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Eleven Criminals: Stories

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ELEVEN CRIMINALS: STORIES

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Mississippi

Brendan Steffen

May 2014

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ABSTRACT

This is a work of fiction about criminality and masculinity. It explores all kinds of crime, both real and imagined.

DEDICATION

For my parents, Sara
and for Mary Holt Statom—in memory

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Megan Abbott, Tom Franklin, Jack Pendarvis, Chris Offutt, Nic Brown, Josh Weil, and Richard Ford for the input and advise. And thanks to the members of Good Idea Club for their continuing encouragement and support.

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CHAPTER 1
A GROWING CONCERN

To the Editors:

Those of us on the statue were quite troubled by the front-page editorial printed in your newspaper two days ago entitled ‘Everyone Leave Manhattan, Let The Statue Fall Down On Its Own.’ That being said, we freely admit that the article did make some very legitimate criticisms of our architectural project. Yes, there remains the lingering question of structural stability, or, as you say, “the constant threat of imminent collapse.” And your concluding paragraphs concerning the “indefensibly crude visual aspects” were met with much sympathy among us construction workers. I heard one fellow say aloud, “Yep, the shoe fits on that one. They *are* indefensible.”

These are just some of the places where we could not see more eyeball to eyeball with your editorial staff.

However, is mass exodus really the answer? Would it truly be beneficial for “all parties involved” if every living soul on the statue perished by falling to their death when the foundation inevitably crumbles? Are us construction workers actually “brainwashed serfs beyond the pale of redemption?”

These are hot button issues, and perhaps your readership has only heard half of the story. Perhaps they have only heard the opinions of government officials offering

soundbites and newspaper journalists. Perhaps they don't know the feelings and experiences of those of us *on the statue*.

For starters, "brainwashed serf" is not a phrase I would apply to myself, nor do I believe it fits any of the colleagues on whose behalf I am writing. Is Holly Martin, our lead electrician, a "brainwashed serf?" What about Russell Morrison, the acclaimed tradesman who is accomplished in the field of plumbing installation and who owns a timeshare on Fire Island? Holly and Russell are only two of the nearly one hundred hardworking Americans your editorial is condemning to certain death.

I remember a time when kinder words followed us around. "Hero," for one. "Patriots," for starters. A brief recounting of our time on the statue might help us all to understand where exactly things went wrong. We have faith that many of your concerns are the result of miscommunication.

We broke ground nearly ten years ago, and, despite what your newspaper claims, we had no idea that the second foot would end up where it did. Let's just put that one to bed right now. The current and terrifying location of the second foot was *not* a part of our initial designs. In retrospect, would we have built both feet on the ample construction site provided, rather than just the one? Yes. Absolutely. That was the most logical place for the second foot to go. You might even say it is our biggest regret that we did not. However, the emotional atmosphere among New Yorkers must be taken into account when judging our architectural decisions at the time.

Everyone wanted a really big statue. That's a fact. After the attacks people demonstrated through the poll that, overwhelmingly, they craved the human form. We

had all been made aware of the terrible potential of buildings. Maybe the thought of a giant marble face hovering over the roofs of skyscrapers, keeping an eye on things, protecting the skies itself from unwanted visitors, provided feelings of comfort. Maybe there was an idea back then that it was the people—not the fallen towers—who deserved remembrance. Regardless, putting both feet on the construction site cut the potential height of our statue in half. It would have topped out at fifteen stories, maximum. How could that compete with even average buildings? No, New Yorkers wanted something much bigger.

So an adoring public looked on as a single, sandaled heel and five perky toes grew out of the rubble. We built the ankle, the calf muscle, the tip of a shinbone, and began in on the fringes, and then the flapping cloth, of an archaic robe. The plan was to construct a totally neutral human being. The body was swallowed up in a baggy robe to avoid gender confusion. There would be no indicator of any nationality or proclivity. A memorial to all. And boy the city loved the leg! It curved in an athletic way that seemed pleasing to everyone, and its grey skin seemed an extension of the tar-covered streets and sidewalks, the skyscrapers that disappeared into the smog and the train tunnels. It seemed an extension of the city itself.

Goodwill thrived as the construction crew broke into two groups, half of us continuing up past the hips and the stomach and the well-formed and ambiguous pectorals. The rest worked their way down the second leg. Thigh construction met immediate difficulty, though, as the weight of the jutting femur caused hairline fractures to form along the arch of the first foot. The plan, as you know, was to bend the second leg so that the second foot rested gently against the first knee in what is called a “flamingo

standing position,” but this design was quickly scraped as more and more cracks appeared. For the sake of structural stability, we built the second leg straight down, with only a slight bend in the knee, so that the nether side of the sandal was finished off several meters above the roof of St. Jude’s Children’s Hospital on Vessey Street.

No one on the construction crew wants to “stomp on” St. Jude’s Children’s Hospital. How can such a vile though even cross decent minds? Admittedly, the statue does sway on windy days—a difficulty made worse by more recent and critical deterioration—which causes an up-and-down swinging motion. But stomp? Besides, we have heard that the unfortunate children of St. Jude love the foot, that they rush to the windows to watch its perambulations. We have heard that it is a source of great entertainment and fun.

Support for the statue remained high in spite of the controversial second foot. Citizens felt a particularly strong need to see it completed. It was not until we reached the face that the real trouble began. None among us understood why its features so enraged the people of New York and why their ire was so immediately upon us. Maybe it is because we were on the statue most of the day and could not see the face from a distance. That’s possible. But even so, from my vantage, I would not have described the chin as “receding to the point of nonexistence and yet begging for a smack.”

We asked the city for suggestions of improvement and man oh man did the letters start rolling in. One woman wrote saying that the anonymity of the face was its main defect. People didn’t like that the features of the face resembled no one in particular, she said. It looked vague, like a plaster mold that has had its refined contents scalped out. She recommended that we redesign the face in the likeness of her husband, who had died

when the towers fell. We got a lot of letters like that. New Yorkers who had seen the attack from their homes in Brooklyn and Queens sent self-portraits, claiming their role as witnesses made them perfect symbols for memorial. We got similar head shots from shop owners and street vendors whose stores were forced to close after the attacks; from Dry Cleaners who claimed to have pressed one thousand soot covered suits on the 12th of September; from fireman, alive and dead; from a Saudi taxi driver who, in the days after the attacks, was beaten by a drunk patron; from the mayor; from the comptroller; from street sweepers, and letters from Guantanamo prisoners smuggled to us on toilet paper. They wanted to drape a bag over the statues' head.

Everyone looked up hoping to see themselves, their own loss. Everyone thought they symbolized they the individual loss that encapsulated the collective. Maybe this is why a memorial to more than one person cannot take the human form, why most are sharp rectangles, precise grids of headstones. Shapes that find no correlate on the body. Common grief cannot drown in the shape of any man.

And so, in our frustration to please the city, we completed one final redesign: we chiseled a long nose, full lips, feathered the folds of a beard and turban. We dug out the eyes and formed craterous rims of scar tissue around the sockets. Dead Osama Bin Laden, we declared to the city. If you can't agree on a memorial, have a trophy instead.

Our pulley systems were severed in the ensuing riots and the first foot suffered severe damage.

I guess that about brings us up to speed.

As I write, the unfortunate children of St. Jude are being wheeled out of the hospital and loaded into a long line of emergency vehicles. We watch from our scaffolds.

I suppose they are watching us as well, from their gurneys. The evacuation has begun. Supplies are low here. Deep splinters climb the first leg. I don't think we can hold out much longer. The threat of collapse is indeed imminent.

We thought the city would love to see their enemy dead while on their way to and from work. We thought they'd look up and say things like, "*got 'em*" or "*pow!*" with one eye closed and a hand stretched into a gun. In retrospect, we understand how Osama Bin Laden—thirty-five stories tall, with both eyeballs shot out, and clomping remorselessly close to a Children's Hospital could be viewed as "crude." Even frightening. In that way, your editorial was enlightening.

So really, when you think about it, this is all a lesson in perspective. We've been on the statue for so long that our desires no longer coincide with the city. But may we be so bold as to suggest that some of your anger may stem from a disappointment totally unrelated to the statue? Perhaps when you look up you think our labor is an unworthy prize for all that has gone on in the past decade. But that is hardly our fault. We didn't make any of those things happen. We've been on the statue the whole time.

Sincerely ,

The Constructionists of Ground Zero

P.S. We've gathered that the plan is to build a pair of towers once we are destroyed. Two hollow bones where the movers and shakers of this country can climb up and down in its insides. That's fine. Maybe it's a good thing to return to the basic elements—greed, pathological optimism—and go on as life was before. But may I suggest that you plant

sunflowers in a window box on one of the lower floors? My wife Ashley loves them and I know that she would love to see them whenever she walked by. She lives in Manhattan. I have not seen her for a very long time. I doubt she would even recognize me and all that I have become up here, but I hope that she is well.

CHAPTER 2

DEEP WINTER IN DAYTONA BEACH

2045.

The news came from three-hundred thousand miles away, beamed across on a ham radio: Mikel Aleksandrov had hogtied his copilot to the forward bulkhead of the ARK Interceptor, a prospecting ship towing an asteroid across the face of the sun. No one on earth knew why he had done this, Mikel didn't say. His message told only the skeletal fact of the situation.

The ARK, a two-man vessel, was traveling to Lagrange point L1, a small area between the sun and the earth with no gravitational pull in either direction. Here, the two cosmonauts were to sink the ARK's drill into the side of the asteroid, blooming dust that would spread as a curtain, tamping the sun's rays as they filtered through space and entered the earth's atmosphere. Mikel, in the two weeks since announcing the capture of his copilot, appeared to have made no progress in the mission.

The sun rose again and again without the promised stubble of asteroid dust, and each time the residents of Daytona Beach felt a profound disappointment and sense of grief for a world that seemed already half in the grave. They were caught in a deep wintry snap of Arctic winds blown south. In the past decade, the Atlantic had pounded above lifeguard towers, swallowed oceanfront property. Lobbies of condo towers rusted in ten feet of brine. Now the ocean tapped the newly constructed barrier wall that stretched the

shoulder of highway A1A. The sky, scorching hot and white most of the year, hung like a gray rag used for wiping cast iron skillet.

Manny Fialco and his mother Binda, however, did not share in the city's elegiac mood. Manny, Aaron Fialco's son—the man hogtied with cable wire onboard the ARK—was holding vigil at his childhood home on Ridge Road. Neighbors brought Tupperware dinners. A NASA representative had given them a radio with a direct channel to the ship, and asked them to periodically plead and reason with Mikel, who never responded.

On the thirteenth morning of their vigil, as an undiffused sun warmed sinks inside abandoned condos and spread across the peeling turf of mini-golf greens, Manny crouched above a vacuum cleaner and felt his mother—leaning over a sofa arm in her silk bathrobe and slippers—lay a loud kiss on his uppermost vertebrae. The kiss felt horribly intimate, as though Binda's lips were wrapped around the tail of his brain stem. Eight years earlier, when Manny was twelve, he had seen Binda kiss Aaron on that same knuckle of spine the morning after Aaron had slapped her face in the driveway of their white stucco house. Rubbing the wetted skin, Manny felt similarly forgiven for having done something fixedly bad.

“Jesus,” Manny said, switching off the vacuum. “Don't do that.”

Binda folded her feet under her thighs and retrieved a soft paper sack of shelled peanuts from the bathrobe's pocket. Her face was especially pale since hearing about Aaron, veins swimming visibly across her forehead like little blue tadpoles. Her eyes, distended under thick tortoiseshell frames, had resumed a long dormant tremor. She made Manny answer the door when neighbors came by with food and stewed in the bathtub

through the afternoon hours. The radio, its rubber antenna pointing toward the popcorn paint ceiling, hummed quietly on a glass side table.

“Why not?” she said

“Because it gives me the shivers.”

“I’m allowed to kiss you,” she said, chewing.

“Stop eating those all day. Let me heat you up some quiche.”

Binda nodded and sucked salt off her fingers. “I’m trying to say hello,” she said.

“We haven’t said a word all morning. How’s your class work going?”

“Because I’m cleaning this dump,” Manny said. He went to the refrigerator, opened it, and stared inside. “The teachers send me the stuff, I work on it. You want Lorraine or with bacon?”

“Bacon.”

Manny slid a container out from under three others on the bottom shelf and cut slices on the counter beside the knife rack. Cold light pressed through the window over the stove, looking out on the ice-covered lawn. Manny felt both elated and a little embarrassed at the satisfaction wrought from his new husbandly role. After listening to Mikel’s brief transmission, he had surprised himself by sensing, quite powerfully, that his father was being rightfully punished. It took him a moment to even remember what act the feeling referred to. He hadn’t thought of the slap in years. Since the transmission, however, the memory of it had grown more lustrously awful and large each day. The image of abuse, witnessed privately from his second floor bedroom, seemed to Manny—as he stuck a plastic fork in the bacon quiche—a pit into which an otherwise happy childhood was being dropped.

Binda yawned and stretched her legs, the slippers hanging loose over the tips of her toes.

“Thank you,” she said, receiving the quiche.

“When are we going to get you out of the house?” Manny sat down on the carpet by her feet, leaning his back against the vacuum cleaner. “We could go for a walk along the barrier wall.”

“Your father. He said that if what they’re doing up there succeeds, we won’t need that wall. The ice caps will reform, and the sea will recede.”

“Come on, get your coat on. It’ll be nice.”

“I don’t want to go for a walk.”

“You need it.”

“Your father, he just obsessively wants to save the earth. Isn’t that nice? He’s a really simple man. He just wants to save people.”

“I’m sure a lot of astronauts feel that way.”

Binda removed her glasses and cleaned them on the flap of her robe. Manny looked away from her face. He felt his mother directing a long stare at him.

“Why do you speak that way about your father?” she said.

Manny fiddled with the string of his pajama pants. “Nothing,” he said. “It’s just... on the news everyone talks about Dad like he’s some hero. And we should know better than that because he’s family. We know he’s just a normal guy. But it’s like you’ve bought into all the things they’re saying about him.”

The radio crackled and Aaron’s voice, leathery and breathless, filled the room. Binda sprang to her feet and held the speaker to her ear.

“Hello? Hello? This is Aaron Fialco, onboard the ARK Interceptor. I have freed my left arm enough to reach the transmission station.” He coughed weakly, a sound like air fed out of a deflated bellows. *“There has been a hydrogen leak. Mikel has gone temporarily insane. I am unhurt, nourished, but in need of rescue.”*

He coughed again and the line went dead.

“Aaron? Aaron?” Binda tapped the side of the radio. “Aaron, can you hear me?”

Manny took the radio out of her hands and muffled its speaker with his palm.

“Shut up, mom! He’s trying to be secret. You want Mikel to hear?”

“Oh Manny! Manny!” She kissed his eyebrows, his cheeks, lips, chin. She squeezed his face. “He’s alright!”

“Ok,” Manny said, dropping the radio. “Alright. He’s alright.”

“Fuck. Jesus.”

“He’s alright.”

“Dance with your mother, Manny.”

“What?”

Binda laced her fingers in Manny’s and twirled him around the living room. They danced past the white bookcases that lined three walls, Binda leading them in a jerky cha-cha, around the couch and the side tables. Manny drew his mother into his chest, pressed a palm to her waist, feeling the pleasant fullness of her hips, and, dizzy, collapsed backward.

Binda laughed on top of him on the floor.

“Mom,” Manny said. Blood thumped in his ears and he thought of the slap, the way his mother had just stood in the driveway afterwards, looking more disappointed than angry, more stunned than hurt. “Do you ever wonder what happened up there?”

He pointed at the ceiling. Binda looked up.

“Hydrogen leak,” she said. “Mikel went crazy.”

“But what if that’s not it.” He swallowed and scratched his nose. “What if it turns out dad was the bad guy?”

“Jesus, Manny.”

She rolled off his chest and lay beside him on her back.

“Well it’s possible,” Manny said. “What if he did something terrible up there?”

“Like what?” Binda said coldly.

“I don’t know. Behaved violently. Mikel defended himself.”

“Your father’s not violent.”

“He’s not?”

She tipped onto her elbows and looked Manny in the face. “Has your father ever once been violent toward you?”

“No.”

“Then don’t say things like that.” She crossed her hands over her stomach and breathed in, Manny noting something nostalgic in her face. “Do you remember when your father took us to the launch site? Do you remember that Manny? You were just ten or eleven.”

“Yes. Of course.”

“He carried you all the way up the loading gantry on his shoulders and let you sit in the pilot’s seat.”

“You guys were fighting a lot back then,” Manny said. “I remember that too.”

Binda gave him an even look and said flatly, “Is there something you want to ask me, Manny?”

Manny sighed. “Has dad ever been violent toward *you*?”

Binda massaged a finger on the side of her glasses, as if adjusting the tiny screw.

“No,” she said.

“This is Aaron Fialco in need of immediate rescue. Mikel, he has some kind of small axe. I am hiding in the rear...Mikel! Mikel how come? Stop!”

The sound of struggle—metal clashing into bodies, objects falling, groans and garbled threats—issued from the radio. Manny listened to the thud of absorbed pain. Binda pressed her face into the carpet and beat her fists.

“No! No! No!” she screamed.

There was a silence, and then Manny heard his father’s labored breathing.

“This is Aaron Fialco. Again. Mikel is dead. Jesus. He’s...I put the axe right through his...He was attacking me. Oh Jesus. I’m going to try to adjust the hydrogen...”

Binda crawled, shaking, to the radio and pressed the receiver down.

“Aaron! Aaron!”

“Binda?”

Her eyes widened. Manny looked at his mother for a long while. The belt of her silk robe was twisted up like horns, the ends disappearing at angles into the loose flaps. She clamped the flaps together, covering her breasts, and removed her tortoiseshell

glasses to cry more freely. This is my mother, Manny thought, and imagined the axe sunk deep in Mikel's chest, or his throat, or even between his eyes. He couldn't shake the certainty that the force behind this fresh gore was rocketing to earth—as they spoke—ready to knock on the front door with bloody teeth.

“Can I see that?” Manny said. He slipped the radio out of his mother's hand, tucked it under his arm, and ran out the front door. He hurried down the driveway in his pajama pants and socks, sprinting along the street toward the highway. He ran past neighboring houses—dry and powdering facades with doorknobs blackened by salt winds. Icicles dripped from gutters. He shivered. The street was darkened by the shadow of a condo tower.

The last of the night's snow was falling into the ocean when Manny reached the highway. He crossed carefully, tiptoeing and clutching himself. He stood against the barrier wall. Seagulls circled. Ice rattled inside the wall's cracks as the surf thumped against the other side.

“Hello? Hello?”

He wanted to toss the radio into the ocean. Cold pressed against his every joint. He could barely move his arms. His teeth were clacking. Manny was shocked, stupefied by the sheer meanness of the weather. The surf, vibrating into his spine through the wall, seemed to hold all of the world's rumbling violence. He felt certain that the earth wanted nothing more than to tear everything on it to pieces—that at its center, inside its furthest roots, the earth carried this psychotic logic, coursing through everything forever and ever. He thought of his father, and of the slap, and of how utterly natural the violence had seemed, how it was an almost perfect expression of the secret man at his father's core. It

was the same way hurricanes and scorching summers and earthquakes and winter snow on Daytona surf seemed to Manny more truthful of the earth's intentions than temperate weather. It was the natural aspect, the way his father had never seemed more himself than while in the act of slapping his mother, that most repulsed Manny.

"What the hell is happening down there?"

Manny, with automatic obedience, held down the receiver. This was his father. He recognized the voice, the slight worry along its edges. Manny was flooded by a desire to speak to his father in their regular patter.

"Hey dad."

"Manny! Jesus Christ, you sound awful."

"I'm outside. It's cold."

"Why the hell...Go inside, then."

"Alright."

Manny started back toward Ridge Road and Aaron filled him in on the plan: he would fix the hydrogen leak by patching up the damaged vent line and drag Mikel's body to the cryogenic freeze. After a short rest he would pilot the ship to Lagrange point L1 by himself and initiate the drill, transforming the asteroid to a cloud of raised dust. And then, someday soon, as Arctic vapors burn off in the spring heat and the sun rises over the sea flensed of its most destructive rays, Manny will see his father plummet through a high white sky, reentering a world happy to receive him.

CHAPTER 3

PREHISTORY

West of Damascus, in the snowy mountain range that shades the Mediterranean Sea, two hordes of men sparked flint, hunted hill creature, and bartered amongst each other in peace for three hundred years. The horde who crowded around deerskin tents at the foothills of the mountain were *homo sapien*. Those heartier, shorter fellows making camp in the thin air of the peaks were Neanderthal.

In the August month of 28,382 B.C., as glaciers dripped sweat, an unusual union was formed between a *homo sapien* man and a Neanderthal woman. The indifferent harmony of the two species co-existence was forever altered.

Kara'tu'tu was carrying her dead great grandfather down to the funerary pit when she first laid eyes on Derl'ku. The pit was a deep, glaciated crater located halfway up the mountainside, and both Neanderthal and *homo sapien* disposed of their dead inside its murky depths. Derl'ku held a dead boy in the crook of his arms and was kneeling by the edge of the pit. Kara'tu'tu, amazed at seeing a *homo sapien* up close, paused at the opposite rim and watched. The *homo sapien* wept and kissed the pale boy and let him drop into the mouth of the crater, which was already choked with bodies. Kara'tu'tu did the same with her great grandfather and crossed the pit's edge to Derl'ku.

His body was slender and he shook with cold and Kara'tu'tu tried warming him with her arms, but he batted her away, complaining that her grip was too hard. They walked among the snow oaks for a time, communicating with their few shared words. When they reached the far side of the mountain Derl'ku pointed at the Mediterranean, that black sea undulating miles below, and made an illustration on the smooth bark of one of the trees. He dipped his hand in the pile of ash he kept in his satchel and sketched on the tree with his delicate fingers.

The drawing itself looked like a tree, Kara'tu'tu thought, a felled tree with eight long roots splaying out of its base. After a full minute of gesturing, Kara'tu'tu was made to understand that Derl'ku was showing her a creature he had encountered on the coast. Several weeks earlier, the *homo sapiens* had come upon a giant squid, half-beached along the surf, its long, conical head lifting up on the soft, frothy waves. Derl'ku went on to tell her all about the experiments his tribe had been conducting on the squid—cutting lengths off its tentacles and using them as rope, brewing its blubber in vats and drinking it for medicinal purposes—but he stopped suddenly and began to weep. His son had died. The hot blubber did not cure his son.

Kara'tu'tu took his hand and crouched with him behind the frigid trunk of a snow oak. She pulled his fur pants down and drew his narrow sex between her hips and pinned his slender wrists to the snowy ground. He was weaker than most Neanderthal men, but Kara'tu'tu didn't mind. She enjoyed the fragility of his body. She roughoused him the way she had with the bone dolls she had played with as a child, snapping teeth kisses on the bones of his pale cheeks, twisting the flesh in her mouth until he called out.

When it was over, both Neanderthal and *homo sapien* felt embarrassed. They quietly uncoupled and went their solitary way up and down the mountain.

Derl'ku returned to his tribe along the foothills, discovering there a debate being waged in the communal tent. More of the children and old and infirm of the *homo sapien* had taken feverish, spitting up pale and bloody bile. Derl'ku's neighbors agreed that an unpleasant stench had grown into the stiff mountain winds, originating, most likely, from the funerary pit. Was the stench the cause of the illness? If so, what to do with all those bodies moldering in the pit's cavity? Could they be transplanted to individual graves along the soft beach?

“And what of Derl'ku?” Raf'ga said, “Who returns from burying his boy. What does Derl'ku have to say?”

Derl'ku felt exhausted. Fulgurating melancholy and spent lust made him look old.

“Do what you want,” he said, and left the meeting for his own tent, where he fell asleep, almost immediately, beside his wife.

In the weeks that followed, flecks of rot were spotted around the funerary pit. Some flecks journeyed even farther—appearing suddenly like bird droppings on the shoulders of fur jackets and the heads of hunting spears. A heat wave cooked the remainder of the late summer month, transforming the pit into an ulcerating wound emitting a vicious odor.

Derl'ku saw Kara'tu'tu regularly. They met under the light of half moons by the small rear entrance to the Neanderthal cave. Kara'tu'tu would sneak away from her sleeping tribe and cavort with her new lover among the night birds and hill creature. He

moved with a deftness of foot Kara'tu'tu envied. Derl'ku spoke some about his tribe, his problems with his wife, and the grief he still felt over his son. Kara'tu'tu listened, picking up a word here and there, as the surf beat against the rocks miles below, where the giant squid still lay. They held each other and watched their breaths mingle above.

Meanwhile, debates were being waged among the *homo sapiens* over whose responsibility it was to remedy the new crop of illness. Able-bodied men and women were beginning to spit up the blood-spotted bile. In his paranoia, Raf'ga claimed that it was only Neanderthal corpses who carried the disease, and that he had seen dead Neanderthal illumine in the funerary pit with an icterus glow. Some suggested laying siege to the Neanderthal camp, and burning their bodies inside the pit until nothing but ash remained. The only problem with this course of action was that it required the *homo sapien* to strike straight into the mouth of Neanderthal cave—the passageways and corridors of which were unknown to them.

Derl'ku warned Kara'tu'tu of the attack. She nodded, thanked him, and told him that there had been many new deaths among her tribe as well. As they spoke on the matter, a vital species-distinction was found out: Kara'tu'tu—and all Neanderthal—could not conceptualize disease. They disliked the smell of the funerary pit and the splatterings of decay around its rim, but they saw no causal relation between that and the new crop of vomiting and death. The idea of symptoms and remedies were equally ungraspable. Blisters, sores, lumps and oscillating pallor were as causeless as any of the bodies other functions.

“The smell in the air, though,” Derl'ku said. “You breath it and it makes you sick!”

“Sick?” Kara’tu’tu shrugged, unable to find meaning for the word. “No.”

Derl’ku could not explain to Kara’tu’tu why he intuited disease as the fingerprints of an insidious stranger, nor did he derive much pleasure from having to defend the claim. Frustrated, he returned to the foothills and confessed his affair to his wife.

“A Neanderthal?” she said.

“Yes,” Derl’ku said. “She’s not very smart.”

His wife pulled back the flap of their deerskin tent and stomped over to the council tribe—who were convening then around a fire—and informed them that her husband knew a secret entrance to the Neanderthal cave.

Derl’ku stood behind his wife, shaking his head.

“Come, come,” Raf’ga said to Derl’ku. “If you have this secret, it’s a duty to your species to inform us.”

“I don’t know anything,” Derl’ku said.

“He’s been sleeping with one of their women,” his wife said.

“Is this true?” Raf’ga said.

“I have been seeing one of them, yes,” Derl’ku said.

“Has she infected you?” Raf’ga said.

“I hadn’t even thought of that,” his wife said.

“No,” Derl’ku said. “Of course not.”

Raf’ga slid a flint knife from the pouch on his fur pants. Derl’ku stepped away from the fire.

“These sub-men,” Raf’ga said. “They carry a disease that killed your only child. And you...sport with them?”

Derl'ku hung his head. "I'll show you the cave," he said.

The next night, Kara'tu'tu sat on her knees outside the rear entrance to the cave, a knotted piece of wood in her hands. It was the ash painting of the squid. She had stripped the bark off of the snow oak Derl'ku had drawn on. She kept the painting by her dwelling space in the cave.

She heard a shuffling in the darkness and a man came out to the lip of the cave. Kara'tu'tu smiled at him until she realized that it was not her lover, not Derl'ku, but a taller man bouncing a rock in his hand. Other foothill men appeared around the lip of the cave, Derl'ku standing off a distance and looking away. The tall one let his stone fly and Kara'tu'tu watched it soar toward the middle of her flat sloping head.

She awoke submerged, peering through murk at a beak. It opened as if to coo, a post-mortem spasm, gaping wide, unhinged from mysterious jaws. A hand snatched her out of the water. Fellow Neanderthal surrounded her in the shallows, each bound at the wrists and feet. Their faces were beaten and they rested against the suction of massive, somnolent appendages. The giant squid, half-deteriorated now and stinking with rot.

She tried pulling her hands apart, but the rope held firm. The squid was taller than the snow oaks, wider than the nets the foothill men used to fish. She felt the hand that had retrieved her from the water move along her damp shoulder. She turned around. Derl'ku. She tried nuzzling his hand, her mind still hazy, piecing together how she arrived at the coast. Then she felt a throbbing in her temple and remembered.

She watched Derl'ku approach the creature and trace the blade over one of its enormous wandering eyes. A black circle drifting languorously in the white. The eye dripped out in a fat congealed tear at the bite of the blade and hung from its socket like a piece of mauled fruit on a vine. He continued the incision, moving surgically up the wine-red skin, organs unraveling into the crisp seawater. The brain made a wet intestinal sound when he reached the bow of skin at the top of the head. It rolled once, and fell out of the wound. Water splashed into Kara'tu'tu's nostrils.

Raf'ga tromped through the shallows, pushing the expunged brain aside, and circled Kara'tu'tu. He grabbed a handful of her black hair and dragged her by the pate to the open cavity in the creature's head. He lifted Kara'tu'tu out of the ocean and inserted her thrashing feet through the line of incision. She looked at Derl'ku, who kept his head down, examining a shoal of small fish swimming past his feet.

“Oh dear deflated head, lobotomized now with scalpel of bone,” Raf'ga said. Other foothill men peeled back the incision on the squid's head and held it open to ease the insertion of Neanderthal. “We fill your pitted mind with sub-man, unworthy, we know, of your inky thoughts. Forgive us. We suspect that your floundering flesh is all that protects us from plague. House these sub-men so they do not infect any more of us.”

Raf'ga tossed Kara'tu'tu inside the wound. She rolled down a membrane of netherskin, cracking shells of the squids' hatchlings as she went, and landed atop a mass of her tribesman. She looked up the wall of broken eggs, affixed like barnacles to the thick flesh, and then up, up, at the light hitting the ocean, and at Derl'ku peering down at her, his eyes wet as he closed the two ends of the wound.

48,000 YEARS LATER

Lee and Jen Spivey bought Kara'tu'tu from an auctioneer in Damascus and brought her back to *The Spiveyville Prehistory Museum* in Sacramento. Kara'tu'tu came in an elegantly wrapped box, almost a cake box, all of her bones separate and individually wrapped, except for the delicate ones in her hands, which, despite being severed from the rest of her body seemed to rise upward, penitent and grasping, full of confusion at something high above.

Kara'tu'tu will return in *THE FUGUE JUDGE*

CHAPTER 4

DAMNED

“It’s as if your life is a perch on the edge of a cliff and going forward seems impossible, not for a lack of will, but a lack of space.”

Kevin Powers, *The Yellow Birds*

Night came down like a slow rockslide, thin runnels of blackness tumbling over the fading pink, the Colorado river full of disused houseboats. The glens deepened to amber, and the diamonds on the river softened, winked, went out. The John Wesley Powell Dam rose from the river like a pale and dying mountain, its shadow stretching across the water to Wahweap State Park. The frigid campgrounds were populated by a single tent straddling the shore. Between the tent and the aluminum fire pit his girlfriend stoked with a charred log, Preston Grady sat on a foldout chair and mouthed numbers to himself. He was looking at the cord of firewood stacked in the bed of his pick-up truck. Sandy Baum dropped the log and sipped beer from a paper coffee cup. A tarp yawed over the wood in the stiff wind.

“Fifteen will get us through the night?” Preston asked.

Sandy nodded and refilled the cup. All around them red hills stretched out, their tops long and smooth like rows of ground down teeth.

“My grandfather has a story about how he met my grandmother,” Sandy said. She took a long draft and sat cross-legged on the picnic table. “He grew up with a large family, you know. Liked working in big groups. 1961, Grandpa ended up here. Page, Arizona. Alongside two-thousand men all housed in bachelor quarters in the middle of the desert, churning concrete from sun up to sun down for the John Wesley Powell Dam.”

“I know that,” Preston said. He was watching the slow, perpetual clouds that formed over the concrete flues of the Navajo Generating Plant on the other side of town.

“Let me tell this,” Sandy said. She stood, dusted the seat of her pants, and crouched behind Preston’s chair, spreading her hands over his shoulders. “There were only about twenty houses around here back then, and in one of them lived my Grandma. You can imagine, young pretty girl like her? Hounded constantly.”

Sandy removed her hands from Preston’s shoulders and sat on her knees in front of him on the cold desert floor.

“They met, they fell in love immediately, and on the day they were married, Grandma explained why it had to be Grandpa, out of all the bachelors. She said that it was like her veins were finally connected to a larger circulation, which was what she had been looking for all along. My grandfather’s veins.” Preston swallowed as Sandy slid a ring box from her jacket pocket. “He said he could feel the whole world beating between them.”

She opened the box. It was what he had feared. Grandma Baum’s engagement ring, braided gold cupping a bright green gemstone.

“Preston, that’s what I want with you.”

In the half-light, cactus rose from the desert like dark, crooked spinal columns. Preston opened his mouth, and the arid wind dried his saliva to a sticky mucilage.

“Well,” he said, covering his lips with a fist and clearing his throat. “And you know I think your family is a decent brood. I’ve said as much. But if we got married right now, where would we live?”

“In the house next to my sister,” Sandy said. She pressed a palm to her knee and stood up, stuffing the ring box back into her pocket.

“And that’s precisely...it’s sort of a ‘compound situation’ you got over there.”

He made air quotes in the air around “compound situation.”

“We just live close,” Sandy said. She looked past him and spoke like a stage lawyer. “We like to live near the people we love. I wanted to bring you out here, to the dam my family helped build—”

“Let me think awhile.”

“Forget it.”

The night did not improve. Hot black smoke chased their chairs around the fire pit, burning Preston’s eyes and sending asthmatic Sandy into long bronchial fits. They soon resigned themselves to sleep.

They were alone. At random intervals in the night Sandy clicked the flashlight on and sent the beam through the mesh walls of the tent. She studied some point at the end of the bulb-lit darkness, her body soundless and paralyzed, like a deer drawn mute and still by the command of its own light.

“Did you know that some campers were murdered last year at Palo Duro?” Sandy whispered.

“Why would you tell me like something like that?”

After that, Preston squeezed his eyes shut whenever he heard her reach for the flashlight.

The cold glow cast by the Mag, to which Preston had imputed an unnamable evil, was washed out at three in the morning by the headlights of a low purring car. The Subaru pulled into a campsite two fire pits down from them, the John Wesley Powell Dam cresting over the bike racks like a moon, eerie and tooth-white. There was a metallic rattle from within the car, like raccoons pilfering a trashcan, then the engine died and no one stepped out.

“Why aren’t they setting up a tent?” Sandy whispered.

“He’s probably going to sleep in his car,” Preston said. Images of the shadowed motorist sharpening knives pulsed across his vision.

“Creepy.” Sandy gave up on sleep soon after. She washed her face and armpits with bottled water, dressed in the dark, and had Preston drop her off at the Desert View K-8 four hours before her first period class. During the drive, Preston was reticent and boorish. He spoke little, and when he did, he mocked Sandy with the comfort words of their relationship. “You’re so good to me,” he said with a false smile. “I just can’t function without you.” This chiding was dangerous and a portent of a serious fight, but Preston wanted a fight.

Preston was an only child from San Diego. He felt certain that he loved Sandy, but the thought of joining the band of Baums on Keyway Street filled his sternum with

hot beads of doubt. He was plagued by images of constant waving—rotating his hand whenever he stepped outside. Sister-in-laws, nephews, second cousins, some dragging trashcans to the curb, others pogo-sticking the circumference of a cul-de-sac, or on their lawns pushing strollers and mowers. Everyone waiting to chat.

He wanted to finally have the Baum fight.

When they arrived outside Sandy's trailer, where she taught math to seventh graders, Preston eased the truck into a parking spot and they sat in the cab. Sandy kneaded with her thumb the foil on a small packet of butter. A stump of cinnamon raisin bagel rested on her thigh. Preston watched her small, well-defined bicep tense slightly as she worked. She avoided his approving gaze, focusing her eyes instead on a spot in the parking lot with the rapt attention of a zoogoer searching for poisonous frogs in the nooks and plastic eaves of a well-dressed terrarium. She had not deserved his rudeness.

Despondent and hot with shame, Preston set out on the task of fixing the day.

“Let's go in that trailer and make up,” he said.

Sandy excised a small clump of butter with her pinky finger and rubbed it over the bagel. She nodded.

With his brown shorts around his ankles and Sandy bent over a desk, Preston marveled at his girlfriend's capacity for forgiveness. He feared that she would never leave him, even as he entered a period in which the grand arc of his decision-making brought her more dissatisfaction than joy. He felt helpless, and the thought of his helplessness redoubled his desire to please her.

Preston wiped tree sap on his shirt, buckled his shorts, and went through the metal door into the predawn parking lot. Sandy looked sad.

“That was nice,” she said.

He passed the intolerable hours before his shift dozing by a bank of delivery trucks outside of the UPS warehouse, intermittently watching the night crew load the trucks up with packages.

When it was time, he bent his body with the other deliverymen who were spread out in rows on the warehouse floor. The sound of men cracking pain out of their elbows and knees. Preston stared with acrid disapproval at the calligraphy of blue veins peeking out at him from under brown shorts. After two thermoses of coffee, he felt only dehydrated and itchy. His umber knee-high socks emitted a sour smell. Exhaustion held his blood in pools of gray stagnancy.

He read over his route readout sheet. The route was his astrology. It sorted the stars. It kept his days—each so much like the one before—from devolving into brainless clusters. He pulled his delivery truck into a long brown train with the others and waited. The first delivery was to the John Wesley Powell Dam.

The two-lane highway was flanked on both sides by an expanse of desert and empty billboards, canvases stark as movie screens. Each time the centerline broke, a tiny car roared up from behind, kicking out thick veils of sand and gravel from its speeding tires. It was startling.

People are always passing each other in their cars out here, he thought, squirting lines of washer fluid up his vertical windshield. The flatlands. You can see more.

The entrance to the private road atop the John Wesley Powell Dam was marked by an unattended watchtower the size of two Porta Pottie’s pushed together and a tollbooth arm standing erect and wrapped in soft, spongy material. Preston drove past this

towards a Corolla parked against a retaining wall overlooking the Colorado—a stubble of ducks congregated far below. He could make out his campsite, the adobe bathroom complex and even the Subaru a half-mile in front of him, up a distance from the shore. Across from the Corolla an elevator shaft perched above a long drop, the shaft leading all the way down to the generators of the hydroelectric plant, and the reservoir.

George Mullington sat behind the steering wheel of the Corolla, his long legs crossed over the passenger seat, feet resting on the top bar of the retaining wall. With the open-door alarm chiming he ate an egg McMuffin and drank coffee from a Styrofoam cup he kept on the dash rather than in a cupholder. George, the foreman of the Penstock Repainting Project, owned one of the nicer pontoons on the river, which he used during the summer. He had a milky birthmark on his cheek, its shape amphibious, but only vaguely so, like a rubber fishing lure.

“We were supposed to get this epoxy two weeks ago, you useless son of a bitch,” George said, stepping out of his car. He blocked the thin road with his body.

“Sorry,” Preston said. “I’m not really in charge of when things get here.”

“Fuck that,” George said. “I’ve got a dozen unionized painters sitting on their asses in the spillway tunnels without materials. Load it up in the elevator. Here.” George opened the backdoor of his car and rummaged through a pile of t-shirts and gasmasks. “Wear this,” he said.

He handed John a celluloid-colored hard hat with clear plastic chinstraps and the word Visitor written in masking tape across the brim.

Once, George had invited Preston to a houseboat party, and while the other guests were treated to salmon, imported beer and spaghetti squash, George fed Preston blue gill

and Fritos. Preston could not account for the snub, and when he told Sandy that his dinner had come from the bait bucket, she only shook her head and told him that George was known as a bully.

“I went to high school with him,” she said. “He’s nice to most people, but if you’re grandpa didn’t work on the dam, he could be a total dick.”

“Was he nice to you?” Preston asked.

“We dated junior year and he was an asshole.”

“But that thing on his cheek!” Preston said, stunned by his girlfriend’s admission.

“He sort of made it work back then. It wasn’t as droopy.”

With two fingers in his mouth, George loosed a sharp, predatory whistle. Preston stepped out of the truck instinctively.

“Get to work,” George said.

“Alright,” Preston said. He buckled the hard hat over his chin, rolled open the big metal door on the back of the truck, and grabbed a cardboard box. George resumed his supine position in the Corolla and watched.

“What vexes you, Preston?” George asked.

“Excuse me?” Preston dropped the box in the elevator. The metal pulleys shivered. A murky drop swayed below the steel diamonds. “Heights, I suppose.”

“If I were you I’d have nightmares about that fucking uniform, man. Christ, they make you wear those socks?”

“I’m gonna back the truck to right in front of this elevator,” Preston said. “It’ll go faster.”

George nodded and chewed his breakfast, bending his neck to look out over the Colorado. “We’re having another party on the pontoon this weekend. You were a real trooper eating that sardine last time, or whatever it was. Thing had been in the bait tank for god knows how long.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Preston asked, pressing the ridges of his key against his index finger.

George laughed and took a sip of coffee. “Nothing’s wrong with me. What’s wrong with you? Why’d you eat a rotten fish?”

Dizzy with rage, Preston started the engine and cut the steering wheel counterclockwise, gassing the pedal lightly.

“You know, if you moved your car, I’d have more room to do this!” Preston shouted.

“What?” George crawled out the passenger door of the Corolla and sat on the retaining wall. His windbreaker swelled. It was lined in a silk, sepia-toned map of the world, a dragon in each ocean. “I can’t hear you. You’re doing great!”

The delivery truck stalled. George laughed again, rubbing his Styrofoam cup with a thumb. Stomping the clutch, Preston turned the key across the ignition and punched the plastic ball atop the stick shift with a closed fist.

“Motherfucker,” Preston said, stammering into first gear. The van lurched forward. It lifted the Corolla up on two wheels. The passenger door flapped open and rapped George across his knees. Preston killed the engine. The Corolla’s side mirror, shattered, swung below the window on a few colorful cords. Preston ran to the retaining

wall and put his palms where George should have been. He looked down. The foreman made a little white splash, like a pill dissolving, and was gone.

As Lester Oates finished his morning thigh stretches, a frenzy of quacks and wings beating against water drew his attention to the John Wesley Powell Dam. He heard a loud splash. Mallards, their breasts dripping with the river, were taking to panicked flight near the base of the concrete wall. A man at the top of the dam was dropping cans of something on them.

Lester shook his head at the complexity of the scene. The moon was up in the noon sky just beyond a tip of still cloud, solid blue showing through its craters. He returned to the warmth of his Subaru and ate a donut. A crow pecked at cold chicken skins by his tent. One hung from its beak, limp, in the shape of some deflated continent. He horse-shoed a half moon of donut over the stick shift, picked up his phone, and dialed Aunt Laura. She answered on the third ring and Lester asked if there was any news about his mother.

“She made some gurgling noises in her chest after breakfast,” Aunt Laura said.

“Have you done your yoga today?”

“What kind of noises?” Lester asked.

“Choking. Where are you?”

“Nowhere that good. Drove in from Flagstaff last night.”

“You don’t want to tell Aunt Laura your whereabouts.”

“She was choking?”

“It’s not good, Lester. This is the part the doctors warned us about. This is why you’re out there.”

“Is she going to die soon?”

“You know the answer.”

“Maybe I should come home.”

“Being by her bed, it’s like looking in a casket,” Aunt Laura said. “I’m looking at her right now. Betsy, you’re like looking in a casket.”

“Don’t talk to her like that,” Lester said.

“She’s my sister.”

“I should come home.”

“No. You’re a young man and you’ve done your part. Befriend a shaman. Dabble in some hard drugs. This place is no good for you.”

“Can you put the phone up to her?”

“She’s spitting again. I’ll have to call you back.”

She hung up. Lester kicked the car door open, stripped a silver-black piece of bark from a log in his fire pit and threw it against a Pinyon tree. It made a wide, satisfying sound—lots of individual things breaking all at once.

The night before, stumbling outside the Cat Lounge in Flagstaff in a dumb haze of concupiscence, watching the rain make quick paw-prints on the puddles that formed in the eighteen-wheeler parking spots, Lester had marveled at how entirely self-regulated he had become. His mother’s Huntington’s disease had been the central organizing fact of his life, and now the entirety of it was under Aunt Laura’s charge. The disease could no longer instruct him to organize pills, or be outside the hospital at a certain time.

He studied the abandoned site two fire pits down from him. The tent was still there, as was a cutting board and two foldout chairs, small lumps of sand in the seats. He walked kicking beer cans to the tent, unzipped it, and looked inside. Pillows, air mattress, a pair of women's jeans with the belt still in, one cup of a lacey bra, the other buried under the folds of a sleeping bag. A make-up mirror on the pillow. He picked this up and puckered his sun-scorched lips in the crusty reflection.

When yogically bereaved Aunt Laura came to live with Lester four months ago to share the nursing duties for his mother, she began her residency by leading Lester in grief-breathing exercises and a series of sun-greeting thigh squats. They got along fine, but soon Lester began attending to her with some of the votive care he had grown accustomed to giving his mother. Aunt Laura rebelled. She ordered out to prevent him from cooking for her, locked herself in basement rooms below the stairlift to better ignore him, refused coffee, and finally, on Lester's nineteenth birthday, laid fifteen hundred dollar bills on the kitchen table and suggested Lester take a trip. To leave a dying mother screamed of an enervated character, but in truth there was not much left to do. The disease had poked its head outside the realm of the medical. Doctors spoke of DNR forms now, not treatment.

A car approached from the road running along the shore of the river. It hummed past a row of houseboats, stopping intermittently, the brake lights flashing like two drops of magma. Lester knew that the car was looking at him. He zipped the tent back quickly and began walking toward the bathroom complex.

"Excuse me?" a woman in the passenger seat had rolled her window down. The driver turned into Lester's hamlet of campsites.

Lester waved and kept walking. He pushed open the Men's room with a shoulder, sat down on a cold porcelain toilet seat, and locked the stall. After awhile there was a knock at the bathroom door.

"Excuse me. Sir?"

Then more knocking. At least two people pounding their fists.

"Yeah, guy, can you open this door?"

"We're coming in if you don't."

"No thanks!" Lester said, and flushed the toilet. It was all he could think to do. He looked at the ceiling, hoping to see a vent to scurry away through.

"It's my planning period, man," said one of the women. "I don't have time for this."

"If you don't come out, we're calling the cops," said the second woman.

When the wheeze of the toilet ceased, Lester flushed it again. As the bathroom door opened, he stood, hands over his head. The two women walked shoulder to shoulder to his commode stall. An unthinking purposefulness attached itself to their posture. They were righteous. One was tall, pretty, dressed in a long skirt and sheered hoes. She smelled like fire, like Lester did. The shorter one had wide-bottomed slacks, no neck, and frizzy hair like cotton candy.

"What you did was a huge invasion of privacy," said the neckless one. "We saw you rifling through Sandy's things."

"I'm sorry," Lester said.

"Were you stealing from me?" Sandy asked. "This is the guy in the Subaru who creeped us out last night."

“Are you a stalker?”

Lester stretched his chin over the top of the stall to meet the shorter one’s eyes.

“No,” Lester said. “I thought I saw an animal at her camp. Like a jackrabbit or something. I tried scaring it off.”

“I came to pick up my tent,” Sandy said. “While I do that, you stay put. Aileen here will honk when we’re done. If anything’s missing, the cops are getting called.”

Lester looked down and saw the make-up mirror in the damp folds of his palm.

“Here,” he said, holding it out over the stall.

Sandy crossed her arms and looked at him in a stern, pitying way.

“I don’t want to ever see you again, ok?” she said.

It was like she was questioning his very person by saying that, his right to exist. The words knocked disapprovingly on his innermost bone.

“Let him keep it,” Aileen said. “He may have *done things* with it.”

Sandy pointed at him. “A horse in his stable,” she said. “Act like a good horse. Stay put.”

He continued standing with his chin over the stall. A Koala Kare Bear station opened out when they left. An automatic towel dispenser unscrolled a foot of paper without provocation. He tried recalling himself in the dutiful son who had fretted over the idea of abandoning his mother until the thought of it became such a morass that he left one morning just to ease the pain of his own indecision. He sat back down on the toilet and waited.

“What is this thing on your head?”

Preston reached up and knocked his knuckles against the celluloid hardhat.

“That’s not why I’m here,” he said, removing the hat and hiding it behind his back.

The Indian Woman leaned on the doorframe. She held a Budweiser in her hand and wore a pair of diabetic socks. Behind her, on the arm of a black sofa, a serving spoon stuck out of a bowl of ice cream. The walkway to the front of her white-and-blue ranch house was lined with lemon trees. Preston smelled the dirt under the brown leaves that collected at their bases.

“You’re the guy who ate that bait at George Mullington’s party,” she said.

“Yes, but that’s not why I’m here.”

“So you work for UPS, huh? My husband works painting the penstocks over there at the dam. He should be home soon. He said there was an accident.”

Preston held out a small cardboard box he had been cradling in his armpit.

“I have a package for you,” he said.

“You delivered a digital camera to my house not three weeks ago. We talked. I signed for it. It has two settings just for babies. Baby setting one and baby setting two.”

“That’s great.”

“It’s going back though. I wanted something else for Christmas.”

“Oh.”

“Where do I sign?”

The Indian Woman trusted him. The citizens of Page opened their doors, no questions. All of that was over. He was just drawing out an ill-fated doldrums by pretending otherwise. He had thrown the epoxy cans off the dam. That was tampering

with a crime scene at the least. An admission of guilt even. The idea was to make the fall look more like an accident, but the exact reasoning melted under scrutiny like snow under a hot sun.

And there was the broken mirror on George's car to contend with. Preston had stared at it for a dense minute before coming to a kind of acceptance of it.

In all situations, he told himself, there are things that work against you. Weaknesses. This mirror, in this situation, is mine.

Preston strolled back to the street to his delivery truck, slid the driver's door open, and examined his route page, stretching his sinewy calves against one of the tires. He yawned and popped his neck. The moon was still up in the noon sky. Streetlamps sprouted from the edges of front lawns, their braided support wires disappearing at angles behind spruce stockades.

The route was keeping him sane. But there was only one delivery left.

He passed for the thousandth time a destitute convertible on blocks outside of a tire repair shop. The cloth top was retracted and a tall wooden cross leaned over the backseat. The shop's name was printed on the rusted hood.

It was already a memory. Going through the route was like going through a lucid dream, and the cold, cold prison sentence he envisaged was as inevitable as waking life.

He pulled into the parking lot of a Piggly Wiggly and turned in his seat. Cobwebs of lights spread across the trailer bed, coming down from tiny holes in the walls and ceiling. He lifted the final box, set it on his knee and shook. It made a sound like bundles of sand.

Trailer homes with red doors flanked the Piggly Wiggly. There were only a handful of cars in the parking lot. He passed a Subaru with cluttered bumper stickers on its hatch window. Preston, who changed his bumper stickers regularly and allowed no more than three on his truck at a time, frowned and went with the package on his forearms through automatic doors into the sound of barcode scanners and gimpy shopping cart wheels.

As he tapped the bell on the Customer Service desk, a woman who had been crouching behind the desk stood and raised her eyebrows. Feeling rude, Preston tried rubbing at the bell with his fingers, as if he were interested in its shape rather than its sound. The bell was as cold as refrigerated water.

“Can a manager come sign for this?” Preston asked. Just go through your deliveries, he thought. Just get them done and go home.

The woman nodded and disappeared through a door on a wall of Marlboro’s and Skoal cans.

Preston didn’t like standing in open space. He felt vulnerable. He scanned the aisles for policemen, set the package down on the desk, and began walking slowly towards the exit. Under a sign written in tubelight that read Food, he saw a fat young man at a round Formica table surrounded by sacks of groceries hunched over a plate of chicken tenders. Behind him in the serve-yourself buffet most of the victuals were housed in boxes made out of corrugated metal. The young man looked like a hippie and wore Velcro sandals, soccer shorts over a pair of long johns, and a pale blue beanie. He smelled like wood smoke.

The Subaru, Preston thought. From the campsite. He saw the whole thing.

“Excuse me,” Preston said. “Do you know if there’s a burn ban out at Wahweap?”

The hippie raised his face from his meal. His eyebrows were as thin and unmoving as bicycle tread, but his ears wiggled hungrily like a rodent’s snout.

“You can burn,” the hippie said. “I’ve seen people burning for a long time.”

Preston looked beyond the hippie. A gray sausage was turning on the hotdog pipes.

“Is that right?” Preston asked.

“A long time.”

“Well that’s all I need to know,” Preston said.

A witness.

He went back to his delivery truck and started the engine. Blue fumes chugged out. Preston was a man prone to confession, and he knew now that he had to tell Sandy. The situation was speeding beyond his brain’s velocity. He couldn’t keep up. He needed someone to forgive him. Sandy would eventually accept his error and relinquish it in the cleansing springs of ablution, to which, it seemed to him, she had divine access. She would be a constant wife. She would understand that he had made a mistake, nothing more.

Turning right onto South Navajo Drive, he saw the Desert View K-8. The backend of the playground was fenced against a sheer cliff. Children gripped the chains of swing sets and squirmed on the rubber seats. Their long shadows swung like pendulums on the grass. It looked like a cloud city, the school built so close to an unseen drop.

Heights imply falls, he thought.

Standing on the top step outside of the trailer, he knocked on the metal door. Sandy saw him through the fanlight, set a piece of chalk down, and gave a stern finger to her students.

“Let’s go pay a visit to the house by your sister’s,” Preston said, when she opened the door.

Sandy cocked her head. Preston followed her to a crossroads between four classroom trailers. Generator’s brayed. Sandy’s students peered out at them through the fanlight. The sky was high and white.

“I have a class to teach,” Sandy said.

“It’ll be worth it,” Preston said. “You have a spare key.”

“Did you hear about what happened to George Mullington?”

“What are they saying?” Preston crouched and rubbed on a steel trailer hitch like it was a genie lamp.

“He slipped carrying cans of paint. Fell off the dam.”

“That’s all?”

“He’s dead.”

“Any other details?”

“He’s dead. I’d say that’s a detail worth mulling over.”

“I suppose so. Where’d you hear that?”

“They’re dragging the river for details.” Sandy shrugged and picked a loose thread from her skirt. She stared at the playground through a cut between the trailer rows.

“I can probably get Aileen to cover this class.”

“Let’s go,” Preston said.

On the road, Preston picked at grains of dry leaf in Sandy's hair. At stops, she stared straight into the red light. There was something autumnal at work between them. He pinched the skin on her cheek and softly tugged.

"What are you doing?" Sandy asked.

"Just scrunching up your face."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

Preston turned onto Keyway Street and stopped in front of the shell-white house. There was a cinder porch out front and a little square lawn, the grass like a leaf of blue cabbage against the desert reds. It was a good house, Preston decided.

"You still have the ring?" Preston asked.

Sandy ran her fingers through her peanut butter hair and looked at him.

"Do you really want to live here, Preston? We could move somewhere else."

"Yes," he said, and he felt sure of it. The incident at the dam had launched him out of a moral sphere he had never considered, dismissing it as too spacious and encompassing to ever break free of. But now he was standing alone, banging on the window to be let back in. He needed to be sewn into a community.

"Grandpa built all these houses because he wanted his family to live like one person," Sandy said. "It's weird, I know. When I was twelve and had my first period, my cousin ran around the street screaming about it. I locked myself in the bathroom, but all of my Aunt's came by with flowers and banged on the door, telling me I was a woman. It's—there's not much privacy."

“I want to marry you and I want to live here,” Preston said. He wasn’t even listening to her. There was relief in knowing, finally, that Sandy was the best he could get. He felt warmly neutered by his crime and pledged never to speak to a woman with stray intention again.

“Oh, Preston. I do. I’ll marry you.” To tell Sandy what happened at the dam would slake his previous life and begin a new one. One in which enduring the daily sacks of guilt would become the principle ethos. Endurance was the trial of that other word—acceptance.

“But first I need to tell you something,” he said. He could feel the blood rattling in his fingertips and his heart, beating so fast it rocked his vision. “George Mullington didn’t fall off that dam.”

He told her everything, and as he did the events on the dam hardened and became less malleable. It was something he had done. For a wicked moment he even allowed himself to marvel at the grandness of his deed. Murder. It was the biggest thing you could do.

When he finished, Sandy cupped her hands over her face, carefully, like a tiny bird was between them instead of her nose.

“Oh my God,” she said. “I have to go.”

“Why? All because of this one thing?”

Sandy stepped out of the cab. She walked in small circles in the street with her hands on her head, then lay on her back on the sidewalk. An uncle of some kind watched them through the windows of his house.

“Yes,” she said. “You proposed and it was just a trap. You’re trying to lock me in this with you.”

“Maybe you should take a minute to mull it over.”

“I don’t think that will help.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ve learned a new fact about you. And now I’m going to incorporate that fact into how I live my life. Like a rational human being.”

“Don’t start with that talk about rational human beings,” Preston said. He kicked open the driver’s door and hopped down to the curb with his hands in his pockets, moving his fingers around the fabric like there were piles of assorted change inside. Some unseen wealth. Something more to offer her.

“I’ll give you twenty minutes before I call the cops,” she said. She wiped gravel on her knees and stood up. She was backing away from him.

He had been mistaken about Sandy. She had a consistent and welcoming sexual appetite, and he had confused this for meekness. But she was not meek, and he knew this now, and it added a primacy to her forgiveness. She could offer it fully, objectively.

“Marry me,” he said. “I didn’t mean to do it. How does it help anything if I go to jail?”

“Twenty minutes.”

“Who else will live in this crazy fucking place with you? Think about that!”

But he said this to her fleeing back. Sandy was running full tilt down the sidewalk, bellowing to Keyway Street that a stranger was among their herd.

Stuffed, cross-eyed bears, trotting purple unicorns, and several tiny throw pillows in the shape of moons and planets slid out of the cardboard box. Lester watched the stock boy feed the contents of the box into the open roof of a claw crane, like fish food into an aquarium. This was what that UPS man had delivered. The toys brushed against tripod prongs before dropping soundlessly to the bottom.

Lester wiped his mouth with a napkin, dumped the paper plate in a trashcan and took his groceries outside. The Piggly Wiggly was painted honey gold and out front three columns, their surfaces chewing gum-freckled and engraved with many slender diamonds, framed an awning.

His hunger relieved, Lester crossed the oil-dribbled asphalt and unlocked the hatch-door of his Subaru. Below several empty twelve packs of Canada Dry and a quilted blanket, he retrieved a plastic cooler. Inside there was just soupy ice, a small mesh lunchbox, and a head of wilted lettuce. He deposited the groceries in the cooler.

Recalling the confrontation in the Wahweap bathroom, Lester stuck two fingers between his teeth and pulled the trigger. The conflict had been mortifying, yes, but being in the presence of two women who were so certain of their moral superiority was also invigorating. It was the longest conversation he had had in weeks, and it felt good to be in the presence of certainty.

It was infectious. He knew now that he needed, very much, to go home. The few interesting things he had done on his road trip—snorting cocaine with a line cook named Lugo in Santa Fe, visiting the Grand Canyon and Buddy Holly's grave, passing twenty signs over a three-mile stretch all advertising the same Dairy Queen—were actually fairly dull and not at all revelatory.

He remembered when he bought the Canada Dry's. Lester had placed one on the rubber belt and kept two others on the bottom racks. With a low groan the cashier had scanned the soda three times, ran her hand below the scanner, and brought out a coil of Paid For stickers. She unstuck five of them, placing one on the tip of each finger so that her ample digits looked like a bouquet of dandelions, and she transferred them in this way to Lester's fingers, so that for a moment their fingertips touched. The contact was almost unbearably thrilling, and Lester shivered for a moment before crouching down and depositing the stickers on his soda. That was the best moment of his trip.

A low wall of mountains rimmed Lester's vision. He felt like a rubber duck stuck on the bottom of a dry bathtub, like one of those bean-filled animals below the prongs. Something unable to help itself and made with a claw in mind.

If the fund was depleted, Lester reasoned, Aunt Laura would have to let him come home. He could take his money to an Indian Casino and burn it in cards. She would not stand by while Lester starved. And Aunt Laura was a retired librarian. She didn't have another thousand dollars lying around just to keep him away. If she did, he would burn that too.

On the highway, Lester considered the ways he could lose his money. He could bet it all in one hand, or he could play methodically, wasting fifteen dollars at a time over the course of several hours. He counted telephone poles.

At the casino, Lester pulled slot machines distractedly, ate alfredo pasta from an aluminum buffet bin, then sat at a blackjack table and watched waitresses ferry bright martinis across the track-lit floor.

He cashed out after betting seventy-two dollars, bought tamales at a gas station, and drove back to Wahweap. He watched the telephone poles again, this time imagining himself crucified on their crossbars, his bloody head high among the insulator and wires and bolts.

Squad cars were parked on sand by the bank of the Colorado. Lester drove on to the park's innermost campsite, in the shadow of a cold red mountain. He crouched on the hood of his car, the two tamales wrapped in butcher paper on his lap. He watched the police boats drag the river.

Men playing blackjack had talked about this—some accident at the dam—but Lester hadn't really listened.

When the moon poked all the way through the sky and hung over the river like a sightless eye, the police and EMT's retrieved their nets and began packing up. Divers took off their fins and padded through the pale sand to their cars. There was no more heat coming off the Subaru's engine, so Lester collected dry twigs for kindling.

It was quiet for a time after the crime scene disbanded. Lester stoked his fire and popped Canada Dry's, smoke going down his throat alongside the drafts of ginger ale. He cut up a banana and ate it in slices out of a bowl, an old high school habit to reduce fellatio-resemblance. He felt the edges of the makeup mirror in his pocket.

A houseboat out on the river flashed its light at him. It pulsed like Morse-code, casting long shadows over the lumpy ground. Lester shaded his eyes with a hand and tried looking past the glow. There was a man on the boat, clicking the big mounted bulb on and off. He was signaling to Lester.

The river was a pistolshot away. The man continued hitting him with the brights, so Lester set his bowl down and walked the length of the campsite to the shore.

“Is everything ok?” Lester said, the tide lapping over his ankles, sogging his socks and sandals.

“Swim out here,” said the man, his face like the bottom of a cast-iron skillet behind the boatlight.

“Why?”

“I just want to talk. There’s some people in here. We’re having a party.”

“Did I meet you at the Piggly Wiggly?”

“Yes sir. I recognized you and thought I’d extend an invite.”

Lester rolled his long johns over his knees and ripped the damp Velcro on his sandal straps. He placed his socks in his sandals on the beach and squelched out into the water, cold mud pressing through his naked toes. Wind chimes tinkled on a neighboring boat.

“Talk about what?” Lester said, desperate for a conversation. The water was freezing, and he clutched his ribs to stop shivering. He stepped past a shoal and dropped into a convulsive paddle.

“Fuck! Cold!”

“I got you,” the man said. “Come on a little more.”

Lester reached his hand out and the man pulled him up a small ladder hanging off the stern. He lay balled and trembling on the Astroturf lip while the man stepped into the dark cabin.

“My name’s Preston.”

“What are you doing out here?” Lester asked. It was a good-sized boat, thirty feet from stern to bow, with long pontoons running below it.

Preston wore brown shorts and nothing else. No shoes. No socks. He was a young man, older than Lester, but still young. His eyes were blue, his calves taut, and he had defined biceps the size of meatballs. His legs were much bigger than his torso. Veins ran across his chest. Patches of curly black hair covered his bare shoulders unevenly, as if nibbled at by a team of small mice.

“Cops,” Preston said, returning with a towel. He draped it over Lester, and Lester smelled the boat on him, petroleum and fish, but also something sweet, not aftershave, but a mild fragrant soap.

“What about them?” Lester said.

“They look inside the clam for the pearl. But they never think to look inside the pearl itself. This boat belonged to George Mullington. It’s a good place to hide.”

Preston seemed quite pleased by this, whatever it meant.

“My name’s Lester.”

They shook hands and Preston switched off the light.

“Those palms are soft as pincushions,” Preston said.

“I’m not much of a laborer.”

“You camped beside my wife and I last night.”

Lester considered diving back into the water.

“It was a huge invasion of privacy, what I did sir,” Lester said.

Preston smiled down at Lester and tapped the air between them with a finger like he wanted Lester to roll down a window.

“No worries man,” Preston said. “You’re one of those road warriors, eh? You look just like John Lennon. Come inside.”

“Thanks.”

Lester scratched his oily beard and dried his armpits under his hoodie with the towel and followed Preston into the cabin. He liked Preston.

Preston sat on a fiberglass chair pressed up against tiled wainscoting. His feet were propped on a bolted table next to a coffeemaker and several Styrofoam cups with pink packets of sugar and powdered cream sprouting out of them. An unplugged television sat on the floor, the screen pigeon-colored and reflecting the whorled orange face of a space heater. Several gaffs with gleaming metal hooks stood at an angle in a corner of the room beside a filthy bait bucket.

Lester stripped to his boxers and squatted with the towel over him among a cycle of black and white photographs hanging from nailheads on the walls. They were of the dam in its construction, scaffolds, cranes and concrete mixers, and of the bachelor quarters that housed the workers. In one photo, hundreds of men were squinting outside a line of trailers in the desert, hardhats at their waists, waving to a camera in a helicopter.

“What vexes you, Lester?” Preston asked. “Are there bad things in your personal life? Is everything alright at home?”

“My mother is very sick.”

“Will she die soon?”

Lester smiled. He sensed he was being mocked, but some uncertainty plagued the man’s devilment. Preston was weak, perhaps cowardly, which made Lester like him even more. It had been a long time since Lester had spoken to someone he liked, and there was

so much bile inside of him to burn off before he could think of behaving with some degree of civility that it felt good to speak with mutual abrasiveness.

“You think you’re bold, asking me a question like that,” Lester said.

“I’ve made a fairly bold showing today.”

“Did your wife tell you to come kick my ass?”

“Are you afraid I will?” Preston moved to the corner of the room and picked up a gaff. He sloshed the tip in the bait bucket.

Lester shrugged, looking at the photographs. “The whole town was built around this dam.”

“It’s real tribal because of it,” Preston said. He stood close to Lester, holding the gaff. Their chests touched, and Lester could feel both of their hearts thumping out at the other.

“You think I’m a punk,” Lester said. “You think punks need ass-wuppings. The world is real simple to you.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Beat me up and go fuck your wife to celebrate. I don’t care. You and monkey’s have similar ideas about pain.”

Preston hooked the gaff, lightly, under the node of Lester’s left collarbone.

“Maybe we do,” he said. “But right now you’re all that’s between monkey man here and a great abyss. I need to know if you’re going to push me over. What did you see at that dam?”

Lester swallowed and turned his face toward the stern of the boat. He was full of pie-eyed confusion now, and very frightened, but there was something so puny and

shamed about the man. It oozed off like a smelly burp. There was none of Sandy's righteousness, which had surprised Lester and emboldened him.

"All of it," Lester said.

Preston dropped the gaff and closed his eyes. He seemed relieved.

"What did it look like? Did it look like an accident?"

"It looked like ducks flying away from cans."

A sardine moved in small circles on the surface of the bait bucket, seemingly on the axis of its own eyeball.

"So you didn't see anything," Preston said. "You're telling me that I'm all alone with this. I'll never know if I really meant to do it."

"Sounds like you are."

"Your mother. Does she want to die?"

Lester stepped over the gaff and began walking backwards toward the stern.

Preston picked it up and followed.

"She told me she did, in so many words" Lester said. "Once."

"Why?"

"Sometimes it's not a thing you can work your way out of."

"Why doesn't she kill herself?"

"Waited too long."

"Do you wish she had?"

They were both outside the cabin, Lester leaning on the big spotlight.

"There's no courage in asking me a question like that," Lester said. "I felt pretty miserable," Lester said. "That's all I know."

“You’re not much help to me.”

“This isn’t much of a party.”

Preston pressed the blunt end of the gaff into the soft pouch below Lester’s chest.

“Goodbye,” he said. He pushed, and Lester fell off the stern, water rising up his body. He paddled to shore and looked back at Preston on the houseboat.

“You wish she had!” Preston said. “It would make things simpler! It’s selfish, her hanging on like this! She makes everyone miserable!”

Lester weighed retorts. He shook his head, jogged sopping wet to the bathroom complex, where he showered with clattering teeth, squatting cross-legged under the stream. He dried himself with paper towels, sat on the belt buckles in the backseat of his car, and stared straight ahead, still weighing retorts, until he fell asleep with cold hair.

Lester slept deeply through the night, and when the soft morning broke over the mountains he packed the Subaru and called Aunt Laura.

“She’s doing a little better today,” she said.

“How so?”

“Eyelids. They’re fluttering. Lots of energy around the eyelids. You sound sick.”

“Listen, I met someone last night and—”

“Romantic?”

“No. But they got me thinking and I’ve decided to come home. I’m packing right now. I’ll be there by the time you wake tomorrow.”

“That’s not how this—”

Lester hung up. He scooted the cooler between two blankets and slammed the hatch door. His campsite was bare. Mucus dribbled through the passages of his nose as he bent down for a stretch. His ears mewled and his face was flush with fever and the thought of his own sickness reminded him of the time his mother first became divested of all she once was.

It happened when the worst of the illness first began incubating in her. She was sitting in the den below the stairlift, head pressed into a plastic sofa, watching television on their wood-paneled set. She watched it constantly. When Lester came downstairs with a plate of mashed potatoes for her to eat he asked her what the matter was.

“I have nothing to live for,” she said.

He wanted her to weep after saying it, but she didn't. She never spoke like that again, but she never denied the feeling either. And it was after this pronouncement that she began giving things away. First it was chairs and photographs, then the piano, then the shape and the smell of her own body. The knotty skein of her healthy life was cut and abandoned. She passed the days with Lester abiding by the rhythms of the terminal. And those rhythms became Lester's rhythms. He met the world's blind speed with the idling pace of one resigned to die.

Noting the blue tint on his bare toes, Lester walked down to the shore to retrieve his sandals and socks. Freezing, he stuffed his hands in the pouch of his hoodie. His hair was too cold and stiff to touch. He needed to be with his mother, who would pass away—maybe tomorrow, maybe in five years. He was a caretaker, it was written in him like the design of a spider's web. It felt good, knowing his place in the world.

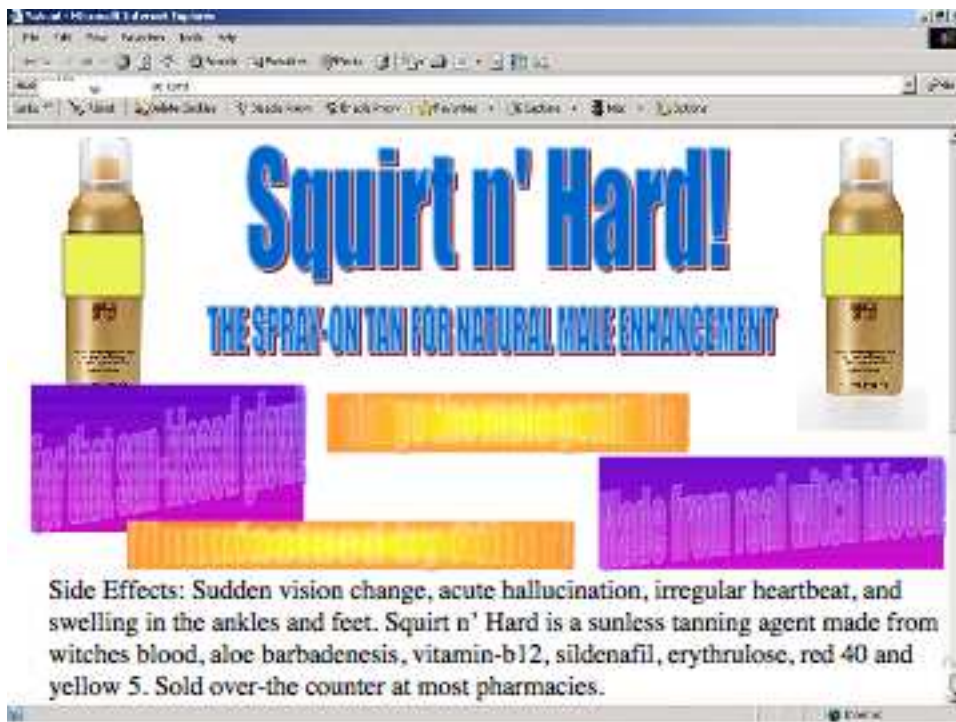
Beside the sandals, Preston was half-blanketed in foaming surf. His nose was nestled in cold grey sand and he lay there in his brown shorts without moving. Lester lugged him out of the water, pumped his chest, and listened to the veins in his neck for a pulse. There were no good sounds within him, just a slow draining noise. The red muscle below his ribs stood still. Lester wiped grains from the suicide's face and fished through his soccer shorts for the make-up mirror. He opened it, shoved the glass under Preston's nose, and continued to pump.

The dam showed in the reflection, pink morning sun on the modular concrete. It looked alive and covered in skin, with mountainous roots buried far below, puncturing primeval lakes and miles of sediment, nursing greedily at the world's core. Lester stared in horror at the thing, at the resources the living demand and hoard.

Then the glass fogged, and Lester looked up with hope, but the breath on the mirror had been his own.

CHAPTER 5

SQUIRT N' HARD



I tried listening through the window, but the clatter of washing machines next door muffled their moans. All I could make out was the clumsy bonk of my bed hitting the wall. Someone emptied a flowerpot full of cigarette butts off the second floor landing and I opened my eyes. The day was dimming, the hotel pool at the end of the parking lot grey and round like an enormous nail head. I stared out beyond the pool, at the highway

bridge and the valley of fumes and surging cars below. The cigarette butts were splayed inside a handicap spot in front of me.

The top of my lawn chair was pressed against the window. I pictured Hannah and Yuk inside: Hannah removing Yuk's cleats and long red socks, scooting his baseball pants down his legs. Reaching behind to unhook her bra clips. Showing him the pouch of skin between her legs, shaved down to a pornographic ideal. She had two bumps on the tip of her upturned nose, and a wandering eye that was always drifting toward her lashes. The eye was pale blue with tiny gold flecks, and made her look bored, lost in thought. I imagined her smiling on her knees and lifting his cup off his crotch like a plate cover. Looking up while bobbing her head, trying to fix her one wandering eye in a gaze of solicitude.

Warm, pleasant air drafted over from the laundry room, smelling of detergent crystals and lint. I imagined Hannah's pleasure at having her walls stretched by Yuk's girth, her depths touched by his length.

I focused on my laptop screen. The website was simple—bare background, thumbnails for videos stacked in rows of seven like day-boxes on a calendar. A banner at the top of the page read:

JESSICA SHY—SQUIRT N' HARD ADULT PERFORMER

UPDATED REGULARLY

LIVE/PRIVATE SHOWS EVERY FRIDAY @ 7 PM EASTERN

The thumbnails played silently, flesh moving in tiny boxes, the frames too small to distinguish individual actors. It was like seeing a collection of microscope slides spread out over a table, cells and bacteria writhing below the glass, all awaiting my inspection. I

was fifteen years old and watched pornography from the time school let out until my Papa arrived home from work at ten, eleven o'clock.

I shook my bottle Squirt n' Hard: Baha Blend. The liquid made sharp, crackling noises inside the metal canister, like a flame catching on a match. I sprayed a coil on my calf and rubbed it into my skin. I was steeping myself in arousal in the hopes that Hannah would take note, would be somehow overcome by the abundance of my amorous feeling. I was at the age when I mistook horny for attractive. You look at old people sometimes, passing them by on the road, and you think that they cannot get any older. That anymore aging would surely be impossible, would be death. That's how I wanted to be with horny.

I heard the door unlatch. Yuk stepped through the frame, squinted, and whipped me on the neck with a twisted-up towel.

"I thought I told you to take a walk," he said.

He removed his baseball cap and squeezed the bill between his palms. A thin trickle of sweat dribbled out of the fabric. He was smiling, showing his wide-spaced teeth that were shaped like pill capsules.

I shrugged and rubbed the place the towel hit. "Walk where?"

"Doesn't matter," he said, making a point to adjust the cup inside his pinstripes. You could see he was proud, coming out of the room to an audience. This vanity gave me power. Though he wouldn't have acknowledged it, he was allowing me a degree of access to his sex life, to Hannah. "Just walk around," he said.

Hannah emerged from the room with Yuk's bat bag sliding down her left shoulder. She was finishing off a joint rolled with college-ruled paper. She wore a fitted

oxford shirt and her hair was pulled under a burgundy *tichel*. She was very thin with wide hips that stretched the fabric of her long black skirt.

“Hey Zeke,” she said.

“Hey,” I said.

“Let me get a hit off that,” Yuk said.

He took the joint and puffed at the butt of paper, which burned bright green and much faster than the weed. The weed was falling out of the joint in blackened clumps.

Yuk Austin was my Talmud partner, my *chavruta*. Every day we paired up in Dr. Birnbaum’s class, a fat volume of Medieval Jewry between us, and went about parsing the finer points of the clerics. We had an uneasy friendship. On the second day of class I quietly confessed to Yuk that I hadn’t done the assigned reading. He said it was cool, that he had and would do all the talking.

“What does the *Havdallah* say,” Dr. Birnbaum asked, coming toward our desks, “about the smelling of spices when you are walking outside of a city half-populated by Jews?”

“Zeke here really wanted to answer that one, Birnbaum,” Yuk said, and stared at me blank-faced.

“Well, I’m not really sure,” I said, searching Yuk for pity. “I can’t seem to remember.”

When class was over I found Yuk in the hallway, slammed his locker shut, and demanded explanation. He just laughed. And the funny thing was, I started laughing too. “You fucking asshole,” I kept saying, but I couldn’t stop laughing.

Yuk played on the baseball team. When I told him that I lived at a weekly rate at the Knights Inn, Room 207, and that my Papa worked late, he began bringing Hannah by after practice. This had been going on for some time.

A roll of plastic doughnuts and a mitt fell out of the bat bag. It was almost full dark, the brake lights on the highway like a stream of lava. Yuk stooped and tossed the doughnuts back in the mesh pouch. He paused to sniff the leather fingers of his mitt.

“I’m going to stick around here for awhile,” he said. “Hang out with Zeke.”

“Really?” Hannah said. “Why?”

He tossed her a bundle of keys from his pocket.

“You go ahead,” he said. “Pick me up in a couple hours.”

“What are you going to do?” Hannah said. She put her hands on her hips, an affect that left me breathless, and looked at me in an apologetic way. “I mean, you two don’t normally hang out together is all.”

Yuk flicked the joint into the handicap spot among the others. I watched the paper smolder and unravel atop a glassy puddle of oil.

“Show her, Zeke,” he said.

I clicked one of the squirming boxes on the website. The boxes were the size of matchbooks, but when you clicked one it filled the whole screen. I raised the laptop so she could see, offering the video as a declaration of love.

“Oh my god,” Hannah said. “I have Geometry with that girl.”

“She’s a witch,” I said.

“Gross,” Hannah said.

“It’ll be hilarious,” Yuk said. “We’re gonna get wild on Squirt n’ Hard and talk to her online.”

Hannah shook her head and walked off toward Yuk’s Tercel, which was parked near the pool. She stepped over a spoiled diaper wrapped in a face cloth.

“A couple of faggots,” she said.

“Yeah right,” I said.

We laughed. We weren’t gay. Or, if we were, that didn’t have a lot to do with it. I’ve thought about this a long while. Yuk knew that I desired Hannah—a fact that most likely peeved him—but he also knew that I was in awe of his sexual competence. He kept me away from her, but he enjoyed my worship and wanted to show me in further detail the precise things he could do to a girl. Jessica Shy, who neither of us knew particularly well—she knitted at lunch, spoke little, and made poor grades—was distant enough for us to commune on. I would follow Yuk’s lead when we found her on the sex show, and because of my passivity Yuk would have the space to demonstrate his superior manhood and pose for my praise.

I, for my part, was participating because I beat off to online pornography five hours a day, alone, or until I was so sore that I couldn’t continue. I would still watch, entranced, until self-loathing crept completely over the branches of my desire. It was a terribly solitary addiction, so I was excited at the prospect of sharing the time with someone. Anyone. Also, I had my pincers hooked into Yuk’s desire for praise. He was allowing himself to participate in something sexual with me out of vanity, a concession that I hoped would open him up to other concessions and eventually lead to his allowing me full access to Hannah.

I held Yuk's sexual abilities in such esteem that I thought of Hannah as a piece of Yuk's body. I imagined he pleased her so thoroughly, she craved him so carnally, that a part of her had transmuted through the flesh and attached itself to him. He could snap her off like a rib and give her away.

We were quiet as Hannah turned out of the parking lot, speeding past the bodegas and the boarded-up fish fry. The Knights Inn was about two miles from our Yeshiva, a semi-industrial neighborhood peopled by oil change garages, discount appliance outlets, and pigeons roaming the sidewalk under billboards for Title Loan companies with gobs of gum stuck between their talons.

We stared off at the room numbers across the parking lot. To break the silence I closed my eyes, shook my Squirt n' Hard. I sprayed big wet orbs over my eyelids. I heard Yuk howl with joy as I fell out of my chair.



We propped our heads up with pillows on opposite twin beds and watched the laptop screen with the cordial disinterest of patients sharing a sick bay.

Jessica Shy sat on a red velour bench-seat that had rubber wheels the size of half dollars fixed to the bottom. Stripped from the back of a minivan, presumably. Two headrests lay beside her on the upholstered seat, their metal spokes sticking out like stiff roots.

Nude except for a pair of cherry-tinted aviator sunglasses, she wore her hair like a half-drawn curtain. Red bangs streamed down over the edges of her mouth. Her upper lip was plump and stuck out almost as far as the tip of her nose. Her bottom lip was thin and deep-set, owing to the uneven way her teeth sat. She was in a garage. Behind her was a pegboard hung with lures and fishing line. Squares of white light bore through her, pouring in from the windows of the garage door, too bright for the aperture to register. Just white holes checkering her body.

“Lick your titties,” Yuk said.

She scratched at the swamp-green beards below her breasts and lowered her tongue to a nipple.

“We go to your high school!” Yuk said, laughing. “My girlfriend has geometry with you!”

“I want both of you to cum,” she said. *“That would make me so happy.”*

Yuk sprayed his neck with Squirt n’ Hard and tossed the bottle on my bed. I lit a glass bowl of Yuk’s weed, held it, and exhaled. The smoke curled up to the popcorn paint on the ceiling. I tucked my hand under my shirt and sprayed a big wad of the Squirt n’ Hard on my chest. I had been spraying myself off and on for about six hours. It felt cold

all of a sudden, and smelled a little briny, like a small saltwater fish was brushing against my skin. My breath felt constricted under its weight.

“We want you to cum first, baby,” Yuk said. “You think we’re sexy?”

“*Really sexy.*”

“You like it when we tell you to do things?” Yuk said.

“*Oh yeah.*”

“Then play with your pussy,” Yuk said. “Rub it all over and tell us all the sexy things in the world.”

She tossed the headrests off the seat and complied.

“*I want you to taste all of the magic blood in my veins. I want you to feel so good you can’t even handle it.*”

“Oh yeah,” Yuk said. He rose to his haunches and started bouncing on the bed.

“You see this shit, Zeke? Toss me that love potion.”

I ashed the bowl in a paper coffee cup on the nightstand and handed him the Squirt n’ Hard. I kept looking over at the drapes. I saw something bright and familiar there, but every time I looked I forgot what it was.

“Who’s sexier?” Yuk asked, holding the bottle under his belt. He was misting his loins. “Me or him? Who you going to cum for?”

“*Doesn’t matter.*” Her eyes were closed. “*You’re both sexy.*”

Yuk was disappointed with this answer.

“Stick a finger in your butt hole,” he said, frowning. He bounced high, tucked his feet to his chest, and landed on the bed in a loose cannonball. “You try, Zeke. Tell her to do something.”

I was standing by the heavy drapes. Magnesium streaks, barbed and thin like the legs of insects, danced on the edges of my vision. The type of streaks that accompany staring at a bare light bulb; but when I turned my head, the streaks didn't turn with me. They stayed on the drapes, unmoving as scars. I pressed my eye to one of them. The color changed from green to yellow as my iris pushed through, and I saw a flight of glass stairs inside the metallic glow, rounded steps descending at odd angles and reflecting body parts of Jessica Shy from the laptop screen: the space between her fingers stuck together like Barbie's fingers, plastic titties and teeth. But the rest of her was real.

I floated down the stairwell like light through the mirror path of a telescope, and I felt my own aroused flesh dribbling away from me in pink tremulous ribbons. It was impatient, casting out without me in search of Jessica Shy, smashing glass reflections, desperate for copulation with something equally stimulated. It bubbled and rose, filling the stairwell, and I sank below the brim of my own watery skin and choked.

“What's that thing where you can't breath?” I said. I was sitting on the bed.

Yuk was masturbating on the other bed. His cup sat beside him on a pillow like a pet skull. He was quite big but it's difficult to tell with Squirt n' Hard. Particularly Baha Blend. I'm 5.10 inches normally, but on Baha Blend I shoot up to 8.2.

“What?” he said. Rivulets of sweat dripped off his chin.

Jessica Shy had her ass raised to the camera, steadying herself on the armrest of the bench seat. She was twisting a vibrator around in her vagina.

“You wanted me to ask her to do something,” I said. “What's that thing where you can't breath?”

“I asked you that ten minutes ago.” He wasn’t interested in my praise anymore. He was only interested in Jessica Shy now. I felt like I was outside the room on my lawn chair again.

“Auto-erotic asphyxiation.”

“Yeah,” I said. “That. Do that.”

She removed the vibrator, picked up her laptop, and swung it around. We saw a vacant garage—freezer chests, bins stacked with nails, loose socks, wrenches, and shoetrees. A few tents bundled together with masking tape. A white door, presumably leading up the house. No cars. Just oil spots on the concrete and green tennis balls hanging from the ceiling on strings. She returned with a brown plastic Kroger bag and a braided leather belt and stood by the door.

“This will make you feel good?” she asked.

“Oh yeah,” I said. I still felt a heavy tingle in my throat, the afterimage of drowning in my own flesh, from my time at the drapes. I wanted to share that with her. She draped the bag over her head and looped the belt on the doorknob.

I saw that Yuk was softening. “With the bag and all?” he said.

“I think so,” I said. She tightened the belt around her neck and sat down on the concrete. “Is that not how it goes?”

She opened her legs and centered herself in the laptop camera and began masturbating. We watched her uneven lips suck at the inside of the bag, drawing it tight over her face, until it resembled a mask. She took sharp breaths, drawing the bag in. She bent her neck against the door, still rubbing herself, and shook her head back and forth. The bag was very tight.

“Tell her to stop,” Yuk said.

“I did,” I said.

“Tell her again.”

“She can’t hear.”

“Fuck you, make her stop!”

“Stop!” I screamed.

She was thrashing her head back and forth, fingering herself vigorously. Then she seemed to pass out. Her whole body slouched down so that the belt was pressing very hard against her throat.

“Fuck this,” Yuk said. He buttoned his pants and paced around the room collecting clothes. He adjusted his hat, stuffed his cup in a back pocket, and opened the door. “You’re disgusting,” he said, staring out at the parking lot, which was lit by the steamy reds and yellows of the highway. He closed the door softly and I heard the descent of his quick, second-baseman feet.

The room was very quiet. I looked up at the ceiling—brown stains from water and smoke among the pink paint. It looked like the insides of a dying lung. I wasn’t going to look at the laptop until I heard movement—a shuffle of regained consciousness, the crinkle of a bag sliding off a head. I looked at the wood-paneled A/C unit; the white plastic vents.

“*Chirp.*”

Her head was still resting on the curve of belt and her arms were open on the tops of her thighs, which were spread in a sloppy way that made me hate her. The bag had loosened a bit. It made her head look like it was cast in bronze. The folds of her vagina

were tobacco-colored and shaped like a pecan, and between them I saw a small glittering thing. I thought it was a marble with a stripe through the middle.

“Chirp.”

The thing pushed forward until it was the size of a dilated pupil. It opened. It was a beak. A bright yellow canary slid out, stretching her fleshy lips gently, and stood in the valley between her thighs. It stretched and flew away.

I slammed the laptop screen and sprayed Baha Blend down my throat until desire flooded guilt and I was floating high and disappearing all at once.



I could hear the *swoosh!* of wings batting at the ceiling.

The burial was Monday.

I thought I was really going to be sick when Yuk sort of crab-walked past Dr. Birnbaum, who stood under the eaves of his classroom door conversing with another teacher, and plop down in the desk beside me. He looked a wreck—hair matted and streaked in places with a faint glaze of dry shampoo, blue and green circuitry of veins in his cheeks livid against the etherized snow of skin. His pill-capsule teeth were freckled with a shimmering, honey-colored substance: Squirt n’ Hard. He looked at me and I thought he was still angry, still disgusted. I thought he was going to ball me up like scratch paper and toss me away, expose me, wash his hands and glare at me from the other side of the law. My one witness was going to leave the scene of the crime and I would be alone forever.

“I say we go fuck with her grave,” Yuk said. He smiled and slid a few inches of a brown plastic Kroger bag from his pants pocket. “Hannah even cut eyeholes. Shit’s hilarious. Let’s go out to that stubby, bunk-ass grave of hers and wrap this plastic bag over it.”

It felt a sack of prickly sand spill out in my chest.

“Oh no.” I rubbed my eyes until I felt pressure gathering at backs of my sockets. “Oh God, Yuk. This isn’t a joke. We killed her. Her birds are out there.”

“What birds? I didn’t see any birds.”

“After you left. I saw them. Why do you think she’s buried in a murder grave?”

“We didn’t kill her. It was an accident. She killed herself. And Hannah says that you can’t make someone kill themselves. It’s impossible.”

I looked around at our classmates—discussing the Talmud, discussing God and grains of rice and inches of candle-wax and all the bureaucracies of faith. They knew

themselves the way real people know themselves. They cried when they were sad, mourned when they lost, desired when they mated. And Yuk and I seemed terribly distant from all that now. This thing with Jessica Shy had crossed our wires. We would forever after feel shame at sadness, desire at loss, guilt at desire. I felt myself in the act of retreat from elemental life—from trust in my instincts. From faith. My only comfort was Yuk's willingness to join me.

“Then why'd you call me disgusting?” I said.

“I was freaked out,” Yuk said.

“What changed?”

“I talked to Hannah.” He produced a dishrag sprayed in the center with wet bronzer. He held it to his mouth and inhaled. “You want some?”

“Squirt n' Hard? No.”

“I talked to Hannah and she said that what we did was like the equivalent of feeding a cow until its stomachs explode. It's upsetting, sure, but at the end of the day...”

“It's just a cow?”

“That, and, plus, the cow is the one doing the eating.” He tucked the dishrag back into his pocket and shrugged. I was shaking. “It's a joke, our situation. You'll feel better when you think about it that way. Come with me and Hannah. You'll see. It's funny.”

I opened my golf-green volume of the Talmud and flipped pages to the Havdallah. I dropped the book on his desk and pointed.

“It says here that if you are walking outside the city and you see a slice of bread on the ground, you do not say a blessing, even if the majority of the city are Jews, because some Jewish women use bread for witchcraft.”

“Ok?”

“Well,” I said, “at the least, we participated, are currently participating in, some sort of witchcraft. And God doesn’t like that. And, I think, more importantly, since witches exist to please us, and if we tell them to do something to please us that ends up killing them, then, well, they didn’t really have a choice in the matter because it’s in their nature to do anything that pleases us.”

“Ok?”

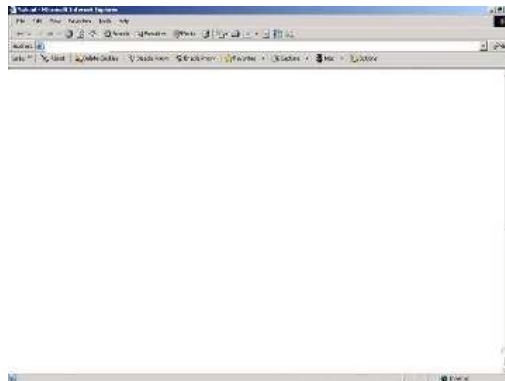
“So it’s our fault if they die!”

“That’s self-centered. No one would die for your pleasure, Zeke. She died for her own pleasure. It had nothing to do with you.”

I snatched the dishrag out of his pocket and huffed. I wanted to be convinced.

“You can’t argue against the Talmud. God doesn’t like witchcraft.”

He slid the rag out of my fingers and returned it to his pocket as Dr. Birnbaum closed the classroom door and walked to the chalkboard. Yuk lowered his voice. “Fine. If you insist on taking responsibility, sure, God hates witches. Well then God must *love* you.” He slammed the book. “You killed the bitch dead.”



Yuk drove. Hannah sat shotgun and I watched from the backseat as the highway gravel sped by, the shoulder framed by a canopy of birch and spruce and sunset pressing down through the leaves that fluttered together like hands in prayer. We were far away from the Knights Inn and the Yeshiva. We stomped through striated muck, our shoes leaving shallow prints. Guilt lifted off of me, like the crime only existed in the city and we were outside its local jurisdiction.

We descended into the bog, the three of us drifting on a small boat, water spiders and flakes of pale bark floating below on green water, glittering like snake scales. We shooed bugs from our faces. Hannah rowed, jabbing her paddle on drifting beer cans at the stern of the boat. I sat beside Yuk up front, huffing on his dishrag and watching the murder graves float by. I had taken so much Squirt n' Hard by then that my brain felt like it was riding on the surface of a lewd fart. We were both very tan. The birds were perched atop gravestones like chimneys, ringed around the throat with metal bracelets that were connected by a length of braided chain to the submerged coffins. Dark dripping roots grew up the sides of the gravestones. It was full night, the moon broken into white glowing leaves on the water. My ass was soggy and cold from sitting. I scooted across the wooden bench and rubbed my shoulder on Yuk's to keep warm.

"I hate witches," Hannah said. We turned our heads around but she wouldn't meet our eyes. She talked to the water. "I hate that when you fuck me I have to know that there's witch blood inside of you. I hate that that's what fuels you. I hate that their blood is what turns you on. I hate that my own pleasure is built on the backs of these disgusting creatures all you boys are so in love with. It's like I have to fuck them too. It's like no one is fucking anyone they're supposed to anymore because we're all just fucking

witches. They're stealing all the pleasure we should be saving for each other. It's really quite unnatural. It's really quite absurd." She smacked the paddle down on the top of a gravestone. The bird shot off like a popped kernel, the chain rising with it, warbling indignantly. "I'm really tired, Yuk, of outside influences in our love life."

"Would you shut up?" Yuk said. "It's your idea to be out here."

"It wasn't my idea to bring *him*," she said, and met my eyes for the first time.

"I can leave," I said.

"Then leave, doo doo dick," she said. She scrunched her nose up.

"So I invited him," Yuk said. "He was there. He feels terrible. He deserves to know that it wasn't his fault. We're going to talk to the bird and set things straight."

"I thought it *was* my fault and that was ok," I said.

"I hate him!" Hannah said. She beat the paddle on the surface of the water. "I hate him! I hate him! I hate him! I hate his horrible hotel and that he sits out front like some perverted troll and that you just *let* him!"

"Don't listen to her, Zeke. She's just being a bitch."

Yuk lowered his eyes. He was embarrassed for me.

"Maybe the bird will make me a better person," I said. "A good citizen."

Hannah sighed. "That might be a miracle beyond even her. You're the one who got everyone into this mess."

I looked out at the bobbing graves, black water lapping on stone, and at the thick sunken trees with spider-webs swaying in their branches. I saw a yellow canary flying in tight loops over a gravestone about twenty-feet away.

"There it is," I said.

“I don’t think we did anything wrong,” Zeke said. “She was a dumbass for putting a bag over her head. That’s not our fault.”

I nodded and huffed at the Squirt n’ Hard. It was like taking in a dull anesthesia—rather than tamping out pain it induced only a vague sense of optimism. I had been masturbating constantly since Friday night, so my desire had evaporated out of my muscles and skin. It was just a smelly vapor now, perfuming my thoughts.

Yuk handed me the Kroger bag. “I think you should be the one to swim over there,” he said. “I mean, you told her to, you know, do the thing with the belt.”

“Ok,” I said. I put my fingers through the eyeholes and held it up. “But this isn’t right.”

“So go without it,” Hannah said. “Swim.”

“Maybe she’s not dead,” I said. “Maybe I can cut some kind of deal with the bird to bring her back.”

“I’m sure you can,” Yuk said.

I tried to catch Hannah’s eye. I wanted her to agree with me. She laid the paddle flat on her knees.

“I’ll take a walk next time you two come over,” I said. “I’m sorry Hannah. I’ll just hang out at the gas station.”

“Sure,” Yuk said. “It’s not a big deal.”

I spread my arms at Hannah for a hug. She shook her head no. Yuk patted my shoulder. I pinched my nose and rolled out of the boat.

The water was murky and cold and smelled bitterly of decomposing plants. I swam a breaststroke, spitting the rank foam that filled my mouth. Damp reeds wrapped

around my arms. Hannah and Yuk were silent on the boat. I only heard the sound of my legs sloshing in the water. The canary spiraled down and watched my approach from the gravestone. I didn't want to think about the punishment to come, so I dunked my head under and tried fantasizing Hannah and Yuk fucking one last time, but all I could conjure was Jessica Shy—flushed purple-red nipples and breasts as round as coins.

When I emerged I was facing the canary. I paddled beside the grave, holding the sides of the stone like a buoy. The canary had beady eyes and a livid beak that were drawn into a wreath of puffed feathers. It shook itself and seemed to expand. It looked down at me and tooted in a high, false voice.

“Zeke Paige, are you ready to accept your punishment?”

“Yes.”

“Then make a wish.”

My shoes grazed the coffin below. It was slick and sawed back and forth.

“A wish?”

“Yes. You came here after all. You must want something.”

“I wish for Jessica Shy to come back then. I wish that she would tell me her death wasn't my fault.”

“All that's left of her are murmuring visions seen through glass. You could never touch her or smell her or taste her. You could only observe. And forgiveness would require twenty-five years of daily labor. Is that what you wish for?”

“Yes.”

“Then the terms of your punishment are set. You will labor on yourself for twenty-five years.”

A wind picked up that pulled the foamy skin off the water and sent all the birds careening into the air. I heard the metal ring unlatch from around the neck of my little yellow canary. It beat its wings into a sky full of rising birds and sheets of pale foam. The birds were squawking at the ends of their chains and bending their talons as the canary shot through them into the dark. Below the canopy of their shadows the bog looked different—like a rug looks after being beaten—cleaner, more clear, but with some texture missing. I tapped my head and realized that I felt no desire at all. The birds tumbled through the wind, helpless as leaves.

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS LATER

The sheets were stiff as an ironed suit and I shivered. I peeled my pajama pants from the nest of worn socks and boxer briefs balled at the foot of the bed and stepped into my house shoes.

“Where are you going?” my wife asked.

“Read in my office,” I said. “I’m feeling restless.”

She worked her fist into the center of her pillow and pulled the covers over her chin.

“Go to her,” she said.

I sat in my upstairs office reading for half an hour, until I knew my wife was asleep, then I set my book down on my desk and opened my laptop. What I searched for was archived deep within the Squirt n’ Hard website. I could tell from the view count that no one watched these videos anymore except for me.

JESSICA SHY—SQUIRT N’ HARD ADULT PERFORMER

UPDATED REGULARLY-VOID

LIVE/PRIVATE SHOWS EVERY FRIDAY @ 7 PM EASTERN-VOID

The page looked the same—bare and outdated. The thumbnails were still like microscope slides, but slides now holding long dead tissues and membranes. The contents no longer seem to writhe, though they moved around in an automated kind of way. I clicked one and the video filled the screen. I couldn't feel her inflammation or her squishy anguish, and though my own skin withdrew at the approach of my fingers I still unbuttoned my pajama pants and took hold of my labor.

CHAPTER 6

HAYMAKER

It all started when we gave the children wine. We were having Thanksgiving dinner at my in-laws house and old gouty Grandpa just rose from his seat at the head of the table and started pouring Pinot in the children's empty water cups. My son Mark, who at nineteen was the youngest of his cousins on my wife's side of the family, looked to me for approval.

"That's fine, Mark," I said. "You can have some wine with dinner."

"Yes," my wife said. "I think that would be nice."

My wife has three sisters, each still on their first marriage, and all of their kids were college-aged. The Aunts had yet to break the habit of cooing and baby talking their nieces and nephews however, so the wine felt like a long overdue rite of passage. We watched our children sip and as we did I sensed that all of us adults were grappling with the dilation of time, trying to squeeze all the Thanksgivings that had passed without a new birth together into a manageable ball. That barren time wasn't going to contract though, and no amount of goo-gooing could lure the long dormant kid out of the grown child. It suddenly felt silly for a group of adults to gather like this twice, three times a year, with no squealing toddlers around. We were basically strangers without the cords of babies to connect us.

“Alright kids,” Grandpa said. “You tell us some of the secrets you’ve been keeping and I’ll tell you a story from my navy days.”

Mark smiled. “Last year,” he said, “at Christmas? Todd and I snuck onto the roof one night and got high.”

“We took like fifteen bong hits each,” Todd said. “I almost slept up on the roof I got so paranoid.”

Mark’s cousin Chloe opened her mouth to speak but Grandpa had already started in.

“This was 1952, alright?” he said. “Terry and I went down to this Port Show in San Diego. Dancing girls with tassels on their bosoms sort of thing. It was just a place to blow off for a night. And there was this kid, everyone knew he was a queer. Name of Michaelis Buckholz. He was a sailor, just like us, sitting there at the bar watching the ladies.”

“Who’s Terry?” my wife asked. When the word *queer* came around, most at the table assumed they had misheard. It was difficult to pay attention to Grandpa talk because of the skin graft over his throat, which bobs and swells with his words.

“Navy buddy,” Grandpa said. “So Terry gets a few drinks in him and decides we should fluff this kids sweet tooth. Teach him a lesson. What’s a queer doing at a Port Show anyways? It’s a disgrace.”

“Dad,” Aunt Aimee warned.

“I tell Terry that I’m game, so we go up to this Buckholz and let on like we’re a couple of pillow biters ourselves, you know? Terry whispers something in the kids ear, I can’t remember what, but it’s enough that Buckholz agrees to let us drive him to these

woods by the off-ramp. That's where queers did these things back then. We're out in these dark fucking woods without a flashlight and all of a sudden the kid unzips his pants like, "Alright, I'm ready fellas," and Terry, he just knees him right in the kidney! I mean hard, no hesitation. Then Terry gets a hold under his shoulders, the kid all squirming, and Terry says, "Give him the haymaker, Joe!" and I just womp the kid. Broke his jaw clean. We pounded him for a good while."

For awhile there was only the sound of our digestion. Then Uncle Brian raised his glass and said, "Well that's quiet a story," and broke out laughing. The other uncles started laughing and raised their glasses to toast. They were amused by the story in a cynical sort of way—not really endorsing the actions described—but welcoming it as a break from the drudgery of Thanksgiving chatter.

Mark looked to me. He's always been a sensitive child. He was looking to me for protection, for guidance, for me to restrain the madness that was taking place between these adults and then explain their failings and their transgressions in a way that would restore familial order. But instead I just sat there and listened to the clinking of glass.

The stars were muggy and full when we drove Mark to the airport the next morning.

After I picked his bags out of the car he kissed us goodbye.

"Dad," he said. "Do you think Grandpa was telling the truth? Did he really beat that guy up?"

My wife rubbed his shoulders. "No," she said. "He was just being stupid. Right, Rob?"

“Yeah,” I said. “He was just trying to tell a big manly story. He’s old. Don’t worry about it.”

Mark nodded, unconvinced, and rolled his bag into the terminal. On the way home, my wife asked me if I wanted to have another child. I drove five miles, stopped along the shoulder of the highway, and gave her my answer. While shadows faded off the trees and wrinkled beer cans in the grass began to shin, we undressed each other in the backseat and forged a modest defense against unspeakable things.

CHAPTER 7

KING OF THE BEACH

I sink where others float. I am a coil of hard muscle, flensed of fat. A polished stone, the moss mowed off my surface. There is nothing inside of me that is like you, no loose pockets of flab hiding in my stomach or in my fin, none of the things that keep you above the water. And yet I am a lifeguard, a merman, a Beach Patrol Officer. I tow the drowning in from the breaks and resuscitate them in the sand with the great wind from my lungs. Look at you, drowning, getting smashed against the rocks. Come closer, follow my voice. I've got you. Touch my churning arms, climb aboard my shoulders, watch the wake of my perfect movements unraveling behind us. Look on my queens when we reach the shore, all of my lifeguards in their one-piece county-issued bathing suits, blowing whistles atop tower chairs. I have trained them well. They know CPR, daisy chain, fireman's carry.

You are saved. I am your king. Your women swim out when I coo my merman coo. They know that I am the only one stronger than the waves. They know that you are puny and fragile. This silly attraction you have towards the sea is a doomed love. The sea is without pity, like me.

Clara. Swim out. Hand-in-hand let us dive to my merman garden.

“You a pervert,” Fran Kingston declares.

I was at the seashore, sucking the brine out of this man’s sunburned chest, thinking about Clara, when Fran just walks right up to me and socks my ribs with an aluminum baseball bat. She’s a squat, middle-aged Vietnamese woman with big calves and a swimmer’s shoulders. She wore her bathing suit under a khaki-colored polo with a dispatch radio clipped to the collar, royal blue fishing shorts, wraparound shades, and sneakers.

“You a pervert,” she declared again. The blow must have knocked all of my lungwind into the sunburned man’s mouth. He belched water and opened his eyes against the white sky, gasping. “We’ll go to the state,” she continued. “You quit stalking Clara or we’ll get the state police after you.”

“Police?” I said, lifting my lips from the man’s face. I formed legs as I stepped out of the sea. On land I am a glorious naked man with a trident. I removed my Beach Patrol Badge from its slot on my gunbelt. “I’m the only police out here,” I said.

“Beautiful Bobby, you dumb shit,” Fran said. That’s my name. Beautiful Bobby. Every couple of months the mother of one of my lifeguards comes poking around. Fran’s just the latest. The only difference is that Fran’s a Captain—technically my superior in the Beach Patrol chain of command. “You think you can pull rank on me?” she said. “We’ll get you on federal charges. You want jail? You want to be a sex offender? Clara’s sixteen! They’ll look you up on the registry.” She made a *click-click* sound like she was typing on a keyboard. “One search and you’re done. Pedophile. You want that? No Beach Patrol. Homeless.”

I thumped the beach with my trident, cracking sand castles. Thunder shuddered through the sky.

“Who saves people out here?” I said. “Who rescues all of you flailing, drowning creatures?”

“Girls been going missing,” Fran said. “The Johnson’s daughter. The Cassady’s. Folks around here talk. Even *you* can’t get away with kidnaps. Stay away from her.”

Indeed, when I looked around, folks were whispering on their beach towels and watching us. I eased my trident down and patted Fran’s shoulder.

“And the mysterious disappearances of our young lifeguards will not go unavenged,” I said loudly.

“I’m serious, Bob,” Fran said, walking backwards towards the boardwalk. “I don’t want to see you poking around outside her window anymore.”

My ribs throbbed and I wanted to spend the rest of the day convalescing on my rock, but this man with pale, skinny arms and lots of hair on the top of his hands and a low, distended stomach tapped me on my back.

“Um, Beautiful Bobby?” he said.

“What do you want?”

“Well, I hate to bother you, but a lot of people on the beach have gotten their wallets stolen today, and, uh, we think it’s *that* guy.”

The guy he pointed to was slinking behind umbrella chairs with a duffel bag hanging off his shoulder. His eyes were spaced close together and he had a beakish nose like a predatory bird. I sighed.

“I’ll handle it,” I said.

I dragged Jeremy behind a food truck, out of view of the beachgoers. He opened the duffel bag and we split up the loot.

“Sixty-five, eighty-five,” Jeremy said, peeling bills out of a wallet. A dune covered in beach grass wavered behind us, leading up to a condo tower. “You got any use for a Macy’s gift card?”

“How much is on it?” I said.

“Says twenty-five bucks.”

“Yeah, give it to me.”

“Fuck you going to buy at Macy’s?” Jeremy said.

“Just hurry up. And be a little less obvious next time.”

I stuffed the Macy’s card and a quarter-inch thick roll of bills in my gunbelt and walked to the other side of the food truck, where the man with hairy hands was waiting.

“Well?” he said.

“That’s not the guy,” I said. “Keep your eyes peeled though, and report any lost goods to the...”

“Oh horseshit!” the man said, stamping his foot on the sand. Jeremy scampered up the dune toward the condo tower. “That was definitely the guy. Now... fuck! You’re just letting him get away.”

I shrugged and started walking toward the surf. I love to sun on the big rocks that stretch far into the ocean. I could almost hear the slosh of water on the granite boulders. My ribs were like tender piano keys someone had set on fire and I wanted to pick a merman flower from my merman garden and sniff it. I wanted to go find Clara.

“Now you’re just walking away?” he said, following. “Great. Fuck you, Beautiful Bobby!”

I stopped at the water’s edge, turned around, and aimed the horns of my trident at his face.

“Woah,” he said, raising his arms. “Wait.”

“*Nando telaraso sindarith fa!*” I cursed, and the man’s nose disappeared.

He touched the exposed pits of his nasal passageways, almost unbelieving, running his hairy fingers over the new flatness. Then he looked up, his face bat-like and terrified.

“Wha...What? Turn it back, Bobby,” he said, the sea winds blowing a pathetic whistle into his voice. “Come on, turn it back.”

A woman sunning in a plastic chair started laughing at him.

“Teach you for sniffing around,” I said, and dove into the sea. I flapped out to my rock. Finally. For about an hour I entertained myself by transforming my lower body from fin to leg, then back to fin again—examining my cold scales and the shimmering slabs of my thigh muscles. My thigh muscles are like fruits ripening below their bronzed skins, pulsing and taut, heavy, sagging lustily on their branches. My fin is a flower that can turn the face of the sun with its unraveling pedals. My fin is what light aspires to be. I prefer my fin.

It’s funny though. I didn’t particularly feel like a merman. It’s hard to explain, I guess, but putting the curse on hairy hands made me feel like a regular, sniveling human. I am at my most merman when I’m towing them in from the breaks. When I’m saving them.

I swam to Publix and bought groceries with my haul with Jeremy, and then walked on over to the scuba store, where I loaded up on tank refills. I swam back to my rock and peered down through the current with my magnified merman vision. The wavering outline of my merman garden five-hundred feet below. Every merman has a garden, grown in the shade of a great rock, and the upkeep of his garden is his pride and his life's work. Mermen wield power over their garden through their trident. From the water's surface the crop looked feeble and antiqued. My merman flowers were losing potency. The garden needed replenishing. It needed Clara. Tonight I will hunt.

The night sky came on like a tree with fifteen glowing birds in each branch. My ribs were beginning to mend so I dove through the dark water, past a shoal of mullet all zig-zagging and turning at the same time. I brushed against a shark with skin like cold lace, down, down, down, through thickening currents and flapping until I reached the seabed.

My garden is tended by the missing lifeguards. I seduce them with my coo and drag them to the bottom of the ocean, where I outfit them with scuba suits and breathing tanks and shackle them to the garden's perimeter with iron balls. They are my young cattle, grazing aquatic fields. Their snorkels belched bubbles as I went around inspecting my dying crop and dividing their rations from Publix. The coral was the color of worn varnish and the kelp stiff as broom needles. The lifeguards stroked the sand with their rakes, watching me from behind their goggles. The Cassidy's girl was crouched at the center of my garden, sprinkling my merman flowers. I refilled her tank, plucked a flower, and swam to the surface and sniffed the soggy blossom.

Nothing. The flower smelled like the laundry of an old lady and I was ashamed. It smelled like yellowed bras that look like they've been sewn out of the same stuff as straightjackets. That's what getting old is, being slowly detained by undergarments. Then, when you're totally paralyzed, they put you in a padded room under the care of a nurse.

Not me, though, and not my flowers. I swam past the rocks, along the scarp leading up to the highway, and flapped my fin outside Clara's house, which is perched on a cliff overlooking the sea not far from my merman garden. I saw her through the fogged rime of her window and called out with my coo.

She ignored me and disappeared into an interior room. I wanted to sneak her out of her pale bedroom lace and devour her in the dunes. A few minutes later she walked outside with a tied-up trash bag.

"Clara!" I said, gliding toward the cliff's edge. "Come swim with me!"

"Hey, Beautiful Bobby," she said. She looked despondent, like two pounds of hound dog flesh hung off her frowning face.

"What's the matter?" I said.

"My mom." She dropped the trash bag in a metal can and folded her arms, looking out at the sea. "I'm just ready to get out of here, that's all. I'm just tired of living in her house."

"What'd she do?"

"It's nothing in particular. It's just her rules, you know? Ever since those girls went missing I'm not allowed to go out, like, ever."

"She thinks I had something to do with that?"

She shrugged. “I don’t know. She says a lot of stuff. I think she just hates you, generally.”

“Dive in,” I said. “I want to show you something.”

“I don’t have my bathing suit,” she said, looking down and smiling.

“You can ride on my back. It’ll just take a second.”

She looked at me and scrunched her lip up to her nose, considering. “No. I have homework,” she said, and started walking back to the house.

“Clara, wait.”

She slammed the front door shut and reappeared in the living room beside Fran.

I swam far out, weeping in salt water. I usually clean up with the new recruits. I can’t help it. I look awesome. They just toss it at me. And I don’t drop things. And I don’t miss. I catch it when they toss it. Not Clara, though.

I saw a trawler boat with a group of old men fishing off the sides. I dove below their fishhooks, tying the lines together as I circled. Then I tugged, and all the fishing poles plopped into the sea.

“What was that?” one of them said when I swam back up.

“Dance for me old men!” I said, and held my trident up to the sky. Lightning struck their boat, splitting it from stern to bow, and all the men dove off the sides.

“Dance! Dance! Dance!” I struck the water’s surface with lightning, sprays of foam shooting into the air. One of the men screamed in a high horse nicker, trying to hold onto boat debris, and I laughed. “Dance for your king!”

I led the old men in a five-hour session of water aerobics. They were wheezing and exhausted and still I was not sated. The sun was beginning to climb over the sea.

Nothing but Clara would do. My heart beat hungrily for her, the bloody valves sucking at the world, at Clara, with their refined appetites.

I started making my way back toward her house. I formed legs and climbed the cliff-edge leading up to their carport, blood throbbing in my temples. I broke a window with my trident and jumped inside.

“Clara! Clara!” I screamed, thrashing through the living room.

Fran appeared on the second floor landing in sweatpants and a Beach Patrol t-shirt, taking in my glorious nudity.

“What the fuck?” she said, scrambling out of sight. “Clara, get in your room!”

I ran up the stairs and pounded on Clara’s door until it’s hinges busted loose and goddammit if Fran wasn’t crouching right there with a knife. She ran the blade through my bare foot, just slotted it between two tendons, then huddled with Clara by the window.

“Jesus Christ,” I said, and yanked the handle out. I limped toward them trailing blood, and separated the two women with my trident, wedging the handle between their laced arms. “Come on,” I said. I picked Clara up and threw her over my shoulder, hobbling down the stairs like that with Clara screaming and Fran pounding on my back with her fists.

“Kidnap! Kidnap!” Fran yelled as I opened the front door. Lights clicked on in neighboring houses and people gathered on their lawns. “It’s a kidnap! Help! Help!”

The neighbors gave chase as I went around the side of the house. I fell beside a water meter, banging my hip on the glass dial, and rolled down the eroding scarp. The neighbors whipped rocks at my head and waved bats and logs of wood as they picked

their way down to the shore. I dove into the water with Clara and flapped off. The sun was almost all the way up and the water was clear. We swam out to the rocks and I was going to dive to my merman garden, but my breath was short and my fin was bleeding pretty bad, so I surfaced and tried to rest a moment. The neighbors were standing on the rock when I surfaced. One guy threw a god damn shrimp net on me that tangled up my caudal fin and sent me into a fit of trashing. He strung me up to the rocks and the others commenced to beating me with their bats and logs. I felt like a gaffed tuna flapping on the deck of a ship.

Clara wriggled free and started kicking me. Someone shouted, “Get his trident! Get his trident!”

I managed to slip off the rocks but Clara had her hands on the outer blades of my trident, wrestling them like horns. She yanked the trident out of my grip, and as she did, I saw my merman garden begin to rise through the water, the flora breaking apart in the currents, spreading like ink, the lifeguards floating up in their scuba suits, and soon all of my merman flowers and all of the missing lifeguards were bobbing in the water around me.

It was a nice morning, pink sky, wind in my hair. I tried thinking of my great strength and my health. I have the advantage of perfect health over all my would-be detractors, like the Cassady’s and the Johnson’s, who were reuniting with their daughters on the rocks. No matter what it is, no matter what has happened, I feel great. I floated among my ruined garden. I felt my vision tunneling out, blood draining from my fin and bruises beginning to swell everywhere else. I tasted the morning light. It was spritzed with jasmine and citrus. My health is a bodily truth, like the holiness of Jesus.

“Look!” one of the neighbors said, glassing the ocean with a pair of binoculars.
“That guy’s drowning!”

Far out into the sea I saw the noseless man with hairy hands struggling in the waves. He had tied stones to his pale arms and his bat-face dipped up and down on the surface. He was committing suicide because I had stolen his nose.

“Go get him!” someone said. “Go rescue him, Beautiful Bobby!”

And I tried, I really tried, but my muscles were like anchors crying out to sink.

CHAPTER 8

THE VISITING GARDENS

2047.

They went out on the lawn, Manny following Jeff, and dug holes beside the potted eucalyptus. Two years after Aaron's capsule splashed into the South Indian Ocean, the earth's temperature beginning to regulate. After six holes had been dug—running along the sides of the yard like pockets on a pool table—they sparred with shovels, giggling at the clang of cold metal and the reverberations that traveled down the wooden handles. Manny dropped his shovel and clutched his wrist in mock agony. They could hear the thump of surf across the highway.

Manny felt a little hungover, mostly just tired, but the coffee and the scrambled eggs and the early morning blowjob from Jeff had fortified him. A pleasant daze lingered along the fringes of his skull.

Manny lived in Daytona Beach, where he cut grass and planted flowers for *The Visiting Gardens*, a landscaping service. The market for lawn maintenance had been booming since the ARK Interceptor fixed the weather, or so Jeff— whose father owned

The Visiting Gardens—often claimed. “Really,” Jeff would say, “We have your dad to thank for all of this.”

The lawn was large and green, sloping down at one end to meet a curtain of bamboo stalks. A wrought-iron fence stretched across the lawn’s perimeter. Small, ranch style houses lay beyond the fence on three sides and beyond that was the highway, and then the beach, which was habitable now that the ocean had receded. The city had the barrier wall knocked down six months earlier and construction crews were inside the condo towers every day repairing the water damage.

The house was three-stories and stone, granite lions flanking the front door. It belonged to Stan Alabaster, who made a fortune buying up parking lots in downtown Orlando. Stan was throwing his second-annual garden party that evening, a two-day job for Manny and Jeff.

The night before, Jeff convinced Manny to come over to his apartment, drink a few beers, and watch *Jaws*. Manny had never seen *Jaws*, and hours of cutting into the lawn with shovel blades left him feeling exhausted and convivial.

Jeff had brown eyes and a scar through his left eyebrow he claimed was given to him by a childhood cat. He had blue hair and smoked an e-cigarette. He was nineteen years old, deciding between art or biology, and had girly dimples when he smiled, which was often. They stayed up late in Jeff’s living room, talking on Jeff’s couch about the debacle with Aaron and Mikel under a string of red Christmas lights. “What’s it like being the son of Superman?” Jeff said. Manny just laughed at the shark on the TV.

When they finally kissed it was slow and sleepy and didn’t lead anywhere, but Manny was happy anyway. Jeff woke him up with the coffee and eggs and the blowjob

and then informed him that they had forgotten to plant the eucalyptus. Jeff said he was giving the good news before the bad, and Manny laughed much longer than the joke deserved. It was like the laughter mixed up some kind of medicine in his brain—performed a blind alchemy—because when it was finished, Manny felt entirely certain that he was in love with Jeff.

Manny leaned on his shovel over a eucalyptus and spit. There was an anthill beside the sapling and Manny scuffed its roof with the bottom of his shoe. Only a few black ants emerged from the tracery of tiny tunnels. Then the whole colony came pumping out like a burst vein, crawling over the nodes of his Reeboks thick as blood. Manny grimaced. It looked like the anthill was a carcass that the ants were devouring.

This was a problem of Manny's. Ever since his father returned to earth, he saw violence in everything. Everything seemed to be in the process of eating everything else.

“So this guy Mikel,” Jeff said. “So what'd they do with him?”

“The state buried him,” Manny said. “The state of Russia. He wasn't a bad guy, not really. There was a hydrogen leak, you know. Who knows, really, though? Maybe Mikel didn't have to die. It was a waste.”

“What are you talking about?” Jeff said. “He attacked your dad! Who was earth's final hope! Of course he had to die!”

“I dunno.” Manny walked to their pick-up truck, which was parked in the driveway along the side of the house, and slid a weedwacker from its bed. “The way I see it, Mikel's family are the true victims in all this. They're paupers over there in Russia. Get harassed all the time. It's so fucked up.”

Manny felt Jeff examining him. “You’re a pretty sensitive guy, aren’t you?” Jeff said.

“So?”

“It’s a good thing! It’s good to be...feeling. I admire it.”

They worked hard through the afternoon—hedging mondo grass and laying pink stepping stones for the guests to pick their way between the flower beds. Stan came out of the house at three o’clock and told the boys he was going to the liquor store. Jeff watched Stan disappear into the shadows of the kitchen and waited for the sound of his car reversing out of the driveway.

“Let’s check his house out,” Jeff said.

“Come on,” Manny said, shaking his head.

“Come on, what? We’re almost done out here! Look at this fucking house!”

Jeff reached his arm through a cloud of mown grass and touched Manny’s forehead. He dragged his hand down Manny’s face, closing Manny’s eyelids. Manny felt the pressure of Jeff’s fingers, and saw a green glittering dust when Jeff pressed against his irises.

“Has anyone told you about your eyes?” Jeff said. “We should do a lawn where the whole yard is one of these eyes. Do you know how many types of flowers we’d need? I don’t even know. Blue daisies. A string of cornflowers. Damn, something green, for sure. A whole pool of black roses at the center. I mean a lot of fucking flowers!”

Jeff tapped the quivering eyelids, too hard, like a brail reader shocked by some word they’ve come across.

“Ow,” Manny said, blinking. “Why?”

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking. I just want to squeeze them they’re so beautiful.”

“Alright asshole,” Manny said. “Let’s go snoop through this poor fellow’s house.”

“Poor?” Jeff laughed, leading Manny by the hand through the sliding glass door and into the kitchen. They walked past bay windows and vacant guest bedrooms, past aquariums with expensive fish gliding over beds of blue pebbles.

Jeff paused outside a bedroom and wrenched the neckline of Manny’s sweater, filling the wool garment with the smell of iron as static electricity popped through Manny’s hair. Manny kicked his shoes off. Static cracked when their noses touched.

“Let me smell your breath,” Manny said.

Jeff curled his tongue out, hesitantly, as if bracing for a nurses’ swab. Manny dipped his nose inside and sniffed.

“Smells like cold spit,” Manny said. “And mown grass.”

“Duh,” Jeff said.

“Duh?”

Manny moved into the bedroom and straddled Jeff on the bed. He started peeling Jeff’s clothes off.

“Hold up a sec,” Jeff said.

Manny undid the pearl snaps on Jeff’s shirt, removed his t-shirt and pants. He threw the clothes on the bed and saw the bright cutting scars along the sides of Jeff’s stomach.

“Oh,” Manny said.

They were dimpled and clumsy, as if made with a bread knife, most about two-inches in length and a few fresh and lividly infected.

“It’s a bummer of a story,” Jeff said. “You don’t want to hear it.”

“I don’t?”

Jeff pulled the bed sheet up to his neck. Manny dismounted.

“It’s a long time ago now,” Jeff said.

“Some of them look pretty new.”

“It’s just a bummer.”

“Did...did someone *do* this to you?” Manny asked.

“I do it. It’s an old habit, like chewing nails. It used to be a suicidal gesture. Now it’s just an aesthetic thing. I’ve gotten used to the way they look. It’s a habit.”

“I don’t like that.”

“Like chewing nails.”

“Have you seen anyone about it?”

Jeff tipped his head into his palm and looked at Manny. He looked hurt, offended.

“No,” Jeff said, “do you have a psychiatrist to recommend me?”

“I could find you one,” Manny said. “If that’s what you want.”

Manny tried docking his nostrils in Jeff’s mouth again, but Jeff draped the sheets over his head.

“You’re disappointing me,” Jeff said.

“What did I do?”

“Let’s just fuck,” Jeff said.

“Not like this. Not with you all mad at me. ”

Jeff removed the rest of his clothes and undressed Manny. Manny watched their bodies in a wall mirror, Jeff on his stomach and Manny on top, and began to kiss Jeff's cutting scars.

"No, no," Jeff said, "Kiss me up here."

He pulled Manny up so that their faces touched. Manny watched as Jeff spit on his hand, stroked Manny until he was ready, and guided Manny inside of him. Manny sucked on the skin over Jeff's eyebrow, feeling pleasure in the power gained from Jeff's submissiveness, feeling love falling like a rain.

"Oh," Jeff said. "Oh. Oh. Ow. Fuck."

"What?" Manny said, breathless.

Little red drops had grown into the skin over Jeff's eyebrow. Manny tasted the iron tang of blood on his tongue. Jeff touched his eyebrow, smearing the blood, and looked at his fingers.

"You sucked the blood right through my skin," Jeff said.

"Oh no."

"Like a vampire," Jeff said, smiling.

"Does it hurt?" Manny said, feeling himself softening.

"No. It's alright. Keep going."

Manny rolled over and stuffed his face into a pillow. "I'm sorry," he said.

"It's fine," Jeff said. "I'm ok."

"No, it's not," Manny said, beating the pillow with his fists. "You're already so...injured."

“Am not. What the fuck kind of a thing is that to say? Why would you want to fuck me if I’m so injured?”

“Can I be alone for awhile?” Manny said.

Jeff huffed once, dressed and went out of the room.

“You’re a sick puppy, Manny,” he said from the hallway.

Manny watched from the bedroom window as Jeff walked onto the lawn with a weedwacker. He looked confused and angry, hedging the mondo grass surrounding a tuft of roses, unsure of what he had done wrong. Manny’s phone rang and Manny retrieved it from his pant’s pocket.

“Hey dad.”

“Manny, how are you?”

“Fine.”

“What’s the matter? You sound upset.”

Manny found his boxers and put them on. He examined his naked torso in the wall mirror.

“Nothing...just, issues with someone.”

“I see. Well, thanks for being so forthcoming. Your mother wants to know if you’re joining us for dinner tonight.”

“Sure.”

“Good. See you in a few hours.”

“It’s a guy I met and I think I like. He just seems very...like you could very easily hurt him. Like that would be almost inevitable. If you were to be in a relationship with him, that is. Fragile.”

“You tend to pounce on the birds with the broken wings.”

“I dunno,” Manny said. “I don’t really want to talk about it with you. I should go.”

He hung up the phone, dressed, and went out to the lawn.

“I’m sorry, Jeff.”

“You don’t have to take care of me, you know,” Jeff said, lowering the weedwacker.

“I know. I won’t try to.”

But it was a lie. He *would* try to take care of Jeff. He would hurt him as well. Manny already knew it. He would hurt Jeff when he told him about his father, because Jeff, like most of the world’s population, idolized Aaron. But Manny would tell him anyway, eventually, and Jeff would tell Manny the story of his scars. Manny would try not to pity, judge, or flinch. There would be a million other ways to hurt. Love carried an amazing capacity to injure and maim. Violence and insanity were always lurking between lovers and could only be tempered with a tender, beating heart.

Later, when the well-dressed people of Daytona Beach arrive for Stan Alabaster’s garden party, and the eucalyptus, daisies and lopus lazulli are strung around their feet like jewels, like petals of glittering topaz and jade and pearls, Manny will think of his father sitting down to dinner with Binda, hurt and confused by his son’s dismissal. Manny will feel shame and guilt for causing these emotions in his father. Then Jeff will press his hip against Manny, two flutes of champagne in his fist, and they will toast to the treasure of all this new growth.

CHAPTER 9

COUVADE

On the day that you left me Yuk Austin and Hannah Meyers just barged right through my office door. I yanked my pajama pants off the carpet and fiddled with the drawstring, trying to hide my erection.

“Oh, uh, I was just, uh,” I said.

“No need for modesty, Mr. Paige,” Hannah said.

Yuk still had his bat bag slung around his shoulder and Hannah still fixed me with her one wandering eye. They looked like teenagers.

“My, you all haven’t aged a day,” I said.

“It’s been twenty-five years,” Yuk said. “The sentencing is over. Today is the last day you’re going to see her. They’re deleting her page.”

I opened my laptop and went to your website.

JESSICA SHY—SQUIRT N’ HARD ADULT PERFORMER

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“Can I at least have a little privacy?” I said.

“No,” Hannah said, “we thought we’d watch *you* for a change.”

I clicked on one of your videos and resumed masturbating. In it, you have painted glitter all over the skin of your eye sockets, so that your face looks almost like a skull. You are on a bench seat in the garage where all your scenes are set, bringing yourself to orgasm. My lust forms at the pace of our re-creation, because it is just you and I with these videos now—me, the sole viewer, you the sole performer.

Suddenly four men wearing white lab coats walk into the garage and I know something is different. There is a change. They are going to take you away. They struggle under the four edges of a tanning bed, which they are carrying across the room like pallbearers. They set the machine down and open its hood and a blue phosphor of electric steam billows out. The tube-lights inside the bed are bright blue. The four men gather around you and undo the noose from the doorknob. They catch your head before it can fall limp to the concrete floor. One of the men picks you up and slides your body into the open tanning bed. They close the hood and bow their heads, taking turns speaking elegies. The tanning bed whirs like it's on some self-cleaning cycle. A crest of hot light burns within. When the words have been spoken the four men nod, open the hood, and smile at its glistening vacancy.

I turned around, but Hannah and Yuk are gone, along with the object of my fantasy.

CHAPTER 10

THE MAYOR GETS THE NEWS

Stoplights change for no one, casting their colors on sidewalks patched with untouched snow. The Mayor watches the intersection from the hospital, twelfth floor, the gown itching his bandaged knees. His doctor and his press secretary and the chief of police are arguing in the windows' reflection. They are all trembling in the eternal morning of overhead fluorescents, projected on the window against the outside dark. *DUI, potential manslaughter, victims in critical care, add that to the corruption charges,* police belts rattling in the hallway. Soon they'll cuff his ankle to the bedpost.

A courier appears out of shadow, a trail of boot-prints pressing deep into the snow, newspapers bundled under his arm. The Mayor watches the courier carry the news of his crime to the intersection, where one car, now two, slows to unroll a window. The news spreads, the somnolent, forgiving night is breaking. Soon they'll cuff his ankle to the bedpost. The Mayor plans his escape.

The courier walks down the middle of the salted street in a tunnel of yellow headlights, fine snow melting in his eyebrows, and presses the newspaper against windows of shadowed faces and glowing radios.

“Yep.” A woman stretches her arm out to him, a dollar flapping between her fingers. “Just heard it. That crook. That irresponsible, repugnant crook.”

“And he’ll get away with it too!” A man beside her in a Taurus, talking through the passenger window. “Let me get one of those.” The courier plucks two papers from his satchel and accepts the money. “Just watch, he’ll get away with it like everything else. Probably be reelected.”

The lights change, the cars swim past, dark ice sloshes under tires. Cars collect on the intersecting street. A bell chimes and the courier watches the hospital doors slide open for a barefoot man wearing a pale gown. He plunges into snow up to his shins, bouncing on his naked heels and clutching himself. He runs to the curb and then across the stopped traffic, headlights blinking out behind his body, the gravel slick and lambent. His feet go out in front of him, gliding upward. He lands on his back, breaking the fall with his elbows. The courier drops his satchel in the street and runs to the fallen man. The lights change as he drags him to the sidewalk. Cars pass, looking. Cars collect at the red light. The courier stands the man up and spins him into the light of the hospital. Yes, this is the Mayor. A bandage on his knee hangs off, the white pad sopped with blood.

“Fuck him up,” someone says. People are watching from their cars. Some honk.

“Now wait a minute,” the Mayor says. He puts a finger on the courier’s chest.

“No charges have been filed. Nothing’s been proved. If you just let me go...”

Honks. The courier can’t think too well over the honking, but he senses the people in the cars want to see violence. Blood. They’re impatient because the light will change soon, yet no one is getting out of their car. This is something *you* have to do, they are saying. The Mayor has done wrong, wrong that maybe effects people like you even more

than us, and you—as the courier—are poised to be the enactor of a perfect revenge. They want to see the symmetry, the perfect reversal of fate.

“Just let me go,” the Mayor says.

The courier swings his fist and the Mayor drops. The lights change. Cars carrying raised arms and festive cries race further into the city. Silence gathers with the descent of red brake lights. The Mayor wipes his bloody nose. Cars collect on the intersecting street.

CHAPTER 11

THE FUGUE JUDGE

“Journeys to relive your past?” was the Khan’s question at this point, a question which could also have been formulated: “Journeys to recover your future?”

And Marco’s answer was: “Elsewhere is a negative mirror. The traveler recognizes the little that is his, discovering much he has not had and will never have.”

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

“There should be stars for great wars like ours.”

Sandra Cisneros

The Judge read the sentencing: For the crime of a fatal hit-and-run accident committed thirty-one years ago, and for hiding the victim’s body behind a false wall in your basement during all that time—a wall which your wife recently discovered while searching for a stamp to mail the gas bill—you, Lee Spivey, will be strapped into the Interstellar 5—a new, untested spaceship—and launched through a black hole in search of a parallel world that can undo your guilt.

That night the Judge drove me into the desert to meet my ship. I could see it from the car window—a tall, thin, silver-blue machine that filled the air with gloomy gray fumes. The

ship was flanked on three sides by a chain of equally tall, wrinkled, windswept hills that thinned near their summits like big wizard hats. At the base of the ship, as we approached, I saw that Jen, my wife, had parked her Taurus beside several squad cars and was sitting cross-legged on the hood.

The Judge pulled up next to her and uncuffed my wrists in the backseat. I cracked my fingers, feeling pain in every joint.

“You can have a few minutes to talk to her before we launch,” he said.

Jen had spread blankets on the hood and I felt the engine cool on my back as I lay beside her. I rubbed my pointy hip against Jen’s soft hip. Our bodies were pale and speckled and our hair was gray. We were cotton-mouthed from fighting all week. Our breaths mingled above us.

“I want to buy a pair of bright birds,” I said. “We can hang the cage in the laundry room by the window.”

“Always buying,” Jen said. “Always renovating.”

“I want to clean the garage,” I said. “Do we have time for that?”

“Why won’t you admit that you’re guilty?”

I sat up and considered. I closed one eye and streaked a finger across the night sky. The ship rose above us—conical tip piercing the stars, floodlights glittering around the perimeter. I imagined the worlds that would soon greet me, worlds that would not question the core of my self-knowledge—the basic, animal faith in my own innocence.

“Because I’m not,” I said, buoyed by the thought of my imminent banishment. “I don’t know how that body got there. I don’t have any idea. Someone put it in the basement before we bought the damn house.”

Jen shook her head. "That's not true."

"Jen. I'm your husband. How long have we been together?"

"That's not true." She slanted her eyes against the slick luminosity of the ship. "I remember. Thirty-one years ago you started renovating everything. You redid the whole basement so I wouldn't notice the false wall. Then, when you were done, ten years later, you started renovating the Prehistory Museum."

"We renovated the Prehistory Museum. It was a good investment."

"Exhibit changes. New artifacts every week. Kara'tu'tu, a genuine Neanderthal woman. You know how much she cost? An entire floor of the museum devoted to one sub-human skeleton. You were like a shark, constantly swimming away, building new realities. You're evil." She hugged her knees and looked right at me. What can I say about Jen? Even when she hates me, even when she's flaxy and old, she still makes my blood chug around like it's got somewhere to go.

"You've made my life into a lie," she said. "Do you realize that? Every moment I have spent with you I have to rethink. This crime of yours, it replaces every memory I have. Your presumption to include me in this. Jesus." She laughed bitterly.

The Judge returned, his black robes drafting on cold desert sand.

"You're boarding, Lee," he said. "And remember, look for a world that can make your crime go away. Find a place where your behavior is acceptable and then stay there." He looked at Jen. "We're going to wash your husband through the universe like dirty money through a Swiss bank account, ma'am. There are infinite worlds, which means there is a proper home for every criminal. It's more ethical than prisons. If Lee succeeds, the concept of a jail cell will dissolve from society. Do you have any last words for him?"

She drew a quilted blanket to her chin and shivered. “Yes. When you’re up there, Lee, no matter what they say, these people you’ll meet on these other planets, don’t let anyone convince you that you’re a good man.”

The Judge looked puzzled. “That would sort of defeat the purpose,” he said, but I was nodding.

“And if it’s you up there?” I said.

She shook her head. “I’m right here,” she said.

She was asking me to return to her, to live out my life as a criminal awaiting her forgiveness.

“I promise,” I said.

The living heat of a marriage depends on these kinds of promises. You find a way in the world through the limitations they set on you. Vows. Oaths. Forty years ago, at our wedding, I promised to protect her from pain, and so I did. So I did. I made the truth about the boy behind the false wall into a nocturnal truth, a remembered dream unraveling suddenly in waking hours, like a vapor under the nose, ferrying images that did not demand to be believed in. For her, to protect her from painful knowledge, I put a secret room in our home.

The Judge patted my shoulder and rushed me up the loading gantry to the domed capsule atop the ship. He opened the thick metal door to the pilot’s seat. I looked down at the spectators on the desert floor—policeman and scientists and Jen, all staring up and flushed with hate as I ducked into the capsule, keyed the launch code, and felt the rumble of fire casting me off.

I.

The Judge read the sentencing: For the crime of a fatal hit-and-run accident committed thirty-one years ago, and for hiding the victim's body behind a false wall in your basement during all that time—a wall which your wife will soon discover—you, Lee Spivey, must face the wrath of Jen "Sister Spit" Spivey.

The words existed physically in the air, an immutable law, an insistent tug at my sleeve. I could not help but abide by them. This new world held the sentencing like gravity. The ship had landed in the middle of a dirt road flanked on either side by cornfields. I climbed down from my capsule as the sun lowered over the cornstalks, varnished light catching the lacy tufts that hung off the ears.

A rangy kid with mussed and greasy hair, wearing a gray suit, ran toward me on the road, kicking up ocher-colored dirt.

"You better get out of here, Mister," he said. "She's on her way."

"Who?" I said.

"Sister Spit," he said. "Your wife."

He pointed to a hot air balloon careening down from a streak of pink cloud. I could make out the crepuscular silhouette of a woman in the balloon's basket, her hands on the basket's rim, looking down.

"What does she want?" I asked.

"She wants me dead. You gotta hide me."

I saw the flat red roof of a house a half-mile into one of the fields.

"That's my house," I said. "We'll hide you there."

We ran through the rows of corn, breaking stalks with our shoulders and feet, as the shadow of the balloon dipped over our heads.

“He’s dead, Lee!” Jen screamed from the balloon.

I heard a small, papery thing whip by my head and slice through the green spears of corn.

“Watch out,” the kid said. “Those are her supercharged stamps! One drop of her saliva and those babies are deadly!”

“Stamps, huh?” I said, running. I looked up at the underside of the balloon basket. “Why do you have stamps?”

“I was just trying to mail the gas bill!” Jen screamed.

The lights were off in the house but the front door was unlocked and I followed the kid through the kitchen and down the basement stairs. We stood breathing heavily in the dark, cold, hull-like basement, listening to the whistling deflation of the hot air balloon as it floated down and landed on the front lawn.

“She’s going to find us, man!” the kid said. “You got to hide me!”

“This is as hid as it gets, kid,” I said.

He slapped his hands against the wall. “There’s got to be a better place! Somewhere she wouldn’t think of.”

“I don’t think so. This is it right here.”

“No, no, no.” He struck the wall again, blooming dust. “Really try to remember. A really, really good hiding place. A basement within this basement where you could put me.”

The kid ran fingers over his scalp, bringing back a handful of stringy hair. Acne cluttered his chin, spaced tight, like divots on a golf ball, and a vein had burst in the white of one eye. His breathing became strained.

“Please,” he said. “Or I’ll die.”

We heard the front door open upstairs and the tinkling footfalls of heels on tile.

“Fine.” I reached behind the kid and slid the false wall open and stuffed him inside. “But I don’t think you’re going to like it in here.”

Jen picked her way down the uneven stairs in the heels. Her hair was the same gray as it had been at the launch, and her skin—even in the coal-dark of the basement—radiated a fragile paleness, like a white nightgown was floating toward me through the hallway.

“Hey babe,” I said.

“Can it,” she said. “Where is he?”

“Who?”

She unclipped a thin gold necklace from around her neck and spit on it, rubbing the saliva into the loops of the chain.

“Hands,” she said.

“I don’t know where he is, honest,” I said, offering her my hands. She draped the necklace over my wrists.

“That should hold you,” she said.

She reached into her pants pocket, pulled out a book of stamps, and unpeeled an 80-cent mammoth, drawing the scalloped edge along her tongue. I whimpered as she held the stamp to the false wall and flicked it through the plaster. I heard a wet gurgle, the kind

of sound a fish who has swallowed a hook might make, and then a thud, and I knew the kid was dead. Jen grabbed my neck and led me up the stairs and out to the front lawn, where her hot air balloon was tied down with ropes. She undid the ropes and shoved me into the basket.

“Why Jen?” I cried. “Why’d you have to snoop around? Why’d you have to kill him?”

“I was just trying to mail the gas bill,” she said, and held a lit match up to the hissing propane of the burners. “I was just looking for stamps.”

I had the sense, as the suspended flame ignited and the balloon took off, of being fired leisurely from a heaven-aimed cannon. The cornstalks fell away, became smudges of green flat florets, and then the whole cornfield was just one green square on a massive rug of orange and brown and green.

“You should look for things more intelligently, then” I said, gripping the lip of the basket. “You managed to avoid it for thirty-one years somehow. Then you fuck up and kill the kid.”

Jen laughed and peeled another stamp off her book. “Why won’t you admit it, Lee? You’re so close.”

I folded my arms and looked down at sun setting across the earth’s curvature. “This isn’t a new world at all,” I said. “This is just like the old one.”

“Look at me, Lee.”

She waved the stamp. On its display side there was a boy, a boy in a gray suit lying in the middle of a road, tire tracks across his dented chest. Jen stuck out a pink

length of tongue, ribbed on the surface with tiny bubbles, and licked it. She held the stamp out to me.

I nodded and pressed my mouth to the bitter glue.

II.

The Judge read the sentencing: For the crime of a fatal hit-and-run accident committed thirty-one years ago, and for hiding the victim's body behind a false wall in your basement during all that time—a wall which your wife will eventually discover, no doubt—you, Lee Spivey, must count bird wings in the basement of the *Spivey Prehistory Museum*.

After I licked the stamp, everything I ate tasted like a scar. My tongue felt bloodless, looked gray, and was veined with yellow strands of pus. I landed on the new planet without knowing how I got there, in a parking lot outside a refurbished old Packard Motor Plant—*The Spiveyville Prehistory Museum*—with the knowledge that I was a killer. I tried sucking on some of the freeze-dried space food the Judge had provided, but no use: my mouth greeted the edible world with a hard, dead muscle.

The Packard Motor Plant looked just as it had been twenty-one years ago when Jen and I bought our prized exhibit—Kara'tu'tu, our genuine Neanderthal woman. In my mind's eye I saw her smiling her skeleton smile from behind a glass exhibit-case. I smiled back, thinking fondly of this time with Jen—our shared passion for the museum, leading tours—and I climbed down the side of the ship and stretched my legs in the parking lot.

The sentencing rang in the fabric of the world, and I figured there was no use fighting it, so I went on in through the front door. The cement floor was covered in dust and spotted with flecks of black paint that tapered up like picked-at scabs. Long fluorescent lights stretched across the exposed ceiling, a crosshatch of h-beams and copper pipes hanging over flint arrowheads and taxidermied warthogs that shed and had plaster extensions glued to their tusks.

“Babe, you should sit down,” Jen said.

I turned around. She was standing against a display of Mastodonic teeth resting on plush purple baize, looking twenty-one years younger. Her hair was brown and her skin held a lush, copper tone.

“Jen,” I said.

She placed her hands on her hips. “Chicken bones,” she said. “Can you believe it? I was carrying Kara’tu’tu down to the basement and I slipped on a chicken bone. The whole skeleton just flew out of its case! Someone must have raised a whole coop down there and let them die because the floor is covered with chicken bones! Kara’tu’tu, I...I spilled her in with the fucking poultry. They’re all mixed up, the bones. Oh, Lee.”

She crossed the room and tenderly nuzzled her face on my chest. I felt my heart churn itself into a warm butter, but the thought of accepting affection from this younger Jen seemed perverse and deceitful. She didn’t yet know who I really was—wouldn’t know for twenty-one years.

Shame washed over me as she abandoned herself to the comfort of my body. Jen hadn’t touched me since the day she discovered my crime and I had not been struck by the warmth of her embrace since I put the kid in the false wall. Since that day our bodily

routines—hugging and kissing and digesting—began to gain, on my part at least, a willed synchronicity. I had to leave my own body and collect myself inside of Jen’s. I had to conjoin my daily acts with a good woman in order to live with myself. Jen’s body became a part of my body, her limbs orbited around my limbs. And because of this, I began to ignore her the way I ignored my own fingers and toes. I became blind to her the way my eye is blind to itself.

Jen raised her lips to mine and instead of kissing her I tucked my gray tongue against my bottom row of teeth and made my way toward the basement.

“I’ll get a broom,” I said.

In the dewy, metal-dust dark of the basement we passed a bank of rusted oil drums and a conveyor belt. We sorted through the bird wings, some flattened on the floor in a puddle of feathers, others covered over in a skin of dark, greasy liquid, picking out those that were clearly Neanderthal.

“This used to be the assembly floor,” Jen said, sweeping a pile of bones with the pushbroom. “This is where they put the cars together.”

“Think it still works?” I asked.

“Doubt it.” She leaned against the broom handle and twirled its tip thoughtfully.

“We could probably make something new with all these bones, you know. Like a Neanderthal with wings.”

“With chicken wings?” I laughed.

“Sure, why not?” She picked a few Neanderthal bones out of a swept pile on the floor and arranged them on the rubber belt of the conveyor. “Would we calm them chicken wings?” she said.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“You’re in awfully good spirits about this. I was sure you’d rip my head off.”

“I’m a changed man,” I said.

As I walked over to embrace her, I bumped my hip against a small control box in the center of a steel lathe. The conveyor creaked and shuddered and cranked into motion—emergency light blinking—and the belt began moving across the plant floor, carrying our Neanderthal bones toward the core molds of the Foundry.

“Holy shit,” Jen said.

We watched the bones disintegrate under the big metal fists in the Foundry, where they vibrated in a white dust and were shaped, and—like food pulverized inside a bird’s throat and fed back through its beak—reappeared on the belt transformed.

“Who is that?” Jen said.

The kid, dead in his gray suit, with tire track embossed on his broken chest, snaked toward us on the belt. I nodded.

“It’s a kid I killed,” I said. “I hit him with my car one night running a red light. He was in the crosswalk. I didn’t see him. I can accept that about myself.”

“That’s horrible,” Jen said, examining the kid’s face.

I let my fingers slide up the kid’s body as he passed us on the conveyor belt, from his shoes to his mussed hair. The belt suddenly stopped and we both looked down at him.

“I keep him in the basement,” I said. “The renovations on the house, this is why. I’m sorry. I wish I could undo it. I wish I could make him go away.”

“I can make him go away,” she said, and sank her teeth into the kid’s neck. She tugged at the rubbery tendons, blood bubbling in her mouth, smelling of iron and salt. She lifted her lips from the neck and looked at me expectantly.

“I can’t taste anything anymore,” I said, backing away. “I can’t.”

“Try,” she said. “Really try to taste.”

I undid the buttons of his shirt and took little bites from his stomach, tearing ribbons of flesh and purple-pink organ. The warm flavor of his skin translated across the battered nerve endings on my tongue.

“Why are we doing this?” I said.

“I knew,” she said, “I knew that there was something. I knew something was up. But I don’t want to know! I don’t want to think about it!”

We ate until our eyes were blind with tears, unable to see each other as we chewed and ripped the boy down to bone. We ate the skin over his kneecaps and sucked the marrow from his shoulders. We devoured him so ardently that when we were done there was no substance left at all, he was just an ancient skeleton. And our bodies were so full of him that we couldn’t see a thing.

III.

The Judge read the reward: For the good deed of a fatal hit-and-run accident committed thirty-one years ago, and for hiding the lucky kid’s body behind a false wall in your basement during all that time—a wall which your wife will proudly accept as an architectural improvement on the house—you, Lee Spivey, must sit back and let Jen Spivey cook you steak and scallops one night a week for the rest of your life.

I was flanked by four police officers, pushing the kid inside the false wall. My tongue felt better but I had a bad stomachache. One of the officers grinned and asked me for a beer.

“Sure, sure,” I said, and pointed to the kid. “But who put the cast on him?”

A hard blue cast swaddled the boy’s left arm. He lay slightly crooked and cramped, like a man resting in the sleeper car of a train. Inside the false wall there was mold-covered plaster and planks of wood standing exposed.

“Funniest thing,” the officer said, wiping his brow. “The kid already had a broken arm when you hit him with the car. Isn’t that something?”

Another officer slotted the false wall into place and dusted his palm along the seam of his pants. “I think we’re done here,” he said.

The first officer extended his hand. “Well, on behalf of the entire police department, let me profess my undying thanks. We really appreciate it.”

“Ah,” I said, taking his hand in mine. “Thanks for helping me wall him up here. Do you think maybe I could cut the cast off the kid?”

“Of course,” he said, and slid a box cutter out of his pocket. He flicked the blade up. “Now how about that beer?”

We all laughed.

“I’ll go grab you a couple,” I said.

The officer tapped my chest. “Oh no,” he said. “We’ll get it. In the fridge upstairs?”

“That’s right,” I said.

The officers walked up to the kitchen, gunbelts clattering on their hips. I removed the false wall and crouched by the kid with the box cutter blade. His broken arm was laid

at an angle across his stomach. I split the cast in two and sat for a time looking at his withered forearm. I thought about how the rest of his body would soon follow, and I lifted the pieces of the cast to my nose, inhaling the white flaky insides, the painful musk of his dead skin. I sniffed past the point of watery eyes, getting as much of the smell as I could stand. I thought that it was precious, this smell, a memory I did not want to lose.

“Come and get your dinner!” Jen hollered from upstairs.

The four police officers were standing with their hands behind their backs around the dining table. They looked like butlers in their black uniforms.

“At ease, gentleman,” I said. “Your work here is done for the night.”

Jen stood over the stove in the kitchen, pouring melted butter on the scallops. She looked just as she did the night of my crime—same apron and paisley-blue dress. “Didn’t you hear?” she said. “These men have to stay here to make sure you don’t violate the terms of the reward.”

“What terms?” I said.

“You can’t fix anything in the house,” Jen said. “No renovations. Never again can you lay nail to a home improvement. And you can’t offer anything either. You have to let me serve you. And you have to give these boys in blue a tour of the house before dinner.”

“Huh,” I said, scratching my head. “Well alright. Sounds like a pretty swell deal.”

I led the officer’s through the rooms of the house and they took it all in respectfully, hands behind their backs, leaning through doorframes to get a closer look. When we reached the second floor bathroom I saw that the sink had a drip, the fossit sputtering into its porcelain basin.

“Huh,” I said. “I’d sure like to fix that.”

The officers quietly reached for their pistols.

I sat at the dining room table while Jen cracked pepper over the steak. I watched the ceiling fan turn at the bottom of my glass of water.

“Another beer or something, fellas?” I said.

“Another beer?” Jen asked from the kitchen.

“Yes, ma’am.” The police officers nodded. “And may I use your bathroom, ma’am?” one of them asked.

“Up the stairs, first door on your left,” I said. “We just saw it. Fix that sink while you’re up there, why don’t you?” I laughed.

“The bathroom, ma’am?” the officer repeated.

“Up the stairs, first door on your left,” Jen said.

“Thank you, ma’am.” He nodded to the other officers and excused himself from the dining room.

“Well shit,” I said. “I can’t even tell them *that*?”

“Just kick back,” Jen said, carrying the steaming plates to the table. “Enjoy the fruits of your labor.”

We ate in silence. A toilet flushed upstairs and the officer reappeared in the dining room, taking his place among the others. I managed small bites, despite my stomach, and looked around at all the objects of my home—stainless steel refrigerator, 42-inch TV, walls that I had painted brown and orange and green. I wanted nothing more than to repaint, to gut the living room and install a 46-inch TV. Tile the kitchen walls. But the laws of this world were forcing me to be content, to be pleased with my actions. No renovations necessary.

“Do you hear that sink dripping?” I asked. “I think the clevis strip might be loose.”

“I don’t hear anything,” Jen said. “I just still can’t believe you had the courage to hit that kid with your car and wall him up like that. Jesus, that’s great.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s the clevis strip,” I said, and wiped my mouth with a napkin. “I could be wrong though. I do have to hit the head. I know that for certain.”

The officers followed me upstairs and waited outside the bathroom door. I opened the little green doors under the sink and examined the pipes. They were thin and curved like swan necks. I adjusted the clevis strip until the dripping ceased.

The officers kicked down the door.

“Did you fix that god damn pipe?” one of the officers asked, a hand on his wrist bracelets.

I was not invited back to dinner. I rode in the backseat of their squad car, the prison bars between us, under a moon with a gun-gray cloud running up its middle. The officers dropped me off at my spaceship, my new home, they said, and drove off.

I immediately went about renovating the ship. I painted the interior walls brown and orange and green, hammered together bookshelves, bought a stainless steel refrigerator and 42-inch TV. I built our brick-two story Tudor within the tubular confines of the Interstellar 5. The ship would look like the house I lived in with Jen, just as it was the day before I hit the kid with my car.

I remembered that Jen had clipped her toenails over the toilet that day and forgotten to flush them. I grew my own nails out and sprinkled them over the placid toilet water. I remembered that the bathtub soap was almost cashed, so I bought a new one and

worked the bar down to a nub. I gargled mouthwash and spit into a foggy cup, like Jen did, and placed it beside her replica toothbrush. I bagged the space food and the landing gear and dragged it all to a dumpster.

It was funny, though. As I paged through the Sears Catalog we had received in the mail that day—and which I had tracked down a copy of from the waiting room of our local dentist office—I couldn't help but glance at their selection of false walls. The desire to put a false wall in the ship came on hard, irresistible as sniffing a secret smell coming from your own body. And a week later I had, almost without meaning to, ordered one. And a week after that I had ordered a genuine Neanderthal woman, Kara'tu'tu, from a pair of auctioneers in Damascus. She arrived as a puzzle of bones inside a box cushioned with tissue and packing peanuts. I constructed the skeleton, placed her behind the false wall in the rear bulkhead of the ship, and suddenly I felt confident enough to ask Jen over for dinner.

She came the next night and I de-veined a bag of shrimp and heated a pot of water while she sliced carrots on the counter. This was the meal we had the night before I hit the kid with my car.

"I want to buy a pair of bright birds," I said. "We can hang the cage in the laundry room by the window."

"There's plenty of light back there," Jen said, eyeballing the ship's windows.

"I want to clean the garage," I said.

"Why not just come back to the real house and leave everything the way it is?"

Jen said. "It's great at the real house. It's perfect."

I shrugged. I could feel the logic of this world flooding my veins. I was a good man. I was a courageous fellow.

“No,” I said. “It’s not perfect. I killed a kid for Christ’s sake.”

I poured the shrimp into the saucepan and looked down at the tile floor. The false wall just below me, below deck, and I suddenly had a desire to start hacking at the fake tile and the baseboards with a sledgehammer. I wanted to dig on my hands and knees, fling dirt from the hole. I wanted dirt to stick to the back of my throat and mottle my lips. I wanted to hold my ancient skeleton up to Jen as I stood in my trench, my grave, my jail cell.

“You’re a good man,” Jen said. “Let’s go home.”

“Anywhere you want.” I fingered the launch pad. “We can leave right now. Where would you go?”

I keyed the launch code and felt the familiar roar of fire. Space, the black blood between worlds, received us as we sped past a pearl string of moons and a whorl of suns.

She looked down at my wrist. She cradled her hand round it until I felt her grip on the bone, the thump of my blood going into her fingers.

“Right here,” she said. “I want to be right here.”

“Let’s name one,” I said. “Something out here. A star. A rock. Something. It’s all ours, unclaimed. No rules on any of them.”

There was hardly any light where we were, just cold, shadowy planets passing by the windows.

“They all seem sort of funny-looking,” Jen said, squinting. “And I thought they named outer-space stuff after battles and gods and things...not just a couple of married people.”

Under the shroud of pupil-dark night I kissed Jen and as I did I felt all the buried worlds floating up, showing their bones—I felt Sister Stamp careening out of her hot air balloon, and Jen sweeping bird wings in the basement of the museum, and even my own Jen, on my own world, waiting for me to return so we could start fighting again. I thought of our fierce clashes, waged on multiple planets, and of our marriage, its years stretched into a constellation of war, a red ball at its center. Full of flames.

“Name it,” I said. “We deserve one.”

VITA

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