes. He became emaciated. He smelled like an old towel. He could no longer remember why being struck by lightning had been so important to him in the first place, but he remained on his plot of ground.

The villagers began to think of him as a curse and eventually some of them went into the mountains and asked him to leave. They allowed him to stay one more night. There was a massive electrical storm that night, not unusual, and he stood up and waited one last time to be struck. Towards daybreak there were only traces of lightning in the distance. Traum yelled at the skies. He'd meant to say one of the quotes from Shakespeare that he'd memorized and repeated to himself over and over during storms: "Rage! Blow! You cataracts and hurricanes, spout! Rumble thy bellyful! Spit fire!" But in his anger he could only yell, "Goddammit! Goddamn you! Goddammit!"

When he returned to Abilene, he barely left his room, except to sit in the library. His family never came to see him. He was an old man. He didn't know how this had happened.

In the library he looked at microfiche, searching old newspapers for stories of lightning survivors.

He was bitter and full of envy. The lightning survivors he read about had been struck almost at random. They had never worked as hard at it or devoted as much time as he had. During such times he would try to remind himself that it wasn't a competitive enterprise, that one person being struck doesn't lessen another's chances of being struck. But then he would think back to when he was young and the notion had once crossed his mind that you only read about success stories in the paper, but you never hear about the lifelong failures.

Over the course of a week, by bus, he visited Paige and her husband and their daughter Mary in Houston and Lily and Lily's husband and their daughters Beth and Sam in Plano. They seemed happy enough to see him. They tried to get him to shave his beard and buy some new clothes.

He took the bus back to Abilene and made arrangements to have himself buried at a future date on his dad's old hunting lease, by a bush that had been struck by lightning once when Traum and his father had been hunting. He had his tombstone made and placed in the field. The tombstone had his name and birth year on it with a dash and a blank space where the year of his death would go. Above that was a quote from Shakespeare. Traum had told the man the entire quote over the phone: "Was this a face to be opposed against the warring winds? To stand against the deep dread-bolted thunder? In the most terrible and nimble stroke of quick, cross lightning?" But the man had used letters that were too big, or he wasn't listening, and the quote on the tombstone simply said, "Was this a face?"

## National Scrap

The catalyst might've been when my buddy Hurst called from Fort Worth and compared me to Eddie Gaedel, the dwarf who played for the St. Louis Cardinals. I told him Eddie Gaedel played for the St. Louis *Browns*, look it up. But that wasn't the point and I knew it.

For the longest time me and Hurst had been planning on making a movie together. During our last years of college—we went to different schools—we'd be at a bar or on a minor road trip and we'd always talk about one thing: our hypothetical movie. First we talked about making an ironic action movie called *Runaway Truck!*, but after a while irony started to seem weak, so we dropped that idea and never spoke of it again. Then at some point I read in a Bob Dylan biography that his favorite movie used to be *Shoot the Piano Player*, which I'd never heard of, so I hunted down the DVD at a big chain bookstore and the movie turned out to be French. I watched it about a hundred times, more like listening to an album than watching a movie. I'm pretty sure I hadn't ever seen a French movie before that and I knew the men in my family would disapprove—this was not so long after the era of Freedom Fries—but I didn't give a crap about their opinion, by which I mean I never mentioned the movie in their presence, like it was an adult film, not an art film. (In fact, my granddad would've definitely approved of an adult film more

than an art film. But I'd stopped watching those kinds of movies after high school, for the most part.) Anyways, *Shoot the Piano* player led me and Hurst to the other movies of the great and lovable French director Truffaut, who became a part of our trifecta of heroes with Bob Dylan and Jack Kerouac. We decided to make something more like his movies, more French.

We started tossing around a bunch of ideas and eventually settled on *National Scrap*, the name of a junkyard we'd seen one time on a road trip. Not long afterwards a plot emerged: a trucker gets mixed up with the mafia while trying to deliver cocktail umbrellas to the town of Las Vegas, New Mexico. It was semi-autobiographical.

In high school in Houston I'd worked one summer as a delivery driver for Lone Star Office Supply and when I graduated college I contacted my old boss and got a job there again. The work was pretty easy and I've never minded driving and I got off relatively early afternoon, so it gave me time to work on our script, although all I actually ended up doing every day after work was just sitting on my couch, watching or reading about movies. But I considered that necessary preparation. My parents were disappointed in my choice of employment, in a supportive way. They kept reminding me I had a college degree and that I should use the talents God gave me, but my degree was in American Studies and they were never specific about what talents I actually had. Hurst got a job as a permanent substitute teacher at a middle school in Fort Worth, a job he hated. But these were always supposed to be temporary: we believed the movie would change our lives in the near future.

We both kept saying we'd start working on the script and send each other pages, but neither of us wrote any actual scenes and the only line I even remember either of us

writing is, “He’s got us by the balls, Tubby.” Gretsky says you miss a hundred percent of the shots you don’t take, sure, but my subconscious philosophy at the time was the exact opposite: until you actually take a shot, your percentage is perfect. Hurst didn’t write much either, like I said. All we did was constantly revise our list of songs for the soundtrack, most of them from 1965 to 1975, our favorite stretch at the time. We decided “Willin’” by Little Feat should play when the credits start to roll at the end, but we argued about whether it should be the version from their first or second album.

Eventually we realized: hey, we’ve been working these temporary jobs for nearly five freaking years now and made no progress. So I came up with a plan that Hurst would come down to Houston when the school year ended and we’d work on the script every day when I got home from my job until we finished it. Then shoot a few scenes at the end of the summer and cut a trailer to raise money, or maybe put together a short for some festivals. We were ready now, knowledgeable and mature enough, to actually sit down together and write this thing. Hurst agreed.

But a few months before school let out, he started acting weird. He didn’t return my calls or if he did, he acted real serious, this new stiff formality in his talk. When he left me messages now, he’d end each one by saying, “If you have any questions, you can reach me at...” and then he’d leave his number, which I’d known for ten years. At first I thought he was being funny, but he wasn’t. I have no clue what kind of questions he thought I might have.

Then in early May he called me while I was working and said he wasn’t coming down for the summer.

“Good one,” I said. I was looking for an office park on Chimney Rock near

Gulfton, passing all the check-cashing places, gas stations, *Dinero a Mexico*, prepaid phone stores, hair salons.

“I’m not joking around, Lyndon,” Hurst said. “I’ll be attending dental school this fall.”

“Ha!”

“I am. I just got accepted. Wanted to tell you before I applied, but I didn’t really know how.”

“Your dental hygiene isn’t even—”

“Listen, you and I both know the movie plans weren’t serious.”

“I’ve seen you go a whole weekend without *brushing your teeth*.”

“Well, that’s gonna change.”

It took me a second to process all this. Hurst’s dad was a dentist, so it wasn’t completely random, but still. Both of us had always talked about being as different as possible from our respective fathers, not because they were bad role models—they were pretty good ones, actually—but just on general principle.

“When’s school start?” I said. “August? Still have time to stick to our plan. Come down this summer, we’ll do a draft, and if you get excited about the movie, you can postpone school. And if not, at least you can go with no regrets.”

“Not happening.” He said this quick, like he was pulling off a Band-Aid. Then maybe he felt bad, because he qualified it. “I have to take care of my prerequisites this summer.”

“You serious about this?” I said. “Because you never once—”

“I’m doing what’s best for my future. And you should think about doing

something too.”

I found the office, an eighties-looking brown building across the street from a rundown apartment complex with a sign that said WE WELCOME LARGE PETS. “We just gotta be patient,” I said. “This stuff doesn’t happen overnight.”

“Overnight? It’s been five years, Lyndon. Time to grow up. It’s not happening.”

The crazy thing is Hurst used to be the more optimistic one of us two. Couldn’t blame him for being fed up, though: our financial situations weren’t good at all and since the beginning of college both of us had suffered a painful and protracted slump with the ladies. Nothing wrong with wanting to make some money, and the chances of a dentist meeting a quality woman are much higher than the chances of a substitute teacher, obviously. But Hurst wasn’t thinking about the beautiful artsy women we’d meet if we stuck it out and got our movie made. Plus, the end of *National Scrap* would basically mean the end of our friendship, though I didn’t realize that yet. All friendships operate in past or present tense, and here we moved directly to past. Maybe we’d still hang out every once in a while, the way some troops stay in a country after a war is over, but this was the end of combat operations.

“What about our Kerouac movie?” I said. “Like, later on down the road, after you’ve made some money?” We’d talked about how if our first movie was a success then we’d make a bigger budget follow-up where Jack Kerouac is a minor league baseball reporter in Florida in his old age. The last line was going to be a New England-accented voiceover adapted from a line Kerouac wrote about boxing, but switching boxing with baseball: *You can bet your life: boxing matches are sad, and everything is sad anyhow, till that day when the Lion lies down with the Lamb.*



“No, man,” Hurst said.

There was a long pause after that. Then Hurst said his cousin knew somebody who was making a movie in Shreveport about weightlifting.

“Which cousin?” I said. I knew most of his cousins.

“The one from California. She said she could probably get you a job as a production assistant or something. Experience on an actual set.”

A parting gift, arranged ahead of time to soften the blow, I guess. In retrospect I should’ve been grateful, or at least gracious about it, but I’d read an interview once with a famous young director where she said if you want to make movies, don’t go to school or take a job as an intern, just make a movie. And I’d resolved to follow that advice.

“I’m not fetching coffee for the director of a damn *weightlifting* movie,” I said. “I’ve never lifted weights a day in my life. No interest.”

That’s when Hurst got frustrated and compared me to Eddie Gaedel and I corrected him about the team and everything.

Then he said, “You never take the bat off your shoulder, man. No intention of actually swinging. It’s sad. You’re gonna become a freaking *novelty*. I’m sorry, but it’s true.”

“You should check out the suicide rates for dentists sometime,” I said.

Hurst said, “That’s not factually—” and then I hung up.

Right away I regretted it. My hands were shaking. Usually, if I’m angry at all, I’m the kind of guy who’s only *secretly* angry, not the kind who makes one last asshole comment and then hangs up. The amount of times I’ve hung up on another human being is easily less than five, probably less than three. Told myself I’d call back and apologize

after I made my delivery, but then I rationalized that I could just do it whenever he called me back, which he never did, of course.

When I was younger, whenever I gave up on one of my big dreams—comics, pro baseball, college basketball, music, music writing—I always replaced it right away with a new one. The failure never really stung. When you're a kid you just assume you're going to do something special, and only the particulars change. Even with *National Scrap*, I'd always just assumed we'd get it made eventually, that it was *fate*. This was the first time I ever considered if we were on a trajectory to do it, and the answer, of course, was no way.

One time on a delivery near 610 North I saw an obese sunburned woman in an electric wheelchair at a light by the feeder road and she had on a neon yellow t-shirt that said IT DON'T GET MUCH BETTER THAN THIS. I'd always assumed that the shirt was a brag and I thought it'd make a pretty good photograph if somebody was willing to exploit that poor lady's circumstances, but after the conversation with Hurst I remembered her again for the first time in a while and realized the shirt might've just been offering a terrible hard-earned warning. For the first time, it occurred to me that my life might not get so much better, that I could easily never make a movie, that *nothing* special might ever happen to me, in fact. I didn't have any replacement dream for *National Scrap*. Felt like the end of the road, time to put away childish things.

A few years previous I'd moved into a duplex on Nadine, on the edge of the Heights and not far from the Lone Star offices and warehouse. The place had old wood floors and little stained-glass squares in the windows, plus the street shared the name of a

Chuck Berry song, though not one of my favorites. Only downside: a few shopping carts always ended up scattered along the curb, even though there's no grocery store nearby. That doesn't happen in real nice neighborhoods. Still, when the old lady in the other unit got moved to a nursing home, I convinced my old buddy Junior to move in next door.

Junior and I met in elementary, played middle-school basketball together, and reunited in college, where we were roommates our junior year, a disaster. Me and Hurst sometimes seemed like two versions of the same person, which can cause a lot of problems actually, but that was never the issue with Junior. In college when we lived together, I'd stay home most nights and watch movies and he'd go out on the town and then come back around 2:30 in the morning and play poker with his obnoxious buddies until daylight, even though he was usually late on his half of the rent. Neither of us cleaned the place and eventually there was only a small circle of non-filth in the shower where you could stand. He also broke my mandolin before I ever learned to play it and then tried to paint over the damage. But I missed hanging out with him when our lease ended.

A little more background on Junior: when he was twelve he starred in a locally famous public service announcement in which his final and most repeated line was, "Can we go to the *library*?" His mom's a nurse who came here from Nigeria before he was born and who worked constantly. His dad has been gone as long as I've known him and we don't talk about it, though once Junior mentioned out of nowhere that he may have passed away in Lagos. I've never beaten Junior in an argument. He won Mr. Personality in high school, a fact he often wove into conversation with people he'd just met. He resembled Magic Johnson during the Vlade Divac era. When I went to movies with him

he usually fell asleep. He paid a guy to maintain a website for his inactive charity, The Junior Kargbo Foundation. The only books in his half of the duplex were the Bible and a self-help book called *The Two Minute Millionaire*. He dropped out of college our senior year to sell knives, then dealt sub-prime mortgages, became a loan officer, sold roofing in Galveston after the hurricane, and at his point sold timeshares over the phone.

His job was such that the more calls he made, the more money he earned, plus he liked to go out, so I didn't see him all that much. We didn't really socialize. I didn't care for his trendy friends or the trendy places they patronized. Sometimes me and Junior would grab dinner, but the main thing we did together, what we did every time we were both home, was play *R.B.I. Baseball* on Nintendo.

I'm talking about the original Nintendo, the gray one you have to blow into, which I bought online after Junior moved to Nadine. Junior owned all the latest systems, but I never had any interest in video games at all, don't touch the stuff, except for *R.B.I. Baseball*, the most perfectly simple and realistic baseball video game ever created.

On Friday Junior came over and we played Ribbie and after the first inning I told him about Hurst and the Eddie Gaedel conversation.

He didn't say anything for a while, just kept throwing fastballs. Finally he shook his head without taking his eyes off the screen and said, "Man, if our teenage selves could see our adult selves, they'd think we were *scrubs*."

This comment hung in the air for a few seconds, obviously true.

"Most of our middle school cheerleaders are probably married by now," I said.

"With *kids*."

"I can still name all of them. Is that weird?"

“We all can, brother.”

A brief moment of silent concentration followed, only the pitches and the lovely repetitive *R.B.I. Baseball* theme music making any sound.

“Wonder how many of our old cheerleaders are talking about *me* right now,” Junior said. “Plus or minus five?”

He was always making comments like this, which were usually playful but sometimes just annoying. I could never tell if his self-promotion came from a deep and secret insecurity or from being *overly* secure. Seemed like the latter, but I’ve met very few people in my life who are overly secure.

Junior changed the subject. “I tell you about my new thing? I might sell organs.”

“What?”

“Church organs. Huge commissions selling high-end organs. The organ at St. Mike’s cost 2.5 million. Think about how many new big churches there are in H-town. *You* know that, obviously. I can sell two organs in a couple months, make six figures in commissions, take the rest of the year off to work on my charity.”

Junior always talked up some big idea and then dropped it a month or two later, and every time it made me legitimately angry and sad, probably because it reminded me of my own constant empty talk. “What about your book on how to meet people at bars?” I said. “What about Chairman of the Board?” This was his idea for a high-end office furniture outlet. “What about Glazed and Confused, ‘The Donut Remains the Same,’ all that?”

“Still wanna do it. I just need the capital.”

“Junior, we’re grown-ass men.”

“Fully aware of that.” He doubled with Dykstra.

“Listen, I’ve been working on a theory,” I said. “Maybe the definition of a true adult is somebody who’s given up on all their dreams.”

“Sounds like bullshit.”

“Why you think athletes and rock stars and Hollywood people are so immature?”

“Because they’re coddled.”

“*And* because they never had to give up on their dreams.”

“Maybe.” Junior had this friendly, condescending way of saying maybe that basically translated as: *Yeah, you don’t really know what you’re talking about.*

“Probably why Hurst got so serious, too,” I said. “Think about it.”

“Some people just get serious. Happens.”

I struck out the remainder of the side with Kerfeld throwing sidearm. “Maybe you should just pick one thing and stick with it,” I said. “Something worthy of your abilities, instead of all this get-rich-quick bullshit. I’m serious. Getting tired of hearing you talk every time about how you’re about to make six figures in, like, a month, and then you never do. You need to do something that’ll take you years to accomplish.”

“Riiiiight,” Junior said. “I see how successful you’ve been with that plan.”

I tried not to show that this bothered me. “I know what I’m doing.”

He turned and looked at me for the first time all game. “Hey, you can’t become an astronaut just by talking about space all the time. You know that, right?”

“Huh?” I said. “Well, you can’t become an astronaut in a few months either. Like you always try to do.”

“Yeah, I got it.”

Neither of us spoke again for the rest of the game, which I lost on a blown save. When it was over I turned off the Nintendo and put on ESPN, three dudes in suits making predictions with absolute certainty. We sat there in silence and watched the latest criminal allegations scroll against the bottom of the screen. Whenever we hung out, Junior and I were near-constant talkers, so our rare extended silences were almost always a sign of resentment.

After a few minutes of this, I said, “It’s my birthday on Sunday.”

Junior stood. “That’s *right*.”

“My folks want you to come with us to Welbourne Cafeteria on Sunday for dinner.”

“Man, I’d love to...but that sounds pretty boring. Sorry.”

“No problem.”

“Maybe we can meet up later, though.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m gonna get outta here.”

After Junior left I put on *The 400 Blows*, Truffaut’s first movie, which I hadn’t seen in a few months. I sat there thinking about how I needed to go ahead and become an adult, but then the movie started—the opening credits playing over different shaky shots of Paris with the Eiffel Tower in the background and then the great first scene, a bunch of kids in a classroom passing a pinup calendar around in a classroom, the camera following from kid to kid—and I forgot about everything except for wanting to make something like that. Happened every time I watched a movie I really loved: I got this special charge out of it and couldn’t help thinking about being part of that charge myself, even if I never

actually did anything about it.

And then I thought: *Screw those guys, I'm gonna make this movie, prove everybody wrong.* I was still younger than the peak statistical age for a Major League baseball player, and I was trying to enter a field where the age ceiling was much higher than for athletes. A fifty year-old film director is the equivalent of only like a thirty-four year-old pitcher, I'd say. If some strange old man had come up to me and offered a deal where he guaranteed I'd make a good movie one day, but it wouldn't be for twenty plus years and I'd have to work hard every day until then and fail thousands of times, I'd take that deal in a heartbeat. And I wouldn't even be that old, in movie-making terms. But then again, *The 400 Blows* came out when Truffaut was twenty-seven and he died of a brain tumor at 52.

I decided that from now on all my failures would be glorious active failures, and that by the following birthday I'd have written and directed *National Scrap*, even if it turned out to be terrible.

For my twenty-seventh birthday my parents gave me an electric toothbrush and some towels, and my granddad gave me a book called *Championship Techniques for Track & Field*. Opening gifts always embarrassed me, and these were worse than normal, but I tried to be enthusiastic.

Welbourne Cafeteria, where we ate, was a place patronized mostly by old people and owned by a middle-aged Lebanese guy with a well-manicured beard. The walls were lined with blown-up photos of his wife and young children, and the kids looked like those weird computerized images of the hypothetical offspring of two celebrities. (I'm sure



they were cuter in real life.) The food at this place—fried chicken, baked chicken, chicken-fried steak, chicken-fried chicken, chicken pot pie, vegetables—was excellent. We'd been going there since I was little.

After we ate, I opened the gifts and told everybody thanks, they hadn't needed to do that, etc. My mom said, "I knew how much you admired your father's toothbrush, so we bought you one." I didn't even know my dad owned an electric toothbrush. It didn't surprise me, though. He's the kind of guy who clips his fingernails every day.

The towels were blue and yellow and appeared to be a His and Hers set. I didn't say anything about it, but when I looked over at them, my mom smiled and said, "You can use those whenever you settle down." It worried her that I hadn't found a wife. It was something she thought and prayed about every day. I know this because she told me, more than once. My sister Lisa's three years older than me, but by the time *she* was twenty-seven she'd already been married for five years.

"Really soft," I said, feeling the towels.

My granddad F.W. pointed to his gift. "That's for your running, son." The book had been published in the seventies and smelled like his garage. I ran cross-country for a few years in high school, like all the other skinny nerdy white guys, but I hadn't run at all in years. My grandmother used to be a champion gift giver, but she'd passed away the year before, from complications related to emphysema. The book was one of those weird, sad reminders that F.W. lived alone now after fifty-something years.

"Thanks a bunch," I said, giving him a vigorous nod. My granddad was a big man, unconcerned about his own health and fitness, but concerned about everyone else's, especially as it related to their appearance. In college he used to mail me newspaper

articles about the Freshman Fifteen, even though I hadn't gained any weight. F.W. himself was a handsome fat man with a nice smile and sunspots all over his skin. Most really old people are neither fat nor tan, but he was both.

"Why didn't Junior come?" my mom said.

"Had to work," I said.

"On a Sunday?" she said. "That's too bad."

"He still selling timeshares?" my dad said.

"Yep."

My dad shook his head, like this tried his patience. He considered Junior a massive underachiever, his worst designation.

My dad's the pastor of a large United Methodist church in the suburbs, and like most Methodist preachers I've seen, he looked more like a well-paid college football coach than a man of the cloth. He knows Greek and Hebrew, got his Master of Divinity at Perkins in Dallas, but he spent the majority of his time at the church dealing with financial stuff.

"Your sister call to wish you happy birthday yet?" my dad said.

"Not yet." Normally we talked at least once a week, but I hadn't heard from her.

"Go to church this morning?"

"No sir." I'd stopped going to his church once I came back from college, which really bothered him. Mostly because of how it looked to his congregation, I think. But I couldn't help it: nobody's flaws are clearer to a guy than his father's, which made it hard to listen to my dad's sermons, even if he has relatively few flaws. (Incidentally, nobody's flaws are *less* clear to a guy than his grandfather's.) Sometimes I went to Catholic

evening mass with Junior.

“We were talking before you got here, Lyndon,” my dad said, “and we all agreed you’d be great at something like dental school yourself.” Earlier in the week I’d talked to my mom on the phone and told her about Hurst.

“That’s not really something I’m looking into,” I said. “But thanks.”

“Your mom and daddy thought that toothbrush might light a fire under your ass about dental school,” my granddad said.

“Not true,” said my dad, shaking his head again.

“I’m still working on my movie,” I said.

“How close are you to finishing now?” said my dad. He used to ask me this a lot, and with a more optimistic tone, but he’d stopped a while back. Couldn’t blame him.

“I wrote twelve pages this weekend,” I said. I’d woken up on Saturday morning, the first day of the rest of my life, and spent the whole day and night working on the script. Most of the twelve pages consisted of voiceover narration or descriptions of montages.

“So how many is that total, now?” my dad said.

“On this new draft?” I meant to give everyone the impression that an old draft existed, that I hadn’t frittered away the last four years of my life. “Twelve.”

My dad made the same loud *ch* sound he emitted whenever he saw a preacher on TV with one of those hands-free microphones.

“What’s the movie about again, sweetie?” my mom said, possibly trying to redirect the conversation before it became an argument.

I told them it was about a young trucker name Lowell and his brother Levon and

the difficulties they encounter delivering some cocktail umbrellas to a casino in New Mexico. It sounded dumb when I said it aloud.

“It takes a while,” I said.

The table went silent for a few seconds.

“Lyndon,” my dad said, “it makes *zero* sense not to at least consider all your options. You can always work on your movie on the side while you’re doing something else, building a *career*. You’re going to want a family some day and it’s very difficult to do that on an hourly wage, let me tell you.”

“I can’t make decisions based on a family I don’t have,” I said.

“What your daddy’s trying to tell you,” said F.W., “is you don’t wanna spend your whole life working a job where you wear shorts every day.”

“I don’t give a flip what you wear to work,” my dad said. This was as strong as his language ever got. “I just think that whatever you do, you should do it the best you can. And I don’t see you doing that.”

“He’ll figure it out,” my mom said.

F.W. turned to a woman walking by and said, “Excuse me, baby. Could you get me some more iced tea?”

“I don’t work here,” she said.

“Would you mind?”

After she took his glass, F.W. turned to my dad and said, “One of these days he’s gonna have to make a decision.” Then he looked at me and said, “It’s a yes or no question, son: *what’re you gonna do?*”

I said, “I don’t really get how that’s a—” and then the woman came back and set

his tea on the table.

“Thank you so much,” he said, smiling, and turned back to me. “Yes or no, son.”

“I honestly don’t understand the question,” I said, and then my dad got up and walked outside, concluding dinner.

That night I watched a baseball game on cable, feeling like I could afford the rest after my twelve-page weekend, and thought about how I never call anybody on their birthdays either, and then around the seventh inning I started feeling down. I never got bored—there were always too many movies I hadn’t seen or movie books I hadn’t read or movie websites I hadn’t checked lately—but sometimes I’d get a sudden bout of loneliness, and I’d get negative about everything for a while, and that’s what happened.

I thought Hurst might’ve called, which would’ve eased my mind about being an asshole and the collapse of our friendship, and I thought for sure my sister would’ve called, but neither of them did. My sister worked at a homeless women’s shelter in Seattle (which grieved my parents, who often pointed out that there are lots of homeless people in Houston too) and she was really busy, so I understood, but it would’ve been nice to talk to her.

I turned the game off and started a Truffaut movie—*Stolen Kisses*—to cheer myself up, and about fifteen minutes into it, Junior knocked on my door. I hadn’t seen him all weekend.

“Happy birthday, brother. We’re going to Beer Haus to celebrate.”

“Who?”

“Who do you think? Me and you.”

“Appreciate the gesture, man, but I’m pretty beat.” My first inclination was always to say no to leaving the house.

“Not optional, sir.”

“I got work tomorrow.”

“Everybody’s got work tomorrow. Meet you outside in five.”

So after a couple minutes of hesitation I got in Junior’s Civic and we headed for Hanz’s Beer Haus, a bar Junior would never choose to go himself—he preferred places with one word names, like Chrome, Rehab, Lust—but the kind of establishment he knew I liked: picnic tables out back, a jukebox (digital, unfortunately), and not much going on most nights. It was across town from us, and on the way there Junior rolled down the windows and played the incredible last two songs on this Van Morrison live album I’d gotten him into, and then a couple Bun B and Pimp C songs, all at full volume. He might be the only person in the world who’s ever played that combination in his car, although maybe not. People’s interests are always more mixed than I assume.

When we rolled up there was hardly anybody there, just a few old hippies at the bar, a group of middle-aged women wearing name tags next to the jukebox, and a group of college kids out back playing bocce. The last time I’d tried to go to Beer Haus, when my sister was in town, there’d been nobody there at all because someone in the high-rise condos next door had thrown raw meat into the space between the two buildings, as part of an ongoing dispute about noise. It made the news.

On this night, though, it smelled great out back, like the air on the last day of school. Felt nice to be out there. We sat at one of the picnic tables with our pitcher of beer and Junior started giving me ideas for my movie: a gesture of good will, I believe.

“There’s this geologist, right? And these kids are pelting the geologist with rocks, and they’re like, ‘What kind of rocks are *these*, Geologist?’ and he’s like, ‘Sedimentary,’ as he’s getting nailed with rocks.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“Or you ditch your idea completely and make a movie about a dude who starts a male escort service, and call it *Get Rick Quick*.”

“That’s pretty good.”

“I know it is.”

“But not for me.”

“I came up with that the other day, after we talked. The main guy’s name would be Rick.”

“I figured.”

“I might make it myself then.”

“You should.” I refilled my glass. “You’d be a good producer, actually. Giving pitches and all that.” Somehow that hadn’t occurred to me. “You ever thought of that?”

“Yep. Not realistic.”

The jukebox started playing “Ain’t No Sunshine” and the bartender turned it up loud enough that you could hear even the little guitar notes. We listened in respectful silence. Bill Withers sang, “I know, I know, I know, I know, I know, I know, I know...” and I thought about what it’d be like to make something as good as that song, something so permanent. For a couple minutes the song added a special gravity to our night.

“*That* should be in your movie,” Junior said, after it was over.

He was right: put it in a driving scene, when Lowell Bogart is at his low point,

right before the redemptive third act. I made a mental note. Any time I was moved by a song, I imagined it in *National Scrap*.

Then suddenly I got excited. “Hey, what if you produced *my* movie? We can team up and you take care of the fund-raising and promotion and all that.”

“Yeah, that’s like asking me if I wanna ride a unicorn. No offense.”

I nodded.

“No, but when and if you ever finish your script, let me know, brother.”

“Yeah.” I decided to drop the subject forever after that.

We stayed at Beer Haus a few more hours and the conversation touched on a bunch of random topics: Arvydas Sabonis, Jessica Alba, Creflo Dollar, the rapper Snow. I kept expecting Junior to ask me to set up an appointment for him with my dad, to try to sell his church a new organ, but he never did. I also half-expected a group of beautiful women, or at least one pretty woman, to show up randomly at the bar on my birthday, but that didn’t happen either, so I didn’t get a chance to try out my new philosophy of active failure, which I intended to apply to my love life as well. One of the middle-aged women with the nametags came outside to smoke and told me I looked like an I.T. guy, but that was it.

That week my mornings went like this: get up at 4:30, ride my bike a mile to the ubiquitous chain coffee shop on the 610 feeder (indie coffee shops don’t open before 6:30), and work on the script for an hour and a half or two hours before I had to be at Lone Star. I started this routine on Monday, despite staying out late the night before for the first time in months. Next to my bed I taped two notecards to the lamp. One said,



GLORIOUS ACTIVE FAILURE. The other one was a quote from Dr. J: “Being a professional is doing the things you love to do on the days you don't feel like doing them.” I can't say either of the notecards actually helped me get up, since I couldn't see them until I turned on the lamp. The hard part was turning on the lamp.

But for a few days I turned on the lamp each morning and got up earlier than I'd ever done in my life, except maybe for duck hunts. You get up that early on a workday and ride your bike in the dark in the cool air with only occasional pairs of headlights passing by, even on the highway, and you feel like a worthy human being for once. No more wasted time, no more Eddie Gaedel jokes.

When I got to work I locked up my bike in front of the offices, clocked in at the little machine in the break room, got my invoices, and went to the warehouse to load up. It always smelled good in there in the morning, like wood and cardboard and cold concrete. By Thursday I felt dizzy from lack of sleep, and I stood in the middle of the warehouse for a minute staring at my invoices but not seeing them, while the other drivers scooted around me in forklifts or loaded their trucks. Most of the Lone Star fleet consisted of standard fifteen-foot delivery trucks, plus one semi. I was the only one who drove a van. It had never been clear whether this was a privilege or a slap in the face.

My afternoon deliveries changed each day, but my morning route was always downtown. I looped around the skyscrapers on the Pearse Elevated and then exited. Normally I'd be listening to the *National Scrap* soundtrack, but I was too tired and needed something to stay alert, so I listened to the morning news on AM radio. All awful stories: a fireman dying in a massive blaze at an egg farm, a North Houston man beating his four year-old stepson to death for crying too much, a motorcycle cop severely injured

during a funeral procession. The kind of stories that make it difficult to understand the world.

Large stretches of downtown looked like a metropolis where the rapture or an atomic bomb had left only people in suits and very poor people. Everybody moved with a clear monetary purpose or no purpose at all, nothing in between. In front of a Blimpie and a Christian Science Reading Room I saw a young dreadlocked homeless man with big open sores on his legs, arguing with himself. A few blocks later, waiting on a worker to move a port-a-pot across the street with a forklift, I saw a police officer who appeared to nap for a second while sitting on a horse.

Downtown was the only part of the city that would habitually make me depressed, especially when I was tired. But I pulled into the loading dock of the Shell building and once I got in there I felt a little better, could concentrate on the simple tasks at hand. I sat in the van a few seconds and just stared out the window, and then roused myself out, piled up the dolly with boxes, and took the service elevator. When I stepped out into the actual building the clean air-conditioned fanciness always made me feel good, at least temporarily, like being in a museum or a luxury car.

When I got back in the van after my last trip, I had fifteen missed calls from F.W. I called him back immediately, worried something bad had happened.

“What's going *on*, big man?” This was his normal enthusiastic greeting. There was no emergency.

“Uh, I saw you called me fifteen times so I was just making sure everything was okay.”

“Couldn't be better, son. Called to see if you wanna have lunch with me

tomorrow. Got a special announcement I need to share with you. How's 11:30 sound?"

"Tomorrow?" Me and F.W. ate lunch together a lot, every couple weeks, but usually on Saturdays. I couldn't really meet people for lunch while I was working and he knew that.

"Yes, son. You hard of hearing? Tomorrow. You know the Cattle Guard on I-10?"

"No sir."

"Excellent. Why don't we meet there, let's say 11:00."

"Could we just do it Saturday?"

"It can't wait that long, son. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Alright."

"Sounds like a winner." Then he told me he had somebody on his other line and we hung up. I'd never heard him use the phrase *special announcement* before. I worried it was something about my future.

On Friday I got up early again and stuck to my routine, but all I did at the coffee shop was stare out the window at the highway and eavesdrop on the few conversations that occurred at that hour. A guy who looked like the dad from *Family Ties* came in there every day and spoke to whoever would listen, and on Friday he talked to a cop for ten minutes about Al Roker's "gastro-whatever surgery" even though the cop had no interest, and then he touched the cop's holster in admiration, without permission. The cop didn't seem happy about that at all, but didn't do anything either.

I'd reached the stage of exhaustion where everything in the world seemed like

shit. I wrote zero pages.

During work I had to get my deliveries done faster than usual, so I'd have time to eat with F.W. and hear this special announcement, and luckily I didn't have too many stops that morning. Got it done, but I was half an hour late. My granddad called me a bunch of times, but I didn't answer.

The restaurant was way out on I-10, almost to Katy. F.W. met me just inside the door, talking on his phone. He got off and introduced me to the hostess. "Britney, this is my grandson." He was always introducing me to people he'd just met, especially women.

The Cattle Guard turned out to be a place that served chicken-fried steak while ladies walked around modeling lingerie. Young ladies. F.W. mentioned right away that he brought his preacher here the week before. To be fair, though, it wasn't clear whether the lingerie modeling was an every day occurrence or a one time thing. But that day the place looked like a Victoria's Secret catalogue shot in a giant Outback Steakhouse, the stuff of dreams.

After we got seated, this one ridiculously attractive dark-haired girl in a red teddy kept walking by our table. I kept my head down, for the sake of propriety, but I'd try to catch glimpses of her after she passed. Looking at this tan woman in her red teddy was like staring into the sun. Most of the other men in our section stared at her too, making that dumb evil face older dudes make when they're looking at a young woman and don't think anyone notices. I wondered if my face looked like that. My sister would've had a lot to say about this establishment and my presence there.

F.W. stared at the red-teddied woman in open admiration. He asked me how I liked the place and I said it was nice. The models didn't take orders, by the way. The

place had normal waiters and waitresses.

After we ordered our drinks, F.W. cleared his throat and said, “Son, I’ve decided to run for City Council.”

I looked at him with an expression that was meant to be neutral. “Really?”

“Hell yes. At-large position. Election’s in a month. Special election, because of that woman who got nailed for embezzlement. And the thing of it is, I’ve always wanted to be involved in politics.”

My granddad inherited a bunch of money from my grandmother’s family when they got married and then lost it all in a carwash business, which always upset my dad and but didn’t seem to trouble F.W. at all. Later he got into the air-conditioning business and most of his customers were members of my dad’s congregation. But over the years a lot of them had complaints about their air-conditioning, so F.W. and my grandmother started attending another church. He still worked, because he had no choice. No man was more comfortable with himself, but not being a bigwig always bothered him, I think.

“A month?” I said. “You talk to my dad about this?” I knew my dad wouldn’t approve.

“I don’t *need* to, son. I’m seventy-nine years old. My daddy’s been dead forty years.” He sounded a little like he was trying to convince himself.

The woman in the red teddy walked by and F.W. stopped to clear his throat. For a second it sounded like he might be preparing to spit, but he didn’t. “Your mom and daddy think I’ve lost it,” he said. “And I may have. But, hey, life is too dadgum short, I don’t care who you are. I’m not gonna just sit around the house all day staring at your grandmother’s clocks.”

Since the funeral, I hadn't seem him act sad about my grandmother even once, but he'd do weird things that made you think he was struggling to get his bearings without her.

"Well," I said. "You think you can win?" I tried to sound positive.

"Son, I got a list of acquaintances a mile long. There are some people who would thoroughly enjoy getting me elected to City Council." He looked around the table.

"Where's my Rolodex?" He had this pop-up Rolodex with thousands of numbers in it, used to be an object of fascination for my sister and I when we were little.

"On the chair," I said.

"So it is." He grabbed it. "The point is that if you take all the names in this Rolodex and all my friends and all your daddy's friends, I think we got ourselves a winner. And I'm gonna need your help, son. I got a special project for you, if you don't mind. Tell you after we order."

While we scanned our menus looking at the different choices of sides, it dawned on me that F.W. needed me to make him a campaign commercial. And as soon as the thought came into my head, I knew I could do it and make a more artistic campaign commercial than usual, something that would be great practice for *National Scrap*, maybe even something I could use later as a calling card, my first big break. Shoot F.W. and different parts of Houston in black and white, play an old Carter Family song in the background. I got legitimately excited.

After the waiter took our order, F.W. said, "Alright, here's what I need. I'm gonna have to get my name out there to as many people as I can, and I want you to be involved in that."

“I’m in,” I said.

“Excellent.”

“How much are you looking to spend?”

“However much as the leaflets cost.”

“Leaflets.”

“Hell yes, son. Leaflets. Leaflets with my picture on em. Go around the different subdivisions, put em in people’s doorknobs. You follow me?”

“Yep.”

“You and your buddies. Take your work van. What do you say?”

“Sure.”

“*Fantastic*. I got a rough draft of the leaflet that I want you to look over. Need you to proofread it for me. I’ll get that to you soon.”

Shortly thereafter the waiter brought our food and we didn’t speak any more about the leaflets or the election. The woman in the red teddy passed by a few more times, but I mostly kept my head down. At the end of the meal, F.W. leaned back in his chair and said, “Well, I just impaled that chicken-fried steak.”

When I pulled out of the parking lot, F.W. was still standing in front of the restaurant, introducing himself to whoever walked by. He probably would’ve done that whether he was running for office or not. He never had any hesitation with people.

When I finally read what I’d written of the script so far with a good-night’s sleep under my belt, I saw it for the first time for what it was: a piece of shit. In the middle of this realization, my sister called.

“Happy belated, belated birthday! Twenty-seven, wow.”

“Thanks.”

“What's wrong with *you*?”

“Nothing. Tired.”

“Yeah right.”

“Seriously. Just feeling crappy about stuff. What's up with you?”

“Don't turn the conversation back to me, buddy. What stuff?”

So I told her about my piece of shit script, about Hurst going to dental school. She listened without interrupting.

Then she said, “Okay. Well, first of all, here's what I think you should do. You need to go out and buy a really big map of the world, a huge one, like one that'll take up a whole wall, and then every time you get down about any of this stuff you need to look at all the places on the map and think about the problems going on in all the different places, and then think about how *tiny* your problems are. I'm serious. You don't wanna know some of the stuff I heard about this week. Really. And the map thing also works if you ever become successful. Just replace problems with achievements.”

“Where'd you learn that? Some kind of retreat?”

“I made it up.”

“Just now?”

“No.”

“You guys see anything good lately?”

Since I was fourteen or so, my sister has been my primary source for cultural recommendations. And even with her busy schedule, her and her husband still saw a



bunch of movies and told me about them, stuff I somehow hadn't heard of. Most of our conversations just consisted of the two of us speaking in sort of a cultural shorthand, talking about stuff we'd seen and read and heard lately that we liked. Which is what we did for the rest of the conversation, until she had to go.

Wednesday afternoon, while I was driving back to the warehouse on the Gulf Freeway, F.W. called.

“Hey, son. Got a proposition for you. Got a couple propositions for you, actually. First of all, I gotta swing by City Hall by Friday to sign some papers for the election. Wanted to see if you'd join me. Somebody told me there's a movie office in City Hall, so I'll take you by there after I sign the papers and we can check it out. And I'll give my campaign leaflet I need you to edit. How's all that sound?”

“Sure, I can definitely come with you to fill out the forms,” I said. “But we should do the movie office some other time. Might be too much for one afternoon.” I wasn't sure a movie office in City Hall existed. F.W. had once set up a lunch for us with a guy he'd met who supposedly taught screenwriting at one of the community colleges, and I was pretty excited, but it turned out the guy taught screen *printing*. I spent the whole lunch trying to avoid embarrassing the guy by pretending I had an interest in making t-shirts, and I don't think F.W. noticed the difference.

“Son, you need to get off the damn sidelines. Never hurts to meet somebody who might be able to help you down the road.”

“Well, let's just play it by ear.”

“Fine. And on Sunday I want you to come to church with me. They're honoring

the veterans, so I wanted you to be there for that. Last year it was unreal. We stood up there and the congregation wouldn't stop cheering.” He'd been an ambulance driver during World War II, but never got overseas. When I was a kid, he told me that he'd saved multiple lives in Jacksonville, Florida, where he was stationed.

“Yeah, let's play that by ear too.” F.W.'s preacher was ten times worse than my dad, a caricature of a preacher.

“I'll pick you up on Sunday morning, no problem. And I'll pick you up from work tomorrow afternoon so we can go down to City Hall.”

“Thought you said you wanted to go on Friday.”

“Might as well knock it out tomorrow.”

“Alright.”

Before we hung up I passed the Earthman funeral home on I-45, where my grandmother's service had been, and for a second I thought about mentioning it to him, but decided against it. Earthman has to be the most strangely appropriate name for a funeral home ever. The day before the funeral, I'd gone there with F.W. to bring the funeral director some nice clothes for my grandma to wear in the casket, and I made the mistake of asking the guy why they didn't need us to bring shoes. The guy hesitated and then said something about how the feet of the deceased get bloated and that the shoes wouldn't fit my grandmother anymore, and then F.W. didn't say a word the whole way back home, the longest I'd ever seen him go without speaking.

Instead of working on *National Scrap* on Thursday, I went to City Hall with F.W. He gave me the leaflet he wanted me to edit, and I glanced at it on the way over, saw a

handful of mistakes, but put it away to look at more closely later. We parked out in front of the little reflecting pool outside City Hall, at a meter that I started to fill before F.W. stopped me, saying he was a City Council candidate and didn't need to pay.

Inside we found the office F.W. needed and he chatted everybody up along the way. "I'm running for City Council and this is my grandson Lyndon." It didn't really seem like he was actually running until he signed those forms.

I was hoping he'd forget about the movie office, but he asked a security guard about it, and I waited for him to look at F.W. like he was crazy, but he didn't. He said, "The Film Commission?" then directed us to the very first office back on the first floor, an unmarked glassed-in waiting room. Then I was hoping it would be closed--it was right at five o'clock--and I could come back alone, but the door was open.

The office smelled like Pez and the receptionist, a middle-aged black woman with blonde hair, put down the phone to address us. "Can I help you?"

"Yes," F.W. said. "You sure can. We're looking for the movie office."

"Y'all have an appointment?"

I was ready to leave at this point.

"No ma'am, but we were just hoping to peek our heads in real quick and speak to the main man."

"Hold on one second," she said, and resumed her phone conversation. She was complaining about a woman whose kids coughed all over the receptionist's kids. She talked about this for almost a minute, leaving only very brief spaces for the person on the other line to respond, and then she hung up. "Okay," she said, looking at us. "The main man. Well, the executive director of the Film Commission is a woman, and the deputy

director's a woman too, and they're the only two who work for the Commission full-time, so I don't really know who you're talking about. And we're about to close up for the day. I could make you an appointment, though. What'd you wanna talk about?"

"Well, my grandson's a filmmaker and we just wanted to come by and introduce ourselves. Lyndon, introduce yourself."

"I'm Lyndon," I said and shook her hand. She didn't give me her name.

"Okay, Lyndon," she said. "See over there in that corner, behind my desk?" She pointed to a big cardboard box against the wall. "Go over there and grab one of those out of that box."

I went beside her desk and pulled one of the books out of the box. It was a *Houston Film and Television Production Guide*, a publication whose existence I'd never even suspected. It was maybe an inch and a half thick, with a plastic ring binding and a picture of an exploding World War II plane on the cover.

"You can keep that," she said. "And there's numbers and stuff in there if you need more information. Does that help?"

"Big time," I said.

The pictures in the production guide were mostly of military equipment--battleships, tanks, B-52 Bombers, Browning .30 caliber machine guns--like Houston was trying to position itself to be the war-movie capital of the world. I can't think of a single part of Houston that could pass for any setting of any major war. If I didn't know better, I would've assumed the guide had been created by dudes. One way women are better than men, in my opinion, is that they don't have a stupid fascination with war. But apparently

the Director and Deputy Director were a different breed.

Besides all the war pictures and ads, the guide was basically just a gigantic index with categories for every single thing you could possibly need to make a movie, and a list of the places in Houston that provided those things. Whenever I thought about how to proceed once I actually finished the script, everything became real vague in my head. But now I realized that all I needed to make the movie was a script, this guide, and money to hire people. I looked at all the different phone numbers and thought about how much I hated using the phone, and then I thought about how I had no money in savings and how I'd have to convince strangers to give me money and how all the movie books say you have to be a good negotiator and haggle with the different companies who sell film and rent equipment and all that, and I knew I couldn't do any of that very well and decided I had to make a serious pitch to Junior.

I waited for him on Thursday, but by midnight he wasn't home, so I went to bed. But I was ready for him on Friday afternoon, after work. He pulled up to our duplex about six o'clock and I met him outside, the production guide in hand. Hadn't seen him in over a week, at least.

“Hello, sir,” I said.

“What's up,” he said, pulling out the trendy bag he took to work and walking up to the porch.

“Got a proposition for you.” I realized as the words came out of my mouth that F.W. had said the same thing to me. For a second I wondered if I was about to start turning into F.W. My dad used to say that when he was growing up, all the men in the

neighborhood referred to F.W. as a *piece of work* and that my dad's only goal as a young man was to become a man who could never be described that way. To me being described like that didn't seem like such a bad thing, though.

“Okay,” Junior said, skeptical already. “Tell me.”

I told him about the production guide and that all we needed to make a movie was his negotiating skills and this book. He said all that information was available on the Internet and then told me he was busy with another project anyway. “So my friend sent me this article about some cherries that make everything taste different, right?” he said. He had gone into sales-pitch mode himself, for some reason. Maybe for practice, or just because he was excited. “They're called Miracle Cherries. You suck on these things and then for a couple hours everything you eat or drink tastes *crazy*. Cheese will taste like...limes, or something. And vice versa.”

“That sounds terrible.”

“You wouldn't say that if you tried em, brother.”

“You've tried them?”

“No, but anyway, here's the thing: people in New York have started throwing parties where they charge everybody for a cherry and then put out a bunch of beer and tequila and fruits and vegetables and everybody just tastes a bunch of different stuff until it wears off. Fruit-tripping parties. These things are *huge* in NYC right now, brother. And guess what? Nobody does it in Houston, or anywhere in the Southeast or Southwest. If anybody threw these parties down here, I would know. Right? So that's where I come in. The whole market's untapped.”

“Honestly, this sounds like another bullshit scheme to me. Sorry.”

“That's what they said about eBay too, brother. And now that guy's a billionaire.”

“A woman created eBay.”

“Be skeptical. I'm used to getting no support from you. Doesn't bother me anymore.”

I realized then that I'd made a huge mistake in giving him my honest reaction, letting my annoyance with his history of schemes get the best of me. The fruit-tripping parties and the movie weren't mutually exclusive at all. In fact, the one might help fund the other.

“Listen, man, you're right. Sorry to be so dismissive. Seriously. It sounds like a great idea and it does actually use some of your best qualities, though maybe not *all* your best qualities. I guess I'm just trying to talk you out of it so you'll consider my idea. But I realize now that the great thing about the fruit-tripping is that you'd have time to do both.”

“I'm not working on your movie, brother. I'll do *imaginary* work on it, because it's an imaginary movie. But that's about it.”

“That's the thing. It's not imaginary anymore.”

“Riiiiight,” Junior said.

On Saturday I worked on the script all day at the house, but without setting any ridiculous goals for myself. I worked on the script until about midnight and then watched *Bob the Gambler*, which I'd never seen and which I enjoyed as much as any non-Truffaut French movie I'd ever seen, and tried not to compare the quality of my script so far with that one. Then I looked up as much as I could about Bob the Gambler on the Internet and

found out that the director shot some of the scenes on location with a handheld camera *while riding a delivery bike*. That's the kind of thing I wanted to do. Hearing stuff like that made it hard for me to sleep.

Woke up on Saturday morning at nine to the sound of my phone ringing. F.W.

“You up and at ‘em, son?”

“No sir.”

“Well, better get moving. I'm on my way. Gonna pick you up in about fifteen minutes. So hustle.”

“I don't think I'm gonna be able to make it today. Sorry. I got a bunch of work I need to do.”

“Alright...That's fine.” You rarely heard F.W. sound disappointed, but he did here.

“Sorry about that.”

“Okay, no problem. I guess I'll talk to you later.”

I sat there in bed for a while after I hung up and tried to go back to sleep, but I couldn't. I started feeling bad, thinking about the disappointed sound in his voice, even though I told myself it wasn't a big deal at all. The only time in my life I think I'd ever seen F.W. disappointed because of something I did--if you don't count the thing with the shoes at the funeral home--was when I was a little kid, and I kicked the crap out of F.W.'s shin for no reason. I don't know what happened, why I did it. Just some sudden inexplicable meanness. Which wasn't how I normally rolled as a kid at all. But I was like eight years old and I just kicked him as hard as I could--he ended up having a nasty bruise for a few weeks--and I remember he was grabbing his shin and looking at me like,



*Why, son?* In my bed I thought about that memory for the thousandth time, one of those little memories that just stick with you, and then I got up and called him.

“Hey. Too late to change my mind?”

“Hell no, son. You wanna go?”

“Sure.”

“Excellent. Sounds like a winner. Pick you up in just a little bit.”

At church F.W. wore a suit with a light pink dress-shirt and a darker pink tie and stood longer than anyone else when they honored the veterans. The pastor was the same one since the last time I'd been there, and I think he was a good-intentioned guy, but he laid on the gentle preacher way too thick. A lot of his statements began with him speaking in a stage whisper and saying, “Friends...” He had a voice and manner that refused to acknowledge any complexity.

After church F.W. spent an hour introducing or reintroducing me to other members of the congregation in the lobby. You could tell who knew him well and who didn't by their reaction when F.W. introduced me. The ones who didn't know him well acted serious and polite when they got introduced, as opposed to F.W.'s friends. One guy came over and F.W. said, “Roy, this is my grandson,” and the guy smiled at me and said, “I'm sorry to hear that, young man. Must be a great burden.” Another guy said it was good to meet me and then turned to F.W. and said, “I don't know what your grandson thinks, but I'd say a man's gotta think pretty highly of himself to wear a pink shirt with a pink tie.” And when F.W. introduced me to the assistant pastor, who was a lot older than the main pastor, the guy said, “Son, I just want you to know that the Lord doesn't punish grandsons for the sins of their granddaddies.” Those introductions were worth the visit.

On the way out, F.W. walked a blind worshipper across the street, bullshitting with him the whole time and treating him with no sympathy at all, and then we went to lunch.

At the end of lunch he asked if I'd edited his leaflet yet and I had to say no, but that I'd get on it right away, and I did.

The picture on the leaflet featured a younger, less handsome F.W. in an eighties-style coat and tie, smiling like he'd just done something evil. Above the picture, in big letters, it said: *CHILDRESS FOR HOUSTON, CHILDRESS FOR AMERICA*, which I thought was a pretty decent slogan, actually. Below the picture he'd created a bunch of bullet points, almost all of which had some kind of spelling or grammatical mistake. One of the bullet points said: *F.W. Childress care's about the kid's*. Another one said: *F.W. Childress will roll up his arms and get after it for the taxpayer*. I made my corrections with red pen and also typed up a list of all the corrections he needed to make.

I thought he'd be calling me that night and multiple times per day asking for the edits, but I didn't hear from him for a few days. I stuck to my new routine of working on the script in the afternoons, kept making my slow progress and kept trying not to think about whether it was any good or not.

Friday, F.W. called me from a restaurant and right away he started telling me about his dinner companions, who were apparently sitting right next to him. "Bob here's an electrical engineer, so I've been picking his brain about that..." He sounded like he'd just met these people, which wasn't surprising. Every Friday night him and my grandmother used to go to the same Mexican place and drink Margaritas, and now that she was gone, he still went to the same place by myself every Friday, and struck up

conversations with nearby tables until somebody invited him to join them.

He told me he was going to come by my place in the morning and take me to breakfast, so he could get the corrected leaflet. I told him that was fine. It was almost certain that he called me in front of those people on purpose, to show everybody the rapport he had with his grandson.

A couple hours later, I'd settled in for a movie at around ten when Junior knocked on my door.

"Ribbie?" he said.

"Uh, sure."

We started it up, having to turn the Nintendo off and on a few times before we could get it to work. Then we picked teams and starters. "Why are *you* home so early?" I said.

"Don't worry bout it." Neither of us looked away from the screen to speak.

"Cherries make everybody sick?"

"Nope."

"It just ended early? That doesn't sound like a Junior Kargbo event."

"This wasn't the event."

"What was it?"

"Test run."

"How'd the test run go?"

"Not great."

"Sorry to hear that. What now?"

"Already made the deal with the bar and I guaranteed we'd reach the maximum

capacity allowed by the fire code. I also already spread the word, so..."

"Shit. You could back out? Cancel it."

"Riiiiight."

"Hey, you know what? If you get maximum capacity at the bar, people aren't even gonna care if the cherries work or not. They're just gonna be excited to be at an *event*. It's not all about the cherries. It's about you hosting everybody, making sure it's a good time, your specialty. And people'll always come back for that."

"Not a bad point, actually."

"You can make a disclaimer: *We can't guarantee that these cherries will do anything special, but we can guarantee you'll have a special night*. Put that on a sign for everyone to read when they come in, along with a disclaimer about the cherries not being FDA-approved. And then you don't have to be nervous about anything."

"Yeah. I might word the sign better, but yeah. That could definitely work."

"You're welcome."

Saturday morning me and F.W. had breakfast at a diner on the Southwest Freeway. Every time I'd tell him about something he needed to fix he'd say, "Duly noted," but he didn't always look at the flyer as he said it, and he kept trying to change the subject. "What's old Junior up to these days?" he said, after I told him it needed to be *sleeves*, not arms.

Junior and F.W. both viewed each other with amused condescension, which I always found interesting. Both of them liked each other, but neither seemed to think the other was deserving of a full measure of respect, and probably both felt like that for the

same exact reasons, although a case could be made that Junior also condescended because of F.W.'s age and F.W. also condescended because of Junior's skin. I pointed out a comma error and then told him about Junior's party, and F.W. said, "Leave it to your buddy Junior to hoodwink a bunch of young people with fruits and vegetables." But he also seemed to wish he'd thought of the idea himself.

I tried to redirect the conversation back to the campaign leaflet, pointed out that he used the phrase *due to the fact that* three times in one bullet point.

"Duly noted. Hey, tell me about your current female situation."

I said I didn't really have one to speak of.

"Son, if I was your age..." He had to stop and calm himself. "You need to get out there and throw caution to the wind, stop being so damn tentative, make some mistakes. You know what I'd give to be twenty-seven years old again? Hell, you know what I would give to be *fifty*-seven again?" He took a deep breath, then made some hawking sounds, clearing his throat. "In Jacksonville, I dated three nurses at the same time. I'd leave one nurse at one wing of the hospital, go see the next one at the next wing." Seemed like this was the start of a longer story, so I waited, but that was it. "Okay, what else?" he said, looking at the flyer.

When I finished showing him every correction, I summarized what he needed to change and then gave him the marked-up leaflet and the list of changes.

"Well, I really appreciate this," F.W. said, putting the paper in his coat pocket as we got up from our table. He was dressed nicer than usual, like he had a campaign event after this. We went to pay at the front and F.W. said, "You see the paper this morning?" and picked up one of the papers for sale, opened it up and started flipping to the back of

the first section. "Look right there." There was a list of all the candidates for the at-large position, probably twenty names, and F.W. was on it, third from the top. This made it seem very real.

"They got me in third place," F.W. said, nodding, and then folding the paper sloppily before returning it.

"I think that's just alphabetical order," I said.

"I know that."

When we got back in the car, F.W. went south on the highway, instead of back towards my place. "Where're we going?" I said.

"I just need to stop by this funeral real quick."

Once you got into the car with F.W. for breakfast, you were committed for the rest of day. You might end up going with him for no apparent reason to the ship channel or an AC supply warehouse or the top of a building in the Galleria area or to bring lightbulbs to one of his elderly cousins. So I wasn't surprised that he wasn't taking me back to my place, but I was surprised that we were going to a funeral. I wasn't dressed for it and didn't want to go to a funeral whether I was dressed for it or not. Nobody ever wants to go to a funeral. The last one I'd gone to was my grandmother's, which I know I keep talking about, but still. I remember spending the whole time trying to keep my emotions under control and then at the end of the day really wishing I hadn't.

So we drove down to Rosenberg to go to the funeral of a man who owned a paint and body shop that did work a few times on my granddad's car. F.W. had read about the funeral in the obituaries, the first section he read every morning. "You know how many funerals I've been to this month? Guess." Before I could give a number, he said, "Seven."

He acted like he was bragging, but he also seemed overwhelmed, like he was talking about the death toll of a tsunami.

“How old was this guy?” I said.

“Young. Sixty-two.”

“Had he been sick a long time? Was he expected to die?” I always look for something to convince myself there’s a logic to it.

“I don’t know if he’d been sick long. It didn’t say. But we’re all expected to die, son. Stupid question.”

The cemetery was a couple miles off the highway, which was nice, as opposed to where my grandmother’s buried, right alongside the Interstate. The grounds were enormous and it took us a while to find the canopy and all the cars, and by the time we did, the service was already in progress. We walked up quietly, F.W. nodding at anyone who looked his direction, and stood in the back. The preacher faced everyone and there were four people in chairs by the casket and three people standing behind the chairs and that was it. Single digits, not counting us. I’m not counting a worker standing a little ways off, waiting do his thing with the backhoe, or the two funeral people, an older man in a suit, looking exactly we expect funeral directors to look, and a pretty attractive dark-haired woman in her late twenties or early thirties, dressed business professional, holding a clipboard. The woman appeared to be crying a little, even though she was clearly attending the funeral for her job. I figured maybe she worked for the funeral home and also knew the guy.

I’ve only been to a few funerals, but the preacher gave what I imagine to be one of the worst eulogies in funeral history. We walked up after it seemed like he’d already

been going a while. “Although Jimmy was not a veteran,” he said, “many men of his generation and the generation before his died so that we might have freedom, and for that we will always be grateful. And I’m sure that Jim was always grateful for that freedom himself. There are those that say we don’t need to protect these freedoms, that we should co-operate with tyrants, but the men of Jim’s generation and his father’s generation knew that this was naive, that the world is a hard place...” This preacher made very little attempt to even *pretend* he was speaking about the deceased, like the preacher’s thoughts were more important than the actual guy who was being eulogized. He went on like that for a while. Only at the end did he mention the body shop, saying, “Jimmy served others selflessly every day at his shop, never stopping to ask that age-old question, ‘What’s in it for me?’” That didn’t seem to be a necessary question for someone who owned a paint and body shop. The whole thing seemed so fake and impersonal, like the guy’s life hadn’t been enough to earn him a genuine funeral. I didn’t even know him, but it made me sad and kind of sick.

When it was over, I hung back on the side and F.W. went over to talk to give his condolences. He talked to a woman who must’ve been Jim’s wife and I heard him raise his voice and say, “Yeah, old Jimmy was a decent man. Always gave me a good deal when I needed some work done. One time I brought my old Maxima down there, my other Maxima, after it got scratched up, and Jimmy told me, ‘F.W., I’ll do this for you, cost you about four hundred bucks. But you could get yourself some touch-up paint and do it yourself for five dollars.’ I told him, ‘Jimmy, I don’t *want* touch-up paint. I want the real deal.’ That was Jimmy.”

F.W. talked to a few other people, shaking hands and patting shoulders, and I



stayed over on the side, by myself.

F.W. talked to a few other people, shaking hands and patting shoulders, and I stayed over on the side, by myself, and tried not to seem like I was observing, even though I was. There was a big, red-faced guy in his twenties who kept dabbing his eyes with Kleenex and talking to a really old woman, Jim's son and Jim's mother, I guessed. The son wasn't like the men in my family, who tried to keep a straight face no matter what, and for no clear benefit. He looked shocked. He looked like he wasn't even seeing the things in front of him.

I turned away when he looked over, and then I realized the woman with the clipboard was standing a few feet away from me, in the grass just outside the canopy. She wasn't crying. She was just waiting, with a neutral helpful face, holding the clipboard to her chest. I had two thoughts at that moment: this woman was unusually pretty for someone who worked at a funeral home, and I was very curious about why she was crying. My curiosity outweighed my shyness in this case.

“Hey,” I said, talking softly and moving a step closer to her, “you work for the funeral home?”

“Mm-hmm.” She said this gravely, with professional sympathy.

“And you knew Jim too?” I said.

“No, I didn't,” she said, like she regretted it. “He sounded like a lovely man, though.”

“Oh. I thought I saw you crying earlier.”

“I get emotional when I see people grieving.”

“Every time?”

“Well, sort of. Yeah.”

“How often do you have to do this?”

“What?”

“Go to funerals.”

She looked at me like maybe she wasn't supposed to talk about this, like it might take away from this particular funeral. “Usually once a week, sometimes two or three. But each one's different.”

“You go to multiple funerals a week and you cry every time? Man...”

“Some weeks we don't have anything. And I get two weeks of vacation.”

“How long've you been doing this?”

“Nine months.”

“Wow.” For a second I couldn't think of anything else to say, and we both looked at the people still talking under the canopy.

“What's your relationship to the deceased?” she said.

“He worked on my granddad's car,” I said.

“Oh.”

“That's my granddad right there, by the casket? The one handing out business cards.”

She nodded.

“Only that guy would hand out business cards at a funeral.”

She smiled, just barely, and then her face went serious again.

“I never met Jim,” I said, “but he deserved a much better eulogy, right? That was terrible. Made me sad.”

“Yeah, that was...” She trailed off. “I don’t know. But everybody definitely deserves a good eulogy.”

“Everybody should get at least one person who keeps track of all the details and does their life justice after it's over.”

“Maybe his family did that, and just shared it with each other.”

“Yeah, true. I hope so.”

“Me too.”

A few people started to leave the canopy and walk back to the cars, men holding the older women gently by the arm. “Well, I have to go,” she said, and looked at me.

“Nice meeting you.”

“You too,” I said, not even remembering to introduce myself before she walked off.

F.W. came by and didn’t say anything to me about her, which means he didn’t see it.

“Is there a reception?” I said, when we got back in the car.

“Not that I know of,” F.W. said, starting the engine. “I would’ve been invited if there was.”

We wove through the cemetery, away from the canopy and the other cars, me looking out the window. “What’d you think of the service?” I said.

“Thought it was real nice. Real good eulogy. But I’d like to have a few more people at mine.”

“I bet that won’t be a problem,” I said. It wasn’t unpleasant to think of F.W.’s death, because you got to imagine one of the biggest funerals ever, and because it only

seemed like he'd die in theory. He looked exactly the same as he did when I was little kid, always sixty-five years old.

We pulled out of the cemetery, got back on the road toward the highway. F.W. rolled down the window, made loud revving noises in his throat and spit, his normal ritual whenever he commenced a drive.

"I'll tell you what, though," he said, after he rolled the window back up. "You say, 'Lord, let's make a deal. You give me eighty good years and I'll be *more* than happy.' But then you get close to the deadline and you wanna ask for an extension."

After that I thought a lot about that girl from the funeral home, and also about the eulogy. And I was thinking about the preacher at my granddad's church, a decent man if he had a fake preaching voice, and I knew he wouldn't contort F.W.'s life story for his own purposes, but he still wouldn't do F.W. justice. The other old men at the church could come closer, but nobody could fully do him justice. But I decided that my movie needed to stop being so stupid and impersonal and start being a tribute to F.W. When I got home, I started writing down as many things as I could about F.W., things he'd said, things he'd done, including in those recent weeks. I realized that instead of making the movie about Lowell and his brother Levon, I'd make it about Lowell and his *grandfather* Levon.

I felt like I'd had about five cups of coffee.

And then I thought about the title, which had always meant nothing, and suddenly I pictured a business called National Scrap and thought about *Bob the Gambler* and decided that the company would be a front for an illegal casino and that the trucker

Lowell and his boss and grandfather Levon would try to pull off a heist and steal all the money from the casino, to give to charity. And that the first line of the movie would be Levon saying this to Lowell: *Always look a lazy-eyed man in the right eye.* Because that was advice F.W. had given me when I was little. And the villain, Tubby Hester, would have a lazy eye now. And I would drop the cocktail umbrellas from the story completely.

Instead of saying I'd start it later, like I usually did, I started it right then, that night, from page one.

Called in sick Monday morning so I could keep working on the script. I'd never called in sick before, didn't get paid if I missed. Seemed worth it though. Stayed home all day and didn't shower or brush my teeth and only left to walk some place close to my house to get food or occasionally to circle my block when I didn't know what to write next. Junior came over on Monday night to see if I wanted to play Ribbie and I said no and didn't explain.

Called in sick again Tuesday and on Wednesday told them I'd be out all week. They didn't ask what was wrong. By the end of Friday night I had sixty pages, an hour's worth of script. It occurred to me that quantity didn't mean much at all, but I was having fun, so I didn't give a crap. My goal now was glorious activity.

I wrote for a few hours on Saturday morning and then F.W. picked me up for lunch. My head was fuzzy from being in my own world all week and it took me a while to focus. We had lunch and he asked me how my movie writing was going and I told him it was going good, actually, and didn't mention that he was a character. He told me about the latest news in the City Council race, which was getting to the home stretch now. He'd

been doing nothing to campaign except make phone calls from his Rolodex and talk to everyone he came across in public, which admittedly was a lot of people. The frontrunner according to the newspaper was a former school board member named Cheryl Reavis, who had run the only television commercials of the election and who F.W. referred to as the Black Panther. She was a white woman with dark hair and I worried that the nickname might cause confusion or be misconstrued and make him look bad if he referred to her this way in public. "I told Fat Boy that if the Black Panther keeps this up, it's gonna be too wet to plow," he said. Fat Boy was the nickname he'd given his next-door neighbor.

I nodded. He seemed to be losing it a little, maybe.

He said, "My new line is, 'We've had a black mayor named Brown, a white mayor named White, and a Lesbian mayor. The least the citizens can do is put an old air-conditioning man on the City Council.'"

"Have you used it yet?" I said.

"Used what?"

"The line."

"I used it on Fat Boy. He got a big kick out of it."

"Yeah, I'm not sure you should use it. It doesn't even completely make sense."

"Let your granddad decide what makes sense, son."

After we'd stopped talking about the election, I said, "You got any plans for the rest of the day?"

"My schedule's clean. You got something in mind? I'll do whatever you wanna do, big man."

“Need you to take me back to that funeral home in Richmond.”

“Sure. What happened, you leave something?”

“There's a girl there I wanna talk to.”

“She alive?” He kept a straight face when he said this.

“Yep.”

“Well, let's hook 'em outta here then.”

So F.W. drove us the thirty miles to Rosenberg, asking me questions, but not in a prying way. “Tell me about this sweet baby doll...” I told him about her and our interaction in a general way. I didn't try to explain our exchange about eulogies or her crying at every funeral.

When we pulled into the entrance, I contemplated asking F.W. to stay in the car, but I knew that would hurt his feelings worse than a kick in the shin and that, more importantly, his presence would make the situation less awkward. We parked in front of the main funeral home building and walked inside.

A kid in his early twenties dressed like a bellhop met us at the entrance. “Yes, can I help you?” he said. He whispered this. The place was quiet and empty.

“You sure can,” F.W. said. “We're looking for--what'd you say her name was, son?”

“I didn't get her name,” I said. “The woman who works here...” I couldn't think of what her job title might be.

The bellhop-looking kid stared at me with a compassionate, confused expression.

“The young woman who holds the clipboard at funerals,” I said.

“Okay. Ms. Romero. She's actually out at a burial site right now, unfortunately.

Could I give her a message for you when she comes back?"

"Thank you," I said, and then we walked back outside to find the burial site.

We drove around for a while and got lost on the all the different little streets and couldn't find the tent for a long time until we got to the far opposite side of the cemetery. We pulled up as people were getting into their cars and limousines. I saw her with her clipboard, talking to the funeral director from before, standing under the canopy.

At this point I realized I had no idea what to say or do. We waited in the car until all the mourners had driven off, and then we both got out. I was nervous as hell at this point. I thought about shouting her *Ms. Romero* and asking her to come over to where I was, so I wouldn't have to talk to her in front of the funeral director, but I felt real weird about saying her name, since I hadn't earned it.

We just kept walking through the grass up to the funeral tent, the director and the girl both staring at us now. This was one of those unnatural situations in which F.W. felt perfectly comfortable. When we got close I saw the moment when she recognized me, either because we'd gotten close enough or because it finally registered in her head how she remembered me. She wasn't crying, but her eyes were red.

"How are y'all doing?" F.W. said. And then I realized he might try to play match-maker right now and would be liable to say anything and I got terrified. He looked at the funeral director and stuck out his hand and said, "F.W. Childress."

"Nice to meet you," the director said, in the same quiet voice as the bellhop.

"We've met before, old buddy. You've buried a few of my friends. In fact, me and my grandson were at the service last Saturday."

"That's right," the funeral director said. I'd been watching this conversation, but



now I looked at her. She turned and looked at me and gave me the same brief smile she'd made at the funeral.

F.W. put his hand on the funeral director's shoulder. "Now, my wife is buried over on the Gulf Freeway and I'll be buried next to her, but you do such good work that I thought I might come down here and just get an estimate."

"Well, certainly," the funeral director said, and then F.W. led him away from us, into the grass out by the car, and we were just standing there.

"So," I said. "Basically, I thought about our conversation a lot over the last week and then I asked my granddad to come down here with me, so I could introduce myself. I'm Lyndon." I waved instead of going for the handshake.

"Good to see you again, Lyndon. I'm Stephanie."

"Stephanie."

I heard a snippet of F.W.'s conversation, him asking the funeral director something about wastewater treatment facilities.

"How was the eulogy today?" I said.

"Better."

"That's good. Hey, would you wanna go eat together some night this week?"

"I have a boyfriend." She said this apologetically.

"Oh. Well, crap," I said. "I didn't see that coming. Not that I didn't see you being in a relationship. You...of course a girl like you would be in a relationship. I just didn't consider it for some reason." Something about finding out that she had a boyfriend made me talk too much. "I hope he supports you with your job. It's not an easy job. Really."

"Thanks."

“Okay. I'd say we should hang out some time as friends, you and me and your boyfriend and my granddad and Curtis, but I live like forty miles away and I don't have a car.”

“Well, I just hope we don't run into each other again while I'm working.”

It took me a second to get this. At first I thought she was criticizing me. “Oh. Yeah. Me either.”

“But I do hope we run into each other again,” she said. “Thanks for coming. That was sweet.”

“No problem. And now I'm gonna go.”

I left her standing there and walked back towards the car. F.W. told the funeral director they'd be in touch and gave him a business card. Then we got in the car and drove off.

“Well, tell me. How'd it go?”

“She has a boyfriend.”

“And? So what. That doesn't mean squat, son. She got a ring on her finger?”

“No.”

“That's *his* problem, then. Can't let a showdog loose on the Southwest Freeway without a collar.”

“Huh?”

“I'm just telling you not to worry about the boyfriend. Nothing legally binding about a boyfriend.”

Sunday night was Junior's big night: the fruit-tripping party. In the back of my

mind I'd had a plan to invite the girl from the funeral home to come with me, figuring it'd be a good ice-breaker, but I'd given up on that now, despite what F.W. said. Even though I told Junior I'd go, I skipped it.

Instead I just stayed home and worked on *National Scrap*, wrote a new scene where Lowell Bogart gets rejected by his love interest. I didn't hear Junior come home that night. In the morning, I rode my bike over to Lone Star to see if I could get a leave of absence for another week. They told me to come pick up my last paycheck the next day and when my so-called leave of absence was over I could reapply for my job, if they hadn't hired someone already. I felt like a professional athlete who finally realizes it's a business.

I'd hoped to use my van and the other trucks and the warehouse itself for the movie, but I decided to worry about that when the time came. I've never had an ability to think ahead about financial matters, so once I picked up my pay check the next day, I didn't worry, though later I realized I should have.

On Friday afternoon I finished the script. I thought I'd feel elated or celebratory or something, but I didn't feel anything. Maybe a little relieved. A few months before I would've been thrilled to have finished a script, but now I was used to the idea. You always get used to everything before you can get real excited about it, in my experience. I wanted to start thinking about the cast and crew, and who would play Lowell and Levon and Tubby Hester.

On Saturday morning, F.W. was too busy to have lunch for once. He had to get a bunch of copies made of the flyer, which we were passing out the next day, and make one last visit to our city's malls to speak to voters and Saturday night he'd been given an

opportunity to speak to the crowd at a Baptist church downtown before the performance of a patriotic musical.

So Junior and I headed over to breakfast at a place on Washington called El Guapo. “So where you been all week, brother?” he said, on the way over.

“Home. Where *you* been?”

“Things have been *crazy*. Been doing some press for the parties. This thing's blowing up. Gonna do another one in a couple weeks, possibly in a bigger venue.”

“No problems with the cherries?”

“Nope. You came up huge for me on all that.”

“Did the cherries actually work?”

“Hit or miss. But like you said, the key is creating an event. I created an event. I'd give you the same advice if you ever make a movie. Turn it into an event.”

“I finished my script.”

“Nice. What?”

“Finished a draft of my script.”

“When?”

“Yesterday.”

“Look at *you*.”

“Yep.”

“Is it any good?”

“Don't know.”

“Well, either way, long time coming.”

“Yes it is.”

“You're evolving. I love it. Breakfast is on me, brother.”

When we got into El Guapo, Junior kept referring to me as “my amigo the screenwriter” whenever he said something to the waitress. I appreciated that, but I don't think she did. We didn't talk about the details of the script. He spent the rest of the lunch telling me about various comments that were made at the party, various local celebrities and professional athletes who'd attended.

When the meal was over and we were walking back to the car, I said, “Hey, I know you probably can't make it, but I'm helping F.W. pass out leaflets tomorrow afternoon for his campaign.”

“Yeah, he already called me. Told him I'd be there.”

Early Sunday afternoon Junior and I started handing out the campaign leaflets in various neighborhoods, some of which had signs that explicitly told us not to distribute leaflets. F.W. followed behind us in his car, going slow, stopping every so often to lean out and shake hands. We'd already handed out leaflets to a few houses before I realized that he hadn't made any of the changes I'd suggested. I don't know if this was a computer issue, him not knowing how to use one, or what. I should've just done the leaflet for him. Multiple times throughout the afternoon I heard him say, “My grandson there helped me write this thing.”

Around three F.W. left to go take a nap and Junior and I kept going, walking around the nice tree-lined neighborhoods around Rice University. I'd only stick the leaflets in the doorknobs, but Junior knocked each time, and gave a pitch about my grandfather and how well he'd represent the city and the importance of this election. He

also told some of the younger people about his next party and sold at least one family a timeshare.

After a couple hours we took a break in a little park near the university, sitting on a bench under the enormous oaks, tired from all the walking and the heat and humidity.

“So when do I get to see this script?” Junior said.

“Huh?”

“When do I get to read it and see if I wanna get involved?”

“I can give it to you after we're done here.”

“Do that.”

F.W. called and I told him where we were and met us over there, parked his Maxima on the side of the street with the flashers on. He came over and leaned against a tree near our bench and unwrapped a cough drop. “How we doing out there?”

“Pretty good,” I said.

“Building a lot of support,” Junior said.

“That's what I wanna hear. Boys, I'm happier than a dog with two deals that y'all were able to come out here and help me today. You don't know what that means to an old man like me. I'm serious, now. And I think we're in pretty good shape. I've seen a lot of signs for the Black Panther, but I've seen a lot of our leaflets too. I'll tell you one thing, we're gonna put it on Cheryl Reavis like Bon Ami can't take off.”

Junior and I nodded, not invested in this speech. F.W. started coughing, a long hacking cough, and hitting his chest with his fist. He coughed for a full thirty seconds and then said, “Hey, let me tell y'all something else. What this shows, me running for City Council this late in life and maybe winning the whole damn deal, is that you gotta keep

chasing your dreams. Hey, life's pretty fun, if you let it be. And I know you both have your own little dreams and I just wanna say, hey, and you need to follow them to the end. The thing of it is, you may not be seventy-nine years old 'til it happens, like me, but it'll happen. That's the main thing.” He started tearing up.

He pulled out a tissue and dabbed his eyes, made another hacking sound in his throat, walked back to his car, and drove off.

Me and Junior handed out leaflets until it was almost dark and then we walked a couple miles back to the other side of 59, where Junior's car was parked. F.W. was supposed to drive us back to his car, but we didn't hear from him again. When we got home, I gave Junior the script, and then went back over to my place so I didn't have to watch his reaction.

A couple hours later Junior knocked on my door, script in hand.

“Pretty good,” he said. “Not great, but pretty good. I've never actually read one of these things before, mind you. But I finished it.”

I nodded.

“So what are what are we talking about, here? What would the job of producer entail? Specifically.”

“Raising money would be the main thing. Also, doing the line budget, helping me choose a cast and crew and then negotiating their contracts, finding locations, negotiating with the people who own the locations. A lot of negotiating. What else? Filling out the legal paperwork, getting the movie into a festival, promoting it, campaigning for awards.”

“When do we start?”

“You serious?”

“Yes sir. Let's do it. *National Scrap*. We'll talk about the title later.”

We shook hands. I went and got all the how-to-make-a-movie movie books from my shelf that had stuff about production and gave it to him. “This stuff'll give you a better idea.” He didn't look happy about receiving the books.

“Only thing is,” I said, “I don't want you to say you're in if you're gonna back out later. It's gonna be a ton of work.”

“Don't question me. I'm in.”

“Alright then.”

We ended up going to a bar to celebrate the first day of pre-production, me telling him all the different stuff we need to do, approaches I've read about for raising money. Junior wanted to talk about who might play the love interest. Discussing this stuff with Junior was a lot more fun than planning it in my head.

Then around twelve-thirty I got a phone call. My dad. One of those calls you get and you stop breathing and hope it isn't something really terrible.

“Hey. You talk to your granddad this evening?” he said. “Where are you?”

“No sir. Not since this afternoon. I'm at a bar with Junior.”

Normally he'd comment on this, me at a bar on a Sunday night. “Well, we can't get ahold of him and don't know where he is. His neighbor David called me a few minutes ago and said he noticed that F.W. never came home tonight.” David was the guy F.W. called Fat Boy. “He's not picking up his phone.”

I didn't know what to say, didn't say anything. Junior stared at me.

“What was he about to do when you saw him this afternoon?”



“I don't know. Maybe campaign some more? He didn't say. We were handing out leaflets.”

“I need you and Junior to go drive around those neighborhoods and look for him. We've called the police and a few of the hospitals. Your mother's outside his house and I'm driving around over there.”

“Oh man.”

So me and Junior retraced our steps, me with a pit in my stomach the whole time, feeling nauseous. We didn't see him or his car. Drove back to the park and everything. Nothing. I called him, too, even though I knew my mom and dad were doing the same thing. There's nothing worse than when you can't get ahold of somebody you love and you're worrying more and more and the phone just keeps ringing. After a while it stopped ringing and started going straight to voicemail, which was even scarier somehow.

By the time we time we drove to F.W.'s house, there was an Amber Alert on the highway: MISSING ELDERLY WHITE NISSAN MAXIMA. Part of me, even under the circumstances, couldn't help but thinking about all the different ways you could read that alert, the elderly and the white describing either F.W. or his car. But then I'd remember what the alert actually up there for, and I'd feel sick. We went over there to his house and stood in the driveway with my mom and dad and David, my dad talking on the phone and the rest of us staring at the dark and hardly speaking.

We got a call from the police at four in the morning, all of us still standing outside. They told my dad that they'd found F.W. in Tanglewood and that he'd been taken in an ambulance to Methodist Hospital. A woman had called about a man sleeping on her

lawn, who turned out to be F.W. The police found him unconscious in the grass, but they were able to wake him, though he was extremely groggy, and had difficulty breathing. There were a couple of Cheryl Reavis campaign signs next to him and in the back seat of his Maxima they found more signs. They speculated that he'd been running with the signs and had a heart attack, although I'd never seen him run before and doubted at least that part of the story. F.W. wasn't charged with anything, despite the stolen signs.

At the hospital that morning the doctors performed an emergency angioplasty and put stents in his coronary artery. This was the first time I'd ever heard that word, *stents*. We went to the hospital and sat in the waiting room during the surgery, none of us saying anything. It wasn't until almost lunch time that they moved him into a recovery room and we were able to go see him.

He was groggy and had tubes all in him, but he looked like himself, except that he didn't smile. He stared at all of us in an alert way when we came in the room, the whole group of us, Junior and David included.

“Hi, dad,” my dad said.

F.W. nodded.

“You feeling okay?” my mom said.

He nodded again.

“Do you understand what happened to you?” my dad said.

“Can y'all clear out of here?” F.W. said. His voice wasn't strong.

Junior stepped out of the room. “Who?” my dad said.

“Everybody. Everybody but Fat Boy.”

“We just want to make sure you're okay,” my dad said.

“Need to do damage control,” F.W. said.

“You don't need to be thinking about that right now,” my dad said. “You had a *heart attack*. You need to worry about your health. And your mental health, to be completely honest.”

“Y'all clear out,” F.W. said. And we all did, including David.

The doctor told us that, barring complications, F.W. would be released tomorrow afternoon, and that it looked like he was recovering fine. David and Junior went home and I stayed with my parents in the waiting room. We peeked in on F.W. a few times, but he was sleeping. After a while we picked up some food across the street and then I told them I'd stay for a few more hours and get Junior to come pick up, and they could go and come back in the morning. They protested only for a second.

So I sat in the chair in the corner and watched TV and after a while he woke up and started talking.

“I shouldn't have been removing those signs. That was a mistake. That was an error in judgment. Maybe God struck me down. I heard some choir sounds in my ear and then I was out.”

“That's probably an effect of the heart attack,” I said.

“Some people are just *born* to make errors in judgment. I can't tell you how many I've made over the years. Your grandmother, bless her memory, could tell you some stories if she was still here and speaking honestly. Your daddy, I don't think he's made an error in judgment his entire life.”

“I don't know about that.”

“Son, I've always tried to learn from my mistakes, but you can't learn *everything*

from mistakes. That's too many mistakes. Some things you just need to know ahead of time. Remember that. I worry you're the same way.”

A new nurse came in, introduced herself and wiped off the other nurse's name from the little board and put her own name: Sheila. F.W. didn't show his normal charm, which worried me.

When she left, he said, “I'll tell you something about this election. This has really and truly been the best I've felt since your grandmother passed away. I just hope I didn't ruin it, hope I can keep going. What time is it? Need you to be ready to turn on the news.”

We watched the nine o'clock news on one channel and then the ten o'clock news on another and nobody said anything about the incident until the very end of the ten o'clock news, in the segment called “Before We Go,” where the anchor smiles the whole time. In an incredulous delighted voice, the anchor talked about a local city council candidate who was found *asleep* in a woman's yard with *stolen* campaign signs, an account that wasn't completely accurate. When it was over, I thought F.W. would say something, but he just kept staring at the screen and made a motion with his hand for me to leave.

They discharged F.W. from the hospital the next day and he insisted that Fat Boy pick him up and take him home. Once he got home, he stopped answering the phone or returning calls or leaving the house. But his neighbors could see him moving around in there. He wasn't dead. My mom tried to bring over some soup and he wouldn't even open the door, and he always loved her.

I voted in the election, but it didn't help, obviously. I also called F.W. once or twice a day and he never answered. Usually he was the one calling me and I was the one not answering. It was strange.

Junior set himself a goal of raising a hundred thousand dollars, a thousand dollars each from a hundred of his associates. We both agreed that the movie should begin with "Ain't No Sunshine," and then Junior made some calls to some friends of friends and found out that the rights to that song would cost us fifteen grand for every fifteen seconds we used it. The rates were the same for most of the other songs we wanted to use. We could spend our whole projected budget on one minute and forty seconds of one song. That was demoralizing. We either needed to abandon having any music in the movie, which was the whole reason I'd wanted to make a movie in the first place, or we needed to raise like a million dollars.

We also realized that we'd only be able to afford unknown actors. Junior started looking out for a young guy and an old guy to play the leads and a girl to play the love interest, but didn't have any luck casting any parts except for with the love interest, for which he'd already collected a bunch of local head shots.

But then one night I had a casting idea for the part based on my granddad: we could offer the part to my granddad. I mentioned the idea to Junior and a few minutes later we got in his car, headed for F.W.'s house.

When we got to the house, his lights were on, but he wouldn't answer the door. I knocked multiple times and called him and shouted my name. Then we tried to look in

the front blinds, but they were all closed. Back in the day, F.W. and my grandmother used to set up lawn chairs and a cooler in their driveway after F.W. got home from work and without moving or calling anyone there'd be like twenty people hanging out with them by the end of the night, which I always considered one of the greatest things ever. Now he wouldn't even come outside.

So we had to climb the fence and go around back. It smelled like mint leaves in the backyard, which always reminded me of my grandmother. We walked past the flower beds where there weren't any flowers anymore except the ones that grew accidentally and we looked into the window of the living room and the window of the kitchen, and didn't see him in there either.

We walked over to the other side of the house, where his bedroom was, and we could see him through the bedroom window, standing in front of their big closet. I was about to knock on the window, but Junior stopped me. F.W. was just standing there, staring into the closet at all the clothes. He was wearing a robe. He grabbed a dress, held it up, flinched a little, and put it back.

Junior gave me a look like, *This is getting weird.*

“Those are my grandmother's clothes,” I whispered.

“I think he's about to wear them.”

Then F.W. walked all the way into the closet, where we could see him anymore. He was in there for maybe twenty seconds and we just waited in silence and then he stepped back out with a shotgun aimed at us.

I put both hands up and Junior fell into a fetal position.

The shotgun was shaking in his hands. He lowered it and walked to the window

and raised it with one hand, the other hand pointing the gun towards his shoes. What little hair he had on his head was sticking out at weird angles and he hadn't shaved in a while, had gray stubble. I could tell he'd been crying.

He shook his head and said, "You jackasses..." but didn't finish.

"We knocked for a long time," I said.

"Well, you didn't knock hard enough."

He looked at us and then he walked out of the room and we heard the sliding glass door open in the kitchen. We went over there and walked in. He still had the .410 pointed down, but he raised it briefly to point at the couch and we sat down.

Below the glass coffee table, in stacks, were probably a thousand *People* magazines that my grandma had saved over the years, the covers on top featuring Princess Di and Tom Cruise and OJ.

F.W. sat in the chair where he always read the newspaper and watched the news and napped. He looked at us and then looked at the TV, which wasn't on. I'd never seen him unwilling to start a conversation in his house. I'd also never seen him unshaven or with his hair messy, not once in my entire life. Even when I stayed over at my grandparents' house as a kid, even when we went on overnight deer hunts together as a teenager, he was either awake way before me or he didn't come out until he was fully shaved and dressed. I'd never realizing how disturbing it could be to see someone let himself go who normally doesn't.

We'd come all the way here and now I didn't know what to say to him. I was hoping Junior would take the lead, but I knew he was disturbed by the situation himself, and especially about having the gun pointed at him, and that the gun remained in F.W.'s

hands.

F.W. said, “Well, I’ll be the first to admit it. I haven’t been too much of a success in my life, boys. There comes a point when you realize you haven’t done much of note and you try to convince yourself otherwise, but finally you have to admit it. Admit you didn’t do anything you intended to do, except maybe marry a good woman.” He opened the shotgun, took the bullets out, and set them on the coffee table. “Lyndon, your mother tells me that you two boys are working on this movie.” I hadn’t known my mom had talked to him, much less about Junior producing the movie. “Now, that’s *fine*, but you need to realize: people are gonna think you’re silly. Lyndon, I know for a fact that people already *do* think you’re silly. Junior, I don’t know about you. But this movie stuff will make you guys look damn foolish. And I just don’t wanna say y’all laid out on somebody’s lawn like I was. It’s a rotten feeling. I’ll tell you.”

“Well,” I said, “the movie is actually the reason we--”

“Wait a second. Let me finish. If I could give one piece of advice you boys, it would be this: hedge your bets. Hedge your damn bets. I meant that. That’s all I wanna say. Y’all can go home now.”

“I wrote the main part in our movie based on you, because you’re the greatest character I know.”

“Uh-huh.”

“We want you to be the lead in the movie,” Junior said. “As yourself, basically.”

“We’re gonna make you a star,” I said. “This thing’s gonna change all of our lives.”

F.W. nodded, and cleared his throat. “I’ll do it,” he said.



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