

FIVE STORIES FROM SOUTH JERSEY

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS
FIVE STORIES FROM SOUTH JERSEY
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A divorced dad taking his seven-year-old to the zoo, a middle-aged farmer who gets his tractor stuck in the mud, a twenty-something yuppie who thinks he belongs back on the farm, a woman from South Philly who gets the country house she always wanted, and a bachelor trying to reconnect with his old friend over a bottle of gin—these are the protagonists in this short story collection. “Five Stories from South Jersey” is an assortment of vignettes, brief glimpses into the fictional lives of people sharing the same residential space. Whether from city, suburb, or farmland, each character is navigating a way amidst the organized chaos of urban sprawl.

Dedication

For Ava

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In the Field

It was eight-thirty in the morning. I was at the farm and had been waiting for what felt like a very long time. Sarah and I were on the outs for good and going back to work with my father felt like the right thing to do. Our house was on the market. She was living with her sister in Philly, while I stayed in Jersey—mowing our lawn, trimming our hedges, tending to the garden she had insisted on planting. I still nodded to neighbors on walks to the mailbox, and although they had watched her go, no one knew me well enough to say a word about it.

Sarah never came back to the house, yet we had fucked more in the months after her leaving than we had at any point during our marriage. We met in cheap hotels late at night or middle of the afternoon. Once I fucked her in my Civic after hooking up in an AMC parking lot.

After awhile, I even moved the for-sale sign into the garage, propped it against the pegboard wall behind a shovel and rake. But then her calls stopped. I could only get her voicemail. Finally she got on the phone and broke everything off. “I can’t do this anymore,” she said. “My head’s getting twisted and I don’t know up from down.”

“Just come over,” I said. “Come see your garden. Come see how I’m taking care of the place.”

“Don’t you understand?”

“Things are better between us.”

“But I don’t want them to be.”

“Then what are we doing?”

“I don’t know and it has to stop.”

Sarah was gone, and I knew I’d have no choice but to finally tell my father. He’d ask me if I was still drinking, if I still had a hard-on for waitresses and bank tellers. I would say that she just walked out, that she didn’t want to be married to a guy who spent so much time working. I’d say nothing about the girl I had fucked or the phone call Sarah got from her at two in the morning.

It was starting to get warm and there was still no sign of my father. I kicked a stone across the gravel yard. A truck motor rattled and screeched from the other side of the packinghouse. I walked toward the orchard and stopped dead-center of the yard. The fueling station sat on one side of me. A broken-down tractor—engine exposed, hood propped against a rear tire—sat on the other. With a cloud of dust rolling from under its chassis, a pickup trundled around the cold-storage. I recognized the driver and cracked a smile. Manny had worked for my father since I was a little boy. “How you doing, Manny?” I said. We shook hands and I peered inside the cab and into the bed of the truck. There were two guys next to him and six riding in back. “Where you been, Joey?” he said. “You don’t come around no more.”

“Work and wife, Manny. You know how that goes.”

“Yup,” he said, pushing up the brim of his cap with an index finger. Manny had on navy blue coveralls, zipped to his neckline. His dimples were still strong, and his face was taut and dark from working in the orchard.

“You seen my father?” I said.

“Not yet, maybe coming in late?” he said. “You still working in Philadelphia, Joey?”

“I am, Manny.”

“Bien,” he said. “You’re doing real good, Joey. When I see your daddy, I tell him you’re here. You have a baby yet?”

“No,” I said.

“Too much money. Babies. Mucho fucking dinero, man.” Manny tapped the steering wheel with a couple fingers and stared over the dash. He had on these cotton work-gloves they sell at 7-Eleven, and I could tell he was anxious to take the men into the field. I reached inside the truck and patted him on the shoulder. Manny smiled, all toothy and proud. “Good seeing you, Joey. Come around more. Ok?” I didn’t say anything and slapped the side of the pickup before backing away. Many put the truck in gear and the fan belt screeched and it took a second for the tires to move. The men sitting in the bed had on sweatshirts and jeans and their faces were stiff when the truck took off.

I was all by myself, standing in middle of the yard. I looked at the orchard, at a block of young trees centered between two overgrown tracts of land. Leaf tips poked through grey bark. The trees had just bloomed. Amongst the canvas of felled twigs and branches, withered petals reddened the ground. I grabbed my coffee off the trunk of my car and walked into the orchard.

The grass, still damp with dew, shined a deep green under the overcast. I planned each footfall as I pushed through the brush, and it didn’t take long to get deep into the orchard. When the cold-storage was a grey blotch on the horizon, I stopped walking and regarded my surroundings. Rain seemed on its way. I could smell the uncut grass and acres of nothing. The cuffs of my khakis were wet, my shoes lost in vigorous weeds. I

sipped my coffee, and in the distance, an air-blast sprayer hummed. Deep. Rhythmic. Gregorian chant.

The week Sarah stopped calling I didn't go to work. I stayed home, watched Law and Order, toiled in the yard until there was nothing left to do. One morning I even drove to Sacred Heart Church, in sweat pants and sneakers, teeth not even brushed. I pulled myself up the steps and into the marble foyer. I tasted the musty air. There was a faint hint of burned incense and I was all alone. I used the holy water and genuflected and kneeled in a pew. That massive crucifix hung high above the altar. I had forgotten how small the cathedral made me feel—that vast stone cavity, which was still cold and uninviting. Yet at that moment I wanted it all: mass on Sunday followed by a spaghetti dinner with homemade sauce and fresh Italian bread. I wanted Sarah and I wanted kids and I prayed that she would come back home.

But she wasn't coming home. I thought about the church when out in the orchard, about praying and waiting, about standing on the front steps like a fool, squinting in exploding sunlight as cars shot down Petrini Avenue. I thought about my job at the bank and about Sarah in Philly and I began to feel sick. I wanted a drink. I heard a rustling coming from a few rows over. I dropped to one knee and peered through the scaffold branches, expecting to see rabbit or deer. There was nothing there. A southern breeze blew against my jaw and neck. I turned to the far end of the orchard where a stand of black walnut trees reached up from the gully. I regarded the gully, thought about my grandfather's stories, about the pond that had been there before I was born, about the stream that had once brought catfish from the Cohansey River's muddy currents.

I made my way to the gully and looked into it and thought about my father and brother and about coming back to work on the farm. It was a pit of vegetation and abandoned equipment: vermin, vines, tractors with rusted engines hidden in the undergrowth. I recognized one of the tractors and shimmied through a briar patch to see it up close. I wanted to find my brother's and my initials, which we had scratched into the fender when we were just boys. But the fenders were gone. So was the torn foam seat that I remembered so clearly. Wooden blocks were stacked under the axle—the diesel engine exposed, mottled with rust.

I stayed by that tractor for what felt like a very long time. Thunderheads pushed past the sun, making shadows come and go. I wanted that John Deere restored to the way I had known it: glossy green paint and yellow diesel engine, trudging through the orchard steady and fierce. I was convinced that I was finally doing the right thing. That everything I needed was right where I had left it. What a farmer I would have been if I had never gone to Rutgers. Along the bank, piles of peach pits, coalesced into knee-high mounds of rot, lined the dirt road. Four turkey buzzards, perched high in a tree, spread their black wings as if preparing to take off. I picked up a peach pit and threw it at them, but they didn't fly away.

I visited the frost pockets on my walk back to the packinghouse. With the empty coffee cup in the grass between my shoes, I'd pull down a branch and peel the buds open with my thumbs and forefingers. Most ovules were green, viable. I thought about the night of the fires, about working on the farm with my brother and father. Before Dominick joined the Army. Before I went away to Rutgers. Before I met Sarah and got married and fucked everything up.

They had called for a hard frost, a front moving down from the north. My father made me and Dominick spend the afternoon throwing tires into brush piles and hanging thermometers in trees. We stayed up all night, and when the time came, we raced around the orchard in an old Ford pickup that had only one working headlight. The pickup had a diesel tank in the bed. With buckets of diesel fuel and a propane torch, we lit the piles as if they were straw huts in an enemy village. My father guided a rented helicopter, sitting shotgun next to a pilot who had come up from Georgia. The chopper hovered, circulating the air and smoke. Branches bounced and swayed. Leaves convulsed in the blinding light.

I smiled when I thought about those people from Willow Run, that development up the road where Curcio's farm used to be. They had awoken to a film of soot on their vinyl siding and SUVs. Some wrote letters to the township permitting board. I thought about me and Dominick sitting in that old Ford pickup, nodding off as the frost crept up from the ground. When we inspected the crop in the midday sun, it was almost impossible to find a bud that wasn't black, brittle—burnt by the bitter cold. Nothing we tried had worked; the season was over before it even started. All that for nothing, was all I could think, as my father paced in front of his pickup, mumbling about crop insurance and not knowing what to do.

At the far end of the field, in front of the cold-storage, I saw my father's truck bounce across the yard. I cut through one of the tracts of neglected land. Rabbits scurried amid the weeds: acres of Canadian thistle, morning glory, and tufts of Bermuda grass standing tall and bending in the direction of the wind. A block of Jersey Queens had thrived in that spot for almost twenty years, and the trees were still present—piles of them scattered about the field. Trunks and limbs busted and splintered. Root balls bigger

than tractor tires jutting from heaps of dry rotted branches. Ruts from the dozer marred the terrain with hardened ridges and standing water.

By the time I got to the packinghouse, bands of grey stratus blocked the sun and the sky screamed downpour. Puddles broke into ringlets. A paper cup flipped across the yard and drizzle fell with the wind against the cold-storage's cinder-block walls. The concrete around the pole barn got dark as rain fell, and a guy stacked bins with the forklift, holding a sheet of cardboard above his head with one hand.

My father's truck was parked up ahead, the blade of a pole-saw hanging off the edge of the tailgate. The exhaust pipe sent faint bursts of smoke into the air as the pickup idled in the rain. He blew the horn when I came out of the orchard. Manny was standing outside the driver-side window. I could see my father's eyes in the rearview mirror, and he gestured for me to get inside.

You could tell by how he kept his truck that my father was used to being in it alone. Newspapers covered the seat and center console. There was loaf of Italian bread next to his thigh, along with a small bottle of olive oil and a Mason jar full of ice water. The passenger-side floor was lost under a mound of empty coffee cups. I dropped mine into the heap.

Manny stayed quiet as I cleared a place to sit down. "Well look who it is," my father said. I dusted breadcrumbs off the seat with my palm and got inside and closed the door. Manny and my father each grinned.

"You look good, Dad," I said.

My father's hair had gone almost bone white and sawdust peppered the curls. There was sawdust on his shoulders too. He had on a flannel shirt and jeans and there was

a notebook in his chest pocket. My father turned to Manny, “Ok?” he asked, wrapping up the conversation they were having before I arrived, “Tell the boys to check with us at one o’clock. If this rain lets up, everyone goes back out in the field.”

Manny walked away with the saw over his shoulder and the gas can by his side. Then my father rolled up his window and put the truck in gear and drove into the orchard. It had been a long time since we last rode around the farm together, and it felt good to be with him. I pulled the loaf of bread out from its paper bag and tore a piece off to eat. “You’re starting to remind me of Grandpop,” I said, “with this bread and olive oil all over the place.”

“Now that guy—he knew how to take care of himself,” my father said. It had been a long time since I ate real Italian bread. Sarah preferred baguettes and I had learned to stop complaining. “You still go to Terrignos?” I asked.

“Yeah, but it’s not Terrignos no more,” he said. “Indians got it from them last year.”

“Indians?” I said. I looked down at the piece I was holding. “Never would’ve known.”

“Goes to show you,” my father said.

We were driving alongside one of the tracts of vacant land. “Dad,” I said. “Sarah’s gone.” He didn’t say anything right away. “She’s been gone for months now and she isn’t coming back.” He stopped the truck and stared out his window. “We’re selling the house and everything,” I said.

“Don’t do that,” he said.

“She’s not coming back, Dad.”

“You mother left more times than I can count before she stayed away for good.

Don’t sell your house, Joseph.”

“It’s too late.”

“No it’s not—”

“But Dad, I fucked up real bad.”

“Everyone fucks up.”

It was raining harder now than it had all morning. The overcast was dark and constant and there wasn’t a break to be found anywhere on the horizon. My father opened his door and stepped out of the truck. One hand was on his headrest. “Watch out,” he said. I leaned forward, so that my chest was against the dashboard. He stood in the rain, reached behind the seat, pulled out a fifth of Jim Beam. He put the seat back and got inside the truck and closed his door. “What the hell is that?” I asked.

“What does it look like?” he said. “This is bourbon, boy.” He reached down and grabbed two empty coffee cups from the floor by my feet. Handed me the cups. “Hold these a minute,” he said. He unscrewed the lid on the Mason jar, poured water into each of them. After washing out the cups, he poured the bourbon, and out in the field we drank, not saying a word until the first pour was gone. The bourbon went down smooth, cold from riding behind the seat of the truck. My father was slouched behind the wheel, looking tired, old—his gut pushing hard against the inside of his flannel. Rain spilled down the windshield. “When’d you start drinking in the morning?” I said.

“Just be quiet and enjoy it,” he said.

“I don’t know what to do, Dad.”

“Why aren’t you at work today?”

He started the truck and the wipers clicked on. Next thing I knew we were driving again. When we got to the back of the farm, the dirt road snaked alongside the gully. I thought about the John Deere rusting away in the weeds. "I came out here this morning," I said. "It was nice being in the orchard again." We came up on where I had been earlier, and when I saw the John Deere I told him to stop the truck. "Remember that tractor, Dad? Why'd you have to dump it out here like this?"

My father poured himself more bourbon, without offering any to me. "I wish I knew how to help you boys," he said. "Dominick's not doing so hot either these days."

"He'll be fine," I said, "and he has that girl now."

"What does that have to do with him getting sent over there?"

"What do you mean?"

"You boys have the wrong idea about women. They don't mean shit, Joseph. That boy should never have joined the service."

"But he wanted to go," I said. "Nobody could stop him."

"He only did it because you went off to that college. He left because you left."

"Is that how you remember it?"

"That's the way it was."

I looked into the passenger-side rearview mirror and watched the rain destroy the surface of a puddle. The cuffs of my khakis were still wet, and my shoes felt waterlogged and ruined. I flipped down the sun visor and looked at myself in the mirror. I used my thumb and forefinger to pull down the skin beneath my eyes. "I don't look good," I said.

"No," my father said. "No. You don't." I put the visor back and tried to get the last drop of bourbon out of my cup. I sank into that tattered bench seat. "I hate the way

my life has turned out,” I heard myself saying. “Dad, I want to come help you on the farm.”

His head was cocked back against the headrest, eyes closed like someone trying to sleep. “Stop that,” he said. “Go back to work tomorrow and be nice to your wife.”

“What?”

“I just want to see you boys doing ok for yourselves. Will you listen to me? Go back to work tomorrow, Joseph. Don’t sell your house.”

“Be nice to my wife. What the fuck does that mean? And I’m not ok,” I said.

“Dad, I’m not ok at all. Let me come back. I want to quit my job and work here with you. This is the only place that feels right anymore.”

He pulled himself up and ran a hand through his hair. I watched him flick sawdust off his fingers. “Jesus Christ. You have to stop it, Joseph. You have to stop this right now.”

“I’m being serious,” I said. “I could help you so much. Just—just hear me out.”

“I don’t need any help. Now do us both a favor. Let this go.”

“But this place looks like shit—”

“What did you say?”

“You haven’t even cleared the trees that you pushed out two seasons ago. I could get some money, a loan from F.S.A. I could get some money to buy trees, to—”

“Are you kidding me? Do you hear yourself?” He looked out his window, brought a hand to his forehead. “This kid thinks he’s going to march right over to Farm Service Agency.”

“But why not?”

“Go home,” he said. “Rest up, Joey. I don’t like seeing you this way.”

“Dad, for once, stop being so stubborn. Just look around, man. You don’t have it anymore.”

“Watch yourself, boy.”

“I worked here a long time—”

“Did you quit that job?” he said. “Quit that job at the bank. Go ahead and you’ll see. Quit that job and you can kiss your wife goodbye.”

“What don’t you understand?” I said. “Sarah is fucking gone.” He turned away and looked out the window. His cap, a sun-beaten NJ Farm Bureau cap, had been on the dashboard since he broke out the Jim Beam, and he put it on, tugging the brim close to his brow. “I don’t want to hear this,” he said. “She’s a nice girl, Joey.”

“C’mon,” I said. “I never should have left the farm. I belong here. You need me here—”

He started the truck. “Let’s go,” he said.

“What the hell is your problem? Why are you being such an asshole?”

He had one hand on the wheel and the other on the gear shift. “You know, Joseph, if you really want to help me then go get your brother out of the fucking army. Go get Dominick and bring him in the field with the men. I don’t know where you come up with this shit. You’re not worth a damn on this farm by yourself. The only reason I even let you stay is because Dominick looked up to you so much. You come out to my place and call me an asshole. Tell me I can’t run my own farm. Who the fuck do you think you are?”

Outside, the gully was still. Even the turkey buzzards had gone away. I turned to the old man. He was looking out his window. I threw the cup he had given me on the floor with the rest. “You’re a drunk,” I said.

“Then go the fuck back home and stop being stupid. You don’t know when you have it good.”

I opened my door and stepped outside and walked down the bank of the gully. The rain had let up. But the ground was slick. I fell backwards twice on my way to the bottom. My father blew the horn and hollered out to me through the open passenger-side door. “What are you doing?” he said. “I don’t have time for this shit.” I got close to the John Deere and pissed on the wooden blocks that were stacked beneath the axle. Then I walked back to the truck and got inside. On the ride out of the orchard we didn’t speak to one another, but I listened to my father call Manny and tell him to bring the men into the field after lunch.

Lawn Problems

"I'm looking for a gun in my mind."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Jim said to his old friend Mike.

They had been sitting on Jim's deck reminiscing for almost six hours. Under the cocked umbrella, strewn on the glass table top, were spent lime rinds, cigarette ash, empty tonic bottles, and cubes of melting ice. The fifth of Bombay Sapphire was half-gone. It was twilight, the air was still warm, and a westward breeze kept the humidity away. Not much of a view, only the neighbors' backyards, and not one measured up to Jim's Kentucky bluegrass and white vinyl fence.

Behind the din of conversation, a bug-zapper hummed and crackled in a corner of the deck. Mike's chair lay in the zapper's purple light, and when he brought his drink to his lips, the carbonated bubbles glowed like neon. "I'm not sure, dude. Sometimes I just want to bash my brains out. I wish I could find a gun, an imaginary one, you know, and fire it inside my head. I want to feel the bullet ricocheting off the inside of my skull, erasing unnecessary bits of memory, useless things I've been taught but never asked for."

"I don't get you anymore, Mike. What the hell has happened to you? Jim sipped his drink, put the glass on the table. "You telling me that you think about killing yourself or something?"

"Forget it. That's not what I'm saying at all. Just drunk. Talking out my ass."

Mike smoked a cigarette, then another, poured himself a fresh gin and tonic. Jim just stared into his neighbor's yard; he had been talking about wanting to fuck the guy's wife when she was outside earlier, hanging sheets on the line. The sun did its thing, and

Jim lit the Tiki torches once it got dark. The evening felt over, but Mike wasn't ready to leave.

Out of nowhere, the bug-zapper buzzed fierce and loud—a sharp, piercing sizzle that turned both heads. “Something big went down,” Mike said.

“You know what your problem is?”

“Why don't you tell me, Jim.”

“Your problem is you think too fucking much. That's it, man. You spend too much time thinking and no time doing anything real. Seriously, don't take this the wrong way, but we're thirty years old, dude. Look at me: I have a house, a state job, a pension, and 401K. I have a wife and a mortgage. Pretty soon kids and all that shit. What the hell do you got, man? What've you been doing these past ten years? Bash your brains in. I don't want to hear that, dude. Stop your whining and grow the fuck up. Get your shit together. You got too much time on your—”

Mike got up and walked to the French doors leading into the rancher's kitchen.

“Taking a leak,” he said.

“Whatever, man. Just can't take the tru—”

After closing the door, Mike looked through the glass to his abandoned seat, which beamed from the pest control glow. The kitchen smelled like potpourri and fabric softener. This was the first time Mike had been over since the wedding. He got a glass of water from the tap and took a deep breath. Someone had folded the dishrag so that the corners aligned like magazine pages. Fresh vacuum tracks crisscrossed the carpet. Even the suede sectional had been brushed and unused since. Mike rinsed his glass and put it in

the empty drainer. Knowing the house was now Leah's made him feel like a tourist, and he wanted to get back outside.

After sitting down, Mike topped off their drinks. "So," he said, "married life is ok for the most part, huh?"

"Everything has its ups and downs, you know. I have to keep my Playboys in the basement these days."

They laughed, and from then on, Mike made every effort to keep the conversation as light as he could. He learned that he and Jim had both downloaded the Kim Kardashian sex tape. That after watching *Closure*, they both jerked off to Natalie Portman. Mike discovered an upcoming Black and Decker sale at Home Depot and tried to discuss the Eagles, even offering an opinion on their playoff odds. Mike listened as Jim rattled off the itinerary to his Vegas vacation, and smiled when Jim suggested he find a girlfriend and come along.

After wiping his mouth with a sleeve, Jim stood up and walked to the edge of the deck. "Come here, man," he said. "Look at this fucking shit."

Mike grabbed his drink and walked over. Jim pointed out into the yard. "What is it?" Mike said.

"You don't see those patches of dead sod?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"I had to give up on it this year."

"Fuck it," Mike said. "Probably setting yourself up for disappointment, anyway. Sometimes nature wins out no matter what we do."

“I guess you’re right, but it just pisses me off. Everything was good until the stretch of rain we got. Then I changed the sprinkler heads, but it started drying out. Now it’s dying, and—get the fuck out of here!”

Jim shot down the weather-sealed steps, leaving his old-fashioned glass on the railing. He pointed, with each hand, to different spots in his lawn. “Come here, Mike. Well goddamn it to hell. Look at this shit.”

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

“You can’t see the crabgrass that got in here? Open your eyes, man. It’s everywhere! And I followed the instructions on back of that fucking Scott’s bag to the tee. No goddamn way, man.”

By the time Mike got into the yard, Jim was on his hands and knees pulling at tufts of weeds. The halogen lanterns lining the fence made his face appear red and swollen. Mike stood there for what felt like a very long time, Jim crawling about, ripping holes in his perfect yard. “Dude,” Mike finally said, “C’mon man, we have to kill this bottle before Leah gets home.” He put a hand on Jim’s shoulder and his old friend stood up. He was bug-eyed and not smiling, the knees of his jeans stained green like those of a child.

“Huh?” Jim said. “What about Leah? She home?”

“Not yet,” Mike said. “But we have to finish this bottle before she is.”

“Fucking crabgrass, Mike. Can’t win for losing. I’m telling you.” Jim walked to the back of his yard and tossed the handfuls of weeds over the fence. On the deck, when they were sitting at the table again, Mike looked at Jim, who was still panting and flushed.

“Landscaping’s a bitch, huh?” he said.

“I’m telling you,” Jim said.

“I got to say, though, definitely the best yard on the block.”

“Thanks, dude. When you get a house, I’ll come over. Show you everything I know.”

Mike finished his drink and cracked a smile. “That’d be great, man. Thanks.” They sat on the deck until the Bombay was gone, Mike looking into the neighbors’ yards, waiting to hear Leah’s car in the driveway.

A Pair of Jacks

Jack Ridellio yelled upstairs for little Jackie to come down. “C’mon, dude,” he said. “It’s time to get going.” Normally, it would have taken at least two calls to pry little Jackie away from his X Box, but today they were going to see the monkeys, orangutans actually, bare asses and all. Little Jackie busted out his bedroom door and shot down the stairs, one hand squeaking as it slid along the banister. “Whoa,” Jack said. “Take it easy, little man. The damn zoo isn’t going anywhere. I promise.”

Jackie knelt by the front door and started putting on his sneakers. “You turn the TV off?” Jack said. “What about your game and the light?” The boy’s shoes were already tied, his hands reaching for the doorknob. “Yeah, Dad,” he said. “C’mon, I’m ready.”

“Just wait a minute. Let me see what you have on.” He spun his seven-year-old around by the shoulder. Jackie had his camera hanging around his neck, an old 35mm Angie’s mother had given him. He was wearing a new Eagles tee from Christmas and matching sweatpants. “Get over here, boy. Now where do you think you are?” Jack flattened the kid’s hair with a little pressure and spit, zipped him into a winter coat. “Where’s your hat?” he said.

“Lost.”

In the closet, Jack had an old wine case, a cardboard crate overflowing with winter hats and scarves. “Here you go,” he said. “I got one just for you.” The kid’s smile soured when he saw the Giants cap in his father’s hand.

“No,” he said. “I hate the Giants.” Jack pulled it down over the boy’s ears and smiled. “Maybe you’ll learn your lesson then?”

“But it’s too big.”

“Stop being a baby.”

Jackie had never been to the Philadelphia Zoo. He had never even been out of South Jersey. The Camry shot up Route 55 at a 70-MPH clip, Jackie belted into the passenger seat, Gameboy armed, Jack senior trying to make decent time, always reminding himself that the kid was in the car. Every few minutes, Jack would primp a little in the rearview mirror or check his cell for missed calls. He was meeting Melissa Baker in front of the lion cage, and wanted to make a good impression.

Melissa was a paralegal for the Vineland Prosecutor’s Office. Jack had met her at a conference in Atlantic City, talking shop at the continental breakfast. They had gone out for dirty martinis at the Taj Mahal, and Jack watched as she nursed her first drink for almost an hour, stabbing the olives again and again with her toothpick. But when Melissa brought up her little girl, Jack knew how to hijack the conversation. He praised fatherhood, swearing that his weekends with Jackie had priority over everything, that his dedication had made dating difficult in the years since the divorce. She bought every line of his bullshit, and before Jack knew it, Melissa was tossing down martinis almost two at a time and fucking his brains out in a suite at the Tropicana.

Now he was introducing little Jackie for the first time, and that meant little Jackie had to behave. “Now Jackie,” Jack said, one hand on the wheel, the other sliding his coffee into the cup holder. “I want you to be good, you hear me. None of the crap you pulled at the aquarium.” Jackie didn’t look up from his video game. “Hey Jackie. C’mon man, I mean it. No running off. No talking back. No temper tantrums. Got me? If you’re good all day, I’ll have a surprise for you on the way home.”

Jackie's brows arched into his forehead, forcing Jack to acknowledge the set of blues the kid had inherited from Angie. "What kind of surprise?" the little negotiator asked.

It had been a rough two weeks for them both. Jack hadn't spent this much time with his boy since before the divorce. The kid was spoiled, and there wasn't time for Jack to undo the damage Angie had done. She'd be back from her cruise in a couple days anyway, and life would return to normal. "The bridge is coming up," Jack said, prompting little Jackie to finally set his Gameboy aside.

"Are we close to the zoo?" Jackie asked. Jack pointed toward the Rutgers campus and the law school he had graduated from.

"I work right over there, dude. The courthouse is just over those buildings." After seeing little interest in Jackie's blank face, Jack pointed toward the Campbell's Soup factory and to the baseball field and riverfront. Little Jackie wasn't impressed. Finally, Jack said, "You know, someone gets shot in Camden almost every day."

"Every day?" Jackie asked. It was time for Jack to get some respect.

"Just about every day, little man. Sometimes lots of people get shot." The toll booths were coming up, and Jack looked down to find little Jackie staring at him, wide eyed, mouth open. "Yeah dude, that's what your father does. I send killers to jail."

"Aren't you scared that they'll shoot you when they get out?"

"I don't think about that kind of stuff."

"Yeah...but, is that why you take your suit off right when you get home? So they won't recognize you when you go shopping or jogging?" The kid's eyebrows were raised the way they always were when he was serious.

“Of course not, Jackie, I was in the Marine Corp, remember? Marines aren’t scared of anyone. I never liked wearing suits. That’s why I only wear them to work.”

Jack stayed in the Ben Franklin Bridge’s far right lane. He let Jackie take off his seat belt and sit on his little knees so the boy could see between the suspender cables out over the Delaware River. “How high are we?” Jackie asked, palms pressed against the window.

“I’m not sure. Pretty high I guess.”

“Everything looks so small. I wish I could spit from up here.”

“Now, why would you want to do that for?”

“I don’t know,” Jackie said. “Maybe I could hit a boat or something.”

Little Jackie didn’t care much for the Philadelphia skyline. Jack had even detoured through Center City, instead of beelining it down the Schuylkill to Girard Avenue. He tried, again and again, to tear Jackie away from his game. Nothing really worked, not the Liberty Bell or Independence Hall, not the skyscrapers or busy streets. It was starting to piss Jack off.

“You know,” Jack said, after leaving Broad Street to get back on the expressway. “Your mom and I met in this city. She used to live with your grandparents over in South Philly.” For the first time since the bridge, little Jackie perked up.

“Where’s that?” he asked.

“What do you mean? Where is South Philly or where did we meet?”

“Where did you meet, I guess.”

“At a cheese steak place called Tony Luke’s. Your Uncle Al introduced us. Then got mad when we started dating.”

“How come?”

“Just trying to be a good big brother. Sometimes brothers are like that with little sisters. It’s just the way things are.”

“Was he protecting her from you?”

“Not exactly, Jackie. It’s just the way things were. He wasn’t trying to protect her from me personally. I mean—” Jack was stumbling over words, annoyed that he had backed himself into a corner talking with a seven-year-old. Little Jackie had always blamed Jack for the divorce, at least that’s how Jack saw things. What was Jack thinking, anyway? Bringing Angie up like that. Boy, had that woman done a number on this kid.

“Do you want to hear how we met or not?” Jack asked, jarring the kid’s head away from the river and boat houses lining the Schukyll shore line. “Your uncle Al used to come to Vineland in the summers to visit his aunt Lisa, who lived right next door to Grandma and Grandpa. We used to play baseball down at Petrinni Park and ride bikes and stuff.”

“Why didn’t Mom come, too?”

“Your grandad never let her. He made her work in the bakery so he could keep a close eye on her.”

“Was he trying to protect her like uncle Al was?”

“Something like that—watch out,” Jack said, reaching over the boy’s chest to shield him from an SUV cutting across his lane. “Fucking asshole!” Jack yelled.

Little Jackie looked down at his father’s arm, which was still across his chest, pinning him into the seat. “What about Uncle Al?”

Jack went for his coffee. “Anyway, me and Uncle Al were good friends, and one day, when we were teenagers, he introduced us at Tony Luke’s.”

“The cheese steak place, right?”

“Yup. And that was that. It’s still there you know. Looks exactly the same.”

“But Mom hates meat.”

“She didn’t back then, Jackie. She didn’t start that shit till college.”

The exit was coming up, only a mile to go. Jack’s phone rang. It was Melissa Baker. Jack knew from her voice that she had bad news. He lowered the earpiece volume, switching the phone to his left ear. Jackie didn’t seem to notice a thing. After hanging up, Jack slid into the middle lane and ran his hand through his hair. “I can’t believe I did this,” he said—in a slow, serious hush.

“What? Dad, who was that?”

“That was Grandma,” Jack lied. “I...I can’t believe I did this, Jackie.”

“What, what did you do?”

“The zoo, the zoo is closed this week. I can’t believe I didn’t know this, Buddy. Your father’s made a big mistake.” The exit zipped by as Jack moved into the far left lane, behind a Jeep plastered with Sierra Club stickers.

Jackie’s face turned red. Red. Getting-ready-to-blow red. He turned away from his father, staring forward, breathing hard through his nose. Then he ripped the camera from around his neck, slamming it against the door. The white Nokia sticker made a faint line on the panel. Jack reached over and snatched it from the kid’s grip. The car swerved out of their lane. Horns sounded around the Camry.

“You’re going to get us into a fucking accident, Jackie!”

“Fuck you!” Jackie screamed.

“What did you just say?”

“Fuck you! Fuck you! Fuck you!” The last “you” turned into a howl. The kid was thrashing, going berserk, kicking the underside of the dash. Jack got scared and pulled off the expressway toward Conshohocken, racing into the first parking lot he saw.

After throwing the car in park, Jack grabbed his boy by the shoulders. The kid’s face was covered in tears and snot. He wouldn’t look his dad in the eye. “Why are you acting like this, dude? It’s not my fault they’re doing construction this week.”

“You’re a fucking liar!”

Jack snapped and slapped Little Jackie across his mouth and cheek. Before he could realize it, his boy was sobbing hysterically into the Giants hat, hunched over, screams muffled by the cotton pushed up against his little face. The smack echoed above the racket; all Jack could see was his boy’s face pushing to the side. He wiped his hand on his jeans. It was clammy and wet with tears and spit. Jack had never hit the kid before then. No one had.

Jack leaned against the steering wheel, almost pulling his ass off the seat, muscles clenched, blood pressure rising. He couldn’t look at the boy. What if there was a hand mark across his cheek? What was Angie going to say about this?

“Jackie,” he said, still staring out the windshield. They were parked at a doctor’s office. He hadn’t noticed until then: an OB-GYN. “I’m sorry, dude. I didn’t mean to slap you.”

“You punched me in the face,” Jackie yelled, spit everywhere.

“Don’t say that! I slapped you, Jackie. I would never punch you. It was just a slap. That’s all it was.” That was just what Jack needed—for the kid to tell Angie that Jack had punched him in the face. She’d probably threaten to sue for full custody, unless he upped the support payments. He couldn’t think about it.

“You did! You did! You punched me in the face!”

“I lost my temper, Buddy. I didn’t want to hit you. I just lost my...when you grow up you’ll see. It just happened. You know I’d never hurt you on purpose.”

The kid started crying harder, wilder. Jack had never seen him so pitiful. He reached out to rub the kid’s back. Jackie jerked away. The boy took a deep breath and, almost mechanically, stopped sobbing. Jack withdrew the outstretched palm, puzzled by the change in behavior and leaned back into the crotch of his seat and door—watching.

Jackie stared into his lap, but his breathing was still rapid and loud. Jack watched his son fight for self control. The kid mopped his face with the Giants hat, then with his sleeve. “Why didn’t we go to the zoo like you said we would?”

“Jackie, I already told you. Grandma called and said that it was closed. She read it in this morning’s paper. They’re doing construction, some kind of renovations. It’ll be open again next week.”

“That’s not true.”

“Yes it is. I’m telling you,” Jack readied for another outburst. “Now don’t use that language again. I’ll give you a pass, this one time, but don’t do it again. Understand?”

“Charlie’s mom and dad are taking him there, too. Today. They’re going today to see the monkeys and everything.”

“Who the hell is Charlie?”

“He’s in my class.”

Jack stared out into the empty parking lot. He could feel the kid looking up at him; he could hear his erratic breathing and sniffing. What the fuck was he going to say? He turned toward his son. Fuck it. He was the father, wasn’t he? When did his dad ever have to explain himself? But he had Mom, not this fucking Angie.

“Okay, Jackie. You’re right.” Jack took a deep breath and looked the kid smack in his swollen eyes. “The zoo isn’t closed. But something happened, something important at my work. I’m not supposed to talk about that kind of stuff. Could be dangerous, you know? I had to lie, Buddy.”

Little Jackie scowled at his father with disbelief: nose scrunched, eyebrows furrowed. “Can we go home now?” he said.

“You shouldn’t have spoken to me like that, Jackie.”

“Can we please go home?”

“Let’s just go to the damn zoo. I’ll handle that other stuff later. What can they do to me, really? I’m the big-cheese down there. I should have kept my phone off like other guys do on their days off. We’re going, all right?”

“I don’t want to anymore.”

“We’re going to the zoo to see the monkeys. We don’t want you to look stupid when Charlie comes bragging on Monday. Right? That’s the end of it. It’ll be fun. We’ll forget about this whole thing.”

“Whatever,” Jackie said.

“It’s not far from here, anyways. Afterwards, I’ll take you to South Philly for the best cheese steak in the world. That was going to be your surprise. But maybe you’re getting too old for silly surprises.”

“I don’t care.”

“Remember, Buddy, I never punched you. Don’t go telling your mother that. You don’t even have to say I slapped you. Guys never tell women everything. That’s part of being a man. Even your granddad and Uncle Al will tell you that.”

They stayed at the zoo for only an hour and a half, never running into Charlie and his parents. Jack started wondering if the kid had made the whole story up. It gave him a weird sense of pride to think he had.

Jack didn’t call Melissa Baker back until the next day. She had wanted to meet at the Bridgeton Zoo instead of the Philadelphia Zoo. Her daughter was sick, and going to Philly was simply too much of an ordeal. Jack didn’t fuck her again until after he took her and her daughter to Little Mermaid on Ice. The price you pay for standing a woman up on a Sunday afternoon.

Angie never mentioned anything about the parking lot episode. God knows she would have if she knew. Jack had never been prouder of his son. Even with that woman for a mother, it looked like Little Jackie would turn out all right.

Stuck

Vince has Anthony, his oldest son, in the truck with him and they're driving down Buckshutem Road, past the Case International that's stuck in the mud. The International is no piss-ant tractor, no lawnmower on steroids. It's a farmer's tractor: tires so heavy that changing one requires a forklift, a chain, and two or three men. The cab is accessible only by the three-step ladder that's welded to the frame, and only those with good arms and legs are able to hoist themselves into the canvas seat. This is a tractor summoned to pull weak machines out of bad decisions. Yet here it is, caked with mud, rutted two feet deep in the middle of an open field.

The boy (a young man really, in his twenties, graduated Rutgers) puts both hands on the dash, which is coated in dust, and leans forward to get a better look. This is a decent-looking kid, takes after his old man, and has the balls to sport khaki pants and a v-neck sweater on a visit to the farm. "What the hell happened?" he says.

Vince is the one who got the International stuck in the mud. And he's still pissed about looking like an asshole to the farmers in Hopewell, the guys driving past the scene in their new Ford pickup trucks, drinking coffee from thermoses, steering with one hand. Vince was in the field before dawn again—the windows of the labor camp still dark—trying to pass the bush hog over the dead vines of butternut squash plants, trying to prove to anyone taking notice that he runs the farm; that it doesn't run him.

"You did that?" Anthony says.

Vince pulls off the road and looks at the International, which sits lopsided in the field, rear tires sunk much deeper than he remembers. "That son of a bitch," Vince says,

more to himself than to Anthony. He has on the same navy coveralls he wears every day: grease stained, frayed corduroy collar, trailing the hint of diesel fuel wherever he goes.

“You really did a job on that thing,” Anthony says.

“I’ve had enough of this guy’s shit,” Vince says.

Vince flings the door open and storms outside. He stands atop the embankment, only a stumble away from being in the irrigation ditch that runs the perimeter of the field. Vince talks with his hands. “That son of a bitch came out here this morning. Ricardo came out here, Anthony. He got in that tractor and tried to pull it out. Just look what this asshole has done.”

“Calm down, Dad. I can’t handle a heart attack today.” Anthony’s stretched across the bench seat, smiling, sending his voice out the open driver’s side door. Vince doesn’t move. His back is to the truck, and his hair looks more salt than pepper in the mid-morning sun. “C’mon, Dad,” Anthony hollers. “There’s nothing you can about it do right this second.”

Vince walks back to the truck without saying anything. His mind is made up. Enough is enough with this goddamn Ricardo. After getting behind the wheel and closing his door, he turns to Anthony. “What are you looking at?” he says. Anthony pokes an elbow out his window and watches a tractor-trailer barrel down the road. Vince puts the truck in drive. Out in the field, behind the International, a flock of snow geese lifts and falls against a backdrop of woods, orchard, and rolling land.

Vince hasn’t abandoned a piece of equipment like this in twenty-two seasons. It last happened when he was young and skinny and working atop his father’s rusty Oliver

tractor. He was prepping a field for cucumbers, under a high-angled South Jersey sun, when he got the cut-harrow wedged between two spindly pine trees. It was mid-July, and when Vince Sr. showed up and saw his boy leaning against the fender of the half-buried Oliver, he didn't have much to say. The tractor had to be disconnected, the cut-harrow towed into open space. "How stupid can you be, boy?" the old man said, shaking his head from inside the pickup. His hair was black and coarse, and some fell out from under a tattered fedora.

"I thought I could clear it," Vince said.

"Well you was wrong. Now you have to fuck around with this mess before you can finish what you started," and the old man, in that beat-up Ford pickup of his, drove away leaving a cloud of dust in his wake. Young Vince walked from the field to the shop, and on his trip back to the tractor, with his shirt drenched with sweat, he lugged a twelve-foot chain in one arm and a stack of wooden blocks in the other.

Vince and Anthony continue down the road toward the shop, where Ricardo is supposed to be changing the points on the moldboard plow. Ricardo isn't your everyday farm hand. He's what you'd call a key man—a guy with keys to the shop and gas tank, who lives, rent free, in a bungalow out back of the orchard. Ricardo has been on Vince's farm for five seasons, got hired two years before they found Vince's father dead in his pickup, hunched over the steering wheel, newspaper spread across the dash.

Vince drives past the old farmhouse and turns down the dirt road leading to the office and packinghouse. This is the homestead where Anthony, Michael, and Joseph were raised. The house still looks the way it always has, albeit the white paint is chipping

and a few of its green shutters are missing. The mini-van in the driveway, with its Pennsylvania license plates, belongs to the Mexican family who now rent it from Vince. “You ever have to go inside the house, Dad?” Anthony says. “I don’t know how long it’s been since I have.”

“What would you want to go in there for?”

“I don’t know. Didn’t say I did.”

“Only when I have to.”

“Mom says she might have left some things in the attic, you know.”

“If she did, whatever it was is gone now. How is she? How is your mother?”

“Ok,” Anthony says. “Ok. I guess.”

They drive past the office, which is nothing more than a cinderblock room annexed to the two cold storages towering behind it. The gravel yard soon becomes a dirt road that hugs the peach orchard and wraps around the complex. The packinghouse is an amalgamation of aluminum, tin sheeting, I-beams and concrete—a combo of pole barns and panel buildings pieced together over the years.

In front of the labor camp are rows of equipment, farm implements left in plain view to discourage thieves and iron scavengers from coming on the farm. The moldboard plow is connected to that old John Deere tractor. The plow’s blades hang off the ground. Stacks of wood blocks are wedged under the frame, just in case the hydraulic system fails. There’s no sign of Ricardo. Vince noses the truck alongside the plow. On the ground, just outside Vince’s window, some tools are strewn across a piece of cardboard. “See what I’m saying about this guy,” Vince says. “Never where he’s supposed to be. Always fucking around.”

“If you hate him this much, why’ve you let him stay for so long?”

“I’m by myself out here you know.”

“Why don’t you put an ad in the paper?”

“You guys really have no idea.”

When Ricardo first showed up on the farm, Vince was standing at the squash machine’s conveyor belt, fitting butternut into boxes. Vince Sr. stood beside him, dressed like the old *cumpà* he was: fedora, dress shirt, cotton gloves to protect his soft hands. They rarely spoke to one another while working, these two partners, always conscientious that they provided a living example of what was to be expected from their men. A few guys worked alongside them, four to be exact, and each maintained a station along the line: one man operating the bin dumper, one checking for decay, one packing next to Vince Sr., another stacking boxes onto pallets.

When Ricardo walked up to the line, he garnered furtive glances from the men but not the slightest reaction from the two farmers. He stood, hands folded at his waist, twenty minutes before Vince gestured for him to come over. Back then, Ricardo stood up straight and didn’t have the gut he does today. He tucked his shirt in, was clean shaven, seemed proud of himself and what he could offer the farm.

Vince had never been the type of man to put much stock into impressions or promises, but Ricardo knew just the right amount of English, had a firm handshake, and claimed to have worked for many other growers in South Jersey, even a vintner out in Napa, California. They talked for some time, Vince packing, making eye contact only

when the line lightened up. Ricardo even stacked boxes when the stacker got overwhelmed. This is what impressed Vince's father, and just like that, Ricardo had his job on the farm.

They wait by the plow for what Vince feels is a very long time. The day is shaping up nicely, a warm February morning that hints to the coming of spring and the start of another harvest season. They drive around the equipment yard: past the cut-harrows, sprayers, piles of aluminum irrigation pipe; the chisel plow, old moldboard plow, retired hydrocooler, and stacks of tractor tires; past Vince's old pickup, past his father's, past the six harvest tractors that need to be overhauled, and the bin trailers sitting empty in the weeds.

They pull up to the labor camp. This is a camp like all others: cinderblock frame, heavy screen doors, an oil tank out front flanked with Rubbermaid trashcans. The first thing Vince notices is the mess on the ground. Old Milwaukee cans, crumpled and crushed, overflowing from the trash into the yard. Empty twelve-packs littering the grass around the weeping willow tree. Paper bags and old sneakers thrown on the couch where the men sit and drink in jeans and wife-beaters. He blows the horn. "Look how they keep this place," he says.

"I thought Ricardo lived out in the bungalow," Anthony says.

Ricardo, wearing a thick winter coat, knock-off Wolverine boots, and loose-fitting knit cap, walks out the screen door that leads to the kitchen. The door slams behind him, sending flecks of exterior paint onto the mat by his feet. He's holding a half-eaten apple, and there's not an ounce of hurry in his step. After seeing Anthony in the truck, Ricardo

cracks a tight-lipped smile. “Anthony,” he says. “How you doing, amigo?” Vince has both hands on the wheel, his shoulders are tense, and he’s looking over the dash. “Baño, Mr. Vince,” Ricardo says.

“Listen,” Vince says.

“What happened with the International? You get stuck in a hole?”

“Call Fabian and disconnect the plow from the John Deere,” Vince says. “Get a long chain and meet me by the office.”

Ricardo puts a hand over his eyes and peers over the hood of the truck. You can see the International from the camp. “Maybe no, Mr. Vince. The John Deere no have the power.”

“Just do what I say, Ricardo. Meet me by the office, and tell these guys to clean up around here. They’re living like shit.”

There was a time when everyone pitched in on the farm. When the boys were in school; when Vince’s father still cooked polenta at noon; when Vince’s wife, Elizabeth, ran her little fruit stand in the side yard. Vince thinks back to these days often, now that he’s alone—in his office before dozing off, on the evening drive home, when in the supermarket deciding what to cook for dinner.

“Is all that stuff still up in the barn?” Anthony asks. They’re headed to the packinghouse, where Vince wants to count the bins of squash still left to sell. They pull alongside the Morton building. Its tin-panel walls have lost the luster they had when new.

Anthony gets out of the truck and fishes a pack of Marlboros from his pants pocket. The sky is becoming overcast and it feels like rain is on the way.

“Huh, Dad?” Anthony says. “Is all that stuff still up there?”

“Yeah,” Vince says. “It’s up there. But if your mom left things in the attic, they won’t be in with that shit.”

“Can I go up and look around?”

“Do want you want.”

Anthony strolls away smoking a cigarette, leaving Vince, pen and notebook in hand, to walk the wide aisle of the aluminum-panel barn. Bins of butternut are stacked against the two long walls. Industrial ceiling fans circulate air. He counts the bins: four high, six deep, eleven rows. That’s two-hundred-sixty-four eighteen-bushel bins. He does the math: four-thousand-seven hundred-fifty-two bushels. Say he throws away ten percent: that leaves around forty-two hundred bushels. Each box is one bushel. If the market picks up to say ten dollars a box, he’ll take in just over forty grand. Forty thousand dollars could get the farm to harvest season.

This fact almost makes Vince smile, but reality grabs him by the face: Honduras has been flooding the market since October. Butternut isn’t moving at all. Lou, Vince’s produce broker in Philly, hasn’t put an order in for almost a week and a half.

Vince is standing outside now, annoyed at how Ricardo stacked the bins. The rows are crooked, the spaces between columns much wider than necessary. In the corner of the concrete slab, Vince counts twenty-two bins of culled butternut squash. There’s a puddle of juice and stems at the base of the heap. It’s running into the yard, pooling around the tire of a bin trailer, which has been parked there for almost two weeks. Vince

stares at the scene and rubs his temples. Maybe he should figure twenty percent trash instead of ten?

When Elizabeth left she did it her own way—without taking a thing other than photo albums and clothes. Vince was in Hershey, Pa, at the annual growers' meeting, earning professional credits for his pesticide applicator's license. He and Elizabeth, like most farmers and their wives, normally used this event as a modest vacation. It gave them an excuse to go out for drinks and to eat at fifty-dollar restaurants. Hilton sex was some of the best Vince ever had. When Elizabeth said she didn't want to go, that she wanted to stay with the boys instead, Vince was surprised but thought little of it. If not for his license, he'd have stayed home as well—to hell with her if she didn't want to keep him company.

But when he got back, the house was dark save for a single bulb on the porch, and Vince had a hunch, even before turning down his gravel driveway, that she had finally taken the kids and left for good. There was no shit-storm that precipitated her departure. Just years of threats realized with one swift kick.

Vince stood there, in the dark kitchen, with the back door open at his heels. He smelled her potpourri, like he always had; but there was no TV blasting in the living room; no stereo coming from upstairs; no fighting; no yelling, and Vince never in his life knew a quiet house. Light from the porch poured over the linoleum floor. The only thing Vince heard was his own breathing and the sound of the heater tripping on in the basement.

Vince waited a month before clearing everything out of the house. He used a crew of eight men to haul all his family's belongings down the steps and into the barn. He had the men fill seventeen bins full of clothes and knickknacks and pictures and books. They carried dressers, drawers still full, outside the house. The men dropped Elizabeth's piano and broke its two front legs. They took everything but a reclining chair, a table to set the TV on, and the boys' three beds. Vince had them take his and Elizabeth's mattress out back, where he burned it to springs drinking Jack Daniels from the bottle.

Vince had the men put it all on the second floor of the barn. They used a forklift to stack the bins in a corner. As the years passed, dust collected under the cobwebs and mice made nests that were never disturbed. Once, Vince found himself up there, surprised at how little space twenty years of memories actually took up.

Vince walks to the office, stands over his desk, looks out the tinted window to the dormant orchard across the yard. It feels like winter again. Clouds from the north have blocked the sun, and the breeze has a bite that turns ears red and tender. Vince checks the messages. Lou hasn't called. He gets on the phone, but the secretary sends him to voicemail. If the squash doesn't start moving, Vince will be out of money by March. He won't be able to finish pruning without a loan from Lou's commission house. Vince starts to feel sick and slumps into his chair. He flips on the space-heater and closes his eyes.

Vince's father used to stop in front of the camp in the morning. He'd blow the horn, and Ricardo would sprint into the bed of the truck. They'd go to the shop to get the chainsaw, gas can, files, and oil. The old man would bring coffee and pepper and egg sandwiches, wrapped in foil, to the field. He'd circle each tree, bundled like a Bolshevik, tapping branches with the end of a stick. Ricardo would follow his lead until four in the afternoon, every day except Sunday.

Vince hears footsteps outside the door and lifts his head just high enough to see Anthony walking over. Anthony flounces through the bookkeeper's side of the office and sits in a chair by the magazine rack. Vince hears him thumbing through a magazine but he doesn't move.

The longer Anthony sits there, the more in tune Vince gets with the sounds and smells of the office: the bit of hoagie in the garbage, wrapped in oily butcher paper; the wind funneling through the gaps around the air-conditioner. Vince doesn't open his eyes; he wants Anthony to think he's asleep. The last thing he wants to talk about is what's stored in the barn. They sit like this for a very long time. Soon, the only thing Vince hears is Anthony's shallow breathing. He feels like he's married to Elizabeth again and lying next to her in bed.

Vince springs from his chair when he hears the John Deere coming up the drive. He turns around, grabs his cap off the desk calendar and looks out the window. "You really going to fire Ricardo today?" Anthony says.

Vince puts on the cap, checks his reflection in the tinted glass and tugs on the brim. “Yeah,” he says. “Maybe it’s time for you to get going? Won’t be pretty out there.”

“I think I’ll go with you,” Anthony says.

“Suit yourself,” Vince says.

“Unless you don’t want me to come.”

“You’ll need some boots,” Vince says. “Look in the closet.”

The sun bursts through cracks in the overcast as bands of clouds push by overhead. Ricardo parks the John Deere in front of the office, and when Vince and Anthony come outside, he spits on the ground before pointing in the direction of the squash field. Vince nods, uses his hand to send him that way. He and Anthony get in the truck and follow Ricardo around the packinghouse.

Standing next to the bins of rotten squash is Fabian, a tractor driver from last harvest season, who managed to weasel his way into a full-time job. His cap is battered, and underneath his unzipped coat, he wears a uniform top with the name Harold embroidered on the chest pocket. Fabian stands just off the concrete like a man waiting for a bus. He uses both hands to keep the chain coiled and off the ground. Vince pulls over, while Ricardo continues on, and gestures for Fabian to get in the back of the truck.

The pickup truck bounces along the squash field’s access road, and it takes them a long time to get through the field. Deer forage at the timberline, and Vince and Anthony both turn to watch as the herd breaks for the woods. “Why didn’t Mom ever come for that stuff?” Anthony says.

“Why don’t you ask her?” Vince says.

“It’s like a museum up there. Made we want to cry.”

“One day I’ll need that space. So you guys better take what you want before I burn it with the rest of the junk that’s around here.”

“You can’t do that.”

“Who says?”

Ricardo pulls the John Deere in front of the International. Vince parks the truck on the dirt road, a good walk from where they need to be. “All right,” Vince says. “I don’t know if this is going to work. But I want this asshole to admit what he did this morning.”

They start the trek across the field, walking over last season’s squash vines, which are trampled and withered, lost amid the weeds. Vince turns around and Anthony and Fabian stop in their tracks, eyes wide and fixed on him. “You guys didn’t get the shovel from in back of the truck. Anthony, run back there and get it, please.”

Elizabeth came over soon after hearing about the barn. Vince was pruning with hand shears, his truck parked on the side of the road. He saw her pull up, but waited until she blew the horn before walking out of the field. She sat in her Explorer, madder than hell; Vince could tell by her eyes that she had been crying. Her hair was done up and so was her face. He didn’t recognize the floral print blouse or earrings. “What the fuck?” she said. “How could you do such a thing?”

“How could you?”

“I wanted the house to be nice for the boys.”

“It is nice.”

“You ruined it.”

“You did.”

“I’m getting a lawyer, Vince.”

“What the hell has happened to you?”

Vince and Elizabeth never divorced. For almost eight years, they’ve kept separate homes, and Vince mails her a check for three-hundred-fifty dollars every Wednesday. Her name is still on the deed to the farm; she’s still the beneficiary on Vince’s whole life policy; she still gets health insurance from Vince’s group HMO. Every time the mail lady brings a certified letter, Vince thinks it’s the day Elizabeth has finally gone through with it.

The International looks worse up close than it does from the road. The rear window is coated with mud. So are the doors and step ladder. There are even clumps of it on the radio antenna. Vince walks to the rear of the tractor, where the chopper is wedged behind a mound of earth. Ricardo and Fabian are connecting the chain, and Anthony stands off to the side leaning against the shovel.

Vince walks toward the front of the International and calls Ricardo. Ricardo’s hands are grey from handling the chain. He walks over. Fabian watches from behind the idling John Deere. “Why’d you touch this tractor this morning?” Vince says. “Did I tell you to touch this tractor?”

“What, Mr. Vince?”

“You did. You came out here and tried to drive this machine out. You thought you could do it. You spun those tires, wanted to show me how to drive.”

“No, Mr. Vince. I no.” Ricardo shakes his head, shows his stained, calloused palms. “I no touch nothing this morning. Nothing, Mr. Vince.”

“You’re done, Ricardo. I’ve had it. I want you off my farm.”

“But—”

“I want you off my farm. Understand? Get out of that house. Go find another job.”

Ricardo looks at Anthony, who’s standing there in rubber boots that reach up to his knees. He’s no longer holding the shovel and is standing with his arms folded in front of his chest. Anthony steps away as Ricardo gets closer. Ricardo’s boots clomp against the ground, sending flocs of mud in the air as he walks.

“Anthony?” Ricardo says. “What happened?”

Vince follows Ricardo, yelling as they trudge through the field. He hollers with his hands. “What do you think he’s going to do? I’m the boss around here. I’m the one who—”

Vince trips over the shovel, which is lying flat in the vines. He falls on his hands and knees. “God—goddamn it,” he says to the ground beneath his chest. Vince peers over his shoulder and sees the shovel by his feet. “Just get the hell out of here.”

Anthony walks to his father and puts a hand on his shoulder. “C’mom, Dad,” he says.

“Go ahead, Anthony. Everybody. Just leave me alone—”

“C’mom. I’ll help you up.”

Vince pulls himself off the ground and sees Ricardo walking out of the field. Fabian is leaning against one of the John Deere's fenders. Vince brushes himself off, runs a hand through his hair. "Fabian, take that tractor home."

"But?" Anthony says. "What about the International?"

"Who said to put that shovel there?" Vince says. "You kids really are good for shit around this place."

Anthony picks up the shovel and carries it out of the field, almost tripping more than once in his father's rubber boots. Fabian does a u-turn with the John Deere, leaving the chain connected to the International's front axle. Vince's knees are caked with mud. The palms of his hands crusty and sore. On the walk to his truck, he sinks his hands deep into the pockets of his coveralls and realizes that the key to the International has been with him all day.

A Place in the Country

I flipped out after seeing the yellow envelope. Vince was supposed to have paid the electric bill Tuesday. I put the rest of the mail on the kitchen counter and went out on the porch, where he was smoking a cigarette and having coffee.

“What happened, Vince?” I said, holding crumpled bill and envelope in front of his face.

“What’s that? You know...they said it’s getting into the fifties later.”

“What do want—the baby to fucking freeze to death?”

“What are you talking about? What is that?”

“Why didn’t you pay the electric?”

“Calm down, Elizabeth,” he said. “I got something going on. The electric is good until Tuesday.”

“Where’s the money?”

“You think I never been here before? Relax. We got until Tuesday I’m telling you. Read the goddamn thing.”

“I don’t care, Vince. Where’s the money I gave you? I’m not playing.”

Vince put his cigarette out in the ashtray, and while watching the smoke dwindle, said, “I had to use that money, hon.”

“What?”

“Just listen. Don’t go goddamn crazy now. I got in on something with my cousin Frankie. It’s only a couple hundred dollars now. Remember that.”

I don't know why I stood there listening to Vince go on about that loser cousin of his. Frankie sold pot over in Bridgeton. He sold it right from his mother's basement. Thirty years old and living in his mother's basement! People would come and go all day and night. So I knew what was going on when Vince mentioned Frankie's name. I still don't understand why I didn't just leave Vince outside, maybe even have locked him out in the cold. If I had locked him out, Vince would've probably busted the goddamn sliding door. He might've even thrown his chair through it. Vince can get crazy when he's pissed, and we lived out in the country then, way out in east Vineland, where there's nothing but vegetable farms. They did whatever they wanted out there.

"They're going to cut electric off," I said.

"Not until Tuesday, I just told you."

"When are you seeing him?"

"Later. When he comes by."

"Why's he got to come here?"

"He just has too, Elizabeth. He's my first cousin. Don't forget."

"You really want him bringing that shit into your little baby's house?"

"Stop being a bitch about this. C'mon now. What's he bringing that's so fucking bad? Is money bad? Is that what you're saying?"

I didn't say anything when Vince said that. We were out of money. I had been working for that law firm downtown: *Gruccio and Finch*, answering the phones and filing billing statements, but I didn't expect another check until the next Thursday. The rent didn't come out of the account yet. Vince was in between jobs. This was back when he drove a truck, when his CDL was clean. We were still waiting for his first

unemployment check. Vince lit another cigarette and started back on his coffee. I called him an asshole and went inside to check on the baby.

FRANKIE showed up late in the afternoon. Vince was in the bathroom when the doorbell rang; I was in the kitchen straightening up. I carried the baby with me when I answered the door. Frankie had some guy with him, some big black guy with a gold tooth; he stood behind Frankie and looked me dead in the eye. I got the feeling they stopped talking when they heard the lock turning.

When I opened the door, Frankie smiled like politicians do. Everything about Frankie smells like bullshit. When he smiles it makes you not trust him. When he whines or bitches, it feels like he's trying to convince you of something. He never comes across as being real. I've never known what to make of Frankie. That's the main reason I never liked him. Frankie had on a pair of wire rimmed glasses and an argyle sweater, but a piece of shit is a piece of shit, even if it's in a bed of flowers. When I saw Frankie dressed like a nice white boy I got the feeling he was doing something very illegal. The whole thing made me pissed and scared.

"Who the hell are you supposed to be?" I said.

"How you been, Liz?" he said.

"Come on," I said. "Who are you?" I said to the other guy.

"This is Rakim," Frankie said. Rakim stopped and gave the baby his meaty pinky to hold.

"That's a good looking baby," Rakim said. "I can see Vince in the eyes."

"That's what people say. He's inside. How do you know Vince, Rakim?"

“Shit, I’ve known that cat since high school.”

“Al lright, Rakim. Go ahead inside. I can hear Vince in the kitchen. I have to go out for a minute.”

“I’m telling you: that’s a damn good looking baby. You’re real lucky. I was a good looking baby myself.”

“That’s good to know, Rakim. Now can you get the fuck out of my way?”

“Damn, girl. I’m just making conversation.”

I TOOK the baby with me outside. The yard was brown with fallen leaves; they crunched when I walked, and I’d kick some into the air to make the baby laugh. It was a real nice day, one of those weird winter days that feel more like April than December. The baby didn’t have a coat on, but I wanted to see what the weather was like. I was thinking maybe I’d take the baby to Giampetro Park later—throw some bread at the geese while Vince did his dumb shit with Frankie and Rakim. I held the baby close to my chest to keep him warm.

We were renting a house back off Chestnut Ave. It was a nice little house: white wood siding and shutters on the windows. We even had a screened in back porch. This was the first house I had ever lived in. I wasn’t used to not having neighbors. I grew up in a row house. We didn’t have porches on 12th street, only stoops; my grandmother used to take care of her three sidewalk squares like people take care of their lawns. It’s funny, but when Vince first moved me to the country, I couldn’t sleep at night without the TV on. But South Philly has changed so much; that’s no place to raise a kid today.

We didn't always live out the country. Before getting that place, Vince and I rented an apartment in Brewster Gardens, in downtown Vineland. That was more what I was used to. It was a tiny place, though: a one bedroom shit-hole with roaches under the fridge and walls so thin you could hear the old man above us watching porno at night. I had it better than that back on 12th street, but I didn't complain too much, because I was stupid in love with Vince then. When I got pregnant, Vince started talking about the future and about doing what's right. I had never seen him like that before. He took his CDL and passed first try. He stopped selling coke almost overnight. Then his dad got him a job at Donio's, that big produce broker across the street from the auction block. After his first check we got our little place out in the country.

I really grew to love that little house. We had a front yard, with a planter by the front steps and mulch beds around the trees. There were trees all over the place. I had never seen leaves turn color like I did that year: reds and yellows and oranges, all different shades, just hanging on those branches until a strong wind came and took them off. I'd sit on the porch sometimes and just watch the leaves fall. Those were the times I was most grateful to Vince. I even bought one of those nature encyclopedias from that Borders over by the mall. I started looking up the trees in our yard. Now I know what an Elm looks like, a birch, an oak. I'm going teach these things to the kid when he gets older.

RAKIM was sitting in my chair, and Frankie was on the couch next to Vince. There was a brick of weed on the coffee table. Each of them had a chunk of it, and they

were ripping it apart, making piles in front of them. I remember turning the baby's head into my neck when I first walked in. I didn't want him even seeing that kind of shit.

I didn't say anything to them at first. And they didn't say anything to me. The baby was being good so I put him in his chair in our bedroom. I was hot. Fuming. The baby went down and started to fuss. I changed a shitty diaper and rocked him to sleep. I was so fucking mad at Vince.

The piles had gotten bigger. I had heard Frankie whispering when I was in the bedroom. I walked in front of TV and turned it off. Vince would watch Sports Center all morning when he was home. They didn't say anything when I turned the TV off. Frankie looked down at the pile of weed in front of him. Rakim looked at Vince. Vince looked at me.

"I want this shit out of my house," I told Vince.

"Calm down, Elizabeth. We'll be out of here soon."

"Fuck you, Vince. Fuck all of you." I looked over at Rakim, who was now looking up at me, and then over to Frankie, who was still looking down at his pile. To Rakim I said, "I want you motherfuckers out of my house." I kicked Frankie's thigh, just hard enough to make him spring back in the sofa. "Right now! You here me—"

Vince jumped up and came around the table like a maniac. I was scared. Vince had never hit me, but I had been hit before; and they always charged at you before it happened. "Elizabeth!" Vince grabs my arm and pulls me away from the TV. The asshole drags me into the bedroom and starts in on me, not worrying at all about bothering the baby. "Listen," he said. The bedroom door was closed. Vince wanted this kept private. "Listen...half of that shit out there is mine."

“What do you think I am? A fucking idiot? You only put in two hundred and twenty dollars. You forget where I’m from, Vince. I’m not one of your dumb country bitches.” The baby started acting up. I went and got him from his little chair and sat on the edge of the bed. Vince was by the window, looking out onto the side lawn.

“Honey, I used the rent money to go in big on this.”

I didn’t know what to say. I knew he was telling the truth, and I didn’t know what to say.

“I had to do it, Elizabeth.”

“You went to the bank and took the fucking rent money out?” The baby was nuzzling my breast, but I was so disgusted with Vince that I didn’t want him around when the baby ate.

“This is big time,” I said, rubbing the back of the baby’s head. I didn’t feel like yelling. I was already cleaning my room back at my mom’s house on 12th street. Vince came over and knelt in between my legs. He was looking up at me. I got the same feeling I get when Frankie smiles. “No,” I said. “Get away from me, Vince.”

“Baby,” he said. “Please. We’re not getting kicked out of here—”

“You know how much I love this place, Vince.”

“I know—”

“No. You didn’t really do that? Did you? How could you play with our rent money? That’s all we have. I could get the two hundred from my mom. But where—”

“Just wait—”

“—you know how much I love it here.”

“That’s why I’m doing this,” he said. “I’m doing this for us.”

“Fuck you,” I said, pulling the baby tight against my chest.

“When you got pregnant I said I’d stop it with the coke. And I did. I said I’d get a job. I passed my test. I’d be working right now if they didn’t lay me off. You know that, Elizabeth. What the fuck am I supposed to do?” He was pacing at the foot of the bed now.

“Our rent money, Vince. I had already postdated the check.”

“The check won’t bounce. I promise.”

“I don’t believe you. I can’t trust you anymore.”

I got up and headed for the bathroom. Vince grabbed my shoulder, just firm enough to remind me of his strength. “The check will clear. I’m looking at tripling our money. This is weed. It’s not coke. I’m still keeping my promise.”

“You’re a thirty year old drug dealer. I’ll never take this boy to see you in jail, Vince. This boy won’t know you.”

“Stop being so dramatic. This is weed. Nobody goes to jail for selling weed.”

“Do you know how stupid you sound?”

“We need this, Elizabeth. The money will be in the bank Monday morning. Today’s Saturday. That money won’t come out until four o’clock—”

“I’m leaving.”

“No you’re not.”

“I’m taking the baby to the park, Vince. Let go of me. I can’t believe you’d bring that shit, and those assholes, into the house where your wife and baby sleep. I can’t believe you’d let that asshole bring just anybody into our house.”

“What do you mean? Rakim? I’ve known that dude for years. Rakim’s good people, Elizabeth. You’ve even met him before. Back when we lived at Brewster Gardens.”

“You’re thinking about one of your other bitches.”

“No, you have. I remember—”

“I got to get the baby ready.”

“You’re just going to the park?”

“Where else am I going to go?”

“Don’t go to Philly, Elizabeth. Look me in the eye and promise you’re just taking the baby to the park.”

“I’m just going to the park, Vince. But if that check bounces—”

“Use my car, then.”

“Why?”

“I need yours. My inspection sticker is expired, and I don’t want to take a chance.”

“I really hate you right now, Vince.”

“Just take my car. Go to the park. I’ll wrap things up here and get these guys out the house. You’re right. I don’t want you two around any of this. Please, just go. But don’t start that leaving me shit again. I’m doing this for us. Think about it: It’d be a lot easier for me if I just sat around on my ass like a bum.”

“The baby’s hungry,” I said. Vince rubbed the baby’s head and kissed him.

“You guys are all I have, Elizabeth. I love you. My checks will be coming in soon, and we won’t have anything to worry about. You’ll be glad when we have this money. Watch and see.”

GIAMPETRO PARK was only a ten minute drive from our house. It wasn’t really much of park. There was a pond and benches and a little playground with a swing and sand, but those who went there stayed in their cars most of time, smoking joints, or in the summer, eating custard from the little stand up the street. I had the baby in his stroller; he was bundled up warm and snug. It was really nice out, but you could feel the cold night just waiting to move in. I took the kid down the bike trail, around the pond and through the woods. All I could think about was Vince. I just couldn’t believe what he did.

After walking, I parked the stroller by a bench. I got the baby and sat him in my lap. He had just started laughing and smiling at things around that time. So I wanted him to see the geese. There were these beautiful Canadian snow geese that hung around the park, clamoring about in groups, chasing bits of bread or handfuls of popcorn—whatever people tossed out their car windows. I had brought a few slices with me, and I started throwing bits of bread down by the pond. But the geese didn’t come. They were over by the cars, just bustling around. I kept trying to get their attention. The baby started fussing. I ended up putting the bread away and bouncing the baby on my lap.

All I could think about was Vince. There was really no way I could go back to 12th street. I think Vince knew I wouldn’t go. I had that job at the law firm, and we had the baby. And all the work I put into that house. I hung pictures on the walls and vacuumed the carpet every day when I got home from work. I had even made Vince stop

at a farmer's market to get me Indian corn to hang on the front door and dried corn stalks to tie on the mailbox post. There were pillows on the couches and the place always smelled so nice: like cinnamon or lavender, depending on what Yankee candle I decided to light. I had started cooking, too. Me. I was learning to cook. My mom and I started talking again, like we used to when I was a kid. We talked about being wives and about having husbands. She told me how to make potpie and chicken cacciatore. She was always telling me how proud she was, how she had always wanted a little place in the country, how good we were making it for our baby. She was planning to come down at Christmas; my dad said he was looking forward to some real apple cider.

And the baby's room, my god: How could I take my baby from that beautiful blue room, with the quilts on the walls, and the stuffed animals in the corners? The baby had that beautiful room just waiting for him to be old enough to use it. Vince had done that for him. He went to Home Depot seven or eight times when he was painting it blue. I loved Vince so much that day. We had just moved in. There were boxes scattered everywhere, still taped shut; and all Vince wanted to do was paint the baby's room and put the crib together. I couldn't imagine sticking the baby in the corner of my old bedroom on 12th street. That room was so dingy and small. I'd have to get help moving the dresser. All my cousins would start talking. And it's not like I'd stay away for good. Vince and I would eventually get back together, but everybody would keep talking about us having problems. My entire family would turn on Vince. Nothing would ever be the same. Plus, how could I get the crib? Vince would never let me just walk out the house with it, not without one hell of a fight. I guess I could have called the cops. But who would have the guts to call the cops on Vince?

Sitting there on that bench, with the pond shimmering in the cold winter sun, I worried. The baby looked tired. He was getting cranky. I knew I would have to go home soon. It was starting to get chilly, so I wrapped the baby in a blanket. The sun was starting to go down. I just wanted that shit out of the house. The longer I sat there, the less mad I was at Vince. I knew he'd never let us get evicted. That was the thing about Vince: When he got mad, people did what he wanted. I knew he'd get that money back, and part of me actually started looking forward to the extra two grand he said he would make.

THEY were there when I got home. Vince was in his La-Z-Boy with a beer in his lap. Rakim and Frankie were on the couch. They were watching football. As soon as I walked in, Vince got up. He was drunk. I didn't say anything to Frankie or Rakim; neither looked away from the TV screen. There were empty Heineken bottles and a half empty fifth of Hennessy on the coffee table. They were all drunk. Vince smiled and followed me into our bedroom. Vince knows he's cute and shows it when he's been drinking. He beat me to the light switch, still smiling, standing there against the wall with his hands in his pockets.

"Check this out," he said. Vince pulled a wad of cash from his pocket and held it in my face.

"That's good," I said. "Can you please move? The baby has a dirty diaper."

"Let me change him," Vince said. He reached for the baby, but I pulled back.

"You're drunk, Vince."

“No. I’m not.” His breath smelled like shit. I could smell burnt weed on his fingers. “Let me see my son. That’s my little boy, Elizabeth. You don’t know how much I love that baby.”

“Vince, please, just back up.”

“I made fifteen hundred dollars today, Elizabeth. And there’s a lot more coming.” Vince started thumbing through the wad of money. He fanned it underneath his nose. “Mmmm...remember who you married, girl.”

I had the baby on the bed. He was naked, lying on a baby-blanket. Vince came and sat next to us. He tickled the baby’s belly with his finger. “You’re not still mad?” he said.

“No.” He stood up.

“Yes you are. Look at this. Just look.” Vince threw the wad of cash onto the unmade bed. He spread it over the mattress, breathing hard, smelling like a degenerate.

“How can you still be mad,” he said.

“I’m not mad,” I said.

“The fuck if you aren’t. What is it? Those guys out there? They’re leaving soon as the game is over. It’s the fucking fourth quarter. Frankie’s got money on Texas A&M.”

“What about you? How much did you bet?”

“Nothing, you know I don’t do that shit anymore.” The baby was dressed. I carried him to the bassinette and put him down.

“I don’t believe you.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Elizabeth. I had to lie. You never would have went for it. Everything turned out fine. Why can’t you give me any credit?”

“You want some credit from me? Get those assholes out of this house. Make them take the empty bottles with them. Or are you too much of a pussy to stand up to your boys.”

“Watch what the fuck you say, Elizabeth.”

I charged into the living room. “Get the fuck out of here,” I said. Vince was right behind me.

“Yo, Liz,” Frankie said. He was starting to get up. Frankie tapped Rakim’s shoulder with the back of his hand. “We can go. It’s cool. Did Vince show you all the—”

“Don’t you guys move,” I heard Vince yelling. “Sit back down. This is my goddamn house. I say who stays and who goes.” He looked at me. “Either go back into the bedroom with the baby or get the fuck out of here.”

“Fine,” I said. “We’re leaving.” I wasn’t thinking, just reacting. I headed for the bedroom to get the baby.

“No,” Vince said. “That kid stays here.”

“Fuck you,” I said, trying to get by, trying to use my shoulder to push him out of my way. I never realized how fucking sturdy Vince was. All he had to do was step one way and then the other. I felt like a little kid. Frankie and Rakim got up from the couch. Vince said, “I said sit the fuck back down.” I heard Rakim ask Vince who he was talking to—Rakim was getting pissed, and for a second, I thought he was going to hit Vince.

“Get the fuck out of my way!”

I hadn’t yelled that loud since I was a teenager and fighting with my mom. The baby started crying. Vince wouldn’t move. Frankie and Rakim just stared. I punched Vince in the face. He took me by the shoulders and threw me to the floor.

I jumped up hell bent on killing him. I ran into the kitchen. The baby was screaming. I thought Vince was coming after me, so I grabbed the big knife from the block without stopping. I heard the block fall from the counter when I turned the corner. They were yelling, “Yo! Yo!, Yo! What the fuck! C’mon, people! What the fuck!” All I could hear was the baby crying. When I got back into the living room, Frankie and Rakim were standing in front of the TV. They got quiet after seeing the knife. It took a second for me to realize the baby wasn’t crying. Then Vince walked out the bedroom holding the baby against his chest.

“What’s that?” he said.

“What are you doing with the baby, Vince?”

“This is my son, Elizabeth.”

“I want you out of here, Vince. I want you to go.”

“What do you want to do—kill me? Stab me in front of your baby? Is that what you want? You want to kill your baby’s father? You’re going nuts, hon.”

“Put the baby down, Vince. Give him to me.”

“You’re in no condition to take care of this kid.”

“Give that baby to me, Vince. Please put him down and get the hell out of here.”

“Look at you. We were just sitting here, Elizabeth...watching TV...you just had to—”

All I saw was the baby. Not Vince. Not Frankie. Not Rakim. I didn’t want the baby brought into that mess. He belonged in his bassinette, over by my bed. Not there. Not with him. Not with me even. With all of Vince’s shit, never, and I mean never, would I have pictured him doing what he was doing. I remembered the knife I was holding. I

don't know why, but I imagined myself stabbing the baby—the blade going right through his little body and into Vince's chest. I wanted to die just then.

I tossed the knife onto the floor by Vince's feet and got to my knees; the heels of my shoes digging into my thighs. "Please, Vince...Why won't you just go?"

Vince didn't say anything right away. The baby started screaming. I looked up and he was squirming in Vince's arms. Vince looked at him, concerned. "It's okay, buddy. It's okay. It's okay." But the baby wouldn't stop crying.

"Just give him to me!"

Frankie and Rakim came over to Vince's side. "C'mon, Vince," I heard Rakim say. "Give that baby to his mother."

"This is none of your business."

"Vince," Frankie said, "This is too much, man. Just come with us. Get out of the house for a while." Frankie looked at me. "I'm really sorry, Liz. I'm really, really sorry."

They were talking in new voices—loud, serious tones—that demanded attention even with the baby crying the way he was. Words weren't being said; they were being shot. The baby was screaming so fucking loud. I was wishing for neighbors. If we had neighbors, someone would have called the cops by now. I never hated living in the country before then.

"Please, Vince," I said. "Go with them. Look...just look at what you're doing to your son."

Vince held the baby away from his chest. The baby was flailing and kicking. His cries had become high pitched wails—a non-stop assault of high pitched wails. I was worried the baby was going to fall—that this ordeal would end a catastrophe.

I got up from the floor. It felt safer with Rakim and Frankie standing there. I reached for the baby. Vince didn't look up. "Give him to me," I said, in the sweetest, softest, most concerned voice I could muster. Vince pulled the baby against his chest. I was stepping on the knife. "Please, Vince."

"I don't know why you did this, Elizabeth." Vince's cheek was red from where I had hit him. He kissed the baby before handing him over.

"Fuck you." he said, almost in a whisper. "Fuck you. I'll go."

I WAS sitting on the couch rocking the baby when Vince left with Frankie and Rakim. The football game was still on. They didn't take the empty bottles with them. Nobody spoke to me, or to each other, as Vince got ready to go.

I waited a few minutes before going to the front door. I opened it and the yard was so dark. It had gotten cold. In the porch light you could see frost forming in the grass by the walkway. There were no streetlights. I think part of me expected to see Vince sitting on the front step, wearing his leather coat, blowing cigarette smoke into the night. But he wasn't. I realized, right then, that this would be my first night alone in that house. Before closing the front door and turning the deadbolt, I looked at the baby, who was starting to fuss. I could smell the shit in his diaper. I checked the windows and the sliding door—closing every blind. I turned on all the lights. Made the volume louder on the TV. I think that football game was over, but I don't remember what came on next. I almost called my mom. The phone was in my hand when I got to the bedroom. I didn't expect the money to still be strewn all over the bed. But it was. Holding the baby in one arm and the phone in the other, I sat on the edge of the mattress and wished for Vince to come back home.