

MAN CAVE

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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Man Cave is a novel about the façades that men construct in order to escape their lives.

Pete, a suburban professional with a family, is desperately trying to construct a “man cave,” a getaway in his basement where he can cool off from the pressures of modern life. Andy, a disturbed, alcoholic carpenter, is obsessed with knives and has built an underground home in the forest behind Pete’s house. When they meet, each man’s strengths covers the other’s deficiencies, but only for so long. Eventually, even the most carefully built façade crumbles.

1.

The night was full, and Andy let it surround him. He sat on the ground, his back resting on a large boulder about six hundred feet from the edge of the woods. So close to the end, but the trees were thick here. Behind him, the woods stretched for a mile before the next subdivision sprouted out of nowhere. In front of him, however, the lights of the Meadow Village homes twinkled through the leaves. A car engine rumbled somewhere in the distance. There were places left in the world, he knew, where he wouldn't see any roofs, wouldn't hear any cars.

He liked the unassuming nature of these suburban forests. No one ever walked through these woods. They were just a centerpiece to be looked at. It was small, though, and the sprawl of Monroe State Forest had long been draw to Andy. There was so much to see when there wasn't a horde of yuppie hikers ruining it, their brand new EMS backpacks and chemical-free water bottles interrupting the natural order. On the weekends, their Subarus lined the road. On the trails, and even off, everything was glutted with people.

He sat with his back against a peeling birch, drinking beer from a case of Budweiser. Andy placed the empties back in the case. He kept hoping a stag would slip by, its eyes green in the moonlight. But, after all the beers and waiting, there was nothing in the forest except Andy. He finished the last can and rested his forehead in his hands. Every thought throbbed in his brain, and sleep was creeping in from the corners. Why not stay there for the night? Why bother crawling back into his hole? The trees and the black sky was like a cocoon, surrounding Andy like amniotic fluid.

He was letting himself go, and almost there, when a squirrel rustled in the leaves. Andy stilled himself. The rustling got closer, and then the squirrel was to the left of him, gray and starving in the night. It dug its head into the leaves. Andy floated his right hand over the ground, his fingers grazing the surface until they came upon a fallen branch. It was a good thickness, like the handle of an axe. Andy gripped it, and waited.

The squirrel burrowed deeper into the leaves. Andy swung the stick out and struck the animal. The sound thundered through the forest. Andy swatted away the leaves and looked at the kill. The squirrel, its eyes black and unmoving, its mouth open, lay quiet. Andy dropped the branch behind him and picked up the squirrel. Up close, its fur looked brown with a few spots of blood on its neck.

He placed it on the ground and pinched the fur to loosen it. Like opening a bag of chips, Andy tore the fur open. He undressed the squirrel, pulling at the fur, poking in the limbs, until it was only connected to the tail and the head. He reached at his pocket and pulled out the Kershaw skyline, one of his favorite knives.

When closed, it was four and a quarter inches resting in his palm. With a tap of his forefinger and a flick of his wrist, the jagged blade swung open. Andy practiced constantly: closed, open, closed, open. Attached to his pocket with a clip, he could free the knife and release its blade in a moment. With almost one motion, it felt like a natural act, like something he was born to do. The handle fit perfectly in his hand like an extension of the bone. It was a sixth finger. It *was* his hand.

He used the skyline to cut off the squirrel's tail, and then its head. Andy ran the blade across its abdomen, where the flesh yielded easily. He remembered roasting one over a campfire once. The meat was tasty, but the field dressing is important. It was easy

to pierce internal organs when cutting into a small animal. Piss or shit spilling out of an intestine turned meat rotten. With a small blade, however, it was simple.

Andy dug his finger into the warm cavity of the squirrel and pried out the organs. The purple and red balloons of the lungs and stomach were tossed to the side with the fur and tail and head. Andy looked at the little meat that was left. He could bring it to the creek and wash off the remaining hair. Soak it in some salt water, maybe, at home. Perhaps he could make a stew.

Andy stood up, the squirrel meat red in his hand. He felt alive, and awake.

After he brought it inside, he cooked the meat over the small flames of his propane stove. Stringy, yet delicious, Andy ate everything, washing it down with five more Budweisers. Full, he went outside and decided he wanted to see Helen. It wasn't yet one, so she would still be at the Birch. It was the last place that Andy wanted to go. Even energized from his kill, he knew that the Birch still held the power to silence him.

The Birch Athletic and Social Club was an awful place. A dark bar in a dank corner of Greenfield, it had no windows and one door, leaving little room for escape. Inside, the walls were covered in neon liquor advertisements, Red Sox and Patriots posters, and an old television blaring some sports talk show. The people were even worse: monsters, they licked the salt from their fingers as they burped and screamed at each other. When Andy walked in, they turned to look with empty eyes before snorting out fetid air and returning to their drinks. It was hot, and all of the barflies made the air damp. Music thundered from the jukebox, but failed to drown out the piercing squawks of all the people.

Helen was sitting at the bar, alone for once. She refused to talk to Andy at first, but, as the night went on and the beers kept coming, anger seeped into her words.

“Why do you have to be such an asshole all the time?” she asked. Her words raised and lowered in pitch and Andy knew she was drunk. He hated this place, and he almost hated her for going there. Once, Andy had rested his head in her lap and she had grazed her fingers through his hair, humming some tune he didn’t know. He had closed his eyes at the time, listening to the song, feeling her fingers, and he thought he could have been anyone.

“Well?” she said. “Or are you just going to be quiet again? Creep.”

“I’m sorry,” Andy repeated.

“You’re a real piece of work,” Helen said. “Stevie thinks you’re autistic. That’s why you’re always so damned quiet.”

Andy nodded and tried to smile, but inside he bristled at the mention of her son. He was weak, tied to his electronics, and when anyone tried teaching him anything, Stevie would look off into the distance, waiting for something more interesting. Worst, he expected that the best would always happen to him.

A man in a nearby booth coughed. He ended it with a long spitting sound like he was extracting the snake venom that he had ingested. The Birch’s low ceiling, dark with cigarette smoke, pressed down upon Andy. The chorus of burping and coughing and laughing stung his ears. He wanted to plant both of his hands to the side of his face and run from that bar. She wasn’t worth this, he thought to himself, she wasn’t worth entering new dimensions of hell. He had his knife. He had his wits. All that remained was the wild country.

But her eyes, though red with anger and drunkenness, curled at the edges, and Andy could see the music, that nameless tune she sometimes hummed.

“I will,” Andy said softly. “I’m trying. I really am.”

She smiled with a sly wink. She had taken him home shortly afterward and they had had sex, her voice whimpering softly to conceal it from Stevie. Then she fell asleep and left Andy waiting beside her.

He could never sleep. As soon as the lights were out, all of the hate and cruelty of the day washed out of him and all that was left was sorrow. There were always so many instances where he could have said something, or where if he could have just left, if he could have just escaped the clutches of those monsters, then he might have had a piece of himself left. But they were always taking, never giving, and, inside, Andy felt like an amputee.

But stewing about it was even worse, and only led to more lonely sadness in the middle of the night. So he created scenarios, fantasies that he would play out in his mind like movies to lull himself to sleep. Some of them were benign, like an infinite forest where Andy can slip inside the trees, or an intricate story where gold coins dripped from leaves like rain. One that he’d had since childhood featured an island of asphalt in the middle of the wilderness. Leaves scratched and danced upon its surface, and it was up to Andy to solve the mystery of what it was doing there, and whether it was or wasn’t malevolent.

Lately, however, his scenarios ran violent, and sometimes centered around a fortress at the edge of a cliff, fully stocked with water and food and weapons; a last stand against hordes of villains rushing at the gates. In a more recent fantasy, Andy made C-4,

working his fingers into the plasticizer, and then, when it was finished, wrapping it around the foundations of the Hadley Falls Bridge. He'd stand on the banks of the Easthampton River and watch as the habitat was brought back to equilibrium, the victims' screams sounding like songbirds.

He always regretted that one. He wished, instead, he could just take an eraser to the bridge and the roads and the towns where the roads led. Just erase them all, remove them from the consciousness of the earth, and no one would be hurt because they had never existed.

Andy turned onto his side and imagined Easthampton wiped away like grime on a countertop. All that would be left would be the soft soil offering up the pines. The sun burning overhead. The river flashing in the distance. Everything empty.

When he opened his eyes, he thought he hadn't slept, but the green digits of the alarm clock resting precariously on the television said otherwise. It was a little after three, and Helen, sprawled inelegantly across the mattress, one leg pointedly sticking out of the sheets, snored next to him. He thought about touching her bare shoulder, feeling the twitching movement of her muscles under her skin. Feeling her warmth.

There were usually a few shallow creases in her face, but they smoothed out at night. Her hair had more gray than brown, and it unfolded upon her pillow like a spilled drink. He rubbed a few strands between his fingers. He could almost smell the floral scent of her shampoo beneath the more powerful stench of stale beer. Looking at her face, at her nose and its curve toward the nostrils, at her small and delicate ears with the

dimples of old piercing dotting the flesh, he felt like he could see her as a child with her entire life's worth of dreams and hopes still ahead of her.

A snore growled out of her mouth, and she turned her head revealing a drool stain on the pillowcase. The warmth he had wanted to feel had turned to radiating, unforgivable heat. He kicked off his blanket, his face coated with an oily sweat. He felt feverish, the walls collapsing around him. How long had he felt this way? Her leg brushed up against his and he recoiled in disgust. He tried to take a second to comprehend this. After all, he thought, they had just had sex. What was the problem? But he knew what it was. The problem was her. Her son. The people at the Birch.

He got up from the bed, dressed, and walked to the window. It was painted shut. Outside, the houses, all small and packed close together, were silent. Behind them lay the footpaths into Easthampton State Forest, and the trees were a mass of black. When he turned around, he saw Helen's bedroom in its entirety. Clothes strewn everywhere, nets of cobwebs in the corners of the ceiling. Yellowed crayon drawings that Stevie had made years ago were taped on the wallpaper. He tried to remember what had brought him here, but that had washed away, too.

He slipped into the hall. The next room over was Stevie's, and Andy could hear him snoring in there as well. The whole house vibrated with a chorus of mother and son's sleep sounds. Andy wanted to drift out of the house unnoticed and deal with the ramifications of that later, but his hand fell upon the door knob to Stevie's room. There was something about the sound of him sleeping, so violent and disgusting, that Andy imagined entire flaps of phlegm vibrating in the soft tissue of Stevie's throat. He wanted to see it. He wanted to see what something so awful looked like while it lay defenseless.

The door was covered with stickers. Some from years earlier, showing a child that had loved Disney cartoons, but they were mostly hidden by the ugly, black, Gothic-lettered stickers of bands Andy had never heard of. The doorknob was warm to touch. Of course it was. Stevie was in there, an organism designed to give off fiery heat. Andy turned the knob slowly and opened the door enough to stick his head in.

The scent of sweat and semen lingered in the air. The room was a disaster of forgotten toys, crumpled tissues and wiring leading from one piece of electronics to the next. Stevie was asleep, barely covered by a blanket, his tee shirt lifted up to reveal the soft, pink flesh of his stomach. There was something gurgling in his throat. His feet were brown with filth on the bottom. Andy began to feel light headed, like he might faint, so he stepped back from the room, his stomach in knots.

By that time, the walls of the house seemed to beat with his heart, each time closer and closer. He wanted to tear at his throat, and he stumbled through the filth and furniture of Helen's house looking for an exit.

The cool night air on his skin. The opening of the walls to the outside, like a stomped foot releasing compressed lungs. He was free, and sweating. Helen would call after him the next time they met, her eyes dimmed with anger, but it was okay. Andy started walking through the neighbor's yard toward that mass of black trees in the distance.

If he could just get her out of Easthampton, he thought, things would be so much better. They could drive into the forest, maybe go camping. Sleep under the stars, and make love amongst the animals. He could really connect with her like that, he thought. But then he remembered Stevie. He'd have to come, of course. They could bring two

tents, but just his presence alone soured Andy to the idea. The kid would complain the whole time, Andy knew it.

Andy passed by the back window of the neighbor's house. In a brief flash of the eye, he saw the green lights of another clock. 3:42. It wasn't normal to be outside at this time of night, he told himself, yet kept walking. He thought that maybe he could go on a camping trip with Helen and Stevie. Maybe if he could just swallow the poison that tickled the back of his throat every time the boy was around, he could be with Helen. He could be a normal person. It was a good idea, he thought in the end. He'd bring it up to Helen as soon as he made it up to her for leaving.

Andy reached the footpath leading to the woods, feeling refreshed and new. The tendrils of darkness wisped off of the branches and curled around his body, carrying him home.

2.

Pete's basement wasn't the largest by any means, but it was finished and held the promise of unlimited possibilities. When they first saw the house, the realtor called the basement a "second bonus room," but Pete was quick to recertify the space as his own. Had he let the basement be named a "second bonus room," it would only have been a matter of time before a box of Ryder's toys appeared, and then boxes of Christmas decorations, and then piles of Tracy's old college textbooks which she hung onto for some reason. After a while, it wouldn't be a "second bonus room" anymore, but "another place to store our junk."

After they moved in, Pete placed his electric guitar and amp down there, plus a few chairs. He told Tracy that it would be his "jamming space," but he barely even played the guitar anymore. He only picked it up during high school as a way to meet girls. He'd write them songs, impress them with his chops, but after he married Tracy, he didn't see a point to it anymore. The guitar served as a place-setting, a quarter on the arcade machine, letting Tracy and Ryder both know that the basement was his.

Pete stood in his basement and observed his realm. It was Saturday morning, and the house was empty. Ryder had his gymnastics class, which was really just an hour of running around, singing songs and kicking balls. Pete wasn't sure when they got around to doing the rings, but maybe he would start accompanying Tracy if they did. He had seen the arms on those men gymnasts during the Olympics. If Ryder grew up with biceps like that, and perhaps tapping a hidden gene that allowed him to shoot up to 6'3", well then the boy would be unstoppable.

As it was, Pete didn't like going. The mothers sat in front of a large window to watch their kids scream, and talked amongst themselves about yoga and how tired they were. The few fathers that were there were either timid flowers waving at children with their backs turned or men bored and restless. Pete loved playing with Ryder, and he especially liked it when all three of them went out to the park or the woods to explore. However, trapped inside the gym's watching room was not how Pete liked to spend his Saturday mornings.

He sat down on an uncomfortable wooden chair. Aside from the guitar, the basement had little in it. Just a chair and a folding table with a radio resting on it. Most importantly, the space had a door that blocked access. A man needed time alone to relax, Pete realized. So much of his day was spent dealing with disgruntled chamber members that he couldn't just come home and turn everything off to join his family at the dinner table. What Tracy had a hard time accepting was that this time alone resulted in better family time later. Pete laughed. He couldn't imagine his parents having a conversation about that. Pete liked to think that hundreds of years of societal evolution had allowed modern men to be more involved with the day-to-day matters of the household without losing their masculine edge, but even the sharpest edges need honing.

Pete reached for a pad on the table. His plans were scrawled in black ink. One column titled "Ideal" and one titled "Real." The two columns overlapped sometimes, like when he wrote "television" under "Real," he also noted "65 inch LED DLP HDTV" under "Ideal." When he thought about his space at night, Pete always went back to a medieval German pub that is wired with today's technology. Something dark and wooden, yet plush and comfortable at the same time.

The fight between ideal and real was something Pete struggled with his entire life. At ten years old, Pete imagined he'd be living in a huge mansion surrounded by twenty thousand acres of wilderness. Every day, he would hunt the game and then cook it in the wall-sized fireplace. There would be a helicopter landing pad and race track for his many cars. Pete laughed. His childhood self imagined a future where he'd have limitless wealth, and time enough to enjoy it. All he wanted now, Pete thought, was a nice reclining easy chair in his living room.

It was his hope, however, that this space could be perfect compromise between real and ideal. He didn't need to have a five thousand dollar surround sound system, but he did need something more than a laptop and a beanbag. Money, of course, was the problem. Pete didn't have his younger self's bank account. The chamber paid well, but with Tracy at home and the property taxes in Greenfield, he didn't have the kind of disposable income that he wanted.

So Pete decided he would do as much as he could in his space by himself. Cleaning out the room? Sure. Painting the walls? No problem. When it came to electrical wiring or large installations, however, Pete thought he might be able to teach himself how to do it. At the very least, he could get things started before he had to call in a professional.

Before anything could happen, the cream colored carpet needed to go. Pete inserted a mix CD into the radio. Hootie & the Blowfish started playing, and he sang along. He remembered dancing to this song at a party at the Phi Sigma Kappa house. They usually attracted girls from campus, but sometimes some Amherst chicks would

come and it was exciting. He remembered this blonde who he talked to for a long time before they made out in the stairwell. What was her name again?

He knelt down on the carpet at the corner of the room, thinking of that blonde and the way she bit his lip. The day after the party, he and his brothers tossed a football around in the field by the campus lake. It wasn't fair, he thought, that you only got to live once.

He gripped the carpet between his fingers and yanked out strands of fluff, but nothing else. Pete tried again, squeezing the fibers between his knuckles. The carpet moved a little, but then he tore the strands out again. He kept trying, sweat starting to bead up around his hairline, but he was not successful.

After he went upstairs to get his toolbox, he went after the carpet with a pair of needle nose pliers. All they did was rip more of the carpet fibers out. Besides the pliers, he had a wrench, two screwdrivers, and a hammer. The flathead fit in between the carpet and the wall, but when Pete tried to pry it loose, the screwdriver popped out and gouged the wall.

"God damn cocksucker," he said.

Pete had forty-five minutes before Tracy and Ryder came home, and he did not want to be sweating and cursing when that happened. When he had made the backyard patio, it was while Tracy and Ryder were visiting her sister for the day. When they arrived, Pete was clean and the backyard was made anew.

On the internet, Pete watched a video of two women renovating a house. They used a box cutter to slice the carpet, and then they pulled it up from there. Pete didn't have a box cutter. The sharpest object in his house was his Victorinox chef's knife, and

he wasn't about to ruin his favorite meat blade. The Home Depot was just down the block. If he sped over, Pete reasoned, then he could at least get started before his family comes back. He wouldn't have time to do the whole floor, but he could begin, take a shower, and be "finished" by the time they walked through the door.

Before Pete left the house, he cleared his browser history.

Pete realized that there were three classes of customers at The Home Depot: the Ineffectuals, the Pretenders, and the Authentics. The Ineffectuals begged five different sales clerks for help finding the screwdrivers. The Pretenders generally knew where the locksmith was located, but their pressed pants and neat haircuts betrayed them. The Authentics, however, strode the aisles of The Home Depot with authority, their fingernails dirty, and their pants paint-splattered. If you didn't make room for them, they'd crush you under their steel-toed construction boots.

Closing in on noon on a Saturday, the Home Depot was full of Ineffectuals. Yuppies and old women shuffled down the aisle, looking this way and that, and finally just stopped in the middle of the store, their mouths agape. They desperately searched for those men in the orange aprons to tell them where the D batteries were located. One guy in his late twenties stared at a display of venetian blinds. His paunch and dewy eyes immediately reminded Pete of his brother.

At least you're not him, he thought. Ken was the poster child of the Ineffectuals. He was funny, sure, but Pete could easily imagine Ken asking a clerk where the Ethernet cords were located, or, worse, how to install those venetian blinds. Pete smiled to himself and accidentally made eye contact with the Ineffectual.

“Oh, hey,” the man said, “shouldn’t the curtain rods be around here?”

Pete shrugged his shoulders.

“Sorry.”

The last thing Pete wanted was to be ensnared in the web of an Ineffectual. He kept walking until he reached the garden section.

When he bought the stone tiles for his homemade patio last summer, he had seen a display of box cutters next to the garden section. He remembered that Tracy flipped through the seed packets while Ryder desperately tried to free himself from her grasps to engage in all sorts of trouble with scythes and pick axes. But as he stood next to the garden section, there was no sign of the box cutters. It had all been replaced with boxes of light bulbs. Pete became conscious of the fact that he was staring at those boxes, and that his face was slowly becoming slack with confusion. He grabbed a box of 150 watt scorchers and marched down the aisle like the bulbs were the one thing he was looking for.

The next aisle over was lined with power tools: sanders, saws and drills. This place was plagued with poor planning, Pete thought. Why place incongruous things next to each other? But he knew how these big box stores worked. No windows, and a cavernous environment to get lost in, like a casino. Pete quickened his pace and passed the tools into the next aisle.

He looked at the wares with his peripheral vision, knowing that he’d find the box cutters eventually. Until then, he looked like he belonged here, and felt that way too, until, somewhere in the core of The Home Depot, in a corridor that teemed with new trash cans, he encountered an Authentic.

Incredibly thin, his forearms nevertheless bulged with thick wires of muscle. Clumps of shaggy gray hair stuck out of a filthy black hat. Although his arms told a tale of coarse strength, the Authentic's face was ragged and drawn with lines. The stubble around his chin was white. Too much sun had leathered his skin, which cracked around his eyes. A roofer, Pete thought. Maybe a carpenter.

"How's it going?" Pete said.

The man nodded his head slightly and passed Pete in a cloud of sweat and dirt.

An Authentic Asshole, Pete thought. He'd like to see that guy read and understand the land use management ordinance and then make a speech about it in front of the town council.

A collection of glow sticks hung from some wires somewhere near the locksmith. Pete grabbed one as he rushed by. Ryder would squeal when he saw what happened when you cracked the stick. Pete remembered when he was a kid, running around the neighborhood with a glow stick, acting out some scenario from *The Empire Strikes Back*. Pete was always Luke, and Ken was always Darth Vader. That particular night, the two of them were facing off with their lightsabers, when Pete's exploded on his pants.

Pete snickered and ducked into the next aisle, but it wasn't the box cutter section, either. Screws and bolts encased in tiny containers, themselves encased in a row of large shelving, ran along the aisle for what seemed to be three football fields. Next was lumber. Then appliances. Then signage.

The store probably took up an entire zip code. How could anyone ever find anything in this pit? He turned down an aisle and was greeted with rows of light bulb boxes. He stopped and looked down at the 150 watt box he was still gripping. The

cellophane had grown soft ripples where the heat of his sweaty fingers had pressed down. He tossed the box onto the shelf. What happened to the glow stick? Somewhere it had been sucked back into the soul of The Home Depot to prance along with the box cutters.

A man in an orange apron approached. Pete sighed.

“Excuse me,” Pete said, “I’m looking for the box cutters.”

“It’s just on the other side of the garden section,” the clerk said. “I’ll show you. Follow me.”

Pete did as he was told, but he kept his head up. There was a quiet dignity in surrendering that was often overlooked in the history books.

Although he never looked like the models in the catalog, Pete liked to order their exact outfits. That Saturday, he chose what a dark haired man was wearing on page 44 of the Summer Banana Republic catalog. Plaid shorts with brown boat shoes and a purple polo shirt. He looked at himself in the mirror. Very close to the model, he thought. The model had had a rugged look to him, like he’d seen war, or high seas, and the purple of the shirt tempered that, making him an amalgam of modern sensitivity and old world masculinity. The difference this time was that the shirt made Pete’s arms look huge, much bigger than the model’s, and he flexed his biceps to be sure.

So what if all he did was get the box cutters? There will be time tomorrow to get started on the carpet, he thought. And, it wasn’t a complete waste of time. Pete had grabbed a gerbera daisy from the garden section on the way out. He was a big fan of small relationship gestures, like flowers, or the occasional backrub. Pete had given Tracy

a daisy on their first date, and it was something he repeated a few times every year. She loved it, he was certain.

Pete took one last glance in the mirror and rubbed his hair down and to the right of his forehead. It was just starting to thin at the hairline, and, if he pushed his hair up, it looked like trees in winter. Pete had thought for years that he would escape Ken's fate. He had started balding when he was a teenager, the poor guy. But, while Ken had accepted his fate with open arms, and allowed it to influence other parts of his appearance, Pete vowed to not give up without a fight. One way was to strategically comb his hair to hide his deficiencies. Another way was to dress like an adult, not like some kind of Japanese teenager. Pete smoothed his collar and sat down at his laptop to order some work outfits from Banana Republic.

A model with silver hair wore dark khaki dress chinos, the baby blue classic oxford long sleeve, and the brown chukkas. The pants were suitable for business while the shoes told coworkers and clients that his heart was on a mountaintop. Pete ordered that outfit, and the complementary chino blazer.

Tracy and Ryder had come home while he was in the shower, and the house was filled with their noise: television, things dropping, ceramics clinking. He picked up the daisy and tromped downstairs.

Ryder sat on the couch in front of the television watching some show Pete didn't recognize. Four grown men sang and danced about tools. When the program wasn't grabbing one hundred percent of Ryder's attention, he drew circles on paper with a marker. The paper lay flat on the couch without a book underneath, and Pete thought the marker was probably bleeding through onto the fabric.

“Hey, kiddo,” Pete said, leaning over Ryder to give what he said was five million kissies, although it was only seven. “Careful with that marker.”

“Okay,” Ryder said, and then drew a circle inside another circle. “Is that for me?” he asked, pointing to the flower.

“No. It’s for Mommy,” Pete said.

“I want one.”

“Draw your own flower,” Pete said. “Seven sixes in a circle. It’ll look great.”

“Okay,” Ryder said, continuing the circle project that Pete had interrupted.

Pete walked into the kitchen and placed his hand half on Tracy’s back and half on her ass. He kissed her cheek, but only once.

“Hi,” Tracy said. “Late shower, huh?”

Pete ignored the question/accusation and thrust the daisy at her. Tracy took the flower and waved her half-smile at him. It was her sly look, her look of love, one that he had grown used to over the years. Pete remembered when he first saw that half-smile, with its dimple in her right cheek, and he had thought at the time that he may not need food or drink for sustenance any longer.

“Thanks, babe,” she said, kissing him. “Did you finish up down there?”

“It’s a work in progress,” Pete said. “What are you having for lunch?”

“I don’t know. We haven’t gone to the store recently, which is a point off ‘Healthy Living.’ But, if I figure things out with what’s in the cupboard, that’ll be a point toward ‘Adaptability.’”

Pete nodded his head.

“I had to turn the TV on for Ryder while I figure it out,” said Tracy, “but I think he’s watched enough. Can you go play with him until we’re ready to eat?”

Pete went back into the living room, sat on the couch, and turned off the television. Ryder looked up from his circle art and stared at Pete. Their eyes locked together for a few beats.

“Do you want to play with me?” asked Ryder.

“Okay,” said Pete.

Ryder hopped off the couch and slid on his belly toward the stack of wooden blocks. Pete had had the same blocks when he was a child. He remembered creating an epic pyramid in his basement, only for the foundation to crumble. The blocks fell, and some landed on his bare feet. After the tears came the rage, and Pete threw the blocks against the wall until his mother came down and yelled at him. After that, blocks weren’t too exciting. Pete followed Ryder onto the floor and sat cross-legged next to him.

“You be Bert and I’ll be Ernie,” said Ryder. He put a few blocks together to make a house, and then pulled out the Sesame Street figurines. Pete sighed and grabbed Bert.

“Hello, Bert,” said Ryder in a voice Pete assumed was to be Ernie’s. “What are you doing today?”

Pete walked the figurine over to Ernie.

“I’m working on a spreadsheet,” said Pete in a voice that wasn’t anything like Bert’s. Pete laughed.

Ryder looked up at Pete with a crinkled forehead.

“What’s a spreadsheet?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” said Pete.

“You be Bert,” said Ryder, “and we’ll go to the dancing place.”

“The dancing place?”

“Yeah,” said Ryder as Ernie. “I love to dance.” The figure bounced around in Ryder’s hand.

“Well,” said Pete as Bert, “are you sure you wouldn’t rather play football instead, or go camping in our Bert and Ernie camping play set?”

“No,” said Ryder. “Let’s go.” Ryder was lying on his belly, his bare feet kicking in the air.

Pete’s legs were falling asleep. “Here,” said Pete, handing off Bert, “you show me how.”

So, Bert and Ernie danced in a scenario that somehow involved them buying some cheese. Ryder was both characters now, so Pete stretched his legs and reclined on the hard wood floor.

“Thanks for dancing with me,” Ryder squawked in Bert’s voice.

Pete turned his head to look at his son. He thought about attempting to steer the play into a direction he preferred. Maybe Bert and Ernie could go rafting. Maybe they could build a house. Maybe they could restore a 1969 Mustang.

“Thanks, Bert,” said Ryder, pressing the figurines together. “I love you.”

Pete stood up and walked back to the kitchen. Tracy was still puttering around.

“Can’t make up your mind?” he said.

“I just wish we had gone to the store yesterday,” she said, pulling at a stray strand of hair.

“Why don’t I grill out back,” Pete said. “We have ribs, I think.”

Tracy smiled. "I guess you get the 'Adaptability' point," she said.

"Okay," said Pete. He was trying very hard to be supportive of her new interest in that book she worshipped, but it was hard. The first step, he realized, was to not say anything unsupportive, and that usually meant not saying much.

Tracy frowned and lowered her voice. "I kind of wanted to relax," she said, "and I can't do that if I have to watch Ryder in here."

Pete waved his hand in dismissal. "I'll take him out with me."

The rolling field of Pete's backyard led to a deep forest where shadows laid by the tall firs darkened and cooled the yard. Once within the woods, you were surrounded by thin and seemingly infinite fingers of birch, with occasional razors of light that cut through the gloom. Pete used to wander around back there when he first moved in, and he liked to pretend it was an ancient wood, like Sherwood, only with a different subdivision starting around a mile in.

As Ryder ran around and played some kind of spaceship game, Pete sat on his patio next to his grill. Those flat, pink-gray stones that he laid himself were beautiful. He had leveled the ground, picked out stones, and then placed them again and again. Whenever Pete and Tracy had someone new over, Pete would take them outside, have them stand on the patio, and he'd wave his arms over the stones, saying, "I made this." He liked to joke that it was the crowning achievement of his life, but as the months went on, he wondered if it really was a joke after all. The patio looked nice and everyone smiled when they heard that Pete had built it himself, but would they still have smiled to learn how hard it was for him?

Leveling the ground had been filthy work for obvious reasons, but he had also dug up finger-sized worms, tangled like a handshake, writhing in the soil. The stones didn't fit together properly, and, when they did, they felt loose when stepped on. The work wrecked his hands. Halfway through, his fingers, chapped and raw, cracked with blood, ached with every move. Pete had always thought that the hands of a construction worker, callused and strong, would be something to strive for, but the ordeal of the patio changed his mind. It took hours to finish, the entire time Tracy and Ryder were gone. They missed Pete sweat and curse in the filth, and for that, Pete was grateful.

Still, it looked nice, especially in the light of the afternoon sun. The gray briquettes in the chimney glowed orange and ghostlike wisps of black ash floated above. The heat prickled his face. It was his favorite part of grilling; the time when you were alone and had no responsibilities other than ensuring that the grill doesn't tip over and an ember land in the dry grass.

Ryder suddenly made dash toward the grill, his hands waving wildly. Pete thought of the hiss of flesh on the hot, black metal.

"Stop!" he shouted, leaping from his chair.

Ryder froze.

"Do not come near the grill," Pete said, in a growl that reminded him of his own father.

The boy's eyes watered, but, thankfully, he ran off to play more before he could really get into a fit. Pete, while he was already standing, checked on the ribs. It's bad form to open the lid of the grill during a barbecue, but he had little faith in the spice rub he had applied. The brown sugar and salt was supposed to meld with the rendered fat and

create succulent ribs without the need of a thick, ketchup based sauce. Sure enough, the meat was a deep mahogany, and the smell that pushed against Pete's face was divine.

He sat down and stared at the forest. It was looking at those trees that calmed him after a day at the office. No matter how many problems arose, no matter how many chamber members called to "chew the fat" with hidden agendas, those trees whisked away the stress like a sandstorm.

When he was a child, Pete wanted to be so many things: soldier, policeman, park ranger. He was too old and out of shape now to be a soldier. Besides, when he indulged in these fantasies, Tracy would always say, "I'm leaving you if you join the Army." That was a potent enough threat to last the years until he couldn't qualify anymore. He thought that he could still be a policeman, but he thought that that job would require skills of conflict resolution that he couldn't be bothered to master.

A park ranger, however, was the perfect compromise. Patrolling the grounds, he would spend each day in communion with nature. And it would be an adventure, too: illegal hunters stopped, vagrant campers evicted, rabid animals destroyed. Every day, he would face those problems under the never ending blue canopy. Looking at the woods at the end of the yard, listening to the crackle of air bursting in the charcoal, Pete wondered if it was too late.

Ryder kicked a ball toward the grill and Pete stopped it with his foot.

"Don't send things over this way," Pete said.

Ryder walked to Pete and grabbed at his hand. The boy pulled at it, trying to move the immovable.

"Play with me," Ryder said.

“I’m making our lunch,” Pete said.

“But I want somebody to play with.”

Pete smiled and ruffled the boy’s hair. He kicked the ball toward the middle of the yard.

“Go kick the ball around some more,” Pete said.

The boy ran off and Pete watched him go. His eyes, however, traveled over his son’s head to the forest. The breeze blew in and rattled the branches, creating a flurry of movement. Pete stared at the blur until it almost looked like there was a man stalking through the trees.

3.

While her husband fiddled away in his basement, Tracy gazed over her poster. She had it pinned up on the wall of their bedroom, just to the side of their bed. Originally, Tracy had wanted to have it in the kitchen so everybody could track the family's progress, but Pete had said that he didn't want visitors to get the wrong idea. That was okay, she decided. It looked lovely in the bedroom, plus she could look and update it right when she woke up and just as she went to bed.

On four feet square of thick poster board, Tracy had drawn a chart with Tracy, Pete, Ryder, and Family as names for the columns. The rows, in order, were named: Healthy Living, Relationships, Work Life, Adaptability, Attitude, and Goals. Dozens of small yellow happy faces were attached to various squares in the chart, and Tracy could move them around based on the day's tally. On the top of the poster, Tracy had scrawled in thick black marker:

Promise of Happiness

The Tompkins Family

Tracy took a smiley point off Healthy Living for the macaroni and cheese, but placed a new one in Adaptability. A successful family dinner meant another smiley point on Relationships, and the Internet research done on her prospective business plan earned her a point on Goals. She was low on smiley points for Work Life, but that would change soon. In the next six months, she would be ready to launch Joyful Serendipity. After that, all of her squares would be full of the yellow smileys.

She stepped back and looked at the chart. Everything was going really well. She wrote down the total number of smileys in her spiral notebook. At the end of each week, she would calculate her level of “completeness” using a formula in Promise of Happiness. Tracy had been calculating her weekly progress for just over a month, and seeing her growth over the weeks made her smile.

It was so simple following Jeanne Costa’s book that sometimes Tracy wondered if Ms. Costa was some sort of incarnation of Buddha. Pete had laughed when she said that, saying that she had said the same thing at one point or another about Bob Ross and Fred Rogers. But it was true for them, Tracy thought, and it was true for Jeanne Costa. All three of them were able to use the simplest phrase, brushstroke, or concept, and make it transcendental.

When her sister Tina had come home from college one weekend while Tracy was sixteen, she had told her that college was eye opening. Living with mom and dad during high school, Tina had said, was like living under water, and when you got to college you finally reached the surface. You had a chance to reinvent yourself, a chance to shed the false layers of suburban life in order to really experience what the world had to offer. Tracy took those words and memorized them in the leafy layers of her heart. She had sat with the popular kids in high school, playing soccer and performing in school plays, but after Tina had talked to her, Tracy was drawn to the sullen, long-haired freaks who smoked by the dumpsters after school. Her friends called them smelly hippies, stupid burnouts, but a few had been in Tracy’s honors English class, and they seemed to understand what was happening in literature more than anyone else. Maybe they had

advanced to this mind-expanding phase early. She felt like she needed to talk to them, but she was always too scared, though, to treat them with anything but derision.

Scared, that was the right word. Tracy remembered nights in high school where the quiet of the evening was strangling. She felt fear about so many different things. Talking to those burnouts. Failing American Civilization with Mrs. Riordan. Being different. Most of all, though, she feared a dream she had where she always in her bed at home, weak with fear and growing older.

She was determined to release herself from that kind of fear in college. She went on a subculture safari, dabbling in just about every clique and group that her campus had to offer. University Democrats led to Mass PIRG, which led to the Campus Socialist Organization. She attended rallies for cannabis reform, Mumia Abu-Jamal, and animal rights. Her music had shifted from the pop she had listened to in high school on Lite 98.6, to grunge, to ska, to punk. Her attire moved from preppy sweaters and jeans to spikes and leather. Her hair changed color on a whim. Everything changed. She never stayed with one decision for very long. Once she tried something, she usually found that she was still the same Tracy with the same fears.

By the time Tracy had finished college, her cornrows unraveled and her Phish ticket stubs removed from the cork board, she had experimented with so many different things that she knew that change came not from the stimuli you received, but from the inward realm. She went back to her old self, and it felt comfortable. Tracy, still figuring out what she wanted to do, got a job as a receptionist at a real estate firm, and that's where she met Pete. He didn't seem to have experimented with anything, and that was

one of the reasons why she had married him. Everything was going to be fine as long as she concentrated on changing her inner self.

And what could be more inwardly changing than motherhood? Tracy began to believe that motherhood, the act of giving and nurturing life, would give her what she looked for. She was good at loving things. She would be a good mother. Getting pregnant was easy, and the experience was wonderful. She rubbed at her tummy when the little, unnamed peanut kicked. She felt good, like she was part of the cycle of life. The midwives turned her on to the writings of Dr. Amelia Horvato, whose credo was “the uterus is the center of the universe, where energy is transformed into life and life transformed into love.” Tracy would have a natural birth, at home, surrounded by her husband, midwife and doula. Her child would be born into a loving environment free from the confines of anxiety and modern machinery. In the end, however, Ryder was born in the hospital surrounded by a team of doctors and nurses. Tracy had taken the epidural. She still regretted it.

But Ryder was still a lovely boy despite his less than ideal birth. He was a joy, and the days with him had been fun, beautiful even. The fall when he was two and half and they were going to Roslindale Park every day to play produced memories she would hold on to forever. On weekday mornings, the park had been completely empty, and toys from the previous day’s fun were strewn about like the abandoned relics of a lost civilization. She and Ryder would play with the toys, slide and swing, and venture into the woods to throw rocks into the creek. Afterwards, Ryder would munch on goldfish crackers in the car while they went to the library or to Target.

She chuckled to herself. If Tracy at 19 could have seen Tracy at 32 shop at Target, there would have been a problem. Target didn't exactly mesh with the urban cries of social change and upheaval that Young Tracy so vehemently preached. That same child had known in her heart that throwing rocks at Ralph Nader rallies would result in inner peace. What an idiot, Tracy thought.

She had nothing in her life to complain about. She lived in a nice house in a lovely neighborhood. Her husband was a good man. She had a beautiful little boy. Still, though, every evening as she climbed into bed, she was afraid. She couldn't explain the fear, but it wasn't the front door (which she always made sure was locked) or the gas stove (which she always made sure was off). At night, with Pete snoring next to her, Tracy would cry softly. Pete heard her once and asked her what was wrong.

"I don't know," she had said, and that was answer enough for him to fall back asleep. She wept because Ryder wasn't the answer. She wept because the answer she had been looking for her entire life was just as out of reach as it had been at the beginning. With every birthday for Ryder, hers seemed to come doubly as quick. Soon, she would be forty, then fifty. How long before she was dead? Once Ryder passed on (the thought of which produced even more tears), she wouldn't be remembered. It would be like she had been erased from the annals of humanity.

When Tracy woke up on those mornings, her face bloated and her eyes puffy, she couldn't stand to look at herself in the mirror. Too many times to count, she had dozed off while Ryder played in the other room, only to awake with a start, wondering where her child was, her heart threatening to pierce the skin of her breast. A bad time followed.

At the Stop & Shop, the bakery section was adjacent to the produce. With Ryder playing in the cart, Tracy began to slip away from the asparagus and carrots, and toward the red velvet whoopee pies, the frosted shortbread cookies. At home, while Ryder napped, Tracy would consume the junk food, whoopee pie after whoopee pie, while watching library-loaned DVDs of *The New Adventures of Old Christine*. Was that the way she wanted to spend her life, eked out by pastries and installments of a mediocre television program? She would think about her high school and college classmates, and the things they were doing with their lives, with their days. Usually, by the time Ryder woke up, her face would be wet from crying.

But then, during one of her trips to the library to get another season's worth of television shows, she had seen *Promise of Happiness* on the shelf like it was placed there by Krishna. "Be happy!" the blurb on the front read. "Rid yourself of negative influences."

Tracy stepped back and looked at the poster. She and Ryder were excelling. Soon they would have enough points to proceed to Rank Three. Pete, on the other hand, trailed considerably. In relationships, he had a mere three smiley points. It was because of that damn basement project, she thought. When she had free time, she liked to spend it with her husband and son, not run away like some overgrown child. Pete had even said to her that one summer he'd like to take an extended leave, not to go on a Hawaiian vacation like Tracy had hoped, but to hike the Appalachian Trail.

Of course, she and Ryder would not be accompanying him. We would just slow him down, she thought, in his quest to be rid of us for an extended period of time. Had she ever once even thought about going on a vacation alone? She enjoyed spending time

with her family. She didn't view them as an anchor. Besides, she wasn't even sure that he enjoyed being outside. Had he ever been camping before? She was unsure. Still, the thought of him camping out for six months while she and Ryder moldered away somewhere was ridiculous.

Tracy felt the heat of the blood in her face, and, sadly, took a smiley point off Attitude.

4.

Andy dreaded going to the Birch. He knew that he didn't have to go. He didn't have to go anywhere. He could just crawl back into his home and stay there until his food runs out. However, he felt an urge to see Helen, to apologize. Andy tried to imagine what she would have felt when she woke up the other morning and saw that he wasn't there anymore. Sadness and rage, he thought, although part of him wondered if, in the sobering light of the morning sun, she had felt relief.

He sat against his normal rock and told himself that he should go. He knew what it would be like inside, and if only he could separate her from the hell, then he would win. She would forgive him and they could start over. That was the problem, though. She was always at the Birch, always circled by the awful people there. He stood up and tried to will away everyone, but there were always reminders. Someone had carved their initials in a nearby oak tree, along with the year 1989. Andy pulled his Mark 3 out of his sheath and skimmed the edge of the blade along the back of his hand. Those initials, K.P., teased him. No matter where you go, asshole, they said, we'll follow you.

Andy walked over to the oak, his feet snapping the twigs on the ground. He hacked at the tree with the Mark 3, large chunks of bark splintering off. The blade was so sharp that it only took four swipes before K.P. had vanished into sawdust at his boots. The tree had a gash in it now, but it could have been done by a bear or raccoon. He wished he could see K.P.'s face now that his stamp on the world was reduced to a pile of crap on the dirt. He wished that K.P. would antagonize him while he held the sharp power of the Mark 3.

The blade of the Mark 3, six inches of steel finished with black phosphate, was still as sharp as when he had bought it at a gun show at the old expo fairgrounds. He remembered Nazi memorabilia and Hillary Clinton targets sitting still and stupid under fluorescent lights. At the end of a row, a semi-circle of Mark 3 knives lay fanned on the table like a black rainbow. He picked up a blade, unsheathed it, and skimmed the hair on the back of his hand.

“That’s a good one,” said the man behind the table, “Official knife of the US Navy Seals.” His voice was ugly and phlegm-filtered. He sat with a newspaper curled over his lap, and ink had stained his shorts and skin. White cakes of spit clotted the corners of his mouth, barely covered by the yellowed hairs of his moist mustache. The rest of the salespeople looked similarly horrific. Andy wondered why the slugs in the world always sold what he was interested in.

“It’s beautiful,” Andy said so softly that the man wrinkled his nose and leaned forward.

“Come again?” he asked. Andy placed the knife on the table.

“I like it,” Andy said, louder.

“Well, since you’re interested, it’s seventy bucks,” said the man, a frown hatching on the edges of his mouth. “I only accept cash.”

Andy dug into his pants and retrieved his wallet. Inside was just over ninety dollars. Travis wasn’t going to pay him again until the following Friday, or maybe later if the asshole still bristled. Andy hesitated for a moment, but then thought of how the knife would make field dressing deer much simpler, slicing with ease through hide, anus to breast. He needed a big knife. Everybody does. The knife monger grunted.

“You don’t need to touch it no more. Just buy it or move along.”

Andy shoved the Mark 3 into the new gash of the oak and spit. After he purchased the knife, he thought about waiting for that shithead. Andy had gone as far as sitting on an old stump on the far end of the parking lot where the cars had grown thin. He thought there would be a certain justice in sliding the blade through the ribs of the man he had bought it from. He got up and walked away, though. It always happened like that. He’d get steamed over something, decide that now was the time he would make a stand with sweat and blood, but then the feeling passed and all he was left with was hollowness.

He pulled the Mark 3 out of the tree and slid it back into its sheath. The last light of the day had faded and the forest was engulfed in darkness. Andy pushed a large rock onto the sod patch behind the boulder and walked toward the last place he wanted to go.

It was late, close to midnight, by the time Andy made it to the Birch. He hated this place, and the thought of entering made his stomach upset. Near the front door was a dog tied to a signpost. A mixed breed, it was well behaved and sat on the cold concrete. A small crowd circled around the dog, and several people bent over to pet its fur, to talk down to it. There was no joy in the dog’s eyes. It sat there and absorbed their scrutiny. A spider crawled on the back of Andy’s neck. He brushed it off and pulled the flask out of his pocket.

The steel somehow still smelled of his father, but the gin inside tasted like nothing but hell. He didn’t want to get too drunk. The roof of the Frederickson house was a beast. Travis was always there, seven in the morning, waiting for Andy and the rest of the guys

to show up. A week earlier, Andy had let the night take him, and didn't arrive until half past eight.

"What time do we start here?" Travis had asked him on the driveway, the rest of the crew watching from the edge of the roof.

"What time, Lavallee?" Travis had asked again. Andy remembered his boss' voice rising to reach his audience. Not the crew, but that old woman in the house, glaring from the window, her silver hair whipped to the side and ending in a wave, not a single strand undone. She smirked. Andy had felt the hate casting from her eyes.

He hated Travis and the rest of them, but there were aspects of his job that he liked: the wood, the tools, the cutting. Besides, he couldn't quit. He wasn't ready to go on his own. Not just yet. Andy sighed and sipped from the flask.

He whispered the beginning of a joke, one that he spent hours practicing in front of a mirror. The week earlier, Andy had found a pile of old books rotting away in the woods. One of them was a compilation of dirty jokes. None of them were funny to Andy, yet he still memorized one to tell Helen. She was at the Birch most nights, and he hoped that he would see her. He just wanted to talk. Maybe invite her to go camping.

He wondered when the group of dog gawkers would disperse. His Mark 3 could cut through that leash and free that dog, but, Andy thought, the mutt would probably just lie there and wait for its owner. He slipped it out of the sheath. The handle felt coarse, even in his callused hands. His arms were balanced with its weight, like his whole life had been incomplete until he bought the Mark 3. He pressed the flat of the blade against his cheek. It was a good knife. Official knife of the US Navy Seals.

Andy didn't see Helen at the Birch when he walked in. He weaved through the herd to the bar, keeping his head down. The bartender nodded his head at Andy to get his order.

"Budweiser," Andy said.

"What?" the bartender shouted.

"Just a Bud. A beer." The bartender nodded again and disappeared. When he returned he tossed a glass covered in smudged fingerprints in front of Andy and waited for his money. Andy gave it to him, and then downed the beer and pushed the glass far away from him.

He turned and saw her. Helen sat at a table accompanied by two men with lips and fingertips glistening in the dim lights. He wished she had been alone. He could have met her in a corner and talked. She would have listened to his joke and laughed. She would have invited him back to her place. It would have been quiet there.

Now, though, he was fighting against something that he felt he couldn't win. He wanted to lift his foot and kick both of those men in their faces.

He sighed, stood up, and walked slowly over to their table. They stopped talking when he grew closer, as if they were talking about Andy the whole time. He clenched his fists.

"Hey Helen," he said.

"Hi," she responded without smiling. He glanced at the other two men. They sat still in their seats, their eyes raised to watch the action.

"Um, how are you?" he asked. His voice trailed off toward the end, but Helen didn't call him on it.

“Fine. Do you know Teddy and Gordon?” The men both smiled and revealed yellow teeth with mashed up peanuts peppering the gums. Andy nodded. He glanced at the exit.

“I’ve got a joke,” Andy said, speaking fast to get it all out. “So this man and woman were camping. The lady has to piss, so she squats over a cliff into a river. She looks down at the water and says, ‘Honey, I didn’t know you brought a canoe!’” Andy smiled so hard his face hurt. He was going to laugh, but decided against it. He was getting a headache.

Helen wrinkled her brow. Teddy and Gordon snorted and looked at each other. Andy felt his face grow hot. Had he messed up the joke? He could barely even remember what he said.

“I don’t get it,” said Helen.

“You’re supposed to mention a reflection,” said Teddy. “That joke is older than hell.” Gordon laughed. Helen shook her head.

“I still don’t-”

“I’m gonna get going,” Andy interrupted. Before anything else could be said, he flitted between the tables and toward the door. He felt all the eyes upon him now, and he knew if he listened closely, the beginnings of laughter were forming in the corners of the Birch, ready to infect the entire bar. It was so damp. Everything smelled of shit and sweat.

Outside, the cool night air filled his lungs until he coughed and spit out onto the sidewalk. He sat on the curb of the parking lot and looked out onto the Birch. Would

Helen come out? She had in the past, sitting down next to him and resting her hand on his back. Please come, he thought.

He waited fifteen minutes and the door never opened. He remembered the Mark 3. He unsheathed it and held it in his hand. Its lines were straight. How can an object be so perfect? He ran the edge across his thumb until he saw that red curtain come for him, and he wanted to swim in it forever.

5.

Pete walked into the Friendly's and saw Ken, a blob of pink and purple, sticking out in a sea of muted colors. They met for breakfast every week or so before work, and each time Ken sank deeper and deeper into his craze. He wore a purple tee shirt, much too small for his girth, emblazoned with garish flying ponies. A pink cap was festooned with several pins featuring the same animals as his shirt. A necklace hung around his neck with a pendant that read "Friendship is Forever" in such large print that Pete could read it as he walked across the restaurant toward the booth.

"Hey, Ken," Pete said as he slid into his seat. He was careful to remove his overcoat so his brother could see what a man in his thirties dresses like: suit jacket, tie, crisp white shirt, all like the model in the Fall 2011 Banana Republic catalog.

"What's up, bro? I waited to order," Ken said, drinking out of a glass which looked like it contained chocolate milk, but, as Pete feared, actually was a milkshake.

"Okay, thanks," he said, picking up the menu and glancing at it while Ken did the same. Pete's eyes, however traveled over the laminate and onto his brother's face. His beard had gone untrimmed for far too long. The whiskers traveled down his neck and into his shirt, while on the northern front, they threatened the base of his glasses. And those large, wire rimmed spectacles sat on a nose and cheeks as oily and marked as the Friendly's menu.

"How's Tracy and the kid? Still into Sesame Street? And what's Ryder into?" Ken laughed, a high-pitched snort that made a couple other diners turn their head.

"That's funny," said Pete. "They're fine."

“What’s Tracy do with her days while you’re slaving away?”

What the hell do you do with your days, Pete thought. Ken was only three years younger than Pete. How could something like that have happened to him, Pete wondered. They grew up in the same household, and were reared the same way. Perhaps there was some kind of undiagnosed mental disability at play in his brother’s mind. Perhaps, Pete thought, he should treat his brother kindly this time, instead of the usual barely-hidden scorn.

“She takes care of everything,” Pete said. “She’s the lynchpin in our organization.” Pete meant this as a statement of mirth, something deserving of a smile, but his brother responded with a flat-faced nod.

“I bet she’s a lynchpin.” Again, he snorted.

Pete knew that that was Ken’s way of making some sort of sexualized joke about his wife, about the mother of his child. Pete thought of his mother, and what she would say if she knew that he was considering punching his own brother in his grease-filled face.

“How’re your jobs?” Pete asked, making his words bounce off the end of the sentence in a way that connoted kindness and understanding, at least to him.

“Alright,” said Ken, shaking his head and shoulders at the same time, like he needed to brush the words off him before they soaked into his skin. “I’m gonna strike out on my own.”

Pete lowered his menu. His brother had two part time jobs: bookkeeping for a charity and web design and maintenance for a local men’s clothing store. Pete, knowing both organizations from the Chamber, had made the connections for Ken, and he thought

his brother was doing an adequate job. He was able to work remotely for both gigs, which was good because nobody would want someone like Ken around a professional office. Ken didn't have health insurance; god knew the last time he'd been to the dentist. He was a barely employable slug, and Pete could feel the reemergence of the contempt he had tried so hard to quash.

"Strike out on your own?" Pete said. "Doing what?"

Ken pulled the pendant away from his chest and pointed it at Pete. It was like a large picture frame, the size of a saucer, with the words in large black print wrapped around the metal frame perimeter. The printing looked hand-made and bad, like a Sharpie was given to a kindergartener. Inside, covered with plastic, was what looked like a computer printout of a purple and pink pony leaping over a star. Beams of light shot from its ass and it looked like it was shitting a rainbow. Ken squinted and noticed that the printout was actually a drawing, and one that wasn't too bad. He suspected, however, that Ken used a stencil and a paint-by-number kit.

"Selling these. At the last con, they went like crazy."

"You made that?" Pete asked.

"Made 'em, sold 'em," Ken said. "Two hundred of them. And that was just a regional con. The national one is in the fall, and I could make a killing."

Two hundred sold. That meant there were two hundred people, at least, that looked and acted like Ken, wandering around the Greenfield metro area. Pete stifled an urge to get up, start his car, and leave his brother behind forever.

"I don't think you can live off that," Pete said.

"I don't need a lot of money to live."

“You need something,” Pete said. “You need to buy food and clothes and pay rent and-“

“I made four thousand dollars,” Ken interrupted. “That’s more than I make working like an asshole for two months.”

“Like an asshole?” Pete said. “You lay around in your pink pajamas all day, watching your stupid show, and sometimes you go on the internet or talk on the phone to do something. If that’s working like an asshole, what do you call it when you make those necklaces? Working like a piece of shit?”

Ken leaned back in the booth and sighed, his hands making an arc over the table. Pete wondered what Ken thought of himself as he made that posture, perhaps like some sort of Mafioso.

“It’s not a stupid show,” Ken said.

“Maybe not if you’re six years old, but it’s a children’s show,” Pete said. “You are a grown man. Act like a man, for Christ’s sake!”

“You have no idea,” Ken said. “You could never understand a show like that because you’re too far inside the mainstream. It’s not a kids’ show, it’s a show for everyone. It teaches you about friendship, about love, about how to get on in life without falling to the same shit like everyone else.”

“Why do you have to dress like that?”

Ken scoffed. “Why do you have to dress like that?” he said, pointing to Pete’s pressed outfit.

“I dress like this,” Pete said, trying to draw his words slowly for extra meaning, “because it makes me feel good and I want people to respect me.”

Ken took a long draw out of his chocolate milkshake, slurping it up with volume.

“Well, brother,” he said, “I dress like this because I want people to know how much a television show, one for ‘kids,’ like you said, can change your life if you are open to letting it.”

Pete shook his head. “Flying rainbow ponies? That’s what can change your life? Are you kidding?”

“‘Get off my lawn,’ the old man said,” Ken sneered, making invisible quotation marks with his fingers.

Pete picked up the menu and pretended to look at the breakfast offerings. “It’s your life, Ken,” Pete said. “I’m just trying to help.”

Ken scratched at his beard, nodded, and rocked back toward the table. There was a shine in his eye that Pete recognized as his brother’s version of winning an argument. Pete wanted to start up at his brother again, but he decided to let him wallow in his faux victory. Pete looked at the menu again.

“What are you getting?” he asked, but the kindness in his voice had surrendered to a dead monotony.

“The reg,” Ken responded in his truncated adolescent way, “Pancakes and bacon. A total nosh. You?”

Before Pete could answer, the waitress strolled over.

“Ready to order?” she asked.

Ken looked down at his menu like he was studying Sanskrit scrolls. He suddenly looked deflated, and the cockiness that dripped from his eyes vanished.

“The number two, please,” he said softly, handing the menu to the waitress without looking at her.

But Pete looked at her. She was in her twenties. Choppy blonde hair ended in shocks of pink and purple. She was slightly pretty, but her ugly yellow and red uniform shirt shaped itself around her breasts, and Pete could tell that Ken wanted to look but was averting his eyes. He wondered what his brother would be like at Hooters. Pete looked back to the waitress. She had a nice figure, but she looked like she probably had dropped out of high school when she got pregnant during sophomore year.

“Western omelet,” Pete said. “And a coffee. Black.”

“You got it,” the waitress said and walked away. Pete saw his brother’s eyes hit the top of his brow as he watched the waitress’ ass recede.

“How’s your love life?” Pete asked, and his brother crumpled until he was nothing more than a tossed paper in a wastebasket.

6.

Up on the roof, Andy only looked down at the shingles. Above, the late morning sun stripped the cells of his skin. Nail, hammer. Nail, hammer. If he looked to his left, he'd see Tony and Jose talking about football and women while working on the beams. If he looked to his right, he'd see the lip of the roof fall away and his eyes would meet Travis'. Andy's boss, a predator with muscles clenched, was just waiting for some mistake so he could pounce.

Andy's left thumb and right hand were wrapped in gauze and it stung every time he used them. His hands probably needed several stitches, but Andy knew how much that would have cost. He had gotten to the Rogers house just on time, but he had paid for it. Andy's head was splitting like the flesh on his thumb had the night prior.

Travis didn't need to be at this site. He had two other crews working in the neighborhood, on far more advanced jobs. But he was there, looking at Andy. Last night, after the cut and after the seal of the bourbon bottle was cracked, Andy had inflamed himself. Ensconced in his home, he stood in front of a wall length mirror and watched as his features, bland, brown hair and eyes, dirty skin, melted into Travis' hard cut chin and trimmed moustache.

He had seen Travis in his own home, and Andy thought about Helen not leaving the Birch. She didn't come. She didn't come.

"Fuck you," he had said to the mirror, the still bloodied blade of the Mark 3 whooshing out of its sheath.

“I’ll kill you!” he had roared, and it had felt like the vocal cords snapped at that instant. Blood had risen in his throat, his eyes had come apart and Andy had screamed as he stabbed at the mirror, glass shattering and falling, cutting the skin of his hand. He had pierced the wall of his home, the home he had worked so hard to build, and only that stopped him.

He had fallen into a bloody clump on the floor and raged. He wanted to eat Travis’ children, he had screamed. He had wanted to eat their hearts and dance in their cavities. But he had thought of Helen then, of that same nameless tune she hummed constantly, and Andy had crawled into his bed and wept until he fell asleep.

He awoke two hours later and puked into his chemical toilet. He cleaned his hand and ate dry toast for breakfast, washing it down with a beer. It was a miracle he had made it in on time, Andy thought as he hammered another shingle into place.

Nail, hammer. Nail, hammer.

“Hey, Andy,” Tony said. Want to hit up Wendy’s for lunch?”

Jose laughed.

Nail, hammer.

“No, thanks,” Andy said softly.

“Did you bring your lunch again?” Tony asked.

More snickers came from Jose. They knew that Andy didn’t bring anything but his tools to work. Couldn’t they just do their work? Why did everything have to be a game?

“Yep,” Andy said, keeping his head down.

“Man, you gonna tell us what happened to your hands?” Jose asked. “Try to fuck a porcupine again?”

Andy gripped the hammer and looked up at Tony and Jose. They kept smiling, each tooth a blinding yellow.

“Christ, man,” Tony said. “We’re just fucking with you. Calm down.”

Andy looked back at the shingles, but his hand froze when he brought down the hammer. His grip had opened his wounds, and the gauze was saturated with blood. Droplets of red had coated the shingles, his pants, his shirt.

“Shit,” he whispered. He slid the hammer into his belt and climbed down the ladder.

“Lavallee!” Travis shouted. “What are you doing?”

“I’m hurt,” Andy said. “I need to rewrap my hand.”

“That ain’t a work injury,” Travis said. “You go home and I ain’t paying you for today.” Travis stood with his hands on his hips like a middle aged woman might. Andy thought of his mother, and how she used to stand like that sometimes, especially when she was cross. She had given hell to him once from that position for throwing rocks at the backyard shed, but the smell of spaghetti sauce wafted from behind her, and it had been hard to feel anything but hunger.

When he had stepped off the ladder, when he had heard what Travis said, Andy wanted to slip the hammer from his belt and drive it far into his boss’s head. He had taken two steps before he saw the way Travis was standing, and now all Andy wanted to do was laugh.

“Okay,” Andy said. “I’m sure you don’t want blood on the roof anyway.”

“Very funny, asshole,” Travis said. “Like I said, I’m not paying you for today. If you’re not here, on time, tomorrow ready to work a full day, then you can crawl back under your rock.”

Andy walked away from the Rogers house to the sounds of the Tony and Jose laughing about something again, but probably him. Travis was probably laughing too. Oh, everybody laughed all the time. Everything was always so funny. Andy ripped off the wet bandages from his hand and let the sun penetrate his open wounds. He tossed the bloody gauze in the cab of Travis’s truck. Each step of his boots ground against the gravel of the road, fresh blood dripping from his hand, the sun browning his neck, and the memory of his mother and the dinner she had made receded further and further into his grimace of pain.

7.

Pete never ended emails with the word, “Best.” There was something smarmy and impersonal about it, and it annoyed the hell out of him. Best what? Wishes? Luck? News for your upcoming colonoscopy? Pete used “Sincerely.” That was a pleasant and clear way to end your message. He didn’t like getting worked up over something so trivial, but whenever Ned, Pete’s boss, sent him an email, he would clench his fists when he saw the signature line. Of course, Ned also committed the atrocity of including, after his name, logos and slogans in a block about four inches high.

He knew when he parked his Outback in the parking lot on Monday morning that he would have a pile of emails accumulated over the weekend, all from Ned. They would all either ask for some minute detail on an arcane city ordinance, pester about meeting the new council candidates, or, worst, testify with a quote from Ned’s Motivate-A-Day calendar.

Predictably, the first three emails that morning were:

Pete:

Could you send me the list of members on the city
parking committee in 1998?

Best,

Ned

Pete:

Have you met Cal Nelson yet? It is important that we get answers to his views on economic development before he announces his run for council.

Best,

Ned

Pete, Jess, Robin:

Remember: You must be the change you wish to see in the world. - Gandhi

Best,

Ned

It was a little after eight, and no one had arrived at the office yet. The place was dark and the only sound to hear was the hum of electronics. Ned quickly replied to those first three emails, and then got up and stretched. It had been about ten minutes since he got to the chamber, and already he was tired. He walked out into the lobby. Shelves upon shelves were stocked with pamphlets, brochures, and magazines, all promoting Greenfield, the chamber, or its member businesses. Some of these were hot items, like the town maps, or the coupon booklets. Others, however, like the dog training leaflet ("Don't let a 'Faux Paw' happen!") or the commercial real estate business newsletter, were wilted and covered with a film of dust.

On busy days, he could hear the visitors quiz Jess at the front desk about the chamber and its works.

“Are you the visitor’s bureau?” they would ask.

“No,” Jess would reply, “They’re a separate organization. We’re the Chamber of Commerce.”

“Well, what do you guys do?”

“We promote and advocate for our members in order for Greenfield’s business environment to thrive.”

“Oh,” the visitor would say, and, most of the time, walk out in search of the visitor’s bureau. These people wanted maps, lists of things to do. The chamber could serve that function, Pete often thought, but why have one semi-useless non-profit organization in the community when you could have two?

When Ned, Pete’s boss, got a hold of these visitors, he would talk to them like they were his long lost brothers and explain how everything in the town relied on the chamber. Pete never understood how some people are energized by personal interactions. He could do it, sure, but it left him feeling drained.

That’s why Ned got paid what he did, Pete supposed. Pete had stumbled across the payroll records once when he was rifling through the files on Ned’s laptop. His salary increased \$40,000 in three years. Ned brought home close to two hundred thousand dollars a year, in addition to a yearly 10K bonus for meeting the board’s expectations. What those expectations were, Pete wasn’t sure. He supposed it was about promoting the members. When Pete thought about how much Ned made and how much it differed from what his own salary was, he felt sick.

Pete sighed. He wondered how many of Greenfield's businesses he would be promoting today. It didn't matter if they was the dog training company (\$350 a year in dues) or the giant Blue Cross campus (\$10,000), every chamber member needed to be promoted. In emails, in newsletters, at events, "push the members," as Ned would say.

Pete walked back to his office. Monday meant that the city council met, and Pete needed to be there. It would be a late night of listening to bores drone on, and then, when the time came, Pete would make a speech about the need for updated parking lots in the downtown area. The bores would listen, maybe ask a question, and then everyone would forget what Pete said. It happened every two weeks.

Unless there was a big issue on the agenda like the homeless shelter or revising the parking code, the meetings were usually sparsely attended. Sometimes a chamber member would spot him and sit next to him, whispering in his ear about regulations, or nudging him with jokes. Most of the time, though, he was on his own, able to look over his prepared remarks.

Of the five council members, two were perceived as "business-friendly" and the others were either historical society nuts or vehemently pro-environment. The ones harping on about which buildings were around when some revolutionary war general marched through town were difficult to identify with. Pete had seen firsthand how their narrow vision had cost Greenfield's downtown customers, businesses, and jobs.

But Ned and the chamber board were forcing Pete to speak against a green regulation in order that a new parking lot be built on Main Street, a parking lot that would serve only to funnel people toward the Ben & Jerry's. Ancient elms that lined the road would be torn down. Pete had tried arguing with Ned about it.

“Those trees are beautiful,” Pete had said.

“I agree,” said Ned, “but no one will come downtown if they can’t park. The trees won’t look so pretty in front of boarded up buildings full of drug dealers.”

Pete could close his eyes and see their green teardrop leaves and gray etched bark like ripples in a morning pond. It would be a shame to see them go, he thought, but he certainly wasn’t going to quit his job over some trees. He’d save his “taking a stand” for something real.

The front door squealed open and the lights in the lobby glared on.

“Good morning, everybody!” yelled Ned as he walked down the hall.

“Hey,” said Pete from his office.

Ned stopped in the doorway. Although he was only a couple years older than Pete, Ned had lost most of his hair. He had worn the bald horseshoe for a while until he saw a chamber member with a shaved head, and then he followed suit. Completely shorn except for a goatee, Ned’s gleaming head could be spotted in any crowd.

“First one here,” he said. “Very nice. I like to see the lights on when I come in, and when I leave.”

Pete tried to think of a response that wasn’t “shut up,” but he couldn’t, so he just smiled.

“Did you see my emails?” Ned asked.

“Already responded,” said Pete.

“Good man,” said Ned, walking away to his large office with the huge window.

“I’m about to head out to a meeting with the IKON folks,” Pete called out.

“Sure thing,” said Ned, “Have fun storming the castle.”

That was Ned's go to phrase for whenever anybody left for a meeting. It was funny hearing him quote *The Princess Bride* the first time, four years earlier.

Pete walked out through the lobby and into the parking lot. He was sad that he'd miss Jess coming into work, but she would be around later. He so enjoyed their late afternoon chats when Ned and Robin had gone to meetings. They talked about music, movies, and sometimes other things.

But he had this meeting to go to, or, he didn't. Pete had developed a nasty habit of inventing meetings as an excuse to get out of the office. He'd drive to Otis, the next town over, and drink coffee at a Starbucks. He seemed to do it most often on Monday mornings. And, since it was supposed to be a business meeting, Pete charged the coffee to his chamber credit card.

That credit card had been a blessing of late. Ned looked after the books of the chamber, but he never asked questions regarding the credit card statement. If something looked really strange, like a charge at a local hotel, Pete was sure he'd ask about it. But charges at a coffee shop, or a grocery store, or an office supply store, were fine. Ned never even asked for receipts.

Pete walked to his Outback and turned to look back to the chamber. It sat just outside of downtown in a long, ugly brick building. One side held offices, and the other a large conference room that was filled with board members once a month. A strange piece of artwork consisting of blue, overlapping triangles rose from the grass between the sections of parking lot outside. Beneath it, a sign reading "Greenfield Chamber of Commerce."

Looking at the sign, Pete noticed something moving near the bottom. He walked over slowly, trying to not step on any sticks with his Keens. A long black snake slithered through the wood pieces and fallen leaves. Pete gasped in surprise. He had never seen a snake in the wild before, and wasn't even sure that Massachusetts had snakes this large. He had always expected to see a garter snake in the bushes of his yard, but a beast like this was unexpected.

"Whatcha got there?" a voice called out from behind.

Pete turned around. The landscaper, nameless even after coming to the chamber for years, stood there holding a shovel in his dirty hands.

"Snake," said Pete. "Big black one."

"Shit," said the landscaper when he saw it. "You weren't kidding."

"Probably a pet that escaped," Pete said. "It'll have fun chowing down on the local mice." Pete smiled at his whimsy, but the landscaper didn't.

He walked over to the snake and swung the shovel over his head.

"What-" said Pete.

The shovel's edge sliced down with violence. With one hit, the snake's head hung off its body by a thin layer of black skin. The landscaper scooped it up with the cup of the shovel, and the snake dangled like an unused extension cord. The skin looked wet and smooth. It really was an amazing animal, Pete thought. The landscaper walked to the side of the building and chucked it into the dumpster.

"Let it chow down on that," the landscape said. He then revved up the weedwhacker and attacked the lawn.

Pete had an urge to walk to the dumpster, peer in, and look at the dead thing inside. He didn't, though, because it was just a snake. If Pete had had a shovel, he would have swung it as well.

Pete ended up not seeing much of Jess. He took a long time at his "meeting with the IKON folks," taking each sip of his caffe misto slowly into his mouth, churning it in his cheeks as he read the Boston Globe. By the time he got back, it was close to lunch, and she was gone at some meeting of her own. She came in briefly toward the end of the day, furiously gathering items together for the chamber's after hours networking event that evening. Soon after, everyone was gone except for Pete.

It was quiet in the office, the shadows growing longer in the hall. Pete wanted to go out to the front desk and sit in Jess' seat and see if he could nose around there, but he decided against it. He didn't want to turn into a total creep. When the front door squealed open, Pete started. The posted hours stated that the office closed at 5:00, but he knew from experience that the masses will pull at any door, at any time of day, to get their answers about where the nearest car wash is.

When Pete walked out to the reception area, a man with a mess of white hair on top of his head and the stink of mildew reeking from his brown Army jacket greeted him.

"Hey there," Pete said. "Can I help you?"

"Yeah, yeah," the man said. "What is it you guys do here?"

Pete sighed through his nose. "We promote our members in order for Greenfield's business environment to thrive."

"How does that help me?" the man said. Torn scabs dotted his wrists and hands.

It doesn't, Pete thought, but said: "It helps everyone be more financially successful."

"What does that mean?"

"What does what mean," Pete said. "Financially successful?"

"Don't mince words with me, boy," the man said, his voice rising. "I pay taxes here, so I have a right to know what goes on."

"Actually," Pete said, "the Chamber is a non-profit organization. We're not affiliated with the government."

"Sure, sure," the man said. "Dance around the answers. You should be a g-man. You give out answers as much as they do."

"Okay," said Pete. He wished Ned were still here. He would have offered the crazy man a coffee and gotten him to join the Chamber in about fifteen minutes. Pete wasn't sure what he would have paid with, but regardless...

"Well, we're closed now," said Pete.

"Is that your way of asking me to leave?" the man asked, his eyes red and cracked.

"Yes," said Pete.

"Kind of a shitty way to ask," the man said as he turned for the door.

"Have a good day," Pete called out to the man as he crossed the threshold.

"Go fuck yourself," the man said.

Pete stood there and watched the man walk through the parking lot. He walked over to the front door and locked it. Only then did he feel his heart racing, his sweat flowing.

Pete used to think that he could thrive in any environment. Place him amongst hostiles and he would talk his way out. Drop him in the woods and he'd claw through the brush to get home. He could excel at any job, perform any task. Pete sat in his Outback outside the hotel and tried to remember all the different scenarios that he'd dreamt of, most of them conjured when he was a teenager.

"Let's say I'm in a bank robbery. I'd just talk to the man, reason with him, and when his guard was down, I'd snatch the gun away and hold it on him until the authorities arrived," Pete said to no one, the words colliding into the closed windows of the car. He smiled at himself. If he was actually in a bank robbery, confronted by a man or men with nothing to lose, brandishing guns or bombs, what would he do? He liked to think it would play out similarly to his cocky fantasy, but as he got older, he knew what would really happen.

From his vantage point in the parking lot, Pete could see the people milling into the lobby of the hotel. He knew most of them by name, a product of working at the Chamber, and many of them knew each other, yet they all wore nametags on their right side near the shoulder. Always on the right so the person you meet will follow your open hand to your name. To place it on the left side reveals to all your amateurish nature, so said Jane the etiquette expert who came to speak to the Chamber staff. She also instructed them to never say "no problem" in reply to "Thank you." To do so would be the epitome of rudeness. Pete had been doing everything wrong, and from that day on he always wore his nametag on the right, and never said "no problem."

More people walked into the hotel, some passing by his car on the way. Pete thought about holding up his cell phone to his ear so no one would think he was just sitting in his car quietly. He looked at the clock. 6:47. Not even seven yet, and the networking event was getting packed. This was always the most popular event of the year, held at the Greenfield Inn where the staff created hors d'oeuvre stations representing the corners of the world. "The Entire World in One Room!" a sign read.

"Hey!" said Jess when she saw Pete walk through the door. "What took you so long?" She was standing behind a folding table covered with nametags, brochures and sharpies. A cloud of people flitted around her, reaching for markers, scrawling their names across labels and plastering them upon their chests (right side, of course). As soon as she said those words, her eyes darted to one man signing his name, and then to a woman arriving in fancy dress, and then to a rod of a man wearing worn work pants. To each one, Jess said, "Hello! Welcome!" like they were the oldest friends in the world.

The lobby itself, a huge room meant to impress the guests, teemed with people. The Chamber members moved by small steps, migrating from conversation to conversation.

Pete smiled and inched his way to the table. He reached through the glut of arms and grabbed a name tag. He inscribed it:

Pete Tompkins

Greenfield Chamber

Dir. of Gov't Relations & Ext. Affairs

After he stuck it to his suit jacket, he looked up at Jess.

“The trials of email,” he said as he winked. Jess grinned back and looked down at the nametags, and then back up at him, staring from under her brow. Pete looked past the table and into the swarm of Chamber members and prospects pushing toward the food tables. Everyone stopped for each other, looking at their nametags while shaking hands. Each conversation, Pete knew, started with the words, “What do you do at...?” All the exhaled breaths accumulated above their heads and made a moist blanket of humidity. The night air was cool outside, and when the doors opened, Pete wondered if the two competing air temperatures would create a new weather pattern, right inside the hotel lobby.

“Have you seen Cal? Cal Nelson?” Pete asked.

“Yes,” Jess said. “He’s been here for a little while.”

“Well, then, off I go,” said Pete as he started to walk away. He realized he was still gripping the sharpie in his hand, and turned around to give it back.

“Don’t you steal my markers!” Jess said, and their fingers brushed together during the hand off. Pete entered the throng.

“There’s the guy!” shouted a man a few heads in front of Pete. Who was he talking to? In every direction was another face with a mouth full of faux-exotic morsels spitting out self-promotion to every open hand they could grasp. Someone bumped into Pete’s back and pushed him into a small woman before him.

“Whoa,” said the woman. “Oh, you’re with the chamber?”

Pete tried to plant both feet on the ground. He looked at the woman’s nametag. She was Sylvia from Harrington Dog Training, Inc. Pete had been to plenty of these networking events, and each time he seemed to run into new members. There was an

unending supply of needy businessmen and women seeking out both “personal connection” and a free light dinner.

“Yes,” Pete replied, “Pete Tompkins. I’m the director of government relations. I’m the guy who works to advocate—”

“You work with Ned?”

“Well, he’s the executive director. We both sort of tag team—”

“He’s a good salesman,” Sylvia said. “He sure sold us.” She smiled and then her lips dropped to what was seemingly her normal expression: a frown, pinched and lined. She hobbled through the people toward a table offering lamb shish kebobs.

Pete craned his neck and looked over the heads of the networkers. He had seen a picture of Cal Nelson in the Greenfield Herald and was pretty sure he’d spot him easily. A tall man, Cal wore his blonde-white hair longer than others seeking political office. It fell half an inch over his ears and brushed against his collar. Pete had read that he was gregarious, but Ned had confided in him that the candidate for town council liked to drink too much, and when the wine flowed, Cal Nelson tended to gesticulate.

So, Pete knew what he was looking for, and when he saw a rail of a man with a head like Edgar Winter, holding a clear plastic cup of red wine in one hand, and waving wildly with the other, he started to edge his way through the crowd. Pete’s encounter with Sylvia the dog-woman had been in the hinterlands of the mass, but Cal Nelson was holding court in the heart of the horde. Repeating “excuse me,” Pete sidled through shoulders, smiling in recognition at the disembodied faces floating out of other people’s necks. The further he went in, the tighter, the hotter, it became. A cacophony of

networking chatter crashed around him. Eventually, he was stopped by an immovable heap of suited backs, faded haircuts and moist necks.

Cal Nelson was just a few people away from him, but Pete felt like he was trapped at the base of a stage right before the crowd stampedes. All he needed to do was introduce himself and make the initial connection.

The feedback of a microphone screamed through the lobby. Ned, his bald and shaved head gleaming in the overhead lights, was on a stage on the far west side of the lobby. Cal Nelson had somehow evaporated from the glut of people mere feet away from Pete and then reappeared next to Ned. The room quieted to a murmur and Pete could feel someone's breath whisper across his neck.

"Good evening, everybody," said Ned in that collegial voice that reminded everyone that he was their best friend, "I am Ned Branson, executive director of the Greenfield Chamber of Commerce. Welcome to the Greenfield Inn. Don't they do a beautiful job? Let's give them a hand." The crowd applauded, and then the claps transformed into a rumbling white noise of murmured conversations that competed with Ned's amplified yammering.

"In case this is your first time at one of our shindigs," he continued, "we usually like to start things off with around the room introductions. Now, this is a huge crowd, so it could take some time, but that's what we're here for, right?" Someone to Pete's left shouted, "Damn right!"

"All right, then!" said Ned. "I'll start. My name is Ned Branson and I'm the executive director of your Chamber of Commerce." He handed the microphone to Cal Nelson, who stuck out his chest when he spoke.

“I’m Cal Nelson, running for town council this year. I’d love to speak to all of you.” The chamber members in the audience clapped. The microphone passed to someone else.

“I’m Jan Hendrix with Eastman Honda. See me about a deal on our 2013 models.”

“Good evening! I’m Bill Jacobs. Account executive with Verizon.”

“Beautiful night here, folks. I’m Donnie Bolick of Sheer Designs. We can re-brand your business for the age of social media.”

It would go on like that for nearly thirty minutes. Pete had seen it before, stuck in the net with tuna too stupid to protest. He couldn’t believe it the first time. Who would stand around for a half an hour listening to every single god damn person in the room to introduce themselves? It was inane and a huge waste of time. But his time at the chamber had taught him that people wanted this more than anything. They needed their three second advertisement. In their minds, it was what they paid for. It was the one thing separating them from bankruptcy.

The crowd swelled around him, people half-listening while preparing something witty to say to reach more ears, more handshakes. Ned had told Pete a few days ago that he needed to meet Cal Nelson, someone who was going to revolutionize this town, but it seemed hopeless now. Pete had shrunk into the crowd, and the other people towered over him, dressing him with crumbs and sweat. There’d be other times to meet him, he told himself. Pete could just call to make an appointment. Why did he need to make a spectacle of himself here, in front of all these beasts?

Pete elbowed his way through the crowd, a difficult task. There were so many bodies rubbing up against him, so many competing smells that created a fetid blend of rancid meat and acrid perfume.

“Excuse me,” he said, he begged. An open hand rubbed against his buttock and traced the trail of his spine to his kidneys. A laugh barked out in front of him rang in his ears.

“Pardon me, please,” he said. Looking past the glut he could see the edge of the wall not too far ahead. A body squeezed against Pete’s torso and he panicked. The wind escaped from his lungs. Sweat poured freely into his eyes. A woman said something ribald into the microphone and the people roared around him. Pete slithered and grimaced through the jam and touched the wall. Tiles of cobalt that felt cool and natural to his fingers. He stood straight up and followed the wall, letting his hand rub against the bumps of the mosaic. A sign that said “Gentleman” appeared and he flew through the door, waiting until it silently sealed shut again.

The bathroom was all white, shining blindingly, and, best of all, empty. Pete avoided the mirror. When he left the chamber, his tan suit and crisp Oxford shirt looked linear and without a piece out of place, and he knew if he saw himself now, if he looked the same as he felt, he would be horrified. Instead, he slunk into a stall, closed the door behind him, and sat on the toilet. The muffled sounds of the microphone bled through even the tiled walls.

Pete clawed at the knees of his pants and his hands enveloped the fabric. He breathed rhythmically, eyes shut, counting to twenty. When his heart had slowed some, he opened eyes and saw the back of the stall door. It was immaculate, the white paint

unblemished until Pete glanced down and saw a black scuff mark near the bottom. It looked like a gash in the world, a chasm that broke apart the earth in its becoming and revealed the fiery hell beneath.

He shut his eyes again and leaned back. The ceramic of the toilet felt cool and welcoming, even through his suit. Pete thought about the elm forest again. The deep, feminine scent of earth meets him slowly, a lover's hand gliding over his skin. A breeze rushes past his body. What is the music that he hears?

8.

The whole night was off, right from the beginning.

“I don’t like this,” Ryder whined about his dinner as he rubbed a chicken nugget across his plate like he was trying to erase it.

“I’m not tired,” he whined about bedtime though the child had awoken hours before the sun rose.

Tracy tried to be patient, but when he started running around his room instead of putting his pajamas on, she had had it.

“Ryder Tompkins,” she shouted, “Come here right now and get dressed. I am getting very serious.”

The boy’s smile dropped and he quickly returned to her. He hated the word “serious,” and just the mere threat of someone becoming serious was enough to bring him back in line. As Tracy put one of his legs through the black pajamas, she stole a glance at the clock. 7:10. Pete would come home sometime soon, she hoped. The third Thursday of the month was forever booked for his afterhours events he was forced to go to. She just needed some time to turn her brain off. Just a few minutes, but even when Ryder was asleep, she had to listen to the drone of the baby monitor. She could never truly be off, not without Pete here.

While Ryder tossed in his sheets in his nightly ritual of writhing himself to sleep, Tracy sat in the hallway just outside his door. It was dark, and Tracy closed her eyes and repeated her mantra, “God is love. God is love.”

When she opened her eyes, Ryder was still, and she felt better. Tracy closed his door, and crept downstairs. She walked into the kitchen and thought about the evening, so full of possibility. Maybe she would begin the quilt she wanted to make for the family. She had seen in a home and living magazine a picture of a framed quilt hanging on the wall. Each square told the story of a different aspect of their family. Tracy thought that the project would reach across multiple rows of her poster. The sewing of the quilt would count toward Healthy Living because it would stimulate her mentally and emotionally while she performed a physical task. It would count toward Relationships because it would bring the family together (Tracy even imagined herself sitting with Pete and Ryder as they gazed at the quilt). Finally, she figured that she would also get a point for Attitude, because just starting this project and seeing it through to the end would be a step in the right direction. She didn't start the quilt, though. Instead, she was drawn to something else.

Tracy held the postcard, running her fingers over the glossy finish, the gold-colored printing, the purple swirls extending from the lettering, everything having its own texture. It had arrived in the mail a few days earlier, and each morning she would pull it from the stack of bills and magazines that accumulated on top of the kitchen counter and look at it. The morning before, Pete had walked into the kitchen, pulling the cuffs of his lavender J. Crew shirt just past the sleeves of his tweed J. Crew blazer.

"What's that?" he had asked, giving it a nanosecond of a glance before rummaging through the refrigerator.

"Junk mail," Tracy had said.

Why did she lie? What did she have to hide from a simple postcard about an upcoming conference? Did she think Pete was going to flip out, grab the postcard from her hands, and tear it to shreds? Tracy was troubled by her actions, yet she still didn't understand yet. She wanted to go to the event, she wanted to meet Jeanne Costa in person. What was the problem? She shook her head. How could she fulfill her Promise of Happiness if she was keeping secrets from her partner?

She didn't even know how they had gotten her address, perhaps when she signed up for the newsletter at the Promise of Happiness website. Regardless, she was ecstatic to find out that there was a conference on the book, entitled "Promise of Happiness: Live!" coming to the civic center the next month. Costa would be the keynote speaker, and the postcard said there would be workshops and social opportunities. One of the workshop leaders would be Dr. Amelia Horvato. Tracy had a hard time believing that her two favorite writers would be converging in her area in a matter of weeks.

She stuck the postcard back into the pile of papers and walked into the living room, sinking down into the couch. Ryder was quiet, Pete was still not home, and the evening was open to Tracy. Besides the white noise of monitor hissing at her, the house was silent. The light from the overhead lamp was bright and bounced off the thick blue curtains that hung from the picture window. Something about their stillness, the way the light bounced off the fabric, made Tracy acutely aware of what was behind them.

But she was a long way from Pennsylvania, and that teenage night when she was home alone. It was night, her parents had gone out and left her alone. Tina was at college, and she was old enough to occupy herself for an evening. When the doorbell rang that night, it was startling, but not a big deal. Tracy had turned down "The Real World" and

stepped to the front window, peeking through the lacey shade, and seeing nobody at the front step. She thought that it may had been the UPS man, but, when her hand curled around the doorknob, the bell rang again. It happened every five minutes or so, and the night ended with Tracy in her room, the door locked, tears running down her cheeks.

Forcing herself to look away from the blue curtains, she grabbed at the remote control and turned on the television. She flipped through the channels until she landed on a gardening show she was unfamiliar with. She didn't really care what was on as long as the noise of other people talking filled the gulf that had opened up in her living room. Her thoughts drifted back to Jeanne Costa, and Tracy wondered what she would have thought about the sight of a grown woman scared of what's beyond a closed curtain. There go another day's worth of Attitude points, she thought.

Tracy turned off the television and stretched her arms. She wasn't about to let the evening get to her again, like the way it used to, like the way it had done to her mother. She strode up the stairs and walked right up to her dog-eared copy of *Promise of Happiness*. Each chapter began with a quote, and Chapter Ten's read "Fear fears noise, the noise in your heart, the noise in your head."

Tracy took a deep breath and closed her eyes. "You've been taken by the wind," she sang. "You have known the kiss of sorrow." She would tell Pete she was going to the conference when he got home, she decided. And she wouldn't just dwell on the silence of her home. She would make her own noise.

Ryder moved in his bed, broadcasting it through the baby monitor. Tracy laughed. Not so loud next time, she thought.

“You’ll be welcome at love’s table,” she sang, softer this time. Tracy placed a smiley sticker on Attitude, and her eyes filled with tears.

The front door clicked open, and Pete’s heavy footfalls followed. Tracy wiped the water from her face and placed the book back on her nightstand. How many times would it save her, she wondered.

She swam downstairs and hugged Pete tight, ignoring the fact that he barely reciprocated.

“I’m so happy you’re home,” she said, kissing his cold lips.

9.

In the woods beyond the border of the subdivisions, at a small clearing, near the entrance way covered by black rubber, sod, and a blanket of leaves, a three inch length of steel pipe stuck out of the ground, soft curls of smoke seeping out. The pipe reached ten feet under the surface where it was bolted to a tiny stove. Twigs and dried grass burned inside the stove, just enough heat to warm an old can of chili. The stove sat atop a bed of flat stones, dug out from the shallows of the Easthampton River. Laid in a square, the stones measured the room eight feet by eight feet.

Walls of plywood, backed by insulation and a rubber membrane, rose from the stones. Wood paneling was attached to it, and some paintings hung from nails. Simple landscapes, lakes ruffling the shore, dense forest, a cloud of ducks rising from a blind. The paintings and the frames they were in were old and covered in a sheen of dirt and grease. They weren't even looked at often, but a house, no matter what kind, should have something on the walls. There used to be a simple crucifix, but it had been tossed into the river one night after too many beers. In its place was the compound bow.

Rubbermaid containers filled with canned goods lined one wall. Lots of chili, lots of beans. Meat and beans, someone had told him once, were the cornerstones of a man. He remembered pirate stories from when he was a child, stories where pirates rotted from the inside because they never ate fruit, but fruit didn't keep. Jars of vitamin C tablets did, though. The creek water was left in two basins in a corner near a washing area, and a couple jugs of spring water leaned against the Rubbermaid containers, but it wasn't

enough. One dead animal, one nasty season, and the creek would be gone. Water stored correctly would keep forever.

Against the other wall, a twin-sized mattress covered with an oily sheet rested flat on the stone. Ancient, creased issues of Juggs and Barely Legal were stuffed under the mattress. The roof, more plywood, had lanterns dangling off wires nailed to it. Near the bed, in the crease of wall and roof, was a single transom window made of a one-way mirror. It was built into the base of a tiny rise, and covered with a mat of pressed leaves and pine needles glued onto a shingle. A little chain, when pulled, lifted the mat and allowed viewing. To see: the elements, the wildlife, the light, and, unfortunately, a small corner of the nearest backyard.

Most of the time he saw squirrels dash by, sometimes a deer, and now, in that small corner, Andy watched his neighbor. A small boy ran around the yard, arms waving like he was bringing in an airplane. A man leaned against the wall of the house and looked at something in his hand, probably some gadget. Andy thought about his own father, and then reached for his oldest knife, the Buck model 110.

The handle was splintered wood, bordered by tarnished brass, and hugged the blade when folded within. The years had made the knife difficult to open, but its edge was still intact. Andy always kept it deep in his pocket, rattling with the coins. He used it infrequently, but it was always there, adding weight to his stride. He pulled the blade open and thumbed the steel.

Andy couldn't remember when he first received the Buck, but the day he first saw it was vivid. He was six, sitting cross-legged on the cracked driveway outside of his

house. It was a hot day, sometime in August, and Andy had thrown the screen door open that morning and seen a pyramid of broken shingles on the driveway's black asphalt. He picked them up one at a time, marveling at how thin and brittle they were. He had never seen them off of a roof, and it was fascinating. The underneath of the shingle was smooth and black, but the top looked like it had black and white pebbles glued to the surface. Andy rubbed his fingers over the pebbles and imagined all of the animals that had most likely trod on them. What were the shingles doing here?

"You! Careful!" a voice shouted from behind. Andy recoiled from surprise, his chest full of needles. The shingles he held fell out of his hands. Andy turned around quickly and scooted away from the voice. It was Mr. Cournoyer from across the street.

"Don't you know not to play right there?" he asked. Mr. Cournoyer usually watched his neighbors from a folding chair beneath the shadow of his garage. Andy had never seen him on this side of the street, or off of the folding chair for that matter. But there he was, mere feet from Andy, and creeping closer and closer. He was old and fat. The skin underneath his chin hung loose and billowed with the wind like a diseased rooster. His face was full of lines, two of which intersected at his mouth so it seemed instead of a smile or frown he always presented an X.

"You could be bopped on the head and killed," he continued. "You know how many kids I seen killed from being stupid? You want to be killed?" Mr. Cournoyer, ever creeping, had come to tower over Andy. He bent down, bones cracking from somewhere, and brought his face close. Cottony saliva bubbled on his lips. Andy felt some urine escape. He was trying very hard to hold it, but that face, that spit-laden X, kept coming closer.

“They’re working on the roof up there,” he said. “Smarten up, you damn fool.”

Mr. Cournoyer straightened and shambled away to his chair. Andy darted into the house. He couldn’t remember seeing anybody working on the roof, and was sure that his father would have told him. Regardless, the image of Mr. Cournoyer’s inching face was not easily forgotten. Andy hid in his bedroom. It was dim and stifling. He could hear his mother in the kitchen tinkering with pots and pans. Earlier, she had wordlessly given him breakfast earlier and then, her responsibilities completed, sent him away. Her eyes were bloodshot, Andy noticed, red and swollen and etched with what looked like pink lightning.

Andy took off his pants and changed his underwear. He stuffed the wet shorts between the mattress and the wall and got dressed. Shortly after, the deep rumble and metallic clang of his father’s truck boomed from outside. Andy sat on his bed and looked at the closed door. Footsteps rumbled on the creaking floor. The door swung open, and there was his father, a mountain, hulking with a fishing reel in one hand and a bag from a sporting goods store in the other.

“Let’s go to Dutch,” his father said softly.

Andy, his hands full of pebbles, threw them one at a time into Dutch Pond. First a small white one, then a larger black rock, shaped like a triangle. His hands were full of them, and when he looked at the muddy ground, all he saw were more rocks. He threw a heavy gray one the size of a baseball. The splash was louder, deeper. The ripples seemed to extend forever, and he tried to follow them to their end. His next rock, flat and smooth, skipped unintentionally. Andy gasped. It was the first time.

“Hey,” his father said, “Come on.” Andy followed him down the shore some, fitting his sneakered feet into the huge divots left by his father’s boots. After a while, they stopped and sat down on the dirt. His father speared a worm onto a hook and cast it into the murk. They sat in the quiet. Andy knew not to run off, so he remained and watched the water for signs of a catch. The sun was behind his father, and he appeared like an unknowable shadow, glittering light eclipsing from all sides.

“What kind of fish are out here?” Andy asked. His father took a while to respond.

“Trout,” he replied, his voice barely a whisper, “but mainly pumpkinseed.”

The line lurched in the water. Andy sat up straight, his heart racing. His father reeled the line in slowly and pulled out a small, orange fish. The hook had gone through its mouth and poked out its eyeball. The fish shook violently. His father tore it from the hook and tossed it behind him. The fish struggled in the dirt, gasping and dying. His father had already cast again, yet Andy couldn’t look at anything but the orange death.

Later, in front of a small fire, his father took out the Buck 110, shiny and new. He opened the blade and cut into the fish. The knife was sharp and the flesh yielded with ease. A small fillet was removed. His father did not narrate. Andy watched closely. His father’s knuckles were warped and recently scabbed. Andy started to watch his father’s hands instead of the knife. They looked jumbled, out of order, and brutal.

Dark storm clouds had started to gather, Andy noticed. He closed the knife, and then the transom window. He sat down on the only chair in front of a small card table. When they built that subdivision a few years ago, Andy worried that the developers would expand back into the forest. So far, though, they’ve remained where they were. He

remembered looking out the window to see just trees, and, beyond that, more trees. Now, he had his own family drama he could watch whenever he wanted.

He hated it. He hated them for moving in, and, most of all, he hated himself for being unable to turn away when they were outside. He sat at the card table and tried to read an old magazine that he found, a year-old Newsweek, but all he could do was sit, and hate.

10.

Ryder was running around in the backyard, kicking a ball and acting out some kind of space scenario. The ball was supposed to be Mars, Ryder was an astronaut, and Pete was the spaceship. The rules kept changing, though, and while the space journey was supposed to go smoothly, an asteroid belt appeared and everything exploded. And that resulted in Pete leaning against the house while Ryder ran around and kicked the ball.

An adult can play a child's game for about two and a half minutes before a boredom so deep and crushing sets in, Pete knew. He tried to play these games, he really did, but he couldn't last. Sometimes it made him sad. He knew that one day Ryder wouldn't ask him to play anymore, and, of course, by that time that would be the only thing Pete wanted. This was realized, but Pete couldn't fight the boredom. A child needs time to explore, he thought. A child needs alone time. Isn't it enough that a parent is there to watch him play?

"Ka-boom!" screamed Ryder.

"Too loud there, buddy," said Pete, even though they were outside and Ryder was using his outside voice.

Ryder flapped his arms, the wings that propelled the spaceship. His blonde hair was turning brown, just like Pete's had when he was four. Pete often compared Ryder to himself at that age. Is he the same height as Pete was? Is he as happy as Pete was? Does he think of his father the same way Pete thought of his own, a glimmer of a person, there only on the surface while his mother took him to parks, to museums?

Although Tracy usually dropped him off at preschool, sometimes Pete undertook that responsibility. He judged every single child and parent that he saw. The children were wild beasts, lacking the innocence and basic human empathy that Ryder had in full. The parents were no better, either blank-faced automatons or smothering suburbanites who cared more that their child had a lunchbox from Pottery Barn than what was actually inside it. Those lunchboxes from Pottery Barn were ridiculous, he thought. They looked rustic like ones that their own parents might have used, but they cost forty-five dollars. But all that mattered was that someone would see that little Tommy had parents who would buy only the very best lunchbox for their child, a lunchbox that wouldn't keep a baloney sandwich cool for more than an hour.

Tracy would admonish Pete and say that you can't judge somebody that you only see for around five minutes a day, but he would anyway. And Pete knew that although he couldn't last playing a spaceship, or any, game with Ryder, he was a thousand times better than the other parents. And Ryder was a thousand times better than his classmates, undoubtedly due to the diligence of Pete and Tracy.

Ryder kicked the ball to Pete, and it bounced off his shin. Pete looked up from his phone and nudged the ball back to his son. Something rumbled in the distance. The clouds had turned grey suddenly. Ryder continued running around, and Pete looked up the weather on his phone. The radar showed a stain of yellow and red pixels approaching. Pete pocketed his phone and called over to Ryder.

"All right, buddy," he said, "it's going to start raining soon. Let's head inside."

"Five more minutes!" Ryder screamed, louder than before, and ran off to the edge of the yard where the trees took root.

A fat raindrop splattered on Pete's head. He sighed and walked over to Ryder, grabbing him in his arms.

"I said we have to go in now," Pete said, carefully modulating his voice to sound serious.

"Don't be mad, Daddy," Ryder said and pressed his face against Pete's shoulder.

"You have to listen," Pete said. "I'm tired of having to tell you things twice."

Ryder, his head still buried in Pete's pale pink J. Crew oxford button-down, coughed out a loud sob. Poor kid, Pete thought. All he wants is to be a child. "I'm sorry, Ryder," Pete said. "Daddy was being grumpy."

Ryder forgot about his sadness the second they stepped inside. The boy leapt from his father's arms and ran into the living room, searching for the remote control. Pete found it deep inside the cushions of the couch.

"I want to watch the Imagination Movers," Ryder said.

"Again?"

"Yeah."

Pete turned it on. He wasn't sure if it was healthy to watch the exact same program more than a couple times a day. He was sure that Tracy would have something to say about it, but she wasn't there to see. She was off at the library researching some odd thing or another. Pete found it hard to keep track after a while. He thought it was something about the "business" she wanted to start.

She'd be home soon, though. A good thing, because Pete wanted to slip into Pete's Place while Tracy played with Ryder. Pete paused for a moment and realized that

his earlier declaration about adults and kids wasn't a hundred percent applicable to women. Sure, they got bored just like men, but they had that maternal instinct which could power through the most mundane of play sessions. Something to be admired, Pete supposed, but he was more grateful for it because it gave him more time to goof off on the weekends.

Pete sat on the couch and watched the Imagination Movers with Ryder. It was an okay show. The adults weren't too creepy. It's good to have strong males on television that aren't child molesters. Sometimes Pete watched Ryder's programs and tried to see how long he could last without reaching for his phone. Once he had lasted twelve minutes, which he thought must be some sort of record. Ryder didn't have that problem, though. The boy could sit there and watch the goofy bastards dance for hours.

The rain started falling heavily with the thunder roaring. Pete had started dozing, his head bobbing down, when he heard the beep of the Outback locking. He grabbed at the remote and turned off the television just as Tracy walked in.

"A huge storm is here," she said. "We may have to go into the basement." She was biting her lip and rubbing at the strands of her hair that fell on her neck. Pete knew what that meant.

Ryder ran to the window and looked out.

"Whoa," he said.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Pete said. If they went to the basement, he was afraid that they'd spill over into Pete's Place, and then things would get sullied.

"If there's a tornado warning, we're going downstairs. I don't care," Tracy said.

“Fine,” Pete said. “But there hasn’t been a warning yet. It’s just a thunderstorm. They happen every day.”

Tracy frowned and walked into the kitchen. Pete knew that she was staring out the window, looking at the storm. Some people find that relaxing, but Tracy watched the clouds to see if they were beginning to form funnels. Pete wondered what kind of smiley point she’d get for this.

Pete rolled his eyes, rose from the couch and peeked over Ryder through the front window. The recently-planted saplings of the development waved back and forth in the wind, and loose leaves and broken sticks scraped against the asphalt of the road. Thick streaks of lightning sped across the sky followed by bombs of thunder. A few pellets of hail bounced off the pavement, and soon they sounded like machine gun fire outside. Pete looked down at Ryder. The boy’s eyes were wide, yet he didn’t shy away from the sights or sounds. A brave boy. Pete was proud of him.

“Pete,” Tracy said, “come here. Look at this.” There was an urgency in her voice that moved Pete faster than usual.

He didn’t see anything at first, and was about to tell Tracy as much, when branches blowing in the wind parted and a man appeared. It was well past the line of the backyard where the grass turns into the thick underbrush that coated the floor of the forest. The man was a few yards in the trees, bent over something. Although the man wasn’t right there at the window, and although the rain clouds were dark, Pete could tell that he was soaked, his wet hair thrashing in the storm.

“Who is that?” Pete asked.

“I don’t know,” Tracy said. “Is it one of our neighbors? Does he need help? He shouldn’t be out there with the weather like this.”

The man was working on something, but it was too far away to see what. Why the hell would anyone be outside now, he thought. Maybe something had blown from his lawn, but if that was the case, why fiddle with it for minutes on end while getting pelted with hail? Unless, of course, you were hurt.

“I think I should go out there,” Pete said. “He may be stuck. A tree may have fallen on his leg.”

Tracy snorted. “Even if it did, what are you supposed to do? Other than get hit by lightning, that is.”

“Aw, come on,” Pete said. “I’ll be in and out in like five minutes. I’ll just check on him.”

“I don’t want you to,” she said.

Pete, however, had already donned his New England Patriots rain poncho and pair of galoshes. He squeaked over to Tracy and cupped her chin in his hand.

“Quit worrying,” he said. “I’ll be right back.” Then he kissed her and hurried out the door.

11.

Andy's Mark 3 sliced easily through the block of wood. Warped shavings fell to the floor with each stroke of the blade against the grain. He wasn't sure what he was making. Perhaps a spoon? Andy had already whittled several wooden spoons for his kitchen, and he hardly needed another one. However, it was calming and easy to do. He wasn't trying to impress anybody with a fancy sculpture of Buddha, like the ones the yuppies buy in those shit stores on Pleasant Street.

Sometimes Andy wondered about his death. When he went, would anybody find his body? Perhaps eventually the roof would collapse and someone would spot his bones surrounded by dozens of hand-carved wooden spoons. It didn't matter, though. When you're dead, that's it. Andy had seen enough blood and guts to know that life was just a matter of chemicals, and once they get out of sorts, that's it.

This roof would never collapse, he thought, except maybe if there was an earthquake. He was confident of his skills, and the beams overhead were thick and strong. He thought of the encroaching houses, he thought of a backyard grown over his moldering corpse.

Andy scraped a chunk of wood out of the bowl of the spoon, and saw his thumb. The wound was healing nicely, and the thin line of a scab was fading away. The cuts on the outside of his right hand, though, were ugly and gnarled. They added to the scars on his legs, on his belly, on his arms. Sometimes he held the blade of the Mark 3 against the veins of his wrist. He never cut there, though. One day, he thought, when the ladder outside becomes too long to climb, too hard to traverse, the Mark 3 would come for him.

He sheathed the knife and tossed the half-finished spoon onto the ground. He stood up and listened to the branches outside as they snapped and fell with a thud onto the floor of the forest. When he opened the transom window, he saw that the man and child were gone. They had probably fled the storm at the first sight of the purple clouds rolling in. The boy had left a plastic whiffle ball in his backyard, and it whipped around the grass in the wind. The ball would end up in yet another pile of trash somewhere, another reminder that escape was near impossible.

He wanted to close the window and steal into his liquor stores. Andy imagined curling into his bed with his cheap rotgut and drinking until he lost consciousness. It didn't sound that bad, he thought. He was about to begin when he saw a dog limp by through the trees near the edge of the forest.

A mongrel with ugly gray-brown fur matted down by the torrential rain, it held its right front paw up and wobbled as it walked pathetically toward some far goal. It should be laid up somewhere, Andy thought, if not in a home, then under some log. Nobody needs to be outside during a storm. The dog leaned its body against a pine tree and slid to the ground amongst the wet leaves and mud. It nuzzled its head into his paws, the rain continuing to soak into its skin.

Andy closed the transom window. He still wanted to get the whiskey and sleep, but that dog was imprinted into his mind.

"Fuckin' Christ," he said. He pulled his hat down tight and climbed out of his home.

Outside, it was hell. The hail blew sideways and crackled against Andy's skin. The wind bristled, and Andy hunched down as he approached the dog. The lights were on

in the house beyond the trees, and a figure stood in the window, with their head down.

When it was dark, the forest was even darker, so Andy thought he would remain hidden if he stayed within the trees.

The dog lifted its snout as Andy got closer. Its wet eyes were half-closed, and it whimpered softly. Andy knelt down beside it and looked at its wound. Its paw was bloodied and mangled with green pus seeping out of the cuts. The dog probably stepped on an old fox trap. Andy had seen one rusted into the ground over the ridge back by the creek. He had set that one off and tossed its skeleton into the woods, but he knew that there would be others. Andy cursed softly at himself for not even trying to look.

“Hey girl,” Andy said. “What else is wrong?”

The dog whimpered again and put its head back down into its paws. The mutt’s ribs poked out through the onion-like skin of its underside. When he was a child, Andy had a beautiful mongrel Australian shepherd named Duke. They let him run through the neighborhood at night to explore and do what dogs do, and he was hated because of it. Duke barked at cars, chased cats, and ripped apart garbage bags. He had a wildness to him that Andy loved. Even as a child, Andy didn’t want a docile toy dog that just sat there. He wanted a beast. But no one else did, and someone gave him raw beef tainted with broken glass. Duke ate it greedily, and it tore him open.

Andy’s eyes misted at the memory. Duke was such a good dog, and he was killed because of it. He looked at the dog in front of him and knew that the mangled paw wasn’t its only problem. It was sick and starving, and Andy couldn’t do anything about it. It, too, could have been a beautiful dog if someone had allowed it to do what it was meant to do.

Andy's hand fell to the Mark 3 on his belt. It would be quick; a piercing stab through the back of the neck, and the suffering would be over. Once, Andy's mother had taken him to church one Sunday morning when his father hadn't come home the night before. The preacher had spoken of Abraham raising a knife to his own son, holding it in the air, waiting to slice into his own child until God told him not to. There were so many times his own father's or mother's hands were in that very same position. Andy had grown to believe that a child existed to be punished, and that story of Abraham's bloodlust cemented it in him. And there he was, ready to have his own knife in the air above a suffering small thing. What crimes did this child commit?

"What else can I do?" Andy asked. A tear mingled with the rain on his face. It shouldn't be here, anyhow. This wasn't a place to die. Andy decided that he would carry the dog to a special place deep in the woods, away from the house. A tiny stream bubbled over rocks close to a clearing. Sometimes in the early morning, the rising sun would shine through the clearing into the trickling water, and it would glow. That was a place nice enough to receive mercy, not here in the shadow of that hulking monstrosity bordered with trimmed grass. Andy slid his hands under the dog and stood up. The poor thing weighed almost nothing. Water dripped from its wet fur and ran down Andy's stomach. The dog seized, sighed loud enough to be heard through the whistling rain, and then stopped. Andy nudged at the dog's head, but it didn't move.

Another thing had died in his arms.

"Hey!" a voice shouted from the side.

Andy started and turned.

“You all right?” Pete asked as he trudged through the trees, the rain bouncing off his pristine poncho. “It’s a hell of a storm! You shouldn’t be out here.”

Andy’s heart raced. The figure in the window was looking right at him. The man got closer and saw the dog.

“Is that your dog?” Pete asked.

“No,” Andy said. “He was hurt and died.”

Pete clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

“That’s too bad,” he said. “I can call animal control when I get back in.”

The fury of the storm was passing, and the rain was lightening. The man in front of Andy was around the same height, but younger, and cleaner. With his poncho and hood on, Andy imagined that the man’s clean clothes wouldn’t have a spot on them when he got back inside. He’d call “animal control” and some government asshole would come in a van, scoop up this poor dog with a shovel, and then pile it into some incinerator with the corpses of rabid raccoons and groundhogs. Andy started to trudge through the trees.

“Wait,” Pete said. “What are you going to do with it?”

Andy turned around. The man stood there, his shaved face turned inward, lacking comprehension.

“I’m gonna bury him,” Andy said.

“I think there’s a town ordinance about that.”

Andy shrugged his shoulders.

“You gonna tell on me?” he said.

“No,” Pete said quickly. “I just didn’t want you to get in trouble if someone happens upon you out here.”

Andy nodded. "Don't worry about it. I'll be fine."

Pete looked up, and Andy did the same. The clouds were parting, and the sun breaking through them.

"I've got a shovel in my garage. Wait a second and I'll help you out." Pete ran off toward the house, disappearing around the corner. Andy looked toward the house. The figure in the window disappeared. He turned around and trotted deep into the forest, deep enough where he could bury things in peace.

12.

Pete's garage wasn't in the right shape for a car. Piles of old Amazon boxes competed with discarded beach toys and other assorted garbage. Before a winter storm, he would push all of the detritus to one side so he could squeeze in the Outback. Other families had a two-car garage that was like a hospital, clean and bright and empty. Someone could actually do some work in a garage like that. As it was, Pete had to kick debris aside in order to make a path so he could walk without killing himself. How did they get so much stuff? Sure, there were a lot of Ryder's old toys, but he couldn't be blamed for the overturned buckets and dented Rubbermaid containers. At some point, somebody was going to have to get their hands in the garage and clean it. But that wasn't for today, he thought.

In Pete's mind, in the perfect garage, the shovel would have been hanging from the wall, illuminated by the bright fluorescent lights overhead. Instead, he had to dig through the piles of junk with a dim forty watt light bulb casting more dark than light. Where were the shiny red chests of tools lined up against the wall? Where were the work tables, empty, waiting for a manly project? If Pete thought about what was missing in his garage for too long, he became sad.

There was pressing business, however. He needed the shovel. Pete couldn't really explain why he felt a fervor inside of him that compelled him to help the man and his dog. Of course, he didn't want a rotting carcass putrefying just a few feet away from where Ryder plays. But there was something else, something other than the need to not have dead animals in his backyard.

The man looked so perfect as he held that dog. Soaked through with rain, his clothes covered with muck, days-old scruff growing on his face, he looked at home in the sinking earth. He was a bit older than Pete; shocks of gray hair shot out from underneath his soiled John Deere cap. However, Pete could see the lines of muscle in the man's forearms, the tautness of the tendons in his neck. The man looked like a racecar in the nanoseconds before it burst down the track. When he looked at his own arms, Pete saw featureless rods, pale and smooth.

Most of all, though, Pete noticed that the man's eyes were as wet as his clothes. Had he cried over that dead animal in his arms? It seemed so out of place with the rest of his body, that Pete couldn't get it out of his mind. Pete himself cried easily, though he hid it masterfully. Ever since Ryder had been born, a switch had been pulled inside of him caused weeping at the mere depiction of fathers and sons. Pete had taken Ryder to see some loud, 3D, cgi-driven crap at the multiplex, and, at the end, when the father caveman tries to sacrifice himself to save his family, Pete's tears threatened to stream down past his 3D glasses. He was sure that he was the only one in the theater having that reaction. He stifled the sadness, causing the headache he was accustomed to.

Pete stuffed his hand into a pile of old shoes and dug around for the shovel. He thought his fingers were dancing around the edge of the handle when the door that led to the kitchen swung open.

"What are you doing?" Tracy asked, standing in the doorway.

"There's a dead dog out back," he said. "I'm getting a shovel to bury it with that guy."

“No way,” she said. “It’s storming out. Let’s just call animal control after it clears up.”

Pete sighed and stood up. “Honey,” he said, “that thing could spread all sorts of diseases out there. It’s better to take care of it now. Besides, it’s not raining anymore. It’ll just take a few minutes.”

Tracy’s face turned into a maze of lines. “Who is that guy?” she asked. “Why was he out in a storm?”

“I don’t know,” Pete said, bending back to the mess.

“Why is he in our backyard?”

“I told you,” said Pete. “The dog.”

“That doesn’t answer my question!”

Pete straightened up again and sighed loudly.

“Listen,” he said. “I don’t know. Maybe he was going for a walk in the storm and the dog died. Maybe the dog ran away and then died. Who the hell cares?”

“Just give him the shovel, and then come back. Don’t go anywhere.”

Was that the handle of the shovel, covered with a white, plastic Target bag?

“Did you hear me?” Tracy asked.

“Yes,” said Pete, and the door closed. After what seemed like ten minutes, he found the shovel and ripped it free from its stone of crap. Holding it in front of him, he marched out of the garage door to take care of business. He wished Ryder was looking at him through the window to see his dad trudge through a violent storm to do what was right. It would be an iconic image, Pete imagined, something that Ryder would remember long after his father died. Pete knew he wasn’t watching, though. That iconic image

would be replaced by something far more humiliating, so that all he'd remember of his father would be buffoonery. The boy still talked about the time his father slipped on the driveway ice and fell into the snow bank created by the plows. Pete shook off the bad vibes and reached the edge of the forest.

He had had a feeling that the man would have disappeared. He had taken too long. How long is someone supposed to stay there with a dead animal in his arms? It was that conversation with Tracy, Pete thought. He could feel her staring at his back from the kitchen, and he knew she'd be calling out to him soon, so, instead, he walked into the trees.

For as much as he liked looking at this forest, Pete thought, he very rarely ventured out there. It was pleasant and not too overgrown. He thought he'd take Ryder out there sometime, maybe find a creek to throw rocks into. The mud underneath his Keens squished with every step. He thought about how he looked there, in the forest after a storm, wearing a poncho and holding a shovel. That man with the dog was soaked, his clothes soiled with mud, and he didn't seem to care. His first thought was saving the dog, not saving his J. Crew shirt. Pete sighed, and his foot stepped on what he thought was a rock. He looked down and saw a closed folding knife with a black handle. The light of the sun, somehow brighter after the storm's end, bounced off the silver rivets of the handle. Pete bent down and picked it up.

Pete used both hands to open it and looked at the black blade with tiny scratches in its metal. It was sharp, he could tell, so Pete closed it again. One side of its handle had a steel belt clip, and it was turned ninety degrees, like it had been wrenched off someone.

The dog-carrier, most likely. Pete thought about walking further into the woods, or at least waiting around the perimeter to see if the man came back for the knife.

The sing-song beep of his cell phone screamed through the trees. He started at the noise. Pete slipped the knife into his pocket, switched it for his phone, and saw that it was Tracy checking in on him.

“For Christ’s sake,” he said, and then, after he answered it, “Hey.”

“Where are you?” Tracy asked.

Pete could hear the anger in her voice. He thought about asking what her fury would do to her point system, but then reconsidered.

“I’m just out back. The guy took off. Must’ve been his dog or something and he wanted to take care of it himself.”

“Uh huh,” she said. “Well, could you come back?”

Pete agreed and hung up the phone. He took one last look into the trees, but, besides the rippling breeze, everything was quiet. He thought about the man, carrying that big dog, digging a hole somewhere with no tools. As he walked back to the golden windows of his warm home, the knife weighed down his pocket, and it was pleasing.

13.

As soon as he placed the dog's body on the wet pine needles of the forest floor, Andy knew his knife was gone. When it was clipped to his belt, he could feel the weight it added, and it jutted into the flesh of his abdomen. Andy thought that the dog's paw must have knocked it loose, probably when he turned around to talk to that asshole who wanted to help. How could he have helped, exactly? By bringing his shiny, new shovel with a handle that would have cracked upon hitting a rock?

Andy sighed and kicked at the loose leafs that clumped together at the base of the trees. Underneath lay a flat rock, and Andy pried it out of the mud. He stabbed at the dirt, scooping up handfuls with the long side of the rock and tossing them to the side. When the hole was big enough, he carefully placed the dog in it and scraped the dirt back over its body. He thought about what normal people did at funerals. They usually stood somberly around the grave while someone prayed aloud. That wouldn't be the case here, though. Andy stood up and brushed the dirt off his knees. As he walked back through the forest, he knew that with every step, he strode upon body after body. The earth was full of corpses, so full that no amount of prayer would do anything about it.

The missing knife bothered him. It was an expensive blade, and he didn't have the money or resources to throw anything away. He kept his eyes down as he walked, searching for a glint of metal in the muck below. As he got closer to his home, the clouds his mind grew thick. If he couldn't find it, it would be another waste in a world full of them. Like the yuppie earlier, so many people disposed of things that still had use. Andy broke off a branch of swaying elm and whipped it against the bark of the tree. The twig

shattered in a pop. He slowed his stride a bit and then stopped. The entrance to his home was a few hundred feet away, and Andy stood still to listen. He doubted that the man would still be there, but an image lingered in his mind of that person standing there with his shovel like an idiot, waiting for someone to tell him it was okay to go back home.

But it was quiet. Andy skulked among the trees, being careful not to be seen by any peepers in the windows of the house. When he neared the edge of the forest, he scanned the ground. There was nothing except the heavy footprints of the man, depressed into the mud in a way that said “I don’t care who knows that I’ve been here.” Andy shook his head, crouched down, and crawled toward the footprints. The ground was cold and wet, but it felt good. Sure enough, the boot marks were deep like the man had stood there for a while. It was funny, Andy thought, that his imagining should be so close to reality. The man had turned around and walked back toward the house, and Andy followed the prints. A few paces away, the prints stopped and sank into the mud. The man had stood again, and Andy decided it was there that his knife was found.

Andy stood up and stared at the house through the trees. The windows were full of golden light and warmth. Outside, the sun had finally dropped past the horizon, and the sky was rapidly darkening. He wanted to crawl back into his hole and forget about it, forget about the dog, the man, the knife. But where was that familiar feeling of the handle poking into his stomach? Where was the weight it added to his step?

What would it take to knock on the front door? What would it take to just ask the man if he had found the knife. He imagined it taking just a few seconds. Andy would suffer through some informalities, and then he could burrow back into his home. But those informalities were always worse than he imagined. He looked down at his clothes,

muddy, torn and asunder, and then he thought about the man fooling with the Kershaw Skyline, cutting cheese with it, keeping it in the glove compartment of his SUV. He'd rather slice his own throat, he decided.

He stepped into the yard, crossing the boundary from woods to manicured grass. Although still just at the periphery, Andy felt naked, like an unarmed soldier wandering into known sniper territory. Everything looked different on the other side, expanded like a filled balloon. From his transom window, Andy had seen a touch of green of the lawn. Actually on it, however, it seemed to go on forever. A patio made of pink stones jutted out haphazardly from the back of the house, and Andy shook his head. The man who lived there probably did that himself, although that would be granting him a handiness that probably wasn't deserved.

The windows of the house, although lit, were empty. The man and his family were probably playing a board game in some room called a "den." Andy suddenly remembered the time he had crawled into an old bear's den. How many times had Andy wanted to hibernate? In grade school, he had wished that he would fall into a coma and wake up when he was grown. In the bear's den, he had found the rectal plug, a disc of shit and grass that the bear had passed some earlier spring. It smelled of compost, of earth, and the thought of it calmed his blood.

Andy continued. He skirted around the edge of the lawn, past the discarded toys, and slowly passed the side of the house. In the driveway, a Subaru Outback gleamed through the dusk. He walked onto their slick black driveway, up the front stairs, and planted his muddy boots on the welcome mat. The door had a square window that let out the golden light, and beneath it hung three pieces of colored corn tied together with some

twine. A wooden sign attached to the corn read “Welcome, friends.” Andy held his hand out and pressed his knuckles against the door. He closed his eyes and thought about the Skyline. It was his. He bought it with his own money. He’d be damned to give it up. Andy knocked, softly.

He dropped his hand to his side and waited. He looked down and reevaluated his outfit. He should have changed, he realized. What kind of monster goes to a normal person’s house dressed like this? He wouldn’t have been surprised if the cops were called.

The door suddenly opened, making no noise on its well-oiled hinges. It wasn’t the man, though, but a woman. On the short side, her blonde hair with no misplaced strands curled up at the shoulders. Her clothes were neat and crisp. Her bottom lip stuck out slightly, and it was so red. He had a desire to take that lip into his mouth and suck on it. She was a different breed from Helen. Untouchable. Andy stood up straight, but the woman’s face dropped at the sight of him, a reaction he had seen so many times before. Somehow, though, it hurt when it came from her. Andy would have liked to have seen her smile. He cursed himself for the choices he had made. Who can smile at a man so foul?

“Yes?” she asked, the door closing slightly.

“Is the, uh, man of the house here?” Andy stammered.

The woman crinkled her forehead and nodded.

“Hold on,” she said, shutting the door. Andy thought he heard the latching of a chain, but he couldn’t be sure. Some voices clashed behind the door, and then it opened, revealing the man. The poncho was gone, and he was wearing a pink button down shirt

that was half tucked in to his cream colored pants. Andy couldn't believe the outfit, especially in comparison to his own. The man looked like a clown, like someone who should be on the cover of a magazine. Those are the people who run the world, though. Men who dress in pink shirts.

“Oh, hey,” the man said. “I came back with a shovel, but you were gone. Everything go okay? You find a place for him?”

“Yep,” Andy said. “I dropped my knife. You seen it?”

“Folding knife, right?” the man asked. “Serrated blade?”

“Yeah.”

“I thought that was yours,” the man said. “It's really nice. You can open it one-handed, like a switchblade. I had a buck knife when I was a kid.”

Andy nodded. What was he supposed to say? “Great story! Me too!” The man dug into his pocket and produced the Skyline, a little dirty, but perfect. He wanted the man to say that he was sorry for holding on to it. He wanted something else rather than the surprised whimsy that the man had given him. Andy thought about taking the man's wife home with him. When he came to ask for her back, maybe Andy would respond in the same way.

“I really like the way it felt when I opened it,” the man said. “Do you mind me asking how much it set you back?”

Andy reached and took the knife. It felt so nice to have it again, Andy had to stifle a smile.

“Around 80 bucks,” Andy said. “It was a place in town. Hendrick's.”

“Good to know,” the man said. “I guess they probably don’t sell switchblades, huh?” The man grinned and looked like a goofy asshole.

Andy shook his head. “Those are illegal.”

“I know,” the man said. “I was just kidding. I work at the chamber doing government relations. Not that there are a lot of knife regulations that I deal with regularly. You can buy them on the internet, though. I saw a special on 20/20 about that a few months ago.”

Andy imagined what this man in the pink shirt would look like holding a switchblade. He nodded and began to turn around when the man spoke up again.

“You live around here?” he asked. “You were in the back.” The man pointed his thumb behind him.

“Yeah,” Andy said. “I was just walking and came upon the dog.”

“Otis Brook?”

“What?” Andy asked.

“You know, the subdivision on the other side of the woods,” the man said. “Otis Brook.”

“Oh,” Andy said. “Yeah, I got a place there.”

“Get an umbrella next time,” the man said, smiling. “You don’t want to be caught in another storm.”

“Okay,” Andy said. “Thanks.” He turned around and trotted down the front steps. He was almost gone when the man stepped out of the doorway and onto the porch.

“Wait,” he said. “I’m Pete.” He stuck out his hand. Andy took it, and it felt soft and warm.

“Andy.”

“What do you do?”

Andy ground the sole of his boot against the front step. It wanted to turn his body around and carry him away. “I’m a carpenter,” he said. “I do a lot of roofing.”

Pete glanced behind him and lowered his voice.

“It’s great to meet you,” he said. “The other guys in this neighborhood are kind of pansies. They wouldn’t have known what to do if they saw that dead dog.”

Andy wanted to damn him with the rest of them.

“Thanks.”

“I grill out pretty regularly,” Pete said. “Why don’t you stop by on Saturday around noon and we’ll have some burgers? I’d love to pick your brain about knives. I could use a good one. Besides, it’s nice to meet the neighbors.”

Andy was still half turned away, and he glanced out of the corner of his eye. There was movement in the street, a cat, maybe. Sneaking around on padded paws, never having to do anything you don’t want to. Andy wanted to eat that’s cat’s soul.

“Sure,” Andy thought, knowing that the best way to end a conversation is to agree to anything.

“Great,” Pete said. “Great. I’ll see you then. Have a good night. I gotta get back to the old battle axe.”

Pete was almost whispering when he said that. Andy was unsure if that was a joke. Should he smile? Laugh slightly? He thought about it for a moment, and then the moment passed and he realized he had kept the same look that he always had: bland, dead.

14.

Tracy had not taken the news of their upcoming visitor well. Pete knew she was within earshot as he spoke to Andy while on the front steps, standing and listening to her husband converse with a man who looked like he had crawled out of a foxhole decades after the war is declared over. As soon as he shut the door, she was upon him.

“Why did you invite him here?” she asked, her voice trembling with anger.

“He’s not going to come inside,” Pete said. “I was planning on grilling out this weekend anyway, so he’ll just be in our backyard.”

“Again.”

“What?” Pete said.

“He’ll be in our backyard again,” Tracy said. “Only he wasn’t invited the first time.”

Pete sighed.

“Look,” he said, “he was really upset about that dog. And he seems like an interesting guy.”

“In what way is he interesting?” Tracy asked. “In the way that he looks like a serial killer? Or a child molester?”

“Shh,” Pete said. “Ryder will hear you.”

“And I don’t appreciate being called a ‘battleaxe.’”

“That’s just the way guys talk to each other,” Pete said. “It doesn’t mean anything.”

“It does mean something,” Tracy said. “It’s demeaning and rude.”

“Okay,” said Pete. “I’m sorry.”

“I don’t want him coming here.”

Pete sighed. “Jesus Christ. Relax, will you? It’s just our backyard. He’s not going to sleep over.”

A crinkle carved its way through Tracy’s forehead, and she stormed off. Pete stepped out of the foyer, and saw Ryder sitting in front of the television. Entranced with the dancing men, the boy had not stirred during his parents’ quarrel. Pete remembered his own father’s shouts, so heavy with bass and violence, shaking the walls, entering through the holes in the drywall where his fist had been. Pete was the same age as Ryder, and he responded the same way: inward escape.

Long after Ryder had fallen asleep, Tracy still seethed. She had gone up to bed early, and Pete had retreated into his basement. Progress was slow down there. The carpet was replaced by a dark hardwood that Pete had paid a handyman to install. Tracy had questioned the cost, but Pete had weaved a tale of discounted materials, free networking, and a traded membership in the chamber. It was fiction, however. The handyman was expensive, and Pete had shelled out for the expensive hardwood panels, the ones that would have seemed right in a fancy speakeasy. When it came time to pay, Pete had settled the account with his chamber credit card, confident that Ned would overlook the charges. Sure enough, Pete’s boss had marked the credit card statement as “Pay,” without a second glance. Pete wondered if he could get away with the same trick at Best Buy when he bought the nausea-inducing television (sixty inches at the very minimum) that was required in a place like this.

The television that was in the basement was not that. It was the same thirteen inch piece of crap that had been following Pete like a lost dog for a decade. One chair sat in front of the set, and it was not a plush recliner, but rather an old wooden seat that had been rejected from the upstairs kitchen.

If he closed his eyes, Pete could imagine what the perfect room would be. The door leading to the room looked like a heavy piece of oak with a worn iron grating over it, something that wouldn't be out of place in a medieval German pub. Inside, a paucity of lights shrouded by green glass shades illuminated the brick paneling on the walls and the faux hardwood floors. A pool table, already set up, sat to the right with a cue lain artfully over one corner. A poker table with the cards already dealt was situated on the left. In the corner by the door, a bar protruded from the wall, with a rack of liquor behind it. Framed baseball jerseys lined the wall, some with signatures scrawled with black marker. The centerpiece, at the far end of the room, was a large flat screen television mounted to the wall, with several movie theater style chairs before it like praying pilgrims.

But when he opened his eyes, all Pete could see were the bare walls. The only thing hanging was a wooden sign painted a deep forest green with the words, "Pete's Place," burned into the grain. Pete had made it himself using the skills he remembered from his Boy Scout woodworking days.

Looking at the sign, he remembered that when he was a boy, Pete's father used to take him to a pizza place in the bad part of town. He was never sure why they couldn't just go to the Pizza Hut near the mall, but his dad liked it at KJ Pizza, probably because the people there were loud enough that he didn't have to talk to his own son. The pizza

wasn't memorable, either. Canned tomato sauce beneath a thick blanket of congealed mozzarella. Cheap enough for his dad, that was for sure. Next door to the restaurant, though, was a sporting goods store that Pete and his father went in once.

Everything there was coated in dark brown or green. The felt on the floor. The boards on the walls. Racks of camouflage fatigues surrounded life-size cardboard cutouts of men riding horses like they did in the cigarette advertisements Pete saw in the back of his father's magazines. A display case held a row of knives lined up like the silvery scales of a caught fish. They started with a small pocket knife, opened to reveal its shiny silver blade. At the end of the row, a huge, machete-like knife dwarfed all that came before it, its wooden handle bordered with gold, its blade looking sharp enough to slice through steel. Behind the case, guns hung from hooks in the wall. Shotguns and rifles and pistols, they were all waiting for the right hands to grip them and take in their power.

Above the guns, the disembodied head of a moose protruded from the wall. Pete had stared at it for a long time until his father yanked him out of the store. He had known it wasn't a real moose, or, at least, not anymore. However, its nasal cavities were wet. Its eyes were full of tears. Massive antlers stuck out like an open baseball glove. Pete had never seen anything so beautiful.

He wanted people who entered "Pete's Place" to have the same reaction he did when he walked into that sporting goods store. He wanted them to appreciate the fact that a true man is an outdoors man. Someone who is at home hanging a moose head like that on wall. Someone, obviously, who is able to kill it.

Pete muted the television. He didn't care about the particular repeat of a decade-old college basketball game, anyhow. He wished his iPad was in the basement, but it lay

on the dresser in the bedroom where his mad wife sat. Thinking of that sporting goods store and the moose and its disappeared, processed body had created an urge in Pete to look at gun prices again.

Although he had never been hunting, and desperately wanted to try, these guns he wanted to peruse would have other purposes. Pete hated to admit it, but his wife's concerns about his new friend had burrowed into his own mind. Andy did look like a foreboding man, but that was one of the things that Pete liked. He looked like someone who knew his way around a tool set. He looked like someone who would be able to lay down some hardwood flooring by himself. The fact remained that he was a stranger who showed up at their doorstep, covered in filth, looking for his dropped knife. An incredibly sharp knife at that, Pete remembered.

Pete crept into his bedroom. Tracy lay in bed with the lights out, turned away from the door. He wasn't sure if she was sleeping at first, but then he could hear the soft girl-snores rumbling from her throat. He quickly undressed, grabbed the iPad, and slipped under the sheets. Keeping the brightness low, and an ear out for any stirrings from his wife, Pete scrolled through page after page of guns.

He looked at the shotguns: single barreled, double barreled, pump action, all containing maximum stopping power in each loaded shell. He looked at the rifles: .30-30 lever-action like the cowboys used, 30.06 bolt action for the sniper shots, single shot .22 for knocking cans off of fence posts, all beautiful with rose-tinted wood nuzzled against the blue gun-metal. He looked at the handguns: .45 caliber army issue, .357 magnum Smith & Wesson revolver, 9 millimeter Sig Sauer automatic, rugged, like a boxy Jeep

with its rivets showing, all so tiny and with the greatest potential. Pete imagined having one of those handguns in a small safe next to his bed, and when the bad guys came in, he would be prepared. As it was, it would take him over a minute to dig out the baseball bat that was stuffed between Rubbermaid boxes under the bed, and when he did have it ready, what good would it be against someone who had nothing to lose?

15.

When Andy turned off the LED flashlight, a full, cave-like dark enfolded him. At night, with the transom window closed and covered, no light could penetrate his home. If he had to piss at some point, he reached for his small flashlight and clicked it on. He liked to lay back on the bed and point the light from twelve small bulbs at the plywood ceiling. With his eyes wide open, he'd stare at the circle of light, and then click off the flashlight, watching the glowing purple ghost disintegrate. The phantom seemed to get larger as it broke apart, and sometimes Andy imagined it was a blanket being carefully laid out over him.

But as he lay in bed, he clicked the light on as soon as it was off. He couldn't get the conversation with Pete out of his head. What had the man said? What had he himself said? He could no longer remember the exact wording of the conversation, due partly to the drained and crushed cans of Bud Light littering the floor, but the feelings left behind were as illusionary as that overhanging ghost of light.

He had been asked to a backyard barbecue. Andy couldn't remember the last time he had been invited anywhere, except for the occasional time Helen had drunkenly pulled him to her house. He had agreed to go to the barbecue, but the words meant nothing when they spilled out of his mouth. His objective was to get off the front steps, and the easiest way to do that was to agree without meaning. He had taken a crazy chance just to get his knife back, and look what happened. He revealed himself to his "neighbor."

But the more he played with the flashlight, and the more beer he drank, Andy grew paranoid. If he didn't show up tomorrow, what would Pete think? Would he start to

wonder about the man in his backyard? And, more troubling, what if Pete should see Andy again? Andy cursed the proximity of their homes. I was here first, Andy thought. Those suburban assholes encroached on me.

It was concerning, to say the least. Sure, Andy had been careful for ages when entering and leaving his house, but now it seemed that the world was finally closing in. If he couldn't stay here, where would he go? He should have prepared better, he thought. He should have built other homes, other caves, that served as contingency plans. He didn't have an emergency strategy. This was it. And he was as good as spotted. A pressure weighed down his chest and curl of vomit tickled his throat.

Andy sat up. He reached for his Skyline and flicked it open, pressing the flat of the blade against the upraised blue veins of his wrist. It would be so easy this time because there was no other way. Stop being a coward, he thought to himself. This is it. You're trapped. Give in. The knife trembled against his skin. His eyes filled with tears, and then he threw up upon the plywood floor.

He stood up, his head full of clouds, and wiped his chin on the sleeve of his still-muddied shirt. Andy snapped the Skyline back onto his belt and grabbed at the plastic collar still gripping two cans of beer. He couldn't look back at the puddle of vomit on the floor. He knew it would still be there when he returned, no matter how much he hoped for it to disappear. Andy took the rung of the ladder, and crawled out.

The night air, cool and fragrant, slipped over his body. He inhaled, and felt clearer. His normal sitting rock proved to be good company, and he slumped down upon it. Maybe it wouldn't be too bad, he thought. Just show up, eat a hot dog, and try to laugh

at the man's jokes. People like him made light of a lot of things, and it was always best to smile, even though it was difficult.

Still, a sadness shrouded Andy. He thought something was now lost, some way of his life, and it would be near impossible to retrieve it. Instead of wanting to harm himself, all he now wanted was someone to tell him that everything was going to be okay, that, yes, a barbecue wouldn't be the end of the world. He wasn't sure what time it was, only that it was late, and well past the time people should be awake. Nevertheless, he rose and walked through the woods, with one word on his mind: Helen.

He had downed the other two beers by the time he reached the other development, and his mind was swimming again. He stumbled past the houses, so much smaller than Pete's and the other rich pricks that lived on the other side. One stories, these dwellings twisted along the darkened, narrow street. Andy walked in the shadows, trying to quicken his step, but he knew that Helen's place was still miles away.

Andy stopped to get his bearings. The intersection in front of him (Jacob and Carlton), seemed not right. He should have been farther along but perhaps the alcohol was making him walk slower than he thought. The house to his right was tiny even among these dollhouses. Two vehicles were parked in front of its one-car garage, and Styrofoam lay littered in the grass. The windows, like all the windows on the street, were as dark as the sky. Andy crept up to the cars and peered in through the drivers' windows.

One of the sedans, old and beat up, was unlocked. Andy lightly gripped the handle, and the door opened noiselessly. He slipped into the seat and closed the door. The keys were not in the ignition, and no spare was hidden in the glove. Andy rested his head against the steering wheel. He wished someone would come out of the house and see him

there. Maybe they would pull him out of the car and beat the piss out of him. Maybe they would stomp his head until his skull cracked.

Andy was about to get out and continue on his journey when he glanced behind the passenger seat. There, tossed among some other old tools, was a long, sturdy, flat head screwdriver. Andy picked it up and worked it gently into the ignition. When it wouldn't go in any further, he hit it with the ball of his hand, forcefully, until it crunched together. The windows of the house were still dark, the cab of the sedan muffling the noise, he thought.

Andy turned the screwdriver, and the car burst into life. For the first time in days, Andy smiled. He never thought that the screwdriver trick would work, but whatever.

"Here we go," he said, swerving onto the road. For seven minutes on 181, Andy was straight, his eyes near shut. Somewhere on that road he had once slept in a tree for some forgotten reason. He was drunk, he knew that. Andy had crawled up a tree and fallen asleep as he watched the cars zip by, their red lights trailing them in the distance like the eyes of a demon. Thinking about that made him smile. It was very pleasant to sleep with the night air cooling your face. When he awoke a few hours later, his ass hurt, but he had miraculously not fallen. He had climbed down the tree that morning feeling like he had accomplished something.

Between that memory ending and the exit off 181 for Helen's house, Andy's eyes fell together and glued themselves, not opening until the car was careening down a ravine. Andy hit the brakes, but the car only stopped when a tree forced it to.

The seat belt constrained his chest. The buckle was ensconced within crumpled metal. Why had he buckled himself, Andy wondered. He couldn't even remember that

last time he had driven. Nothing was bleeding, and, although several places hurt, Andy reached for the Skyline. The knife cut through the seatbelt simply, without resistance. He crawled out of the window, leaving the truck in the woods, hissing and dripping oil, and staggered back to the dark and empty road.

A few miles south was Helen's place. He walked there, flicking the blade open and closed. He thought about what he would tell her. She would undoubtedly be horrified by his appearance, but, as he approached her house, the words made sense in his addled brain. They appeared so simply, he was shocked. He stumbled through the backdoor that was always unlocked and tried to slip as gently as he could down the stairs into the basement. A couch sat in the darkness, and on it was someone sleeping. Helen. Andy clipped the Skyline onto his pocket and knelt on the floor in front of her. He hugged her blanketed torso.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he said, the words gurgling from his throat. "I hurt myself real bad, I'm sorry." The body beneath him stirred. The head lifted, covered in a mop of greasy black hair.

"Andy?" came the voice. It was deeper and cracked with adolescence. Stevie. Andy pitched himself back. Stevie was awake, a crinkle of confusion carved in the skin of his forehead. He propped himself up on his elbows.

"What are you doing?" asked Stevie. He was still groggy, yet the realization of what had happened was opening his eyes. Andy's pulse throbbed within his ears. A droplet of sweat ran down his back.

"You freak! Wait 'til Mom hears about this!" said Stevie, and he snorted. Andy's vision seemed to tear apart at the ugly sight of Stevie, lips curling at the corners, a sheen

of oil covering his face. The boy's lips parted again, and Andy could not bear to hear any more. His hand swung from his side and struck the boy on the cheek. Stevie's mouth dropped open and he screamed without noise.

"I'm sorry," Andy whispered. He gripped Stevie's shoulder. "I didn't mean..."

"Mom!" Stevie finally shouted. Andy rose and ran up the stairs two at a time. Lights were turning on behind him. Outside, on the driveway, he turned back and looked toward the house. A curtain opened. She was there, a darkened silhouette in front of bright lamps. Andy felt an insect dance across the surface of his arm. He let it crawl and allowed the hairs to rise. Behind Helen was the blurred image of Stevie, talking fast, holding his face. Andy would place second again. He could just make out Helen's face, and it was grotesque with anger. She walked away from the window and opened the front door.

"Fuck you both!" Andy shouted. He stomped the side of Helen's car three times until the metal dented. He heard Helen gasp, but Andy did not wait to hear what she said. He fled down the road, running as fast as he could. He ran until the cartilage in his chest felt like it had ripped apart, until the sweat ran onto his tongue, tasting of salt and alcohol. He stopped and panted, the breaths coming with so much difficulty that he dry heaved. He sensed it then, the Skyline was gone.

He found it a few hundred feet up the road. The impact on the asphalt nicked the fiberglass, but the action was there, the blade was sharp. On the porch across the street the red embers of a lit cigarette glowed, then dimmed in the darkness. Andy's face grew hot, and fear circled in his gut. He backed away slowly into the forest until the gloom had swallowed him.

He walked deep into the woods. The trees stood tall and black in the night, and Andy stalked amongst them. He sat down against a peeling birch and pulled the Skyline off from his pocket. Andy flicked the blade open and shut. He started to practice: closed, open. Closed, open until his blood slowed. Closed, open. Open. He left it open.

16.

Sometime in the next year, solar flares of unusual intensity will peel off the surface of the sun and bombard earth with electromagnetic particles, causing massive blackouts. All of the electronic infrastructure will be destroyed. People will panic and devolve into their worst selves, into the beasts that sleep inside of them. Gangs will form and they will spread out, searching for food, for shelter, for sex. Those that are prepared will survive, and the others will be killed.

Pete closed the issue of National Geographic and pushed it away from his scrambled eggs which had started to look like a weeping brain. He took a deep, staccato breath that he had learned during Tracy's pre-birth classes at the hospital. The article didn't exactly read like that, though Pete thought that it was a natural progression of events if there was ever a massive, near-unfixable disaster regarding the world's power grid. Pain squeezed at his eyes, and he closed them. Take it easy, he thought. Take it easy. You stayed up too late looking at things which cause anxiety.

When he opened his eyes, he saw Ryder sitting across from him, nibbling at buttered toast while playing some piercing game on his iPod. It'd be nice to be a kid, Pete thought, free from worry. When he was a boy, Pete had lost sleep thinking of nuclear missiles screaming their way into western Massachusetts. What had Ken said that one time? Getting up to use the bathroom at a restaurant, his brother had remarked, "If the Russians start a nuclear war, the world will be over in thirty minutes." Pete spent years thinking that was true.

He turned to Tracy, who had noticed his episode and had crinkled her forehead in concern.

“You okay?” she asked. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” said Pete. “I’m fine. Didn’t get a lot of sleep last night.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t be looking at your iPad all night. Maybe you should try sleeping instead.”

Had she been faking all of those girl-snores?

“Yeah.”

“And, you shouldn’t read at the table,” she said. “It’ll count against ‘Relationships’ on the chart.”

“Sure, sure,” Pete said. She had woken up happy, thankfully. Pete hoped that things would go as they usually do: Tracy gets mad, but forgets about it and the thing that caused the problem happens anyway. It happened when he wanted a PlayStation, and it should happen again with Andy. But all of that solar flare shit and the thoughts of his knew friend were playing havoc on his mind.

“I don’t want that man coming inside,” she said like she was reading Pete’s mind.

“Of course,” Pete said. “I don’t want that, either.”

“And I’m going to take Ryder somewhere while he’s here. Maybe to the library or park.”

“I understand,” Pete said. “Do you want me to call you when he leaves so you know that you’re safe to come back home?”

Tracy started to roll her eyes, but instead said, “Maybe we could watch a movie tonight after Ryder goes to bed.”

“I’m not going to bed tonight,” said Ryder, holding up a piece of toast like an auction sign.

“Sure, whatever, anything,” said Pete.

Tracy smiled and brushed a strand of dirty blonde hair away from her cheek.

When Ryder bent back to his iPod, Pete tapped the cover of the National Geographic.

“Did you read this yet?” he asked.

“I flipped through it,” Tracy said. “The Tunisia piece was interesting.”

Pete shook his head. “Powerful solar flares,” said Pete. “Very scary. The article focused on the worst possible scenario. Apocalyptic rioting, and stuff like that.”

“Wow,” Tracy said, moving her eyes to Ryder. “Just a few more minutes, and then we have to take a bath, okay?” Ryder nodded without looking up.

Pete had lost Tracy. She never liked to talk about this kind of thing when Ryder was near.

“I think we should make a contingency pack,” said Pete. “Water, canned food, first aid kit. We can keep it in the basement. What do you think?”

“Sure, whatever, anything,” said Tracy. Pete saw beyond his family to the door to the backyard that was behind them. It held a large window in its flimsy wood, which would snap like balsa if pressed hard enough. The door would crumble, the window would shatter, and all of the dark winds and the filth they carry would rush in.

“And maybe,” said Pete, pausing slightly, “we should think about getting something for protection.”

“Like an alarm system?” asked Tracy. “I’ve always thought that was a good idea. Evan and Chrissy have one and I can find out the brand.” Pete sighed through his nose.

“Well,” he said, “I don’t think that would do us much good during an end of the world scenario. I was thinking about some kind of gun. A shotgun, maybe. Kept under lock and key, of course.”

“What’s a shotgun?” asked Ryder.

“It’s something that policemen use,” said Tracy, her voice high, “But Daddy’s being silly. He’s not a policeman! Right, Daddy?” She turned to Pete still smiling, yet the mirth was absent from her eyes. He had to look away.

“Yeah,” he said. “Just kidding.” The door behind them seemed to vibrate, the doorknob seemed to rattle, and all he could do was bite his lip. He poked at his breakfast. His toast had been hot when he started eating, but when he lifted a bite to his mouth, it was cold and soft.

“I’m done,” Ryder shouted, pushing himself away from the table.

“Okay,” Tracy said and she got up with him.

He should have known that Tracy wouldn’t allow a gun. She wasn’t too concerned about the future, about possible apocalypses. She was concerned about Andy, but Pete didn’t want to bring him into it like had already happened in his own brain.

“Love you!” Pete shouted as they left the kitchen, but he wasn’t sure to whom. Ryder only said “I love you,” when forced by his parents. A hug was only given against his will; it was an unwelcome break between Legos and bedtime. He thought about Boots and Duke, the two dogs that he had had when he was a child. Boots was just a puppy when Pete got him, and he had given him all the love he could muster, yet still Boots would nip at your hands if you didn’t warn him in advance that you were coming. Duke, on the other hand, was a mongrel that Pete’s father had found on the side of the

road, shivering and near starved. That dog brandished the scars of abuse all over its thin skin, but nevertheless Duke always gave only love to Pete. It was Duke who would put its head in Pete's lap. It was Duke who would play with Pete. Boots couldn't be bothered.

Pete decided he would talk with Ryder about appreciating what he's got. As for the gun, he had decided about that, too.

Fridays at the chamber crawled by. The phones stopped ringing and the front door stopped opening. Pete had caught up on his emails, and even set up a Monday morning meeting with Cal Nelson. That was his big chance, he realized. He'd finally get to sit down with the fabled town council candidate and pick his brain. And it would be on his terms, as well. No crazy after hours event filled with people. They'd meet at Friendly's for breakfast. With no emails to catch up on and no meetings, Pete researched gun license laws in Massachusetts.

Jess sat at the front desk listening to some songs that Pete found bewildering, yet the music floated in his office and reminded him of her. He wanted to learn about those bands. He wanted to find out more. The clock hit 4:15, and Ned poked his head into Pete's office.

"I'm headed out to Wells Fargo to talk to Chandler about sponsoring the next annual meeting," he said. "Want to come?"

"No," said Pete, minimizing the browser window that lay out in clear terms just how difficult it was to purchase a firearm in Massachusetts. "I've got some things to finish up."

“Have it your way, buckaroo,” Ned said and vanished. Pete could hear him say, “Have a good weekend, kiddo,” to Jess.

As soon as the front door squealed shut and Ned’s chamber-purchased hybrid pattered out of the parking lot, Jess sauntered into Pete’s office. She smiled and Pete’s sat up. He smiled back and tried not to stare at her body and the way it filled her blouse and skirt.

“Hey, there,” he said.

“Hey, back,” Jess said. She sat in the chair opposite Pete’s and crossed her legs. Her skirt fell just below the knee, but Pete could see bottom of her thigh. When he talked to her at her desk, he seemed in control, like he knew what to say and what to expect. Here though, invaded in his own territory, Pete stammered.

“Got any weekend plans?” he said.

“I’m hitting Carly’s tonight,” she said.

Pete thought that this was a club in Springfield, but he just nodded anyway.

“Cool,” he said.

“Do you think Ned’s coming back this afternoon?”

“Probably not,” he said, “but you never know.”

Jess nodded and leaned in, her cleavage visible. Pete kept his eyes up.

“Do you mind if I leave early?” she said.

“No,” he said. “I might follow you.”

She smiled and patted his hand. Jess occasionally rested her hand on Pete’s shoulder, or playfully punched his arm. Pete wondered if there was any meaning behind that.

“Great,” she said. “See you on Monday.” She rose and walked out, her fragrance lingering. Pete inhaled, and pulled out his phone.

“Leaving early,” he texted to Tracy. “Want to get ice cream?”

As he waited for his wife to reply, and as the front door squealed again as Jess left, Pete wondered what would happen if he showed up at Carly’s. He wondered if Jess would pat his hand again.

Ryder licked at his ice cream cone and the sticky brown melt was painted all over his face and shirt. They were sitting at a picnic table outside the creamery and the sun was shining right in Pete’s face. He squinted, but was getting a headache. A couple teenage boys sat nearby, both wearing black tee shirts advertising bands Pete had never heard of. They laughed constantly: an ugly, loud bark that could split skin. Greasy hair rested on their cheeks torn red and pink from acne. Pete looked at Ryder. He was sitting still, concentrating on his chocolate, and he decided to teach a lesson.

“Ryder,” he said, “Do you like your ice cream?”

“Yeah.”

“Great,” he said. “Mommy and Daddy work very hard to give you the things you want and need. And we do that because we love you very much. Some other little boys don’t have Mommies and Daddies that are as loving.”

“Pete,” Tracy said, “I think Ryder just wants to eat his ice cream.” Pete normally would have dropped the subject and yielded to his wife, but he thought of Andy and his knife, and his heart beat like an ancient battery.

“I can see that,” he said, “But it’s important for kids to appreciate what they have. Ryder’s a very fortunate boy.” He mussed his hair and Ryder ignored him. His ice cream was dripping past the cone and down his fist.

“Nah, dude,” one of the teenagers said in a voice that bounced from the creamery to the highway, “she was a fucking cunt.”

Tracy tightened and bit her lip. Pete turned to the teenagers and glared, but they didn’t notice.

“Just a few months ago,” Pete continued, turning back to his family, “some mother from the Heights left her kids at the city pool. Just left them! And this was during the heat wave when everyone from that area was crowding that place. Anyway, those kids vanished. That mother didn’t care.”

Tracy reached over and gripped Pete’s forearm. Her hand was cold from where she was holding her diet Pepsi.

“Stop,” she said. “He doesn’t need to hear this.”

“I need a napkin,” Ryder said.

Pete laughed. “Okay, okay,” he said. “Sorry.”

“He punched her in the fucking tit!” one of the teenagers shouted. Ryder looked at them and Tracy gasped.

“Let’s go,” she whispered. Tracy’s voice was warbled with fear and anger. She was always running back to the safety of the cave instead of confronting the hunter. To be honest, Pete usually did, too. He wished he had a shotgun. Pete thought about walking over to the table brandishing it like fire hose, grabbing one of the punks by the hair and stuffing the barrel of the Remington into his mouth.

“This is a family establishment!” he’d shout. The whole scenario excited and amused him. Pete sighed. He wasn’t sure whether he should get up and complain to the owner of the creamery, or to the teenagers themselves. With the owner, Pete risked looking ineffectual and scared, and with the teenagers, he risked getting mocked in front of his family, or worse. He decided on the owner and was about to get up when the teenagers suddenly rose from their seats and threw their trash on the ground near the garbage can. They walked off down the road, their voices still carrying.

“We can stay,” Pete said.

“We can stay,” Ryder repeated.

A garbage truck stopped at a light in front of the creamery, and its height blocked the sun. In the shade for a moment, Pete widened his eyes and smiled at Tracy. She smiled back, and then the truck spewed black smoke and thundered away.